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At the Met, the Art Moves



Michael Nagle for The Wall Street Journal

Shen Wei Dance Arts performers rehearse their new work, 'Still Moving,' in the Engelhard Court at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

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The Metropolitan Museum of Art has presented art of virtually every type, from ancient Mesopotamian figures to guitars made in Brooklyn. Now, for the first time, the museum's concert series will host a site-specific dance performance within the sculpture-filled Engelhard Court. While performances have taken place in galleries before, choreographer Shen Wei is the first to design a work for a specific hall.

Lined with windows and dotted with work by artists such as Augustus Saint-Gaudens and Hiram Powers, the Engelhard Court was the choreographer's choice for "Still Moving" because the stationary figures enhance the contrast between stillness and movement. "As soon as you walk in, you see the beautiful classical and renaissance sculpture," said the choreographer, adding that the museum setting draws a different type of attention from the viewer. "Sometimes theater can be entertainment. But in a museum, we walk in, and we open our minds to absorb the work."



In a site-specific performance at the Engelhard sculpture court at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, choreographer Shen Wei uses dancers' bodies and sculptors' works to examine movement and stillness.

"Still Moving," which will be staged on June 6 and June 13, functions in some ways as an art installation: Almost 20 dancers are positioned all over the court like sculptures, then peel off, giving way to two dancers who cover themselves in body paint. "You cannot get too crazy because you don't want to damage any artworks," Mr. Shen said.

A spokeswoman for the museum, Elyse Topalian, noted that the Met was receptive to the choreographer's plan for a performance that would relate to the works of art—despite the dancers' proximity to the sculptures. "In general, the museum likes to explore different venues in the building, such as the Temple of Dendur in the Sackler Wing for performances," she said. "So we're delighted that the Shen Wei performance will be presented in the American Wing."



Choreographer Shen Wei, center, leads a rehearsal in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Engelhard Court.

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Mr. Shen was born in China, where he studied Chinese opera, before moving to New York in 1995. He has since become known for inventive, interdisciplinary work, and rose to global prominence in 2008 when he choreographed the opening ceremonies of the Summer Olympics in Beijing. His Manhattan-based company, Shen Wei Dance Arts, melds elements of contemporary dance, Chinese opera, visual arts and movement based on his own technique, which requires extreme attention to breath, weight and gravity.

"I deal with a lot of internal energy, and how internal energy affects our body," he said. "The dancers have to be super sensitive about their bodies."

Often the method results in extremely slow movements. The first portion of "Still Moving," for example (a restaging of his previous work, "Near the Terrace") conjures the illusion of dancers as still sculptures who pop to life at random moments as music—Arvo Part's "Fur Alina" and "Spiegel Im Spiegel"—is performed.

In this dreamlike work, several female dancers are bare-chested and wear floor-length skirts resembling blankets tied around the waist. The second portion is a duet (with paint), set to a commissioned score by Daniel Burke. The third portion picks up the pace and features rubberized body stockings designed by Mr. Shen and fashion designer Austin Scarlett.

"It's about highlighting the body," Mr. Scarlett said. "In a way, they are naked. The imagery is that they should be like living sculptures."

Apart from the imperiled sculptures, Mr. Shen noted that the unusual setting presented quite a few choreographical challenges. For the faster-paced third portion, for instance, the museum's hard flooring was a concern. "I cannot do too much big movement or too fast because the floor is marble—not like a stage floor or a wooden floor," he said. And though he could visit Engelhard Court during regular museum hours, rehearsal time there was extremely limited: "You can't just close a part of the gallery from the public," said the choreographer, who started the work in the studio, then made major adjustments. "When we got here, I changed a lot. It's a new creation inside the museum."