

How to Make Great Art More Accessible

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A FEW YEARS AGO, I WAS WALKING IN BERLIN WITH a German colleague near to the Museum Island. On one side, he remarked, you find the site of Hegel's office. And on the other side, the Bode Museum, the Pergamon Museum, and the other great Berlin art museums. That makes it sound like the academics and the museums were closely connected. In fact, however, he went on to note, Hegel didn't play any practical role in the founding of the great Prussian public art museums. But that proximity is very suggestive, for it's a reminder that academic art history and the art museum grew up together in 1820s Prussia. Indeed, there was a natural alliance, for the museum curators need their colleagues in art history to make attributions, explain the values of artworks, and develop a history of these artifacts. The art museum curator is concerned with artifacts, and the academic art historian with the attributions, the history, and the interpretation of those artifacts. If we accept this broad division of activities, then it seems obvious that the births of the art museum and art history occurred at the same time and place because they needed each other. This, at least, is a useful generalization.

If you read Hegel's two volumes on aesthetics, given as lectures in Berlin in the 1820s and then published posthumously from student notes, you find the bare bones of modern art historical surveys. The best part, I think, is the few pages devoted to Dutch art.¹ The art of Holland is distinctive, he argues, because the Dutch are Protestant merchants, and so have a different visual culture from the Italian Renaissance Catholics or the pagan Greeks, a culture that expresses their worldview. From this vivid description you can sense that Hegel

¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), I: 599.

visited Holland. He develops the sketch of a sociological account which, without naming any artists, might without embarrassment be set alongside the much fuller accounts of his numerous French, German and American successors. When Svetlana Alpers offers a modern revisionist history that characterizes Dutch art, it's unsurprising that she refers to Hegel's discussion.² The very basic idea that diverse visual cultures have different aesthetics is developed and defended by him. And thanks to that way of thinking, our curators are prepared to gather art from every human culture.

But of course, that story about academics and curators comes from the distant past. And nowadays, relating those two distinctly different tasks is more complicated in part because everything has become more complicated, but also because everyone is so busy. In the 1950s, Arthur Danto was both a successful practicing artist and a teacher of philosophy at Columbia University. Once, so he told me in the 1980s, he chose to be an academic philosopher because he thought that post would leave plenty of time to make his art. How distant that world seems now, when being an academic is so time intensive. It's all to the good to argue that curators and academic art historians should work together. Still, the very real practical question is how to bring this about. It's true, of course, that a curator's practical concern with objects differs from the scholars' interests. But how can the proposal that they collaborate be justified in constructive terms?

Academic art history and the art museum grew up together in 1820s Prussia.

Thanks to my long-standing authorial collaboration with Joachim Pissarro, I got to meet and talk with Richard Brettell. And so I published an interview with him.³ Brettell, of course, as everyone knows, was a model of a scholar who engaged the art museum. And some of the things we talked about which were not included in the published account gave me some suggestions of ideas that I develop in this present discussion.

How might academic research enter into the life of a museum? And, to look at the other side of this puzzle, how might the practical concerns of a museum generate academic research? Being a

² Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing. Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 249.

³ "Richard Brettell with David Carrier: 'I don't think that what I do or what one ought to do has rules.'" *The Brooklyn Rail*, May 2020, brooklynrail.org/2020/05/art/RICHARD-BRETTELL-with-David.

curator is a full-time job, as is doing research and teaching as an art historian. And so it's not obvious how, in practice, someone can combine these two activities. Here, going beyond these plausible generalities, I offer a constructive suggestion about how in Dallas you might proceed. This proposal builds upon my long research about the historic center of Naples, forthcoming in the book *In Caravaggio's Shadow: Naples as a Work of Art*.⁴ I myself am neither curator nor art historian, but a retired philosopher. My hobby horse, then, is a visionary plan relating to that book.

Recently I have made a number of trips to Naples. I have reviewed exhibitions at the Museo di Capodimonte. And I have a special interest in the city because it has extensive displays in the historic center of old master sacred art, which have ironically benefited from the city's scholarly neglect by comparison with its more intensively studied peers. Although in the seventeenth century Naples was the largest city in Italy, it has been relatively marginalized by scholars compared with Florence, Rome, and Venice. A look at library listings reveals that art in Naples attracts much less attention than works in those cities. Because modernists viewed the major pre-modern artistic developments as having taken place outside of Naples, this meant that the most important older artworks elsewhere moved from churches into public art museums. But, thanks to that very neglect, a great deal of Neapolitan art remains in its original sites, in the churches of the historic center.

Studying the sacred art in Naples' historic center poses a particular practical problem that has preoccupied me for some time. There are a large number of interesting churches. I've visited forty, but there are many more. Anthony Blunt did a large academic book on the architecture of these churches.⁵ Each of them has a great deal of art. And in these densely hung churches, sorting out what you see is not easy. There are numerous guidebooks. The most complete one that I have found, is *Napoli sacra. Guida alle chiese della città*, published in 15 paperback volumes.⁶ It has maps, photographs of the buildings and some artworks in them, and written descriptions. And of course, there are numerous other guides in Italian and also in English, as well as the art-historical literature on the various painters, sculptors, and architects. In general, however, no single reference identifies all of the art on display.

When you visit an unfamiliar art museum, usually you can get a floorplan and purchase a guidebook. And then with the aid of the wall labels, you make your way through the collection. The churches in the historic center of Naples are more challenging,

4 (London: Thames & Hudson, 2025).

5 Anthony Blunt, *Neapolitan Baroque & Rococo Architecture* (London: Zwirner, 1975).

6 (Naples: il mattino, 2010).

for they are densely hung, with art on the walls and ceiling, and a rich decorative arrangement on the floor. Over the years, as I struggled to learn about Neapolitan art, I would bring two or three guidebooks, sit in a pew, and try to identify what I was seeing. The lighting is rarely ideal, and many of these works are at some distance. And so, identifying what you see is not easy. Looking in these churches gave me new sympathy for the pioneering connoisseurs, Bernard Berenson and the others, who had to make attributions under these conditions. Their focus generally was on Renaissance art, which means that the Neapolitan baroque is still terra incognita. Apart from Caravaggio, who visited only briefly, and Artemisia Gentileschi, whose apotheosis is recent, most of these artists are too little known. Some major figures have not as yet been researched or had retrospectives. And so, determining what you are looking at in the churches of Naples is not easy.

Here, then, we come to my constructive proposal about how art history and the art museum can work together. This proposal builds upon the ongoing working relationship between Capodimonte, the great Neapolitan public art museum, and the University of Dallas. The figure associated with the University of Texas at Dallas whose thinking about this issue has influenced mine is Brettell. And here I should mention a second person, Roger Malina. For a very long time I've been involved, first as a contributor, then on the editorial board of his journal *Leonardo*. And I believe that its bold, systematic scrutiny of the relationships between the visual arts and scientific research can play an important role in relating the art museum to art history research.

What's needed in Naples right now is some efficient practical way to organize experience of the art displays. There is, as I noted, a considerable body of information about what's to be seen in the churches. The question is, how to make that material usable.

William Gibson's science fiction novel *Neuromancer* (1984) imagined what became known as Google Glass, an apparatus that would project computer screen information onto what's being seen. Then, for political reasons, when this apparatus was developed around 2013, it proved to be extremely controversial, because people feared it invaded privacy. And so, it as yet isn't in use. What, however, interests me is the way that such an optical device could be used in Naples. I say that while agreeing that its general use might be pernicious.

Imagine that you could walk into one of the Neapolitan churches and see, just by looking through your Google Glass, the attributions and subjects of the artworks. Surely this information would enrich your experience, for it's more engaging to know what you are looking at. And, possibly, it would suggest improved ways of interpreting the art in these churches. I believe that such a device would be popular with visitors, for it would make the art treasures of Naples more accessible. On my most recent visit to the city, in fall 2021, Pio Monte del Misericordia had installed a rudimentary optical device used to unpack the arrangement of the acts in Caravaggio's *Seven Acts of Mercy* (1607). The device I imagine is a natural extension of that apparatus. Here, then, is a concrete way that the concerns of art historians and the art museum could be conjoined, for their mutual benefit. At this time, when Naples is attracting more visitors and additional art historical research, this apparatus would prove popular.

In my academic career, I was fortunate enough twice to do research at an academic center attached to a major art museum. At the Getty and at the Clark, any time that I sought visual inspiration, I could wander across to look at the collection, testing my experience against what I saw. You learn a lot about art when it is accessible nearby. And so, looking at the very ambitious Edith and Peter O'Donnell Jr. Athenæum Masterplan, I envy its future scholars.⁷ ■

⁷ My prior accounts of Naples include "The Best Painting in Naples," *Athenaeum Review* 3 (winter 2020), athenaeumreview.org/essay/the-best-painting-in-naples.