

■ The Public Quality of a Museum

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3

Résumé

Le personnel des musées fonde sa politique sur l'objet, considérant la plupart du temps le visiteur comme un ennemi; il a, d'un autre côté, de très hautes ambitions en matière de communication. Les musées sont des institutions qui requièrent un travail important. Les expositions réalisées ont pour but de contribuer à une meilleure compréhension du monde et de l'histoire. Des originaux sont indispensables pour atteindre ce but bien que, dans certains cas, des répliques puissent suffire. Le terme de "public quality" décrit le rapport d'un musée avec le public et englobe également, outre ce que l'on entend par collection et conservation, l'attention portée au visiteur. Un musée est un bon musée lorsqu'après l'avoir visité, on se sent mieux qu'auparavant. Mais puisque les visiteurs sont conditionnés par des éducations, des expériences, etc. fort divergentes, il s'agit là d'une approche qui ne peut être généralisée sans discuter auparavant de la nature du "on". Ainsi la qualité d'un musée ne dépend-elle pas du nombre de visiteurs, mais du temps que ces visiteurs passent dans ce musée. En principe, deux types de musée sont porteurs d'avenir: il s'agit des musées dotés d'une certaine ambiance et des musées équipés de chaises. Les musées, par contre, qui tablent uniquement sur la transmission d'information, sont dorénavant en perte de vitesse. Alors que les musées porteurs d'ambiance présentent un certain charme, les musées ayant des chaises permettent aux visiteurs de réfléchir en profondeur sur les contenus et contribuent ainsi vivement à la qualité de la visite. Un point important pour juger de la qualité d'un musée est l'attention qu'il porte à son public. Le visiteur doit se trouver au premier plan des considérations. Les enquêtes effectuées sur les visiteurs ne doivent donc pas uniquement s'attacher aux informations d'ordre statistique, mais plutôt faire la lumière sur les besoins exprimés par les visiteurs. D'autres facteurs entrent également en ligne de compte tels que l'accessibilité, les vestiaires et la possibilité de prendre des rafraîchissements. A l'avenir il conviendra, au moment de justifier les subventions accordées par les pouvoirs publics, de se demander ce que le musée fournit à la collectivité en contrepartie. Il en résulte que désormais les directeurs de musées doivent non seulement disposer de connaissances spécifiques, mais aussi de sensibilité en matière de politique économique.

The title of the annual conference of ICR in 1997 was very interesting: *Museums - yes or no?* This suggests that there are people who don't think museums should exist any more, that you are arguing with them that museums should exist, because they do something useful. There is a very interesting point about this, that I would call the Public Aspects of museums. A line has been drawn that has at one end the people who earn their living from museums, the museum professionals, and at the other end, the people who visit museums, the public. The European Museum of the Year Award is in the middle of that line, so that it faces both ways, the professionals in one direction and the public in the other. It has, so to speak, two masters and tries to serve both.

It is obvious that, if one works in a museum, it is possible to have two completely different attitudes towards the public. There are those who regard the public as a nuisance. They wish these people were not there, they wish they did not have to do things for them. They see museums essentially as treasure houses, full of valuable things which have to be stored and protected. On the other hand, there are those who are fundamentally communicators. They want to explain what they have in the museum. For them collections are only communication tools.

These two kinds of people inevitably have different attitudes towards the same museum.

I ought to make my own personal attitude absolutely clear at the beginning. When I am in a museum, I like to look at an object and let my imagination work on it. I like to say to myself *What am I learning from this object that kicks my imagination into life, that helps me to have a better understanding of the world in which we live and a better understanding of history?* I see museums as places with that as their main function. That means that I am not prepared to accept a museum as being an institution that does not have original objects of some kind. I am not saying how many, I am not saying what kind of object. The objects can be stuffed monkeys, they can be chairs, they can be paintings. It does not matter. But there have to be physical objects for a place to be entitled to be called a museum.

I know perfectly well that museums are, as we say in the commercial world, very labour-intensive places. That is to say that you have to have staff to present the objects to the public, to allow them to make sense and to be attractive, you have to have a certain number of people at your disposal. You have to have some people who are essentially at the back of the stage - these are the people who are looking after the objects - and you have to have others at the front of the stage,

the people who are essentially showmen, who like presenting what they have got to the public. They are object-impresarios.

In many cases, but not in all, these objects must be originals. Let me give you an example of what I mean. King Charles I was executed in the middle of the 17th century in England. He had his head cut off in a revolution. I have seen the shirt which Charles I was wearing when he put his head down on a wooden block and had it cut off. When I see this shirt in the museum where it is kept, it has to be the original shirt. It is of no importance or interest to me if it is only a copy. However perfect it may be as a replica, if it is not the actual shirt that he wore at his execution, there is no point in putting it in a museum at all. The original object in this case is essential. A copy would simply illustrate the history of the shirt.

On the other hand, suppose the object is a Bronze Age pot. An exact replica of this pot does as much for me personally to stir my imagination as the original pot. There is no difference in its effect on me. So, when I am talking about objects in a museum, I have to recognise the difference between two kinds of object, originals and replicas. In some cases you must have the originals, in others the replicas will do just as well. Take for example the first steam locomotive to run on rails in England. It is very important to preserve that locomotive if you can, and we have in fact preserved it. It has associations. It has a certain romantic quality. I say, *This is part of the history of my people.* I can see the size of it, the materials it was made of, the quality of the workmanship, in a way that a mere picture or a replica would not be able to show me.

When I talk about the "Public Quality" of museums, I think this is a new phrase. So far as I know, I invented it myself two years ago - I felt the need for a phrase that would explain the position of museums with regard to the public. I acknowledge the existence of two kinds of quality that a museum has. On the one hand, there are what you might call the professional virtues and you all know what those are supposed to be. You buy objects for the museum, or you acquire them as gifts or loans, you conserve them, you look after them, and you present them. Those are the professional virtues. The public virtues are rather different. During the past 21 years, I must have visited well over 1,000 museums in different countries of the world, and it seems that some experts are only really interested in the professional virtues; some people are interested in collecting, others in conserving, others in presenting, up to a certain point. But for these people presenting is not of the first importance. This is the reality of the situation. The basis of museum quality is money. A museum has to have money in

order to survive. And where is that money going to come from? The money will come, directly or indirectly, from the people who come to see the museum.

We are not paid enough money. Our salaries are too low, a young zoologist once told me. So I asked him if he knew where the money to pay his salary came from. He turned the palms of his hands upwards and looked up to God in Heaven at the same time. So I put the question to him again and he replied: *Well, it comes from the Ministry of Education.* So I said: *Yes, but where does the Ministry of Education get the money from?* He made the same gesture once again, and I told him the answer: *It comes from the taxes paid by poor widows.*

This is when you realise that there are some people working in museums who feel that the money to run the museum, the money to pay their salaries, comes from the sky, comes from God. They do not relate it directly to taxes at all. Now, if we assume – and surely it is reasonable to assume – that the money to run museums comes from the public in one way or another, then the members of the public must be given value for what they pay. The definition of a museum I wrote once – *A good museum is one from which you go out feeling better than you came in* – is not completely satisfactory, because it depends on who “you” are. A hundred people going into a museum are a hundred different people. They have different backgrounds, a different education, different families. Each one of us brings different values and experiences to the museum. We all react differently to what we have just seen. So it is necessary to define which “you” we are talking about.

There was a very good study made by Michel Van Praët, who is now Professor of Museology at the Natural History Museum in Paris. He investigated research carried out in a number of museums of different types and sizes in order to assess what he called “the quality of a museum visit”. He defined “quality” as *the length of time that a visitor spends looking at a particular object*, and he found that the more people there were in a museum at a given time, the less time any one person spent looking at an object, so that the more people there were in the museum, the lower the quality of the visit. Not a very popular thing to say, because there are many people who believe and say that the success of a museum can be measured by the number of visitors that it has. I can not myself accept that definition, and I will tell you why. In London, during the summer months, the public is permitted to visit part of the Royal Palace, Buckingham Palace. When you get inside, this is what you find. You see hundreds of people – the opening has been extre-

mely successful, and you pay a lot of money to go in – who have all bought a guide. They follow the prescribed route through the Palace in a slow-moving procession that never stops. They go in four people side by side, and behind them are another four people, applying a steady pressure to keep moving. There are ropes cutting you off from the rooms that you are going through, so that you can see what is in the room, but you can not go near it. All you can do is to glance at the guide in your hand, see which room you are in and, with luck, catch a glimpse of everything as you pass by. If you stop, you feel the relentless pressure of people building up behind you. You might just as well be on a moving belt, taking you through automatically. Commercially, this is an enormous success, because you get the maximum number of people each hour through these rooms. Buckingham Palace is essentially a big museum. But from the point of view of the quality of the visit, it is hopeless. The quality of the objects is high, but the quality of the visit is low.

I believe that there are only two kinds of museum which are going to survive and prosper into the next century. The first is what I call museums with charm. These would be, for example, the house in which Picasso lived, or the laboratory in which Pasteur worked, usually museums which are identified with a particular individual. They do not cost much to run, they do not demand or need large numbers of visitors and they are mostly in places where people want to go, in pleasant parts of the country. I believe they are going to survive. In another category are the museums that I call the museums with chairs. You can get information in so many ways nowadays. You can get it through your computer, through many kinds of pictorial system available through the computer, you can get it from television, you can get it from books and magazines. You do not need to go to a museum in order to get information, as you once did. What you can not get without actually going to a museum is the magic of objects and the opportunity to discuss with other people what is there and to ask questions about those things. And in order to be able to do that properly you need to be able to sit down. It is not easy or comfortable to discuss standing up all the time. Museums which are built around easily movable chairs, easily portable chairs, large numbers of them, have very good survival possibilities, in my opinion. I went to one of these quite recently at Umeå, in the north of Sweden, the University Museum of Pictures. They do not call it the Art Museum, they call it the Museum of Pictures.

When you go into this museum, you pick up a chair, a very easy chair to carry, a sort of stool. Then, when you want to stop in front

of a picture, you can sit there for half-an-hour, if you want to, you do not have to stand up. In order to be able to appreciate a work of art, you have to be able to do that, to sit down comfortably and absorb it. Equally, at the new Museum of Science and Technology in Amsterdam, the architect was instructed to design the museum around chairs, which you could find in every part of the museum, large numbers of chairs, which can be moved about and regrouped as necessary. Visitors can find, dotted about the building, members of the staff who are good at provoking discussion and answering questions and, when this person sees a number of people obviously interested in a particular exhibit, he can bring them together, sit them down and deal with the questions and discussion in a comfortable way. There was only one source of trouble and this was with the fire authority, which said: *You can not have chairs in places where people can not get out of the building if there is a fire. You have to have lines and you must put any chairs on the other side of that line.*

I think these two kinds of museum will survive, the museums with charm and the museums with chairs, and do well into the next century. The museums that will find themselves in great difficulties are those which exist in order to give information. Of course, all museums give some information, but the information places that have no charm and no chairs are going to find life rather difficult.

In order to assess the public quality of a museum, there are four or five details that we need to think specially about. First of all, has the museum got interesting things to show? Second, you have to wonder if they are well interpreted and well presented. Then you have to decide what the atmosphere of the museum is like. Is it friendly and welcoming or is it cold and clinical? There are, as we all know, museums of both sorts. What are the public amenities like? Is it easy or even possible to park a car? Is there a convenient and safe place to leave a wet hat or coat? Is there a restaurant or a café in the museum? Are there places where you can sit down and rest, because walking around a museum is a tiring business? All these, together with the museum shop, are part of the “Public Quality” of a museum.

Another part of this quality is the public relations and publicity of the museum. Does the museum push its fingers effectively into the local community? And then there is what is called “visitor research”. A museum does not know if it is meeting people’s real needs unless it is doing research all the time, and research of the right kind. For many years museums have been doing a standard type of visitor research. They discover quite easily

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by means of questionnaires where their visitors come from, what their sex is, how old they are and what sort of school they went to, but what they do not know are the much more personal things, which can only be found out by actually talking to people. Two museums in Switzerland seem to be extremely well placed to find out what individual visitors think. One of these museums has managed to get the money to appoint a very superior type of administrative secretary, capable of carrying out most of the work that the traditional museum director or curator used to. She is the person who sits in the office and deals efficiently with the material that comes to her and with routine enquiries. This frees the director to spend time on the shop floor, so to speak, and to meet the customers, to walk around and talk to people, to listen to them, putting questions to them and, if necessary, break into their conversations. In the other museum, a man walks around wearing a big, easy-to-read badge saying *Walking information - Informations ambulantes*. He is a very friendly man. He looks and sounds like everybody's uncle and he will answer any question that is put to him in a warm-hearted manner, about the museum in general, about particular aspects of the museum. If he does not know the answer, he will go to the telephone and ring up one of his colleagues to ask for help.

Each of these two Swiss approaches seems to go some way towards meeting the demands that the public makes on a museum. They acknowledge the fact that people who go to museums do not all have the same questions to ask. You never know what people are going to be interested in and you always have to be prepared to deal with the unexpected. So, in order to get a little closer to answering the question *Museums - yes or no?* one has to add that *it depends what kind of museums they are and how they deal with their customers*. The short and oversimplified answer is: *Museums, yes*, when the "Public Quality" is high. You have to specify: *museums which think of their visitors first*. Nowadays, if museums do not exist mainly for the benefit of the visitors who go there, they are not doing their job. A museum that believes its justification to exist is based only or mainly on its ability to provide a living for the people who work there has no right to exist under today's conditions.

Three years ago, I went to a new museum pleasantly situated in a park. It was on a fine day in June and it was on a Wednesday. I arrived at nine o'clock in the morning and I spent four hours there, touring the museum and talking to its director. During those four hours there was not a single visitor to be seen and at the end of the morning I asked the director if he found it normal that I was the

only one to visit the museum. He told me that he was not responsible for the museum being deserted and that it was up to people themselves whether they visited or not. It is one of the hard facts of today's museum world that the people who provide the money to run museums will call the tune. They will decide whether the museum continues or not. They will ask how the museum justifies spending these large amounts of money. If it happens to be run entirely on private money or if it is sponsored or financed entirely by entrance charges and profits from the shop and the restaurant, it knows whether it is succeeding or not, because if it is not succeeding it will go bankrupt. But, if the museum's costs are met from public money, there are public officials, perhaps as high as Ministers, who are very likely to say to the director: *Tell us what you are doing to persuade us that we should give this money to you and not to an equally deserving customer*, and that is when the critical problem comes.

In trying to find an answer to *Museums - yes or no?*, I believe you are thinking mainly of the second kind of museum, the local or central government funded kind. To try to calm the doubts of these public officials you can answer, as museums have for years, that every government has a duty to support its museums as a matter of national honour or local pride. But it could mean that it was fulfilling this duty merely by preserving and conserving its heritage, by putting it into store and not admitting the public to see it. This would save an enormous amount of money. This would convert museums into banks or safe-deposits, into mere treasure-houses. I think it is going to be impossible to be in charge of any kind of museum during the next 10 or 20 years without spending a lot of time thinking about where the money is coming from. That means that a museum director who does not have a commercial instinct is going to find himself or herself in great difficulties. It is not going to be sufficient to say that he knows everything that needs to be known about his collections. He has also got to be able to provide evidence of a good business sense.

Some years ago, I went to Varazdin, the old capital of Croatia. I talked to the woman in charge of all the museums in the town. I asked her what her most important duty was. And, without hesitation, she answered: *Well, you know my country. We are surrounded by war and poverty. We are surrounded by ugliness and misery of all kinds. What I have to do in each museum is to provide an island of beauty, an island of beauty in the middle of a sea of ugliness*. The museum as an "island of beauty" has nothing to do with money, but has to be considered as well in the debate *Museums - yes or no?* ■

Summary

The successful work of a regional museum is invariably linked to the museum's ability to specify its own identity, to obtain a unique and inimitable image. The reasons that lead museums to conclude that specialization is necessary are the following: decreased interest in museums, insufficient financing, and collections that are large but not displayed satisfactorily. Museums in Latvia have chosen their specialization on the basis of various factors: their location, the specific traditions of the respective region, the collection at each museum, the research work of the museum, as well as the traditions, previous work and abilities of the museum. Finding an image that is specific only to that one museum is a long and complicated process. It cannot be imposed upon a museum through directives or other legislation. Museums must find their ideas themselves, while state cultural policy can certainly be a stimulating and encouraging factor.

En 1997, le Comité international des musées régionaux a choisi de tenir sa réunion annuelle en Lettonie. C'est un petit musée régional, situé dans la ville de Limbazi, qui a sans doute créé l'une des plus vives impressions sur les participants. Le musée des Etudes locales de Limbazi ne peut s'enorgueillir d'un long passé de traditions - sa fondation remonte seulement à 1983. Il ne possède pas non plus de collection qui le distinguerait des autres musées régionaux de Lettonie. Pourtant, on peut raisonnablement parler de "phénomène" au musée de Limbazi, car il n'est pas seulement apprécié des professionnels de musée. Son succès auprès du public local est peut-être encore plus impressionnant : il a fait l'objet d'articles dans les plus grands journaux de la région, et son travail a donné lieu à des reportages présentés à la télévision nationale lettonne. Et, encore plus remarquable, le musée n'a pas manqué de visiteurs.

Le musée présente une petite exposition permanente. En trois volets, elle entend non seulement informer le public sur les traits dominants de la région, mais aussi les lui faire "ressentir". L'exposition touche les visiteurs aussi bien par son point de vue artistique que par des idées laconiques et très