

"Museums acquire and study objects of historic and aesthetic value which serve to illustrate certain developments and trends, and from these select objects and exhibit them in installations planned to inspire and educate the public" (Encyclopedia Britannica).

Museums are in essence a collection of collections which were born of a 19th century desire for knowledge. Gradually, throughout the century a record of Man's artistic, technological and scientific achievements were built up and from these humble beginnings grew a desire to provide prestigious places of culture where citizens could visit "to instruct and improve themselves". Museums were regarded as institutions which were more concerned with aesthetics and conservation than with popular education and very little encouragement was given to the children to visit their local museum.

Attitudes changed slowly and it wasn't until the 'fifties that a large network of Museum Schools Services had developed throughout the country. It is interesting to note that the museums' contribution towards formal education was specifically based on the provision of activities for schools, as if this was the only educational field in which museums had a part to play.

Museums are clearly intended to serve the public at large but many adults have never entered a museum nor are encouraged to do so. Those who do venture as far as the local museum, usually to shelter from the inclement weather, are usually confronted by a large, austere, cathedral-like building with a forbidding ornate entrance and a multiplicity of warning notices served to put off all but the brave. After entering and venturing as far as the front hall, the public are confronted with a uniformed attendant and regimented glass cases containing a miscellany of objects, often bearing no relationship to the adjacent case or to any reality, past or present. These are the remnants of the Victorian establishment which had a somewhat elitist view of education in museums.

Fortunately this exclusive attitude towards the public is being modified, albeit slowly, and most museums today are making increasing efforts to come to terms with the increasing numbers of school children and adults who form not only their new public but a source of income.

But whatever else our museums do well today, they still do not provide the visitor with a good educational experience. The basic problem seems that the meaning and significance of the exhibits tend to be lost on the generally uninformed lay visitor. A display may be full of meaning to the visitor who already happens to know something of the subject matter, but this type of visitor is by no means typical of the general public for whom such exhibitions are laid on. The great number of visitors simply wander in, tour the galleries and leave in a state of bemusement, having learned very little.

The most obvious failure of museums today, is their inability to create exhibits which communicate. Too much emphasis is placed on the display of the object rather than on the transmission of ideas and when attempts are made to transmit ideas very little consideration is given to the needs and interests of the public. Labels are either too brief or too long, explanatory captions or wallcharts explain nothing, children are unable to see the displays and viewing distances of large objects are often cumbersome.

Misjudgements of this kind are inexcusable as they could easily be avoided at almost no financial cost to the establishment.

In their quest for new techniques in education and interpretation museums are in danger of overloading their displays with audio-visual paraphernalia, drowning the objects under a mass of 'gobbly-gook'.

Audio-visual aids may brighten the displays and enlighten the visitor but they also bring other technical problems in their wake which may mean that the solution is more trouble than the original problem!

The museum has so much potential to offer in providing variety of methods through which the school and adult visitor can receive insight into and enjoyment of its collections. The interdisciplinary possibilities of these collections, together with the services of multidisciplinary staff expertise open up exciting and limitless potential learning situations. The casual visitor visits the museum more out of curiosity 'to see what they've got', and this underlines the unique and fundamental attraction of museums. They collect real objects ranging from pictures to pots and from bronzes to dinosaurs, which when correctly displayed will stimulate the curiosity and we hope invoke a demand for some form of follow-up.

Today with the ever-increasing demands made by schools the whole concept of education in museums is changing. The former traditional techniques of talks, lectures and displays no longer suffice and the museum's educational role has become more complex. A great deal of progress has been made but still major

problems of curatorial, teacher and committee indifference remain.