

INTRODUCTION



In the final decades of the *ancien régime* a succession of ministers under two kings dreamed of creating a public art museum in Paris that would be the envy of Europe. Those dreams were realized when the Louvre opened in 1793 at the height of the French Revolution. This book recounts the key moments in the movement to create that most celebrated of museums. Chapters 1 and 2 consider two forerunners of the Revolutionary Louvre, the exhibition of royal paintings at the Luxembourg Gallery between 1750 and 1779 and the unrealized museum project of Comte d'Angiviller under Louis XVI. Chapters 3 and 4 concern the formation of the Louvre museum from 1793 to its apotheosis a decade later as the Musée Napoléon. A final chapter on Alexandre Lenoir's Museum of French Monuments represents a case apart, but an essential one. A museum born of the Revolution and containing only French sculpture, Lenoir's museum offers a valuable museological foil to the Louvre, in addition to being a fascinating institution in its own right. No account of the dawn of the museum age in France would be complete without it.

At a time of heightened interest in the history and ideological underpinnings of museums and exhibitions, an account of these two famous institutions needs no justification. But what lends the French case particular interest and importance is that it was in Paris in the latter half of the eighteenth century that the central and abiding issues of museum practice – the classification and display of objects, lighting, the aims of conservation – were first discussed and articulated. The fifty years covered in this book witness the emergence of criteria for the display of art in what was essentially a new building type: the public museum of art. It is the process that resulted in the elaboration of modern museum discourse that interests me. Whereas that discourse might seem to be aesthetic in nature, limited to questions of how

works of art are presented and seen, I will argue that it is also deeply political, and that on various levels art museums carry a heavy symbolic load on behalf of the governments and factions that sponsor them.

The Louvre as it came to be under Napoleon is usually and correctly identified as the archetypal state museum and model for subsequent national art museums the world over. But it should equally be seen as the end product and culmination of earlier initiatives.¹ Because these initiatives are my main concern, little will be said about the Musée Napoléon's glorious but museologically unadventurous years after 1803. No doubt a history of those years would be worth writing – especially one that focused on the museum's director, Dominique Vivant-Denon, the prototype of the modern museum man – but it would be an account different in character from the case studies that make up this book. The same can be said for the Museum of French Monuments. Though Lenoir's museum remained popular until it was dissolved at the start of the Bourbon Restoration in 1816, it was essentially complete by 1802. My interest is in the museum's formation and purpose, and I will argue that it is best understood as a product of Revolutionary events and strategies to control memory of the past and of the Revolution itself. Apart from its novel structure and ideology, the Musée des monuments is of interest as the focus of the first sustained critique of the museum's power to transform and alienate works of art not originally intended for its walls. This will be considered at the end of Chapter 5 and in the Conclusion.

The search for criteria of display in late-eighteenth-century Paris was predicated on the assumption that the purpose or "mission" of the museum was, as it still is, to educate and conserve. Therein lies the "modernity" of the museums I discuss, and it is that which distinguishes them from other prominent art collections in Europe. All royal and princely collections in the eighteenth century manifested the wealth and taste of their owners; throughout Europe collecting became a major form of princely patronage. Modeled on the late Renaissance *kunstammer*, early eighteenth-century cabinets (the term often used to describe rooms set aside for the presentation of valued objects) signified princely rule through an abundant and harmonious arrangement of paintings. At Mannheim (Fig. 1), for example, we find pictures densely and symmetrically arranged around a central vertical axis like pieces of a puzzle. The effect is dazzling, indeed overwhelming; discriminating viewing of individual works is out of the question. Exhibitions such as this closely resembled and were often contiguous with porcelain and curiosity cabinets (Fig. 2), further suggesting that the visual effect of the whole counted for more than scrutiny of its component parts. But in France at the Luxembourg Gallery from 1750 a new set of priorities came into play. Though the protocols of magnificent display were hardly ignored

(damask wall hangings, gilt tables and frames, and porcelain vases were all in evidence), they were supplemented by an arrangement of pictures aimed at instructing artists and would-be amateurs in the art of painting. Working in conjunction with mainstream art theory, particularly the writings of Roger de Piles, the Luxembourg encouraged a comparative mode of viewing that revealed the strengths and weaknesses of chosen artists and the schools to which they belonged through calculated juxtaposition of different paintings. Highly formal in character, this way of seeing was indifferent to chronological sequence, to the “history of art” as we understand it today. It concentrated on the pictorial qualities – what we would now call the “style” – of individual paintings rather than the place of those works within a larger diachronic structure.

In the latter half of the century both the comparative, “mixed-school” arrangement effected at the Luxembourg and the unsystematic, decorative mode of display prevalent in other princely galleries were superseded by a hanging system that served to demonstrate historical evolution within national schools.² Propelled by the advent of new taxonomies in the study



Figure 1. Anonymous, *Electoral Gallery, Mannheim*. Drawing, 1731, Bibliothèque d'art et d'archéologie, Université de Paris.

of natural history (especially the binomial genus/species classifications of Linnaeus and Buffon) and the rise of historicism, the ordering of past art according to school and chronology became the norm in leading European art collections by the end of the century. As the prominent dealer and connoisseur Jean-Baptiste-Pierre Lebrun remarked in 1793, a collection not arranged in that fashion was “as ridiculous as a natural history cabinet arranged without regard to genus, class, or family.”³ Just as the baroque picture gallery shared much with the *wunderkammer* in terms of display, so there were important parallels between the rationalization of early modern natural history collections and the reordering of the first art museums. Lebrun’s linking of the two is particularly noteworthy because it was dealers and professional connoisseurs such as he who in the late eighteenth century took over from court artists as custodians of royal and princely collections. Men like Count Francesco Algarotti, Louis Petit de Bachaumont, Chrétien de Mechel, Nicolas de Pigage, J. J. Winckelmann, and others formed an international network of advisers who ushered in the new taxonomy and set a standard no enlightened collector could ignore. The mark of the progressive collection after 1750 was its adherence to that standard. The “taxonomic, aesthetic structure” of the collection, to borrow James Clifford’s phrase, came to matter as much as the collection itself.⁴ “It wasn’t enough,” Nicolas de Pigage wrote in 1778 of the Elector Palatine, Karl Theodor,

to assemble a magnificent picture gallery at Mannheim and to build a second gallery for plaster casts of the most beautiful antique statues alongside the newly built academy. . . . He wanted at the same time to give a new luster to the Düsseldorf gallery by reorganizing the collection in a more favorable manner.⁵

The new order at Düsseldorf (Fig. 3) involved segregating the different schools and then within a given school hanging works by a celebrated artist together. So, for example, the paintings of Rubens were hung side by side to give the viewer a sense of his *oeuvre*, his manner and range as a painter; and an effort was made to define the Flemish and Italian schools by displaying them in separate galleries. This ubiquitous and largely contemporaneous shift in the organization of European collections defined the art museum as a site of public instruction in the history of art, which was constructed as the succession of great masters and their pupils within national schools. At Vienna in the early 1780s Chrétien de Mechel transformed the ornate baroque gallery (Fig. 2) into what was arguably the first art historical survey museum (Fig. 4). He described the new museum as “a showroom for the visual demonstration of the history of art.”⁶ A decade later Lenoir aimed to do much the same for French sculpture in his own strictly chronological exhibition.

The second half of the century also witnessed a gradual loosening of the

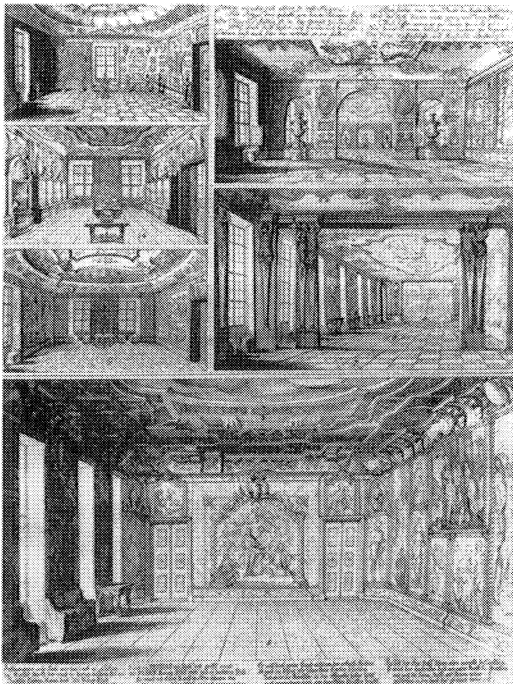


Figure 2. Frans van Stampart and Anton Joseph von Prenner, *Prodomus*. Vienna, 1735. View of the Imperial Galleries.

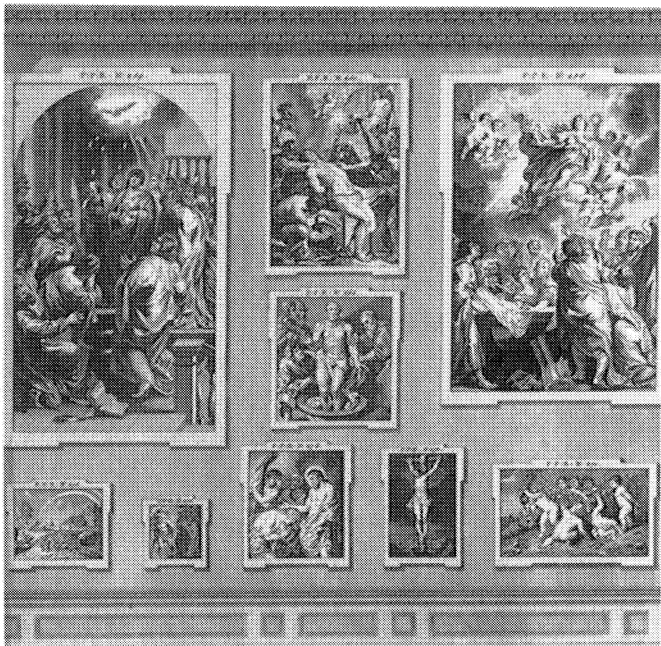


Figure 3. Nicolas de Pigage, *La Galerie Electorale de Dusseldorf*. Basel, 1778. The Rubens Room.

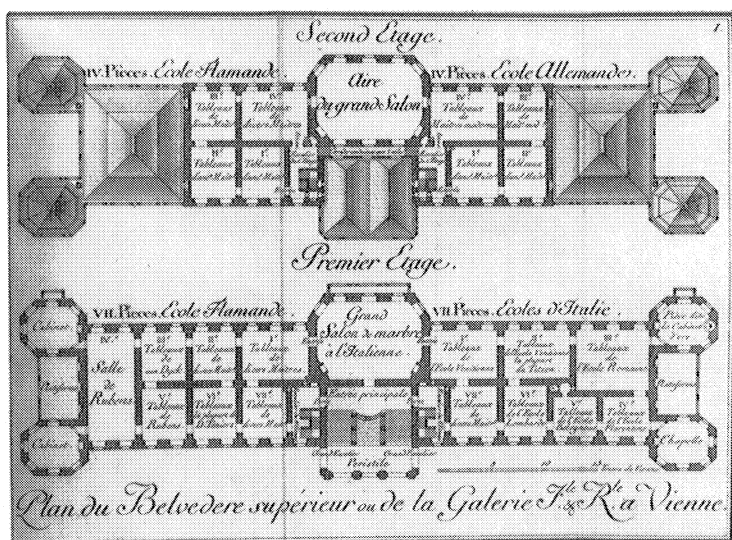


Figure 4. Chrétien de Mechel, *Catalogue des tableaux de la Galerie Impériale et Royale de Vienne*. Basel, 1784. Plan of the Imperial Gallery.

saturated mosaic-like hang as connoisseurs increasingly expected to be able to view paintings at an appropriate distance, up close in the case of cabinet pictures and further away for larger canvases (Fig. 6). The connoisseurial desire to apprehend the surface of a work and traces of the artist's hand heightened interest in conservation and the lighting of picture galleries, the subjects of much discussion during the period. Questions of conservation and lighting concerned the creation of optimum conditions in which to examine art objects and may be linked to the larger eighteenth-century quest for what Michel Foucault and Barbara Stafford have called "transparency": immediate and unmediated contact with the material world.⁷ Late-eighteenth-century museums initiated the now commonplace practice of isolating works of art, both from each other, through hanging and frames, and from the social roles and physical contexts that they originally enjoyed, in the service of direct or transparent viewing. The desire for transparency entailed erasure of the life of a picture, its purpose and critical fortunes, between leaving the artist's studio and entering the museum, at the same time that newly developed restoration techniques sought to insulate it from the ravages of time. In order for the viewer to better apprehend the artist's hand and genius, museums aspired to simulate the conditions of the studio in which the object was created.⁸ Transparency in the museum encouraged (and still encourages) the illusory sensation of direct contact with the act of creation, the fiction of a canvas as fresh and as *present* as the day it was painted.

The increased public accessibility and didactic emphasis of princely art collections throughout Europe in the second half of the century is a clear mark of the spread of Enlightenment culture. We might add to what Pigage said of the Elector Palatine that it was not enough to own a magnificent and well-ordered collection, one had further to open that collection to the public.⁹ In France, moreover, the royal collection came to be seen as national property, part of the nation's cultural patrimony that had to be preserved for posterity. The French case thus anticipated modern national museums in which the rhetoric of collective ownership and the fostering of national pride remain crucial. The Crown became the guardian of transcendent cultural values embodied in works of art that belonged in the public sphere and to the public as much as to the king. Against this background, the question of restoration and conservation assumed great political weight. Accepting responsibility on behalf of the nation, the Crown turned the maintenance of the royal collection to its advantage by forging an equation in the public eye between careful conservation of valued art treasures and good government. As we shall see, this equation grew in importance after its invention at midcentury to the point where, during the Revolution, the museum was used to counteract perceptions at home and abroad of social and political turmoil. In the late 1790s French commitment to conservation was stretched to justify the appropriation of art confiscated as the booty of war in conquered lands. Portraying itself as a politically and culturally superior nation, France claimed to be uniquely qualified to safeguard the world's treasures for the benefit of mankind.¹⁰

The political possibilities of the museum space expanded under Louis XVI as Comte d'Angiviller, superintendent of royal buildings and minister of art, set out to make the arts "an emanation of the throne."¹¹ Both in his patronage of living artists and acquisitions for the royal collection, d'Angiviller planned the Louvre as a showcase for French artistic ascendance and a platform for royalist politics.¹² The museum's involvement in the political life of the nation was taken a step further during the Revolution, when, as I argue in Chapter 3, the Louvre museum became a sign of popular sovereignty and the triumph over despotism. The communal enjoyment of nationalized property in a palace that had once belonged to the king contributed to what the Abbé Henri Grégoire, the priest turned revolutionary, called the "republican mold." In a manner similar to popular Revolutionary festivals, the museum shaped the Republican identity. In the late 1790s under the Directory and the Consulate, the integration of museum and state was pursued and manipulated to somewhat different ends. As a result of French territorial expansion after 1794, the Louvre swelled with confiscated art, and the museum became a monument to military might. Military emblems replaced the new national flag, the *tricolore*, as decora-

tion, and visitors were encouraged to regard captured paintings and sculptures as trophies of war.

The transition from Luxembourg to Louvre, from an institution serving the Paris art world to one fully embedded in the nation's body politic, transformed the museum-going public. Entry to the Luxembourg from 1750 was open to all and free of charge, but it is clear that the educated classes – consumers of high culture and potential patrons of Academy artists – constituted the primary or ideal viewing community. When Etienne La Font de Saint-Yenne spoke of the public's desire to see an art gallery in Paris in his important *Réflexions sur quelques causes de l'état de peinture en France* of 1747, he had just such a constituency in mind. Other texts spawned by the gallery are more specific. Bachaumont, for example, addressed his *Essai sur la peinture* of 1751 to "men of good sense . . . and good faith" possessed of "sensibility and quality of mind."¹³ An important guide to the exhibition took the form of a letter from a *chevalier* to a *marquise* in the provinces, suggesting that well-bred women as well as men were welcome. Aristocrats and foreign dignitaries of both sexes could view the gallery privately on request.¹⁴ Similarly, the leading artists of the day painted mainly for what Charles-Antoine Coypel, director of the Royal Academy and first painter of the king, described as the "enlightened, delicate public."¹⁵

The Louvre planned by Comte d'Angiviller in the 1770s and 1780s envisaged a public considerably wider than the circle of refined art lovers served by the Luxembourg. Aware of the museum's political potential and influenced by Enlightenment ideas about the importance of public instruction, d'Angiviller intended to use the museum to address those segments of society whose voice made up "public opinion" on issues of private morality, public service, and devotion to king and country.¹⁶ Eager generally to demonstrate Louis XVI's enlightenment and magnanimity, d'Angiviller promised the public a perfect museum, a "monument unique in Europe." His ambitions fueled the utopian museum designs of Etienne-Louis Boullée (Fig. 5) and his colleagues at the Royal Academy of Architecture, which in their turn raised public expectations still further and put pressure on the government to deliver.¹⁷ D'Angiviller's failure to complete his museum before the outbreak of the French Revolution owed as much to a fear of falling short of those expectations as to the demise of the monarchy. Indeed, so important was the perceived relationship between museum project and public that Jacques-Henri Meister, Baron Grimm's successor at the *Correspondence Littéraire*, wondered if the opening of the Louvre might even have prevented the Revolution! "Who knows if this museum, completed to perfection, might not have saved the monarchy, by providing a more imposing idea of its power and vision, by calming anxious spirits, and by dramatizing the benefits of the Old Regime."¹⁸

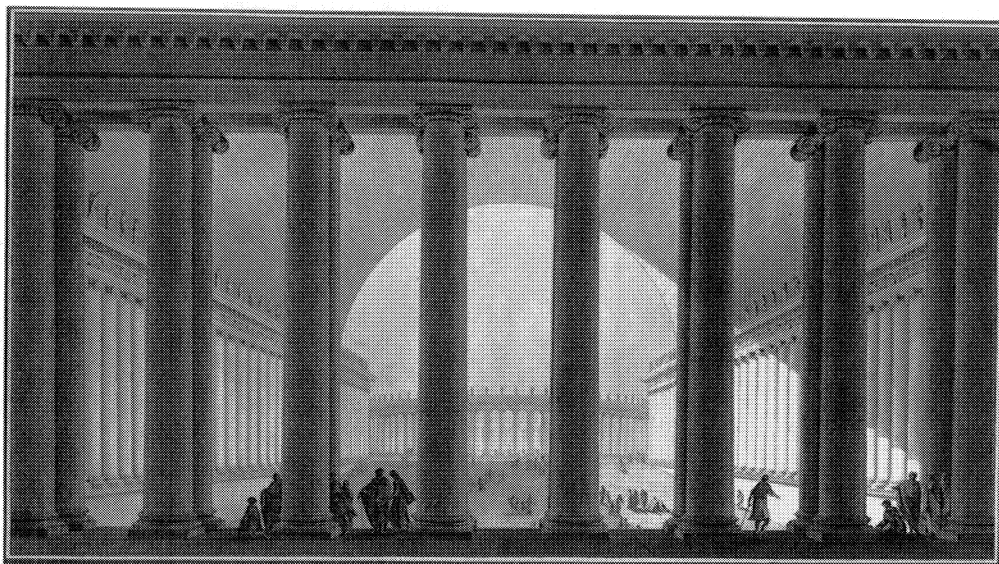


Figure 5. Etienne-Louis Boullée, *Imaginary Museum and Temple of Fame*. Drawing, c. 1783, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

While the passage from royal collection to public museum occurred without fanfare elsewhere in Europe, in France the opening of the Louvre in 1793 was sensational because it was tied to the birth of a new nation. The investiture of the Louvre with the power of a Revolutionary sign radically transformed the ideal museum public. To the extent that the Louvre embodied the Republican principles of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity, all citizens were encouraged to participate in the experience of communal ownership, and clearly many did (Fig. 6). The introduction of regulations concerning behavior in and around the museum as well as safeguards against theft point to a socially diversified public in need of surveillance.¹⁹ Foreign visitors were struck by the presence of “the lowest classes of the community.”²⁰ But enjoyment of the fruits of revolution required no aesthetic sophistication, any more than access in and of itself supplied the theoretical and historical grounding necessary to *see* the art and decipher its systematic presentation. If people came away from the museum confirmed in their devotion to the state, only some could fathom the art historical lessons inscribed on the walls. Theoretically one, the museum public was divided by degrees of visual competence. The lack of cultural and art historical sophistication in certain viewers led to the type of faux pas that Honoré Daumier was later to make the subject of caricature (Fig. 7). In 1795, for example, in order to underline the act of appropriation, the museum used wall labels to indicate the provenance of works of art seized from émigrés. But, according to one



Figure 6. Hubert Robert, *The Grand Gallery of the Louvre between 1794 and 1796*. Oil on canvas, Musée du Louvre, Paris.

account, some visitors completely missed the point: confused by the labels, they mistook busts of Plato and Alexander the Great for the Duc de Brissac and the Prince de Condé.²¹ The idea backfired because it had been assumed that anyone could tell the bust of an ancient Greek from one of a French aristocrat simply by the look of it.

Insofar as the museum provided instruction in the history of art, its pedagogic strategies continued to privilege the bourgeois amateur. The debates of the 1790s about how to hang the Grand Gallery meant nothing to and were not intended for the *sans-culotte*. There were no “popular arts” at the Louvre, and even the types of painting that had proven popular with the person in the street at the regular art exhibitions in the Salon – genre scenes and landscape – were condemned during the Terror. The success of the Louvre as outward symbol of Republican culture required the adoption of display con-

Figure 7. Honoré Daumier,
*"The Egyptians weren't good
 looking!"* Wood engraving,
 1867.



ventions and value hierarchies recognized by connoisseurs throughout Europe. There was no education department or written guides to explain to the uninitiated how to look at art or marvel at the “progress” made by Raphael over his teacher Perugino, the purpose of arguably the most important installation in the museum (Fig. 54). Nevertheless, those unable to read the installations were still invited to behold their new-found artistic wealth. Many who came to the Louvre in the late 1790s to admire the paintings and sculptures acquired as the spoils of war were evidently unaware that Bonaparte’s booty represented the greatest art ever brought together under one roof. In May 1799, a writer for the Republican journal *La Décade philosophique* described what he had seen on a recent visit to the Grand Gallery. In addition to young artists copying the Old Masters and finely dressed women whose beauties rivaled those of the paintings, he encountered a young soldier escorting his father, his mother, and his sister, good village people who had never before left their community, and who apparently had never seen paintings other than the sign of the local inn or the smoke-covered daub above the altar. These good people could never tell the difference between a Poussin and a Watteau, but they were all proud to be there; and the son, all the more proud to be leading them, seemed to be saying “it is I that conquered many of these pictures.”²²

Whatever this good family was actually thinking, the author saw in them an illustration of the power of the museum – initially, to draw them to Paris for the first time in their lives, and then to instill in them a sense of national pride. Yet in order to insist on that power he had to deny them the only other reason one could have for visiting the museum: to appreciate the difference between a Poussin and a Watteau. The museum spectacle impressed upon them the difference between local works and the framed canvases in the Grand Gallery, but within the museum the paintings of one artist were indistinguishable from those of another. What separated his humble compatriots from the author was their mode of viewing, their inability to see the museum's contents except as prized trophies.

Elegant men and women of the world rubbed shoulders with artists and simple countryfolk, some proud to be there, others hoping to learn, and some content to be seen. Little has changed in 200 years. Not least of the Louvre's legacies to the modern museum is this diverse yet fractured public. We are still expected to view our great museums with national and civic pride, but only some of us are schooled in the mysteries of art and the museum's strategies of display. The museum bequeathed to us by the Revolution continues to operate on the paradoxical principle of an institution ostensibly open and populist but infused by the exclusive tastes of an Old World elite and full of art fit for kings. Whose museum? Whose art? Of all the questions facing the museum today, none are more pressing.

One thing that the early history of French museums demonstrates is the contingent, constructed nature of the art museum and its public. There is nothing natural or necessary about the way museums are organized or works of art displayed within them. Nor are museums neutral spaces: they "frame" their contents as certainly as a picture frame circumscribes a canvas. I hope the striking parallels between museum practices in the early modern era and now will help readers better understand how museums think and work today. But at heart this book is an eighteenth-century history in which I try to capture the excitement (and intrigue) generated by the movement to create a new kind of public institution, an institution at once noble in design and rich in political possibilities.