



## **Preface**

### **Uses of the Past – Historical Narratives and the Museum**

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*Text translated from French by Felicity Bodenstein*

For the historian, the museum represents both a resource and a place where his work may be presented. As a visitor, the historian is also an expert of the institution's performance, capable of judging it in relation to his own field of knowledge, related to the nature of the collections and the museographical project that guides their display. The museum can also be a place that inspires, reactivates, or even induces historical work, suggesting new topics or points of view. The writings of historians bear witness to the stimulating effect of the museum, such as Jules Michelet's by now classic account of his visit to the *Musée des monuments français* created by Alexandre Lenoir (but also to the galleries of the natural history museum), or Arnold Toynbee's reaction to the display of civilisations in the British Museum. The visit to the museum is an essential experience in the birth and development of historical imagination.

The historian may be a specialist of all or part of a museum's collection, whether on display or stored in its reserves. He establishes a direct relationship with the objects, contributing to their understanding. In this case, the historian is part of the museum's team, and must adapt his work to the needs of its management, in particular in terms of communication and public policy, whilst adhering and imposing the ethical standards of his own profession, its erudite specificity and methods of scientific interpretation. The historian becomes part of the sphere of "public history" and dedicates a more or less important part of his activity to guaranteeing a balance in the mediation of his research for the interests of scholarly communication with the development of civic values and the public success of the establishment that he works for or with.

However, in relation to the museum the historian more often than not plays the part of the independent scholar who, if needs be, may express his opinion of the institution in critical terms, appreciating and questioning the interpretations that nourish the exhibitions that it dedicates to events, personalities, objects, sometimes dealing with memorial, political, cultural or social issues. In this case, the historian sees the museum as he might see any other media, such as cinema, television productions, historical novels, school manuals, etc., that popularise what he considers to be his field of expertise. Lastly for the historian of historiography or memory studies, the museum has itself become an object of inquiry as it provides particular insight into the constitution of collective memory, the state of historical knowledge in the past, providing a more or less clear panorama of the practices and issues at stake in the way the past was used to serve the present at different points in the museum's history.

The diversity of relationships that exist between the historian and the museum needs to be considered in the context of the different kinds of historical genres and the variety of specialised domains that they engender. An historian of art, or more generally of forms and objects, who

may see himself as a veritable archaeologist of more or less banal things, relating to past societies, will most likely find himself entering into direct contact with some form of museum collection. On the other hand, the historian of economy or politics, international relations or doctrines, may feel very detached from the accumulation of old manufactured products or the relics of great men that more classical museums might dedicate to such themes. The relationships between narrations and museums are conditioned, on the one hand, by the modalities that organise the writing of history and forge the didactic ideal of its diffusion, and on the other, by the logics inherent to writing about collections, including different rhetorics of enumeration and listing, and the sense of vertigo that goes with them, as described by Umberto Eco.

## **The museum and the historical account**

The philosopher Jacques Rancière attempted to define a certain typology of historical meaning in four modes, which can also be considered as categories for thinking about history museums. Firstly, “history as the account of memorable events, an anthology of examples preserved by tradition and offered for emulation”. He also identifies “history that is an assemblage of elements unified in order to offer an organised representation”, such as the fable of tragedy or the *historia* of the painting. Another kind is “history as a regime of coexistence”, “the science of men in time”, dominated by the idea expressed by Marc Bloch that men are “rather sons of their time than of their fathers”. Lastly “a history that is an oriented kind of time; that is to say that it is not just a time that goes from the past to the future but it accomplishes a greater principle” (Rancière, 1996). In relation to this typology one might distinguish the museum of examples, the museum as presenting a *tableau* kind of overview, the museum of scientific history and lastly the oriented museum, that is presentist or that desires to be a guarantee for the future. In any case, the elaboration of an historical museum is a phenomenon that needs to be considered concurrently to the evolution of accounts by historians and the models of public discourse considered as best adapted to expressing the objectives of the institution.

Throughout European history, material elements of the past, presented as repertoires of monuments, collections and relics, have been identified with the prestige of a territory or a specific political regime. The glory of the prince, the quality of a population, the spirit of a place have always been partially defined by historical considerations and aesthetic judgements of value related to such material. This might be the classical definition of a museum built to celebrate the glory of a city, the best example of which are probably the humanist collections of the Capitoline museum in Rome. In the course of the eighteenth century, the development of antiquarian science reinforced the relationship between patriotism and artistic or archaeological research, with the different Italian states undertaking measures to protect their treasures from the vicissitudes of the antiquities market; this new sensibility was later interpreted as a founding initiative in the establishment of a unified Italy.

The humanist gallery, such as Paul Jove’s collection of copies that decorated the corridor of the *Uffizi* gallery from 1587 onwards, and similar installations, has been dedicated to the memory of Caesars and other illustrious men of the past. The intersection of this tradition with the later notion of a museum of national identity resulted in the creation of national portrait galleries. Such institutions, created from the nineteenth century onwards, were determined by both historical and artistic considerations, in the service of royal families or of great men, as defined by

the Enlightenment. The national portrait gallery in Stockholm opened its doors in the palace of Gripsholm in 1823, based on the traditional royal collections. The British National Portrait Gallery opened in 1856 and was also designed to illustrate the biographical history of the country (Pointon, 1993). Another tradition is that of the antiquarian museum that serves different forms of specific curiosity and specialised history: such museums may be dedicated to groups of objects such as utensils, engraved stones, costumes, etc. If one accepts the idea that the birth of modern history came about through the “fusion of the antiquarian and the historian” (Momigliano, 1983), then in practice this can be observed in the progressive articulation of a relationship between objects that represent the everyday life of the past, works of art that occupy the connoisseur, and history as established by scholarly literature.

The hanging of paintings in galleries was originally conditioned by the academic doctrines of aesthetic distribution and the balancing out of the different qualities of paintings through their placement. It wasn't until the end of the eighteenth century that the notion of national schools of painting appeared, allowing for a classification of paintings at once hierarchical and encyclopaedic that related to an underlying patriotic claim. In France, the principle of the elegant assembly, so important in curiosity cabinet-type displays, still prevailed in the debates surrounding the organisation of museums at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In the Louvre, as in the model of the Vatican that preceded it, the display of antiquities refers to a prestigious past and the statues are witnesses to a form of continuity across the centuries. The Museum of French Monuments, on the other hand, presents a juxtaposition of centuries from one room to the next, through a collection of original elements and plaster copies evocative of the typical decors that represent the century in question, producing a repertory of *historia* that can inspire the painter of history, or the so-called *troubadour* artist.

Conversely, over a generation later, the Cluny museum offered the visitor the experience of reconstituted historical interiors, as the earliest examples of *period*-rooms. The suggested possibility of being transported back into the past haunts the visitor and bears witness to the efficacy of museographies based on the idea of presenting habitat and, more generally, the context in which the past could be experienced. It is interesting to observe that it was developed at a time when figures such as François Guizot in France or Walter Scott in Great Britain incarnated a new intellectual and romanesque use of the past. In the context of the Universal Exhibitions, the principle of retrospective exhibits was developed, with the creation of spaces designed to identically reproduce the past; everything from the former streets and towns of the nation to those ethnographic villages where lost traditional worlds could be rediscovered. The museum seemed to provide an answer to the historical ideal expressed by Leopold von Ranke, who affirmed in 1824 that it was no longer a question of “judging the past, informing contemporaries to better understand the future” but that it was rather more about “showing what had really happened” (Bouton, 2004).

The question of provenance in relation to the museum introduced a new “use of the past” as the question of the origins of an object became a counter-revolutionary argument that was indeed a contestation of the principle of the institution itself. The historian and philosopher Quatremère de Quincy successfully put forward the idea that the true heritage of Rome was the Roman sky, the topography of its hills, the mentality of its inhabitants, the music of its language, and that its monuments, once exiled to the banks of the Seine or elsewhere, had lost their true value

(Quatremère, 1796). The evocation of the artefact's past became an integral part of the political confrontation opposing the partisans and the adversaries of the museum, between traditionalists and progressivists. The traditional use and definition of heritage as used by inhabitants or those most familiar with it was dismissed as based on errors of appreciation. In the context of the modern construction of heritage, of which the museum is an exemplary space, the object was legitimated and recognised by the specific frame provided by the museum's educated and critical interpretation (Poulot, 1997). All over Europe, the museum established a new use of the past at the expense of former practices considered as unsatisfying, inappropriate, or unworthy – an assemblage of representations, of legends and souvenirs, precisely those that Quatremère and his followers recognised as the real truth of the artefact.

Henceforth, museological organisation privileged the principle of national schools as an incitement to compare talents, styles and sources of inspiration. The idea for a special museum dedicated to the French school finally came to fruition with the creation of the Luxembourg museum in 1818 as a means of putting contemporary artists in competition, but also to compensate for the Louvre's loss of the finest antique sculptures, returned to the Vatican. Throughout the nineteenth century, the use of the past in the museum progressively became an element in a larger construction of historical consciousness. The museum claimed to be in this way a frame for the future, at once archive and laboratory for the auxiliary sciences of history – as was the case of the Museum of Archives opened in Paris in 1867. This work ideal is accompanied by a growing sense of pedagogical responsibility: the visit contributes, in parallel to mandatory education, the growing diffusion of newspapers, etc., to the establishment of “imagined communities”. Certain history museums came to include libraries and research centres, to edit and distribute manuals, as was the case of the Germanisches Nationalmuseum of Nuremberg (1852) or the Ossolineum of Lvov (1817) – driven by a progressivist and cumulative idea of the past in the service of a patriotic enterprise.

In terms of “uses of the past”, as related to properly “national” collections, a decisive turn was the development of archaeological practices that gained increasing importance from the 1850s onwards. Krszystof Pomian describes the emergence of a second kind of archaeology, national and rooted, alongside that of older antiquarian archaeology, which had provided such an important aesthetic and moral canon (Pomian, 1991). In this new ideological, aesthetic and scholarly context, the discoveries provided material for the opening of galleries of national art whose legitimacy rested on the performance of the long past of nations, their sovereigns and the settlers attested to by the results of archaeological digs. Another related evolution is the qualification of national art through an “ethnographic” approach that focuses on popular and local art: the myth of the labourer's home and the museums that develop it, especially in Northern and Central Europe, constitutes an emblematic kind of use of the past.

With the triumph of scholarly history based on the archive and privileging political and international perspectives, the practices of collecting and exhibition became increasingly removed from the realm of academic history. The preoccupation with material culture as presented in the museum became more related to the work of linguists, anthropologists and ethnographers. This separation can be observed most strongly in the countries of the New World. When Henry Ford decided to found Greenfield Village, a history museum destined to present the true life of generations of Americans, it was openly conceived of as an enterprise that, by showing tools and

everyday objects, opposed itself to the history of intellectuals and universities. Though they do not necessarily share the populist and anti-intellectual intentions present at Greenfield, many other history museums have adopted similar conventions of display. For certain European ecomuseums, their approach is related to a certain sentiment of dissatisfaction with academic historiography and their aim is to invent other kinds of narratives, but also participation and even mobilisation of the past.

### **The museum and the story of art**

Artistic collections that bear the title of “national museum” may do so in reference to their status as public property, to their management by the state, no matter what their nature, but also in reference to their collections, characterised as products of national artists, territory or populations, and as such emblematic of the nation’s identity in artistic or scientific terms, or indeed both. If the development of an identitarian iconography is the simplest approach, constructed through an enumeration of subjects held as “national”, another method consists of regrouping artists of national origin to define a national school of art. The creation of national art museums in the nineteenth century is accompanied by more or less affirmed proclamations, such as the royal decree that created the Royal Museum of Art in Brussels, to be exclusively dedicated to the most remarkable Belgian painters, sculptors, engravers and architects (Roberts-Jones, 1987:26). The “nationalisation” of artworks and objects from the past responds to the need for a rich and exemplary past. As an episode amongst others, this is illustrated by the identification of the Flemish school with the so-called Belgian school in the speech made by the mayor of Brussels in 1840 to incorporate in the nation’s folds such artists as Van Eyck, Rubens and other great masters (Loir, 2001:49).

A notable turn in the second half of the twentieth century, in terms of the different pasts privileged or used by the museum, is without any doubt related to the development and the questioning of notions of modernity and contemporaneity in art. Of course, one can consider the restructuring of national museums according to the chronological divisions of modern and contemporary art as answers to pragmatic problems of space. However, is the history of art museums not also that of these temporal breaks based on an ideology and an aesthetic of the present? This might be considered the case in Norway, where the post-1945 break with the collections of the national gallery was established through the creation of the Museum of Contemporary Art in 1990, or the creation of the Tate Modern in 1992 as an international gallery of contemporary art imagined as a break from the Tate Gallery of British art, founded in 1879 and dedicated uniquely to national art. In this perspective, the creation of a contemporary art museum is a way of performing a chronosophy, or a philosophy about the movement and the breaks of time. In France, the history of the modern art museum established in 1818 in the Luxemburg palace is one of a progressive divorce between modernity and the art actually represented in the state’s collections. The recreation of the museum of contemporary art after 1945 was an attempt to reconcile, in the words of its director, Jean Cassou, the state and genius. The Moderna museet in Stockholm, however, truly managed to incarnate an image of the modernity of Swedish society, and it became a model for the large national museum of art, the Centre Pompidou, in Paris.

In many European countries, the national museum is more or less completely an affair of state, depending directly on central government agencies to define it by weighing in on the choice of collections, through commissions but also through forms of censorship, going as far as contributing to the definition of a national-ideological style. The case of popular democracies during the cold war amply illustrates such practices, as did the fascist and Nazi dictatorships in the most sinister examples of the interwar period. Such nationalist constructions rely on the categorisation, identification and adoption of values that constitute the specificity of national art, held as the expression of a community or of a political project. Of course, national state museums are not systematically condemned to presenting an official version of the past: the use of the past is rather more the product of a compromise between different political movements at work inside of the state's apparatus.

The national museum is often related to scholarly sociability at a national level that provides elements of the study of those civilisations that are the pride of the nation, its origins and influence. Many art museums are conceived of in terms of a particular form of militant implication for a particular cause, be it scholarly or aesthetic, to which the state did not contribute directly, at least not in the traditional sense of the term. Thus certain museums that have come to have a national status are the result of personal or collective initiatives of collectors or associations of scholars, artists or amateurs that managed to gain collective recognition and state support for their projects. The result can lead to museums that are very different for the traditions of national history museums, and that participate in movements refused or locally ignored, for example related to a more international modernity. The representation of the art of the past and history also form a complex geography more or less related to the nation itself and its geo-political relation to other territories. This is inherent in the claim of certain national museums to the title of 'universal museum', developed specifically in reaction to restitution claims for objects issued by former colonies or countries formerly under the tutelage of a specific nation.

### **The museum's call to witness**

Today it is the explicit intention of many history museums to develop specific pedagogies of historical understanding and thinking in their visitors by establishing a stronger resonance between the past and the present. It is a matter of using the experience of each and everyone to develop their capacity to interpret history and the identities related to it, mainly thanks to new museographical practices that use eyewitness accounts or environments designed to provoke and promote a more active role on the visitor's part. The museum needs to provide and maintain a culture of history that is first and foremost a response to the need, recognised by Jörn Rüsen, as felt by everyone, to be oriented in time. The history museum intends to provide a way of learning about the past based on the acquiring of specific competencies: not simply reading a story but analysing a document or learning about practices, collected and presented in a manner adapted to their nature and context. It is mainly dedicated to the development of learning through the visual culture of the past, as can be seen in the case of "classic" history museums, which to borrow the famous expression of Michelet, provide a "history that can be seen with the eyes". But more and more often, it resorts to a culture that uses the entire range of documentary possibilities open to the museum, especially through the means provided by new technologies.

The most recent generation of museums, such as that of the Museum of the History of Immigration, differentiates itself by calling on family and personal memories to incarnate the utopia of a democratically shared past, where all participate in historical research and writing. This strategy of making direct appeals for personal contributions to collections is used in holocaust museums, museums of terror or genocide, or, more generally, museums dedicated to the memory of a specific community. Such practices refer to a diversity of national political cultures, in as much as they claim to contribute to modalities of history writing that are in opposition to academic writing or at the least complementary to more classical forms of research. They often call on “independent” historians or claim to represent “public history”, or even to partake of a kind of militant civil mediation. The risk of such narratives is the instrumentalisation of historical knowledge, the use of research to supply lessons for the instruction of public morals or the defence of community interests up until then denied or neglected.

One of the major challenges for national museums today in their use of the past is to find a way of taking into account the field of oral history and memory studies (Wieviorka, 1998 ; Frank, 1992) – generalising the precept expressed by Freddy Raphaël some years ago in relation to the ecomuseum, to become “provocateurs of memory”. If the history of mentalities has experienced exemplary success in museums of late, then this is due to what Phillipe Ariès defined as the “recent rapprochement between the past and the present” (Ariès, 1954). Indeed local museums, or museums of identity, regional museums of ethnography and the different forms of ecomuseums, all sought to “provoke memory” (Raphaël & Herberich Marx). This was also the aim of the Imperial War Museum North, set up in Manchester in 2002 in a building by Daniel Libeskind that immerses the visitor into the struggles suffered by soldiers during the war and by their parents and grandparents, soliciting real or imagined memories. Inversely, professional literature on the museum is also filled today with the autobiographical memories of visits to the museum in young years and the indelible traces that they leave behind (Preziosi, 2003 ; Shore, 2005).

In certain cases, the national museum is no longer an “attic full of facts” (L. Febvre) that the historian visits at his leisure, or a means of vulgarising historical knowledge, but rather it has become a clinic for acts of memory (Andrieu et Lavabre, 2006), and first and foremost those memories that are felt as most traumatic, related to issues of memory and history under public discussion. Based on the collaboration of political and social movements, these museums privilege a kind of truth about the past anchored in the present, from the perspective of memories and values located at the heart of civic and political debates. The past is conjugated in the present but in a discontinuous form, focusing on particular moments that seem to appear sometimes contradictorily, in accordance with the rhythm of historical commemorations.

As has been shown by several generations of studies dedicated to the political manipulation of the past and to public uses of history, the collection of any museum is the product of reconstructions based on selection and choice, on selective omissions and voluntary commemoration. The relationship of the museum to the uses of the past, in terms of its activity in exhibiting and communicating history, is tightly bound to another larger story, that of oral and written narrative. Responsible for vulgarising scholarly history written in the context of or related to its collections, the museum first began by exhibiting national icons, evocative relics, capable of maintaining patriotic feeling and political fidelity, before turning to the everyday past that allowed

it to address the memories of the visitor. Although the classical or traditional history museum was capable of raising the spirits of national communities and even inspiring vocations in budding historians, a new generation of establishments is more set on provoking memory than on providing a kind of unified narrative.

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