

A cultural transformation

Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art unveiled its latest acquisition during the weekend, a Mark Rothko painting, *No. 210/No. 211 (Orange)*. The work of the famed abstract expressionist, who came to this country from Russia in 1913 at age 9, will be featured in a temporary exhibition called "See the Light: The Luminist Tradition in American Art." The painting, which has large rectangles of vivid color and has only been exhibited twice in public, will be moved to the museum's permanent collection once the exhibition closes January 28.

Crystal Bridges officials announced the acquisition last month. As has been Alice Walton's custom, no price was disclosed, though you can bet it was a pretty penny. It's another reminder of how Crystal Bridges is spurring nothing short of a cultural transformation in Northwest Arkansas. The region's business transformation—with the spectacular growth of Wal-Mart, Tyson Foods, J.B. Hunt and other companies through the years—has been chronicled in everything from books to magazine articles to television specials. This is the next step in the region's evolution.

The growth in the number of employees who work directly for those companies was followed by growth in the housing market and the retail sector. Next there came an explosion in the number of Wal-Mart vendors in the region. Now, the cultural transformation has begun as Northwest Arkansas is recognized as a destination for some of the world's most cultured people. With that change will come first-class hotels, restaurants, art galleries and retailers to serve the well-heeled visitors and new residents. Those facilities will complement the existing midlevel hotels and restaurants.

Earlier this year, *Business Insider* put Bentonville on its list of the "15 Hottest American Cities of the Future." It was predicted that "as the Waltons continue to invest and

Wal-Mart continues to thrive, Bentonville will become a top city." Just



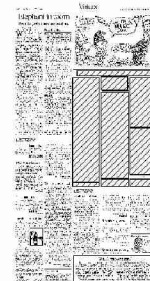
Rex Nelson

last week, Wal-Mart and the city announced plans for a shopping and business center on the northwest corner of the Bentonville square. A 31,000-square-foot Neighborhood Market will anchor what will be known as Midtown Center, which will include a variety of retailers on the ground floor with office space on the second and third floors.

Within walking distance of that planned development, construction continues on the 21c Museum Hotel, which will combine a boutique hotel, contemporary art museum and world-class restaurant modeled after the award-winning 21c Museum Hotel in Louisville, Ky. The complex will have 12,000 square feet of museum, meeting and event space, along with an outdoor sculpture garden.

During the summer, it was announced that Emmanuel Gardinier will be the hotel's general manager after having served as managing director of the Planters Inn in Charleston, S.C. Under Gardinier's leadership, Planters Inn was named one of the world's best hotels by *Travel + Leisure* magazine. Gardinier, who is from France, has managed hotels from Switzerland to the French West Indies. Prior to moving to Charleston, he was the general manager of Little Palm Island Resort & Spa, a private island resort in the Florida Keys. His past stops give you an idea of the high level at which 21c plans to play.

Gardinier called Bentonville the "home to people from all over the world" and a place that has "cultural attractions that compete with big cities." It's not the kind of talk once heard about places in Arkansas. Matt McClure will serve as the execu-



tive chef of the 21c restaurant, The Hive. McClure, a Little Rock native, plans to showcase Ozark ingredients such as black walnuts, freshly milled cornmeal, country hams, peaches and melons. After a number of years in Boston, McClure worked at Little Rock's Capital Hotel.

The Hive will add to the growing number of fine-dining options in Bentonville, places such as Tusk & Trotter American Brasserie, which is just off the square. The trend of top-notch restaurants and hotels designed to serve demanding travelers isn't confined to Bentonville. In Fayetteville, for instance, the downtown hotel that originally was a Hilton before becoming a run-down embarrassment for the city's leaders has been transformed into The Chancellor.

The team behind the hotel includes well-known Arkansas names such as restaurateur Scott Bowman of Fayetteville, landscape designer Chris Olsen of Little Rock and interior designer Tobi Fairley of Little Rock. Bowman, the owner of Theo's in Fayetteville, has opened

Union Kitchen + Drinks, adding to downtown Fayetteville's growing dining scene.

In Siloam Springs, meanwhile, chef Miles James, the owner of the renowned restaurant James at the Mill in Johnson, has opened 28 Springs in partnership with Shelley and Todd Simmons. I recently visited the restaurant and can tell you it's like something you would find in a chic neighborhood of a large city. The old Crain Motor Co. building was renovated with an open kitchen, exposed beams and historic photos of Siloam Springs.

Places such as 28 Springs, The Chancellor, 21c and Tusk & Trotter are just the beginning as Northwest Arkansas experiences an upscale transformation the likes of which no part of this state has ever seen. One of the world's best art museums is the protagonist. A vastly different region will be the result.

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