Riches, Rivals & Radicals
100 Years of Museums in America

by MARJORIE SCHWARZER

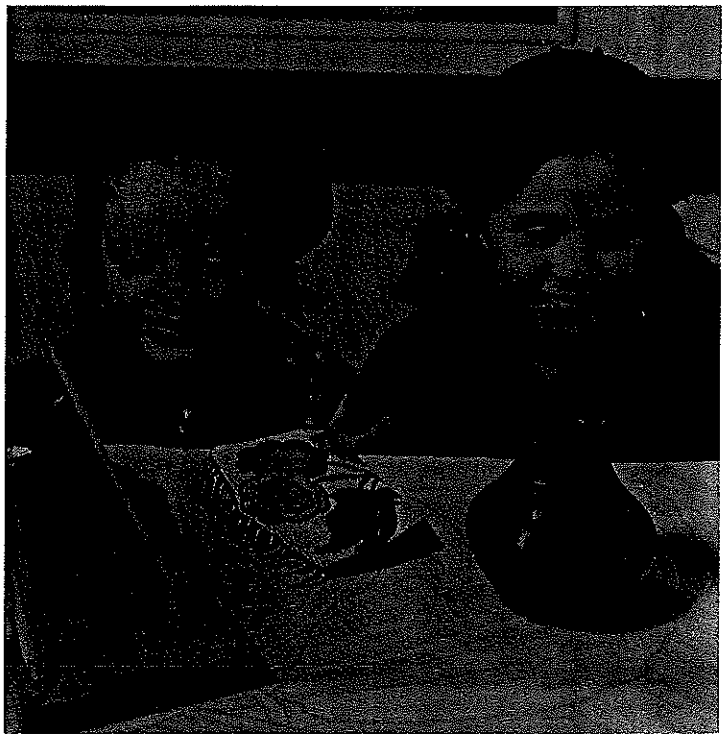
American Association of Museums

INTRODUCTION

It was positively civilisation condensed, concrete, consummate, set down by his hands as a house on a rock—a house from whose open doors and windows, open to grateful, to thirsty millions, the higher, the highest knowledge would shine out to bless the land . . . this museum of museums . . . a receptacle of treasures sifted to positive sanctity.

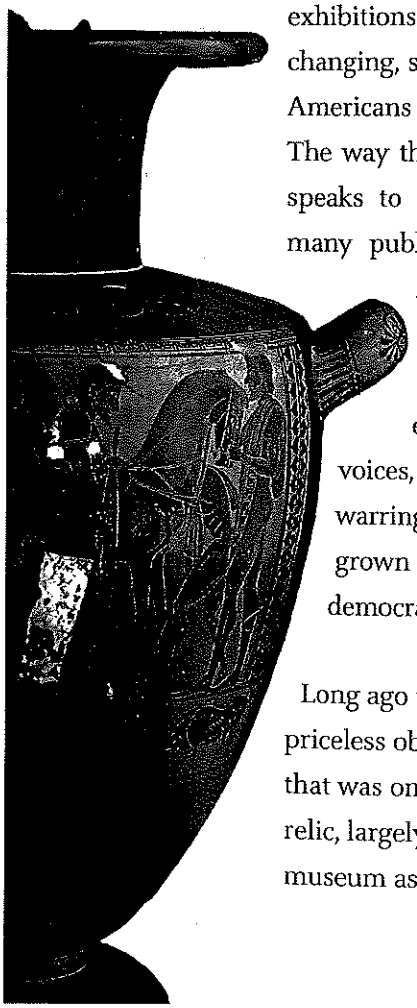
—HENRY **JAMES**, THE GOLDEN BOWL, 1904

The American museum is a prism of American society. Its buildings reflect civic pride, often serving as examples of outstanding architectural accomplishment. Its collections are evidence of the nation's boundless curiosity, our desire to know the achievements of other people, other lands, other times. Its exhibitions tell us stories, adding to the ever changing, sometimes contentious meanings we Americans give to history, to culture, to identity. The way the museum is managed and funded speaks to its position in the community, its many publics and political importance. The American museum today, more than at any time over the past century, is a place of exchange, encounter and education. As a chorus of different voices, an arena of differing, sometimes warring interpretations, the museum has grown to become a reflection of American democracy itself.



Above: *Sisters Dorothy and Francine Berman admire Native American objects at the Brooklyn Children's Museum, late 1930s.*

Left: *Hydria, black-figure, 520-500 B.C., terracotta, by Antimenes painter, Greek Attica. John R. Van Derlip Fund. The Minneapolis Institute of Arts.*



Long ago the museum in America ceased to be a repository for priceless and not-so-priceless objects, many of them the gifts of wealthy donors. The exclusive private collection that was once open only to those of the owner's race and social class has itself become a relic, largely banished after decades of struggle inside and outside the museum. Today's museum aspires to be much more. It is, at its most ambitious, a complex mix of town

square, classroom, playground, forum, sanctuary, community center, temple, laboratory and probably much more. Even the word "museum" has a wide variety of definitions, not unlike the term "American." Once the authoritative interpreter of priceless objects, it now also acknowledges the many interpretations of its visitors. In the process it has become priceless in new and perhaps surprising ways.

Museums do matter. They are the only institutions that collect, preserve, display, interpret, and educate for the public good. They are stewards of who and what we are today, and have been in the past: our shared heritage, good and bad, accomplishments and failures as humans, the treasures of a natural world that we ourselves endanger. Museums offer us an opportunity to be informed and inspired, to be enriched culturally, intellectually, emotionally. Without them we would be infinitely poorer as individuals and as a nation.

There is a story here. How the American museum got from where it began to where it is today has required a long journey, sometimes arduous, often fascinating, filled with many notable and even a few notorious characters. It is a journey that continues today. The story of the American museum tells us as much about ourselves as it does about the institution and the objects in its collection.

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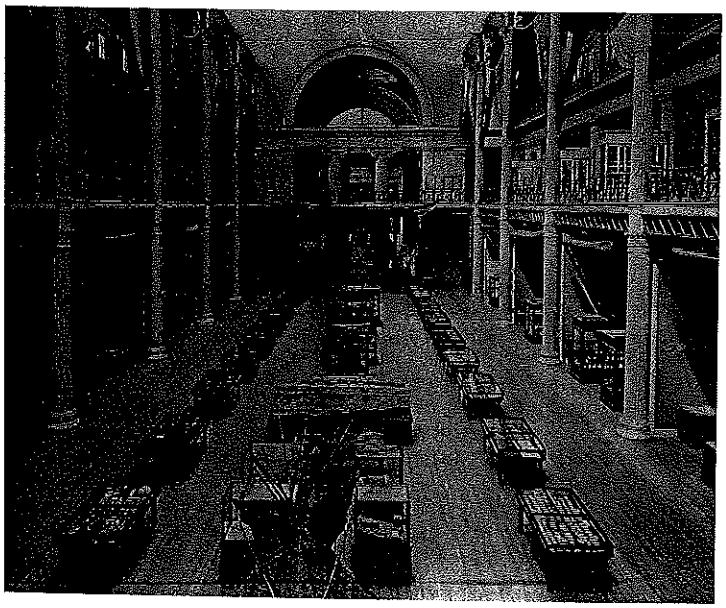
Change, it has often been noted, is the one great constant of history. In the past 100 years the United States has experienced tumultuous change. Museums, some of them collecting and exhibiting artifacts of social and cultural transformation even as it occurred, were slower to change. But change they did.



Left: *The Hall of Archaeology of North America in the East Court of the Field Museum, Chicago, c. 1896, featured tipis, Utah pottery and paintings by George Catlin in the alcoves. © The Field Museum, #CSA8193.*

Right: *Schoolchildren were the target audience for an exhibition on tuberculosis organized by the American Museum of Natural History, New York, as a public health service in 1907. Courtesy of AMNH.*

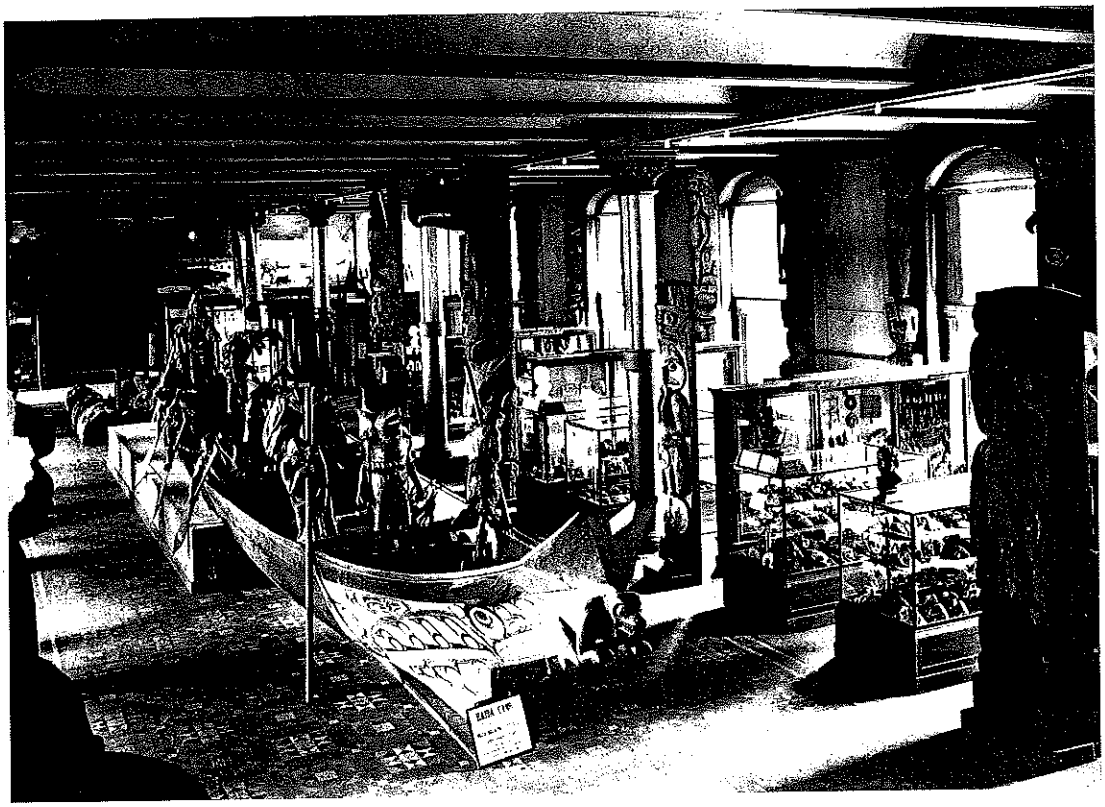
In the late 19th century the typical museum was a collecting institution, organized in strictly hierarchical fashion. It was a place for the elite and privileged to teach the nation's working men and women what it meant to be cultured, civic-minded Americans. It was typically a paternalistic, somewhat moralizing institution. Its mission was, at least in part, the improvement of society through the display and explanation of art or historical artifact or scientific specimen or technological marvel. Its goals were, at one and the same time, idealistic and practical—not unlike the nation itself, then and now.

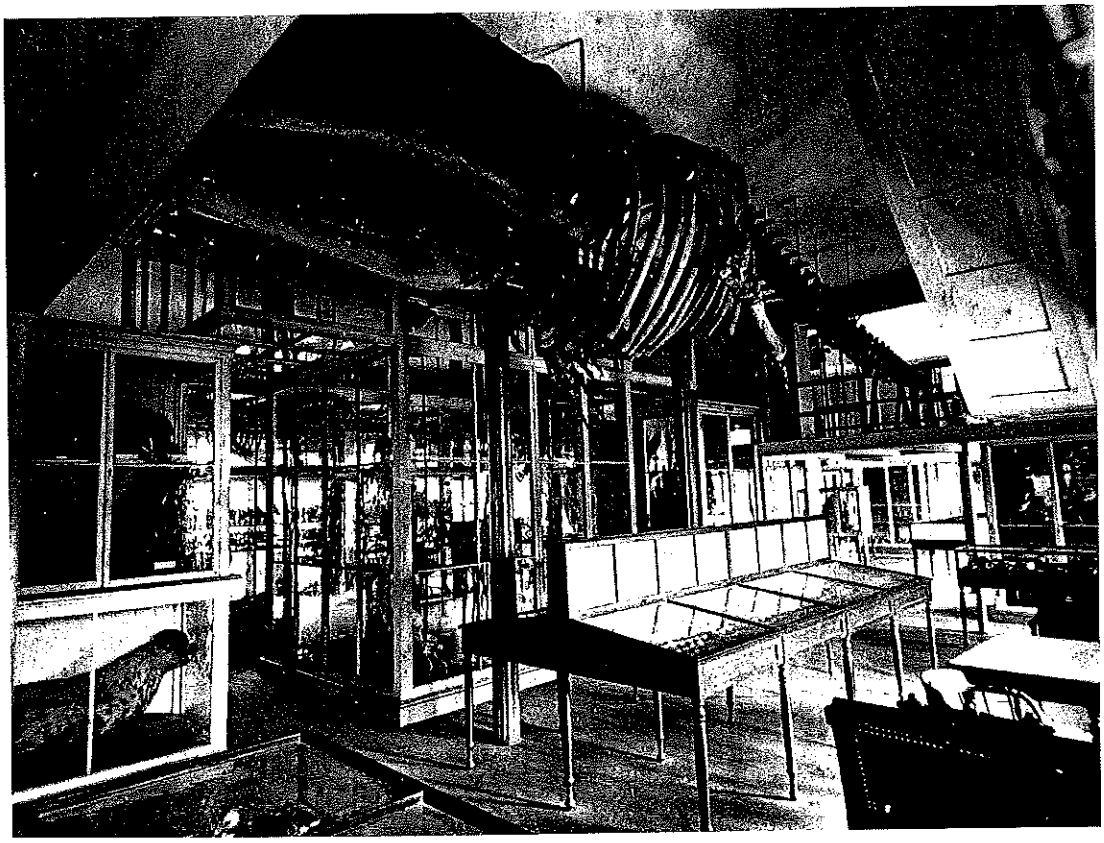
At the turn of the 20th century America was busily engaged in becoming an industrial power. Cities grew dramatically, immigration expanded, the population diversified. Science, scholarship and the arts began to flourish. A small class of the super wealthy established itself at the same time that a sizeable population of the working poor emerged. Museums of the day, managed and governed by a socially prominent patrician class, reflected the national struggle to redefine the values of public education, citizenship and American identity.

They did so in very different ways. Some were progressive and allied themselves with movements for social reform. Others were concerned with upholding and preserving tradition. Still others were pragmatic, hoping to prove their worth by being useful and efficient. Most had in common the ideal of being a beacon for their towns or cities, or even for the country.

With each ensuing decade of what came to be called "the American century," museums recrafted their visions of themselves, some more overtly and more publicly than others, striving to change as the nation changed. During World War I some museums displayed letters from soldiers fighting in the trenches, others the flags of America's allies. In the Roaring '20s the number of museums expanded suddenly as American society rose on a tide of prosperity. In the decade of the Great Depression, museums allied themselves with progressive social movements of the day, offering services to cash-strapped public schools and sharing in the largess of the Works Progress Administration. In the 1940s museums again reflected the patriotism of the war years, with some institutions serving as hospital wards and military research and training centers in support of the war effort and a few others displaying anti-Japanese propaganda.

A return to tradition and an interest in collections conservation marked the 1950s, along with increased prosperity and further expansion. The 1960s and 1970s were decades of radical change for some museums, especially those that embraced a more socially responsive role in light of the sweeping changes brought by the great movements in civil rights. An anti-hierarchical hands-on approach to learning took root in new models of children's museums and science centers. During the 1980s and 1990s museums found themselves in the crossfire of the culture wars as traditionalists and multiculturalists



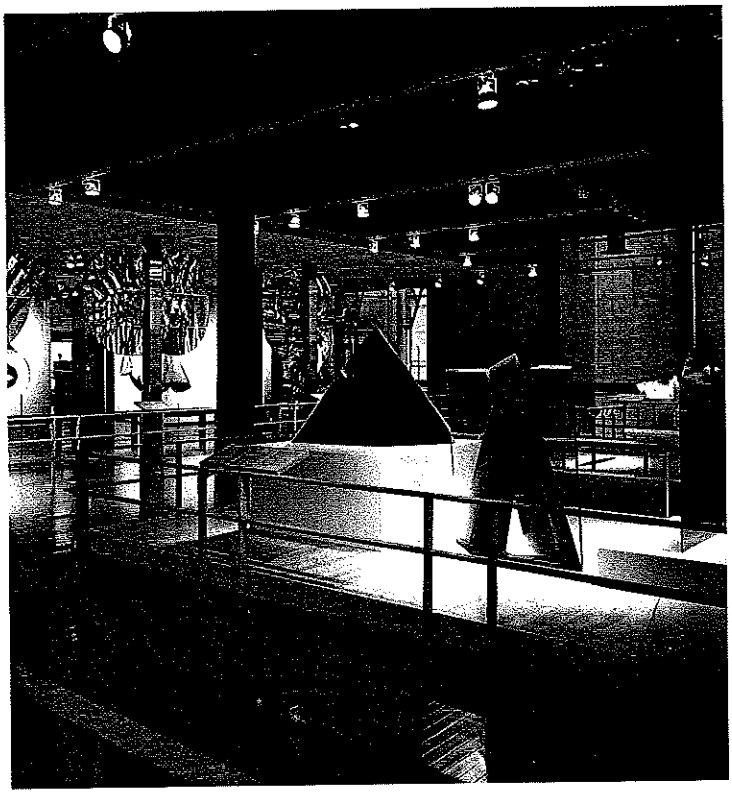


Facing page, above: *Anthropologist Franz Boas organized the American Museum of Natural History's North Pacific Coast Hall in 1899. The display included a 64.5-foot Haida canoe, later immortalized by J. D. Salinger in* CATCHER IN THE RYE.

Facing page, below: *Main exhibition hall, c. 1880, in Randolph Hall, a building that is now part of the College of Charleston. Courtesy of the Charleston Museum, Charleston, S.C.*

This page, right: *The Corning Museum of Glass is home to one of the world's greatest collections of glass objects. Courtesy of the Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, N.Y.*

This page, below: *Arlene and Harold Schnitzer Center for Northwestern Art, Portland Art Museum, 2002. Courtesy of the Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oreg.*



battled over the interpretation of collections and exhibitions. Native Americans joined a movement of disenfranchised groups that challenged assumptions about the ownership of artifacts and the right to display them.

The early years of the 21st century saw museums grow again in number and size, expanding their missions and scope, emphasizing more strongly than ever education and community engagement. Like the rest of the nation, museums struggled to respond to the growing diversity of American society, the swelling chorus of different voices. All the while they were facing the same questions: What must we be, and for whom, and to what purpose? These, of course, are the questions that museums began with.

It says a great deal about how seriously museums take their missions and the respect they have for their publics when we note that the questions have remained the same for more than 100 years. It is the answers that continue to change. And it is no small thing to remark that the same can be said of the nation itself.

If we follow the story of the American museum it becomes evident that these institutions large and small do not merely collect and display the elements of our past, our heritage, our achievements. They are themselves evidence of these things, a sometimes surprising articulation of who we are as Americans, and for whom, and to what purpose.

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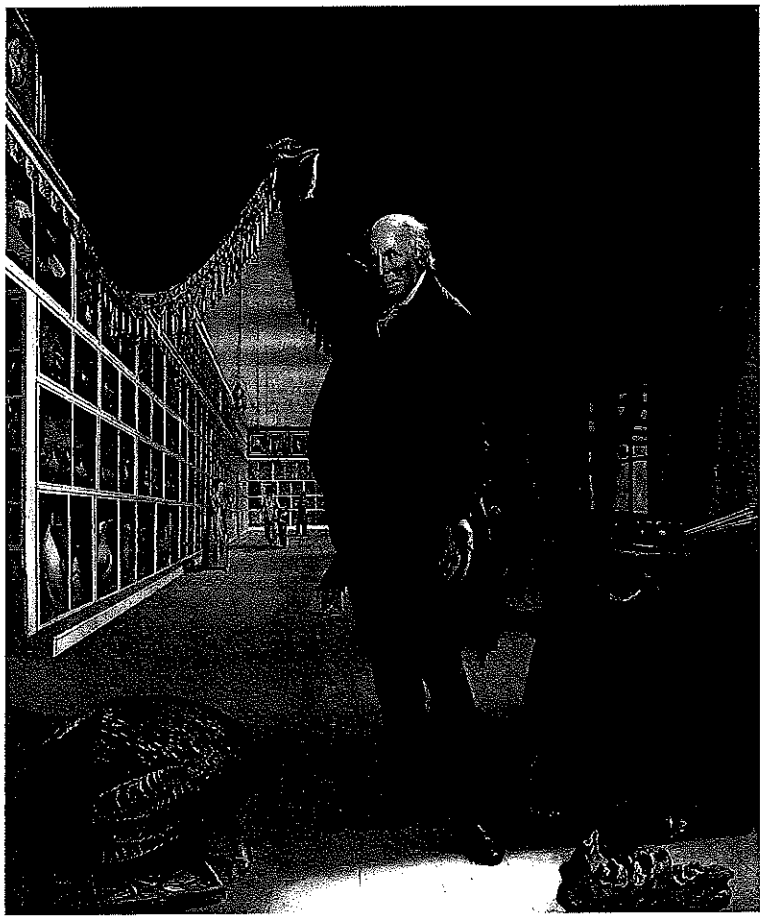
In 1928 the American Association of Museums (AAM) estimated that the country's 1,400 museums received 32 million visits annually, a figure equal to about 25 percent of the population of the time. Seventy years later more than 10,000 museums were in business. The annual number of visits had skyrocketed to an estimated 865 million in 1998, more than three times the country's population. Museum visitorship has grown at a much faster pace than the U.S. population. Visits now far surpass attendance at all professional sports events combined.

Whatever else may be said of the changes over the past century, museums have made themselves more popular than ever.

As their numbers multiplied, museums have become more complex institutions. The very word "museum," once comfortably static and easily defined, now is used for institutions that would never have called themselves museums a few generations ago. Today museum buildings are often larger and host a greater array of activities, from large-format film to fine dining to feng shui classes and singles' evenings. Their collections overall are more extensive, better documented and researched. Exhibition techniques have become more sophisticated, incorporating the latest advances in technology. The people who visit are



In 1786, artist Charles Willson Peale turned his home into a cabinet of curiosities. **CHARLES WILLSON PEALE, THE ARTIST IN HIS MUSEUM,** *1822. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia. Gift of Mrs. Sarah Harrison (The Joseph Harrison, Jr., Collection).*

more diverse in age, ethnicity, levels of education and income and far more international than ever before. The funding of museums, once almost exclusively dependent on the generosity of a few wealthy philanthropists, has become broader, increasingly reliant on earned income from admissions fees and sales at museum shops and restaurants.

The increase in scale and complexity has meant that the older identity of the museum, forged in Europe during the 19th century, has been refashioned. In Europe the public museum developed out of an aristocratic society uncomfortable with commerce. By contrast, business has long been a readily accepted aspect of life in America, this nation of immigrants striving to get ahead financially. The American museum, much more than its European predecessor, has been continually preoccupied with justifying its usefulness and value to society. Thus the repeated attempts, even in the present day, at bridging the gap between elite and popular cultures.

The American museum in its new complexity finds itself accountable to many more constituencies than in the past. It often is expected to be as cost-effective as a business while serving as an educational resource, a civic institution and a community partner—usually all on the same day. Inevitably the contemporary museum has had to embrace some apparent contradictions as it attempts to define itself for its many publics: being a charitable nonprofit organization in a marketplace culture, being a place of memory, reflection and learning in a nation that stresses action and immediacy, being a champion of tradition in a land of ceaseless innovation.

Nor are these changes without controversy within the museum itself. There are many proud traditionalists, those who sometimes also self-identify as "essentialists," who decry the steady drift away from scholarship, connoisseurship, the primary tasks of collecting, preserving and exhibiting. To these museum professionals, the diversity of functions within the institution serves not to strengthen it but to weaken it by fragmenting its focus and encouraging it to be too many things to too many people at the expense of the few things it has always done best.

These opposing visions, of course, are part of America's larger, endless battle over the meaning of its own past. And museums are a battleground.

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A Brief History of Evolution—The Museum's

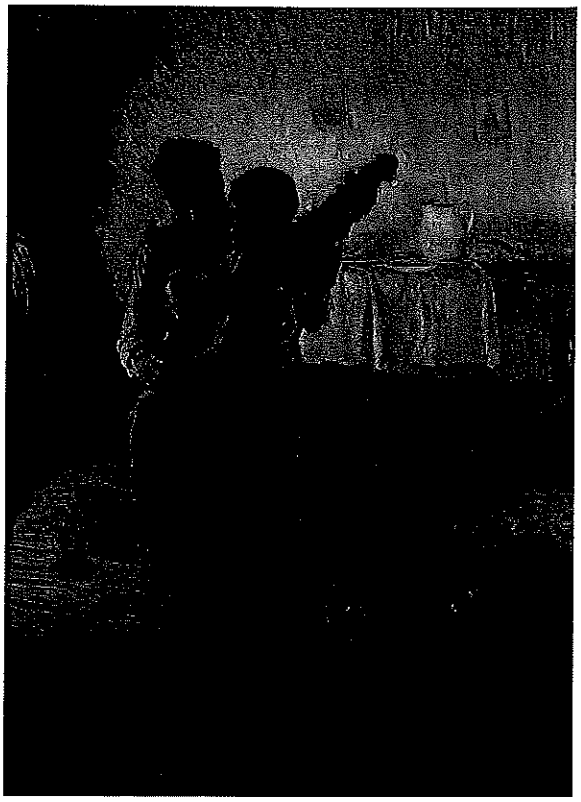
Even before there was a country, there was the country's first museum. In 1773, in the midst of the war for American independence, the Charleston Library Society gathered samples of animals, plants and minerals from the South Carolina low country. This collection formed the first American museum. In 1786 artist Charles Willson Peale opened his Philadelphia home as an American cabinet of curiosities. This display is regarded as the nation's first museum open to the public. Part of the Peale family's collection later was purchased and displayed by none other than P. T. Barnum, who included a "genuine" mermaid skeleton among the artifacts in his American Museum in New York. The tension between popular entertainment and authenticity began very early in the museum world.

During the next 100 years most public exhibits, often no more than a case of arrowheads or medical instruments, took place largely in the basements of libraries and colleges. Most early 19th-century American museums did not call themselves museums at all. They operated as antiquarian societies, open only to their members, many admitted by secret vote. These were private collections or esoteric amusements rather than public places of education.

The radical changes brought by the Civil War and its aftermath had their effect on museums no less than on American society as a whole. The issues of the day in the 1870s will sound familiar to the 21st -century reader: industrialization and sprawl, periodic stock market collapse, business scandal, urban poverty, the influx of non-English speaking immigrants, corruption of the clergy, political graft. In part to cope with this daunting list of woes, civic leaders in different cities relied upon public schools and museums to help promote a cohesive set of moral values in their communities.

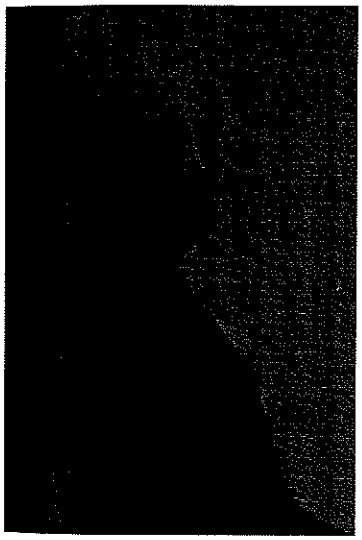
"It is difficult to overemphasize the stress [museums] placed upon their pedagogical functions some 100 years ago, and the benefits they promised for industrial production, scientific curiosity and historical consciousness," writes Neil Harris, professor of history

at the University of Chicago. Founders used the same arguments as proponents of public schools: museums could help to shape an informed citizenry, ultimately resulting in a more productive economy. Thus began such pioneering institutions as New York's American Museum of Natural History (1869) and Metropolitan Museum of Art (1870), Boston's Museum of Fine Arts (1870) and the Detroit Institute of Art (1885). In the South, emerging black colleges also recognized that museums could help form an educated class in post-Civil War society. In 1868 the Hampton Institute in Virginia founded the nation's the first African-American museum.



Henry Ossawa Tanner, THE BANJO LESSON, *1893. Oil on canvas. This masterpiece is in the collection of Hampton University Museum in Hampton, Va., the nation's first African-American museum.*

Museums quickly made good on their promise to educate. They offered free public lectures on a wide array of topics, from "the effects of water on the surface of the Earth" at the Public Museum of Grand Rapids to the arctic expeditions of Admiral Peary, a topic that captivated American imaginations in the early years of the 20th century as much as space exploration fascinates us a century later. Many of these lectures were geared to public school teachers to encourage them to use museums as new sources of knowledge for their pupils. In the 1880s librarian Henry Watson Kent began the tradition of bringing schoolchildren to public exhibitions when he invited classes to visit the Norwich Museum and Library in Connecticut. In 1899, concerned that almost one-third of the children living in Brooklyn received no formal school instruction, a curator named William H. Goodyear founded the world's first museum dedicated to youth education, the Brooklyn Children's Museum.



Librarian Henry Watson Kent introduced scores of children to museums in the 1880s. Courtesy of the Grolier Club of New York.

More than anyone else, educational reformer and philosopher John Dewey helped to make education central to the museum's mission and greatly influenced the children's museum movement. In 1896 at the University of Chicago he and his wife founded an experimental school, appropriately named the Lab School. Students spent one and a half hours per week at a museum, engaging in a variety of experiments and adventures. It is a model that is still used today. Dewey's work extended well beyond Chicago. He lectured widely on the failures of public schooling. Dubbing desks, blackboards and textbooks "dull drudgery," he called on teachers to look beyond the schoolyard and create real-life experiences for students who could "learn by doing." Dewey firmly believed that children learned a great deal by experiencing a museum's stately building and collection.

John Singer Sargent, PORTRAIT OF ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER, *1888. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston.*

While educating the populace was always one of the stated goals of the museums founded during the late 19th century, there was also the less altruistic goal of pride. Some of the wealthy industrialists who emerged from this era of rapid growth amassed impressive collections of art and scientific specimens, later building museums to house the objects. At a time when there was no government money or foundation support for such efforts, these museums were financed entirely by their founders and namesakes, men and women such as Massachusetts industrialist Steven Salisbury, founder of the Worcester Art Museum, and Boston socialite and collector Isabella Stewart Gardner, who named her museum after herself. Such a move was philanthropic but also had its practical side. For the founder it represented a great increase in social stature.

For the visitor, too, the intended rewards were also practical. Displays of art were supposed to raise the level of Americans' aesthetic tastes. In the words of novelist Henry James, museums would display "not only beauty and art and supreme design, but history, fame and power." Collections of science and anthropology demonstrated the evolution of life and the belief that, as Harvard University president Charles Eliot Norton put it, Americans could "advance civilization from good to better." To be fair, many of these new museums were not entirely lecturing in tone, nor were they mere tombs of curiosities and relics. The best of them were at the forefront of a young nation's efforts to demonstrate its material and intellectual progress.

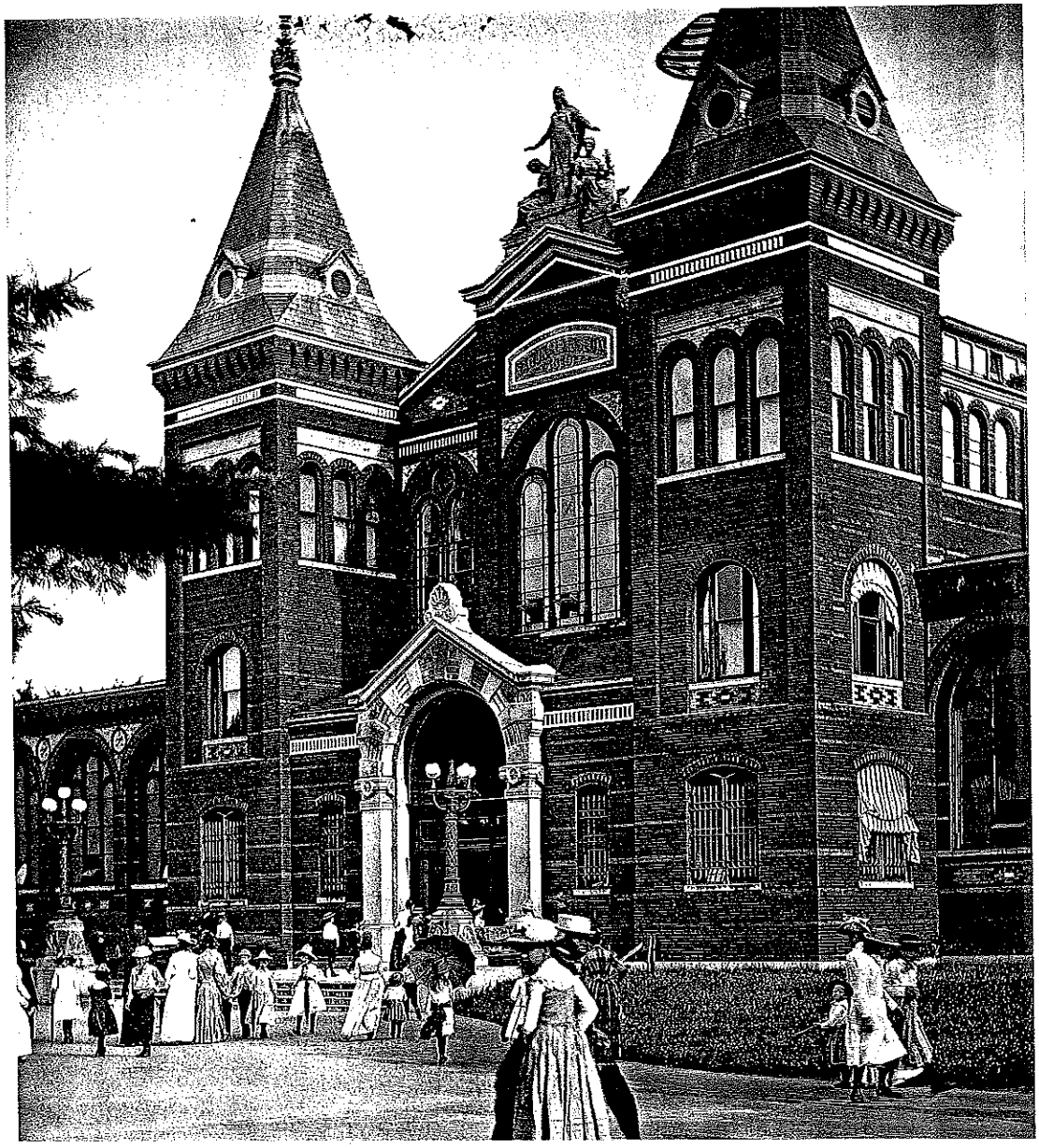
Yet despite their emphasis on education and public service, in reality these early museums sent mixed messages. Their doors were open every day of the week, even Sunday, and often at night, but to whom? Even with no admissions charge, museums asked a lot of the middle- and working-class visitor. The architecture was often grand and imposing, implying who might belong and who not. So too the location of choice for many museums: public parks, most of which were off-limits to people of color. Other museums opened their doors to "colored" visitors one day a week, but limited access to basic amenities, like restrooms. Even in northern museums that did not overtly abide by segregation laws, some museum guards refused entrance to black visitors.

Museums of this era promised to uplift humanity, but there was ambivalence about the practical details of reaching that goal. Directors frequently complained not only of visitors touching the objects, but of whistling, singing, nose-blowing, the spitting of tobacco juice on

gallery floors and disruptions by unruly children. Many museum staff held definite attitudes about how visitors should look and behave. As if in church, visitors should be properly attired and reverent. As if in a stranger's house, they should be exceedingly polite and not handle anything that didn't belong to them. "We do not want," stated a director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the 1890s, "nor will we permit a person who has been digging in a filthy sewer or working among grease and oil to come in here, and by offensive odors emitted from the dirt on their apparel, make the surroundings uncomfortable for others."

Reaching and Teaching the Masses

Compared to their European prototypes, American museums at the turn of the 20th century lacked depth and quality in their collections. Instead they distinguished themselves by their educational programs. It was common practice to work closely with local boards of education, lending specimens to public schools as teaching aids. It was also common to teach free on-site classes in topics ranging from drawing to music appreciation. Around 1907 Boston's Museum of Fine Arts introduced the term "docent" (from the Latin *docere*), a person who explained artwork to visitors in the galleries. In 1908-09, when the country was gripped



The Smithsonian Institution's United States National Museum Building (now the Arts and Industries Building), c. 1900. The building opened in 1881 and exhibited everything from from Mammals and Geology to Engineering and Art. Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 95, box 32, f. 8, image #2002-10677.

Children from the South Street School learn about weaving at the Newark Museum, 1927. Unlike most museums of the day, the Newark Museum featured exhibitions designed to appeal to a working-class audience. Collections of the Newark Museum Archives.

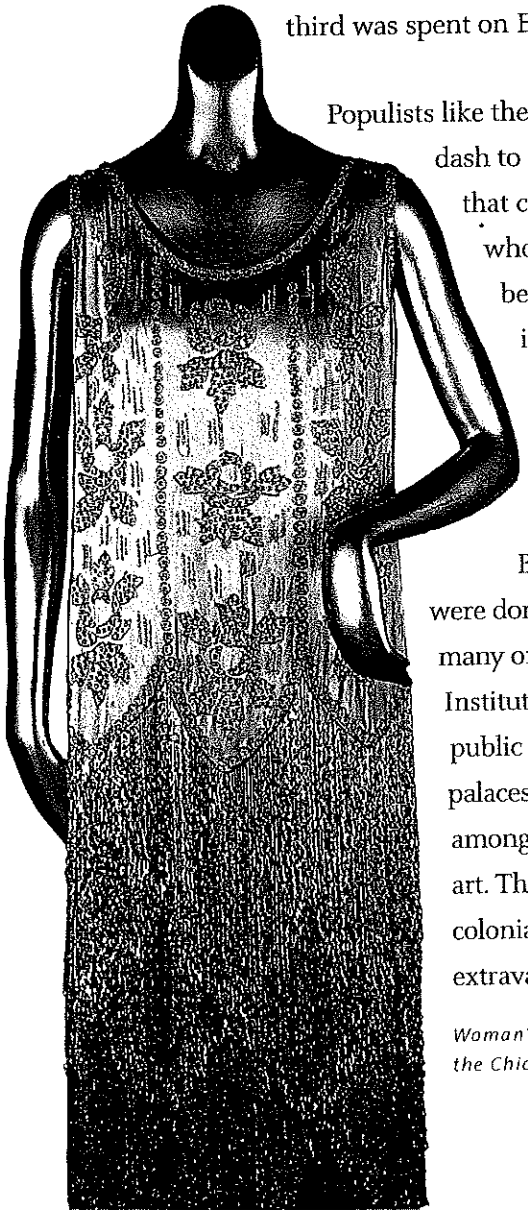
with fear about a tuberculosis epidemic, the Smithsonian and the American Museum of Natural History focused on public health education, hosting exhibitions about the disease. Public health workers recognized that museums were more enticing places for instruction than the hospitals and medical clinics distrusted by most immigrants. The exhibitions—supported by pamphlets in different languages, including Yiddish, Italian and Chinese—illustrated TB's dreadful consequences and instructed visitors how to minimize their risks. A sign admonished visitors: "Do not spit."

In 1915 the Cleveland Museum of Art inaugurated one of the nation's first internal departments devoted to instructional programs, eventually hiring one of John Dewey's disciples, Thomas Munro, to run it. Within a few years nearly every major museum in the country offered a variety of free-of-charge educational services. They lent objects and specimens to schools, factories and army bases. There were children's story hours, "lantern-slide" lectures for the deaf, and how-to classes in topics like sketching or taxidermy. Museums organized "hobby" clubs and nature outings, sponsored concerts and music recitals and gave college extension courses for credit.

But the idea of public education was not without its skeptics, in museums and in American society. It was an expensive undertaking, opponents pointed out. Worse, it was potentially counterproductive. What was to be gained by developing a nation filled with overeducated citizens? Museum educators began to ask related questions. Was it right to

bring uneducated people to museums? Did the lower classes have the ability to understand high culture? Perhaps museums weren't for everyone after all. As Benjamin Ives Gilman, secretary of Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, mused, "We are misled into thinking educational effort is the panacea for all the ills of society." He believed that "a museum of art is primarily an institution of culture and only secondarily a seat of learning." Its true role, according to Gilman and others like him, was to raise the bar of American taste through displaying the finest paintings and sculptures from abroad to an upper-class, educated audience.

Around this time there was a notable shift in emphasis as major art museums began to concentrate less on education and more on acquiring objects that would strengthen their collections. World War I had ended and the leading European nations were struggling to recover from the human and economic devastation. The new Soviet government and members of the former Russian aristocracy were among those who offered great masterworks for sale. Americans and American museums were active buyers of the formerly priceless paintings now suddenly not so priceless. By 1923, the American Art Dealers' Association estimated that Americans spent $250 million on art purchases. One third was spent on European old masters: Titian, Bellini, Rubens.



Populists like the Newark Museum Director John Cotton Dana bristled at the sudden dash to snap up European art. Museums would do better to create activities that catered to everybody, he declared, especially the factory workers who were building America. During the 1920s Dana created displays he believed would appeal more to a working-class audience, incorporating items such as merchandise from five & dime stores and scale-models of New Jersey river systems built by schoolchildren.

Among American museums at this time, Gilman's elitism was more in evidence than Dana's populism. By the 1920s connoisseurs like Bernard Berenson and educators like Harvard University's Paul Sachs were dominating museum collecting and influencing the training of curators, many of whom now aspired more to scholarship than to public education. Institutions relegated instructional activities to the basement. A well-dressed public was invited to climb the grand sweeping staircases of these ornate public palaces—Buffalo's Albright Art Gallery (now the Albright-Knox) is one example among many—and view the proud new acquisitions of priceless and timeless art. There was a growing high-society interest in American decorative and colonial art. Curators often borrowed techniques from world's fairs, organizing extravagant displays that communicated abundance, wealth and power.

Woman's evening gown, 1925, from the collections of the Chicago History Museum. Courtesy of the Chicago History Museum.

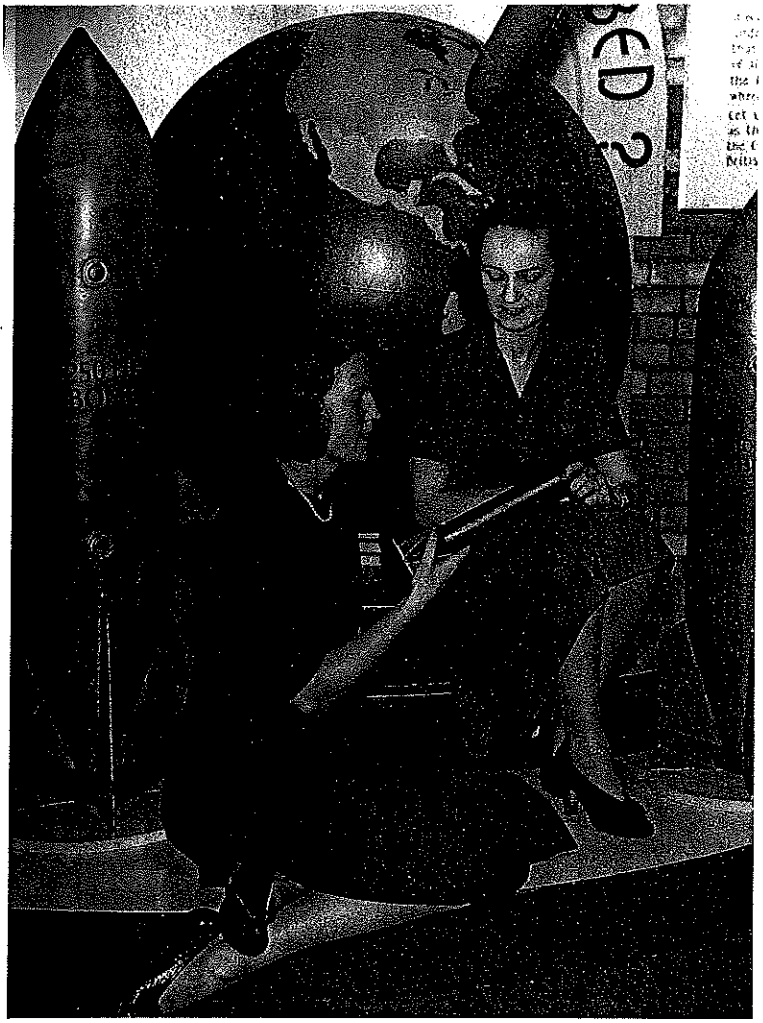
And there was a great deal of it. America was turning into an economic colossus. Signs of its wealth abounded. Automobiles streamed down the new paved highways, skyscrapers towered above the rapidly growing cities, ornate movie palaces sprang up in towns large and small across the land. New museums also were founded in greater numbers. Americans began to realize that museums needn't be only tools for carrying on the traditions of Europe; they could be symbols of an emerging American sophistication. As Alfred C. Parker, director of the Rochester Museum of Arts and Sciences, declared: "Unimportant cities have no museums; great cities have flourishing museums." And flourish they did. During the 1920s a museum building was christened every 11.4 days. Businesses such as Wells Fargo Bank and Crane & Crane Paper Company founded museums to preserve their contributions to American progress and society. By 1933 President Herbert Hoover's administration could proudly report: "Today a museum is found in every city in the United States of over 250,000 inhabitants." Among the influential museums founded during this roaring decade were Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia (1926), the Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village in Dearborn, Mich. (1926), the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago (1926) and New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) (1929).

The Return of Populism

America's era of seemingly boundless prosperity ended almost overnight. With the stock market crash of 1929 and the onset of the Great Depression in the 1930s, the emphasis on serving an elite audience was again called into question by many museum "workers," as they referred to themselves (not "professionals," a term that would come later). In 1931 Philip Youtz, the director of the Brooklyn Museum accused museums of being oriented to "the wealthy collector . . . not the common man on the street . . . who enters its great halls with an initial inferiority complex that leaves him cowed from the start."

Two developments during this era helped remove some of the barriers between "the common man" and the elite class of wealthy collector. The first was the utopian vision of an emerging modern architecture and design that sought to create buildings and exhibitions that were more neutral, more functional and thus less intimidating to the general public. The second was a renewal of the role of education, which the hard times of the Great Depression helped elevate again to a place of importance within the museum.

Public schools, like other national institutions of the day, suffered from a sudden and severe lack of funds. Museums responded to the crisis by offering more classes and other educational services, assisted by charitable foundations that embraced progressive educational values. It was Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration, however, that made a decisive and lasting contribution. Roosevelt believed that museums, at their best, could be "woven into the very warp and woof of democracy." In addition to



Junior League guides inspect an incendiary bomb, part of a 1941 exhibit on national defense efforts during World War II. Courtesy of the Science Museum of Minnesota.

upgrading existing museums and developing traveling shows, the WPA opened 53 art centers with classes in painting, drawing and sculpture. Many of these centers later became permanent museums, such as the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the Roswell Museum and Art Center in New Mexico and the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh. The art centers went beyond the WPA's immediate goal of providing employment to teachers and art lessons for citizens. WPA classes were racially integrated, an idea so controversial at the time that it eventually contributed to the demise of Roosevelt's program.

Wars at Mid-Century: The Call to Patriotism

During World War I museums had done little directly to raise morale or influence public opinion save for a few token gestures such as sending newsletters to "homesick soldiers in the trenches." With the onset of the World War II, however, museums, now greater in number and influence, responded with a more vigorous patriotism.

They participated in programs that encouraged military recruitment and supported national security. In the heartland for example, the Walker Art Center created "Halls of Montezuma," a display of modern Marine equipment, while across the river in St. Paul the Science Museum of Minnesota hosted an exhibition about stateside safety. Its display titled "Can America Be Bombed?" appeared on the cover of the AAM periodical *The Museum News* only six days before the attack on Pearl Harbor.

On Jan. 1, 1942, just a few weeks after the attack, a group of prominent museum directors issued a resolution to their colleagues: "If, in time of peace, our museums and art galleries are important to the community, in time of war they are doubly valuable." Museums must "fortify the spirit on which Victory depends" through continuous exhibitions and programs. Art museums converted their regal flowerbeds into patriotic victory gardens, and botanical gardens offered classes that taught citizens how to do the same at home. Museums near military training facilities presented educational programs for the troops on fundamental topics such as the value of democracy. Those in cities popular with off-duty GIs opened members' lounges to men in uniform, serving refreshments and showing motion

A few of the 45,000 sailors who learned about celestial navigation at New York's Hayden Planetarium during the war. Neg. 285779, American Museum of Natural History Library.

pictures. Others showed stay-at-home wives how to prepare food economically despite the limitations of rationing. On the West Coast the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art stayed open to the public until 10 p.m. every night, dutifully blacking out windows as a defense against potential bombing raids. In Hawaii the Honolulu Academy of Arts and the Bishop Museum reopened only days after their city's harbor was bombed. With area schools still closed, the Bishop sponsored classes for children and organized a morale-boosting Christmas carol sing-along for the community.

But in their eagerness to aid the cause, museums sometimes allowed zeal to overshadow objectivity. To aid the U.S. Army, the American Museum of Natural History produced 162 portable exhibits on racial identification to be used by soldiers to help them distinguish enemy troops from allies. MoMA's exhibition "Road to Victory" showed a giant photo of bombs blowing up a ship in Pearl Harbor. Pasted below was a photo of two Japanese diplomats dressed in business suits, their eyes positioned to look directly at the explosion, their mouths laughing with glee. The caption read "Two Faces." Other museums removed all Japanese items from display, sequestering them in storage and replacing them with art and objects produced by American allies.

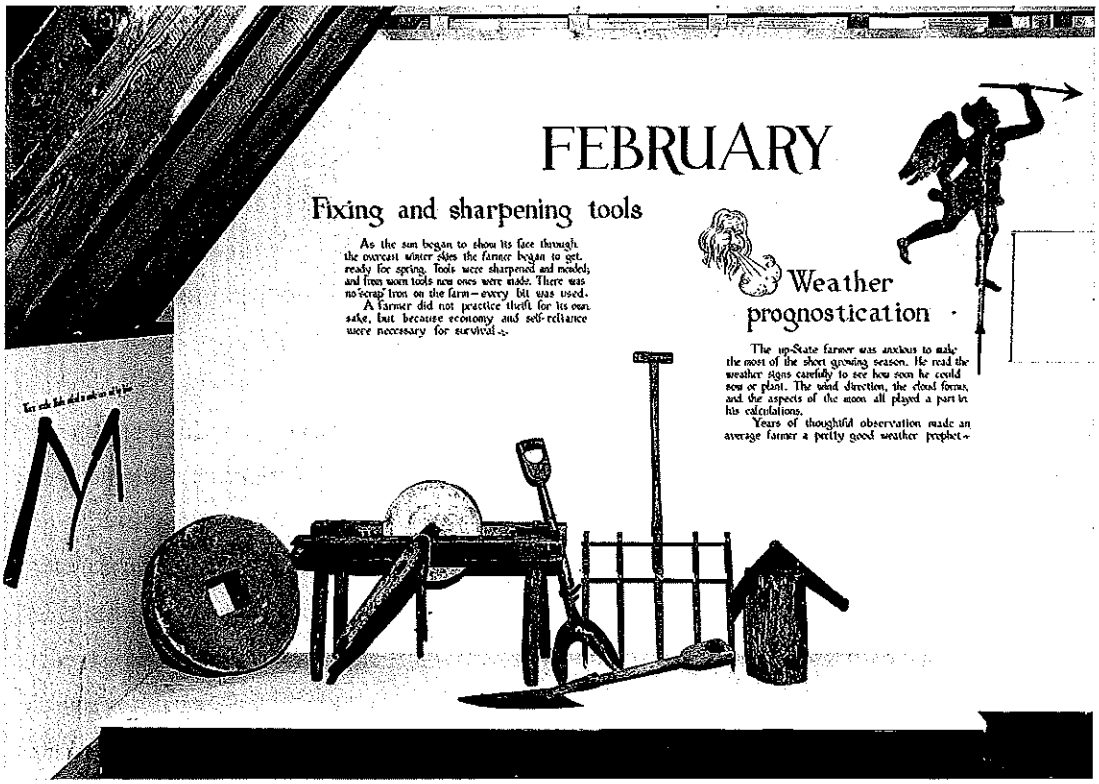
Elsewhere museums worked to prove that they were truly "doubly valuable" to the nation by serving as hospitals, Red Cross stations, training and research centers, manufacturers and offices. New York's Hayden Planetarium trained 45,000 sailors in celestial navigation. The Kansas City Art Institute and the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia conducted research on camouflage. The California Academy of Sciences manufactured naval optical equipment. One San Francisco museum even played a central role in the post-war peace process. In 1945 the galleries of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art served as offices for international delegates convened to discuss the formation of the United Nations.

In the post-war years, museum visits exceeded the nation's total population for the first time. Renewed prosperity led to unprecedented interest in education and culture. Refugees from war-shattered Europe streamed into American cities, profoundly influencing the nation's cultural life, sparking new movements in art, science and scholarship. Museums benefited too from the new national focus. Middle-class women increased their involvement

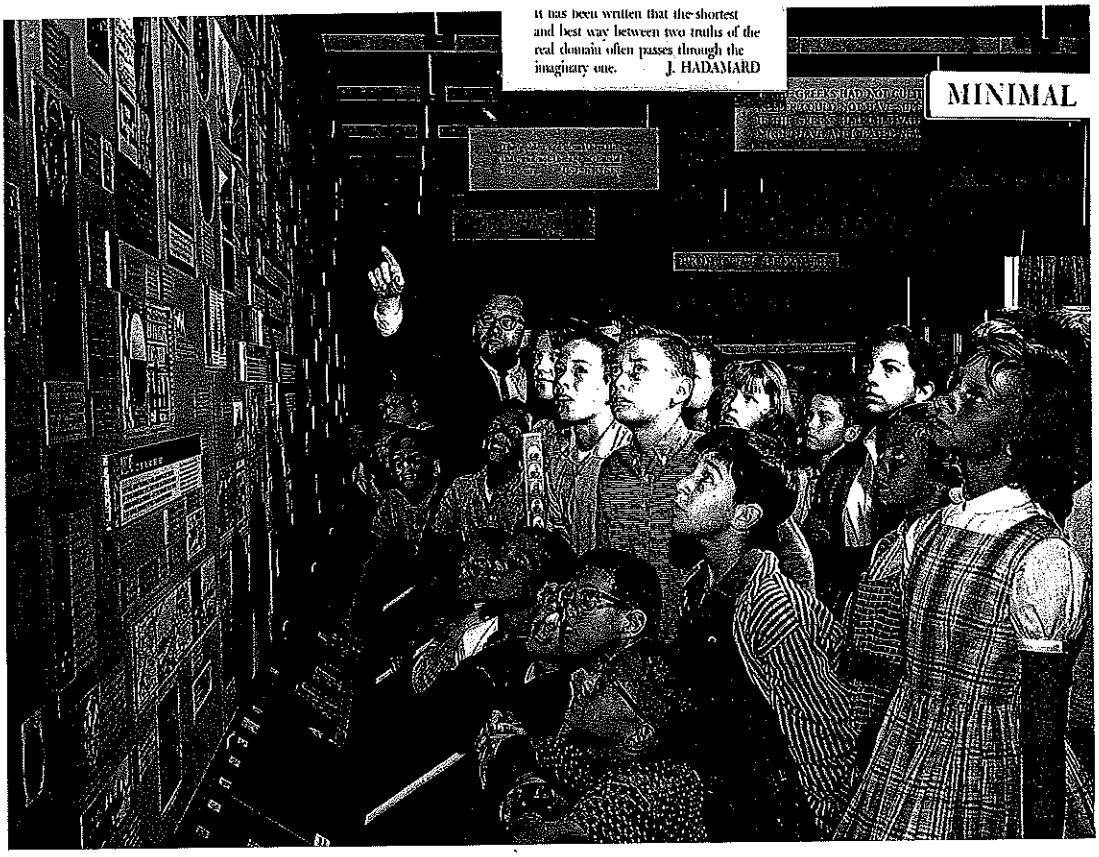
in collecting and volunteerism. Teachers looked to museums as field-trip destinations for their classrooms, which were filling rapidly with the first baby-boomers.

But with victory came a sobering aftershock: the emergence of the Cold War with the Soviet Union and China. Like much of the nation, museums became obsessed with protecting themselves from atomic attack, something that many Americans considered imminent. The focus turned now to the precious national legacy that hung upon museum walls or lay within their vaults. Museum charters of the time spoke less of uplifting the citizenry and more about the obligation to protect and preserve art and artifacts. Conservators, many trained as scientists, aided the cause. So did architects. Museum construction projects were increasingly linked not to aspirations of grandeur but to the more concrete concerns of storage, ventilation and security.

The generous educational programs of previous decades received less attention. Cold War paranoia and McCarthyism led to the blacklisting of progressive artists a nd educators. Some museums such as the Dallas Museum of Art were forced to stand up to demands from local "patriotic" committees to censor work by artists suspected of being active on the communist front. Others earnestly organized exhibitions that promoted desirable American values like rugged individualism, motherhood and the nuclear family. Notable among these were "Family of Man," organized by the Museum of Modern Art and "The Farmer's Year," organized by the Farmers' Museum in Cooperstown, N.Y.



During the Cold War, such American values as rugged individualism, ingenuity and self-reliance were incorporated into exhibitions like "The Farmer's Year," which opened in 1958 at the Farmers' Museum in Cooperstown, N.Y.



"Mathematica: The World of Numbers and Beyond" was popular with visitors and critics alike when it opened at the California Museum of Science and Industry (now California Science Center) in 1961. It was the first museum exhibition to use tangible objects and ideas to explain the abstractions of mathematics. Photo by Delmar Watson for the California Science Center.

Schools now widely discredited John Dewey's once groundbreaking work in education as "communistic, atheistic and un-American" and shifted toward teaching "fundamentals" according to "standards." With the notable exception of some children's and science museums, many mainstream museums now also dismissed Dewey's ideas. To connoisseurs, the philosopher was too closely associated with the eccentric Philadelphia collector Albert Barnes, who believed in "Negro" education and possessed other possibly subversive notions about art education.

The 1957 launching of *Sputnik* by the Soviets provided another jolt to America's sense of security. The space race was on and museums quickly joined in. As part of the push to interest a new generation in science, communities founded science museums and planetariums, among them the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry in Portland (1957), the Pacific Science Center in Seattle (1962) and the Miami Planetarium and Museum of Science (1966). The impetus for these new institutions came not from wealthy industrialists as had been the case with art museums and natural history museums earlier in the century, but from the federal government and university educators. Upgraded planetariums were immediately put to use. The seven original *Mercury* astronauts learned star navigation at the Morehead Planetarium at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. Museums

also trained teachers and developed groundbreaking science exhibits. In 1961 the California Museum of Science and Industry in Los Angeles (now the California Science Center) unveiled "Mathematica," a show designed to demystify the abstract world of mathematics. It was one of the country's early interactive exhibitions.

"Learning by doing" was back in fashion. It dovetailed perfectly with the scientific method. The hands-on laboratory became the model for a new kind of science museum geared to high school students. Foremost among these was the Exploratorium in San Francisco, founded in 1969 by Frank Oppenheimer, an atomic physicist who had been blacklisted during the McCarthy era. (His brother J. Robert headed the Manhattan Project that developed the first atomic bomb.) In the same vein the Boston Children's Museum, founded in 1913 by natural science teachers, introduced hands-on exhibits for children. The visionary behind this new kind of exhibition was Michael Spock, prominent social activist and son of the era's most famous pediatrician, Benjamin Spock.

A new kind of threat was beginning to emerge for museums during these years, one that few museums recognized. The new mass entertainment of television, popular music like rock 'n' roll, the suburban shopping mall and theme parks such as Disney's Magic Kingdom soon would challenge museums for the attention and leisure-time decisions of the public. Most mainstream museums however viewed themselves as sanctuaries of tradition, unaffected by the hustle and bustle of mass culture. They were content to remain conservative enclaves, preserving Old World values. In 1957 while documenting the vibrant community life on the streets of Pittsburgh, photographer W. Eugene Smith wandered inside the city's Carnegie Museum and later remarked: "Educational television is more imaginative than . . . dusty but sound museums. Museums are stale; they need fresh injections of money, spirit and ideas."

From Civil Rights to Watergate: Growth and Tumult

Like many other national institutions, museums were largely unprepared for the sweeping social changes that began in the 1960s. New science centers and children's museums were founded, but art and history museums lagged behind the times. Outside on the streets, Americans were marching for civil rights. On college campuses students demonstrated for free speech and rallied against the Vietnam War. In galleries and artists' studios in cities across the country new movements in experimental art were beginning to bloom. Yet most museums continued to act like fortresses. They saw their primary duty as one of defending the highest values of Western culture from the destructive impulses of an outside world gone slightly if not frankly mad. Sherman Lee, director of the Cleveland Museum of Art, beseeched his colleagues not to let the art museum become "a whipping boy for a host of extraneous social issues. . . . It is time for art museums and for those genuinely interested in their survival and proper development to resist actively the chaotic demands forced upon them . . . [by] moralizing Maoists."

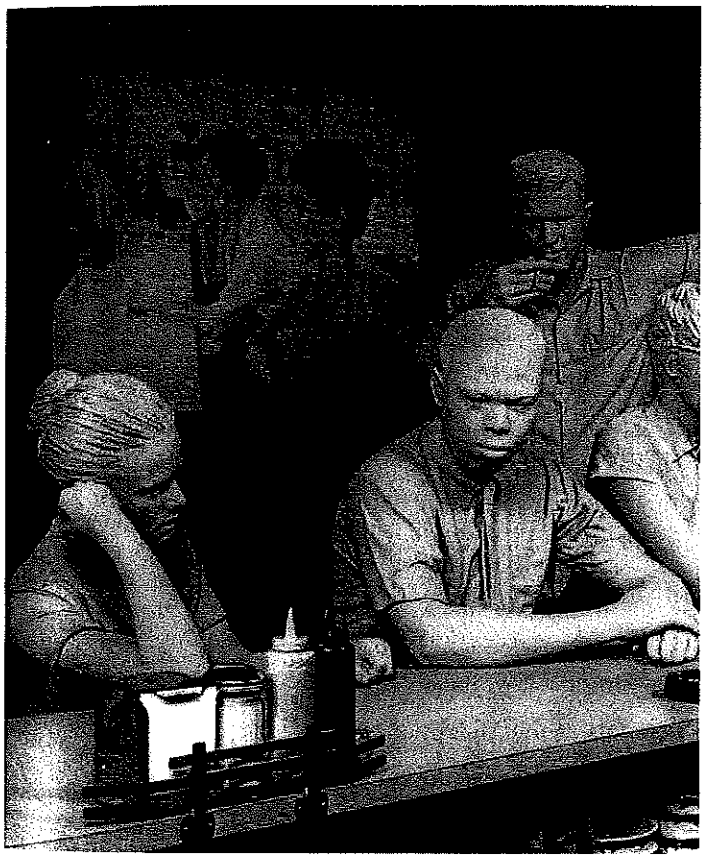
Founding Director John Kinard (second from right) and Smithsonian Secretary Robert McCormick Adams (far right) at the groundbreaking for the Anacostia Museum in May 1985. The museum's previous home had been a converted movie theater. Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 371, box 4, image #95-1212. Photo by Rhawn Anderson.

By the close of the 1960s museums had begun to emerge cautiously from their ivory towers. History museums offered outdoor community festivals. Art museums created mobile art vans that allowed works to leave the building and venture to communities without museums. Some institutions actively began to cultivate African-American audiences, a group that historically had been largely ignored by museums. In 1967, the Smithsonian established a branch facility called the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum in a low-income African-American neighborhood in Washington, D.C. Other efforts could only be considered clumsy, at best. The Metropolitan Museum's "Harlem on My Mind: The Cultural Capital of Black America" (1969), for example, was so naïve in its conception that it highlighted the deep communication gap between museums and a large part of the American populace. Community activists began to rally against what they saw as museum paternalism and racism. "Take me into the museum and show me myself, show me my people, show me Soul America," wrote Harlem-born poet June Jordan. "If you cannot show me myself, if you cannot teach my children what they need to know—and they need to know the truth, and they need to know that nothing is more important than human life—if you cannot show and teach these things, then why shouldn't I attack the temples of America and blow them up?"

The rebelliousness and youthful idealism that defined the 1960s inspired a generation not to blow museums up but to found new and innovative ones. The period saw vigorous growth characterized by new kinds of institutions, new kinds of money, a significant leap in new building projects, and new crowds of visitors. The same impulse that wealthy industrialists

had felt a century before was now taken up by community activists and educators. They wanted museums to contribute to building community pride. One of their goals was to lift up marginalized ethnic communities. As Washington, D.C., community activist John R. Kinard put it, a museum could "restore a sense of place among [neighborhood] residents" and serve as "a catalyst for social change." Kinard became the first director of the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum, which initially occupied an abandoned movie theater. Other early neighborhood museums founded on the same principles of civil rights and ethnic pride included the Wing Luke Asian Museum (International District, Seattle, 1966) and El Museo del Barrio (East Harlem, New York City 1969).

These new community-oriented museums were buoyed not only by the pride borne of the civil rights movements but also by the availability of government funds and programs. In 1971 the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities, agencies that were formed only six years earlier, established programs specifically designated to provide money to museums. Federal funding opportunities further expanded with the founding of the Institute of Museum Services (later the Institute of Museums and Library Services). New support was offered for exhibitions, performances and educational programs linked to the nation's 1976 bicentennial celebration. Even though these federal agency budgets were modest, their impact was powerful, inspiring a generation of idealistic teachers, artists and activists to devote their energies to museums.



A STUDENT SIT-IN *re-created at the National Civil Rights Museum, which aims to help visitors understand a painful yet inspirational period in American history. Courtesy of the National Civil Rights Museum, Memphis, Tenn.*

Ironically, it was the influential trustees from major metropolitan museums—the same institutions that initially had resisted change—who lobbied to create the federal agencies that helped bring about that change. A few generations removed from the original founders, many of these trustees began to scrutinize the cost of maintaining collections. They realized that their institutions would not survive financially with the dual mandate of collections care and public service. They turned to the federal government for help. During the 1970s federal funding gave rise to hundreds of community outreach projects—partnerships between museums and senior centers, hospitals, prisons and juvenile justice halls. Museums furthered their visibility, designing elaborate exhibits for neighborhood festivals, YMCAs, local libraries and shopping malls. They reinvigorated their presence

in schools. Federal insurance indemnity programs provided the means for importing and insuring valuable artifacts and art works, ultimately making possible such crowd-pleasing shows as "Treasures of Tutankhamen" (1976-79), often called America's first blockbuster exhibition.

By the end of the decade, museum visits had climbed to over 500 million, double the U.S. population. Americans continued to show that they were avid museum-goers, especially those over the age of 65 who were healthier, wealthier and more educated that ever before. The American Association for Retired Persons estimated that between the bicentennial and the end of the decade, the number of people over the age of 65 visiting museums more than doubled. The affordability of commercial flights sparked a boom in cultural tourism, allowing middle-class Americans to travel to the sites and monuments of the world and whetting their appetites for culture at home and abroad. To further cultivate the growing legions of frequent flyers, in 1977 the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco became the nation's first museum to design exhibitions for airport terminals.

The 1970s and '80s were yet another period of growth for the American museum. More than 3,200 were founded, the equivalent of almost one every other day. (40) Nearly three-fifths of existing museums expanded or undertook major renovations. All told, nearly 2 million acres—the equivalent of the Florida Everglades—was upgraded and added to the museum landscape. Many of these projects were linked to urban revitalization plans, with museums serving as catalysts to help revive sagging inner city neighborhoods. Children's museums too expanded significantly, some founded by parent groups increasingly disenchanted with the public school system, others by parents who valued the hands-on approach to informal learning that flourished in these museums.

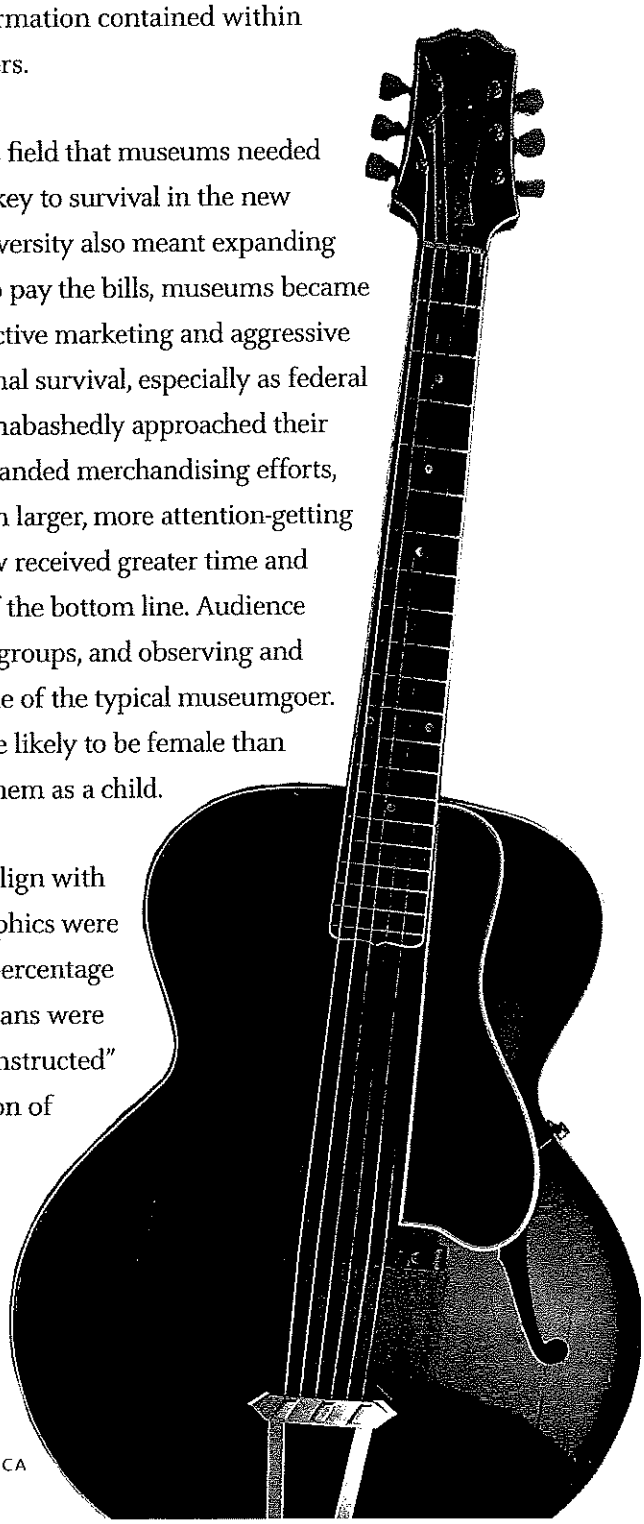
During these energetic years, mid-level museum professionals such as educators gained more control over the management and direction of their institutions. The scope and depth of scholarship and exhibitions improved. Training programs for museum staff increased. A national network of professionals revised codes of ethics and established standards for earning accreditation. Yet increased popularity also meant increased public scrutiny. Scandals erupted over insider deals, plundered goods and "deaccessioning," the museum profession's odd, somewhat delicate phrase for divesting itself of its collections—that is, selling or trading its objects. Still, the deaccession scandals at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the 1970s—when it was revealed that the museum had circumvented two donors' wishes and secretly sold valuable pieces of donated art—led to stricter guidelines that became a model for the field. And the negative publicity the New-York Historical Society received a few years later for its own deaccession practices galvanized its supporters, resulting in new fiscal priorities and a revamped institution.

A Century Ends in Diversity

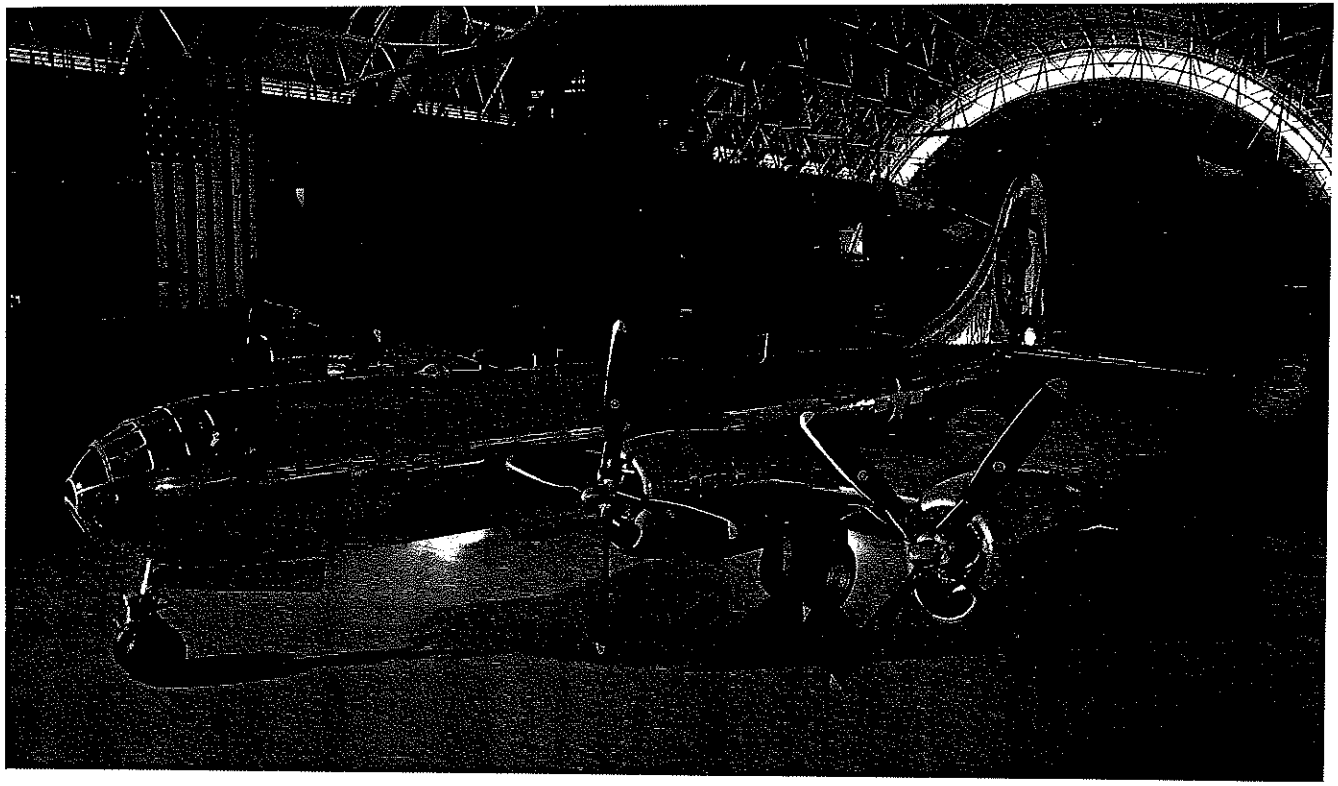
With the exception of a few pioneering institutions, the exuberant activity of the 1970s had not led to fundamental change throughout the field. In their exhibitions and collections, weren't museums in the 1980s really just better-organized, more popular versions of the museums that existed at the beginning of the century? The typical history museum collection was still narrow in focus, celebrating battles and famous heroes, presenting the hardworking pioneer or colonial family. The typical natural science or anthropology museum was still full of mounted animals in dioramas, dinosaur bones and in some instances human remains and sacred religious objects. Most curators had little idea where the works in their collections had come from and no definitive way of knowing whether they had been legally acquired. Much of the information contained within museums was off-limits to anyone but scholarly researchers.

By the 1980s it had become apparent to many leaders in the field that museums needed to open themselves up to new ways of doing business. The key to survival in the new America was diversity, and not just in terms of audience. Diversity also meant expanding the sources of income. As they looked for additional ways to pay the bills, museums became entrepreneurial, a catch-phrase in Reagan-era America. Effective marketing and aggressive fund raising now were widely seen as essential to institutional survival, especially as federal programs were being cut back or axed entirely. Museums unabashedly approached their own members and corporate sponsors for money. They expanded merchandising efforts, built movie theaters for large-format films and planned even larger, more attention-getting exhibitions. Demographics studies and market research now received greater time and attention from directors and boards of trustees conscious of the bottom line. Audience evaluators emerged as important players, conducting focus groups, and observing and interviewing visitors. Study after study confirmed the profile of the typical museumgoer. She was white, in her mid-to-late 30s, college-educated, more likely to be female than male, and more likely to go to museums if she had visited them as a child.

Yet this composite portrait of the museum visitor did not align with the profile of the average American. The nation's demographics were shifting. Asian and Latino populations were growing, the percentage of whites shrinking. Native Americans and African Americans were gaining new political power. In universities, scholars "deconstructed" American institutions' biases toward the arts and civilization of Western Europe. Educators from kindergarten teachers to dissertation advisors embraced the new multiculturalism.



Mother Maybelle Carter's Gibson L-5 guitar, on display in "Sing Me Back Home: A Journey through Country Music" at Nashville's Country Music Hall of Fame® and Museum.



It survived World War II only to be thrust into the culture wars of the early 1990s: the B-29 Enola Gay, *now on display at the National Air and Space Museum's Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center. Photo by Eric Long/OIPP, National Air and Space Museum; image # SI2003-29268-5, © Smithsonian Institution.*

They rejected the idea of America as a "melting pot" where different traditions merged into a single identity. Instead they insisted that the nation was a mosaic of distinct traditions and cultures. American society was entering another turbulent era, where categories of race, ethnicity and privilege would be reexamined and contested.

University-based scholars launched stinging attacks against museums. Their past collections and exhibitions practices were signs of "the dread disease of imperialist, capitalist and white culture," in the words of University of California, Santa Cruz professor Donna Haraway. "Colonial," once used to conjure up quaint images of rocking chairs and grandfather clocks, was now a pejorative term. If museums really wanted to reflect America, these scholars argued, it was time to tell, honestly and fully, the stories of those who had been oppressed or ignored by the majority culture.

This challenge to the social order was also a challenge for most museums. Generally they lacked the collections to document America's history from the viewpoints of society's marginalized groups. Nonetheless, the museum field set about the task of staking a place within multicultural America. A taskforce of 25 of the field's leaders produced *Excellence and Equity* (1992), a report that called on museums to emphasize their roles as educational institutions in the largest sense and to reexamine their public dimension to "include a broader spectrum of our diverse society in their activities." Collections expanded to document the growing influence of popular culture and the media. There was a new interest in the diverse cultures and ethnicities of the local community.

Museum educators sought to appeal to new generations of visitors by utilizing technologies such as video and computer screens and new programs such as theatrical performances in the galleries. There were welcome improvements to the museum's physical space brought about by the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act, which compelled such changes as training docents to give tours to hearing impaired visitors, canting labels so people in wheelchairs could read them and creating audio and touch tours for people with visual impairments.

This was also a time of bitter contention over the museum's role in an increasingly politicized society. The era of the "culture wars" saw pointed debate over who had the authority to interpret the nation's history and the right to display controversial or "offensive" art. Public exhibitions and the institutions that hosted them were suddenly front-page news, often much to the consternation of directors and boards. What a museum curator might see as a thought-provoking challenge to conventional ideas about military history, homosexuality or art scholarship, the media and certain politicians saw as a direct attack on society's core values. Some commentators claimed these skirmishes to be part of a larger battle for the soul of America. Museums found themselves directly in the crossfire.

Notable examples were exhibitions such as "The West as America" (National Museum of American History, 1990), "The Last Act: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II," a show about the *Enola Gay* (National Air and Space Museum, 1993), and "The Perfect Moment" (1991), a touring retrospective containing sexually explicit images by photographer Robert Mapplethorpe. As public institutions with their doors wide open to everyone, museums logically became the battlefields where this clash of ideologies played out. Yet despite a good deal of negative press coverage and some barbed commentary by conservative politicians, museums remained as popular as they had always been, with ever larger numbers of people waiting patiently in line to see what all the fuss was about. Membership and attendance numbers continued to grow. Museums emerged from the decade of the 1990s with a weakened level of federal financial support but strengthened in their resolve to be a part of the larger national dialogue about cultural and social issues.

New Challenges for a New Century

Like the rest of the nation, museums lurched into overdrive in the late 1990s, becoming multi-tasking institutions that tried to be many more things to many more people. Collections expanded as museums gathered up popular music, oral history, digital art and websites. Educational programs went digital as educators exploited web technology to post curricula and live data feeds of zoo animals, weather satellites and artists at work. Museums posted online exhibitions and hosted "field trips" via videoconference. They invested in logo merchandise and high-end restaurants and discovered branding and licensing. They also went on another building frenzy. In the 1990s almost every

redevelopment zone in a U.S. city or exurb added a museum. A new building or expansion opened every 15 days. But these buildings differed from those of prior decades. They were bolder, flashier projects, intended as icons. Globetrotting architects were commissioned for the next great signature building. Having a "Frank Gehry," a "Renzo Piano" or a "Santiago Calatrava" could add inestimable prestige—and tourist dollars—to a city or region.

But as always there were troubling questions about the future. Was there a vital societal role for an institution associated with slowness and authenticity in an age seduced by speed and artifice? Would emerging technologies and entertainments, especially the Internet, erode people's desire to visit museum buildings? How could museums compete with the stream of information and images emanating from screens that were getting tinier, more portable and more ubiquitous? How would the realities of a global economy affect museums' strategies for collecting, exhibiting and teaching, not to mention funding?

Then came the events of Sept. 11, 2001, and for a brief time the world seemed to slow down and reflect. In the aftermath of a tragedy that would irrevocably change the national focus, museums awoke to the realization that the American public had a new expectation of its museums. In the days following the attacks, hundreds of thousands of people sought solace in museums. The *New York Times* reported that 8,200 people showed up at the Metropolitan Museum of Art on Sept. 13, 2001. Two visitors, painters Helen and Brice Marden, commented, "Today it's comforting to come back and see everything still here. All this beauty. . . . Being in a museum together can feel safe and normal." Across the country museums waived admission fees, invited psychologists and counselors to host workshops for families, sponsored concerts of soothing music, and mounted special exhibitions documenting the event with photographs and artifacts. The South Street Seaport Museum in New York held an exhibition called "All Available Boats: Harbor Voices and Images 09.11.01." The New York Fire Museum presented photographic exhibitions and a changing display of memorials dedicated to the firefighters who lost their lives at the World Trade Center. But programs stretched far beyond New York City. The Japanese-American National Museum in Los Angeles created programs about tolerance and cultural awareness of Arab Americans. The Oklahoma City National Memorial mounted a show that explored the common themes of rescue, recovery and the healing process associated with the events of Sept. 11 and the Oklahoma City bombing. There were many more examples and they came from every state in the union.

Lonnie G. Bunch, then president of the Chicago Historical Society, summarized this new spirit: "Museums all over the country are working to create opportunities that allow visitors to see our institutions as places of healing, education, affirmation and reflection; cultural entities that are ripe with contemporary resonance; and sources for historical knowledge . . . for people wrestling with despair and uncertainty."

During the past century museums transformed themselves every bit as much as the nation itself. The changes did not come without risk or loss, nor did they occur in a smooth or linear fashion. They were the result of tremendous push and pull among opposing forces and competing visions inside and outside the institutions. The same struggle continues in the present day. But of the changes that have occurred, the most profound and encouraging is perhaps that the American museum at last has discovered what it means to be a civic institution. Growing far beyond its early limitations, it has begun to understand its true potential to educate, inspire and lead. It is striving to become what Missouri Historical Society Director Robert Archibald calls America's "new town square, a public institution with the confidence to share authority with the people it serves." It is this transformation that allows the American museum to aspire to be not just another part of the community fabric but a necessary element at the center of the community, a defining place where anyone of any age or background who wishes to enter can be transformed.