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What is a Museum?

> A "Museum" in the American sense of the word means a place of amusement, wherein there shall be a theatre, some wax figures, a giant and a dwarf or two, a jumble of pictures, and a few live snakes. In order that there may be some excuse for the use of the word, there is in most instances a collection of stuffed birds, a few preserved animals, and a stock of oddly assorted and very dubitable curiosities; but the mainstay of the "Museum" is the "live art" that is, the theatrical performance, the precocious mannikins [*sic*], or the intellectual dogs and monkeys.
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> *(Ward 1997 n.p.)*

In defining museums, several characteristics blend, but having a permanent collection of things original to a museum's subject is what makes them unique. Indeed, as far as I'm concerned, getting and keeping stuff for the long term is the only assignment that, in the final analysis, ultimately sets museums apart from any other human invention, endeavor, or function. Everything else museums do, be it teaching, hosting parties, running retail operations, organizing travel tours, presenting exhibitions, developing real estate ventures, selling art and antiques, and so forth, is also done by other organizations, institutions, agencies, and businesses. Acquiring, maintaining, and holding original physical evidence of the human and natural world in perpetuity for evidential reasons makes museums singular.

By a "permanent collection" I mean the material museums acquire in a deliberative process that results in items being accessioned (numbered) and held with every intention of being around forever – for the long haul – until death do us part – 'til the end of time – not for the moment, etc., etc., etc. The concept is odd, no? Is it any wonder that museums range from being magnets for the magical, warehouses of wow, accumulators of the actual, to packrats of property or dumping grounds for things intended for the scrapheap?

Conceiving and causing a permanent collection covers a variety of intentions, disciplines, practices, and motivations. Thus there are museums for an

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astonishing (some might say alarming) mix of subjects, topics, stories, and reasons. In practice it is the permanent collection that defines all. One could say: No collection, no museum.

Size and quality are not determining factors when defining a museum, at least insofar as having a permanent collection is concerned. Museums may consist of one item or zillions. The content may be considered superb or laughable. The collection may be well-cataloged, stored, understood, cared for, and used, or not. I know of highly reputable museums, even some accredited by the American Alliance of Museums, that are remiss in aspects of collection stewardship while I am also aware of little-known museums that provide excellent coverage for collections. It is the fact of a collection that counts.

I should note that in requiring a museum to have a permanent collection I am not differentiating between museum typology, magnitude, name-identity, ownership, or governance status. Whether government, private, corporate, or individually owned, be it an art, science, or history museum, or an amalgam such as a children's museum, having a permanent collection is the common thread they share in both concept and reality. Thus we see, literally, permanent collections of art, scientific specimens, and historic artifacts acquired and held by places that may call themselves museums, galleries, historical societies, collections, and foundations. We also see such titles applied to places that do not collect. Whatever the case, names do not matter when it comes to museums. To emphasize my point, it is the existence of a permanent collection that in the end differentiates real museums from those desirous of the status but not the duty deserving it.

Not incidentally, I am limiting my discussion of permanent collections to non-living things such as chairs, guns, clothes, skeletons, paintings, boats, rocks, dead bugs, radios, silverware, and so on. I am avoiding so-called living collections that are found in zoos, aquaria, and botanical gardens. There is a reason these endeavors do not refer to themselves as museums, by the way, and the idea of a permanent collection that has longevity is one of them.

So – what is the role of the permanent collection in and for a museum? Why have stuff? Museum collecting is based on an assumption that providing meaningful proof of and about some aspect or aspects of the human and natural universe we all inhabit together has merit. Psychologists are more equipped to investigate in depth the human nature of this notion but the fact that there are so many museums suggests it has credence. Museums are a (*the?*) designated place for us to selectively use and engage with things intellectually and emotionally for enjoyment, contemplation, celebration, enlightenment, discovery, entertainment, knowledge, and understanding. Whether or not these were motivating factors for inventing museums, they are operating realities today.

For permanent collections to have value in both the long and the short run, we must think they hold bona fide intrinsic veracity values. Most museums have a pretty good idea about what their collections mean to them, but

evaluation must be ongoing, reaffirmed, and continually assessed. Generally speaking, collections must be original to a subject being explained or explored. This is why most museums usually avoid accessioning reproductions or copies. They might use them in exhibitions or for educational purposes but it is the original object that usually gets an accession number.

Thus, what is held by a museum must be content-specific. Things should not be randomly brought in. They must be acquired for their evidentiary power and meaning. Museums exist because of the belief and feeling that tangible items have informational, emotional, and psychological stature. That belief and sense is at once visceral and actual. It can be proven or implied or a little of both. In these capacities collections are the dialectic of a museum.

I liked the concept that the two opposite sides of the brain were markedly different, with the right side being visceral, intuitive, and nonverbal while the left side was logical, verbal, and rational. I could explain that initially and in the blink of an eye, the right zone might dominant as people first optically responded to whatever physical matter engaged them in museums. Then the left zone was involved as the literate side of the brain kicked in to sort things out. This cranial ping-pong game was happening at warp speed in museum visitors' minds as they navigated, absorbed, and explored what they found themselves in the midst of, which they were told was a material world of meaning. That meaning evolves out of what visitors know when they come to a museum and what museum workers try to convey via their stock in trade (the collection) through and with which they attempt explanations.

Museum employees are the interlocutors who decide what a museum will own and why, and how its possessions will be used. Museum audiences, however one defines them, are the end-users of museums. In application they are the ultimate recipients of what museums hope gives worth to being in them. Moreover, museums want a visit to have a long afterlife. The magnitude and depth of museum meaning happens in and through the orchestrated and highly concocted public information forum called an exhibition, which relies on presumed and desired connections between objects and people.

Though the public may be the ultimate beneficiary of museums, mainly through the medium of the exhibition, most visitors have little immediately direct influence on what they see, how it is presented, and why. These duties all rest with museum staff – and only a handful at that. From the outside there is an assumption that those responsible for acquiring collections, caring for them, conducting research, and enabling exhibitions and education do so with the best interests of the public at heart. For the most part I suspect this is the case as it is verified over the long term by how little changes in the collection arena of the vast majority of museums. We may hear about museum deaccessioning these days but the bulk of what museums have remains in them, at least for now. It is this retention-longevity that supports voiced arguments and assumed thoughts regarding the impact and importance of permanent collections.

Museums claim to be places of truth. Whose truth is a matter of conjecture and opinion, but whatever the circumstances, meaningful museums rely on objects original to the subject for which the institutions were established as sources of information. When an object is acquired, studied, put on display, and published, dutiful museums at least strive to present facts regarding the object itself: "The public has a right to believe what it reads in a museum label" (Thompson 2014).

How objects are used in the larger context of museum interpretations will vary and be quite subjective, but the veracity of individual collection pieces is essential regardless of their applications. That is one reason museums avoid and are quite sensitive to fakes, frauds, and phonies when it comes to collections. It is why matters of provenance, condition, behavior, and employee ethics is of paramount concern, or should be.

Collections connect us to people, places, epochs, ideas, events, theories, accomplishments, conundrums, you name it. We know George Washington was a historic figure, but we know he was a real person when we visit his home, Mount Vernon. We are told Leonardo was a great painter, but we know it when we see his original art. We believe dinosaurs lived once but are convinced of that when we see their bones.

I have often wondered why museums came to exist when they did. After all, for thousands of years humans were content to exist without them. The reasons are several and revealing. They grew out of the age of Enlightenment, of exploration and cheap, often bawdy, entertainment. As European inventions they reflected what was happening in that part of the world during a time of great intellectual ferment, turmoil, and theatre. To a degree, science led the charge as evidence of newly "discovered" continents became the stuff of Cabinets of Curiosities in the palaces of royalty and a newly rich merchant class. Research was the purview of rigorous academic institutions and approaches to learning. But art, which has always been available to the masses in places of worship, for instance, started being seen elsewhere in abundance. Evidence of history was largely visible in the built environment and religious relics. The museum as a popular place of common entertainment was perhaps best personified in P.T. Barnum's mid-nineteenth-century museum at Broadway and Ann Street in New York City.

In addition to the origins briefly cited above for the mainstream sorts of museums we are familiar with today, ideas for art and history museums also emerged from idiosyncratic private and ecclesiastical collections not contained in personal cabinets. The thought that all these treasures should also be made available to the general public, perhaps even in a nonsectarian, nonpolitical, "neutral" environment, flows from concepts of democracy, public education, and equality of access that especially evolved in the nineteenth century. Supporting the idea of museums as places for people to come together of their own free will and in a collegial manner was the argument that museums would

have educational value, especially for the "masses." America's creation of an unprecedented public education system influenced the notion of the museum as a locus of learning. So strong was and is this concept that museums in the United States continue to be in the global vanguard insofar as broad-based teaching is concerned.

I suggest that in addition to the customarily referenced causes of museums, it is no coincidence that they developed at the same time that humans were creating methods for physical destruction more devastating than ever before and making irreversible social, cultural, environmental, demographic, and political changes. Saving what was being lost or seriously altered became, if not the original or main mandate for museums, something that they either quickly championed or had thrust upon them. Natural history museums have been especially noteworthy in this regard.

I define a museum as a public service preservation organization that explains subjects through objects. Let me dismantle this.

The public service aspect of museums may be obvious and a given, but that is not always the case. Public service, in my opinion, means public access and public governance. The effectiveness of public service starts at the top of a museum's human hierarchy with a governing structure at least purportedly accountable to the general populace. In the United States this would be a museum board of trustees. In other countries it might be a government, organized religion, or private owner. Of course, public governance does not necessarily translate into public transparency. Museums can be quite secretive about their inner workings. Just ask for salary information for all positions. Programmatically, though, the concept of museums existing for some common good is generally apparent from the outside. It is seen in collection acquisition, care, access, education offerings, security, and operational professionalism.

Once a museum has been founded to explain a subject, be it in the arts, history, or sciences, it needs the requisite evidence to support its job of explaining. Things are acquired with this idea in mind, and those things evolve into collections. When well and judiciously assembled, these collections take on a permanency as proof. They become, to an extent, inviolate public treasures devoted to the service of learning, discovery, reassurance, celebration, study, and memory.

The idea of a museum as an organization is worth considering in all its manifestations. Most museums, even tiny ones, have some sort of organizational structure. The nature and quality of that structure will vary. In small institutions it may be largely on a governance level. There are very many little museums in the United States, many of them so small that it is not unusual for them to have more trustees than paid staff. There is nothing amiss in this. Fortunately, as a result of the rise in more defined and rigorous professions within the museum field, there is a heightened awareness of how things should be accomplished, be they "best practices" or headed in that direction.

Increased professional standards have slowly caused improved functions for museums as organizations. Let us hope this continues.

The preservation duty contained in my museum definition is central to what a museum does. It sets these places apart from other endeavors that might traffic in or focus on physical stuff. The preservation imperative they have declared for themselves, and ceaselessly postulated over the years, hinges on my concept of museums as places that use objects for educative purposes. It is this decision that causes the fact of the permanent collection. Whether realistic or not, it is the concept of permanence that causes the responsibility of preservation.

The role of objects in museums is accepted as an ordinary fact of life for most people. Museums = things. For some wonky reason there are a few heretics in the museum field who have trouble with this notion. They suggest that objects are not all that important to museums and indeed museums might even be better off without them or at least without making such a fuss over them. Oh for heaven's sake! If you don't like objects and the prominent role they are given in museums, go into another line of work, preferably far outside the museum field.

Like it or not, museum collections can have a sanctity that is almost spiritual in effect. We simply need only think about how tragic events such as collection theft, loss in war, destruction by natural causes, and so forth, are lamented. Whether such a focus on material goods has merit can be debated, but for the moment museums, at least as they exist in the democratized world, have the upper hand. If and how they will continue to believe in the importance of the tactile and tangible remains to be seen. For now, museums will continue to lead in the emotional, pedagogical, and cultural elevation of objects to positions of shared societal meaning – even if and when parts of a society have no idea, or care, what that meaning might be. Museums are held in such regard that the concept of the permanent collection requires holding it, in bulk, as some sort of common DNA for anyone to connect to. Preservation is not a maybe.

I divide museums into three types: science, art, and history. Occasionally there are blends. As places of learning my museum types pursue widely divergent paths that rarely seem to cross. This begins with the training, interests, and academic background required for curators of these institutions. As the intellectual soul of a museum, curators must be the experts, specialists, and core knowledge people about the subject embraced by their place of work and the objects collected to explain that subject. Consequently, their career trajectories are quite specific when it comes to fields of interest. Fine art curators will rarely have science backgrounds. Science curators will rarely have history backgrounds. And history curators will have minimal fine (especially studio) art backgrounds. There are exceptions to be sure, but for the most part division is the rule. I do not see this as a difficulty, by the way.

Most museums in the United States are private and unaffiliated with other entities or government bodies. They are institutions governed by a board of trustees of some sort. They usually own the physical structures and the land they occupy as well as the collections and other contents. There are also quite a few government owned and operated museums. These can be found on a federal, state, and local level. Obvious federally operated museums are those of the Smithsonian Institution and the National Parks Service. At the state level can be found state museums and historic sites. Local governments often own or support regionally valued buildings and museums, as might be the case with a county museum. Cities own museums or have quasi-ownership support arrangements. This is the case with the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which though private is on city property, and part of the annual budget is contributed by the City of New York.

What I call subsidiary museums are those owned by larger private entities. This is the case with college and university museums. They can also be art, science, or history types. The country is full of them, and many are excellent. My favorite is the one at the University of Pennsylvania. It specializes in archaeology and anthropology and has absolutely fascinating collections. A drawback to these museums is the fact that they are not under the watchful eye of a governance structure solely and exclusively legally devoted to their well-being. Oh they might have boards of advisors, visiting committees, or departments that look after them, but these groups generally have no meaningful independent binding authority responsible for the museum. The downside of such situations was dramatically exposed in the case of the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts, which was nearly eviscerated by the university's board of trustees in a desperate attempt to raise much-needed operating funds for the school. The art in the museum was discovered to be quite valuable on the open market and its sale was pursued. Fortunately saner heads prevailed and no art was lost – but that has not been the case in other such museums.

Occasionally museums will be created and owned by commercial businesses. The subject of the museum may or may not be connected to the purpose of the business. These are rare and rarely survive for long. Inevitably new management takes over the owning business and decides operating a museum is totally outside the company's financial interests. The collections are sold or otherwise dispersed and that's the end of that. A wonderful exception to this reality is the Corning Museum of Glass in Corning, New York, which, while a private, nonprofit entity, receives significant support from the Corning glass company. Museums owned by individuals are also brief in their private existence, though they can morph into the customary not-for-profit publicly oriented museum structure reflecting my definition of a museum.

Regardless of the type, subject, contents, budget, size, or location of a museum, when people enter they should have a sense they are about to experience

something they would not otherwise in their daily lives. I think this is usually the case, but it requires emphasizing for several reasons. Certainly the old stereotypical art museums immediately declared this idea with their temple-like facades and grand stairs leading up and into them. You walked – transitioned – from your everyday world to another world. There is no question that smaller and other kinds of museums can to a degree replicate such a feeling.

For several decades we in the museum field have heard noise from some colleagues that we must make museums more user-friendly, easy to access, less intimidating, and so on. Frankly I think they are already user-friendly and easy to access. As for intimidating, I feel that when I'm in an airplane, see a cop car on the highway as I'm driving, or walk into a casino. Lots of places and situations are intimidating for some. I am ill-prepared to judge the intimidation factor of a museum, but considering the millions who visit them every year, they can't be too off-putting. What might be considered intimidating might also be considered the awe factor we feel as we enter some museums. Or, maybe it is the curiosity factor. I have long held that if people were not curious museums would not exist.

"We live in an age without memory – this makes museums even more important" (Salman Rushdie, Keynote Speech at the American Association of Museum's Annual Meeting, Chicago, May 2007, from the author's notes).

Class Questions: Beginning of First Class

1. Why do you want to work in a museum?
2. What is a museum for, and why?
3. Do museums deal with truths, and if so, what might those truths be?
4. What are your favorite kinds of museum?
5. What are your least favorite kinds of museum?
6. What sort of museum would you like to work in?
7. Do you want to work in a big city, suburb, town, or rural area?
8. Would you prefer to work in a large or small museum?
9. Of the museum disciplines with which you are familiar (administration, curation, education, security, conservation, fundraising, etc.), which ones appeal to you most? What skills and abilities might you need for each?

10 What do your family, friends, significant others think of your wanting to work in a museum?

11 How do you keep current with what is happening in the museum field?

12 Is there a legal definition of a museum?

13 Are you a member of a museum?

14 Have you ever donated anything to a museum for its collection?

References

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