

## THE PUBLIC SCHOOL MUSEUM — A VISUAL AID

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**INTRODUCTION.** A museum that has been established and is operated by the public school is one of the most adaptable instruments of the modern educational method of teaching by visual means.

The first museums were set up in colonial times and the history of the development of the American museum parallels that of the nation. The colleges and universities began in early 1800's to organize museums, but it was a full century later before public schools made any provision for museums as a part of their equipment. For three quarters of this century the museums served only as depositories for materials and relics. Interest began to wane in viewing collections and to wax in the activity of the experimental laboratories being developed.

But about 1880 museums changed their policy and added education as one of their objectives—first to adults only, especially teachers. Then it was an easy step for teachers to ask permission for museum excursions for their students. This practice became general with all the large municipal and endowed museums, and thousands of children received museum instruction in this way. Again it was the public school teacher, ever feeling the need for and ever on the lookout for better and more usable means of instruction, who took the initiative in establishing a new institution—the public school museum. An event of national moment helped. In 1904 the Louisiana Purchase Exposition was held in St. Louis. Mr. C. G. Rathmann, an assistant superintendent of the St. Louis Public Schools, noted the enjoyment of the school children in the exhibits, as they wandered about the fair grounds. He resolved to save some of the material for their future use. So in 1905, through the vision and efforts of Mr. C. G. Rathmann the first public school museum was established.

The public school museum has four types of activity to offer to the visual aid program of the school.

1. Opportunity to teachers to observe the interests of their students.
2. Loan of visual aid material to the teacher to use in her classroom.
3. Museum instruction of individuals or classes.
4. Assistance in the organization and carrying on of activities in which the pupils are interested.

There is a definite and important role for a museum as a visual aid in the public school. It is ever at hand to furnish the teacher with the illustrative material needed when it is needed. The museum brings the student in very close visual contact with objects—so close that museums may become tactile aids as well. It is natural to want to touch the curious and new things. Also visits to museums give instructive and constructive use of leisure time to the citizens of the community.

**CHARACTERISTICS OF THE VISUAL AIDS OF A PUBLIC SCHOOL MUSEUM.** The goal of all education is the ability to think, both for solving problems and for creative purposes. The word museum is related to the Greek Temple to the Muses—a place for meditation and free play of the imagination. The objects seen in the public school museums must be thought provoking. Seeing tends to promote correct and accurate thinking. Herein lies the great advantage of the visual material of the museum for observation can be done in three dimensions—a potent factor in producing reality in the mind of the students who are often heard to exclaim, "I did not know this object looked like that, from the picture in the book!"

In order to render the best service as a visual aid the objects in a museum must be classified and marked with labels that give name and location of the specimen. A proper label contains enough information to answer the

questions aroused in the mind of the spectator. The following four classes are suggested as being usable for public school museums: (1) Art; (2) History; (3) Industry; (4) Science.

For complete service the illustrative material in a museum should encompass the entire curriculum and extra-curricula activity. But any subject taught in the system can be placed under one of the general classes mentioned above. A geometry class may find applications in the art or science departments. Articles may be borrowed for the presentation of plays.

Education is becoming more social in character. Industry can train men for jobs in a few weeks. Schools must train for leading a good life and for good citizenship in a local and world wide democracy. The social sciences of history and geography need visual aids for effectively presenting their facts and ideals. Exhibits from foreign lands can help to sweep away prejudices about foreigners and their goods. Americans have a large stock of such prejudices. Foreign exhibits help us to understand the culture and character of other peoples, even primitive people. Respect for the achievements of other nations makes us realize we must share and solve common problems for the good of all. The many objects sent or brought back by men recently in our armed forces in every part of the world, and now finding their way into the school museums are a socializing influence in the community. Many persons both old and young are coming to see these objects and are becoming interested in world resources and to realize that world wide cooperation is necessary.

If the exhibits in a school museum include recent things—even living things—and new processes, they will attract more people and tend to correct the idea that one sees only old things in a museum. This concept is lodged in the minds of high school students who are often reluctant to make their first visit for fear of being thought old fashioned if they spend time looking at old things. That this concept is general among the masses is shown by the following remark of a patron to the writer upon the opening of the Lawton High School Museum in temporary quarters in the attic of the building: "How good that the museum is in the attic—just the proper setting for old but interesting things." Scientific exhibits are excellent for depicting new developments and our changing environment. Visual material on the recent science of aviation would be of great interest and use because every child and most adults long and hope to fly. Exhibits of recent art show that the new is just as good as the old. Modern industrial exhibits bring the museum right up to the last minute in point of time.

To be most effective visual material, the exhibits must be interpretive. President Hutchins, University of Chicago, gives the keynote by saying, "It is not the object that is important, but the meaning of the object." Especially does man need his environment interpreted in order to learn the mastery of it. Here is the school museum's opportunity to help bridge the gap between the educated and the uneducated in the community, by setting up exhibits that will explain every-day phenomena. An example of such an interpretive display is a series of progressive steps in the process of erosion—a process so dangerous to our way of life. All the sciences and industries offer a wealth of material for creating exhibits that will explain man and nature. As a result many superstitions may be overcome and common fallacies about common things corrected. The exhibits should be mobile whenever possible. Informative labels should be placed in readable positions.

Visual material in school museums would not be complete without exhibits of the beautiful—both that found in nature and that man has made, known as art. Emotions are formed in youth, especially those that cling by faith to ideals. The Hitler Youth Movement is an example of loyalty to the wrong ideal. How important it is that the emotions of the American youth be directed into the right channels.

Finally the service of the public school museum in a visual way is a lasting one for the community and its citizens. When one graduates from the public school his formal education is finished, for the great mass of people. But his education continues by other means whether he is aware of it or not. The museum center of the school still helps.

The museums is seductive. Perhaps because it does not employ compulsion but woos the learner with artful wiles, it continues to deceive him into educating himself as long as he lives.

In testimony of this enduring visual training are the recurrent visits to the museum of former students who have graduated years before. Sometimes they are accompanied by their own children thus introducing the next generation to this realistic visual tool by a pleasant experience.

**SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR USING THE VISUAL AIDS OF THE PUBLIC SCHOOL MUSEUM.** The engrossing tasks of every day life plant and cultivate an idea in the mind that the pleasant things of life are far away. Or, if one does know of an excursion within easy reach, going is put off from day to day on the mental plea for a "more convenient time." Since to date the students, teachers, and patrons are not enjoying the full capacities of the school museum, several suggestions for its use are offered.

One of the teacher's first concerns each autumn is to learn the interests of her pupils for working with the child through his interests is an approved procedure of child training. The school museum offers a visual opportunity to the teacher for child study. When brought to the museum and allowed to wander at will, a class in a very few minutes separates into groups before exhibits making the greatest appeal to the individuals of that group. The students talk and ask questions in a natural manner. This service is especially valuable to the inexperienced teacher, or to one coming into a new environment or community. Qualities of character are displayed unconsciously by the students for the teacher's notation. She can encourage the desirable tendencies and curb the selfish and unsocial ones.

After the pupils' interests have been analyzed, a teacher can then plan her lessons and request loan material from the museum to use in her classroom. Choice of the proper material is made easier if the curator of the museum, usually a faculty member who is a permanent resident of the community, has prepared for distribution a manual of the exhibits. Herein the four general classes of objects mentioned earlier are broken down into study units, each briefly described. For example: The American Indian is a unit of the historical class of exhibits. A description of this unit tells that it consists of stone artifacts, baskets, weapons, etc. The manual should also contain lists of exhibits suitable for the different grade levels.

There are many types of visual material that may be prepared in the museum for circulation. For the classes in nature study in the elementary grades and natural science courses in high school, there are specimens from the animal kingdom, the plant kingdom, and the mineral kingdom. Some of the loan collections should contain objects illustrating resources of the local community; others, objects from other parts of the United States; and others, objects from foreign lands. A difference in resources makes a great difference in the culture of people. Samples of material used for clothing and articles showing customs of different people are good loans for classes in social sciences. Displays showing the different steps in the manufacture of some product used in the home as an aluminum utensil can be carried to different schools. Packages of flat pictures, posters, and charts can be used in the same way. Loans can be made to neighboring schools.

The public school museum is also the depository for much material that is too bulky, too fragile, too rare, or too precious to be loaned. If such an exhibit illustrates a unit being studied, the teacher who has previously made an appointment accompanies the class on an excursion to the museum for

instruction by the director. The class comes for a specific purpose this time. The director should make a few remarks on what to look for, then let all children have an equal chance to observe, answer as many of their questions as possible, and make any additional explanatory remarks necessary to direct their attention to proper achievement. If any time is left of what was allotted for the excursion pupils may be permitted to look about discovering stimuli for future visits. Any adult study classes that have been organized by the school or any other agency in the community will find museum excursions profitable.

The best teaching is done individually. Ideally the school museum should be open every day, but at least at regular periods, for the individual student to enter and unconsciously find his own visual aids, rejoicing in the discovery. The museum attendant should be in the offing to render any assistance, offer suggestions about other exhibits or new additions. The best of labels are sometimes not clear enough. The interest of the attendant is also flattering to the visitor as the writer knows from her own experience in visiting museums.

An evaluation that the time spent in a museum has been gratifying is the contribution that individuals make. These come from both children and adults. Another testimony of satisfaction is a return visit by an individual bringing one or two congenial companions. Sometimes a child brings his parents to see a discovery he has made. Adults bring neighbors, or out of the community guests, especially if local exhibits are good. The patrons of Lawton High School Museum take pride in showing guests the fossil skull of an elephant found nearby, the branding iron collection, or the objects in Pioneer Room depicting the early history of Lawton.

Viewing objects in a museum is a profitable way of spending leisure time but it is not enough. The exhibits should stimulate an individual to think of activities he can pursue at home, or in the museum work shop, or in the community. Teachers may find suggestions for an extra-curriculum activity that can be organized for students in the classroom on bad weather days. By studying in the museum older students and adults may be helped in pursuit of their hobbies which bring happiness and sometimes remuneration. School museums can often offer visual aids to sponsors and members of such groups as Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, and Camp Fire Girls. Patriotic Societies, Study Clubs, and garden clubs can illustrate their programs or perhaps hold an occasional meeting in the museum because of the visual material at hand.

**CONCLUSION.** Francis Henry Taylor says "The American museum is the child of nineteenth-century liberal thought. The public school museum is the child of twentieth-century search by teachers for better methods of child training. It was founded by the school, for the school, and of the school. That is, the teachers aided by pupils have installed the museums. Perhaps at first not consciously as a visual aid, but that has come to be the most important objective of it. Now since many schools are providing for adult education in their communities, school museum can serve in that capacity.

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