

The Social Obligation of Museums

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The social obligation of museums is a vast subject raising a large number of ethical, professional and political issues for organizations. I would like to deal with six questions. In doing so I will try to share examples of our work in Glasgow Museums, not because we know all the answers to the questions, but because the nature of museums is such that philosophy which doesn't influence practice is pointless, just as practice without a sound philosophical and ethical basis is ineffective. The questions and our attempts to answer them in Glasgow reflect our particular circumstances and I will say a bit about the nature of society in which the museums function, which may not be as different from that of Los Angeles as one would initially imagine. But first to the six questions:

- What kind of experience do we think we are providing for visitors to museums, and if it is "learning" what kind of learning is it?
- Which members of our community are good enough to visit our museums?
- Why are some of our museums boring, not by accident, but by intention?
- Who are we really willing to share our collection with?
- What issues, which are important for our community, can we engage with through our collection?
- Do our museums help to create a more just community, or do they help maintain the current level of injustice?

Why are some of our museums boring, not by accident, but by intention?



1. What kind of experience do we think we are providing for visitors to museums, and if it is “learning,” what kind of learning is it?

I believe that the purpose of museums is inherently educational, not in a didactic sense but in the terms of the experiential education advocated by John Dewey. For Dewey, the purpose of education is the provision of experiences, which promote the growth of the individual. An important quality of an experience that promotes growth is that the experience is not only positive in itself, but also that it equips and encourages the individual to seek out further positive experiences. Dewey also states that educational opportunities are missed when experiences may be so disconnected from one another that, while each is agreeable or even exciting in itself, they are not linked cumulatively to one another. Many museums generate a lot of educational activity, but unless they are capable of being connected up in ways that are meaningful for visitors, in terms of their prior knowledge, personal, family and cultural experiences, their benefit will be diminished.

In Dewey’s terms, if learning is what goes on in museums, the least important part of it is the actual information—whether that is about evolution, the principles of physics, the facts of history or the work of artists. The essential learning from experiences in museums is where people fit in society and the world, what society considers their appropriate level of interest, aspiration and ambition in terms of understanding the world through the sciences, the arts and history. Positive museum experiences equip and encourage people to seek out other experiences that increase their understanding of themselves and the world. As suggested by the work of Lois Silverman and Douglas Worts, people have a rich and diverse range of positive experiences in museums. Learning may not be a very adequate term to describe it, but if used in Dewey’s sense of growing as individuals to fulfill their potential and to explore their experience of the world, learning will do as shorthand for my purposes today.

Before I turn to looking at how we have tried to act on these principles perhaps I should say a few words about Glasgow. Glasgow is a city of about 600,000 people in a conurbation of about a million, in central Scotland. In the 19th century it was one of the great cities of the first Industrial Revolution and of the British Empire. In 1914, two thirds of the steamships afloat had been built there, and a million people lived in one of the most densely populated places on the earth. Incredible wealth was generated, and a great deal of it was

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spent on fine buildings and on art, which was often bequeathed to the city museums. Thus we have an amazing architectural legacy, including the works of Charles Rennie Mackintosh, and the greatest collections of Old Masters, Impressionists and post impressionists outside the nationals in London, as well as world class collections relating to shipbuilding and other industries. The Queen Mary in Long Beach was built in Glasgow between 1930 and 1934. In 1990, Glasgow, in recognition of this heritage and its current vibrant cultural life, won the accolade of European City of Culture. It was a city with many conflict visions of itself, which we tried to capture in the local history museum—the People’s Palace, founded in 1989, and redisplayed five years ago. This gallery is called Visions of the City, and sets out the Capitalist Socialist and Civic visions of the City.

Since the city began expanding rapidly in the 1780s, doubling in size every decade, about a third of the population has lived in the direst poverty, and despite improvements brought about by modern welfare, the percentage of people living below the poverty line is still the same. This deep historic poverty is reflected in appalling public health. This headline (Glasgow: City of the Damned) from the local evening newspaper was for a report that Glaswegians have the highest rates of heart attack and lung cancer anywhere in the world. Infant mortality in the poorer parts of the city is 21 per thousand, 7 more than in well off areas. The latest figures I could find for California were for 1993, when the infant death for Californian White people was 6.2 and for Californian Black people was 15.5, 5.5 less than Glasgow – roughly the same as in Sri Lanka. Of the ten poorest electoral districts in the UK, 3 are in London and several are in Glasgow. Glasgow has the highest percentage of lone parent families in Britain. Glasgow has the highest percentage of minority ethnic population in Scotland, 40% of whom live in substandard conditions. 70,000 children live below the official poverty line.

So what are museums to do in such circumstances? The traditional enlightened liberal approach is that museums and art galleries do what they do everywhere, displaying their material in more or less standard ways, and employ educationists and outreach workers to provide programmes that give access to the excluded. This is a welfare model of culture, which implies a majority of well off people who receive a service which reflects their needs and values, and which is accompanied by some redistribution of cultural benefits to the deprived. This is the only way to start, but unless we move beyond cultural welfare these programmes become about avoiding the creation of real access, as they support and reinforce the existing process of exclusion. To move beyond the welfare model means providing learning opportunities on a scale that makes a difference to



more than just a few individuals. Moving beyond welfare means changing the basic learning experience of the museum, from that "people have to be improved for them to belong," to them being welcome in a place which provides opportunities for them to grow.

The gap between rich and poor in the UK is second only to that in the USA. In Scotland it is greater than the British average. One of the consequences of this is a conflict over resources that are perceived to be in short supply. A sub-theme of my talk this morning is a change within Glasgow Museums from a confrontational to a collaborative approach to managing the issues relating to access. This brings me to how we have tried to answer the second question in Glasgow:

2. Which members of our community are good enough to visit our museums?

The 1994 exhibition, *Canvassing the Clyde*, was jointly curated by a social historian and an art curator. It installed works painted by Stanley Spencer when he was a war artist working in the River Clyde shipyards in a display setting that suggested the physical context in which they were painted. Real machine and hand tools used by the workers were displayed alongside the paintings. Comments from shipyard workers on the paintings were displayed, including points about how Spencer had taken artistic license with technicalities. This exhibition was described by *Glasgow Herald* as, "The most unsympathetic presentation of any artist I have ever seen... Spencer is popularized and patronized in the misguided view—I assume—that it will bring the punters in. Must they be spoon-fed? Are they unable to take their art neat?" (Henry: 1994).

Glasgow's Gallery of Modern Art opened in 1996 showing a selection of mostly representational work including naive and self-taught artists such as Beryl Cook, alongside major Scottish figures such as Ken Currie and Alan Davie, all reflecting the personal tastes of Julian Spalding, then director of Glasgow Museums. Works deliberately chosen to appeal to novice visitors and children were placed on display with no framing that suggested they were any way lesser works than by John Bellany, Bridget Reilly, Nikki de San Phalle or Jean Tinguely (Spalding: 1996). Even discounting the fact that this was not presented as an alternative view of modern art, but as a deliberate attack on what might be called the avante garde establishment, the critics' responses were vitriolic.

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“A travesty,” said the Guardian, “a mockery, quite the worst arranged collection of dire purchases I have ever seen.” (Searle: 1997). The fact that it was popular did not impress. When the gallery exceeded its target visitor numbers of 300,000 by 100% in its first year, the Scotsman was not impressed. “The Romans got lots of people into the Coliseum to see the lions munching Christians.” (McMillan: 1997).

By the time *The Birth of Impressionism* was mounted in 1997 there was open conflict between what was seen as an elitist and an inclusive view of museums. *The Birth of Impressionism* sought to tell the fairly standard art history story of how Impressionism developed, how it emerged from and contrasted with what the art that went before. It used videos to show the landscapes in which the Impressionists painted. A Salon hang included mannequins wearing late 19th century French costume, and there was a reconstruction of the boat from which Monet painted many scenes. “I will be blunt,” wrote *Scotland on Sunday*, “this is simply the worst exhibition I have ever seen... It is crass, unintelligible, and a positive danger to the general public. What we have here is not an art exhibition at all, but a history lesson... in which the pictures become mere tools... as the father of a four-year old, I would be happy to take my son here, but were he a year older, I would think twice. Art demands space, light and silence.”

So what is going on here? Though the criticisms express considerable anger at the museum staff, this is not done directly, but is in fact focused on visitors. All the critics strongly imply that anyone who enjoyed these exhibitions is somehow not a good enough person to be in an art gallery. If they liked the videos and the costume and the theatricality of the *Birth of Impressionism*, if they thought the shipyard sets were evocative, if they thought the eclectic mix in GoMA exciting, then they are punters, they can't take their art neat, they have a mental age of four, and are so weak-minded that they might be damaged by the exhibition; they are the kind of ghouls who would enjoy public executions. This kind of exhibition, the critics say, is no longer for us, who belong here, but for them, who don't. *They are simply not good enough to visit our museum.*

So the first question for any museum to answer is, “Who is not good enough to visit?” No one will answer this explicitly, but you will know from your demographic who they are. These people are often described as non-attenders or non-visitors. Many of them may indeed be people who would feel at home in museums but exercise their democratic right to find museums boring and to spend their time elsewhere. However, many non-attenders are potentially interested in museums, but they know from the unconscious signals museums give

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off that they won't be made welcome. These are the people the museum has decided are not good enough to attend. When we asked people in the neighbourhood of the Burrell Collection, why they didn't go, they said it was too expensive to go in. It is and always has been free. We were somehow communicating that if you couldn't afford to pay an entrance fee you wouldn't be welcome. The non-existence of the entrance fee was irrelevant to this powerful message. The Burrell Collection is a very traditional art museum and one of the key ways it communicates who is welcome is by being boring. Which brings us to the next question.

3. Why are some of our museums boring, not by accident, but by intention?

Perhaps I can explain what I mean by looking at another temporary exhibition we did in 1996. This was a major show about Glasgow-born architect Charles Rennie Mackintosh that toured to the Metropolitan Museum in New York, the Art Institute of Chicago and to the LA County Museum. The New York Times reviewed both the Glasgow and the Met's installation and expressed puzzlement at the change. The Glasgow installation they described as "ravishing," the French designers shaping the Victorian galleries to capture the style and sensuality of the furniture and the interiors. The presentation in the Met was dull in comparison. I wasn't involved in this exhibition—I was the lowly head of the social history section at the time—but my fantasy is that the staff from the Met walked around our exhibition and said to themselves, "This is all very well, but it isn't boring enough. For this to work in the Met it needs to be more boring. How can we make it more boring?" They made it more boring by presenting the objects in an unmodified gallery interior, and above all by removing the story of Mackintosh's relationship with his wife Margaret MacDonald. A significant artist in her own right, Margaret was a partner in many of Mackintosh's greatest creations and their intertwining lives and creativity was celebrated in the exhibition. Margaret was completely written out of the Met exhibition.

The underlying assumption amongst many museum staff, rarely spoken, is that museums are for people who are already educated in the same cultural background as the staff. Curators with this outlook tend to develop exhibitions in a way that mutes enthusiasm and narrows the focus to exclude human interest. "Boring" creates a fake academic respectability, and is not an accidental outcome—many

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museums that are boring achieve it intentionally. Boring displays have the great benefit of restricting intellectual access to the meaning of the works to those who are already knowledgeable. Boring assumes that museums are not in fact educational institutions; they are for people who are already educated.

So the question is where do we stand on the question of boredom? How boring do we want our museum to be? We choose boring every time we reject an idea for a display because of a worry about what our peers will think. We choose boring every time we reject a human-interest story because it might “trivialise the objects.” We choose boring every time we refuse the responsibility of explaining why particular objects are on display. We choose boring every time we refuse to provide introductory information for novice visitors on the grounds that it is dumbing down or patronising.

In the cultural welfare model, a small number of the uninitiated and their children are provided with some basic training in how to be a “good enough” museum visitor. Thus they are not really about developing museums so that they work for all citizens but are about making small adjustments to avoid any fundamental change. The welfare model was captured perfectly by a curator in the Prado in Madrid, who put it as follows: “We must not say that we are going to adapt the museum to the public. No, it is the public that must adapt to the museum.” This is completely different from the approach which sees education and access as central, and where all visitors from the most to the least educated are treated as having a right to be there. In a model based on museums having a comprehensive social obligation, museums aim to provide learning experiences to all citizens who are potentially interested in visiting. Are we serious about access and education being at the heart of our museums, or is it a form of appeasement, appeasement of funders, liberal consciences or board members? Which brings us to the fourth question.

4. Who are we really willing to share our collection with?

Glasgow's eleven civic museums receive about three million visits annually. About a million of these visits come from the city, with half of those from working-class communities. This is unusually high, but we reckon about a third of the city's white working class population and about fifty percent of the city's minority ethnic population don't use our museums because they don't feel welcome. How far are we

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prepared to go to provide them with access to the city's collection? Wherever we draw the line is that museum's Acceptable Level of Exclusion. I often think you could devise a numerical test for some museums—the Acceptable Level of Exclusion Quotient, or ALEQ, based on comparing its actual and potential audiences. The ALEQ would be a formula that identified the percentage of each racial, disability and ethnic group that was acceptable as visitors, combined with the minimum level of education and income required of visitors.

What is your museum's Acceptable Level of Exclusion?

In 1990 we decided that the first step to sharing our collections with everyone was to take them out to where people live, where they gather in surroundings they feel at home in or where they go through necessity. We set up an Outreach Department, called the Open Museum, which delivers museum services to non-museum venues throughout the city. We do not use duplicate objects; we use the registered collection. Exhibitions are made in partnership with community groups, and toured to hospitals, homes for the elderly, schools, prisons, and shopping malls. Smaller handling kits are used in homes for the elderly and by reminiscence groups. We do 1,000 loans a year, and we have over 200 organisations that regularly use the service. Last year, the UK Museums, Libraries and Archives commission funded an assessment by Leicester University of the Open Museum to assess its effectiveness. The University researchers did follow up interviews with people who had worked with the Open Museum over its first ten years. They found considerable evidence that it made a real difference to people's lives, not only improving their sense of personal self-confidence, improving school grades and inspiring creativity, but also eliciting a sense that the participants had as much a right as anyone else to use the resources of museums.

For over ten years the Open Museum did excellent work, but we slowly realized that it had become a ghetto, an add-on facility that salved our consciences, provided photo opportunities and won awards. Given the scale of Glasgow's problems and the scale of the assets in our museums, we decided we needed to take radical steps and spread the Open Museum philosophy throughout the museum service. As well as taking objects out to people we wanted everyone to be able to visit our international class venues, and be sure they would be made welcome there. Within our existing budget, we redirected funding to create an additional thirty-six education and access curatorial posts, giving us a total of forty-five: the largest education department amongst UK museums. The restructuring also included additional conservation and curatorial staff, and a new research department.



This restructuring coincided with a decision to move on in terms of the debates about the social obligation of museums. We made a conscious decision that we needed to transcend futile debates between elitism and access, between traditional standards of conservation and research and new standards of inclusiveness. This was important for two reasons. First it connects with the Victorian origins of museums—many of the great museums were founded with philanthropic ideals that would make the wildest dreams of today’s supporters of social inclusion seem un-ambitious. Reconnecting with this tradition gives us a very strong feeling that we are building on something from within rather than having to choose between traditions that are valuable in different ways. There is no necessary conflict between curatorial, conservation and academic standards and standards of access and learning. The other benefit is that we could get on with dealing with important issues of controversy in the big world outside museums, rather than being the focus of controversy ourselves. Which brings us to question number five.

5. What community issues can we engage with through our collection?

In 1990 the museums department was asked to rescue this building—a visitor center for the medieval Cathedral, which had run out of money. The original suggestion was that it would be a museum of medieval art, of which we have an excellent collection in the Burrell Collection. This seemed to me to be misguided and to miss an opportunity. Why would you want two museums of medieval art? If the meaning of the building was the religious origin of Glasgow, why couldn’t we address the issue of religion as a whole? As a city of the British Empire our collections represented cultures from all over the world, and most art and archaeology collections are religious anyway. The initial reaction from some colleagues was doubtful. “What a Ghastly idea,” wrote one conservator, “putting all these objects that have nothing to do with each other into one place.” The others said, “If there are no other museums of religion, it’s for a very good reason. There’ll be trouble. There’ll be letters, possibly something in the papers.” And there were those who thought no one really was interested in religion—the world has left that kind of thing behind. This latter group has proved most wrong—tragically in many ways, even if religion had been in decline it is now back with a vengeance. Religious hatred and intolerance is alive and well. Religion is also code for race in lots of instances, and racial and religious hatreds often overlap. The City Council however was not afraid of

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controversy, and when they learned that it would be the first museum of religion in the UK and one of only three in the world, they accepted the idea. The purpose of the museum, which is stated in the foyer, is to promote mutual respect and understanding amongst people of all faiths and none. This divided the subject into three main themes—the Gallery of Religious Art, The Life Gallery and the Scottish Gallery. The first took a very aesthetic approach, while the latter two took a cultural historical view, though all three included objects from across the wide range of the city's collections—paintings (including Salvador Dali's Christ of St John of the Cross), Nottingham alabasters and Italian majolica as well as African masks, Islamic prayer rugs and Buddhist Thangkas. The museum is in general celebratory of humanity's search for meaning, but it would have been bland and shallow if it had not acknowledged in some way that religion is a force for destructiveness as well. There are six or eight references to the destructive force of religion, from the Holocaust to female genital mutilation. This element of shadow throws the whole of the rest of the museum into relief.

We have repositioned our Gallery of Modern art, moving away from a kind of conservative populism, to looking at art that reaches a wide audience because it addresses issues of widespread concern. In April this year we opened a major exhibition called *Sanctuary*, dealing with asylum seekers and abuses of human rights. In 2005 we will do a major exhibition on violence against women and in 2007 we will do a show on cities divided by religion, from Belfast to Jerusalem. *Sanctuary* got rave reviews from many of the critics whom I quoted earlier, which is good news, not just because it takes the pressure off us, but because it focuses attention on the issues and above all because it proves that you don't have to compromise standards to engage with difficult subjects or with new audiences.

Religion and human rights are universal and are only two of many issues which museums could address, but which they rarely do for fear of peer disapproval or public controversy. Most often this self-censorship is unjustified—and controversy is not such a bad thing anyway. Museums are full of erotic art, but its power is suppressed, just as the spiritual power of religious art is treated almost with embarrassment. Many museums have collections of weapons, arms and armour, but they are portrayed as art or technology. The suggestion that they were used for killing people is never mentioned. In Glasgow we have done exhibitions on *The Bombing of Pan Am Flight 103*, which fell out of the sky onto the village of Lockerbie in Scotland, *Gay and Lesbian history of Glasgow*, *Religion and Science as comparable belief systems*, and the *Veil in Islam*. In a world where there are museums of the Holocaust, Museums of Human Rights,

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Museums of Freudian Psychoanalysis, of the Armenian Genocide, there is practically nothing that we can't address. Starting from what is important for our communities and looking at our collections in that light will not only produce exhibitions which engage with different sections of our communities, but also provide a stimulus to museum creativity.

In Glasgow we feel we are really only at the beginning of exploring the potential of the museum as a force for change. The projects I have described today are interesting experiments and we now have an idea of what works. To make a real difference we have to apply the results consistently over years, and on a scale where the impact on individuals is sufficient to make an impact on communities. A key element in this is to build partnerships with all sorts of other organisations, from the National Gallery in London, to the Social Work Department in Glasgow, from the public library network to homes for the elderly. In Dewey's terms, museums on their own simply don't have the resources to provide the cumulative experiences which will equip and encourage people to achieve their growth potential—but we can help them along the way in their journey out of exclusion. We hope we can make a difference by them along their way, to help them to grow in their own terms—not try to force them to take paths based on our preconceptions. What is fundamental is that what we do is part of a pathway, not a separate experience provided within the museum blinkers. The *Sanctuary* exhibition finished last week—but the workshops will continue for six months. The focus in these will be to enable any of the 700 people who have taken part to continue involvement in other more mainstream programmes in other museums or in community colleges or libraries. To conclude I would like to move on to the final question.

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6. Do our museums help to create a more just community, or do they help maintain the current level of injustice?

Underlying everything I said is a more fundamental question. We can work towards all the experiences we offer being positive in enabling individuals to grow, we can act on the principle that everyone who might wish to visit is good enough to do so without passing a test, we can view our boring displays as a mistake which we wish to correct rather than a deliberate barrier, we can determine to share the collection with as many people as possible and to engage with important subjects in the real world. If we do this we would be



making our unique contribution towards creating a more just society. So the question is why would we do this? Why should we bother?

Museums are busy with lots of other things, and we can go on doing a bit of outreach and good education programmes without trying to engage in a complete transformation of the museum and taking on the problems of the world. The suggestion that museums have an obligation other than to provide opportunities for the already educated, with a cultural welfare programme to appease our consciences, often elicits the response that we are not social workers, it is not our job to compensate for the inadequacies of the state education system or to get involved with politics. We will do our share, but we have other priorities as well—preserving and researching the collection, fundraising and exhibiting and so on.

Almost all museums are publicly funded, either through taxpayer's money, or through tax relief on charitable contributions. In our mission statements and in our funding applications we claim that museums are somehow essential to the self-definition of our society. Museums seem to form some crucial element of our societal consciousness, perhaps the equivalent of elements of an individual's memory, cultural identity and creative imagination. Theories of social justice provide no basis for limiting this fundamental function to any particular group. And while museums will want to stay clear of party or partisan politics, they cannot avoid "politics" in the sense of the process through which scarce social goods are distributed. We compete for money with children's charities, hospitals, and international aid agencies. We cannot pretend we are not part of the world. We cannot say we are doing our bit by funding educational programming and preserving the rest of the museum unscathed from the impact of the world. No amount of programming can change the overall message of a museum, in terms of the fundamental experience it provides. Unless the museum is committed to its social obligations at its very heart, and sees these as seamlessly integrated with research, conservation and exhibition, people will know this. They may come to our workshops—or more likely, they will be brought to our workshops by their teachers or group leaders—but the bottom line is that they will not come back of their own volition, with their families and friends unless they know they are genuinely welcome. Unless we work constantly and consciously to undermine all the subtle barriers which form the Acceptable Level of Exclusion, existing patterns of use and existing patterns of exclusion will be reinforced by everything we do. Any organization that is not working to break down barriers to access is actively maintaining them. Neutrality on whether museums should contribute to the creation of a more just society is not possible.

Museums cannot avoid politics in the sense of the process through which scarce social goods are distributed. We cannot pretend we are not part of the world.

