Best of shows

Around Town editor Madeline Nusser remembers her favorites of 2010, and bigger was not better.

5. Newberry Library’s “Everywhere West”
A captivating series of photos taken along quiet train tracks left me hopelessly lamenting the death of train travel (along with silent, iGadget-free living). Ironically, the photos were digitally archived and displayed on a monitor, showing that, for better or worse, even silence has become a mediated part of our digital lives.

4. Art Institute of Chicago’s renovations
While I once wept (seriously, tears) at the midcentury Modern Wing installation’s beauty, I was glad to see its flaws (a restaurant that prices out most Chicagoans, a disdainfully dinky photo gallery) eschewed when the AIC rehabbed the soft, fluent Japanese galleries; and the spacious, formerly hidden textile rooms.

3. Loyola University Museum of Art’s “Faith and Pilgrimage”
This show featured some of the most beautiful, deftly-rendered objects and antiquities I’ve ever seen. Match that with a certain preciousness—most objects were affectionately and observantly touched during prayer—and the works contain a soulfulness lacking in much contemporary art.

2. Museum of Science and Industry’s “Science Storms”
Indoor lightning is neat and all, but I especially commend this exhibit for the brainpower it pulled behind each display: Artists, scientists and museum workers toiled to make the impossible (an indoor funnel cloud) possible. It came together like a working science experiment, and its contagious energy spreads to kids (future physicists?), which it best serves. Happily, armchair scientists aching to know more will walk away equally informed.

1. Kendall College’s “Culinary Curiosity”
Respectfully mounted displays, sumptuous writing and rigorous research transform old junk (19th-century food gadgets) into storied, Dickensian objects. In part, my top honors go to this small exhibit because I hope curators of all stripes can learn a lesson: Greatness doesn’t take bells and whistles. The exhibit opened in 2008, but this year the school worked to get it out to the public by creating an online catalog.

Honorable mentions

Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center’s “Deadly Medicine” Junk science can happen anywhere anytime, with lethal consequences.

Chicago History Museum’s “I do!” What could easily be cliché was instead a touching and historical homage to the wedding dress, plus a nod to gay marriage.

AIC’s “Ballplayers, Gods, and Rainmaker Kings” Macabre, oddly contemporary-looking assortment of pre-Columbian objects.