

CHAPTER NUMBER

MYTHOLOGIES OF THE MODERN MUSEUM: COLLECTOR-PHILANTHROPISTS, THE FIRST INFLUENCERS IN HISTORY?

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Abstract:

The fine art museum's history sustains the mythology of the Revolution and its eagerness to make available to the people those sacred objects that had previously been in the hands of the authoritarian monarchy. Under the emblem of the common good, the museum laid the foundations of an ideological program aimed at strengthening the identity of the nascent nation-states.

In contrast to the desire to erase the private origin of the collections of the fine arts museums, the 20th century established in the origins of the modern art museum a similar mythology of the Revolution, but this time based on the individual and personal character through the exaltation of artists, collectors and architects who encouraged their foundation, even if their ideological programs aimed to establish civic institutions capable of abolishing the old museum.

Nowadays, personalism gained more and more ground and is used in the 21st century as a fundamental value for repositioning modern Western art museums: in the age of *influencers*, the figure of the collector-philanthropist who realized his dream seems the perfect *insight* to connect with audiences. Following this hypothesis, we studied the cases of Malba, Moma, Tate Modern, and Centre Pompidou by concentrating on the *institutional discourse* of their websites and social media (Instagram, YouTube, and Spotify). We focused mainly on the following points: the collections' origins, the history of their founders, and the construction of their buildings.

We present some observations and conclusions from an analysis realized between 2016 and 2022; we observe how these mythologies contribute to building bounds with visitors and configuring local identities.

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Il servait d'exemple: the philanthropist-collector gentilhomme

« Riche bourgeois, M. Jourdain ne rêve que d'une chose : devenir gentilhomme. Et quels ne sont pas ses efforts pour y parvenir ! Cours de danse, de chant, d'armes et de philosophie : tout est bon pour acquérir les manières d'un noble. Hélas ! L'élève multiplie les maladresses et les balourdises. L'extravagance de M. Jourdain atteint son comble quand il refuse la main de sa fille à l'homme qu'elle aime, sous prétexte que celui-ci n'appartient pas à la haute société. Cette fois, c'en est trop. Son entourage est bien décidé à lui faire recouvrer la raison. Rien de tel que les ruses d'un habile valet pour mettre un terme aux lubies d'un vieux barbon ! »

Le Bourgeois gentilhomme, Molière, 1670

Traditionally, when we refer to the history of the art museum, we turn to the French Revolution and the "conceptual rupture (at the end of the 18th century) articulated in the passage from private collecting to the development of a public pedagogical-informative project" (Zunzunegui: 2003, p.39). Thus, as Santos Zunzunegui (2003) indicates, the museum appears as a cultural institution promoted and protected by the nation-state, acting as a space destined to establish signs of collective identity. However, a long process precedes the stabilization of the ideological and aesthetic program that this definition implies.

Kristof Pomian's work entitled *Le musée, une histoire mondiale* (2020) traces the history of the first European museum foundations highlighting two central notions for our analysis: the collector and the public. Since the 16th century, the collector's figure appears as a critical agent, however somewhat indifferent to the making available of valuable objects, such as artworks, to the public. Nevertheless, at that time, the notion of the public and, particularly, of the "art public" designated a social category and a cultural education.

In 1718 the French historian Jean-Baptiste Dubos characterized the art public as possessing a "taste for comparison," which meant having the time to consume literature, appreciate spectacles, and see and hear about many artworks. These experiences allowed members of this social class not only to acquire *Les Lumières* but, above all, to have exclusive access to exhibition spaces, whether sacred-open, such as churches, or profane-closed, such as private collections.

This art public already had its influencers: the monarchy. The classic example is the French minister Richelieu, who was one of the first French collectors when neither the king nor the monarchy was interested in

paintings and antique objects. However, Louis XIV became the most significant influencer in history, creating a collection on such a scale that he needed an organization to take care of it, thus creating a cultural bureaucracy.

Kings were the first trendsetters, imposing and spreading their taste(s) for art to their closest circles until they reached the bourgeoisie. For example, in the 18th century, the English elites developed collections for their country houses.

The taste phenomenon is strongly associated with the subject that concerns us: the mythology or mythologies surrounding the modern collector figure. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, an artistically educated public grew up in Europe with a unified taste that went beyond the differences between countries. Pomian (2020: p.479) points out that in the last decades of the 17th century in Paris, a circle of art amateurs, collectors, and the curious had already formed. The members met each other and assembled in the salons and academies according to their tastes and preferences.

This transnational phenomenon is linked, among other things, to "the transition from the model of the *gentilhomme* formerly embodied by the defending warrior to another model which, without eliminating the warrior component, places more and more value on intellectual and artistic occupations" (Pomian: 2020, p.476). It is possible to observe this transformation through the long history of educational establishments, civilization manuals, and spaces of sociability where good manners (manners of speech and ways of behaving in public) were learned. The gentleman's education also included the attitude towards Art, which by the 18th century had become an institution with a capital letter.

Thus, the new image of the *gentilhomme* emerged: interested in and able to appreciate music, painting, and sculpture, he was skilled in the art of conversation, made sophisticated aesthetic appreciations, and, above all, had contact with the elites and artists. This description coincides, for example, with the text *Il Cortegiano*, by Baldassare Castiglione (1528), widespread in Italy, Spain, and France from the seventeenth century, and the German publication *Der Geöffnete Ritter-Platz* at the beginning of the XVIIth century that presented to the nobility the most distinguished chivalric sciences and practices.

A century later, the *gentilhomme's* definition also included the practice of collecting as a central input to the research of this curious and cultivated man. Thus, the myth of the collector began to take shape: a gentleman in touch with the latest cultural trends, owner of a cabinet of curiosities and linked to the elites and power.

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Collecting also began to include the desire for transcendence. The Museum Fridericianum in Kassel is the primary historical example. Founded in 1709, the Fridericianum was an unprecedented architectural challenge created to exhibit the collection of Frederic II, who had inherited his father's collection (and his passion as a collector). The building is a tribute to its founder and his ancestors: "Frederic II appears in the light of his museum as an enlightened and generous prince, in contrast to the character he was: a merchant of soldiers. His museum is a temple celebrating the cult of Man, master of nature, creator of arts and sciences, and philanthropist prince" (Pomian: 2020, p. 509).

The public of this museum consisted of nobles, high officials, the bourgeois, and, rarely, artisans. However, the unusual visit of some manual workers shows that things would start to change. Nevertheless, the museum institution's origin was private, aristocratic, and elitist, and these features contradicted young modern states' political programs. Therefore, creating a different history based on the social and political revolution myth was necessary. This way appeared the national collections whose owner was the people and which, before the social and political revolutions, had been in the hands of the authoritarian monarchy. Under the emblem of the common good, the revolutionary museum laid the foundations of an ideological program to reinforce national identity.

The French Revolution and the consolidation of the *Musée du Louvre* in 1792 (first named *Musée Central des Arts de la République* and then *Musée Napoléon*) established the definitive shift of the collection and exhibition from the private domain to the public domain. This program had two purposes that served as a model for most museums in the West: to allow artists to study art history in the presence of masterpieces and to make the national heritage available to the people.

From that moment on, the role of the fine arts museum was clear: to educate. To that end, it was necessary to impose order and a guided tour through a spatialized discourse that presented the museum as a scale model of man's history and Western and Christian civilization. The narratives about the former owners of the objects exhibited described, on the one hand, egotistical monarchs; and, on the other, distant, exotic, and even savage peoples.

Even after museums became public, private collectors stayed close to them. Museum collections were (and are) accessible to the public because of "generous donations" as indicated, for example, room names. The bourgeois elites remained close to power through their contributions to the national heritage. Thus, they got their exclusive exhibition halls. For example, in 1805, the British Museum named 30 rooms *The Townley*

Gallery in honor of the donator of the objects exhibits (Pomian: 2021, pp. 201-203).

This model, almost intact to this day (despite the efforts of contemporary artists and curators who question it), was rejected in the twentieth century by intellectuals and avant-garde artists who sought to break with the ideological program of the traditional museum. Their premise was to abolish the walls of the old museum and create civic centers to exhibit a new art destined for a public freed from the pedagogical device of the previous model. To this end, they proposed establishing the modern art museum program and its mythologies, also based on the idea of revolution.

However, the theoretical, historical, and even institutional discourses that mention the architects, directors, artists, and even philanthropists or collectors who participated in the development of the modern art museum give back the image of the *gentilhomme*: white, western, educated, collector, belonging to the dominant political and economic classes.

This return to the male figure of the *gentilhomme* that founded the first museums persists in the 21st century and remains a fundamental value that operates in the positioning of modern Western art museums. In the age of influencers, the figure of the collector-philanthropist committed to his country, his love of art, an aesthetic, a political program, or a dream seems the perfect insight to connect with the public.

We are therefore interested in analyzing how the myths of the revolution and the collector-philanthropist, configured since the 16th century, permeate the discourses on the foundations of modern art museums and, consequently, their institutional program, in general, and their experiential promise, i.e. links with their visitors, in particular.

To this end, we have analyzed the institutional discourses (social media and website) of Tate Modern (London), MoMa (New York), Malba (Buenos Aires), and the Centre Pompidou (Paris), concentrating on the presentation of each institution's history, to find the mythology or mythologies surrounding it and constructing its exhibition proposal.

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Tate: from business to inclusion

We said that the *gentilhomme* was a cultured, curious, and adventurous gentleman who wanted to contribute to the national cultural heritage. Henry Tate was one of those men: an industrialist who, in 1889, donated his collection of 19th-century British art to the English State and obtained the necessary funds to build the gallery that would later bear his name.

On the institutional website, he is present through a neoclassical portrait and a text that mentions his biography, including his refined taste inclined towards the Pre-Raphaelite school of which he was a patron. Then, we find a gallery of portraits and descriptions of the key male figures in the institution's development, highlighting the Tate's patriarchal, Eurocentric, and elitist origins.

Nevertheless, the institutional discourse recognizes the contact with colonialism and slavery that had Tate Britain's collection. Moreover, it presents a subtitle ("Tate and slavery") that announces a report where Tate's relationships with the main sugar capitals of America where African slaves are analyzed.

The institutional tone changes from a neutral tone when the museum presents the historical discourse to a friendly one (however corporative) when it presents its social responsibility and mission. Tate introduces itself as a welcoming institution describing its work and efforts to reach inclusion and equality, as well as its apologies for all that remains to be done.

However, there is tension between the story of the old Tate and the new one. Tate Modern is the paradigm of contemporary art museums (Fleck, 2014), but Tate British is still a classical gallery trying to fix the new positioning of the brand "Tate."

The tension is also present in Tate's Modern institutional communication and building (and consequently, its visitor experience). On the one hand, the old energy factory structure is a symbolical tribute to the history of England, mainly the Industrial Revolution, and Tate's founder. Its architectural monumentality dialogues with other emblematic places such as the Tower of London, St Pauls's Cathedral, London Bridge, the British Parliament, and Big Ben. On the other hand, the type of experiences offered to visitors subverts the monumentality of the building: it is open and accessible to all and proposes a revision of the history of art and exhibitions that explore central themes nowadays: environmentalism, identities, decolonialism, social inclusion, for example.

The openness and welcoming predisposition expressed in the web discourse is transferred to the physical space and emphasized in the visual materials produced for social media: Tate Modern invites its visitors to explore the free access collection and enjoy the museum's border spaces, i.e., parks, terraces, views, cafes, and boutiques, advertised as part of the experience: "art, eat and shop¹."

Tate builds its mythology and revolution on the revision of its history, the accessibility of its galleries and collections, the capacity to understand new art, experience, and people, and the unprecedented freedom offered to visitors.

¹ See: Rosso, A.A. (2022). What Do Museum Visitors Leave Behind? The New Experience and the New Visitor in the Twenty-First Century. In: Comunello, F., Martire, F., Sabetta, L. (eds) *What People Leave Behind. Frontiers in Sociology and Social Research*, vol 7. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-11756-5_6

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MoMA: businesswomen

MoMa was born as a project of three women who decided to create a "museum for New York City" dedicated to the art of their time. Underlying its institutional discourses are the mythologies of revolution and the XXth Century *gentilhomme*, or *gentillefemme*. Moma is revolutionary in that it set out to create a collection of artists of its time in 1929, the moment of the Wall Street Crash.

The three patrons believed in the potential success of the museum because they knew many other passionate women and collectors of art who would be interested in visiting (and investing in) it. Furthermore, as Henry Tate did, they raised the necessary financing to rent a space where they found the first MoMa. Hence, the names of the investors and founders are given to halls, exhibition rooms, restaurants, and gardens, and they even welcome visitors on a panel at the entrance.

The institutional discourse is overlapped with a corporate tone when presenting its general organization, with a welcoming and inclusive tone in the home or *who we are?* sections, and an academic tone when going through its history. It is concerned with its audience segments: experts, university students, families, and investors. To each of them, the museum dedicates specific content and events.

The discourse on the origins of MoMa is built around the ideas of invention, vision, innovation, and investing. These notions appear in its spatial organization: going through one of its revolving doors and walking through the entrance hall seems like entering a big financial company.

At the same time, the fact that three women founded it adds another spice to the mythology of the museum: the feminist revolution. We will find more and more women gallerists, collectors, artists, critics, curators, and directors through time.

The academic tone emphasizes the relevance of its research and education center by highlighting the figure of its first director, Alfred Baar Jr., a revolutionary and rebellious professor. He strategically occupies the classic place of the museum founder: male, white, visionary, and cultured.

The passionate director also feeds MoMA's revolution myth: a space for the study, exhibit, and archive of all manifestations of the visual culture of "our time." The institutional website claims that MoMA revolutionized the art world by creating "the greatest museum of modern art in the world."

Centre Pompidou, another French revolution

As already mentioned, it was in France that the king became the first influencer by being the "first in everything" (Pomian: 2020, p.474). This idea seems to have been transferred to the president Georges Pompidou when he thought of creating an "unprecedented" place for art and culture, the Centre Pompidou: " Je voudrais passionnément que Paris possède un centre culturel [...] où les arts plastiques voisinaient avec la musique, le cinéma, les livres, la recherche audiovisuelle, etc."

Passion rhythms the tone of the institutional discourse of Centre Pompidou's official site. Qualifying adjectives invade the texts of the French institution, underlining the project's greatness and the revolution that its inauguration meant in Paris. In this case, several controversies support the myth of *Beaubourg's* revolution.

The first is its name: the Centre Pompidou or *Beaubourg*. The right-wing political orientation of the president who promoted its foundation gave rise to the nickname that survives to this day and designates the place of the building. The mythology of the institution's creation presents the politician as an art amateur passionate about poetry who died without seeing his dream come true. The presentation also mentions Pompidou's wife as part of this project that became "a personal matter" for the president. He is the prototype of *le gentilhomme du XXe siècle*.

The second controversy is the construction of the building. The creation of the "cathedral of pipes" brought its supporters and its enemies, but a significant turnaround occurred when international architects and theorists highlighted its creation. The "Pompidium" became an icon of the city and is now one of Paris's five most important monuments. This repudiation and sudden success fertilize the building's history while feeding the classic misunderstanding of geniuses.

The third controversy is Piano and Rogers's statement. The architects conceived the building as a living being and the public as the blood that pumps its heart. The institutional discourse highlights the revolutionary architectural proposal: the views from the famous stairs, the view of the Eiffel Tower, the sunset from the sculpture garden, and the life of the esplanade are all part of this "immersive experience."

The fourth controversy is the French *mai 68's* generation spirit. Beyond Pompidou's political position, the institution is a civic center representing this social revolution's values. The institutional discourse defines the Centre Pompidou as "a place always deeply in contact with society." The most evident signs of its link with people are the flexibility of the building

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(which changes according to different activities and exhibitions) and the entrance hall's name: Forum, a place of meeting and debate.

The Centre Pompidou emerges as an artistic, urban, political, and French Revolution. As in the previous cases, the social role of its founder gives rise to its institutional program: this underlines the notions of art promulgated by the then-president and his essential role in the configuration of national identity.

Malba: 21st-century museum by a 21st-century philanthropist.

Malba could be considered a 21st-century museum, as defined by Robert Fleck (2014) when describing the fusion of the Moma and Tate Modern models that gave rise to a new paradigm of institutions based on *branding*. According to Fleck, these museums are founded in third-world countries by members of business dynasties who possess sufficient capital to form a valuable collection curated by the West's leading professionals and cater to an audience "hungry for culture."

Fleck's definition coincides with Malba's and its founder, Eduardo Constantini, a businessman who presents his museum in the first person. On the official website, Constantini describes the origin of Malba, representing himself as a *gentilhomme*: from European origins, cultured, passionate about art, idealist, and visionary. He bet on Latin American art when no one else was doing so and finally founded his museum in 2001, the year of the great economic crisis that Argentina went through. The corporate tone is also present, mainly in its commitment to institutional transparency.

His discourse has the emotional, personal tone and ways of speaking typical of the middle and upper classes of Buenos Aires: it emphasizes effort, personal energy and passion, dreams, solidarity, and harmony. Constantini tries to build a humble ethos, seeking to identify with the middle-class entrepreneur. The revolutionary element of Malba is to bet on Latin American art in a developing country.

In his discourse, Latin American art emerges as an "other", an alien to what he calls "my country." However, Malba aims to favor "the affective and cognitive relationship of the public with art and with Latin America." It supposes that Malba's public is unfamiliar with it and has no interest in the art of the continent (even if they live there). Constantini's speech positions his museum as an international one, that is, outside Latin America; for example, it reiterated the inability of public organizations to take care of its collection due to lack of funds "as it happens in developing countries". The revolutionary thing about Malba is its commitment to Latin American art in a Latin American country.

On its website and social media, Malba takes Moma's model: minimalist, simulating the white cube (even its logo is similar to Moma's), corporative tone, and dedicated to different publics to whom it offers different events and services. Furthermore, as Moma, Malba seeks a complicit tone and positions the visit as a "cool" activity for sharing on Instagram. The commercial spaces coincide with the lifestyles of the

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inhabitants of Barrio Parque (Malba's neighbourhood), one of the most expensive areas of Buenos Aires, highlighted in its institutional speeches.

Even though Constantini proposes the museum as "everyone's house," its discourse is not aimed at everyone but the social classes that share the same lifestyle and imaginaries about art and Latin America as him.

The construction of identity:

We conclude that the mythologies of the founders of each museum condense institutional values but also collaborate in the configuration of their model visitors insofar as they appeal to their lifestyles as an institutional branding strategy.

Malba's institutional communication positions the museum as a social space for the neighbours and highlight the Buenos Aires upper class's identity and lifestyle. MoMA highlights the New York identity overlapped with that of the business class, covered with the image of the collector-philanthropist. Centre Pompidou's and Tate Modern's discourse configure the institutions as spaces for reaffirming national identity. They have numerous differences, but *Beaubourg* is mainly public, politically, and socially engaged, and Parisian, while Tate is British, corporate but also inclusive, (somehow) decolonial and socially engaged.

The modern art museum's mythology includes its births from a social, political, or artistic revolution. It also sustains the myth of art as personal fulfillment for the founders and the visitors. Exactly as at the beginning of the museum's history, collections are available to those who share, in some way, the same values and tastes as their founders. Even if most of these influencers did not use Instagram, they imposed trends that live on today.

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