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**F**rom the original lyrics of Willie Nelson's "On the Road Again" to a rare edition of Spanish explorer Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's travels through the Southwest, **The Wittliff Collections** at **Texas State University** presents a thorough study of the region's writers, photographers, journeymen and cowboys after a transformational renovation and expansion designed by **McKinney York Architects (MYA)**.

**Bill Wittliff**, a novelist, photographer, and the acclaimed screenwriter of the western classic "Lonesome Dove," began curating his collection at the Central Texas university in 1986 **with his wife, Sally**. What started as an assortment of papers from Austin-based author and folklorist **Frank Dobie** quickly transformed into an extensive archive and exhibition of celebrated Southwestern artists.

**The Wittliff Collections** welcomes 20,000+ visitors a year, and its collections – as well as its staff – had seen significant growth in recent years. In addition to needing more space to display new acquisitions, there was a desire to improve the visitor experience through better flow between the galleries and modernization of exhibits with state-of-the-art technology.

The Wittliffs, along with **collections Director David Coleman**, called upon Principal Michelle Rossomando, AIA, RID and Associate Aaron Taylor, AIA at MYA to envision a new lobby and exhibit galleries to further the collection's literary, photographic, and musical mission. One-of-a-kind environments totaling 8,400 square feet engage visitors in the history, culture, and character of the unique artifacts on display from the archives.

"The treatment that McKinney York brought really offers a significantly heightened museum experience," Coleman said. "The gallery now feels like it's showcasing the crown jewels of the region."

Founded in 2017, **the Texas Music Collection** was a leading factor in the need for expansion in exhibit space. After collecting music in the archives for many years, this new gallery allows for **memorabilia of Jerry Jeff Walker, Ray Benson, Selena and others** to be on display permanently. The design for this black box gallery features the exposed steel structure of the building and a suspended lighting grid akin to a sound studio or live concert venue. State-of-the-art interactive media around the room allows for guests to take a deeper dive, **by both looking and listening**, into the vast music collection.







All new spaces are grounded in three spatial characteristics of the “**spirit of place**” of the Southwest: **mystery, thresholds, and vistas**. The journey through the museum begins by walking through a diaphanous wall that frames views of rustic wooden beams floating below a backlit light cove. Museum quality lighting highlights the artifacts while creating shadows that add mystery and surprise around each corner. Thresholds between each gallery mark the crossing, like borders in the landscape that mingle together, setting the mood for each exhibit. As visitors navigate the collections, they are offered choreographed vistas connecting old and new spaces transitioned by warm wooden portals.

“I think MYA did a fantastic job carrying forward the elements of the museum while bringing new elements into the space that complement what was already there,” Coleman added. “It all fits so nicely – **the renovation adds a whole new level of excitement and energy.**”





“We already had a good foundation in music collecting which is why we felt we would be successful. **McKinney York** helped us carry that movement forward with this new gallery,” Coleman added. “It might be the most interesting space designed because it’s so different from the rest of the museum.”

A new enlarged gallery was created to **permanently display the Lonesome Dove Collection**, the multi-media production archives of one of the most beloved television miniseries of all time. MYA cleverly leveraged the constraints of the existing ‘L’ shaped floor plan to create an intimate screening room showcasing the film. The design for the Lonesome Dove Gallery uses the existing material palette of stained pine and Saltillo tile mixed with tailored frameless glass artifact cases to create a modern authenticity to the displays. Elegant detailing utilizing regional woods, glass, leather and metal is sympathetic to the past while looking towards the future.







Bill Wittliff passed away in 2019, but, his legacy lives on through his carefully curated, and designed, collection.

“McKinney York was really great to work with – they made our gallery more modern and the spaces flow so well,” **Sally** said. “When the space opened, I was sad Bill couldn’t be there to see it because he would have been really, really proud of how it was designed. I was drop-jawed at how great everything turned out.”

Located at the top of the **Albert B. Alkek Library** (below), with sweeping views of the Texas Hill Country just outside, this understated yet nuanced revitalization distills the ethos of the Southwest – reflecting Bill Wittliff’s larger-than-life presence and the University’s dedication to serving the needs of the diverse population of Texas and the world beyond.

