

# Frederick Kiesler: Lost in History



Frederick Kiesler: Lost in History  
*Art of this Century* and the Modern Art Gallery

By

Shirley Haines-Cooke

**CAMBRIDGE  
SCHOLARS**

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P U B L I S H I N G

Frederick Kiesler: Lost in History *Art of this Century* and the Modern Art Gallery,  
by Shirley Haines-Cooke

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# INTRODUCTION

"No one has ever forgotten that marvelous place where sculptures hung in mid-air and paintings leaped out at you on invisible arms from the walls, where miniature pictures revolved in peepshow cabinets, where Marcel Duchamp displayed his life's work in a suitcase, tables became chairs, and chairs became pedestals".<sup>1</sup>

The material for the book was taken from the 2006 thesis, *Frederick Kiesler's Art of This Century, New York, 1942-1947, in the Context of the Twentieth Century Art Museum*.

The first objective of the research was to establish why so few people remember *Art of This Century*, a comment made to Kiesler by Thomas Creighton in July 1961. Peggy Guggenheim's ruthless decision to close *Art of This Century*, after only five years in 1947, not surprisingly caused Kiesler to express an element of resentment towards Peggy Guggenheim, as he recounted all that he had achieved for her in such a short period. A second aim was to investigate why there has been little or no research carried out into *Art of This Century*, when it was clearly acknowledged as a work of art in its own right at the time of opening in 1942. Indeed, Thomas Krens, the present global director of the Guggenheim Foundation stated in 2004 that:

Peggy Guggenheim's museum/gallery *Art of This Century*, and its exhibitions are routinely included among significant factors in the 1940s New York scene, but there has been little research to substantiate or document this, and there is even a risk that such ill-charted terrain may slip into oblivion.

Such a comment raises serious questions as to why it has taken the Guggenheim Foundation, under the direction of Krens, over half a century to instigate its own research. More importantly, why has

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<sup>1</sup> Weld, Jacqueline B. 1988. *Peggy the Wayward Guggenheim*. New York Dutton Publishers, p. 360

the Guggenheim Foundation not previously acknowledged the invaluable contribution that Kiesler's designs for *Art of This Century* clearly made towards the development of the twentieth century art museum? If it had not been for the dedication of Frederick's second wife, Lillian Kiesler, the select but relatively small representation of his work would have been irretrievably lost to posterity, and would not now be situated in the Kiesler Foundation archive in Vienna.

Indeed, Kren's comment shows scant regard for the vital role that Kiesler played in the success of the project, which was often contentious and by no means the meaningful collaborative project that is claimed by the two Foundations. It would appear that once the monograph, *The Story of Art of This Century* was produced in 2004, following two retrospective exhibitions held in Frankfurt and Venice,<sup>2</sup> there was little else to discover with regard to *Art of This Century*. Considering that the majority of contributors were directly or indirectly associated with the Guggenheim or Kiesler Foundations, clearly suggests that there was indeed a call for a more critical investigation into why so little is known about such a unique gallery project.

Much of the research has had to be extracted from secondary sources, because firstly, *Art of This Century* no longer exists. Secondly, at the start of the research no archival material was available from the Guggenheim Foundation. Indeed, any enquiry was met with little or no response. Access was however available at the Kiesler Foundation, but it was somewhat limited, because it had only been open since 1997, and much of the material and contents from *Art of This Century* no longer exists as it was either given away, or discarded by Peggy Guggenheim in 1947. The lack of biographical information on Kiesler has resulted in many of the references being extracted from the wide range of biographies written on Peggy Guggenheim.

The book is divided into four parts, each of which consists of individual chapters that form an historical pathway from the inception of the art museum, through to Kiesler's early life and work, and his contemporaries who might or might not have influenced his eclectic and diverse multidisciplinary *oeuvre*. This

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<sup>2</sup> *Frederick Kiesler, a Guest in the Museum of Modern Art*, held in Frankfurt/Main, 2002. *The Collector and the Visionary*, held at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection Venice, 2003-2004



leads into the central and most important section of the book, which is devoted to an in-depth account of *Art of This Century* from 1942-1947. Finally, Kiesler's work is examined in a late twentieth and twenty-first century context in order to illustrate how his innovative theoretical concepts and revolutionary designs were not only out of his *zeitgeist*, but have influenced today's architects.

Part 1 consists of two chapters. Chapter One lays the foundation of the work in its exploration of the development of the modern museum. This is carried out through the examination of selected definitions and interpretations of the term *museum*, written by commentators writing from specific historical periods, in order to provide an overview of how over time the concept of the museum has expanded and changed. It commences with texts on the classical third century Ptolemaic Mouseion in Alexandria, and continues through sixteenth century Renaissance Italy, the eighteenth century Enlightenment period and the nineteenth century. It concludes with selected texts on Foucault's twentieth century concept of *epistemes* and the notion that today anything can be interpreted as a museum.<sup>3</sup>

In the context of politics within the museum environment, a second section considers to what extent the critic and the curator have exerted their power to determine the function and taxonomy of the art museum. The power of display is looked at from the perspective of the framing of visual arts, and the notion of the museum as a conceptual frame. This provides a premise for the later discussion on Kiesler's concept of the elimination of the frame in his designs for *Art of This Century*.

Chapter Two addresses the emergence of the twentieth century modern art museum at the time that Kiesler was working in New York. The Museum of Modern Art is used as a case study to ascertain to what extent art movements, and styles such as Modernism were a catalyst for its evolution. The Museum's first director Alfred H. Barr Jr's famous method of hanging paintings is also discussed, because it not only maps out his interpretation of modern art, which is today seen as a contentious issue, but he was also closely associated with both Peggy Guggenheim and Kiesler.

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<sup>3</sup> Hooper Greenhill, Eilean, 1992. "What is a Museum?" in *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, London, Routledge, p. 1

The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright from 1943 to 1959 is put forward as a second case study, because Wright's design for the Guggenheim was one of the first examples of the architectural design of a museum building that took precedence over its function as a repository for art. It also focuses on how conflict can emerge between a powerful patron and a renowned architect, during the planning and execution of an art museum project. It also looks at the adverse reaction of artists to what they perceived as a gallery design that was not conducive to the displaying of their art.

Within a national context the final section looks at the external political control of twentieth century museums in order to identify the dilemma that art museums face in a climate of restricted funding and limited planning vision. From a global perspective it looks at how leading art museum organisations, such as the Guggenheim Foundation, have commissioned internationally renowned architects to design their art museum projects as mechanisms for economic growth and urban regeneration, rather than cultural establishments for the viewing of art.

Part 2, consists of a descriptive and biographical account of Kiesler's life and work from 1890 to 1942. The topics addressed in Chapter Three are first, an overview of Kiesler's life, and asks to what extent Kiesler introduced his notion of *Gesamtkunstwerk* into his early multidisciplinary *oeuvre* of theatre designs and commercial displays. The second is an analysis of his early work, leading up to the period when he started formulating his ideas for his manifesto, *Correalism and Biotechnique*, in 1937. The third, seeks to establish whether Kiesler's association with selected, contemporary architectural theorists, and architects, such as Adolf Loos, Theo van Doesburg, Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright might have influenced his career, and whether any comparisons can be drawn in respect of their career structure and development.

This leads into Chapter Four, which consists of a comprehensive and detailed summary of Kiesler's manifesto for building design, entitled *On Correalism and Biotechnique: A Definition of a New Approach to Building Design*, which Kiesler started in 1937 and was published in September 1939.

Chapter Five consists of an overview of selected architecture styles and schools of art, with which Kiesler was associated. This is

carried out to assess the validity of statements made by architectural historians and scholars, who have attempted to place Kiesler's work into a specific milieu. The question is also asked if Kiesler made a definitive shift from his early functional thinking to the Correalist concepts and Surrealist ideas that he incorporated into *Art of This Century*, or whether he retained an eclectic independence throughout his career. Kiesler's involvement with the Surrealist movement and avant-garde artists is examined to see to what extent such an association might have influenced a shift. Kiesler's implementation of his concepts into his designs for *Art of This Century* is addressed in a later chapter.

Part 3 opens with Chapter Six, which lays the foundation for the main body of the work. The first section looks at Peggy Guggenheim's association with leading artists, art historians and collectors, whose advice she sought on her art collecting, and gallery projects, including those who advised her to commission Kiesler to design her *Art of This Century* gallery in 1942. How, and why she chose New York as a location, and *Art of This Century* as the name for the gallery is also addressed. Further questions are asked as to whether a power struggle emerged between Guggenheim, who was renowned for her capricious nature, and Kiesler a reputed egotist, during the planning and execution of the project. Whether *Art of This Century* was a meaningful, albeit brief, collaborative gallery project, as claimed by the Guggenheim and Kiesler Foundations, is also considered.

The second section constitutes the central and critical body of the work, as it seeks to prove that the Correalist and Surrealist ideas that Kiesler incorporated into his designs for *Art of This Century* were a work of art in their own right. Whether Kiesler achieved his objective of creating a unique and distinct exhibition space, in which he implemented his notion of *Gesamtkunstwerk* and his strong belief in the importance of the gallery visitor's participation in the experiencing of art is also addressed. A detailed description of the four individual gallery spaces, Correalist furniture, Surrealist special effect features, and frameless paintings is carried out. Selected press reports and critical commentary that were produced at the time of the opening of *Art of This Century* in 1942 are examined to establish to what extent their comments influenced how the gallery was received and perceived. In the final

section the question is posed as to why Guggenheim should choose to prematurely close her *Art of This Century* gallery in 1947 after only five years, when the new avant-garde Abstract Expressionist artists were making their mark on twentieth century art history. It also examines what effect its closure might have had on Kiesler's long-term recognition.

Chapter Seven considers the shift that took place once the initial publicity had subsided, as Guggenheim focused on using the gallery to carry out her art dealing and promotion of new American avant-garde Abstract Expressionist artists, such as Jackson Pollock. It also looks at why *Art of This Century* is not remembered for the contribution it clearly made towards the dramatic change that evolved in the mid twentieth century modern art world.

Chapter Eight asks what effect the creation of the Kiesler Foundation had on the resurrection of the work of Kiesler, specifically his designs for Guggenheim's *Art of This Century*. It also considers whether the two retrospective exhibitions held in Frankfurt and Venice resulted in a renewed interest in Kiesler's work. An enquiry is also carried out to establish how successful the Kiesler Foundation has been in its attempt to promote Kiesler into Vienna's wider cultural environment, and whether the revival assured Kiesler retrospective recognition in the city in which he claims to have been born.

Part 4 consists of Chapter 9, which brings the work to a close, and a final conclusion.

Chapter Nine is presented in two sections. The first considers Kiesler, the avant-garde architectural theorist in the context of today's installation and display. Whether his ideas provided a catalyst for a more meaningful collaboration between architects and patrons in art museum design and cultural centre projects is also addressed. The second section suggests that a contributory factor why Kiesler's work has not been widely recognised is because his ideas were too revolutionary for their time, and might be better understood in today's milieu of architectural design. This is carried out through a reassessment of his *spiral* design, *endless* and *biomorphic* forms and his frameless paintings, which he saw as a way of encouraging viewers to participate in the *seeing* of art. Case studies of late twentieth and twenty-first century art centres and

museums are used to establish to what degree today's architects have been influenced by Kiesler's multidisciplinary *oeuvre*.



**PART I:**  
**THE POLITICS IN MUSEUM DESIGN**

# CHAPTER ONE

## THE BIRTH OF THE MODERN MUSEUM

### Introduction

This first chapter seeks to show that over time political power has had a significant influence over the development and function of the art museum. A first theme provides an historical overview of selected definitions and interpretations of the term museum, taken from the classical era of the Greek *Mouseion*, the late fifteenth and sixteenth century Italian Renaissance, the Enlightenment period and nineteenth century. Using Foucault's concept of *heterotopias*, a second theme looks at the progression of the twentieth century museum in the context of the claim that any form of public entertainment establishment might be interpreted as a museum.

### 1.1 Selected Views on the Term *Museum*

Scholars have over time put forward their hypotheses on the definition and interpretation of the term *museum*. Peter Vergo, of the University of Essex, argues that:

The origin of the museum can be traced back the Ptolemaic *Mouseion* in Alexandria, which was first and foremost a study collection with library attached, a repository of knowledge, a place of scholars and philosophers and historians.<sup>1</sup>

Edward Alexander, formerly of the University of Delaware, writes that the Latin word *museum* or Greek *Mouseion* has had a

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<sup>1</sup> Vergo, Peter. 1989. *The New Museology*, London Reaktion Books Ltd. Introduction, p. 1



variety of meanings throughout the centuries.<sup>2</sup> He goes on to claim that "the most famous museum of that era was founded at Alexandria in about the third century B.C. by Ptolemy Soter (*Preserver*), but was destroyed during several conflicts in the third century A.D."<sup>3</sup> Ironically, his description of the *Mouseion* as an establishment that displays "statues of thinkers, astronomical and surgical instruments, elephant trunks and animal hides and a botanical and zoological park"<sup>4</sup> is not unlike today's repository for the display of artifacts. However, the *Mouseion's* main function was that of a university or philosophical academy that not only accommodated prominent scholars, but was also supported by the state,<sup>5</sup> indicating an early example of how politics played an integral part in the organisation and taxonomy of the museum.

A further interpretation of the term *museum* is proposed by Craig Judd, education manager of the Sydney Biennale, who claims that the term "is derived from the name given to sacred shrines dedicated to the Muses".<sup>6</sup> He also claims that many museums existed before the collections they were meant to house, and that "with the rise of Christianity, art became associated with cult and ritual".<sup>7</sup>

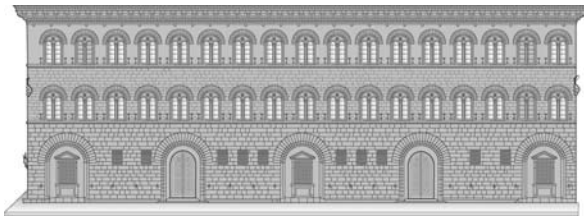


Fig.1-1. *Medici Palace*: Started by Riccardi Michelozzo di Bartolomeo in 1444. Photograph of early sketch

<sup>2</sup> Alexander, Edward P. 1979. "Ancient and Medieval Prototypes", in *Museums in Motion* Nashville, American Association for State and Local History, pp. 6-7

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>6</sup> Judd, Craig. 10/11/2000. *Framing the Museum*, Opening Address, Focus Fest Biennale of Sydney, available at: -[www.Biennaleofsydney.com.au](http://www.Biennaleofsydney.com.au), *op.cit*, p.1.

<sup>7</sup> Judd, *op.cit*. p.3

Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, of the Department of Museum Studies, University of Leicester argues that the first museum in Europe was the fifteenth century Medici Palace in Florence. (Fig.1.1)

She also suggests that "it is cited and celebrated as the identity of origin for European museums and collecting practices",<sup>8</sup> and that the Medici Palace emerged as a status symbol to mark the Medici family's success as wealthy, prestigious merchants.<sup>9</sup> It was undoubtedly one of the first art museums in Europe to promote its political status in Florentine society. However, pertinent to a later theme that discusses how by the mid to late twentieth century, patrons used renowned architects to design their prestigious museum buildings, is that Cosimo de Medici "rejected an ostentatious design by Brunelleschi",<sup>10</sup> in favour of a less elaborate design by the architect Michelozzo, who he had used on other projects, thus showing that his collection was of greater importance than the building.

It is indisputable that during the Renaissance period, political influence on the commissioning of artists by patrons such as the Medici, or indeed the Vatican, was at its height, as illustrated in Hooper-Greenhill's further comment that the Medici Palace constituted both a major political decision and a new form of power.<sup>11</sup> She also argues that:

Families of power like the Medici looked beyond the boundaries of the city-state, in their quest for dominion over nature and their fellow man, when they amassed collections of artifacts and antiquities as well as art, which have more recently become cabinets of curiosity.<sup>12</sup>

In Renaissance Italy there were two types of museum. The gallery or *galleria*, which was a long, well lit, elaborate hall used for exhibiting pictures and sculpture and the cabinet, or *gabinetto*, a square shaped room used to exhibit stuffed animals, botanical

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<sup>8</sup> Hooper-Greenhill, Eilean. 1992. *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, London, Routledge, p. 23

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>10</sup> Hooper-Greenhill, *op.cit.* p. 24

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Vergo, *op.cit.* p. 2

rarities, medallions, statuettes and other artifacts. The equivalent in Germany was the *Wunderkammer*. However, at this time, collections were not open to the public, as they “remained the playthings of princes and plutocrats”.<sup>13</sup>

## Enlightenment

It was not until the late seventeenth century that the museum became a public facility. However, a strong political influence over museums came from universities and the church, which determined that their prime function should be to educate the public through free access to human and scientific creations.



Fig.1-2. *British Museum*, 1753

The first European university museum opened in Basel, 1671. The Oxford Ashmolean followed this in 1683. By the eighteenth century the Vatican established several museums around 1750, and in Britain the British Museum was formed in 1793, as was the Louvre Palace in Paris, which was opened as the Museum of the Republic.<sup>14</sup> (Figs. 1-2 & 1-3)

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>14</sup> Alexander, *op.cit*, p. 8



Fig. 1-3. *Louvre*, 12th-19<sup>th</sup> Century, with *Glass Pyramid* by Ieoh Ming Pei

Over twenty years, Denis Diderot, the eighteenth century *philosophe*, defined and embodied Enlightenment thinking in his thirty volumes of the *Encyclopédie*.<sup>15</sup> In a *dialogue* with his friend Frédéric Melchio Grimm, he commented on the emergence of the Salons as an establishment for the viewing of works of art. According to Diderot scholar, Geoffrey Bremner, “public exhibitions of painting and sculpture were instituted in 1667 by the *Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture* to show works by members of the Academy”.<sup>16</sup> By 1725, regular exhibitions, which became known as *Salons* were established in the Salon Carré in the Louvre. In 1748, biennial exhibitions emerged that Diderot frequented and commented on. However, Tony Bennett, of the Faculty of Humanities, Griffith University, Australia puts forward the notion that the public museum resulted in the French Revolution, because it:

Created conditions of the new truth, a new rationality out of which came a new functionality for a new institution, the public museum.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Bremner Geoffrey. 1994 ‘Introduction’ to *Denis Diderot: Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, London, Penguin Classics, p. ix

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>17</sup> Bennett, Tony. 1995. “The Birth of the Museum”, cited in *The Political Rationality of the Museum*, London, Routledge, p. 92

It is indisputable that over time, the development and function of the museum has been determined by political control. This notion is supported by lecturer in Art History at Ramapo College, New Jersey, Carol Duncan who claims that "art museums have always been compared to older ceremonial monuments such as palaces and temples".<sup>18</sup> Indeed, she goes further in her assertion that specific museums such as Greek Temples and Renaissance palaces can be used as a method of deconstructing museums today.<sup>19</sup> However she also questions the political usefulness of public art museums, and cites the Louvre's transformation of its royal collection into a public art museum by the French Revolutionary Government, as a significant influential and political act.<sup>20</sup>

### Nineteenth Century Art Museums

An indication of global eighteenth and nineteenth century evolution of the modern museum can be seen in the founding of museums such as the Brera in Milan, 1803, the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, 1808 and the Prado, Madrid in 1814.<sup>21</sup> Ernest Gombrich the early twentieth century art historian claims that he regarded Hegel as the father of the history of art, because of his overwhelming influence on the subject, a role that has also been attributed to Winckelmann.<sup>22</sup> Hegel used the Altes Museum, Berlin to study the institutions themselves, their representations of history and the ways their own history is represented.

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<sup>18</sup> Duncan, Carol. 1995. "The Art Museum as Ritual", in *Civilizing Rituals*, London, Routledge p. 7

<sup>19</sup> Duncan, Carol. 1994. "Museum as Ritual in Pearce" Susan M. Pearce, ed. *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, London, Routledge, p. 280.

<sup>20</sup> Duncan, *op.cit.* p. 279

<sup>21</sup> Duncan, *op.cit.* p. 7

<sup>22</sup> Gombrich Ernest. 1977. "Hegel and Art History", E. Lecture, on receiving the Hegel Prize of the City of Stuttgart, Source, handout, BA History of Art module, University of Leeds, 2000



Fig.1-4 *Altes Museum*, Berlin. Coloured etching by Friedrich Thiele, 1839

Art historian, Michaela Giebelhausen also argues that "the Altes Museum occupied a prominent place in Berlin's symbolic geography of power, redrawn to accommodate the civilising rituals of culture".<sup>23</sup> (Fig.1-4) However, pertinent to the later discussion on how today museums are used for urban regeneration, is her further argument that this was not confined to the museum's interior space, but to the wider urban environment.<sup>24</sup>

Theodor Adorno, the early twentieth century German philosopher, social critic and founder of the Frankfurt School, argues that the derivation of the term *museum* is taken from the German word *museal* (museum like), which he argues has "unpleasant overtones".<sup>25</sup> He also describes the museum as an institution where objects no longer have a vital relationship with the observer, and are in the process of dying.<sup>26</sup> The architectural historian, and founding director for the Getty Research Centre, Los Angeles, Kurt Forster claims that "museums emerged as public institutions in the early nineteenth century".<sup>27</sup> He goes on to argue that "although the history of collecting has historically been a

<sup>23</sup> Giebelhausen, Michaela. 2003. "The Most Typical Institution of the Metropolis", in *The Architecture of the Museum*, Manchester, University Press, p. 5

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>25</sup> Adorno, Theodor, W. 1997. In Douglas Crimp, "Valéry Proust Museum", *On the Museum's Ruins*, Cambridge Massachusetts, MIT. Press, p. 44

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>27</sup> Forster, Kurt.W. 2001. "Frank O. Gehry Guggenheim Museum Bilbao", 1991-1997, in *Museums for a New Millennium*, eds. Lampugnani and Sachs, Munich, Prestel, p. 124