

Art for Art and Natural History Brethren
A Brief Museum Comparison

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Private art museums fall on any lists of “roads less traveled” by tourists and popular event reviewers. One in Washington D.C. might even make a real estate list. The Corcoran Gallery of Art was officially born in 1869 when William Wilson Corcoran turned over the deeds to his lands and his art collection to a ‘self-perpetuating Board of Trustees...for the purpose of encouraging American Genius.’¹ Considered to be a collection of historical and contemporary the Corcoran, one of the only museums in D.C. to charge admission, is part of the Corcoran College of Art and Design. While tuition and enrollment continue to rise the Washington Post reveals “It has posted deficits of \$7 million-plus two years in a row.”² Today it seems like the Corcoran has a devoted, if small, following mostly of modern art lovers and art students. The latter seems appropriate, as Corcoran wanted his gallery to be “a source of assistance and encouragement for artists” as well as “a center of learning in the arts.”³

Private art museums are faring better in Europe. This might be due to the higher profile artists’ whose homes have been turned into art museums or higher profile and more visible wealthy art patrons. By way of example, the financial stability of the Spanish private art museum that was once the studio home of Salvador Dali is much more promising. Similar to the Corcoran, the Figueres Dali Theatre-museum is part of a larger network. In the Figueres case, the network is much, much larger—the Fundacio Gala-Salvador Dali.⁴ Most private art museums house modern or contemporary art. This is the case in both instances. Like the Corcoran, the Figueres purpose is to “promote, foster, disseminate, enhance prestige,

protect and defend...[modern] art.” What is most interesting is the Theatre-Museum was opened in 1974—more than 100 years after the Corcoran.⁵

While the Figueres position within a much larger foundation grants it more stability than the Corcoran in D.C. it also presents a much larger network of issues and many more restoration and care projects that need prioritizing. One issue that the conservator-restorer at the Figueres, Georgina Berini, has to attend with is geography. The Theatre-Museum battles extremely high relative humidity for part of the year and then when the winds shift extremely low humidity. Such changes, while not an issue on the east coast of America, wreak havoc on the wooden structures in the Figueres.⁶

Private art museums across the world have more commonalities than differences. Generally, they are all purposed with increasing the education of artists as well as house and exhibit modern and contemporary art. Historically most are established through the donation of a personal art collection. This donation can come after a death, or as a grand philanthropic gesture in life. They are also generally housed in either the former homes of the deceased benefactor or in some building that was bought for the specific purpose of housing the collection. In both instances the buildings become part of the museum exhibit itself. To explore this phenomenon farther, one has to only look at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice. It is almost an amalgamation of the two previously discussed. Her private art collection is housed and exhibited in her former residence, and is part of the larger international Guggenheim foundation.⁷ Peggy Guggenheim’s Venice collection is just another example to reinforce the notion that merging modern art, teaching,

and endowments of the arts are all key factors in the establishment of private art museums around the world no matter which time period may be the backdrop for the 'modernity' captured in the collections.

Are there similar congruencies within the world of natural history museums housed under Universities? The simple answer is yes. While, the Oxford University Museum of Natural History is closed to the public during 2013 in order for the building's roof to be restored, it can still be used for comparison.⁸ The OUMNH shares much in common with another OU museum, the University of Oklahoma's Sam Noble museum of natural history. Oxford's museum proudly states its purpose is "to assemble, preserve, and exhibit the University's natural history collections and to promote research, teaching, and public education in the natural sciences based on the museum's collections."⁹ While Sam Noble's mission is to inspire "minds to understand the world through collection-based research, interpretation, and education."¹⁰

Oxford founded its Honour School of Natural Science was in 1850, and by 1852 growing support managed to convince the University Commission to recommend that the University proceed with the plan to build a great museum for the sciences. At first glance that seems rather late for a University as old as Oxford to create a museum, but Davies and Hull point out a long history of collections arriving at Oxford but being housed a various locations around the University.¹¹ One standing boast about the University of Oklahoma is that it has been a university longer than Oklahoma has been a state. This is true for the natural history museum as well. The Territorial Legislature's mandate for a museum came in 1899.¹² As the

collection grew so did the need for a larger facility and in May 2000 The Sam Noble Museum of Natural History as it is seen today opened its doors.

An interesting point that should be made is that not only do the museums share similarities within their exhibits and kind (art for art and natural history for natural history), but they also share something that crosses those boundaries. Each one of the museums mentioned above hold a special connection with their localities. Each promotes the area in which they call home, for some it is at the village or city level others it might be state. This is a commonality between most museums and can be explored further to reveal the successes and failures of outlying institutions. Their ability to draw in visitors from around the world, while still giving local visitors reason to come back is one of the great strengths of museums. What this project has revealed is that regardless of content area most museums are run effectually in the same manner. Their differences may be as simple as geography or as complex as whether to exhibit paintings of still life or taxidermied still life. In the end, every museum displays snapshots of the world around them, either of the present with modern art or photography, or the vastness of deep time with fossil dioramas. Whether private or public, someone's home or their alumnus, the collection of things on exhibit for the public is all part of the same family.

Notes:

1. Corcoran.org/about-gallery/history (Accessed January 28, 2013)
2. http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-12-10/entertainment/35745700_1_bollerer-corcoran-gallery-national-gallery (Accessed January 28, 2013)
3. Holly Tank, "Dedicated to Art: William Corcoran and the Founding of His Gallery," *Washington History* 17, no. 1 (Fall/Winter, 2005): 26-53
4. Fundacio Gala-Salvador Dali, *Annual Report Memoire*, (2011), 20.
5. *Annual Report*, 1.
6. Georgina Berini, *The Conservation of Salvador Dali's work: Problems and Solutions*, (Fundacio Gala-Salvador Dali: Figueres), 5-7
7. <http://www.guggenheim-venice.it/inglese/museum/peggy.html> (Accessed February 1, 2013)
8. <http://www.oum.ox.ac.uk/> (Accessed February 3, 2013)
9. <http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/statutes/regulations/527-122.shtml> (Accessed February 3, 2013)
10. <http://www.snomnh.ou.edu/information.htm> (Accessed February 4, 2013)
11. K. C. Davies and J. Hull, *The Zoological Collections of the Oxford University Museum: A Historical Review and General Account, with Comprehensive Donor Index to the year 1975.*, (Oxford University Museum, 1976): 16
12. <http://www.snomnh.ou.edu/information.htm> (Accessed February 4, 2013)