Art Museums - Past/Present/Future

When I was asked to address you on art museums today, I really blanched because it is a very difficult subject to cover adequately. There is no real consensus on what museums are today, what they should collect, how they should be funded and curated, what the government should or should not do for museums, what their ethical structure should be, or what their power structure should be.

A recent book on the subject is called The Art Museum: Power, Money and Ethics by Carl Meyer. Meyer calls for certain problems to be solved with regard to art museums and sees a deep need for a national arts policy, for museum tax reform, for standardization of performance measurements for museums, and for vigorous self-searching definitions by trustees or boards of art museums, not only the staff.

It is not a book that deals with collections or aesthetics at all. It dwells on the politics of museum boards with a certain salacious appetite on what Hoving-ism was at the Met or how Merrill Rueppel came to leave the Boston Museum.

The book is funded by the 20th Century Fund, “A 20th Century Fund Report.” I can remember the questionnaire that was sent to the Nelson Gallery. It had a kind of chip-on-the-shoulder attitude. Both Laurence Sickman and I were rather wary of it. What has turned out is really quite polite. Meyer says everyone loves museums in the end, but he never comes to grips with what a museum really is.

To me that is one of the troubles in the state of the art today. Everyone loves museum politics, museum gossip, the latest scandal, the problem of Nelson Rockefeller’s reproductions, and whether we should have surrogates of works of art marketed by art museums, shops and sales desks. All of these questions preoccupy the art world today. But the definition of what a museum really means within its community, and most of all, why it is important in itself, has somehow eluded us. We have gone into a period of fun and games rather than serious evaluation.

I do not think we can approach evaluation without access to the history of museums, yet there is not even a book on the history of museum architecture as there is for the railway station. (That would be a marvelous subject for a dissertation.) Since there really is not a cohesive history, I have had to go to sources like Meyer’s book, the Encyclopedia Britannica, or books that have been put out for professionals such as the National Endowment for the Arts book, Museums U.S.A., and a number of conference reports which have been published on museums. I have finally been able to put together some interesting historical perspectives about museums,
and I offer them to you as a kind of background for any conception in your own mind of what we
would be doing today with art museums.

Art museums as we behold them today are a late emergence, essentially a 19th and 20th
century concept. It is true that our prevalent demand that a museum today be a multi-
departmental, exhibition-holding, publications-oriented, library-supplied, period room-equipped,
educational programs-oriented, and sales room-annexed institution is certainly a very modern
phenomenon in the world – a specific reaction to our own cultural demands. More than ever
before, culture involves diversity in its disciplines.

There is, however, a much broader definition that goes back toward the beginnings of
civilization. That definition has to do with assembling, possessing, and delectation of works of
art. This must be one of the oldest unassailable urges that man has. At ancient Ur of the
Chaldees, archeologists came across a clay tablet with cuneiform writing on it that some experts
think was the first museum label ever devised. We also know from the archeologist Wooley’s
reports at Ur that there was evidently a boy’s private school run by a lady who had a kind of
treasure room set aside for the delectation of those treasures by her pupils. So actually maybe the
first protomuseum of which we have an historical record was attached to a school like Groton or
Barstow in the ancient Mesopotamian area.

While the collecting of treasures was important in the beginning, it was the making of the
work of art and its ceremonial role in civilization which was of paramount importance. That idea
survives even today among the American Indian sculptors of the Northwest Coast. A tribal art
museum would have been totally anti-ethical because it would have been outside the culture;
they were “doers.” Northwest Coast Indians would traditionally hold potlatch festivals and use
the masks, but the idea of putting them in a museum was not considered on their own turf. When
I went back last summer to the Coast, the Haida peoples had their museum on an island at
Skidegate village. It was run, however, by a white couple. So you see, the idea of an historical
collection is coming very late to some people in the world.

The \textit{mouseion} or sanctuary to the muses of Greek mythology was a step in the formation
of the idea of a museum. A Greek public collection really did exist for Pausanias tells us that
there was a building adjacent to the Propylaea, the gateway to the Acropolis, called the
Pinakotheka. It was open to the public, and Pausanias described the mythological scenes painted
there.

By the third century B.C. the \textit{mouseion} or museum designated that part of the palace that
housed a great library. The most famous one was the library of Alexander the Great in
Alexandria, which Ptolemy Soter had put together as a paean to his own glory. The library, one
of the seven wonders of the ancient world, was essentially a place of learning, an educational
institution under the care of a priest. It was based on the idea of the \textit{mouseion} at Athens which,
incidentally, was founded by Aristotle; but it was far larger. No teaching went on in it; studies
were pursued personally. There was undoubtedly some kind of a room that contained votive
offerings and sculpture along with the several hundred thousand volumes of the library itself.

Hellenistic sanctuaries that came after the greatest days of Greece were treasure
accumulations of silver plate, furniture, and weapons. The different rooms of the treasuries were
connected with galleries which reflects the beginnings of the museum idea of an interconnected
series of rooms. In addition to objects, they contained stones and medicine objects. They were
also bank depositories. The idea of the gold standard being works of art as well as treasure is
again a very, very old one. It is not only a matter of the Medici inventories, J.P. Morgan’s collecting activities, or present day auction records.

The first standards of artistic judgment seem to have been developed at Pergamum where the first excavations in the western world were made by the Attican/Pergamum kings near their own library. Their idea was to go back in history to find antiquities. While you do not have a connected museum idea here, you do confront the avarice for objects and the assignment of values to these objects.

Rome actually invented two particularly important aspects of collecting. one was rapine acquisitions made by generals by gross military might. The other was the development of the art dealer pretty much as we know art dealers today. In fact, there was a whole quarter in ancient Rome along the Via Publica which was a kind of “57th Street” of the Roman Empire. Rich Romans and merchants would take great delight in trading, retrading, and buying at ever-increasing prices the portable objects of Greece, for example. Along with that came falsification and forgery. It was a very active industry in Rome, and as you know, it has never ceased:

In fact, there was even a quality of avariciousness in the collectors of Rome that the famous writer of the Satyricon had to caricature. It is so delightful and so contemporary in some ways that I would quote it to you. In the Satyricon, Trimalchio, the nouveau riche man of acquired culture – acquired the day before – boasts of his possessions. He sounds exactly like a robber baron of the 19th century.

“I am the sole owner of Corinthian silver plate. You may perhaps inquire,” he declared, “how I have come to be alone in having genuine Corinthian stuff.”

Now I have heard a modern art collector such as Joseph Hirschhorn refer to his collection as “stuff.” Corinthian silver, incidentally, was plentiful; and it was famous in Rome for its patina, what time had done to it. So when you hear a museum curator talking about the patina of the object, he is really going back again to a very old tradition.

“Because the obvious reason for that, for the genuineness of it, is that the name of the dealer I buy it from is Corinthus.”

That is like the museum docent today who says, “Do you have a son in the Marines? You can enjoy a marine painting.” Unless the man has Corinthus at his beck, how would he know?

Now in the early medieval period the institution of the mouseion was lost, as was the pinakotheke; but it had a kind of afterglow in the medieval scriptorum and in the writing of the beautiful illuminated pages of the medieval period. In fact it is due to the collecting instinct of a monastic church foundation that we have presented the comedies of Terence and Plautus, which survived in ecclesiastical libraries. Church treasuries were in a sense a continuation of the idea of the classical treasury. St. Mark’s in Venice and St. Nectaire in the Auvergne house two of the countless church treasuries that still survive.

The treasury survived through the Church to the time at the very end of the medieval period in the cathedral in Halle when Cardinal Albrecht of Brandenburg (the man whom Luther went against when he nailed up the propositions on the church doors) established an extraordinary collection of relics. He set the relics in sumptuous cases and provided a printed catalog, the first in modern European history, dated 1510. But even here it was the canonical presence that made art collecting a thing of the spirit outside one’s own bodily grasp.
The Renaissance changed all that with a remarkable amount of vigor. Anybody who has read Jakob Burckhardt knows about the atmosphere that brought about the Renaissance. However, you might be interested to realize that the *garderobe*, which was usually underground in the late medieval/early Renaissance period, was a kind of treasure vault containing among other things your best armor and some of the coinage held for the inspection of your friends. The Renaissance moved the *garderobe* upstairs and created what was called not a *museion* but a *museo*. You may also know it by the term *studiolo* or study.

The *studiolo* contained a desk for the humanist with beautiful Renaissance bronzes and plaquettes upon it, small medals, boxwood sculptures, treasures like that – rather small-scale objects. Around the walls were intarsia or inlaid wood panels composed like paintings.

By the early 16th century, the *studiolo* of Alfonso d’Este of Ferrara had magnificent pictures by Titian. For that *studiolo* Giovanni Bellini and Titian worked together on a painting called *The Feast of the Gods*, which is one of the masterpieces of the National Gallery in Washington. Later, the paintings were bought by a canny gentleman named Richelieu, who put them into his palace in France and added four paintings to go with the older Italian Renaissance paintings. One of them was the Nelson Gallery’s Poussin of the *Triumph of Bacchus*.

The *museo* or the *studiolo* moved across the Alps in the high Renaissance period. In France it became the *cabinet de curiosites*, and Albert V of Brandenburg had a *Kunstkammer*, which is the first use I find of the word “art,” i.e., “art room.” The *Wunderkabinet* was a more typical German manifestation. It balanced the natural wonders of the world – the geodes, minerals, nautilus shells, narwhal horns, things like that – with the man-made wonders, which were the bronzes, the silver, the works of art. The Renaissance was broader than we are today. It did not worry about which was better. It simply had man-made wonders, and it had natural wonders. Both of them could exist side by side with very easy living room for both.

Larger in scale and scope than the *museo* or *studiolo* was a late Renaissance manifestation that was called the *galleria*. When you reach the *galleria*, you are entering the world that we all know when we go to an art gallery. The *galleria* would contain a collection of paintings. By the end of the 16th century, the *galleria* was enclosed, usually at the top of the palace. It was a windowed series of long galleries. The most famous of these is the top floor of the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. (I refer to the windowed loggias.) When you go there, do you realize that you are looking at the quintessential Renaissance *galleria*?

The *galleria* concept still serves us today. It is the direct predecessor of the 19th century gallery except that it was lighted by windows on the side rather than skylights. It is a very important concept and stands behind any idea of walking before paintings. The *museo* and the *galleria* – when they were joined, the room with the objects and the room with the paintings – really became the basis for the great museums that we know.

During the Baroque period, the 17th century, and the earlier part of the 18th, collections by princely families grew openly more secular and were pointed to with pride. They were more and more removed from religious or instructional associations. For example, one needs only to examine the palaces of the Via Garibaldi in Genoa, where the public today can still view many of the objects and paintings from the 16th and early 17th centuries.

One of the first of the princely collections of the 17th century and early 18th century opened in a more general way, the “Green Vaults” of Augustus the Strong. He was the 18th
century king of Saxony and Poland, the great proprietor of the Meissen porcelain factory who died in 1735. One could formally apply and be admitted to see his treasures in Dresden. I suspect that if you were too common you knew enough not to apply: But among the visitors at the Green Vaults was Boswell, who mentions it in his *Travels in Europe*. He was a commoner, but a most uncommon commoner. What he saw there was much of what was seen at the recent Splendors of Dresden exhibition in the National Gallery in Washington.

Of interest to us here is a family who lived in England called the Tradescants. They owned large holdings in Virginia although they never went there, were avaricious collectors, owned Powhatan’s mantle, and founded a Museum Tradescanteanum, which was given to Oxford University in 1630. The Ashmolean Museum at Oxford, which was given by Lord Ashmole in the next generation and which absorbed the Tradescant collection, is the oldest public museum with regular hours and exhibits in the western world.

For his collection, John Tradescant used the catalog system of a Flemish doctor named Samuel Kiechenburg. As far as I know, it was the first museum catalog in the modern sense; it had a systematic division of the objects that we have in museology. This catalog was followed by the first handbook on museological method in 1727.

Following on the heels of those publications was the collection of Sir Hans Sloane of London, who gave his collection to the British nation in 1759. It was opened by an act of Parliament. Many people think the gift was entirely free – it was not quite. Sir Hans’ heirs received a certain remuneration for it. So you see, the kickback is not exactly a new idea.

In 1739 the Vatican museums, the famous Papal collections, were opened to a restricted public. About that time some of the French royal holdings in collections and their inventories were made available, again in a very restricted way, at the Palais de Luxembourg. The Louis’ did not like those objects; therefore, they were fit for other people to see as they were removed from Versailles.

In the modern world it is the French Revolution which transformed the restricted museum collection, the aristocratic collection, into the living museum that we know today. That was achieved by a fascinating Frenchman named Vivant Denon, who opened the Musee Napoleon in the Palais de Louvre in 1793. At that point the museum became part of the world of culture and politics, in a sense a polity.

Vivant Denon set aside the Salon Carre as a gallery for the greatest paintings for public enjoyment. I love his memory dearly because he was the first director to try to get salaries for his employees. He came into deep conflict with the ministers of the new regime under Napoleon, who tried to straitjacket his operations. (That is also new in the art world.) More than 400 antique sculptures were on exhibition in the Musee Napoleon at the end of Napoleon’s reign, in concert with the greatest picture gallery. Paris at that point became centered on the Louvre, not a palace but the museum housed in it. The public was admitted without any restrictions whatsoever. Actually if you admit the public, military conquest of works of art is perfectly all right. Even Heine, the German poet, wrote a praiseworthy poem to the accumulation of works of art under Napoleon as campaign booty.

The idea of going to a museum as a habit, walking before the works of art, beginning to look at them as reflections – maybe even of your own aspirations – came about through the foundation of the Louvre as we know it today.
In 1781 the Viennese collections were made semipublic, arranged chronologically, and then quite soon thereafter were opened to the entire public. The first print cabinet in the world, the Albertina in Vienna, was founded about that time. Another wonderful eccentric Englishman, Sir John Soane, designed the first independent museum building in the western world, the Dulwich Picture Gallery in London, between 1811 and 1814. In some ways I do not think Sir John Soane’s building has ever been bettered. It is a rather small museum containing maybe 15 or 18 galleries. He invented a kind of tension between the vestibules that go into the galleries and the galleries themselves. You feel when you are there that not only are the paintings framed, but the whole gallery is framed by the architect. It is an extraordinary space sequence that prepares you for the works of art. If I were ever going to build an addition to a museum somewhere, I would send the architect to take a look at the Dulwich Picture Gallery.

The Dulwich collection, which was owned by a gentleman named Bourgeois, was really meant to be a national gallery for the British public. This turned out to be impossible. The pictures were later given to Dulwich, a preparatory school. A national gallery, however, was in the wind. When John Julius Angerstine died in 1833, he asked that his pictures be given to the nation. There was a great brouhaha in London at the time, but finally his pictures were made the nucleus for the National Gallery of London. The pictures were in the Angerstine house until 1838 when they were moved to Trafalgar Square. The rest, as they say, is history.

I would like to read you another quotation which I think is delicious beyond compare. It concerns the National Gallery and politics, and it probably has to do with Charles Dickens, who edited a magazine called All Year Round. In 1860 our “eyewitness,” who was either Dickens himself or someone who wrote and then had Dickens as editor, really took on the National Gallery. This excerpt sounds sickeningly familiar to any museum director.

Witness finds on reference to the catalog which he holds in his hand that there are in the national collection eleven works by Rubens, seven of which were purchased with public money. Of those seven pictures, only three are good for anything, that is to say, The Rape of the Sabines, lucidly described in the catalog as ‘a tumultuous group of men and women in violent struggle,’ the landscape called Rubens’ Chateau and the Judgement of Paris. The rest, which are poor affairs, can only be excused as purchases if they were inevitable parts of a lot which the country wanted.

In other words, the other great Rubens in that collection were nothing. The Chateau de Steen by Rubens – I wish it was in the Nelson Gallery!

He wishes to know for whom the National Gallery is intended, whether for the English public generally, or for connoisseurs like the learned doctor or enlightened ghosts like his colleague on the Bench.

Then the “witness” goes on to say that paying 300 pounds for a portrait by Van Eyck is an absolute outrage upon the public purse. In the National Gallery there are two portraits by Van Eyck of about eight that exist in the world. I do not know to which it referred, but the painting is easily worth two to four million dollars today.

The struggles museums have in asserting themselves against philistinism were certainly very much alive in the 19th century:
Now we move to America and to our present situation. The American museums that came in the wake of the National Gallery in London were founded on two principles. One was the idea of the museum as an instrument of education and moral nourishment and is an outgrowth of the moral artistic values of the nascent republicanism of the country. The most beautiful representation of this idea was written in 1864 by James Jackson Jarvis. He was one of the first American collectors; his Renaissance paintings are today at Yale; his second collection is at Cleveland. As an expatriate in Europe, he wrote a book called The Arts Idea. This was before any museum in the United States was founded. We had athenaeums; we had libraries, but we had no gallery. Listen to this American gentleman writing in 1864:

To stimulate the arts feeling, it is requisite that our public should have free access to museums or galleries, in which shall be exhibited in chronological series specimens of the art of all nations and schools, including our own, arranged according to their motives and the special influences that attended their development. After this manner a mental and artistic history of the world may be spread out like a chart before the students, while the artist with equal facility can trace up to their origin the varied methods, styles and excellencies of each epoch.

This sounds already like a definition of the future Metropolitan Museum.

The other aspect may strike you rather peculiarly – the idea of the museum as a place of entertainment. It is peculiar that newspapers in America generally have an “Arts and Entertainment” section. On the surface the combination might seem degrading. But actually it is quite apt since the other founding museological idea was the museum of entertainment. The P.T. Barnum Dime Museum of 1854 is the greatest example, showing Tom Thumb on exhibition, bearded ladies, all kinds of strange anomalies. In fact, P. T. Barnum tried to buy Shakespeare’s cottage – like the Arizona group that landed the London Bridge at Lake Havasu a century later. So, early in our own national relationships to the arts was born a demand and interest in showmanship and theatricality.

American museums today are far more theatrical when they put on an exhibition than anything done within the present-day museums in Europe and way ahead of what our museums were up to at the end of World War II. The present concept of a grand opening at a major art exhibition in London is to have an opening with maybe 150 people. The Queen visits or a dignitary tours the exhibition, makes some pleasantries, and leaves. In 1976 when the Sacred Circles exhibition opened in London the American volunteers wanted to include a bar; eyebrows were raised, and that was a first, so I believe, at the Hayward Gallery.

So we have these two factors: (a) the democratic idea of the museum in terms of entertainment and (b) the idea of moral enrichment for public, the students, scholars, and artists. In some ways those two things really do not work any more than Jeffersonian democracy and Jacksonian democracy mix. The museum director is always trying to preach one and do the other; it is a part of our lives.

The famous portrait of Charles Willson Peale hangs in the Philadelphia Academy. Peale was a magnificent painter as well as a museum director. The year is 1785. Peale is drawing back the curtain of his museum of natural history. He is revealing his mastodon skeleton and his specimen shells. You are actually invited into his exhibit area; you are invited to participate as the museum director (proprietor) is your “host.” That is a totally American idea, and it goes back to 1785.
In 1966 when I arrived at the Victoria and Albert Museum to be trained, the museum director there seemed almost the equivalent of a high ecclesiastic above and beyond touch. He was commented about from afar. Sir John Pope Hennessey, the famous art historian, became the ‘next director, and he was affectionately called the “Pope” – with very good reason. The director is sometimes an inaccessible figure to this day in Europe, sometimes to the envy of his beleaguered American colleagues.

So before the museum or theatre was ever broached in Europe, it was made in America with the founding of the Metropolitan Museum and the Boston Museum. These are perhaps our Wagner operas to visual culture. These museums set the idea across the land for the encyclopedic collection which would be the inheritor of all the cultures of Europe and the past, just as the American land became the inheritor of all the various peoples who were disaffected for one reason or another and immigrated here. We inherited pell-mell the whole tradition of 3,500 years. It came tumbling upon us asking for quick answers.

Now let me turn to the problems of the art museum in its present encyclopedic guise. For example, 84 percent of American museums today have budgets of less than $500,000, and 16 percent (the great ones) over $500,000. Since 1950, $561,700,000 has been committed to 10.2 million square feet of new exhibition space in 123 art museums. No nation has ever done anything like this before. Pressures have built and in some cases exploded. Budgets have expanded beyond the wildest expectations of a few years ago.

One of the recent outcomes of such dynamics in museums has been the firing of directors. Traditionally in the old days the director stayed in office for 20 or 25 years. From 1969 to 1975, however, the American Association of Museum Directors, the membership of which is a sort of roster of the profession, numbered about 90. Of the 90, 38 had been dismissed at one time or another, which is a 40 percent decapitation rate. The sport has become such a national theatre that all of you know what Hoving does, what happened in Washington or Boston, and about the present quandaries in Chicago where the Art Institute has not been able to find a director after 30 months. Museum politics has become a matter of national importance. Again, the ruckus disguises what the purpose of the art museum is, which is to be stable, to operate a collection, and to research and interpret it for the delectation of audiences near and wide.

Unlike the past, museums today face a complex system of patronage, particularly of state and federal patronage. Two national endowments have been formed by the government as a result of the Johnsonian Great Society. One of them, the National Endowment for the Arts, operates on about $170 million a year and provides needed project funding and programming. But in the early 1970’s the profession outcry was: What about the growing deficits of our museums? Finally, in the last year, another institute or endowment has been formed called the Museum Services Institute (HEW), which gives operational support to museums. It has a small budget now which will grow very fast, but museums applying must comply with increasingly complex federal regulations that are often expensive to enforce, sometimes prohibitive.

The director thinks, “Ah thank heaven there is that money in Washington.” But there is all that bookwork, forms to fill, time away from the museum's tasks – a tremendous headache. I mention that headache as an example of the problems facing art museums as they benefit from these government agencies, trying to see through the red tape.

Another question crucial to the future is the tax incentive. European museums are often green with envy over the U.S. Internal Revenue Service provisions for tax deductible charitable
artistic donations. Yet every time we have a “tax round,” this accommodation to culture is attacked, and the American Association of Museums and the American Association of Museum Directors have to hire very expensive legal help, file briefs, lobby, and hope …

Other concerns today are the “global” loan shows – the King Tut exhibitions. They are wearing on the facilities and personnel of museums. In accommodating them, whole sections of a museum are temporarily rebuilt, services strained almost beyond capacity, and staff enlarged beyond what can be normally contained. They serve, of course, a very obvious role in diplomacy, exposure, and education. I need hardly mention that, considering what many of you saw during the Chinese Exhibition at our gallery. But recovery from a “block buster” exhibition – returning the museum to normal – can take as much as a year. How long will the wear and tear go on? Museums have become a commodity of visual wealth and display technology all bound together. In fact, two years ago I participated in a conversation organized at St. Louis for political scientists. My subject was “The International Implications of Art Exhibitions.” Some of the political scientists were simply amazed at the diplomatic power these exhibitions actually command, like the armies of ancient days – only winning cultural converts on the battlefield.

Certainly the public viewing the huge exhibition sees works of art that are absolutely beyond the reach of ordinary Americans. The opportunity is extraordinary. That, of course, is a very important aspect – that the taxi driver, the farmer, and the bank president can all go and see the mask of King Tut (who, however, I think would be shocked beyond belief if he knew his totally private never-to-be-seen objects were being seen by millions).

Such exhibitions are very safe. Art history is safe when you deal in the past. Among museums there is a perceptible shift away from the experimental exhibitions of contemporary art that went on in the 50’s and 60’s. Hilton Cramer of the New York Times has been particularly sad to witness this process.

To conclude, I would leave you a radical view, a conservative perspective, and finally a middle view.

The radical view by Linda Nochlin is taken from an essay she wrote on “The Radical in Museums.” She says the creation of the museum was a “token of art’s impotence, its final severance from the social structure, setting apart.” That is balderdash in view of what I have just outlined for you about the history of culture. Actually, the museum can widen perspective to all of culture. It was hardly separated from the structure of society at any given time in the past. It all depends on how the culture functioned. There is always a generation of artists who want to burn the Louvre. That’s healthy. But I do ask that now they put away their matches.

Now the conservative view. These extracts from a symposium on the problems of museums, The Purpose, Financing, and Governance of Museums. Three Conferences, Spring Hill Center, Donner Foundation sponsorship, 1968.

...that the physical expansion of museums is over, that there would be few new museums in the last two decades of the century. Therefore, more time should be given to the analysis, examining what museums are, and whom they are to serve. We are questioning and changing old staffing concepts and boards of trustees. We are analyzing our audiences and trying to change programs accordingly. These are the issues and activities of the next few years rather than acquisitions and facilities.
I am in moderate agreement with that statement. I believe that the purpose of museums is to be museums and not politics, making the museum a true instrument of presentation and enlightenment. The symposium resolution simply restated that collecting, preservation, and research are the central purposes of museums. To this I would add education central to focusing on the museum as a humanistic force today.

A middle view states, “With more government funding needed, as expected museums will have to deal with the assumption that public money is based on the broadest public service.” That is inescapable reality.

A respected commentary on the more personal aspect of museum leadership was written by Thomas Leavitt just a few years ago in an essay, “The Beleaguered Museum Director.” Tom is one of the sanest voices speaking today for the museum profession. His statement sets the whole museum problem in perspective. Salvation for the present day museum director lies in realizing that most of the criticisms directed at him or his museum come from extremely limited perspectives – in other words, as limited as Charles Dickens’ attack on the National Gallery. He stresses the credibility inherent in our great collections – to create policy on art and not on politics, local or national. What museums need is an enlightened climate of humanistic perception in which to function – a considered and sane climate by which we all can best contribute.

No doubt many of the premises upon which museums were originally founded need drastic revision if museums are to maintain contact with contemporary human values; but it is also evident that museums simply cannot provide all things cultural for all people. Standards for museum workers, like accreditation of public school teachers, tend only to guarantee certain minimum levels of performance. No provisions can be made in them, of course, for the soaring intellect, the great humanistic soul, or even the lively wit one delights in finding occasionally within the directorial ranks. These and other valuable qualities will be attractive only when the profession itself attracts people who possess them. Such men and women will be attracted only when museums are no longer cultural playgrounds and human meat grinders, when directors are able to regain a sense of direction and trustees a sense of trust.

When that direction and trust are regained, we once again will be reaffirming the tradition of nearly 4,500 years, and adding to it a fact ever present today: That art museums are necessary to our civilization as a mirror of our past and future aspirations, that on no account can we ever do without them. They are fast becoming as eternal as politics and vastly more beneficial to the spiritual needs of all of us. In the design of civilization they show every sign of becoming more powerful, part of that design itself no longer an adjunct. From that point of view, the art museum becomes a force to be reckoned with, always with reason and never with fear, but as an integral part of life – life at its best.
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The list of Mr. Coe’s publications and the exhibitions he has organized is extensive. One of the most prominent was “Sacred Circles: Two Thousand Years of North American Indian Art,” held at the Haywood Gallery in London and later brought to Kansas City.

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MIDCONTINENT PERSPECTIVES was a lecture series sponsored by the Midwest Research Institute as a public service to the midcontinent region. Its purpose was to present new viewpoints on economic, political, social, and scientific issues that affect the Midwest and the nation.

Midcontinent Perspectives was financed by the Kimball Fund, named for Charles N. Kimball, President of MRI from 1950 to 1975, Chairman of its Board of Trustees from 1975 to 1979, and President Emeritus until his death in 1994. Initiated in 1970, the Fund has been supported by annual contributions from individuals, corporations, and foundations. Today it is the primary source of endowment income for MRI. It provides “front-end” money to start high-quality projects that might generate future research contracts of importance. It also funds public-interest projects focusing on civic or regional matters of interest.

Initiated in 1974 and continuing until 1994, the sessions of the Midcontinent Perspectives were arranged and convened by Dr. Kimball at four- to six-week intervals. Attendance was by invitation, and the audience consisted of leaders in the Kansas City metropolitan area. The lectures, in monograph form, were later distributed to several thousand individuals and institutions throughout the country who were interested in MRI and in the topics addressed.

The Western Historical Manuscript Collection-Kansas City, in cooperation with MRI, has reissued the Midcontinent Perspectives Lectures in electronic format in order to make the valuable information which they contain newly accessible and to honor the creator of the series, Dr. Charles N. Kimball.