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Modernizing the Academy

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The difficult job of any museum renovation is to balance the old with the new—to jettison what is unnecessary, outmoded and ineffectual; to conserve and enhance the permanent collection; and to improve exhibition space, all while retaining what is essential to that institution's identity. And identity, a combination of body and soul, refers to a museum's mission, as well as to its physical plant. Legacy matters. Before an institution embarks on a costly and, often, irreversible makeover, it is vital that it has a comprehensive sense of self.

Newer and bigger aren't always better. Maintaining historical continuity is as important as updating one's image and establishing a fresh start. To understand just how far astray an institution can go in the name of modernization and expansion, one need only consider the recent botched redesigns of New York's Morgan Library & Museum and Brooklyn Museum.

These difficulties are compounded when the institution is as unique and multifaceted as the member-run National Academy Museum & School, which reopened in September at the heart of Manhattan's museum mile after a 15-month, \$3.5 million renovation.



Montclair Art Museum

'Old Man's Afternoon' (1947) by Will Barnet, on show at the NAM as part of a retrospective on the artist.

Established in 1825, the multipurpose NAM is an expanding honorary association of peer-elected artists and architects, and is home to an art school and museum within an interconnected complex of Beaux Arts townhouses. Like most academies, the NAM is slow, if not averse, to change. It has typically evolved generationally—which, in art-world time, might as well be geologically.

Until recent decades, the NAM, bucking trends, has generally held firm to its position as an institution devoted primarily to educating and showing contemporary American figurative artists. And the NAM's outsider/insider self-image has allowed its museum to mount major exhibitions of master painters such as Louis Michel Eilshemius and Jean Hélicon—important artists ignored by mainstream New York powerhouses such as the Guggenheim Museum, the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

But the NAM school, clinging to notions of drawing and painting that were as academic in the 19th century as they are now (concerned more, that is, with producing illustrative likenesses than with creating form, movement and life on canvas), has a confused sense of what it means to uphold and further artistic tradition.

It was not until 1980 that the figurative-or-bust NAM recognized abstract artists. And ever since then, the institution has been engaged in an uncharacteristic and self-conscious game of catch-up. Lately, the academy has altered its course considerably—if not irrationally—betraying a sense of desperation. Seemingly chasing trends and attempting to appear up-to-date, the NAM has embraced video and installation art, as well as photography. And it has inducted contemporary art stars whose work is at odds with the academy's mission. It is well to remember, also, that the NAM, suffering financially, is still under probationary sanction by the American Association of Art Museum Directors for wrongfully deaccessioning two of its Hudson River School paintings in 2008.

Considering all of this upheaval, one might think that the NAM, choosing now of all times to renovate, is not only off-course but in danger of foundering. But that seems not to be the case for this plucky, inimitable institution, which appears to be taking serious stock of itself in the 21st century.

For the most part, the academy's renovation, overseen by Jane Stageberg of the architecture firm Bade Stageberg Cox, feels seamless, almost handless, as if many of the changes were cosmetic. Galleries have been modernized, subtly shifting the 19th-century atmosphere of the interior spaces to that of the sleek white cube. Doors, walls, dark paneling, wainscoting, picture molding and fireplaces have been covered or removed here and there. Most notably, the stately former Huntington Library has been converted into a versatile assembly hall better suited to conferences, films, lectures and exhibitions.

Throughout the museum, spaces, less stuffy and mazelike, flow more smoothly. And most, but not all, of the galleries retain their walnut paneling. Other galleries, resurfaced with white full-

height hanging walls, can accommodate larger paintings. New noninvasive track-lighting has been installed. And heavy window treatments are gone, allowing natural light to illuminate—seemingly cleanse—dark, musty corners.

The schoolrooms feel refreshed. And in the new museum lobby off Fifth Avenue, the gift shop has been removed. Its entranceway leads more easily into the galleries and historic rotunda, and the ceiling, handsomely redesigned (along with the NAM's banners and signage) by Pentagram, is engraved with the names of all of the 1,995 academy members dating back to 1826.

To keep alive the connection between old and new, a range of six uneven, temporary exhibitions (all through Dec. 31) have been mounted. They include salon-style hangings of portraits from the early 19th century to today in "The Artist Revealed: A Panorama of Great Artist Portraits"; 100 American paintings (1820s to the 1970s) from the NAM's permanent collection of more than 7,000 pictures in "An American Collection"; as well as three shows featuring works of representational and abstract painting, architecture and sculpture by contemporary and postwar academicians; and the full-dress, late-career retrospective "Will Barnet at 100." Mr. Barnet has alternately pursued biomorphic-shaped figuration and abstraction. Oddly enough, inspired by Native-American and early Modernist art, he shines best as an abstract painter.

These exhibitions, along with the renovation, reveal the scrappy nature of the NAM. And there continue to be mismatches and tradeoffs. Decorum and proportions matter. Some of the academy's intimate, old-fashioned charm has been sterilized, sacrificed. Some galleries—though airier, better lit and more picture-friendly—are slightly smaller and constricted, as if the walls are encroaching. But the new NAM is also more conducive to its primary functions of museum and school.

The NAM may feel less like a home, but it is seemingly much more able, at least physically, to handle the increasing demands of its evolving mission. Thanks to the redesign, its body appears ready. What matters more—and is yet to be seen—is the state and evolution of its soul.