

Arts & Leisure

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A Museum Grows in Brooklyn (Painfully)

By NICHOLAS FOX WEBER

THE POET MARIANNE MOORE moved from Manhattan to Brooklyn in 1929. In Brooklyn, where she lived for more than 30 years, she felt refreshed by the "atmosphere of privacy with a touch of diffidence"; the calmer ambiance replaced the "life of pressure" she had left behind on the other side of the river. In a 1960 essay, she summed up its allure for her: "Brooklyn has given me pleasure, has helped to educate me; has afforded me, in fact, the kind of tame excitement on which I thrive."

One place where Moore found that tame excitement was at the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, known today as the Brooklyn Museum. In her poem "A Carriage From Sweden" — inspired by a 19th-century gilded Scandinavian sleigh covered with intricate carving and painted landscapes — she captured the effect its holdings might have:

*They say there is a sweeter air
where it was made, than we have here,
a Hamlet's Castle atmosphere.
At all events there is in Brooklyn
something that makes me feel at home.*

That sleigh, once drawn by horses on the other side of the Atlantic, was precisely the sort of offbeat gem one could count on finding in the Brooklyn Institute when Moore moved to the borough. The museum's grand galleries housed a range of decorative art, as well as strong collections of Egyptian objects, American paintings and — then rare in most American museums — African and Indian art. What the poet felt while looking at the sleigh was in keeping with what the institute's founders had, over a century earlier, intended its exhibits to provide.

It has not always been easy to realize that simple goal. Although now rejoicing in a splendid new wing, the Brooklyn Museum has continually been buffeted by ups and downs. It has more than once been on the brink of disaster. The saga of the institution in the 19th century — grandiose dreams, retrenchment, then compromise — established the pattern of jagged peaks and valleys that has been occurring right up until the present day.

Six years ago, in the prosperous 1980's, the Brooklyn Museum embarked on a \$31 million plan, with the architects Arata Isozaki and James Stewart Polshek, to put its house in order. The scheme included a 460-seat auditorium and 14,000 square feet of modernized art storage space, both of which were completed last year. The west wing, largely unused since the 1930's, has undergone a com-

plete renovation, resulting in 30,000 square feet of new gallery space. The space will not be completely unveiled until next fall, but the first 10,000 square feet, on the fourth floor, opened on Friday with an exhibition of paintings by the 19th-century Frenchman Frédéric Bazille.

"But the improvements to our building have come out of the pipeline at the worst moment," says Robert T. Buck, the director of the museum. The museum feared for a time that it would be unable to afford the additional staff members needed to keep its new wing open. Because of three budget cuts imposed in the last two years by New York City, which owns the museum, the curators cannot adequately care for the resources they already have. When a curator from the National Museum in Tokyo visited Brooklyn a few years ago, he remarked that its holdings of Ainu art were the most extensive in the world; lacking money to study them, Brooklyn's curators had never realized their magnitude or significance.

Even when the art is not in storage (94 percent of it is), it may languish unseen. While the museum's board has increased its own giving by more than \$1 million in the past year, severe cutbacks in the budget for the city's Department of Cultural Affairs resulted in a loss of \$2 million of the \$16 million operating budget for fiscal year 1992. The museum managed to balance its budget, but only by reducing its hours. On one level the Brooklyn Museum has appeared to grow by leaps; on another it is scarcely surviving.

The History

A Grandiose Vision
Vis-à-Vis Manhattan

The seeds for the Brooklyn Museum were sown on July 4, 1825, when General Lafayette laid the cornerstone of the Brooklyn Apprentices' Library — in a ceremony that Walt Whitman characterized as having "quite an amount of speechifying." The mission of its earnest founders was "extending the benefits of knowledge to that portion of our youth who are engaged in learning the mechanical arts, and thereby, qualifying them for becoming useful and respectable members of society."

In 1833, the library became associated with the Brooklyn Lyceum, equally geared toward intellectual improvement. A decade later, the two were consolidated into the Brooklyn Institute. The institute thrived. In 1860, when

Brooklyn was the third largest city in the United States, its proud leaders decided that the institution should be expanded into a cultural organization that would make the Louvre look like small potatoes.

The City of Brooklyn had a grandiose vision of itself vis-à-vis the City of New York. In a dedication ceremony in 1881, Joshua Van Cott predicted that Manhattan would be abandoned in favor of Brooklyn or New Jersey, assuring his audience that Brooklyn would have "everything that adds to the sweetness of life and the moral and intellectual excellence of a great city."

It was in that spirit that the Brooklyn Institute was reorganized into the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences in 1890, with the Brooklyn Museum as part of it. The new institution had 25 departments devoted to science and the various arts. Its intended home, never completed, would have been the largest museum structure in the world, more than 1.5 million square feet. The design, by McKim, Mead & White, was in the Neo-Classical tradition of Karl Friedrich Schinkel's Altes Museum in Berlin and the British Museum in London. The grand scheme called for an enormous square in Greco-Roman style, with multiple facades and domes, on Eastern Parkway at the edge of Prospect Park.

The first section of the new institute was its west wing, completed in 1897. But only months later Brooklyn became part of the city of Greater New York and ceased to exist as an entity on its own. So the museum that was meant to be the focal point of an independent metropolis quickly became one among many administered by the New York City Parks Department. Construction continued, but the grand plan was never fully realized. McKim, Mead & White's east wing and central pavilion were completed in 1906, and further sections in 1927, but they amounted to only one-sixth of the original conception. Then came a long period of starts and stops.

The Building

Big Dreams,
Often Frustrated

In the 1930's the Brooklyn Institute, and the museum within it, continued to define itself. Having proudly taken as its province all of human knowledge, "in all departments of art and science," it was forced to retract and reduce its aspirations to being a gallery of fine arts, and the entire place became known as the Brooklyn Museum.

One of the most spectacular unrealized schemes was announced in 1935. The International Style architect William Lescaze developed a new master plan to replace McKim, Mead & White's. It included a 100,000-square-foot Industrial Center intended to put the industrial arts on the same level as the fine arts by emphasizing the design of machinery with exhibitions of objects ranging from refrigerators to airplanes.

The Industrial Center never became a reality, but Lescaze did influence alterations on the interior of the existing building. Essentially, though, the institute drew back. Then, in an administrative reshuffle in the 1970's, the Brooklyn Academy of Music, the Brooklyn Botanic Garden and the Brooklyn Children's Museum, all part of the parent institution, broke off from it and moved elsewhere. In 1985, the Art School closed.

But not everything has been a reduction. The Isozaki-Polshek plan fits well into the museum's tradition of big dreams. Its various phases would ultimately result in a renovated and enlarged building, with an impressive south facade where today there is just the back of the building. The success of phase one is inspiring, with \$14 million of the \$31 million cost having come from the city, the rest from private donors and foundations.

The new galleries will house contemporary and ancient art as well as changing exhibitions. For the first time, Brooklyn will not have to remove parts of the permanent collection to accommodate major shows, and the top floor of the renovated west wing has that great rarity in modern exhibition space — natural light — which can be controlled by electronically operated blinds in the skylight.

But then there is what Mr. Buck terms the bugaboo. Whereas in the 1980's the city was flush enough to provide money for the additional space, now it cannot even cover operating expenses. Because of budget cuts, in the summer of 1990 the museum had to eliminate 45 of its 300 jobs, reduce visiting hours (adding Monday closings to the regular Tuesdays) and put its renowned costume collection in storage.

The seesawing of the past few years has been no secret. In June 1991, only two months after the auditorium opened, Mr. Buck said that planned cuts in New York's arts budget would force the museum to close. Salaries, no longer covered, could not be paid with money restricted for other purposes. Mr. Buck said he had no choice but to "stop the meter" on salaries, his own included, and the museum shut down for a week.



Metropolitan Museum of Art/The Brooklyn Museum

Frédéric Bazille's "Manet Dessinant," which is part of an exhibition of the artist's work that has reopened the Brooklyn Museum's new west wing — Institutionally, ups and downs.

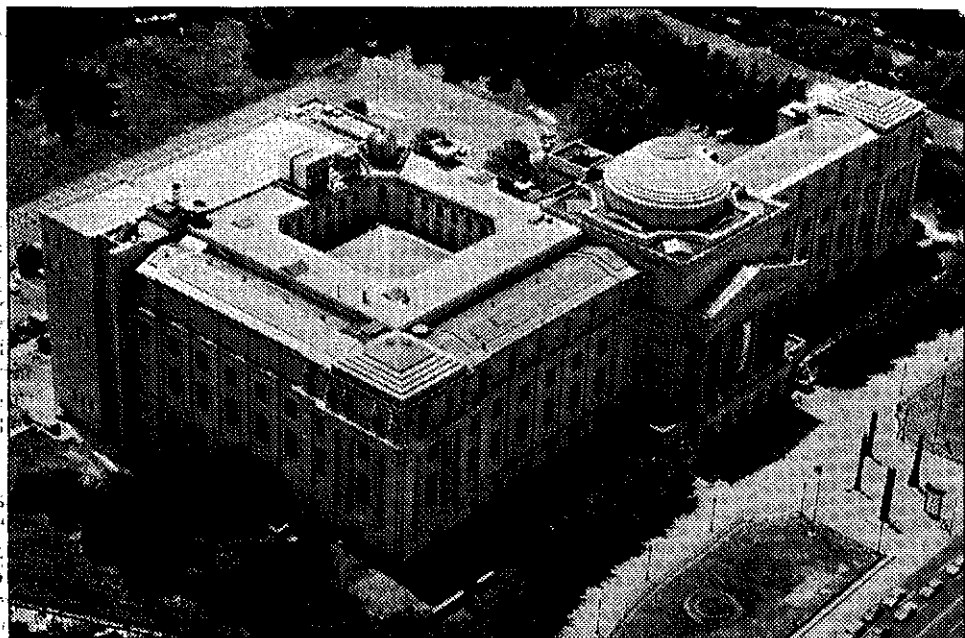
Nicholas Fox Weber is the author, most recently, of "Patron Saints: Five Rebels Who Opened America to a New Art, 1928-1943."

A Museum Grows (Painfully) in Brooklyn

But things have improved a bit. The original budget cut from the city was \$2.5 million, \$618,000 of which was restored in June, enabling the museum to rehire 11 people. And a few days ago, according to Mayor David N. Dinkins, the city agreed to "allocate additional funds in the range of \$300,000 that will begin to address the museum's current needs."

Even though such injections of cash will not substantially change the institution's financial situation, Luis R. Cancel, the city's Commissioner of Cultural Affairs, defends Brooklyn's expansion. "Certainly there's an awkwardness in the short term," he said recently, "because you're caught partially opening a renovated facility. But these are difficult times, and operating support is always going to be cyclical. What matters is that the Brooklyn Museum is stronger now than it was seven years ago."

Having been director of the Bronx Museum of the Arts for 13 years, Mr. Cancel says he has a personal affinity for the Brooklyn Museum. "If it were anywhere else in the world, it would be the major cultural institution of that municipality."



Photographs by the Brooklyn Museum

The grand plan of the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, right, drawn up by McKim, Mead & White in the 1890's; only the shaded area toward the bottom was completed. Above, the Brooklyn Museum as it is today.

The Competition

Too Much 'Cooking' Across the River

How the Brooklyn Museum compares with its neighbors across the river may affect the way people perceive the institution, hence how well they support it. For almost a century the Brooklyn Museum was unique in its role in greater New York because of its outstanding collections of non-Western art. Then this changed. "This institution was eclipsed in its uniqueness and significance in the New York City area in the 1960's," says Mr. Buck, "when the Met declared that they would get involved in the arts of the South Pacific, in African art, and to a greater degree in Asian art. When the Met redefined its role, the uniqueness of this institution was subtly undercut. It was not done on purpose, but the results confused the public."

Obviously, a main task for Mr. Buck is finding ways in which Brooklyn can excel. Personally interested in contemporary art, he notes that the museum has suitable space in which to display contemporary sculpture. "Another direction for us is emerging younger artists," he says. "Work doesn't have to be tried and true for us to show or acquire it."

The museum has made a mark in its exhibitions, above all the important Bierstadt and Courbet shows of recent years. It has also focused on Brooklyn artists and major modern artists whose work has received less attention in Manhattan — Anni

Albers, Ben Nicholson and Arman among them. Brooklyn has specialized in "deliberately imaginative and provocative exhibitions," says Linda S. Ferber, chief curator and curator of American painting and sculpture. These include two major surveys showing art of or by black Americans.

Charlotta Kotik, Brooklyn's curator of contemporary art, is organizing Louise Bourgeois's exhibition for the 1993 Venice Biennale, which will be the core of an expanded exhibition that will open in Brooklyn and travel internationally. Other shows will present Indian miniatures from the museum's own collection; a promised gift of work by the American abstractionist Leon Polk Smith and Spanish colonial art, including paintings, tapestries, silver, furniture and manuscripts.

Mr. Buck's ability to keep these and his other programs alive gets high marks from his fellow museum directors, who blame Brooklyn's problems on its location and the economy. "Has Brooklyn done everything it can?" asks David Ross, the director of the Whitney Museum of American Art. "You bet. They've gone after their educational mission. They've tried to raise money in a way that's competitive and appropriate. You could write the textbook off the way that Bob Buck has planned his expansion stage by stage. But unfortunately, life's not fair."

Alan Shestack, director of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, sees the location as a major hardship. "If you're an out-of-towner

coming into New York," he says, "you tend to forget about it, because there's so much cooking in Manhattan. Why would people go there if they can go to the Museum of Modern Art, the Met, the Whitney or the Guggenheim? If it were in Manhattan, it would be besieged by visitors."

The Community

Reaching Out Through Design

The people now in charge have struggled to overcome aspects of the museum that could make it intimidating and cause infrequent visitors to feel as if they were entering some sort of royal sanctuary.

One way of doing this is through architecture and design. "Display is enormously important to overcome the off-putting austerity of this very grand Neo-Classical architecture," Mr. Buck says. "If through design intervention we can make an easier entree into the beauty of its contents, we will have achieved a worthwhile goal."

That has been a primary purpose of Isozaki and Polshek's alterations within the building. Lower arched ceilings make the spaces more intimate; new showcases move objects closer to the viewer and present them under optimal lighting conditions.

Deborah Schwartz, the energetic vice di-

rector for education, has developed various outreach programs to lure people unaccustomed to visiting museums. In working to attract residents of the entire metropolitan region but primarily the area within a five-mile radius of the museum, a neighborhood that has deteriorated in recent years, Brooklyn has done an admirable job in overcoming any tinge of elitism. There are also tours, gallery talks, workshops and film series — with various ethnic groups, the elderly and schoolchildren among target audiences. Recent film programs have been devoted to work by black directors and Israeli women directors.

Above all, the museum has tried to work with the public school system. It is hardly alone in this, but it puts unusual emphasis on its educational mission. In the "Raiders of the Fine Arts" Saturday programs, children are encouraged to use objects in the museum collection as starting points for creative observation. After studying a Pennsylvania German whirligig, for example, children made their own. One child transformed the stiff 19th-century soldier into a smiling cardboard girl, her arms spinning from a jump rope.

At the time of the 1990 exhibition "Festival Arts of the Caribbean," the education department set up focus groups within the West Indian community to find out how people felt about the museum and how new visitors might be beckoned. It ran a summer training institute in which 25 teachers of diverse backgrounds learned about the exhibition and Caribbean culture in general.

The Collection

From the Official To the Quirky

The stirring quality that Marianne Moore found in the permanent collection remains the essence of the museum. There is a series of period rooms where one can gaze at a trestle table and open hearth in the Dutch-style Jan Martense Schenck House, built in Brooklyn around 1675, as well as at a 19th-century dining room from South Carolina, where an elegant antebellum luncheon seems ready to begin.

These are just two of many examples of the museum's decorative arts holdings. There is also first-rate folk art, like that whirligig and a remarkable wood-and-metal trade sign, from Greenpoint, of a boy riding a bicycle. The American painting collection has a John Smibert portrait of Captain James Gooch, circa 1740, that evokes the rich character of some of the Colonial settlers, and a 1789 Ralph Earl of Clarissa Seymour in which her white lace is perfectly translucent over peach silk. A classic Gilbert Stuart of George Washington represents our national art at its most official; a pair of lean Ammi Phillips portraits reveals its quirkiest side.

The permanent collection excels in European painting as well. While the major New York art donors of the late 19th and early 20th centuries gave most of their gems to institutions in Manhattan, they still steered a few prizes here. So Brooklyn's Italian primitives include a glorious Lorenzo Monaco "Madonna of Humility," and there are good paintings by Hals and Goya. The four fine Courbets include a "Wave" that is one of the best of that artist's evocations of pure, rich nature. There is a feast of Monets, a large Degas oil, and distinguished work by Delaunay, Derain and Matisse.

There are also splendid Iranian ceramics, fine Chinese painting, and a Japanese 16th-century red lacquer bowl with as luminous a color as has ever radiated from wood. The 2,000-year-old Paracas Textile from Peru has a border that consists of a fantastic population of costumed people and gesturing animals. An Egyptian ibis — made in the

Ptolemaic period of gilded wood, rock crystal, gold and silver — is as streamlined as a Brancusi.

Art of this calibre is what has given Brooklyn the strength to weather the vagaries that have become an inherent part of an underappreciated, underused museum. If the obstacles of location can be surmounted and budget cutbacks can be overcome, the Brooklyn Museum is well equipped to provide tame excitement for years to come.

Chords of Memory

The Brooklyn Museum has played a significant role in the lives of many illustrious Brooklynites. They have responded to it with the mixed feelings that characterize one's view of one's family or high school years. Here is a trio of memories.

Alfred Kazin In his memoir "A Walker in the City," Mr. Kazin recalled going there with a school group:

"They led us into the museum that day, up the big stone steps they had then, through vast empty halls that stung my nose with their prickly smell of new varnish and were lined with the effigies of medieval Japanese warriors — the black stringy hairs on their wigs oppressively unreal, the faces mock-terrible as they glared down at us through their stiffly raised swords, everything in that museum wearisome and empty and smelling of floor polish until they pushed us through a circular room upstairs violently ablaze with John Singer Sargent's watercolors of the Caribbean and into a long room lined with oily dim farmscapes of America in the 19th century, and I knew I would come back."

Henry Miller Miller also got to know the museum on school field trips. Unlike Kazin, though, he was unable to get beyond his initially unfavorable impression. After he moved to Paris and was fired by his passion for Matisse, Picasso and the Surrealists, he complained in his memoirs of being forced, as a high school student, to copy the plaster casts of "ancient eyeless Greeks and headless vestals with flowing drapes."

Ben Shahn Budding artists responded intensely to the museum and its collections. In an unpublished memoir, Willie Snow, a childhood friend of Ben Shahn's, describes how the future master of Socialist Realism took him there as a teen-ager:

"Nobody had suggested that we go. It was his idea. There was no guidance. Just two boys fascinated by the wonderful creations in art. Because of his ravenous readings he was already aware of the civilizations that had made their contributions. We were impressed with the feeling that new things were not always better than the old. That which was worthy had survived and was held precious. It was a lot for two youngsters to have found out by their own explorations."

— N. F. W.

How Four New York Museums Stack Up

	Brooklyn Museum	Metropolitan Museum of Art	Museum of Modern Art	Whitney Museum of American Art
Objects in collection	1.5 to 2 million	Over 2 million	Over 100,000	10,000
Endowment	\$27.6 million	\$507 million	\$154 million	\$6 million
Annual expenses	\$16.9 million	\$78 million	\$46 million	\$14.3 million
Square feet of gallery space	155,000	650,000	87,000	23,100
Portion of collection in storage	94%	Not available	75% to 80%	97%
Size of staff	263 full-time	1,700 full-time 800 part-time	500 full-time	161 including part-time
Number of members	8,500	102,000	49,860	6,780
Number of visitors annually	290,000	4.5 million	1.3 million	268,000

Source: Individual museums; figures are the most recent available

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