Strengths stand out at UM's new, improved Lowe

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Art Critic

The Lowe Art Museum doesn't look the same anymore.

A summer-long interior overhaul has altered the spaces, accommodating a semi-permanent display of the museum's holdings and leaving plenty of room for the usual loan exhibition and the annual faculty show.

There is a carpet on the floor now, and a newly acquired ornamental doorway from Java, attractive props that remind us of the

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serious purpose of this museum — to select, show and preserve art.

Truly diverse, and perhaps too richly massed at present, the art selected from the permanent collection necessitates long study; I will be going back for sure. But even on a first look around the new gallery arrangement, the Lowe's strengths stand out.

The Barton collection of American Indian textiles and beadwork, pottery and baskets is superb. One of the Navaho blankets, in fact, has been chosen to grace a new issue of U.S. postage stamps coming out next month. The Lowe has a very sophisticated group of Oriental artworks too, ranging from several elegant Japanese screens to a wonderfully earthy pottery water buffalo from the Han dynasty.

The Pre-Columbian group of ceramics is impressive, and there are a few rare examples of desirable Peruvian textiles. African art is well represented.

Displayed as it is, however, the painting collection suffers defeat: It is all but impossible to assess the works fairly. We can see and praise the latest acquisition, an image of *Saint Onuphrius* by the Spanish master Jusepe De Ribera (1591-1652), and it is possible to savor the naive charm of a pair of portraits by James Peale (1729-1831), the younger and less talented brother of Charles Willson Peale who headed the first American family of painters. But the manner in which the paintings hang edge to edge, period against period, nationality against nationality, makes the whole place look like an untidy frame shop. We get the idea that the Lowe owns a lot of paintings, but we are none too clear about how fine they are. The names are there — Claude Monet, Theodore Rousseau, Paul Gauguin, Henry Raeburn, Charles Bird King — but they rest in a visual mishmash, lacking context, hard to isolate, harder to appreciate.

No such lack of why or wherefore hampers the *Sharing Traditions* exhibition, a show that explores the careers of five 19th Century black American artists.

Curated from the collection of the National Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C., the works have been selected to demonstrate that several black Americans enjoyed distinguished followings in the 19th Century, as well as to showcase their accomplishments. One of the byproducts of that scheme is that the show mirrors the 19th Century in American art. It traces the rise of the artist from self-trained journeyman limner to a person of professional, even international status. It also recapitulates the range of traditional subject matter, from portrait, landscape, genre and history, to the exploration of the mystery of the inner world as first penetrated by the Symbolists.

There is the undercurrent of a racial story here too, but race is hardly relevant to the success of these artists, who looked for recognition from the mainstream. Joshua Johnston, a Baltimore portrait painter and perhaps the first black American to be considered a professional artist, flourished before the Civil War. He is the only one in this group who was unschooled, and the only one who never traveled abroad. The foreign training of Robert Duncanson and Edward Bannister, artists of the next generation, is only too obvious in their more mature paintings. They echo, respectively, English and French landscape traditions. Edmonia Lewis, first of this set to use themes based on her own minority situation — she was half Indian, half black, and a woman — managed to become a popular artist. She is also the only sculptor in this group, and none too inspired at that, although her pearly white "statue" groups were precisely what the American tourist in Rome thought worthy of bringing home.

Henry Tanner is arguably the most important artist in the group. Trained in Philadelphia under Thomas Eakins (who also painted his portrait), Tanner traveled extensively, spent most of his life in Europe and died in Paris, a well known expatriate painter, in 1937. He knew and tested the most advanced art of his time, but he was, by nature, a conservative artist. Unfortunately, his canvases have not held up well: *Salome* in this show is cracked and dulled now. But his best abilities are still evident in such works as *Abraham's Oak* and *Fishermen at Sea.*

Even so, it is Duncanson's paintings that sing out above all the rest at the Lowe, their Claudian beauties typical of the mid-century taste for the ideal landscape, the symbol of an age that took its spirituality very seriously. The aura created by Duncanson, and sustained in Bannister's Barbizon-inspired vision, lasts long enough to permeate the Barton Wing, where selected members of the art faculty have mounted their show. It looks restrained overall, handsomely installed and very refined. Included are a pair of hands-on graphic works by Tom Gormely; the official, ceremonial mace of the University of Miami, designed by sculptor Bill Ward; a series of spare paintings by Brian Curtis; a sequence of romantic ones by Ronna Harris; and new sculptural works in cast iron, enamel and clay by Ron Fondaw. For once, and happily, this show ushers us out with a sense that things have been done well; that art is no fugitive thing on the university campus.

FOCUS ON THE COLLECTION, (through Jan. 11) **SHARING TRADITIONS: FIVE BLACK ARTISTS IN 19TH CENTURY AMERICA,** and **UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI FACULTY SHOW** (through Sept. 28): 12 to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday, and 12 to 5 p.m. Sunday; Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami, 1301 Stanford Dr., Coral Gables.

In conjunction with the exhibition "Sharing Traditions" there will be a panel discussion on "The Black Experience in America" at the Lowe at 8 p.m. Sept. 18. The talk is open to the public free of charge. For information call 284-3535.