

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

NEWS RELEASE

FOURTH STREET AT CONSTITUTION AVENUE NW WASHINGTON DC 20565 • 737-4215/842-6353

THE OCULUS

Sixth Street at Constitution Avenue Entrance, West Building

Background: The primary motive for the Oculus was a functional one--improvement of the Sixth Street entrance to the West Building, one of the Gallery's busiest entry points. The Oculus allows natural light from the Main Floor above to filter down to the ground level while, at the same time, orienting the visitor in terms of the central rotunda and gallery level above. Thus, it serves as a bridge between the two floors of the West Building, a function parallel to that of the balcony cut through the two floors on the east end of the building, providing orientation to the East Building across Fourth Street. The opening also serves an esthetic purpose, offering the visitor a dramatic view of the Rotunda above. The Oculus constitutes the last major item in the renovation of the Ground Floor.

Design: The Vitetta Group/Studio Four of Philadelphia, specialists in renovation of historic buildings. Hyman Myers, designer in charge, with Elroy Quenroe of the National Gallery Department of Design and Installation

Planning Consultant: David W. Scott
Construction Manager: Hurley F. Offenbacher

Dimensions: The opening is 19'7" in diameter and is surrounded, on the main floor, by a 39" high marble parapet.

Materials: Botticini marble, the same used for the original balustrades on the adjacent stairs

Funding: Paul Mellon Building Fund and federal appropriations

A model of the Oculus is installed in the ground floor lobby of the East Building.

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The new circular opening, that has been cut into the main floor of the north lobby of the West Building, now gives visitors entering from Constitution Avenue a view of the great rotunda and dome. This has turned a relatively dull entrance into a marvelous experience with the architecture of the West Building.

The opening is ringed with a parapet of Botticino marble matching the railings and walls throughout the building. The original marble floor was taken up, recut and relaid in a radial pattern.

The opening could not actually be cut in the main floor. Most of the existing two way slab and joist concrete floor had to be removed, steel beams installed and a new concrete deck poured with the circular opening in it. The parts of the main level floor that were not removed had to be carried on shores during construction. The marble walls and pilaster at the main level were supported by the main level two way slab that had to be removed. The problem was to remove the slab without loosing the marble walls and pilasters and then get the steel beams, pans and concrete under them. The weight of the walls and pilasters was then transferred back to the new floor slab and the new beams which now span the Constitution Avenue Lobby. In effect, we built a bridge with a hole in it.

The view achieved is even greater than that anticipated. Some work will continue on the Oculus as we learn more from living with it. Currently the polished finish is being sanded to make it look more like the existing marble. Changes in the ground level lighting and the pattern of the ground level marble are being considered.

Over the years, the Gallery tried a variety of ways of explaining to the visitor coming in from Constitution Avenue that the Main Floor exhibits, and the majority of our greatest works of art were upstairs. Since the stairs were not visible from the entrance lobby, and there was no art around, we were afraid, as Carter Brown once put it, "that people might think they had stumbled into some bank by mistake." Now not only do they have a breathtaking view, with daylight and the sound of the Rotunda fountain coming through down to the ground floor, visitors on the main floor can look down and perhaps be intrigued into discovering some of the newly-developed attractions on that level.