



## Museum

Georges Bataille; Annette Michelson

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According to the *Great Encyclopedia*, the first museum in the modern sense of the word (meaning the first public collection) was founded in France by the Convention of July 27, 1793. The origin of the modern museum is thus linked to the development of the guillotine. Nevertheless, the collection of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, founded at the end of the seventeenth century, was already a public one, belonging to the university.

The development of the museum has obviously exceeded even the most optimistic hopes of its founders. Not only does the ensemble of the world's museums now represent a colossal piling-up of wealth, but the totality of museum visitors throughout the world surely offers the very grandiose spectacle of a humanity by now liberated from material concerns and devoted to contemplation.

We must realize that the halls and art objects are but the container, whose content is formed by the visitors. It is the content that distinguishes a museum from a private collection. A museum is like a lung of a great city; each Sunday the crowd flows like blood into the museum and emerges purified and fresh. The paintings are but dead surfaces, and it is within the crowd that the streaming play of lights and of radiance, technically described by authorized critics, is produced. It is interesting to observe the flow of visitors visibly driven by the desire to resemble the celestial visions ravishing to their eyes.

Grandville has schematized the relations of container to content with respect to the museum by exaggerating (or so it would appear) the links tentatively formed between visitors and visited. When a native of the Ivory Coast places an axe of neolithic, polished stone within a water-filled receptacle, then bathes in that receptacle and offers poultry to what he takes to be thunder stones (fallen from the sky in a clap of thunder), he but prefigures the attitude of enthusiasm and of deep communion with objects which characterizes the modern museum visitor.

The museum is the colossal mirror in which man, finally contemplating himself from all sides, and finding himself literally an object of wonder, abandons himself to the ecstasy expressed in art journalism.

*Grandville. The Louvre of the Marionettes.*

