

Repousando no Museu Metropolitan: construção de espaços de acolhida na obra *Metropolitan Stories* de Christine Coulson

Resting in the Met: Constructions of Homelike Spaces in Christine Coulson's *Metropolitan Stories*

Pallavi Narayan¹

DOI 10.26512/museologia.v10i19.35565

Resumo

O Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art, conhecido popularmente como The Met, é um edifício tradicional que abriga tanto arte tradicional quanto inovadora através dos tempos. Neste artigo, eu examino sua representação no recém publicado *Metropolitan Stories*, de Christine Coulson. Começando com o limiar como ponto de definição e delineamento de entradas e saídas, dentro e fora num estado de fluidez e brincadeira, eu examino a construção de espaços de descanso e espaços acolhedores no museu, assim como o descanso na casa. Eu investigo exemplos pertinentes e trago sua análise para expor uma performance da casa no museu, conectando humano e não-humano em uma sinergia de comunicação não-verbal.

Palavras-chave

Museu Metropolitan. Museu Literário. Limiar. Acolhida. Pós-humanismo.

Abstract

The Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art, known familiarly as The Met, is a traditional edifice housing both traditional and innovative art through the ages. In this article, I examine its representation in the recently published *Metropolitan Stories* by Christine Coulson. Beginning with the threshold as the point of defining and delineating entrances and exits, inside and outside in a state of fluidity and play, I examine the construction of spaces of rest and homelike spaces in the museum, as well as of resting in the home. I peruse pertinent examples and provide their analysis to display a performance of home in the museum, connecting human and non-human in a synergy of wordless communication.

Keywords

Met. Museum and literature. Threshold. Homelike. Post-humanism.

“Museums remain one of the important congregant spaces in any community. To encourage use by all citizens we need to be more sensitive to the space requirements that make it clear the visitor is welcome.”² This is what the Metropolitan Museum of Art—a landmark edifice and “towering” cultural space appears to do, defining, in a sense, the aesthetics of New York City. It comprises, according to the Met’s promotional statement, a “living encyclopedia of world art ... [e]very culture from every part of the world ... from the earliest times to the present and in every medium represented, frequently at the highest le-

1 Pallavi Narayan’s monograph on Orhan Pamuk’s works and museum based on her doctoral dissertation from the Indian Institute of Technology Delhi, is forthcoming with Routledge in 2021. She is also co-editor of *Singapore at Home: Life across Lines*, an anthology of short stories to be published by Kitaab in 2021.

2 Elaine, Heumann Gurian, “Threshold Fear,” personal website, 6 April 2015, p. 25, <https://www.egurian.com/omnium-gatherum/museum-issues/community/accessibility/threshold-fear> [accessed 8 December 2020].

vels of quality and invention.”³ The statement asserts an ambition that seeks to homogenize cultural difference under one umbrella and takes upon itself the “power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging,⁴ reflecting, in Edward W. Said’s words, an imperial vision in its accumulation of “strange territories and gradually turn[ing] them into ‘home’.”⁵ Because of the grand narrative that the institution has created around itself combined with its imposing structure, its solidity, its great halls, its sheer breadth, the layperson can be overawed enough to not even dare to venture in. And this is precisely what Christine Coulson overturns in her presentation of the Met as an interior space in *Metropolitan Stories*.⁶ Coulson, who worked at the Met for twenty-five years, has written this collection of loosely linked stories inside the Met’s premises: each story may be read as a standalone text, while a character or an artwork finds mention in some of the other stories as well. The stories cover a multitude of museum subjects and characters such as the objects themselves – furniture, sculpture, paintings, etc.; donors and trustees; museum staff; and gallery spaces or parts of galleries. Each story revolves around a protagonist who is at the threshold of a home, and searches for or succeeds in creating a homelike space for themselves in a prestigious, even majestic, institution. Bringing to the reader the tension between the exhibition and the back stages of museological processes, the stories thrive on powerfully stimulating the imagination to blend not only fact and fiction, but also to combine them with fantasy.

Much of the action centres in and through the Wrightsman Galleries. As these galleries and the figure of Mrs Wrightsman are present in the stories, it is necessary to provide some background context, particularly because Jayne and Charles Wrightsman’s “unparalleled ... collection of French eighteenth-century interiors and furnishings” possibly provide places of rest to visitors and, as see further in the article, the occasional resident. From marble reliefs to urns to platters and tureens, from snuff boxes to dressing-table sets, their additions to the museum include a horde of such objects complete with entire furnished rooms altogether; for instance, the Crillon Room, Bordeaux Room, Early Louis XV Room, Louis XVI Gallery, Sevres Room and Paar Room, a few of which are mentioned in the book.⁷ In “Night Moves,” for example, Radish, the night security guard, whiles his time away in the Met by seeking all the reflective surfaces; he knows that the “Wrightsman period rooms offered repeated reflections, “eighteenth-century France” flattering “with its faint candlelight and smoky glass.”⁸ In “Mezz Girls,” as Mrs Wrightsman’s form passes through the entrance to the party, all eyes turn to the hallowed “collector of all collectors, donor of all donors, queen of all queens.” Indeed, like royalty, Mrs Wrightsman, the museum’s primary patron and distinguished connoisseur of art, does not need attention but is protected from it.⁹ And in “Papercuts,” a room in the Wrightsman Galleries is shown to be reconstructed in paper by a recently deceased employee

3 Kathleen Howard, (ed.), *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Guide* (New York, NY: The Metropolitan Museum of Art (1983) 2000), p. 6.

4 Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. xiii.

5 *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

6 Christine Coulson, *Metropolitan Stories* (New York, NY: Other Press, 2019).

7 Douglas Dillon, “Foreword,” in *A Guide to the Wrightsman Galleries at The Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art*, ed. James Parker and Claire le Corbeiller (New York, NY: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1979), p. 7.

8 “Night Moves,” in Coulson, *Metropolitan Stories*.

9 “Mezz Girls,” in *ibid.*

Repousando no Museu Metropolitan: construções de espaços de acolhida na obra *Metropolitan Stories* de Christine Coulson termed *The Rubber Band Man* as no one knows his name.¹⁰

As a collection, the book, also interestingly subtitled *A Novel*, appears to mirror the gallery format of the museum space by including *Stories* in its main title. Perhaps it then seeks to bring alive the museum's interior architecture that holds up the façade of the building, so to say. It makes allowance for the fabrication of temporary or permanent constructions that provide rest or a sense of home to both people and artworks alike. Spaces of rest in the museum could be taken literally, as when characters sink down on sofas or chairs, or metaphorically as in feeling at rest and refreshed from the thrum of life outside. As I use the phrase, by spaces of rest, then, I refer to the literal furnishings and objects that constitute entire rooms in the Met, as brought to attention in the paragraph above. These spaces engender a sense of relief in visitors – particularly if they end up in one of them accidentally, for example Melvin in “Lost”¹¹ – by showing them a different kind of everyday life that is beyond their daily experience, and encouraging them to imagine a life of idleness and leisure. By restful spaces, I mean those spaces that help the museum's staff, visitors, and artworks feel at ease in an otherwise seemingly imposing edifice. Both spaces of rest as well as restful spaces are then connected with the arousal of a feeling of being at home, and aid in the construction of homelike spaces, be they transient or permanent. I analyse examples of each of these further in the article, examining the interdependence of individual and object, human and non-human.

One usually views the edifice of the Met from the outside, but Coulson brings us into its “tangled paths—every gallery, every limestone hall, every catwalk and shortcut, every stairway up and down and across and over,” into the threshold spaces, so to say, the liminal nature of which engender stories of the everyday, explicated best in the opening story titled “We.”¹² It is curious that in *Metropolitan Stories* we barely view the architecture of the museum, although in a semi-visible manner it defines every interaction that occurs within its galleries, rooms and offices. Oddly enough, in a collection about the Met, we “never leave the Museum building, though plenty of New York comes inside.”¹³ The proliferation of New York characters is nowhere better listed than in “Lost.” As Melvin, the protagonist of “Lost” as well as “Found,” waits for the his appointment at the Met, he watches the “looping activity on the museum's plaza”: food vendors, schoolgirls, Wall Street bankers, rats and couples equally openly displaying unbridled passion, bike messengers, Park avenue matrons, the sweeper, a homeless man, and “excited tourists clocked to the wrong time zone, too early for the Met, but elated by the sight of genuine New York City rats;...” Tourists are more than happy to gaily step into the museum to tick it off their list, but those who actually live in the city, like Melvin, feel intimidated about approaching this institution that purports to be a repository of Art, with a capital A.¹⁴ It can give rise to, for the uninitiated, as Elaine Heumann Gurian elaborates, threshold anxiety or threshold fear, as: “[T]here are both physical and programmatic barriers that make it difficult for the uninitiated to experience the museum. ... Museums

10 “Papercuts,” in *ibid.*

11 “Lost,” in *ibid.*

12 “We,” in *ibid.*

13 Bill Wolfe, “A Conversation with Christine Coulson: Behind the Scenes at the Met in *Metropolitan Stories*,” *Read Her Like an Open Book*, 27 April 2020, <https://readerlikeanopenbook.com/2020/04/27/a-conversation-with-christine-coulson-behind-the-scenes-at-the-met-in-metropolitan-stories/> [accessed 2 December 2020].

14 “Lost,” in Coulson, *Metropolitan Stories*.

clearly have thresholds that rise to the level of impediments, real and imagined, for the sectors of our population who remain infrequent visitors.”¹⁵ This line of thinking seeks to unpack the concept of the threshold as a “sensitive and ambivalent spatial zone”¹⁶ which both opens up spaces as well as nestles them within its bounds, performing access to, and experience of, the interior architecture such that both museum visitors and the works of art “live in the expectation of what is to come.”¹⁷ Announcing and prefacing the entrances to spaces, they mediate simultaneously both outside and inside, opening and closure, arrival as well as departure. The narrative moment in several of Coulson’s stories is often identified at the threshold—“a rich, varied and multifaceted ‘problem space’”¹⁸—which is instrumental in organizing transitions.

Thus, as I examine instances from these stories that revolve around this seminal museum, one of my aims is to also facilitate thinking on how thresholds can invite museum staff and visitors into restful spaces as also spaces of rest within the environs of the galleries, rooms, and open places they protect as well as offer for consumption. These can be visual, aural, psychological, and also physical, for the people who move through the museum are looking for different ways of being in the world outside of it. In the Met, they enter into several small self-contained worlds that are well ordered. In their intact, cataloged, and labeled existence, these worlds bring together cultural elements from vast geographical and historical locations. They silently ask visitors not only to immerse themselves for a while in their narratives but to also enjoy pleasurable moments of contemplation of details. To allow themselves to be “rescued by marble and silk, or canvas and oil paint, or charcoal upon a page, pushing beyond gilded frames and glass cases to reach out and do with us what they will, always for good.”¹⁹ In the tightly controlled environment of the museum, visitors permit themselves to be entranced by what they are shown, and frequently fail to realize that one “cannot grasp historical experience by lists or catalogues and, ... selectivity and conscious choice determine the coverage.”²⁰ How do the stories that museum objects and artifacts carry impact the lives of those who work and visit there? Do artworks develop their lives? What does the reorganization of thresholds do the artworks ensconced in galleries and sub-galleries? Finally, does the Met generate homelike spaces that the text articulates?

Homelike spaces and spaces of rest in *Metropolitan Stories*, then, usher readers into the thin boundary between imagination and reality. Longing to touch objects in front of the gallery ropes, they find themselves on the other side of said ropes, lounging on, near, or in the objects on display. I begin this analysis by way of surveying the entry, and in parallel the exit, of the thresholds formed in and around the Met. The stairs, the arches, the doorways make the individual visible. For a time, they grant a visitor the identity of a museumgoer by way of the vibrant turquoise metal disk clipped to their lapel,²¹ and also permit them the anonymity of the very same identity. As Ross Parry et al. declare: “Museums

15 Gurian, p. 2.

16 Till Boetegger, *Threshold Spaces: Transitions in Architecture: Analysis and Design Tools* (Basel: Birkhäuser Verlag GmbH, 2014), p. 4.

17 Ibid., p. 10.

18 Ross Parry et al. (ed.), *Museum Thresholds: The Design and Media of Arrival* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), p. 4.

19 “We,” in Coulson, *Metropolitan Stories*.

20 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. xxiv.

21 “Lost,” in *ibid.*

Repousando no Museu Metropolitan:

construções de espaços de acolhida na obra *Metropolitan Stories* de Christine Coulson

have never really had one threshold. There have always been many ways to find the museum, to start a museum experience, to build a relationship with it. Indeed, theirs is a story of multiplying entry points.”²²

The museum threshold is both a space (a place to traverse) and time (a condition to progress within). It is betwixt and between the everyday and the imaginary, carrying the characteristics and affordances of both. It is liminal and transitory (full of transformations and suspension), and yet distinctive and fixed (a place and time for transaction, decision and resolution). It is both shared and owned: where the public negotiates its place with the museum and the museum reaches out to the everyday. And it is typically a place and moment of both beginnings and endings. ... This is the museum threshold as engagement, encounter, openness, transparency, access and affordance. It shows us everything the museum is, and wants to be.²³

Melvin, in “Lost,” after being laid off, feels ashamed of himself, and empty as there is no one he lives with and he has never received any visitors in his home.²⁴ To keep up appearances with his doorman, he takes up residence on the steps of the Met. Being “both hidden and exposed atop the majestic heap,” he provides an entirely new meaning to the concept of the threshold. The boundary between inside and outside is blurred in this unemployed, formerly corporate man wearing the appearance of a homeless person, seeking sustenance in the art on the outside of the edifice, feeling sensitive about venturing inside and acquiring the individualized identity of museum visitor. Gurian suggests watching for the ways the public actually uses the building, and then formalizing “these unexpected and even serendipitous uses.”²⁵ Maureen Mullarkey states that: “It is safer to poke fun at the ruling class from the inside.”²⁶ This could be read as a sarcastic comment on the museum building up its collections through wealthy patrons, or conversely as a means to be, if for a while, in direct communion with the luxury and aura of the flowing reams of objects from every part of the world.

“Aesthetics is a semantic system, sufficiently tractable—amenable to market sentiment—to pose no ... problem to the Met.”²⁷ In “Musing,” Michel Larousse, the Met’s director, is shown to be “marked by the acquisition of every stylish trapping: a baroque desk, volumes of art books, handmade suits each punctuated by his small, red Chevalier lapel marker.” Not only is he surrounded by some of the most precious works of art that are to be accessed worldwide, items of his personal use are bespoke and branded, signifying his buying into the egocentric identity of his powerful position. Searching for a muse to bring to his next meeting, he thinks of people as akin to the to the *objets d’art* around him, wondering aloud about the “intriguing brunette researcher in the Drawings Department, and the “Italian decorative arts curator [who] always made him think of eighteenth-century French novellas about sex and exquisite furniture.” Or even that, in a pinch, “the startlingly good-looking woman in Finance would do.” “Over the past two and a half decades, the museum had grown around his interests and desires, conforming to them like a well-worn shoe, creased and cleft between the repetition of his opinions, so often delivered in the same direction.

22 Parry et al., *Museum Thresholds*, p. 1.

23 Ibid., p. 7.

24 “Lost,” in Coulson, *Metropolitan Stories*.

25 Heumann Gurian, “Threshold Fear,” p. 23.

26 Maureen Mullarkey, “Tuesday at the Met,” *The Hudson Review*, vol. 40, 2 (Summer 1987): 199.

27 Ibid., p. 194.

... He and it, man and institution, had fused into a single entity.”²⁸ *Metropolitan Stories* takes us down the Met’s tunnels and archways, seats us on its steps and makes us see it as a collection of rooms housing memory. However, while visitors may have their individual memories associated with their day out at the museum, what it purports to house is collective memory across centuries, as mentioned in its ambitious promotional statement at the beginning of this article. In *Metropolitan Stories*, however, the narrative of this great cultural repository is, in actuality, shown to be decided behind the scenes by the director, here the viciously satirized Larousse!

In the museum, the objects are always already in a state of rest. Dynamism in their midst is predicated on movement in obvious ways such as guided tours and visitors moving between and in front of them, as well as conservators temporarily taking objects to be restored and preserved, or taking them off their positions and stands for loans and exchanges. In “Musing,” with Larousse seeking a muse, all departments are thrown into a tizzy as curators select prints, drawings, paintings, sculptures, and jewelry for his approval. Interestingly, the inanimate artworks are narrated in adjectives of movement. The Graces from the Greek and Roman Department, for instance, shuffle out clumsily “the stuttering steps of the conjoined,” and muses “of every stripe, stroke, and stipple” gather in “confused clumps, many creakingly stiff, frozen in their original poses.”²⁹ On the subject of a female muse, the Met’s staff, “young women of Development’s mezzanine offices” – who are, in the snarky narration, “indistinguishable, from one to the next” – are responsible for directing, and socializing with, guests to the museum’s parties. Restfully, they “sail across a room,” as if “airborne,” lifting retrieving fallen flowers and cutlery,” greeting guests and making small talk. In their airy being, they embody “Met style—a cocktail of European elegance and Protestant restraint,” settling subtle disorders, rescuing senior staff from awkward conversations, murmuring, soothing, snapping into action when called for with a “swift, boomerang movement.” Through their collective demeanor and calming gestures, they attempt to make the guests feel at home in the formal ambience.³⁰

Perhaps the most alluring example of resting in the Met is in the marble sculpture of the Renaissance Adam described below in Radish’s story. An “art historian’s work of art,” this Adam is “revolutionary to those who understood his historical force.”³¹ A resident of the Met since 1936, Adam has observed several generations of visitors to the museum, and in a surprising turn of events, has delicately sketched human movements in his mind—how the feet, hands, arms work. Yearning for freedom of motion, he manifests action fiercely with his entire being. A fantastical couple of sentences recall Edith Nesbit’s *The Enchanted Castle*: “All the art at the Met could move, but not until it had to. Not until it was needed.” In Nesbit’s novel, sculptures of the Greek gods come to life every night, enjoying drunken moonlit parties on the island in the middle of the lake that is on the grounds of the castle.³² Having been still for five centuries, Adam, awaiting his “heroic turn,” starts moving very gradually in the same direction, during nights, thrilled at feeling “the pool of flesh expand.” Experimenting with

28 “Musing,” in *ibid.*

29 *Ibid.*

30 “Mezz Girls,” in Coulson, *Metropolitan Stories*.

31 “Adam,” in *ibid.*

32 Edith Nesbit, *The Enchanted Castle* (London: Puffin Classics [1907] 2000); Christopher Marlowe, *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus* (Delhi: Worldview Publications [first performed 1592] 2000).

Repousando no Museu Metropolitan:

construções de espaços de acolhida na obra *Metropolitan Stories* de Christine Coulson

flexing the muscles of his hips, face, fingers, “a midnight flip of the wrist” over several days, Adam feels confident of taking the risk of a bolder motion. Pushing through all the constraints and restraints of his marble form, he assumes his liberation. “Space expanded within his body in a way that felt buoyant and rippled with life.” However, this lasts merely a moment, after which he slips and crashes, shattering his legs into thousands of tiny pieces. Adam is aware that he will get his pedestal maker in trouble, for it is his longing to be greater than himself, like Icarus careening towards the sun in the Greek myth, or Doctor Faustus craving immortality.³³ Suitably horrifying the conservators and curators, Adam garners much media attention and, over the next decade, is rebuilt piece by tiresome piece, like putting together a puzzle, and placed on a new pedestal. What price a decade, however, for a moment of motion in centuries, crossing the museum’s boundaries, something Adam could do only because he knew the museum was his home, that he would be protected and if required, rebuilt, for home is where he could take a reckless risk. The sculpture is found by Radish, connecting human and non-human in a synergy of wordless communication.

The night security guard, Radish, in “Night Moves,” is another interesting character. He enjoys the silent energy of the galleries at night, believing that these hours allow “the art to somehow relax, breathe.” The currency of the night provides Radish with the presumption of treating the space as his own, of permitting himself to be comfortable in it, that is to say, to rest in it. Similar to his musings on modern art, he first takes tentative steps, familiarizing himself with the layout of the galleries and the main artworks, but still getting surprised by the unexpected turn or looming wall with a statue or canvas that had escaped his notice. As he finds his footing, so to say, he creates favorite routes for himself until “this once reliable meal” leaves him hungry. Subsequently, he uses his body to allay his boredom and enjoy the art, preening in front of any reflective surface he can find, and later “comparing his own taut frame to the idealized nudes.” He jumps “from one to the next, flexing and posing to emulate the posture of each figure. His antics are dismissed as comic by his colleagues, who observe him in the security cameras, comment on them, and leave him to his own devices. He gets bolder; taking inspiration from Adam, the marble Renaissance sculpture mentioned above, he considers doing push-ups to win back his girlfriend, another security guard. In order to accomplish this during his watch, he requires privacy, for: “Posing with statues was one thing, but full-on exercise in his pressed uniform was beyond what he could share with the cameras.” He identifies the Blumenthal Patio as the ideal workout room. Neatly folding his uniform and placing it on the stairs’ handrail the very night he takes this decision, he has barely, half-naked, started on his push-ups, when he senses a figure “stretch across the floor in front of him.” Looking up, he realizes that it is his supervisor, and his so-called private adventure has disastrous consequences. For the space of ten minutes, however, the Patio gives him the sense of comfort, a place to just be, to be himself, as do his preferred galleries in the nighttime.³⁴

A striking 1545 charcoal under sketch on *The Miracle of the Loaves* by Tintoretto comes alive in “Big-boned,” arguing that although it was left out of the finished painting, it still rests underneath the painting’s surface. Tired of staying motionless for the last few centuries under the lull of the paint that covers it, it too slips out, an androgynous figure, into the gallery which it has

33 “Adam,” in Coulson, *Metropolitan Stories*.

34 “Night Moves,” in Coulson, *Metropolitan Stories*.

called home for decades. Its aim is truly to treat the museum and its staff as its family, for it heads straight to the cafeteria in a bid to “help the staff, to comfort them.” Recalling Adam’s crash a few years ago, its only purpose is to be kind and empathetic to the curators and other employees. To achieve its goal, it clothes itself in a uniform and becomes part of the food service, hoping that its “450-year affiliation with those loaves and fish” on Tintoretto’s painting would assist in its compassionate objective.³⁵

Entering through the lobby of the Met, Melvin in “Lost” looks for an artwork to capture his emotions, and sauntering through the galleries, crosses “the threshold of the space to find no art in sight.” Disoriented by the space, he wonders if he has wandered into a museum, but which in fact may be viewed as a museum within a museum, with a crisp contemporary air about it rather than centuries-old dust. The Robert Lehman Wing, according to *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Guide*:

opened to the public in 1975, houses the extraordinary collection assembled by Mr. Lehman and his parents. Renaissance maiolica, Venetian glass, bronzes, furniture, enamels, and textiles form the core of an outstanding group of decorative arts. These works ... are exhibited in galleries designed to reflect the ambience of the Lehman house in New York.³⁶

Commenting on privilege, Melvin is dumbfounded as to one’s individual power to make a deal with the Met “to get all this space with *his* name on it.” Enticed by the “unremarkable old sofa” that sits in the “center of the room, facing the fireplace,” Melvin gingerly sits on it very rigidly at first, but then slumping into it as he comprehends “Mr. Lehman’s real trick, the clever tactic that he knew would allow visitors to truly understand what it was like to live with masterpieces—to sit and read the newspaper with Rembrandt, to do the crossword puzzle with El Greco.” Images from Melvin’s childhood home with its plastic-covered furniture run through his mind, and eventually he slides deeper into the sofa, “a gesture of comfort and occupation.” It is interesting that the common working-class man occupies and rests his eyes on, or takes occupation of, items of grandeur and pleasure for purely its own sake: the author’s use of the word “occupied” makes one recall that these works of enjoyment have been “meticulously charted, spoken for, inhabited by a hierarchy of metropolitan personages,”³⁷ suggesting “imperial intercourse through trade and travel” and producing a “rhetoric of power.”³⁸ These add to the splendor and glory of the collections donated to the museum by its wealthy patrons, and indeed the more beauty that Melvin absorbs, the more it absorbs him. Finally, he starts vanishing into this world, his flesh dissipating in an arresting description, his humanness disappearing into the inanimate, until he turns invisible, barely detectable by the video cameras in the gallery. He has “claimed his future, his new home – a fresh routine among masterpieces and the lush trappings of a Lehman life.” While reflecting on six categories he could divide all objects in the museum to – “life and death, sex and love, war and religion, power and money” – he has now dissolved into them, merging his flesh and bones, his very physicality, into the tender emotions of grace and magnificence. Contrary to Adam, who longs to

35 “Big-boned,” in *ibid.*

36 Howard (ed.), *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Guide*, p. 347.

37 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. xvii.

38 *Ibid.*, p. xix.

Repousando no Museu Metropolitan:

construções de espaços de acolhida na obra *Metropolitan Stories* de Christine Coulson

become human and fails, Melvin, who did not even know what he wanted, achieves oneness with art by melting into it and organically becoming it.³⁹ Thus what is not obtained by force or hardness, as in “Adam,” naturally flows in “Lost.” Nevertheless, in both instances the human/non-human bring themselves home, one by an expected crash, the other through an astonishment of succor. The identity that Melvin welcomes in the guise of the Met’s turquoise badge melts into an invisibility that he is glad to slip into, for it brings him into a sort of holy communion with what he realizes is most important to him: the truth of beauty. His abandoned briefcase is found by a guard outside the English period rooms in “Found,” and his name is called out repeatedly at the Employment Office but he is no longer present to answer it for he has willingly merged into the museum, transforming into not-quite-person not-quite object.⁴⁰ On the contrary, in “Chair as Hero,” the narrator – the chair – is granted human expression and emotion, and sighs aloud for a support group to share its tales of dreary days stored in warehouses and lonely attics. It tells of its craving for humans, especially children, to sit on it again; it recalls a toddler wandering past the barriers in the Wrightsman Galleries and remembers woodenly egging him on towards itself. Instead, it finds itself behind gallery ropes at the Met.

In a peculiar take on anonymity is the death, in “Papercuts,” of The Rubber Band Man, the longest-serving employee of the Met (of all the employees in *Metropolitan Stories*) for sixty-eight years, and whose actual name no one knows. His work – that of organizing and distributing the museum’s shopping bags – while considered of no great import by the management, seems to have a rebound effect on the Merchandise Department and museum shop. To systematize things, Edith, a member of the Department, is commissioned to assess The Rubber Band Man’s supplies – hills of boxes and bags that are stacked up in the basement. While finding her way through the various batches of shopping bags, Edith realizes that some of the cartons are fused together to make a door that “swings open on a series of rubber band hinges.” Turning the handle of a real door, she gains access to “a breathtaking room constructed entirely of white paper.” As she notices in wonder the Neoclassical detailing, the recessed areas, the paper furniture and moulding, the realization dawns on her that she is now an object within “a reduced version of the 1775 room from the Hôtel de Crillon in the Wrightsman Galleries.”⁴¹ Checking the room against the *A Guide to the Wrightsman Galleries at The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, I realized that the daybed and armchair are part of a set made for “Marie-Antoinette’s *cabinet de toilette* at the Château de Saint-Cloud.” They are “[p]ainted and gilded walnut, covered with modern green silk damask” and it bears imagining how the objects’ appearance would be replicated in the paper room constructed in this story. The writing desk mentioned in the story, that is said to simulate 18th-century mechanical furniture is, in fact, described in the *Guide* as part of Marie-Antoinette’s *cabinet intérieur* at the Château de Versailles in 1781.⁴² Each of these items, painstakingly constructed out of paper, generates a secret museum within a museum: a paper museum gallery that resides pristinely within the Met’s mountain of packing material. This mirroring of images brings to mind the formal technique of *mise en abyme*. In its play of signifiers the paper museum

39 “Lost,” in Coulson, *Metropolitan Stories*.

40 “Found,” in *ibid.*

41 “Papercuts,” in *ibid.*

42 “Crillon Room,” in *A Guide to the Wrightsman Galleries at The Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art*, ed. James Parker and Claire le Corbeiller (New York, NY: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1979), pp. 26–28.

encapsulates a dream within a dream, that is, a gallery is dreamt up in makeshift paper architecture in the basement of the very museum where the actual gallery is housed. It generates, too, the sense of a secret home, for only one gallery is replicated, as if providing a frame to the real one. In parallel, it simulates, in its privacy, a homelike space, a restful space for its creator to construct and perhaps, on occasion, to dwell in. Embedding the metaphor of framing more tightly into the narrative, the mechanical table's sliding top opens to reveal a painting on an easel; as the image in the *Guide* shows, the easel looks very much like an electronic tablet that has become the mainstay of all cultural institutions that can afford it, from the Met to Palais de Papes in Avignon to the Buddha Tooth Relic Temple and Museum in Singapore. Out pops a letter from 1963 from the Met's director at the time, regarding the loan of the *Mona Lisa*, and on opening the door behind the desk, that forms part of a large cabinet, Edith is astounded to see an interior light automatically turn on, illuminating the iconic, charismatic, unframed picture. The *Mona Lisa* in the original rests in the paper confection, the homelike structure that The Rubber Band Man has crafted quietly and determinedly for his sole enjoyment. "A sensation glowed from the painting, golden and warm and insistent, a true soul rather than a tired tourist attraction. It hummed with a unity and balance, an intangible clarity that vibrated just below the artist's diffused rendering." Edith notes a monogrammed stamp and a catalogue number, and knows that she has "wandered into something at once deeply poetic and profoundly complicated."⁴³ The employee whom no one knew turns out, in fact, to have been the most important person of them all: the artist as well as the collector. The little room is of course fictional, a literary contrivance that mirrors, in seeming miniature, a gallery in the Met. This world is that of the interior, the flow of spaces leading deeper inward, to ever more delicate paper furniture and objects. It is multi-sensory: the rustle of the decor, the smell of aging paper, the optical confusion of a filtered, soft light, the sighing of the fragile, makeshift fixtures. In this context, then, the fictional element is the person who walks into this all-too-real paper shrine. In here, the reality is that of the paper gallery, and the person who walks in enters into this fiction, losing her humanness and truly becoming a character in a story. This story recalls a quite different novel, *The City of Dreaming Books* by Walter Moers, in which the entire fictional city of Zamonía is devoted to publishing and the paper arts, and a monster made entirely of paper lurks deep in the catacombs, the walls of which are also constructed of bound manuscripts.⁴⁴ The makeshift name of The Rubber Band Man segues into the perfectly crafted Crillon Room that he has envisioned as an architect as well as curator: "[a] magnificent life devoted to a pure and constant beauty," much as in Melvin's case.⁴⁵ Here, the difference is that of between riches and wealth, a silent mockery of a flaunting of art as against a discreet elevation, a calling out to the artist-collector's highest self (though one could consider it thievery) in its fabrication and presence. The Rubber Band Man thus transcends the tedium and repetitiveness of his everyday existence, installing a shrine-home for the *Mona Lisa* in his paper residence within the basement of the museum that also houses the actual representation of the real Crillon Room in Louis-Marie-Augustin, Duc d'Aumont's residence in a hotel in Place de la Concorde, Paris.⁴⁶ For Edith,

43 "Papercuts," in Coulson, *Metropolitan Stories*.

44 Walter Moers, *The City of Dreaming Books* (London: Harvill Secker [2004] 2006).

45 "Papercuts," in Coulson, *Metropolitan Stories*.

46 "Crillon Room," in *A Guide to the Wrightsman Galleries at The Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art*, p. 26.
ISSN 2238-5436

Repousando no Museu Metropolitan:

construções de espaços de acolhida na obra *Metropolitan Stories* de Christine Coulson

too, this miracle of the paper Crillon is, for a moment, a “private world, ... [a] slice through a paper façade, revealing the glorious shape of an anonymous existence,” that of a true collector who cares solely about what is significant: the collection. This room is “solitary ... inhabited thanks to the image,” the image that The Rubber Band Man inhabited in his imagination. The dimensions of the room are not mentioned, and this is but fitting for, as Gaston Bachelard asserts: “It would be ridiculous ... to ask the dreamer its dimensions. It does not lend itself to geometrical intuition, but is a solid framework for secret being.”

In fine, through this article I have shown how the space of a well-established museum may be deconstructed into spaces of rest, restful spaces and homelike spaces, all of which create pockets of intimacy within the immensity of the museum. Most of the characters inhabiting the museum as transient residents do so alone, for in solitariness are they able to truly be. Characters who perform rest in the museum in the presence of others disguise themselves, such as the sketch in “Big-boned” or show off, such as Michel Larousse in “Musing.” Some are discomfited in an identity that has been thrust on them, such as Melvin in “Lost” or Radish in “Night Moves.” Others, like the sculpture of Adam in “Adam,” seek to expand their identity in a space they understand as home and which will guard their experimental whims. And yet others like Radish in “Night Moves” view the gallery as a temporary home. Each of the characters, in their search for rest in the Met – for spaces of being and not doing – enters through a threshold, bringing outside and inside together in a state of fluidity and play. While some characters depart, others make their residence in the museum permanent. The deft lightness of Coulson’s writing is undercut by the gravity of certain sentences such as: “We and the objects stay. We have our evenings to cling to and our mornings to unite.”⁴⁷ Indeed, each individual character approaches the construction of homelike spaces as an admixture of animate and inanimate, corresponding non-human and human, visitor and resident.

References

BACHELARD, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places*. Translated by Maria Jolas. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1958.

BOETEGGER, Till. *Threshold Spaces: Transitions in Architecture: Analysis and Design Tools*. Basel: Birkhäuser Verlag GmbH, 2014.

COULSON, Christine. *Metropolitan Stories*, ePub version. New York, NY: Other Press, 2019.

DILLON, Douglas. “Foreword,” in *A Guide to the Wrightsman Galleries at The Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art*, ed. James Parker and Claire le Corbeiller. New York, NY: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1979, p. 7.

HEUMANN GURIAN, Elaine. “Threshold Fear,” personal website, 6 April 2015. <https://www.egurian.com/omnium-gatherum/museum-issues/community/accessibility/threshold-fear> [accessed 8 December 2020].

47 “We,” in Coulson, *Metropolitan Stories*.

HOWARD, Kathleen (Ed). *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Guide*. New York, NY: The Metropolitan Museum of Art (1983) 2000.

KIRKUS Reviews. "Metropolitan Stories." 8 October 2019. <https://www.kirkus-reviews.com/book-reviews/christine-coulson/metropolitan-stories/> [accessed 2 December 2020].

MARLOWE, Christopher. *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus*. Delhi: Worldview Publications [first performed 1592] 2000.

MOERS, Walter. *The City of Dreaming Books*. London: Harvill Secker (2004) 2006.

MULLARKEY, Maureen. "Tuesday at the Met." In *The Hudson Review*, vol. 40, 2 (Summer 1987): 193–205.

PARKER, James; LE CORBEILLER, Claire (Ed.). "Crillon Room," in idem, *A Guide to the Wrightsman Galleries at The Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art*. New York, NY: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1979, p. 26–30.

PARRY, Rose; PAGE, Ruth; MOSELEY, Alex (Ed.). *Museum Thresholds: The Design and Media of Arrival*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2018.

SAID, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Vintage, 1994.

WOLFE, Bill. "A Conversation with Christine Coulson: Behind the Scenes at the Met in Metropolitan Stories," *Read Her Like an Open Book*. 27 April 2020. <https://readherlikeanopenbook.com/2020/04/27/a-conversation-with-christine-coulson-behind-the-scenes-at-the-met-in-metropolitan-stories/> [accessed 2 December 2020].

Recebido em 06 de junho de 2020
Aprovado em 05 de outubro de 2020