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Museum Storage as an Active Cultural Resource

From Invisibility to Exhibition: The Case Study of the
Musée des Beaux-Arts de Tours

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*«In un mondo che crede di avere visto tutto, [il museo] è rimasto
paradossalmente come uno degli ultimi luoghi nei quali si va alla ricerca della
meraviglia o del diverso.»*

Adalgisa Lugli, Museologia.

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Introduction

Every museum possesses a publicly and universally known dimension: that of the exhibition rooms that daily welcome visitors, curious individuals, and enthusiasts eager to discover the beauty on display¹. However, these institutions also conceal a secret place: the storage facility, an invisible treasure hidden from view, filled with history and culture, where the majority of the museum's collection is kept².

For decades, this space was considered a mere storeroom for unexhibited works, a term that has frequently evoked the negative image of a crumbling and overcrowded space³. As Marzia Loddo highlights, indeed, «one of the practical problems that museum storage facilities must contend with is the “hidden heritage” they contain, which often gets forgotten in storage areas that are no longer in order and are overwhelmed»⁴. Precisely for this reason, over the years, the management of storage facilities and their accessibility have increasingly become a crucial issue debated by museum professionals, as the core of the problem continues to be represented by this space in a broad sense – namely, the fact that it is still not a fully understood space and its function is not yet entirely clarified. Today, work continues toward the proper management of reserves, spaces that only in recent years have been converted into areas suitable for the proper conservation of the museum collection; historically, from their inception, these storage areas existed in critical conditions, hindering the protection of the works and making it impossible to use them for any museum activity⁵. Since the 1970s, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) has sought to lead an awareness campaign regarding the condition of museum storage facilities worldwide, initiating its battle in 1976 during the conference in Washington, D.C., whose theme specifically addressed the lack of adequate spaces for museum reserves. Subsequently,

¹ Rai Cultura, in collaboration with Ministero dei beni e delle attività culturali e del turismo, *Italia: viaggio nella bellezza. La bellezza addormentata: alla scoperta dei depositi museali*, 2018, <https://www.raiplay.it/video/2018/09/Italia-Viaggio-nella-bellezza-La-bellezza-addormentata-alla-scoperta-dei-depositi-museali--6670896a-e8c3-4360-8488-1a669c8d436d.html>.

² <https://gam.comune.verona.it/nqcontent.cfm?a_id=63158>, last check on 08/09/2026.

³ G. Nepi Scirè, *Gallerie dell'Accademia di Venezia. Guida alla Quadreria*, Venezia, Marsilio, 1995, p. 12.

⁴ M. Loddo, *Storage facilities for the collection of Western art museums: a focus on the Italian context*, 2019, Santarcangelo di Romagna, Maggioli, p. 7

⁵ G. de Guichen, personal communication in S. Lambert, *RE-ORG: A methodology for reorganising museum storage developed by ICCROM and UNESCO*, «CeROArt journal», 7, 2011.

in 2011, thanks to the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) and UNESCO, an international survey was launched whose data revealed a dramatic situation: on average, approximately 90% of worldwide museum collections are confined to storage⁶. This means that only 10% of the cultural heritage is displayed, and only this small percentage is directly accessible to the public. Such heritage should instead be accessible, because, as international guidelines on preventive conservation remind us, «the heritage must be visible if we want it to be known or: learned, appreciated, internalised, perceived as an identifying factor, defended and protected, valued, promoted and visited»⁷.

Building upon this theoretical and critical framework, this research develops an analysis centred on the case study of the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Tours, examining the internship experience undertaken and the active participation in the *récolement des collections* and the curation of the exhibition *Drôle de collection*. Through a three-chapter structure – addressing respectively practical fieldwork and cultural mediation, the historical evolution of storage facilities, and a comparison with major contemporary avant-garde models – this work aims to demonstrate that museum reserves should no longer be regarded as a hidden margin, but rather as the beating heart and true future of the museum institution.

⁶ <<https://www.iccrom.org/news/objects-museum-storage-more-danger-you-think>>, last check on 08/09/2026.

⁷ M. Lanzinger, *Intorno all'esporre le collezioni nei musei scientifici*, edited by B. Mutillo, M. Cangemi, C. Peretto, *Le risorse invisibili. La gestione del patrimonio archeologico e scientifico tra criticità e innovazione*, «Museologia Scientifica e Naturalistica», 11, Annali dell'Università di Ferrara, 2015, p. 51.

Chapter 1

The Internship as a Case Study

1.1 The Institutional Context

The aim of this research stems from the study experience carried out during the Erasmus programme in France, as part of the Master's degree in *Histoire de l'art, parcours médiation culturelle et pratique de l'exposition* at the *Université de Tours*. During this time, I had the opportunity to take part in an internship at the Musée des Beaux-art in Tours, which has maintained a collaboration with the university for over fifteen years. This partnership is conceived as a training program, that helps students to engage directly with the operational dynamics of a museum institution, promoting the transition from a theoretical approach to a practical one.

The internship serves as an extension of the university's course *Pratique de l'exposition*. Its primary aim was to allow me to immerse myself in the operational dimension of the museum, by gaining a direct understanding of its internal functioning. In this context, I had the opportunity to actively participate in the development of a temporary exhibition project, contributing to both the selection of the works of art and the design of cultural mediation strategies. This aspect was subsequently evaluated through targeted public guided tours. At the same time, I was responsible for managing the museum's social media platforms, focusing on promoting the exhibition and highlighting the various activities done during the internship.

An added value of this experience lies in the fact that the internship was carried out in an international context, due to the presence of students from different cultural backgrounds. This aspect fostered an exchange between different working approaches, contributing to the development of a collaborative environment. This cooperation represented a central element of the project, requiring a continuous process of decision-making, during the planning phase and in the definition of the mediation strategy. The collective dimension that characterised the development of the project highlights, how the construction of an exhibition is not just the result of an individual process, rather a continuous exchange of ideas among multiple actors.

Under the supervision of the Head of the Cultural Action and Audience

Development, Virginie Dansault, the internship provided the opportunity to observe the main functions of a museum institution, by actively participating in the various phases of exhibition design, as well as in the strategies for its presentation to the audience. Through direct experience, it was possible to develop a concrete understanding of the complexity and multi-layered nature of the exhibition-making process, highlighting the preparatory work required to create an accessible, coherent, and high-quality experience for visitors.

The Musée des Beaux-arts of Tours (figure 1) is currently housed in the ancient Episcopal Palace, a building dating back to the fourth century, whose current structure presents great architectural complexity due to several reconstructions over the centuries⁸.



Figure 1: image of the Musée des Beaux-arts de Tours from the garden (current state).
Source: Ville de Tours – F. Lafite.

A distinctive feature of this complex is that the successive historical periods, from the Gallo-Roman to the nineteenth century, remain visible within the palace's architecture. Infact, traces of the ancient city of *Caesarodunum*⁹ are presents cross the various

⁸ <<https://musees.tours.fr/visiter/musees-et-centre-d-exposition/musee-des-beaux-arts/>>, last check on 16/04/2026.

⁹ *Caesarodunum* was the ancient Roman name of the city of Tours (France). Founded in the early 1st century AD as the civitas capital of the Turones, it became a major urban centre in Roman Gaul.

buildings that comprise the museum site, serving as unique witnesses to the history of Tours. Ultimately, the current layout of the building was defined by the architectural interventions commissioned by Bishops Henrie-Marie-Bernardin de Rosset de Fleury¹⁰ and Joachim-François Mamert de Conzié¹¹ during the course of the eighteenth century¹².

For this reason, over time its functions have undergone several transformations, and in 1789, during the French Revolution, the different buildings provisionally housed the seized artworks, which formed the initial nucleus of the future museum collections, anticipating a function that remains central to museum management today. Its official institutionalization dates back to 1910, when the building was entrusted to the city and permanently designated for the conservation and valorisation of the artistic heritage¹³. Nowadays, the museum holds approximately eighteen thousand artworks, of which only one thousand are exposed to the visitors. The museum collections, the foundation of which – as previously noted – was established through artworks seized during the Revolution, cover a wide chronological range, from Greek and Roman antiquities, to modern and contemporary works¹⁴. This highlights how only a limited part of the collection is effectively accessible, while the remaining works are preserved in museum storage.

Today, the museum holds the status of a “*musée classé et contrôlé*”, meaning it is subject to a national scientific oversight and operates under the official “*Musée de France*” designation¹⁵. By virtue of the framework legislation enacted on January 4, 2002, all institutions under this label are required to comply with standardized regulations regarding the inalienability of permanent collections, their systematic entry into public inventories, management by qualified professional staff, and a mandatory provision of public and educational services¹⁶. This landmark legislation also

¹⁰ Rosset de Fleury (1718-1781) was a French prelate, and served as Archbishop of Tours from 1750 to 1773.

¹¹ François Mamert de Conzié (1738-1795) was a cleric who succeeded Rosset de Fleury as Archbishop of Tours from 1775 to his death.

¹² Musée des Beaux-Arts de Tours, *Le Project Scientifique et Culturel du Musée des Beaux-Arts de Tours*, Ville de Tours, 2014, pp. 12-13

¹³ <<https://musees.tours.fr/visiter/musees-et-centre-d-exposition/musee-des-beaux-arts/>>, last check on 16/04/2026.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵ Musée des Beaux-Arts de Tours, *Le Project Scientifique et Culturel*, 2014, p. 19.

¹⁶ <<https://www.culture.gouv.fr/aides-demarches/protections-labels-et-appellations/appellation-musee-de-france>>, last check on 01/07/2026.

introduced the mandatory obligation for every Musée de France to draft a *Projet Scientifique et Culturel* (PSC), an operational document that defines the identity of the museum and its scientific, cultural, and operational strategies to be carried out. The document also includes the museum's policies on preventive conservation that must be formally authorized by the French Ministry of Culture and the Centre de recherche et de restauration des musées de France¹⁷ (C2RMF)¹⁸. Furthermore, the museum is a municipal institution directly dependent on the city of Tours, and precisely for this reason the museum operates within a specific organizational framework, characterized by the coordination of four institutions: le Musée du Compagnonnage, le Muséum d'histoire naturelle, le Musée des Beaux-arts et le Centre d'exposition du château de Tours¹⁹. This structure involves a shared management of resources and expertise, allowing for the transversal circulation of professionals across the different institutions. Activities are developed according to a collaborative approach, enabling the optimisation of available resources and ensuring coherence in cultural programming. In this system, the museum's activities are primarily structured around three fundamental areas: the management and the conservation of the collections, the exhibition design and the cultural mediation, in addition of fulfilling the other missions defined in the Statute of the International Council of Museums (ICOM)²⁰. The operations carried out within these areas are not autonomous, but are deeply interconnected, contributing to the construction of a structured and coherent cultural experience for the audience. Art historian and museologist Maria Laura Tomea Gavazzoli²¹ emphasises that these functions are not only a set of operational actions, but rather tasks governed by regulatory frameworks shared at the international level.

¹⁷ The C2RMF is the French public institute that deals with the scientific study, conservation and restoration of the collections of the national museums.

¹⁸ <<https://www.culture.gouv.fr/thematiques/musees/pour-les-professionnels/construire-un-musee/creer-un-musee/le-projet-scientifique-et-culturel-d-un-musee-de-france>>, last check on 15/07/2026.

¹⁹ <<https://musees.tours.fr/visiter/musees-et-centre-d-exposition/musee-des-beaux-arts/>>, last check on 16/04/2026.

²⁰ The International Council of Museums (ICOM), created in 1946, is a worldwide non-governmental organisation comprising thousands of museum professionals. It is uniquely tasked with establishing ethical standards, driving innovation in museum management, and shaping international policies that govern museum operations and heritage protection.

²¹ Maria Laura Tomea Gavazzoli is an Italian art historian, museologist, and former director of the Civic Museums of Novara. She taught Museological Disciplines at the Catholic University of Milan and authored the widely acclaimed *Manuale di museologia*, a core text on museum functions, regulations, and management.

She defines the museum as an institution responsible for the conservation, the valorisation and the transmission of cultural heritage. In this sense, the achievement of these missions involve a series of decisions that affect both the management of collections and their accessibility to the visitors²².

From this direct experience, it emerged that the management of collections bring together a range of activities related to the conservation, documentation and monitoring of artworks, while exhibition design requires a continuous reinterpretation of spaces and conservation requirements. Finally, cultural mediation represents a central function that makes accessible the exhibition contents, by adapting them to the diverse needs of the public.

Within this context, I had the opportunity to observe the work of *régie des collections*²³, particularly during the process of *récolement*²⁴ (figure 2) of the artworks. This operation, which is mandatory every ten years in French museums, consists of the material and documentary verification of all objects recorded in museum collections, making possible to monitor their presence, their location and their conservation status²⁵. Through this process it was possible to access to the museum storage, that is located off-site.

²² M. L. Tomea Gavazzoli, *Manuale di Museologia*, Milan, Rizzoli Etas, 2011, p. 9.

²³ Management of the collections in French.

²⁴ Verification or control in French.

²⁵ N. Bel, *Les collections des musées de France: acquisition, inventaire, récolement, circulation*, «Musées et collections publiques de France», 275, 2018, p. 17.

FICHE DE RECOLEMENT			
N°: R2		Zone de recollection n°: Salle des Elus	
Date: 20/04/25		Nom de l'agent recollecteur:	
IDENTIFICATION		objet isolé / lot, ensemble	
Objet: N°: 1947.217.1. Désignation: <u>Allegorie de la France</u> Technique: <u>Terre - cuite -</u> Dim. (H x l x prof.): 225 x 132 x 5 cm ou Dim. hors cadre: cm Dim. avec cadre: cm Dim. montage: cm		Inventaire: N°: Désignation: Technique: Dim. (H x l x prof.): cm Dim. hors cadre: cm Dim. avec cadre: cm Dim. montage: cm	
LOCALISATION			
Exposé: <u>Non</u> / <u>En réserve</u> / <u>En dépôt</u> / <u>Non localisé</u>			
NUMERO D'INVENTAIRE			
Marqué sur l'objet: oui / non Marqué sur étiquette: oui / non Marqué sur autre support: oui / non Autre numéro:			
ETAT SOMMAIRE			
satisfaisant / moyen / médiocre / mauvais Structure: (déchirure, cassure, froture, gercure, déformation, instabilité, mauvaises fixations, ...) oui / non Surface: (encrassement, taches, graisses, écaillage, usure, soulèvements, lacunes, oxydation, pulvérisation, ...) oui / non Traces d'humidité: oui / non Traces d'infection: oui / non Altérations biologiques: oui / non Fort empoussiérement: oui / non Peinture: posséder un châssis, cadre: oui / non Cadre: cassure, fentes: oui / non mauvaises fixations, disjoint: oui / non Dessin: colle en plein, partiellement: oui / non			
PHOTOGRAPHIE			
Existante: Réalisée lors du recollection / à faire			
VALIDATION DU RECOLEMENT SUR PIECE ET SUR PLACE			
Signature du responsable des collections, lieu, date			
OPERATIONS COMPLEMENTAIRES			
Date:			
Auteur:			
Suite à donner au recollection			
A inventorier: oui / non A marquer: oui / non A photographier: oui / non			
A traiter, à déplacer: oui / non			
A localiser: oui / non			
Sortie temporaire (exposition, restauration, ...): oui / non			
Manquant: oui / non			
Plainte à déposer: oui / non			
Problème d'identification			
Objet non localisé mais inscrit à l'inventaire			
Objet localisé mais non inscrit à l'inventaire			
VALIDATION DEFINITIVE			
Signature du responsable des collections, lieu, date			

Figure 2: document utilisé during the *récolement*.
Source: created by the author.

This arrangement facilitates optimal conservation conditions and ensures efficient collection management through dedicated monitoring system. At the same time this spatial separation highlights the contrast between the heritage preserved in museum storage and the works accessible to the public.

Krzysztof Pomian exemplifies this concept: he defines the artworks as *semiophores*, which are objects that are no longer used for their original function and designed to be conserved and exposed. This implies that their value does not relies only in their materiality, but specifically in their capacity to be made accessible for the communities²⁶. This approach underscores how not all artifacts are presented in the same way: the distinction between exhibited artworks and those held in storage involves a selection process that determines which works are publicly visible over which remain unseen.

²⁶ K. Pomian, *Collezionisti, amatori e curiosi. Parigi-Venezia XVI-XVIII secolo*, Milan, il Saggiatore, 2007.

This experience represented to me a privileged point of observation for analysing these dynamics, allowing a deeper understanding of how a cultural institution operates, and fostering a critical reflection on the process of the development of an exhibition project. Undertaking this internship provided direct and valuable insight into the operational realities of the museum, constituting a pivotal moment in my educational journey. It also allowed me to experience the practical aspects of museum work, developing a deeper understanding and a more critical perspective on exhibition dynamics.

1.2 The Exhibition Project: *Drôle de collection*

The internship was made possible thanks to the collaboration between the Fine Arts Museum and the University of Tours, which served as a continuation of the *pratique de l'exposition* master course. This opportunity has been offered since 2006 by the Department of History of Art and, thanks to the support of the Direction Régionale des Affaires Culturelles (DRAC) du Centre-Val de Loire²⁷ – alongside other partners such as the Fonds National d'Art Contemporain, the Centre National des Arts Plastiques, and the Fonds Régional d'Art Contemporain Poitou-Charentes – it enables students to participate in this placement at the museum, enhancing their university education through direct, hands-on experience²⁸. Students are given the opportunity to collaborate on the creation of a contemporary art exhibition featuring works sourced from the partners participating in the project. Subsequently, students are tasked with defining the theme and selecting the artworks, which must then be presented to the museum directorate. The exhibition layout must then be planned and visitor itinerary developed, while also taking care of its communication management²⁹.

The collaboration between the museum and the university is further supported by the fact that the city of Tours presents itself as a dynamic urban hub with a strong cultural identity, capable of attracting numerous tourists. Moreover, it serves as the largest university centre in the Centre-Val de Loire region, with approximately 30.000

²⁷ The *Direction Régionale des Affaires Culturelles* (DRAC) is a decentralized administrative service of the French Ministry of Culture. It coordinates and implements state policies locally regarding historical heritage, archaeology, architecture, and support for contemporary artistic creation.

²⁸ <<https://histoire-art.univ-tours.fr/pratique-de-lexposition>>, last check on 10/07/2026.

²⁹ Ibidem.

students (10% of whom are international)³⁰. For this reason, the partnership between the two institutions becomes even more solid, precisely aiming to increase student engagement in the cultural and social life of the city. Additionally, in 2000, the city of Tours was designated a UNESCO World Heritage site, further reinforcing the cultural image of both the city and the museum, which is located in the heart of this historic area.

1.2.1 The selection of the artworks

The exhibition created by my group was named *Drôle de Collection* (figure 3), which evoked the central theme of the bizarre that characterised the entire process of creation of this experience. This project was created starting with artworks conserved in the external storage of the museum (figure 4), highlighting from the beginning the primary object of the project, which was to expose works remained hidden until that moment in the depot.



Figure 3: flyer of the exhibition *Drôle de collection*.
Source: website of the Musée des Beaux-arts de Tours.

³⁰ <<https://institutdetouraine.com/it/vivre-a-tours/>>, last check on 10/07/2026.

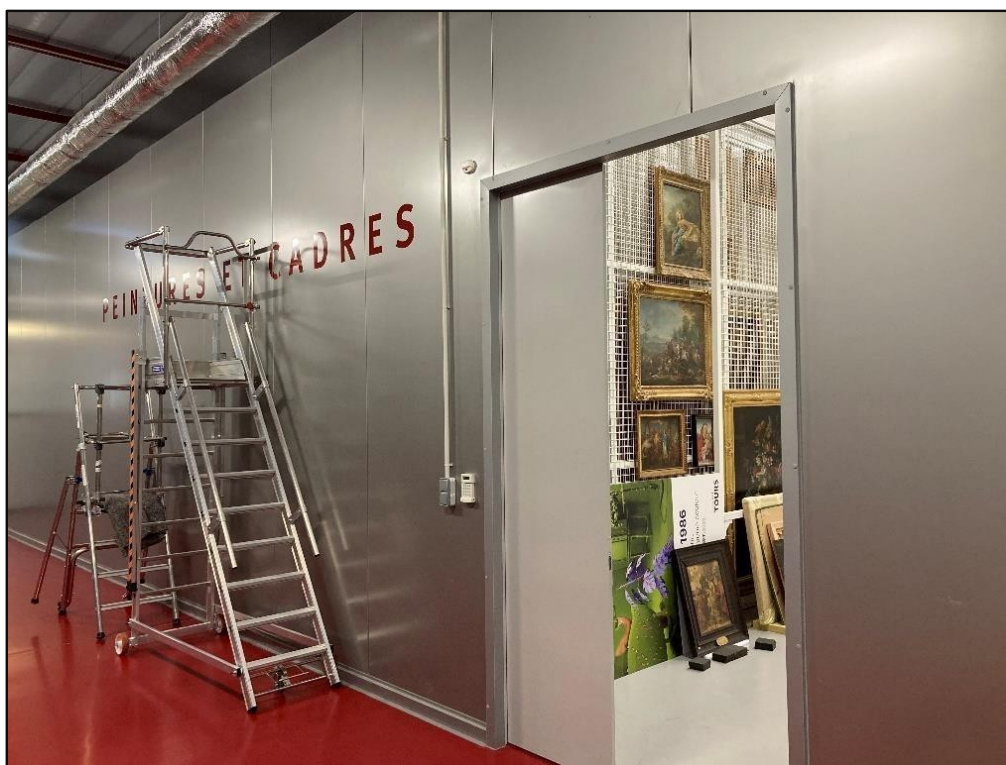


Figure 4: interior of the museum storage.
Source: created by the author.

To develop this exhibition, several phases were carried out. At first, the museum team selected around twenty works from the storage, from which eleven were later chosen by the students. This step aimed to guide the project toward the theme of the exhibition and to reduce the workload, making it compatible with the available time and resources. Starting from this initial group, the corpus of the artworks for the exhibition was defined. These works were then studied through art-historical research, which made it possible to write their descriptive labels. Writing these texts proved to be a complex task, as it required summarising the content as much as possible in order to present a clear and concise text to the public, despite the richness of the material analysed. In this regard, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill highlights how language plays a fundamental role in constructing museum meaning, helping to contextualise objects and guide their interpretation by the audience³¹. Although it is often perceived as an invisible element, language actively contributes to the construction of understanding, supporting the production of documentation, the development of the exhibition

³¹ E. Hooper Greenhill, *Museums and their Visitors*, London, Routledge, 1994, p. 115.

narrative, and the promotion of new museum projects³². It is within this perspective that the drafting of the descriptive labels can be placed, as it made it possible to make complex content accessible while maintaining coherence with the exhibition theme *Drôle de Collection*.

1.2.2 Exhibition design and spatial constraints

The exhibition layout was built around the theme of the *étrangeté*³³, expressed through the different types of medium of the works selected from the museum depot. The common characteristic connecting all these objects concerned the deformation of bodies, the accumulation of elements, the kitsch, and the presence of unusual subjects. This curatorial choice guided both the selection of the works and the construction of the exhibition itinerary, showing how the curatorial process is closely related to a specific and personal interpretation of the works. In this sense, the exhibition space is not simply a container, but an active device in the shaping of meaning. As Brian O'Doherty observes, «[...] things become art in a space where powerful ideas about art focus on them»³⁴, underlining how the exhibition context shapes the perception of the artwork itself.

Indeed, the ancient episcopal palace was not originally conceived to house a museum; consequently, the current museographical layout must constantly adapt to the historical architecture. For this reason, the entire visitor path, while striving to remain chronologically and stylistically accurate, lacks fluid circulation (figure 5). Despite this limitation, the museographical approach aims to maintain aesthetic coherence among the artworks, ensuring that the overall legibility of the tours is never compromised³⁵. It was precisely due to these spatial conditions that we, as students, faced an initial obstacle when deciding where to position the selected pieces within rooms already saturated with artworks from the permanent collection.

³² Ibidem.

³³ Strange in French.

³⁴ B. O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: the Ideology of the Gallery Space*, Berkley, California, California University Press, 1999, p.14.

³⁵ Musée des Beaux-Arts de Tours, *Le Projet Scientifique et Culturel*, 2014, p. 22.

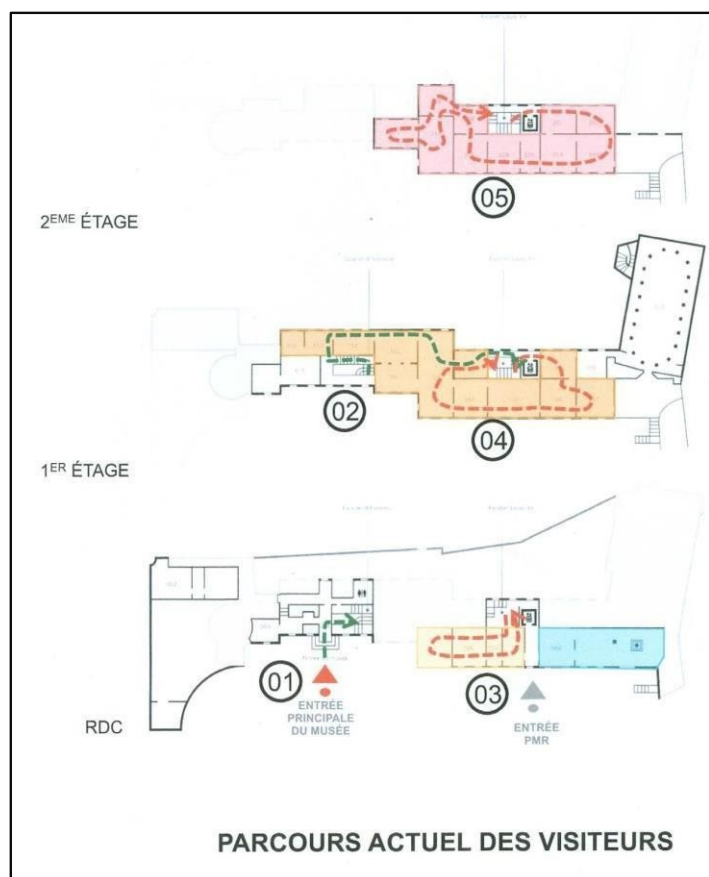


Figure 5: current visitor rout of the Musée des Beaux-Arts of Tours.
Source: Projet Scientifique et Culturel of the Musée des Beaux-Arts of Tours.

After selecting the objects to be displayed in the exhibition *Drôle de Collection*, it was necessary to decide where to place them within the museum rooms, where the permanent collection is already installed. This process was carried out with the supervision and support of the museum team, as it was not possible to position the works freely. Adding objects to already crowded rooms was one of the first major challenges faced during the internship, especially because some of the works already on display could not be moved due to the risk of structural damage. Initially, the students tried to identify where the selected objects could best fit among the permanent works; afterwards, these choices were evaluated together with the museum staff to assess their feasibility. With some spatial adjustments, the works were ultimately placed in the rooms, and from that moment on the concrete work for the creation of an exhibition path coherent with the theme began.

Once the arrangement of the works in the different rooms had been defined, it was necessary to build an exhibition path that was coherent both thematically and

narratively. The selected objects were not only meant to relate to each other, but also to interact with the works belonging to the museum's permanent collection, creating a visual and conceptual dialogue. Their placement thus generated a structured sequence, presenting different interpretations of the *étrangeté* through visual and symbolic connections. This required a constant balance between thematic coherence and clarity of the narrative, making explicit the reasons behind the selection of the works and highlighting the features that justify them as unusual. Within this process, attention was also given to designing the mediation for the exhibition itinerary, understanding that it could be effective to introduce a sound component as a tool to strengthen the immersive experience of the visit and enhance the audience's perception.

This focus on the communicative dimension shows how museums and art galleries cannot be understood only as places of conservation, but also as spaces for the transmission of meaning, as underlined by Robert Hodge and Wilfred D'Souza: «Museums are not only protectors but also communicators»³⁶.

1.3 The Internship as a Practical Experience

At this point, a fundamental conceptual shift emerges: cultural mediation is not merely an instrument that connects an exhibition path with the public, but rather a dynamic device that actively constructs the visibility of the works. It is an active process that makes these artefacts tangible; they are not only displayed, but explicitly shown through appropriate language and the strategic design of a specific itinerary. This shift from the invisible to the visible represents the final stage of a broader process of valorisation that begins with the selection of works from the museum storage. Storage itself is a space of inherent invisibility, standing in direct contrast with the exhibition and mediation spaces, which instead represent the moment of symbolic activation. In the creation of *Drôle de Collection*, this parallel was established from the very beginning: the first activity consisted in extracting works from the confinement of the storage, and this trajectory was completed through guided tours specifically designed to allow the public to finally see, interpret, and activate the intrinsic meaning of the objects.

³⁶ R. Hodge, W. D'Souza, *The museum as a Communicator: a semiotic analysis of the Western Australian Museum Aboriginal Gallery, Perth*, «Museum International», vol. 31, 1979, p. 252.

1.3.1 Designing the mediation process

To translate this theoretical shift into practice, the full realization of the exhibition took shape through its physical reception by the public (figure 6). In this sense, cultural mediation represented the crucial fulcrum through which the works were presented and explained to visitors, translating accessibility from a concept into a spatial reality. This operational phase was also characterized by several steps.



Figure 6: mediation process of the Drôle de Collection project.
Source: created by the author.

First, it was necessary to draft an initial text to serve as the baseline for the mediation discourse. This text was then tested directly in the different rooms to identify the most suitable physical route to propose to the public. At this stage, important curatorial and practical decisions were made based on spatial constraints; for instance, it was decided to begin the tour in a room better suited to host a large number of visitors and support

an opening speech, even though it did not correspond to the ideal starting point of the exhibition path. As highlighted in the *Projet Scientifique et Culturel* of the Musée des Beaux-Arts of Tours, the spaces of the ancient Episcopal Palace were not originally designated to house a museum, and for this reason, several rooms prove to be cramped for welcoming visitors. Due to this complex architecture, the current visitor route is the result of numerous adaptations, which hamper the overall legibility of the display and may cause discomfort during the visit. The location of the ticket office, situated on the ground floor of the museum alongside other spaces essential for proper museum operations, serves as an emblematic case. It has been evidenced that these functional areas cover less than 50m², posing a severe logistical challenge when large groups arrive at the museum and hindering their proper reception³⁷. This structural issue also affects other rooms within the museum, thereby emerging as an obstacle when determining the itinerary for the exhibition created by us students. For this reason, it was also necessary to determine in which spaces it was better to spend more time and where it was better to limit the duration of the visit. Some rooms were comfortable enough for large groups, while others, being smaller or less illuminated, did not provide an optimal view of the works. In the latter cases, the time spent was intentionally reduced to avoid overcrowding spaces. After several tests, the most effective itinerary was defined.

This practical process clearly demonstrated that space is not a neutral container, but an active element that directly affects both the mode of mediation and the audience's reception. This idea is perfectly captured by Yves Michaud, who states that: «*Un museo mette in mostra opere e oggetti ma ci dice anche come vederli*»³⁸ (A museum showcases works and objects but also tells us how to see them). This highlights how museum architecture shapes visual perception: spaces act as a selective device that guides the viewer's gaze according to a specific system of classification and hierarchies of visibility³⁹, heavily influencing what can be seen and how it is interpreted. Consequently, students made shared curatorial decisions adapted to these spatial constraints, aiming to align different narrative proposals into a coherent itinerary.

³⁷ Musée des Beaux-Arts de Tours, *Le Projet Scientifique et Culturel*, 2014, p. 64.

³⁸ Y. Michaud, *L'arte allo stato gassoso*, Roma, Idea, 2007, p. 84.

³⁹ T. Bennett, *The birth of the museum: history, theory, politics*, London, Routledge, 1995.

Simultaneously, alongside the spatial design, the initial mediation text was revised and adapted, adopting a simpler and more accessible language suitable for a non-specialist audience. In this perspective, it is important to stress that language, much like space, plays a crucial role in transmitting meaning. Without a formulation and a vocabulary calibrated for specific contexts and diverse audiences, visitors may not be fully engaged or able to correctly interpret the exhibition. In this regard, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill underlines the need to avoid technical or highly specialised curatorial language, which may alienate visitors without specific background knowledge, causing them to struggle with the meaning of descriptive texts⁴⁰. This demonstrates that language is not merely a descriptive support for the exhibition path, but a key tool for interpretation, capable of transforming, expanding, and ultimately making the curatorial process accessible to all.

1.3.2 Mediation as experience: sound and perception

In the case of *Drôle de Collection*, it was also possible to experiment with the ideation of the exhibition path by offering to the audience a sensory experience, guiding visitors through the itinerary with sound elements associated with some of the objects. In this regard, according to Patrizia Violi visitors search beyond mere cognitive knowledge, seeking a different kind of value, that is linked more to feeling and emotion than to pure understanding: «Ciò che si cerca di acquisire con la visita non è tanto una competenza cognitiva, un accrescimento sul piano del sapere, che raramente i siti offrono, ma un valore di ordine diverso, che investe la sfera del sentire, dell'emozione più che della cognizione»⁴¹ (What one seeks to gain from the visit is not so much cognitive competence or an increase in knowledge, something sites rarely provide, but rather a different kind of value, one that engages the sphere of feeling and emotion more than that of cognition).

This choice reflected the theme of the exhibition: starting from a bizarre imaginary, sound was introduced to immerse the audience in this eccentric world and to highlight the unusual nature of the works of art. The selected sounds helped to create a stronger narrative function, especially in moments of transition between the different

⁴⁰ E. Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and their visitors*, London, Routledge, 1995, p. 116.

⁴¹ P. Violi, *Paesaggi della Memoria: Il trauma, lo spazio, la storia*, Milano, Bompiani, 2014, p. 119.

rooms, and to introduce the explanation of the objects, thus creating a sense of unity between the mediation and public enjoyment of the works. Moreover, sound was used to communicate the peculiarity of the exhibition, which was not conceived as a traditional installation, but followed an atypical approach from the beginning, also highlighted by the presence of master students as curators and mediators. Ultimately, the sound component was conceived not as an accessory element, but as a true mediation device, capable of guiding perception and reinforcing meaning. It played an active role in shaping both interpretation and experience, offering visitors a different kind of experience.

1.3.3 Challenges and personal reflections

During this phase, several difficulties emerged and were addressed after the first guided tour. One initial issue concerned the choice of the route for visitors, highlighting how essential it is for a mediator to have adequate space and good visibility of the works. Later, after introducing sound into the visit, it became clear that it was not immediately understood or appreciated by all visitors, as the audience itself is an integral part of mediation and influences its reception. This shows that the relationship between the museum, the items, and the visitors forms a dynamic system based on emotional engagement. For this reason, the conditions of experiencing the works are strongly shaped by the spaces that host them⁴², which directly influence perception in real time. During a visit, it is never possible to predict exactly what will happen, what questions the audience will ask, or how engaged they will be. For this reason, mediation is a dynamic and flexible activity, constantly adapting to the situation. It can be understood as a relational practice, constructed in the moment of interaction with the audience and requiring continuous adjustment. Nevertheless, the intention to involve visitors in an immersive experience was generally well received, and feedback showed that the addition of sound was a strategic choice for understanding the theme of the works. It is important to note, however, that audiences do not react in the same way, as they are heterogeneous.

⁴² M. Petrelli, *Lo sguardo disperso. Vedere l'opera nell'epoca dei musei smemorati*, «Psicoart», 7, 2017, p. 12.

A further difficulty concerned the timing of when to start the sound and the coordination among the mediators. This made it clear that mediation is a collective activity that requires coordination among different actors; much like film direction, it follows a script, but must also allow for improvisation when unexpected situations occur. Mediation is therefore not a fixed procedure, but a flexible approach adapted to the needs of the audience. The sound files were saved in a shared drive and played manually by one of the students using a speaker. It was necessary to assign specific roles to avoid clashes between speaking and activating the sound. Reflecting on these actions highlights how the audience's full understanding of the exhibition depends on clear mediation, while also seeking to engage them. Although the organisation was not simple at first, repeated practice made the process smoother and more fluid, without interruptions during the guided tours. It was a collective and coordinated effort that ensured continuity in reception and produced effective results in practice.

From a personal perspective, the main challenge faced during the internship was delivering mediation in a foreign language. French is not my native language, so managing an oral presentation during the visits and expressing myself correctly required additional effort, that initially created uncertainty, especially because language directly affects reception and the quality of museum communication. However, with the support of my colleagues and the internship coordinator, I was able to overcome these difficulties. Their guidance made it possible to undertake this activity, emphasising the importance of intercultural collaboration within museum institutions, especially in valuing the diversity of academic backgrounds. Although these aspects were initially challenging, they contributed to developing greater awareness of my skills, supporting both personal growth and a more critical perspective. Here, I also realized the importance of an effective mediation for the public it allows for a deeper appreciation of the artworks, in contrast with those held in storage, which remain inaccessible until explicitly brought out. In this sense, mediation acts as a mechanism that reveals what is hidden in storage, becoming the central point of the tension between conservation and accessibility that characterises the museum institution.

Chapter 2

Museum Storage between Conservation and Visibility

2.1 The Evolution of the Museum Institution and its Definition

The museum today continues to present itself as an institution in constant evolution, and it is for this reason that its definition has changed over time. As the institution itself has evolved, so too have its purposes and functions, making it difficult to establish a universally shared definition of what a museum is. Nevertheless, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) has been committed, since its foundation, to developing a definition capable of encompassing the full range of museum functions.

ICOM was established in 1946, after the Second World War, as a non-governmental organisation with the aim of bringing together the international museum community, promoting the preservation and management of cultural heritage, and supporting museum professionals⁴³. At the time of its foundation, the first definition of a museum still focused primarily on museum collections and their exhibition function, without explicitly referring to the educational and social roles that characterise museums today. From that moment onwards, a long process of reflection led to the current definition of the museum, reflecting the continuous transformation of society itself over the years⁴⁴. Thus, during the 26th ICOM General Conference held in Prague in 2022, the definition currently in effect was adopted: «A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing»⁴⁵.

⁴³ <<https://www.icom-italia.org/le-prime-definizioni-di-museo-dellicom-1946-2001/>>, last check on 20/05/2026.

⁴⁴ <<https://www.icom-italia.org/le-prime-definizioni-di-museo-dellicom-1946-2001/>>, last check on 20/05/2026.

⁴⁵ <<https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>>, last check on 20/05/2026.

This new definition stems from an extensive international debate regarding the political and social neutrality of cultural institutions. In fact, as Jette Sandahl emphasises, this shift was necessary for the new definition of the museum to focus more closely on the concept of this institution, rather than conceiving it as a mere container for the protection of artworks, as outlined in the earliest definitions⁴⁶. Sandahl further argues that a change in definition was imperative because history and society have transformed over the years, and contemporary museums are facing «the challenges of the 21st century, and begin to radically adjust and reinvent their principles, policies and practices accordingly»⁴⁷.

To understand how these contemporary functions and the modern conception of the museum took shape, it is necessary to retrace their historical roots, beginning with the birth of the public institution. As noted above, the functions of museums have progressively evolved over time, from the earliest etymological use of the Greek term *mouseion*, referring to a place dedicated to the worship of the Muses, to the advent of the public museum⁴⁸. With regard to the latter, Jeffrey Abt, professor of Art History at Wayne State University (Detroit, Michigan, United States), traces the origins of the public museum to the opening of the Grande Galerie of the Louvre Palace in Paris in 1793⁴⁹. Focusing specifically on the concept of the public museum, Abt argues that, just as the functions of museums have evolved over time, so too has the meaning of the adjective “public”, changing in relation to both the places in which collections are displayed and the audiences to whom they are addressed⁵⁰.

2.2 The Birth of Museum Storage and the Regime of Visibility

Despite the growing centrality of museums within contemporary society and culture, as well as the constant increase in visitor numbers, museum institutions have undergone a profound process of redefinition over the last few decades. In this regard, the museologist Sharon Macdonald observes that museums occupy «an intriguingly

⁴⁶ J. Sandahl, *The Museum Definition as the Backbone of Museums*, «Museum International», 71, 2019, p. 1, available online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/13500775.2019.1638012>.

⁴⁷ Ibidem.

⁴⁸ J. Abt, *A Companion to Museum Studies*, edited by S. Macdonald, Malden, United States, Blackwell, 2006, p. 115.

⁴⁹ Ibidem.

⁵⁰ Ibidem, p. 132.

paradoxical place in global culture»⁵¹, highlighting the ambiguous position that these institutions assume in contemporary society. This condition reflects the progressive expansion of the functions attributed to museums and the ongoing debate surrounding their social, cultural, and political roles, as well as the audiences they are intended to serve. From this perspective, the British museologists Gordon Fyfe and Sharon Macdonald herself further emphasise this contradictory position, arguing that, through their exhibitions and everyday practices, museums inevitably: «raise questions about knowledge and power, about identity and difference, and about permanence and transience»⁵². Consequently, museums should not be understood merely as neutral spaces for the preservation and display of objects, but rather as sites of knowledge production in which narratives shape meanings and define particular representations of cultural heritage. Indeed, although museums continue to attract an ever-growing number of visitors, this should not necessarily be regarded as an indicator of success, since significant challenges remain in terms of accessibility, inclusivity, and economic sustainability⁵³.

Within this context, particular importance is given to the difficulty of preserving, cataloguing, and making accessible an ever-expanding heritage that often exceeds the available exhibition space. This challenging institutional identity and spatial constraints directly reflect on exhibition practices and collection management. Indeed, as the display of artifacts evolved over time, the selection of what to show and what to hide inevitably shaped the hidden counterpart spaces of the museum. It is precisely within this organisational tension, between preservation and visibility, that museum storage assumes a central role, providing an exceptional perspective through which to analyse the process of selection, exclusion, and value attribution that shape museum narratives.

As the curator Hans Ulrich Obrist points out, this process of selection and exclusion implemented by curators has developed only in recent years. This is because

⁵¹ Ibidem.

⁵² S. Macdonald, *Theorizing Museums. Representing identity and diversity in a changing world*, edited by S. Macdonald and G. Fyfe, Oxford, United Kingdom, Blackwell, 1996, p. 2.

⁵³ M. Lanzinger, D. Piraina, M. Vanni, *Museologia del presente. Musei sostenibili e inclusivi si diventa*, Pisa, Pancini, 2024, p. 10.

the earliest *décorateurs*⁵⁴ around the eighteenth century favoured a dense, frame-to-frame hang (“a ranghi serrati”), where every artwork was displayed directly alongside the next⁵⁵ (figure 7). This methodology, typical of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, is known as the *salon style*, named after the academic salons from which it originated. Subsequently, this approach began to decline, partly because canvases grew larger and curators started placing a single artwork on a wall⁵⁶ (figure 8).



Figure 7: the Waterloo Room (n. 255) of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, 1887.
Source: Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.



Figure 8: room n. 261 of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, 1929.
Source: Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

⁵⁴ The *décorateurs* were the first professional exhibition designers and operated within the Louvre Museum.

⁵⁵ H. U. Obrist, *Ways of Curating*, London, Penguin Books Ltd, 2014, p. 42.

⁵⁶ Ibidem, p. 44.

Indeed, as Brian O'Doherty analyses, Impressionism – and more specifically Claude Monet – shifted the focus from subject matter to more abstract paintings composed of colour and light, where perception is rendered through a personal interpretation of these blurred brushstrokes⁵⁷. In fact, with Monet we witness the initiation of «una nuova e decisiva epoca della storia dell'arte in cui l'aspetto primario non era più la profondità verticale delle raffigurazioni, bensì la superficie orizzontale dipinta»⁵⁸ (A new and decisive era in art history where the primary aspect was no longer the vertical depth of representations, but rather the painted horizontal surface).

According to this new conception, the space between paintings began to increase, and frames – which were previously chosen to be larger and more lavish precisely to accentuate the presence of the painting on the wall amidst all the others – began to be eliminated⁵⁹. From this practice derives the bare, white space termed by O'Doherty as the *white cube*, wherein he analyses this process in which the exhibition itself serves as a frame for the works⁶⁰. Moreover, this transition toward the *white cube* and the selective display method transformed the role of the curator from a passive custodian of accumulated works to an active agent of visual subtraction and intellectual selection⁶¹. Consequently, by emptying the museum walls to allow individual artworks to "breathe", this curatorial revolution automatically designated the museum storage as the necessary, invisible counter-weight to the public gallery⁶².

This thought is also supported by Marzia Loddo, a researcher at Politecnico di Milano, who similarly reports that a major turning point on the usage and the evolution of the storage facilities occurred in the nineteenth century, a time when exhibition practices and the process of selecting works in museums began to change⁶³. In particular, at the end of the nineteenth century, the difficult situation characterising exhibition spaces forces curators to seek order precisely because the walls were

⁵⁷ B. O'Doherty, *Inside the white cube: l'ideologia dello spazio espositivo*, Milano, Johan & Levi, 2012, p. 22

⁵⁸ Ibidem, p. 23.

⁵⁹ Ibidem.

⁶⁰ B. O'Doherty, *Inside the white cube*, 1999, p. 18.

⁶¹ Ibidem, p. 19.

⁶² M. A. Staniszewski, *The power of display. A history of exhibition installations at the Museum of modern art*, Cambridge, Mit press, 1998, p. 64.

⁶³ M. Loddo, *Depot versus museum: what is the future of art museum collections?*, in *Metamorphosis. The transformation of Dutch museum*, edited by J. Roos, D. Hoebink, A. Kok, Netherlands, TU Delf Heritage and Architecture, 2019, p. 45.

congested with exhibited works, compromising the presentation and perception of the artworks themselves⁶⁴. Furthermore, they wanted to make the exhibition spaces brighter – recalling the thought of O’Doherty and the white cube – and thus eliminating as many objects as possible, selecting only specific works to be exhibited so that they could attract a greater number of visitors⁶⁵.

In this regard, during the same period, the German art historian Wilhelm von Bode himself recognised the “unbearable overcrowding” (*unerträgliche Überfüllung*) of the collections in Berlin’s museums⁶⁶. And it is here that von Bode devised a new methodology for selecting works of art: the “dual division”. According to this new method, only high-impact works were chosen for display, while the rest were placed in reserves, classified according to art schools, and made available to scholars and researchers⁶⁷. Von Bode accomplished yet another revolution: still within this perspective of “privileged selection”, he was the one who began grouping artistic objects in the same room based on their historical period rather than dividing them by categories (paintings with paintings, ceramics with ceramics, etc.), as had been customary until then⁶⁸. This step is extremely important because it outlines a curatorial practice carried on to the present day: that of selecting works that attract an audience solely for their fame and importance, where the act of “choice” becomes an instrument of power determining what can be seen and what instead remains hidden in places still unknown to ordinary visitors. As Eilean Hooper-Greenhill points out, «the power of display as a method of communication lies in its capacity to produce visual narratives that are apparently harmonious, unified and complete»⁶⁹, thus reinforcing the division between what is shown to the public and what is relegated to the hidden storage.

Building upon this critical framework, Marzia Loddo notes that when addressing the management of these spaces, a preliminary terminological clarification is necessary. Although the institutionalisation of the storage facilities is relatively recent,

⁶⁴ M. Loddo, *Museum storage facilities: what’s next?*, «International Journal of Young Conservators and Restorers of Works of Art» (ICAR), 2, 2018, p. 146.

⁶⁵ M. Loddo, *Depot versus museum*, 2019, p. 45.

⁶⁶ M. Griesser-Stermscheg, *Tabu Depot. Das Museumsdepot in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Weimar, Böhlau Verlag, 2013, p. 39.

⁶⁷ M. Loddo, *Depot versus museum*, 2019, p. 45.

⁶⁸ K. Schubert, *The curator’s egg: the evolution of the museum concept from the French Revolution to the present day*, London, Ridinghouse, 2009, p. 37.

⁶⁹ E. Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the interpretation of visual culture*, London, Routledge, 2000, p. 151.

various names have been used over the years to designate these environments, reflecting their continuous evolution. The terms generally employed to indicate unexhibited collections – even when housed in unsuitable and unequipped spaces – are warehouse and repository⁷⁰. Regarding the Italian language, the most common term is *deposito*, which can assume different meanings, though in a museum context, much like warehouse and repository, it designates the place where unexhibited works are kept⁷¹. In this regard, the very word *deposito* can carry a negative connotation when linked to the more generic meaning of a warehouse; indeed, both *deposito* and the English term storage «evoca infatti immagini di spazi fatiscenti e sovraffollati, una congerie di oggetti accumulati alla rinfusa»⁷² (Evoke images of crumbling and overcrowded spaces, a collection of objects accumulated in bulk). This negative perception is further confirmed by art historian Maria Vittoria Marini Clarelli, who notes that: «Ai depositi non di rado si affibbiano sinonimi dispregiativi, come scantinato o soffitte, e/o aggettivi poco lusinghieri, come polverosi o bui»⁷³ (To the deposits we often employ derogatory synonyms such as basement or attics, and/or unflattering adjectives, such as dusty or dark). If such terminology reflected past difficulties, nowadays the expression storage facilities denote spaces specifically equipped for the proper management and conservation of museum collections. A further difference can be found in France, where *réserve* refers to spaces designated for a wide range of activities, including educational and research programmes, and occasionally even exhibitions⁷⁴.

2.3 Preventive Conservation and the Management of Museum Storage

As the renowned art historian Antonio Paolucci stated, «i depositi stanno al museo come i nostri organi interni ai nostri occhi e pelle»⁷⁵ (Museum storages are to the museum what our internal organs are to our eyes and skin). This evocative metaphor

⁷⁰ M. Loddo, *Museum storage facilities: what's next?*, 2018, p. 146.

⁷¹ Ibidem.

⁷² G. Nepi Scirè, *Gallerie dell'Accademia di Venezia*, 1995, p. 12.

⁷³ M. V. Marini Clarelli, *Il bello di avere molte riserve*, in *Le storie dell'arte. Grandi nuclei d'arte moderna dalle collezioni della GNAM*, edited by M. Mininni, Milano, Electa, 2011, p. 64.

⁷⁴ V. E. Jorgenson, J. C. Horgan, *Museum collection storage*, 1979, p. 9.

⁷⁵ M. Loddo, *I depositi, organi della conservazione museale*, «Ananke», 84, 2018, p. 60.

highlights how depots are not dead spaces or simple storage facilities, but the vital core upon which the visible museum relies. To further explore the definition of ‘museum storage’, it is necessary to examine an interview conducted by Yaël Kreplak and the museologist François Mairesse⁷⁶ with Gaël de Guichen⁷⁷, a key figure in the field of conservation and collection storage. His career has ranged from work at the Lascaux Cave in the Vézère Valley in France to involvement with the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) in Rome, Italy⁷⁸. During his time at ICCROM, he developed the concept of ‘preventive conservation’ and established numerous training programmes dedicated to heritage preservation, including the RE-ORG method, which has since become an international standard in collection storage management. Within this broader framework, drawing on over thirty years of international experience analysing museum storage facilities, de Guichen highlights a peculiar behavioural pattern frequently adopted by the directors of these cultural institutions. Indeed, when inheriting collections housed in deplorable reserves, directors often choose to ignore the issue rather than confront it⁷⁹. Various excuses are regularly put forward to justify this attitude, such as claims of insufficient space, a lack of funding, or a shortage of personnel required to implement a radical shift in storage management. Furthermore, de Guichen points out that the reorganisation of depots is rarely perceived as a priority by museum directors; because these spaces remain hidden from the public eye, management typically prefers to focus on temporary or permanent exhibitions, as these are the primary drivers for attracting visitors⁸⁰. It is precisely at this point that de Guichen underscores the critical importance of preventive conservation, framing it as a necessary shift in institutional mentality that contemporary museum directors must embrace to foster the proper

⁷⁶ François Mairesse is a Belgian museologist, professor of Museology and Cultural Economics at the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle, and holder of the UNESCO Chair for Museum Diversity and Evolution.

⁷⁷ Chemical engineer at the École Polytechnique in Lausanne. After being responsible for the conservation of the Lascaux Caves, he joined ICCROM in 1969, an organisation for which he carried out more than 600 missions to member countries, where he held conferences and courses on preventive conservation in museums. He subsequently devoted himself to the RE-ORG project for the reorganisation of museum storage facilities, developed in various countries on five continents. Nowadays he is a special advisor to the Director General of ICCROM.

⁷⁸ Y. Kreplak, F. Mairesse, *Collection Storage: A Window into the Richness of Cultural Heritage. A Conversation with Gaël de Guichen*, «Museum International», 73, 2021, p. 228.

⁷⁹ Ibidem, p. 231.

⁸⁰ Ibidem.

management of their collections and reserves – one grounded in careful planning, constant monitoring, risk management, and staff training.

In a second article authored by Gaël de Guichen, the concept of preventive conservation is examined more deeply from a theoretical perspective. To illustrate its significance, the author emphasises that the vast majority of museum collections have been passed down to us – allowing us to admire and study them today – thanks to past owners who recognised their value and successfully preserved them intact across generations⁸¹. It is precisely within this framework that the definition of preventive conservation takes shape: de Guichen highlights how this modern concept emerged in response to the radical cultural shifts of the past two centuries. This perspective is firmly supported by the Heritage Studies professor Rodney Harrison, who argues that while collections were once the private property of individuals, today they form part of the public heritage, demanding heightened attention to their safeguarding and protection against increasingly aggressive and varied threats⁸². The article further points out that, as evidence of this paradigm shift, a greater public and professional awareness regarding the vulnerability of museum objects is urgently required, though it is still struggling to take root. The example provided to demonstrate the persisting lack of awareness once again concerns collection management. Indeed, many institutions continue to accumulate objects within storage facilities that are already in deplorable conditions, while others fail to maintain proper inventories, remaining entirely unaware of the exact number of items they actually possess⁸³. Fortunately, not all museum institutions find themselves in this situation, thanks in part to new regulations implemented to properly protect and conserve collections, as well as ongoing studies and activities aimed at raising awareness among citizens and professionals alike. At this juncture, de Guichen offers his own personal definition of preventive conservation, arguing that it is first and foremost necessary to: «think differently, so that: yesterday’s “object” becomes today’s “collections”; yesterday’s “room” becomes today’s “buildings”; yesterday’s “individual” becomes today’s “team”; yesterday’s “present” becomes today’s “future”; yesterday’s “professionals”

⁸¹ G. de Guichen, *Preventive conservation: a mere fad or far-reaching change?*, «Museum International», 51, 1999, p. 4.

⁸² R. Harrison, *Heritage. Critical approaches*, London, Routledge, 2013, p. 42.

⁸³ G. de Guichen, *Preventive conservation*, 1999, p. 5.

become today's "public"»⁸⁴.

This necessary evolution in institutional thinking directly reshapes how the very physical space of the museum is conceptualised. According to de Guichen: «A museum's storage room is the place where unexhibited collections are brought together in optimal conditions, ready to be displayed in galleries, studied by specialists, and, if possible, seen by the public»⁸⁵. This definition differs from the one proposed by ICOM; however, it more closely reflects de Guichen's own understanding of conservation. Gaël de Guichen further explains that this definition is accompanied by a series of quality standards, which were progressively refined through training programmes, and later formalised within the RE-ORG methodology.

RE-ORG can be defined as a method developed by ICCROM and UNESCO for the reorganisation of museum storage facilities, specifically designed to improve the management, accessibility, and long-term preservation of collections, while ensuring a more effective and creative use of existing storage spaces (figure 9). This framework was established to address a critical, global issue affecting cultural heritage. Indeed, thanks to UNESCO funding, ICCROM launched a preliminary international and anonymous survey on museum storage conditions in 2009. The gathered data revealed that approximately 60% of museum storages worldwide required urgent and significant intervention, highlighting systemic issues related to overcrowding, poor management, and inadequate safety standards⁸⁶. Consequently, international organisations recognized the need for a sustainable solution to safeguard these hidden collections, ensuring they are properly preserved for future generations rather than being permanently confined to inaccessible, non-functional environments. This finding also revealed a longstanding imbalance in museum priorities, whereby exhibition spaces traditionally received greater attention and investment than storage facilities, despite the latter housing the majority of museum collections⁸⁷.

⁸⁴ Ibidem.

⁸⁵ Y. Kreplak, F. Mairesse, *Collection Storage*, p. 228.

⁸⁶ G. de Guichen, *Il programma re-org. Un problema mondiale, alcune soluzioni in 12 musei in 5 continenti*, conference held in Lugano at the Scuola Universitaria della Svizzera Italiana (SUPSI), September 28, 2017, p. 1, available online at: https://www.iccrom.org/sites/default/files/2017-12/conferenza_gael.pdf.

⁸⁷ UNESCO, *Storage*, «Museum International», volume XLVII, n. 4, 1995, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, p. 8.

Come funziona RE-ORG?



Figure 9: practical table explaining the function of the RE-ORG method.

Source: ICCROM official web-site.

Reflecting on this paradigm shift, Gaël de Guichen addresses a crucial semantic and conceptual distinction. He points out that while the term "storage" typically evokes the idea of an organized, well-structured space, the reality of these environments is often quite the opposite. Furthermore, de Guichen emphasizes an unusual linguistic phenomenon: despite referring to the exact same physical space, different languages employ a vast and different terminology, such as *storage*, *deposit*, or *storage room* in English; *réserve*, *dépôt*, or *magasin* in French; and *riserva*, *deposito*, or *magazzino* in Italian⁸⁸. This terminological diversity reflects the absence of a universally shared conceptual framework and reveals how storage has historically occupied an ambiguous

⁸⁸ G. de Guichen, *Il programma RE-ORG. Un problema mondiale, alcune soluzioni in 12 musei in 5 continenti*, p. 1.

position within museum practice. This global wakeup call regarding the precarious state of museum repositories was not, however, an entirely new phenomenon, but rather the culmination of a century-long institutional neglect.

This critical issue has challenged museum institutions since the early twentieth century. The first official international debate specifically dedicated to museum storage occurred in 1934 during the Madrid International Conference. This landmark event was organized by the Office International des Musées (OIM)⁸⁹, an institution directly linked to the International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation (IIIC) of the League of Nations, the historical precursor of the United Nations (UN). This conference aimed to establish shared guidelines for the spatial management and structural organisation of non-exhibited collections, explicitly highlighting the persistent inadequacy of museum repositories under the dedicated session title: *Organisation des dépôts, réserve et collections d'études*⁹⁰.

A subsequent milestone was achieved in 1976 through the initiative of Paul Perrot⁹¹, then Assistant Secretary for Museum Programs at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. (United States of America), who promoted an International Council of Museums (ICOM) conference entirely focused on storage. Perrot strongly advocated for this summit because he was driven by his acute awareness of the precarious conditions within the Smithsonian's own facilities. Conversely, the ICOM Council initially underestimated the global severity of this problem until Perrot presented compelling photographic evidence documenting the severe overcrowding and deterioration inside the institution's warehouses⁹². This conference marked a

⁸⁹ The Office International des Musées (OIM) was established in 1926 in Paris as a specialised subsidiary of the International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation (IIIC), which in turn served as the executive agency for the League of Nations' International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation (ICIC). Operating until 1946, the OIM was the very first intergovernmental body dedicated to international museology, technical cooperation, and heritage preservation. Following World War II and the dissolution of the League of Nations, the assets, archives, and core functions of the OIM and IIIC were directly absorbed by UNESCO and led to the creation of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) in 1946.

⁹⁰ International Museums Office, International Institute of Intellectual Property, *Muséographie: Architecture et aménagement des musées d'art. Conférence internationale d'études, Madrid 1934*, Vol. I, Paris, Office international des musées, 1935, pp. 248, available online at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000394277>.

⁹¹ Paul Perrot was of French origin and a naturalised US citizen, he was an influential museologist, art historian and director of numerous museums, best known for his work in cultural heritage conservation and on the ICOM executive board.

⁹² G. de Guichen, *Il programma re-org. Un problema mondiale, alcune soluzioni in 12 musei in 5 continenti*, p. 3.

profound turning point in museological history, as it represented the first critical, collective inquiry into the vulnerability of museum collections packed into environments unsuited for preventive conservation.

As a direct consequence of this international conference, UNESCO commissioned and published the seminal volume *Museum collection storage*, edited by architect Verner E. Johnson and museum planning expert Joanne C. Horgan. The introduction to the manual contains a definitive statement that perfectly encapsulates the alarming state of museum repositories during an era still lacking standardized frameworks: «The preparation of a handbook on museum storage is long overdue. The storage and conservation of many museum collections have received inadequate attention in the past, and in most cases are still receiving inadequate attention. In fact, probably more harm has been done to museum collections through improper storage than by any other means»⁹³. The theoretical frameworks and international guidelines established by these historical conferences found a concrete, urgent testing ground in everyday museum reality.

2.3.1 The case study of the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Tours

Within the *Projet Scientifique et Culturel* of the Musée des Beaux-Arts of Tours, a notable passage highlights how, up until the document's drafting, the conditions of the museum's collections were essentially disastrous. Specifically, it is noted that in 2008, a technical study was launched to gain a clearer overview of the artworks' condition, as well as an assessment of the museum's storage facilities⁹⁴. This study aimed to evaluate both the conservation status of the objects and the saturation of the reserves – which inherently led to poor collection management – thereby underscoring the urgent need to create larger, off-site storage facilities. Consequently, in 2010, the global assessment report was released, revealing highly concerning results: sculptures in wood, paintings, photographs, and furniture were found to be in poor condition, with the notable exception of works made of stone, metal, and ceramics, which remained in good condition⁹⁵. The report's findings can be summarized as an urgent call for the

⁹³ V. E. Johnson, J. C. Horgan, *Museum collection storage. Protection of the cultural heritage: technical handbooks for museums and monuments*, Paris, France, Union Typographique, 1979, p. 9.

⁹⁴ Musée des Beaux-Arts de Tours, *Le Projet Scientifique et Culturel*, 2014, p. 42.

⁹⁵ Ibidem, p. 43.

Musée des Beaux-Arts of Tours to establish a larger and more functional museum depot to ensure proper heritage preservation, necessitating the swift relocation of collections to a new site, while simultaneously implementing a rigorous preventive conservation policy. Indeed, it must be highlighted that at the time this study was conducted, the museum's reserves housed approximately 92% of the museum's collection objects and spanned a mere 860 m², distributed across 24 rooms located on the five levels of the museum building⁹⁶. This configuration already made it clear how space was entirely insufficient to accommodate all the items destined for storage, making the handling and monitoring of the works difficult, alongside rendering the climate of the rooms impossible to control. Moreover, the museum completely lacked workspaces: the shortage of space meant that any available open area was occupied as a temporary depot, leaving no room for spaces dedicated to packing and unpacking objects, condition reporting, or the quarantine of artworks⁹⁷. It was precisely within this context – following findings regarding the state of the reserves and the degrading conservation conditions – that the decision was subsequently made to transfer all works to an external off-site facility. Consequently, in 2015 the City of Tours thanks to the support of the Communauté d'Agglomération Tour(s) Plus⁹⁸, the Conseil Régional du Centre-Val de Loire⁹⁹, and the Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication¹⁰⁰, the former Crédit Lyonnais (LCL)¹⁰¹ site located in Saint-Avertin, also known as *La Camusière*, was successfully rehabilitated (figure 10). This location was specifically chosen to establish new externalized and shared storage facilities designed for three cultural institutions in Tours that lacked adequate space for proper collection conservation: the musée des Beaux-Arts, the musée du Compagnonnage, and the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle¹⁰².

⁹⁶ Ibidem, p. 44.

⁹⁷ Ibidem.

⁹⁸ Renamed Tours Métropole Val de Loire in 2017, it is the local metropolitan authority responsible for urban planning, economic development, and public services within the Tours metropolitan area.

⁹⁹ It is a regional elected assembly responsible for strategic economic development, transport, and regional funding.

¹⁰⁰ It is the French national ministry responsible for cultural policy and the preservation of historic and architectural heritage.

¹⁰¹ It was an historic French commercial bank founded in 1863.

¹⁰² Musée des Beaux-Arts de Tours, *Le Projet Scientifique et Culturel*, 2014, p. 99.

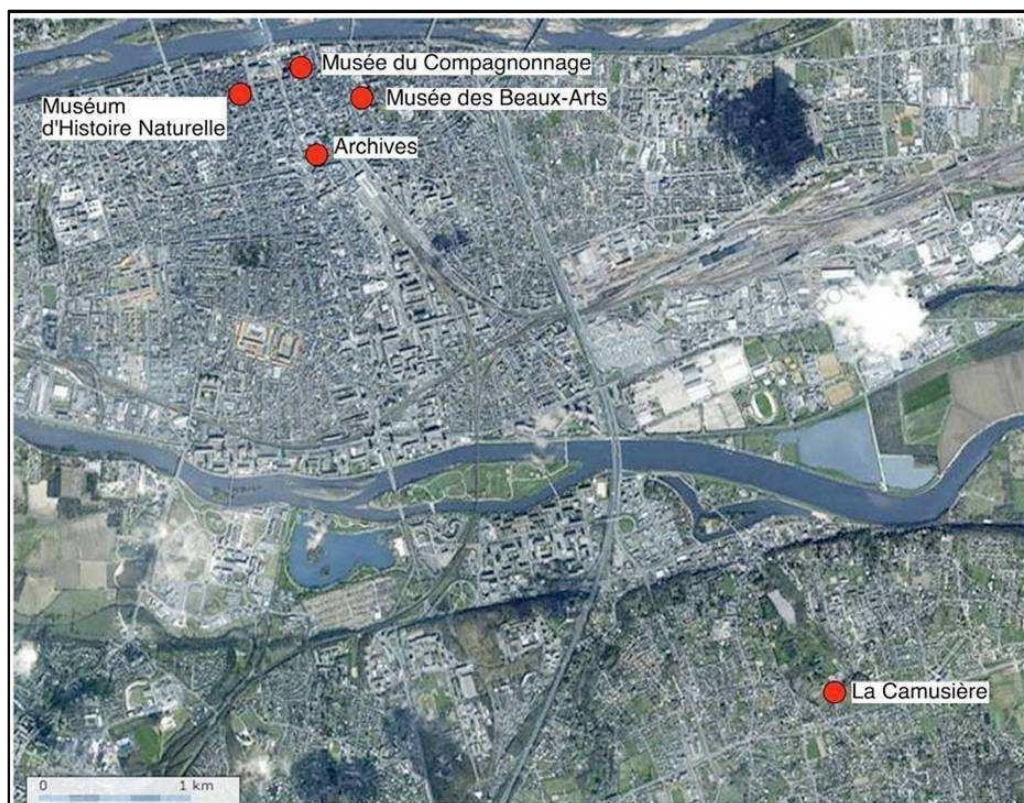


Figure 10: aerial view of the location of the new outsourced museum storage in Saint-Avertin (La Camusière), shared between the musée des Beaux-Arts, the musée du Compagnonnage, and the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle. Source: Projet Scientifique et Culturel of the Musée des Beaux-Arts of Tours.

Once the necessary spaces were secured, a preventive conservation study was carried out to assess the sanitary condition of the collections and prevent infestation risks among the artifacts. Following this, approximately 22,000 works were transferred to the new *La Camusière* facility, a site spanning a usable surface area of 1695 m² across two floors (figure 11), including rooms dedicated to artwork quarantine, workspaces, and storage areas (figure 12). Specifically, the ground floor accommodates the logistics and registrar zones, the distribution hall, and heavy-load storage, while the first floor houses the main storage area surrounded by essential workspaces such as study rooms, offices, and workshops¹⁰³. This new site has guaranteed the collections of the city's three cultural institutions proper preservation in healthy environments with constant climate control, featuring specialized storage furniture and dedicated spaces tailored to the diverse nature of the works.

¹⁰³ Ibidem.

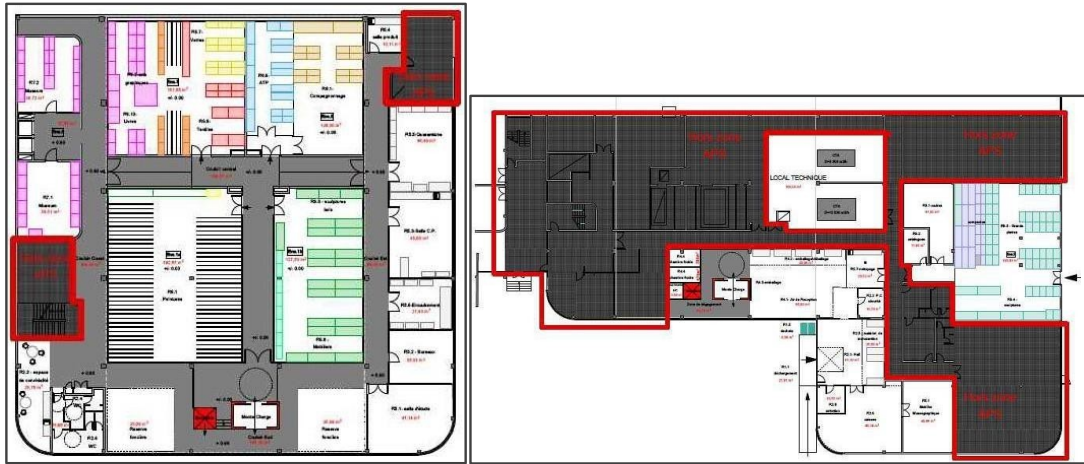


Figure 11: ground floor and first floor of the outsourced reserves of La Camusière.
Source: Projet Scientifique et Culturel of the Musée des Beaux-Arts of Tours.



Figure 12: preventive conservation room in the La Camusière depot.
Source: created by the author.

A core principle underscored in the *Projet Scientifique et Culturel* is the necessity of making these externalized reserves as accessible as possible, by welcoming researchers, encouraging artworks loans, and regularly updating the pieces on display in the museum with items from the storage facilities: «Il faut ensuite faire vivre ce nouvel espace pour qu'il ne devienne pas un "cimetière" des collections»¹⁰⁴ (This new space must be brought to life so that it does not become a "cemetery" of collections). This crucial concept is also shared by Marzia Loddo, who argues that the objects preserved within storage facilities should be fully integrated into the museum's main scientific activities and cultural projects, ensuring that what remains hidden from the everyday visitors' eyes can still be accessed, studied, and appreciated through alternative means¹⁰⁵. This theoretical vision found concrete application during my internship at the museum, where I had the opportunity to work directly within these facilities and participate in the creation of the exhibition project *Drôle de Collection*. Experiencing this environment firsthand demonstrated how transforming storage from an inaccessible vault into an active, dynamic workspace is essential not only for the preservation of heritage, but also for bridging the gap between hidden reserves and public visibility.

Beyond spatial issues, the study conducted on the museum reserves revealed also a profound imbalance between the works concealed from the public and those actually on display. Specifically, the *Projet Scientifique et Culturel* indicates that at the time of drafting, the Musée des Beaux-Arts of Tours held 17.000 objects, of which barely 9% (1.305 items in total) were displayed in the museum at that time¹⁰⁶, once again demonstrating how a lack of space impedes the proper exhibition and appreciation of the collection's true value. This critical condition further exposed the architectural and spatial limitations of the historic building, whose environments proved inadequate for housing the reserves and ensuring proper collection management, thereby reinforcing the decision to relocate the museum's depot to an external site. To fully grasp the extent of this imbalance, the quantitative breakdown presented through a table in the museum's document (figure 13), illustrates the distribution of collections across various categories and highlights the striking contrast between inventoried items and

¹⁰⁴ Ibidem, p. 100.

¹⁰⁵ M. Loddo, *Storage facilities for the collection of Western art museums*, 2019, p. 7

¹⁰⁶ Musée des Beaux-Arts de Tours, *Le Projet Scientifique et Culturel*, 2014, p. 25.

those accessible to the public. Out of the 17.000 objects owned by the museum – including 1.942 paintings, 1.065 sculptures, 1.855 prints, 5.126 drawings, 1.070 ceramics, 1.097 art objects, and 428 pieces of furniture – only a small fraction is permanently displayed¹⁰⁷. In particular, graphic works such as prints and drawings experience total or near-total invisibility within the rooms, as do all other categories to varying degrees, thereby reinforcing the role of storage as the primary custodian of the museum's collections.

	Évalué à ce jour	Exposé à ce jour
Peinture	1942	303
Sculpture	1065	93
Dessins	5126	0
Estampes	1855	5
Mobilier	428	102
Céramiques	1070	82
Objets d'art	1097	22
Livres anciens	1052	698
Divers non complètement évalué (photographies, miniatures, médailles, intailles, monnaies..., collections ethnographiques....)	Environ 3400	0
Total	Environ 17 000	1305

Figure 13: table.

Source: Projet Scientifique et Culturel of the Musée des Beaux-Arts of Tours.

The *Projet Scientifique et Culturel* further emphasizes the importance of preventive conservation as a comprehensive and necessary tool to extend the lifespan of conserved works and prevent their degradation: «La conservation préventive intervient sur l'ensemble des domaines qui peuvent avoir des incidences et des effets sur l'intégrité d'une collection, d'un objet ou d'une oeuvre d'art, et menacer à terme son existence»¹⁰⁸ (Preventive conservation covers all areas that have or may have an impact on the integrity of a collection, object or work of art and ultimately threaten their existence).

¹⁰⁷ Ibidem, pp. 26-28.

¹⁰⁸ <<https://c2rmf.fr/conserver>>, last check on 15/07/2026.

2.4 Beyond the Depot: the Evolution of Storage Systems at the Museo del Prado

Despite the historical evolution of museum storage highlighting that this space has traditionally been regarded as secondary, recent studies have sought to challenge this position. Rather than considering storage facilities as mere ‘warehouses’ devoted solely to collection preservation, more contemporary approaches increasingly recognize these spaces as active components of the museum, contributing to enhanced collection management, research, and knowledge production. This shift is particularly evident in the study conducted by the art historians Patricia Lucas Murillo de la Cueva and Isabel Bennasar Cabrera regarding the Museo del Prado, which argues that museum storage continues to lack the recognition it deserves, and should be understood not merely as a simple physical repository, but as an integrated system within the museum structure, comprising objects, documentation, technologies, and professional expertise.

The case of the Museo Nacional del Prado perfectly exemplifies this historical trajectory and the ongoing redefinition of storage spaces. At the time of the museum’s inauguration on 19 November 1819, only 311 artworks were placed on display, while 1.531 were already packed inside the storage facilities located in the Villanueva Building¹⁰⁹. This part of the museum dates back to 1785 and was designed by the architect Juan de Villanueva; it was originally conceived as a Cabinet of Natural History under King Charles III, but was later repurposed as an art gallery to house the new royal museum¹¹⁰. Shortly after the opening, in 1835, the first conservation issues emerged regarding approximately 1.000 unexhibited works, which had accumulated in these improvised spaces and were exposed to hazards such as mold and moisture. Subsequently, in 1872, around 2.000 works from the collection of the Museo Nacional de la Trinidad were merged into the national collection; however, only about 100 paintings physically entered the Prado, as the Villanueva storage was already completely saturated after just over fifty years of operation. The remaining artworks were distributed among official organisations and diplomatic representations, giving

¹⁰⁹ P. L. Murillo de la Cueva, I. B. Cabrera, *Storage as a System: Collection Management at the Museo Nacional del Prado*, «Museum International», 73, 2021, p. 34.

¹¹⁰ G. Finaldi, *A Brief History of the Prado*, in *Del Greco a Goya: obras maestras del Museo del Prado*, curated by C. Hartup and P. Pérez d’Ors, Museo de Arte de Ponce, Museo Nacional del Prado and Acción Cultural Española, 2012, p. 102-103.

rise to what is known today as the *Prado disperso*, a phenomenon involving approximately 3.500 works stored outside the museum's main premises. Furthermore, this study highlights that the first rooms opened to the public were managed according to a museological approach that prioritised the dense accumulation of artworks within the galleries. For this reason, according to the painter José de Madrazo¹¹¹, the shortage of space at the nineteenth-century Museo del Prado forced organizers to display artworks wherever possible, including staircases and landings, effectively «leaving no inch uncovered»¹¹². It now becomes evident that, even in the case of a prestigious institution like the Museo del Prado, there was an absolute lack of regulatory frameworks governing the status of non-exhibited works, as well as a failure to foresee adequate spaces for them. This highlights a profound institutional unreadiness to manage the growing museum collection effectively. Another critical point to emphasize is that, from the very beginning, the museum staff was extremely limited; consequently, the safeguarding, conservation, and registration of artwork movements were entrusted to the *concierge* (porter), a figure untrained for this type of professional task. A permanent team dedicated to the internal transport of artworks, exhibition curation, and the coordination of collections within storage facilities was finally established only in 1942. A major turning point occurred between 1982 and 1987, with the creation of the North and South storerooms in the Villanueva building. These spaces were equipped with systems specifically designed for the protection and preservation of artworks, directly aligning with the international preventive conservation guidelines proposed by UNESCO a few years prior. Despite these additions, by the end of the 1980s, the Villanueva repositories reached their maximum capacity.

Driven by the urgent need for modernisation and expansion, a profound transformation took place between 2002 and 2007, headed by the architect Rafael Moneo. This intervention led to the creation of a museum campus comprising five distinct buildings – including Villanueva structure – and the development of new,

¹¹¹ José de Madrazo y Agudo (1781–1859) was a Spanish Neoclassical painter. He served as the Director of the Museo del Prado from 1838 to 1857 and was instrumental in its early institutional and architectural management.

¹¹² J. de Madrazo, cited in J. Portús, *Museo del Prado, memoria escrita: 1819-1994*, Madrid, Museo del Prado, 1994; cited in P. Lucas Murillo de la Cueva, I. Bennasar Cabrera, *Storage as a System: Collection Management at the Museo Nacional del Prado*, «Museum International», 73, p. 33.

dedicated storage facilities. Furthermore, through the efforts of the Registrar Department, these new spaces were systematically organized and equipped with advanced systems tailored to the conservation needs of the Museo del Prado's collections, with the primary goal of optimizing the available space. Following these changes, several other Spanish museum institutions undertook similar remodelling and reorganisation efforts within their own storerooms, triggering a widespread awareness of the utility and strategic importance of these spaces. As noted in the article: «These reflections were included in the digital publications of ICOM's National Committee in Spain in 2011 and 2012, evidencing the growing importance of storage spaces and the need for professionals to share experiences around their conception and management»¹¹³.

2.4.1 The European panorama after WWII

Taking a broader look at the European panorama, a major turning point occurred starting from the end of the Second World War, when, following the conclusion of the armed conflict, common museographical thinking began to change. Indeed, it was precisely during the conflict that directors of various European museums had to confront a difficult situation and decide how to manage the collections preserved within their museums. In this regard, Marzia Loddo notes that on many occasions museums were emptied of their works, which were transferred in crates to safer locations. This operation also forces many directors to choose among various works which ones to prioritize for saving¹¹⁴.

During this period, true museum depots did not yet exist, and what was designated as such did not prove to be an entirely secure: artworks were often moved to facilities far from the city centre, while whatever could not be moved was protected by sandbags piled all around the work¹¹⁵. Controversely, others – as in the case of certain Russian museums described as described by Aleksandra Guzeva – packaged their works and

¹¹³ P. L. Murillo de la Cueva, I. Bennasar Cabrera, *Storage as a system: collection management at the Museo Nacional del Prado*, p. 35.

¹¹⁴ M. Loddo, *Museum storage facilities: what's next?*, 2018, p. 147.

¹¹⁵ T. Calvano, M. Forti, *Musei e Monumenti in guerra 1939-1945: Londra Parigi Roma Berlino*, Città del Vaticano, Edizioni Musei Vaticani, 2014, p. 9.

buried them in the garden adjacent to the museum¹¹⁶. Another important detail to emphasize is that these makeshift hiding places often lacked climatic conditions favourable to the proper preservation of the works, compounded by the conditions under which they were transported to these sites, which certainly did not reflect the regulations in force today. Indeed, at the end of the conflict, authorities had to contend not only with the damage inflicted by the war clash, but also with all these precarious conditions that museum collections had to endure.

The positive outcome of this situation was that, despite governors having to cope with all the problems related to the destruction of cities and their reconstruction, this proved to be the perfect condition for a museographical and architectural renewal of museum institutions. In fact, with this perspective, museums began to reorganize and expand their collections, conceiving the idea of making them increasingly accessible so they could be enjoyed by a larger public, while also creating study spaces for researchers. In doing so, a new type of collaboration was forged: the one between the museum director and the architect¹¹⁷.

It is precisely in Italy that this collaboration is strongest, in a dialogue based on avant-garde museum solutions capable of addressing issues linked to the post-war period and contemporary culture¹¹⁸. In fact, many emerging architects were protagonist of this revolution, among whom we find Carlo Scarpa¹¹⁹, who in 1953 was asked to intervene at Palazzo Abatellis in Palermo to create an exhibition area¹²⁰. During the restoration and renewal of the palace, which had to house the new National Gallery of Sicily, the architect wrote a letter in that same year to Giorgio Vigni, General Director for the Antiquities and Arts. For an appropriate reorganization of the works, in this letter Scarpa inquired whether some ground-floor rooms were to be designated for storage – or rather, to use a term far removed from the conventional

¹¹⁶ Guzeva, Aleksandra, «Russia Beyond», 2020, p. 5, <https://it.rbth.com/cultura/84544-come-e-dove-vennero-nascosti>.

¹¹⁷ F. Albini, *Funzioni e architettura del museo*, in *I luoghi del museo. Tipo e forma fra tradizione e innovazione*, curated by L. Basso Peressut, Rome, Editori Riuniti, 1985, p. 105-108.

¹¹⁸ A. Huber and S. Polano, *The Italian Museum. The conversion of historic spaces into exhibition spaces. The relevance of the museographical experience of the Fifties*, Milano, Lybra Immagine, 1997, p. 8.

¹¹⁹ Carlo Scarpa (Venice, 1906 – Japan, 1978) was an Italian architect and designer, among the most important of the 20th century.

¹²⁰ <<https://divisare.com/projects/369227-carlo-scarpa-jacopo-famularo-palazzo-abatellis>>, last check on 01/08/2026.

conception of museum storage, as a *galleria secondaria*¹²¹. This space was located on the ground floor, where Scarpa designed a peculiar system for hanging works with sliding racks that allowed them to slide on a wooden support on the floor, so that scholars could observe them at their best¹²².

Following this, a second space designated as a depot was organized, conceived according to the more common logic, intended for unexhibited works and always featuring the hanging system devised by Scarpa, though here the tracks in which the supports for the works slid were positioned in the ceiling. In this case, researchers and scholars did not have access to it¹²³ (figure 14). This aspect outlines the logic pursued by the majority of Italian museums during that period and the conservation strategy implemented: in fact, these spaces resembled more inaccessible warehouses where artworks were densely packed, precisely favouring an arbitrary selection of what was exhibited versus what was instead transferred to the depository.



Figure 14: sliding painting racks in the new storage facility in Palazzo Abatellis, Palermo.
Source: Marzia Loddo.

¹²¹ M. Iannello, *Carlo Scarpa a Palazzo Abatellis, in 1954-2014: sessanta anni della galleria e delle sue collezioni a Palazzo Abatellis*, edited by G. Barbera, Messina, Magika, 2015, p. 21.

¹²² M. Loddo, *Museum storage facilities: what's next?*, 2018, p. 147.

¹²³ Ibidem.

A second central figure taking part in this museographical revolution in Italy is the architect Franco Albini¹²⁴, who, together with Caterina Marcenaro, reorganized the collection of Palazzo Bianco in Genova. During the Second World War, the palace was bombed and subsequently restored before reopening to the public in 1949¹²⁵ (figure 13).



Figure 13: breach in the façade of Palazzo Bianco (Genoa) after the bombing.
Source: Istituto centrale per il catalogo e la documentazione.

¹²⁴ Franco Albini (Robbiate, 1905 – Milan, 1977) was an Italian architect, urban planner, and designer, and one of the most important and rigorous Italian architects of the 20th century.

¹²⁵ Ibidem.

In this sense, it is important to emphasize how Marcenaro intended to reorganize the collection according to a logic of quality, eliminating all works that she did not consider «very efficient for educational purposes»¹²⁶. In the case of Palazzo Bianco as well, two spaces used as depots were created, both of which were accessible to researchers. A first space was located in the attic, where, as in the case of Palazzo Abatellis, the works were positioned on sliding racks, but using a system devised by Albini that differed from Scarpa's one (figure 14). In this instance, the system used to hang the works features frames suspended from hooks, which likewise slide on tracks to enhance visibility for scholars¹²⁷.



Figure 14: sliding painting racks in the attic storage at Palazzo Bianco, Genoa.
Source: Marzia Loddo.

¹²⁶ ASCG, Fondo Belle Arti, scat. 230, cassetta 142, fasc. 21, *Palazzo Bianco: restauro 1949-1981*, verbale della Commissione per il riordinamento della Galleria di Palazzo Bianco, 1950, cited in M. Loddo, *Palazzo Bianco e Rosso*, Genoa. Albini and Marcenaro's productive relationship, «Nuova Museologia», 43, 2020, p. 41.

¹²⁷ C. Marcenaro, *The museum concept and the rearrangement of Palazzo Bianco*, Genoa, «Museum International», 7, 1954, p. 266.

The second space, also named *galleria secondaria* as in the case of Palazzo Bianco, was located on the fourth floor of the building. Here, however, it was attributed a different meaning compared to the one described by Scarpa, turning into a true exhibition space characterized by wooden panels – also designed by Albini – that could be moved inside the room to vary the architectural configuration¹²⁸ (figure 15).



Figure 15: wooden panels to exhibit the paintings in the secondary gallery in Palazzo Bianco, Genoa.
Source: Marzia Loddo

¹²⁸ Ibidem.

Chapter 3

Museum Depots in Modern Times and their Different Typologies

Around the early 1970s, at an international level, greater prominence began to be given to museum storage facilities in relation to the conservation and management of collections. It is precisely from this perspective that different types of storage began to spread with various purposes, including visible storage, accessible storage, shared storage, and off-site storage¹²⁹.

As anticipated in the previous chapter, a turning point for understanding the situation in which global museum collections found themselves is the International Conference on Museum Storage (*Problèmes des Collections de Réserve dans les Musées*) held in 1976 in Washington, D.C., and organised by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and UNESCO, with the support of the United States National Commission for UNESCO and the ICOM Committee for the American Association of Museums. The conference program clearly highlighted this aspect: «The problems relating to museum storage have been of concern to all museum professionals, but until now have never been the subject of examination. Yet it is evident that if museums are going to fulfil their responsibilities in preserving the heritage of the past for future generations, far more attention must be paid to the conditions under which reserve and study collections are stored»¹³⁰. At this point, it is possible to understand how, even in the 1970s, museum professionals were not fully aware of the actual state of their collections. A striking example of this condition concerns the reserves of the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Tours – analysed previously – where, as emerges from the *Projet Scientifique et Culturel*, until 2014 the museum lacked an adequate depot, leaving the artworks in a highly critical state of conservation. This conference raised questions about the accessibility of museum storage facilities by scholars and visitors, who increasingly expressed their interest in seeing heritage never seen before¹³¹. Precisely

¹²⁹ M. Loddo, *Museum storage facilities: what's next?*, 2018, p. 150.

¹³⁰ International Council of Museums (ICOM), *International Conference on Museum Storage, 13–17 December 1976*, Paris, ICOM, 1976.

¹³¹ M. Loddo, *Depot versus museum*, 2019, p. 47.

for this reason, one of the first models adopted was the visible storage, conceived to radically change the nature of such spaces, which until then had remained «out of bounds to unauthorized persons»¹³².

Another key point that emerged during the conference was that: «storage is more than a physical facility: it reflects the museum's role as guardian, exhibitor and interpreter of cultural and natural objects and as a research institution»¹³³. With this statement, new identity was conferred upon all those technical practices – such as humidity control and application of technologies – that are indispensable for the proper administration of museum collections. All of this culminated in the drafting of the manual by Verner E. Johnson and Joanne C. Horgan, titled *Museum Collection Storage*. The text encapsulates the most important themes discussed during the conference and became a fundamental guide for all professionals in the sector for a proper reorganization of museum depots.

Another factor to highlight, which emerged a few years before the Washington conference but is nevertheless related to the museum landscape of that period, concerns a new current of thought called the New Museology. This term, used mostly in Europe and North America, reflected general dissatisfaction with major failures of museum institutions in revolutionizing themselves and keeping pace with new social, cultural, and political developments. During that period, there was a re-evaluation of all human activities, and precisely for this reason, New Museology tended to adopt more critical, inclusive, and community-oriented approaches, reflecting a departure from traditional museum practices focused on the museification of the object¹³⁴. New Museology had important repercussions on museum collections precisely because it questioned the spaces and the neutrality of the museum, emphasizing the importance of narrative and the multiplicity of meanings attributed to museum objects¹³⁵. Consequently, it is also thanks to this new current of thought that museums evolved into institutions more oriented towards social issues, and this change had a significant impact on the activities

¹³² V.E. Jognson, J.C. Horgan, *Museum collection storage*, 1979, p. 20.

¹³³ International Council of Museums (ICOM), *International Conference on Museum Storage*, 1976.

¹³⁴ A. Hess, *Problem or opportunity? A museological review of accessible museum storage*, «Museum management and curatorship», 2026, p. 4, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09647775.2026.2678162>.

¹³⁵ P. Vergo, *The new museology*, London, Reaktion Books, 1989, cited in A. Hess, *Problem or opportunity? A museological review of accessible museum storage*, «Museum management and curatorship», 2026, p. 4.

carried out within museum spaces, subsequently refining expectations regarding collections¹³⁶. Parallel to this, a critical reflection emerged concerning the authority exercised within museums and, consequently, the characters who personally control museum narratives. From this perspective, as previously noted, in 2022 ICOM proposed a new definition of museum, containing a different terminology that highlights the openness toward a more social function that museum institutions should embody. Indeed, the definition includes terms such as «in the service of society», «accessible and inclusive», and «offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection, and knowledge sharing»¹³⁷. Despite these multiple positive developments in the museum field, author and collections manager Suzanne Keene observes that even in the 21st century, museums find themselves «entangled in inconsistencies and logical binds»¹³⁸. Here Keene emphasizes that museums will most likely continue to struggle with the demands of a postmodern world and an increasingly demanding public, leading to a widening gap between what a museum could theoretically achieve and what it is actually able to offer¹³⁹.

It is precisely from this perspective that contemporary academics, such as Suzanne Keene and other colleagues, argue that the principles of the New Museology could be applied to museum storage facilities. Once again, researcher Alison Hess points out that although the vast majority of museum collections are kept within reserves, these remain spaces that are frequently overlooked and under-funded¹⁴⁰. This tension is strongly amplified when considering that «museums, in their role as custodial institutions of the world's material heritage, must also acknowledge and serve two unique communities – our ancestors and those who are not yet born»¹⁴¹, making it clear that it is precisely in storage facilities that the diverse needs of these communities intertwine, giving rise to tensions linked to institutional priorities and costs¹⁴². Indeed, in an editorial for the official ICOM journal «Museum International», managing editor

¹³⁶ H.S. Hein, *The museum in transition: a philosophical perspective*, Washington, Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000, pp. 107-108.

¹³⁷ <<https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>>, last check on 20/08/2026.

¹³⁸ S. Keene, *All that is solid? Museums and the postmodern*, «Public Archaeology», 5, 2013, p. 185.

¹³⁹ Ibidem, p. 194.

¹⁴⁰ A. Hess, *Problem or opportunity*, 2026, p. 6.

¹⁴¹ R. Sandell, R.R. Janes, *Museum management and marketing*, London, Routledge, 2007, p. 1.

¹⁴² T. Jones, *A (practical) inspiration: do you know what it costs you to collect?*, in *Active collections*, edited by E. Wood, R. Tisdale, T. Jones, New York, Routledge, 2018, p. 141-144.

Marcia Lord points out that regarding the issue of increasingly saturated museum storage facilities, the situation is aggravated by the way objects are presented, given that until recently a much higher proportion of a museum collection was on public view¹⁴³. Lord notes that this tension has an impact on specific museum activities, such as exhibition design, substantially influencing another core area: the management of storage facilities¹⁴⁴. Furthermore, in the late 1990s, the policies of various Western nations – especially in the United Kingdom – began to promote a program centred on social inclusion, utilizing cultural institutions as a tool for this social redefinition¹⁴⁵. This political propaganda established itself in parallel with the new movement of the New Museology, transforming museums into educational institutions open to communities¹⁴⁶.

As already highlighted through the new 2022 museum definition, in this case too, despite recent changes within the museum field, attention toward storage facilities has remained unchanged. In 2008, Suzanne Keene herself, together with Alice Stevenson and Francesca Monti, conducted a project concerning the state of reserves, highlighting once again that: «the perception has been that museum collections, mostly maintained at public expense, are under-used as a resource»¹⁴⁷. Continuing, the three authors emphasize that, beyond the climatic and environmental issues of storage spaces expressed during the 1976 ICOM conference, the real problem turns out to be the lack of access inside these spaces¹⁴⁸. Keene's project was not carried out, due to the 2008 financial crisis which also hit cultural institutions and the grants dedicated to them. To provide a concrete example, in the United Kingdom, spending on museums and galleries dropped by 27% between 2009/2010 and 2019/2020, practically falling from 426 to 311 million pounds¹⁴⁹.

A further pivotal moment was reached in 2011 with the launch of the ICCROM-

¹⁴³ M. Lord, *Editorial*, in *Storage*, «Museum International», 4, 1995, p. 3.

¹⁴⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁴⁵ A. Hess, *Problem or opportunity*, 2026, p. 7.

¹⁴⁶ A. Tlili, S. Gewirtz, A. Cribb, *New labour's socially responsible museum. Roles, functions and greater expectations*, «Policy Studies», 28, 2007, p. 270, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01442870701437634>.

¹⁴⁷ S. Keene, A. Stevenson, F. Monti, *Collections for people. Museum's stored collections as a public resource*, London, UCL Institute of Archeology, 2008, p. 11.

¹⁴⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁴⁹ B. Rex, P. Campbell, *Local authority investments in museums after a decade of austerity*, London, Museums Association, 2021, p. 9.

UNESCO International Storage Survey¹⁵⁰. This global initiative called upon museum professionals worldwide to assess the condition of their storage. The findings confirmed that museum collections in storage remain at severe risk on a global scale. Surveying a sample of 1490 respondents across 136 countries, the study revealed that institutions consistently struggle to manage their storage and convert them into optimal environments for preventive conservation¹⁵¹ (figure 16).

In direct response to these alarming data, ICCROM and UNESCO, in close collaboration with Gaël de Guichen, formalized the RE-ORG method – as previously introduced. This methodology provides museum with a flexible tool to regain control of their unexhibited works by optimizing spaces and resources that are already available¹⁵².

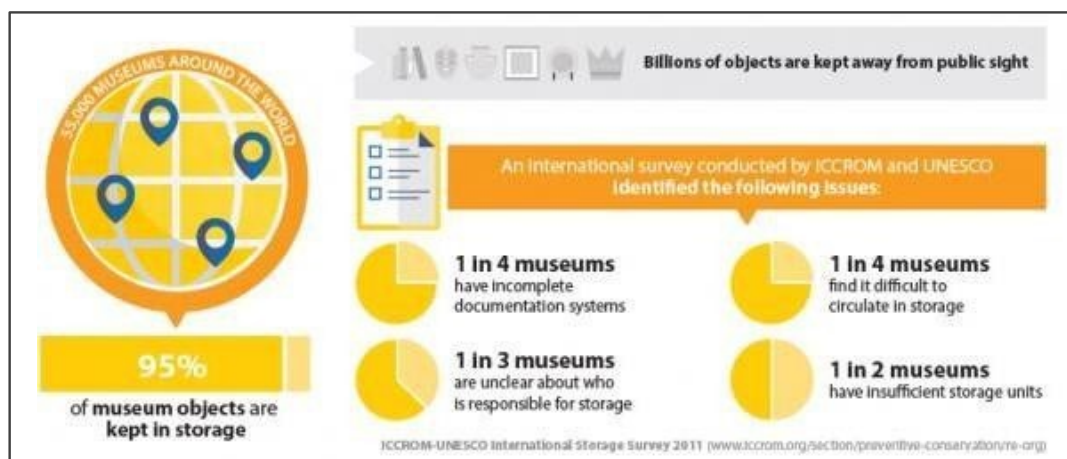


Figure 16: data collected from the ICCROM-UNESCO International Survey of 2011.
Source: ICCROM official web-site.

Following up on the 2011 ICCROM-UNESCO survey, a further step forward was taken in 2019 during the 34th ICOM General Assembly held in Kyoto, Japan. During the congress, a resolution was established concerning «measures to safeguard and enhance collections in storage throughout the world»¹⁵³, urging targeted interventions

¹⁵⁰ The 2011 represents the official consolidation and expansion of the preliminary investigation initiated by ICCROM in 2009, which had initially yielded the critical estimate of 60% of collections at risk. These preliminary data were reprocessed and used to structure the 2011 global campaign.

¹⁵¹ <<https://www.iccrom.org/it/section/conservazione-preventiva/dati>>, last check on 21/08/2026.

¹⁵² <<https://www.iccrom.org/it/temi/conservazione-preventiva/re-org/il-metodo>>, last check on 21/08/2026.

¹⁵³ International Council of Museums (ICOM), *Resolutions adopted by ICOM's 34th General Assembly*, Kyoto, Japan, 2019, p.4.

aimed at reducing risks to collections in storage. In this regard, the assembly report emphasizes how the care of collections contributes to the development of knowledge and the advancement of human rights¹⁵⁴. It should also be noted that ICOM put forward a proposal to establish a ‘Standing Committee to analyse the Storage Situation in Museums around the World’, which, however, faded into the background due to discussions surrounding the new museum definition. Fortunately, after a few years, in 2022, during the 158th Session (an official meeting of ICOM's governing bodies), the Executive Board approved the request for the creation of a Working Group on Collections in Storage, with the purpose of examining the situation of collections preserved in storage facilities worldwide¹⁵⁵. Among the members of this group are François Mairesse, as Chair of the Working Group on Collections in Storage, Maria Lucia Ferruzza as the representative of ICOM Italy, and Gaël de Guichen, representative of ICOM France & ICOM-CC (Committee for Conservation). As a first step, the Working Group wanted to assess the main issues related to the development of storage facilities and, at the same time, launch an international survey to understand the current situation of museum storage worldwide. Building upon this, the group's activities were articulated in several phases. Initially, a preliminary report was drafted and presented during the 26th ICOM General Conference held in Prague, which identifies four thematic areas concerning contemporary storage management, focused on: new storage typologies created in the last decade, open and accessible storage for visitors, shared storage facilities among multiple institutions, and the reorganization of existing depots through the RE-ORG program¹⁵⁶. On this basis, in 2023 the previously planned international survey came to life concretely, with the Working Group supported by the UNESCO Chair and ICCA (Cultural Industries & Artistic Creation), thanks to which it was possible to engage researcher Marine Thébault to follow the survey and subsequently draft the final report. The questionnaire, after being tested and approved by the entire ICOM community, was administered online and remained open from April 4, 2023, to July 18 of the same year. Total participants were 1,132 from 98 different countries, largely from Western Europe, with 51% of them

¹⁵⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵⁵ F. Mairesse, M. Thébault, *Museum storage around the world*, Paris, International Council of Museums (ICOM), 2024, p. 2.

¹⁵⁶ Ibidem, p. 7.

choosing to remain anonymous¹⁵⁷.

Entering into the heart of the survey, the majority of participating museums stated that one of the critical problems concerns the lack of storage space, a factor partly due to the fact that many of these institutions are housed in buildings that originally had a function other than that of a museum (figure 17). An example of this is once again the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Tours, whose building was originally the episcopal palace.

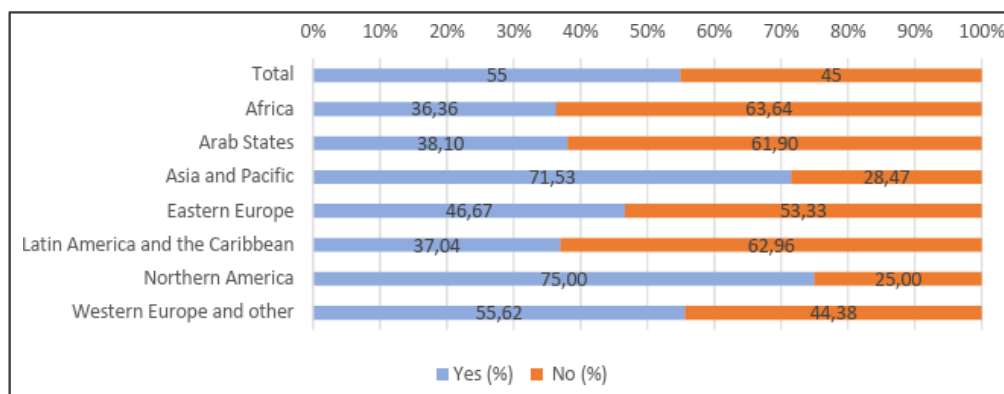


Figure 17: data regarding storage spaces specially designed to house museum collection (55% of respondents affirmed to have a deposit specifically created to house the collection).

Source: Official 2024 ICOM report – *Museum storage around the world*.

The first storage typology analysed in the ICOM report is the on-site storage, which turns out to be the most used by survey participants (79% of the respondents declared to have on-site storage facilities). In this case, the space designated for reserves is located inside the museum itself, and from the data collected, it is possible to learn that for 36% of participants the depot is located on the ground floor, for 31% in the basements, for 21% on the upper floors, and only for 12% in the attics¹⁵⁸. In this scenario, the majority of the museums considered have realized they have no possibility of expanding their depots as they no longer have available space.

To overcome one of the significant problems afflicting museums, namely the shortage of space, many museum directors in the late 1970s began considering the construction of dedicated spaces for artwork conservation external to the institution¹⁵⁹.

¹⁵⁷ Ibidem, pp. 8-11.

¹⁵⁸ Ibidem, pp. 22-23.

¹⁵⁹ F. Mairesse, *La collection a-t-elle un avenir au sein du musée?*, «Culture & Musées», 37, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.4000/culturemusees.6124>.

This type of solution is increasingly used nowadays, and the survey data demonstrate this. Indeed, 44% of participating museums stated they possess a purposefully built depot outside institutional walls, an aspect particularly common in Asia, Europe, North America, and Arab countries¹⁶⁰. Thanks to the fact that this typology of storage is usually larger compared to on-site storage, many museums share their reserves with other museums or public institutions, as in the case of the La Camusière reserves, which are used by the Musée des Beaux-Arts, the musée du Compagnonnage, and the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle.

The central aspect of the research concerns data regarding the fruition of collections in storage and access modalities. Indeed, the results highlight how 55% of participating museums allow access to their depots to both researchers and the public, compared to 30% that instead exclude this possibility. In fact, public accessibility remains limited, with 87% of survey participants declaring that access to reserves during museum opening hours is not feasible, while barely 5% state they are able to offer this service¹⁶¹.

As a result of this, the daily use of these spaces nonetheless remains predominantly reserved for scholars, for research activities or exhibition loans. In this instance, only about 20% of museums organize guided tours for the public inside storage facilities, while just over 10% have adopted a different strategy, choosing to set up visible storage spaces (without, however, allowing access to them)¹⁶². Finally, a more modern approach, adopted primarily in Asia-Pacific countries to overcome the problem of access to reserves, involves the integration of a part of these spaces into the permanent exhibition itinerary (figure 18).

¹⁶⁰ Ibidem.

¹⁶¹ Ibidem, p. 43.

¹⁶² Ibidem, p. 32.

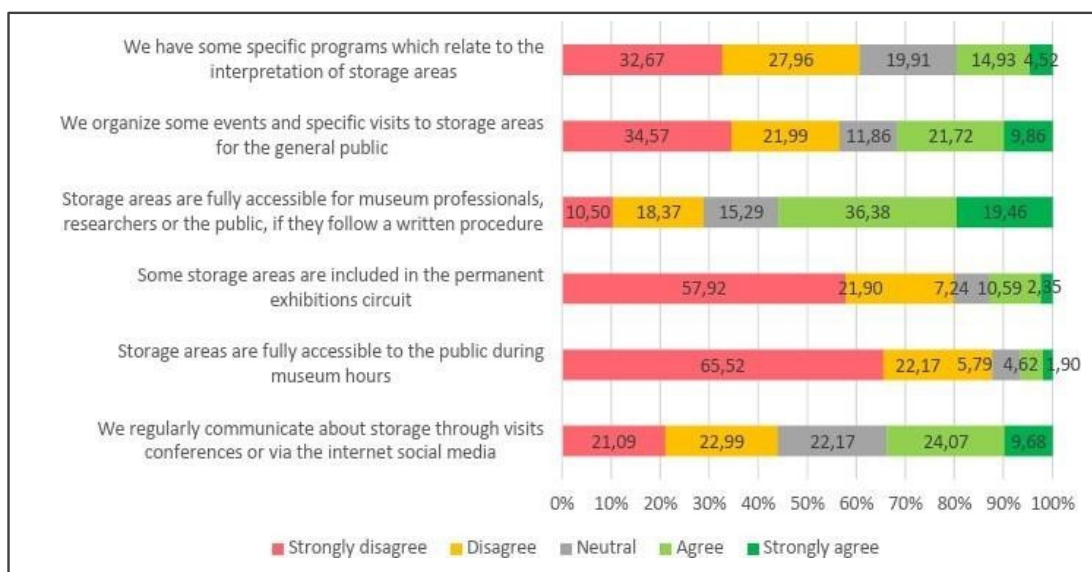


Figure 18: table with data about professionals' attitude toward storage communication.
Source: Official 2024 ICOM report – *Museum storage around the world*.

3.1 Les Reserves de La Camusière Today and other Examples

Taking back under consideration the reserves of La Camusière, before transferring the artworks to the new site, a preliminary analysis was conducted to assess the condition of the objects. Following this a *chantier des collections*¹⁶³ – literally the implementation of a museological program – was set up, that is an «opération exceptionnelle pour une institution permettant de traiter « en masse » un ensemble d'objets dans un objectif défini (transfert de collections, création de nouvelles réserves, rénovation de musée...)»¹⁶⁴ (An exceptional project undertaken by an institution to process a large batch of objects en masse for a specific purpose (such as a collection transfer, the creation of new storage facilities, or a museum renovation...)). This operation took place in various phases starting in 2011: when the artworks were moved to the new deposit, they were all carefully checked to verify their identity, to confirm their inventory number, to evaluate their conservation status, and to proceed with the *récolement*¹⁶⁵. At that point, the museum aimed to enhance the operation by displaying selected works exceptionally taken from storage within the permanent exhibition, as

¹⁶³ Specific term in the field of cultural heritage.

¹⁶⁴ <<https://www.icom-musees.fr/actualites/agenda/le-chantier-des-collections>>, last check on 01/09/2026.

¹⁶⁵ Musée des Beaux-Arts de Tours, *Le chantier des collections et le déplacement des collections vers les réserves externalisées de la Camusière*, Tours, France, 2026, p. 1.

well as organizing guided tours of the La Camusière. Furthermore, precise mapping activities of the artworks have been ongoing since 2016, enabling their location within the rooms; in parallel, the second cycle of *récolement* is currently underway and will be completed by December of this year. Today, the primary aspect of the new reserves is that they operate as a real study centre for the collections, allowing scholars, researchers, and students to access them to closely examine the artworks and their documentation¹⁶⁶.

In the European context, we have several cases of museum institutions seeking to adopt more contemporary solutions and implement new storage typologies within their spaces. A famous example is the musical instrument tower of the musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac in Paris: a structure divided into six levels that acts as a showcase to display the musical instrument collection to the public¹⁶⁷ (figure 19).



Figure 19: View of the musical instrument storage area.
Source: Musée du quai Branly–Jacques Chirac official website.

¹⁶⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁶⁷ <<https://www.quaibranly.fr/en/public-areas/the-musical-instrument-tower>>, last check on 01/09/2026.

Also in France, the Louvre constitutes an exemplary model of off-site storage with the Louvre Conservation Centre in Liévin, which opened in 2019 about 200 km north of Paris and designed to protect national collections from the risk of the Seine flooding¹⁶⁸. However, the ultimate example and most emblematic case is represented by the Depot Boijmans Van Beuningen (figure 20), which is also the world's first art depot completely accessible to the public. Officially inaugurated in 2021, the building is located next to the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam's Museumpark. Its primary function is to preserve the institution's entire collection, offering visitors a behind-the-scenes experience of the activities that characterize the museum's operation. The space consists of fourteen exhibition compartments featuring five different microclimates, which allow for the proper preservation of the works, in which 155.000 objects are on display to the public¹⁶⁹.

The analysis of these examples highlights how storage has become an essential structure for the proper management of museum institutions, transcending its original function as a mere 'storeroom' for works. Today, the entire community of museum professionals continues to explore the potential of these spaces, with the aim of enriching the public's experience. It thus becomes evident that in the contemporary scenario, «the future of the museum lies in the depot»¹⁷⁰.



Figure 20: image of the Depot Boijmans Van Beuningen.
Source: Depot Boijmans Van Beuningen official web-site.

¹⁶⁸ <<https://www.louvre.fr/en/the-louvre-in-france-and-around-the-world/the-louvre-conservation-centre>>, last check on 01/09/2026.

¹⁶⁹ <<https://www.boijmans.nl/en/Depot>>, last check on 01/09/2026.

¹⁷⁰ M. Loddo, *Depot versus museum*, 2019, p. 49.

Conclusions

Throughout the course of this research, the aim has been to explore and examine one of the most radical, complex, and still ongoing transformations that have affected museum institutions over recent decades. In particular, attention has focused on the shift that has redefined the nature of the museum storage space: a place traditionally conceived as a dark warehouse characterised by structural inadequacies, filled with invisible and hidden objects, often in poor conservation conditions, has progressively evolved into an active cultural resource and a space for research, study, and heritage enhancement.

Based on the conclusions emerged from this study, it has been highlighted that the traditional dichotomy between the exhibition gallery and the underground storage facility must no longer, and cannot, be interpreted in terms of a rigid separation. In this regard, as curator Barbara Tomassi points out, «la relazione dinamica che si crea tra la parte di collezione esposta e quella che non lo è costituisce un principio basilare del funzionamento di un museo»¹⁷¹ (the dynamic relationship created between the displayed part of the collection and the undisplayed part constitutes a fundamental principle of museum functioning), configuring the storage as a “living” space to draw upon, ensuring constant renewal for the public¹⁷². Indeed, as researcher Marzia Loddo demonstrates, what is daily accessible to the public represents merely “the tip of the iceberg”, since approximately 90% of collections are kept in storage¹⁷³. Consequently, contemporary museology requires us to rethink the museum as a complete institution, conceiving it as a complex system in which storage represents the vital engine and foundation of these cultural organisms¹⁷⁴.

The results of the most recent international surveys – including the document published by ICOM in 2024, edited by François Mairesse and Marine Thébault, as well as a research carried out this year in Great Britain and promoted by the National Lottery Heritage Fund – nevertheless continue to present a picture of persistent

¹⁷¹ B. Tomassi, *L'ordinamento del deposito XIX secolo oggi aperto alla consultazione del pubblico*, «Belle Arti 131», 1, 2012, p. 9.

¹⁷² Ibidem.

¹⁷³ M. Loddo, *Storage facilities for the collections of Western art museums*, 2019.

¹⁷⁴ M. Jaoul, *Des réserves, pour quoi faire?*, «Museum International», 188, 1995, pp. 4-7.

organisational criticality¹⁷⁵. Taking as a reference the survey conducted this year in British museums, the data collected demonstrate just how far the vast majority of museums still are from a proper management of their museum resources, namely their storage facilities. It has emerged that more than 70% of the collections remain in storage, facing daily challenges such as a lack of space, precarious preservation conditions, and an ever-growing shortage of dedicated funding¹⁷⁶. Indeed, as Marzia Loddo further highlights, this tendency toward the accumulation and ceaseless expansion of museum collections has forced many institutions to make a change – a shift stemming from the failed attempt to expand spaces within historic buildings (as in the case of Italian museums, where 97% of them are housed in historic buildings)¹⁷⁷. The focus then shifted to the design of dedicated centres for conservation, research, and work located outside museum institutions.

In this sense, the analysis of the *Projet Scientifique et Culturel* drafted in 2014 by the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Tours allows us to see how this museum institution, too, has chosen to expand its storage by creating a new off-site storage facility. The original reserves, located within the museum – housed in the former palace of the archbishops –, were in extremely critical conditions. Furthermore, the impossibility of modifying the architectural layout of the building made it necessary to establish the new conservation hub of La Camusière in Saint-Avertin. Following a complex *chantier des collections* intervention, aimed primarily at verifying the conservation status of the artefacts, all the works in excess have been transferred from the museum to the new storage facility, where operational spaces dedicated to restoration, analysis, and research activities have subsequently been set up. Since the design phase, the museum's collaborators strongly intended to make the reserves an active and accessible space, ensuring they would not be reduced to a mere archive. Nevertheless, access remains restricted to professionals, scholars, and researchers, although special openings to the public are provided, such as during the *Journées Européennes du Patrimoine*¹⁷⁸.

This significant case study demonstrates how a greater sensitivity towards storage

¹⁷⁵ F. Mairesse, M. Thébault, *Museum storage around the world*, 2024, p. 49.

¹⁷⁶ T. Seymour, The hidden crisis inside Britain's museums, «The Art Journal», 2026, <https://www.theartjournal.com/articles/the-hidden-crisis-inside-britains-museums>.

¹⁷⁷ M. Loddo, *Museum Storage Facilities: what's next?*, 2018, p. 155.

¹⁷⁸ Musée des Beaux-Arts de Tours, *Le chantier des collections*, 2026, p. 1.

management is progressively taking root, re-evaluating the importance they hold within the museum institution. Indeed, a further fundamental milestone is represented by the creation of the RE-ORG method, developed by Gaël de Guichen and promoted internationally by ICCROM and UNESCO. This rigorous protocol, designed to reorganise and revolutionise the management of reserves, has profoundly renewed the operational standards of these spaces, conferring upon them appropriate attention. However, despite today's growing focus directed towards the safeguarding and proper preservation of works kept in reserves, the mere logistical decentralisation of storage remains insufficient to guarantee the effective enhancement of these places. Gradually, an increasing number of institutions are opting for the inclusion of *visible storage* solutions within their visitor routes; however, in many cases direct visitor access is still not fully authorised. Although these choices undoubtedly represent progress and an improvement over the past situation, such solutions are still not sufficient to grant these spaces the centrality and visibility they deserve in the context of cultural promotion and enhancement.

As highlighted by Suzanne Keene, «the role of the museum is changing, from object- and collections-centred to people-centred. Further, there are political pressures on museums to make proper use of all their resources, including the stored collections»¹⁷⁹. In light of this conceptual revolution, it is clear that museum institutions are today called upon to make a radical change of direction, obliging them to critically rethink their activities and their cultural offering. Furthermore, it becomes essential to promote a service oriented towards the enhancement of the entire collection and its full accessibility, extending this visibility also to all the heritage kept within the storage facilities.

Recognising the essential role that museum storage facilities play as multifunctional spaces whose activities range from research to conservation, they constitute an indissoluble element of the institution, housing the majority of collections within them. The reserves, in fact, play a fundamental role in the development of the museum and its programmes, as they ensure the preservation and accessibility of the

¹⁷⁹ S. Keene, *Fragments of the World. Uses of Museum Collections*, London and New York, Routledge, 2011.

heritage, highlighting museum institutions as hubs of knowledge and inspiration¹⁸⁰. It is therefore impossible to conceive these spaces as a marginal component, even though the focus today is primarily on exhibition rooms and on attracting a growing number of visitors¹⁸¹. In this regard, the American artist Mark Dion explains that storage facilities can foster the revitalisation of museums, proposing a radical idea: «So I say freeze the museum's front rooms as a time capsule and open up the laboratories and storerooms to reveal art and science as the dynamic process that they are»¹⁸². Finally, words my own regarding the fact that storage represents the beating heart of the museum, I can affirm that in the future even greater importance must be given to these spaces, precisely because the destiny of museums lies in the depots¹⁸³. Only when these places are opened to the community will it be possible to state that the contemporary museum has fulfilled its most authentic mission.

¹⁸⁰ UNESCO, *La manipulation des collections dans les réserves*, Cultural Heritage Protection Handbook n. 5, Paris, UNESCO, 2010, p. 3.

¹⁸¹ M. Loddo, *Storage facilities for the collections of Western art museums*, 2019, p. 7.

¹⁸² M. Dion, *Miwon Kwon in Conversation with Mark Dion*, in *Mark Dion*, edited by L.G. Corrin, M. Kwon, N. Bryson, London, Phaidon, 1997, p. 1, cited in M. Endt, *Beyond Institutional Critique: Mark Dion's Surrealist Wunderkammer at the Manchester Museum*, «Museum and Society», 5, 2007, p. 1.

¹⁸³ M. Loddo, *Depot versus museum*, 2019, p. 49.

Appendix I

Catalogue of the exhibition *Drôle de collection*



Cat. 1 – Francesco PROVIDONI, *Le Martyre de l'apôtre saint Jude dans le Temple de Diane à Suanyr*

ARTIST: Francesco PROVIDONI (Bologna, 1633 – Bastia Umbra 1703).

TITLE: *Le Martyre de l'apôtre saint Jude dans le Temple de Diane à Suanyr* (The Martyrdom of the Apostle Saint Jude in the Temple of Diana at Suanyr).

OBJECT TYPE: Painting.

MEDIUM AND TECHNIQUE: Oil on canvas.

DIMENSIONS: 75 x 64 cm (unframed) / 95 x 82.5 x 6.5 cm (framed).

REPOSITORY: Musée des Beaux-Arts, Tours (France) – Salle Italie 17^e, 18^e.

INVENTORY NO.: 1825-1-44.

PROVENANCE: Cardinal Francesco Nerli Collection (Garde-Meuble de Versailles), acquired by François-René-Jean de Pommereul (1804).

Analysis: the martyrdom of the apostle Saint Jude Thaddaeus, a companion of Christ, takes place in the temple of Diana in Suanyr, Persia, in present-day Iran. Driven into a corner at the foot of the statue of Diana by his executioners armed with axes, the apostle lying on the ground is accompanied by an angel who hands him the palm of martyrdom. Around him, the worshippers of the goddess run in all directions, terrified by the wrath of the heavens and the imminent collapse of the sanctuary.

Francesco Previdoni sets the murder of Saint Jude in a chaotic atmosphere where storm and martyrdom merge. The episode is lost amidst the swarming of fleeing figures in a massive scramble, which fosters a sense of anguish and extreme strangeness.



Cat. 2 – Anonymous, *Le Christ aux Limbes*

ARTIST: Anonymous (attributed to Pieter Huys), atelier of Jan Mandijn (Flanders, late 16th century).

TITLE: *Le Christ aux Limbes* (Christ in Limbo).

OBJECT TYPE: Painting.

MEDIUM AND TECHNIQUE: Oil on panel.

DIMENSIONS: 57.0 x 54.0 cm (unframed) / 77.5 x 74.5 x 6.5 cm (framed).

REPOSITORY: Musée des Beaux-Arts, Tours (France) – Salle Italie 16^e.

INVENTORY NO.: 1973-3-2.

PROVENANCE: Bequest of Raymond Marcel, 1973.

Analysis: in a luminous halo, Christ, who has just passed through death and has not yet resurrected, approaches Limbo, situated at the border of Hell. Here, the souls of the Old Testament Patriarchs promised Paradise await him. Heavily inspired by the monstrous beings and strange visions of Hieronymus Bosch's works, this piece, characteristic of the Antwerp painter Pieter Huys's style, closely blends the religious and secular, esoteric and alchemical worlds. The egg- and bottle-shaped furnaces, the accumulation of naked bodies, the phantasmagoric creatures and the demons lit by the glow of the flames offer a strange and terrifying vision far removed from traditional biblical representations.



Cat. 3 – Georges GARDET, *L'ours mendiant*

ARTIST: George Gardet (Paris, 1863 – 1939).

MANUFACTURER: Manufacture Nationale de Sèvres.

TITLE: *L'ours mendiant* (The Begging Bear).

OBJECT TYPE: Statuette.

MEDIUM AND TECHNIQUE: Painted and glazed biscuit porcelain.

DIMENSIONS: 26.5 x 18.0 x 15.5 cm.

REPOSITORY: Musée des Beaux-Arts, Tours (France) – Salle des États.

INVENTORY NO.: 1896-2-60 (On permanent deposit from Sèvres since 1896).

Analysis: the bear, seated on the ground with its paws brought forward in an almost human position, seems lost in the contemplation of the sky. Abandoning any expression of the strength and supposed aggressiveness of the beast, animalier sculptor Georges Gardet presents a version of a purplish colour with a strange gentleness. Produced many times over in bronze, porcelain or plaster, the small sculpture caters to collectors' taste for works blending naturalism and imagination.

This softened representation of the animal stems from its omnipresence in 19th-century fairs, eventually and curiously evolving into the famous teddy bear, the gentle and comforting animal of childhood.



Cat. 4 – Jacques I LAUDIN, *La Femme mal dressée*

ARTIST: Jacques I Laudin (Limoges, 1627 – 1695).

DESIGN AFTER: Jan Saenredam and Hendrick Goltzius.

TITLE: *La Femme mal dressée*, (The Untidy Woman).

OBJECT TYPE: Rectangular plaque.

MEDIUM AND TECHNIQUE: Painted enamel on copper.

DIMENSIONS: 18.5 x 15.5 x 1.5 cm.

INSCRIPTIONS: Inscribed “La Femme Maldressée” at lower centre; signed “Laudin émailleur / à Limoges” on the reverse.

REPOSITORY: Musée des Beaux-Arts, Tours (France) – Salle Louis XIII.

INVENTORY NO.: 1874-8-1.

PROVENANCE: Schmidt Collection, acquired in 1874.

Analysis: "La femme mal dressée", with her heavily hunched back, steps forward leaning on a cane and on the pedestal of a column to find her balance. This work is a simplified adaptation of an engraving by Jan Saenredam, itself based on a painting by Hendrick Goltzius. The latter depicts the miraculous healing of a woman by Christ as recounted by Saint Luke.

Here, curiously, the enameller retains only the infirm body of the woman, making the divine intervention and all the moral discourse of the engraving disappear. Only the image of suffering and old age remains.



Jan Saenredam after Hendrick Goltzius.
Le miracle de la femme courbée.
BnF, Cabinet des Estampes.
*Dum mulier sentit divina numine nervos
firmari extollit nomen ad alta dei* (While
the woman feels her nerves strengthened by
the divine power, she lifts the name to the
heights of God).



Cat. 5 – Alexandre-Joseph LANDAIS, *Vue de Tours et allégorie de la Touraine*

ARTIST: Alexandre-Joseph Landais (Tours, 1860 – 1912).

TITLE: *Vue de Tours et allégorie de la Touraine*, (View of Tours and Allegory of Touraine).

OBJECT TYPE: Decorative dish.

MEDIUM AND TECHNIQUE: Glazed faïence.

DIMENSIONS: Height: 5.5 cm / length: 49.3 cm / width: 48.0 cm.

INSCRIPTIONS: Signed at lower right: "A Landais".

REPOSITORY: Musée des Beaux-Arts, Tours (France) – Salle de la Touraine.

INVENTORY NO.: 1984-7-1.

PROVENANCE: Acquired at a public auction at the Hôtel des ventes de Tours, June 1984.

Analysis: the personification of the city takes on the features of a woman in the manner of a Renaissance allegory. Behind her, a curtain reveals Tours, its broad river, its bridges, its cathedral and a vast, mild sky. Crowned with a fortified wall and brandishing a flag bearing the city's coat of arms, the allegory leans on a cornucopia that pours forth, right down to her feet, the natural and cultural riches born of Touraine's benign climate. Around the rim of the dish, the names of the greatest artists from Tours appear on the walls as a testament to the region's predisposition for the arts and sciences. Through its colours, its decorative overload and its unmistakably kitsch style, this work could easily be found today in a souvenir shop. In reality, it is a unique commemorative object intended for wealthy amateurs.



Cat. 6 – Charles-Jean AVISSEAU, *Grand Groupe Rustique*

ARTIST: Charles-Jean Avisseau (Tours, 1796-1861).

TITLE: *Grand Groupe Rustique*, (Large Rustic Group).

OBJECT TYPE: Sculptural group.

MEDIUM AND TECHNIQUE: Glazed faience.

DIMENSIONS: 49 x 56.2 x 36.1 cm.

INSCRIPTIONS: Signed, dated and localised on the base: "Avisseau / à Tours / 1855 / AV".

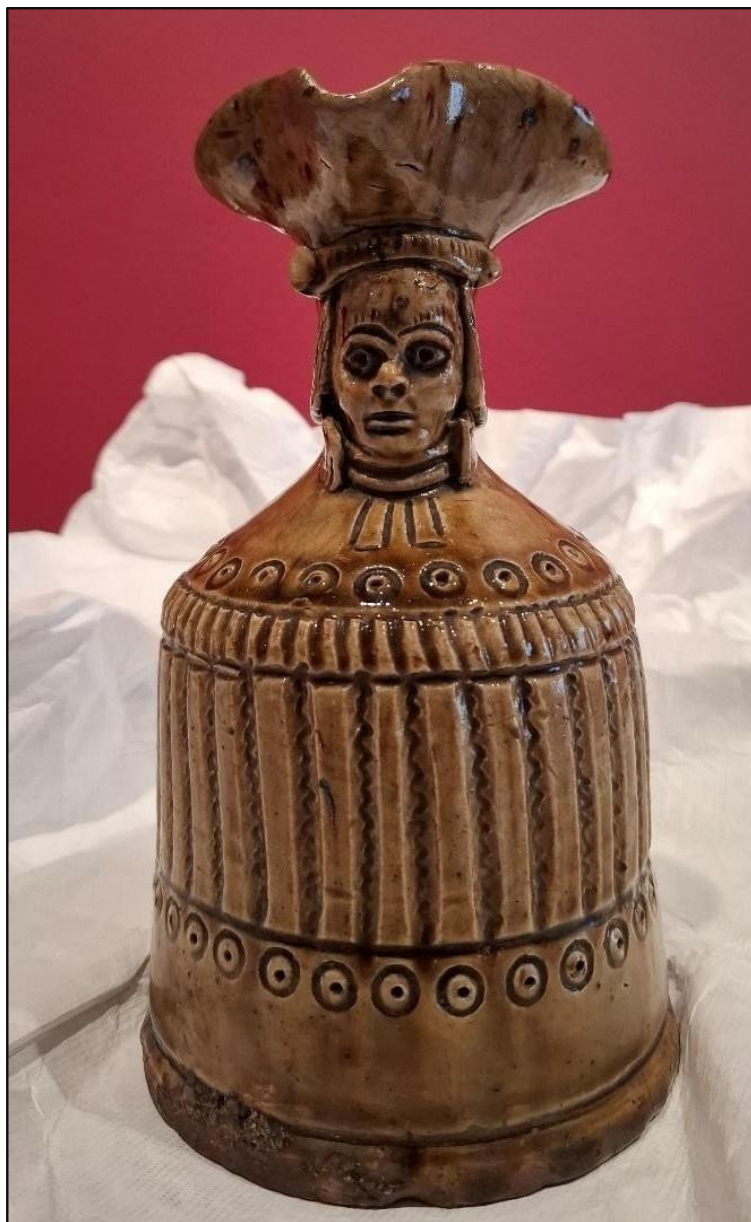
REPOSITORY: Musée des Beaux-Arts, Tours (France) – Salle du Réalisme.

INVENTORY NO.: 1903-6-2.

PROVENANCE: Gift of Jean-Baptiste Camille Briandet, 1903.

Analysis: a kestrel and a grass snake clash over the body of a dead lizard atop a tree stump inhabited by molluscs, reptiles, amphibians and a blue butterfly. This imitation of nature is as much a matter of artistic virtuosity, through its pyramidal composition, as of scientific knowledge, through its technical mastery of colours and firing.

Both a quotation of the art of Bernard Palissy, master of Renaissance coloured earthenware, and a memory of walks along the banks of the Loire, this work is a piece of reconstructed nature, whimsical and strange, fascinating and terrifying.



Cat. 7 – Marie TALBOT (Jean Brulé), *Pichet anthropomorphe*

ARTIST: Marie Talbot (Henrichemont, 1814 – La Borne, 1874).

TITLE: *Pichet anthropomorphe* (Anthropomorphic Pitcher).

OBJECT TYPE: Jug.

MEDIUM AND TECHNIQUE: Glazed stoneware.

DIMENSIONS: Height: 21.0 cm / diameter: 11.5 cm.

REPOSITORY: Musée des Beaux-Arts, Tours (France) — Salle Néoclassique.

INVENTORY NO.: 1955-8-1.

PROVENANCE: Purchased from Jean Blin, 1955.

Analysis: Marie Talbot transforms the pitcher into a character: its head, wearing a tricorn hat, becomes the spout, while the lines of the belly suggest the folds of a coat. This object comes from the village of La Borne, in the Cher department, where the Talbot family has practiced the art of pottery since the 17th century.

The artist, one of the very few female potters of her time to sign her works, produced numerous common utilitarian objects like the one presented here, transforming the human figure and playing with popular imagery. Humorously blurring the boundary between everyday household objects and artistic creation, she introduces strange characters with unsettling faces and mysterious identities to the dining table.



Cat. 8 – Jean VEBER, *Luna Park*

ARTIST: Jean Veber (Paris, 1864–1928).

TITLE: *Luna Park*.

OBJECT TYPE: Painting.

MEDIUM AND TECHNIQUE: Oil on canvas.

DIMENSIONS: 80.0 x 112.0 cm (unframed) / 95.7 x 128.5 x 7.0 cm (framed)

REPOSITORY: Musée des Beaux-Arts, Tours (France) — Salle des États.

INVENTORY NO.: 1947-36-14.

PROVENANCE: Gift of Rosset Ibert, 1938.

Analysis: a laughing crowd watches a group of well-dressed women and men sitting on the spinning disk of a funfair. While some still resist the centrifugal force of this fairground ride, others, carried away by the speed, are violently propelled in all directions. This painting belongs to the art of caricature, which Jean Veber practiced in both painting and printmaking at the beginning of the 20th century. He is renowned for the biting tone he deployed in both satirical and political press cartoons.



Louis Testelin, *La Roue de la Fortune*, 1651-1652, black chalk on beige paper, 113cm x 30cm, Paris, musée du Louvre, RF11671.

A modern Wheel of Fortune, the subject of this work grips the viewer with its frenzy and expression of the absurdity of the human condition.



Cat. 11 – François SICARD, *Œdipe et le Sphinx*

ARTIST: François Sicard (Tours, 1862 – Paris, 1934).

MANUFACTURER: Manufacture Nationale de Sèvres.

TITLE: *Œdipe et le Sphinx* (Œdipus and the Sphinx).

OBJECT TYPE: Sculpture.

MEDIUM AND TECHNIQUE: Biscuit porcelain.

DIMENSIONS: 60.0 x 35.5 x 21.0 cm.

INSCRIPTIONS: Signed and dated on the base: "F. Sicard 1903"; features the Sèvres incised factory mark dated "S 1904" and monogram "CV 2".

REPOSITORY: Musée des Beaux-Arts, Tours (France) — Salle des États.

INVENTORY NO.: D 1912-3-1 (on permanent deposit from Sèvres since 1912).

Analysis: winner of the Prix de Rome in 1891, Sicard became an official artist, benefiting from numerous commissions and adapting his mythological subjects into decorative objects produced by foundries or the Sèvres Manufactory.

In Greek myth, Oedipus triumphs over the Sphinx by solving its riddle, thus freeing the city of Thebes from this monster symbolising evil and fate. A recurring subject in painting and sculpture, Oedipus and the Sphinx embodies the struggle between Good and Evil and, in the French context of the 1890s-1910s, resonates with the call for Revenge following the 1870 defeat against Germany.

While Sicard's work evokes the Italian Renaissance and Antiquity, its treatment is surprising: Oedipus, a frail adolescent rather than a victorious hero, strikes the Sphinx like an annoying insect, lending the scene a decadent tone and a bizarre quality far removed from classical dignity.



Cat. 10 – Alexandre BIGOT, *Crabe, Insecte, Carreau ajouré au lézard et Tête féline et entrelac*

ARTIST: Alexandre Bigot (Mer, 1862 – Paris, 1927).

TITLE: *Crabe* (Crab), *Insecte* (Insect), *Carreau ajouré au lézard* (Openwork tile with Lizard), *Tête féline et entrelac* (Feline Head and Interlace).

OBJECT TYPE: Plaque.

MEDIUM AND TECHNIQUE: Glazed stoneware.

DIMENSIONS: 19.0 x 19.0 x 2.0 cm / 14.5 x 18.3 x 2.0 cm / 15.0 x 15.0 x 25.0 cm / 13.0 x 13.0 x 1.5 cm.

REPOSITORY: Musée des Beaux-Arts, Tours (France) — Salle des États.

INVENTORY NO.: 1923-601-4 / 1911-601-5 / 1923-601-8 / 1923-601-11.

PROVENANCE: Gift of Pierre Roche, 1923 / gift of Alexandre Bigot, 1911.

Analysis: crab, ibex, salamanders and a cat-headed chimera in low relief adorn these ceramic tiles intended to cover the facades of Art Nouveau buildings. At the end of the 19th century, this new style advocated the union of nature and art through forms combining curves and counter-curves, the organic and the plant-like. Alexandre Bigot was one of its leading representatives.

A doctor in chemistry, this artist put his scientific knowledge to work for the perfection of his technique: the firing of his works and the rendering of colour. Closely imitating nature, these tiles shape a troubling universe where the wall surface transforms into a living organism, populated by animals with a disturbing presence.



Cat. 11 – Eliane LARUS, *Paysage primitif*

ARTIST: Eliane Larus (Le Pin, 1944).

TITLE: *Paysage primitif* (Primitive Landscape).

OBJECT TYPE: Painting.

MEDIUM AND TECHNIQUE: Acrylic paint on plexiglass.

DIMENSIONS: 38.0 x 30.0 cm (unframed) / 55.0 x 47.0 x 5.0 cm (framed).

REPOSITORY: Musée des Beaux-Arts, Tours (France) — Salle contemporaine.

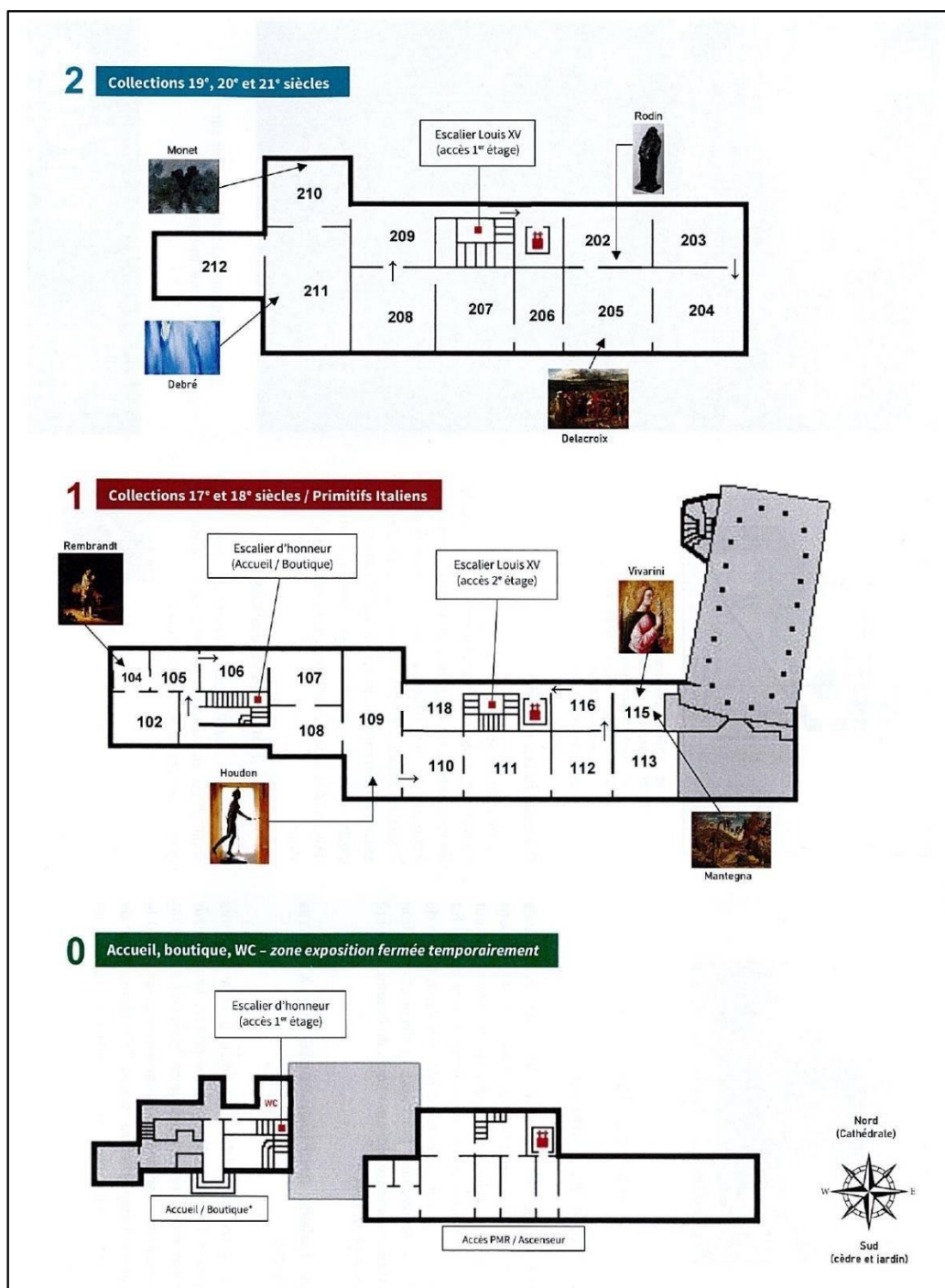
INVENTORY NO.: 1991-6-2.

PROVENANCE: Gift of Michael Lecomte, 1991.

Analysis: in this landscape inhabited by two nude figures and animals, between an orange sky and muddy earth, Eliane Larus invites us into a childhood memory. She takes us back to a primitive state, to the origins of creation, where imagination and innocence reign.

Trained at the École des Beaux-Arts in Tours, the artist champions a practice free from artistic codes, close to Art Brut, where freedom remains essential. From technical mastery to the spontaneity of gesture, her painting questions the boundary between naivety and strangeness. Beneath an apparent simplicity, a disturbing tension reveals itself, unsettling our aesthetic benchmarks.

Map of the rooms of the Musée des Beaux-Arts of Tours



Images showing the *accrochage* of the artworks for the
Drôle des Collections project



The first artwork of the *Drôle de Collection* itinerary: *Le Martyre de l'apôtre saint Jude dans le Temple de Diane à Suanyr* by Francesco Providoni
Source: made by the author.



Image showing the installation of the *Christ aux Limbes*.
Source: made by the author.



Image showing the guided tour through the *Drôle de Collection* itinerary.
Source: created by the author.



Image showing the installation of the Jacques-Louis David's plaque *La Femme mal Dressée*.
Source: created by the author.



Image showing the installation of the *Grand Groupe Rustique* sculpture.
Source: created by the author.



Image showing the guided tour through the *Drôle de Collection* itinerary.
Source: created by the author.



Image showing the installation of the *Pichet Antropomorphe*.
Source: created by the author.



Image showing the installation of the Jean Veber's artwork *Luna Park*.
Source: created by the author.



Image showing the installation of the Alexandre Bigot's artwork.
Source: created by the author.

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