

# INTERNATIONAL LEXICON OF AESTHETICS

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## MUSEUM

*By Michele Di Monte*

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It. *Museo*; Fr. *Musée*; Germ. *Museum*; Sp. *Museo*. As the current and now widely accepted definition formulated by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) states, "A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment" (ICOM 2007).

### MUSEUMS AS VISUAL SITES

In recent times, and due to the remarkable transformations that have taken place over the last ten years in the museum organizational structure, politics and activities, ICOM itself is trying to develop, through an effort of collegial participation of all interested parties, an updated definition. And it is significant that among the parameters and guidelines suggested by ICOM for the new definition, in addition to the emerging needs of ecological sustainability and the recognition of the profound social inequalities and the different worldviews of contemporary societies, the defining and essential functions of collecting, preserving, documenting, researching, exhibiting and communicating are nevertheless considered as pivotal features.

However, for these functions and features to be truly "defining" it seems necessary to specify some further qualifications. For museums are not the only institutions devoted to the collection, conservation and communication of the cultural heritage of humanity for educational purposes and it is therefore appropriate to identify those elements that distinguish a museum, in the proper sense of the term, from similar institutions, such as, for instance, archives or libraries. In this perspective, the difference lies in the fact that the museum's collections not only guarantee public accessibility and consultability, but they are also (more or less) permanently exposed to viewers. Properly speaking, then, and even in the literal sense,

museums are the exemplary sites of the modern system which has been called the "exhibitionary complex" (Bennett 1988).

This pre-eminence of the visual and ostensive dimension is not only a question of mere perception, but entails also, as a rule, a particular aesthetic discipline of vision, or the gaze, which tends to shape certain normative behaviors and habits, and to delimit a pertinent space, explicitly, through prescriptions and proscriptions, or implicitly, thanks to the establishment of a specific regime of liminality, in both the material and the ritual senses of the term (Duncan 1995: 7). The interaction, especially visual, with museum objects is therefore regulated by thresholds and standards that involve different physical, aesthetic and cognitive aspects of the experience, regardless of whether the visitors are fully aware of them. In a way or another the museum space allows yet controls a number of variables, such as the viewing distance, the lighting conditions, the attentional allocation, the abstractive attitudes, the order of priorities, the connecting sequences, the attribution of values and the like.

In determining such a technology of observing – the effects of which can extend even outside the museum space – the display criteria, the arrangement and the relationships between the objects, the construction of specific paths play obviously a key role. As early as the 19th century, the collected museum materials were classified according to typological principles, and exhibited in such a way as to highlight syntactical relationships establishing a genealogical, evolutionary or more generally historical-chronological order. It is no coincidence that this typical developmental design, still largely dominant today, unites institutions that are otherwise very different, such as natural history and art history museums.

#### CRADLE OR GRAVE?

Such a process of accumulation and hoarding, which removes objects from their original vital context and their circulation, all the more because it is inspired by an allegedly didactic and encyclopedic claim, elicited the well-known harsh criticisms of the museum institution by several thinkers and philosophers, from Paul Valéry to Maurice Blanchot, from Martin Heidegger to Theodor Adorno, in particular as far as the museum display of works of art is concerned. This has fueled a long-lasting critical attitude, which David Carrier (2006) recently labeled as "Museum Skepticism". According to this interpretation, which we may call somehow "cemeterial", museums would rather be "like the family sepulchres of works of art" (Adorno 1981: 175), if not even something "lugubrious" and "insuperably barbarous" (Blanchot 1997: 45-46).

Ironically enough, such criticisms have spread just at the same time that art museums acquired an increasingly decisive role not only in preserving and exhibiting works of old art, but also in shaping the very identity and status of many contemporary or avant-garde works, conceived from the beginning in the framework of museum fruition. For, no matter how we want to evaluate the so-called "institutional theories of art" (according to the model originally proposed by George Dickie), it is clear that much modern art would not even be identifiable and recognizable as such without and outside the museum, or similar structures, which have not only an aesthetically normative function but even an ontologically constitutive role within the "Artworld" nowadays. "In the age of its technical availability" (Damisch 1989)

the museum is no longer just a collector, but is also an “institutional entrepreneur” and a “patron” of art (Michaud 1989).

#### THE MUSEUM OF UNCERTAINTY

Starting from a different theoretical background, especially during the last two decades of the 20th century, museum studies have increasingly explored and discussed the controversial functions of the museum and its underlying philosophy from an ideological and socio-political point of view. Assuming a more or less explicitly Foucaultian perspective, many authors have analyzed the cultural assumptions, preconceptions and prejudices that underlie an official and axiological representation of the past, history, cultures or values, implicitly prospected as universal and objective truths (Bourdieu, Darbel 1966; Karp, Levine 1991; Bennett 1995, McClellan 2003; Preziosi, Farago 2004, Macdonald 2006; Bennett *et al.* 2017). As exemplary places of “visibility” and “readability”, in the Foucaultian sense specified by Gilles Deleuze (1986: 47), modern museums embody and elaborate, albeit often tacitly, a specific relationship between power and knowledge (Bennett 2018).

This exercise in ideological demystification or “hermeneutics of suspicion” promoted in different ways by the so-called “New Museology” (Vergo 1989) has by now become almost a commonplace, especially in the academic field, and has produced an enormous and even overabundant international literature, but it has not remained unchallenged. According to some authors, to put it blatantly, “such criticism is fantasy. And we could have dismissed it out of hand were not so influential in the most popular academic disciplines of cultural and museum studies” (Cuno 2011: 3). Just on the contrary, in the contemporary world the “encyclopedic museum” could and should still be an instrument of cultural emancipation in favour of a dynamic and cosmopolitan identity.

Be that as it may, the contemporary museum faces the difficult challenge of rethinking its purposes of “education, study and enjoyment” in terms of communication, in an age in which the museum public is increasingly composite and heterogeneous from an ethnic and socio-cultural point of view, and in which what Valéry had called “la conquête de l’ubiquité” (Valéry 1960) now seems to be fully realized. When visual and textual information is now virtually available to anyone worldwide, the question is what kind of distinctive experience the museum can offer its audience and if such an experience is not equally or even more easily accessible elsewhere. According to modern museology, the so-called “transmission” paradigm of communication, linear and authoritatively unilateral, should be definitively supplanted by an “interpretive” model, more participatory and viewer-centered. A model in which the meaning and the relevant values are the result of a constructive negotiation rather than a passive reception (Falk, Dierking 1992; 2000; Hooper-Greenhill 1992; 2000).

On the other hand, however, it seems pointless to think of a museum where visitors could arbitrarily project their own meanings and values (if not any meaning and value) onto objects or could always confirm the familiar interpretive strategies of the community they belong to, without any kind of cognitive or epistemic “friction” with the objects themselves. Such a museum would be practically transparent and

completely useless, for, after all, the public – as Michael Baxandall once said – doesn't need what it has already got.

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