

Museums and the Democratic Order

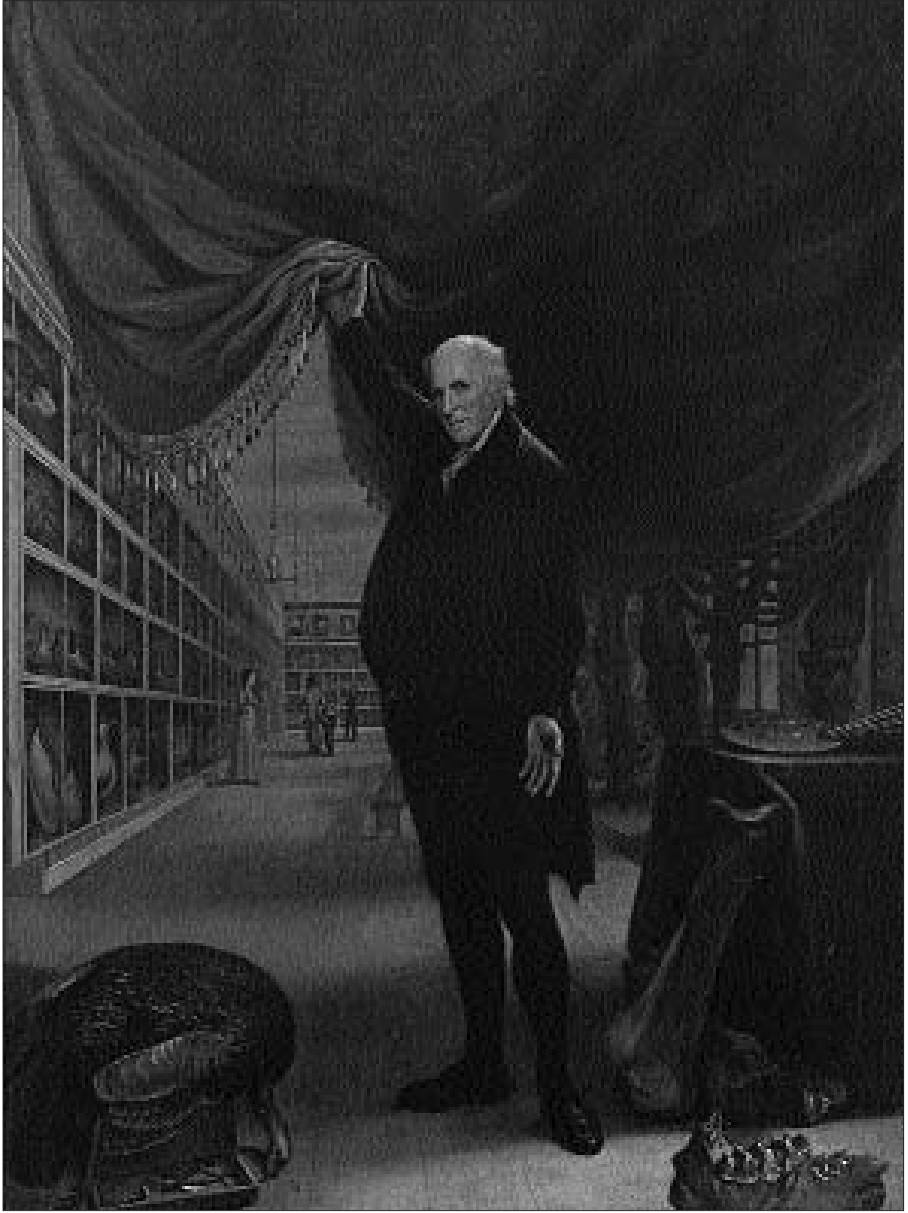
by *Miriam R. Levin*

The origin of the museum is inextricably linked with the storms of history. “Again and again, museums have received new impetus from lurches of humanity,” Lawrence Vale Coleman noted in the three-volume study of American museums he published on the eve of World War II. “And now, with turmoil everywhere, these institutions are gaining ground more surely than ever before.”

Almost 60 years later, Stephen Weil, a former official of the Smithsonian’s Hirshhorn Museum, startled the more conservative members of his profession when he wrote: “Discomforting as the notion may be to many of its advocates, the museum is essentially a neutral medium that can be used by anybody for anything. . . . Museums are at their best and most distinctly themselves when they deal with ‘stuff.’” The process by which that “stuff” is chosen, displayed, and interpreted is how these storehouses of detritus function as agents of social change.

The concept of the museum as a public space rather than a private collection emerged in tandem with the European upheavals of the late 18th century—an age of popular revolutions and the emergence of the modern nation-state, of colonial expansion, and of an abiding faith in reason and progress. In the 19th century museums began to proliferate, stimulated by the growing industrial power and wealth of the West. By the end of the 20th century, as Western businesses and international organizations extended their reach globally, museums cropped up in all the postcolonial nations of the world, becoming an essential element in their development strategies. Spurred by a growing sense of a unique national and cultural identity, and aided by international law governing patrimony rights, countries also began demanding that artifacts taken from them long ago be returned.

Although the museum as we know it is a late-18th-century Western innovation, precedents for the variety of functions museums have come to serve existed much earlier. Chinese emperors and Trojan kings kept their treasures in guarded chambers. Greeks and Romans displayed their valued sculptures, paintings, and other objects in temples that drew travelers to Athens and Rome. In medieval Christian Europe, churches great and small were filled with awe-inspiring relics for veneration. The earliest precedent usually cited for the museum is one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, the Great Library at Alexandria, which sprang from the fertile collision of Hellenic and Egyptian cultures in the fourth century B.C. Its collection of more than 400,000 manuscripts embodied what was then thought to be all that was known in the world. That



The Artist in His Museum (1822), by Charles Willson Peale. Peale hoped that his Philadelphia museum, launched in 1784, would give America a premier institution that would rival famed European collections such as the British Museum and the Louvre.

knowledge served the political and economic ambitions of the Ptolemaic dynasty as well as the interests of scholars.

European rulers, aristocrats, merchants, and scholars in the Age of Discovery were familiar with these precedents. They began to build collections that included paintings, herbs, and such oddities as “a knot tied by the wind on a ship at sea” for their private study and enjoyment, keeping them in “cabinets of curiosities,” as the rooms were called. They were driven by the same impulses as the ancients — cupidity, curiosity, egotism, and sensory pleasure — but the expansion of their world after 1492 to include an entire hemisphere, hundreds of cultures,



and thousands of previously unknown species stimulated European collecting to an unprecedented degree.

By the 17th century, the rulers of France and England began to realize that a market for such objects could assist them in their continuous struggle to maintain a favorable balance of trade—if only the market existed. They opened their collections—not only their fine art, but their botanical gardens and herbariums—to members of the royal academies for the express purpose of encouraging research whose results would augment the state’s coffers and add to its glory. (Among the most important collections were those belonging to Louis XIV, including the paintings in the Louvre and the scientific specimens in what is now the Musée National d’Histoire Naturelle in Paris.) In the mercantile age, new sources of food and medicine, new products for export, and innovative designs for the luxury goods

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The Gallery of the Louvre, depicted in this 1831 painting by Samuel F. B. Morse, housed magnificent works of art, but they were not displayed with ease of viewing in mind.

coveted by the aristocracy were means to the end of market domination.

The second half of the 18th century saw the emergence of truly national museums open to the public—albeit a very limited public. Reformers of the Enlightenment encouraged governments and the wealthy to recognize that science and technology were the keys to building a stable social order. The advance of both required an educated populace, so institutions devoted to collecting, preserving, studying, and exhibiting things now had a new justification: public education. Nonetheless, the presentation of the collections left a great deal to be desired. In 1838, a visitor to the British Museum in London, founded by an act of Parliament 85 years before, described a hodgepodge of minimally organized stuff. Although the growing size and comprehensiveness of the museum's collections matched the expansive energies of England itself, the place was, in fact, a jumble. Access remained extremely limited.

Across the Channel and across the Atlantic, the revolutions in France and America brought the citizenry into public life on a scale never before seen. First in France and later in America, the state embraced the idea of museums as truly public institutions. Even before the upheaval of 1789, Parisian artists and artisans and the new

upper bourgeoisie struggled with the Crown over access to what was increasingly considered a national patrimony in the Louvre. By 1793, the revolutionaries had opened the collections to the nation and created a truly national museum of art. Later, as Napoleon's armies conquered the Continent and moved into Egypt, their plunder greatly (if temporarily) enhanced the collections. The Louvre was renamed the Musée Napoléon, and on certain days the general public could view without charge its holdings—now augmented by the lootings of the Grande Armée and displayed in groups that recognized national origins, periods, and artists. The realization that the treasure brought to French soil by French armies was now a part of the glory of France had a transforming effect on the public psyche; the trauma of having to return the works of art to their original owners after France's defeat at Waterloo was therefore all the more profound.

In a society without royal collections or the palaces to contain them, but with citizens who wanted to create a strong nation within a strong republic, museums in the United States were more attuned to the marketplace than were their British and French predecessors. In 1784 Charles Willson Peale, an energetic, patriotic, and entrepreneurial scientist-artist, welcomed paying customers to his muse-

um in Philadelphia, which he hoped would become a national institution. Peale had the blessings of Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson for his project, and he shared their enthusiasm for the French Enlightenment. He set out to create a comprehensive museum that would challenge those in Europe, if not in the size of its holdings then in the quality of their presentation. Nationalism, mixed with a firm Protestantism, stirred Peale to attempt to prove to European scientists that America was superior in its God-given biological and geological resources and in its intellectual and democratic aspirations. His museum would be a secular temple, where the “most perfect order in the works of a great Creator—whose ways are wisdom,” would become manifest. It would also be an instrument for order and tranquility, inspiring citizens through “charming models for every social duty, in order to render man . . . more content in the station where he is placed.”

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Peale knew that a popular audience might not find rows of studiously arranged fishes particularly gripping, so he worked to present the contents of his collection, which paralleled those of the old cabinets of curiosities, in ways that

would “afford a source of entertainment in the mind, the very reverse of dissipation and frivolity which seems at present to have seized the inhabitants of this growing City.” In developing his natural history collections and ethnological materials, he gave special attention to specimens from North America. And even as he recognized the marketing value of the odd and alarming—the trigger fin-

ger of an executed murderer, the five-legged cow with six feet and two tails that had for years faithfully provided the Peale family with milk—he sought to wrap them in a higher moral purpose.

In the familiar painting that hangs in the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts, we see Peale lifting a curtain to reveal a somewhat idealized view of the main room of his museum as it was in 1822. The animals are arranged according to the Linnaean system. Though the painting includes neither the wax figures he dressed for realistic effect in Native American garb, nor his exotica from the Far East, some of his innovations are on view. Drawing on his artistic ability to communicate ideas and his scientific observation of nature, he tried to present his objects in context. The animals he carefully stuffed and preserved are posed behind glass against painted backdrops that evoke their natural habitat. The dark and bulky mastodon bones and the wild turkey are from a recent expedition to the Rocky Mountains. On the walls above are portraits of modern savants and artists from Europe and the United States, many painted from life by Peale’s son Rembrandt. Because the organized presentation of the collections was meant to have a salutary effect on the public, the painting includes visitors who appear fully engaged by the objects on

display. Indeed, attracting visitors was an ever present concern to the proprietor—as it would be to future American museum administrators.

To stay in business and maintain his educational mission, Peale sought a balance that would leave visitors “happily amused and certainly instructed.” For a small sum he would produce silhouettes of visitors, and he put on special exhibitions, concerts, and lectures. He found it difficult to guess what visitors would take away from their experience—which was often not what he had hoped they might. Some admired the portraits but couldn’t care less about the natural history collections. Others came for the thrill of observing nature’s mistakes. Peale admitted anyone who could pay the 25-cent entry fee, but Americans weren’t particularly enthusiastic about spending their money or their leisure time in museums. Peale’s museum managed to survive 60 years, but in the end his hopes to found a national museum went unfulfilled and his collections were dispersed, as were those of the museums in Baltimore and New York with which his sons were involved.

The United States did not have a national museum until the 1850s. Although the British scientist James Smithson died in 1829, leaving his fortune to the United States of America to found an institution “for the increase and diffusion of knowledge,” his bequest did not stipulate how the two purposes were to be achieved, an omission that precipitated many years of debate. The act of Congress that in 1847 established the Smithsonian allotted half the income from the bequest to research efforts and half to a library and museum. In 1855, the National Museum at last opened its doors in the Castle building on the Mall. Even then, Joseph Henry, the first Secretary of the Smithsonian and a strong proponent of research, resisted the idea of a public museum. Research advanced knowledge; museums full of exhibits would only entertain the masses—and draw funds away from research. Nonetheless, Henry was pleased that during the Civil War its collections were “a never-failing source of pleasure and instruction to the soldiers quartered in the city.”

The comfortable classes in Europe and the United States—the newly rich and the growing middle—on contemplating themselves, their relationship to the past, and their achievements in science and technology, found a satisfying explanation for their superior powers in the idea of progress, which, while pointing cheerfully toward the future, also provided a format for coherently organizing the past. Beginning about 1870, and for more than a century thereafter, wealthy donors and a growing cadre of scientists, scholars, and museum personnel energetically scoured the Earth for archaeological and ethnological artifacts, works of art and craft, biological specimens, machines, and manufactured products. This mass of material stuff—brought to heel and displayed in hundreds of new public museums—revealed the very drama that the Victorians saw unfolding in the world at large: history as a progress to their present moment. Not so incidentally, this idea of historical progress sanctioned their efforts to bring the lands and peoples of the world under their control.

In the United States, the robber barons were covering the country with iron rails, telephone wires, and power lines. They were making vast fortunes in oil, steel, banking, railroads, breakfast cereals, and they were building huge mansions



P. T. Barnum's museum of "living human curiosities," many of them fakes, was little more than a circus sideshow, but it grossed \$400,000 in its first season, in 1871.

that incorporated fireplaces, chandeliers, columns, and paneling—sometimes whole rooms—stripped from European castles. To the workers at home, the captains of industry were spreading the discipline of hard work and, by 1914, preaching the rewards of the \$5 day; abroad, they went shopping, scooping up those fine objects that mass production simply could not supply. The acerbic sociologist Thorstein Veblen mocked the tastes of this new class, but the Rockefellers, Carnegies, Mellons, Fricks, and other private citizens like them became public benefactors to an extent hitherto unknown in the modern world. In business, they may have skirted the law; through their patronage, they bought themselves immortality—or tried to.

It's hard to imagine what public museums would be today had it not been for such men. New museums were created—and substantial collections given to existing museums—by names still familiar today: Morgan, Huntington, Barnes, Phillips, Gardner, Taft, Whitney, Frick, Walters, Ringling, Bache, Freer, Mellon, Rosenwald, Rockefeller. After the 1929 market crash, the huge endowments they had established sustained—wholly or substantially—201 public museums through the Great Depression. At the start of World War II, there were numerous municipal, state, and county museums; 60 general museums housing collections of art, history, anthropology, applied science, and natural history; and hundreds more institutions specializing in one or another of those fields. One extraordinary museum of specialization was New York City's American Museum of Natural History. Founded in 1869 by a group that included Theodore Roosevelt, Sr., and J. Pierpont Morgan, the museum has gone on to sponsor more than a thousand scientific expeditions and amass a collection of 30 million specimens and artifacts. But there had been a profound change

since Peale, some 80 years before, sought to reveal God's grand design in the order of things. In the industrial age, natural history and cultural artifacts had more utilitarian functions, such as the development of industry and the promotion of patriotism. Most important, though, was the conviction that history was a continuum, the continuum represented progress, and the future would be better (if everybody worked hard).

Patrons also encouraged new types of museums. Taking as their model the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, whose vast collection of decorative arts from all over the world was unparalleled, the founders of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (1870) and the Cleveland Museum of Art (1913) hoped that the study of fine arts and crafts might influence taste in all the social classes, in time improving the design of manufactured goods—and not so incidentally stimulating demand in a competitive market. This was the first of three important museum innovations that began in the late 19th century and reached their zenith in the interwar period.

Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia (1926), the great project of John D. Rockefeller, is a notable example of a museum in which not only the object but the entire environment of the object is painstakingly restored and also made pristine. In the case of Williamsburg, the object was an entire colonial town, saved from the ravages of time and real estate developers to become a kind of national shrine. Here visitors from around the country and the world can get an idea of life in the pre-industrial society of our country's origins. Henry Ford, on a vast acreage near his Dear-

born, Michigan, plant, opened Greenfield Village and the Henry Ford Museum in 1929. The "village" consisted of a conglomeration of structures Ford had purchased and moved to the site, among them the buildings, complete with tools and furnishings, where Thomas Edison had invented the light bulb and

Alexander Graham Bell the telephone. Greenfield Village offered an idealized view of the American small towns that had cradled Ford and the other great inventors of his generation. Ironically, these same men had laid the foundations for the giant industrial society that was destroying the very culture Ford's village was meant to preserve.

But it was the museum of science and industry, modeled after the great Deutches Museum in Munich, Germany, that proved to be the most popular innovation in the American museum world, and the most controversial. The Henry Ford Museum, adjoining Greenfield Village, was one of several such institutions. There were others in New York and Chicago; the Boston Science Museum and the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia are other notable examples. All celebrat-

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Museums

The Smithsonian Institution's 1903 fossil display was typical of the age in its studied aversion to showmanship.

ed the progress of the nation as measured by its machines, inventions, and industrial products. Ford's museum was unique among them in that it celebrated the history of inventions with American technologies at the forefront; the others focused more on contemporary scientific processes, inventions, and products.

The industrial museums were wonderfully innovative—and threatening to the traditional idea of what a museum did and how it should go about doing it. They did not merely display steam engines and electric diodes; they showed how they functioned. Indeed, instruction was what these museums were principally about—in a hands-on, interactive sort of way. The exhibits *worked*, to the delight of visitors who leaned forward to press buttons and push levers. Moreover, they tried to make hard industrial labor vividly real to those who had no direct experience of it. Along with the verisimilitude came a strong element of show business. At Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry, guides even carried smelling salts to revive visitors overcome by the realism of the simulated coal mine. For good or ill, museums were moving into the realm of “education.” How people *felt* about their museum experience was given equal status with what they *learned* from the experience.

Science and industry museums were strongly connected to another institution growing out of industrial society, the international exposition. Large portions of the museums' collections came from these periodic shows and fairs, and in some cases museums even inherited buildings that had been erected for them. The Smithsonian, for example, got 42 railroad cars of materials from the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition, along with a building to house them. Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry moved to a hall that had been built for the Fine Arts Pavilion of the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893. The museums also borrowed the expositions' concepts of interactive displays and brightly lit, well-labeled cases, as well as schemes to organize and control their growing mountains of stuff.

What the innovative museums salvaged from the past was intended not only to mark but to idealize our progress from it. Yet the very idea of a museum, devoted by necessity to the past, defied the destructive forces of industrialization that were demolishing it. Old and often historic buildings were razed to make room for factories; the factories needed workers, hence the flight from town—the town that Ford idealized in his museum—to city. It is at least ironic that museums were





simultaneously complicit with those same forces. They made a devil's bargain. Museums were sustained by the economic growth that was destroying much of what museums were attempting to preserve for the increasing numbers of tourists who wanted to look through the glass to see what had been lost. The automobile boosted tourism, which in turn fostered consumer-oriented industries, and the resulting prosperity supported the museums. Between 1895 and 1940, the number of cars in the United States grew from four to more than 25 million. With the increase in leisure time and the construction of superhighways throughout the country after World War II, more and more people ventured forth to visit new places, see new things. Museum attendance climbed, but museums now had to compete with Niagara Falls and Madame Tussaud's. So they did what successful tourist attractions from Yosemite to Disney World did: They added lounges, restaurants, bookshops, snappy audio-visual aids, computer technology, and information areas in an effort to appeal to still more visitors.

Museums

The United States, the world's leading industrial power, had no national museum of industry until 1958, when Congress authorized the National Museum of History and Technology as part of the Smithsonian. There had been important initiatives earlier, the seminal one in 1887, when G. Brown Goode became assistant secretary of the Smithsonian in charge of the National Museum. Goode introduced methods that administrator-curators who succeeded him adhered to well into the 1960s. He gathered together all the instruments, machines, and tools that were scattered in other departments and organized them into exhibits according to categories: fire making, transportation, crafts, and so forth. But his forte was to develop a method for organizing materials in all the departments along uniform, evolutionary lines, so that all artifacts and specimens (natural, human, cultural, technological) were subjected to the same systematic, progressive arrangement.

Goode secured his professional stature in a famous speech delivered at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association in 1888. Museums, he declared, were handmaidens of science, and history could be studied and displayed as scientifically as natural phenomena. The way museums presented information could demonstrate the laws of science and the laws of history. Both studied the processes of change over time. Natural history, the formation of the cosmos and the Earth, the emergence of biological life and human cultures—all could be encompassed on one long continuum of progress toward more specialized forms. Objects—whether knives, fossil fish, or meteorites—showed the course of this progression. Goode insisted on the importance of labels and explanatory material, and was a stickler for accuracy. He insisted that exhibits incorporate the most recent research. Following Goode, the Smithsonian and its administrators became leaders in establishing the authority of science—and of technology as applied science—in American museums, and that influence has only grown over the years.

By the 1960s, the Smithsonian's old comprehensive museum had split into a congeries of specialized museums under the Smithsonian's umbrella. What happened there was reflected in museums across the country and abroad. Curators scurried to perfect their collections and bring their exhibits in line with current research. But the idea of progress still reigned as an organizing principle. Halls of evolution were installed in natural history museums. Ethnographic departments displayed the culture of traditional societies from industrial society's point of view, and measured them against American cultural and technological dominance. Art museums focused on the heroic emergence of the abstract and other modern styles from past traditions. History museums told the progressivist narrative through the accomplishments of great white men.

The first of the blockbuster shows, "In the Presence of Kings," opened at the Metropolitan in 1967 and drew 247,000 visits. Later, thousands lined up daily at one major and sometimes minor museum after another to see treasures from the Vatican, Impressionist paintings, Tutankhamen's gold, or room after room of Picassos. Scholarly catalogues based on the most up-to-date research actually sold thousands of copies in museum stores. New as well as old donors contributed

more money, and their own collections as well. Thanks to those donors and their own burgeoning endowments, museums had more money to buy newly available works on the world market. Prices began to soar. The Metropolitan Museum's acquisition of Rembrandt's *Aristotle Contemplating a Bust of Homer* for \$2.3 million was front-page news in 1961. The record stood for 18 years. Now that price would be news only because it was so low. By the 1990s the price of art had skyrocketed, and even lesser works routinely sold for a few million dollars. Major works brought in upwards of \$50 million.

Starting in the 1960s, museum administrators began systematic efforts to attract larger and more diverse crowds—with considerable success: The Smithsonian alone recorded 35 million visits in 2000. Researchers physically tracked the movements of visitors. What did they want to know that they had not learned? How could the museum serve them more effectively? By the 1990s, museums were using focus groups to ascertain how they might compete with other attractions. There was another concern:

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French visitor surveys in the late 1980s had revealed that working-class citizens were staying away from the new Pompidou Center; in the United States, many studies indicated that African Americans, Hispanics, and other minority groups weren't showing up in proportion to their numbers in the population. What to do?

In recent decades, a new generation of curators has sought to take account of new scholarship on class, race, ethnicity, and gender in the exhibitions they mounted. They have questioned both the progressive claims of Western science and scientists' assertions of objectivity. The system of identification that had been used to categorize artifacts and organize history exhibitions on a continuum of progress was broken. Now it was possible to construct new narratives, to look again at familiar artifacts, and to consider whole ranges of contextual materials previously ignored in order to interpret cultures from more egalitarian and arguably more authentic perspectives.

These multicultural initiatives reflected and helped give shape to massive changes already taking place on a global scale. The new global economy, spurred by Western multinational corporations, was informational and interconnected. Markets were opened, rights were asserted. Culture became a potent force. It acquired political leverage. The past became political in new ways, as questions arose about who could lay claim to certain objects and how those objects should be interpreted. Museums, which communicated through the artifacts of the past, both reflected and engaged in these upheavals. As various cultural groups sought to define themselves in ways often different from the secular, scientific claims of the Western powers, they looked to museums to help them present their heritage.

Museums

The issue of ownership of that heritage took center stage in the 1980s and 1990s, when the Greek government demanded the return of the Elgin Marbles from the British Museum, Sri Lanka the seal of Kandy from Amsterdam, Tahiti its treasures from Paris. In the United States in 2000, the American Museum of Natural History in New York City and the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde Community of Oregon reached an agreement to explain the significance to the Clackamas tribe of the Willamette meteorite on display in the museum, in addition to the description of the meteorite's scientific significance. The angry objections by veterans' groups to the 1994 plans for the *Enola Gay* exhibition at the National Air and Space Museum (a revised exhibit opened the following year) and the criticisms of the 1994 Science in American Life exhibit at the National Museum of American History show emphatically the struggle of politically empowered groups over ownership of the meaning of the past.

International organizations, particularly the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), became a powerful force in organizing and promoting museums throughout the non-Western world after 1960. UNESCO's committee on cultural heritage built networks of communication between national and local populations and the international tourist trade. Tourism was growing by leaps and bounds, boosting the number of museum visitors dramatically, and indirectly increasing the number of museums worldwide. Cities from Cleveland to Los Angeles, from Bilbao to Paris and Munich, sought to attract international corporations by including museums, along with restaurants, malls, and river walks, in their redevelopment plans. This was not only true in the West. Partially spurred by UNESCO efforts, new museums—such as the National Museum of Kenya, the Sulabh International Museum of Toilets in New Delhi, and the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum in Northern Ireland—reflected and served local and national interests.

Such efforts raise questions of whether Western contexts for understanding culture are exportable. Does culture mean the same thing in every society? Professor Seyyid Hossein Nasr of George Washington University raised the question in a doubly provocative way. Asked in 1983 to advise the Saudi government about founding a science museum in Riyadh, he told them that it could be a time bomb:

Do not think that a science museum is simply neutral in its cultural impact. It has a tremendous impact upon those who go into it. If you go into a building in which one room is full of dinosaurs, the next room is full of wires, and the third full of old trains, you are going to have a segmented view of knowledge which is going to have a deep effect upon the young person who goes there, who has been taught about *Tauhid*, about Unity, about the Unity of knowledge, about the Unity of God, the Unity of the universe. There is going to be a dichotomy created in him. You must be able to integrate knowledge.

Despite the quest to find ways to present artifacts that express and form identities distinct from those of the West, the adoption of the museum as an institution that stores and displays artifacts buys into Western culture and the value it places on such structures. Museums are everywhere serving to disseminate particular habits of seeing and feeling through means of communication that were

developed in the West. But museums also provide a universal matrix allowing for variety of content; what information is communicated lies in the organization of the details. And that is local.

Just as in the past, when museums of industry embraced film, audio recordings, and other media to communicate better with the public, today museums as far away as India, Korea, and Kenya are embracing computers and the Internet not only to extend their reach but to make their exhibitions more accessible to more people. And almost every museum now has its own Web page containing information about current exhibitions, museum shops, and even tours, as well as areas that serve the needs of students and their class projects. Multinational corporations have supported the introduction of computers into museums worldwide to create a mutually beneficial network of local and global relationships. Microsoft's first community project undertaken in the Middle East opened in 2000 at "Planet Discovery" in the Children's Science Museum in the Beirut City Center, where a special wing was set up to house computers purchased from local assemblers in Beirut.

The World Wide Web has made possible a new kind of museum: the virtual museum, which has no "real" artifacts, no "real" geographic location, but a library of hypertext images, sounds, and words that create exhibitions out of digitized information that can be reached from any place on the planet with electronic access. (A recent Google search of museum Web pages produced more than 300,000 hits.) The low cost of a Web page certainly gives museums with little money, and even individuals, a certain equality with their more affluent counterparts. Yet despite claims that the Web is a democratic environment on a level previously unknown, these virtual museums only create networks among those who have the means to access the sites.

At the beginning of the new millennium, we are left with a set of institutions that have not only weathered the major lurches of history Lawrence Vale Coleman noted more than 60 years ago but have also helped smooth social transitions. Museums have helped citizens understand the often disturbing processes of development. Their value and power has lain in their historic association with that very malleable and elusive term *democracy*. They have wanted to reach a vast public, but it is only recently that they have been able to—and even then the message the public understands is not necessarily the message the museum people intended to convey, nor is the message always egalitarian. Museums have recently tended to equalize the value of all sorts of artifacts, but they have also—at all times and in all places—favored the politically and economically dominant caste over the less privileged. And if they have hoped to create orderly societies through their effect on the public mind, they have so far touched a relative few.

Museums, in effect, convey two antithetical messages: one of human liberty, of men and women freely communicating; the other, a controlled vision of ordered progress that has fueled the extension of Western influence for more than two centuries. In the future, museums promise to keep alive this dynamic between the individualistic and the ordered, the local and the global, within a matrix of economic and political change. □