**The New Galleries Are 'Near Perfect': ARCHITECTURE VIEW New Galleries**
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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# The New Galleries Are 'Near Perfect'

**By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE**

For anyone keeping score, the latest entry in the ongoing and apparently unending construction and reinstallation derby at the Metropolitan Museum is the newly completed set of André Meyer Galleries of 19th-century European art. On a scale of one to 10. this installation gets close to 10; it is among the most successful of the museum's changes to date. Not only do the new galleries contain some of the most familiar and ravishing paintings in recent history, now immensely enhanced by proper cleaning and hanging, but their beauty and visibility have also been dramatically reinforced by the design and nature of their setting.

These 13 galleries surrounding a large center space are not as obviously "architectural" as some recent new art museum construction; for one thing, they occupy just one floor of the Metropolitan's still incomplete south wing. The almost scaleless outside walls of smooth masonry and reflective glass are a stylistic match to the north wing housing the Temple of Dendur, which opened last year, and the earlier Lehman wing on the park side. This new look is well on the way to wrapping around all of the museum's vast side and rear expanses, which will soon leave only the historic Hunt and McKim, Mead and White facades of 1895 to 1906 along Fifth Avenue.

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The New York Times / Carl Gossett

**ARCHITECTURE VIEW**

# New Galleries

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Although there were enough cooks involved to spoil any broth, the André Meyer Galleries are a near-perfect synthesis of the arts of scholarship, building and display. They represent the collaborative effort of the museum's Consultative Chairman of the Department of European Painting, Sir John Pope-Hennessy, and the architects of the entire Metropolitan building program, Kevin Roche, John Dinkaloo and Associates, working with Arthur Rosenblatt, the museum's Vice President for Architecture and Planning.

The initial response to the new interiors is that it is hard to tell where the old galleries stop and the new ones begin. The 20-foot high skylit ceilings, oak floors and moldings, silk-covered walls and panels — in fact, all of the proportions and details — suggest nothing radical at first glance, which is just the way the museum wants it. But this is not, as it would appear, the result of an old-fashioned sensibility; it is more indicative of the new fashion of accepting the past — a development for which everyone can now breathe a deep sigh of relief. And it is a kind of "tradition" that is served by the most advanced technology and sophisticated esthetics.

The really striking feature here is not the architecture, but the daylight that fills the rooms. The paintings, the sculpture, and the architectural spaces are illuminated and brought to brilliant and beautiful life by floods of changing, warming and revealing natural light. The intensity and quality of this light — and the way the art is continually transformed by it — all varies eloquently with the hour and the day.

While beautiful, this would not be extraordinary except that the acceptance of natural light and its fluctuations is as revolutionary for museum architecture as the acceptance of the past. This return to the vagaries of sun and clouds comes after decades of trying to achieve optimum, fixed foot candles and rigidly controlled viewing conditions.

It must be pointed out, however, that this natural light would not be admissable without recent innovations in glass technology — developments which must also be seen as one of the most remarkable, refined, and genuinely progressive aspects of contemporary architecture. It is now possible to control and direct natural light, reflecting and diffusing it, and filtering out harmful rays. In these galleries, the destructive ultraviolet rays are blocked by the skylight roof, which is made of 14 percent reflective glass, before they reach the ceiling that is a full six feet below it. This ceiling is made of stippled, light-diffusing glass panels.

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In the space between the glass ceiling and the skylight is a polished stainless steel baffle, which reduces shadows and reflections. Incandescent light from individual quartz lamps hung in this space passes through the glass to wash the vertical surfaces of panels and walls, and to provide artificial illumination as needed. Since the lamps are above the ceiling, these fixtures are not seen from below.

For the installation itself, there are subtle and important design aids. Tripartite screens group pictures in threes, in clear view of others related to them. Sharp right angles have been eliminated for better visibility and easier transitions.

Much of this marks a significant reversal of what had become standard new museum practice from the 1950's through most of the 1970's — the design of bland, blind, sealed boxes of neutral, all-purpose space and a "scientifically" regulated viewing environment. The new buildings either totally rejected natural light or sought a constantly maintained, electronically controlled mix of natural and artificial illumination. Complex and costly installations like that of the Hayward Gallery in London have proved the fallacy of the pursuit of computerized perfection; as sensors turned assorted lights on and off and opened and closed louvers automatically, the pictures went flat, drained of contrast and highlights.

Most museums of this period are a depressing lot of buildings in which "ideal" conditions have produced a singularly impoverished experience. They were the end of the line of years of sealing up windows and closing off light sources in a combination of legitimate concern for the deterioration of works of art and a secret war with architecture. As a general group, museum directors and curators hate architecture. They see it as a disruption of installation possibilities and a distraction from the art. Any design features of the building, good or bad, are treated as adversaries to be battled, suppressed, or eliminated. But even that attitude is changing now. Institutions like the St. Louis Museum are carefully restoring their original architectural aspect. The Metropolitan's approach has been a curious mixture of respectful concern and arrogant disregard, marred by episodic miscalculation. But with more to come, the final score is not yet in.

The counter-revolution in museum design became noticeable in the 1960's and appeared in places like the Kimbell Art Museum in Ft. Worth, Tex., and later, at the British Art Center at Yale, both works of the late Louis Kahn. Among Kahn's particular gifts and passions was a rare understanding of the magical nature of light. He knew that what illuminated space also illuminated the spirit, and he did not consider that a concern beyond the architect's job. At the Kimbell, long barrel vaults admit daylight through continuous glass strips along their center and sides. In New Haven, daylight is diffused in a clear high space that is the focus of the building. Kahn's preoccupation with light that defines art and space and the viewer's experience of both, as well as his love of pale oak floors and woodwork, are tastes that have been shared by architects like the Roche, Dinkaloo firm, and are echoed in the Metropolitan's new galleries.

The inevitable conclusion is that the best background for art is not the most studiously neutral container, but one in which architecture is enough of a creative and supportive presence to make the art look better than ever. For the art in the André Meyer Galleries, that would be saying a lot. There would seem to be no way to improve on the mere act of showing magnificent multiples of Courbet and Corot, Manet and Monet, and a pride of Impressionists and post-Impressionists.

For those of us who were lucky enough to grow up with this work when museums were a free and natural part of a young New Yorker's turf of discovery, the new galleries are filled with nostalgia. Much of the collection has not been on view for some time. It has never seemed more dazzling and beguiling. ■