Guest Editorial

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 instead, perhaps also with the sound of the trade winds? 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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