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The Art Museum in Modern Times

Charles Saumarez Smith

The renowned director Charles Saumarez Smith explores the ways in which the architecture, vision, funding and public role of art museums across the world have changed over the past eighty years

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.



101 David Bates, the founder of MOMA, New York

available – but, instead, to stimulate an idea of the unique world through a jumble of objects and the creation of an atmospheric visual experience is more important than intellectual instruction. The second was the Palais de Tokyo, a set of decaying, rough interiors that are used as a very basic, unaccommodating setting for the installation of works of art without too much regard for the character of their surroundings. This, paradoxically, gives the works more integrity than if they were all displayed on the same uniformly antiseptic white walls. The third was the Museu Dalmau Clomado in Mexico City, which is essentially a private house turned into a museum that includes gardens, pools and a shop. The fourth was Anselm Kiefer's house and estate, La Ribaude at Berge in the hills west of Arnsheim, where work is displayed in very rough underground and cave settings.

These examples of unconventional art institutions gave Walsh the freedom and courage to break with the standard characteristics of most contemporary museums (Fig. 102). He planned to create a museum that would be underground, carved out of the rock. Visitors would be forced to find their own way through the labyrinth and, most importantly, there would be no labels – only hand-held iPhones, each equipped with a small black navigation device called 'O'. These would allow the visitor to find nearby works and access different types and levels of information about them, including (initially) conventional art historical descriptions by the senior curator, Jane Clark, described as 'work', and much more personal comments on the works and anecdotes about their acquisition by Walsh, labelled 'gonzo'.

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by 2007, when Walsh visited La Ribaude, he and his staff were already working on the design of the new museum with a Melbourne-based architect, Nanda Kassaridis, whom Walsh also hired to design a house in Marion Bay, Tasmania. The original plan was that the museum itself should be as unobtrusive as possible, underground so that it did not draw attention to itself in the way of most public museums, without a grand entrance and made, as far as possible, out of industrial materials. If this was the plan, it has certainly not worked out that way, because the design of the museum – the way you descend by a staircase deep down into the side of a cliff, the experience of its interior spaces, the way it encourages the visitor to explore, how it is carved into the rock face creating the mood of a catabasis – is at least as memorable as any of the individual artist's installations. Indeed, the whole idea of the museum and the way that it draws the visitor along on a personal, private journey, without the assistance of museum labels or a clearly demarcated route, makes the experience of MONA as much purely architectural as artistic; more viscerally experiential than about the aesthetic experience of individual works of art. My only criticism is that the roughness and rawness of the surroundings, although



102 The interior view of MOMA, New York, designed by Nanda Kassaridis

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4. The Museum Reimagined



101 The view of the new Museum, Shanghai, China, designed by David Chipperfield



102 The interior view of the new Museum, Shanghai, China, designed by David Chipperfield

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Wear Bund Museum, Shanghai (2019)

floors from basement to attic – a civic forum with a bookshop and cafe, but most importantly, public circulation space, a commodity which is in short supply in the densely built-up spaces of central Shanghai. To the north of the entrance are three immense floors of gallery space, flanked by a long sloping entrance from the north taking visitors down to the basement level, and, to the south, another three floors. But originally there was no specification as to their long-term use, what type of art would be displayed, or whether the space would be used for temporary exhibitions or a permanent collection. It was only in January 2018 that the Centre Pompidou became the building's tenant, when President Macron visited China on a state visit. This led to some major adaptations of the design in order to provide enough high-quality and environmentally controlled display space in which to display the Pompidou's collection to best effect. The atrium was converted from being three stories high to two only, creating a space in the basement for new media (Fig. 103). The top floors have been used to show works from the Centre Pompidou's permanent collection and, at the moment at least, the top lighting has been covered over by screens. The north galleries are being used to show work from the Pompidou's extensive collection of new media. The basement is used for purposes of public education, including a big, flexible auditorium with retractable seats.

Will it work?
We will see. It symbolizes the transformation of the art museum from being a long-considered public project, with a big staff devoted to the care and development of a permanent collection, to a much more lightweight and ephemeral project – in this case, here today and possibly gone tomorrow, leased by an international museum for a period of not necessarily more than five years and used for purposes of soft power, supported by the French state.

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4. The Museum Reimagined



103 The Louvre Abu Dhabi, designed by Jean Nouvel

sensitivity to issues of global culture and their representation in museums. Construction was originally supposed to have begun in May 2009, when Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, and Nicolas Sarkozy as president of France opened an exhibition called 'Telling Art: Louvre Abu Dhabi'. This included works of art purchased over the previous eighteen months for the new museum alongside loans from the French national museums. But in practice the real work of construction began in 2013 – accompanied, as at the Guggenheim, by criticism of poor working conditions.¹¹

The museum opened in November 2017. It is extraordinarily impressive, more ambitious probably than any other museum of the last two decades, reviving the traditional idea of a Universal Survey Museum that systematically displays the cultures of the world through a selection of carefully chosen, representative artefacts.¹² Its only equivalent in terms of scale, ambition and

Louvre Abu Dhabi (2017)



104 The interior view of the Louvre Abu Dhabi, designed by Jean Nouvel

strong sense of the nature and construction of a mechanical universe. Inside, light falls through gaps in the dome, changing during the course of a day in a way that keeps the interior alive and prevents the dome from being too visually dominant (Fig. 104).

The second aspect of the museum which is extraordinarily impressive is its determination to treat culture globally. This is made possible both by the wide range of objects and works of art which the Louvre Abu Dhabi has itself been able to acquire on the international art market with the advice of French curators, but greatly enriched by its ability to borrow objects from all French museums: come from the Bibliothèque Nationale, medieval works of art from the Musée Cluny, Asian works of art from the Musée Guimet and ethnographic art from the Musée du Quai Branly. There is a strong intellectual underpinning based on a rebalancing of the way that culture is typically viewed – not surprisingly, placing Arab culture more nearly at the