The New York Cloisters: A Forgery?

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Amerika, du hast es besser  
Als unser Kontinent, das alte,  
Hast keine verfallene Schlösser  
Und keine Basalte.  
Dich stört nicht im Innern  
In lebendiger Zeit,  
Unnützes Erinnern  
Und vergeblicher Streit.

Benutzt die Gegenwart mit Glück!  
Und wenn nun eure Kinder dichten,  
Bewahre sie ein gut Geschick  
Vor Ritter-, Räuber- und Gespenstergeschichten.

(Goethe: Den Vereinigten Staaten)

Museums, as relatively recent cultural phenomena, can be said to establish new contexts for the works of art, the context of museal presentation. An exception is modern “museal art”: objects that were produced with the intention (or hope) to be sooner or later displayed in a museum.

Whether representative art is identical with the museal one is, however, questionable, since, say, the mid-nineteenth century. In museal keeping there is always and necessarily an element of conserving and conservatism. The champions of the new rebel against it—only to have their own works become objects of such kind of conservation later. Those refused, rise up against those accepted in the salons and exhibitions—forerunners or experiments of the museum—and establish their counter-salons. And so on and so forth.

Similarly, one may ask whether displaying a work of art is not the very opposite of placing or integrating it into life; and if so, whether this is right or reprehensible.

In contrast to “museal art” of which the museum is the ideal context and function, for the majority of older works the museum is not their primary and original place. The museum itself is the prime example of the necessary change and transformation of the original intent and function. Actually, it is a series of
examples in which different types of objects of art interact in a historical and natural manner with the different historical character of museums.

Museums have their own history. Concepts and styles of collection and presentation are varied. Nor is the building and the location irrelevant. The Museo Nazionale del Bargello is also taking its objects out of their original context, but it is surely different when the works of the Tuscan Trecento and Quattrocento are displayed in a palace of the old town of Florence and when a medieval altar retable is hung in a contemporary building of a modern city. Even if the altar remains in its original site in the surviving old church, it is subject to a kind of musealization by the aesthetic, scholarly, historical, and touristic approach to it.

Having always been intrigued by this issue, I should like to explore one of its most peculiar examples, the Cloisters in New York City. This ensemble of medieval monastic architecture is located on the northwest corner of the island of Manhattan, the center of the tri-city metropolis, on top of a hill in Fort Tryon Park, high above the Hudson River, in a place where there were no Middle Ages. It is sneered at by Europeans, as is the capital of American “modernity” where history is present only in the shabbiness of nineteenth-century façades, something very different from European cities.

Coming by bus from Broadway, having left Columbia University behind, one rides through a rather run-down neighborhood. Then, after the George Washington Bridge, the scene is again different; the bus climbs up amidst well-kept middle-class houses before reaching the Neogothic building of Charles Collens (1873–1956), built for the museum in 1934–8, on the behest of John D. Rockefeller Jr. (1874–1961).¹

The remnants of four French monasteries, Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa, Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert, Bonnefont-en-Comminges and Trie were here reconstructed and spolia from several Romanesque and Gothic churches, chapels and monasteries built into the walls. Moreover, a nice collection of sculptures, gravestones, carpets, paintings, books and liturgical vessels is exhibited in the rooms. Old stones were included into the modern building and since its exterior follows its contents, the museum structure itself is an ensemble of medieval styles.

The idea, and indeed the core (the material from the four monasteries) of the museum comes from the artist George Grey Barnard (1863–1938). This master of monumental sculptures, once called “the response of Iowa to Michelangelo”