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Artifacts, Learning, and The New University Museum

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I would like to make some comments about the direction of planning for Brown's new University Museum but first wish to discuss museums in general. They are complicated and interesting institutions and can differ widely in their purposes. A kind of learning goes on inside museums that is not the same as the kind of learning that takes place in the classroom. This learning is partly emotional, involves many different dimensions, is not altogether well understood, and has something to do with childhood. Whatever those qualities of childhood are that enable us to appreciate a museum, they are qualities we should cultivate throughout our lives and not leave behind.

I am a native of Providence and grew up not too far from the Roger Williams Park Museum where, during the summer, I remember standing for hours in front of one exhibition. An elderly curator had made a model reconstruction of a Native American community from Southern New England that showed the layout of the village plan. Off to the side was a display of artifacts that had been contributed to the museum. One fascination to me of this exhibit was that it gave the street addresses of the places where these artifacts had been found (for example, a stone axe-head from a specific address on Broad Street). Looking at this exhibition changed forever my perception of the place where I lived, including the feelings I had as I walked up and down the streets noted in the exhibition labels.

I do not know how common an example this is, but it tells me that a museum can convey a sense of understanding and appreciation that is different, a kind of learning that is long-lasting.

Museums come in species and varieties: natural history museums, fine arts museums, cultural, archaeological, historical, and anthropological museums, and combinations of these. Within these classifications is another important distinction — that between a university museum and all other kinds of museums. I oversimplify here to make the point. Other kinds of museums include basically a staff, a collection, and an exhibition space. By and large the life of the museum is based on the quality of its collections and the exhibition and outreach practices they present to the public. They are places where knowledge is protected and exhibited but not necessarily created.

A university museum is different. Yes, a university museum is a place where collections are protected and used to tell the stories that objects can tell, but they also are part of the teaching and research life of the university. In addition to facing outward to the community, the university museum faces inward to engage the intellectual lives and activities of faculty and students — this is the main difference. It provides students with a special dimension to their education by putting them in direct physical contact with objects that originate in the worlds of the ancient, distant, or nearby people that the faculty and students are studying to better understand.

University museums are different in another respect. What faculty and students do with its collections can extend the frontiers of knowledge in their disciplines, which in turn provides a source of originality and creativity to the public face of the museum.

Artifacts in museums are a unique kind of source material for learning. The Rubicon in the human journey from nature to culture is marked by the creation and use of objects which began 2.5 million years ago. We in the university are focused on books and the written word. But writing goes back only 5,000 years and then only in a few places. Most of what we know of the whole human trajectory we know through objects. We don't stop learning through objects after writing appears, for aspects of early modern and contemporary societies are not accessible through the written record. Take, for example, the insights into seventeenth-century Plymouth Colony that Brown students excavating with Professor James Deetz were able to reveal through his field programs in historical archaeology.

In the university, we study objects within the intellectual frameworks of specific traditions of scholarship known as academic disciplines. Here at Brown these disciplines include Classics, Old World Archaeology and Art, History of Art and Architecture, Anthropology, American Civilization, Egyptology, ethnomusicology, and others.

Although the Haffenreffer Museum began as a museum of the American Indian, its collections have grown substantially and are now global in scope. In moving the Haffenreffer Museum to the Brown campus in Providence, we plan to expand the potential of it into a University Museum in order to make it useful to all those academic disciplines

for which material culture objects are important in teaching, understanding, and research. We plan to take this opportunity to make the study and interpretation of objects available to all Brown students and faculty in those disciplines that can be served by the museum. We think it will both extend the teaching and research facilities currently available to these departments and provide them with opportunities to work and teach side-by-side with faculty and students in other disciplines, thus creating the context for interdisciplinary sharing of ideas. Conceived in this way, the Brown Museum can set a standard for teaching and thinking with cultural things.

Museum teaching fits Brown's intellectual culture. Small scale, intimate, hands-on, and contributing to advancing knowledge within the contributing disciplines. The final point is really a question. We refer to familiarity with the written word as literacy, and familiarity with the spoken word as fluency. Is there a word for familiarity with cultural things which will describe the impact of the new Museum on teaching and learning at Brown?