In what sense could museums and/or art galleries be said to be ritual spaces? Refer to at least two examples of specific institutions.

The concept of an art gallery or museum as a ritual space is one that has only been studied in the past decade or so, but the principles behind it can clearly be seen emerging from the earliest days of private collections being opened to the public. The idea of a ritual has both religious and psychological connotations and both are exemplified in the study of museums and galleries.

The architecture of the public museums built in the nineteenth century is the first link to the sacred aspect of rituals. New buildings were built to “establish continuity with a suitable historic past” (Hobsbawn and Ranger 1994:1) and as such they resemble Greek temples, raised above ground level to draw the eye upwards, with façades of columns conveying the sanctity of the contents and the need to protect it. It is interesting to note that this borrowing is not a new idea as Romans borrowed it from the Greeks in their building of sacred places such as the Pantheon in Rome. The National Gallery in London (Trafalgar Square location from 1831), and the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery (founded 1885) are clear examples of these architectural ideas. The Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge (founded 1815) takes this outward impression one step further as it is not only when visiting the museum that one is presented with the façade, as it has also been incorporated into the museum’s logo.

The idea of purpose built structures for museums is just as relevant today. The Imperial War Museum North (opened 2002) was designed by the architect Daniel Libeskind, and the building is described as a “visionary symbol of the effects of war” (IWM 2003:1). In the same way as Victorian museums are physically set apart from the day to day activities, IWMN is also detached, but the difference is that the building is not striving to alienate or intimidate the visitor; it is providing a holistic experience for the visitor in an attempt to facilitate their understanding and appreciation of the exhibits within.

While some may feel that through their structure these buildings are trying to make art a more exclusive pastime, “Britain’s newest art gallery” that opened in October 2003 contradicts this. It has opened in Kingston, near London, in a disused public toilet. The purpose of the gallery is to display the work of students from art colleges, and the contemporary artists Gilbert and George who are “against art’s elitism” (Guggenheim, 2003:1) were at the opening ceremony. In an interview, they commented on the suitability of the building as it “breaks down barriers” by providing “art for all because everyone uses the toilet” (BBC, 10 October 2003).

The reverence that is more often instilled by the exterior of the building is perpetrated by the interior of galleries and museums. Duncan describes the museum space as being “marked off and culturally designated as reserved for a special quality of attention” (2002:10). The inside of the Musée D’Orsay is arranged in such as way that there are many ‘mini’ galleries off the main thoroughfare and this layout can be seen to parallel Catholic cathedrals throughout Europe where there are many small chapels for private prayer and meditation off the main body of the church. The purpose of the galleries is the same as the chapels’ purpose in that they provide the visitors with suitable surroundings for personal contemplation.

The visitor’s attention is often focussed on a single item by presenting the item – be it a painting or a sculpture – on its own. Tate Modern presents much of its collection with a great deal of space around each item forcing the visitor’s attention onto the single exhibit. Their galleries are also very ‘clean’, in that there is very little to interfere with the art and the visitor’s appreciation of it, indeed the plain walls and bare floors suggest a nearly clinical environment. However, the Spartan galleries often contain simple benches positioned in front of paintings to allow the visitor to enter a contemplative state aided by the atmosphere.

Both the sparseness of many modern galleries and the grandeur of older galleries serve to suggest a deferential behaviour pattern to the visitors. Where the visitors are obliged to concentrate their attentions on a single item they are made to feel that they are in the presence of a sacred item, set apart from

everything else. Duncan (2002:19) cites Bazin's analysis that the item's isolation provides a form of mental escapism for the viewer providing them with the means to be affected by the exhibit. A parallel to a religious pilgrimage in which people are journeying to a sacred site with the intention of being affected by what they are visiting is unavoidable at this point. At the other end of the scale, the large staircases, richly coloured rooms, and dimly lit exhibits found in many Victorian museums detach the visitor's museum experience from the reality experienced by the majority of people and their behaviour is adjusted accordingly.

The meeting of sacred and secular in a museum is nowhere more clearly embodied than in the National Gallery of Canada. In 1988 a derelict chapel became part of the museum's permanent collection and was integrated into the building as an aesthetic exhibit. Although on a wholly different scale it has been suggested that this is not dissimilar to displaying sacred artefacts from other cultures as examples of vanished traditions and exploiting their "spiritual capital with little or no regard for the artefacts' former ritual value" (Duhamel, 1996:2,5). As part of the Canadian National Gallery the reconstructed chapel is today used for displaying art works. This secular utilisation of a previously consecrated space completely blurs the increasingly hazy distinction between the sacred and secular within galleries and museums.

When the fundamental purposes of a gallery or museum are considered, they can be seen to match the reasons given for sacred rituals: "enlightenment, revelation, spiritual equilibrium or rejuvenation" (Duncan 2002:20). Whether or not they are aware of it, museum visitors are inevitably influenced by the exhibits and this usually results in a sympathetic response to the museum's narrative. This response is precisely what both the earliest and contemporary public museums are endeavouring to induce. Duncan suggests that museums are places where "politically organised and socially institutionalised power most avidly seeks to realise its desire to appear as beautiful, natural and legitimate" (2002:6).

This institutionalised power determines which "objects constitute the material basis for veneration [by] the Eurocentric dominant culture" (Duhamel, 1996:1), and this was a key element behind the British

National Gallery. The British idea grew out of the private collections of individuals whose collections were usually displays of both their power and gentlemanliness. Art served an ideological ideal in that it erected class boundaries as it was not available to the public, but only to the social and moral elite which served to reinforce the beliefs of the age. The government of the time was wholly self-interested and did not see the need for any public access to art.

John Julius Angerstein exposed the aristocracy as selfish in 1802 in a publicised list of donations that ultimately indicated that bankers, like him, were more in touch with the nation's needs (Duncan 2002:41). In keeping with his philanthropic nature he made his private collection of art available to everyone is his house in London. After his death, the 38 pictures in his collection were to form the foundation of a national collection when Parliament bought the pictures from his estate. It took seven years for the Trafalgar Square site to be opened as a purpose built gallery in which time his house was still used as the gallery. The new location was chosen to allow maximum accessibility to people: the rich could arrive by carriage, and the poor could easily walk there.

The purpose of a 'national' gallery was not addressed by Parliament until 1835 when the suitability of the Gallery's collection to satisfy the cultural needs of the public was questioned. Duncan suggests that this question was not answered until the end of the nineteenth century when the political outlook in Britain changed uniting under "universal values" (2002:47). The successful creation of a British National Gallery occurred nearly a century after France's national museum, the Louvre, opened. This is probably due to the control maintained by the British government to prevent a Republican uprising in the aftermath of the American and French Revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century

The Louvre was established in 1793 when the French Republic declared the King's art collection to be public property, and the former King's palace was opened to the public; in the Revolutionary age this was a highly symbolic action emphasising the fall of the *ancien regime.* The power relationship between the gallery and its visitors is very different in this case, as each of the exhibits was being displayed as public

property meaning that the boundary of accessibility through ownership was automatically dismissed. From this point where the exhibits were available to everyone, the gallery could set about its task to offer something more to the visitor in the field of art history and education. This was something for which Britons had to wait nearly a hundred years until the country's political ethos changed, in turn increasing the accessibility to art.

The historic importance of the museum as a means of creating a cultural ideology in "social, political, civic, moral, religious, and sexual" terms (Wyk & Wurgaft, 2000:2) is self-evident. However in today's society their importance must be examined:

> While museums have always been informative, is the museum still an important medium for the dissemination of information? Less so, I suspect, than might once have been the case. Such media as radio, broadcast television and the videocassette recorder may have come to serve at least as effectively as exhibits to disseminate information about certain subjects that once were the exclusive province of museums (Weill, 1990:50)

This was written over ten years ago in which time a new medium has appeared which not only detracts from the exhibits individually, as television and radio could be argued to do, but also from the galleries themselves. Every national museum, and many more beside, has an Internet presence. Their web sites break down any remaining physical barriers between the individual and art, as individuals can take virtual tours through galleries, or find, view, and research items from museums' collections from the comfort and safety of their own home.

On a web site the museums' management no longer has control over what the visitor sees and how they see it; the visitor is free to pick and chose what to explore, and to form their own impressions with the minimum of guidance. The visitor's theatrical ritual of examining objects and conforming to an expected behaviour pattern vanishes. The action of having to visit a gallery in person is gone, as a wealth of information is available at the click of a mouse. The same is also true of sacred spaces such as cathedrals that offer similar tours and displays of information to the on-line visitor.

This greatly increased access must initially be seen as a ‘good thing’ as in 2002 only 45% of the British public visited museums (MORI, 2002:1) and although this was an increase on the previous year, it still means that in 2002 approximately 32,600,000 members of the public did not visit a museum. If the museums’ web sites make gallery visits more accessible to some of these people, then the museum is achieving its aim of providing a source of information. However, the virtual museum must be a poor substitute for the experience of visiting a real museum – by just looking at a representation of a picture or artefact on a computer screen, the museum cannot offer the visitor the potential for enlightenment or revelation that is made available to them while experiencing a visit to a carefully curated museum.

Museums and galleries can be seen to be ritual spaces in many of same ways as sacred buildings, including their outward appearance, their organisation, and the use to which everything inside them is put. From the advent of national galleries their ideology has been decreed in some form by the controlling corpus of power, today in the UK this ultimately must be the government as all museums are publicly funded. However, their unique position of power has been diluted over the past twenty years, as there are so many other channels through which the same information can be provided. Ultimately, the concept of a museum is a man-made construct, and men will always determine how they can and will be used: “museums are inventions of men, not inevitable, eternal, ideal, nor divine. They exist for the thing we put in them, and then as each generation chooses how to see and use those things”(Weill, 1990:xiv).

(2144 words)

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