

*Enjoying the Dimensions
of History*

Museums offer us, running from among the 'buses,/A centrally heated refuge, parquet floors and sarcophaguses,/Into whose tall fake porches we hurry without a sound/ Like a beetle under a brick that lies, useless on the ground./Warmed and cajoled by the silence, the cowed cipher revives,/Mirrors himself in the cases of pots, paces himself by marble lives,/ Makes believe it was he that was the glory that was Rome,/Soft on his cheek the nimbus of other people's martyrdom,/And then returns to the street, his mind an arena where sprawls/Any number of consumptive Keatses and dying Gauls. — [Louis Macneice, Museums]

Museums are markers in time testifying to a migration of ideas. The stories that museums tell are more perdurable than the lives of individual visitors. History is the dead's gift to the living, a gift it would be unwise to refuse. The contents of a museum can instruct, symbolize, and give pleasure. History

museums help us see heroic possibilities and rise from the lowly status of a "beetle under a brick, that lies useless on the ground."

The history museum functions as an asylum. It helps man get to his humanness, put aside his daily social function for a moment and dip be-



low the surface consciousness to quarry something of what it means to be human. Without the genuine experience of history within a museum's walls, man suffers from a poverty of spirit.

When we visit a museum we are

lifted out of our birth-through-death continuum and allowed to relate our narrow experiences to the wider and more satisfying experiences of the parade of humanity. By thinking about th[e] who have passed before, and the meaning of their progression, we can better see our place in the ranks and march with more purpose. To try and understand our place in history may be regarded as a conceit, but it is one that can be immensely satisfying. It can also be immeasurably humbling and provide a realistic perspective. Our personal trials and triumphs can be seen as trivial compared to the suffering and exaltation of others in that column which recedes into the miasma of the past. It is more difficult to wallow in selfish indulgence when we open our vision to the dimension of time. No one has accomplished much alone. The story of human society is one of interdependence.

The Interpreter's Responsibility

What role do museums play in this process of remembering, this cognizance of the historical flow? If the client's purpose is to learn, they need only to read some books, watch some documentaries on PBS. Why visit a museum that is limited to little label-length bursts of information or

staccato belches of recorded messages, when volumes are within reach at the library? The answer can be more clearly seen when we look at what museums are and what they do.

For some historical evangelists, the museum is clearly reverential, even spiritual, like a tabernacle of history. For other less devout practitioners of the museum art, they are at least an occasion for high seriousness. Of all the things history museums do, keeping alive the memory might be the most important. The artifacts, likenesses of what happened in the past, are carefully composed, lighted, and interpreted to organize and illuminate corners of history. While historians may help us know the past, the museum worker helps us *see* the past. History is speculative; the history museum is palpable.

The part that curators play in this museum experience is usually invisible to the visitor's casual eye, as it should be if the storytellers are to achieve any subtlety. The average visitors are usually so struck by the visual messages that they encounter that they never fully realize that a group of people have organized themselves in an unselfish, non-profit way, collected together what would otherwise be

ephemera, and preserved these things so that they could be put in front of the public to impress them with their collective meaning.

The idea of all of the bric-a-brac bearing on a chosen subject collected together in one place conveys a pleasurable feeling of completeness. It is the best kind of evidence, examined

us from the tyranny of time and place. History is more often contextual rather than prescriptive. The museum mediator foregoes lesson mongering for the drama of the human experience. We can see future possibilities only as they relate to our past experiences and those experiences the museum worker has mined and

smelted for us. How have we come to be where we are, how have we come to think the way we think; what are the underpinnings in our understanding? These are the questions the museum mediator asks.

It is important for the stories told in museums to be functional rather than abstract. They must relate to the things of everyday experience and provide the visitor with guideposts. History's conclusions must make connections in the visitor, be significant to their lives, and illuminate and enrich them. The interpreter wants the visitors to be pressed up against the case window of life. If they fail to connect with the reality of the visitor's experience, they will be arbitrary and opaque and waste space in the museum gallery.

In making the relics of the past more durable, more survivable, and imbuing them with possible significance in a setting that provokes remembering, the curator provides an experience for visitors that can afford them edification and, because remem-



by the most knowledgeable minds, assembled by those with the most love for the subject, and placed in front of us by the most caring of teachers.

The museum worker is an interpretative artist, a mediator who frees

bering is pleasurable, the entertainment that they seek. Museums are places where yesterday is at the service of today.

The Visitor's Contribution

Having talked briefly about what the museum worker does to frame the museum experience, I turn now to what the visitor should attempt to do to enhance the museum visit.

The museum is perceived by its visitors as a shrine wherein they can place their faith in the evidence of the past. Like pilgrims to a holy place, the visitors troop by the relics of other times and places. You don't have to be a specialist or scholar to understand the objects in a museum. They are the testimony of like human minds.

In the context of the imagination, time travel is possible. There are those who disbelieve in the past and are content with their experiences bracketed by their birth and death. They are stuck in their own generation, like a

fly in a fondue.

History, as a schoolbook collection of knowledge, is disparaged as interesting but useless. It can only become useful when that knowledge is referred back to our everyday experiences, used as hypotheses which direct inquiry along heretofore unthought of paths, used to widen our experiences and

For art to have meaning the beholders must bring to it some preparation. They must work at it, participate in it. A discriminating viewer will be able to perceive and enjoy more and new meanings in the museum experience and therefore will be rewarded with a deeper and prolonged appreciation. According to Plato, the

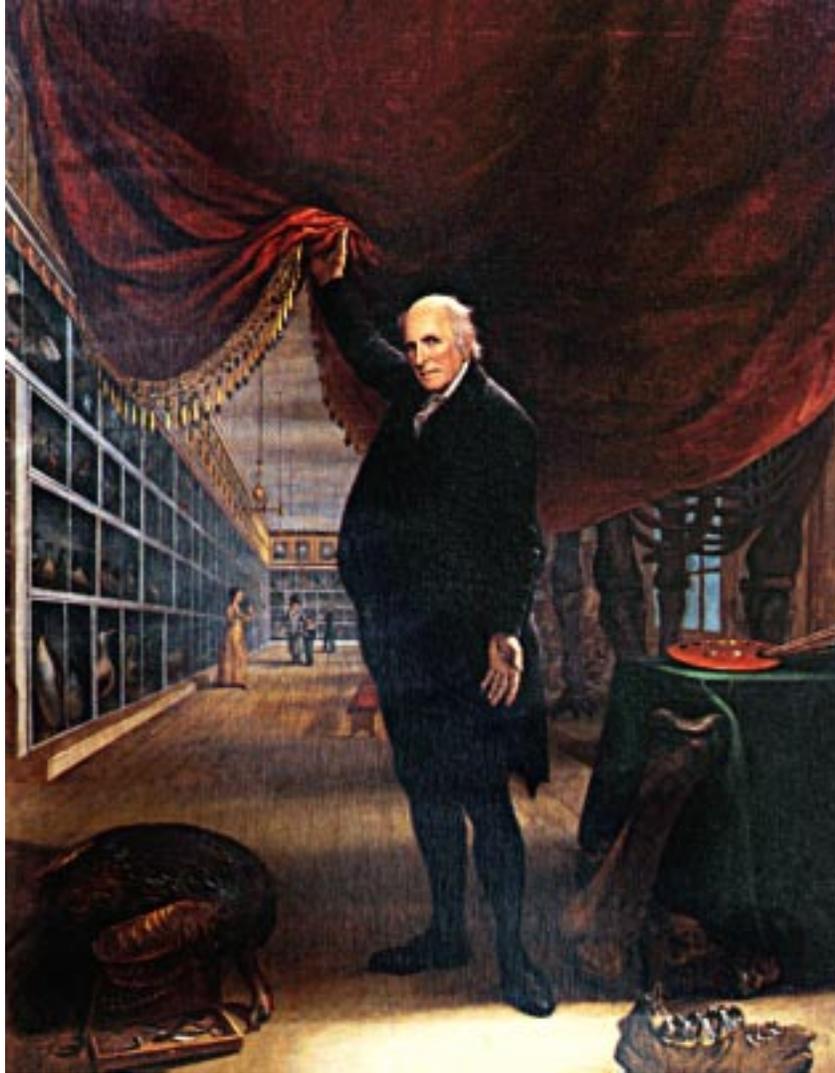
patrons are the best judges of art.

Those viewers who look for value in displays are a museum's best critics. Their criticism is made possible by the reflection upon the form and content.

If you wish to enlarge your experience, you must practice reflective thinking. Museums must show connections between things that will engender reflection on the part of the visitor, that will suggest further connections as he places himself in the experiential con-

text. The ideas suggest new undertakings.

The interpreter/designer employs skill; the consumer contributes taste. No matter how perfect the execution, the product will ultimately be judged by the perceiver in terms of his enjoyment. The artist must have the



deepen our understanding. The usefulness of history depends not on the teacher but on the pupil—the user. He who rules out history as being useless is probably correct because he will not use it. He who welcomes the enriching qualities of that art will be enriched.

perceiver in mind when he embarks. He brings to bear not only his powers of execution but his unusual sensitivity to quality.

In the museum history is recreated visually rather than mentally, mainly through the use of touchstones that we are not allowed to touch. The artifact affords a frame of reference for experience, a dimension for the vitality of the past. Placed in the context of the history exhibit, it can freeze-frames the flux of human endeavor.

Communing With the Artifact

When we think of a history museum, a number of things come to mind. We envision the galleries, the building that houses the exhibits, the people, like the volunteers that work so tirelessly to keep the institution thriving, some of the educational programs that bring the Army's unique history to the public, and even the gift shop where goodies overflow into the aisles. But we seldom think of that thing that gives the museum its purpose and distinctiveness—the artifact.

Museums can often speak more eloquently of the past than the history book or the flickering TV image. They have been invested with the metaphorical power of the artifact. The artifact is the starting point for a history museum. Without a thoughtful collection, the curator becomes just a historian putting books on the walls.

A museum's primary cargo is that artifact which imports the "Queerly strong perfumes" of former civiliza-

tions. It is the artifact's three-dimensional quality that gives it an advantage over the video or movie image. You can approach it from several angles and share its space. The artifact can overpower the book by offering the real thing rather than a wordy description. It engages the intellect.

The artifact has intrinsic value and it is the collection of these material things that separates the temple from the amusement park, the museum from the computer-driven gimcrackery of the trade show. The artifact is authentic. It is not an artist's rendering or a model-maker's approximation. It has been around. It is our culture's spoor. We can entertain and instruct only through its power. It is our link with the real past and can provide joy and uplift by virtue of its authentic connection to the past. The artifact throws its weight behind what had existed in the visitor's mind before only as an intellectual perception.

Artifacts would be quickly reduced to acid-etched fragments were the thousands of visitors who troop by them every week to touch them and lift them in order to get an appreciation of their heft. But the most intriguing thing about a three-dimensional object is their shape and mass and the best way to appreciate those characteristics is through the sense of touch. Since they can't be handled in a museum setting which seeks to preserve them from deterioration, the next best thing is to imagine their weight and texture, to think of the men that made and used them, and they how they must have felt to them, what problems their weight and contour might have posed for them, what pleasures their shapes might have

yielded.

This imagining the feel of an object is akin to the mental work done by a sculptor when he contemplates mass. Henry Moore has described it as "getting the solid shape, as it were, inside [the sculptor's] head—he thinks of it, whatever its size, as if he were holding it completely enclosed in the hollow of his hand. He mentally visualizes a complex form *from all round itself*; he knows while he looks at one side what the other side is like; he identifies himself with its center of gravity, its mass, its weight; he realizes its volume, as the space that the shape displaces in the air." [quoted in Read, Herbert, *The Art of Sculpture*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1956]

While the artifact occupies a prominent nave in the cathedral of history, it is not alone. It needs interpretation, it needs a body of scripture to invoke meaning. Art objects were created to speak for themselves; historical artifacts beg for interpretation. Otherwise they are just a midden hoard of mute evidence. The label is a pointer, a guide. It helps the viewer make a connection and impart specific meaning to the artifact. The label deflects the question, "So what?" It leads them the well-traveled aisle of history.

But the artifact is the soul of the museum. It is from another time and place, like a moonrock, and just by standing in its presence, one can be connected with that other time and place, contemplate the flow of history, and come to terms with the reality of that other historical existence. The artifact as sacred relic confronts one with the evidence for and possibility of historical knowledge. It is evidential, revealing, and a piece of sculpture displayed to please the in-

quiring person with the contours of its own time and place. The artifact is not a voiceless and decaying survivor of a past world. It gives off vibrations. It has the power to confirm or deny our hypotheses, to stir the brew of historic understanding. If beauty is “that which pleases,” the historic object is a beautiful object for the enlightenment it engenders in the searching mind. Additionally, many historic objects were intended in their own time to be works of art and therefore can please us on more than one level, like the rococo engravings on a battle saber artfully designed to ornament the object’s deadlier purpose.

In her poem *Memorabilia*, Adrienne Rich tries to make the connection with the past after reading the Civil War letters of a great grand uncle. She says:

History’s queerly
strong per-
fumes
Rise from the
crook of this day’s
elbow:
* * *

What, in fact, happened in these
woods

On some obliterated afternoon?

The boy George Patton would
palm the shell fragment that killed his

grandfather in the Civil War, and clutch the man’s blood-stained shirt. It led to a lifelong practice of making connections with the past through the objects of the present. He would become a man with a highly defined sense of history given form by poetic license. He saw his tankers as reincarnations of medieval knights.



When the Joad family packs up to leave Oklahoma for California in Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*, they find they must jettison some of their belongings, those things that carry special meaning. There is not enough room. But they find room for their

keepsakes at the expense of other things. They express the centrality of the artifact, when they declare, “How will we know it’s us without our past?”

The artifact is a synapse linking then and now. That connection was made by ninth century Chinese poet Li Ho when he picked up an arrowhead he found on the ancient battlefield of Ch’ang-p’ing. He wrote, “To left and right, in the air, in the earth, ghosts shrieked.”

Writer Julian Barnes described a visit he made in recent years to the hometown of Gustave Flaubert and a little museum in the town’s hotel where he found

“the unlikeliest exhibit—a stuffed green parrot. The label explained that this was the very parrot that Flaubert had borrowed from the local natural history museum when he was writing his story “A Simple Heart.” It appears there as Flecite’s parrot Loulou, a bird that increases in symbolic significance as the owners gets older and more fuddled.

Barnes continued:

...the strangeness om
the relic before me and the
improbability of its survival
al seemed very touching. It

was a small epiphany. This parrot had once stood on the writer’s desk; now, a century later, it stood in front of me. It was as though the parrot were a relay runner who had just passed on some invisible baton. I felt closer to Flaubert.”

[Parenthetically, he would find a second parrot at a second museum, it too claiming to be Flaubert's authentic parrot. Barnes felt deflated and deceived. While the story tells eloquently of the power of the artifact to transport the viewer over time, it also makes clear the curator's responsibility to authenticity.]

Stephen Jay Gould tells us in a 1991 issue of *Natural History* magazine about a meeting between the director of the Air and Space Museum and a group of sightless people representing blind clientele. Wanting something they could touch, they agreed upon a replica of the *Spirit of St. Louis*, but insisted that it be placed under the actual *Spirit of St. Louis*, suspended from the ceiling. They wanted to be in the presence of authenticity.

On 7 March 1944 Emmanuel Ringelblum was shot along with his wife and child by the Nazis in the blasted ghetto of Warsaw. Ringelblum, an intellectual and historian, was a leader of the Jewish resistance in Poland and the author of *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto*. Ringelblum hid his writings in three milk cans which he buried in the ghetto in the Spring of 1943 before the Jewish revolt. One of these milk cans surfaced when Polish president Lech Walesa visited the site of the Holocaust Museum and donated the can to the museum. While Walesa and other officials made speeches, the can stood on the platform and had a particular fascination for one of those present, Leon Wieseltier, who wrote:

...The milk can was about three feet tall. It was almost sensuously rusted, and the brown on its tor-

tered surface turned to gold as the sun lowered in the sky. It was sealed shut, with a mechanism that had the remonitory shape of a sickle. It sat silently in its clear plastic container, the aspic of historical consciousness. Sat silently, but subversively: as the proceedings wore on, the milk can shamed them, towered above them, mocked the platitudes, Polish and Jewish, that they were convened to confirm, restored the material integrity of the catastrophe, established the facticity that defeats language as completely as metal defeats light.

"The commemoration of the past is a fine anesthetic against the pain of the past. The Holocaust Museum," Veaseltier thinks, "will prove the proposition hourly. Still, now and then, a shock will get through. When the meeting broke up, the milk can was left alone on the stage. It was the very image of unassimilability. A few serious souls in the crowd came up for a closer look and drifted away. It had held its secret. In the dusk, it fairly glowed."

Just as that milk can glowed in the dusk, just as that deadly shell fragment that had lodged in grandfather spoke over the years to George Patton, just as the correspondence of Adrienne Rich's ancestor retained the aroma of the Civil War, so too can those carefully catalogued objects residing in military museums make history breathe in the spectator. Curators know the feeling. Even through their white linen gloves, they can feel an impression of a different time, he different milieu.

The Difference History Exhibits Can Make in Our Lives

It was said of Joseph Campbell that he "could make the bones of folklore and anthropology live." When he died in 1987, a memorial service was held for him at the Museum of Natural History in New York, for it was there that he became transfixed as a boy by the things that had been made by humans before him.

The dimensional historian is concerned with creating places where we can speak with the future, build dialogues with our great grandchildren. The historical museum display is merely a paraphrase, an attempt to isolate what is meaningful to an audience and express it dimensionally. It is our gift to tomorrow.

The museum is a space to which the museum worker brings his art and expertise, and to which the visitor brings his will to learn, both seeking a common ground for understanding.

I want to suggest that the dimensional historian, through the art of exhibit interpretation, not only provides the visitor the opportunity to have an aesthetic experience but literally changes the world. When the exhibit awakens a new thought or emotion in the spectator, it makes it

at once a different place in which to live. The artistic exhibit slips up on the viewer and hits him with an unexpected idea, one that he had not thought of before. Perhaps, he will spend a few minutes of his life writing down that idea, communicating it to others in his sphere. A few of these people will act upon that idea, and so the course of the world has been slightly jarred.

That is the history museum's bottom line. It is not the number of artifacts accessioned, nor how many educational programs are produced. It is not the services, the policies or even the attendance which measures the museum's mission effectiveness, but the lives that have been altered. And this can happen only through the art of history exhibits.

Stephen E. Weil in his book *Rethinking the Museum and Other Meditations*, views the museum as "an instrument of empowerment."

Its goal as such would be to provide the members of its public with a knowledge of the methods, processes, and techniques through which they, in turn, could make better-informed judgments about their own past and more insightful choices about their future.

The museum would not presume to teach a subject but would provide the means by which its clients could learn the subject for themselves. Rather than holding itself forth as the authoritative or exclusive source of historical interpretation or aesthetic



judgment, the museum would hope to enlist the visitor as a collaborator who might, in turn, develop his own sense of heritage, causality, connectedness, and taste—his own links to both an individual and a

communal past.

* * *

...the life of the community is richer for the work we do, if we make an important and positive difference in the lives of others, then the zeal we bring to our daily work will have been well rewarded, and our own working lives well spent.

Robert Frost, in trying to explain the essence of a poem, said, "it begins in delight, and ends in wisdom." For me, that is as good an explanation as any for what a visit to a history museum can do.

At the Fort Huachuca Museum, the dimensional historian helps today's soldier see his life and purpose reflected in the form and substance of the flow of the U.S. Army history in the Southwest.