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Ancient Roman Spaces that Served as Museums

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Abstract: *Between the 2nd century BCE and 2nd century CE, ancient Roman spaces, both public and private, served as museums that met religious, political, and social needs. Museums in the sense that they were places that acquired and exhibited art and objects; however, the purposes of these museums were strongly linked to where they were located and that space's uses. In religious contexts such as temples, shrines, and sanctuaries, art served primarily as votive offerings. Public buildings like the Atrium Libertatis displayed collections that commemorated important military victories and furthered political agendas. Other spaces, such as the Templum Pacis, served religious and political purposes simultaneously. Spoils of war dedicated to the god(s) associated with the military victory were exhibited alongside artworks to memorialize the military victor's piety and achievements. Private collections were shaped by the interests of the collector and became popular due to practices in Pergamon and other Hellenistic courts. Owners of domus- and villa-style homes, like the master of the Villa of Papyri in Herculaneum, collected and displayed art to present themselves as culturally educated, upper-class men. Many of these homes even incorporated architectural, decorative, and literary elements to display their high status and facilitate reflective thinking and philosophical discussions. Since ancient times, museums have served to present a multitude of ideas, invite dialogue, and inspire an interest in culture.*

Introduction

With thousands of years of recorded history, there is essentially nothing new under the sun. The ancient Romans, whose cultural legacy is predominant in American society today, exemplify this concept: they, too, had heating systems, designated public restrooms, and even a form of fast food. They also popularized the prototypes of several modern institutions, including the museum. Art collections were amassed in various locations, ranging from temples to special public buildings to private homes. A museum today may be defined as a “non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates, and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study, and enjoyment.”¹ However, ancient Roman museums were not the same as modern museums in the sense that they were not fully public non-profits with educational aims. Rather, the purposes of ancient Roman museums were largely tied to their location and that location's associated functions. Between the 2nd century BCE and 2nd century CE, ancient Roman spaces, both public and private, served as museums that met religious, political, and social needs.

Religious Contexts

Art collections in religious contexts served as museums of votive offerings. Temple inventory lists from Delos in the late Hellenistic period indicate that temple art was mainly valuable because its religious nature, rather than for its subject matter, aesthetic, or maker. Dedicated objects became the property of the god they were dedicated to; even Greek panel

¹ “Museum Definition,” *International Council of Museums*, <http://icom.museum/the-vision/museum-definition/>.

paintings, which were incredibly popular to collect and admired for their artistic elements, were usually listed in these temple inventories with only identifying information and the name of the individual who dedicated the piece. The panel paintings were also placed among other votive art without special attention,² indicating that religious art served religious purposes above all else. However, religious art was still displayed and admired for its artistic qualities. Paolo Liverani argues that temple inventories were strictly used to track assets and that a list more like a catalogue would have been used to record the artistic properties of pieces if they had existed.³ Similarly, the lack of separation of panel paintings from other dedicated objects did not mean they were not valued for their artistic merit. The ancient author Pliny the Elder wrote of renowned sculptors, their works, and where to find them, nearly all of which were in temples, shrines, and sanctuaries.⁴ *Aediles*, who oversaw public buildings and sanctuaries in the Republic, also organized temporary art exhibitions for religious festivals with object from local private collections and distant locations, illustrating an interest in the aesthetic and cultural values of religious art.⁵ Ancient Roman religious spaces served as museums that met religious needs, as their collections were chiefly valued as dedicated objects.

Political Contexts

Public buildings in ancient Rome could serve as museums that spread political propaganda. In the 2nd century BCE generals began to create buildings specifically to house their triumphal loot and personal collections to make them accessible to the public.⁶ Livy described in *Ab Urbe Condita Libri* the triumph of Marcus Fulvius, who organized a triumphal procession for his victory in Ambracia. He was said to have paraded “bronze statues to the number of seven hundred and eighty-five and two hundred and thirty of marble, weapons, javelins and other spoils taken from the enemy.”⁷ These *Spolia* (spoils of war) and their associated constructions added new, political meaning and value derived from military conquest to artworks’ original ones;⁸ they also established permanent visibility for generals and added to their political clout.⁹ Some collections were comprised of a mixture of art, like that of Gaius Asinius Pollio’s *Atrium Libertatis*. He received permission to rebuild the structure originally dating to the 2nd century BCE in north west corner of the *forum* of Caesar after his military victory in the region of Illyria in 39 BCE. According to Pliny the Elder, Pollio wished to have his collection draw in visitors, which was a combination of *spolia*, art collected from other sources, and pieces commissioned

² Nathaniel Jones, “Temple Inventory and Fictive Picture Gallery: Ancient Painting between Votive Offering and Artwork,” in *Museum Archetypes and Collecting in the Ancient World*, eds. Maia Wellington Gahtan and Donatella Pegazzano (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2015), 118-123.

³ Paolo Liverani, “The Culture of Collecting in Roma: Between Politics and Administration,” in *Museum Archetypes and Collecting in the Ancient World*, eds. Maia Wellington Gahtan and Donatella Pegazzano (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2015), 77.

⁴ Pliny, *Naturalis Historia*, trans. Harris Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), 156-191.

⁵ Maria Wellington Gahtan and Donatella Pegazzano, “Museum Archetypes and Collecting: An Overview of the Public, Private, and Virtual Collections of the Ancient World,” in *Museum Archetypes and Collecting in the Ancient World*, eds. Maia Wellington Gahtan and Donatella Pegazzano (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2015), 5.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Livy, *History of Rome: Volume XI: Books 38-39*, trans. Evan Sage (Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936), XXXIX.V.

⁸ Paolo Liverani, “The Culture of Collecting,” 73.

⁹ Maria Wellington Gahtan and Donatella Pegazzano, “Museum Archetypes and Collecting,” 5.

for the large gallery-like spaces; this was unique as public collections traditionally focused on *spolia*.¹⁰ Public uses of art for enjoyment and appreciation were supported by notable individuals like Cicero and Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa. Cicero orated a case against Gaius Verres, who kept stolen artwork from sanctuaries in his home and prevented them from being used by the public,¹¹ and in his *Naturalis Historia*, Pliny the Elder wrote that Agrippa was:

Vir rusticitati propior quam deliciis. Exstat certe eius oratio magna et maximo civium digna de tabulis omnibus signisque publicandis, quod fieri satius fuisset quam in villarum exilia pelli. – A man who stood nearer to rustic simplicity than to refinements. At all events there is preserved a speech of Agrippa, lofty in tone and worthy of the greatest of citizens, on the question of making all pictures and statues national property, a procedure which would have been preferable to banishing them to country houses.¹²

In this period, Augustus also seemed to support art for public consumption and restored several public buildings, adding not just Greek sculpture and series (i.e., the Julian portraits) to them but also architectural frames to support them. It is likely that in this case, Pollio's, and many others, that their contributions to Rome were at least partially intended as self-promotion; perhaps personal motives even influenced their selection of artworks deemed appropriate for public display.¹³ However, it also appeared there was true public interest in having access to well-known works of art. Pliny the Elder wrote that when Tiberius replaced the renowned *Apoxyomenos* of Lysippos with a copy at the Baths of Agrippa so that he could put the original in his bedroom, he was forced to restore the original after the people protested the swap. *Naturalis Historia* also in some ways made private art collections more widely available to the public by publishing detailed information on them. Similar constructions to those by Augustus and Pollio included Tiberius' *Porticus Octaviae*, rebuilt in 23 CE.¹⁴ Public spaces were converted into museums by prominent political figures to improve their public images.

Religious and Political Contexts

Public spaces that served as museums could also serve multiple purposes simultaneously. Vespasian opened the *Templum Pacis* (Temple of Peace) dedicated to Pax, the goddess of Peace, in 75 CE after his victory over the Jews.¹⁵ Not only were *spolia* displayed,¹⁶ including the Menorah, but also painted and sculptural Hellenistic masterpieces, several of which came from the *Domus Aurea* (Golden House), where Nero had hoarded the statues of his liking that he had removed from public areas.¹⁷ These artworks, accompanied by descriptive inscriptions, were, as written by the ancient historian Josephus, "objects for the sight of which men had once wandered over the whole world."¹⁸ The porticoed sanctuary's architectural design improved the viewing of

¹⁰ Ibid., 6.

¹¹ Ibid., 12.

¹² Pliny, *Naturalis Historia*, 278-9.

¹³ Maria Wellington Gahtan and Donatella Pegazzano, "Museum Archetypes and Collecting," 6-7; 12.

¹⁴ Ibid., 7-15.

¹⁵ Richard Neudecker, "Collecting Culture: Statues and Fragments in Roman Gardens," in *Museum Archetypes and Collecting in the Ancient World*, eds. Maia Wellington Gahtan and Donatella Pegazzano (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2015), 130.

¹⁶ Nathaniel Jones, "Temple Inventory and Fictive Picture Gallery," 119.

¹⁷ Maria Wellington Gahtan and Donatella Pegazzano, "Museum Archetypes and Collecting," 14.

¹⁸ Richard Neudecker, "Collecting Culture: Statues and Fragments," 130.

the works and recreated the setting of a villa garden.¹⁹ Dedicated *spolia* served both as votive offerings to the Roman gods associated with military victories and as enduring public commemorations of the victor's achievements for Rome. The *Templum Pacis* perhaps showed Vespasian to be a pious man dedicated to the people of Rome, favorably distancing his image from that of Nero. Numerous similar examples exist that conflate religious motives with political propaganda, such as the *Aedes Iovis Optimi Maximi Capitolini* (Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus Capitolinus), the *Templum Divi Iuli* (Temple of the Divine Julius), and the *Templum Divi Augusti* (Temple to the Divine Augustus), and date as far back as the hut of Romulus.²⁰ Notably, the *Aedes Concordiae* (Temple of Concord) of 10 CE had dedicated exhibition space in its long podium with 10 niches for statues that were lit by windows. Additionally, Pliny the Elder detailed how *spolia* were temporarily exhibited for public viewing in the Campus Martius and other areas before being carried in triumphal procession and dedicated to the gods.²¹ Public spaces served as multi-purposed museums that met religious needs and self-fashioning desires.

Social Contexts

Ancient Roman homes served as museums that elevated the social standings of their owners. Interest in art and its collection and display in ancient Rome grew from the Hellenistic courts, and from Pergamon specifically.²² While Hellenism influenced public display of art, it had an especially significant impact on *domus*- and villa-style homes and their owners. The desire to own copies of great artworks and be a subject of admiration and envy arose with the imitation of Hellenistic kings.²³ The design and decoration of many private Roman homes between the 2nd century BCE and 2nd century CE revolved around the social functions of the home. Upon entering a *domus* in Pompeii, for instance, a visitor was already able to sense something about the personality of the owner. A sign of social status was having many visitors – invited or not – come into the *atrium* at the front of the house, a space open to the public where the master conducted business, and it was necessarily grandly decorated.²⁴ The technique of allusion was frequently employed by using elements from true public spaces to “evoke in the visitor the feel of something more than a private house,”²⁵ and served to elevate the status of the owner.²⁶ The visual expression of high social status was elaborated as one advanced through the home, where the master demonstrated their culturally refined nature and social distinction. Even these more private areas of the house were meant to recall public spaces, such as the Greek

¹⁹ Ibid., 131; Maria Wellington Gahtan and Donatella Pegazzano, “Museum Archetypes and Collecting,” 7.

²⁰ Maria Wellington Gahtan and Donatella Pegazzano, “Museum Archetypes and Collecting,” 4.

²¹ Ibid., 5-7.

²² Ibid., 11.

²³ Ibid; Francesca Ghedini and Giulia Salvo, “Private Art Galleries in Roma: Literary and Archaeological Evidence,” in *Museum Archetypes and Collecting in the Ancient World*, eds. Maia Wellington Gahtan and Donatella Pegazzano (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2015), 110.

²⁴ Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, *Houses and Society in Pompeii and Herculaneum* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 3-11; Eugene Dwyer, “The Pompeian Atrium House in Theory and in Practice,” in *Roman Art in the Private Sphere: New Perspectives on the Architecture and Decor of the Domus, Villa, and Insula*, eds. Elaine Gazda and Anne Haeckl (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1991), 26.

²⁵ Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, *Houses and Society in Pompeii*, 17.

²⁶ Eve D’Ambra, *Roman Art* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 130.

sanctuary or *gymnasium*.²⁷ The peristyle's extended rows of columns resemble the *stoa* and their rectangular layout sometimes combined with a central *piscina* (pool) suggest the *palestra*.²⁸

The image of the homeowner as sophisticated and their allusion to Greek public life was further enhanced by the decor of the home, which could include not just art but also literary references.²⁹ The epigrams of Martial provide insight to the popularity of art collecting as well as his targeted upper-class audience that had the knowledge to render his work witty. Although there is debate to as if Martial refers to a real collection or not inside of the *Templum Divi Augusti*,³⁰ his epigrams were referenceable if a piece on the same subject was displayed, possibly allowing for an educated discussion to arise. For example, he wrote of a Corinthian Hercules: "the infant crushes the two snakes without turning his eyes from them. Already might the hydra have dreaded the tender hands."³¹ The *exhedra* of the House of Meleagros in Pompeii from the late Republic interestingly had fictive statues depicted in vignettes painted with accompanying Greek epigrams. Archaeological evidence indicates that real collections with epigrams inscribed on statue bases could have existed.³² Other homes contained *pinacothecae* (picture galleries) with paintings on wood or marble panels, which became popular in the mid-1st century BCE.³³ Fictive panel paintings from the ancient Roman Villa della Farnesina dating to around 28 to 19 BCE were framed by intricate architectural illusions, creating an effect that would have been coded as Greek and thus elevated to contemporary viewers.³⁴ These valuable paintings cover a wide array of formats, subjects, and styles.³⁵

The garden was a place where enlightened conversations of possibly mythology or literature in relation to the owner's collection would have occurred. The popularity of large gardens among the elite grew throughout the Empire³⁶ and they provided the ideal space for *amoenitas*, or contemplative leisure,³⁷ where thoughts on literature, history, and identity could be explored.³⁸ In *Elegiae in Maecenatem*, authored by Vergil on the deceased Maecenas, he described him as "cultivating Muses and Apollo in soft gardens."³⁹ The presence of trees could have brought to mind, even if not consciously, the laurel tree, the cleansing and restorative symbol of Apollo. It was also used as a symbol by Augustus, whose reign was characterized by peace and prosperity, and appeared throughout Rome in important locations. Perhaps mythological gardens from contemporary authors also would have to mind or historical ones, like the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.⁴⁰ Thus, trees could have helped to initiate reflective thoughts. Beginning in the period of the Empire, *horti*, once agricultural gardens, transformed

²⁷ Richard Neudecker, "Collecting Culture: Statues and Fragments," 131.

²⁸ Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, *Houses and Society*, 21.

²⁹ Richard Neudecker, "Collecting Culture: Statues and Fragments," 131.

³⁰ Maria Wellington Gahtan and Donatella Pegazzano, "Museum Archetypes and Collecting," 14-16.

³¹ Martial, *Epigrams*, trans. Henry Bohn (London, UK: G. Bell and sons, 1897), 626.

³² Maria Wellington Gahtan and Donatella Pegazzano, "Museum Archetypes and Collecting," 16.

³³ Francesca Ghedini and Giulia Salvo, "Private Art Galleries in Roma," 111-114.

³⁴ Nathaniel Jones, "Temple Inventory and Fictive Picture Gallery," 118-119; 123-124.

³⁵ Francesca Ghedini and Giulia Salvo, "Private Art Galleries in Roma," 116; Nathaniel Jones, "Temple Inventory and Fictive Picture Gallery," 119.

³⁶ Maria Wellington Gahtan and Donatella Pegazzano, "Museum Archetypes and Collecting," 13.

³⁷ Eve D'Ambra, *Roman Art*, 132.

³⁸ Jones Frederick, "Roman Gardens, Imagination, and Cognitive Structure," *Mnemosyne* 67 (2014): 782.

³⁹ Jones, Frederick, "Roman Gardens, Imagination, and Cognitive Structure," 791.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 786; 793-794.

into another area to exhibit art⁴¹ with the ability to make it come alive and enhance the imaginative setting. Cicero, in a letter to his brother, described one such account of how he was seemingly transported into another world in a villa garden:

Quamquam ea villa quae nunc est tamquam philosopha videtur esse quae obiurget ceterarum villarum insaniam; verum tamen illud additum delectabit. Topiarium laudavi; ita omnia convestivit hedera, qua basim villae, qua intercolumnia ambulationis, ut denique illi palliati topiarium facere videantur et hederam vendere. – Although the villa as it stands seems to have the air of a philosopher, meant to rebuke the extravagance of other villas. Yet, after all, that addition will be pleasing. I praised your landscape gardener: he has so covered everything with ivy, both the foundation-wall of the villa and the spaces between the columns of the walk, that, upon my word, those Greek statues seemed to be engaged in fancy gardening, and to be shewing off the ivy.⁴²

Cicero's comment of the villa seeming as if it was inhabited by a philosopher is likely a high compliment because of the suggestion that the owner was educated enough to understand and contemplate lofty and complex ideas, like a philosopher. Cicero's letter also hints to the importance placed on the maintenance of gardens: some were frequently opened to the public or had specialized workers to do restoration work. Examples of *horti* included the *Horti Sallustiani* and the imperial *Horti Lamiani*.⁴³

The Villa of Papyri in Herculaneum illustrates well the concept of the villa as a museum. Over 80 statues and busts in marble and bronze were found. Some were arranged to resemble a Greek sanctuary setting, others represented the greatest Greek scholars, philosophers, and historians,⁴⁴ and others still were copies of statues famously displayed in public spaces, like the Danaids in the Temple of Apollo.⁴⁵ What the master of the house chose to display reflected his interests. This occurrence is even more apparent in imperial residences, such as Hadrian's villa in Tivoli, which was a rather eclectic collection of over one hundred sculptures and reconstructions of famous locations in Greece and Egypt.⁴⁶ The eclectic style represented wealth and power; the aforementioned *Atrium Libertatis*' collection of statues had a huge variety of subjects with little in common with each other.⁴⁷ A common theme in collections, however, were portraits of famous figures due to their nature as symbols of high status.⁴⁸ Previously, around the period of the middle Republic, images of ancestors were exhibited in the *atrium* area of the *domus*, demonstrating piety (i.e., the commitment to maintain the *mos maiorum*, or family tradition), the ability to purchase busts in expensive materials, and sometimes to exhibit prominent lineage.⁴⁹

⁴¹ Maria Wellington Gahtan and Donatella Pegazzano, "Museum Archetypes and Collecting," 13.

⁴² Cicero, *Epistulae Ad Quintum Fratrem*, trans. Evelyn Shuckburgh, in *The Letters of Cicero: The Whole Extant Correspondence in Chronological Order* (London UK: G. Bell and Sons, 1920), 293.

⁴³ Maria Wellington Gahtan and Donatella Pegazzano, "Museum Archetypes and Collecting," 13-14.

⁴⁴ Richard Neudecker, "Collecting Culture: Statues and Fragments," 131-132.

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Bartman, "Sculptural Collecting and Display in the Private Realm," in *Roman Art in the Private Sphere: New Perspectives on the Architecture and Decor of the Domus, Villa, and Insula*, eds. Elaine Gazda and Anne Haeckl (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1991), 76.

⁴⁶ Maria Wellington Gahtan and Donatella Pegazzano, "Museum Archetypes and Collecting," 14-15.

⁴⁷ Elizabeth Bartman, "Sculptural Collecting and Display," 73.

⁴⁸ Maria Wellington Gahtan and Donatella Pegazzano, "Museum Archetypes and Collecting," 11.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*; Eugene Dwyer, "The Pompeian Atrium House," 26-27; Eve D'Ambr, *Roman Art*, 94.

Then, with the Hellenization of Roman society, these small domestic museums morphed into larger ones that served a social purpose of elevating the homeowner's cultural standing, although moralists opposed collecting and showcasing objects for it emphasized more opulent and decadent lifestyles.⁵⁰ Owners of ancient Roman homes used museums in the domestic setting to illustrate their extensive cultural knowledge and upper-class status.

Conclusion

Public and private ancient Roman spaces served as museums with religious, political, and social purposes between the 2nd century BCE and the 2nd century CE. Religious art in locations like temples, shrines, and sanctuaries may have been displayed inside or outside sacred space and was publicly accessible. Collections exhibited in buildings designed with the viewing of art in mind also were open to the public, usually featuring *spolia*, the spoils of war, and served to promote the images of political figures. In many instances, both sacred and triumphal objects were presented together to combine the idea of piety and personal political agendas together. More private museums also existed in the homes (i.e., *domus* and villas) of elite ancient Romans that crafted elaborate social impressions. Collections, either real or fictitious (i.e., painted), were paired with Greek-like architecture and occasionally literature to portray the homeowner to be a wealthy, sophisticated, and culturally adept man. Imperial residences tended to consist of the same elements and serve the same function but on a grander scale. Hellenism was a critical influence on the development of ancient Roman interests in collecting, possessing, displaying, and viewing art. Over time, the Romans have had a similar impact on the practices and culture of much of the rest of the world. Understanding the ancient Romans may not only help us better comprehend our own culture and identities, but also aid us in relating to other cultures through the recognition of similarities. Museums past and present help discover this kind of information. While museums today may still include religious, political, and social aims, they still have a common, overarching goal of educating and helping people gain new perspectives. No longer is the collection and discussion of art restricted to the upper class; many have access to education and communities are welcomed to the discussion garden. Now, the majority may analyze the past and present through museums to contemplate and appreciate their lives further.

⁵⁰ Eugene Dwyer, "The Pompeian Atrium House," 32; Francesca Ghedini and Giulia Salvo, "Private Art Galleries in Roma," 110.

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