David Carrier

Remembering the Past: Art Museums as Memory Theaters

Nothing about museums is as splendid as their entrances—the sudden vault, the shapely cornices, the motionless uniformed guard like a wittily disguised archangel, the broad stairs leading upward into heaven knows what mansions of expectantly hushed treasure.

John Updike[1]

At the entrance to an art museum, you usually find a free floor plan, which maps the displays, restrooms, café, and shop.[2] These little charts deserve attention, for they tell much about these institutions. In his discussion of museums, Ivan Gaskell speaks of "how meaning might be generated by the juxtaposition of" works of art.[3] "No object," he notes, "is perceived in isolation and that how any given object is perceived is vitally affected by its juxtaposition to other objects is a truism of curatorial practice." How we understand one painting depends, in part, upon what other works of art are in the same room. And Gaskell's claim can be generalized. How we understand the paintings in one room depends, to some degree, upon the sequence of works of art presented in the other galleries. Only curators and lovers of museums articulate such concerns, but every visually sensitive visitor is surely aware, perhaps only subconsciously, of the importance of these settings.

Before the late eighteenth century, museums intermingled the artifacts found today in natural history museums—wondrous stones, fossils, stuffed animals, and art from cultures without writing—with works of art. And paintings and sculptures tended to be displayed in aesthetic arrangements.[4] In some museums constructed in the nineteenth century, the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh or the Glasgow Art Gallery and Museum, for example, one large building still contains both paintings and stuffed animals. On the first floor of the Carnegie you walk past the small gallery near the entrance, enter the hall of sculpture with its plaster casts, and see the minerals, gems, and fossils. In Glasgow, looking down from the old fashioned close hanging of paintings, you view the armor and firearms. Such collections, like premodern museums, mix together the objects usually separated nowadays into museums of fine arts and natural history.

Even today, such major institutions as the Barnes Foundation, the Gardner Museum, and the Wallace Collection do not display art in historical sequences. But most museums, and certainly most newer museums, adopt historical arrangements. That the museum derives, as Rosalind Krauss notes, from the Renaissance palace, influences our understanding of hangings: "One proceeds in such a building from space to space along a processional path that ties each of these spaces together, a sort of narrative trajectory with each room the place of a separate chapter, but all of them articulating the unfolding of the master plot."[5] This analogy between walking through a museum and reading art history is very suggestive. In museums, as in books, we find individual works of art presented in a narrative. A walk in an art museum is a narrative under another name, for you need but describe what you see as you walk to write a history. Just as you may momentarily put down a book between chapters, so too in museums a resting point is desirable. The Cleveland Museum of Art and the Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City have inner courtyards surrounded by galleries. Stepping out of the narrative presented in the galleries, you can stop momentarily before continuing your historical survey.

When Dominique-Vivant Denon assembled the art looted from countries conquered by Napoleon's armies in the Louvre, these paintings and sculpture were displayed according to national schools.[6] Hegel's lectures on aesthetics provide a philosophical perspective on such arrangements, explicitly linking his way of thinking about art's history to the museum:

> Unless we bring with us in the case of each picture a knowledge of the country, period, and school to which it belongs, as well as of the master who painted it, most galleries seem to be a senseless confusion out of which we cannot find our way. Thus the greatest aid to study and intelligent enjoyment is an *historical* arrangement.[7]

Hegel wants the museum to show not only the external history but the essential progress of the inner history of painting. It is only such a living spectacle that can give us an idea of painting's beginning, of its becoming more living, of the progress to dramatically moved action and grouping. His analysis describes a modern, historically organized museum.

As Philip Fisher has observed, there is a strong analogy between moving along sequences of works of art and reading art history.[8] That we walk through a museum—walk past the art—recapitulates in our act the motion of art history itself, its restlessness, its forward motion, its power to link.... Insofar as the museum becomes pure path, abandoning the dense spatial rooms of what were once *homes* or, of course, the highly sophisticated space of a cathedral, it becomes a more perfect image of history.... Earlier I made a similar, but less general claim: "In the 1970s... the very layout of the Museum of Modern Art, which took me from Cézanne and Monet through cubism to abstract expressionism, illustrated *Art and Culture*.... The 1984 redesign of the museum reflects a changed estimate of Greenberg."[9]

As Mieke Bal puts it in her very suggestive account comparing a museum installation to a statement, "The utterance consists not of words or images alone, nor of the frame or frame-up of the installation, but of the productive tension between images, caption (words), and installation (sequence, height, light, combinations)."[10] We may attempt to restrict ourselves to what Clement Greenberg called tunnel vision, focusing on one painting, occulting our observation of the art surrounding it. On occasion, doing that is valuable, even necessary. But Bal identifies our more typical experience when she asks, "What happens... when one painting, in a particular museumroom, ends up next to another, so that you see the one out of the corner of your eye while looking at the other?"[11] What happens, of course, is that you see those paintings as defining an implied narrative sequence.

The museum setting influences how we think of the art displayed. In the 1960s, *Guernica*, installed at the entrance to the second floor galleries of the Museum of Modern Art in NewYork, told an episode in the history of modernism. Picasso's picture led you toward American abstract expressionist art. Today, set in the Reina-Sofia, the Madrid museum of modern art—which is but a short distance from the Prado, where Goya's *The Third of May* is on display—Picasso's picture relates to Spanish political history. *Guernica* has not changed, but viewed in its new, different context, most people think of it differently. Seeing Carpaccios, Tintorettos, and Titians in Venice, the city where these artists worked, is different from viewing these artists' paintings in other places. Piero della Francesca's *The Flagellation of Christ* is in Urbino, an out of the way town.[12] To view it you enter the Palazzo Ducale, walk upstairs and then through the rooms leading to Gaurarobe del Duca, the small gallery where Piero's painting is displayed. In London's National Gallery, a Piero is a foreign object, but the Palazzo Ducale was Piero's world. The landscape around Urbino looks like the background of *The Baptism of Christ*; and Piero's painted architecture is identical to the door frame in the Palazzo. No one who has not visited Italy can entirely understand Piero's art. The landscape of the West Lake, Hangzhou, long an important center for Chinese art, is a perfect subject for painters working with ink brush on rice paper. Walking in the summer rain, you see how a long scroll captures the effect of moving around the lake. Ink on paper is the perfect medium for showing mists. Chinese scroll paintings in American museums look different after you have visited China.

Phenemenology provides useful abstract ways of characterizing our experiences of museums. Edmund Husserl's concept of a horizon of expectations describes the way in which visual experience involves both knowing what is seen here and now and some awareness, or expectation, of what lies beyond the immediate perceptual field. The identity of any object involves "a series of intuitive recollections that has the open endlessness which the 'I can always do so again' (as a horizon of potentiality) creates. Without such 'possibilities' there would be for us no *fixed and abiding* being, no real and no ideal world."[13] Maurice Merleau-Ponty explains this point in a much clearer way: "I anticipate the unseen side of the lamp because I can touch it—or a 'horizontal synthesis'—the unseen side is given to me as 'visible from another standpoint,' at once given but only immanently... the perceived thing is... a totality open to a horizon of

an indefinite number of perspectival views which blend with one another."[14]

Looking at the front of a building, you know that stepping forward will reveal its sides. You see a flat movie set differently, even were it visually indistinguishable from your vantage point. In a museum, we may speak of a horizon both literally, as including what we see when we walk beyond one picture, and also figuratively, as including the knowledge we gain when reading about that picture.[15] How you see one painting depends in part upon what is in the room where it is hung. How you view that room influences what you expect to see when you walk further. And how you look at art in those galleries, in turn, is affected by the experience of entering the museum and, sometimes, even by what you see in the streets outside.

Just as the acknowledgements and introduction of a book set the tone, so a museum entrance prepares you to view the collection. Originally, a museum was the home of the muses and so it is appropriate that coming into older museums, you walk up steps, as if going into an antique temple or a church. Works of art, detached from any utilitarian function, are set outside the everyday world. Entering the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, you ascend the stairs from Fifth Avenue and mount the grand staircase. You come into the Prado by walking up stairs. In Boston, Minneapolis, and Cleveland, the original entrances are now closed, or at least replaced as the primary entrance by side doors opening into the modern wing.

Reversing convention, some modern museums have visitors descend to enter. The main entrance to the New Louvre takes you down into the grand pyramid, and then underground across the courtyard, to come up in the three sections of the museum: Richelieu, Sully, Denon. You enter the new Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles by entering a courtyard, then going down stairs. The galleries of that museum are underground, a curiously perverse arrangement in a city famous for its sunlight. When you are in the galleries, the artificial lighting and absence of windows remind you that you are underground. And you enter the J. Paul Getty Museum on a tram, an elongated electric version of the traditional grand staircase that takes you on a five-minute ride high up the hill to the galleries.

Once you enter a museum, then usually you must choose how to proceed. The uptown Guggenheim Museum in New York is a spiral, but you can either walk up or take the elevator directly to the top and come down. The linear structure means that it is "difficult to organize, display, and therefore for the viewer to conceptualize the history of art as anything other than an illustration of conventional art history's enabling assumption, which is more or less 'one piece of art influences another.'"[16] And in the Sheldon Memory Art Gallery, Lincoln, Nebraska, "The visitor is offered a single path—or, at least, not more than one choice of path—in moving through... (the galleries), while, on the other hand, any one of them can be cut out from the circulation for rehanging without making the other galleries unapproachable."[17] But most museums offer multiple paths. Many visitors to the Metropolitan Museum first go to look at the European art galleries. But you can begin in the galleries of Oriental art. European painting looks different if you come to it after seeing Chinese scrolls. At the main entrance, you can go to the left to the Greek sculptures and vases, or up the grand stairway to the old master European art, the historical core of the collection. If at the top of the staircase you walk to the right, you enter the galleries of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean art. Going to the left, you walk through a gallery devoted to prints and arrive at the Islamic wing. On the far side, you enter the large new wing devoted to modernist and contemporary art. And downstairs, you reach the rooms devoted to the arts of Africa and Oceania. But if you walk right at the entrance and take the elevator down to the basement, you enter the new galleries presenting fashion. The Metropolitan grew by accretion, adding sections as its vision of art's history expanded, a history revealed by its floor plan. Typically, American art museums have an original older building, usually in a classical architectural style, joined to a more recent addition. Some have rational plans, but most have grown by accretion, and only a few are rich enough to rebuild completely when they remodel.

In the Frick Collection, New York, you can turn to the left to go directly to the Fragonards, walk through the courtyard to the long gallery with *The Polish Rider*, or continue to the small Piero *Crucifixion*. If you first look at the early Renaissance religious paintings, then the sensual

Fragonards may look slightly different. In the Louvre's Grand Gallery, walking west, you get to the later art. The basic arrangement of the Prado, similarly, is chronological, with fifteenth- and sixteenth-century painting (and sculpture) on the ground floor; seventeenth- and some eighteenth-century painting on the second floor, and eighteenth-century painting on the top floor. In the Cleveland Museum of Art, the main entrance in the Marcel Breuer wing by the parking lot feels like a back door.[18] Temporary exhibitions are held in galleries to your left. Walking straight ahead you can either descend to the large section of the museum devoted to Asian art, or go upstairs where European art is arranged clockwise in chronological order. In that circle, some relatively small rooms are reserved for the art of Africa and the South Pacific, as well as Islamic art. Like most large American museums, the Cleveland Museum has added galleries several times, and so the present floor plan is something of a compromise.

Just as a painter often puts the most powerful figure near the center of a composition, so museums commonly give their most valued works privileged positions. At the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena, you see Giovanni Battista Tiepolo's *The Triumph of Virtue and Nobility over Ignorance* at the end of a very long sequence of galleries of European painting. On the other side of the museum, in the galleries devoted to nineteenth-century art, Manet's *The Rag Picker* occupies this position. On the first floor of the Prado, Spanish painting occupies the central galleries, with Velázquez's *Las Meninas* at the far end of the largest gallery off the middle. Piero's *The Baptism of Christ* in the National Gallery, London, used to be in a room of Pieros to the left of the entrance, before the galleries displaying Italian painting in chronological order. In the newer Sainsbury Wing, *The Baptism of Christ*, flanked by Piero's *Nativity* and *St. George*, is alongside Italian and Northern fifteenth-century paintings.[19] This new hanging stresses links between Southern and Northern European art. Now Piero's painting is visible from a distance, reminding us of its importance.

A museum ought to have a lucid floor plan, making it easy to return to some recollected work of art, for a hard to remember structure is fatiguing. Just as an ill-ordered book is frustrating, so too is a museum with poorly organized transitions. At the Louvre, in fall 2000, you walked through the Spanish art to get to the rooms containing ethnographic art. In fall 2001, the uptown Guggenheim in New York devoted the main gallery to art from Brazil, with Norman Rockwell's paintings in a side gallery. Such startling transitions feel uncomfortable. And this analogy between books and museums can be taken further. Just as it can be unsettling to find an unpredicted topic in a book, so it is surprising to see an out-of-place painting in a relatively static collection. Once I was astonished to see Poussin's *The Arcadian Shepherds* on loan from the Louvre in the Frick Museum. The effect was almost hallucinatory.

The original source for this argument deserves mention, for it helps explain my reasoning. Frances Yates's famous account discusses the origin and long development of the memory theater. At a banquet the poet Simonides, who recited a poem in honor of the host, was called out. During his absence, the roof fell in, killing all of the guests. Because Simonides remembered where the guests were sitting, he is able to identify the bodies. "This experience suggested to the poet the principles of the art of memory of which he is said to have been the inventor."[20] The poet remembers by associating things with places in some large building. Yates's tracing out of the long uses of this memory theater suggests that there might be some relationship between that institution and the art museum.[21] So far as I know, no concrete connection has been established. Perhaps none exists, for by the time historically organized art museums were established, the memory theater had lost its once prominent place in the intellectual culture, and became merely a conjuring device discussed in self-help books for people who wanted to improve their memory.

But there is an important conceptual relationship between these memory techniques and the complex narrative orderings provided by our art museums. A museum aims to provide a lucid plan, making its presentation of art clear in our memory.

On the whole, art historians have not taken much interest in the history of hanging arrangements. So far as I am aware, there is no systematic collection of the museum floor plans, and no general history of the changing styles of collection.[22] As a recent history of exhibitions observes, art historians "have rarely addressed

the fact that a work of art, when publicly displayed, almost never stands alone: it is always an element within a permanent or temporary exhibition created in accordance with historically determined and self-consciously staged installation conventions."[23] That is unfortunate, for much can be learned through a study of these humble charts. But in drawing attention to the ways in which museum floor plans influence how we understand the art displayed, I would not want to overemphasize their importance. Nothing prevents you from walking directly to some favorite painting, taking little note of the curator's flow plan. And even when a temporary exhibition is arranged chronologically, it is usually possible to walk through to the end, and then view the art in reverse-chronological order. Perversely reading a book's chapters back to front takes effort, but refusing to follow the ordering imposed by a curator is easy. The historical hangings of our museums may influence, but they do not determine, how we see the art they display.[24]

DAVID CARRIER
Champney Family Professor
Case Western Reserve University/Cleveland Institute of Art
Cleveland, Ohio 44106

INTERNET: dxc89@po.cwru.edu

1. John Updike, *Museums and Women and Other Stories* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Crest, 1972), p. 20.

2. This essay is for Ruth and Paul Barolsky.

3. Ivan Gaskell, *Vermeer's Wager: Speculations on Art History, Theory, and Art Museums* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), p. 86.

4. See Andrew McClellan, *Inventing the Louvre: Art, Politics, and the Origins of the Modern Museum in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); and Paula Findlen, *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting, and the Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (University of California Press, 1994).

5. Rosalind E. Krauss, "Postmodernism's Museum without Walls," *Thinking about Exhibitions*, ed. Resa Greenberg, Bruce W. Reguson, and Sandy Nairne (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 343.

6. See *Dominique-Vivant Denon: Løeil de Napoléon* exhibition catalogue (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1999).

7. G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. 2, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), p. 870.

8. Philip Fisher, *Making and Effacing Art: Modern American Art in a Culture of Museums* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 9.

9. David Carrier, *Artwriting* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), p. 35. This account attributes too much importance to Greenberg and too little to Alfred H. Barr.

10. Mieke Bal, *Looking In: The Art of Viewing* (Amsterdam: G & B Arts, 2001), p. 187.

11. Ibid., p. 161.

12. See *Il palazzo ducale di urbino*, ed. Mario Bucci and Piero Torriti (Firenze: Sansoni editore, 1969) and Alta Macadam, *Blue Guide. Northern Italy: From the Alps to Rome* (London: A. & C. Black and New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), pp. 381–383.

13. Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nikhoff, 1960), p. 60.

14. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, trans. James M. Edie (Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 15–16.

15. The concept of horizons, developed in phenomenology, can be formulated within the framework of Arthur Danto's philosophy.

16. Shelley Errington, *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art and Other Tales of Progress* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), p. 22.

17. Henry Russell Hitchcock, *The Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska, Lincoln* (University of Nebraska, 1964), np.

18. The museum, about to embark on a major construction plan, reopened its original front entrance in summer 2002. On its history, see Walter C. Leddy Jr., *Cleveland Builds an Art Museum. Patronage, Politics, and Architecture 1884–1916* (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1991); and *Object Lessons: Cleveland Creates an Art Museum*, ed. Evan H. Turner (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1991).

19. See Colin Amery, *The National Gallery Sainsbury Wing: A Celebration of Art & Architecture* (London: National Gallery, 1991).

20. Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 2.

21. See my "Why Were There No Public Art Museums in Renaissance Italy?" *Source* 22 (2002): 44–50

22. One exception to this generalization is Margrit Hahnloser-Ingold, "Collecting Matisses of the 1920s in the 1920s," in Jack Cowart and Dominique Fourcade, *Henri Matisse. The Early Years in Nice 1916–1930* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1986), pp. 234–274.

23. Mary Anne Staniszewski, *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), p. xxi.

24. This essay borrows one idea from conversation with Clement Greenberg. Paul Barolsky generously made very detailed suggestions, Henry Adams gave several key ideas, and Tiffany Sutton discussed the argument with me during a leisurely walk through the Minneapolis Institute of Art.