

FROM UNDER THE BOW: A REDEFINITION
OF THE PURPOSE AND POTENTIAL
OF MUSEUMS FOR SOCIETY
IN THE DIGITAL AGE

by

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the legacy of colonialism in museums and, in combination with social digitization trends, its impact on current museum attendance trends. Specifically, it discusses the racism and classism integral to the historical development of the museum as an institution, and argues that although these discriminations are significantly less blatant than when museums first developed, their harmful legacy is still present within the special and temporal exhibition strategies curators undertake. The 2012 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts confirms declining museum visitation rates, particularly among traditionally marginalized communities; however, it also demonstrates the potentiality for significant visitation growth from that category. Some museums recognize this and are working towards increased exhibition inclusiveness in line with the central goals of museum work: presenting information to, entertaining, and informing visitors. However, efforts are not widespread. This essay presents a basic plan for beginning the shift towards harnessing traditionally marginalized communities: focusing efforts on youth education, empowering vocal agency among marginalized peoples, and strong community engagement.

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INTRODUCTION

“All over the world major museums have bowed to the influence of Disney and become theme parks in their own right. The past, whether Renaissance Italy or Ancient Egypt, is re-assimilated and homogenized into its most digestible form. Desperate for the new, but disappointed with anything but the familiar, we recolonize past and future.” ~J.G. Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition*¹

In the second and third centuries CE, a remarkable sight sprang up among the hills of Tibur, modern day Tivoli. Hadrian, Roman emperor, noted patron of the arts, and responsible for the creation of the world-renowned Pantheon, had commissioned a villa covering at least 250 acres and consisting of over thirty buildings throughout the sacred landscaping of Alexandrian gardens for the base of his governance. A substitution for the traditional seat of power, Palatine Hill in Rome, after Hadrian supposedly expressed his contempt towards the palace, the villa was perfectly suited to the emperor's tendency to pine for the perceived Golden Ages long past and provided a veritable historical theme park for entertaining aristocratic friends. He had entire landscapes recreated from the places he had heard about or seen so that he could walk through them and show them off at his leisure.² The villa complex featured palaces, theatres, temples, libraries, and grottos, among other buildings; while the site is largely still unexcavated, among what archaeologists have uncovered, nearly all of the structures show signs of Greek influence mixed with foreign designs. One of the best preserved and most striking areas are a pool and an artificial grotto, named Canopus and Serapeum after the Egyptian city and one of

¹ J.G. Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco and London: Re/Search Publications, 1990), 51.

² Göran Schildt, “The Idea of the Museum”, in *The Idea of the Museum: Philosophical, Artistic and Political Questions*, ed. Lars Aagaard-Morgensen, Problems in Contemporary Philosophy (Lewiston, Queenston, and Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1988), 85.

that city's temples, respectively.³ In fact, Egyptian scenes are perhaps the most prevalent in the villa, second only to the influences by Roman and Greek inspirations over time. The complex continued to be of use for Hadrian's successors until the decline of the Roman Empire. During the sixteenth century, much of the marble and looters moved statues to the Villa d'Este as part of Cardinal Ippolito II d'Este's water gardens, leaving the sacred landscapes, previously the site of so much wonder, in ruins. Nonetheless, today Hadrian's Villa is a UNESCO World Heritage Site designation and, in combination with the town of Tivoli and the nearby Villa d'Este, is a major tourist destination.

The site has received accolades as "an architectural masterpiece"⁴ and serves as one of the earliest examples collecting artifacts to immortalize them, and the ideas they represent for the future of humankind. This "philosophy of collecting" eventually became the cornerstone of modern museums, valuing the preservation and presentation of an ideal of culture to the public, often in a way that places the past on a pedestal as a lost "Golden Age," glorifying some cultures while shortchanging others. This elitist approach to history of the "winners tell all" variety, stemming from the explosion of colonization beginning in the Western world with the Greek Empire, is slowly changing, especially among larger institutions that feel increasing pressure to be first and foremost culturally aware and sensitive.⁵ When discussing the upcoming center for African, Near Eastern,

³ For more information on the villa, and to explore the site on your own, visit "Digital Hadrian's Villa Project" (15 May 2013) <http://vwahl.clas.virginia.edu/villa/index.php>, accessed 4 April 2014.

⁴ Alan Johnston, "Deep inside tunnels revealed under Hadrian's Roman villa," BBC News, last updated 10 September 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-24027845>.

⁵ For the sake of brevity and clarity throughout the rest of this essay, a few definitions are in order. Where I refer to the modifier "Western", I mean it to encompass all thoughts, ideologies, cultures, social constructions, and peoples that trace their roots or origins to Europe and the Greek Empire. Similarly, unless amended by an alternative modifier, "society" will refer to that of the Western world. "Modern" here will have two connotations: when referring to museums, it shall serve as a stylistic adjective for museums with an exhibition setups based in the traditions of the *Wunderkammer*; while discussing movements for future progress and the people undertaking them, both socially and within museum traditions, "modern"

and Oriental art and culture in the February 1983 edition of *Smithsonian Magazine*, Director of the Smithsonian S. Dillon Ripley remarked, “[The center] will make culturally important contributions to the furtherance of mutual understanding and tolerance between us and other nations in an increasingly interdependent world.”⁶ Despite this move towards historical and ethnographic exhibition goals that not only portray the ideals of the past but attempt to shape the ideals of the future, many Western museums still struggle with their colonial legacy. Cultural artifacts from indigenous or Far Eastern peoples frequently remain enclosed in isolated spaces apart from “mainstream” Western cultural artifacts, and are more likely than their mainstream Western counterparts to remain displayed behind glass rather than brought into direct contact with the public. This traditional layout subtly reinforces the idea that while marginalized communities may have a space in history, it is peripheral and not important within the larger historical narrative. As the world becomes increasingly saturated with technology and information is more easily available to larger communities of people, this traditional museum layout where cultural items exist away from the public behind layers of glass and are only accessible in a way abstracted from real life is not sufficient to reach today’s visitors. Instead it reflects an outdated mode of teaching that divides the public’s space from the privileged, intellectual space of the artifacts and their handlers. A report by Thomas Huxley, written in 1896, describes just such an approach:

The cases in which these specimens are exhibited must present a transparent but hermetically closed face, one side accessible to the public,

may be synonymous with “current” or “today’s” and will refer approximately to the mid-1960s to 2014. Lastly, “bias”, when used, indicates the unavoidable slants, both positive and negative, and just as often unintentional as chosen, added to exhibits due to the personal histories of the curatorial staff in charge.

⁶ Quote found within John Fisher, “mUSEums”, in *The Idea of the Museum: Philosophical, Artistic and Political Questions*, ed. Lars Aagaard-Morgensen, Problems in Contemporary Philosophy (Lewiston, Queenston, and Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1988), 58.

while on the opposite side they are constantly accessible to the Curator by means of doors opening into a portion of the Museum to which the public has no access.⁷

Thoughts and approaches have changed in the succeeding hundred years since Huxley worked, but not much. Ask the average person on the street to describe a museum and the image they are likely to conjure up is this one: an institution that is a positive social force, particularly for the care and preservation of heritage and holding collections and mounting displays, but that should avoid the creation of spaces for discussion of social justice and human rights for risk of promoting a politicized or subjective viewpoint. Despite a strong sense that museums must have a central role in society, the glass separation makes visitors feel as if regardless of subject matter artifacts and people exist isolated from each other in their own worlds. This perception has limited the circumstances under which people feel it is acceptable to visit – namely, as young children with parents or on school trips, tourists to a foreign locale, or retirees – creating a culture of people who have decade-old perceptions of “stuffy, aloof, and boring” museums, “gloomy, dusty and distanced from visitors, full of velvet ropes and ‘do not touch’ signs.”⁸

Most people are aware their perceptions are outdated, and yet with no motivation to visit now and change those ideas outdated sensitivities remain the primary associations for the institutions. This effect intensifies among traditionally ostracized demographics such as people of color, indigenous groups, and women, all of whom do not see their existence and achievements reflected in history books until the civil rights and women’s

⁷ Thomas H. Huxley, “Suggestions for a proposed natural history museum in Manchester,” *Report of the Museums Association* (1896a), quoted in Tony Bennett, *Pasts Beyond Memory: Evolution, Museums, Colonialism*, Museum Meanings (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 13.

⁸ BritainThinks, “Public perceptions of – and attitudes to – the purposes of museums in society,” report prepared for Museums Association, March 2013.

rights movements of the 1960s on paved the way for a more serious consideration of marginalized people's voices in academic disciplines. The traditional format is particularly toxic to the youths of these demographics, those who traditional public schooling frequently underserves and who rarely see others like themselves in history textbooks or on the public stage. Museums are well-positioned to fill in that gap – they are among the most popular destinations for school-age children both on field trips and alone – with special exhibits focusing exclusively on celebrating the legacies and futures of a wide variety of cultures. However, in order to be most effective glass cases will not be enough to both draw people in and hold their attention. Children today are increasingly used to learning through multiple senses simultaneously, especially touch.⁹ Although many museums today struggle to remain relevant without technologically trivializing their subjects in the face of increasing public access to instant information in this digital age, they can maintain significance by redefining themselves broadly as representations of specific cultures and creating a more welcoming and engaging space for visitors.¹⁰

Historical Context for Museum Development

“Museums have changed in much the same way as language changes, and the history of museums shows how varied and conflicting have been the roles given to the museum.” ~John Fisher¹¹

⁹ While undeniably essential, the question of how to most effectively incorporate new technologies that engage this new generation of visitors while furthering museum goals is broad and one there is not room to address here.

¹⁰ Due to my own areas of academic expertise, I will focus my inquiries primarily on historical and ethnographical museums. However, my hope is that museum staff across a broad cross-section of the field will find this essay useful in its suggestions as well, and to that aim wherever it has been possible I have left suggestions for exhibition alterations open ended to allow the diversity of museum communities to each adopt the suggestions to fit their localized needs.

¹¹ Fisher, “mUSEums”, 45.

In order to fully engage with the issues involved in the presentation within today's Western museums of alternate, non-dominant, and particularly non-Western cultures, a brief tour of how museums developed, how they specialized and redefined their purposes, and how the public understanding of the word "museum" has shifted over time is necessary. Merriam-Webster dictionary online provides two definitions for the word museum: "a building in which interesting and valuable things (such as paintings and sculptures or scientific or historical objects) are collected and shown to the public: and "an institution devoted to the procurement, care, study, and display of objects of lasting interest or value."¹² The American Alliance of Museums lists a similarly broad definition in more succinct terms: "Museums serve the public. Museums are trustworthy. Museums are popular. Museums educate communities. Museums partner with schools. Museums are economic engines. Museums serve every community, but are struggling to meet community needs."¹³ In 1988, the Museums Association (MA) agreed upon the following: "Museums enable people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment. They are institutions that collect, safeguard, and make accessible artefacts and specimens, which they hold in trust for society."¹⁴ The breadth of these definitions hints at the depth of purpose found inside today's museums, but barely scrapes the surface of the vast number of issues museums can expect to address day to day. It also reveals the difficulty of pinning down a single, succinct definition for the word "museum" that will conjure a similar mental picture no matter which cross-section of the public the poll

¹² Merriam-Webster.com, "Museum", <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/museum>, accessed 16 February 2014.

¹³ American Alliance of Museums, "Museum Facts", <http://aam-us/about-museums/museum-facts>, accessed 27 December 2013.

¹⁴ "FAQs – What is a museum?," Museums Association, <http://www.museumsassociation.org/about/frequently-asked-questions>, accessed 20 March 2014.

represents – the definition must be both common enough to for a wide portion of the public to understand and expansive enough to portray the complexities of institutions’ purposes without losing any of its focus on the single, shining Ideal Institution.

Today’s ideas about the place and purpose of museums sprouted out of several different lines of thought, but no matter how vastly different the philosophies are, each finds common ground on a single cornerstone – that museums, at their cores, are simply collections of things put together for some service to humanity. Collecting interesting and appealing things is certainly not a new concept – children collect shells, neighbors collect stamps, perhaps a well-travelled friend collects postcards, while another may collect treasured family recipes. This is all evidence of a central human tendency, as humans shifted from transient hunter gatherer communities with few material possessions to a more sedentary existence allowing for accumulation of non-essential items, to attempt to capture and bring order to items of personal or cultural significance. This desire to fight the chaotic happenstances of life and to accumulate insurance for survival through the ordering of one’s immediate world plays an active role throughout the history of the museum.¹⁵

Across most of human history cultures around the world have valued their collections as practical and essential links that, initially, served as votive offerings to their gods. To showcase an example, the Greeks offered up public spaces to hold their statues and paintings, and created treasuries to store and display local art in and among the

¹⁵ For an expanded discussion of humanity’s hoarding tendencies, as well as commentary on its implications for the repatriation movement, see Elaine Heumann Gurian, “Repatriation in Context: The important changes brought to museums by indigenous communities, 1991,” in *Civilizing the Museum*, Elaine Heumann Gurian, ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 194-197.

temples. However, the potential of these collections to interest, inform, or entertain the public fell secondary to their larger, religious purposes as votive offerings to the gods.¹⁶

One of the first major shifts away from divine service towards more secular cultural collections occurred when King Attalus of Pergamon successfully raided Aegina in 210 BCE. After the raid, the king left for home with a large number of looted sculptures he particularly admired for their mastery of technique and representations of the same cultural ideals he sought to bring to fruition in his kingdom. Rather than storing them away for a privileged group to view, or standing them along temple walls in service to the city and the gods, Attalus was among the first to create a new public space dedicated solely to inspiring the now-famous Greek ideal among the public of Pergamon.¹⁷ Arguably, this is simply a more secularized version of the previously votive art, usurping the Divine with the Moral in a reshuffle of the priority for the crowd mind of the public. Whatever the intent behind the shift, however, it created the groundwork for more modern, larger museum-development movements spanning from the western edge of Europe to the Eurasian borderlands that strove to inspire future humanistic cultural renaissances. These movements continued to build off each other and shift foci until after the Italian Renaissance in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. By introducing the idea of collections serving secular purposes for the public good, and by removing the holy, Attalus set in motion the creation of modern-day museums as the public widely knows them today.

Although the idea behind it developed early on, the word “museum” did not come into play until the early 1600s. The English word comes from the Latin *museum* meaning

¹⁶ Schildt, 85.

¹⁷ Schildt, 85.

“library” or “study”, and further back derives from the Greek *mouseion* referring to a place or temple dedicated to the study of the arts and the patronage of the Muses.¹⁸ In the ancient world, The Musaeum referred to an institute of philosophy and research founded by Ptolemy I Soter in Alexandria around 280 BCE.¹⁹ Scholars widely consider the first museum as a library of knowledge to be the one Plato established in Athens.²⁰ Its first use in English was as a broad descriptor for English institutions of knowledge – in other words, for libraries – in the 1610s. By the 1680s the term had evolved to evoke the sense of a “building to display objects” in its first recorded use as such.²¹ These objects took a wide variety of forms although initially, collections of objects fell into two categories. According to the ancient tradition, some objects existed as part of “shrines” while others, as in Hadrian’s case, exhibited some “exotic” feature that appealed to Western private collectors as “treasures.” The former concentrates public attention on the object and values the sacred; the latter brings the owner into focus and values prestige, power, and human delight.²² Since the first century CE both of these formats for collections have coexisted more or less equally. However, beginning in the mid-1700s with the establishment of the British Museum, a third form overtook its predecessors in both quantity and accessibility. This new museum style was a combination of the other two: emphasis rested on objects removed from day to day humanity and placed on pedestals

¹⁸ Paula Findlen, “The Museum: its classical etymology and renaissance genealogy,” *Journal of the History of Collections*, no. 1 (1): 59-78.

¹⁹ Jimmy Dunn, “Ptolemy I Soter, The First King of Ancient Egypt’s Ptolemaic Dynasty,” *Tour Egypt*, <http://www.touregypt.net/featuresstories/ptolemy1.htm>, accessed 1 April 2014.

²⁰ Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, “Mouseion, def. 3,” *A Greek-English Lexicon*, at Perseus.

²¹ Douglas Harper, “museum,” *Etymonline*, (2014) <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=museum>, accessed 20 March 2014.

²² E.H. Gombrich, “The Museum: Past, Present, Future,” *The Idea of the Museum: Philosophical, Artistic and Political Questions*, ed. Lars Aagaard-Morgensen, Problems in Contemporary Philosophy (Lewiston, Queenston, and Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1988), 103-104.

out of human context (many of the first museums established in this style focused on natural history²³), and yet the objects were available for everyone to view and learn from regardless of social class or means.

These “halls of curiosities” were innovative in their objective to transform a previously privileged activity into a popular one for the masses. When it opened its doors to the public on the fifteenth of January 1759, entrance to the British Museum cost nothing for “all studious and curious Persons”²⁴ – and yet these new museums were little more than their name. The objects curiosity halls frequently featured centered around either manuscripts/documents or natural history, with a smattering of other ethnographic “curiosities” depending on the collectors’ interests and personal travels. Among the objects the halls housed, however, there was little direction or organization.²⁵ Sir Hans Sloane, whose collection in combination with medieval and Tudor manuscripts and state papers was the foundation stone for the British Museum, listed an inventory of his items in volume two of his *Natural History of Jamaica*. These items included precious stones, eggs, vipers, coins, books, and by the time of his death in January of 1753 estate executors listed significant collection growth in every single category. Notably, in his inventory Sloane listed his “Things relating to the customs of ancient times or antiquities, urns, instruments, etc.” amidst the scientific remnants rather than with the coins, books,

²³ This was especially the case in North America, although it was pervasive internationally – the British Museum referred to itself as a “National Museum” initially to differentiate itself from natural history or folk museums popular during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For more information, see George W. Stocking, ed., *Objects and Others: Essays on Museums and Material Culture*, History of Anthropology, vol. 3 (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

²⁴ Note that “Persons” here refers primarily to white people, who came to view the exotic artifacts and specimens from the non-white imperial colonies. Certainly a few people of color did visit, and increasingly so as time went on, but it was likely an uncomfortable experience at times. Quoted from an unknown source by the British Museum, “The Museum’s story: General history,” http://www.britishmuseum.org/about_us/the_museums_story/general_history.aspx, accessed 2 April 2014.

²⁵ This lack of order in combination with the museums’ tendency to hoard objects causes E.H. Gombrich to refer to this type of museum as “the depository or storehouse” in his “Past, Present, Future” essay, page 108.

mathematical instruments, and other evidences of human ingenuity.²⁶ While the majority of these items were related to the Classics – that is, primarily Greek and Roman civilizations – approximately three hundred and fifty of them came from “remote and primitive peoples,” including indigenous cultures from North America, “South America, the West Indies,...[Jamaica],...Africa, East Indies, Lapland, and Siberia.”²⁷

The classification of ethnographic materials as a single section of the natural history spectrum rather than as the entirety of a field in its own right was a widespread practice in the emerging tradition, in no small part because of the ongoing attempt by economic powers to colonize the rest of the world. Ethnographic and natural history artifacts arrived at the quickly expanding British Museum from explorers throughout the British Empire, counting among its contributors men like Sir Joseph Banks, Archibald Menzies, and Captain Cook. Artifacts related to the Classics – expanded in this era to include Egyptian and Mesopotamian cultures – became “antiquities” while items with indigenous roots remained “curiosities.”²⁸ Both linguistically and intellectually, museum professionals and visitors distinguished indigenous cultures as inferior to those of the Classics thought to be the traditional basis of Western culture. This practice was not limited to items institutional museums formally housed in exhibitions, nor geographically to just England. The Literary and Philosophical Society of South Carolina listed among its 1824 museum collections,

²⁶ Edward P. Alexander, ed., “Sir Hans Sloane and the British Museum,” in *Museum Masters: Their Museums and Their Influence*, American Association for State and Local History Book Series (Walnut Creek, London, and New Delhi: AltaMira Press, 1995), 30.

²⁷ Alexander, *Sir Hans Sloane*, 31.

²⁸ For an example of the importance of these antiquities as foundational to the collective historical psyche of the Western world, one only needs to examine the fierce debate surrounding the requested (and, as of this writing, still denied) repatriation of the Elgin Marbles by the British Museum back to Greece. One essential argument of many that oppose the repatriation is that due to the high tourist rates in England compared with Greece, and because of the assumed significance of the statues to Western development, the Marbles belong where the most people can encounter them rather than in their home setting.

...eight hundred birds, including an ostrich as big as a horse; seventy beasts, with a great white bear from Greenland and a boa constrictor twenty-five feet long; two hundred fishes, the largest a twenty-foot grampus whale; the head of a New Zealand chief; an Egyptian mummy; four-inch-long shoes of a Chinese lady; and assorted curiosities.²⁹

By including human remains and cultural artifacts alongside animals the list subscribed to the Western anthropomorphism characteristic within most museums until the mid-twentieth century.

Western anthropomorphism existed outside the museums' physical buildings as well. In Curtis M. Hinsley's essay discussing the "Commodification of the Exotic at the World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago," he calls the popular temporary outdoor museum exhibitions that featured material artifacts and human groups side by side as raw materials "carnivals of the industrial age" and argues that each one, from London to Paris to Chicago, "was classically imperialist in conception and construction."³⁰ These expositions played host to everything from the latest scientific developments to curiosities – meaning both artifacts and humans – from around the world that deviated from Western norms, and displayed close ties with their contemporary sideshows that featured human "freaks of nature" as objects the public could view and experience for a small fee.

Despite this accurate assessment of the negative aspects of exhibition, it is important to acknowledge the intentions of the creators during the development of this model. By the beginning of the nineteenth century the field of archaeology was

²⁹ Edward P. Alexander, "Charles Wilson Peale and His Philadelphia Museum: The Concept of a Popular Museum," *Museum Masters*, ed. Edward P. Alexander (Walnut Creek, London, and New Delhi: AltaMira Press, 1995), 65.

³⁰ Curtis M. Hinsley, "The World as Marketplace: Commodification of the Exotic at the World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, ed. (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 344-345.

formalizing and gaining academic respect under the expertise of scientists such as William Cunnington, James Hutton, Thomas Jefferson, and Augustus Pitt Rivers. Stepping from antiquarianism, which valued the Classics above all, to a broader professionalism by the mid-nineteenth century, the newly established archaeological method steered investigation of past artifacts away from its previous treasure hunting tendencies and towards a systematic and rigorous cataloguing of *all* items at a site.³¹ When discussing the ethnographic exhibits at Chicago's Columbian Exhibition in 1893, the *Chicago Sunday Herald* commented on the paradox between the grudgingly intrigued respect and dismissive incredulities the academic community (and, by extension, the public) granted the emerging study of anthropology:

Be it known in the first place that the Anthropological Building is the most serious place on the face of the earth. The man who enters there leaves fun behind. The man who has studied its mysteries...never smiles again. Before you study anthropology, you must have learned all about history, physiology, geology, zoology, and all the other topics ending in y. Your hair must grow long and your tongue must caress with the familiarity of an old love words of fifteen syllables. You must know at a glance the touching history of a piece of flint, and you must become enraptured with the tales expressed by a long buried image.³²

In conjunction with other major influences from rapidly developing scientific fields, most prominently the evolutionary biology and investigations of Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer, the developing archaeological movement stirred up enough public interest that by 1889 an ethnographic village became a central feature of the Paris Exposition. From this movement developed an obsession with classifications – from Pitt River's temporal typology to Lewis Henry Morgan's theoretical model of cultural evolution. These

³¹ Dan Hicks, "Characterizing the World Archaeology Collections of the Pitt Rivers Museum," ed. Dan Hicks and Alice Stevenson, *World Archaeology at the Pitt Rivers Museum: a characterization* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2013).

³² *Chicago Sunday Herald*, 12 September 1893, quoted in Hinsley, 348.

systems of classification transformed the reality of the world in the public mind from its eighteenth century status as a place of divine mystery to one of scientific principles awaiting mankind's conquering intellect. This new regime order amounted to a well-intentioned, yet racist and inherently harmful, refocusing of aims for historical and ethnographic presentations within the museum community. Expositions featuring these subjects would engage in "an effort to educate [the public] and 'to formulate the Modern'" through "the steps of progress of civilization and its arts...in all lands up to the present time." In short, the exhibitions would serve as "an *illustrated encyclopedia of humanity*."³³

These statements encompass three key exhibition goals that, in a modified format, are still central to museum work today: exhibitions should *present* information to, *entertain*, and *inform* visitors.³⁴ Equally present today, although equally modified and significantly less blatant, are the harmful foundations of Western anthropocentric attitudes. As historical and ethnographical museums continued to develop throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, collections retained remnants of the language and implications from the colonialism of their origins, both intentionally and unintentionally. As late as 2006, the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History presented ecological and social accounts of the lives of hunter gatherer peoples from the earliest days of humanity alongside its collections of extinct biology and environmental elements.³⁵ This sort of

³³ R. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 45-46.

³⁴ This is a modified version of Fisher, "mUSEums," 49, where he argues that museums traditionally do three things: exhibition, education, and conservation.

³⁵ Based on my personal experience at the museum when last visited in that year. As with all claims based in memory, the risk of the erasure of important details is prominent, and so I have intentionally left the blurrier details of the exhibition vague. This generality also allows for identification by the reader of similar exhibits seen, and provides a gateway for discussion of the commonality of such things.

design, while not overtly negative, conveys meaning by association – if all of the surrounding exhibits recount long gone natural artifacts, an entire series of implications for the indigenous peoples becomes clear. For peoples who currently utilize the tools and methods demonstrated in the exhibit, their modern existence becomes buried under associations of an inherently simpler historic time when people lived closer to the earth, entirely erasing the complexities and struggles such groups experience in reality. As the exhibits set people firmly in the past and entirely removed from the present, both peoples utilizing “primitive” tools and methods today, and those who trace their ancestry to represented demographics suffer from the erasure of their voices and modern presence, leading to a host of political and social difficulties.

In addition to this issue of placement within, and proximity to, other exhibits, a recurring question that haunts museum workers is the issue of bias and perspective. When the very first museums appeared as sacred tributes, the purpose of every artifact was to give service to the glory of the gods. As the public displays developed into personal collections of the “exotic,” museums sought to show off their owners in the most powerful light to their elite peers through emphasis on the number, diversity, and sizes of artifacts (with extra pride granted to those collectors with particularly unique items, or with a significant number of Classical originals). With the innovation of the public museum founded in the halls of curiosities, the purpose of display became murkier. What could people possibly gain from the artifacts that would make them worth the time and money it takes to manage the collections? In response, curators returned to the essential

goals for museums – information, entertainment, and presentation – in an attempt to carve direction out of the mix.³⁶

Traditionally, collectors completely disregarded an object’s host culture, either because they did not know it or because they believed circumstantial mystery added personal value.³⁷ This created a precedent for an environment in which people interpreted objects solely through the aesthetic lens of, as Gurian puts it, “the culture where the object ‘finds itself’” rather than with the artistic conventions of the object’s formational culture in mind.³⁸ In the United States of America, collectors often acquired such objects belonging to the Native American tribes through unfair trades, grave looting, or outright theft. In Europe there was more diversity because of the powers’ scope, but victims tended to belong to a similar demographic to the Native Americans – that is, many were members of indigenous tribes or Far Eastern countries, whereas Arabic and Eastern European peoples encountered “only” negative attitudes and generally rude treatment while in Western Europe. As a general rule the closer one lived to the Ideal West the less likely one’s culture would end up in an inaccurate and sensationalistic exhibit for Western audiences to ogle.³⁹ The only additional method of acquisition Europe engaged in was centuries of spoils of war from the invasion of cultures without the technology or manpower to successfully fight back – although, arguably, the United States undertook this method as well over a shorter period of time. An examination of specific current

³⁶ A caveat: bias in exhibition, although discussed primarily in a negative light here, is inherently a neutral and necessary presence. It is impossible to avoid bias entirely – even the most carefully crafted exhibition has a creator with unique personal experiences and world views that shaped that person’s language spectrum and informs their decisions regarding which artifacts and aspects of culture to place into focus. Bias integrally ties into humanity and museums cannot eliminate it, nor should they try.

³⁷ Gurian, “Repatriation in Context,” 195.

³⁸ Gurian, “Repatriation in Context,” 195.

³⁹ The “Ideal West”, in this context, refers specifically to the Western ideals based on English and United States cultures.

efforts to counteract this tendency exists in the next section; for now suffice it to say that modern museums are constantly engaging in dialogue about the proper worldview lenses to prescribe, and who had the authority to do so.⁴⁰ In addition, they are discussing ways to best *positively* harness biases in service to their communities and society as a whole.

Today museums around the world operate as showcases of everything from culture to art to science to history, often specializing in a single community or aspect of their fields. They are leaders in preservation and research, and seek to educate the public broadly and create a community based on informed communal memories. However, museum staffs, when faced with questions of presentation and interpretation, frequently encounter the legacy of racism and classism in their work. These legacies pervade not only the physical museum space, but also public opinion and media, leading to an epidemic of cultural appropriation and misinformation resulting in real violence against misrepresented demographics. As early as 1807 an hierarchy of display developed that placed sedentary naturalists in a position of elevated respect over their field contemporaries. The ultimate goal was to build connections between objects and living things, natural surroundings, environments, and “the full vigor of life and activity,” but field naturalists lacked “the means of drawing comparisons between them with the result that his observations are ‘broken and fleeting.’”⁴¹ The perspective gained by examinations of sedentary collections “permitted the development of abstract and totalizing frameworks of knowledge because of the new relations they made

⁴⁰ A wonderfully illuminating essay on this subject, and a practical commentary on how museum professionals outside the ethnographic tradition they are presenting ought to operate, is Elaine Heumann Gurian, “A Jew Among Indians: How working outside of one’s own culture works, 1991,” in *Civilizing the Museum*, Elaine Heumann Gurian, ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 189-193.

⁴¹ Georges Cuvier, quoted in Dorinda Outram, *Georges Cuvier: Vocation, Science and Authority in Post-Revolutionary France* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), and summarized in Bennett, 21-22.

perceptible.”⁴² Because of this privileging of the dead over the living, a highway sprung up between world fairs, circuses, and other exhibitions featuring “living villages of peoples from ‘remote’ parts of the world, reconstructions of how the west was won in the face of Indian savagery, and the caged display of wild animals and ‘primitives’ as semiotic equivalents” and the more respectable, in the words of Tony Bennett, “dead circuses” that museums represented, where “only the peeling away of custom, clothing, skin and flesh to reveal the skeletal truth of the body beneath could provide an ultimate basis for the ‘objective’ scientific demonstration of racial difference.”⁴³ Traffic on this highway consisted primarily of previously living displays that, due to the violence of their time in living exhibition, suffered death and involuntarily remained on as part of dead exhibits. This was an intentional and systematic practice – often, the hunting exhibitions that acquired living exhibits actively sought specimens with the sole purpose of their eventual sale to museums.⁴⁴

Opinions are numerous and diverse regarding the proper way to move forward. Unquestionably, the development of more cultural agencies available to speak on behalf of marginalized peoples in a public sphere is critically central to this discussion, as are the problems of definition and interpretation associated with a broadly generalized statement meant to represent a large community, and both of these must work in combination with the formerly mentioned primary goals of museum exhibitions for change to progress.. Some scholars believe that curators hold the bulk of the weight of responsibility for accurate and well-rounded presentations. Others argue that exhibitioners should begin the design process at the heart of the represented communities

⁴² Bennett, 21.

⁴³ Bennett, 15.

⁴⁴ Bennett, 15.

and build exhibitions up from there. Still others maintain that exhibitions of outside cultural objects ought to be identical to those of traditional Western displays in order to foster an equality of respect and regard.⁴⁵ However, equally important to these well-studied central components for museum professionals seeking to continue moving away from prejudiced roots is what is on the other side of the glass: who, exactly, is visiting museums, and why?

Demographics, Case Studies, and the Current State of Affairs

The 2012 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA), sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), which tracks the engagement of Americans aged eighteen and older with a broad spectrum of arts revealed that over the course of a year, seventy-one percent of the general public engaged in some form of arts consumption through electronic media while twenty-four percent toured a park, monument, building, or neighborhood for historic or design purposes and only twenty-one percent visited an art museum or gallery.⁴⁶ Art museums⁴⁷ suffered a drop in visitation of negative eight percent between 2008 and 2012, manifesting more strongly among men than women and among those aged eighteen to forty-four. More highly educated populations are also visiting art museums less frequently; while attendance remains consistent at the grade school and high school graduate levels, those demographics reporting some high school, some college, and college graduation all

⁴⁵ Steven D. Lavine, "Museum Practices," *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 151-158.

⁴⁶ National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), "How a Nation Engages With Art: Highlights from the 2012 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts," *NEA Research Report #57* (September 2013), 10.

⁴⁷ Note that listed percentages for "art museums" includes "percent of U.S. adults who attended an Art Museum or Gallery **and/or** Attended a Crafts Fair or Visual Arts Festival"; NEA, "How a Nation Engages With Art", 20.

reflected statistically significant declines.⁴⁸ While the overall drop for visitation of parks, monuments, buildings, and neighborhoods remained statistically insignificant from 2008 to 2012, once again people aged eighteen to forty-four and those having completed some high school showed the most dramatic declines.⁴⁹ Neither chart provided by the survey gives racial demographic information, but a brief introduction to the “Attending Arts Events and Activities” section informs readers that “notably, non-white and Hispanic groups upheld their arts attendance rates, and even showed increases for some activities.”⁵⁰ In addition to the two museum-related areas just mentioned, the NEA recorded drops in literary reading, particularly poetry, and major shifts towards all media consumption via electronic devices.⁵¹

Throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, museums have made concerted efforts to shift towards cultural inclusiveness in their exhibition setups. In 1850, while attempting to lay the foundations for the South Kensington Museum and facing down strong opposition from the *London Times*, among other powers, Prince Albert gave a speech condemning the assertion that this new museum would flood the area with plagues, venereal diseases, cheap goods, vagrants, and brothels. He waxed poetic about the museum as a launching platform for movements of international peace and claimed that the collections would grant “a living picture of the point of development at which mankind has arrived, and a new starting point from which all nations will be able to direct their future exertions.”⁵² This hopeful vision permeated the field - in the

⁴⁸ NEA, “How a Nation Engages With Art”, 20.

⁴⁹ NEA, “How a Nation Engages With Art”, 22.

⁵⁰ NEA, “How a Nation Engages With Art”, 12.

⁵¹ NEA, “How a Nation Engages With Art”, 42-43.

⁵² Patrick Beaver, *The Crystal Palace, 1851-1936: A Portrait of Victorian Enterprise* (London: Hugh Evelyn, 1970), 20-22.

same year and across the Atlantic Ocean, Miss Ann Pamela Cunningham and her Ladies' Association began a successful campaign to save former president George Washington's home at Mount Vernon, located along the Potomac River in Northern Virginia. Its restoration was groundbreaking for numerous reasons, providing a model for all future historic house renovations to follow, but most relevant to this essay is its entirely female leadership and their focus on preserving the details and not-so-glamorous realities of everyday living for every member of the household, including the underrepresented experiences of women, servants, and slaves.⁵³ Although he held firmly onto the racist constraints of human typologies, George Brown Goode of the Smithsonian was, over the course of thirty years in the second half of the nineteenth century, the first to envision a museum of history and culture separate from that of the scientific natural history.⁵⁴ By allowing ethnographic artifacts a separate space, Goode re-established the existence of indigenous peoples in the present day, laying the groundwork for all future developments in the quest to liberate ethnographic exhibitions from racism and classism. More recently, the focus has moved towards eliminating the microaggressions that litter many exhibitions and easily pass unnoticed if curators are not already aware of the potential for their existence. These microaggressions involve transgressions such as referring to a cultural group and their traditions in the past tense despite their continued presence in today's world, or eliminating humans from the idyllic images in the presentation of

⁵³ Edward P. Alexander, "Ann Pamela Cunningham and Washington's Mount Vernon: The Historic House Museum," *Museum Masters*, ed. Edward P. Alexander, American Association for State and Local History Book Series (Walnut Creek, London, and New Delhi: AltaMira Press, 1995), 178-200.

⁵⁴ Edward P. Alexander, "George Brown Goode and the Smithsonian Museums: A National Museum of Cultural History," *Museum Masters*, ed. Edward P. Alexander, American Association for State and Local History Book Series (Walnut Creek, London, and New Delhi: AltaMira Press, 1995), 286-291.

Africa's past.⁵⁵ When curators do recognize microaggressions, their attempts to erase them frequently result in the isolation of cultural groups into standalone ethnographic exhibitions that create a timeline separate from that of the historically white-dominated mainstream. This creates a safe space for members of the culture in focus but runs the risk of misrepresentations (if curated by a non-member) or division of ethnic culture from the "real" (read: white) world.

When asked what "people should experience in museums" in the late 1980s, Director of the Museum of Modern Art, Mr. John Hightower, declared that "first of all, it ought to be fun."⁵⁶ This is a laudable focus, and certainly one of the original three at the heart of exhibition strategies; but despite staff efforts to bring Hightower's statement to fruition, museum attendance remains in decline. To effectively counteract this trend, museum professionals must redirect their attentions towards the demographics with the most potential for visitation growth – people of color and others from traditionally marginalized communities. However, attracting the necessary demographic will not be easy. Historical cultural appropriation throughout Western societies resulted, and continues to manifest, in grossly unequal power balances and circumstances for peoples belonging to the appropriated cultures. Although significantly less blatant, today's attitude of romanticism is equally as appropriative and harmful, and until museums fully

⁵⁵ Both of these transgressions, as well as several others, were present at the Boston Museum of Science recently, as noted by Adrienne Keene, a member of the Cherokee Nation, in a 2010 post on her blog dedicated to the identification of native appropriations. Adrienne Keene, "Appropriations at the Boston Museum of Science," *Native Appropriations: Examining Representations of Indigenous Peoples* (9 February 2010), <http://nativeappropriations.com/2010/02/appropriations-at-the-boston-museum-of-science.html>, accessed 4 April 2014.

⁵⁶ Television interview conducted by Aline Saarinen with Director of the Museum of Modern Art, John Hightower, quoted in Harold Rosenberg, "The Museum Today," in *The Idea of the Museum: Philosophical, Artistic and Political Questions*, Lars Aagaard-Morgensen, ed. (Lewiston, Queenston, and Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1988), 131.

divorce themselves from both historical and current prejudice recruiting a new visitor pool from among marginalized peoples will remain a lofty goal.⁵⁷

A few concrete plans have emerged to fight the good fight against cultural appropriation in all arenas, from the legislative sphere to community and self-reflexive commentaries. In 1990 the United States passed the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), allowing Native American and Hawaiian tribes, lineal descendants, and culturally affiliated organizations to request that all Federal agencies, which includes all museums both public and private that have ever received Federal funding⁵⁸, return specified cultural items ranging from human remains to funerary and sacred objects to objects of cultural patrimony to their origins. Federal grants and museum funding cover the expenses associated with the documentation and repatriation of all items, relieving the financial burden from the tribes and minimizing the barriers in need of navigation.⁵⁹ Repatriation is a slow and continuously ongoing process, but effective – since the legislation passed, tribes have received the human remains of approximately 32,000 individuals, nearly 670,000 funerary objects, 120,000 unassociated funerary objects, and 3,500 sacred objects.⁶⁰

In addition, many individual museums are taking the initiative and eliminating some of the problems of representation by allowing members of represented communities

⁵⁷ For a comprehensive look at how New Age romanticism of Indigenous Aboriginal Australian culture affects the indigenous peoples, see David Waldron and Janice Newton, “Rethinking Appropriation of the Indigenous: A Critique of the Romanticist Approach,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 16, no. 2 (November 2012): 64-85.

⁵⁸ The only exception to this rule is the Smithsonian Institution, repatriation from which is governed by the earlier National Museum of the American Indian Act of 1989.

⁵⁹ For more information about NAGPRA, including specific discussion of definitions, costs, and the repatriation process, visit the government-sponsored informational website provided. National Park Service, “National NAGPRA” (Washington D.C., United States Department of the Interior, 2014), <http://www.nps.gov/history/nagpra/INDEX.HTM>, accessed 4 April 2014.

⁶⁰ National Park Service, “National NAGPRA – Frequently Asked Questions.”

to take the lead in exhibit and museum development. One particularly powerful example is that of the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) established as a branch of the Smithsonian Institution through repatriation legislature in 1989. The NMAI brands itself as an institution “dedicated to acting as a resource for the hemisphere’s Native communities and to serving the greater public as an honest and thoughtful conduit to Native cultures – present and past – in all their richness, depth, and diversity.”⁶¹ Essential to the NMAI’s identity as a voice for Western indigenous cultures is the makeup of its leadership – as part of the museum’s establishing legislation, among the initial Board of Trustees appointments at least seven of the twenty-three had to be American Indians, and in subsequent appointments the number jumped to twelve, with eight of those positions having defined term lengths.⁶²

When internal community consultations are inaccessible or not financially feasible and museums must create fair and accurate presentations of artifacts and exhibits from external worldviews, a common technique is to interpret the items through self-reflexivity, leaving the interpretation process transparent and visible to visitors. This educates viewers about both the artifacts and the internal museum world, and encourages the populace to engage in their own interpretive process alongside the professionals. By acknowledging that curators make interpretive decisions for every aspect of presentation rather than pretending to have insider membership and knowledge, self-reflexive exhibits allow museums to sidestep the accusation of cultural hegemony. An alternative method of self-reflexive presentations brings museum-goers into common space with displays. It

⁶¹ National Museum of the American Indian, “About the Museum,” *Smithsonian Institution* (2014) <http://nmai.si.edu/about/>, accessed 4 April 2014.

⁶² Senate, *National Museum of the American Indian Act*, 101st Cong., 1989, S. 978, 20 U.S.C., 80q-3.

frequently does this by harnessing connections between media, popular culture, and artifacts to draw visitors in and make them aware of their own socially engrained interpretations and assumptions about indigenous cultures present in their daily lives. A 2012 student-curated exhibit entitled “Thawing the Frozen Indian: From Tobacco to Top Model” displayed at Brown University’s Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology (HMA) utilized this method particularly effectively. In the exhibit, the curators openly confront the idea that cultural appropriation is, as many people claim, simply harmless imitation in its highest form of flattery, focusing the discussion through Native American representations in museums and popular communal identity formed by a combination of partial and whitewashed histories and mythical media constructions. The exhibit’s establishing panel read:

From cigar store Indians to reality TV, American popular culture has reflected, created, and perpetuated stereotypical representations of Native Americans. Museums have helped legitimize and solidify these stereotypes, freezing American Indians in a primitive, ahistorical past. As part of the class “Thawing the Frozen Indian: Native American Museum Representations,” we have created an exhibit about the (mis) representation of Native Americans both inside and outside of museums. This exhibit is confronting the complex, and often painful, history of cultural appropriation in order to foster conversation. As part of the process, we created a Facebook page and crowd-sourced comments from individuals who identify as Native American. We have organized our research into three categories: racist stereotypes, mass-produced cultural appropriations, and contemporary Native art. In this last and final section we provide examples of the “unfrozen Indian,” art that combines the tradition and modern in Native American life today.⁶³

⁶³ “Thawing the Frozen Indian: From Tobacco to Top Model,” *Brown University*, as quoted in Adrienne Keene, “Thawing the Frozen Indian: Brown University’s new anthro exhibit,” *Native Appropriations: Examining Representations of Indigenous Peoples* (14 June 2012), <http://nativeappropriations.com/2012/06/thawing-the-frozen-indian-brown-universitys-new-anthro-exhibit.html>, accessed 3 April 2014.

Throughout the exhibit the curators had juxtaposed appropriative pop culture items and their associated “real-world” Facebook comments with traditional artifacts from the lives of Native American tribe members. Perhaps the most creative subversion of the traditional separation caused by glass-case exhibits however was the provision of glass pens for visitors write their thoughts directly on the artifact cases. Writing on the clear glass while simultaneously looking straight through at objects allowed people and artifacts to meet in a centralized neutral space and forced viewers to contemplate the intersections between ahistorical museum exhibits and their own ongoing human experiences. Making meaning in this sort of space becomes an active and constantly evolving activity as visitors add new comments to each display; the more comments provided, the more perspective other visitors gain to supplement and inform their personal interpretations of the artifacts and their relevance to themselves.⁶⁴

The “Frozen Indian” exhibit featured cross-sectional interactions with social media platforms as part of its strategy to engage viewers in contemplation of exhibit implications. And according to the SPPA statistics quoted at the beginning of this section the digitization and easy dissemination of information around the globe at increasing speeds and densities with the click of a button reflects an important and worldwide trend that is not slowing down. As the Millennial Generation, the first generation to grow up entirely in a digital world and as members of a global village, enters the workplace, their researchers and intellectuals will turn first to the Internet and technologically literate exhibits for answers and communal scholarship. More and more, visitors will forgo in-person experiences in favor of cheaper, more easily accessible virtual tours or interactive

⁶⁴ The exhibit ran from 9 May 2012 to 6 October 2013; parts of it are now available for anyone to view on the HMA website: <http://brown.edu/Facilities/Haffenreffer/ThawingtheFrozenIndian.htm>

activities where they are able to explore and contribute to the community. This generation of Western museum-goers will expect hands-on, instant, immersive, and personal experiences full of accurate representations of diversity, and will shy away from Thomas Huxley-styled exhibition models that keep information and people on separate planes. The transition has already begun: when comparing the roped-off pieces (of which, admittedly, there are very few) with those designed with visitors' digital interaction preferences and learning styles in mind at the EMP Museum in Seattle, Washington, it is abundantly clear which style is more effective in attracting and retaining visitors across demographics. While visitors certainly do not neglect the separated artifacts, they are inclined to spend less time engaging with the objects and the accompanying information than at each digital portal, where crowds quickly accumulate and stick around for longer periods of time.⁶⁵ Technology is increasingly integral to people's lives. From this point forward, then, to remain relevant the museum must of necessity continue to move further and further away from the static, dispassionate exhibits of the past. The challenge, however, is to do so while avoiding a regression to the vaudeville-esque popular theater that drew admissions in the nineteenth century or misdirection towards the over-saturated and over-simplified theme parks that many modern museums seeking to increase visitation rates have inadvertently become, all the while keeping the fight against cultural misrepresentations and appropriations as a primary focus.

Thankfully, the SPPA statistics also suggest some key areas of focus professionals can examine to ensure the future relevancy of museums within a society saturated in computer-based technology. In the introduction to Part II of her essay collection,

⁶⁵ All observations made and experienced firsthand by the author during her visit to the museum in March of 2014.

“Civilizing the Museum”, Elaine Heumann Gurian makes the case for museums as important yet unacknowledged civic spaces that are “lively, funny, noisy, inclusionary places that offer human interactions, civic discourse, and social service in addition to the more expected exhibitions and programs.”⁶⁶ The SPPA survey confirms this finding, albeit indirectly. Spaces where adults shared art with each other, such as through social media and in movie theatres, or where they were able to commune for social dancing or other artistic activities as a hobby, consistently received more traffic in 2012 than traditionally solitary spaces such as quiet, detached art museums or professional art classrooms. The first step towards remaining relevant, then, is to acknowledge the central presence of Gurian’s civic space in every museum and actively work to both buttress and promote it to the American public. Within that public, the SPPA findings also note statistically significant increases of ethnic American involvement in the majority of activities, naming African-Americans, Hispanics, and newly immigrated populations. Unfortunately, museums were one of the few areas that did not see growth in the cultural diversity of visitors. Why is this? What can museums do to attract this increasingly important demographic into their annual visitation totals, increasing attendance percentages to levels that reaffirm the museum’s place as important cultural spaces at the heart of Western society?

While eliminating the colonialist assumptions in current ethnographic exhibits is a vital first step, alone it is not enough to recover museums’ status. In a recent survey conducted by Reach Advisors in 2012 among a brief sample of convenience and regarding current attendance trends, the researchers came away with a curious finding:

⁶⁶ Elaine Heumann Gurian, “Part II - A Safer Place: Museums in a civil society,” in *Civilizing the Museum*, Elaine Heumann Gurian, ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 67.

Interestingly...those who reported increased attendance tended to attribute that growth to things museum had done, while those with decreases tended to attribute it to constraints external to museum...[Reasons for increases included] new/improved exhibitions, new/improved programs, including family programs, new building/renovation, [and] improved marketing, and those who saw decreases tended to cite...fewer tourists, cuts in school programs, the economy, [and] museum budget cuts.⁶⁷

While the survey admittedly only reached a small, easily accessible sample demographic, the preliminary findings are provocative enough to warrant further study and attention and confirm what many museum professionals have already realized and attempted to actualize: in order to be relevant and competitive in the contest for the public's limited free time, museums must grow and adapt themselves to better suit the technological and cultural demands of the twenty-first century.

Looking to the Future

“People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them.” ~James Baldwin

It is all well and good to establish a need for some drastic shift in the way museums approach the public – and in the face of steadily decreasing visitation rates, the professional museum community as a whole generally agrees on this fact - but museums' motivations for wanting to make this change range from economic practicalities to rosy visions of the social importance of their institutions. The challenge is to develop a single, coherent plan that successfully addresses the motivations and needs of different museums while simultaneously addressing all possible barriers to success. Instead of a single plan, then, a list of guidelines related to specific facets of museum work is more appropriate and flexible, and it will better serve to help museums focus on promoting their strengths and developing their weaknesses according to individual museum needs.

⁶⁷ Reach Advisors, “Attendance Trends: Overall Results” (17 July 2012) http://reachadvisors.typepad.com/museum_audience_insight/2012/07/attendance-trends-overall-results.html, accessed 4 April 2014.

The number of facets museums can choose to focus on is nearly as large as the number of types of museums, and so for the sake of brevity only an overview of the three with the most potential for growth and impact on several types of museums' relevance occur here: minority youth education, ethnographic agency, and community engagement.⁶⁸ The following explanations of the foci are intentionally vague prompts to encourage museum professionals to launch their institutions from the provided categories onto tracks that best reflect the needs of each. Regardless of museum type, however, it is absolutely essential to remember that at the heart of all three categories are people, not institutions. As museums professionals continue to engage in discussion that thought should remain central to every decision the socially responsible museum of tomorrow chooses to make.

Museum schools exist in various official forms throughout the world, providing services from summer camps and day care to full-time primary school enrollment to weekly classes for adults. This is a valuable service, and one of the most well-utilized by museum-goers today – at the Fort Worth Museum of Science and History's Museum School program, the first in the United States to receive accreditation by the National Association of the Education of Young Children, over 200,000 children have enrolled since the program's founding in 1949.⁶⁹ And yet most of the schools cater only to children of middle and upper level financial strata whose parents can afford the extra fees associated with an immersive, caring learning environment with personal attention and an

⁶⁸ For thorough and current information about more facets and upcoming trends within the museum community, including a discussion of the importance of ethnic Americans in emerging philanthropic trends, the possibilities of 3-D printing for fostering increased creativity, the potentiality of a shift from résumés to portfolios of microcredentials among postgraduates, and uses for networked objects placed within attentive spaces, to name a few, read: American Alliance of Museums, "TrendsWatch 2013: Back to the Future," (2013).

⁶⁹ Fort Worth Museum of Science and History, "About Museum School," <http://www.fwmuseum.org/museum-school>, accessed 5 April 2014.

abundance of resources. In fact, the FWMSH program is so popular among this demographic that enrollment is based on a lottery system, and while a limited number of scholarships are available, tuition for one preschool student is either \$750 with museum membership or \$775 without.⁷⁰ Children enrolled in public schooling, in contrast, are frequently members of marginalized ethnic communities who cannot afford a personalized school system and must, more often than not, do their best to make a way through a learning environment that minimizes ethnic contributions to history and society. The state of the United States' public school systems is frequently a hot topic in political debates, although no one seems able to find viable solutions for budget shortfalls, alternatives to standardized testing for measuring students' intelligence and mastery of course material, or the number of people of color to include in mandatory federal curricula. The first guideline for museums, then, in the field of youth education: design, develop, and expand affordable or subsidized youth education programs to bridge the knowledge gap public schools often leave for students who are members of marginalized communities.

Minority youth education is perhaps the single most important focus for modern museums of the future, not least because of their impending status as future museum funders, and this is a truth beginning to receive recognition outside the museum community. In 2013, the University of Washington Seattle awarded the Graduate School Distinguished Thesis Award to Museology graduate student Dylan High ('13) for his work examining the impact of teen museum programs on ethnic identity formation in adolescence, proclaiming the results of that research to be the most valuable contribution

⁷⁰ Fort Worth Museum of Science and History, *Fort Worth Museum School*, (Pretoria: Fort Worth Museum of Science and History, ca. 2014), 2-3.

with the most meaningful social implications to come out of all the University's graduate programs that year.⁷¹ Recognition of the benefits of an immersive, personalized museum education to ethnic American youth is an important first step towards creating museum programs around the world designed to promote thoughtful adolescent identity-formation through youth empowerment. Programs would have tangible, socially productive results; High found that teens who participated in a museum program were more likely to continue learning about their ethnic identity after the program's end, more likely to be involved in ethnic community and cultural practices, more likely to develop positive and healthy self-esteem, and more likely to understand the context surrounding cultural identity development in general.⁷² Youth who receive these benefits are more likely to stay engaged learners over time; museums that focus on youth development in this way will therefore create a generation of socially-conscious people more likely to stay engaged with museums throughout their lives.

In a narrow Georgian building on the northeast side of St Stephen's Green in Dublin, Ireland, a collection of approximately 5,000 twentieth century artifacts resides. Appropriately named "The Little Museum of Dublin," the refurbished building opened in 2011 after widespread public demand for a place where average Dublin citizens could go to view the history of their city as told through their own words. The collection is open daily for a small entrance fee and almost entirely consists of objects the people of Dublin donated or loaned, and the museum does not hold an archive – all artifacts are on display

⁷¹ Museology Master of Arts Program, "Dylan High Receives Distinguished Thesis Award," *University of Washington* (2013), <http://depts.washington.edu/uwmuse/about/dylan-high-receives-distinguished-thesis-award>, accessed 21 March 2014.

⁷² Dylan High, "Ethnic Identity Formation in Adolescence: Impact of Teen Programs in Museums" (MA thesis summary, University of Washington Seattle, 2013), http://depts.washington.edu/uwmuse/sites/default/userfiles/file/High_Dylan_Synopsis_13.pdf, accessed 22 March 2014.

on one of the museum's three floors. Because of the institution's status as a "people's museum," the artifacts are intensely varied and diverse. Currently the museum is searching specifically for "artefacts related to the 1913 Lockout...Popular culture artefacts from the 1980s and 1990s...Fine Gael paraphernalia, letters and election posters...[and] Anything to do with the Women's Movement of the 60s/70s."⁷³ In addition to the citizen-designed content, the museum features an award winning hospitality service called "City of a Thousand Welcomes." This service is 100 percent free and pairs visitors to the city with local volunteers who serve as Ambassadors and show off Dublin as its residents see it.⁷⁴ The museum's efforts to be a platform on which Dublin citizens can share their communal history through their own voices has been wildly successful – as of this writing, Trip Advisor ranked the museum tenth out of 263 attractions in the city, and in 2013 granted the museum a Certificate of Excellence.⁷⁵ The Little Museum of Dublin serves as an example for the actualizing of the second guideline: museums should focus on granting agency to marginalized peoples and empowering them to tell their own stories.

A brief discussion of the benefits of ethnographic agency in section two utilized the National Museum of the American Indian as an example of the successful implementation of this model. Another well-received example is the Makah Cultural and Research Center in Neah Bay, Washington, created by Makah tribal chairman Edward Eugene Claplanhoo in 1979 as a way to display artifacts recovered from the recently

⁷³ The Little Museum of Dublin, "What sort of artefacts are we looking for?" <http://www.littlemuseum.ie/collection/what-sort-of-artefacts-are-we-looking-for>, accessed 13 April 2014.

⁷⁴ For more information about the Little Museum of Dublin, as well as ticket prices and visiting hours, please visit <http://www.littlemuseum.ie/>.

⁷⁵ Trip Advisor, "The Little Museum of Dublin, Dublin" http://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g186605-d2306703-Reviews-The_Little_Museum_of_Dublin-Dublin_Dublin.html, accessed 13 April 2014.

unearthed Lake Ozette Archaeological Site, a site whose existence tribe members long anticipated in their oral history. The tribe continues excavations today, in collaboration with Washington State University, but the Center's purpose has expanded far beyond simple display. Their mission statement currently proclaims the Center's dedication

To protect and preserve the linguistic, cultural and archaeological resources of the Makah Indian Nation; To provide policy direction in the area of archaeological, linguistic, and cultural management to the Makah Tribal Council, Makah Tribal Departments and other interested organizations; To *educate* Tribal members and the public in the culture, heritage, and language of the Makah Indian Nation; To *stimulate, support and carry out research* which will benefit the Makah Nation and the academic community, providing a comprehensive center for Makah oriented research.⁷⁶

To this end the Center has established cultural and language revitalization programs led by Makahs, a language chronicling program that is currently developing a basic Makah Language Dictionary, a Tribal Historic Preservation Office that manages the museum's collections as well as the Makah Indian Reservation's cultural properties, and an extensive Library and Archives for community and scholarly research endeavors. The Center's example is unique because it goes far beyond the simple idea of allowing the marginalized to speak. It instead grants complete ownership to the represented group, freeing them to focus on the aspects of preservation, education, and entertainment they find most important to their community. This style of presentation has several benefits for museums – when the artifact interpreter is a member of the displayed group of people, museums are more likely to avoid accusations of misrepresentation or appropriation for the benefit of Western hegemony. In addition, although any one cultural insider is incapable of fully representing the entire culture with all its facets, their contributions can

⁷⁶ Makah Cultural and Research Center, "Makah Cultural and Research Center Mission Statement" <http://makahmuseum.com/about/>, accessed 13 April 2014.

help present a more balanced and accurate account of cultural history from which visitors can learn, fulfilling one of their three primary goals. Members of represented ethnic communities benefit too – when ethnographic and historical representations and accounts are in a member’s own words, inaccuracies and erasures are almost nonexistent and non-member viewers gain a humanized perspective that fosters an attitude of cross-cultural respect and learning.

The third guideline takes both of the first two foci and acknowledges them as essential components in the creation of the third: strong community engagement. The exact nature of these communities directly correlates to the details of subject and central aims of each independent museum, making it infeasible to parse them all here. However, the importance of fostering these relationships cannot be overstated. One essential function of modern museums is to serve as representatives for their surrounding communities. With the trends of decreasing attendance, a simple increase of communication is not enough to reverse the situation. Something more is necessary.

A few museums have attempted to tackle the dilemma. The National Multicultural Western Heritage Museum and Hall of Fame in Fort Worth, Texas, originally emerged as a way “to acknowledge the contributions of Hispanic Americans, Native Americans, European Americans, and African Americans in the settlement of the Western American Frontier.”⁷⁷ In addition to its permanent exhibits featuring subjects such as the Tuskegee Airmen and the Buffalo Soldiers, the museum offers opportunities to engage exhibits through hands-on activities, weekly cultural heritage youth education workshops examining minority involvements in the settling of the western United States, free weekly

⁷⁷ The National Multicultural Western Heritage Museum and Hall of Fame, “About the National Multicultural Western Heritage Museum,” (2008) <http://www.cowboysofcolor.org/about.php>, accessed 27 April 2014.

storytelling by local celebrities, and a travelling living history presentation that encourages people to “learn about a proud heritage, learn to embrace diversity and tolerance, encounter new role models, and engage in interactive activities that will increase the knowledge of the complete history of the settlement of the western United States.”⁷⁸ However, despite the NMWHM’s stellar example and the acknowledgement by most museum professionals of the connection between their institutions and the people that support them, a surprisingly limited number of models exist that museums can adopt to further develop this connection. Outside of the museum world, however, there are several models that might serve as solid foundations. The most successful and visible of these began in 1994 as an attempt to rebuild safe and caring communities in the Shreveport-Bossier City Metropolitan Area, Louisiana. Called Community Renewal International (CRI), over the past twenty years this program has expanded from a small inner city movement to the primary community building model for the United Nation’s Infopoverty Programme and the recipient of a “Best Practice Model” from the White House Conference on Community Renewal.

The organization tackles community building with a three-pronged approach. First, Friendship Houses establish themselves in low-income areas. These houses offer communal spaces for social, technical, and formal education, and are run by live-in CRI staff. Second is the creation of Haven Houses, voluntary houses within targeted neighborhoods that spearhead community building efforts through hosting block parties, assisting sick neighbors, or sharing garden produce. The third prong is the Renewal Team, a group of CRI staff that exists outside a physical building and works on a citywide scale to recruit churches, businesses, and more as partners in their community

⁷⁸ National Multicultural Western Heritage Museum and Hall of Fame

revitalization efforts. The factors CRI strives to influence, such as their impacts, risk factors, and levels of community change, fall outside traditional evaluation methods so the organization is working towards a new system that can “measure immediate and quantifiable quality of life metrics from a 2009 baseline of function/dysfunction.”⁷⁹ In the meantime, CRI allows raw numbers to tell their story: upon the implementation of the We Care model, there is on average a “50 percent drop in major crime in target neighborhoods” and, more concretely, record of “50,216 members of the We Care Team (people actively caring about and reaching out to their neighbors and others in the community)...32,522 volunteer hours given in 2012...244 children and youth active in after-school programs...118 active students in the Adult Renewal Academy [ARA]; 64 ARA students who have earned their GED...[and] 2 full replication sites in Abilene, Texas, and Cameroon, Africa.”⁸⁰ These results are impressive, and suggest the possibility for a strong model that, adapted, can serve museums’ needs well.

One essential suggestion that the CRI models which deserves further development is the idea of moving museums beyond the constraints of a physical building. Certainly the physical presence of museums is vitally important. With no building, there is no space for hosting collections or sponsoring academic inquiries. If, however, the constraints of physicality limit museums’ attempts to achieve the three central goals – entertainment, education, and research – then they lack effectiveness on their own. Creating a multi-pronged approach to community engagement allows modern museums to adapt to the lifestyles and needs of their target demographics. In particular, this innovation is relevant

⁷⁹ Community Renewal International, “Evaluation” (2014) <http://www.sbcir.us/evaluation.cfm>, accessed 14 April 2014.

⁸⁰ Community Renewal International, “Community Impact” (2014) http://www.sbcir.us/community_impact.cfm, accessed 14 April 2014.

for museums attempting to engage with communities of ethnic groups immersed in poverty and with people who are unable to get away from their daily routines to visit museums due to disability, illness, or any number of other reasons. These outreach branches of museums might take any number of forms, but all would rely on compassionate volunteers and/or staff and feature easily transportable and transferrable programs and exhibitions that attempt to bring all the benefits of museums out into the communities rather than waiting in vain for those communities to come inside museums. In order to engage with new communities and new generations in this twenty-first century, museums must be willing to meet people at least halfway where they are intellectually, recreationally, and geographically.

Conclusion

Each year more ethnic minorities become entrenched in the arts than ever before. The culture surrounding education – the inner operations of Western society in general, in fact – is changing more rapidly now at the start of the twenty-first century than in any era previous. Computer-based technology is increasingly integral to the daily lives of most people today. Even people from marginalized communities who may lack personal technological gadgets are more familiar with online search engines such as Google than with physical encyclopedias. These people are used to technological immersion and hands-on learning with instant access to questions regarding tangential thoughts, and experience more human diversity firsthand than any of their predecessors. At the same time that people are drastically adjusting the way they experience the world, however, museum professionals are struggling with redefining the purpose of their museums in this new digital age.

Museums are continuing their decades-long struggle to pull away from the impersonal, colonial, and elitist operational legacies of the nineteenth century. Even as more accurate and fair exhibits arrive, however, museum attendance is in a noticeable decline when compared with attendance elsewhere in the arts; even the trend of rising ethnic American engagement across the board does not extend to museum visits. This loss of attendance is central to the question of repurposing the modern museum – in an age where Google is just a click away, how can museums that traditionally served as repositories for knowledge redefine themselves to remain cultural centers without accidentally morphing into flash and smoke theme parks in the style of Hadrian’s Villa? The answer lies in harnessing the demographic with the most potential for visitation and engagement growth: ethnic Americans and recent immigrants.

Museums have certainly made significant changes to the blatantly problematic aspects of their ethnographic and historical exhibits over the past two centuries. Yet this effort is not enough to draw in new visitors from traditionally marginalized groups. Museums must therefore work to develop a comprehensive plan to reach these target demographics. Although the endeavor is far from simple, three central foci may serve as a helpful launching pad. Museums should first design, develop, and expand youth education programs; second they should focus on granting agency to marginalized voices and empowering them to tell their own stories; third museums should create strong community engagement programs that reach beyond the physical walls of their buildings. By experimenting with new strategies in each of these three categories museums may allow themselves to develop their potential as relevant institutions of education, entertainment, and scholarly achievement. This new approach – concentrated on

recruiting more ethnic visitors and keeping social consciousness constantly in mind – has at its heart a focus on people rather than abstract interpretations of items outside human context. If museums are able to keep this people-based focus at the center of all future decisions then the proposed new strategies can help these institutions rebrand themselves as essential conduits for the representations of cultures and to create welcoming and engaging spaces full of potential that are still worth visiting in the digital age.

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