

The Transformation of the Louvre into a Public Museum

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Nineteenth-century France underwent great social, political, technological and cultural change as a result of the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution during the previous century. France was progressing toward reformation and a modern state. Radical changes in the structure of social classes and clashes between the old and new regime caused people hardships. Nonetheless, citizens had already begun to experience new liberties and equalities. The appearance of new classes such as the petit bourgeois and the industrial working class, the development of new technologies for the production of industrial goods and photography, and the proliferation of education, shaped Paris into a new city. Many different cultural institutions appeared in Paris at this time. The most important institution for people and art was the Louvre museum.

The Louvre galleries took on a new identity as the first national museum in France. Originally a palace for the kings, it was not until 1774 that plans for a museum were first proposed, prompted by the philosophy of the Enlightenment.¹ In 1793, the Louvre was opened to the public as a museum and the collection was designated public property. As an embodiment of the new democratic order, the museum required a new approach to displaying its collection, since expropriated royal treasures were to be presented in a democratic public setting.² Through the reconfiguration that developed, the Louvre contributed to the formation of the modern concept of a museum. During the nineteenth century in France, new relationships were formed between the public and the Louvre museum.

The Grande Galerie of the Muséum Central des Arts, the name of the Louvre at the time, was opened to the public in 1793.³ The Louvre occupied center stage in the public life of the capital city of Paris and was a source of national pride. It served as a symbol of the success of the revolution and as a cultural counterpart to the political ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity. This inaugural opening of the museum was part of the celebration of the first anniversary of the birth of the Republic. Admission was free to all, boasting the nation's artistic heritage and its bonds of equality and citizenship.

Under the absolute monarchy, works of art had been a source of enjoyment for only the royalty or the aristocracy. A fraction of the public – academicians, artists and intellectuals – had limited access for the purpose of demonstrating the monarchy's glory, wealth and absolute power. Since the Civil and Industrial Revolution, people advocated for the principle of equality through law and philosophy. Consequently a new urban culture was born in Paris, accommodating people of different classes. Visitors to the Louvre were diverse in their rank, gender, occupation, and nationality. Those who had been denied any access to arts were now, at the Louvre, where the vulgar met the refined, "equal" citizens. Of course, people would have reacted to the exhibits in different ways in accordance with their interests, knowledge, gender, and class.

The first exhibition in the Louvre was held by the Académie Royal de Peinture et Sculpture in 1699. However, this was only for an elite segment of the population. In 1793, the Galerie du Muséum Central des Arts and the annual Salon exhibition opened for the public. The Galerie opened permanently on the following November 18 (the annual Salon exhibitions were temporary). The Académie Royal de Peinture et Sculpture and the Académie Royal d'Architecture merged into the Académie des Beaux-Arts and the system was changed significantly In 1795. From then on, all artists – not just members of the

Academy – could submit their work to the annual Salon in the Grand Galerie.⁵ As a result, art exhibitions developed not only for living artists but also for the general public. When the Louvre became a public museum, its displays and labels required adjustment to a viewer-friendly fashion. Throughout the nineteenth century, a new visitor-oriented method of display and labeling was developed and included new classification principles governing the arrangement of exhibits. Visitors could see both the national collection and works of living artists in the museum. It became the people's palace.

In the late eighteenth century, the Louvre displayed its collection according to particular artistic virtues or masterpieces' fame, which only connoisseurs or art collectors could understand. This was the gentlemanly type of installation. Throughout the nineteenth century, the collections were rearranged and displayed in a new way, according to art history and medium (e.g., painting, sculpture, ceramics, etc).⁶ The Grand Galerie was designed to orient viewers through the installations. The art historical arrangement was well suited to provide a narrative for the visitors.

The Louvre grew in size and stature throughout nineteenth century.⁴ Independent of any regime, it developed into a modern museum with the inauguration of several galleries such as the Cour Carrée, the Grand Galerie, and the Petite Galerie. The Assyrian Museum was created in 1847, and in 1857 the first exhibition of the Salle des États was held in the Louvre.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the Louvre required instruments of public instruction for understanding its collections, such as clear labels indicating the artist and subject for objects, a guidebook and other types of explanatory materials.⁷ Different visitors, such as art lovers, artists, educated people, the bourgeoisie, and working people, would obviously have different attitudes toward the collections. Working-class visitors would likely respond most positively to these didactic instruments. By the 1860s and 1870s, greater emphasis was placed on the necessity of instruments of public instruction. However, its development ceased due to the turbulent social situation. In 1871, when the Paris Commune had taken over Paris, the Louvre was destroyed by a fire set by Communards. During the last decades of the nineteenth century, the Louvre redefined its identity.

During the nineteenth century, the prosperous age of the museum in Europe, the Louvre was a good example of an instrument of both national glory and civic engagement. Since the establishment of the Louvre as a public art museum, the concept of the museum has been expanded. The influence of the Louvre continued in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries in many public museums founded throughout Europe and other places under the sway of European culture, such as New York, Boston, and other American cities.⁸

In the course of the nineteenth century, the Louvre was in the process of becoming an art museum. However, it had yet to become a full-fledged public museum (as the term is understood today). The Louvre made some attempts for public understanding, through its development of exhibitions, installations, and instruments of public instruction. The attempts made by the Louvre emphasized national glory, the achievements of the Revolution, and a broad manifestation of political issues, rather than public cultivation. In the nineteenth-century Louvre, educational programs were not developed to consider different responses of people. There were only programs for artists, in which they were educated about the history of the museum such as the Academy and Salon.

The most interesting and valuable point uncovered during my research was the complimentary responses and attitudes of the various visitors to the nineteenth-century Louvre. People from different backgrounds were able to experience works of art formerly

inaccessible to most. Although the Louvre then offered few public programs for understanding its collections, it began to acknowledge the existence of the public at the museum. It can't be said that the nineteenth-century Louvre became a real civic space, but it is true that the greater population was welcome to view its collection. This was a very significant development for the public in museum history.

¹ It is uncertain who first proposed a public exhibition of the king's pictures, but circumstantial evidence points in the direction of Louis Petit de Bachaumont, the influential amateur and pioneer of historical preservation of national artistic treasures. Andrew McClellan, *Inventing the Louvre: Art, Politics, and the Origins of the Modern Museum in Eighteenth-Century Paris*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999, p. 15.

² Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, London/New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 21.

³ Alexandra Bonfante-Warren, *The Louvre*, New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2000, p. 31.

⁵ Alexandra Bonfante-Warren, *The Musée D'Orsay*, New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2000, p. 11.

⁶ Duncan, p. 25.

⁴ In 1824, the Galerie d'Angoulême, for the display of sculpture from the Renaissance to the eighteenth century, and the Musée Charles were inaugurated; in 1827, the Musée Dauphin was created; in 1850, the Mexican Museum opened; in 1851, the Salon Carré, Salon des Sept Cheminées, and Galerie d'Apollon, restored by Duban, were inaugurated; and in 1852, the Musée des Souverains was created. Pierre Rosenberg, *The Louvre: An Architectural History*, New York: Vendome Press, 1995, pp. 217-18.

⁷ Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*, London/New York: Routledge, 1997, p. 167.

⁸ Duncan, p. 32.