

Museums: Recent Trends by Alice Parman

Collections: The Holy of Holies

As the 21st century began, museum professionals wondered if museums had been eclipsed by the Internet; why pay to view real objects that are pictured online? In *Do Museums Still Need Objects?* (2010), Stephen Conn argued that museums would continue to find a *raison d'être*. And to the surprise of many, visitors have continued to show up.

Polls continue to rank museums among our most trusted institutions. They are *entrusted* with perpetual care of irreplaceable treasures. Research into original objects is the basis of public programs. Research in scientific collections is more often reported in journals than represented in exhibits. But lately, some academically oriented museums have attempted the unprecedented architectural feat of making their collections visible to museum visitors. The wheel has come full circle; not long ago, natural history museums' collections were avidly studied by experts but widely ignored by the general public. See Karen A. Rader and Victoria E.M. Cain, *Life on Display* (2014).

Museum Staff: The Family Drama

Collections are the heart of the museum; curators know them intimately and care for them expertly. Program staff long for access to collections, the only authentic basis for exhibits. Administrators and development staff focus on the organization's identity and sustainability. The balance of power among these diverse interests shifts over time; visitor experience is in the ascendant these days. Collections are publicly available via digital media. Museums' partnerships, sponsorships, and marketing are driven by exhibit topics. Exhibit development brings in-house teams and community members together: see Polly McKenna-Cress and Janet A. Kamien, *Creating Exhibitions: Collaboration in the Planning, Development, and Design of Innovative Experiences* (2013) and Alice Parman, Ann Craig, Lyle Murphy, Liz White, and Lauren Willis, *Exhibit Makeovers: A Do-It-Yourself Guide for Small Museums*, 2nd edition (2017).

Visitors: Active Participants

Stephanie Weaver's pioneering handbook, *Creating Great Visitor Experiences* (2007) has helped museums large and small improve and innovate. Visitor studies and front-end/formative evaluation have become essential to exhibit development. Meanwhile, visitors are creating on-line tours, rating museums on Yelp!, joining Facebook groups, and volunteering in droves. In Santa Cruz, California, the Museum of Art and History rewrote their mission a few years ago: "Our mission is to ignite shared experiences and unexpected connections.... [to] bring people together around art and history through dynamic exhibitions, events, partnerships, and programs." Led by their director Nina Simon, the MAH has indeed become a gathering place. Visitors *want* to get involved!

Technology: The Enemy Within?

Since the 19th century, museums have used technology to engage visitors and share knowledge. At annual meetings of the American Alliance of Museums, the latest gadgets fill the exhibition hall; many of them are affordable only to the wealthiest institutions. In contrast, web-based media has been a boon to all museums. Accustomed to YouTube, Facebook, and

Instagram, today's visitors don't expect high production values; content is more important. Videos and slide shows, along with simple hands-on interactives, enliven galleries that would otherwise be stationery and unchanging.

The downside of technology is that personal devices are the new smoking. Screens are addictive. Museums have tried and failed to ban them. This is especially sad in the case of family groups. Kids want to play and ask questions; too often, their parents are busy texting. When these kids grow up, what will they treasure from their museum visits? What will make them want to bring *their* kids?

Your Thoughts?

What other changes and trends have you noticed in museums lately? Write to Alice at alice@aparman.com.

(582 words)

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