

The Origins of the Public Museum

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The beginnings of the public museum are commonly traced to either the founding of the Ashmolean Museum in 1683 or the opening of the Louvre Palace's Grand Gallery in 1793. The Ashmolean is singled out for being the earliest museum whose creation stipulated accessibility for public viewing. The Louvre is noted because its opening to public access, achieved during the French revolution, symbolized the French people's claims to political sovereignty and the national patrimony. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that the modalities represented by "public" and "museum" were new to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. To the contrary, the Ashmolean and Louvre mark only a couple of points in nearly two millennia of intersections among the uses of objects, the spaces of display, learning practices, and communities. Before addressing these terms and the understandings they represent, however, I want to consider their conflation in modern museology.

"Public museum" must be one of the most commonly used and least-questioned expressions in contemporary museological discourse. The reduction of "public" to an adjective modifying "museum" suggests that the meaning of "museum" precedes the qualification of "public" as though, for example, the "public" museum came into being with the Ashmolean. However, the nomenclature and meaning of "public" in relation to the practitioners, places, and audiences of collecting and display has been, like that of "museum," in use and evolving over two thousand years. For this reason, I explore the nascence of the public museum by investigating the individual trajectories of "public" and "museum" as they began to intertwine during classical antiquity and the Renaissance. I then return to the Enlightenment and the Ashmolean and Louvre before briefly considering their successor institutions in nineteenth-century Europe and America.

Classical Antiquity and *Res Publica*

Most accounts of museum history begin with either the etymological origins of "museum" in the ancient Greek word for cult sites devoted to the muses (*mouseion*) or the legendary Museum of Alexandria's founding c.280 BCE. However, the association of "museum" with the systematic collection and study of evidence began some-

where in between – probably with Aristotle’s travels to the island of Lesbos in the mid-340s BCE. It was there that Aristotle, in the company of his student Theophrastus, began collecting, studying, and classifying botanical specimens; and in so doing formulated an empirical methodology requiring social and physical structures to bring into contiguity learned inquiry and the evidence necessary to pursue it.

Aristotle’s methodology found expression in the formation of his Lyceum, a community of scholars and students organized to systematically study biology and history, among other subjects. The Lyceum contained a *mouseion*, and it is probably during this period that the term came to be associated with scholarly investigations. According to some, when Ptolemy I Soter began building Alexandria in c.331 BCE, he invited Theophrastus to join his court and advise the monarch on creating this new capital of his empire. Theophrastus declined and Ptolemy Soter turned to Demetrius Phalereus, a former governor of Athens who was familiar with Theophrastus’s Lyceum. Demetrius Phalereus apparently inspired the monarch to establish the Mouseion of Alexandria in c.280 BCE. It seems that, in creating Alexandria, Ptolemy Soter was striving to become heir to the glory of Alexander the Great’s rule, an effort that included establishing something akin to the Lyceum of Alexander’s famous teacher, Aristotle (El-Abbadi 1990).

The Mouseion of Alexandria is one of the most renowned institutions of classical antiquity and the one whose accomplishments resonated most strongly with scholars of subsequent eras. Yet cultural memory of the Mouseion tends to conflate two distinct aspects: a community of resident scholars and the cult-center where their activities were housed (the Mouseion); and a collection of texts, the acquisition, editing, cataloguing and – in some instances – translation into Greek of which formed a share of the scholars’ work (the Library). While many details regarding the Mouseion and Library remain in dispute to this day, there is a consensus about some aspects of the Mouseion. Some of the ancient world’s greatest minds participated in the work of the Mouseion, the text editing and cataloguing practices established there transformed the nature of Western scholarship, and the Library’s collections – reputed to have numbered more than half a million works at their greatest point – formed the basis for much of the classical literature that survived the dissolution of Hellenic civilization. Equally important, in establishing the Mouseion, Ptolemy Soter, and his successors who continued to support it, redefined kingly patronage (Fraser 1972). Because the monarch’s possessions, powers, and interests constituted the state, Ptolemy Soter’s founding of the Mouseion of Alexandria linked the institution of learning and its materials to the purposes of the state in a manner that enhanced the sovereign’s prestige and extended his reach to include the less tangible but no less significant realm of knowledge. There was “something imperialist in the [Mouseion’s] treatment of the books themselves – organizing them, cataloguing them, and editing them” (Erskine 1995: 45). The Mouseion’s establishment appeared to have been, like Ptolemy Soter’s processions and similar symbolic acts, a means of declaring his sovereignty over Ptolemaic Egypt, and ultimately over all of Hellenic civilization.

Although some believe that objects other than texts, including botanical and zoological specimens, were eventually added to the Mouseion of Alexandria’s resources, the evidence is scanty and unreliable. Things were different in Pergamon, however,

a contemporary city with a library and scholarly community striving to rival Alexandria's. Pergamon and its institutions came to prominence under the leadership of Attalus I Soter, the first king in the Attalid dynasty and an aggressive collector of statuary and paintings from lands he controlled or conquered. Some of these works were installed throughout the outdoor spaces of Pergamon during the Attalids' ambitious building program, while others appear to have been reserved, perhaps in gallery-like settings, for local artisans to imitate (Hansen 1971). Despite the fragmentary evidence for these practices, they suggest an intriguing shift in the use of such objects during the transition from Greek power and influence to that of Rome – a shift from serving as objects of religious veneration to trophies of conquest and cultural veneration. With the advent of Roman expansionism between 211 and the early 60s BCE, and the arrival of looted statuary and paintings from conquered lands coinciding with the inauguration of a massive building program, Greek statuary was used to ornament the exteriors of new buildings and monuments throughout ancient Rome. In the words of Jerome Pollitt (1978: 157): “Rome became a museum of Greek art.”

While Pollitt's use of “museum” may be overly broad by today's standards, it calls attention to the several ways by which Romans institutionalized the assimilation of Greek statuary and other precious objects into the visual culture and daily life of Rome. One was through stewardship, particularly the state's administration of statuary and other valued objects on or in state buildings, including temples and shrines. Existing administrative offices were enlarged to set and enforce standards for the care of public statuary, usually through the purviews of *aediles*, censors, and later *curatores* (Strong 1994: 16ff). Another was through ownership, expressed in a contest of attitudes about the use of Greek statuary in public (meaning outdoor) settings. It was ultimately a debate over the use of Greek statues by strongmen displaying their power and wealth to challenge that of the central authorities. Augustus resolved the debate by “let[ting] it be known that Greek art should henceforth be considered *public property* and that it should [only] be used in the service of the state” (Pollitt 1978: 165, emphasis in original). The symbolic potency of statuary in Rome's visual culture reveals a general sensitivity to the spaces as well as ownership rights of *res publica*. “Public” in this context thus defined the spaces of the *civitates* (community of citizens) bound together by Roman law – an arena delimited by an opposing “private,” or settings where something could be seen by the many as opposed to settings where visibility was confined to a relative few. Here a brief digression on the nature and interpenetrations of “public” and “private” spaces in ancient Rome is necessary.

Vitruvius wrote his famous *De architectura libri decem* (Ten Books on Architecture) in c.30–20 BCE, when Rome was in the youth of its ascendancy, to prescribe architectural standards in anticipation of the city's expansion. In laying out his vision, Vitruvius distinguished between “Public Buildings” (in Book 5) and “Private Buildings” (in Book 6). He prepared the way in Book 1, on city planning, by characterizing public spaces as open areas to be allocated for siting temples, forums, theaters, and other structures requiring considerations of physical accessibility and convenience. As Vitruvius suggests in Book 5, “Public Buildings” also include basilicas, porticoes, baths, and ports. It is important to note, however, that “public” and “private” could overlap, as in the case of libraries:

Private libraries were normally available to [patricians'] clients and would probably have been the primary means of access to books by those who were not wealthy until the first "public" libraries opened in Rome about the time Vitruvius was writing . . . These public libraries were essentially private libraries writ large and made only slightly more available to the public than a "private" library would be . . . Their purpose was to serve the personal political advertisement of the patrons in the environment of competitive patronage of the 30s and 20s BC. A "public" library in effect asserted the right . . . to the clientage of the entire public. (Howe and Rowland 1999: 2 and n.10)

When, in Book 6, Vitruvius addresses "Private Buildings," by which he means everything from the various structures in villa compounds (including farming-related buildings) to the somewhat more modest *domus*, he reveals the house was yet another boundary area where "public" and "private" overlap. This was because many Roman patricians conducted business in the *domus*, and thus Vitruvius had to distinguish between "Personal areas . . . those into which there is no possibility of entrance except by invitation . . . [and] Public areas . . . those into which even uninvited members of the public may also come by right" (Vitruvius 1999: 80). As John Clarke (2003: 221) put it, "Ancient Romans never understood the home as a private refuge . . . cut off from the invasions of commerce and the intrusions of strangers . . . [T]he house was the primary place of business. Daily visits of the paterfamilias's clients required the house to be open to everyone." The shading of "public" space within the *domus* becomes particularly clear when discussing the display of paintings.

During this period there was a proliferation of *pinacothecae* (picture galleries) in Roman domiciles. Derived from the Greek word *pinakes* for (painted) tablets, the *pinacotheca* was a room containing movable paintings and/or frescos depicting scenes in panel-like frames or *trompe l'oeil* images of paintings hanging on or installed in walls (van Buren 1938). Like Roman libraries, *pinacothecae* were socially ambiguous spaces because, although situated inside houses, most social conventions dictated that they ought to be accessible to the many:

For . . . those who should carry out their duties to the citizenry by holding honorific titles and magistracies . . . there should be libraries, picture galleries, and basilicas, outfitted in a manner not dissimilar to the magnificence of public works, for in the homes of these people, often enough, both public deliberations and private judgments and arbitrations are carried out. (Vitruvius 1999: 81)

Yet the entire house was not readily accessible either. Rather, it functioned "as a place where zones of increasing intimacy opened to the visitor, depending on the closeness of his relation with the *familia*." This "gradient of intimacy," ranging from conventional clients, to special clients and peers, to close friends and relations, determined how far a visitor could penetrate into the variously arranged succession of spaces in the Roman house (Clarke 2003: 222).

One last point about Rome's function as a "museum": as spoils of war and conquest, the Greek statuary displayed in Rome's public arenas communicated the state's power and reach, not only to *res publica*, but to foreign emissaries and traders passing through this center of imperial might. Yet the widespread veneration of Hellenic

culture, which led the Romans to ornament their capital with Greek statuary in the first place, would later be complicated by the advent of Christianity. When Constantine and his successors sought to establish a “New Rome” in Byzantium by replicating Rome’s architectural grandeur, the display of Greek pagan deity sculptures in the public spaces of the Byzantine empire’s now Christian capital city seemingly contradicted the anti-paganism of the state religion. However, the installation of the Lausus Collection of several famous sculptures of Hellenistic antiquity, including pagan deity figures, along a major thoroughfare in fifth-century Constantinople, indicates that this kind of display was permitted. Surely Lausus, a high-ranking figure in the court of Theodosios II, would not have been able to display the statues in such a prominent location if their presentation did not accord with the monarch’s imperial and Christian policies.

Sarah Bassett (2000) argues that the prominent display of these celebrated works of Hellenic culture signified the Byzantines’ veneration of and triumph over their powerful predecessors. Moreover, with regard to the sculptures’ pagan content, Bassett cites an edict concerning public access to pagan images in a temple now under Byzantine rule: “We decree that the temple . . . is for the common use of the people, and in which images [there] . . . must be measured by the value of their art rather than by their divinity . . . In order that this temple may be seen by the assemblages of the city and by frequent crowds . . . you shall permit the temple to be open” (quoted in Bassett 2000: 18–19). The display of the Lausus Collection in Constantinople thus served as a “visual corollary” to the imperial policy of mediating between a continuing admiration for its Greco-Roman past and Christianity’s anti-pagan doctrine. “Emphasis on the aesthetic appeal of cult images neutralized their sacred qualities and in so doing made them legitimate objects of profane aesthetic contemplation of the Christian viewer,” thus allowing their display to convey both Byzantium’s dominance, as well as Lausus’ personal prestige and loyalty to the sovereign (Bassett 2000: 19). The public display of symbolic or precious objects, whether for reasons of state policy or personal prestige, was acquiring a significant rhetorical power in its own right.

Renaissance and the Reformation of Civil Space

The retrieval of classical learning that shaped so much of Renaissance culture rekindled interest in Aristotle’s writings and methods. What began in the 1400s as a widespread effort to translate Aristotelian texts directly from the Greek and disseminate them through the new medium of printing, evolved by the 1500s into ambitious enactments of his empirical methodology. Among these was the study and classification of specimens from nature, often with reference to Aristotle’s writings in order to verify or gloss his teachings. And what began as studies of materials from local sources soon broadened as objects and specimens were brought to Europe by explorers to the New World and traders returning from distant lands. By the late 1500s, the assimilation of this evidence included its more or less systematic arrangement in tidy cabinets, cases, drawers, and other specialized furnishings, often in specially designated rooms in the homes and workplaces of amateurs and scholars. It also found

expression in an outpouring of books that catalogued, classified, and illustrated the findings.

A variety of words was employed to characterize these collections, their settings, the encyclopedic ambitions of their creators, and the kinds of objects collected: *pan-dechion*, *studiolo*, *gabinetto*, or *Wunderkammer*, *galleria*, *Kunstkammer*, or *Kunstschränk*. However “*musaeum*” soon became the most widely accepted and broadly applied term for characterizing the physical manifestations of this activity, whether spaces filled with objects or books filled with descriptions. As Paula Findlen (1989: 59) observed:

Mediating between private and public space, between the monastic notion of study as a contemplative activity, the humanistic notion of collecting as a textual strategy and the social demands of prestige and display fulfilled by a collection, *musaeum* was an epistemological structure which encompassed a variety of ideas, images and institutions that were central to late Renaissance culture.

Yet, the emergence of *musaeum* as the preferred nomenclature was no accident. The recovery of classical learning included a fascination with Alexandria’s ancient institutions as well, albeit in sadness over what had been lost and a longing to recreate them (Heller-Roazen 2002). For Renaissance scholars, then, “The trail of words leading from the Greek ideal of the home of the muses and *μουσεῖον*, the famous library of Alexandria, marked the transformation of the museum from a poetic construct into a conceptual system through which collectors interpreted and explored their world” (Findlen 1994: 49).

The joining of objects and inquiry in architectural and textual spaces would be replicated with growing frequency and ever more encyclopedic breadth throughout Europe over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. However, the acquisition of objects from explorers and traders was expensive and a number of scholar/collectors drew on a widening interest in collections to seek the patronage of royalty and church leaders. A noteworthy rhetorical strategy for pursuing patronage cited the precedent of Alexander’s sponsorship of Aristotle and the enduring role of the latter’s work in preserving the memory of the former – coyly implying that a Renaissance prince, aspiring to the eternal fame and prestige of Alexander, had much to gain by sponsoring the Aristotle of his own time. The formation of this patronage system not only enabled the creation and maintenance of collections, it also brought them – and the scholar/collectors who created them – into the ambit of European courtly society to inspire and entertain. According to travelers’ accounts and collectors’ visitor books, a relatively large audience of clerics, scholars, and others – some traveling long distances – began to see the collections as well (fig. 8.1). Naturalist and professor at the University of Bologna, Ulisse Aldrovandi, recorded the names and occupations of nearly 1,600 visitors between about 1566 and 1605, though there were certainly many more because he listed only those whose nobility or reputation warranted documentation (Findlen 1994: 352ff, 137ff).

While Renaissance collections tended to mingle specimens from nature (*naturalia*) with human-made objects (*artificialia*), their varying emphases nonetheless indicated differing purposes. Collections of *naturalia* were formed to support the investigative



Figure 8.1 Frontispiece from Ferrante Imperato, *Dell'istoria naturale . . .* (Naples: C. Vitale, 1599). This woodcut shows visitors being shown through Imperato's museum by, in all likelihood, his son Francesco on the far left. Reproduced courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution.

interests of scholars adumbrating what would be called “natural sciences” in later centuries; collections of *artificialia*, especially ancient coins, medals, and fragments of epigraphy facilitated antiquarian studies. Collections of painting and statuary, however, constituted a distinctive sub-group that addressed a variety of other needs depending on the nature of the works collected. These ranged from conveying the wealth, refinement, and power of their owners, such as the Medicis' holdings, to serving particular intellectual interests such as Paolo Giovio's portrait collection. Although the settings of painting and statuary collections, especially those in Italy, were frequently called *galleria*, here too “museum” was often the more general term of choice for collections whose contents were delimited in terms of thematic or investigatory purpose. For example, Giovio's collection, which facilitated his later books of elegies, was installed in a specially constructed space he called a *museo*. Both the *museo* and his *Elogia* were models for contemporary and later generations of collectors and elegists (Klinger 1991).

Whereas statuary and painting were displayed in outdoor or readily accessible settings during the Roman and Byzantine eras, during the Renaissance the presentation of such works moved indoors or to less approachable locations. Accordingly, the

potential for large sections of the populace to see collections was severely limited. Nonetheless, as during classical antiquity, the spaces of public and private access overlapped *within* the confines of palaces, church-related institutions, universities, and the homes of scholars and merchants. When Aldrovandi's collection of *naturalia* became a widely known destination for visitors from Italy and across Europe, it evolved from a private project into a semi-public gathering place for the learned, curious, and famous of the day. The earliest documentation of Aldrovandi's museum situates it in a room adjacent to his *studio* or study. The Renaissance study, however, was typically located in the innermost spaces of the home, often adjacent to the owner's bedroom. When, as often happened, the *studio* was transformed into a collection space or an adjacent room was adapted for this purpose, the acceptance of visitors into it – and the conversation it thus engendered – transformed the collection into a *mouseion* in the classical sense, a setting for learned discourse in the presence of its objects. Because this conversation was so important to the formation of Renaissance civil society, collections were increasingly viewed as quasi-public forums. The Senate of Bologna accordingly understood the communal value of, and accepted “with great affection,” Aldrovandi's 1603 donation of his collection for installation in Bologna's seat of government (Findlen 1994: 24).

The association of collections with affairs of state became manifest in new ways during the Renaissance or perhaps in ways not apparent during classical antiquity. Francesco I de' Medici's *studiolo* was situated in the Palazzo Vecchio, the seat of Florentine government and Medici domicile, adjacent to the *sala grande* where he received state visitors. The *studiolo* contained both *naturalia* and *artificialia* installed in an elaborate scheme of cabinets and iconographically related wall paintings and ornamentation commissioned for the setting. Though it was created primarily for private contemplation, it is conjectured to have been “an attempt to reappropriate and reassemble all reality in miniature, to constitute a place from . . . which the prince could symbolically reclaim dominion over the entire natural and artificial world” (Olmi 1985: 5). Perhaps the rewards of having the *studiolo* in this boundary zone between private interests and public responsibilities led Francesco I to transform the loggia above the Uffizi (then literally the administrative “offices” of the Duchy of Tuscany) into a suite of galleries. There gleanings from the Medicis' collections of painting, statuary, and related kinds of precious objects and scientific instruments – including the *studiolo* – were gathered and displayed to Florence's elite and foreign dignitaries (Barocchi and Ragionieri 1983). According to Olmi, this vast reorganization of the Medici collections may have been related to the dynamics of Tuscan politics:

The need to legitimize the Grand Duke and his dynasty meant that the glorification of the prince, the celebration of his deeds and the power of his family had constantly to be exposed to the eyes of all and to be strongly impressed on the mind of every subject.

This transition from private to public . . . entailed a new arrangement of the collections . . . [in which works] of art and antiquities gradually came to be seen as status symbols and instruments of propaganda . . . (Olmi 1985: 10; see also Findlen 1994: 113–14)

Other collections of the era functioned in similar ways, especially with regard to the projection of regal power. The diplomatic uses of Emperor Rudolf II's collection toward the end of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries are particularly well documented. The collection, which contained *naturalia* and *artificialia*, including a number of paintings, statuary, and other works created by court artists and artisans, was one of the largest and most celebrated of the era and occupied an entire wing of the Habsburg monarch's palace in Prague. Rudolf II used it as a setting for private audiences with visiting monarchs, receiving foreign ambassadors, tours for other dignitaries, and viewings for his own ambassadors before being dispatched to foreign courts. And although the collection was not ordinarily accessible to the less highly placed, several did see it.

In considering Rudolf II's uses of the collection in conjunction with its placement, organization, contents, and iconographic program, Kaufmann (1978) found that the monarch's collection "like much of the art and public ceremony of his reign, was a form of *representatio*, of imperial self-representation." Rudolf II not only spoke in but "through" the collection as a medium of diplomacy; and one of its primary messages was "Rudolf's possession of the world in microcosm . . . an expression of his symbolic mastery of the greater world" (Kaufmann 1978: 22, 27). Comparable uses of collections are also found in early- to late-seventeenth-century Rome. As Patricia Waddy notes, "Collections of paintings and sculptures were not only for the private delectation of their owners; they were also part of their public reputations." Significantly, as in Rudolf II's palace, a purpose-specific architecture of separate "apartments" and galleries "so located within the palace that visitors could enter them without passing through other rooms of the palace" began to arise, spaces that would thus be "increasingly accessible to artists, travelers, and other interested persons" (Waddy 1990: 58–9).

Enlightenment and Assertions of the Museum's Public

Realization of the museum as a more wholly public institution, whether defined by accessibility or ownership, was born of the "crisis of authority" and efflorescence of social idealism that began in mid-seventeenth-century England (Cochrane et al. 1987: 1). The increasingly combustible swirl of grievances that sparked the English revolution, and resonated in the American and French revolutions, are best understood in the context of developing visions of the public good, economic opportunity, and political sovereignty that juxtaposed unbearable actualities with nearly utopian ideals. Throughout this sequence of revolutions, regressions, and eventual successes, practical concerns and idealistic visions clashed and battled for supremacy.

Not surprisingly, these debates widened to include the ownership and uses of cultural patrimony, notions which informed the divergent aims of individuals throughout Europe and England concerned with the transmission of collections to subsequent generations and the opportunities afforded by such acts. When Ulisse Aldrovandi donated his collection to Bologna, it was not only to assure that it remained "for the utility of every scholar in all of Christendom," but to guarantee

publication support for his remaining works (Findlen 1994: 24, 109). This transaction modeled exchanges whereby the donation of collections to institutions was reciprocated with certain benefits; here continuing access to the collection for future generations of scholars and publications funding, secured by the presumed durability and fiscal well-being of the Bolognese government. The uses and disposition of John Tradescant's collection reflects this model, albeit colored by the shifting political and economic circumstances of England in the years following the English revolution.

A British naturalist and gardener to Charles I, Tradescant ("the Younger") inherited his father's position, interests, and collection of *naturalia* and *artificialia*. He added to the collection, which was based primarily on materials acquired from Algiers and Virginia, such that it came to be regarded as one of the best gatherings of its size and quality in early modern England. Celebrated as the "ark of Lambeth," a reference to Noah's Ark and its aggregation of diverse species, the collection was located near London and attracted visitors from the continent as well as throughout the British Isles. Tradescant, like Aldrovandi, led visitors through the collection and apparently welcomed anyone wishing to see its contents, including children, beginning as early as 1649 and continuing until his death in 1662. He charged an admission fee of six pence, beginning about 1649, which coincides with Charles I's execution and, no doubt, Tradescant's unemployment (MacGregor 1983: 22–3). Among the visitors was Elias Ashmole, who befriended Tradescant and assisted him in compiling a collection catalogue (Tradescant 1656). Tradescant bequeathed the collection to Ashmole, a man of modest origins who rose to a high level of British society, power, and wealth as a solicitor, treasury official, and adviser to the king. Also an antiquarian, astrologer, and founding member of the Royal Society of London – a group with shared interests in the natural sciences – Ashmole had formed his own collection and published a number of books on history, alchemy, and related subjects. In 1675 Ashmole expressed interest in donating his collection, including the Tradescant holdings, to his Alma Mater, Oxford University. In 1677, the university proposed erecting a building with a "laboratory" to house it; the cornerstone was laid in 1679, and it opened in 1683 (Josten 1966: vol. 1: 205, 218). The Ashmolean Museum, which contained ten rooms to house collections and three larger rooms designated for "public" uses, was "designed for the study of natural philosophy, with a laboratory superbly equipped for experimental research, with a magnificent lecture hall, and with a museum of objects close at hand to aid and illuminate these studies" (Ovenell 1986: 22ff). The original structure still stands in Oxford though the collections were moved to newer quarters in 1845.

Ashmole's 1682 memorandum of gift and his 1686 set of "Statutes, Orders and Rules" specify the museum's governance, operations, and income sources. Though owned by Oxford University and supervised by a university board of visitors, the Ashmolean was intended to be fully accessible to the public from the outset and its operating funds, including a two-thirds salary for a keeper (who taught at Oxford for his remaining income) and pay for two half-time assistants, were to be drawn entirely from admission fees. The museum was to be open throughout the year except for Sundays and holidays ("unless there be an especiall occasion"), from eight to eleven in the morning and from two to five in the afternoon during the "Sommer halfe

yeare,” and from two to four in the “Winter [half].” Visitors were to be shown through the collections by the keeper or an assistant, one at a time (Ovenell 1986: 26ff, 50ff). The admission fees were variable, and between 1683 and 1697 most paid one shilling, some as little as six pence, and “an outlandish Lord” and other notables as much as five or even ten shillings. A year-by-year accounting between 1683 and 1687 showed the annual income falling steadily so that the staff’s income must also have been reduced (Josten 1966: vol. 1: 278). The extent of the museum’s public access and popularity in 1710 was attested, if in a somewhat back-handed fashion, by visiting German scholar Zacharias Conrad von Uffenbach. When he first entered the museum the rooms containing the collections were so crowded with country folk (“*Manns- und Weibsleute vom Lande*”) that he put off the visit. On his next visit he observed: “it is surprising that things can be preserved even as well as they are, since the people impetuously handle everything in the usual English fashion and . . . even the women are allowed up here for sixpence; they run here and there, grabbing at everything and taking no rebuff from the [attendant].” As Martin Welch (1983: 62–3) conjectured, perhaps the one-at-a-time visitor rule was ignored to increase the income from admission fees.

Ashmole’s goal in donating his collection to Oxford University was to ensure its continuation in perpetuity. In a 1674 letter regarding a medal he received from the King of Denmark, Ashmole wrote “when I dye, [I shall] bequeath it to a publique Musaeum; that Posterity may take notice . . .” Josten believes that because there was no “publique” museum in England at the time – about a year before the donation – Ashmole must already have been thinking about founding one to preserve his collections for “posterity” (Josten 1966: vol. 4: 1395). The museum thus provided an institutional form that enabled the donor to perpetuate his legacy and the university to add a facility which, like the *mouseion* of antiquity, integrated inquiry and its objects. Further, by structuring a method of self-financing based on admission fees, Ashmole used his knowledge of finance to sustain this new institution without imposing a burden on the university. One wonders, however, why Ashmole did not donate his collection to the nation as would another similarly well-connected collector, Hans Sloane, about sixty years later. After all, Ashmole was a former government official and one-time adviser to the king. Perhaps the difference is due to the political environment of the time and Ashmole’s particular place in it. He allied himself with the “royalists” during the English civil war and revolution in support of Charles I and preservation of the institution of monarchy in opposition to the “parliamentarians” who sought to permanently remove both. Even though Charles I’s execution and the unrest that followed had passed, and the monarchy’s restoration was underway in the 1670s, parliament retained its relative independence. Many members who had opposed the royalists retained their seats and they certainly would have fought expenditures for a museum housing a royalist’s collections. Parliament’s treatment of Hans Sloane’s collections a generation later is instructive in this regard.

Sloane was a physician, naturalist, and collector who became a “fashionable” doctor in London with a practice that served members of the royal family and the aristocracy. Sloane’s collection began with *naturalia* which he personally gathered in Jamaica which were then augmented with purchases, including entire collections acquired from three other naturalists. By the end of his life, Sloane’s collection

had grown to include thousands of coins, medals, antiquities from throughout the Mediterranean and the Near East, old master drawings, and books and manuscripts related to medicine and natural history. When Sloane decided to leave his collection for posterity, he specified the creation of a board of trustees to oversee the process, indicating his first choice was the nation of England, provided that the government pay Sloane's heirs £20,000 and assure the collection's proper housing and maintenance.

Despite Sloane's popularity and the renown of his collection, when – after his death in 1753 – the estate's trustees approached the king and then parliament about the bequest, they were gently but firmly rebuffed, all citing the government's limited finances. The plan only went through when Sloane's offer was linked with remedying the poor conditions of the Cottonian Library, for which parliament had accepted responsibility in the early 1700s, and the availability of the Harleian collection of over 20,000 manuscripts. By act of parliament, the British Museum was established in 1753 to function as a public repository of objects *and* texts that would be maintained in perpetuity by the English government and overseen by a government-appointed board of trustees (Miller 1974: 28–63). It would continue to serve as both England's national museum and library until 1973 when the institution's books and manuscripts were put under the separate administration of the newly formed British Library (and moved to another location in 1997–8). The natural history collections were gleaned out and moved to a separate Natural History Museum in 1881. While the British Museum's collections grew to include works of art, particularly antiquities from around the world, such as the celebrated Elgin Marbles, its scope was limited by the founding of the National Gallery in 1824, also by parliamentary purchase of an individual's collection, which concentrated the acquisition of paintings and the graphic arts there.

Acquisition of Sloane's collection, and a mansion large and safe enough to house it along with the book and manuscript collections, was financed by lottery – one of parliament's more reliable if easily corruptible financing tools. The museum's annual operating funds were drawn from the interest yielded by the unused balance of lottery income, a very modest sum that began to be supplemented by parliament in 1762. Although there was some debate among the trustees about how broadly to interpret the “public” to be admitted, it was finally agreed that the museum: “tho' chiefly designed for the use of learned and studious men, both natives and foreigners, in their researches into the several parts of knowledge, yet being a national establishment . . . it may be judged reasonable, that the advantages accruing from it should be rendered as general as possible” (from *Statutes and Rules Relating to . . . British Museum*, 1759, quoted in Miller 1974: 61).

The museum was initially open every day except Saturdays and Sundays, Christmas day, the week after Easter, Whitsunday, Good Friday, “and all days . . . specifically appointed for Thanksgivings or Feasts.” The hours were nine in the morning to three in the afternoon, and during the summer the museum was open on some days from four until eight. Despite the trustees' best intentions, however, entry was controlled by a ticket application process that could drag on for two or three days, and they were capped at ten per each hour of admission. Groups wishing to visit were limited to five per tour led by a staff member. Despite the restrictions, by 1762

the museum was serving as many as 10,000 visitors a year with ticket-applicant waiting lists lengthening to 300 per week. It seems the trustees' hesitation over truly throwing open the museum's doors to the public found partial expression in the staff's admission procedures. Yet, it also appears that the museum supported the research interests of a growing number of scholars – an audience whose needs surfaced repeatedly in the trustees' appeals to parliament for additional support (Miller 1974: 62–3, 66–71). The discourse surrounding the founding and maintenance of both the Ashmolean and the British Museum reflects subtle but important changes in the institutionalization of collecting and display. While the “museum” remained closely associated with scholarship, access to the learning it offered was slowly being widened. Whether this access was for largely pecuniary reasons, as with the Ashmolean, or out of a sense of governmental obligations to its citizens, as with the British Museum, the museum in England was becoming a social as well as physical space in order to accommodate larger numbers of visitors of varying backgrounds and classes.

The period of these developments was marked by a gradual opening of royal collections throughout Europe. Some, like that of Landgrave Frederick II, resembled the British Museum in combining a heterogeneous array of natural history specimens and statuary with a library. The Museum Fridericianum in Kassel, which opened in 1779, was available to visitors four days a week, for an hour in mid-morning and one in mid-afternoon (Sheehan 2000: 36–9). Far more common, however, were the princely collections of painting and statuary being made available such as the Medici's in the Uffizi on a limited basis in 1743 and more widely in 1769. This incremental widening of access, particularly to painting collections, took place against a background of social and cultural changes across the face of Europe and the British Isles. Chief among these were a growing interpenetration of court and public, facilitated in part by a specializing architecture of palace galleries, proliferating spaces for musical and theatrical performances (Sheehan 2000: 14–26), the demands of art academies seeking works to emulate, and a broadening of visual culture venues and markets. In particular, painting competitions, such as the salons in Paris beginning in 1737 and the Royal Academy exhibitions beginning in 1768, were widely attended and reported – later with illustrations – in contemporary print media (McClellan 2003: 4). As observed by Sheehan and McClellan, the constituents of the “public” finding its way to monarchs' galleries, museums, or to exhibitions, remain unclear. In general, however, access to the most significant collections on the continent remained at the discretion of the monarchs who possessed them. When access was allowed, whether for art students, foreign dignitaries, and the elite, or a larger segment of the populace, it was nearly always for a purpose that redounded to the monarchy's interests: demonstrating beneficence toward the kingdom's subjects, conveying moral authority by association with the works displayed, cultivating the arts on the populace's behalf. Although absolutism was beginning to wane by the mid-eighteenth century, pressures for economic and political reform were building throughout continental Europe.

The effort to create a national art museum for France originated with a display of paintings selected from King Louis XV's collections in a suite of rooms in the Luxembourg Palace. Mounted partly to assist the training of French artists and

partly to demonstrate the monarch's benevolence and effective handling of the collections, the Luxembourg Gallery was opened in 1750 for two days a week. When the gallery was closed in 1779 to provide quarters for members of the royal family, plans were already underway to establish a larger and more extensive display in the Grand Gallery of the Louvre Palace. For two centuries the site most conspicuously associated with the French monarchy, until Louis XIV moved his court to Versailles, the Louvre was also home to the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture. Though the planning was supported by Louis XVI, it became mired in a number of disputes concerning lighting and best use of the gallery, as well as the contents and organization of the display. The disputes, which in some respects mirrored the dithering nature of the monarchy, continued until 1792, three years after the French revolution began, when the king's palaces were overrun and he was taken prisoner. The museum initiative then fell to appointees of the revolutionary National Assembly. Parenthetically, in 1789 the revolutionaries appropriated church property and subsequently that of the monarchy, émigrés, and the royal academies, including their collections of painting and statuary. Together, these actions transferred sovereignty from the monarchy to the people and, in the name of the people, created a national patrimony out of the seized collections. The potential symbolism of these acts was realized in August 1793 when a selection of the appropriated treasures was displayed for all to see in the Grand Gallery of the Louvre Palace, newly renamed the *Muséum Français*. The opening was timed to coincide with the Festival of National Unity, a triumphal celebration of the first anniversary of the fall of the monarchy and the successes of the revolutionaries.

The transformation of the formerly restricted Louvre into a truly public space, one in which the treasures of the people's adversaries were now rendered accessible, reified the revolution's accomplishments in a manner that few other acts could. In the gallery, as Andrew McClellan put it, "Elegant men and women of the world rubbed shoulders with artists and simple countryfolk, some proud to be there, others hoping to learn, and some content to be seen" (1994: 12; see fig. 8.2). Yet the selection of works to be shown was not without controversy. One of the concerns, as with the Lausus Collection nearly a thousand years earlier, was the religious content of some of the works. In this instance, however, instead of enforcing the teachings of Christianity, the new government sought to quash religious fervor in favor of the "cult of reason." And rather than relying on aesthetic qualities alone to override the troubling content of religious works, the museum's organizers hoped that a rigorously chronological display subdivided by national school – the articulation of a visual history of art – would do the job. Ideally, the "power of the museum to elide original meanings and to substitute for them new aesthetic and art historical significances" would result in a fresh role for the paintings in France's republican future (McClellan 1994: 14, 108–14).

The disposition of art in the Louvre was further complicated by the influx of works appropriated within France and later those confiscated by Napoleon as he conquered land after land across the face of Europe. This growing bounty offered the possibility of making the Louvre Europe's artistic crown and added to its symbolism that of France's cultural and military supremacy. Yet it also rendered superfluous many lesser works for which there was no longer room in the museum. The



Figure 8.2 Hubert Robert, *La Grande Galerie [of the Louvre]*, oil on linen, c.1795. Painted after the Louvre palace's Grand Gallery was opened to the public in 1793, this view shows a broad cross-section of visitors, including art students on the far left and women with children admiring the bronze Mercury by Jean de Bologne in the center-right foreground. Reproduced courtesy of the Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, New York.

government responded in 1801 by establishing fifteen other public museums among its *départements* to receive the surplus art. The museums of Bordeaux and Marseille (1804), Lyon (1806), and Rouen and Caen (1809) soon followed, most originally housed in existing buildings which were later replaced with purpose-built museums (Sherman 1989). The French authorities' appetite for centralized administration, along with the confiscation of church, royal, and noble property in conquered lands, enabled the establishment of central museums modeled after the Louvre in regions occupied by Napoleon: the Galleria dell'Accademia (1807), Venice; the Pinacoteca di Brera (1809), Milan; the Rijksmuseum's predecessor (1808), Amsterdam; and the Museo del Prado (1809), Madrid. While the French were eventually forced to retreat, they left behind a durable model for the public museum in Europe which, despite the political vicissitudes of many countries, continue today as symbols of, and containers for, national patrimonies, such as the Rijksmuseum for The Netherlands and the Prado for Spain.

The Privatization of Public in Nineteenth-century America

The history of museums took a decidedly different turn after “the curio cabinet [was] transplanted to the New World” toward the end of the eighteenth century (Orosz 1990: 11ff). Over the course of the nineteenth century there were experiments with museum-like proprietary enterprises designed to entertain and amuse, including “dime museums” and P. T. Barnum’s American Museum (Dennett 1997), teaching collections formed to support an indigenous object-based educational movement, and institutions similar to European precedents like the Brooklyn Museum (New York, 1823) and the Wadsworth Atheneum (Hartford, Connecticut, 1842). But the nature of American democracy in general, and its legal and economic system in particular, turned upside down the relationship of collecting and the public sphere established in Europe.

Collections were rarely of interest to federal, state, or municipal officials. An exception which proves the rule on the federal level is the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC. The United States of America only inadvertently accepted collecting and display as a federal responsibility in the course of implementing the 1835 bequest of French-born Englishman and scientist, James Smithson “to found in Washington, under the name of the Smithsonian Institution, an Establishment for the increase and diffusion of knowledge” (Oehser 1983: 15). Formally authorized twelve years later as primarily a research center, augmented – almost as an afterthought – by a repository of natural history specimens gathering in various Washington offices, the Smithsonian gradually expanded its collecting and display interests to include ethnology, archaeology, the history of science and technology, as well as art.

Aside from isolated instances like the Smithsonian, however, the creation and governance of museums in America were led by private citizens pursuing commonly shared goals in concert. As Alexis de Tocqueville observed in *Democracy in America* (1835–40), “Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions constantly form associations.” Nowhere is this more evident than in the formation of museums. During the late nineteenth century in particular, westward expansion, mineral exploitation, and industrial growth seeded unparalleled opportunities for the accumulation of wealth among a rising number of mercantilists, industrialists, and financiers in the country’s urban centers. Many devoted fortunes to acquiring all kinds of specimens and objects with a special appetite for works of art, other precious objects, and rare books and manuscripts. Those who possessed the wealth to acquire great collections also possessed the civic influence and social connections with other like-minded leaders to found cultural institutions modeled on those of Europe.

A disproportionate emphasis on creating art museums as opposed to other types has been attributed to the concerns of opinion leaders about the youth and inferiority of American culture. Many institutions were thus created in a burst of activity beginning in the 1870s: the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (1870) and Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (1870, fig. 8.3), the predecessor to the

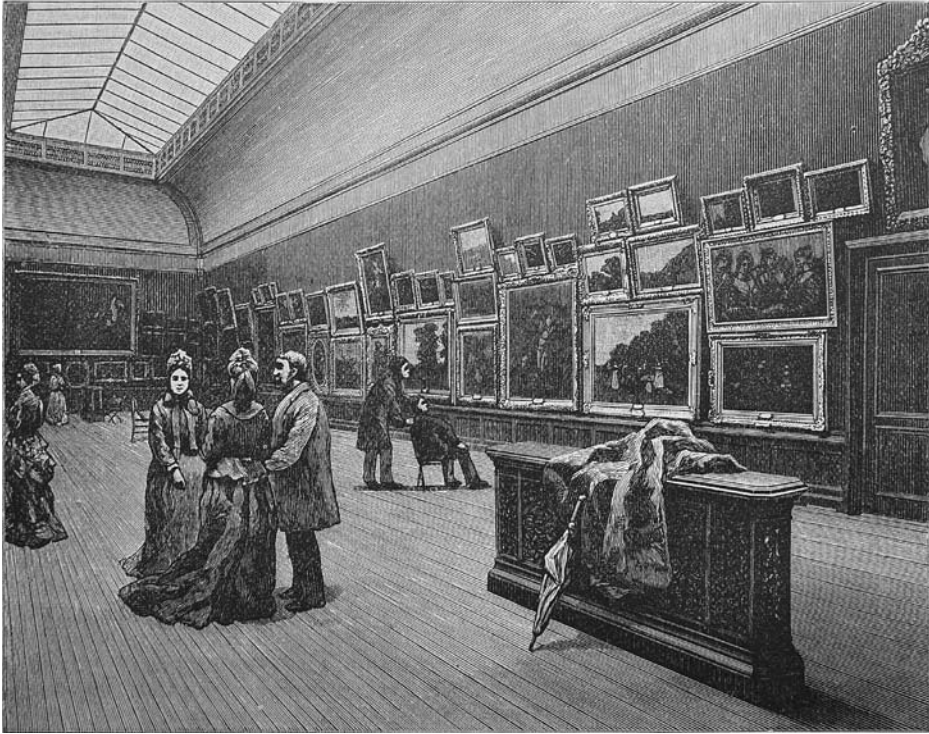


Figure 8.3 “Art Gallery [in the Metropolitan Museum of Art]” from *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, vol. 60, no. 360 (May 1880). The engraving shows the interior of the first of the museum’s buildings to be erected at its permanent location shortly after completion in 1880.

Philadelphia Museum of Art (1876), the Art Institute of Chicago (1879), and the Detroit Institute of Arts (1885) (Burt 1977). Each was created as a non-governmental, non-profit institution overseen by a self-perpetuating board of trustees composed of business, civic, educational, and cultural leaders. Sometimes individual states assisted these efforts by enacting statutes legalizing these voluntary associations as “non-profit” corporations so they could pool resources to acquire land, erect buildings, and establish endowments that could continue in perpetuity; and, further, do so without being required to pay taxes like ordinary corporations of individual investors. Sometimes museums received state, or more often, municipal assistance in the form of land grants or annual funding. But such assistance rarely amounted to more than a fraction of the institutions’ needs, and it was seldom available for acquiring objects. Accordingly, the vast majority of American museums are privately governed and funded. The American museum’s attention to local constituencies derives from the legal stipulations accompanying its formulation as a “public trust,” as well as the interests of its creators enshrined in founding articles of incorporation.

Of nineteenth- and twentieth-century museums, Andrew McClellan has observed: “the question of the public became not so much who was admitted, for in

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time virtually all were welcome, but how museums would be called upon to shape the public in keeping with perceived political and social needs” (McClellan 2003: 7). Without exception, American museums reflected this shift in founding documents which identified them with civic virtues of public service, education, and social stability. In particular, they focused on providing public instruction for a variety of purposes, including the training of craftsmen to improve manufacturing design, the orientation of recent immigrant populations to a unifying culture, and the elevation of manners and morals. A dominant concern was the fortification of the spiritual life of ordinary citizens, and museums were envisaged as potential surrogate religious institutions, calculated to help preserve family and social values (Fox 1995). This conviction held that social improvement could be obtained through exposure to the past and eternal, especially religious, verities in museums where great works were marshaled into visual narratives of the saga of human development.

Conclusion

The origins of the public museum derived from many sources over the course of more than two millennia, its evolution as an institutional form resulting from chance confluences of individuals’ interests and ever-widening social demands. The nature of that development accelerated, however, with the professionalization of museum work toward the end of the nineteenth century (Lewis 1989; Spiess et al. 1996; see also chapter 25 of this volume). When the museum became the province of professional associations replete with the organizational accoutrements of journals, annual conferences, and accreditation criteria, the “public museum” acquired a kind of Platonic image – an idealized standard against which individual institutions would be measured.

Soon a literature that probed and sought to close the gaps between ideals and actualities flowered. The best of these studies constituted the beginning of an emerging new conception of the public museum in the twentieth century. It was one based increasingly on “performance”-related measures, including virtually everything from attendance (in comparison with local demographics; Rea 1932) to efficiency (based on comparisons of museums according to various operational criteria; Coleman 1939). To read these studies today is to appreciate the relentless dynamism of social change and its effects on the collecting and display of objects and, further, how the pace of change has been telegraphed by the professionalization of museum work. Despite the great antiquity of its origins, the public museum remains a steadily evolving institutional form, one that continues to be shaped by the demands of preserving objects to address societal needs.

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