Beating a path to the boats in the Addison’s basement

Model ships at the Addison Gallery of American Art in Andover include the Flying Cloud (pictured) and the Mayflower.

By Mark Feeney | Globe Staff | April 05, 2014

ANDOVER — Beloved by enthusiasts of all ages, model ships may not be art — whatever that is — but they are undeniably beautiful objects, as much sculpture as toy: miniature monuments to marine architecture. Both the Museum of Fine Arts and the Peabody Essex Museum own and exhibit ship models. So does the Addison Gallery of American Art, at Phillips Academy.
Unlike the MFA and PEM, the Addison has model ships written into its founding document. Museum benefactor Thomas Cochran specified in his 1930 letter of trust that “there may be housed in the Addison Gallery scale models of famous ships connected with the recent history of the United States.”

Cochrane’s inclusion of ship models at the Addison was part of his awareness, unusual for the time, of the place of decorative arts and American cultural history within the fine arts. “It was all about thinking of American art in the broadest sense,” says Susan Faxon, the Addison’s associate director.

There are two dozen ship models in the Addison collection, commissioned by the museum in the early ’30s. The work of 10 model makers (different makers specialized in different types of ship), all are built to the same scale: ¼ inch to 1 foot.

Among the ships are Christopher Columbus’s Santa Maria; the Pilgrims’ Mayflower; Henry Hudson’s Half Moon; Robert Fulton’s Clermont, the first steamship; the racing yacht America, which gave its name to the America’s Cup; and the most famous clipper ship of them all, the Flying Cloud. The models are in display cases in the basement, except for the Flying Cloud, which is on the first floor.
MODELS OF
AMERICAN SAILING
SHIPS

Addison Gallery of American Art Phillips

“The miniaturization is the thing that overwhelms most everyone, adults as well as kids,” says Faxon. “It’s astonishing. The detailing is so meticulous.” How meticulous? The engine of the Clermont actually works. The seats in the cabin of the 1850s trans-Atlantic packet ship Dreadnought are mahogany and its cuspidors are brass.

The Addison’s permanent collection comprises more than 17,000 works. Among artists represented are Jackson Pollock, Edward Hopper, Thomas Eakins, Georgia O’Keeffe, and Walker Evans. Yet at least some visitors ignore the paintings and sculptures and photographs to head for the basement stairs.
“There are the people who come again and again to see the ships,” says Anthony F. Connors, head of security. “They ask for them. Others don’t even have to ask. They know right where they are and go straight to them.”

Even after the Addison’s recent expansion and renovation, completed in 2010, exhibition space is limited. And those 17,000 items keep getting added to. Is there a temptation to put away the ships in favor of more traditional art?

“This is valuable real estate,” Faxon says of the ships’ basement gallery. “It’s very enticing to hang paintings here. But historically, [the models are] so important to this institution. This is the way our founder and his advisers thought about American art. There’s also a very practical reason [not to move them]. When they’re in storage, they take up almost the same amount of space. They have to be cradled and domed. You can’t just stack them up. And storage space is almost as precious as display space.”

The models are a popular destination for school groups. Jamie Kaplowitz, an Addison education associate, leads discussions with the students, relating the models to the art upstairs or to US history.

Kaplowitz recalls a group that visited before Thanksgiving last year. “We talked about what life was like on the Mayflower and what they knew about the Mayflower. Then they only wanted to talk about the Titanic.”

Until such time as the Addison commissions another set of models, the collection lacks that particular vessel.

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