

# Beyond the Galleries: The Brooklyn Museum Library Shares Its Treasures

By DEIRDRE E. LAWRENCE



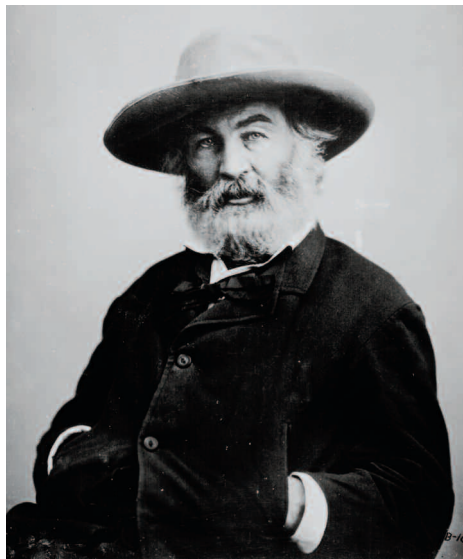
Although attendance at U.S. art museums has never been higher, many visitors still don't know that most large museums possess important libraries and archives filled with additional treasures. Seeing them may require an advance appointment on a weekday, yet access is free and can offer extraordinary insights that enrich the regular gallery-going experience. In addition, more museum libraries are posting highlights online so that art lovers around the world can study and enjoy them.

A great example is New York City's Brooklyn Museum, which is renowned for its huge collection of art from around the globe, ranging from ancient to contemporary. Behind the scenes, the Museum's Libraries and Archives hold approximately 300,000 volumes, comprising one of America's largest art museum libraries. These holdings include a trove of documentary photographs, sketches, artists' books, rare books, auction and trade catalogues, exhibition documentation, and correspondence. Brooklyn has particular strength in the arts of North and South America, especially painting, sculpture, decorative arts, prints, drawings, and photographs made in the U.S.

## A LIBRARY GROWS IN BROOKLYN

Believe it or not, the Brooklyn Museum got its start as the Brooklyn Apprentices' Library, founded in 1823, exactly 185 years ago. The young Walt Whitman (1819-1892) was acting librarian in 1835 when he recorded a total of 1,200 volumes and 172 readers in the first free, circulating library in Brooklyn, which was then separate from Manhattan. In 1843, the library became the Brooklyn Institute, which launched an exhibition program and began collecting fine art. Now working as a newspaper editor, Whitman remained involved by writing eloquent reviews of the Institute's exhibitions.

During Whitman's life, the village of Brooklyn grew into a city teeming with art and artists. The museum is one of the few public collections possessing a book that perfectly exemplifies this flowering — the illustrated catalogue of the first chronological survey of American art, mounted by the Brooklyn Art Association in 1872.<sup>1</sup>



WALT WHITMAN, WET PLATE NEGATIVE TAKEN BY MATTHEW BRADY, 1865-67; NATIONAL ARCHIVES, WASHINGTON

Many items in the library reflect the institution's early interest in the world's peoples and cultures. Key examples include George Catlin's magnificent *Illustrations of the Manners, Customs & Condition of the North American Indians* (1842) and Giovanni Belzoni's *Adventures in Egypt and Nubia* (1843). By 1900, the library was acquiring publications that shed light not only on artworks, but also on the displays of archeology, ethnology, and natural history in its grand 1897 building designed by McKim, Mead & White. The globe-trotting curator of fine arts, William Henry Goodyear (1846-1923), assembled with librarian Susan A. Hutchinson (1873-1945) a research collection documenting his studies of world architecture. During his tenure, several important collections were acquired, including the estates of the retailer-philanthropist Michael Friedsam (1860-1931) and the artist Emil Fuchs (1866-1929). Hutchinson also collaborated with the swashbuckling

ethnology curator Stewart Culin (1858-1829): After Culin died, the trustees wisely acquired his nearly 7,000 titles, focused primarily on the Americas, Asia, Africa, and eastern Europe.

Of similar importance are the Egyptian antiquities and library donated (with a generous endowment) by the family of the American Egyptologist Charles Edwin Wilbour (1833-1896). Wilbour's social circle included many artists, as well as his son-in-law, the great muralist Edwin Howland Blashfield (1848-1936), who came along on trips up the Nile and recorded what he saw in his remarkable diaries, which are also in the Brooklyn Library collection.

## A LIVING THING

Fortunately, generous donations still occur. One recent example is the collector Paul Walter's gift of a rare copy of *Artistic houses: Being a series of interior views of a number of the most beautiful and celebrated homes in the United States* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1883). This exquisite portfolio of plates illustrates the long-lost interiors of many important 19th-century collectors, including famous names like Astor and Vanderbilt. And for many years, the Brooklyn-based scholar Dr. Clark Marlor has been donating books and

research files that document hundreds of little-known American artists.

Of keen interest to scholars are materials donated by a descendant of the painter Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902), just before the Brooklyn Museum produced his landmark retrospective and catalogue in 1990. This gift contains 14 photographs and stereo-cards by Charles Bierstadt depicting Albert's Hudson Valley studio-house, as well as a unique scrapbook from his heyday. Also popular is C. Deirdre Phelps's gift of photographs and documents from Brooklyn's prominent Southwick family — intimates of "the most famous man in America," the Brooklyn minister Henry Ward Beecher (1813-1887).<sup>2</sup>

#### EASY ACCESS

Like most museum libraries, Brooklyn's welcomes visits from researchers and gladly provides reference services on-site and by telephone, fax, and e-mail. Evermore research is conducted on the Internet, of course, which is why the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation has helped the Brooklyn Museum Libraries and Archives launch an online catalogue. The staff is now busy posting digital images of key treasures, and early in 2009 will launch a larger, shared online library catalogue with the Frick Collection and Museum of Modern Art.

The Brooklyn Museum Libraries & Archives can be explored online by visiting the site [brooklynmuseum.org](http://brooklynmuseum.org) and clicking on "Research." ■

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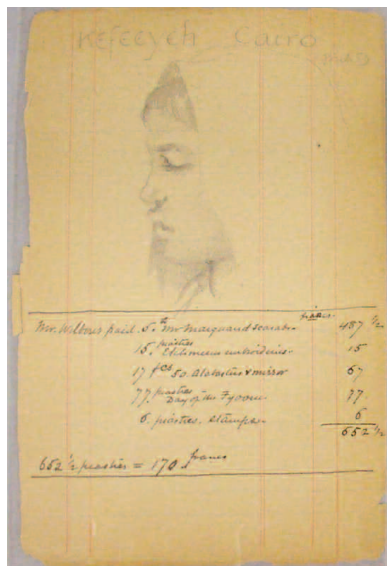
**Information:** Brooklyn Museum Library and Archives, 200 Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn, NY 11238, 718.501.6307, fax 718.501.6125, [library@brooklynmuseum.org](mailto:library@brooklynmuseum.org)

#### Endnotes

- 1 For details, see Kate Nearpass, "The First Chronological Exhibition of American Art, 1872," *Archives of American Art Journal*, 23:3, p. 21.
- 2 Teresa A. Carbone, *American Paintings in the Brooklyn Museum: Artists Born by 1876*, Vol. 1, Brooklyn Museum in association with D. Giles, 2006.

#### Editor's Note:

The Brooklyn Museum's initiative to build an endowment for its Library and Archives began recently with a \$50,000 gift from Michael and Georgia de Havenon. To learn more, please contact Deirdre Lawrence.



A PAGE FROM A DIARY MADE IN EGYPT BY  
EDWIN HOWLAND BLASHFIELD (1848-1936)  
SCR N200 B61 T69

ONE OF THE 360 ENGRAVINGS AFTER PAINTINGS BY  
GEORGE CATLIN (1796-1872)  
INSIDE HIS *ILLUSTRATIONS OF THE MANNERS,  
CUSTOMS & CONDITION OF THE NORTH AMERICAN INDIANS* (1842)  
SCR N200 C28 A2

