

INTRODUCTION

Art museums have never been more popular, but at the same time their direction and values have never been more contested. Extensive press coverage has been in turn celebratory and critical, trumpeting new exhibitions, acquisitions, and buildings one day and probing unseemly transactions with tomb robbers, art dealers, and corporate sponsors the next. Within the art world, opinion is divided over the relative importance of traditional functions—collecting and scholarship—and the expansion of the museum through new programming, amenities (shops, restaurants, etc.), and outreach initiatives. It would seem to be both the best of times and the worst of times for an institution that over the past two centuries has worked its way to the center of, and come to epitomize, civilized society. This book offers a historical, theoretical, and critical perspective on both the continuing vitality of museums as social institutions and the challenges they face today. Separate chapters, each working backward from a recent dispute or controversy, offer focused histories of key aspects of museum theory and practice—ideals and mission; museum architecture; collecting, classification, and display; the public; commercialism; and restitution and repatriation—from the Enlightenment to the present, from the visionary museums of Boullée to the new Guggenheim in Bilbao and beyond. Because these issues are rooted in the history and evolution of museums, we must come to terms with that history to understand where museums are now and what their future might hold. This book aims to give readers—students, academics, present and future museum professionals—the background and range of views to engage in debate about the art museum’s purpose and direction.

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Art museums have emerged in recent decades as the most vibrant and popular of all cultural institutions in the West. As audiences for classical music, theater, and historical sites and museums stagnate or decline, attendance at art museums has steadily grown, from twenty-two million visitors in 1962 to over one hundred million in 2000. Long lines at blockbuster exhibitions have become commonplace, and it is said that art museums now rival professional sporting events in their drawing power.¹ New buildings are ubiquitous. The 1990s witnessed what the *New York Times* described as “the broadest, grandest, most ambitious museum boom” in history, and that boom has carried into the new century.² Despite a slump in the world economy and tourism after 9/11, museum construction and renovation continue at a remarkable pace in Europe, the Americas, and elsewhere. Cities without new or renovated museums would seem to be the exception rather than the norm. China has announced a target of one thousand new museums, and there is talk of new branches of the Guggenheim, and even the Louvre, in far-flung parts of the world (Abu Dhabi, Mexico, Singapore, Argentina).³ Cutting-edge buildings designed by a cadre of globe-trotting architects have energized their host cities. Urban planners now speak of the “Bilbao effect,” referring to the remarkable success of Frank Gehry’s new Guggenheim Museum in northern Spain as an engine of urban renewal, economic expansion, and local pride. Where art and museums go, gentrification follows. The expansion and popularity of museums have fueled an increase in university-based museum studies programs and in the literature on museums. Museology is now a recognized branch of study in art history departments on both sides of the Atlantic.

What accounts for the art museum’s recent success? Beyond education and the preservation of treasured objects for future generations—the standard justifications for all museums—the most compelling argument for art museums presents them as platforms for international dialogue and oases of beauty and calm in a hectic and rapidly changing world. In times of global anxiety, turmoil, and mounting differences, museums extend hope for mutual understanding grounded in the common traits of world art traditions. And as the pace of life and technology accelerates and society sinks beneath a rising tide of disposable products, ephemeral celebrity, and simulated images, art museums serve as repositories of the real, housing beautifully crafted artifacts that embody lasting values and collective memory. The allure of the genuine masterpiece offered for quiet contemplation in a soothing environment removed from the complexities and pressures of contemporary society has never been greater.

This argument was recently put forward by James Cuno, director of the Art Institute of Chicago, in a collection of essays by leading art museum directors that reads like a mainstream museum manifesto for the twenty-first century. For Cuno, art museums, by staging encounters with wondrous objects made by different peoples across many

centuries, encourage a process of “unselfing,” through which we learn to see ourselves in a larger flow of human experience and to empathize with others through a shared appreciation of beauty. Following a museum visit, we return to our everyday existence at a “different angle,” “changed somewhat from who we were . . . re-sourced, re-oriented, and renewed.”⁴ In a world of rising tensions and uncertainty, Cuno concludes, art museums offer “places of refuge and spiritual and cultural nourishment” where people may be “led from beauty to justice by a lateral distribution of caring.”⁵ Along similar lines, the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah has defended museums as a welcome space for imaginary and potentially healing conversations across the divisive boundaries of nationality, ethnicity, and religion.⁶ Besides contributing to personal enrichment and global understanding, museums are places to shop, eat, socialize, and take in a film or concert, activities that have increased their profile in the civic and commercial landscape.

With success and celebration, however, come scrutiny and criticism. Precisely because the museum matters in our society, we argue about its purpose, what it should exhibit, and whom it should serve. From the late 1960s, activists and academics have critiqued the main spheres of the museum’s activity: the contents, display, and interpretation of its collections; the nature of its public; the search for secure funding; and the ethical consequences of collecting practices past and present. When Cuno speaks of the museum’s contribution to “justice” in the world, critics ask: What does he mean by justice, and justice for whom? Which cultures and heritages are included in the “cultural nourishment” museums provide? If “nourishment” involves education, how, and whom, does the museum educate? Who is invited to participate in the global conversations Appiah envisages, and how are different voices—or the voices of difference—registered? We now understand that the building and presentation of collections, the allocation of resources for exhibitions, and the content of public programming all involve choices and priorities that reflect the interests and biases of those in charge. Indeed, all museum work, from collecting and display to education and marketing, involves selection and interpretation. Museum critique has sought to understand the museum’s operations as a historically specific and culturally mediated set of practices that may shift over time and vary from one institution to another but are never simply “natural.” At a conference on museums held at Harvard in 1988, a prominent art museum director made himself an easy target for the critics by declaring that he espoused no particular philosophy, agenda, or point of view.⁷ It is a mark of how thoroughly theory has been assimilated into the field that today no director would be so naive or unguarded.

In a remarkably short time, practices once taken for granted have been questioned and curatorial attitudes have evolved. Art museums now are arguably more “diverse” than they were thirty years ago: the canon includes previously overlooked cultures and populations, including women, and contemporary art is now recognized as a truly global phe-

nomenon. Curators are more sensitive to how they treat objects from different cultures and where things in their collection come from. Responsibility for objects in their care may go beyond the traditional concerns of preservation and exhibition to include respect for the viewing expectations of different constituencies and the meanings and purposes the objects once had, especially sacred objects from indigenous cultures. Public outreach initiatives, popular programming, and internship opportunities have perhaps never been greater. Critics would say that much work still needs to be done. Collections and exhibitions could be more heterogeneous, as could the museum's public and staff. The latter is still mostly white and, at the top, male. Rising admission charges at many institutions will surely work against broadening access. The much-publicized success of recent restitution claims still leaves many questions about provenance unanswered.

Criticism of the museum has generated a countercritique from factions in the art world. If critique gained momentum as a progressive, liberal assault on a conservative, elitist institution, it now includes a conservative backlash from establishment journalists and museum professionals who defend the museum's traditional commitments to collecting, preservation, and scholarship and resist the move to populist programming, building expansion, and market-driven initiatives. The critics' critics argue, moreover, that museums are no more elitist than universities, sports franchises, or any other institution that relies on judgments of quality and merit and charges for admission. Why expect art museums, any more than opera or bowling, to appeal to everyone? Critics argue against postcolonial demands to repatriate cultural artifacts by pointing out that a mass return of world treasures would limit our knowledge of other cultures at a time when we need to expand it.

Museums find themselves attempting to placate patrons and critics of different stripes while keeping an eye on rising costs and competing forms of recreation. The search for comfortable ground between elitism and populism, high standards and dumbing down, challenges all but the most insular, financially secure institutions. The present moment, one of critical exchange, global consciousness, institutional expansion, press coverage, broad public support, and shifting leisure patterns, is a compelling time to reconsider the art museum—its ideals, ethics, and practices—from a historical perspective. We stand to learn much about recent disputes if we see them historically, as the product of forces and tensions deep in the museum's structure.

Following chapter 1, in which I explore the recent evolution of the rationale for the museum as a place of refuge and dialogue, chapters 2 through 6 focus on continuing controversy in five areas: architecture; collecting, classification, and display; the public; commercialism; and restitution. Chapter 2 examines Frank Gehry's new Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao in light of tensions between architecture's symbolic function and its functional responsibilities that date back to the eighteenth century and the visionary

designs of Etienne-Louis Boullée. Why is opinion on this extraordinary building in northern Spain so sharply divided? Working backward from provocative recent installations by the contemporary artist Fred Wilson, chapter 3 considers the principles of collecting, classification, and display that have governed art museums since their inception. Extended asides look at the history of lighting, period rooms, and the emergence of the “white cube” gallery. Chapter 4 takes on the issue of the art museum public, or publics, in theory and actuality. Are art museums bound by their collections and their past to be less than all things to all people? Left-leaning critics and conservative museum staff agree on the corrosive potential of creeping commercialism and corporate involvement in museums, the subject of chapter 5. But why are funding and commerce viewed as such threats to art museums? Chapter 6 looks at restitution and repatriation, which have emerged lately to challenge the integrity of the mainstream art museum in the West. Can museums remain platforms for global dialogue *and* accede to the demands of other nations and indigenous peoples to retrieve their cultural artifacts and control their artistic heritage?

As I mentioned above, this book aims, not to chronicle the art museum comprehensively, but to chart the major themes and moments of engagement between museum theory and practice. While certain institutions, personalities, and developmental phases of the art museum figure prominently, others worth considering do not appear at all. I hope that such omissions will be viewed as opportunities for further research and future publication. I focus on major art museums (including survey museums, like the British Museum, which feature more than art), primarily those in the Euro-American orbit. And within that orbit, the traditions I know best—France, Britain, the United States, and, to a lesser extent, Germany—predominate.

By way of justifying a limited geographic scope, I would argue that art museums are a Western invention and that wherever they have taken root they conform essentially to the Western model in their core ideals, taxonomic principles, and administrative structure. Whether at the turn of the twentieth century in Japan, where the new national museums (fig. 1) demonstrated assimilation of modern Western values, or a century later in Zimbabwe, where a newly independent nation has aimed to redress colonial wrongs and foster a new self-identity through reworked museum displays, the blueprint has been recognizably Western.⁸ Over the past two centuries museums have emerged as a universal sign of civilization that no nation-state or self-respecting municipal government can afford to ignore. Conformity is part of what has been on display. When Pakistan gained its independence in 1947, for example, it built museums in the belief that “the number of museums in a country is taken as indication of the cultural level that country has reached.”⁹ To learn the principles of museology, Pakistan turned to the West and the famous museum studies program at Harvard. China has embarked on an am-



1. Katayuma Tokuma, Hyokeikan Museum, Tokyo, 1908.

bitious course of museum building for the same reason. So widely shared are museum values today that when a guard at the National Museum of Iraq exclaimed at its devastation during the invasion of Baghdad in 2003, “It was beautiful. . . . The museum is civilization,” people all over the world recognized his pain and despair.¹⁰ By the same token, efforts to rebuild the museum and reclaim Iraq’s cultural heritage have elicited remarkable international sympathy and cooperation. And where museums evidence nonconformity—recent Native American museums come to mind—the mainstream Western museum and “the hegemony of the management regimes of Eurocentric museology,” as a recent critic put it, are the forces from which their directors hope to liberate them.¹¹

The Culture of Critique

In a recent essay, the distinguished American museum educator Danielle Rice tells an amusing and familiar anecdote of a fresh-faced college grad who, after interning for a summer at a large art museum, learned to look past “the evil political side of museums”

that the university had drummed into her.¹² For the past generation academic discourse on museums has generated what Rice calls a “one-dimensional representation of art museums,” a critique evidently at odds with the public success those museums currently enjoy. The negative cast of much recent museum discourse has overlooked the power of attraction that keeps people coming back to museums in record numbers; has obscured what may be construed as the ultimately positive goals of critics who are motivated by the desire for institutional reform; and, as an essentially oppositional practice, has failed to acknowledge whatever reforms it may have helped bring about.

The familiar tropes of museum critique, likening museums to tombs, ritualized religious structures, and theme parks, fail to account for museums’ burgeoning success across time, space, and cultural divides. Such comparisons also fall short on their own terms. For example, the metaphor, long popular with the avant-garde, of the museum as tomb, the place where art goes to die after serving a useful life elsewhere, willfully ignores the multiple lives and identities objects may have as they shed the uses and meanings gained in one time and place and acquire new relevance in another.¹³ As Philip Fisher has remarked, “[N]ew characteristics come into existence [and] earlier features are effaced” as objects pass from one social and cultural context to another.¹⁴ Museums offer a new life to many objects that have lost their *raison d'être* over time. Many modern works of art, meanwhile, were made for museums and depend on them for their meaning. Objects new and old, once in a museum, can and do serve a variety of purposes for different publics. The idea that modern museums are tomblike is also belied by the great surge in their popularity over the past half-century. Crowds flock to new exhibitions and buildings as a market-driven blurring of high and low culture, art and entertainment opens the museum to life and interests beyond its walls.¹⁵ At the same time, however, disparaging references to the museum as a theme park or shopping mall underestimate the public's capacity to identify the distinct benefits and pleasures museums offer. To say that museums, movies, and malls now compete as alternative forms of recreation is not to say they are the same thing.

The frequent comparisons of the art museum to ritualized religious structures call for some refinement. The historical account of museums as sites of moral improvement, ideological acculturation, and social distinction, richly articulated by Pierre Bourdieu, Tony Bennett, Carol Duncan, and Alan Wallach, among others, is uncontestedly important. But are museums still the engines of bourgeois assimilation they once were? Rising costs, which have necessitated increased admission fees, have reinforced the status of museums as self-selecting preserves of the educated middle class, and even where museums are free, if you take away obligatory school groups, they are not ostensibly popular with the poor and uneducated. In any case, political parties and corporations now have more effective means—not least the media, sporting events, public education,

and organized religion—of inculcating patriotism and bourgeois capitalist values in the public. At the same time, in a society where wealth matters more than breeding, taste, or education as the criterion of status, conspicuous consumption—of property, designer couture, or sports franchises—carries more weight than patronage of art and museums. Does anyone care if Bill Gates or Richard Branson owns art or goes to the opera? Or if Ralph Lauren collects racing cars rather than art? Buying art is but one outlet for the superfluous wealth of the postmodern plutocracy, just as going to museums is only one of many recreational alternatives for today's middle classes. As Andreas Huyssen has suggested, the top-down "power-knowledge-ideological" model reduces audiences to "manipulated and reified culture cattle" and needs to be "complemented by a bottom-up perspective that investigates spectator desire . . . and the segmentation of overlapping public spheres addressed by a large variety of museums and exhibition practices today."¹⁶

As I mentioned above, the critique of museums by academic outsiders has been supplemented by a tradition of debate over ideals among museum insiders. Indeed, museum professionals have at times been their own sharpest critics. In the United States between the world wars, Benjamin Ives Gilman, a noted author and longtime secretary at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, and John Cotton Dana, director of the Newark Museum, led opposing camps in a heated dispute over the soul of the museum. In the late 1960s Thomas Hoving, of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, sided with liberal social critics in a bid to change the course of the art museum; Hoving's biggest critics were conservative museum men, led by Sherman Lee, director of the Cleveland Museum of Art. The collection of essays assembled by James Cuno represents a polemical affirmation of traditional ideals in response to both external critique and what the authors see as the wayward paths of certain colleagues. Adopting a broad view of what constitutes critique underscores the wish of the great majority of critics, whatever their profession or persuasion, not for the museum's demise but rather for a different and better museum.

We need a framework for analysis that accommodates the reasons for popular support as well as criticism, the aspirations as well as the disillusionment that museums have inspired. To that end another metaphor recommends itself: the museum as a utopian space. Museums are utopian in the simple sense that they have often been imagined as contributing to the building of a better world. Set apart from the flow of normal life, art museums of our time, like classic utopias, offer a seductive vision of harmonious existence and communal values in a parallel realm of order and beauty. Free from the divisive tensions of the everyday world, we may entertain utopian thoughts about "what man is" and has as his "inner aim."¹⁷ Or as Georges Bataille exclaimed, "The museum is the colossal mirror in which man finally contemplates himself in every aspect, finds

himself literally admirable, and abandons himself to the ecstasy expressed in all the art reviews.”¹⁸ It is a staple of museum rhetoric today that the transcendent art of distant ages and cultures speaks to us all about where we come from and what we have in common. Museums are emboldened by the belief that evidently shared ideals bodied forth in world art and experienced in the neutral zone of museums will foster cooperation and help overcome obstacles in the real world. As globalization draws the world closer together, the art museum prepares the way for a deeper understanding of our differences and commonalities. Museums are inherently “cosmopolitan” institutions, in the sense articulated by Kwame Appiah, and as such can work toward resolving conflicts born of ignorance and prejudice.¹⁹ That museums actually have this power is safely beyond our ability to confirm or deny, for how could their success or failure be measured? Without a metric of success for such sweeping ambitions, museums remain places of hope and aspiration, and are no less important for that.

The concept of the museum as a utopian space not only accommodates the social aims and future-driven ameliorative dimension of our museums but also has powerful historical reach. As we shall see in chapter 1, museum ideals and utopian thinking overlap from a point of common origin in early modern Europe through the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution to the present. The social good that museums could be made to serve evolved over time in response to historical circumstances and changing visions of what constituted a better world. At the dawn of the museum age after the French Revolution, newly created public museums helped to shape the body politic and cultural identity of emerging nation-states through shared access to nationalized art treasures. In the nineteenth century, museums aimed to provide training in design, uplifting recreation, and improved taste among the masses in the industrialized cities of Europe and the Americas. Following World War I and the Great Depression, museums acquired new life as spaces of redemptive retreat from war and socioeconomic strife, functions that intensified with further cataclysms and deepening Orwellian gloom later in the twentieth century. After 9/11 the rhetoric of hope and the power of art to mend a divided world have been revived. And museums have also become refuges of authenticity and affect in a society dominated by mass reproduction, media saturation, “reality” television, scripted photo shoots, and sound bites.²⁰ Nostalgia for the authentic is projected into the future as hope that the real will survive Jean Baudrillard’s dystopian view of the world as simulacrum. Though museums have embraced computer technology and boast “virtual” Web tours and sophisticated collection databases, people still go to museums to see the real thing.²¹ Virtual visits will not supplant real ones.

Insofar as museums are dedicated to improving the world, their idealism makes them vulnerable to critique. The goal of the modern museum critic is to penetrate the mu-



2. Fred Wilson, *Guarded View*, 1991. Mixed media. Installation view from the exhibition Primitivism: High and Low, Metro Pictures, March 1991. Mannequins, 75" x 48" x 166"; base, 9" x 144". © Fred Wilson. Photo courtesy of Pace/Wildenstein, New York.

seum's rhetoric of benevolence and disinterested service to society, pinpointing slippage between ideals and practice and identifying new or unfulfilled aspirations. According to Michel Foucault (who inspired much recent museum critique, though he did not write about museums themselves), the critic's aim is to "criticize the workings of institutions which appear to be both neutral and independent; to criticize them in such a manner that the political violence which has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight them."²² By *fight* Foucault meant identifying "the points where change is possible and desirable" and determining "the precise form this change should take."²³ When, for example, critics point to the pernicious influence of corporate sponsorship on museum programming, are they not defending the integrity of museums in the name of democracy, public enlightenment, and access? When the artist Fred Wilson invades the museum with an installation of faceless brown-toned guard mannequins (fig. 2) or juxtaposes slave shackles and repoussé silver vessels in a display case he ironically titles nineteenth-century American "metalwork" (see chapter 3), is he not inviting the public to reflect on how museums perpetuate—but might also alleviate—problems of race and class in the United States?²⁴ The desired outcome of criticizing

museums as mechanisms of Western colonial dominance is the liberation and empowerment of oppressed and marginalized peoples to pursue and celebrate their own cultural identity. The rhetoric of universality that museums happily embrace invites constant scrutiny for sins of omission; as Tony Bennett has observed, “The space of representation associated with the museum rests on a principle of general universality which renders it inherently volatile, opening it up to a constant discourse of reform as hitherto excluded constituencies seek inclusion—and inclusion on equal terms—within that space.”²⁵ Since no collection can ever be complete, a function of criticism—Bennett’s “constant discourse of reform”—is to revisit the canon and nominate overlooked artists and peoples for inclusion. Museums inch toward an elusive plenitude in response to evolving ideals and external pressure.

Criticism, by serving as the museum’s conscience and engine of reform, is itself utopian. When asked why museums are willing to host his trenchant installations, Fred Wilson replied: “I think there are many curators and, interestingly, more and more directors, who on one level or another want things to change. . . . They want their museums to be more sensitive and inclusive. I’m brought in because there’s a genuine desire to self-reflect and even change attitudes and policies. . . . They want something positive and dynamic to happen.”²⁶

Wilson’s work is “outcome driven,” we might say. Similarly, Andreas Huyssen observes that Baudrillard’s dark account of the simulated environment in which we live reveals “nothing so much as the desire for the real after the end of television”²⁷—an endorsement of museums that makes what and whose “reality” they represent more important than ever. The stated purpose of James Clifford’s important book *The Predicament of Culture* is to offer a “critique of deep-seated Western habits of mind and systems of value” in order to “open space” for the “cultural futures” of marginalized peoples. Clifford admits to a “utopian hope” for the survival of “difference” against the “homogenizing effects of global economic and cultural centralization.”²⁸ Museums are, and will continue to be, subjected to analysis and critique across a broad ideological spectrum because they matter and because they are susceptible to change. Criticism is integral to museums, as it is to any important social institution, and should be viewed as the legitimate prerogative of all who care about their future.