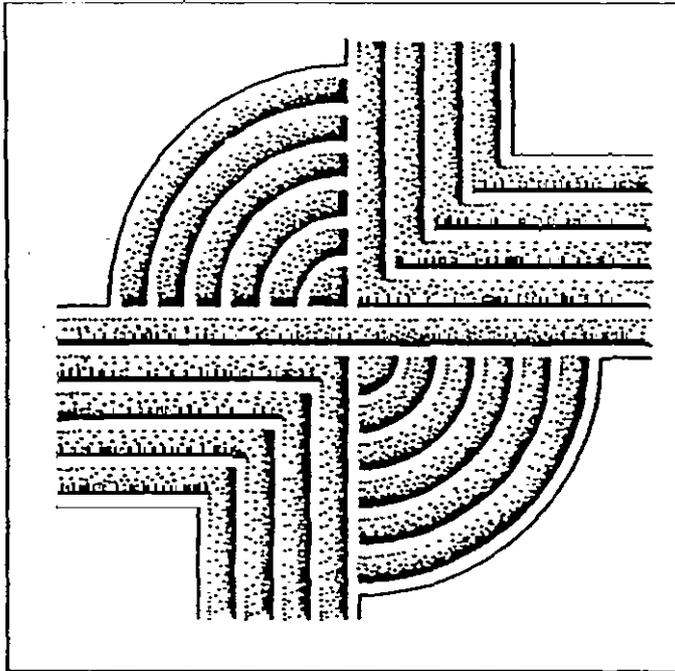


TAKING A STAND FOR QUALITY



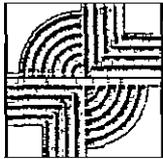
RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION 272

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TAKING A STAND FOR QUALITY

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As John Shelton Reed observed, "Southerners will be polite until they are angry enough to kill you." This seems to fit the situation brewing among many museum professionals today. I see an increasing dichotomy — often, though not always, between staffs and administrators — concerning the role museums ought to play in society, how museums pay the bills, and a whole host of ethical issues that come along as part of the baggage. And I see the issue at a broad range of institutions that I work with, from as far west as Louisiana to as far north as Virginia.

We appear to be living in a world of exceptional prosperity. Every day I see more behemoth sports utility vehicles on the road. I see more people purchasing more consumer goods — bigger TVs, digital thises and thats, cell phones, and other "must-haves." I pick up paper after paper and read about how good the economy is. In this midst of what might be characterized as an obsession with wealth, I also see more and more institutions pleading that they have no money — they can't afford to care for collections because there isn't money. They can't replace the roof, because of a policy of deferred maintenance. They can't prepare a disaster plan, because they say they don't have the staff resources.

Somewhere, somehow, we managed to create either a real or a perceived shortfall of cash. It probably came from several directions. We allowed politicians, rather than statesmen, to lead our country. We allowed the public to feel that somehow they would receive government services (such as museums) without having to pay the bill for those services. There are also spineless administrators who are always willing to "do more for less." We created a situation where the public's expectations were far greater than their willingness to pay — or our ability to produce.

Coupled with this, we have created large museum with large infrastructures. It is to the administration's credit to expand — to build new buildings, to acquire new collections, to hire more staff. Just like at fast food joints, one hamburger patty isn't enough, we need two, with three pieces of cheese, and bacon, all topped with a special sauce. The only problem is, sooner or later that lifestyle catches up with us all. In the case of fast food it results in clogged arteries and a heart attack. In the case of museums it results in the institution gradually becoming more concerned with expanding — and paying for the glut of staff — than with its own mission statement.

And where the idea of "bigger is better" hasn't yet caught hold, we promote the idea that every community, every town, not only can, but must, have its own "museum," thereby dividing the pie into smaller and smaller slices. This parochialism results in everyone being impoverished because no one wants to admit that we can't have everything and that choices have to be made. We also stretch both the definition and ethics of museums to be "all inclusive."

So what do many museums directors and board members do? Unfortunately, many of them pander to the lowest possible denominator — they seek to create something spectacular and unexpected, something to draw crowds from miles around. To many of the directors and board members it is far more important to pay the bills and maintain monolithic structures than to recognize the folly of their ways and seek new, and realistic approaches to deal with these problems. In anthropology we call this “cultural conservatism” — groups don’t want to change or give up cherished ideas and beliefs.

We really can’t blame them too much — look at what’s on TV: “When Good Times Go Bad,” “Best Home Videos,” “The Wheel of Fortune.” American society, as a whole, is not prepared to deal with tough issues and make tough choices — most people want to be entertained, so why shouldn’t museum directors cash in on this attitude?

Some of you may have caught the sleaze of TV, Jerry Springer, at Oxford. He readily admitted to hosting the most sleazy, despicable TV show around. And the crowd cheered. Then he added something to the effect of, “And if you watch it, shame on you — you should go out and get a real life.” It seems that Jerry recognizes the intellectual poverty of his show — but he still does it because it brings in the big bucks. I wonder how many museums find themselves in this same situation — or even worse, how many museums have sold their intellectual birthright for a pottage of make-believe space ships, Civil War balls, golf masquerading as science, and other “edu-tainment” programs — and don’t even recognize the road they have gone down.

Of course museums fall into the same trap as businesses, thinking that what they lack in loyal customers they will make up in volume. Curiously, this doesn’t seem to work. Going back to Jerry Springer, he probably has very few viewers who continue to watch the channel when the local news comes on. His viewers don’t want to be educated, they want to be entertained. Likewise, I suspect that there are far too many one-time museum visitors who go to be entertained, but never go back to be educated.

Curiously, there are beacons around us — institutions that don’t sell out, that maintain a clear direction and philosophy, and make money at the same time. One of them, as an example, is Biltmore. They find the money not only to care for their collections, but to have one of the most competent conservation and curatorial staffs that I have seen. And they are a for-profit museum. Then there are the Ripley Believe-It-Or-Not Museums. Also making money hand-over-foot while keeping their institutions impeccably clean, their exhibits pristine, and always maintaining their focus of presenting the public with oddities and curiosities. While you may not consider them “real museums,” they are far more real than many listed in the AAM directory.

From my perspective the problem begins when museums lose sight of who, and what, they are. They begin compromising. Some of you may remember what the famous depression era author James Agee had to say about this, talking about what he called the “self-styled realists”

who are dangerously ready to compromise. "They seem never sufficiently aware of the danger; they must too quickly and easily respect the compromise and come at rest in it. I would suppose," he goes on, "that nothing is necessarily wrong with compromise of itself, except that those who are easy enough to make it are easy enough to relax into and accept it, and that it thus inevitably becomes fatal. Or more nearly, the essence of the trouble is that compromise is held to be a virtue of itself."

In other words, I don't see cash strapped museums saying, admitting out loud, that they made poor choices and are now in a bind, and as a result are going to do one or two sleazy exhibits in order to get into the black, where upon they will change their ways and return to their foundation of teaching and research and their focus on their particular theme. No, instead, many directors, boards, and most especially business managers, too easily accept the compromise and suddenly that compromise becomes a way of life — something that is done over and over, and something for which no one offers up the least apology. Moreover, by making the compromise, everyone forgets what got them to that place, no changes are made, and the museum finds itself not simply continuing to compromise, but beginning to defend its compromise as somehow more spiritually superior to the old view. And like other institutions, some museums refuse to acknowledge that having made a bargain with the devil, they will eventually be expected to make payment.

So, what is the alternative? Personally, I believe that museums should refocus on what they once were and attempt to reclaim their birthright as leaders of preserving our heritage and knowledge, as leaders of solid, real education.

And frankly, museums and their curators are ideally suited to this role — if they are just left alone. Dr. Tom McDonald is a specialist in "people skills" needed for "business results" and he has pioneered the idea of "virtual teamwork" — which is far more appropriate for museums than conventional team approaches — which is really pretty outmoded.

Virtual teamwork starts with a high emphasis on individual responsibility, rather than group thinking. Team members are very clear about their individual jobs and, typically, just want to be left alone to do their work. Achievement is uppermost in their minds and they expect others to be equally serious and focused. Although recognition for a job well done is appreciated, it isn't critical and virtual team members don't expect a lot of fanfare. To them success is reward enough. Dr. McDonald explains that the best way to approach a job is to give team members a lot of room and get out of their way.

I think this pretty well characterizes the dedicated curators I have known — and I think it is the foundation on which museums can return to their level of pre-eminence. Allow curators to focus on their field, develop exceptional exhibits and programs, and recognize that bigger isn't always better. Tackle tough issues and topics, generate some heat, and force the public to think

— both about the exhibit and the role of museums in today's society. It won't be easy, but it will be far more productive, and ethical, than continually seeking easy money and exhibits have little or nothing to do with one's mission statements.