

Exhibition Reviews

Emily Dickinson Museum. Jane Wald, Jane and Robert Keiter Family Executive Director; Brooke Steinhauser, Program Director. Restoration Project, Phase 2: August 16, 2022—Present. <https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/>

In the opening credits of *Dickinson*, the irreverent, historically distorted comedy about Emily Dickinson from AppleTV+, the Dickinson Homestead appears almost as a character itself, framed in a black-edged photograph. When you visit the house today, it looms large—just like in that photograph—perched at a slight vantage point above Main Street, just a few blocks from downtown Amherst, Massachusetts. It isn't so hard, approaching with your back to the modern world, to feel transported back to the nineteenth century.

Last summer, the house reopened to the public after a significant restoration project that allows visitors to carry that feeling of connection to the past into the house's interior. Prior to the project, the museum operated in a sort of spartan



Homestead exterior. (Photo by Patrick Fecher; Courtesy of the Emily Dickinson Museum)

fashion, with few interior details or artifacts dating to the period of Emily Dickinson. When the museum was forced to close during the pandemic, it provided an opportunity to develop an ambitious long-range plan that, in this first phase, has restored “interior architectural features, finishes, and furnishings of the revered poet’s Homestead” per the reopening press release. This project coincided with a renewed interest in Emily Dickinson, in part thanks to the AppleTV+ series, and the museum reopened to the public in August 2022 to an eager audience.

The hour-long house tour begins in the dining room, where visitors gather around a modern table and the tour guide sets the scene. Then, the tour steps into the front hall, where you are transported back in time to the 1830s. On our tour, the guide was clearly proud to be able to show off the reproduction floorcloth, and indeed, the tour group was quite pleased to see these beautiful textile additions and hear about the details of how they were discovered and/or reproduced. Additionally, it was neat to see throughout the house little windows of surviving wallpaper next to the full reproductions. In this space, we are introduced to Emily’s parents, placing her within the context of a well-off (for most of their lives, anyway), well-educated, and well-respected family in Amherst.

After the front hall, the tour moves through the library, double parlor, and to two upstairs bedrooms. Upstairs, one non-period room is devoted to thinking about her poetry, including the process by which it was published after her death. Throughout the house, we learned about Emily’s relationships with her own family, with the surrounding community, and with other writers and editors. I appreciated the ways in which the tour occasionally de-centered Emily, in an effort to demonstrate how influential others, such as her father, were in her life and her experience of the house. Our tour finished in the garden, in full view of an oak tree present in Dickinson’s own time.

The new interior elements serve a powerful purpose. In our collective imagination, Emily Dickinson is often two dimensional—a recluse in white, her only contact with the world through her words, which she guarded mightily. Stepping into her technicolor home, with the loud floral prints in the parlor and the busy blue wallpaper in her mother’s bedroom upstairs, we are invited to broaden our conception of her life. Here is a woman who lived within the context of a family and a community, and who occupied this full home. Although wallpapers and architectural finishes might seem ancillary to the narrative, in fact, they are crucial to providing visitors with an authentic experience, allowing us to engage more deeply with Emily Dickinson’s experience as both a person and a poet.

Visitors continue to flock to historic houses because they are intimate spaces in which to come into contact with the past. A house is where we do those mundane human things, like eat, sleep, and bathe; it is also where we might battle an illness or have a tryst with a lover. And indeed, I found myself wanting to hear more about those aspects of Emily’s life. What was the nature of her illness that increasingly kept her separate from her community? The reopening press indicated that health and healthcare would be a significant part of the reinterpretation, especially in the



Bedroom. (Photo by Jon Crispin; Courtesy of the Emily Dickinson Museum)



Northwest chamber. (Photo by Jon Crispin; Courtesy of the Emily Dickinson Museum)

context of Emily's mother; our tour was running over when we reached her mother's bedroom and didn't quite make those links.

The next phase of the planned renovation will connect the Evergreens, the house of Austin Dickinson and his wife, Susan, with the Dickinson Homestead. The path between them is already present, although currently unused. It is a tricky business, interpreting the personal life of an individual who looms so large in popular imagination. And yet, many visitors come to the Emily Dickinson Museum with some ideas about the relationship between Emily and her sister-in-law, Susan. Our group talked about this possible romantic relationship inside the house, and it was particularly interesting to consider it in the context of the posthumous publishing of Emily's poems and of her legacy. As the Evergreens story continues to be fleshed out, I look forward to the ways in which the museum will further engage in that conversation and with queer history.

What I ultimately found to be most powerful about my visit was the way in which Emily's words were spun into the very fabric of the tour. Our guide had a thick sheaf of papers, which he read from in almost every single room. Her words, paired with family furnishings (including Emily's own bed!) and other interior details, render this famous person at less of a remove. And, that subsequently, helps her poetry come alive, move through the centuries, and continue to resonate with us today.

Meghan Gelardi Holmes, Gibson House Museum

Join In: Voluntary Associations in America. Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

Cynthia Wayne, Lead Exhibition Director; Nathan Dorn, Lead Curator; Jurretta Heckscher, Curator; and the *Join in* exhibits team. December 16, 2022–December 31, 2023. <https://www.loc.gov/exhibitions/join-in-voluntary-associations-in-america/about-this-exhibition/>

Alexis de Tocqueville was among the first to highlight the remarkable tendency of Americans to form voluntary associations in pursuit of shared purposes. During his visit to the US in the early nineteenth century, he observed Americans enthusiastically establishing associations at a fervent rate that he believed to be unparalleled anywhere else in the world. For many years, the United States has been celebrated as, in the words of the eminent twentieth-century American historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr., “a nation of joiners.” In 2000, however, political scientist Robert D. Putnam noted a decline in civic engagement in some quarters, and urged Americans to reassess whether they still embody the spirit of “a nation of joiners.” The Library of Congress has unveiled a new exhibition, *Join In: Voluntary Associations in America*, which contributes to a conversation about the history of voluntary associations and their significance in American society.