

MUSEUMS AND THEIR USE

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AT a time when the chief of Canada's museums, in fact the only one pretending to be at all representative, is approaching a period in its existence, and must shortly double its space or become useless for its purpose, it seems fitting to follow up one or two lines of reflection which suggest themselves almost inevitably with regard to the scope and functions of these institutions.

In general, too little attention has been given by the educated public to the purpose for which a museum is established. They have more or less definite views on what a theatre, a railway station, a public-house or a public park should be, and will express those views; but regarding such an institution as a museum they are dumb: they have no ideas, and take almost without a word what they are given. Criticism and suggestion are the breath of life, and none, or practically none, is forthcoming.

In some countries, of course, notably the United States, the museum is frequently merely the toy (often a very useful one) of some wealthy person who has chosen that way to spend his fortune and fill his declining years. In these instances the public naturally can hardly expect to have much say; it must be thankful for such gifts as Heaven has thought well to bestow. It is different, however, with a museum supported and managed by or on behalf of a state, municipality or province; there the citizens support the institution through the taxes and exchequer, and it is surely not too much to expect that they should have some idea of what they want. This is true, for instance, of the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, and the British Museum in London; it is not true of the Museum of Toledo, Ohio. The present article is an attempt to explain briefly the questions at issue.

There are two kinds of people who visit museums: the person who goes as a casual sightseer, ready to be distracted, or entertained, or (more ambitiously) to pick up some crumbs of information—he does not care what—which the authorities have set out attractively for him; the other, the student. The latter class includes, of course, all those who visit a museum with a definite object in view: whenever the writer calls in at the Tate to linger a half-hour among the Hogarths, he would consider himself as belonging to the second category. Some museums provide for one of these

classes, some for both; most university museums cater for the student only. The Royal Ontario Museum endeavours to fulfil both functions. It is thus as comprehensive as possible in its scope, for no period or aspect of civilization or of man's existence is outside its purview; and in addition it has the two-fold aim of presenting these things to the general public in a form which can be grasped by the person of average education and intelligence, for their pleasure and enlightenment, and of maintaining a collection of material, not primarily for its attractiveness for exhibition, but for handling and study by those persons who are acquiring knowledge or pursuing research in certain particular directions. These latter want their material to be conveniently accessible, and as representative as possible; moreover, they do not need enticing into the museum by any of the advertising methods employed to overcome the intellectual lethargy of the crowd.

This second activity, which may be broadly called the study side of the museum, includes the museum's work in encouraging or prosecuting research; this may vary from nothing at all to the equipment and maintenance in the field of several archaeological or anthropological expeditions. Thus the British Museum does a vast amount of exploration and research of this kind, being at present the headquarters in England of certain studies, e. g., the archaeology of Iraq, and so fulfilling a function often carried on by universities. Hence it comes that universities and museums of this calibre are often found in close collaboration; and it is a natural consequence of this that in many instances it is held expedient for the same man to hold a position on a university and on a museum staff. He is so enabled to co-ordinate the work done in the same subject in both institutions, and to use the one to supplement the other.

It may perhaps be deemed invidious to try to estimate the relative merits and advantage to the community of the two aspects of a museum's work outlined above. But it is high time that all thinking men should face the issue of a sound education as against a smattering of general knowledge; and while this issue does not involve a complete lack of confidence in the one side of a museum's use, it will soon appear that there are in the public or exhibition side grave and inherent defects from which the study use of a museum is entirely free. Most people can collect for themselves a few of the things that interest them—if they are consumed by no more than a passing curiosity. But a museum is the only instrument which can effectively gather together and administer a fairly representative collection in many different kinds. For

this, accumulated technical experience and collective effort are necessary. Herein a museum has an advantage over the private collector; in this direction the natural genius of a museum best expresses itself.

No museum, however expensively equipped, can produce the complete illusion of reality. It is impracticable to rebuild a street in mediaeval Florence in order to place a della Robbia over the door, or to reproduce Tower Green to show thereon the headsman's axe at work. These are only extreme instances of what applies in a less degree to all objects shown in a museum. Objects of art and of historical interest, once torn out of their proper setting, can be fully realized and appreciated only by an effort of the imagination. A suit of mediaeval armour or a della Robbia terracotta is as out of place to-day as a Hottentot at the court of King Arthur, so long as we have not the society for which they were made; and this remains true whatever the amount spent on trying to produce an accurate copy of the mere shell into which they fitted. Why, then, strive to vie with those whose sole desire seems to be to entomb every remnant of the handiwork of the past in a splendid mausoleum seven times more costly than itself? We should concentrate on the thing rather than on its appendages and environment, on explanation rather than reconstruction. The grandiose reconstruction policy is not only ruinously expensive, it is part of the great conspiracy afoot to encourage mental laziness. If a person wishes to get an idea of the original surroundings and importance of a given object, and refuses to do so by reading, he does not deserve to know. On any other principle, we should soon have our museums approximating to the famous description of Alfred Harmsworth, who, after producing a newspaper for those who could not think (*The Daily Mail*), produced another for those who could not read (*The Daily Mirror*).

It is all a matter of degree; and we are ultimately faced with the question of how far we wish to go in assisting the imagination. An over-assisted imagination soon grows weak and exhausted, a notoriously common complaint in the present age. In the greatest days of the theatre, in fifth-century Greece and in Elizabethan England, the scenic apparatus was of such an order that to describe it as meagre would be an exaggeration. Yet what times were these for the imagination! How much longer are we to endure the self-perpetuating atmosphere of the intellectual nursery?

The Elgin Marbles in the British Museum are perhaps as well known to the world at large as any object in an institution of the sort.

Their influence on ideas, on art, and on the ordinary educated man's views of Greece have been immense. Yet they are, by the most "advanced" standards of to-day, badly housed and shown in almost every particular. Whereas in their original position they decorated the outside of a building, they are now hung around the internal walls of a room; whereas formerly they were lit solely from below, to-day they receive their only illumination from above; and whilst they used to be visible only to spectators peering up with craning necks to a height of forty feet, now one inspects them almost at eye level without the need for neck-exercise. Other circumstances there are wherein the present method of showing the Marbles differs from their original position, but these will suffice. The point of all this is to note that it has not prevented in the least their becoming known to the wide circle of educated people everywhere, and exercising a greater influence than perhaps any other single work of art, ancient or modern. At other times and in other hands, maybe a second Parthenon (such a building does indeed already exist, in a city whose fame it is perhaps unnecessary to increase by mentioning its name more precisely) might have been erected to receive them once more *in situ*; but then we are immediately faced by the question, "Where shall this end? Are we to do the same for everything from the past?" Is the colossal expense repaid? Is it not losing all sense of proportion and fitness to go to such lengths?

Furthermore, museum education is not one of the primary studies; to be educative, it can be applied only to those minds which have reached a certain degree of development. It is no use assuming that it can supplement, e. g., the essential basis of education in reading, writing and arithmetic. The contents of a museum are, after all, only *materies*, *Stoff*, and the mind must have first received training in its appropriate functions (education) in order to deal with them. The ordinary person whose life is cast in an ugly or crude environment cannot be inspired with any effective appreciation of or response to the beauty of art by one or two visits a month, it may be, to a museum. Only here and there a youthful Keats is capable of such a response. For the majority, appreciation of beauty is the result of natural aptitude, or of education, or of a beautiful environment, several or all of these: beauty must impinge on their life constantly at many points: for them, it cannot be captured and imprisoned in a museum. What the museum can do is to collect things for the person who has an eye for them to enjoy: the rest mostly pass through, as little affected as though they had been to a cinema.

For all its "anti-democratic" implications, this is a true account of the situation; nor is there anything remarkable in it, except to those who still cling to the forced and outworn notion that the great "public" consists of a number of strictly equal and similarly disposed particles, and can educate or govern or in fact do anything for itself.

An important factor in education is limit. To know when to stop! You cannot get a child, or even an adult with a normally vigorous intellect, to be equally interested in a Greek terracotta figurine, Captain Scott's diaries, a piece of Chantilly lace, and a flint implement from the Cromer Forest Bed. A museum will have many things which are dull; it is part of its job. The child's or the adult's selective interest will be attracted (probably) by one or other of these objects, and he will want to know more of it. Thus we arrive at the principle that from the very outset the attitude of the uninformed but intelligent person towards the contents of a museum is by nature highly selective, i. e., specialized. For those who come merely to gape at everything they see, it is surely not worth while erecting and filling the museum. The most perfervid and perverted view of "democracy" could hardly go so far as to maintain this.

The principle just enunciated is of extreme importance in its effect on the view we take of the best method of arranging and working the museum. In particular, it does away with that view which confounds education with the spreading of a thin layer of heterogeneous and undigested information over the entire surface of the mind, clogging and numbing it more than anything else. It can never be too often or too strongly insisted on (and let this be an excuse for repeating a commonplace) that information is not education, which is an attitude of mind, entirely unrelated to the amount of miscellaneous information that mind possesses. Education is quality, not quantity, and is produced most satisfactorily by applying oneself to a limited field of knowledge, and making oneself thoroughly master of the field. When you have learnt all that is known of the subject you have chosen to work at, your curiosity is aroused, your faculties are whetted, and your mind attempts to scale the vast precipices and cliffs of ignorance that hem it in. This leads to research, literally. This is the feeling, the motive, which has been the moving power of every great and notable discovery without exception, a disinterested passion to extend the confines of knowledge, to get beyond the barrier of ignorance, to exercise the soaring spirit. This is then the activity of mind which it is the museum's chief business to

foster and provide for, and looked at in this light it is an intoxicating privilege. Those minds which have attained this point of view will not want to revive a costly artificial milieu in which to enshrine (or entomb) the things they are interested in. They will view the idea with disgust, and is it worth the expense for the others? It matters not what the subject or what the province of knowledge, be it art or philosophy or natural science, in which one is thoroughly immersed; its value is entirely independent of any practical application of a discovery so made. Those second-rate persons who are content merely to apply what has been hewn from the unknown to practical purposes are at the mercy of blind chance: they cannot suggest what they would have, but must be content with what they can get. The sutlers and camp-followers who hang around and live on the fighting force and suck the profits of what it has won, could these direct the operations, or tell the general where to strike?

We are thus arrived at the point where it seems apparent that the chief and vital purpose of a museum, especially one connected with a university, should be to provide opportunity for unlimited enquiry and study to capable persons within definite fields, the possibilities varying with the scope of the museum; in brief, to promote enquiry and sound learning. Let it be said, however, before we pass on, that it is not in the least suggested that the opportunity of everyone, regardless of education or capacity, to wander freely through galleries devoted to a general display of material should be withdrawn; all that is intended is to point out that this practice has been recognized and acted upon in most museums already. A word in season, however, if not in fashion: if the public goes to the museum only when the cinemas are closed or there is no football match as a counter attraction, it is clear that the object is not education but entertainment, an unusual activity in these days to be maintained out of the public purse. On the other hand, the study side of a museum's work, as it is less exposed to the public notice, so it receives less than its fair share of attention. Of all the museums of Canada, the Royal Ontario Museum is the only one which enters into competition with and ranks beside the great internationally celebrated museums of the world, and this is no small achievement in a provincially controlled institution with very restricted means, which has not yet seen its sixteenth birthday. Its lonely position makes its development still more difficult, for there are few persons in the country who really understand what the aims of a comprehensive museum should be, and there is not the advantage which the friendly rivalry of a similar institution would give.

It may be said that what is needed in a first-class museum to-day—and it is to this class that the Royal Ontario Museum justly claims to belong,—is a dual life, or the existence of public galleries in which a restricted number of objects of great attractiveness are exhibited in a setting which, in a not too elaborate but reasonable manner, at once completes and explains them, (can it be denied that this is what the general public want?) side by side with rooms for study and storage, where large numbers of specimens can be kept on a system not primarily selected for its alluring qualities, but for its convenience for storing and handling by students. It is hardly too much to say that this latter section should constitute the greater part of the museum, for the specialist services which a museum is able to render are continually increasing; and whether it is the education of the young student, or work being done on some special subject by someone highly skilled in it, both are amongst the most fruitful and civilizing activities that the world can boast. Moreover, attractive display and window dressing are being more and more practised by the large shops which have a pecuniary interest in doing so. Cannot this technique on the grand scale be profitably left to them? Can and should public money be spent on trying to rival them? The public see appropriate pictures hung in period rooms at some large firm's exhibition: why not turn this feature of present-day life to good account in our educational institutions such as museums and art galleries, and supplement instead of trying to duplicate it? One would think this an obvious economy on any broad view; and it may once more be emphatically asserted, in the face of all the watered-down, sugar-coated theories of education that hold the field to-day, that it is still roughly true that the easier you make things for the student, the less good you will do him. The art gallery and the museum of the twentieth century have a big enough task to fulfil in merely obtaining, assembling, and arranging their material, without embarking on the illimitable one (in time and expense) of recreating a past world for every type of exhibit. What fantastic vistas arise if one considers for a moment whither such a proposal would logically lead! Enough has been said above about disinterested research. The Royal Ontario Museum is representing and going to represent—alone as far as can be seen—Canada in the coming international world of the future. In the past nothing has equalled a common interest in learning and scientific research for bridging the gulf of racial enmities and breaking down national antipathies: in this sort of activity the museum has a foremost part.