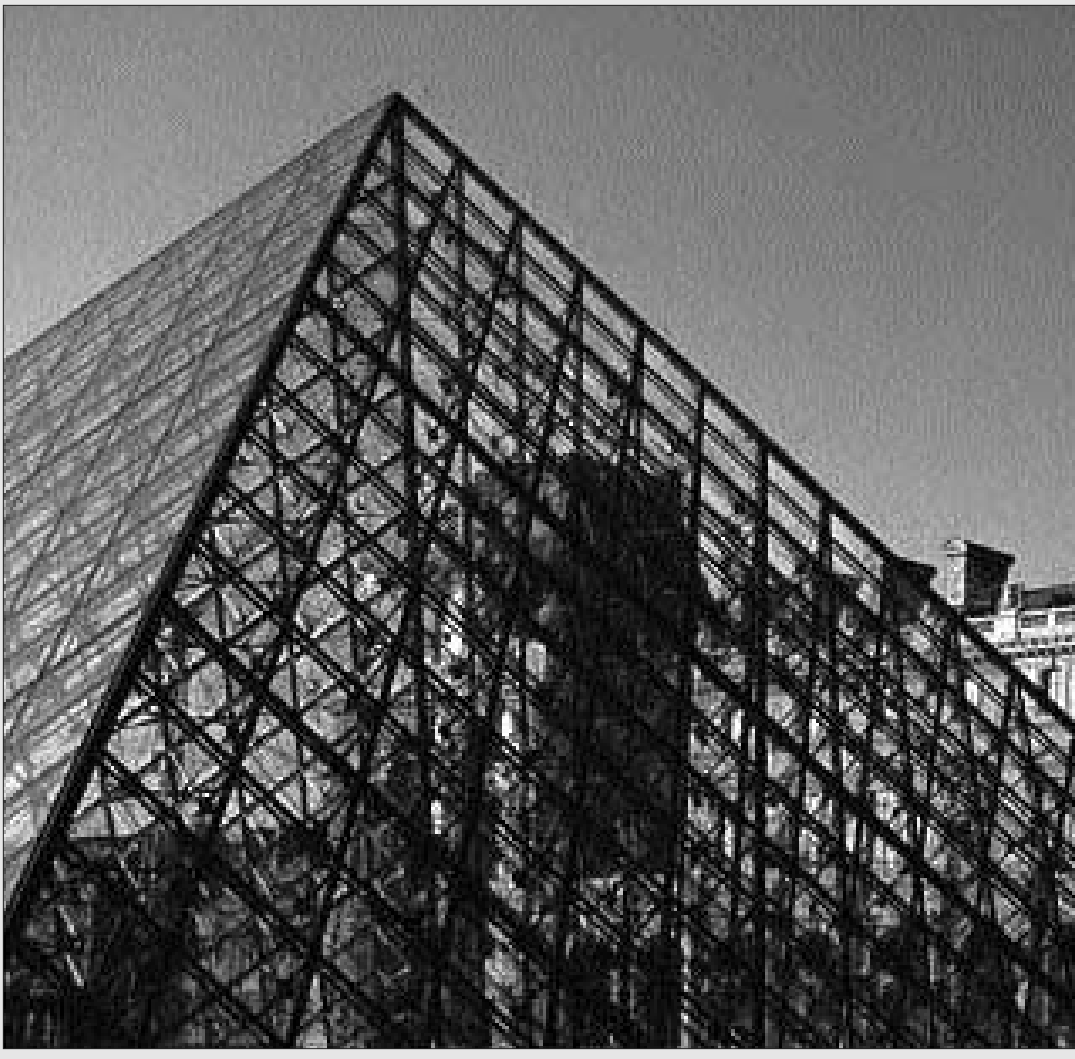


The Once and

Born barely two centuries ago, the modern museum soon evolved into an institution devoted to charting the course of progress—in science and technology, art, national history, and other realms. Now scholars and curators are questioning some of the assumptions behind this approach. Is history a grand march of progress, or is it something more complex and nuanced? What is a museum for? Some trends suggest a triumph of form over content. Cities around the world are erecting

FUTURE MUSEUM

spectacular museum buildings that lack an essential ingredient of traditional institutions: a permanent collection. Our authors trace the history of the museum and ponder its prospects as it seeks to explain the past to the present while pointing us toward the future.

Museums and the Democratic Order

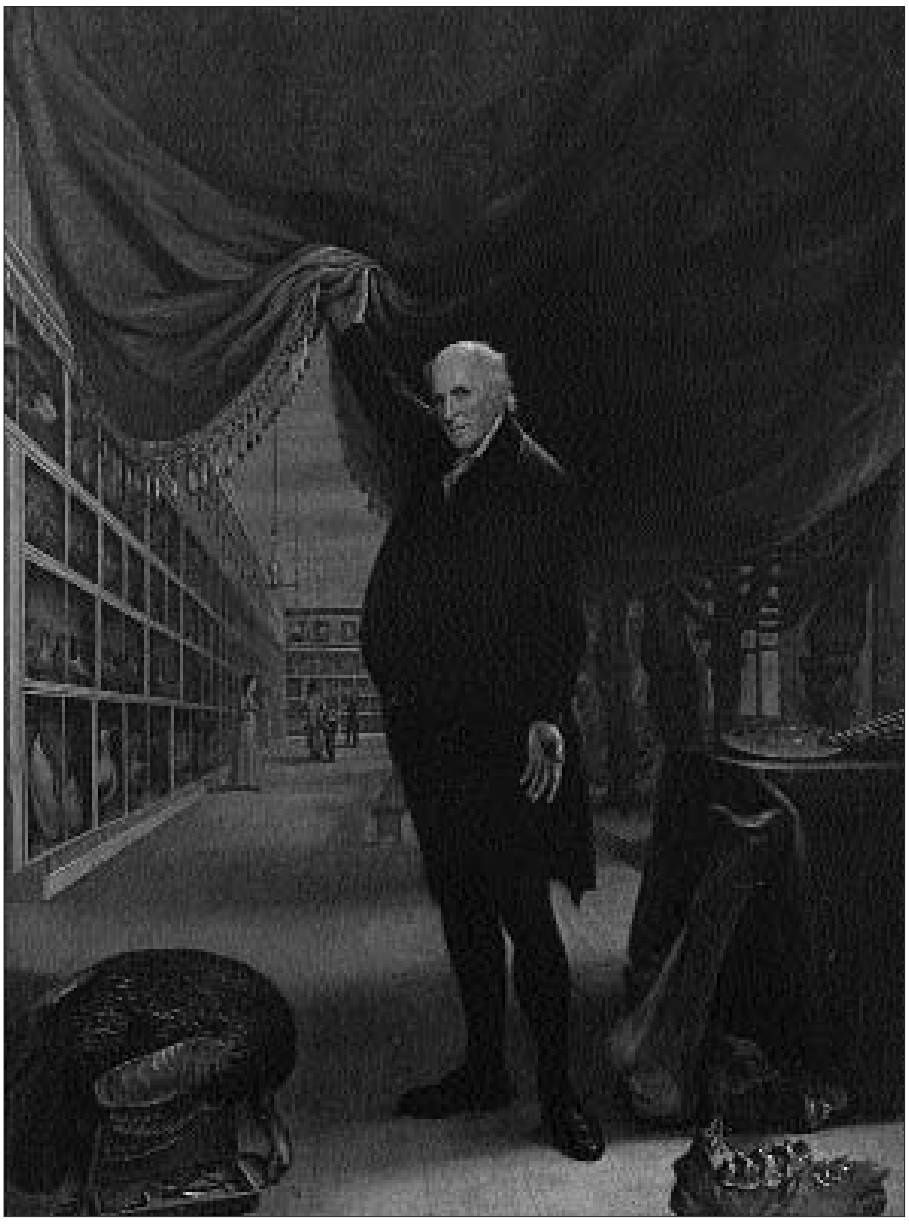
by Miriam R. Levin

The origin of the museum is inextricably linked with the storms of history. "Again and again, museums have received new impetus from lurches of humanity," Lawrence Vale Coleman noted in the three-volume study of American museums he published on the eve of World War II. "And now, with turmoil everywhere, these institutions are gaining ground more surely than ever before."

Almost 60 years later, Stephen Weil, a former official of the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum, startled the more conservative members of his profession when he wrote: "Discomforting as the notion may be to many of its advocates, the museum is essentially a neutral medium that can be used by anybody for anything. . . . Museums are at their best and most distinctly themselves when they deal with 'stuff.'" The process by which that "stuff" is chosen, displayed, and interpreted is how these storehouses of detritus function as agents of social change.

The concept of the museum as a public space rather than a private collection emerged in tandem with the European upheavals of the late 18th century—an age of popular revolutions and the emergence of the modern nation-state, of colonial expansion, and of an abiding faith in reason and progress. In the 19th century museums began to proliferate, stimulated by the growing industrial power and wealth of the West. By the end of the 20th century, as Western businesses and international organizations extended their reach globally, museums cropped up in all the postcolonial nations of the world, becoming an essential element in their development strategies. Spurred by a growing sense of a unique national and cultural identity, and aided by international law governing patrimony rights, countries also began demanding that artifacts taken from them long ago be returned.

Although the museum as we know it is a late-18th-century Western innovation, precedents for the variety of functions museums have come to serve existed much earlier. Chinese emperors and Trojan kings kept their treasures in guarded chambers. Greeks and Romans displayed their valued sculptures, paintings, and other objects in temples that drew travelers to Athens and Rome. In medieval Christian Europe, churches great and small were filled with awe-inspiring relics for veneration. The earliest precedent usually cited for the museum is one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, the Great Library at Alexandria, which sprang from the fertile collision of Hellenic and Egyptian cultures in the fourth century B.C. Its collection of more than 400,000 manuscripts embodied what was then thought to be all that was known in the world. That



The Artist in His Museum *(1822), by Charles Willson Peale. Peale hoped that his Philadelphia museum, launched in 1784, would give America a premier institution that would rival famed European collections such as the British Museum and the Louvre.*

knowledge served the political and economic ambitions of the Ptolemaic dynasty as well as the interests of scholars.

European rulers, aristocrats, merchants, and scholars in the Age of Discovery were familiar with these precedents. They began to build collections that included paintings, herbs, and such oddities as "a knot tied by the wind on a ship at sea" for their private study and enjoyment, keeping them in "cabinets of curiosities," as the rooms were called. They were driven by the same impulses as the ancients—cupidity, curiosity, egotism, and sensory pleasure—but the expansion of their world after 1492 to include an entire hemisphere, hundreds of cultures,

and thousands of previously unknown species stimulated European collecting to an unprecedented degree.

By the 17th century, the rulers of France and England began to realize that a market for such objects could assist them in their continuous struggle to maintain a favorable balance of trade—if only the market existed. They opened their collections—not only their fine art, but their botanical gardens and herbariums—to members of the royal academies for the express purpose of encouraging research whose results would augment the state's coffers and add to its glory. (Among the most important collections were those belonging to Louis XIV, including the paintings in the Louvre and the scientific specimens in what is now the Musée National d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris.) In the mercantile age, new sources of food and medicine, new products for export, and innovative designs for the luxury goods

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The Gallery of the Louvre, ***depicted in this 1831 painting by Samuel F. B. Morse, housed magnificent works of art, but they were not displayed with ease of viewing in mind.***

coveted by the aristocracy were means to the end of market domination.

The second half of the 18th century saw the emergence of truly national museums open to the public—albeit a very limited public. Reformers of the Enlightenment encouraged governments and the wealthy to recognize that science and technology were the keys to building a stable social order. The advance of both required an educated populace, so institutions devoted to collecting, preserving, studying, and exhibiting things now had a new justification: public education. Nonetheless, the presentation of the collections left a great deal to be desired. In 1838, a visitor to the British Museum in London, founded by an act of Parliament 85 years before, described a hodgepodge of minimally organized stuff. Although the growing size and comprehensiveness of the museum's collections matched the expansive energies of England itself, the place was, in fact, a jumble. Access remained extremely limited.

Across the Channel and across the Atlantic, the revolutions in France and America brought the citizenry into public life on a scale never before seen. First in France and later in America, the state embraced the idea of museums as truly public institutions. Even before the upheaval of 1789, Parisian artists and artisans and the new upper bourgeoisie struggled with the Crown over access to what was increasingly considered a national patrimony in the Louvre. By 1793, the revolutionaries had opened the collections to the nation and created a truly national museum of art. Later, as Napoleon's armies conquered the Continent and moved into Egypt, their plunder greatly (if temporarily) enhanced the collections. The Louvre was renamed the Musée Napoléon, and on certain days the general public could view without charge its holdings—now augmented by the lootings of the Grande Armée and displayed in groups that recognized national origins, periods, and artists. The realization that the treasure brought to French soil by French armies was now a part of the glory of France had a transforming effect on the public psyche; the trauma of having to return the works of art to their original owners after France's defeat at Waterloo was therefore all the more profound.

In a society without royal collections or the palaces to contain them, but with citizens who wanted to create a strong nation within a strong republic, museums in the United States were more attuned to the marketplace than were their British and French predecessors. In 1784 Charles Willson Peale, an energetic, patriotic, and entrepreneurial scientist-artist, welcomed paying customers to his muse-

um in Philadelphia, which he hoped would become a national institution. Peale had the blessings of Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson for his project, and he shared their enthusiasm for the French Enlightenment. He set out to create a comprehensive museum that would challenge those in Europe, if not in the size of its holdings then in the quality of their presentation. Nationalism, mixed with a firm Protestantism, stirred Peale to attempt to prove to European scientists that America was superior in its God-given biological and geological resources and in its intellectual and democratic aspirations. His museum would be a secular temple, where the "most perfect order in the works of a great Creator—whose ways are wisdom," would become manifest. It would also be an instrument for order and tranquility, inspiring citizens through "charming models for every social duty, in order to render man . . . more content in the station where he is placed."

Peale knew that a popular audience might not find rows of studiously arranged fishes particularly gripping, so he worked to present the contents of his collection, which paralleled those of the old cabinets of curiosities, in ways that would "afford a source of entertainment in the mind, the very reverse of dissipation and frivolity which seems at present to have seized the inhabitants of this growing City." In developing his natural history collections and ethnological materials, he gave special attention to specimens from North America. And even as he recognized the marketing value of the odd and alarming—the trigger finger of an executed murderer, the five-legged cow with six feet and two tails that had for years faithfully provided the Peale family with milk—he sought to wrap them in a higher moral purpose.

NATIONALISM, MIXED WITH A FIRM PROTESTANTISM, STIRRED PEALE TO ATTEMPT TO PROVE TO EUROPEAN SCIENTISTS THAT AMERICA WAS SUPERIOR IN ITS GOD-GIVEN BIOLOGICAL AND GEOLOGICAL RESOURCES.

In the familiar painting that hangs in the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts, we see Peale lifting a curtain to reveal a somewhat idealized view of the main room of his museum as it was in 1822. The animals are arranged according to the Linnaean system. Though the painting includes neither the wax figures he dressed for realistic effect in Native American garb, nor his exotica from the Far East, some of his innovations are on view. Drawing on his artistic ability to communicate ideas and his scientific observation of nature, he tried to present his objects in context. The animals he carefully stuffed and preserved are posed behind glass against painted backdrops that evoke their natural habitat. The dark and bulky mastodon bones and the wild turkey are from a recent expedition to the Rocky Mountains. On the walls above are portraits of modern savants and artists from Europe and the United States, many painted from life by Peale's son Rembrandt. Because the organized presentation of the collections was meant to have a salutary effect on the public, the painting includes visitors who appear fully engaged by the objects on

display. Indeed, attracting visitors was an ever present concern to the proprietor—as it would be to future American museum administrators.

To stay in business and maintain his educational mission, Peale sought a balance that would leave visitors "happily amused and certainly instructed." For a small sum he would produce silhouettes of visitors, and he put on special exhibitions, concerts, and lectures. He found it difficult to guess what visitors would take away from their experience—which was often not what he had hoped they might. Some admired the portraits but couldn't care less about the natural history collections. Others came for the thrill of observing nature's mistakes. Peale admitted anyone who could pay the 25-cent entry fee, but Americans weren't particularly enthusiastic about spending their money or their leisure time in museums. Peale's museum managed to survive 60 years, but in the end his hopes to found a national museum went unfulfilled and his collections were dispersed, as were those of the museums in Baltimore and New York with which his sons were involved.

The United States did not have a national museum until the 1850s. Although the British scientist James Smithson died in 1829, leaving his fortune to the United States of America to found an institution "for the increase and diffusion of knowledge," his bequest did not stipulate how the two purposes were to be achieved, an omission that precipitated many years of debate. The act of Congress that in 1847 established the Smithsonian allotted half the income from the bequest to research efforts and half to a library and museum. In 1855, the National Museum at last opened its doors in the Castle building on the Mall. Even then, Joseph Henry, the first Secretary of the Smithsonian and a strong proponent of research, resisted the idea of a public museum. Research advanced knowledge; museums full of exhibits would only entertain the masses—and draw funds away from research. Nonetheless, Henry was pleased that during the Civil War its collections were "a never-failing source of pleasure and instruction to the soldiers quartered in the city."

The comfortable classes in Europe and the United States—the newly rich and the growing middle—on contemplating themselves, their relationship to the past, and their achievements in science and technology, found a satisfying explanation for their superior powers in the idea of progress, which, while pointing cheerfully toward the future, also provided a format for coherently organizing the past. Beginning about 1870, and for more than a century thereafter, wealthy donors and a growing cadre of scientists, scholars, and museum personnel energetically scoured the Earth for archaeological and ethnological artifacts, works of art and craft, biological specimens, machines, and manufactured products. This mass of material stuff— brought to heel and displayed in hundreds of new public museums—revealed the very drama that the Victorians saw unfolding in the world at large: history as a progress to their present moment. Not so incidentally, this idea of historical progress sanctioned their efforts to bring the lands and peoples of the world under their control.

In the United States, the robber barons were covering the country with iron rails, telephone wires, and power lines. They were making vast fortunes in oil, steel, banking, railroads, breakfast cereals, and they were building huge mansions

P. T. Barnum's museum of "living human curiosities," many of them fakes, was little more than a circus sideshow, but it grossed $400,000 in its first season, in 1871.

that incorporated fireplaces, chandeliers, columns, and paneling—sometimes whole rooms—stripped from European castles. To the workers at home, the captains of industry were spreading the discipline of hard work and, by 1914, preaching the rewards of the $5 day; abroad, they went shopping, scooping up those fine objects that mass production simply could not supply. The acerbic sociologist Thorstein Veblen mocked the tastes of this new class, but the Rockefellers, Carnegies, Mellons, Fricks, and other private citizens like them became public benefactors to an extent hitherto unknown in the modern world. In business, they may have skirted the law; through their patronage, they bought themselves immortality—or tried to.

It's hard to imagine what public museums would be today had it not been for such men. New museums were created—and substantial collections given to existing museums—by names still familiar today: Morgan, Huntington, Barnes, Phillips, Gardner, Taft, Whitney, Frick, Walters, Ringling, Bache, Freer, Mellon, Rosenwald, Rockefeller. After the 1929 market crash, the huge endowments they had established sustained—wholly or substantially—201 public museums through the Great Depression. At the start of World War II, there were numerous municipal, state, and county museums; 60 general museums housing collections of art, history, anthropology, applied science, and natural history; and hundreds more institutions specializing in one or another of those fields. One extraordinary museum of specialization was New York City's American Museum of Natural History. Founded in 1869 by a group that included Theodore Roosevelt, Sr., and J. Pierpont Morgan, the museum has gone on to sponsor more than a thousand scientific expeditions and amass a collection of 30 million specimens and artifacts. But there had been a profound change

since Peale, some 80 years before, sought to reveal God's grand design in the order of things. In the industrial age, natural history and cultural artifacts had more utilitarian functions, such as the development of industry and the promotion of patriotism. Most important, though, was the conviction that history was a continuum, the continuum represented progress, and the future would be better (if everybody worked hard).

Patrons also encouraged new types of museums. Taking as their model the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, whose vast collection of decorative arts from all over the world was unparalleled, the founders of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (1870) and the Cleveland Museum of Art (1913) hoped that the study of fine arts and crafts might influence taste in all the social classes, in time improving the design of manufactured goods—and not so incidentally stimulating demand in a competitive market. This was the first of three important museum innovations that began in the late 19th century and reached their zenith in the interwar period.

Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia (1926), the great project of John D. Rockefeller, is a notable example of a museum in which not only the object but the entire environment of the object is painstakingly restored and also made pristine. In the case of Williamsburg, the object was an entire colonial town, saved from the ravages of time and real estate developers to become a kind of national shrine. Here visitors from around the country and the world can get an idea of life in the pre-industrial society of our country's origins. Henry Ford, on a vast acreage near his Dearborn, Michigan, plant, opened Greenfield Village and the Henry Ford Museum in 1929. The "village" consisted of a conglomeration of structures Ford had purchased and moved to the site, among them the buildings, complete with tools and furnishings, where Thomas Edison had invented the light bulb and Alexander Graham Bell the telephone. Greenfield Village offered an idealized view of the American small towns that had cradled Ford and the other great inventors of his generation. Ironically, these same men had laid the foundations for the giant industrial society that was destroying the very culture Ford's village was meant to preserve.

IN THE INDUSTRIAL AGE, NATURAL HISTORY AND CULTURAL ARTIFACTS HAD MORE UTILITARIAN FUNCTIONS, SUCH AS THE DEVELOPMENT OF INDUSTRY AND THE PROMOTION OF PATRIOTISM.

But it was the museum of science and industry, modeled after the great Deutches Museum in Munich, Germany, that proved to be the most popular innovation in the American museum world, and the most controversial. The Henry Ford Museum, adjoining Greenfield Village, was one of several such institutions. There were others in New York and Chicago; the Boston Science Museum and the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia are other notable examples. All celebrat-

The Smithsonian Institution's 1903 fossil display was typical of the age in its studied aversion to showmanship.

ed the progress of the nation as measured by its machines, inventions, and industrial products. Ford's museum was unique among them in that it celebrated the history of inventions with American technologies at the forefront; the others focused more on contemporary scientific processes, inventions, and products.

The industrial museums were wonderfully innovative—and threatening to the traditional idea of what a museum did and how it should go about doing it. They did not merely display steam engines and electric diodes; they showed how they functioned. Indeed, instruction was what these museums were principally about—in a hands-on, interactive sort of way. The exhibits *worked*, to the delight of visitors who leaned forward to press buttons and push levers. Moreover, they tried to make hard industrial labor vividly real to those who had no direct experience of it. Along with the verisimilitude came a strong element of show business. At Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry, guides even carried smelling salts to revive visitors overcome by the realism of the simulated coal mine. For good or ill, museums were moving into the realm of "edutainment." How people *felt* about their museum experience was given equal status with what they *learned* from the experience.

Science and industry museums were strongly connected to another institution growing out of industrial society, the international exposition. Large portions of the museums' collections came from these periodic shows and fairs, and in some cases museums even inherited buildings that had been erected for them. The Smithsonian, for example, got 42 railroad cars of materials from the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition, along with a building to house them. Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry moved to a hall that had been built for the Fine Arts Pavilion of the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893. The museums also borrowed the expositions' concepts of interactive displays and brightly lit, well-labeled cases, as well as schemes to organize and control their growing mountains of stuff.

What the innovative museums salvaged from the past was intended not only to mark but to idealize our progress from it. Yet the very idea of a museum, devoted by necessity to the past, defied the destructive forces of industrialization that were demolishing it. Old and often historic buildings were razed to make room for factories; the factories needed workers, hence the flight from town—the town that Ford idealized in his museum—to city. It is at least ironic that museums were

simultaneously complicit with those same forces. They made a devil's bargain. Museums were sustained by the economic growth that was destroying much of what museums were attempting to preserve for the increasing numbers of tourists who wanted to look through the glass to see what had been lost. The automobile boosted tourism, which in turn fostered consumer-oriented industries, and the resulting prosperity supported the museums. Between 1895 and 1940, the number of cars in the United States grew from four to more than 25 million. With the increase in leisure time and the construction of superhighways throughout the country after World War II, more and more people ventured forth to visit new places, see new things. Museum attendance climbed, but museums now had to compete with Niagara Falls and Madame Tussaud's. So they did what successful tourist attractions from Yosemite to Disney World did: They added lounges, restaurants, bookshops, snappy audio-visual aids, computer technology, and information areas in an effort to appeal to still more visitors.

The United States, the world's leading industrial power, had no national museum of industry until 1958, when Congress authorized the National Museum of History and Technology as part of the Smithsonian. There had been important initiatives earlier, the seminal one in 1887, when G. Brown Goode became assistant secretary of the Smithsonian in charge of the National Museum. Goode introduced methods that administrator-curators who succeeded him adhered to well into the 1960s. He gathered together all the instruments, machines, and tools that were scattered in other departments and organized them into exhibits according to categories: fire making, transportation, crafts, and so forth. But his forte was to develop a method for organizing materials in all the departments along uniform, evolutionary lines, so that all artifacts and specimens (natural, human, cultural, technological) were subjected to the same systematic, progressive arrangement.

Goode secured his professional stature in a famous speech delivered at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association in 1888. Museums, he declared, were handmaidens of science, and history could be studied and displayed as scientifically as natural phenomena. The way museums presented information could demonstrate the laws of science and the laws of history. Both studied the processes of change over time. Natural history, the formation of the cosmos and the Earth, the emergence of biological life and human cultures—all could be encompassed on one long continuum of progress toward more specialized forms. Objects—whether knives, fossil fish, or meteorites—showed the course of this progression. Goode insisted on the importance of labels and explanatory material, and was a stickler for accuracy. He insisted that exhibits incorporate the most recent research. Following Goode, the Smithsonian and its administrators became leaders in establishing the authority of science—and of technology as applied science—in American museums, and that influence has only grown over the years.

By the 1960s, the Smithsonian's old comprehensive museum had split into a congeries of specialized museums under the Smithsonian's umbrella. What happened there was reflected in museums across the country and abroad. Curators scurried to perfect their collections and bring their exhibits in line with current research. But the idea of progress still reigned as an organizing principle. Halls of evolution were installed in natural history museums. Ethnographic departments displayed the culture of traditional societies from industrial society's point of view, and measured them against American cultural and technological dominance. Art museums focused on the heroic emergence of the abstract and other modern styles from past traditions. History museums told the progressivist narrative through the accomplishments of great white men.

The first of the blockbuster shows, "In the Presence of Kings," opened at the Metropolitan in 1967 and drew 247,000 visits. Later, thousands lined up daily at one major and sometimes minor museum after another to see treasures from the Vatican, Impressionist paintings, Tutankhamen's gold, or room after room of Picassos. Scholarly catalogues based on the most up-to-date research actually sold thousands of copies in museum stores. New as well as old donors contributed

more money, and their own collections as well. Thanks to those donors and their own burgeoning endowments, museums had more money to buy newly available works on the world market. Prices began to soar. The Metropolitan Museum's acquisition of Rembrandt's *Aristotle Contemplating a Bust of Homer* for $2.3 million was front-page news in 1961. The record stood for 18 years. Now that price would be news only because it was so low. By the 1990s the price of art had skyrocketed, and even lesser works routinely sold for a few million dollars. Major works brought in upwards of $50 million.

Starting in the 1960s, museum administrators began systematic efforts to attract larger and more diverse crowds—with considerable success: The Smithsonian alone recorded 35 million visits in 2000. Researchers physically tracked the movements of visitors. What did they want to know that they had not learned? How could the museum serve them more effectively? By the 1990s, museums were using focus groups to ascertain how they might compete with other attractions. There was another concern: French visitor surveys in the late 1980s had revealed that working-class citizens were staying away from the new Pompidou Center; in the United States, many studies indicated that African Americans, Hispanics, and other minority groups weren't showing up in proportion to their numbers in the population. What to do?

BY THE 1990S, MUSEUMS WERE USING FOCUS GROUPS TO ASCERTAIN HOW THEY MIGHT COMPETE WITH OTHER ATTRACTIONS.

In recent decades, a new generation of curators has sought to take account of new scholarship on class, race, ethnicity, and gender in the exhibitions they mounted. They have questioned both the progressive claims of Western science and scientists' assertions of objectivity. The system of identification that had been used to categorize artifacts and organize history exhibitions on a continuum of progress was broken. Now it was possible to construct new narratives, to look again at familiar artifacts, and to consider whole ranges of contextual materials previously ignored in order to interpret cultures from more egalitarian and arguably more authentic perspectives.

These multicultural initiatives reflected and helped give shape to massive changes already taking place on a global scale. The new global economy, spurred by Western multinational corporations, was informational and interconnected. Markets were opened, rights were asserted. Culture became a potent force. It acquired political leverage. The past became political in new ways, as questions arose about who could lay claim to certain objects and how those objects should be interpreted. Museums, which communicated through the artifacts of the past, both reflected and engaged in these upheavals. As various cultural groups sought to define themselves in ways often different from the secular, scientific claims of the Western powers, they looked to museums to help them present their heritage.

The issue of ownership of that heritage took center stage in the 1980s and 1990s, when the Greek government demanded the return of the Elgin Marbles from the British Museum, Sri Lanka the seal of Kandy from Amsterdam, Tahiti its treasures from Paris. In the United States in 2000, the American Museum of Natural History in New York City and the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde Community of Oregon reached an agreement to explain the significance to the Clackamas tribe of the Willamette meteorite on display in the museum, in addition to the description of the meteorite's scientific significance. The angry objections by veterans' groups to the 1994 plans for the *Enola Gay* exhibition at the National Air and Space Museum (a revised exhibit opened the following year) and the criticisms of the 1994 Science in American Life exhibit at the National Museum of American History show emphatically the struggle of politically empowered groups over ownership of the meaning of the past.

International organizations, particularly the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), became a powerful force in organizing and promoting museums throughout the non-Western world after 1960. UNESCO's committee on cultural heritage built networks of communication between national and local populations and the international tourist trade. Tourism was growing by leaps and bounds, boosting the number of museum visitors dramatically, and indirectly increasing the number of museums worldwide. Cities from Cleveland to Los Angeles, from Bilbão to Paris and Munich, sought to attract international corporations by including museums, along with restaurants, malls, and river walks, in their redevelopment plans. This was not only true in the West. Partially spurred by UNESCO efforts, new museums—such as the National Museum of Kenya, the Sulabh International Museum of Toilets in New Delhi, and the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum in Northern Ireland—reflected and served local and national interests.

Such efforts raise questions of whether Western contexts for understanding culture are exportable. Does culture mean the same thing in every society? Professor Seyyid Hossein Nasr of George Washington University raised the question in a doubly provocative way. Asked in 1983 to advise the Saudi government about founding a science museum in Riyadh, he told them that it could be a time bomb:

> Do not think that a science museum is simply neutral in its cultural impact. It has a tremendous impact upon those who go into it. If you go into a building in which one room is full of dinosaurs, the next room is full of wires, and the third full of old trains, you are going to have a segmented view of knowledge which is going to have a deep effect upon the young person who goes there, who has been taught about *Tauhid*, about Unity, about the Unity of knowledge, about the Unity of God, the Unity of the universe. There is going to be a dichotomy created in him. You must be able to integrate knowledge.

Despite the quest to find ways to present artifacts that express and form identities distinct from those of the West, the adoption of the museum as an institution that stores and displays artifacts buys into Western culture and the value it places on such structures. Museums are everywhere serving to disseminate particular habits of seeing and feeling through means of communication that were

developed in the West. But museums also provide a universal matrix allowing for variety of content; what information is communicated lies in the organization of the details. And that is local.

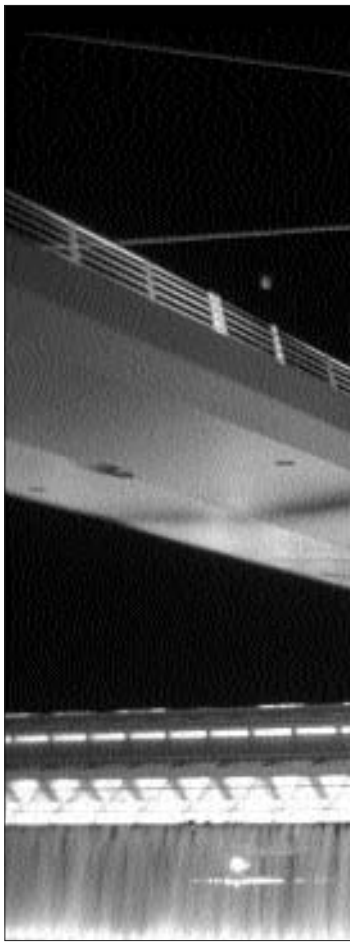
Just as in the past, when museums of industry embraced film, audio recordings, and other media to communicate better with the public, today museums as far away as India, Korea, and Kenya are embracing computers and the Internet not only to extend their reach but to make their exhibitions more accessible to more people. And almost every museum now has its own Web page containing information about current exhibitions, museum shops, and even tours, as well as areas that serve the needs of students and their class projects. Multinational corporations have supported the introduction of computers into museums worldwide to create a mutually beneficial network of local and global relationships. Microsoft's first community project undertaken in the Middle East opened in 2000 at "Planet Discovery" in the Children's Science Museum in the Beirut City Center, where a special wing was set up to house computers purchased from local assemblers in Beirut.

The World Wide Web has made possible a new kind of museum: the virtual museum, which has no "real" artifacts, no "real" geographic location, but a library of hypertext images, sounds, and words that create exhibitions out of digitized information that can be reached from any place on the planet with electronic access. (A recent Google search of museum Web pages produced more than 300,000 hits.) The low cost of a Web page certainly gives museums with little money, and even individuals, a certain equality with their more affluent counterparts. Yet despite claims that the Web is a democratic environment on a level previously unknown, these virtual museums only create networks among those who have the means to access the sites.

At the beginning of the new millennium, we are left with a set of institutions that have not only weathered the major lurches of history Lawrence Vale Coleman noted more than 60 years ago but have also helped smooth social transitions. Museums have helped citizens understand the often disturbing processes of development. Their value and power has lain in their historic association with that very malleable and elusive term *democracy*. They have wanted to reach a vast public, but it is only recently that they have been able to—and even then the message the public understands is not necessarily the message the museum people intended to convey, nor is the message always egalitarian. Museums have recently tended to equalize the value of all sorts of artifacts, but they have also—at all times and in all places—favored the politically and economically dominant caste over the less privileged. And if they have hoped to create orderly societies through their effect on the public mind, they have so far touched a relative few.

Museums, in effect, convey two antithetical messages: one of human liberty, of men and women freely communicating; the other, a controlled vision of ordered progress that has fueled the extension of Western influence for more than two centuries. In the future, museums promise to keep alive this dynamic between the individualistic and the ordered, the local and the global, within a matrix of economic and political change. ❑

The Museum as Artifact

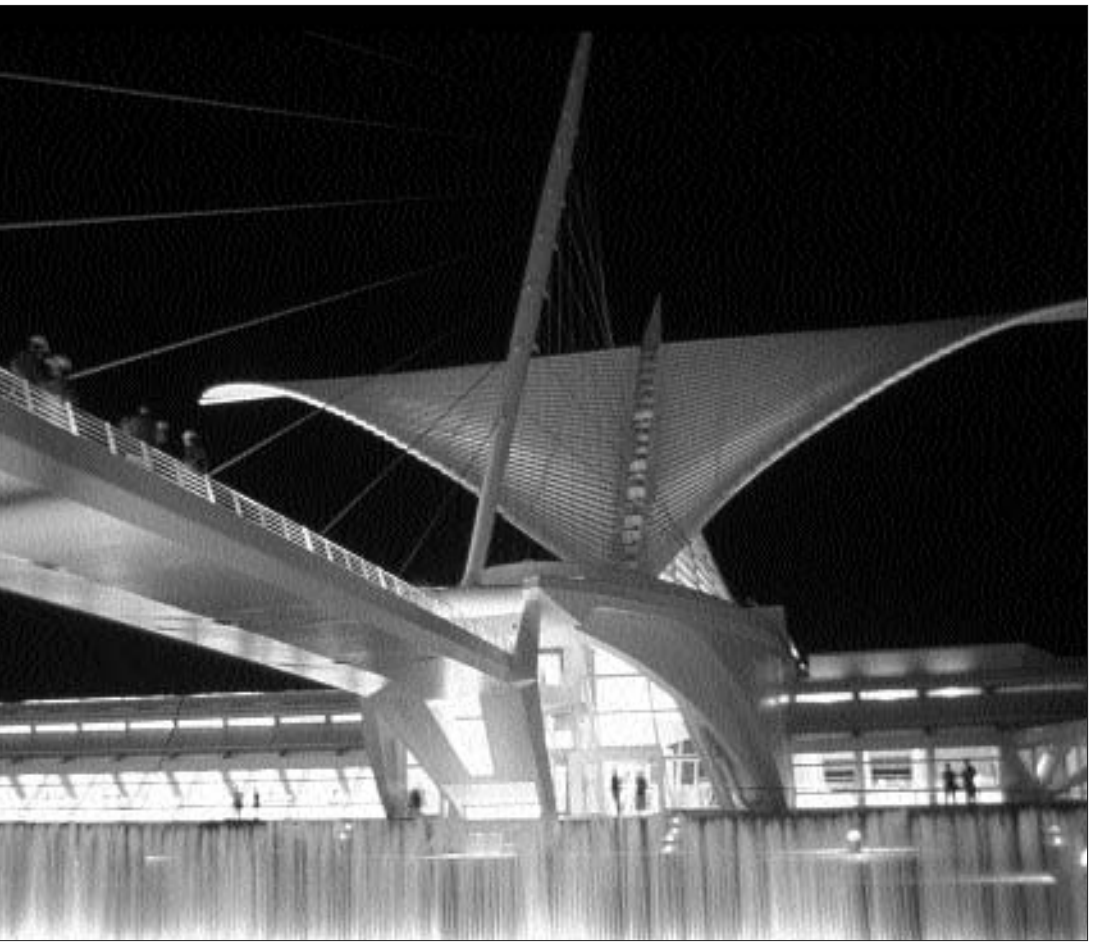


by Jayne Merkel

Hoping to recapture their days of glory, the citizens of Santiago de Compostela, in Spain's northwestern corner, have embarked on a building program even more ambitious than the one that created the magnificent 11th-century Romanesque church that awed the medieval pilgrims who flocked to the city seeking the tomb of St. James. They are now constructing an 810,000-square-foot Galician Cultural Center on a 173-acre mountaintop two miles from the historic heart of the city. The gargantuan $125-million effort signals a new age of faith, a faith whose core belief is in the power of museum architecture to attract fame, fortune, and tourists, as the spectacular Guggenheim Museum designed by Los Angeles architect Frank Gehry has done for the Basque capital of Bilbão in northeastern Spain.

The form not the content matters. The $100 million, 256,000-square-foot Bilbão Guggenheim was not built to house an existing art collection. In fact, there was none. At least until the recent recession, the New York Guggenheim's entrepreneurial director, Thomas Krens, had been establishing a chain of museums around the world (Berlin, Las Vegas, New York's SoHo, and Venice, where the museum has long maintained Peggy Guggenheim's villa) to exhibit the New York institution's holdings. But architecture, not the shows, has attracted the hordes to Bilbão. Because architecture put the Guggenheim on the international map, the people of Santiago de Compostela are using architecture to do the same. After an international competition, they chose as their architect Peter Eisenman of New York. He is of approximately Gehry's age and professional stature—but has an even more radical reputation. His first major building was the Wexner Center for the Arts at Ohio State University (1983–89), so much a phenomenon unto itself that it opened before any art was installed. The building was sufficient display.

Like the Bilbão Guggenheim, the Galician Cultural Center is being constructed without a collection. Its six buildings will contain a Museum of Galician History (for exhibitions of photographs, electronic materials, and whatever else can be assembled), a library, a 1,500-seat music theater, an IMAX theater, an administration building with reception halls, and a New



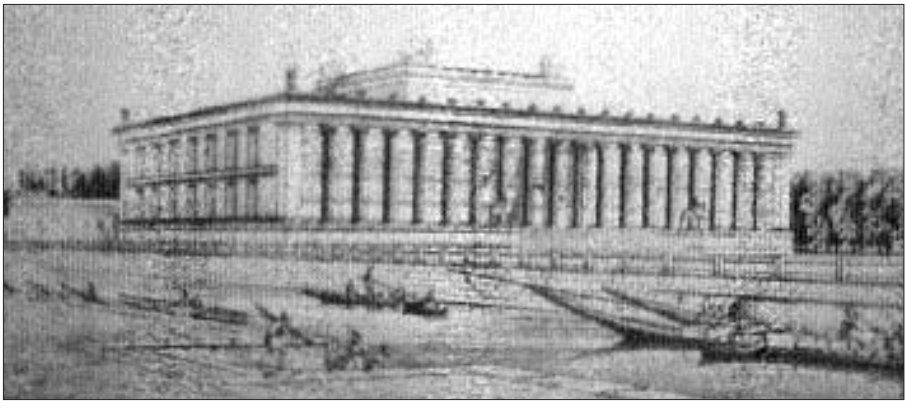
The Milwaukee Museum of Art, a prime example of the new breed of showplace institutions, appears ready to take flight from its perch on the Lake Michigan shore.

Technologies Center with galleries, video games, an archive, and research areas. But the main attraction will be the massive native-stone buildings that will look as if they were pushed right up through the earth.

Traditionally museums have been built to house collections, and for ancillary functions such as storage, conservation, administration, and education. But after Bilbão opened in 1997, interest in the *architecture* of museums escalated exponentially, and civic leaders all over the world have been hiring famous architects to build museums intended to cause a sensation. Cultural institutions in a number of cities (Chicago, New York, Seattle, Washington, D.C.) have commissioned Gehry himself. Elsewhere, as in Santiago de Compostela, they recruited architects whose work may be even more provocative. A distinguished museum building has become the ultimate contemporary trophy, the most sought-after artifact in the 21st-century city. We have taken to an entirely new level a trend that began, if not in Berlin in 1823, when the great German classicist Karl Friedrich Schinkel designed one of the first buildings for the specific purpose of publicly exhibiting art, then certainly when Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum opened in New York in 1959.

Most clients of architects are developers who build for profit, and even if they had the will and the expertise to select great architects few of them could justify the commitment in time and money that serious architecture demands. America's public buildings—courthouses, police stations, firehouses, schools—used to be designed by talented architects and constructed of substantial materials, but that changed after World War II, when economy and speed took precedence over design and quality. Occasionally, an initiative such as the U.S. General Services Administration's Excellence in Architecture program supports ambitious design by selecting leading firms such as Richard Meier & Partners or Pei Cobb Freed, but it's the exception. The most valued patrons of ambitious architecture in our time are art museums, just as art collectors today are the principal clients for serious private architecture.

Museums were a product of the Enlightenment. Napoleon opened part of the former royal palace at the Louvre to the public in 1793; there, the French royal collection was exhibited in the Grande Galerie, which had proven ideal for viewing works of art. Within a decade of the opening of the Louvre, professors at the French Academy began drawing plans for museums, and a few years later a collector in the village of Dulwich, near London, commissioned a museum from Sir John Soane. Not



The strong design of Berlin's neo-classical Altes Museum (1830) influenced many that followed.

surprisingly, palace architecture—grand, classical, urban, and horizontal—was a principal influence when the first museums were designed. But like most public buildings at the time, they were built in the classical style for other reasons as well, including classicism's association with government and law (Roman basilicas), with the sacred (Greek temples and Italian Renaissance churches), and with the culture and art of the past.

The most influential early museums were Leo von Klenze's Munich Glyptothek (1816–30) and Karl Friedrich Schinkel's Altes Museum in Berlin (1823–30), which occupies a site surrounded by the Spree River that came to

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be known as Museum Island because a whole cluster of museums grew up there. The Glyptothek has a square plan, with galleries of various geometric shapes surrounding a central courtyard. Though the building rises only one story, a Greek temple front with tall Ionic columns makes it seem larger. Schinkel's brilliant and well-preserved Altes Museum rises two stories behind an uninterrupted giant order of Ionic columns and a broad staircase. Inside, courtyards flank a central rotunda and a monumental stair to second-floor galleries, where perpendicular panels supplement wall space. The upstairs galleries are flooded with natural light from larger windows than, for reasons of security, had been used in single-story museums.

The great art museums in London—Sir Robert Smirke's British Museum (1823) and William Wilkins's National Gallery (1832–38)—follow this classical model, as do so many museums elsewhere in Europe. Almost all the features that most people today associate with art museums were incorporated into these early examples. In one way or another, they solved the major problems of exhibition design—lighting, security, procession through space—and they did so with enough success that the classical museum building persisted for another 150 years.

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Many of the first museums in the United States were built later, when Victorian architecture was in full bloom, so they drew on medieval rather than classical sources. Neo-Gothic and neo-Romanesque buildings for the display of natural or historical objects (such as James Renwick's 1849 Smithsonian castle in Washington, D.C., and Calvert Vaux and J. Wrey Mould's American Museum of Natural History in New York, 1872–77) have tended to retain their original fronts, though many later acquired classical wings. But the classical style soon returned to favor, and the major art museums covered up their Victorian Gothic arches (as in Vaux and Mould's 1874–80 façade for the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York) and presented themselves to the public in the "proper" classical mode. Every major (and many a minor) American art museum of the first half of the 20th century has a grand classical façade.

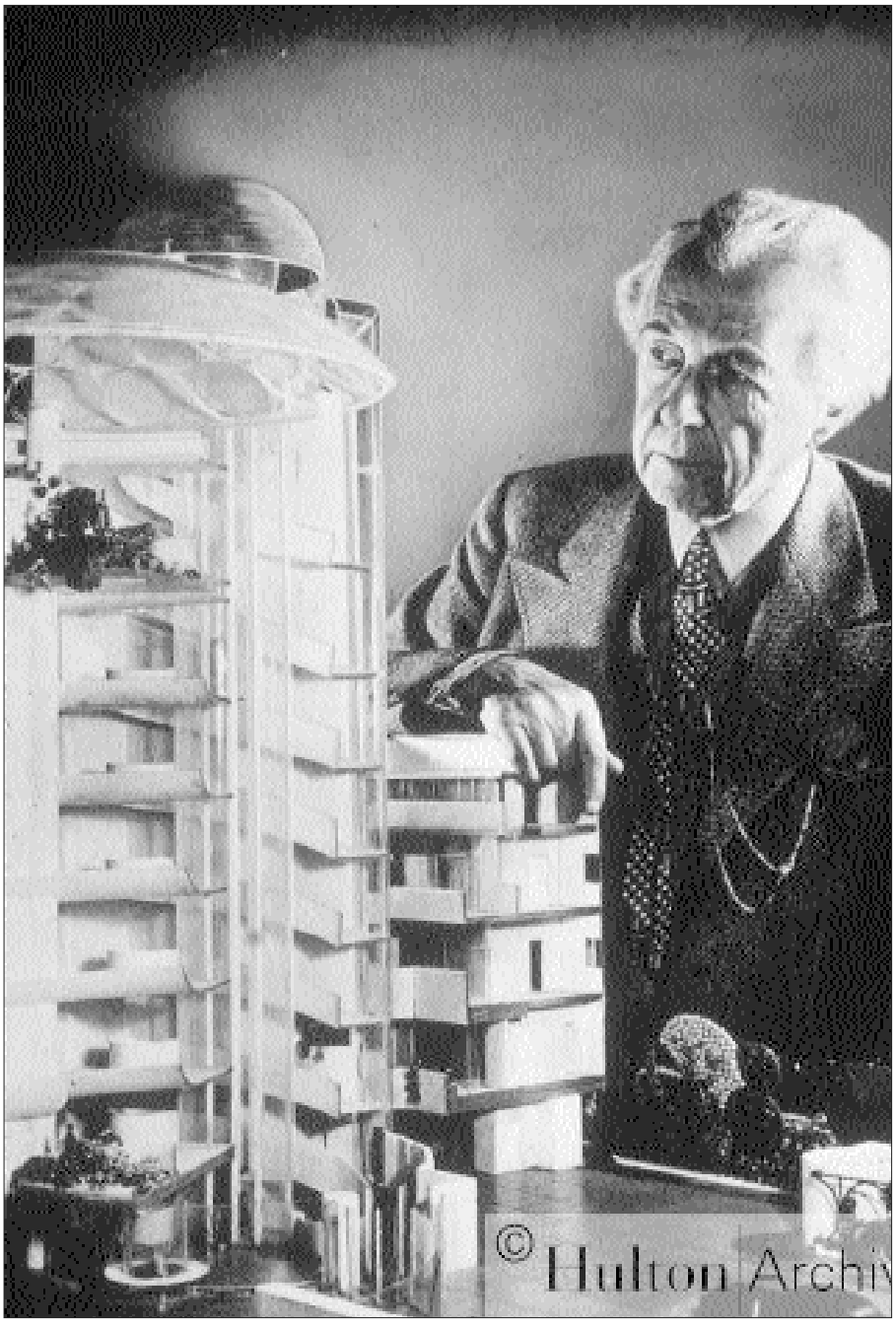
If West Coast museums fail to conform to the classical type, it is because they appeared after the watershed year of 1939. Two years earlier, John Russell Pope of New York, the last of the great classical masters, had won a competition to build the new National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. Pope's museum, with a temple front approached by grand stairs and flanked by matching wings, holds its place proudly on the National Mall. A dome rises behind the front, and, inside, dignified grand galleries and inte-

rior courtyards provide a sense of history. The building looks bigger and older than it is—which is how it was intended to look.

In 1939, a new era arrived when the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York set out to build its first permanent home. (The museum had opened in a Fifth Avenue office building just 10 years earlier.) To MoMA's founders, modernism wasn't just a style; it was a cause that transcended national boundaries and connected all the arts. Enthusiasts saw modernism as both the product of a new age and a means of change. Though the design MoMA chose was less radical than an earlier, unrealized scheme for a vertical museum commissioned in 1930 from George Howe and William Lescaze, the new building, by Philip Goodwin and Edward Durrell Stone, was everything traditional museums were not. It was modest in size and scale; it was on a side street (West 53rd Street) rather than a prominent avenue; its design was geometric, abstract, and pioneering, like the art it was built to house; and its architects were not (yet) famous. Goodwin and Stone's smooth white-marble building had a flat façade, punctured by ribbon windows and crowned by a flat roof; within were flexible, open-plan galleries and a broad open staircase. MoMA was completed before Washington's grand National Gallery, and was its opposite in almost every way.

Like other American museums, MoMA grew larger over the years, despite its cramped, midblock site and the high cost of land. Philip Johnson, the museum's first Curator of Architecture and Design, who later became an architect, designed an addition in 1951, an exquisite walled sculpture garden two years later, and a second addition with arches framed in black steel in 1964. The expansions, which contained not only new galleries but a cafe and a museum store, marked the beginning of an important trend in museum building—the creation of spaces to attract visitors and raise money rather than to display objects. MoMA's next building campaign (1977–84) was even more ambitious in that regard. It included a 56-story, glass-walled apartment tower of very expensive condominiums whose sale would offset the cost of another expansion and was also intended to shore up the endowment. The tower, designed by Cesar Pelli, who had just become dean of the architecture school at Yale University, was quietly handsome, and the new galleries blended in with the older ones. But this addition had some uncomfortable commercial touches, such as escalators just inside the garden wall. More important, it changed the scale of the museum.

In 1995, MoMA acquired a hotel next door and began assembling adjacent lots for yet another addition—which, when completed, will almost double the museum's size. The committee to select the design took a worldwide tour of architects' offices and projects, and then announced a competition by invitation only. Surprisingly, none of the elder statesmen, or even elder rascals like Eisenman and Gehry, were asked to compete. Yoshi Taniguchi of Japan produced the most subtle, practical, and contextual final scheme, and was chosen from a group of well-known but still emerging architects in their fifties: Wiel Arets, Herzog & de Meuron, Steven Holl, Toyo Ito, Rem Koolhaas, and Yoshio Taniguchi, Bernard Tschumi, Rafael Viñoly, and Tod Williams Billie Tsien and Associates.



Frank Lloyd Wright contemplating a model of his masterful 1959 Guggenheim Museum.

Though it grew more conservative over the years, MoMA was one of the most influential forces in architecture in the second half of the 20th century. It established the importance of architecture as an art. It identified trends, launched reputations, and, in its exhibitions and publications, codified movements. And it helped make *modern* the only acceptable style for museums of modern art (and eventually for all museums and public buildings). As MoMA grew rich and powerful—thanks to the financial, political, and social power of its Rockefeller patrons, an unexcelled collection, and the relocation of the international art world to New

York after the outbreak or World War II—museums everywhere tried to compete. Only one upstaged it architecturally.

In 1943, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum hired the most famous and provocative architect in the world, Frank Lloyd Wright, to design a new building (which was not begun until 1956). What Wright produced was no quiet marble box on a Manhattan side street. His defiant spiral is right on Fifth Avenue, across the street and a few blocks north of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The Guggenheim was completed in 1959, the year of Wright's death, and though its curved ramps proved a challenge to many of the works hung on its walls, it was clearly a masterpiece, one of the greatest museum buildings in the world. With one sweeping gesture, Wright managed to solve the three problems of museum design that had engaged museum architects from the first—procession through space, lighting, and security. A single continuous ramp leads the viewer all the way up (and down) through the core of the Guggenheim—and what a ramp it is! A gigantic skylight floods the interior with natural light that nonetheless does not shine directly on the works of art. And the concrete conch of a building seems impenetrable, except at the glass front door. Wright even managed to tuck in an entrance plaza, a little shop, an underground theater, lavatories on every level, a balcony overlooking Central Park, and facilities for the trustees. The Guggenheim was a very hard act to follow.

By the 1960s, when American art and modern art were one and the same, the Whitney Museum of American Art, which occupied a quiet, boxy brick building designed by Philip Johnson behind MoMA, on 54th Street, set out to make its own statement. The Whitney's trustees hired Marcel Breuer, a highly respected, German-born New York architect and Bauhaus alumnus. Breuer was known for beautifully crafted suburban houses in natural materials and for some subtle college buildings and chapels. But the Whitney Museum he designed (with Hamilton Smith, 1963–66) is relatively bombastic—a massive, hovering pile of stone on the corner of Madison Avenue and East 75th Street in Manhattan, approached by a bridge over an underground terrace. Unlike the Guggenheim, it gets larger as it rises. Within, it features a gargantuan elevator; huge, well-lit, flexible open galleries that at the time accommodated oversized art better than any at MoMA or the Guggenheim; and, set off from the galleries, an enclosed stone staircase—dark, beautiful, mysterious.

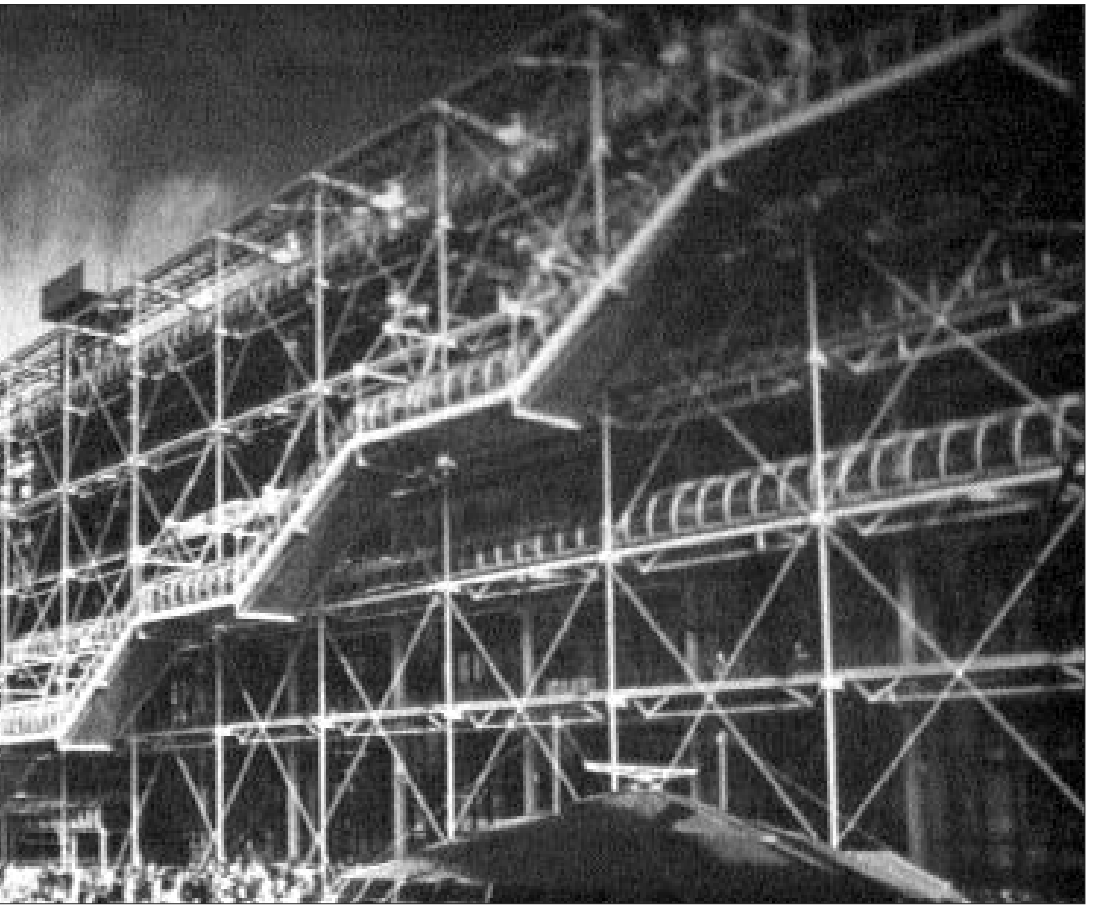
The Whitney contained many fresh ideas, but it also owed a lot to Louis I. Kahn's 1951 addition to the Yale Art Gallery in New Haven, Connecticut. Kahn was a generation younger than the architects who were considered the modern masters: the American Frank Lloyd Wright and Walter Gropius, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and Le Corbusier, the three Europeans who were largely responsible for the boxy, white-walled structures that MoMA promoted as the "International Style." Gropius, who had directed the Bauhaus in

The radical design of the Pompidou Center on the Place Beaubourg in Paris was far more controversial when it opened in 1977 than the contemporary art shown within—or the vibrant street theater without.

Berlin and subsequently headed Harvard University's Graduate School of Design, never designed a significant museum. His influence gradually declined. Le Corbusier grew in stature and range and worked in many materials and with a multiplicity of forms after the 1920s. He created curved shapes as well as rectangles, small enclosed spaces as well as big open ones, in smooth and rough concrete. The Carpenter Art Center at Harvard (with Sert, Jackson, Gourley, 1963), not a museum exactly but a building designed to display art, is one example of his lively and varied late work.

Mies, who succeeded Gropius at the Bauhaus, moved to the United States and became dean of architecture at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago. He perfected the steel-framed, glass-walled box filled with what he called "universal space," and he adapted it, exquisitely, to all purposes. His museums include the unbuilt Museum for a Small City (1942), an addition to the Houston Museum of Fine Arts (1951–58), and the New National Gallery in Berlin (1962–68), an enormous glass pavilion with temporary partitions and underground galleries. Mies's influence on every kind of building—office towers (such as the Seagram Building in New York), apartment houses, schools—was so ubiquitous that it eventually provoked the reaction of postmodernism.

As Gropius, Le Corbusier, and Mies achieved old-master status in the 1950s, attention in America turned to the next generation of *American* architects, and

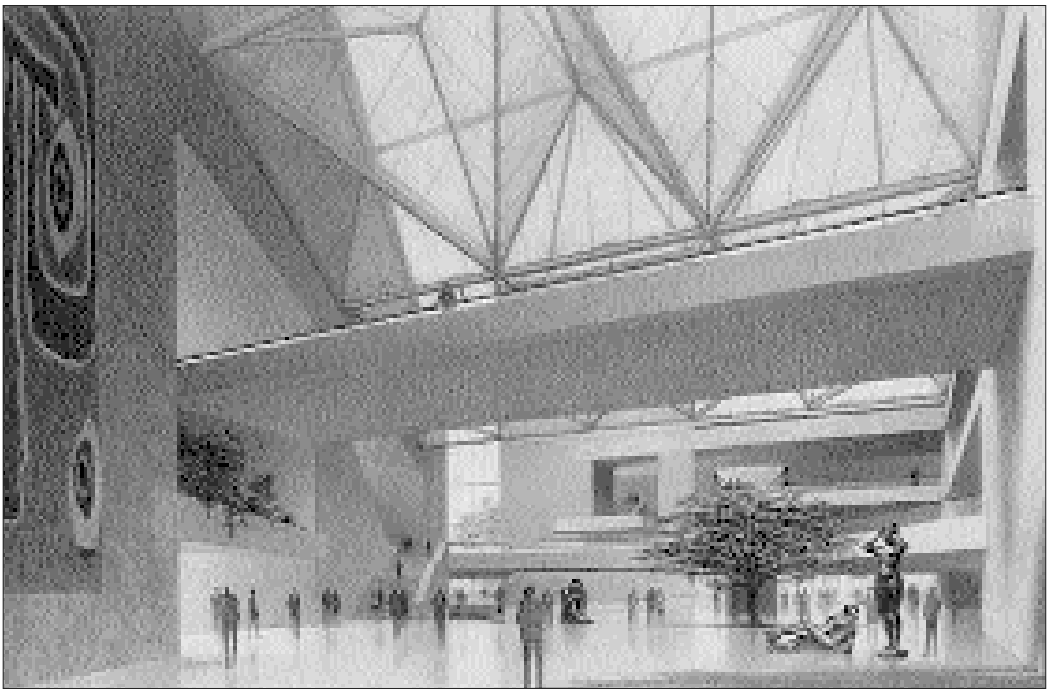


especially to Kahn. A Philadelphia-based professor, he was almost 50 years old when he received his first important commission: to design an 84,000-square-foot addition to the neo-Gothic Yale Art Gallery. The addition, completed in 1953, defers to the decorative exterior of the original gallery adjacent to it by meeting the street with a plain brick wall, marked only by a glass door set perpendicularly between two planes of the façade, along which horizontal bands denote the floor levels. Inside, the building has a Miesian open plan with movable "Pogo panels" on little feet for the display of paintings and a gridded, exposed-concrete ceiling, textured like the work of Le Corbusier, but open so that the mechanical systems inside are visible. Though the building's triangular ceiling structure derives from theories of the architect-engineer Buckminster Fuller, classical proportions govern its design. Kahn made something new from these influences, and something right for the time.

He subsequently received a number of important commissions, including the Kimball Museum of Art in Fort Worth, Texas (1967–72), and the Yale British Art Center in New Haven (1969–77), directly across the street from the Yale Art Gallery. Both are lighted with elaborate systems of baffles that block the sun's harmful rays and create a kind of palpable space inside.

Almost contemporaneous with the British Art Center was a museum that, though less awe inspiring, was even more celebrated: the Georges Pompidou National Art and Cultural Center (1971–77), in Paris, designed by Renzo Piano of Genoa and Richard Rogers of London. In many ways, the Pompidou—a big glass box that resembles a 19th-century industrial exhibition hall rather than a museum—is completely different from the British Art Center, and yet it too was influenced by Kahn's Yale Art Gallery addition. Kahn had exposed the ductwork in the Yale Art Gallery; Piano and Rogers enlarged the Pompidou's ductwork to Brobdingnagian scale and placed it on the exterior of the building, where escalators within tubes carry visitors along the façade to the upper floors. Shiny metal, glass, and primary-color plastic make the building look like a gigantic Tinkertoy. People loved it from the start, and it suited the exhibitions of its day, but as fashions changed and the Pompidou became the home of the national collection of modern art, curators began to complain that the building was not functional because it had open spaces instead of defined rooms. So the galleries were rebuilt in the 1980s by Gae Aulenti, an Italian architect—who was also hired in the 1980s to turn a vast train terminal in Paris, the Gare d'Orsay, into a vast museum of 19th-century art. The Pompidou was one of the first museum buildings to become a tourist attraction and almost singlehandedly transformed its once-dreary neighborhood. It draws some eight million visitors a year.

The building that most captivated the American public in the 1970s was I. M. Pei & Partners' addition to the National Gallery in Washington, the so-called East Building, completed in 1978. Composed of a pair of isosceles triangles, this elegant, abstract structure cleverly fills an awkward trapezoidal site on the National Mall. It is sheathed in marble from the same quarry as the marble used for its great neoclassical neighbor, but it relates to the original museum largely by contrast. Instead of applying ornament, Pei made the whole building a piece of sculpture. Like other museum additions of the time, it is devot-



Paul Stevenson Oles' study of the much admired East Building of the National Gallery of Art.

ed less to gallery space (galleries are tucked away in the corners) than to office space, subterranean restaurants with light entering from little glass pyramids that poke above ground, and public meeting space (in the form of a gigantic, glass-roofed lobby atrium). In part, no doubt, because of the acclaim the East Building had received, Pei was asked in 1984 to renovate and expand the Louvre. The $1.38 billion project added 825,000 square feet of space (less than half of it for galleries) to the venerable museum, largely in the form of underground facilities lighted through an enormous pyramid in the courtyard above.

Louis Kahn's late work exerted much more influence on architects in the United States than either the Pompidou or the East Building. The classical tradition that Kahn had successfully integrated with modernism came into favor in the 1980s as a reaction to Miesian restraint and the stripped-down boxes it inspired. Robert Venturi—like Kahn, a Philadelphia architect who had taught at the University of Pennsylvania and Yale—led the postmodern revolt. Venturi argued that modern architecture was meaningless because, without ornament, it lacked necessary symbols. He and his partner, John Rauch, put the theory into practice in an addition to Cass Gilbert's 1917 Allen Memorial Art Gallery at Oberlin College. They added large-scale, patterned brickwork and columns with gigantic capitals, flattened out and inflated in size for effect.

Venturi brought to architecture not just a sense of irony but a sense of humor. With his wife, Denise Scott Brown, he later designed a larger, far more prominent, and much more complex museum addition than the one at Oberlin: the Sainsbury Wing of London's National Gallery. Venturi and Scott Brown placed well-proportioned individual galleries in the new wing, used restrained ornament, and paid careful attention to the building's side on

Trafalgar Square. The Sainsbury Wing was completed in 1991. Venturi's cleverest museum is a 1972 re-creation of Benjamin Franklin's house in Philadelphia, of which only the footprint and the roofline were known. So that is all Venturi built—a three-dimensional outline. The exhibits are in sheds and underground passageways.

Though the Franklin project parodied the desire to turn back the clock, many converts to the postmodern movement tried to do just that. The office-building boom of the 1980s proceeded with insufficient time for reflection, and much of what was built was unimaginative and shoddy. The most controversial museum project of the era was a proposed addition to the Whitney Museum by Michael Graves—a hulking, brooding pile of colored classical forms that, though handsome and original, tried to dwarf Breuer's building. The proposal elicited such a powerful defense of the original Whitney from architects that it actually strengthened Breuer's reputation and advanced the cause of modern architecture. (Curiously, a Gwathmey Siegel addition [1985–92] to Wright's Guggenheim Museum received little criticism, mainly because, though large, it was respectful and unassertive—and located where Wright himself had once contemplated an addition.)

While the battle of the styles raged on the East Coast, on the West Coast and in Europe modern architecture never really went out of style, and two of the most important commissions of the 1980s, which both happened to be in California, went to modernists. The Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art hired the Japanese architect Arata Isozaki to design a new building in the arts district downtown, and, after considering 80 architects, the Getty Center selected Richard Meier of New York to design its $1 billion, 360,000-square-foot complex on a 110-acre site looming over the Santa Monica Freeway. Neither commission went to the sentimental hometown favorite, Frank Gehry, who for many years had designed studios for artists and was highly respected within the art world. But in a sense, Gehry ended up winning the first competition when he was asked to convert two industrial sheds to a "Temporary Contemporary" (now called the Geffen Contemporary) on the edge of downtown Los Angeles. Gehry's big open space with exposed roof trusses and a raw feeling was such a success that Isozaki's more costly and "permanent" museum seemed anticlimatic when it opened a few years later.

Meier's huge, buff-stone, much-anticipated Getty opened at almost the same time as Gehry's Bilbão Guggenheim. Meier had never abandoned his commitment to an abstract, white-walled, spatially complex form of modern architecture derived from Le Corbusier's early work; he had, in fact, become the master of the mode. The Getty was highly praised and wildly popular with visitors, but the museum in Bilbão stole the show and became an international phenomenon. Even before that happened, Gehry's star had been rising. He completed a lively California Aerospace Museum and Theater in Los Angeles, had a major retrospective at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, was invited to design the Weisman Art Museum at the University of Minnesota and the Vitra Design Museum in Germany, and began to be

embraced by the critical establishment in New York.

The 1980s also saw a carefully orchestrated reaction from within the modernist camp itself to the reductivism of modern architecture. It was led by Peter Eisenman, who spoke (rather opaquely) of being inspired by deconstructionist literary theory. In 1988, Philip Johnson put together an exhibition of "deconstructivist architecture" at MoMA that was meant to suggest that a new movement was afoot. None actually materialized, but for a time there was a lot of talk about "decon" architecture. The true importance of Johnson's show may have been that it advanced the careers of all the participants—Eisenman, Gehry, Zaha Hadid, Daniel Libeskind, Rem Koolhaas, Wolf Prix of Coop Himmelblau, and Bernard Tschumi—a group that forms the core of those considered for major museum commissions even today.

> THE MUSEUM IN BILBÃO STOLE THE SHOW AND BECAME AN INTERNATIONAL PHENOMENON.

The completion of two museum projects designed in the late 1980s helped reestablish modernism in New York. One was a garden court linking the Renaissance revival Pierpont Morgan Library, designed by McKim, Mead & White in 1906, with a taller, Italianate brownstone house of 1853 that had once belonged to Morgan's son. Instead of making the connection "match" either building, Bartholomew Voorsanger created a glass-and-steel pavilion with a piano-curve roof that owed more to Le Corbusier than to Alberti. And because he believed that shoddy materials and careless craftsmanship were partially responsible for the disillusion with modern architecture, Voorsanger made his pavilion as sumptuous as the old buildings it linked by installing gray-veined marble floors, Indiana limestone walls with pewter-clad aluminum panels and mullions, a row of olive trees, and climbing fig vines. The place soothes even as it dazzles.

The second project preceded the completion of the Morgan court. In 1987 Richard Gluckman, an architect who had been designing commercial art galleries and working with artists for many years, took a different approach to building a new museum with a design commissioned by the Dia Foundation. Housed in a brick warehouse on the industrial western edge of Manhattan's Chelsea district, the Dia Center retains the direct, raw quality of the structure and the neighborhood; its plain-concrete interior walls are reconfigured into large, well-proportioned, divisible galleries and enhanced by lighting from exposed industrial fixtures. Gluckman's spare but beautifully lighted galleries resemble the studios where art is made, and they reproduce the essentials of studio space with subtle detail. Soon after the Dia Center opened, the principal contemporary art galleries in New York started moving from SoHo to Chelsea, and Gluckman found himself invited to design museums the world over. He has joined the surprisingly small and completely international group of contenders for choice museum commissions, made up of veterans of the MoMA "deconstructivist architecture" show, participants in the competition for MoMA's latest addition, and architects of the most celebrated museums of the 1990s.

There was considerable variety in the museums designed in that

decade (some of which are only now being completed), as evidenced, for example, by the Polshek Partnership's planetarium at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, a fully transparent, machinelike glass cage with a gigantic, solid-white sphere seemingly suspended inside (it actually stands on little legs that look as if they were built to hold a spaceship); Tod Williams Bille Tsien and Associates' sagebrush-green precast concrete addition to the Phoenix Art Museum and new bronze-coated American Museum of Folk Art in New York City; Antoine Predock's Arizona Science Center in Phoenix and Tang Teaching Museum at Skidmore College; Mario Botta's brick-and-granite San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; and Santiago Calatrava's soaring addition to the Milwaukee Museum, which, in addition to its new galleries and reception spaces, literally creates a bridge to the downtown.

Of a quite different character are the numerous commemorative museums that opened during the decade, such as James Ingo Freed's United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington (1993), stony and contextual on one side, foreboding on the other, and inside, elements from concentration camps, such as oven doors, communicate visually and viscerally. David Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin (1998) disturbs visitors with angular dead-end spaces, narrow lightning-bolt windows, and a zigzagging plan with a 13-foot-wide void that symbolizes the missing Jews and the contributions they never got to make. The exquisite zinc-skinned structure is an abstract chamber of horrors. (One reason the Bilbão Guggenheim was such a sensation is that its exuberance made it the polar opposite of the memorial museums, just as its intertwined curves and endless complexity set it apart from all the understated art museums of the time.)

The goal of much museum architecture today is to stun, and what could be more shocking than a museum that doesn't exist in any traditional physical sense? Of course, the idea is not new. It was advanced by Walter Benjamin in the famous essay "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936), by André Malraux in *Museum without Walls* (1947), and by Marcel Duchamp in "Boîte-en-Valise" (1936–41), a box filled with reproductions of his work—in multiple editions, of course. Today it takes the form of the Virtual Guggenheim, an electronic "museum" filled with reproductions of the Guggenheim's holdings. Its colorful, curvaceous, ever-morphing forms were created by architects Lisa-Anne Couture and Hani Rashid, partners in Asymptote Architecture, for "visits" from computer terminals. Similarly ephemeral is the marvelously named Blur Building, a planned exposition pavilion in Lake Neuchâtel at Yverdon-les-Bains, Switzerland. The design is the work of Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio, who were recently selected to design the new Museum of Contemporary Art in Boston. The Blur Building, accessible by a ramp from the lakeshore, will be sprayed by a mist that makes it seem to disappear. The North Carolina Museum of Art, by New York architects Henry Smith-Miller and Laurie Hawkinson, is fully visible only from high in the air: At that distance, its various structures and fields can be seen to spell out "Picture This."

Visitors will approach the planned Blur Building on Switzerland's Lake Neuchâtel across a ramped bridge. It will deposit them on an open-air platform in the center of a manmade fog mass.

The evidence is overwhelming: Museums are no longer just repositories of treasures or "cabinets of curiosities"; they have become objects in their own right. During the past decade, the exotic has invaded a building type that used to be, quite properly, the most conservative of all—because it was intended to conserve artifacts for the ages. But museums today do not merely conserve. They entertain, feed patrons, sell wares, host parties, and make displays, if not out of whole cloth and real objects, then out of whole bytes and digits. (The richest man in the world, Bill Gates, has assembled a collection of art and books not to enjoy or display them as much as to own the legal rights to reproduce them.) And when museums educate these days, they may well do so using reproductions, films, and video displays rather than original artifacts. That's a risky course for them to take when more information than anyone can absorb is already coming into homes and schools electronically.

At a time when schools are deteriorating, roads are crumbling, and low-income housing is woefully underfunded, one can't help but question the vast sums being spent on new museums ($650 million for the MoMA addition; almost $1 billion sought for a proposed new Gehry Guggenheim in New York). But the extravagance is certainly good for the art of architecture and for the few architects who get the chance to build museums. The artist Frank Stella said of Victoria Newhouse's book *Towards a New Museum* (1998) that "it reveals how well the guys in suits who can't paint perform when they have to design a home for art." Increasingly, the guys in suits are getting to upstage the guys who can paint. ❑