CHAPTER I

The Museum as a Way of Seeing

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One of the clearest memories from museum visits of my childhood is of a crab. It was a giant crab, to be precise, which was in a glass case, a quite hard-to-find case, in the Peabody Museum (actually, in the Museum of Comparative Zoology) in Cambridge. As I remember, it was the scale that was so astonishing. I had never seen a crab that size and had therefore not imagined that it was possible. It was not only the size of the whole but of each of its individual parts. One could see the way it was made: huge claws, bulging eyes, feelers, raised bumps of shell, knobblty joints, hairs that extended out around them. It was placed at the corner of a case so that one could walk around from the front to the side and take it in from another view: a smallish main body delicately supported on improbably long legs, like the tines of some huge fork or rake.

I could attend to a crab in this way because it was still, exposed to view, dead. Its habitat and habits of rest, eating, and moving were absent. I had no idea how it had been caught. I am describing looking at it as an artifact and in that sense like a work of art. The museum had transformed the crab—had heightened, by isolating, these aspects, had encouraged one to look at it in this way. The museum had made it an object of visual interest.

The museums of Europe have a long history of encouraging at-
tention to objects, crabs included, as visible craft. This was a good part of the rationale of the early collections of Renaissance princes. Much has been said of the ideology of power, political and intellectual, engaged in both the collecting of objects and the taxonomic manner of ordering them. But I want to stress that what was collected was judged to be of visual interest (and even was enhanced by early museological concern that cases be in appropriate colors). Spaces were set aside for the display of examples of natural and human artifice from around the world. Rare sorts of fish were displayed side by side with human oddities (two-headed or hairy), Chinese porcelains, and antique busts. In a special class were objects that tested the border between the craft of nature and that of culture, natural artifice and man’s—goblets fashioned out of shell, for example, or worked coral. Indeed, painters took up the challenge in their own media: Dürer’s watercolor crabs or the painted flowers and shells of Jan Bruegel compete with what nature has made. The visual interest accorded a flower or shell in nature is challenged by the visual interest of the artist’s representational craft. Providing paintings of rare flowers and shells for attentive looking in encyclopedic collections was one way that artists were involved with the museum from the start. Some apocalyptic accounts of the modern museum’s usurpation of the artist and his or her art are misleading. From Bruegel’s time to that of Cézanne and Picasso, museums have been a school for craftsmen and artists.

The taste for isolating this kind of attentive looking at crafted objects is as peculiar to our culture as is the museum as the space or institution where the activity takes place. (A separate space for images is of course not totally exceptional among humans—prehistoric paintings were in caves, Egyptian paintings were in tombs, and already in the Renaissance Europeans had turned a chapel, Giotto’s Arena Chapel, into a viewing box where the ritual of attentive looking and the display of skill went hand in hand with religious ritual.) If the crab seems an eccentric example, we might consider instead a Greek statue, removed from its sanctuary or stadium, eyes gone, color worn to an overall pallor. The museum effect—turning all objects into works of art—operates here, too. Though as an issue of national property some Greek statues may be returned to their place of origin, no one would deny—and I think no one has thought to protest—the museum effect, through which Greek sculpture has assumed such a lasting place in our visual culture. By contrast, in the exhibiting of the material culture of other peoples, in particular what used to be called “primitive” art, it is the museum effect—the tendency to isolate something from its world, to offer it up for attentive looking and thus to transform it into art like our own—that has been the subject of heated debate.

The museum effect, I want to argue, is a way of seeing. And rather than trying to overcome it, one might as well try to work with it. It is very possible that it is only when, or insofar as, an object has been made with conscious attention to crafted visibility that museum exhibition is culturally informing; in short, when the cultural aspects of an object are amenable to what museums are best at encouraging. Romanesque capitals or Renaissance altarpieces are appropriately looked at in museums (pace Malraux) even if not made for them. When objects like these are severed from the ritual site, the invitation to look attentively remains and in certain respects may even be enhanced.

But objects are not always exhibited in such a way as to bring this out. Museums can make it hard to see. I shall begin with Dutch art and culture, the case I know best (the crustaceans of my grown-up days). A recent, highly acclaimed exhibition was entitled Masters of Seventeenth-Century Dutch Landscape Painting. The organization of the exhibition was chronological by loosely described types and the catalogue was alphabetical by artist—both established art-historical categories of mind. But there was no visual evidence offered that the categories or the change over time was part of the enterprise of those making the pictures. Of course we know that any order we place on material is ours and not necessarily theirs. But in this instance there was contrary visual evidence, from the layout of the great maplike panoramic views of Konink to the extraordinary backlit clouds and cows of Cuyp, that Dutch artists had other things on their minds than these proposed types and their sequence.

It is not that a chronological arrangement can never make cultural as well as pictorial sense. Until the rehanging of London’s National Gallery in recent years, one could walk through rooms of Italian painting from the fourteenth through the sixteenth centuries and discover through looking that the sequence of those paintings—in terms of media, color, and handling and arrangement of figures and setting—resulted from a self-conscious experimental practice. It was not by chance that the model of art as history, as distinguished from other kinds of accounts of making art, is provided by Vasari writing on Italian Renaissance works such as these. The persistent adjustment and calibration of elements construed as problems and taken up suc-
cessively by certain artists is a distinctive aspect of this visual culture. To walk through the rooms was to see that for at least three hundred years those objects themselves constituted a history.

To offer another example in which the historical constraining of visual culture is justified. Some of the most successful exhibitions of Western art in recent years have been monographic. The work of an individual artist or a characteristic form our culture takes. Therefore, setting out the lifetime production of one individual makes sense as visual culture. It makes sense to look even if the order that emerges from viewing seems to be obsessional (as Fragonard looked to me) rather than developmental in nature.

But the visual culture of Dutch pictures is different in kind. If one wants to offer it for viewing one might suggest exhibiting landscapes along with drawn or printed maps, which share both a pictorial format and a notion of knowledge. Or one might hang Vermeer's backlit cows and clouds with works in other genres (interiors, for example) that share his fascination with the problems of the representation of light; one might also try to show where else in the culture (in the pursuit of natural knowledge, for example) this optical interest can be traced.

Dutch painters have not been renowned for their history paintings, that major European genre dealing with significant human actions as narrated in central texts of the tradition. Nor did they make pictures of important public events: a map of a battleground or a portrait of a general with his family takes the place of what in another country might be the depiction in paint of a heroic battle or a surrender. What happens, then, when an exhibition is mounted that focuses on a major historical event? In 1979 the Central Museum of Utrecht commemorated the 1579 Union of Utrecht, the Dutch declaration of independence from Spain. But the declaration of union itself was overwhelmed and lost amidst a feast for the eyes—documents, decorated plates, coins, engravings, illustrated journal entries, maps, and drawings of land holdings. One came to understand Dutch culture better but perhaps in a way contrary to the intention of the exhibition. (The catalogue title, which begins with a proverb posed as a question—"De kogel door de kerkring" or "The Die is Cast!"—and the decision to focus not on the event but on 1539–1609, the fifty years surrounding it, already reveal a curious difference about an event as the occasion for celebration.) It was as if the Dutch were so committed to recording and understanding in pictures that they could not focus on a single event or text. The museum played its part here: the organizers obviously tried to collect material of visual interest so that the exhibition would be museum-able, and the museum in its turn made such objects of visual interest stand out. But nowhere in the exhibition or its catalogue was the proliferation of images itself recognized or assessed. This is not a case of pictures illustrating history, such as we can find in certain types of illustrated history books, but rather pictures themselves constituting a social fact.

The most famous recent attempt to consciously transform the exhibition of European art in the direction of the broader culture is the Musée d'Orsay in Paris. Both in the media displayed (furniture and decorative arts, photographs, and sculpture mixed in with painting) and in the choice of artists exhibited, this museum disputes the accepted canon—by which is meant twentieth-century notions of skill, ambition, and the achievement of art in the second half of the nineteenth century in France. The Orsay, paradoxically, makes seeing almost impossible. First of all, the way the pictures are sited and lighted and the presence of distracting hardware make the pictures hard to see. Secondly, works of lesser visual interest (e.g., Couture) are better placed for looking at than those of greater visual interest (e.g., Courbet), and the paintings of lesser visual interest are not visually improved by this exposure. One critic has defended the Orsay by saying that the social history of art is not about what is visible but about what is invisible. All well and good, but then one might ask how, or why, exhibit it in a museum?

I started with the hypothesis that everything in a museum is put under the pressure of a way of seeing. A serial display, be it of paintings or masks, stools or pitchforks (I have in mind here the Musée d'Orsay, the Musée National d'Art Populaire in Paris, and any older ethnographic museum), establishes certain parameters of visual interest, whether those parameters are known to have been intended by the objects' producers or not. This might also be accomplished in a museum by the exhibition of one sample of a class—a Couture in Japan, perhaps, or a baled fish net, as on the cover of the catalogue for the Art/Artifact exhibition mounted by the Center for African Art in New York. Each of my examples is a work exhibited outside its place of origin difference from what is customarily seen is a spur to visual attention, while extending a sense of craft. But as the Orsay hugely demonstrates, when exhibited together certain objects in any class might repay attentive looking more than others. When the works of art were seen amidst the pictures and even in the kinds of spaces and lighting to which the artists themselves aspired—Courbet
The distinction a museum brings out between a Courbet and a Couture is comparable to that which it brings out between a highly decorated African stool (I am thinking here of the Saule word again) and another, planter one. But—particularly if the object was not made for such attentive looking—this distinction need not have been a cultural value for the maker and users, nor need the object be what we would call a work of art. What the museum registers is visual distinction, not necessarily cultural significance.

It is only recently that peoples or groups, nations, and even cities have felt that to be represented in a museum was to be given recognition as a culture, therefore giving rise, I suppose, to questions about how to do it right. It may not be politically or institutionally possible to suggest that justice to a people should not be dependent on their representation, or their representability, in a museum. Some cultures lack artifacts of visual interest. And politics aside, museums are perhaps not the best means of offering general education about cultures. It is not only that cultures are not the sum of their materials, but also that books and/or film might do the job much better. I remain puzzled as to how James Clifford would make a museum display in the manner of the anthropological text he praises, which describes the inauthentic, heterogeneous living tradition of a Zoni Shalako ceremony. The home setting of "tribal" art (e.g., a photograph of the interior of Chief Shake's house, Wrangal, Alaska, 1909) that Clifford offers as an alternative to the Museum of Modern Art's much-discussed "Primitivism" in Twentieth-Century Art show would look suspiciously like a Rauschenberg (if in two dimensions) or a Kienholz (if in three) if it were exhibited in a museum. Our way of seeing can open itself to different things, but it remains inescapably ours.

One measure of a museum's success would seem to be the freedom and interest with which people wander through and look without the intimidating mediation between viewer and object that something such as the ubiquitous earphones provides. Considered in these terms, the Museum of Modern Art in New York is a signal success. When MOMA applied some years back for support from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) to put on an exhibition, a question was raised about evidence of educational content. Hanging pictures in a certain way on the wall was all right for art (for the National Endowment for the Arts) but not for education (which is the province of NEH). MOMA came up with the device of a separate information room, with much documentation on the wall and so forth, through which one passed on the way to the pictures that were there for the looking. It seems to me a practice worth imitating, though one might even dare to put the documentation after the pictures, not before. Or one could, like the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., offer take-home sheets that do not interrupt and discourage looking while in the museum.

Perhaps more attention could be paid to the educational possibilities of installing objects rather than communicating ideas about them. Free viewers, in other words, and make them less intimidated about looking. One way of doing this is to pay as much attention to the possibilities of installation as to the information about what is being installed. Of course, the two are not separate—but one might argue that the collecting and cataloging functions of a museum can continue behind the scenes while installations do more in the way of encouraging seeing and suggesting ways to see. Recent monographic shows in which the detailed documentation is put in a catalogue separated from the evidence offered by the works themselves provide one model for this. In the face of the American enthusiasm these days for turning museums into major educational institutions, it is a matter of redressing the balance. The way a picture or object is hung or placed—its frame or support, its position relative to the viewer (is it high, low, or on a level? Can it be walked around or not? Can it be touched? Can one sit and view it or must one stand?), the light on it (does one want constant light? Focused or diffuse? Should one let natural light and dark play on it and let the light change throughout the day and with the seasons?), and the other objects it is placed with and so compared to—all of these affect how we look and what we see.

The history of exhibiting practice makes clear that this idea is hardly new. A visit to museums such as the Pitti Palace in Florence or the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, which retain outdated modes of exhibition, suggests less that they were wrong and we can get it right than that the museum—as a way of seeing— itself keeps changing and that installation has a major effect on what one sees. A constant, however, is the issue of seeing. And the question to ask is, why and with what visual interest in view do we devise this or that display for particular objects?

My conclusion about the representation of culture in a museum is a bit troubling: Museums turn cultural materials into art objects. The
products of other cultures are made into something that we can look at. It is to ourselves, then, that we are representing things in museums. But museums provide a place where our eyes are exercised and where we are invited to find both unexpected as well as expected crafted objects to be of visual interest to us. The mixture of distance, on the one hand, with a sense of human affinity and common capacities, on the other, is as much part of the experience of looking at a Dutch landscape painting of the seventeenth century as it is of looking at a carved Baula heddle pulley of the twentieth. This, it seems to me, is a way of seeing that museums can encourage.

NOTES

1. For a study and catalogue of a partially reconstructed collection of this kind at Schloss Ambras, Innsbruck, see Die Kassakammer (Innsbruck: Verlaganstalt Tyrolia, 1977).