"The Met" from the Inside

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“So you’re with the Met . . . what is it like to be at the Met?” Each time we hear this question it faces us with what we might otherwise forget – that the 670 of us who work in the Metropolitan Museum form a group at least distinct enough to share a corporate slang. With the unconscious arrogance of any large family, we speak of “The Museum” (as though there were no other) and would no more think of saying “The Met” than San Franciscans would say “Frisco.”

Yet how can we describe this village to which we so distinctly feel that we belong? Few groups of our size can fascinate with as bright contrasts of background, opinion, and idiom. We have come together from such different origins to do such different tasks that we can only itemize our meeting ground like the blind men generalizing about the elephant from the particular part that each feels with his hand. For the Director, the Museum is the headache of conciliating personalities, reconciling mutually exclusive demands, and organizing diversity into a common effort. For the treasurers it is the search for ways to stretch large but still limited funds to pay for services expanding at the infinite rate of life. For the conservators it is a clinic of incurables who can be cheered by discreet cosmetics, but who are all dying faster or more slowly. For the editors it is the assault of deadlines to make up this lively monthly, and the long pull of organizing complex books. For the various services of display it is the challenge to invent new yet unobtrusive ways to show works of art, it is acres of wall to paint in exact tints, and light bulbs dead at dizzy heights. For the purchasing department it is the procuring of everything from paper towels to Barcelona chairs. For the night watch it is a prowl along the catwalks under the dimming skylights, and then a plunge into the night outdoors, whatever the weather. For office service it is the mail of a small township to stamp for sending out and distribute when coming in. Most conspicuously of all, for the attendants it is a swirling cataract of crowds who need advice, directions, and control, requiring a traffic policeman’s nerves, a politician’s memory for people, and, at times, the insight of a psychiatrist. The curator’s point of view is the only one that I can define from something closer than hearsay. Each curator, as he peers out from behind his show window, sees nothing but lacks, gaps, and desiderata. The shopping list of necessities to improve the collection sometimes obsesses him more than the inventory of treasures already here.

Unlike teachers of the history of art, who reassemble the world in evolutionary sequences of lantern slides, our outlook on art is dominated – perhaps warped – by the things that happen to be in the building. Works of art held in the hand, like white
Display
1922, 1965
Conservation
1880, 1922, 1965
mice or fruit flies in a laboratory, humble any observer with a complexity beyond his knowledge. By stubbing our toes against questions that we cannot answer, we have learned, if not always humility, then at least the wisdom of hesitancy. Unlike businessmen, we can share ideas and information without impoverishing ourselves. Discussions are made even franker and freer by the social discipline of frequently lunching together in the building’s four restaurants. Though the talk at the lunches flashes only occasionally into brilliance, it always stimulates by its uniqueness. As in a Platonic dialogue, casual greetings evolve into a theme that develops in ways that will never occur again. By sharing these moments of the exhilarating waste of life we come to accept each other with a better grace than most groups. No two members of the staff have ever refused to greet if they met in a corridor, and what malice there is, is mostly ornamental.

For all our diversity, the strength of the organization has bent even the toughest of us to a common service. As one prized advantage of this, we have always had some trustees who have shared in the thinking and doing of the curators through an equality of knowledge. Our second president, Henry G. Marquand, probably knew more about paintings than any American curator of the 1890s, and the American Wing was the intelligent creation of a later president, Robert W. de Forest, and our trustee R.T.H. Halsey. “R.T.H.,” as my elders called him, was the only survivor of heroic times who seemed comfortable to anyone so junior as I. When this cultivated Baltimorean talked with a Southern mellowness articulated by Northern consonants, he sounded as contented as though he were settling down to a luncheon with green terrapin soup. Weighing this world for what it is worth, he questioned all grandmothers’ tales about American silver and furniture in order to start discovering their history through documents. No man did more to establish a reliable study of our decorative arts.

Our directors have been as varied as our trustees. The one with the most romantic curatorial destiny was perhaps Herbert Winlock, who, as a small boy, knew that he had to be an Egyptologist when he embalmed a mouse and coffined it in a nest of tiny carved sarcophagi. His massive head was weatherbeaten like a Roman proconsul’s, and when he talked about Egypt—the picaresque quips of the fellaheen, the first flashlight glimpse into a tomb, the sunsets on the sands—he became a poet of nostalgia.

Some curators have brought unexpected talents to their work. I had known Preston Remington, our curator of decorative arts, for several years before I realized that he was trained as an architect. This I discovered in 1935, when he was preparing a comprehensive exhibition of eighteenth-century French painting, sculpture, and decoration. He spent some fine spring mornings in the print department turning the leaves of our great eighteenth-century folios on architecture, while he told us who had said what during lunches at the Plaza or the Colony. Now and then he would jot down a detail so negligently as to imply that his real concern was to amuse us with the doings of his elegant friends. Yet a few days later, when he sailed for France to borrow his show, he left behind him plans for a beautiful oval gallery so specific that the whole intricate carpentry fell exactly into place during his absence. He calculated his proportions so perfectly that an installation that he intended for one exhibition only has served for any number of them over the past thirty years.
Installing an Exhibition
The Armorer’s Shop
When I first came to the Museum there were still people who remembered the very founders. The dominant ghost was General Cesnola’s, the Italian soldier of fortune who won his rank in our Civil War, excavated Cyprus while acting as American consul, sold his collection of antiquities to us, and came along with it as our first director. He established the Museum’s restaurant with an Italian chef, a bar of ebonized moldings and faceted mirrors, and wines so delicate that people traveled all the way uptown just to lunch. Since the General liked to find everybody alert and on the job, his shoes had steel heels that could be heard several galleries away. When his military tidiness was offended by the headless bodies and bodiless heads among the sculpture that he had dug up, he set any head on any body that it would approximately fit, plastering up the chinks in the necks with a paste of lime-dust and honey. The Cypriot gods and goddesses endured the mixture all winter, but when the windows were opened in summer they put on collars of flies.

All this amusement of personal intimacy came quite late in my life. During my boyhood and early youth, the Museum was not people but things. I cannot remember when I first entered the building, but by my early teens I was already rambling through the galleries as though they were my own back yard, taking all for granted as I used – misused – the treasures that had become familiar. I spent days in the paintings galleries without ever noticing a painting in my intentness to study the frames for motifs simple enough to carve at home. The only pictures that then talked to me were the Byzantine and Rhenish enamels that J. P. Morgan had recently given to the public. At night I could still see their clarity of sard and sapphire, their liquid calligraphy of gold, their
hieratic sideways glance. But being an ignorant boy who assumed that no local museum could be anything but provincial, I promised myself the prospect of some day visiting the famous European collections to wallow in a glut of the Real Thing. When I finally traveled, I judged all museums by the quality of their enamels, and found them wanting. Then, as I was about to give up my search, in the Galerie d’Apollon at the Louvre, I found at last a pair of golden roundels inhabited by those princely jeweled saints of Byzantium that I had learned to love. The label said Don de M. J. P. Morgan – who had separated the two from the nine at home.

In those remote days before the American Wing, my only impression of the staff came one quiet morning when I was making my way through the Bolles collection of early American furniture, then crammed into a basement gallery like a warehouse. In the silence of the dim room a voice drifted down from the transom over a tall door, a voice resonant with wisdom, pitched deep in authority. “This is Bashford Dean.” I never saw our first curator of armor, who also curated fishes across the park, but when I heard those balanced tones, I said to myself, “I have heard the Voice of the Met.”

As I go about my errands today, does some adolescent perhaps glance at me as though I, in turn, had inherited the ages?

Storeroom