

Behind the scenes at Ithaca's museums

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A rope and a guard have closed the entrance to a gallery in the Johnson Museum of Art. There is a new exhibit going up, and visitors can't go in yet.

Beyond the rope there's not much to see, but you can tell something is coming together. A few colorful Japanese prints lean against a wall, which has been freshly painted light blue. Except for a few objects - tools and ladders and a garbage can - scattered around, the gallery is empty. This is not what the visiting public usually sees on a visit to the art museum.

"We just started the framing this morning," said Ellen Avril, curator of Asian Art at the museum. Avril and other museum staff are just days away from opening "Colored in the Year's New Light: Japanese Surimono from the Becker Collection," one of the museum's major exhibits this year. The surimono exhibit will display a private collection of 173 early 19th century Japanese woodblock prints that are usually stored in boxes.

Seeing the gallery under construction is a little like being backstage before the audience files in to watch a play.

Across town, the basement workshop of the Sciencenter, a very different kind of museum, has a similar "under construction" look to it.

"You drive by the Sciencenter and there's a whole world you don't see," associate director Lara Kimber said during a recent visit.

The basement is full of wood, metal, machines, parts and supplies. A broken exhibit or two waits for repair. There is a wood shop, a machine shop, an electrical shop and a ventilated painting area. There is a science presentation "kitchen" area, lined with plastic bins, where educators can go to assemble materials for hundreds of lessons.

Bin number 55 is labeled "stickers, labels, stars." Bin number 73 contains "glue sticks, glue guns, hair dryer, aerators for crayfish."

This basement is where the Sciencenter's nationally-known touring exhibits take shape and it symbolizes the planning, building, testing and rebuilding that goes into a successful traveling hands-on science exhibition.

There's another whole world the public doesn't see at a third Ithaca museum, a very old world.

The Museum of the Earth is a small museum but its parent institution, the Paleontological Research Institution, houses an enormous collection of geological specimens, one of the top ten research collections in the United States. At any given time, only a fraction of PRI's vast collection is on display at its Museum of the Earth.

This fall, for example, visitors can view several dozen brightly-colored cross-sections of fossilized trees in "Missing the Forest for the Trees: The Beauty of Petrified Wood," the current temporary exhibit.

"There's an entire petrified wood exhibit in the back," said exhibits manager Eric Chapman, who designed this exhibit, "that no one gets to see."

Each of these **museums**, although different in purpose and mission, has areas the casual visitor does not see. At each, vast amounts of work, knowledge and planning go into every public exhibit, whether it's a collection of ancient petrified wood, delicate Japanese calligraphy or a noisy, messy contraption at the Sciencenter.

Because it is a teaching-focused art museum associated with Cornell University, the Johnson Museum constantly invites the public into its galleries and students into its classrooms to view and study art objects in its permanent collection.

No matter how many temporary exhibits the Johnson Museum puts on, however, most of the permanent collection remains hidden at any given time, stored away in carefully-controlled spaces.

It is "just murder" to store such a large and growing collection, said Frank Robinson, the Richard J. Schwartz Director. When the Johnson Museum moved into its current building in 1973 there were 9,000 pieces in the permanent collection. Now there are about 33,000.

"The museum is its collection," said Robinson.

So while many people think of the Johnson Museum as that rectangular I.M. Pei building prominent on the East Hill skyline, staff think of the museum as the paintings hung on metal storage walls in the basement or the Asian art objects - terra cotta, wood, ceramic - neatly arranged in cushioned drawers on the fifth floor.

Robinson moves through the Asian art storage area reverentially. Everything is kept at 68 degrees F, and at 40 to 50 percent relative humidity. Some especially delicate objects, such as lacquered wooden boxes from China, require special stability and are kept in locked drawers.

Everything is carefully numbered by date of acquisition and arranged chronologically in the storage area. On these shelves are paper scrolls stored in chemically neutral cardboard boxes. There are terra cotta pots decorated when fabric was pressed against the wet clay 4,000 years ago. There are rows of clay tomb horses from the Tong Dynasty, a highlight of Chinese culture.

"It's a great way into a culture," said Robinson, moving out of the Chinese area of the storage space and into the Korean. "If you understand this you understand a lot about China."

Every one of these pieces is exquisite enough to be on public display, yet only a few examples are out in the galleries. One of the benefits of having a large collection is the opportunity for comparison, said Robinson. He points out two vases, both white and decorated with fruit, from the Ching dynasty. Nearly identical at first, one emerges as the clearly superior example.

Robinson pulls out one white drawer to reveal a surprise - several faces are staring up at the ceiling, row after row of Javanese theatrical masks. Although they are currently stored, these masks have been revealed to the public in another way, through the Internet. A National Endowment for the Humanities grant enables the museum to improve its online presentation of these masks.

In fact, the Johnson Museum is currently in the process of taking high quality digital images of its entire collection, and thousands of images are available on the Internet, accessible through the museum's Website. The museum also digitizes some of its visiting shows, such as the Becker Collection of surimono print.

Pieces from the Johnson Museum permanent collection also make their way out into the public eye when other **museums** request to borrow them.

Of course, parts of the permanent collection are exhibited to the public on a regular basis. For example, selections from the museum's collection of Asian calligraphy will be displayed in "Art of the Written Word: Calligraphy in Asia," which opens Nov. 8. All but a few pieces are in-house, and the show will mix time periods - ancient to modern - and cultures - East Asian, Islamic, Indian, Tibetan, Chinese and others, said curator Ellen Avril.

A comprehensive collection like the calligraphy exhibit allows the Johnson Museum to focus, for one exhibit, on a specific subject in depth, said Robinson.

The Museum of the Earth, like the Johnson Museum, must show its comprehensive permanent collection in shifts, and in ways that will catch the visitor's attention.

"We're balanced," Director of Exhibits Sarah Chicone said, between research, publication and education. The public museum component of the Paleontological Research Institution is fairly new, opened only five years ago.

This museum's mission is to increase knowledge about the history of life on earth and, since a display of Mars Rover photos opened recently, on the planet next door. ("It's time to branch out a little," said exhibits manager Eric Chapman, not really joking.)

When the museum opened in 2003, there simply wasn't room enough to display PRI's whole collection.

"We had these really fantastic collections and when we got the permanent exhibits out there we didn't have room for everything," said Chicone. Although there's an example of almost any type of paleontological specimen in the collection, most of the research collection is not very eye-catching, she said. The exhibits staff members try to create exhibits that will catch the eye of visitors and tell a story.

"The Beauty of Petrified Wood," on display through January 18, is one of these "left over" exhibits the museum wants to highlight.

Chapman said he designed this exhibit to emphasize the esthetic power of nature. "I approached it from an art museum perspective."

The petrified wood specimens are displayed much like art in a gallery, with simple labels and just a few pieces of text on banners. To compliment the petrified wood, water color paintings of petrified wood by artist Barbara Page hang on the walls around the display cases.

Chapman said there are petrified wood exhibits in many **museums**, but this one is unique, taking a science topic and displaying it like art. In this way, the beauty of the petrified wood specimens speaks for itself.

"We have a small space," said Chicone. "People are going to go away with one main message."

Museum of the Earth staff design temporary exhibits with the audience in mind, and the audience changes with the time of year. Summer is a big time for families and children, so last summer the museum displayed "Hatching the Past," a kid-friendly exhibit brought in from the outside. Fall brings in a lot of school groups, so museum education staff members have designed interactive programs to compliment the petrified wood exhibit for young students.

In its five year history, the Museum of the Earth has designed exhibits from its own collection, and has rented or borrowed outside exhibits, but it will venture into new territory in the next few years. A National Science Foundation grant has named this little museum as one of the three lead institutions - along with the Field Museum in Chicago and Harvard University, to design and build a traveling exhibit on the philology of bi-valves, commonly known as clams.

"We're going to use it to talk about evolution, using clams," said Chicone. By 2010, the exhibit will open at the Museum of the Earth and by 2011, it will go on the road.

To create its first traveling exhibit, the Museum of the Earth will get some help from another Ithaca museum, an expert in traveling exhibits.

The Sciencenter, that building with the tilting sign and the fun-looking playscape along Route 13, has become a national leader in traveling science exhibits focused on children and discovery. It is the only science center to install two exhibits at Disney's Epcot Center, and it has received grants from NASA.

This winter, exhibits fabricated in the Sciencenter basement workshop and tested by Ithaca visitors will be installed in Boca Raton, Florida, Queens, New York and Bozeman, Montana.

"It's like taking a piece of Ithaca out and showing it to the world," said Associate Director Lara Kimber.

It is clear, walking through the Sciencenter, that there is no fragile collection here. Everything moves, smells unique, feels cool or makes noise. Exhibits encourage visitors to touch them and do something active.

"We're not a collections museum," said Kimber. "We don't have a curator of cool stuff."

But the Sciencenter does have an army of highly-qualified volunteers, many of them retired university professors or current graduate students, who come up with marvelous ideas for hands-on exhibits. From its beginning in 1983, the community- and volunteer-based Sciencenter has relied on the creativity and ingenuity of local science folks - those who want their ideas to go beyond the pages of their thesis projects or beyond the pages of a scientific journal - to design and create exhibits.

The exhibits, however, have become more sophisticated over the years, said Kimber. At first, exhibits were built by volunteers, used a lot of duct tape and string. The Sciencenter had a nomadic existence for years, moving from storefront to storefront before settling into its current location, a former wastewater treatment plant.

The Sciencenter has grown from a "funky collection of multi-colored stuff" to its home on First Street with spaces that call for permanent exhibits, and also spaces that allow new exhibits to rotate. Once physics-based, the center now investigates biology, astronomy, seismology, chemistry, engineering, zoology and other areas of science.

The focus of the Sciencenter, said Kimber, is discovery. Visitors see, hear, touch, smell and move. "We are looking to inspire rather than being like an encyclopedia," she said.

Right now in the Sciencenter, visitors make new creations from throw-away items at the Re-invention Station. They walk into a giant pin-hole camera that projects a live image, upside-down, of the parking lot outside.

They send ducks down a water-filled chute built by Cornell engineering students at the Water Gates exhibit and try to block flowing water using metal blocks in "Dam the Creek." They explore an ocean floor in the touch tank.

Upstairs, visitors engage in quieter (and dryer) activities using computers, in "Mars and Stars," a permanent exhibition built, exhibit by exhibit, in collaboration with projects from various colleges.

"Each of these kiosks is a separate grant," said Kimber. It often benefits both the Sciencenter and an outside group, for instance a nanotechnology lab at Cornell, to collaborate on a grant. The university does the research and a Sciencenter exhibit offers an outreach component by applying the principles for a young audience.

It's implicit that the Sciencenter is focused on children, but Kimber said everyone, from a toddler to a Nobel Laureate, can get something from it.

Even museum staff members who spend years putting an exhibit together get something from it.

At the Johnson Museum, curator Ellen Avril has been working for years on the exhibit of the Becker Collection of Japanese surimono but she still hasn't seen all the prints up in one place. Even Gloria and Horace Becker, who own the collection, haven't; they display only one piece at a time in their Rochester, New York home, one print a day on a special easel. The rest of the collection remains packed away, until now.

"Once the show goes up," said Avril, "that's the first time we see them up at once, and in the museum setting."

"Colored in the Year's New Light: Japanese Surimono from the Becker Collection" and "Art of the Written Word: Calligraphy in Asia," both open Nov. 8 at the Johnson Museum of Art.

"Missing the Forest for the Trees: The Beauty of Petrified Wood" will be on display at the Museum of the Earth through Jan. 18, 2009.

"Spin: The Science of Rotation" and "From Here to There" are two special hands-on exhibits currently open at the Sciencenter.