

The Historical Evolution of Fine Art Museums and Art Galleries: Curatorial Practices and Sustainability Approaches

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Abstract

A review of the historical trajectory of fine art museums and art galleries that once served as closed repositories in the early modern period examines their possible future as civic agents of social and environmental change. In this article, we explore the shift from custodial forms of curation based on connoisseurship and taxonomy to more recent facilitative and authorial models that prioritise interpretation and inclusivity. In this article, we have carefully critiqued how sustainability has been built into museums. Further, it explains the new definition of sustainability. Finally, that is more than just being environmentally efficient. Paying special attention to the digital turn accelerated by the pandemic. A cause of democratisation of access across hybrid exhibition models. Also, new revenue streams, such as NFTs, are emerging. While also pressuring showcases on issues around the digital divide. The review also compares traditional Western frameworks with new models from the Global South that use participatory governance and “possitopian” thinking to redress postcolonial and climatic traumas. We believe that art institutions will remain viable to the extent that they can be non-neutral players in planetary health and social justice.

Keywords: Curatorial Practice; Museum Sustainability; Digital Transformation; Social Responsibility; Global South Museology; Cultural Heritage Management.

1. Introduction

1.1 Historical and Architectural Evolution of Museums

The first museum to be established was the Capitoline Museum in 1471. Museums are architectural, cultural and epistemological formations that have been modified by several social expectations, cultural ideas, and technological variations.¹ As an increasing number of public museums recognized the significance and worth of that which private collectors possessed, they were being acquired. As time went on, the way museums show their items changed considerably, from showing items in one place to making moving items or items on a big narrative that help in cultural understanding.² Architectural innovation, curatorial philosophy, and social functions museums fulfil within contemporary society are all interdependent.¹²

These days, museums are designed in a modular arrangement with multi-use galleries, and more importantly, visitor-centric planning to maximize accessibility, efficiency and interpretive clarity.³ This constant evolution is further illustrated by the shift in their role toward sustainability whose financial,

social, and environmental dimensions are multifaceted.⁴ Museums have adopted energy-efficient techniques and resilience measures in their operational and exhibition strategies as their understanding of sustainability has expanded. This adoption is frequently driven by global events and crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.⁷⁰¹ Museums are educational institutions and are responsible for promoting ecological solutions and optimising their buildings for renewable energy.⁵

1.2 Transformations in Curatorial Practice

The curatorial practice has seen reforms from being a study of objects to interpretive, participatory, and socially engaged strategies. Contemporary frameworks highlighting a reflexive attitude, inclusivity, and ethical responsibility⁶⁷ were previously held curatorial models that privileged aesthetic formalism and historical taxonomy. According to Lahav,⁸ research of curatorial labour finds that exhibition-making is not simply the application of tacit knowledge, but grounded, situated embodied and material negotiation. Curators today play an essential role as facilitators of dialogue. This shift coincides with the museum practice of the “situated turn,” which sees visitors as socially and ecologically embedded subjects who can engage in participatory knowledge-making.⁹

1.3 Digital Transformation and Hybrid Museum Experiences

The rapid integration of technologies such as virtual and augmented reality, multimodal storytelling tools, 3D imaging, artificial intelligence etc. has transformed museum practice.¹⁰ The COVID-19 pandemic injected new momentum into the ongoing process of expanding museums’ digital collections, virtual exhibitions, and online learning programs, establishing hybrid models.¹⁰ Studies show that engaging with art online offers aesthetic and emotional engagement similar to that of a museum experience. However, experiencing art in-person leads to better cognitive understanding and contextual sensitivity.¹¹ As virtual museums become more popular, a question emerges: what will happen to authenticity and cultural memory in the dematerialized contexts?¹²¹³

1.4 Museums, Sustainability, and Social Responsibility

Museums of today must inculcate sustainability, in environmental, social, cultural and institutional terms. Museums are recognised as civic agents that will have to face climate change, environmental justice and social equity.¹⁴ According to case studies of Finnish art museums, museums play various roles: mediator, collaborator, activist with regards to the representation of climate change, but initiates a tension between neutrality and social action.¹⁵ Strategies to curate contemporary art include attention to colonial histories, gendered narratives, and the views of marginalised people.¹⁶⁷

2. Historical Foundations of Fine Art Museums

2.1 Early Precursors and Royal Collections

Fine art museums or galleries originated in early institutions that focused on preserving knowledge, were funded by the elite and were restricted in access. The Hellenistic Mouseion, a scholarly institution for the pursuit of knowledge rather than the curation of things, is among the earliest predecessor. In the middle ages, churches and monastic institutions had treasury chambers where valuable sacred objects were kept, which corresponds to systems of symbolic and spiritual authority.¹⁷ As Europe entered the early modern era, the collecting habits of aristocrats and bourgeois began to intensify. The cabinets of curiosity (Wunderkammern) famously involved an intentional but highly subjective form of object curation, which laid important groundwork for systematic collecting.¹⁸ But access was limited, displaying the social hierarchy and power struggles of the time.

2.2 The Enlightenment and the Birth of Public Institutions

The late eighteenth century witnessed a major turning point with the modification of understandings and use of collections under Enlightenment. Philosophes managed to popularize reason, education, and public access in this time, claiming that cultural holdings must benefit the public rather than being the private interest of an elite.¹⁹ The British Museum founded in 1753 and the Louvre's opening as a public museum in 1798 are notable embodiments of this new thought.²⁰²¹ These initiatives redefined cultural stewardship dramatically. The works that were confined within royal or aristocratic spaces were now offered up as shared sources meant to support learning, identity, and civic life.²² Public museums were converted from palaces or elite residences, through these means creating a certain space and environment for the public.²³

2.3 Professionalization and Institutional Expansion in the 19th Century

The nineteenth century saw considerable institutional consolidation and professionalization of museology. Museums had a formal administrative structure, systematic classification practices and designed buildings reflecting modernist views.²⁴²³ During this time, museums transformed from mere repositories into educational and cultural institutions, reflecting the growing demand of society to expose the public, as well as contributing to national identity. The evolving specialization called for the adoption of systematic classification systems, conservation techniques, and scholarly methods which qualified curatorship as a professional and interpretative process, rather than merely custodial care. The role of curators has changed to that of researchers who catalogue and interpret culture in a way that is empirical and methodological.²⁵

2.4 Modern Era Professionalisation and the Expansion of Museum Institutions

The early twentieth century marked a decisive transition for museums as professionalised civic institutions with expanding mandates. During this era, museum work shifted from voluntary or semi-professional custodianship toward a more formalised labour structure characterised by scientific methods, specialised roles, and institutional governance. Contemporary scholarship observes that museum professionals are increasingly expected to deploy “adaptive skills” that respond to evolving collection practices, audience-engagement models, and sustainability imperatives.²⁶

In North America, museums in the interwar and post-war periods expanded their social and pedagogic functions, placing emphasis on public education, popular programming, and outreach beyond purely academic or elite audiences. In contrast, many European institutions adhered longer to traditional exhibition models centred on “the wonders of humanity” — yet the devastation of World War II triggered a fundamental re-evaluation of the museum's role. After the war, museums set themselves up not only as preservers of objects, but of human memory and culture, as custodians against barbarism and ideological extremism.²⁷²⁸²⁹³⁰³¹

Recent studies confirm this shift towards social agency. Fackler³² points out how, in Germany, museums are increasingly framing themselves as engaged social actors tasked with ethical, civic, or democratic actions rather than as occupying a custodial display role. This was reinforced by the definition adopted in 2022 by the International Council of Museums (ICOM), which for the first time included the terms “sustainability,” “diversity,” “inclusion” and “community participation” in its institutional definition.²⁶

Professionalisation has also transformed staff roles and organisational capabilities. The modern museum features clearly delineated roles — curator, conservator, registrar, educator, and digital architect — requiring credentialed training and the mastery of interpretive skills. Tasks such as digital platform management, ethical stewardship, community liaison, and inclusive design are now identified as core responsibilities.²⁶

Institutional expansion manifests further in infrastructure, exhibitions, and global outreach. Wang et al.⁷⁰ point out that sustainability in museum strategy is now central: measuring museum sustainability extends beyond environmental footprints to encompass social equality, economic viability and cultural relevance.

3. The Evolution of Curatorial Practices

3.1 From Connoisseurship to Academic Specialization

In earlier times, curatorial work mostly meant the formation of connoisseurship or subjective aesthetic judgement guided the acquisition of collections. However, the late 1800s did see the emergence of a considerable shift towards an academic approach influenced by Enlightenment principles favouring systematization.³³³⁴ This meant that curatorial competence would have to be developed to systemise the cataloguing, inventorying and classification of collections. The emergence of art history directed the re-organization of collections according to how they were categorized, interpreted and displayed.³⁵ The curator became a scholar and expert after this academic specialization, the scholarly figure placed in charge of choosing exhibitions and making interpretive texts.⁴³

3.2 The Rise of the Exhibition

The nineteenth and early twentieth century saw the rise of exhibitions at such an intense rate that museums were rendered no longer quiet storage places but, rather, active sites of public engagement.³⁶ Curators moved on from just display to exhibition design and interpretation.³⁷ In addition, as the study of history enhanced a more complicated commission of exhibitions.³⁸ The expanded responsibilities of the curator hastened the formal professionalization of curation as an actual discipline. Curation has now begun to influence the way the art world presents and interprets art on a worldwide scale.

3.3 Contemporary Curatorial Strategies: The Curator as Author

The curator has shifted from custodian to mediator, interpreter, and experienter³⁹⁴⁰ in today's curatorial world. One of the biggest catalysts for the evolution of the art world has been the independent curator.⁴¹ They are not driven by the collections of a single institution. This trend resulted in the curator being regarded as an "author" of exhibitions — creating conceptual frameworks that assign new meaning to the works on display, much like a director of a theatre production.⁴²

Table 1: The Evolution of Curatorial Paradigms

Curatorial Paradigm	Key Characteristics	Role of the Curator	Visitor Role	Primary Literature Support
Traditional Connoisseurship /	Object-centered; aesthetic formalism, taxonomy, historical preservation.	Custodian: arbiter of taste, solitary scholar, guardian of objects.	Passive observer; recipient of authoritative knowledge.	Lahav (2023) ⁸
Academic Educational /	Systematic classification; didactic displays;	Educator/Researcher: disseminator of knowledge,	Student; learner engaging with	Lahav (2023) ⁸ ;

Curatorial Paradigm	Key Characteristics	Role of the Curator	Visitor Role	Primary Literature Support
	national identity and public instruction.	responsible for interpretative clarity.	structured narratives.	Zabalueva (2023) ⁴⁴
The "New" Museology	Thematic, narrative-driven; exhibitions as "cultural productions" or "theatrical" events.	Auteur/Creator: independent voice, creative director, mediator of experience.	Critic/Participant; engaged in emotional and intellectual dialogue.	Rubantseva & Hoffmann (2020) ⁴²
Post-Digital / Sustainable	Hybrid (physical/digital); ethically driven (decolonial/green); participatory and inclusive.	Facilitator/Activist: mediator of social justice, sustainability advocate, co-creator with AI/public.	Co-curator; active contributor to meaning-making and activism.	Sanders et al. (2025) ⁷ ; Cerquetti et al. (2024) ⁵⁵

4. Sustainability Approaches in Art Institutions

4.1 Environmental Dimensions

The cultural sector is going after sustainability because society accepts environmental responsibility; this is making art institutions rethink their structure.⁴⁵ Museums are working hard on new ways to reduce their environmental impact. Examples include using sustainable architectural designs, improving energy efficiency and checking supply chains for embedded carbon.⁴⁶ Major art fairs like Frieze and Art Basel are putting into action using recycled energy and opting for rail or sea transport.⁴⁵

4.2 Social and Economic Sustainability

In addition to environmental issues, museums are starting to appreciate the importance of social and economic sustainability. Museums are recently functioning as “hubs” of cultural, social and economic development so as to promote heritage conservation.⁴⁷ An integrated approach demonstrates that cultural heritage possesses intrinsic value and is able to catalyze social inclusion and community development, particularly for marginalized groups. This expands the museum from an agent of custodial preservation to one of social engagement.⁴⁸ From this point of view, museums are invited to accomplish the Sustainable Development Goals, such as heritage protection, education, and sustainable tourism.⁴⁹

Table 2: Sustainability Implementation Matrix in Art Institutions

Sustainability Dimension	Institutional Focus	Operational Strategies	References
Environmental	Reducing Carbon Footprint & Waste	Energy-efficient architecture (LEDs, solar); slow collecting policies; green public procurement; virtual couriership to reduce travel.	Duarte & Ibáñez (2023) ⁴⁵ ; Wang et al. (2023) ⁵
Social	Equity, Justice & Inclusion	Decolonization of collections; community-led co-curation; addressing difficult knowledge (trauma, climate justice).	Sanders et al. (2025) ⁷ ; Ruggieri & Lippolis (2023) ⁴⁷
Economic	Financial Resilience & Viability	Diversifying revenue (NFTs, digital subscriptions); circular economic models; reducing reliance on blockbusters.	Mezei & Lapatoura (2023) ⁷⁶ ; Larkin (2021)
Cultural	Heritage Preservation & Vitality	Safeguarding intangible heritage; digital preservation of at-risk artifacts; fostering possitopian future thinking.	Cerquetti & Montella (2021) ¹⁴ ; McKenzie (2023) ⁵⁹

5. Ethical Considerations in Collections and Exhibitions

The evolving role of museums necessitates a rigorous re-evaluation of acquisition policies and exhibition practices to ensure ethical sourcing and the incorporation of diverse perspectives.⁵⁰ At the heart of this process is an ongoing critical reflection on historical bias in collections and a proactive decolonising commitment — in particular, recognising the complex provenance of artefacts. Community-initiated co-curation initiatives and integration of Indigenous knowledge systems are essential for better interpretive frameworks and equal representation.⁵⁰ Museums are called to contribute to the climate change discourse⁵¹ as this ethical re-assessment extends to the environment. Museums can take a more proactive position in the environmental debate⁵² by dropping the pretext of neutrality and engaging in present debates.

6. Global Case Studies in Institutional Evolution

6.1 Institutional Evolution

Institutions internationally are upgrading their role by prioritizing ethics and sustainability. Major institutions, such as the Rijksmuseum and Tate, include sustainability in governance structures and operational systems.⁵³ One significant example is the Australian Museum's Climate Solutions Centre which brings together social scientists, Indigenous knowledge holders and climate experts to devise culturally-grounded approaches to climate change.⁵⁴

6.2 European Fine Art Museums

European fine art museums are increasingly adopting environmental ethics in collection management and exhibition development.⁵⁵ Initiatives such as Horizon 2020's Museum Education for Social Inclusion and Cohesion show how Europe's museums can, through international cooperation, work towards sustainability and social inclusion.⁵⁶ As a result of climate change, curatorial practices are increasingly tackling the divide between nature and culture, promoting climate justice.⁵⁴

6.3 North American Art Galleries

North America's gallery sector is evolving as curatorial methods change and galleries take on a more active role in contributing to the sustainability of the art market.⁵⁷ More and more commercial and non-profit galleries are integrating environmental concerns into their processes and incorporating sustainability into exhibition design and materials.⁵⁸ Methods like "slow collecting" challenge the quick turnover style of the global art market, requesting more sustainable acquisition and display strategies.⁵⁷

6.4 Models Emerging in Global South Art Institutions

Emerging models in Global South art institutions are increasingly challenging the museological dominance of the West by advancing curatorial practices that are locally grounded, socially embedded, and sustainability-oriented. Organizations like the ZhiLn project constitute socio-ecological devices which allow institutions to empower locals to produce culturally sustainable solutions rooted in lived practices.⁶¹ The models address so-called "possitopian" futures. These futures reject deficit-based narratives in favour of imaginative possibilities based on local geographies and the social ecology of action.⁶⁰ Global South museums often use Indigenous ways of knowing, local craft traditions, and intergenerational knowledge systems to conceive of futures that redress environmental precariousness and social injustice.

India has many institutes that showcase these. The Anokhi Museum of Hand Printing in Jaipur combines curatorial practice with craft revitalization, working with artisan communities towards the conservation of the block-printing tradition while promoting ecological production methods.⁶² Bengaluru's Museum of Art & Photography (MAP) is using a hybrid digital-physical approach to democratizing access to South Asian visual cultures, with building sustainability and material ethics central to the programming.⁶³

From Africa to Latin America, South Asia and beyond, emerging art institutions have begun to embrace participatory curatorial methodologies. This includes the co-curation of exhibitions with Indigenous or marginalized groups to make up for historical exclusion.^{64,65} Rather than a site of knowledge, these models imagine the museum as a collaborative platform; curatorship is reframed as a shared civic and ecological responsibility. Additionally, these organisations lead the way towards sustainable exhibition design by using biodegradable materials, upcycling waste, and using low-energy displays.⁶⁶

These emerging models indicate that the Global South plays a crucial role in developing innovative community-based and ecologically conscious museological models. They provide scalable alternatives to Western-dominated frameworks while repositioning art institutions as agents of culture, resilience, and social-environmental justice.

Table 3: Comparative Framework of Museological Models

Feature	Traditional Western Model	Emerging Global South Model
Primary Function	Collection, preservation, and authoritative display.	Social agency, community resilience, and craft revitalization.
Sustainability Focus	Operational efficiency (HVAC, lighting) and carbon footprint.	Holistic ecology, material reuse, and social/economic justice.
Curatorial Authority	Expert-led; centralized academic voice.	Participatory; co-curated with Indigenous/local communities.
Future Orientation	Preservation of the past for the future.	"Possitopian" futures; imagining alternative ecological realities.
Key Reference	Lahav (2023) ⁸	McKenzie (2023) ⁵⁹ ; Brown (2023) ⁵⁶

7. Challenges and Opportunities in the Modern Era

Fine art museums and galleries are undergoing a rapid evolution in the 21st century. New challenges force them to consider how to balance their long-established goals of preservation and exhibition with new demands for social relevance, environmental sustainability and economic viability.⁶⁷ Institutions' responses to changes in attendance patterns, pressures to decolonise collections and increasing implementation of digital technologies all contribute to institutional resilience over time.^{68,69} This expanded role sees museums no longer as mere custodians of culture but as active civic spaces capable of mobilising collective action and enhancing environmental literacy.

7.1 Digital Transformation and Accessibility

Wang et al.⁷⁰ note that the COVID-19 epidemic accelerated the growth of digital technologies and digital modes of production and consumption. This has transformed museums' audience engagement, collection management, and sustainability. This digital shift offers new opportunities for reaching wider audiences, democratizing access to culture and cutting down on the carbon footprint of physical visiting.⁵³ According to Borda,⁷¹ climate change advocates have taken the full plunge into creating virtual experiences, offering rich affectively and cognitively-engaging experiences. However, digital accessibility comes with challenges too; the digital divide could lead to the exclusion of people without reliable technology or digital literacy.⁷²

7.2 Funding Models and Economic Pressures

Museums may want to explore revenue sources not dependent on physical location as they move toward digital engagement. The pandemic accelerated interest in new digital revenue models such as virtual exhibition fees and subscription access.⁷³ As per Aziz et al.,⁷⁴ the emergence of blockchain technologies and non-fungible tokens (NFTs) offers new revenue-generating avenues. Data from the International Council of Museums shows that the production of digital content increased by almost 50 per cent in 2020, which highlights the need to develop strong online revenue models.⁷⁵

7.3 Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)

It has become critical for curators to embrace diversity, equity, and inclusion in their practices, as art historians have come to understand that art history is largely Euro-centric and exclusionary. To redress these historical imbalances, an intentional effort is needed to broaden collections and engage communities. A key part of DEI is diversifying curator and decision-maker workplaces in digital- and NFT-based museums to ensure such venues do not become compromised by algorithmic bias.⁷⁶

8. Conclusion

The fine art museum and galleries have transformed as they have appraised new curatorial practices and sought sustainable operational models, this analysis shows. The use of immersive technologies presents exciting opportunities for cultural engagement and preservation, but also ethical and methodological challenges that require careful regulation. In future research, creating strong standards for the ethical use of things must take priority. There should be transparency, trust, and stakeholder participation in shared authority. In the end, the future of sustainable and equitable museum practice will rely on the joint capacity of institutions to bring together technological innovation with ethical rigour, inclusivity, and culturally formed approaches.

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