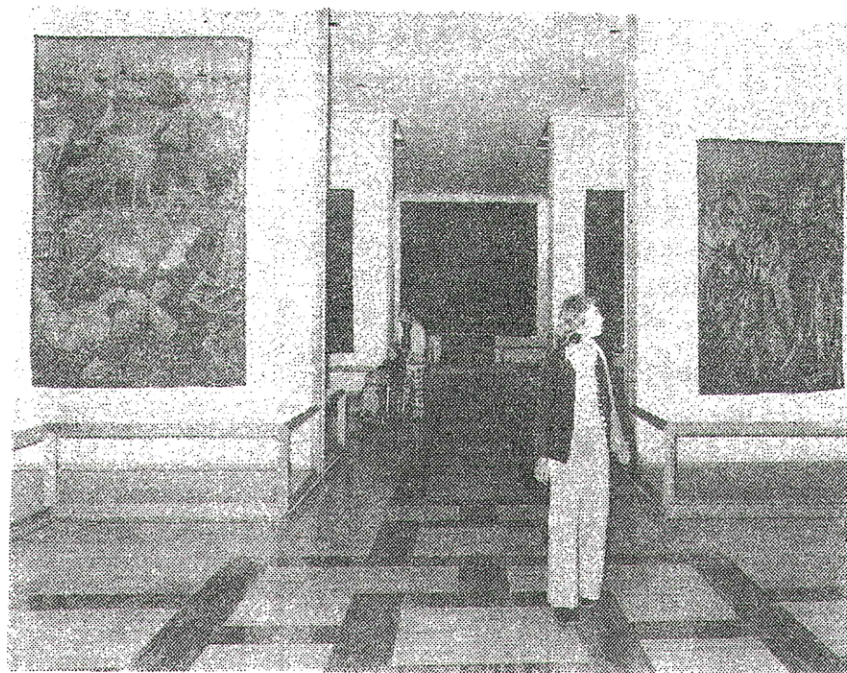


A New Look in the Museums



BY PRIVATE gift, a totally rebuilt suite of Fagan Galleries adds palatial dignity and space to old arts at the Legion

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NORTHWEST Indian totem pole welcomes de Young visitors into a rich array of world ethnic arts.

"MY NAME is Rip Van Winkle" was the thought that entered my mind when after six weeks' absence I caught up the other day with events at the de Young Museum and California Palace of the Legion of Honor.

Both museums, I realized almost with surprise, have completed major projects of interior construction. Vital new developments in both gave me the wonderful feeling I had wandered into a place where I'd never been before, as if in a strange city.

1) Most startling is the Legion's transformation of three large galleries into a totally new single grand suite — high, wide and regally palatial.

The suite presents a superb sight and perspective the moment you reach its entry. It is now permanently named the Helene Irwin Fagan Galleries, after the late art patroness Mrs. Paul Fagan. Funds from the William G. Irwin Charity Foundation made it possible. The cost must have been large.

Already on view in it are Fagan Collection tapestries, as well as others, of the 14th to 16th centuries. Among them, one from an "Apocalypse" series, 600 years old, is said to be the oldest surviving French tapestry. Least old is a lushly fascinating Renaissance landscape and harvest scene, full of floral, human and animal vividness.

Also in place, with more to come, are antique furniture and religious sculptures, locally familiar and unfamiliar. One limestone "Madonna and Child" of the early 15th century is most delicate and touching.

Portland architect John Yeon has achieved a rare feat in creating so handsome and atmospheric a gallery setting, so dignified and lofty, with its travertine floor and amber-hued geometric floor pattern, its oak paneled platforms, walls, railings and softly blue hung ceiling.

However, while its lighting is finely expressive, it seems too subdued for perfect viewing of the individual art objects.

2) In the de Young Museum, an entirely new, intricate and absorbing division of traditional arts of Africa, Oceania and old America likewise marks a new step in local museum development. The installation has been funded privately, not by tax money.

Its intimate, warmly colored and dramatically illuminated circle of exhibit sections is imaginative and practical. Starting with a formal entry distantly faced by a Northwest Indian totem pole, the exhibits embrace visitors in devious moods of scrutiny and exploration.

Whether the set-up is theoretically right in building so various and copious a show of different regional cultures — American Indian, international African, Eskimo, South Seas and pre-Columbian, I'm not yet sure.

Yet its design by Royal Basich and Thomas Seligman adds up steadily to a fascinating, compound experience.

3) Meantime the Legion of Honor has unveiled its much enlarged quarters of the Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts, housing drawings and prints.