New York City

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The storm never quite seems to break, and it's unsettling. I fiddle about with the papers and books on my desk, try to get some reading done while sitting on the couch, and peer down into the street from my fifth-floor window: "a New York state of mind," as Billy Joel would say. I finally decide to go up onto the roof and watch the battle being waged between the wind and a mass of black clouds (how fascinating, these New York roofs, early in the morning or late in the evening or, quite simply, at moments like this, when the city skyline takes on the semblance of a storm-tossed sailing ship!).

But even a visit to the roof on an afternoon like this leaves me disgruntled, and after ten minutes of stiff winds and the odd raindrop I decide to take to the street and head uptown. Maybe I'll take a look to see how the trees in Central Park are coping with all these violent gusts . . . I walk along Avenue C and East 6th Street toward Astor Place, and from here, with the black storm clouds gathering overhead, I take Line 6 of the subway and get off at 59th Street. Resisting the temptation to get lost for an hour or two in the enormous F.A.O. Schwartz toy store, I head off toward the park.

By now the wind is furious, bending the trees backward and sending whirlwinds of leaves into the air. A sight to behold. I stroll along the broad sidewalk, uncertain if I should go straight or enter the park, when suddenly, all around me, as if by magic, the solemn pachyderms of culture set off on their solemn parade: I am walking along Museum Mile, a sequence of museums that has turned this stretch of road into one of the jewels of New York. Under a darkening sky, I watch them trudge along down or just behind Fifth Avenue: the Frick Collection, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum, the Guggenheim Museum, the National Academy of Design, the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, the Jewish Museum, the International Center of Photography . . .
Well aware of their personal magnificence, of their role in the life and public image of the city, the museums seem to possess a sternness bordering on the haughty. For, it is well known, New York is a city of museums: together with the banks, they are its real cathedrals, its true places of worship.
At long last the much-coveted storm breaks. Forced to seek shelter, I run to the low grey building with a rectangular garden on Fifth Avenue, on the corner with East 70th Street: the Frick Collection. I must say right away that I have no particular liking for Mr. Frick, regardless of the number of masterpieces he managed to cram his house with. Henry Clay Frick lived from 1849 to 1919, and his name languishes in my memory as the manager who, acting on behalf of the steel magnate Andrew Carnegie, unleashed all manner of repression against the workers in Homestead, Pennsylvania, in 1892. The end result was seven people dead, a union in ruins, and a 20 percent drop in salary. Carnegie, who was traveling in Europe at the time, sent a telegram: “Congratulate all around. Life worth living again. Beautiful Italy . . .” Feel free, of course, to make up your own mind on the matter.

Frick undoubtedly had no cash flow problems when it came to buying up the masterpieces of world art. Among his purchases: Sir Thomas More by Holbein the Younger, The Harbour of Dieppe by Turner, Lady Meux by Whistler, then works by Titian, Constable, Hals, Rembrandt, Vermeer, Hogarth, Bellini, Gainsborough, Boucher, El Greco, and Fragonard; not to mention enamels from Limoges, antique furniture, Oriental carpets, bookcases, vases, porcelain, crystal . . . all distributed higgledy-piggledy about the house. A house that you will, of course, visit: the dining room, the library, the West Gallery, the Oval Room, the East Gallery, the music room, the fireplaces, writing desks, and divans, glass windows facing the south garden and another overlooking Fifth Avenue and Central Park, and then the “Colonnade Garden Court” . . . Which brings me to the small central cloister: a columned rectangle featuring dense clusters of plants, a huge skylight, pure white statues by Rodin lent by the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection in Madrid (one in particular struck me with its calm sensuality—The Dream), and, on descending a few steps, an oblong pool whose central jet of water cascades onto two concentric, concave dishes, and smaller jets of water at opposite ends that gush from the yawning mouths of two bronze frogs. A delightful gurgling sound to listen to while sitting on one of the stone seats, with Mr. Frick’s favorite organ music echoing about the cloister: Irish airs, Fauré, Saint-Saëns, Handel, Wagner . . .

I imagine you have seen (or will see) the museums of New York.

You will have wondered at (or will wonder at) the Museum of Modern Art, the much celebrated MoMa of Monet’s Nymphs, Van Gogh’s Starry Night, Andy Warhol’s Marilyn, Georgia O’Keefe’s drawings, and the photographs of Dorothea Lange and Alfred Stieglitz, and perhaps you will have had (or will have) your photograph taken in the sculpture garden, between a Giacometti and a Brancusi. And you will have ascended (or
will ascend) the long spiral staircase designed by Frank Lloyd Wright for the Guggenheim Museum, savoring Chagall’s Paris Through the Window, a Nude by Modigliani, and Manet’s Before the Mirror. You will have gotten lost (or will get lost) in the bewildering labyrinth of rooms in the Metropolitan Museum, perhaps while tracking down the splendid works of Cézanne, Picasso’s Gertrude Stein, Rembrandt’s Self-Portrait, and Vermeer’s Young Woman with a Water Pitcher; or while marveling at the limpid linearity of the Temple of Dendur, commissioned by Caesar Augustus; or while pausing for thought in the newly erected Ming garden in Astor Court. And, inside the inverted grey pyramid structure of the Whitney Museum of American Art, you will have seen (or will see) the charming Circus by Alexander Calder, the luminous solitudes of Edward Hopper, the American flags by Jasper Johns, the urban panoramas of Louis Lozowick, the glowing vitality of Brooklyn Bridge of Joseph Stella . . .

You will also have been (or will also go) to the Morgan Library, the Frick Collection, the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, the International Center of Photography, the Museum of the American Indian, and the American Museum of Natural History. And in your walking to and fro, you will have negotiated (or will do so) another of New York’s inevitable maps.

I have done it, too, and will continue to do so, albeit in a haphazard fashion characterized by long absences and periods of indifference. It is a question of priorities, really: I think the first things we should look for in a city are the places it contains, the feel of it, the different views, the streets, and the people, and since these things are subject to continual change, they must be appreciated anew again and again. Museums are (almost) invariably there, rather like the masterpieces they house, and—as Walter Benjamin taught us—by now we know those masterpieces almost by heart due to an endless series of reproductions (and anyway, hasn’t it all become so difficult to observe them with the necessary calm when coping with throngs of people to the left, right, and center?).

Yes, call me irreverent. But the problem here really is that of those “mythical” places in a metropolis, from which you “can’t stay away,” because they are endowed with a “must-see” status—they are so deeply identified with the metropolis that the act of not seeing them is tantamount to confessing that you haven’t actually been there. And so a visit to the MoMa is rather like sending a postcard back home: tangible proof. Nothing wrong in that, of course. But New York also possesses a host of smaller jewels that are no less symbolic than the MoMa or the Met. They are well worth an attentive visit, also because, in contrast to those “pachyderms of culture” with all their masterpieces hanging on the walls or hidden away in glass cabinets, these other jewels are often organized in
such a way as to truly engage the visitor, and turn him or her into the beneficiary of what is not only *exhibited* but literally *staged*.

So if late one morning you find yourself in front of the Plaza Hotel and cross Central Park in a diagonal line until you come to Strawberry Fields (opposite the Dakota Houses where John Lennon was gunned down), it would pay you to exit the park right here and walk four blocks north. Just before you reach the majestic American Museum of Natural History, you will come across a squat parallelepiped with the usual Doric columns and capital above the entrance. Here is situated the New-York Historical Society, with access at number 2 West 77th Street (I have already mentioned it in relation to Seneca Village, but the time has come to say more).

The society was set up in 1804. Its archives contain a magnificent photo taken from the roof of the Dakota Houses in a northward direction in 1881, showing a wide expanse of uncultivated lands, huts, excavations, and paths; on the left, an iron support belonging to one of the Elevated lines; on the right, the western boundary of the park; and in the middle, the lofty tenement of the American Museum of Natural History, which, over the years, would grow until it reached the size of a real castle. The building that would eventually house the society did not yet exist in 1881, but the society was already active. Today it is the oldest museum in the city and contains some of America’s most valuable archives.

The society makes available to the public a wealth of material that includes something on the order of 650,000 volumes and pamphlets, 500,000 photographs from the mid-1800s to the present day, 10,000 different newspaper titles, 15,000 maps, innumerable musical scores, 750,000 advertising announcements from different periods, thousands of restaurant menus, an enviable archive of documents relating to slavery and the abolition movement, collections of paintings, drawings, and sculptures ranging from colonial times to the present day, the original watercolors of John James Audubon, an exhaustive collection of Tiffany lamps, the sketches and projects of New York’s most famous architects, precious naval and military collections, letters written by Abraham Lincoln and other American presidents, and the documents, diaries, and correspondence of anonymous citizens, fugitive slaves, frontline Civil War soldiers, nurses, housewives . . .

I remember working long hours in the society rooms years ago, cautiously flicking through the pages of old magazines and watching the mosaic of a city gradually assemble before my very eyes. Because it is New York itself, of course, that stands at the center of the archives and the collections, the guidebooks and the “Hudson River Weekends,” the expositions of paintings or the performances of the Actors Company Theater,
and in particular the exhibitions. Among the subjects are Seneca Village (precisely), the evolution of Times Square (Signs and Wonders: The Spectacular Lights of Times Square), and the centenary celebration of the birth of Greater New York in 1898, when the city spread its wings beyond its original Manhattan island confines to encompass other boroughs.

Now, on leaving the New-York Historical Society, walk back diagonally across the park and exit on Fifth Avenue, near the area where Manhattan opulence and refinement crosses swords with Harlem and Spanish Harlem (further metropolitan contradictions). Almost in front of you, between 103rd Street and 104th Street, is an enormous white building with a staircase that houses the Museum of the City of New York, founded in 1923. This, too, is a must. Or at the very least, it is heartily recommended.

The society and the museum dialogue with one another from opposite sides of the park. In some ways they may even be thought to overlap (some years ago a merger was hinted at, but nothing came of it), or, rather, slot perfectly one into the other: the society with its research center, and the museum with its more didactic-cum-spectacular approach. Years ago I also worked for a long time in the museum, marveling over the photographs of Jacob Riis, and I remember that whenever I arrived in the morning, there were always hordes of schoolchildren milling about the rooms, gazing starry-eyed at the expertly displayed objects and pondering over the questions and exercises that had been prepared especially for a public of children and adolescents: the city’s history was being brought home with an uncharacteristic verve and relevance.

Again, the statistics speak volumes: more than a million and a half objects consisting of paintings, prints, photographs, theatrical costumes, garments from the 1700s and 1800s, toys, manuscripts, rare books, works of art, sculptures, dolls’ houses, and other things besides. Or, to be more precise: paintings by American artists like Ralph Blakelock, Asher Durand, Reginald Marsh, and Franz Kline; photographs by Riis, Berenice Abbott, and Carl Van Vechten; lithographs by Currier and Ives; portraits of famous Americans from the last three hundred years; an incredible collection of theatrical materials (scores, bills, stage directions, caricatures, scene designs, and reviews); furniture, musical instruments, silverware, clocks, ceramics, copper and pewter vases, and porcelain; fire engines; naval and military collections. And there are some rare treats, too, like the first canvas painting to make its appearance in Nieuw Amsterdam (the Portrait of Katrina van Cortlandt by van Mienevelt, circa 1630), the first terra-cotta model of the Statue of Liberty prepared by Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi, the studies for the murales of Ben Shahn and Reginald Marsh, or the Stettheimer Doll House, a 1920s piece that comes complete
with a miniature art gallery featuring the paintings and sculptures of the main avant-garde artists working in New York at the time . . .

Here, too, however, it is the exhibitions that take pride of place. Subjects have included the World’s Fair of 1939, the city’s homeless, Greenwich Village between 1830 and 1930, the ethnic community centers, Duke Ellington, African Americans in Manhattan, the social photography of Jacob Riis and five other contemporary photographers (among them Margaret Morton, mentioned earlier in connection with the tunnel people), and the Irish in New York. Talks have been organized on subjects like the relationship between skyscraper construction and land rent, or the circus tradition in New York, not to mention the guided visits to Hispanic East Harlem and Chelsea. The museum’s program is more a kind of brightly colored kaleidoscope of projects that are all centered on the need to offer a dynamic approach to the metropolis, and it contrasts markedly with the notions of spectator passivity that seem to underlie the ruling ethos in museums. I greatly regret missing out on one particular evening called “Tellabration: New York’s Night of Storytelling,” when artists and writers came along to “tell” their very own New York: an intriguing blend of writing, words, and urban folklore that must surely have succeeded in communicating a different, three-dimensional vision of Manhattan, all too often flattened in static images.

I did not, however, miss out on Taíno: Pre-Columbian Art and Culture from the Caribbean, an exhibition organized by the Museo del Barrio in the grand neoclassical building (originally an orphanage, if I am not mistaken) that stands to the side of the Museum of the City of New York at 1230 Fifth Avenue—a highly stimulating exhibition that I think was the first to document the Caribbean roots of a large section of the metropolis in such a thorough and winning manner. (“Taíno” was the name of the original inhabitants of “Borinquen,” or Puerto Rico; and Barrio, “city,” is now the name given to that area of Harlem inhabited by people mostly of Caribbean origins.)

I was assisted in my visit by two exceptional companions: the painter and muralist Maria Dominguez (who at the time was a member of the museum staff) and the performing poet Jésus Papoleto Melendez, two friends who (together with Pedro Pietri and other Nuyorican poets) have been indispensable to my understanding many things about Puerto Rican New York over the years. They took me around the exhibition rooms dedicated to the clothes, ornaments, and appurtenances (like the exquisite duhos, wooden thrones carved—usually by women—in the shape of animals) of the caciques, or Caribbean tribe chiefs; or the room dedicated to the sacred ceremony of the cohoba, a hallucinogenic substance that played a central role in religious rituals whose participants imagined they
could get into contact with an “other” universe, parallel and upside down (this was one of the effects of taking cohoba). I was then taken to the rooms dedicated to Taíno cosmology, with its mysterious trigonolitos, or three pointed objects in worked stone that continue to puzzle experts even today: are they mountains, volcanoes, breasts, phalluses, or cassava shoots? The Taínos called them zemi, spirits and otherworldly presences possessed of supernatural powers. Among the exhibits is a magnificent example, a colorful riot of small pearls mounted in stone, on loan from the Museo Preistorico ed Etnografico Pigorini in Rome. At the end of my visit I was accompanied to the rooms dealing with the ordinary daily life of the Taínos: their houses, their fabrics, their food (with the omnipresent cassava), the game of football played in the batey (a paved courtyard surrounded by statues representing divinities) often during the course of the areytos (huge family or tribal gatherings consisting of dances, songs, and celebrations and, once again, the reciprocal telling of stories and experiences).

It is an exhibition of extremely rare objects (some displayed for the very first time), splendid photographs and videos recounting the stories of the Puerto Rican elderly, topped off by a kind of laboratory room built expressly for children. In this room (Maria entertained me at length on this) a number of museum items had been reproduced as a pretext for a series of manual and intellectual activities, as a cue for the overturning of customary perspectives, the stimulation of curiosity, and the asking and answering of questions; judging from the appearance of the room at the end of the day, I would say that the children reacted with great enthusiasm to this new way of experiencing museums and their objects!

I understand that this exhibition is a point of arrival and departure for the Museo del Barrio. It was founded by some parents, artists, and teachers of Spanish Harlem in 1969, and for some time was housed in a school, then in a series of other smaller spaces and shops along different streets, and finally, in 1977, it ended up in this magnificent building—a kind of outpost (within the glimmer and glitz of wealthy Manhattan) of the barrio latino that stretches out feverishly behind, just beyond the murky tunnel beneath the Park Avenue Elevated. And, in its present location, it became one of the founding members of the Museum Mile Association, featuring a collection of eight thousand objects of Caribbean origin and courses of professional formation for teachers and cultural operators—and a very special attention to the world of adolescents.

So, there you are, right in front of the Museo, uncertain as to your next step. Well, you could always head south for a couple hundred yards and make a visit to the Jewish Museum at 1109 Fifth Avenue; alternatively, you could set off northward in the direction of nearby Harlem to seek out
another cornerstone of multiethnic Manhattan—the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at 515 Malcolm X Boulevard. But if you have the time, and don’t mind the idea of cutting across the city overland from north to south, might I suggest you take the number 1 bus and get off on Broome Street: from there, walk eastward until you get to Orchard Street.

What we have here is a totally different ball game. The majestic pomp of Fifth Avenue and the greenery of Central Park are just a distant memory among these narrow streets and hoary dilapidated buildings; the crowds milling around have nothing of the museum-visiting tourists about them; poverty and degradation are there to be seen and touched. Walking about, you can hear or read the myriad languages of America. You are bang in the middle of the Lower East Side, the historical heartland of multiethnic Manhattan. In a certain sense, you have traced your way back to the very roots of the city. Near here are the two oldest synagogues in Manhattan—the Congregation Chasam Sopher on Clinton Street and the Congregation Anshei Slonim on Norfolk Street (which has been renovated after years of complete neglect and is now the multipurpose Angelo Orensanz Foundation cultural center). And there is also a small museum whose express intent is to safeguard the city’s origins: the Lower East Side Tenement Museum.

When you reach 90 Orchard Street, on the corner with Broome Street, stop off at the bookshop (which also houses the museum) and take a peek at the various objects and volumes, or pick up one of the catalogs and choose from among the many weekend activities that have been organized, or sign up for one of the guided visits to the old tenement that is currently being restored just a few yards to the north on the opposite side of the road at number 97. It was right here, in this five-story house, that the adventure of the Tenement Museum began: in the mid-1980s Ruth Abrams, an experienced social worker who was already working on the idea of opening up a museum about immigration, came across this building (which had been boarded up and left to its own derelict devices since 1935). She rented one of the shops on the raised level, and it was here that the seeds of the future museum were sown: materials were collected, social workers and historians were invited to lend a hand, and work was begun on the renovation of the first apartments.

As more was learned about the history of the building, so the museum housed within its confines developed. Slowly yet surely, everyday objects were uncovered and more things came to light concerning successive waves of immigrant families and names from the distant past. Between 1865, when the tenement was actually built (typical of the area, a three-room apartment featuring one room in the front, one in the middle, dark
and stuffy, and one overlooking the small closed courtyard at the back—a railroad apartment, as this kind of architectural solution used to be called), and 1935, when lodgers were evicted and entrances to the building were boarded up, something in the order of ten thousand immigrants from twenty different countries spent some time in it. The building at 97 Orchard Street is a metaphor for the United States: or, rather, for America.

Time passed, and three apartments were renovated and named after the Gumpertz, Baldizzi, and Rogashevsky families (a fourth would later be “assigned” to the Confino family). Crossing the threshold of these apartments is an experience akin to passing through the looking glass: you are taken back in time, you move within a past dating back more than a century, and you bring back to the present something of its history and stories. I remember working here, too, on some beautiful October mornings almost fifteen years ago: all around me plumbers, carpenters, bricklayers, and architects set to work while the neighborhood rose from its slumber and paraded in front of the large windows of the small office. I visited the rooms on the top floors, which had remained virtually unchanged since the building had been boarded up in 1935, and I can still recall the overpowering impression it made on me: the sense of stupor and mystery—of anxiety even—I experienced on treading the creaking floorboards and brushing against the old peeling wallpapers, on seeing the washtub in the darkness of the middle room and on looking down through opaque windows onto the streets below . . . all experiences I had read in novels or seen in the yellowing photographs of the past, but which now became real and tangible, all around me.

And now it is your turn. Although work on the building proceeds slowly, 97 Orchard Street has achieved National Historical Landmark status and is today more lively and meaningful than the Museum of Immigration on Ellis Island (the tiny island adjacent to New York where immigrants were detained in quarantine). Yet the Tenement Museum is more than just a museum, bookshop, and renovated building: it organizes conferences and slide projections, guided visits to the neighborhood, theatrical shows staging family stories, and photographic exhibitions (particularly memorable was the exhibition dealing with the works of the 1930s photographer Arnold Eagle). And then there is the Tenement Times, an excellent newsletter whose collection of memories, stories, recipes, photographs, and glimpses of private lives and experiences does much to restore the atmosphere of the immigrants’ Lower East Side—yet another way of approaching history.

Once you leave the Tenement Museum, you need only to go down Orchard Street until you come to Canal Street. Walk the length of it
beyond the Bowery, then take a left down Mulberry Street where you will find another precious little museum (once a school) housed inside a stately building on the corner of Mulberry and Bayard Streets. The scenario has changed again: a hundred years ago this was the heart of Little Italy and one of the most run-down—albeit vital—areas of the city, and now it has become part of a Chinatown whose territorial expansion shows no sign of slowing down. Between the 1970s and 1980s, relations between Little Italy and Chinatown became more strained, and the flow of capital from Hong Kong and Taiwan (thought to be on the verge of being returned to China) in the decade that followed led to a sharp rise in crime in the area. With its narrow, cluttered streets, its sidewalks dotted with the odd-looking vegetables and wriggling fish of local stores, the comings and goings of the locals and their rapid-fire chitchat, the Chinese ice-cream seller, the shop selling tea and fortune cookies, and one of my favorite restaurants (the Bo-Ky), Chinatown lays a special claim on my Manhattan heart. It is one of the first places I go to on arriving in New York, and one of the first places I take people to when they come and visit me in the city. And I feel at home when I ascend the staircase of the immense building located at 70 Mulberry Street and push open the glass door that opens out onto the few rooms of the Museum of Chinese in the Americas.

The museum took its present name just a few years ago. Earlier on it went by the name of the Chinatown History Museum, and before that, at the time of its creation in the early 1980s, the New York Chinatown History Project. The two men behind the original project, Charlie Lai and John Kuo Wei Tchen, knew the streets of Chinatown like the backs of their hands: they rummaged around the basements and lofts and sifted through the back rooms of shops and the memories of the elderly in order to compose anew the identity of a group that had survived decades of total isolation. Indeed, in 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act (renewed again and again during the years that followed, and made even more restrictive) had effectively put an end to the further importation of Chinese workers. Immigrants who had already been living in the country for years could no longer be joined by their wives and fiancées, which originated the so-called bachelor society, lonely men whose virtual status as hostages on American soil only ended in 1943, when the vicious Exclusion Act was repealed to allow American soldiers of Chinese origin to bring the wives or fiancées they had married or met on the battlefield into the country. The psychological, social, and cultural mess resulting from this long period of isolation is something of a festering wound in the Chinatown of today, and the New York Chinatown History Project was precisely the means whereby the silence and oblivion of those years was broken.
Today, the archives of the museum (two small rooms with a skeleton staff that worryingly risks further streamlining as a result of cuts on the part of a scroogelike city administration) contain a precious range of materials which have often been put together in decidedly adventurous fashion: papers, letters, documents, the daily knickknacks of the elderly “bachelors,” an entire collection of material pertaining to a Cantonese opera company (costumes, stage directions, scripts, musical instruments, and scene designs), the only existing copies of Sino-American newspapers published in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, guides and manuals prepared expressly for those immigrants who sought to get around the Chinese Exclusion Act . . . And there is more: 3,500 photographs, three hundred hours of recorded interviews, twelve hours of documentary material on video and film, a library of more than two thousand volumes, essays, articles, pamphlets, an astonishing collection of materials and artifacts, and a delightful newsletter, the Bu Gao Ban, which provides up-to-date information on museum activities. A genuine gold mine for scholars and, more importantly (this has been the real scope of the museum since its beginnings), for a community in search of itself and its history.

The Museum of Chinese in the Americas has developed its research largely by means of exhibitions, which are its main strength (and, simultaneously, the area most susceptible to budget cuts). Hence Eight Pound Livelihood told the story of Chinese washermen in America, Chinese Women of America rescued the virtually unknown role of women before and after the Chinese Exclusion Act from the silence of history, and Salvaging New York Chinatown: Preserving a Heritage was dedicated to reconstructing life in the neighborhood more than fifty years ago; Both Sides of the Clothes blew the lid off the largely feminine world of the clothing industry laboratories after the Second World War, Remembering New York Chinatown summarized the first ten years of the museum’s existence, and Sites of Chinatown explored the map of Chinatown locations as seen through the eyes of creative local artists. The Where Is Home? Chinese in the Americas exhibition featured two hundred daily objects (not the usual porcelain stereotypes but, for example, the eight-pound irons traditionally used in laundries) in an effort to answer the question that for all immigrants remains the most crucial, and the most cruel.

The charm of the museum (its daily bid to survive in the face of so many obstacles) lies precisely in this close tie with the community of which it is an expression, in the constant attention it pays to the reactions (criticisms, requests for changes, suggestions) of a public that first and foremost (but not only) consists of Chinatown inhabitants themselves, and in this profoundly fascinating “dialogic” way of running a museum and organizing exhibitions. In other words, it is a continual work in progress.
that comes into being, develops, “breathes” and is transformed, poses questions and asks questions of itself, all while managing to avoid the presumption or paternalism that at times characterizes the behavior of researchers and collectors.

The notion of a “dialogic museum” informs the most interesting activities of many of these “other” museums and of several local historians in New York. Take, for example, Arthur Tobier, a freelance writer who has worked on several projects connected to the Museo del Barrio. For about the last twenty-five years he has devoted his efforts to the recording of “oral histories,” which he then uses to prepare his own exhibitions, valuable pieces in an “ongoing history of New York City.” And this idea of a “shared authority” (from the title of a book by historian Michael Frisch, which has contributed so much to the elaboration of this notion) transforms the museum’s exhibitions into small and intense masterpieces that are of considerable interest even to those who are not members of the Chinatown community, but wish to understand its complex and largely ignored history. In other words, it is an authority shared by the community and researchers, founded on the passion for a dialectical relationship with all those (individuals, groups, and classes) who, day after day, have anonymously contributed and continue to contribute to their own history and, by default, to the history of the city itself.

By now, having left the Museum of Chinese in the Americas, and standing on the corner of Mulberry Street and Bayard Street, while the sun sets on the arabesques of fire escapes patterned on the house facades, you are probably quite worn out. A whole day spent traipsing up and down the island from one “alternative” museum to another takes its toll. It is time to head back home for a jasmine or mint tea, or whatever takes your fancy. Although you might consider stopping off along the way and, together with your tea, savoring a slice of cheesecake or carrot cake. Seeing as you are downtown, you could take a stab at the Café Orlin, overlooking St. Mark’s Place and almost on the corner of Second Avenue: situated a few steps down from the street, the lovely atmosphere of this century-old café is an invitation in itself to sit down, have a chat or a read, and do some people watching. After all, even a place like this is a museum sui generis: a place where you can breathe in Manhattan and absorb the history and life of New York.

The light is fading now beneath a curtain of rain and cloud. I walk about the rooms of Frick’s house seething with almost timorous visitors; I admire the splendid pictures of the collection and stand a long time in front of Rodin’s
Dream. Then I lapse into a state of befuddlement as nearly always happens to me after being bombarded by museum works, and walk down the steps of the rectangular cloister in search of respite. I find a seat and listen to the burbling of water in the fountain, the thunder clapping its way across the skylight, the organ music.

Just as Wagner’s march from Tannhäuser gets under way, right there in the muffled quiet of Mr. Frick’s cloister, with all its absorbed visitors and stock-still custodians, an amusing thing happens. With a wheeze, one of the bronze frogs blowing lovely soft jets of water suddenly starts spitting out a fierce gush in the direction of the central fountain where, up to now, the water had been dripping so lightly from one dish to the other. At a stroke, the delicate equilibrium is broken. The fountain dishes rudely overflow, and the jet of water ricochets to splash those who had been sitting around in contemplative silence. Exclamations, bursts of laughter, a general springing to feet follow, and any feelings of awe or stupor that Mr. Frick’s masterpieces and lavishly furnished rooms may have helped to foster are dispersed. Something must have happened to the mechanism regulating the emission of water, and for a couple of minutes the custodians—now deprived of their uniformed aplomb—are at a loss as to what to do. At first embarrassed, then amused, they squint this way and that from behind the cloister columns: the atmosphere of healthy irreverence turns the scene into something right out of Mark Twain or Charlie Chaplin.

In the meantime, the storm is letting up. I take one last look at the seditious frog, unruffled as he splashes the water about, and head toward the exit tittering. Outside, the pachyderms of culture seem to have lost their air of solemnity and arrogance, and now resemble something akin to a row of drenched little chicks.