

# The New Criterion

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## Notes on the postmodern museum

by Eric Gibson

*On the distinct phases in the evolution of art museums.*

In moments of uncertainty, it sometimes helps to step back. To try to make sense of the myriad changes that have taken place in museums in recent years—changes of scale, character, and outlook—I'd like to take the long view and propose that we are now in the "Third Phase" of the great age of American art museums that began in the last quarter of the nineteenth century with the founding of institutions such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Art Institute of Chicago, and what would come to be known as the Philadelphia Museum of Art. What makes this period so different from those that preceded it is the questioning, even overturning, of many of the premises and principles that had guided...

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