

## Book review

# James Cuno's *Museums Matter: In Praise of the Encyclopedic Museum*

Nancy Hanover  
12 February 2014

The financial industry is demanding the “monetization” of the world-renowned Detroit Institute of Arts, forcing the hard-pressed museum to relinquish public ownership and ante up \$100 million to the bankers in the hope of keeping its collection intact. The government of Portugal is auctioning 85 paintings by Joan Miró to help balance the state budget in the aftermath of the 2008 crash.

In this context, the slim volume *Museums Matter: In Praise of the Encyclopedic Museum* makes a number of important points.

Author James Cuno is a noted American art historian, the former director of the Harvard Art Museums (1991-2002), the Courtauld Institute (2003-04) and the Art Institute of Chicago (2004-2011), and is now the CEO and president of the J. Paul Getty Trust. The book is based on lectures given at Rice University in Houston in 2009.

*Museums Matter* speaks to the claim that museums are superfluous to daily life or the rightful sphere only of the upper classes. It makes a passionate case for their essential aesthetic, educational and cultural role in a mass, global society.

Cuno takes special aim, however, at the “left” academic opponents of encyclopedic museums, polemicizing against the postmodern view that museums are nothing more than institutions of ideological control imposing Western and state supremacy.

He argues, instead, that they provide a means to achieve an international, dynamic and cosmopolitan perspective. Further, he reasons, the encyclopedic museum reveals humanity’s collective and universal ability to develop its culture and the fundamentally interconnected character of that culture.

In light of the confluence of financial and ideological attacks on museums, the book is a worthwhile look at history and attitudes.

The huge popularity of major museums is a fact of modern life. Cuno notes that 42 million visitors were recorded in

2009 at the top 100 US museums, two million alone at the Art Institute of Chicago. In fiscal year 2011-12 the Metropolitan Museum of Art shattered its historical attendance record, receiving 6.28 million visits. The Louvre in Paris received 8.9 million. Clearly, museums matter to people in growing numbers and they feel, not coerced, but inspired to visit again and again.

Cuno’s argument bases itself, even more fundamentally, on the essential liberating and democratic idea of museums. Like travel, travel literature and translation, Cuno argues, museums allow visitors to identify with others around the world and evoke a shared sense of being human, having a common history and common future.

Strongly endorsing the Enlightenment approach to inquiry, Cuno sees museums as the repository of a scientific approach to cataloging, classifying and scientifically analyzing the world and human culture. Encyclopedic museums, he affirms, “scrutinize unverified truths and oppose prejudice and superstition, maintain belief in individual agency; hold that all the arts and sciences are connected; and [are] confident in the promise of rigorous, intellectual inquiry to lead to truths about the world for the benefit of human progress.”

Why do so many people attend art museums? Precisely for those same Enlightenment goals, he says—to have their world enlarged, to experience new and strange things, to make sense of the world and to view it in historical context. He argues that such a worldview is essential to oppose the growth of nationalisms in a polyglot, multiethnic world.

Characteristic of the academic “left” opposition, Dr. Courtney Rivard attacked Cuno’s book for “allow[ing] liberal conceptions of individuality and equality to propel his argument, ignoring the many ways in which difference is embedded within deeply unequal power structures.” Rivard, a feminist protégé of Stalinist Angela Davis at the University of California-Santa Cruz, indicts Cuno for “failing to thoroughly grapple with the real effects of the structures of

power.”

Without being too literal, one could point out that the “real effects of the structures of power” are, above all, the privatization of art, the defunding of museums and other public cultural institutions and the placing of education and artistic training out of financial bounds for growing segments of the world’s population. The call for equality—in the culture and social life of humanity—has not lost its force.

Cuno’s book cites museum studies academics with similar outlooks. Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, for example, allege that “the museum is the site of a symbolic transaction between the visitor and the state. In exchange for the state’s spiritual wealth, the individual intensifies his attachment to the state.”

Critical theorist Tony Bennett references postmodernist thinker Michael Foucault and claims that museums have replaced prisons as instruments of state power: “Rather than embodying an alien and coercive principle of power which aimed to cow the people into submission, the museum—addressing the people as a public, as citizens—aimed to inveigle the general populace into complicity with power by placing them on this side of a power which it represented to it as its own.”

Claims that museums make individuals complicit with power are ludicrous. In an aside, Cuno says we would dismiss this idea out of hand “were it not so influential in the increasingly popular academic disciplines.”

To answer these positions, Cuno turns to history. He briefly surveys the development of encyclopedic museums arising out of the Enlightenment and its revolutions against the state, as well as its revolutionary demand for reasoned inquiry and skepticism of the unverifiable. He looks at the examples of the Louvre in Paris, a product of the French Revolution, the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, an imperial museum developed and expanded through the Russian Revolution, and the British Museum in London.

The British Museum (established in 1753) was assembled by a number of individuals, most especially Sir Hans Sloane, a physician, who upon his death insisted that his collection belonged to the people, not the king, and that it must kept together for study free and open to all “studious and curious persons.”

Cuno emphasizes that the breadth of the museum’s collections was characteristic of the Enlightenment’s view of the world. Collecting was part of scientifically testing one’s hypotheses and learning far-reaching truths. “In every respect the encyclopedic museum—like the encyclopedia itself, dedicated to gathering as many specimens of nature and the world’s cultures as possible, for the curious and scholarly alike—was an Enlightenment institution.”

Out of this Enlightenment practice emerged public

intellectuals, the political philosophy of liberalism and the notion of a “commonwealth” where ideas were proposed, debated, refuted or rejected, says Cuno. Immanuel Kant’s “Dare to Know” became the fearless motto of the Enlightenment. Those who go to museums are not “being indoctrinated by hegemonic state ideology” Cuno argues, but attend in order to critically question, assess and learn from the collections.

The belief that all people should have access to knowledge and the public gathering of art and artifacts was inseparably connected to the great ideas of the American and French Revolutions, and their promise of the Rights of Man. These aspirations were precisely the context and motivations for the founding of the encyclopedic museums, notes the author.

Clearly, there is much that is healthy and valuable in Cuno’s positions. And it is shameful that hostility to culture and misanthropic, cynical attitudes toward humanity and its aspirations, which the author opposes, pass for “leftism.”

However, the working class must have its own independent standpoint in the defense of culture. There is a crisis that requires an urgent, revolutionary response. As Leon Trotsky pointed out, the working class is forced to do away with bourgeois society “for the very reason that society does not allow it access to culture.”

This is brutally evident today, as all forms of art are subordinated to the crassest profit concerns—orchestras and opera companies dismantled, performance schedules slashed, theaters closed, budgets for all the arts cut remorselessly.

The ruling elite is hostile to the conception that art should be available to the people. Only the working class can defend all that is progressive in human history by putting an end to the capitalist profit system.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**