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The Museum as Public Sphere

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This paper explores a paradox. Museums are a part of the public sphere, arguably a defining element in the creation of the public sphere, and yet for the most part museums have stopped playing a significant role in the political and social discussion that define the public sphere. But I believe that museums can, and should, regain their role in public discussion, should once again become a player in the public sphere. They can do that, I suggest, by breaking down some of the traditional barriers between museum curator and visitor, and by exploring the public sphere as historical subject.

This talk has two parts. The first is a very selective history, or, more accurately, a selective genealogy, of museums that promoted a more active view of the relationship of museum, artifact and visitor. The second is a look at some recent exhibitions to see how they might relate to this alternative history, and expand upon it, and some suggestions for future exhibitions that might build upon this quiescent museum tradition.

I. A New Museum History

First, the history. I would like to suggest an alternative past for the museum—a group of museums that represent a “path not taken”—and contrast these with a set of museums that represents the mainstream of museum history and historiography. That mainstream has been, to a large degree, a Whig history written to find the roots of the

“modern” museum. Museum historians have focused on museums that seemed “modern,” that is, museums that seemed to be appropriate ancestors to the museums that came of age after World War II—museums where the visitors come to be taught history, or to be told the correct ways to appreciate art. (Note the use of the passive in those sentences: this model of museums sees the visitor as a passive recipient.)

My alternative history suggests a different group of predecessors, ones that spins museum history in a different way. I will examine three museums where the visitors had an active, not passive role, where they explicitly participated in the production of meaning in the museum. These are museums that broke down lines between public and private spheres, that crossed categories in provocative ways, that thought about commerce, education, and presentation in ways that many of today’s museum professionals will find odd. These museums brought the public sphere, in all its messiness, within the walls of the museum. I will compare each of these with a more mainstream museum of its era—mainstream in the sense that it’s been written into the mainstream of museum history.

I also want to consider the history of the museum audience, something that has been left out of most museum history. Museums don’t make sense without museum audiences, but it is difficult to understand what audiences get out of museums today, let alone what they might have gotten from museums over the course of the last two centuries. The museums in this alternative history served as more than display spaces; they engaged their visitors as participants in a discussion. Visitors, my alternative history suggests, might be both producers and consumers of ideas in museums.

I will start with the late eighteenth century, the era that represents “the birth of the museum.” I want to consider two roughly contemporaneous museums, one well-known, one much less so.

The better-known museum, of course, is the Louvre, a place for the display of paintings for the private enjoyment of the court until the French Revolution, when it opened to the public as the “Museum central des Arts” in August 1793. This was more than simply the public sharing of a formerly private space, of course. It was also the creation of a secular, not religious, space for aesthetic display, and the creation of a space where art could be critiqued publicly. Donald Preziosi calls the Louvre and similar museums “a device for distributing the spaces of social memory.” Art, he says, “provided the means for envisioning all times and places and peoples within a common and universal and “neutral” frame.” This creation of a neutral museum also marks the creation, it’s been argued, of the modern idea of art.¹

The Louvre imagined a particular kind of audience, and a particular role for that audience. Art, the Louvre and its successors said, is universal, and is to be appreciated on its own terms, by a mostly passive audience, and without reference to anything outside the exhibit space. The curator selects the masterpieces; the audience appreciates them. The Louvre set a “modern” style for museums: the curator selects the masterpieces and arranges them to tell a story, and the visitor appreciates, and learns.

Now the contrast, the alternative history. Founded about the same time, and in the same city, was a very different kind of museum: Pahin de la Blancherie’s Commercial Cabinet of Curiosity (1779-87). This museum provides a much more interesting

¹ Donald Preziosi, “Collecting Museums,” in *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 289.

predecessor for today's museums, in its audience, its use of collections, the stories it told and the way it told them.

De la Blancherie's Commercial Cabinet represents the transition from the private cabinet of curiosities that a scholar might have kept for his and his friends' amusement and edification to the commercial cabinet of curiosities. The traditional cabinet of curiosity, a private space, famously encompassed the world in a box, allowing a scholar to possess the world. It did this not in the modern way, by showing off representative samples of the world, but in a distinctly pre-modern way, by showing off oddities and wonders of nature. Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park argue that "wonders had defined the order of nature by marking its limits; wonder had been the peculiarly cognitive passion that registered the breach of boundaries."² The cabinet of curiosities was for a small, invited private audience.

The first commercial cabinet of curiosity turned that idea on its head. Like later museums, it focused more on the representative, not the wondrous; on illustrating the categories, not the breach of boundaries. It "exhibited paintings and sculptures along with two-headed calves, anatomical models, and the latest fashions in combination locks." The categories of the museum describe the contents of the place: "The lists published by the museum identify "Painting," "Sculpture," "Engraving," "Drawing," "Music," "Mechanics," "Chemistry and Economics," "Manufacture," "Natural History," "Physics," "Hydraulics," "Surgery and Medicine," "Home Economics and Health," "Woodworking," "Metallurgy," "Sundials," "Locksmithing," "Goldsmithing," "Ballistics," and, for those truly unclassifiable items, the catchall heading "Curiosities."

² Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), 363.

This museum was less about wonder than, to use Stephen Greenblatt's phrase, "resonance." Blancherie's Commercial Cabinet of Curiosity was, as Laura Auricchio describes it in a recent article, a place that melded an older model of collecting and exhibiting with a new spirit of entrepreneurship.³

Indeed, as important as the categories was the mode of presentation and the relationship to the audience. These things were not just for show. They were public in two essential ways. Most shocking to those accustomed to modern museum ideals, they were for sale. The Commercial Cabinet of Curiosities was, indeed, commercial; the museum was part of the marketplace. It was also part of the marketplace of ideas. The objects in the museum were there to simulate discussion, not just to be "appreciated." La Blancherie's museum was also explicitly a piece of the public sphere, with weekly discussion sessions where "men of letters and artists" would gather to discuss the objects on view. La Blancherie published a journal with descriptions of the artifacts, art, and the discussions. He described the Bureau de la Correspondance as a contribution to the emerging "republic of letters." The combination of marketplace, museum and classroom seems odd; but it would certainly lead to an engaged and interested audience.

Comparing the Louvre and the Commercial Cabinet of Curiosities highlights significant differences in the role of audience, the role of the marketplace, the role of discussion and appreciation. The staid Louvre serves nicely as the ancestor of the traditional "modern" museum; but the livelier, more engaged, and more engaging, Commercial Cabinet might well be a better model for the museum that comes after the modern museum.

³ Laura Auricchio, "Pahin de la Blancherie's Commercial Cabinet of Curiosity (1779-87)," *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 36.1 (2002: 47-61), 47.

My next pair of museums to contrast are American, early 19th century. One, Charles Wilson Peale's American Museum, is the traditional ancestor in the traditional genealogy of American museums. It was didactic, patriotic. It taught citizenship, finding in the orderly display of nature a model for the orderly running of society. The other is a museum that may be better known, but not nearly as well respected, at least among academics and contemporary museum curators. That, of course, is P.T. Barnum's American Museum, the famously commercial operation of the famous proprietor of "humbug." These two "American" museums nicely show two sides of America, and two sides of museums.

The Peale Museum, as Joel Orosz's history makes clear, transformed itself many times in its history, but it kept throughout its fundamentally didactic approach. In the 1780s the Peale Museum was about republicanism. Peale would simply show the wonders of nature, and his visitors would be inspired: Show Americans the universe, he believed and they would learn of the goodness of nature. A few years later, after the French Revolution, Peale had lost his "blind faith in the efficacy of Enlightenment ideals." In the museum as he redid it in the late 1790s, he saw it as an instrument of social control. He would teach citizenship, and orderliness, and system. The proper ordering of museum collections would show the proper ordering of society. The museum was "the perfect place in which to teach the lower orders a proper respect for rank and gradation," writes Orosz. Visitors would see the system of nature as "charming models for every social duty, in order to render man...more content in the station where he is placed."⁴

⁴ Joel J. Orosz, *Curators and Culture: The Museum Movement in America, 1740-1870* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1990), 41-49.

Peale hoped that his museum would “sow the seeds of virtue” and cultivate republican virtue in Americans, especially in the lower classes. Lectures, along with the exhibition, served this end, and the museum would also, but to a lesser extent, as a place for discussion, a public sphere. Peale was explicit about this role for the museum: with “the mixture of men at such a rallying point viewing the charming variety of nature, people would become more sociable by being accustomed to see each other frequently in the same pursuits of knowledge.”⁵

But the order that was so precious to Peale left little room for discussion. As Gary Kulik has pointed out, “Peale’s pedagogy and taxonomy were better suited to birds and mastodons than to history and human culture.... His gallery of heroes made the Revolution tamer, more respectable, and more orderly than it ever could have been.” He couldn’t allow space for discussion, for debate, and he was left with an array of artifacts that suggested a simplified past, or even worse, a random one.⁶

P.T. Barnum’s American Museum, which opened in 1841, took itself a little less seriously. While it’s known today for its scams—the 110-year old nurse of George Washington, for example—and its freaks—Tom Thumb—Barnum had a philosophy of museums that bears closer examination. In his museum, the visitor was the central player. As Neil Harris explains in his wonderful biography of Barnum, the reason Americans so liked to visit Barnum’s museum was the hope that they might be fooled—and that they would figure it out. The visitor experience was interactive in a profound way, with museum and visitor fighting over truth and meaning.⁷

⁵ Ibid., 51.

⁶ Gary Kulik, “Designing the Past,” in *History Museums in the United States*, ed. Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 6.

⁷ Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973).

Harris explains this as being part of what he calls an “operational aesthetic.” By the mid-1840s, he writes, “authority—social, moral, aesthetic, even religious” was in the “hearts and minds of the ordinary citizen, the much-celebrated common man.” (You can see why Peale was so upset—and one of the reasons why his museum failed.) With so diffuse an authority, it was hard to know what to believe: “everything was up for grabs.” This, combined with “technological progress and egalitarian self-confidence” made many Americans certain of their own opinions. This not only made them easy prey for hoaxers, Harris writes, but also made them eager to participate in the debate about what was true and what was not.⁸

Harris writes of “the sheer exhilaration of debate, the utter fun of the opportunity to learn and evaluate, whether the subject was an ancient slave, an exotic mermaid, or a politician’s honor. Barnum’s audience found the encounter with potential frauds exciting. It was a form of intellectual exercise, stimulating even when literal truth could not be determined.” “Experiencing a complicated hoax,” he continues, “was pleasurable because of the competition between victim and hoaxer, each seeking to outmaneuver the other, to catch him off-balance and detect the critical weakness.” At his museum, Barnum told a visitor, “Persons who pay their money at the door have a right to form their own opinions.” Not something Peale would have said—and not a bad motto for the modern museum!⁹

Let’s compare the two American Museums. The Peale museum attempted to replace the authority lost with the rise of Jacksonian democracy with a new source of authority, a new narrative: the order of nature. Peale put nature—and tried but failed to

⁸ Ibid., 3-4.

⁹ Ibid., 74-77.

put history—in ordered rows. He called upon scholarly expertise to support his ideas. He told visitors what to think, either directly in words, or by the authority of the artifacts and their arrangement.

Barnum, on the other hand, presented a less authoritative story, in several ways. Unlike Peale, he did not use learned societies and academic experts as sources of authority. He presented artifacts of dubious authenticity at least in part to provoke debate, to provide his visitors with the pleasure of doubting, of forming their own opinions, of questioning authority. He created, in a strangely perverse American sort of way, a public sphere. At the Peale museum, visitors were told what to think. At Barnum's they were challenged to think for themselves.

Finally, a third pair of museums, this one from the first third of the twentieth century. I want to quickly contrast the American Wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, putting its masterpieces on display, and the Newark Museum just across the Hudson River, participating in the hurly burly of immigrant life and industrial production.

The Metropolitan Museum was founded in 1870 to “bring art and education to the American public.” That meant European art at first. Not until 1924, with the opening of the American Wing, did the Metropolitan take American art and craft seriously. The American wing “traced the history of design and good taste.” It displayed only “things which have class,” wrote R.T.H. Halsey, its curator. Its goal, like that of so many other museums founded in that era of concern over immigration and fear of the industrial economy, was to promote good taste, the nobility of the American past, and patriotic feeling. Halsey was blunt: “The tremendous changes in the character of our nation and

the influx of foreign ideas utterly at variance with those held by the men who gave us the Republic threaten, and unless checked, may shake the foundations of our Republic.” A visit to the American Wing would be “invaluable to the Americanization of so many of our people to whom much of our history has been hidden in a fog of unenlightenment.”¹⁰

Contrast this to the aims and methods of the Newark Museum, founded by John Cotton Dana in the Newark Public Library in 1902, and in its own building in 1926. Dana was explicit in his founding of a counter-Metropolitan; it would be silly, he said, to try to compete with the largest museum in the country, just a few minutes away. He presented a Veblenesque critique of museums, calling them “mausoleums of curios” and “gazing palaces” designed to show off the “costly and curious objects” collected by the wealthy to show off their wealth.”¹¹

Dana founded a museum that explicitly engaged its visitors in collecting, displaying, analyzing, and other educational activities. The question once was, Dana asked, “‘What can a library be?’ Today the question is, ‘What can a library do?’”¹² And he answered that by asking the public what it wanted and needed. Dana made first the library, and later the museum, into a cultural center for the community. A believer in the “cultural pluralism” popular among progressives in the early 20th century, Dana had students bring in for display textiles brought to this country by their immigrant parents. He believed that commercial products—radios, coffee tables, clothing—were important

¹⁰ Kulik, “Designing,” 14-16.

¹¹ John Cotton Dana, “Libraries and Museums,” *Library Journal* (15 May 1921), 455, quoted in Kevin Mattson, “The Librarian as Secular Minister to Democracy: The Life and Ideas of John Cotton Dana,” *Libraries & Culture* 35.4 (Fall 2000: 514-534), 523. See also N. Mafai, “John Cotton Dana and the Politics of Exhibiting Industrial Art in The US, 1909-1929,” *Journal of Design History* 13.4 (2000): 301-318. For a recent appreciation of Dana, see Stephen E. Weil, “Transformed From a Cemetery of Bric-a-Brac,” in *Perspectives on Outcome Based Evaluation for Libraries and Museums* (Institute for Museum and Library Services, n.d.), available at <http://www.ims.gov/pubs/pdf/pubobe.pdf>.

to the lives of his visitors, and so he showed them off in his museum. (Department stores, he said, were “the teaching museums” of these new days.) Teaching workers and what he called the “buying public”—a telling choice of words—to be critical consumers of the industrial products around them, he believed, could mean better, more beautiful products, and a better, more meaningful, more critically engaged, life for those who bought them.¹³

Dana believed, perhaps naively, that “a democratic public” could grow from the business culture of manufacturers, retailers, and advertisers. With the understanding visitors to the museum gained from the exhibits of aesthetically superior products, they would not only be better consumers, but, closely connected, they would be better citizens. Dana hoped to find a new way of tying museum artifacts to the public sphere: not as examples of the taste of the wealthy, but as object lessons in industrial and commercial democracy. He was not afraid of the marketplace, or consumer culture, or sharing the museum’s authority with its visitors.

There are other pairs of museums that might be similarly contrasted in this historical archeology of museums. One might look at the debate over the future of the Smithsonian in the 1860s, between those who saw it as a place for research and education and those who saw it as more a place for popular entertainment. One could contrast, in the 1920s, the Philadelphia Commercial Museum and the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry, or the Museums of the Peaceful Arts in New York City. Or even the Smithsonian’s Museum of History and Technology and Disneyworld, both of which opened in 1964...

¹² Dana, “The Public and Its Library,” (1897) in Dana, *Libraries: Address and Essays* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), 17, quoted in Mattson, “Librarian,” 521.

¹³ Quoted in Mattson, 524-27.

In each case, the traditional history of museums tells us to pick the one that is purer, cleaner, with a deeper divide between museum staff and audience, more didactic, less open for discussion, closer to science, less commercial, less political, less engaged. But there are alternatives one can find in the long history of museums, a different set of examples that one might point to as museums try to become more engaging, more a part of the public sphere today. What was good about these alternative early museums, what have we lost as we've forgotten these museums and written them out of our museum histories?

These museums were bold. They took on the whole world. Like the cabinet of curiosities, they were macrocosms in microcosms. While they made categories, they never enforced them, and never worried about incommensurate categories. Even bolder, from our modern point of view, they included commerce as part of the museum's public sphere. De la Blancherie and Barnum and Dana were delightfully subversive in the way they mixed different measures of value, switching without notice from commercial to artistic to historical value in a way that seems outrageous to us today. These museums captured—more accurately, they defined—a world where categories were fluid, not enforced, and where modern categories of art and knowledge mixed with categories of commerce and politics. And finally, they saw themselves as part of the public sphere. They were explicit in their role as a place for the public to participate in discussion. They saw what today we would call “education and outreach” as part of their mission. Pahin de la Blancherie set up discussion groups. Barnum challenged his visitors to disagree with him. Dana asked his public what they wanted to see, and displayed the things they

brought to the museum. These museums, for better or worse, engaged with their public and with the ideas and issues—political and scientific—of their times.

II. A New Museum Future

I'm going to jump now to the present day, and the future. Museums today are mostly about “show and tell.” Put an object on display, and tell the visitor what it means. Now, we've gotten very, very good at show and tell, and pushed all of the technological and physical limits of showing and telling:

We've made things very large, to get attention

We've put things in context

We've arranged things in order

We've devised ways of ordering and explaining a narrative

We've mixed in video, sound, vibrations, computer games, and more.

In short, we have done about a good job as we might expect to do at displaying things, describing them, ordering them, telling our visitors how to look at them. We developed museum techniques of display, narrative, entertainment in a way that I think museum curators and designers and educators have every right to be very proud of. But I want to ask if museums might not go beyond show and tell to discuss and argue and provoke—to use an academic metaphor here—to go beyond the lecture to the discussion section. Can the museum engage the visitors as a co-discoverer, sharing authority with them in a way that might make the ghosts of de la Blancherie, Barnum, and Dana smile upon us?

Museums have started to do this. In recent years, most museums have asked visitors for their comments, or for their stories. Especially in history exhibits that address events within living memory, it's become almost *de rigueur* to ask visitors for stories. So

for example, in the National Museum of American History's "World War II: Sharing Memories" exhibition, one of the highlights of the exhibition was the area where visitors wrote out their stories and posted them. Similarly, the NMAH "Family Car" exhibition asked for travel stories, and in the recent September 11 exhibition a request for museum and virtual visitors to share their story brought in tens of thousands of responses.¹⁴

But sharing stories is a weak manifestation of the public sphere. Much stronger is sort of discussion that the National Museum of American History's "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Sweatshops in America" exhibition managed to encourage. Here the museums admitted that it did not know the answer, perhaps that there was no single answer. Instead, curators gave space in the exhibition to five different points of view, and asked visitors to write down their point of view. These discussions—visitors responded to the material in the exhibit, and to each other—were remarkably interesting. Visitors were participating in teaching and learning.

Might it be possible to go further, to use our display expertise to not simply to present the public sphere, and give a chance for participation, but to go further and do what only museums can do: to bring it to life? At the Museum of American History, visitors to an exhibition on the Great Migration were forced to choose between a door marked "White" and one marked "Colored." In the infamous "Etiquette of the Underclass" exhibition put on by the Smithsonian's experimental gallery a decade or so ago, the visitor was reborn as a homeless person, and surrounded by objects and events that were designed to confuse and disorient him or her.

¹⁴ See Steven Lubar, "'Exhibiting Memories,'" *Museum News* (July/August 1996) and <http://www.911digitalarchive.org/smithsonian/>.

A recent exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum puts the visitor into the scene in a much more profound and provocative way. “Dangerous Liaisons,” a show that opened in 2004 months ago, purports to be a show about costume and design. But it’s more than that. As Herbert Muschamp points out in his *New York Times* review, it’s also a show about “flirtation with new ideas: reason, science, personal responsibility and a concept now known as the public realm.” The exhibition puts the museum visitor into the role of voyeur, and voyeurism, Muschamp points out, citing Sarah Maza’s book on scandals in pre-revolutionary France, was “not a minor actor in the foment of revolution.” And so “we, the museum-goers, are cast in the role of radicals, spreading the idle gossip that will help topple the ancien régime.”¹⁵

While it’s hard to imagine many topics that so nicely let the natural stance of the museum visitor as voyeur overlap with an important historical role, it seems that there might be other ways to allow the visitor to participate in the public sphere in the museum. Remembering de la Blancherie, we might consider rethinking the museum shop to allow visitors to engage in the marketplace at the same time as they engage in the marketplace of ideas. Taking a page from Barnum and forcing the visitors to sort out what is real and what isn’t might provide a new critical perspective and engagement with museum exhibitions. And rethinking Dana to allow the world of commerce and advertising as well as the visitors’ own stories might make the museum a more engaging place.

It’s rare that museums participate in the public sphere as fully as they might. One of the few educational institutions visited by a broad swath of society—neutral territory yet with a high level of public confidence—it seems fair to ask museums to do more.

¹⁵ Herbert Muschamp, “Let them wear silk: Decadence before the fall,” *New York Times* (April 30, 2004): E29. He cites Sara Maza, *Private Lives and Public Affairs: The Causes Celebres of Prerevolutionary*

They could raise issues, provide a place to discuss them. They could serve as places of public discussion. It's been done before, and it would be useful for museums to think about how they might once again participate fully in the public sphere.