

And Sackler Said, 'Let There Be Light'

By Linda Lin

Q: Why did the Fogg Art Museum cross the road?

A: Because the light changed.

Not the traffic light, of course—but light as an architectural device. This summer's cross-Broadway migration of three major collections from the William Hayes Fogg Art Museum to the Arthur M. Sackler Museum marks an even more profound shift: from the subdued classicism of the Fogg to the bright, post-modern minimalism of the Sackler.

Designed by the British prize-winning architect James Stirling to house Harvard's East Asian, Islamic and ancient art collections, the Sackler is the first addition to the public exhibition space of the University's art museums since 1927, when the Fogg building opened. Shifting architectural values, combined with a low (\$9 million) budget and an awkwardly shaped site, have led Stirling to create a structure of functional rather than decorative lines.

Stirling has dispersed the gloom of the Fogg by combining natural and artificial lighting in the Sackler. He protects sensitive objects (such as Japanese prints and Oriental scrolls) with artificial illumination while bathing the sturdier sculptures in natural daylight by means of skylights and baffles.

Even before its official opening, the Sackler has received high praise for the simplicity and practicality of its design. American architect Philip Johnson has noted that Stirling "had to contend with not enough money, with not enough room, with not enough space. . . yet he was able to squeeze out of it a plan of this magnificence." John Rosenfield, acting director of the Harvard Art Museums, concurs. "I think it's adding to the architectural face of the community," he says.

Assistant Director for Operations in the Harvard University Art Museums Philip Parsons describes the Sackler as "intimate" while pointing to its "informal monumentality." For him, "it's been an obsession for the last three years. I've thought about nothing else."

Parsons's excitement about the Sackler stems largely from his concern for the preservation and accessibility of the works in the three collections that are being transferred. Cramped display spaces, inconvenient storage areas, detrimental lighting and a lack of climate control have long troubled curators at the Fogg. The new Sackler has 75 percent the display space of the Fogg itself, and also boasts storage facilities which allow works to be viewed even when they are not on public display.

Because of the additional space, many works that have been hidden in storage will enjoy more display time. "If you have a favorite piece," says Parsons, "it'll be there, we hope. And if you want to bring a friend to see it a year later, it'll still be there."

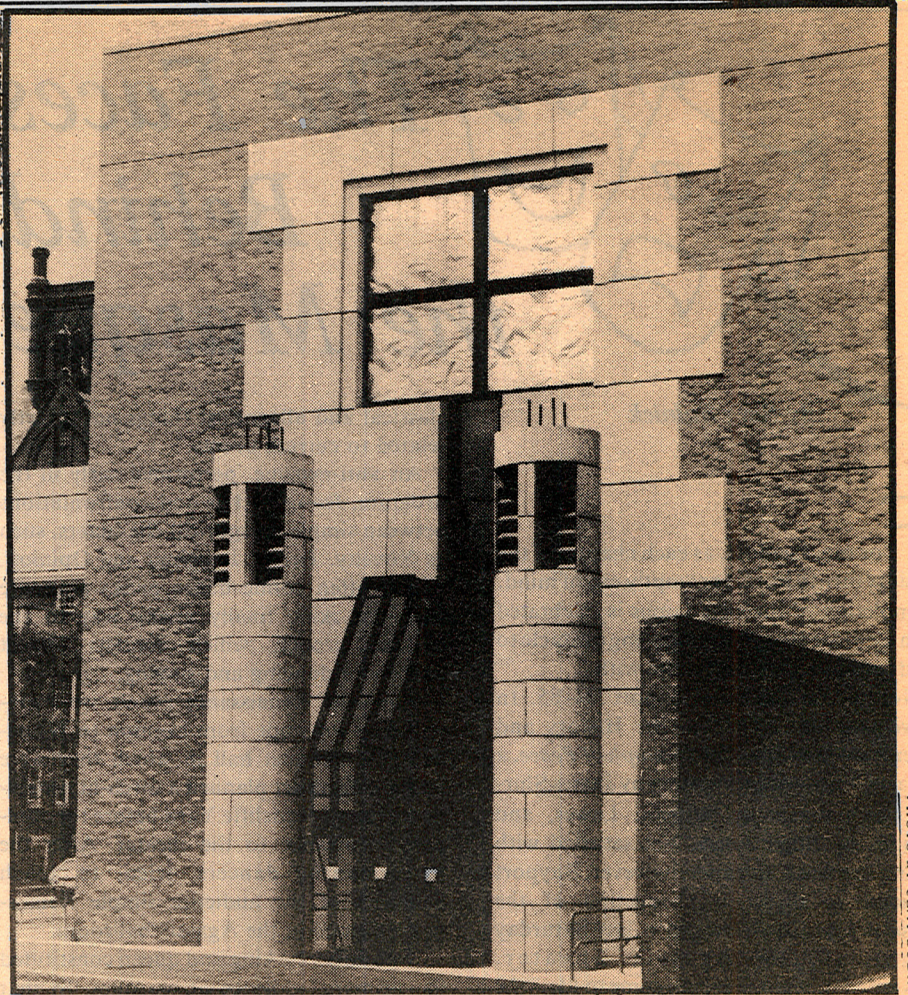
Although the new museum will not open its doors to the public until October 21, curators of the three collections have already started to occupy their Sackler offices. During the summer, the corresponding departments will complete the move from their current homes in the Fogg, bringing with them their faculty, offices, permanent collections, libraries and classes.

Of course, the actual collections will have to make their way across Broadway, as well. And Parsons recognizes what a dangerous intersection his new building occupies. "You

won't see people walking across the street with objects," he says. Security requires that most works be transported by truck.

Meanwhile, the Fogg will be closed—from June 9 until the Sackler's opening—for refurbishment. According to Parsons, most of the Fogg's changes will be "modest improvements"—cosmetic changes to make the old building look brighter and newer. In addition, the Harvard Fine Arts department will gain custody of the entire third floor of the Fogg, complete with an outside entrance to their offices and classrooms. Downstairs, the galleries will be rearranged to provide viewers with a chronological survey of European and American art.

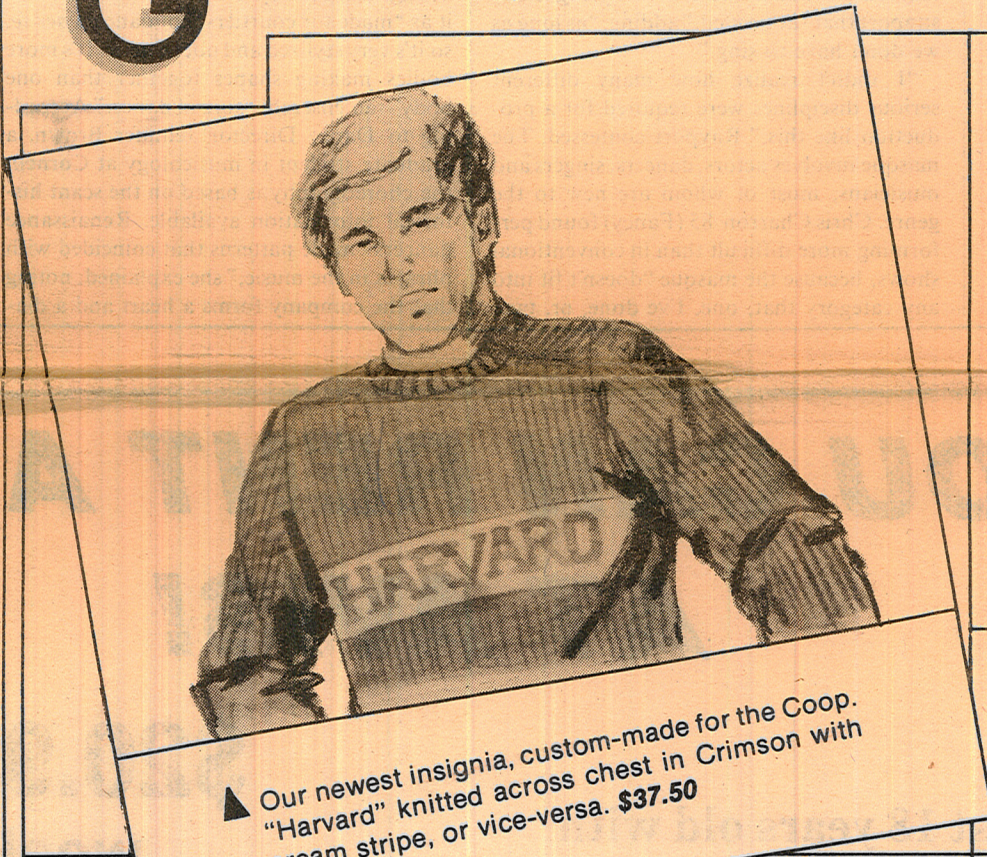
The Sackler is named for its principal donor, Dr. Arthur M. Sackler, who contributed more than five million dollars to the project. "He is what Andrew Carnegie was to libraries in his day," comments Rosenfield. Adds Parsons: "When you think about it, this is probably the biggest thing the Harvard Art Museums have ever seen."



The new Sackler: dispersing the gloom of the Fogg.

PHOTO BY CLAY BUDIN

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