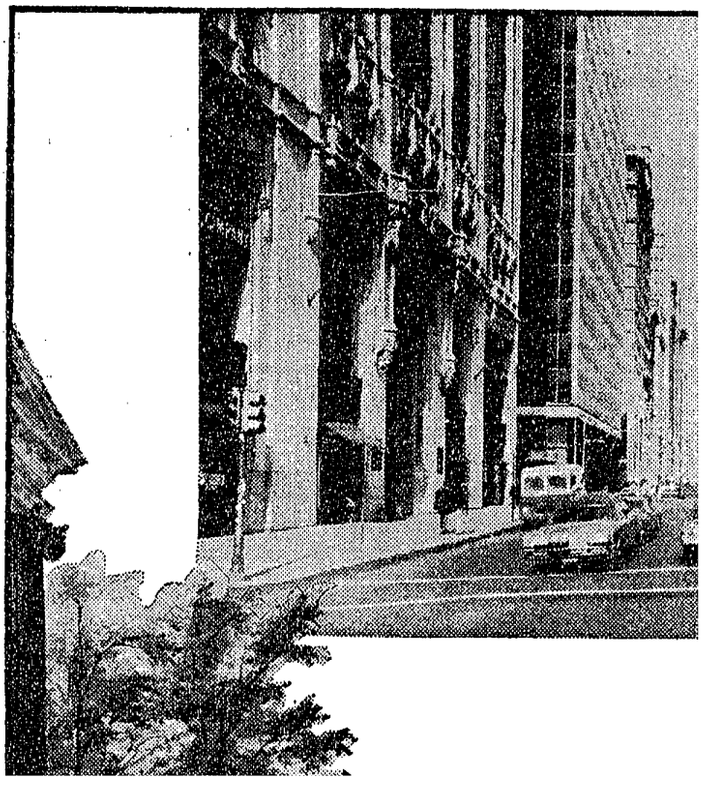
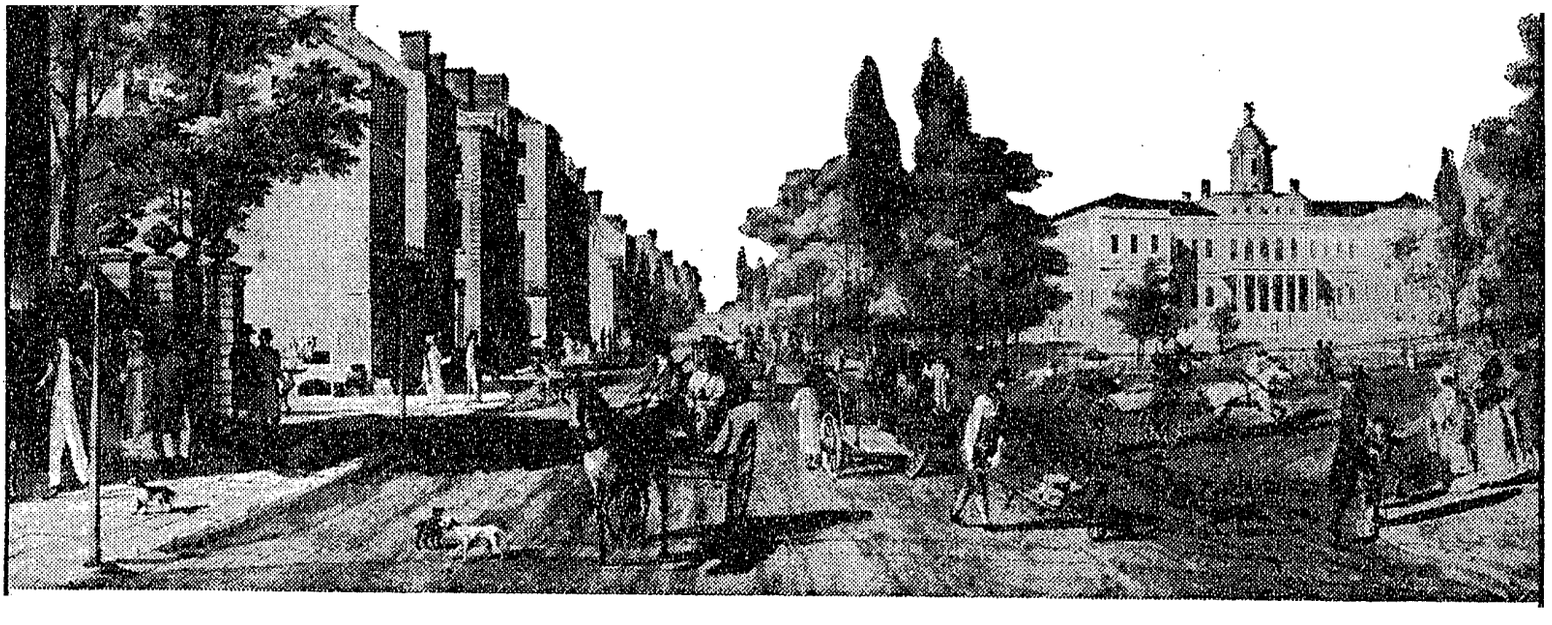


The New York Times/Michael Evans

Broadway in the City Hall area, above, is better paved today, though City Hall itself is overshadowed by the Municipal Building, near it at the right. In 1819, Baron Axel Leonhard Klinckowstrom depicted the scene in a water-color below, now at the Museum of the City of New York.



Museum Exhibit Evokes a Lost Grace

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

It is an experience in cultural shock to go to the Museum of the City of New York these days. Outside is the sad, shabby, paranoid city of despair. Inside is a world of drawing rooms and polished silver and bullseye mirrors with convex, wonderful glimpses into a past of sailing ships and tree-lined streets and harbor views.

To get to that world right now you've got to pass the "Drug Scene" on the ground floor, a current show that spotlights caskets and messages of terror. After that—gentility and polished mahogany. Then and now. Trauma, all the way.

You can't escape then-and-now shock even at a small show called "How Green Was My City" on the third floor. The purpose of this article is to suggest that you see the exhibition. But don't go for nostaglia. You can go for a choice selection of oils, watercolors and lithographs from the museum's collections, or for scholarship unobtrusively and charmingly rendered, or for a demonstration of a superior sensitivity to the past and present that goes beyond bows to "little old New York."

There is a message here, too. And it is neither quaint nor sentimental. Nor is any voice-over propaganda needed to get it across. It is conveyed simply by pairing the original 19th-century view of a part of New York that attracted the artist because of its conspicuous charm with a view of the same place, photographed today. The result, generally, is a smack in the eye.

As an example, there is a desolate view of docks and piers on the Brooklyn waterfront. A century ago, according to the Currier and Ives lithograph called "New York from Bay Ridge," the same spot held a suburban villa in a rural setting. About 30 such views are matched. The photographs are by George

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Roos. The message is considerably more complex than the obvious demonstration of the passing of a simpler, more bucolic way of life. It is not just a matter of wasn't it pretty then, and isn't it ugly now. This is a low-key documentation of blight, sometimes flagrant, sometimes subtle. It can be the actual elimination of beauty for economics and expediency, or it can be the hamhanded mistreatment of the parks we have. The show really documents attitudes: what is made chillingly clear are the values New York subscribes to, and they aren't pretty at all.

The famous 1802 Birch view of Manhattan from Brooklyn Heights with its fashionable picnic party on the lush shore with the rustic town of Manhattan across the water is paralleled by a scene of an industrial waterfront facing new Battery blockbusters — aggressively unrepentent, and unrepentently ugly, in the celebration of Mammon. The overriding impression is that Mammon hasn't done the city much good, environmentally.

There is an implicit irony here that is even greater. When you read A. K. Baragwanath's introduction to the exhibition, you learn that contrary to popular romantic history and later artists, Manhattan was not a "verdant, virgin forest" when the Dutch found it.

"Contemporary sources do not indicate such a stand of trees, and, more importantly wooden artifacts from Indian culture have been notably absent in archeological findings." Put that in your peace pipe and smoke it. The Dutch planted trees and orchards. The English nurtured parks and gardens. The Victorians created that bountiful masterpiece, Central Park.

According to Mr. Baragwanath, who is a senior curator at the museum and director of the show, the glorious achievement of Central Park in the eighteen-fifties made New York careless of its lesser parks. After that triumph, "the fate of small parks, tree-lined streets and landscaped areas was sadder. The primary force for their demise was the ever-increasing property values in an unexpandable island." Unexpandable, yes; expendable, too.

One pair of scenes tells the tale. St. John's Church and Park at Varick, near Laight Street, painted by E. L. Henry about 1840, shows a fenced green square described earlier with approval by Mrs. Trollope on her 1831 visit to New York.

Mrs. Trollope didn't like much about America, but she liked St. John's Park. "The square is beautiful," she wrote, "exceedingly well planted with a great variety of trees. The iron railing which surrounds it is as high and handsome as that of the Tuileries." In 1840, Mr. Henry showed it with fashionable New Yorkers promenading its border, a gentleman lifting his hat to a long-skirted lady, pre-Women's Lib. Mrs. Trollope wouldn't have approved of Women's Lib.

The wall label tells the rest. "In 1866, in spite of many angry protests, the park was sold to the Hudson River Railroad Company for the building of a freight station. Dr. Morgan Dix, rector of Trinity, wrote of this event, 'Then followed a shocking scene: the felling of the trees, the uprooting of the whole place, and the erection of an unsightly and vast freight depot . . . and so before the rolling car of the business-juggernaut, the grace and beauty passed forever."

Even that isn't the end. The terminal is gone—replaced by approaches to the Holland Tunnel. The church was demolished for street widening in 1918.

That says it all — "progress," Mammon, highways and street widening. The story of New York.

But the show says still more. There are parks that have been destroyed, and there are parks that have merely been mutilated, and there are some surprising survivals. Even the idea of parks as sylvan retreats and green islands of repose has been damaged by the 20th century switch to "active recreation."

The 1878 birdseye view of Battery Park shows gracious walks radiating from Castle Clinton. The Victorians believed in pedestrian pleasures and the leisurely contemplation of nature.

Castle Clinton went through an exemplary and spontaneous cycle of what we now call "adaptive refuse," from fort to theater to aquarium, until the 20th century lost the message. When the aquarium was moved to Brooklyn, the corpse sat there for many years. It is now being "restored back" to a fort again a stillborn concept of history that makes correct archeological boondoggles and urban death.

For graces lost, the park offers contemporary monuments: a comfort station and the air intake for the Brooklyn-Battery tunnel. It could be worse. It could be gone.

Union Square, so verdantly elegant in the mid-19th century, survives as S. Klein's front yard. It could be worse, too, but not much.

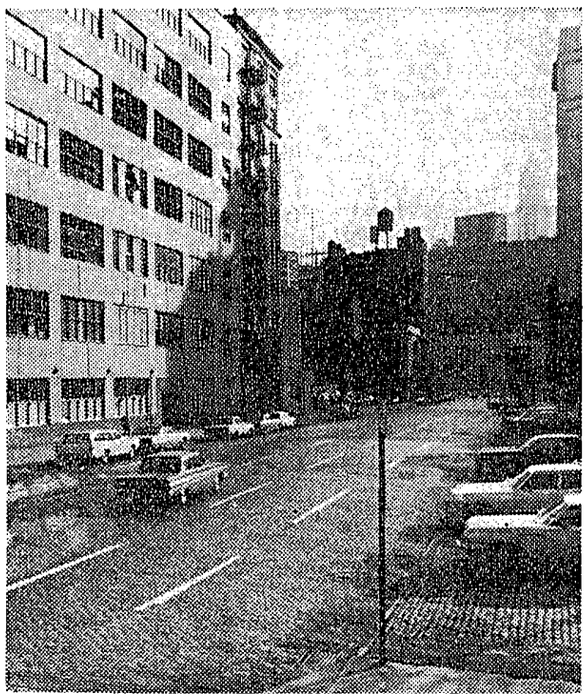
See the lithograph after C. Bachman, with the central fountains that flowed first on October 14, 1842, to celebrate the arrival of Croton water in the city—a sanitary measure that made modern New York possible. On such things as indoor toilets and water pressure to upper floors does urban greatness rest. I'll bet you thought it rested on public parks and squares.

The old Union Square Park is gone. It was dug up for the construction of the subway underneath. The new Union Square Park contains some neo-classical pavilions of permanent grayness enjoyed by the pigeons and pathetic human fallout. No fountains play, for anyone.

Finally, there are those surprising survivals. Duane Street Park, at Hudson Street, was acquired by the city from Trinity Church in 1797, and small miracle, is still there. "It is not that the trees have disappeared," says Mr. Baragwanath," but rather that the size of the surrounding buildings dwarfs them."

We all seem smaller, too.

In 1802, William Birch looked to Manhattan from Brooklyn Heights and created a picture from which Samuel Seymour made engraving above. Photo below is by George Roos.



In 1840, E. L. Henry painted St. John's Church and its park, later sold. George Roos made the companion photo.