



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Art Museums as Social Agents: Working Towards the Creation of a Socially Inclusive Museum: A Critical Analysis of the Thyssen-Bornemisza National Museum's Temporary Exhibitions

Harman Moris, Ana Louise

Citation

Harman Moris, A. L. (2024). *Art Museums as Social Agents: Working Towards the Creation of a Socially Inclusive Museum: A Critical Analysis of the Thyssen-Bornemisza National Museum's Temporary Exhibitions*.

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [License to inclusion and publication of a Bachelor or Master Thesis, 2023](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3926653>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

ART MUSEUMS AS SOCIAL AGENTS: WORKING TOWARDS THE CREATION OF A SOCIALY INCLUSIVE MUSEUM

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE THYSSEN-BORNEMISZA
NATIONAL MUSEUM'S TEMPORARY EXHIBITIONS

Key words: social inclusion, Knowledge Gap Theory, third place, art museums, exhibitions

Ana Louise Harman Moris

MA Museum Studies 2023 – 2024

20 ECTS

Thesis supervisor: Dr. Marika Keblusek

16.601 words

June 14, 2024

List of Contents

INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1. ART MUSEUMS AS SOCIAL AGENTS	6
The Knowledge Gap Theory through a Museological Lens	11
The Museum as the Third Place in Society	14
CHAPTER 2. SOCIAL ART EXHIBITIONS	18
Role of Curators	23
Shift in Blockbuster Exhibitions	26
CHAPTER 3. SOCIETAL COMMITMENT IN EIGHT MAIN THEMES	29
‘Feminism(s) and Equality’: <i>Heroines</i> (2011) and <i>Women Masters</i> (2023)	34
‘Migrations’: <i>Chagall</i> (2012); <i>Beckmann. Exile Figures</i> (2018) and <i>Stephanie Comilang. Search for Life</i> (2024)	36
‘Decolonialism’: <i>Into India. South Asian Paintings from the San Diego Museum of Art</i> (2012) and <i>In the Eye of the Storm: Modernism in Ukraine, 1900 - 1930s</i> (2022-2023)	37
CONCLUSION	40
APPENDICES	46
ILLUSTRATIONS	49
ILLUSTRATION CREDITS	50
BIBLIOGRAPHY	51

Introduction

The Thyssen-Bornemisza National Museum, located in the city centre of Madrid is one of the leading art museums in Europe. Its rich collection features a broad range of Western artworks and contributes to the enhancement of the city's status as a global art hub. Since its very beginning it has organised exhibitions to augment the audience's experience. However, only since 2017 has it been actively working towards becoming fully transparent in its actions regarding social inclusion. In 2019 it claimed to be "everyone's museum" - making clear its intentions to be an open and accessible institution.¹ This strong commitment to inviting everyone into the museum proves that the museum is in line with ICOM's most recent definition of a museum which asks for museums to be conscious about their role within society and how they can become active social agents.²

The 2022 ICOM definition starts as follows: "A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society".³ The use of "in the service of" seems to imply that a museum should play an active role in ensuring that it targets a broad range of people and meet the needs of the general public. Museums, since the 1970s, have been conscious of this significant role within society, for this phrase roots back to UNESCO's 1972 Declaration, whereby it stated that museums must be "at the service of society and its development".⁴ The idea of society's development is further explored in ICOM's 2022 definition by referencing ways in which museums can meet society's needs and concerns by becoming places which, as taken from the definition, must "research, collect, conserve, interpret and exhibit tangible and intangible heritage". The Thyssen Bornemisza focuses on tangible heritage, in the shape of almost a thousand paintings from the 13th to the 21st century.⁵ It is faced with the challenge of making this huge collection accessible to be enjoyed by all members of the general public and not just an intellectual elite. In other words, if it wishes to align itself to the whole of ICOM's demands, it must work towards the continuation of the definition and become a space "open to

¹ Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, "Memoria de sostenibilidad 2019", 1. In the 2019 *Record of Sustainability*, it first made the claim to be "everyone's museum". This phrase also appears in the museum's website homepage.

² International Council of Museums, generally referred to as ICOM, advocates for the protection of cultural heritage by building a strong network of museums worldwide. It also ardently works on defining the term 'museum' in order to reflect contemporary challenges and public demands.

³ International Council of Museums, "Museum Definition".

⁴ Brown and Mairesse, "The definition of the museum through its social role", 527.

⁵ Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, "Collection".

the public, accessible and inclusive”.⁶ In this case, its most recent claim targets this concern but only on a superficial level. Claiming to be “everyone’s museum” is one thing but implementing that desire as part of its policy and aligning the museum to ICOM’s definition is another.

A review of the etymology and history of the concept of museums proves significant when addressing museum’s shift towards becoming social agents and redefining their knowledge structures. The history behind the term *museum*, is long, complex, and even controversial. Scholars agree that it first appeared in Ancient Greece, as *mouseioun*, whereby it was understood that the museum was a temple of the muses, the inspirational goddesses of literature, science, and the arts. By comparing them to a temple, museums are then elevated to a sanctified, religious space only accessible to those who comprehend the power of the muses. However, this point of view withholds certain limitations as it doesn’t implicitly include museums’ connections to knowledge and learning. Art historian Peter Vergo, when writing on the New Museology’s framework, stresses the idea of the museum as a place of study.⁷ This directly links to historian Paula Findlen’s detailed examination on the classical etymology of the term. She points out how, from the beginning, museums focused on serving primarily as research centres and further describes, how they also became “an institutional setting in which the cultural resources of a community were ordered and assembled”.⁸

Museums since the 16th century as evidenced by Findlen have seemingly been aware of their significance within society. A full comparative study of today’s museums with those in Ancient Greece or their renaissance counterparts is quite a broad task which falls outside the scope of this research. The study will then limit its parameters to highlighting, how museums, more often than not, tried to solve a certain “crisis of knowledge”, as Findlen termed it.⁹ Remarks made in the second part of the 2022 ICOM definition on museums, appear to target this crisis by stating that museums are places of “knowledge sharing”.¹⁰ Thus, it is paramount to explore how present-day museums can become spaces which allow the input of new points of view coming from the community they serve, whilst still acting as safeguards of knowledge.

The history and etymology of museums have been frequently discussed, one of the most comprehensive evaluations being Findlen’s 1989 essay on museums’ classical etymology and renaissance genealogy. In other studies, scholars have further analysed the transformation of

⁶ International Council of Museums, “Museum Definition”.

⁷ Vergo, “Introduction”, 2.

⁸ Findlen, “The Museum: Its Classical Etymology and Renaissance Genealogy”, 60.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹⁰ International Council of Museums, “Museum Definition”.

museums within the knowledge structures of society. A paper on the social function of museums in the digital age, written by art historian Susana Smith Bautista, critically examined the challenges 21st century museums are facing when becoming what she mentions as “social centres for the community”, but still not disengaging from their role as guardians of knowledge.¹¹ For this, she borrowed the knowledge gap theory from mass communication studies in the University of Minnesota, which defined the ‘knowledge gap’ as the barrier between two socioeconomic groups originating from the influx of information produced by mass media. They concluded by stating that “segments of the population with higher socioeconomic status tend to acquire information at a faster rate than the lower status segments”.¹² Smith Bautista goes one step further and analyses how different segments of the population, not just divided by socioeconomic status, but also by age, perceive information differently within a museum environment. She stresses how knowledge gaps can be narrowed by targeting visitor’s levels of uncertainty. Only when visitors feel that they have a kind of uncertainty or curiosity will they enter the museums in the search for answers.¹³ She considers art museums as ideal places where this learning or acquisition of knowledge can take place and goes on to highlight the ambiguity which can be found in contemporary art as the means to motivate visitors to pursue their personal learning paths.

Smith Bautista’s analysis, although focused on evaluating the knowledge gap within museums, indirectly explores other ways museums are becoming social centres. In this regard, art historian Karen Brown and media culture professor François Mairesse, in their search for a new definition of the museum through its social role, reference museologist Duncan F. Cameron’s (1930-2006) statement in which the museum perhaps should be seen as a forum.¹⁴ Findlen shares the same outlook and finds that museums in the late renaissance culture were seen as in-between structures in society, bringing together the private and public space.¹⁵ Even though her study is centred on 16th and 17th century museums, the idea of having a mediating space, similar to a forum, a public meeting place where people debate and discuss topical issues, can be extrapolated to present day museums. Modern sociology has come up with the term ‘third place’ to mean a kind of communal space in society, as opposed to the home (first place) or the space of work (second place).

¹¹ Smith Bautista, “The Social Function of Museums in the Digital Age”, 9.

¹² Ibid., 10.

¹³ Ibid., 17.

¹⁴ Brown and Mairesse, “The definition of the museum through its social role”, 529.

¹⁵ Findlen, “The Museum: Its Classical Etymology and Renaissance Genealogy”, 59.

Recent museological trends are evaluating ways that modern museums can actively and explicitly become third places within society. Art historian and curator, Ariadna Ruiz Gomez's paper on the social debate regarding 20th century museological parameters in 21st century museums proves significant. This study examines the turnaround of the ICOM definition and pinpoints its most recent concern with museums being outwardly centred on social issues. Hence, she uses the sociological theory of the third place to showcase how museums seem to increasingly aspire to the inclusion and participation of the community.¹⁶ To prove this she gives two examples, one of which is the Thyssen Bornemisza in Madrid. However, the study is quite limiting for the examples are not described in depth and so, a deeper examination is needed to evaluate the extent to which the Thyssen is attempting to become a third place in society.

Various theoretical explorations have discussed the transformation of ICOM's definition and the recent inclusion of social paradigms into its demands. However, these pose certain limitations and there remains a significant gap when analysing the more practical side of the matter and understanding how these demands are then put into action in a museum. To critically evaluate the extent to which museums can develop different strategies to meet these new social demands, it is useful and informative to look at how one particular art museum has responded. I have chosen to focus on the Thyssen Bornemisza Museum, for it does claim to be "everyone's museum" on the one hand and on the other hand, it is an art museum.¹⁷ I want to shine a light on its most recent actions and evaluate the extent to which it is concerned with social challenges. This museum then acts as a baseline or test-case to explore how art can be contextualised within recent social demands. I wish to explore Smith Bautista's remark on art's ambiguity being used to attract visitors into the museum and so decreasing their knowledge gap.¹⁸ This study will provide insights on a specific museum, hoping to add value to recent explorations of art museums in general and their significance in the social debate.

The research will use a qualitative and quantitative approach. By focusing on the interpretative analysis of different academic reviews on the subject of social museums, it will first provide a critical examination on findings on this matter. It will then fit these within the Thyssen's recent initiatives. The paper will examine the broad range of exhibitions showcased in the museum to evaluate the extent to which social concerns are put into action by looking at how the museum is choosing to select and display artworks. The use of a quantitative approach

¹⁶ Ruiz Gómez, "The discussion on today's museum", 79.

¹⁷ Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, "Memoria de sostenibilidad 2019", 1.

¹⁸ Smith Bautista, "The Social Function of Museums in the Digital Age", 17.

will be necessary to thoroughly explore the more than a hundred exhibitions and examine the evolution of the inclusion of societal concerns within their main themes. Thus, the list of museum's exhibitions, provided by the museum's website, will work as evidence to further question if the museum is indeed becoming the museum for everyone and is including social concerns into its exhibition's programming.¹⁹

In order to evaluate the Thyssen's recent activities and future plans to include the museum within the social debate, I will focus on analysing its *Records of Activities and Sustainability*. These were first published in 2017 and are accessible on the museum's website, and as such, are an illustration of the museum's attempt at openness and transparency. The website of the museum also included a complete list of all of its temporary exhibitions which was useful when organising a detailed table to examine them all together. The use of primary sources, such as exhibition's brochures, flyers, and promotional videos, all available on the website, were helpful when evaluating the thematic scope of each exhibition. Nonetheless, these sources were complemented with an outlook on ICOM's most recent definitions on the term 'museum' and other academic papers ranging from art historians to sociologists.

After a critical evaluation of the studies on social museums, different theoretical perspectives are shown to be of utmost significance to the whole research. A range of papers on museology were used as background knowledge on the social museum and its evolution in recent times. Here, both Peter Vergo's first overview on New Museology and its latter re-evaluation by Nick Merriman, expert on sustainability in the museum world, proved most useful. However, the key concepts which will appear throughout the paper are the 'knowledge gap' as introduced by Susana Smith Bautista and the 'third place', as reviewed by Ariadna Ruiz Gómez. Both these concepts have their origin in sociological sciences but are easily co-opted to museology when exploring the move towards a socially conscious art museum.

¹⁹ Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, "Browse Exhibitions".

Chapter 1. Art Museums as Social Agents

“A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing”.²⁰

This, most recent definition of what a museum must attain to proposed and accepted by ICOM in Kyoto 2022, exemplifies the role of the museum as a social agent which fosters diversity and sustainability. This definition was proposed in 2022 for there was some dissatisfaction with the previous 2019 definition, as it didn't refer to matters of inclusion, diversity, and sustainability.²¹ Nor, for that matter, were issues such as behaving ethically and professionally addressed. Nonetheless, when evaluating the evolution towards the 2022 definition, we can observe how the social role of museums was always at the forefront. Since 1974, the ICOM definition has always mentioned museums being “in the service of society”, a phrase coined from UNESCO's Declaration of 1972.²²

Karen Brown and François Mairesse explored new possibilities of defining a museum, with regards to its social role back in 2018, a year prior to the 2019 ICOM discussion panel which was held in Prague. In their conclusion they described a museum as: “a complex hybrid, torn between its collections, its public, and its researchers, or in a more global manner, its users”.²³ This observation foreshadows the 2022 definition where the multifaced aspect of museums is clearly stated. Thus, a museum is not merely an institution for the public and for society, but as the definition underlines, a museum also “offers varied experiences for [...] knowledge sharing”. This evolution on the whole concept has metaphorically allowed the museum to open its gates, for it was once only seen as a gatekeeper of knowledge, but since

²⁰ International Council of Museums, “Museum Definition”.

²¹ ICOM's 2007 definition states the following: “A museum is 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.” This definition lacked specific references to inclusion, diversity and sustainability and issues such as behaving ethically and professionally were not addressed either.

²² Brown and Mairesse, “The definition of the museum through its social role”, 529.

²³ *Ibid.*, 536.

2022, has professed itself as a place where knowledge must be shared.²⁴ It levels the balancing equation whereby communities can learn about themselves from museums and museums may also learn from these communities about their role in society.

The focus of this paper is on the Thyssen-Bornemisza National Museum. While an active member of ICOM, this museum has its own agenda and unique characteristics. Above all it is an art museum, housing a grand collection of art, which differs drastically to what we might perceive in say, a natural science museum. It is also a museum that aligns itself with the most recent ICOM definition as it claims to be, or at least aspires to become, “everyone’s museum”.²⁵ Naturally then, it is expected that it will actively work with the artworks of its collection to try to achieve this objective. This is an intentional rebranding of a museum from one that was once a private collection of art to a public museum. Up until 1992 the collection was located in the house of the industrial-elite Thyssen family and, it could only be viewed by the family and their acquaintances. By opening its gates and inviting the general public to enjoy its artistic wonders, it became a museum for everyone. Since June 1993, when it was acquired by the Spanish State, the museum’s directors have prioritised and ardently worked on how the collection could become an asset to society.²⁶

The year 2022 was a definitive marker in the decision-making process within the museum. Not only was it the same year that witnessed the redefinition of the term museum from ICOM, but it also celebrated thirty years since the foundation of the Thyssen Bornemisza Museum. Hence, quite interestingly its directors made a similar remark to what had been discussed in the ICOM meetings. As a way of introducing that years *Records of Activity and Sustainability*, Evelio Acevedo, managing director, and Guillermo Solana, artistic director, stated the following:

“We are proud to contribute to building a better world by addressing issues of concern to our society. A society that asks the museum to be an agent of social change and to focus on ethical, social, and environmental issues”.²⁷

²⁴ Smith Bautista, “The Social Function of Museums in the Digital Age”, 11.

²⁵ Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, “Memoria de sostenibilidad 2019”.

²⁶ Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, “History of the Collection II”.

²⁷ Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, “Memoria de sostenibilidad 2022”, 4. “Estamos orgullosos de contribuir a construir un mundo mejor, haciéndonos eco de cuestiones que preocupan a nuestra sociedad. Una sociedad que le pide al museo que sea un agente de cambio social y que se fije en aspectos de carácter ético, social y ambiental” (translated by the author of the paper from original text in Spanish). All translations made by the author, unless otherwise mentioned.

Thus, the museum clearly states its active role within society and its move towards becoming a social agent, realising that in order to progress to a fairer world, changes must be done in cultural institutions such as museums. Furthermore, it underlines that these changes must attain to society's primary issues of concern, which this statement summarises in three main topics, "ethical, social and environmental". We can evaluate how this has affected the reinterpretation of the whole collection and the programming of exhibitions. It has integrated these issues within the formulation of eight main themes it targets as central to the contemporary cultural debate, ranging from feminism to climate change. Therefore, it foresees that the museum of the future, and more specifically an art museum of the future, must keep in mind how its collection will create a powerful impact on the visitor by constantly addressing those issues that most concern society.

In that same year, on the 7th of October 2022, the Thyssen Bornemisza organised a discussion panel where it asked museum professionals and members of ICOM to reflect on the theme of museums of the future and how these might look. Throughout the discussion many interesting remarks were made. Marta Pérez Ibáñez, lecturer, researcher, and president of the Contemporary Art Institute, reflected on how museums have shifted from being "exclusive to inclusive" structures.²⁸ A comment echoed by José Luis Pérez Pont, director of the Consortium of Museums of the Valencian Community, whereby he proposed museums to start using the tools of the 21st century, familiar to all, to approach a broader audience.²⁹ Juan Ángel López-Manzanares, aligned this interpretation on museums to the Thyssen-Bornemisza, where he works as a curator and head of contents, demanding a paradigm shift from how museums were understood before, in parallel to the redefinition of ICOM. In this sense, he believes museums must "talk to society and observe in what way the museum can be helpful".³⁰ He then asked for museum professionals to constantly be self-reflexive with regards to their collection and ask far-reaching questions such as, "How can I [the museum] help you [society] with these collections? What initiatives can I take?"³¹

Addressing this matter, Teresa Reyes Bellmunt, president of ICOM Spain, realised how drastic changes within the permanent collection can be difficult to make, and proposed to make smaller but more meaningful changes starting from the exhibitions, which must target the

²⁸ Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, "El futuro de los museos", 22:28. "El museo en general ha pasado de lo exclusivo a lo inclusivo".

²⁹ Ibid., 42:55. "Para hacerlo [el museo] accesible a ese público tenemos que utilizar las herramientas del siglo XXI, no podemos acercarnos a la sociedad de hoy hablando desde un púlpito que nadie va a escuchar".

³⁰ Ibid., 43:54. "El cambio de paradigma supone, primero hablar con la sociedad y ver en qué sentido el museo puede ayudar".

³¹ Ibid., 44:00. "¿Cómo con estas colecciones te puedo ayudar? ¿Qué iniciativas puedo tomar?"

present-day concerns, or as she put it “to what’s happening in the street”.³² Understanding society in this sense was a primary concern throughout the conference. José Luis Perez Pont, dutifully reflected on how society purposefully chooses different ways of entertainment, and so in order to invite everyone into the museum, museums must fully comprehend what venues society is choosing to go to. He invited and even demanded citizens to shift from “the commercial centre to the cultural centre”.³³ Nonetheless, to achieve this societal shift, cooperation and commitment must also come from the museum side so, he suggested museums must become more interdisciplinary places.

A year before this critical moment in museology and in the history of the Thyssen Museum, researchers from the Spanish University of Deusto were already reflecting on the museum of the future, however they turned their attention towards the visitors. They conducted a quantitative analysis where they evaluated how the Spanish audience perceived museums and how these views would shift in the near future. Thus, they aimed to clarify how visitors envisioned the museum of the future, any possible changes they must tackle, and which segments of the public were the most demanding in relation to the implementation of these changes.³⁴ Their conclusions are quite surprising when correlating them to what was discussed in the Thyssen a year later. Although a high number of visitors demanded Spanish museums be aware of societal issues, such as cultural diversity, and have a space where this could be put into action, another section of visitors strongly felt that changes might be too brisk and could further delink the museum from its ‘essential’ values.³⁵ The analysis concludes by stating “museums must find ways to preserve their essence while deepening their social role”, but fails to specify what those essential values might be.³⁶ The Thyssen Museum has seemingly set this concern front and centre as its directors in 2022 showed awareness on the matter by stating how even with the help of new technologies, the museum will stay true to what it has always been and keep its proximity to the visitors.³⁷ Its most recent initiatives will be explored further on in the paper.

³² Ibid., 52:52. “Podemos hacer pequeños gestos para que la exposición pueda tener esta mirada hacia el presente, hacia lo que está ocurriendo en la calle”.

³³ Ibid., 36:52. “Frente al centro comercial, el centro cultural”.

³⁴ Ayala, Cuenca-Amigo and Cuenca, “The Future of Museums”, 172.

³⁵ Ibid., 171.

³⁶ Ibid., 184.

³⁷ Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, “Memoria de sostenibilidad 2022”, 4. “Seguir avanzando hacia una gestión responsable y un modelo de institución mixta en la que las oportunidades de la tecnología digital nos ayuden a mejorar en el cumplimiento de nuestra misión en equilibrio con el museo “de siempre” y la proximidad a las personas”.

Nonetheless, we must turn our attention to other theories which have also dealt with the shift towards the museum becoming a social agent by purposively addressing social issues within their programming. Peter Vergo first published his book *The New Museology* in 1989, laying the grounds, in anglophone academia, for this museological theory, which he defined as a “dissatisfaction with the ‘old’ museology”, claiming that what was wrong with the previous way of studying museums barely examined the role of the museum and focused too much on its methods³⁸. One of the main aims of the New Museology, is to target the shift towards making the visitor play a more active role, which evidences the necessary collaboration between museums and the communal space they are located in. To this regard, it is important to link this claim from New Museology with the 2022 definition of museums, where it states that museums must “operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities”.³⁹

Art curator, Nick Merriman revisited New Museology and its implications in 2020, thirty years after Vergo’s publication. He criticized Vergo’s vision as too theoretical, coming from an art historical perspective, and asks museums to be more active places within society.⁴⁰ He believes broadening the definition of culture is fundamental; if culture includes all aspects of human civilisation, then humans’ influence on nature should not be ignored.⁴¹ All contemporary challenges, such as climate change, should be target issues addressed by museums. Furthering on this perspective, theorist Kevin Coffee claims that “museums have always had social purposes, just not often purposes beneficial to most humanity or the natural world”.⁴² So, while museums have always had some kind of place in society, it is only recently that that place is being questioned and there are increasing demands on museums to rethink their passiveness and become social agents. Merriman further proposes a re-definition or even re-direction of museology to what he terms ‘Integrated or Holistic museology’, in his words, “one that overcomes the historic culture-nature divide”.⁴³ In his list of challenges on how to make museums more inclusive and how to encourage engagement from wider audiences, he includes addressing issues such as climate change and pollution and confronting racism and colonialism.⁴⁴ Hence, he demands museums turn their focus to these concerns, which are

³⁸ Vergo, *The New Museology*, 1.

³⁹ International Council of Museums, “Museum Definition”.

⁴⁰ Merriman, “30 Years After the New Museology”, 186.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁴² Coffee, “Museums and Social Responsibility”, 2.

⁴³ Merriman, “30 Years After the New Museology”, 186.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 176.

inextricably linked with society, and by doing so, he believes this will allow “their visitors to empower themselves to take positive actions”.⁴⁵

The Knowledge Gap Theory through a Museological Lens

“The museum, in its commitment to the continuous improvement and especially with regards to the visitors’ experience, has carried out numerous actions to understand, listen and improve according to the profiles, ages, nationalities, interests, etc. of our audiences, so that an almost personalised visit can be offered”.⁴⁶

This claim made in the Thyssen’s *2022 Record of Activity and Sustainability*, evidences the museum’s willingness to constantly self-reflect on what society is asking of it. The statement purposively chooses words such as ‘understand’ and ‘listen’ to clearly demonstrate that in order to evolve towards the future it is aware of the two-way dynamic it must have with society. The ICOM definition made a similar remark by describing museums as places which foster “knowledge sharing”, where not only do they invite people to share their insights with each other on what they encounter, but also it understands that museums can learn from its visitors.⁴⁷ Therefore, it levels down museums from an unreachable position, often regarded as “gatekeepers of knowledge” as art historian, Susana Smith Bautista points out.⁴⁸ We can observe how this statement in itself creates further nuances on the whole concept. By giving the museum the role of a gatekeeper, it implies the existence of a gate which further implies the existence of a closed-off space, that is ‘guarded’ and entry to that space - the museum and the knowledge it contains - will be controlled. Therefore, it is critical to evaluate ways to open that gate and to create the prime conditions for the sharing of the knowledge that lies within.

Smith Bautista thoroughly analyses the issue concerning museums’ hierarchical status and power within society in a critical text on the social function of museums in the digital age. Although published in 2009 it is still relevant when exploring these issues in recent museum’s

⁴⁵ Ibid., 186.

⁴⁶ Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, “Memoria de sostenibilidad 2022”, 5. “El museo, en su compromiso con la mejora continua y especialmente en lo referente a la experiencia del visitante, ha llevado a cabo numerosas actuaciones para entender, escuchar y mejorar según los perfiles, edades, nacionalidades, intereses, etc. de nuestros públicos, de forma que se pueda ofrecer una visita casi personalizada”.

⁴⁷ International Council of Museums, “Museum Definition”.

⁴⁸ Smith Bautista, “The Social Function of Museums in the Digital Age”, 11.

initiatives for she aligns the knowledge gap theory specifically to art museums. By seemingly allowing this gap to co-exist in the museum's dynamic with its visitors, she evidences how museums then remain in a superior position, as bearers of knowledge. Thus, it is interesting to evaluate the extent to which museums, such as the Thyssen are quite recently, choosing to actively open their gates and becoming places where knowledge must be shared and not imposed. Already in the early 1920s, the American businessman and art collector, Albert Barnes (1872-1951) attempted to create a more democratic museum, inviting those he saw as "plain people, that is, men and women who gain their livelihood by daily toil", into his museum.⁴⁹ As the director of research and interpretation of the Barnes Foundation, Alison Boyd asserts, although his intentions were good, "in practice the foundation's educational experiment produced nuanced relations of power and conflict across cultures and classes".⁵⁰ Proving there was still a lot to be done to fully democratize the museum and why it is necessary to pinpoint those museums which are actively working towards creating a fully democratic museum.

The history of museums as places of knowledge dates back to the origins of the museum, specifically to the library of Alexandria, where the general Ptolemy oversaw its creation as a place to keep "information and objects obtained as tribute or loot from the far reaches of Alexander the Great's empire", as critically reflected on by Kevin Coffee.⁵¹ Even from its very beginnings, the ownership of this knowledge was used as a mechanism of power as there was a clear political message attached to the library, whereby it can be seen as a direct link to the emperor's grandeur and all the wonders which he claimed for himself and his empire. These kinds of institutions did indeed become places of reflection, but it is important to stress that this knowledge was limited to a close-knit elite circle, and it was far from narrowing or even necessarily wanting to narrow any knowledge gap. The act of associating museums throughout history to this very first instance of a museum already predisposes of a certain power-play to clearly differentiate the West to 'other' cultures, as claimed by art historian and museologist Eva Maria Troelenberg. Whereby, in order for the West to self-sustain its superiority, it needed to create a clear separation between Ancient Greeks as producers of 'useful' knowledge and linking them to the West, as compared to 'other' cultures from around the world.⁵²

This idea of holding on to knowledge as a way of taking a hold of power within a museum can also be clearly seen during colonial times. Brenda Trofanenko, expert in critical pedagogy

⁴⁹ Boyd, "The Visible and Invisible", 133.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 135.

⁵¹ Coffee, "Museums and Social Responsibility", 2

⁵² Troelenberg, "Images of the Art Museum", 6.

in cultural heritage institutions, exemplifies how they were used as nationalistic mechanisms to affirm clear differences between the ‘home country’ and the ‘colony’.⁵³ In her own words, “the function of the public museum was to assist in the dual purpose of educating and civilizing the public”.⁵⁴ For the most part, earlier instances of museums have always been concerned with public matters in the shape of education and knowledge. The difference between current museums and those of the past, lies in the purpose given to these knowledge structures, and what kind of ideology they want to induce in the minds of their visitors. Hence, it must be highlighted how the whole concept of museums is very much intertwined within European history and particularly colonial history. Museums in the West were purposefully used to portray their perceived cultural superiority and to clearly foment a nationalistic identity to their visitors.

It is important to mention these double objectives found in the past within museum structures, to understand the impactful shift, which is currently taking place. As the case of the Thyssen demonstrates, not only are museums nowadays concerned with social issues and how these are influencing their collections and exhibitions, but they are aware that in order to fully let these issues into the museum halls, they must narrow their knowledge gap. The Thyssen Bornemisza, however, demonstrates a particular scenario, for it originated in the early 1990s as a private art collection, it never directly worked towards creating a demarcated nationalistic identity, separating one group of individuals from another. Since the foundation of the museum, and more so in recent years it looks on society as a whole and thus, it is continually working on creating an open safe space where everyone is welcome. It invites the visitors to take a reflexive stance on the artworks and exhibitions in front of them and allows them to benefit from these, by using them to create their own personal identity. In doing so, the visitors can appreciate how some artists have had similar concerns to them.

These kinds of initiatives clarify the recent understanding that knowledge is everchanging and previous knowledge structures must be constantly questioned and reflected upon. In the case of art museums, the artworks hold within themselves a deeper meaning which can also be in constant flux, depending on the different readings assigned to them. It is not surprising then, how an art museum, such as the Thyssen Bornemisza, chooses to host a variety of exhibitions to underline the different meanings which can be attached to an artwork. Thus, the evolution of art history, in this particular case, is used to shift towards the inclusion of

⁵³ Trofanenko, “The Public Museum and Identity”, 96.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 98.

museological perspectives, such as those ideas brought about by Peter Vergo and Nick Merriman in both the first texts on New Museology and its latter reevaluation. It also works towards finding ways of narrowing the knowledge gap. Even if we understand that knowledge is in a constant state of flux, there can still exist a social gap between those who have access to that knowledge and those who do not. Smith Bautista further questions if such a gap must be narrowed, or if simply by being aware of it can museums, then be used to encourage visitors to come to terms with their own individual perspectives.⁵⁵ Therefore, museums are seen as places to interpret knowledge, rather than regard it as unquestionable, which links them back to the ICOM's view on museums becoming places to share knowledge.

The Museum as the Third Place in Society

Becoming social agents implies that museums are not only aware of society's concerns and showcase these within their halls, but they are also aware of their place within society. This place exists both in the physical sense, in a determined location, and mentally in the minds of all those who visit it. By observing the museum in this way, we can witness how they can become a fundamental part of society. The ICOM definition, further underlined this by stating that museums are "at the service of society", which then puts society first, making it the role and purpose of a museum to serve that society.⁵⁶ This further entails how social concerns should be the top priorities for museums to address. To this extent they have been evaluated as a kind of third place within society.

The idea of the third place belongs to social studies. It was first brought about by urban sociologist, Ray Oldenburg (1932-2022) in his book *The Great Good Place* published in 1989 where he thoroughly studied human connections and the need for communitarian spaces within society. Thus, he simplifies human daily routines and categorises these in three main places, the living place and the working place as opposites of each other, and within these, he centres the third place, "one of the physical settings that have throughout history encouraged a sense of warmth, conviviality, and that special kind of human sustenance we call community", as mentioned in a post-mortem 2023 article, published in *The UNESCO Courier*.⁵⁷ Hence, he signals that any kind of communitarian feeling and connections within it roots back from this

⁵⁵ Smith Bautista, "The Social Function of Museums in the Digital Age", 9.

⁵⁶ International Council of Museums, "Museum Definition".

⁵⁷ Oldenburg and Christensen, "Third places, true citizen spaces".

place. A way for museums to become social agents then is to become a kind of third place in society.

Art historian and curator, Ariadna Ruiz Gómez, in her evaluation on the use of 20th century social parameters in 21st century museums, opted to include a geographical outlook on the third place by referencing geographer and sociologist Edward W. Soja (1940-2015). In his book, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, published in 1996, he used this concept to observe specific trends regarding the understanding of human space and spatiality. In a similar fashion to Oldenburg, he categorized three main spaces, however he preferred to use the term ‘space’ as opposed to ‘place’, to determine singular characteristics. On the one hand the ‘material environment’, that being the built-in space humans find themselves in. This in turn becomes the second space, the ‘conceived environment’, as it refers to how the previous first place is interpreted in the mind of those who live in it. The third space is a combination of both these two environments, the physical and mental space, which in turn makes it the lived-in place or the ‘experiential place’, as it is what humans experience.⁵⁸ Ruiz Gómez thus brings back this concept to the 21st century museum, underlining how recent initiatives are putting forth these new inclusive spaces, where they are a respite of enjoyment and experimentation while at the same time becoming places of meeting.⁵⁹

Recently, the Thyssen-Bornemisza’s actions underscore its aim to become such a third place. In the discussion panel on the future of museums, Marta Pérez Ibáñez, mentioned the concept of the third place regarding the responsibility museums have towards the public and the need for them to be inviting and welcoming to all. She further proposes that museums align to that concept and become “spaces of co-creation, work, sharing ideas, socializing... all in all, spaces where citizens go to spend their time”.⁶⁰ She then relates to José Luis Pérez Pont’s idea of the necessary shift from the commercial centre to the cultural centre. Hence, we can observe an urgent call coming from museum professionals towards the public to change their views and include museums in their lists of places of leisure. They seemingly pinpoint that it is as much the museum’s task to create that safe and comfortable third place, as it is the public’s task to switch their choice of entertainment venues.

⁵⁸ Ruiz Gómez, “The discussion on today’s museum”, 79.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, “El futuro de los museos”, 1:29:16. “El concepto de ‘the third space’, el tercer espacio. Son espacios de co-creación, de trabajo, de puestas en común, de socialización, espacios en los que simplemente vengas a pasar el tiempo.”

Furthermore, in the case of the Thyssen Museum we can observe how it is choosing to become the third place by working on its exhibition's programming which are including current social demands, such as decolonisation, gender issues and the sustainable development of the planet, as mentioned by Ruiz Gómez.⁶¹ Therefore, it is aware that one way to become a safe and inclusive space within society is by reflecting on what society is asking of it, this being a mirror of the visitors' concerns. In this regard, she praises the museum's exhibition, *Memorias mestizas*, which took place in 2022 and showcased artworks by Carla Hayes, an Afro-Andalusian artist who intertwines the colonial past in Spain and Europe from a decolonial and feminist perspective.⁶² This small exhibition was not located in any specific exhibitionary hall, but the pieces were displayed alongside the museum's collection. This creative endeavour proves how art museums can stay true to their 'essence', as some visitors were still demanding, whilst also demonstrating awareness of contemporary issues.⁶³

As a final cautionary thought on this, when shifting the museum's role to that of a social agent, should we also allow this to redefine the objects or artworks themselves and taint them with recent societal concerns, even if the exhibitor has favourable intentions? This is not a recent consideration and was already reflected on, back in the 17th century, as Paula Findlen demonstrates when mentioning the case of Sir Thomas Browne's interpretation. He wrote an ironic guidebook which he titled *Museum Clausum, or Bibliotheca Abscondita*, translated as *The Enclosed Library or Secret Library* to critique what he regarded as "the epistemological framework of the museum".⁶⁴ Explaining, how this imaginary library, in his point of view, gave "a microcosmic gloss to every object it encountered".⁶⁵

Exhibitions, to a certain extent, can prove to do the same and taint the artworks on display with their overall thematic scope. This paper focuses solely on the Thyssen's exhibitions in which the objects on display are primarily artworks and thus it must be underlined how these are by-products of their time - a time with, perhaps, different societal concerns. Thus, the act of linking them to contemporary issues might delink them from the epoch in which they were created. Perhaps some issues such as love and hate, are universal and will be unaltered during time, while others, such as space exploration or global warming are only applicable in a particular historical context. The understanding of knowledge is

⁶¹ Ruiz Gómez, "The discussion on today's museum", 79.

⁶² Ibid., 80.

⁶³ Ayala, Cuenca-Amigo and Cuenca, "The Future of Museums", 172. Researchers from the University of Deusto found that part of the Spanish public was still asking for museums to attain to their essential values.

⁶⁴ Findlen, "The Museum: Its Classical Etymology and Renaissance Genealogy", 63.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 63.

intertwined with contemporary society and thus, it is paramount for museums to evidence this. One way of targeting this is by linking these artworks with contemporary issues, making them metaphorically exit their display case and enter the public debate.

Chapter 2. Social Art Exhibitions

Museums of the future, while centred on their collections, will progressively prioritise contemporary issues rather than objects, as Nick Merriman states in his evaluation on New Museology.⁶⁶ A reflection of this can be observed in the Thyssen Bornemisza Museum's recent initiative whereby it links its collection to society's cultural debates, where issues surrounding, for example, inclusivity and diversity are brought to the surface.⁶⁷ To help achieve this, it places its exhibitions and past activities within eight main themes:

- Feminism(s) and Equality;
- Climate Emergency;
- Cities that care;
- Migrations;
- Art & Science Synergies;
- Decolonialism;
- Museum of the Commons;
- LGTBI+ and non-binary Identities.

This classification came about in an art museum which was centred primarily on the display of western artworks, rather than using their collection to highlight societal concerns. With the use of recent technologies, such as Wayback Machine, which regularly saves snapshots of websites, I was able to track down when the museum's website first set about a specific section dedicated to the museum in the cultural debate as it were, 2022, a year of many museological changes, as explored in the previous chapter.⁶⁸ Nonetheless, the concept of the 'social debate' was already reflected in the 2020 *Record of Activities and Sustainability*, when the museum directors, Evelio Acevedo and Guillermo Solana, regarded the museum as a "sensor of the social debate", which allowed it to "connect with the concerns, needs and interests of our society".⁶⁹ These concerns were then more clearly pinpointed in the 2022 Record, for the directors took notice that what society was asking of the museum belonged to "ethical, social

⁶⁶ Merriman, "30 Years After the New Museology", 186.

⁶⁷ Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, "The Museum in the Cultural Debate".

⁶⁸ Internet Archive: WayBack Machine, "Snapshot from December 4th, 2022".

⁶⁹ Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, "Memoria de Actividades y Sostenibilidad 2020", 5. "Tanto en la colección permanente como nuestras exposiciones temporales y toda la suerte de iniciativas colaterales desarrolladas en su entorno nos permiten ser sensor del debate social conectando con las preocupaciones, necesidades e intereses de nuestra sociedad".

and environmental aspects”.⁷⁰ Interestingly then, these three main topics translated into eight more specific themes. It must be noted though, the eight themes only came about in September 2023, as previously in 2022, there were only six themes, excluding the collection’s links to science and the urban life.⁷¹

Social issues are thus becoming an essential part of the role of museums in the 21st century and are indeed influencing the decision-making process within museums. Art museums house grand collections of art and it is in how they exhibit these artworks to highlight societal issues, that they manifest their transformation towards a fully social museum. Hence, they are designing exhibitions by carefully selecting appropriate artworks, creatively using the limited space that they have available and planning how each temporary show fits into their calendar. As seen in the table (Fig. 1, fig. 2 and fig. 3), the Thyssen Museum organises five to six big temporary exhibitions a year. In principle, at least, there is plenty of opportunity to showcase a range of different social issues. Nonetheless, as the table shows, grasping these opportunities is a relatively recent phenomenon. Only since 2011 onwards were exhibitions aligned with social commitment and it was not until 2017 when we can observe a progressive inclusion of these concerns. We also need to consider how the museum can use such exhibitions to narrow the knowledge gap between the museum and the society that it claims to serve and then, become the third place within society.

Exhibitions have been purposefully used by museums as a means to engage the public with their collections for they allow the museum to experiment with the inclusion of new themes. Because of this, they have been critically evaluated by many scholars in the art field. For instance, as early as 1988, the prestigious art editorial, *The Burlington Magazine*, published an article where the “acceptable” reasons for organising exhibitions were listed.⁷² Before even mentioning them, we can observe the fact that if these were deemed “acceptable”, this predisposes the existence of others which were not. The acceptable reasons were given as: “To make accessible the rarely seen, to alter or enhance perception of the already known, to unite comparable works”.⁷³ These seemingly straight-forward reasons hide layers of complex questions and, though it is the museum’s task to find how to resolve them, they also uncover the prior perception of the amount of knowledge needed to enter a museum. For example, the use of phrases such as “make accessible”, “the rarely seen” or “already known” begs questions

⁷⁰ Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, “Memoria de sostenibilidad 2022”, 4. “Una sociedad que le pide al museo que sea un agente de cambio social y que se fije en aspectos de carácter ético, social y ambiental”.

⁷¹ Internet Archive: WayBack Machine, “Snapshot from September 28th, 2023”.

⁷² *The Burlington Magazine* 1988, 3.

⁷³ Ibid.

regarding to whom they are accessible or already known by whom. These reasonings leave a vague idea of what artworks can be redeemed “comparable” to each other, allowing the art museum a free reign in how to let artworks and objects within an exhibition dialogue with each other to address the particular theme of the exhibition.

“Objects are ‘sticky things’ ... meanings adhere to them”, states the historian and scholar Richard Rabinowitz, as cited by Professor Steven Lubar in his review on the exhibition *Eavesdropping at the Well*.⁷⁴ Rabinowitz claimed one of the fundamental objectives when planning an exhibition was exactly the act of linking objects and in so doing, allowing them to visually create new insights and interpretations. He only mentioned objects; however, the same ideas apply to the act of combining different artworks. It is then the task of the curator to select what meaning may be engendered in the mind of the visitor. Art exhibitions then, can be seen as museums’ way of creating narratives or telling stories. The diversity of stories found in-between the museum walls, will be as diverse as the countless ways different artworks can be combined together. Stories don’t always have to be inspiring or underline humans’ achievements, but they can at least make the visitor reflect on topics they might have never considered. Museum curators, in turn, need to reflect on how their museums have told different stories in the past and how they can plan to tell new stories in the future, stories which society wants to hear.

Regarding the Thyssen Bornemisza Museum, evidence shows that themed temporary exhibitions are an attractive and stimulating event for many visitors. Since 2017, there has been an increase in number of visitors going to see the temporary exhibitions in the museum, as opposed to the permanent collection.⁷⁵ For instance, in 2022, its most recent *Record of Activity and Sustainability*, recorded that 46% of the visitors chose to go to the exhibition rooms, whereas only 44% of the visits were made to the permanent collection.⁷⁶ Leaving the statistics to one side, as the article in *The Burlington Magazine*’s stated in 1988, “exhibition going is a modern form of pilgrimage”, and these numbers only exemplify this even more.⁷⁷

It is clear that the Thyssen is trying to tackle the ambitious task of becoming everyone’s museum. On the one hand, it does have a very large art collection and can supplement this with loans from other museums. On the other hand, there are limits to what it can do with the

⁷⁴ Lubar, “Curator as Auteur”, 73.

⁷⁵ Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, “Memoria de sostenibilidad 2017”, 39; “Memoria de actuaciones y sostenibilidad 2018”, 37; “Memoria de actividades y sostenibilidad 2019”, 75; “Memoria de actividades y sostenibilidad 2020”, 98; “Memoria de actividades y sostenibilidad 2021”, 107; “Memoria de actividades y sostenibilidad 2022”, 114.

⁷⁶ Thyssen Museum, “Memoria de actividades y sostenibilidad 2022”, 114.

⁷⁷ *The Burlington Magazine* 1988, 3.

relatively limited number of exhibition rooms that it has available. Nonetheless, it is aware that one storyline will not be able to encompass all of society's concerns and to address this it is relying on the organisation of different exhibitions which tackle different issues. Once an exhibition starts, the museum must then trust its audience to understand any implicit or explicit messages behind it, as Dr Gillian O'Brien, professor of Public History, recalls in a recent report on Exhibition Development and Delivery.⁷⁸ She remarks how "no museum can be all things to all people, and it shouldn't try to be", which seemingly undermines the Thyssen's objective of becoming a museum for all.⁷⁹

The Thyssen's solution to this is to first evaluate the social situation as a whole and following this, pinpointing certain considerations which are then targeted throughout their exhibition programming with the inclusion of the eight societal themes. It understands then that one exhibition might be more alluring to one part of the population while, another exhibition will appeal to a different group. The fact that different people's perceptions will be altered or enhanced in different ways is probably unavoidable and may even be a desirable result. This links back to Smith Bautista's critical remark that there will always be a certain knowledge gap, but instead of trying to narrow it by attempting to make everyone share the same amount of knowledge, museums can simply accept that different people will acquire different knowledge and by accepting this they can attend more thoroughly to societal concerns.⁸⁰

Temporary themed exhibitions may be a key way for the museum to address societal concerns but, we must keep in mind their intrinsic limitations. They work within a limited space and a limited time frame. Kathleen McLean, curator and director of Independent Exhibitions, a museum consulting firm, shares a rather positive mindset on this and to do so, uses a singular comparison. She suggests exhibitions, to a certain extent, are comparable to theme parks or at least use similar techniques, insofar as they offer a wide range of activities within a delimited space – including introductory films, photos, maps, etc., even the exhibition gift shop itself – all referencing one central theme.⁸¹ She then reflects how this "multiformity of exhibitions ensures that museum visitors will interact in an almost endless variety of ways with the exhibits and with each other".⁸² Exhibitions, then are praised for being inter-dynamic and dialogical spaces which differentiate themselves from the more staid permanent collections. In turn, these characteristics allow the museum to get closer to their objective of becoming a third place

⁷⁸ O'Brien, "Beyond Storytelling", 5.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Smith Bautista, "The Social Function of Museums in the Digital Age", 9.

⁸¹ McLean, "Museum Exhibitions and the Dynamics of Dialogue", 86.

⁸² Ibid.

within society, a place, which as Oldenburg underlined, put community building at its forefront and thus becomes a fundamental place where people can interact with each other.⁸³ They even link these exhibitions with Ruiz Gómez's viewpoint on the same concept that museums can not only become places of meeting, but also places to experiment new ways of connecting with art.⁸⁴

Nonetheless, as marketing communications professor, Alexandra Zbucheá, reminds us, museums can indeed learn ways of becoming a more communitarian place by appealing to those forms of entertainment found in theme parks but must be cautious in doing so.⁸⁵ Theme parks, such as Disneyland, align with a well-known theme to their audience and create an experience around it.⁸⁶ Art museums, as is the case of the Thyssen-Bornemisza, maybe do select a theme and create an experience around it in a similar fashion to theme parks, but they are aiming to achieve more than 'entertainment'. ICOM's definition stated how museums will constantly promote a broad array of experiences, centred around "education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing".⁸⁷ This definition accepts that visitors should enjoy their experience, and, in that sense, museums can become places of entertainment. But art museums are not theme parks and it is essential that they remain places of critical reflection where knowledge is not imposed, but rather shared. The Thyssen Museum promotes the idea of building a community where knowledge can be critically reflected on within the arts by organising exhibitions focusing on one particular societal theme. In this regard, the exhibition functions as a base from which different activities, such as discussion panels or dynamic tours, can then develop, all surrounding the same theme.

When asking how exhibitions in the Thyssen 'fit into' each one of the eight main themes we need to consider the following. As we have already observed, even though the website only set down these eight themes in 2022, they were used retrospectively to categorise all previous exhibitions. Some of these earlier exhibitions then included societal issues before the museum had established a policy regarding the use of such themes. After 2022, it does seem that these themes have been used as a backdrop for the organisation of exhibitions, as the table (Fig. 1, fig. 2 and fig. 3) shows. Out of the seventeen exhibitions showcased after 2022, only six were not connected with any of the themes, and these mostly had to do with male artist retrospectives, such as Alex Katz and Lucian Freud (1922-2011).

⁸³ Oldenburg and Christensen, "Third places, true citizen spaces".

⁸⁴ Ruiz Gómez, "The discussion on today's museum", 79.

⁸⁵ Zbucheá, "Museums as Theme Parks", 485.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 486.

⁸⁷ International Council of Museums, "Museum Definition".

Role of Curators

The change in the exhibitions' objectives, whereby these societal issues become constant considerations within the museum's programming, brings about a shift with regards to the role of the museum curator. This transformation of the curator's role also reveals how art museums, particularly, are attempting to narrow any knowledge gap within their museums or least are acknowledging its existence. Scholars have highlighted a variety of roles for curators we might begin to encounter in contemporary museology, and it must be underlined that these new role suggestions, from educator, to interpreter, to mediator are in a state of flux.

In 1992, when writing about museums' programs being more inclusive towards the female audience, didactic professional and artist Emily Curran proposed the museum curator becoming an educator.⁸⁸ In this context, she rather seems to perceive the museum to be a classroom, where the curator is a kind of teacher, and the visitors are her students. This interpretation can be criticized if it only sees the visitors as passive consumers of the knowledge on display who do not question or reflect on that knowledge. This would be a reflection of an educational model in which the relationship between students and teachers is seen as hierarchical. If then, the museum maintains this hierarchy, some teaching and learning may take place but any perceived knowledge gap could be better addressed by involving the audience in a more active way. Curran's article focused on the idea of making the museum become a place to promote educational equity for women, and specially girls. She saw in museums' programming an opportunity to create educational structures outside of the classroom but felt that it was not being taken up when she wrote the article.⁸⁹ It is issues like this that the Thyssen is most ardently working on in recent times. If we apply these ideas to an art museum, then the artworks can become the adequate vehicle for students to learn about societal issues. Museums can then become a place where knowledge is shared and reflected on.

Sociologist Max Ross, in his interpretation on New Museology, also recedes from the staid view of the over imposing educator or as he terms it 'legislator'.⁹⁰ He brings up the late philosopher and sociologist Zygmunt Bauman's (1925-2017) idea of the museum professional becoming rather an interpreter of culture when considering the evolution towards social-knowledge accessibility within museums. He refers to a double bind situation, where on the

⁸⁸ Curran, "Half the Students in Your Museum are Female", 17.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 14.

⁹⁰ Ross, "Interpreting the New Museology", 85

one side, “there are [economic and social] pressures for museums to become more accessible and representative of multicultural society” and, on the other side, “there are forces of resistance for the dismantling of established cultural boundaries”.⁹¹ This conclusion is similar to what researchers from the University of Deusto found the Spanish public was demanding from the museums - a closer involvement with societal concerns without forgetting the essence of the museum.⁹² This recent study, though, failed to give any clarification on what truly was the essence of the museum. It simply used limiting phrases such as “the traditional function of the museum” or “the traditional culture value of museums”.⁹³ Ross’s outlook, however, gives the job of explaining the position of museums in society to the curators. It is part of their role as interpreters of culture. After succeeding in deciphering these concerns the curator must translate them into a powerful exhibition. We can observe then, how the transformation of the role of the curator increases the status of the position but adds ambiguities, complexities, and responsibilities. This in turn means museum professionals must always keep a self-reflexive stance as López Manzanares recalled in the discussion panel held at the Thyssen, referred to in the previous chapter.⁹⁴

Historian Richard Rabinowitz suggests an even more creative role for the curator by referencing the curator as *auteur* (author in French) or creative mastermind.⁹⁵ He understands that if exhibitions must tell stories, then it is the role of the curator not only to be the storyteller but also the story writer. He further proposes that the curator becomes a theatre director by comparing the exhibition to an interpretative act, in which “to interpret is to imagine one cast of historical actors stepping out of the document, and another set of modern-day visitors coming across it”, following through by stating that “historical time and exhibit time flow together”.⁹⁶ He thus, gives part of the task of interpreting to the visitor, who in doing so will weave the exhibition’s themes, and its historical subjects, with their own present set of prejudices and biases. Nonetheless, whether the exhibition is a story or theatre, it would have been created by the curator working with their own set of rules and parameters. In commenting on this perspective, Lubar remarks on the fact that Rabinowitz seems to be giving too much importance to the curator which will only create a one-sided exhibit. This can of course have a great turn-out, if the exhibit coincides with society’s demands, but Lubar underlines that

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ayala, Cuenca-Amigo and Cuenca, “The Future of Museums”, 184.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum “El futuro de los museos”, 44:00. “¿Cómo con estas colecciones te puedo ayudar? ¿Qué iniciativas puedo tomar?”

⁹⁵ Lubar, “Curator as Auteur”, 71.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 72.

“*auteurs* can fail badly [...]. They can create exhibitions that work for themselves, and other aficionados, not the general public”.⁹⁷ Hence, curating is no straightforward task and requires collaborative work to meet all the demands from the public and attempt to narrow the knowledge gap.

Alternatively, art historian Hubertus Kohle, back in 2017, reflected on particular collaborations which can take place between the museum and the visitor as the museum begins to use digital mediums, such as websites or mobile applications. In this case, there is even a shift in the role of the visitor who becomes a ‘producer’ of culture by interacting with the website and creating their own digital exhibitions.⁹⁸ This demonstrates how the dynamic aspect of websites and other digital technologies allows the visitor, who becomes the user, to creatively engage with the collection. The Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam even invites users to create their own Studio, including works of their choosing which can then come together to form their own digital exhibition revolving around a theme of their choosing. These can even be shared with other users, creating a truly inter-dynamic experience. Insofar as the visitor becomes a producer, the curator will then have to take on the role of being a mediator between the museum’s information and the user of the application or website.

This is a complex issue as the curator may still maintain the role of *auteur* by being part of the process of creating web pages and applications. Nonetheless, this is a more recent take on the idea of the curator as the interpreter. By allowing the visitor more influence within the decision-making process of exhibitions and shifting the role of the curator to that of a mediator, the museum can truly become a place where knowledge is shared, as ICOM pointed out in its most recent definition.⁹⁹ The museum then accepts knowledge coming in from the visitor’s perspective and interactively works with this in the digital realm. The Thyssen-Bornemisza hasn’t yet included an interactive Studio in its website, but it does offer a range of ways to explore the museum and study the artworks in the collection, however it could borrow interactive activities and include them in its programming.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 74.

⁹⁸ Kohle, “The Museum Goes Collaborative”, 325.

⁹⁹ International Council of Museums, “Museum Definition”.

Shift in Blockbuster Exhibitions

Museums have abided times of uncertainty regarding the number of visitors, who are fundamental for the upkeep of these institutions as they help bring in a significant amount of economic revenue. New, exciting and thrilling, exhibitions which appeal to a wide range of people and, are well marketed and advertised lead to a bigger number of visitors. These ideas were used by museums in the 1970s when they began setting out blockbuster exhibitions. These have been defined as “an exhibition that is large, expensive to organise and with a temporary, travelling character”, by researchers Kaja Jurčišínová, Marline Lisette Wilders and Janneke Visser, writing in the context of an evaluation of Dutch museums.¹⁰⁰ The use of the word ‘blockbuster’ stems from the world of cinema where it was used to describe a highly successful and popular Hollywood feature film. In modern usage, nonetheless, this term has always been linked to hugely popular and spectacular films or other entertainment events. Museum critics have used the word as a means of pointing out and critiquing this seemingly ‘easy fix’ for museums lacking audiences. Museums have systematically highlighted the number of visitors they have reached on different platforms, as a way of demonstrating their success. For instance, in the case of the Thyssen Bornemisza, we can see this in its *Records of Activity*. As denoted in its 2017 edition, where it makes clear certain exhibitions achieved a high number of visitors, by labelling them as Top 1 (Hopper exhibition in 2012 which received a total of 322,223 visitors); Top 2 (Antonio López in 2011 with 317,648 visitors) and so on.¹⁰¹

Blockbuster exhibitions have been critiqued by one of the key scholars used in this paper, Susana Smith Bautista. She observes how they seem to solely focus on attracting the greatest number of visitors, rather than what these people might get out of the experience of exploring the exhibition. Thus, she denotes them as a populist attempt to bridge the knowledge gap.¹⁰² On the one hand, when they are successful, they do undoubtedly, expose works of art to a wider range of people than more ‘traditional’ exhibitions. However, we might consider to what extent they genuinely change the general public’s attitude towards art and museums and whether blockbusters generate sustainable interest or not. Smith Bautista further reflects on the extent to which blockbusters help to narrow the knowledge gap, or on the contrary, by

¹⁰⁰ Jurčišínová, Wilders and Visser, “The Future of Blockbuster Exhibitions”, 22.

¹⁰¹ Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, “Memoria de actividades y sostenibilidad 2017”, 7.

¹⁰² Smith Bautista, “The Social Function of Museums in the Digital Age”, 14.

highlighting well known artistic themes and artists, the museum is inadvertently reinforcing its image as a bastion for the cultural elite.¹⁰³

Art historian, James Beck evaluated them from a more academic standpoint and considered how “museum rhetoric is quick to proclaim that spectacular shows are invaluable to scholars”, he even views them as “less informative than carefully and thoughtfully selected smaller exhibitions”.¹⁰⁴ He accepts blockbuster exhibitions can be beneficial to the museum by publicizing it and attracting new audiences but, he suspects that they are academically shallow experiences and so of limited educational value. This standpoint does seem to stem from the academic world of scholars rather than addressing the general public. Therefore, it doesn’t share the same perspective on museums working on narrowing any knowledge gap, or even accepting such gaps as Smith Bautista’s analysis does, and further delinks museums from the social realm and ever becoming a third place within society, a space for all. To a certain extent, these two scholars do share the same point of view on blockbuster exhibitions being unnecessary to the museum experience and observe that the museum could benefit without them. However, this is far from becoming a reality as a recent analysis concluded that blockbuster exhibitions are here to stay. Jurčišinová et al. observed how some Dutch museums, having had to face a huge decrease in visitors during the Covid-19 pandemic, used blockbuster exhibitions as a strategy to try and win back the general public.¹⁰⁵ Given this reality, they propose that larger institutions, who have more means available, continue to organise these kinds of shows.

If then, larger museums, such as the Thyssen Bornemisza, are the most adequate spaces to host exhibitions of this kind, and these museums are in line with becoming truly communitarian third places in society; then this will foresee that big blockbuster exhibitions will align with these matters. Hence, to ensure that societal issues are at the forefront of the museum’s programming, the Thyssen will need to purposively base such grand exhibitions on one, or more than one, of its eight main societal concerns. This will allow the museum to use blockbuster characteristics to its advantage and by doing so, be able to bring in new visitors into the museum. More so, it will make sure that these new visitors observe that the museum is not a self-imposing hierarchical knowledge-structure, but rather a place where everyone is welcome and thus moving towards becoming a truly communitarian place within society. Furthermore, the museum can think of ways of involving the local community in a more active

¹⁰³ Ibid., 12.

¹⁰⁴ Beck, “The End of Blockbusters?”, 2.

¹⁰⁵ Jurčišinová, Wilders and Visser, “The Future of Blockbuster Exhibitions”, 27.

role, therefore allowing the museum to become a space where knowledge is shared with locals and other visitors, such as tourists. Thus, blockbuster exhibitions, in all their grand, publicising and even travelling fashion can become both educational and entertaining and will bring in the crowds while, at the same time, address and reflect upon important societal issues.

Chapter 3. Societal Commitment in Eight Main Themes

“All museums are exercises of classification,” stated historian Ludmilla Jordanova in 1989.¹⁰⁶ She reflected on this imposition of order with regards to exhibitions as a whole, however this process of categorisation within museums can be observed in a variety of forms, as the Thyssen Museum’s recent initiative demonstrates. When the user enters the page *About Us* on the Thyssen’s website, placed prominently at the top one finds the segment on *The Museum in the Cultural Debate*. The eight societal themes only appear on their website, acknowledging the Thyssen’s use of digital technology to disseminate important information. This modernity is further illustrated by the painting chosen as the header of the page, Renato Guttuso’s (1911-1987) *Caffè Greco* (Fig. 5) from 1976, which shows a very cosmopolitan mix of people in a café, which Oldenburg already observed as a third place in society. The explanatory text explicitly refers to the age that we now live in:

“Societies in the 21st century are facing major challenges in terms of ecology, unequal distribution of wealth, cultural clashes, gender equality, etc. In this section we present various lines of work of the museum to respond to the main challenges of the current cultural scene”.¹⁰⁷

Clearly categorising its past exhibitions and activities using these eight societal themes is an unambiguous attempt by the museum to demonstrate their commitment to society and a way to implement their aim of becoming everyone’s museum. Each theme is clearly and simply introduced and, of course, linked to works of art in the museum’s collection. This use of technology, which structures and carefully presents ideas and information, is an excellent example of how to share knowledge with the general public. This links their activities with the ICOM’s definition framework on how a museum should be “in the service of society”.¹⁰⁸ Analysing this form of categorisation, we can observe a progressive evolution towards a museum that’s fully committed to ‘serve’ society. With this in mind, I will further evaluate current exhibitions and contrast them to other exhibitions that deal with similar themes. The

¹⁰⁶ Jordanova, “Objects of Knowledge”, 23.

¹⁰⁷ Thyssen Museum, “The Museum in the Cultural Debate”. e

¹⁰⁸ International Council of Museums, “Museum Definition”.

way the curators decide on describing social issues by displaying works of art through an exhibition can drastically change depending on the message they want to put across.

An example to consider, for instance, is how two exhibitions seemingly focused on the same theme can completely alter our perception of the story behind it. This is the case of two exhibitions held in the museum fifteen years apart: *Robert and Sonia Delaunay (1905-1941)*, organised in 2002-2003 as opposed to *Sonia Delaunay - Art, design and fashion*, from 2017. On both occasions Sonia Delaunay's artworks were included in the exhibition. In the earlier exhibition, her presence was limited, as she was presented as Robert Delaunay's spouse who, as a matter of fact, was also an artist herself. The information about the exhibition focused mainly on her husband with phrases such as: "Light was the main motif within Robert Delaunay's pictorial language", or "The artist himself gave his method of representing light through colour the name of *Simultanisme*".¹⁰⁹ In contrast, the 2017 exhibit focused solely on her artistic career and her contributions to the fashion and design scene. In this case, it was now Robert Delaunay who played the role of Sonia Delaunay's spouse, who, as a matter of fact, was also an artist, "Together with her husband, the painter Robert Delaunay, she undertook an artistic adventure based on contrasts of colour and the dissolving of form through light that led towards abstraction".¹¹⁰ Both exhibitions used some of the same works of art by Sonia Delaunay but, the different contexts in which they were placed would have changed the viewers perspectives of the value or importance of her works. A recent exhibition from 2023 directly criticized previous assumptions on the great artistic masters by presenting *Women Masters*. This exhibition featured only women artists who must also be considered masters in their own right.

In order to demonstrate and evaluate Thyssen's eight categorisations, I have grouped all of the Thyssen's exhibitions in a table (Fig. 1, fig. 2 and fig. 3). Each exhibition has been pinpointed with three sets of descriptive elements:

1. Societal theme, whereby I have made three columns depending on how many themes the exhibition targets.
2. TBA21's involvement, to which I refer to Thyssen Bornemisza Art Contemporary Foundation.

¹⁰⁹ Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, "Robert and Sonia Delaunay (1905-1941)".

¹¹⁰ Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, "Sonia Delaunay. Art, design and fashion".

3. Blockbuster, whether or not it can be described as a blockbuster exhibition, solely looking at the number of visitors, provided by the 2017 *Record of Activities and Sustainability*.

TBA21 is a leading international art and advocacy foundation led primarily by artists, which was established in 2002 by philanthropist and art patron Francesca Thyssen-Bornemisza. Their work, as mentioned on the foundation's website, involves showcasing art and culture as a "carrier of social and environmental transformation, ultimately contributing to the creation of spaces of peace".¹¹¹ In order to create outreaching activities, it works alongside the museum in the organisation of exhibitions as well as its educational and public programming. Regarding the data analysis, shown in the table (Fig. 1, fig. 2 and fig. 3) we can observe, nevertheless, how its involvement in the museum only began to fully emerge in 2018 with the exhibition *Purple, of John Akomfrah* centred around the topic of Climate Emergency. Since then, it has organised a total of twelve exhibitions, nine of which are monographic exhibits based solely on one contemporary artist.¹¹²

Moreover, the integration of TBA21 works as an experimental field for the museum in which it can bring the most recent societal concerns such as climate change into its halls. When evaluating the nine exhibitions focused on the topic of Climate Emergency, we can observe how all of them have been organized with the help of TBA21. A slight criticism may be that the exhibitions focused only on contemporary artists' perspectives. On the one hand, this approach highlights how global warming fundamentally concerns today's society, but, on the other hand misses an opportunity to show how artists have illustrated humans' relationship with technology and nature over a longer period of time. Nevertheless, TBA21's actions align with Nick Merriman's proposal regarding a new "ethical museum ecology", for which he lists eight potential principles museums should follow.¹¹³ As previously mentioned, he observes how social and environmental issues are inextricably linked and introduces 'holistic museology' to study them alongside each other, something which TBA21 also shares in its aims to become a "carrier of social and environmental transformation".¹¹⁴ Another of his principles gives predominance to the museum to fulfil a leadership role when engaging with

¹¹¹ TBA21, "Who we are".

¹¹² These include: John Akomfrah; Amar Kanwar; Joan Jonas; Claudia Comte; Walid Raad; Ragnar Kjartansson; Himali Singh Soin and David Soin Tappeser and Stephanie Comilang.

¹¹³ Merriman, "30 Years After the New Museology", 186.

¹¹⁴ TBA21, "Who we are".

issues on climate change.¹¹⁵ This, in turn will allow the visitors to become active citizens and not passive consumers.¹¹⁶ Hence, we can observe how in recent years, the Thyssen Bornemisza is creating a space for the visitors to reflect on emergent issues such as climate change. Nonetheless, slight improvements might include the museum to reflect on its collection and evaluate other instances of climate change throughout art history, not simply with the use of contemporary artists.

In the case of targeting these exhibitions by their link to blockbuster exhibitions, I have limited my data description to the number of visitors, which was shown in the 2017 *Record of Activities and Sustainability*. In doing so, I am aware that this is a simplistic definition of a blockbuster exhibition. Referencing back to Jurčišinová et al.'s outlook on these exhibitions, they do mention how the idea behind a blockbuster “no longer exclusively means an exhibition that breaks the record number of visitors”.¹¹⁷ Rather, it is a type of exhibition, one that is, in their words, “large, expensive to organise and with a temporary, travelling character”.¹¹⁸ Nevertheless the Thyssen Museum in 2017, chose to not only take note of those top visited exhibitions, but highlighted them when reflecting on the whole history of the museum on a page where they described the museum's trajectory in a timeline-form. When setting this descriptive element on each exhibition alongside their societal concerns, we can evaluate if there is a pattern based on the extent to which those ‘top tier’ exhibitions are also those concerned with societal issues.

Despite their aim of becoming everyone's museum and dealing with these concerns, the data shows how out of the ten exhibitions which reached the top number of visitors, highlighted on the record, none dealt with a societal concern. However, we can observe a very intriguing pattern, all those top visited exhibitions were very similar in form, for they all focused on one artist and their oeuvre.¹¹⁹ All of these are male artists and, with the exception of El Greco (1541-1614) and Antonio López (1936), are from the late 19th and 20th centuries. If the museum were to be solely concerned with attracting the greatest number of visitors, one assumes it would limit its exhibitions to organizing monographic shows on male artists who have been

¹¹⁵ Merriman, “30 Years After the New Museology”, 186.

¹¹⁶ Ibid. 185.

¹¹⁷ Jurčišinová, Wilders and Visser “The Future of Blockbuster Exhibitions”, 23.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ These include: El Greco (1541-1614); Gauguin (1848-1903); Van Gogh 1853-1890); Modigliani (1884-1920); Matisse (1869-1954); Monet (1840-1926); Antonio López; Hopper (1882-1967) and Cezanne (1839-1906).

considered masters of their time. This take on exhibitions aligns with Smith Bautista's idea behind blockbuster exhibitions, when mentioning:

“Some of the most popular blockbuster exhibitions have focused on King Tut, Salvador Dalí, Andy Warhol, China's Terracotta Warriors, Picasso, and Van Gogh. Much like the levelling effect of television, they appeal to a broad audience that will either know these cultural giants, or at least know that they *should*”.¹²⁰

It is questionable as to whether these blockbuster exhibitions narrow the so-called knowledge gap. Presumably many visitors leave such exhibitions slightly better informed about a particular artist and art in general. However, by only focusing on 'cultural giants', as termed by Smith Bautista, who most people have already heard of, museums are in danger of simply reinforcing popular prejudice that art is restricted only to a few iconic figures. A kind of vicious circle is created whereby a famous artist is popular so, to guarantee a high number of visitors, museums exhibit his works which makes him even more famous.

Linking back to previous academic ways of exploring and understanding art history, we might recall how in 1550, Giorgio Vasari wrote *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, which would take precedence when highlighting the artistic masters at the time, most of whom were male artists. Much later, in 1950, Ernst Gombrich, also came up with a historiographical manifesto titled *The Story of Art*, which gave a very limited overview of the evolution of art, underlining specific artists who contributed significantly to the art scene. These two books on art history help illustrate the fact that focusing on a few masters is nothing new. If museums are genuinely working towards narrowing the knowledge gap, the exhibitions staged in their halls will encourage visitors to appreciate a wider range of art and artists. More so, visitors will be able to indulge in the art realm and observe what art can teach them. Recent actions evidence how the Thyssen Museum is valiantly looking at ways of shaping the museum of the future, by considering exhibitions concerned with societal issues, despite the proof that monographic exhibitions give the museum increased revenue by attracting a greater number of visitors.

Regarding the museum's take on societal themes, a quick glance at the set of 132 exhibitions shows there has been a progressive move towards including these themes into the programming of their exhibitions. Before 2011, only two exhibitions centred around one of

¹²⁰ Smith Bautista, "The Social Function of Museums in the Digital Age", 14.

these themes, both addressing the topic of ‘Cities that Care’: *George Grosz. The Berlin Years* in 1997 and *Canaletto. An Imaginary Venice* in 2001. As shown by the data, it was during the years 2011 and 2012 when the museum put forth exhibitions centred around other concerns such as ‘Feminism(s) and Equality’ (with *Heroines* (2011) and *Berthe Morisot - The Impressionist Painter* (2012)); ‘Cities that Care’ (with *Painted Architectures* (2011)); Migrations, with *Chagall* (2012)); and ‘Decolonialism’ (with *Visions of India* (2012)). However, there’s a three-year gap where the museum didn’t organise any other exhibition around these themes, not until 2015 when it showcased *The Illusion of the American Frontier*, which addressed issues on ‘Decolonialism’. Exhibitions centred around feminism and equality and climate change seemingly take centre stage in the programming in recent years, with a total of nine exhibitions on both themes. On the other hand, the museum mentions two societal concerns on their website which haven’t yet had any exhibition: ‘Art and Science Synergies’ and ‘LGTBI+ and non-binary Identities’. Clearly the museum does realize the importance of these issues but has yet to represent them in an actual exhibition. I believe then, it is crucial to the analysis of the paper to further pinpoint certain exhibitions and evaluate how these changes have been put into action. For this reason, I have selected three topics where I have found there have been critical curatorial and strategical advancements over the years.

‘Feminism(s) and Equality’: *Heroines* (2011) and *Women Masters* (2023)

In the subpage on *The Museum in the Cultural Debate*, the Thyssen’s website proposes an introductory question for each theme. Regarding ‘Feminism(s) and Equality’ it asks the viewer: “What is the daily reality of men and women in terms of representation, redistribution and recognition?”.¹²¹ As a way of answering the question or at least reflecting on it, the museum highlights those initiatives it has done in line with a feminist re-evaluation of the museum’s collection in favour of creating an equalitarian space in the arts. In terms of exhibitions, there have been two main ones which stand out from the rest: *Heroines*, showcased in 2011 and *Women Masters*, twelve years after, in 2023. These are seemingly similar in form, as they introduce the topic with a powerful and straightforward title. Interestingly, when translating the title to Spanish, *Heroínas* and *Maestras*, using feminine nouns is a message in itself. The gender-neutral plurals have always been the male forms of the nouns *Héroes* and *Maestros* and

¹²¹ Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, “The Museum in the Cultural Debate”. e

the historical heroes and masters were indeed, more often than not, males. The museum is matter-of-factly introducing a new perspective on who are the true heroes and masters in history and giving predominance to the women in the artistic scenario.

Hence, both exhibitions are similar in content, as they reflect on issues concerning the representation of women and they both consider how women have become active members in society, even though this has rarely been mentioned in other historiographical accounts. Nonetheless, they differ in what artworks they use to display this theme and from which artists. Whilst there is little information online about the exhibition *Heroines*, the video in the museum's website shares some glimpses of the works on show where we can observe the inclusion of Edgar Degas' painting *Young Spartans Exercising* (1860), Edvard Munch's *Evening* (1888) and Edward Hopper's *Hotel Room* (1931).¹²² These three artists and others on show are male but nonetheless share a representation of women which was fundamental for the whole message of the exhibition.

On the other hand, *Women Masters* only featured artworks by women artists. In turn, this exhibition goes in line with recent changes and advancements from art historians. Kathy Hessel, for instance, published a retelling of the story of art in 2022. In a similar fashion to what Ernst Gombrich did back in 1950, she describes the evolution of art history, but in her case, she does this by pinpointing only women artists who made significant contributions. Thus, she reverts the previous art historical canon focused solely on men. The exhibition achieves the same effect and they both divide this retelling in chapters, or by different halls in the case of the exhibition. Each chapter in Hessel's book, focuses on women throughout different epochs and quite interestingly, they both begin with the late Italian Renaissance. Hessel explains that it was during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when women artists really began to create a place for themselves. This early flourishing of female artists may have been because progressive cities, such as Bologna, allowed women to live as practicing artists, or because they came from well accommodated artistic families, such as Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1653), whose piece, *Judith and her Maidservant* (1618-1619) is one of the first featured in the exhibition.¹²³ This evidences how the museum has chosen to use a reanalysis of the past to look towards the future in a similar manner to contemporary scholars. Both are uncovering new perspectives on art history that are stimulating modern audiences to reassess their response to art and society.

¹²² Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, "Heroines: the exhibition".

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 20, 23, 35.

‘Migrations’: Chagall (2012); Beckmann. Exile Figures (2018) and Stephanie Comilang. Search for Life (2024)

Throughout their exhibition programming the Thyssen museum has showcased three exhibitions referencing the topic of ‘Migrations’, central to how we understand the world we live in today. The main question the museum wants to reflect on is “How to turn museums into networks and communities of support for migrant citizenship in museums?”.¹²⁴ These three exhibitions, each organized during a six-year gap between them, take on different explorations of the question at hand and signal the intentional progress of the museum to become a dynamic and informative space. Before 2024, the museum put on two exhibitions which focused on the artistic trajectory of two artists both of whom had to live in exile for part of their lives. Marc Chagall (1887-1985) a Russian-French Jew who fled France for New York when it was occupied by the Nazis and Max Beckmann (1884-1950) a German who spent ten years in self-imposed exile in Amsterdam in an attempt to avoid Nazi persecution. Perhaps their individual stories of persecution and exile can help us to relate to the suffering of countless people forced into exile in modern history right up to the present-day conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East. Nonetheless, the condition of the exiled artist is only introduced as a chapter in these artist’s lives, and it is questionable how either exhibition promoted what the museum referred to as “networks and communities of support for migrant citizenship”.¹²⁵

Currently on show, as of April 2024, we find an exhibition organized by TBA21, also reflecting the oeuvre of an individual artist, in this case a contemporary artist, Stephanie Comilang, born in Canada to Filipino parents who had fled Ferdinand Marco’s dictatorship in the 1970s.¹²⁶ *Search for Life* divides her artistic explorations in four main topics ranging from building connections, reflecting on colonial history, maritime migrations and even introduces the powerful symbolism behind the butterfly. These all interweave with each other when exploring deep-rooted connections between Spain’s colonial past and countries such as the Philippines and Mexico. The exhibition compares Spanish colonial maritime routes with modern-day trade routes while at the same time paralleling human migration with animal migration such as the monarch butterfly. She uses the symbolism behind a butterfly to signify universal ideas of transformation, possibility, and change.¹²⁷ As the curator of the exhibition,

¹²⁴ Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, “The Museum in the Cultural Debate”.

¹²⁵ Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, “Migrations”.

¹²⁶ Zhou, Feifei. “En casa, y en casa lejos de casa”, 22.

¹²⁷ Video: “Stephanie Comilang Search for Life / En busca de la vida”, 3:12

Chus Martínez clarifies, the artist is able to set a parallel between human migration and animal migration, by mentioning how “We consider that animals migrate to survive, but humans also migrate to survive”.¹²⁸ Hence, this recent exhibition coincides with at least part of the museum’s vision of becoming both a place of mutual recognition and a space of hospitality.¹²⁹

‘Decolonialism’: *Into India. South Asian Paintings from the San Diego Museum of Art* (2012) and *In the Eye of the Storm: Modernism in Ukraine, 1900 - 1930s* (2022-2023)

In the previously referenced exhibition *Search for Life*, artist, Stephanie Comilang, does indirectly refer to Spain as a colonial power but, she lingers on this part of history only to refer to the first commercial trading routes between Spain and Philippines. Global colonial trade would have subtle yet far reaching influences. For example, disparate items such as Mexican clothing or Spanish ceramics, both could include Asian elements which were highly appreciated in America.¹³⁰ This critical reflection on the past allows the visitor to observe how historical circumstances shape the present we believe we understand, as the curator, Chus Martínez brings to our attention in the explanatory video on the exhibition.¹³¹ In reality, the present is full of these intricate and almost unnoticeable connections which stem from a far-reaching past, many times shaped by colonial times. The Thyssen Bornemisza is thus becoming aware of this necessary curatorial shift whereby Western museums should uncover and bring to everyone’s attentions the colonial past of many collections.

Humans have been migrating since our ancient ancestors evolved in East Africa and then spread to occupy all corners of the world. Over time very different civilizations and cultures developed. It is trade between these civilizations that the exhibition *Into India* highlights. This goes in line with the question the museum wishes to underline on this theme: “What kind of power relations are hidden behind Eurocentric ‘universalism’?”.¹³² It understands its collection is eminently Western and European but explains that it wants to revert this one-sided view, at least with the organization of activities and exhibitions. As

¹²⁸ Ibid., 1:11.

¹²⁹ Thyssen Bornemisza Museum, “Migrations”.

¹³⁰ Video: “Stephanie Comilang Search for Life / En busca de la vida”, 4:18

¹³¹ Ibid., 0:34

¹³² Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, “The Museum in the Cultural Debate”.

categorized on the website, however, the first exhibition dealing with subjects on ‘Decolonialism’ was set forth in 2012, when it was loaned a selection of 105 artworks from the San Diego Museum of Art to showcase them in the exhibition *Into India. South Asian Paintings from the San Diego Museum of Art*. As mentioned in the brochure, “the exhibition reveals the remarkable ways that Indian artists adapted their styles and artistic practice to accommodate the wishes of patrons who were culturally rooted in foreign traditions”.¹³³

In a similar way to Stephanie Comilang’s exhibition, it brings about the inter-dynamic relations between the colonies and the colonial powers in terms of artistic products. Earlier I referred to how, for example, Mexican textiles could incorporate Asian ideas into their designs. This exhibition shows how local Indian artists would modify their works to satisfy the tastes of Persian, Central Asian and European merchants. The explanatory text mentions how “the works on display demonstrate these artists’ remarkable ability to adapt and modify their traditional style without losing their distinctively Indian character”.¹³⁴ Both evidence early instances of globalization. Though, perhaps further reflection on the provenance of the San Diego collection would have proved to be quite interesting. The brochure refers to philanthropist Edwin Binney III’s collection, who the *Harvard Magazine* describes as an “adventurous polymath with an appetite for escargots, travel, and family history”,¹³⁵ who amassed a great collection of 1,453 Persian, Ottoman, and ancient Indian paintings, now in the San Diego Museum of Art.

A more recent exhibition is deeply involved with current political issues and recent instances of ‘colonialist’ invasion in Ukraine. In 2022, the Thyssen Museum organized *In the Eye of the Storm: Modernism in Ukraine, 1900 - 1930s*, which began on November 29th, barely nine months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. At a time of turmoil, the museum served as a safe haven for many artworks which were brought from museums in Ukraine, such as, the National Art Museum and the Museum of Theatre, Music and Cinema, in order for them to survive the air raids and bombings. Moreover, it also shed a light on the prolific cultural times during the first three decades of the twentieth century when Ukrainian Modernism began, years in which the country was also involved in war and revolution. So, the exhibition creates a parallel between these two eras and highlights the need for culture to be protected. The exhibition was organized in close collaboration with other museums in Europe, underlining how collaborative work and travelling exhibitions can have a bigger aim, that of standing

¹³³ Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, “Into India. South Asian Paintings from the San Diego Museum of Art”.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Madison U. Sowell, “Edwin Binney, 3rd”.

against imperialistic aggression and showing solidarity to people in difficult times. Jurčišínová et al., referring to blockbuster exhibitions, mentioned their travelling character, so in this way we can observe how they disengage from being mere “populist museum practices” as described by Smith Bautista and rather re-shape themselves as important exhibitions for reflection, education, and change, where bringing in the biggest number of visitors is a by-product rather than the reason for the exhibition.¹³⁶

These curatorial advancements further prove that the museum is continually being self-reflexive and observing how its exhibitions fit and target issues concerning society. It is thus becoming more aware of its past actions and is re-framing them into a contemporary perspective, where critical issues such as inclusivity and climate change are taking the centre stage. Modern exhibitions are changing their role to include creating a stimulating place for everyone to visualize how artworks throughout history have been and still are very much in line with contemporary social issues. Finally, the museum is also looking towards the future by giving predominance to contemporary artists, specifically in issues such as climate change and feminism, whilst still managing ways to explore its own collection with works ranging from different epochs throughout art history.

¹³⁶ Jurčišínová, Wilders and Visser “The Future of Blockbuster Exhibitions”, 23; Smith Bautista, “The Social Function of Museums in the Digital Age”, 14.

Conclusion

Museums have been generally understood as places which encapsulate knowledge by displaying objects from the past giving glimpses of the way humans have come to terms with the complexities of the world over time. Thus, it is on how they deliver, what I will term this ‘encapsulated knowledge’, where present-day museums can demonstrate their differences and transformation from those of the past. The role of museums has always been inextricably linked with the preservation and display of artworks and other objects of cultural importance. Since the late 16th and early 17th centuries, as evidenced by Paula Findlen, museums have also been aware of their commitment towards society and how they can become a reflection of that society by what they choose to display and more importantly, how they choose to display the objects in their collection. In this regard, Findlen makes an acute observation, when delving into how museums were understood in renaissance culture:

“A repository of past activities, created in the mirror of the present, the museum was above all a dialectical structure which served as a meeting point in which the historical claims of the present were invoked in memory of the past”.¹³⁷

Although she was evaluating museums in the past, this description can just as easily serve as a critical basis for an analysis of the role of an art museum in Madrid in the 21st century. Such connections and similarities between past and present museums are not that hard to find. Through this exemplative quote, I want to underline important topics which have made an appearance throughout this paper, all stemming from the Thyssen’s most recent actions. For example, by stressing the “dialectical structure” of museums, she is claiming that museums were places to foment discussion and debate revolving around historical differences between the present and the past. This links to ICOM’s recent definition of museums which underlined how museums are “places of knowledge sharing”.¹³⁸

In this regard, the Thyssen-Bornemisza’s initiative towards becoming a social museum is a prime example of ways museums can narrow the knowledge gap, as referred to in the critical paper on the social function of museums by art historian Susana Smith Bautista.¹³⁹ It is

¹³⁷ Findlen, “The Museum: Its Classical Etymology and Renaissance Genealogy”, 60.

¹³⁸ International Council of Museums, “Museum Definition”.

¹³⁹ Smith Bautista, “The Social Function of Museums in the Digital Age”, 9.

crucial then, for museums to be aware of this knowledge difference between the visitor and the museum, and to work towards reducing it by sharing information in line with the communities' social concerns, rather than only catering to people from the 'cultural elite'.¹⁴⁰ However, as Smith Bautista also reflects, it is not enough for museums to work towards making everyone have the same knowledge, but they should go further and, as she explains, "inspire individuality in the interpretation and performance of knowledge".¹⁴¹ To achieve this, museums encourage and foment a range of interpretations reflecting on the diversity and uniqueness of the individuals who make up society. In this way the Thyssen can aspire to its stated goal of becoming everyone's museum.¹⁴²

Findlen's reference to a metaphorical 'meeting point' between ideas of the past and present can be extended to the idea of museums becoming actual meeting places which bring together people from the local community and so become examples of the, so called, third place within society. This concept is an objective of utmost importance in recent museology as evidenced by the recent discussion panel on museums of the future held in the Thyssen Museum in 2022 and in art historian and curator Ariadna Ruiz Gomez's critical paper, from a year later.¹⁴³ The strategy the Thyssen is focusing on to become such a third place is by developing art exhibitions which target perceived critical societal issues. Artworks here act as powerful triggers that can evoke, in the audience, a critical analysis of contemporary concerns. Visitors then, are able to appreciate how artworks throughout art history can illustrate present-day concerns and even offer new alternative points of view. Museums can then become meeting places, where artworks act as the meeting points between the past and present. Hence, the past is never forgotten, but it is simply observed through a different lens, that of the present.

This in turn, further brings art museums and their contemporary society closer together until, to a certain extent, they can become reflections of each other or, as Findlen puts it, "past activities, created in the mirror of the present".¹⁴⁴ The idea of reflection appears constantly throughout the history of art. The extent to which paintings can act as mirrors or windows is a theoretical discussion all of its own. Here the significance is how an art museum, and the exhibitions of its artworks, can become a mirror of society. The Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum shows this transformation by recent changes in its organisation and exhibition programming

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, "Memoria de sostenibilidad 2019", 1.

¹⁴³ Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, "El futuro de los museos", 1:29:16; Ruiz Gómez, "The discussion on today's museum", 79.

¹⁴⁴ Findlen, "The Museum: Its Classical Etymology and Renaissance Genealogy", 60.

and it is becoming a kind of ‘two-way mirror’ or a reflective window. It is a mirror in which society can be reflected but it can also be seen as an open window, which invites the visitor to peek into the range of artworks on display. Continuing with the mirror metaphor, exhibitions then will encourage visitors to self-reflect and think about how the artworks evoke personal responses within themselves. This deeper level of personal reflection evidences how the museum is becoming a social agent in its own way.

The Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum is a Spanish institution working to reach universal goals where everyone will feel comfortable in its halls, by claiming to be “everyone’s museum”.¹⁴⁵ In its two-worded simplicity, this claim underscores further projects organised by the museum. For instance, the recent changes in the structure of exhibitions, which use themes which reflect societal concerns. Thus, the museum aligns itself with the idea of re-writing the past so that visitors can reflect on the past and the present and perhaps, think about the future. This is not supposed to sound like an Orwellian nightmare, “Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past”.¹⁴⁶ Rather it is a reflection on the idea that history is a part of a civilized society which means it belongs to people. The Thyssen wants visitors entering the museum to feel like their story is being heard and valued. Moreover, it attains to ICOM’s proposal of museums being fully conscious of their role within society.¹⁴⁷ In this museum’s case, one way it is achieving this is by considering these stories, immersed in contemporary issues, as a part of the museum.

Regarding previously mentioned theories on the social museum, the Thyssen is seemingly putting these into action in a variety of ways. Peter Vergo’s *New Museology* stated that the visitor should play a more active role within the museum.¹⁴⁸ The museum is consciously trying to bring in the visitor’s perspective by its use of eight societal themes, which reflect concerns of people in their day-to-day life, for its major exhibitions. Nonetheless, these themes are selected by the museum’s decision makers not by the general public which, to some extent, means the museum maintains a slightly elitist or at least paternalistic attitude to its visitors. This could be further revised by considering Ruiz Gómez’s proposal on *Integral Museology*, where she demands “an increased participation of communities”.¹⁴⁹ Her analysis and examination on ways museums can work together with communities, stresses the ICOM’s definition of a museum, which underlines ways museums can work both “professionally and

¹⁴⁵ Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, “Memoria de sostenibilidad 2019”, 1.

¹⁴⁶ Orwell, *1984*.

¹⁴⁷ International Council of Museums, “Museum Definition”.

¹⁴⁸ Vergo, *The New Museology*, 1.

¹⁴⁹ Ruiz Gómez, “The discussion on today’s museums”, 76.

with the participation of communities”.¹⁵⁰ I would like to propose this to be understood in a more interlinked way, whereby museum professionals actively work together with the community that they serve. This means creating new roles for the curators. For example, scholars, such as Max Ross, who observed the curator as an interpreter of cultural meanings or Hubertus Kohle who perceived the curator as a mediator in the digital age. In turn, the museum could perhaps be more dynamic and take note of different themes which also affect the community which might not have been included beforehand or even shift their perspective and the way of handling those it has already considered.

Nonetheless, the Thyssen does seem to include Anthony Shelton’s proposal on Critical Museology, which targeted the reconsideration on how museums are working with their collections.¹⁵¹ Hence, the museum is taking a closer look at what artworks it has to offer, ranging from those which have been in the museum since its foundation in 1992 and more recent acquisitions made by the baroness Carmen Thyssen. By conducting thorough and meticulous curatorial work the museum is considering how these artworks, together with other loans, can work together to bring awareness of contemporary issues. Even though the museum does propose eight main themes in this regard, it has yet to find ways to target three of these, for they haven’t been addressed in any exhibition to this day, such as the link between art and science and the focus on art and LGTBI+ and non-binary identities.¹⁵² It is one thing for the museum to be aware of these contemporary issues but, if there are no actual physical exhibitions, then the museum’s website could be criticized as paying a kind of digital lip service but not actually doing anything. Specifically, on the theme of LGTBI+ and non-binary Identities, I believe the Thyssen Museum could play a more active role by staging an actual exhibition that shares critical assessments showing how this theme has evolved throughout art history, in a similar fashion to what has recently been done with the case of women in the arts. This is a sensitive and complex area, but the museum should try to reflect the views of as wide a range of people as possible.

The museum, with the help of TBA21, has used artworks to address the important, almost existential, issue of climate change.¹⁵³ This aligns with Nick Merriman’s ideas for an ethical museum ecology, where he understands nature to be of equal importance to human creations. Nonetheless, these exhibitions were somewhat self-limiting by only using work from

¹⁵⁰ International Council of Museums, “Museum Definition”.

¹⁵¹ Shelton, “Critical Museology”, 11.

¹⁵² Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, “The Museum in the Cultural Debate”.

¹⁵³ Merriman, “30 Years After the New Museology”, 186.

contemporary artists. Notwithstanding the fact that TBA21 must be praised for encouraging new artists and allowing them a safe space, within established art museums, to contribute their creations to the history of art, museums must also reconsider how artworks in the past might have been concerned with similar issues. Or, to a further extent, how certain artworks, even if they weren't dealing with these issues per se can illuminate and guide a re-evaluation on the subject at hand. I believe the museum could do more work within this field of positive categorization by re-signifying artworks by creatively using them to illustrate a certain theme.

Regarding challenges and limitations of the study, it must be noted that I only had access to brief explanatory summaries and videos describing each of the exhibitions covered. Access to the complete catalogues would have proved useful to thoroughly observe and closely examine the specific artworks included in each exhibition and how these might attain to a social issue. To go any deeper, I would need the necessary permissions to carry out this research at the museum itself and to interview key members of staff. Moreover, the research was limited only to the examination of large temporary exhibitions as these were the ones that the Records primarily focused on. However, there are other ways that the Thyssen presents its collection in a selective way such as various online and in-situ audio-visual themed tours of its collection. Using the Thyssen's own Records as sources reveal certain limits for the these were only published from 2017 onwards, and the museum hasn't yet published the Record for 2023. It may be that the museum targeted societal concerns before 2017 but other sources of evidence would be needed to show this. Finally, primarily using information provided by the museum is bound to introduce some bias. It is clear that the museum wants to present itself in the best possible light to show that it is, indeed, "everyone's museum".¹⁵⁴

By encompassing far-reaching social agendas, museums worldwide are seeking to become inclusive and thought-provoking centres in which all visitors feel welcome. This can be perceived most simply in the mottos they choose to ascribe to their museums. As shown in this paper, the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum in Madrid, chose to use "everyone's museum".¹⁵⁵ In London, the banner facing the south-bank of the Tate Modern, reads "Tate Modern – Free and Open to All".¹⁵⁶ Both have chosen catchy and straight-forward phrases which stress the same ideals, the museum being inclusive to all. However, with this paper I hope to have demonstrated that these kinds of statements require a critical and thorough examination of the extent to which they are actually implemented by the museums. Thus, their choice of strategies

¹⁵⁴ Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, "Memoria de sostenibilidad 2019", 1.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Tate Modern "Plan Your Visit".

to work towards their commitment with society must be fully reviewed. This paper does show that there has been progress in making art museums more inclusive and addressing societal issues, as evidenced with the case study of the Thyssen. Art museums in the 21st century can be exhilarating, stimulating, educational, relevant, and inclusive spaces which can act as mirrors of society and make society reflect upon itself. It is up to society to work together with the museum and its curators to make this happen and in turn, be able to observe their reflection in the mirror that is the museum.

Appendices

Name of Exhibition	Start Year	End Year	Theme	Theme 2	Theme 3	Blockbuster (Visits)	TBA21
From Impressionism to the Avant-Garde: Works on Paper	1994	1994					
The Golden Age of the Dutch Landscape	1995	1995					
André Derain (1880-1954)	1995	1995					
Cualladó. Viewpoints	1995	1996					
From Canaletto to Kandinsky. Masterpieces from the Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection	1996	1996					
Spanish Rugs in the National Museum of Decorative Arts	1996	1996					
Surrealist Plays	1997	1997					
George Grosz. The Berlin Years	1997	1997	CIT				
The Triumph of Venus, the image of women in 18th-century Venetian painting	1997	1998					
Auguste Macke (1887-1914)	1998	1998					
Schommer. The living museum	1998	1998					
Paul Klee	1998	1998					
Sorolla and The Hispanic Society	1998	1999					
El Greco. Identity and Transformation	1999	1999				Top 5. 229.473 visits	
Morandi. Anthological exhibition	1999	1999					
Painted natures from Brueghel to Van Gogh	1999	2000					
Gazes without Time. Drawings, Paintings and Sculptures from the Jan and Marie-Anne Kruger-Poniatowski Collection	2000	2000					
Spanish Painting from the Meadows Collection	2000	2000					
Victor Hugo. Drawings: Chaos in the brush...	2000	2000					
Exploring Eden. 19th century American landscape	2000	2001					
Mediterranean Renaissance	2001	2001					
Canaletto. An Imaginary Venice	2001	2001	CIT				
Form. The classical ideal in modern art	2001	2002					
The Three Wise Men of the East. History of a Tradition	2002	2002					
Braque (1882-1963)	2002	2002					
Sisley. Poet of Impressionism	2002	2002					
Robert and Sonia Delaunay (1905-1941)	2002	2003					
Musical Analogies. Kandinsky and his contemporaries	2003	2003					
Willi Baumeister 1889-1955	2003	2004					
Catalan Painting from Naturalism to Noucentisme	2004	2004					
Andalusian painting in the Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection	2004	2004					
Gauguin and the Origins of Symbolism	2004	2005				Top 3. 279.591 visits	
Brücke. The birth of German Expressionism	2005	2005					
Corot. Nature, emotion, memory	2005	2005					
Mimesis. Modern Realisms 1918-1945	2005	2006					
Russian avant-garde	2006	2006					
Bae Bien-U	2006	2006					
From Cranach to Monet. Masterpieces from the Pérez Simón Collection	2006	2006					
Sargent / Sorolla	2006	2007					
The Mirror and the Mask. Portraiture in the Century of Picasso	2007	2007					
PHotoespaña 07: Lynn Davis	2007	2007					
Van Gogh. The last landscapes	2007	2007				Top 4. 237.717 visits	
Richard Estes	2007	2007					

Figure 1. Table showing the list of exhibitions in the Thyssen Bornemisza (from 1994 to 2024), Part 1.

Name of Exhibition	Start Year	End Year	Theme	Theme 2	Theme 3	Blockbuster (Visits)	TBA21
Modern Masters of Drawing	2007	2008					
Dürer and Cranach. Art and Humanism in Renaissance Germany	2008	2008					
Modigliani and his time	2008	2008				Top 6. 226.355 visits	
PHotoespaña 08: Florian Maier-Aichen	2008	2008					
Avigdor Arikha	2008	2008					
Miró: Earth	2008	2008					
1914! The Avant-Garde and the Great War	2008	2009					
The Shadow	2009	2009					
Matisse: 1917-1941	2009	2009				Top 7. 225.230 visits	
Frantín-Latour (1836-1904)	2009	2010					
Tears of Eros	2010	2010					
Monet and Abstraction	2010	2010				Top 10. 179.099 visits	
Ghirlandaio and Renaissance in Florence	2010	2010					
Mario Testino. All or Nothing	2010	2011					
Impressionist Gardens	2010	2011					
Jean-Léon Germ (1824-1904)	2011	2011					
Heroines	2011	2011	FEM				
Antonio López	2011	2011				Top 1. 317.649 visits	
Painted Architectures	2011	2012	CIT				
Berthe Morisot: The Impressionist Painter	2012	2012	FEM				
Chagall	2012	2012	MIG				
Into India. South Asian Paintings from the San Diego Museum of Art	2012	2012	DEC				
Hopper	2012	2012				Top 1. 322.223 visits	
Gauguin and the Journey to the Exotic	2012	2013				Top 9. 199.881 visits	
The art of Cartier	2013	2013					
Impressionism and the Open Air. From Corot to Van Gogh	2013	2013					
Hyperrealism 1967-2012	2013	2013					
Pissarro	2013	2013					
Surrealism and the dream	2013	2014					
Cézanne site / non-site	2014	2014				Top 8. 203.837 visits	
Darío de Regoyos (1857-1913)	2014	2014					
Myths of Pop	2014	2014					
Alma-Tadema and Victorian painting in the Pérez Simón Collection	2014	2014					
Hubert de Givenchy	2014	2015					
American Impressionism	2015	2015					
Raoul Dufy	2015	2015					
Paul Delvaux: A Walk Through Love and Death	2015	2015					
Zurbarán: a new look	2015	2015					
Vogue like a painting	2015	2015					
Edvard Munch. Archetypes	2015	2016					
The Illusion of the American Frontier	2015	2016	DEC				
Madrid Realists	2016	2016					
Wyeth: Andrew and Jamie in the Studio	2016	2016					
Caravaggio and the Northern Painters	2016	2016					

Figure 2. Table showing the list of exhibitions in the Thyssen Bornemisza (from 1994 to 2024), Part 2.

Name of Exhibition	Start Year	End Year	Theme	Theme 2	Theme 3	Blockbuster (Visits)	TBA21
Caillebotte, painter and gardener	2016	2016					
Renoir: intimacy	2016	2017					
Bulgari and Roma	2017	2017					
Masterpieces from Budapest. From the Renaissance to the Avant-Gardes	2017	2017					
Rafael Moneo. A theoretical reflection from the profession. Archival materials 1961-2016	2017	2017					
The Renaissance in Venice. The Triumph of Beauty and the Destruction of Painting	2017	2017					
Sonia Delaunay. Art, design and fashion	2017	2017	FEM				
Picasso/Lautrec	2017	2018					
Art Lesson	2017	2018	COM				
Sorolla and Fashion	2018	2018					
Purple, of John Akomfrah	2018	2018	CLI				TBA21
Victor Vasarely. The birth of Op Art	2018	2018					
Monet/Boudin	2018	2018					
Beckmann. Figures in exile	2018	2019	MIG				
Balthus	2019	2019					
Amar Kanwar	2019	2019	CLI	DEC			TBA21
Balenciaga and Spanish Painting	2019	2019					
More-than-human	2019	2019	CLI				TBA21
The Impressionists and photography	2019	2020					
Rembrandt and Amsterdam Portraiture, 1590-1670	2020	2020					
Joan Jonas. Moving Off the Land II	2020	2020	CLI				TBA21
Move forward at a slow pace	2020	2020					TBA21
German Expressionism	2020	2021					
Georgia O'Keefe	2021	2021	FEM				
Claudia Comte. After Nature	2021	2021	FEM	CLI			TBA21
The Magritte machine	2021	2022					
Walid Raad. Cotton Under My Feet	2021	2022	DEC				TBA21
American Art in the Thyssen Collection	2021	2022	CIT	DEC			
Ragnar Kjartansson. Paisajes emocionales	2022	2022	CLI				TBA21
Hyperreal. The art of trompe l'oeil	2022	2022					
Alex Katz	2022	2022					
Picasso/Chanel	2022	2023					
The third pole. Himali Singh Soin with music by David Soin Tappeser	2022	2023	FEM	CLI			TBA21
En el ojo del huracán. Vanguardia en Ucrania, 1900-1930	2022	2023	DEC				
Lucian Freud. New Perspectives	2023	2023					
Wu Tsang. Of Whales	2023	2023	CLI				TBA21
André Butzer	2023	2023					
The Occult in the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collections	2023	2023					
Liquid intelligence	2023	2024	CLI				TBA21
Women Masters	2023	2024	FEM				
The intimate realism of Isabel Quintanilla	2024	2024	FEM				
Stephanie Comilang. In Search of Life	2024	2024	FEM	DEC	MIG		TBA21
Rosario de Velasco	2024	2024	FEM				
Colonial Memory in the Thyssen Collections	2024	2024	DEC				
Gabriele Münter	2024	2025	FEM				

Figure 3. Table showing the list of exhibitions in the Thyssen Bornemisza (from 1994 to 2024), Part 3.

Colour Code	Theme
FEM	Feminism(s) and Equality
CLI	Climate Emergency
CIT	Cities that Care
MIG	Migrations
SCI	Art and Science Synergies
DEC	Decolonialism
COM	The Museum of the Commons
LGTBI+	LGTBI+ and non-binary

Figure 4. Key with Colour Coding for the previous table.

Illustrations



Figure 5. Renato Guttuso, *Caffè Greco*, 1976, acrylic on lined cardboard, 186 x 243 cm (Madrid, Thyssen-Bornemisza National Museum, inv. Nr. 573 (1977.14))

Illustration Credits

Figure 5. Digital reproduction of the painting, downloaded on June 14, 2024. Courtesy of Thyssen-Bornemisza National Museum, Madrid. Reproduced in accordance with the Terms of Use corresponding to Fundación Colección Thyssen-Bornemisza, F.S.P. and VEGAP, Madrid.

Bibliography

Primary Literature

“Into India. South Asian Paintings from the San Diego Museum of Art: Exhibition Brochure.” *Thyssen-Bornemisza National Museum*. (2012): 1-2.

Memoria de sostenibilidad 2017: El arte como forma de comunicar, Madrid: Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza.

Memoria de actuaciones y sostenibilidad 2018, Madrid: Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza.

Memoria de Actividades y Sostenibilidad 2019: El museo de todos, Madrid: Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza.

Memoria de Actividades y Sostenibilidad 2020: El museo de todos, Madrid: Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza.

Memoria de Actividades y Sostenibilidad 2021: El museo de todos, Madrid: Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza.

Memoria de Actividades y Sostenibilidad 2022: El museo de todos, Madrid Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza.

Zhou, Feifei. “En casa, y en casa lejos de casa: Una conversación entre Feifei Zhou y Stephanie Comilang” In *Stephanie Comilang: En busca de la vida*, edited by P. Escalona and A. Guerra, 3-31. Madrid: Agencia Letraherida, 2024.

Secondary Literature

Ayala, Iñigo; Cuenca-Amigo, Macarena and Cuenca, Jaime. "The Future of Museums. An Analysis from the Visitors Perspective in the Spanish Context." *The Journal of Arts Management, Law and Society* 51, 3 (2021): 171-187.

Beck, James. "The End of Blockbuster Exhibitions?" *Notes in the History of Art* 20, 3 (2001): 1-4.

Boyd, Alison. "The Visible and Invisible: Circulating Images of the Barnes Foundation Collection." In *Images of the Art Museum: Connecting Gaze and Discourse in the History of Museology*, edited by E.M. Troelenberg and M. Savino, 133-154. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017.

Brown, Karen and Mairesse, François. "The definition of the museum through its social role." *Curator: The Museum Journal* 61, 4 (2018): 525-539.

Carrier, David. "The Display of Art: An Historical Perspective." *Leonardo* 20, 1 (1987): 83-86.

Coffee, Kevin. *Museums and Social Responsibility: A Theory of Social Practice*. London / New York: Routledge, 2023.

Curran, Emily. "Half the Students in Your Museum are Female: Gender Equity and Museum Programs." *The Journal of Museum Education* 17, 2 (1992): 14-17.

Findlen, Paula. "The Museum: Its Classical Etymology and Renaissance Genealogy." *Journal of the History of Collections* 1, 1 (1989): 59-78.

Gombrich, Ernest. *The Story of Art*. New York: Phaidon Publishers Inc., 1950.

Hessel, Katy. *The Story of Art Without Men*. London: Hutchinson Heinmann, 2022.

- Jordanova, Ludmilla. "Objects of Knowledge: A Historical Perspective on Museums." In *The New Museology*, edited by P. Vergo, 22-40. London: Reaktion Books, 1989.
- Jurčišinová, Kaja., Wilders, Marline and Visser, Janneke "The Future of Blockbuster Exhibitions After the Covid-19 Crisis: The Case of the Dutch Museum Sector." *Museum International* 73, 3-4 (2021): 20-31.
- Kohle, Hubertus. "The Museum Goes Collaborative: On the Digital Escapades of an Analogue Medium." In *Images of the Art Museum: Connecting Gaze and Discourse in the History of Museology*, edited by E.M. Troelenberg and M. Savino, 317-332. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017.
- Lubar, Steven. "Curator as Auteur." *The Public Historian* 36, 1 (2014): 71-76.
- McLean, Kathleen. "Museum Exhibitions and the Dynamics of Dialogue." *Daedalus* 128, 3 (1999): 83-107.
- Merriman, Nick. "30 Years After the New Museology: What's Changed?" *Prace Etnograficzne* 48, 2 (2020): 173-187.
- O'Brien, Gillian. "Beyond Storytelling: Exhibiting the Past. A Report on Exhibition Development and Delivery." *Liverpool John Moores University* (2020): 1-18.
- Ross, Max. "Interpreting the New Museology." *Museum and Society* 2, 2 (2004): 84-100.
- Ruiz Gómez, Ariadna. "The discussion on today's museum: the social debate. 20th century parameters in the 21st century and Ibero-American debates." *DATJournal* 8, 4 (2023): 71-83.
- Shelton, Anthony. "Critical Museology A Manifesto." *Museum Worlds: Advances in Research* 1 (2013): 7-23

Smith Bautista, Susana. "The Social Function of Museums in the Digital Age." *The International Journal of the Arts in Society* 4, 2 (2009): 9-19.

The Burlington Magazine 130, 1018. 1988. "Still too many exhibitions." January 1988.

Troelenberg, Eva-Maria. "An Introduction." In *Images of the Art Museum: Connecting Gaze and Discourse in the History of Museology*, edited by E.M. Troelenberg and M. Savino, 1-27. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017.

Trofanenko, Brenda. "The Public Museum and Identity: Or, the Question of Belonging" *Counterpoints* 272 (2006): 95-109

Vergo, Peter. "Introduction." In *The New Museology*, edited by P. Vergo, 1-5. London: Reaktion Books, 1989.

Vergo, Peter. "The Reticent Object." In *The New Museology*, edited by P. Vergo, 41-59. London: Reaktion Books, 1989.

Zbucheá, Alexandra. "Museums as Theme Parks – A Possible Marketing Approach?" *Management Dynamics in the Knowledge Economy* 3, 3 (2015): 483-507.

Websites

Harvard Magazine. "Edwin Binney, 3rd: Brief life of a philanthropic art collector: 1925-1986." 2021. Accessed on 26 April 2024.

<https://www.harvardmagazine.com/2020/12/feature-vita-edwin-binney-third>

International Council of Museums. "Museum Definition." Resources: Standards and Guidelines. 2022. Accessed on 15 April 2024.

<https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>

International Council of Museums Nederland. “Museum Definition.” About ICOM. 2022.

Accessed on 5 June 2024. <https://icom.nl/en/about-icom/museum-definition>

Internet Archive: WayBack Machine. “Snapshot from December 4th, 2022.” Accessed on 15 May 2024.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20221204141903/https://www.museothyssen.org/acerca-museo/museo-debate-cultural>

Internet Archive: WayBack Machine. “Snapshot from September 28th, 2023.” Accessed on 15 May 2024.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20230928175136/https://www.museothyssen.org/acerca-museo/museo-debate-cultural>

Oldenburg, Ray and Christensen, Karen. 2023. “Third places, true citizen spaces.” UNESCO: The UNESCO Courier. October 2023. Accessed on 13 May 2024.

<https://courier.unesco.org/en/articles/third-places-true-citizen-spaces>

Tate Modern. “Plan Your Visit.” Tate Modern Home Page. Accessed on 11 June 2024.

<https://www.tate.org.uk/visit/tate-modern>

TBA21 Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary. “Stephanie Comilang Search for Life / En busca de la vida.” YouTube. March 2024. Exhibition video, 5:06. Accessed on 26 April 2024. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xpL9ldq_ojw

TBA21 Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary. “Who we are.” About. Accessed on 26 April 2024. <https://tba21.org/about>

Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum. “Collection.” Accessed on 27 May 2024.

<https://www.museothyssen.org/en/collection>

Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum. “El futuro de los museos.” #Thyssenmultimedia. 2022.

Accessed on March 12 2024. <https://www.museothyssen.org/thyssenmultimedia/futuro-museos>

Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum. “Heroines: the exhibition.” #Thyssenmultimedia. 2011.
Accessed on 24 April 2024.

<https://www.museothyssen.org/en/thyssenmultimedia/heroines-exhibition>

Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum. “History of the Collection I.” Collection. Accessed on 29
April 2024. <https://www.museothyssen.org/en/collection/history-collection-I>

Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum. “History of the Collection I.” Collection. Accessed on 3rd
June 2024. <https://www.museothyssen.org/en/collection/history-collection-I/II>

Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum. “Migrations.” The Museum in the Cultural Debate. Accessed
on 4th June 2024. <https://www.museothyssen.org/en/about-us/museum-cultural-debate/migrations>

Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum. “The Museum in the Cultural Debate.” About Us. Accessed
on 30 April 2024. <https://www.museothyssen.org/en/about-us/museum-cultural-debate>

Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum. “Picasso: The Sacred and the Profane.” Exhibitions. 2024.
Accessed on 14 April 2024. <https://www.museothyssen.org/en/exhibitions/picasso-sacred-and-profane>

Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum. “Robert and Sonia Delaunay (1905-1941).” Exhibitions.
2003. Accessed on 14 April 2024. <https://www.museothyssen.org/en/exhibitions/robert-and-sonia-delaunay-1905-1941>

Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum. “Sonia Delaunay. Art, design and fashion.” Exhibitions.
2017. Accessed on 14 April 2024.
<https://www.museothyssen.org/en/exposiciones/sonia-delaunay-art-design-and-fashion>

Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum. “Women Masters.” Exhibitions. 2024. Accessed on 24 April
2024. <https://www.museothyssen.org/en/exhibitions/women-masters>