A 'Beautiful' Showplace for American Art

Eric Pollitzer

The spectacular, glass-enclosed, 70-foot-high garden court of the Metropolitan Museum's new American Wing, opening to the public on June 11

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The new $18-million American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art will open to the public on June 11, but in the meantime, it is not exactly being kept under wraps. There have been press and members' previews over the past two weeks, and a formal dedication last Monday marked the completion of the most ambitious revamping of the museum to date in the extensive, ongoing construction program that is enlarging to an awesome extent both the building and the collections.

Of course, it would be hard to downplay a new structure of 130,000 square feet that is six times the size of the old American Wing, and that contains, as its focal point, a spectacular, glass-enclosed, 70-foot-high garden court that will rank as one of the city's most beautiful and important spaces from now on.

This is the third and best of the skylit courts that are a repeated theme of the museum's remodeling and reconstruction. The first of these, for the Lehman Wing, was small and charming, but as dubious an addition as the wing itself; much too much was made, architecturally, of an uneven collection wrongheadedly installed in a pointless imitation of its original quarters. The second court was the overscaled and barren gymnasium that upstages the tiny Temple of Dendur.

The American Wing court is the first of the glassed-in spaces that relates satisfactorily to the park and the existing building, creating a transitional structure that is also an extraordinarily handsome indoor-outdoor room. That room is significantly enriched by the handsome artifacts it contains. Taken as a whole, however, the architecture of the new wing, like that of the other additions, is disruptively strong, with a tendency to overshadow the old Beaux Arts building and the exhibits alike. The new construction is aggressively stylish and coldly monumental; it has produced impressive amounts of space and a creeping corporate veneer. It is also proving distressingly insensitive to the job at hand, the integration of new and old in the appropriate service of the arts.

The three new floors that have been wrapped around the old American Wing on its north and west sides will make it possible to display almost all of the museum's comprehensive collection of American painting, sculpture, furniture, silver, ceramics, glass, textiles and decorative arts for the first time, in everything from evocative room settings and more academic permanent and temporary exhibition space to study-storage areas. The first phase of this massive installation is now ready, with more to follow next year. *[For a profile of curator John K. Howat, see Page 29.]*

Also for the first time, the painting and sculpture collections have their own galleries. Nine new galleries contain the paintings familiar to every student of Americana: the sharply observed Copley portraits, the huge, romantic landscapes of Church and Bierstadt, Bingham's fur traders becalmed on a glassy Mississippi. The fine-arts collection, which ranges from 1700 to the end of the 19th century, includes about 1,000 paintings and an equal number of

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watercolors, 123 sculptures and 300 miniatures. The ever-popular period rooms, closed during the five years of construction, have been reinstalled according to the latest scholarly standards. Full-size architectural elements that could never be shown before now have stellar space in the monumental garden court. The result is a theatrically handsome art and architectural blend.

On the north side of the garden court, the entrance to the galleries is through one of the architectural displays: the re-erected facade of the 1822-24 Branch Bank of the United States, or Assay Building, by Martin E. Thompson that stood on Wall Street until 1915. Some time after it was torn down, in 1924, the front wall was moved to the "back yard" of the museum at the rear of the first American Wing, where it was barely visible for years. Now the mel-

'The new and old American galleries are intricately connected.'

low, creamy marble (snow-white when it was new) with its house-like, classical details, is imbued with the drama of an architectural stage set within the concrete and steel-framed, glass and limestone courtyard.

The new space and construction are immensely enriched by these relationships of new and old style and scale. One wishes only that the bank facade were not quite so flat; it would have been better if it had projected beyond the containing walls for a sense of its original three-dimensional quality.

It is a poignant footnote to art and architectural history that the architectural artifacts on display, which have been so beautifully integrated with their new setting, are here almost without exception by courtesy of the bulldozer. (Period rooms, of course, are cultural tokens often rescued from structural vandalism.) Built into the court's south wall is the flower-columned loggia from Louis Comfort Tiffany's own home in Oyster Bay, Laurelton Hall, built from 1903 to 1908, with his superb landscape window of wisteria-framed sky and water in jewel-toned glass. A pair of ornate bronze and iron stairs by Louis Sullivan that once graced the 1893 Adler and Sullivan Stock Exchange Building in Chicago lead to a balcony level.

The east wall of the court contains a Tiffany mosaic fountain of about 1905-15, and a majestic entrance hall mantel from George B. Post's house for Cornelius Vanderbilt 2d, with caryatids representing Peace and Love supporting an entablature and mosaic, designed and executed about 1880 by Augustus St. Gaudens and John La Farge. Also incorporated are additional Tiffany and La Farge works in stained glass, and Frank Lloyd Wright's windows for the Coonley Playhouse of 1912.

In addition to these architectural elements, the court contains a selection of the museum's American sculpture collection, long assigned to oblivion and still troubling to the experts, arranged enchantingly among trees and greenery. A pool and fountain and 19th-century American garden furniture complete the setting. The esthetic and environmental quality of this area does a lot to make up for the fact that the park land used for the court is no longer open public space, but has become a part of the museum. There is to be an entrance from the park when the landscaping is approved, funded and completed.

The 12,000-square-foot garden court, in common with all of the elements of the museum's master plan, is the work of the architectural firm of Kevin Roche, John Dinkeloo and Associates, working with Arthur Rosenblatt, the museum's vice president for architecture and planning, who has been the assiduous on-site overseer of the entire operation. The court has been landscaped by Innocenti and Webel. In line with the growing practice of crediting construction that is producing a kind of Almanac de Donor, this is the Charles Engelhard Court, and the paintings are housed in the Joan Whitney Payson Galleries, with special exhibitions in the Erving and Joyce Wolf Gallery.

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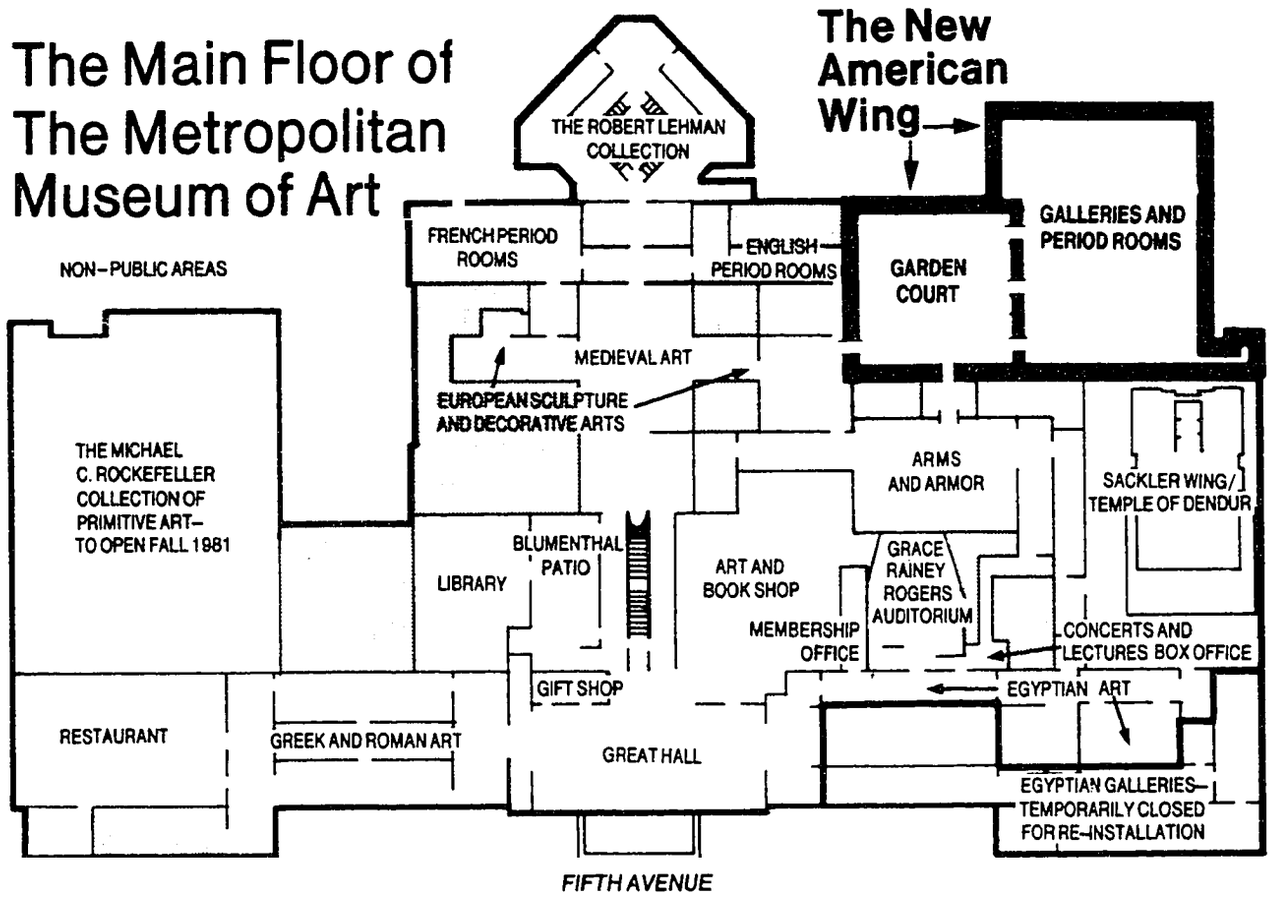
The new and old American galleries are intricately connected on several levels. The old rooms, unfortunately, have lost their windows on the park; they now look out on artificially lighted, painted backdrops of views meant to suggest the original settings of the departed houses. They may have acquired accuracy, but they have lost life. This trade-off gains the spacious set of new display spaces surrounding the old ones, which are simply and elegantly detailed with oak trim, much like the recently opened André Meyer Galleries.

The painting galleries, which have been installed by John K. Howat, curator of American paintings and sculpture, are on the park side of the building and are flooded with natural light. There was no department, as such, until 1949, although the museum had routinely acquired American work. The emphasis now is on a full representation from Colonial painting and primitive and folk art, through the Hudson River and American landscape schools, to American Impressionism.

It comes as something of a surprise to realize that the original American Wing opened more than 50 years ago, in 1924. Designed by Grosvenor Atterbury, it represented the thoroughly establishment standards of the day. The building was a meticulous "period" construction that coincided with a fashionable rise of interest in English-influenced American furnishings of the 17th through the early 19th century. The view of the American past that the museum espoused was culturally narrow and qualitatively high, with a careful cutoff point for what merited serious respect. The re-created rooms were an instant and lasting success.

The Main Floor of The Metropolitan Museum of Art



The new American Wing opens to the public on June 11. The hours of the museum are Tuesdays, 10 tc 8:45; Wednesdays through Saturdays, 10 to 4:45; Sundays, 11 to 4:45. The museum is closed Mondays

With the hindsight of half a century, the limitations that were set then seem highly arbitrary. The original displays reflected as much of the taste of 1920's collectors and curators as they did of the architects and artisans of the early Republic. A bit of fudged plasterwork here, a Chinese wallpaper there, or the use of wing chairs to suit 20th-century ideas, only gave the rooms additional appeal and immense influence in the revivals that swept the home furnishings field.

One question that faced Berry B. Tracy, curator in charge of American decorative arts, and his staff, was how much to undo in the redoing. The line that has been walked in the process of reinstallation is a curious and delicate one. Rooms have been furnished more accurately this time around, using inventories of the time and new scientific knowledge about colors and finishes.

But not all of the 1920's has been removed. It is acknowledged that this taste, too, has its place in history. The taste of the 1980's — cooler, more austere, and possibly more reliable — overlays the taste of the 20's resulting in a palimpsest of art-historical revivals. There is more informed guesswork and less willful "correctness"; acknowledged uncertainty rather than doctrinaire tastemaking.

'Architectural artifacts are courtesy of the bulldozer.'

It is only during the last 20 years, in fact, that the museum has acquired examples of American architecture and the decorative arts from 1825 to 1915. That immensely rich and diverse period will be represented in the next phases of the installation, which will extend the period rooms to include Gothic Revival and Victorian examples, and a room from a demolished Frank Lloyd Wright house.

In sum, the new wing comes at a time when the American heritage has been fully released from the limitations of esthetic acceptance set by earlier generations. It is now recognized as a broad, eclectic and almost unlimited source of creative vitality to which no single yardstick of taste can apply.

Watching the sunlit patterns filtered through the striking glass-roofed structure of the garden court to make a latticed geometry of shadows on the old bank building's gently weathered facade, one becomes very conscious of the achievements and the continuity of American art and architecture. Sitting on a 19th-century cast-iron settee, surrounded by the nymphs, maidens, babes and animals so dear to Victorian sensibilities and so long rejected by our own, one feels that continuity reestablished. What was esthetically reprehensible has become respectable. Our attitudes toward the past are changing. It is a lesson made visual and pleasurable by the new American Wing. ■