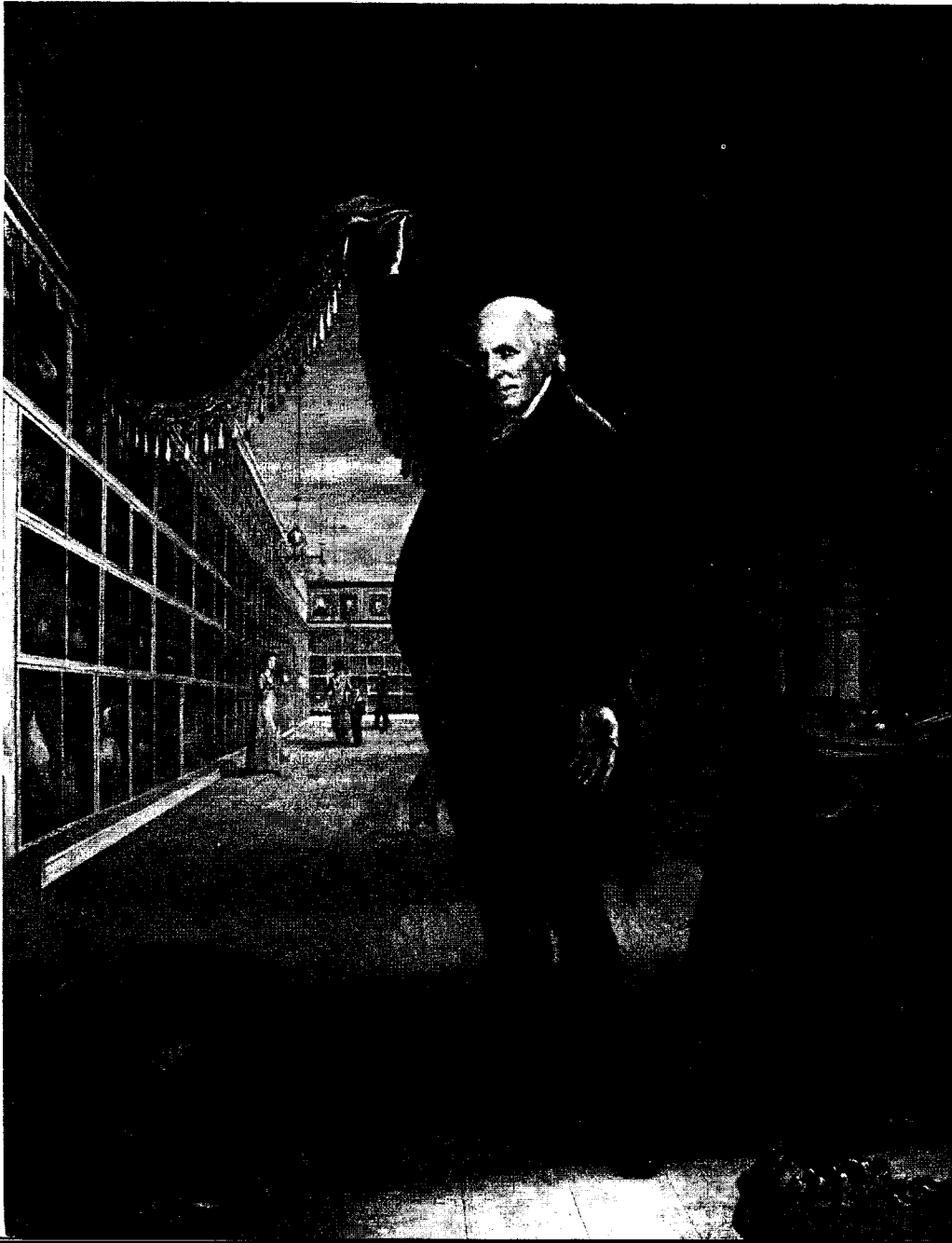


Charles Willson Peale, the artist, in his Philadelphia museum, 1822



Edward Alexander, *Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History + Function of Museums* (Nashville: AASLH, 1979), 5-15

AE useums 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.¹

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, late 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."² 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, has defined 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."³ That definition has met some objection from art centers, neighborhood museums, science centers, and planetariums that have little or no collection, and the association is beginning to develop special definitions for some of these categories. Those who emphasize the research function of the museum would like to see research mentioned in the definition.

Thomas P. V. Hoving, former director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, declares 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."⁴ Dillon Ripley, secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, which operates the huge national museum megalopolis in Washington, thinks that "a museum can be a *powerhouse*," though only if "museum people and the public get away from the 'attic' mentality."⁵

A lively German writer describes an art museum as a place "where every separate object kills every other and all of them together the

visitor," and some critics would do away with museums altogether. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, a founder of Italian Futurism, in 1908 urged artists to start afresh and ignore all tradition. He wished to destroy museums (and libraries also) and welcomed "the kindly incendiaries with the carbon fingers!" He went on to say:

Museums, cemeteries! . . . Identical truly in the sinister promiscuousness of so many objects unknown to each other. Public dormitories, where one is forever slumbering beside hated and unknown beings. Reciprocal ferocity of painters and sculptors murdering each other with blows of form and color in the same museum.⁶

Today, unless museums reform themselves, some militant minority groups also advocate their destruction. June Jordan, a black poet, not long ago electrified a museum seminar in Brooklyn when she said:

Take me into the museum and show me myself, show me my people, show me soul America. If you cannot show me myself, if you cannot teach my people what they need to know—and they need to know the truth, and they need to know that nothing is more important than human life—if you cannot show and teach these things, then why shouldn't I attack the temples of America and blow them up? The people who hold the power, and the people who count pennies, and the people who hold the keys better start thinking it all over again.⁷

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 third century B.C. by Ptolemy Soter ("Preserver") and was destroyed during various civil disturbances in the third century A.D. 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, Apollonius 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 library, lecture halls, covered walks, refectory, laboratories for dissection and scientific studies, and botanical and zoological gardens.⁸ Some modern students 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 fifth century the Acropolis at Athens had such paintings in the Propylae, 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 second 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 Temple in Thessaly, and the Canopus of the Egyptian delta. In a sense he created an open-air or outdoor museum.⁹

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 treasures or to the palace collections of princes and nobles, thus illustrating what the late Francis Taylor wittily called the "magpiety" of mankind.¹⁰ In Islam, China, and Japan similar accumulations were made, and the Shōsō-in (eighth century) at Todaiji Monastery at Nara near Kyoto is probably the oldest museum in the world.¹¹

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 sixteenth 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.¹²

The ancient world had had its great gardens, and medieval monasteries cultivated and cherished plants and flowers, but true botanical gardens now began to appear at the 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 materials, for example, at Holburn and Chelsea in London.¹³

The museum began to go public in the late seventeenth century. Basel opened the first university museum in 1671, and the Ashmolean Museum appeared at Oxford a dozen years later. The eighteenth 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. 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.¹⁴

Museum Functions

Thus far, the museum movement had been intensely personal and haphazard in plan. The entire 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 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.

Collectors traditionally have turned their hoards over to museums, and museums have often caught the raging collecting fever. Art museums have spent fortunes for paintings or objects while paying inadequate staff salaries and neglecting such everyday running expenses as air conditioning. Conservative museum directors sometimes consider collection far and away the most important museum function. One museum authority even suggests 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.¹⁵

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, and 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 sixteenth 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.¹⁶

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 restoration of objects. Good housekeeping methods, proper control of lighting and relative humidity, and ingenious repair and rehabilitation procedures in the last fifty years have revolutionized the preservation of museum objects and added to museum staffs skilled conservators trained in physics and chemistry.¹⁷

Research was still another museum function. In a sense it could be viewed as an extension of collecting, for research thoroughly examined the objects collected in order that they could be accurately catalogued. In natural history museums, botanical gardens, zoos, and aquariums, this study resulted in important taxonomic contributions to biological studies. In all museums, in-house, programmatic research often led to additions to the collection, sometimes obtained through field expeditions and archaeological excavations. The study of art history and architectural history also advanced through the research of museum curators, and, though historians have been slower to study objects, cultural and social history is more popular today and only a step removed from the ethnological studies so zealously pursued by museums of anthropology and archaeology.¹⁸

Once the museum admitted the public, its exhibition function became predominant. Collecting, conservation, and research were used chiefly to secure excellent 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 labels and 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.¹⁹

In the nineteenth century, however, the exhibition function began to change. 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.²⁰ Artur Hazelius established Nordiska Museet at Stockholm in 1873, devoted to the everyday life of the Scandinavian folk, and in 1891 he opened Skansen, the first true outdoor museum, on a seventy-five-acre tract overlooking Stockholm harbor. There he moved buildings chiefly of vernacular architecture, provided them with garden settings and interior

furnishings, and employed costumed craftsmen, musicians, dancers, and interpreters to bring the whole folk village to life. No longer was the common man overawed by palace or temple; now the museum and the picnic could be combined and the whole family might share in enjoyment of the national heritage.²¹ The new approach fitted well the increasing democratization of modern life, and the series of world's fairs that began with London's Crystal Palace in 1851 contributed ever more spacious and dramatic systems of exhibition.²²

American Museums

Museums developed slowly in the United States. The Charleston Museum, founded in 1773, collected natural history materials in leisurely fashion.²³ Charles Willson Peale was the first great American museum director. Peale's Museum in Philadelphia began in his home, moved to the Philosophical Hall of the American Philosophical Society in 1794 and on 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.²⁴ 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, a talented museum man, joined the Smithsonian in 1873, it began to become a great national museum devoted to science, the humanities, and the arts. Today it has more than 55 million specimens of natural history and ethnology alone.²⁵ The founding in about 1870 of three great museums—the American Museum of Natural History and 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.²⁶

The advent of the automobile enabled the historic house museum to flourish by attracting tourists. (The first American house museum had been established at Washington's Headquarters in Newburgh, New York, 1850, soon followed by Washington's plantation home of Mount Vernon in Virginia.) Museums also sprang up in the national parks, and Colonial Williamsburg in 1926 was the first of a host of preservation projects and outdoor museums that drew millions of visitors who usually traveled in the family car.²⁷

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. George Brown Goode went so far as to declare that "An efficient educational museum may be described as a collection of instructive labels, each illustrated by a well-selected specimen." 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, monstrant, and docent*." David McCord made fun of the word in an amusing quatrain that runs

The decent docent doesn't doze:
He teaches standing on his toes.
His student dassn't doze—and does,
And that's what teaching is and was.²⁸

Still, the American Museum of Natural History, the Metropolitan Museum, and even the British Museum appointed such guides.²⁹

Education or Interpretation

Since then, American museums have continued their leadership in educational programs. They frequently refer to the kind of education they provide as interpretation, that is, teaching through the use of original objects. Interpretation relies heavily on sensory perception—sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, and the kinetic muscle sense—to enable the museum-goer emotionally to experience objects. This interpretation complements the rational process of learning through words and verbalization. American museums developed close relationships with the schools, welcoming thousands of students with their teachers and in return sending traveling exhibits and museum staff to the classroom. Museum clubs for children appeared, and also children's or youth museums. Nearly every museum authority from abroad who

comes to visit American museums is deeply impressed by their devotion to education, just as American museum professionals comment on the research and scholarship they encounter in European curators. Still, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London was a European leader in using the museum as an educational force for both craftsmen and the general public, and museum education programs are thriving in many parts of Europe today, including the countries of the Communist bloc.

Many American museums in the past few decades have transformed themselves into cultural centers with music, theater, motion pictures, the dance, and other performing arts programs. State museum organizations send concerts, plays, dance groups, and lecturers on circuit, as well as traveling exhibits, sometimes contained in a "museumobile."³⁰

The emphasis given educational functions by museums also had social implications. Some museums tried to reach all parts of their audience and to use their collection, research, exhibition, and interpretive functions for the benefit of the entire community. John Cotton Dana, the ingenious, innovative founder of the Newark (New Jersey) Museum in 1909, expressed his social philosophy thus:

A *good* museum attracts, entertains, arouses curiosity, leads to questioning and thus promotes learning. It is an educational institution that is set up and kept in motion—that it may help the members of the community to become happier, wiser, and more effective human beings. Much can be done toward a realization of these objectives—with simple things—objects of nature and daily life—as well as with objects of great beauty. A museum should also reflect our industries—be stimulating and helpful to our workers and promote interest in the products of our own time. The Museum can help people only if they use it; they will use it only if they know about it and only if attention is given to the interpretation of its possessions in terms they, the people, will understand.³¹

As a result of the efforts of Dana and his successors, the Newark Museum managed to reach nearly all parts of the community, including the poor and minority groups. Not only did it build a collection of American and world art of high excellence, but it staged special exhibitions relevant to minority groups and timely for community interest. Titles of some of the subjects were: Modern Pictorial Photography; German Applied Arts; New Jersey Clay Products; Primitive African Art; Inexpensive Articles of Good Design; History of Newark; Aviation: A Newark Industry; The Human Body: How It Works; Newark of the Future; What Makes Music; Our Town; and Satellite Science. This broad, humanistic approach kept the museum close to the community and preserved its influence, even as many upper-middle-class citizens

moved to suburbs, and Newark became a black city with numerous inner-city problems.

Museums like that of Newark largely avoided the criticism that they appealed only to the educated few and collected objects valued by wealthy leaders, that the immigrants, blacks, and other deprived minorities as well as the poor had been ignored, their cultural contributions and needs forgotten. Such discontent recently has led to the establishment of neighborhood museums in several slum-ridden inner cities. They are community centers that carry on varied programs that often employ museum techniques. The neighborhood museum is organized democratically and open to everyone. It conducts classes in painting, sculpture, and the crafts; presents African dances or varied musical and dramatic groups; and strives to improve the social welfare of the neighborhood. In many cases it has no collection, though it frequently borrows objects from museums. It is interested chiefly in people, not objects, and its critics say it is more of a settlement house than it is a museum.³²

Pluralistic Museums

This rapid sketch of museum development through the ages underlines the flexible nature of the modern museum. The late Albert Ten Eyck Gardner, a curator of the Metropolitan Museum, summed up the situation well when he wrote:

One reason that this Museum—like any major American Museum—is so complex is that its basic “personality,” if it can be called that, is derived from various other, older social organizations. It is in fact a modern hybrid, bred with mingled characteristics of the cathedral, the royal palace, the theater, the school, the library, and according to some critics, the department store. As the emphasis of interest or activity shifts, the character of the organization changes. Thus when the museum serves as a place of entertainment it takes on the dramatic quality of the theater, when it is used for scholarly purposes it can become an ivory tower, when its educational activities are stressed it becomes a school. For the scientist or professor it may seem to be merely a series of specimens illustrating a seductive theory, or a library of artifacts filed in chronological order. In the family of social institutions invented by man, the place of the museum is not rigidly fixed. It is pliant and can develop in many directions, or sometimes move simultaneously in several directions.³³

Thus we may think of the museum as collection, the museum as conservation, the museum as research, the museum as exhibition, the museum as interpretation, the museum as cultural center, and the

museum as social instrument. Museum objects, so real and so convincing, constitute an important part of the human heritage and give their beholders a feeling of continuity and cultural pride. The priorities assigned to the different museum functions are important in establishing the essence of any museum, and its board of trustees, director, curators, educational staff, conservators, designers, and other specialists should all ponder its basic purposes, as well as try to find ever more effective ways of achieving them.

Obviously, the objects themselves are the heart of a museum, and their collection according to a logical over-all plan is of great importance. They also deserve the best kind of preservation and conservation that can be given them, for they constitute a precious heritage to be passed on intact to future generations. Of equal moment is the research that finds out everything possible about the discovery or creation and the provenance of each object, as well as its contributions to human knowledge. Thus the three traditional museum objectives—collection, conservation, and research—can be amply justified.

But of great significance also are the ways that objects can be used to bring understanding and appreciation to contemporary life, for, as Thomas Jefferson so cogently reminded us, “The earth belongs always to the living generation.” Thus exhibition, education or interpretation, conveyance of culture, and contribution to community or social welfare are all worthy aims for the museum. The good museum will be conscious of all these purposes—traditional and educational—and devise such programs and activities as its collections, staff, and resources will allow it to pursue with excellence.

As an encouraging note, let us cite the opinion of Germain Bazin, a chief curator of the Louvre, who defines the American museum as the university of the common man. He says:

Perhaps the most significant contribution America has made to the concept of the museum is in the field of education. It is common practice for a museum to offer lectures and concerts, show films, circulate exhibitions, publish important works of art. The museum has metamorphosed into a university for the general public—an institution of learning and enjoyment for all men. The concept has come full circle. The museum of the future will more and more resemble the academy of learning the *museion* connoted for the Greeks.³⁴

Notes

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