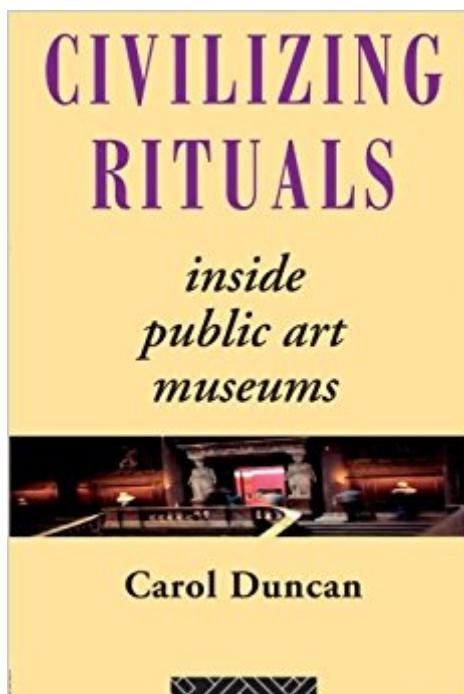


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# Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums (Re Visions: Critical Studies In The History And Theory Of Art)



## **Synopsis**

Illustrated with over fifty photos, Civilizing Rituals merges contemporary debates with lively discussion and explores central issues involved in the making and displaying of art as industry and how it is presented to the community. Carol Duncan looks at how nations, institutions and private individuals present art, and how art museums are shaped by cultural, social and political determinants. Civilizing Rituals is ideal reading for students of art history and museum studies, and professionals in the field will also find much of interest here.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Duncan balances her reading of the museum as economically motivated and culturally specific sign with a theoretically promising investigation of ritual and liminality in the gallery context.

In a groundbreaking study, Carol Duncan explores the function of art museums as ritual settings and as cultural artifacts that are much more than neutral shelters for art. She illuminates the ways in which museums in France, Britain and the U.S. engage their visitors in the performance of ritual scenarios and, through them, communicate and affirm ideas, values and social identities.

Yet another required textbook for yet another art class. I'm at a loss on this one, people. Lively debates and central issues involved in art. You know...I wish I had the time to have one of those lively debates about those central issues. Bet they take place in Starbucks.

Lots of great ideas and info in here. It's a textbook that I have actually enjoyed reading!

Definitely an interesting look into the origins and creation of public art museums and the history up until recently. I purchased this for a college course but it was definitely an interesting read if you are interested in public institutions especially art museums

Dr. Duncan's books discusses the history of art museums and focusses in on some notable, present day museums. Her approach combines the traditional art historian view with a sociological view. Art is not created in a vacuum and reflects the society it lives within. Duncan's approach gives us insight into why some artwork is accepted while other artwork is not. This book was required reading in my undergraduate studies. It is one of the few I choose to have in my personal library as well. Carol Duncan's book is small in size and easy to read. However, just because of its ease and size, don't mistake its value to art history. It is well researched and well edited. It is short, sweet and to the point. Too bad other art history books cannot be like that.

This book was mandatory reading for a university art history class. As far as required readings go, it was easily comprehensible to a general audience. The only flaw was that at first glance it appeals to an art-minded audience. Yet then it actually converses in the sociological jargon, which could put off some readers.

The book was for my academic course..... and I was surprised by the response of . They delivered it to me so fast. Thanks a lot. And the quality of the book is good too.....Book is basically related to museum culture and importance of rituals in those spaces.

Dr. Duncan's book was required reading in my undergraduate studies. She writes from two angles - first, being the traditional fine arts view, and second, a sociological view. Art is not created in a vacuum and is directly affected by the society it lives in. There is a value to looking at art from this combined point of view. You have a clear picture why some art is considered valuable, while some is not. Carol Duncan's book delves into the reasons why we have art museums and then focusses in on some notable museums of today. The small book is an easy and quick read. However, its relative ease and small size does not mean it does not inform. It is well researched and well edited. It is short, sweet and to the point. Too bad more art history books are not like that.

As the title of Miss Duncan's book suggest, she sees the museums as almost religious institutions that entice the visitor to "enact a performance of some kind". Their very identity and meaning are constructed through this ritualistic practice, which is neither natural nor neutral. In the introduction the author states that she has no ambition in propagating what an art museum should be. In fact she does not indicate if she has such a clear cut ideal thought-out at all. The purpose of her research is to see, decipher and describe. There are, it turns out, two ways - two ideals in fact - a museum is presented to the public: the educational museum and the aesthetic museum. The first type proposes to educate the visitor, treating the exhibits as "art-historical objects", while in the second they are unique, original works of art to be reflected upon by the sophisticated guest, sheltered by the museum. Duncan insists that either way, all this happens in a "ritual-like" atmosphere, and that is what she wants to prove in her book. She deals with this aspect specifically in the first chapter. The older museums were practically all built in a style that consciously copied the architecture of old Greek and Roman temples and were often compared to them. The visitor, already mentally prepared for an enlightening experience, would receive (in a seemingly "objective" and disinterested package) rational and verifiable knowledge - a truth that is so obvious as to be irrefutable, when in fact it is highly subjective and hierarchical. In the second chapter, Duncan traces the development of the museum from the princely gallery into today's public, secular space, and maintains that this space is neither quite as clearly public, nor secular as it would like to be seen. Here, the Louvre and the National Gallery in London are primary examples. The museum here serves particular needs of the bourgeois state and its ideology. The third chapter follows the "museum boom" in the United States that begun in the late 19th century. Duncan sees it as a pretentious attempt of the new republic with no history to boast to be seen as civilized and a part of wider Western culture. She follows the mushrooming of "American Louvres", museums that ideologically support White Protestants' view of themselves and their political power. Here, an American museum equals money. Private museums that once belonged to rich collectors are dealt with in the fourth chapter. The characters of the often ruthless and predominantly white men are vividly brought to life, together with how they saw themselves, and how they wished their collections to reflect this. The final chapter deals in great length with the nature of modern art, and its use in today's museums. The premise that museums are ritual sites is highly problematic and on closer examination cannot be supported by facts. The argument that older museums were built in the style that closely followed that of the temples of antiquity is a hollow one, for in the late eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth century, all structures of significance were built that way. Banks, schools, parliaments, city markets, private houses, châteaux, family crypts, public baths and indeed

museums were built in that style. Does it mean that all of these were ritualistic, temple-like places? Hardly. Duncan either doesn't know it or doesn't grasp the significance. Instead she tells us that in art museums, it is the visitors who perform the ritual. And I think therein lies the problem. While it is perfectly reasonable to say that a great majority (if not all) of people attending a mass in a church are there for a specific - ritualistic - reason, such assumption won't work when studying the behavior of museum-goers who may be there for a number of causes. First of all, there is absolutely nothing about timing one's visit to a museum that would suggest this. There is nothing regular about the visits and such a visit is often accidental as much as planned. Once inside the museum, I have never seen anything that would suggest any shared patterns of the visitors' conduct that would support this 'ritual' theory. I have always interpreted what is more-or-less silence or only quiet talk as a mere politeness towards people around, rather than any sort of 'ritualistic behavior'. I am silent in a hospital too. Whether one wants to admire one particular work of art or even see it as such is one's free choice. No museum in the world could force me to look at something longer than I want to. I have seen people, particularly in American museums, to behave no differently than they would elsewhere. Museums can place all manner of things for us to see in every way they can, to represent whatever they want them to represent, but in the end it is up to us to accept it or not. If someone wants to worship, why should I care? Duncan quotes Goethe as he impatiently waited for the opening of the Dresden Gallery in 1768 and using his exaltations as a proof of the ritualistic nature of gallery visits. She probably doesn't realize, that if this was the very first day of a gallery functioning, in the 18th century when there were almost no public museums or galleries, there could be hardly any talk of an established ritual. Duncan states that the origins of the evolution of the museum from the princely gallery lie in the discourse "in which bourgeois and aristocratic modes of culture were pitted against each other" and that the museums such as the Louvre stand as monuments to the new bourgeois state as it emerged at the time of revolutions. Yet later in the second chapter she says that conversions of this type happened before revolution in Dresden and Vienna. Why aristocratic and ultra-conservative regimes such as Saxony and Austria had at the time, would promote a monument to bourgeois state remains a mystery our eager writer could not be bothered to explain. After all, even Bourbons were considering opening the Louvre to the public before the revolution. Between 1789 and 1871 France experienced several revolutions, was run by three monarchies, two empires, three republics, directory and a consulate, and went through the Paris Commune, yet none of these widely varied governments thought of closing down the museum. If the new type of museum was simply a monument to the bourgeoisie, then why was it kept on in Soviet Russia and the entire communist bloc? Little details like that could not bother

Duncan. Her overall historical scholarship is below that of an eight-grader, and so she cheerfully states that by 1825 all western capitals, monarchical or republican had a national gallery. Obviously, the fact that in 1825, there was no republican government in Europe escapes her. It is the complete lack of in-depth knowledge on Duncan's part that allows her to arrogantly write that the countries of the third world have museums just so that they can receive western military and economic aid. It is not just that it is plainly insulting, but what is implied is that getting money and weapons from the west is as easy as building a museum. And why, then, do some third world countries that refuse aid from the west still build museums? If a major argument in (what I take for) a serious book is built on hot air like that, than the book is perhaps not as serious as we might think. Duncan, as is painfully obvious by now, has no taste. It is therefore no surprise that she hates those who do. With misplaced sarcasm she derides the practice of basing museums on 'national genius', claiming this to be the governing pattern in the west by 19th century. I seriously doubt that, if only because hardly two, perhaps three countries in the west could possess such wealth of cultural heritage as to claim a genius and not be laughed at. British art galleries, for example, could hardly build their identity on such shaky ground. But Duncan does not care about facts. Or logic. She unworriedly states that museums were seen as instruments of "social change capable of strengthening the social order", without realizing that it is a contradiction in terms. Now the plot has been completely lost, and by chapter three Duncan doesn't talk about ritual anymore. What she wants is to hate and deride. To her, public museums set up in the United States in the second half of the 19th century are nothing but nests of hypocrisy, thinly veiled racist institutions, run by and for the white male, the root cause of all evil. Uncouth terms like the 'WASP' are standard here and one is left wondering if all white male Protestants really are pathological liars. The impression one takes from this is that museum founders, donors and curators are twisted, dangerous psychopaths. Perhaps we should keep them under lock and key as soon as they even start rambling about museums. When talking about lives of museum donors, Duncan approaches something resembling mildly appealing writing, but only because the subject is interesting. Predictably, another pearl awaits us at the end of the fourth chapter where she idiotically writes that Andrew Mellon's refusal to have his name associated with the National Gallery "is an act, however, that also obscures the deep contradiction on which the National Gallery is built: that one man, single-handedly, was able to dictate, pay for, and carry out the creation of so potent a symbol of the nation's spiritual and material wealth". I don't see Duncan's point. So what if one man can do all this? One man was behind building of the Suez Canal, one man led India's independence movement, a single sixteen year old French girl in the 1420's saved her country, yet no one would claim there to be some "deep rooted" contradictions. One prefers to

admire the courage and persistence of an individual. Duncan does not. To her, anyone out of the ordinary, above the average, is an elitist. It all finally falls apart in the final chapter on modern art museums. These are places frequented by sexual deviants, all male. In fact, Duncan is convinced, all (!) of the modern art is about sex. This is just one of her bizarre beliefs, based on her strange, shamanistic psychoanalysis. I was, let me admit, a bit surprised to discover that as a man I had feelings of inadequacy and vulnerability in front of mature women (like Duncan, I presume) and was frightened of the vagina. Throwing in Latinisms just for good measure is apparently Duncan's idea of maturity.

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