Museums

Can and do they make a difference?

"So here it is at last: the distinguished thing!!"

These words came to the great Anglo-American novelist Henry James after he suffered a stroke in December 1915, an episode that James took as signaling that his death was imminent (he did in fact die some twelve weeks later). In considering the most fundamental of questions concerning museums—Do museums really matter? Can and do museums make a difference?—we could more than appropriately echo James’s words: So here they are at last: those distinguished—or, at least, those persistent—questions. Here are what Phil Nowlen of the Museum Management Institute has for many years referred to as the ultimate “so what” questions. So what difference did it make that museums were ever here? So what difference would it have made if they hadn’t been?

Posed in a variety of ways—sometimes as questions about a museum’s impact, outcomes, or results, at other times as inquiries into institutional effectiveness—these are also the in-your-face, bottom-line, hard-nosed questions that the museum community has, for the past several decades or more, struggled mightily to keep safely locked in the closet and out of public view. With some haughtiness, J. P. Morgan once observed that if you needed to ask what the annual cost of operating a yacht was, then you

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probably couldn’t really afford one anyway. Too frequently, all too many of us working in museums have assumed a not dissimilar haughtiness: If you needed to ask the value of a museum, if you needed to ask whether it mattered, then you probably wouldn’t understand the answer anyway.

That time has gone. Those ultimate “so what” questions are finally here and with us. With us as well are some postultimate questions that must invariably follow in their wake. If museums do matter, if they can make a difference, to whom do they matter, and what are the differences that they might make? Who determines, and when, and how, whether they are, in fact, making those differences? And, perhaps thorniest of all, how much of a difference must any particular museum make, and over what length of time, for some well-informed observer—a donor or an influential legislator—to consider a museum to be successful, to consider it as having demonstrated itself worthy to receive ongoing support?

When James sighed “at last,” he thought he was facing his end. By contrast, our “at last” might just as readily signal a beginning. What will be argued here is that rather than being intimidated by these long-deferred questions, the museum community ought to encourage and even warmly welcome them. Subject to our willingness to take two major steps—one a bold conceptual step forward, the other a more strategic step off to the side—these are questions to which we can properly respond clearly, persuasively, and positively.

The first necessary step, the bold one, requires that we publicly face up to the reality—and face up to it with a forthrightness that hitherto has been lacking—that all museums are not equally good and that, in fact, some museums that manage to remain solvent and go about their day-to-day business might really be no good at all. Such an admission will require, first, that we reach some consensus as to what constitutes a “good” museum and, second, that we be prepared to acknowledge that a museum that fails to meet our consensus definition of a good museum should be considered, by reason of that failure, to be a “bad” museum.

The second necessary step, the strategic one, is concerned with articulating the potential outcomes that museums can achieve. We must be able to sort out—with far greater facility and somewhat more systematically than we generally do now—the full range of public-service roles that museums have the capacity to play. All too frequently, museums are characterized—sometimes even by themselves—as being important principally as sites for informal education and/or self-directed learning. They are cer-
MUSEUMS: CAN AND DO THEY MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

tainly important for that, but they are also important for a very great deal more than that. To conceive of museums in so narrow and constricted a way is to omit entirely—or, at least, to greatly obscure—the many other rich and important ways beyond the educational in which they are able to provide a range of public benefits.

REACHING A CONSENSUS ON MERIT

In approaching the first step—achieving some consensus as to what might constitute a good museum—I propose that these questions cannot be answered in any generic way. To think that there might be a single set of answers applicable to all museums, or even to the museums of a single discipline, is simply not realistic. This country’s eight thousand museums vary enormously in terms of the purposes to which they aspire, the resources that they have available, and the infinitely different contexts in which they operate, and it would defy common sense and every statistical expectation to think that all museums, regardless of how evaluated, would be found equally meritorious. What seems clear at the outset is that these questions can only be answered on an institution-by-institution basis.

Approaching museums in that way has several consequences. It renders obsolete—in fact, wholly nullifies—that perverse (but also pervasive) bit of logic that might (for lack of a better name) be called “museology’s secret syllogism.” It’s that superbly self-serving syllogism that goes: All museums are good per se. My institution is undeniably a museum. Ergo, my institution is undeniably good. In the face of these long-deferred questions about whether and in what ways museums can make a difference, individual institutions will no longer have the abstract cloak of their museum status in which to wrap themselves protectively. On the multiple judgment days to come, every museum will have to stand and answer for itself.

A second consequence—almost a comic one—of approaching museums on an institution-by-institution basis is that it allows us to enrich our discourse by including a phrase that has hitherto remained largely unspoken. That phrase is “bad museum.” I have scarcely ever heard or even seen that unusual combination of two such otherwise common words—“bad” and “museum”—used in any public setting, not at twenty-eight consecutive annual meetings of the AAM, not at innumerable meetings of state and regional museum organizations, not in the pages of Museum News. It is almost
as if we are all the children of some great museological mother who taught us early on that “if you can’t say something nice about another museum, then it’s better to say nothing at all.” Or, more fancifully, it’s as if museum workers constitute some kind of a tribe and that this is one of our taboos. “Bad museum” simply is not something to be said in public. It’s like the “F-word”—not polite.

Considered less fancifully, the fact that we so rarely hear or read about “bad museums” may touch on several important issues. First, to some people within the museum field and beyond whom I’ve described elsewhere as “romantics,” the concept of the museum is an inherently positive one. These are the people who embrace the first and major premise of that secret syllogism. Museums, from their viewpoint, are good organizations perse. The notion of a bad museum would, accordingly, be an oxymoron—like an ugly baby or too much ice cream. Even the worst of museums, like the worst of ice creams, would still be pretty good.

Second, the failure to talk publicly about bad museums may also be an unfortunate by-product of the museum field’s long and generally successful quest to professionalize itself. Although most observers regard the process of professionalization as generally positive or at least benign—a means of raising the standards in a particular field—others have seen it as having a distinctively negative aspect. As long ago as 1776, Adam Smith noted in The Wealth of Nations that “people of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public, or in some contrivance to raise prices.” One of the characters in George Bernard Shaw’s 1911 play The Doctor’s Dilemma puts it more succinctly. “All professions,” he says, “are conspiracies against the laity.” To some extent, our almost congenital avoidance of open references to bad museums may simply rest on an understandably collegial and even sympathetic desire to protect one another.

Finally, and perhaps most likely, there appears to be a deep reluctance across the museum field to believe that any judgment about a museum’s overall merit could possibly have any validity beyond being merely “one person’s opinion.” For those inside an institution, this can be almost as marvelously self-protective as the secret syllogism. If no objective judgment of the institution’s overall performance is possible, then objective judgments about the performance of its key staff members may be equally impossible. I had a somewhat heated discussion about this with a senior Smithsonian scientist who claimed that any effort to judge a museum must be, at best, a
MUSEUMS: CAN AND DO THEY MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

matters of subjective speculation. Thinking to clinch the argument that some museum might genuinely be a terrible place, I asked what he would think of an institution in which the collections were deteriorating, the pertinent records were either missing or inaccurate, the endowment money was long since wrongfully squandered, and the little information provided to the dwindling handful of visitors was almost invariably wrong. After sucking his pipe for a few moments he said, "Sounds like it could stand some improving."

This avoidance of virtually any public discourse concerning bad museums might be merely amusing if it did not also have one serious consequence. Because the museum community has never been willing to grapple openly with what might make any particular museum a "bad" one, by the same token it has failed to address in any sustained and productive way the question of what might make some other museum a "good" one. The closest it has come is through the AAM's accreditation process. Accreditation, however—and, in a membership organization like AAM, there may well be no alternative—simply works on a pass/fail basis. It does not grade museums; it does not award a truly superb one an A+ and a less than superb but still more than minimally acceptable one a B-. The museum that is outstanding by every possible measure and the museum that can simply squeak past the current accreditation standard fall into the same category. Museums that fail to achieve accreditation at all are largely protected by silence.

By facing up to these questions of whether museums matter and whether they can and do make a difference, and by acknowledging that these questions can only be addressed institution by institution, we can begin to provide ourselves with a basis on which to make sound, open, and credible judgments about which museums might be good ones and which ones might not. In doing so, we can also begin to provide ourselves with some meaningful ways of comparing the actual performance of any particular museum with its aspirations, and—when making the comparisons that must inevitably be made when museums compete for limited resources—to reach some reasonably objective conclusions concerning their relative merit and their relative worthiness to receive ongoing support.

ATTRIBUTES OF A GOOD MUSEUM

On what basis might we judge whether a museum is a good or bad one? What can we identify as the attributes of a good museum? I propose using
some of the materials developed over the past few years by the Alexandria, Virginia, headquarters of the United Way of America as a model. United Way has exerted an enormous—even seismic—influence throughout the health and human-service field by its formal adoption in June 1995 of outcome-based evaluation as the primary basis on which it would thereafter allocate its grant funds. As succinctly described in one of its publications, this constituted a shift from a previous focus on the programs of its applicant agencies to an emphasis instead on their results, that is, on the measurable outcomes or impacts that these agencies were able to achieve through those programs.

In the course of that shift, United Way developed a simplified vocabulary with which to discuss its new approach. In lieu of asking applicant agencies to describe their goals in such conventional organizational terms as “mission,” or “vision,” or “mandate,” it suggested that they focus instead on two key words: “hope” and “expect.” “Given the immense amount of work that your organization proposes to undertake, what do you ideally hope to accomplish?” And, “realistically, what do you expect to accomplish?” Those questions are not meant to be answered in programmatic terms, but rather by describing how a proposed program is intended to make a “positive difference” in the quality of people’s lives.

This last requirement—that the intended outcome of the programs that United Way funds must be a positive difference in the quality of people’s lives—is the cornerstone on which United Way’s entire scheme of outcome-based evaluation is built. As for what, in that context, United Way means by “outcomes,” these were defined in a program manual as: “benefits or changes for individuals or populations during or after participating in program activities. . . . Outcomes may relate to behavior, skills, knowledge, attitudes, values, condition, or other attributes. They are what participants know, think, or can do; or how they behave; or what their condition is, that is different following the program.”

I would argue that these United Way concepts can be directly imported from their health and human-service context into the world of cultural institutions, and specifically into that of museums. I would further argue that United Way’s cornerstone—to make a positive difference in the quality of people’s lives—ought to be consciously adopted as our cornerstone as well. And I would argue still further that, at least at their best, museums operate today in the hope and expectation that they will make a positive difference in the quality of people’s lives. And I would argue finally that we form,
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preserve, and study collections today not because we think that those ac-
tivities are appropriate ends in themselves but because we hope and ex-
pect that those collections will be used in ways that will, to quote United 
Way, “provide benefits ... for individuals or populations.”

In one sense, we have no alternative but to rest our definition of the “good 
museum” on just such a cornerstone. For publicly supported institutions, 
it is conceivably the only such definition that we can afford. If our museums 
are not being operated with the ultimate goal of improving people’s lives, 
on what alternative basis might we possibly ask for public support? Not, 
certainly, on the grounds that we need museums so that museum profes-
sionals might have an opportunity to develop their skills and advance their 
careers, or so that those of us who truly enjoy museum work will have a 
place in which to do it. Not because they provide elegant venues for open-
ings, receptions, and other glamorous social events. And not on the argu-
ment that museums—collectively, a humongous enterprise involving in this 
country alone the expenditure of billions of dollars annually and the dedi-
cated efforts of tens of thousands of individuals—deserve to be supported 
simply as an established tradition or an ongoing habit, long after any good 
reasons to do so have ceased to be relevant or have long been forgotten.

What about our existing collections? Could their continued preservation 
provide a rationale for the ongoing support of museums? Reverting to a 
tribal mode, might we successfully argue that the objects in these collec-
tions are like fetishes, that they embody such potent values that their in-
definite preservation is warranted regardless of any relevance or use that 
they might ever have to lives now in being or yet to be? At best, such an 
argument might justify warehousing those objects in some distant and bare-
bones storage, but not in the costly museums where we keep them today. 
Again, we have no real alternative but to argue that museums are at their 
best when they seek to improve the quality of people’s lives.

Following in the wake of United Way, we can begin to identify the ini-
tial attribute of a good museum: It is an institution that is operated with the 
hope and expectation that it will make a positive difference in the quality of 
people’s lives. Before we move on, two ancillary issues must be addressed. 
First, as for making a difference, will any differences do, or is it only in-
tended differences with which we are concerned?

In terms of accountability, it must surely be the latter. A museum’s pro-
gram, like any complex institutional activity, may produce a range of out-
comes, both intended and unintended. Nevertheless, the core question of
positive accountability—in carrying out its program, has this organization made effective use of its resources?—can only be answered in terms of the program’s intended consequences. Concerning this first attribute, then, some further refinement is needed. The good museum is one that is operated with a clearly formulated purpose, describable in terms of the particular and positive outcomes that it hopes and expects to achieve.

The second ancillary issue concerns the qualifier “positive.” In various degrees, museums are ideological or at least reflective of particular points of view. Equally varied in ideology or point of view are those who may be called upon the evaluate them. Setting aside the case of any diehard museographical technocrats, who might elect to judge a museum by the skill with which it was managed rather than by the outcomes it was seeking to achieve, those who argue that all value judgments concerning museums are inherently subjective have at least part of a valid point. Whether the difference that any particular museum is hoping to make is a positive one is a judgment that will necessarily vary from one observer to the next. The observer who regards the Macho City Museum of Male Supremacy with great enthusiasm is not likely to be equally enthusiastic about the newly founded National Museum of Gender Equity, and vice versa. How can we cope with this? Best, perhaps, is simply to acknowledge that there may be no universally accepted positions with regard to certain issues. To the extent that some ideological differences may be truly irreconcilable, any judgment as to whether or not the difference that a museum is trying to make is a positive difference must be always be understood to be in some degree subjective.

What further attributes must we add to this initial one—that the good museum is one that has a clearly formulated and worthwhile purpose? As an old English proverb has it, if wishes were horses, beggars might ride. In the case of museums, resources—those at a level commensurate with the outcomes that they hope and expect to achieve—are what provide the horsepower that enables the well-intentioned ones to achieve their worthwhile purposes. Except for those romantics who view all museums as inherently good, it ought be evident that a museum seriously lacking in the resources required to achieve its purpose—whether that lack is in dollars, collections, trained staff, equipment, and/or facilities—cannot be evaluated as a good museum and must accordingly be considered a bad museum. A “bad museum” is not an oxymoron. If anything is oxymoronic in our field, it is the belief of national and local funding sources that they can reduce the resources available to museums and still expect them to maintain their prior
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level of quality. Resources are not a frill. Adequate resources are what well- intentioned museums must consume if their good intentions are ever to be realized.

Those are two attributes of the good museum: a clear and worthwhile purpose and the resources necessary to achieve that purpose. In order to respond positively to our basic question—do museums matter?—two more attributes must be considered. One relates to leadership. Within its governance and its own senior staff, the good museum requires a leadership fiercely determined to see that the achievement of its purpose is established and unblinkingly maintained as the institution’s highest priority. The good museum is neither a survival-driven institution nor a process-driven one. The good museum is a purpose-driven institution. Its leadership understands and makes manifestly clear that other and more conventional measures of success—a balanced budget, approbation of peers, high staff morale, acquisition of important collections—all have to do with means, and not with ends. They may be necessary to the good museum—adequate resources certainly are—but in and of themselves they are not sufficient to make a museum a good one. The things that make a museum good are its purpose to make a positive difference in the quality of people’s lives, its command of resources adequate to that purpose, and its possession of a leadership determined to ensure that those resources are being directed and effectively used toward that end.

The last attribute concerns feedback. With purpose, resources, and leadership all in place, how does a museum go about determining whether its purposes are being achieved? The museum, as a nonprofit organization, rarely gets the same feedback from the competitive marketplace that a for-profit organization relies upon for guidance. In this connection, United Way’s otherwise useful model offers little help. The outcomes pursued by health and human-service organizations are far more susceptible to quantification than are those generally pursued by museums. Moreover, such outcomes can often be presented in far more vivid, concrete, and dramatic terms—emergency rooms or shelters for battered children—than may ever be possible for museums.

Museums are not unique in this disadvantage. That museums cannot report their results as measurable outcomes or plot them against statistical data bases are problems that they share with a host of other socially important organizations, ranging from liberal-arts colleges to advocacy groups to religious denominations. Churches, to name one of these, argue per-
suasively that they cannot be expected to report their success in terms of “souls saved per pew-hour preached.” With outcomes that tend to be so much more elusive, imprecise, and indirect than, for example, drug rehabilitation programs or a blood drive, perhaps the best that these organizations can hope to do—rather than to measure—is simply to ascertain or approximate.

For museums, even that looser requirement presents difficulties. In general, the impact of museums on their visitors is not of the one-shot or “Eureka!” kind but something far more subtle, cumulative over repeated visits, and quite possibly ascertainable only after many years. Nor can a museum’s long-term impact on its visitors always be wholly isolated. It will be found intertwined with the impact that other community-based educational and cultural organizations may have made on those same visitors. Notwithstanding those complexities, the good museum must be able to devise the means to assure itself on some regular, reliable, and ongoing basis that its programs are having their intended effect—or, if they are not, that it is in position to recognize that fact and to make whatever corrections are necessary. To the extent that the outcome-based evaluation that United Way advocates continues to spread through the nonprofit sector and become a norm for other grant makers, the need for such feedback mechanisms will become all the more urgent.

The foregoing list by no means exhausts the attributes of the good museum—efficiency, responsiveness, and accessibility might easily be added—but it should suffice when we return to our original, basic question: whether and how museums make a difference. We must turn to the second of the two steps that need to be taken if that question is to be answered positively. We must look at the full range of public-service roles that museums might play to see whether these could be usefully sorted into a pattern.

**ENTERTAINMENT, EDUCATION, AND EXPERIENCE**

Museums are most frequently characterized today as sites for informal education and/or self-directed learning. _Excellence and Equity_, for example, argues that museums ought to place “education—in the broadest sense of the word—at the center of their public service role.” Let me begin, though, by considering education in _less_ than its broadest sense—by considering it as a process by which the specific knowledge that visitors gain through a mu-
seum visit is congruent with the knowledge that the museum intended that those visitors acquire. That would be what my Smithsonian colleague Zahava Doering refers to as the “baby-bird” theory of museum education. The museum, as the great all-knowing mother bird, carefully chews up what the fledgling visitor will need for sustenance and then doles it out beakful by careful beakful. Looking at visitor studies done over the past several decades, some museum people clearly thought this was the proper direction.

If you glance through Chandler Screven's seminal 1974 study of museum education, The Measurement and Facilitation of Learning in the Museum Environment: An Experimental Analysis, you will encounter a vocabulary of instructional technologies and specific learning outcomes. A learning outcome would include, says Screven, “the specification of what the learner (museum visitor) is expected to do as a result of exposure to the exhibit in terms of action verbs such as: name, arrange, compare, order, list, distinguish, identify, solve.” An exhibition of Greek and Roman pottery, for instance, might have the following instructional objective: “Given six pairs of color slides of pottery, presented one pair at a time in a test machine, each pair containing an example of one Greek and one Roman piece, the visitor will correctly identify the Greek (or Roman) example in five out of six pairs.”

To determine how much of a visitor's postvisit knowledge may be attributable to the visit itself, Screven envisions various schemes of pretesting and posttesting. To increase an exhibition's effectiveness as an instructional mechanism, he discusses how visitors might be induced to spend more time on such productive behaviors as reading labels and making comparisons, as contrasted with less productive behaviors such as “random gazing” or careless generalization.

Imagine some hypothetical visitors to Screven's hypothetical exhibition of Greek and Roman pottery. One is a recent immigrant from Greece for whom the exhibition triggers a profound sense of pride in the achievements of her ancestors. Two others are brothers who lately lost their younger sister and find it somehow comforting that the arts and beauty can endure even though life may be short. Another is an amateur potter who regularly visits ceramics exhibitions of every kind in search of new ideas. Still another, a recent tourist to Rome, finds that the exhibition revives pleasant memories of his trip. Finally, two young lovers amuse themselves by making up their own funny and mythlike stories to explain the amorous and other episodes depicted on some of the pottery.

The point is that a visitor might derive considerable personal enrichment
from this hypothetical exhibition without ever improving by one bit his or her ability to distinguish a Greek vase from a Roman one. Unless we are to adopt some puritanical point of view that denounces as illegitimate all of a visitor’s responses to a museum visit beyond those narrow, didactic ones intended by its program staff, we have to acknowledge that the totality of what goes on in a museum—the myriad interactions between visitors and objects, the equally myriad interactions of visitors with one another—is a far headier mixture than much of our museum literature suggests. Should museums ignore or reject those many interactions as a kind of static that interferes with the main educational messages that they are trying to send? Do these myriad interactions simply come, in Screven’s language, from “random gazing” or careless generalization? Or, from an opposite point of view, might we not accept these as appropriate museum behaviors or even, beyond merely accepting them, actually embrace them as providing important insights into the real riches that museums can provide to their communities? It would be a wonderful irony if all those distractions, which the more narrowly education-minded among us think of as static, turned out instead to be some of the museum’s most important and memorable music.

In considering how we might better sort out and consider the full range of public-service roles that museums might play, an article appearing in the New York Times by music writer Paul Griffith suggested an interesting framework. In analyzing what the presenters of classical music concerts believed themselves to be providing to their audiences, Griffith referred to what he called “the three Es of music: entertainment, education, and experience.”

With some slight modification—principally, the addition of the museum as a place for socialization—I would argue that Griffith’s three Es also describe what museums in their public-service role can provide to their communities: entertainment, education, and experience. That the museum may, for a great number of its visitors, function primarily as a place of entertainment is sometimes a bitter pill for many museum people to swallow. Having prepared for their museum careers through the long and arduous study of a discipline, they would prefer to see visitors take an interest in that discipline with at least some of the same seriousness that they do. And yet, undeniably, for a great number of regular museum visitors, museum going is a pleasurable leisure-time activity, a way to relax, a form of diversion competitive with film, theater, dance, and other modes of entertainment. Past school age, cultural participation is not mandatory, and the
people who participate in cultural events—any questions of conspicuous cultural consumption aside—do so mostly for pleasure, not out of duty.

Where the museum differs significantly from film, theater, dance, and those other modes of entertainment is in its relative informality. Contrast the fluidity of a museum visit with the rigid routine of attending a theater: a fixed starting time, a predetermined duration, a preassigned place to sit, and a socially enforced rule of silent participation. Because of its relative informality, museum going—in addition to the three Es—is almost unique among cultural activities in providing the opportunity for valuable social interactions. On occasion, these interactions may even be wholly separate and apart from those educational and experiential encounters of visitor and object that the traditional museum literature treats as central to a museum visit. Although museum workers tend to see these interactions as peripheral, to visitors they may be anything but.

Some figures concerning attendance at the Smithsonian are striking. Of sixteen thousand visitors interviewed between 1994 and 1996—visitors who had come on their own, not as part of any organized school or other tour—only 14 percent had come by themselves. For the other 86 percent, their museum visits were interwoven with a social experience. As Deborah Perry, Lisa Roberts, Kris Morrissey, and Lois Silverman have pointed out (Journal of Museum Education, fall 1996), “People often come [to museums] with their families and other social groups, and they often come first and foremost for social reasons. Although visitors say they come to museums to learn things, more often than not the social agenda takes precedence. Quality family time, a date, something to do with out-of-town guests, a place to hang out with friends: these are some of the primary reasons people choose to go to museums.”

In a 1986 article in UNESCO’s magazine Museum, Sheldon Annis wrote in a similar vein. Watching groups of visitors move through a museum, he suggested, was to see them “playing to and against each other. For most, nothing is more interesting than acting out and within the social roles of their own lives.” In all, he concluded, “Museum-going is usually a happy and social event. Being there in some particular social union is both purpose and product. It does not really matter whether the coins were Roman or Chinese.”

Some commentators have seen the socializing potential of museums in still broader terms than that. They argue that, beyond their capacity to enrich already existing relationships, museums might also contribute to the creation of important new relationships. In the statement of principles that
accompanies its strategic agenda for the years 1998 to 2000, the AAM refers to museums as institutions that can help to build community. In that view, the museum may be considered as a distinctive public space, in which diverse elements of the community might intermingle in ways not readily available elsewhere. Some have suggested that museums to an extent have replaced churches in that respect. Museum consultant Elaine Heumann Gurian has argued (Daedalus, summer 1999) that—because of the high degree of public trust they enjoy—museums should also be recognized as one of the few institutions within a community that can function as a safety zone, a place to which parents might comfortably send their children or in which members of a minority group might hope to socialize without fear of intimidation. Others see the museum as one of the few community institutions that can provide an antidote to urban loneliness, a place where individuals can safely satisfy a basic need to be in the company of other people.

Moving along to the second of Griffith’s three Es—education—there is little to add to the voluminous literature already generated concerning the museum in its educational function. As before, and Excellence and Equity notwithstanding, I would like to continue to treat museum education in less than its broadest sense, as referring primarily to the visitor’s acquisition of the particular knowledge that the museum intended to impart. By doing so, we can leave maximum scope for what may be the most interesting and distinctive of Griffith’s three Es: experience. Beyond providing diversion and entertainment, beyond their role as a site for social interaction, beyond whatever educational functions they may choose to assume, museums are also places that indisputably provide their visitors with an almost infinite range of experiences. Quoting again from Perry, Roberts, Morrisey, and Silverman:

While visitors may have a primary social agenda, they also want and expect to learn something new, have their curiosity piqued, see something they’ve never seen before, or in some cases revisit an old favorite. However, the learning occurs not only through traditional methods, but through social mediation, dialogue, and joint construction of meanings. By listening to visitors, museum professionals have realized that they are not—and should not be—in the business of teaching. Instead they are in the business of creating environments that facilitate the construction of appropriate meanings, that engage people in the stuff of science, art and history.

Recent visitor research supports this notion of the museum as an environment for the construction of meaning—a meaning that may well (or indeed...
most likely will) differ from one visitor to the next. In 1996, Russell J. Ohta of Arizona State University West studied visitor responses to the highly controversial exhibition *Old Glory: The American Flag in Contemporary Art* when it was shown at the Phoenix Art Museum. Although each of the visitors he studied experienced “rich moments filled with deep personal meaning,” none of those meanings resembled any other. The meaning in each case was forged from the visitor’s own personal identity. What they experienced had nothing to do with either the American flag or its use in art. Their experiences, he concluded, were primarily about themselves.

“In essence,” Ohta writes, “the exhibition became a looking glass for visitors. They experienced what they were capable of experiencing. They experienced who they were.” He concludes by quoting anthropologist David Pilbeam’s dictum that, in looking at things, we tend not to see them as they are but as we are. Ohta is not the first to have used the imagery of the museum as a looking-glass experience. In his 1986 article, Sheldon Annis concludes that neither museums nor objects are possessed of intrinsic meanings. “Rather,” he says, “they accept and reflect the meanings that are brought to them.”

A similar conclusion was reached in a study of informal education in Holocaust museums by Zaha Doering and another of my Smithsonian colleagues, Andrew Pekarik. Arguing that museums, upon close examination, turn out to be “not particularly effective in accurately conveying detailed, factual knowledge,” they argue that the single most powerful determinant of a visitor’s response to a museum exhibition is what they refer to as his or her “entrance narrative.” Constituting that entrance narrative is a basic framework, or the fundamental way in which the visitor construes and contemplates the world; previously acquired information about the exhibition’s topic, organized according to that basic framework; and the sum of the visitor’s personal experiences, emotions, and memories that verify and support this understanding. What their model suggests, they argue, is that “the most satisfying exhibitions for visitors are those that resonate with their experience and provide new information in ways that confirm and enrich their view of the world.” Rather than communicating new information, they say, the greatest strength of museums may be in confirming, reinforcing, and extending the existing beliefs of their visitors.

Lois Silverman has reached a similar conclusion, albeit by a different route. In a widely cited article published in *Curator* in 1995, she argues from a postmodernist perspective that museum objects are like texts that lack
any fixed or inherent meaning until they have been “completed” through the act of reading. In the case of the text, there will be as many versions—all equally correct—as there are readers. A similar “meaning making” process—by which an object acquires meaning for a particular visitor—occurs in the museum. In common with Doering and Pekarik’s entrance narrative, such meaning making will in every case involve the totality of specific memories, expertise, viewpoint, assumptions, and connections that the particular visitor brings to the museum. Silverman is critical of current museum practice for its failure to take better advantage of what she thinks is the essentially experiential nature of museum visiting. “ Hindered,” she says, by their “historical focus on a nearly exclusively educational mission, other potentialities of museums lie seriously underutilized in exhibitions and institutions alike. Museums in a new age can become places that actively support and facilitate a range of human experiences with artifacts and collections—social, spiritual, imaginal, therapeutic, aesthetic [experiences], and more.”

One final note with respect to experience: In arranging the several hundred very diverse objects included in the Smithsonian’s 150th anniversary touring exhibition, the organizers consciously sought to elicit three distinct kinds of response. In contrast to those somewhat dry and distant actions suggested by Screven’s list of action verbs—to name, arrange, compare, order, list, distinguish, identify, or solve—what visitors to the Smithsonian’s exhibition were asked to do was infinitely more personal. The exhibition invited them to remember, to discover, and—perhaps above all—to imagine.

Venturing only a little way beyond Paul Griffith’s three Es, we can generate a rich pattern of purposes—none of them unimportant—that museums might pursue in their public-service role. Given that these are all good purposes, the question remains: Is one as good as another, or—without wholly neglecting any—might the museum community be wise to single one out for special emphasis? Curiously, that seemingly theoretical question may have an intensely practical answer. In his presentation at the Smithsonian’s 150th anniversary symposium, Harold Skramstad argued that not only was the museum a wholly pointless institution unless it helped to solve people’s real problems, but also that—if it was to survive—it had to do so in some way that was unique to itself and not redundant with what other kinds of organizations might have to offer.

If we apply Skramstad’s test to the range of public-service possibilities, it seems clear that only with regard to the fourth and last of these—its ca-
pacity to provide visitors with an experience-rich environment—is the museum’s true uniqueness to be found. The museum that conceives of itself primarily as a tourist destination—that seeks to increase its recreational appeal in order to attract visitors who might, in turn, bring economic benefits to the surrounding community—is constantly vulnerable to the danger that Disney or some Disney clone will come along and, through the magic of its checkbook, create an even larger and more attractive tourist destination. Similarly, museums have no natural monopoly as sites for social interaction or as the providers of education. The very notion that these activities even require a physical site may be at risk. Distance learning is already with us. Can distance socialization be far behind?

What museums have that is distinctive is objects, and what gives most museums their unique advantage is the awesome power of those objects to trigger an almost infinite diversity of profound experiences among their visitors. Nor are those responses limited to visitors; museum workers may be equally susceptible. At the April 1997 annual meeting of the Texas Association of Museums in Midland, Hal Ham of Texas A&M’s Conner Museum gave a wonderfully provocative presentation about nanotechnology. Nanotechnology is an anticipated twenty-first-century technology that will permit its practitioners to make exact, molecule-for-molecule reproductions of any object—a way to do for inanimate things what cloning can do for living ones. Teasingly, Ham asked his audience members how they would feel about providing every art museum—or perhaps, even, every household—with a Mona Lisa replica that was in every last molecular respect identical to the original.

One museum director immediately rose to argue. Those replicas were not and could never in every way be identical to the original because Leonardo himself had never personally touched them. Ham stood his ground. Was the Mona Lisa important as a work of art? If so, more should be better, and perhaps one in every home (or why not two?) would be best of all. Or was it also important as a relic, important because of its association with Leonardo, important like the things in history museums? There was no show of hands at the end, but my guess is that the overwhelming majority of museum people there—myself included—did not honestly believe at any gut level that these molecule-for-molecule replicas really were the same thing as the Mona Lisa. They lacked the power to send our imaginations soaring in the same way that the original could.

Do we fully understand the depth and workings of this power? Do we re-
ally know why, during the Smithsonian's 150th anniversary touring exhibition, visitors stood in long, uncomfortable lines to see Abraham Lincoln's top hat or, more wondrously still, although there never really was such a person as Dorothy, to look at Dorothy's ruby slippers? Some, like the German cultural critic Walter Benjamin, talk about the authentic original as possessing an "aura." Others liken such originals to those objects that Melanesian natives say are imbued with mana, an inherent supernatural power. More prosaically, we might hypothesize that—to filch the title from one of Leo Steinberg's essays—the eye is a part of the mind, and looking and seeing are not the end of what happens to a visitor in a museum but only the starting points of an ultimately holistic experience.

Standing squarely in front of one of fifty million exact replicas of the Mona Lisa, and knowing it to be nothing more than that, a visitor might at the most think it a somewhat amusing application of modern technology or, at the least, might actually find it boring. But standing squarely in front of the original in the Louvre, that same visitor might have a far richer response. Such a response might, for example, blend the uniqueness of the moment—the wonder of being, at that instant, the only creature in the entire galaxy to be standing in front of that one real thing—with a sense of awe that she and Leonardo were somehow linked across nearly five centuries; that she might perhaps be standing at precisely the same distance from the Mona Lisa that the artist himself stood at that moment in 1506 when—backing just slightly away from the painting for a moment—he finally said to himself, "Basta, enough, finito," and launched it out into the world.

This almost unparalleled ability of objects to stimulate so diverse a range of responses seems to me the greatest strength of museums. Nor does there seem to be any limit to what the range of those responses may be. Some museums are celebratory, others seek to console. Some try to stimulate a sense of community, others to capture memory. And some simply offer the important refreshment to be found in breaking the grip of everyday routine. As Nelson Graburn wrote, among the various needs of their visitors that museums can meet is one that he termed the "reverential." It was, he said, "the visitor's need for a personal experience with something higher, more sacred, and out-of-the-ordinary than home and work are able to supply. . . . The museum may provide a place of peace and fantasy, where one can be alone with one's thoughts and make of the objects and exhibits what one will."

In the opening of Anna Karenina, Leo Tolsoy writes, "Happy families are
all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." In a sense, all
good museums can be said to be alike. Common to every good museum is
a clear sense of the worthwhile things it hopes to do, the resources together
with the determination necessary to get those things done, and such feed-
bback or other mechanisms as may be needed to determine that those things
are, in fact, getting done. In contrast to good museums, bad museums—
like unhappy families—may be bad in a number of very specific ways.

If we continue to define a "bad museum" in the simplest and most straight-
forward way—a museum that is not a good museum—it seems apparent
that a museum may be bad because, first, it lacks any clearly articulated and
worthwhile purpose; or second, having such a purpose, it nevertheless has
failed or is unable to attract the resources necessary to accomplish that pur-
pose; or third, having both such a purpose and the necessary resources, it
nevertheless lacks the will, the determined leadership, to achieve that pur-
pose; or last, with appropriate purpose, resources, and leadership all in
place, it smugly and erroneously assumes that it is doing its job when in
reality it is not doing any such thing.

Bad museums should be of greater concern to the community of good
museums than has generally been the case. They tie up old resources and
divert new ones, and they tend to diminish the high esteem in which mu-
seums ought be held. It should be the business of good museums to help
those bad museums that can change to become good ones, and to help move
those that cannot change toward a quiet and dignified exit. Deficiencies of
purpose, resources, and feedback generally can be addressed without thor-
oughly overturning an organization. By contrast, museums that are bad be-
cause their leadership lacks the determination to make them good present
a more difficult case. Paradoxically, it is frequently just such museums that
are—because of their weak leadership—the most reluctant to put a quick
and decent end to themselves so that the valuable public resources they still
hold might be released for more productive use by other organizations.

And so at last, we return to the first questions: Do museums matter? Can
and do they make a difference? The answer should be self-evident. At the
other pole from the secret syllogism, we have now reached a tautology.
Some museums matter. Good museums matter, good museums make a
difference, and they matter and make a difference because that is exactly
how we have defined them. The very things that make a museum good are
its intent to make a positive difference in the quality of people’s lives and,
through its skillful use of resources and under determined leadership, its
demonstrable ability to do exactly that. Other museums don’t matter. Bad museums don’t matter, and the reason that they don’t matter is also definitional: Either they have no real desire to make a positive difference in the quality of people’s lives or, notwithstanding such a desire, they lack the capacity and/or the leadership to do so.

What remains most remarkable to me is how broad a range of purposes the good museum has available to choose from in shaping its public-service efforts. Within the broad categories of entertainment, socialization, education, and experience, innumerable subcategories remain to be identified and named. As most good museums ultimately arrive not at just one purpose but at some mixture of purposes, the number of possible combinations of these categories and subcategories is virtually endless. Having said that all good museums are in one sense alike, we can also say that, in another sense—in the mix of purposes they pursue—they almost all differ from one another. It is that variability, it seems to me, that makes museum work so exciting, even magical. So long as a dedication to public service is its driving force, a museum can be a good one in an almost infinite number of ways. The constructive ways in which museums can innovate and explore new dimensions are almost endless. In everything museums do, they must remember the cornerstone on which the whole enterprise rests: to make a positive difference in the quality of people’s lives. Museums that do that matter—they matter a great deal. And their crowning glory is that they can matter in so many marvelous ways.