

Museum Theory

Final Examination

One thing that is (almost) universally true of what most people call museums is that they display objects of some sort or another. This becomes, for many, the defining factor in determining the appropriateness of the label “museum” to an institution, and even in evaluating the merit of something that has been labeled a museum. This, however, is a serious mistake. It is not the objects alone that make a museum a museum. The objects are a means to an end, and that end is ideas.

Defining the Museum

It is helpful, when defining the nature and value of a particular institution, to describe the characteristics that make that institution unique from other institutions. Objects are the primary characteristic that separates those institutions we call museums from those we call schools and churches. It is tempting to end a definition with this, to simply state that a museum is only the sum of its objects. That is, the whole is merely the sum of its parts. This is not, however, the case; it is not enough to end with this definition. The museum is more than a collection of objects. Merely stating what its characteristics are that separate it from others falls short of understanding the essence of the museum.

Charles Alan Watkins has a fear of contamination of the definition of the museum by those who do not view care and exhibit of the object as the sole end of the museum. He writes, “The object is the power and the glory of the museum and, if interpreted well, separates the museum from challengers and establishes the museum’s image as the repository of the real thing.”¹ His fear stems from the increasing smudginess of the lines between museums and chic shopping centers, and museums and theme parks. It is unrealistic to cling to the possession of objects as the sole means of keeping this line firmly in its place. It need not stay in the *same* place; things change and so do the times and this is nothing more or less than a value-free, existential statement of fact. The crucial element in separating the museum from these cultural siblings is the mission, the idea that drives the museum. Those who work in shopping malls and theme parks do not have the mission that drives the museum staff. The museum is set apart by something intangible. Certainly, the objects are the

¹ Charles Alan Watkins, “Fighting for Culture’s Turf, in *Museum News*, March/April 1991, p. 63.

external distinguishing characteristic, and with museums displaying increasingly technopopular exhibits and with shopping centers carrying increasingly cultural merchandising displays, those externalities may appear dangerously similar. However, it is just the sort of object-oriented defensiveness that Watkins espouses that clouds the vision of the museum as a distinctive institution, different from the others. Shopping centers are never going to stop having access to some of the objects museums own, and museums are likely to continue to cater to the television generation through interactive and video-oriented technology. If Watkins feels threatened by statements about “a first-class department store” being “more like a good museum of art than any museums” like that of John Cotton Dana, that

It is centrally located; it is easily reached; it is open to all at all the hours when patrons wish to visit it; it receives all courteously and gives information freely; it displays its most attractive and interesting objects and shows countless others on request; its collections are classified according to the knowledge and needs of its patrons; it is well lighted; it has convenient and inexpensive rest rooms; it supplies guides free of charge; it advertises itself widely and continually; and it changes its exhibits to meet daily changes in subjects of interest, changes of taste in art, and the progress of invention and discovery²

² Dana in Watkins, pp. 63-64.

then Watkins should examine what the museum industry is doing or not doing to meet those goals of visitor service. But in any case, shopping centers will always be about shopping, and museums will always be about learning (we trust). This is an idea, and it is the defense of ideas as the primary end of the museum that will maintain the integrity of the museum industry.

The Essence of the Museum

There is a certain importance to be attached to the possession of objects in the museum setting. Without objects, fabrications (reproductions) or representations (computer or video images) may constitute the only possible collection instead. These are acceptable, but probably not desirable, and they certainly lessen the credibility and value of the museum. Authentic objects are what one expects to find in a museum, not reproductions or images. Images are easily attainable in our information age society through television, film, rental videos, photographs, slides, color or black and white images in books and magazines, and even now in digitized form on computers. This is not part of the definition of the museum. Museums do exhibit photographs, but generally of activities, phenomena, situations—not objects. To display a photographic image of an object in a museum is to say to the visitor, “We couldn’t get hold of the object itself, so this is what we settle for.” It is definitely substandard, less than we demand. Reproductions send the same message. Authentic objects, then, are an essential component of a museum.

Objects are not randomly collected and displayed in most museums, though. Objects are collected around a theme of sorts. Certain types of objects may be collected, or objects pertaining to the life and times of a certain person or population. A collection must have some link in order to form a museum today. We no longer sustain the cabinets of curiosities (although even this is a theme which defined the collection’s contents—anything unusual or strange) prevalent in the early history of museums.

One important added quality of museums, that quality which ties the parts together to create and sustain the whole, that quality which is the essence of the museum, is the ideas behind the collection. Before the collection is acquired, there is at least a seed of an idea, some value or ideology to be conveyed. This is what drives the collecting force, what determines what will be collected, how monies are to be allocated to acquire those collections, what priorities various types of objects will have in acquisition and care. Even if the collection exists and then a museum is created to house it, as in the case of wealthy donors setting up a museum of their belongings upon their deaths, the idea exists in the collector’s mind. That idea may be as simple as a category, as when a private collector accumulates African sculpture or Oriental rugs, and the idea usually is this simple when the collection begins prior to the museum’s conception. However, in many cases, the museum is conceived of first, and collections are accrued to support whatever ideas were present at the

outset or through the formulation of the museum idea. An example of this is a history museum whose founders and mission statement determine what type of history it will emphasize, such as Holocaust history. From that point on, the collection's contents will be determined by those ideas driving the museum founders and staff. The objects, then, are the means by which the ideas are conveyed, much as the words on this page are the means by which the author's ideas are conveyed to the reader. Or, as William James wrote, "We need them both, as we need both our legs to walk with."³

Does this mean that the museum is (or should be) set up as a means of conveying some set of values or ideologies? Perhaps in some instances this is appropriate. But the real mission of the museum should be to provide a "starting point...for a process intended to continue long after the visitor has left the museum's premises."⁴ The purpose of the museum may be to convey certain values (e.g., anti-racism, anti-sexism, patriotism), but often it is most effective when it sets out to be a means of provoking thought and discussion in a community of visitors and neighboring residents. Not only do different museums within a given field (i.e., history museums) have different missions and methods, but so, too, do different types of museums have different goals, philosophies, and means of conveying those ideals. This is in part by virtue of the variance in their collections' contents, but also in their beginnings. As noted above, many art museums begin with a collection, whereas other types of museums usually begin with an idea of what their content *ought* to be and base their collecting practices on this premise.

It should be noted here that the primacy of ideas is not universal in the same ways across all types of museums. History and science museums and art museums have different means and different ends. The ideas behind art museums may be more difficult to articulate than those goals and ideas behind more clearly educational museums such as science and history museums.

Conclusion

Going into a museum whose primary purpose is the care and exhibition of objects is much like going into a store whose goods one cannot afford to buy. There is no interaction, nothing required of the visitor but to look. No thought is required, and nothing more than merchandising is required of the staff of the store. No education is involved, and labels are limited to "vital statistics" of the item—fabric and manufacturer. A museum distinguishes itself from this sort of mindless repository by using its labels and other modes of communication (tours, guide books, etc.) to

³ William James, quoted by Stephen E. Weil in a speech to the 1988 annual conference of the Canadian Museums Association, and published in *Muse*, the CMA's journal (vol. 7, no. 1, Spring 1989); reprinted in Weil's *Rethinking the Museum and Other Meditations*, Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990, p. 48.

⁴ Weil, p. 53.

communicate a context into which the visitor can critically place the object and the means to extrapolate some meaning from this integration.

[That paragraph concludes my final, but I thought you might enjoy my father's electronic mail response to my proposed thesis for this final.] Is the proper business of a museum the presentation of objects or of ideas? Is a car better if it has 4 doors or if it has good acceleration? Objects are the only things a museum CAN display. If it's a good museum, those objects will be things that stimulate thinking because excellent artifacts whether it's works of sculpture, painting, weaving (I can't exclude that!) or mementos of events -reach out and grab the viewer, force an experience to happen, transmit ideas. One of the functions of a museum curator is to select such objects. Another is to display them, with explanatory material to help the viewer along, in ways that maximize their tendency to stimulate thinking and feeling and thinking about what's being felt. The difference between a museum of art and of history is only in the nature of the artifacts, and the line between the two kinds of museums gets very fuzzy if they are well curated (is there such a word as curat-ed?). You must let me give you my talk about tribal weavings and show you how these things are aesthetic objects but that is a secondary objective to the weaver, to whom they are household furnishings with real practical needs to be filled, they are often talismanic, and often heraldic. In the really great pieces this is obvious to anyone who thinks about what they're looking at when they examine the piece. To anyone who doesn't, of course, they're just pretty things.