

CHAPTER 6

Art Museums and the
Ritual of Citizenship

CAROL DUNCAN

The French Revolution created the first truly modern art museum when it designated the Louvre Palace a national museum. The transformation of the old royal palace into the Museum of the French Republic was high on the agenda of the French Revolutionary government. Already, public art museums were regarded as evidence of political virtue, indicative of a government that provided the right things for its people. Outside of France, too, educated opinion understood that art museums could demonstrate the goodness of a state or municipality or show the civic-mindedness of its leading citizens. By the middle of the nineteenth century, almost every Western nation would boast a national museum or art gallery. Even Washington, D.C., was, for a time, slated to have a national gallery of art in what is now the Renwick Building, which was designed in 1859 with the Louvre's architecture very much in mind.

The West, then, has long known that public art museums are important, even necessary, fixtures of a well-furnished state. This knowledge has recently spread to other parts of the world. Lately, both traditional monarchs in so-called underdeveloped nations and Third World military despots have become enthralled with them. Western-style art museums are now deployed as a means of signaling to the West that one is a reliable political ally, imbued with proper

respect for and adherence to Western symbols and values. By providing a veneer of Western liberalism that entails few political risks and relatively small expense, art museums in the Third World can reassure the West that one is a safe bet for economic or military aid.

So in 1975 Imelda Marcos put together a museum of modern art in a matter of weeks.¹ The rush was occasioned by the meeting in Manila of the International Monetary Fund. The new Metropolitan Museum of Manila—it specialized in American and European art—was clearly meant to impress the conference's many illustrious visitors, who included some of the world's most powerful bankers.² Not surprisingly, the new museum reenacted on a cultural level exactly the same relations that bound the Philippines to the United States economically and militarily. It opened with dozens of loans from the Brooklyn Museum, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the private collections of Armand Hammer and Nathan Cummings.³ Given Washington's massive contribution to the Philippine military budget, it is fair to assume that the museum building itself, an unused army building, was virtually an American donation.

The Shah of Iran also needed Western-style museums to complete the facade of modernity he constructed for Western eyes. The Museum of Contemporary Art in Teheran opened in 1977 shortly before the régime's fall.⁴ Costing over \$7 million, the multilevel modern-style structure was filled mostly with American art from the post-World War II period—reputedly \$30 million worth—and staffed by mostly American or American-trained museum personnel. According to Robert Hobbs, who was the museum's chief curator, the royal family viewed the museum and its collection as simply one of many instruments of political propaganda.⁵

Meanwhile in the West, museum fever continues unabated. Almost weekly, newspapers publicize plans for yet another new museum or an expansion or renovation of an old one in London, Paris, New York, Los Angeles, or some other national or regional capital. As much as ever, having a bigger and better art museum is a sign of political virtue and national identity—of being recognizably a member of the civilized community of modern, liberal nations.

Recently, there has been much concern with how Western museums represent other cultures—how museum displays of "primitive," Third World, or non-Western art often misrepresent or even invent foreign cultures for what are ultimately political purposes. The question of what museums do to other cultures often leaves unexamined what I believe is a prior question: what fundamental purposes do

museums serve in our own culture and how do they use art objects to achieve those purposes? My essay, then, will be concerned not with the representation of foreign or non-Western cultures but with what art museums say to and about our own culture—what political meanings they produce and how they produce them. I should immediately say that I am concerned with the most familiar kind of public art museum, the typical capital or big-city museum dedicated to a broad sweep of art history. The Louvre is the prototype of this kind of museum.

THE MUSEUM AS RITUAL

I will be treating art museums as ceremonial monuments. My general approach grows out of work I have done in the past, much of it in collaboration with Alan Wallach.⁶ In referring to museums as ceremonial monuments, my intention is to emphasize the museum experience as a monumental creation in its own right, a cultural artifact that is much more than what we used to understand as "museum architecture." Above all, a museum is not the neutral and transparent sheltering space that it is often claimed to be. More like the traditional ceremonial monuments that museum buildings frequently emulate—classical temples, medieval cathedrals, Renaissance palaces—the museum is a complex experience involving architecture, programmed displays of art objects, and highly rationalized installation practices. And like ceremonial structures of the past, by fulfilling its declared purposes as a museum (preserving and displaying art objects) it also carries out broad, sometimes less obvious political and ideological tasks.

Since the Enlightenment, our society has distinguished between the religious and the secular. We normally think of churches and temples as religious sites, different in kind from secular sites such as museums, courthouses, or state capitols. We associate different kinds of truths with each kind of site. The distinction, rooted in Enlightenment struggles against authoritative religious doctrines, makes religious truth a matter of subjective belief, while the truths belonging to museums, universities, or courts of law claim to be self-evident to reason, rooted in experience, and empirically verifiable. According to this tradition, we think of religious truth as addressed to particular groups of voluntary believers, while secular truth has the status of objective or universal knowledge and functions in our society as higher, authoritative truth. As such, it helps bind the community as a

whole into a civic body, identifying its highest values, its proudest memories, and its truest truths. Art museums belong decisively to this realm of secular knowledge, not only because of the branches of scientific and humanistic knowledge practiced in them—conservation, art history, archaeology—but also because of their status as preservers of the community's cultural heritage.

In contrast, our concept of ritual is normally associated with religious practices, with real or symbolic sacrifices or spiritual transformations. Clearly, such events can have little to do with so secular a place as a museum. But, as anthropologists now argue, our supposedly secular culture is full of ritual situations and events.⁷ Once we recognize the ideological character of our Enlightenment vocabulary and question the claims made for the secular—that its truths are lucid, rationally demonstrable, and objective—we may begin to conceptualize the hidden (or perhaps the better word is *disguised*) ritual content of secular ceremonies. We can also consider the advantages of a ritual that passes as a secular, and therefore objective and neutral, occurrence.

The very architecture of museums suggests their character as secular rituals. It was fitting that the temple facade was for two hundred years the most popular signifier for the public art museum.⁸ The temple facade had the advantage of calling up both secular and ritual associations. The beginnings of museum architecture date from the epoch in which Greek and Roman architectural forms were becoming the normal language for distinctly civic and secular buildings. Referring to a pre-Christian world of highly evolved civic institutions, classical-looking buildings could well suggest secular, Enlightenment principles and purposes. But monumental classical forms also brought with them the space of rituals—corridors scaled for processions and interior sanctuaries designed for awesome and potent effigies.

Museums do not simply resemble temples architecturally; they *work* like temples, shrines, and other such monuments. Museumgoers today, like visitors to these other sites, bring with them the willingness and ability to shift into a certain state of receptivity. And like traditional ritual sites, museum space is carefully marked off and culturally designated as special, reserved for a particular kind of contemplation and learning experience and demanding a special quality of attention—what Victor Turner called "liminality."⁹

In all ritual sites, some kind of performance takes place. Visitors may witness a drama—often a real or symbolic sacrifice—or hear a recital of texts or special music; they may enact a performance them-

selves, often individually and alone, by following a prescribed route, repeating a prayer or certain texts, reliving a narrative relevant to the site, or engaging in some other structured experience that relates to the history or meaning of the site. Some individuals may use ritual sites more knowledgeably than others; they may be more educationally prepared to respond to their symbolic cues. Ritual is often regarded as transformative: it confers identity or purifies or restores order to the world through sacrifice, ordeal, or enlightenment.

So visitors to a museum follow a route through a programmed narrative—in this case, one or another version of the history of art. In the museum, art history displaces history, purges it of social and political conflict, and distills it down to a series of triumphs, mostly of individual genius. Of course, what the museum presents as the community's history, beliefs, and identity may represent only the interests and self-image of certain powers within the community. Such deceit, however, does not necessarily lessen the effectiveness of the monument's ritual structure as such.

THE POLITICS OF PUBLIC ART MUSEUMS

I want to return now to the question with which I began, namely the political usefulness of public art museums. Some museum history will help bring this political use into focus.

Ceremonial sites dedicated to the accumulation and display of treasures go back to the most ancient of times. It is tempting to extend our notion of the museum back in time and discover museumlike functions in the treasuries of ancient temples or medieval cathedrals or in the family chapels of Italian baroque churches. But however much the public art museum may resemble these other kinds of places as a structured experience, historically the modern institution of the museum grew most directly out of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century princely collections. These collections, often displayed in lavishly decorated galleries built especially for them, anticipated some of the functions of later museums. Beginning in the eighteenth century, public art museums would appropriate, develop, and transform the central function of the princely gallery.¹⁰

Typically, princely galleries were used as reception halls, providing sumptuous settings for official ceremonies and magnificent frames for the figure of the prince. Princes everywhere installed their treasures in such galleries in order to impress both foreign visitors and local

dignitaries with their splendor and, often through special iconographies, the rightness or legitimacy of their rule. This function of the princely gallery as a ceremonial reception hall wherein the state presented and idealized itself would remain central to the public art museum.

The Louvre was not the first royal collection to be turned into a public art museum, but its transformation was the most politically significant and influential. In 1793 the French Revolutionary government, looking for a way to dramatize the creation of the new republican state, nationalized the king's art collection and declared the Louvre a public museum. The Louvre, once the palace of kings, was reorganized as a museum for the people, to be open to everyone free of charge. It thus became a powerful symbol of the fall of the *ancien régime* and the creation of a new order.

The new meaning that the French Revolution gave to the old palace was literally inscribed inside, in the heart of the seventeenth-century palace, the Apollo Gallery, built by Louis XIV as a princely gallery and reception hall. Inscribed over its entrance is the French Revolutionary decree that called into existence the Museum of the French Republic and ordered its opening on 10 August 1793 specifically to commemorate "the anniversary of the fall of the tyranny" (Figure 6-1). Inside the Apollo Gallery, a case holds three crowns from the royal and imperial past, now ceremonially displayed as public property.

Other art museums could hardly boast such politically dramatic origins or so historically rich a setting. But every major state, monarchical or republican, understood the usefulness of having a public art museum. Such public institutions made (and still make) the state look good: progressive, concerned about the spiritual life of its citizens, a preserver of past achievements and a provider for the common good. The same virtues accrue to the individual citizens who, in the Anglo-American tradition, bring about public art museums. Certainly vanity and the desire for social status and prestige among nations and cities as well as among individuals are motives for founding or contributing to art museums, as they were in the creation of princely galleries. But such motives easily blend with sentiments of civic concern or national pride. And since public museums are, by definition, accessible to everyone, they can function as especially clear demonstrations of the state's commitment to the principle of equality. The public museum also makes visible the public it claims to serve. It produces the public as a visible entity by literally providing it a defining frame and giving



Fig. 6-1. Entrance to the Apollo Gallery, the Louvre. Photo by Carol Duncan.

it something to do. Meanwhile, the political passivity of citizenship is idealized as active art appreciation and spiritual enrichment. Thus the art museum gives citizenship and civic virtue a content without having to redistribute real power.

In all this, the work of art, now displayed as public property, becomes the means through which the relationship between the individual as citizen and the state as benefactor is enacted. In order for art to become useful in this way, however, older concepts of art and art collecting had to be reconceived. In the princely gallery, paintings, statues and other rare and precious objects were understood as luxurious decorations and enviable displays of wealth, or as trophies of military exploits.¹¹ In one way or another, displays of objects demonstrated something about the prince—his splendor, glory, or wisdom. To fulfill their task in public art museums, the same objects had to acquire yet another layer of meaning, a layer that could obliterate, contradict, or radically distort previous meanings and uses. In the

museum, the prince's treasures, along with other things—altarpieces, for example, taken from yet another ritual context—now had to become art-historical objects, repositories of spiritual wealth, products of individual and national genius. Indeed, the museum environment was structured precisely to bring out these meanings and to suppress or downplay others. The museum context is, in this sense, a powerful transformer: it converts what were once displays of material wealth and social status into displays of spiritual wealth.

The form that this new kind of wealth takes in the museum is the work of art as the product of genius, an object whose true significance lies in its capacity to testify to the creative vitality of its maker. This reinvestment of meaning was made possible by the new discipline of art history, whose system of classification was immediately employed by the state as an ideological instrument. Thus recontextualized as art history, the luxury of princes could now be seen as the spiritual heritage of the nation, distilled into an array of national and individual genius. Displayed chronologically and in national categories along the museum's corridors, the new arrangement illuminated the universal spirit as it manifested itself in the various moments of high civilization. Significantly, the new value discovered in the prince's old treasures could be distributed to the many merely by displaying it in a public space. To be sure, equality of access to the museum in no way gave everyone the relevant education to understand the new art-historical values of these old treasures, let alone equal political rights and privileges; in fact, only propertied males were full citizens. But in the museum, everyone was in principle equal, and if the uneducated were unable to use the cultural goods the museum proffered, they could—and still can—be awed by the sheer magnitude of the treasure.

In a relatively short time, the Louvre's directors (drawing on some German precedents) worked out a whole set of practices that came to characterize art museums everywhere. Very early on, the Louvre's galleries were organized by national school. By its 1810 reopening as the Musée Napoléon, the museum, now under the direction of Vivant Denon, was completely organized by school, and within the schools works of important masters were grouped together. The new art history thus provided the authoritative text upon which the public art museum was to structure its ritual. The vestibule of the Musée Napoléon (the Rotunda of Mars), dedicated in 1810 and still intact today, already states the new art-historical program. Four medallions in the ceiling celebrate what art history early designated as the most important moments in the history of art. Each contains a female personifi-

cation of a national school along with a famous example of its sculpture. Egypt holds a cult statue, Greece the *Apollo Belvedere* (Figure 6-2), Italy Michelangelo's *Moses*, and France Puget's *Milo of Crotona*.¹² The message reads clearly: France is the fourth and final term in a narrative sequence that comprises the greatest moments of art history. Simultaneously, the history of art has become no less than the history of the highest achievements of Western civilization itself: its origins in Egypt and Greece, its reawakening in the Renaissance, and its flowering in nineteenth-century France. As promised by the vestibule's decorations, the sculpture collection was organized as a tour through the great schools.

Even though almost two centuries have passed since the Louvre opened as a museum, and even though there have been and still are expansions, alterations, reorganizations, and reinstallations, the museum is still remarkably coherent both as a series of ceremonial spaces and as a programmed sequence of collections that maintains the nineteenth-century bias for the great epochs of Civilization. Strong doses of classical art are still administered early in the tour and visitors soon see Italian Renaissance art, the importance of which is stressed,

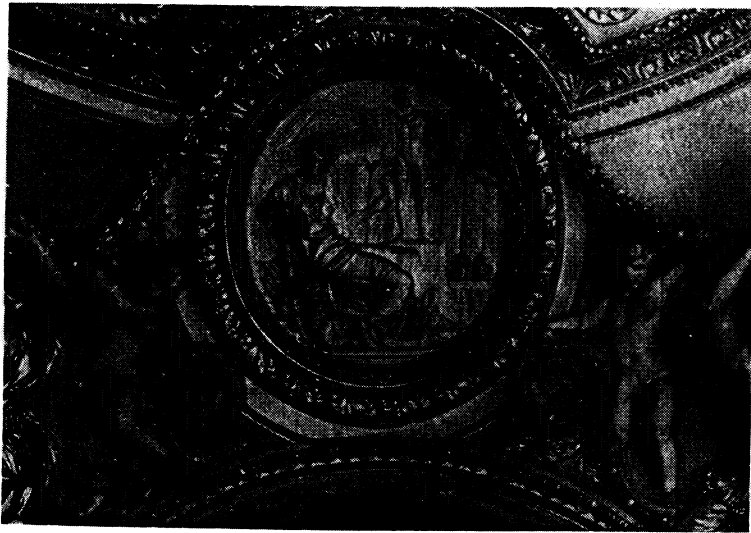


Fig. 6-2. *The School of Greece with the Apollo Belvedere*; detail of the ceiling of the *Rotunda of Mars*. Photo by Carol Duncan.

no matter what route one takes, by the monumentality and centrality of the halls devoted to it.

In the nineteenth century, when these museum meanings were still novel, the ruling authorities spelled them out on the Louvre's ceilings. At first, the ceilings hammered home the image of the state or monarch as protector of the arts. Using traditional princely iconography, images and insignia repeatedly identified this or that government or monarch in that role. But increasingly the iconography centered on artists. In the Musée Charles X, dating from the 1820s, ceiling after ceiling celebrates great patron-princes of the past—popes, kings, and cardinals (Figure 6-3); but famous artists are also abundantly present, their names or portraits, arranged into schools, decorating the entablatures. Ever greater expanses of overhead space would be devoted to them as the century wore on. Indeed, the nineteenth century was a great age of genius iconography, and nowhere are genius ceilings more ostentatious than in the Louvre. Predictably, after every coup or revolution, new governments would vote funds for at least one such ceiling, prominently inscribing their own insignia on it. Thus in 1848, the newly constituted Second Republic renovated and decorated the Salon Carré and the nearby Hall of the Seven Chimneys, devoting the first to great artists from foreign schools and the second to French geniuses, profiles of whom were alphabetically arranged in the frieze (Figures 6-4 and 6-5).¹³

It should be obvious that the demand for Great Artists, once the type was developed as a historical category, was enormous—they were, after all, the means by which, on the one hand, the state could

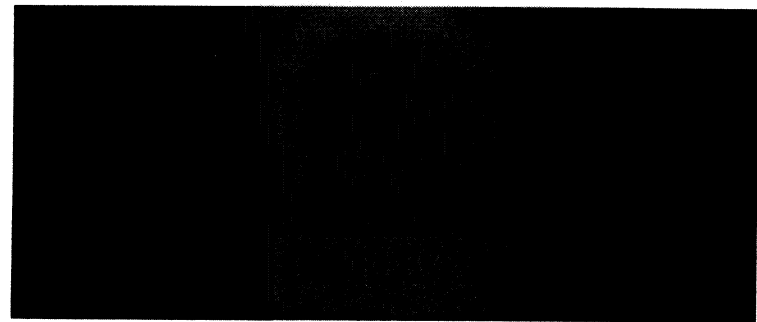


Fig. 6-3. Charles X as Protector of the Arts; detail of ceiling, Musée Charles X, the Louvre. Photo by Carol Duncan.

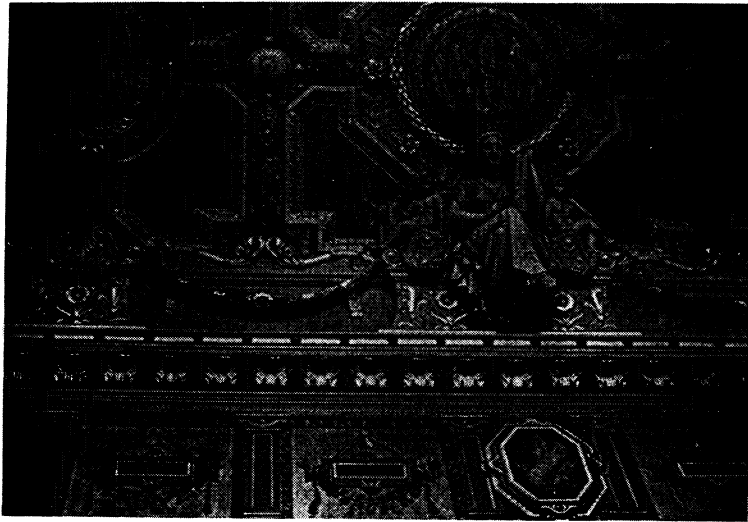


Fig. 6-4. Detail of ceiling, *Salon Carré, the Louvre*. Photo by Carol Duncan.

demonstrate the highest kind of civic virtue, and on the other, citizens could know themselves to be civilized. Not surprisingly, quantities of Great Artists were duly discovered and furnished with properly archetypal biographies by the burgeoning discipline of art history. We should

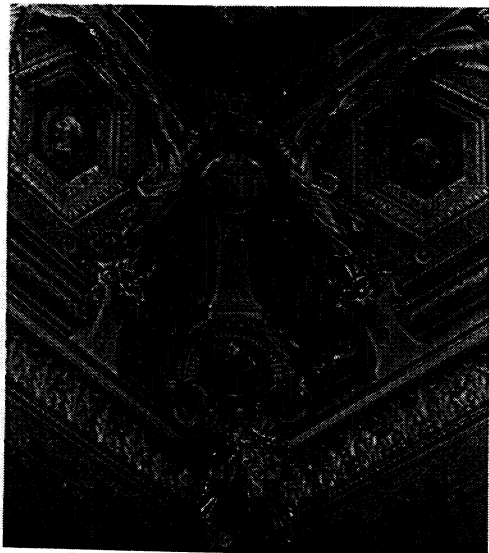


Fig. 6-5. Detail of ceiling, *Hall of the Seven Chimneys*. Photo by Carol Duncan.

also recall that artists such as Ingres and Delacroix were very aware of themselves as candidates for the category of Great Artist so lavishly celebrated on the museum's ceilings, and plotted their careers accordingly. The situation continues today in the institution of the giant retrospective. A voracious demand for Great Artists, living or dead, is obligingly supplied by legions of art historians and curators trained for just this purpose. Inevitably some of the Great Artists recruited for this purpose—especially premodern masters—fill out the role of museum art star with less success than others. Even so, a fair or just good Great Artist is still a serviceable item in today's museum business.

CIVILIZATION ON THE WANE

The United States followed the English tradition of relying mainly upon private citizens to found museums. Nevertheless, museums in the United States have played the same ideological role as their state-founded equivalents in Europe, just as they adopted the essentials of the ceremonial program first perfected by the Louvre.

New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, for example, was directly inspired by the Louvre. Until a few years ago, the museum's commitment to the great-epochs approach was unmistakable. From the museum's vast, monumental entry hall, all the main axes led either to antiquity or to the Renaissance: Greece and Egypt to the right and left, Italy up the stairs. Other collections were fitted in behind these. Thus, as in the Louvre, the three great moments of Western civilization were programmatically emphasized as *the* heritage of the present. These arrangements were echoed by every major American museum and scores of minor ones. When no Greek or Roman originals were on hand, as they were not in many museums, the idea was conveyed by plaster casts of classical sculpture or Greek-looking architecture, the latter often embellished with the names of Great Artists; such facades are familiar sights everywhere (Figures 6-6 and 6-7).

The general museum ideal I have been describing went through a variety of particular developments in the various nations of the West, where it was subject to different sets of tensions and pressures. Nevertheless, it remained remarkably viable and coherent as an ideal until around the 1950s, when its hold on the museum community began to wane—at first in the United States and then internationally. The frenzy of museum building that began in the 1950s and continues to this day has left us with many new museums dedicated to modern art. Modern art museums (or modern wings in older museums) differ from tradi-

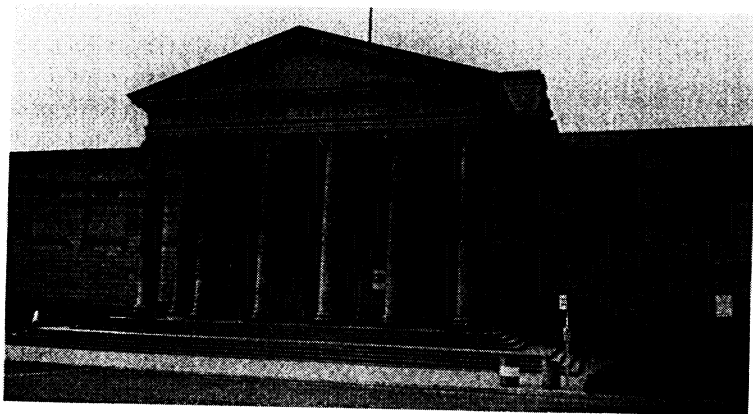


Fig. 6-6. *Facade, National Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.* Photo by Carol Duncan.

tional museums not only because their collections consist of more recent art, but also, and more important, because they introduce a different museum ritual. The concept of the public and the reverence for the classical Western past that informed the older museum do not operate in the modern one, just as the new, more alienated kind of individualism celebrated there is very different from the idealized citizen-state relationship implicit in the older museum.

These shifts are dramatically visible in many traditional museums that, like the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, have been expanded or altered in recent years. In the old Museum of Fine Arts, everything was organized around the central theme of Civilization. Behind the monumental classical entry facade, the entire sequence of world civilizations followed one upon the other: Greece, Rome, and Egypt on one side, balanced by their Eastern counterparts on the other. The rest of art history came after, all in its proper order, with the Renaissance centrally placed. This arrangement is still intact today, but the recent addition of the new East Wing has seriously disrupted the order in which it unfolds. Because the new wing has in practice become the museum's main entrance, the classical galleries, the old museum's opening statement, now occupy the most remote reaches of the building—remote, that is, in relation to the new entrance. The museum's opening statement now consists of a large gallery of modern art, three new restaurants, a space for special exhibitions, and a large gift-and-book store. It is now possible to visit the museum, see a show,



Fig. 6-7. *Detail of facade, National Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.* Photo by Carol Duncan.

go shopping, and eat, and never once be reminded of the heritage of Civilization.

In the same way, the new primitive-art wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art decidedly upstages the Greek collection, which had to be moved to create an access first to the new primitive-art galleries and then later to the new twentieth-century wing, an arrangement that decidedly blunts the museum's earlier claims about Greece as an antecedent to modern civilization (Figure 6-8). As constructed by the museum, the modern soul yearns not for the light of classical antiquity but for the presumably dark and incomprehensible creations of supposedly precivilized, ahistorical cultures. In other museums, so-called primitive art is frequently mixed up with twentieth-century avant-garde art, where it validates every possible modern style from early cubism to surrealism to current neoexpressionism and neoprimitivism.

As we see so often in the papers in this volume, museums can be powerful identity-defining machines. To control a museum means pre-

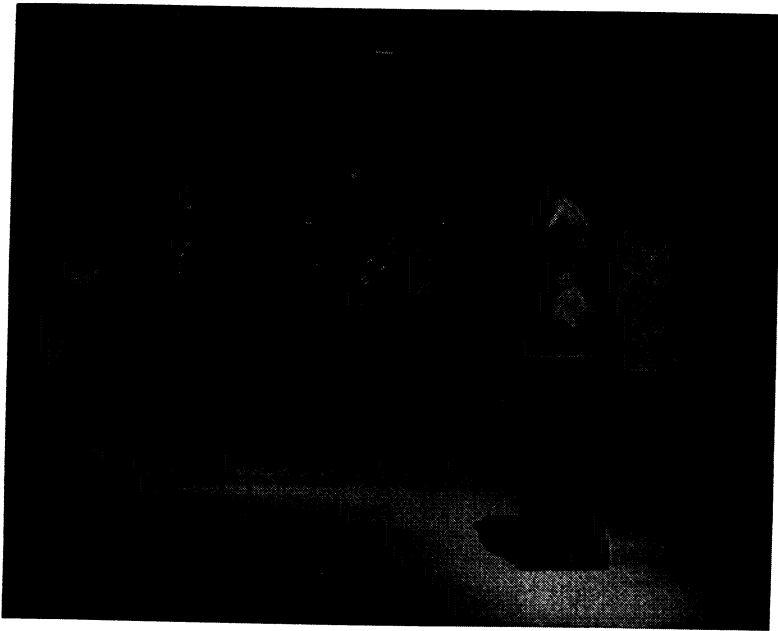


Fig. 6-8. Entrance to the twentieth-century wing, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Photo by Carol Duncan.

cisely to control the representation of a community and some of its highest, most authoritative truths. It also means the power to define and rank people, to declare some as having a greater share than others in the community's common heritage—in its very identity. Those who are in the greatest accord with the museum's version of what is beautiful and good may partake of this greater identity. It is they who are best prepared to recognize the history presented by the program and who have most cultivated the skills to produce the particular kind of associations or, as the case may be, the aesthetic attention, implicitly demanded by the museum's isolated objects. In short, those who best understand how to use art in the museum environment are also those on whom the museum ritual confers this greater and better identity. It is precisely for this reason that museums and museum practices can become objects of fierce struggle and impassioned debate. What we see and do not see in our most prestigious art museums—and on what terms and whose authority we do or don't see it—involves the much larger questions of who constitutes the community and who shall exercise the power to define its identity.

NOTES

1. "How to Put Together a Museum in 29 Days," *ARTnews* (Dec. 1976).
2. *New York Times*, 5 Oct. 1976, 65, 77.
3. "How to Put Together A Museum."
4. Sarah McFadden, "Teheran Report," *Art in America* 69, no. 10 (Oct. 1981).
5. Robert Hobbs, "Museum Under Siege," *Art in America* 69, no. 10 (Oct. 1981).
6. See especially Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, "The Universal Survey Museum," *Art History* 3 (Dec. 1980).
7. See, for example, Victor Turner, "Frame, Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality," in Michel Benamou and Charles Caramello, eds., *Performance in Postmodern Culture* (Milwaukee: Center for Twentieth-Century Studies, University of Wisconsin, 1977), 33–35. See also the contribution to this volume by Masao Yamaguchi, which discusses a wide variety of secular rituals and "sacred spaces" in both Japanese and Western culture, including modern exhibition spaces.
8. See Nikolaus Pevsner, *A History of Building Types* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 118ff.; Neils von Holst, *Creators, Collectors and Connoisseurs*, trans. Brian Battershaw (London: Thames and Hudson, 1967), 228f.; and Germain Bazin, *The Museum Age*, trans. Jane van Nuis Cahill (New York: Universe, 1967), 197–202.
9. Turner, "Frame, Flow and Reflection."
10. For princely galleries see Bazin, *The Museum Age*, 129–39; von Holst, *Creators*, 95–139 and passim; Thomas da Costa Kaufmann, "Remarks on the Collections of Rudolf II: The Kunstkammer as a Form of Representation," *Art Journal* 38 (Fall 1978); Pevsner, *History of Building Types*, 112ff.; and Hugh Trevor-Roper, *Princes and Artists: Patronage and Ideology at Four Habsburg Courts 1517–1633* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976). For the beginnings of public art museums, see Bazin, *The Museum Age*, 141–91 and passim.
11. The princely gallery I am discussing is not the cabinet of curiosities, which mixed together found objects, such as shells and minerals, with manmade things, but the large, ceremonial reception hall, such as the Louvre's Apollo Gallery. For a discussion of the differences, see Bazin, *The Museum Age*, 129ff.
12. Christiane Aulanier, *Histoire du Palais et du Musée du Louvre* (Paris: Editions du Musées nationaux, n.d.), 5:76.
13. Aulanier, *Histoire du Palais* 2:63–66, 7:96–98.