How have art museums changed in the past century? Where are they headed in the future? Charles Saumarez Smith is uniquely qualified to answer these questions, having been at the helm of three major British institutions over the course of his career.

His story starts with the Museum of Modern Art in New York, one of the first to focus squarely on the art of the present. When it opened in 1939, MoMA’s boldly modernist building represented a stark riposte to the neoclassicism of most earlier museums. From there, Saumarez Smith embarks on an odyssey to explore forty-one museums across the globe, including Tate Modern in London, the Getty Center in Los Angeles, the Benesse House Museum on the Japanese island of Naoshima, and the Centre Pompidou in Paris – as well as the Pompidou’s new Shanghai branch, which opened in 2019.

In each case, Saumarez Smith casts an acute eye on the ways in which the experience of art is shaped by the nature of the buildings that house it and the organizing principles by which it is displayed. He traces a radical shift from a belief that museums can and should instruct and educate, to the idea that museums should be more about contemplation, spectacle and individual experience.

A compelling examination of the art museum, this sweeping book explores how the architecture, vision, funding and public role of art museums across the world have transformed – and considers their future in a new era of pandemic and uncertainty.