

MUSEUM



• SKEPTICISM •

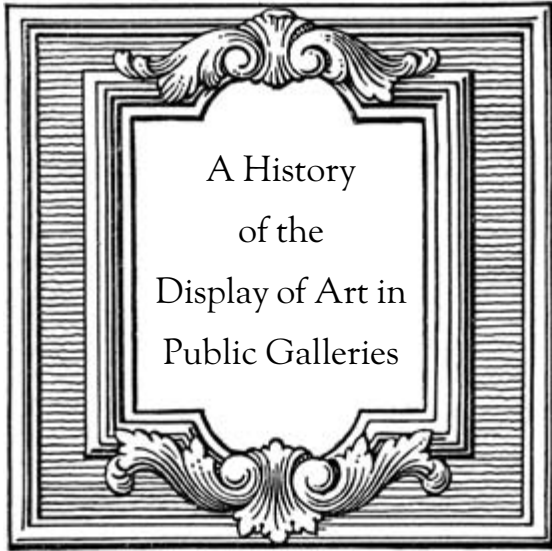
A HISTORY OF THE DISPLAY OF ART IN PUBLIC GALLERIES

DAVID CARRIER

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for BILL BERKSON,
CATHLEEN CHAFFEE,
LYDIA GOEHR,
and DING NING
and for
MARIANNE NOVY,
without whom
not

MY PURPOSE is to tell of bodies
which have been transformed into shapes
of a different kind. You heavenly powers,
since you were responsible for those changes,
as for all else, look favourably on my attempts,
and spin an unbroken thread of verse, from
the earliest beginnings of the world,
down to my own times.

—OVID,

Metamorphoses

THE LIFE Achilles chooses is an image
of all life as Homer understood it. . . . It is only
because life is irretrievable and irrepeatable
that the glory of appearance can reach such
intensity. Here there is no hidden meaning, no
reference to, nor hint of, anything else. . . .

Here appearance is everything.

—ROBERTO COLASSO,

*The Marriage of Cadmus
and Harmony*

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Art, *ars*, means “deception,” and . . . the artist (suspending disbelief) must participate in his own illusion, if it is to be convincing. He must fool himself.—PAUL BAROLSKY

Guided by a Hegelian philosophical framework presented in the overture, this book employs case studies to explain the origin of the modern public art museum, describe how it developed, and indicate why now it is undergoing a radical transformation. Research began on March 29, 1986, when I started reading Thomas Crow’s *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris*. His analysis of art in the public sphere provided one central idea, but I didn’t know that until I began writing in 1998. It took me two years to understand the central importance of museum skepticism and three more years to comprehend fully how to use that concept in my historical discussion. The final argument was worked out in April 2003, thanks to Eleanor Munro’s *Memoir of a Modernist’s Daughter*, which showed how to link Crow’s discussion to discussion of the present fate of the museum. My use of Ovid’s conception of metamorphosis builds self-consciously upon Paul Barolsky’s claims. In writing art history, he argues, we need to acknowledge that “our understanding of art, far richer than the sum of the documented facts, is itself fictive, given form by a web of poetic influences that escape detection in conventional exegesis.”¹ Within such narratives a firm dividing line between strict historical truth and creative fiction may be impossible to establish. I play the philosopher’s inevitable concern with truth against the creative writer’s natural fascination with metamorphosis, with resolution coming only in the conclusion, where the distinction between what is and what might be is deconstructed.

Like successful visual artists, art writers have a personal style. Once you have done a number of books, then (so I have found) the basic ma-

terials needed for your next one are already available in your prior work, if only you know where to look. In 1991 I published *Principles of Art History Writing*, a study of the rise of academic art history. Then by the late 1990s I realized that in order to justify this analysis I needed to describe the institutional foundations of art history. That extension of that earlier account built upon a pregnant observation in the book collecting my art criticism: “Like an inept narrative, a poorly organized museum tells a story that is hard to follow. By contrast, a carefully hung museum like a lucid essay, makes its transitions seem effortless.”² *High Art* (1996), my study of Charles Baudelaire’s criticism, showed how to explain the role of contemporary art in the J. Paul Getty Museum. *The Aesthetics of Comics* (2000) indicated how to understand the relationship between high art and mass art, a theme further developed in *Sean Scully* (2004). And, finally, *Writing about Visual Art* (2003) compared art history narratives and historical museum hangings in an analysis that I now extend and modify. A close reader of my oeuvre will see that this present book, which is entirely self-sufficient, fits into a larger plan.

Unlike faculty, museum employees are not at liberty to discuss their institutions with outsiders. And so, as Sherman Lee notes, “critical (in the best sense of the word) studies and attitudes are uncommon in this area. . . . The intellectual stimuli symbolized by the healthy give-and-take of responsible criticism are largely absent from the ‘universe’ of the art museum.”³ I thank the curators and administrators who talked to me: Richard Armstrong, John Caldwell, Mark Francis, Madeleine Grynsztejn, and Thomas Sokolowski at the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; DeCourcy D. McIntosh of the Frick Art and Historical Center; John Elderfield of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Daniel Seidel of the Sheldon Museum, Omaha, Nebraska; Constance Lewallen, the Berkeley Art Museum; Jeffrey Grove, Constantine Petridis, and Charlotte Vignon of the Cleveland Museum of Art; Timothy J. Standring at the Denver Museum of Art; Marcia Reed, Michael Roth, and Steve Rountree (in one generously full e-mail) at the J. Paul Getty Museum and the Getty Research Institute; Michael Conforti of the Clark Art Institute, who read a portion of the manuscript; Michael Clarke of the National Gallery, Scotland; and Gloria Williams of the Norton Simon Museum.

Seidel arranged for me to present my ideas to his colleagues, and Jeffrey Weiss of the National Gallery, Washington, D.C., invited me to his Col-

lege Art Association panel in 2002. Thanks to Cordula Grewe, I attended “Exhibiting the Other: Museums of Mankind and the Politics of Cultural Representation,” Centre Allemand d’Histoire de L’art, Paris, November 2000, which allowed me to learn about natural history museums. Richard Hertz arranged for me to talk about the Getty Museum at the Art Center College of Design, Pasadena. Dorothy Johnson invited a lecture at the University of Iowa, as did Carl Goldstein and his colleagues at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro. Mark Cheetham and his colleagues at the University of Toronto responded to two presentations. That material, a version of chapter 7, will be published in *Editing the Image: Strategies in the Production and Reception of the Visual*, ed. Mark A. Cheetham, Elizabeth M. Legge, and Catherine Soussloff (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, forthcoming 2007). In 2004 portions of this material were given at a conference on popular culture at the University of Buffalo; the High Lane Gallery, Dublin; Mount Holyoke College; and the Clark Art Institute. A symposium held at the Clark in October 2004 provided a most valuable exchange of ideas.

Paul Benacerraf and Alexander Nehamas supported my position as Lecturer in the Council of the Humanities and Class of 1932 Fellow in Philosophy, Princeton University, for the spring semester of 1998, making it possible for me to test my claims. As a Getty Scholar in 1999–2000 I had the leisure to read widely. And then my high-spirited students at Case Western Reserve University and the Cleveland Institute of Art helped me to refine the argument. Deborah Cherry, editor of *Art History*; Brian Fay at *History and Theory*; Pradeep Dhillon, editor of the *Journal of Aesthetic Education*; Philip Alperson and Tiffany Sutton from the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*; John Dixon Hunt, editor of *Word and Image*; Roger Malina, *Leonardo*; Simona Vendrame at *Tema Celeste*; and Laurie Schneider at *Source* published materials that here are drastically reworked. Robert Mangold and Garner Tullis provided memories of the Cleveland Museum of Art under Sherman Lee. Christa Clarke shared her research on Albert Barnes, and Henry Adams showed me his unpublished lectures on Ernest Fenollosa. Sean Scully has said how much he depends on his friends:⁴ “I want emotional and contextual information to enter the work all the time, this is the pasture on which it grows. The people who are friends are affecting my work, it’s made through the vitality of these relations.” The same is true for me. I thank Paul and Ruth

Barolsky, Mark Cheetham, Arthur Danto, Bianca Finzi-Contini Calabresi, Jonathan Gilmore, Richard Kuhns, George Leonard, and Gary and Loethke Schwartz for sustaining discussions. Scully's view of modernism was a decisive influence. Malcolm Bull, Terry Smith, and Charles Salas made comments on my discussion of the Getty. John O'Brian commented on chapter 8. In Cleveland's museum Barolsky, Danto, and Richard Wollheim listened to halting presentations of chapter 10.

Some topics are best presented in a self-sufficient analysis. But in order to understand art museums, it is necessary to respond to the vast literature. My analysis develops dialectically, in opposition to the claims of the most influential recent commentators. Once you have identified the fundamental philosophical questions, Danto has said, then all the details of your narrative fall into place. My analytical framework comes from his trilogy *Analytic Philosophy of History* (1965), *Analytic Philosophy of Knowledge* (1968), and *Analytic Philosophy of Action* (1973); his treatise on aesthetics *Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (1981); and the summary of his system *Connections to the World* (1997). "To be human is to belong to a stage of history and to be defined in terms of the prevailing representations of that period," Danto has written. But philosophers "have not pondered the complex interrelations between individual representational systems and the cultural or historical representational systems that define the circumstances in which we live."⁵ Following this model, I analyze the relationship between works of art and the museums in which they are displayed. My style has been most influenced by Barolsky's and Nehamas's. I thank Barolsky, Danto, and Kuhns—great patient friends!—for reading drafts; my daughter Liz Carrier for many discussions of pop culture; and Brigston, our golden retriever, for accompanying me on walks in Pittsburgh's parks and Williamstown, good occasions for reflection. When the book was almost finished, a heart attack gave personal urgency to my interest in preserving the past. James Slater, MD, saved my life. I am indebted, also, to two readers for Duke University Press, and to Sage Rountree, the copy editor. The final draft was edited when I was a Clark Fellow. My research assistant Kerin Su-lock read the entire manuscript and made many valuable suggestions. Michael Ann Holly, Mark Ledbury, Gail Parker, and the staff members made my visit enjoyable and productive.

The dedication expresses debts to five essential friends. In July 1998, I

taught at the National Academy, Hangzhou where Ding Ning made it possible for me to learn about Chinese art and culture. In 1999 a miraculously suggestive conversation at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco with Bill Berkson provided one necessary conception. At the Getty I enjoyed happily ferocious debate with Lydia Goehr. In Cleveland Cathleen Chaffee criticized my claims and cocurated an exhibition with me.⁶ Last and *not* least, my wife, Marianne Novy, who has enthusiastically supported and frequently participated in my adventures while writing her own books, worked hard to help me refine these arguments. Without such loving support, what reason would I have to write?

Williamstown, December 12, 2004

Overture

Forms would become manifest insofar as they underwent metamorphosis. Each form had its own perfect sharpness, so long as it retained that form, but everybody knows that a moment later it might become something else. — ROBERTO CALASSO

Ovid's stories about personal identity are very suggestive for the philosopher of art. Arachne, an arrogant weaver who challenges a rival to a weaving contest, learns too late that this old woman is the goddess Pallas in disguise. Defeated Arachne attempts to hang herself but survives, metamorphosed into a spider: "She yet spins her thread, and as a spider is busy with her web as of old."¹ Philosophical theories of personal identity explain how a child becomes an adult and, finally, an old man, remaining the same person as his body ages. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* discusses more extreme physical transformations. Philosophers are concerned with the identities of actual persons, things, and institutions. Creative writers have broader concerns. Presenting magical radical alterations of persons or things, Ovid shows what is fictionally plausible.² All figurative visual art involves metamorphosis because an image transforms physical materials into a representation. As Leonard Barkin puts it, "The art of metamorphosis is the art of the image."³ Then the materials of art illusionistically become what they depict. "If metamorphosis produces an apprehensible trace of distant or incredible events in the real world of the readers, so too does a statue, a painting," writes Andrew Feldherr. "Thus metamorphosis becomes a way of dramatizing the act of representation itself."⁴

Representing metamorphosis is a special challenge for the visual artist — rival of the poet — who must show change, presenting past and future in one image. The poet can describe the entire process, but the visual artist is only able to show the transition in progress. Consider, for example, the story of Apollo and Daphne: "A deep languor took hold on her limbs,

her soft breast was enclosed in thick bark, her hair grew into leaves, her arms into branches, and her feet that were lately so swift were held fast by sluggish roots, while her face became the treetop. Nothing of her was left, except her shining loveliness.”⁵ Bernini’s *Apollo and Daphne* depicts Apollo grasping the fleeing Daphne *as* she is becoming a tree (fig. 1). But Ovid tells that story. In his striking account of this theme, J. G. Ballard describes a world in which objects, animals, and people turn to crystal: “A huge four-legged creature . . . lurched forward through the crust. . . . Invested by the glittering light that poured from its body, the crocodile resembled a fabulous armorial beast. Its blind eyes had been transformed into immense crystalline rubies.”⁶ Like the scene of Apollo and Daphne, this metamorphosis could inspire a visual artist.

Museums are centrally concerned with metamorphoses, both because they contain so much figurative art and because often their contents have survived dramatic change. An adequate account of these institutions thus needs to be as imaginative as *Metamorphoses*, whose “picture of natural generation, assuming a universe that’s unceasingly progenitive, multiple, and fluid, organizes the relationships between creatures according to axioms of metaphorical affinity, poetic resonance, and even a variety of dream punning,” as Marina Warner describes it.⁷ Christopher Allen writes that as a pre-Cartesian way of thinking, “metamorphosis implies that nature is animate, that bodies can change their forms, and that spirit and matter can still act on each other.”⁸ Retelling Ovid’s stories, a modern novelist argues that “in the capital city of Emperor Augustus, the very title of the book had been presumptuous, a provocation to Rome, where every edifice was a monument to authority, invoking the stability, the permanence, and the immutability of power.”⁹ But the political implications of *Metamorphoses* are complex, for while conservatives often fear change, leftists do not necessarily welcome it.

Caroline Walker Bynum describes metamorphosis as “about process, *mutatio*, story—a constant series of replacement changes.”¹⁰ To say that a person can become a spider only because *Metamorphoses* tells us that happens is surely unsatisfactory. We want to understand *how* Arachne’s metamorphosis is possible. People and spiders are very different, so Ovid’s claim that a woman can become a spider is puzzling. Arachne survives her transformation, Ovid implies, because her essential quality, being a skilled weaver, is preserved. According to Stephen Wheeler, “The iden-



1. Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598–1680). *Apollo and Daphne*.
Marble, 1622–25. Front view, post-restoration. Galleria Borghese, Rome.
Photo: Scala / Art Resource, N.Y.

tity of a changed form persists in its new body.”¹¹ When, to cite another Ovidian example, Narcissus is transformed into “a flower with a circle of white petals round a yellow center,” there is a natural connection between the physical qualities of this beautiful youth and that plant.¹²

The complex changes Ovid describes always are logical. When Tiresias, who had “experienced love both as a man and as a woman,” is asked whether women or men got more pleasure from sex, he annoys Juno by giving the nod to women. She blinds him, but Jupiter, in response, “granted Tiresias the power to know the future and softened his punishment by conferring this honour on him.”¹³ Are there some limits on what transformations are conceivable? Perhaps! Could we imagine that a person first become a rock, then a plant, and, finally, a person again? Maybe not, at least not until some creative writer shows what principle of continuity is invoked. According to Virginia Woolf, Orlando “had become a woman. . . . But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. . . . His memory . . . went back through all of the events of her past life without encountering any obstacle. . . . Orlando was a man till the age of thirty; when he became a woman and has remained so ever since.”¹⁴ Through the dramatic physical change Orlando retains his memories and essential personality.

“The central moral to be drawn from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*,” Richard Wollheim writes, “is that, if it is imaginable that there are animals, non-human animals, that are persons, then they have to be—that is, they have to be imagined to be—persons through, or in virtue of being, animals.”¹⁵ His suggestive remark, which is more than a little enigmatic, leads to a very interesting question: “What is it to lead the life of a person?” Like persons, works of art may be said to have lives. What is it to lead the life of a work of art? This book will answer that question. Like Ovid’s characters, works of art pose philosophical dilemmas about identity through time when they undergo metamorphoses. In an Indian temple a sculpture is worshipped. Transported to an American museum, that artifact becomes art. And so a theory is required to explain how an object can survive such dramatic changes. To learn what it is to lead the life of a work of art, we need to understand museums.

The philosophical literature on personal identity discusses memory, the possibility of changing bodies, and the uses of psychological and psychoanalytic evidence.¹⁶ Some writers hold that identity is tied to the

body; others say that it is essentially linked to mental qualities. Identity of persons (or animals or things) over time requires some such form of continuity. Metamorphosis suggests that more radical changes of identity are possible by offering a convincing narrative linking earlier and later times. The wolf attacking Peleus's flocks is changed to marble: "The body preserved its original appearance in every respect, except as regards colour; the whiteness of the stone showed that it was no longer a wolf, and need not be feared any more."¹⁷ Without Ovid's narrative, we could not understand how the wolf and stone are the same thing.

An adequate theory of personal identity must take account of this double identity of persons. Works of art also have a dual nature. Wollheim and Arthur Danto, philosophers with very different aesthetics, agree that the visual work of art cannot simply be identical with a physical object that is moved into a museum. Wollheim writes: "Art, and its objects, come indissolubly linked. . . . Aesthetics then may be thought of as the attempt to understand this envelope in which works of art invariably arrive."¹⁸ Danto agrees: "An artwork cannot be flattened onto its base and identified just with it, for then it would be what the mere thing itself is—a square of red canvas, a dirty set of rice paper sheets, or whatever. . . . without the artworld there is no art. . . . Art is the kind of thing that depends for its existence upon theories."¹⁹ Wollheim and Danto are influenced by much recent art, which exists as art only in relation to theorizing, but their claims have more general validity. Baroque Italian painting is not fully comprehensible unless you understand Counter-Reformation Catholicism, seicento theories of emotion, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Chinese and Japanese art can be properly seen only if you know how Asians comprehend landscape painting, calligraphy, and artistic originality. No form of art wears its meaning entirely on its face.

All visual art thus is inextricably linked with what Wollheim calls its envelope and what Danto identifies as a theory of art. In this way works of art are like people, a unification of body and something else—call it mind, soul, or a system of mental states. Wollheim says: "Living is an embodied mental process."²⁰ And Danto writes: "The mind-body problem, which is our heritage from the seventeenth century, is an artifact of the concept of substance."²¹ Visual works of art, which are physical artifacts accompanied by theory, also have a double nature, as Wheeler explains: "Metamorphosis involves a continuation of the old identity in

the new. As a metaphor, metamorphosis gives coherence to change by revealing the mysterious interconnectedness and parity between things.”²² To understand what happens when art enters the museum, we need to identify what, following Wollheim, I will call its envelope.

Once we make this distinction between the work of visual art and a physical object in which it is embodied, then we need also to discuss interpretation. Metamorphosis, it has been suggested, “can be read as a metaphor for interpretation: moving from manifest to latent, from latent to manifest, reflecting the conscious and unconscious levels of representation . . . reflecting as well those stories in which a demand is made for penetrating into an inner meaning.”²³ To interpret is to change and preserve. That an object is preserved does not show that the work of art survives. In their original settings, many older sculptures and altarpieces were employed in religious rituals. Interpretation, it might be said, marks out the distance between these communities and our museum culture. To properly see Poussin’s *Landscape with Diana and Orion* (1658), you need to know that Orion has been temporarily blinded by the goddess.²⁴ To comprehend Sean Scully’s *Walls of Light* you must recognize that these late 1990s paintings reject his earlier concern with abstract narratives.²⁵ Poussin is historically distant, and so considerable interpretative labor is needed to reconstruct the beliefs of his community. Scully is a contemporary master extending abstract expressionist tradition, and so less bookish learning is required to understand his paintings.

Plausible competing interpretations are often possible. Consider recent debates about whether Caravaggio’s early genre pictures are homoerotic; the claim that Jacques-Louis David was already a political artist in the 1780s; and the controversial interpretation of Jackson Pollock’s late 1940s paintings as anticipating fashionable “adjection” art of the 1980s and 1990s.²⁶ Trained as a philosopher, I became fascinated with such conflicts once I entered art history. Why, I asked, do competing commentaries describe pictures so differently? We philosophers believe that rational debate is possible. My *Principles of Art History Writing* (1991) discussed this issue. This book extends these concerns to the art museum. Like paintings and sculptures, art museums too can be interpreted. And they should be, for to fully understand art we must analyze its setting. A container for individual works of art, the museum itself is a total work of art.

Museum displays project implicit interpretations. Like art writers, curators thus create the envelopes in which art arrives. And we can compare and contrast competing museum interpretations, testing them against the visual evidence. We see one display while recalling or imagining how that art could be installed differently. We view one painting in relation to others and recall what we have just seen or are about to view. We learn who owned art before it entered the museum and how it was displayed at earlier times. And we become aware of the history of a museum and its setting in ways that contribute to our experience of individual paintings. As if in compensation for their inability to present explicit written interpretations except in wall labels, museums suggest many ways of thinking about the artifacts that they collect. Art writing and art museums thus offer complimentary ways of theorizing visual art.

Two views of museums dominate the literature. According to the practice of historians and the memoirs of curators, when art enters the museum it retains its full prior identity. Looking at a painting, you need not examine the context, for all that matters for understanding its artistic qualities is what you see within the frame. Social historians of art extend but do not essentially transform this way of thinking when they argue that knowing the artist's culture may legitimately influence what we see inside that frame. By contrast, according to museum skepticism, the most influential theory, old art cannot survive the metamorphosis taking place when it enters the museum. I will argue that the truth lies between orthodox art history and museum skepticism. When the museum envelope changes, we view its contents differently. But because we can view or imagine viewing art in another context, we are able to subtract out, as it were, the interpretative setting.

Like Ovid's gods who become human or his humans who become animals or natural objects, works of art thus preserve their identity through changes. Since about 1750, the art museum has been one essential element of the envelope in which visual art typically arrives. To fully comprehend an individual work of art, we need to understand the history of the museums in which it has been exhibited. Stated baldly, the argument for that assertion is so simple as to be self-evident. When its context changes, visual art then is seen differently. Buddhist sculptures and Catholic altarpieces are in a new context when put in the museum. And when historians interpret that art, they are providing a permanent writ-

ten record of its contexts. But to be convincing, this argument cannot simply be stated baldly. Case studies are required to show how a work of art survives changes in its envelope.

“I have banished all care from my mind, I have secured myself peace”:²⁷ In the opening paragraph of his “First Meditation,” René Descartes prepares to consider “what can be called in question.” In discussing museums, similarly, we need initially to set ourselves momentarily apart from the everyday practical concerns of curators. Descartes’s proper philosophical analysis is abstract and austere. As his epistemology raises questions that seem distant from the practical concerns of the man on the street, so our philosophical account of museums deals in problems far from the concerns of the working curator. But when its implications are spelled out, then the links of our investigation with museum practice will become apparent. What makes my allusion to Descartes more than a vague analogy, so we will see, is the deep parallel between the double natures of persons, both body and soul, and works of art, artifacts linked to their envelopes.

After concluding his critical analysis, Descartes passes “from contemplation of the true God, ‘in whom are hidden all the treasures of knowledge and wisdom,’ to the knowledge of other things.”²⁸ Our account, to extend this comparison, will move from a philosophical discussion of museums to a historical account of their practice.²⁹ Recent art historians devote considerable attention to the history of their discipline. The art writing of Vasari, Bellori, and Winckelmann prepared for the aesthetic theorizing of Kant and Hegel, which was an essential resource for the great original founding historians—Panofsky, Riegl, Warburg, Wolfflin, and some other writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.³⁰ But once we recognize that the implicit interpretations projected by art museums complement the written interpretations of historians, then that history needs to be supplemented by an account of collectors, curators, and museum architects. My central figures are Baron Dominique Vivant Denon, first director of the Louvre; Bernard Berenson, whose connoisseurship helped Isabella Gardner found her museum; Ernest Fenellosa, who applied Hegelian aesthetic theory to Asian art and assembled a collection now in the Boston Museum of Fine Art; Albert Barnes, who wrote about and collected modernist painting; Richard Meier, architect for the J. Paul Getty museum; and Sherman Lee and

Thomas Munro, the Cleveland Museum director and his art educator. These are not necessarily the most important or even the most famous museum personalities. But they are the best figures for my narrative of the birth, expansion, and fall of the public art museum. In another book different men might be discussed. That mine is an all-male cast reflects the realities of museum life before the immediate present.

Jorge Luis Borges's short story "Averroes' Search" tells of an Islamic commentator on Aristotle who, never having seen a theater, is unable to understand that philosopher's distinction between comedy and tragedy. Arguing that one speaker may read any written words, Averroes is unable to imagine why different actors play the various parts. Borges's fine irony comes when he reveals that had Averroes only attended to the playacting of nearby children, he would have found the answer to his query. Without needing to read Aristotle, these kids spontaneously act a play with several actors. His story, Borges says, is concerned not just with failure but with "a more poetic case . . . a man who sets himself a goal that is not forbidden to men, but is forbidden to him."³¹ Inspired by that story, let us look at the origin of museums.

There were no public art museums in Renaissance Europe, where, as Kenneth Clark describes it, "in the fifteenth century art aspired to be a branch of knowledge, in which a permanent record of natural appearances was valuable both for its own sake and because it could furnish men's imaginations with credible images of God, his Mother, and his Saints."³² Because historians customarily explain what *did* happen, asking why there were *no* art museums in the Renaissance may seem strange.³³ But sometimes answering questions about what did *not* happen is enlightening. Why was there no large socialist party in nineteenth-century America? Engels thought this a good question, for answering it reveals much about class structure.³⁴ Around 1900 American museums collected plaster casts of European masterpieces. The Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh still has a large room of such copies. And the nearby University of Pittsburgh art history department houses copies of Renaissance paintings. Much might be learned by explaining why most museums do not any longer exhibit such copies.

Housing of the treasures of the Greek gods in the temple, Julius von Schlosser argued, could mark the origin of the public museum.³⁵ Most recent historians think this claim misleading. Not until the eighteenth

century do we find institutions like our art museums. Renaissance Italy had a historical perspective on culture, a well-developed market in contemporary art, and a highly sophisticated tradition of art writing, but no public art museums. The Medici aimed “to acquire the finest ancient statues that came from the soil of Rome,” Filippo Rossi writes. “Not only did they commission the best Florentine artists of the *quattrocento* for their own homes and villas . . . but with the comprehension and taste of true collectors, they also collected the works of foreign artists.”³⁶ China too had sophisticated artistic traditions, connoisseurs and collectors, but no public art displays, as Joseph Alsop explains: “Art Museums are a strictly Western phenomenon. . . . In the other rare art traditions, splendid shows were for the masses, but the more refined pleasures to be got from studying individual works of art were for the classes.”³⁷ Why did such non-European cultures not also have museums?

All of the machinery of the public art museum had been invented in the Renaissance. There were artists, collectors, and connoisseurs. And Vasari’s *Lives* provided a historical way of organizing collections. Why then was the birth of this institution delayed until the late eighteenth century? Historians such as Susan Pierce explain the origin of the public art museum in sociological terms: “The new public art museums required a new philosophy and a new iconography which would draw upon the idea of classification inherited from the previous century and link this with the applied intellectual rationale characteristic of the developing European middle class, who wanted to see a clear increase in knowledge and understanding for their own efforts, and who preferred this knowledge to underpin their own position.”³⁸ The first such museums were royal collections opened to the public.³⁹ Lacking our distinction between beautiful works of nature and works of human art, Renaissance *Kunst-kammern* and *Wunderkammern* mixed together rare animals, plants and stones, and works of art.⁴⁰ But such collections did not survive the rise of modern science, which destroyed what Paula Findlen calls “the valiant attempts of Renaissance and Baroque naturalists to preserve their image of the world.”⁴¹

German aestheticians discuss this history in more abstract terms. For Kant, art is both similar to and also essentially different from nature: “A product of fine art must be recognized to be art and not nature. Never-

theless the finality in its form must appear just as free from the constraint of arbitrary rules as if it were a product of mere nature. . . . fine art must be clothed with the aspect of nature, although we recognize it to be art.”⁴² As G. E. Moore puts it in his summary of this tradition: “It is not sufficient that a man should merely see the beautiful qualities in a picture and know that they are beautiful, in order that we may give his state of mind the highest praise. We require that he should also *appreciate* the beauty of that which he sees and which he knows to be beautiful—that he should feel and see *its beauty*.”⁴³ Hegel, by contrast, makes a much more dramatic distinction between art and nature: “The beautiful objects of nature and art, the purposeful products of nature, through which Kant comes nearer to the concept of the organic and living, he treats only from the point of view of a reflection which judges them subjectively.”⁴⁴ Hegel greatly admired Napoleon, whose policies could, he thought, instruct German rulers.⁴⁵ But he did not relate Napoleonic politics to the Louvre.

The birth of the public art museum was intimately bound up with the rise of academic art history, new aesthetic theories, and the development of democracy. Once high art moved from churches, temples, and princely collections into the public space of the museum, visitors needed to be educated. In the late eighteenth century, Johann Winckelmann wrote an elaborate history of Greek and Roman art. He was not much attracted by most postclassical painting, but his analysis, in which, Per Bjurström writes, “the development of art was equated with the natural life cycle of birth, growth, maturity and decline,” was quickly applied within the new museums in Vienna and elsewhere.⁴⁶ In Düsseldorf in the 1770s, for example, Andrew McClellan explains, “an effort was made to define the Flemish and Italian schools by displaying them in separate galleries. At Vienna in the early 1780s Chrétien de Mechel transformed the ornate baroque gallery into what was arguably the first art historical survey museum.”⁴⁷ “Until the turn of the nineteenth century access was governed by the rules of court protocol and aristocratic etiquette,” Karsten Schubert writes.⁴⁸ This policy sometimes created awkward situations. In 1773, Schubert reports, an English nobleman “tired out with the insolence of the common people” refused admittance to his museum “to the lower class except they come provided with a ticket from some

Gentleman or Lady of my acquaintance.”⁴⁹ As late as 1785, a German historian complained that in order to visit the British Museum it was necessary to present credentials and wait fourteen days for a ticket.

Public museums admitting every visitor appear near the end of the old regime, in Rome and in the German-speaking countries, but the great model is the Louvre, the former royal palace opened to the public on August 10, 1793.⁵⁰ McClellan explains, “It was in Paris in the later half of the eighteenth century that the central and abiding issues of museum practice . . . were first discussed and articulated.”⁵¹ This institution was a product of the revolution and Napoleon’s looting, and so here the link between the public museum and modernist politics was made fully explicit. Findlen writes, “In the Rousseaian climate of revolutionary Europe, collections were no longer the property of a private individual, the church . . . or the personal possession of a monarch.”⁵² Once the king admitted any well-dressed gentleman to view his treasures, it was easy to think the royal collection belonged to the nation. In Germany “in the course of the eighteenth century, the circle of those who could gain admittance to the collection steadily widened as a number of princes came to believe that their art, like their gardens, libraries, and theatres, should be more available to their subjects.”⁵³ Art in the nation’s museums was really owned in common by all citizens.⁵⁴

The public art museum thus is linked with the French Revolution and the novel aesthetic theories of German philosophers. “In distinguishing civil from political society, Hegel recognized the emergence of a new social configuration: a separate private social sphere, within which agents lived for themselves, without participating in political affairs. The heart of this new sphere was the modern market economy.”⁵⁵ In a letter of September 9, 1827, he described the Grand Gallery in the Louvre, “a straight long hall, vaulted at the ceiling and with paintings hanging on both sides—an almost endless corridor a quarter-hour long.”⁵⁶ Hegel said more about the museums in Dresden, Vienna, and Holland, but in no case does he respond to either the buildings or the collections in any interesting detail. He did, however, sketch a theory of the public art museum. “Unless we bring with us in the case of each picture a knowledge of the country, period, and school to which it belongs and of the master who painted it, most galleries seem to be a senseless confusion out of which we cannot find our way. Thus the greatest aid to study and intel-

ligent enjoyment is an *historical* arrangement.”⁵⁷ Hegel’s late-1820s lectures on aesthetics provided the intellectual framework for the historical hangings of the new public museums. And then in 1830 the Prussian king Friedrich Wilhelm III, an admirer of Denon, founded the Berlin gallery.

Hegel is the great theorist of the historical art museum because, as Beat Wyss writes, his “philosophy of history was reconstructed as an imaginary museum. His art history is museum-like, since the present is separated off from the past. Only what has the aura of the historical and has been passed by the social consensus is admitted to this museum.”⁵⁸ A recent commentator writes: “Hegel insists that the expression of *Geist* must (metaphysically) have a physical seat (the activities of people—physical beings in a physical world—and their products). Geist is ‘constituted’ (in the sense of actualized) by human beings engaging in the social, political, and cultural practices of their community.”⁵⁹ I certainly do not mean to suggest that the theorizing of Kant and Hegel guided museum directors. If anything, the process worked the other way around—the abstract arguments of philosophers, developed mostly without explicit reference to museums, reflected changes in the practice of collectors and historians. In many ways, indeed, Denon’s Louvre employed a traditional organization. He told Napoleon that he aimed for “a history course in the art of painting,” but in the Grand Gallery “commitment to art historical demonstration was outweighed by a desire to achieve a visually pleasing, symmetrical hang.”⁶⁰ Nor did historical installation styles affect every museum immediately or take effect at once.⁶¹ Here it is useful to draw an analogy with political institutions. “The chief permanent achievement of the French Revolution was the suppression of those political institutions, commonly described as feudal, which for many centuries had held unquestioned sway in most European countries.”⁶² It certainly did not finally destroy absolute monarchy, which in any event had been under serious attack before the last days of the old regime. But by 1793 it was clear that this political system was outdated.

When Baron Denon was young, he charmed Louis XV. After traveling extensively in Italy, writing accounts of his voyages and himself making pictures, some pornographic, he proved supple enough to survive the Revolutionary terror, Napoleon’s expedition to Egypt, and the fall of that patron.⁶³ Denon purchased *Gilles* (fig. 2), Antoine Watteau’s most famous painting, during the First Empire. At seventy-eight he went to



2. Jean Antoine Watteau (1684–1721). *Pierrot*, formerly called *Gilles*.
Oil on canvas, 184 × 149 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris. Photo: J. G. Berizzi,
Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, N.Y.

an art auction, came home with a chill, and died. In 1869, after passing through the hands of other collectors, *Gilles* entered the Louvre. Denon's successor at the Louvre, Pierre Rosenberg, has noted the difficulty of understanding this picture. "The expression on his face has caused considerable perplexity. People have read in it 'stupidity,' 'credulousness,' 'lethargy,' 'revery,' 'melancholy,' 'poignancy.' It is in fact indefinable, as in the emotion that the painting brings out. . . . Cut off from the world surrounding him, without movement, isolated and alone, Watteau's poignant and awkward image of *Pierrot* remains unique in the history of art."⁶⁴ *Pierrot* might stand for that museum, a perplexing institution hard to interpret, which also is set apart from the world of change.

This book describes the birth, development, and end of the history of the public art museum. There were institutions before 1793 that made art accessible to the public, but in linking the origin of the museum with the French Revolution we draw attention in a natural way to its relationship with modern democratic culture. In tracing the expansion of the museum to include art of non-European cultures and its elaboration in countries outside its original European home, we describe developments very closely related to the expansion of bourgeois democracy and imperialism. Socialism, so it has been said, links French revolutionary politics, English industrialization, and the German philosophy of Hegel and his most important heir, Marx.⁶⁵ For all of its obvious problems, that quick generalization suggests how to describe the historical relationship between the public art museum and its supporting culture. There are museums almost everywhere because European institutions have triumphed, admittedly at the price of being radically transformed, almost everywhere. The large new I. M. Pei museum in Shanghai, for example, demonstrates that this Western institution has taken root in an exotic culture. Art museums are found nearly everywhere now because almost no part of the world remains outside of capitalist culture.

Constant expansion has defined the history of the public art museum since 1973. Once art from all cultures and contemporary art was collected, then the development of this institution was closed. Just as the origin of our museums is linked to modernism, so the present radical transfiguration of this institution relates to recent changes in our larger culture. The public art museum is a fabulously successful institution. Every city has at least one, many are expanding, and most have an in-

satisfiable desire to create new exhibitions. It may seem strange to speak of the end of this institution when our prosperous museums, drawing larger, more diverse crowds than ever before, are the subject of so much popular and academic attention. Certainly the story of this institution will continue, but what has recently ended, so I will argue, is the development of the modernist museum, that institution whose development began on August 10, 1793.

Just as the modernist artistic tradition has ended, to be replaced by what Arthur Danto has identified as our posthistorical era, so the story of the modernist art museum has now concluded. Our present-day museums display art inherited from their modernist precursors, and they shared many goals. But this institution now is reinventing itself in dramatic ways. When Marxism became “the repository of ideals and values not attained in actuality, and perhaps not capable of attainment,” then it disintegrated, for “its accomplishments are shown to be incompatible with its ultimate aims, which thus disclose their essentially metaphysical, i.e., transcendental and unrealisable, nature.”⁶⁶ By showing how the modern public art museum disintegrated because its accomplishments were incompatible with its ultimate as yet unrealizable aims, we will be prepared to anticipate its next metamorphosis.

“Beauty and Art, History and Fame and Power”

ON ENTERING THE LOUVRE

Representation in general has indeed a double power—that of rendering anew and imaginarily present, not to say living, the absent and the dead. . . . if representation reproduces not only *de facto* but also *de jure* the conditions that make its reproduction possible, then we understand that it is in the interests of power to appropriate it for itself. Representation and power share the same nature.

—LOUIS MARIN

Just as works of art require interpretation, so too do the museums in which they are displayed. But while everyone understands the need to explain visual art by identifying its iconography and social significance, and by placing individual paintings in historical narratives, the idea that museums also require such analysis is less familiar.¹ That may seem surprising, for we certainly interpret them informally. When approaching we judge the architecture. Upon entering we sense if the ingress is inviting and the floor plan easy to follow. Reading wall labels, we reflect upon the provenance of objects in the collection and the roles played by curators in organizing their display. We readily think about the visual relationships of the works of art on display. And thanks to Nietzsche's genealogy of Christian morality and Foucault's books about madness and the prison, we are very aware that institutions can be interpreted. As Alexander Nehamas writes, “Genealogy is interpretation in the sense that it treats our moral practices not as given but as ‘texts,’ as signs with a meaning, as

manifestations of a will to power that this interpretation tries to reveal.”² Because Nietzsche and Foucault are interested in political power, their ways of thinking are very suggestive for our present purposes.

The literature of art is devoted to individual paintings. And so the argument of my *Principles of Art History Writing* was relatively easy to work out, for identifying it merely required examining the practice of art historians. Locating my present analysis was more difficult, because although art museums have been much discussed recently, there is less articulated awareness that we interpret them as total works of art. When a painting or sculpture is given a suggestive analysis, what I call an interpretation by description, then its appearance changes before our eyes.³ For example, Rudolf Wittkower says that in Bernini’s *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*, Cornaro Chapel, S. Maria della Vittoria, “directed heavenly light . . . sanctifies the objects and persons struck by it and singles them out as recipients of divine Grace. . . . we realize that the moment of divine ‘illumination’ passes as it comes.”⁴ When he adds that “here in the ambient air of a chapel [Bernini] did what painters tried to do in their pictures,” use real light, his account carries real art historical weight. When Adrian Stokes writes that the figures in Cézanne’s *The Large Bathers* in the National Gallery, London, could “suggest a quorum of naked tramps camped on top of railway carriages as the landscape roars by from left to right,” he changes how we see that picture.⁵ And Arthur Danto’s description of Cy Twombly’s *Leda and the Swan* projects a strong interpretation of that abstract painting, calling it “the zero degree of writing, drawing, painting, composition, somehow achieving—at its greatest achieving—a certain stammering beauty, where the base elements are possibly even transformed into elegant whispers. There is an almost Taoist political metaphor here for those who seek such things.”⁶ Much art writing—by Vasari in the sixteenth century as well as by *Artforum* critics today—is interpretation by description.

A strong interpretation changes dramatically, perhaps permanently, how art is seen. The aim of successful interpretations, Leo Steinberg writes, is “that they be probable if not provable; that they make visible what had not previously been apparent; and that, once stated, they so penetrate the visual matter that the picture seems to confess itself and the interpreter disappears.”⁷ A Marxist commentator characterized this activity in political terms: “Interpretation is not an isolated act, but takes