

# Collecting Ourselves

*An approach to art, museums and exhibitions*

Dr. James M. Bradburne AADipl MCSD

*Director General*

**Museum für Angewandte Kunst**

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A recurring figure in children's literature and in childhood memories is the rag-and-bones man, the collector, the junk-man, the shabby bearded figure with his cart, his new-pots-for-old singsong and his assortment of marvellous and wonderful things, brought like stories of far-off Byzantium by Water Rat in *Wind in the Willows*. He would appear one summer morning and wend his way down the street, stopping to chat with passersby, children, sharpening housewives' knives and rummaging through his collection of oddities to show us yet another marvel; the inside of an electric motor, a set of old gears, a battered salt cellar of obviously great antiquity and value.

What magic there was in collecting! Treasures to be found here and there, at first rocks and curiously shaped things, like the spring of an old watch, or the heavy spikes used to fasten down railway ties. As time went by, the collecting became more knowing and directed: stamps, baseball cards, lead soldiers, their paint worn and chipped. Still later, fleamarkets and jumble sales fuelled the growing collections, which were stored carefully, prized acquisitions placed in special boxes, others grouped together on a particular shelf or hidden in a secret drawer. Collecting was a joyful process; of sniffing and snooping, of sifting through countless objects to find the best one, a nascent connoisseurship, an apprenticeship in acquisition and discernment. And collecting soon gave way to exploring collections, and rummaging in fleamarkets gave birth to a practice of museumgoing.

What makes this process so compelling, this engagement with objects and the stories they can tell?

There is an immediate appreciation for the object as made, for the instrumentality of its making, for the joy that must still be resident, even as a memory of its manipulation. "Joy was in every ingredient of our making" says Kahn, "When the world was an ooze without any shape or direction, there must have been this force of Joy that prevailed everywhere and that was reaching out to express." We gravitate to the object in the measure the expression it extends to us.

This is true of all objects, to the degree to which their presence speaks of their making. We invest objects with powers to the extent to which we can participate in them, in their history, in their making, in the intellectual and emotional process of reliving their conception. Jun'ichiro Tanizaki speaks of the "sheen of antiquity" much prized by the Oriental cultures. "...we do love things that bear the marks of grime, soot, and weather, and we love the colours and the sheen that call to mind the past that made them. Living in these old houses among these old objects is in some mysterious way a source of peace and repose."

Dwelling and the saga of making; twin passions that engage the viewer and the object, that draw from the viewer an engaged participation. It is this engagement that is the phenomenological keystone to the museum enterprise. The visitor must be able to live through the objects he experiences in an exhibition. Paul Valery, in his essay Man and the Seashell, recounts his engagement with the object that has aroused his curiosity, a seashell. "I look for the first time at this thing that I have found. I note what I have said about its form, and I am perplexed. Then I ask myself the question: *Who made this?*... my first stir of thought has been to think of *making*. The idea of making is the first and most human of ideas. 'To explain' is never anything more than to describe a way of *making*: it is merely to remake it in thought."

These objects do not exist in a universe of their own, they belong to a human world, a world of human actors. But does not the object itself give us some clues, like poetry, to its possible reconstruction? Are not the joys of intellectual exploration necessary to this decoding those same joys which fuel the desire to create, to collect, to see?

The museums of our past were dark, dusty and mysterious. There was a deep psychological participation in the jumble, in the clutter of mysterious objects piled

together each in its special room, musty and poorly-lighted; some objects in their own cases, others in special drawers. We were in the realm of intimate space writ large, and it was in this space that we were masters. The lack of order invited us, the viewer, to create order. The mysterious provenance of the objects was an invitation to speculate, imagine, wonder; to engage fully with the object itself, seeking clues to its mystery. The apparent chaos of chosen objects, each empowered by the act of choosing, by the presumed magic of discovery, by the vicarious experience of shared delight, gave to the viewer a panoramic freedom to participate in the life of the object, to wander freely towards the horizons of its ability to enchant, to exhaust its resources, to relive the history of its making.

Now, a scant few years before the end of the century, our museums have changed dramatically. Museums have grown bigger, brighter, and often more banal.

During the past quarter century, two major impulses have shaped museums.

First, as support from the state was threatened by economic recession, museums sought to increase revenues, and as a consequence the intimacy that was once the preserve of the museum was sacrificed at the altar of increased attendance. The past decades have witnessed a massive explosion of museum expansion and museum building. The building programme was driven on the one hand by the need for additional space to show existing collections, but equally by the need to show temporary exhibitions. The modern exhibition is a creature born out of a desire to increase the number of visitors. With the advent of inexpensive travel, these visitors can be drawn from a global pool of cultural tourists, and benefit the museum in terms of catalogue and gift sales, and fuel the region's tourist economy.

Second, since the 60s, museums have felt a genuine need to make their collections accessible to a greater number of people. Labelled as the dusty preserve of a privileged few, museums felt that their own collections were no longer sufficient. In order to attract new visitors, temporary exhibitions of works from other museums, or from long hidden reserves were mounted. Exhibitions had their roots in the collections of the museum. Beginning with the post-war exhibitions on modernist art in America, temporary exhibitions were seen as a way to appealing to non-traditional audiences. Later, in the 70s,

the great 'blockbuster' exhibitions such as King Tut, proved that the travelling art exhibition could also be a major money-earner, as well as a sure generator of extra visitors.

Propelled by these twin imperatives, to increase the number and broaden the range of visitors the museum has changed its character, from dusty closet to brightly lit shopping mall.

Have museums succeeded in meeting their two objectives?

Certainly the numbers of museum visitors have increased enormously. New museums and new exhibitions are good business, and gift shop sales are now an important source of museum revenue. Numbers have increased, to be sure, and every jumbo jet brings pilgrims to the Meccas of high culture. But increased attendance has come at a high price. Exhibitions generate more visitors, and more visitors need larger buildings. Larger buildings, however, incur higher costs, and what was once a financial solution becomes a financial problem, and exhibitions become an ongoing financial necessity. Many museums are now faced with the difficult choice of cutting programmes to pay for the costs of building maintenance, and with the spectacular activity of the art market in recent decades they are increasingly burdened with the costs of shipping, installing and insuring the large travelling exhibitions that ensure that the flow of visitors does not diminish.

What about the second objective, that of reaching new audiences, people who would not normally come to museums. In this regard the success is not as obvious. Most statistics, in Europe and in America, where the political agenda is explicit, show no significant broadening of the kind of people who come to our museums, just more of the same kind of people, from farther away. The museum visit is now the *sine qua non* of the cultural tourist, and exhibitions are cultural events of the first water. Contemporary museum-going is considered part of the "embourgeoisment" of the museum visitor, and one of the essential roles of the visit is to distinguish a "cultured" group from others. Historically museum visits were a mark of distinction, of definition, of exclusion, and this perception has changed little over the past decades, despite the concerted attempts on the part of the museum establishment.

What of the exhibitions themselves, exhibitions often conceived in one museum and toured to many others? Having transformed a once magical palace into a shopping centre

in order to serve a greater number of people, are the new exhibitions a success? Can they claim to be more than just a sterile cultural event linked to proclaiming membership in the horizonless middle classes? Are exhibitions reaching out to new kinds of visitors? Are exhibitions touching the young people who must become the stewards of culture? Are exhibitions teaching new skills, providing new experiences, creating new culture? In short, are the exhibitions we find in most large museums succeeding?

If we are to be honest, the answer has to be no. And, unless we adopt a dramatically different museum practice, the answer will continue to be no, as long as our exhibitions do not seize on the importance of two key concepts: engagement, and competence.

On the one hand, museum visitors are increasingly visually sophisticated, bombarded daily with millions of images. They need to understand their own culture and its history, in order not to be excluded from the world in which they live and work, in order to participate fully in events around them. Museumgoers can no longer be seen as mere receivers of culture, but must become active participants in their own culture. They must engage once again with their own culture and their cultural legacy, and become actors in the world they inhabit

On the other hand, museums are under pressure to encourage young people to understand their past in order to better participate in the future. Increasingly museums must play a role in encouraging young people to explore, not only the history of art, but the creative thinking that has resulted in their culture. Museums are being told that it is not enough to teach our young people about when a Fra Angelico was painted. It is not enough to explain the principles that underlie linear perspective. We must actively pass on the skills of culture: of understanding and appreciating on the one hand, and of creativity on the other. Visitors must leave the museum with new competence, with new skills and deepened understanding.

So what kind of exhibitions should we be producing?

The engagement with material culture is a direct consequence of putting the work in context, and from providing visitors with a reason to understand that comes from their own experience, their own needs, their own interests. Providing this context is the natural complement of the physical restoration of a work of art. In physical restoration, we render visible what was buried for centuries under layers of paint, varnish and grime. Our exhibitions must complete the task of restoration by uncovering the intellectual structure,

the universe of meaning in which the work of art made sense, the way in which it participated in a world of living actors, of events, beliefs and knowledge.

In the same way one can argue that the fundamental skills of art appreciation are imagination, invention and a sensitivity to history, and that it is the responsibility of our museums to develop exhibits that allow the public to experience these creative forms of thought. This learning is an essential part of the museum experience, and these skills are central to full participation in cultural life. Exhibitions that have as their goal the communication not only of facts, but of skills, encourage new audiences, people normally at the periphery of the museum culture due to the lack of confidence, background, or skills. Exhibitions that emphasise skills especially encourage children, the ground in which every generation must plant the memory of its past for the future, in order that culture flourish.

We hear all around us that museum visitors are too stupid, or perhaps too lazy to undertake the intellectual effort of an exhibition that demands that they become an active participant. Recent experience suggests that this is not so, and that exhibitions that demand an effort on the part of the visitor are popular, exciting and well-attended. But in some ways, even this is beside the point. It does not matter whether people are really intelligent or stupid. The real question is one of approach. There is not a single decision that can be made in preparing an exhibition that does not reflect a belief about the material, the museum, and the audience. We already know too well what kinds of exhibitions are made if we assume that the curator knows everything, that the museum is the sacred grove for the chosen few, that the audience is passive, stupid and lazy. Exhibitions based on these assumptions can be seen in every city in every museum in every country of the western world. Even in the absence of concrete proof to the contrary, we can and must reject these assumptions as the basis for our exhibitions.

The challenge is to assume the opposite, and to imagine exhibitions that take into account the interests of the visitor, that see the museum as an exciting place where real learning can and does occur, and see the visitor as intelligent and willing to learn new skills. In this way, we can give people the means to engage with art from a position of knowledge and competence, to become the actors they once were in the childhood of the collecting moment, when the world was theirs to discover, to invent and to inhabit. We can give them the intellectual tools to think about art, and, as a consequence, help them become full participants in the culture they have inherited and are in the process of creating.

