

IT'S THE ARTIFACTS, STUPID!

What is the function of a public museum? Public museums were originally established to collect, store, study, and make available to scholars and the general public objects deemed worthy of preservation. These objects were of many sorts: historical, cultural, (“art” in the broad sense), “natural history” and scientific. These categories are not rigid, and there is great overlap among them; a collection of astronomical images partakes of all four.

Just as a library was thought of as a collection of printed material, museums were thought of as collections of artifacts. In recent years libraries have been forced, by the flood of material inundating them, to resort to microfilm, microfiche, and other bulk storage, for permanent retention, discarding the original print matter. This compressive process has been accompanied by much public controversy. Museums have always had space constraints, but they have never been as oppressed as libraries; no museum in the past has said that it had too many Vermeers, meteorites, or Lincoln memorabilia. But in the past quarter century many natural history museums have felt obligated to move from artifacts, however well displayed, to educational and “popular” presentations, which discount their natural artifacts in favor of artificially generated media experiences.

Originally this movement was well-founded: too many museums had too many dry-as-dust, catalog-type exhibits. Museums had felt that every species of bird that they owned, every kind of meteorite in their inventory, had to be on display, usually with scant explanatory material, or worse, with prosy didactic text that mystified the non-specialist.

To make their exhibits more meaningful to the general public, museums resorted not only to a reconfiguration and a more selective presentation, but also to the use of new technologies. By means of these technologies, not only birds could be shown, but how the bird wing operates; not only the lava, scoria, and ash from a volcano, but how a volcano functions. The museum was becoming more educational, certainly a desirable development. But eventually, with the concentration on the educational media, there came a “realization” that the artifacts themselves could just as well be dispensed with. Who needs an albatross with a six-foot wing span, when a beautiful film strip of the bird skimming the Pacific can be shown instead, perhaps also with the sound of the trade winds? Why show lumps of rock when Kilauea itself can be shown sliding its hissing, red-hot lava into the sea? Why indeed?

Because museums are the repositories where civilizations store their treasures. Because humankind has always preserved artifacts that it deemed important, that it has valued and treasured—things never to be parted with except perhaps as neolithic grave goods. Because that is the basic purpose of a museum: to preserve the artifacts, and to make available to the public as many of them as possible, couched in meaningful public displays.

Why should natural history museums feel somehow required to cease being natural history museums, and to become collections of

media presentations? No art museum in the world feels any such compulsion. The Art Institute in Chicago feels no need to un-hang several of its magnificent Impressionist paintings to make room for a robotic diorama of Degas painting his ballet dancers. No Rubens masterpiece in the National Gallery will come down to make room for a video screen, a collection of push buttons, and an endless interrogatory menu.

Nor are art museums alone in refusing to replace their artifacts with technology. The great Native American collections in New York City and St. Joseph, Missouri will not replace their war bonnets, tomahawks, and bows and arrows with interactive gadgetry. The magnificent collection of astronomical instruments at the Adler Planetarium in Chicago is undoubtedly safe from similar intrusions.

(Lest the reader conclude that this is the diatribe of some anti-technology Luddite, know that the author worked for the National Security Agency from 1951 until 1980 and worked for the supercomputer firm Cray Research, Inc., until 1987.)

Our museums should continue to concentrate on the artifacts, not because of historical continuity, but because that is what their customers (the public) want to see. Most debate about what the public wants to see is based only on presumptions. Very few museum professionals ever go down into their halls while the public is also there, to see what people are really doing; such rare visits by the staff are usually to show a visiting fireman around, or to impress a dignitary. But you only have to visit a museum, as one of the general public, to see what is truly popular. The most popular venue at the National Museum of Natural History is the Gem and Mineral Hall, and the most popular exhibit in this hall is the Hope diamond. This is not an artificial imitation of the diamond, nor a film showing how it was cut or mined; it is the genuine article, and the American people love seeing it. The Museum has provided excellent explanatory text with the Hope, but this text is somewhat removed from the diamond, so that the visiting public can soak it in by seeing it from all sides.

One of the most popular displays at Mount Vernon is George Washington's spectacles; the reasons for this popularity defy simple explanations. Why is it so enchanting to visit Lincoln's home in Springfield, Illinois? How much astronomy can one glean from staring at a moon rock in the American Museum of Natural History on Central Park? Why do so many people, not themselves collectors, gaze at the amazing collection of coins in the National Museum of American History? The answers to these questions lie deep in the human psyche, but we do not need the answers in order to acknowledge that these fascinations exist. Why do people love museums? The answer is best put in a paraphrase: “it's the artifacts, stupid.”

Finally, the question that constantly hovers over museums is: are they educational institutions? The answer is no; museums are extremely educational (one who has never visited a museum can

hardly call himself educated), but they are not educational institutions. The primary (and unglamorous) role of a museum is to be a repository. But as a repository, a museum must make what is deposited available to the public in as effective a manner as possible, and this manner can be very glamorous indeed: think of MOMA in New York or the Page Museum of La Brea Discoveries in Los Angeles. And concentrating on their main draw, their artifacts, does not mean that museums must forsake the use of technology. But technology should not devour the artifacts. How many times have we seen children, faced with an array of buttons providing options, push every button, then depart without looking at the display? How often have three of the buttons become defunct after two weeks of such use? Of course the children did not use the presentation as the designer intended; should the museum replace the children or the designer? If museums attempt to compete with Disneyworld or The Discovery Channel, they are doomed to failure. They can never have the managerial agility, nor the fiscal flexibility, of a Six Flags over Texas.

Though I believe that my observations apply to all museums, it is true that what provoked me to put them in writing is the recent Sand Creek massacre of the curatorial staff at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science (until recently, the Denver Natural History Museum). Entire departments are to be deprived of full-time professional management. What will happen to the collections of these departments? Exactly what has happened to the thousands of collections donated, over the years, by alumni to universities and colleges: they will be lost, forgotten, ruinously damaged by careless storage, embezzled from (ask Yale University), pillaged, junked. It won't happen overnight, but it will happen. Does anyone

believe that a collection of Clovis artifacts can be locked up in their cases, and sit undisturbed forever? This degradation is analogous to what happens to libraries: dozens of abbey libraries have been fleeced of extremely valuable manuscripts by dealers who knew the market better than the Priors.

My special concern is the Denver Museum's great mineral collection, whose market value is surely well up into eight figures. It is clear that current management wishes to have as little to do with this collection as possible. How long will it be before the rhodochrosite wall is dismantled to make way for more modish presentations? What about the world-famous Breckenridge gold collection, itself alone worth millions? With no permanent professional curation, it would be better if the museum would face reality and sell the collection. This would be a tragedy for Denver, but at least the museum would gain some needed funds. Much more importantly, the specimens would be spared damage and destruction, and would go to institutions and collectors who really wanted them; no private collector who spent his own money would countenance the degradation of his purchases.

Lastly, a comment about Space Odyssey, the Museum's excellent new production. Meritorious as it is, we know that it will never approach the popularity of the National Air and Space Museum. Why not? Because the NASM has on display a Gemini capsule, a section of Skylab, and an astronaut's complete moon-walking suit (not to mention the Wright Brothers' Kitty Hawk flyer). It's the artifacts, stupid.

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