

***Storage in Early Modern Art Museums:  
The Value of Objects Behind the Scenes***

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Abstract

One of the most important arguments for the creation of the modern art museum around 1800 was to give the public access to hitherto hidden works of art or whole collections. The museums had their points of reference in royal castles, rich collectors' homes, or secularized churches and monasteries that were either closed to the public or whose access was very limited. As the modern concepts of "public" and "public interest" began to emerge during the Enlightenment and Revolutionary eras, so too did the urge to make artworks accessible to almost everyone – in the interests of fulfilling citizens' rights (as newly defined) to education and enjoyment.

The idea of separating off parts of the museum collections from the exhibition spaces was therefore inherently at odds with this aim. In fact the Louvre or Musée Central/Musée Napoléon in Paris has been criticized ever since the day it opened for the number of paintings that are undergoing restoration, stored in closed rooms, or missing. The National Gallery in London, too, has always suffered from a lack of space since its founding in 1824, even though until the 1840s the collection contained fewer than 150 paintings.

The problems we face today – limited space, the high costs of conservation and storage, and the huge number of objects in the collections – are the same problems that museums have grappled with since their inception. In Berlin, for instance, it was decided to put over 2,000 paintings of the new Royal Museum collection into storage even before the gallery rooms were built and opened in 1830. They ended up in the attic of the new building, since the museum did not provide any space in which to store its objects aside from the exhibition rooms. In northern and central Italy, the provisional *depositi demaniali* of the revolutionary and Napoleonic era, which were filled with thousands of artworks from monasteries and churches that had been claimed by the state, became part of the existing academies and galleries, which had difficulty preserving them for the following several decades.

Using the major examples of the Louvre in Paris, the Royal Museum in Berlin, the National Gallery in London, and the academy galleries of Milan, Florence and Bologna, the paper will look at the origins of today's museum storage facilities in the first decades of the 19th century. Though the question of how art should be presented in public has been much more widely discussed than how it should be preserved, we will see that there has been a steady growth of awareness, first, of the need to store artworks, second, to store them carefully as public property, and third, to do so within the newly created museum structures. Although the progress of this "history of museum storage" can only be roughly sketched as yet, it is nonetheless part of museum history that deserves more attention.

*About Robert Skwirblies*

Dr. Robert Skwirblies is a research assistant at the Technische Universität Berlin, where he is affiliated with the research clusters Transnational History of Museums and the Center for Art Market Studies. He is collaborating with Bénédicte Savoy on a scholarly edition of the letters written by and to the painter and art historian Johann David Passavant from 1807 to 1824. He lectures in art history at universities in Berlin and Frankfurt/Main. He recently published his PhD on the reception of, and market for, Italian Renaissance paintings in Germany, especially in Berlin, between 1797 and 1830, with a special focus on cultural policy, the art trade, and personal networks in post-revolutionary Europe.