

ART MUSEUMS AND THE PUBLIC

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Introduction

This is one of a series of papers prepared by the Smithsonian's Office of Policy and Analysis to brief members of the Smithsonian Council in advance of their November, 2001 meeting on Smithsonian art museums. Preparation for this paper included interviews with art museum staff, some from inside the Smithsonian and some from outside the Smithsonian.

The Activities of Art Museums

The official definition of a museum, according to the grant guidelines for the Institute of Museum and Library Services, is:

"an organized and permanent nonprofit institution, essentially educational or aesthetic in purpose, with professional staff, which owns and utilizes tangible objects, cares for them, and exhibits them to the public on some regular schedule."

The International Council of Museums (ICOM) defines a museum as:

"a nonprofit making, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study education and enjoyment, material evidence of humans and their environment."

The American Association of Museums (AAM), however, has altered its official definition to insist only on the use of objects, not on their ownership. To be a museum, in its definition, is to meet the following requirements:

- be a legally organized not-for-profit institution or part of a not-for-profit institution or government entity;
- be essentially educational in nature;
- have a formally stated mission;
- have one full-time paid professional staff member who has museum knowledge and experience and is delegated authority and allocated financial resources sufficient to operate the museum effectively;
- present regularly scheduled programs and exhibits that use and interpret objects for the public according to accepted standards;
- have a formal and appropriate program of documentation, care, and use of collections and/or tangible objects;
- have a formal and appropriate program of presentation and maintenance of exhibits.

These definitions provide a basic skeleton of three principle functions: collection, research, and public programs. The collection function includes owning objects, conserving them, preserving them, and storing them in a way that is likely to maximize their longevity. The research function provides expertise in connoisseurship, identification, interpretation and scholarship. The public program function encompasses display, exhibition, interpretation, communication, and programs directed to specific audiences, such as school children and teachers.

Collecting and Preserving

Although most people probably consider the collection to be the essential element in defining an art museum, this is not always the case. There are forms of art institutions in Europe and America that function as art museums in nearly every respect but one -- they do not own collections. These organizations, sometimes called "Kunsthalle," "Art Galleries," or "Alternative Spaces," present exhibitions, publish, and engage the public, usually with contemporary art. In Europe, where they are relatively more common, they are sometimes more active than museums, more adventuresome, more relevant, and more integral to the creative life of a city. They have had less impact in America, where the prestige of a collection seems to carry more weight in the advancement of an organization than the daring of its programs. Institutions in America that began as Kunsthalle, e.g., the Miami Art Museum, tend over time to acquire collections and re-establish themselves as museums.

The Smithsonian's art museums were established primarily as the repositories of existing collections, except for the National Portrait Gallery. As public organizations, they are conceptually more limited than private institutions. In particular, from a legal point of view, their roles in maintaining and preserving the collections is set forth as the core function that cannot be delegated or contracted (unlike virtually all the other functions of the museum).

Research

Research in art museums is rarely undertaken for its own sake. It is usually linked to either the collection function or the public program function. Although there are often close relationships between museums and academic institutions (many of which have art museums of their own), in recent years there has been a more marked divide between research done in museums and research done in universities. Art historical discourse within academic circles has moved farther from the physical manifestation of the object and closer to its imagery and social context, while museum curators, driven by the needs of acquisition and exhibition, have maintained their base in connoisseurship and identification. On the museum side this growing division has created some difficulty in cases where "peer reviews" in museums have been conducted by colleagues from academia rather than from other museums. On the university side it has discouraged scholars from writing exhibition catalogues, because such publications are not counted toward tenure requirements.

Public Programs

Public programs, especially exhibitions, have been a prominent function among American art museums, which typically describe themselves as educational institutions. Exhibitions are generally thought of as a medium of this educational aim. Nonetheless, museum education is not clearly defined, and its meaning varies widely over time and among museums. At the simplest level, an art exhibition's educational function is taken to mean communicating the facts of art history to a visiting public, but few museums would be content with such a narrow definition. More broadly the exhibition goal is thought to include such disparate activities as arousing curiosity, stimulating imagination and creativity, affirming identity, developing interpretive skills, raising levels of taste, inculcating ideas about culture, teaching history, expanding horizons, providing informal learning opportunities, evoking personal epiphanies, arousing aesthetic and emotional responses, etc.

Establishing and Maintaining a Balance of Functions

In the concept of an art museum the three fundamental functions of collection, research, and public program are intimately bound up with one another, and the museum's management, usually its director, strives to create and maintain an appropriate balance among them. That balance usually determines the style and character of the museum and can vary widely. From a resource point of view it seems that these three dimensions are, on average, well balanced in American museums. Consider, for example, Table 1, which compares the program costs in art purchases, curatorial programs, and exhibition programs at the Smithsonian art museums with the average costs of those programs at 200 of America's leading art museums (members of the Association of Art Museum Directors, AAMD).¹

This data leaves out important, lesser expenses, such as the cost of conservation, storage, and education. It does not specify where publication costs are assigned, or what portion of curatorial program properly belongs to the collection function and what part to the exhibition function, but it still suggests that American art museums on average spend more on purchasing art than on either their curatorial or exhibition programs. Even so, the prices of art are so high at present that it is unreasonable to expect that any museum, even the best-endowed, could acquire significant numbers of the most important art objects.

Nonetheless, we can note that the Hirshhorn (HMSG) spends far above the average on its art purchases, while the National Museum of African Art (NMAfA) and the National Portrait Gallery (NPG) spend far below average on art purchases. Only the Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM) and NPG spent substantially more than the average amount on their exhibition programs.

¹ All AAMD data in this paper are taken from the various annual reports of the AAMD Statistical Survey. This data is submitted by the individual museums.

Table 1
Costs of Key Programs at Smithsonian Art Museums and AAMD Averages
(in millions of dollars)

Museum	Program	1999	AAMD Average	Percent of average
HMSG	Cost of Purchases	3.8	1.8	211%
	Curatorial	1.3	1.3	100%
	Exhibition	0.7	1.3	54%
FSG	Cost of Purchases	1.8	1.8	100%
	Curatorial	2.8	1.3	215%
	Exhibition	1.4	1.3	108%
NMAfA	Cost of Purchases	0.3	1.8	17%
	Curatorial	0.9	1.3	69%
	Exhibition	1.3	1.3	100%
SAAM	Cost of Purchases	1.3	1.8	72%
	Curatorial	2.8	1.3	215%
	Exhibition	1.6	1.3	123%
NPG	Cost of Purchases	0.4	1.8	22%
	Curatorial	1.0	1.3	77%
	Exhibition	1.5	1.3	115%

The debate of how to balance collection, research, and public programs was an active one at the Smithsonian a generation ago. In 1969, Secretary Dillon Ripley stressed the educational role of museums, while in 1975, W.E. Washburn, Director of the Office of American Studies at the Smithsonian, held that the primary aim should be research publications.² One of the clearest and most consistent voices on this topic has been that of Smithsonian scholar, Stephen E. Weil, who wrote in 1989 that,

We must start with the proposition that the museum's *raison d'être* is to provide an important public benefit, to have an important impact on the lives of others -- not merely to provide a custodial or scholarly service -- and we must then proceed to inquire into what the nature of that benefit and that impact might be.³

² Ripley, S.D. (1969) *The Sacred Grove: Essays on museums*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
Washburn, W.E. (1975) "Do Museum's Educate" *Curator*, 18(3), p. 211-218.

³ Weil, S.E. (1990) "The proper business of the museum: Ideas or thing?" in *Rethinking the museum and other meditations*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, p. 50.

Weil's position has become an increasingly familiar one in the museum world. Although the exact nature of the "public benefit" function is not much clearer now than it was ten years ago, there seems to be widespread agreement that the effect that museums have on their visitors is likely to become the central priority for museums of all kinds, including art museums. As one non-SI museum director put it recently, "At one time we occupied the position on top of the hill and said, 'we have the collection and when you are ready, come to us to use it.' Then we realized that that's perhaps not enough." The emphasis on public responsibility puts public programs at the heart of the museum's activity.

The Outcomes of Art Museum Activities

Understanding the impact of exhibitions

Exhibitions are the principal public programs of museums. They reach far more people than other types of public programs, such as school group tours, workshops, film presentations, lectures, or symposia. An exhibition is an organized, self-conscious display. Exhibitions are usually produced with a sense of some intention, an aim that the planners wish to achieve. Most frequently this goal is increased awareness and appreciation of some type or aspect of art. The purpose can be as specific as the development of a known artist's work over a limited period, or as general as the concept of worship as expressed in the art of a broad and complex culture. In the words of a noted curator and scholar, "Art museums have exhibitions that keep culture alive. They state art in terms of new research, attesting new prejudices, keeping touch with a constantly changing state of society. Like something alive. But exhibitions are the life of those museums, not the objects, not the research."

Audience Research

Over the last 25 years, many museums have engaged in studying the impact of their exhibitions on their visitors. More of this work has been done in science museums than in art museums, and it has tended to focus on learning. The research has been primarily evaluative, comparing outcomes with intentions, and has been directed towards improving the mechanisms of presentation so that desired outcomes are more likely. Because so many of these investigations have taken place within the intellectual framework of the museum and its aims, they have not brought about substantial change, except in design and texts. The studies have taught us, for example, that labels should be short, layered, and legible, that exhibition paths should be clear and logical, that learning is more likely when ideas are focused and repeated, and that many visitors need orientation to the subject matter or a context in which to grasp it.

Measuring against aims

One of the most striking results of this generation-worth of museum audience studies is that the explicit aims of exhibition planners are rarely achieved to any significant degree. In study after study at the Smithsonian, in all types of settings, researchers found that the central goals of the exhibition team (which are usually learning goals) were rarely met for more than half of the visitors, except in those cases where most visitors entered the museum already possessing the knowledge that the museum wanted to communicate. Rather than questioning their aims, most museums, at the Smithsonian and elsewhere, reacted to such results by attempting to improve their exhibition designs and information delivery systems, and by downplaying the importance of such outcome measures.

Measuring experience

An alternative way to measure exhibition outcomes was developed out of the satisfying experiences of visitors without reference to museum intentions. This model, converted into an empirical survey instrument, revealed that there were four major types of experiences that visitors looked forward to and found satisfying in all museums, including art museums: object experiences (such as being moved by beauty or seeing the real thing), learning experiences (such as gaining new knowledge or understanding), reflective experiences (such as imagining other times or places, remembering, or reflecting on meaning), and social experiences (such as spending time with friends and family). These experiences are determined both by an individual's personal preference and by the kinds of experiences the museum encourages in its galleries. Among the Smithsonian art museums, this instrument was applied in depth only to Freer-Sackler visitors, where it demonstrated that there is equal interest among visitors in object experiences and in learning experiences, and lesser interest in reflective and social experiences in the current audience.

Community as an art museum responsibility

Exhibitions can only have an impact on those who choose to visit them. As the emphasis on the public dimension of art museums has increased, more attention has been given to those who do not already go to the museum. If the art museum is truly public, then it should affect more than a narrow segment of the community.

Demographics of visitors

Visitor surveys to capture demographic characteristics have become standard in museums of all kinds, including art museums. They have consistently shown that museum visitors are not representative of the population, but are more likely to be highly educated. Although attention is frequently given to the small portion of ethnic minorities within museum audiences, education, and the characteristics associated with education, are more closely correlated with museum visitation than ethnicity. The extreme example at the Smithsonian is the Freer-Sackler, where 44 percent of visitors have graduate degrees. The narrow demographic profile of art museum visitors is the most obvious indicator that the public benefit these organizations provide has been relatively limited.

Stimulating community involvement

The identification of the art museum audience as an educational elite conflicts directly with the idea that museums provide a broad public benefit. The museum community as a whole has responded to this challenge by promoting new kinds of programs and by engaging in wide-ranging research.

Programs and communities

Starting in 1995 the Pew Charitable Trusts started making large grants to eleven art museums across the country to "strengthen alliances with their communities and explore dynamic approaches to high-quality programming." Most of these grants have been used to either begin marketing efforts or to build on existing programs, such as artist-in-residence programs in museums of contemporary art. Typically these community programs grow directly out of the focus of the museum. The Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, for example, uses Warhol's art and life as its guide and has community projects and partnerships with Neighborhood Housing Services, Schenley High School (Warhol's alma mater), Artist Image Resource (a printmaking studio), the local Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network chapter, and the Carpatho-Rusyn Society.

Smithsonian art museums have been involved with their communities primarily through their education departments. For example, in the recent exhibition, *Worshipping the Ancestors*, the Sackler Gallery staff worked with high school students of Chinese descent to document contemporary ancestor-worship practices in Chinese communities. In association with an upcoming exhibition of African art, the staff at NMAfA are working with local black communities on documenting their initiation practices. Programs like these are first steps towards broadening the public benefit of museums, but are usually run as secondary activities, with very limited staffing, funding and visibility.

Community dialogues

The American Association of Museums, which now describes itself as "enhancing the ability of museums to serve the public interest," has conducted a series of five town meetings across America to discuss how museums can better serve their communities. The primary questions asked at these meetings include: How can we re-imagine the civic role of museums? How do we envision a museum that is at the heart of its community?

Meetings were held in Providence, Tampa, Los Angeles, Detroit and Wichita last year and this year. The following few, sample observations of dialogue participants highlight both the problems and the possibilities:⁴

- Museums are not neutral places. They are about things that matter, and they reflect the opinions and ideas of the people who manage them. Others should influence this process

⁴ See <http://www.aam-us.org/communitydialogues.htm>

- A museum's importance goes beyond its buildings and collections.
- The perception appears to be that museums are not community places.
- There is a rift between what museums present and what communities expect museums to present.
- Museums exist in large part in people's hearts and are part of their memories.
- There are physical and metaphorical barriers to visiting and enjoying museums.

Number of visits as a measure of outcome

When museums seek to demonstrate their public impact they often point to the number of visits. The underlying assumption is that number of visits is a reliable indicator of the public benefit that museums provide. Is this a valid assumption? There are reasons why we should be cautious about equating visit counts with public impact.

First, the number of visits is not the same as the number of people served. The Smithsonian museums as a whole, for example, record upwards of 30 million visits per year, but these visits represent approximately nine or ten million individuals, most of whom are entering multiple SI museums. Art museum audiences across America have been increasing over the last few decades probably because there are more museums and because museum-goers are making more visits per year. The audience as a whole for art museums may not have increased substantially.

Second, there is a need to distinguish between the quality of programs (i.e., the satisfaction they provide users), and the draw of such programs. Good advertising, with effective text and images, can increase the number of visits, but many of those visits are made by the same visitors who normally visit the museum, and the program itself might not have excited them as much as the promotion promised.

Third, while many believe that a shift in priority (and presumably resources) from collecting and research to exhibitions and community programs would result in more visits, the time-lag might be considerable, as the audience that had previously avoided the museum might need to change fundamental impressions of what the museum is and does.

Number of visits as a key to bringing earned income

For most American museums the desire to increase the number of visits at art museums is driven by the need for money from admissions, sales, exhibition entrance fees, and other sources of earned income. Led by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, whose business side generates a substantial portion of the museum's income, museums have learned that the more visits they have, the more income they can generate. Some museums have become so dependent on earned income sources that their annual budgets are constructed on the basis of their estimates of the number of visits per day and the average expenditure per

visit. Increased visits, however, do not have significant impact on the bottom line of the individual art museums at the Smithsonian, which have neither admission fees nor large business operations.

According to some museum managers, when a museum attempts to keep increasing its visits by promoting exhibitions as ever-more-special, once-in-a-lifetime events, its audience can come to view the museum in the way it views theaters or movie houses, i.e., as a venue for presentations, rather than as a destination of its own. A conceptual shift of this kind makes accurate estimates of future visits all the more difficult, since they depend on the relative popularity of exhibitions. And the more difficult estimates become, the more those museums will need to commit to programs that provide the most predictable results.

Approximately half of Smithsonian visitors are coming to a particular museum for the first time, and many others are arriving after a lapse of many years. They see the Smithsonian as a destination and many of them are unaware of special exhibitions when they arrive. Smithsonian art museums rely more on local residents for their visit counts, compared to other SI museums. As a result, the exhibition program can have a greater impact on their visit counts, since local residents can be made more aware of special exhibition schedules. This gives the art museums considerable latitude to develop and promote exhibitions that might appeal to larger numbers of people.

Number of visits to justify financial support

Increased visit counts are often used as an argument for increased financial support, especially in localities where the museum is a significant factor in the tourism economy. The economic argument for public support has been especially popular where it can be substantiated through the results of economic impact studies. In some cities the breadth of the audience, i.e., the demographic profile, can also be used to make an argument for increased government support.

Number of visits at Smithsonian Art Museums

When the number of visits at Smithsonian art museums are examined, we first note that compared to museums of similar types, SI art museums have relatively large visit counts. In 1999, for example, the Hirshhorn Museum had nearly as many visits as the Philadelphia Museum of Art, a general museum with a much larger space. Even when one takes into account the different sizes of the museums (by calculating the annual number of visits per square foot of total exhibition space), Smithsonian museums are doing very well, as shown in Table 2. All Smithsonian museums benefit from the overall image of the Smithsonian and from the high levels of tourism in Washington, D.C., especially on the National Mall.

Table 2
 Number of Visits and Total Exhibition Space for Selected AAMD Museums in 1999
 (exhibition space in square feet)

Rank	Museum	1999 Visits	Exhibit Space	Visits/sf
1	National Gallery of Art	6,713,000	234,596	29
2	Metropolitan Museum of Art	5,096,630	843,522	6
3	Museum of Modern Art	1,818,610	95,185	19
4	Museum of Fine Arts, Boston	1,700,000	196,540	9
5	Art Institute of Chicago	1,480,221	219,631	7
6	Los Angeles County Museum of Art	1,328,765	167,911	8
7	J. Paul Getty Museum	1,023,742	60,000	17
8	Art Gallery of Ontario	813,357	109,100	7
9	Walker Art Center	813,269	30,000	27
10	Philadelphia Museum of Art	801,417	129,761	6
11	Hirshhorn Museum	786,221	65,393	12
18	Freer and Sackler Galleries	599,696	41,935	14
19	Cleveland Museum of Art	596,399	89,858	7
21	Virginia Museum of Fine Arts	532,409	105,217	5
25	Smithsonian American Art Museum	488,764	55,930	9
26	National Portrait Gallery	432,323	30,348	14
34	Baltimore Museum of Art	277,589	81,600	3
42	Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago	248,797	79,341	3
51	National Museum of African Art	200,000	19,105	10
52	Asian Art Museum San Francisco	193,500	33,500	6
57	Modern Art Museum, Fort Worth	158,534	17,378	9
84	Musee d'art Contemporain de Montreal	108,822	33,005	3
87	Contemporary Arts Museum	99,231	10,600	9
91	New Museum of Contemporary Art	90,000	16,000	6
95	The Contemporary Museum, Honolulu	85,260	10,833	8
97	Dia Center for the Arts	81,356	58,204	1
114	Contemporary Arts Center	48,999	10,280	5
127	Southeastern Center of Contemporary Art	27,449	15,754	2

The view of SI art museum visit counts is less favorable when we look back across time. When these same museums are compared with the AAMD data from 1989, ten years earlier (Table 3), we see that, except for SAAM and NPG, Smithsonian art museums had lower numbers of visits in 1999 than in 1989. Many of the other comparable museums had increases during that same ten-year period.

Table 3
1989 and 1999 Visits at Selected AAMD Museums

Museum	1989	1999	% Change
J. Paul Getty Museum	383,763	1,023,742	167%
Modern Art Museum, Fort Worth	76,161	158,535	108%
Art Gallery of Ontario	457,242	913,357	100%
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston	864,273	1,700,000	97%
Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago	135,422	248,797	84%
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts	323,374	532,409	65%
Philadelphia Museum of Art	511,739	801,417	57%
Los Angeles County Museum of Art	950,833	1,328,765	40%
Walker Art Center	650,000	813,269	25%
Museum of Modern Art	1,456,986	1,818,610	25%
New Museum of Contemporary Art	75,000	90,000	20%
Smithsonian American Art Museum	408,684	488,764	20%
Cleveland Museum of Art	516,295	596,399	16%
National Portrait Gallery	378,719	432,323	14%
Metropolitan Museum of Art	4,585,554	5,096,630	11%
National Gallery of Art	6,221,682	6,713,000	8%
Art Institute of Chicago	1,619,131	1,480,221	-9%
Freer and Sackler Galleries	659,400	599,696	-9%
Baltimore Museum of Art	330,553	277,589	-16%
Hirshhorn Museum	1,048,103	786,221	-25%
Asian Art Museum San Francisco	389,292	193,500	-50%
Nat'l Museum of African Art	500,000	200,000	-60%
Musee d'art Contemporain de Montreal	na	108,822	na
Contemporary Arts Museum	na	99,231	na
The Contemporary Museum, Honolulu	na	85,260	na
Dia Center for the Arts	na	81,356	na
Contemporary Arts Center	na	48,999	na
Southeastern Center of Contemporary Art	na	27,449	na

The trend is clear when we compare visit counts at SI art museum buildings over the last five years. Using Smithsonian visit counts, in Table 4, we see that in the last six years only the Cooper-Hewitt has consistently had annual visit counts higher than the museum's average for the previous five years (1990-1994). NMAfA attendance, in particular, has declined to the point that by 2000 it was only 57% of the average attendance between 1990 and 1994. Clearly there is significant room for improvement, even to reach recent levels.

Table 4
Annual Visit Counts in Smithsonian Art Museums and Overall
(in percent of each museum's 1990-1994 average*)

	Sackler	Freer	HMSG	NMAfA	SAAM&NPG	Renwick	CHNDM	SI Overall
1990-94 Avg	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
1995	64%	97%	89%	75%	78%	80%	closed	93%
1996	66%	68%	85%	64%	71%	80%	closed	88%
1997	65%	67%	93%	62%	93%	98%	96%	107%
1998	77%	76%	98%	64%	107%	96%	127%	112%
1999	88%	80%	90%	69%	93%	99%	111%	111%
2000	71%	76%	104%	57%	closed	107%	115%	122%

*Freer closed 1990-1993. Average is for 1993 and 1994 only.

Some Implications of a Focus on Public Benefit

What are some implications for Smithsonian art museums if they follow the national trend towards a focus on public benefit, and an emphasis on public programs and increased visits?

Leadership

As emphasis has shifted from what Weil referred to as the museums "custodial and scholarly" functions, there has been a change from the tradition of selecting directors from among curatorial staff. (An interesting exception to this common pattern is the Toledo Museum of Art which has traditionally been led by directors with backgrounds in museum education.) More museum directors are coming from areas outside of the museum, such as university administration, or from non-curatorial areas inside the museum. Whatever their backgrounds, it is reasonable to expect that directors called upon to lead their organization through cultural change into new models of institutional purpose will need to have strong, personal commitments to public service, no less than to a particular subject matter.

Structure

Art museums serious about enhancing their public role may also need to reconsider their internal structures to better express their priorities. How are decisions about public programs to be made? Must exhibition subjects be determined solely by the interests of the museum's research staff? Who will be responsible for maintaining the dialogue with present and prospective visitors? Will the dialogue function be called marketing? Program research? Audience research? What role will those specialists play in directing the museum's program plans? What role can be shared with the public directly?

Ultimately, it might even be necessary to review the subject matter distinctions that currently separate museums. If the aim of a museum is to serve a public that is often less interested in the authorship and style of an art object than in the culture that gave rise to it, or the meaning that is currently found in it, there may be little practical reason to maintain the subject matter boundaries that museums have inherited from the departmental structure of academic institutions.

Less radically, art museums could learn from the model of the National Portrait Gallery, which is staffed by specialists in both art and history. One senior museum manager outside the Smithsonian who was interviewed recently suggested that it may now be time to remove the distinction between curatorial and education staff, so that all the museum's professional staff can be focused directly on the needs of visitors.

Public Programs vs. Education

Smithsonian art museums face a special challenge in determining how they will define the public they serve. Which public activities will be focused on local populations, and which on national populations? Such choices should arise out of the visions of the individual museums. SAAM, for example, has focused strongly on national audiences, while NPG has given more attention to the local community. In times of limited resources, it is unlikely that a museum will be equally capable of serving all possible populations.

Web-based Programs

Websites, interactive teleconferencing, and other technologically-based forms of public service will become increasingly important. As with visit counts in museum buildings, the number of users is a measure of activity, but not a good measure of outcome. There is a serious need to more efficiently and accurately measure the benefits of electronic media, so that resources can be moved towards those that are most effective, not just those that generate the most activity.

Community Affairs

Some museums have found that it is very difficult to change the image and role of the museums in their communities without establishing a long-term, well-staffed, and imaginative program within the museum to carry out this function. Initially such a

program brings local groups into the museum for reasons that seem unrelated to the institution's purpose, such as, to have regularly scheduled meetings in a safe, convenient environment. As groups begin to feel a sense of ownership and belonging in the environment, the museum can also help them to find ways to use the experience of the art to meet their needs. One director expressed the desire that his museum be "a resource to the community" like a medieval cathedral, where many different kinds of events can take place.

As a museum becomes more involved in the community, it is compelled to take more of a leadership role. As one director pointed out, " we are being asked -- no it is insisted -- that we join the body politic, be civic leaders, not the kind that just sit back and wait, but help to define what the quality of life is in our communities. Not just connoisseurship, which runs in our veins, as our DNA, but how can we use these objects to take us to one intellectual destination or another in culture."

Community Dialogue

If a museum wants to seriously address its public role, it needs to find a way to engage in an extensive, prolonged, multi-faceted dialogue with that public. There needs to be a way for the museum to listen, especially to those who do not believe that the museum has anything to offer them. And there needs to be a way for the museum to respond to what it hears. There are existing models, ranging from the town meeting to an individual who serves as a kind of ambassador from the museum to local community groups.

Audience Feedback

In addition to listening to prospective audiences, museums also need to improve their ability to learn from their existing audiences. Each museum should have staff whose responsibility is to obtain audience feedback of all kinds, from the most basic to the most subtle. And there should be a way to include that feedback into the deliberation of the museum's managers at the highest level.

Performance Measures

Following trends in the business community, museums have become much more interested in establishing performance measures (i.e., objective, numerical data that track the success of an organization in achieving a defined goal.) Unfortunately there are some major drawbacks to this approach in a museum environment.

First, symptoms are often measured, not the phenomena themselves. Visit count, for example, like temperature, can suggest that something unusual is happening when it is especially high or especially low, but it does not tell you whether the public benefit of that activity has increased or decreased.

Second, any statistical measure, at best, is a poor guide to action because it is affected by so many factors, known and unknown. Take for example, the Visitors per Square Foot of Exhibition Space statistic used in Table 1. Any museum could improve that statistic by closing gallery space.

Third, any measure that is meant to assess a response among visitors is a complex interaction between the particular individuals who are responding and the situation that they are responding to. Some museums, for example, have started using visitor surveys with satisfaction scales to measure their performance. Comparisons of such scores are meaningful only when they come from the same audience. At the Smithsonian we know that audiences change with the seasons. The same museum will receive different satisfaction ratings depending on the time of year. Then can we call it a measure of performance? Or is it a measure of the level of dedication of that particular audience? Or some complex interaction between the two?

More resources for public purposes

Despite the desire for greater public service, museums might find it difficult to assemble the necessary resources. How will they pay for the community-relations staff, marketers, audience researchers and other specialties that they need? What current activities will be reduced, if ceilings are not raised? In museums with admissions fees and strong business activities, these expenses might be recouped from increased visits, but Smithsonian art museums, several of which are seriously hampered financially, would have a difficult time.

Broader exhibition agendas

Without significantly increasing resources, Smithsonian art museums could re-shape the nature of their exhibition programs to make them more interesting and accessible to audiences. In some cases this might require the participation of researchers outside the museum. For example, some visitors in the Hirshhorn indicated that they were interested in going to the Sackler Gallery to see the exhibition called *Worshipping the Ancestors*, because they were interested in the cultural and social dimensions of the topic. The exhibition, however, was less about the concept of ancestor worship than it was about the particular set of Imperial Ancestor portraits that the museum had recently acquired. A broader exhibition concept might have made the exhibition more compelling to some visitors.

More innovative design

If art museums are going to expect to draw more visitors from a wider range of the community, they will need to invest in more innovative design. For example, a number of museums, perhaps most notably the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, have tried to deal with the lack of children in their museums by building galleries that are approachable, unusual, and interactive, and specifically designed to attract families.

Potential Difficulties

Internal Cultural Changes

Cultural changes are required if art museums are to be more responsive to their actual and potential publics. As one museum specialist put it, " There is a discrepancy between what the staff know about what museums should be doing and a willingness to let go of their previous habits and do it. Leadership can affect this culture, but the main problem is habit."

Re-envisioning the mission

A clear vision of the museum's future direction is a critical instrument for substantive change. A number of art museums redefined their mission in the 90's to make the public dimension more central. Here are two samples from Minneapolis:

"The Minneapolis Institute of Arts is dedicated to national leadership in bringing *art* and *people* together to discover, enjoy, and understand the world's diverse artistic heritage."

"The Walker Art Center is a catalyst for the creative expression of artists and the active engagement of audiences."

These changes came about as the result of extensive strategic planning processes involving both staff and board. The challenge is to find a way to express the aim of public service within the framework of the museum's mission as an arts institution. As one director put it, " I want to hold the line that we are a visual arts organization, not a social service organization, but we can work with them, bringing them the resources that the visual arts can bring, whether for therapy, self-esteem, etc."

Rethinking "quality"

The operations of some Smithsonian art museums are deeply affected by a concept of quality that discourages innovation, experimentation, and flexibility. If museums are going to find ways to connect with new audiences, they will have to experiment. Many of those experiments will fail and many will have to look very different from what is currently being done. Unless the museums are willing to take such chances, they will not change.

Directors will also have to take risks with their own image. In the words of one interviewee, " The people who run museums have to be willing to appear to be popularizers, if their purpose is to help people understand more about the art."

Meeting diverse needs

Range of expectations and desires

If the range of art museum publics expands, the diversity of visitors' interests will widen significantly. This may be a serious problem for Smithsonian art museums, each of which presently promotes a relatively limited range of experiences within its galleries. If experience options increase haphazardly and without some plan or underlying order, the museum may seem chaotic and confusing. Public spaces may need to be re-thought and re-ordered, not from the perspective of the usual categories (such as permanent collection vs. special exhibition), but from the point of view of the types of experiences that the museum will provide or the types of audiences that they want to serve.

Range of familiarity

If new audiences develop, there will be more people in the museum with lesser levels of prior knowledge of the subject matter. They will enter side-by-side with the highly educated, knowledgeable audiences of the past. Methods need to be devised to serve each of these groups effectively and appropriately, signaling to each that they are respected and valued as visitors, despite their differences.