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Musée du Louvre

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About this free course

This free course provides a sample of Level 2 study in Arts and Humanities: http://www.open.ac.uk/courses/find/arts-and-humanities.

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Introduction

This course will help you to understand how major art collections are brought together over long periods of time and why particular pieces gain notoriety.

This OpenLearn course provides a sample of Level 2 study in Arts and Humanities.

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand how the Grand Louvre has come to be as it is
- critically discuss the claim that the collections in the Louvre constitute a significant part of the canon of Western European art
- ask questions of museums and collections that are appropriate to art history.

1 Themes and issues in the history of art

This course introduces you to a number of themes and issues in the history of art, taking as its pretext a visit to the Louvre in Paris. It asks three kinds of question:

1. How did the Grand Louvre (as the modernised Louvre is called) – its buildings, paintings and sculptures – come to be as it is?
2. How should we respond to the claim that the collections in the Louvre constitute a significant part of the canon of Western European art?
3. What can we, as art historians, do with a museum of this kind? (What are appropriate questions to ask of any museum and its collections?)

The Louvre is structured as a series of activities, each associated with a video clip taken from the original TV programme. In addition to watching the clips, you'll be asked to tackle a number of questions that should help you clarify your thoughts and understanding of the material presented on the clips.

Activity 1

Think of an art museum you have visited recently. Ask yourself how aware you were of the building and the history of the collection when viewing the works. Do you think that the context of works of art and the types of decision which went into their acquisition are relevant to an understanding of their meaning?

Here are some thoughts of my own:

> Some would argue that confronting works of art requires little more than close attention, some imagination and patience. These are indeed indispensable requirements. On the other hand, few people feel completely at ease in a public place as august, authoritative (literally 'palatial') and imposing as the Louvre. Whether this environment provokes awe, respect, a sense of inferiority or annoyance will depend on you. Do you feel comfortable in a museum? Do you talk in hushed tones or can you chat freely about a painting? Do you feel guilty looking at the labels, as if you ought to know who painted the pictures?
>
> If part of the message we get from going to a museum is that important, knowledgeable and well-educated people have selected these things because they believe them to be 'good', it must be of interest to find out why they thought they were of value. If it turns out that the original reasons for commissioning or acquiring works of art were of a kind unlikely to be shared by modern viewers, we can ask ourselves questions about how our 'taste' is formed.
>
> Of course, it may be that whatever we find out about the value of works of art to those in authority will not influence our perception of them and may have nothing to do with why we 'like' or 'dislike' them. This will probably depend on how closely we've looked at the works and how much we know about them – in modern parlance, how much 'ownership' we feel for them.

2 The Louvre

2.1 Introduction

The original TV programme was divided into an introduction and seven sections, each preceded by a simple question that appears on screen. To help you to explore this material, we have split the programme into eight clips, each associated with an activity. Once you have completed all the activities, you will have viewed the TV programme in its entirety and considered some of the questions explored in the original OU course.

Activity 2 deals with the whole history of the buildings from medieval castle to the 'pyramid'. Activities 3–5 deal with the ancien régime from the sixteenth century to the French Revolution in 1789, looking at the relationships between the acquisition of works of art, their display and the patronage of contemporary art. Activities 6–8 cover the creation of the Louvre as a museum under Napoleon I and its gradual transformation into the modern Louvre.

A list of the principal artists and works shown on video is given in Section 3.

Activity 2

Watch the first segment of video. This clip has been created from the introduction to the original TV programme, and it asks a number of questions about the experience of visiting the Louvre. As you watch, consider the following questions:

1. What are these people doing here; what are they looking for? Are they interested in the Venus de Milo as an example of late Hellenistic Greek art, or as an icon of feminine beauty recognisable from twentieth-century popular culture? Are they here just to say they've seen the Mona Lisa, or to evaluate it as an example of an early Renaissance portrait?
2. How does the museum, and the authority behind the museum, guide their quest and manage the cultural exchange? What sort of transaction is being managed here?
3. Are they in a position to make up their own minds, or are their judgements determined by what the curators are telling them?

Think about these questions and jot down your own views.

Click to view video

Video content is not available in this format.
Clip 1

2.2 Activities 3 to 5

Activity 3

Watch the next segment of video. Once you've watched the video, make a few notes on what you've learnt about how the present buildings of the Louvre came about.

Click to view video

Video content is not available in this format.
Clip 2

Activity 4

Watch the next segment of video. Once you've watched the video, use your own words to explain how the royal collection was formed.

Click to view video

Video content is not available in this format.
Clip 3

Activity 5

Watch the next segment of video. Once you've watched the video, jot down a few thoughts on how royal patronage promoted art practice.

Click to view video

Video content is not available in this format.
Clip 4

2.3 Activities 6 to 8

Activity 6

Watch the next segment of video. Once you've watched the video, make a few notes on what you've learnt about how the taste of the court was challenged by a new public.

Click to view video

Video content is not available in this format.
Clip 5

Activity 7

Watch the next segment of video. Once you've watched the video, make some notes on what you learnt about how the royal collection was transformed into a state museum.

Click to view video

Video content is not available in this format.
Clip 6

Activity 8

Watch the next segment of video. Once you've watched the video, make a few notes on how the Louvre was adapted to meet the needs of a mass audience.

Click to view video

Video content is not available in this format.
Clip 7

2.4 Activities 9 and 10

Activity 9

Watch the next segment of video. Once you've watched the video, jot down some notes on what you learnt about how the Grand Louvre meets the needs of today.

Click to view video

Video content is not available in this format.
Clip 8

Activity 10

Before tackling this activity, you might like to review the notes you made in the preceding activities and, perhaps, view the video clips once again. When you're ready, consider the following questions:

1. Do visitors 'like' the art in the Louvre in the same way that the people responsible for putting it there 'liked' it, and what were the motives of those who first collected the art?
2. The programme presents examples of four interlocking kinds of historical narrative:

- history of the building
- history of the royal collections
- royal and state patronage of art and architecture
- history of the museum.

Can you identify ways in which these narratives intersect?

Answer

1. It would be surprising if most visitors to the Louvre had in mind when looking at Raphael's *Saint Michael slaying the Dragon* that Francis I was Grand Master of the Order of Saint Michael and that this was a reason not only for the papal gift to the French king, but also for the king to display it prominently in his palaces. Similarly, much of the work commissioned by Louis XIV had a specifically propagandist function. On the other hand, the reasons which might have motivated the Duke of Gonzaga, Charles I of England and Louis XIV of France to admire Correggio's so-called *Sleep of Antiope* may not have been very different from those which set Zola's fictional Boche and Bibi la Grillade into 'paroxysms'.

   Those in authority may have had special motives for commissioning or celebrating particular works of art, but from an early stage in the history of the French royal collections we find kings and their advisers operating as 'connoisseurs', trying to pick winners from the available talent. If the subsequent history of taste is to be trusted as a measure of value, some were better at this than others. Many of the best-known paintings in the Louvre were acquired in the reigns of Francis I and Louis XIV. Both kings were highly preoccupied with their image, and used artists and craftsmen to project their splendour in paintings and palaces.

   From the directorship of Vivant-Denon in the First Empire, criteria for acquiring work became more specialised. As Pierre Rosenberg (Director 1994–2001) explained, Vivant-Denon's guiding idea was that the art in the national collection should be organised on art-historical principles and presented to a mass public. The problem is that if you exclude the potential of military conquest, the very best art in Europe was simply not for sale. When Napoleon's armies brought to the Louvre a selection from Italy, Germany and the Netherlands of the best antique and Renaissance art at the end of the eighteenth century, the Louvre was briefly the centre of the art world. Many foreigners who visited Paris during this period were persuaded that this fabulous collection should never be broken up. Only after Napoleon's final defeat at Waterloo in 1815 were the victorious allies persuaded to return the art treasures to their owners. Nevertheless, over 100 'stolen' works, in addition to the Borghese collection of antique sculptures which came to France by the marriage of Napoleon's sister, remain in the Louvre today. Does the modern visitor pause when admiring Veronese's huge *Marriage at Cana* or Cimabue's *Maestà* or Mantegna's *Crucifixion* predella to ask how these works got there? And yet, although military might made these acquisitions possible, the process of selection depended on professional critics and artists who accompanied Napoleon's armies with lists of works to acquire.
2. Here are some examples of mine where the narratives intersect:
   - Although the Louvre and the Tuileries were royal palaces until the French Revolution, they were also partly public. The royal collection of paintings (the Cabinet du Roi) and the Galerie des Antiques could be visited on request.

Furthermore, Louis XIV housed his academies of art and architecture in the Louvre, thus giving the collection new functions for teaching.

- As the royal collection grew, it became a key source of inspiration for the artists employed by the Crown. When the Académie royale was founded in 1648, pupils were trained by copying works in the royal collection. In the 1660s the professors like Charles Le Brun developed their art theory through lecturing on works in the collection. Stylistic debates between more classical and more painterly artists were waged around the 'cases' of famous painters in the collection (for example, Poussin and Rubens).
- The very authority of the Académie royale and the appeal to 'good taste' which stood the Crown in good stead when it could be seen that it was making 'good' choices could also turn against the Crown when its taste was questioned in the eighteenth century as decadent and frivolous. References to antiquity and to Renaissance prototypes were used by Jacques-Louis David to mock royalty and evoke republican virtue. The development of the tradition of biennial Salons in the Salon Carré in the Louvre was a tangible symbol of the art world escaping from the control of the monarchy. The public who attended these Salons engaged in fierce aesthetic and political debate.
- Even in the heyday of royal patronage, it is a mistake to assume that royal whim was everything. Painters like Charles Le Brun or sculptors like the Coustou brothers might fit well into the royal propaganda machine, but the career of a maverick like Puget can only be explained if Louis XIV and his advisers are assumed to be genuinely anxious to discover and support good artists wherever they could be found.
- By contrast with the Puritans after the execution of Charles I of England, the French revolutionaries decided that the significance of the discredited monarchy's art collection was too important to be lost to the nation. So, although many of the best works in the royal collection were either overtly propagandistic for monarchy or explicitly religious, they were housed and prominently hung in the new museum as great works of art. Vivant-Denon's policy of exhibiting the collection by 'schools' (Italian, Netherlandish, French) makes sense in this context. It was preferable to celebrate the collection as 'Art' than as a reminder of bygone days of tyranny and superstition.
- One of the arguments for supporting a national museum from the start was that all the best modern French artists should be allowed to copy the great works of the past, as the king's academicians had been allowed to do in earlier times. So, although most painters who came to copy in the Louvre were not 'state artists', and indeed often saw themselves as 'avant-garde', the relationship between the collection and the practice of art remained as a key feature throughout the nineteenth century. Many important 'modern' artists, such as Cézanne and Picasso, spent days in the Louvre copying.
- The substantial investments which post-revolutionary heads of state (from Napoleon III to Mitterrand) have committed to the Louvre can be understood as shrewd investments in public respect.

3 Principal artists and works

Michelangelo, Slave, known as *Rebel*, sculpture, c.1513, acquired 1794

Michelangelo, Slave, known as *Dying* or *Asleep*, sculpture, c.1513, acquired 1794

Venus de Milo, sculpture, late Hellenistic, acquired 1827

Leonardo da Vinci, *Mona Lisa*, painting, 1501–6, acquired 1519

Cimabue, *Maestà*, painting, c.1270, acquired 1814

Diana of the Louvre (also known as *Diana of Versailles*), sculpture, Roman copy of Greek original with seventeenth-century restorations, acquired by Francis I c.1530s, acquired by Louvre 1798

Hyacinthe Rigaud, *Louis XIV*, painting, 1701, acquired 1701 (commissioned by king)

Unknown French artist, Paris Parlement altarpiece, c.1452, acquired 1789

Titian, *Francis I*, painting, 1537, acquired 1538 (commissioned by king)

Raphael, *Virgin and Child with Saint John the Baptist* (also known as *La Belle Jardiniere*), painting, 1508, acquired 1530

Andrea del Sarto, *Charity*, painting, 1518, acquired 1518 (commissioned by king)

Raphael, *Saint Michael and the Dragon* (also known as *Saint Michael Confounding the Devil*), painting, 1518, acquired 1518 (commissioned by the Pope as a gift for the king)

Giuseppe Castiglione, *View of the Salon Carré in 1861*, painting, 1861, transferred from Ministry of Finance to the Louvre 1933

Titian, *Le Concert Champêtre*, painting, 1510, acquired 1671

Naked Mercury Attaching his Sandal, sculpture, antique, acquired 1797

Venus of Vienne (also known as *Crouching Aphrodite*), sculpture, probably Roman copy of Greek Hellenistic original, acquired 1848

Coysevox, *Crouching Venus*, sculpture, 1685, acquired 1685 (commissioned by king)

Titian, *The Entombment*, painting, 1525, acquired 1662

Peter Paul Rubens, *The Disembarkation of Marie de' Medici*, painting, 1622, acquired 1693

Nicolas Poussin, *The Rape of the Sabines*, painting, 1685, acquired 1685

Charles Le Brun, *The Queens of Persia at the Feet of Alexander* (also known as *The Tent of Darius*), painting, 1660–1, acquired 1661

Charles Le Brun, *The Conquest of Franche Comté*, 1660, acquired 1660 (commissioned by king)

Charles Le Brun, *The Battle of Arbella*, painting, before 1673, acquired 1673 (commissioned by king)

Jacques-Louis David, *The Sabine Women*, painting, 1799, acquired 1819

Eugene Delacroix, *Scenes from the Massacre of Chios*, painting, 1824, acquired after the Salon 1824

G.P. Panini, *Gallery with Views of Ancient Rome*, painting, 1758, acquired 1944

Nicholas Coustou, *Borghese Gladiator*, sculpture, copy of antique, 1683, acquired1874

Nicholas Coustou, *Farnese Hercules*, sculpture, copy of antique, 1683, acquired 1874

Nicholas Coustou, *Apollo Unveiling a Bust of Louis XIV*, sculpture, 1688, acquired1793

Guillaume Coustou, *The Horses of Marly*, sculpture, 1739–49, acquired 1794

Pierre Puget, *Alexander and Diogenes*, sculpture, 1689, acquired 1833

Pierre Puget, *Milo of Crotona*, sculpture, 1670–82, acquired 1824

Decorative roundels in Salle de Mars, new entrance to Musée Napoleon, 1800, featuring:

1. *Milo of Crotona* by Puget
2. *Moses* by Michelangelo
3. *Apollo Belvedere* (antique)
4. *Colossus of Memnon*

Apollo Belvedere, sculpture, antique, acquired 1797

Eugene Deveria, *Puget Presenting his Statue of Milo of Crotona to Louis XV in the Gardens of Versailles*, oil sketch for mural, 1832, acquired 1833

Nicolas de Largillierre, *Charles Le Brun*, painting, 1683–6, acquired 1793

F. Girardon, *Louis XIV on Horseback*, sculpture (bronze maquette for the statue in the Place des Victoires destroyed during the French Revolution), 1692, acquired 1784

François Boucher, *Diana Bathing*, painting, 1742, acquired 1852

Jacques-Louis David, *The Oath of the Horatii*, painting, 1784, acquired 1784

Jean Antoine Watteau, *The Pilgrimage to Cythera*, painting, 1717, acquired 1790s

Hubert Robert, *The 'Salle des Saisons'*, painting, 1802–3, acquired 1964

Hubert Robert, *The Grande Galerie in Ruins*, painting, c.1801–5

Benjamin Zix, *The Marriage Procession of Napoleon and Marie-Louise through the Grand Galerie*, painting, 1810 (Musée Ceramique, Sèvres)

Eustache Le Sueur, *Saints Gervasius and Protasius before Anastasius*, painting, 1652, acquired 1793

Dionysus and the Infant Bacchus, sculpture, antique from the Borghese collection, acquired 1809

Borghese Gladiator, sculpture, antique from the Borghese collection, acquired 1809

Paolo Veronese, *The Marriage at Cana*, painting, 1562, acquired 1798

Andrea Mantegna, *Calvary*, painting, 1457, acquired 1798

Bulls of Khorsabad, sculpture, Assyrian, excavation began 1843

Nyke of Samothrace, sculpture, Hellenistic, acquired 1863

Hubert Robert, *Projected Redesign of the Grande Galerie*, painting, 1796, acquired 1975

François Biard, *Four O'Clock at the Salon* (also known as *We're Closing*), painting, 1847

Hubert Robert, *The Grande Galerie*, painting, 1795, acquired 1948

Hubert Robert, *The Grande Galerie in the Course of Restoration*, 1796–9, acquired 1946

Conclusion

This free course provided an introduction to studying the arts and humanities. It took you through a series of exercises designed to develop your approach to study and learning at a distance and helped to improve your confidence as an independent learner.

Acknowledgements

This course was written by Professor Tim Benton

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