

What Do Museums Do?
UC Berkeley Syllabus Spring 2025
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Museums are unique spaces that shape stories around resonant objects. This course explores the evolution of museum archetypes: from private collections of ancient relics to magnificent public buildings filled with art, scientific specimens, and historical archives. How and why have they evolved? Who really owns the artifacts on display? Is everything you see in a museum authentic and/or priceless? What is it about museums that compels us to visit and enjoy them? We will look at a variety of noteworthy institutions and installations, from the Louvre in Paris to New York MoMA to the POLIN Museum in Warsaw; from the earliest habitat dioramas in Milwaukee and Pittsburgh to displays of repatriated looted antiquities in Rome.

April 2 Introduction and Early History of Museums

Exhibiting culturally important objects has been an integral part of human history for centuries, at locations as diverse as religious edifices, palaces and private residences and, eventually, public museums. The objects shown are associated with values ranging from divinity to aesthetics to historical/scientific importance to outright weirdness. The collections bring their sponsors and cities status, political power, and economic gains through pilgrimage and tourism.

April 9 Habitat Dioramas and Historical Interiors

More than dusty displays of stuffed elephants and butter churns, the venerable habitat diorama and historical period room are vibrant artistic creations linked to 19th century advances in technology and consumerism, as well as 20th century narratives about the “great white hunter” and “high society.” How are these iconic displays viewed today, and what can we learn from efforts to reconfigure them?

April 16 Modernism and its Progeny

Over the past century, architectural modernism reoriented museums from their modeling after highly ornamented palaces to open, flexible plans and forthright expression of new building materials and structural systems. Such dynamic architecture did not always mesh with curatorial and exhibition goals, and history museums of late (such POLIN in Warsaw and the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC) have combined striking exteriors and lobbies with gallery plans (some subterranean) that follow detailed and complex narratives.

April 25 How do museums acquire collections?

Museums house billions of precious and not-so-precious objects, but how did they get there? Some were legally-acquired through auction houses and donations, but others have a murkier

provenance. In this final session, we will look at the ethical debates around contested objects: from purloined antiquities to Native American sacred items to Nazi-era loot. It turns out that repatriation isn't as simple as it sounds, although innovative initiatives are underway at some institutions.

Resources:

Youtube videos:

1. Overview of history of museums in the U.S.: <https://greatmuseums.org/riches-rivals-and-radicals-100-years-of-museums-in-america>.
2. Napoleon's Art Loot at the Louvre
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CZdTm904D-Q>
3. Why Four New York Museums were designed so Differently:
<https://www.architecturaldigest.com/video/watch/the-blueprint-show-architect-breaks-down-why-nyc-museums-all-look-so-different>

Recent Articles of interest:

1. "Do Science Dioramas Still have a place in Today's Museums," Amber Dance (Science News, February 2025): <https://www.sciencenews.org/article/science-museum-dioramas-displays>
2. The Repatriation Project (2023-2024), Pro Publica:
<https://www.propublica.org/series/the-repatriation-project>

Books:

Conlin, Jonathan: *The Met: A History of a Museum and Its People* (Columbia University Press, 2024).

Lindsay, Georgia: *Contemporary Museum Architecture and Design: Theory and Practice of Place* (Routledge, 2020).

Schwarzer, Marjorie: "Butterflies in the Basement: Requiem for the Snow Museum of Natural History," in *The Marvelous Museum*, ed. Andrew Leland, (Chronicle Books, 2010).

----, *Riches, Rivals and Radicals: 100 Years of Museums in the United States* (3rd edition, Rowman & Littlefield, 2020).

-----, "Schizophrenic Agora: Mission, Market and the Multi-tasking Museum," *Museum News* 78 (November-December 1999).

Schwarzer, Mitchell. "Architecture and Mass Tourism," in *Architourism: Authentic, Exotic, Escapist, Spectacular*, Joan Ockman, ed. (Prestel Verlag, 2005).

-----, "Form Follows Friction," in *The de Young in the 21st Century*, Diana Ketchum, ed. (Thames and Hudson, 2005).

-----, "Toward a California Judaism," in *Daniel Libeskind and the Contemporary Jewish Museum: New Jewish Architecture from Berlin to San Francisco* (New York: Rizzoli, 2008).

Weiss, Daniel H.: *Why the Museum Matters* (Yale University Press, 2022). [For Marjorie Schwarzer's review of this important book, click [here](#).]