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# From Period Rooms to Period Environments: a Look at How Museums are Redefining the Scope of the Period Room

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*From Period Rooms to Period Environments: A Look at How Museums are Redefining the Scope of the Period Room.*

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## **Abstract**

Although the debate over the appropriateness, purpose, and degree of authenticity of period rooms in an art museum setting is still an area of contention between scholars and experts in the field of decorative arts, there is no denying their popularity to visitors. While there has always been an interest in period rooms, published research on the subject mainly focuses on illustrating specific collections, or addresses conventions of authenticity and the cultural encoding of presenting interior spaces. This thesis takes a look at how by expanding period rooms into period environments they can be used as tools to comment upon and interact with other objects, breathing new life into permanent collections and providing cultural context for temporary exhibitions.

## Introduction

Period Rooms are a traditional and popular way of framing a museum's collection of decorative arts or thematic objects. David Phillips in *Exhibiting Authenticity* describes "framing" as a metaphor for what curators do. Museums and the art they house are framed affairs. Art is often framed by the museum architecture in the most literal sense.<sup>1</sup> The American artist Fred Wilson experimented with how museum display spaces affect a visitor's perspective. One of his shows, *Rooms With a View*, played with the notion of the installation space itself by placing a trio of emerging artists in three different settings: a contemporary gallery, a turn-of-the-century space, and a small ethnographic museum—where the artists' work was identified not with their names but with generic history-oriented museum-style labels. The works in the ethnographic room became exotic. In the turn-of-the-century-space, artworks appeared to have a certain authority that they did not have in the white cube. The white cube space looked cold and scientific. "The deceptively simple juxtaposition of art objects, display space, and institutional labels showed how by simply changing the environment in which these objects were presented, changed how people viewed them."<sup>2</sup> There are three realities that compete within the art museum. One is the reality represented within the works of art themselves. Second is the reality of the history of the work that the museum presents or implies in a documentary

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<sup>1</sup> David Phillips. *Exhibiting Authenticity*. Manchester: Manchester University, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Phoebe Hoban. *The Shock of the Familiar*. New York Magazine. July 28, 2003.

way. Competing with these two realities, which are only available in the museum as framed, there is the everyday reality of the museum and of us visiting it. The extent to which our attention and experience are held by any frame varies because frames can be broken by inappropriate intrusions. Period rooms that are part of larger collections have to be aware of this framing effect. Visitors know they are viewing a room within a larger building. Once they leave the room, the frame is broken.

On April 20<sup>th</sup> 2007 the Metropolitan Museum of Art reopened its newly renovated Greek and Roman Galleries. Described by Director Philippe de Montebello as a "museum within the museum" for the Metropolitan's world-renowned collection of Hellenistic, Etruscan, South Italian, and Roman art, the new galleries evoke the architecture of ancient Rome.<sup>3</sup> The series of complementing galleries trace the development of Hellenistic and Roman art in chronological order from the time of Alexander the Great (336-323 BC) to that of Constantine (306-337 AD). The galleries along Fifth Avenue house the Museum's collection of wall paintings and frescoes from the Roman villas excavated at Boscoreale and Boscotrecase once buried by the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 A.D. Included in this timeline is the Boscoreale Cubiculum (bedroom) from the room of the Villa of P. Fannius Synistor at Boscoreale which was buried by the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 AD, considered by many to be the "most significant

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<sup>3</sup> "Special Message from the Director: Philippe de Montebello"  
<[http://www.metmuseum.org/works\\_of\\_art/gr\\_director.asp](http://www.metmuseum.org/works_of_art/gr_director.asp)> Accessed October 2007.

well-preserved Roman chamber with fresco painting in the western hemisphere.”<sup>4</sup> It has been restored and installed at the center of the wing, alongside other panels from the same villa. Complementing the Boscoreale cubiculum is another beautiful bedroom, the so-called "Black Bedroom," this one thought to have been made for a villa built by Agrippa, a close friend of the Emperor Augustus. On view near these masterpieces are sculptures, bronzes, and other arts of the late Hellenistic and early Roman periods. For the first time in many years museum visitors are able to “view these masterpieces in the proper context of sculpture, bronzes, and other arts of the late Hellenistic and early Roman periods.”<sup>5</sup> By moving these period rooms into their proper chronological and artistic context they are able “tell us much about the domestic life of wealthy Romans nearly 2,000 years ago.”<sup>6</sup>

According to Metropolitan Museum director Philippe de Montebello, some scholars and experts in the field of decorative arts do not agree on the appropriateness of period rooms in an art-museum setting, their purpose, and their degree of authenticity.<sup>7</sup> The small Boscoreale Cubiculum exemplifies elements of this debate. The walls are authentic, but the ceiling and floor are recreations. Should furniture or other decorative arts be included in the room or should the room remain unfurnished to maintain a level of authenticity? Does

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<sup>4</sup> John P. O’Neill ed. *Period Rooms in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> <[www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org)> Accessed August 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> John P. O’Neill ed. *Period Rooms in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, p 9.

the room help to give a broader context for the surrounding Roman galleries? As museum and conservation scholarship has changed so has the installation of museum period rooms.

The villa of P. Fannius Synistor, from which the Cubiculum was removed, was discovered in 1900. Following common practice at the time, the frescoes on the walls were cut out, framed in wood, and divided between local authorities and art dealers. Since the Met has all four sides of the cubiculum preserved, it has been displayed consistently as a period room. The ceiling is a modern reconstruction based upon similar cubicula, and the ancient mosaic floor is one of several in the Museum from a building discovered at Montebello, just north of Rome, in 1892. Adaptations occur commonly with period rooms, a fact that leads many scholars to dismiss their value. When it was originally displayed the Boscoreale Cubiculum included a couch and footstool in order “to evoke an appropriate appearance of antiquity.”<sup>8</sup> However, with the new installation, the furniture has been removed. Some scholars believe that putting a piece of furniture in a period room detracts from its value as an individual work of art and that great pieces should be viewed outside of any contextual setting. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that period rooms afford the viewer a chance to experience the furnishings as related to each other in time, place, and style in a way that isolating them cannot. It can afford the visitor a broader insight into the

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.



art, architecture, and culture of a time and place. Clearly, curators must be responsible for making these exhibits as historically accurate as possible, but this can be a challenge when their colleagues have different opinions on how best to present the material. The reinstallation of the Boscoreale Cubiculum, though without the furniture, illustrates that traditional period rooms still play an important role in museum narratives. However, the walls of these rooms have expanded. Curators no longer wish period rooms to be static dioramas for passive viewers. The Boscoreale Cubiculum is part of a larger art and culture narrative, meant to draw the museum visitor into the collection. Philippe de Montebello's description of a "museum within the museum" exemplifies this new direction of involving museum visitors into one time frame of art history: not just galleries devoted to one period of art history, but whole environments exploring relationships among time spans and cultures.

There has been a shift of focus from period rooms to period environments. The Met's Roman period rooms are within a larger environment, which offers new ways to understand its permanent collection. Some museums are able to encompass their entire collection within a period environment frame. After a nine-year renovation, the Getty Villa in Malibu, California - a museum dedicated exclusively to Greek and Roman antiquities - was reopened on January 28, 2006. Related to the Getty Center the way the Cloisters in upper Manhattan devoted to the art of medieval Europe, is to its parent, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Villa is modeled after a first century Roman country house, the Villa dei Papyri

at Herculaneum. The museum also incorporates details from several other ancient sites in Herculaneum, Pompeii, and Stabiae. Its mission is as an educational center and museum dedicated the study of the arts and cultures of ancient Greek, Roman, and Etruscan civilizations and serves a varied audience through exhibitions, conservation, scholarship, research, and public programs. The antiquities are arranged by theme including *Gods and Goddesses*, *Dionysus and the Theater* and *Stories of the Trojan War*, housed within Roman-inspired architecture and surrounded by Roman-style gardens. The new architectural plan surrounding the Villa is designed to emulate an archaeological dig. The Getty Villa is an example of a period environment. Whereas the Met's Greek and Roman Galleries are within a large museum with a diverse narrative, the Getty Villa is focused solely on one period. Open spaces around the site feature bronze sculptures, fountains, and lush plantings of trees, herbs, and flowers known to have flourished in the ancient Mediterranean. Replicas of bronze sculptures, statues found at the Villa dei Papiri are incorporated into the gardens. Near the gardens is the new amphitheater, which although modern in design is still meant to evoke a feeling of an ancient Greek amphitheater. It hosts performances of ancient Greek and Roman plays such as retellings of Homer's Iliad and concerts using music of ancient Greece as transcribed from period notation preserved on stone and papyrus sources.<sup>9</sup> Even the museum Café offers Mediterranean

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<sup>9</sup> <<http://www.getty.edu/visit/calendar/events/Performances.html>> accessed October 2007.

inspired cuisine in order to keep with this total atmospheric and cultural immersion.

Why create these elaborate spaces to highlight one period of art? Choosing to showcase medieval art at the Cloisters, instead of at the Metropolitan Museum itself, is due in part to the canonical value system of encyclopedic urban museums such as the Met that privilege aesthetics informed by ancient Greece and Rome. But the classical art on view at the Getty Villa is part of this canon. Why present classical or medieval art in an environment that attempts to be a contextual frame for the collection? Does this recreation detract from or help to produce an authentic experience?

When J. Paul Getty created the Villa it was with a desire to present authentic works of art in a museum that would evoke the context of where they came from:

It is easy to say: Put all your objects in a row with explanatory labels in a neutral setting. In Europe the neutral setting is called the Louvre, Castello Sforzesco, Uffizi, [and] Tate Gallery. It is easy to give a neutral setting to visitors who can breathe the past a few steps away, who reach the neutral setting after having walked, with emotion, among venerable stones.<sup>10</sup>

Museum period rooms codify a certain cultural moment in history for the viewer by using the aesthetics of one specific room to generalize an entire period. J. Paul Getty's archeologists worked from drawings, models of other Roman villas, learned conjectures, and archeological syllogisms, and they have reconstructed

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<sup>10</sup> Umberto Eco. *Travels in Hyperreality*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986.

the building as it was or at least as it ought to have been. How do you regain contact with the past? Archeological respect is only one of the possible solutions, but this sense of creating an environment is proving to be a new direction for curators who are dissatisfied with historically false impressions that traditional period rooms suggest.

While there has always been an interest in period rooms, published research on the subject focuses on illustrating specific collections, or addresses conventions of authenticity and the cultural encoding of presenting interior spaces. This is seen in John P. O'Neill's *Period Rooms in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, reissued in 2004 or in the most recent research, *The Modern Period Room 1870-1950: The Construction of the Exhibited Interior*, published in 2006. What has not been discussed in much detail is the development and expanding use of period environments along with coordinating educational programming to engage the visitor in a multi sensory experience that evokes an interdisciplinary cultural context for understanding objects.

This thesis proposes to look at how curators and museums are reexamining and experimenting with their traditional period rooms and how museums are expanding upon the notion of the period room and developing period environments to incorporate larger portions of their collections into their museum displays. As with many other aspects of museums, period rooms must be adaptable to current trends and scholarship. A common criticism of museums is that they sterilize art by removing it from the setting that gave it meaning.

Works of art are seldom discussed in isolation, or for their own sakes, but almost always in relation to the development of styles, the evolution of ideas, the lives of famous people, or in relation to historical events.<sup>11</sup> In other words, art is usually subordinated to its historical context. Curators are looking more closely at how their period rooms represent the past, whose past is being displayed, how many artifacts should be included and how authentic they should be. They are also experimenting with being a bit more playful with their representations; allowing the authentic artifacts to coexist with the ambiance of a slightly fictional or recreated atmosphere. By expanding period rooms into environments they can be used as tools to comment upon and interact with other objects, breathing new life into permanent collections and providing cultural context for temporary exhibitions.

In order to discuss the period environment in its relation to the traditional period room, I will first examine its emergence by looking at the creation of the Metropolitan's Cloisters Museum and how it took the idea of a period room and evolved it into a period environment. Second, I will examine two recent exhibitions held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Dangerous Liaisons: Fashion and Furniture in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century* and *Anglo Mania: Tradition and Transgression in British Fashion*, which illustrate how traditional period rooms can be used in new ways to explore aspects of a collection that may not have been understood before.

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<sup>11</sup> Wendy Moonan. *Visiting History in Period Rooms: Careful, Don't Touch*. [The New York Times](#). Sept 1, 2006.

By engaging the audience with a playful and somewhat theatrical display the impression of a stagnant decorative arts panorama is broken down. Third, I will look at the Peabody-Essex Museum's Yin Yu Tang House which is meant to function for diverse audiences as a window to the broader context of Chinese art, architecture, and culture. It is here that curators create a fully multi-sensory period environment while still maintaining a museological approach to the collection.

## **Chapter I: From Period Room to Period Environment**

Period rooms had their origins, literally and museologically, in European palaces and homes that had long attracted admiring visitors.<sup>1</sup> This along with a fundamental change in the philosophy of museum installations in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe led to the idea of the museum period room. This change in philosophy came from many different sources and took diverse forms: panoramas, dioramas, wax museums, natural history museum habitats, and international expositions. In part, national pride, a desire to educate the public to the great achievements of its own culture, gradually led to museum installation organized by style or period rather than by material. Once this transition of thought had been made, the idea of period settings was a logical development.<sup>2</sup> Gradually, museums, mainly those in Northern European countries, began to forsake the old exhibition

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<sup>1</sup> Sally Anne Duncan. *From Period Room to Public Trust: The Authority Debate and Art Museum Leadership in America*. *The Museum Journal* 45 (2002): 93.

<sup>2</sup> Dianne H. Pilgrim *Inherited From the Past: The American Period Room*. *American Art Journal*. 10 (1978): 4-23.

technique of organizing works of art by type and material. In order to emphasize cultural history, they adopted an arrangement by period and style.

Toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, New York's merchant class had begun furnishing their homes in lavish scale in emulation of the European palaces and homes.<sup>3</sup> Soon, American museums began incorporating historical rooms within their walls using paneling, furniture, and objects from colonial America, Britain, and France. It was New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art that popularized the period room in America. The Met was the first American art museum to organize a large and systematic collection of period rooms with the opening of its new American Wing in 1924 with period rooms as its centerpiece.<sup>4</sup> Some were original rooms with period furnishing while others were artistic reconstructions that emphasized the beauty, quality, and connoisseurship of individual period objects. Two years later, European period rooms were installed in the museum's south wing. The museum had already installed a 17<sup>th</sup> century wood-paneled chamber from the Swiss village of Flims and a baroque bedroom from the Palazzo Sagredo in Venice in 1906. The Metropolitan's American Wing had a profound effect on museums and collectors everywhere. Shortly after it was installed, Philadelphia (1928), Boston (1928), Brooklyn (1929), Baltimore (1930), and St. Louis (1930-31), among others, began displaying their own rooms.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Sally Anne Duncan. *From Period Room to Public Trust: The Authority Debate and Art Museum Leadership in America*, p 13.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

The traditions of period rooms in America is usually associated with institutions that thrived during the 1920s, when entire buildings were created and filled with rooms in such styles as “Early American”, “Colonial”, and “Federal”. Winterthur, Colonial Williamsburg, the Brooklyn Museum, and the Metropolitan Museum with its American Wing, which opened in 1924, all participated with great enthusiasm. As scholarship became more sophisticated, questions of authenticity were posed about rooms that had been “enhanced” where the original was in less than perfect condition. Also, the beginnings of the activist historic-preservation movement made people aware that it was preferable to save buildings intact rather than to remove rooms. At this point, curators and art historians began to reevaluate the importance of period rooms and in many cases revised not only their thinking but also the rooms themselves.<sup>6</sup> In *Exhibiting Authenticity*, David Phillips suggests that, “There is also surely scope for much more variety in the way that objects are juxtaposed, at least in some museums.” This variety can be seen by the expansion of the traditional decorative arts period room to an entire period environment. One famous early example of this period environment is the Metropolitan Museum’s Cloisters.

The idea to house a medieval collection in its own museum sprang from previous private and public collections beginning in France in the eighteenth century. Whereas, in the late seventeenth throughout the eighteenth centuries

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.



people regarded the Middle Ages<sup>7</sup> as “dark”, superstitious and lacking in enlightenment; beginning at the end of the eighteenth century and continuing in the nineteenth century this idea began to change. The Victorians, in particular, began to look back to the Middle Ages as a way to escape their own world of industrialism, urbanization, secularization, and socialism. This medieval revival affected all aspects of Victorian life, including art and architecture, literature, philosophy, politics, and religion. Romanticism became the vogue of Europe in the early nineteenth century, and many private collectors in France, became attracted to the medieval style. A renewed taste for Gothic costumes, furnishings, and objects took place.

This desire to step back in time went so far as to inspire such ‘living museum’ displays like the Paris en 1400 and Vieux Paris exhibits at the 1900 World’s Fair, which featured “costumed minstrels and artisans, recreated medieval towns, staged battles and jousts, and performances of medieval plays and concerts”.<sup>8</sup> This imitation of the Middle Ages expanded into many different aspects of nineteenth-century life and came to be known as the Gothic Revival. In his 1836 book *Contrasts*, A.W.N Pugin put forth the idea that the Middle Ages, in its way of life and art, was superior to his own time and ought to be imitated.<sup>9</sup> The term, Gothic Revival referred to a return to the building styles of the Middle

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<sup>7</sup> The *Middle Ages* is the term applied to the period of Constantine (311-337) to the beginning of the Renaissance.

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Emery and Laura Morowitz. *From the Living Room to the Museum and Back Again: The Collection and Display of Medieval Art in the fin de siècle*. *History of Collections*. 16 (2004): 285-309.

<sup>9</sup> Kerry Dean Carso. *The Theatrical Spectacle of Medieval Revival: Edwin Forrest’s Fonthill Castle*. *Winterthur Portfolio*. 39 (2004): 21-41.

Ages. Although this Gothic Revival was practiced throughout Europe, it most heavily influenced the United States and England. The early works were designed in a fanciful and imaginary manner, but as the century progressed the architects began turning to more literal and archaeological methods. This renewed interest in the Middle Ages was also heavily influenced by the nineteenth century Arts and Crafts Movement. The Arts and Crafts Movement was a term coined in England in the late nineteenth century as a label for the then current movement directed toward the revivifying of the decorative arts.<sup>10</sup> By the mid nineteenth century, factory processes had almost entirely driven artisans from their traditional trades and threatened to obliterate the techniques they used to produce beautiful objects of utility. The Gothic revival brought into existence a great body of knowledge concerning the arts of the Middle Ages.

The Gothic revival presented different problems for Americans. At this time, concerns about the newness of the New World were on the minds of many American artists and writers. The American author, Nathaniel Hawthorne, remarked that "writing romances infused with history presented him with a challenge because America had 'no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong'".<sup>11</sup> It was within this atmosphere of medieval revival and romanticism that the prominent American sculptor George Grey Barnard (1863-1938), decided to build his own museum dedicated to medieval

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<sup>10</sup> Wendy Kaplan. *The Arts & Crafts Movement in Europe & America, 1880 - 1920: Design for the Modern World*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> Kerry Dean Carso. *The Theatrical Spectacle of Medieval Revival: Edwin Forrest's Fonthill Castle*, p 39.

art and architecture. Born in Bellefonte, Pennsylvania George Barnard studied engraving and sculpture, first at the Art Institute of Chicago, then at the École des Beaux-Arts, Paris. Before 1914, while he was living in France, Barnard became an avid collector of medieval art. While working in rural France, Barnard supplemented his income by locating and selling medieval sculpture and Gothic architectural fragments that had made their way into the hands of local landowners over several centuries of political and religious upheaval.<sup>12</sup> He kept many pieces for himself and, upon returning to the United States in 1896, opened to the public a churchlike brick structure on Fort Washington Avenue, in Washington Heights, New York. He called this building the Cloisters and filled it with his collection, including much of the architectural material seen in the Metropolitan Museum's Cloisters today, such as the columns and capitals of the Saint-Guilhem, Cuxa, Bonnefont, and Trie cloisters. This became the first installation of medieval art of its kind in America. The display of architectural elements and sculpture of this first building reflected Barnard's strong vision of what a museum of medieval art should be. He wanted his museum to evoke the solemn but vigorous piety of the Middle Ages that would "enable Americans to acquaint themselves not only with medieval art but also with the age in which the art was produced".<sup>13</sup> To create an atmosphere that would replicate the medieval age, "he artificially weathered his museum, a basilica-plan brick shed,

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<sup>12</sup> Bonnie Young. *A Walk Through the Cloisters*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004.

<sup>13</sup> Mary Rebecca Leuchak. *The Old World for the New: Developing the Design for The Cloisters*. *Metropolitan Museum Journal*. 23 (1988): 257 - 277.

by hosing down the walls while the mortar was still fresh, and illuminated the interior with a steel and glass roof and the warm glow of candles".<sup>14</sup> He went as far as having his museum attendants dress as monks and usher visitors into the "sanctuary". The desired effect of these dramatic and decidedly fanciful touches was, according to Barnard, "to create an ambience evocative of the Middle Ages".<sup>15</sup> Barnard's accomplishment in exhibiting this material in his Fort Washington Avenue museum was recognized when he put the collection up for sale in the 1920s. A newspaper asked: "Is this gem of French art to be torn from the environment so patiently and lovingly created for it and sold to some more enterprising city?"<sup>16</sup>

The answer came in 1925 when John D. Rockefeller, Jr. (1874-1960), donated funds to the Metropolitan Museum of Art with the intention to purchase Barnard's museum and to continue to maintain and exhibit the collection of medieval sculpture and architectural material acquired.<sup>17</sup> The original Cloisters's contextual displays became the basis for the modern Cloisters, the most ambitious period reconstruction of its time.<sup>18</sup> The Cloisters was described by Germain Bazin, former director of the Musée du Louvre in Paris, as "the crowning achievement of American museology."<sup>19</sup> The museum is situated on

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Bonnie Young. *A Walk Through the Cloisters*, p 4.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Sally Anne Duncan. *From Period Room to Public Trust: The Authority Debate and Art Museum Leadership in America*, p 15.

<sup>19</sup> <<http://www.metmuseum.org>> Accessed August 2007.

four acres perched on a hill above the Hudson River in northern Manhattan's Fort Tryon Park and is named for the portions of five medieval French cloisters, Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa, Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert, Bonnefont-en-Comminges, Trie-en-Bigorre, and Froville, that were incorporated into the modern museum building.<sup>20</sup> The focus of the Cloister's collection is on the medieval periods known as Romanesque (c. 1000 - 1150) and Gothic (c. 1150 - 1520). The site of the Cloisters may be the closest approximation of an isolated monastic setting possible in an American city<sup>21</sup>.

Museum professionals outside of the Metropolitan shared their ideas and concerns over the design of the cloisters. The idea of a branch museum devoted to only one period of art was praised. W.R. Valentiner, the director of the Detroit Institute of Art stated,

One of the first principles of education in art is to concentrate the public on one great epoch in history and not let the mind of the museum visitor wander about through collections of other epochs until it had thoroughly absorbed the spirit of this one period.<sup>22</sup>

The difficulty lay in capturing the spirit of the art without making an empty copy of an original façade. After four years of construction beginning in 1934, the Cloisters was formally dedicated and opened to the public on May 10, 1938. It became, "not a copy of any particular medieval structure, but an ensemble of rooms and gardens that imitated the European originals which provided a

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Bonnie Young, *A Walk Through the Cloisters*, p 4.

<sup>22</sup> Mary Rebecca Leuchak, *The Old World for the New: Developing the Design for The Cloisters*, p 261.

harmonious and evocative setting in which visitors could experience the rich tradition of medieval artistic production.”<sup>23</sup>

The Cloisters was much praised when it first opened. George H. Edgell, director of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, remarked, “I visited the Cloisters yesterday for the first time, and feel that you [Collens<sup>24</sup>] have produced one of the beautiful things existing in the Old World for the New.”<sup>25</sup> Just as cloisters provided sheltered access from one building to another within a monastery, here they act as passageways from gallery to gallery. They provide as inviting a place for rest, contemplation, and conversation as they did for their original monastic population.<sup>26</sup> The Cloisters cannot fully recreate the Middle Ages, but what it does do is to surround its wonderful collection in a unique and contemplative, medievaesque frame.

It is not just the building that is meant to frame the medieval collection. The Cloisters also incorporates gardens and landscaping to evoke a medieval setting. Three of the cloisters contain reconstructed gardens, which are planted “according to horticultural information found in medieval treatises and poetry, garden documents and herbals.”<sup>27</sup> The gardens do not follow a specific model, but in form and planting are meant to suggest the look of gardens represented in medieval art as well as descriptions in documents. Special attention was given to

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<sup>23</sup> Bonnie Young. *A Walk Through the Cloisters*, p 5.

<sup>24</sup> Cloisters architect, Charles Collens (1873-1956)

<sup>25</sup> Mary Rebecca Leuchak. *The Old World for the New: Developing the Design for The Cloisters*, p. 265.

<sup>26</sup> <<http://www.metmuseum.org>> Accessed September 2007.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

the garden in the Bonafont Cloister, which was conceived of as a medieval garden of herbs and flowers. The plan has no particular prototype, but is based on medieval gardens as they are shown in manuscript illuminations, tapestries, and paintings. Each variety of herb and flower is labeled for visitors.

The rooms and the gardens act as a frame for the museum's renowned medieval art collection. This medieval framing invites visitors to immerse themselves in a period environment. The art works may not be in their authentic environments, but they are also not hung on isolated white walls. Throughout the year museum visitors are invited to participate in many special events and tours, as well as a variety of other activities that focus on the art, history and culture of the Middle Ages. The education department conducts group tours, for students through adults, which supplement classroom education in art, architecture, and medieval history. The period environment of the Cloisters can be an interesting alternative to those studying medieval history and art that may not be able to visit the "authentic" sites in Europe. School programs include *A Medieval Bestiary* in which students search for animals, real and imaginary, in a variety of media; and *Walls* in which learners experience medieval architecture, by demonstrating basic medieval building principles with building blocks. There are also programs that expand from the Cloisters collection to the Metropolitan's main collection. The Age of Chivalry is a same-day program encompassing an introductory session at the Cloisters focusing on knightly heroes and continues

to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and its Arms and Armor Galleries.<sup>28</sup> The period environment of the Cloisters allows educators and museum personnel to engage visitors directly with the collection. The different elements of the museum help to attract a varied audience. Garden enthusiasts and architecture students can engage with the collection along with medievalists and art historians. The Cloisters cannot fully recreate the Middle Ages, but what it does do is to surround its wonderful collection in a unique and contemplative, medievaesque frame. This environment allows visitors to understand the Cloister's permanent medieval collection in a way that is unique to other medieval art collections.

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<sup>28</sup> William Crow. Associate Museum Educator, The Metropolitan Musuem of Art. Telephone Interview. 4 Oct. 2007.



## Chapter II: New Uses for the Traditional Period Room

Period rooms are usually frames for decorative art collections. But these frames are typically within a larger museum collection. The English and French period rooms at the Met are only one small section of the many collections on view. Since the rooms are not contained within a historic house it is clear that these rooms are out of their original context. How then to engage museum visitors and create an atmosphere that envelopes them in these rooms? It is necessary to create an environment that distracts them from the museum atmosphere and the velvet ropes.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art has a long tradition of period rooms. The Metropolitan's rooms vary from the authentic to the mostly interpretive. Several of the rooms were installed principally as galleries to display suites of furniture selected from the Museum's holdings and combined in the setting to express a particular style, rather than to reinvent the original setting. Over the years the intentions of the Met's curators has varied from re-creating a "period feeling" to restoring an original interior in every detail.

In recent years the Met has taken a new approach to period rooms by using them as temporary exhibition spaces. *Dangerous Liaisons: Fashion and Furniture in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century* (April 29, 2004 – September 6, 2004) and *Anglo Mania: Tradition and Transgression in British Fashion* (May 3, 2006 – September 4, 2006) experimented by using the Wrightsman Galleries, the Museum's French period rooms and The Annie Laurie Aitken Galleries, the Museum's English period

rooms in interesting and engaging ways. These two examples show how even older traditional period rooms can be reexamined and, in the process, can become a means of collaboration among diverse departments within the museum.

In 2004, the Metropolitan Museum of Art designed an exhibit organized around a novella of manners and seduction, *La Maison Petit*<sup>1</sup> by Jean-Francois de Bastide. The book is an important but overlooked architectural document, and has become an underground classic among architects and architectural historians. *La Maison Petit* narrates a plot of seduction as it gradually unfolds in a visit to an architectural and artistic gem—a maison de plaisance in suburban Paris—enacting a tale of seduction, affect, and desire. The exhibit took the idea that the setting created by the aristocratic and well-to-do in eighteenth century France was not just to create a world of beauty, but one that was also meant to seduce the senses and aid in the game of sex and manners that undercut the entrainment and pastimes of the upper classes. For the exhibit the Met used its 18<sup>th</sup> century French period rooms as a backdrop for objects from its Costume Institute. Technically, the exhibit was meant to showcase items from the Met’s collection of historic French clothing and furniture. But according to curator Andrew Bolton, “underneath the traditional showcase there is also an erotic subtext to the exhibition. We’re trying to create a storyline which [is] often based on 18<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> English translation: *The Little House: An Architectural Seduction*

century paintings of illustrations in which men and women used furniture and clothing to seduce each other.”<sup>2</sup>

The title of the Met’s exhibit comes from Choderlos de Laclos’ 1782 epistolary novel *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. More visitors would be familiar with this title due the many popular film adaptations, most notably the 1988 adaptation, *Dangerous Liaisons* starring Glenn Close and John Malkovich. Owing to the fact that visitors were more likely to recognize and be drawn to the “Dangerous Liaisons” title rather than the “Petite Maison” title, it easy to see why the curators went in this direction.

The exhibit, *Dangerous Liaisons: Fashion and Furniture in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century*, was organized by Harold Koda, curator in charge of the Costume Institute, and associate curator, Andrew Bolton. It was a collaboration of the departments of European Sculpture and Decorative Arts and the Costume Institute. The narratives that linked the rooms in *Dangerous Liaisons* were a kind of theater, and unusual for an art museum. More typically, artworks were displayed with the understanding that their aesthetic merit and the virtuosity of their creators are better conveyed when they are separated spatially to underscore their uniqueness. Unlike natural-history dioramas or historical-society tableaux, presentation of works in an art museum is generally without recreation of their original social and cultural contexts. Perhaps no one was more surprised than the

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<sup>2</sup> Harold Koda and Andrew Bolton. *Dangerous Liaisons: Fashion and Furniture in the Eighteenth Century*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2006.

contributing curators to see how the exceptional nature of their objects was enriched by such juxtapositions. To view the elaborately attired figures in the rooms was to understand the just proportions of the spaces.<sup>3</sup>

Philippe de Montebello has noted that the Metropolitan's period rooms, including The Wrightsman Galleries, "were installed principally...to display suites of furniture selected from the Museum's holdings and combined in the setting to express a particular style, rather than to reinvent the original room." For all of its dramatic invention, however, the premise of the exhibition was to establish an apparent discourse between objects. In every room furniture remained as originally placed or was only slightly shifted to accommodate the mannequins. The actions of the figures were, therefore, directly predicated on concepts originating from the rooms and the décor. For example in the Parr Room, the mannequins recreate "The Music Lesson". The young girl sits at her harp, ankle exposed, while her tutor leans over her with his hand caressing her. The chaperone is absorbed in her book (*Les Liaisons Dangereuses*) and mimics the Jean-Honoré Fragonard painting *Young Woman Reading* (ca. 1780), which hangs on the wall. Sheet music lays scattered on the floor, a dog naps in a chair, and another mannequin peeks out behind painted screen. It is more than a simple display. The scene animates the room.

Period rooms are about relations among artifacts in contemporary spaces to give an impression of original ensembles for human habitation. The problem

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<sup>3</sup> <<http://www.metmuseum.org>.> Accessed April 2007.

with period rooms lies in their lack of malleability, and in their readily perceptible lack of authenticity. However contrived the interior of a historic house museum may be, its fiction passes for reality far more readily than does the re-created interior of a museum period room. To begin with, period rooms rarely survive their translation from setting to setting, and ultimately to the museum, internally unaltered. More fundamentally, by seeking to evoke a fabric without substance, period rooms suffer from the ultimate museum credibility problem. In the Met, visitors are invited to believe they have entered into these time-frozen rooms or at least are viewing them from their thresholds. However, the striking difference between these interiors and their immediate surroundings, plus the pure artifice of their lighting, especially through any windows, tell those visitors that their credulity is being imposed upon. Ivan Gaskell in his article, *Period Rooms, and Donors: Dangerous Liaisons in the Art Museum*, states that "One cannot enter or look into a period room that is implicitly offered in terms of a physically enveloping, comprehensive authenticity, without having been, in effect, primed for distrust by its incongruity with the very fabric of the building into which it has been inserted."<sup>4</sup> However, I would argue that modern audiences are comfortable with a willing suspension of disbelief. Movie theatres, plays, television, video games, virtual reality, interactive theme park rides, all invite their audience to forget their external surroundings and immerse

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<sup>4</sup> Ivan Gaskell. *Costume, Period Rooms, and Donors: Dangerous Liaisons in the Art Museum*. Antioch Review. 62 (Fall 2004): 615-623.

themselves in the activity. If it is done well, audiences will willingly allow themselves to be transported and the fictional elements such as lighting will be ignored or better yet integrated into the fiction. Audiences know that they are not literally stepping back in time just the same as they know that when they walk out of the French rooms they will still be in a New York museum and not miraculously in France. This only means that curators must be aware of these limitations and their conditions of use if they are to use these types of rooms well.

In *Dangerous Liaisons*, all of the displays succeeded in giving a sense of the necessary human dimension of the spaces on view. The rooms were shown to be places where one could imagine things happening in a human sense, involving the use of what would otherwise be inert, unemployed artifacts. The presence of clothing imparted a sense of greater textural variety to the ensemble than the usual contents of the period rooms allow, and served to enhance the status of textiles generally within the hierarchy of the decorative arts.

The exhibition was extremely popular with museum visitors. Rebecca Huston, a visitor to the *Dangerous Liaisons* exhibit, expressed her delight at viewing the new additions to rooms she had previously overlooked.

I really enjoyed that these large rooms in the Met, which had before seemed too big and rather pompous, suddenly had scale with the addition of life-sized manikins. Women with their hair dressed in towering styles appeared to fit right in, and the rooms instead became frames for sumptuous dresses and elegant courtiers in embroidered coats and vests.

There were even replicas of pet dogs here and there, curled up on a chair or lolling at their mistress's feet.<sup>5</sup>

*Dangerous Liaisons* illustrated that museum visitors were open to different and playful exhibitions being presented in traditional period rooms. The exhibit also succeeded to drawing visitors who might have otherwise overlooked the decorative arts rooms. I believe the playful nature of this exhibit enticed visitors to view it. The elaborate wigs and costumes displayed enhanced the lush period rooms. The curators designed a very welcoming exhibit. Although it was aristocratic scenes in a prestigious museum, it attracted a varied audience. It had the feeling of a giant dollhouse. By allowing themselves to work outside the traditional walls of the period room the curators were in fact experimenting with creating small period environments. This experiment expanded with their next period room exhibition.

“Anglomania”, the craze for all things English, was the premise for another of the Metropolitan's exhibitions that experimented with new ways of presenting their traditional period rooms. As opposed to the *Dangerous Liaisons* exhibition, which blended costumes and furniture of the same period harmoniously, *AngloMania: Tradition and Transgression in British Fashion* oscillated between 70's punk and British tradition, rethinking and recasting the English period rooms and their objects that date back almost three hundred years with a

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<sup>5</sup> Rebecca Huston. [Amazon review](#). *Fusion of Fashion and Style, Done with Amazing Grace: Dangerous Liaisons: Fashion and Furniture in the Eighteenth Century*. May 5, 2006. <<http://www.amazon.com/Dangerous-Liaisons-Furniture-Eighteenth-Metropolitan>> Accessed August 2007.

postmodern veneer. The modern fashions clashed with their historical counterparts and surroundings, thus challenging perceptions and even established notions of museological practice.

Organized by Ian Wardropper and Danielle O. Kisluk-Grosheide, curators of European decorative arts, with the curators of the Costume Institute, the show had mannequins wearing predominantly contemporary couture parading through the Met's normally sedate English period rooms. The exhibit focused on British fashion from 1976 to 2006, a period of creativity and experimentation and "presented a series of tableaux based on Britain's rich artistic traditions and focused on the postmodern and historicizing tendencies."<sup>6</sup> The exhibition was set in the Metropolitan's English period rooms to create a potent dialogue between the past and the present. *AngloMania* examined ideals, stereotypes, and representations of Englishness by juxtaposing historical costume with late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> - century fashions. Through the lens of fashion the exhibit examined aspects of English culture such as class, sport, royalty, eccentricity, the English gentleman, and the English country garden. To reveal a conceptual continuum of the "English imaginary," costumes from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries were placed alongside the work of designers such as Manolo Blahnik, Stella McCartney, Alexander McQueen, and Vivienne Westwood. As with *Dangerous Liaisons*, the clothing was styled as a series of thematic vignettes that reflected the

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<sup>6</sup> Andrew Bolton. *AngloMania: Tradition and Transgression in British Fashion*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2006.



history, function, and decoration of the Museum's English period rooms. The combination of avant-garde fashion and 18<sup>th</sup> century décor was a huge hit. Curator Ian Wardropper described the process as "an experiment to use the rooms as a temporary museum space."<sup>7</sup> The collaboration between the different departments allowed the curators and designers to try things they may not have thought of before. One such new innovation was using theatrical lighting. "[It] gives you the chance to plunge rooms into dramatic darkness and tease out aspects not seen with modern lighting."<sup>8</sup> Associate Curator Andrew Bolton said that they, "wanted the clothes to have a direct dialogue with the rooms themselves, so every room has a direct relationship between the clothing and the rooms and that helps the process." Bolton explained that this relationship was intended to help visitors realize a "continuity of thought and continuation of ideas from centuries ago to present day and mixing of styles is something that's very important to English culture."<sup>9</sup> Culture has many layers and the curators succeeded in presenting very layered scenes.

One of the most remarkable pieces of furniture in the Museum's English period rooms is a state bed from Hampton Court in Herefordshire (ca. 1698). State beds were potent symbols of status and upon the death of a senior family member were used to stage a wake. Reflecting this function, the vignette entitled "The Deathbed" examined symbols of death and decay. Queen Victoria's

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<sup>7</sup> Wendy Moonan. *Visiting History in Period Rooms: Careful, Don't Touch*. The New York Times. Sept 1, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Bolton. *AngloMania: Tradition and Transgression in British Fashion*, p 12.

“widow’s weeds” were shown alongside a dress by Alexander McQueen with a memento mori in the form of an eerie skeleton corset by the jeweler Shaun Leane.<sup>10</sup> Each room with its distinct narrative helps to create an environment. There is more going on in the rooms than simply presenting furniture and costumes. There is a theatrical narrative connecting all of the elements in much the same way that *Dangerous Liaisons* animated the French period rooms.

The Costume Institute’s exhibitions have had the effect of the new enlivening the old and the old verifying the new. What was novel, perhaps, was the use of historical and modern clothing to represent “characters,” as if in a play or a painting. Apart from a device to engage visitors, such an approach referenced one of the defining features of the English, namely their interest in character and biography. The show presented the opportunity of highlighting significant paintings from the Museum’s holdings, including Thomas Gainsborough’s *Mrs. Grace Dalrymple Elliott* (1778), one of the most celebrated courtesans of the eighteenth century. This was meant to illustrate that English history is alive with such eccentric characters, some real, and some, as in the exhibition fictitious. The show also mixed period costumes with modern accessories. Most of the modern pieces were selected for their avant-garde nature and their self-conscious historicism, two of the defining features of British fashion of the past thirty years (the modern time frame of the exhibition). All of the pieces, whether modern or historical, were selected for their relevance to the

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<sup>10</sup> <[http://www.metmuseum.org/press\\_room.](http://www.metmuseum.org/press_room.)> Accessed June 2007.

interiors. This relevance may have been symbolic, metaphorical, or iconographical, but it supplied the exhibition's justification. One of the themes throughout the exhibition was historicism, and how designers look to their past for inspiration. The presence of costumes in the English period rooms provided a contextual relativity that was at once startling and seductive. A frequent visitor to the Met expressed his delight for the show as "one of the most beautiful and innovative special exhibitions I have ever seen at the Met in the twenty five years I've been going there."<sup>11</sup>

Exhibitions like *Dangerous Liaisons* and *AngloMania* illustrate how curators can use period environments to create innovative interpretations of temporary exhibitions. These exhibitions allowed curators to reexamine their period rooms and allowed visitors a new perspective when viewing them. There is often a lot to be seen in a traditional period room, but visitors may not notice all the different elements presented. Exhibitions that introduce new contexts for the room, such as costumes, may encourage visitors to perceive something about the room they may not have noted before. In these two exhibitions, the mannequins interacted with the decorative arts within the period rooms. This helped visitors to gain a deeper understanding of the space and function of the room that they may have previously overlooked. The Metropolitan's curators and designers succeeded in giving new life and a fresh take on their traditional period rooms.

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<sup>11</sup> Anne Jacobus. [Amazon review](http://www.amazon.com/AngloMania-Tradition-Transgression-Metropolitan-Publications). *Wonderful: AngloMania: Tradition and Transgression in British Fashion*. March 2007. <<http://www.amazon.com/AngloMania-Tradition-Transgression-Metropolitan-Publications>> Accessed August 2007.

The rooms became more than static period rooms. Even within the confines of their three walls and velvet ropes a period environment was being created. The rooms were no longer frozen. It was as if the visitor was peering into these rooms that were still alive - framed as a photograph is framed. A room and inhabitants captured in the midst of everyday life. The mannequins, whether they were historical or modern, helped the room to become more personable to those viewing it. In both exhibits, there was so much action taking place that as a visitor you knew you might not be catching every small detail. It made you want to get closer, to hear the stories behind the pieces and figure out the relationships between the objects. The rooms were illustrated picture books without much text. This forced the viewer to really examine each scene to try and get the whole narrative the curators had developed. By doing so the curators were involving their audience.

### **Chapter III: No More Velvet Ropes**

Issues of authenticity are at the forefront of period room debates. As ideas of authenticity have changed, so have the installations of period rooms. How “authentic” does a modern period room have to be? Can a museum present a playful environment in this day and age, and still be authentic? Where is the line drawn between a playful museum exhibit and tourist attraction promenade? Walt Disney World’s website describes its Epcot Norway Pavilion as a place where tourists, “can ride the Maelstrom adventure cruise, climb aboard a

realistic sailing ship, inspect noteworthy Norse artifacts inside an authentic Stave Church, and dine inside a castle at the Restaurant Akershus.”<sup>1</sup> Tourists visiting Disney’s Norway Pavilion will not be expecting the same kind of authenticity they would expect when visiting a museum. However this type of marketing shows that even entertainment venues try to lure in visitors with the promise of the “authentic” experience.

The Peabody Essex Museum’s Yin Yu Tang House, like the Cloisters and The Getty Villa, offers a total period environment, but it is not a recreated structure. In dismantling and reassembling the house brick by brick the Peabody Essex curators wanted to create as authentic an experience as possible. In the same way as a period room the house freezes a specific time and place for visitors to explore. But unlike most period rooms, Yin Yu Tang is not a frame for decorative arts. It acts as a full environment and as a gateway to exploring the whole of the Chinese collection. It is meant to give visitors a context for the rest of the Asian collection that they might not have otherwise gained. Walking into the museum from the quaint New England streets of Salem it may otherwise be difficult to provide a context for the Asian collection.

By traveling across the world to America, Yin Yu Tang serves as a cultural ambassador. Not only is it a marvelous artifact to preserve, but it also allows us to compare a traditional Chinese home to our own homes in areas such as construction, ornamentation, function, and living space.

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<sup>1</sup> Disney World Norway Pavilion  
<<http://disneyworld.disney.go.com/wdw/parks/attractionDetail?id=NorwayPavilionAttractionPage>> Accessed August 2007.

With careful observation, one is able to decode much of the past by living vicariously through what the house has experienced.<sup>2</sup>

In the summer of 1997, Yin Yu Tang, a well-preserved house dating from the mid Qing period (1644-1911) and located in the Huizhou region of China, in the southern province of Anhui, was carefully dismantled and re-erected at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts.<sup>3</sup> It opened to the public in June 2003. It was agreed that Yin Yu Tang would be transferred to the museum as part of a cultural exchange that would help protect and promote Huizhou architecture. The house is its own structure on the museum grounds and visitors are invited to walk through and explore on scheduled tours. The house is presented as it appeared when it was last occupied in the 1980s and is meant to “function for diverse audiences as a window to the broader context of Chinese art, architecture, and culture.”<sup>4</sup> An underlying premise of the Yin Yu Tang project is the belief that architecture can communicate cultural values and rich traditions and inspire the ever-evolving cultures of all societies.<sup>5</sup>

Many villages in the Huizhou region, 250 miles Southwest of Shanghai, are filled with ancient houses. Many of these are being torn down to make way for modern homes. On a trip to China in 1996, Nancy Berliner, then an independent scholar of Chinese art and now Curator of Chinese Art and Culture at the Peabody Essex Museum, was visiting the village when she first saw Yin Yu

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<sup>2</sup> Alison Liou, The Chinese Language School, Lexington, MA. <[www.pem.org](http://www.pem.org)> Accessed July 2007.

<sup>3</sup> <[www.pem.org](http://www.pem.org)> Accessed July 2007.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Yin Yu Tang: Preserving Chinese Vernacular Architecture*. John G. Waite Associates, 2003.

Tang, which was unoccupied at the time.<sup>6</sup> On an ensuing trip to China in the same year, she revisited the house. Coincidentally, family members were present, and on that day they had decided to put the house up for sale. In addition, Berliner learned that the Xiuning County Cultural Relics Administration was seeking an American cultural institution to assist in an effort to increase international awareness of traditional architecture of the region. In May of 1997 an agreement was established: Yin Yu Tang would be transferred to the Peabody Essex Museum as part of a cultural exchange that would help protect and promote Huizhou architecture.<sup>7</sup> Additional projects would be established in China to protect and conserve historic architecture in Huizhou.

Yin Yu Tang, which translates as Hall of Plentiful Shelter, is the first house brought, in its entirety, from China to the United States. Its conservation and installation at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, is a landmark in the history of international preservation. Not only have the building and its contents been preserved as artifacts; Chinese culture has been brought halfway around the world, expanding the opportunities for people in the Western Hemisphere to learn about Chinese architecture, art, and history. Yin Yu Tang provides an unusual opportunity for interpreting Chinese culture, not only because the house was exceptionally well crafted and well preserved but also because many of the family's furnishings and household utensils had

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

survived, along with papers and photographs. Family members were interviewed about domestic life in the house, and their support helped make the relocation of their ancestral home a success. The Huizhou region is known throughout China for the success of its merchants and for its rich history of scholarship, painting, architecture, carving, opera, and literary accomplishment. Yin Yu Tang is meant to enable the public to learn about the history, architecture, and lives of many generations of people from this remote part of China.<sup>8</sup> Access to documentary records, household goods, and oral histories make this house a rich resource for understanding Chinese families and their relationship to their homes. Yin Yu Tang is an outstanding example of the renowned Huizhou architecture, presenting such regional characteristics as stepped, exterior “horse head” walls, a “sky well” interior courtyard, a carved brick front entrance, and intricately executed post-and-beam, mortise-and-tenon construction.<sup>9</sup>

The architectural goal was not only to retain the historic fabric of the building but also to preserve its centuries-old character. The Yin Yu Tang project team was made up of preservation architects, museum curators, and representatives of philanthropic foundations. Together they developed detailed preservation guidelines that governed the approach to the conservation work and the insertion of new building systems. The historic structure was conserved but new electrical, heating, and ventilating systems were inserted. New materials

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<sup>8</sup> <[www.pem.org](http://www.pem.org)> Accessed July 2007.

<sup>9</sup> *Yin Yu Tang: Preserving Chinese Vernacular Architecture*. John G. Waite Associates, 2003.



were required to have the same physical and chemical characteristics as the original materials and were then finished to be visually consistent with their location, so that the repairs would not detract or distract from the historic character of the house.<sup>10</sup> New work was marked discreetly to distinguish it from the historic building fabric. Also, much of the new work was designed to be reversible, so that more advanced technologies may be utilized in the future.

Some would perhaps argue that it would have been better to leave the Yin Yu Tang house in China and restore it at its original location. But the Xiuning County Cultural Relics Administration felt that exhibiting the house in the United States would help increase international awareness of traditional Huizhou architecture and convey the pressing need to repair and protect other historic structures of this region.<sup>11</sup> It is fortunate for the curators and others involved in this project that the descendants agreed with this idea and fully supported the project. Huang Binggen, a Huang family member now living in Shanghai, expressed his appreciation in these words:

[This] arrangement is the best solution for preserving the house. It's actually a big favor for us descendants. We can preserve the house forever and it will help us to remember that our ancestors had glorious achievements, and that we must keep forging ahead ourselves and make progress in our own careers.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

Through this cultural exchange between China and the United States, visitors, scholars, and students can see the Yin Yu Tang house, gain a better understanding and appreciation of Chinese art, architecture, and culture, and learn about daily life in a Chinese village.

When planning to exhibit and interpret the Yin Yu Tang house, the Peabody Essex Museum decided to conserve and install the house as a major new element of the museum's during the museum's extensive expansion in the summer of 2003. Two accompanying galleries were also planned within the new museum facility, presenting Yin Yu Tang within the larger context of Chinese culture. One was to be dedicated to describing the family, the house, its history, and Chinese architecture; the other would feature rotating exhibits on Chinese art. The house itself would be presented as it appeared when it was last occupied in the 1980s.

In addition to two exhibition galleries, the Peabody Essex Museum also offers a large variety of programs related to the house. It presents lectures, screens films, and holds a wide array of programs on topics such as the conservation of Yin Yu Tang itself, traditional Chinese architecture, daily life in rural China, and the art and furnishings on exhibit within the Yin Yu Tang house. Stonemasons, carpenters, and other experts from China occasionally travel to the museum to demonstrate traditional crafts. The museum also offers a special audio tour to enable visitors to experience the atmosphere of the house when it was occupied in order to

give a sense of a “living” environment. All of these elements are designed to give visitors an understanding of Chinese culture, as well as the fascinating history of the house and those who lived in it.

The Peabody Essex’s Chinese art collection was born during the height of the China trade in Salem, Massachusetts. It features important Qing dynasty works, including ceramics, textiles, and decorative arts.<sup>13</sup> Yin Yu Tang joins the museum's existing collection of twenty-three historic houses, providing a rare context in which to interpret the American architecture the museum currently features, as well as its commitment to cultural education. Yin Yu Tang also adds a dramatic new perspective to the museum's interpretation of Chinese culture, to its collections of Asian art, and to the historic connection between China, the museum, and the town of Salem, Massachusetts. Together these houses provide a compelling portrait of the diverse ways in which humans shape the world in which they live. A visiting student from New Hampshire expressed what she learned from this unique environment:

When one hears the word China, the pop of firecrackers, scent of fried rice, and flash of a dragon’s bright crimson tail may come to mind. In America, we see China as a land overcrowded and distant. We western students scarcely read ancient Chinese literature and all too often dismiss their religious inclinations as primitive. We as a society do not display much interest in one of the world’s earliest civilizations even though we unknowingly emphasize its cultural teachings and claim them as our own through morality. However, by visiting Yin Yu Tang, it is clear that the

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<sup>13</sup> <[www.pem.org/collections/chinese.php](http://www.pem.org/collections/chinese.php)> Accessed July 2007.

people and history of China may have much more to express to us in this “modern” culture than we would ever discover on our own.<sup>14</sup>

The Yin Yu Tang house illustrates how period rooms do not need to simply frame decorative art collections. By expanding rooms into environments they can be used as tools to expand upon other collections present how all the elements interact with each other. Using the house as an educational tool helps to expand on the Chinese and Asian collections at the Peabody Essex Museum, but also works to illustrate Chinese history and culture in a tangible way. Just as the Cloisters and the Getty Villa help to make medieval and classical art accessible and familiar to American audiences, so too does Yin Yu Tang with the Peabody Essex’s Asian collection. Yin Yu Tang allows visitors to become fully enveloped into a Chinese environment and this helps to give a broader context to art on display. Unlike a reconstruction, Yin Yu Tang is the authentic environment. Yin Yu Tang was not originally created as a museum; it was built as a home. The house may have been moved half way across the globe, but the structural elements are all original. The cyan stones and black tiles, horsehead walls, small windows, austere facades, and vivid paintings all witnessed and helped shelter the lives of real people. The phrase, “If these walls could talk” becomes poignant. While they can not literally speak out loud, they can whisper if you listen closely. The smells of wood and stone are the same as they were in China and the echoes of family life can still be felt as you let yourself become immersed in the house. In

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<sup>14</sup> Holly Beaulac. *Gorham Middle/High School, Gorham, NH.* <[www.pem.org](http://www.pem.org)> Accessed July 2007.

its new location, the house is able to speak to wide and diverse audiences. It carries a message between people, one that spans time and space, culture and history.

### **Conclusion:**

Although the debate over the appropriateness, purpose, and degree of authenticity of period rooms in an art museum setting is still an area of contention between scholars and experts in the field of decorative arts, there is no denying their popularity to visitors. Fiske Kimball, former director of the Philadelphia Museum, discovered in 1929 when he took a survey of visitors to the Pennsylvania Museum (now the Philadelphia Museum of Art), that the period rooms were the first choice of all the exhibits. In general he found that “people like best what they know.”<sup>1</sup> However, if these period rooms were to stay as they always were, than today’s museum visitors might bypass them on their way to the blockbuster exhibits or intriguing installations of contemporary artists. A majority of the research available suggests that future audiences will be increasingly demanding in terms of service quality, no matter the type of museum or heritage product they seek. Sites will require strong individual identities and will have to increase visitor choice and add novelty to their

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<sup>1</sup> Dianne Pilgrim. *Visitors to Pennsylvania Museum Express Preference for Period Rooms*. Art News, vol 28, December 7, 1929, p9.

approaches.<sup>2</sup> Museums must also recognize that to the majority of visitors they represent one choice of leisure activity among many. Tourism is an industry that enables people to travel to 'consume' experiences away from home. A major motivating factor behind cultural heritage tourists lies in their desire to gain a deeper understanding of the culture and heritage of a destination. Today's audiences want to be entertained as well as educated. They want to see something new when they visit the museum. New conservation and installation scholarship as well as the desire to attract new museum visitors has led museum professionals to rethink their period rooms and experiment with period environments. Whether they are authentic structures, playful vignettes, or recreated atmospheres, period environments have aided in giving new vitality to traditional period rooms. By incorporating period rooms into larger narratives and making use of education programs to expand the walls curators and educators are allowing visitors to see their collections in a new light. The more children and adults can feel a part of an exhibition or collection the more vested interest they will have in it. "Serious" cultural events do not need to be passive. The audience does not need to only sit, listen, and watch in order to learn. If they are involved or can interact with the exhibition they will be more attentive. Period environments allow for this. Visitors do not need to touch the artwork in order to be involved. It is the entire atmosphere they interact with. Museums

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<sup>2</sup> Graham Black. *The Engaging Museum: Developing Museums for Visitor Involvement*. New York: Routledge, 2005.

must not be afraid to to break down the gallery's "fourth wall" through the period environment in order to encourage audiences to think more critically and contextually about what they are viewing.

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*The Peabody Essex Museum*  
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<<http://www.disneyworld.go.com>>

*The Getty Villa*  
<<http://www.getty.edu>>

## **Interview**

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Telephone Interview. 4 Oct. 2007.