

A temple for the arts

Galleries as spiritual spaces

The first public museums opened their doors at the end of the 18th century. The history of art and collecting goes back further than this, but access for the general public to collections was new at this time. People visited the museums to study the works of great artists and started to cultivate the study of art. It was generally believed that art could contribute to the elevation of mankind. Art was removed from everyday life and became set apart as a separate world. Consequently there was a need for an appropriate place for showing and storing art. Art was highly valued, and called for a worthy repository. The descriptive terms that were given to museums are telling: 'cathedral of art', 'temple of the muse', and art itself was considered a new kind of religion. This change of attitude toward art, which started at the end of the 18th century, can be expressed as the realisation of the spiritual potential of art and museums; both were accorded the status of being 'holy' and 'sacred'.

Nowadays museums still have something of this sacred character. However some things have changed. Today, as well as studying art for its own sake, visitors seek the opportunity for silent contemplation while looking at art. Religious experiences in a museum are not at all uncommon.

Thus, when looking at the history of museums, we see a developing recognition of their latent spirituality. Some characteristics remain the same as in the last

century, but new aspects are also beginning to show themselves. How should we assess the nature of this development? Is it superficial or has it a basis in something profound? This essay examines the realisation of this spiritual quality and the responses to it.

Appearances

The architecture of the museum - the building itself - is a statement about how art is regarded. Museums are often prestigious buildings, designed by prominent architects. The national art collections of Holland are mostly housed in buildings that date from the era the museum came into being. It is no coincidence that 19th century museums breathe an atmosphere similar to that of a cathedral, as these cultural institutions began taking over the life-shaping role of religion. The museum entered the stage as a replacement for the cathedral.

The Rijksmuseum¹, built in 1885, can serve as an example. On its website the building is described as 'the impressive cathedral of architect Cuypers'. The rooms are indeed impressive and the building is richly decorated. A wide staircase leads up to the floor where the artworks are on display.

The Stedelijk museum of Amsterdam² dates from the same decade. It was built in 1895 and designed by Weissman. This impressive building also has a staircase that allows visitors to climb up to the



Rijksmuseum. Photo: John Naughton.



Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Stedelijk museum, Amsterdam. Photo: Melinda Minch.

Gemeentemuseum, The Hague. Photo: Harry van Reeken.

Groninger museum, Groningen. Photo: Ralph Richter.

exhibition floors. The Gemeentemuseum of The Hague³ was designed by Berlage, who introduced a new style of museum at the end of the 19th century. The Gemeentemuseum therefore has a different style from its predecessors, but the impulse to set art apart from everyday life is still apparent. To enter the museum, one must cross a bridge with water on both sides. The entrance, a long glass corridor, leads into a different world.

Berlage wanted to make a properly organized and structured museum where the visitor could enjoy the optimum environment for studying art. Art was considered to be of a timeless beauty that should be appreciated without the disturbance of any noise, and should therefore be insulated from the hustle and bustle of common life. A plaque in the hall articulates this belief: "Eer het god'lijk licht in d'openbaringen van de kunst" – Honour to the godly light that is in the revelations of art. The new Groninger Museum⁴, opened in 1994, varies from the theme of ascending to the level of art. Here the visitor has to descend, down a relatively narrow spiralling staircase. Nonetheless, a big golden tower, right at the centre of the building attracts the attention of every visitor. It is the repository of the art objects, and Mendini, the architect, considers it to be the heart of the museum, the vault for the precious treasures.

All of the examples above illustrate the function of the museum as that of a temple, with sacred rooms filled with art objects. This concept was well understood when the museums were built, and sometimes it is even played upon. In all museums we see that on entering the museum one enters a different world, the world of art. Besides the special forms, shapes and structure the architect imposes on the building, we also notice a spiritual quality in the atmosphere. There is an indefinable sense of reverence, an aura of uniqueness, a feeling that one should only speak respectfully, in a hushed voice.

The museums also display their artworks as icons. The objects are not merely an expression of art, they represent art themselves. Placed on pedestals, with special lighting, behind glass, the works are meticulously exhibited and protected.

Beyond appearances

To collect and set aside selected objects is in itself a declaration of their holiness. The museum is a special place where carefully selected objects are set apart from the regular world, as being holy.

Art and religion speak a similar language. Both seek to be freed from the restrictions of life. Art is about the impression and expression of the 'experience of life'. However, art itself and the life experience it alludes to, are not the same thing. Art is a new world that is being created by the artist, who in turning away from his or her world and fully toward another world, is able to create and recreate.

Religion also offers another world – a reality, totally different from this world, but connected to it in an essential way. Both artist and believer have awakened and want to interpret their dream. They want to show this other reality to mankind.

In a museum the visitor is confronted with these interpretations of another reality. Museums endorse this perspective by providing an appropriate and fitting entrance and passage. A person seeking for a new experience has much in common with a religious person, and so the art lover and the believer have

many similarities. When the attention of a museum visitor is caught by an abstract painting, eg the mystic blue of Barnett Newman's *Cathedral*, and he reflects deeply upon this painting – is he then an art lover or - in a broader sense - a religious person?

Recognition of the spiritual, apart from its physical manifestation in shape and form, is probably also, at a deeper level, an intrinsic value of museums.

Higher meaning

Contemporary society seeks meaning, and desires to transcend the humdrum. Our powerlessness in the face of the catastrophic events we see around the world almost every day impels us to search for a higher meaning in life. In an individualistic society, people long for a sense of community. Is this what we are looking for in a museum? Are people trying to forget one world by entering into another?

The swift secularization in the Netherlands after World War II seems to have had the effect – more so here than in other European countries – that people are visiting museums to retrieve some kind of religious experience. Observation suggests that the reason many people visit a museum is for silent contemplation and to search for meaning. A lot of mainstream museum visitors do recognize and admit to a kind of religious experience.

The director of the Den Haag City museum states: "In my view the ideal museum is a synthesis of art, life and nature. A sort of paradise, but without snakes". He conjures up an image of a perfect world, an innocent world, a dream of a future in which no evil exists. He uses religious (biblical) language as a metaphor for his dream of the ideal museum. He thus endorses the sacred role of the museum.

This expression of his views is exceptional however; the spiritual role of the museum is not often openly acknowledged by curators. Many see the role of the museum changing from temple to forum, and think that in the future the museum will evolve into a centre of information. The religious role of the museum seems therefore to be denied.

Separation of art and religion

The Dutch government policy for the arts and art objects has, since the 90s, been based on ideological, neutral, cultural-political principles; policy effectively makes for a religion-free zone. The separation of religious experience and art participation has thus become an unwritten rule.

Although realization of the spiritual potential of art is not openly admitted, and is discouraged in Government policy, many people now are conscious of the fact that in a museum a spiritual experience can occur – something that curators had not anticipated. This is an important fact: despite the imposition of a religion-free zone, people can and will have significant experiences of a spiritual nature in a museum.

Comments? Do not hesitate to contact the author: ballroom@zonnet.nl



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1 www.rijksmuseum.nl

2 www.stedelijk.nl

3 www.gemeentemuseum.nl

4 www.groningermuseum.nl

5 Prof. Dr G. van der Leeuw was a Dutch theologian and phenomenologist who wrote books on art and religion in the period after the second World War. *Sacred and profane beauty; the holy in art* is his main work.