

Editorial

The Stakes of the Collection in the 21st Century

Is art universal? Among the current debates within the international heritage and museum community, the contemporary pertinence of that question has extended beyond the professional field to capture the attention of governmental authorities. The question has profound implications for the mission of museums and the role of governments in supporting them. Indeed, the very future of the museum is bound up in this critical question.

Complementary to the public debate which was organized by the MUSEUM International journal at UNESCO on 5 February 2007, this issue addresses the notion of the collection in the 21st century. From a perspective fixed within the academic tradition, we will examine the aims and practices of the collection, the significance of this founding act of the museum.*

To guide us in these reflections, we have invited Isabelle Tillerot as Guest Editor. Through her formal training and publications, Isabelle Tillerot represents two academic traditions: Anglo-Saxon and French. She holds a doctorate in the history of art from the Université de Paris X – Nanterre and, from 2002 to 2004, she was the recipient of a pre-doctoral fellowship at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles (USA). She teaches 18th century French art at the University of California – Los Angeles (UCLA).

What are the political, moral, artistic and philosophical issues of the collection in the 21st century? That is the subject of this issue of MUSEUM International. The intention of the collection is always to accumulate, protect and exhibit – to make visible and to explain. However, the distinction

between the nature and the role of museums has undergone significant evolution, compelling us to study anew how the question of universality has been addressed in the past, and how it is addressed today. Restitutions, for example, have unveiled a new chapter in the history of museums, which can no longer avoid this matter. It is because of this that there has been a change in direction and in this issue we reflect on the mechanisms and purposes of the collection. The change in perspective induced by the return of works of art requires more than ever an understanding of the reasons which govern the collection.

This means reflecting on the invention of the collection within Western thought and what the notion represents to different cultures. Describing the specific nature of other collections facilitates an awareness of the changes in the values of the collection and restores the exception which it can constitute. The first section of the issue is dedicated to studying the functioning, scope, and role of contemporary collections. Significant relationships and differences between collections emanate from their specific histories, as well from History in the broadest sense of the word, the conditions for the development of older collections and the mechanisms at work in their development today.

This is why it is important to determine the links of convergence and divergence between the practices and conceptions of the collection, in order to perhaps better understand the changes they caused in the status of artworks. Can we discern among contemporary examples new models of the collection and, from these, extrapolate valid paradigms for current and future practice?

The issue opens with Kathleen Berrin's account of the unprecedented agreement made in 1981 between the National Institute of Anthropology and History in Mexico and the Museum of Fine Arts in San Francisco. The history of this collaboration and restitution demonstrates that when the laws of nations clash with the ideas of the ownership of artworks, museum agents can go beyond the differences and determine viable principles of exchanges and loans.

Africa, and particularly Cameroon, represents the reverse side of the Western model. Steven Nelson describes the historical and political issues of two events which were intertwined at the beginning of the 20th century during the colonial era: the first

exportations of Bamum art to Europe, and the creation of two museums on the African continent.

The next two articles echo the links between contemporary practices of art and the museums that host them. The three authors of the conceptual group, *Art & Language*, analyse the response of artists to museums, as well as the emergence of the artist-curator, and the consequences of changing the place of creation from the artist's studio to the museum. For his part, Matthew Jackson studies the new forms of art which integrate museums, and the growing space for discourse on art within the different modes of constituting collections of contemporary art.

Our intention is also to address the stakes, aims and significance of collections, which is the subject of the second section. The relationships between private and public domains on the one hand, and those maintained between collections of the past and of the present on the other, all merit our attention. Similarly, the articulation between the individual history of the collection and the collective history of the museum, as well as the notions of local art and universal art, are the main themes for exploring the contemporary meaning of public collections within a significantly modified political and cultural context.

The Louvre, by incarnating the model of the revolutionary museum, was the first to conceive the dream of the universal museum. The recent *Declaration on the Value and Importance of Universal Museums* doubtlessly proceeds from such an ambition. Nonetheless, how can we abide by this aspiration when confronted with the legitimate nature of restitutions? To what extent does the inalienability of a collection protect the artworks which it contains? The act of collecting comes down as much to relinquishing as acquiring, and is predicated more than ever on the mobility of works which the collection harbours. It is therefore important to rethink the notion of the singular work of art, the universal virtue of art, and of the collection that articulates such values.

The history of art, law and philosophy contribute their thoughts and ideas to these questions.

The universal value of art and the museum, a utopian ideal from the Age of Enlightenment, is analysed by Roland Recht who examines 18th century debates concerning artwork in situ and artwork in museums, the place and function of the monument in the development of an awareness of cultural heritage, the symbolic value specific to the artwork and the role of the museum in its uncertain status of universality.

Cezanne's painting and Heidegger's philosophy lead to a reflection on the presence and site of the artwork. The incidence of a painting within a collection and the distinction which it establishes allow Éric Marion to explain the different meanings of the artwork and the change it undergoes within a collection. Measuring the distance which separates the artwork from the collection reveals their deeper significance.

Jean-Louis Déotte proposes an interpretation, supplemented by theorists of the collection from the first half of the 20th century. The museum becomes a device capable of organizing productions and visions, leaving aside the sacred value of artworks and their specific time, but reinventing a shared sensibility.

The issue concludes with a text by Cécile Marceau, who reflects on the commercial destiny of artwork and the museum and the resulting erosion of universal value. By linking the controversies which followed the aforementioned *Declaration* and the creation of the Louvre Abu Dhabi to the notion of nation, the author examines the crisis of authority within the museum world. The artwork becomes in some way the means to understand what each nation means by "universal".

A journal, unlike an anthology, inevitably leaves shaded areas in order to emphasize others. The partiality, the scope inherent in this sort of publication, nonetheless enlightens the aims of the collection in the 21st century. The conception of the collection can no longer remain quite the same. This difference is due to multiple factors which the authors of this issue describe and explore.

The quality of the collection depends on its incompleteness, on its ability to relinquish artworks in order to receive new ones. The value conferred on an artwork in a collection is

attributed by the gaze. In receiving shapes and sensitive gazes, its design is what Gérard Wajcman called “the universal singularity” of art.

Three full-page illustrations convey the rhythmic movements of this issue. In Jean-Luc Godard's film, “Bande à part/The Outsiders”, the collection is a separate and suspended place and serves as a prelude for its vocation. The protagonists of the film, who seem to least respect the museum, perhaps provide it with the finest praise, that of an open space, accessible to everyone, two thousand years after Cicero and Pliny the Elder pleaded in their favour against the appropriation of artworks within private residences. The partisan collection is at the heart of time, whether in the short or long-term. The open collection is the space for art to come, for artwork in progress. This explains the presence here of the work of Jian-Xing Too, since it is from the collected and exhibited artwork that the new work of art emerges, in turn finding its place within the collection.

Isabelle Tillerot

**Webcast available at www.unesco.org/culture/museumjournal/publicdebate2.*