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WHitE iS WHitE...

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A research document

by Amélie Bernazzani and Frédéric Herbin,
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Sammy Engramer
WHITE IS WHITE...
TO THE WHITE CUBE BOUNDARIES

I first encountered 17th century Dutch painting more than twenty years ago, while reading G.W.F. Hegel's *Aesthetics* (Part III). In the chapter dedicated to Dutch painting, Hegel leads us to understand the “death of art”, which is rather to be taken as a “Dissolution” (*Auflösung*) of art. As a Protestant and a Spinozist, Hegel's praise of painting is before all that of the Dutch painters' resistance against the Spanish Catholics. The Dutch painters followed a practice set in between the imperatives of the Counter-Reformation and of Protestant iconoclasm. To these rules may be added the concern for a “humble” painting, relating explicitly to daily life, and even to the simple and arduous life of 17th century Dutchmen —like in a photograph, all is depicted through “the instantaneity of the gesture”. According to Hegel, this set creates a “plane of immanence” (dear to Spinoza) on the whole surface of the painting. This plane of immanence obviously goes against the transcendental Catholic painting based on the quest for depth (via constructions following cone-shaped perspectives) so as to signify the presence/absence of God. The Protestant Reformation imposed specific laws, not only at the heart of picture constructions, but also on the choice of subjects. I then decided to look for the “the proof of the existence of a plane of immanence” in museums. But by dint of sticking my nose on Dutch painting, and of course, after a reading of Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, a patently obvious fact imposed itself to my mind and encouraged me to look closer at the painters of temples and churches.

When facing paintings by Saenredam or De Witte, I was immediately struck by the bright whiteness of the interior of Protestant temples, deprived of any ostentatious or holy signs. This *tabula rasa*, this cleaning through vacuum, seemed dazzlingly modern to me —as if all the religious colours and trinkets has slid off the canvas and disappeared into the frame moulding. Shining with a light radiating from the building's stones rather than from the sun, the empty yet magnificent whiteness of the Protestant temples convinced me that an international plot had been going on for the past four centuries; and I was certain that there was a definite and uncontested relationship between my training as a painter (one of its characteristics consisting in painting in white long walls before actually hanging anything on them), and Protestants' meditation places.

Some encounters and research later, and also after reading Frédéric Herbin's Master II thesis, I could no longer ignore that there was a strong link between the Protestant Reformation and the white cube ideology. Besides, the exhibition spaces I had been to for the past twenty years boldly emphasized a specific policy of the cult of the art, somehow imposing a univocal and magic ideology in the way of looking at art. Pretty convinced that my idea was good, I called on Amélie Bernazzani and Frédéric Herbin's clear-sightedness to get further into this question. After some exchanges, we agreed on a straightforward research angle, based on the comparison between Dutch Protestant and Catholic painting of the 17th century. The aim was to confirm whether or not these artist's enthusiastic and cranky intuitions of mine could turn into serious historical issues. After a few months of research, the results were encouraging enough and we produced

a first document, which, to me, opens an analysis of the “geopsychic” of exhibition space. This research is also a basis from which to consider both the origins of contemporary art, which appear way more distant, and the religious, even magic, aspects on which both contemporary art museums and private galleries still depend today.

1. *La réalité du White Cube à travers les revues Mousseion et Museum*, Master II's thesis, under the direction of Eric de Chassey, Université François Rabelais de Tours, 2005.

Frédéric Herbin
CAN WE ASSUME
THAT THE INVENTION OF THE WHITE CUBE
HAS PROTESTANT ORIGINS?

Drawing a parallel between the functioning of a museum and that of a place with a religious vocation is generally agreed. This was already in 1966 the main argument in the critique on museum and cultural diffusion carried out by Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel in their famous *The Love of Art: European Art Museums and Their Public*:

“Like a church, where chosen ones come to feed their virtuous faith as some conformists or fake devotees come to botch up a class ritual, the museum may become, for a moment, a place of pilgrimage where the tightly packed troops of faithful rush. In New York, Washington, Tokyo or Paris, they queue patiently to quickly cast an eye —like people used to kiss a crucifix or reliquary— over a masterpiece pointed out by collective enthusiasm...”¹

Indeed, going to a museum is to a large extent a sort of “contemporary ritual”², which like a religious ritual cuts off from daily life, isolates from the outside world and prescribes a codified behaviour made of silence, meditation and contemplation in front of the exhibited works³. The architecture of the place, like that of a religious building, is a physical expression of that cut off from society, with openings presenting opaque materials, being pushed upward or even non-existent.

Nonetheless, if all these common features make the connection between the two institutions relevant, it also appears that it tends to erase the

1 - Pierre Bourdieu, Alain Darbel, *L'Amour de l'art: les musées européens et leur public*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1969 [1966], p. 131. Published in English by John Wiley & Sons, 1997.

2 - On this notion, see: Martine Ségalen, *Rites et rituels contemporains*, Paris, Éditions Nathan, 1998.

3 - On this aspect, see: Carol Duncan, *Civilizing rituals: inside art museums*, New York, Routledge, 1995.

specificities and evolutions that each underwent. It is acknowledged that the museum's layout has gone through deep transformations from its creation at the end of the 18th century to its great increase in number during the second half of the 20th century. In the same manner, the church, as an element of comparison for the museum for Bourdieu and Darbel, but also for Carol Duncan⁴ and Brian O'Doherty⁵, is merely a place of worship among others, which characteristics also changed according to the various reforms that the dogma went through. In other words, can we not refine this comparison and cease to consider museum and place of worship in a generic way?

In that case, we need to distinguish the significant main forms of museum layouts —the “palace museum” of the 19th century and the white cube that became widespread after the Second World War— and see if this evolution finds an echo in that of places dedicated to cult. We will then be able to specify whether the white cube borrows to the traditional model of the church or, more specifically, to the Protestant temple.

If we are to roughly trace the evolution of the form of the public museum, from its invention at the end of the 18th century to the second half of the 20th century, we notice that two main opposite models dominate. The type of museum that developed through the 19th century and prevailed until the 1930's widely keeps the trace of the princely or royal origin of its collections and/or buildings. It embodies the movement through which the royal or princely collections opened to the public, or even became a national common good⁶, and which yet only slightly changed the setting

4 - *Ibid.*, p. 12.

5 - Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: the Ideology of the Gallery Space*, Santa Monica, Lapis Press, 1986, p. 15 [originally published in three different articles in 1976 in *Artforum*]. Galbert, 2008.

6 - On the history of the creation of public museums, see Germain Bazin, *The Museum Age*, translated by Jane van Nuis Cahill, New York: Universe Books, 1967.

and the presentation. Often, the palace remains the favourite location for its installation. When the museum gives rise to a new building, it is still the palace —to which elements inspired by the Greek temple are added or substituted— that is used as a model. The building has to express the prestige of its function and to act as a signal in the city. The interior design intensifies the monumentalisation through a solemnity and a sumptuousness that impress the visitor. The adaptation of the building for the exhibition and conservation of the works is given up for this symbolic display.

Indeed, in terms of interior design and hanging, the princely or royal collection is also used as a reference, as A. Lauterbach explained in 1935: “Most of European museums originate in royal or princely collections settled in a luxury way in palaces. (...) The royal galleries were used as a decoration and setting for curiosity collections. Even if the representative or decorative role of the collections lost its *raison d'être* when the democracy formed, some traits of this former museum physiognomy lasted until today.”⁷ The focus was apparently put on how to offer a setting ranking with the works presented, as if the only way for them to not be affected by their surroundings was to reproduce the splendour of the environment for which they were created or into which they were gathered by their former owner. This is not only true of European museums that often inherit old buildings, but also of American museums with new constructions, as described in an article by the architect of the Detroit Institute of Art:

“It may be useful to explain that, in a city, the Museum is one of the few buildings where the public comes to seek an art emotion, that it misses its point if it does not contribute to it and that it can only do so through

7 - A. Lauterbach, « L'adaptation des palais anciens à l'usage des musées et la présentation des ensembles », *Museumion*, Paris, 1935, vol. 29-30, p. 73.

the harmony between architecture, paintings, sculptures and furniture. In a word, architecture in a Museum is not a poor relation. (...) All that partakes in the conviction that a Museum, an art works reliquary, has to be a work of art itself, and cannot fulfil its function if, through its aspect, it does not rank at the same level as the works it houses.”⁸

Eventually, the works are integrated into a decorative setting to which they partake in the same way as the antique furniture, the architectural ornament and wall coverings do. Thus, museums seem to be reconstitutions of private interiors, with no hierarchy bringing forward the works of art in comparison with the environment in which they are set. The hanging of the works also participates to this decorative setting. As Guglielmo Pacchioni testified in 1934 about the principles followed by his predecessor at the head of the Turin Royal Gallery:

“The principles he followed were naturally those applied during the second half of the 19th century: (...) layout on two or three rows, by symmetric groups, resorting widely —one has to acknowledge, quite cleverly— to the symmetric correspondence, not only in the dimensions of the painting and the frame moulding, but also often in the very subject of the painting.”⁹

In such a situation, each work obviously does not have the largest space available, but as Clarence Stein underlines: “Most museums display their whole collection, or part of it, in exceedingly cluttered rooms...”¹⁰

The autonomy of each work is thus sacrificed in order to create a general atmosphere that makes it look more like a private interior than

a place which primary purpose is the careful observation of each object taken separately. The “palace museum” is essentially designed to integrate a collection which unchangeable corpus has been established once and for all; which implies that the building matches physically with it, in some ideal permanence.

In total opposition to this architectural and museographic model, a new conception of the museum developed in the 1930’s. Indeed, from then on, the professionalization of museum employees, along with the stress put on the scientific and educational vocations of the institution, led to a complete reform in the way works are displayed. The new museum’s function is to mostly and only put forth the objects that it stores. The building that shelters it has therefore to be as plain as possible. Any form of decoration vanishes and leaves place to the most neutral colour as possible that will cover the whole exhibition spaces, as Orlando Grosso recommended, as early as in 1929, “the elimination of vivid colours and the resort to one neutral hue, matching that of the floorboards, the walls and vaults (...). This unique hue applied in galleries, draws the visitor’s attention to meditate without being distracted; the eye gets used to contemplate each work on one same chromatic background...”¹¹

In terms of hanging, it is no longer a matter of creating a general decorative effect but to ensure an autonomous visibility for each of the works, as Louis Hautecoeur indicates: “each piece is isolated, highlighted (...) statues shouldn’t stand out against each other...”¹² This conception of museography quickly spread in the world of museums, as Wolfgang Schöne

8 - Paul Philippe Cret, « L’architecture des musées en tant que plastique », *Mouseion*, Paris, 1934, Vol. 25-26, p. 9-10.

9 - Guglielmo Pacchioni, « Les principes de réorganisation de la Galleria Sabauda de Turin », *Mouseion*, Paris, 1934, vol. 27-28, p. 124.

10 - Clarence Stein, « Architecture et aménagement des musées, *Mouseion*, Paris, 1933, vol. 21-22, p. 8.

11 - Orlando Grosso, « « Éclairage et décoration aux musées de Gênes », *Mouseion*, Paris, 1929, vol. 9, p. 246.

12 - Louis Hautecoeur, « Architecture et organisation des musées », *Mouseion*, Paris, vol. 23-24, p. 10-15.

expressed: “Our time requires light-coloured museums. Instead of harsh colours, light hues are chosen everywhere, predominantly neutral...”¹³

This radical transformation surge does not only affect the interior design of the museum but also its architectural conception. Again, it is a matter of breaking once and for all with the “palace museum” model:

“Like in the past, some museums recently erected give to the exterior of their buildings an architectural imposing figure; thus, they merely shape wonderful graves for the hopes that should have been fulfilled instead. These museums keep on developing their surface area, inaccessible exit doors whereas their entrances are uselessly large, and offer to the eye a set of unpleasant colours (...). Once completed, a beautiful marble building is the least elastic thing in the world...”¹⁴

The needs of the modern museum, conceived to respond to its function and adapted to the requirements of the nascent museographic science, are fully met by the functionalist ideology of the Modern movement. Thus, the absence of decoration concurs with the demand of constructive integrity on which the architecture is based. This is widely expressed in the writings of Le Corbusier: “We owe the gold and precious stones decoration to the savage on his Sunday best that still lives in us. (...) If iconolatry rises up and grows like a cancer, let us be iconoclasts.”¹⁵ He opposes to decoration the white and naked wall as enacted in his “Law of the Ripolin”: “figure out the effects of the Law of the Ripolin: each citizen has to replace his draperies, damasks, wallpapers, stencils by a layer of white Ripolin.”¹⁶

13 - Wolfgang Schöne, « Le nouvel aménagement de la National-galerie de Berlin », *Mouseion*, Paris, 1937, vol. 37-38, p. 100.

14 - Richard Bach, « Le musée moderne : son plan, ses fonctions », *Mouseion*, Paris, 1930, vol. 10, p. 18.

15 - Le Corbusier, *L'art décoratif aujourd'hui*, Paris Flammarion, 1996 [1925], p. 12.

16 - *Ibid*, p. 191.

If this precept applies before all to houses, the question also has to do with the exhibition of art works: “Your stuccos and colour papers are as insolent as footmen, and I bring back to my place the Picasso I came with as a present, for we wouldn’t see it in this messy interior of yours.”¹⁷ Thus, it is quite clear that this will to neutralize the museum space to highlight the works of art is an echo to the architect’s precepts: “If the house is completely white, the design of things will stand out without any possible transgression; the volume of things will appear clearly; their colour will assert itself. (...) It is somehow like the X-rays of beauty.”¹⁸ To this may be added the taste for pure geometrical shapes that the architect shares with the advocates of the Modern movement and that excludes any artificial dressing of the volumes: “Architecture is the masterly, correct and magnificent play of masses brought together in light. Our eyes are made to see forms in light; light and shade reveal these forms; cubes, cones, spheres, cylinders or pyramids are the great primary forms which light reveals to advantage; the image of these is distinct and tangible within us, without ambiguity. It is for this reason that these are beautiful forms, the most beautiful forms. Everybody agrees with that, the child, the savage and the metaphysician. It is the very condition of plastic arts.”¹⁹

Quite quickly too, the necessity of a greater flexibility in the building layout imposed itself to museum professionals: “If this architecture is really functional, flexible and well conceived with regards to circulation, then the question of the fit-out is quite simple. But if on the contrary the building is a historical monument, or if the architect designed a composition that borrows to various Renaissance palaces, according to the orthodox Art

17 - Le Corbusier, *Vers une architecture*, Paris, Flammarion, 1995 [1923], p. 90.

18 - Le Corbusier, *L'art décoratif aujourd'hui*, see above, p. 193.

19 - Le Corbusier, *Vers une architecture*, see above, p. 16.

schools tradition, the problem will unlikely be solved.”²⁰ This surge also struck a chord with the architects, as Clarence Stein puts it: “It should possible, after some study, to get to fit out various types of rooms, corresponding to the needs of every particular specimen. This requires, in all cases, a new and more flexible kind of interior disposition in buildings.”²¹ He is even led to imagine a device, which even if it wasn’t immediately implemented, will after all be present in many museums after the Second World War: “We are led to imagine a system of mobile walls that allows to arrange the rooms so as to emphasize every particular object...”²² Again, the specific requirements of the new museum meet the principles that the Modern movement applies to architecture. Thus, it the development of the concept of “open floor plan” —one of the “five points towards a new architecture” defined by Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret in 1927²³— that will provide the flexibility that the museum requires.

The principles of the modern museum didn’t remain on paper and first found an application in Holland where in between 1935 and 1938, not less than four buildings were erected and quickly considered as perfect examples: the Haags Gemeentemuseum built by Berlage (The Hague), the Boijmans van Beuningen by van der Steur (Rotterdam), the Van Abbemuseum by Kropholler (Eindhoven) and the Kröller-Müller Museum by van de Velde (Otterlo). Another instance, chronologically close but

20 - *Muséographie : architecture et aménagement des musées d’art. Conférence internationale d’études, Madrid 1934*, Paris, Société des Nations, Office International des Musées, Institut International de Coopération Intellectuelle, 1935, p. 39.

21 - Clarence Stein, see above, p. 15.

22 - *Ibid*, p. 21.

23 - Alfred Roth, Le Corbusier, Pierre Jeanneret, *Zwei Wohnhäuser von Le Corbusier und Pierre Jeanneret*, Stuttgart, Verlag Dr. Fr. Wedekind & Co., 1927; quoted after Le Corbusier, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. I - 1910-1929, Zurich, Les Editions d’Architecture Erlenbach, 1937-1970, p. 128.

located in another context, is worth mentioning in that it also announces the widespread use of the new museum model for the exhibition of Modern art works: the new Museum of Modern Art building in New York²⁴. Indeed, if the building and fit-out principles have an important impact on the world of museums, they will be fully implemented after the Second World War in museums dedicated to the exhibition of the latest art.

It is under the name *White Cube*, coined in 1976 by Brian O’Doherty²⁵, that we refer to this model of museum fit-out, which spread widely in the museums of modern art, as opposed to, as we saw, the “palace museum”. Yet, if these two types of space have been compared to religious places, the many differences that we have pointed out show how difficult it is to compare them to any of these places. The way those two museums have been built and fitted-out, the quantity and arrangement of the works they present leads us to trace two different genealogies. We can thus assume that the “palace museum” refers to the traditional space of the Catholic church whereas the white cube originates in the Protestant temple.

The foundation of a Catholic church originates in the presence of relics that need to be sheltered. The building is erected around them and the addition of new relics means the creation of new separate spaces to receive, and also to emphasize them. In other words, the architecture is designed as a permanent receptacle. Whether a religious activity happens there or not, the place remains symbolically the same: the house of God. Besides, this symbolic aspect prevails on any other consideration. Thus, the cross-shaped plan imposed itself with —depending on the addition of new altars— the multiplication of built spaces (chapels) each dedicated to the

24 - The building conceived by Philip L. Goodwin and Edward Durrell Stone and completed in 1939.

25 - Brian O’Doherty, see above.

adoration of religious figures. The plan expresses the various “poles” of worship of the building and is complemented with an architectural staging and a decoration expenditure, which, through its image and proportions, intensifies the symbolic system of each space.

The Catholic church thus offers a context that willingly welcomes sumptuousness. The exterior of the building, as much as the interior, give evidence of this aspect. The image —sculpted or painted— plays a very important part there. Any object present there, any part of the building, may be a medium onto which decoration or narrative elements will be laid, so that very few spots remain clear. Far from the whiteness that we experience today in a church, it is traditionally the scene of a polychromy that spreads from the floor to the vault and stained-glass windows: it is within this framework that images participate to the liturgical function of the place. They are the medium through which visitors watch and memorize the Holy story. Thus, they also serve its edification.²⁶

Eventually, the whole thing proves to lack flexibility since each space is conceived for specific objects or images or else, on the contrary, objects or images are created to fit into these spaces. We are here indeed dealing with a composed set that puts together, around each altar, architecture, furniture and image, as in a “palace museum”. The spectator/visitor faces an environment that mixes many stimuli, difficult to be differentiated the one from the other, and that makes any appreciation of a single object even more complicated.

Contrarily to these characteristics, the White Cube embodies the opposition of the modern museum to the traditional practice, just as the Protestant religious space embodies the Reformation against the Catholic doctrine. Both new spaces long for the same simplicity. First, it is a question of transforming the existing buildings. Whether a church or a museum, both are cleared out of any decoration, any sharp colour, to give way to neutrality. White is then often used to cover the architecture and carry out this transformation. Images get scarce, more spaced out, almost even disappear under the effect of the iconoclasm that characterizes the Protestant Reformation.

Then, new buildings start to appear. As we mentioned above, after the Second World War, the White Cube becomes more general for the modern art museums. For the Protestant religion, the 1598 Edict of Nantes made the development of temples possible. The volumes of the building erected at this period are simpler, based on pure geometric shapes. The Protestant temple abandons the cross-shaped plan and its chapels, for a unified space with a centralized plan (often square or oval-shaped). The building no longer seeks to embody/symbolize the power it emanates from, but it adapts to the function it has to fulfil. In that manner, both the temple and the White Cube do not really differ from the other kinds of architecture in terms of decoration. They are essentially meant to erase and reduce as much as possible any distraction that may divert the visitor from what is happening there. As for the temple, the worshiper’s attention should only focus on the priest placed in the centre, so he can hear and memorize the

26 - On the function of religious images, see Jérôme Baschet, « L’image-objet », dans Jérôme Baschet, Jean-Claude Schmitt (dir.), *L’image : fonctions et usages des images dans l’Occident médiéval*. Actes du 6^e International Workshop on Medieval Societies, (Erice (Sicile), Centre Ettore Majorana, 17-23 oct. 1992), Paris, 1996, p. 7-25.

Divine Word that he spreads. In the White Cube, the spectator should be able to concentrate on the works that are exhibited and abstracted from any context but that of the art, as Brian O'Doherty explains: "The ideal Gallery subtracts from the artwork all cues that interfere with the fact that it is 'art'. The work is isolated from everything that would detract from its own evaluation of itself."²⁷ Consequently, if both places do not totally deny it, they tend to reduce the body reality of people by purely aiming to their senses and useful functions —hearing and spirit for the temple, sight and spirit for the White Cube: "The space offers the thought that while eyes and minds are welcome, space-occupying bodies are not —or are tolerated only as kinesthetic mannekins for further study."²⁸

Connecting these two types of building is not just a formal matter: it reveals similarities in the ways of thinking. We saw that the invention of the model of the white cube owes a lot to the architectural principles advocated by the Modern movement. Yet, among the main protagonists of this movement, many have Protestant origins. Thus, the rigour and simplicity of the architecture, as advocated by Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe and Frank Lloyd Wright —which impacts directly on the model of the modern museum— may be linked to their contact with the Protestant thought²⁹. In the same way, the Protestant temple and the white cube play an important part in art's economic dimension. Max Weber showed that the Protestant thought played a major part in the development of the capitalist doctrine³⁰. In the field of art, one has to acknowledge that the Protestant Reformation,

27 - Brian O'Doherty, see above, p. 14.

28 - *Ibid*, p. 15.

29 - See Dominique Péneau, *Architecture protestante et modernité : Du sacré et de l'ascèse en particulier*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2008.

30 - Max Weber, *L'Éthique protestante et l'esprit du capitalisme*, Flammarion, 1999 [1904-1905].

and how it forbids images in worship places, compelled the artists to find another market than the religious commission and thus directly played a part in the birth of the private art market. As a result, it is within this context that one has look into the origin of the work of art as a merchandise concept. It turns out that the intensification of this concept is one of the functions generally attributed to the white cube: "A direct correlation exists between the 'aura' of the isolated work of art and commodity fetishism which is the central means for the production of desires and therefore essential to the survival of capitalist economy."³¹ Brian O'Doherty makes a similar comment: "The development of the pristine, placeless white cube is one of modernism's triumphs —a development commercial, aesthetic, and technological."³²

As an outcome to this comparison, it appears that the museum of modern art, and the generalisation of the white cube, owes more to the Protestant temple than to any other place of worship. The fact that the church and the "palace museum", on the one hand, and the temple and the White Cube, on the other hand, are radically different makes absolutely no doubt. Both the temple and the White Cube respond to the same desire for a mere container that isolates and emphasizes in the best way what it contains. The temple fulfils this function without a doubt, yet the situation has grown totally different for the White Cube. From a mere background for the works of art, it has become as much the symbol of the modernity as the objects it emphasizes. As Brian O'Doherty wrote: "We have now reached a point where we see not the art but the space first. (A cliché of the age is to ejaculate over the space on entering a gallery.) An image comes to mind of a white, ideal

31 - Christop Grunenberg, *The politics of presentation: museums, galleries, and exhibitions in New York, 1929-1947*, Ph.D, Londres, Courtauld Institute of art, 1994, p. 305.

32 - Brian O'Doherty, see above, p. 79.

space that, more than any single picture, may be the archetypal image of the twentieth century art...³³ But if the White Cube finally embodies 20th century art better than any other object, 20th century art may be one of the ultimate outcomes of the Protestant Reformation.

Amélie Bernazzani

**A MOST EDIFYING ENCOUNTER:
THE CONFRONTATION OF 17TH CENTURY
PAINTINGS DEPICTING CATHOLIC CHURCHES
AND PROTESTANT TEMPLES**

In the 17th century, many Flemish, Dutch or German painters represented the interiors of places of worship —churches or temples— depending on their religious faith or on what they were commissioned. These paintings give us a chance to observe today 17th century Catholic and Protestant places of worship, even if through the filter of painting. And some dogmatic opposites characterizing the Reformation and Counter-Reformation are discreetly at work there. Thus, even if we are in both cases far from the Italian or Spanish Baroque, in the Catholic spaces depicted by Hendrik van Steenwyck or Pieter Neefs the Elder, the altars are numerous and the lit candles embody the actual Presence of Christ during and after the Service time: let us recall that the Protestants deny the transubstantiation and therefore the actual presence of Christ at the altar. Moreover, each of these altars is decorated with an altarpiece, sometimes very imposing in size, in front of which people stand and pray. In the same way, naves are decorated with sculptures. Some celebrations can be noticed (sometimes they happen simultaneously), such as Eucharistic processions or baptisms, another ritual which effects are denied by the Protestants. We can also notice the offerings made to the Saints (also rejected by the Protestants) and the holy garments that glorify the ecclesiastic hierarchy that the Reformation wishes to abolish. The abundance of furniture, of people and actions is yet another way of standing against the Protestants' quest for simplicity. By comparison, all these elements are missing in the paintings by Pieter Jansz Saenredam or by Emanuel de Witte, with their Protestant temples characterized more particularly by white and bare walls. From this opposition between churches and temples in paintings, we may admit that the White Cube —a chromoclast exhibition place for a better contemplation— follows the Protestant arrangements and thought rather than the Catholic ones.

CATHOLICS



“True image of the papist Church”

- Multipurpose space
- Proliferation of people and events: in the nave, Blessed Sacrament, Baptism, funerals, simultaneous services
- Abundance of furniture: fonts, altars, altarpieces, pulpit, organ, rood screens, statues, stained-glass windows...

PROTESTANTS



“True image of the apostolic Church: one cult within one place”

- Men, women and children are gathered freely in the middle of the building and listen to the priest at the pulpit
- On the left, Baptism of a child, only ritual in progress
- No picture, no sculpture, only the Tables of the Law on the wall in the background
- Few pieces of furniture: the main one is the pulpit

PAINTERS DEPICTING CATHOLIC CHURCHES

Hendrik van STEENWYCK the Younger
(Dutch, ca.1580-1649)

Pieter NEEFS the Elder
(Flemish, Antwerpen, ca. 1578/ca. 1656-1661)

PAINTERS DEPICTING PROTESTANT TEMPLES

Bartholomeus VAN BASSEN
(Dutch, Antwerpen, 1590 - The Hague 1653)

Pieter Jansz SAENREDAM
(Dutch, Assendelft 1597- Haarlem 1665)

Gerard HOUCKGEEST
(Dutch, The Hague, ca. 1600-1661)

Hendrick Cornelisz VAN DER VLIET
(Delft, ca. 1611 – 1675)

Emanuel DE WITTE
(Dutch, Alkmaar 1617 – Amsterdam 1692)



Fig. 1: NEEFS, 1618, oil on panel, 58 x 98 cm, Madrid, Prado.
Great number of altarpieces.

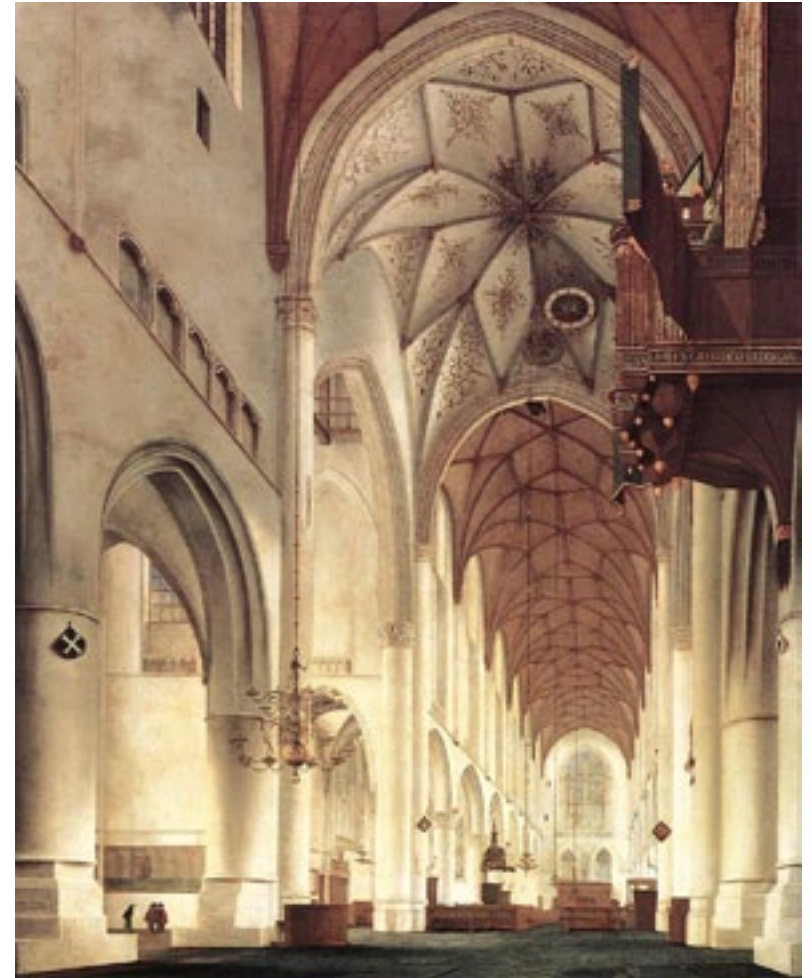


Fig. 2: SAENREDAM, *Interior of Saint Bavo's Church at Harleem*, 1648, oil on panel, 174.8 x 143.6 cm, Edinburgh, National Gallery.



Fig. 1: NEEFS, oil on panel, 39 x 51 cm, private collection.
Altarpieces and candles of the real Presence.



Fig. 2: SAENREDAM, *Buurberk at Utrecht*, 1654, oil on panel,
unknown dimensions, Amsterdam, Six Collection.



Fig. 1: STEENWICK, 1605, oil on panel, 37 x 48 cm, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.



Fig. 2: SAENREDAM, *Interior of Saint Bavo's Church at Harleem*, 1628, oil on panel, Los Angeles, Getty Museum.



Fig. 1: NEEFS, oil on panel, 39 x 54 cm, Saint Petersburg, The State Ermitage Museum. Mass being held with candles revealing the True Presence of Christ. Imposing altarpiece.



Fig. 2: SAENREDAM, *Interior of the Church of Saint-Odulphus at Assendelft*, 1649, oil on panel, 50 x 76 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, detail. Sermon.



Fig. 1: NEEFS, 1636, oil on panel, 68 x 105 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum. Eucharistic procession. Pictures in the nave.



Fig. 2: SAENREDAM, *Central Nave and Choir of the Church of Saint-Peter at Utrecht*, 1654, oil on panel, 50 x 72 cm, Haarlem, Frans Hals Museum.



Fig. 1: NEEFS, oil on panel, 33 x 48 cm, Paris, Louvre.
Baptism procession in the centre; Mass on the right.
Several altarpieces.



Fig. 2: SAENREDAM, *Interior of the Nieuwe Kerk at Haarlem*,
1652, oil on panel, 66 x 93 cm, Haarlem, Frans Hals Museum.



Fig. 1: STEENWICK, *Interior of a church*, oil on panel, 38 x 58 cm, Versailles, Musée Lambinet. Mass on the left, several altarpieces.



Fig. 2: SAENREDAM, *North Aisle of the Mariakerk at Utrecht*, 1651, oil on panel, 19 x 14 cm, private collection.



Fig. 1: *Interior of Saint Bavo's Church at Harleem,*
1628, oil on panel, Los Angeles, Getty Museum.



Fig. 2: *Interior of Saint Bavo's Church at Harleem,*
1628, Brussels, Musées royaux des Beaux-arts.



Fig. 1: *Saint Bavo's Church at Haarlem*, 1630, oil on panel, 41 x 37 cm, Paris, Louvre.

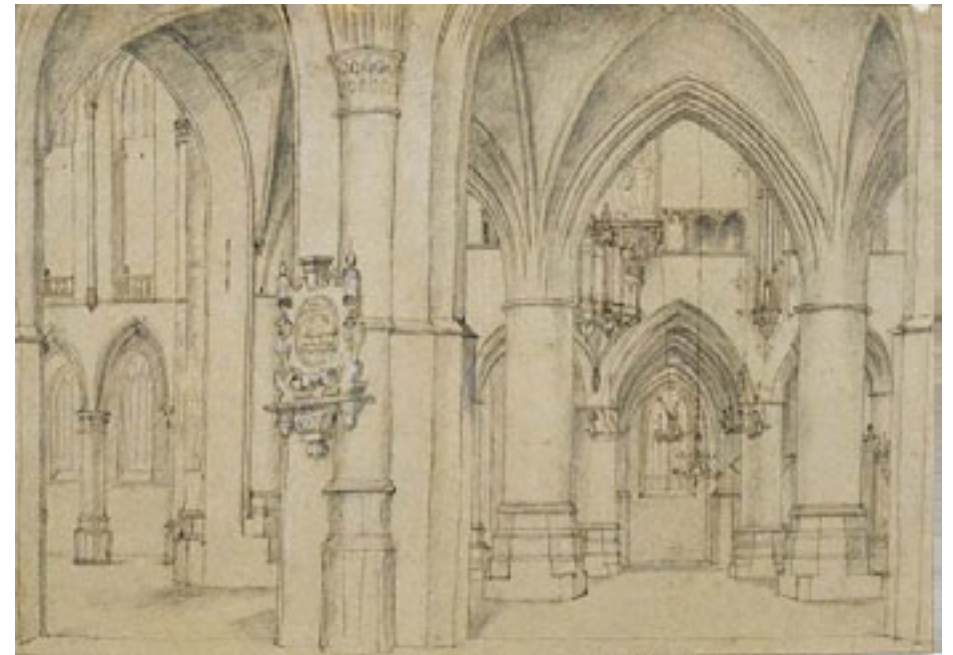


Fig. 2: *Interior of Saint Bavo's Church at Haarlem*, 1634, Haarlem, city archives.



Fig. 1: *Interior of Saint Bavo's Church at Haarlem,* 1634, Los Angeles, Getty Museum.



Fig. 2: *Choir of the Saint Bavo at Haarlem,* 1635, oil on panel, 48 x 37 cm, Berlin, Staatliche Museen.



Fig. 1: *View of the Interior of Saint Bavo's Church at Haarlem through the Choir and North Ambulatory*, 1635, oil on panel, 34 x 28 cm, Warsaw, National Museum.



Fig. 2: *Interior of Saint Bavo's Church at Haarlem*, 1636, oil on panel, 43 x 37 cm, Zurich, Bührle Collection.



Fig. 1: *Interior of Saint Bavo's Church at Haarlem,*
1648, oil on panel, 200 x 140 cm, Edinburgh, National Gallery.



Fig. 2: *Interior of the Nieuwe Kerk at Haarlem,*
1652, oil on panel, 66 x 93 cm, Haarlem, Frans Hals Museum.



Fig. 1: *Interior of the Nieuwe Kerk at Haarlem*, 1655, oil on panel, 44 x 35.9 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.



Fig. 2: *Domkerk at Utrecht*, 1636, Utrecht, city archives.



Fig. 1: *Interior of the Saint James' Church at Utrecht*, 1642, oil on panel, 55.2 x 43.4 cm, Munich, Alte Pinakothek.



Fig. 2: *Buurkerk at Utrecht*, 1644, oil on panel, 60 x 50 cm, London, National Gallery.



Fig. 1: *Buurkerk at Utrecht*, 1654, oil on panel, 60 x 50 cm, unknown dimensions, Amsterdam, Six Collection.



Fig. 2: *North Aisle of the Mariakerk at Utrecht*, 1651, oil on panel, 19 x 14 cm, private collection.



Fig. 1: *Saint Janskerk's Central Nave Towards the Choir at Utrecht*, between 1650 and 1655, oil on panel, 65 x 83 cm, Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen.



Fig. 2: *Saint Anthony's Chapel in Saint Janskerk at Utrecht*, 1645, oil on panel, 42 x 34 cm, Utrecht, Centraal Museum.



Fig. 1: *Central Nave of Saint Peter's Church at Utrecht,*
1654, oil on panel, 50 X 72 cm, Haarlem, Frans Hals Museum.



Fig. 1: Ca. 1660, oil on canvas, 49 x 57 cm, Berlin, Staatliche Museen.



Fig. 2: Oil on canvas, 80 x 63 cm, private collection.



Fig. 1: Ca. 1660, oil on canvas, 80 x 66 cm,
Saint Petersburg, The State Ermitage Museum.



Fig. 2: 1668, oil on canvas, 79 x 112 cm,
Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen.



Fig. 1: *Interior of Saint Cunera Church at Rhenen*,
1638, oil on panel, 61 x 81 cm, London, National Gallery.



Fig. 1: Ca. 1660-1670, oil on panel, 92 x 112 cm, Paris, Louvre.



Fig. 2: *Interior of the Oudekerk*, 1660, oil on canvas, 82.6 x 66 cm, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Arts.



Fig. 1: *Interior of Saint John's Church at Gouda*, oil on canvas, 110 x 128 cm, Australia, NVG.

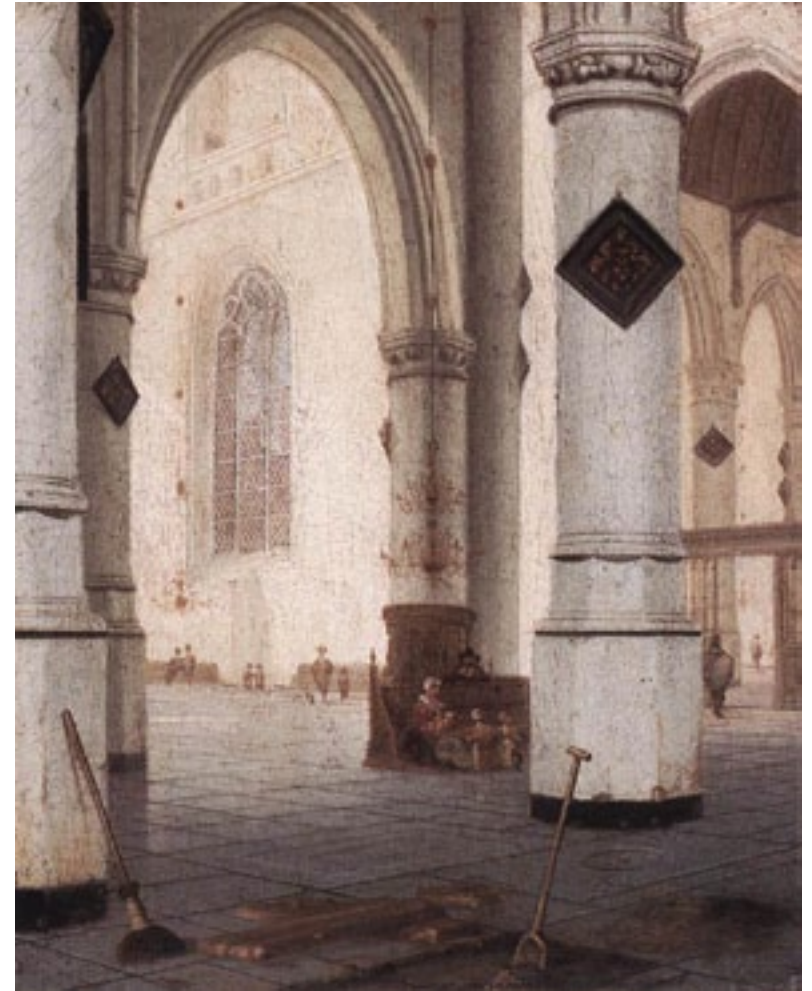


Fig. 2: Oil on panel, 18,4 x 23,3 cm, Gand, Museum of Fine Arts.

Amélie Bernazzani

FROM THE PROTESTANT TEMPLE TO THE WHITE CUBE: THE CENTRALIZED PLAN

The primary difference between the Catholic “church” and the Protestant “temple” is the name chosen for the place of worship. Choosing the word “temple” is quite significant, and two assumptions can be made to explain this. First, a different name from that used by the Catholics simply had to be found. Second, the Protestants had to assert their wish to celebrate a cult that is before all rooted in the Bible: by listening to the Gospels from the pulpit and by taking part to the Last Supper, the gathered assembly is the “body of Christ” which is itself the “temple of God” (Epistle of Peter). But more than this, it is the formal choices made when the temples were built that matters to us.

Before the promulgation of the Edict of Nantes in 1598, the new religion was not allowed any new place of worship. The former Catholic buildings were then salvaged and transformed **[figures 1 to 3]**: the painted and sculpted images are removed, the walls are whitewashed, the rood screens destroyed and the space around the pulpit rearranged. Following Bernard Reymond’s thought, we may consider that iconoclasm is a matter of emphasizing the pulpit: removing any visual distraction to the faithful allows “to centre the worship environment on the encounter between God, present through his Word, and the people gathered there to listen to him”.¹ Drawing a parallel with the White Cube is relevant in that the number of works presented is brought to the minimum so as to allow a better reflection and a deeper contemplation. All in all, in the temple, emptiness paradoxically reveals the presence of God. Yet it is the buildings erected from start to finish that matter to us.

The sixteenth article of the Edict of Nantes reads as follows:

“After the second article of the Conference of Nerat, we grant to those of the said Religion power to build places for the exercise of the same, in cities and places where it is granted them, and those formerly build or the base for them (= the plot of land) will be given back to them in the

state they are presently in, the very places where the said exercise is not allowed, if not otherwise converted into buildings of another nature.”

Yet, building a temple follows some rules: it may not in any way be mistaken for a church. Consequently, and among other examples, erecting a steeple is forbidden. Thus, in order to differentiate themselves from the Catholics who prefer a cross-shaped plans, the Protestants chose to build centralized-plan buildings: ellipsoidal, oval-shaped, octagonal, rectangular and mostly square ones. The parallel with the White Cube is quite obvious here! Making a distinction with the Catholic tradition is not the only reason for choosing the centralized plan. The architecture of the temple is first and foremost functional (another common point with the White Cube) and it thus has to adapt perfectly to the requirements of the service. And the centralized plans, which focus their organization on a fixed point, allow the service to take place within a close distance. Indeed, the temple space is generally smaller than that of a church; it is unified and above all totally directed towards the altar in order to draw one's attention. To sum up, the architecture and the Faithful turn towards God like Elizabethan theatre's spectators turn towards the scene **[figures 4 and 5]**, and the medical students towards the dissection table placed in the centre of the anatomy lecture theatre **[figures 6 and 7]**. We then see how the centralized plan allows a better vision and hearing of the ritual than the strongly symbolic Latin cross-shaped plan does, and which puts some distance between the Faithful sitting at the back of the nave and the altar; all the more so as a rood screen often stands in the way.

Functionality is not the only reason for choosing a centralized plan. Just as when the name “temple” was chosen, it is here a matter, I feel, of getting back to the biblical texts, the fundamental sources. In the Book of Ezekiel, chapter 40, the description of Salomon's temple in Jerusalem draws a centralized plan **[figures 8 and 9]**. The tradition respects and explains this choice of shape. Let us quote Saint Augustine about Noah's Ark, chapter 15, paragraph 26 of *The City of God*:

“A square is the absolute stability in that whichever way you turn it, it remains steadfast, so that, the design of the Ark should shows no curve and only straight lines drawn lengthways or widthways.”

Saint Augustine makes us understand that the geometric shapes chosen by the Protestants follow a rational and intellectually purified conception of God. Maybe the Protestant spirit present in the White Cube is at stake here: purity and simplicity for the sake of an independent presence of the works.



Fig. 8: The Jerusalem temple according to Sebastian Münster, *Cosmographia Universalis*, Basel, 1560.



Fig. 9: The temple in La Rochelle. Same look as the Jerusalem temple. Engraving by Martinus Zeiler, *Topographia Gallicae*, 1620.



Fig. 6: Lyons, anatomy lecture theatre. Photo © Anaëlle Vanel



Fig. 7: Liège, anatomy lecture theatre, rue des Pitteurs.

EXAMPLES OF CENTRALIZED PLAN TEMPLES

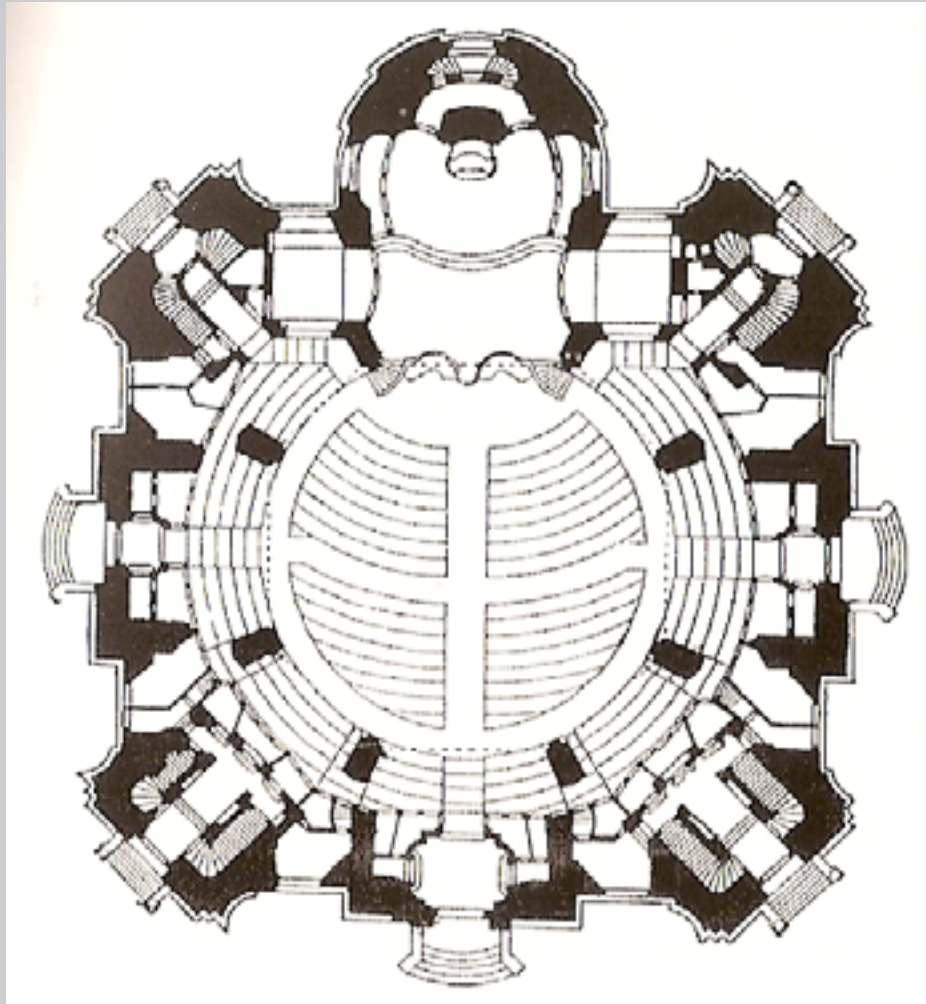


Fig. 1: Dresde, Frauenkirche.

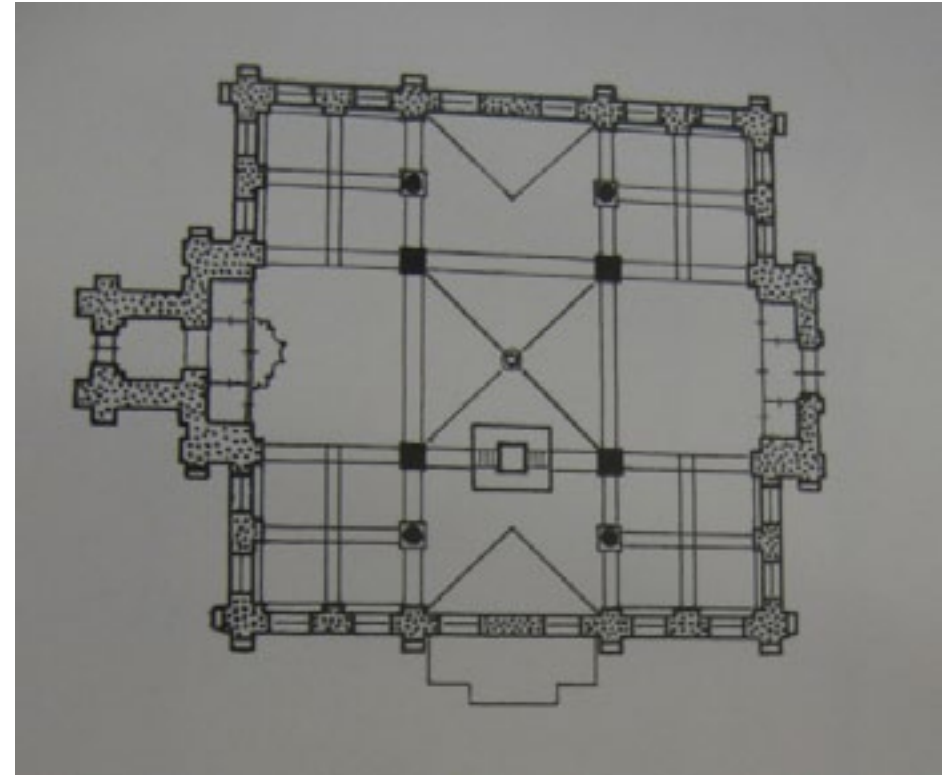


Fig. 2: Haarlem, Nieuwe Kerk.

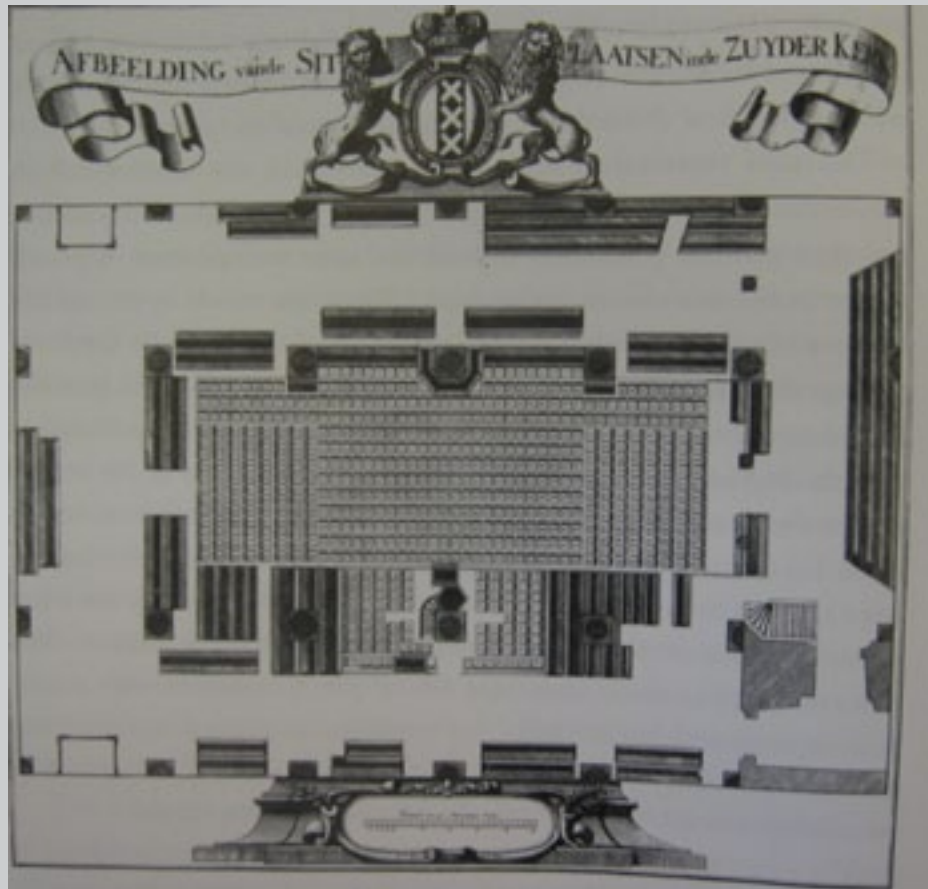


Fig. 1: Amsterdam, Zuiderkerk.

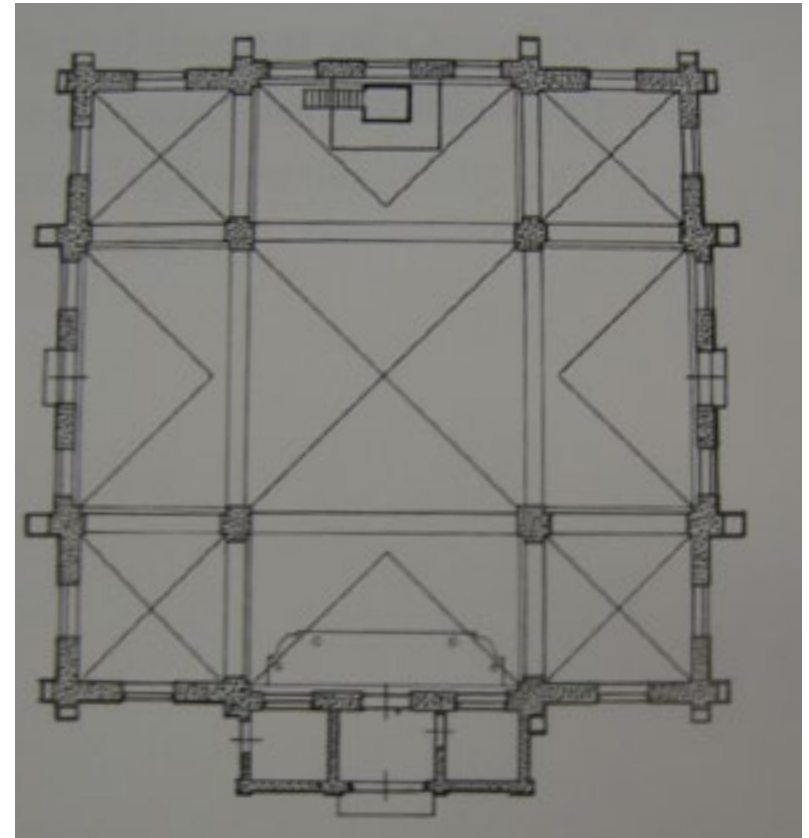


Fig. 2: Amsterdam, Oosterkerk.

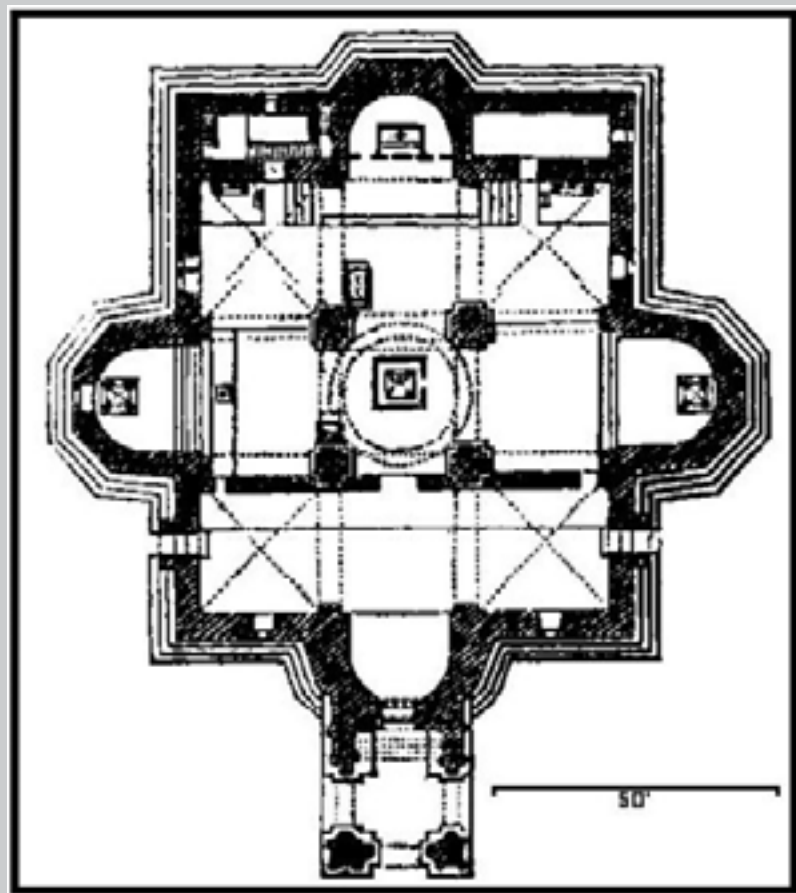


Fig. 1: Amsterdam, Zuiderkerk.

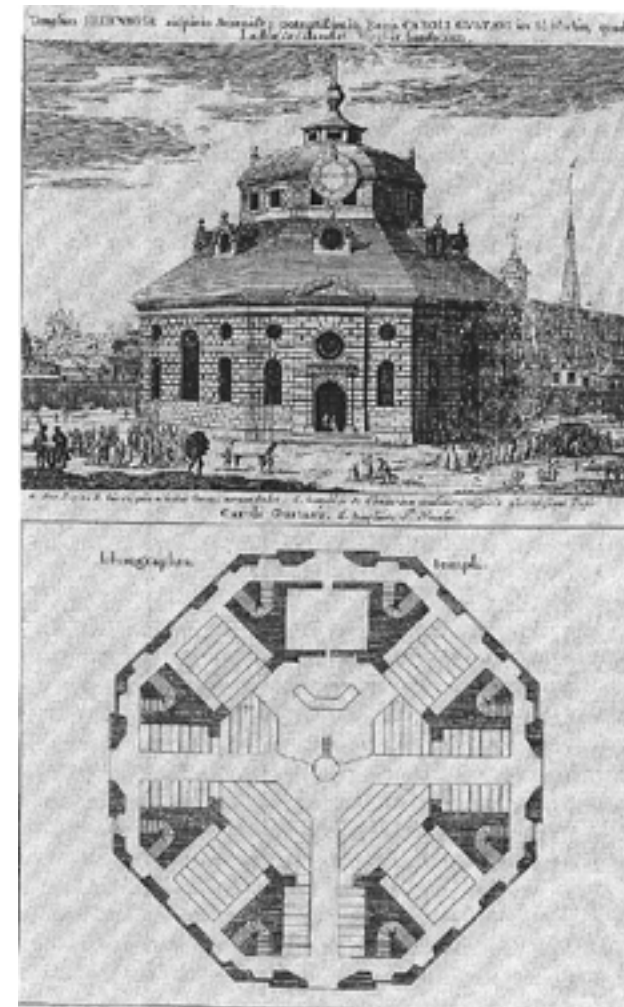


Fig. 2: Stockholm, Hedvig Eleonora temple.

CENTRALIZED PLAN AT THE CITY SCALE

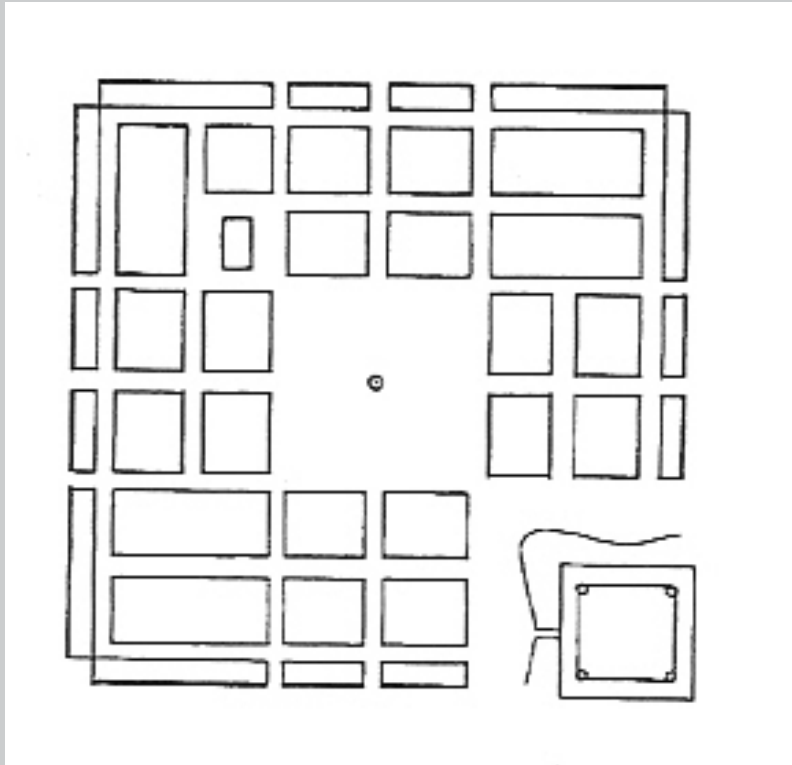


Fig. 1: First project by Heinrich Schickhardt for the construction of the city of Freudenstadt commissioned by Frederick I of Württemberg.

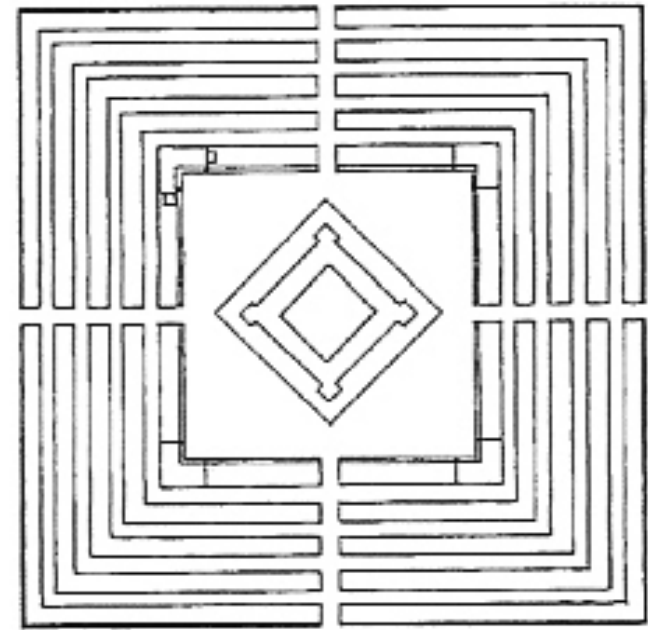


Fig. 2: Second project by Heinrich Schickhardt for the construction of the city of Freudenstadt commissioned by Frederick I of Württemberg.

Elements of comparison

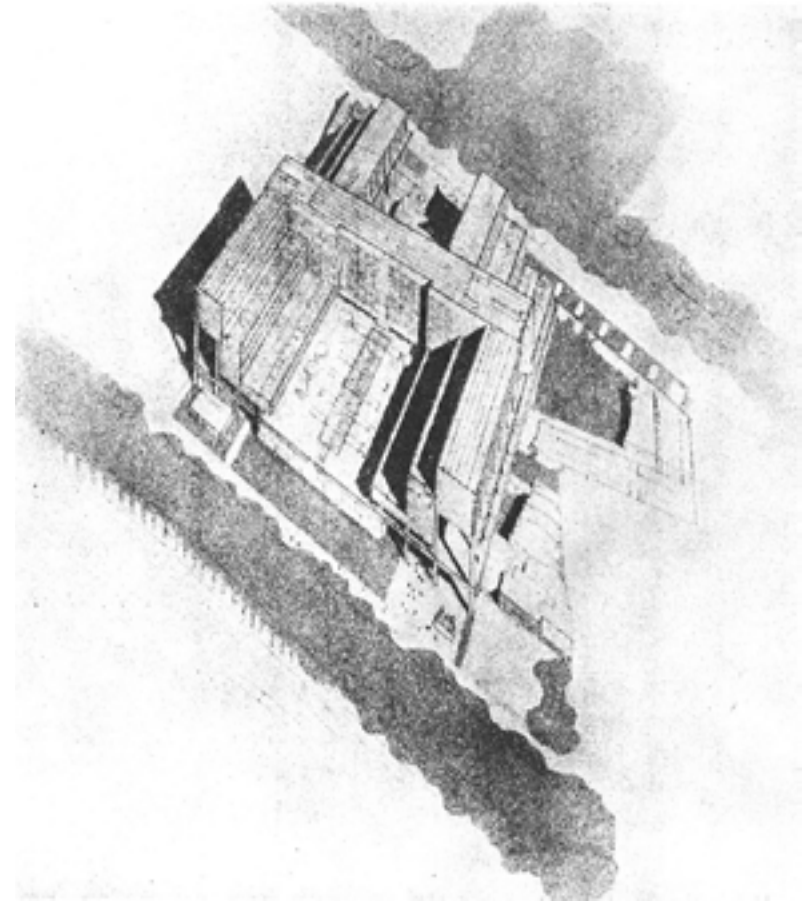
Exterior architecture: Plates I to V

Interior arrangement: Plates VI to XI

Plans: Plates XII to XIV



Kassel, Museum Fridericianum, 1779, architect:
Simon Louis du Ry



Project by Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret for
the Paris Musée d'art moderne competition in 1934



Berlin, Altes Museum, 1830,
realized after Karl Friedrich Schinkel's project



The Hague, Gemeentemuseum, 1935, architect:
Hendrick Petrus Berlage



London, National Gallery, 1838, architect:
William Wilkins



Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, 1935, architect:
Adrianus van der Steur



Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, 1891, architects:
Karl Hasenauer and Gottfried Semper



Eindhoven, van Abbemuseum, 1936, architect:
Alexander Jacobus Kropholler



Chicago, The Art institute of Chicago, 1893, architects:
Shepley, Rutan and Coolidge



New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1939, architects:
Philip L. Goodwin and Edward Durell Stone



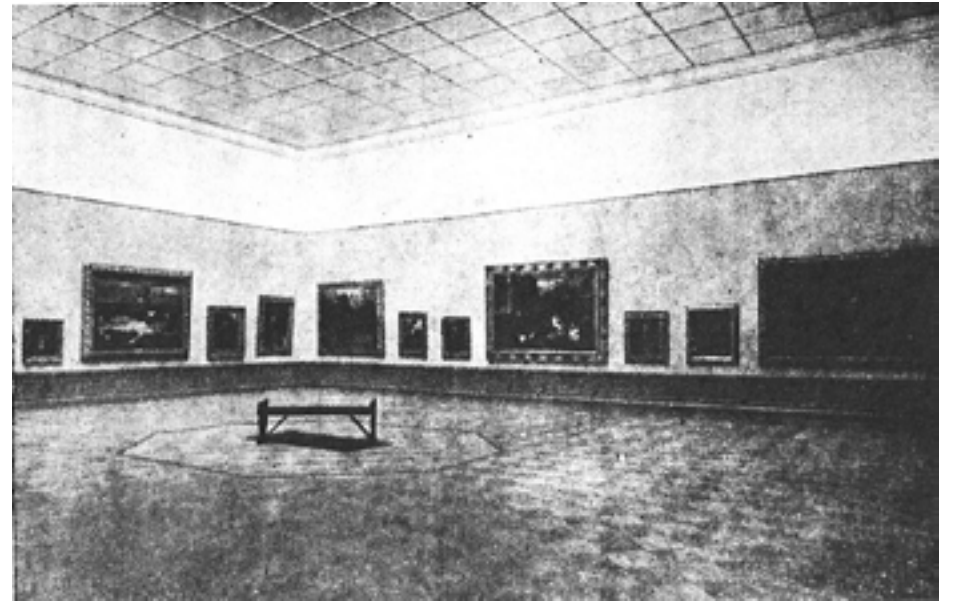
View of the Italian sculpture section of the Kaiser Friedrich Museum before it was reorganized in the early 1930's, from the magazine *Museion*, vol. 25-26, 1934



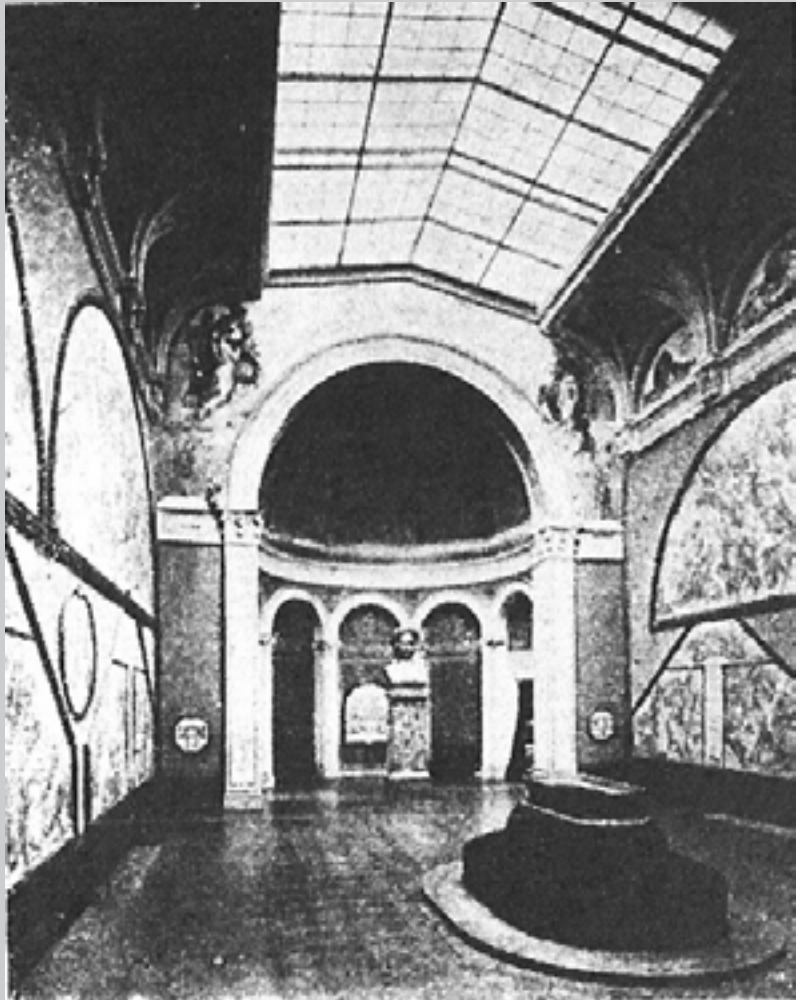
Views of the first floor rooms of the Gemeentemuseum in the Hague, from Pieter Singelenberg's *H.P. Berlage's Haags Gemeentemuseum*, The Hague, Haags Gemeentemuseum, 1996



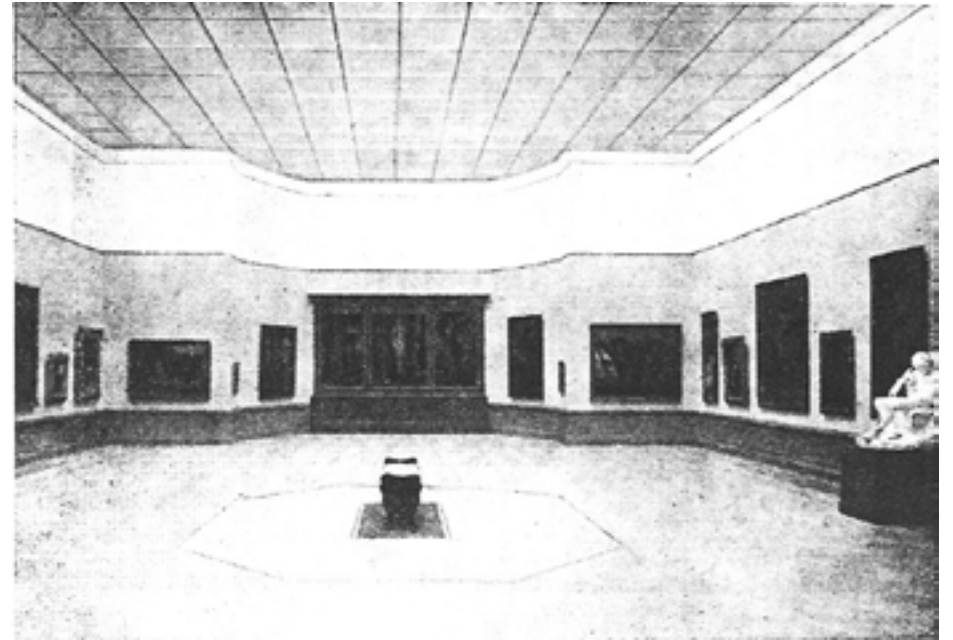
View of the first Cornelius room of Berlin's Nationalgalerie in 1919, from the magazine *Museum*, vol. 37-38, 1937



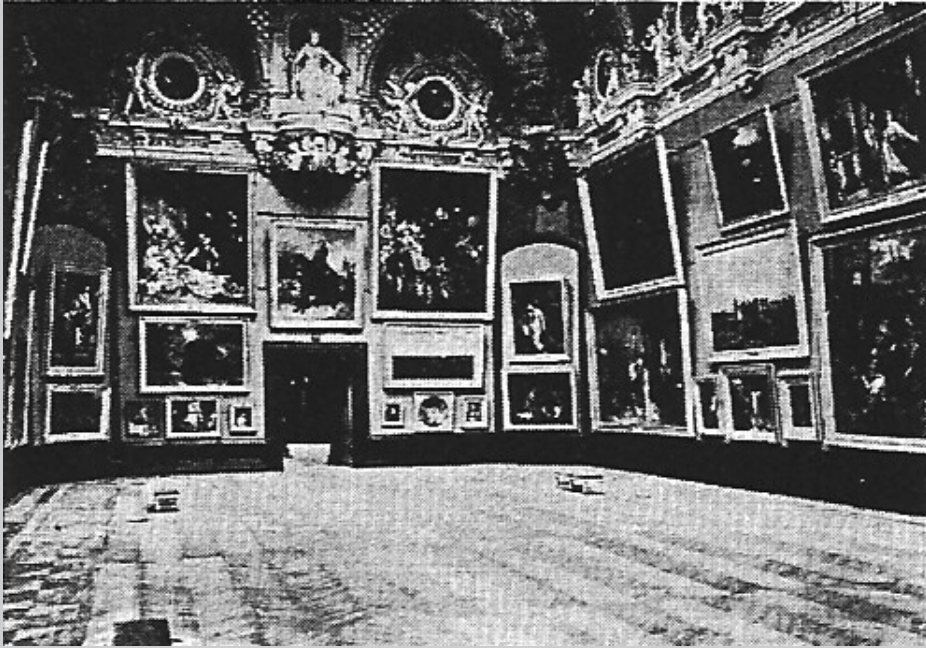
View of the first Cornelius room of Berlin's Nationalgalerie after transformation, *ibid.*



View of the second Cornelius room of Berlin's Nationalgalerie in 1919, from the magazine *Monseion*, vol. 37-38, 1937



View of the second Cornelius room of Berlin's Nationalgalerie after the 1936 transformation, *ibid.*



View of the State rooms in the Louvre, before the 1952 refurbishment, from the magazine *Museum*, vol. V, N° 3, 1952



View of a room of the van Abbemuseum during the 1952 Fernand Léger exhibition



Jean-Baptiste Gustave Le Gray, *The Salon of 1852. Perspective of the First Floor Gallery*, 1852, salted paper print laid on board, 19.4 x 23.6 cm, Paris, Musée d'Orsay



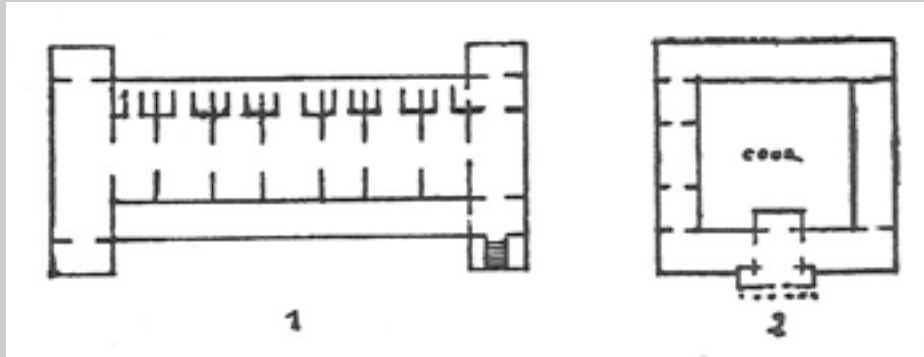
Thomas Struth, *Art Institute of Chicago II*, 1990, color photography, 186 x 221 cm, Kunstsammlung NRW



Samuel F. B. Morse, *Gallery of the Louvre*, 1831-1833, oil on canvas, 187.3 x 274.3 cm, Chicago, Terra Foundation for American Art



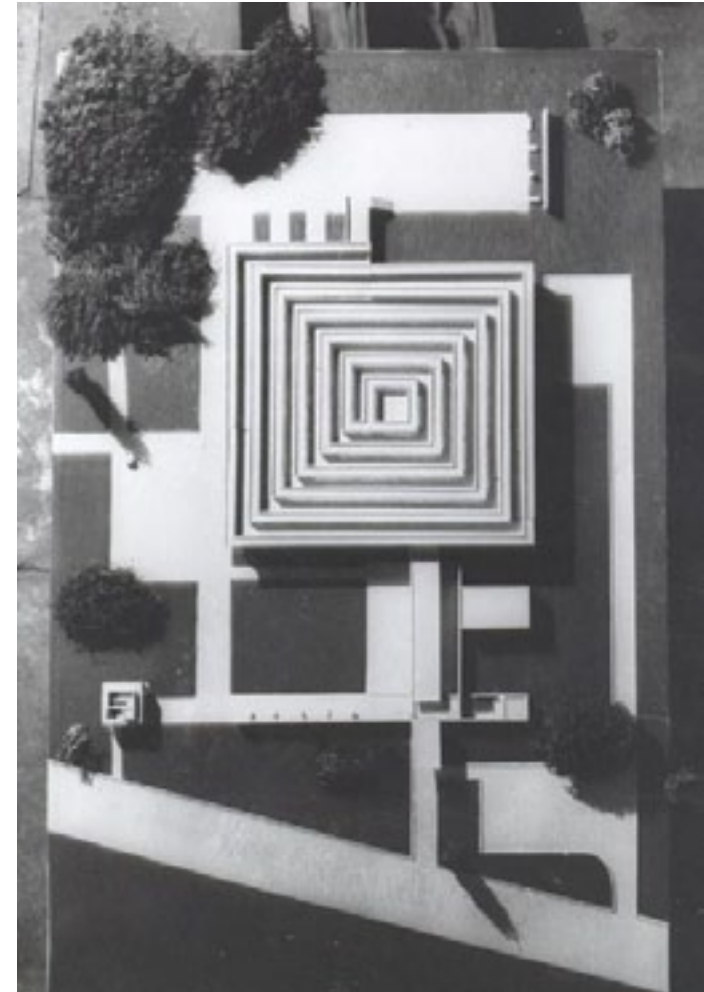
Louise Lawler, *Not yet titled*, 2003, 10 numbered digital cibachrome prints, 20.6 x 20.6 cm, Basel, Kunstmuseum



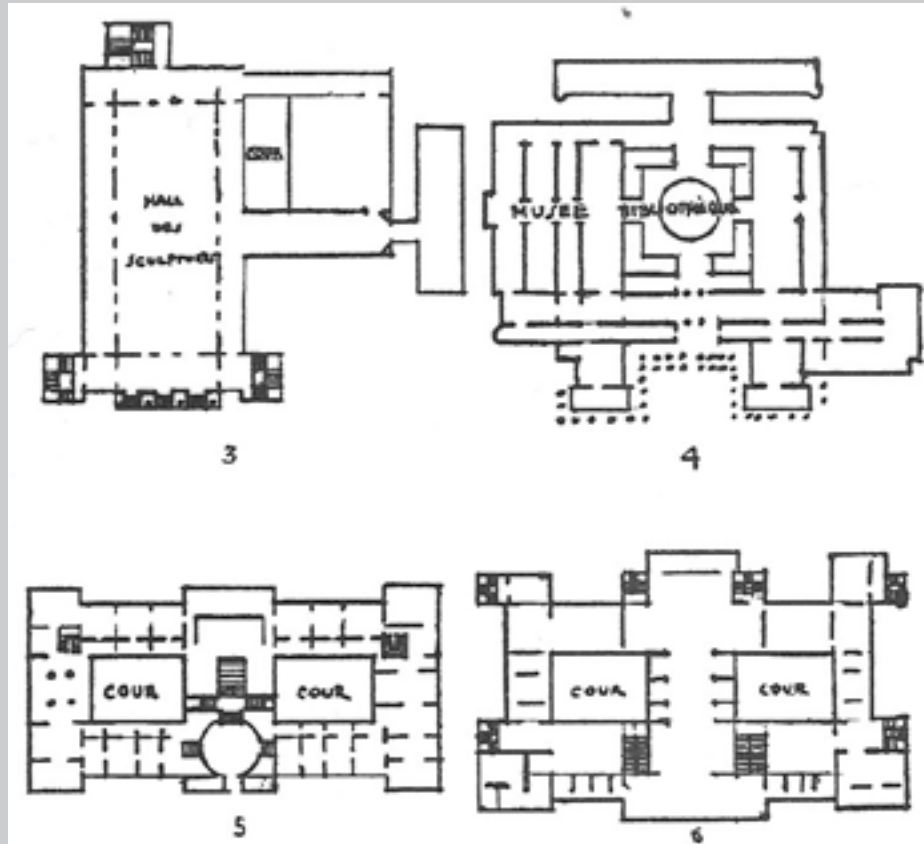
1: Former Munich Art gallery

2: Munich Glyptothek

Examples of museum floorplans, sketches from the article by Louis Hauteceur, "Architecture et organisation des musées", *Mousson*, Vol. 23-24, 1933

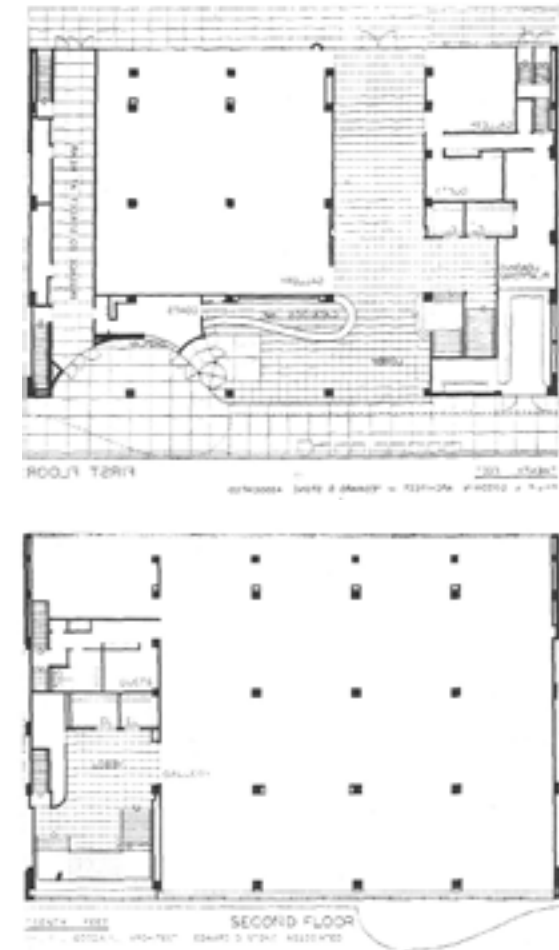


Le Corbusier, project for the Museum of Unlimited Growth, 1939 model, Paris, Fondation Le Corbusier

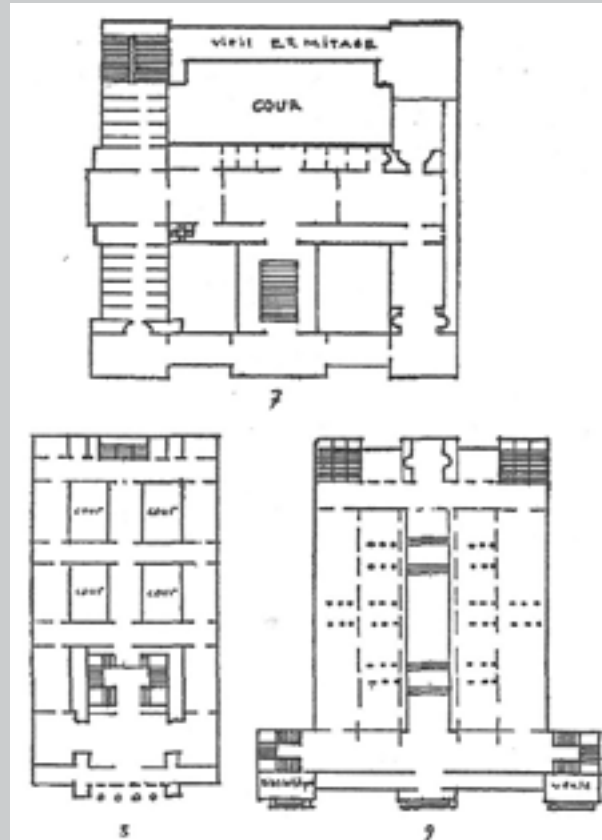


- 3: Brussels
- 4: Brisish
- 5: Vienna
- 6: Amsterdam

Examples of museum floorplans, sketches from the article by Louis Hautecoeur, "Architecture et organisation des musées", *Mouaison*, Vol. 23-24, 1933



Plans of the second and third floor of the Museum of Modern Art in 1939, from the article by Philip L. Goodwin, "Le Nouveau musée d'art moderne de New York", *Mouaison*, vol. 49-50, 1940

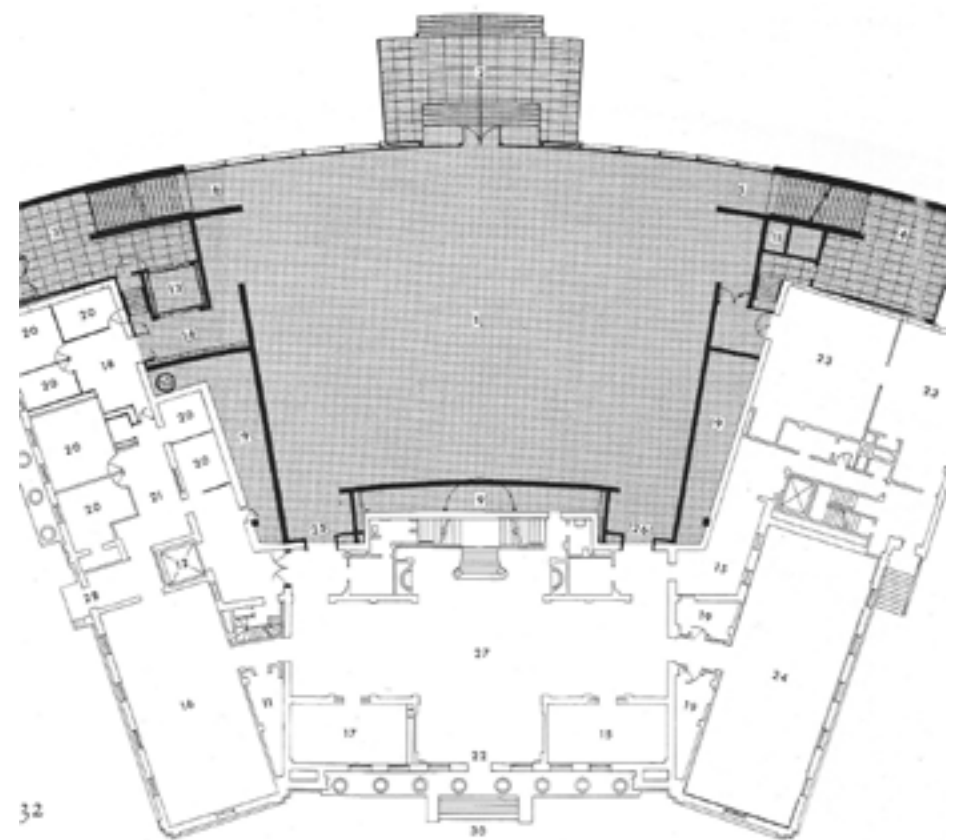


7: Hermitage

8: Antwerpen

9: Cairo Egyptian museum

Examples of museum floorplans, sketches from the article by Louis Hautecoeur, "Architecture et organisation des musées", *Mousetion*, Vol. 23-24, 1933



Ground floor plan of the Cullinan Hall (grey-colored part) by Mies van der Rohe, 1958 extension of the Museum of fine Arts in Houston, from the magazine *Museum*, vol. XII, No 1, 1959

COMPARISON TABLE

	Catholic church	Reformation temple		Palace museum of 19th century	White Cube
Origin and function of the space	- Altar with relics - Hosting God (the Eucharist): permanent place of worship	- Either the transformation/ adaptation of an existing building, or the creation of a new space (after the 1598 Edict of Nantes) - Hosting the Holy Word of God (preaching): place of worship open only when a celebration is on	Origin and function of the space	- A palace or a princely mansion - Hosting a permanent royal or princely collection	- Either the transformation/ adaptation of an existing museum, or the creation of a new space - Hosting temporary exhibitions
Architecture Common point: The architecture isolates from the outside world	- Often a cross-shaped plan (Latin or Greek) - Sumptuous both inside and outside - “Multicentred” architecture (great number of altars and chapels)	- Often a centralized plan (square or oval-shaped) - Towards simplicity both inside and outside - “Unicentred” architecture around the altar and/or the pulpit	Architecture Common point: The architecture isolates from the outside world	- Classical architecture - Sumptuousness both inside and outside - Rigid and self-sufficient architecture	- Modern architecture - Simplicity of the geometric volumes - Functional and modular architecture in order to fit the scenography of the temporary exhibitions
Interior design	- Heavy presence of architectural decoration - Walls painted with frescos - Liturgical furniture - Many figurative paintings or sculptures	- Both in the case of a salvaged building or a construction, architectural decoration is reduced - In the case of a salvaged church, the walls are whitewashed - If a new construction, white walls: walls and ceilings reflect the light - Liturgical furniture reduced to the altar alone - Tendency to iconoclasm, works of art are scarce	Interior design	- Heavy of the architectural decoration as a symbol of princely or royal power - Coloured walls - Rebuilding the interior is tempting - Overloaded display of the works	- Clear of any decoration - Reduced colour spectrum for neutral walls (white, grey...): light matters most - Space is emptied, the works of art become autonomous entities - Reduced number of exhibited works, there is more space between them - Less stimuli which allows a better concentration on the works - The institution and context are concealed for a direct contact between work and spectator

	Catholic church	Reformation temple		Palace museum of 19th century	White Cube
Spectators within the space Common point: Meditative attitude (silence, contemplation...)	- Spectator's five senses are aroused: sight with the works and the wafer contemplation; smell with incense; hearing with the Mass and preaching; taste with wafer and wine; touch with the apotropaic statues. - Importance of sight. - Too many stimuli at once may divide attention. > A rather sensual space	- Arousal of sight but especially of hearing with the preaching from the pulpit. - Activities concentrate on hearing and memorizing the word of God. > A space dedicated to thought and intellect	Spectators within the space Common point: Meditative attitude (silence, contemplation...)	- Heavy presence of decoration, colours, etc., too many stimuli that may divide the attention. - Assertion of the presence of the institution, the context > A space for delight	- Less stimuli which allows a better concentration on the works - The institution and context are concealed for a direct contact between work and spectator > Towards a scientific and educational space
Status and function of the works within the space	- Teach - Move - Memorize - Make God present - Elevate the soul towards God - Decorate	- When taken out of the sacred space, out of context, they become merchandize, material objects	Status and function of the works within the space	- Objects with a symbolic value - Decorate	- Out of context, they become merchandize - Objects of study

WHItE iS WHItE...

A RESEARCH DOCUMENT

by Amélie Bernazzani and Frédéric Herbin,
initiated by Sammy Engramer

Translated by Lucie Cluzan

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