

A photograph of a grand museum gallery. The space is characterized by a series of repeating vaulted arches. The walls are covered in intricate frescoes and decorative panels. On the left, there are tall, narrow columns with elaborate carvings. The floor is polished and reflects the light. In the distance, a doorway leads to a brightly lit area. A person is visible on the right side of the gallery, near a red rope barrier.

The Museum

From its Origins to the 21st Century
Owen Hopkins



The Museum

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Left Void at eastern end of the Jewish Museum in Berlin, designed by Daniel Libeskind

Overleaf Spiral staircase designed by Giuseppe Moro in Vatican Museum, Vatican City

PREFACE

We take museums for granted. Even if they aren't all free to get into, we assume museums will always be there; their doors never closed, their treasures always available to view. Yet for much of 2020 and into 2021, museums across the world were empty and silent, forced, like so much of society, to close as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

By any measure, this was a strange time to be writing a book about museums, and that moment has been indelibly imprinted upon it. The book reflects both the longing that I, and countless others, felt for the solace and community offered by contemplating a work of art, or wandering through museum galleries, but also the critical distance that this unprecedented period enforced.

As society begins to open up and, we hope, return to some semblance of normality, we are left grappling with what aspects of our lives will revert to the way they were before, and what may have changed for good. For museums, the immediate effects of the pandemic were dire. Shutting the doors to visitors not only cut off museums' lifeline, but also their main source of income. Mass furloughing and layoffs ensued. Some museums closed for good, others had to rely on lifelines offered by governments (frequently with strings attached). Longer term, the pandemic has accelerated several already existing trends, notably the decline of the blockbuster exhibition and the shift towards digital.

Although the pandemic has brought about a crisis of unprecedented proportions for museums, the last year has seen

another event and movement whose impact has been even more profound and far reaching.

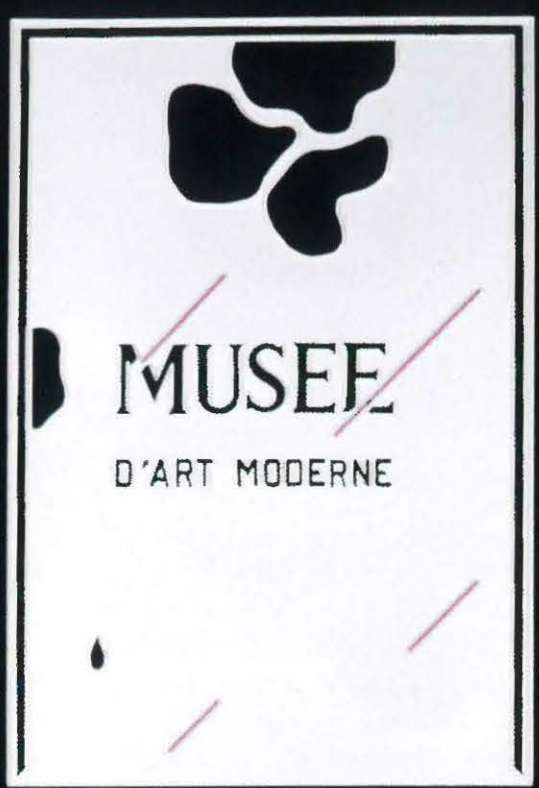
On 25 May 2020, a 46-year-old African American man named George Floyd was murdered in Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA by city police officer, Derek Chauvin. 'I can't breathe', the words uttered by Floyd as Chauvin knelt on his neck, became the *cri de cœur* for mass rallies and protests in the US which spread across the western world, united under the banner of Black Lives Matter.

What had begun in 2013 as a protest against police brutality and racism became a broader movement against systemic racism across society, and the histories, institutions and structures that perpetuate it. As arbiters of what we value, what we remember, and also what we exclude, museums are undoubtedly complicit in this and Black Lives Matter has for many institutions prompted a concerted, if belated, period of learning and reflection.

The question is what happens next. It is sometimes said that museums hold up a mirror to society. But today it is not enough for museums to reflect the world as it is. By putting diversity, representation and racial equality at the forefront of their mission, they have the power as well as the duty to help bring about a more equal and inclusive future.

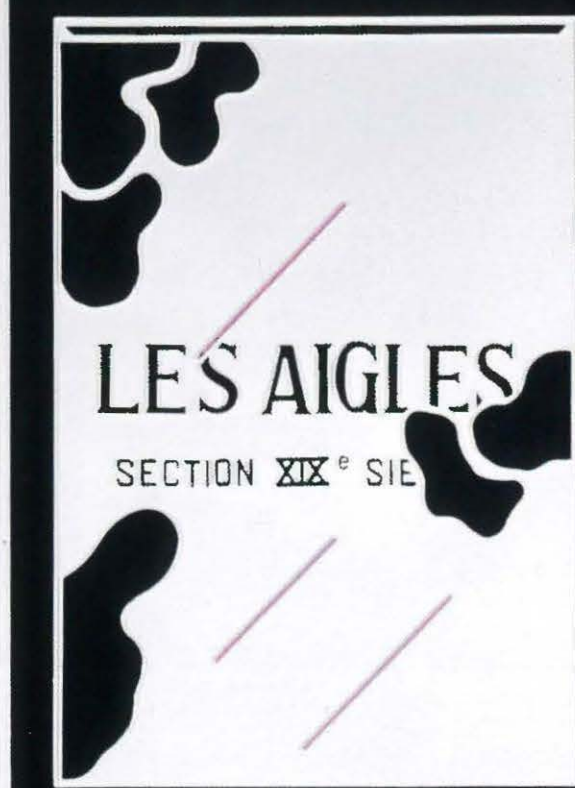






MUSEE

D'ART MODERNE



LES AIGLES

SECTION XIX^e SIE



INTRODUCTION: THE AGE OF MUSEUMS

In September 1968, the Belgian artist and poet, Marcel Broodthaers, announced the opening of the *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Section XIXème Siècle* (Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles, 19th-Century Section). Despite the traditional name, this was unlike any other museum. For a start, it would occupy Broodthaers' house/studio on the rue de la Pépinière in Brussels. And secondly, he announced its opening before any of the objects it would contain yet existed. 'The works are in preparation', he wrote, 'their completion will determine the date at which we hope to make poetry and the plastic arts shine hand-in-hand'.¹

These cryptic words became even more perplexing to visitors to Broodthaers' museum when it opened on 27 September. The scene before them appeared, at first glance, as if they had arrived before the installation of artworks was actually finished. Empty picture crates, stencilled with the usual instructions 'handle with care' and 'keep dry', were arranged casually around the room, with a ladder leaning against the wall, all as if the art handlers were still working. The only concession to visitors expecting from the title some exposition of nineteenth-century art were postcards of works by French painters of the era such as Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, Jacques-Louis David, Gustave Courbet and Pierre Puvis de Chavannes. Meanwhile, slides of prints by the caricaturist J.J. Grandville were projected on the wall.

Visitors who could see beyond the immediate strangeness of what Broodthaers had created would have also noticed some of the artist's more subtle interventions. These included the careful addition of numbers to the doors of the rooms of his house so as to denote them as galleries, and the painting of the words 'musée/museum' on the windows, announcing to the outside world that, for the duration of Broodthaers' exhibition, this was no longer a house or studio, but had been transformed into a museum.

An open letter written by Broodthaers two months after the opening offered something by way of an explanation of the project, albeit a rather cryptic one. Particularly revealing was the way he described the opening as having been attended by 'leading representatives of the public and the military' and that 'the speeches were on the subject of the relationship between institutional and poetic violence'². A short note thanking the shipping company was accompanied by an inventory of the 'Département': the crates, the postcards, the projection and 'devoted staff' – i.e. Broodthaers himself, as the self-styled director of the museum. Alongside the entry for the postcards was printed a single word: 'overvalued'.

Broodthaers' *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* is considered a seminal work in the development of installation art and, more specifically, of an art practice that is often described as 'institutional critique'. Broodthaers'



Left Posters for Marcel Broodthaers' Section XIXème Siècle in an exhibition at Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin, 1997

Right The King's Library, part of the collection of the British Library, London

installation of crates brought into the view the usually hidden aspects of museum operations, such as storage, transportation and installation. By doing so he revealed the way museums appear as unchanging and eternal as something of a fiction, and exalting rather than obscuring the support structures that allow this façade to be maintained. The art itself was reduced to the status of a postcard, a cheap everyday item, yet, at the same time, one that is indelibly associated with the increasingly commercialized experience of the museum. And perhaps most critically, by bringing the museum into his house/studio, he overturned the essential distinction between the studio as a place of production, and the museum as a place of reception, of the studio being where culture is made, and the museum where it is seen.

The Section XIXème Siècle was followed by further iterations of the *Muséed'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* project in Antwerp, Düsseldorf and Cologne, including some that actually included the 'aigles' (eagles) of the project's title, before concluding at the Documenta 5 exhibition in Kassel in 1972. In many ways, it was a project of its time, emanating from the challenges to the establishment of the epochal student anti-capitalist uprisings of May 1968. Broodthaers himself had taken part in the occupation of the Palais des Beaux Arts in Brussels, and his project was in a sense an attempt at fashioning art borne of these radical politics. Yet it also, and perhaps inadvertently,

pointed to some fundamental truths concerning the power and almost quasi-spiritual hold that museums have over us as individuals and as societies. While Broodthaers undoubtedly succeeded in revealing the essentially ideological basis on which museums operate, and the way certain objects and certain histories are privileged over others, the very idea of the museum as a space where time and space collapse into each other, evaded this critique.

A BEDROCK OF UNDERSTANDING CIVILIZATION

To get a clearer sense of what marks out museums as a particular kind of institution or space, and why they in particular were the focus of Broodthaers' critique, it is instructive to compare and contrast them to other institutions. As repositories of human endeavour, knowledge and creativity, the institution of the museum is most like the library. Yet the two differ considerably in the range of media they hold, which for museums today has more or less no limits. They also differ in the possibilities they offer for shared experiences. While there may be hundreds of people in the reading rooms of a national library at any one moment, books are generally read by one person at a time. Museums offer the possibility of experiencing an object together, with friends, family and more broadly as a society.



Here, museums have something in common with civic spaces like parks, public squares, or even streets, malls or shopping centres. In these spaces, the individual is a more or less free agent, and even though malls, for instance, are usually private spaces and therefore subject to controls and regulations imposed by the owner, the very existence of these spaces is owed to the consumer. If no-one chooses to shop there, they close. This clearly is not the case with museums. While almost every museum today is deeply attuned to the needs and desires of visitors – both existing and potential – they have to balance being open and accessible with an academic rigour that's grounded in knowledge built up over time through research and study. When we visit a museum we above all expect to learn something. But an experience is only likely to be meaningful if we can relate to it in some way. As a result, it is also incumbent on museums to act as arbiters of the knowledge they hold, necessarily foregrounding some histories, cultures and objects over others.

Acting as arbiters in this way, museums operate a little like law courts. But yet again, the similarities are only partial. Courts arbitrate based on laws made by parliaments. However, as places of scholarship and learning museums are constantly creating new knowledge with the potential of changing the terms through which they act as arbiters. Whether through the cutting-edge technical analysis of an object – for example, through some kind of new imaging technique – or simply a new insight gleaned through traditional historical study, new research has the potential to completely alter how we see not just that object but whole cultures or periods.

While sharing some aspects of a range of institutions, museums are their own distinct category. In a way, it is this hybrid quality – one part one thing, another part something else – that actually makes them stand apart as the ultimate, even the essential institution. We can imagine a world without libraries, for example, in fact we are quite possibly entering one, but it is impossible to imagine a world without museums. They are the bedrock on which every understanding we have of civilization ultimately rests. Without museums we would drift untethered in a perpetual present, unable to imagine any kind of future because we have lost our connection to the past. Yet at the same time it is a mistake to think of museums as simply about the past; in how we look and in what we choose value, they are inescapably a reflection of society as it is now.

The appeal of museums cuts straight to something primordial or even hardwired in each of us. As a result, even when museums have been subject to challenge or critique, such as through projects like those of Broodthaers', they have endured and even benefited from the self-consciousness through which they now undertake their work. And when they have seemingly had the intellectual and ideological rug pulled from under them, they have even strengthened their hold over us. In 1980, the art historian and critic, Douglas Crimp, published an essay entitled 'On the

Museum's Ruins' in the radical journal *October* in which he argued that practices of Postmodernist art challenged the fundamental basis on which museums operated. In short, he posited the shift in the work of artists such as Robert Rauschenberg from 'techniques of *production* (combines, assemblages) to techniques of *reproduction* (silk screens, transfer drawings)' undermined the 'notions of originality, authenticity, and presence, essential to the ordered discourse of the museum'.³ Crimp concluded the essay with the 'proclamation' Rauschenberg himself had written for the Museum of Modern Art's Centennial Certificate in 1970, suggesting that it showed the artist had not fully understood the implications of his work:

*Treasury of the conscience of man.
Masterworks collected, protected and
celebrated commonly. Timeless in
concept the museum amasses to
concertise a moment of pride
serving to defend the dreams
and ideals apolitically of mankind
aware and responsive to the
changes, needs and complexities
of current life while keeping
history and love alive.*

It is Rauschenberg, though, who has had the last laugh. Today, museums have fully assimilated media that are defined by their inherent reproducibility, such as photography, film and, increasingly, digital media and objects, which appear to fundamentally challenge the notion of the 'original' object. Yet the museum's status as a 'timeless' 'treasury', as described by Rauschenberg, remains as strong as ever.

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**Right Centennial Certificate MMA,
1969 by Robert Rauschenberg**

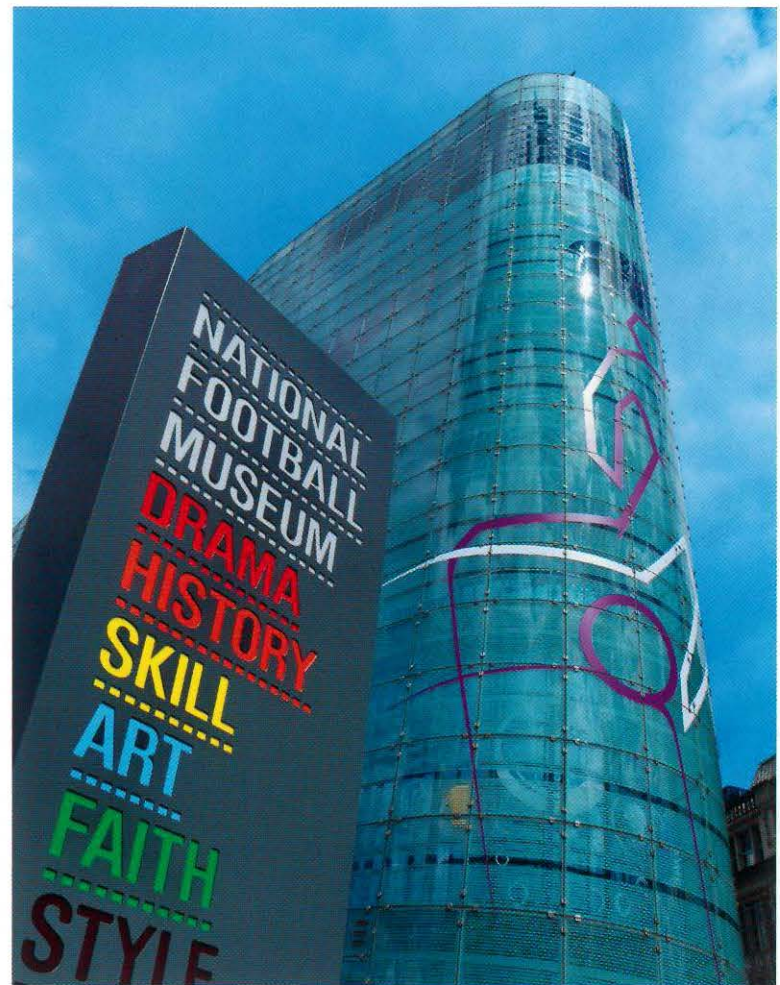




Left Gallery of Statues and the Hall of Busts, Vatican Museum, Rome

Below National Museum of China, which is situated on the eastern side of Tiananmen Square in Beijing, China

Right National Football Museum, Manchester, UK



THE CONTEMPORARY SITUATION

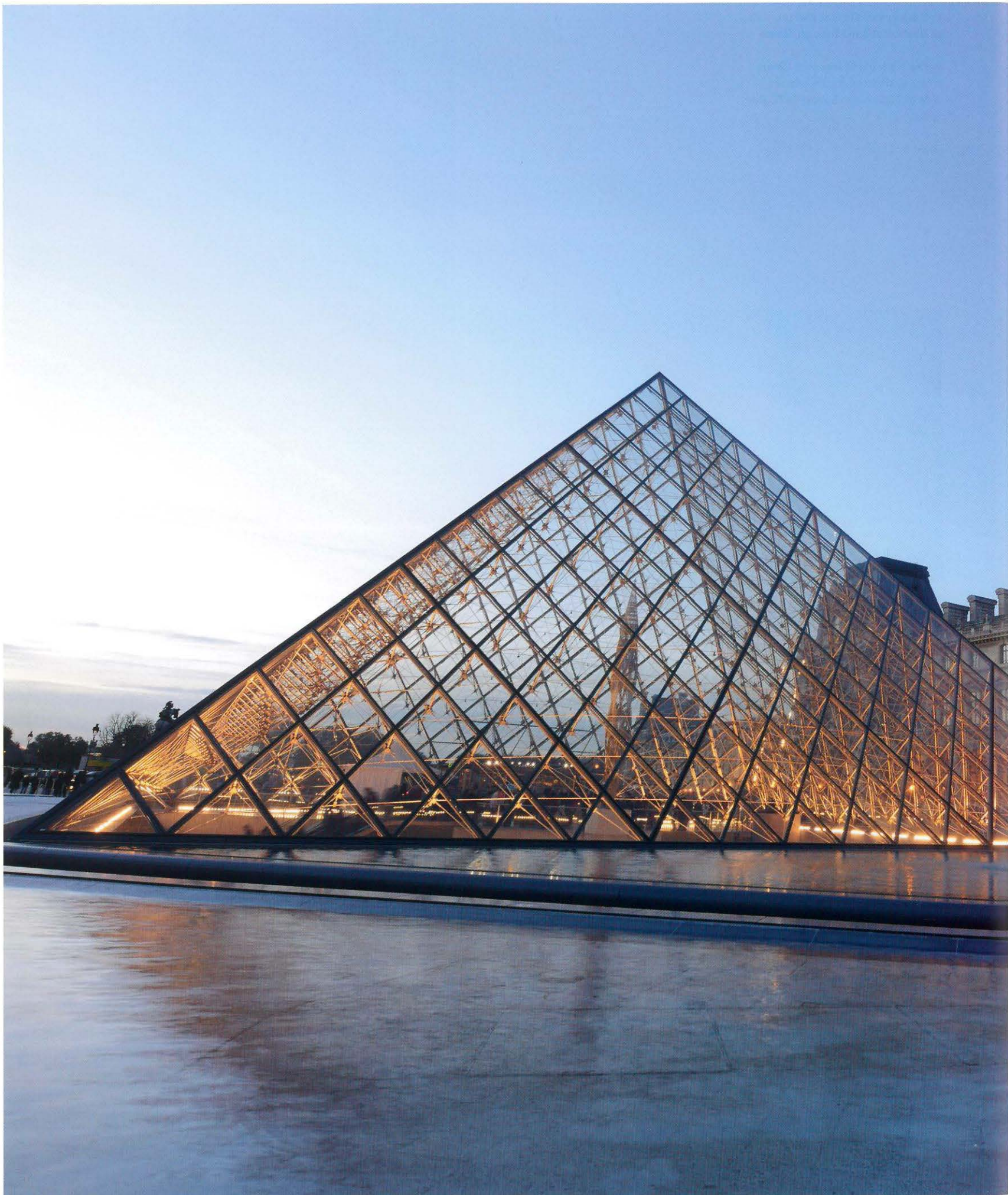
Museum visitor numbers, at least before the COVID-19 pandemic, are at record levels across the world. In 2018, more than 10 million people visited the Louvre in Paris, of whom three quarters were visiting from abroad. Other museums such as the National Museum of China in Beijing, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Vatican Museums in Rome and the British Museum in the UK are not far behind.⁴ As visitor attractions they are rivalled only by theme parks and the great natural or man-made wonders of the world.

At the same time we are witnessing an unprecedented moment of museum building across the world, especially in the Middle East and in China. With just 349 museums in 1978, China is now home to 5,100, nearly reaching the government's goal of having one museum for every 250,000 people by 2020. It seems a lot, and the country is already having problems filling these museums with collections and with visitors, but it remains still some way shy of the 35,000 museums currently operating in the USA.⁵

The proliferation of museums across the world, and the increase in the number of people visiting them, has been matched by a diversification in museums themselves – the

particular areas of human activity to which they are dedicated and the types of objects they collect. Alongside the traditional museums of natural history, fine art, science or antiquities, we now have museums dedicated to football, to brands and to ice cream. There are museums of erotica, underwater museums, museums of ramen, of spying and of toilets. There is even a museum of the French fry. You name an object or an activity and there is likely to be a museum dedicated to it.

Today, the museum has reached a state of pre-eminence greater than it has achieved at any moment of its history, so much so, in fact, that it is no overstatement to say that we are now living in the age of museums. This book is about how we have got here. It charts the origins of museums in the first collections assembled centuries ago, and in the seemingly innate human urge to collect. It follows the emergence of the idea of the museum as we might understand it today, of the fundamental relationship between object and audience, between institution and public, and how that idea has evolved and been manifested at different moments and in different places. In doing so, this book offers fresh insight into the pivotal role that museums play in our present moment and how that role might evolve in the future.





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Left The Louvre Pyramid, designed by
architect I.M. Pei, in Paris, France

