

MUSEUMS IN A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

Moderator: Richard Ford, Arthur F. Thurnau Professor, Chair and Professor of Anthropology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

Speakers: Herman Belz, Professor of History, University of Maryland-College Park
Ellsworth Brown, President, The Carnegie Museum of Natural History; Past President, American Association of Museums

Marta de la Torre, Director, Training Program, The Getty Conservation Institute

Irene Hirano, Executive Director and President, Japanese American National Museum

Thomas J. Kilcline, President, The Retired Officers Association, Retired Vice-Admiral, United States Navy

George MacDonald, Executive Director, Canadian Museum of Civilization

Rem Rieder, Senior Vice-President and Editor, *American Journalism Review*

Barbara Clark Smith, Curator, National Museum of American History

Robert Warner, Professor of Information and Library Studies, Professor of History and University Historian, University of Michigan; Former Archivist of the United States

SUMMARY OF REMARKS BY RICHARD FORD

"We cannot discuss museums in a democratic society without acknowledging the structural differences of museums in different countries regardless of political orientation," Richard Ford began. The more than 5,000 museums in the United States occupy a privileged position despite not being organized by a central authority. Unlike many of their European counterparts, American museums have, from the nation's beginnings, been founded by private, local interests and characterized by educational missions.

Ford identified several factors in the privileged status of American museums: 1) the "authoritative" role created by public belief "in their interpretation of events in history or their interpretation of artifacts"; 2) the fact that the objects they house might otherwise disappear with time and culture change; 3) a tax-exempt status that allows them to receive private contributions that permit independence from government subsidy; 4) the numerous and ill-defined quality of their constituencies, which gives museums few constraints; and 5) their existence independent of a national museum system.

Noting that museums are presently affected by changes that are sweeping the culture, Ford concluded that the questions to be addressed concern both the diversity of museum audiences and the nature of their role, whether as "institutions that lead their communities, that change ideas, that present concepts that are not accepted by the community or are interpreted differently" by it, or as "institutions that reinforce social values and beliefs."

SUMMARY OF REMARKS BY THOMAS J. KILCLINE

Thomas J. Kilcline does not believe museums are hearing a death knell. "The people want to see the museums," he stated. "That is why you have a fantastic number of people going to them every year." Museums allow citizens to understand their civilization and society, even if their approach is "unsophisticated and basic." This has been true of his own experience he remarked, recalling museum visits made with his parents, his children, and grandchildren.

The museums that will survive in a changing world are those "that will adjust to the different personality we are developing as a civilization." Museum audiences "put some demands on us," he continued. Among these are that the public not "be led by the hand, but shown the facts and the instruments of history. We want to have an idea exposed to us and [be allowed] to make the judgments."

SUMMARY OF REMARKS BY HERMAN BELZ

Turning to the museum's role in society, Herman Belz noted the educational function "of pouring into the lives of people a degree of culture, a degree of knowledge done in a kind of recreational way." To successfully combine education and recreation, museums must be aware of "the limitations of people, nature, and human nature." Belz deplored the fact that "museums have gone into the marketplace of ideas and they have brought newfangled ideologies, hermeneutic theories, and postmodernism" into their culture. The result has been "a cultivation of suspicion," he charged, "and it is sorely, sadly reductionist."

The controversy over the *Enola Gay* exhibition is the result of eroded boundaries "between objective fact and arguable, interpretive, hermeneutically influenced text, so that the written text drives the undertaking." Recalling Neil Harris's distinction between a museum's functions as temple and forum, Belz concluded that while it is "superficially satisfying to say they can be both," it is not possible to do so, and he predicted that postmodernism will be superseded.

SUMMARY OF REMARKS BY GEORGE MACDONALD

In addition to viewing museums as temples and marketplaces, George MacDonald suggested regarding them as "media in their own right." The *Enola Gay* exhibit exemplifies the trend to move away from collections and the degree to which the media "artificially enhance the value of the icons" that speak to the public.

The Canadian War Museum faced a controversy similar to that provoked by the *Enola Gay* when it produced a miniseries to commemorate the end of World War II. What MacDonald learned is that museums must be more sensitive to public opinion. "We have to know where the hot buttons are," he maintained, and how an issue's explosiveness differs when it reaches the public through the media rather than through a museum visit. The museum world has "a tremendous amount to learn" about how to handle media issues, for "the *Enola Gay* is not just an American icon. It is a world icon." MacDonald believes that "the last act is yet to come, and in that sense the *Enola Gay* is not just a hot button but a radioactive button and a world story."

SUMMARY OF REMARKS BY REM RIEDER

Rem Rieder agreed with MacDonald on the importance of "media savvy." To him, the *Enola Gay* controversy underscored the need for museums to include in the exhibition-development process "some people who are sophisticated about how media work." It is important to respond promptly to criticism. The controversy exposed the need for "Clinton campaign tactics," he asserted. "You have to have people ready to marshal the facts, assuming that you have an entirely defensible exhibit. You have to be able to say that history is being distorted here or that there is some unfairness here or that these are cheap shots."

SUMMARY OF REMARKS BY ROBERT WARNER

"No one makes us go to museums," Robert Warner observed. "You have to want to go, and if people do not go, there will not be the support that is necessary" for museums' continued survival. Therefore, museums must "pay attention to the audience," which is broad, and "be sensitive to their local environments." As an example of this sensitivity, he recalled a time when the National Archives wished to include the rifle used to assassinate President Kennedy as a symbol of cultural violence in its fiftieth-anniversary exhibition. However, Senator Ted Kennedy's distress over the possibility led to the decision not to display the gun. "People would come to see this somewhat morbid object rather than looking at the broader message, so we yielded to that," Warner said. The decision not to display the gun also resulted in "a great friend in Congress" for the archives.

"There must be a great deal of sensitivity," Warner reiterated, "especially in the interpretation, [which is] where we get into the most trouble, not the artifacts. I feel very strongly that you cannot force a position and take an authoritarian view."

SUMMARY OF REMARKS BY ELLSWORTH BROWN

The *Enola Gay* controversy does not represent a trend, Ellsworth Brown argued, but is a unique phenomenon. The National Air and Space Museum suggests "federal values," he commented. "You have the fiftieth anniversary. You have the bomb. You have race. You have changing public expectations. You have the plane, war, and everything that it does to those who fought in it to help themselves justify what they did as good or worthwhile. I do not know how many exhibits carry that kind of load, but not many." To him, the controversy reflects the "different expectations of collaboration and openness" that different generations bring to their work in museums.

The Chicago Historical Society's venue of the "Bridges and Boundaries" exhibition, about the relationships between African Americans and American Jews, typifies what Brown called "a middle ground" type of exhibition. Despite a controversial subject, it brought together many different groups for "a wonderfully emotional and revealing program." Because of this, corporate sponsors vied for association with it.

Museums should be concerned with people, Brown declared. "History will take care of itself. There are enough of us historians around to make sure that works." He recommended asking audiences "what they want . . . and expect."

SUMMARY OF REMARKS BY MARTA DE LA TORRE

Agreeing with Brown that "museums have a serious responsibility toward the public," Marta de la Torre advocated "a middle-of-the-road position." A museum's role, she stated, is not "to destroy existing social values," but, as a social institution, it must participate in a responsible dialogue about change and alternatives. Taking extreme positions may attract the attention of the public, but "standing at any extreme will bring controversy." A museum that is constantly in the midst of controversy, she said, jeopardizes its educational mission.

SUMMARY OF REMARKS BY IRENE HIRANO

Irene Hirano finds the present time “exciting” for the museum world which is facing challenges that include the incorporation of diverse voices into exhibitions. Recognizing that a single exhibition cannot do justice to all viewpoints, her museum organized two explorations of World War II internment camps. One was a major exhibit developed by the museum and the other was a weekend “community” exposition in the Los Angeles Convention Center that allowed any organization that wished to set up its own display about the World War II experience. Over 100 organizations nationally participated with displays, enabling a diverse and participatory presentation of this period of history.

SUMMARY OF REMARKS BY BARBARA CLARK SMITH

“My primary sense, as someone who works at the Smithsonian, is that we are missing an opportunity to make a clear statement of our commitment as a public institution to a broad public,” Barbara Clark Smith declared. Participation, access, and equality are essential for a democracy to function, “and anything that works to curtail people’s knowledge and thinking undermines the fundamental structures of democracy.” What this means for museums is that they must “protect minority and controversial views.”

The recently proposed Disney theme park on American history helped Smith understand the difference between casting one’s audience as “members of the public, people whose chief obligation is to participate in an open sphere with one another to discuss what they think is right and good” and casting an audience as a market. “If you are going to formulate your audience as a market, then fundamentally you want to sell them things and please them and use a lot of marketing techniques,” she continued. While not disagreeing that museums should be sensitive to their audiences, Smith contended “it is our role to talk to the whole person and not just the consumer.”

In this context it is important to understand the politics of controversial exhibitions. “There are a bunch of old museum exhibits still around which give a very biased, one-sided view of history,” she noted. “The new exhibits that become controversial are often a very small voice arguing from the other side or suggesting that there are other ways of looking at this.”

SUMMARY OF GROUP DISCUSSION

Museums’ attention to audience, or market, desires must be tempered by two factors, **Ellsworth Brown** commented. Once a market and its desires are recognized, museums must determine if they have the tools to meet them. Further, museums must balance the understanding of public service that equates audience needs with institutional values. He would “temper the crass statement, ‘give them what they want,’ partly because we are not able to and partly because we cannot always and should not. Still, it is a valid thing to ask the public, ‘What are your expectations when you come to the National Air and Space Museum?’”

Marta de la Torre wished to explore Barbara Clark Smith’s comment about the nature of the exhibitions that arouse public controversy. “What does that say about our public or about the groups that react to this new view of history or presenting several voices?” she asked. “Is it the general public that actually complains about these controversial exhibits?” **Brown** responded. “It may not be.”

Comparing statements by Dylan Ripley and Alma Whitney in 1970 about the nature and purpose of museums with one published in the Smithsonian Institution Press's 1992 *Museums and Communities*, **Herman Belz** asked, "Are these simply descriptive statements or are they normative concerning the nature and purpose of museums?" Belz detected a normative tone in the 1992 book's statement that "museums make meaning and negotiate and debate identity" that stood in sharp contrast to Ripley's 1970 remark about the authenticity of the subject. Ripley, he observed, "had not been hanging out in the Organization of American Historians meetings nor at the American Historical Association, where all this postmodernist or constructive historiography was."

The day's discussions, **Belz** continued, indicate "that there are limits to this social construction of reality." Museums must "recognize people's limits, the limits of nature and human nature, and recognize that the authenticity of the object—collecting things— is important." As many historians and museum professionals are realizing, once museums have "gone through the deconstructionist mill," they can no longer "appeal to academic freedom or objective history."

Richard Ford emphasized the importance of recognizing that what the museum world faces is "not business as usual, nor do we look at the objects or what museums have accomplished with the same eyes as a generation ago." Many of the critiques of museums, he believes, are the result of long-standing concerns about museums from various segments of society that are finally surfacing. However, while the understanding of museum professionals is changing, "this does not mean that the audience's appreciation of the museum is necessarily going to change."

"There are different kinds of institutions," **Irene Hirano** responded, "and what they all do is very different." While there are no defined rules that describe these roles, the museums that survive "will be those that do and can define what their role is and [that] have a constituency." Private museums in particular must "be sure we can keep our doors open."

George MacDonald was disturbed by the rapid acceleration of information that makes it difficult to stay current. "It may mean that museums as we have known them with large collections are really just data repositories," he speculated. "The action of interpretation and scholarship could move elsewhere." Already, students are learning to develop "virtual exhibitions," and "virtual museums" may be "a new era in the history of museums," linking museums and universities as they were at the beginning of this century. **MacDonald** predicted that in the future "we will never see an exhibit like the *Enola Gay* get that far down the line without an awful lot of testing of the concepts in many different pieces."

Another factor in the *Enola Gay* controversy, he continued, is the "iconic dilemma." Icons like the *Enola Gay* itself are "fraught with emotion, multiple levels of meaning, and very much manipulated," which are among the reasons the media is drawn to them.

The virtual museum "is going to be extremely important," **Robert Warner** agreed, and will potentially enhance the museum world. "Somebody still has to collect the material for it to be put together in a sophisticated way," he pointed out. Also, "seeing something on a CD that attracts their interests" may prompt visitors to come to the museum to see the actual object.

Brown shared Warner's optimism. He cited Steve Wild's distinction between museums' former preoccupation with "inputs" to that with outputs, to the current concern with outcomes, or "what happens and to whom."

"Is the term 'museum' appropriate for the so-called virtual study of objects?" **Ford** asked. "Sure," **Brown** replied. "Museums are really places of gathering and doing, rather than just rows of shelves."

Barbara Clark Smith objected to **MacDonald's** implication that, as a virtual exhibition, the *Enola Gay* would have drawn objections. "I think it is important to realize that Americans did not react to the exhibition," she declared. "They did not get to see the *Enola Gay* exhibition." Its controversy "is very much a matter of political timing." **MacDonald** remarked that "the flaming would have gone on in the Internet, and that would have defused a lot of the situation. Once the defusing has happened, the media is not all that interested."

Smith also objected to the statement that curators today do not care about the authenticity of objects. "One of the things that is critical at our museum is that real artifact." She is heartened by Smithsonian visitors' frequent question, "Is it real?" Americans "know they have been Disneyfied," she concluded. "They want someone to show them the real thing and tell the truth about it. The truth is a pretty complex thing." Artifacts will not speak for themselves or make connections, and the connections among people have always been the real story in American history."

"I am not here just because I love to go the museum," **Thomas Kilcline** interjected. "I am here because I spent a lot of time on the *Enola Gay*." He was convinced that the public would have "loved" the exhibition, based on the fifth script, and contended that the problem was caused by egregious statements and unbalanced presentations in the early scripts.

"It is a shame you were not more aggressive about going public [about the positive changes in the exhibit] as this evolved," **Rem Rieder** commented. "A lot of good might have been accomplished by getting the word out aggressively."

Ford asked, "How do you see the changing museum landscape in terms of the role of administrators, in their role of both overseeing curators and keeping public interests at the forefront? Is a change occurring in the relationships in the administration and museums? **Brown** believes that it is and likened it to the same kind of change taking place in corporations. American society is evolving toward a corporate process structured by teams. Management's responsibility in the team structure might be establishing value systems and expectations, as well as a collaborative matrix for decision making. **Warner** agreed that even in federal museums there is a move toward total-quality management. In the federal system, however, "the Congress is still enamored of the hierarchy and uses it."

"I think the role of management is to bring together the parties and to, in a sense, act as a catalyst to make sure the voices are heard," **Hirano** added. Managers must ensure the larger community is actually engaged. "As administrators, we play a role in providing leadership within the field to open it up and make it much more inclusive."

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Q: Many commentators have said that there no longer exists "an American people," but rather an ever-shifting series of special-interest groups. How can museums be responsive to their audiences? Are we in danger of becoming a zero-sum museum with no ability to bring any voice to life?

A: (Belz) **Barbara Franco** of the Maryland Historical Society wrote an interesting article about common citizenship. In the most fundamental sense, people are not socially constructed. There are

some continuities in histories and some variations in the fundamental structures of family, work, community, and a sense of place. The common elements that people share is an important thing on which to focus. There are over 6,000 museums in the United States, and many are local museums. So there is a rich field of development for museums that emphasize local structures.

A: (MacDonald) I have reflected many times on Buckminster Fuller's view that in the future, identity for the individual would not just be along a single axis but an intersection of many axes of identity. I think multiple identities are the key to museums' role in the future. Throughout Canada and the U.S. and Mexico, to a certain extent, people have embraced a new identity in the world even as important elements of their identity hearken to another time.

What I do see happening now, with the idea of virtual museums, is that all of this in the new world—with the exception of the indigenous people—were parts of diaspora of one kind or another, whether it was the closures of pastures in the highlands of Scotland or the potato famine in Ireland. In the postindustrial age these ethnicities are coming together again. The National Museum of Scotland decided a year ago to add a wing and began to use Internet and other means to establish contact with all the Scots who had moved to New Zealand, Canada, Australia, and so forth. The Museum of the Diaspora in Tel Aviv has extensive genealogical records that knit together these world ethnicities that were wrought asunder during the industrial revolution.

Museums have an exciting role to play in the postmodern age because multiple-culture identities are the way of the future. It enriches people who can identify with the great contributions of all peoples of the world. Instead of being isolated and rejecting them, they will have learned enough about the cultural grammars of other groups to appreciate them.

A: (Warner) I am also optimistic on that point. Museums can bring in groups who feel isolated from the mainstream and give them a sense of belonging to a broader pattern.

Q: In 1990, the American Association of University Professors issued the policy statement, "Institutions that display artistic work or provide venues for performance do not necessarily endorse the work nor are they responsible for the views or attitudes expressed in the works." Is it possible for public institutions, including museums in and out of the academy, to be neutral? If so, what are the pros and cons of neutrality?

A: (de la Torre) Do we disclaim our exhibits? What is neutral?

A: (Ford) Let me reword the question. Does the museum go ahead and stand behind artistic expression whatever the cost may be to that museum—either in the press, financially, or what have you? If the museum is doing it, does the museum remain fully accountable for it?

A: (Brown) I think the museum definitely remains fully accountable. Whether or not one does it depends on whether there is a huge principle at stake or whether one is wise, unwise, strategic. . . . I cannot imagine a museum saying, 'Well, it is here, we do not mean it.'

A: (Warner) No one would pay attention to a disclaimer anyway. If it is there and in that museum, everyone will view the organization as responsible.

A: (de la Torre) Before the decision is made to put something on exhibition, the museum should ensure it says what the museum is willing to stand behind. Once it is out there, you really have to stick to it.

A: (Belz) I think the question is whether it is possible to do something that does not strike the ordinary, reasonable observer as loaded, tilted, and biased. I think it is possible.

A: (Warner) An interesting suggestion this morning was to use multiple labels with people citing their own views. That may be cumbersome, but it is intriguing.

A: (Hirano) Many exhibits provide an opportunity for viewers to voice their own opinions through various books. Often those are as interesting as what is on the walls. It is part of enabling more voices to be heard and become part of the documentation that future historians can use.

Q: (Ford) In 1994, 27 percent of adult Americans eighteen and over visited historical sites or museums. This is second to zoos and aquariums, with 46 percent, and more than the 24 percent who went to art museums. A third of the nation did not enter a cultural site or institution at all.

Education is the key factor explaining attendance. In view of these facts, what responsibility do museums have toward the total society?

A: (Belz) I could conceive a "New Museum Act" requiring voluntarily attendance at museums at least once a year, like communion at liturgical churches. I do not think that is feasible, of course.

A: (Ford) The question points to the larger historical issues. Museums have a historical role in American society as part of the educational process. The question is how museums stay current in terms of their educational mission. The cost of exhibitions is such that museums can lag behind in the currency of what they are communicating. What is the responsibility of the museum in light of the possibility of conveying misinformation as things change over time?

A: (de la Torre) Exhibitions may be expensive, but through docents, publications, and so forth the museums can change faster than exhibitions can. I have always had a problem with the idea that everyone in the world should be a museum visitor. The challenge is to expand our market without expecting everyone out there to come. Some people would rather spend their day in Disneyland or watching football.

A: (Brown) In 1993 I read an article by John Edgar Wideman in *Discovery* magazine about the Carnegie Museum of Natural History. He said, "Under the roof of the natural history museum my sense of the past is at times elaborated, extended. The past gained an immediacy and relevance that was frighteningly alien, daunting, but also included me, ended and began with me. My imagination was stirred, and I was on my way to becoming a citizen in a larger world than Homewood. I was lucky. I grew into manhood and passed on that experience to my children. The museum is still there for anybody who wants to listen." This makes it clear that museums have a deep and abiding need to be part of a community in ways that we do not think of when we talk about them.

A: (Smith) Part of what is important about museums is that they are inclusive but they also take you elsewhere. It seems important to offer visitors both those things. You do not just go to the museum to find yourself. People can be interested in those who are not themselves because underneath it all, that is how we learn about ourselves, by knowing more about what is possible and what human beings have aspired to. A national museum has the certain obligations toward a local community and is also expected to speak for the nation in some ways. I would love to include the audience in participating in those questions and looking at them in a historical way. What is the common ground? Who is this "we the people"?

A: (Hirano) With shrinking school budgets, field trips to museums are becoming more difficult. One of our roles is to reach out and work in partnership with school districts and find funds to ensure that school visits continue. They are an important part of the educational process.

A: (Brown) This suggests that the next wave of museums are ones that actively partner with the schools to work on the next bond issue. That is something I have never seen museums do.

Q: (For Rieder) Can you speak to journalism culpability in the *Enola Gay* fiasco? To what extent does a museum, or for that matter, a politician, have to bear the brunt of poor journalism?

A: (Rieder) There are two elements to the situation: One is from the defense of the institution or the person under fire -- it makes sense to get out there and aggressively correct the record, to defend yourself. Nonetheless, there is a burden on the part of journalists to independently assess the truth. What often happens is that journalists can get caught up in the charge and counter charge of the controversy -- the Smithsonian's on the run and the veterans are mad. They perhaps did not go to the most important level of checking the facts. That can happen -- it certainly was part of the dynamic here.

Q: (for Warner) Has anyone examined the *Enola Gay* controversy in light of similar situations that libraries have faced? Is there any effort to do for museums what the library profession has done -- develop a "Library Bill of Rights"?

A: (Warner) The library profession is proud of the fact it has had a mechanism in place for a long time to defend intellectual freedom. I do not know of anything in the museum world that is

comparable. Interpretation and subtleties of presentation are, however, different from intellectual and academic freedom.

Q: (For Hirano) Among Japanese Americans the “No No Boys” remain controversial, so the Japanese American National Museum is preparing an exhibit on the army veterans. Does it also plan to present the history of Japanese American draft resisters? More generally, should ethnic museums address issues that are controversial within their community, or should they refrain from airing “dirty laundry” in public?

A: (Hirano) You cannot include all the different aspects of any one story, no matter how small or large. But you have a responsibility to allow—through public programs, materials, and other means—the public to address a variety of opinions. There has been great debate about whether or not the Smithsonian should include new ethnic museums. Public resources are certainly finite, but I think the Smithsonian can help link those different ethnic perspectives and find the common values in different experiences. Both within the institution, through diversifying programs and collections, and also in partnering with other institutions, we can develop a more diverse view of our past.