Nebraska Wesleyan University

ARH 3000 History of Art Museums

Catalog

2025-2026

Course Description

Art museums are powerful cultural institutions with complex histories. This course examines the history of museums, practices of collecting, and the interpretation of the past through artworks. The course starts by exploring ancient examples of the urge to collect and display objects, from Babylonian exhibitions of archaeological artifacts and Roman imperial displays of looted artworks in public fora to Medieval treasuries of sacred relics. We will then consider the earliest manifestation of the art museum as we know it today, the Wunderkammern-cabinets of wonders, featuring artworks alongside curious animal, mineral, and vegetal objects. The course will then examine, in depth, the emergence of the "encyclopedic" museum model during the Enlightenment, as well as its problematic roots in colonial enterprises, despoiling archaeological pursuits, and outright looting. Throughout the course, we will critically evaluate the missions of museums as public institutions, their role in defining cultural identities, and the legitimacy of their claims of ownership for artworks acquired in surreptitious circumstances.

Archway Curriculum: Essential Connections: Writing Instructive
Archway Curriculum: Foundational Literacies: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion – Global
Archway Curriculum: Integrative Core: Power Thread

Course Hours

4 hours

Departments

1. Art