

## Museum Art Exhibitions: Between Aesthetics and History

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The subject of this talk was kindly proposed to me by the organizers of the CODART Congress, who suggested that I reflect in my capacity as a historian upon the new permanent exhibition of the Rijksmuseum – more specifically upon the section devoted to Dutch paintings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. A visit to the exhibition convinced me that its core problem is the relationship between art and history: in other words, between the production, circulation and reception of works considered to be art (according to historically variable criteria) and the ever-changing society in which they were produced and received. This problem itself has a history: for a long time, it was not even considered a problem, and when it began to be acknowledged as such, it was not always formulated in the terms I use here. Moreover, it was tackled in two different ways: it was discussed in the philosophical and art-historical literature, and at the same time avoided or solved in curatorial practice by choosing objects that could be suitably displayed as elements of the same set and by arranging them in what was believed to constitute a meaningful whole. I shall speak here about both strategies, because philosophical and art-historical discussions have influenced curators, whose practice, in turn, has influenced philosophers and art historians. And I shall look at them from a historical perspective, because I am convinced that one cannot understand the opinions expressed by the latter and the decisions implemented by the former without putting them in their proper time and place.

### 1

In the first half of the seventeenth century, there were only four art museums in the world, all of them Italian. Outside Italy, museums did not exist. These four museums were the Capitoline collection in Rome, the Galleria degli Uffizzi in Florence, the Vestibule of the Biblioteca Marciana in Venice and the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana in Milan. The museums in Rome and Venice exhibited only ancient sculpture, whereas the other two displayed modern art as well. In contradistinction to the Ambrosiana, which initially had only paintings, the Uffizzi was an encyclopedic museum that exhibited paintings together with sculptures and, in the Tribuna, with *naturalia*, *exotica* and *curiosa*. In fact, the Tribuna had been conceived as a showcase of the visible and the invisible world, of art and nature, of the four elements, of land, sea and sky: in other words, the whole of Being. It was an exhibition of marvels, of

exceptional and hence stupendous works produced by exceptional men, and of equally exceptional works produced by nature at the peak of her creative power. The same pattern was often followed in the princely collections north of the Alps that eventually became museums.

The eighteenth century invested art with a significance and value it had never had before; henceforth it was Art with a capital A. Such a new philosophical dignity of Art, which went hand in hand with its social promotion, was a corollary of the anthropocentric stance dominant in Enlightenment culture and revealed by Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Man* (1734). From this perspective, Art is an achievement of Man – not Man as part of nature, i.e. the visible world, but as endowed by the Creator with invisible creative powers which make him a truly God-like being. Art is the highest, fullest, and noblest expression of these creative powers. It is, to use a later formula, a second, ideal creation. Under exceptionally favorable circumstances, some extraordinarily gifted individuals are enabled by their creative powers to transcend temporal limitations and to render visible their ideas, projecting them into works worthy of admiration for all eternity. It follows that Art is unique, it is considered universal, its rules are thought to be valid in all places and all times; its exemplary realizations are famous ancient buildings, ancient sculptures, and no-less-famous modern masterpieces of painting, all things every artist must memorize, which are known more often than not through the medium of images, miniature models, plaster casts, copies or prints. In antiquity the motherland of Art was Greece; in modern times its motherland is Italy.

This idea of Art, which permeated the culture of the Enlightenment even before having been clarified and codified in Winckelmann's masterpiece *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* (1764), had several practical consequences. It conferred an unprecedented importance to the art museum, which became a temple of the new anthropocentric religiosity: a place to celebrate Man in works of Art, just as God was celebrated elsewhere in the works of nature. The desire for art museums therefore spread among the cultural elite, and enlightened opinion put pressure on art collectors in general and princes in particular to open up their collections to the public. This eventually resulted in the proliferation of art museums north of the Alps. It also resulted in the demarcation of the frontier between Art and nature and a separation of their respective productions. Art museums and natural history museums began to evolve along different lines. In the study of nature, attention slowly shifted from the exceptional to the everyday, from the distant to the close, from the marvelous to the ordinary. By contrast, the study and display of art privileged exceptional artists and exceptional works.

Another consequence of the Enlightenment idea of Art was the demarcation of the frontier between Art and all human productions that do not belong to it, and a display of Art intended to isolate it from anything that could compete with it for the gaze of the spectator.

As far as museums were concerned, art was confined to paintings, sculptures, engraved gems, medals, coins, drawings and prints. The last two, despite being considered Art, could not be exhibited in the same way as paintings and sculptures. Furniture, jewelry, silver, ceramics, tapestries and so on were relegated to the realm of minor, decorative or applied arts, which meant that they were not on a par with Art. Even Art with a capital A was exhibited so as not to mix its different modalities. Paintings were separated from sculptures, *pinacothecae* from *glyptothecae*. The separation of Art from nature and from different human productions not included in Art was introduced in museums and galleries in the course of the eighteenth century. It was a slow process, not only because it was resisted by people accustomed to traditional displays, but also because it was costly and required more space. In some cases, it was completed only in the second half of the nineteenth century. Ultimately, old museums were restructured and new ones were set up according to new principles. There was one important exception to this rule, however: the Museo Ercolanese at Portici, officially opened in 1758, which exhibited objects excavated at Herculaneum and Pompeii. It displayed sculptures, mosaics and frescoes, as well as ceramics, weapons, tools, and kitchen and household implements. Such a *mélange des genres* was not the result of an intention to put artworks in context. It was necessary simply to secure excavated objects. The museum was also a storeroom. When it was transferred to Naples, Art was separated from non-Art and paintings from sculptures.

## 2

Despite the separation of paintings and sculptures, the principle which presided over the placement of the latter and the hanging of the former was initially the same: aesthetic delectation, giving pleasure to the senses, in this case to the sense of sight. Curators were aiming to create an immediate and striking effect, to compose a set of paintings that would instantly be perceived, upon entering the room, as being in harmony with one another, because of color, composition, drawing and format, and sometimes also subject matter, regardless of the author. Sculptures were grouped according to a similarity in the figures they represented. With respect to paintings, this was later called the “flower bed” principle. A highly subjective principle, it was valid in the display of a private collection, whose owner could do what he liked, but it was much more difficult to justify in a public institution like a

museum, visited by people with different sensibilities and tastes, where the principles of display presume universal validity. As early as the eighteenth century, the “flower bed” principle was declared unsatisfactory, for it could be applied only to a room or a segment of a gallery, but not to the gallery as a whole. Locally, it could arouse sensory delight; globally, it left a feeling of disorder in visitors with more stringent requirements.

In the course of the eighteenth century, such a hang – according to the principle of aesthetic delectation – was gradually replaced by a display based on what I would call the principle of intellectual satisfaction. It meant, first of all, that any painting which is not an isolated work can be juxtaposed with other paintings if their combined effect is pleasing to the eye. It also meant that the work in question is not just part of its author’s oeuvre but also part of a larger corpus, composed of all the works belonging to a given “school,” each “school” being connected to the place where it originated and developed. “Schools” were initially distinguished only inside Italy and corresponded to great artistic centers: Florence, Venice, Rome, Bologna, Naples and so on. Such a division into “schools” is very old. It is a product of the urban patriotism characteristic of Italian cultural life and was already inbuilt in Vasari’s *Lives of the Painters* and in all subsequent artistic literature. Only in the eighteenth century, however, does it seem to have been applied to the hanging of paintings in galleries and museums. It does not appear to have been applied to the placement of modern sculptures.

In the late seventeenth century, French and Dutch “schools” were added to the Italian school. At this point one must be careful to avoid anachronisms. The division of “schools” of painting into Italian with its inner divisions – French and Dutch, and later, but still in the eighteenth century, English, Spanish and German as well – was based on the presence, in a city or country that had given birth to a “school,” of an artistic genius who initiated a “manner” that was subsequently adopted by his pupils and his pupils’ pupils: Raphael in Florence, Titian in Venice, the Carracci brothers in Bologna, Poussin in France, Rubens in Flanders, Rembrandt in the United Provinces, Dürer in Germany and so on and so forth. Because art was considered universal, its rules were thought to be valid in all places and at all times. Artistic geniuses were supposed to introduce only modifications of such a substantial identity of Art. In other words, they were supposed to apply creatively the rules applicable to all artists. Innovations are merely visible renderings of a potential present in these rules. Such an idea of Art means that, in contrast to all other human products, it is located outside time and space. Thus there is a flagrant incompatibility of the division into “schools” with the claim that there is no art but national art, and that each national art is governed by specific

rules. Such a claim was indeed presented in the nineteenth century, as will be pointed out later, but we have not yet progressed that far.

In addition to the division of art into “schools”, the second eighteenth-century innovation concerning the hanging of paintings was to display each “school” in chronological order. This development began in Venice in the middle of the century when collections acquired works painted “in the Greek manner” which were later called “primitives,” i.e. works dating from before Cimabue and Giotto. Chronological order was subsequently introduced in the hanging of paintings produced after the “renaissance of the arts.” Such a “visible history of painting” was already exhibited in some private collections in Venice itself and in cities in the Venetian Republic in the second half of the eighteenth century. Moreover, it was applied to the hanging of paintings in a museum (more specifically, a public gallery) in the 1770s by Christian Mechel, who was entrusted with the task of restructuring the Belvedere in Vienna. Today such an approach would be considered legitimate only if one accepts that knowledge of an artist’s time frame is essential to the perception of his works, and that any perception of artworks must be informed by such knowledge if it is to bring about not only sensory delight but also a correct understanding of the works and an adequate assessment of their merits, i.e. the intellectual satisfaction alluded to earlier. This means, however, that Art is not completely immune to time. Even if artworks, once created, are shielded from time’s destructive influence (excepting accidents), the circumstances in which they come into being leave on them a lasting imprint. And this means, moreover, that the display of paintings is intended not for simple art lovers in search of naïve aesthetic delectation but rather for dilettanti who, without being artists themselves, study artists’ lives and learn many things related to their practice, and whose perception of artworks depends on their accumulated learning. The difference between the former and the latter is not just cognitive, but also social: dilettanti usually belong to much higher social strata than art lovers.

Even though Mechel’s hanging elicited some critical comments, it was not shocking in Ancien Régime Vienna. But the proposal to introduce it in a museum to be opened in the Louvre, in revolutionary France during the Reign of Terror, provoked fierce debate. Such a proposal was made by Jean-Baptiste-Pierre Lebrun, a famous art dealer, in his *Réflexions sur le museum national*, an answer to Jean-Marie Roland, the Interior Minister in charge of the museum. Roland’s letter to the commission responsible for the opening of the museum stated: “A museum is not exclusively a place of study. It is a flower bed which must be scattered with the most brilliant colors. It must interest dilettanti and at the same time amuse simple visitors.

The museum is everyone's property. Everyone has the right to enjoy it. It is your duty to put such enjoyment, as much as you can, within everyone's reach." The insistence on "everyone" is significant. For Roland, museums must be accessible to visitors who are not there as scholars and do not presume to know anything about the works on display. They come to the museum just to enjoy what they see. Lebrun opposed the "flower bed" principle with his idea of classifying paintings according to their spatial and temporal positions: "All paintings must be arranged according to the order of their schools, and they must point out, by the very place assigned to them, the different epochs of the infancy, progress, perfection and finally the decay of art." Lebrun lost. The commission adopted "the arrangement ... of an infinitely varied flower bed." Later on, Dominique Vivant-Denon implemented the arrangement of paintings according to "schools," but the Louvre did not introduce chronological order until after the revolution of 1848.

Such an order, however, had already been implemented in the 1790s in a museum which faced the Louvre on the left bank of the Seine. It was called the Musée des Monuments français and had been organized almost singlehandedly by Alexandre Lenoir, a painter put in charge of a storeroom of objects confiscated from religious institutions that had been closed by the revolutionary authorities. Lenoir received permission to open his storeroom to the public, whereupon he transformed it into a museum. It exhibited mostly religious sculpture and other works of art refused as "unworthy" by the commission in charge of the Louvre. Many of the objects were medieval, which only made them more "unworthy" in the eyes of those influenced by Winckelmann's aesthetics, which had a powerful hold on the minds of the French revolutionary elite. The museum also contained historical relics and specimens of artistic production that had been banned from museums of Art: stained glass, tapestries, mosaics, armor and weapons. Lenoir arranged his objects according to the centuries in which he believed they had originated, and he did this in a way that stressed the singularity and unique character of each century. At the same time, he placed each century in a global historical sequence, achieving this by means of lighting: progressing from darkness in the crypts that displayed Merovingian art and becoming increasingly intense until it finally attained its full brightness in the rooms devoted to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Staged in such a way, this collection of unwanted stuff – as opposed to a display of objects reflecting the prevailing neoclassical taste – attracted great numbers of visitors. It became a place where the young generation discovered the art of the Middle Ages and brought it back into favor. What is more, it actually became a model that was followed in other countries, and

after its closing in 1816, it remained a legend that exerted a strong impact on the further history of museums.

### 3

The medieval remnants that enchanted young visitors to Lenoir's museum were not considered Art in those days. Even Lenoir himself did not rank them that high. For him and for his public, they were monuments of the national past. They acquired the dignity of Art in the first half of the nineteenth century, at different times in different countries. But medieval art contrasted with ancient and early-modern art not only because of its subject matter and formal qualities, but because it was not the common property of the European elites. It was seen as a product of the people – the *peuple*, the *Volk*, the *lud*, the *narod* – rooted in its particular language, its traditions and customs, its collective beliefs and specific institutions, and therefore opposed to cosmopolitan classical art and its modern sequels. It was divided like a political – and now also cultural – map of Europe into French art, English art, German art and so on. Art lost its capital A when it became nationalized and, as a result, historicized: invested with an inner historicity attested to by its distinction into successive periods characterized by their styles: Romanesque and Gothic. And it was connected, more strongly than ever before, to the history of politics, religion and mores. In other words, the relationship between art and time and between art and space changed radically. From then on art was seen more and more as immersed in the former and marked by the latter. It was in the process of losing its transcendence.

Another manifestation of that process was the blurring of the boundaries between Art – in the singular and still with its capital A – and the plural “decorative,” “applied,” “minor,” and “industrial” arts. It could not have been otherwise. Leaving aside architecture, which is outside the scope of this talk, medieval art consisted of sculpture and works in glass, fabric, metal, wood, pottery, precious stones, ivory, enamel, wax and so on: all materials which, until the nineteenth century, were not considered materials of Art. The elevation of medieval remnants to the dignity of art was therefore tantamount to the elevation of these materials and the objects made of them. They now came to be exhibited in museums designed for this very purpose, such as the Musée de Cluny in Paris (since 1843) and the medieval departments of encyclopedic museums such as the Louvre and the British Museum, which opened such departments in 1826 and 1866, respectively. But the promotion of the applied arts also had more practical reasons. Considered an efficient remedy for the flood of industrial rubbish on the market, it resulted in the opening in London in 1857 – in the wake of the Great Exhibition

– of the South Kensington Museum, which was devoted exclusively to the applied arts. This sparked the creation of similar museums all over Europe, and eventually influenced the acquisition policy of art museums and the display of art itself.

In the eighteenth century, Art was considered one and universal, but after the assimilation of medieval artistic productions and their promotion to the dignity of Art, it became plural and particularized: plural, because there were now as many arts as there were nations, there were many different styles, and the hierarchy of art modalities had been eroded; particularized, because its form and content were thought to be dependent upon its epoch and country of origin. Only Greek art and its Roman sequel were still considered universally valid in the second half of the nineteenth century. Therefore, in order to satisfy museum visitors, all art, except the art of antiquity, had to be displayed in a way that would make manifest its nationality and its historicity. The museum was no longer a temple of anthropocentric religiosity; it had become a sanctuary for the celebration of the nation cult. The first step in this direction was the replacement of the cosmopolitan neoclassical architecture reserved for museums of ancient art by either the neo-Gothic or any other style considered truly national. In this respect the contrast is striking between, for instance, the Ny Carlsberg Glyptothek in Copenhagen and the National Museum of Finland in Helsinki, or between the Pushkin Museum and the Tretiakov Gallery (both in Moscow). A fascinating example of a building conceived as an embodiment of the national character is the Narodni Muzeum in Prague. But it's enough to look at the building we're in now to realize that Cuypers intended it as a materialization of "Dutchness."

This insistence on nationality extends, not only in the last case, to details of the interior architecture – the Prague museum is a perfect example of that – and to the display of collections. National art is separated from foreign art. Of course this was part of the old division into "schools," but now, even though the term "school" is still in use, it has a different meaning, inasmuch as national art is not considered a modification of universally valid rules but rather seen as art that has been individualized and singularized by a nation's natural environment – its history, mores and institutions. The separation of national art from foreign art was unknown in Italian museums until the eighteenth century. They exhibited Art with a capital A, and from this perspective, artists' origins were purely accidental. The problem arose during the creation of the Louvre. Initially the Musée central de l'Art, as it was called, displayed only European, i.e. foreign paintings. French art was confined to the Musée spécial de l'Ecole française at Versailles. The twofold opposition between *central* and *spécial*



and between *Art* and *Ecole française* is telling. During the Revolution and later as well, the best French paintings were exhibited at the Louvre, and after the Napoleonic wars, the gallery of French painting was the museum's crowning glory – even though it was more rhetoric than reality. Until today the most prestigious gallery at the Louvre, the Grande Galerie or Galerie au bord de l'eau, contains Italian paintings, and the emblematic masterpieces of the museum are the *Mona Lisa*, the *Nike of Samothrace* and the *Venus of Milo*. Granting such privileges to European or universal art, rather than to indigenous art, was also characteristic of the Altes Museum in Berlin, which differed in this respect from the Alte Pinakothek in Munich and the Gemäldegalerie in Dresden. It is interesting to note that, in the beginning, the Metropolitan Museum and the Museum of Modern Art (both in New York) followed the example set by the Louvre: they exhibited only European art and did not accept American art until many years after they opened.

In some museums the very distinction between foreign and national art appeared to be irrelevant. So it was with imperial museums: the Prado and the Kunsthistorisches Museum. Because Italy and Flanders were both provinces of the Habsburg Empire with its center first in Madrid and later in Vienna, their art was not foreign in either place. In Vienna, moreover, there was no national art. Even the art of the Vienna Secession in the late nineteenth century was part of an international movement and came to qualify as national Austrian art only after the breakup of the Empire following the First World War. In Madrid there has always been a balance between the art of the former European Empire and the Spanish artistic tradition with its great masters. There was also another reason to neglect the distinction between national and foreign art. In many countries the latter was only marginally present or completely lacking, and their museums were created from the start as national museums devoted principally to the exhibition of national art. The Rijksmuseum belongs to this category.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, art – whether national or universal – had to be exhibited according to the requirements of history, which now meant much more than the display of works in chronological order. History in art museums was identified with the history of art, which had now become largely the history of styles: their evolution over time and the transformation of an earlier into a later style. The notion of style unified the “technical and architectural arts,” to quote from the title of Gottfried Semper's influential book. It erased or at least diminished the old frontier between Art with a capital A and the “minor,” “applied,” “decorative” or “industrial” arts, inasmuch as they all expressed the same style, though this was related in different ways to their uses, materials and techniques. The idea of

style as a common feature of contemporaneously produced works of art – and thus characteristic of a certain period in the history of a civilization – was also present, although not mentioned by name, in another very influential book published shortly before Semper's: Jacob Burckhardt's *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien (The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy)*. Forty years later, it was translated into museum practice by Wilhelm Bode, who was well acquainted with Semper and considered Burckhardt his master. At that time Bode was responsible for the arrangement of the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum, to be opened in 1904, and he created spaces with ceilings, floors, doors, chimneys, and other elements of interior decoration originating from the same period. He even made sure that the color of the walls was historically appropriate, and he placed paintings, sculptures, tapestries, furniture and *objets d'art* in interiors devoted to the same period. He called such spaces *Stilräume*.

Bode's was not the first attempt to show, in a museum display, art as an expression of style and history within the context of the history of a civilization. Some authors assign the invention of period rooms to Lenoir or to Du Sommerard's initial arrangement of the Musée de Cluny. In so doing, they overlook the fact that both Lenoir and Du Sommerard were exhibiting undifferentiated medieval objects at a time when the distinction between Romanesque and Gothic had only just been made. Period rooms are much more specific and usually connected to a definite style. But the term is also used for the reconstruction of interiors transported from either peasant dwellings or from castles or palaces, or even from bourgeois homes. These historic interiors are united both by their origins and by their stylistic homogeneity. Bode seems to have been the first to stress the latter and to apply to the arrangement of an art museum the notions of *style* and *civilization*. Moreover, it was his example that probably launched the fashion of period rooms, particularly in American museums, where one can still see some of the most accomplished examples.

#### 4

The intellectual life of the late nineteenth century was characterized by the growing importance of the social sciences and by the clash of ideologies, among other things. Art history was not isolated from these processes, even if its transformation from a *Geisteswissenschaft* into a social science was finalized only after the Second World War. Yet even before 1914 sociologists tried to explain the role of art in society, while Marxists attempted to show that an artist's social class determines the content and form of his art, and that art serves as a weapon in the class struggle. These ideas do not seem to have had the slightest impact on art museums, neither then nor later. Curiously enough, after the

Bolsheviks' victory in the former Romanov Empire, at a time when museums were supposed to be revolutionized like everything else, even though some artworks were removed from the permanent display and relegated to the storeroom, while others were declared masterpieces despite their scant artistic value, no one, to the best of my knowledge, tried to rearrange the Tretyakov Gallery, for instance, in an attempt to show that the history of Russian painting is marked by class struggle between serfs and landlords. If such attempts were ever made, they soon faded into oblivion. There was a striking difference in this respect between museum exhibitions and school textbooks, which proposed an interpretation of art and art history in terms of classes and their antagonism – an interpretation which, more often than not, was simplistic and vulgar.

As a problem of curatorship – not without political overtones – the relationship between art and its social environment was the center of debate during the preparations for the opening of the Musée d'Orsay. They started in 1978 under the liberal presidency of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, who was the originator of the project. Following the advice of the Direction of French Museums, he decided to preserve the railway station opened in 1900 but closed down for many years and scheduled for demolition. The new view of the nineteenth century, rediscovered after long neglect, enhanced the beauty of this example of industrial architecture. Its happy location in the city center, on the Left Bank, made it the perfect candidate to house a museum of predominantly French, nineteenth-century art, which would relieve the congestion in the Louvre. The museum intended to cover the period from 1848 to 1914, already classified according to political criteria, and it was to be divided into six departments: paintings, sculpture, decorative arts, photography, graphic arts and architecture. In 1981, François Mitterrand became the first socialist president of the Fifth Republic. As a result, the team that was preparing the future museum was enlarged to include a historian specialized in social history, Mme Madeleine Rebérioux. Her task was to break with the traditional presentation of artworks and place them in the context of the industrial revolution, with its class conflicts, political struggles and rapid changes in everyday life.

When the museum opened in 1986, it became clear that their ambitions had been realized only in part. The author herself summarized their aims under three headings. The first was the division of nineteenth-century art into two periods separated by the 1870s, a decade of both political and artistic turning points: the disappearance of the Second Empire and the Paris Commune, on the one hand, and the beginning of Impressionism on the other. This division was built into the structure of the display: works pre-dating the 1870s occupy the

ground floor, while the impressionists are displayed below the glass roof, where they benefit from better light. The second innovation was the gallery devoted to the popular press and illustrated books, i.e. to the mass media of the time, which were important as vehicles of images, in particular reproductions of artworks. The third was the gallery of dates, which showed the events between 1848 and 1914 by means of posters, newspapers, photography and the like. As noted by the author of these innovations at the time of the opening, history – as distinct from art history – was either imperceptible to the average visitor, for whom the division of paintings was seemingly dictated not by political or social criteria but by constraints of space, or separated to such an extent from the artworks themselves (in the gallery of dates, for example) that visitors had to make an effort to associate the history with the art.

Thirty years have passed since the opening of the Musée d'Orsay, and this has been a very hectic time in the history of museums. The Louvre expanded into all the space offered by the royal palace, succeeded in expelling the Finance Ministry, acquired a new central entrance, and became the Grand Louvre. The National Gallery in London built the Sainsbury Wing. The Prado completed the first stage of its extension, which will be followed by others. The Berlin museums were at last reunified: the Gemäldegalerie moved from Dahlem back to the city center, while Museum Island was completely renewed and in some cases, such as the Neues Museum, rebuilt from the ruins of the Second World War. Since 2009 the Musée d'Orsay has been carrying out renovations that will transform it into the Nouvel Orsay. These are only a few examples, concerning some of the most famous European art museums. But as far as I know, these renovations, however radical, have never been underpinned by the intention to create a permanent display that would reveal the connection between the evolution of art and the changes in its social, political and cultural environment. In other words, no one has tried to solve in curatorial practice the old problem of the relationship between art and history.

## 5

At this juncture we encounter the new display at the Rijksmuseum, which proposes just such a solution. It is inbuilt into the difference between the ground floor and the other floors. The ground-floor display contains Christian art in its Catholic version with some local, Dutch peculiarities. On the first floor, we begin to look at art produced in a Protestant country and characterized by strong national specificity. However, taking the floors in succession, we begin with eighteenth-century art and go back in time to the seventeenth century on the

second floor, only to jump into the twentieth century on the third. The reason for this discrepancy between spatial layout and chronological order is obvious. It is the result of the initial location on the second floor of the Gallery of Honour with its climax: Rembrandt's *Night Watch*, the only painting which has remained in its original place. Therefore, the correspondence between the display of works and their time of origin holds true for each level separately but not for the museum as a whole.

Such a correspondence, though a prerequisite to the integration of history into an art display, is in itself not enough. One must also introduce historical events, personalities, social groups, institutions, customs, beliefs and the like. This is especially striking in the core section of the museum, the one devoted to Dutch art of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These elements are introduced in what seems to me to be a very Dutch manner: without insistence and non-systematically, yet with the obvious intention of making visitors aware of a number of important things: the great figures and major events of the Dutch Golden Age, of the central place occupied by the sea in the country's economics and politics, the role played by colonial expansion, and the differentiation of Dutch society, particularly the part played by urban patricians as a political force and as patrons of the arts. Whether the curators have succeeded in acquainting visitors with a bit of Dutch history is difficult to say, especially since today's public is increasingly unaware of any historical perspective whatsoever. Complex psychological research is needed to assess the display's impact on the public. Such research would be very costly, so we'll probably never know whether visitors leave the exhibition with a fresh view of the Dutch Golden Age. I can therefore speak only about what I perceive as a peculiarity of this exhibition: the connection it tries to establish between art and history.

The art rightly occupies center stage: the Gallery of Honour, whose name dates from the museum's inception. It culminates with Rembrandt's *Night Watch*, which visitors reach after seeing masterpieces by the most famous painters of the Dutch Golden Age, including Frans Hals, Jan Steen, Pieter Jansz Saenredam, Pieter de Hooch, Jacob Isaacksz van Ruisdael, Johannes Vermeer and Rembrandt. There is also a selection of the best still lifes. On both sides of the gallery, spaces focusing on historical processes alternate with areas that highlight artistic phenomena. Thus the side devoted to the first half of the seventeenth century starts with "The birth of the Republic" followed by "Cabinets of curiosities," followed in turn by "Flemish influence," which opens into "Power struggle in the new Republic," from which one proceeds through a "Print room" to "The Netherlands overseas." Similarly, the side devoted to

the second half of the seventeenth century starts with “The power at sea” and leads through “Medals and coins” and “Italianate painters” to “Burghers in power” and then through “Townhouse” and “Dollhouses,” two presentations of the life of ordinary burghers, to another “Print room” and on to “William and Mary.” Such an intermingling of spaces – with rooms stressing history mixed with more artistically oriented rooms – seems to be trying to integrate artistic and political events, with a view to showing that both are expressions of the same society, its unity when confronted with external enemies, and its occasionally violent internal strife.

The coexistence of history and art is also manifest in a single room, sometimes also in a single showcase or even in a single object. So it is with paintings that depict events of lasting significance to the history of the Netherlands: the abdication of Charles V, the Iconoclastic Fury, the war against Spain on both land and sea, the Treaty of Munster and the assassination of the De Witt brothers. So, too, with portraits of eminent historical figures – William of Orange, Constantijn Huygens, Jan Uytenbogaert, Prince Maurits of Nassau, among others – and artists’ self-portraits. It is the same with portraits of less important individuals and with the group portraits of civic-guard companies or the regents of towns or charitable institutions. All such paintings belong to both art and history. Projecting the past onto the present, they represent events in a way their contemporaries thought appropriate, and they show personages as they wished to be remembered. They are the iconic equivalent of narratives: memoirs, chronicles, histories.

But the past is present in these spaces not only in images, but also in the form of relics, which represent historical events or figures because they are believed to have originated with an event or to have been touched by a historical figure. Their relationship to the past is not one of similarity but of contiguity. The cannons used in the war against Spain, Hugo Grotius’s book chest, Van Oldenbarnevelt’s walking stick and the executioner’s sword he was murdered with, woolen caps worn by whalers, Admiral Michiel de Ruyter’s goblet – all these objects are interesting and valuable not because of their artistic qualities but because of their connection through oral or written tradition to events or persons whose memory, preserved over centuries, has become part of the Dutch national identity. The existence of a tradition, whether oral or written, is essential in the case of a relic, because it directs the gaze of the visitor, invests it with a certain content, and – inasmuch as it associates an object with a name and a date – it raises expectations that can be fulfilled only through contact with the object. That is the nature of a relic.

There is another category of objects that connects art with history: glassware, earthenware, porcelain, silver, jewelry, furniture, clothes, tapestries, toys and the like are at once artworks and relics, particularly when we know their previous owners, which we often do. These objects show their owners' positions in the hierarchy of taste, wealth and power, as expressed by their ability to acquire objects of time-consuming and painstaking production, or goods brought back to the Netherlands on long and dangerous voyages, or indeed captured as booty. They shed light on social differentiation and in so doing they complement the message of paintings which confront viewers with the contrast between sumptuously dressed burghers in richly decorated interiors and peasants and plebeians in coarse clothing, eating and drinking in taverns and brothels. Like historical relics, a reconstructed cabinet of curiosities or a model ship, all these examples of the decorative arts interact visually with paintings and much rarer sculptures, even without a deliberate attempt to link them in some way, but simply because they are seen together at first glance. As a result, some connection between art and its original environment is indeed established, but is it preserved, memorized and reflected upon by visitors after leaving the museum? Impossible to say.

With this reservation, I am convinced that the arrangement of the floor devoted to Dutch paintings of the Golden Age is a success, and not just because it attracts unprecedented numbers of people to the museum, thereby receiving daily confirmation of its efficacy. I believe it is a success also from a purely intellectual perspective as an example of the museography which integrates art with history: i.e. with politics, social life, colonialism, wars. I wonder, however, whether this example can be reproduced elsewhere. In Italy, France, Spain and the Habsburg Low Countries, paintings of the same period seem – more often than Dutch works – to depict religious subjects. They were indeed products of a system where the court, the Church and the aristocracy dominated the patronage of the arts. In those countries, landscapes and genre paintings were near the bottom of the hierarchy of pictorial productions, the top of which was occupied by “history paintings” – actually depictions of gods and heroes of ancient mythology, not of modern historical events – as a result of which the relationship between paintings and history was much less straightforward than in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic.

One must also take into account the specific nature of the Rijksmuseum, which has always been first and foremost a museum of Dutch art, where foreign works never counted for much in comparison with its universally acclaimed Dutch masterpieces. Such homogeneity makes it easier for the Rijksmuseum to relate art to history than it would be for an

encyclopedic museum like the Louvre, the Prado or the National Gallery in London, where many “schools” of painting are represented and where, for this reason, the only relevant history would be European history. But while I do not think that the solutions adopted in the Rijksmuseum could easily be adopted elsewhere, I nevertheless believe that they can inspire other museums to provide historical contexts for their artworks which are appropriate to the specific nature of their buildings, collections and public. But for what purpose? People flock to museums for the pleasure of viewing original works of art, and they are chiefly motivated by their belief in the artworks’ authenticity, their conviction that these works are not recent copies, that they have been handed down to us without substantial changes, and that they preserve something of the master’s touch. If museum visitors did not believe this, they would be satisfied with good replicas or even digital images.

For some people, the authority of the museum is sufficient to guarantee the authenticity of the works on display. Others demand more proof, however. They require convincing arguments, and want to know why a certain work is attributed to a certain artist. They want to know the reasons for asserting that a work represents what it claims to represent. How do curators know that this or that picture is the same as it was when it left the master’s studio? The list of such questions is obviously much longer. Museums must answer them to maintain their credibility. And they must answer them not only in catalogues and other publications but also by means of the display itself and the accompanying labels. But there is more to it than that. Learning about the artist’s life, who commissioned the artwork, the circumstances in which it originated and their influence on the final product – all of this enriches our perception of the work because it heightens our sensitivity to details, directs our gaze to aspects which would otherwise be overlooked, and helps us understand things that would otherwise remain enigmas. The more we know about a work of art – or about any museum display, for that matter – the more carefully we look at it. Perhaps, after all, historical knowledge does not dampen our aesthetic pleasure, but enhances it and confers on it a liveliness and fullness that make us want to repeat the experience again and again.