Measuring the modern museum

by Karen Wilkin


Charles Saumarez Smith
The Art Museum in Modern Times
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In the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, museum buildings throughout the United States and Europe were grand neoclassical monuments, temples to culture (or occasionally natural history), and symbols of civic pride, whose debt to Enlightenment ideals was signaled by impressively colonnaded porticoes. Think of (among many other contenders) the Philadelphia Museum of Art; the National Gallery, London; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; the Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh; the Metropolitan Museum of Art; the various institutions on the Museum Island, Berlin; and even the National Gallery, Washington, D.C., a latecomer, inaugurated in 1941. The construction and organization of these splendid edifices coincided with the transformation of the conception of the art museum from a Wunderkammer—a random gathering of precious and interesting objects of all sorts—to a coherent gathering of paintings and sculpture, arranged according to chronology and place of origin. While at first the main role of the museum and its staff was seen as protecting its holdings and conducting research—the public seems to have been considered as a benign nuisance and not particularly encouraged—there was also a burgeoning awareness of the museum as an educational institution. Casts of celebrated works from antiquity allowed the history of art to be demonstrated as a continuous line beginning with the classical past.

Nothing could be further from what we now think of as the raison d’être or the appearance of the present-day art museum. The evolution of these characteristics, as they have manifested themselves in twentieth- and twenty-first-century museum buildings, is tracked in the lively, informative overview *The Art Museum in Modern Times*, by Charles Saumarez Smith. As a former director of the National Gallery and of the National Portrait Gallery, London, and as a former official of the Royal Academy of Arts who teaches the history of design at the Victoria & Albert Museum, the author has insider knowledge of the needs of present-day institutions dedicated to showing art. Having overseen a redesign and expansion of the National Portrait Gallery, he also has experience in the process and protocols of creating museum spaces.

Divided into chronological sections headed “The Modern Museum” (1939–78), “The Post-Modern Museum” (1984–97), “Museums for the New Millennium” (2000–11), and “The Museum Reinvented” (2011–19), the book is a series of case studies, beginning with the first iteration of New York’s Museum of Modern Art, which opened in 1939, and ending with a series of projects from the last decade. The most recent examples range from Tod Williams and Billie Tsien’s “new” Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia, which recreates the interior of the original Paul Cret building while adding present-day amenities and temporary exhibition galleries, to the wildly experimental mona (Museum of Old and New Art), an eccentric private collector’s eccentric private museum, in Hobart, Tasmania, described by Saumarez Smith as “the most radical reinvention of what an art museum can and should be.” In between there are discussions of the origins, development, and realization of such projects as Louis Kahn’s Kimbell Art Museum (Fort Worth); Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers’ Centre Pompidou (Paris); I. M. Pei’s Louvre Pyramid (Paris); James Turrell’s Dia:Beacon (upstate New York); David Chipperfield’s Hepworth Wakefield (Yorkshire); and many more paradigms in the United States, Europe, and Asia, with brief forays to Brazil and Australia.
Each case study has a slightly different emphasis. We get capsule histories of institutions, gossipy stories about patrons and architects, accounts of complicated or vexed projects, descriptions of sites, and evocations of moving through buildings, even, on occasion, notes on views seen out of the buildings. We discover that Saumarez Smith is a fan of Dominique de Menil (the founder of the Menil Collection, Houston, and the force behind its splendid Renzo Piano building) and equally enthusiastic about Nicholas Serota (until recently, the director of the Tate, on whose watch Tate Modern was conceived and executed). Since the book is about the embodiment of changing conceptions “of what a museum can and should be,” Saumarez Smith always concentrates on the physical characteristics of each included museum, rarely giving anything but the most general notes on its collections, apart from often-detailed comments on how the works are displayed. Photographs document interiors and exteriors, although not quite as many as one might wish. It would have been helpful to have had more images of the buildings rather than of the patrons and architects, important as they obviously are.

Another exemplar, Frank Lloyd Wright’s Guggenheim Museum, which opened in 1959, defied expectations that a museum building would respond politely to context. Instead, the inverted ziggurat announced itself as an autonomous, sculptural object, unlike anything around it, setting a new precedent and opening up new possibilities, which Saumarez Smith sees as fulfilled in New York by Marcel Breuer’s assertive Whitney Museum (now the temporary location of the Frick Collection) and Renzo Piano’s recent new home for the Whitney, in the Meatpacking District. Saumarez Smith gives us the backstory of the Guggenheim, starting with the first, temporary version of what was then the Museum of Non-Objective Art, run by its curator, Baroness Hilla von Rebay, which opened in 1939 in a former automobile showroom not far from moma. (Peggy Guggenheim referred to the place as “Uncle Solomon’s garage.”) We learn the complicated, tortuous history of the Wright building—from Solomon Guggenheim’s enthusiasm, to Rebay’s doubts, to the active opposition of Rebay’s replacement, James Sweeney, who had come from moma and loathed Wright but who was obviously overruled. Saumarez Smith sees the saga as demonstrating the persistent tension “between the wishes and demands of museum curators, who normally want a serviceable building that focuses spectators on the experience of the collection, and those of architects, who tend to view the experience of the museum visitor as being equally if not more concerned with the building.” Just how well the Guggenheim functions as a place to display art is another question.

Saumarez Smith recounts how enthusiasm has diminished for “white cube” galleries, both in museums and in high-end commercial enterprises. This kind of sleek, neutral setting once seemed to be the ideal for works of art, but unpolished spaces—often repurposed industrial buildings, such as Dia:Beacon’s former box factory, or Tate Modern’s power plant—later gained favor. Saumarez Smith sees these “rough” settings as echoing the types of places where contemporary artists make their work, suggesting that, by extension, these must be the contexts in which artists prefer their work to be seen. (He must know different artists than I do. Most of those I have encountered welcome the chance to view their work in a setting as unlike the studio as possible.)
Saumarez Smith refers, as well, to other kinds of rough spaces, citing the resuscitation of the badly damaged Neues Museum on Berlin’s Museum Island (by David Chipperfield and the restoration architect Julian Harrap), which preserves the scarred ruins and replaces only what was essential to replace, allowing the history of the building itself to become part of the experience.

As an experienced museum executive who has been involved in building projects, Saumarez Smith has a clear sense of the issues at stake in the design and realization of any present-day museum, not only because of the specific function of the building itself (including all of the auxiliary features now deemed essential—event space, restaurant, gift shop, library, auditorium, and all the rest of it), but also in terms of the relationship between the museum’s architecture and the art on display. He leaves no doubt about his appreciation for non-traditional ways of installing work. He admires Norman Foster’s Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts (University of East Anglia, Norwich, England), singling it out for special attention and praise. In close collaboration with the donors, Foster designed a vast airplane hangar–like edifice that accommodates many different functions related to the art and art history departments, housed in enclosures that, in my experience, feel provisional. Paintings in the wide-ranging collection are hung on fairly low freestanding walls, with sculpture and three-dimensional objects relegated to isolated cases; the effect is of a temporary, low-end art fair, haphazardly installed in a building meant for some other purpose. The enormous space is exhilarating, but the works of art on view are diminished by the incoherence of the installation.

More agreeably, Saumarez Smith is a fan of Carlo Scarpa’s elegant, pared-down approach to placing works of art of all periods within powerful ancient structures. Among Scarpa’s many impressive projects in Italy, he cites the iconic Castelvecchio Museum, Verona, which, one may argue, can be seen as the gold standard of minimalist display that grants equal importance to the setting and the art. Scarpa’s way of isolating works of art within dramatic spaces allows visitors to concentrate on their special qualities, but the threads connecting the various works in a particular collection also remain visible.

Less to his credit, Saumarez Smith rhapsodizes about the installation at the São Paulo Museum of Art, designed by the Italian-born architect, editor, and writer Lina Bo Bardi. The idea, “which involved hanging pictures on large sheets of transparent glass between steel rods supported on concrete blocks,” Saumarez Smith tells us, “was to show works of art as if they were simply commercial goods . . . to be experienced in the present rather than imprisoned in a sacralized past.” He claims that Bo Bardi’s style of display “remains a model of how to break with the conventions of the past and create a new relationship between the viewer and the work of art.” Maybe. The photograph of the installation is just plain frightening, with traditionally framed canvases apparently suspended in midair, in regular rows, above chunky concrete bases. Everything seems visible all at once, with no place to hide. I kept wondering what the back-views would look like and what the authors of the works might think.

Saumarez Smith deals with the growing phenomenon of the private museum, including the
relatively modest Saatchi Gallery (London), and the ambitious Broad (Los Angeles), designed by Diller Scofidio + Renfro. Saumarez Smith sees these as representing a movement, beginning in the mid-1980s, “away from a view of museums as the established citadels of high culture, collecting work slowly over time and conferring their authority on it, towards a recognition that private collectors are at least as important in establishing the value, critical as well as financial, of contemporary art.”

Well, yes. Many of those collectors sit on museum boards, which affords them even more influence. But there’s nothing new about private collectors leading the way in establishing critical value for the art of their own time, even if, unlike Albert Barnes or the Phillips family, they didn’t build their own museums. Witness the Steins, the Cone sisters, John Quinn, or those daring Russians, Sergei Shchukin and Ivan Morozov, all of them instrumental in establishing the importance of the vanguard modernist art that filled their homes. Saumarez Smith describes Eli Broad’s collection as “classic contemporary”—a polite way of saying that his museum is full of the expected rather than courageous choices, offering none of the pleasure of discovering an individual’s quirks of taste, as the Barnes Foundation does.

Saumarez Smith has high praise for recent museums that challenge our (outmoded?) expectations of logic and coherence by refusing to direct visitors in any way, instead encouraging, even demanding that they find their own way, unaided. His favorite example is Tasmania’s mona, which he finds particularly notable for “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.” In some especially up-to-date institutions, this kind of layout is coupled with a non-hierarchical, non-linear installation that ignores chronology, place of origin, or other connections, in order to encourage that “personal, private journey.” Saumarez Smith believes that this facilitates the appreciation of individual works of art. Whether it helps visitors to make sense of the increasingly broad, inclusive way the history of older and recent art is viewed these days is another matter. Probably because it wasn’t open in time for his deadline, Saumarez Smith omits an obvious example of this philosophy, the Museum of Modern Art’s recent addition by Diller Scofidio + Renfro. There, randomness is built into the galleries by multiple doorways that provoke multiple paths, reinforced by curatorial decisions to create disjunctive relationships of gallery to gallery, destroying any sense of progression or connections.

The book’s main themes are itemized, not at the beginning, as we might expect, but at the end. The last section, titled “Key Issues,” addresses such topics as the roles of the client and of the architect, “the morality of wealth,” and “the changing characteristics of works of art,” among other basic considerations. While it might have been useful to read these earlier, encountering them at the end acts as a review, as Saumarez Smith weighs the pros and cons of the characteristics he has dissected before.

Saumarez Smith apologizes for his emphasis, as an Englishman, on Europe and the United States. (He gets a few things about American museums not quite right, but they’re minor.) On the whole, The Art Museum in Modern Times
is a good read and a useful compendium. I expect that my interest was heightened by my having firsthand knowledge of the majority of the places discussed, but I also found myself wanting to visit the ones I didn’t know and, often, wishing to return to others to check my recollections against Saumarez Smith’s observations. Maybe when we’re traveling again.

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