For Modern Art Museums, A Time for Change

NEW YORK. Two of the most influential museums of 20th-century art -- the Tate Gallery in London and The Museum of Modern Art in New York -- will soon be taking a millennial wrecking ball to the edifice of modern art history. In presentations of their collections, they are discarding the textbook chronology to which we've grown accustomed, and introducing thematic and theoretical modes of representing the period. Out goes the canonical procession of masters and isms, and in comes an assortment of fashionably new alternative views, intended to correct our hitherto narrow perspective on modernity.

The Tate's new branch for modern art, which opens today as Tate Modern in a remodeled power plant in London, abandons the familiar artist-by-artist, movement-by-movement survey, and divides the collection into four separate displays, each dedicated to a broadly conceived genre: still life, landscape, the figure, and historical subjects. MoMA, in its current cycle of mini-exhibitions, similarly trades traditional art history for a content-based approach based on people, places, things, and other motifs. A press release proclaims "a radical rethinking of the nature and meaning of modern art," describing the innovative exercise as a "laboratory" for the future installation of the collection in MoMA's new building, projected to open in 2005.

Ironically, MoMA is tilting at the very conventions it established. It was the museum's founding director, Alfred Barr, Jr., who in the 1930s plotted the now dogmatic march of avant-garde isms. Only now is his model being challenged.

"It's high time to experiment in upsetting those traditions," says Robert Rosenblum, distinguished art historian at NYU's Institute of Fine Arts and part-time curator at the Guggenheim Museum. "They've been a catechism for the 20th century, like believing in the church or something," he notes. "And I just am not a believer." Neither is Tate director Nicholas Serota, who deems "the linear march through history [an] insufficiently complex pattern of display."

Even MoMA director Glenn Lowry debunks the notion of a single history of modern art. He and others feel museums should not represent a monolithic chapter-by-chapter saga of masters and masterpieces -- not one great story, but many interwoven small ones. They see history not as a truth that curators aspire to articulate in their installations, but as something infinitely variable, dependent on our changing contemporary points of view. Which is all fine in theory, but if museums were to entertain every theoretical conceit of the moment, they would abandon any attempt at providing a coherent sense of history.

Fortunately, MoMA's revisionism has limits. Mr. Lowry acknowledges that "one of the obligations that comes with this collection is to insure that we display it in a way that allows the history of modern art to emerge. Our collection is sufficiently broad and rich, and the tradition of modern art sufficiently complicated, that there are multiple histories embedded in it. What we're grappling with is how to make those multiple histories accessible to a public

without making them confusing...and [how to maintain] a clear sense of what the major thrusts have been -- the isms and the history and the critical artists."

According to MoMA curator Kirk Varnedoe, a key figure in the collaborative reinstallation, there will be two types of galleries: "fixed" galleries will lay out a roughly chronological permanent array of masterpieces, and "variable" galleries, whose contents will change several times a year, will augment and amplify points along the timeline, zeroing-in on individual artists, or focusing on particular themes or media, such as prints and photographs.

This combination of a stable chronicle and flexibile satellites is likely the best way to install a museum of modern art. But it's not always an option. The Tate's collection lacks the depth and breadth to articulate a comprehensive history of modern art. The truth is that their genre-based scheme is not some intellectual triumph that will correct our misconceptions of the past, but an expedient means of masking their collection's deficiencies. By adopting the thematic view, they can smooth over gaps and create a semblance of completeness, "a rounded experience" as one curator puts it.

Thematic and polemic installations may be educational, but they're like a menu of side dishes without a main course. Still-life shows about kitchen tables or about "fetishized objects" may make sense for temporary exhibitions, but not for the core component of a historical survey. It's worth noting that the whimsical then-and-now juxtapositions in the Tate's reinstallation of British art -- in the old Millbank building -- have been roundly panned by critics who bemoan the museum's neglect of its mission to teach visitors the evolution of image making.

Moreover, the whole revisionist enterprise has about it the smell of a marketing ploy -- this year's model of history. Marketing pressures have no doubt played a part in the decision to makeover the museums. Novelty is always a selling point, and museum marketers know it. With both institutions expanding and reinstalling their collections, they're availing themselves of an opportunity to give the 20th-century collections a "new and improved" 21st-century spin. And categories like people, places, and things make "difficult" modern art more accessible to a wider public. "I don't think we've dumbed down in any way," says Frances Morris, one of the curators in charge of the Tate rehang, "but we wanted the baseline to be accessible, for everybody to begin to understand what it was about. Categorizing art in subject terms is something that most people could instantly grasp."

It remains to be seen whether the new installations will offer a sharpened or expanded understanding of the history of modern art, or a blurring of the orderly narrative scholars have created. Even if the standard chronology -- Cezanne to Fauves to Expressionists to Cubists -- is an oversimplification, to discard it for the sake of some "deconstruction" of art history or history itself, to interpose chaos and randomness into our view of history, is to shirk a fundamental aspect of human activity -- the bringing of order to an incomprehensibly complex world.

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