

WHAT ARE MUSEUMS FOR?

SYMPOSIUM

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I asked two American friends, very experienced and knowledgeable in the art world, what are museums for? One (Victoria Newhouse) responded immediately "Entertainment," the other (Phyllis Lambert), also immediately, "Education." Interesting that neither mentioned Conservation nor, Preservation, which is the first purpose of the European Museum.

By and large the modern public museum has developed, mainly since the late eighteenth century, along two lines. European museums were and are government institutions created as repositories devoted to the conservation and display of more or less precious objects, artifacts as well as natural specimens. It is no accident that the title given to the officials into whose care the collections were entrusted were called Conservators. Apart from assuring the safety and well-being of the material under their tutelage, the main public responsibilities of the curator were the display of the objects and their publication in the form of scholarly books and articles and museum catalogues. It is no accident that those in charge of the collections are called conservators and that some of the greatest scholars in the field of art history have been employed in that capacity.

By contrast, it is no accident that until relatively recently the United States had no nationally funded museums of art. (Unbeknownst to most people the National Gallery is a private institution founded and funded by the Mellon family, and only maintained at public expense.) The great, federally funded institution of this sort, the Smithsonian Institution, is not really a museum at all, and does not go by that name.

Similarly, the American patent (copyright) system is not primarily to enrich the inventor, but to serve the public good by encouraging inventiveness. People who complain about art as commodity should think about that. If you disapprove of commodification then you should disapprove of copyright and the right of the artist to profit by his work. (Artists under Communism did not profit and did not innovate.)

Even the federally funded museums of recent date cannot be called art museums, pure and simple, since they were motivated largely by social and political considerations.

The museum as instrument of public education has continued to inform American cultural life literally into the modern era. It occurs to me that the Museum of Modern Art may have been the first museum ever created for the express purpose of promoting a particular style with no regional, national or ethnic connotations.

In the past quarter century or so, this fundamental difference between the European and American traditions has tended to diminish. European museums, largely on the American model have become much more public-oriented, and this on two levels, pedagogical and financial. European museums have instituted public education and publicity programs of all sorts, and temporary exhibitions—also a relatively recent development in Europe—now include explanatory placards as a matter of course. The shift in financial structure has come with the institution or the increase of entrance fees, the addition of very profitable museum shops, and the solicitation of private donations. (The creation of the ‘Friends of the Louvre’ is an instance of an unabashed “Americanization.”). European tradition is Beaux-Arts, i.e., Fine Art to be preserved, revered, contemplated—essentially passive, “culture.”

Conversely, federal funds have become available to American Museums, if largely in the American way, that is, through short-term, specifically targeted, competitive grant programs. American museum curatorial staffs have also become much more professionally qualified (it is rare to find a museum curator without a Ph.D., whereas they were rare birds indeed when I started my career—sometimes actually discouraged as a distraction from proper museum duties, where scholarly acumen was less important than the personal qualities needed to deal with potential donors and trustees.) The major museums, at least, now actually facilitate their curators' private research, with leave time and even sabbaticals. The result has been a great increase in the quantity and quality of serious publications by American museum professionals. Museum is for public utility—aggressive, public edification and education.

While adopting, consciously or not, many such European museological traditions, the American museum has also continued to develop along its own course of public utility. MoMA is the first museum dedicated to a style, called Modern. Paradoxical: dedicated to a Style, in the European sense of Beaux-Arts, *Fine Art*, but in the American spirit of aggressive, public education.

Modern is now a period style, succeeded by the Museum of Contemporary Art, a term that is style-neutral.