



INSIDE VIEWS OF OFF-VIEW ART

When Esther Bell, chief curator of the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts, wants to see one of her favorite works in the museum's collection, she doesn't head to a gallery to view it on a wall. Rather, like any visitor who also wants to see it, she makes an appointment with the on-site Manton Study Center for Works on Paper and then walks over to that facility. A curatorial assistant there retrieves a Solander box, a container specially designed to hold fragile prints and drawings, opens it, and places the artwork in front of Bell.

And, so, there it is for Bell to admire — a pen-and-ink Albrecht Dürer drawing from 1521 that depicts feral and fantastical animals in various poses, some backdropped by Renaissance cityscapes. “Whenever I have the opportunity to look at this drawing,” Bell says, “my heart flutters. This particular Dürer is one of the most beautiful drawings in the history of art.”

Because of its fragility and propensity to fade in light, *Sketches of Animals and Landscapes*, rendered by Dürer in black ink and blue, gray, and rose washes, is one of thousands of works in the Clark's collection that is permanently “off view” to the public — yet available for anyone to see in person, with an appointment. Indeed, of the 10,354 items in the Clark's collection, only 1,278 are currently on view in its four-building complex; 6,892 of that total number are works on paper, most of them off view.

Bell shares a recent anecdote that underscores the true accessibility and caliber of the Clark's off-view works. A woman had made an appointment to see an 1898 pastel by Mary Cassatt (1844–1926), *The Portrait of Mrs. Cyrus J.*



Because of its sensitivity to light, this 1521 drawing of animals, rendered in pen and ink, with color washes, by Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528), remains off view at the Clark Art Institute. But with an appointment, anyone can view it at the museum's Manton Study Center for Works on Paper.



A descendent of the figures depicted in Mary Cassatt's *Portrait of Mrs. Cyrus J. Lawrence with Her Grandson R. Lawrence Oakley* (c. 1898) was able to see the work at the Clark Art Institute's Manton Study Center.



Adam Levine, president, director, and CEO of Ohio's Toledo Museum of Art

Lawrence with Her Grandson R. Lawrence Oakley. It held a special meaning for that visitor, for it depicts her father as a young boy with his grandmother, affectionately clasping hands as she pauses from her knitting. Her family had donated the portrait to the Clark in 1973 and the last time the visitor had seen it was when it was still hanging over her grandparents' sofa. Bell characterizes that particular encounter as "a very touching family reunion."

It is works on paper that are most often kept off view, yet their portability makes it easier to show them to visitors during one-on-one viewings arranged through written or online requests. Paintings, sculptures, murals, valuable jewels, and fragile tableware are far less accessible for simple reasons of size; more than one staff member is required to carry such items to the viewing area and to monitor the visit. Fortunately, more and more institutions like the Clark now have every object in their collection listed online, most with an accompanying photograph.

REASONS TO STORE

"Off view" is an off-putting term. Yet every major encyclopedic art museum is limited in what it can show the public at any one time. No museum building, even ones as vast as the British Museum, the Louvre,



Roxana Velásquez, executive director and CEO of the San Diego Museum of Art

the Hermitage, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, is large enough to show all it owns. This means that much of a collection is often kept in secure, temperature-controlled storerooms (on site) or in warehouses (elsewhere).

"Museums only have so much display space, and it is rare that an institution with any scale can show everything it has," remarks Adam Levine, who is president, director, and CEO of Ohio's Toledo Museum of Art (TMA). "Put simply, works being off view is a feature, not a bug." According to Levine, the TMA currently has about 30 percent of its 25,000 objects on display.

Roxana Velásquez, executive director and CEO of the San Diego Museum of Art, echoes those remarks, saying that "only a small fraction" of her institution's 32,000 objects — which date from 3,000 B.C. to the present day — are on view. "Yet the full museum collection is available for research purposes by appointment," she emphasizes.

Fragility is a key reason many works are kept off view. "Some materials degrade with exposure to light, including textiles and works on paper, and so those works must be 'rested' [kept off view] after short periods of display and light exposure," Levine notes. "This cycle of rotating light-sensitive works ensures that they remain in the same shape as the artist intended."



Idle Hours (1888) by Julian Alden Weir (1852–1919) is among some 7,300 works displayed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Visible Storage facility.



In 1971, Gloria Vanderbilt painted a portrait of a friend, the photographer Gordon Parks (1912–2006), which she later donated to the National Arts Club. It now hangs in the parlor there (at right).

Redundancy is another factor. At the Clark, which is noted for its sterling collection of sterling silver pieces, only a select number of its many 18th-century metalware pieces are displayed, simply for reasons of space and because the import of their artisanship can be conveyed with just a few examples illuminated within glass cases. Out of dozens of late-18th-century silver teaspoons made by Samuel Drowne, for instance, a single circa-1770 exam-

ple is sufficient to highlight his artisanship and design, while all the others remain in tarnish-proof storage.

Although many centuries-old paintings appear to be ageless, their upkeep and conservation are key concerns. Protective varnishes degrade, discolor, rub away with time. Repairing and restoring means that works need to be taken away, their places filled, with other works that are typically kept off view. “Varnish, like all resins, yellows over time with exposure,” Levine explains, “and so, periodically, a painting may be rotated off view for a treatment, perhaps because the varnish needs to be carefully removed and replaced.”

Sometimes the manner in which certain artworks were originally acquired can lead to their being taken off view. This September, works on paper by Austria’s Egon Schiele were abruptly removed from the Art Institute of Chicago, Pittsburgh’s Carnegie Museum of Art, the Allen Memorial Art Museum at Oberlin College, New York’s Museum of Modern Art, and other institutions when it was discovered the Nazis had likely looted them from a Jewish collector who was murdered at Dachau. Though the institutions had acquired the art in good faith, later discoveries about their provenance proved problematic.

Sometimes, too, the very attribution of an artwork is questioned. When the National Gallery of Art’s *Girl with a Flute*, a notable Dutch Golden Age work thought to be by Johannes Vermeer, was found to have been painted by someone else, the museum temporarily removed it, later rehanging it with a different attribution on the wall label.



Among the busts and statues grouped behind glass in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Visible Storage facility is a depiction of Scottish poet Robert Burns, cast in 1891 by sculptor Charles Calverley (1833–1914).

A STORIED PAST

One of the defining features of a visit to any art museum, and an aspect that may not be immediately discernible, is the narrative storyline that the institution seeks to convey through the arrangement of its works. Museums tell stories about art, about its makers, and about its origins through its very placement in galleries.

Some museums have lately expanded their display of works by women artists and people of color. As these narratives shift or new stories arise, some works are deemed “off subject” and thus go off view, while others long stored away suddenly become relevant to the narrative. Of the TMA, Levine emphasizes, “The order of our operations is to acquire great art, consistently raising the bar, and to periodically assess the collection on its merits, refining it by removing artworks whose contribution to the narratives on display would be better made by newer, higher-quality works.”

And sometimes, too, museums borrow works in order to complete the new stories they wish to embrace. “Exhibitions and collection displays are selected from the many works available to showcase major highlights and also lesser-known works,” says Velásquez. “The selections vary depending on the theme and subject of the display, so works are changing frequently. Loans from other institutions augment the displays and fill gaps in the collection.”

Bell echoes those remarks by adding, “Generally, it is part of our business to loan out our works when we get a request to do so. It’s a privilege to be able to share what we have with another region or country or institution. It helps them tell the stories they want to relate.”

Even private institutions, such as New York’s venerable National Arts Club (NAC), which is distinguished by its also being a chartered nonprofit 501(c)(3), are often approached with requests to remove from walls and plinths some coveted works, albeit temporarily. Just this fall, for instance, the NAC was approached by Long Island’s Nassau County Museum of Art for a show it will present on America’s Gilded Age. The museum requested two NAC paintings from that period — William McGregor Paxton’s *The Shade Hat* (1912) and William Baxter Palmer Closson’s *Feeding the Peacocks* (1910).

“We’re always very, very happy when the opportunity arises to make loans like this,” says Robert Seyffert, chair of the NAC curatorial committee. In keeping with the club’s desire to subtly shift “the narrative” that has long been told in its



In its Visible Vaults, the San Diego Museum of Art invites visitors to peek into drawers and cabinets to see fragile and light-sensitive works that are normally off view.



Last year, the Toledo Museum of Art exhibition *State of the Art: Revealing Works from the Conservation Vault* highlighted artworks that require specialized care to improve their condition, both aesthetically and physically. It included *Armida, Ready to Slay the Sleeping Rinaldo, Is Restrained by Love*, by the French painter Jean Mosnier (1600–1656).

galleries, as well as to feature more contemporary art, especially as it celebrates its 125th anniversary, it recently repositioned a portrait of the African-American photographer Gordon Parks that had been painted by club member Gloria Vanderbilt (1924–2019). “She had donated it many years ago, but now it’s highlighted in an especially prominent spot in our parlor,” Seyffert notes. He and his fellow volunteer committee members, along with NAC staff curator/registrar Robert Yahner, have the enviable task of reviewing their collection’s 600-plus works to decide what might replace those empty spaces on the walls and when to bring works back into view.

ANOTHER STRATEGY

Some institutions seem unable to resist keeping anything off view completely, or for too long. In 1988, the Metropolitan Museum of Art debuted its Visible Storage, a dimly lit, maze-like gallery of floor-to-ceiling glass cases situated on an unassuming mezzanine of the American Wing. There, some 7,300 items are arranged by type — paintings, sculpture, architectural details, silverware, mirrors, chairs, furniture, ceramics, jewelry — all laid out in what might be considered the Great American Attic. There is something both celebratory and forlorn about these objects in their current state of exhibition limbo. While they can indeed be seen, they are not exactly shown in their (literally) best light, not given the same respect as pieces in the museum’s well-lit, well-appointed galleries nearby.

A close look at some of the paintings in these cases reveals their provenance and, likely, the length of time such portraits and depictions of domestic life have remained off view. *Idle Hours*, an 1888 canvas by J. Alden Weir, shows a Victorian mother and daughter at home, the latter holding a guitar far bigger than she is. The placard reads that this painting came to the museum in the same year it was made as a “Gift of Several Gentlemen,” phrasing that bespeaks a past era.

Elsewhere in Visible Storage, centuries-old tall-case clocks, most of their mechanisms stilled at either 8:20 or 10:10, stand behind glass. Not unlike a pet shelter, haunting portraits from the 18th, 19th, and early 20th century seemingly beg for attention from passersby, many of whom appear to have accidentally wandered in from the adjacent period rooms. John White Alexander’s *Ring* (1911) reveals a lovely young woman admiring what appears to be an engagement ring, holding it to the sunlight streaming through a window. A group of expressive bronze and marble busts huddle in a case, with Scottish poet Robert Burns’s gaze eerily catching visitors’. Georgian chairs upholstered in bright fabrics appear ready for extra guests at a dining table, while empty

gilded frames await their canvases. According to the Met’s mission statement for Visible Storage, which is part of The Henry R. Luce Center for the Study of American Art, its various curators of American art decide which materials from their areas of expertise will go on view here.

The San Diego Museum of Art has a feature similar to the Met’s, but far more interactive. Visitors to its Visible Vaults can open drawers and cabinets to find some 250 works that would otherwise be kept in storage due to light sensitivity. As Velásquez remarks, “Works on paper can normally be displayed only one month for every year of rest. In the Visible Vaults’ drawers, they can remain on view for two years. In most cases, a context needs to be found to bring works out of the vaults and into the galleries.”

In the Vaults, the appeal is the sheer surprise of opening drawers to find, with no context, a cabinet of curiosities that might include Hiroshige woodblocks of 19th-century Japanese life, complete with examples of the tools needed to make them, or Indian miniature paintings accompanied by seashells filled with the type of powdered pigments used to create them.

While the TMA doesn’t have a dedicated area such as the Met and the San Diego Museum to showcase works off view, it did open up its “conservation vault,” as it’s known within the institution, to the public last year in a special exhibition. Their on-site lab is always busy with the restoration of fragile works, and the exhibition allowed museumgoers a chance to see such works prior to their undergoing work, as well as those in the midst of repair.

Last September, Esther Bell was walking through the Clark’s galleries noting some of the works that were soon to go out on loan, namely Francesco Pesellino’s *King Melchior Sailing to the Holy Land* (c. 1445–50) and the 20-piece *Tea Service of Famous Women*, a collection of Sèvres porcelain (c. 1811–12) housed in an alcove gallery able to display up to a dozen paintings. “I know the collection like the proverbial back of my hand,” Bell explains, “but I’ll also physically go into our storage areas to make sure that what I choose to display in their place will be of the right scale — even whether one kind of frame will work with frames already on the walls. It’s one of the great privileges of being a curator — being able to walk through storage and see all that we have, and what we can present again to the public.” ●

DAVID MASELLO writes about art and culture. He is a widely published essayist and poet, and many of his short plays and monologues have been produced by theater companies in New York and Los Angeles.