



Quatremere de Quincy and the instrumentality of the museum

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The creation of a French Empire under Napoleon required not only the exercise of military muscle but cultural clout too. Part of the Imperial project involved the removal of vast quantities of works of art and other artifacts from Europe's finest palaces and churches and their relocation into the recently vacated Palais du Louvre, now known simply as "the Museum". Most French critics of the early 1800s celebrated the centripetal lure Paris had over the rest of Europe's art. One critic, however, stood out. The art critic and historian Antoine Quatremere de Quincy complained bitterly about the instrumentality of the exhibition, arguing that works of art lost their value when they were translated elsewhere, especially into museums.

Quatremere's observations are significant because this was one of the first instances when the museum was recognised as an abstracted space that skewed and redefined the meaning of the objects it contained. In many ways his ideas anticipated those of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu who also complained about ways in which the arts in modern culture has lost their religious or political function. It is, I suggest, this loss - the entry of art into a sequestered realm of the Museum - that makes it so hard for us to look for its epistemological roots and to configure it as "knowledge". It is important to remember that both the Bohemian Self (that also first emerged in the early 1800s) and the spaces in which it is paraded, systematically shunned all attempts to understand them for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Quatremere, however, insisted that art could be configured as knowledge. Art revealed much about the origins, rise and decline of civilisations and pointed to the social conditions ripe for their development. It also revealed something about climatic conditions, geography and politics. Art, for Quatremere, was an object of social and cultural utility and as such could be assessed with little difficulty. Through a reading of his attack on the instrumentality of the Museum, I want to explore this alternative pre-modern paradigm of art and the epistemological base on which rested. I want also to explore what happened to art's epistemological foundations when it was abstracted into the forerunner of the white cube, the museum. While we may not be able to bridge the divide between art and knowledge, Quatremere's views are valuable, I suggest, because his perspective helps us understand much about the origins of the divide and the critical assumptions that make the crossing so difficult.