

THE ART MUSEUM AS A WORK OF ART: THE J. PAUL GETTY MUSEUM

David Carrier

Picture to yourself a vast amphitheatre such as could only be a work of nature; the great spreading plain is ringed round by mountains. . . . It is a great pleasure to look down on the countryside from the mountain, for the view seems to be a painted scene of unusual beauty rather than a real landscape, and the harmony to be found in this variety refreshes the eye wherever it turns.

—Pliny the Elder¹

Like the art they contain, museums need to be interpreted. The meaning of the J. Paul Getty Museum depends, so I will argue, upon how its unusual building uses the site (Figs. 1–4). The museum has a very traditional collection of European decorative art, painting, and sculpture; but how in context we understand this art requires analyzing the display. Inspired by Los Angeles's Mediterranean climate, the architect Richard Meier

keep[s] returning to the Romans . . . for their sequences of spaces, their thick-walled presence, their sense of order, the way in which building and landscape belong to each other. The material substance of the Getty Center will come out of the history and regional tradition of Southern California.²

Meier, I will show, both acknowledges the importance and power of precedent, and undercuts tradition.

To enter a typical older art museum, you walk up a flight of marble steps to be elevated out of the ordinary world. The Getty tram taking you from the main parking lot up to the museum is an elongated electric version of that grand staircase. Most people ride up the hill. But you will better appreciate the view if you walk. As you ascend, at first you hear the swoosh of the mechanical propulsion system. But then the track swings out to the left, high above the hill, and you are almost alone. When again you are close to the tram, the roar of the traffic from the very busy freeway, five lanes in each direction, blurs to become background noise, like the ocean but with a higher pitch. You have climbed four hundred feet and are nine hundred feet above the ocean.

In traditional museums, the center is the dome of heaven, home of the Muses. At the Getty, the large entrance room is circular, but bright natural light comes through flat windows in the very high, flat ceiling. Most museums, traditional or contemporary, turn visitors inward, separating their art from the external world. The Getty is a sequence of pavilions, rooms pulled apart and set outdoors. Upon entering, you see marble-covered walls hanging in midair, unsupported from below at the corner where they meet. Some older museums have inner courtyards surrounded by galleries. Between the Getty ground-floor galleries is an outdoor fountain. Using the California climate to good advantage, Meier transforms the usual rela-

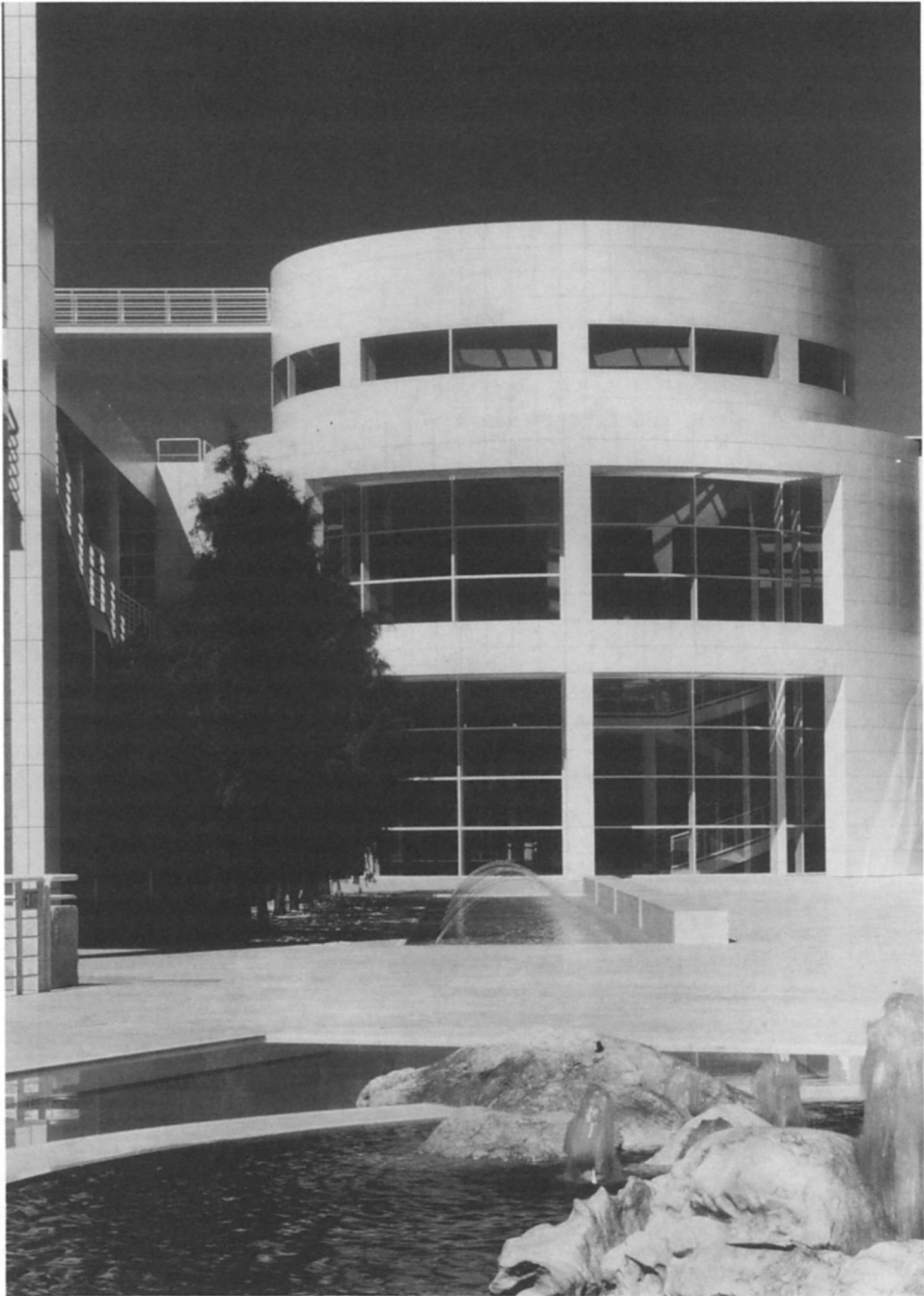


Fig. 1 The J. Paul Getty Museum, view of the entrance-hall rotunda from the courtyard of the museum. Getty Center, Los Angeles. (Photo: Alex Vertikoff, © J. Paul Getty Trust)

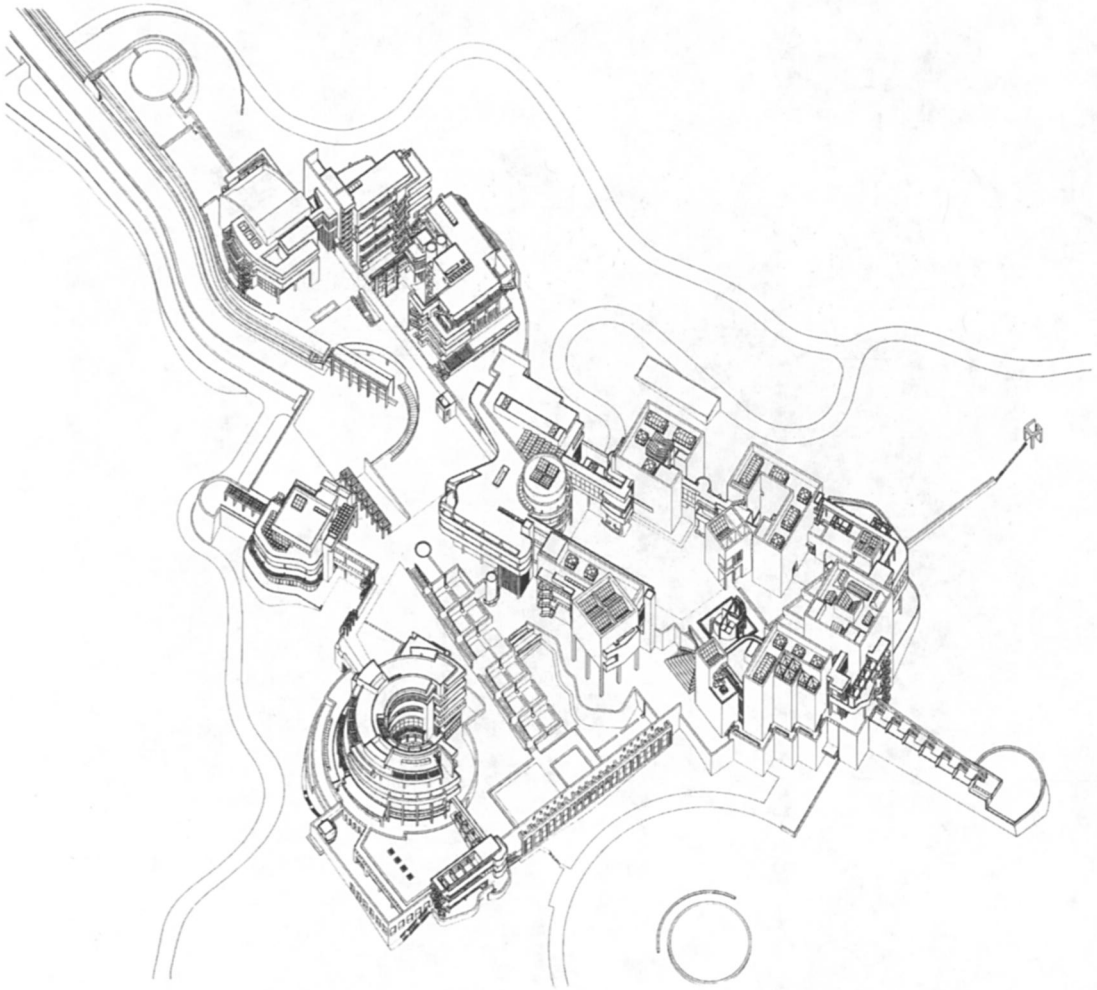
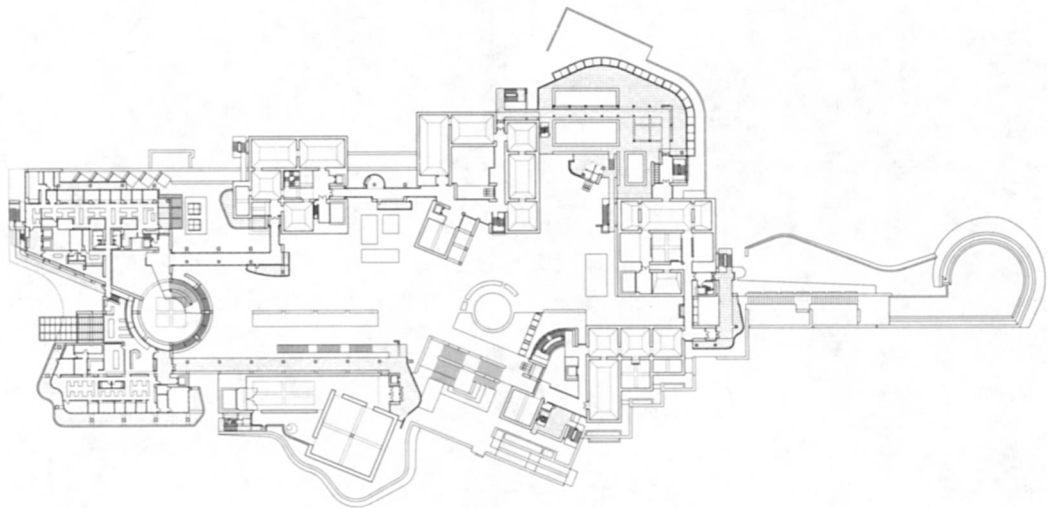


Fig. 2 Axonometric drawing of the Getty Center, designed by Richard Meier & Partners. © J. Paul Getty Trust and Richard Meier & Partners



The J. Paul Getty Museum



Fig. 3 The J. Paul Getty Museum, upper-level plan. Getty Center, Los Angeles. © J. Paul Getty Trust and Richard Meier & Partners



Fig. 4 Aerial view of the Getty Center, Los Angeles. (Photo: John Stephens, © J. Paul Getty Trust)

tionship between the museum interior and exterior space. Traditional museums have solid walls. The Getty walls are “honey-colored travertine, a stone of which much of Rome was built.”³ These 295,000 pieces of travertine are independently mounted so that each can vibrate separately in an earthquake. Beneath the pavilion for temporary exhibitions are not the Corinthian, Doric, or Ionic columns of classical architecture, but marble-covered struts. And in front of the Research Institute, you will find not a proper classical arch, but a decorative frame marking the view.

From the North Pavilion, containing art before 1600, you walk through a passageway to the East Pavilion, which shows paintings from 1600 to 1800. Then you go outside on a balcony that provides a vantage on the distant city vistas, before getting to the South Pavilion, which displays art of 1600 to 1800. As you move through the painting galleries, you turn repeatedly from viewing art to looking outside. On rainy winter days, the glass-enclosed passageways and bridges allow you to see the city below. And on bright, sunny days, visitors linger outside. Turning outward, encouraging the visitor to look at the city, the museum acknowledges its location in space and time. You go between the North and East pavilions on a closed passageway with vistas. Then, as you move between the East and South pavilions, you walk outdoors, guided by the overhead structure and permanent placards, which mark the sights. Benches inside and outside the museum encourage contemplation. At night, you view the band of car lights approaching and receding, and in the middle distance the queue of planes approaching Los Angeles International Airport. On a clear day, you can see far out to sea.

The Getty chooses to collect European works of art up to 1900; Getty’s will did not specify the acquisitions policy. The year 1900 is a convenient terminus point, but the result is that the end point of your walk through the galleries feels slightly arbitrary. The last major painting, James Ensor’s *Christ’s Entry into Brussels in 1889* (1888), closes off the period presented and reminds us of the modernist art to come. But what reason is there to end here when the Ensor (and the Impressionist paintings in the last room) naturally lead toward twentieth-century art? Considering Meier’s building, I would suggest, provides an answer to that question.

Normally, a museum collection includes just the physical works of art owned by that institution. But the Getty site adds one additional, absolutely contemporary work of art—Los Angeles as viewed from Meier’s building. With windows framing the landscape, the Getty turns its vistas into art, completing its collection with these cityscapes. Once you enter most museums, you get only occasional views of the external world. At the Getty, you repeatedly see panoramas. The exhibition of paintings in the North, East, and South pavilions takes you around three-quarters of a circle. That walk is an incomplete circle, I am arguing, because what completes the collection is the view of Los Angeles.⁴ As Meier says:

The spatial experience should allow for the contemplation of works of art from close up, and from a distance, but there has to be a periodic interval allowing the viewer to see nature, to see natural light, and to have a kind of syncopated rhythm of experiences as one moves through the museum.⁵

The views you see at the Getty before you

enter the galleries, between pavilions, and after you exit the museum are as important aesthetically as the museum's collection of painting, sculpture, and decorative art.

Thus interpreted, the Getty Museum is not just a building displaying art, but an apparatus providing a viewpoint on the city of Los Angeles. Meier treats the vistas as readymades, which need only have attention called to them to become art. As he says,

The Getty Center is proposing that art can be something elevated, set a little apart from everyday life. But in the same gesture, the Getty is also making Los Angeles accessible to people in a new way.⁶

Again, Meier uses tradition in radically original ways. Eighteenth-century connoisseurs used reducing glasses to make the countryside look like the scenes depicted by Claude, converting English landscapes into aesthetic objects. And aestheticians compared painted depictions of landscapes and real three-dimensional gardens. In the eighteenth century, Canaletto's paintings helped visitors see Venice aesthetically. And in the late nineteenth century, the Impressionists showed that Paris and its suburbs could be seen as a work of art. Cityscape painting is no longer a living tradition, and reducing glasses are no longer in common use, but these ways of thinking are revived by Meier's Getty building.

Traditional museums end with modernism without venturing into the display of contemporary art. But nowadays many museums display art right up to the present. In treating its vistas as works of art, I am suggesting, the Getty does the same. Like art, these views can be variously interpreted.

The Getty Museum encourages us to take an aesthetic attitude toward Los Angeles without telling us how we should see that city. Pleasure in aesthetic experience has been associated in the American art world with conservatives. But it is possible to understand these vistas in very different, socially critical ways. Guy Debord's now famous notion of the society of a spectacle suggests one way to interpret the view from the Getty.

The spectacle corresponds to the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life. . . . Commodities are now *all* that there is to see; the world we see is the world of the commodity.⁷

Some problems in interpreting the Getty are linked to difficulties with understanding Los Angeles.⁸ In a rich, young city, great hopes are invested in this institution. Much reportage on the Getty is a catalogue of complaints—worries about the cost, about the location, about the collection, and about elitism.⁹ Every institution has its limits, and a grand new museum needs time to define its identity. But one senses that many commentators are not just describing the Getty, but expressing their frustrated sense of larger issues. Much of the ambivalence involves uncertainty about how to respond to the museum's democratically accessible luxury—not the baroque excess of much populist culture, but the austere, high-maintenance spaces of high modernism.

Only a few intellectuals will think of Pliny the Elder when climbing the hill in Brentwood or recall, when entering the main building, that originally a museum was the home of the Muses. But everyone is aware of being in a lavishly funded institu-

tion. An art museum gathers beautiful objects, and so, rationally speaking, we need to guard art. But identifying the line between rational reasons for caring about art and the ways in which art is linked in irrational ways with power and political prestige is not easy, if, indeed, it is possible. Premodern collections displayed the power of the ruler. "The person who called himself emperor . . . needed to demonstrate his right to that position by his displays of knowledge and power."¹⁰ The Vatican collections display the pope's wealth. And, until the Revolution, the Louvre was the palace of the French king.

Symbolism of power in our society functions differently. The Getty, at some distance from the centers of national and state government, is a conspicuously expensive building with a grand setting. The museum offers the democratically accessible luxury of good, clear spaces and lucid hanging conditions. But, of course, not everyone can go everywhere. The more open the space, the more guards are needed to draw the boundary lines. And the weaker the ties of the museum to tradition, the greater the need, perhaps, for affirmation of this symbolism.

In interpreting the Getty, it is important to know how this museum came to be in Los Angeles. J. Paul Getty grew up in the city and made his fortune in the oil business. He played a major role in the exploration of Saudi Arabia. He was not a great collector, but after his death wise management rapidly increased the value of his inheritance. Getty's fortune, made in part from the oil from iconoclast Islamic culture, now returns in Los Angeles in the form of European painting and sculpture as well as a research institute with an art-history library. The

Getty Museum is a museum of European art in a city where, the Euro-American population now a minority, the majority has ancestors with African, Asian, and Latin American roots. Such great collectors as Charles I or Baron Denon, Napoleon's director of the Louvre, could have easily understood most of the Getty's collection, but this radically original museum would have been very hard for them to comprehend.

Arthur Danto has presented a now much-discussed thesis to the effect that the history of art has ended. Danto's thesis suggested to me this way of understanding the Getty. If anything can be a work of art, then, so I thought, the Getty's panoramas can also be art. Just as we cannot be sure if our interpretations of the art of Nicolas Poussin or Henri Matisse correspond to their intentions, so I am not certain if this account of the Getty Museum makes explicit the goals of the architect and the Getty Trust. The Getty, so one may infer from the published information, realized that it started too late to collect a truly world-class collection. Today it is very hard to import old masterpieces. And so it chose to construct an extremely expensive showplace. Neither the Getty nor Meier anywhere present in so many words my interpretation, which offers a speculative way of interpreting the facts. I think, still, that this interpretation is worth considering, for it provides a suggestive way of understanding how Meier's building functions and of identifying its relationship to the historical development of the art museum. In my happy recent experience, a nine-month residence is hardly sufficient time to understand this very subtle, deeply original building, which deserves prolonged close attention.¹¹

NOTES

This essay is for Laurie Schneider Adams in thanks for her generous support of art-historical scholarship.

1. Pliny, *Letters and Panegyricus*, trans. Betty Radice, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., and London: 1972), I, pp. 339–341.

2. Quoted in “Building for the Future,” *Getty Bulletin* 1, no. 1 (Fall 1986):4.

3. Joseph Rykwert, “The Third Installment,” in *Richard Meier, Architect*, essays by Kenneth Frampton and Joseph Rykwert (New York: Rizzoli, 1999), p. 22.

4. One painting in the Getty, Philips Koninck’s *Panoramic Landscape* (1665), shows a view from a mountain of the flat landscape running to the horizon; see Burton B. Fredericksen, *Masterpieces of the J. Paul Getty Museum Paintings* (Los Angeles: 1997), p. 69.

5. Clare Farrow, “The Art of Abstraction: Interview with Richard Meier,” in Richard Meier, *Frank Stella: Architecture and Art* (Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art, 1996), p. 93.

6. Quoted in *Richard Meier, Architect*, p. 351.

7. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. anonymous (Detroit: 1973), p. 29.

8. On Los Angeles, see Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London and New York: 1990); Norman Klein, *The Histo-*

ry of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory (London and New York: 1997); David Rieff, *Los Angeles: Capital of the Third World* (New York: 1991); and Sam Hall Kaplan, *LA, Lost and Found: An Architectural History of Los Angeles* (New York: 1987).

9. My account draws upon the two volumes of media coverage of the opening assembled by the Trust.

10. John Onians, “‘I wonder . . .’: A Short History of Amazement,” in *Sight and Insight: Essays on Art and Culture in Honor of E. H. Gombrich at 85*, ed. John Onians (London: 1994), p. 30.

11. See Michael Brawne, *The Getty Center: Richard Meier and Partners* (London: 1998); Harold M. Williams, Ada Louise Huxtable, Stephen D. Rountree, and Richard Meier, *Making Architecture: The Getty Center* (Los Angeles: 1997); and Harold M. Williams, Bill Lacy, Stephen D. Rountree, and Richard Meier, *The Getty Center: Design Process* (Los Angeles: 1991). This essay was drafted in 1999–2000, when I was a Getty Scholar. I thank Paul Barolsky, Arthur Danto, Brian Davis, Lydia Goehr, Marianne Novy, Marcia Reed, Steve Rountree, Gary Schwartz, and Catherine Soussloff as well as Richard Hertz and the students at Art Center, Pasadena, where, in June 2000, the essay was presented as a lecture.