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## MUSEUMS AND PEOPLE

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In the introduction to the catalogue of his collection published in 1656, John Tradescant set out the basic principles by which museums have functioned, time out of mind:

Now for the materialls themselves I reduce them into two sorts; one Naturall, of which some are more familiarly known and named amongst us, as divers sorts of Birds, foure-footed Beasts and Fishes, to whom I have given usual English names. Others are lesse familiar, and as yet unfitted with apt English termes, as the shell-Creatures, Insects, Minerals, Outlandish-Fruits, And the like, which are part of the Materia Medica; (Encroachers upon that faculty, may try how they can crack such shells). The other sort is Artificials, as Utensills, Householdstufte, Habits, Instruments of Warre used by several Nations, rare curiosities of Art, etc. These are also expressed in English (saving the Coynes, which would vary but little if Translated) for the ready satisfying whomsoever may desire a view thereof (Tradescant 1656:a2 - a3).

The emphasis which Tradescant placed on the need to reduce his materials to order, and to identify them in the English language, "for the ready satisfying whomsoever may desire a view thereof" makes good sense. Museums have always been concerned with two basic tasks: to maintain collections in order not just physically, but also in relation to some philosophical system; and to explain them to the visitor. Obviously, these tasks are not always in harmony with each other. To preserve something may mean hiding it away, and in any case few museums have the resources to display everything they have in custody. Selection, traditionally the prerogative of curatorial staff, determines both content and form of display. It has generally operated in the light of answers to two questions put by curators: "What do we think visitors need to know?" and "How much space have we to satisfy that need?" I am perhaps putting the matter rather bleakly, but I wish to stress the point that museum display is a very limited form of public education, especially when one bears in mind that, historically, museums were regarded, and often deliberately designed, as grand secular temples to the glorification of knowledge. The selection of material to publicly illustrate this knowledge is done by a group of scholars trained, as a first priority, to maintain and extend collections. It is no slur on the museum profession to say that people come second.

(Archaeological Review from Cambridge 2:1 (1983))

The emphasis is always on the object as a source of information, arranged according to agreed scientific or historical principles. The inevitable tendency, given this emphasis on the need for order, is to equate conceptually knowledge and order, and to encourage the view that museums, by their nature, stand somewhat apart from society.

But knowledge is never quite amenable to being ordered in this sense, because it is continually changing (museum curators, in my experience, have a tendency to confuse knowledge of an object with knowledge about that object). So museums always risk losing touch with their times, not only with what curators loosely call "the public", but also with the changing interests of scholarship. Museums are astonishingly imperfect instruments of education, whether popular or specialist. Far from being stimulants to the growth of knowledge, they are always in danger of becoming, and often are, repositories of immobilized received opinions. We have all seen, for example, displays of prehistory which reflect one long-gone phase in the history of the subject rather than the present-day subject itself, or we have perhaps been allowed to venture into storerooms where chaos rather than order rules supreme.

Commonly, throughout the world today people demand more than the traditional roles of museums have allowed. Once, museums tended to work according to what was regarded as the lowest common factor of educational understanding, which avoided the need to consider particular and sometimes conflicting interests of different classes or groups. This has changed. Museums have become cultural centres, with more varied ways of expressing their educational role and so mirroring more effectively the needs of their constituents. In the main, it is the local body museums which have responded most readily to changing demand. National and university museums, those guardians of rare and famous objects, have tended to hold on more resolutely to their traditional functions on a plea that this is precisely what their guardianship entails. The danger in this attitude, of course, is that it might become too closely identified, at least according to its critics, with the views of those in society who resist notions of change in practice or attitude within museums. During a recent visit to New Zealand, I was not surprised to find that colleagues there often considered inevitable the present view of the British Museum against the repatriation of cultural property, given that it is our National Museum.

Today many museums are adventurous in spirit and diverse in form, where visitors are regarded as participants as much as spectators, and entertainment is seen as part of education. In Britain the recipients of the 'Museum of the Year' award (Ironbridge, Scunthorpe, etc.) are precisely those museums which seek to involve people in the programmes as a matter of course. This

raises the interesting question of whether or not there is now a serious clash between the idea of order as exemplified by traditional museum practice, and that of disorder as expressed by the participation of the non-specialist in museum activity.

The question is usually put in organisational terms, but it is really one of concepts. What is at issue derives from the nature of ideology in our society. Museum curators have usually accepted the view that ideology is homogeneous, at least as far as it can be reflected in the acquisition and display of collections. Facts have been regarded as neutral, and to that degree as existing in independence of how members of society have viewed them. Ideology is not homogeneous, even in this limited sense. It expresses conflict as much as consensus concerning the nature and functions of knowledge. In fact, museums have an important place within the sociology of knowledge, if, in their activities, they can express the ambiguities and tensions within ideology. Just as knowledge is continually changing, so is the wider ideology of which it is part. Thus the dichotomy in museums between the need for order and the continual pull towards disorder is real but need not be negative. Disorder can be creative. The wise curator in today's world will see it as a means to foster healthy debate concerning the nature and purpose of knowledge. For a museum today is not so much a storehouse, or a provider, of knowledge, but rather it is a place where knowledge is created. And this process of creation involves curator and visitor alike.

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