

**E. H. Gombrich, Exhibitionship, The Atlantic, Vol. 213, 1964, pp.77-8  
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*André Malraux's decision to send the VENUS DE MILO to Japan as an inducement for the Olympic Games and Pope John's earlier offer to have Michelangelo's PIETÀ travel to New York for the World's Fair have prompted this expostulation by ERNEST H. GOMBRICH, Director of the Warburg Institute in London and the author of ART AND ILLUSION.*

I know an old retired and retiring director of one of the world's great museums who likes to sum up the attitude of some of his young colleagues in the phrase, "What shall we do next?" We know the latest answer. The Venus de Milo will be wrapped up, created, and sent from the Louvre to Japan. It will make headlines and attract the crowds. Those of us who may want to pay tribute to a classic ideal of beauty that may not be fashionable but is still worth a moment of reflection will have to exchange our tickets to Paris for one to Tokyo. Or if we cannot afford this and decide to go to Rome instead, we may discover at the place where we hoped to find solace and inspiration in Michelangelo's Pietà a little notice: "Gone to the World's Fair; back soon." Whatever will they do next? Take out the windows of Chartres and send them to a show? Lend the caves of Lascaux to Egypt for the promise of one of their pyramids? It would cost a lot, but it could be done, or at least among transport contractors?

Satire apart (though it is sometimes difficult, as a Roman poet said, not to write satirically), what is it that makes the guardians of our artistic inheritance so subject to whims and so eager for stunts? Perhaps it is unfair to blame them too much, for they are driven into this attitude by public pressure: the pressure of success and the menace of failure. Exhibitions attract, museums repel. The museum has been denounced for so long as the morgue of dead art, the vault for mummies, that a museum director can hardly be blamed if he tries to shout it from the housetops that his own museum is alive, that it moves with the times and responds like a kaleidoscope to any shake of fashion.

But even these hectic efforts to remove the faintest smell of mustiness and to keep up with every new trick of display technique are, one suspects, of comparatively little avail. Parties of schoolchildren and sightseeing tourists will make the round of the galleries, but what of the citizens who own and support the collection? We are all guilty here. We know the museum is there, we are proud to think of its treasures, but it is precisely because we know or hope that these will always be with us that we let the days slip by and go to exhibitions instead. For the exhibition puts the pistol at our heads; it is now or never that we can see these works assembled at so much cost from all parts of the globe, and so it has to be now. The museum may own better works, but they can wait.

Moreover, the exhibition has a social incentive that is quite out of reach of the permanent collection. For the exhibition will always stand high on the list of likely conversation topics at parties. We can turn to our dumb-looking neighbour and ask with perfect propriety, "Have you been to the exhibition of Japanese basketwork?" Even if she says no, we can tell her about it. But social conventions normally discourage us from asking our fellow citizens whether they have ever visited their own museum? Even less are we expected to describe the content of one of its galleries, where, possibly, superior basketwork has been displayed for many decades. And so the exhibition flourishes, first as a prospective topic and then as a remembered one. The museum lingers in the shadows, a place that reproaches us with its very presence and with its countless showcases which we could and should see and enjoy if only we had the leisure.

What other solution can there be, then, but to transform museum into exhibitions? To exploit the attraction and the menace of change? To invent excuses for loans and for impermanent shows? To ask, in other words, "Whatever shall we do next?" because the question is raised by the public?

And yet, I think, this drift towards sensationalism must end in disaster. Physical disaster, possibly, for the transport and shuffle of frail and precious objects are obviously fraught with danger; psychological disaster certainly, for works of art should provide more than momentary stimulation. For good or ill the museum is a resting place, the treasure-house where the heirlooms of the past which were cut adrift by the wars of princes and the greed of collectors found a haven at last. It is restful for us, too, to know that they are there, that we can seek them out and consult them whenever we feel like it. Perhaps there are not that many people who desire this reassurance. But they are the ones whose needs are genuine and should be respected. It should be possible for them to visit their favourite painting, statue, or vase for a few minutes without having to search and to learn that it was removed to the stores or sent to Timbuktu to make room for some circulating circus. Granted that a museum is, at best, an imperfect setting for a work of art, it is at least a second home and not a wandering side-show.

Above all, of course, we must rally to protect the works of art that can still be found where they grew, in the place and setting for which they were created. How rewarding it is to make the pilgrimage to the little chapel of the cemetery of Monterchi where Piero della Francesca's majestic Madonna del Parto has looked down on the worshipers for five hundred years. How grateful we must be to see Titian's Assumption of the Virgin again on the high altar of the Frari in Venice for which it was painted and which therefore enhances its meaning and its splendour.

How wonderful it is that there still are the old churches and old palaces in the towns of Europe, with their wall paintings and their monuments telling of a mode of life so different from our own narrow, perhaps, and grim, but all the more intense. If ever the old saying that the whole is more than the sum of its parts had relevance, it is surely true of these products of a slow and deliberate growth, with their layers of decoration and their sequence of donations. Every chapel tells the story of generations; every villa proclaims the aspirations of men, with their idiosyncrasies, their good luck, and their follies. And yet even these survivals are threatened, and their number is dwindling every day. In Italy the murals of the masters are increasingly being detached from the walls on which they were painted and removed to museums. There may be no choice here. The clouds of fumes raised by the torrent of motor traffic have begun to eat into the pigment. The frescoes will perish unless they are removed to air-conditioned rooms. Already we have seen a fabulous show of detached murals wisely displayed in the Florentine Belvedere far above the dust and exhaust that fill the street of that once peaceful city. Soon, perhaps, Giotto's frescoes may follow the Venus de Milo to Japan or the Pietà to New York.

Soon, perhaps, but not yet. So far this is only the nightmare of a worried art lover. There are still old churches and splendid palaces and villas. And there are still museum, treasure-houses to which we can return throughout a lifetime to see old friends and discover new ones. And once we have made such friends we almost cease to care whether they stand on sacking or on silk, whether we must look for them in a crowded showcase or find them in a place of honour with a new spotlight and a spring fountain. Indeed, some perverse souls may prefer the crowded display because it shows more of the treasures that have been amassed and offers us a greater opportunity to make our own discoveries.

For, the decisive argument against all the techniques that play with works of art as if they were objects of salesmanship is that there is no substitute for the pleasure of discovery. Museums may

look labyrinthine and uninviting to the uninitiated, but to those who have discovered their worth they offer the prospect of a lifetime of explorations. To those of us who have acquired this taste for the permanent and inexhaustible, the exhibition offers mainly frustration here today and gone tomorrow.

Needless to say, there are exhibitions which are worth the sacrifice. To see the whole work of a Poussin or a Delacroix assembled in one spot we may gladly put up with a sense of inadequacy. But for the rest, let the museum return to its proper function, which was and is to preserve, protect, and make accessible the relics of the past which have unfortunately lost their original context. There used to be a real meaning in the designations of conservator, curator, and keeper. What alternative titles do those who betray this trust propose? The Venus de Milo was not made for the Louvre. But it has come to reside in it, and it now belongs to Paris, no less than does the Mona Lisa, which the King of France inherited, from Leonardo himself.