The Divided House of the American Art Museum

Measures by almost any quantitative criterion, the American art museum stands at a historic peak of institutional power and prominence. Rising attendance figures, growing collections, building expansions, renovations, new foundations, busy home pages, interactive display systems, enlarged memberships, enormous endowment campaigns, splendid gifts, and continuous press coverage all testify to a handsomely enhanced status within American cultural, social, and economic life. "Fueled by a powerful national economy and aided by management policies put into effect over the past decade, museum growth appears, by some indices, to be a verifiable "boom," declares a recent article in Museum News. "There's an explosion," agrees one Philadelphia museum director, who is quoted in the same article. Business leaders, politicians, and newspaper editorials alike honor the museum as a force in the health of local economies and as a source for social integration. Merchandisers acknowledge the energy of museum product management and promotion, particularly the tactics associated with special exhibitions. Scholars have become frequent and energetic contributors to an eruption of symposia, lecture series, texts, and catalogs sponsored by museums and heavily subsidized by them. Foundations and corporate sponsors systematically underwrite ambitious exhibition programs. And activists praise museums as exemplars of the special American system of cultural philanthropy, blending tax-subsidized private giving with shifting levels of public support, which serve

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variously to support existing needs or energize new departures. Even current controversies, exciting so much media attention, demonstrate the newsworthy status of American museums.

Such absorption and interest are, in their expanse and intensity, relatively new. While the self-conscious professionalism and broad cultural ambitions of the American museum community may be more than a century old by now, and while critics and commentators, here and abroad, have long acknowledged the special user-friendly style of American museums, their rise to distinction, if not celebrity, has been a product of the last three or four decades.4

So late an ascent has not been for want of trying. For much of this century museum staffs have tried to secure public attention for their institutions; public-relations programs, some of them scoring spectacular successes, go back many years. But for a variety of reasons, the social functions museums perform, their significance in the larger life of the community, and the interest taken in their activities are perceived to have moved up to another level.

With gains, of course, come costs. And critiques. Criticism of museums, once more, is not new. The size, wealth, internal arrangements, and architecture of museums, as well as the inherent decontextualization of museum exhibits, had attracted hostility in the nineteenth century and certainly in the early twentieth century. The gargantuan temples of the early twentieth century were labeled by some critics “dignified disasters”; their organization of exhibits resembled nothing more than a “Minotaur’s labyrinth,” ran one, not atypical, complaint; museum policies were condemned as socially aloof and indifferent.5 Some educators fumed about museum failures to acknowledge contemporary needs and interests, while others condemned large-scale collecting as the poisoned fruit of capitalism.

But such charges, however numerous, were embedded within a broadly positive set of endorsements. The museum, in theory at least, seemed to epitomize the best of civilization. Reflecting high standards of scholarship or connoisseurship, selfless giving, and a democratic interest in self-improvement, it apparently transcended political and social divisiveness. The criticism of the last few decades has been far more fundamental.
Accompanying the dizzying rise of museums in public awareness have been a series of challenges, some mounted by scholars, some by museum administrators and curators, some by members of the public, and some by competitors. Collecting policies, exhibition planning, governance, financing, institutional arrangements, hours of opening, fee charging, commercial exploitation, interpretive stances, even cultural legitimacy itself have stimulated assaults. They have not necessarily been consistent. Museums have been labeled racist, revisionist, hegemonic, elitist, politically correct, mercenary, greedy, and self-serving. Responding to their growing sets of critics, many American museums sound a defensive note rather than basking in their growing influence. This apparent paradox—triumphant public achievements coexisting with sternly issued warnings—deserves explanation. When and how did American museums come to change? How have they not changed? And why has so much controversy erupted over their professional mission and practices? Links between the two trends have grown closer in the last thirty years, the period of this survey.

Revealed in a composite snapshot of the 1950s, American museums, art museums particularly, my special focus here, strongly resembled their ancestors of several generations earlier, if not in size, number, and wealth, then at least in management style, governance, financial support, philosophy, and general reputation. Self-perpetuating boards of trustees, representing major business, professional, political, and collecting interests, leavened often by social pedigree, supervised programs that were financed largely through endowment, contributions, and, in a few places, by massive memberships or local taxes. As in most other areas of American institutional life, the influential figures tended to be white males of Northern European descent, and the same thing was true of institutional staff, with some exceptions forced by a need for specialized skills. Active educational activities with professionally trained staff linked to public school systems characterized most metropolitan areas. Museum buildings tended to be traditional in appearance, a number of them already, in the 1950s, receiving substantial additions to house growing collections of objects. In keeping with democratic ideology and most charters of incorporation,
museums tended to emphasize the value of large attendance, clear and comprehensive labeling, docent and lecture programs, and other devices meant to encourage broad public visitation. Collection development rested largely, although not entirely, on the opportunities presented by local connoisseurs and collectors, along with the criteria and desiderata established by professional staff and administrators. Few institutions possessed funds sufficient for them to shape their holdings. In art, at least, comprehensive anthological collections were deemed the most appropriate way of establishing distinction. Promotion and publicity were already part of larger operations but obeyed generally agreed upon limits of propriety. Newspapers, radio, and the new medium of television were exploited in moderation, but there were brochures, catalogs, postcards, handouts, and some souvenirs available, more frequently for visiting exhibitions and special occasions than for permanent collections.

Generally speaking, American museums, while understood to be slower-paced, more formal, quieter, even deader sectors of social action than most other areas of contemporary life, were treated respectfully by the local press. Visitors from abroad testified to the good reputation enjoyed by American museums for their accessibility, coherence, aggressive educational programs, labeling, and cultivation of private gifts. Museum history and analysis were largely matters of professional interest; the American Association of Museums had a tradition of commissioning special surveys, while individual museums, as part of larger programs of self-promotion, supported authorized and largely uncritical histories of their operation. While not especially smug or complacent, given the continuing need to raise private funds for ordinary operations, and humbled to some extent by the competition of mass entertainment, museum staffs up through the 1950s might be said to have operated within an atmosphere of self-satisfaction. To be sure, contemporaneous observers defined certain problems, among them issues of boundary keeping, a certain passivity in stimulating new activities, and a general air of fatigue, which apparently got in the way of attracting broader audiences. As suggested earlier, such critiques had been a part of museum discourse by then for more than half a century, voiced by trustees, administrators, and
mators as well as by journalists and lay people. Such qualifications not only obtained some attention, they occasionally culminated in actual reforms. Repudiation of the immediate museum past as dusty, remote, lifeless, and unimaginative became an expressive ritual for each generation of museum professionals since the late nineteenth century. One German art historian described the art museum in 1890 as a place “where every separate object kills every other and all of them together the spirit.” Twenty years later, Mary Harrt was telling readers of Outlook magazine that docentry had recently “transformed the museum from a grim fastness for the safeguarding of the possessions of art into a people’s palace of delights,” converting the staff from “a body of narrow-ranged specialists . . . into a company of eager profyters [sic] . . . .” The day is passing, Benjamin Ives Gilman of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, wrote one year later, when “the accumulations of museums will be accepted as a measure of their success. They will be asked what they are doing to make their accumulations tell on the community.” Still before World War I, a Metropolitan Museum of Art lecturer declared that while nineteenth-century museums existed “simply to provide an esoteric and aesthetic mausoleum of pictures, open on certain days of the week to a few people,” now “the museums desire to reach the largest number of people and do the greatest amount of good.” Twenty years later, during the depression, museum specialists were still announcing the birth of new, more socially conscious institutions. The Art Institute of Chicago, Elizabeth Luther Cary reported to readers of the New York Times, was “deliberately sacrificing opportunities of acquiring art for what it considers the more important opportunity of inspiring art and the appreciation of art.” In 1935 Grant Code of the Brooklyn Museum pointed proudly to a recent shift of attention “from the museum object to the museum visitor.” Reform, then, is a long-standing tradition within American museums. Experiments in media programming, in branch museums, in longer and more convenient opening hours, in hosting of musical and social events, and in sponsorship of cooperative community activities formed a corps of active responses. The much maligned Metropolitan Museum of Art was showing portions of its collections in neigh-
borhood venues throughout the city—mainly high schools and libraries—to some 474,000 visitors in 1937.\textsuperscript{12}

But despite the rhetoric, the exceptions, and the promises, despite the continuing sense of new beginnings, despite occasional lapses into populist activity at moments of crisis, this sense of adventurous marketing was not sustained. On the whole, American museums, and art museums especially, up through the early 1960s might be said to have constituted a self-enclosed world, clearly defined by hierarchies of prestige and privilege, visited by largely traditional audiences, and promulgating an ideal of self-restraint in their display of art, history, science, and culture.

Have they changed? From the standpoint of governance and maybe even of staffing, perhaps not all that much, despite the recent boom and growth in size. But in many other ways they have changed quite a lot. American museums today, building on the last several decades, claim new and unprecedented levels of support as well as increased attendance and a great number of user-friendly programs. They are active suitors of new audiences, they partner with a variety of civic and cultural organizations, they welcome gifts and exhibitions of classes of objects they once dismissed as irrelevant or unimportant, they tackle themes that are socially relevant and court controversy, and they promote and merchandise themselves with impressive aggressiveness. They seem unashamed of their mimicry of business corporations and willing to experiment with aggressive systems of outreach. Who or what has been responsible for these shifts? And what difference have they made to the museum as a social institution?

It is difficult to know precisely when to date the reinvention of the American museum or where to locate its shift toward active audience development. But signs of awareness can be found even in the 1950s and early 1960s that the stable serenity of the museum world could not go on forever.

One source for all this was economic. Museum budgets, especially those of nonprofit museums, have always been highly vulnerable to inflationary pressures and to rises in energy and labor costs. During the Eisenhower years, inflation remained relatively low and stock-market yields high, enabling tradi-
tional methods of financing museum operations to stay largely intact. Only two of the years between 1949 and 1959 saw a negative return from stocks, and in five of those years, the real returns averaged more than 20 percent annually. Wealthy board members and individual patrons could still make up the difference between income and outgo on an annual basis, although calls for help might become increasingly frantic. To take one example, the operating costs of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, increased over the ten-year period from 1948 to 1958 by 56 percent, but the museum’s operating income moved up 68 percent. There were deficits, to be sure, and they were worrisome, but they were beginning to decline and the problem did not seem insurmountable. In New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Cleveland, where, unlike Boston, there were significant public subsidies to museum operation, the story was not fundamentally different: controlled growth with heavy reliance upon endowment income and annual contributions. The New-York Historical Society, an institution that would experience severe financial difficulties in the 1980s and 1990s, in 1956 obtained 194 percent of its total income from a return on investments, and, like quite a few other museums and libraries, could confidently think about expansion of its mission.13

By the mid 1960s and early 1970s, signs of real trouble had emerged. Fueled in part by the Vietnam War and in part by national economic policies, inflation had begun to erode the power of endowments. With returns on equities reflecting a sluggish stock market, the term “stagflation” became popular as a way of capturing the strange if depressing conjunction of two unhappy economic trends.

Increasing costs, however, were caused only partially by a general inflation. They reflected, as well, the pressures put on building maintenance and energy costs by enlarged attendance, the need to modernize obviously outdated facilities, and the skyrocketing prices demanded for acquisitions. The inflation of the 1970s led many individuals to invest in arts and antiques, among other objects, as a form of hedging. While this eventually would intensify the appeal of the art museum to the general public as a repository for fabulously valuable objects, it also produced unprecedented constraints on institutional purchas-
ing. Museum officials lost no opportunity to point out the discrepancies produced; drowning in popularity became a popular refrain.

Financial pressures spawned a number of effects. One was a turn to government, at every level—local, state, and federal—for increased support. The establishment of the two National Endowments in the mid 1960s and the activities of various state arts and humanities councils constituted not only a source of immediate revenue but a larger promissory note. These were followed by the creation of the Institute of Museum and Library Services a decade later. The expansion of governmental support rested on many things, but the rhetoric of cultural competition, inspired by Cold War rivalries, constituted one of the more significant factors. Throughout the Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations there existed a willingness to tolerate subsidy of the arts and humanities in order to counter the charges of soulless materialism being advanced by America's adversaries. State Department art and lecture tours, White House conferences, international fellowship programs, student loans, visiting professorships, and ultimately the two National Endowments and the Institute of Museum and Library Services formed part of the response. Although they were far behind universities in obtaining rewards from these programs, museums benefited directly and indirectly from these activities, as they did from the federal indemnification program, a device that made the federal government the principal insurer for great (and expensive) international exhibitions. Public funding thus permitted museums to host unprecedented blockbuster exhibitions, to expand education programs, to invite scholars to participate in publications and exhibition planning, to modernize management and facilities, and generally to expand programs of many kinds.

But museum financial pressures were affected only marginally by public subsidies. More fundamental was the need to create larger constituencies of supporters and to increase revenues through increased attendance and the sale of goods and services. American museums had never been totally averse to commercial opportunism; in early years institutions as distinguished as the Art Institute of Chicago counted on renting out
part of their facilities to other organizations, and indeed the Art Institute could not have constructed its monumental Michigan Avenue building without the cooperative support of Columbian Exposition authorities who used it for congresses, lectures, and seminars before the museum's formal opening. Postcards, souvenirs, and other promotional materials had been available in gift shops before World War II. In the 1930s organizations like Colonial Williamsburg had begun to license manufacturers to produce reproductions of their holdings in return for royalty fees. And, responding to financial challenges in the 1950s, some museums, to step up their membership levels, developed creative recruitment strategies. Some even began to redesign their annual reports, peppering them with photographs and eye-catching graphics in imitation of the corporate model.

But these commercial activities were mere dalliances compared to what happened in the 1960s and 1970s. As museums coped with larger crowds and as the consumer market grew in scale and ambition, there came a realization that the shop could become a major source of profit. Books, catalogs, articles of clothing, reproduced antiques, sometimes actual antiques, craft objects, greeting cards, jewelry, clothing accessories, and novelties of all kinds (many, but not all, based on museum collections, but not necessarily on the host museum's collection) filled the shelves of these stores and, in time, the pages of mail-order catalogs. The museum visit became part of a larger buying experience. In fact, many museum stores were strategically located so that visitors could patronize them without actually entering the museum. So active would museum stores become over the next few decades that their tax-exempt status in satellite sites became the subject of special inquiries.

That museums could become shopping destinations, dependent upon patronage, not only in stores but in restaurants and cafeterias as well, meant they would need to develop exhibition strategies to support the visitor numbers these services required for effectiveness. The string of blockbusters in the 1970s and 1980s included shows featuring the art of ancient Egypt, Vatican collections, gold from the Caucasus, and Impressionist masters. These became news stories and media events because of the unprecedented crowds they attracted. Blockbusters brought in
new members (at least for a time) and new visitors, and some of them soon attracted corporate sponsorship as well. In their quest for support, museums had begun to court large corporations and their foundations, which found exhibition patronage to be a powerful instrument of beneficent publicity. Some museum officials worried that blockbusters eclipsed the museum’s more ordinary functions (and permanent collections), overemphasized the value of large numbers, consumed far too much revenue and staff time, degraded the viewing experience with uncomfortable and inappropriate crowding, and set institutions on boom-or-bust cycles. But the publicity, the income, and the sense of serving a public far larger than the museum’s customary constituencies proved too enticing to be resisted most of the time. Museum facades began to resemble movie theater marquees, more and more of them now sporting banners that proclaimed current temporary exhibitions. Because of their limited durations, such exhibitions ensured, as certainly as theaters did with their changing programs, returning patrons eager to see the next show.

Once more, the phenomenon of frequently changing exhibitions and spectacular blockbusters was not invented in this period. American museums had cultivated the visiting show earlier in the century when their own collections were not always up to sustained scrutiny. And during the 1920s and 1930s specific shows—the Museum of Modern Art’s traveling Van Gogh show, the Guelph Treasures at the Cleveland Museum, the Century of Progress exhibition at Chicago’s Art Institute—had attracted enormous crowds. But these events, exceptional in the 1920s and 1930s, and a bit more common in the 1950s and 1960s, became routinized in the 1970s, absorbed into the ordinary calendar of events, and treated by urban audiences as a normal part of the cultural agenda.

By the 1990s some museum shows had achieved the complex planning levels of major trade fairs, with tie-ins to hotels, restaurants, railroads, and airplane systems; they yielded impressive benefits to local businesses and municipal tax revenues. They were also graphic evidence of the museum’s involvement with the larger life of the community. It was difficult to charge museums with standoffishness and withdrawal when
hundreds of thousands of visitors would make their way, in just a few weeks, to particular cities simply because of their interest in a museum exhibition. In some cities, museums seemed more significant than professional sports franchises, or at least more lucrative. The income generated by very popular shows served to subsidize, of course, more scholarly, specialized, or recondite exhibitions that otherwise would have been difficult to support.

Curators and museum directors, responding to critiques of their new consumer-friendly policies, pointed this fact out on many occasions, without always convincing doubters that the larger policy made sense.

What could not be denied, however, were the gains of energy, drama, excitement, newsworthiness, prestige, and membership (not always a permanent gain) that blockbuster shows added to their host museums. And this, in turn, strengthened the credentials of museums as they applied to governments for further support. In a curious and even ironic way, consumerist orientation seconded the public-service rhetoric that had so long been part of the museum vocabulary. And many of these developments were simply responses to the financial stringencies born out of the weakened power of endowments.

But simultaneous with financial motivations for programmatic expansion and public cultivation were ideological imperatives born from a mood of public protest and carried forward by a broader sense of social equity. Here emphasis was placed not simply on numbers, as it had been decades earlier, but on demographic representation. A pervasive sense existed that museum governance, attendance, collecting, and exhibition policies reflected racial, gender, religious, and class dominance. Critics argued that traditional boundaries no longer suited an increasingly self-conscious multicultural society. Swirling around museum discussions was, of course, a much larger movement that would, in time, be translated into debates about affirmative action, equal opportunity, hiring practices, ghettoization, and gender and racial stereotyping, among other things. A compound of the struggle for racial justice, the protests against the Vietnam War, a revolt by youth against the authority of parents and teachers, the new era proclaimed itself most dramatically in the museum universe in January of 1969,
just thirty years ago, with the intensely polarizing exhibition hosted by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, *Harlem on My Mind*. Decades later, the echoes of the angry words it provoked still resonate. Like the famous Armory show half a century earlier, *Harlem on My Mind* was as important for its revelation of existing assumptions and expectations as for its actual exhibits. A multimedia documentary history of African-American life in Harlem, studded with extraordinary photographs, the show and its catalog raised many questions: about appropriate exhibition subjects, about curatorial staffing and editing, about audience makeup, about originality and scholarly accuracy, and, above all, about the relationship between the inside and outside of the museum. These questions would ferment for decades to come.15

Again, it was not that such issues had never been raised before the 1960s. But what *Harlem on My Mind* did was dramatize a sense of injury and exclusion felt by whole groups of people: exclusions of caste, class, viewpoint, status, value, ethnicity, activity, or affiliation. The museum’s historic claims to transcendent representation, its sense of standing above the fray of contending opinions, already called into question by reformers, professionals, and practicing artists for several generations, were now subjected to angry rebuke by other constituencies. The specifics of the New York show, the angry debates about distortion, responsibility, demagoguery, plagiarism, exploitation, and pandering, are, once more, less significant than the way the exhibition proclaimed itself to be an obvious watershed, announcing the arrival of a new era and claiming to challenge museum practices that it declared far too comfortable and self-congratulatory. With its photographs of Harlem, its deliberately provocative catalog, and its new groups of museum-goers, the show posed three different challenges to the museum: first, dramatically to redefine its urban audience; second, to tackle controversial contemporary social issues; and third, to incorporate formats, objects, and artists who, until then at least, did not appear to belong in an art museum.

These issues were dramatized by a confluence of circumstances, some of them contingent, that pinpointed the crisis in the country’s city of art and in its greatest museum. That this
museum was being directed by a young, newly appointed, self-celebrating, and rhetorically ambitious prophet, prepared to cleanse the temple and restore it to the purposes he believed it once was meant to serve, made the moment all the more painful, problematic, or triumphant, depending on one's view. Just months before the exhibition opened, Thomas Hoving, speaking at a meeting of the American Association of Museums, reported that, in response to the set of crises the nation was experiencing, the Metropolitan had awakened in itself "a keener conscience and social responsibility," reexamining community relations and public services, shaking up its organization, and reaching out to new audiences. "Instead of sitting back and accepting the arrows of their discontent, we're trying to bring them into the shop...." Hoving spoke respectfully of an earlier point in the Met's history, when trustees had apparently welcomed involvement with the social order. Museums had to recover that heritage. The "crusading museum is a reflection of the political ethos of today," he declared elsewhere. "It is part of the same thing as the attack on poverty, the urban extension of services for all sorts of people."

The storm of controversy surrounding *Harlem on My Mind* was even more significant because its host, the Metropolitan, was just passing the century mark, planning a heady round of exhibitions, publications, receptions, and fund-raising efforts designed to celebrate its past and launch an extraordinary expansion into the surrounding groves and meadows of Central Park. Centennials are made for introspection and reassessment; it was the Met's fate to hold its birthday party for guests who were uncertain whether they were attending a celebratory banquet or a ritual of atonement.

The Met, of course, was not alone. Urban museums across the country encountered a whole series of protests. Like many other professional meetings, the annual convention of the American Association of Museums was disrupted by demonstrations aimed at challenging policies declared repressive and inequitable. Museum trustees faced embarrassments ranging from picket lines to the release of cockroaches. Art magazines ran symposia on the status of museums and hosted intense debates about the harmful impact or irrelevance of museum-going. For
the “vast majority of people throughout the world,” wrote Linda Nochlin in 1971, concluding an essay on museums and radicalism, “struggling against poverty, decimated by war and hunger or crushed by demeaning life-styles, neither art nor culture nor the museums themselves have ever really been alive.”\(^{18}\) The “Museum age,” declared Brian O’Doherty in 1971, “is over.”\(^{19}\)

Despite this tone of formality, proposals for redemption emerged. They included the expansion of art categories to include kitsch and graffiti rooms, the creation of vest-pocket museums, the addition of community representatives to boards of trustees, pageant productions to make the megamuseums more inviting and less intimidating, drastic decentralization, downsizing, and branch facilities.\(^{20}\) While traditional charges of jumboism, clutter, and irrelevance were not entirely quieted, as this list suggests, they were overshadowed by newer attacks on museum power-politics, public-relations efforts, and cultural colonialism.

During the thirty years that followed, despite a string of great triumphs, American museums have put into effect few of the fundamental reforms proposed. Museum governance has not changed significantly, decentralization has not become characteristic, branches are few in number, and staffing criteria have not been dramatically modified. But in planning exhibitions, developing collections, targeting new audiences, and, finally, confronting significant contemporary issues, museums did begin to change. Some of these responses, again, were linked to financial stringencies. Courting popularity, after all, made commercial sense. Others were functions of increased public funding. Government grants often emphasized diversity. But the aggressive pursuit of minority visitation reflected new knowledge and a new will.

To speak about knowledge first, it is difficult to realize the crudity of earlier conventional wisdom about museum attendance. Before the 1970s few museums possessed significant information about just who their audiences were and why they came to visit. Most were simply not interested, or assumed that common-sense assumptions were a sufficient basis for policy making. There were, to be sure, periodic surveys undertaken,
and in the 1920s several psychologists made some pioneering efforts to investigate gaze time and gallery memory. But in those years the primary thrust of research into consumer preferences was reserved for profit-making enterprises and factored into the costs of marketing such goods and services. Moreover, during these same years, probably right through the 1950s, there was a reluctance by museum professionals to link their institutions to others concerned with market share. The very basis of museum identity was shaped by a sense of exceptionalism so far as the larger political economy was concerned, in indifference to or even in opposition to mere popularity. What the growth of public subsidies did was increase the pressure on museums to demonstrate their relationship to broader audiences and ultimately force a series of more sophisticated audience surveys. Incomplete, spasmodic, and uneven as they were in the 1970s and 1980s, the surveys began to break visitation down by age, race, income level, residence, and other indices. Although many museums were (and indeed some remain) slow learners about their visitors, some progress developed. Specialists in audience analysis appeared, sociologists and statisticians among them, capable of analyzing the racial, social, and economic makeup of museum constituencies (as well as the patrons for other nonprofit cultural organizations). Employed by government agencies as well, these experts pinpointed underserved sectors, although they could not necessarily devise strategies that would change the mix or increase the pool. But armed with the information, and aided by foundation support and merchandising advisers, some American museums began to do just this, attempting to shift the profile of their visitor populations in the interests of making it more representative of the general population. Self-evaluation was becoming a standard part of ongoing institutional activities.

And the quest for more knowledge was driven by something beyond mere technical needs. The growth of focus interviewing, a series of supervised, sometimes lengthy, and often expensively monitored encounters with museum-goers, demonstrated this during the 1980s and 1990s. These conversational efforts, in several cases funded by the Getty Trust, attempted to discover which museum features attracted or repelled visitors,
what kinds of displays they found particularly appealing or especially unappealing, what their assumptions, expectations, and actual gallery experiences were like, and which kinds of promotion and publicity seemed to work better than others. Major museums undertaking such projects could repair policies that were not always working, but these repairs were often expensive when sustained, and grants to support inquiries did not invariably subsidize improvements. But the turn to focus interviews, among a series of other techniques, demonstrated a hunger to learn more about the museum as visitors actually experienced it. This went beyond mere responses to financial need or governmental and foundation mandate. It reflected an awareness that interactions between themselves and objects remained complex, mysterious, and profoundly significant to twentieth-century people, and that somehow, as instruments of pleasure, sources of personal and collective validation, and mediators with history and science, museums helped to define these relationships.

The absorption with self-improvement that has characterized American museums with such special intensity these last three decades may also have owed something to the fact that the international museum community was simultaneously being energized by extraordinary new levels of support. Where once the educational, architectural, and curatorial innovations of American museums had created a clear standard of world performance, now all over Europe, Canada, and in parts of Asia, boldly assertive museums, often armed with generous public support and significant private collections as well, opened to the public with elaborate programs of education and publicity. Montreal, Ottawa, Rotterdam, Stuttgart, London, Paris, Barcelona, Madrid, Helsinki, Stockholm, Turin, Tokyo, and Bilbao were among the many cities outside the United States to sport cultural complexes that were sometimes astonishing in their boldness. Older institutions such as the Louvre have not hesitated to adapt to and then move well beyond the marriage between commodity merchandising and art display that American museums promoted. Indeed, most American museums may seem somewhat dowdy and conservative by comparison, their alliances with commercial and political interests who are will-
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mg to subsidize operations and exhibitions more tentative than in Europe and Canada. A walk around the shopping center that surrounds the entrance to the Louvre is enough to establish this point. American architects, museum professionals, and tourists have contributed mightily to the vigor of this overseas museum empire, but its somewhat competitive vitality may well have stunted some American museums to even greater activity.

If the growing social and economic significance of museums was trans-Atlantic in character, so too was the expanding critique of their practices and influence. In Europe the contributions of Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida, quickly translated into English, helped transform contemporary theories of subjectivity, representation, and otherness. Critiques of post-Enlightenment history, supplemented by contemporary investigations into audience composition, essentially eviscerated a whole range of reformist institutions that had long claimed to progressive admiration: hospitals, reformatories, public-school systems, universities, libraries, and museums. These institutions, and others like them, turned out not to be trophies of benevolence but disciplinary devices in an extended class war, with spectacle and gaze as part of the new economy. Explaining the growth of the hospital, Foucault said that it "became viable for private initiative from the moment that sickness, which had come to seek a cure, was turned into a spectacle. Helping ended up by paying, thanks to the virtues of the clinical gaze." 21 With pain itself a spectacle, looking and showing in order to know and to teach became violence upon sick minds and bodies that more immediately demanded comfort rather than display. If the language of spectacle, gazing, and display could be applied to illness and incarceration, how much more easily could it be applied to art? And how quickly one could turn from Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon to enveloping, sacralizing institutions like museums. Even when museums were differentiated from these other sites, they nonetheless enjoyed extraordinary powers. Tony Bennett, an Australian student of museum history, posited an "exhibitionary complex" that contrasted with the asylum, the clinic, and the prison—the cluster Foucault had examined. This approach concerned itself not merely with a governable, disciplined populace, but one
that assented to its status. Museums "sought rhetorically to incorporate the people within the processes of the state. If the museum and the penitentiary thus represented the Janus face of power, there was none the less—at least symbolically—an economy of effort between them. ... Where instruction and rhetoric failed, punishment began."  

Aside from specifically privileging certain classes of objects and dignifying their owners—longtime criticisms—during the late twentieth century museums have been fingered as significant social narrators, codifying modernity, organizing history, subduing nature, and ultimately disciplining their visitors. The great national and civic museums of art were organized, argues Donald Preziosi in one representative analysis, "so as to stage the dramaturgies of modern nation-states." The museum itself had become an institution "of astonishingly potent and subtle illusion ... one of the most powerful factories for the production of modernity." While the late-twentieth-century museum was bringing together many varied aspects of human creativity, it "remains as the very emblem of desires set into motion by the enterprise of the Enlightenment," one of the "premier theoretical machineries for the production of the present." The museum, condemned decades earlier for its irrelevance and distance from contemporary life, was now discovered to be a theater for the performance of hegemonic rites, a central instrument for promoters of modern values and systems of discipline. 

Such appraisals have swelled in number. One recent reviewer of texts on museums and collecting refers to a "museophobic discourse." Two historians wrote in 1994 that over the past twenty years, "a broad range of critical analyses have converged on the museum, unmasking the structures, rituals, and procedures by which the relations between objects, bodies of knowledge, and processes of ideological persuasion are enacted." Nothing the museum did was unconnected to its instrumental functions: its systems of classification and display, its site and architectural plan, its choice of special exhibitions, its permanent collections, its educational programs, its catalogs and stores, its bestowal of honor and prestige. Drawing on and occasionally merging Marxism, semiotics, structuralism, and post-structuralism, a cluster of scholarly critics produced a
of treatises offering prominence to earlier commentators—
Walter Benjamin, T. W. Adorno, Georg Lukacs, Georg
Gimmel, and Antonio Gramsci, among others. It is difficult to
understand the complexity and hard to overemphasize the intel-
lectual influence of these analyses, which helped stimulate a
considerable international literature on the history and sociology of
collecting, display, classification, and museums. Museums them-
Selves exemplify the levels of co-optation that were part of
these analyses, invited some of their critics to serve as exhibit-
curators and began to incorporate, within exhibition labels
and catalogs, questions about their functions as bringers of
authority and codifiers of order. Being sensitive to the new
museum scholarship and incorporating representatives of the
new sensibility into their staffs, directors and curators occasion-
nally agreed to deconstruct the sources of their expertise and
emphasize the fallible character of interpretation.

But the new museology, with its revisionary views of museum
history and function, probably affected museums less than did
the series of dilemmas, swelling in number and complexity as the
millennium approached. Each of them merits extended analysis,
but for present purposes a short list may suffice. Some, of
course, have already been addressed, and they did not always
possess the value of consistency. On the one hand, charges of
elitism, of catering to wealthy, well-educated audiences with
attractions subsidized by public money, continued to attract the
attention of critics and newspaper editorialists, determined to
put a halt to federal funding. On the other, often coming from
the same mouths, were complaints about crass commercialism,
philistine exploitation of artistic masterpieces, vulgarity, Disney-
lke imitations, technological hype, and concentration upon the
bottom line. Museum directors could legitimately claim bewil-
derment at being told, simultaneously, to avoid the public trough
and stand on their own two feet, but not to resemble too closely
the commercial world that, after all, had to show a profit.
Although there were some limited victories in these skirmishes—the
two National Endowments and the Institute of Museum and
Library Services continue to exist—American museums, like
other cultural institutions, failed to make much of a dent in the
larger discussion of public subsidies.
But ballyhoo and elitism are far from exhausting the list of current challenges. Controversial shows—on art, history, and science alike—have, while testifying to museum willingness to confront social relevance, also stimulated attacks and efforts to distinguish the museum from the school or university, as a site not for contesting and debating truth but one that more appropriately celebrates consensual values. While not a universal view by any means, the notion that exhibitions are more difficult to argue with than lectures or written texts is a popular one. If museum displays are by nature more authoritarian than the printed page, and if their visitation is more heterogeneous and more vulnerable than the classroom, some critics see all the more reason for them to rise above the vortex of scholarly interpretation and stick to clearly established facts, whatever their limitation.26

Still others challenge museums on issues of ownership and possession. Newspaper exposés paint respected institutions as complicit abettors of a series of crimes: theft, smuggling, and expropriation of property among them. Whether accused of the purchase or acceptance of classical antiquities with dubious provenance, the display of treasures smuggled out of Latin America or Southeast Asia, or the presentation of art expropriated from its rightful owners by Nazi officials, museums are forced to defend both their policies and their integrity and to investigate more effectively the provenance of everything they own or exhibit.

There are some who take a different line, attacking museums for taking the path of least resistance in their quest for attention, abjectly obeying the elaborate surveys and planning strategies that are designed to increase attendance, funding, and popularity. Instead of setting standards, they assert, museums are responding to them, dumbing down exhibits and labels, relying upon elaborate (and expensive) orientation films, audio tours, and interactive terminals—anything to avoid concentrating upon the fundamental if difficult experience of confronting objects on their own. The expanded educational staffs, the elaborate school and family programs, the broad range of social activities intended to market the museum to new audiences, all have aroused the scorn of purists who accuse muse-
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...mean of becoming therapy centers or adopting the techniques of Disney, Nike, and Universal Studios.22

Actually, of course, these are among the museum's competitors for patronage and attention, particularly among the young. Even while museums have gained so impressively in size, numbers, and influence during the past three decades, their growth has been dwarfed by the explosive advance of entertainment, destination marketing, theme parks, professional sports, and other recreational outlets. The fact that the boundaries separating museums from commerce, hospitality, and entertainment institutions are more porous today merely reflects the pervasive presence of these powerful forces that do indeed shape expectations for exhibitry.

There are grounds for wondering, then, just how significant a cultural and social force museums have become. The rhetoric of both their promoters and their critics suggests levels of influence and power that they may not possess. The exaggerated tirades of an earlier day, created by those who persistently labeled museums morgues, mausoleums, charnel houses, and institutions dead to the world around them, are complemented by contemporary assignments of responsibility for sustaining the class structure, spreading racism, and protecting the canonized narratives of Western civilization. Only the university rivals the museum among contemporary institutions in its simultaneous position of prestige and vulnerability to criticism. But the university, unlike the museum, gives credentials to its consumers and shapes their careers as well as their values.

What are we to make, then, of the position of museums in modern American life? Do they shape anyone's values, validate anyone's identity, impose any lasting sort of order? Their significance is clear for scholars, students, connoisseurs, and enthusiasts. But for most ordinary visitors, has the American museum shed its traditional functions of yielding pleasure, diversion, and status? Does it continue to store and highlight broadly valued objects? How are we to measure the impact of the museum experience, or even to talk about so diverse a universe of institutions in any categorical way? Something has happened, these last thirty years particularly, but just what that
is remains unclear. Finding that out will continue to defy our patience, our energy, and, above all, our ingenuity.

ENDNOTES

1As quoted in Jane Lusaka and John Strand, “The Boom—And What To Do About It,” *Museum News* 77 (November/December 1998): 57. The article brings together some of the statistical support for the notion of a “Golden Age” of museums.

2See, for example, the series of articles published in a special section of the *New York Times* (“Museums,” *New York Times*, 21 April 1999) for evidence of the art museum’s transforming urban influence.


4This is not to argue, of course, that serious intellectual ambitions and activities are new to the American museum. For one recent study arguing the case for the centrality of museums in the epistemology of nineteenth- and twentieth-century America, see Steven Conn, *Museums and American Intellectual Life, 1876–1926* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). For admiring European comments on American museums see, for example, the observations of Sir Henry Miers quoted in the *New York Times*, 27 May 1928, 6.


6This was Julius Langbehn in *Rembrandt als Erzieher*, as quoted in Benjamin Ives Gilman, *Museum Ideals of Purpose and Method* (Cambridge: Riverside Press and Boston Museum of Fine Arts, 1918).


8Benjamin Ives Gilman, “Docent Service at the Boston Art Museum,” *Nation* 91 (1 September 1910): 197.

9These were the comments of Kenyon Cox in Stockton Axson, Kenyon Cox, G. Stanley Hall, and Oliver S. Tonks, eds., *Art Museums and Schools: Four Lectures Delivered at the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: Scribner’s, 1913), 70.


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For retrospective observations by the curator, see Allon Schoener, ed., Harlem On My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900–1968 (New York: New Press, 1995), introduction to new ed. This is a reprinting of the original catalog published in 1968 by Random House.


Linda Nochlin, “Museums and Radicals: A History of Emergencies,” Art in America 59 (July–August 1971): 38. This issue of Art in America was a special museum issue, bringing together critiques and jeremiads reflecting the mood of the day.


"The "biggest problem facing art museums today" is the "emerging 'consensus' among politicians, community activities, funding sources, and engaged academics that the art museum is first and foremost a social institution, an active educational center with a mandate to encourage therapeutic social perspectives for learning about and appreciating the visual arts." James Cuno, "Money, Power and the History of Art," *Art Bulletin* 79 (March 1997): 7.