

Introduction
to

Museum
Work



*Third
Edition*

G. Ellis Burcaw

FOR EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES ONLY



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Introduction to Museum Work

THIRD EDITION

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About the Author

George Ellis Burcaw, after serving as a U.S. Marine Corps officer in World War II, received his initial museum training in a long internship at the Field Museum of Natural History while a graduate student in anthropology at the University of Chicago. He worked as an archaeologist, most notably in Illinois, North Dakota, Mexico, and the Yemen, and served as a museum director in Green Bay, Philadelphia, and Denver.

He began the museum at the University of Idaho, where he was on the faculty for twenty-two years as museum director, professor of anthropology, writer of correspondence study courses, and head of the internationally known museum studies department, which he had created.

Professor Burcaw has traveled on all continents and because of his reputation was an official guest in the former German Democratic Republic (East Germany) and other countries. Now retired in Tucson, he continues to write and to serve as a consultant.

Author's Dedication

I dedicate this third edition of *Introduction to Museum Work* to my many museum colleague friends, in this country and abroad, and to my hundreds of museology students. I have enjoyed sharing an interest in museums and museum work with them for half a century.

Preface

Introduction to Museum Work was first compiled more than twenty years ago as a textbook for on-campus and correspondence study courses at the University of Idaho, with acknowledgement of the debt owed to my previous co-workers in museums and to such writers as Carl E. Guthe and Raymond O. Harrison, whose works are listed in the bibliography. It was an example of teaching creating the textbook rather than of a textbook creating or molding courses. Its aim has always been to introduce, to explain, and to recommend, not to be the last word on any topic or on any aspect of museums and the work they do.

Over the years, this book has served students, volunteers, staff, and board members, and it continues to do so. It has achieved a worldwide reputation and use. In countries where instruction is not in English, *Introduction to Museum Work* has been translated, at least in part, into other languages. Early in its existence it was accepted as a standard for museum training by the Documentation Center (in Paris) of the International Council of Museums. In foreign countries the book has been regarded as representing museum professionalism and practice in the United States as well as in Western countries generally.

There has been a phenomenal growth in opportunities for college-based museum training following the increase in the number of museums since the 1950s and, more importantly, following development in the direction of greater professionalism in museums of all types and sizes. There were probably fewer than a half-dozen general courses in museology in the United States, if not in the entire world, before 1950, but twenty years later there were nearly a hundred, and twenty years after that nearly five hundred. "Museum Studies" now forms the emphasis in many college and university degree programs, and such formalized training is frequently mentioned in job vacancy descriptions as being highly desirable.

Training in museology is designed to broaden the outlook of museum workers and to introduce students, who are not yet launched on a career, to museums and museum work. *Introduction to Museum Work* establishes a basis of museum philosophy and practice

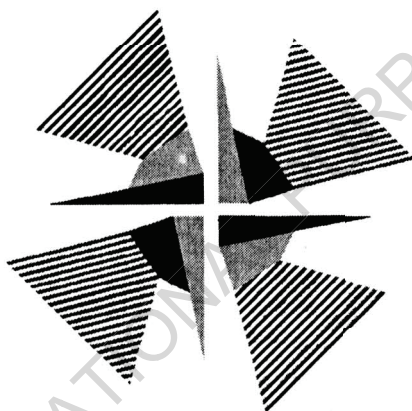
on which students and workers can build and advance, if they wish, to administration or museum specialties. It should be one of the first training aids, though certainly not the last. It is a book not only to grow out of, but also to refer back to.

The museum is not immune, nor should it be, to vast and rapid changes our society and our culture are undergoing. Periodic revision of this book is necessary for it to keep abreast of not only what the effective contemporary museum is, but of what it can be, and of what museum work is likely to be in the near future. Yet the fundamentals have not changed, nor will they do so soon. What was true of the good museum of the past is still true of the good museum of today. Moreover, museums can do much more for society tomorrow than they have been able to do in the past with the vision and the tools that were available. No other institution or service can fill its place.

G.E.B.

PART I

Museums and Collections



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1

Museum Defined

Since this book is about museums and museum work, it is necessary to begin with an understanding of what a museum is. Put another way, it is important for the student to learn to define the word "museum."

A newspaper story was headed, "W_____ Plans Museum For Celebration." The story said that the owner of a vacant business building had given permission to the local Booster Club to use it "as a museum during the W_____ Days celebration July 2. Antiques and artifacts for the museum will be accepted either on a permanent or on a loan basis. These may be brought in as soon as there has been an opportunity to clean the building. Anyone who has items to display for that day only may do so, according to the program chairman."

Another news item described a new library building at a junior college. In addition to mention of classrooms, offices, kitchen facilities, and restrooms, the article said, "the basement contains a museum of Indian artifacts, a storage area, (etc.)." Has the word "museum" been properly used in these news stories?

Before we can answer that question, we need to define some terms, establishing a basic vocabulary.

DEFINITIONS

Object

a material, three-dimensional thing of any kind. "The paper bag contained three objects."

Museum object

an object in the collections of a museum, collected for its own sake. For example, a cassette tape collected as such and not for whatever sound might have been recorded on it.

Specimen

usually synonymous with museum object but properly having the connotation of an example or sample; a representative member of a class of objects. "The sedimentary rock exhibit needed a limestone specimen."

Artifact

an object produced or shaped by human workmanship or, possibly, a natural object deliberately selected and used by a human being. A cultural specimen. "The archaeologist examined the tray of rocks to see if it contained artifacts such as spear points."

Art object

an artifact of aesthetic interest (though not necessarily intended to be an art object by its creator). "The niche in the gallery wall was meant to hold an art object."

Work of art

something of aesthetic importance created by a human being (note that works of art are not necessarily art objects; for example, a symphony). "Her clay pot was a work of art, but so was her cherry pie or, for that matter, her dancing."

Collections

the collected objects of a museum, acquired and preserved because of their potential value as examples, as reference material, or as objects of aesthetic or educational importance.

Collection

a unit of the collections, consisting of objects having something of importance in common. One may speak of the bird's-egg collection of a natural history museum, or of the J. W. Whiteford collection if Mr. Whiteford has donated a large number of important, similar objects to the museum.

Accession

One or more objects acquired at one time from one source constituting a single transaction between the museum and a source, or the transaction itself. "We made ten accessions last month totaling 218 objects. The third accession from Miss Baum consisted of a sword. A previous accession took place a year ago. It included over a thousand butterflies and some other things."

Registration

assigning a permanent number for identification purposes to an accession and recording this number according to a system. "As soon as the accession was registered, it was turned over to the graduate students for study."

Cataloguing

assigning an object to one or more categories of an organized classification system (to be described in a later chapter). "The chair was catalogued as a Civil War item, and it was also entered in the catalogue with the furnishings of the former governor's mansion."

Classification of collections

the establishment of the major categories of the collections on the basis of anticipated use. This is a prior condition, or prerequisite, of good collecting. Art objects are collected primarily for their aesthetic qualities; as unique, artistic creations. History objects are collected primarily with the intent of interpreting (explaining) the past.

Science objects are collected primarily to demonstrate and/or interpret natural phenomena and the laws and applications of science. "The art curator saw no value in the old lithograph and called it hideous, but it was just what the history curator had been looking for to complete the decorations of the parlor of the historic house that was being restored as an annex of the museum. The curator of botany was on an expedition collecting specimens for an exhibit of tundra vegetation."

Display

the showing of objects, depending on the interest of the viewer in the objects themselves. "A shoe store displays shoes in its window."

Exhibit

of more serious, important, and professional connotation than "display." It is the presentation of ideas with the intent of educating the viewer, or, in the case of an art exhibit, a planned presentation of art objects by an informed person to constitute a unit. As such, it might be an identifiable part of an exhibition. "A museum uses objects and labels in preparing an exhibit." "There was an exhibit of engravings in the Victorian Art Exhibition."

Label

written material in an exhibit to identify, to explain, and to inform. Labels may also be called signs, titles, captions or text. Often the labels accomplish more real education in an exhibit than the objects. "The main label was placed at eye level. The only other labels in the case were the captions on the photographs."

Exhibition

an assemblage of objects of artistic, historical, scientific, or technological nature, through which visitors move from unit to unit in a sequence designed to be meaningful instructionally and/or aesthetically. Accompanying labels and/or graphics (drawings, diagrams, etc.) are planned to interpret, to explain, and to direct the viewer's attention. Usually, an exhibition covers a goodly amount of floor space, consists of several separate exhibits or large objects, and deals with a broad, rather than a narrow, subject. "The art museum director organized an exhibition of the 19th-century paintings." "We added an exhibit of quartz crystals to the rock and mineral exhibition. We then displayed some crystals in the sales room."

Art show

a temporary display of art objects, commonly the paintings of one or a few contemporary artists; informal connotation.

Art gallery

a commercial establishment for the buying and selling of art objects; or a separate exhibition room devoted to art in a general museum; or an art museum. The word "gallery" places the emphasis on the displaying of works of art, regardless of the ownership of the objects. "When the art teacher retired, she opened a gallery on Main Street to handle the work of her former students."

Art museum

a museum devoted to one or more of the art fields (dealing with objects). The emphasis here is on the ownership and preservation of important collections. "The finest collection of Oriental ceramics in the Southwest is in that art museum."

General museum

a museum dealing with several or all fields instead of just art, just history, just geology, etc. "The director is an anthropologist and his assistant is a historian; but since theirs is a general museum they need to hire a curator of art."

Encyclopedic museum

a general museum that has practically no limitations as to time, space, and subject placed on its collections, and which seeks broad coverage in all fields. "The coverage of some subjects is rather superficial in that encyclopedic museum, but at least they can claim with some justification that they have something of interest to every visitor."

Historic building or site

a structure or location of significant historic connections, often associated with a famous person or event or a significant social or economic development; may include exhibits of pertinent objects. "The museum took over the administration of two historic houses, and the curator of history immediately began to plan for the authentic refurbishing of some of the ground floor rooms."

Botanic(al) garden

grounds with or without greenhouses, for the scientific cultivation of plants for study and display.

Arboretum

a botanical garden that specializes in trees.

Herbarium

a systematic collection of preserved plant specimens.

Zoological garden (zoological park, zoo)

a professionally designed and managed compound where live animals are kept for study and display, and that is often concerned with the preservation of endangered animal species. (See additional commentary near the end of this chapter.)

Aquarium

a building equipped with tanks for a collection of animals that live in water.

Children's museum

a museum intended exclusively for young children, with everything scaled to their physical size and mental capacity, often managed by elementary school teachers and including such activities as hobby classes and story hours.

Planetarium

a machine which projects tiny spots of light on a domed ceiling to represent the stars and planets, the building which houses such a projector, and the institution that maintains the facility.

Nature center

an establishment for outdoor learning about nature, including a natural site for field study, with facilities and services for an interpretive program.

Visitor center

a facility for the interpretation of a historical site or natural region, usually with a small auditorium, exhibits, and an information desk. Established by the National Park Service, forest service, state parks department, or other agency accommodating tourists.

Science center

a facility or establishment that deals largely with exhibitions and demonstrations in the physical and biological sciences and associated technology, usually with "hands-on" opportunities and often with much of its programming aimed mainly at children.

Art center

an establishment by and for a community where art lessons are taught, the work of local artists is shown, and other art interests of the community are accommodated. The performing arts may be included, but ordinarily there is no permanent collection of objects.

Significance

having meaning or importance; hence, concerning museums, serving the educational purpose of a museum. A significant object in the museum's collections is one that can be used by the museum educationally.

Docent

originally, a university-level teacher who was not a member of the regular faculty. In the museum context, a docent is a trained volunteer teacher-guide.

Historical society

an organization having the purpose of discovering, preserving, and disseminating important knowledge of past human behavior in a particular region. It may or may not have various departments devoted to archival, library, publication, preservation, or museum work. The essential point here is that a historical society need not collect objects, though most do. "Historical society," therefore, is not synonymous with "historical museum."

Alienation

in a museum context, the loss of objects from the collections, for whatever reason.

Fungible

a legal concept having to do with the replacement of one thing by another. In museum work the term is used to describe the collections of zoos, botanical gardens, and similar biological institutions. The objects in the collections are not permanent, since all living things die, but as new specimens are added, the collections on the whole continue. We say that aquariums can be museums with fungible collections.

Other definitions will be given throughout the book, but we are now ready to consider definitions of "museum."¹ First, let us make a distinction between a center and a museum. It is that a museum is an institution existing to collect objects, maintain permanent collections, and base its educational work on these collections. A center is not. While a center may own and care for collections, it need not do so, and its emphasis is on exhibition and public programming. Curatorial work is not central to its activity or its purpose. Both museums and centers may be educational, entertaining, permanent, existing as a public service, and professionally managed.

"MUSEUM" DEFINITIONS

(from several sources, numbered for future reference)

A museum is

1. a building or space within a building significant chiefly for presentation and/or exhibition of collections.
2. a building to house collections of objects for inspection, study, and enjoyment. (Douglas A. Allen)
3. an institution for the safekeeping of objects and for the interpretation of these objects through research and through exhibition. (Edwin H. Colbert)
4. a house of marvels, or a house of keeping. (from two terms in the Gaelic language meaning "museum")
5. any permanent institution which conserves and displays for purposes of study, education, and enjoyment collections of objects of cultural or scientific significance. (International Council of Museums, 1956)
6. an institution for the preservation of those objects which best illustrate the phenomena of nature and the works of man, and the utilization of these for the increase in knowledge and for the culture and enlightenment of the people. (George Brown Goode, 1895)
7. a permanent establishment, administered in the general interest, for the purpose of preserving, studying, enhancing by various means and, in particular, of exhibiting to the public for its delectation and instruction groups of objects and specimens of cultural value: artistic, historical, scientific and technological collections, botanical and zoological gardens and aquariums, etc. Public libraries and public archival institutions maintaining permanent exhibition rooms shall be considered to be museums. (International Council of Museums, 1960)
8. a nonprofit permanent establishment, not existing primarily for the purpose of conducting temporary exhibitions, exempt from federal and state income taxes, open to the public and administered in the public interest, for the purpose of