



## THE NEW PARADIGM IS ALREADY HERE

Among all the avenues for thought opened by the meaty "Creativity" issue (Spring 1999), I was especially struck by the call for a new paradigm of museology put forth by editor Jay Rounds in "Creating Creative Exhibits" (1999:35). The challenge took me by surprise because I had been under the impression that the profession had already entered an era driven by a "new set of fundamentals." I think we haven't yet begun to see this paradigm shift for what it is because we haven't yet settled on a descriptive name that can adequately cover all its ramifications. And, perhaps more to the point, we haven't yet developed a toolbox of workable exhibition strategies for putting it into practice.

Cultural historian Neil Harris took notice of the shift a decade ago in an address to a colloquium sponsored by the Getty Trust in Phoenix, Arizona, though he was loath to pigeonhole it with a term as vague and unsatisfactory to him as those he had reluctantly come up with to describe earlier phases of American museum history: authoritarian condescension, authoritarian experimentalism, and populist deference. Viewing these historical phases from the vantage point of the kinds of questions museums asked (or didn't ask) about their activities and their audiences, Harris rather hesitantly called ours a period of "existential scrutiny, one in which the institution stands in an unprecedented and often troublesome relationship to its previous sense of mission" (1990:51). The 1988 Getty-sponsored focus group studies that gave rise to Harris's conclusions struck him as being different from earlier visitor studies in important ways: They were experiential. They tried to gauge what people believed about their museum experience rather than their actual behavior. They were open-ended, not intended to measure the effectiveness of specific theories or strategies. And they emphasized individual differences rather than commonalities.

These changes in what Harris calls "polling" techniques reflect profound changes in institutional attitudes toward authority, the nature of knowledge, and the significance of encounters with objects. As the present "Meaning Making" issue of *Exhibitionist* will undoubtedly make clear, we are already in the middle of a conceptual revolution which began in the 1970s and 1980s when the museum community first started trying to understand the museum experience from the viewpoint of visitors. Simply because all institutions, their managers, and their practitioners have not joyfully embraced the tenets of this revolution does not make the revolution any less real. Nor does the fact that those who have helped bring the

revolution about are still struggling to find ways to put its ideas into practice. Make no mistake, we have already entered a period of postmodern "existential scrutiny" that is leading inexorably to fundamental changes in our exhibition philosophy and practices. As Lisa Roberts concluded more than six years ago, "Clearly, older models of interpretation based on hierarchical, unidirectional modes of communication are no longer adequate. Interpretation is not about teaching visitors. It is about the negotiation of meanings from different worlds" (1993:101).

In 1986, when my own museum began conducting open-ended, small-sample interviews with visitors about the nature of their esthetic experiences (McDermott-Lewis 1990), Sheldon Annis's groundbreaking essay, "The Museum as Symbolic Experience" (1974), had been circulating in manuscript for more than a decade, and Nelson Graburn's "The Museum and the Visitor Experience" (1977) had been around almost as long. Similarly, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety* (1975), in which he first described the psychological characteristics of the flow experience, and Howard Gardner's *Frames of Mind* (1983), about the way different types of "intelligences" processed information, were beginning to make an impact on the museum world.

Like all revolutions, this one sneaked up on us. It can't be traced to a single "eureka" moment or credited to an Archimedean hero daydreaming at the baths. As Csikszentmihalyi has pointed out, "Edison's or Einstein's discoveries would be inconceivable without the prior knowledge [they inherited], without the intellectual and social network that stimulated their thinking, and without the social mechanisms that recognized and spread their innovations" (1996:7). The conceptual changes we have seen in the museum world during the past two decades have resulted from a community-wide effort and have depended on the intersection of ideas from a range of intellectual disciplines. There are innumerable museum practitioners who could claim, like Barry Howard in the "Creativity" issue's Forum column, some small part in what he calls "a well-documented shift" in museum "exhibition philosophy" (1999:48).

Yet, as Csikszentmihalyi's systems model demands, the shift would not have occurred without a "social mechanism that recognized and spread [these] innovations" (1996:6, 27-36). Howard suggests the museum world's "compelling mandate" for change lay in pressure to "increase the ratio of earned income." Several years before the Getty focus groups that struck Neil Harris as so innovative, Marilyn Hood's germinal and influential psychographic study of museum visitors and nonvisitors had alerted museums to



## forum

the rather uncomfortable conclusion that they would have to take account of people's leisure goals and experiential preferences if they wanted to stay in the running for audience-share and finish in the money (1983:56-57).

Like other fields affected by postmodern ideas, museology has changed along so many dimensions in the past two decades that it's difficult to put a name to the movement. "Existential scrutiny" certainly defines the period, but not the changes in perspective that have occurred as a result of that scrutiny. In 1988, with the aim of offering visitors the opportunity for a psychologically satisfying "flow experience," I somewhat naively proposed a paradigm shift in museum interpretation from "information driven" to "experience driven." That same year, with a far better grounding in postmodernist ideas, Michael Baxandall urged his audience at a conference on presenting and interpreting cultural diversity to stop treating the exhibition as a "static entity" and to view it instead as a "field of action" with three agents in motion: "makers of objects, exhibitors of made objects, and viewers of exhibited made objects" (1991:36). Exhibitors should, Baxandall exhorted, stop trying to control viewers' reactions in favor of enlarging their opportunities for action (1991:40).

Bringing her background in postmodern communication theory to bear on efforts to understand and improve the museum visitor's experience, Lois Silverman suggested that the "meaning-making" paradigm already current among historians could be usefully translated to the museum field (1993). By viewing communication as "a process of negotiation...in which information (and meaning) is created rather than transmitted," Silverman argued, museums could devise a snugger fit between "human meaning-making and

museum methods" (1995:161). And, even more recently, taking her cue from educational psychologist Jerome Bruner, who has much to say on the subject of the constructivist view of reality and making meaning (1986), Lisa Roberts has suggested the term "narrative endeavor" to describe the new paradigm. Museums are, she says, no longer "object-based institutions in the traditional sense of the term," but rather "idea-, experience-, and narrative-based institutions—forums for the negotiation and the renegotiation of meaning" (1997:147).

Embedded in all these attempts to name and explain the museum's changing role in an age of "existential scrutiny" is a transformation in the way we see the visitor—as a unique person with a constantly evolving conception of the world who, nonetheless, shares with us and with others a common set of motivations and strategies for ordering new experience. Museum workers are growing less concerned about controlling the visitor's experience, less bent on producing specific outcomes, more skillful at facilitating opportunities for personal perspectives, and more aware of the indivisibility of cognitive and affective experience.

Oh, delivering a message is still important to us. It's just that the character of the message is changing—from "here are the objects, and here are the facts, and this is what they mean" to "what kind of sense can we make of these objects, given these facts"; from "this is the truth" to "the meaning of truth changes over time and cultures." There are, we are discovering, a lot of worlds out there.

**Marlene Chambers**  
Denver Art Museum

---

### REFERENCES CITED:

**Baxandall, Michael**

1991 "Exhibiting Intention: Some Preconditions of the Visual Display of Culturally Purposeful Objects." In I. Karp and S. D. Lavine (eds.), *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*. Washington, DC, and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, pp. 33-41.

**Bruner, Jerome**

1986 *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press.

**Chambers, Marlene**

1988 "Improving the Esthetic Experience for Art Novices: A New Paradigm for Interpretive Labels." In *Program Sourcebook*. Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, pp. 215-27.

**Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly**

1975 *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

1996 *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.

**Gardner, Howard**

1983 *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. New York: Basic Books.

**Graburn, Nelson**

1977 "The Museum and the Visitor Experience." In Linda Draper (ed.), *The Visitor and the Museum*. Berkeley: Lowie Museum of Anthropology, University of California at Berkeley.

**Harris, Neil**

1990 "Polling for Opinions." *Museum News* September/October 1990: 46-53.

**Hood, Marilyn**

1983 "Staying Away: Why People Choose Not To Visit Museums." *Museum News* April 1983: 50-57.

**Howard, Barry**

1999 "The Case for Cultural Attractions: A Design Perspective." *Exhibitionist* 18(1): 48-49.

**McDermott-Lewis, Melora**

1990 "Through Their Eyes: Novices and Advanced Amateurs." In *The Denver Art Museum Interpretive Project*, pp. 7-46. Denver: Denver Art Museum.



**Roberts, Lisa**

1993 "Analyzing (and Intuiting) the Affective Domain." In S. Bicknell and G. Farmelo (eds.), *Museum Visitor Studies in the Nineties*, pp. 97-101. London: Science Museum.

1997 *From Knowledge to Narrative: Educators and the Changing Museum*. Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press.

**Rounds, Jay**

1999 "Creating Creative Exhibits." *Exhibitionist* 18(1): 35-40.

**Silverman, Lois**

1993 "Making Meaning Together: Lessons from the Field of American History." *Journal of Museum Education* 18(3): 7-11.

1995 "Visitor Meaning Making in Museums for a New Age." *Curator* 38(3): 161-170.

**M.A. in History**

(Museum Studies)

**The University of  
Missouri–St. Louis and  
The Missouri Historical Society**

offer an innovative two-year  
program to develop the skills needed  
for leadership in today's changing  
museum environment.

The program focus is on audience-based  
museumology, theoretical foundations  
and project management.

**For details, visit our website at  
[www.umsl.edu/~museums](http://www.umsl.edu/~museums)**

For a brochure or information on  
financial aid, please contact:

**Jay Rounds, Director**  
Graduate Program in Museum Studies  
University of Missouri St. Louis

Phone: (314) 516-5473

E-mail: [rounds@umsl.edu](mailto:rounds@umsl.edu)

Now accepting applications for Fall 2000

**Guest Designer:  
Louis Nelson**

Thanks to Louis Nelson Associates (New York City) for donating design services for this issue of *Exhibitionist!* Louis Nelson has designed exhibits and master plans for such institutions as the California Museum of Science and Industry, the Tennessee Aquarium, the Corning Glass Center, AT&T's Technology the 24th Event exhibit at the 23rd Olympiad, the Discover all Boston exhibit at the SkyWalk on top of the Prudential Tower, the World's Fair Pavilions for the U.S. Information Agency and the Coca-Cola Bottling Museum in Chattanooga.

He serves on the advisory boards of the American Crafts Museum, Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, the Aspen Design Conference and World Design.

Louis Nelson Associates is currently developing the master plan for the information systems and environmental graphics for the AirTrain Project and the new Jamaica Station in New York; the identity, environmental graphics, and wayfinding for Constitution Plaza in Connecticut and the wayfinding system for the Digital Galaxy project at the American Museum of Natural History.

Among Louis' other design credits are the Korean War Veterans Memorial on the Mall in Washington, adjacent to the Lincoln and Vietnam Memorials, the Statue of Liberty Restaurant interiors and the environmental graphics, information systems and corridor galleries at New York's JFK Airport.

Mr. Nelson believes that with museums and exhibitions, we become storytellers, seeking ways for people to discover on their own and without boundaries; to enlarge their imagination; and to evolve knowledge from information. Mr. Nelson seeks ways to make the story personal and the experience motivating. He relies on the inventive use of form, light, color, texture, music, sound, aroma, metaphor and technology to bring meaning to the obscure.

Mr. Nelson's office is located in Greenwich Village, a part of New York City where light abounds and human scale still thrives.

*Like to be the guest designer for a future issue of Exhibitionist? Give Whitney Watson a call at 314-746-4592 and volunteer!*