

AT ISSUE

Posterred and Mugged

The front door of my high school was a thousand feet from the front door of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, but Greenland might as well have blocked the distance for all the travel there was between the two. Not once, in four years, were we directed to the museum, and the museum, in those chilly 1950s, folded its arms against the temptation to reach out. These days, the reaching out by museums is so aggressive that you walk a little faster when you pass an entrance, to elude the hook that will pull anyone inside, each body a number, and maybe a wallet—a diner, a souvenir hunter, a magazine subscriber, a course taker, annually, eternally. Just about every museum with its lights still on has to market itself like a detergent or a presidential candidate. And other not-for-profit arts and cultural institutions are similarly pressed. Expenses and public expectations have soared, and money cannot be allowed to duck for cover.

Two recent books, written under the auspices of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation in New York and published by Jossey-Bass, are exceptionally instructive on the evolution—and the school-of-hard-knocks education—of the not-for-profits: *Managing Change in the Nonprofit Sector: Lessons from the Evolution of Five Independent Research Libraries*, by Jed I. Bergman (in collaboration with William G. Bowen and Thomas I. Nygren), and *The New-York Historical Society: Lessons from One Nonprofit's Long Struggle for Survival*, by Kevin M. Guthrie. Resist the novocaine of the titles and you are home free, for the texts are lucid and compelling, and require no specialist's degree to be understood.

If you've wondered why ballet shoes ring the edge of your scarf and an odalisque curls round your coffee mug, why

your gym bag boosts PBS and your lunch dates are inscribed in the Book of Kells, let Bergman and Guthrie suggest answers. Their proper subjects are a half-dozen prestigious research institutions, all of them libraries and several of them museums as well, but it is not difficult to draw from the seemingly narrow case studies lessons applicable to other not-for-profit cultural organizations (symphony orchestras, ballet companies, regional theaters, and so on) that now need to work as adroitly as the libraries to survive.

WQ Bergman describes how the financial status of five great American private libraries underwent a fundamental change during the last 25 years. There was a time when the income on their endowments could sustain these institutions. But once the libraries committed themselves to a future of stronger and better-housed collections, new technologies, and service to a wider range of clients—an admirable commitment, by the way—they chose a future in which adequate funding was no longer guaranteed. Vulnerable to reductions in their earned income, they became dependent on external funders, whose generosity might well be driven by idiosyncratic priorities. How many strings must be attached to a gift before an administrator declines to accept it lest the strings enmesh the institution? A library, even—especially?—a great research library, is not an easy sell to the general public. Its collections are of interest primarily to scholars, who will always seek them out and need no lure, but who tend to think deep rather than reach deep.

Then, too, luxury and lack seldom cohabit as closely as they do in some cultural organizations, which conceal an arrhythmic heart behind a deceptively sturdy physical or artistic facade. The

New-York Historical Society is a good example. An imperious presence on Central Park West, the place was once thought secure as the rock beneath Manhattan. Though its travails for the past decade and more have been a matter of public record, the head-shaking detail gathered by Guthrie lends them a new cautionary force.

There are less charitable explanations than the ultimate insufficiency of old endowments for why budgets sometimes separate themselves from reality in not-for-profit organizations: the unsteady attention of trustees, or their downright ignorance of the mission and financial status of the institutions for which they are responsible; the willfulness of directors, who may wish to build or acquire when prudence dictates that they lock their office doors and remain seated; the reluctance of donors to put their money where there's not a large public to marvel at their generosity.

The rising costs are attributable as well to a phenomenon known as “Baumol’s disease,” after the economist William Baumol of New York University (who, in truth, has the manner of a family doctor making a house call and deserves to have his name attached to a *cure*). In sectors of the economy where output is not heavily dependent on labor as an essential input (automobile manufacturing is an example), productivity grows at a faster rate than it does in sectors where labor inputs are critical (teaching, for example, or dance performance). That is to say, you can always find a more efficient way to build an automobile, but you can’t save a salary by reducing the *pas de deux* in a ballet to a solo, or a string quartet to a trio, or symphonies to piano transcriptions, or operas to recitals—the examples multiply endlessly—without stripping each experience of its first meaning.

Nonprofit cultural organizations (not just research libraries) provide services that, by their very nature, are labor-intensive. As labor costs increase, so too do the costs of maintaining the primary functions of these institutions, of keeping them true to themselves. The organi-

zations must find new ways to cope. No wonder we have suffered the expansion of the museum shop into the museum shopping mall. Mugs and coasters and T-shirts, pens and posters and tote bags—all are the trivial surface blemishes that suggest some underlying disorder.

How much crowding and dunning and shilling and hustling—but civilized, always civilized—will the public put up with? A lot, apparently. Some years ago, merchandise on display at the sprawling souvenir stand just past the finish line of the Met’s Velázquez exhibit was partially visible while you were still in the homestretch presence of the pictures. You could view simultaneously a glorious Velázquez and its beckoning poster reproduction. The reproduction was to the original as Cliffs Notes are to *Paradise Lost*. True, it could be rolled up and taken on the bus. But nothing could compensate for the falseness of its colors against the damning witness of the original.

The Met should not have countenanced the reproduction’s display, let alone sponsored its sale. But customers seemed not to care, or notice. Is it the business—I mean *purpose*—of a museum to make them see the difference? Once upon a time, perhaps, but the purpose has grown more equivocal these days. Being severe with visitors needs to be weighed against being liked by them. The first purpose is survival. And so, relaxing their starch, cultural organizations let go their dignity. In their zeal for dress-down Fridays, they sometimes forget to fasten the buttons on their jeans.

Commercialism—exuberant, successful, and rank—must inevitably tempt nonprofit cultural institutions that want to be true to their original mandates in an age when it is no longer possible to be a library exclusively for scholars, an opera company for patrons only, a museum of empty corridors, or an orchestra indifferent to its community. As soon as they seek money from foundations, corporations, and federal agencies, they will be grilled Soviet-style about outreach

activity and efforts to build new audiences and encourage—what else?—diversity.

What do these institutions risk in adapting to survive, especially when the task is not equally difficult for all? Some have sure-fire ways to open wallets: a museum can hang Monet or Van Gogh or Matisse, an orchestra can program Beethoven, and PBS can quite easily reshow “Yanni at the Acropolis” and “*Les Misérables* in Concert.” But a research library? Its real treasures—not just information, but knowledge, wisdom—may not lend themselves to easy exposure. There is nothing glamorous about fulfilling the basic mission of a library. Books attract readers, not crowds. Collections are expensive to grow and to keep, and require as much care as moody orchids. Libraries can work only with what they have; in so doing, they should not compromise what they are. In “the new funding environment” (the ozone layer gone, the air thinning), even the Library of Congress is scrambling. It holds all the cards, and a lot else besides, and has begun to lease portions of its collections to commercial vendors, who will digitize and package the materials and make them available to distant publics—for a price. Information is not such common coin as we may presume. For some, it positively glitters.

The effort to make accessible the higher culture that was once the preserve of the few is entirely laudable—essential, in fact, if the culture is to keep breathing. Seal it

off from the bracing air of fresh exposure and it will mummify. But by how much of the air of contemporary culture and its hucksterish proclivities can the higher culture be touched without beginning to spoil? “High” is already barely “middling”: a few bomb-free Jane Austen films are thought to signal a cultural renaissance, though dozens of movies about blood loss or animals who excel at a sport continue to pitch the world toward darkness.

You can argue art’s origins back to the Garden of Eden, to the moment the first couple garnished themselves with greens and altered a simpler reality. Art was born of trouble, brought culture in its wake, and both have been trouble ever since. They’ve been fun too, and marketable, never more so than in our own day, when the only unpardonable emotion may be boredom. What’s it to be for pleasure, then, on a Saturday afternoon, the museum or a movie, Watteau or Willis, Chuck Close or Glenn Close? And, on the CD player, Telemann or Tesh; on the night stand, the *American Scholar* or *George*? We move freely between cultural realms because they are marketed alike. Tickets to museum shows are available through the same agency as tickets to plays, pop concerts, and football, and the sameness of the marketing erases the line between high and low, blurs the differences between what’s being sold, slides the products toward identification, till they all sit atop one another and any protruding edges are lopped off. The equivalence is violently won, and counterfeit.

—James Morris