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## What Is a Museum?

A hospital is a hospital. A library is a library. A rose is a rose. But a museum is Colonial Williamsburg, Mrs. Wilkerson's Figure Bottle Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, the Sea Lion Caves, the American Museum of Natural History, the Barton Museum of Whiskey History, The Cloisters, and Noell's Ark and Chimpanzee Farm and Gorilla Show.

—Richard Grove, 1969<sup>1</sup>

The museum is an "empowering" institution, meant to incorporate all who would become part of our shared cultural experience. Any citizen can walk into a museum and appreciate the highest achievements of his culture. If he spends enough time, he may be transformed. This is precisely what the museum founders had in mind when they brought great collections to their own cities.

—Mark Lilla, 1985<sup>2</sup>

By thinking of their missions as contact work—decentered and traversed by cultural and political negotiations that are out of any imagined community's control—museums may begin to grapple with the real difficulties of dialogue, alliance, inequality, and translation.

—James Clifford, 1997<sup>3</sup>

The 1979 edition of this volume began with these words: "Museums in the United States are growing at an almost frightening rate. If we count the smallest ones with only one person on the staff and he or she without

professional training, about five thousand of them exist today, and recently a new one has appeared every 3.3 days. People are crowding into them in droves, and the annual visits made to museums are now estimated at 600 million, give or take 100 million." Current estimates of the number of U.S. museums hover around sixteen thousand and the pace of additions, so noticeable in the 1970s, according to the American Association of Museums (AAM) has slowed. U.S. museum attendance continues to be high, outstripping major sporting events. These numbers neglect the growing impact of "visiting" museum programs or exhibitions in cyberspace, or virtual museums with only World Wide Web addresses.<sup>4</sup>

### Museum Definitions: Friendly and Unfriendly

A museum is a complex institution, and defining it is not easy. Whether one likes or dislikes museums will influence one's definition. Douglas Allan, former director of the Royal Scottish Museum in Edinburgh, said that "a museum in its simplest form consists of a building to house collections of objects for inspection, study and enjoyment."<sup>5</sup> Except for the confining of the museum to a single building, perhaps most of us would agree with that generalization.

The American Association of Museums, in developing a nationwide museum accreditation program, defines a museum as "an organized and permanent non-profit institution, essentially educational or aesthetic in purpose, with professional staff, which owns and utilizes tangible objects, cares for them, and exhibits them to the public on some regular schedule."<sup>6</sup> That definition met some objection from art centers, children's museums, science centers, and planetariums that have little or no collection. In 1988 the accreditation commission changed the term from "owns and utilizes" to "owns or utilizes" to accommodate those institutions without collections. The International Council of Museums (ICOM) in 1995 defined a museum as "a non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits for the purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment."<sup>7</sup>

Thomas P. F. Hoving, former director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, declared that the museum possesses "a great potential, not only as a stabilizing, regenerative force in modern society, but as a crusading force for quality and excellence."<sup>8</sup> S. Dillon Ripley, former secretary of

the Smithsonian Institution, which operates the huge national museum megalopolis in Washington, D.C., opined that "a museum can be a powerhouse," though only if "museum people and the public get away from the 'attic' mentality."<sup>9</sup> A lively German writer described an art museum as a place "where every separate object kills every other and all of them together the visitor."<sup>10</sup>

Barry Gaither, director of the Museum of the National Center of African American Artists, in a *Museum News* roundtable discussion of cultural diversity suggests:

The struggle [for museums] . . . has to do with hegemony over the interpretation of one's own experience, and how to give institutional form to that hegemony. If I saw any mission as the appropriate mission of newer museums, evolving museums, museums associated with a specific heritage within the American story, I would say it's finding the courage "to be." And that "to be" is open-ended, because the "to be" is an evolving understanding of self and culture and its dynamic relationship. That's our real work. Other institutions can respond to us in a more concrete way, whether willingly or not, when we are more clearly ourselves.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps this is attempt enough at definition for the moment, and we should leave the subject while enjoying the quip of an anonymous Englishman who considers the museum "a depository of curiosities that more often than not includes the director."

### Ancient and Medieval Prototypes

The Latin word *museum* (Greek: *mouseion*) has had a variety of meanings through the centuries. In classical times it signified a temple dedicated to the Muses, those nine sprightly and pleasantly amoral young goddesses who watched over the welfare of the epic, music, love poetry, oratory, history, tragedy, comedy, the dance, and astronomy. The most famous museum of that era was founded at Alexandria about the 3rd century BC by Ptolemy Soter ("Preserver") and was destroyed during various civil disturbances in the 3rd century AD. The Mouseion of Alexandria had some objects, including statues of thinkers, astronomical and surgical instruments, elephant trunks and animal hides, and a botanical and zoological park, but it was chiefly a university or philosophical academy—a kind of institute of advanced study with many

prominent scholars in residence and supported by the state. The museum and the great international library of papyrus rolls and other writings collected by Alexander the Great were housed in the royal quarter of the city known as the Bruchium. Euclid headed the mathematics faculty and wrote his *Elements of Geometry* there. Archimedes, Appolonius of Perga, and Eratosthenes were only a few of the noted scientists and scholars who lived in the king's household and made use of the library, lecture halls, covered walks, refectory, laboratories for dissection and scientific studies, and botanical and zoological gardens.<sup>12</sup> Bearing in mind that musing and amusement are interrelated and reflect pondering and deep thought as well as diversion and entertainment, it is no surprise that museums have long been considered to be places of study as well as repositories of collections. Didier Maleuvre's engaging description of a museum emphasizes the pondering of objects in an exhibit or collection quite apart from a museum's didactic program: "[T]he museum does give free time—freedom to loiter and tarry, to indulge the long double-take, the retracing of steps, the dreamy pause, the regress and ingress of reverie, the wending progress that is engagement. It is a tempo of consciousness disarming to modern audience conditioned to fear open-ended silence as a forerunner to boredom."<sup>13</sup> Some scholars of the museum movement, who emphasize its research function and prefer to define the museum as a community of scholars, look back on the Alexandria institution with real affection and nostalgia.

Though the Greeks and Romans thought of the museum in different terms from those we use today, the ancient world did possess public collections of objects valued for their aesthetic, historic, religious, or magical importance. The Greek temples had hoards of votive offerings of gold, silver, and bronze objects, statues and statuettes, paintings, and even bullion that could be expended in case of public emergency. The paintings were on planks (Greek: *pinas*), and thus a collection of them was called *pinakotheke*. In the 5th century the Acropolis at Athens had such paintings in the Propylaea, placed above a marble dado, lighted by two windows from the south, and protected individually by shutters. The Romans displayed paintings and sculpture, often the booty of their conquests, in forums, public gardens, temples, theaters, and baths. Roman generals, statesmen, and wealthy patricians often appropriated such objects for their country homes. The emperor Hadrian in the 2nd century at his villa near Tibur (today Tivoli) reconstructed some of the landmarks he had seen in his travels through the empire, for example, the Lyceum and Academy of Athens, the Vale of Tempe in

Thessaly, and the Canopus of the Egyptian delta. In a sense he created an open-air or outdoor museum.<sup>14</sup>

The museum idea was barely kept alive in western Europe during the Middle Ages. Churches, cathedrals, and monasteries venerated alleged relics of the Virgin, Christ, the apostles, and the saints and embellished them with gold, silver, and jewels, manuscripts in sumptuous metal bindings, and rich oriental fabrics. The Crusades brought back fabulous art objects to add to these treasuries or to the palace collections of princes and nobles, thus illustrating what the late Francis Taylor wittily called the "magpiety" of mankind.<sup>15</sup>

### From Private Collection to Public Museum

"The modern museum," says J. Mordaunt Crook, in his architectural study of the British Museum, "is a product of Renaissance humanism, eighteenth-century enlightenment and nineteenth-century democracy." The humanist, with keen interest in the classical past and the world about him, began to throw off the reins of superstition and take halting steps toward a scientific method. Two new words appeared in the 16th century to express the museum concept. The gallery (Italian: *galleria*), a long, grand hall lighted from the side, came to signify an exhibition area for pictures and sculpture. The cabinet (Italian: *gabinetto*) was usually a square-shaped room filled with stuffed animals, botanical rarities, small works of art such as medallions or statuettes, artifacts, and curios; the Germans called it *Wunderkammer*. Both types of collections rarely were open to the public and remained the playthings of princes, popes, and plutocrats.<sup>16</sup>

The ancient world had had its great gardens, and medieval monasteries cultivated and cherished plants and flowers, but true botanical gardens began to appear at universities—Pisa (1543), Padua (1545), Bologna (1567), Leiden (1587), Heidelberg and Montpellier (1593), and Oxford (1620). Scholarly botanists used them for scientific plant study; physicians, for testing remedies. Herbalists, barber surgeons, apothecaries, and physicians also established physic gardens as sources for medicinal treatments rather than simply for study, for example, at Holburn and Chelsea in London.<sup>17</sup>

The museum began to go public in the late 17th century. Basel opened the first university museum in 1671, and the Ashmolean Museum appeared at Oxford a dozen years later. The 18th century concerned itself

with discovering the basic natural laws that formed a framework for the universe and humanity, and intellectuals of the day wished to preserve in museums natural specimens as well as human artistic and scientific creations. Supposedly they would help educate humankind and abet its steady progress toward perfection. The Vatican established several museums about 1750, and the British Museum was formed in 1753 when Parliament purchased Sir Hans Sloane's great collection devoted chiefly to natural science.<sup>18</sup> In 1793 France opened the Palace of the Louvre as the Museum of the Republic. Napoleon confiscated art objects by conquest and devised a grand plan for a unified French museum system as well as subsidiary museums elsewhere. The scheme collapsed with his defeat, but his conception of a museum as an instrument of national glory continued to stir the imagination of Europeans.<sup>19</sup>

### Museums of the United States

As British colonies in North America merged and became the United States, museums evolved alongside the political process. The Charleston Museum, founded in 1773, collected natural history materials.<sup>20</sup> Along the Atlantic, small groups of enthusiasts met together to discuss and study objects emerging from the explorations of the new continent. Like their European predecessors, the institutions—philosophical societies, antiquarian groups, museums—began with “members.” But quickly, the members offered public hours for visitors to gaze upon the rare and exotic. In addition to providing public access, these groups sought financial support from a variety of sources, including paid admissions, making the “entrepreneurial” spirit a special American contribution to museum practice.<sup>21</sup> Charles Willson Peale was the first great American museum director. Peale's Museum in Philadelphia began in his home, moved to Independence Hall, and had branches in Baltimore and New York. He mounted specimens of animals, birds, and insects with realistic backgrounds and displayed portraits of nearly three hundred Founding Fathers, painted chiefly by himself or members of his family.<sup>22</sup> In the capitol city, the Smithsonian Institution, started in 1846 with the Englishman James Smithson's bequest to the United States “for the increase and diffusion of knowledge,” for a time was loath to accept collections and remained chiefly a research institution of pure science. When George Brown Goode

joined the Smithsonian in 1873, it began to become a national museum devoted to science, the humanities, and the arts.<sup>23</sup> The founding in about 1870 of three great museums—the American Museum of Natural History, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston—marked the entry of the United States into the museum mainstream.<sup>24</sup>

By 1900 American museums were becoming centers of education and public enlightenment. This development was natural in a country that prided itself on its democratic ideals and placed deep faith in public education both as a political necessity and as a means of attaining technological excellence. Benjamin Ives Gilman, secretary of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, considered this conception proper for science museums, but not for art museums. He thought “a museum of science . . . in essence a school; a museum of art in essence a temple.” Works of art communicated directly with their beholders and needed little labeling; art museums were “not didactic but aesthetic in primary purpose.” But Gilman wanted art museums to have interpreters to help their visitors see the beauty of their collections. Thus in 1907 the Boston museum appointed a docent to its staff. Gilman dreamed up this new title that avoided any reference to “education”; he explained that “a museum performs its complete office as it is at once gardant, mon-strant, and docent.” The American Museum of Natural History, the Metropolitan Museum, and even the British Museum appointed such guides.<sup>25</sup> American museums have continued their leadership in educational programs. They frequently refer to the kind of education they provide as “interpretation” or teaching through the use of original objects, emotionally engaging the visitor and complementing learning through words and verbalization. American museums developed close relationships with schools, welcoming thousands of students with their teachers and in return sending both objects and museum staff to classrooms. The Brooklyn Children's Museum, founded in 1899, continues to serve young people today.

### Museum Functions

The development of museums has been intensely personal and haphazard in plan. The emphasis had been upon collection of the beautiful and curious. The objects gathered were chiefly works of art, historical

rarities, or scientific specimens and equipment; some objects were animate, and the botanical garden, arboretum, menagerie, and aquarium as living collections were essentially museums. Collecting seems to be instinctive for many human beings. It may be based upon the desire for physical security (today collections often are considered good investments), social distinction (Thorstein Veblen would call it “conspicuous consumption”), the pursuit of knowledge and connoisseurship (genuine love for objects and desire to find out everything about them), and a wish to achieve a kind of immortality, as witness the great number of named collections in museums. Collectors also sometimes display neurotic symptoms that may result in obsession or a kind of gambling fervor. Sir Kenneth Clark suggested that “collecting is like a biological function, not unrelated to our physical appetites.”<sup>26</sup>

Collectors traditionally have turned their hoards over to museums, and museums have often caught the raging collecting fever. Museums have spent fortunes for paintings or objects while neglecting institutional needs from salaries to operating expenses. Conservative museum directors sometimes consider collecting far and away the most important museum function. One museum authority has suggested that it is the sole reason for museums and that exhibition, education, culture, and the social good are only rationalizations and window dressing used to justify the basic collecting passion.<sup>27</sup>

Closely connected with collection was the function of conservation. Collectors have always taken care of their hoards, oftentimes with miserly devotion. The techniques of conservation were at first little understood, as a result nearly all the panel paintings of antiquity have disappeared. The Greeks made crude attempts to preserve votive shields by coating them with pitch to prevent rust, and they placed vats of oil at the feet of Phidias’s Athena Parthenos to reduce excessive dryness. By the 16th century, paintings were being cleaned and revarnished, but not until nearly 1750 was the rebacking process perfected that could transfer the layer of paint from its original wall, panel, or canvas to a new surface.<sup>28</sup>

As long as a collection was private, it could be kept under lock and key and relatively safe. When the public was admitted to the museum, however, precautions had to be taken against theft or handling, and the Industrial Revolution brought high-intensity lighting, central heating, air pollution, and other unfavorable conditions that could speed the deterioration of collections. Yet the revolution also brought scientific study and knowledge of the composition, conservation, and restora-

tion of objects. Good housekeeping methods, proper control of lighting and relative humidity, and ingenious repair and rehabilitation procedures have revolutionized the preservation of museum objects and added to museum staffs skilled conservators trained in physics and chemistry.<sup>29</sup>

Research into museum collections allowed objects to be accurately described and cataloged. In natural history museums, botanical gardens, zoos, and aquariums, this study resulted in important taxonomic contributions to biological studies. In all museums research often has led to additions to the collection. Today museum research ranges from basic research into the nature of objects to applied research that places those objects in their artistic, scientific, or historic context. In the 20th century, museum research expanded beyond collections to include museum practices and the museum’s visitors themselves.<sup>30</sup>

Once the museum admitted the public, its exhibition function became predominant. Collecting, conservation, and research in the main supported the development of exhibitions. At first the displays were arranged to benefit the aesthete, the scholar, the collector, and the craftsman, a knowledgeable audience satisfied with a minimum of interpretation. The collection usually was arranged either aesthetically or according to the principle of technical classification in chronological or stylistic order—a kind of visible storage with crowded walls of paintings or heavy glass cases crammed with ceramics, textiles, metalware, or natural history specimens. Museums were housed in palatial or templelike structures that made the man on the street feel uncomfortable and discouraged his attendance. Here’s Alma Wittlin’s amusing description of early encounters between the collector and the public: “The situation proved to be a disappointment to many owners of collections and probably to much more numerous visitors. The collectors felt that they received ingratitude in return for their favors, and many visitors were frustrated and angered. They had endured humiliating interrogations to obtain admission to a place described to them as a land of wonders, and they discovered they were aliens in it. Some people found an outlet in inappropriate and rambunctious behavior.”<sup>31</sup>

In the 19th century the exhibition function began to change from displays of objects, whether art, natural history specimens or historically significant artifacts, organized with some overarching system (taxonomy). German and Swiss museum directors experimented with culture history arrangement—placing objects in period rooms or halls

that gave the visitor the feeling of walking through different stages of national history.<sup>32</sup> The wonders of technical and scientific accomplishments were put on view to be admired and to celebrate “progress.” The series of international expositions or world’s fairs that began with London’s Crystal Palace in 1851 contributed to ever more spacious and dramatic systems of exhibition. In Scandinavia, history museums in parklike settings celebrated the rural, nonmechanized life that was so quickly vanishing with industrialization and urbanization. Artur Hazelius’ Skansen (opened in 1891) on the outskirts of Stockholm became an international model.<sup>33</sup>

Exhibition, education, or interpretation—the conveyance of culture—and a commitment to community or social welfare have grown to be important aims for the museum in the last century. As public education expanded worldwide, museums joined schools as agencies for conveying cultural traditions. With the 20th century came ever more emphasis on attracting visitors, which has led to more of an emphasis on public service over the basic maintenance of collections. Stephen Weil has suggested that museums have moved beyond collections and collecting so dominant in the 19th and early 20th centuries, to become institutions rooted in interpretation in its broadest sense, actively seeking to provoke thought and the exchange of ideas between the museum and its visitors.<sup>34</sup>

This rapid sketch of museum development through the ages underlines the origins of the flexible nature of today’s museum. Wander into any midsize town’s museum nearly anywhere in the world and you may see a variety of activities underway. A school group sits on the gallery floor enjoying a lesson from a museum staff member. Musicians are rehearsing in another space for an evening performance. An exhibition planning team argues over which objects best convey an upcoming exhibit’s messages. Or, exhibit installers are building elements of a temporary exhibit. A researcher meets with curatorial staff to see and better understand an object featured on the museum’s webpage. Staff members are leaving the museum to meet with other community organizations to arrange literacy training classes either at the museum or elsewhere. Staff and visitors connect to researchers continents away through a projected Internet hookup to review current research findings. This description neglects the invisible work of museums to secure financial stability; work that may involve local philanthropies, politicians, or leaders of other cultural institutions. Early in the 20th century, Arthur Parker cautioned museum directors that museums that are not changing are in essence “dead institutions” and to him therefore un-

worthy of notice or support. Today, no museum administrator can ignore Parker’s advice.<sup>35</sup>

## Changing Definitions for Museums

The ancients visited museums or the “place of the muses” to look upon beauty; to discuss ideas with others; to experiment with natural phenomenon, in essence to be “amused”; and thereby to think deeply and to learn. The 18th-century setting for these activities might best be described as a university. From these roots as a center for learning, museums added specimens, historical objects, documents, and artworks, assuming the role as guardian or “keeper.” Brooklyn Museum director Duncan Cameron published the notion that museums occupy two ends of a spectrum from a “temple” to a “forum” in the early 1970s. A review of museum development, especially in the United States at the beginning of the 21st century, reveals that the premodern form of a museum as a site for musing and for discourse or Cameron’s forum seems to be on the rise again. The 19th-century dominance of collections, the objects within Cameron’s temple, has been challenged by those who identify museums to be places for public discussion, engagement, and learning. Today, the balance between museum as a repository of objects and as a place for learning has tipped back to the ancient forum.<sup>36</sup>

What follows is a snapshot of definitions of museums and their roles, primarily from the United States, beginning in the early 20th century and ending with the opening of the 21st century. They suggest the complexity and changing nature of museumness, ending with two institutions that describe themselves as “a museum different,” and another that highlights its “unmuseum.”

Anthropologist Franz Boas—whose actual museum experience was very short-lived, but whose work affected the development of anthropology museums within the 20th century—wrote in 1907: “The value of the museum as a resort for popular entertainment must not be underrated . . . where every opportunity that is given to the people to employ their leisure time in healthy and stimulating surroundings . . . that counteracts the influence of the saloon and of the race-track is of great social importance.”<sup>37</sup>

Cleveland Museum of Art educator Adele Silver opens a 1979 national report on U.S. art museum education practices by reminding readers: “In the beginning, there were no art museums. Innocent

irreverence reminds us that museums are inventions of men [*sic*], not inevitable, eternal, ideal nor divine. They exist for the things we put in them, and they change as each generation chooses how to see and use those things."<sup>38</sup>

American art historian Carol Duncan's writings place museums within their broader social and political contexts. "A Museum is not the neutral and transparent sheltering space that it is often claimed to be. More like the traditional ceremonial monument that museum buildings frequently emulate—classical temples, medieval cathedrals, Renaissance palaces—the museum is a complex experience, involving architecture, programmed displays of art objects, and highly rationalized installations. And like ceremonial structures of the past, by fulfilling its declared purposes as a museum (preserving and displaying art objects) it also carried out broad, sometimes less obvious political and ideological tasks."<sup>39</sup>

"Museums place history, nature, and traditional societies under glass, in artificially constructed dioramas and tableaux, thus sanitizing, insulating, plasticizing, and preserving them as attractions and simple lesson aids; by virtue of their location, they are implicitly compared with and subordinated to contemporary established values and definitions of social reality. We 'museumify' other cultures and our own past." Canadian anthropologist and museum director Michael Ames argues that museums by their very nature limit their audiences' abilities to make sense of collections and place them in broader social contexts.<sup>40</sup>

Stephen Weil chides American museums to use their collections for "the public good," rather than simply placing them in protective custody. His hope for museums echoes Cameron's forum rather than the temple. "The American museum—notwithstanding the ringing educational rhetoric with which it was originally established and occasionally maintained—had become primarily engaged in 'salvage and warehouse business.' . . . To the extent that some further benefit might be generated by providing the public with physical and intellectual access to the collections and information thus accumulated, that was simply a plus."<sup>41</sup>

Museum educator Elaine Heumann Gurian describes museums this way:

The museums' relationship to its collections and to the ownership and care thereof will change, and in some instances already have changed. The distinct edges of differing function among libraries, memorials, social ser-

vices centers, schools, shopping malls, zoos, performance halls, archives, theaters, public parks, cafes, and museums will (and in many cases have already begun to) blur. On the content side museums will become more comfortable with presentations that contain a multiplicity of viewpoints and with the interweaving of scientific fact and what is considered by some, but not by others, to be 'myth.' On the interpretive side, museums will rely less on collections to carry the story, and more on other forms of expressions, such as stories, song, and speech and the affective dramatic, and psychological power that their presentations can contain; and they will be less apologetic about including emotional and evocative messages. These changes will help museums become more effective storehouses of cultural information.<sup>42</sup>

New York City's Chinatown History Museum founder and historian, John Kuo Wei Tchen, goes beyond Gurian's advice and writes that museums and their exhibitions "must be done in tandem with the people the history is about . . . personal memory and testimony inform and are informed by historical context and scholarship. The museum reaches its communities through 'reunions' (especially of P.S. [Public School] 23 where the museum is located) to link the felt need for history directly with historical scholarship."<sup>43</sup> The Chinatown project reflects the expansion of the fundamental "authority" of museums from academically trained curators to the museum's own audiences. The project from its outset was a working partnership with the intended audience; it offered them Cameron's forum as their own.

Understanding the concept of museum has become even more complex with variations on the term. National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) director, W. Richard West describes NMAI as "museum different" arguing that the museum is "most accurately described, and functions as, an international institution of living cultures . . . [it] is a civic space not just a cultural stop. I don't pretend our model is the destination for every museum. I am saying as a model we present potential for a different way of putting a museum together."<sup>44</sup> The newly reopened Cincinnati Arts Center uses the term "unmuseum" for its educational programming, which director Charles Desmarais describes: "One of the things we've thrown into the mix is to ask contemporary artists to join us in planning the UnMuseum . . . to create works of art that kids can manipulate and change. The idea is for kids to discover on their own how we get meaning from visual art."<sup>45</sup> Some museums accentuate their uniqueness as a "brand" with names designed to attract the public; Finland's Heureka and San Francisco's Exploratorium are two examples.

## What to Expect in These Pages

This volume is divided into two sections; the first centers on the history of museums by type, art, natural history and anthropology, science, history, botanical gardens, zoos, and those dedicated to youth. The second addresses museum functions starting with collecting through public service, and ending with a look at the museum profession. The emphasis is on European and U.S. museums. Each chapter closes with a discussion of “challenges.” They are intended to give readers a glimpse into the future; they often raise questions rather than offering answers.

At the end of this volume is a very selective bibliography of museum texts. The citations have been selected to provide the reader with general information about museums; however, for every topic of this volume, there is much more literature that may be of interest to those seeking to understand museums. The list is only an introduction to the complexities of museum history and practice. Chapter footnotes will guide readers to fuller information.

## Challenges

### Public or Private Support

The European model for museums is one of governmental support that often is centralized. However, as these institutions diversify and proliferate, how should they be supported? Nicholas Burt points out limitations of both public and private support: “In Europe the state or the city has always supported museums. . . . It is not at all obvious that U.S. government support would be the best answer. What are the alternatives? Massive popular support on a broad base means popularity contests. State or city support means politics and poverty. Support by the rich, if available, means control by the rich.” In the United Kingdom in recent years, the Millennium Fund, supported by a national lottery, has blended public-private support for the nation’s cultural institutions. There is fierce competition among museums for these funds.<sup>46</sup>

### Measuring Success

Museum boards of directors and governmental oversight entities too often measure a museum’s success by attendance through the door-

way. As the Internet has added a new format for museums to use to reach their audiences, this measurement seems both too limited and limiting. But, what are the appropriate criteria for measuring the impact of museums? How does a museum quantify its visitors’ quiet, reflective inspiration for its oversight boards, funders, and even the general public?

### Research

Museums as reflections of the Enlightenment sought to add to humanity’s understanding of the world through the most basic research functions—finding, naming, collecting, and categorizing—elements of the world’s wonders. Museums, along with universities, played a central role in this process. Today that role has changed, expanding in some instances and falling away in others. What role should research play within today’s museums? In the past, basic research distinguished museums from their competitors for public entertainment; what research role should museums assume today? How has technology changed the place of museums within the scholarly research communities?

### Authority

As museums open their doors and create more audience-based experiences, who should be the “authors” of the museum’s interpretive messages from exhibitions to public programs? As historian Neil Harris suggests: “The museum’s position is no longer seen as transcendent. Rather it is implicated in the distributions of wealth, power, knowledge, and taste shaped by the larger social order.” What are the messages that the museum should convey? Who determines those messages and gives one idea precedence over another? Should the audience be engaged in the process and how?<sup>47</sup>

### Collections

Stephen Williams, who has charted how collections have diminished within museums, states emphatically: “An art museum without a collection is only a gallery. A children’s museum or a science museum without a collection is only a discovery center. A historical society without a collection is only an affinity group. A historic site without a collection is only a local attraction. A zoological or botanical garden



without a collection is only a nature center. A museum without a collection is not a museum."<sup>48</sup>

As the 21st century opens, the dominance of collections in museums is certainly fading (and has faded). What are the implications for this change? What is the impact on the fundamental definition of a museum absent collections? If museums abandon their commitment to collections, will it be necessary to create another institution to assume that role; another "museum"?

## Notes

1. Richard Grove, "Some Problems in Museum Education," in *Museums and Education*, ed. Eric Larrabee, Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1968, p. 79.
2. Mark Lilla, "The Great Museum Muddle," *New Republic*, April 8, 1985, pp. 25–29.
3. James Clifford, "Museums as Contact Zones," *Routes, Travel and Translation in the Late 20th Century*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997, p. 192.
4. American Association of Museums, *America's Museums: The Belmont Report*, Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 1969, pp. 3, 17–20; American Association of Museums staff, personal correspondence, 2006.
5. Douglas A. Allan, "The Museum and Its Functions," in *The Organization of Museums: Practical Advice*, Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1967, p. 13; Elaine Heumann Gurian, "Choosing among the Options: An Opinion about Museum Definitions," *Civilizing the Museum*, London: Routledge, 2006, pp. 48–56; Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, London: Routledge, 1994, pp. 1–22.
6. American Association of Museums, *Museum Accreditation: Professional Standards*, Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 1973, pp. 8–9.
7. www.icom.museum.
8. Thomas P. F. Hoving, "Branch Out!" *Museum News* 47 (September 1968): 16.
9. Daniel S. Greenberg, "There's a Windmill in the Attic: S. Dillon Ripley Is Blowing Dust off the Smithsonian," *Saturday Review* 48 (June 5, 1965): 48.
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