A Museum on the March: Neighborhood Circulating Exhibitions at The Met, Their Evolution, Reception, and Influence

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Keywords:
The Met; exhibitions; medieval art; neighborhood; New York City

ABSTRACT:

This essay addresses the Met's commitment to reaching local communities through circulating exhibitions. It traces the evolution, reception, and influence of the Neighborhood Circulating Exhibitions program, a series of exhibitions sent to public libraries, settlement houses, and high schools in poorer communities around New York City between 1933 and 1942. It also examines the pivotal role played by museum staff in the program's development and success. The Met's continued dedication to local communities outside its walls is further demonstrated by discussing later circulating exhibition initiatives, including an exhibition focused on medieval art and culture from the late 1940s. This case study illustrates how objects were chosen, displayed, and reviews educational materials sent with the works of art. Finally, a comparison of The Met's activities with other museums situates its endeavors within the larger context of circulating exhibition programs during the twentieth century.

Il saggio affronta l'impegno del Met nel raggiungere le comunità locali attraverso le mostre itineranti. Sono analizzate l'evoluzione, la ricezione e l'influenza del programma Neighborhood Circulating Exhibitions, una serie di mostre inviate a biblioteche pubbliche, case di accoglienza e scuole superiori situate in comunità più povere di New York City tra il 1933 e il 1942. È inoltre esaminato il ruolo fondamentale svolto dal personale del museo nello sviluppo e nel successo del programma. La costante dedizione del Met verso le comunità locali al di fuori delle proprie mura è ulteriormente dimostrata attraverso l'analisi di iniziative successive di esposizioni itineranti, tra cui una mostra sull'arte e la cultura medievale alla fine degli anni Quaranta. Questo caso di studio illustra le modalità di selezione e di esposizione delle opere, nonché i materiali educativi inviati insieme ai manufatti artistici. Infine, un confronto tra le attività del Met e quelle di altri musei colloca i suoi sforzi nel più ampio contesto dei programmi di mostre itineranti del XX secolo.

Opening Picture:

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. View, *Art of the Near East*. Neighborhood Circulating Exhibitions. Shown at the Hudson Park Branch Library, 66 Leroy Street, Manhattan, New York. Photographed ca. February 14, 1934. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. [MM6561]

https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.3034-9699/22955

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Introduction

Creating relationships with local communities remains a central goal of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (the Met) into the twenty-first century, just as it was when the museum organized its first series of local circulating exhibitions ninety-two years ago. One need only explore the museum's website to recognize that developing new local audiences continues to drive the Met's online features and programming. This essay focuses on the evolution, reception, and influence of a group of circulating exhibitions, designated *Neighborhood Circulating Exhibitions*, which took place from 1933 to 1942.

In 2020, the Met celebrated its 150th anniversary with the exhibition *Making The Met, 1870–2020*, which addressed the history of the museum in a series of chronological thematic sections. In conjunction with this larger project, a group of museum curators, researchers, and digital specialists curated a small exhibition on the Met's earliest *Neighborhood Circulating Exhibition* program, an initiative that presented exhibitions at venues in communities around New York City. Called *Art for the Community: The Met's Circulating Textile Exhibitions, 1933-42*, the 2020 show emphasized the vital role local circulating exhibitions played in providing historical examples of European textiles for study and inspiration to local students and the working population who could not regularly visit the museum.[1] The display also emphasized how, at the time, Met staff hoped this endeavor would be of service to local manufacturing. A map identifying the thirty-one institutions that participated in the program demonstrates that most venues were in lower income communities.[2] Although the 2020 exhibition closed during the height of the pandemic, materials associated with it are still available on the museum's website, including archival documents that provide an overview of the project.[3] To date, this exhibition was the first attempt in more than fifty years to assess the program's significance and influence.[4]

This essay builds upon the work my colleagues undertook in 2020 by looking further into the factors that contributed to the formulation of the earlier project, the significance of Richard F. Bach's work on industrial arts at the museum during his tenure from 1918 to 1949, and the institution's reaction to the economy of the early 1930s.[5] It also addresses the presses' reception to the circulating exhibition project. The museum successfully utilized newspapers and magazines to publicize their effort to bring art to local audiences and selected references to articles will illustrate how the project was perceived. More specifically I will consider an example of the language used in these articles, including phrases that described the neighborhoods where the museum placed these exhibitions as slums. Other wording described the museum's services as ministering to local populations on the subject of art.[6] Statements contained in letters received by the museum from hosting institutions will also be discussed within the context of the reception of these exhibitions. The influence of these circulating shows to future museum initiatives will also be addressed. A case study from 1946-1947 of the exhibition, *Mediaeval*

https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.3034-9699/22955

Life: The Creative Spirit of the Middle Ages, will examine the organization of a circulating exhibition focused on medieval European art, including an analysis of the types of objects chosen and the related materials sent to be used alongside the displays. Finally, the circulating program will be compared with similar programs at other local institutions at around the same time. For the purposes of this essay, "circulating" exhibitions are defined as shows organized for continuous movement, while "traveling" exhibitions are shows sent to numerous locations before permanently closing and returning to their origin.

Development of the Program

The Metropolitan Museum of Art's original mission statement declares the institution was created,

> *by a group of American citizens – businessmen and financiers as well as leading artists and thinkers of the day – who wanted to create a museum to bring art and art education to the American people.*[7]

With a mandate similar to that of the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, the founders of the Met fashioned an institution dedicated to promoting art education and to inspiring modern design through the study of historical objects.[8] Refining public taste was a crucial part of the museum's function from its inception, however taking the collection out of the museum to the public was impossible until the collection had grown large enough to accommodate the circulation of original art outside the building. Unlike the Victoria & Albert Museum, an older institution whose collection formed more quickly, the Met needed time to develop a collection that could sustain a consistent lending campaign.

The Met's circulating program was undeniably influenced by its precursor, the Victoria & Albert Museum, which was the first art institution to begin an extensive program of circulating and traveling exhibitions. Its program was developed in the mid-nineteenth century as part of the Design Reform initiative associated with the Government Schools of Design at Marlborough House.[9] Following the museum's 1909 reorganization, a dedicated Circulation Department was created, and each curatorial department transferred objects from its collection to that department for inclusion in circulating exhibitions.[10] The Victoria & Albert Museum had the best facilities for organizing such projects, and their staff was committed to providing service to the community.[11] Although exhibitions were sent to secondary schools, as well as other venues, they were later phased out as educational priorities expanded and changed in the United Kingdom.[12] It is important to note that circulating exhibition programs developed in Canada in the 1920s, however, following the second World War, programs inaugurated in countries around the world, from South Africa to Norway, India and France also proliferated.[13]

The seeds of the Met's plan to send circulating exhibitions to local New York City institutions developed slowly during the tenure of the museum's third director, Edward Robinson (1910–1931). The 2020 ex-

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hibition *Art for the Community* has highlighted that the initial spark for the program emerged out of correspondence with a high school teacher named Jessie L. Clough from Richmond Hill High School in Queens.[14] In September 1913 Clough requested the museum to lend fabrics for use in her classes to be sent "about twice a year for periods of 3 or 4 weeks."[15] Henry W. Kent, Assistant Secretary at the Met, responded that the museum was unable to send textiles to her school, but that she was free to arrange a time to come to the museum.[16] In response, Clough expressed her disappointment, reminding Kent of the Museum of Natural History's policy to lend material. She further stated,

> *I tried to make it clear... that our pupils had heavier expenditures of carfare and time to reach the Museum, than the city children + the interest to make this expenditure, needed awakening.*[17]

Students needed a good reason to spend money to visit the museum. The surest way to accomplish this was to entice them by sending select objects to the schools. The museum had already begun to lend works externally, sending a collection of paintings to the Children's Room at the New York Public Library in 1913.[18] Staff descriptions of these early loans seemed to emphasize aesthetic appreciation over practical applications.

In 1914, the museum lent an exhibition of modern oil paintings and watercolors for display at Washington Irving High School in the Gramercy Park area of Manhattan.[19] A year later, twenty-one paintings by American artists were installed in the Lorillard Mansion in Bronx Park at the headquarters of the Bronx Society of Arts and Letters.[20] In 1916, just three years after the museum was first contacted by Miss Clough, Kent wrote to her with the news that the museum's trustees had authorized "the loan of a series of textiles to teachers like yourself who teach practical design and who make practical use of such objects."[21] These works, however, were not to be used for exhibition "but only for working purposes."[22] Two years later, in 1918, the museum lent eighteen paintings to the New York Public Library's branch at Chatham Square on Lower Broadway, and it later circulated to the Hamilton Fish Park branch on the Lower East Side. In accomplishing this, the Met's goal was to "extend its influence, through its pictures, to a distant part of Manhattan..."[23] The museum's bulletin later published comments by the branch librarian highlighting the popularity of the exhibition both for copying and enjoyment.[24]

There is no doubt that Henry Kent's correspondence with Miss Clough played an influential role in the formulation of a circulating exhibition program geared to local institutions. However, the museum was already well on its way to moving in the direction of developing a program, evaluating the difficulty of organizing exhibitions and documenting their popularity with visitors by sending individual shows to branch libraries, a school in Manhattan, and an arts society in the Bronx.

In 1919, the Met announced its intention to create a circulating loan program when president Robert

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W. de Forest wrote that taking the collection out of the museum and putting objects to work outside the museum was better than keeping them idle in storerooms.[25] De Forest also addressed the potential financial concerns associated with embarking on such a program, arguing that "the expense of circulating exhibitions in New York schools and libraries comes fairly within the Museum's obligations to the City."[26] He also described that other loan exhibitions were administrated and paid for through the American Federation of Arts.[27] It appears, however, that an official program of circulating exhibitions was not begun until more than a decade later. The economic crash of 1929 and the Great Depression would further influence the development of the *Neighborhood Circulating Exhibition* program. With the U.S. unemployment rate at twenty-five percent by the early 1930s, significantly fewer visitors had the financial ability to visit the Met, further illustrating what Miss Clough had already stressed in 1913, that the public needed a reason to spend the money to travel to the Met, whether for enjoyment or practical purposes.

The Neighborhood Circulating Exhibition Program, 1933–1942

Formally begun under the museum's fourth director, Herbert Eustis Winlock (1932-1939), the person at the center of the circulating program was Richard F. Bach (1887–1940). Bach began his career at the Met in 1918, and during his tenure he served as Director of the Department of Industrial Relations and later as Dean of Education. He was instrumental in introducing European modern design to the American public and in advancing coordination between the museum and manufacturers, designers, and craftspeople to promote modern design. Inaugurating the *Neighborhood Circulating Exhibition* program was a logical extension of his initiatives in modern design because of they, "offered a tangible venue for social progress."[28] The exhibition program was, however, focused on education rather than on commercial interest.[29] Designated an "experiment" by Winlock, the program aimed at reaching a larger and more diverse segment of New York City's population, especially those who could not easily travel to the museum.[30] Between 1933 and 1942, exhibitions were sent throughout New York City's five boroughs to settlement houses (fig. 1); to branches of the New York Public library throughout New York (fig. 2); to high schools in the Bronx (fig. 3), Queens, and Staten Island; and to local community centers, such as the Bronx Municipal Building (fig. 4). [31] Settlement houses were institutions located in the poorest areas of a city that provided social services and recreational activities.[32] Indeed, most of these venues were located in poor and working-class communities.[33]

Organized by Bach and his staff, the exhibitions consisted of between 50 and 500 works of art each, including paintings, prints, and objects from the permanent collection. It began with six collections —*Art of China*, *Arms and Armor*, *European Textiles & Costume Figures* (fig. 5), and *Ancient Egypt*, and *Art of the Near East* (fig. 6).[34] One of the goals of the first season was "to collect data which might be of use if in the future if it becomes feasible to estab-

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01

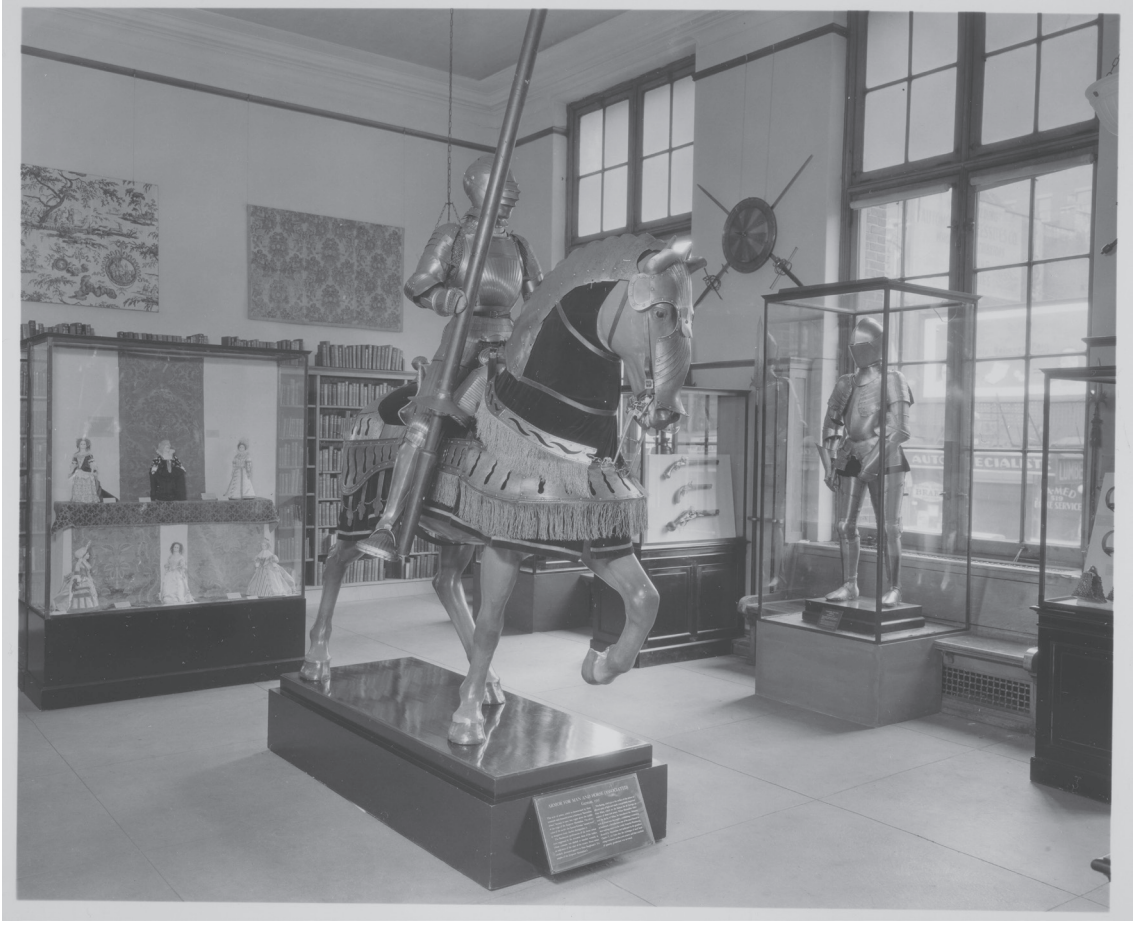

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Fig. 01:
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. View, *The Art of Ancient Egypt*. Neighborhood Circulating Exhibitions. Series of 1934. Shown at the University Settlement House, Manhattan, New York. Photographed ca. March 7, 1934. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. [MM6641]

Fig. 02:
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. View, *Arms, Armor and Textiles, 1492–1776*. Neighborhood Circulating Exhibitions, Series of 1934. Shown at the George Bruce Branch, New York Public Library, West 125th Street, Manhattan, New York. Photographed ca. March 8, 1934. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. [MM6646]

https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.3034-9699/22955

03

Fig. 03: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. A Teacher with a Class, *Arms and Armor*. Neighborhood Circulating Exhibitions, opened February 9, 1939. Shown at Theodore Roosevelt High School, The Bronx, New York. Photographed February 1939. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. [MM8746]

lish branch museums in the city."[35] The notion of creating branch museums had been under discussion by museum officials since at least 1925, with the acquisition of the George Grey Barnard Collection of medieval sculpture.[36] Each subsequent and successful season of the circulating program was hailed in the Met's bulletin where the dates, venues, and the number of visitors were regularly published.[37] During the second season of the program, in 1934, 22,377 people visited the exhibition, *Chinese and Japanese Art*, which was displayed for just 49 days.[38]

By 1935, the procedures for sending out a circulating exhibition to local institutions were well-established by the Met and were even described in *The New York Times*.[39] Although the program eventually included all five boroughs it wasn't until 1938 that locations expanded to include locations in the Bronx and Staten Island.[40] The exhibition themes continued to comprise subjects such as arms and armor, ancient Egypt, and Oriental textiles and prints.[41] Circulating exhibitions generally required minimum effort from the host venue's staff, with principal issues such as packing, safe transport, and installation being overseen by the Met.[42] Following receipt of a request, museum staff visited the venue to assess the physical location and lighting capabilities. Occasionally conditions were such that additional construction was required. Frequent rearrangement of materials determined that exhibitions were often quite changed from one venue to the next.[43] One-page flyers were printed for each exhibition, which described the topic, provided an overview of the layout case by case, and offered "good books"

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Fig. 04:
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. View, *Arms, Armor and Textiles, 1492–1776*, Neighborhood Circulating exhibitions, series of 1935, No. II. Shown at the Bronx County Building, The Bronx, New York. May – August 30, 1935. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. [SF449]

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Fig 05:
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. View, *European Textiles and Costume Figures*,"Neighborhood Circulating exhibitions. Shown at Union Settlement House, East 104th Street, Manhattan, New York. Photographed ca. October 31, 1936. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. [MM7596]

https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.3034-9699/22955

about the subject.[44] Opening receptions were held at each venue.[45] Expanded hours enabled neighborhood populations to see the displays outside of hectic work and family schedules.[46]

Works of art chosen for circulating exhibitions were referred to as "surplus objects" or "duplicates" to underscore that the museum's treasure remained on site.[47] Yet, in other descriptions, museum staff members were careful to state that works lent, such as a complete suit of armor, were also suitable for display at the museum, if there had been room.[48] The Met's method of identifying objects for loan contrasted with the Victoria & Albert's, where works were deliberately selected to include significant objects, not "throw-outs" or works unworthy of being displayed in the museum.[49] Moreover, objects culled from all the departments of the Victoria & Albert Museum were transferred to the Circulation Department to create a reserve collection of 10,000 works in about 1909, and that grew to 25,000 works of art by 1950, while the Met's circulating collection was much smaller and individual objects remained within the purview of the curatorial department to which it belonged.[50]

Cases and other exhibition materials had to be transported from the museum to a location and then installed. Starting in 1935, the Works Progress Administration provided guards and lecturers on site.[51] Although exhibitions were sent out at no cost to the borrowing institution, museum staff reported the cost was

Fig. 06: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. View, *Art of the Near East*. Neighborhood Circulating Exhibitions. Shown at the Hudson Park Branch Library, 66 Leroy Street, Manhattan, New York. Photographed ca. February 14, 1934. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. [MM6561]

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significant. It was later reported that, although the annual allotment of funds never exceeded $5,000 per year, the actual cost to the museum was $15,000 or more per year.[52] The value to the museum was to introduce to the public "the conviction that the Metropolitan is their museum."[53] Most importantly, admission was free.[54] Between 1933 and 1940, exhibitions had been shown at 6 library branches, four colleges (fig. 7), 13 high schools, 1 art high school, 3 settlement houses, 2 YMCA branches, 1 museum and 1 city administration building, with a total attendance figure of 1,999,690.[55] The program was suspended in 1941 when, according to internal Met documents, the pressure of defense requirements associated with World War II had reduced available man power and funds. In addition, the assistance from the WPA was withdrawn.[56]

An analysis of the language used by Richard F. Bach to describe the program provides crucial information about its rationale and goals. In an essay for the museum's bulletin in 1935, two years after the program began, Bach referred to the program as, "this invasion of ours in regions of the Greater City whence but few ever do or can come to the Museum itself…[57] He also likened the circulating exhibitions to temporary branch museums woven into the fabric of local neighborhoods.[58] In another essay, he described having developed a "caravan of art" suggestive of mobile exhibitions on buses, a later phenomenon in museum extension.[59] Moreover, he explained that original museum objects were entering the "circle of daily activities of the people."[60] New Yorkers from poor and working-class neighborhoods in the five boroughs were able to view original works of historical art in person, likely for the first time. The result was that objects in circulating exhibitions inserted the museum directly into the lives of neighborhood residents. At the same time, the objects' movement from the museum to less affluent areas of the city helped to democratize an elitist art collection assembled by the wealthiest robber barons of the previous century.[61] In the final reports of the program, which ended in 1942, more than two million people, nearly a quarter of the New York City area population and mostly from lower income groups, reportedly viewed these exhibitions.[62]

Reception

The *Neighborhood Circulating Exhibition* program received a significant amount of press attention from its inception in 1933 and throughout the nine years it existed. This recognition consisted of announcements or articles repeating text provided by museum staff, and explanations of how the program was perceived. For example, a 1933 article in the *New York World Telegram* proclaimed in its title that art was reaching New York slums.[63] It was one of the only articles to directly acknowledge the exhibitions were sent to areas of urban slums around the city. In 1934, M. D. C. Crawford, a writer for *Women's Wear Daily*, emphasized the utility of the opportunity for a larger population to view historical works generally only available to a small audience.[64] Lloyd M. Crosgrave from Muncie, Indiana, described feeling a type of "mental indigestion" when visiting the museum. Lauding the idea of

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07

Fig. 07: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. View, *Arms and Armor*. Neighborhood Circulating Exhibitions, through September 6, 1939. Shown at the College of the City of New York. Photographed ca. July 7, 1939. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. [MM8935]

smaller branch museums, like the Met's circulating exhibitions, Crosgrave argued the visits would be more of "an endless series of dainty meals instead of a gorge."[65] Viewing fewer works of art installed in a smaller venue was seen as preferable to wandering through a large and intimidating museum with many galleries. Commendation letters received by the museum from staff at host venues illustrate how significant these opportunities were for communities. In a letter to the museum, from the head of the Hudson Guild, a settlement house, expressed that there was no place where carrying the message of art was more needed, because

> *...the neighborhood, which it seems to me, almost more than any other, is in need of the help that you can give.*[66]

Another letter described how important it was to promote the cultural branches of education, especially at a moment when a

> *...lack of employment gives to others more spare time than is conducive for producing healthy minds...*[67]

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Two threads emerge from these examples: the innovative approach to reaching a diverse audience and the exposure of a more distant public to art fulfilling the role of education and refining the taste of visitors to the exhibition. It is important to note that following World War II traveling and circulating programs developed worldwide. An example that is comparable to the Met's program is one implemented in Australia in 1944 with governmental support that brought exhibitions to remote areas of the country, "to diffuse a knowledge of, and an interest in, the visual arts…"[68]

Later Years

In 1943, a year after the close of the *Neighborhood Circulating Exhibition* program, Francis Henry Taylor (1903–1957), the museum's fifth director who took the helm in 1940, produced a confidential preliminary report for museum trustees called, *Where is The Metropolitan Museum Going?*. Under the section "Education and Museum Extension" Taylor described the museum's many years of maintaining "a variety of contacts with the schools, colleges, and institutions of the city…".[69] It was further announced that these initiatives were now part of one administrative unit – the Department of Education and Museum Extension under the direction of Richard F. Bach.[70]

A document outlining the revised circulating exhibition program at the Met from the same year describes an extremely ambitious program of 9 types of exhibitions. Considered the most important series of circulating exhibitions the museum offered, the so-called "interborough" circulations were meant to be similar to the earlier neighborhood circulating program. Additional services included loans to junior high schools connected with the educational curriculum, and a suburban "belt" circuit, which had not yet begun due to wartime shortages. Still others included a labor union circuit, consisting of reproductions, a college circuit, plans for a Mexican circuit, and several other services including original works of art and reproductions.[71] Outreach to schools also included tours and the circulation of visual material, such as lantern slides and small exhibitions.[72] While not all of these programs were put into effect, exhibitions to junior and senior high schools, colleges, and labor unions were sent out. With this considerable number of local circulating exhibitions moving around New York City, it is not surprising that the museum encountered staffing issues in organizing the material, preparing labels, and installing the exhibitions. The result of these activities was a recommendation to add personnel, preferably employed by the city's Board of Education.[73] By this time, the Met had partnered with the New York City Board of Education to send exhibitions to junior and senior high schools.[74] Two museum helpers were sent to install the works, but the truck and driver were paid for by the Board of Education.[75] In a 1946 letter to the museum's president, William Church Osborn (1941-1947), Bach reiterated the importance of giving free exhibitions to schools as a "quid pro quo for the fund annually voted us by the City."[76]

The archival records of these exhibitions indicate that issues concern-

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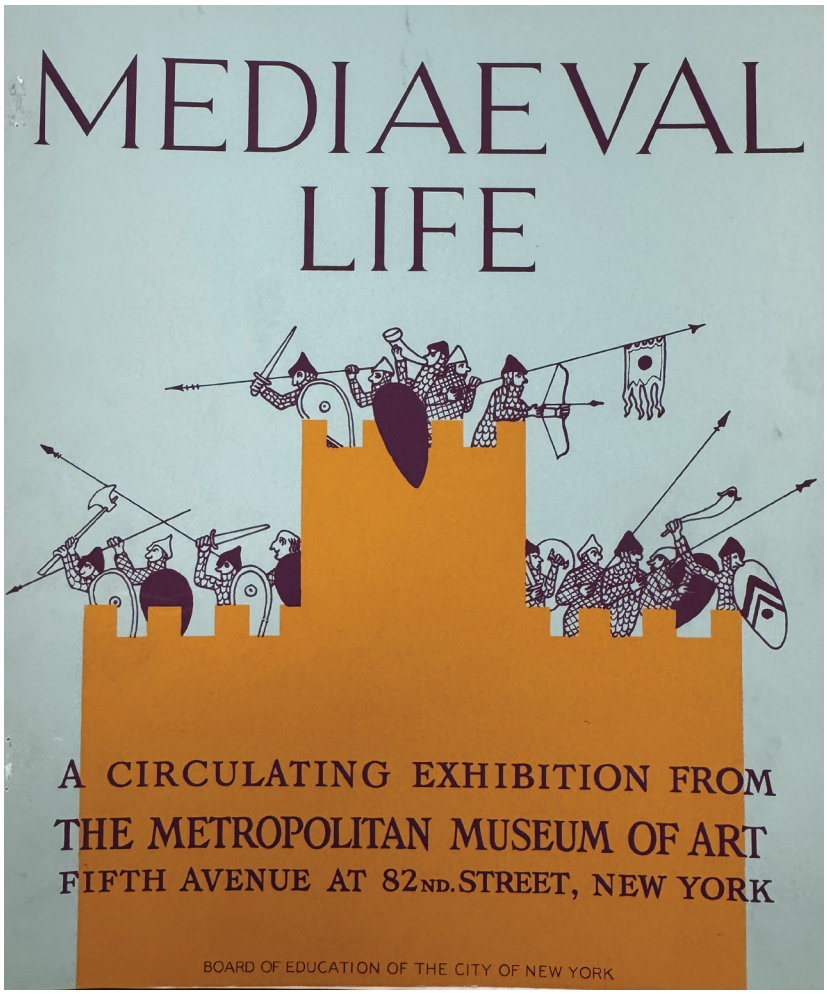

Fig. 08: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Poster for *Mediaeval Life: The Creative Spirit of the Middle Ages*, 1946-1947. Office of the Secretary Records, The Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

ing the condition and security of the works lent were few, but evidence shows problems did exist. An internal memo from 1947 describes that the previous 3 years had witnessed damage to painting frames and "evidence of a lack of careful handling."[77] In late 1947 and early 1948, internal memos specify that paintings, "are standing on the glass tops of cases, leaning against the wall without fastening of any kind" at Midwood Highschool in Brooklyn.[78] At the Bronx High School of Science, paintings were hung in high traffic areas and some even stood on the floor.[79] It was therefore decided that collections had to be displayed in rooms with locks so spaces could be locked when not monitored.[80] In addition, a "special man" was assigned to superintend the movement of paintings exhibitions at each stop.[81] Interestingly, there is no discussion of damage to three-dimensional works of art, which were displayed inside casework.

Case Study

By the late 1940s, three exhibitions were being circulated to thirteen senior high schools and eleven exhibitions were sent to eight junior high schools. Among the exhibitions prepared were *Living Past of China, Ancient Greece, Masterworks*, and two exhibitions focused on the European Middle Ages, *Mediaeval Life: The Creative Spirit of the Middle Ages*, (fig. 8) and "Mediaeval Castle: Its Siege and Defense."[82] A file located in the archives of the department of medieval art at the Met provides a list of objects and black and white photographs showing how the exhibition, *Mediaeval Life: The Creative Spirit of the Middle Ages*, was displayed.[83] Works of art and printed labels in sections were separated by velvet-covered panels. The texts included in the cases no longer survive, but the exhibition contained four cases of original art with 94 objects devoted to the following themes: The Castle (fig. 9), The Town (fig. 10), The Monastery (fig. 11), and The Church (fig. 12). The existing object lists, consisting of about seventy-five objects, and the photographs show a range of works, including plaster casts of ivory mirror cases, diptychs, and game pieces[84]; reproductions of Byzantine and Irish metalwork from other museum collections[85]; and they include original medieval works that can be primarily classified as surplus or works that would ordinarily not be chosen for display in the Metropolitan's gal-

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09

Fig. 09:
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. View 1, *Mediaeval Life: The Creative Spirit of the Middle Ages*. Circulating Exhibition at Unknown Senior High School, September 1946. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. [MM16735]

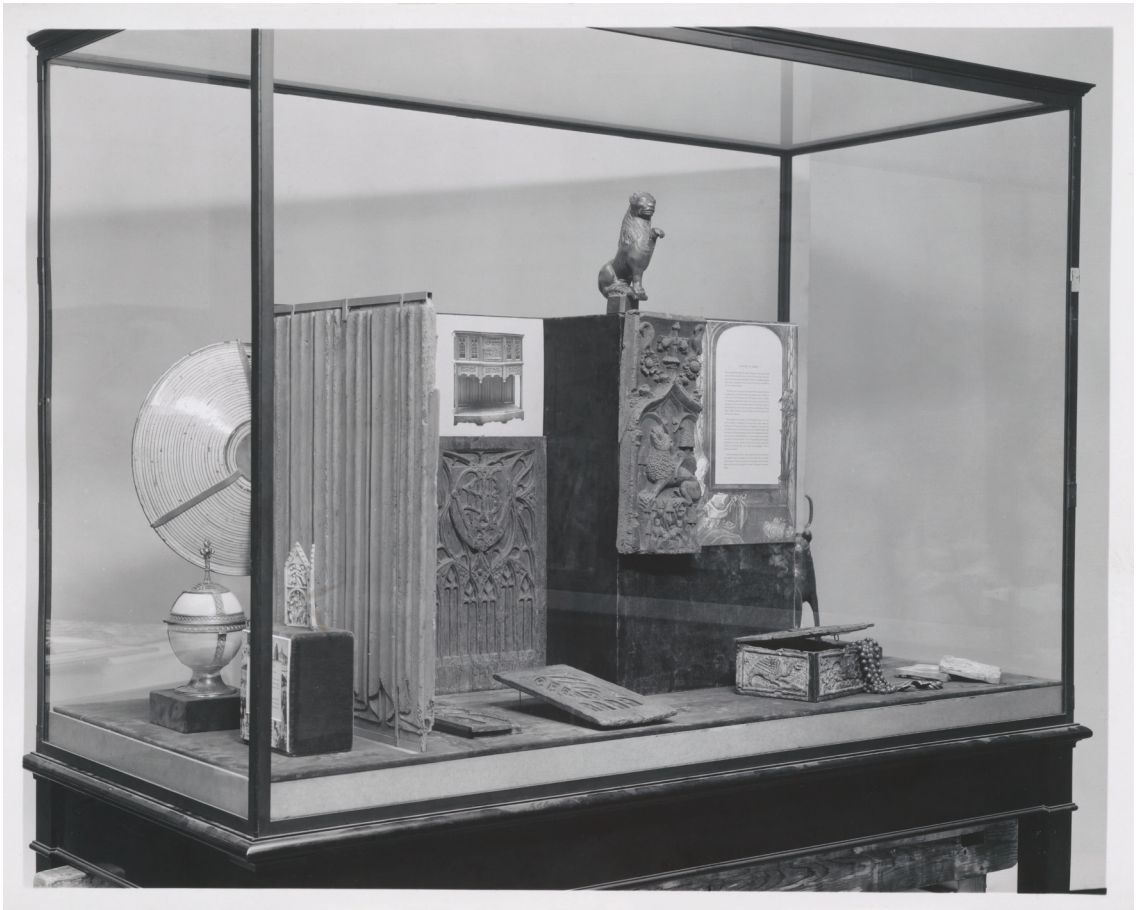

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Fig. 10:
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. View 2, *Mediaeval Life: The Creative Spirit of the Middle Ages*. Circulating Exhibition at Unknown Senior High School, September 1946. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. [MM16728]

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Fig. 11: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. View 3, *Mediaeval Life: The Creative Spirit of the Middle Ages*. Circulating Exhibition at Unknown Senior High School, September 1946. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. [MM16730]

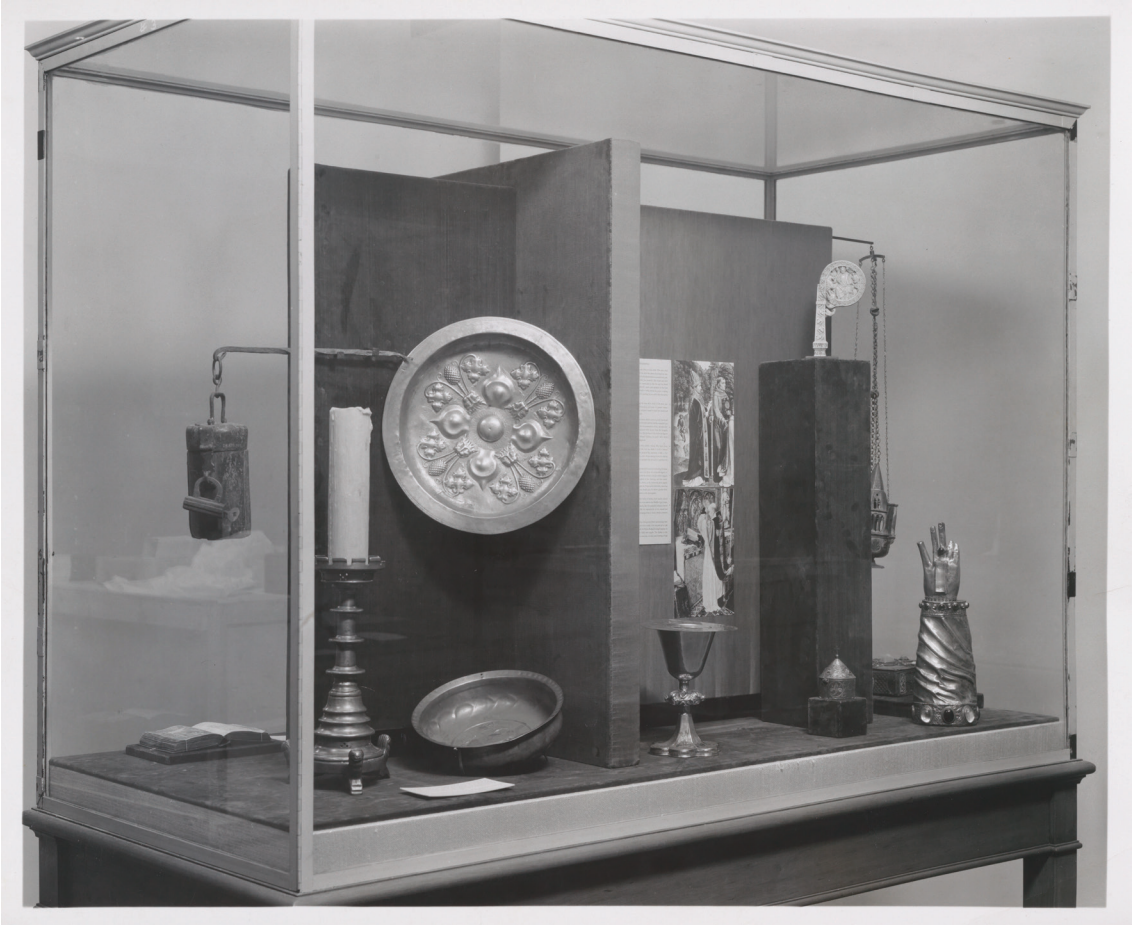

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Fig. 12: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. View 3, *Mediaeval Life: The Creative Spirit of the Middle Ages*. Circulating Exhibition at Unknown Senior High School, September 1946. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. [MM16731]

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leries.[86] Indeed, the woodwork displayed figure 10 was subsequently deaccessioned from the collection and sold. Woven from silk and metal thread, the early sixteenth-century Rhenish chasuble displayed in figure 11 and the various ivory and ceramic works in this exhibition, demonstrate that museum staff sent fragile, breakable, and light sensitive works to schools throughout the five boroughs of New York City.[87]

The educational materials paired with the exhibition included a helmet in the style of the fourteenth century that students could wear, and an example of chain mail. A short film about the Ghent Altarpiece, photographs of The Cloisters in Fort Tryon Park, a set of slides, and an album of music were also included. Readings and recommendations for the use of the exhibition in the curriculum of English, music, and art were also contained in the packet of materials sent along with the works of art.[88] A museum memorandum indicates this exhibition remained among the museum's staple of circulating exhibitions for high schools until the mid-1950s. The education department stored them in the museum's tunnel, underneath the building, while not in circulation.[89] A series of nationally circulating shows was inaugurated in 1947, each containing thirty-five to fifty works and lasting about six weeks. The museum paid for packing, insurance and installed the works of art on site, whereas borrowers assumed the cost of transportation.[90]

By the early 1950s, the Met investigated the feasibility of mobile art exhibitions in motor buses for communities within a fifty-mile radius of the museum.[91] Such discussions continued into the 1960s, citing the possibility of sending mobile displays "in a caravan of three buses" to "members of the armed services in military establishments and hospitals."[92] Although the Met never experimented with a mobile exhibition, other museum in the United States and in Europe did especially in the 1950s and 1960s.[93] Circulating exhibition programs focused on junior and senior high schools and colleges continued at the Met into the 1950s and beyond. For example, in 1951, Francis Henry Taylor, announced that, among other loans throughout the country, seventeen were shown in senior, junior, and vocational high schools in New York City.[94] The museum designed a more streamlined group of exhibitions in the early 1950s, such as the exhibition "Iron," which contained printed images of medieval cathedrals, castles, late medieval half-timbered buildings, and a just few original objects placed in the center of the display (fig. 13).

In 1968, another program was initiated to integrate American art into American history studies in high schools. Like the *Neighborhood Circulating Exhibitions* begun in 1933, this effort aimed at reaching audiences outside the museum's physical building and was intended to support art education in high school curriculums nationally. Exhibitions were sent to thirteen schools involving 400 students – in New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, and Alabama.[95] The project was deemed so successful that a subscription service was initiated to allow more schools to take advantage of the exhibition for teaching purposes.[96] Two circulating exhibitions devoted to historical

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13

topics were sent to the participating schools for display in their public halls. Rather than displaying original works, however, these shows contained reproductions mounted on both sides of ten panels.[97] The culmination of the program was an overnight trip for students to New York for a reception and visits to several New York landmarks, including Lincoln Center and the American Museum of Natural History.[98] Didactic materials for teachers and students, including films and publications, were sent to facilitate additional student enrichment.[99] The museum's centennial in 1970 provided a time to reflect and the museum's department of education released a report where, once again, the difficulty of bringing students to the Metropolitan Museum was acknowledged. To address this, the museum reminded readers that circulating exhibitions, would, again, be one of two primary activities aimed at high school students.[100]

Fig. 13: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. *Iron*, Circulating Exhibition, 1951–1952. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art [MM22292]

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the Met succeeded in creating a "caravan of art" or a "museum on the march" as described by Richard Bach and others by the mid-1930s with the *Neighborhood Circulating Exhibition* program. It was not the only American museum, however, to embrace circulating exhibitions. For example, the Newark Museum in Newark, New Jersey pioneered neighborhood displays of art, science, and industry with eight branch museums. For example, in 1929, it opened a Polish art exhibit at one of these, the Springfield branch library.[101] The Museum of Modern Art inaugurated a program in 1931, and it also circu-

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lated material through public high schools in New York. They, however, sent reproductions, not original works of art.[102] Like the Met, the Museum of Modern Art published data about its circulating exhibitions to demonstrate its long-standing institutional commitment to reaching more of its community over two decades.[103] Perhaps more important than the tangible statistics published, was the announcement that the Museum of Modern Art circulating exhibition program had transformed the museum into a museum without walls.[104]

In 1951, Francis Henry Taylor stated that, "Despite the fact that more than 2,000,000 persons visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art each year, the museum is constantly seeking new ways and means of making its art treasures available to a greater audience."[105] So, indeed, the Met's mandate to make the collections available to new audiences has been a consistent thread. The Met's mandate to make its collections available to new audiences has been a consistent thread beginning with *Neighborhood Circulating Exhibition* program in 1933 and throughout its history. The theory that art museums should not only serve as repositories, but also as centers for disseminating knowledge to the public through circulating exhibitions – essentially a museum without walls – is the cornerstone behind the Met's first experiment with circulating exhibitions.[106]

The nineteenth-century concept of art museums providing essential educational services directed to new audiences outside the institution, has been a significant part of the Met's focus since the early twentieth century. It was due to Met directors such as Herbert Winlock and Francis Henry Taylor, Met president Robert W. de Forest, and countless other museum staff, but especially Richard F. Bach, that the Met successfully created a museum without walls beginning with the *Neighborhood Circulation Exhibition* program in 1933. More importantly, works of art removed from the walls and storage rooms of the Met were democratized as they moved into communities of poor and working-class populations where they could be woven into the fabric of the neighborhood through displays in schools, civic buildings, and libraries. While they lasted, these free circulating shows benefited more than 2 million students and residents of less affluent areas of New York City. Circulating programs continued to be a priority at the Met beyond its centennial in 1970. Over time, however, these initiatives, in some cases, have come to include fees for exhibition services, and an important aspect of their service to less affluent populations was lost. While today the free circulating exhibitions programs may seem like a project from the New Deal era, their ideals and goals continue to influence the Met's activities, whether in its strategic efforts to engage local communities or to captivate ever diverse audiences near and far.[107]

https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.3034-9699/22955

Endnotes

1 See https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2020/art-for-the-community, for the exhibition overview, accessed March 3, 2025.

2 See https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2020/art-for-the-community/1930s-exhibition, accessed March 3, 2025, for the map identifying the location of each venue. One archival document identifies thirty venues. See List of Neighborhood Circulating Exhibition Locations, December 27, 1939, Office of the Secretary Records, The Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives, The Met, New York. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/844358?exhibitionId=%7Bfb098768-39b0-4ccd-w869e-7e911f1b7bd1%7D&oid=844358&pkgids=619&pg=0&rpp=100000&pos=8&ft=*&offset=100000&locale=en, accessed March 3, 2025.

3 See https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/objects?exhibitionId=fb098768-39b0-4ccd-869e-7e911f1b7bd1&pkgids=619, for archival documents, accessed March 3, 2025.

4 Post 2020: https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2020/art-for-the-community, accessed March 3, 2025.

5 I gratefully acknowledge the work of my colleagues, Elizabeth Cleland (Curator), Eva Labson (Manager, Ratti Textile Center), and Stephanie Post (Senior Digital Asset Specialist) on the 2020 exhibition.

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7 See the Met's website: https://www.metmuseum.org/press-releases/a-brief-history-of-the-museum-2005-general-information, accessed April 2, 2025.

8 Denis 1997, pp. 107-116. Guglielmo 2008, p. 56.

9 Floud 1950, p. 299. Weddell 2018, p. 147. Weddell 2012: https://research.vam.ac.uk/journals/research-journal/issue-4/room-38a-and-beyond-post-war-british-design-and-the-circulation-department/

10 Weddell 2018, p. 147. Weddell 2012.

11 Weddell 2018, p. 147.

12 Weddell 2018, p. 147. The V&A's Circulation department was closed in 1977, due to government spending cuts. For more information, see Weddel 2012.

13 McCann Morley 1950, p. 264-265. See also several case studies by country. Osborn Courter 1953, p. 11.

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19 The Met 1914, p. 152.

20 The Met 1915, p. 154.

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22 Henry W. Kent to Jessie L. Clough, January 18, 1916.

23 Winlock 1933, p. 183.

24 The Met 1918, p. 159.

25 de Forest 1919, p. 190.

26 de Forest 1919, p. 190.

27 de Forest 1919, pp. 190. For more on Met exhibitions handled by the American Federation of Arts, founded in 1909, see de Forest 1920, p. 126.

28 Guglielmo 2008, p. 122. For a description of Bach's position in 1938, see The Met 1938a, p. vi, 18. The Works Progress Administration, or WPA, was one of the programs under the New Deal, which provided work for the unemployed in the wake of the economic crash of 1929 and subsequent Depression. For a comprehensive discussion of Bach's activities in the field of manufacturing and the industrial arts, see Guglielmo 2008 and Eklund, Friedman, Griffey 2020, p. 159.

29 Guglielmo 2008, p. 124.

30 Winlock 1933, p. 183.

31 The Met 1938a, p. 24. For settlement houses, see Museum of the City of New York web feature: https://www.mcny.org/exhibition/settlement-houses, accessed April 2, 2025.

32 See Museum of the City of New York web feature: https://www.mcny.org/exhibition/settlement-houses.

33 See the map of participating institutions, https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2020/art-for-the-community/1930s-exhibition.

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36 Husband 2013, pp. 18, 29-30.

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38 The Met 1934, p. 13.

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43 *Under Museum Banners*, in "New York Times," July 28, 1935.

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68 Osborn Courter 1953, p. 12, note 2.

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