The End of the Museum?

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Perhaps the first impression one gets from some museums and some writing about museums is that a museum functions much like such other institutions as a house of detention, a house of rehabilitation, or a house of pleasure; or in the vernacular, a jailhouse, a madhouse, or—a teahouse. I am sure you have had days when your own museum seemed like one of these, or even like all three combined.

These comparisons are not altogether facetious. A museum may maintain an elaborate intelligence network to capture the wanted, and a security system to prevent their escape or to protect vulnerable inmates. And by overwhelming popular opinion supported by a distressing number of official statements, a primary function of the museum is to provide the opportunity for a few moments of inconsequent pleasure.

Sometimes, again, the behavior and reports of a museum suggest rather that it is like a professional ball park, where what counts is how many people go through the gates. On the other hand, is it perhaps possible that a museum may be more like a hospital, where what matters is not how many patients enter, but what happens to them while they are there?

To these hit-and-run remarks, let me add a final, somewhat more detailed comparison. A few years ago an old friend of mine, Professor Hans Trublemacher, visited Mars and wrote a report[1] on the sad state of science education there, where, it seems, in many leading institutions education in the sciences is entirely extracurricular and is treated in much the same way as education in the arts in many leading universities on Earth: that is, as a

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way of giving people something to do in their leisure time. Later, Professor Trublemacher made another trip, on the request of the Martians themselves, to evaluate their libraries. I quote from one of his letters:

> Until twenty years ago, the Martians had no libraries. They sent a committee to Earth to survey our libraries here and to set up a like system on their return. But something seems to have gone astray.
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> In a typical Martian library there are no tables, desks, or cubicles, and seldom any chairs except for the guards. There are no open shelves, and no books circulate. In each reading room, certain of the most important books are set out on separate pedestals, against the wall and behind a rail that keeps readers about four feet away, pages being turned by remote control. Frequently, groups of children are led through the room while a docent lectures about the books. In the newer libraries several readers had electronic packets strapped on, and I discovered that these were miniature projectors, rented by the libraries, that flashed a sequence of slides just above the text in the reader's visual field. I could not determine whether the purpose was to make sure the reader had the proper images accompanying the text, or to pace his reading, or merely to give him something to occupy his mind while reading.
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> All in all I found very inspiring the sight of people standing and doggedly reading a book more than an arm's length away, while machines flashed pictures and docents chattered to their charges; but I could understand why the shop at the entrance was doing a brisk business selling small (and of course unreadable) plaster reproductions of some of the more popular volumes.

Now obviously the Martians, from our point of view, had somewhere gotten their antennas crossed. You can't run a library the way they run a library; and you can't run a library the way we run a museum. But the question arises whether you can run a museum the way they run a library—that is, whether you can run a museum the way we run a museum.

Of course, there are at least two obvious differences that make it impossible to run a museum as we run a library: first, that the museum's works can't be circulated or put on open shelves; and second, that while most of those who use a library know how to read, most of those who visit a museum don't know how to see. I'll come back to this later.

These brief comparisons and contrasts may by indirection and negation sidelight or backlight some aspects of what a museum is and is not. But after all you are not, except perhaps on the side, running a jail or a sanatorium or a teahouse or a superdome or a hospital or a library. You are running a museum. What can be said for this cultural curiosity, this institutional monstrosity? Well, some of what *is* said can be found in your annual reports and your appeals, in speeches by officers of arts councils and foundations, and by members of legislative and administrative organs of governments. And to most of what is said, I cry:

Deliver Us from Our Defenders

What you and others say often adds up to something like this: that museums provide a relaxed way of filling up the spare time that advancing technology has given us; that they exert a humanizing influence against the overintellectual, materialistic tenor of our times; that they reduce juvenile delinquency and, by stressing the spiritual, make for moral betterment of citizens and community; and that museums, by attracting tourists, providing jobs, and stimulating the expanding art market, contribute to prosperity.

The case put more or less in these terms has become so familiar that we often forget how hollow it is. All these arguments, of course, are beside the point, and some are simply false. Museums, like theaters, sometimes do provide pleasure for leisure, but what have exhibitions of Goya's *Disasters of War* or Picasso's *Guernica* to do with pleasure? To contend that museums foster our humanity in the face of current intellectual and scientific fervor suggests that what museums do is not intellectual, and that scientific activity is not human. As for moral uplift, there is equal evidence that museums offer outstanding opportunities for vandalism, and promote cupidity and connivance. The only moral effect a museum has on me is a temptation to rob the place. And while museums do attract tourists and stimulate cash flow, that is done better by gambling casinos.

Of course, your arguments are designed for those you must convince: foundations, politicians, chambers of commerce, trustees, and the public. You will hardly be misled yourself by the specious challenge to justify museums in terms of what they, on the contrary, help to justify. Shakespeare's plays and Bach's music—and Einstein's theorems, too—can give pleasure, occupy leisure, elevate character, and contribute to the economy, but quite plainly, that is not the point. The pleasure is incidental. The point of having leisure time, of a decent moral climate, of prosperity beyond basic need, lies in what these can help make possible. The plays, the music, the mathematical physics, and painting and sculpture do not pose the question "why?"; they answer it. To look at it the opposite way is to demean your profession and your institution.

The Museum's Mission

You will have gathered by now that, despite some irreverence, I am thoroughly convinced of the high importance of the museum's mission. What is that mission? We have come closest to it, I think, in the comparison with libraries. Libraries and museums alike collect and preserve works and make them available for public use. Library and museum staffs thus have in their charge enormously powerful agents for transforming ourselves and our

environment. Libraries and museums alike are fundamentally educational rather than recreational institutions.

But we noticed that museums face problems that libraries do not: first, while most users of a library know how to read the books there, many visitors to a museum do not know how to see, or to see in terms of, the works there; and second, the works in a museum must be viewed under severe and stultifying restraints. Unless the museum, despite its handicaps, finds ways of inculcating the ability to see and of aiding and abetting the exercise of that ability, the other functions of the museum will be pointless and its works as dormant as books in an unreadable language or in locked bindings. The museum has to function as an institution for the prevention and cure of blindness in order to make works work. And making works work is the museum's major mission.

That raises four questions. What, more expressly, does it mean for works to work? What are the special obstacles to be surmounted or circumvented? How, despite the obstacles, can works be made to work? And how can you judge the success of your efforts to make them work?

The Work of Works

What we see in a museum may profoundly affect what we see when we leave; and this is as true for nonrepresentational as for representational works. Our worlds are no less powerfully informed by the patterns and feelings of abstract works than by a literal Chardin still-life or an allegorical "Birth of Venus." In the words of *Ways of Worldmaking*, "After we spend an hour or so at one or another exhibition of abstract painting, everything tends to square off into geometric patches or swirl in circles or weave into textural arabesques, to sharpen into black and white or vibrate with new color consonances and dissonances."[2] In turn, what we seen when we leave the museum may appreciably affect what we see when we return.

Works work when by stimulating inquisitive looking, sharpening perception, raising visual intelligence, widening perspectives, bringing out new connections and contrasts, and marking off neglected significant kinds, they participate in the organization and reorganization of experience, and thus in the making and remaking of our worlds. If that sounds grandiloquent, I must insist that I am not romanticizing or rhapsodizing here, not talking of ecstasy or rapture or the miraculous or the visionary, but calling attention to down-to-earth facts abundantly attested by observation, by able writers on art, and by psychological experiment. The myths of the innocent eye, the insular intellect, the mindless emotion, are obsolete. Sensation and perception and feeling and reason are all facets of cognition, and they affect and are affected by each other. Works work when they in-

form vision; *inform* not by supplying information but by *forming* or *re*-forming or *trans*forming vision; vision not as confined to ocular perception but as understanding in general. Clearly, works of science work in this sense, too, and so also do the collections of museums of science and museums of cultural and natural history, as well as the collections of botanical and zoological gardens and of all the institutions that make up this Association. The differences between the arts and the sciences have been, I think, misunderstood and overstressed; outmoded dichotomies have contrasted them in misleading ways and even engendered antagonisms. Museums of different kinds do have some different problems, but their common end is improvement in the comprehension and creation of the worlds we live in.

But a work must not be treated as a mere visual aid for use in seeing what lies beyond it. Equally important is how we see the work, and what we see in it, in terms of a world we build partly in terms of the work. Reverberations from a work may travel in cycles through our everyday environment, other works, and itself, again and again, with ever-changing effect. Works work by interacting with all our experience and all our cognitive processes in the continuing advancement of our understanding.

Obstacles

Even the most able work, however, does not always work. Whether it does or not will depend also upon the capacities and condition of the viewer, and the surroundings and circumstances of the viewing. The museum has to contend with inexperience and ineptness in many viewers, a fixed and formidable environment for viewing, and usually with lack of any mobility or progression or time-value in the work itself. Before we consider what measures may be taken, let me expand briefly on these obstacles.

First, as I have already insisted, what we see in a work and what we take from it depends heavily on what we bring to it: upon relevant experience and skills involved in our looking—upon pertinent visual inquiry. The museum cannot instantly supply the needed experience and competence but must find ways of fostering their acquisition. Audience development is not finished when lines form at the door.

Second, the circumstances for viewing in a museum are at best abnormal and adverse. The viewer cannot handle a work, try it in different lights, put it beside various other works for comparison, take it home, come upon it in a sunbeam reflected from snow, contemplate it in comfort. The floors in a museum will defeat any feet and wrack any back; the distance from turnstile to object you want to see is longer than from airport entrance to your flight; the displays are as if congealed in a glass paperweight, the lighting as unvarying as in summer at the Poles, the oases as scarce as in

Death Valley, and the atmosphere as bristling with prohibitions as in the Pentagon. All this occasions some rather ludicrous behavior. If you thought my comparison of a museum to a home for the mentally deranged far-fetched, where except in these two institutions do you expect to find anyone standing stock-still staring at a wall where nothing is going on? Our justifiable concern over the cost and rarity of works, and the need to protect them from theft and violence and deterioration, have reinforced the inherent tendency of the museum to become a place hostile to the achievement of its own main purpose.

Third, and aggravating the other difficulties, is the timelessness of most works in a museum. Unlike a play or a concert, a painting or sculpture is all there at once. And although a book, too, is all there at once, you start reading on the first page and stop when you reach the last. You can go back if you like, but the difference between going back and going forward is clear. But where do you start and when do you stop looking at a picture? There is no going forward or backward, no beginning and no end. You can take it all in, superficially, at a glance, and the average looking time per viewer per picture viewed must be something under five seconds. Dynamic as a work may be in expression and design, it is physically inert, while the human being is alive and restless. Psychologists have found that what is looked at by the unmoving eye tends to fade out; that change is essential to perception. Somehow, the immutable work and the volatile viewer have to be reconciled. Attention must be held long enough for a work to work.

In sum, your job is to make works work under the worst imaginable conditions—that is, in a museum.

Means and Methods

How, now, can these obstacles described and others be removed, surmounted, neutralized, or evaded? Surely it is not for me, a layman, to tell you, the experts, how to solve problems that you face very day. All I can do is review for your consideration some of the issues, arguments, and possibilities.

On the question of how the viewer can be helped, there are opposing policies. The first is to show a work properly and get out of the way. Keep it free from all encumbrances, all gimmicks, all jabber. Show it well-spaced from other works, with minimal labels and nothing else. The extreme example of this is showing a work in a separate and otherwise empty gallery.

The case for such a policy is strong:

> Supplementary material, whether presented by lengthy labels, gallery talks, or cinema sideshows may distract and mislead, may block the insight a viewer could gain from undisturbed study of the work

> itself. Where nonverbal works are concerned, words are intrusive and nonverbal aids are presumptuous and competitive. In the museum, there should be a direct, unchanneled transaction between viewer and work. One learns to see, not by being told or shown how to look, but by looking. If the viewer will try, and the work is good enough, it will work without help.

The opposite policy is to make available all sorts of help: informative and suggestive labels, pointed juxtapositions in installation, easily accessible photographs and books, live or recorded talks, film and videotapes in adjacent cubicles, and whatever else may hold and guide attention.

The case for this policy is also very strong. Against the director or curator who advocates showing a work in splendid isolation, the argument begins:

> After all, that's not the way you look at a work yourself. You immediately assemble photographs of related works, consult books and articles, see all the comparable works possible (even taking the trouble to visit Europe on a grant), and generally betray your proclaimed principle that all there is in a work can be seen by looking at it apart from all else. If with your experience and skill, you still need informative and comparative material before you, how can you expect the novice and the amateur to do without it? As for the idea that words are an intrusion where nonverbal works are concerned, we need only remember how comment by a Meyer Schapiro[3] can illuminate Cézanne's "Bather." But the development of discrimination requires also presentation by example of some of the subtle differences and covert kinships between works. Much of the looking we learn by is comparative looking. What can be found in a work is intimately involved with other works seen, and with other experience. As no man is an island, neither is any work.

In the face of this conflict between the two policies, what shall we do? Seek further arguments for whichever position we favor? Or compromise? Or vacillate? More to the point, in view of the virtues and vices of each policy—in view of the danger that proffered help may distract and that lack of help may leave the looker lost—what particular means and measures shall we choose?

For dealing with the artificial and uncomfortable conditions for viewing works in a museum, we seem to be restricted to such needed but inadequate measures as carpeting, seating, daylight when possible, and demilitarization of the guards. Security and conservation cannot be sacrificed; we cannot give the viewer free access to the works or lend them to him. What we have to do, therefore, is to find other means of extending the museum's influence beyond the museum building into the more natural setting—of homes and working places.

The commonest device, though often thought of more as a source of revenue than as an educational instrument, is the shop or sales desk. The

visitor's experience in the museum can to some extent be prolonged and enhanced if he can take away photographs, even postcards, and pertinent books. They serve as reminders of what he has seen. The sale of plaster reproductions is much more controversial. The argument for them is that they are substitutes for the originals since the amateur cannot tell the difference, and that they are inexpensive enough to be thrown away when he comes to know better. The contrary view holds that the ready disposability of these imitations is their best feature.

For how can the person with a daily visual diet at home consisting of imitations that lack most of the important qualities of the original ever come to know better? How can discrimination develop when the significant subtle qualities of the genuine works are missing? We might do better to install the imitations beside the originals, where the differences can be seen.

A less frequent response to the problem is the sales and rental gallery where original works can be found to take home. These are not, indeed, the present masterpieces in the museum's collection; but the visitor fresh from seeing those can here apply his newfound excitement and acuity to choosing a work to live with. Surely for the present audience I need not dwell on the enormous growth in understanding that can result from so intimate an acquaintanceship, whether the work wears well or wilts. When the visitor to the museum is motivated to rent or buy an original work, the museum is making its own works work beyond its walls. 'The museum without walls' in my view embraces not reproductions but a wider range of genuine works.

But the sales and rental gallery, and the sales exhibition, may be resisted on the ground that the museum thus dirties its hands with commerce and opens its doors to works of lesser quality, or at least of less well-recognized quality, than those in its collection. Here, I am afraid the evil side of elitism looms. Insistence on excellence in works for the museum, and refusal of all compromise with popular taste, are all to the good; for the muscles of the mind must stretch to be strengthened. But giving the impression that the only works worthwhile are those so rare and costly as to be confined to museums and great collections, that there are no good works that people can own and live with—this is one of the worst effects a museum can have. And when works begin to be produced expressly for museums, we reach a stage of utter perversity. For the museum after all is an anomalous and awkward institution made necessary only by the rarity and vulnerability of works that belong elsewhere.

On the problem presented by the timelessness of works—their being all there all the time—I can be very brief; for many of the means used to help the inexpert viewer may also serve to lengthen looking time. The value of a gallery talk, for instance, may often lie less in the imparting of

information than in the focusing of attention upon a work. But a more effective means may be to initiate inquiry. I suspect that children may not benefit so much from what a teacher tries to tell them in a gallery as, say, from being asked to search the gallery for another work by the same artist as an indicated work. The active inquiry that begins then and continues to a conclusion or a conjecture may well have more effect than does passive gazing. (Incidentally, some interesting research has been done recently on the age when children are first able to relate works by style rather than subject.)[4]

Signs of Success

Finally, how are you to make your decisions concerning principles, policies, and practices, and how can you tell whether you are accomplishing your purpose? Lists of acquisitions, accounts of donations, attendance records, columns of publicity, and number of wings the building has sprouted, speak only of means. But are you making works work?

Unfortunately, there are no crisp and clear tests. There are only signs. As a hospital's success may be gauged by improvement in the physiological and psychological health of its patients and its community, so a museum's success might be judged by the cultural health of its visitors and its community. But cultural health is much less easily judged than organic health. Again, there are only signs, signs that you may seek by asking whether people are buying original works, whether commercial galleries are surviving and what they are handling, whether serious artists are becoming recognized by the public. But the answers are not easy to arrive at and the criteria applied are debatable.

Are you, then, left with the disheartening conclusion that you never will be able to tell how well you are doing? Or can you perhaps, if not measure, at least roughly estimate your success as judged by some such criteria? Alas, even that hope may be clouded by a further problem. Consider a well-known experiment carried out a few years ago by some industrial engineers exploring ways of increasing production in factories. They spent some days in one department improving the lighting—and production immediately went up. But before they wrote into the books the law that better lighting will increase production, one of them had a second thought. He sent a crew into another department to spend some time conspicuously working on the lights but leaving them in the end exactly as they had been before—and production went up. You can predict the results of a third experiment when the lighting was made a little worse. This is the famous Hawthorne effect,[5] also known as the Pink Pill Phenomenon, or the Doctor's Delight. Within limits, whatever you do will succeed, so long as you do, or appear to do, something. While that may sound

comforting, the conclusion that improvement effected constitutes no evidence that you have been making good choices all along is, to say the least, somewhat disappointing.

Luckily, you have other resources: your own experience and the still meager and seemingly remote results of basic research. First, you yourself have been through the process—and are probably still going through the process—of learning how to look at a work, learning what helps and what hinders, and under what circumstances illumination results; and in these learning processes of your own and your colleagues you can seek guidance. Second, theoretical and laboratory research that tells us something of how human beings function in acquiring and exercising skills involved in the understanding of works can help in deciding the means and methods to be adopted in the museum. Basic research can supply no fast and full and final answers, but I am convinced that cooperation between research and practice is as much needed in making works work as in making crops grow—even though the harvest is less easily weighed.

NOTES

1. See Nelson Goodman, *Of Mind and Other Matters* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), pp. 168-72.
2. Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978), pp. 102-107.
3. Meyer Schapiro, *Cézanne* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1952), pp. 68-69.
4. See Howard Gardner, "Style Sensitivity in Children," *Human Development* 15 (1972): 325-38.
5. The Hawthorne effect was first described in Elton Mayo, *Human Problems of Industrial Civilization* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1933), pp. 53-73.