

## The rise of the modern Romantic concept of art and the art museum

In the year 1782 a young German publicist, called Karl Philipp Moritz, visited the British Museum. In his travelogue he tells how glad he was to have obtained an admission ticket from an English friend with connections to the Museum. Otherwise he would have had to wait for several weeks, possibly months, now he got instant access. Yet the visit turned out to be rather a disappointment. It was a guided tour and the tour party, among which Moritz noticed people 'of the lowest classes and of both sexes', was rushed through the museum 'in a space of time little longer than an hour'. As a result he had only 'leisure just to cast one poor longing look of astonishment on all these stupendous treasures of natural curiosities, antiquities, and literature, in the contemplation of which you could with pleasure spend years, and a whole life might be employed in the study of them'. Some compensation, however, Moritz found in the fact that he, carrying with him a German guidebook of the British Museum, at one point saw his whole tour party gathered around him to listen to his explanations, while the British Trustee who had led them so far stood by in 'mocking amazement'.<sup>1</sup>

The British Museum is a good example of the so-called 'encyclopaedic' museum, exposing a vast miscellany of objects, including naturalia, antiquities and manuscripts. Works of art were only a part of the collection. In the decades after its official opening to the public on 15 January 1759, however, beside the encyclopaedic museum emerged another kind of museum, specialized in works of art. What was the connection of this art museum to the new concept of art? There you have the reason why I started with Karl Philipp Moritz, for he is one of the thinkers and writers who were involved in what I like to call the *Aesthetic Revolution* of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In the course of this revolution the classical concept of art changed into the modern or Romantic concept of art. The aesthetic revolution, on the one hand, was the necessary precondition of the rise of the art museum; without the modern concept of art there would have been no art museum. On the other hand, the developments that led to the art museum, for instance the opening to the public of princely art collections in several European countries, as well as the fact that a general public had emerged eager to visit them, take part of the aesthetic revolution itself. Here, as so often in ideal changes of this calibre, practice and theory are closely interwoven.

I shall first concentrate on the theory and next consider the relations of the theory to the new art museum. As it is impossible to do justice to every theoretical aspect of the aesthetic revolution, I shall mention just three important moments that shaped the modern Romantic concept of art.<sup>2</sup> Modern, because it is still largely *our* concept of art. Romantic, because it only fully unfolded towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, in the aesthetic program of the first German romantics, among whom we may count Karl Philipp Moritz.

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<sup>1</sup> *Reisen eines Deutschen in England im Jahr 1782*. In: Karl Philipp Moritz. *Werke* II, Frankfurt am Main, 1997, 286-7.

<sup>2</sup> For a more generous treatment, including chapters on the aesthetics of Moritz and Schiller and an extensive bibliography, see my *De esthetische revolutie. Hoe Verlichting and Romantiek de Kunst uitvonden*. Amsterdam, 2015.

## Aesthetic Revolution

The aesthetic revolution started already a century before with the famous *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*. The *Querelle* made an end to the up till then almost undisputed authority of the Ancients. The crucial question about a work of art is not whether it is created in accordance with the right ancient rules, but whether we are *moved* by it or not, abbé Du Bos concluded in 1719.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, subjective feelings and genius became more important than objective rules. This switch from objectivism to subjectivism opened the Enlightenment aesthetic debate, to which my three moments belong.

The first moment, then, is the formation of the fine arts as a coherent whole by abbé Batteux in his book *Les beaux-arts réduits à un meme principe* (The fine arts reduced to a single principle)(1746). Painting, sculpture, poetry, music and dance (and on the side rhetoric and architecture) are since then, as arts that give first and all 'pleasure', separated from the first and all useful 'mechanical arts'. This separation did not exist in the old system of the *artes*, in which the difference between free and mechanical arts went along totally different lines. Logic, astronomy and mathematics were also considered to be liberal arts, for instance. Thanks to Batteux a new classification of the arts emerged.

And in addition, a whole new concept of art emerged, singular and not plural, 'art-as-such', as M.H. Abrams called it.<sup>4</sup> In it a certain almost sacred elevation beyond simple pleasure is expressed, as well as a distinction between art and its opposite, plain entertainment or, as one would call it today, kitsch. Only since the aesthetic revolution of the eighteenth century we can ask whether a painting or a novel is *art* (or not), and be understood by everyone, however much the answers may differ. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century or before nobody would have understood the question to begin with.

This singular, elevated, distinctive concept of art could be developed thanks to my second moment: the rise of *aesthetics* as a separate branch of philosophy, a philosophy of art, which was given its proper name by the young German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten in 1735. His main work *Aesthetica*, written in scholarly Latin, came out in two volumes in 1750-1755. Closely related to this second moment is my third moment: the invention of aesthetic autonomy, as a theoretical development inside the new discipline of aesthetics, a discipline which rapidly gained a considerable popularity among the lettered and the learned, especially in Germany. The word autonomy was introduced into aesthetics by Immanuel Kant in his *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Critique of judgment) (1790). However, Kant uses this notion only in relation to the judgement of taste, which has to be disinterested as well as autonomous to become at the same time

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<sup>3</sup> See his *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture* (reprint Genève, 1967). Paradoxically Du Bos in the *Querelle* belonged to the Ancients. The Moderns defended the superiority of the modern poets with the argument that they had better rules. Du Bos's switch proved the superiority of the ancient poets, as they had touched the feelings of their readers for many centuries, something about which their modern colleagues of course were still uncertain.

<sup>4</sup> 'Art-As-Such: The Sociology of Modern Aesthetics', in: M.A. Abrams, *Doing Things with Texts: Essays in Criticism and Critical Theory*. New York, 1989.

subjective and universal. About the specific autonomy of art or of the work of art Kant has not so much to say.

## Moritz

For this we have to turn again to Karl Philipp Moritz. Three years after his visit to the British Museum, in 1785, he published an article in the *Berlinische Monatschrift*, with the title: *Versuch einer Vereinigung aller schönen Künste und Wissenschaften unter dem Begriff des In sich selbst Vollendeten* (An Attempt to Unify All the Fine Arts and Sciences under the Concept of That Which Is Complete in Itself). One can hear the echo of Batteux' title (*Les beaux-arts réduits à un meme principe*), only the principle is a different one. Batteux' principle was: the imitation of beautiful nature, Moritz' principle comes down to the autonomy of every beautiful or perfect work of art. Moritz does not use the word 'autonomy', alas, but his 'concept of that which is complete in itself' means more or less the same, that is to say: a work of art which is 'complete in itself' does no longer obey other rules than its own, it is a law to itself – the literal, originally Greek, meaning of the word 'autonomy'.

Moritz illustrates his theory by comparing a beautiful work of art to a useful object, like a knife. A knife always has its perfection or its purpose outside itself, a knife is perfect when you can cut your bread or steak with it. But where is the perfection or purpose of a beautiful work of art? It finds both in itself, Moritz claims, beauty and external usefulness being opposites. 'So when an object lacks an external use or purpose, purpose must be sought in the object itself if it is to awaken pleasure in me. Put another way, I must find so much purposiveness (*Zweckmäßigkeit*) in its individual parts that I forget to ask, what is actually the point of the whole thing. In other words, I must find pleasure in a beautiful object only for its own sake; to this end, the lack of external purposiveness must be compensated for by inner purposiveness; the object must be complete in itself'.<sup>5</sup> In his article Moritz never talks about any moral, political or religious use or purpose of works of art. To be complete in itself means indeed to be autonomous. Here we have, one could say, the basis of the modern concept of art.

Where is the connection to the museum? And is there such a connection in the first place? This is not at once evident. The encyclopaedic museum, for that matter, claimed to be useful in many ways. The same applies for the French revolutionary museums, where a political purpose was never absent, even when the exhibits consisted exclusively of paintings and sculpture.<sup>6</sup> To clarify the connection I propose to listen for a moment to one of the staunchest opponents of the museum in France. It is always rewarding to hear the arguments of one's enemies.

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<sup>5</sup> Moritz. *An Attempt to Unify All the Fine Arts and Sciences under the Concept of That Which Is Complete in It self*. Criticism in translation. PMLA, 2012, p.99. German text in: Moritz. *Werke* II, pp. 943-949.

<sup>6</sup> See Debora Meijers. 'Het "encyclopedische" museum van de achttiende eeuw' in: Ellinoor Bergvelt/Debora Meijers/Mieke Reijnders (eds.). *Kabinetten, galerijen en musea. Het verzamelen en presenteren van naturalia en kunst van 1500 tot heden*. Zwolle, 2013, and Andrew McClellan. *Inventing the Louvre. Art, Politics, and the Origins of the Modern Museum in Eighteenth-Century Paris*. Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, 1994.

## Quatremère de Quincy

The enemy here, of course, is the philosopher and archaeologist Antoine-Chrysostome Quatremère de Quincy.<sup>7</sup> He successively opposed the museum as an ideal school for artists and a replacement for the Academy in 1791, and in 1796 he opposed the museum as the chosen 'home' for the confiscated works of art from Italy. According to Quatremère these works of art belonged in Rome, which was a 'museum' in its own right, not in the Louvre. In 1815, finally, in his book *Considérations morales sur la destination des ouvrages de l'art* (Moral considerations on the destination of works of art), he formulated his arguments contra the museum in a more systematic way.

Quatremère's main objection is that to place a work of art in a museum is to rob it of its 'necessity' and its 'destination', and that is what happens when art is cut loose (as the Italian works of art were by Napoleon) from its original surroundings and context: 'Can one better proclaim the uselessness of works of art than by announcing through the collections one makes of them the worthlessness (*nullité*) of their employment? To remove them all and sundry from their social destination, what else is this as saying society has no need for them?' To defend the museum as the proper place to educate young artists brings no solution, Quatremère argues, as one falls prey to a bizarre 'vicious circle', because the museum cannot will necessarily educate artists who produce art fit only for the museum.<sup>8</sup>

In other words: art loses its purpose and function in a museum, and is surrendered to trade, to art history (in Quatremère's words the 'epitaphe' of all living art) and to a sterile critical competition.<sup>9</sup> In a negative way Quatremère thus describes some of the aspects of that which, in a positive way, we just now called the *autonomy* of art.

There are several similarities to Moritz' ideas indeed. For instance: a work of art that is complete in itself, according to Moritz, demands the utmost attention not to say devotion from the artist. He has to sacrifice himself to the perfection of his work and he should not pay attention to the demands of the public. Rewards or fame should not play a part in the making of pure art. No less disinterestedness is demanded from the beholder, as Moritz makes perfectly clear: 'While the beautiful draws our contemplation entirely to itself, it draws our contemplation away from

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<sup>7</sup> More on Quatremère in R. Schneider. *Quatremère de Quincy et son intervention dans les arts (1788-1830)*. Paris, 1910, and Annie Becq. *Genèse de l'esthétique française moderne 1680-1814*. Paris, 1994 (1984), pp. 500-504 and 799-810. On the French looting of art and its consequences see Ellinoor Bergvelt/Deborah J. Meijers/Lieske Tibbe/Elsa van Wezel (eds.). *Napoleon's Legacy: The Rise of National Museums in Europe, 1794-1830*. Berlin, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Quatremère de Quincy. *Considérations morales sur la destination des ouvrages de l'art*. Paris, 1815, p. 41. Quatremère's notion of 'original' context remains rather unclear, especially regarding paintings - are they never to leave the studio of the artist? The notion seems more appropriate with regard to Greek and Roman antiquities; these indeed lose a lot if not all of their traditional function and meaning when removed from their 'native' surroundings.

<sup>9</sup> For a similar argument see Chateaubriand's *Génie du Christianisme* (1802): 'Crowded into a narrow space, divided according to centuries, torn from their connection with the antiquity of the temples and of the Christian worship, subservient only to the history of the arts, and not to that of morals and religion, not retaining so much as their dust, they [works of art in a museum, A.H.] have ceased to speak either to the imagination or the heart'. English translation by Charles I. White. *The Genius of Christianity*. Philadelphia, 1871; original French text in *Génie du Christianisme*. Paris, 1978, p. 936n

ourselves for a while and causes us to seem to lose ourselves in the beautiful object; and precisely this losing, this forgetting, of ourselves is the highest degree of the pure and selfless pleasure that the beautiful affords us. In that instant, we sacrifice our individual, limited existence to a kind of higher existence'.<sup>10</sup>

We lose ourselves in the work of art, we sacrifice our individuality. Art, in Moritz' view, is a severe mistress, standing all by herself, without context or surrounding, in this respect similar to a confiscated work of art in a museum. No mention also, in Moritz' essay, of the external necessity or destination of art. What is completely lacking is the *social* dimension, Moritz only speaks about the *individual* experience of art. And there we meet nonetheless a certain usefulness of art, at least a reward for our undivided attention in the shape of what Moritz calls rather enigmatic 'a kind of higher existence' (*eine Art von höheren Dasein*). The enigma disappears in a later essay, where this 'kind of higher existence' turns out to be a kind of redemption, a temporary deliverance from finitude and mortality.<sup>11</sup>

It sounds religious, and that is not accidental. In Moritz' theory of art a lot of secularized theology resonates: the 'selfless *love*' true art requires is not so different from the loving devotion to God Quietism, the mystical Christian sect in which Moritz was brought up, expects from its believers.<sup>12</sup> There is a direct line from Moritz' aesthetics to the typical romantic conception of art as a substitute religion. Art itself replaces God as the object of love and devotion. And there we draw near the museum, being the ideal temple for this love and devotion. Listen to Moritz' student Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder in his *Herzensergießungen eines kunstliebendes Klosterbruders* (Outpourings from the heart of an art-loving monk) (1797): 'Picture galleries are thought of as fairs where people judge, praise and despise works of art while passing by, and they should be temples where, in silent and unspeaking humility and in inspiring solitude, one may admire artists as the highest among mortals, and where, in long and undisrupted contemplation of their works, one may warm oneself in the sunshine of the most eminent thoughts and sentiments'. The 'joy of noble works of art' is like a 'prayer' according to Wackenroder who, in his complaint about the 'fairs', joins Quatremère de Quincy and his aversion to the commercial side of art. But first of all he joins Moritz and his quasi-religious approach of art. To Wackenroder, as to his close friend Ludwig Tieck (who edited Wackenroder's writings posthumously after his early death in 1798) and to many other romantics, museums were sacred places of individual aesthetic bliss.<sup>13</sup>

## Schiller

The modern art museum, however, often pretends to be still something more than just that. The problem with the autonomization of art, and here again Quatremère

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<sup>10</sup> Moritz. *An Attempt to Unify All the Fine Arts and Sciences under the Concept of That Which Is Complete in Itself*, p. 98.

<sup>11</sup> *Über die bildende Nachahmung des Schönen* (1788). In: Moritz. *Werke* II, pp. 958-991.

<sup>12</sup> 'The pleasure we take in the beautiful must thus increasingly approach selfless *love* if it is to be genuine', Moritz. *An Attempt to Unify All the Fine Arts and Sciences under the Concept of That Which Is Complete in Itself*, p.98. German quietism was particularly inspired by the seventeenth-century French mystic Madame Guyon.

<sup>13</sup> Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder. *Werke und Briefe*. Berlin, n.d., p. 79.

de Quincy proves to be of relevance, is that art in the process lost all traditional bindings. Aesthetic autonomy can be evaluated as a liberation and emancipation of art and artist, yet there is a reverse consisting of a loss of social and political functionality. That is why art, since it became autonomous, has to legitimize itself time and time again, by inventing some social and political meaning and function for itself. In this respect autonomous art does not differ very much from the art museum, something that underlines the intimate relationship between the two. So the task was to find or invent a social and political function for autonomous art, without deleting art's autonomy.

Artists are still struggling with this rather paradoxical problem. Yet Friedrich Schiller, an admirer of Moritz, solved it already in his famous letters concerning the 'aesthetic education of man' from 1795. Schiller gives a bleak view of the modern world, focussing on the bloody aberrations of the French Revolution. Modernity appears to cause many unforeseen evils, from the abstract 'barbarism' of the French elite to the murderous sensuality of the common people of France, and everywhere it causes estrangement, discord and nihilism. To remedy all this and to restore freedom and morality as well as harmony, Schiller offers his recipe of an aesthetic education, for which the autonomy of art is a necessary precondition. Art is a product of the present but, thanks to its autonomy, it does not completely belong to the present. As a consequence art shows 'immunity' (Schiller's word for autonomy in the 9<sup>th</sup> Letter) to all the modern ills and evils, and is able still to communicate with the art of older, healthier times, more specifically the classical art of ancient Greece.<sup>14</sup> Therefore an education by art, an education in true moral freedom, can serve as the great healer, able to purify modern culture and restore harmony between the senses and rationality, in the individual person as well as in society. After all, a free, moral and harmonious society is impossible without the presence of free, moral and harmonious individuals.

Art and the museum, not only in spite but also because of their autonomy, nonetheless can have the social and political 'destination' that Quatremère de Quincy did deny them. Autonomous art and the museum in many ways show a similar distant relationship to the present and to society, and together they can function as an Archimedian point, as a healing outsider. In the 1820's this constellation for the first time took shape materially, when Karl Friedrich Schinkel designed and built the first Berlin art museum, now called the *Altes Museum*. In this museum Wackenroder's 'temple' was realized, in honour of Moritz' semi-sacred autonomy of the true work of art, and with Schiller's aesthetic education as social and political purpose.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in eine Reihe von Briefe*. In: Friedrich Schiller. *Sämtliche Werke* V, p. 593. München, 2004.

<sup>15</sup> See James J. Sheehan. *Museums in the German Art World: From the End of the Old Regime to the Rise of Modernism*. Oxford, 2000, p. 70-81, en Jörg Trempler. *Karl Friedrich Schinkel, Baumeister Preussens. Ein Biographie*, München, 2012, p. 164.

## In Holland

How much of all this did reach the Netherlands in the first decades of the nineteenth century? Here we can turn to Teyler's Museum, the first of its kind in Holland, which opened its doors to the public in 1789. By the will of its founder Pieter Teyler van der Hulst the museum was explicitly meant to collect and expose natural and scientific artefacts, *and* works of art. In the beginning the latter consisted mostly of designs and prints, but since the 1820's Teylers collected and exposed contemporary paintings as well. Remarkable is the separate mention of the works of art. Unfortunately we don't know much about the motives of the founder nor of the directors who introduced the paintings in the collection, except that they hoped to raise the level of good taste of the Dutch, first only the members of the learned societies which the museum was supposed to serve, and later on also the artists and the general public.<sup>16</sup>

Since the 17th century there were many art lovers (*konst-beminders*) in the Dutch Republic, generally well-to-do men who collected works of art and came frequently together to enjoy and discuss them. There also was already a lively art market. On the other hand, art (*kunst* or *konst*) meant first and all the visual arts, without the associations typical for the modern Romantic concept of art, such as aesthetic autonomy or Schiller's aesthetic education.<sup>17</sup> The same applies to Romanticism with which these notions were connected in Germany and soon also in France. Although the word 'romantic' was introduced in Dutch art criticism in the wake of the partial translation in 1810 of August Wilhelm Schlegel's *Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Literatur* (1809), scholars are still quarrelling whether in the Dutch visual arts of the early 19th century a romantic school ever existed. Consequently, Romantic art, in connection with the modern concept of art and its abovementioned notions, seems to have emerged in the Netherlands only much later in the 19th century.<sup>18</sup>

That, however, does not mean there were no Dutchmen who already at an earlier date showed some romantic susceptibility. In the 1820's a young Dutch scholar travelled through Germany. He arrived in Berlin too soon for a visit to Schinkel's museum (which opened in 1830), yet in Dresden he visited the famous *Gemäldegalerie*. In a letter to his parents in Zwolle he wrote, overflowing with enthusiasm: 'A great past presents itself to the mind and dissolves the mist which hindered the view of the height on which the genius of art assembles its high priests. Raphael, Correggio, Michelangelo open for the young man a new world that he, just like Columbus, suspected rather than knew. One senses an

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<sup>16</sup> See the contribution of Terry van Druten ('Teyler's "secretiveness"') in this book, as well as Annemiek Ouwkerk. *Romantiek aan het Spaarne. Schilderijen tot 1850 uit de collectie van Teylers Museum Haarlem*. Amsterdam, 2010.

<sup>17</sup> See Lyckle de Vries. 'De gelukkige schildereeuw. Opvattingen over de schilderkunst van de Gouden Eeuw in Nederland, 1700-1750'. In: Frans Grijzenhout/Henk van Veen (eds.). *De Gouden Eeuw in perspectief. Het beeld van de zeventiende-eeuwse schilderkunst in later tijd*. Heerlen, 1992, p. 72-73, en Ellinoor Bergvelt. 'Tussen geschiedenis en kunst. Nederlandse nationale kunstmusea in de negentiende eeuw'. In: Bergvelt/Meijers/Reijnders (eds.). *Kabinetten, galerijen en musea*, p. 361.

<sup>18</sup> See W. van den Berg. *De ontwikkeling van de term "romantisch" en zijn varianten in Nederland*. Assen, 1973, en Louis van Tilborgh. 'Dutch Romanticism: A Provincial Affair'. In: *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, Vol. 14, No. 3/4 (1984).

unspeakable desire not just to drink from this stream of pleasure but to jump right into it and go under’.

Our susceptible young scholar from the Netherlands is none other than Johan Rudolf Thorbecke, the later liberal statesman, in October 1821 only 23 years of age. In the same letter to his more and more worried parents he described what the experience of art did to him. It was able ‘to liberate me from all my doubts and unrest, and place the mind with mighty hand in the middle of the highest and the eternal, and reconcile the divided heart with itself.’<sup>19</sup> Schiller’s aesthetic education in action, one is tempted to conclude. This last quotation, though, does not concern Thorbecke’s experiences in the museum, but those in the theatre where he attended a performance of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*. Apparently, in 1821, music was still a more appropriate key to the heart of a romantic young Dutchman than an art gallery full of beautiful paintings and sculptures.

(lezing conferentie Teylers Museum, Haarlem 22-4-2017)

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<sup>19</sup> Hooykaas (red.). *Thorbecke op de romantische tour*. Amsterdam, 1991, p. 39-40. On Thorbecke's German trip see also Meindert Evers. *Begegnungen mit der deutschen Kultur. Niederländisch-deutsche Beziehungen zwischen 1780-1920*. Würzburg, 2006, chapter three.