

Musings About Museums

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INTRODUCTION

With the coming of a new University museum director, faculty members generally assume some sort of changes in policy and practice will occur, and this is generally true. But at the University of Oklahoma the time is also ripe for a penetrating look at the basic rationale of a campus museum. Specifically, I am interested in the purpose and the significance of our museum. We have reached a plateau of maturity that also reflects the signs of maturity in the museum profession as a whole.

In the natural history museum at the University of Oklahoma we are thus doubly concerned to make an "agonizing," or at least searching reappraisal of our institution. We want to discover what we are and relate this to what we should be. Today I want to pose and briefly respond to a short series of rather terse questions.

WHAT IS A MUSEUM?

Perhaps we can best define a museum as that specialized kind of institution which collects, preserves and uses (for study and display) *real objects*, whether they are objects of nature or objects of art. Fundamentally a museum is educational in the sense of the allegoric meaning of the myth of Antaeus whose strength was doubled when he could touch the earth, his mother. Here we suggest that the reality presented in a museum provides humanity with a source for doubling and redoubling intellectual strength.

Man is distinguished from other animals by his social heredity (i.e., his culture) and a museum, like a library, is an institutionalized form for this transmission of human culture and knowledge from generation to generation. It is quite different, however, from a library, or formal teaching, or "book learning," emphasizing as it does the contact with prime evidence or nature in the raw. Actual specimens are the basis for most museum exhibits and ultimately all museum activities.

A university museum differs from most other museums in being centered in an academic community drawing on teaching scholars for resources and research. Exhibit emphasis can be directed at a broad approach to knowledge that crosscuts and integrates, or at least, interrelates the various departmental specialties taught as formal courses. In many ways it is probably important for a university museum to de-emphasize or counter-balance the "bookish" atmosphere of the university. (This, of course, is to say nothing of the public image of the university as a seat of vast athletic programs and fraternity social events.)

WHY DO WE HAVE A MUSEUM?

Three basic goals or objectives seem to underlie most science or natural history museums. I suggest these as the reason why we have a University of Oklahoma Museum.

- 1) To increase knowledge; i.e., to conduct research.
- 2) To disseminate knowledge; i.e., to educate.
- 3) To provide service to the several communities represented by the museum.

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HOW DOES A MUSEUM ACCOMPLISH ITS OBJECTIVES?

Generally speaking a museum program of activities is not clearly related to a well-defined set of objectives. In the case of the University of Oklahoma Stovall Museum, it is possible to look at our various activities and align these idealistically or relate them to the objectives stated above.

- 1) *We increase knowledge by*
 - a) Acting as a repository for specimens related to our several divisions. We preserve and store in systematic, accessible fashion with accompanying system of records to enable the collections to be utilized for research and exhibit purposes.
 - b) Acting as a research agency. We sponsor field work for observation and collection of natural history items; we carry out the necessary laboratory preparation and study of observations and collections; and finally we issue technical publications on our research activities.

- 2) *We disseminate knowledge by*
 - a) Exhibits in all the fields of knowledge represented by our divisions. These are designed to stimulate and to integrate knowledge from other sources. They are aimed at three main groups of viewers: the university students and staff; the sub-university students; the extra-university general public.
 - b) Teaching in several ways with the same three groups as foci of attention. Here we utilize guided tours, lectures, training of assistants in laboratories and museum, film programs, lecture programs and "popular" publications.

- 3) *We provide services for*
 - a) The university community by means of our exhibits and lectures, by providing meeting places for student and faculty organizations, by being a "show place" for the campus visitor.
 - b) The Norman community by means of the above plus special exhibits and guided tours as well as sales desk items for school children and adults.
 - c) The Oklahoma state community by being in effect the state museum of natural history; our exhibits, research emphasis and public services stress the state aspect of our multi-faceted community.
 - d) The professional community of university and museum scholarship — we are in a sense the prestige link with other institutions (e.g., The University of Oklahoma is known in some quarters primarily in terms of its staff members' research publications or organizational memberships.)

This all adds up to what we may call the "organic" or "whole" concept of a museum. While it is possible to have many different kinds of specialized museums, I feel that the museum associated with a great university must clearly be this "organic" type of museum. In a sense, a university museum is a microcosm of the interests and activities of the university itself.

S: WHAT?

It is often difficult to answer this crass kind of a question, particularly about an institution that we generally accept without much question or active interest.

We don't have to be at all backward about saying that a museum has significant and apparent value to the several communities it serves (and represents). This value can be measured in terms of various factors. Perhaps the most obvious is in the extension of service activities to communities beyond the university.

1) The fact is that during the last 15 years, museums have increasingly been functioning as community and cultural centers. Reasons for this are multiple, but certainly the rise in leisure time available, emphasis on "do it yourself," awakening of many older museums to attractive and new exhibit techniques and growing concepts of adult or informal education (e.g., the extension services of universities and museums) have all had important bearing on the fact that today the Stovall Museum is better known and more important to its several communities. Our annual attendance has risen to a figure of nearly 30,000. We sponsor 20 social events or lectures each year and our lecture room is used by some interest group or club an average of 10 nights each month. The Stovall Museum is well known nationally, largely as a result of the activities and publications of its former director, Stephan F. Borhegyi.

2) Another very important value of a university museum is the renewed interest in the kind of fundamental research (i.e., systematic observation and description of some aspect of nature) that museums are best suited to support. The modern ecological approach has clearly demonstrated the limitations of laboratory and experimental observations — and has also stressed the need for better and more complete fundamental descriptive work. Here is the area in which museum research facilities can strengthen and deepen our scientific foundations — foundations suitable to any kind of superstructure, be it behavioral studies, population problems or revised taxonomy.

3) A third obvious value which accrues from the active and effective presence of a university museum is the breadth of background and a general orientation to nature that comes from repeated contacts with real objects of nature in museum exhibits. While we think here of the general population, we should be most deeply interested in the university students, that group of citizens from which we expect a large portion of our future leadership to develop. We are concerned here in a university museum to present ideas and facts that crosscut or interrelate formal disciplines and help orient specialized knowledge. In a sense we are one of the very important intellectual extra-curricular activities and should represent the extension of the best our university has to offer.

If we grant and appreciate the above values which derive from a museum, we should have little difficulty recognizing its needs. These needs ramify in bewildering variety, reflecting our variety of interests and activities. In the Museum of the University of Oklahoma, however, the problem is qualified by our objectives. While our base of public usage and informal public support has increased and broadened, we need constantly to consider our activities in terms of our capabilities. Perhaps we should concentrate our efforts in a smaller and more clearly defined area of activities.

As it now stands, our full-time staff size is based on the programs and activities of a decade ago while our responsibilities have increased several fold. Our budget is such that we are essentially limited to a low-level maintenance program. To more effectively handle our present program

or to consolidate part-time help into a more efficient full-time personnel, we must seek extra resources.

I am currently making a study of surrounding university museums. On the basis of this study I hope to be able to assess realistically our progress and status against not only our own aims but also the aims and achievements of our sister institutions. In order to do this successfully I depend upon the University of Oklahoma Museum staff members for help — criticism of the past, comment on the present and suggestions for the future. These two studies, the internal questionnaire and the cross-institutional survey, should give us a solid basis for planning and action.

Our most obvious need is for a building that will more adequately house our exhibits, services and research facilities. This need, to have a building commensurate with the scope of our activities, is also reflected in our need to have a substantial "showcase" for these activities. External impressions, though secondary, are important considerations for us to be aware of. Of interest here is the fact that a "practical" or financially self-liquidating building often goes up in a hurry. Natural history museums seem not to be in this category of "practicality."

On the other hand an art gallery or museum may be handsomely supported in a jewel-like setting, but this, of course, is in the name of culture. And natural history museums are not usually thought of as such a valuable vehicle for "culture." In fact, however, a modern natural history museum can be and should be both practical and uplifting.

A final important need (and here as elsewhere I am anticipating the results of our staff questionnaire) is a publication series. We should have both a technical and popular series, but particularly a technical series since this is so vitally related to our research role as a university museum. There are potentially publishable manuscripts available for such a publication series.

THE FUTURE

An extremely good foundation has been laid for our future work. The activities of Drs. Stovall and Borhegyi and their staff members stand out here. Now, perhaps, more than ever before with increasing public recognition of educational needs, the time is ripe to attempt to realize more fully the potential of this basic work. As I make my internal and external studies this fall and learn more about the Museum and the University, I plan to develop a concrete program for the future of the Stovall Museum. I feel certain that this program will conceive of the University of Oklahoma Museum as an organic museum rather than simply a convenient exhibit area on the campus. To realistically achieve a status of organic museum we will need to emphasize our research and custodial responsibilities by acquiring full-time scientific staff members. Such a program should accrue great value to the University and to the State. I hope we will achieve the full understanding and support of the University administration in the accomplishment of our objectives.