Museum in Motion

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The visitor coming to The Metropolitan Museum of Art for the first time has probably heard of the richness and extent of its collections of paintings and sculpture; its archaeological collections from the ancient Near East, Egypt, Greece, and Rome, from China, Japan, and India; and its huge and varied decorative arts collections.

To the casual observer, the Museum’s displays of paintings neatly hung in rows, or its impressive European and American period rooms may give the place a deceptive air of changeless permanence, static and quiescent – a place for the placid contemplation of works of art. Yet no visitor can be unaware that the Museum is full of activity and change, and there are many aspects of the institution itself that, though they may escape the attention at first, inevitably arouse curiosity. To judge from the requests addressed to the staff, there are many things the public wants to know about the Museum – how it began and how it has developed – in addition to information about the collections.

It is sometimes forgotten that the basic purpose of most American art museums was to provide inspiration and instruction for American artists and designers, as well as education and enjoyment for the general public. For about a hundred years after the Revolution, American artists complained that they were forced to go to Europe for training and for the opportunity to study old master paintings, as well as classical and Renaissance monuments of sculpture and architecture. These complaints were voiced with increasing frequency and effect as the years passed, and finally the cry was raised in the mid-nineteenth century that art museums were a necessity for America. As a result, about twenty-five active museums were founded in various cities across the country between the end of the Civil War and the turn of the century. This altruism, however, had a practical side. By the middle of the nineteenth century, manufacturers, merchants, and educators both in England and America became aware that trained draughtsmen, designers, sculptors, and architects were not a romantic cultural luxury but an absolute economic necessity. Plans for a building and designs for a locomotive could not be made without them, nor could any type of goods that depended upon design, such as textiles, pottery, hardware, or furniture. This fact was brought forcibly to public attention by such international displays as the Crystal Palace Exposition in London in 1851, which resulted in the foundation of the Victoria and Albert Museum. Here textiles, pottery, woodwork, paintings, and sculpture were brought together for the instruction and inspiration of British artists, craftsmen, and designers. When the
Gallery talks in 1920 and 1965

A public school group in 1924, and the Junior Museum in 1965
Metropolitan and other American art museums were founded, they followed closely upon this British precedent.

Another important factor in arousing and sustaining enthusiasm for an art museum in New York was the surprising success and popularity of the temporary art gallery assembled from New York studios and private collections for display at the Metropolitan Fair in 1864. This fair was organized to raise money for the care of soldiers wounded in the Civil War, and the committees of men and women responsible for the art gallery set an important precedent by bringing together the leading artists of New York, with certain influential political, financial, and social figures. Among the people on these committees were some who were to be the leaders in organizing and founding The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The foundation of the Museum itself was set in motion two years later in Paris, on the Fourth of July, 1866, when a group of patriotic American ladies and gentlemen gathered at the Pré Catalan to celebrate the occasion with a ball and a banquet. The principal after-dinner speaker was John Jay, an important figure in New York legal and political circles. His address that evening, partly serious, partly humorous, was on the subject of the invasion of Europe by American tourists. During the course of his remarks, he suggested that the time had come for the American people to lay the foundation of a national institution and gallery of art. Before the evening was over, a group of gentlemen from New York had formed themselves into a committee to investigate ways and means of transforming Mr. Jay's suggestion into fact, and the ultimate
result of their work, and that of later committees formed in New York, was the foundation of this Museum.

When the State of New York granted a charter to The Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1870, the Board of Trustees found themselves in a unique position. At that time the sole tangible possession of the Museum was its Charter—a legal document. The Museum did not own a single work of art; it had no building and practically no funds. But the Trustees had one other asset, and that was one of incalculable value: the enthusiastic concern and personal involvement of many members of the community and of the leaders of the New York art world.

Starting with the basic ideas outlined above, and with the unbounded enthusiasm of the founders and their successors, the Museum has developed over the past 95 years into a vast and complex educational organization. This complexity is reflected in the building itself. One of the first things to impress the visitor is the imposing size of the building and its sometimes baffling architectural intricacy.

The building as it stands today was erected in sections, with each part designated by a letter. The first—Wing A—was begun in 1874 and opened in 1880; it is now almost completely hidden by additions built in 1888 and 1894, and, most important, by the whole line of wings along Fifth Avenue. The central section of the Fifth Avenue façade was designed about 1894 by Richard Morris Hunt (1827-1895), one of the leading architects of his time. Trained in Paris at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, he was one of the designers for the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. The large scale and mixed Roman and French detail of the Main Hall seem to have been influenced by his work at Chicago. This section was opened in 1902, and the adjoining north and south wings, designed by McKim, Mead, and White, were completed over a period of years up to 1926. Thus, although the familiar Fifth Avenue façade has become one of
The Cesnola collection of vases in 1907, and the present gallery of early Greek vases.
the landmarks of the city, its air of monumental calm, completion, and architectural repose is false. Since the first building plans were drawn, no year has passed when some part of the building was not in the hands of architects. Actually, the building has never been completed. If new construction was not in progress, interior reconstruction or rearrangement was under way. It might reasonably be considered as a sort of cultural coral reef, always growing and changing.

The collections, too, are always changing — growing, being refined and culled over to eliminate lesser works and substitute more important examples. Some time during 1904 or 1905, when Henry James was in this country, he came to see the Museum and wrote an interesting passage about it that was published in his book *The American Scene*. His remarks are too long and rambling to be quoted entire but toward the end of his description of the Museum he wrote: "It is a palace of art, truly, that sits there on the edge of the Park, rearing itself with a radiance, yet offering you expanses to tread. . . . From the moment the visitor takes in two or three things — first, perhaps, the scale on which, in the past, bewildering tribute has flowed in; second, the scale on which it must absolutely now flow out; and, third, the presumption created by the vivacity of these two movements for a really fertilizing stir of the ground — he sees the whole place as the field of a drama. . . . Education, clearly, was going to seat herself in these marble halls — admirably prepared for her, to all appearance — and issue her instructions without regard to cost. The obvious, the beautiful, the thrilling thing was that, without regard to cost either, they were going to be obeyed. . . ."

"The Museum, in short, was going to be great, and in the geniality of the life to come such sacrifices, though resembling those of the funeral-pile of Sardanapalus, dwindled to nothing."

This acute appraisal of the position of the Museum, and the prophetic remarks about Education and the necessity for weeding out the collections may have had their influence here, for shortly after his book was published ambitious educational programs were inaugurated and the collections were given their first major critical examination by experts. Many galleries were completely reinstalled, and countless objects of minor interest were relegated to storage and later disposed of at auction. This is a process that has continued, though usually in a quieter way, ever since.

The ways in which objects are displayed have also changed greatly. In the interests of clarity and comprehensibility, there has been a perceptible trend, accelerated in recent years, to concentrate and simplify the exhibits — to have more, but show less. The serried rows of all-but-indistinguishable archaeological specimens and decorative duplicates, which made many of the early galleries impressive but stupefying, have given way in the cases to a few superlative examples, carefully selected. The specimens and duplicates and lesser works are available to the specialist for study, but are not on public view.

The basic form of the institution has remained remarkably constant since its inception. The governing body of the Museum is a board of trustees. The Trustees are technically the owners of the collections of art and the funds of the Museum, which they hold in trust to accomplish the purposes of the institution, as stated in the Mu-
The Information and Sales Desk in 1921, and the new Bookshop

Chinese porcelain in 1908, and in a recent installation
The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

But the broad and complicated nature of the Museum's present operations would probably astonish its founders. The Museum is actually run by the professional staff, headed by the Director, whose responsibilities, direct or delegated, range through legal and financial affairs, architectural and engineering matters, the security of the collections, the personnel, the superintendence of the building, the purchase of supplies and equipment, the management of the membership program, the production of Museum publications, the construction of new installations and special exhibitions, the care of the Museum's papers in Archives, the conservation and restoration of the works of art, and the operation of the Library, the art and book shops, the Auditorium, the educational program, and the Junior Museum. In addition to these service divisions, the Director must also deal with thirteen curatorial departments, whose staffs are actually responsible for the collections, and who attend to their care, exhibition, and study, and also attempt to increase and improve them. The staff now numbers 670 men and women who work full time.

The Louis XV alcove in 1910, and during the exhibition Period Rooms Re-occupied, 1963
The complexity and highly specialized operations of the Museum may be suggested by the fact that the Museum has between 275 and 300 galleries and other display spaces; merely the housekeeping necessary to keep such large areas in presentable condition is a major operation. The Museum contains two concert and lecture halls offering constant programs of the widest variety. There are four restaurants and between six or seven hundred thousand meals are served during the course of the average year. The Museum operates two fully equipped photographic studios. There are four bookshops. There is a fully equipped laboratory for the restoration and repair of paintings, and another solely for the care of drawings and prints and other works of art made of or on paper, as well as a general laboratory occupied with the restoration, scientific study and analysis, and mounting of countless other art objects. Several curatorial departments also maintain studios for the care of their particular types of collections, among them the Armorers Shop with its forge and anvils and a complete set of seventeenth-century
armorers’ tools. Other hives of activity are to be found in the Lending Collection of slides and photographs, in constant use by lecturers. The Library is the largest of its kind in the country. The Museum even maintains a special museum for children, where specially planned exhibitions are held, dealing with serious subjects but scaled to attract the curiosity of our youngest visitors. Last year over 112,000 people attended 551 talks or formal lectures on art in the building, and about 50 concerts of serious vocal and instrumental music were performed.

One reason that this Museum – like any major American museum – is so complex is that its basic “personality,” if it can be called that, is derived from various other, older social organizations. It is in fact a modern hybrid, bred with mingled characteristics of the cathedral, the royal palace, the theater, the school, the library, and, according to some critics, the department store. As the emphasis of interest or activity shifts, the character of the organization changes. Thus when the museum serves as a place of entertainment it takes on the dramatic quality of the theater, when it is used for scholarly purposes it can become an ivory tower, when its educational activities are stressed it becomes a school. For the scientist or professor it may seem to be merely a series of specimens illustrating a seductive theory, or a library of artifacts filed in chronological order. In the family of social institutions invented by man, the place of the museum is not rigidly fixed. It is pliant and can develop in many directions, or sometimes move simultaneously in several directions.

These multiple facets of the museum’s personality, and the dualities of Preservation and Use, of Education and Entertainment, generate the tensions that give the institution vitality and liveliness, lacking in more staid and antique institutions devoted to single purposes.

Let us for a moment cast aside the restricting concentrations of the scholarly specialist, no matter how necessary they may be for the student, the professor, or the scientific research worker, for they usually see in the museum only fragments of their
particular corner of a specialized field. Let us look at the art museum not as a collection of tangible artifacts, but rather as an expression of ideas and feelings about man and his most important work – Art. The particular virtues of an American art museum – seen from this broad and unaccustomed point of view – may be considered the result of a democratic experiment in creating a collective work of art. In this, perhaps, lies the chief difference between American art museums and those of Europe. Most of the older American art museums were deliberately started with the idea that their prime function was the education of the people and the training of craftsmen and artists. These museums, including the Metropolitan, began merely with an idea and a legal document. They had no collections, no money, no buildings, no traditions. On the other hand, the great European museums were usually based upon collections made for the entertainment or aggrandizement of royalty; the visitor to the royal collection gained entrance by permission from above, but in America entrance was regarded as a right. The European art museum often seems a terminal point for the accumulation of the antique, but the American art museum has always been considered a point of departure for the new.

The whole vast congeries of the Museum’s halls, rooms, and galleries, together with its almost innumerable works of art, are the product of many hands and minds, guided often by disparate if not frankly opposed enthusiasms. Those who influence it are not limited to the Trustees and staff who run it. There are also professional artists and their
numerous amateur friends. Others include serious students of art history or of history in general, archaeologists, designers, antiquarians, collectors, craftsmen, decorators, dealers, art critics (and who isn’t an art critic these days?), and connoisseurs of every degree. Each group approaches the museum with its own specialized interests in mind, and these interests seldom run in smooth parallels. Yet all of them contribute touches of form and color and meaning to the ensemble.

Since our people are drawn from many nations and races of the earth, it is appropriate that our art museum should show examples of the arts of many times and places, and that these diverse forms of expression should become naturalized as a part of the background of American art—a source, a subject of study, from which can emerge the ever-changing elements that form the art of our country. From this point of view, all American art museums and all their contents and activities assume their place as a vital part of American life.