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The World Art History Museum

Abstract

In 2011 Professor Philippe de Montebello asked a number of scholars to participate in his New York University graduate class on the art museum. Because of his long-time association with the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which was near to our classroom, many of my examples were drawn from exhibitions at that museum. My assignment was to discuss my writings about museums and world art history in ways that would appeal to both art historians and curators. This is a heavily edited and revised version of the presentation given October 18, 2011.

"Art museums rest on... fundamental assumptions that took shape within the eighteenth-century art world. Most obviously, the museum assumes that there is such a thing as art ...Only because they can all be regarded as 'art' can the museum's diverse contents occupy the same physical space..."¹

"The greatest aid to study and intelligent enjoyment is an historical arrangement. Such a collection, historically ordered... we shall soon have an opportunity to admire in the picture gallery of the Royal Museum constructed here in Berlin. In this collection there will be clearly recognizable... the essential progress of the inner history of painting..."²

Because I have never worked in a museum, I approach them as a consumer, trying to deduce how they function from what I see and read. What, then, can an outsider say about these institutions? Of what use to curators are academic theories of the museum and of world art history? My prior account of these questions is developed in three books, which in effect constitute a trilogy. *Principles of Art History Writing* (1991) discusses the history and validation of interpretation in art history³. I then realized that I needed to identify the institutional foundations of this activity, which I did in *Museum Skepticism: A History of the Display of Art in Public Galleries* (2006)⁴. Museums display the works that

¹ J. J. Sheehan, *Museums in the German Art World: From the End of the Old Regime to the Rise of Modernism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000, p. 3.

² G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1975, vol. 2, 870.

³ D. Carrier, *Principles of Art History Writing*, Pennsylvania State University Press, London 1991.

⁴ D. Carrier, *Museum Skepticism: A History of the Display of Art in Public Galleries*, Duke University Press Books, Durham and London 2006. See, however, the critique by Ivan Gaskell in his review "Museum Skepticism", in: *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 68 (1): 65-68 (2010).

art historians interpret. But what is the relationship between these institutions, art history and the museum? As I worked on that book, I realized that I needed to look outside of Europe if I was to provide a satisfactorily comprehensive answer to that question. My *A World Art History and its Objects* (2008) offers an accessible analysis of the prospects for a world art history⁵.

The art museum and art history developed at the same time, in Berlin in the 1820s when Hegel was presenting his lectures on aesthetics whilst the new Prussian museums were being constructed. Hegel's office was right across the street from these museums, but he himself had no connection with that activity. Indeed, by modern standards, he barely qualifies as an art historian; the best art history in his lectures is the description of Dutch genre art:

"[The Dutch people] wishes to enjoy . . . in every possible situation the neatness of its cities, houses, and furnishings, as well as its domestic peace, its wealth, the respectable dress of wives and children, the brilliance of its civil and political festivals, the boldness of its seamen, the fame of its commerce and the ships that ride the oceans of the sea . . . the real subject-matter is . . . cheerfulness and naïvete"⁶.

Although Hegel does not name any painters, you sense from the tone that he had visited the low-countries. In a brief effective account, he explains how Dutch painting expresses the spirit of Holland in its golden age. The history of art history is the extension of such a way of thinking by Hegel's academic successors, who developed accounts of all European art and, soon enough, of all art from everywhere. The history of the art museum is the story of its extension to include this art from everywhere discussed by historians.

Museum Skepticism draws obvious, unoriginal analogies between the historical narratives of book surveys and the floor plans of art museums. Walking clockwise around the National Gallery, London, you traverse the history of European art from the early Renaissance into the early twentieth century. Like a survey art history book, such collections present their art in chronological order. When you walk up the stairs of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York to the left is the art from the Islamic world; to the right, that of Asia; and straight ahead, the European paintings. My world art history, offering a structure mapping the relationship of four major traditions, presents the narrative structure of such a museum.

Curators usually focus on their own period and place. Do they need any theory of art to govern their practice? That challenging question deserves to be answered. I offer these curators three things. 1. Ideas about how to organize the permanent displays and temporary exhibitions of nonwestern art. 2. Reflections about how to stage the presentation of the relationship of these various traditions within the museum. 3. A suggestion about how to understand the concept "visual art".

Curators usually hang Artemesia Gentileschi's baroque paintings before Mary Cassatt's impressionist pictures which, in turn, appear before Agnes Martin's abstractions. They do this because they know that earlier art influences what

⁵ D. Carrier, *A World Art History and its Objects*, University Park, London 2008.

⁶ G. W. F. Hegel, *op. cit.*, p. 886.

comes later in Western tradition. But these arrangements do not presuppose any particular view of how to understand that causal history. Curators do need to study connoisseurship, for accurate attributions are important. And they certainly need the ways of thinking provided by social historians of art to organize their exhibitions. But it's not obvious that they need theories of museums to practice their craft. I do hope that some curators read *Museum Skepticism*. But I am not sure that my analysis could or should change how they work within the museum.

A similar skeptical point can be made about academic accounts of world art history. *A World Art History and its Objects* is but one of many accounts. There is David Summers' ambitious book⁷. John Onians has published a neurological theory supporting his analysis of world art⁸. David Freedberg, too, has a neurological analysis forthcoming. James Elkins has gathered various points of view⁹. Julian Bell's survey, *Mirror of the World* is a clear, visually exciting world art history¹⁰. Terry Smith, who takes world art history into the present, has produced a vast book¹¹. And there are specialist surveys of the history of relationships of visual cultures¹². It is not obvious that any of these accounts suggest how a curator might reorganize the museum.

Some commentators think it wrong or impossible to write a world art history. Such an account, they sometimes argue, is a form of cultural imperialism. One reason that the Quai Branly *Museum*, the newest large Paris museum is so unsatisfying is that it puts together art from varied visual cultures, China and Africa and Oceania, which have nothing in particular to do with one another. Indeed, the very phrase 'Non-European art' is hopelessly problematic. What have Muslims in North Africa in common with the Buddhists of Tibet or the Aztecs? Many would be offended with calling Chinese and Africans and Maori 'non Europeans', as if being *not* white gave them some common identity. Grouping their art together makes no sense.

One critical concern critics of world art history sometimes invoke concerns with use of universals, "Western art", "Chinese painting", and so on. Any universal identifies diverse artifacts. This is true even with relative narrow universal art historical categories. "Abstract Expressionism" usually includes Pollock, de Kooning but also Barnett Newman, whose paintings look very different. Broader universals may seem more problematic. Duccio and Jasper Johns are both "European painters", but since their works look very different it would take some time to explain how they are connected. And yet, put a painting by either of them alongside *Summer Mountains* attributed to Qu Ding (active ca. 1023–ca. 1056), and you will see the ways in which "Chinese art" is distinctive.

⁷ D. Summers, *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism*, Phaidon Press, London 2003.

⁸ J. Onians, *Neuroarthistory: From Aristotle and Pliny to Baxandall and Zeki*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2008.

⁹ J. Elkins, *Is Art History Global? (The Art Seminar)*, Routledge, New York 2006.

¹⁰ J. Bell, *Mirror of the World*, Thames & Hudson, London 2010.

¹¹ T. E. Smith, *Contemporary Art: World Currents*, Pearson, New York 2011.

¹² See for example my review of *Artistic and Cultural Exchanges between Europe and Asia, 1400-1900: Rethinking Markets, Workshops and Collections* has been published at caa.reviews. Thursday, March 24, 2011.

Imagine a vast warehouse housing art from these four traditions: “Chinese”, “European”, “India” and “Islamic” art. If in most cases, we could sort out the works, then perhaps we are justified in employing those universals. For nominalists such as the philosopher Nelson Goodman, author of *Languages of Art* (1968) an important treatise on aesthetics, there are only individuals. Logically speaking, even to speak of “Poussin’s paintings” is to link together very different artifacts using that universal. But without appeal to universals, thinking is difficult. And we need some way to explain how we can sort out Chinese, European, India and Islamic art.

In museums Western art is usually displayed in chronological order. This is because earlier art leads to later art leads to the latest art: Masaccio leads to Raphael leads to Sean Scully. If a tradition does not develop in such a fashion, then a different installation is required. China also lends itself to a historical hanging, if, as the distinguished specialist James Cahill claims, in China, as in Europe we find a gradual development of naturalism¹³. Naturalism in China starts earlier, he argues, develops with different subjects and ends sooner: this development has the same structure as in Europe¹⁴. Chinese painters aspired to make representations, pictures that visually resemble what they depict. Here the results of an informal little experiment are revealing. In Southern China, near Guilin, are marvelous, seemingly unreal mountains, which are depicted in many Chinese paintings. I took a photograph, setting the representation of the mountains on the 20 RMB note against the real mountains. (Inserted image *Against Semiotics*.) As you can see, the mountains look just like their representation.

If Cahill’s account is correct, then it suggests how to display Chinese art, but that says nothing about how to relate it to European art. Would it be possible to intermingle Chinese and European paintings, not in strict chronological order but with reference to his analysis? (China perfected naturalism by the 12th century, long before Europe.) I believe that such an installation would appear incoherent. Chinese and Western paintings look too different to allow for easy display side-by-side. Recently the Metropolitan displayed two near contemporaries, Wang Hui (1632-1717) and Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665) in separate galleries¹⁵. Showing their paintings in the same room would be confusing.

When we get to other art from outside Europe that doesn’t have such a tradition of development, then it needs to be hung different. At the Metropolitan, for example, art from the Islamic world is hung in part according to a geographic rather than a chronological organization. Nowadays few curators would be happy with showing African masks alongside Matisse and Picasso, circa 1910, on the grounds that they influenced Europeans. China, Europe and India have always been connected; the Muslims interacted with their European neighbors.

¹³ James Cahill defends this controversial view on his web site, <http://jamescahill.info/> which presents fully illustrated lectures, marvelous material not available in his books.

¹⁴ There is a very interesting discussion of this claim by James Elkins; see my review of his “Chinese Landscape Painting as Western Art History”, in: *History and Theory* 51, 1 (February 2012): 116-22.

¹⁵ See my “Landscapes Clear and Radiant: The Art of Wang Hui. The Metropolitan Museum of New York”, Published www.artcritical.com 12.2008 and my “The Beautiful and the Sublime: Keith Christiansen’s Poussin”, online, University of Tampa Journal of Art History, www.journal.utarts.com. August 2009.

But until the Spanish invasions, the Aztecs and Mayas had no contact with other traditions. When displaying Chinese, European, Indian and Islamic art, curators need to think about causal connections. Buddhism moved from India to China, and so in Western China, in Dunhuang you can see visual cultures in interaction. And so the museum needs to show how that happened. How, by contrast, should art from the old Americas be displayed, when the Aztecs and Mayas (and their precursors) had no contact with art in Asia and Europe?

The Metropolitan's exhibit presenting Venice's relationship with Islam was one suggestive model of how to relate visual cultures¹⁶. You find Islamic carpets in many Renaissance paintings. These imported luxury goods were inserted without reference to their original function¹⁷. Some commentators speculate that the presence of carpets in Venice influenced Venetian painting. But there is no textual evidence that any Venetian artist was affected. The Renaissance artists inserted carpets, exotic objects, into their paintings. Not until much later did European modernists like Henri Matisse treat the Islamic carpet as the basis for their compositions¹⁸.

I encountered another challenging exhibition about cultural connections in Istanbul.

In sixteenth century Transylvania, part of the Ottoman Empire, Lutheran churches were decorated with Anatolian prayer rugs. Sakip Sabanci Muzesi, a large private museum far from the center of Istanbul displayed precious carpets hung in place of paintings on the wall¹⁹. The exhibition included a full-scale installation of carpets in a church with organ music. Watching Muslims in that museum one saw how works of art are transformed when they move between cultures.

Philosophers offer definitions of art. They ask what features are shared by such diverse art as Islamic textiles, Chinese scholar rocks and Italian easel paintings. But do curators need have such a theory in order to display those artifacts within the museum? The Metropolitan's exhibit of Damian Hirst's *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991), a fourteen-foot long shark in a glass and steel tank could have been mistaken for an exhibit in a natural history museum. And so the museum presented alongside it paintings which underlined its status as a work of art. Like a deal of contemporary art, *The Physical Impossibility of Death* cannot be fully understood without reference to some theory. The philosopher Arthur Danto has developed an aesthetic focused on cases such as the Brillo Boxes by Andy Warhol, which are almost physically indistinguishable from non-art from outside the museum²⁰.

¹⁶ See my "Venice and the Islamic World 828-1797, The Metropolitan Museum of Art", in: *ArtUS*, 19 (summer 2007): 56.

¹⁷ See my "Islamic Carpets in Christian Paintings: An Alternative Theory of the Origin of the Public Art Museum", in: *Source* XXV, 1 (Fall 2005): 1-5.

¹⁸ J. Masheck, "The Carpet Paradigm: Critical Prolegomena to a Theory of Flatness", in: *Arts Magazine* 51 (September 1976): 89-109.

¹⁹ See my review "In Praise of God. Anatolian Rugs in Transylvanian Churches 1500-1750. Sakip Sabanci Museum, Istanbul", in: *ArtUS*, 20 (winter 2007): 8.

²⁰ See my Keynote essay, Online Conference in Aesthetics. Arthur Danto's, *Transfiguration of the Commonplace – 25 Years Later*. January 22, 2007 – artmind.typepad.com/onlineconference [Retrieved January 22, 2007].

To understand the role of such theorizing about visual art within the museum I would appeal to an analogy between aesthetic theory and political philosophy. The relationship between John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*, the canonical liberal account and everyday practice is distant²¹. Rawls's account is abstract and so its relationship to everyday political activity is not easy to identify. But since politicians make assumptions about morality, they cannot proceed without some implicit theorizing.

Is economic inequality in itself wrong? Some people feel strongly that extreme economic differences are illegitimate. Others, that sometimes such differences are sometimes justified. Bill Gates is richer than anyone I know. But if he has improved all of our lives, then maybe that inequality is justified. We all would be poorer did he not exist. Rawls offers a way of analyzing this quandary.

The division between social philosophers and politicians is akin to the division between philosophers of art and curators: It is the division between theory and practice. Just as busy politicians probably do not have time to read Rawls's *Theory of Justice*, so obviously curators may not be able to read the philosophical literature about museums and world art history. These curators do not need to do so because their everyday practice is grounded in its presuppositions. But just as a democratic culture is inconceivable apart from these ideologies, so the museum is inconceivable apart from this supporting structure provided by philosophers and theoretically-minded art historians.

The absolute rulers of the old regimes, in Europe, in China and elsewhere could not have imagined the ways in which we take for granted that the government is a servant of the people. No more than the Aztecs, the Mayas or their European contemporaries in the fifteenth-century could have envisaged that we would install their artifacts within museums. But to have an art museum, you need some implicit theory of what art is. The art museum is a highly distinctive creation of the West because it was there that the theories supporting that institution were developed. China had highly sophisticated art writing, developed much earlier than in Europe. But that country never developed museums until after the belated fall of the old regime, 1911.

Writing about cultural encounters, a historian of Aztec art says: "If (the others) are completely unknown to us, their very presence generates in us innumerable questions and sensations that range from unbridled attraction to irrational repulsion"²². Museums of world art history are exciting because they allow us to reflect on cultures that are exotic to us. Nowadays almost no one would assert that the art of any culture is essentially superior. And so in our museums, paintings and sculptures from every human culture are displayed. But doing that, we encounter much discussed, very difficult to resolve questions. Few Westerners believe that cannibalism, infanticide or polygamy are justifiable. Nor it should be added, do we deny that many of the practices of our European ancestors were barbaric. When it comes to judging slavery or

²¹ J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Belknap Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2005. The critical literature on Rawls is immense.

²² Leonardo Løpex Lujan in: J. M. D. Pohl, C. L. Lyons, *The Aztec Pantheon and the Art of Empire*, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles 2010, ix.

women's suffrage, we are not relativists. But exhibiting an Aztec dagger does not require admiring the violent executions in which it was employed. Nor more than displaying a Counterreformation Italian altarpiece by Caravaggio demands acceptance of his barbaric counter-Reformation Catholic worldview. Within the museum, we value art aesthetically. This allows us to enjoy art from everywhere, Aztec daggers and Caravaggio altarpieces. But we can do that only because these objects are detached from their original contexts.

Unless you possess a philosophical theory of art, you cannot set objects from many visual cultures within the museum, comparing them aesthetically. In that way, the art museum is like that other, closely related product of modernism, democracy. Just as our politicians assume, and so do not need to mention (or even consciously know) the details of theories of democracy, so our curators do not have to be aware of the complex, intricate history of aesthetic theory, which makes possible their activity. You don't have to read Jean-Jacques Rousseau in order to understand that democratic societies manifest the General Will; any more than you need to read Immanuel Kant's *Third Critique* in order to know that the art museum makes it possible to compare artifacts from everywhere aesthetically.

We believe that art from all cultures is valuable. And thanks to museums, we can see all of that art aesthetically. I hope that a world art history promotes understanding between cultures. And so I would love to support exhibitions of art from non-Western cultures on the ground that they promote international understanding. Museums need support. The problem, however, is that the necessary precondition for an artifact entering that space is that we respond to it aesthetically. Admiring the artistic skills of the people whose art we view gives us no reason to think that their culture itself is valuable. Cultural encounters are often not peaceful²³.

Oleg Grabar greatly influenced my writings on world art history. And so I dedicate this paper to his memory and to Dr. Mika Natif, his student who played a central role in the editing of his collected essays and now is poised to continue this vital tradition²⁴.

²³ Consider, for example, the rugs of war, made by the refugees from war in Afghanistan, which offer decidedly pessimistic images. See my "War Rugs: Political Art from the Islamic World", in: *ArtUS*, 16 (January-February 2007): 54-7.

²⁴ O. Grabar, *Constructing the Study of Islamic Art*, vol. I-IV, Ashgate Publishing, Hampshire 2005-6.