

ISAIAH BERLIN LECTURE

## Palace or Powerstation? Museums Today

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IN 1965 ISAIAH BERLIN delivered the A. W. Mellon Lectures at the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC on ‘Sources of Romantic Thought’. According to his faithful editor, Henry Hardy, he suggested ‘The Roots of Romanticism’ as a title for the series, but agreed to change it, no doubt with a wry smile, when it was pointed out to him that he had been pipped to the post, because the eponymous hero of Saul Bellow’s novel *Herzog*, published a year earlier in 1964, was a Jewish academic of a certain age undergoing a crisis of confidence as he struggled to deliver a course of adult-education lectures not simply on the same subject, but with the very same title.<sup>1</sup>

As I stand here this evening in the British Academy, to give a lecture in the name of one of its most distinguished past presidents, who was also for many years a devoted Trustee of the National Gallery, you will forgive me, I hope, if I empathise for a moment with his fictional counterpart!

However, I want to make a more serious point. By giving a course of lectures in which he identified, in his own words, ‘a radical shift of values (that) occurred in the latter half of the eighteenth century’, a shift so radical that it ‘has affected thought, feeling and action in the western world’,<sup>2</sup> Berlin lent his authority to the idea of the museum as a place for discourse. He was not, apparently, in sympathy with that younger generation of

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, ed. Henry Hardy (London, 2000), p. x.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Hardy from Berlin’s notes, *ibid.*, p. xii.

European philosophers whom he thought of as café intellectuals, but I like to think that he would have been willing, at least, to entertain Michel Foucault's definition of museums as heterotopia, or sites designated 'to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, . . . the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside time and inaccessible to its ravages . . . this whole idea belongs to our modernity'.<sup>3</sup> My only quibble is with that last clause; for while it is true that the word we use in English, *museum*, gained currency as late as the seventeenth century, as private cabinets of curiosities, such as the one formed by the Tradescants, father and son, began to enter the public domain, we also need to remind ourselves of the word's much earlier, classical derivation—from the Museum (with a capital M) at Alexandria, that seat of learning which flourished under the Ptolemies from the third century BC onwards. The association between collections and academic pursuits (*scientia literarum*) is therefore, I would argue, definitive. It is also one which, by that same definition, assigns a particular importance to university museums. This was recognised explicitly by the founder of the one where I work; in the will he signed shortly before he died in 1816, Richard, Viscount Fitzwilliam bequeathed his collections to the Chancellor, Masters and Scholars of the University of Cambridge 'for the increase of learning'.

But let me turn now to one or two examples of museum architecture. I would like to do so for the obvious reason that the shape and size of buildings are bound to reflect not only their purpose but also the cultural assumptions of the period in which they were created, or recreated. Form may not always follow function, but to the informed eye it rarely fails to reveal it.

The Louvre is, of course, the *palace par excellence*. However, we are concerned not with its original purpose, to accommodate the household and offices of a highly centralised absolute monarchy, but with its recreation as a museum during the French Revolution. Ten years later, in 1803, enlarged by loot from his conquests, it was renamed for the emperor, Musée Napoléon. Notwithstanding Napoleon's defeat, and the subsequent repatriation of some of his more egregious spoils, by the third decade of the nineteenth century the Louvre was established as one of Europe's outstanding national museums; a reproach, in a word, to Regency London and the British Museum, with its muddle of collections,

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, 'Texts/Contexts: of other spaces', *Diacritics*, 16/1 (Spring 1986), 22–7.

from Sloane's curiosities to the Elgin Marbles, all crammed into the barely modified rooms of Montagu House.

Smirke's original plans date from those very years and, looking at the British Museum as it was rebuilt between 1823 and 1846, it is easy to see the influence of what were rapidly becoming assumptions about museum architecture; the relationship to royal palaces and to their original contents, those 'princely goods' that formed the basis of so many national collections, but also an equally strong association with classical temples. Schinkel's Altes Museum in Berlin of 1823 was, of course, one of the first to invoke antiquity directly, with its central rotunda emulating the Pantheon in Rome. In London, the emphasis was on Greece; not only because of the Elgin purchase, made in 1816, but also because of Charles Towneley's and other collections formed in the late eighteenth century by a generation of antiquarians and connoisseurs for whom, to quote one of them, Richard Payne Knight, 'the prodigious superiority of the Greeks over every other nation, in all works of real taste and genius, is one of the most curious moral phaenomena in the history of man'.<sup>4</sup>

Turning from exteriors to interiors: I think we can see that here too there were distinct assumptions about the display of art. Johann Zoffany's painting of Grand Tourists among cognoscenti and British residents in Florence, informally assembled in the Tribuna of the Uffizi, was painted for Queen Charlotte in the 1770s.<sup>5</sup> Setting aside as we must the degree of artistic licence he employed in this elaborate conversation piece, it reproduces quite faithfully the way in which paintings were hung in European palaces, from the High Renaissance onwards. And when the last of the Medici, the Electress Palatine Anna Maria Luisa de Medici, entrusted the Uffizi and its contents to the city of Florence in 1743 'to benefit the public of all nations', it would not have occurred to anyone that there was anything inappropriate in the way that the pictures were arranged. Lord Northwick's Picture Gallery at Thirlestaine House, which was painted by Robert Huskisson in 1846, provides one example among many of the persistence of this fashion.<sup>6</sup> Even today, one or two delightful examples of

<sup>4</sup> Richard Payne Knight, *Specimens of Antient Sculpture*, 1 (London, 1809); quoted by Nicholas Penny, 'Collecting, interpreting, and imitating ancient art', in *The Arrogant Connoisseur: Richard Payne Knight, 1751–1824*, ed. Michael Clarke and Nicholas Penny (Manchester, 1982), p. 79.

<sup>5</sup> See Oliver Millar, *The Later Georgian Pictures in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen*, 2 vols. (London, 1969), 1. p. 154, no. 1211; 2. plates 40–2.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Huskisson, *Lord Northwick's Picture Gallery at Thirlestaine House*, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, oil on canvas, 81.4 × 108.5 cm.



**Figure 1.** The Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge: Founder's Building, 1848, designed by George Basevi (1794–1845) and completed after his death by C. R. Cockerell (1788–1863).

these aristocratic interiors survive: the Palazzo Doria Pamphili in Rome, for instance.

Moving closer to home, as far as I am concerned, the ‘good, substantial, museum repository’ George Basevi designed to fulfill one of the stipulations made in Lord Fitzwilliam’s will, opened to the public in 1848 (Fig. 1). Its exterior bears a family resemblance to Smirke’s British Museum, completed at the same time and already the hallmark for art museums in Victorian Britain. The interior was, quite naturally, arranged according to those time-honoured conventions we have already examined (Fig. 2). However, by the middle of the nineteenth century there were murmurings against hanging on, above and below the line. They began, I suspect, among artists who were dismayed when their paintings were ‘skied’ in exhibitions at the Royal Academy and elsewhere. They were certainly voiced by at least one reviewer of the new galleries in Cambridge. Writing in the *Cambridge Chronicle and Huntingdonshire Gazette* on 1 July 1848, he observed that

the first coup d’oeil must convince the beholder how cleverly the pictures have been marshalled according to their *sizes*. This grouping, we must confess, has been most successful in its way. He must not, therefore, be offended at a few special effects produced in consequence. Companionship in subject or style, having been made a secondary point, there must occur some few violations, perhaps rather harsh, of other harmonies . . .

One group embraces a piece of fish, and flesh, and fowl, with landscape delineations of almost all the elements.

Another group contains a portrait of Hone, a Holy Family, and a cattle market.

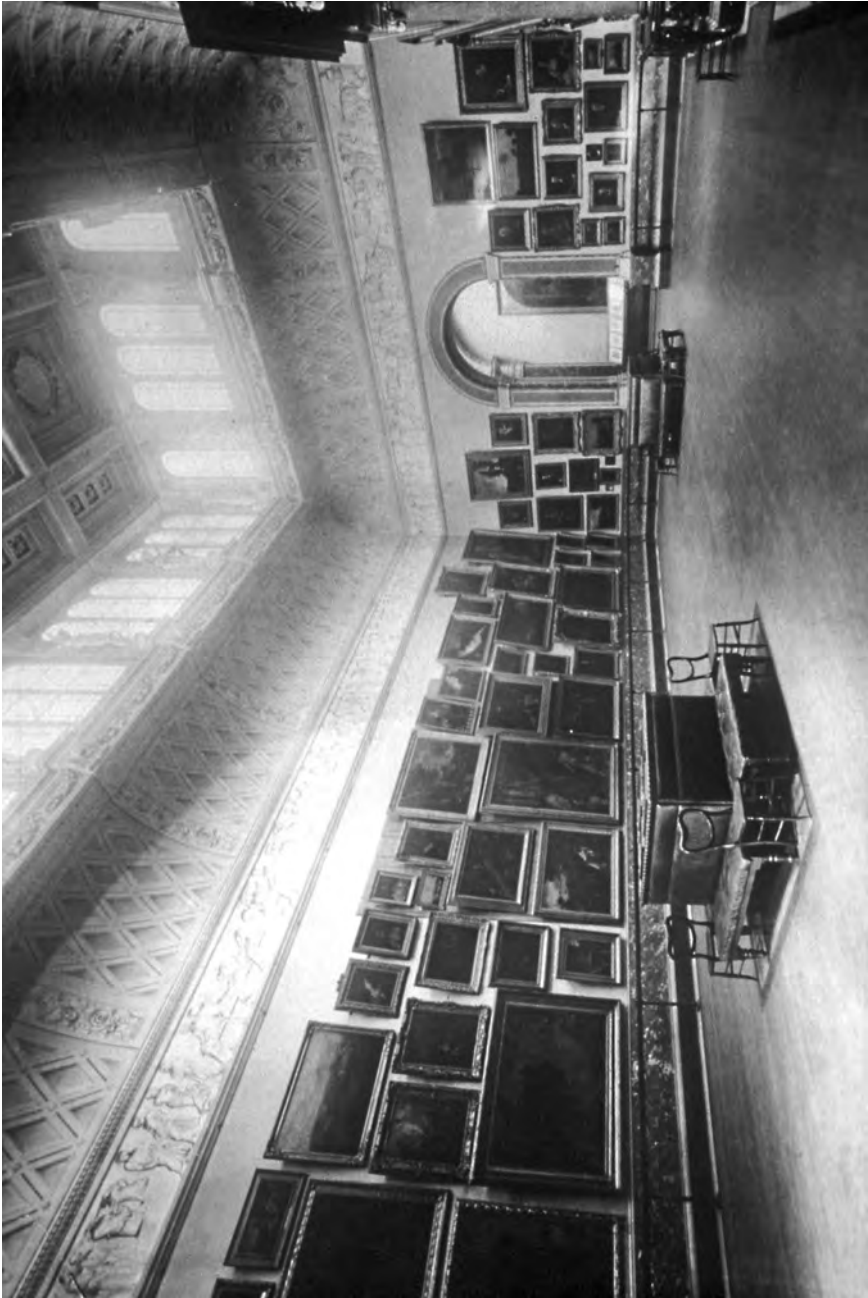
Further on in the article, the reviewer cannot resist the inevitable quip that the viewer ‘may wish to have a ladder to help him to a fair view of a few inviting works’. But there are also two more serious criticisms, one veiled, the other levelled more directly. First:

Until . . . they (the Syndics) shall . . . mark out the boundaries between the dominions of purity and indecency, and draw the fine line which excludes a work of art of a certain kind from the immoral, it is to be feared that many . . . will condemn the present display . . .

Secondly:

not a few will, till better informed, lament the non-adoption, in a place of science, of a scientific arrangement for such a collection.

Both of these comments are, I believe, signs of the times. The lack of ‘scientific arrangement’ remained a problem for decades, to judge not only



**Figure 2.** Gallery 3, The Fitzwilliam Museum, photographed in the nineteenth century.

from the surviving photographic records but also from the guide to the collections written at the turn of the century. On the other hand, in 1856 the university's vice-chancellor 'thought it his duty to make considerable changes in the FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM during the Christmas vacation'. As he explained in a flysheet dated January,

the exhibition of nude figures in a public gallery is always a matter of some embarrassment. Even where the gallery is visited by those only who are habituated to regard merely the pictorial interest of such objects, they ought not, it would seem, to be obtruded on the eye of the visitor. But since, in recent times, we have opened the Fitzwilliam Gallery to the public indiscriminately, and to very young persons of both sexes, it appears to be quite necessary, for the credit of the University, that it should be possible to pass through the Gallery without looking at such pictures:

We smile, but we also need to remind ourselves that although the goal posts have moved, in terms of what is, and what is not, acceptable, the museum is still a sensitive site in which the question of censorship remains open. Twenty years ago, when I was working in the United States of America, I remember the very varied fortunes of a touring exhibition of photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe. In Washington it was scheduled to appear at the Corcoran, a few hundred yards from Capitol Hill. Such was the outcry against its homoerotic content that the Trustees declined to open it and the director resigned. Questions of a threatening kind were asked in Congress about the use of public money via the Arts and Humanities Endowments to support such controversial art. Six months later, however, the same exhibition opened at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut; a State Capitol this time, in the heart of puritan New England. There, ironically, it was a runaway success, earning valuable dollars for the museum and accolades for the director and his board.

In the case of the Fitzwilliam, it took rather longer to address the second criticism, until 1924 in fact, and the completion of the first of the museum's twentieth-century extensions, the Upper Marlay Gallery. In what was seen as a highly innovative approach to the display of art, Sydney Cockerell, director from 1908 to 1937, installed the early Italian schools in more or less chronological order, hanging the pictures at or near to eye level and interspersing them with appropriate sculpture, furniture and ceramics (Fig. 3). But if Cockerell's installation owes a great deal to the new science of connoisseurship derived from Morelli and applied particularly to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in central Italy by that most passionate of all sightseers, Bernard Berenson, it also



**Figure 3.** Upper Marlay Gallery, The Fitzwilliam Museum, designed by A. Dunbar Smith and Cecil C. Brewer, 1915–24.



descends from another late nineteenth-century tradition, one associated with both Arts and Crafts and the Aesthetic Movement, the ‘Haus eines Kunstfreundes’, the collector’s domestic paradise in which he could dwell in a tastefully constructed world surrounded by his most cherished possessions. It was, of course, a deliberate construct, both illuminated and exploded by the image of the dealer William Agnew posing in his Bond Street Gallery.<sup>7</sup> This, the *fin de siècle*, was the era of collectors, connoisseurs and marchand-amateurs, and sometimes, as in the case of Charles Fairfax Murray, a blend of all three. Berenson too, with I Tatti, his beloved *casa colonica* in the hills above Florence where he supported himself by writing opinions and advising other collectors on their purchases; Berenson who wrote towards the end of his life that ‘rereading Pater’s Marius, I am surprised to discover to what extent it is my own spiritual biography’.<sup>8</sup>

Looking more closely at the disposition of works of art throughout the Upper Marlay Gallery (Fig. 4), André Malraux’s famous dictum springs to mind: ‘A Romanesque crucifix was not regarded by its contemporaries as a work of sculpture; nor Cimabue’s Madonna as a picture’. But whereas he attributes this metamorphosis as he calls it—of the devotional image into an object of aesthetic contemplation—to the museum, which he characterises as an institution which ‘divests works of art of their functions’, it is clear, I think, that this process of transformation began at least a generation earlier, with those collectors who rehabilitated the discarded fragments of late medieval altarpieces into icons of their own taste. Simone Martini’s three separate panels, as they have been presented with minor modifications to their framing ever since they emerged from the Charles Butler collection in 1893, make no sense at all iconographically. It is only when we use our art-historical knowledge to take them apart and to rearrange them mentally around the missing central image, with its subjects of the saints’ eternal devotion, that we begin to appreciate their original function.

To go further, beyond the walls of the museum, in search of the historical contexts for Simone’s altarpieces, we have to look for evidence of a different kind; evidence which can be derived from archival, documentary, or visual sources. One example of the last is a small painting by Sassetta,

<sup>7</sup> Edward Salomons (d. 1906), *William Agnew in his Gallery, c.1880*, Thos. Agnew & Sons, London.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted by John Pope-Hennessy, ‘Portrait of an Art Historian’ in *Essays on Italian Sculpture* (London and New York, 1968), p. 206.



**Figure 4.** Detail of the Upper Marlay Gallery, showing Simone Martini's three panels of Saints Geminianus, Michael and Augustine, each 59.7 × 35.8 cm. The Fitzwilliam Museum, purchased 1893.

another Sienese artist, active in the fifteenth century, who faithfully depicted this Miracle of the Eucharist in what were for him the familiar surroundings of a late medieval church interior.<sup>9</sup>

This is not the place or time to elaborate upon a single art-historical detective story, although it provides a good example of the kind of museum-based research to which we owe our knowledge, in this instance of Simone's commission to paint an altarpiece for the church of Sant'Agostino in the Tuscan hill-town of San Gimignano, and the whereabouts of the other surviving fragments of the polyptych.<sup>10</sup> What I wish to emphasise instead is the general point; that the relationship between museum collections and scholarship is one which has to be maintained and, if possible, strengthened. Personally, I have no objections to anyone constructing their own myths around surviving fragments of material culture; in fact doing so has been one of the main preoccupations of artists and writers during the past century, but I am convinced that by careful research we can recover something at least of the original meanings of the works of art we have inherited from the past. Think back for a moment to Palma Vecchio's *Venus and Cupid*, or consider Titian's great allegory of the five senses summarised in his painting of *Venus, Cupid and a Lutenist* (Fig. 5). No one in the western world objects today to the display of naked flesh; indeed, it is hard to avoid exposure to it, in paint and on the screen, not to mention it being served up in gigantic portions on billboards, but to attribute our acceptance of Renaissance art to our more permissive attitudes is to miss its point just as completely as our repressed Victorian counterparts did. Our appreciation is based not on toleration but on knowledge, on a far greater understanding of the artistic and intellectual milieu from which those idealised images of sacred and profane love arose.<sup>11</sup> This brings me back to the importance of collections-based scholarship and to the expression of one of my serious concerns about the status of research in museums today.

Fifty years ago and for much of the second half of the twentieth century, scholar-curators set new standards for the cataloguing of public collections in our national and regional museums: for example, Martin

<sup>9</sup> Sassetta, (Stefano di Giovanni) c.1400–50, 'The Miracle of the Eucharist', Bowes Museum, Barnard Castle.

<sup>10</sup> J. W. Goodison, *Catalogue of Paintings: The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, 2. Italian Schools* (Cambridge, 1967), pp. 158–62.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Erwin Panofsky, 'The Neoplatonic Movement in Florence and North Italy', in *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (Oxford, 1939; repr. New York, 1962), pp. 129–69.



**Figure 5.** Titian (Tiziano Vecellio) (? 1477–1576), *Venus, Cupid with a Lute Player*, oil on canvas, 150.5 × 196.8 cm. The Fitzwilliam Museum, Founder's Bequest.

Davies, Assistant Keeper, Keeper and then Director of the National Gallery; John Pope-Hennessy, Assistant Keeper, Keeper of Sculpture and then Director of the Victoria and Albert Museum. Their catalogues remain indispensable tools for any serious student of the areas and periods they covered. Contrast today, when far too many curators have far too little time to work on the permanent collections in their care, because their roles have widened and diversified. Of course there are honourable exceptions—but what I find disturbing is that although the national museums (and where they lead, presumably others will follow) are gaining analogue status with institutions of higher education, and thereby qualifying for funding by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, they have a tendency to buy in research, to regard it as an add-on, to be carried out by independent scholars or temporary staff, paid for by external funding, as opposed to treating it as a core function of the permanent staff or establishment.

For me the curatorial function remains crucial, and it must certainly not be underestimated. To return to Foucault's notion of the museum as a heterotopia, a place where different cultures can be both represented and contested, simultaneously, side by side; in such a context, the curator wields enormous power, simply by selecting the exhibits and less simply by arranging them. To illustrate the point, I offer a comparison of two photographs taken at different times of the same paintings in the same space (Figs. 6 and 7). The gallery was designed in the 1930s by the architects A. Dunbar Smith and Cecil C. Brewer. The earlier photograph shows the gallery as Cockerell installed it initially, applying the somewhat austere aesthetic of the Arts and Crafts movement including truth to materials. The more recent one shows it after it was refurbished by another of my predecessors, Michael Jaffé, in 1975. His aim was to increase the impact of these three great masterpieces from the founder's collection by suggesting the opulence of their original settings—in the emperor's palace in Prague for instance, or the Palais d'Orleans. Once again, this is not so much an attempt at accurate, historical reconstruction, as an act of empathy and evocation.

The process continues, and I take my share of the responsibility. In 1975 the Adeane Gallery opened as a temporary exhibition gallery, a use to which it was dedicated until it was made over, on my watch, to provide a gallery for our permanent collection of the arts of the late twentieth century. I am fully aware of the fact that this action not only extended the museum's narrative chronologically, but also that it did so in a particular way, giving priority within that narrative to a certain type of art produced



**Figure 6.** Detail of the Courtauld Gallery, Fitzwilliam Museum, photographed c.1970.



**Figure 7.** Detail of the Courtauld Gallery, Fitzwilliam Museum, photographed after 1975.

in the last three decades of the last century. In other words, decisions taken within the museum about both the design and the content of the galleries will inevitably influence the way in which art is received and perceived. The text is unwritten, and perhaps all the more persuasive for being so.

In trying to understand the place and importance of museums today, it is worth recalling the outlook a hundred years ago. Marinetti's call to 'Burn the Museums' was echoed by avant-gardes all over Europe, impatient with the claustrophobic constraints of the nineteenth century. Museums, with their dinosaurs' bones and dusty cases of stuffed birds, became the antithesis of modernity, of progress, of the machine age. Wyndham Lewis led the charge in England; his *Blasts* were directed against those individuals and institutions he held responsible for the repressions of the Victorian era. I hesitate to mention it, but on one page of *Blast* a predecessor of mine at Magdalene College, A. C. Benson, shares the honours of excoriation with the British Academy!<sup>12</sup>

How did museums, along with academies, survive this assault? The reason is, I suggest, that museums have proved adept, over the past century or so, at reinventing themselves. Twenty years ago, when I read the table of contents of the American journal, *Museum News*,<sup>13</sup> I was struck by the way in which the titles of the articles provided a series of highly relevant cues: here, under four headings, are the reasons why the futurists, among other cultural iconoclasts of the early twentieth century, were proved to be wrong.

Museums have modernised. The first heading was 'The Selling of the Museum', indicating the importance we now attach to marketing and promotion as well as the needs of our different audiences. The second, provocatively headed 'Serving up Culture', featured the expansion of the Whitney Museum of American Art to off-site locations, in a conscious attempt to create a *different* kind of 'museum without walls' from the one envisaged by Malraux. The third caption read 'Showplace, Playground or Forum', to indicate the way in which museums are increasingly seen as sites for a variety of discourses; why should they not serve all three of those functions, not least as fora for the kind of intellectual debate the A. W. Mellon lectures were designed to stimulate in Washington? Finally, 'Investing in Conservation' as one of our most urgent priorities.

<sup>12</sup> Wyndham Lewis (ed.), *Blast: Review of the Great English Vortex*, 1. 20 June 1914 (London, New York and Toronto), p. 21.

<sup>13</sup> *Museum News*, 64/4, April 1986.

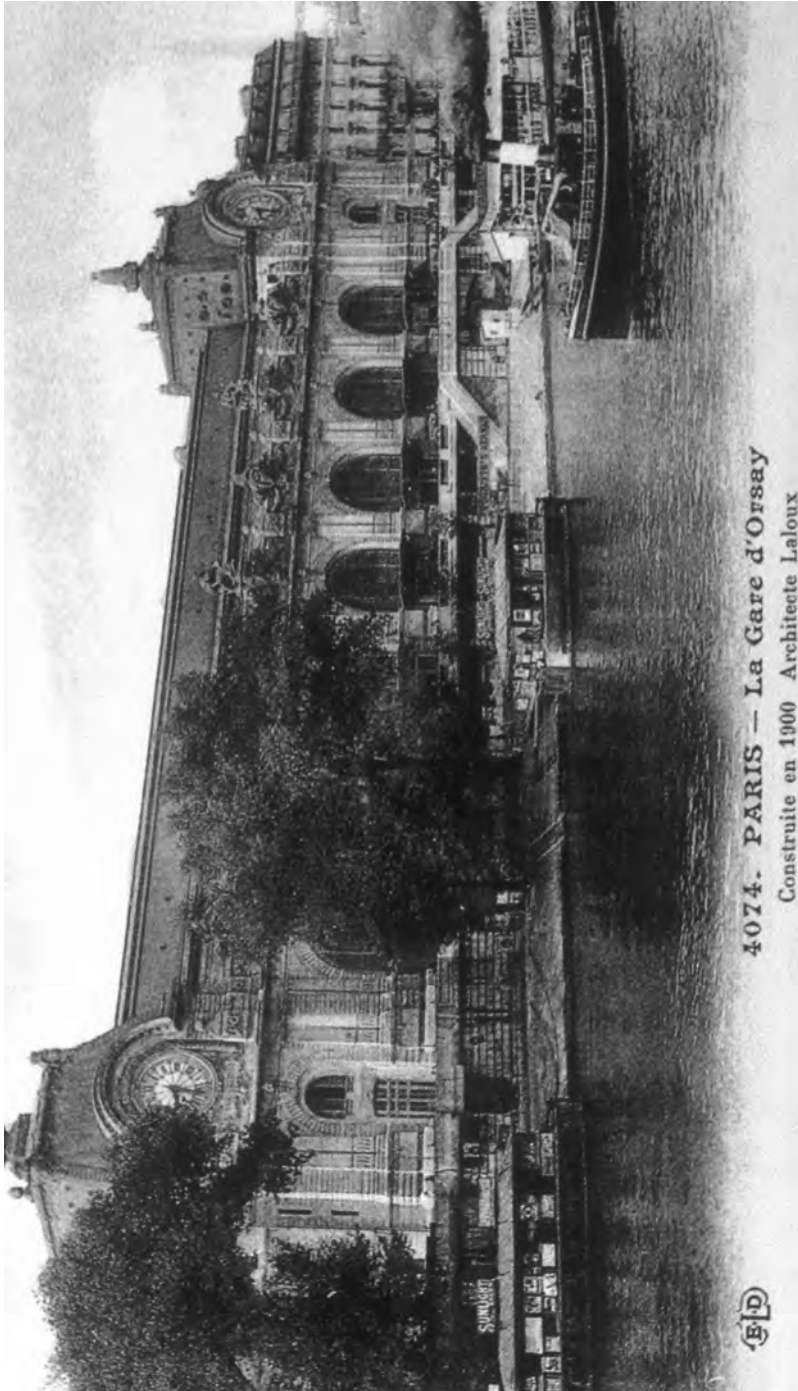


Museums have in many ways anticipated in microcosm several of our global concerns, and by doing so they have attracted public attention, support, and respect for technical art history, that branch of the discipline in which academic art historians, conservators and curators confer and combine their skills and experience.

Another reason why the museum today has not only survived but has also achieved unprecedented levels of attendance is surely attributable to the iconoclasm within the sector itself. The decision was taken in the late 1960s to break from tradition in the museum capital of Europe, and to rehouse the French national collection of twentieth-century art in a building which could not have presented a greater contrast with the Beaux-Arts idiom derived from the Louvre. That decision, taken at a time of considerable social unrest in Paris, and indeed elsewhere in the world, was both political and cultural. It combined urban renewal with democratisation, utilising high-tech allure to demystify high art and to make it both more accessible and more inviting. The approach to the opening hours of the Pompidou Centre was, initially at least, as radical as its architecture, replacing office hours, when the vast majority of the population is at work, with extended openings into the evenings and at weekends.

As you know, one of the most successful recent additions to the Parisian art scene was not originally an art gallery at all. The Gare d'Orsay (Fig. 8) was one of the last railway stations to be built in nineteenth-century Paris. Commanding a highly sensitive, riverside site, clearly visible from the Tuileries, it was obliged to rise to the occasion and succeeded to the point that when it opened in 1900 one commentator exclaimed 'mais c'est un véritable palais des beaux-arts'. Less than a hundred years later, his prophecy was fulfilled, when an unsuccessful railway station, with platforms that were too short to accommodate the increasingly long commuter trains bringing workers to the centre of Paris from its southern suburbs and satellite towns, was converted into the highly successful Musée d'Orsay (Fig. 9).

One reason the Musée d'Orsay works so well is that it was designed originally to deal with large numbers of people. Like the commuters of yesteryear, today's visitors are keen to get on with their journey and to do so with a maximum of comfort and efficiency. What I hope my illustrations show is how little had to be done to convert the central hall into an art terminal, with clear sight-lines and self-explanatory signals to direct those passing through towards a whole network of cultural destinations. In many ways, I think the comparison itself is worth emphasising, for practical as well as metaphorical reasons. Museums today receive more



**Figure 8.** The Gare d'Orsay, Paris, designed by Victor Laloux, 1900.



**Figure 9.** Le Musée d'Orsay, Paris, remodelled by ACT Architecture, 1986.

visitors than ever before. We read in a recent *Manifesto for Museums* that ‘the 2,500 museums in the UK receive more than 100 million visits each year, more than all the country’s live sporting events combined’.

Today’s museum architecture needs to reflect this dramatic increase in public interest. And museums must also consider and provide for the rising expectations of their users as they embark on their journeys of discovery, or take a break, halfway through, to visit the buffet car. I illustrate two recent interventions within museums to improve the kinds of provisions I have alluded to; Rick Mather’s courtyard at the Wallace Collection, completed in 2000 (Fig. 10), and John Miller’s for the Fitzwilliam Museum, which opened in 2004 (Fig. 11). The *Manifesto* I referred to above points out that ‘museums make important contributions to urban, economic and social regeneration’. It cites different examples, but I would like to highlight the success of the Tates. Tate North, or Tate Liverpool, to be more precise, was one of the first UK museum essays in urban renewal; moreover one which, instead of clearing the industrial wasteland, recognised the value of retaining old buildings and refashioning them. Like their counterparts in Paris, Tate’s planners realised that existing structures were not only fit for purpose, but ideally suited; in their case, the shell of an abandoned warehouse in Liverpool’s docklands offered the kind of wide-open, unordered and flexible space which a great deal of contemporary art requires. After that, the treatment of Bankside should have been a foregone conclusion, but we all remember the debate in which there was vociferous support for new architecture as a corollary of new art. Eventually we may have both, but in the meantime few now disagree with the decision that was taken, to remodel the redundant powerstation. The redundant machinery, rusting away in the Turbine Hall, has been superseded by a different kind of power generation and energy. Once again, I make no apology for what is, I think, an effective metaphor for the museum today, one supported by the unprecedented success of the Tate Modern. After only one year of operation, it had become the third most visited tourist attraction in Britain and, according to the McKinsey consultancy, it had by then already generated £100 million of economic activity and 3,000 new jobs.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> *A Manifesto for Museums: Building Outstanding Museums for the 21st Century*, issued on behalf of the Directors of the National Museums, the Chairman of the Museums, Archives and Libraries Council, the Chairman of the Association of Independent Museums, the Convenors of the Group for Large Local Authority Museums, the President of the Museums Association and the Chief Executives of the Regional Agencies (2007), n.p.



**Figure 10.** Wallace Collection, Hertford House, London. Courtyard designed by Rick Mather Architects, 2000.



**Figure 11.** Fitzwilliam Museum. Courtyard development designed by John Miller + Partners, 2004.

I have to admit that, in many ways, I am more interested in the reasons for this achievement than in the outcomes themselves. Free admission, flexible opening hours and effective publicity have all played their parts, as has the quality of the exhibitions programme. Beyond those factors, however, I would like to suggest that there are at least two less tangible ones, ones that neither McKinsey nor Mori are likely to tease out with their surveys and samplings. Like the Pompidou Centre, the Bankside development was the right thing at the right time. It struck the right notes socially and politically in London at the millennium—in contrast with that contemporary disaster downstream, the meaningless Dome.

My second point is that Tate Modern shares its success with the sector as a whole; a success which I believe owes much to the increasing emphasis on visual communications within our culture generally. Wherever we look, the evidence is incontrovertible. Take the newspaper for instance, and compare *The Times* of 1957 with its successor today. The obvious difference can be summarised in a single sentence: the photographer has displaced the journalist. The impact of television is, justly in my view, the topic of widespread concern, . . . but setting aside the whole issue of broadcasting standards, about which I suspect we all have strong views, what we cannot deny is that one of television's greatest legacies is the *screen*—an invention which, like many others, is susceptible to misuse as well as use. So we have violent videogames on the one hand and information technology on the other. In terms of the World Wide Web, the screen has become the page, and no one bats an eyelid at the usage of 'web page', although it represents a considerable act of verbal appropriation considering the precise, single side of a single leaf, hard copy definition of the second of its syllables. But this cavalier attitude to language as our principal means of communication pervades the internet. Where images once illustrated words, they have now replaced them. And of course in our shrinking world where the difficulty of communicating in different languages is a daily occurrence, there is a growing tendency to rely on signs and symbols. Road signs are an obvious example, as are identifiers for public lavatories. Trivial as these instances are, the point I am trying to make is that generation by generation we are learning to see more, and that our growing dependence on non-verbal communication is just one indication of an increasingly visual culture in which we now refer to 'reading' images and objects.

To state the obvious—all of this has serious implications for museums and their visitors. In last January's issue of *Research Horizons*, the

University of Cambridge's research magazine, there was an article on 'using technology in cultural spaces'. In it, the author pointed out that

Already digital technology is beginning to find a place in museums in the form of eguides and digital information points which augment the glass cases and printed labels . . . The rise of ubiquitous computing and increased affordability of digital technologies will doubtless see further developments in the integration of smart-media in the museum context.<sup>15</sup>

In March a series of workshops was held, sponsored by the AHRC Museums and Galleries Research Programme, to explore some of the wider issues—of place, narrative and digitality—in the museum of the future.

Which brings me to the last point I want to make about museums today. They are, fundamentally, about images and about objects. There is always a temptation to define them in terms of what they do, socially and economically, and I hope I have said enough about those effects to persuade you that I take them seriously, but we must not confuse cause and effect: what museums are, with what they can achieve. *Collections* differentiate museums from all other public institutions, and I have tried to demonstrate how the art museum as we know it has evolved from those private collections of 'princely goods', as well as 'cabinets of curiosities'. Acquisitions are, by the same token, the life-blood of collecting institutions. They come in all shapes and sizes, from a variety of sources including gifts, bequests and purchases. At times acquiring them can be difficult, expensive and also controversial. Take for instance that incomparable painting by Raphael, 'The Madonna of the Pinks', purchased by the National Gallery in 2004. I did not envy the director as he shouldered the particularly difficult task of raising public money to pay for a very small, very expensive, cult object—by that I mean a picture of a subject unfamiliar to many and offensive to some. But of course history will side with the director and trustees, because they took the lead in saving for the nation a pre-eminent work of art, an object of enduring beauty which will inspire and uplift visitors to the National Gallery from all over the world for years to come. It takes courage to declare that works like these are literally priceless—worth far more than even the hideously inflated prices their owners sometimes demand.

<sup>15</sup> Tamsin Pert, 'Guiding muses—using technology in cultural spaces', *Research Horizons*, University of Cambridge research magazine, Spring 2007, 24–5.



Two years ago in Cambridge we faced a similar, though in some ways easier, challenge. The *Macclesfield Psalter* was seen as a national treasure not least because it was produced in this country. On the other hand, because it was small and bound, it was difficult to answer all of those questions about accessibility and impact that are now considered to be of such crucial importance by the funding bodies. It is, I am afraid, a feature of the current climate, one consistent with my fears about defining museums in terms of their utility, that funders tend to place more emphasis upon the immediate, measurable benefits to be derived from their investments in objects, than upon their intrinsic qualities, or the long-term benefits they hold in store for future generations. The same is true, I might add, in the case of the conditional exemption of pre-eminent works of art from capital taxation. However, in the case of the *Macclesfield Psalter* I need not have worried as much as I did. The response to the museum's efforts, and to the national appeal launched on its behalf by the Art Fund, demonstrated a surprising level of public support; sufficient, in the end, to convince the Trustees of the National Heritage Memorial Fund to commit to the purchase. And in what seemed at the time to be a vindication of the museum's efforts, when the psalter finally returned to the east of England, its region of origin, and was placed on display, for several days thousands of people queued to catch a glimpse of this rare treasure of medieval art. So much for presuppositions about wall-power.

Allow me to offer one more example of a recent acquisition, of Barbara Hepworth's three figures from her 'Family of Man', to make a related point, albeit about an object acquired by a different route. The group was standing on the salt marshes next to the Maltings at Snape in 2000 when it was accepted by HM Treasury in lieu of capital taxes. The figures were placed there originally to mark the bonds of mutual respect and friendship that united the sculptor with the musicians Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears, the *genii loci* so to speak. So, while the sculptures are not site-specific in the strict sense, their present siting adds meaning as well as resonance to them. In allocating them to the Fitzwilliam Museum, the Department of Culture, Media and Sport therefore stipulated that they should remain *in situ*, unless some overriding consideration arose to necessitate their removal to the museum. Let us hope it will not, for here I suggest we have a clear demonstration of one way in which museums can play important regional roles *fuori le mure*, or museums without walls again!

To retain the regional focus for a moment, there have been two highly positive developments during the past decade; the 'designation'

of collections as being of national importance irrespective of their ownership and location; and ‘Renaissance in the Regions’, an initiative designed to build regional museums services not as free-standing entities but as museum-based networks throughout the country. With only three of the nine regional hubs fully funded, and the other six capacity-building and in waiting, it is already clear that renaissance works, that it delivers in terms of government’s priorities, socially and economically. In his foreword to *Understanding the Future: Priorities for England’s Museums*, published last October, Arts Minister David Lammy writes about museums as ‘community spaces, as mediators between the past and the present, and as agents in a dialogue about who we are and what we might become or achieve’. For those of us within these heterotopia, we could not wish for a more ringing endorsement of our aims and ambitions. On the other hand I do think that we have to be careful to maintain that distinction I have already emphasised, between what museums are—collections-based institutions devoted to the study and appreciation of the past through material culture surviving into the present—and what they can achieve.

To summarise: I think we have come a long way in the last 100 years. The museum today looks outward, not inward, and in spite of the problems they face in terms of resources, museums have succeeded in moving closer to the centre of the stage of public life. As I have hinted, that incurs risks, of increasing regulation for example, and the growing expectation on the part of governments that museums will earn their keep by promoting specific social agendas. While not for one moment denying the importance of those, what museum professionals have to do is remind our funders and stakeholders, tactfully but persistently, that people do not visit museums in order to comply with public policies. As we know from our visitor surveys, their pretexes differ: from schoolchildren following the national curriculum to members of the University of the Third Age; through life-long learners, united in their personal and above all pleasurable pursuit of that ‘increase of learning’ which is integral to the definition of the museum; to local residents from across the social spectrum, regular visitors for whom ‘*their*’ museum is a source of pride and joy; and tourists from near and far for some of whom at least their visit is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. I could go on expanding this list, but for all of the above there is one common cause: palace or powerstation, or ideally a combination of the two, unlike so many museologists who cannot see the wood for the trees, millions of museum visitors every year know that the museum is what it is. And here, at last I know that I am on firm

ground with that distinguished scholar whom we commemorate this evening, the philosopher who championed ‘common humanity’ above all differences of age, race or gender. In his essay on ‘Two concepts of liberty’ Isaiah Berlin abbreviated one of his favourite quotations from the eighteenth-century divine, Bishop Butler, to read, quite simply, ‘Everything is what it is’.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Isaiah Berlin, ‘Two concepts of liberty’ [1958], in *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (London, 1997), p. 197.