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New York! New York!

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Introduction

“New York, New York, a wonderful town!” (Comden & Green, 1942), full of museums, performance halls—and libraries. Most people know about the main branch of the New York Public Library (NYPL), with its iconic lions, Patience and Fortitude, flanking the broad steps to the entrance. But New York City (NYC) has other libraries open to the public. These hidden gems often escape the notice of the casual visitor. In particular, there are two libraries, in addition to NYPL, that are well worth visiting if you have an extra day or so in NYC.

The New York Public Library

History

By the 1850s, NYC was a bustling metropolis with a population larger than Paris. Civic leaders dreamt of a future New York replete with the cultural riches worthy of such a great city. NYC already had two quasi-public libraries. John Jacob Astor established the Astor Library in 1849, primarily for research purposes. Later, in 1871, James Lenox opened his private library of rare books to scholars and bibliophiles, although access was limited. By the early 1890s, both libraries were struggling to maintain their collections and services. Meanwhile, in 1886, Samuel Tilden, a former governor of New York State, bequeathed NYC almost \$2.5 million dollars to be used to establish a “free library and reading room in the city of New York” (New York Public Library, 2011).

With these resources in place, plans moved ahead to merge Astor’s and Lenox’s libraries with Tilden’s trust fund and create a new entity: The New York Public Library. The organizers of the new library envisioned a landmark building, to include a capacious reading room and seven floors of stacks. The beautiful marble building opened to the public in 1911, sixteen years after initial planning began (Reed, 1986). The architecture reflects the vision the creators had of “library as temple of learning.” As Reed writes, “one cannot imagine New York without it” (1986, p.x i).



Patience, one of two lions flanking the main entrance to the New York Public Library.



Visiting

Even if you choose not to poke into the collections (many of which require making advance arrangements), the building itself is worth taking time to meander through. Astor Hall is the main lobby, a vast vaulted space with wide stairs flanking each side that lead up to various exhibit and collection rooms. The Main Reading Room is not to be missed. Reference books on two levels line the massive space. Soaring windows, huge chandeliers, and brass table lamps provide illumination for readers. The Gottesman Exhibition Hall showcases collection highlights. During my last visit, books, letters and small personal objects from the Romanov Dynasty (the last imperial house to rule Russia) were poignantly displayed.

The Frick Art Reference Library*History*

Henry Clay Frick was a successful 19th century industrialist who was notorious for his ill treatment of workers (Emma Goldman was involved in an assassination plot against him). He used his enormous wealth to support his passion: art collecting. By 1905, Frick's collection had grown to such an extent that he began to scout for land in NYC to build a house where he could display his treasures. He soon acquired a building at the corner of Fifth Avenue and 70th Street.

But Frick could not start work on his house until the construction of the new branch of the New York Public Library was completed. Why would this be? Remember our bibliophilic philanthropist, James Lenox? His original library was sited at this very location! Lenox's collection first had to be transferred to the new NYPL before demolition. Additionally, Lenox's will specified that any use of the land must include a library. Perhaps these restrictions planted a seed in Frick's mind, as within a year after moving into the new house, he stated that he wanted his extensive collections available to the public in order "to encourage and develop the study of fine arts, and to advance the general knowledge of kindred subjects" (Bailey, 2006, p.93).



The Main Reading Room of the New York Public Library is a popular space for quiet study ... and other mysterious activities. Check out this YouTube!

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKB7zfopiUA>



Soon after Frick's death in 1919, his daughter, Helen Clay Frick, founded the library in her father's memory. At first, the library was located in the home's bowling alley, but within four years, the collection moved to a newly constructed building on the site. This building soon proved inadequate for the growing collections and plans were made to construct a thirteen-story library. The current building, immediately adjacent to the Frick Museum, officially opened to the public in 1935 and still houses the collections today.



The serene reading room at the Frick Art Reference Library.

The library's collections focus on European and American art from the fourth through the twentieth century. The library holds over 285,000 monographs, and currently subscribes to 750 journals. Regular exhibits include artists' sketchbooks, catalogs dating back to the eighteenth century, and other unique ephemera, with a special emphasis on the history of collecting in America.

Visiting

Unlike many special research libraries that restrict access to credentialed scholars, the Frick Art Reference Library is open to any adult with a "serious interest in art" (Frick Collection, 2011). If you are visiting the library for the first time, bring photo ID and arrive before 3 p.m. on weekdays;

11 a.m. on Saturdays. Registration is painless, especially if you present your library employee ID. Exhibitions showcase the library's extensive holdings and change regularly. After browsing the stacks, the reading room is an ideal place to relax and leaf through books filled with glorious art plates.



Exhibit at the Frick Art Reference Library.



The Pierpont Morgan Library & Museum

History

John Pierpont Morgan was born into a banking family in 1837, and leveraged his background and connections to become a wealthy financier. By the early 1890s, he was one of the United States' most prominent citizens, both lauded and hated. Morgan started to collect books, paintings, and other art objects at an early age. In 1902, his home no longer had the space to contain all his literary materials, so he commissioned a library to be built adjacent to his residence. The design was inspired by the European model of a gentleman's library. There is evidence that from early on, Morgan planned that his collections would be made "permanently available for the instruction and pleasure of the American people" (Pierpont Morgan Library, 2000, p.18).



The original Morgan library, now the East Room.

Morgan had a particular interest in the history of the physical book, so the library's collection holds special interest for those of us that still love to cradle a book in our hands. Other highlights include ancient seals, tablets, papyrus fragments, medieval codices, and an extensive array of American first editions. The library also holds a substantial collection of early children's books. Of particular note are three copies of the Gutenberg Bible.

Visiting

Any visit to the Morgan Library & Museum must include a stop at the East Room, originally Morgan's personal library. The room evokes past splendors, with its rich walnut bookshelves that stretch three stories high, beautiful painted ceiling, and hidden staircases. Exhibits change regularly, but always include a representative sample of the library's extraordinary holdings. During my last visit, among the items on display were the following: a Gutenberg Bible; an autographed manuscript of Mozart's Symphony no. 35 in D Major ("Haffner"); and a Queen of Swords tarot card originally owned by the Visconti-Sforza Family circa 1450.




A Day at the Libraries

Manhattan is a city for walkers, and there are few cities in the world where you can sample such a rich array of cultural institutions within a two-mile stretch. You might begin your day starting with the Morgan Library at Madison and 36th Street. From the Morgan, it is only a few short blocks to the New York Public Library. After enjoying the splendor of the NYPL, and perhaps a bite of lunch, it's time to stroll up Fifth Avenue. Depending on when you visit, you may catch a parade. Regardless, this section of Fifth Avenue provides great window shopping, including Cartier, Tiffany & Co., Prada, and Versace. Apple's flagship store beckons to those less interested in glitz and fashion. Further up, you will pass the Washington Plaza Hotel, cross 59th Street over to the east side of Central Park and soon arrive at the Frick Museum and Frick Art Reference Library. The Frick Collection is well worth viewing before visiting the Art Reference Library. If you have any stamina or time left, you are well placed to continue on to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Guggenheim Museum. By the end of the day, you will be saturated with images of magnificent cultural buildings, exquisite art, and fascinating books. Ah, New York—a wonderful town!



Can't go? Visit Virtually!

All three libraries offer extensive online resources, including institutional histories, access to digital collections, and shopping! 

New York Public Library

General Information

<http://www.nypl.org>

Digital Gallery

<http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital>

Live from NYPL (taped lectures, performances, etc.)

<http://www.nypl.org/live-multimedia>

Treasures of the New York Public Library

<http://www.nypl.org>

Shop!

<http://shop.nypl.org>

Frick Museum & Art Reference Library

General Information

<http://www.frick.org/library/index.htm>

Active Highlights

<http://www.frick.org/archives/slides.htm>

Photo Archive

<http://www.frick.org/photoarchive/index.htm>

Virtual Tour

<http://www.frick.org/virtual/index.htm>

Shop!

<http://www.shopfrick.org/index.htm>

Morgan Library & Museum

General Information

<http://www.themorgan.org/home.asp>

General Information

<http://www.themorgan.org/exhibitions/defaultExhibOnline.asp>

Music Manuscripts Online

<http://www.themorgan.org/music/default.asp>

Virtual Tour

<http://www.themorgan.org/about/campus.asp>

Shop!

<http://www.themorgan.org/shop/>



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