The Cult of the Museum

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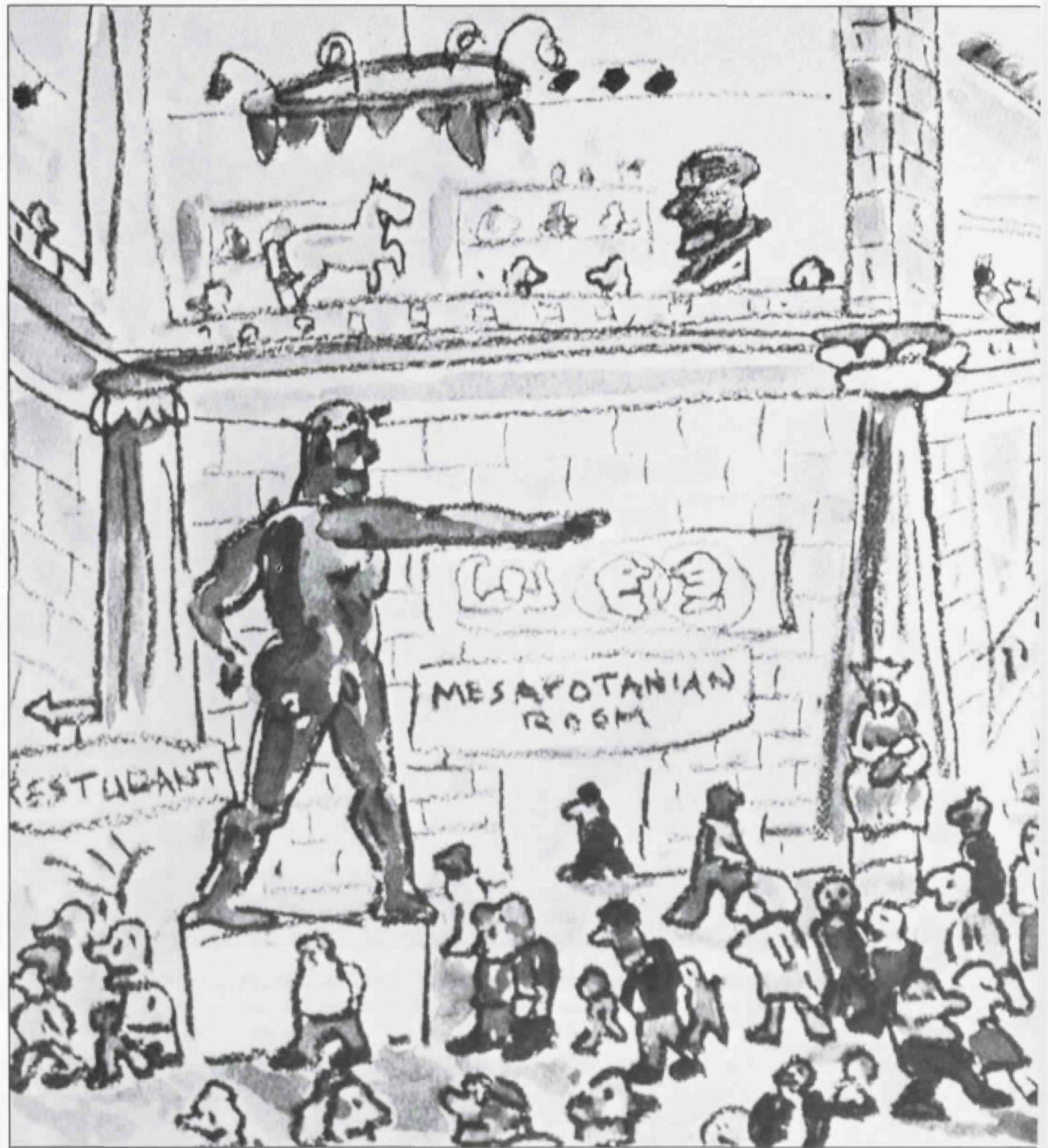

"The Met," drawing by Red Grooms, 1978.

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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 Pontus 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, regretfully, 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" (*Kunstgewerbliche 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objects which demand a unique, emotional response at every confrontation with one of them; that is why they have to be withdrawn from everyday life – and the withdrawal is represented by the frame of the picture.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.

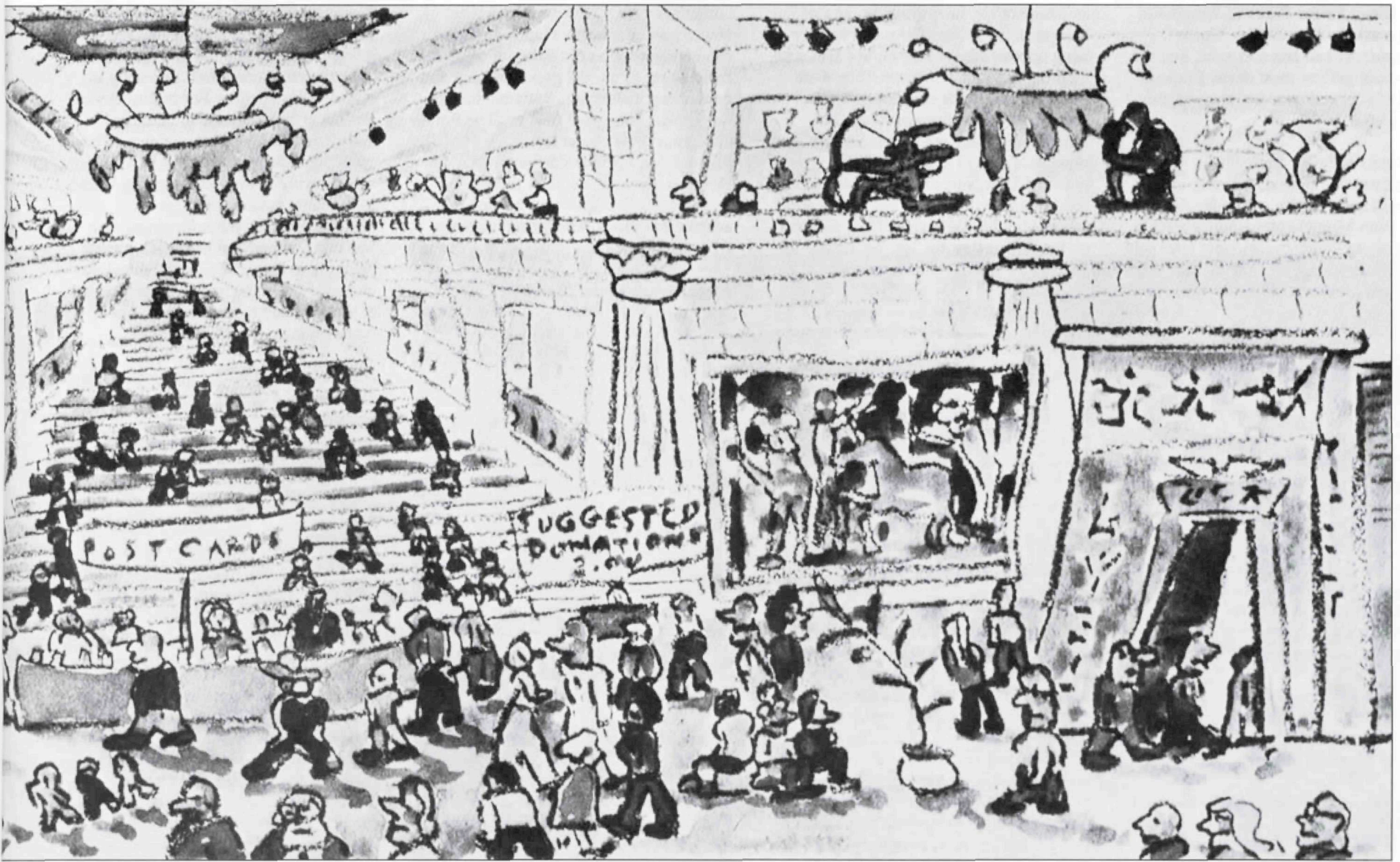
In fact, a visit to any museum is also a visit to a series of objects displayed so as to demand emotional and individual responses. However friendly the environment, however bland and refreshing it may be, that experience always must be exhausting. It is therefore useful to consider first what seems to me the archetypic image of the viewer's response to a work of art: suggested by the portrait of the collector Andrea Odoni 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 pell-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 antique. 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 Museion 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 Ptolomaic 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 spoiliation 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 étagère, 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, outsize horns. They were mounted in gold or silver, sometimes very elaborately, to be used as church ornaments, reliquaries, or objects of domestic display. Many treasuries 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 *Heiltumsbuch* (the special gate where the relics were exhibited being popularly known as the *Heiltumstuhl*), was actually published in 1502! All such curia were collected much as people nowadays gather grand manuscripts, celebrated paintings, or sculptures. And indeed, old pictures



Private collection, courtesy Marlborough Gallery, New York

were already a matter for collectors in the 16th century. Nor were they simply amassed, but closeted 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 Odoni'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 vassals (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 Heemskerk 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 "museyroom." 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 reliefs. 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 antiques. 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 befriended 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 *Barocchetto* 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 Americans. 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 magnificent 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 *Kunstschrank*, 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 Wladislaw Hall was regularly opened to an art-and-antiques fair where print sellers set up their stalls. Hradcany was both the greatest collection and the greatest art market of the time, but 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 reconstituted. 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 cupidity: 20 years after Gustav Adolph looted the

Munich Antiquarium, his daughter Queen Christina extended the negotiations for the Peace of Westphalia to last until her commander, Count Königsmarck, had taken Prague, and she was sure of getting most of the Emperor Rudolph's collection as her share of the booty.

When she became a convert to Catholicism and moved to Rome, she took with her a choice of Gustav Adolph's booty from Munich, and Königsmarck's from Prague. Many pieces were later sold and exchanged. After her death, and that of her sole heir soon after, the collection was dispersed. But in the Palazzo Riario (now Palazzo Corsini) in which she lived, she had a specially constructed muses' room occupied by her Hellenistic muses, which eventually ended up in the Prado.

In fact, the great collecting mania of the 16th and 17th centuries became the object of diplomatic and warlike exchanges and looting on a scale that makes the 20th century seem moderate by comparison. Of that time, apart from the Vatican, one gallery has remained intact: the Uffizi in Florence. Duke Francesco decided to store and display some of the treasures gathered by the Medici on the top floor of the huge palace designed by Giorgio Vasari, which it shared with the administration of the Medici lands in Tuscany. 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 house which Pontus Hulten has offered as a model for the museum: the house and studio of Peter Paul Rubens in Antwerp, who was – in an age of looting, strife, and banditry – the great peacemaker as well as the great painter of Europe. It is only fitting that his major patrons both as diplomat and as painter, the Archduke Albert, governor of the Netherlands, and his wife the Infanta Isabel, should have been painted by a lesser master on a visit to Rubens's studio. In this portrait of visitation, the paintings on the walls are mostly those of Rubens while those above the heads of the Archducal pair 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 an extension, an exalted version of the prosperous Antwerp burgher's house.

Well into the 18th century collections went on being heterogenous – curios, stuffed animals, puzzling bones, shells, and ethnographic items of the kind which 18th-century connoisseurs would not have called "fine art." The great 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 ethnographical collecting. It was not until the 19th century, however, that people began to consider ethnographical objects as having a proper artistic value which was analogous, and in some cases perhaps even superior, to those produced in the western world.

Perhaps the first person to realize clearly what was involved in such collecting was the German Jesuit Athanasius Kircher, who made an enormous collection of American-Indian, Oriental, and Egyptian antiquities. He also had devised a system for reading Egyptian hieroglyphs, a rather improbable one as it now seems, which involved parallels between Chinese and Egyptian picture-writing. But his collection also included western-type works of art as well as musical and scientific instruments. The way in which collectors diversified, and did so deliberately to achieve a complete representation of the intellectual compass of the time, seems very remote from the museum- or collection-making of the late 20th century.

The very way in which works were reviewed is very alien to us, as evident in an image of the varnishing day at the Louvre in the 1670s. The pictures were hung opposite the windows, but also with their backs to the windows. They were exhibited partly for acquisition by the state, partly for private purchasers. Accordingly, they are inspected with great passion and discernment by potential buyers in what amounted to a semi-public setting. Into the 19th century artists actually did varnish their pictures on varnishing day, the last day before the public opening, but in the presence of an elite audience. However, the idea of arranging them to make a coherent ensemble – as one might do with antique fragments – was entirely alien to the people who arranged such exhibitions.

One of the salons of which an excellent representation has survived is that of 1787, two years before the fall of the Bastille. Yet from the middle of the 18th century to the middle of the 19th, there was little change in the format of these shows. Even when they did not include any recognized masterpieces, the salons were something of an occasion for both the critic and the amateur. All the artists in Paris, and many working elsewhere in France, wanted to show their pictures in a review of the year's achievement. The critics discussed the work and the state acquired select exhibits. Private individuals bought the majority. In fact, the placing of the work on the walls was governed partly by the size of the picture but also by the salon jury's opinion of its merit. Although it looks all pell-mell, in fact the display was hierarchical: the higher the piece was hung, the less likely it was to be bought.

Therefore there were two extremes in looking at works of art: the permanently framed and polished ensemble that made a continuous narrative, a continuous experience out of the vision of the antique; and, on the other hand, the halls stuffed with pictures assembled expressly so that they might be dispersed. In between came a whole gamut of collections. But as yet there was no specific type of building which might house all those things which were thought to have special artistic value. That arose in the middle of the 18th century, almost by accident. In London, a number of private libraries and collections – including those of Sir Hans Sloane, Sir Robert Cotton, and the Earl of Oxford – were to be deposited in one place to make a national British museum and library. Purchase and housing was to be financed by a lottery. Later in the century a movement started in Germany, Austria, and the Scandinavian countries to put together national antiquities into coherent, even monumental, collections.

The man who welded all this into an instrument of policy was Napoleon. He was determined to make Paris even more a center of the arts than had Louis XIV. And he believed that the way to go about achieving this was to gather as much of the antiquities of the world as he could and bring them to Paris. From Italy the works of art were brought in a triumphant procession over the Alps. They included the four bronze horses from St. Mark's in Venice. Napoleon had first intended to put all these works of art in the Invalides, as if they were a display of trophies. His architects, Charles Percier and Louis Fontaine, persuaded him that the Louvre – which had been voted into a museum by the Convention in 1791 – was much more suitable. And this decision made the Louvre into one of the world's great museums.

After the fall of Napoleon, many things had to go back: the bronze horses which Napoleon had harnessed to the quadriga of his own triumphal arch went back to Venice, which had become an Austrian possession. But a lot of the works Napoleon had looted were distributed to French provincial collections by prudent curators, and only some were allowed to trickle back into Paris, thereby often escaping the attention of the commissioners who were reclaiming Napoleon's conquests. Napoleon therefore can be regarded as the father of the great national museum: the great teaching and conserving institution. But what he did was typical enough of his age. The Prado collection was first settled in Charles III's disused Academy of Science in 1800. However, there was still no museum 'type' and collections were housed in adapted buildings. The formal museum type was not devised until the 19th century.

An early attempt to formulate it is exemplified by the Dulwich Art Gallery designed in 1811 by Sir John Soane. The Dulwich collection was put together by a French émigré art dealer, Noel Desenfans, who had married well and made a small fortune in buying and selling the effects of French refugees, as well as by acquiring pictures for the King of Poland who was to lose his own throne before he had paid his debts. Desenfans wanted to establish a national British art gallery as a pendant to the British Museum and saw his collection as the nucleus of such an institution. The government refused to take any interest in the business, and Desenfans, disillusioned, left his collection to a close friend, Sir Peter Francis Bourgeois, who was a painter of some note.

Desenfans had one rooted obsession – he did not want his body buried underground. With his collection he left Bourgeois not only his fortune and his wife, but also his corpse; the condition of the legacy was that his body was to be kept above ground.

When Mrs. Desenfans died in 1807, Soane designed a Doric funerary chapel in Bourgeois's house, and Bourgeois disposed that on his death the collection, his body, together with those of Mr. and Mrs. Desenfans, would be laid in a chapel off the main exhibition space where the collection was displayed, and that Soane would design the building. It was done, and the sarcophagi round the lantern of the chapel are cenotaphs that show the nature of this part of the building, which provides it with a caesura for melancholy meditation. The Dulwich collection is, in a sense, a failed national collection. But it is also a shrine to its originator and brings to mind the nature of the first museums. It stands in a curious relation to the new national museums of the 19th century, but also has the character of a reliquary chapel – the monumental institution – in the sense that it commemorates a particular person.

In fact, the first proper building of the type is probably the Altes Museum in Berlin designed by Karl Friedrich Schinkel in 1822-1823. The plan reveals the cunning way in which Schinkel operated its elements: the long frontal colonnade, the exterior stairways, the enfilades of galleries, and the circular, domed, central space. From that time onwards, Schinkel's scheme became a model of how a national museum should look and how it was to be recognized. He did not devise the type; it had originated earlier in the century in Paris, at the Ecole Polytechnique. Schinkel, however, made it into a built form. Any number of museums (including the British Museum in London, whose portico was begun in 1823, though the rotunda was not added until the 1850s) show the same relationship between the domed rotunda and the frontal portico or some modification of it. The "hall of Roman baths" type sometimes overlays Schinkel's scheme (as at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York) since it is a form which the architects of the time loved, and which also was used for railway stations and factories. But Schinkel's portico-dome formula remained a point of reference. Wherever museums were built in the 19th century, these elements seem to be invoked, however remotely; and the type has been bequeathed to our own times.

The museum is predicated on a notion sonorously announced by Sir William Flower in the 1870s: that the museum's first duty is to instruct; the second, to entertain. Most of the world's museums were therefore conceived primarily as places of instruction. For that works of art had to be presented in classified gatherings, as historical evidence. The emotional response which Andrea Odoni was showing in his Lotto portrait would presumably have counted as "entertainment." What was important was that one realized how each picture belonged to a school or a style, and that one acquired some notion about how all of them related to one another, like so many separate pieces of evidence.

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 as museums rose in our cities, the general level of building fell in quality. The process has been almost inverse to that desired by the museum founders. However, the museum has changed function very rapidly in the last half century. It is no longer a place of instruction in either of the two senses I have described. And if it is a place of entertainment, it is so to very few. It has become a place of cult. Museums are the nearest thing we have to the temple in our time. They are now quasi-, if not wholly, religious institutions. It is that, their pilgrimage quality, which ultimately justifies the crowded trudge, the charabanc excursion. It is not the one-to-one "aesthetic" which the crowds (surely the thing is a contradiction in terms?) seek, but a cultural experience. The change is a complex one, and I certainly do not wish to make light of it. It has become a very important part of our culture. I think those of us who have to do with museums, whether as architects or curators, or even (like myself) merely as interested visitors, must take account of this very important development, whose future is not easy to forecast. But I think we have to ask ourselves what the nature of this cult is – for surely, it is not a cult of beauty – and how we are to come to terms with it. Whatever it has become, it will be with us for some time yet and we will have to reckon with it. ■

Suggested Readings

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