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New Wing at Boston Museum: Worth a Trip from Anywhere

by Jeanne Schinto

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Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

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In H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895), the Time Traveler observes that there are no museums in the world of the future. He comes across a ruin of one called The Palace of Green Porcelain, which reminds him of the Victorian-era museums of his day. Assuming it must be a variation on "South Kensington"—i.e., today's Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A)—he reports that he "found the old familiar glass cases." But since he's at that moment trying to figure out how to battle the Morlocks, he has trouble becoming interested in their contents—"old-time geology in decay." In his dystopian vision, museums (and libraries too) were obsolete because intellectual life no longer existed.

If Wells could visit the new Art of the Americas Wing at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA), he'd undoubtedly be pleased to see how wide the gap between his pessimistic prediction and this 21st-century reality. The wing has transformed the MFA into a place worth a trip from anywhere.

Innumerable, grandiose statements by the museum and by reporters who were granted previews prepared me to be disappointed. I remained skeptical on the morning of the opening for press, donors, and other guests. Heralded by trumpets, MFA director Malcolm Rogers and Norman Foster, head of the architectural firm Foster + Partners, which designed the new wing, entered its soaring (63' high) glass-walled Ruth and Carl J. Shapiro Family Courtyard. These and other speakers noted that more than 6000 people had worked on this culmination of over ten years' work and more than \$500 million.

They referred to the new construction and its contents as "something beyond architecture," an enhancement of the entire city and its "urban picture," as well as "a new monument to art." But would it live up to such extravagant claims?

What about the project's scope? The task that the museum staff set for itself in 1999 seemed ill-conceived back then. It aimed to present nothing less than the art and artifacts of all North, South, and Central America spanning the time periods from the pre-Columbian era through to the 20th century. On that opening morning Rogers said the new wing aimed "to tell the story of the Americas as a whole," to say "what it means to be an American." That Rogers is British, as is Lord Foster, was an irony as impossible to ignore as their English accents.

Then, finally, they let us all flow into the galleries to see the wing for ourselves.

The collections are arranged on four levels with the below-ground Level LG being devoted to the earliest period of the Americas. Since the material is arranged chronologically and post-Revolutionary Americas; Level 2 covers the 19th century; and Level 3, the 20th century. Where to begin? I chose Level 1 to enter first, since that was where much of "our" Americana—main focus of this magazine—would be found.

I was greeted by John Singleton Copley's 1768 portrait of Paul Revere, which shows the silversmith in his shirtsleeves holding one of his silver teapots. It's a famous painting that I've seen many times and repeatedly admired, but how much more beautiful it suddenly appeared being displayed with objects—18 pieces—made by Revere's own hands.

In front of the portrait, in a case by itself, was a Revere masterpiece—his Sons of Liberty Bowl. The bowl was commissioned by 15 members of the Sons, a secret, revolutionary organization to which Revere belonged. Their names are engraved on it; their organization would be secret no longer. The bowl honors 92 members of the Massachusetts House of Representatives who stood up to British rule and resisted laws passed to tax the Colonists. It was a political act that led to the Boston Tea Party and eventually the American Revolution. As icons go, it would be hard to get more iconic.

Nearby the Revere display was a Massachusetts side chair, made in Boston, 1765-85, originally owned by Moses Gill, a hardware merchant and sometimes Massachusetts politician. He was married to Rebecca Boylston, whose portrait by Copley was on view in an adjacent gallery. There were other matchups of furniture and paintings too. Copley's *A Boy with a Flying Squirrel* (Henry Pelham), for example, was next to a Massachusetts chair possibly carved by John Welch and a John Cogswell chest-on-chest. Suddenly, I was noticing the "props" in other portraits. How was it that I had never much noticed them before?

Some furniture, decorative arts, and fine artworks were arranged in vignettes. A Boston tea table, 1750-75, was exhibited with a setting of 18th-century silver made by Jacob Hurd (teapot and sugar bowl), John Coburn (sugar scissors), John Burt (strainer spoon), Samuel Edwards (pair of teaspoons), and Revere (cream pot). Hanging above the table was a circa 1748 overmantel by Hannah Otis; her subject, Boston Common. We're used to seeing stage sets that merely suggest architecture or room décor. It's often more effective than verisimilitude, and so was this and other domestic backdrops for the Colonial and Revolutionary periods.

Malcolm Rogers had said in his remarks, "We want to be an encyclopedic museum." Spencer de Grey, senior partner and head of design for Foster + Partners, had quipped, "The shock of the old, you might say." But this was clearly not the V&A. In combining furniture, paintings, textiles, and other decorative arts, and putting things into context, the museum had succeeded in deepening the meaning of each individual object.

That's not to say there weren't a few lineups, but they seemed to come at the right moment and worked beautifully as accents, e.g., a row of 18th-century chairs from London, Philadelphia, Boston, the Connecticut River valley (Wethersfield), and Venezuela displayed against some delightfully raucous period wallpaper.

In Victorian museums of old, there was little signage. Objects were supposed to speak for themselves. In more modern times, I have found signage clearly written and informative but dull, as if all written by the same person in some monstrous university library in the sky. The signage in the new wing is full of verve and interesting details, thanks to people such as Benjamin Weiss, MFA's head of interpretation and one of many MFA staffers on hand that morning to answer questions.

"This is the environment—if you saw this chair in an eighteenth-century house, this is very likely the kind of paper you would see in the same room," said Weiss. "It's the right kind of wallpaper—big-figured, brightly colored. They liked it busy in the eighteenth century. This is the period eye. It's filled with color, ornament, and pattern."

As I moved through Level 1, looking at more 18th-century and early 19th-century New England-made pieces—e.g., a tall clock made in Newport by John Townsend and another by William Claggett of the same city—the exhibits continued the story of the Americas after the Revolution. In a huge space warmed with golden light I came upon Thomas Sully's monumental (12' x 17') *The Passage of the Delaware*, a depiction of George Washington's bold crossing of the Delaware River on Christmas night 1776 during a snowstorm. Sully painted his depiction years later, in 1819. It was given to the MFA in 1903, but here in the new wing it was reunited with its original frame for the first time, said Rhona MacBeth, MFA's head of paintings conservation and Eijk and Rose-Marie van Otterloo Conservator of Paintings.

"The frame was in eight pieces, scattered all over the museum," MacBeth said. "It was too big to be displayed. Some of the gilding is original, some not. It had been repainted with 'radiator-style' paint. An old photo told us vaguely what the missing corner pieces looked like. We had them reproduced. It was quite a moment when it was all assembled. The canvas was brought in rolled, then the frame. For me the great moment was not only connecting the picture and the frame but in finally seeing both in context. Now the whole makes sense."

The new wing has 53 galleries and nine period rooms. As most of us know, the period-room concept is being reconsidered by museums everywhere. ("All our period rooms that were fake are out," Rogers said in his remarks in the courtyard.)

I don't trust period rooms ever since I saw the 1950 House at Shelburne Museum in Vermont. Born in 1951, I know 1950's décor. Shelburne's was accurate enough, down to the soup cans in the kitchen, but there was something that seemed embalmed about the place. I couldn't get out of there fast enough. So again the skeptic, I entered the first of the Level 1 period rooms that I encountered.

These were the 1800-01 dining room, parlor, and bedchamber from Oak Hill, a mansion built in South Danvers, now Peabody, Massachusetts, for Elizabeth Derby West. Featuring the work of Salem, Massachusetts, architect and carver Samuel McIntire, Oak Hill was an architectural tour de force of its time.

Built no doubt with McIntire's involvement in its design (the statement isn't definitive because no documentation survives), it featured interior details, ornaments, and furniture produced by McIntire and then his son. West's chest-on-chest by an unidentified cabinetmaker, whose ornamentation McIntire carved in 1806-09, was perhaps the culmination of the collaboration between this ideal match of benefactor and artisan.

Many people, including myself, saw the piece at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem during the 2007 exhibition *Samuel McIntire: Carving an American Style*. But seeing it in West's Oak Hill bedroom is something else again, especially since, because of the way the room has been designed, you don't have to peer in awkwardly from the doorway, craning your neck. Instead, you can walk a diagonal line right through the middle of it. This is a period room I can believe in.

Some museums, notably the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, have gone heavy on interactive devices in their recent renovations. I was happy to discover that isn't the case at the MFA. When I eventually got to Level 2 and another couple of period rooms—the parlor and dining room from the Roswell Gleason House, built in Dorchester, Massachusetts, circa 1840—I noticed a touchscreen, but the content seemed to me a small touch of genius.

Roswell Gleason (1799-1887) was the owner of a successful pewter and silver-plate manufactory in Dorchester. The touchscreen shows an original trade catalog from his factory. Senior curator of decorative arts and sculpture Gerald Ward told me later, "We wanted technology where it was appropriate. We wanted it to be something we could learn from and didn't want people to be distracted."

John Singer Sargent's enigmatic *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit* was one of Level 2's highlights, displayed in a gallery devoted to the artist. The 1882 painting was flanked by the same colossal Japanese-style blue-and-white vases depicted in the group portrait that has become a symbol of the MFA itself.

Level 2 also featured pairs of complementary artists—Winslow Homer and Thomas Eakins; Martin Johnson Heade and Fitz Henry Lane—along with decorative arts and furniture from their period. A fourth gallery on Level 2 made a grand Victorian statement. It was hung in the style of a 19th-century salon, featuring works by American painters and sculptors who traveled to Europe. One of the works catches the MFA reflecting on itself. It is Enrico Menghelli's *View of a Gallery in the Museum of Fine Arts, Copley Square*, 1877, which shows a salon-style gallery in the MFA's old building.

Inevitably the new wing has its gaps. Most often mentioned by visitors and in the press are the gaps on Level 3. The Lane Collection of the MFA features early Modernist paintings and works on paper by Stuart Davis, Georgia O'Keefe, and Arthur Dove, along with photographs by Alfred Steiglitz, Edward Steichen, Charles Sheeler, and Edward Weston. I also noted sculpture and jewelry by Alexander Calder and sculpture by David Smith alongside abstract works by Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, and Adolph Gottlieb. Some of our greatest realists are represented too—i.e., Edward Hopper, Andrew Wyeth, and George Bellows—as well as innovative industrial designs by Charles and Ray Eames, Eero Saarinen, and Russel Wright. But this level, unlike the others, feels like a work in progress.

"The Lane Collection doesn't have large pieces because they were made to fit in the back of Mr. Lane's station wagon," explained Elliot Bostwick Davis, chair of the Art of the Americas. "It's an important challenge for us in Boston because we don't have the kinds of collections here that have made their way to New York. We've made some headway, but we have a long way to go." She added, "The new wing shows us what we have and what we don't have, and we're addressing the gaps on all fronts."

One step in that direction is the new wing's John P. Axelrod Gallery, devoted to the 1920's and 1930's. Nearly all of what's on display there, including works by Donald Deskey, Viktor Schreckengost, and Paul Frank, were recent gifts to the MFA from Axelrod, a retired Boston attorney. Axelrod has also lent pieces of his fine art collection, including the 1926 *Cocktails* by African-American artist Archibald J. Motley Jr. (1891-1981).

At auctions of African-American art at Swann Galleries over the last few years, the MFA has made some important purchases of its own, clearly with the new wing's gaps in mind. One of those works from Swann, on view in Level 3 today, is *The Juggler #1* by Hughie Lee-Smith (1915-1999) for which the MFA paid \$90,000. Dating from 1964, the brooding oil on canvas dreamscape shows three figures standing on a surreally lit concrete pier. Forty years ago, the painting was exhibited at the museum in a show titled *Reality Expanded*. Now the MFA is its permanent home.

As time ran out on my first visit (we were allowed to stay only until 3 p.m.), I was already looking forward to my next visit, realizing I had not yet seen the 19th-century folk art gallery, the Arts and Crafts gallery, the other period rooms, or any of the three Behind the Scenes galleries, and had hardly glimpsed the Lower Level's pre-Columbian gold, Native North American art, marine paintings by some of our greatest artists, and the ship models.

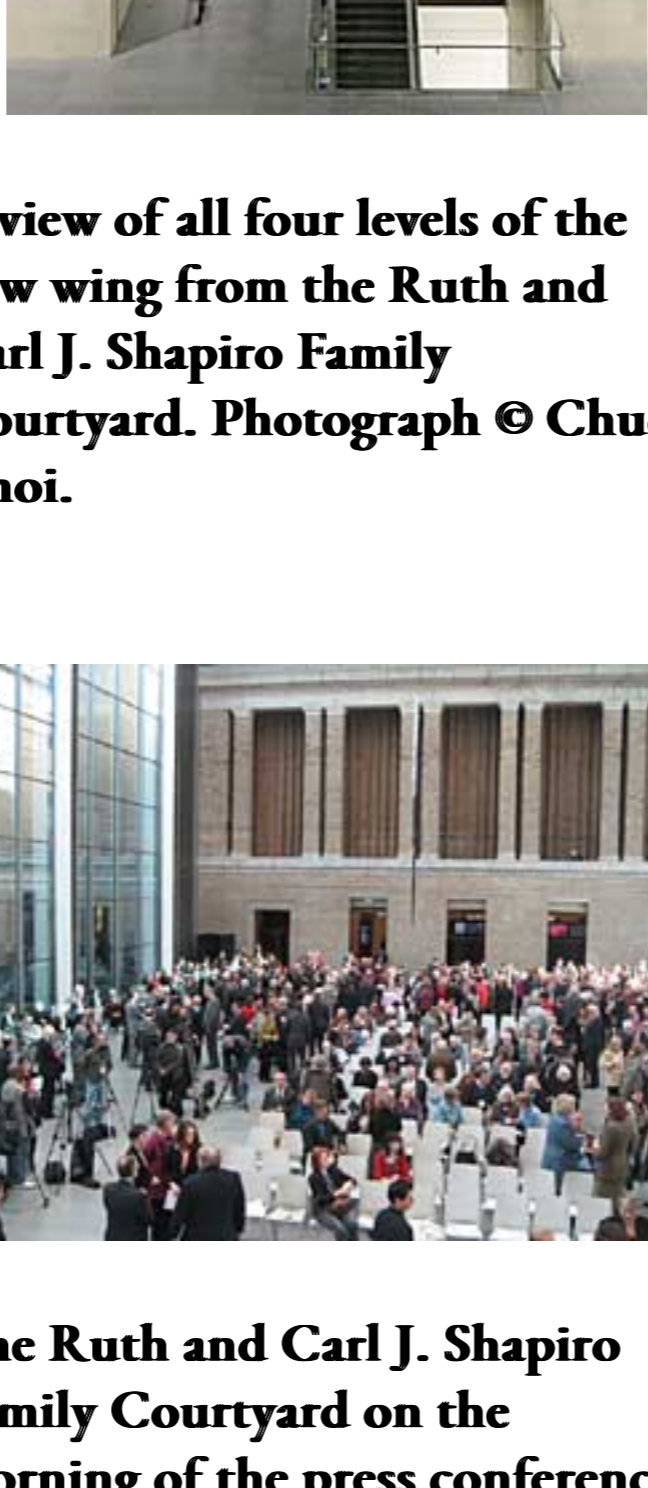
My advice to those who will make their own visits is to use a map and don't be afraid to wander down corridors, which, in an old-style museum, would have led to off-limits areas. These corridors lead not only to magnificent vistas of Boston but also to secondary galleries that you won't want to miss.

Considering that on subsequent visits the staff won't be as much around to answer questions as they were at the opening, I'm planning to use the MFA's replacement for its own audio guide—an Apple iPod Touch 3G that offers images and audio. On that device are commentaries on 120 collection highlights, which have been translated into seven languages. The guide incorporates special features for the blind, those with low vision, the deaf, and the hard of hearing. American Sign Language videos and video captioning for the deaf and hard of hearing will be available later this year.

For more information, phone (617) 267-9300 or see the Web site (www.mfa.org).

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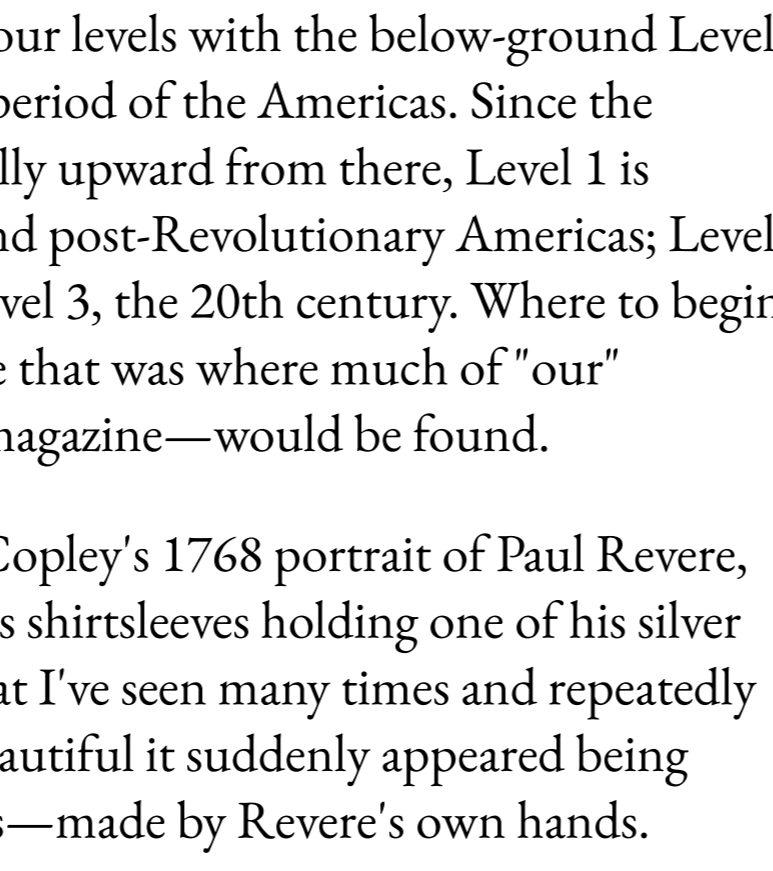
A view of all four levels of the new wing from the Ruth and Carl J. Shapiro Family Courtyard. Photograph © Chuck Choi.



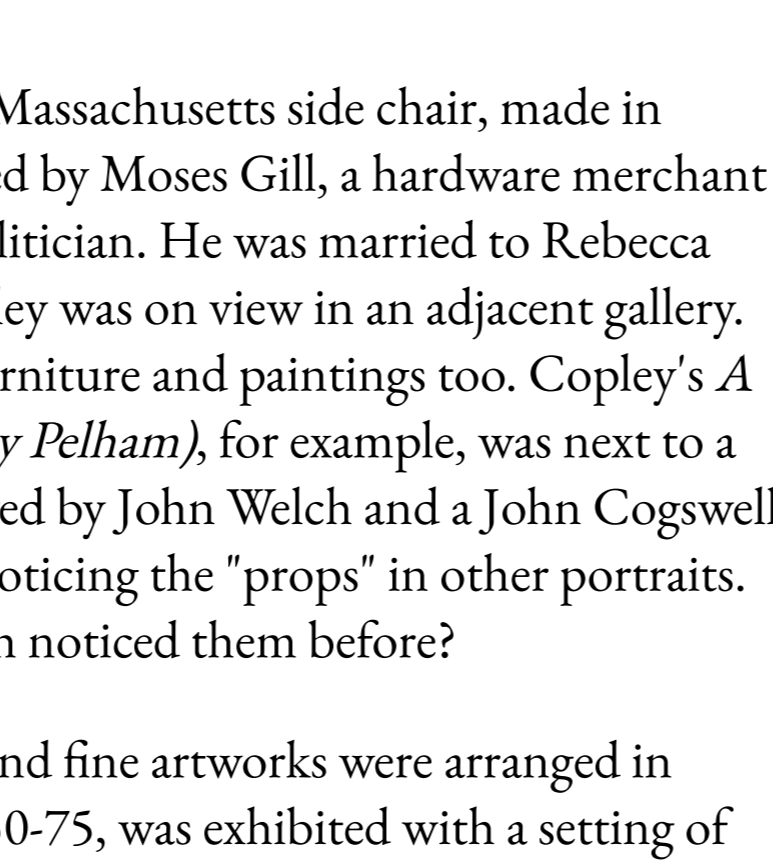
The Ruth and Carl J. Shapiro Family Courtyard on the morning of the press conference and donor/guest reception. Constructed almost entirely of glass and supported by expanses of steel, it connects the old museum building with the new wing. It was so bright and sunny on that opening day, some people donned their sunglasses. The food service people, offering coffee, pastries, and strawberries, wore earpieces, the better to let the kitchen know if they were running out of anything. One guest said, "When you see food service people wearing what the secret service wears, you know it's a high-level affair." The list of invitees included consuls from more than a dozen foreign countries. Schinto photo.



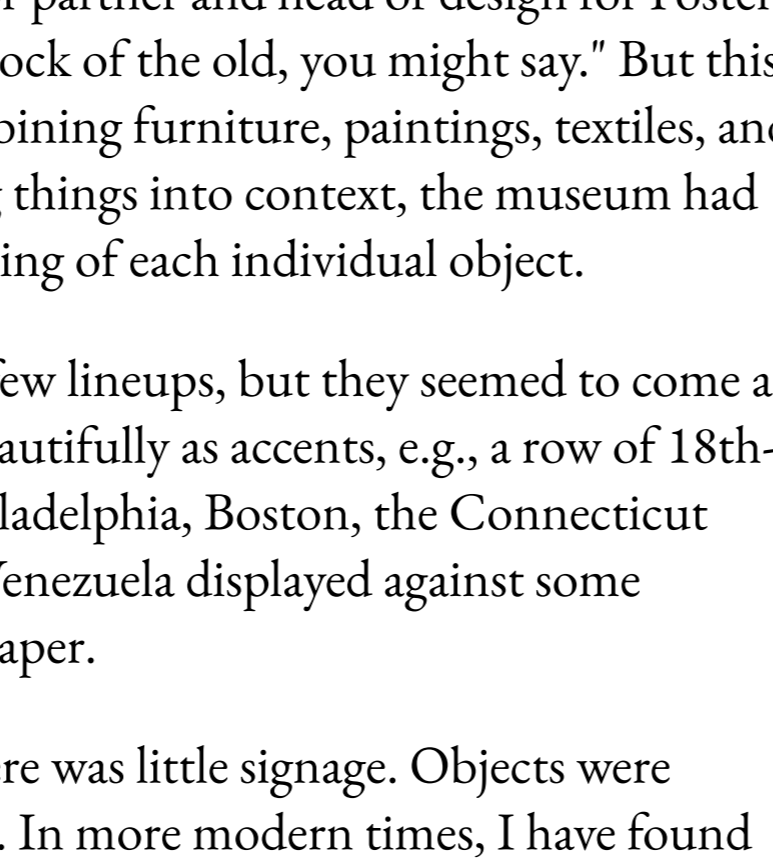
A large gallery on Level 2 is hung in the style of a 19th-century salon. Schinto photo.



The George Putnam Gallery in the below-ground Level LG features 20 ship models and maritime arts, including marine paintings by William Bradford, Fitz Henry Lane, and Robert Salmon. Photographer © Nigel Young/Foster + Partners.



The Passage of the Delaware by Thomas Sully (1783-1820). Gift of the owners of the Boston Museum. The Boston Museum (also called the New England Museum and Gallery of Fine Arts) was incorporated in 1818 by its founder, Ethan Allen Greenwood (1779-1856). Moses Kimball (1809-1895) bought the museum from Greenwood in 1839. The MFA was founded in 1870 and opened in 1876. It moved to its current location in 1909. Schinto photo.



Rhona MacBeth, MFA's head of paintings conservation and Eijk and Rose-Marie van Otterloo Conservator of Paintings, worked on the restoration of the Sully. She is 5'2"; the painting is 12' x 17'. Schinto photo.

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