

Musée ideale. Dreaming of a Perfect Museum

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Summary

Abstract: Mass musealisation of our heritage, where museums represent just one of the outputs, began during the Enlightenment. This work discusses the 18th–19th century dream of a perfect museum on three levels: in form or architecture, in the context of the museum collection's entirety, and from the viewpoint of heritage availability. Reflections of these ideas can be seen in the heritage culture of both the previous century and the current.

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The Enlightenment century's need for general systems and classifications served as the basis for museums and other memory institutions as we know them today. During the Enlightenment century, a principal shift occurred towards a generalised treatment of the past and collective memory as the medium of history. The goal of a museum was to create a total and monolithic memory image, to present history in a manner that would comply with the central notion of the new era, that of the progress of the human spirit, around which a new philosophy of history

was being formed. The Age of Enlightenment was characterised by a search for integral spirituality, faith in a uniform approach to the history of culture aimed at communicating a common treatment of art and history. One of the tangible results of that process was the mass advent of heritage institutions dedicated to art and history.

Although museums open to the general public had existed in the middle of the 18th century, a considerable museum institution identity change took place when the royal palace of the Louvre became a public museum. Museums became part of the state's cultural and educational policies, one objective of which was to define art as national heritage, a way of bringing art closer to the people and educating them through art.

The museum evolved into one of the symbols of the broad worldview of the Age of Enlightenment. Yet the 'total repository' needed a suitable form and the second half of the 18th century and the first half of the 19th century was the time when an ideal museum form language was created. The museum idea was shaped in the classicistic form and the language typical of the Enlightenment – to give direction in matters of preserving and displaying the heritage of past epochs. It was the form aspect that conveyed most lucidly the institution's meaning, its size and its importance.

From the middle of the 18th century onwards, the standard solution for all structures dedicated to knowledge and arts has been that of a centrally planned building with four wings, in most cases the dominant feature being in the form of a cupola. The museum architecture of the Age of Enlightenment – perpetuated in stone or merely as plans on paper – indicated the role that museums were to play in society, and how grand and colossal these cultural life guides should be.

In addition to the perfection of form, museums have also always aspired towards having perfect collections. The enormous collections accumulated by museums in recent centuries only confirm this desire, reflecting the yearning to have as complete a set of items as possible. Many may yearn for a perfect collection, but only great monarchs and mighty empires have been successful in implementing these ideas – to some extent. One of the most famous examples of this dream becoming reality is the Musée Napoleon, founded by Napoleon Bonaparte in the early 19th century. We should, of course, note that the collection was extensive, but more important was its quality – the volume change was coupled with a new collecting principle, as the whole selection process was based on giving preference to masterpieces. The work of art's mastery and its meaning in the history of art, and the author's fame and recognition determined whether it would be admitted to a museum of spectacular masterpieces.

The activities of Napoleon's museum exerted substantial influence on the active efforts of European countries, and later on those of the US as well, to build their own museums and replenish their collections; they acted as the impetus for the onset of museum megalomania worldwide.

The 19th century saw not only the emergence of museums of art, but the fulfilment of the national museum idea. National identity was becoming increasingly important in Europe and, as nation-states developed, museums supporting that concept appeared as well – national museums. In essence, a universal and comprehensive museum would be created, and be limited to the heritage of that one country. Throughout museum history, such museums have always had the largest collections. Nevertheless, perfection can be

not only a physical whole, but a fundamentally different whole, too, in the *musée imaginaire* notion.

The imaginary museum is based on the idea of a whole that simply cannot exist if it consists only of original items – it works more through the 'total museum' concept than via original items. Megamuseums with perfect collections can only be established in a certain social context and, even then, their integrity will have its limitations. That is why it is more important to pay attention to the idea itself, in the same manner in which the surroundings were viewed by idealistic philosophy based on Platonism. As reality is built on ideas, reality can be communicated by a derivation from the original – a copy or reproduction. The classicistic ideology also proceeded from the same notion – through form representation, a message of a grander idea was conveyed that is contained not in that certain shape by itself, but more in the surrounding, more general ideology. The understanding that the most important task of a museum is to communicate the ideas contained in art resulted in completely new opportunities for creating perfect art history.

The goal of the imaginary museum was to offer an art experience that is not possible in reality (i.e. using only original art). That approach was closely connected with the museum concept of the Age of Enlightenment, the dream of a perfect collection, resulting in several spectacular museums of copies of works of art over the next century.

Various forms of using the past – in architectural solutions, the collections' volumes and different methods of comprehending cultural heritage – testify to the increasing importance of heritage for social identity and social consciousness. Since the Age of Enlightenment, museums have served as an im-

portant ideological and political tool, occupying an influential position in the process of assessing the past and of defining our history. The Enlightenment's dreams have been splendidly implemented in museums of the 20th and 21st centuries: in museum goals, their enormous buildings, abundant collections, reconstructions and virtual heritage sets.

When we view the general development of museums from the Age of Enlightenment to the present, we see that the essence of the museum has remained the same as well: the aspiration to musealise everything valuable and the belief that museums can improve our society. Thus, the museum is essentially still a Utopian institution dating back to the Age of Enlightenment. Still, the more intriguing question arises: will museums of the future continue functioning in the same manner or will they take a different route that is not yet known? *Tempora mutantur et nos mutamur in illis.*

Proof-read by Richard Adang