When I last visited the ceramic art museum at Alfred University in 2005, it was housed temporarily in Binns-Merrill Hall. Then called the Schein-Joseph International Museum of Ceramic Art, the museum had a modest 1,500 square feet of exhibition space, and its permanent collection of 8,000 objects was in storage elsewhere. A longtime goal to have a facility of its own was realized thanks to a substantial gift from university trustee and Alfred alumnus Marlin Miller, Jr. ('54, HD '89). It paved the way for a new, spacious 20,000-square-foot museum which opened in the fall of 2016 and was greeted with great enthusiasm and anticipation.

"A new era for Alfred has truly begun," wrote Wayne Higby in the Alfred Ceramic Art Museum Ceramophile newsletter after the opening. Higby, an internationally known ceramic artist and educator whose works are in major museum collections, oversaw the new building's construction as its first Director and Chief Curator. His teaching career at Alfred University spans 45 years. Thanks to Miller, the museum directorship became an endowed position in his honor.

The new museum was built on the site of the university's old gymnasium at the northeast corner of Main and Pine Streets, a walkable distance from Harder Hall, which houses the School of Art and Design. The new facility boasts two stories with a 4,000 square foot main gallery on the upper level along with offices and collection storage below, including a seminar classroom. A terracotta and brick exterior harmonizes with brick structures on campus and in the village of Alfred, but a dynamic roofline and a floor-to-ceiling glass wall sets this building apart. The exciting contemporary design was the work of Kallmann, McKinnell and Wood, the Boston architectural firm also responsible for the Miller Performing Arts Complex across campus with support from benefactor Miller.

Changing exhibitions in the new gallery have increased attendance from university and school-age students, alumni, researchers, and visitors. An inaugural display featured more than 200 pieces from the museum's own collection. A permanent case presents a selection of ceramic vessels and tiles made by legendary faculty members from 1900 to 1997, including Charles Fergus...
Binns, founder and first Director of The New York State College of Ceramics (NYSCC).

Behind the Scenes

"It is the first time early faculty pieces have been located next to one another – Binns, Fosdick, Harder, Rhodes, Randall, Cushing, Turner and Perry," observes Susan Kowalczyk about the new roomy storage area. An Alfred BFA graduate, Kowalczyk began as museum registrar in 1996 and over the years has mounted exhibits, taught classes, and even managed the museum from 2004 to 2014. Now, as Curator of Collections/Director of Research, Kowalczyk delights in unpacking the objects, some long hidden from view. Under her watchful direction, each piece is newly photographed, documented and sorted by accession number and size in the custom-made compact storage. Kowalczyk enjoys seeing the collection studied by teachers and students. One such student-turned-teacher is Kala Stein (MFA ’09) now the Director of Ceramics and the Arts at the Sonoma Community Center in Sonoma, California.

"As a maker and educator, I value the intimacy of going 'behind the scenes' to experience just about anything," confirms Stein. "When I was teaching at Alfred, I loved bringing my students to view the collection each semester. Through these visits, the students became acquainted with the valuable and vast collection, as well the history of The New York State College of Ceramics, through ceramic objects. To completely grasp a dimensional piece, one must have a sensory experience with it. All of the parts count – inside, outside, front, back, the weight, the scale, and especially the nuances and complexities that cannot be captured in a photograph.”
"Reclaiming Splendor: Ceramic Design of Chunmao Huang" September 20 to December 30, 2018

The art of fine dining may receive a boost thanks to the ACAM's exhibition opening this September featuring china designed by Alfred graduate Chunmao Huang (MFA '03) considered China's number one tableware designer. He is chief designer for Yong Feng Yuan Co., Ltd., a leading china manufacturer founded in 1997. His place settings have graced the tables of state banquets attended by many high-level international leaders.

"He is on the world stage," agrees Higby, describing the Alfred alumnus who rose from humble beginnings. Born in 1971, Huang grew up in a rice farming village. After receiving a BFA in ceramic design from the Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute, he came to Alfred in 2000, thanks to a grant from the Asian Cultural Council of the Rockefeller Foundation awarded to the NYSCC, Division of Ceramic Art. Huang has become lead faculty for the ceramic design program which Higby initiated at the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA), regarded as China's number one art school. Alfred's program, ALFRED-CAFA: Ceramic Design for Industry, has an annual exchange student component between countries.

Sure to be a show stopper in "Reclaiming Splendor" is the tableware used at a luncheon held by the First Lady of China Peng Liyuan during the 2016 summit meeting for the Group of Twenty (G20) in Hangzhou, China. Featured is a large, very grand display of 14 individual place settings, each with approximately 35 pieces. Orange flowers and gold accents are set against a background of robin's egg blue, the First Lady's favorite color. "She chose
Thoughts from Wayne Higby on contributing to world peace through art.

"A dialogue of genuine interest and understanding across cultures has always been a goal of mine – since traveling around the world in my 20s. China is of particular interest to us because it represents the root history of Ceramic Art. Crossing the threshold into China has created many friendships that continue to impact the world via ceramic art. World peace is the goal, as my friends and I try to make a contribution to each other and to the bigger picture the best way we know how – through art. Continued and greater understanding is always hoped for. In a few short years we have made remarkable progress as people, as individuals, as loving friends across a huge cultural divide."

On October 10 at 4:30 p.m., the endowed Perkins Lecture will be given in the Nevins Theater by Denise Leidy, a distinguished scholar of Asian art. Leidy is the Ruth and Bruce Dayton Curator of Asian Art, and Department Head of Asian and Islamic Art at the Yale University Art Gallery.

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the robin's egg blue set for the G20 and I agree with her," says Higby. "It is just spectacular.

The Alfred museum will also display other place settings, including the black and white dinnerware with a floral motif designed for the First Lady's banquet at the
As a designer," says Huang, "I have to consider my clients and the general atmosphere. For state banquets, I focused on how to make it classic and simple, and tried to project a sense of authority." The exhibit features one full set of tableware selected for the welcoming banquet at the BRICS summit of 2017 in the seaport city of Xiamen hosted by China’s President Xi Jinping. Its blue and white colors are common on traditional china items. The island of Gulangyu off the coast of Xiamen prompted a wave design and other marine motifs like shell-shaped plates. Even the island’s outline appears in gold under the finial on the lid of a domed serving dish which also features the egret, the official bird of the city.
At the 2014 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) conference, former U.S. President Barack Obama was captured in a famous photograph seated at the banquet table with Huang-designed Imperial Yellow china. This banquet ware blends traditional and modern Chinese elements and was reportedly inspired by ancient mural paintings.

The exhibit of all this elegant tableware is multidimensional and timely. "They tell a fascinating story of China's rise to the world stage," says Higby. "When I first went to Beijing in 1991 – a huge city, it had only a few street lights to guide the way through the streets at night. 'Have you eaten?' was a typical form of greeting – like, we say 'hello.' In China, food is extraordinarily important. Feeding guests is of major significance. All significant transactions from family to government are facilitated with food. Banquet ware – in this case, lavish originally designed tableware – sends many messages. 'Reclaiming Splendor' – reclaiming status, reclaiming the magnificence of China and its position at the center of the world. All this is tied to the new economic initiative to reclaim the ideal of the Silk Road – a form, now legendary, of communication with the world."

A bilingual catalogue accompanies the exhibition and explores these topics in more detail.