The Frist Art Museum is not only an important cultural focal point for the community, but also a significant architectural structure. The Frist is privileged to occupy one of Nashville’s great historic landmarks—the former main post office, located at 919 Broadway. In the early 1930s, the Hoover administration approved plans to build the post office, and construction took place in 1933–34 under the direction of local firm Marr & Holman, financed by the Treasury Department’s Office of Construction. Between 1935 and 1939, more than 1,800 post offices were built in the United States—three times the number built during the previous fifty years. Following guidelines from the Office of the Supervising Architect, Nashville’s post office displayed the two most distinctive architectural styles of the period: classicism and art deco.

The Frist Art Museum is supported in part by

For information about accessibility at the Frist, visit FristArtMuseum.org/accessibility

A Landmark Repurposed
From Post Office to Art Museum

The Frist Art Museum is closed on Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year’s Day.
Most of the pierced, low-relief designs in the grillwork were selected by the architects from a federal building planning manual. Twelve of these motifs, running along the top of the grillwork, are icons that celebrate the progress and productivity of American civilization. The four you see immediately upon entering the building from Broadway show modes used by the postal service for transporting mail: an airplane, a locomotive, a ship, and an automobile. The other eight icons, in the upper grillwork of the post office’s main lobby, represent a variety of activities: scientific research (a microscope, a test tube, and a flask), farming (a sheaf of wheat, a sickle, and a plow), industry (sawmills), publishing (a book press), metalwork (a hammer and an anvil), the pursuit of knowledge (the lamp of learning resting on books), and nautical endeavors (a dolphin and a propeller).

The post office building has been central to the life of the city. During its construction, unemployed workers gathered by the hundreds at the building site, seeking jobs. World War II soldiers sent last letters to loved ones before boarding trains next door at Union Station on their way to the European front. Every April, long lines of last-minute tax filers formed, with postal workers sometimes accepting the returns in the street.

In 1984, the post office building was officially added to the National Register of Historic Places. Two years later, however, a new main postal distribution center was constructed on Royal Parkway, near the airport, and much of the old building was no longer needed. After years of indecision, a unique public-private partnership arrived at the perfect solution.

In response to community demand, the Metropolitan Nashville government and Dr. Thomas Frist Jr. combined resources to transform the old post office into a visual arts center. The city agreed to purchase the building from the US Postal Service, to subsidize part of its renovation, and to lease the majority of it to the new museum. Dr. Frist and the Frist Foundation undertook the rest of the updates to the landmark building, with Tuck-Hinton Architects of Nashville guiding the preservation of its architectural details and spirit. The original pine floors were taken up, refinished, and reinstalled, and the huge high-ceilinged sorting rooms in the center of the original facility were naturally suited to their new role as spacious exhibition galleries. The former skylight in the center of the building, previously covered over in the 1950s, had its function resurrected in the new design, accompanied by clerestory windows that now light the atrium and the grand staircases.

As the Frist Center for the Visual Arts, the museum opened to the public on April 8, 2001, with the mission to present and originate high-quality exhibitions with related educational programs and community outreach activities. On April 2, 2018, it formally became the Frist Art Museum to convey more clearly what visitors can expect when entering the building.