



State Of The Arts

A Force To Be Reckoned

Queens' Cultural Identity As Strong As Its People

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By Jennifer Pollard

While undergoing renovation in 2002, the Museum of Modern Art opened a temporary branch of the historic museum in Long Island City. Later, it packed up and moved back to Manhattan, leaving Queensites with a cultural void. This year, the Museum for African Art, an institution currently based in Long Island City, announced that it too will move to Manhattan's Museum Mile.

All of this shuffling around could make a borough feel a bit neglected. It seems that time and again, the arts in Queens are overlooked for the arts in Manhattan. But underestimating the arts in Queens would be a dire mistake.

No Comparison

Alanna Heiss, the director of P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Museum, said it is impossible to compare the arts in Queens to the arts in Manhattan. Queens is a force in and of itself.

"Queens has many great cultural institutions, but it's almost idiotic to compare it to Manhattan," Heiss said. "This is a huge borough with a huge variety of arts organizations. These organizations serve their borough well and make New York City have a richer cultural menu."

The Museum of the Moving Image is a unique institution that enriches the arts scene in Queens — an idea which we delve into later in this issue. David Schwartz, the chief curator of the Museum, has been working there since it opened in 1988, and has seen a shift in attitudes toward Queens.

"I think the perception of the arts in Queens has definitely changed over the years," Schwartz said. "I've been here since the museum opened, and when it opened, I think there was some resistance. People weren't always willing to come out to Queens to see a museum. But I don't see that attitude as much; maybe it's because we've been around for 20 years or maybe it's because this area has changed a lot. Today, there is a lot of vitality to this area."

Tom Finkelpearl, the director of the Queens Museum of Art, believes that the perception of inferior arts in Queens exists only as much as we acknowledge it. It's self-defeating to combat the perception because it's really just giving credence to it.

"There is a little bit of self-doubt in Queens," Finkelpearl said. "But we have to get over it by being about to laugh at it. It's important to talk about what we have here that's better than anywhere else. We try to look at our strengths rather than our weaknesses."

The notion that Queens is less of a cultural powerhouse than other areas is, in fact, laughable. Here, we have history, diversity and a thriving community of emerging artists — and that should be celebrated.

"In order to stand out, we need to present exhibitions that are good and that are different," Finkelpearl said. "We need to celebrate things that are unique to Queens, and unique to our particular slice of Queens."

QMA recently presented an exhibition on Robert Moses, called *Robert Moses and the Modern City: The Road to Recreation*. This exhibition was a "huge success," Finkelpearl said, because it focused on a subject that is extremely relevant to both Queens and QMA. Not only does QMA feature Moses' Panorama, but the museum is housed in a building that was built by Moses, and it is located in a park — Flushing Meadows Corona Park — that was planned by Moses.

"That exhibition really made sense for us," Finkelpearl said.

So Much History

Other arts institutions are similarly presenting exhibitions that highlight the rich history of Queens. This borough was once one of the most influential communities in jazz. Flushing Town Hall, a cultural institution in Flushing, touts the Queens Jazz Trail, a tour that takes visitors around the historic jazz sites in Queens, including the Louis Armstrong House in Corona.

"Flushing Town Hall is an absolute treasure," Janet Schneider, the consulting director of Flushing Town Hall, said in a recent phone interview. "It's completely unique. The place is incredibly historic; Frederick Douglass once spoke there. You can hear great music, see great art and learn some history — especially about jazz in Queens."

While some arts institutions are choosing to celebrate the history of Queens, others are honoring the diversity of the borough. QMA is currently showing *Generation 1.5*, an exhibition that features the works of artists who immigrated to this country in their teens. Although none of the featured artists live in Queens, Finkelpearl said that it is "a relative topic" to Queens. Similarly, the Museum of the Moving Image hosts *Independence World Cinema Showcase*, an ongoing film series that screens international films at the museum.

Reaching A Diverse Audience

"As a moving image museum, it's important to be global because new filmmakers are emerging all over the world — right now Asia is the hotspot for world cinema — and you never know what area will emerge as an important center for world cinema," Schwartz said. "Also, the international films fit with our very diverse audiences. To me, that's just another reason why I like the fact that we're in Queens, because I think the diversity of Queens is reflected in our programming with its international scope. And the international scope of the programs is reflected in the population of our audiences."

In September, the Museum of the Moving Image will participate in the inaugural Croatian Film Festival. Schwartz said this type of festival will be interesting because it will draw two kinds of audiences: members of the Croatian community and cinephiles.

Queens Theatre in the Park also strives to integrate new and exciting works with the diverse population of Queens. In addition to hosting the Latino Cultural Festival, the Asian Cultural Festival, and the Black Cultural Arts Series, Queens Theatre in the Park sponsors the Immigrant Voices Project, a program that develops new plays reflecting the diverse demographics of New York City.

"Our primary focus in new play development is the work of immigrant authors," Rosenstock said. "That's part of our mission because we want artists on our stage to reflect the diversity of our borough. This is our niche, and it's a niche that has brought us to the attention of our peers in Manhattan. It has brought us to a lot of good funding."

Rosenstock said that rather than lagging behind the rest of the arts world, Queens is paving the future in the way it handles diversity.

"Queens is the most diverse area in the world, and we're addressing that," Rosenstock said. "The rest of America will look like Queens one day, and right now everyone is interested in how Queens is handling this — including the cultural world. All of us are striving to diversify our artists and diversify our programs. We are carving a piece of the city in the way we handle diversity."

By encouraging new and diverse voices in the theater, Queens Theatre in the Park is touching on two important assets of Queens: the diverse population and the growing group of young, emerging artists.



A rendering of the soon to be constructed addition at the Museum of the Moving Image

New Crop

Recently, Queens — Long Island City and Astoria in particular — has become a haven for emerging artists. They flock here because of the reasonable rent, the proximity to Manhattan and, now more than ever, the cultural institutions that support their work.

"Queens is often an individualistic choice for artists," Heiss, who frequently works with emerging artists at P.S. 1, said. "That was true in the jazz days when lots of great musicians lived here, and now it's happening again. Artists move here because a) it's cheap, b) other artists live here, and c) location. Usually arts organizations follow the artists, but in Long Island City, P.S. 1 came first, and the artists have followed."

The mere presence of major contemporary arts institutions in Queens, like P.S. 1 and the Noguchi Museum, is significant. It has established Queens as a center for contemporary art, and has attracted young artists and arts organizations to the neighborhood. Already, several internationally-known artists have relocated their studios in Queens, including world-renowned contemporary artist Matthew Barney.

"Queens is at the cusp of the emerging arts scene," said Rosenstock, who works with new playwrights year-round. "Artists are emigrating here and small grass-roots companies are starting to emerge. If people are looking for the most cutting-edge art, I'd say that they should start by looking at the arts in Queens."

Today, Queens stands in a remarkably advantageous place, culturally speaking. It is equipped with the history, diversity and artistic youth to make some serious noise in the art world. Now many of the cultural institutions of Queens are striving to match the flourishing arts scene; the Museum of the Moving Image, QMA and Queens Theatre in the Park have all announced plans to expand their facilities and programs.

Queens is on the precipice of a cultural boom, so look out Manhattan, because one day, Queens may steal some of your museums and your artists.



Kenny Franklin's forms are inspired by Queens



The Kun Yang Lin Dancers are a highlight of this year's Asian Festival at Queens Theatre in the Park



Over the Panorama, an iconic sculpture that lives in the Queens Museum of Art



Brian Rogers projects images onto walls at the Chocolate Factory, one of the best spaces to open in the last few years in Queens



Artist Ross Sheehan is one of Queens' artists pushing Queens to the next level



Flushing Town Hall is a vital arts resource