



Foreword – Time to Look, Read and Explore

Susanna Pettersson
Director General

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Daniel Seghers (1590–1661) and Erasmus Quellinus the Younger (1607–1678), *Flower Garland with the Standing Virgin and Child*, c. 1645–50. Oil on copper, 85.5 x 61.5 cm. Purchase: Wiros Fund. Nationalmuseum, NM 7505.

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At the time of writing this text, in the early summer of 2020, the whole world has slowed because of Covid-19. It has been an exceptional experience for the majority of the population. Many public services, such as museums, libraries and archives, as well as concert halls, theatres and cinemas, have been closed during the worst months of the pandemic. Even the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm closed on 20 March for three months.

Closing a function like the Nationalmuseum holds a great symbolic value. It signals severe societal disruption, whereas an open and democratic space communicates the opposite. We have witnessed how museums, both large and small, all around the globe, have closed their doors, and how these arenas for exploration, interpretation and learning have been put on hold. Hundreds of exhibitions have been cancelled or rescheduled.

Museums were quick to arrange alternative ways to access their collections, with existing online resources created a solid basis for this work. One example is Europeana, where thousands of European archives, libraries and museums sharing their collections for “enjoyment, education and research”. The material consists of millions of books, music and artworks. The Nationalmuseum has also published over 87,000 images of its collections online, a number that is increasing every year. The aim is to encourage online visitors to explore and enjoy the collections,

no matter whether they are an experience seeker or a professional.

Entering the collections through physical and virtual doors is the key. The pandemic has encouraged museums to increase the number of virtual tours and to produce short, bespoke online films about collections and exhibitions. One could even question whether the concept of a museum visit has changed over the year and, if the answer is yes, how? In order to answer those questions, we should pause for a minute to think about the history of the collections, the encounters between the objects and their public, as well as the related knowledge produced by research.

The museum as a public and democratic space, as we understand it from today’s perspective, is a relatively recent phenomenon. The majority of European museums were founded and opened to the public in the 19th century, as discussed in the exhibition catalogue *Inspiration – Iconic Works* (ed. Susanna Pettersson, 2020), published in cooperation with the Finnish National Gallery/Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki, for an exhibition featuring the history of museums and the formation of the canon of art history.

This era, the grand century of the founding of museums, was also a time that witnessed the formation of something we know as the visitor’s code – how the public that entered the newly opened galleries was expected to behave. Previously, the earliest collections were

open to selected audiences and the visits were private in character. When visiting a private manor house or a castle, for instance, the artworks and objects could be studied at close range. A collection’s owner could show their latest acquisition to a distinguished guest, while the ritual of experiencing and interpreting included looking, smelling the materials and even touching. These events became popular topics for paintings that celebrated the glory and value of private collections.

Knowledge related to items in a collection was highly appreciated as far back as the Renaissance, with the earliest cabinets of curiosities focusing on *naturalia*, *artificialia* and *scientifica*. Collections provided keys for understanding the world, creating structure and categories, and contextual information added to the aura of an object. (However, in some cases the stories were pure invention, as in the cases of fabricated treasures such as mermaids or unicorn horns.) Contemporary museums still build upon this contextual tradition.

The intimate relationship between the object and the visitor changed dramatically when collections were introduced to the wider public at the end of the 18th century. Visitors could no longer touch the works or study the objects up close. Objects were displayed in specially designed cases and paintings were carefully placed on the walls, some very high and out of reach. Closer examination became

a privilege, the responsibility of a new museum profession, conservators, who could provide detailed information about the technique, materials – or layers invisible to the naked eye – for research into art history.

From the perspective of accessibility, our digital age is opening up highways for experiences, interpretation and knowledge building. Collections can be explored in detail and high-resolution images can show more than any one of us has seen before: brush strokes, pigments, or small cracks in the paint. This, combined with art historical information and material studies, adds up to the grand historical narrative of art history.

Having said that, there is nothing as powerful as an encounter with an original, authentic object or artwork in a museum environment. These moments are magical now – and they will be magical in the future. Therefore, it is probably fair to claim that the time we are in has opened a lot of exciting doors to our collections, as well as lowering thresholds, although it has also shown that we cannot move our lives to Teams or Skype meetings – we cannot only interact with digital materials. Real museums are needed to experience the collections onsite, and real museums with their specialists are necessary to take a closer look at the collections.

The *Art Bulletin of Nationalmuseum* vol. 26:1 is a great example of an arena in which you can explore some of the highlights from our acquisitions in 2019. The articles showcase a carefully curated selection of artworks and objects that reflect Swedish cultural heritage, as well as our ambition to strengthen the collections' international aspects. The first category includes articles on Daniel Segher's *Flower Garland with the Standing Virgin and Child* (with its long history in Swedish collections), argent haché, royal tableaux vivants and Elsa Beskow's drawings. The second category includes French master drawings of the 18th century and an article on the Danish Golden Age – an

acquisition project that became an exhibition. This issue also features a concluding article by Professor Michael Yonan, an essay on Martin van Meytens' portrait of the Viennese Court Jeweller Johann Michael von Grosser, a work of art that entered the Nationalmuseum's collections almost a hundred years ago.

I wish to thank all my colleagues who contributed to this publication with their insightful articles. This is how we continue the tradition – by looking, exploring and sharing what we have learned. And the good news is that from this edition onward, we will be publishing the *Art Bulletin of Nationalmuseum* twice a year.

We hope to see you in our galleries, surrounded by our most recent and previous acquisitions!