

Great Museums of the World

Tuesday, October 17 to December 5, 2023 – 10am to 12 noon

Zoom Series

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Coordinator and Presenter: James A.S. Thompson

Course Overview: Ever wonder how the great museums of the world came to be? In eight weeks we will visit through slides, and videos some of the greatest museums that are a *must see*. Each week we will be in a different country and tour great museums. In addition to commenting on the works of art and objects that make them great, we will devote time to meeting the collectors with the vision who made these select museums outstanding.

Tuesday, October 17: Italy and the Earliest Great Museums

We begin in Italy, where the modern concept of the museum was essentially invented. The Capitoline Museum in Rome is Europe's earliest, followed by the Uffizi in Medici Florence, and what is now Italy's National Archaeological Museum in Naples. Along the way, we will discover how politics, and status seeking by the Italian popes and princes resulted in the birth of these early great museums.

Tuesday, October 24: A Tale of Two Cities

With the wealth of England by the sixteenth century, only the interruption of Civil War pre-empted this country from becoming a powerhouse of museums. Some say Britain was at its height by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. We will see how this is measured when the great collection of Sir Robert Walpole leaves London for St Petersburg, Russia to serve as the beginning of a collection that would become the Hermitage Museum of Catherine the Great. In addition, we will trace English patronage to the birth of such important museums as The British Museum, the National Gallery, and the Victoria & Albert, formerly the South Kensington Museum.

Tuesday, October 31: From Royal Palace Museums to Art Palaces of the People

We cross the Channel to France and discover how art patronage and museums were at first in the hands of the king, and to this day remain owned by the French state. We will discover how nothing has changed since art and culture was controlled by the Sun King, Louis XIV. Starting with his patronage and vision we will chart the growth of great French museums such as The Louvre, Versailles, to the more recent Musée d'Orsay, a palace of art for the people.

Tuesday, November 7: The Great Nineteenth Century Museum Explosion

Starting in London with the Wallace Collection, we will see how museums were becoming not only a popular attraction, but a way for nations to showcase and educate their people through their national treasures. On this point, we go the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, the Prado in Madrid, the National Museum of Egypt and the Sarnath Museum, India, and the National Palace Museum in Taiwan.

Tuesday, November 14: The New Florence in America: Museums in Boston and New York

Crossing the Atlantic we will discover great museums in the United States. Beginning with the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts we will visit the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts before moving on to New York City, to explain how the Metropolitan Museum of Art came to be.

Tuesday, November 21: More American Museums and the birth of the Vanity Museum

We devote another session to American museums as we explore the emerging notion of the “vanity museum”. On this point, we will showcase the Museum of Modern Art in New York of the Rockefellers, and as an extension of this idea, the Peggy Guggenheim Museum in Venice. As well, the Lauder Neue Galerie in New York, the Vincent Price Museum in California, and the Chi Mei Museum in Tainan, Taiwan are “vanity museums”.

Tuesday, November 28: Great Canadian Museums

In this session we reach Canada and consider how museums have been always here since the early days of Canada as a nation. We will consider the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and the National Gallery of Canada as well as the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinburg, Ontario.

Tuesday, December 5: Great Toronto Museums

In our final session, we explore how the Royal Ontario Museum and the Art Gallery of Ontario came to be. Toronto over the years has grown and developed into a cosmopolitan city as this is also reflected by such newer museums as the Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Art, and the Bata Shoe Museum and the Aga Khan Museum.

Lecturer: James A.S. Thompson

James is a history teacher with an MA from Durham University UK and an Art History diploma from the Courtauld Institute, London. He has been a Continuing Studies instructor meeting later life learners at schools around Toronto since 2006. He has taught and built many courses relating to art, politics, and history from the seventeenth century through to the twentieth.

Committee Contact: Glenn Yaffee