

Menil Collection - AIA 25 Year Award 2013

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A day-lit gallery of the Menil Collection museum, designed by Renzo Piano. Photo: Hester Paul / © Renzo Piano Building Workshop

The [Menil Collection](#) (1986), located in Houston, Texas and designed by [Renzo Piano](#), has been selected for the 2013 AIA Twenty-five Year Award.

In 1981, Dominique de Menil, president of the Menil Foundation, decided to build a museum in Houston to house one of the world's most significant collections of primitive African art and modern surrealist art.

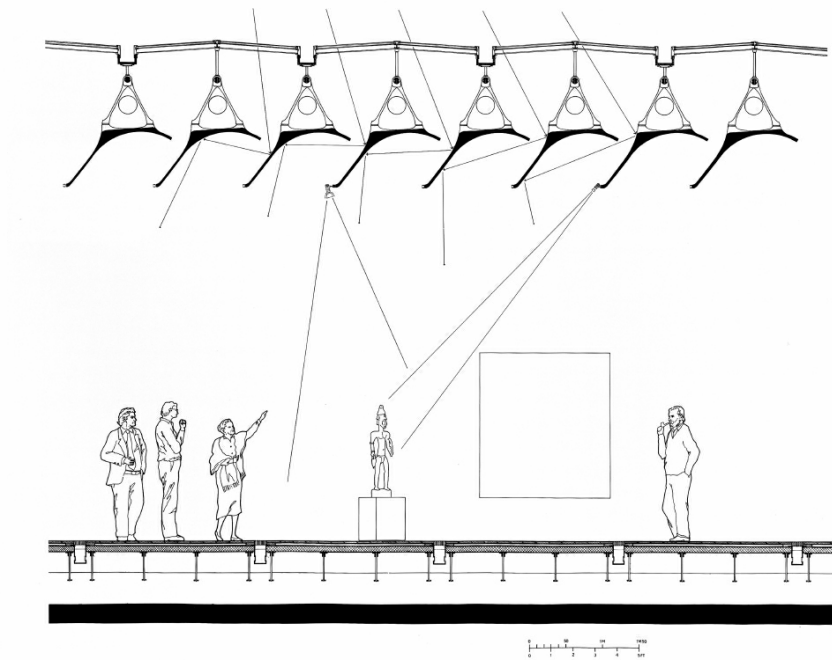
Her main request was that all of the works could be viewed under daylight, and that lighting be treated in such a way so that the visitors would be aware of its continuous variations according to the time of day, the season and the local climate.



Overview of the Menil Collection building. Photo: Hester Paul © RPBW

She also wanted a museum that would appear "large from the inside and small from the outside". It was to be a space that would promote a direct and relaxed relationship between the visitor and the work of art itself, thus resulting in a non-monumental and domestic environment: one that would be in complete contact with nature.

It was Piano's scheme for handling daylighting of the exhibition areas that gave the building its recognizable character. To prevent damage to the artworks from direct sunlight, a multi-layer light diffusion system was created, hinging on a basic, repeating structural element called the "leaf". This form is a 25-millimeter-thick (one-inch-thick) curved light scoop made of ferrocement that hangs just below the building's rooftop skylights. Repeated 300 times across the museum's ceiling surface, the "leaf" provides a diffuse and even daylight to the exhibit spaces while also contributing significantly to the architectural organization of the building.



Gallery section drawing. Image: Renzo Piano Building Workshop

ArchitectureWeek [wrote](#) this of the place held by the Menil museum in Piano's career:

"The Menil Collection Museum first secured Piano's reputation as an elite museum designer. The daylit gallery has become one of Piano's hallmarks. A common sense of ease, of structural lightness and connection with the outside, can belie the technical underpinnings of his designs."

The museum is divided into two distinct areas. The exhibition halls are located on the ground floor, where nearly 200 works are exhibited around a longitudinal spine, or rather the 150-meter-long (490-foot-long) central promenade. The upper floor houses the museum's rich collections in spaces that support scholarly work.



Conservation studio. Photo: Hickey & Robertson / © RPBW

To balance the competing needs of preservation and exhibition, and to house a collection whose size exceeds the display capacity of the exhibit spaces, the second floor also contains the "treasure house," a climate-controlled space where works are stored when not on display.

In 1992, Renzo Piano was also called upon to design a separate building to house Menil's permanent exhibit dedicated to the works of Cy Twombly: the Twombly Pavilion.



Exterior building corner. Photo: Hickey & Robertson / © RPBW

Jury Comments:

The Menil Collection is a monument of 20th century architecture that still resonates today.

Its innovative means of indirect lighting can be, and has been, applied to other building typologies and evolved in Piano's ongoing work.

Timeless - still an amazing precedent for museum design, daylighting, and a clean plan - it's about the contents, not the building itself.

Contextually responsive to it's interesting low scale neighborhood it influenced this quadrant of Houston in many different ways.



Covered patio. Photo: Hester Paul / © RPBW



Exterior diffusers. Photo: Hickey & Robertson / © RPBW



Gallery and courtyard. Photo: Hickey & Robertson / © RPBW



Gallery and corridor. Photo: Hunter Alistair / © RPBW



Gallery. Photo: Richard Bryant / © RPBW

