



Guggenheim Bilbao

Perfect SPACE

Great art needs a great space and there are few greater spaces for displaying art than the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain. Now celebrating its 10th birthday, this architectural masterpiece is credited with rejuvenating the economy of the entire region. Words: Lynn Parr

THERE ARE FEW CITIES in the world defined by a single building. But to millions of people arriving each year from around the world, Bilbao in Basque northern Spain means the Guggenheim Museum.

And to the residents of the Basque region, the museum means a city transformed from a depressed industrial landscape to a vibrant cultural hub – and a revamped economy based on tourism.

The building is as much of a masterpiece as the art within – soaring ceilings, walls of glass and coffee-stripped limestone, thrusting projections faced with overlapping fish scales of titanium guaranteed to last a

hundred years. The curved forms shimmer in the sunlight – silver in the early morning, gold in the afternoon. At night, they rise up out of the darkness like the funnels of a ship in an inky black sea. In the lowering light and pouring rain of a storm, the sinuous walls seem to melt like chocolate.

The museum sits beside the Nervión River and if you are entering from cityside, rather than from the waterfront promenade, you descend a long, sweeping staircase from Jeff Koons' 25-tonne steel sculpture *Puppy* (see overleaf), resplendent in its coat of fresh flowers.

Inside, you step into a futuristic world of



soaring columns and light-filled space – you don't even realise just how big some of the 19 galleries are until you see a tiny figure beside one of the artworks, such as Richard Serra's vast steel labyrinth *The Matter of Time*, the largest sculpture commission in history. Other permanent installations include a giant spider by Louise Bourgeois, fire fountains by Yves Klein, and strips of LED lights by Jenny Holzer.

The museum was built here as part of a grand plan by local authorities to reinvent the city as a

major tourist destination when the coal and steel industries collapsed. At the same time, the American Solomon R Guggenheim Foundation was looking for international partners for expansion into Europe. When a travelling exhibition of artworks from the Guggenheim New York was held in Madrid in 1991, Basque government officials went along and suggested a collaboration with the foundation to build a modern art museum in Bilbao. The regional government funded construction of the \$100 million

building, while the foundation supplied the artworks and continues to manage the museum. Once the American architect Frank Gehry had been chosen in 1992 to design it, construction was fast-tracked and the museum opened in 1997.

Subsequent public projects included a revamped airport, a conference and performing arts centre, a tram system and a redeveloped waterfront – all designed by celebrated architects such as Norman Foster, who created the new railway station.

“Over the past 10 years there ▷

ABOVE Designed by celebrated American architect Frank Gehry, the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao is a futuristic confection of sandstone, glass and titanium

Art in the USA

As part of its 10th anniversary celebrations, the Guggenheim Bilbao is hosting possibly the most important exhibition of American art ever assembled.

Art in the USA: 300 Years of Innovation consists of around 200 paintings and sculptures by some of the most iconic names in art, such as Pollock, Warhol, Remington and Rothko. The

exhibition not only traces the evolution of art in America, but also presents a pictorial review of the country's history.

Elizabeth Glassman, president of the Terra Foundation for American Art, which is a co-sponsor, says the show represents more than just art.

"We all believe strongly that we're not just exporting American art abroad," she says. "We're here to engage in a dialogue. We've thought about who is going to be looking at this; what their tradition is. We want to meet everyone on common ground. The art just sings in this building."

Museum Director General Juan Ignacio Vidarte says the exhibition "gives a very clear picture of how American society has evolved. People can see the wealth and depth of this trajectory. For the international audience, the show offers an extraordinary possibility of analysing the art of the US over the past 300 years. This show will make it possible to understand that the last 50 years is the outcome of the last 250 years."

Art in the USA: 300 Years of Innovation runs until 27 April.



ABOVE Jackson Pollock, *Number 18, 1950*,

©The Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

CENTRE John Singleton Copley, *Portrait of a Lady in a Blue Dress, 1763*, Terra Foundation for American Art, Chicago

BOTTOM Albert Bierstadt, *Sierra Nevada, 1871*, Reynolda House Museum of American Art, Winston-Salem, North Carolina.




have constantly been more than 1 million visitors a year from around the world – in a city of 500,000," says Thomas Krens, director of the foundation. "This city has made a capital commitment to being one of the true cultural capitals of Europe."

As well as the museum, tourists can visit the rejuvenated Old Town with its Gothic cathedral, traditional bars and restaurants serving local specialities, shop in modern malls – even attend surfing championships at nearby beaches. The economic upswing of the regeneration is so marked, it's said to have repaid the initial investment in the museum several times over.

"Scale was a very important factor in the building of this museum," Krens says. "It's not just a function of the design, but also a function of astonishment. Whether in a small city like Bilbao or a large one like Frankfurt, the museum would have the same impact. It's designed to be a world-class venue. It's the balance of the architecture, the programming and the professionalism that goes beyond your expectations."

The foundation is currently building a Guggenheim museum in Abu Dhabi, also designed by Gehry. Krens says it's important to expand, despite the success of the Bilbao venue.

"We can't relax – there's a competitive world out there. We have to take on other ambitious projects. What we're doing in the Middle East is designed to go beyond even Bilbao." 

For information on the museum call (+34) 94 435 90 80, email informacion@guggenheim-bilbao.es, or see www.guggenheim-bilbao.es. For information on visiting Bilbao, see www.tourspain.co.uk.



TOP The Old Town has been rejuvenated as part of the city's reinvention
ABOVE Jeff Koons's *Puppy* dominates the main entrance to the museum