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DJ Spooky, Resident Artist at
Metropolitan Museum

D.J. Spins Museum's Attitude

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Photo: Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

SOON after the Metropolitan Museum of Art hired Limor Tomer last year to oversee its concerts and lectures department, she invited her old friend Paul D. Miller, the hip-hop turntablist, composer and author, on a private tour of the galleries.

The two had known each other since the 1990s, when Ms. Tomer was overseeing the programming at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's BAMcafé, and Mr. Miller was starting his career as "D J Spooky, [That Subliminal Kid](#)." By the end of their walkabout, which hadn't begun with an agenda, Ms. Tomer and Mr. Miller were sketching out ideas that he will explore in a yearlong artist residency at the Met that begins Friday with a screening of the 1956 South Korean film "[Madame Freedom](#)." Mr. Miller has composed a new soundtrack score for the film that he and a string quartet will perform live.

"What I tend to do," Ms. Tomer said, "is walk around the museum with artists and try to see the galleries from their perspective — to see what they see and to understand what speaks to them and how they would animate these spaces. With Paul every gallery we visited he'd say, 'Oh, yeah, I have this project.' In the Asian gallery he was talking about early Korean film and postwar Korean theater, art and culture. When we went to the Oceanic gallery it turned out he's building an artist retreat on a small Pacific island and has been studying the musical instruments there." The tour led Ms. Tomer to reconsider what residencies at the Met — previously long-term affairs — should be and to see Mr. Miller as exactly the game changer she was looking for.

"To me the Met is like a huge record collection," Mr. Miller said. "You have everything from Napoleon's sword to Thomas Edison's first cylinder recordings. They have an incredible archive — not just the paintings and sculptures, but technological artifacts, armor. And I thought that would be incredible to do a megamix, responding to the collection. So Limor and I began to talk about that, and I said: 'I don't want it to just be music. I want it to be conceptual. I want it to be a rigorous

engagement with contemporary art.’ ”

Mr. Miller, at 42, is a self-contained industry. He makes CDs — the latest is “The Secret Song” (Thirsty Ear) — in which he revels in the art of the remix, a magpielike approach to juxtaposing newly composed music with snippets of existing recordings that become a kind of running commentary, and he has been engaged to remix tracks for other artists, including Yoko Ono, Meredith Monk, Stewart Copeland and Steve Reich. He has ruminated on what he calls “remix culture” in a book, “Rhythm Science,” and compiled [“Sound Unbound,”](#) a collection of essays on the subject by musicians, novelists, lawyers and filmmakers. (Both are published by MIT Press and come with CDs.)

Then there’s his D J Spooky [iPhone and iPad app](#) (an Android version is in the works), which lets users do D.J. moves — mixing, scratching, beat-matching and adding electronic effects — on tracks from their iTunes libraries using a twin-turntable interface. And he edits a magazine, [Origin](#), which describes its mission as reporting on “yoga, art, music, conscious lifestyle, humanitarianism and sustainability.”

Mr. Miller allowed that he does not do yoga — his preferred form of exercise is jogging — but calls himself “kind of a workaholic.”

Echoes of most of these projects will find their way into Mr. Miller’s Met residency, which will include not only concerts and talks but also a gallery tour and the publication of three books based on his planned multimedia performances.

Mr. Miller seems perpetually onstage, but comfortably so. Raised in Washington and now based in New York, he is the son of two academics. His father, Paul E. Miller, was the dean of Howard University Law School; his mother, Rosemary Eloise Reed Miller, is a historian of design. The younger Mr. Miller attended Bowdoin College in Maine, and though he studied composition with [Elliott Schwartz](#), he expected to pursue a career in diplomacy.

“I wasn’t planning to do music,” he said. “It still blows my mind that I’m 42 and being called D J Spooky.”

Speaking about his projects on a rainy morning recently he settled into a plush chair backstage at the Met’s Grace Rainey Rogers auditorium and set out a handful of gadgets, including an iPad and a Samsung tablet — he believes in giving the recent litigants equal time — on a coffee table.

The devices were in constant use as he spoke. Discussing “Madame Freedom,” for example, he pulled up the film’s original Korean poster on his iPad. A passing mention of the Renaissance mathematician and astronomer [Johannes Kepler](#) was followed quickly by a portrait, which he displayed on the Samsung. Visual and musical examples, as well as film clips, punctuated the discussion of his Met projects.

In “Madame Freedom,” a morality tale about the collision of Korean and Western culture, Mr. Miller’s 2011 score replaces the original jazz-tinged soundtrack music by Kim Yong-hwan. Mr. Miller’s contribution will be performed live by the Korean Film Ensemble, a string group, with Mr. Miller adding electronic sound and using his iPad app to manipulate the ensemble’s performance electronically.

“The reason I’m interested in this film,” Mr. Miller said, pulling up a copy of his carefully notated score on his iPad, “is that after the Korean War we saw the rise of Korean cinema, which is now really dominant in Asia. And at the time of ‘Madame Freedom,’ jazz, rock and a lot of the Korean musical scene was what was coming out of American soldiers’ radios.

“What’s happening, at the time, is that the social process of hanging out, in Korea, is being updated, with jazz as a kind of cafe culture. And this film became an emblem of a generation. It wasn’t just a film. The story had been serialized in the newspaper, and everyone knew it. And it shows people moving slowly into a Western consumer lifestyle.

“But a lot of the conflict at the core of the film is based on a family’s relationship with its neighbors, and one of the neighbors is a D.J., or at least someone who’s always playing records. I found it really charming to think about the impact of jazz and the African-American vernacular on Asia. I’m interested in seeing how global hybrid cultures work.”

The second and third installments of Mr. Miller’s series — [“The Nauru Elegies”](#) (Jan. 18, with a related tour of the museum’s Oceanic galleries on Jan. 19 and a panel discussion on Jan. 23) and “Of Water and Ice” (March 23, with a discussion on March 24) — grew out of trips he made to the South Pacific and Antarctica.

During his Pacific trip Mr. Miller studied the native percussion instruments and rhythmic traditions — which he typically describes, D.J.-style, as “beats” — of several tribes in the archipelago nation of [Vanuatu](#). He had some of the instruments reproduced by craftsmen in Brooklyn. He was made an honorary member of one of the tribes; on the iPad a photo shows Mr. Miller in tribal garb and makeup.

The piece he will perform sounds mysterious, even a bit arcane. Like “Madame Freedom” it will involve video and music for live strings and electronics. But the electronic component will be based on a combination of geographical information (expressed as GPS coordinates) and economic information.

“It’s a competition based on economic theories,” Mr. Miller said. “We’ll be taking economic data and turning it into sound.”

“Of Water and Ice” is similarly technical. Mr. Miller pulls up a chart on his Samsung tablet and explains: “Those are weather and temperature patterns, and I’m using the data to generate the composition. If there’s one consistent theme here, it’s that information is my palette. And the research I do on any project — it’s reasonably technical but pretty easy to digest.”

“I mean look,” he said, tapping an icon and raising a picture of Kepler, “some of this is based on [Johannes Kepler’s essay ‘The Six-Cornered Snowflake.’](#) He was the first mathematician to look at the complexity of nature in a fundamental way. He used math to analyze how ice forms, and the equations he wrote — I took those and made them into music as well.”

What Mr. Miller is most looking forward to is bringing beat-heavy hip-hop into the museum by way of his works — to be, as he put it, “D.J. in residence.”

“I think a lot of time the art world will let in hybrid experimental composers like Christian Marclay or John Zorn,” he said. “But they won’t let beats in. It’s as if you can’t have beats in an art context. I don’t know why. Fear of rhythm.”

“So I represent a kind of insurgency, and proudly so.”