Love of beauty is a basic human trait that goes back to man’s earliest days on earth. The primitive Ice Age artists who created the vigorous bison and bulls, fleet horses, graceful deer, and other animals of the Lascaux or Altamira caves may have been appealing to supernatural powers to grant them good hunting and fertility or observing some since-lost traditional rites, but at the same time they took delight in combining line and color so as to please the human eye. Thus, it was natural that humankind collect and treasure paintings, sculptures, and other art objects. The ancient civilizations, whether Middle Eastern, Oriental, African, pre-Columbian American, Greek, or Roman, placed their finest productions in temple or palace treasuries. Even during the Dark Ages in western Europe, the artistic tradition was kept alive, chiefly in cathedrals, castles, and monasteries.

Collectors and Patrons

The collector was the force that made the art museum possible. Usually a prince, nobleman, high clergyman, rich merchant, or banker, he purchased or commissioned paintings, sculptures, and other beautiful and useful objects. As his collection grew, connoisseurship became his passion, and he added or discarded pieces, ever seeking the highest quality.

Jean de France, duc de Berry and brother of the French king Charles V, was a great medieval collector. At his death in 1416, he possessed a fine library, some of its bindings adorned with jewels and precious stones; handsomely illuminated manuscripts; antique gold and silver coins; cameos and intaglios; rich embroideries and fabrics; sculptures, panel paintings, and miniatures. Still he could not resist curiosities, so that he had a menagerie and a cabinet that contained ostrich eggs, shells, polar bear skins, and reputed antidotes against poison, such as bezoars—the concretions formed in the stomachs of wild goats—and unicorn horns (actually narwhal tusks). The coming of the Renaissance made Italy the center of the art world. The Medici in Florence were shrewd businessmen and bankers who for two centuries ruled city and state, erected handsome buildings, established a great library, and accumulated fabulous hoards of art objects. They tried to acquire the finest products of the Greek and Roman past,
and sculptures and other antiquities, whether found above or below
ground, henceforth became important collectors' items. The Medici
(Riccardi) Palace in the fifteenth century was in a sense a private
museum. 2 The other Italian states competed with Florence in collecting
art, and the popes gradually made Rome pre-eminent. It was a virtual
museum city, and soon archaeologists were unearthing its buried
treasures. Sixtus IV in 1471 established a Capitoline Museum to house
ancient statuary; he also forbade the exportation of antiquities from the
city. Julius II obtained many rarities, including the Apollo Belvedere and
Laocoön. Leo X filled the Cortile Garden near the Vatican with statues and
in 1515 made Raphael his superintendent of antiquities. A dozen years
later, Rome fell to a Lutheran army, and for a time leadership in art
collecting moved elsewhere. 3

Perhaps the most renowned collector of the first half of the seventeenth
century was Charles I of England. As Prince of Wales, he had visited the
Spanish court and sat for Velázquez. About 1627 he made an astonishing
coup by purchasing for some £80,000 the collection that the Gonzaga
family had accumulated at Mantua in more than a century. On the advice
of Rubens, he bought Raphael's seven original cartoons for The Acts of the
Apostles tapestries. At its height, Charles's collection contained 1,387
pictures and 399 sculptures, with works by Raphael, Correggio, Tin-
toretto, Titian, Leonardo, and many other Italian, German, and Flemish
masters. He was also a patron of Rubens and Van Dyck. As the Reverend
Mr. William Gilpin justly said: "Charles was a scholar, a man of taste, a
gentleman and a Christian; he was everything but a king. The art of
reigning was the only art of which he was ignorant." Two of Charles's
friends and associates were also collectors—discerning Thomas Howard,
earl of Arundel, and flamboyant George Francis Villiers, duke of Bucking-
ham. But all their holdings were largely dissipated when Buckingham
was assassinated, Arundel exiled to the continent, and Charles be-
headed. The Puritan Parliament in the 1650s, by private sale and public
auction, disposed of most of Charles's choice treasures, and many of
them made their way into the possession of the king of France. 4

The French royal art collection began to grow when the Queen Mother
Marie de Medici called Rubens to Paris in 1622 to depict the most glorious
scenes from her life in twenty-one great pictures. Two French prime
ministers were passionate lovers of art and contended that a great
collection was a valuable symbol of royal authority. Cardinal Richelieu
not only helped his king acquire Italian and French art, but also
constructed in Paris the Palais Cardinal (today the Palais Royal) to house
his own jewels and religious plate, 500 paintings, 50 statues, bronzes,
tapestries, textiles, furniture, and Chinese lacquers and
porcelains. He left the palace and collection to the king. Richelieu's
successor, Cardinal Mazarin, was a knowing connoisseur, and he
had some mischievous attributes; he used to let his jewels flow through
his hands. He feared that rival collector, Queen Christina of Sweden, and
engaged his business manager, Jean Baptiste Colbert, to "keep that crazy
woman out of my cabinets . . . for one could so easily take some of my
small paintings." When near death, Mazarin paced about his collection
in his nightshirt, grieving: "I must leave all this. What trouble I had to
acquire these things! I'll never see them again where I'm going." He left
his paintings, the cream of which Louis XIV purchased. The Cologne
banker Everhard Jabach, sole supplier of buff leather to royal armies, had
a passion for drawings, but, during a financial crisis, sold the king 101
paintings and 5,542 drawings. Colbert himself, a skillful administrator,
deserves great credit for building the royal art collection. 5

The Hapsburgs, as Holy Roman Emperors, could draw on the German
and Italian states, Spain, and the Low Countries. Rudolph II, one of the
greatest connoisseurs of his day, had a magnificent collection in his
Hradcan Castle in Prague. This mentally-ill emperor hid his paintings
from public view. During the Thirty Years War, Gustavus Adolphus of
Sweden, emulating the Roman conquerors and foreshadowing Napo-
leon, captured Prague and removed many of Rudolph's treasures to
Stockholm. Gustavus's daughter, Queen Christina, in 1654 renounced
her throne and took most of the finest Hapsburg paintings with her when
she embraced Catholicism and settled in Rome. In Spain, the Hapsburgs
acquired Italian, German, Flemish, and Spanish paintings for their
palaces at the Prado, Escorial, and Alcazar. Charles V and Philip II had
Titian as their court painter and art adviser, and Philip IV, Rubens and
Velázquez. Archduke Leopold-Wilhelm of Brussels built an admirable
collection of paintings (which he later took to Vienna) with David
Teniers the younger as keeper and adviser. 6

During the eighteenth century, the tide of collecting shifted to Eng-
land. Her commercial empire brought the profits that enabled her
nobility to build great country houses and allowed titled young Eng-
lishmen to take the Grand Tour to the continent and Italy. The stately
homes of England fused the best of architecture, landscape design,
paintings and sculpture, and rich furnishings into a unified, artistic
style. London outstripped Amsterdam as an art market and threatened
the supremacy of Paris. On the continent, Saint Petersburg joined the list
of great art centers. Peter the Great acquired some art, including the solid
gold jewelry found in prehistoric Siberian tombs, but Catherine the
Great was a compulsive collector, "a glutton," as she called herself. Represented at all important auctions and frequently buying collections en bloc, by 1785 she owned 2,658 paintings and, in order to house them, had begun building the Hermitage (1767) on the banks of the Neva in Saint Petersburg.7

Thus, during the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries, hundreds of devoted collectors gathered and preserved objects that today are found in the great art museums of the Western World. The flow of art objects from their creators through different ownerships to their present resting places has created many exciting chapters of art history.

The Earliest Museums

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, private collections slowly developed into museums. Before that time, collectors had occasion-ally allowed visitors to see their treasures; the Medici, for example, did so at least as early as the sixteenth century. The arrangements usually were privately made and often required a large tip to a servant.8 In Rome in 1773 Pope Clement XIV opened the Pio-Clementine Museum; it contained the Vatican collection largely as we know it today.9 The famed Farnese collection accumulated by Cardinal Farnese (later Pope Paul III) was left to Charles of Bourbon, king of the Two Sicilies, in 1735 and formed the core of the National Museum in Naples; that museum also received much rich material excavated at Herculaneum and Pompeii.10 The Uffizi Palace at Florence in 1743 secured the Medici collection of paintings under the will of Anna Maria Ludovica, the daughter of Cosimo III. By 1795 the Uffizi had become a true art gallery, with the paintings arranged by schools.11

The Hapsburg collection in Vienna under Emperor Charles VI in the 1720s had been given elaborate frames and ordered according to over-all symmetry and color, with individual paintings cut down or enlarged in size to conform to the arrangement. About 1776 the painter Rosalba began to reinstall the collection in the Belvedere Palace. He called in Chrétien de Mechem from Basel, who restored the paintings to their original sizes in simple frames, arranged them chronologically according to schools, and produced a catalogue. In 1781 the public was admitted three times a week to view the collection.12

France was slow to show the royal holdings of pictures. Under Louis XIV, the gardens of Versailles were open to the public, and one could easily visit the palace and its paintings if equipped with a plumed hat and sword, which could be rented from the caretaker. Louis XV in 1750 exhibited 110 paintings and drawings in Paris at the Luxembourg Palace, and the public was admitted twice a week. There was a constant rotation among the intellectuals of the Enlightenment to open a perma-nent picture gallery, and the Palace of the Louvre was usually suggested to the appropriate place. Diderot, in his Encyclopédie (1765), stated that the Louvre ought to rival the famed Mouseion of Alexandria.

Louis XVI in 1774 appointed Count d'Angiviller Director General of Public Buildings. D'Angiviller moved at once to prepare the royal collection for exhibition and eventually chose for this purpose the great gallery of the Louvre that paralleled the Seine. He had the paintings named, repaired, and reframed, filled in gaps—especially of the Flemish and Dutch schools—and appointed the painter Hubert Robert keeper of the royal collection. The count created a commission of experts on museum problems. The commission prescribed overhead lighting and, for fire protection, that brick and iron be used wherever possible, as well as fire-resistant walls and a lightning conductor, an innovation popular in that day. But d'Angiviller was indecisive in carrying out the recommendations, and the gallery was not yet open when the French Revolution started.13

There were other scattered prototype museums. Basel probably had the first university art collection; in 1661 the city bought the Amerbach cabinet that contained some excellent Holbeins; they were exhibited a decade later in the university library.14 German collections were opened at Düsseldorf, Munich, Kassel, and Dresden about 1750.15 The collection of the Tradesmans became the first English museum, the Ashmolean, at Oxford University in its own building, 1683, but it was composed chiefly of natural history specimens with little art.16 Sir Hans Sloane's collection, opened as the British Museum in 1759, contained some miniatures, drawings, and archaeological objects, but was devoted chiefly to natural history. The radical John Wilkes tried to join a National Gallery to the British Museum in 1777 with the Walpole Collection from Houghton Hall as a nucleus, but Parliament refused, and the collection went to Catherine the Great.17

Revolution and the Louvre

The Palace of the Louvre in Paris, opened to the public during the French Revolution, may be regarded as the first great national art museum. The cataclysm of revolution destroyed some art objects, which, of course, could be considered hated symbols of the aristocratic regime, but fortunately the leaders who overthrew the old order argued that the
nation's art belonged to all the people of the new society created under the democratic ideals of liberty, equality, and brotherhood. The Louvre was to be the capstone of a system of museums to serve the common man and woman of the new Republic.

The National Museum, a "Monument Dedicated to the Love and Study of the Arts," was opened at the Louvre on August 10, 1793, the first anniversary of the fall of the monarchy. Its Grande Galerie exhibited 537 paintings on the walls and 184 art objects on tables in the middle of the hall. Three-fourths of them came from the royal palaces, most of the remainder from churches and religious orders, and a scattering from the emigrés. In the new decade, the ten-day period that had replaced the week, the museum reserved five days for artists and copyists, two for cleaning, and three for the general public. So popular were the public days that the crowds of visitors attracted swarms of enterprising prostitutes, and street lights had to be installed at the approaches.

The pictures were hung frame to frame from floor to ceiling by schools but within the schools according to the old miscellaneous principle; there were no labels, so that the museum was a confusing labyrinth for the untutored visitor. The hall was lighted by windows from two sides, and on bright days pictures were exposed to too much sunlight. Fortunately, Hubert Robert, former keeper of the royal collection, was respected in the new order and managed to maintain tolerable standards of housekeeping and conservation. The Louvre was in such bad structural condition that it had to be closed in May 1796, not to open fully again until July 14, 1801. The Grande Galerie was then more rationally arranged on a chronological principle; a few years later, marble columns and statues divided the long vista of the gallery, and overhead lighting was obtained.18

The victorious revolutionary armies brought art treasures to France. Many masterpieces were requisitioned from Antwerp, Brussels, and other cities when Belgium was overrun in 1794. The radical artist Luc Barbier, one of the requisitioning commissioners, melodramatically justified this pillage of "the immortal works left us by the brush of Rubens, Van Dyck and other founders of the Flemish school" because "it is in the bosom of free folk that the works of celebrated men should remain; the tears of slaves are unworthy of their glory."19

General Bonaparte's Italian campaign of 1796-1797 was even more successful in adding to the French national collections of the Louvre, the Bibliothèque Nationale, and the Jardin des Plantes. He took a commission of scholars with him—a mathematician, a chemist, a botanist, two painters, a sculptor, and an archaeologist—to appropriate "goods of scientific nature" that included books, paintings, scientific instruments, typefaces, wild animals, and natural curiosities from all Italy. In July 1798 a triumphal procession brought the loot of the campaign to Paris, enormous chariots bearing the paintings in huge cases labeled with large letters, and massive carts transporting statues decked with laurel wreaths, flowers, and flags. There were exotic animals in cages and camels led by their keepers. Military detachments, members of the Institut de France, museum administrators, art professors, and typesetters marched in the parade. The vehicles formed a circle in the Champs de Mars three lines deep around a monument to Liberty, and the thundering cheers of the packed spectators. Among the choicest items were the famed four Bronze Horses from Saint Mark's Basilica in Venice; they were placed above the Arc de Triomphe of the Carrousel in the Tuileries Gardens. The Louvre received the Apollo Belvedere, Laocoön, Dying Gaul, Raphael's Transfiguration, and Correggio's Saint Jerome.20

One blessing may have arisen from this seizure of art by the French armies. Many of the paintings were in bad repair, not having been treated since their creation. A conservation workshop in the Louvre knew how to clean and restore paintings and understood the rebacking process that had been perfected in Italy and France about fifty years earlier. At any rate, the French authorities used conservation partially to justify their confiscation of the paintings.21

Napoleon and National Glory

Shortly before Napoleon decided to invade Egypt in 1798, he met Baron Dominique Vivant-Denon at a party. Denon was a charmer, a favorite of Madame de Pompadour. He had held diplomatic posts in Russia at the Court of Catherine the Great, in Switzerland, and at Naples. Napoleon and Denon became close friends, and Denon, though in his fifties, went on the Egyptian campaign. His scholarship helped Napoleon choose superb museum objects, including the Rosetta Stone that was afterwards captured on its way to France by Lord Nelson and sent to the British Museum. Denon also aroused general admiration by his reckless coolness under fire. In 1800 Napoleon visited the Louvre for the first time and soon insisted that Denon be placed in charge of the museums of France and of all artistic services. In 1803 the Louvre became the Musée Napoleon, a name it retained until the emperor's downfall.

Denon made a superb museum director. Endowed with brilliant imagination, personable address, and restless energy, he fought success-
fully to win appropriations for the Louvre and to make it the greatest picture gallery the world had ever seen. Painters and sculptors from all over Europe flocked to view its holdings. Denon used the Salon Carré as a recent accessions room to show off the latest looted masterpieces. In one part of the Grande Galerie, he exhibited sixteen paintings by Raphael, grouped around the great Transfiguration. The Louvre also had more than four hundred statues, busts, and bas-reliefs, and only Nelson's victory at Trafalgar kept Lord Elgin's Parthenon marbles from Denon's custody.

Always the accomplished courtier, Denon made the best of the requisitioned masterpieces; in 1803 he saved the unveiling of the Venus de Medici from Florence for Napoleon's birthday. Occasionally, he had trouble with his patron. In 1810 Napoleon gave him three weeks' notice that his marriage to Marie Louise of Austria was to take place in the Salon Carré and the wedding procession was to pass through the Grande Galerie before six thousand spectators. When Denon protested that The Marriage at Cana by Veronese was too large to move from the gallery, Napoleon suggested that he could burn it. Denon took some of the larger canvases off their stretchers and rolled them; he covered others with handsome cloths. The wedding was a memorable spectacle.22 Napoleon and Denon, between them, devised a comprehensive museum system for France and her conquered satellites. Denon always sought the greatest masterpieces for the Louvre, but Napoleon made the final decisions, based on political expediency. As early as 1800, he had agreed to place paintings in the provincial cities of France that then included Brussels, Mainz, and Geneva. Eventually twenty-two cities benefited from the distribution of 1,508 paintings. Several museums were planned for Italian cities, though only the Brera Gallery in Milan, opened in 1809, was successfully organized; it received confiscations from throughout northern Italy. Napoleon's raids in Germany and Austria produced booty that included 299 pictures from Kassel, 60 from Berlin and Potsdam, and 250 from the Belvedere Palace in Vienna.

Sometimes, reaction against French looting led to the establishment of museums. Thus, Louis Napoleon, king of Holland, founded the Koninklijk Museum (forerunner of the present Rijksmuseum) at Amsterdam in 1808. In Madrid, Joseph Bonaparte, king of Spain, worked with the artist Goya to keep the finest Spanish paintings from the clutches of Napoleon and Denon; later, in 1819, the collection was installed in the Prado and opened to the public. In 1813 Wellington captured paintings from the royal collection taken by Joseph on his flight from Spain. The duke offered to return them, but the Spanish govern-
paintings, of which he wished 302 distributed in the provinces. Public funds and private gifts—the organization called Friends of the Louvre was formed in 1897—continued to add to its comprehensive holdings.25

Great Britain did not establish its National Gallery in London until 1824. For forty years, efforts had been made to secure an art museum for the nation, and in the end the Royal Academy (1768) and the British Institution (1805) marshaled enough sentiment to carry the day. The National Gallery was unusual in that it did not grow from a royal collection. The fact that thirty-eight great pictures collected by the late John Julius Angerstein were up for sale triggered the establishment of the gallery; Sir George Beaumont, himself a collector of note, persuaded the prime minister, Lord Dover, to have the nation pay £57,000 for the Angerstein pictures. Soon, the present building of the National Gallery was under construction on Trafalgar Square, to be opened by Queen Victoria in 1838. The gallery admitted the public four days per week, but the rooms were often dark because no artificial light was provided; on two days, not more than fifty students were allowed to copy the pictures. The gallery also closed on Sundays and for six weeks each year for cleaning purposes. Until after World War I, the pictures were crowded together from floor to ceiling. An outstanding director of the gallery at mid-century was Charles Lock Eastlake, a painter and pioneer student of painting conservation. All in all, British collectors and artists generously supported the National Gallery, which may claim to represent most comprehensively the history of European painting.26

In Germany, the Hohenzollerns of Prussia backed the creation of one of the world’s greatest museum centers in Berlin on a peninsula formed by the Spree and Kupfergraben rivers. This Museum Island, as it was called, contained an Alte Museum (1830) built around the collection of an eccentric English connoisseur, Edward Solly, who sold three thousand paintings to Frederick William III; a Neue Museum (1859) with Egyptian collection, antique ceramics, and national antiquities; a National Galerie (1876) for modern German art; the Kaiser Friederich Museum of Western Art (1904); and the Schloss Museum (1921), the royal Hohenzollern Castle turned into a Museum for the Decorative Arts. Most impressive of all was a group of monumental buildings (1907–1930) that contained the Pergamon Museum, with its Great Altar of Pergamon, one wing devoted to the Museum of German Art and another to the Near East Museum. Many of the buildings of the island complex were connected by covered footbridges. Dr. Wilhelm von Bode joined the staff of the museums in 1872 and served for fifty years, after 1905 as general director. A learned art historian with encyclopedic knowledge of the art market and great diplomatic and administrative talent, he raised the Berlin museums to high levels attained by those of Paris and London.

The rise of Hitler brought increasing disaster to the Museum Island. Ludwig Justi, the long-respected director of the National Galerie, was dismissed, “degenerate” modern art was removed and in some cases destroyed, and many Jewish staff members were discharged. World War II entirely ruined the Neue Museum and Schloss Museum; other buildings were gutted by fire, and 1,353 paintings were lost. The partition of Berlin brought further trouble for the Museum Island, which was situated in East Berlin. Many of its holdings had been stored in salt mines or other sanctuaries. Those captured by the Western armies went to West Germany, and thus a great many paintings once on the island are today housed in West Berlin’s Museum Dahlem. The Russians took many of the collections with them for safekeeping but returned them in excellent condition to East Germany in 1958.

Justi came back to the Museum Island as director in 1948 and with his devoted staff worked hard to restore the museums to their former appearance. The Kaiser Wilhelm Museum was fittingly renamed the Pergamon Museum. Work on the Pergamon Museum, National Galerie, and Alte Museum was substantially completed. Once more the Museum Island is open to the public, with most of its greatest treasures restored and in place. They include the Façade of the Kassite Temple of Ur (c. 1415 B.C.); the Processional Way, Ishtar Gate, and Old Palace Throne Room of Babylon (c. 580 B.C.); the Great Altar of Pergamon (180–160 B.C.); the Market Gate of Miletus (c. A.D. 165); the Façade of the Mshatta Desert Palace (743–744); and the Prayer Niche from the Maydan Mosque of Kashan (1226).27

Munich is virtually a museum city, for King Louis I of Bavaria planned to make it a second Rome. The Glyptothek (1830) contains the Aeginetan pediments from the Temple of Aphaia; the Alte Pinakotheke (1836), a rich collection of old masters; and the Neue Pinakotheke (1853), the Schack Gallery, and New State Gallery, more modern art. The Bavarian National Museum (1867) has historical paintings, decorative art, and period rooms, and the Residence, the former palace opened as a museum in 1920, possesses a rich treasury of exquisitely jeweled pieces. Dresden had a great picture gallery and other museum rarities that are still intact, though this East German city suffered the worst air raids of World War II.28

Catherine’s huge collection in the Hermitage at Saint Petersburg (today Leningrad) was more properly housed in a great palace built by Czar Nicholas I in the 1840s. The Berlin museum director and art
Historian Gustav Waagen was called in to arrange the pictures and do a catalogue (1863). Visitors were allowed, but up until 1866, they needed to wear full dress, on the theory that they were visiting the czar and only incidentally the museum. The czars continued to collect great masterpieces, and the coming of the 1917 revolution gave the new Soviet Union control of rich art collections from throughout the old empire. Museums, historical monuments, and art treasures were nationalized. Some old masters were sold to raise much-needed funds for economic necessities, but the Hermitage remains one of the greatest art museums of the world, with Scythian goldwork; Greek vases obtained from sites on the northern Black Sea coast; Oriental, Egyptian, Babylonian, Assyrian, Near East, and Russian antiquities; and a comprehensive painting collection of high excellence.  

A specialized form of art museum collected and exhibited modern art, as, for example, the Luxembourg Palace (1818) in Paris, superseded by the National Museum of Modern Art (1937), recently moved to the new Centre Georges Pompidou, or Beaubourg, the Neue Pinakothek (1853) in Munich; the National Galerie (1876) in Berlin; and the National Gallery of British Art (1897) in London, now the Tate Gallery. Another specialized museum was devoted to the decorative arts—architecture, furniture, metalwork, ceramics, glass, textiles, and the like. The Great Exhibition at South Kensington in London, the first true world’s fair, in 1851 was enormously successful, and the profits (some £186,000) were used to acquire land for a group of museums in the South Kensington area. One of them finally evolved into the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1909. In France, a world’s fair at Paris in 1855 inaugurated a similar interest in the decorative arts, and the Central Society of Decorative Arts established a museum in 1882, later moved to the Marsan Pavilion of the Louvre. Berlin and Vienna also had such museums.

American Models

The art museum was slow to develop in the United States. Pierre Eugène du Simitière and Charles Willson Peale had portraits in their Philadelphia collections in the 1780s, but regarded them more as historical documents than as works of art. So also did the early historical societies, though the New-York Historical Society (1804) had secured the Luman Reed and Thomas J. Bryan collections of American paintings and European old masters by the 1860s. The society planned a museum of antiquities, science, and art, but failed to raise the necessary funds. The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (1805) in Philadelphia not only conducted an art school and held annual exhibitions, but also acquired an outstanding collection of American paintings and sculpture. The Boston Athenæum (1807), though essentially a library, collected paintings and sculptures that it later turned over to the newly established Museum of Fine Arts. In 1832 Yale built the pioneer American college gallery to house the historical paintings of Colonel John Trumbull. Perhaps the first true and continuing art museum in the country was the Wadsworth Atheneum (1842) at Hartford, Connecticut, which displayed about eighty works by Trumbull, Thomas Cole, and other Americans. The year 1870 saw a break-through for American art museums, with the establishment of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. They were followed within the decade by the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, the Pennsylvania (now Philadelphia) Museum of Art, and the Art Institute of Chicago. Other leading encyclopedic art collections in the United States today include the Brooklyn Museum (1893), Cleveland Museum of Art (1916), and National Gallery of Art (1937) in Washington. A closer examination of the Metropolitan and the Museum of Fine Arts will reveal the chief forces in the development of comprehensive American art museums. The purposes of the Metropolitan, clearly expressed in Joseph C. Choate’s dedication speech of 1880, were to gather together a more or less complete collection of objects illustrative of the history of art in all its branches, from the earliest beginnings to the present time, which should serve not only for the instruction and entertainment of the people, but also show to the students and artisans of every branch of industry, in the high and acknowledged standards of form and color, what the past has accomplished for them to imitate and excel.

The Metropolitan was greatly influenced by the South Kensington (today the Victoria and Albert) Museum in London, as also was the Museum of Fine Arts, one of whose founders wrote: “The designer needs a museum of art, as the man of letters needs a library, or the botanist a herbarium.” Both museums agreed that few masterpieces were available to them, and in the field of sculpture, they began to gather plaster casts of famed originals. A delay in the arrival by sea of fifty cases of casts and an amusing debate about the placement of fig leaves on nude statues accompanied the opening of the Museum of Fine Arts, and in 1883 the first large money bequest to the Metropolitan was earmarked for the purchase of architectural casts.

The Metropolitan Museum and the American Museum of Natural History were responsible for a partnership arrangement between city
government and private board of trustees that has been followed by nearly one hundred American museums, though not by the Museum of Fine Arts, which has refused until recently to accept public funds. The two New York museums in 1871 planned to erect a building together and secured the signatures of the owners of more than half of the real estate of the city on a petition asking the state legislature to authorize the city to tax itself $500,000 for this purpose. The two boards sent emissaries to visit William Marcy Tweed, the city’s representative in Albany. Impressed by the standing of the petitioners, “Boss” Tweed had Peter Barr Sweeney, the city chamberlain, reputed to be the brains of the Tweed Ring, work out an important compromise under which the city agreed to erect and take title to the building (and later to maintain it), and the trustees would own and control the collections. As it turned out, the two museums built separate structures, but an important pattern of museum organization had been established.37

The Metropolitan and the Museum of Fine Arts have helped define what a comprehensive art museum should contain. General Louis P. di Cenola, who became the first director of the Metropolitan in 1879, had been the United States consul on the island of Cyprus; he sold the Metropolitan two collections of classical antiquities he had excavated and also sold a smaller accumulation to the Boston museum. J. P. Morgan became president of the Metropolitan in 1904, and by the time of his death in 1913, the museum had acquired important Greek art, made numerous archaeological expeditions to Egypt, secured an outstanding collection of armor, and received the Benjamin Altman bequest of about two thousand masterpiece paintings and Chinese porcelains valued at $15 million. Morgan himself shocked the Metropolitan by failing to leave it his own collection, perhaps the greatest assembled in modern times, though his son eventually donated about 40 percent of its treasures.38

In 1924 the president of the Metropolitan, Robert W. de Forest, and Mrs. de Forest gave the museum its American Wing, which housed colonial and federal period rooms and a distinguished collection of decorative arts. The American Wing has had great influence upon both art and history museums, and this kind of collection reached new heights with the opening of the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum in Delaware in 1951. In 1938 the Metropolitan also added to its exhibits the Cloisters, on a lofty site in Fort Tryon Park facing the Hudson River. George Gray Barnard, the sculptor, had begun this collection of architectural elements and sculpture from medieval cloisters, and John D. Rockefeller, Jr., presented the park to the city and paid for erecting, furnishing, and endowing the Cloisters. During World War II a great

collection of musical instruments, acquired as early as 1889, was rejuvenated and beautifully displayed at the Metropolitan; in 1941 a Junior Museum was established with its own exhibits and support facilities; and in 1946 the Metropolitan absorbed the ten-year-old Museum of Costume Art and installed it as the Costume Institute with sixteen thousand items dating from 1690. Recently, the Metropolitan has carried out a major expansion of its building with a greatly enlarged American Wing and new wings for the Robert Lehman Collection of three thousand items of paintings, tapestries, bronzes, and other objects; for Nelson A. Rockefeller’s vast collection of primitive art; and for the Temple of Dendur from Egypt. The museum has been well described as “a sort of cultural coral reef, always growing and changing.”39

The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston did not have the great wealthy patrons of the Metropolitan but, instead, had a host of devoted, well-to-do collectors who worked with knowledgeable curators to build a strong collection. The most remarkable of its holdings and perhaps the finest in the world is its Oriental art. Edward S. Morse and Ernest Fenollosa of Salem and Dr. William Sturgis Bigelow of Boston in the 1870s and ’80s journeyed to Japan to collect ceramics, statuary, and paintings that eventually went to the museum, and Chinese, Korean, Indian, and other Near and Far Eastern art found an appreciative home there. The museum also acquired Egyptian materials, mainly through Harvard-Boston archaeological expeditions, and was for a time the leading purchaser of Greek, Roman, and Etruscan antiquities. In addition to a comprehensive collection of European and American painting, the museum’s holdings of textiles, American decorative arts, and prints are of high quality. Its building on the Fenway, opened in 1908, was planned with great care and constituted a noble experiment in trying to separate the more popular display of outstanding masterpieces from study collections accessible to scholars.40

These recitals of American collecting could be multiplied manifold, for by 1971–1972 there were 340 art museums in the United States. The combination of private beneficence, city maintenance, and federal tax laws that encouraged private support had produced some of the greatest art museums of the world. And not only encyclopedic art museums, but also three museums of modern art that have made New York City the center of today’s art world. First came the Museum of Modern Art, familiarly known as MOMA (1929). Founded by Miss Lizzie Bliss, Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and Mrs. Cornelius J. Sullivan, it hired a dynamic director, Alfred H. Barr, Jr. He sold New Yorkers on French postimpressionism (Cézanne, Seurat, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Picasso, and
others) and on Bauhaus modernism, bringing together the visual arts, including architecture, industrial design, film, photography, graphics, and typography. At about the same time, Mrs. Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, assisted by the energetic and witty Mrs. Juliana Force, crowned their efforts to assist American militantly modern painters by establishing the Whitney Museum of American Art (1930). Still another aspect of modern art—this one glorifying the abstract art of Wassily Kandinsky and others—was served with the opening of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (1939), financed by Guggenheim and directed by Hilla Rebay, baroness von Ehrenwiesen. These three museums were largely responsible for the enthusiasm of Americans for modern art and the rise of the New York School of Abstract Expressionism. They continue to give radical artists opportunities to show their work, though the difficulty of exhibiting their growing collections reminds one of Gertrude Stein's alleged remark that a museum can either be a museum or be modern, but it cannot be both.41

Educational Purpose

The charter or constitution of nearly every American art museum puts emphasis upon its educational aims—often specialized teaching for artists, craftsmen, and industrial designers but always general instruction for the public. In the 1870s the contemplation of art was sometimes considered a means of fighting vice and crime by providing "attractive entertainment of an innocent and improving character." Classes for artists and craftsmen and lecture series for the public were established at once, and comprehensive educational programs with emphasis upon co-operation with the public schools soon followed. Henry Watson Kent, appointed assistant secretary of the Metropolitan Museum in 1905, brought order and efficiency to its total operation, but was especially devoted to the educational program. Soon made supervisor of education, Kent organized gallery lectures, a lantern-slide collection, publications including a Bulletin, programs for visiting school groups, traveling exhibitions to schools, Saturday-morning story hours (sometimes with costumed clowns), and radio programs for handicapped children. Today the Metropolitan has not only a separate Junior Museum but a varied educational program that reaches numerous students and adult groups from preschool to postgraduate.42

The Museum of Fine Arts, in carrying out its aim "of offering instruction in the Fine Arts," promptly opened a School of Drawing and Painting in 1876, and then its secretary, Benjamin Ives Gilman, starting

in 1906, established a lecture room, published a handbook, and appointed a docent who would take groups of ten persons on one-hour interpretive tours every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday morning. On Thursday afternoons curators and visiting scholars would hold conferences to discuss the collections, and storytelling sessions were provided for disadvantaged children.43 Almost every American museum today offers a broad-based educational program, and an in-depth survey in 1971–1972 found that 92 percent of art museum directors rated as very important the provision of educational experiences for the public.44

Problems of the Art Museum

The art museum has had considerable difficulty in appearing relevant to the general public. In 1867 Honoré Daumier drew a caricature of a French working-class family gazing at an Egyptian frieze of gods with human torsos but heads of pigs, cocks, elephants, and storks; one of the family was remarking: "The Egyptians certainly weren't good-looking." A recent French study found that art museums were only appreciated by the more elevated classes of society, and that two-thirds of the ordinary visitors were confused, bored, and unable to recall the name of a single work or artist that had impressed them. On the other hand, recent surveys in New York City and upstate Rochester have found art museum audiences praising museums heartily and visiting them frequently. Still, museum boards of trustees today often are accused of elitism, and with museum support coming more from public funds or entrance fees, greater relevance and even decentralization of holdings is demanded for minority, ethnic, poor, and disadvantaged groups.45

The place of modern art in museum collections and modern artists in museum programs often presents a prickly problem. The Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum were organized to collect contemporary art when the staid Metropolitan was reluctant to do so. In 1947 the three museums agreed to a loose designation of collecting fields, from which the Whitney withdrew in a year and the Modern after five years. The Metropolitan set up its own Department of Contemporary Art in 1967. The Cleveland Museum of Art (1916) purchased contemporary art from the beginning, especially from its May Show for Cleveland artists; despite public criticism of "art by anthropoid apes," "dirty and foul canvases," "degenerate art," and "meaningless emptiness," the museum always has exhibited abstract and other modern art. One director said, perhaps somewhat sadly, "There is nothing which says that a work of art is only something which we can recognize."46
The museum's pluralistic purposes also create difficulties. When an art museum needs to choose among the functions of collection, conservation, research, exhibition, and interpretation, and today perhaps also the performing arts, community services to disadvantaged and minority groups, and multimedia happenings, the less spectacular activities, especially conservation and research, may be neglected.

American art museums have developed differing and sometimes conflicting philosophies about their aims. Benjamin Henry Latrobe of Boston insisted that art museums differ from science and history museums in that their collections exist to allow their viewers to experience beauty rather than to convey information. This aesthetic emphasis in a sense meant "art for art's sake," not education. John Cotton Dana of Newark had a very different idea—to emphasize art in the everyday activities of the community, to make immigrant and minority groups as well as factory workers proud of their culture and their products, to show how even wares sold in five- and ten-cent stores could be well designed; in short, to define the museum as an instrument for community betterment. Francis Henry Taylor of the Metropolitan added still another dimension to the argument, namely, that art objects are important and veracious documents of culture history. He held that items of lesser quality were as necessary for an art museum as outstanding creations. "Beautiful and important as it is, the masterpiece cannot stand alone. It is a prima donna which must have a supporting cast and chorus to speak Authoritatively for the time and place of its creation." Taylor also joined Dana in urging museums to render more adequate service to the ordinary visitors, who had become bored and "had their bellyfull of prestige and pink Tennessee marble." Sherman E. Lee, director of the Cleveland Museum of Art, has decided that the museum has three functions—preservation, exhibition, and research and education—and that the greatest of these is preservation, "the basic need of the present and of posterity." One should notice, of course, that all of these writers with their differing views of view still pay allegiance to education as a basic museum purpose. Gilman, though insistent that art objects in themselves were aesthetic rather than educational, organized the first docents. Taylor moved the Metropolitan forward in providing broad educational offerings for many parts and all ages of its audience. Lee, though opposed to much gallery interpretation and to peripheral museum happenings, continues to build his museum's pioneering educational programs and has provided them with a beautifully designed and functional educational wing.47

The spread of art museums and art centers throughout the United