

A Tale of Two Museums 2

The American Folk Art Museum

During the early summer, I had the pleasure of visiting the American Folk Art Museum at 45 West 53rd Street in Manhattan. This structure is adjacent to, but separate from the Museum of Modern Art. MOMA is presently shrouded in plastic sheeting and has moved to Queens while its mid-town building is being renovated and enlarged over the next couple of years.

The American Folk Art Museum, formerly known as "The Museum of American Folk Art" opened late in 2001. The change to a more inclusive 'title' was not as pedantic as it may first appear. In addition to showing the existing collection of 4000 objects of American origin, the directors look forward to presenting more exhibits of folk art of different countries and cultures. The fascinating building, occupying quite a thin slice of 53rd Street on which it fronts, is 85 feet (28 m) high and has eight levels, two of which are underground. Seven levels are public spaces and a large skylight allows natural light into the top four galleries and much of the rest of the building. While the individual exhibit areas are not large, they enhance the contents of the Museum. Among the many objects on display, can be found samplers, portraits, weathervanes, religious statuary, decoys and quilts.

In addition to the exhibit portion of the building, there are a small coffee shop, a museum shop, auditorium, classrooms and offices as well as a reference library. In German: "Klein aber fein."

La Musée du Québec

Not very long after my visit to AFAM, I took a friend from Minneapolis to the Musée du Québec in Québec City. The official address is Parc des Champs-de-Bataille or Battlefield Park. Now a federal park, this is where the battle of Québec was fought between the French and British in 1760. Actually the Musée is located on Avenue Montcalm/Wolfe a side street off the Grand Allée, a pleasant 15-minute walk away from the St. Louis Gate. The configuration of the MdQ, and its park setting with many mature trees, is even more unusual than that of the American Museum of Folk Art. The modern reception area gives access to two buildings. The structure on the right replicates a traditional Greek temple built in 1933 and contains a very large collection of Québec art from the days of the French colony to the present. Most of the paintings are by francophone artists as one would expect, but anglophone painters are also well represented. The entire collection makes for a very interesting visit.

The other building, to the left of the reception area, leads to the original 1867 fortress which formerly served as a Québec prison. Some ground floor space in this building is still used by the federal government but the rest is occupied by exhibits. On one of the floors, a row of cell blocks has been preserved and, in addition, very interesting material on the construction of the prison and the then ideas about penology are available. Lack of time permitted us to visit only one other exhibit in the prison: A permanent gallery of paintings by Jean-Paul Lemieux, 1904 -1990. Lemieux, who is somewhat of a symbolist in his later works, is highly accessible to visitors. Museum goers who are often disappointed by the limited scope of what often passes for modern art, will find an artist in that gallery who is unquestionably modern but speaks to everyone who is truly interested.

I think that the re-cycling of the fortress/prison is successful and I am delighted that another part of an historic urban landscape has been preserved. While not all old buildings are worth saving, the preservation movement is right in trying to conserve as many as possible. In a time of accelerating change, the familiar features of a neighborhood, a village or a city are a welcome and important relief.

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