



House of Fire: Concerning Museums in General and Art Museums in Particular

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Surprisingly, museums were not included on Michel Foucault's list of "heterochronies", those places where, as he explained and proved in a famous essay, time passes in a different, unfamiliar way, the most radical example obviously being cemeteries. Museums are not graveyards, no matter what some avant-garde, museum-hating artists said; the resemblance ended when their works were accepted there, in a realm once firmly believed to be ruled by death, when it was probably just order, a certain order.

Undoubtedly, the founding of contemporary art museums not only placated those artists –chief among them the Italian Futurists, adamantly opposed to virtually any survival of the past, from neckties to the city of Venice– but also made a substantial contribution to the revival of a declining typology. When, in the early twentieth century, Hugo von Tschudi and other German museum directors began acquiring works by the new French artists, a fierce battle ensued in defence of art in general, as if the absence of the most modern would make it inconceivable and not just incomplete.

Im Kampf um die Kunst, a pamphlet published by Piper Verlag in 1911 to counter the opposition of the most conservative, or simply the most chauvinistic, German artists, was actively endorsed by Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc. A few months later, perhaps in connection with the same "battle for art", the two artists went back to that publishing house to produce a strange almanac, *Der Blaue Reiter* [The Blue Rider], which was also the name of their association. Art historians usually classify Kandinsky and Marc as "expressionists", but I believe they were united by something more specific, though no less enigmatic: the idea they formed of art as a "spiritual" activity, and therefore unaffected by historical circumstances, an art outside of time, exactly –or approximately– like the art trapped inside old museums.

Indeed, Kandinsky and Marc, who published an almanac that significantly and paradoxically did not include a calendar for the new year, ignored the historical ties between their favourite works of art and instead set out to find other, more secretive affinities –the mysterious expression of a shared "inner necessity", as they put it– which, as far as we're concerned, are utterly timeless. Kandinsky and Marc illustrated that conviction, which probably does not seem far-fetched to us now, by juxtaposing reproductions of artworks as historically distant as a painting by El Greco and another by Robert Delaunay, or a Benin bronze and an English Gothic tomb. Their almanac thus constituted a kind of portable museum, a plan for a museum at war with time, the ultimate destroyer of all human works and enterprises. That museum

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never materialised, for although there are many that aspire to preserve artworks from every era, only occasionally, in the spirit of experimentation, are works intermingled as in that almanac, making no distinction between “erudite” artists and their popular or primitive counterparts, and even those with no artistic training whatsoever, such as children or Sunday painters.

Many years later, Solomon R. Guggenheim, dissatisfied with the previous venues used to house the collection of “non-objective” paintings he had assembled –acting on the advice of Hilla Rebay, Kandinsky’s disciple and propagandist of the ideas set out in her master’s famous book *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*– commissioned Frank Lloyd Wright to design a more suitable and visible structure, neatly settling the question of whether it made sense to create a home for something that seemingly needs no earthly abode: all that “spiritual” painting, a more accurate description of what was almost euphemistically touted as “non-objective” painting, a painting which, if only because it rejected the material consistency of the objects forever being fashioned by the hands of our species, aptly termed *homo faber*, seemed destined for a dematerialised world –maybe not “superior”, but definitely out of this world. And Wright managed to evoke that world in the outer shell of the building’s main section with a stack of cylindrical bodies, each larger than the one beneath, which instead of giving the impression of increasing heaviness create a sense of airy weightlessness. Inside that feeling is greatly intensified, thanks to the monumental double spiral ramp that disorients us at first and eventually makes us lose our footing, pushing us towards some kind of *nowhere*– the perfect residence for “spiritual” paintings.

Wright’s design *speaks* of this darkly before we enter, but it only becomes luminously clear when we step inside, thanks to the transparent roof crowning the tower –a detail Wright chose to emphasise in a photograph taken in 1945 that shows him posing beside the scale model of the museum. Light comes flooding in through that roof, perhaps trusting that it will in turn emanate from there, from all those paintings freed from the opacity of matter, luminously weightless, and so form a vertical connection between earth and sky, a new *axis mundi*. We understand that it is a spiritual world, whose existence is proved by this “temple of the spirit”, which is precisely what Hilla Rebay asked Wright to design in a letter dated 1 June 1943. In that same letter, attempting to give Wright some background on the nature of the collection, or even speak on behalf of the paintings that comprised it and would be housed in the museum, Rebay succinctly defined the works as “order, creating order”. Wright thus found himself invited to design a temple that would exude order, that would bring order to the art of his time, with a richly deserved reputation for being disorderly and even chaotic, as a handful of New York painters would shortly prove– and in the field of “non-objective” painting, no less, which soon ceased to be a guarantee of order, the culprits being its bitter long-time enemies the Surrealists. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum came along at the wrong time, swimming against the tide, though later it would spawn a new generation of painters who believed in the virtues of geometry and were even more rigorous than the artists Solomon R. Guggenheim had collected and promoted.

The truth is that the museum was a latecomer, if not practically dead on arrival, from the moment it first appeared in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. It was born with no credible purpose –in other words, stubbornly determined to glorify an *artistic order* in decline, the order manifested first and foremost in the

architecture and sculpture of the ancient Greeks and Romans. The Pio Clementino Museum might have seemed like the perfect model in this respect, if not for the fact that its container was improvised within the Vatican palaces and did not reflect, as it should have, the classical language of architecture; it lacked a purpose-built edifice whose exterior would immediately convey the nature of the artistic order within.

Making the container consistent with the nature of its content was undoubtedly the most important contribution of architects like Schinkel and Von Klenze to the history of museum structures, which are far less functionally stable than most of the other architectural typologies defined –or simply redefined– at the same time as museums, such as the cemeteries or prisons to which museums were later likened by avant-garde artists. Of course, at the time very few questioned the credibility or the need for an artistic order, based on the conviction that the practice of art was governed by universally applicable rules, norms or precepts which were hardly open to debate. Even users were bound by these rules, as the only yardstick by which they could measure the good or poor quality of artworks. Soon, however, all this would change with the advent of a new order where everyone was guided by their own, often intractable definition of good taste, where everything in art was simply a matter of opinion, where artists did exactly as they pleased and spectators would judge it as they wished or, as people used to say, “according to their sensibilities”. But sensibilities are notoriously subjective and fickle to boot, as we can infer from the influence of art critics over those who doubt their own judgement as well as their knowledge.

The new literary genre of art criticism– fundamentally opinion-based and capricious, if not outright arbitrary– took over from the treatises of old, vehicles and intellectual guarantors of those rules, norms and precepts which all were obliged to follow, of orders whose execution would establish an order that the first museums undertook to uphold and ardently proclaim, while treatises on art and even architecture were already treating it as a joke, as illustrated by the ones that promised to teach readers how to play the castanets in a week or knot their neckties *comme il faut*. Paper is undoubtedly more conducive to novelties or experiments than stone; cost is a decisive factor. This explains why nineteenth-century architecture was more conservative than painting, and why people continued to build museums committed to the defence of a classical order which began with the building itself, even as curiosity about the infinite ways of subverting that order began to grow in the West. The inertia of stone reflected the nostalgic longing for an art whose value was not subject to shifting sensibilities or swinging markets. Indeed, the risks of investing in art quickly became obvious and still worry investors today; museums offer no long-term guarantee.

Coming from an architect who often wavered between the classical and Gothic styles, and despite the fact that the notion of the museum as a seat of order was already teetering precariously at the time, Schinkel’s solution for Berlin’s Museum Island was implemented with remarkable confidence. He was thoroughly convinced that the exterior, and especially the main facade, should quietly announce the structure’s purpose, and that the interior should be arranged to create a harmonious yet solemn itinerary, where visitors would find that all was still in order within, wisely and quietly reaffirming the universally known and accepted tenets of art. In an absolutist regime, the despot, eventually deified, does not need to be spectacularly visible in order to keep his subjects submissive and maintain order in society. In the same way, no one had a pressing need to actually visit museums; it was enough to know that they existed.

The old museums thus served the same two primary purposes as the national banks created around that time: safeguarding assets but also, and more importantly, defending and guaranteeing an economic order. This idea is eloquently conveyed by the isolation of the Berlin museums, literally built on an “island”. For a long time, the museum represented the last line of defence for what was beginning to be an unattainable dream, an oneiric fantasy. This is made apparent in two famous prints by Grandville that illustrate a chapter of his book *Un autre monde* titled “Le Louvre des marionnettes”, though presumably dedicated to the periodic exhibition of contemporary artists, the Salon. At the time this event was still held in the museum, something that probably gave rise to grotesque confusions between the old order and the modern disorder and increasingly frequent cross-contaminations. Unlike the old museum, which slept the sleep of the indolent friends of order (who, it must be said, did little to make it liveable), the Salon was usually jam-packed. It was a veritable battlefield, a riotous convergence of conflicting opinions, the epitome of a very modern agitation that only served to underscore the anachronism of the languid gravity with which the rare visitors to the first museums strolled among classical statues and paintings by Raphael. And visitors were rare, despite the fact that early museums are often credited with successfully promoting a benevolent intensification of public access to the joys of art.

But let us not be deceived: museums were not invented to democratically satisfy the desires of art lovers, the sensual expectations that classical statues inspired Winckelmann to entertain for a brief moment, but rather to appease lovers of order: an abstract order, though I will not call it incorporeal as it was imposed on the bodies of the vast majority of citizens, an ominous and ultimately criminal order that subscribed to the famous declaration which heralded the dawn of the new era: “Order prevails in Warsaw!” There’s no getting round it: every kind of order ultimately turns out to be public order.

It is therefore not surprising that Napoleon and Hitler were so determined to found museums made to their all-encompassing, genuinely totalitarian measure, which required the systematic looting of their neighbours’ art treasures after defeating them on the battlefields. *Vae victis!* Woe to the vanquished! What else could have been written over the entrance of the failed Napoleon Museum in Paris, or the one Hitler planned to open in his hometown of Linz? Even today, it would be a fitting inscription on the facade of the British Museum in London, where they have the nerve to display the Parthenon Marbles of Athens under the name of the man who stole them: Lord Elgin. World history is riddled with such instances, being a sorrowful yet striking compendium of thefts, rapes and all sorts of crimes.²

Obviously, that premature aim of amassing and taking in the whole of art history which Vivant Denon, the man who planned the Napoleon Museum, ascribed to it from the outset, in consonance with his own plans to publish a richly illustrated history of world art, was merely a metonymy for the Napoleonic ambition to appropriate history in its entirety. That was the true prize, for only world history could provide the legitimate right to possess the world and all its riches, as the working class soon realised.

² When we learn that one hundred Jews were murdered by SS officers to celebrate the wedding of their friend, the father of Heini Thyssen, founder of the famous Thyssen collection, shouldn’t it make us think twice about entering the Museo Thyssen in Madrid?

Nothing did more to ensure the survival of museums than the boon of finding their original purpose, that of serving as the bastion and beacon of an increasingly implausible artistic order, suddenly replaced with the mission to preserve and promote the universally acknowledged need for a historical order—in other words, history itself, all of it, from beginning to end and for all audiences. The cost of this ambitious new charge turned out to be greater than expected, for artworks ceased to be a material proposition, a physical event, as museums dedicated to proclaiming a classical order still and often magnificently insisted, and instead became historical records, exercises in what some call “collective memory”, though in reality it never is and no one actually wants it to be. The radical diversity of people’s memories, depending primarily on their country of origin and social class, has facilitated the creation of historical museums, which at times do not hesitate to present themselves as memorials, not only of events like the *Shoah* that should be remembered at all costs, but also of the material culture of any human community that exists or aspires to exist, a vast collection of things which in turn justify the need for new museums, to the point of establishing institutions dedicated to any culture, community or subject for which funding can be found.

The positive side of all this is the dramatic increase of the presence in museums of the materiality that art entails, which had been weakening under the perverse influence of historicity. But there is also a terrible drawback: the exaggerated emphasis on our differences—which, let us not forget, was manifested in the interior distribution of picture galleries by national schools until quite recently—is blurring that image of universal humanity, imperfectly touted by the classical order, which emanated from the old museums and found its highest expression in Paris’s Musée de l’Homme, where this was not only possible but indeed inevitable, as the artefacts pertained to a time before history began: pure matter. The recent name change of a museum miraculously still dedicated to humankind in general and our indefatigable propensity to shape matter was, in my view, quite unsettling; I am not quite sure what that change announces, although I imagine it has to do with the increasingly widespread notion that there is no such thing as universally recognisable and enjoyable ART, only infinite historical markers that amazingly predate the dawn of history.

In the Aesthetics classes he taught until quite recently at the University School of Architecture of Barcelona, Ferrán Lobo would tell those who were shocked by the nineteenth-century dream of a Religion of Art that, in spite of everything, he preferred it to the monstrous proliferation of private devotions and superstitions that came afterwards. While that dream still endured, a dream obstinately encouraged by Wagner and his supporters and which draws crowds to Bayreuth even today, could anyone have imagined a more fitting place of worship than the museum? The transformation of museums into temples of art, as Hilla Rebay belatedly suggested to Frank Lloyd Wright, might have allowed them to gracefully escape their decline, overcoming their dysfunctionality. However, in the end the religion of art was not much more successful than the art-based order of the ancients and their tireless modern commentators. Even so, something of that ill-fated religion of art, with its implications of a priestly army of devotees, still lingers like a faint perfume in the atmosphere of museums. Many museum goers are well acquainted with this atmosphere of sanctity, recalling that of churches and other holy places and giving rise to similar demands for silence, irksome and impertinent impositions on visitors who cannot repress their loud enthusiasm for the physical charms of artworks, many of

which we are told were only intended for the edification of our souls. I am, of course, referring to the countless works of art forcibly removed from their original settings,³ primarily churches and monastic establishments.

The coexistence of radically secular and purely devotional works of art poses problems for both museology and museography, which are exacerbated in the case of works that still retain material vestiges of their former settings, such as old altarpieces, whose frames are sometimes more attractive and always far more ostentatious than the paintings they hold. Nowadays, the subtle aroma of incense that still wafts, whether we like it or not, from these devotion-machines is rarely masked; on the contrary, more often than not it is deliberately emphasised, though the effect is more theatrical than liturgical. This tendency probably entered museums by way of temporary exhibitions, with their propensity for displaying artworks in spectacular installations in order to lure and satisfy the masses, whose naive idea of a museum is still the model invented in the late eighteenth century by Madame Tussaud: a series of melodramatically lit cubicles, re-enactments of events often no less gruesome than those art has imagined for the Passion of the Christ, the suffering inflicted on his martyrs or the torments of hell.

A similar zeal for atmospheres of mystery, in keeping with the inflated assumption that art and religion are indiscernible among peoples without writing, the so-called “modern primitives”, has gradually taken hold in museums of this ilk. We see it today on a larger scale in the successor to that exemplary Musée de l’Homme or Musée du Trocadéro, where pieces were exhibited in modern metal-framed display cases that emphasised the merely technical aspect of those artefacts, leaving it up to visitors to interpret or imagine their numinous qualities, as Picasso may have done before the renovations carried out in the 1930s. On the other hand, we must admit that those fanciful installations are warranted, not only by the lingering suspicion that the things on display might still possess magical powers –and who are we to say they don’t?– but also by the certainty that some are indeed priceless objects, authentic treasures, as is undeniably the case of many items in the Museo del Oro or Gold Museum of Bogotá. This again brings us face to face with the most striking specimens of conventional religious art: the sum of objects made of precious metals and gems that comprise the “treasures” of the wealthiest churches, especially cathedrals. Among those objects, deemed precious for their material worth as well as their miraculous virtues, none stand out more than reliquaries. We often find them massed in special chapels, like the heavily frequented room in the shrine of Saint Anthony of Padua, and frequently underground, in dimly lit, hard-to-reach crypts that exude something like an intrinsically specious sacred order, though the effect is actually quite disorderly.

Naturally, modern museums, ever eager to take on more substantial duties, have not failed to capitalise on the emotive and suggestive allure of artworks associated with a magical context. By the way, the tendency of some museums to affect a vaguely sacred aura around works of art whose powers are of a different nature (but powers nonetheless) has an obvious parallel in the musealisation of many church

³ Many people rightly lament the fact that certain artworks, some religious and others not, were torn from their original settings and condemned to live in museums. The Florentine *cenacoli* are a superb example of the contrary, as well as a model of accessibility: admission is free, and they usually have seats where visitors can admire the works at their leisure. However, tipping the porter is de rigueur.

“treasures”. This is being accomplished swiftly in Italy, almost certainly with a view to squeezing more money out of tourists who are determined to visit any museum, including the truly unpayable diocesan ones, harmless shams that even the nuns don’t frequent.

Could it be that all the items currently displayed in museums are actually relics, imbued with powers of widely varying intensity? This question is made plausible by the interruption of history; in those places, seemingly impervious to conventional time, it revives the old objections voiced by the avant-garde artists and even by someone as moderate as Paul Valéry, who notoriously despised museums because of the startling alienation of artistic delights that inevitably prevails within their walls. Valéry said that, once inside, he immediately began to miss “the fine weather I left outside” –and he does have a point. Under the museographic pretext that many of the objects exhibited in museums should not be exposed to direct light, not even the sunlight that poured freely through the windows and skylights in years past, darkness is growing in museums and has suddenly become a powerful museological demand. Museums nowadays rarely give us a chance to see whether or not the weather outside is in fact fine. They have gradually turned inwards, even alienating themselves from sunlight, something art had always celebrated, to the point that it might even be considered a form of heliotropism, as Aby Warburg claimed– and he never said a truer word. The artistic order imposed by the old museums did in fact involve a luminous order, an order permanently eradicated by the elaborate artificial lighting strategies which now seem to be the museographer’s most pressing concern. Museums have ceased to be houses of light, instead preferring to explore and recreate an ultra-modern typology which some German scholars consider characteristic of the *Goethezeit*: the romantic den or dive and its countless variants, all of which share a penchant for subterranean locations and poor lighting. The Guggenheim Bilbao, with its emphatic ramp leading to the basement level of an already compact, almost completely windowless building, is perhaps the best example of a tendency which in many other cases has been content to suppress the main facade, as this almost always implies a certain order, simply moving the entrance⁴ and often giving it a secretive or clandestine air.

That dislocation was perhaps unavoidable in the case of the new wing of the Museo Reina Sofia in Madrid, whatever we may think of the aesthetic result. Sabatini’s building unmistakably belongs to the implicit order of classicist architecture, and it certainly needed a more vigorous intervention than the addition of the two lifts, if the aim was not to deceive people about the nature of the collection inside, whose *pièce de résistance*, Picasso’s *Guernica*, shows us the chaos caused by an act of destruction on an urban scale. The only viable solution was to create an off-centre entrance, a dark gash opened in the crystalline orthogonality of the Sabatini building. But Jean Nouvel, perhaps trying to compete with the original facade, went too far, and what should have been an indirect, non-directional, mysterious, almost secret entrance, like the ones that lead to crypts and all sorts of dives, has become a kind of souk surrounded by the myriad auxiliary services which apparently no museum today can

⁴ The fact that the great bay onto which the main entrance of the Museo del Prado was supposed to open was never built explains its relocation to the north entrance before and after the embankment leading up to it was removed; however, there is no doubt that the new wing designed by Rafael Moneo underscores that laterality. Now, more than ever, the forsaken main entrance is an empty stage that recreates the classical order in architecture.

do without, though they obviously have absolutely nothing to do with its primary and sufficient obligation to exhibit excellent specimens of art: library and offices, bookshop and café, a hotchpotch of concessions to the Spirit of the Age⁵. We find an inconceivable, monstrous cocktail of science and bureaucracy in this new courtyard at the Reina Sofía which, unlike its serene, harmonious predecessor, spins round and round the ultimate sarcasm: Lichtenstein's giant brushstroke seems to be telling visitors, "Stop! Go no further! Inside you'll only find more brushstrokes, but far less impressive." Lichtenstein's "gesture" is so impressive that it seems intimidating and, at worst, powerfully dissuasive. Visitors can always take refuge in the café, but the fact remains that the Reina Sofía is anything but warm and inviting. To make matters worse, someone had the unpleasant idea of bringing in one of Louise Bourgeois's enormous spiders, which stood there, like something that had just crawled out of a salad, for too many months.

Dwarfed by all those gigantic things, visitors soon realise that this is not a place made to their measure, on a human scale –and there is no surer sign of the absence of order than a lack of proportion or measure. Architecture has tended towards this uniformly ever since it came to terms, a few centuries ago, with the revelation that the first thing beyond measure was the universe itself. However, in the case of buildings intended to house and safeguard the noblest products of human ingenuity, particularly libraries and museums, the clear knowledge – suddenly clearer than ever in the light of reason – that books and artworks would begin to proliferate without rhyme or reason, the virtual infinity of the project, also constituted an obligation. Extant examples of Boullée's late eighteenth-century designs, in particular his famous plan for a tunnel-shaped library, reveal that those buildings are never truly finished; the inevitable need for an extension can always be felt. For museums more than libraries – which can now be digitised, dramatically reducing their spatial requirements – the true problem is not so much the inordinate growth of their collections as the additional duties they take on, as exemplified by the crowded souk at the Reina Sofía. Some might think there really aren't that many, but even one can be too much: merely ensuring that museums are "places of knowledge" – the latest nonsense regarding their functions – or places where children are initiated into I-don't-know-what (another inanity) seems like an impossible mission, a bottomless pit. Others might think that far more resources are invested in those ancillary duties than in purchasing works of art, and sometimes museum directors are content to just tick the boxes into which scholars have divided the history of art. Consequently, people in both camps tend to make absurd statements to the effect that a certain museum is "lacking" this or that, often things as unlikely as a "Fauvist" painting, whatever that really is.

But enough beating about the bush. The fact of the matter is that the perverse collusion between museology and world history is simply another indication of something far grimmer: the usurpation of the museum space by that accursed beast we call world history, a highly heterogeneous subject and, what's worse, comprised of documents, some explicit and others implicit, used to represent everything concerning the activities of human beings in this world, with an obvious emphasis on spiritual activities, such as beliefs and countless other suppliers of identity. For, although most humans have left a material footprint behind in the form of objects, that circum-

⁵ I once heard my teacher Xavier de Salas, director of the Museo del Prado for many years, say that in order to maintain it, someone simply had to go over the pictures with a feather duster now and then.

stance is immediately disregarded, precisely because of its circumstantial nature, as a kind of unsavoury tax paid to obtain the precious information of which each object is ultimately just an insignificant carrier, a true vulgarity.

In other words, in museums where world history reigns supreme, everything is boiled down to the same ideological pulp, with no recognisable or enjoyable substance or shape. Thus, upon leaving the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam –which I now recall, many years later, as a marvellous conjunction of paintings of interiors and doll houses– it seems the only thing expected of us is to have confirmed what we had been told about the lives of seventeenth-century Dutch burgers. Of course, that purpose would have been better served by taking a stroll through the city’s historic quarter –it seems we cannot escape history!– or better yet having a beer and toasting the memory of those people who, knowing that some of the material goods they traded in were far more appealing than their beliefs, tended towards Puritanism and even iconoclasm as a logical compensation mechanism.

The porcelain with which the Dutch East Indies Company traded and grew rich, and especially the glass with which the Venetians did the same for centuries –two precious materials, in my view the most precious ever invented by human beings, and perhaps the only things in the old cabinets of curiosities that could compete with the wonders of nature or *naturalia*– are the most eloquent and almost the only link between the kind of art museums I have been talking about, the kind that usually come to mind first when we hear that term, and natural history museums, where the material properties of specimens can hardly be considered circumstantial. That contiguity, impervious to the interferences of world history, explains the incomparable charm of the Museo Vetro or Murano Glass Museum, my favourite museum precisely because it blurs the distinction between *naturalia* and *artificialia*. Despite all attempts to arrange the collection in historical order since the invention of glass, century by century, its transparency easily trumps its historicity, of which there is hardly a trace other than the labels announcing that one piece is from the eighth century and another from the eighteenth. I don’t think there are words to accurately describe the feeling: it’s like being, for a brief moment, in another world, but a world made of the best parts of this one. I’m not sure that makes sense, but I did warn you I wouldn’t be able to explain it properly. Instead, I recommend that you review a famous scene from a James Bond film, where Agent 007 fights one of his adversaries in the Murano museum and sends everything flying.

Somewhere in the world there may be a museum which, like the old cabinets of curiosities, assembles all sorts of things, grouping them based solely on their material qualities and making no distinction between natural and artificial objects. However, I would be quite surprised if such a place did exist, and I still cannot understand why people speak of those cabinets as the precursors of museums, when in fact they are more like a chapter in the history of collecting. Collectors do tend to collect “curiosities”, and in this respect a stuffed crocodile hanging from the ceiling does not seem so different from a guitar owned by Elvis Presley. Those cabinets were primarily assortments of rare things and only rarely of precious things, of “wonders”, which explains why they were also called *Wunderkammern*. The current proliferation of museums of curiosities or memorabilia is not a sign of the decline of museums, but rather of their almost infinite uses and the equally infinite quirks of human beings, from sporting trophies won by the Real Madrid football team to Mickey Mouse merchandise, as in Oldenburg’s Mouse Museum.

Nor does the fact that natural wonders, most visibly stuffed animals, had pride of place in those cabinets of curiosities mean that we should regard them as the immediate ancestors of natural history museums. Such institutions were founded at the same time as art museums, and with intentions perhaps not as dissimilar as we might think, for the acquisition and exhibition of specimens was based less on their rarity than on their position within the order established by the division of nature into kingdoms, a system which Linnaeus had begun to organise for plants and Buffon for animals. Natural history museums would have been inconceivable without the assistance of their classificatory tools, which made it easier to manage the more rational standard that replaced the ultra-baroque criterion of rarity: that of the astonishing diversity of nature, soon to be reinforced by Darwin.

Thus, the rise of the “natural sciences” was to natural history museums, like the one Charles III founded in Madrid, what the new art history, with its classification strategies, was to art museums. I am thinking of two in particular: the one Winckelmann applied to ancient statuary, drawing inspiration from the cycle of human life; and the one that divided modern painting into different national and regional schools, a system originally suggested by Giorgio Vasari, encouraged by local chroniclers and finally consolidated in newly printed books such as Abbot Lanzi’s *Storia pittorica della Italia* and the practically symmetrical tome on sculpture published by Count Cicognara. At this magnificent juncture, art and nature seemed to converge, and not only in the same tendency towards order. That convergence is wonderfully illustrated by the famous anecdote about when Goethe stumbled upon a Corinthian capital, partly concealed amid the undergrowth in the Roman forum, and suddenly realised that the natural vegetation was continued in the manmade object. That fortuitous, instantaneous, fleeting misstep confirmed the certain existence of an indiscriminate order, the foundation and *raison d’être* of Western classicism. Since then, nature and art have only repelled and pulled away from each other, for conceptual reasons as well as what we might call practical ones. Museums rapidly became too small and proved to be shockingly unsuitable for assembling and exhibiting the “wonders of nature” (as the earth’s diversity and complexity were still referred to in the nineteenth century) in the brazen way works of art continued to be displayed. Botanic gardens and zoos immediately revealed their glaring shortcomings: they conveyed the same impression of rigidity, griminess and stiffness as the old cabinets of curiosities and even the world-renowned dioramas of the American Museum of Natural History in New York. If only in response to the squeamishness of modern audiences about the biological world, all those glass jars with often indescribable “things” floating inside, natural history museums have gradually disappeared and, oddly enough, been replaced by science museums, where everything seems more pristine, better able to awe and amaze visitors with their infinite, photogenic displays of light and motion – basically television on a larger scale. With the increasing dematerialisation of what science has left us of nature, my vision of a Museum of Matter where the most precious creations of nature could be exhibited alongside the most precious work of human hands – for instance, the 180,000 carats of the Bahia Emerald alongside a painting by Memling – is not only outdated but impossible and perhaps even ludicrous, an infantile dream derived from reading books like *The Children’s Encyclopaedia*. I feel sorry for Ezra Pound, who in one of his cantos seemed confident that eventually the “emerald findeth no Memling”... We shall see!

In reality, the world does have such a museum, the Hermitage, though that was not the original intention; it was the Bolsheviks who decided to make the Winter Palace the main repository of the material treasures amassed by the tsars over the centuries with the blood and sweat of their subjects. It was transformed into a public museum, in my opinion not only to let the people enjoy those treasures but also to make a political statement, a clear lesson and warning that the class struggle was a struggle for material possessions. Coming from admitted materialists, it seems quite obvious. I would happily linger here in what was once an enchanted palace, whose owners nevertheless ended up so unhappy with or ignorant of its material contents that they only have an air of genuine dignity in the photos taken of them in the place where they were killed. It is often the people, and they alone, who appreciate and enjoy the world's treasures, not only because those treasures were unlawfully snatched from them, but also and especially because they were traditionally the ones who worked that matter. But this is increasingly not the case, as far as I can see, and today the people are so surprised by the charms of matter that it makes it even harder for me to leave the Hermitage.

Returning to the more conventional museums, allow me, if you will, to stop at the Museo del Prado. I do this for three reasons, in increasing order of importance: the first is that the Prado, like the Hermitage, is the result of an expropriation, for only after the Revolution of 1868 did it cease to be a crown storage facility and become the property of the Spanish people. The second has to do with the amazing, though admittedly fortuitous, fact that it was a museum of natural history long before it became a picture gallery. As for the third reason, I will begin by acknowledging that it is simply what I believe to be the fulfilment of my dream, that dream of a museum where the splendour of matter is not wasted in the artist's hands because of certain spiritual qualms, but instead intensified and polished to a dazzling sheen. I presume that dream to be realised in a room in the museum basement—could there be a better location?—fitted out to display the aptly termed Dauphin's Treasure, a staggering array of exquisitely crafted vases made of hardstone, a material that would have been perfectly at home in the old natural history museum among exotic stuffed birds and other beauties wrested from nature's bosom. This is not the first time I have drawn attention to this subterranean warehouse of wonders⁶, although now I see that several of the things I have been discussing converge in that space. Since they removed *Las Meninas* from that gloomy cabinet facing a mirror that delighted credulous visitors for so long, the Dauphin's Treasure exhibit has become my favourite spot in the Prado. Of course, this should come as no surprise after what I've already said about the Murano Glass Museum and what I've left unsaid about the Gold Museum in Bogotá or the Topkapi in Istanbul⁷.

This digression through matter, through its vindication at all costs and under any pretext, is ultimately just a desperate attempt to find something in an institution as unstable and changeable as a museum that can withstand both the hurricanes of history and the innocent breezes of fashion, which are almost more dangerous: something capable of offering a kind of certainty, which probably will never be of an artistic nature again, for although the chaos in which the things of art have existed

⁶ See Ángel González García, "La cabeza entre los árboles", *Prado*, Madrid (Spring / Summer 2007), 94-105. Now in *Pintar sin tener ni idea* (Madrid: Lampreave y Millán, 2007), 285-297.

⁷ Another imperial palace that was turned into a museum, like the Hermitage.

for far longer than a century is plain to see, the new museums constantly and quietly promote a vague nostalgia for their exemplary character. At least that is what most of their visitors are meant to believe, drawn by the hope of finding some meaning in what the few who are in on the secret of that confusion find perfectly satisfying and highly amusing. It is rather scandalous, this tendency to divide visitors into the clever few and the bewildered majority, although I fear the latter are more intimidated than perplexed. However, the worst part is the perpetual state of uncertainty which architects and managers can do little to avoid. While it might seem that they simply need to follow the definition of art at a particular moment, or at least the uses made of art, Frank Lloyd Wright and the legendary Alfred Barr, first director of the MoMA, were hardly given any guidelines to work with.

Over the years, everything has become darker and less manageable, an enormous riddle which each architect and director solves as best s/he can, or more likely as s/he pleases. This is not the architects' fault, although I do wonder if all the mutterings about the creation of an elite class of "starchitects", who are often not only capricious but also full of manias and quirks, might be a product of the motley range of museum designs, each more distinctive than the last, as if we had all collectively relinquished the right to know or guess what a museum building might look like. Frank Gehry's design for the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao recreated that uncertainty in an opportunistic yet impressive way. Critics pointed out that building only grudgingly met the conditions for exhibiting works of art, perhaps because it preferred to exhibit itself: a brilliant metaphor for the prevailing spirit of artistic disorder. Indeed, some of the first shows, that of Giorgio Armani and especially the one about motorbikes, though not very conventional, seemingly attempted to address the confusion of most visitors about what the museum directors planned to put inside. Jeff Koons's *Puppy* gave those disconcerted visitors a more categorical and undeniably ironic answer: "Don't look for it inside, it's out here!" Both the programme and the volumes were out of joint. Whether you like it or not –and I liked the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao from the very first, though I admit I like it much more when it's empty– I don't think anyone would dare to question the fact that Gehry, more energetically and eloquently than any other architect, succeeded in capturing the implausibility of a contemporary art museum –maybe even of any type of museum except the increasingly abundant museums of trifles and fripperies, which can be easily set up anywhere, preferably in an abandoned building, thus killing two birds with one stone to everyone's satisfaction. We have seen this recently in Spain, where every time someone proposed the restoration of a building of "historic value", it was hardly ever with the aim of turning it into something necessary and useful, like an old people's home or a public library, but rather into yet another museum –a museum of anything, it didn't matter what– which necessitated the hasty acquisition of a private collection, with little thought for the appeal (not to mention the excellence) of its content, as in the scandalous case of the Museo Thyssen, a colossal swindle. Then again, the gradual disintegration of the common standards of taste that governed the first museums could really only lead to one thing: the particular, quirky tastes of a single subject, the accursed collector. With a few notable exceptions, most museums comprised of private collections are trinket museums. The Wallace Collection in London commendably makes no effort to conceal what it was: the overwhelming, though not always deplorable, accumulation of Mr Wallace's private quirks and obsessions, scattered haphazardly throughout the building.

A few minutes away from the Wallace Collection, at number 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields, we find an exception to virtually everything I have just mentioned: the house museum of Sir John Soane. While it does contain a hotchpotch of objects of wildly disparate value, from humble plaster casts of architectural features to the authentic sarcophagus of Seti I and a set of original paintings by Hogarth, the house's owner, a prominent architect, used them to create one of the most fascinating interiors in the history of architecture. This marvellous place is not a proper museum, but nor is it one of those houses once inhabited by famous people and later turned into pilgrimage sites, where four knick-knacks of unknown provenance are sufficient to satisfy the ghoulish and impertinent curiosity of visitors. Provenance is of no concern to them, anyway; what they are really looking for is not the actual deathbed of Mr X or the genuine quill pen used by Mrs Y, but the emotional thrill of believing in their authenticity, probably the same thrill they derive from going to the theatre or cinema⁸.

Sir John Soane's Museum was officially recognised as such in 1833, but the house was opened to visitors several years before; in fact, in 1830 its owner published a description of the property which continues to be reprinted, with some corrections. Everything about this museum tells us that other museums could have taken many different paths than the one they ultimately chose; logically, the responsibility for that choice lies with their directors, for the most part talentless scholars unable to envision an art museum as anything other than a mechanical aggregate of assorted things, lists of things, as had been done since ancient times and was still being done in baroque cabinets of curiosities. Museum catalogues, identical to those printed up for auctions or the inventories attached to wills, prove that matters have not progressed far beyond this paratactic procedure⁹. In contrast, Soane's description of the things he had in his home, where the collected items are inseparable from the house itself, is unusually organic, hypotactic if you will. For one thing, it features discontinuous, muddled itineraries that weave disparate orders together, orders that differ from each other but also from the omnipotent order represented by ancient art, which suffocated all others: the optic order of the mirrors scattered throughout the house, with their reflections and reflections of reflections; the symbolic order derived from the evidence of a vertical axis, rising from the basement filled with funerary pieces to the yellow- and purple-tinted skylight; and, of course, the material order that lends credibility and charm to the jumble of things made of countless materials, some priceless and others as humble as plaster. At every turn, visitors are faced with the incontrovertible fact that this house was once inhabited by a man able to find meaning where other similar places, such as the Mario Praz house museum in Rome, have none: life and joy.

If any house deserves to be called *La casa della vita*, as Professor Praz insisted on referring to his abode, it would have to be, precisely and perhaps exclusively, Sir John Sloane's residence in London¹⁰. Whose house might our museums be today?

⁸ Well-intentioned falsifications of places and events abound in Pausanias' ancient *Description of Greece*, as well as in the written accounts of pious journeys to Rome or Jerusalem in the Middle Ages. Even today the house of the Virgin Mary stands in Loreto, supposedly carried there through the air by angels.

⁹ In this respect, it is quite telling that the first catalogue of the Museo del Prado by Pedro de Madrazo (Eusebi's previous one was actually just a modest guide) remained in use until approximately thirty years ago, with relatively few corrections.

¹⁰ On the subject of the house museum, see my book *Roma en cuatro pasos. seguido de algunos avisos urgentes sobre decoración de interiores y coleccionismo* (Madrid: Ediciones Asimétricas, 2011).

Since they have ceased to be the declared home of the Muses, I fear they cannot be the house of anyone or anything, except perhaps of unlikely or unsettling abstractions such as *Das Geist* or *Der Volk*. But do museums really need to be someone's house? As I watched street people take shelter inside the National Gallery one cold, rainy day in London, it struck me that the museum might well be the home of the homeless, the house of the poor. I still think this now, despite the general tendency of the wealthy to appropriate museums for their own use; I am, of course, referring to publicly owned museums. I wonder why they do it: is it because they feel at home there, through force of habit? Because of some instinctive urge to grab and monopolise everything? Or because of the snobbish notion that possessing works of art confers social prestige? Only they believe this, but their obsessive efforts to maintain this status quo, pitting themselves against everyone else, have contributed decisively to undermining an institution whose aim should have been to negotiate the shared uses of art in a fragmented society.

The boundaries between museums and wealthy collectors' homes have become so porous that sometimes we cannot tell if the latter are parts of the former, or vice versa. An undefinable air of confusion permeates the tours—strictly limited, to be sure—which palace owners graciously let us make of their opulent homes. A case in point is the *palazzo* of the Doria-Pamphilj family in Rome, though I have never been sure if visitors are allowed inside to contemplate Velázquez's portrait of Pope Innocence, their most admirable possession, or to offer them a glimpse of how the great princely families live, a dramatic initiation into their energetic endeavours at tight-fisted ownership. "Keep your voice down, there are people sleeping upstairs," one of the guards whispered to me and a group of friends. We never doubted it, for who else would have placed protective plastic covers on the rich upholstery of the Louis XV seats lining the walls of the original gallery? Years ago, the owners did some remodelling work to separate the "museum" from the "house", but it's still hard to tell where the boundaries lie, I imagine because they do not want to be far from their treasures or relinquish the immediate privileges of ownership. Those plastic covers are a warning, and perhaps also a knowing wink from the powerful, acting in the name of world history, to the lowly: the die is cast, and we must each accept our lot in life in order to preserve the social order, which has remained intact since the first museums were founded.

Works of art alone are not sufficient to learn the almost mandatory lessons of this long-established order. Arranging them in the form of an *intérieur*, as we occasionally see in museums¹¹—entire rooms lifted from their original settings—is a far more effective means of satisfying the generalised curiosity about how people lived¹². And by people we usually mean rich people, for the poor have always lived poorly. The photo spreads featuring the homes of wealthy people in celebrity tabloids feed that same curiosity, which is usually better sated by an indoor pool than works of art, not necessarily numerous or particularly valuable. Readers of the more sophisticated interior decorating magazines seem to be more—only slightly more—particular; in such circles, collecting art (the more modern the better) has recently become a badge of distinction and prestige for homeowners. None of the many people involved in

¹¹ In *Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century*, Walter Benjamin accurately defined the museum as an interior, but it is unfortunate that he hardly wrote anything else about that institution. Perhaps he felt that definition said it all.

¹² The most overpowering example is undoubtedly The Cloisters in New York.

the contemporary art business –a group that certainly includes museum directors, though some try to hide the fact– want their products to look bad in the homes of those who acquire and hoard them. After all, these days any art collection has the potential to become a museum. I wouldn't be surprised if some collectors even began opening their homes to inquisitive visitors. Although this is unlikely to happen, it is quite probable that the house's transformation into a museum will be a package deal, including the artworks and everything else: furniture, rugs and lamps, the luxury-edition art books on the coffee table, and maybe even the Filipino butler. I'm perfectly serious. In 1926, Marcel Duchamp's friend Katherine Dreier, perhaps acting on his advice, agreed to let the Brooklyn Museum exhibit her modern art collection, passed off as the property of a phantom *Société Anonyme*, on the condition that some of the pieces be displayed in rooms which were not overly large and soberly decorated in the style fashionable at the time: four fake "interiors" where the radical modernism of the paintings hung on the walls or the sculptures placed on the shelves was not at odds with the understated elegance of, for example, her country estate in West Redding, Connecticut, with a *Leda* by Brancusi in the garden and Duchamp's *The Large Glass* in the library (the best location it ever had). I do not know if Dreier's aim was to convince her fellow socialites that modern artworks don't necessarily look awful in a domestic setting. Her initiative did not have an immediate effect on museums, but it certainly tabled the question of treating those places as a virtual network of "interiors" and museography as a new interior decorating paradigm, which would spread almost without a hitch from collectors' homes to museum halls, overflowing into art galleries and eventually artists' studios¹³.

Of course, I would be remiss if I did not say something about art galleries. Their history runs parallel to that of museums, with which they rarely interfered, not even when they acquired shop windows and Jules Lafargue proclaimed them to be the future of the salons occasionally held in museums: all of them, museums, salons and galleries, would become displays of merchandise. Little by little, however, and at an accelerated pace after 1945, museums and galleries began moving towards the same conception of the exhibition space: the "white cube" discussed by Brian O'Doherty soon became a meeting place for certain art critics. Although O'Doherty saw it as a rhetorical figure that expressed a certain exhibition ideology, this did not stop most people from representing the blessed "white cube" as a physical figure, and a gallery by that name opened in London which was quite fashionable for a time. I find this ultra-literal outcome far more interesting and intriguing than O'Doherty's tedious, pedantic text. A true white cube, repainted every time a new show opened, always impeccable and radiant, made a continuity between art galleries and museums plausible. However, galleries were probably ahead of the game, serving for years as the testing ground of an exhibition strategy that sought and facilitated a correlation between the increasingly pristine, glossy appearance of artworks –seemingly not fashioned by human hands or from any earthly materials, indistinguishable from other phosphorescent merchandise– and an extremely potent display device, the perfect showcase, or, couched in more ideological terms, money cubed.

¹³ In the art circles of the time, it was an open secret that the Museo de Arte Abstracto in Cuenca was an extension of the tastes of Fernando Zóbel, its founder, in terms of interior decorating; those tastes were shared by Gustavo Torner and Gerardo Rueda, who with Zóbel formed "the three musketeers", as they were affectionately dubbed.

Logically, museums could not remain oblivious to the almost dizzying rise in the exchange value of artworks, their virtually irreducible status as mere commodities. Yet perhaps they were never more in danger of bowing to the interests of art dealers than when they let themselves be blinded by the dazzling radiance of those enormous white-painted orthogonal spaces, by their false clarity, which did nothing to make the displayed works more comprehensible. Education departments flourished under those conditions. However, the truth is that art galleries have not really insisted on the dubious transparency of the “white cube”, except perhaps those where the exorbitant price tags of the things they sell leave no time for subterfuge. The nooks and crannies and obstacles that the Surrealists found so pleasing have made a comeback. O’Doherty himself remarked on Marcel Duchamp’s substantial modifications to the “white cube” in his installation at the 1938 Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme. What he didn’t mention is that the entire thing posed a serious fire hazard, and that its author did not attend the opening, having already departed for New York. The installation he created in that US city in 1942, to celebrate the appearance of *First Papers of Surrealism*, consisted of hundreds of gun-cotton threads criss-crossing an entire room, which made it very difficult and quite hazardous for visitors to pass. His creation took the Surrealists’ strong and founded suspicion that the artistic experience is riddled with obstacles and perils to a new extreme.

There were other galleries for museums to look to before the majority of New York showrooms embraced the ideals of transparency and glossiness, of hypertrophic visibility, materialised in the “white cube”. In fact, it was there where, in 1942, the gallery designed by Frederick Kiesler for Peggy Guggenheim opened its doors: Art of This Century, which strikes me as an updated, reinforced, almost motley replica of those “interiors” where Dreier had exhibited part of her collection. Peggy’s gallery was like a large living room¹⁴ where visitors could recline in comfort to observe the paintings that protruded from the curving walls, supported by metal brackets of a type rarely seen in galleries but very common in shop windows. Kiesler had designed some in the 1920s for the Saks window display on Fifth Avenue, and in 1947 he created more for another singular art venue, the Hugo Gallery, closer to an experimental theatre than a domestic interior.

Neither Duchamp’s installations, bordering on fun-fair booths, nor Kiesler’s designs, seemingly made of the stuff of dreams (whether those of the architect or of his client, I cannot say), appear to be the best examples to follow in museums. In fact, I sense in them a tendency to unnecessarily complicate installations that often reminds me of the excesses which have become all too common and regrettable in opera productions. This is not something to be encouraged, especially when most of those productions are entrusted to people incapable of giving meaning to their effronteries, as Duchamp did with the clandestine, explosive work of the Surrealists (a delayed-action explosion), and furthermore lack Kiesler’s talent for designing either furniture or environments. Museum directors are advised to exercise prudence –while La Fura dels Baus and Chillida may share a penchant for striking hammer blows, that does not mean it would be wise to hire the theatrical group to organise a Chillida retrospective– but being prudent is not an impediment to exploring and

¹⁴ The living room of her own house. The Palazzo Venier dei Leoni in Venice, now home to Peggy Guggenheim’s art collection, still bears traces of the life its owner led there, particularly in a corner of the garden where her dogs are buried; their graves endure as paradoxical testaments to a long, full life.

testing the various ways in which artworks can be displayed. Right now, these are practically limited to their ascription to a particular moment of human history –their context, as some say, convinced that they are saying something quite fascinating– which often boils down to something as simple as screening traditional Spanish films from the 1950s alongside the paintings of the El Paso group.

Museographic excesses¹⁵ are a consequence of museological defects; they merely patch up and paint over a gap that could be properly filled by appointing directors with a knowledge of something more than the history and sociology of art, a knowledge of the specific formal qualities that Marc and Kandinsky sought in works of art, independently and in resonance with others. Indeed, it would be enough to let them resonate among themselves, stimulating rather than disturbing each other. Marc said that he and Kandinsky were able to recognise those mysterious affinities thanks to a “magic wand”, but obviously the only real requirement is “good taste”. However, I admit it is difficult to evaluate a tasteful predisposition when choosing museum directors; in any case, their museology has long been decided behind closed doors, often for political or ideological reasons. Museums have become instruments of each new administration’s “cultural policy”, even though sometimes that policy merely consists in redistributing the country’s artistic heritage over and over again. This practice is very common in France, though the far more conservative British have also applied it to the former Tate Gallery¹⁶.

The majority of new museums lack an independent, logical museological programme, so it is not surprising that museography, still defined today as the practical or applied aspect of museology, has now replaced the latter, once again proving that “the medium is the message”. In the absence of a consensus on the practices and uses of art, without which art museums become bear gardens, museography continues to decide on such matters: for instance, the aforementioned decision to mistakenly ascribe a sacred quality to works of art, which merely hinders the appreciation of their more active, flattering, comforting attributes. This is an example of how easily museums are swayed by fashions and trends, but it also shows how the proliferation of museums¹⁷ and the increasing complexity of their tasks are making us forget their necessity. Museums have certainly never been more numerous or more heterogeneous than they are today; at the same time, their purposes and duties have never been more doubtful.

As I cast about for a proper conclusion to these musings on museums in general and art museums in particular, I hear the bizarre news that the interim government

¹⁵ Speaking of the occasional blunders of museography, I am reminded of a temporary exhibition on portraiture at the Prado, which included two anamorphic landscapes in which two portraits were hidden. A rope barrier made it impossible to view them from the side, as that perverse perspective required, so those who didn’t know the portraits were there must have been perplexed or wondered if the curator had lost his mind. Often, so many precautions are taken to protect the artworks on display that visitors almost seem redundant.

¹⁶ This is simply and neatly illustrated by its well-documented division into three parts: a picture gallery, a museum of antiquities and another of decorative arts.

¹⁷ A guide to Paris prepared by the leading writers and artists of France, published in 1867, reveals that, aside from the Louvre and the Luxembourg, there were hardly any museums in the city—and one of those few was an artillery museum. The monumental multi-volume work *Paris, ses organes, ses fonctions et sa vie dans la seconde moitié du XIXe siècle*, which Maxime de Camp began publishing in 1869, does not mention a single museum, though it devoted an entire chapter to tobacco and another to prostitution. As I said at the beginning, for the old museums it was enough to simply exist as the guarantee of a robust artistic order: who would waste their time going to verify it?

of Venezuela is considering the possibility of exhibiting the embalmed corpse of the late president Hugo Chávez in a Museum of the Revolution, placing it—where else?—inside a glass casket¹⁸. This would not be the first time a mummy has been displayed in a museum, proving that those avant-garde artists who despised museums as too close to cemeteries did have a point¹⁹. A museum can contain anything, from the most ordinary to the most sacred, but why do the “Chavistas” think a museum is a more appropriate setting for their leader’s embalmed corpse than a mausoleum, like the one built for Lenin in Moscow’s Red Square? Something tells me that the answer ties in with all the questions I’ve raised about museums in this essay. It’s not that Chávez’s mummy is a work of art, although it’s hard to tell in these times, when a shark submerged in formaldehyde seems destined for a museum of contemporary art rather than one of natural history, where it would hardly be noticed. Nor is it that museums have decided to compete with churches. It’s not even that museums are places where time passes more slowly. It primarily has to do with modern fantasies of hyper-visibility, of searing transparency; the greater the suspicion that some things, the truly important ones, can only be viewed by a privileged few, the more feverish these fantasies become. It cannot be a coincidence that Jeremy Bentham, the first man to truly appreciate the enthusiasm for effortlessly seeing everything at once that would dominate the modern world²⁰, decided that his embalmed and suitably attired corpse should be publicly displayed in a cabinet after his death. It therefore seems that the justification for exhibiting Chávez’s mummy in a museum—on a par with *Las Meninas*, a *Tyrannosaurus rex* skeleton, or a tee shirt owned by John Lennon—is its condition as a “visible thing”, an infinitely reproducible image.

Andy Warhol knew this very well. His famous three-dimensional *Brillo Boxes* were, no matter what people say today, mere replicas of the ones sold in supermarkets, which he probably would have had no objection to exhibiting in a museum “as is”, just like Oldenburg did with the Mickey Mouse dolls he purchased here and there. Who’s to say there isn’t a museum somewhere in the United States that displays genuine Brillo boxes or genuine Campbell soup cans, exhibited because they are more images than commodities? An image certainly is a commodity, but in highly concentrated form, the commodity par excellence; and, I would add, the greater their visibility, their hyper-visibility, the more they are stripped of their material properties, their useful value. This is precisely what makes Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes* superior to those sold to ordinary people: inside there are no soap pads, nor room for anything else. Something so solid has never looked so flat, hardly distinguishable from a photograph of the box itself.

While they claim to exhibit things that seem quite different, museums indiscriminately display images which they also sell, sometimes prior to the visit, in the form of postcards and, recently, scale reproductions²¹ or copies that capture every detail of the reproduced object except its matter, often to the brutal detriment of its charms.

¹⁸ In the end, this project appears to have hit some snags, not because it was deemed indecorous, but because of the corpse’s deterioration after a lengthy period of public exposure. We await new developments.

¹⁹ Here I must also mention one of the most scandalous cases in the history of Spanish museology: the display of a stuffed “Negro” in the museum of Banyoles, if memory serves me, which they claim was later repatriated—but where exactly was it sent? In all likelihood, they disposed of the body discreetly.

²⁰ The basic structure of this system was established by Bentham himself with his famous “Panopticon”.

²¹ I found the most outlandish example of museum merchandising in the shop of the National Gallery of Ireland, which had hosted a Munch exhibition and was still selling inflatable replicas or models in different sizes of the

In 1956 Georges Duthuit, an expert on Byzantine art and Matisse's painting, published a book that did not draw a lot of attention, *Le musée inimaginable*, in which he scathingly lambasted André Malraux, whose books about an imaginary museum have been immeasurably more successful. I think what made Duthuit so irate was the fact that Malraux was not just proposing a museum he imagined, his ideal museum; above all, he posited a museum of images, the same ones that profusely illustrated his books, many of which do not exactly correspond to what we see in museums: fragments of artworks, details only visible to the camera, incontrovertible evidence that photography had inspired and guided Malraux's thoughts. What bothered Duthuit the most was not the fact that his museum turned out to be a museum of photographs, but the implied assumption that works of art constitute images even before they are photographed. Duthuit made no such assumption. He did not see images as the ultimate end of our artistic experience, but rather as mediators between that experience and the spectator, a kind of interface. In his view, artistic experience was not limited to the imaginal aspect of artworks; it overflowed, creating a tangled web of powerful sensations that transcend the visible plane. Duthuit found inspiration in the ritualised uses of art in Byzantine culture, and probably also in his experience of Matisse's painting, which affects us with an intensity we would never suspect based solely on what it allows us to see, something that far surpasses its mere visibility.

But is it the museum's job to manage such sensations? As far as the capacity of Byzantine ceremony to accelerate the artistic experience is concerned, this might be inferred from the promenade of art lovers through the galleries of the old museums that Adorno embodied in Marcel Proust, which required a closed order, an itinerary that for habitual visitors was as familiar and ingrained as certain rituals, like saying the rosary or the Stations of the Cross. The museographic temptation to consecrate the artistic experience rears its head once more, resurfacing as a distortion of that experience, which may be corporeal or not. Rituals are certainly not exclusive to religious practices; they are manifestations of the repetition compulsion which Freud believed was innate to human beings. From this I venture to conclude that practically the worst thing museums could do is precisely what they've been doing incessantly in recent years: reorganising their collections²². They move things about, upset tried-and-true itineraries, and win over sporadic visitors by sacrificing the fruitful habits of the regulars, who spend much of their time trying to find the new location of each object. And all this is rarely done for a good reason, namely to enhance its power of suggestion; while I will not deny that surprise has occasionally proved useful for discovering little-known aspects of the practice and uses of art, in concluding I must insist on the importance of a determining factor in our experience of works of art: the difficulty we have in remembering them. We can recall the plots of films and novels we liked fairly well, but paintings are much harder to remember, even the ones we have looked at repeatedly until they eventually become our favourite pieces. In 1862, Horace Lecoq de Boisbaudran explored this unanticipated difficulty in an unfairly forgotten book, *L'éducation*

screaming character from his most famous painting. They looked like doodled worms, truly nightmarish.

²² I wonder if the marvellous Querini Stampaglia gallery in Venice is still how I recall it, marvellous primarily because of the water-level entrance designed by Scarpa. For years, I went there at the same morning hour during the first week of the new year to witness a prodigious phenomenon: a sunbeam falling exactly on a lovely panel by Giovanni Bellini at the back. I trust that painting is still there, as well as the little room where small Longhi pictures are stacked one atop the other, as in the museums of old.

de la mémoire pittoresque et la formation de l'artiste, which set out a method for exercising and strengthening pictorial memory skills and was aimed at his students at L'École Nationale de Dessin, among them Rodin. I think that what for artists constitutes an impediment to recreating a place, event or physical form from memory is actually an incentive for art lovers; the vague recollection of the thing they found so pleasing when standing before it will undoubtedly encourage them to go back and gaze upon it again, time after time. And the likelihood of repeating the experience is directly proportional to the merit of the picture in question, a merit that can be quantified in terms of how frequently it calls us to return.

Setting aside the accusations of distortion and abuse I have levelled against museums here, the ceaseless reactivation of the pleasures derived from contemplating certain works of art, each different and unique, may well be the ultimate and sufficient *raison d'être* of museums, the least convoluted and noblest purpose. Many readers might think this short-sighted, unambitious and hackneyed, a throwback to the past, but allowing museums to be places of recreation –yes, recreation and amusement– for art lovers does not necessarily imply the restoration of that original artistic order. It simply means leaving things where they are, not being so quick to embrace the latest trends in museography, discreetly putting aside the stalls of gadgets and snacks and, last but not least, eliminating the lines at the door²³, which only intimidate the regular, routine, leisurely visitors, the ones who are truly in love with art –*amoureux d'art*, as Jean Dolent said with forgivable mawkishness.

Like most places defined in the nineteenth century, and the customs derived from them, museums –making no distinction between the wax museum of Paris, the Musée Grévin, and the Louvre– are part of a larger itinerary that includes legendary passages, parks and gardens, historical monuments, theatres, cafés and even sewers, inviting us to stroll steadily onwards, making no concessions to anything other than the seamless, wondering fluidity of the journey. The promenade through the museum is merely one segment of that greater promenade. Thus, if there be an honest tavern in the vicinity, there is no need for a poor imitation inside the museum, and the same could be said of the bookshop. A museum does not benefit from isolation and self-absorption, from regarding itself as an exceptional place, almost above and out of this world; instead, it is enriched by its engagement with that world. I am not talking about some abstract form of engagement with “civil society”, the hollow catchphrase now on everyone’s lips, but a physical and sensitive connection. Coffee may be served in a museum, but that doesn’t make the museum café any less mediocre, and sordid salads are not heavenly morsels worthy of the angelic hosts just because they happen to be served at a museum buffet. Ultimately, the convoluted route on which the museum is merely a stop, or perhaps more accurately a junction –what some now pompously call “drift”, laboriously harking back to the rather insubstantial nineteenth-century figure of the *flâneur*– has but one salient attribute or, better said, gift: “the gift of inebriation”, as the poet said.

²³ I am certain those lines would not exist if visitors did not have to run a gauntlet of checkpoints: first the admissions desk, and then the metal detectors and the cloakroom. In fact, I have rarely encountered lines at the door of museums that do not charge admission, like the British Museum in London, which despite being heavily frequented hardly ever feels overcrowded.

A Epilogue from Madrid

To continue and conclude with my insistence on how much it behoves a museum to be part of a complex promenade that gently lulls one into a state equivalent to inebriation or weightlessness, if my readers are not yet thoroughly convinced, I can think of no better example than the space created in Madrid in the latter half of the eighteenth century –then the *Salón del Prado* and now the unlikely *Paseo del Prado*– as an unstable receptacle of varied delights: the *prados* or lawns themselves with their beautiful trees, the successive water channels that irrigate them, the refreshment stalls and carousels where the crowds lost their heads, and of course the striking and logical sequence of the Cabinet of Natural History, the Botanic Garden and the Astronomic Observatory, inserted in that cluster of delights which summoned and gathered people from every social class, a raucous stream of humanity that, further down, flowed into what is still called –I can only imagine sarcastically– the *Paseo de las Delicias* or Promenade of Delights. Despite the current disastrous state of the entire area and the constant threat of even more destructive alterations, the *Paseo del Prado* has continued to attract new museums, but –alas!– only to make visiting them more convenient for harried tourists. We don't even have an “island” like Berlin, just a “theme park”, the new paradigm of mass entertainment.

“History is our business” read the advertisement for a new museum built near Benidorm; I hardly dare to imagine what became of that enterprise. I fear that history has also become the business of museums. As opposed to other more stimulating uses, this is the main grievance I have against today's museums. Mournful places in which to be carried away by the unstoppable flow of time, wallowing in melancholia instead of resisting its swift, overwhelming, lethal current... Who knows? Perhaps the avant-garde wasn't entirely mistaken and they should all be set on fire. Maybe the only thing truly worth saving from a museum filled with art treasures from every era is fire itself: “The fire!” as Jean Cocteau replied to the question which newspapers of the day put to people. His answer was not merely clever in its unexpectedness; it is undoubtedly the only thing we can say to the moderns about an institution that has never quite figured out what it should be doing, and all too often opts for the thing least conducive to our residence in this world: a virtually infinite number of baubles. Ah, but fire, on the other hand... !