The Cult of the Museum

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As I looked, not long ago, through the usual series of books on museums and exhibitions, it occurred to me that museums did not, until very recently, have any recognizable exteriors—a phenomenon that Pauw Hulten even seeks to extend in remarking on the relative unimportance of the museum exterior. I further recalled a book I had chanced on in my late teens, and which had shocked the assiduous museum visitor in me at the time; I read it—Why Exhibit Works of Art?—by Ananda Coomaraswamy. He never gave a conclusive answer to his conundrum and I think that he was never quite convinced that works of art should be exhibited, nor am I. However, he ended his life as curator of Oriental Art at the Boston Museum so that inevitably he, like me, was very ambiguous about it all. Indeed, I think everyone must be more or less ambiguous about museums. For despite whatever goodwill and ingenuity can be brought to bear, I am resigned, regrettfully, to the trudge which a visit to a museum will always involve. The best-designed museum, the most user-friendly museum, inevitably makes for a trudge. And that is because of the very nature of works of art.

At the beginning of the century, a German thinker, Georg Simmel, writing at the height of the art nouveau movement, when hairpins and doorknobs were being made into "works of art," pointed to an essential distinction between works of art (Kunstwerke) and what I propose to call "works of style" (Kunstwerbliche Gegenstände: literally, "products of art-craftwork"). My rather free translation is justified by his later essay, "On the Picture Frame". Works of art, he suggested, are objects which demand a unique, emotional response at every confrontation with one of them; that is why they have to be withdrawn from everyday life—and the withdrawal is represented by the frame of the picture. "Style objects," on the other hand, are part of a series which are shaped by their user's physical needs, require a user's habit-formed, nonchalant response and the viewer's neglect. They demand that lapse in attention which makes the fact that they indeed may be valuable and have intrinsic merit beyond their price acceptable, because if every object that one dealt with required a personal response—if every knife and fork, every piece of jewelry, every bit of clothing claimed an emotional response from the viewer—it could reduce the viewer to a nervous breakdown within a look or two.

In fact, a visit to any museum is also a visit to a series of objects displayed so as to demand emotional and individual responses. However friendly the environment, however bland and refreshing it may be, that experience always must be exhausting. It is therefore useful to consider first what seems to me the archetypic image of the viewer's response to a work of art: suggested by the portrait of the collector Andrea Doldi by Lorenzo Lotto, now at Hampton Court. He is holding a statuette, probably Hellenistic, of Ephesian Diana in one hand while the other is on his breast in a gesture signifying reflection. All around him fragments of antique sculpture litter the room pill-mell; it is an image from the beginning of modern collecting and dated 1527, the period when surrounding yourself with fragments of antiquity became the practice of a social and intellectual elite. But their collections were still not museums.

The word "museum" is itself antiques. Its true meaning comes out in James Joyce's deformation of it into "museyroom!" the room of the muses, the room in which you can receive or confront inspiration, the room into which the muses descend to take hold of the victim or minion they have chosen as their vehicle. That is a very exalted idea of course, and indeed the first public, institutional "museum," the Museum at Alexandria, was not like that at all. It was an institution which, for its day, was exceptionally well equipped. But its collections and grants served a rather menial purpose—to house the main propaganda or public-relations machine for the Ptolemaic kings of Egypt. Its scholars, poets, and painters were there as pensioners to glorify the Dynasty.

The great private collections were built, as they are now, by greed, robbery, and sometimes generous purchase. They were housed in temples and bath buildings, although there were rare special buildings, of which we know little, called pinakothekae, for which special paintings were sometimes commissioned. That kind of collecting lapsed at the end of antiquity, and the whole notion of collecting works of art as works of art lapsed with it. The best known of the great collectors of antiquity was probably Gaius Verres, whose misgovernment and spoilification of Sicily was so effectively denounced by Cicero.

Greed for works of art revived with the Holy Roman Empire. For many centuries collecting concentrated on curiosities. Mammoth bones, for instance, were thought to be the bones of a human giant and were admired in St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna. Paintings and sculptures returned to everyday use; to devotion or propaganda. At the same time relics, particularly the members and bones of saints, were collected and displayed in elaborate jeweled holders. So were the bones of great men, especially of kings. In the chapel of the Escorial the bodies of the Spanish kings are coffined on shelves, one above the other. One image, for instance, houses those of Charles V, Philip II, Philip III, and Philip IV. The whole underground chapel is surrounded by these shelves. It is not a collection or museum in our sense, even if each coffin is itself a splendid object or even a work of art.

All sorts of curiosities and exotica of non-human provenance were also collected: ostrich eggs, nautilus shells, outsized horns. They were mounted in gold or silver, sometimes very elaborately, to be used as church ornaments, reliquaries, or objects of domestic display. Many treasures were filled with them, even if the one in Vienna has remained among the most curious and perhaps the most interesting since the edifying catalogue of relics proper (or supposed), the Heilunmahlbuch (the special gate where the relics were exhibited being popularly known as the Heilunmahlstuhl), was actually published in 1602! All such curia were collected much as people nowadays gather grand manuscripts, celebrated paintings, or sculptures. And indeed, old pictures
were already a matter for collectors in the 16th century. Nor were they simply amassed, but cloistered in special cases and treasuries, even displayed on grand occasions. One such display, organized by Queen Mary of Hungary, widow of King Louis II and sister of the Emperor Charles V, comprised a whole buffet-altar of a feast, entirely arranged to display precious and elaborate objects, recorded by an anonymous painting. This mania, which Andrea Odori’s portrait succinctly represents, led to the formation of collections so large they required special buildings to house them.

In the Belvedere on the Vatican Hill a succession of popes so housed their collection of antiquities, first merely those picked up in Rome and the Roman countryside. But growing greedy and ambitious, they then absorbed the collections not only of their predecessors (such as the Dukes of Urbino) but of their enemies. The most notorious incident was the sacking of the Elector Palatine’s library in Heidelberg in 1620, which was given to Pope Gregory XV by Archduke Maximilian of Bavaria two years later. The Belvedere courtyard, now called the Octagon, where the antiquities were first displayed, is shown in a drawing by Martin van Heemskerck at the beginning of the 16th century. The original Belvedere was linked to the old Vatican palace by the vast new courtyard and gardens by Bramante, and filled with more antiquities. It was subdivided by Pope Sixtus V about 1590 with further buildings to house the growing library and collections.

But as yet the collection had no outwardly recognizable home. Moreover, the experience of the collector, as of the visitor, was a one-to-one experience. The gardens of the Vatican, like those of the Medici Palace in Florence, or those of other princes, were not “public” in the sense of today — not the place where the generality went to refresh themselves on a Sunday afternoon (although quite often they were that as well). On the other hand, artists were expected, even invited to inspect, the great exemplars of antiquity so to receive the inspiration of the muses. They were, therefore, museums in the ancient sense.

In the middle of the 18th century it became increasingly common to give antiquities the sort of framing which they were thought to inspire, a “classical” setting. The original Belvedere courtyard built to an enigmatic design by the enigmatic Jacopo (or Giacomo) da Pietrasanta was done over in 1773 by Michelangelo Simonetti. A few years later he also designed the Sala delle Muse, where the nine muses (Roman copies of Hellenistic sculptures from Hadrian’s villa) and a modern Apollo Musagetes (specially commissioned to complete the group) constitute a true “musseum.” Simonetti’s octagon was designed to enshrine the best-known antique statues — the Apollo Belvedere, the Laocoön, the Praxitelean Hermes — to which was added Canova’s “modern” Perseus.

In a sense, the Vatican Galleries still remain the model, a point of reference. But Simonetti’s sober and respectful setting for major antiquities was sometimes drastically exceeded in the setting of less grandiose ones. Carlo Marchionni, a contemporary of Simonetti’s, is chiefly remembered as the designer of the sacristy of St. Peter’s. But he also designed the extravagant suburban villa for Cardinal Alessandro Albani. When one examines his drawings, as well as the architectural members of the villa itself — the door frames, the marble wall paneling — one sees that the whole decorative scheme is an elaborate framing of antique fragments. In them the cardinal’s name and his arms often enclosed venerable antique relics. In fact, the whole villa and its gardens were filled with antiquities: real and imitated ruins, the walls lined with colored marble incrustations, here and there some genuine antique columns. It made an opulent environment.

A suburban villa of this kind had no bedrooms since it was close enough to the city to be used only during the day; it was a suite of rooms enhanced by what was then the greatest private collection of antiquities. That was in the country; in town, Cardinal Alessandro Albani also possessed what may have been the greatest collection of drawings since Vasari’s. When the daughter of one of his very particular lady friends was to marry, he provided her dowry by selling the bulk of them to George III, in a transaction for which James Adam acted as intermediary and which form the basis of the Windsor collections. It is not quite clear how some of them found their way into the Adam brothers’ own collection.

A nephew of the Pope who befriendd Queen Christina of Sweden, Cardinal Albani was one of the greatest, if not the most admirable, men of his time. His librarian was Johann Joachim Winckelmann, the father of art history. The cardinal and his librarian both believed that they had found the most fruitful, elegant, and faithful way of housing and exhibiting works of art. In a sense the villa was also a building whose exterior was irrelevant to its conservatorial function. It was very much a Baroque villa of the grandest kind. In the splendid gardens, the aged, blind cardinal would go round the collection of statues displayed there, “seeing” them with his hands. He was, quite incidentally, possessed of some very strange ideas about America. When the young Benjamin West was taken to see him and the cardinal was told that he was a young American, he asked permission to stroke his face, and then asked one of the bystanders: “Is he black?”

Although Cardinal Albani’s collection was outstandingly housed, it was in fact merely a magnificently enlarged enlargement of two disparate things: the sort of Roman house which had bits of inscription and statue fragments walled into the plaster, and also the kind of cupboard found in the Vienna sacristy which the Germans called Kurzbruch, an art cupboard. Such objects were specially made for princes and magnates. They housed artifacts — coins, small antiquities, jewels — but also natural curios, metal specimens, rocks, shells, and enigmatic bone pieces, like most in Vienna. Many people, not necessarily princes, collected shells and coral and dried or stuffed animals, regarding them as objects of virtu in the same way as they regarded coins and miniatures.

Appropriately, about the most elaborate Kunstschrank ever made was for the Emperor Rudolph II, who even surpassed his father Maximilian II as the most refined collector of his time. Not only did it house shells and rocks, but it also was crowned with a composition made up of such “natural” specimens. The emperor’s uncle, the Archduke Ferdinand II, put together a vast number of such objects in his castle at Ambras outside Innsbruck. But he was also a great collector of pictures and of armor, as well as a great horse fancier; stables, antiquities, and pictures were housed in similar quarters at the foot of the castle. The Emperor Rudolph spent vast sums of money on both works of art and antiquities with which he surrounded himself. Although he had been properly crowned as emperor with Charlemagne’s crown as well as those of Bohemia and Hungary, he followed some of his predecessors and had a “private” crown made for himself by the Flemish goldsmith Jan Vermeyen, which was so sumptuous that it was later adopted as the crown of the Austrian Empire.

Maximilian’s and Rudolph’s collecting mania, and that of their successors, stimulated the developing art market. The emperor lived in the Hradcany Castle overlooking the city of Prague, and its great Vladislaw Hall was regularly opened to an art-and-antiques fair where print sellers set up their stalls. Headcanoy was both the greatest collection and the greatest art market of the time, its exterior was that of a castle.

After Ferdinand’s collection at Ambras and Rudolph’s in Prague, the greatest collection of the late 16th century was the Antiquarium in the Electoral Residence in Munich, which was looted by King Gustav Adolph of Sweden and never reconstructed. Maximilian I of Bavaria lost heart as a collector when practically the whole of his collection became the booty of the invading army. Yet although he was anxious to display it, it was housed in the palace courtyard which remained intact after the looting. But collections also provoked great crippling: 20 years after Gustav Adolph left the
Monte Uqirniqur, his daughter Queen Christina extended the original agreement of the Louvre in the 17th century, but at the time, the Louvre was being neglected and its collections were in need of consolidation. The collection was expanded under the reign of Louis XIV, and the Louvre was transformed into a public building.

In fact, the great collecting mania of the 16th and 17th centuries became the object of diplomatic and warlike exchanges and lootings. The 18th century seemed moderate by comparison. Of that time, apart from the Vatican, one gallery had remained intact: the Uffizi in Florence. Duke Francesco decided to store and display some of the treasures gathered during the Medici's stay in Florence. He had the idea of creating an underground museum under the huge palace designed by Giorgio Vasari, which is shared with the administrative offices of the city of Florence. So, the gallery was never a physical presence in the city, however rich and famous it may have been.

A notable exception to all this is the kind of fine art that was inspired by the Napoleon's campaign in Egypt, and the works of art that were brought back to France as a model for the museum: the house and studio of Peter Paul Rubens in Antwerp, which housed an age of lootings, strife, and banditry - the great peacemaker as well as the great painter of Jacques Louis David. In 1785, when he was on a mission to France, the ambassador of the Netherlands, Viscount Malesherbes, was given a tour of the Louvre, and his visit to the museum provided the impetus for the creation of the Louvre collections. The paintings on the walls are mostly those of Rubens while those above the heads of the Vatican's collection are obviously by other painters. Rubens was very much the artist-collector. The light streams in through the vast windows; although one is conscious of the windows on the exterior, what Rubens in fact built himself was a large hall, typical of the version of the prosperous Antwerp burgher's house.

Well into the 18th century collections went on being heterogeneous - curious, stuffed animals, minerals, and ethnographic items of the kind which 18th-century connoisseurs would not have called "fine art." The greatest anthropological collections were not put together until the end of the 18th century. Dresden, so important for the king- elector of Saxony's collection of paintings and jewelry, became a center also of ethnological collections. It was not until the 19th century, however, that people began to consider ethnographical objects as genuine works of art. The museum was still a place where art was sold, and in some cases perhaps even superior to, those produced in the western world.

Perhaps the first person to realize clearly what was happening in the West was the German Jesuit Antonius Kircher, who made an enormous collection of American Indian artifacts. Kircher was a quasi-astronomer and a man of the cloth, who had devised a system for reading Egyptian hieroglyphs, a rather remarkable one in its own right, which involved parallels between Chinese and Egyptian picture-writing. But his collection also contained some works of art as well as musical and scientific instruments. The way in which collections were made was intended to deliberately achieve a complete representation of the intellectual compass of the time, seems very relevant to the museum- or collection-making of the late 20th century.

The museum is predicated on a notion that is hardly a public one, but which has been accepted for over three centuries: that the museum is a place of instruction. The emotional response which Andrea Odoni was showing in his Lotto portrait would presumably have quite an entertaining quality. What is important was that one realized how each picture was an instruction in some way, and that one acquired some notion of how all of them related to another, like so many petals on a flower. But the truth is that the instruction which the museum founders were most concerned about was the formation of taste. In the case of the Victoria and Albert Museum, it was founded explicitly as a teaching resource for a design school, the Royal College of Art, which it in fact outgrew. The opening of the museums with their gatherings of masterpieces was intended not only to train artists, as the galleries had always done, but also to raise the declining level of public taste.

In this they have spectacularly failed. Even if our education has not increased in general level of building fell in quality. The process has been almost inverse to that of the museums. However, the museum has changed function very rapidly in the last half century, and it has been transformed. It is the instruction in either of the two senses I have described. And if it is a place of entertainment, it is also a place of instruction in either of the two senses I have described. And if it is a place of entertainment, it is also a place of instruction in either of the two senses I have described.