

100, 50, 10 . . .

April was a big month in New York for museum birthdays: 100 years for the Metropolitan, 50 years for the Frick, and ten for the Guggenheim. The Met celebrated its centenary with formal hoopla, the Frick marked its half century with quiet dignity, and the Guggenheim put out some of its hidden treasures on its go-go ramp as a salute to its institutional maturity.

Happy birthday to all—and a few thoughts for the start of a second century or a second decade. The art museum idea is actually very young. It was only in the 19th century that private princely treasure houses “went public,” and an affluent middle class in America felt that every city should have its solid marble cultural symbol packed with tangible evidence of esthetic and moral uplift.

Today’s museum experience emphasizes entertainment and esthetic enlightenment through fun and games rather than as the result of toiling up several hundred classical steps and down several hundred miles of classical corridors. Uplift is no longer to be wrested from exhaustion. The key word is education.

And so we have developed sanctuaries and circuses. New York has a superb quota of both.

The rare quality of the Frick is its encompassable beauty and the integrity of its setting. It is a tranquillity of treasures. The Guggenheim is a spiralling river of life where art and action intertwine, often in mortal combat. The Metropolitan is sheer magnificence, an esthetic overreacher.

Art as a private experience between object and viewer is eternal, and so are the collections preserved for public pleasure. But the museum is an institution in turmoil now, as are other institutions. The house museum or personal collection—a Frick, or Morgan Library—keeps its validity, as a kind of cultural time capsule.

Some museums change, and others should change. The Museum of Modern Art is trying valiantly to recapture its catalytic role of the 1930’s and 40’s. And the august Metropolitan feels tremors as questions are raised about its monolithic plans and functions in a city of critically changing social and cultural needs.

Does a museum simply go on adding rooms and riches? Is there not a more complex and subtle and necessary relationship of art and society today? Why is the distance between art and life growing greater? These are the ghosts at the birthday banquets.