

Large museums and public galleries are at the centre of our experience of art today. They are the places where we're most likely to spend time engaging with individual works. They shape our expectations and guide our ideas of what we are supposed to do and how we are supposed to behave around art. The great museums – the Louvre, the Metropolitan Museum, the Tate, the Getty Center – are amongst the most authoritative, trusted and alluring places in the world.

However, these institutions present a very complicated and muddled set of messages about art, which often undermines its potential. The problems start with the captions. Most people instinctively edge towards the caption as they approach a work of art and although this is occasionally frowned upon by sophisticates, it makes sense. A caption seeks to tell you what you need to know in order to engage fruitfully with a work of art. It makes the promise, 'Read me and you will get more out of the work I accompany.'

At present, most captions focus on providing stylistic or historical information. At the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, a depiction of Christ appearing to Mary by Juan de Flandes carries the following caption (48):

Workshops routinely produced copies of paintings that were prized for their spiritual powers or for the status of their authorship and/or ownership. Such factors prompted Queen Isabella of Castile to order a copy of Rogier van der Weyden's *Mary Altarpiece* (Gemäldegalerie, Berlin), which was given by her father, King Juan II, to the Carthusian monastery of Miraflores, near Burgos, Spain, in 1445. This picture is the right panel of Isabella's triptych and can tentatively be attributed to her court artist Juan de Flandes on the basis of documentary and technical evidence. The center and left panels remain at Isabella's burial site, the Capilla Real, Granada, where she bequeathed the triptych upon her death in 1504.

At the very moment when it has the best opportunity to guide the response of the beholder, the gallery gives priority to certain facts: by whom an earlier version of this image was owned, the location of a monastery and when Queen Isabella died. The caption imagines the typical visitor approaching the work with some complex questions in mind, such as 'Didn't I see something rather like this in the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin?' 'Was Queen Isabella of Castile's father King Juan the I or the II?' or 'Are you sure this isn't a Rogier van der Weyden?' To these questions, it provides the perfect 200-word answer. That the image was regarded (500 years ago) as having 'spiritual power' is mentioned only to help explain how such a prestigious museum comes to be displaying a copy and not an absolutely original work. An alternative label might read like this:

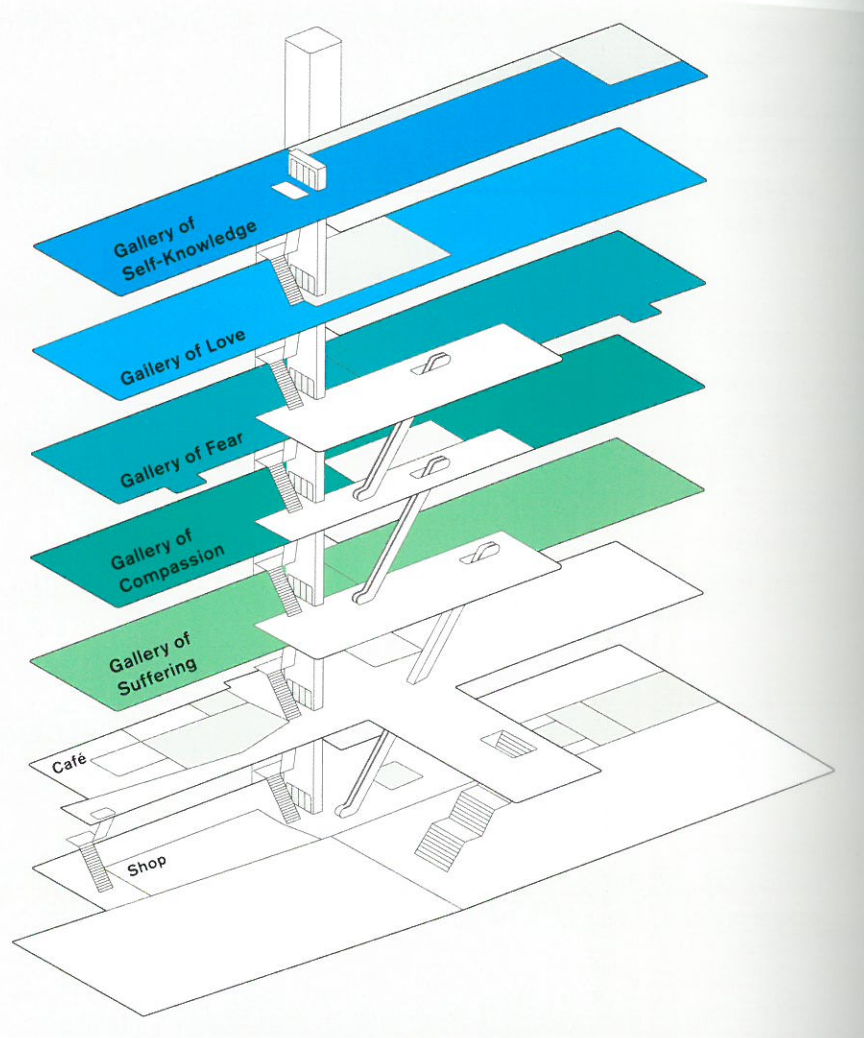
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*In search of a good
label?*
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48. Juan de Flandes,
*Christ Appearing to
His Mother*, 1496



An art gallery reorganized according to a therapeutic vision. The art wouldn't need to change, only the way it was arranged and presented. Each gallery would focus not on dates and provenance, but on the important rebalancing emotions encouraged by particular works.

49. The floor plan for the Tate Modern, revised



A machine for the therapy of the soul.

50. Basilica di Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, 1250–1338



The picture shows us a shocking encounter between a mother and a son. She has seen him humiliated and abandoned. But now, despite everything, he is restored to her. She thought she had lost him. But he is here.

The Biblical story speaks of universal themes raised to maximum dramatic pitch. In her eyes, her son is perfect: he is the most important being who has ever lived. But the world rejects him. His suffering is her suffering. She has been powerless to help or protect him. She could not keep him safe. He left her; he had to go out into the world and pursue his own tasks. We see the ending that all mothers crave: that the horrors will be over. And that in the future people will love her son as she loves him.

This is an image of a loving mother-son relationship. But it does not avoid conflict or grief: these are precisely what the picture says are central to love. It is a very restrained image. They do not embrace. He will soon leave. How often has this scene been re-enacted?

The picture makes the claim that such moments of return (and of survival), though fleeting and rare, are crucially important in life. It wants men to understand – and call – their mothers.

The problem with museums extends from captions to the whole philosophy of how rooms are laid out and how the visitor progresses through the building. In large galleries today, the display rooms tend to be named in ways that are overtly academic and historical, in line with the education of their curators, so we may stroll from the 'North Italian School' to 'The Nineteenth Century' via the 'The Art of the Enlightenment'. This reflects a scholarly attitude to categories, as can also be found in literature courses on 'The American Novel' or 'From Allegory to Realism', rather than the range of needs the visitor might bring.

A more ambitious, and beneficial, arrangement would be to arrange the works in line with the concerns of our souls, bringing together those objects which, regardless of their origins in space and time, address the troubled areas of existence (49). Aided by wise and forthright labels, a tour of the gallery would keep at the front of our minds the things we most need to hold on to, but which so easily fall from view.

The rehang committee could look for guidance to the Venetian church of Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari (50). The Frari makes no concession to scholarly organization of the many artworks it contains, for it is committed to what it holds to be a grander task: that of saving our souls, as understood by Catholic theology. Paintings (there is a large altarpiece by Titian) join with monuments, window traceries, frescoes, sculpture, metalwork and architecture to make a coherent and sustained impression on our deepest thoughts and feelings. The question of where a work was

made, or the precise intentions of the marker, are subordinated to the overall mission.

A modern museum might seem highly organized, but this masks a deeper and very serious disorder when it comes to the true purpose of art. Devotion to academic categories actually gets in the way of creating and sustaining emotional order and insight. Museums are thus prevented from taking up the conception of the transformative, redemptive power of art pioneered in churches and temples. Curators should dare to reinvent their spaces so that they can be more than dead libraries for the creations of the past. Together with the revised vision for captions, our encounters with art would be transformed.

In 1966, the board of the wealthy Kimbell Art Foundation in Fort Worth, Texas, hired the American architect Louis I. Kahn to design a new museum to house its collection of works, ranging from antiquities to contemporary abstract paintings (51). The benefactors, trustees and architect went to extraordinary lengths to create a beautiful environment that would focus our attention on the artworks and proclaim the dignity of art; thus the museum implicitly argues that tremendously significant experiences are to be had within its galleries.

What are these experiences, exactly? The Kimbell takes us to the brink of a crucial idea: that the great themes of existence can be addressed in elevating material spaces. It makes all the right preparatory moves: it creates the luminous space, it assembles prestigious objects. But then it stops short, and never encourages us to reform our lives under the guidance of art. It is often said that the great museums are the cathedrals of the modern world, but the comparison reveals the weakness of contemporary secular galleries, rather than flattering them. Cathedrals were created as compelling statements of a complete theory of life: of our deepest needs, our spiritual destiny and the guidance necessary to live the right life. This religious project may have lost its allure, but we should hold on to the scale and sincerity of its intent.

At one end of a gallery at the Kimbell Museum is a niche designed by Kahn out of travertine marble framed by supporting beams of polished beige concrete, in which Donatello's *Virgin and Child* has been placed and dramatically lit from three sides (52). We know we are being invited to recognize a moment of supreme importance – but what precisely is the moral here? The museum suggests that Donatello is the star of this gallery, which is dedicated to Italian Renaissance art. But the artist should only matter because he is supremely effective at evoking a quality



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The architecture
says that something
truly wonderful
is going on here –
but what?

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51. Louis I. Kahn,
Kimbell Art
Museum, 1966–72

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Currently used
to refine our
understanding of
fifteenth-century
gender politics.

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52. Donatello,
Virgin and Child
(*The Borromeo*
Madonna), c.1450



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We need to learn
more about
affection.
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53. Henry Raeburn,
The Allen Brothers,
early 1790s

that is of general human importance, in this case tenderness. In a gallery system rearranged under the guidance of a therapeutic approach, we should appreciate maternal tenderness through Donatello's work, but not remain fetishistically arrested in front of the work itself. The Kimbell shouldn't, perhaps, even provide us with rooms dedicated to Italian art of the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries. It should have a gallery dedicated to focusing our minds on important aspects of our emotional functioning.

There could be a gallery named Tenderness to help us understand what this quality is and why it is so hard to preserve in the conditions of daily life. We would meet Donatello here, but his presence would be subsumed under a higher heading and enriched by items from other parts of the collection. There would be space for Henry Raeburn's portrait of the Allen brothers (53), currently marooned in the British room, because it matters less that this is a work by a Scottish painter of the European Enlightenment, as the caption tells us, than that it, like the *Virgin and Child*, has many important things to tell us about how to bolster the more delicate inclinations of our hearts.

To accompany visitors to this putative room, we shouldn't need lectures on Florentine altarpieces or Scottish society in the late eighteenth century; we would need lessons in how to make tenderness more active in our lives. The point of museums should not primarily be to teach us how to love art, but to inspire us to love what artists have loved through an appreciation of their work: a minor but critical difference.

Today's museums attempt to draw in visitors by making claims for the rarity of the objects in their collections. They suggest that what they possess is not only good, but also unusual and very scarce. In contrast, the true ideal of the museum should be to make what is good and important very normal and widely distributed. The energies of those who love art shouldn't be devoted to piling up treasures behind high walls, but instead should be to spread the values found in works of art more widely through the world. The mission of the true art lover should be to reduce the relative importance of museums, in the sense that the wisdom and insight currently collected there shouldn't be so jealously guarded and fetishized, but instead scattered generously and promiscuously across life. To guide us in this ambition, we might follow the example of the Dutch twentieth-century designer Gerrit Rietveld (54, 55). It is an irony of his career that many of his works are now found only in museums; for example, his legendary *Red Blue Chair* has pride of place in the design gallery of the Museum of Modern Art in New York.



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‘ou can’t sit on it
n the museum.

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4. Gerrit Rietveld,
ed Blue Chair, c.1923

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‘he values
aptured in art
ouldn’t remain
n the museum
they should go
ith us into the
layroom.

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5. Gerrit Rietveld,
‘olderwagon,
918 (designed),
968 (made)

Rietveld, however, was suspicious of art museums and the snobbery he felt they attracted. His desire was for his furniture to break free from the high-art ghetto of the museum and to enter daily life. Like many designers of his era, he was interested in mass production because of a feeling that the one-off masterwork could not sufficiently change reality, and that only if everyday objects were permeated with the correct values would human conduct change in the direction he wished for it – he wanted us to be more playful, kinder to our children, less judgemental about class distinctions and more relaxed about sex. Moreover, he felt that the right sort of furniture was an important part of any plan to reform humanity in these directions.

It was this engagement with daily life that led Rietveld to take an interest in so-called humble objects such as brooms, waste paper baskets, umbrella stands, prams and buggies. He wisely sought to take the values he loved out of the museum and make them breathe in the playroom.

The museum once had an important role to play. It preserved objects that might otherwise have been lost, democratized their availability and established a reliable set of facts about works. But the museum is only a prelude to a life well lived. It is not its summation. It contains a series of hints of how we might live, but ultimately it stands in relation to art as school does to life – at a certain point we must go out into the world and learn to abandon our guides with the utmost respect and gratitude. The fulfilment of the mission of the museum is the closing of its own doors so that the playroom, the kitchen, the bathroom, the park and the office can become temples to our values as much as the quiet, marble halls of galleries once were.

