

Decentralizing Art

New York's art institutions have traditionally kept their treasures close to their chests; decentralization has been anathema. It has taken the Whitney Museum, far from the largest of these institutions, to demonstrate that one of the best things to do with art is to spread it around a little bit, like cheer, or sunshine.

The new branch of the Whitney that has just opened in Lower Manhattan brings to an immense working population in an area of large-scale physical renewal virtually its only fine-art resource. The facility enriches personal and public experience downtown with art works available for the first time to thousands of people remote from upper Fifth and Madison Avenues.

How great it would be if the Metropolitan Museum would find the means to distribute even a small part of its riches to branch museums in other parts of the city, following the Whitney's excellent example. It was vainly argued a few years ago that the landmark Villard houses would have put the Lehman collection within reach of millions in mid-Manhattan, in a spectacularly suitable setting.

Now that the Custom House at Bowling Green is about to be abandoned by the United States Government for the World Trade Center, this Beaux Arts landmark begs for adaptive use, in part at least, as a cultural resource for a large community many miles from the mother lode uptown.

Mini-museums could bring beauty and pleasure daily to people and places that lack them conspicuously now. And that is what art is about, rather than Sunday head counts.

