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Museum storages: The hidden treasures of the museums

Have you ever considered how many "treasures" of the museum collections are hidden into their storages for the exclusive view of the few lucky ones (staff and scholars)?

That's the reason why I want to introduce to you one of my favorite museum practices that has as a goal to change this situation, the *Open Storage* practice.



The Met Open Storage, NYC. Photo: Malichoutsaki

The open storage as a model of museum practice started in Canada and then expanded to the rest of the world. The beginning of interest in the open storage practice is traced to the '60s and '70s with the development of an idea based on the *democratization* of museum collections. According to this idea, the public is the real "owner" of the museum collections and therefore should

have the right to have full access to them. Initially, the open storage model was considered radical and represented efforts to move away from the typical established museum model. It was an effort essentially to redefine the museum's whole meaning.

Some of my favorite open storages worldwide

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

The Metropolitan museum's open storage was established in 1988 and is the first attempt to apply the practice of open storage to a New York museum. This open storage is considered to be one of the most successful examples in the world. Later became an example to be imitated by also other museums in New York, such as the Brooklyn Museum.



The Met Open Storage, NYC. Photo: Malichoutsaki

According to one of the museum's curators, the success of the open storages these days is due to the fact that most visitors feel more comfortable in the

space of an open storage than in an exhibition room as they feel more familiar with the objects in a space that seems unpretentious.

The open storage of the Metropolitan maintains the feeling of a research center, providing visitors with information about every object on display. According to the museum staff, their open storage tries to invite visitors think about the way and the reasons why the curators choose some objects to be in the exhibition while others to be in the storage space, giving food for thought.



The Met Open Storage, NYC. Photo: Malichoutsaki

The design and the size of this open storage highlight the range of the museum's collections, trying to create a sense of impression on visitors. The categorization is based on the material of the objects. It does not present materials whose condition of preservation does not allow exposure to light (fabrics, paper), with a few exceptions.

The Brooklyn Museum

Another example from New York is the Brooklyn Museum's open storage that opened in 2005. Brooklyn Museum is one of the dynamic constituents of New York's museum life.



Brooklyn Museum's Open Storage, NYC. Photo: Malichoutsaki

In this open storage the visitors have the opportunity to see about 2000 objects of the Museum's collection.

In terms of design, this open storage uses different storage systems, depending on the material and size of the item.

In addition, the museum has organized in collaboration with the Luce Center, on its official website, a special section exclusively for its open storage. There, the visitors have the opportunity to see information and photographic material for each object included in the museum's open storage. This is a great initiative, especially for scholars.

New-York Historical Society

The New-York Historical Society open storage is one of the most recent examples, opened in 2017.



The Tiffany lamps collection Open Storage, New York Historical Society. Photo: Malichoutsaki

It also operates as a Center for the Study of Women's History. The biggest part of the open storage space presents the Tiffany collection of works of art. The cost of the redesign and implementation was more or less \$31 million. The goal of the New-York Historical Society through the opening of this visible storage is to expand its audience and reach more visitors.

The Henry Luce Foundation Center, Smithsonian Museum

The open storage at the Luce Foundation Center for American Art at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington DC can definitely be characterized as one of the most impressive examples of an open storage in the world.



The Henry Luce Foundation Center, Smithsonian Museum Open Storage, Washington DC. Photo: Malichoutsaki

The Luce Foundation Center opened in July 2000 and includes a massive open storage and the *Lunder Conservation Center*, that includes Visible Conservation laboratories. The redesigned open storage and the visible conservation laboratories reopened in 2017 after a donation of \$10 million by the Luce Foundation. The open storage hosts 3.300 objects, which is 4 times more than the objects in the museum's exhibition space.

Another interesting point is the project of Smithsonian Museum, in collaboration with Google that offers the opportunity of a digital visit in the open storage and the visible conservation labs.

Pinacoteca di Brera

The next example takes us to Europe and more specifically in Italy. It's the open storage of Pinacoteca di Brera in Milan. Pinacoteca di Brera is one of the few museums that demonstrates both the practice of open storage and the practice of public conservation.



Pinacoteca di Brera Open Storage, Milan. Photo: Malichoutsaki

This combination of adopting a visible conservation lab and two open storages is crucial in emphasizing the freedom of public access to the museum collections. With these two practices, Brera manages to break away from the pattern of the traditional gallery. The museum includes also some educational activities related to these practices, called *Brera mai vista*.

The design of this example is considered successful for many reasons.

- It does not overshadow the other exhibition halls, operating in harmony with them,

- It aesthetically ties in with the architecture of the building,
- It is an economical design in terms of construction and could be a case study for smaller museums with limited budgets.
- Works in harmony with the particularly impressive construction of the visible conservation laboratory.
- Most importantly it maintains the feeling of looking at the backstage of a museum and does not exaggerate in design, which could otherwise lead to the feeling that we see just another exhibition room. This is a very common mistake in many cases.

V&A

Another European example is the open storage of Victoria and Albert Museum in London. It was created in 1994 for the collections of ceramics and glass and it was redesigned in 2010.

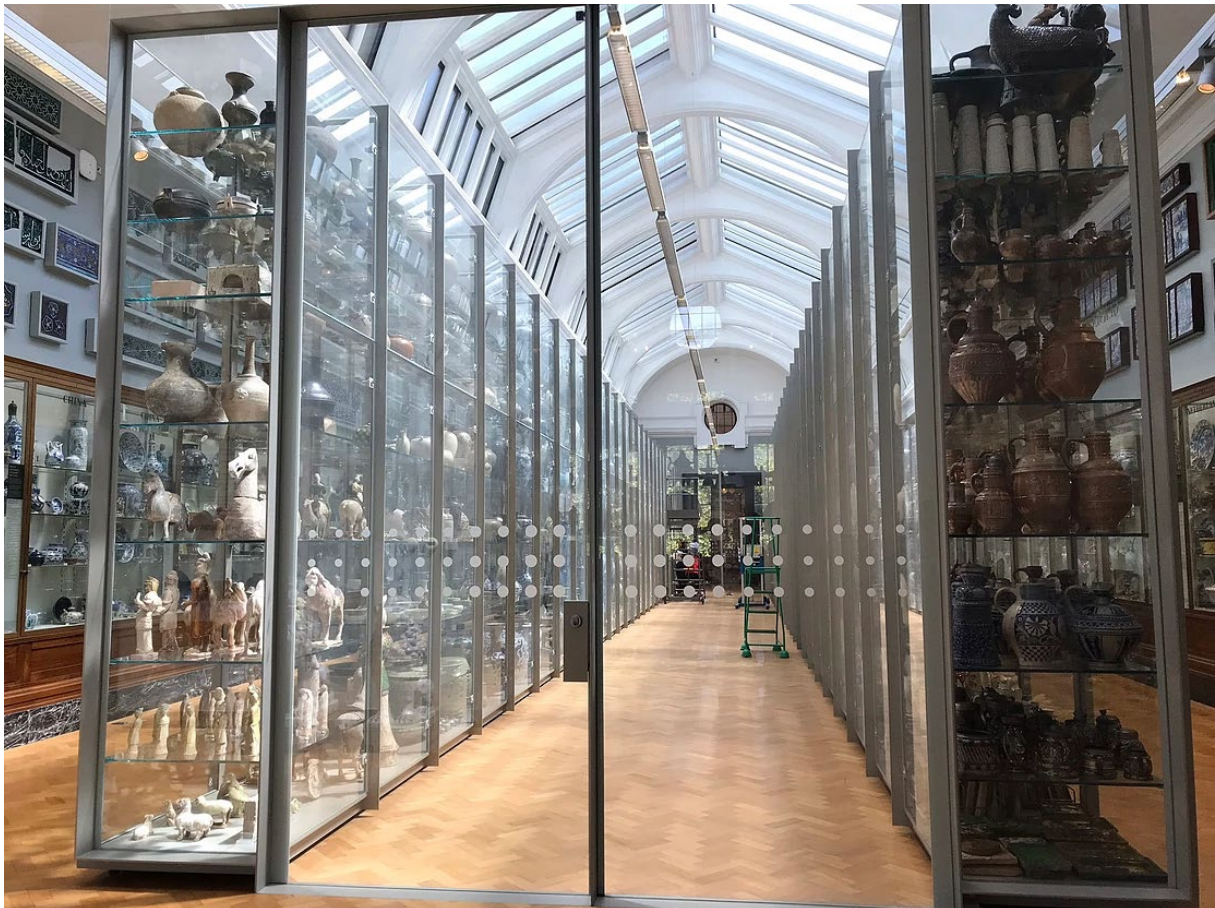


V&A Open Storage, London. Photo: Malichoutsaki

It is one of the first European museums to implement open storage practice. Its design is simple and retains the feeling of the museum's backstage and it is characterized as one of the most successful examples of open storage. The objects are very densely placed on top of each other on shelves covered by a glass divider. This is a technique that is called open storage "walks-in" where

there is a corridor between the showcases. In this case, the dense placement of objects gives prestige to the collection and aims to impress visitors through the presentation of its range and variety.

Next to the open storage there is a study center, allowing researchers to require an object they would like to study from the open storage. When the process of retrieving an object from the open storage takes place, this process is presented on the screens, in a kind of performance so that the public can monitor the know-how of the staff in transporting and handling the objects.



V&A Open Storage, London. Photo: Malichoutsaki

And what about you? Have you ever visited an open museum storage? If yes, let me know in the comments section what's your favorite one.