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Illusions of Antiquity: Comparative Museum Design

Museums do not exist in a vacuum. They are reflections of humanity meant to display and interpret all of humankind and all that it has accomplished. As an arbitrator of culture and identity, a museum plays a significant role in advancing its nation's projected image and agenda. In addition to the message conveyed by the national museums, the conclusions that visitors draw about the museum, its contents, and the nation it represents are directly impacted by both the exterior and the interior design of the museum. There are three distinct eras of museum design, which I will examine in this essay. First I will discuss the Classical Museum and cultural identity, then the Postwar Museum and national identity, and finally I will examine the new Global Museum and its role in shaping a global identity. Each era tells a different story about the message museums intentionally send to their audiences and how it shapes not only the perception of the role of museums but also how museums form a cultural, national, and global identity.

Classicism is rooted in Greece in the fifth century BCE and Rome in the third century CE. Classical antiquity set the standard for the philosophy, aesthetic, government, and structure in Western Civilization. It appealed to the cerebral with its respect for intellect and restraint. In the late 19th century and early 20th century, the classical style came back into popularity. This was considered the "proper classic mode."¹ Museums tried to echo the great civilizations of Western thought, and incorporated many design elements reminiscent of classical antiquity. In museums styled after architecture from classical antiquity, symmetry and balance combined with

¹ Merkel, Jayne. "The Museum as Artifact." *The Wilson Quarterly* (1976-) 26, no. 1 (2002): pp. 69. Accessed February 2, 2021. doi:10.2307/40260572

detailed architraves, delicate pillars, and vaulted ceilings. This is especially the case with the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History (fig. 1).



Fig. 1. *The Smithsonian Museum of Natural Science, Washington D.C.*

The pillars, which are a consistent theme in public buildings across Washington D.C., are topped with intricate scrollwork. These marble pillars, six in total, support a frieze that lies just under an enormous glass window that allows light into the rotunda. Everything about the Museum of Natural History is symmetrical as well. It is orderly and clean. It implies that this building is organized, thoughtfully designed, and beautifully executed.

When museums such as the NMNH were designed, palace architecture was especially popular.² It was meant to invoke a feeling of awe. It was classical, it was urban, it was elegant, it was grand. It promised the rare and exciting. Additionally, by making deliberate references to Classical aesthetic, museums gained a sense of intellectual dignity. The Classical look of the

² Merkel, Jayne. "The Museum as Artifact." *The Wilson Quarterly* (1976-) 26, no. 1 (2002): pp. 68. Accessed February 2, 2021. doi:10.2307/40260572.

museum reinforced the institution's relationship with government, law, and ethics.³ These "classical museums" went to great lengths to create an illusion of antiquity in order to convey their intellectual authority to their visitors.

Just as much thought went into the interior design of these Classical museums. The physical layout within a museum is important. Museums must constantly tailor the visitor experience. Factors they consider include first impressions, logical grouping, and storytelling. The story-telling element is especially important to national museums that seek to establish a clear history, but the physical organization of exhibits has been a source of tension in the anthropology community for decades.

Originally, museums followed a Masonian organizational method wherein material culture was displayed with other artifacts that shared similar characteristics. This method was influenced by American ethnologist Otis T. Mason, who ordered the world according to families, genera, and species. He organized material culture in a scientific manner, grouping them based on similarities in physical traits or function. Mason based this system on the idea that "similar causes produce like effects," and argued that cultures should be compared with each other in order to draw conclusions about "the diffusion of the grades of culture over the earth."⁴ This methodology looked at history and culture through a comparative lens, and failed to consider other influences. Masonian systems were challenged by Franz Boas, who wrote that Mason's system of making "a mere comparison of forms cannot lead to useful results."⁵ He argued instead that a study of material culture must focus on the individual form and its development. Boas also

³ Merkel, Jayne. "The Museum as Artifact." *The Wilson Quarterly* (1976-) 26, no. 1 (2002): pp 68. Accessed February 2, 2021. doi:10.2307/40260572.

⁴ Mason, Otis T. "What is Anthropology?" Lecture, National Museum, Washington D.C., 1882.

⁵ Boas, Franz. "The Occurrence of Similar Inventions in Areas Widely Apart." *Science* 9, no. 224 (1887): 485-86.

believed that exhibits should be organized based on cultural and geographic relevance as opposed to a simple physical similarity.

The ultimate goal of these Classical museums was to strengthen a cultural identity that could be linked to the height of Western thought and civilization. A museum was a place that could house and organize culture from around the globe. Western culture was entombed in the architecture of the museums, and promoted through the documentation of scientific prowess demonstrated by Western civilizations, and specifically in the United States. This is evident in the origin of the Smithsonian Institution: the establishment of the Columbian Institute for the Promotion of Arts and Sciences. The group of men who came together to establish this museum were "impressed with the importance of forming an association for promoting useful knowledge."⁶ This Institute's charter expired in 1838, but its mission was preserved in the National Institution. This mission, beginning in 1840, was to "promote science and the useful arts, and to establish a national museum of natural history."⁷ Superficially, the goal of this association seems innocuous. However, this assembly had the power to decide what knowledge and art was "useful" and worthy of promotion, and what could be discarded. In Classical museums, Western culture survived this process. Other forms of knowledge, other sources of art, were subject to ideals of the museum. In this way, museums were able to ascribe identities to different cultures.

The next era of museums during a time when many nations were attempting to revitalize their national identity. In the interwar period, it was more important than ever to reconnect to the glorious past, before all the war and suffering. It was also essential that nations reaffirm their

⁶ Rathbun, Richard. "The Columbian Institute for the Promotion of Arts and Sciences: A Washington Society of 1816-1838, which Established a Museum and Botanic Garden under Government Patronage." *Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office*, 1917.

⁷ Rathbun, Richard. "The Columbian Institute for the Promotion of Arts and Sciences: A Washington Society of 1816-1838, which Established a Museum and Botanic Garden under Government Patronage." *Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office*, 1917.

own strength through technology, science, and civic engagement. These challenges spurred on the establishment of Postwar museums. This is also where the purpose of Western museums and Eastern museums diverge. Western museums hailed technology as the harbinger of modern progress, and strove to embrace it both internally and externally.⁸ Eastern museums, especially in Japan and China, deliberately designed their museums to echo Western designs in order to gain back some legitimacy. These museums also created a narrative that extended through the past and connected to the modern nation. In both cases, however, these Postwar museums drew their attention away from the cultural identity established by Classical museums, and instead strove to create a national identity.

To China, museums represent Westernization. By embracing Western aesthetics and ideology, China is able to maintain a presence on the global stage. In the late Qing period, during the Hundred-Day-Revolution of 1898, an attempt to cultivate Western science and technology in China, while ultimately unsuccessful, resulted in one of the first proposals for a national museum system.⁹ Later, that proposal would come to fruition. In the early 1910s, the Nationalist Party ended the Qing Dynasty and established the Republic of China, a new government that embraced Western ideologies. The Nationalist Party wanted to create a timeline of the Chinese identity, perhaps hoping to unify a new China through the memory of her past.¹⁰ A Chinese politician of the time, Zhang Jian, recognized the importance of museums in the education of the public. Through education, argued Zhang, a nation could be saved.¹¹ Zhang also understood the

⁸ Darnell, Regna. "Franz Boas as Theorist: A Mentalist Paradigm for the Study of Mind, Body, Environment, and Culture." In *Historicizing Theories, Identities, and Nations*, edited by DARNELL REGNA and GLEACH FREDERIC W., 1-26. Lincoln; London: University of Nebraska Press, 2017.

⁹ Wang, Shu-Li. "Exhibiting the Nation: Cultural Flows, Transnational Exchanges, and the Development of Museums in Japan and China, 1900-1950." In *Eurasian Encounters: Museums, Missions, Modernities*, edited by Stolte Carolien and Kikuchi Yoshiyuki, pp 57. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 66

¹¹ Ibid. p. 58

importance of “constructing a civilizational history for the country.”¹² The connection with the past would serve to reinforce the future. As an attempt to legitimize the source of this history, the design of China’s new museum was imported from European nations. This new system took after that of Great Britain, France, and Japan.¹³ The internal structure was not the only aspect of the museum models after Western nations. The exterior of the museums being built in Beijing were deliberately reminiscent of the Classical museum. This is evident through the Beijing Museum of Nation History (fig 2.).



Fig. 2. *The Beijing Museum of Natural History, Beijing*

The broad symmetry of the wings and the four pillars that guard the large entrance are both aspects of Classical museums. Still, this museum has a Chinese twist on it. The small, square windows and the strong, flat structure with little detailing speak to the practical nature of 20th century Chinese architecture.

The United States also used museums to further political agendas. American museums, just like Chinese museums, attempted to create a linear story that connected the modern day to

¹² Ibid. p. 58

¹³ Wang, Shu-Li. "Exhibiting the Nation: Cultural Flows, Transnational Exchanges, and the Development of Museums in Japan and China, 1900-1950." In *Eurasian Encounters: Museums, Missions, Modernities*, edited by Stolte Carolien and Kikuchi Yoshiyuki, pp 49. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017.

the ideals of the past. The Museum of History and Technology, renamed the National Museum of Natural History in 1969, combined history and technology in a way that reassured the American public in a time where technology was both a savior and a harbinger of doom. By investing in this type of museum, the American government was expanding public interest in science and engineering. Essential to the ideological war being waged against the USSR, museums were able to curate a sense of national pride in technology.¹⁴ In fact, the Smithsonian realized that this was the cause of the interest in their facilities, and they were able to receive funding from Congress by arguing that the United States needed a museum that could rival those of other countries.¹⁵ Creating a museum that could reinforce a national identity and unite the public was crucial to the United States immediately after World War One and continuing for the duration of the Cold War.

As demonstrated by both Chinese and American museums, Postwar museums are centered around shaping a national identity. What national politics still greatly influence museums today, there is a new era of museums that embrace a global narrative and seek a place on an international network of institutions. This Global era brought about change to the exterior design and messaging and to the interior structure and presentation.

The museums of the Classical era and even leading into the Postwar era have adhered to certain allusions to antiquity. The Global museum, however, breaks away from that pattern, launching museums into the world of postmodern architecture and experimentation. The design of the Great Court in the British Museum, seen here in fig. 3, is a prime example. Based on Norman Foster's design for the roof of the Reichstag in Berlin, it is an impressive sculpture of glass and steel with 3,212 different panes of glass.¹⁶

¹⁴ Walker, William S. *A Living Exhibition: The Smithsonian and the Transformation of the Universal Museum*, 44-85. University of Massachusetts Press, 2013.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 52

¹⁶ "The Great Court." The British Museum. Accessed March 15, 2021.
<https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story/architecture/great-court>



Fig. 3. *The Great Court of the British Museum, London*

Another example of this kind of architecture can be found on the other side of the world, in Shanghai, China. The China Art Museum, seen in fig. 4, is a beautiful structure that draws from Chinese heritage for its design. Architect He Jingtang specifically cited traditional Chinese roofing as inspiration for the structure of colorful red beams, and used the shape of ancient bronze vessels as the inspiration for the unique silhouette of the building.¹⁷ This building catapulted China's museums onto the global stage. For so long, China had only been able to grasp at Western imagery. Now, drawing from its own culture, it was able to create a representation of Chinese identity and establish it globally.

¹⁷ Lu Yuan. "2010 Expo: He Jingtang and the China Pavilion". *China Radio International*. 2010.



Fig. 5. *China Art Museum, Shanghai*

While these museums all embody the design of a Global museum, it was Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum in New York City that started the trend towards experiential design. While the Great Court was constructed in 2000, and the China Art Museum opened in 2007, the Guggenheim finished construction decades earlier in 1959. It was revolutionary at the time of its opening. Frank Lloyd Wright, similar to Norman Foster, was a modernist visionary who designed the first postmodern museum. The Guggenheim Museum takes everything classical architecture and throws it out the window. This museum is asymmetrical, taking shape in large spirals that sweep downwards. It stands apart from the surrounding city, very much like a circular peg in a square hole. Wright's design completely changed how the public saw the physical structure of a museum.



Fig. 6. *Guggenheim Museum, NYC*

The Global museum is not only bound to physical form. Virtual reality, interactive exhibits, computer generated graphics, digital artifacts that visitors can examine more closely than they ever could have before. Most important, in an era where distance learning and virtual visits are more and more common, websites are quickly becoming the new space museums must master. These technological advances are changing the way the public engages with museums, but it is also fundamental creating an entirely new global mode of thinking. This shifting paradigm is evident in the mission statements of these Global museums. The Smithsonian states that their mission is to, “is to promote understanding of the natural world and our place in it.”¹⁸ The British Museum’s mission statement is, “The Museum is driven by an insatiable curiosity for the world, a deep belief in objects as reliable witnesses and documents of human history, sound research, as well as the desire to expand and share knowledge.”¹⁹ The Guggenheim Museum’s statement includes, “with its constellation of architecturally and culturally distinct museums, exhibitions, publications, and digital platforms, the foundation engages both local and global

¹⁸ “About the Museum.” The Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History. <https://naturalhistory.si.edu/about#:~:text=Our%20mission%20is%20to%20promote,record%20becomes%20the%20starting%20point>.

¹⁹ “About Us.” The British Museum. Accessed March 15, 2021. <https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us>

audiences.”²⁰ These statements are only several among many, but they share a common theme: the world. This new messaging from museums attempts to move away from the national identities of the Postwar era and into a new era that embraces the idea of the “global village.” Museums have begun to break down long standing barriers in an attempt to embrace different cultures, engage with different nations, and establish a global community dedicated to expanding and sharing knowledge.

In the last few centuries, museums have changed significantly, transitioning from the Classical era of cultural identity to the Postwar era of national identity and competition, and finally arriving at a new Global era of museums that attempt to erase the boundaries previously set. These eras are defined by design, presentation, and structure. These are the factors that impact the conclusions that visitors draw about the museum, its contents, and the nation it represents. As museums move forward, the Global era may be redefined, reshaped, and reconceptualized. The only question is how that change will occur, and what consequences will it have for the global community.

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²⁰ “About Us.” The Guggenheim Museums. Accessed March 15, 2021.
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