

Museums and the poverty of nations
The role of the museum in creating national identity

James M. Bradburne
Director, Museum für Kunsthandwerk
Frankfurt am Main

2 May 1999/revised 4 June 1999

First published in *Heritage and Museums: Shaping national Identity* pp. 379 – 391 Robert Gordon
University, Donhead; Shaftesbury

COPYRIGHT © 2005 DO NOT QUOTE WITHOUT AUTHOR'S PERMISSION

In recent years it has become popular to laud museums for their role in creating, shaping, and sustaining culture. Much in the way that early feminists optimistically argued that dressing girls in blue would address the problems of gender asymmetry, it is now stridently claimed that museums define a nation's identity, contribute to a nation's pride, and play a role in shaping a nation's culture. As I write this, the nations of an increasingly federal Europe are violently and unsuccessfully trying to intervene in the attempts of one sovereign nation to suppress and ultimately crush the claims of another, not-yet-recognised nation in the former Yugoslavia. In this paper I will argue that the attempt to hitch museums and the culture they preserve to the cart of shaping of nationhood is dubious, misguided, and possibly dangerous. The words 'museum' and 'culture' can, of course, and should be spoken in the same breath; however, the construction of national identity is a different responsibility, albeit perhaps an equally worthy one, than that with which a museum is charged.

Let us first look at the terms invoked in the conference's title: museums, culture, and (national) identity.

What is culture? On the one hand, the word is over-used, almost devalued past recognition or redemption. After the recent shooting at Columbine High School in Colorado, the American press was filled with accounts of the failings of America's 'secular culture'. As Alan Gopnik writes 'add the culture of violence, the media culture, kid culture, gun culture, and jock culture, and you've got more cultures in one country than would fit in a Petri dish.'ⁱ How can we meaningfully look at the idea of culture, let alone the national culture that museums are argued to play a role in shaping?

When we roam the halls of a museum, or wander through a shop, or sit in a restaurant, and watch young parents with children, we can actually see culture in the making. 'Don't run, speak quietly, let the grocer pick out the oranges for you, keep your elbows off the table, don't slurp your milk' – culture is all the instruction that becomes internalised to the point of invisibility. In a very serious Heideggerian sense, culture only comes into existence when it breaks – when it is confronted with that which it is not – otherwise it is completely invisible. Culture is like accent – it is a measure of distance, social, geographical, and political. No one has an accent at home. The entire idea of accent – like culture – has meaning only when confronted with others who 'speak' differently.

While culture is notoriously difficult to define, according to Edward T. Hall, ‘in spite of many differences in detail, anthropologists do agree on three characteristics of culture: it is not innate, but learned; the various facets of culture are inter-related – you touch a culture one place and everything else is affected; it is shared and in effect defines the boundaries of different groups.’ⁱⁱ

Nationhood is also difficult to define – in fact, the notion of the nation-state is a relatively recent construction, certainly as it is understood today. In the universities of the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance, students congregated in ‘nations’ of shared language and culture, but few would have understood the meaning of Germany, Austria, or Italy – let alone being Austrian, German, or Italian. Identity was on the one hand far more local, at best regional, and on the other, far more international, as religion, class, and learning readily spanned the rudimentary borders between cities, provinces, and emerging states. Like culture, national identity is learned, complex, and shared.

The world of the late Renaissance court - from Ferrara to Florence and from Paris to Prague - was still largely defined by City-states, small aristocratic principalities, and loose and constantly shifting federations of interests that colluded and collided depending on territorial ambitions, religious convictions, and sheer opportunism. To call any of these groupings 'nations' in any but the loosest sense would be an anachronism. Ports such as Venice, Genoa, and Antwerp were at the centre of vast trading networks linking Europe with China, India, Africa, and later the Americas. In the late Renaissance, the banking system as we know it slowly came into being, and the notion of risk started to figure in the justification of exacting higher interest rates from Princes than those permitted within the Christian definition of usury.

Despite the importance of trade, the economy was still largely based on agriculture, and the wealth of the aristocratic dynasties based on rents and taxes derived from their lands. The notion of 'capital' - at least as investment - had yet to be invented, and centuries were to pass before the Industrial Revolution gave meaning to the term 'means of production.' As families and courts amassed wealth from their activities, they translated this wealth into patronage to guarantee loyalty, and conspicuous display to instil fear and respect. Princely collections were one important way in which the ideology of power was communicated to those over whom the ruling classes wished to exercise dominion. However they exercised their power, their identity, and that of those over whom they ruled, was defined less by national identity than by dynastic, religious, and territorial considerations. A Habsburg, for instance, was a Habsburg first, a Catholic second, and an Austrian third – if at all. *Domus Austriae* was defined as Habsburg – certainly not the other way ‘round.

Beginning in the late 18th century, a social and economic earth tremor transformed the nature of Western society and European economy - the 'Industrial Revolution'. We should be cautious of over-rating the importance of this so-called revolution - European society had already been transformed by other ‘revolutions’ – such as the introduction of separated script (9th century), the banking system (14th century), the printing press, and the discovery of the New World (both 15th century). However, coming as it did at a time when the prevailing magical description of the world was giving way to a mechanical, rational one, the harnessing of machines to create new products had an enormous impact on the organisation of European society and the national identity of its inhabitants.

Nationhood in the sense we understand it today – and in the sense in which it is being contested in Ireland, Québec, Tibet, and Kosovo – can really be said to date to the mid-17th century, and only really reached its full expression as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution and the increasing integration of politics and economics that characterised 19th century capitalism, which, as we shall see, also had an effect on the kinds of museums we were to plan, and to the uses to which our museums were put.

Museums are rather easier to define, although the history one writes depends on the definition one chooses. According to Joseph Veach Noble (Head of Education at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and later president of the AAM) the purpose of the museum 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.'

If one defines the museum largely as the first three fingers of the hand, its history is linked to that of the collection, and the museum has its roots in the Classical past. The earliest museum of which we can speak was actually a library - the 'mousseion' of Alexandria, the institutional sibling of the famous library that flourished three centuries before Christ. Since the Renaissance, the dominant model of the museum has been the collection, and the demands of the collection have taken precedence in the museum's organisation. For example, let us take Rudolph II's Kunstkammer as a collection par excellence. Publicly, it was an instrument of power, and played an important role in legitimating the Habsburg's dynastic claims. As families and courts amassed wealth from their activities, they translated this wealth into patronage to guarantee loyalty, and

conspicuous display to instil fear and respect. Princely collections were one important way in which the ideology of power was communicated to those over whom the ruling classes wished to exercise dominion.

If one puts the emphasis on the last two fingers, the museum's history can be traced to the late 18th century. By the end of the 18th century, the political situation was extremely volatile, and the demands for access to social, political and cultural machinery found decisive political expression. Following the French Revolution in 1789, the very existence of private collections was called into question. Out of the passionate defense of the need for collections to the Convention of 1793 and 1794, the first modern museums were born - the Louvre, the Museum de l'Histoire naturelle, and the Musée des Arts et Métiers.

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.'

Thus the arguments for founding Museums were linked to their ability to teach new skills - not just convey information about the distant past or amuse idler time-wasters. 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 Conservatory were clear from the outset - faced with a substantial delay in catching up with English industry, apprentices were to be routinely brought to the Conservatory to study machines and working models of machines, in order to make up the French deficit in technology speedily. Moreover, the Conservatory became the depot of record for all inventions patented in France, the repository of the history of France's entry into the industrial world. The Convention was convinced, and the Conservatoire des Arts et Métiers in Paris was created on September 26th, 1794.

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. However well-defined its principles, the full development of the Museum

had to wait until the 19th century, when the growing middle classes, enfranchised by the commerce made possible by the political and industrial revolutions, and the Imperial ambitions of the growing European nation-states, were powerful enough for their voice to be heard as a group, demanding full access to the cultural resources they could not afford to have individually.

The need to find an appropriate vehicle for the display and promotion of such a vast quantity of trade goods found its expression first in national trade fairs, popular in France, Germany and Great Britain since the 1840s, and finally in the idea of an international exposition. Consonant with the century's fascination with collection, arrangement and display, which can be seen in the rise of the great museums and galleries, the *Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations* was seen as a convocation of all the industrial wonders of the world, and a demonstration of their utility in all spheres both industrial and cultural. Held in Hyde Park, London, in 1851 under the enlightened patronage of the Prince Albert, the Great Exhibition was a huge popular success, and attracted millions of visitors to Joseph Paxton's *Crystal Palace*, itself a tribute to the industrial virtues of modularity, mass production and utility.

After the Fair closed, the profits were so substantial that in the coming years a concert hall, music scholarships, and three new museums - the Natural History Museum, the Science Museum, and the Victoria and Albert Museum - were founded with the proceeds. The barrier that separated the Museum from the World's Fair in the late 19th century was extremely permeable. As early as 1876, the U.S. government solicited the help of the Smithsonian institution in developing the themes for the centennial exhibition in Philadelphia, despite the opposition of the research community, as the museum was seen as the single most important

institution of public exhibition. In 1893, at the World Columbian Exposition in Chicago, the Smithsonian was again implicated in the organisation, as were other museums including the Peabody at Harvard.

The French Revolution had called for a broad and democratic participation in cultural capital - a radical demand on the part of representatives of the disenfranchised. Yet, as in the case of the earlier American Revolution, the benefits of the dispersion of the cultural and economic capital devolved largely onto the middle classes, and the lower strata of society, while able to participate in principle, were effectively denied access to the machinery of capital and culture alike. Large segments of society had to wait for benefits of public education, reduced working hours and wages sufficient to permit access to the great palaces of culture.

In America at least, the ideology of the Founding Fathers had tended to consider art in general as a sign of decadence, and saw the importance of art as a function of its utility - Benjamin Franklin wrote 'one schoolmaster is worth a dozen poets, and the invention of a machine or the improvement of an implement is of more importance than a masterpiece of Raphaël.' while John Adams wrote 'Every one of the fine Arts from earliest times has been enlisted in the service of Superstition and Despotism.' It is therefore not surprising that American museums, almost all of which had their origins in the last quarter of the 19th century, sought to define their goals in terms of utility: to provide models for American 'tawdry' manufacture, and to educate and refine the labouring classes. John Choate, trustee of the new Metropolitan Museum of Art, wrote that the museum's 'plan was not to establish a mere cabinet of curiosities which should serve to kill time for the idle, but... to gather together a ... collection of objects illustrative of the history of the

arts in all its branches... which should serve not only for the instruction and entertainment of the people, but should also show the students and artisans of every branch of industry... what the past has accomplished for them to imitate and excel.'

Nearly all the new museums had as their mission to educate the public - notably the labouring classes - often with the explicit expectation that an increased exposure to the arts would be translated into better products. Museums were no longer to be the preserve of the few - they were to open Sundays and evenings for the many. Workers newly sensitive to beauty would give industry the competitive edge. This was the Golden Age of the Industrial Revolution, and industry needed a visually literate public - to buy its goods, and to produce them. The Museum was an important part of a broad national social, economic, and cultural strategy. Since mid-19th century, the museum's political masters also had a strong interest in defining national interests, and in using the museum's pre-eminent position as a pulpit from which to proclaim the truths of national identity. Traditionally the museum has been seen to be neutral, and has thereby enjoyed the trust of its visitors. The modern museum preached the truths of the grand narratives— Manifest Destiny, the superiority of Western culture, the onward march of Progress, the Triumph of the Will. To visit a great museum was to situate oneself in a fabric of common achievements – and more importantly, common goals. There was perhaps, however briefly, a time when nation states and national identity meant something to nearly everyone. But these are no longer modern times.

They are, if we must use a term, post-modern times. The 20th century has seen the compact of trust between society and its institutions violated, broken, and fragmented. The First World War

washed away empires in a sea of blood, the Nazis used the narratives of nationhood in the service of unspeakable evil, and the past decades have given us Vietnam, Watergate, Monicagate, and recently Kosovo, undermining any remaining faith in the ability to articulate a common national identity. In a recent article, Peter Schjeldahl wrote of contemporary America 'As a nation, the United States is a fiction that stands on three legs: a set of still contested eighteenth century documents; the cautionary example of the Civil War; and the daily consumption of mass culture. That's it. Everything else, however tremendous, is secondary.'ⁱⁱⁱ As if to underscore this post-modern vacuum, he writes further 'Americanness is nobodyness. Deep down, I feel like nobody...'^{iv} In a Europe groping towards a new identity armed only with a common currency, I doubt whether Schejdahl's angst is uniquely American.

The question must be asked as to whether the notion of a national identity, or at least a national identity defined in terms of the traditional sovereign state, makes any sense in an increasingly global society – a world made irretrievably interdependent by technology and commerce. If national identity does makes sense, who defines it, and how? And what role does a museum play in defining, shaping, and celebrating the national culture – and which national culture? I was born in Canada, a country whose identity is both shaped and distorted by disagreement over which claims to sovereignty take priority. Is Québec a nation? The Dene people? The Inuit? If so, what is Canada? Which museum celebrates what identity? The question would be even more vexed if we took the example of Serbia. Who is a national and who is a minority depends on the definition. A Kosovar is in the minority in Serbia, while a Serb would be in the minority in an independent Kosovo. What would a Kosovar Museum in Belgrade exhibit? Or a Serbian

Museum in an independent Kosovo? As museum professionals are we content if our museums are only instruments through which we trumpet jingoistic self-affirmations?

In many ways, the coupling of museums and national identity represents a dead-end – or at very best, a vicious circle. If museums are to shape national identity, nations must first have a meaning. However, as economic and political independence are eroded, and our world becomes increasingly global, the meaning of nationhood becomes increasingly metaphorical and fragmented. It seems that in a matter of decades we will once again be using the term ‘nation’ as we did in the 13th century – unhooked from any notion of national sovereignty and geographical boundaries. In the 21st century, the very notion of the boundary is called into question.

Yet the idea that museums can shape national identity is an extremely seductive one, given the history of the museum. Originally, collections were the possession of an individual collector - Emperor, prince, or wealthy merchant, and their enhancement and interpretation were intimately linked to their owner's personality. Soon after the birth of the Museum as a public institution, the burden of defining the Museum's mission passed to an elite group of specialists - the Museum curators. Since the early years of the Museum as a public institution, the Museum was seen as a complement to the University - one an informal setting for learning, the other a formal setting for education, and often there was acrimonious competition between them. Despite this tension, the curator's mission was fundamentally seen as that of a professor, delivering the truth about the Museum's objects from on high; a priest at the altar of art history, preaching to the unwashed masses. More often than not, curators would preach to each other, and exhibitions became a

means for scholars to create and sustain reputations, further careers, and to impress other scholars.

When confronted with the collapse of the grand narratives, the museum's response to the post-modern dilemma has been to remain firmly 'top-down', and to address the content of the narrative, ever seduced by the desire to retain control over the narrative it presents. "Bad" old grand narratives are to be replaced by 'good' new de-centred author-less narratives. Instead of museums of heroes, we now make museums of victims. Instead of museums that celebrate imperial identity, we make museums that trumpet new national identities. But it is still the museum that calls the shots, and shapes the content. So under pressure to affirm new national identities - we create a Scottish Museum as the counterpart to the British Museum, and who knows, perhaps we will soon need a new Museum of the Isle of Skye, a Glasgow Museum, a Gorbals Museum, a Museum of the three flats next door - as our identity becomes increasingly fragmented. Where we stop if we follow this logic is only a matter of time and entropy.

The problem, it seems to me, stems from an unwillingness to re-examine the way in which museums have traditionally defined their own role, and what is called for is a total reappraisal of the notion that museums can and should have something to do with shaping national identity. By definition, the notion of nationhood is restrictive, historical, and constructed from the top-down. It is a part of the legitimation of political objectives on behalf of those who wield power, and part of the ideological armament of political action. Culture, on the other hand, is fluid, ever-changing, and almost always bottom-up – boundaries are only discovered through exploration. As long as the museum considers that its primary role is to define content – by definition a top-

down approach – it must answer for the arbitrariness of the content it defines, regardless of its inherent ‘correctness’.

Traditionally museums have considered their visitors - when they considered them at all - as ignorant, or at best, as blank slates on which to write new information – whether the truths of taste or the truths of nationhood. In fact, the opposite is true. Far from being ignorant, our visitors are competent and intelligent, and more often than not, highly educated. They tend to know exactly who they are and where they belong. Far from being blank slates our visitors are already experts in some things, and come with existing experience, education, and opinions. Visitors create their own understanding, and the Museum gives them opportunities to create new knowledge during and after their visit. We cannot insist on dictating the specific new knowledge they create - a museum is an informal learning environment - not a school classroom. The role of the Museum is to create an informal environment where the visitor can explore the ways in which he can actively modify her relationship with culture, by enhancing her knowledge, piquing her curiosity, by honing her critical judgement. In the Museum, the visitor should be in control, and the visitor should be encouraged to chart her own course – given its history, learning in the Museum should not be top-down, but bottom-up.

What does this mean in a museum? Surely the museum always plays a role in shaping the visitor’s experience? Let me give a few concrete examples that point to the museum’s role of capturing identity from the bottom up – not imposing it from the top down.

In 1994, the German Kunst-und Ausstellungshalle in Bonn hosted the exhibition ‘Wunderkammer des Abendlandes’, about the transformation of the private collection into Cabinet of Curiosities, and the Cabinet into the modern museum. Curated by Pontus Hulten, it was a breathtaking panorama of museum history, built around richly detailed settings of collections. A striking and provocative as the exhibition was, it would have remained a ‘classical’ exhibition had it not been for the addition of a collection of children’s ‘treasures’. In seven freestanding vitrines were displayed objects collected by children, organised into the categories the children themselves used – treasures, toys, old stuff. Moreover, in order for the objects to qualify for inclusion in one of the large vitrines, the children had to undertake the work of a curator. They had to describe the object in material terms, date it, ascribe an insurance value to it, specify the conditions under which it could be displayed, and most importantly, assign it to a category. The children were thus introduced to the concepts of collecting, conservation, and curatorship. In this part of the exhibition the children were in control of the definition of their own culture, and their identity was carefully preserved in the teeming binders full of ‘curatorial’ information.

Last summer, the San Francisco Exploratorium opened an exhibition on the theme of ‘Memory’. While some of the exhibition looked at the neurophysiology of memory, large sections also looked at the subjective experience of memory – memories of childhood, memories of historical events, happy memories and sad. To fill a large wall, the design team proposed painting a timeline. Along the timeline, quite traditionally, were written important dates – at least dates that were important within a larger national narrative – the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the day Kennedy was assassinated, the date of the first moon walk, etc. One of the team members, Sally

Duensing, suggested that they place pencils and 'post-it' notes either side of the timeline, in the hopes that visitors would contribute their memories. Despite the success of earlier prototypes, no one expected the huge success that followed the exhibition's opening. Within days, the wall looked like a shaggy yellow-furred dog, as visitors filled the timelines with their memories, and their identities. Some of the dates had only personal significance – 'I was born', 'my Father died', 'my sister had a baby'. Others had broader significance – the founding of a local church, a downtown fire, the results of a local election. Unlike traditional museum displays, this exhibit registered and preserved culture as experienced by local actors – rather than imposing a new narrative in which they were expected to fit their own experiences.

Finally, let me add a Scottish example, SCRAN. As you all probably know, Scotland has taken the lead in the preservation and interpretation of its cultural resources. The SCRAN project has the ambitious aim of digitising all known Scottish material culture – from sword hilts to chess men – and to making these resources available over the Internet to educational institutions. This project, under the leadership of Lord and Lady Balfour of Burleigh, has already created rich interpretive resources to accompany the objects and their description. The potential of this project, however, lies in its ability to be an instrument to gather 'soft' historical information – personal reminiscences, ephemera, accounts of events – and to post this information as part of a growing archive that defines Scottish national identity from the 'bottom-up'. In doing so, it serves as a catalyst for a re-definition of the museum's role – or a strengthening of the museum's real mission to collect, preserve, study, interpret, and exhibit. The power of the SCRAN model has already been noted, and is being used as an inspiration for other projects around Europe.

It can be seen from the above that a museum can continue to fulfil its goals of collecting, preserving, studying, interpreting, and exhibiting without necessarily shaping, constructing, and creating all of the content. A museum's role can be to support – not to create. Of course it can be rightly argued that the museum is still playing an active role in creating certain possibilities and discouraging others – and indeed it is a necessary part of a bottom-up approach that the museum's agency be made visible, and not elided – nevertheless the qualitative difference between the bottom-up approach and the traditional top-down approach cannot be overemphasised.

Creating content, whether top-down or bottom-up, is not enough, however, if the society no longer has the skills necessary to re-appropriate its own culture. And as long as the museum continues to create content without placing an important emphasis on communicating new skills, then it contributes to the very 'dumbing down' of society that it purports to resist. As the technological means to preserve material culture increase, as they have with breathtaking speed over the past fifty years, then the importance of the skills needed to decode the preserved information becomes paramount. The more we store instead of learning, the more we need to ensure we keep and transmit the skills to unlock the stored information.

The past decades have seen European society transformed by a series of changes - each as revolutionary in its way as the revolution that swept across Europe when the printing press was introduced in the 15th century. As Neil Postman observed, 'Prior to the telegraph, information moved only as fast as a train could travel: about thirty-five miles an hour'. With the computer and the development of new global information networks, not only information, but massive

amounts of currency moved around the globe in a fraction of a second, capital restlessly seeking greater return where it can find it - 24 hours a day. Time and space are transformed by information technology, and even our identity is now called into question - who we are and where we are is one on the Internet - we are our address. In the virtual world of the Internet I am jamesb@museum-kunsth Handwerk.de - no matter where I log in.

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 our list of priorities.

Thus the museum assets must be seen to include not only its collections, but also its role as a privileged site for learning, and must therefore stress the acquisition of new skills, not just information. For the Museum to play its role in this 'community of learners' it must take up the challenge of communicating the skills needed for the next century. At the end of the 19th century, these were the skills of industrial production- now they are the skills of creativity and

communication. These skills are largely shared by fine art, applied art, science, and technology alike - creativity, collaboration, abstraction, critical judgement. The common ground provided by putting the accent on skills has the effect of making less important the distinctions formerly made according to content - science, ethnology, history, fine arts. Of course information is still indispensable, but it must be linked to the skills of finding, using, and appropriating that information. This strategy recalls the humanist education of the Renaissance, and prepares us to play our part in the '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.

The Museum is a public place, a 'piazza'. It is a place to wander, to stroll, to sit, to enjoy. It is, as Sherman Lee, former Director of the Cleveland Museum of Art once said, 'a permanent storage battery.' It is to the Museum that we come to recharge our batteries after a long week at the office. It is to the Museum that we bring our children to show them the richness of the world they will inherit and will soon help to create. It is to the Museum we come to be with our friends, to explore, to discover, and to share new experiences. A Museum and its collections help remind us of what all our money is for - making the world around us richer, more beautiful, and more dynamic. It is in the spirit of the piazza that the museum must be a public forum, a place where all voices can be heard, differences explored, similarities compared. To fulfil its role in the next century, the museum must wean itself from the need to dispense the truth from on high – it must give up being top-down. The museum does not make culture, it does not shape identity, it does not have all the answers. The museum plays a potentially far more important role. It preserves culture, registers identity – it has questions. The museum is an institution in which every voice can be heard, and by having a place, can define its own identity – national,

regional, religious, or sexual. It is a place where supporting questioning and exploration is the prime goal. It is a place where we ensure that the past can continue to play a role in shaping identity, without be a place where identity is prescribed from the outside. It is a place where we all belong, where no one is excluded. Frank Oppenheimer often said ‘No one ever failed a museum.’ To this one could add, ‘No one doesn’t belong in a museum.’ Museums are for all of us, but to be for all of us, they can’t pretend to the role of telling us who we are. By supporting agency and identity of all of its users, it can be profoundly local – and by putting its emphasis on communicating the skills needed to appropriate culture, profoundly global.

[5808 words]

ⁱ Alan Gopnik Culture Vultures, New Yorker; May 24, 1999 pp. 27 - 28

ⁱⁱ Edward T. Hall Beyond Culture Doubleday; New York: 1976 pp. 16

ⁱⁱⁱ Peter Schejldahl American Pie, New Yorker; May 17, 1999 pp. 94 - 95

^{iv} Op cit.