

What's In A Name?

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Even though Shakespeare didn't think there was much in a name, since "a rose by any other name would smell as sweet," those who use the term "museum" as a descriptor usually don't intend it as a compliment. In fact, our very name may be the reason why we who work in or for museums fail to engender a positive response from some audiences, if public opinion can be gauged from the newspaper and magazine references I have surveyed.

As a follow-up to Stephen Bitgood's research articles in the winter 1990 *Visitor Behavior*, I decided to explore my file of clippings that use the word "museum" or its ramifications to describe some other entity. I wanted to discern how the public generally perceives the term.

Reading these articles is instructive because it indicated that some of our difficulty in appealing to diverse publics may lie in the mere term "museum." Only about 20% of the 500-plus clippings in my file use the word in a complimentary manner.

It's sobering to read that the very term we revere has a connotation most often of a place that is not only staid, static, stodgy, and stuffy; dull and dry; remote and formal; cryptic, indecipherable and incomprehensible, but dead, lifeless, comatose – presenting only the past, the preserved, the out-of-date. In fact, one how-to book for writers of feature stories cites several sources for articles under the heading of "Morgues and Other Museums."

That "museum" may be a derogatory term and the "dead" connotation is not of recent origin was acknowledged at least 20 years ago by W. S. Dillon in his paper, "Museums: Fossils No Longer."

However, before we get too morose pondering the negative qualities of our name, let us take a lighthearted look at the way in which this term has been used. This summary digests about 200 of the most intriguing mentions of the word "museum" from my clippings collection.

The clippings group under four main topics: (1) something is deficient/unworthy/to be avoided because it is a museum; (2) something is positive/worthwhile/beneficial because it is *not* a museum; (3) generally uncomplimentary references; and (4) generally complimentary invocations. To limit the list, I have omitted references to books, plays, films, TV programs, cartoons; there's enough melancholia in those for another article.

(1) Avoid It! It's a Museum!

Other cultural institutions that are judged to have lost touch with contemporary times (read: "are dead") have been

deprecatingly referred to as museums: the Berkshire Music Center Festival—"a sometimes enlightening, sometimes beautifully arranged museum"; regional theaters—"have become living museums"; opera—"is it really a musty old museum?" and, by a deserter of opera, "I wanted to be involved in something else less museum-like"; symphony orchestras—"if we are limited to the music of the past. . . (we will become) like well-equipped museums"; the Kirov Ballet—"a living museum."

Places that have been snidely referred to as museums include the former mansion of Larry Flynt (publisher of *Hustler*), which was described as looking like a museum—"opulent, oppressive, and unsettling"; the New York subway system's disintegrating cars "that are genuine museum pieces"; and an outdated, minimally operating Soviet hospital.

Even "our lady of the hats," Queen Elizabeth, has been referred to by Labor Party functionaries as "our only living museum." And, actor Melvyn Douglas was called "a museum piece" because of his lengthy movie career.

(2) It's OK! It's Not a Museum!

The Bible must be read in its period of history, not from a modern viewpoint, or the church will become "a museum for us, a fossil," according to a seminary scholar. Another theologian averred that the church is not "a museum of perfect people" but "a hospital where we're all sick, trying to get well." Managers of other institutions, who have stoutly maintained that they are *not* running museums because they provide fresh (read: "not dead") programming, are directors of performing arts centers ("we are not here to run a museum"); theater companies (if you don't try something different, exciting, and dangerous, "you become a museum"); an historic home ("it will be something more than a museum"); and Lincoln Center ("Lincoln Center is not a museum," per former Mayor Ed Koch).

Two famous dance companies were cited by their director as being forward-looking because they were not museums—the New York City Ballet's founding choreographer George Balanchine and Alvein Ailey American Dance Theater's current director Judith Jamison. Jamison stated, following the death of Ailey in 1989, that she was determined that the company not become a museum piece. Balanchine had earlier said that ballet isn't a museum, because "where a painting can hang for a hundred or two hundred years. . . people. . . just look in and say, 'Ah, it's boring in here, let's go on,' (but) if people are bored at the ballet, they'll stop buying tickets."

Places that were proudly designated as not having become museums (or dead) were Walden Pond, the rehabbed Society Hill neighborhood of Philadelphia, Cranberry Bog in Ohio ("a living remnant of the Ice Age"), the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library ("a research collections, not a museum . . . It is alive"), and Pioneer Courthouse in Portland, Oregon ("this is a National Historic Landmark building, but I wouldn't call it a museum"). The Museum of Broadcasting is something more than artifacts "in spooky repose," according to one visitor. Information centers welcoming visitors into Ohio should be more than museums, according to a state senator. To overcome such a misperception, they should hand out grape juice (the official state beverage) in addition to tourist information.

The chairman of a major corporation that was establishing its own art collection instructed the curators, "we don't want a museum; we want art which speaks for itself." In the same city, supporters of a conservatory in a municipal park were determined that it not carry the "cultural snobbery" of the symphony or art museum.

Decorators have frequently advised homeowners not to display their collectibles behind glass doors, because that will make the room "seem like a museum" and not to treat their heirlooms like "museum pieces." Rudy Vallee's widow reportedly moved out of their 20-acre mountaintop estate in the Hollywood Hills because it was like "living in a museum." And, when a missing husband was located, he reported he had left his finicky housekeeper wife because he didn't like to feel he "was living in a museum."

Lastly, advice from a car care consultant: "Don't let anybody tell you that a hand grease gun is a museum relic."

(3) Generally Uncomplimentary References

When Donald Carpentier was creating his Eastfield Village in New York state (assembling 11 old buildings around a village green), he stated he didn't want it to look all neat and polished like a museum, but strove instead to create a "real environment," where people could "sit down and enjoy it." Another view of a museum, as not only an inert but even alarmingly hostile environment, was voiced by a dealer in native American textiles, who announced that he was "more accessible than somebody locked up in a museum."

An aging World War II fighter pilot was horrified to discover that Duxford Air Base in England, where he had been stationed, "had been turned into—steady, now—a museum. They could have spared me that." Other views of what's appropriated for a museum were voiced by some puppeteers who rescued an old barn that had not been used for a decade and was full of debris, "but it was suitable for a museum," and by an outraged policeman who mourned the loss of three fellow officers who died trying to rescue a dog from the surf: "This thing (dead dog) should be put in a bloody museum for all the damage and death it's caused."

When actor Nick Nolte was filming "Teachers" in Columbus, OH, he was asked why he was barhopping instead of attending the symphony or visiting a museum. "You find more of the character of a town in a bar," he explained. "A lot of tourists go to the museum."

Who else goes to museums? Highbrows, according to one article; they even go to museums "when it isn't raining." In a newspaper test that claimed to separate the watchers from the adventure-seekers, those who chose to visit a zoo or museum were said to prefer a nonaggressive, noncompetitive lifestyle; they "get enough excitement from backing the car out of the driveway." And the parent who wrote to an advice column complained that he had done his best by his son, taking the boy to the art museum, science museum, and zoo, and yet the unappreciative lad had ended up in jail. Another advice columnist warned that on vacations, parents should avoid spending much time in "unfamiliar places such as museums," because children will tire quickly there.

When Castro demoted a high-ranking Cuban general, he assigned the hapless fellow to organize an air force museum. The officer defected rather than accept such an ignominious fate. Finally, and ironically, economist Peter Drucker advises in his recent book, *Managing the Nonprofit Organization* (which includes positive references to museums) that NPO's must keep their mission statements operational, or "else very soon you will become a museum piece."

(4) Generally Complimentary References

After all these bummers, does anyone think kindly of museums besides us? A thief who stole paintings from three Paris museums in one day said he loved museums because they're like supermarkets. "You only have to serve yourself." It was easier, he claimed, than stealing cassettes from a music store.

Most often, when the term "museum" is used positively, it is meant to designate superior quality, as in "Movado—the museum watch." Other items that have been touted as being of "museum quality" have been Saint Laurie Ltd. clothing, the Prestwick (Scotland) golf course, outstanding old films, costumes worn in a Jerome Robbins musical, classic and antique farm machinery, and a small town confectionery, which was called "a living museum piece that's the heart-beat" of a rural county. Or, consider the description of the Las Vegas airport: "more like an art deco museum or a gambling casino than an airport."

People who like to get in out of the rain or the heat speak enthusiastically about museums: "We're going to the museum where it's nice and cold," said one visitor to Philadelphia, and "humid Ohio summers make me run into a cool, dark museum," proclaimed another. Political cartoonist Patrick Oliphant said he found going to museums gave him a sense of perspective, was restorative, and prevented stagnation.

Finale

There's a note of humor to close this recital of primarily dismal usages of the term "museum." In 1980, a North Hollywood cab driver said a man with a handgun kidnapped him and forced him to help in a burglary, go barhopping, tour a museum, and listen to poetry during a 14-hour spree, before he was released unharmed. He didn't identify which of the tortures was the worst.

And, those who are seeking a rich mate are advised to dawdle through museums. No less than two matrimonial advisers suggest visiting museums, antique stores, and quality restaurants "where the rich hang out" and poor marriage-seekers can go without spending much money. "If you can afford concert or theater tickets, buy them," they advise. "If you cannot, go to museums."

And what is this place where the rich hang out and which spawns so many belittling comments? The Northeast Texas Museum Association Newsletter defines a museum as: "a collection of curiosities that more often than not includes the director." Any wonder that we're regarded as an oddball, if not moribund, place!

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