

Rouen Address

Sir Nicholas Penny

Sir Nicholas Penny is an art historian and former Director of the National Gallery. He was Slade Professor of Fine Art at Oxford, and was keeper of the department of Western art at Oxford's Ashmolean Museum. He is an alumnus of St Catharine's College, Cambridge.

This is the text of the Introductory Address read at the conference on temporary exhibitions held at the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Rouen on 22 November 2017 and organised by Sylvain Amic, Director of the Musées métropolitaines de Rouen.

I am pleased to have been asked to give an address on the topic of loan exhibitions, because I edited *The Ephemeral Museum*, the book which Francis Haskell was working on during the last year of his life, and I shared his concern—his alarm—at the way in which the priorities of European and North American galleries and museums have altered.

At the same time, I am somewhat ashamed to admit that, as a senior member of the curatorial staff of several major museums—in Oxford, in London, and in Washington DC—and as the Director of the National Gallery in London between 2008 and 2015, I have not been able to do anything to halt the steadily increasing dominance of the temporary loan exhibition over the older ideal of the ‘permanent collection’, of the ideal of the collection as a sort of public treasury of art, which was certainly the idea behind the foundation of the National Gallery, as also the British Museum and many such institutions worldwide.

‘Steadily increasing dominance’ is no hyperbole. The clouds in the sky provide the best example of something moving so constantly that it is hard to mark the successive stages and therefore difficult to notice how much has actually altered. The changes that Francis Haskell had noticed have in fact continued steadily since the publication of his book. Here are some examples from my own experience.

25 years ago, if you were visiting a major museum, whether in San Francisco, Copenhagen, or Budapest, you would not normally have bothered to check whether a famous work of art in that collection was on display. You would have assumed that it would be. 15 years ago, it would have been prudent to check. Today, it would be mad not to do so.

And here is another test: 25 years ago, if you announced to friends in London that you were proposing to visit the Victoria and Albert Museum, or told friends in Washington that you were hoping to spend some time in the National Gallery of Art, it would not have elicited the response ‘What’s on?’, or ‘Oh, are you going to see the show of so and so’, which is what you will almost always hear today.

And then again, and most significantly, 25 years ago it would have been considered very extraordinary for a National Gallery

to clear out a large number of its rooms to make space for a temporary exhibition, but, over the last 15 years or so, this has been quite common. It happens regularly in the National Gallery in Washington, and it has happened several times in the National Gallery in London: with the big Velazquez exhibition shortly before I became director, with the Veronese exhibition while I was director, and with the Michelangelo and Sebastiano exhibition since I retired.

There are other ways in which one can monitor the increase in the importance attached to loan exhibitions. Many institutions smaller than those I have mentioned so far, such as the Frick Collection in New York, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, the Wallace Collection in London, and the Poldi Pezzoli Museum in Milan, were founded with the idea that they would remain the same or much the same, and also often with an injunction against any work being lent. But, despite this, almost all of these institutions have found a way to accommodate loan exhibitions.

And it is no exaggeration to claim that, if any museum is now thought to be ‘moribund’ or ‘sleepy’, the first remedy to be prescribed is to introduce or greatly enlarge a program of loan exhibitions. The trend is not inhibited by the obvious unsuitability of the space available. The most extraordinary example of this is the Villa Borghese in Rome, where our ability to appreciate some of the most beautiful interiors in Europe has often been sacrificed for the display of temporary loans.

I want to analyse here what has been happening in the UK, and chiefly in London, not only because it is what I have observed most closely but also because it is influential on the practice elsewhere in Europe.

In London, the most remarkable change is to be observed in the Tate—as the Tate Gallery is now known. For many years the works on exhibition in Tate Britain were rotated on an annual basis so that there was no ‘permanent’ collection at all. This was not popular and there has been something of a reaction against it, but in Tate Modern today everything is either a ‘display’ or a loan exhibition. It may be that this development has been encouraged by the large gaps in Tate’s holdings of modern art, when those holdings are compared with those to be found in Paris, Berlin, or New York. These gaps

would be immediately apparent were a chronological arrangement of the permanent collection to be attempted.

What may have originated in a pragmatic solution to a British problem has come to be considered as an exemplary curatorial solution for the display not only of modern but of nineteenth-century art. The most recent imitator is the National Gallery of Modern Art in Rome, which is abandoning its previous lucid chronological arrangements in favour of a series of short-lived displays with startling juxtapositions.

I am dwelling on institutions devoted to the presentation of modern art deliberately, because one of the biggest changes since the publication of *The Ephemeral Museum* has been the increasing popularity and institutional enthusiasm for contemporary art. In the United Kingdom you cannot easily obtain a grant for improving the display of Old Masters or ancient art unless you do something to demonstrate its contemporary relevance—which is most easily achieved by ensuring that a living artist add something to the display. The prestige attached to the contemporary can only encourage the tendencies which Francis Haskell most feared.

In the UK there is of course a long tradition of museums and galleries being open to the public free of charge—a concept not entirely unknown in France, as I have found on recent visits to Dijon. Fundamental to this tradition is the idea that these institutions belong to the public rather than to the state. This is not the place to explore the complicated question of museum governance and the British distrust of state control which resulted in the establishment of trustees. But it explains why there was a public outcry when some of London's institutions decided to impose entry charges—so much so that all political parties now regularly declare themselves to be opposed to those charges.

However, since the publication of *The Ephemeral Museum*, there has been a massive change in museum funding, perhaps especially in the UK where the government grant has been drastically reduced almost every year for nearly a decade. Commercial activity to compensate for this has greatly increased. Finding sponsorship had already become a large part of a director's job towards the end of the 1990s, and it has become steadily more important ever since. Sponsors understandably require publicity, and reliable major publicity can only be obtained by a museum with a temporary exhibition or a new building. (The press notice obtained by acquiring one of the greatest paintings of the sixteenth century—Titian's *Diana and Actaeon*—was minute beside the coverage devoted to the Leonardo exhibition.)

Once the National Gallery has entered into a partnership with Credit Suisse, has secured Shell's support for the Rembrandt exhibition, has persuaded private foundations to pay for a new roof and new curator, and has increased its revenues by enlarging its shops, by mounting small paying exhibitions, and by hiring out galleries for parties, then no Government—even a Labour government with a strong belief in funding public services which have been starved by the Conservatives—would seek to revert to former arrangements. Once institutions have learned to help themselves, they will have to live with the unanticipated consequences.

One needs to put this in the context of public amenities generally—at least in the United Kingdom. In front of the National Gallery there is Trafalgar Square which was created as a breathing space and, as it were, an assembly room for the use of the general public. The Mayor's office, in collusion with Westminster's local government officials, uses it as a space which can be hired. Much the same

attitude is taken to London's parks and commons. Across the river there is London's largest concert hall, the Royal Festival Hall, built with public funds for the public, but now so full of shops and cafés that it resembles the retail labyrinths of the modern airport and the quality of its architecture is completely invisible. There has been very little protest at this ugly commercialisation.

What is happening may perhaps be best described as a shift from the Museum and Gallery as Library to the Museum and Gallery as Theatre. No one ever expected theatres to provide performances free of charge, but such remains the case with libraries, even in countries where you normally pay to enter a museum. One might expect the director of a great library to be a person of great learning, but the director of a theatre is expected to be an impresario—if possible one with 'charisma'.

The British Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the National Gallery are still thought of by many of us as something akin to a National Library (indeed, the British Library was not so very long ago embedded in the British Museum). Of course, they remain places where you may go to educate yourself and where you can usually find the unique or rare work which you wished to consult. You can drop into the National Gallery to see a familiar masterpiece; the very definition of a masterpiece must surely be something that you revisit. But these museums are now gradually becoming more and more like theatres where something new and exciting will be found. Indeed, in the case of the Victoria and Albert Museum, a large amount of the gallery's energy appears to be devoted to the most popular elements in the performing arts. You enter the National Gallery without charge, but you may find that a great work by Raphael or by Van Eyck has been inserted into a paying exhibition or lent abroad as a reciprocal loan (as was the case sadly when I was Director), or indeed to raise money.

I do not wish to be alarmist. If the modern museum directors are no longer likely to be scholars, that does not mean that they will not be sympathetic to scholarship. If the modern museum director is going to be a modernist, that need not mean that they will always be averse to older art. The curator who prefers organising loan exhibitions to cataloguing the permanent collection may still be making a major contribution to art history. I do not regret the Barocci exhibition, nor indeed 'Sacred made Real' (devoted to Spanish polychrome sculpture), mounted during my Directorship at the National Gallery, both of which, I believe, altered the way that the history of European art is understood. *The Ephemeral Museum* was entirely fair on this point. One could even read parts of it as an exposition of the huge contribution to art history made by the loan exhibitions held in Italy and France in the first half of the twentieth century. But it is not only getting harder to mount really worthwhile exhibitions designed to alter, rather than to meet, popular taste; there is also more and more pressure to mount exhibitions which are primarily mercenary in motive.

Francis Haskell certainly would have liked to put the clock back. In private he even allowed himself to wonder whether, if a terrible accident were to occur, it might not have the beneficial consequence of forcing institutions to reconsider current loan policies. I have listed many reasons why the likelihood of a return to the situation that prevailed in the 1970s or 1980s is now improbable: the increase in institutions hoping to mount exhibitions and thus demanding 'loan-backs'; the decline in government funding, stimulating dependence on sponsorship, which in turn requires the publicity achieved by popular exhibitions; the priority given to modern and contemporary art. But suppose there was a terrible accident to a great work when

on loan. Damage to the works of art that has been occasioned by loan exhibitions has been very successfully suppressed, but a really large accident might affect the way that works of art are insured.

Without Government indemnity, most large loan exhibitions in the UK would not be possible, especially so-called blockbusters with extensive international exhibitions. The threat on the part of the current [as of 2017] Republican administration in North America to abolish the National Foundation for the Arts, which supplies indemnity, is a real one. In Europe there could be a similar reaction, and indeed in the UK there have long been officials in the Treasury who have worried about indemnity. These worries could lead to a sharp reduction in loan exhibitions and conceivably to a supervisory board deciding on which exhibitions were most eligible for government support.

Who knows who would be appointed to such a board! Perhaps there would be someone there who would propose that it was desirable to identify those works which any member of the British public and every British schoolchild should normally be able to see. But given the political pressure to do more for the regions, touring exhibitions of such works might well be high on the list of those exhibitions which would be encouraged. In addition, political support might be given to the idea of global 'soft power', following the French example. This is of course conjecture. But any forecast of the future should take into account the fact that loan exhibitions can support more explicit political agendas than those that have prevailed until now in the United Kingdom.