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Telling Our Story With Majesty and Manure: The New Permanent Galleries of the Museum of the City of New York

By Justin Davidson



Boss Tweed's cuff links: a capsule history of corruption. Photo: JOHN HALPERN/© John Halpern

How do you cram 400 years of a city's sprawling history into a space not much bigger than a roadside McDonald's? How do you wrestle the chaos of conflicting plotlines and overlapping lives into an orderly museum exhibit? And can you do an honest job of celebrating New York without glossing over its abundance of nastiness, violence, and exploitation? The new permanent exhibit at the Museum of the City of New York confronts the physical and philosophical challenges of telling the city's story with a deft intermingling of artifacts and technology. The display cases brim with porcelain, fabric, silver, iron, and paper; the screens provide a judicious dose of context, anecdotes, and illustrations. High-tech shows can be overweening, but the firm Local Projects has kept the bells quiet and the whistles low.

For years, the Museum of the City of New York was an earnest but slightly dusty institution that mavens visited for its dollhouse collection and Currier & Ives prints. But over the last dozen years, under the direction of Susan Henshaw Jones, it has bloomed into an essential institution, doubling its gallery space, tripling its budget, and putting a bounty of old photographs online. While temporary exhibitions came and went, curators also spent that time circling their elephantine mission, trying to figure out how best to describe the city in all its immensity and detail. Now, with a new director, Whitney Donhauser, in place, the payoff has arrived. I dreaded a hackneyed mash-up of crowded streets, smiling cabbies, and glittering skylines, or an endless trudge through colonial memorabilia. But curator Sarah Henry understands how to make objects speak. A pair of Lord & Taylor women's carriage boots ("white brocaded silk trimmed with white fur and pink ribbons") seem suddenly more defiant when set off against a photograph of a Manhattan street knee-high in horse shit. And at an interactive kiosk, we see the problem from the point of view of a usually silent New Yorker: "Horse."

Move back and forth from screen to vitrine, and what emerges is a loving but clear-eyed portrait of the city in all its glorious mess. If guidebooks send their readers to "New York at Its Core," newcomers will come out with a better grasp of the city's story than most residents accumulate in years. Serious New Yorkophiles will find enchantments, too: the ticket for the very first subway ride in 1904; Boss Tweed's cuff links, adorned with diamond-encrusted Ts; a 19th-century seltzer bottle of thick blue glass; a handwritten Studio 54 guest list that includes Ringo and Liberace (it was 1978). A few objects were created to mark some historical moment or other, but most are scraps that acquired

importance only in retrospect. Someone thought to grab a sign from the Third Avenue El, figuring, perhaps, that even decades after its demolition, some aging Bronx kid might come across it in a museum and remember clattering down the stairs each day to 149th Street. All these years later, a tin of Rokeach kosher scouring powder (an animal-fat-free way to scrub tiles) sings of the struggle to sign immigrants up for America's perpetual war on germs.

The show has more to offer than a repository of nostalgia. Draft riots, abandoned babies, tenement misery, the rubble of the 1970s, the sugar trade that forged a link between slave labor and children's candy — all make an appearance. So do the great engines of the city's growth, like shipping, music, and running water. The narrative divides into three segments: "Port City," which covers the first 300 years or so (from 1609 until the annexation of Brooklyn in 1898); "World City," about the 20th century through the 2012 onslaught of Superstorm Sandy); and "Future City Lab." Inevitably, the narrative suffers from plenty of arbitrary elisions: It hops quickly past 9/11 (after all, a whole other museum downtown deals with that), has barely a nod for sports, and skips a great many notable New Yorkers. If there's any mention of James Baldwin, Duke Ellington, or Langston Hughes, I missed it.

New York has never been a stable place; every lifetime here is long enough to witness gobsmacking change. A few insightful artists help dramatize that volatility. We get a spectacularly detailed shot of Mulberry Street taken by the Detroit Company in 1900 and an intensely luminous panorama taken on the same spot 115 years later by the great urban photographer Jeff Chien-Hsing Liao. The parked vehicles have motors now, the signs have changed alphabets, and the men no longer wear hats. But the street still tingles with commerce and the thrum of a thousand private dramas. The museum also asked the artist Neil Goldberg to roam around interviewing people, a process that yielded the video installation "Then & Now & Then." With humor and wisdom, a smattering of sidewalk seers celebrate change, or resist it; they complain about the city, or complain about how much everyone complains. Out-of-towners, especially, ought to linger for the video's full 24-minute run time in order to grasp how absurd it is to live here, and how addictive. "One of the rights you have here as a citizen of New York is the phenomenon of friction and also entanglement with people that are strangers to you," one man says. New York works by compressing so many different sorts of people into such intense proximity that the only way to survive is through tolerance and flexibility.

It's tempting to see a city that emerges in these galleries as the antithesis of Trump's America, though as Mayor Bill de Blasio pointed out, the president-elect is a dyed-in-the-wool New Yorker. The display implicitly places him in the city's long line of autocratic showmen and outlandish tycoons, but we don't see the man himself.

"New York at Its Core" closes, as it must, with an existential question: *What now?* In the "Future City Lab," curated by NYU professor Hilary Ballon, interactive tables invite visitors to play planner, putting up a tower for neighbors to bitch about or commandeering a trafficked street for bike lanes and streetcars. The gallery's centerpiece is a giant map that scrolls from the wall onto the floor, glimmering with constantly shifting data. Want to know how many residents live a short walk from a park, where all the new construction is taking place, or how ethnic groups flow in, cluster, and disperse? Just wait a few minutes, and watch. As you see the city's evolution whip by, with Bangladeshis settling Kensington and Guyanese colonizing Richmond Hill, know that the same changes you think of as tragic might quicken your neighbor's pulse.