

The New York Times

March 19, 2009

The Good Stuff in the Back Room

By [GERALDINE FABRIKANT](#)

THE poet Clayton Eshleman recently asked the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston to see the Mayan vessels that are in its extensive collection but not on public display. He couldn't read the inscriptions on them from pictures on the museum Web site, he said.

"We told him he would have to pare down his list, but we are trying to help," said Elliot Bostwick Davis, chairwoman of the art of the Americas department at the museum. "After all, who knows, he may be the next John Keats."

Most museums own far more art than they can display. And while they try to accommodate requests from scholars, art-world professionals and families of artists in their collection — and in rare instances, the public — such viewing is made difficult by space, staff and security constraints.

The [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) in New York, for example, owns two million objects and displays only tens of thousands at a time. At the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, 18,000 objects are on display at any one time, of 450,000 in inventory.

But now, one unanticipated effect of the economic downturn has been to motivate museums to display more pieces from their collections.

"In the past, blockbuster shows have brought in big attendance, but no one has the money to do those shows now, so museums are looking to show how deep and rich their own collections are," said Susan Weber, head of the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design and Culture in Manhattan.

That view is echoed by Ms. Davis in Boston. "Museums are going to look to showcase their private collections," she said. "They are getting more collaborative with other museums in doing small exchanges."

Ms. Davis will open a show in late April devoted to [John Singer Sargent](#)'s mural decorations, originally painted for the museum. Now the museum is culling from storage Sargent's oil sketches and preparatory drawings for the murals, as well as related paintings.

And not every museum is in full contraction mode. The [Art Institute of Chicago](#) and the Museum of Fine Arts are building galleries — with money raised in better times — that will let them display far more of their holdings. "Most museums show between 2 and 4 percent of a collection," Ms. Davis said. "When the new wing is down, we will be able to show 30 percent."

Of course, many museums increasingly post pictures of their holdings on the Web, providing an invaluable index of what is behind closed doors.

But for many people, that's not enough. "Photographs just don't do it," said Jasper Gaunt, curator of Greek and Roman art at the Michael C. Carlos Museum at [Emory University](#) in Atlanta. "Art is what gets lost in reproduction."

So beyond creating exhibitions at the Carlos, he said, he tries to satisfy requests to see undisplayed work when he can.

At the Art Institute of Chicago, visitors can make appointments to see photographs, prints and drawings. Some are not shy about asking.

Otto D'Olivo, a music teacher in Chicago, studied photography at the institute's school in the 1960s, and starting in 1990, asked to see the museum's collection to "better understand what photography is." He added, "It took me about a decade because I took notes on each photographer." He still visits the museum to look at some of the collection of 17,000 photographs, of which about 120 are on display.

Generally, it is far easier for visitors to see drawings, textiles and photographs than paintings in storage. But many museums are not accommodating. The Museum of Modern Art, for example, approves requests to view undisplayed work only from curators, scholars and auction house professionals, a policy common among museums.

At the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, Forrest McGill, the chief curator, acknowledges that it is difficult to see objects that are not on display. "It's a matter of having to go into storage cabinets where the bronzes and ceramics are kept," he said. "There are security issues. We can't have everybody knowing how the locks work and where the security cameras are."

So some museums are exploring other ways to get more work before the public. One is "open storage," allowing visitors to see work without the niceties of an arranged exhibition.

At the Metropolitan Museum in New York, administrative offices overlooking the [Leon Levy](#) and Shelby White Court were converted to exhibition space. "The bulk of the collection was last seen in its entirety in 1949," said Carlos Picon, curator of the Greek and Roman collections. Much of it is now available in what is effectively open storage.

The Henry Luce Foundation has underwritten open storage galleries at four museums: the New-York Historical Society, the Metropolitan, the [Brooklyn Museum](#) and the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington. They show thousands of pieces each from their American collections that had once been in storage.

Not everything is labeled, said Ellen Holtzman, program director for American art at the Luce foundation, but at least it is all in the open.

The New-York Historical Society, for example, houses 40,000 objects in a sprawling display that takes up 21,000 square feet and includes the Beekman Coach, which was used by the Beekman family to transport friends, including George Washington, around New York City.

There are also 65 paintings currently on display, including Francis Guy's "Tontine Coffee House" and a William-Adolphe Bouguereau that was part of the highly regarded Robert L. Stuart Collection.

Museums also rely on rotating collections to display more work. Some art is regarded as too fragile to spend years exposed to strong lighting, so it is exchanged regularly for pieces in storage.

At the Asian Art Museum, many paintings are displayed for only six months every five years, putting 10 paintings into a single viewing slot over that period.

While some pieces come out of storage into a museum's own galleries, others are displayed elsewhere. The Bard Graduate Center, for example, displays some of the Metropolitan Museum's little-seen collections. Currently Bard is showing "'Twixt Art and Nature," an exhibition of English needlepoint.

"Bard can do exhibits in galleries with greatly reduced light that would be harder at the Metropolitan," said Ms. Weber of the Bard center. "The objects are fragile and light sensitive. Heavy lights would make them fade."

Other collections travel farther afield. Last year the Carlos Museum, in Atlanta, offered "Lost Kingdoms of the Nile: Nubian Treasures from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston."

"Only a small fraction of the Nubian material in Boston is on display," said Peter Lacovara, who was an assistant curator in Boston before going to the Carlos as senior curator of ancient Egyptian, Nubian and Near Eastern art. "The sarcophagus of Aspelta, for example, the largest and most beautiful royal sarcophagus ever found in the Nile Valley, is stuck in a basement corridor" in the Boston museum.