

## **The Social Role of Museums**

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Yeong-wol Museum Forum (08/31/13)

### **INTRODUCTION**

Because they hold and display some of the oldest items on earth, it is frequently assumed that museums have been around since time began. However, the museum, as we have come to know it, is a surprisingly modern development of western civilization. The British Museum, perhaps the first institution that would qualify as a true museum by today's standards, was established in 1753. Since then, many varieties of museums have come to occupy places of prominence in culture throughout the world. Museums now provide opportunities for research, education and entertainment to vast audiences, and are considered essential elements in modern societies.

### **The Museum in Society**

The earliest civilizations on our planet were avid collectors. Ancient Egyptians deposited artifacts and treasured items, along with the mummified remains of their leaders, and their leaders' family members, servants, and slaves in giant pyramids. Similarly, the Woodlands cultures in North American Great Lakes region buried thousands of artifacts along with their dead leaders and warriors in huge earthen mounds. About the same time, a Chinese emperor carefully placed hundreds of

thousands of artifacts, along with carefully crafted statues of his entire army, in caves near the present city of Xian. None of these great collections, however, would classify as a modern museum. While they were indeed established on a not-for-profit basis by professionals, they did not display their collections to the public on a regular basis. (We have no way of knowing, in fact, whether the collections were displayed to those inhabiting the afterworld).

Over the past two centuries, the role of the museum in society has evolved to include a significant public service dimension – sometimes to promote the message of the government. After the First World War, the Communist regime in the Soviet Union sought to use the museum to present a new culture “for the people.” The number of museums in the Soviet Union tripled over a 20-year period and artistic, historic and scientific achievements were displayed in a manner to reflect the progress brought about by the revolution of 1917. Similarly, in Germany between World War I and World War II regional museums were created to promote nationalism, with a focus on the lives of great figures. While museums were not organized as a national force in the United States at this time, there did exist a desire to present a comprehensive and orderly explanation of the American past. And, unlike efforts in Europe, major museum enterprises in the United States were largely supported through private patronage.

In recent decades, display and interpretation have gained prominence as museums seek to attract larger public audiences and secure financial support from governmental and private sources. Following the devastation of World War II, European museums re-focused on serving the public. There was a notable shift from serving the scholar to attracting a large public audience, and Western European governments were quick to recognize the benefits of tourism generated by museums, and its impact on the national economies.

In the United States, the experience was similar. The number of museums grew dramatically after World War II. By 1988, there were 8,200 museums, 75 percent of which were founded in the decades since 1950. Today, the American Alliance of Museums counts over 17,000 museums. This includes museums devoted to history, art and science as well as numerous halls of fame (commemorating everything from baseball to bowling), zoos, historic houses and structures, and various visitor centers. With the increase in the number of museums, visitation has increased as well: from 350,000 visitors in 1970, to 556,000 in 1988. It is currently estimated that nearly one billion visitors set foot in a museum somewhere in the United States each year.

The growth in the number of museums in the western industrialized countries has not yet been replicated in the developing nations of the world. Two thirds of the worlds museums remain located are located in industrialized countries where there exists one museum for every 50,000 inhabitants. By contrast, in nations such as India and Nigeria, there is only one museum for every 1.5 million.

While the number of museums has significantly increased, many institutions have also grown in size and complexity. Professional standards are now implemented and international cooperation achieved through organizations such as the International Committee on Museums (ICOM) is wide spread. The digital age adds a new dimension, as well as many challenges.

Museums have become big business. They generate billions of tourist dollars while trying to hold fast to a mission that includes research, conservation and education. How to maintain and enhance their central role as a resource for education and research, while using their collections to provide education and entertainment to a wide public, will be a challenge for modern museums in the decades ahead. Visitor engagement and participation are changing the nature of museums in ways that are not always complementary to the museums core mission. In some cases, venerable museums have become trendy community centers with a

focus on amenities. This rush to adapt to new trends and technologies to “activate” the museum may actually be making these revered institutions too much alike.

Meanwhile, museums are facing increased competition for their audience from new technology and media. Sometimes museums actually seem to be competing with themselves, as the public can access the museum’s exhibits and collections on highly sophisticated websites. Cable television provides us with The History channel, The National Geographic channel and other educational resources almost 24 hours a day. In the United States, public television specials and the remarkable CSPAN channel often provide museum experiences, including behind the scenes tours with curators and educators.

### **Society and the Museum**

Today’s museums face challenges from within their own societies. Political, ideological and philanthropic leaders frequently seek to advance a personal or governmental agenda. Sociopathic or fanatical governments have implemented radical agendas aimed at obliterating all history and art viewed as anti-revolutionary or obscene or heretical. The destruction by the Taliban of Buddhist shrines in Afghanistan is a notable example. Political chaos can threaten national treasures. The residents of Baghdad sacked their own great museums and cultural

treasurers of Iraq following the overthrow of the Saddam Hussein regime, and presented a case study of a society “acting out” as a result of decades of pent up hostility. It seems that in today’s world, angry or disgruntled citizens can be a greatest threat to the heritage of their own society than outside invaders. Unbridled development in rapidly industrializing countries also threatens historic, artistic and archeological cultural treasures. Even in stable democracies, politicians frequently insist on a certain politically correct point of view in museum exhibits.

The Smithsonian Air and Space Museum’s Enola Gay exhibit presents a classic case. This 1995 exhibit, featuring the aircraft that dropped the atomic bomb on the Japanese city of Hiroshima in August of 1945, dealt with an extraordinarily controversial subject and brought into conflict irreconcilable elements of American and Japanese society, including museum experts, historians, veterans groups, members of the U.S. Congress, the public and the news media. The controversy involved the most fundamental questions faced by a museum administration in a modern society.

- Does the museum celebrate, commemorate or examine past events?
- To what extent should an exhibit be politically correct at the expense of accuracy?

- Who makes the final determination in resolving these fundamental questions?

The issue the Smithsonian leadership confronted in 1995 was whether or not a nation's history can be openly and critically presented or whether political pressure and donor anxieties can censor solid interpretation and encourage a false understanding of the past.

How society will provide adequate funding from public and private sources for museum programs offers a new challenge in a time of economic stagnation. Public funding (direct or indirect) is absolutely essential to any museum. However, modern societies sometimes appear more concerned about spending on law enforcement, prisons and national defense (presumably to protect a nation's culture and heritage) than maintaining the institutions that actually house, preserve and interpret that heritage.

In the United States, museums depend on government support at all levels, federal, state and local. This includes tax revenue and private donations supported by generous tax breaks to wealthy donors. Remarkably, while governments can't identify the money needed to pay the modest salaries of firefighters, nurses,

teachers and policemen, there appear to be ever increasing super rich buyers for works of art selling at outlandish prices.

Museums across the United States have cut hours, staffing, salaries, programming and hours of operation. Some, in desperation, have sought to sell collection items. The Detroit Institute of Art saw its budget reduced from \$34,000,000 in 2008 to \$24,000,000 in 2013. Even with a regional museum tax to help cover its operations, this museum faces the prospect of selling major works of art to cover operating expenses. It is only one of thousands of museums facing financial distress. Among the well known museums selling collections to cover their operating expenses and debts are such prominent institutions as the Western Reserve Historical Society, Brandeis University, Fisk University and the New Jersey Historical Society. The Field Museum in Chicago recently sold more than \$15,000,000 in George Catlin paintings to cover debts.

Clearly, in the United States and in developed nations, wealth is now more concentrated than at any time in the past century. Yet, there is no way charitable giving, at least in the United States, can come anywhere near making up for declining governmental support. In the United States, nearly all charitable giving to museums is provided by the three percent of the wealthiest households, with a



few in the category of the super-rich making multimillion dollar contributions. Increasingly, these major private donors hold great influence and seem intent on supporting specific objectives rather than providing general support for the mission and good intentions of the institutions. According to the Council on Foundations, today's benefactors are fond of providing funding for "systematic change," the elimination of "structural barriers," empowering "disadvantaged elements of society", and addressing "accountability and governance".

Current private donors, like governments (local, state and federal), seem especially intent on securing measurable results. The emphasis on measurable results or metrics seems to have placed an unreasonable attention on accountability.

Governments and private donors are driven to look for measurable financial returns, increased visitation by minority groups, or greater attendance from certain school groups. While some of these objectives may be worthy goals, the metrics do not reflect realities in a society with high unemployment, single parents working two or three jobs and schools intent on improving scores on standardized tests.

Traditional funders are often dazzled by the latest fads, while neglecting an institution's fundamental needs and its contributions to society's overall well being.

## **21<sup>st</sup> Century Challenges**

As we move into the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, museum leaders will be forced to strive with ever greater resolve to convince the leaders in their respective societies of the value of the museum's core mission.

The current fascination of society's political and philanthropic leadership with numbers and metrics threatens to move museums away from their core enterprises of collecting, preserving and displaying. Just how much time and effort and precious resources should be spent trying to improve attendance figures? Should museums seek to fulfill the wishes and whims of foundation leaders just to secure funding?

In times past, museums did not need to activate "holistic approaches to engagement," or a focus on visitor amenities. Enlightened leaders, both political and philanthropic, understood that museums were "treasure houses, filled with masterpieces meant to outlast the moment of their making, to speak to the universal." (Dobrzynski, Sunday Review, p.7)

As museums struggle to maintain their standards, the public will increasingly find the museum experience outside the hallowed walls of our great cultural institutions, our quaint, little house museums and our trendy science centers. The internet,

social media and cable television are here to stay, and in the years to come, innovations yet undreamed of will become common place. Museums must embrace these developments without becoming driven by them. Museums, after all, have what the electronic media can never possess, the genuine artifact.

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