museums 101

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Published by Rowman & Littlefield *
A wholly owned subsidiary of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc. 4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706
www.rowman.com

Unit A, Whitacre Mews, 26-34 Stannary Street, London SE11 4AB

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Walhimer, Mark, 1964– Museums 101 / Mark Walhimer. pages cm

Summary: "Looking for an A–Z, one-stop, comprehensive book on museums? Wish you were able to have one of the nation's leading museum consultants spend a couple of days with you, talking you through how to start a museum, how museums work, how to set up an exhibit, and more? If so, Museums 101 is the answer to your wishes"—

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4422-3017-0 (cloth: alkaline paper) — ISBN 978-1-4422-3018-7 (paperback: alkaline paper) — ISBN 978-1-4422-3019-4 (electronic) 1. Museums.—United States. 3. Museum techniques. 1. Title. AM5.W35 2015 069.0973—dc23

2015002970

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

Printed in the United States of America

For Anne, Les, Patricia, and Meg

Chapter One

Defining a Museum

Every museum interacts with visitors on multiple levels, but especially through its efforts to educate the public. Although not all museums collect objects, a typical museum is defined as much by its collection as by its visitors.

The International Council of Museums defines a museum this way: "a non-profit-making, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment."

After years of thinking about museums, I have developed a personal definition.

Museum: an organization in service to society, open to the public, that acquires, researches, exhibits, and interprets objects and ideas for the purpose of education, study, and enjoyment.

A collection is at the core of most museums. These collections may include art, historic artifacts, animals, plants, science experiments (interactive science exhibits), teaching tools (early childhood exhibits), and many other things.

Museum collections sometimes start as the personal collection of an individual. The individual creates an institution to care for, protect, and display the collection in perpetuity. The care and ownership of the collection passes from the individual to the institution. Not only is the collection transferred to the institution, but the vision of the individual is also taken up by the new institution. From this vision, a mission is created for the new institution.

The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, Massachusetts, offers a wonderful example of the relationship between a founder and an institution's mission. Mrs. Gardner's will "created an endowment of [one million dollars]

Defining a Museum

and outlined stipulations for the support of the museum, including that the permanent collection not be significantly altered." Mrs. Gardner, an avid art collector, wished to share her art and her vision with the public in perpetuity. Today the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum's main galleries—a villa designed in the style of a Venetian palace—are still displayed largely as Mrs. Gardner designed them more than a century ago.

Another example is the Thomas Edison National Historical Park in West Orange, New Jersey. The Laboratory Complex was judged to be of significant importance, having been the home and laboratory of Thomas Edison. Visitors to the park can view many of the objects in the park's possession and visitors can learn about Edison's process. The Luis Barragán House and Studio² in Mexico City, Mexico, is another fine example. Barragán's home and studio is maintained just as he left it. Visitors gain an understanding of the personality and process of this fascinating architect.

In museums that are created to uphold the specific vision of the founder, the museum's board of directors translates that vision into a mission statement, an embodiment of the purpose and vision of the institution. Different from the founder's vision, a mission statement can be used to measure the actions of the institution. The responsibility for adhering to the mission belongs to the board of directors. This transfer of vision, responsibility, and care is very significant. The founder is forever entrusting the care, protection, and display of the collection to the museum's board.

The museum's board of directors hires staff to fulfill the mission of the institution and the curation of the museum's collection. The verb *curate* comes from the Latin *curare*, to cure or heal. A Roman *curator* was akin to a legal guardian in English law. A curate, an official of a church, has care of souls. A curator in a museum, then, might be said to care for the "heart and soul" of a museum's collection.

The role of a curator is one of enlightenment, using the museum's collection, or objects borrowed from other institutions, to fulfill the mission. The mission is a general statement, while the curator's goal is specific. The work of the curator is to organize the objects in the collection into a statement, which then becomes an exhibition aimed at educating and enlightening visitors.

The word "museum" comes from the ancient Greek *mouseion*, a temple dedicated to the nine Muses, goddesses of inspiration. The relationship between curator and visitor is a dialogue that has existed for more than two thousand years. Visitors enter the museum to gain inspiration. The curator prepares the content for that inspiration.

There are many types of museum-audience relationships: museum as mentor, audience as student; museum and audience as peers; and museum as authority, audience as passive or active participant. In the following chapters,

the relationship between museum and audience (the visitor) will be covered in greater detail. At their core, museums are public institutions that require the participation of an audience for an educational dialogue to occur.

In many ways, museums are a cycle of trust and inspiration. A founder has a vision, which is entrusted to the museum's board of directors, who then creates an institution to embody the vision. The board of directors creates a mission to guide the museum. The board entrusts the statement of the mission to the staff, who transfer the inspiration of the founder to the visitors.

In the next chapter, we will examine the history of museums since the mouseion of ancient Greece.

NEXT STEPS

Become familiar with these leading museum service organizations and their Codes of Ethics (for links, see the Museum Toolbox):

ICOM, International Council of Museums
AAM, American Alliance of Museums
AAMD, Association of Art Museum Directors
ASTC, Association of Science Technology Centers
AZA, Association of Zoos and Aquariums
AASLH, American Association of State and Local History

NOTES

- 1. From the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum website, accessed May 8, 2014, http://www.gardnermuseum.org/about/history_and_architecture.
- 2. From the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's Luis Barragán House and Studio website, accessed May 8, 2014, http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1136.