

# These New York Museums Let Visitors Go behind the Scenes to Explore Their Brimming Storage Facilities

Though space constraints may not come to mind when walking through the Met's multi-block span or the Brooklyn Museum's patchwork of galleries, most museums share a fundamental problem: Their collections are far too big for their buildings to accommodate. Their galleries can often display only a small percentage of the objects they hold. As Kevin Stayton, Chief Curator at the Brooklyn Museum, puts it, "The museum is always looking everywhere for storage. We have so much material and so little space."

In some museums, this problem has generated a different kind of viewing experience—in spaces created to serve the dual purposes of storage and display. Called study galleries or visible storage centers, these repositories are crowded with a wealth of objects that would otherwise remain largely out of sight, making them feel like treasure chests or cabinets of curiosities. New York City is home to three museums with these offerings—the Met, the Brooklyn Museum, and the New-York Historical Society—allowing for less directed viewing experiences and

The center's mission is visitor-centric. It's structured to encourage learning and exploration through periodic mini-exhibitions, supplemental resources that decode some of the ways the museum collects and catalogs, and, especially, through its wonderful crush of objects. "By massing things together, you learn things just from the sheer quantity, which you don't learn when you look at one or two of the very best examples," as in traditionally curated exhibitions, says Stayton. This is illustrated by one of his favorite sections, a floor-to-ceiling case holding Spanish Colonial objects. "You look at the silver, these religious objects, and it really gives you a sense of how different colonial Mexico and Peru were from North America," he explains. "It shows you the pervasive influence of the Catholic Church, the great wealth of that area, and the strong influence from the indigenous communities, which is much less apparent in colonial Boston and New York."

New-York Historical Society is in the process of making their storage facilities a destination. It is currently closed and undergoing a complete transformation, slated to re-open in 2017. While some of its densely filled visible storage cases will be retained, the reimaged center will feature what Hofer describes as "thematic and narrative-driven installations," resembling curated exhibitions. Among these will be the Tiffany Gallery, which will capitalize on the institution's collection of lamps by renowned designer Louis Comfort Tiffany—many of which, recent historical research has uncovered, were actually produced by designer Clara Driscoll and other women who worked in his studio. "We have an extremely talented architect working on this project," says Hofer. "The Tiffany Gallery will be 3,000 square feet and will feature 100 lamps, all lit. It will be a very memorable space."

But aside from their delightful abundance and the logistical issues they can help to ease, visible-storage spaces demonstrate an important and relatively newer ethos, which Stayton sums up. "Museum collections are publicly owned; they're part of our heritage. They need to be seen. And the more you can get out, the better."

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