**Museums**

**Museum**, permanent nonprofit institution housing collections of objects of artistic, historic, or scientific interest, conserved and displayed for the edification and enjoyment of the public.

Similar definitions of the nature and purposes of a museum have been propounded by some of the organizations that today guide the policies and work of museums throughout the world—the American Association of Museums (founded in 1906), the Canadian Museums Association/Association des Musйes Canadiens (1947), the British Museums Association (1889), and the International Council of Museums (ICOM). Founded in 1947, ICOM is an independent professional organization that provides a forum for more than 7000 members in 119 countries through its committees, publications, and activities. Working closely with UNESCO and other world organizations, its mission is to develop new museums and to forge links between existing ones through the national governing committees that are responsible to the parent body. A general meeting of ICOM is held in a different country every three years, and some 20 international committees meet in the intervening years.

***History of Museums***

Museum is a Latin word, derived from the Greek *mouseion,* originally meaning a temple dedicated to the nine Muses. Not until the Renaissance was the term applied to a collection of objects of beauty and worth.

**Ancient World**

The first *mouseion,* founded about 290 BC in Alexandria, Egypt, by Ptolemy I Soter, was a state-supported community of scholars. The community included apartments, a dining hall, lecture hall, cloister, botanical garden, zoological park, astronomical observatory, and library. Objects such as surgical and astronomical instruments, animal hides, elephant tusks, statues, and portrait busts were also housed there and used for teaching. The museum and most of its were destroyed about AD 270 during civil disturbances.

The temples of ancient Greece were filled with statues, vases, paintings, and ornaments in bronze, gold, and silver, dedicated to the gods; some of these works were displayed for the public to see and enjoy. So, too, works of art could be seen in the temples of ancient Rome, as well as in the forums, gardens, baths, and theaters. In the villas of generals and statesmen, works of art and booty captured in wars were displayed for private enjoyment. The emperor Hadrian even went so far as to reconstruct in his villa some of the famous sites and buildings he had seen in Greece and Egypt. Hadrian's villa, in fact, may be considered a precursor of today's open-air museums.

**Orient**

Before AD 1000 royal collections of art objects were preserved in palaces and temples in China and Japan. Of particular note is the still functioning Shoso-in, part of a temple complex in the city of Nara, housing several thousand works of art and religious artifacts.

**Middle Ages**

During the Middle Ages, the churches and monasteries of Europe became repositories for jewels, statues, manuscripts, and saints' relics. Beginning in the 7th century, spoils of the Crusades were added to these repositories. Occasionally displayed, the jewels and gold also served as a reserve to be pawned in time of war. For example, the treasury of the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Reims was enlarged or depleted according to France's fortunes in battle.

**“Galleries” and “Cabinets.”**

In the 16th century it became customary to display sculpture and easel paintings in the long halls, or galleries, of palaces and the residences of the wealthy. Thus began the use of the term *gallery* for a place where works of art are hung or arranged for viewing. Collections of smaller art objects or of natural curiosities were housed in a cabinet (Italian *gabinetto;* German *Kabinett*—all derived from Latin *cavea,* “a hollow place” or “cave”). Originally a piece of furniture where small valuables were stored for safekeeping, the cabinet was later extended in use and meaning to designate a small room where such things were kept. The first cabinets were formed in Italy, spreading to the north in the 17th century; they became widespread throughout Europe with trade and economic prosperity in the 18th century. Occasionally, distinguished travelers were allowed to visit these private cabinets; gradually, in the 17th and 18th centuries they were opened to the public.

**The First Modern Museums**

Museums as they are known today were first established in Europe in the 18th century. In 1750 the French government began to admit members of the public, mostly artists and students, two days a week, to see some 100 pictures hung in the Luxembourg Palace, Paris; this collection was later transferred to the Louvre. The Louvre, which had its beginnings in the royal collections of the 16th-century king Francis I, became, during the time of the French Revolution, the first great public art museum; it opened its doors in 1793. The British Museum in London was founded as a public institution in 1753, but prospective visitors had to apply in writing for admission. Even by 1800 it was possible to have to wait two weeks for an admission ticket; visitors, in small groups, were limited to stays of two hours.

Among other museums founded in the Age of Enlightenment were the National Museum in Naples (1738); the Uffizi in Florence (1743); the Museo Sacro (1756) and the Museo Pio Clementino (1770-74), parts of the Vatican Museum complex; and the National Science Museum in Madrid (1771). Royal collections were opened to public view in Vienna (1700), Dresden, Germany (1746), and at the Hermitage in Saint Petersburg (1765).

Even before the American Revolution, museums were founded in the colonies by private citizens. The Charleston Museum, in Charleston, South Carolina (1773), devoted to the natural history of the region, is an example of the more than 60 cabinets, galleries, and historical societies established from that date up to about 1850. Some, although popular with the public, did not last—like the museums founded in Philadelphia by the Swiss-born artist and antiquary Pierre Eugиne Du Simitiиre in 1782 and by the American artist Charles Willson Peale in 1786. Du Simitiиre was especially concerned with the documentation of the American Revolution. Other institutions, however, remain to the present day—for example, the Massachusetts Historical Society, in Boston (1791); the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. (1846); and the first historic-house museum, Washington's headquarters in Newburgh, New York (opened in 1850).

**Special Museums**

Relatively early in the history of modern museums, special types began to be organized.

*University Museums*

The first museum concerned with a university was established at Basel, Switzerland, in 1671. The Ashmolean Museum (1663), part of the University of Oxford, England, was the first institution in Western Europe to call itself a museum. In America, Harvard College (now University) established a room of “curiosities” in 1750; it later evolved into the University Museum. The first college art museum in the United States was the Trumbull Gallery (1832) at Yale College, now the Yale Gallery of Fine Arts. At present, the more than 150 university and college art museums in the U.S. comprise about one-third of all art museums in the nation.

*Art Museums*

In the northeastern U.S. the late 19th century was a period of rapid proliferation of museums and the emergence of art museums, in particular, as important and distinct institutions. The Boston Museum of Fine Arts and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City were both founded in 1870, the Pennsylvania Museum (now the Philadelphia Museum of Art) in 1877, and the Brooklyn Museum in 1893. By the latter part of the 20th century, however, population shifts and the development of new centers of wealth and culture were reflected in the number of important art museums established in the South and the West.

Modern art museums generally house far more than paintings and sculpture. Prints and drawings in every medium are also shown, as are the decorative arts. Folk art, on the other hand, is sometimes found in ethnic, crafts, or historical museums. Indigenous art of non-Western peoples may also be found in many art museums today (as in the Brooklyn Museum and the Michael C. Rockefeller Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art), as well as in museums specifically devoted to anthropology or natural history.

*History Museums*

Museums devoted to national, regional, or local history include conventional museum buildings as well as historic houses, sites, and districts. Outdoor complexes may incorporate whole buildings, such as barns, churches, workshops, and mills. This type of “living” museum of folk culture, ethnography, and social history developed in Scandinavia at the end of the 19th century. Today such institutions are very popular in the U.S. and may be found in Eastern Europe, Africa, and Canada as well.

*Science Museums*

Among important natural history museums founded in the late 19th century are the American Museum of Natural History (1869), in New York City, and the Natural History Museum in London (1881-85), now part of the British Museum. Anthropology museums of distinction include the National Museum of Ethnology (1837), in Leiden; the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania (1889), in Philadelphia; the Musйe de l'Homme (1939), in Paris; and the National Museum of Anthropology (1964), in Mexico City. Science museums also include institutions devoted to industry and technology, such as the National Air and Space Museum (1976) in Washington, D.C., an addition to the Smithsonian's complex, and the City of Science and Industry (1986) in Paris. Often science museums include aquariums, planetariums, zoological parks, and botanical gardens.

*Other Types*

Other special museums include those for children. The Brooklyn Children's Museum, emphasizing science and ethnography, was the first of its kind (1899); the first children's museum to be devoted to art was the Children's Art Center of Boston (1915). Museums are also devoted to whaling, the circus, glass objects, criminals, jazz, and radiobroadcasting.

***Roles of the Museum Staff***

Because museums exist to collect, preserve, study, and interpret various objects, their collections must be made in accord with well-defined purposes and standards of quality. Objects chosen must be original works, wherever possible, and suitable for exhibition or for study purposes, or both. They must be documented with well-organized information and made available for viewing or study. Their care must be ensured and deterioration or destruction avoided.

According to the first comprehensive survey of U.S. museums, published in 1974 by the National Endowment for the Arts on the basis of data collected in 1971-72, about 120,000 people were then employed at full-time and part-time paid museum jobs. Nearly half of these were professionals with specialized training, acting as curators, librarians, designers, and lecturers. Nonprofessionals held clerical, security, and custodial positions. Two-thirds of all museums surveyed used unpaid volunteers, mainly in the education area, with art museums reporting most use of volunteers.

Increasingly, however, museum work is internationally recognized as a profession, and requires certain levels of academic education and training: a master's degree or doctorate in a subject is expected; a bachelor's degree is the minimum requirement. While some museums, secondary schools, and undergraduate institutions offer limited courses, museum studies training at the university level is becoming a prerequisite for staff positions; such technical training is available in Canada, England, Italy, and the United States. The American Association of Museums, for example, is currently working to establish criteria for accrediting graduate programs. Women and minorities remain underrepresented, however, on museum staffs.

**Curators**

Curators of collections are mediators between the needs and interests of the museum, their departments, other scholars, and the public. A major curatorial task today, aside from collection building, research, and writing, is the mounting of temporary special exhibitions. In the great national museums of Europe, curators hold civil service rank as caretakers of the national and cultural heritage.

**Conservators**

The physical condition of museum objects is the responsibility of specially trained conservators and restorers, either staff members or consultants. It is their duty to assess climatic, lighting, and display conditions; to make recommendations for the protection of objects on display or in storage; and to evaluate the fitness of objects to travel on intermuseum loan.

Knowledge of chemistry and physics is required of conservation specialists, as well as training in art history, archaeological methods, scientific study of materials and media, and restoration techniques. Excellent training is available in Europe at such centers as the Villa Schifanoia, Rosary College, Florence, and the London School of Archaeology, University of London; and in the U.S. at the Smithsonian Institution Conservation Laboratory, Washington, D.C., and the Conservation Center of the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University. The latter awards a diploma in conservation after a rigorous 4-year graduate course.

**Interpretation**

Educational activities, always a focus of museums in the U.S., include the interpretation of collections through permanent displays and special exhibitions, programs for elementary and secondary school children in their schools or at the museum, guided tours by museum staff or volunteer docents, lectures and trips for adults, television and radio programs, film series, and performing arts programs. Many museums customarily lend objects to other institutions for exhibition purposes; many also organize traveling exhibitions destined for other museums, community centers, schools, and storefront museums. Such activities make special subjects available to a broader public.

Art museums customarily publish catalogs of their collections and exhibitions, often illustrated and providing information on the physical appearance, history, and, if appropriate, role played by the objects; fewer science and history museums do the same. College and university museums provide educational opportunities through their publications, exhibitions, and collections.

Most major museums establish and maintain libraries for research and for the documentation of the collections; separate facilities are customarily maintained for collections of slides. Many museums—the British Museum, for example—began both as libraries and collections of objects. Provision for a library was part of the incorporation act of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The librarian in charge of a museum library orders, accessions, and processes materials for the use of the staff and outside researchers and, if library staff and space allow, for the public (usually museum members). Librarians generally must hold a master's degree from an accredited library school, and special subject training is often required. Professional affiliation with such bodies as the Special Libraries Association, the Art Libraries Society/North America, or the Society for the Bibliography of Natural History (depending on the kind of museum served) provides opportunities for exchange of information and cooperative programs.

**Acquisition**

Collections of natural history specimens, archaeological objects, and ethnographical samples are generally acquired by field expeditions. Gifts and bequests are important sources of other types of collections. Purchase of specimens or of works of art is a more costly way of augmenting collections, particularly in recent years of general inflation and increasing rarity of first-rate works on the open market. Once acquired by a museum, a piece (or on occasion, an entire collection) is given an accession number, unique to it. The object is clearly marked with this number in such a way as to be visible but not to affect its appearance or condition.

In addition to a complete catalog of the museum's holdings maintained by the registrar's department, individual museum departments maintain catalogs of the objects for which they are specifically responsible. These catalogs record information that as completely as possible describes or documents each object: a sketch or photograph, pertinent bibliographical references, a report on its condition as received, the dimensions of the piece (in metrics as well as the customary system), and its source and the date received. Since the 1970s many large museums (and, increasingly, numbers of small ones) have employed computers to speed the storage and retrieval of catalog information.

***Museum Organization***

Museums today, as nonprofit institutions, are customarily governed by a board of trustees (alternatively known as governors, regents, directors, or commissioners). Chosen for their management and professional skills, they hold the assets of a museum in trust as fiduciaries for the public. Trustees are a policymaking body who also make decisions on acquisitions (upon curatorial recommendations), manage the physical plant, and are in charge of budgeting, fund raising, and investment of museum funds. In the U.S., the state attorney general's office acts as a watchdog over reported or suspected abuses of power and duty.

**Museum Directors**

Customarily, the board of trustees hires the museum's director, who is the chief executive officer and fund raiser of the institution. Directors, working closely with the curators and heads of service, legal, and financial departments, act as liaison between staff and board. Most directors are appointed from curatorial ranks and must be adept at administration, fund raising, and public relations. They must also be conversant with architectural and design considerations in order to mediate between those who promote extreme functional design of interior space and exteriors and those dedicated to preserving the traditional concept of the museum as a cultural monument in itself.

**Funding**

Recent cuts in public funding and increased competition for money from private sources, coupled with inflation and rises in taxes, have led museums to seek new sources of revenue. Museum memberships and sales of publications and reproductions in gift shops and by mail order are among the means of raising funds. Admission charges have been adopted by some museums but are opposed by others, on the ground that cultural and educational opportunities should be kept free. Many museums have adopted as a compromise the voluntary contribution policy, with amounts suggested for general admission; some museums exact an admission charge only to special exhibitions.

Funding for such shows has customarily been obtained from municipal, regional, state, or federal sources, as well as from the private sector, including foundations. Among the few federal agencies that grant funds to museums, the Institute for Museum Services (created in 1976) is the only one that provides much-needed operating expenses. Since 1981 it has been an independent agency within the National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities.

***Present Problems***

In recent years all over the world, “blockbuster” exhibitions—enormous traveling shows such as the “Treasures of Tutankhamun” or “Picasso”—have attracted huge crowds. Many of the spectators were not, previously, frequent museum visitors. The long- or short-term impact of the popularity of this kind of exhibition has still to be assessed in terms of the educational goals of museums. Some museum professionals worry that, with media attention focused on these spectacular events, curators are diverted from the research, publication, and education that are the real purposes of museums. Other officials, in the U.S., argue that such mass audiences are needed to attract government and private funding and to build new public support for museums.

Many major U.S. museums, beset with economic problems in the latter part of the 20th century, reported inability to supply the number and variety of programs and services required by ever-growing numbers of visitors, totaling in the millions annually. Besides the need for increases in professional curatorial, design, and education staff, there are demands for new facilities for classrooms, libraries, and children's galleries, as well as for preservation and conservation work. Renovations and additions must also be done to satisfy federal legislation requiring museums to provide access and facilities for handicapped visitors.