

On a Mission To Loosen Up The Louvre

By CAROL VOGEL

PARIS

IN a subterranean space far below the swarms of tourists crowding the Louvre's famed pyramid are remnants of a medieval fortress. Here, along a 12th-century sandstone passage, the American artist Joseph Kosuth is about to suspend 15 sentences in giant white neon tubing. The show, "Neither Appearance Nor Illusion," which opens this month, is a first for the 64-year-old Mr. Kosuth. "You only get to do something at the Louvre once in a lifetime," he said, explaining that he picked the museum's catacombs rather than a conventional gallery because "it's a place I've always loved, it gets a lot of traffic and has never been used for contemporary art before."

Neither has the 16th-century Salle des Bronzes, which will soon be famous not just for its magnificent collection of ancient bronzes but for its ceiling, which is about to be painted by another celebrated figure of American art: Cy Twombly.

"I'm really not doing something new," Henri Loyrette, the Louvre's director, said as he was sprinting through the museum's galleries one recent morning. "I'm trying to revive a tradition."

Mr. Loyrette — who arrived at the Louvre in 2001 after 18 years at the Musée d'Orsay — was referring to 1953, when Georges Braque decorated the ceiling in an ornate gallery that was once Henri II's antechamber. Since then the Louvre has been primarily focused on burnishing the reputation of dead artists, not promoting new ones, especially if



MUSÉE DU LOUVRE/I. M. PEI AND ETIENNE REVAULT

The Louvre is building a new wing, its most radical addition since I. M. Pei's 1989 glass pyramid, above.

they're American.

But there seems to be an infusion of many things American at the Louvre these days.

In addition to seeing site-specific installations by high-profile contemporary artists, one might also hear American writers like Toni Morrison or see performances by the chor-

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eographer and dancer Bill T. Jones. Memberships conferring extra privileges, long a standard option at American museums, started here in 2006. Mr. Loyrette also ushered in free admission on Friday nights to anyone under 26. (To make Americans feel even closer to home, a McDonald's restaurant and McCafé are planned to open near the Louvre next month.)

Mr. Loyrette has also been charging about the world in what many might call an American manner — drumming up donations from Cincinnati to Hong Kong, as well as trading on the Louvre's brand and collection to raise cash from Atlanta to Abu Dhabi.

Not surprisingly, his approach has not been popular with everyone. Critics seem to view the idea of branding the Louvre as both crass and unnecessary, and are particularly dismissive of Mr. Loyrette's outreach abroad. Supporters believe that he is merely doing what any museum director has to do these days to make the institution a financially stable place. For Mr. Loyrette's part, he said he is simply, "making the museum more modern."

Regardless of his methods and motives, what does seem clear is that Mr. Loyrette, with major plans for expansion, satellite franchises and new partnerships that would have been unheard of even a decade ago, is overseeing the most drastic rethinking of the Louvre's place and purpose in at least 20 years. (It was 1989 when I. M. Pei finished the then-controversial glass pyramid for the museum's entrance courtyard.)

On a private tour given over the summer, Mr. Loyrette, lanky, 57, and spry in a dark suit, seemed unencumbered by the weight of the world's most august and treasured art collection. Instead he seemed preoccupied with the details, spouting facts and figures as he dashed through the seemingly endless halls and galleries. "If you want to see everything you must walk 14 kilometers," he announced — more than eight miles. Then: "Forty percent of our visitors are under the age of 26." And on a more worrisome note: "80 percent of the people only want to see the Mona Lisa."



PATRICK MESSINA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Much of what he has been trying to do at the museum has been to fuse those numbers so that they are not working at cross purposes: to push the visitors — especially young ones — past the Mona Lisa to explore the miles of largely unexplored artworks beyond it.

Looking at yet another set of numbers, it is hard to argue with his results. Since he arrived a little over eight years ago, attendance at the museum is up 67 percent, with 8.5 million visitors recorded in 2008 and 10 million expected by 2014. (The Metropolitan Museum of Art has nearly 5 million visitors, and the British Museum 5.9 million.)

At the same time he has created an endowment, which right now stands at nearly \$175 million, largely to compensate for gradual decrease in contributions from the French government; in 2008 it covered only 47 percent of the museum's \$315 million costs, down from 60 percent in 2001.

Not that Mr. Loyrette hasn't had some help. His predecessor, Pierre Rosenberg, had started clearing out many of the institution's cobwebs — introducing corporate financing (a relatively new phenomenon for French museums), hiring a fund-raising staff (also novel) and supervising an ambitious exhibition schedule — in the years before Mr. Loyrette arrived.

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While there is a long and ingrained history of philanthropy in America, not so in France, where until recently it was assumed that the government was responsible for the country's museums.

Mr. Loyrette received some help on this front too. In 2003 a new tax was introduced permitting individuals to deduct 66 percent of the value of any artwork given to cultural institutions and allowing corporations to deduct 60 percent to 90 percent if the work is deemed an historic treasure. The change quickly netted the Louvre 130 Italian Renaissance drawings from the Carrefour retail group — the value of which, Mr. Loyrette said, exceeded the museum's annual acquisitions budget. More recently the insurance company AXA donated a 17th-century painting by the Le Nain brothers to the museum, and Pierre Bergé gave the Louvre a Goya portrait in memory of Yves Saint Laurent, his partner, who died last year.

Outside of France Mr. Loyrette has embarked on multiple partnerships with the intention of raising both cash and the museum's profile. Some, like next year's planned exhibition devoted to the German sculptor Franz Xaver Messerschmidt at the tiny Neue Galerie in Manhattan, seem relatively benign. Others have many worried that he is diluting the Louvre brand at best and cheapening it at worst.

In 2004 he struck a three-year agreement with the High Museum of Art in Atlanta that includes seven temporary exhibitions from the Louvre's collection in exchange for a \$6.4 million donation earmarked for the refurbishment of the Louvre's 18th-century French furniture galleries.

More controversially, he made a deal two years ago with Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates to create the Louvre Abu Dhabi — a 260,000 square-foot museum designed by the French architect Jean Nouvel and expected to open in 2013 on Saadiyat Island, off the city's coast. In an arrangement that echoes the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation's deal with the city of Bilbao, Spain, Abu Dhabi will pay the Louvre \$572.1 million for the use of the Louvre's name and give the French museums another \$786.5 million for loans, exhibitions and management advice.

Mr. Loyrette said that the funds will enable him to establish the first-ever endowment for a French museum and pay for special projects that the government will not, but critics were not appeased. "One can only be shocked by the commercial and promotional use of masterpieces of our national heritage," wrote a group of leading art historians in the newspaper *Le Monde* in 2007. Similar outrage has been expressed over a plan to build a satellite branch of the Louvre in Lens, an econom-

ically depressed mining town northwest of Paris. His critics say a museum there is unnecessary; there are already two provincial museums nearby, one in Lille, another in Arras, both with art from the Louvre.

Mr. Loyrette defends the project. "For people living in Lens there is nothing to see," he said. In addition to rotating exhibitions from the Louvre's collection it will also be a laboratory for contemporary art with galleries big enough to showcase large-scale installations.

Others say both praise and criticism of Mr. Loyrette is misplaced, as he is merely carrying out projects initiated by the French government, which has always overseen the running of the museums. Marc Fumaroli, an art historian who is president of the Friends of the Louvre in Paris, pointed out that although Mr. Loyrette is very powerful, he is also "a functionary of the state."

"The deal with Abu Dhabi was conceived by the government," Mr. Fumaroli added. "Lens was too."

But Mr. Loyrette's biggest challenge might be the Louvre itself. If attendance increases at the rate it has been, in five years 10 million visitors a year will be crowding through an entrance designed for less than half that number. Already there is an exasperating and potentially discouraging crush at the Pei-designed

pyramid as visitors vie to get in. Indeed, being told about the line outside the museum was the only thing that made Mr. Loyrette bristle. He said he had asked Mr. Pei's office to reconfigure the interior space to make it more visitor friendly.

Another troubling reality is that the vast majority of those millions of people come to see only one — or three — pieces of art. "Everyone wants to see the same three things: the Mona Lisa; the Venus de Milo and the Winged Victory," he moaned.

To make people more aware of the rest of the Louvre's offerings, he recently released a new audio guide highlighting other works of art. To the same end he is also making sure that contemporary art continues to be subtly installed throughout the museum. His first commission was a painting and two sculptures by the German artist Anselm Kiefer that can be found in a stairwell linking the Egyptian and Mesopotamian antiquities. He recently asked the French artist François Morellet to create stained-glass windows for a Second Empire staircase.

One of the museum's biggest shortcomings, he realizes, is the lack of American art. "It's a scandal," Mr. Loyrette said. "We're supposed to be a universal museum, yet we only have three American paintings in our collection. So besides showing Mr. Kosuth and commissioning Mr. Twombly's ceiling, the museum has set up an English language version of its online database, and soon it is expected to announce the expansion of a comprehensive online catalog of works created by American artists in French public collections.

But his most noticeable contribution will likely be the \$67 million wing to house the Louvre's world-class collection of Islamic art, something no other Louvre director has tried to do, and the most radical architectural addition since Pei's glass pyramid.

"It was not even a department when I arrived," said Mr. Loyrette. "We did not want to make this a separate museum because Islamic art is so artistically and politically important. It's so closely linked with all of Western art."

At 8:30 one summer morning, Mr. Loyrette could be found briefing some of the project's backers. In addition to the Saudi Arabian Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, a grandson of King Abdul Aziz, Saudi Arabia's founder, who has donated \$20 million towards its construction (the largest gift ever made by an individual in France.), the French government has pledged \$28.5 million, while Total, the oil company, has agreed to put up \$4.8 million. The rest is coming from other French companies including Lafarge, the world's largest cement maker.

The Italian architect Mario Bellini and the French architect Rudy Ricciotti have designed a translucent undulating roof fashioned from small glass disks, which will sit in the center of the Visconti courtyard, a majestic, neo-Classical space in the middle of the Louvre's south wing.

Inside, the two-story wing will house a good portion of the Louvre's collection of about 10,000 objects from the Islamic collection, roughly four times its current space, which has only room to show some 1,300 works.

Mr. Loyrette, a trained art historian, appears as comfortable discussing Anselm Kiefer's paintings as he does the oldest known celestial globe. He decided to join the museum world because he "didn't want to become a teacher," he said.

Growing up in Paris, he recalls playing in the Tuileries as a child. "I can't remember a time when I wasn't going to the Louvre," he said. His mother, an Egyptologist, worked there; his father is a lawyer.

He never forgets that the Louvre was originally a palace before it was transformed into a museum in 1793. And he treats it as if it were his home. "I spend every Sunday here," Mr. Loyrette said. "I don't have the time during the week." Each visit he inspects a different set of galleries, looking at the installations, taking note of things he thinks should be changed, making sure nothing is out of place.

"I figure it takes me a month to get through the whole museum," he said and paused before adding, "Cezanne once said, 'The Louvre is the book in which we learn to read.' It's exactly like that for me too."