



G R O U N D S F O R S C U L P T U R E

History of Grounds For Sculpture

Grounds For Sculpture was established by artist Seward Johnson with a vision to make the arts accessible to all: his sculpture park would actively engage the public through art and nature, while promoting sculpture as an artform around the world.

Seward Johnson founded the Johnson Atelier Technical Institute of Sculpture in 1974 to help sculptors retain control over their artwork and to open access to previously guarded information on production techniques. By late 1982, he'd moved the Atelier to a building adjacent to the New Jersey State Fairgrounds.

As the Atelier began to produce a growing body of work for many artists, Johnson began to envision a place to exhibit sculpture in nature. It became essential to Johnson's vision that the new sculpture park would be an accessible place where all people could experience contemporary sculpture and beautiful gardens in a self-directed way, leading to greater appreciation and understanding of both art and nature.

An initial twelve acres of the Fairgrounds were acquired in 1984. The following year, Johnson instituted an architectural design competition for creating a sculpture park at the Fairgrounds, which resulted in the selection of Brian Carey of AC/BC Associates of New York City to be the project architect and landscape designer. Construction started in July 1989. The design incorporated the existing Motor Exhibits Building, Domestic Arts Building, and racetrack grandstand from the NJ State Fairgrounds and successfully relocated and renovated the "Rabbit" building, now known as the Museum Building. The adapted structures are still in use today.

Coinciding with the 14th Annual Sculpture Conference in Philadelphia, Grounds For Sculpture opened to the public in 1992, with an inaugural exhibition featuring fifteen outdoor works by noted sculptors including George Segal, Beverly Pepper, and Mel Edwards. Grounds For Sculpture has since shown the work of more than 700 artists, including both established and emerging sculptors, through a combination of solo and group exhibitions.

In the following decades, additional land acquisitions allowed the sculpture park to expand to 42 acres and develop signature landscape design features including the Bamboo Observation Tower, the Water Garden, Red Maple Allée, Wisteria Pergola, and Lotus Pond Gazebo. It now provides a fertile home for thousands of trees, flowering shrubs, and diverse plants. The Meadow, a 7-acre area with naturalized planting, was the final section to open in 2011 with its inaugural exhibition, *Steve Tobin: Aerial Roots*.

The campus continued to evolve to meet the needs of its growing visitors, collection, and program. In 1997, a redesign of the Domestic Arts Building offered new exhibition space, a café, museum shop, and administration space. Two years later, a full-service gourmet restaurant—Rat’s Restaurant—and an office complex were added. The Seward Johnson Center for the Arts (SJCA) was created in 2007 to expand GFS’s educational spaces and capabilities and offer new visitor amenities. In 2014, the SJCA continued its enhancements with three new galleries, Van Gogh Café, a new museum shop, new outdoor art installations, and more. Through subsequent renovations and modifications, the Seward Johnson Center for the Arts was awarded LEEDv4.1 certification in 2019.

In 2022, Grounds For Sculpture received a Level I Accreditation by The ArbNet Arboretum Accreditation Program and The Morton Arboretum for achieving particular standards of professional practices deemed important for arboreta and botanic gardens. The ArbNet Arboretum Accreditation Program is the only global initiative to officially recognize arboreta at various levels of development, capacity, and professionalism, and also includes recognition as an accredited arboretum in the Morton Register of Arboreta, a database of the world’s arboreta and gardens dedicated to woody plants. Then, just two short years later, GFS was upgraded to a Level II Accreditation. As of April 2025, GFS is one of only 236 arboreta worldwide with the Level II Accreditation.

Grounds For Sculpture and Johnson Atelier joined together in 2025 becoming one unified body— a dynamic new catalyst for contemporary art curation, fabrication, and restoration of large-scale, high-caliber sculpture, and amplified art experiences. This union cements artist and founder Seward Johnson’s legacy by combining the unique strengths of both institutions to usher in a new era of artistic synergy, expanding impact, recognition, and artist support on a global scale.

Today, Ground For Sculpture’s vibrant 42-acre campus features more than 500 works in the permanent collection, and typically more than 300 works by renowned and emerging artists are on view year-round. Over 60,000 plant species can be found on the campus, along with six indoor galleries, and Rat’s Restaurant, as well as world-class fabrication facilities at Johnson Atelier, 25 artist studios and artist apartments. It continues to welcome 250,000 visitors annually through a dynamic schedule of exhibitions and experiential art, horticulture, and wellness programs.