

E. H. Gombrich: The Emptying of Museums, The Burlington Magazine, Vol. 96, No. 611 (Feb., 1954), pp. 58+61 [Not in Trapp]

The Emptying of Museums

SIR, The thinning out of exhibition galleries to which you drew attention in your leading article in November 1953 on the re-organization of the Louvre, raises some issues not yet touched upon in Mr Denis Mahon's timely letter in the following number. To be sure, his argument that this policy increasingly hampers our own researches seems unanswerable; but (fortunately or unfortunately) we art historians are only an insignificant minority and if the majority of museum visitors would want their museum emptied we could hardly expect much special consideration. But is there any evidence that it is the public who want these changes, or that it is the majority who benefits? Museums are fatiguing places, and it is the legitimate concern of museum directors to fight this fatigue and the distaste for art it may sometimes engender. But is it true that this reaction is decreased by decreasing the number of exhibits? Is it not specially strenuous to have to walk several yards from item to item each of which is so displayed as to demand special attention? Nor do I think that the other popular idea that often prompts a clamour for 'spacing' stands up to psychological scrutiny: it is by no means easier to look at a painting that has a wall to itself than at one that is close to other exhibits. If it were, the reading of any news-paper column would impose an intolerable strain on our attention since it is closely hemmed in by adjoining texts, advertisements, and pictures. And yet, the isolation of such an item is a feat that even the most unsophisticated scatterbrain can perform on a crowded bus. And what about the educational argument? Is it really better from that point of view to present the public with a few master-pieces 'on a platter' than to make them choose for themselves? Surely we have learned that the first thing in education is to counteract the passive attitude of the spoon-fed child and to excite active interest. One would expect such interest to be more easily roused by wealth and variety than by the display of isolated objects. But educationally the most dangerous tendency resulting from 'thinning out' is its corollary of frequent changes of exhibits. The neighbouring field of music shows that repetition and familiarity rather than novelty creates the first condition for appreciation to begin. The museum visitor who has discovered an object for himself - and never mind if it is only a visual equivalent of Tchaikowsky's *Pathétique* at first - must be given a chance to return to it, to develop a personal relationship rather than be presented with new and confusing impressions every time he enters the gallery. Let the *cupidi rerum novarum* satisfy their more sophisticated cravings with temporary exhibitions in suitable buildings, but let the museum again become a restful place, not through emptiness but through the feeling of safe orientation that results from growing familiarity. There remains the aesthetic argument for isolation which regards it as a crime to show a great work of art cheek by jowl with mere documents of the past. There can be little doubt that the recognition of what Croceans call the 'insularity' of a true artistic creation has acted as a powerful (and sometimes beneficial) motive in our approach to the art of the past. Nobody will quarrel with museum authorities trying to give an appropriate setting to such treasured possessions of mankind as Rembrandt's *Night Watch* or Watteau's *Embarquement pour Cythère*. But, Sir, by now this distinction between 'art' and 'linguistic documents' has become self-defeating. Clearly the quality of uniqueness that distinguishes the true masterpiece from average products can only be appreciated against the very background that is removed from our sight. Thus it is not only the hypothetical tiresome art historian, engaged on some dreary thesis on Lancret, who has a right to complain that most Lancrets have been removed to

limbo, but every lover of Watteau who is thus deprived of the opportunity of savouring what is most personal and inimitable in the great master's vision. Aesthetically there is only one crime worse than this - to isolate the remaining Lancret and to display it with all the honours of a masterpiece, thus blurring the very distinctions that ought to be made and tricking the public into a false awe. Mr Mahon rightly says that nobody wants to advocate a return to the magazine type of gallery; but is there not some virtue even in this type if it has grown historically and is as rich as the Pitti or the Louvre? The very feeling of inexhaustible wealth gathered together throughout the centuries by men of varying tastes is 'an education' and one that experience shows to be specially attractive to the masses who come to gape and may learn to see. True, they may never hope to 'get through it all' (and neither can we), but this humbling feeling of the endlessness of the task is not the worst impression a museum can create. Sometimes one suspects that all the arguments adduced in favour of 'thinning out' these treasure houses, however sincerely they may be put forward, are not much more than rationalizations of a simple emotional reaction - the reaction of twentieth-century taste against the overcrowded 'Victorian' interior. It was indeed a blessing when all the 'knick-knack' of souvenirs and trophies which only 'collected dust' was at last swept out of our drawing-rooms into the attic and thence to the dustheap, but must we extend this hygienic operation to the depositories of our artistic heritage? Perhaps it is sufficient to diagnose this hidden motive to show why directors of museums and galleries must be especially on their guard against its promptings. A predilection for bare 'functional' walls is all very well in its right place, but in a museum the function of the wall is to serve as support for pegs.

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