

The Internet Will Force Us to Reinvent Museums

Written by Phillipe de Montebello

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"The contemplation of art requires patience; we spend too little time in front of the works."

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At the end of last month after thirty-one years as director, Philippe de Montebello left the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. He left behind an impeccable trajectory, marked by excellence and quality, and an institution that today is a model of reference for the great museums of the world. Tomorrow Montebello will deliver the keynote address at the first course organized by the Prado Museum that will analyze the present and future of museums.

"One of the reasons I left the museum," Montebello explained, "was because I am convinced that I am not the person of tomorrow for the museum. I am the person of yesterday and now is the time to redo things, to reinvent the model of the Metropolitan."

Is it the time for new technologies, or the Internet?

Yes. This is the communications medium of the new generations. And we are forced to communicate with them in their language. They do not read newspapers, they read screens. And this is something that someone like me, someone who was born before World War II, cannot do. The possibility that Google Earth offers to contemplate certain works of art in the Prado is something marvelous. You can zoom in on details that the naked eye cannot see, but what you see is false, because not even the artist or the viewer can do so. Technology helps, adds, inspires sight, but it does not take its place. Physical contemplation is necessary and the public knows it.

Is the Met still the model to follow?

I prefer to use a broader way of looking at things. I have studied the major museums in the world and each one has its role and acts in a different way for diverse publics. There is no model that serves for all of them. The Met is a special museum, truly encyclopedic, universal, spanning five thousand years of history, utterly unlike the National Gallery of London or the Prado, which are painting collections that focus on European art, or museums such as the one in Athens or Cairo, which focus on the art of their respective countries. There is indeed an ethic that we should all follow, based on excellence, on independent thought, on probity.

Is that independence possible in national museums like the Prado?

The Prado is not limited like other museums, which I will not mention, that depend on governments and ministers who can exert very direct influence over them. There is a very healthy balance at the Prado.

What tools help achieve excellence?

"Excellence is an abstract notion. A permanent feeling of always overcoming. Doing things better with each day, never falling into the trap of repeating things, taking a critical look at oneself. One can be excellent in aims, in the way one acts, in art itself. There is a hierarchy in the quality of works, there are very good ones, good, and mediocre ones, which in no way prevents excellence, and that we must recognize, because everything is not equal."

Are museums conditioned by public success?

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"We serve the public. The measure is not the number of people who enter a museum, but rather the quality of the experience. Measuring that quality is difficult, but not impossible. Their reactions can be observed, we can know if they return, or if they are habitual visitors. If they do not wish to return, it would be a sign that the museum has done a bad job. The public makes no mistake, it is intelligent, and it deserves respect, it always surprises me for its discernment and intelligence."

Is it good to have the exaggerated prominence of some directors or curators?

It is not good, it is essential, they are the magicians, the soul of a museum, everything comes from the curators, from their knowledge, from their science, it is the reason why almost all directors were curators at one time or another.

Are there inherent differences between a history museum and a contemporary art museum?

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"The difference resides in the art represented. If it really is a contemporary art museum, the works have not passed the test of history, they cannot be judged in the same way as ancient works whose value has been confirmed by many generations. Their activity is a gamble of the present and the future that entails taking a risk. In a certain way, a contemporary art museum is a contradiction; it should be more of a gallery. A museum is valuable for art to take root, but contemporary art is something alive. They are called museums because they are public, open, and they have curators."

Museums have sometimes been criticized for their extremely close ties to the market.

That's reality. There is a market and artists need to eat, pay their rent, sell their works, and there are museums that buy them. Nothing can be done in this world without money. I think that speaking of business as if it were something evil is wrong.

What do you think about the Prado's decision on "The Colossus"?

"We are forced to present the truth; we must not lie to the public. The Prado has shown its courage by diminishing the symbolic value of such a famous painting. With this action, it improves its public reputation and reinforces the public's confidence in the veracity of other attributions."

You think of the museum as a repository of centuries of knowledge, but normally the visitor fixates on the formal aspects of the works. How can historical awareness be improved?

"The works must be accompanied by information that facilitates their comprehension and enjoyment. It is a mistake to think that if the label accompanying the work is lengthy, museum visitors only read without looking at the work; that's not true. The reality is that if there is little information, the public glances at the work and walks away. On the other hand, they can learn something new if they spend more time contemplating the work."

Which museums do you prefer, big ones or small ones?

"In all things in life, I like variety. Museums are too big only if you want to visit them in a single day. Any museum larger than the Lázaro Galdiano is too big for one day. Listening to Beethoven's nine symphonies one after another would be madness. The best way to visit a museum is to choose a few rooms, see them well, and then return another day to see others. The visit cannot be an inventory. It is clear that many museum visitors go for just a day, someone who comes from far away for just one day, does not mean they are stupid. People who live in Madrid can come to the Prado many times."

What are the works that you never miss when you come to the Prado?

"They change with every visit, depending on my mood. The painting that moved me the other day, tomorrow could leave me cold".

How would you explain the experience of contemplating art?

"It requires time and patience. We spend too little time in front of the artwork. One needs to stay and wait for the painting to speak to us, because most artworks do not burst out their message all at once, they share it slowly, it is a silent, very rich and profound dialogue."

Does it teach us to enjoy art?

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"No. And this is a museum's job, an educator's job. Museums should offer a leaflet that teaches one to look at an artwork, how to approach it, and to let it speak. In museums, people stand too far away from the works, it is necessary to get close, without touching them, to see the brushstrokes, the lines, the handling of the material. Without being in a rush. In some lectures, I start with a blank image to gradually put the image of a painting together, choosing, as the artist did, the different possibilities in the composition, the figures, in their representation. It is something that fascinates the audience".

Have these two months out of the museum changed your way of seeing things?

"I am surely it will change, I don't know how, but it will change. I used to spend all day in meeting after meeting. Now I have time to think, to reflect".

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