2. Museums, Museology, and Museography

SLIDE: Pushkin Museum, Moscow


1. WHAT IS A MUSEUM?

- Definition: 1974, the International Council of Museums (ICOM)

SLIDE: ICOM Definition

“A non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates, and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of man and his environment.”

- Contrary to what is believed, museums are very ancient and very new.

SLIDE: Treasury of the Athenians at Delphi 5th BC 1st Museological coll. in Greece

- Very ancient: from Greek mouseion: seat of the Muses or temple of the muses.

The Greek Philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras (5th C. BC) refers to museums as “a heaven in which scholars conduct research amid discourse, and with reference to books or to objects.”

The Greeks had in mind something quite different from our modern museums. They thought that museums should be like a research institute.

The most famous of these earlier Museums/Research Institute is without doubt, The Library of Alexandria in Egypt, founded by Pharaoh Ptolemy the Saviour (not to be confused with Ptolemy the Greek Mathematician) in 280 BC.
- Its aims: entirely literary and educational
- A hundred students were engaged on various projects.

- Although going back to Greek times, museums are quintessentially a modern invention that could be summed up in three moves:

a. First Move: The Cabinets of Curiosity:

- It is generally accepted that the idea of the modern museum can be situated in the Renaissance with the invention of the Cabinets of Curiosities.

SLIDE: Cabinet of Curiosities

- Created in the 15th and 16th centuries these cabinets had two aims:

- First, to order the universe: to present the entire world as organised by God and Humanity:

  - Macrocosm: God and World ⇒ nature
  - Microcosm: Mankind and Art ⇒ culture
Secondly, to name the world. To name means inevitably to possess it: to name an object is to know it and understand its position within the order of things.

Ex. of famous cabinets: (fame & prestige, obligatory sight for the aristocracy):

→ In Florence there was The Medici Palace (now called the Medici-Riccardi Palazzo), and the Uffizi Gallery, built in 1570 by the Duke Francis 1st of Tuscany.

→ In Prague, there was the Kunstkammer of Rudolph II in the official residence of the king.

b. Second Move: The Cabinets of the World:

• In the 17th Century a new type of cabinet opened: the Cabinets of the World.

SLIDE: The Ashmolean Old Entrance

• The first of these is without doubt the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, opened in 1683.

• These new institutions added another aim to museums: to display a collection for teaching purposes.

SLIDE: John Tradescant

• The Ashmolean Museum comes from the collection of a 17th century Royal gardener, John Tradescant, who opened a popular museum of rarities and curiosities in Lambeth in London.

• It was called the Musaeum Tradescantianum. After his death, his son with the help of the antiquarian Elias Ashmole enlarged the collection and moved it to Oxford.

• It would be wrong to understand the Cabinets of the World of the 17th century the way we understand a museum today: they were very much popular attractions.

Ex: Don Saltero’s Chelsea Coffee House, owned by James Salter founded in 1695 situated at 18 Cheyne Walk:

James Salter was originally Sir Hans Sloane travelling servant. He named himself Don Saltero and opened a barbershop in Cheyne Walk. Sir Hans Sloane began then to donate him unwanted objects from his own collections. Don Saltero displayed these objects in his place of business and the barber’s shop evolved into Don Salter’s Coffee House and Curiosity Museum.

→ Read references in novels written by contemporaries such as Richard Steele’s The Tatler No. 34, 27 June 1709, Jonathan Swift’s The Journal to Stella (1667-1745), and Benjamin Franklin, Autobiography, 1791.

→ Examples: Queen of Sheba’s Fan, Robinson Crusoe’s shirt, A ball of fishbone found in Plymouth and Pontius Pilate’s Wife’ Chambermaid’s Sister’s Sister’s Hat!

c. Third Move: From the Cabinets of the World to the XVIII C. Encyclopaedias

• The Cabinets of the World prefigure the great Encyclopaedias of the Enlightenment.

• Again, like the museum, Encyclopaedias are very ancient and very new:

SLIDE: Encyclopaedias
In Roman times → Ex: Plinus the Elder wrote the famous *Naturalis Historia*

In the Middle Ages, encyclopaedias regulated monastic life and were written by monks: → Ex: *Etymologies* of Saint Isidore of Seville (7th C.)


In the 17th C. (right at the time when cabinets of the world were created), the 1st alphabetical dictionary was created: → Ex: Francis Bacon, for example, worked on one.

In the 18th C. → Ex: Chambers’ *Cyclopaedia* (1728) and Diderot’s *Encyclopédie* (1751-1772) inaugurated the idea of a dictionary written by several authors.

→ Ex: The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1768-1771)

In the 20th C., the dictionary became a prized possession of the bourgeoisie: if you owned a dictionary, you owned the world. In the 21st C., the electronic tablet is the prized possession of the bourgeoisie: if you own an ipad, you own the world.

* Like there are thematic Museums, there are also thematic encyclopaedias.

**d. Types of Museums:**

* As a direct descendents to these cabinets and as a complement to these dictionaries, we can distinguish all the museums we know today:

SLIDE: Pompidou Centre in Paris

1. Art Museums.

SLIDE: Evoluon

2. Science Museums (including Natural History M. & M. of Industry & Technology)

SLIDE: The Roman Museum in Cologne

3. History Museums (most common / local history museum in most towns)

SLIDE: Museum of Childhood

4. Children’s Museums (playful rehearsal space to introduce children into the culture for which they were destined.)

* Many more types of museums.

**e. Conclusion to What is a Museum?**

* The Medieval man looked at works of art as a way of tuning in with the work of God.

* The Modern man looks at works of art as if an autonomous experience

* Hence his final question: what is the foundation of art without external referent?
→ No answer, just highlighting the creation of the museum and of the aesthetic judgement as we understand it today.

2. MUSEOLOGY AND MUSEOGRAPHY

• Presiozzi’s Lexicon:
  - Museology: the language of exhibitions (Logos + Museo)
  - Museography: the writing of art history as it relates to the museum (Graphein + Museo).

• Not unlike for this course’s arbitrary typologies, select only a few of Presiozzi’s propositions and hypotheses:
  - No. 2: The time of the museum: To single alterity, i.e. what does not belong to the present in order to generate the present. (Re: Next Week: Hegel)
  - No. 4: Museum exhibitions as fiction: The history displayed in museums is a fiction and this fiction creates history. (No Session)
  - No. 11: Museum as Mystery Novel: The world needs to be pieced together and the viewer is the reader (Re: Session on Museums and Narratives: Bal).
  - No. 13: Museums as the Future Anterior: “What will have been.” The meaning of the future anterior with regards to museums. (No Session)
  - No. 7: The Hegemony of Art: Organising principle that colonized the world. (Re: Session on the Museum and colonisation: Carré and the Benin Bronzes).
  - No. 10: Heteronormative: The museum is based on heterosexual men’s scopic regime: their specific ocular-centrism. (No Session)