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Munson-Williams-Proctor makes N.Y., U.S. historic registers

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Observer-Dispatch

Posted Nov 16, 2010 @ 07:46 PM

Last update Nov 17, 2010 @ 12:07 AM

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UTICA — The Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute's museum building received a special gift for its 50th anniversary – it was placed on the New York State and National Registers of Historic Places. State officials and the institute's Museum of Art staff pointed to the Philip Johnson-designed building's significant contribution to architectural and cultural history as making it worthy of the distinction.

“The Munson-Williams-Proctor Art Institute is an exceptional example of modern architecture and the first museum designed by world-acclaimed architect Philip Johnson,” said Ruth Pierpont, director of the New York State Historic Preservation Office. “Since opening in 1960, the institute has been at the center of the region's cultural life. Its distinct architecture and role in the community make it a fitting addition to the State and National Registers of Historic Places.”

Besides being a point of pride, the listing will give the museum protection from state and federal action that might alter the building and make it eligible for public preservation efforts, such as grants and tax credits.

The actual application took about a year to complete, but Museum Director and Chief Curator Paul Schweizer said it was the vision of museum board directors more than 50 years ago that deserves a large portion of credit for the distinction.

“It's an example how innovative and forward-thinking the building was when it was drawn and what courage it took for the board to embrace that modernism,” Schweizer said.

Even shortly after its opening 50 years ago, the building already resonated with the art world; it was hailed by Architectural Forum in 1962 as one of 10 new structures around the world that contributed significantly to the art of architecture.

It's that kind of attention over the years that made it easier for staff to prove the building's historic significance, Schweizer said.

Museum staff provided five decades worth of documents – including newspaper articles, magazine reviews, photographs and letters sent between board members and architects – to officials for consideration, he said.

“The building was so worthy, and ... (the state) understood that worthiness,” Schweizer said.

Having the distinction announced while the museum is celebrating its 50th year with the exhibit “Look for Beauty: Philip Johnson and Art Museum Design” was extra special, said Mary Murray, curator of modern and contemporary arts at the museum.

“It's a validation of everything we believe is great about this building,” Murray said. “We certainly believe it's a significant architectural monument, and that's what the exhibit celebrated, and so this is very gratifying to have this building recognized more widely.”

The distinction is likewise significant for the community, said Mary Lyons Bradley, former trustee for the Landmarks Society, who named other local buildings with historic designations, including the Stanley Center for the Arts, the Fort Schuyler Club, the New Century Club and St. Joseph's/St. Patrick's Catholic Church.

“Architecture is a city's most important treasure, and this is sadly not understood,” she said. “By highlighting the museum ... that should raise people's awareness to recognize that architecture really enhances the city's landscape.”

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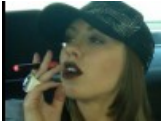
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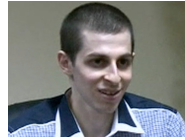
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