



Flirting With the Rabbit Hole

Maureen Melton '85, '90 of Boston's Museum of Fine Arts can't resist a good story, whether unearthing or telling it.

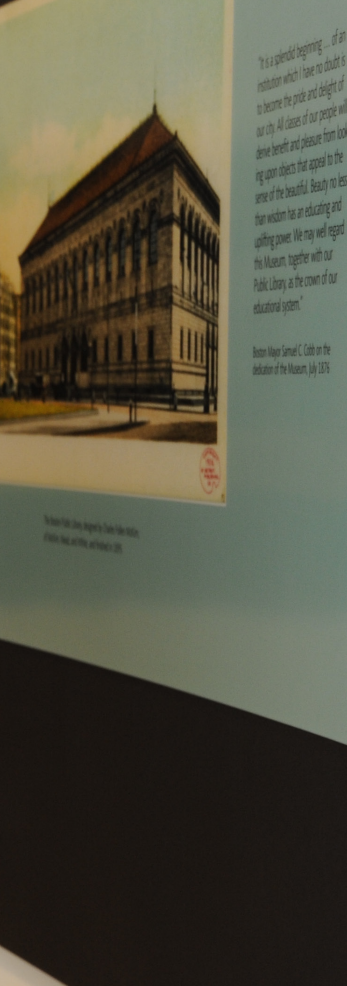
BY LESLIE LIMON

As WCVB-TV's Mary Richardson interviews MFA historian and archivist Maureen Melton on her exhibit, "Preserving History, Making History," Melton—determined to be dignified—displays uncharacteristic reserve. Then Richardson comments that transferring art from the old Copley Square MFA to the current location by horse-drawn cart (which took six months in 1909) would take a year today. "A year!" she protests. "It would take that long today just to decide on the cart!" This burst of wit prompts dozens of people who know her to email her expressing relief finally to see the real Maureen Melton.

As she relates this anecdote in the middle of a nonstop hour-long narrative—all without notes—it becomes clear: when it comes to museum history, she is first of all profoundly knowledgeable, and second, anything but reserved. Standing before the exhibit she has curated, consisting of restored photos, objects, and documents chronicling the museum's history, she details its evolution, stage by stage, since its opening in 1876. But the facts and figures she recites are woven into vivid stories. She explains, for example, that the

early absence of curators and authenticators meant that all acquisitions (6,000 before the museum opened) were kept and displayed. "So the galleries were absurdly packed," she says. "Plaster casts of Zeus and Apollo were fighting it out for elbow room among the paintings."

Melton then segues into the museum's late-nineteenth-century search for a new home. Because the Copley Square land on which the building sat was the main asset, trustees sought "civic-minded businessmen" willing to buy it and wait (nine years, as it turned out) for the museum to move. A photo of the Huntington Avenue site—then hosting a circus—elicits the backstory of the previous occupants. A construction photo triggers anecdotes of how the museum's design was conceived as a vision of a jewel box holding valuable works of art. Then she unfolds the tale of the six-month relocation: 110,000 objects—including monumental Egyptian sarcophagi—moved using block and tackle and transported 1.3 miles down bumpy, dusty Huntington Avenue by horse-drawn cart. With no damage to a single object.



Moving on to the newly opened Fenway entrance, the historian is just getting warmed up as she explains the decisions that went into its layout. From the Sharf Visitor Center, she points through a window to the American Wing under construction, reciting the number of galleries, what they will hold, and which walls will have come down when all is done. In the adjacent rotunda, she raises her eyes upward through the opening in the ceiling to the murals painted by John Singer Sargent, confiding that Sargent painted them on the condition that structural changes be made (such as moving columns) to showcase his work. “The lesson,” she grins, “is that good architecture bows to great art.”

Irene Nichols '52 and Lorraine Kelley-Alessi '84, '98 were among a group of donors (the UMass Boston Chancellor's Council) treated to an earlier gallery talk conducted by Melton, an Alumni Association board member. Kelley-Alessi later recounts the relocation story in detail, a testament to a lecture style described as “dynamic” by Nichols, an MFA member and retired Northeastern University professor. “She talked for 45 minutes or more, but could have gone on for another half hour—and people would still have listened.”

A really big house

Melton's head holds an archive of stories that she recalls, rapid-fire, one after the other. How does she do it? She offers this analogy: “In your own house you remember everything: where that rug or this furniture used to be, what color the living room was before. Well, I just have a really big house.” Plus, she says, history has always fascinated her, particularly “unfolding and discovery, being a part of history in the making.” As a UMass Boston undergraduate studying political science, she worked on political campaigns including those of incumbent President Jimmy Carter and presidential candidate Walter Mondale. Then, seeking a different kind of hands-on involvement, she entered UMass Boston's master's program in history and archival methods. She was still working on her thesis when the MFA hired her as their first archivist in 1987. She arrived to encounter a mountain of records that, as with most museums of the day, had never been archived in any systematic fashion.

Melton's stories, therefore, come from her own discoveries, made

while building the museum's archives from scratch. “Every part of this building,” she says, “has a hundred different stories that I've either investigated on purpose or found out accidentally.” The archivist soon garnered a reputation for uncovering long-hidden historical details about the museum, its collections, and its donors. Eventually this earned her the title of Susan Morse Hilles Director of Libraries and Archives and Museum Historian.

Almost every day, while poring through old folders and boxes, Melton will uncover something that bears further investigation or offers new insights. It was just such a document that led to a revelation about the opened-up floor between the upper and lower rotundas. Photos showed a solid floor as late as 1975, but she could find no explanatory paperwork. Nosing around, she did learn that a temporary ice rink had been installed in the upper rotunda for a 1955 exhibition by Boston-based Olympic skater Tenley Albright. That, people said, is what ruined the center of the floor, hence the hole. Years later she came across the real story in a long-buried report: the center was opened up in 1975 because it had been weakened by 65 years of back-and-forth foot traffic.

Alice in Wonderland

About seven years ago, the historian converted her gift for storytelling into a slim guidebook tracing the MFA's architectural history. Her second book, *Invitation to Art: A History of the Museum of Fine Art*, gave her a chance to tell the personal stories of some major donors, to give readers insight into who gave the collections and why. Finding and telling stories, she says, places her “on the cutting-edge of history by finding out historical gems—like buried treasure.” One of those gems was a letter, left as a time capsule by one Thomas F. Crowley behind a museum wall in 1926, which fell out during demolition last June. A *Boston Globe* reporter (and Crowley's grandnieces) saw Melton's account of her attempts to trace the letter's author on the MFA's Facebook page. This resulted in widespread media coverage—and an unexpected discovery that she knew members of his extended family growing up.

Crowley's letter whetted the historian's appetite to tell more stories of the ordinary yet vital people who constructed the building or gave less visible gifts. But the time it took her to research his identity sheds light on her greatest challenge: resisting the temptation to “go down the rabbit hole like Alice in Wonderland, hunting down any of the stories I find in clippings every day.” Melton knows that people depend on her for the other facets of her job. Yet she'll always be lured by the stories too good to resist, for, by this latter-day Alice's own admission, “I could spend all day getting lost in history.”

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