



ISSN: 2471-6839

PANORAMA

Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art

Bully Pulpit: What are Museums for?

Neal Benezra

Director, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

What are museums for? In the last several decades, I believe the purpose and mission of art museums has changed dramatically, and for the better. Throughout their long history, museums have more often than not functioned as places where important works of art would be conserved for the future. This was not an ostensibly public purpose and the sharing of the objects in museum custody was often a lower priority than was their preservation. The design of museums generally spoke to this mandate to preserve, and the classicizing façades of great museums expressed stability, authority, and control; public access was often of secondary design concern.

In my view, this began to change with the design and inauguration of the Pompidou Center in Paris. Born of the social and political upheavals of the 1960s, and opening to the public in 1977, the Pompidou, of architects Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers, expresses another, far more public purpose. Instead of a stately edifice, the Pompidou is an ultra-modern machine, open both physically and psychologically to the city, its inhabitants, and its visitors. Its outdoor plaza is a gathering place and for young people, in particular, one of the central destinations in Paris. The Pompidou is available late into the evening, when working people are able to frequent its galleries, cinema, library, and public spaces, instead of the limited public hours that historically characterized museum access.

It took years for the expressly public purpose of the Pompidou Center to take hold in the museum community. Today, however, many if not most museum directors and their staffs take their public purpose as seriously as they do the art in their custody.

A key element of this change is to be found in the evolving definition of the word “curate.” Traditionally, curators (the word derives from the Latin, to oversee, guard, care for) were principally responsible for the objects in their custody. Curators were first and foremost scholars, and they organized collections and exhibitions. Today the word has acquired a much more expansive definition; to a certain extent we are all curators of our own time and experience and that of friends and family as well.

In May 2016, the museum that I direct, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, opened following a massive expansion. In the previous decade, our collections and exhibitions, as well as the number of visitors and members, had grown dramatically. Underlying our expansion was not merely a will to grow our gallery space, and the number of works of art that could be placed on view. We also envisioned a museum experience that would be extraordinarily generous. Our designers, led by Craig Dykers, of the firm Snohetta, created open, luminous, and comfortable spaces for people as well as for art. In an effort to welcome a young audience, we are now able to offer free admission to anyone eighteen years of age or younger. We have also created dynamic digital access to SFMOMA, so our public will not be limited to visitors to our building.

We are now engaged in reconceiving the future of museums of contemporary art, and of our own museum. Can we imagine a future in which great works of art and a heightened public purpose are even more closely aligned than today? This is the opportunity that awaits.