



The Henry R. Luce Center for the Study of American Art at The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

COURTESY OF THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

In Plain Sight

SHOWCASING COLLECTIONS OF AMERICAN ART

The Metropolitan Museum of Art has one of the most comprehensive collections of American fine and decorative arts in the world. Yet for most of its history only a small portion of this collection has been on public view, while thousands of works remained in storage.

Most large museums, in fact, have far more pieces in closed storage rooms than in their public galleries. But in 1988, with the opening of its Henry R. Luce Center for the Study of American Art, the Metropolitan Museum pioneered a new model for displaying this rich array of artworks previously inaccessible to the public. The 16,000-square-foot visible storage facility presents more than ten thousand objects and works of American art grouped by category in glass cases for easy viewing—paintings, sculpture, furniture, ceramics, silver, glass and metalwork.

In recent years, Luce centers for American art have opened at the New-York Historical Society (N-YHS), the Brooklyn Museum and the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C. These spaces dedicated to displaying the breadth and depth of American art collections offer museum visitors a new experience. “People love going behind the scenes and the centers give them a chance to do that—to get a sense of what museums are all about, how they classify their objects, what is the nature of a collection,” says Linda Ferber, vice president and senior art historian at the N-YHS, and former chief curator at the Brooklyn Museum. “It’s exciting to see things in mass—all the silver in one place, all the Tiffany lamps in one place, all the furniture in one place. Visitors can put together their own itinerary, their own treasure hunt as it were.”

The New-York Historical Society’s grant to create a visible storage center came at a time when most of its collection was in off-site

storage. When the 21,000-square-foot gallery opened in 2000, it was able to accommodate nearly forty thousand pieces. Today, 60 percent of the museum’s collection is housed in the Luce Center. The Brooklyn Museum’s center is smaller—5,000 square feet—but it displays 1,500 artworks and objects drawn from its stored holdings in Spanish Colonial, Native American, and American fine and decorative art.

More important than the numbers is the educational value of showcasing a wider range of art. While a museum’s main galleries are usually reserved for the major works, the visible storage centers allow visitors to deepen their understanding of artistic traditions by comparing the different styles and quality of specific objects and viewing a fuller representation of the work of particular artists and artisans.

Through the years the centers have been able to take advantage of more advanced technology, display techniques and lighting. The original model of identifying objects by a number, which visitors could then look up at a computer terminal for detailed information, has given way to more interpretive presentations and interactive touch-screen panels. The Luce Center at the Smithsonian American Art Museum is an expansive, skylit space. Award-winning interactive computer kiosks provide lively discussions of each artwork, artist biographies, interviews and videos. The center also offers an innovative range of audio tours and programs, including themed scavenger hunts, where visitors follow clues to find specific works among the more than three thousand objects on display.

The centers are popular with school groups and have become an important resource for scholars. By calling attention to the richness of each institution’s American art collection, they also attract more people to related exhibits in the main galleries.

“The museum benefits, the public benefits, the scholarly and research community benefits,” says Linda Ferber. “But I’ve always felt that it is the general museum visitor who has the most fun discovering what the Luce centers have to offer.” ■