

Temple or Forum? On New Museology and Education for Social Change

Ann Chinnery
Simon Fraser University

New museology is an idea of the museum as an educational tool in the service of societal development ... one of the most highly perfected tools that society has available to prepare and accompany its own transformation.¹

INTRODUCTION

In an influential essay written in 1971, entitled “The Museum, a Temple or the Forum?,” Duncan Cameron argued that museums were in the throes of an identity crisis, unable to figure out who or what they were, and that this identity crisis was leading to widespread confusion about the appropriate role of museums in society.² Should they strive to maintain their identity as “temples of the muses” focusing on the collection, preservation, interpretation, and display of artifacts and natural objects? Or should they move away from the traditional emphasis on things and instead become “museums of ideas” — forums for public debate around the pressing social, political, and moral issues of the day?

While this identity crisis has not been resolved, there has definitely been a tipping of the scales in newer institutions toward the idea of museums as forums. In contrast to institutions such as the British Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Smithsonian, whose status lies in the strength of their collections, exemplars of new museology such as the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles (with its sister institutions in New York and Jerusalem) and the Canadian Museum for Human Rights (scheduled to open in Winnipeg this year) are valued for their ability to stimulate dialogue and promote social change.³ The Museum of Tolerance, for example, seeks to “create an experience that would challenge people of all backgrounds to confront their most closely-held assumptions and assume responsibility for change”⁴; and the Canadian Museum for Human Rights aims to be “a centre of learning where Canadians and people from around the world can engage in discussion and commit to taking action against hate and oppression.”⁵

As Hugues de Varine notes in the epigraph above, there is an explicit relationship between new museology (which emerged in the last half of the twentieth century), education, and social transformation, but it is safe to say that in Europe and North America, at least, museum experiences have also been considered an important part of children’s education for over 100 years. In fact, the sketch of the upper level of John Dewey’s ideal school in *The School and Society* (1900) had a museum at its center.⁶ Therefore, in this essay, I want to explore the implications of the trend away from museums as temples toward museums as forums insofar as they serve as sites of education for social change. This essay is intended to build on my earlier argument for a revival of modesty, humility, and respect for the other *as other* as important dispositions in fostering what we might call a Levinasian conception of ethical relationship across difference and a commitment to social justice.⁷ I suggest

here that museums are uniquely positioned to foster these dispositions, but that in the recent shift away from encounters with objects to dialogue as the primary museum experience, we may have thrown out the baby with the bathwater, so to speak.

In what follows I first give an overview of the changes in museology that gave rise to the current trend toward museums without objects. I then explore the differences between object-centered and dialogue-centered museum education. Finally, I argue for a revival of the kind of museum education that characterized the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century museum experience, in which visitors had direct experiences with rooms full of objects with little or no explanatory documentation to mediate their encounters. My argument hinges on a claim that while museums without objects work very well to promote certain worthwhile educational aims, such as facilitating public debate and dialogue on social issues and arousing empathy for victims of injustice, the shift away from direct experiences with objects comes at the cost of equally worthy aims such as learning to really look at and contemplate an object without the expectation of ever fully knowing or understanding it. This kind of contemplation, in turn, might help us to see encounters with the unknown not as a task of needing to learn *about* that other object or person, but rather as an opportunity to learn *from* the other in a way that does not depend on knowledge or understanding.⁸ I will unpack this argument below, but first let me give an overview of the shifts in museology over the years that gave rise to museums without objects in the first place.

MUSEUMS AND THE EMERGENCE OF NEW MUSEOLOGY⁹

Museums (from the Greek word *museion*) were originally considered temples of the muses, places for reverence and contemplation of art and cultural objects. During Roman times, however, the Latin term *museum* was used primarily to refer to places for philosophical discussion, so both uses have long histories, but it is only in the past fifty years or so that the idea of museums as forums has really come back into the conversation and into the scholarly literature on museology and museum practice itself.

Throughout the seventeenth century, the word “museum” referred primarily to collections of art, natural objects, or cultural artifacts owned by wealthy families or institutions. But by the end of the seventeenth and into the early eighteenth century the trend had begun to shift away from privately housed “wonder rooms” or “cabinets of curiosity” to an idea of museums as a public good. Documents related to the founding of the British Museum, for example, called for an institution dedicated to preserving and displaying artifacts “not only for the inspection and entertainment of the learned and the curious, but for the general use and benefit of the public.”¹⁰ These institutions juxtaposed Western art and artifacts, as examples of advanced civilization and a refined aesthetic sensibility, with cultural and religious objects from non-Western cultures, which were portrayed as primitive and exotic. Museum education was therefore not only about acquiring knowledge about people who lived in other times and places, but about cultivating citizens who were patriotic, aesthetically minded, and who held or aspired to the values of the educated

classes.¹¹ As Janet Marstine puts it, “In the museum, things are more than just things; museum narratives construct national identity and legitimize groups.”¹²

Around the middle of the twentieth century, due in large part to an implicit alliance between artists, academics, and political activists, the museum world underwent a seismic shift. First, the rise of civil rights movements around the world called attention to the colonialist practices of the major museums. The “Elgin Marbles controversy” at the British Museum is one prominent example,¹³ but there are countless other museum collections of cultural and religious artifacts acquired by unethical means and exhibited so as to construct non-Western cultures through an imperialist lens. Museums often justified their practices through what Marstine calls “the rhetoric of salvage,” based on a belief that these uncivilized, primitive cultures could not be trusted to preserve and protect their own history, and that collectors, curators, and conservators from the West had to take on the responsibility to do it for them.¹⁴ Around the same time, cultural theorists and philosophers such as Jean Baudrillard, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, Edward Said, and others were challenging concepts such as high and low culture, civilized versus primitive, art versus craft, and the relationship between power and knowledge, and this work had a significant impact on museum studies, curatorship, and museum education. One of the general aims of what came to be called the “new museology” was to foreground the inescapably moral and political nature of museums and to move toward more just acquisition and exhibition policies and practices, beginning with increased community consultation and collaboration, in order to give non-Western cultures more control over how their cultural heritage was represented.¹⁵

Alongside the civil rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s, some artists began to declare all representation as political and they “demand[ed] a voice in determining how their works were displayed, interpreted, and conserved.”¹⁶ In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Lucy Lippard’s writings on the dematerialization of art — that is, on the shift from art as object to conceptual art — also started to take hold in conversations in the wider museum community.¹⁷ Aside from the ethical and political complexities of acquiring and displaying objects from cultures other than one’s own, museologists began asking whether museums needed to have objects at all, or whether it was time to reconceptualize both the form and function of the museum itself. This line of questioning thus led to another strand within new museology: museums without objects. These new “museums of ideas” (also sometimes called “values museums”) have taken on a wide range of themes — from human rights and social inclusion to war and peace, health, gender, climate change, and more — but the common thread connecting them all is their mandate to serve primarily as a site for dialogue about the issues rather than as a place to exhibit objects.¹⁸ This shift from encounters with objects to dialogue as the fundamental museum experience has significant implications for museum education, so let us now turn more explicitly to the role of museums in educating for social change.

MUSEUM EDUCATION AND SOCIAL CHANGE

According to Robert Sullivan, museums are moral educators whether they realize it or not:

As educational institutions, we are necessarily agents of change, not only changing the knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and feelings of our individual visitors but also affecting the moral ecology of the communities that we serve.... Museums are ritual places in which societies make visible what they value. Through the selection and preservation of artifacts, specimens, and documents, museums begin to define for their societies what is consequential, valuable, and suitable as evidence of the past. Through their presentation and interpretation of this evidence, museums define not only what is memorable but also how it is to be remembered.¹⁹

At the end of the nineteenth and into the beginning of the twentieth century, the assumption among museum professionals was that visitors to public museums would receive an education by “visually engaging with objects — lots of objects” with little else to distract them from just looking.²⁰ The educative purpose of museums was thus provided and provoked by their collections of objects, and it was the visitor’s direct experience of looking at an object that defined the museum experience as different from other educational experiences, such as reading a textbook or attending a lecture.

Before long, however, precipitated in part by the increasing use of storage facilities and the exhibition of selected objects in large rooms rather than whole collections crowded together, museums began adding “explanatory labels, charts, and graphs to help visitors reckon with the objects on display.”²¹ “By the 1920s and 1930s,” writes Steven Conn, “increasing numbers of museums were adding educational programming to their activities and hiring educational specialists to provide it to the public. The objects needed help. As educational programming grew in institutional importance, objects receded.”²² Museum education for most of the twentieth century was thus seen primarily as a way to supplement classroom-based learning, serving to reinforce and provide evidence for the narrative of human history that students learned in school. An obvious problem with this approach is that when history was constructed through a Western lens, the education students received was not just skewed but miseducative, in that it perpetuated imperialist conceptions of non-Western cultures as morally and culturally inferior.²³ However, in response to the political and cultural critiques I outlined in the previous section, museums made significant efforts to move toward more culturally responsive policies and practices. The Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, for example, emphasizes respect for all cultures through its educational programs, and has extensive policies on the repatriation of cultural and religious artifacts, on the protocol around First Nations communities “borrowing” back ceremonial artifacts from the Museum, and on the management of culturally sensitive materials.²⁴

Despite these improvements, one result of the complex interplay of forces I described in the previous section is that society in general began to lose faith in the “power of objects to convey knowledge, meaning, and understanding.”²⁵ In the new museums of ideas, objects and artifacts have been replaced by photographic exhibitions, audiovisual installations, and interactive technologies. The traditional inward focus on collection-building and preservation, and museum education as contemplation, has given way to an outward focus on people and ideas, and museum education as discussion and dialogue.

However, even though the primary aim of museums without objects is to promote an open exchange on social issues, the shift away from encounters with objects risks turning the museum visit into a more, not less didactic experience. For example, in an address to teachers and educational leaders in the spring of 2011, Stuart Murray, CEO of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights, declared:

Our visitors — your students — will become better acquainted with Canada’s human-rights champions as part of the participatory experience that will shape their encounters with the Canadian Museum for Human Rights.... Because that is our mandate: to change the future.

And when I speak of engaging the students at your schools as partners in this process, I’m speaking of the museum’s very reason for being. Because if we as a society want to see that future realized in our lifetimes, then we have an awful lot of work to do, and we’re going to need all the help we can get. Our young people — your students — have a central role to play, and my commitment to you is that we at the museum will do all we can to help your students take that vital first step so that they can take the second, and the third, and then keep moving forward until the human-rights future we dream of becomes a reality.²⁶

Clearly, furthering human rights is essential to creating a more just society, but I share Conn’s concern about those who bring to the museum experience “pre-asked questions” they have formulated in other scholarly contexts, a tendency that risks denying the particular role and potential of the museum experience in education.²⁷

While it is important to understand the intersection of culture and politics, it is also important to understand the difference between the two. By this I mean that if we mistake culture for politics — and if we expect cultural institutions, such as museums, to do the work of political education — we might miss out on some of the qualities that make the museum experience different from other forms of education, such as classroom instruction. In particular, it is the experience of a direct encounter with an object or a piece of art — of learning to sit with the object and contemplate it before moving to judgment and discussion — that is missing in museums of ideas. Therefore, without returning to the colonialist mentality that prevailed prior to the emergence of the new museology, I want to propose a renewal of object-centered museum education as a way to foster modesty, humility, and respect, which in turn might help us to rethink our relationship to the past and to those people and events that lie outside our own experience or understanding.

TOWARD A RENEWED OBJECT-CENTERED MUSEUM EDUCATION

In contrast to the current widespread lack of faith in the power of objects to “do” things to us, in a collection of essays entitled *Art Objects*, Jeanette Winterson issued a challenge to her readers:

Supposing we made a pact with a painting and agreed to sit down and look at it, on our own with no distractions, for one hour.... What would we find?... Increasing discomfort ... Increasing distraction ... Increasing invention ... Increasing irritation ... When the thick curtain of protection is taken away; protection of prejudice, protection of authority, protection of trivia, even the most familiar of paintings can begin to work its power. There are very few people who could manage an hour alone with the Mona Lisa.²⁸

But our inability to sit with a painting and to let it “begin to work its power” on us, Winterson insists, “is not as hopeless as it seems. If I can be persuaded to make the experiment again (and again and again), something very different might occur after the first shock of finding out that I do not know how to look at pictures.”²⁹

While Winterson's concern is primarily around encounters with works of art, I think much the same could be said about encounters with other cultural objects and artifacts. One of the key features of object-centered museum education — and one that distinguishes it from dialogue-centered museum education — is that the encounter between object and viewer is an individual and deeply personal one. Experiences of being taken aback by something we have never seen before — or perhaps even more importantly, being taken aback by something we *thought* we knew, but, upon reflection, realize we never really knew at all — carry considerable ethical and epistemic force. Many of us have had the experience of walking into a museum and seeing a famous painting for the first time with our own eyes. We may be arrested by its colors, texture, and size, which we had no way of conceiving from the reproductions in art history books or on slides. Similarly, in encounters with ancient cultural objects, we may find ourselves startled by the intricacy of design and ingenuity of Indigenous artisans thousands of years ago. This direct experience between object and viewer, I contend, is qualitatively different from what is made possible by other technologies, including the recent innovations in virtual museums.

However, what is apt to make this kind of object-centered museum education less appealing to educators is that it is unpredictable. I may or may not be taken aback by what I see; I may or may not be led to question my existing conceptions or understandings; and in face-to-face encounters with other people, I may or may not hear the address of one who comes to me in all his or her otherness. Object-centered museum education serves primarily to provoke, not to explain, and thus allows visitors to retain their right to their own experience of the objects. It is an education full of potential but without guarantee.³⁰

Now I am well aware of the risks of miseducative (and missed educative) experiences that object-centered museum education can create — for example, when museum staff highlight certain objects over others by displaying them in places of prominence, lighting them certain ways, and drawing the visitor to those objects in the hope that they will come to value them as much as the museum does. In “The Power of the Object,” for example, Andrew Pekarik troubles the hierarchizing of museum objects. He explains how the respective ways in which the Hope Diamond and a vial of ancient stardust are exhibited at the Smithsonian ensure that no visitor fails to be impressed by the Hope Diamond but many pass by the stardust (which is arguably more significant in terms of the human story) without a glance.³¹ But just as the political and cultural critiques of the mid-twentieth century prompted museum professionals to reassess and reform their policies and practices, so too can the privileging of certain objects and artifacts over others be called into question. For example, there is nothing stopping curators from having some objects displayed without labels, and inviting visitors to contemplate the objects without expectation of easy answers.

In the kind of renewed object-centered museum education I am advocating here, what matters most is neither the acquisition of a particular set of facts (as was expected in the explicitly didactic museum education typical of much of the twentieth century) nor a commitment to particular social aims (as is the case in

museums of ideas such as the Museums of Tolerance and the Canadian Museum for Human Rights). Rather, reclaiming the idea of museums as temples of the muses, where visitors encounter objects with little else to distract them, makes possible a different kind of educational experience. From a pedagogical perspective, however, it will require a shift in expectations since we can neither predict nor direct what our students will take from the experience. Rather than focusing on prescribed learning outcomes or on having students take in as much information as possible about the various exhibits, a return to contemplation as the primary museum experience means that students will need to learn how to pause and look deeply at perhaps only one or two selected objects. Before rushing to judgment about whether a particular item is beautiful or ugly, a household object or a ceremonial piece, an instrument of violence or a building tool, students should be encouraged to attend to the ways in which the object affects them. Are they captivated by it? Puzzled? Frightened? Surprised? And how do their responses to the object change the longer they sit with it? Learning facts about the object — categorizing it, determining its cultural context and historical time period, for example — is important too, but all that can come later, after we have let the objects “begin to work their power” on us in whatever ways that might be. Obviously, a revival of object-centered museum education will not, in and of itself, bring about social change. But the hope of such an approach, in my view, is that it can help to cultivate an ability to encounter the unfamiliar — whether an artifact or another person — from a position of modesty, humility, and respect for the other *as other*, as a first step in learning to respond ethically to those people and situations that lie outside our own experience and understanding.

1. Hugues de Varine, “Notes en forme d’avant-propos” [Notes in the form of a foreword], in *Nouvelles muséologies*, ed. A. Nicolas (Marseille, FR: Muséologie Nouvelle et Expérimentation Sociale, 1985), 5.

2. Duncan Cameron, “The Museum, a Temple or the Forum?,” in *Reinventing the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift*, ed. Gail Anderson (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 2004). Consistent with contemporary journals in museum studies, I will use the colloquial terms “museums” and “forums” here rather than the more grammatically correct terms “musea” and “fora.”

3. There are also museums that fall somewhere between temple and forum, such as the Gulag Museum at Perm-36 in Russia or the District Six Museum in Capetown, South Africa, which are part of the International Sites of Conscience Museums (see International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, <http://www.sitesofconscience.org/>). These museums are devoted to preserving particular historic sites and everyday objects, not for the value of the objects themselves, but for their ability to “stimulate dialogue on pressing social issues and promote humanitarian and democratic values” (ibid.). That is, the physical objects are important only insofar as they facilitate the museum’s primary function as a site of moral and political dialogue and education. So while these site-specific museums (including eco-museums) are also examples of the new museology, my discussion here is concerned with the educational implications of the move from traditional object-oriented museums to those that have moved almost away from objects altogether.

4. The Museum of Tolerance, “Our Vision and History,” http://www.museumoftolerance.com/site/c.tmL6KfNVLtH/b.4866027/k.88E8/Our_History_and_Vision.htm.

5. Canadian Museum for Human Rights, <http://www.humanrightsmuseum.ca/home>.

6. George Hein, “John Dewey and Museum Education,” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 47, no. 4 (2004): 418.

7. Ann Chinnery, "Premodern Postures for a Postmodern Ethics: On Resistant Texts and Moral Education," in *Philosophy of Education 2008*, ed. Ronald David Glass (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2009), 43–50.
8. See also Sharon Todd, *Learning from the Other: Levinas, Psychoanalysis, and Ethical Possibilities in Education* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2003).
9. This overview has been drawn from Janet Marstine, *New Museum Theory and Practice: An Introduction* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006); Geoffrey Lewis, *The History of Museums*, http://www.muuseum.ee/uploads/files/g._lewis_the_history_of_museums.pdf; and Elaine Heumann Gurian, "Choosing Among the Options: An Opinion About Museum Definitions," *Curator: The Museum Journal* 45, no. 2 (2002): 75–88.
10. Lewis, "The History of Museums," 9.
11. Marstine, *New Museum Theory and Practice*; and Heuman Gurian, "Choosing Among the Options."
12. Marstine, *New Museum Theory and Practice*, 2.
13. *Ibid.*, 2. Marstine provides a detailed description.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Therese Quinn, "Exhibits Through the 'Other Eye': How Popular Education Can Help Make Museums that Push," *Journal of Museum Education* 31, no. 2 (2006): 96.
16. Marstine, *New Museum Theory and Practice*, 6.
17. Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object* (New York: Praeger, 1973).
18. See, for example, various essays in Graeme Farnell, ed., *Museums of Ideas: Commitment and Conflict* (Edinburgh: MuseumsEtc, 2011); Steven Conn, *Do Museums Still Need Objects?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010); Marstine, *New Museum Theory and Practice*; and Peter Vargo, ed., *The New Museology* (London: Reaktion Books, 1989).
19. Robert Sullivan, "Evaluating the Ethics and Consciences of Museums," in *Reinventing the Museum*, ed. Gail Anderson, 257–258.
20. Conn, *Do Museums Still Need Objects?*, 25.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*, 25–26.
23. Marstine, *New Museum Theory and Practice*; and Heuman Gurian, "Choosing Among the Options."
24. See Museum of Anthropology, <http://www.moa.ubc.ca/collections>.
25. Conn, *Do Museums Still Need Objects?*, 7.
26. Canadian Museum for Human Rights, "Speech delivered by President and CEO Stuart Murray to the Council of School Leaders Leading and Learning Conference, February 18, 2011," <http://humanrightsmuseum.ca/about-museum/speeches-our-museum-leaders/speech-delivered-president-and-ceo-stuart-murray-council-sc>.
27. Conn, *Do Museums Still Need Objects?*, 7.
28. Jeannette Winterson, *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995). See also <http://www.jeanettewinterson.com/pages/content/index.asp?PageID=39>.
29. *Ibid.*
30. See also Claudia W. Ruitenberg, "Giving Place to Unforeseeable Learning: The Inhospitability of Outcomes-Based Education," in *Philosophy of Education 2009*, ed. Deborah Kerdeman (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2010), 266–274.
31. Andrew Pekarik, "The Power of the Object," *Curator* 45, no. 2 (2002): 89–91.