

Talking Shop

The Museum Shop as informal learning environment

Dr. James M. Bradburne AADipl MCSD

Director

mak.frankfurt

Frankfurt am Main

9 April 1999

"I shop therefore I am"

Barbara Krüger 1989

COPYRIGHT © 2005 DO NOT QUOTE WITHOUT AUTHOR'S PERMISSION

First of all, welcome and thank you for taking the time to attend this seminar. My name is James Bradburne, and I am currently Director of the Museum für Angewandte Kunst, Applied Art, in Frankfurt. Unlike other speakers, I am not going to talk about why you should develop a shop in your museum in order to make money - who knows, you might lose money. I am not going to talk about how you can use a museum shop to attract new visitors to the museum - it might not. I am not going to talk about how a museum shop can be used to promote the museum's activities - your museum may be well-positioned enough. None of the foregoing reasons - more money, more visitors, more profile - are enough to justify a museum shop by itself, after all, the museum's mission is not primarily to make money, to attract visitors, or to be famous. So instead of trying to tell you about all the practical and sometimes questionable reasons you might want to have a museum shop, I am going to talk about why you must have a museum shop - in order to fulfil at least part of the museum's primary mission.

A museum's goal, as Joseph Veach Noble (Head of Education at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and later president of the AAM) once said is 'to collect, to conserve, to study, to interpret and to exhibit.' These, he said, 'are like the five fingers of a hand, each independent, but united for a common purpose.' It is the last of these two fingers - interpreting and exhibiting - to which the museum shop adds an indispensable extension. To understand why a museum shop is central to the museum's mission let us briefly look at the history of the museum, and the museum's changing role in contemporary society.

The French Revolution can be said to have been the cradle of the modern museum, as it sparked a widespread appeal for access to cultural machinery. After 1789, the collection and preservation of works of art, specimens of natural history, models, and even books, could only be defended if they could be used as resources by a broad spectrum of the newly-enfranchised. The first public museums were born out of a desire to make cultural resources available to a broad spectrum of the public - a public that needed no letters of introduction, but could come at will, or at least, at a price. The Musée français, (later called the Musée du Louvre), was a creation of the Convention of 1793, and was originally the repository of the fruits of the confiscation of works of art from the church and the aristocracy during the Revolution. Under the Directoire, the museum's collections were organised systematically according to 'schools', and most importantly, explanatory texts were placed with each artwork. In

addition to explanatory texts, the Louvre, following its initial vocation as 'the people's museum', was open to the public free of charge, published a guide for visitors and sold an inexpensive catalogue.

The Museum de l'histoire naturelle was created primarily from the Cabinet du roi and the Jardin des plantes by the Convention of 1794. Lamarck was outspoken about the needs of those who were excluded from the cabinets, and went on to enunciate one of the fundamental principles of the modern museum: public admission - 'the museum should not only be open to the public during the afternoon, that is to say during the hours when passers-by and idle folk seek some relief from boredom; but during the morning as well, that time of the day so particularly intended for travail, above all in investigations relative to the sciences.' Justifying the creation of the Musée des arts et métiers, arguably one of the first museums of applied arts, the Abbé Gregoire summarised his proposal to the Convention by saying 'I have just disclosed to you the means of developing the national industry.' The educational objectives of the museum were clear from the outset - faced with a substantial delay in catching up with English industry, apprentices were to be routinely brought to the museum to study machines and working models of machines, in order to make up the French deficit in technology speedily.

In the institutions founded in the turbulent years of the Convention the principal institutional characteristics of museums had all been sketched. First, they should contribute to the advancement of knowledge, second, they should be organised to some system of classification, third they should be not be administered by a single, private individual, finally, they should be open to the public. The collection is a possession, private and idiosyncratic, whereas the museum is a public institution. By opening the doors to a public 'not like us', even a little, the label - the intentional meaning-making of the museum - took on another role, the informal education of the broadest possible public.

Thus Museums not always been merely repositories of the past, enormous storehouses of potentially useful things. In the Renaissance they were instruments of power, in the early days of the French Revolution they were the key to economic competition, in the late 19th century they were the means to increase the quality of industrial production. Museums have always been instruments of social and educational policy, and in particular, the museum setting has been used as the site of informal learning *par excellence*. In particular, museums have been preferred sites for communicating new skills - the skills required by contemporary society.

With information playing an increasingly important role in delivering products more effectively and more efficiently, we have seen the European economy moving from a product-based economy towards a service-based economy - much as it earlier moved from an agrarian economy to an industrial one. In a sense we could describe this as a shift from a 'high-volume' economy, wherein industry makes a lot of products (BMW's for instance) and selling them each at a profit - to a 'high-value' economy, wherein profit is made by being more flexible, more responsive, more creative. If we are to continue to justify our Euro-lifestyle - and pay our Euro-taxes - it is imperative that this shift towards a high-value economy be made as quickly as possible. Even now new MBAs are taught that 'the only sustainable advantage is the ability to learn faster than your competitors'. We must become a learning society, and lifelong learning has to figure very high in this country's and Euroland's priorities. The Museum is part of preparing us to be part of a 'community of learners', - as Jonathan Miller once said, the Museum must 'prepare us for a world in which the life of the mind is a pleasure.'

In the Museum we continue the tradition of our 19th century forerunners by being a centre for the acquisition of new skills. What are the skills needed in the next century? Just museums of the 19th century hoped to hone the judgement of consumers and producers alike, the museum of the 21st century must prepare its users to understand - and actively help create - the world they live in. In the words of Nelson Goodman, the Museum is 'an institution for the prevention of blindness', and it is in the museum that the visitor can develop the means of seeing better, choosing better, communicating better. It is in the museum that we explore the ways in which we discover, understand, and appropriate our culture, and in so doing, understand the debt we owe to cultures other than our own. Now more than ever, on the threshold of the next century - we must prepare the next generation to participate in a culture that is becoming increasingly European - and increasingly global.

Our museums are treasure house of interesting and wonderful objects - objects that can be enjoyed, inspected, compared, and discussed. Labels guide us through the history of our material culture, and help us look critically at the museum's objects - at provenance, style, composition, sources. Our eyes are sharpened by the process of looking. By honing our critical faculties the museum is indeed 'an institution for the prevention of blindness.' The museum is an informal learning environment par excellence, but where can we put the skills we learn in the museum to use? The hard-won ability to distinguish between a Vermeer and a Van Meegeren, or a Ming cup and a Q'ing bowl, skills well within the reach of every attentive visitor, remain stillborn. The ability to detect the subtle difference between Kitsch and collectable leave the museum unexercised. Unless we happen to be curators or art dealers, all the learning we do in museums can't be put to use - or can it?

The one thing we can't do, is buy the objects in the museum. But it is precisely in the act of informed choice that one brings to bear one's critical skills. The act of choice - especially when it comes to choice that matters - is a fundamental part of creating the world around us. These choices can have political importance, such as voting, or joining a union. More commonly, however, they involve a choice about how to deploy limited resources - of time, and of money. In a world in which identity is increasingly defined by what one buys - 'I shop therefore I am', according to American artist Barbara Kruger - the choices one makes as a consumer increasingly define who we are and the shape of the world around us - at home, at work, at play.

Things matter only when you have a choice. So where in the Museum does the visitor have a choice? Where in the Museum does this choice matter? The answer is - of course - in the Shop. The Museum Shop is the only place in the museum where the visitor has real power. The visitor's opinion about a Moretti champagne flute is perhaps culturally relevant when looking at it behind the forbidding glass of a museum vitrine - but critical when it is sitting with a price tag for DM 250 attached to it. Is it really that beautiful? Is it worth it? As any curator will tell you, you look much more critically when you are buying. It therefore follows that rather than being a mere mercantile afterthought, a crass way to earn a few crowns to keep the museum's collections dust-free, that the Museum Shop is the prime site for informal learning. You may not have the budget to buy a Titian - but you can buy a postcard, and for some, the choice of which postcard to buy - out of potentially hundreds on offer - is a non-trivial choice, that defines the purchaser as surely as a new set of clothes or a new perfume. What would you think if a friend sent you of a postcard of a painting by Van Gogh? or by Botticelli? or of Joseph Beuys? Now imagine a shop stocked not only with postcards, but with contemporary jewellery, sculpture, glass,

furniture, clothing - all of the highest quality, and linked to the museum's collections. The learning potential is enormous.

This said, it is astonishing how little the Museum Shop is used to enhance the visitor experience. But so much could be done! At very least text panels could introduce concepts such as quality, style, and art history. Real museum objects could be displayed alongside reproductions, and information could be provided to place the good for sale in context. In the case of decorative arts museums, particularly those with 20th century collections - the objects on sale may well be found in the collections themselves. Demonstrations could be provided, lectures given, Internet auctions organised. In making an informed choice, the museum visitor shares something in common with the museum curator - and comes away from the purchase having been rewarded for bringing her critical faculties into play.

For far too long, the Museum Shop has been seen as a necessary evil - when it has been seen as necessary at all. Now, on the threshold of the next century, the financial pressures on the museum mean taking a new look at its mission - and the means it uses to achieve it. I believe that only by treating the Museum Shop as a necessary and desirable part of the Museum's social mission, can it meet the challenges of the next century, and grow with the society of which it remains such an important part.