

History Lessons

How the display of art in previous centuries can help us rethink the exhibition industry

Alexander Nagel

Roman statue of Aphrodite at her bath, in the style of **Aphrodite of Cnidos** by Praxiteles, c.100–150 CE. Marble, height: 2.2 m





Johannes Vermeer *The Art of Painting* 1665-8.
Oil on canvas, 12 x 1 m

It surprised me to learn from Philippe de Montebello — who worked in a curatorial capacity at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art in the 1960s before becoming director from 1977 to 2008 — that there was a time when there were no temporary exhibitions at the museum. 'The Great Age of Fresco' exhibition in 1968 was the exception: a gesture of solidarity with the city of Florence after the devastating flood two years earlier. And even then, the museum called in a Princeton Professor, Millard Meiss, to organize it.

'The curator's job', De Montebello explained in a seminar I organized in 2009, 'was to study the collection and acquire new works.'

Things were to change, quickly. From 1976-9, 'The Treasures of Tutankhamun' (popularly known as 'The King Tut Show') went on a seven-city US tour, an extravaganza organized by Thomas Hoving (who was Director of the Met from 1967-77). The exhibition attracted more than eight million visitors and produced untold spinoffs and collateral sales, not to mention riffs on

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Saturday Night Live. Museums around the world got the memo, and we have lived in the era of the blockbuster ever since.

The exhibition industry we now inhabit is such a natural feature of cultural life that even well informed people are unaware of how recent the phenomenon is. Today's overworked curators cannot hope to advance in their fields without a strong record of exhibitions. Museums strive to detach themselves from any association with the art-vaults of old, marketing themselves instead as sites of interest, programming centres and interactive spaces. Museums are now venues where events take place; their mission statements consistently emphasize 'experiences' over objects.

Among the most spectacular of these events is the temporary exhibition; museums of any size are expected to have several shows going at any given time. They receive high loan fees for their works, making it inevitable that at least some of them, some of the time, will leverage the loans for revenue. Museum boards, increasingly populated by powerful figures from the corporate and financial sectors, naturally apply metrics of growth from the area they know best, which means that if they have so many exhibition visitors and so much income last year, then they must improve on that this year — or die. As if in sympathy with the expanding art market of recent decades, the new world of exhibition-making puts works of art in motion, even — and especially — those that are not on the market. The priceless pieces now flow in a general stream with items that really are for sale, or that may be in some proximate future. I admit to having harboured hopes that the financial crisis would break the spiral, but that has not proven to be the case. The logic is systemic; no one controls it.

The logic of the art market — which measures quality on the basis of authenticity, a guarantee that it is made at a given time, and when it is possible to establish, by a given author — is fundamental to our current exhibition industry. The public would not be expected to stand in a queue to see a major exhibition if it were not filled with originals, rarities brought from elsewhere and on view for a limited period only. At the same time, the law of circulation native to the market demands that works of art move at something like the speed of commodities. The two simultaneous requirements — irreplaceable originals forced into swift circulation — causes friction, which translates as damage. There are well-known instances of spectacular damage to works of art during shipping, or during installation and de-installation of exhibitions. And there is the ever-looming danger, invoked by Francis Haskell in a haunting article in *The New York Review of Books* in 1990, of an aeroplane going down with more than one masterpiece on board. But there is also the relatively constant, often undocumented

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— and certainly unadvertised — 'minor' damage that occurs when an object is made to move or is exposed to crowds of people that are difficult to regulate. I don't know how many times I have seen visitors graze a painting with a brochure as they enthusiastically point something out. As one curator responded, when asked about the effects of travel on works of art: 'Well, they certainly never come back in better condition.' If we continue to make art move while clinging to the notion of the original we will soon have a lot of damaged originals, which means more restoration and thus less of the original.

An example: in the ten years between 1999 and 2009, Johannes Vermeer's *Allegory of Painting* (c.1666), whose home is the Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum, travelled to no fewer than eleven shows, many of them trophy exhibitions with no catalogue and zero scholarly value. This was done despite the fact that the white pigment used on this painting, a critical part of its composition, is extremely fragile, flaking off every time it is moved. The museum came to its senses in 2009 and declared that it would never let the work travel again.

This unsustainable situation leads me to think that the art world needs to know more about how art functioned before the art market. The current era is, after all, not the only one in which art was made to move over long distances. A number of great ancient Greek statues and paintings were shipped to Rome to populate the palaces and villas of a new and cultivated wealthy clientele in the late Republic and early Empire. In the European Middle Ages, clerics and devotees avidly collected sacred artefacts and images from the Holy Land. But these imported objects were combined with a whole range of other artistic productions designed to make it possible to re-create like experiences in different places. And not all ancient Roman patrons required Greek originals: when Pyrrhus took Zeuxis's portrait of Helen from Athens in the early third century BCE, it was replaced by a copy, which from that moment onwards was known simply as *Helen by Zeuxis*. Original and copy were switched — it was considered part of the function of images to be copyable. The greatest works of ancient art, by Praxiteles or Zeuxis, were the most copied. Often these copies were not exact. The ultra-famous *Aphrodite of Cnidos* by Praxiteles is known in so many variants, showing so many inflections of the pose, that no one truly knows what the original looked like. In the Middle Ages, the holiest images were the ones most aggressively propagated through replicas.

When it came to important buildings, images and artefacts from the Holy Land, Western Christians used an array of techniques in order to provide access to them from as far away as Europe. At one extreme was the unsubstitutable, authentic sacred object, which bore the name of 'relic' — a copy would not do; a pig's bone, or an ordinary mortal's bone, could not stand in for the bone of a saint. As in our museums today, catalogues and labels were drawn up in order to document the authenticity of relics. (As it happens, relics themselves had gradations, from substance relics, such as the bones of a saint, to original contact relics, such as pieces of clothing worn by the saint, to relics by extension, such as oil or cloths put into contact with a relic at any later point and taken away to 'apply' the relic's powers elsewhere.) But relics were only one element in the gamut of medieval exhibition practices, which also included images — paintings on panel, medallions, drawings on parchment and paper, glass engravings, or sculptures in ivory, bronze, marble and wood — all of which could be effectively copied with sufficient materials and expertise.

Often, very late copies of earlier sacred images themselves became the bearers of cultic power. An engraving by Israhel van Meckenem's from the 1490s carries an inscription which states that it is made on the model of an icon in Santa Croce in Gerusalemme in Rome. The proliferation of the image in print brought into focus the idea that the 'original' was in Rome, and was worthy of a pilgrimage. At the same time, the print itself could be a vehicle of spiritual benefits. A slightly later woodcut, in line with Van Meckenem's engraving, carries an inscription (subsequently crossed out by a Protestant critic of such practices) which declares that anyone who says five Our Fathers, five Hail Marys, and recites the Creed while contemplating the image will be given an indulgence of 32,755 years from time spent in Purgatory.

Even important sacred buildings marking the sites of the life of Christ were copied. Europe is dotted with imitations of the Holy Sepulchre that embody in one feature or another important elements of the structure in Jerusalem. Inside these bits of Jerusalem re-created in European cities, special devotions would happen. So the Holy Land was brought to Europe in various ways, and people performed 'virtual pilgrimages'. These various ingenious methods were intensified after 1291, when the crusaders had lost their last foothold in the Holy Land itself and travel there

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became an especially arduous, expensive and dangerous undertaking. By the late 15th century, elaborate 'pilgrimage parks' were being constructed, so-called *sacri monti* that corresponded to those of the sacred stories set in the Holy Land. Devotees proceeded from one chapel to the other, encountering life-sized figures enacting events from the life of Christ. For the first of these 'pilgrimage parks', founded in Varallo, Italy, in 1491, Pope Innocent VIII granted equivalent indulgences to visitors to the surrogate Palestine to those granted for pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

From the 18th century onwards, the new discipline of art history and the institution of the museum attempted to bring some order to all of this. Linear chronology and style history blasted away at the spatio-temporal confusions in which earlier installations had lived and thrived. Ensembles composed of works in different media and assembled over time were parsed, their artistic elements physically and virtually removed from their institutional settings and 'given' to individual artists. The extracted components, now seen as works in their own right, were re-sorted according to new ordering systems, such as museums, art-historical monographs and catalogues. Frescoed elements were catalogued as 'paintings', sculpted parts were reconstituted as 'sculptures', or as 'ornament', and classed accordingly. Photographs of these objects imposed boundaries on them consonant with the new classificatory schemas. The story is by now familiar enough.

Rebelling against these protocols, the art of the 1960s in many ways worked to recuperate an extended spatio-temporal range.

Minimalist artists experimented with multiple productions and a new distribution of authorship: the works were designed by the artists but fabricated by technicians using readily available industrial materials. Video art introduced temporal relay and multiplication by allowing spaces and experiences recorded in one place to be displayed elsewhere. Performances and Happenings followed scores that could be re-enacted in various places. In all of these cases, the new multiplicity and extension of the work of art allowed for a certain amount of variation. Art works became 'iterable' but their various iterations were inflected by the circumstances of every new instantiation. Some multiples were more readily reproducible than others. Ed Ruscha produced a number of books whose theme was the serial nature of industrialized life: 26 gasoline stations, 34 parking lots, some Los Angeles apartments, etc. The books were small and inexpensive and, importantly, not unique. One copy was as good as another. The idea was that each book would be an 'open edition', with new printings produced as needed to satisfy demand.

As is well known, the logic of the art market and of museum acquisition short-circuited the new extensibility of the art work as imagined by these and other artists. Personally, I am not interested in owning a first edition of any of Ruscha's books; I just want a copy from any printing, even one made yesterday, as long as it respects the original formatting and print quality. But there is no affordable copy for me to buy, because the last edition was issued in 1969 (when it sold for US\$4.00). After that, something changed: no new printings meant the ones in existence acquired the status of originals, which now sell for four-digit sums. Likewise, video works by major artists are produced in very small editions — often only three or four copies are licensed. In the world of digital media — where there is in fact no original but rather a perfect

informational identity between one 'copy' and another — such restrictions come as a highly unnatural imposition. Nonetheless, to an amazing degree these protections hold; uncensored copies (now labelled pirate copies) are almost entirely suppressed. With massive effort and the collaboration of many different sectors in the art world, the outward expanding energies of art since the 1960s have been forced into compatibility with a traditional model of the market-friendly work of art.

Yet much can be learned and applied from the lessons of recent art. If we are going to have such an active exhibition industry, shouldn't it be informed by the many ingenious strategies for making works of art live in multiple times and spaces which were developed in both contemporary and medieval art? If museums, exhibition halls and galleries are interested in becoming programming centres and event-driven venues, why stay beholden to a traditional conception of exhibitions, with trophies lined up on the wall? The medieval way would be to make the most of reproduction technologies, to have a few relics — unsubstitutable originals exceptionally made available to view — which would then be embedded in a wider array of reconstructed sites, repeated performances and visualizations of various kinds.

Why not join the two areas of competence by bringing contemporary artists more regularly into the organization and construction of exhibitions of older art? Ever since Fred Wilson's 1992 exhibition at the Maryland Historical Society, titled 'Mining the Museum', it has become common practice to invite artists to dig around in collections and curate objects into new constellations. But that is still a relatively traditional model of curating: objects are taken from one place and displayed in another. The more interactive model would be of the kind often seen in the medieval and Renaissance periods, such as when 13th-century Parisian artists produced a new building-sized reliquary — we call it the Sainte Chapelle — for a set of precious relics recently imported from Constantinople (where they had been enshrined after having been shipped there from Palestine). Or take the earlier structure of the Abbey Church of Saint-Denis outside Paris, depicted in a painting from around 1500 showing St Giles performing mass at the high altar. The large cross seen at the top of the picture, a known work reputed to have been made by St Eloy in the seventh century, contained a fragment of the true cross set into its base. The painting shows the accumulation of other art works at this important site. The jewel-encrusted altarpiece below the cross was presented to the Abbey by King Charles the Bald (823–77 CE), and was later destroyed in the French Revolution. The copper angels holding candlesticks, standing on brass pillars that support the green curtains around the altar, were added in the Gothic period. On the right, cut off by the edge of the picture, is part of the mid-13th-century tomb of King Dagobert (who died 639 CE). Each of these objects is known to have belonged to the church or remains on site to this day. The eastern Turkish carpet in front of the altar and the velvet altar front (probably Italian), are



This page: Master of Saint Giles *The Mass of Saint Giles* c.1500. Oil and egg on oak, 62 x 46 cm. Opposite page: Ed Ruscha *Thirtyfour Parking Lots in Los Angeles* 1967. Artist's book



The Madrid-based firm Factum Arte has produced startling conjunctions of contemporary methods and older art.

traces of the trading networks connecting France to Italy and the eastern Mediterranean. Works from different periods and cultures cluster around the relic, creating a context for performances and even miracles.

The medieval idea was that if there were important art or artefacts to display, more art and architecture needed to be made to receive and interpret it. With this approach in mind, today's exhibition organizers might draw up shorter lists of masterpieces to be cajoled from other institutions and lined up on the wall, and instead think more actively about bringing contemporary artistic practices to bear on a smaller number of works, or of using the latest technology to make their works available in new ways. This is not simply to propose mingling the works of contemporary artists with works of older art, a curatorial fashion of the last several years that is now becoming tired. Nor is it a proposal to invite artists to do more curatorial digging in museum collections. The idea is that contemporary artists should have a role to play in the design, planning and installation of exhibitions of older art. The result would surely be a mixing of kinds of images. In the panel by the Master of St Giles we see a reliquary, a gold altarpiece, textiles

and tombs, not to mention performers. In the new, already emergent style of exhibition, works of older art are presented in the context of modern reproductions, video displays and even performances. 'A carnival of anachronism!' critics may cry, but let us remember that even the stodgiest show of old master art is inevitably a strange and anachronistic assemblage of works from different places and authors, and often from quite a range of times. To put on exhibitions of moveable works is to engage in an artificial enterprise, and the time has come to think more imaginatively about the artifice.

The Madrid-based firm Factum Arte, headed by the artist Adam Lowe, has produced startling conjunctions of contemporary methods and older art. In 2007, using new, patented techniques, they produced an elaborately accurate three-dimensional facsimile of Paolo Veronese's *Wedding at Cana* (1563). The vast Louvre canvas was taken to Paris from the refectory of the Benedictine monastery of San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice — where it had hung for 235 years — by Napoleon in 1797. Two-hundred-and-ten years later, the facsimile was installed in the painting's original location, an event that



was greeted as a kind of homecoming by the Venetian citizenry. It is clear that the version in Venice is a copy, but in its original location it arguably gives a fuller experience of the work than the original painting, squeezed between two doors in the Louvre. As Lowe said in 2010: 'Do I think the experience of the facsimile, a facsimile of this accuracy — because it is remarkably accurate — in Palladio's refectory, is more authentic than the experience of the painting in the Louvre? Yes, I do think that.'

The authenticity of the in-situ experience is complicated by the fact that the refectory itself has undergone changes since Veronese's time. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that the installation of the copy introduces a new dynamism in the relation to the work in the Louvre. Visitors to Venice who see the installation will be inclined to look at Veronese's painting with a better-informed eye next time they visit Paris. Conversely, the existence of the facsimile means that visitors to the Louvre are now more strongly encouraged to go to Venice to see what the painting looks like in its monastic setting. The Napoleonic appropriation is a fact of history and can't be undone; the Veronese canvas should never again be made to move.

More recently, Factum Arte made a copy of Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* (1495–98) — in its current, ruined state — which was installed from December 2010 to January 2011 at the Armory in New York. A perimeter marked out by minimal temporary architecture reconstructed the dimensions of the refectory at Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan, where the original work still stands. In the moments when *The Last Supper* was not being barraged by hyperactive lighting effects and music choreographed by Peter Greenaway, New Yorkers were allowed to feel something of the true scale and presence of a work that will never travel, and is, anyway, beyond recuperation. I have always found it hard to see it in its original setting. In New York, I felt like I was getting my first good look at it.

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Left: Factum Arte's facsimile of *The Last Supper* (1495–98) by Leonardo da Vinci installed at The Armory, New York, 2010–11
Right: Factum Arte's facsimile of *Wedding at Cana* (1563) by Paolo Veronese installed in the monastery of San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice, the painting's original location