

The Art Museum as a Resource

“[The museum] is probably our richest cultural resource. It brings to our community some of the best artists and the best artwork. And kids don’t have to see it in books; they can actually see it in person and walk around it.”

—Carole Debusse, art teacher, South High School, Omaha, Nebraska

Collecting is a basic human tendency; it spans the history of humankind and appears in many cultures. People acquire all kinds of things, from buttons and antique furniture to dolls and jewelry. And they collect for many reasons. We may desire to own a certain type of object—for example, pottery—because we love its diversity of colors, textures, and forms. Or we might obtain some things, such as coins or stamps, to learn more about their history. People also collect items for rituals, whether religious, communal, or personal; or, our motives may be sentimental or superstitious. And, a collection can remind us of faraway places, loved ones, important experiences, and even ideas. The human interest in collecting is as varied as the diversity of cultural values throughout the world.

Organizing and Displaying Collections

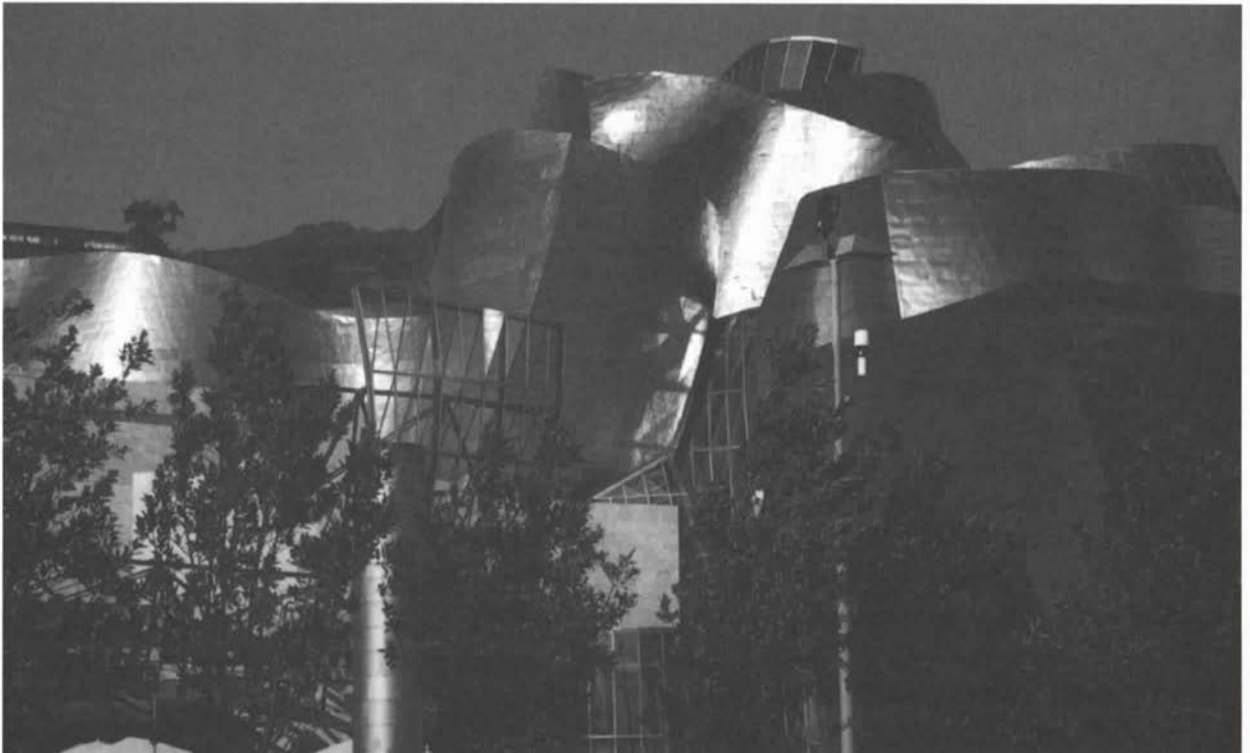
Accumulating a collection often leads to a desire to organize it or to somehow keep track of its pieces. A large collection may even necessitate the creation of a list or catalogue. Related to this process of organization is one of maintenance; certain collections may require special care or constant upkeep.

Collecting also leads to curiosity about the objects, and this can be an impetus for questioning and research. In turn this may spur a continuous process of learning, which for some collectors becomes a lifelong passion. Collecting may even lead to the development of expert knowledge in a particular area. Such knowledge may then provide the basis for improved or more finely tuned methods of organization and an increased understanding and appreciation of the importance of proper

maintenance. As you can see, the ramifications of collecting can quickly multiply.

Related to the collecting process is a basic desire to display one's collection. Acquiring often inspires a wish to allow others to admire the objects that we find interesting or beautiful, and that we have invested time and effort to learn about, organize, and maintain. We might create a simple display of a collection so that it is visible and accessible to ourselves as well as to family members and friends. Or we may devise elaborate showcases that emphasize certain qualities and connections or that reveal our collection's significance in a meaningful way. Such displays can also be an invitation or means to discuss a collection with visitors and fellow collectors.

1.1 Frank Gehry, Guggenheim Museum, 1997. Bilbao, Spain. Photo © Lynn Simon.



The activity of displaying a group of acquisitions can add layers of meaning to its parts and to the collection as a whole. For example, it may increase our appreciation for the objects or even a collector's overall enjoyment in the process of collecting. Such activity also may allow both viewers and collectors a chance to develop and clarify their understanding of individual objects. This may then spur a collector to modify, add to, or otherwise fine-tune or "improve upon" the collection. As you may have experienced, collecting often encourages an avid and meticulous dedication—whether the subject is antiquarian books or baseball cards. Over time, such dedicated efforts have been the basis for many of the world's greatest collections of art.

This first chapter explores what the art museum has to offer to the general public. It then provides an overview of the functions and history of the museum. Next, an argument is presented for making the museum an integral part of the art curriculum. Lastly, the chapter offers a glimpse of topics to be covered in the rest of the book.

Why Use the Museum?

Art museums play an important role in many human societies. By their very nature, museums reflect the basic human impulse to collect. They are also reflections of the attending characteristics of organization, maintenance, and display. Museums offer evidence of our human cultural heritage, they inform us of our creative nature, and they provide excellent and often inspirational examples of the visual arts. In the best-case scenario, collections of art also prompt viewers to think about art objects in new and different ways. Another way to think of museums is that they offer opportunities to learn, and in addition they inspire us, enlarge our vision, and sometimes change our perspectives.

By collecting objects from various historical periods, art museums document multiple aspects of humankind and artistic expression, including art as a reflection of emotions, intelligence, and the human condition in general. For instance, an ancient vase may reveal the Greek ideals of beauty and balance. A painting by Mary Cassatt may embody the emotional attachment between a mother and her child. A single art object also may give evidence of an individual artist's ideas, hopes, triumphs, or misfortunes.

Most museums strive to acquire exemplary pieces, and thus their collections can also inform us of the history of artistic achievement over time. Since artistic expressions travel across art forms and subject matter, they can provide viewers with a perspective of conventions, traditions, influences, and aesthetic vocabularies. Artists naturally respond to the context of the time in which they live. So, for example, the subjects chosen by medieval artists and the ways in which they depicted those subjects can tell us much about the spirit of the time, the role of art, the evolving pictorial craft, and even the influence of the Church.

Another significant contribution of the museum is its role as a storehouse of stories—stories from many cultures and from times both past and present. Burial goods, for example, can bring to life the actions and thoughts of people who lived in Egypt thousands of years ago. And everyday objects, such as implements for eating or grooming, educate us about the diversity of approaches to domestic activities. When exposed to these stories, we can in turn reflect on our own times, culture, and values.

Museums make an important contribution to society. People who spend their time working at art museums—museum professionals—devote their lives to asking questions about art. As a result, they offer interesting ideas for museum visitors to consider.