History Lab

One must look at museums historically not because method dictates it, but because they are essentially historical. By putting forward an image of the past and managing the handing on of tradition through artworks and artifacts, museums participate in a historical production of history. Historiographic through and through, museums thereby beg the question of their historical appearance, of the role they fulfill toward history, in history.

Broadly speaking, museums are institutions devoted to the protection, preservation, exhibition, and furtherance of what a community agrees to identify as works of artistic or historical value. In them, the artistic and the historical fuse into one seemingly immanent essence. To the museum, the beautiful is inherently historical: it emerges out of the past like a residue or a ruin. The work of art in the age of museums is thus a historical appearance, a principle to which we have grown so accustomed that it almost eludes attention. Hardly anything in the museum is not historical, that is, hallowed by official history and productive of a collective idea of what history is. Even the creation of museums is a historical coup staged on the idea of history itself. Museums in their present form came into being at the turn of the nineteenth century, during the cultural secularization of history. Art and historical artifacts were being deprivatized, removed from the princely houses in which they had hitherto rested. The nation became the legitimate vestal of memory and of the past's ruins. Art institutes began cropping up throughout Europe: in France, the Louvre opened in 1793; Spain followed suit in 1820, with the Prado Museum; Britain produced the National Gallery in 1824 and the British Museum in 1852; and in Berlin, the Altes Museum was founded in 1830. This bracketing of art into the autonomous sphere of museums complements the movement that hands art over to the expertise of historical science, to the investigations of historiographic study and the minutiae of scholarship. This process takes place concretely in the establishing of academies and institutes, in the museification of music via repertoires, in the annexation of literature by philological studies. Art in the nineteenth century becomes an object of historical expertise.

Curiously, whereas the museum in today's world is associated with
cultural preservation, it first appeared as a means of social renewal: as a way of breaking, rather than bonding, with the ways of the past. The museum was meant to further the momentum of a historical punctum, in reaction against history conceived as the politics of the status quo. The Louvre Museum, founded in 1793, illustrates the revolutionary thrust of the museum as institution: its initial purpose was to exhibit the spoils wrested from the aristocracy by the Revolution. Art, hitherto the plaything of noblemen, high clerics, and princes, suddenly became the official property of the nation. The opening of the king’s palace to a crowd of visitors on August 10, 1793—the anniversary of the fall of the monarchy—demonstrates the political symbolism of the museum. Conceived as a pedagogical tool for the people, the revolutionary museum was an instrument consolidating a newly revamped national character, promoting the myth of a nation’s innate “genius” as well as the image of a grand historical destiny. In the museum, history assumes the paternalistic countenance of fate: it tells the awed visitor that all stages of the past belong to a necessary pattern of reason, triumph, and order; that all as it should be on the stage of world history. It is all constructed as a pageant of high artistic and historical moments, and history is viewed as an uninterrupted series of climaxs. The museum makes history into its own reason and justification. Its ecumenical mission of encompassing history is political insofar as it fulfills the essence of politics, to wit, the fantasy projection of a reconciled polis (Baudelaire wryly said that “a national museum is a communion whose gentle influence softens people’s hearts”). History becomes myth: that is, an image that gathers people and summons an identity.

Initiated under these political auspices, the museum immediately had the effect of politicizing the contents of artworks. The Revolutionary Louvre Museum selected artworks partly on the basis of their potential for providing political instruction to the public. Civic, republican values were never far from mind when the Louvre’s first curators decided which pictures to hang. The museum is often regarded as a symptom of art’s autonomization in modern times. Yet such autonomization ironically began when art was assigned a political mission. However neutral the museum estheticization of art appears to be, it is nonetheless fraught with political overtones. Art is not the only thing that the museum neutralizes: as a powerful propaganda instrument, it also reifies collective identity by con-
of culture and, as such, an instrument of collective identification. The intensely private language of the work of art collaborates, in the museum context, with what such art may once have stood against: the forces of historical preservation, that is, tradition and the political status quo. Yet the reinscription of art into a socially meaningful language must be more than good politics; people must also believe such reinscription to be in the best interest of art. Otherwise the museum would lose the reputation of protector of the arts, which makes good advertising for its sponsors, national and corporate. Apart from its political function, which was rarely avowed, the nineteenth-century museum assumed a disinterested artistic task: that of preserving, protecting, and restoring works of art and generally rescuing them from the abusive treatment of historical events, mercantile interests, infelicitous conditions, haphazard relocation, and so forth. Salvaging artifacts from history, however, is itself a historical gesture, on three counts: it takes place in history; it passes a judgment on history; it grants artworks a historical character. To decree that the museum piece is an object henceforth removed from historical becoming turns that object into a sacrament of history, a history so absolute as to be above historical being itself. The museum artifact is crowned with a historical aura of such sacredness that history itself, in its becoming, cannot touch it: art stops living the bad history of historical becoming and attains the transcendental history of a historical invariant. This sublimation of history affects the artistic material. The museum absorbs all particularities—works at every stage of their production, pieces of sculpture severed from larger ensembles, works that may have been disowned, or left unfinished—and makes them into precipitates of artistic essence. The museum conveys upon artifacts the sanctity of an eternal judgment: how they look here is how they always have looked and how they always should look. Objecthood is invested with the aura of fate. Thus the museum is historical and ahistorical: the former because it actively shapes the historical becoming of its collections; the latter because it seeks to raise them into a realm above the vagaries of history, where history itself has come to a stop or has not yet begun.

History, therefore, is not a stream in which museums are thrown, on a par with other cultural formations. Rather, museums manufacture history; they engage its image and concept. They claim as historical that which survives history. History is what perdures above and beyond historical becoming, the museum seems to say. History is what escapes the material forces at work in history; what challenges history by means of history.

Pointing Fingers

Museum preservation and exhibition invite us to reflect on the concept of history. History in the museum is no longer the space where one dwells, the objects we touch and live with; it is a spectacle objectively removed. Museums thus lead us to ask: Is history to be conceived as historical living, that is, as immanence within a tradition? Or is history an objectified spectacle, a way of holding tradition as a thing? Does true historical being lie in embeddedness within the social, economic, and material forces of evolution? Or is historical being preservation against the tide of these very forces? In short, the debate boils down to whether history is concerned with life or the petrification of life. Here philosophy entered the debate concerning museums, identifying in the museum a new manner of dealing with history and, most of all, of being in history.

Contemporaries of the Louvre’s creation were aware of this fact. Today their voices are heard most intelligibly through the writings of Quatremère de Quincy, a man who occupied for a few decades the center of official cultural discourse in France. Quatremère began his career as an artist, later became an art historian and reigned over the Académie des Beaux-Arts from 1816 until 1839, from whose pinnacle he exerted enormous influence over the current esthetic discourse. A man of the Revolution who in time got in trouble with the Convention, Quatremère witnessed firsthand the cultural upheaval when the self-appointed French State requisitioned artistic and historical artifacts. To him, the foundation of the Louvre Museum did not look like a holy incarnation of manifest destiny, a canonical fixture. In the turbulent and precarious days of the Revolution, the museum seemed rather a cultural coup, a forceful instrument of social engineering. What the museum did to history by wresting artworks from the hands of the few was consonant with the Revolution’s agenda of chopping off centuries of French history. It was a matter of liq-
uidation as much as preservation. Understanding the museum begins with the realization that, at least in France, it began as a revolutionary device. It intended not so much to maintain the past but to assert the rights of the present over the past; it was not a way of paying respect to tradition, but a way of settling accounts with French history.

Thus Quatremère saw history reappropriated as a regular spoil of war. He witnessed history being rationally managed by public policies intent on asserting themselves over the claims of tradition. Democratization of the access to art and high historical culture meant that the private citizen could become a historiographic subject—the rational observer of history rather than its passive subject. In the revolutionary museum, one was no longer subjected to history, as a serf was subjugated to the ancestral rights of the feudal lord; rather, one is addressed by history, as a citizen is invested with the responsibility of managing the past and the nation's destiny. The difference between subjugation to history and rational and esthetic contemplation of history lies in a degree of immanence. The serf had no choice but to bow to the authority of perennial modes of living; his very existence as serf was an admission of the power of tradition, that is, the replication of the status quo understood as a natural process. Insofar as the serf's life acted our history's self-replication, his existence was immanent to history. By contrast, the ideal citizen is theoretically defined by his potential for self-determination and invention. His rapport with history is no longer one of acceptance and inclusion, but rather of observation and criticism: it is a thoughtfully mediated rapport. History is no longer the ground, air, and substance of existence; it is an object of intellectual observation and social experiment. As an object, a piece of reification, it can be put away, stored, held in reserve, managed. In short, it can be placed in a museum.

The realization that history was being alienated first dawned on Quatremère as the revolutionary armies began taking up artworks and artifacts during victorious foreign campaigns. First came the Flemish pictures, requisitioned after the annexation of Belgium; then came the Italian art triumphantly sent home by Napoleon during the Italian campaign (1796), and finally the ancient art pillaged during the Egyptian wars (1798). Already in 1796, Quatremère published "Letters to Miranda on the Displacement of Italian Artistic Monuments," which drew alarmed attention to the cultural damage of dislocating and transplanting artifacts from their places of origin. Having in his youth admired the works of antiquity in their native settings, he found the sight of the Laocoön or the Feodoré Apollo standing in Les Invalides, in Paris, an artistic impiety, a barbaric swindle that tainted the very meaning of culture. Quatremère did not see the museum as preserving art or culture; rather, he saw it as marketing culture from its true context, in living history. Quatremère collected his thoughts and read them publicly in 1806. With the Restoration of 1815, when it was safe to do so, he published them under the title Considérations morales sur la destination des ouvrages de l'art (Moral considerations on the destination of works of art).

This work constitutes social criticism's first full-fledged attempt to respond to the phenomenon of museums. It is a plea for a traditional culture which Quatremère saw badly compromised by the practice of plucking artifacts out of their settings. What underlies Quatremère's protest against museums is the principle of cultural authenticity:

One destroys the vital example of art by taking it out of the public sphere and disassembling the works as it has been done for the last twenty-five years, and then reconstituting the debris in those warehouses called Conservatories. . . . To what wretched destiny do you condemn Art if its products are no longer tied to the immediate needs of society and if its religious and socializing uses are curtailed. . . . You must stop pretending that artworks are preserved in those depositories. You may have carried the material hull there; but it is doubtful you transferred the network of ideas and relations that made the works alive with interest. . . . Their essential merit depended on the beliefs that created them, on the ideas to which they were tied, to the circumstances that explained, to the community of thoughts which gave them their unity. But now who may tell us what those statues mean, purposeless in their attitudes, their expressions turning to caricatures, their circumstances turning into enigmas? What do those effigies, which are now mere matter, mean to me? What are those mausolea without a proper resting place, these cenotaphs twice empty, these graves which even death has deserted?25

By wrenching artifacts out of their original contexts, the museum deprives them of their cultural lifeblood. Once removed from its environment in the church, the temple, or the agora, the statue is neutralized, washed of its cultural, political, religious, spiritual functions. Chateaubriand made the same point in Le Génie du Christianisme:
Each thing must be put in its proper place: this oft-repeated truth is almost trite, yet no perfection may exist without it. The Greeks would not have liked an Egyptian temple in Athens, nor would the Egyptians have liked a Greek temple in Memphis. Once removed, these two monuments would have lost their essential beauty, viz., their connections to the institutions and habits of a people.

Beauty, the value of an artwork, is therefore contextual, dependent on affiliations with use and cultural provenance. This idea is by no means restricted to conservative cultural politics. Even a progressive thinker like Proudhon shares his basic assumption, namely, that culture is circumstantial; he argued that the Obelisk of Luxor lost its commemorative dimension by being transplanted to the Place de la Concorde, where it became just another blank-faced urban gimcrack. In a similar vein, Quatremère writes that, outside of their proper settings, artworks on museum display revert to “mere matter.” Thus despiritualized, the artifact hangs vacantly and meaninglessly (“turning into enigmas”). It is almost as though, in the museum piece, Quatremère feared the experience of the esthetic itself: form without a purposive content, a singular object and, as such, very much an enigma. The stone-faced objects reject all human resonance. Consequently, museified art invites a detached, passive attitude toward artworks. This contemplative attitude is responsible for the deadening reification of artifacts, their becoming fetishes of alienated consciousness:

So many monuments are stripped of their worth just from being displaced! So many works have lost their real value in losing their usage . . . They are currencies only exchanged among scholars. Thus, as one can see everyday, these scattered pieces are condemned to a sterile admiration, these mutilated remains of antiquity, . . . where the antiquity looks for scholarship but where vainly the soul would look for real emotions. They are too far removed from the original destination.  

Deprived of experiential content, the museum objects are mere vessels of dead knowledge, of alienated contemplation. The museum thereby testifies to modernity’s failure to preserve the past unaltered. Abstracted from any context, stripped of living history and shrouded with scholarly history, artifacts lie in the museum as corpses in an ossuary. Culture becomes synonymous with preservation, not production. It sides with the forces of death. Art, as the expression of vital culture, is only there to be contemplated as a hollow shell of its former life:

Replacing all these monuments, collecting their broken fragments, classifying religiously their debris, and making this collection into a modern history course; if this is to constitute oneself into a dead nation; it is like attending one’s burial; killing Art in the name of its historical investigation; it is not writing history, but an epitaph. (Considerations morales 48)

In sepulchral museum culture, history itself seems to bow to the verdict of its own obsolescence. It agrees with the touristic mindset which holds that culture does not really pertain to the present but to a glorious past—which is a feeble past because it cannot survive unaided in the present.

Authenticity

In Quatremère’s critique, the museum is proof that the present has failed to devise an immanent rapport with the past. This alienation between a past embalmed as an image of itself and a present lost in contemplative ennui involves a problem of authenticity. Wrenching the past away from itself, dismembering and classifying it, the museum turns history into a fetish. Despite the respect and awe it commands in the art gallery, history is nevertheless emptied of experiential value. Thus the industrialist who declares all history to be “bunk” can, in the same breath, sign a fat check in support of the local art institute without in the least contradicting himself. For history in the museum is precisely what is kept dead, relevant so long as it safely pertains to what is no more. History in the museum is inauthentic: it has been stripped of its driving power, it convalesces eternally and powerlessly. Thus the problem of authenticity comes to the fore at the moment it suffers a decisive blow. Modern thought invents the principle of cultural authenticity as, actually, nostalgia for authenticity. Modern consciousness, it seems, begins to worry about authenticity only when the social, economic, and political upheavals of revolution, war, and, later, industrialization started liquidating the genuine and the perennial. Authenticity is therefore an embattled concept: it owes its momentum to its negation in the empirical sphere.
Perhaps, then, authenticity in cultural representation is a mirage in the epigone’s mind, a nostalgic illusion of modern consciousness dreaming of a past ideal integration of life and culture, of art and history. Certainly in Quatremère, authenticity becomes a concern because it is endangered: endangerment of authenticity, it seems, is inherent to the concept of authenticity itself.

This perhaps justifies the relevance of Quatremère today: it is not just that his emphatic critique was a watershed in identifying the very notion of culture as an autonomous concept itself worthy of cultural criticism; Quatremère is important because the demise of cultural authenticity he diagnosed became a leitmotiv of cultural criticism in the modern period. It is heard in the ever-repeated, ever-preserving realization that the modern era is ungrounded, cast adrift from the imminent life of tradition, that perennial ties have been broken. Indeed, reflection on the problem of inauthenticity is almost synonymous with modern philosophy of culture. The tenets of Quatremère’s critique surface in Hegel (even if the latter nevertheless managed to turn the disenfranchisement of modern thought into its own panacea, the quantum leap of Spirit over the heads of all previous historical ages). Likewise Nietzsche is unknowingly Quatremérien when, in his Unimely Meditations, he warns that our hyper-romantically sense of historiography so impoverishes culture that it “is not a real culture at all but only a kind of knowledge of culture.” The legacy of Quatremère’s critique is also discernible in Heidegger’s call to rescue Being from inauthenticity by wresting the work of art from the metaphysical discourse of art history and from museums. Heidegger, however, is more of a pessimist than Nietzsche: he deems irreversible the damage done to culture and art by museification:

The Aegina sculptures in the Munich collection . . . are, as works, torn out of their native sphere. . . . Placing them in a collection has withdrawn them from their own world. . . . Their standing before us is still indeed a consequence of, but no longer the same as, their former self-substinance. . . . This self-substinance has fled from them. . . . The works themselves stand and hang in collections and exhibitions. But are they here in themselves as the works they themselves are, or are they not rather here as objects of the art industry? . . . Even when we make an effort to cancel or avoid such displacement of works—when, for instance, we visit the temple in Paestum at its own site or the Bamberg cathedral on its own

from the world of the work that stands there has perished. World-withdrawal and world-decay can never be undone.11

The authentic experience of the Greek work of art as a reconciliation of life and art has given way to the irrevocable petrification of art and culture in modern times. This mood of ontological nostalgia is not restricted to an element of philosophy concerned with overturning metaphysics. Even the Anglo-American pragmatism of John Dewey searches for a similar authentic experience of art:

When artistic objects are separated from both conditions of origin and operation experience, a wall is built around them that renders almost opaque their general significance, with which aesthetic theory deals. Art is remitted to a separate calm, where it is cut off from that association with the materials and aims of other forms of human effect, undergoing and achievement. . . . Our present museums and galleries to which works of fine art are removed and stored illustrate some of the causes that have operated to segregate art instead of finding it an attendant of temple, forum, and other forms of associated life. . . . Their segregation from the common life reflects the fact that they are not a part of a native and spontaneous culture.12

The museum embodies the doldrums of modern culture. Even in those philosophies that most accommodate themselves to the instrumentalization of mind, consciousness hankers for “a native and spontaneous culture.” It is as though, for Dewey, art was the last repository of primal being, which instrumental reason had otherwise discarded from practical existence. More recently, Merleau-Ponty registered philosophy’s complaint against the museum’s dressing of living history into pompous history:

The museum adds a false prestige to the true value of the works by detaching them from the chance circumstances they arose from and making us believe that the artist’s hand was guided from the start by fate. . . . The museum kills the vehemence of painting as the library. Sartre said, changes writings which were originally a man’s gestures into “messages.” It is the historicity of death. And there is a historicity of life of which the museum provides no more than a fallen image.13

Western culture sings the blues of its own fatigue, seeing that it has replaced artists and makers with curators, fatalists and observers. Enlisting materialist philosophy in this chorus of woe, Adorno too puts the mu-
useum in the dock, charged with the crime of stultifying culture in the name of culture, presenting objects "to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of dying. . . . Museums . . . testify to the neutralization of culture."  

The idea that museums kill culture thus forms a universal doxa of modern philosophy. In truth, regretting authenticity seems almost synonymous with aesthetic modernity. It is as though the embattled modern mind saw in art the last chance of authentic experience. Because the most important voices of modern philosophy have taken up the problem of extricating culture from the inauthenticity of museums, they are somehow indebted to Quatremère. His influence consists in marking an intellectual moment to which subsequent discourses on culture have returned consistently, hence perhaps a moment that modern philosophy has never fully lived down. Nor is it clear that our contemporary debates on culture have outgrown the complex of inauthenticity detected by Quatremère. On the contrary, the question concerning an authentic rapport to culture is raised every time the museum is the object of serious analysis. Recent scholarship attests to this fact. The issues of multiculturalism encountered by today's curators and museologists rehearse the Quatremérien issue of bridging the gap between the theory of culture (historical preservation and exhibition) and the praxis of culture (the social, religious, and political life in which it flourishes).  

The modern museum is self-conscious about its deauthentifying and uprooting effects. Thus its profession of cultural inclusiveness and relativism bespeak a guilty conscience concerning the museum's tendency to level off and subsume all native particularities in the neutral sphere of historical culture. Curators have taken in stride Quatremère's idea that preserving culture is inherently fraught with objectification, mistranslation, and conjectural admixtures; and that cultures are subjected to essential damage in being transplanted to foreign climes, even under the best of circumstances and intentions. The notion that art segregated from its original milieu is as good as dead echoes in today's debate about the "postmodern museum." The art critic Douglas Crimp welcomes the postmodern sensibilities of those artists who create artworks reflective and critical of the museum institution. This strategy, Crimp argues, allows art to secure a critical hold over its institutional circumstances and, to some extent, reverse the pro-

Hegel's Guide to the Museum

Hegel is the museum.

M. Merleau-Ponty, "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence"

Culture is the child of each individual's self-knowledge and dissatisfaction with himself.

Nietzsche, "Schopenhauer as Educator"