The New York Times

ART REVIEW; Retrieving Magic From the Vault

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Published: January 5, 2001

THE permanent collections of museums are family. They are what you go home to at the end of the day, after the glamorous blockbusters have been packed back into their crates and the ritzy roadshows have pulled up stakes and moved on.
Collections define an institution, give it shape and personality, make it tick, day by day, year by year. We've recently seen this demonstrated on an extravagant scale in ''The American Century'' at the Whitney, ''MOMA 2000'' at the Museum of Modern Art and ''The Year One'' at the Metropolitan, all of them entirely in-house jobs.
Not that ''permanent'' is all that permanent. Things come and go. A few go forever. (That's called deaccessioning in museum-speak.) Others retreat from view for a while, either because they are fragile and in need of pampering, or to make room for other objects awaiting their turn in the limelight.
And new items keep showing up. Sometimes they come one by one, single objects that are of exceptional value or fill a historical gap. Occasionally, they arrive in bulk and, in a stroke, a museum becomes a major player in a specialized field.
Examples of all these permutations of ownership can be found in the city's museums at the moment. And these post-New Year weeks, when thoughts of something-old-and-something-new are still in the air, and everyone needs to power down a bit, is a good time to check them out.
The WHITNEY MUSEUM has set aside its capacious second-floor galleries for a changing display of its holdings in postwar and contemporary art. The debut presentation, ''Pollock to Today: Highlights From the Permanent Collection,'' is in place and over all it looks good, though it raises a few questions about curatorial thinking.
First, though, anyone who has been all in a tizzy over the trend toward theme-driven installations -- like those at the Modern, say, or at the new Tate Modern in London -- can relax. Curating is back to ''normal'' here. Art is arranged by date and style, and there's nary an ideological gloss in sight, unless you think the absence of such is a statement.
But the picture isn't entirely simple. The installation was divided between two of the Whitney's newish staff members, with Marla Prather, curator of postwar American art,

responsible for the first part, and Lawrence Rinder, curator of contemporary art, handling the second. Each seems to have a different idea about the way things should go, and some sense of that difference is suggested in the four pieces that open the show.

Two are big, elegant paintings by beatified masters: Chuck Close's 1969 portrait of Philip Glass and Alex Katz's 1963 work ''The Red Smile.'' Flanking them are newer, smaller, funkier items not yet securely in the pantheon. One is Charles Ray's 1992 sculpture of a sort of youthful Aryan bird-watcher in powder-blue shorts, titled ''Boy.'' The other, truly coming out of left field, is Martin Wong's ''Big Heat'' (1988), a rhapsodic painting of two firemen kissing under a gilded city sky.

The rooms that immediately follow have a sense of cool, carved-in-stone repose, with Pollock, de Kooning and Barnett Newman ranged like icons around the walls. David Smith's 1951 openwork ''Hudson River Landscape'' provides a suave segue to a scribbly Cy Twomby from 1969, and beyond a pristine Minimalist lineup is visible. There's a slight interruption near the Twombly, though, in the form of Robert Rauschenberg's ''Satellite'' (1955), with its taxidermic pheasant and gory-looking paint. The piece was nose-thumbing stuff in its day, and even now it creates a mean little snag in an Olympian flow. But only a snag. Other work in the same messy, carnal spirit -- Claes Oldenburg's soft-sculpture toilet, say -- has been tucked half out of sight in a separate cubicle.

This is the material that Mr. Rinder's section most clearly relates to, though the show's linear format permits no side-by-side comparisons. Even without them, the contemporary installation looks diffuse and a little hectic, and the confident stylistic designations posted earlier -- ''Abstract Expressionism,'' ''Conceptualism'' -- give way to a catch-all ''Pluralism.''

But what can you do? After a certain point American art just exploded and fragmented. A curator can either narrow the pieces down to a fine, unrepresentative point, or try to give some sense of their scope. Mr. Rindler takes the latter option, which brings women, African-Americans and ''out'' gay artists into the picture but also puts a Rauschenbergesque stuffed-toy piece by Mike Kelley within shouting distance of a neo-AbEx drip painting by Pat Steir. No wonder museums have seen the wisdom -- or expediency -- of building 20th-century installations around themes. As our polymorphous present continues to turn ''permanent,'' mix-and-match may be the logical way to go.

Museum of Modern Art

This thematic approach can be seen on a grand scale at the Modern, where ''Open Ends,'' the third and last leg of the museum's year-and-a-half long ''MOMA 2000,'' is winding down. The museum has taken some flak for the project, which has naturally had its up and downs. The second installment, covering work from 1940 to 1960,

was the best. Everything – well, most things – clicked: the art looked great, the collecting looked smart and the curatorial mix set off a shower of exciting sparks.

''Open Ends,'' dealing with art from 1960 to the present, is less successful; but there are memorable things, chief among them a set of exhibits devoted to political art.

At their center is the suite of 15 paintings by Gerhard Richter titled ''October 18, 1977.'' The subject is the fate of members of the Baader-Meinhof Gang, named for Andreas Baader and Ulrike Meinhof, who were imprisoned in 1974 in what was then West Germany and tried for terrorist acts. Four members died in prison: Meinhof in 1976, Baader and two colleagues a year later. The official report said they were suicides, though many people believed that they had been killed.

Mr. Richter's images, adapted from contemporary news media, range from a student portrait of the young Meinhof, to images of her and Baader lying dead in their cells. The paintings are realistic and intensely theatrical: deliberately blurred, they have the peculiar gruesomeness of catastrophes half-seen.

Early reviews of the work in Germany complained that the artist had seized on a subject guaranteed to bring him attention but had left his own position on the issues it raised unclear. For later commentators, this perceived ambiguity is what gives the paintings power. It has also, one suspects, done much to make them mainstream critical favorites: acceptable political art for those who believe art has no real business being political at all.

To the Modern's credit, it has accompanied Mr. Richter's series with another exhibit, ''The Path of Resistance,'' in which political convictions are made unmistakably and insistently clear through four decades of activist art. Organized by Joshua Siegel and Susan Kismaric, the installation is dense, the selection deep. This total immersion approach to a currently unfashionable subject is yet another aspect of ''MOMA 2000'' of which the museum should be proud.

El Museo del Barrio

While the Modern has reconfigured its existing collection in an extended gesture of institutional stock-taking, El Museo has combined objects from its own holdings with a selection of loans to create something brand new: the city's only comprehensive permanent exhibition devoted to the art of the Taino, indigenous people of the Caribbean.

The Taino, who are believed to have originated in South America, were the first New World people Columbus saw when he came ashore in Hispaniola, now the Dominican Republic and Haiti. The encounter was, apparently, friendly; both parties

were curious about the exotic Other suddenly in their midst. But the rapprochement didn't last. Later, weakened by disease and forced labor, the Taino vanished from their habitat.

The art they left behind is still only tentatively understood. Most of the objects seem to have had ritual significance. They include wooden stools that probably served as royal thrones, shamanistic instruments for the use of hallucinogenic drugs, and stone belts that were buried with the dead but might have been modeled on lighter prototypes worn in ceremonial games. One such belt, with incised diamond patterns, recently entered the museum's collection. It is displayed along with 125 other pieces, including a fantastic ceramic effigy vessel of the divine hero Deminan Caracaracol (on loan from the National Museum of the American Indian), in ''Taino: Ancient Voyagers of the Caribbean.'' The exhibition was organized by the art historian Dicey Taylor.

Ms. Taylor organized the much-praised survey of Taino art in 1997, the first of its kind mounted in a city with a huge and growing Caribbean population. El Museo has long been an important fixture on New York's cultural landscape. With its permanent Taino gallery, it instantly becomes a primary resource for art historians and anthropologists, and a necessary stop for anyone who wants to fully understand what ''American history'' means.

Yeshiva University Museum

Yeshiva University Museum has not only opened an exhibition of permanent collection works but has changed its location to do so. Formerly on the university's Washington Heights campus, the museum has moved to West 16th Street, where it shares a building with four other organizations -- the American Jewish Historical Society, the American Sephardi Federation, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research and the Leo Baeck Institute -- under the umbrella title of Center for Jewish History.

The show, ''Major Intersections,'' is also a joint project, incorporating art, manuscripts, historical objects and ephemera from the collections of four of the partners. (The Sephardi Federation doesn't have a permanent collection.) Much of the material is modest in appearance but evokes overwhelming sweeps of history and fascinating lives.

The most newsworthy entry is an 11th-century wooden Torah ark door from Egypt, purchased by Yeshiva and the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore last year. With carvings of Islamic-inspired interlaced vines and a quotation from the Book of Psalms in Hebrew, this amazing relic is believed to have come from the Ben Ezra synagogue in Cairo, where Maimonidies once worshiped.

Among several portrait paintings is one of Uriah Phillips Levy (1792-1862), a commodore in the Navy who bought Thomas Jefferson's home at Monticello. The Russian artist El Lissitzky is represented by a charming series of lithographs illustrating a Passover song. Other entries speak of tragedy beyond comprehension: a pretty Rosh Hashana greeting book from Lodz, Poland, dated 1941, carries the signatures of 15,000 schoolchildren, many of whom were consigned to death camps the following year.

Organized by Gabriel M. Goldstein and designed by Constantin Boym, the installation is intelligently annotated, with just the right balance of fact and fervor. A few objects come with remarks by guest commentators. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, for example, offers a tart response to the Emma Lazarus poem inscribed on the Statue of Liberty: Wretched refuse? ''Nonsense,'' he says. All this, plus a 1932 Molly Picon theater poster for ''Oy Iz Dos a Maydel'' (''Oh, What a Girl''), and a kosher cafe, the Date Palm, on the premises.

Hispanic Society of America

Uptown, and not all that far from where the Yeshiva museum used to be, the Hispanic Society is showing selections from a major cache of ceramics that it acquired last year in ''Splendor of Alcora: Spanish Ceramics of the 18th Century, Part I, 1727-1749.'' The factory in Alcora, a town north of Valencia, was established in 1727. The site had many advantages -- fine clay, abundant firewood, access to the sea -- and its owner, the Count of Aranda, was determined to produce a ceramic that would compete with the best in Europe, by combining top-notch workmanship with a French taste for classical themes and chinoiserie.

The earliest work is considered the best, and the examples here are superb. A few are monumental, as in the case of a platter with a battle scene based on a sketch by the artist Charles Le Brun. On the quieter side, there are shell-shaped stands for holding cups of hot chocolate, a design said to have been invented for a viceroy of Peru whose hands shook from Parkinson's disease.

''Splendor of Alcora'' is the first of three successive presentations that will survey the Alcora acquisition. Put together by Margaret Connors McQuade and installed in the Hispanic Society's central courtyard, the show is surrounded by carved medieval saints and madonnas, while portraits by Velazquez, Goya and El Greco peek down from the balcony above. The day I visited, a guard was softly singing in Spanish in the surrounding cloister. He had the voice of an angel.

Bronx Museum of the Arts

New World Hispanic culture is a highlight of the Bronx Museum, which opened a small gallery a few years ago to display rotating exhibitions of its modest collection. Most of its holdings consist of works on paper, and the current show, ''Context: Mexico's Taller de Grafica Popular and Its Legacy,'' consists entirely of prints. The Taller was established in Mexico City in 1937 in the continuing utopian social spirit of the 1910 revolution. Its mandate was to produce widely accessible art, nationalist in content. The earliest pieces in the show, by several Taller founders, including Leopoldo Mendez and Pablo O'Higgins, are scenes of peasant life.

Their work, and their ideal of an inexpensive, easily distributed art, inspired later generations of Chicano artists in the Western United States and Puerto Rican artists working in the Caribbean and in New York, whose art blends a nativist agenda with a call to political action.

A steelworker in a 1993 lithograph by the Texas-based Luis Jimenez is an emblem of proletarian muscle, while Ester Hernandez's color silk screen ''The Offering'' (1988), which shows a rose held up to a resplendent image of the Virgin of Guadalupe tattooed on a woman's back, is a complex study of Latina femininity.

Marysol Nieves, senior curator at the museum, has resourcefully expanded the show by means of a flat file placed at the center of the gallery. In its drawers, the history of the Taller is extended backward in time to the vivid work of Jose Guadalupe Posada (1852-1913) in Mexico and forward to Rafael Tufino and Antonio Martorell (with a big, dark linocut landscape) in Puerto Rico.

Studio Museum in Harlem

Permanent collection galleries for the Studio Museum are still in the works as part of an extensive building renovation in progress. In the meantime, Thelma Golden, deputy director for exhibitions and programs, has been putting material out anyway, upstairs, downstairs, wherever it fits.

''Collection in Context: Selected Works From the Permanent Collection'' fills in a narrow space on the first floor, and holds subtly judged hangings of interesting work. A little shrinelike Betye Saar collage incorporating green parrot feathers is complemented by a gorgeous peacock-colored Beauford Delaney watercolor. And you would have to travel a long way to find as sharp and offbeat a grouping as the small pieces by Larry Walker, David Hammons and Eldzier Cortor seen here.

When this sampler comes down, Ms. Golden will begin work on a much larger one that will fill the ground-floor galleries and, supplemented by some loans, extend the museum's scope globally to cover the larger African world: in Europe, the Americas

and Africa itself. That show will open on Jan. 31.

Metropolitan Museum of Art

The Met is constantly bringing out goodies from its bottomless vaults, sometimes grandish objects, as in its new Byzantine galleries, other times just a little something here and there. The latest little something is a 14-piece minishow, ''Picturing Media: Modern Photographs From the Permanent Collection,'' installed in the hallway outside the Lila Acheson Wallace Wing.

Selected by Maria Morris Hambourg, the curator in charge of the museum's department of photographs, several of them date from the 1970's when photography that was related to, drawn from and critical of the popular media was news.

Richard Prince's grainy Marlboro Man cowboy is of that aesthetic moment, while Chris Burden's documentary photos of his own guerrilla television action -- he appeared on a talk show and held his female host hostage at knife point -- is somewhere out on that moment's wilder fringe. Among new entries, there is an outstanding photo-collage by Lutz Bacher and a very up-to-the-minute Thomas Ruff piece based on a soft-focus porn shot downloaded from the Internet. Mr. Ruff's show of similar, often more explicit work, at the David Zwirner Gallery in SoHo, caused an approving critical fuss last season. The pictures aren't bad; they also aren't much, but they're pretty hot stuff for the Met.

Brooklyn Museum of Art

Sometimes, a single piece from a collection, missing in action and then restored to view, is enough to warrant a museum visit. I dashed over to the Met when the 12th-century ''Morgan Madonna'' reappeared in the early 1990's, and I used to drop in to keep track of the comings and goings of the gilt bronze Cambodian sculpture of a deified king, which before 1995 was on view only six months of every year. (It's now there all the time.)

I recommend a trip to the Brooklyn Museum to see two thrilling Northwest American Indian masks that have been off view but are now reinstalled in the Hall of the Americas.

One of them, the Thunderbird Transformation Mask, made in the 19th century by a Kwakiutl carver in British Columbia, has been in Europe lately. It's back, and it's tremendous, with its great hinged, beaked face opening like a flower to reveal a second face -- animal? human? divine? -- inside.

Maybe even more arresting, because it's less familiar, is a carved Baleen Whale Mask, also from British Columbia, which has been in the museum's collection since

1908 but in storage for at least five years. Nearly six feet long and vividly painted, it was designed to fit over the head, though only a sturdy man could have supported its weight and manipulated its movable jaws.

The Hall of the Americas was partly emptied out a while back to accommodate a recent hip-hop show, and the whale, displayed without a Plexiglass cover, now has all to itself a wide open stretch of space where it seems to be leaping through the air.

Museum staff members are reportedly more than happy to welcome this enchanting creature, whom they affectionately call Free Willy, back in its permanent-gallery haunts. And it really does seem right at home.