

I.

It was Pope John Paul II who first defined the Vatican Museums as “one of the most significant doors that the Holy See opens to the world” when inaugurating the new entrance of the Vatican Museums in February 2000.¹ Indeed, the over four million people from different countries who visit the Vatican Museums each year, along with the many exhibitions organized abroad in Asia, the Americas and Europe, are a tangible sign that the museum is projected into the outside world and open to it. It has thus become a place of encounter and dialogue among cultures, civilizations, peoples and religions.

Last year we celebrated the fifth centenary of the birth of the Vatican Museums, which date back to January 14, 1506. On that date, under the pontificate of Julius II (Giuliano della Rovere, 1503–1513), the famous Laocoön sculpture group was found on the Esquiline Hill in Rome. This discovery had a great influence on the society of that time and led the Pope to arrange the first core of what would later become the Vatican Museums—the newly created Courtyard of the Statues. The year 1506 was an extraordinary one in the history of the Roman Church. Within the span of a few months it witnessed the birth of the Vatican Museums on January 14, the birth of the Pontifical Swiss Guard on January 22, and the laying of the foundation stone of the new, imposing Saint Peter’s Basilica on April 18. As a result, the Vatican under the pontificate of Julius II became a huge building site and a mine of new ideas that would form the guidelines of the sixteenth century aesthetic. Donato Bramante and Giuliano da Sangallo started the large projects of the basilica and pontifical palace, and Michelangelo Buonarroti was entrusted with the tomb of the Pope and—later on—the decoration of the Sistine Chapel. Meanwhile, Raffaello Sanzio was given the charge of painting the Pope’s private apartment. This period would later be poetically defined as “a season of giants.”

The anniversary of such an important year could not pass in silence. Throughout 2006, the Vatican Museums celebrated their unique and centuries-old history with necessary emphasis, promoting a series of initiatives that took place at different times during that year. They began with the most relevant activities, those geared to the re-evaluation and re-opening of the permanent collection. In other words, they began with those activities that all museums are called to engage in for different reasons: conservation, research, and the presentation of their heritage to the public. Among these initiatives was the April unveiling of the restored mural paintings by Pinturicchio in the Sala dei Misteri (Hall of the Mysteries) in the Borgia apartments and earlier, in March, a new display of the Museo Cristiano (Christian Museum) of Benedict XIV (Prospero Lambertini, 1740–1758), which involved detailed studies and re-ordering. Finally, in June, various sections of the Ethnological Missionary Museum were inaugurated as a result of accurate conservation work, among them sections dedicated to China, Japan, Korea, Tibet, and Mongolia.

Recent archaeological research also triggered renewed attention on the connection between the museum and its territory. In particular, the discovery of the Roman Necropolis of Santa Rosa along the ancient Via Triumphalis led to the opening of this archaeological site to the public, clearly the result of patient excavation, restoration and preparation. Another exhibition, titled *The Laocoön: The Origins of the Vatican Museums*, was dedicated to the sculptural group considered to be the first object of the pontifical collections—the Laocoön group discovered on January 14, 1506. In December, the Pontifical Apartments of the Lateran’s Apostolic Palace housed an exhibition entitled *Habemus Papam (We Have a Pope)*. As the title suggests, this exhibition featured the fascinating history of pontifical elections. Finally, from December 14 to December 16, directors of the most important museums of the world, representing five continents, were invited to the Vatican to participate in an international congress with the goal of discussing the museum’s future in the globalized society of our current millennium.

These events were a rich calendar that offered an implicit reminder of the extraordinary complexity, range of issues and rare historical peculiarity inherent to the reality of a museum steeped in time, such as those of the Vatican. They are, however, elements which themselves strictly may not

be part of our discussion, yet still serve as an introduction to this far-reaching and elaborate reflection on the role, function, future and objectives which “the museum” as an institution offers to contemporary society and to future generations. This is a theme right at the heart of the matter yet far from being solved, enshrined in statements or safeguarded by absolute values. It seems right to broach this argument within a historical framework, although clearly I can do this only by painting a few essential brush strokes. So, please bear in mind that what I present here is a historical overview with a vision that stems from a Roman/Italian perspective and consequently with a notion of the museum that is in line with the humanistic tradition.

II.

The word “museum” comes down to us from the Greek *museion*, which means “temple or residence of the Muses,” a place which in origin most likely would have been a hill or a little wood, not a building. In fact, the place which became famous throughout the ancient world as the “great museum of Alexandria” was actually only part of a far more ambitious project attributed to Alexander the Great, one in which he planned to create a new kind of city where the museum would be at the same time both its heart and mind and where a new world order would be established with its center at Alexandria of Egypt. His project incorporated lodgings for a community of roughly thirty academics, with rooms and porches where they could read, reflect, and converse. Above all, however, it was intended to house a great library so impressive it would attract people from the four corners of the earth. To better understand why Alexander gave such relevance to this vision of the museum, one would have to go back in time and space to Athens and its two schools—the Academy of Plato and the Lyceum of Aristotle—and consequently to the little wood of the Muses where Socrates once conversed with Phaedrus.

If you think of it, it is no mere coincidence that founding pilasters of great humanistic culture—art and knowledge, Parnassus and the School of Athens—are represented by Raffaello in the studio of Julius II, the pontiff considered to be the founder of the Vatican Museums. The origins of papal collections reflect the trend in Renaissance collections and how they were considered by their public of artists and personalities from the cultural circles of that era. These collections, once exhibited in the courtyards of the Roman palaces, witnessed to the nobility of their owners, not only because they provided proof of ancient family heritage but also because they mirrored a cultured and refined background—a code of living dictated by humanistic values that often inspired far-reaching idealistic political programs. However, there also existed a more public dimension to the trend of creating collections, one strongly underlined by Sixtus IV (Francesco della Rovere, 1471–1484) and best exemplified in his “donation” of the collection of the great Lateran bronzes to the Roman people, the most famous of which was the equestrian monument to Marcus Aurelius, already moved from the Lateran to the center of the Capitoline Hill in 1471. By gestures such as these, the nobility of origin and the relevance of humanistic values were symbolically indicated as valid founding elements embracing the entire civic community, rather than merely the prerogative of a restricted elite.

It is in light of this that the project of Julius II should be understood. There is a Virgilian *fil rouge* which connects the sculptures within the Courtyard of the Statues and renders them significant, from the Laocoön to the Apollo, then on to the Venus Felix and the group representing Hercules and Telephus (viewed as Aeneas with his son Ascanius). Just as Virgil celebrated the origins of Rome in the *Aeneid* through the story of the Trojan War and the adventures of Aeneas, thus crowning the political project of the Emperor Augustus, Julius II referred through his statues to the story of the *Aeneid* itself. By playing on the significance of his own name, Julius, he placed himself in continuity with the *gens Julia*, the family of Caesar and Augustus, in an effort to announce a new golden age for Christian Rome. Indeed, inscribed on the architrave of the entrance to the Courtyard of the Statues, the original

nucleus of the Vatican Museums, was Virgil's verse "Procul este, profani" (Stay away, o profane), words indicating how that place was once destined exclusively to the study and pleasure of an erudite crowd comprised of artists, scholars, and guests of the pontiff.

The harsh and dramatic events that defined the sack of Rome, the Reformation, and the Counter-Reformation brought with them a veiled disapproval of papal collections. "Sunt idola profana" (They are profane idols), declared Saint Pius V (Antonio Ghislieri, 1566–1572), referring to the ancient statues housed in the Vatican. Indeed, until the end of the seventeenth century, the few statues that had survived of the sixteenth century collection continued to be examined by baroque artists, but no further significance was attributed to them. Attention was instead paid to Church Tradition itself. In an unpredictable development, the renewal project of Saint Peter's Basilica raised a serious issue. With the destruction of the venerated building attributed to the emperor Constantine, the Roman Church had severed one of its most evident links with its roots and history, a move that provoked deep concern among the intellectual circles of the time.

In conformity with this renewal project, when Paul V (Camillo Borghese, 1605–1621) found himself obliged to abolish both the façade and atrium of the Old Basilica of Saint Peter at the beginning of the seventeenth century, putting the final touches to a project first begun a century earlier, he realized it had become necessary to create a museum to preserve its heritage. He placed there not only low-reliefs, inscriptions, and fragments of frescos and mosaics salvaged from the demolition work in the Vatican Grottos but also a series of frescos specifically designed to record the demolition history of the basilica, its main altars, its relics, and its tombs. All the monuments and paintings of images were accompanied by detailed captions in Latin. Despite the fragmentary manner in which this project was carried out, it marked the very first time that the history of the basilica was recounted across time and space, well beyond what we would define today as local history. This display therefore claims the right as the first attempt to establish a historical museum. Meanwhile in Milan, during that same period and with a similar spirit, Cardinal Federigo Borromeo inaugurated the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana. Conceived from its very beginning as an institution open to the general public rather than as a private collection, it was a project in which "library" and "academy" were conceptually integrated into a single unit characterized by strong connotations that focused on erudite research and artistic didactics, a trend later duplicated in the history of the Pinacoteca Brera.

As for the Vatican, it was not until the beginning of the eighteenth century that art collections underwent a new renaissance and artistic patrimony took on a new role. While traces of the controversies triggered by the Reformation focused attention on the first Christian communities, they also inevitably led to a new approach in the reading of history. Criticism of literary sources, compromised by the errors inherent to the manuscript tradition with its often suspect or fraudulent tampering, led scholars such as Muratori to attempt new analysis, re-open archives, and delve into further research of the medieval period. While others were tempted by Pyrronism and its radical skepticism—even going so far as to reject both written sources and the very concept of history—Clement XI (Giovanni Albani, 1700–1721) strongly opposed this critical attitude as undermining the basic ideas of both humanistic and Christian thought, intended as history of salvation. He followed a specific historical approach, and his apartments were regularly open to the public, offering an orderly exhibition of works of art and architectural models witnessing to pontifical initiatives in this field of interest. All objects on show were carefully provided with captions and organized according to themes and groups in the various rooms. He also consequently founded the Ecclesiastical Museum, entrusting it to Monsignor Francesco Bianchini, who centered the museum on the idea that collections should draw inspiration from a strong historical identity where civil history and church history intertwine. To quote from a guide book dating back to 1714, this museum was established as "an ingenious and useful effort to prove the history of primitive Christianity, sometimes reminiscent of the monuments of Gentilism, or [at least] of those first chaotic centuries so similar to Gentilism" (my translation).² Despite an inevitable dose of artless simplicity, Bianchini followed two very important intuitions. The

first was the notion that the didactic value of the image should be considered not so much as a vehicle of aesthetic contemplation but as an instrument of comprehension, and the second was an awareness of the intrinsic value of material documents from the past that could refresh past ages to those able to read them.

The Ecclesiastical Museum entrusted to Bianchini marked the second birth of the Vatican Collections, this time no longer intended as a private institution but as one open to the general public. This anticipated a trend which would be fully developed only with the birth of the Pio-Clementino Museum, a place where research and didactics clearly went hand in hand in the choice of layout, with its numerous sketches and notes drawn up and codified by the nephew of Giuseppe Bianchini in a series of fascinating engravings that testified to an ideal and virtual vision of the museum. We do not know exactly when this museum was inaugurated, but if we were to go by the date of its first inventory back in 1706, it would happily coincide today with the date of the fifth centenary of the Laocoön discovery and Vatican Collection's first birth, making that same date also the third centenary of its rebirth.

By now it was the Age of Enlightenment, an era which provided the humus of the museum as conceived in our modern world—a public institution established with the purpose of protecting a cultural patrimony and making it available to everyone. I would like to highlight two significant dates in this respect: the creation of the Capitoline Museums in 1734, at the request of Clement XII (Lorenzo Corsini, 1730–1740), and the decision of Anna Maria Luisa de Medici to link the treasures of the Gallery of the Uffizi to the city of Florence in 1737. Both of these decisions were dictated by a concern for safeguarding and preserving the works of art. Clement XII founded the Capitoline Museums to prevent the Albani Collection from being dispersed, wishing to avoid a repetition of that regrettable event ten years earlier when entire collections of ancient sculptures had disappeared. Among those that disappeared were the Giustiniani Collection, a consistent part of which had found its way to Wilton House in England, the Odescalchi Collection, gone to Philip V of Spain, and the Chigi Collection, which had made its way to Dresden in Germany. Anna Maria de Medici donated her family's huge artistic patrimony to the City of Florence realizing this was the only way to keep it intact. Not only did she have no direct heirs to whom she could leave this patrimony, she also anticipated that the imminent arrival of the Lorena family in Tuscany might prove to be a threat to the property's safeguard.

These concerns, which are clearly evident in contemporary legislation of the pre-unitary Italian States but which for brevity's sake I cannot examine here, were not limited to a few enlightened rulers but related to a generalized sensitivity right across Italy. In fact, this awareness was so developed that one even refers to this period as the “the century of museums.” Despite their strong private imprint, the Neapolitan collections, which were the result of excavations undertaken by the Bourbons at Ercolano in 1738 and at Pompei in 1748, were significant of this trend. Earlier still, there was the creation of the Lapidario in Verona, established in 1716, and the University Museum in Turin in 1723, the layout of which is attributed to one of the most eminent historians of that epoch, Scipione Maffei. Benedict XIV responded to the simple exaltation of the historicity of reason with the creation of a Christian Museum. Above its entrance he placed the inscription “Ad augendam urbis splendorem et asserendam religionis veritatem” (To promote the splendor of Rome and affirm the truth of Christian religion).

This same eagerness to create museums was manifest in the second half of the eighteenth century in many European capital cities. In Paris, beginning in 1750, the Gallery of Ancient Paintings of Maria de Medici in the Luxembourg Palace was opened to the public twice a week, and three years later in London plans were made for the creation of the British Museum, which was eventually inaugurated in 1759. William IV of Hesse founded the Kassel Museum at almost the same time, the Czarina Cathrine II founded the Hermitage in Saint Petersburg in 1764, and the Museum at Dresden was established in 1765. Within a few years, between 1774 and 1793, Spain and France also created

their public collections. During this same time in the Vatican, the Pio-Clementino Museum—which takes its name from its two founding popes, Clement XIV (Giovanni Ganganelli, 1769–1774) and Pius VI (Giovanni Braschi, 1775–1779)—witnessed huge international success. Once more we owe the creation of this collection to a concern for the safeguard of patrimonies such as the Mattei Collection and the Barberini candelabra, which had been acquired specifically to prevent them from being exported. It was then that the most spectacular part of the Vatican Museums was created and at the same time the ground set for a collection of modern art pivotal to the modern Pinacoteca and the Gallery of the Tapestries.

The museum had soon become a venue of privileged encounter for the European culture in the last thirty years of the eighteenth century, one where the meaning of “place of encounter” went way beyond mere physical space. This was thanks in part to the role of political utopia, which in those years invested antiquity, a dimension perfectly expressed by Winckelmann. It is because of this pivotal role that the Vatican collections allow a dialogue among different realities that might otherwise have been hemmed in by the rigors of etiquette, by obstacles of conflicting interest, and by different confessional choices. This paradigm is best represented by the encounter between Gustav III of Sweden, head of the Swedish Church, and Pius VI, which took place neither in the Quirinal (a venue of political significance) nor in Saint Peter’s (a venue of religious significance), but in rooms with a cultural significance—those of the Vatican Museums! This was an event immortalized both in painting and decorative art, as the pages of the newspapers of the time witness well, and one on which the pontiff acted as guide to the king, who was so enthusiastic that he would later return on many an occasion.

It was evident at this point how the institution of the museum went far beyond the boundaries of aristocratic auto-celebration and mere academic interest, but participated instead in the evolution of contemporary thought and culture. However, clearly this participation in the historical elaboration of human thinking involved a certain amount of risk. This was highlighted during Napoleon’s Italian campaign, which affected all the art collections of the Italian States simply because, for the first time in history, works of art were seized on the grounds of peace treaties and were no longer considered war booty. Taken by Napoleon to France, these works of art were housed in the new Museum of the Louvre, which had been created a few years earlier in an effort to allow the general public access to the king’s collections. The trauma this pillage generated was dramatic, and its effects lasted long after the Congress of Vienna, when these works of art were for the most part effectively returned.

However negative this traumatic episode was, it also had some positive consequences. First of all, the shock surrounding the episode highlighted the depth of general awareness and sensitivity to the role played by (what is today referred to as) cultural heritage in developing our sense of belonging and our civic and cultural identity. Secondly, the Pontifical States, in order to safeguard their own cultural patrimony, were forced to perfect laws and institutions that were eventually inherited by contemporary Italian society. Specifically, there were the legislative proceedings of Pius VII (Barnaba Chiaramonti, 1800–1823), first the Chirograph of 1802 and later the Pacca edict. These proceedings formulated the principle that gave public interest supremacy over private interest, instituted the notification of private works of art, established detailed and more restrictive legislation regarding permits for excavation and exportation, and finally, defined general principles regarding restoration. Furthermore, management of the patrimony of monuments and museums benefited from some innovative and administrative measures drawn from the French experience. It is therefore to Pius VII and his collaborators that we owe the present model for the safeguard of cultural heritage in Italy.

It was not only through this painful process that the understanding of cultural patrimony deepened and spread. The concept of “masterpieces” that had ruled the traditional Winckelmann theory of art (especially among his less shrewd followers), which placed the concept of ideal beauty on a higher plane than history, had been superseded. This was thanks also to Quatremere de Quincy, who had developed the theory that works of art should be part of a connective tissue within a denser and wider context, an urban tissue that embraced both the city and territory housing the patrimony

and one that could not be “wounded” without serious damage. This new cultural trend was perfectly understood and embraced by Antonio Canova and Carlo Fea, protagonists of the pontificate of Pius VII. Its fallout can best be witnessed both in the realization of the Chiaramonti Museum, with its Spartan yet revolutionary museography, and of the New Wing, built in more bountiful times, as well as in the new season of extensive excavations undertaken in the Roman Forum in an effort to better understand the monuments and topography of the area. In the modern and strong sense of the term, the idea of context as such did not yet exist, but signs of its development were already beginning to emerge. It was becoming more clearly visible in the rule of Roman museums from around 1850, a date when the vital cycle of the pontifical museums was about to be affected by the historical developments that came with Italian Unity. Throughout the course of the nineteenth century, museums were considered an indispensable experience, and most of the principal museums in the great European cities were created and developed during this particular period in history. While these institutions learned from the common Italian and French experience, they also showed a creative and innovative approach in line with their peculiar social and cultural contexts.

The twentieth century was marked by growing awareness at the international level, and in 1929 Pius XI (Ambrogio Ratti, 1922–1939) created the Ethnological Missionary Museum to promote inter-religious dialogue and encounter with other cultures, steps which anticipated the resolution of the Roman Question and the signing of the Lateran Pacts between Italy and the Holy See on February 11, 1929. On this occasion the role of cultural heritage took on crucial significance, as it was then that the Pope opened the great artistic, historical, and religious patrimony of the Vatican Museums to the entire world, going as far as to open an entrance from Italy itself. As can be imagined, to allow access to a neighboring state without any formal passage of frontiers was, at the time, a unique situation in the world. In more recent times it was Paul VI (Giovanni Montini, 1963–1978) who renewed the relationship between sacred art and the contemporary world by creating the Collection of Modern Religious Art in 1973. And more recently, prior to the convention organized in December 2006 by the Vatican Museums, in the course of an audience kindly granted to the museum staff by His Holiness Benedict XVI, the Holy Father marvelously outlined the history and mission of the Vatican Museums and highlighted, to quote from the pontiff,

a truth that is inscribed in the “genetic code” of the Vatican Museums: that is, that the great classical and Judeo-Christian civilizations are not in opposition to each other but converge in the one plan of God.

. . . It is the light of a beauty that shines from within the work of art and leads the mind to open itself to the sublime, where the Creator encounters the creature made in his image and likeness.

. . . [T]his logic pertains to the whole of the [m]useum, which in this perspective truly seems a single unit in the complex sequence of its sections, even though they are so different from one another.

The synthesis between Gospel and culture appears even more explicit in certain sections and as if “materialized” in certain works: . . . a constant intertwining . . . between the divine and the human. The Sistine Chapel, in this regard, is an unsurpassable peak.³

III.

At this point I would like to begin the most complex passage of this discussion, focusing more specifically on the object of this lecture. My intent is to outline potential scenarios that could emerge from the process of development that I described a moment ago. Because—and I am firmly convinced

of this—the museum is the building that collects what the genius of man has produced, it is both the screen of its past and the crystal ball of its future. I believe that the museum would, to a great extent, lose legitimacy and purpose should we not put forward a project that both looks toward the future and draws from the history we have just outlined. The great social and cultural changes of our contemporary era will not fail to trigger crucial and radical questions regarding the museum and, as is often pointed out, great challenges. Its traditional role as a “temple of memory” and a place of lay cult is questioned, and its death is commonly proclaimed. At the same time, new museums proliferate and activities connected to these institutions fully enter into the cycle of formation. The reasons for this trend stem from both a logical autonomous process as well as the need to fill that void left by the lack of other educational “sources.” What ensues from this is not just differing analyses of the situation but also clamorous contradictions.

While there is, in fact, an increasing awareness of the historical value of the museum’s content and the intricacy of interventions connected to it, at the same time—and perhaps for the very same reasons—the notion of the museum has reached its natural limits across the board. Firstly, while there may be an awareness of context and of how cultural patrimony spreads across a given territory, the museum cannot possibly represent *the* solution to the problem of its safeguard, given that this safeguard is under the pressure of constant acceleration in terms of economic and social evolution within a landscape that often presents radical changes. However, it is not just the spread of the patrimony across the territory which is a matter of deep concern. Should the notion of patrimony also encompass things immaterial, it becomes necessary for the concept of the museum to embrace our daily lives and our rituals, and it will soon reach beyond the limits of feasibility for this institution, under both economically practical and theoretical aspects. Among the latter there exists also the question advanced by those who contest the museum’s very right to house objects on the grounds that the objects can only mean something if inserted into the reality of their original culture. This problem pertains in particular to ethnic-anthropological collections, but also concerns a variety of other types of collections. Clearly evident in this case is the conflicting nature between the necessity of conservation and the need for daily use. A museum with the capacity to dialogue within its territory, to offer values meaningful to a community that can find therein traces of its historical memory, is one that can continue to be a tool for the comprehension of society in innovative ways and a point of fusion for a variety of specific functions. I am thinking in particular of the possibility of a strong integration between the conservation function, research with its inherent formation, and the formative effect on the public.

I would like to highlight the strong dynamism that museums are showing at a global level despite their contradictions and risks. Museums are by definition fragmentary, partial, and imperfect places where a great number of the works housed have been eradicated from their original context yet continue to communicate the perception of coherent history—a unique narration of the evolution of forms, techniques, materials, and functions of a civilization in its broadest understanding. These two seemingly contradictory aspects therefore allow us to reconsider the museum, and its very concept of collective memory and cultural identity, as a dynamic notion far removed from fossilization into objective criteria, whether external or preconceived. This process represents the same transformation of the idea of the museum as a place that speaks to how each epoch has chosen to represent itself in a given manner and inevitably taken its stand in the face of its history and past. Research and dialogue with the outside world lead to the selection of a path to follow within an existing cultural heritage and to re-elaborate, so to speak, by enhancing, rediscovering, and re-evaluating tradition itself. Like all things, this is a risky operation. There are moments in history when even in museums one or more periods and aspects of human culture have been set aside, in the best of scenarios in a deposit and in the worst damaged or destroyed, but in any case crippled by ideological vice, short-sightedness, or a provincial approach. Fortunately, the ability to recover this lost heritage also exists, the choice to follow a more traditional path which critically reviews the core or the models

we draw inspiration from, not by conforming to preconceived idea but by adopting the humility pertinent to all who acknowledge that there is always something new to be learned.

At the same time there is another requirement that must be met, one that has taken on added importance during the past decades—the idea that the museum can no longer focus exclusively on its own history, but must reach outward to become a meeting place where different cultures can relate. The increasing distance between the world of media and information—marked by communication that constantly supersedes its limits—and the uniqueness of a work of art housed in a museum—understood both as an unparalleled masterpiece and as a witnessing example within this context—on the one hand highlights the peculiarity of privileged communication founded precisely on the understanding of singularity. On the other hand, it also forcibly brings up the question as to how wide and with what selection criteria should the addressed “public” be and at what level and on the basis of what objectives or requests should the language be pitched. Applying time as a criterion to these two parallel worlds gives a significant example of this distance. The concept of time linked to the museum and its contents is slow and contemplative, historically drawn out. The concept of time linked to the world of information and knowledge, as understood by new generations, is accelerated and tense, permanently launched in a quest for “what follows.” To succeed in connecting these two opposite perceptions, to build a bridge between them, is without doubt a highly complex challenge but also the most crucial one to consider.

Should we wish to summarize in one sentence the history of the museum’s function, we could do so with a few significant developments. The museum went from being viewed as a place of privilege to one claimed as a right, from being the domain of artists to that of an exclusive elite of experts from the world of culture and then finally to that of the general public. This evolution was not justified by economic and commercial pressures, as one could simplistically conclude, but was the more intimate response to the educational needs of the museum and society itself, as described above. Conveying, learning, and elaborating are functions that constantly evolve within the complex and articulated network of relationships impacting man, society and, consequently, the cultural patrimony of which the museum is an inherent part. This flexible and fluctuating reality is something the institution must bear in mind in order to avoid all risk of fossilization, which would be out of character with its history.

An example of how this potential evolution could come about is perhaps best illustrated in museums of contemporary modern art. Increasingly, these museums are perceived by the general public, both naturally and by vocation, as a space receptive to the blending of languages and the broadening of cultural horizons, a space where barriers can be broken down, cancelling that centuries-old perception of the museum as a closed space both listless and self-referential. The aura connected to the museum and the works collected there must play into the vital and fertile exchange between the past and the ever-greater presence of the contemporary, both of which find in the museum a virtual place of encounter and reciprocal enrichment. The lesson learned from this experimentation with museum theory becomes even more vital when envisioned as applicable to the more traditional and established areas of the museum.

It is not up to me to find a solution to these problems, but to conclude, I suggest that new scenarios might emerge from building bridges between the fundamental developments pertinent to the museums over the past centuries and the more recent issues of our modern world. This is problematic, perhaps, but also extremely interesting, and it allows us to look toward the future of the museum without a completely pessimistic attitude. We are instead open to any external stimulus, ready to absorb the new trends of developing social and cultural contexts and to become witness to the changes taking place, a sort of gauge of the times that deliberately, rather than by accident and far from ignoring, is well aware that it is pointing out choices and courses to be taken and at the same time recording change, suggestions, and demands from the world around it. Let us then think of museums—not just our existing ones but also those of the future—as an adventure of learning, an

attempt to rewrite new pages of genius and knowledge, and surely the Muses will go on inhabiting them.

Notes

1. John Paul II, "Address of the Holy Father John Paul II for the Inauguration of the New Entrance to the Vatican Museums," February 7, 2000 (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000), http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/2000/jan-mar/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20000207_vatican-museums_en.html.
2. Agostino Taja, "Descrizione del Palazzo Apostolico Vaticano," [ca. 1750], Codex 9927, fol. 302r, Codices Vaticani Latini, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vatican City.
3. Benedict XVI, "Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Staff of the Vatican Museums," November 23, 2006 (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2006), http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/november/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20061123_musei-vaticani_en.html.