

Commentary II: Why Does That Belong in a Museum?

Today we are talking about the institution of the public museum. One of our goals is to compare the excavations at Pompeii and Herculaneum with later museums such as the Louvre or Metropolitan. While there are definitely some similarities, and the excavations at Pompeii share some definite characteristics with the public museum, we also need to highlight the differences. In order to do this, let's dissect the introduction written by Marcello di Venuti in 1750 with a classic mission statement of a major modern museum: the Metropolitan in New York.

The most obvious similarity between the two is that both texts reflect the ideal of "preservation" in some form. They both see inherent value in preserving the material remains of the ancient past. That is, something good happens when we preserve traces of our glorious ancestors and reflect on their larger meaning. But preservation by who and for whom? That's where the big difference comes in. Di Venuti's preservation is preservation by King Charles for the king and his lucky guests. He is preserving these things in order to bolster his own reputation as a man of science and learning, and to impress guests who visit his Portici Palace. Some of the items he displays in his palace may be studied—note di Venuti's boast about having put explanatory placards on the objects displayed in the palace—but you have to request permission to visit and the king has to grant you the favor of entry. Obviously, this isn't open to just anyone. How could we illustrate this private, individualized agenda of preservation? Let's start with noting the common practice of destroying or backfilling with soil anything that couldn't be removed from the site, or which constituted a duplicate artifact that the king didn't need—and didn't want rival kings getting. You could also mention the heavy criticism that Karl Jakob Weber received from the king's ministers for advocating preservation on site for public education rather than removal of portable antiquities to the king's palace. And then there was the criticism of the German scholar Johann Winkelmann, who deplored how tightly guarded access to Pompeii and Herculaneum was for any outside unauthorized visitor.

The Metropolitan vision statement, by contrast, subscribes to the ideal of scientific preservation as a means to public education for all. Note how this statement makes no mention of individual benefactors or owners of the objects in the museum. This does not mean that similar power dynamics are not at work—just look at the entry hall of any museum, which carves the names of philanthropists for public adulation (or the name of the museum itself, ahem, Immoral Big Pharma—I mean Sackler Gallery...). So the Met statement still conceals some unsavory hidden agendas—but the fact that it makes a much more sophisticated effort to conceal those agendas is really what sets it apart from what was going on at Pompeii and Herculaneum 250 years earlier. If we want to be cynical about all this, that's fine—because significant amounts of wealthy "laundry" are being laundered in the modern museum. But they don't admit that with such unabashed glee as di Venuti does. So though there is obviously some hypocrisy here, there is less hypocrisy in the goal of public education. The Met really does open its collections to all, and at least up until a few years ago, there were measures in place to ensure that anyone could visit free of charge at least one day a month. For that is how public museums since the Louvre justify their existence: the elites who fund it are extolled through their enabling of the lofty mission of disseminating science, preservation, and education to the common masses. (There is some of this in di Venuti, for instance when he hopes that scholars throughout Europe will read his book—it was, after all, translated from Italian into English.) This is why modern museums come under withering criticism for even broaching the idea that they might sell some of the artwork in their collection to raise money for various purposes—we see this clearly in the article on the Baltimore Museum of Art in 2020. For a museum to turn what are supposed to be "priceless" works of art into bald economic cash instantly calls in question its commitment to those lofty Enlightenment ideals.