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## **The Future of Public Galleries in the New Technological Age**

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### **1. Introduction**

The Oxford English Dictionary notes that the term "public" goes back to 1436. In French the term goes back to 1236; in Italian it goes back at least to Dante (1265-1321). Even so the notion of public galleries is much more recent. Art galleries typically began as sacred collections in churches, monasteries, or private collections of ruling sacred and secular families, such as the Medici, which were accessible to local friends, worthies and visiting dignitaries. Only much later was the Uffizi opened to the general public. In Italy, political events such as the general suppression of convents in the early nineteenth century, transformed much that had been in the hands of the Church into state property. Hence the former monastery of San Marco in Florence became the (Art) Museum of Saint Mark, an institution open to the public.

These collections often had no descriptions at all. Visitors were then "tested" on their ability to distinguish a Giorgione from a Titian or a Veronese from a Tintoretto, as still occurs to this day, for instance, with visitors to the Duke of Buccleugh's Castle at Drumlanrig. The nineteenth century academies with their annual exhibitions of new art led to more carefully labelled paintings with artist and title. The rise of connoisseurship with Morelli in the latter nineteenth brought new attention to distinctions between paintings by a master, pupil of, in the workshop of, school of and so on. Descriptions on paintings became accordingly more complex. Special exhibitions showing major works by a master and their followers became not infrequently a prelude to or occasion for a *catalogue raisonné* of the painter in question. In this context the public acquired a new function: of being expected to examine, praise and if necessary criticize the connoisseur's largely personal claims. In the case of some connoisseurs such as Berenson the role of the

public was further reduced: a passive backdrop to an expert's supposedly impeccable claims, a role not unakin to the proverbial Victorian child, to see, to be seen, but not heard. The public's function, it now seemed, was merely to admire the erudition of others.

Initially the role of technology seemed merely to confirm this trend. Technology produced more impressive captions, thicker catalogues. Slides permitted experts to give learned lectures in auditoriums which became an apparently natural appendage to galleries and museums. Typically they were even called the ... theatre in honour of some wealthy and /or famous donor. Education departments, which grew as another appendage of these institutions often seemed to confirm this trend. Indeed many assume that this is the prime role of all new technologies: to present the views of experts to the public in new ways: on CD-ROM, online on the Internet etc.

All this has rightly inspired a great deal of reaction against elitism, and by association, against technology. One of the purposes of this paper is to claim that there is no necessary connection between technology and elitism and indeed that the new media can help in creating new kinds of public participation, through interactive art, recording devices, databanks and networks.

## **2. Interactive Art**

One context for the new technologies has been to become responsive to their surroundings. To save money and to protect sensitive exhibits various museums have installed sensors such that the lights turn on only when visitors enter a room. In some cases this principle is being extended to the work of art itself, such that a kinetic work is activated when a viewer enters a room; a mirror changes its reflections as it is looked at in different ways; a "painting" is actually altered by a person's looking at it.

## **3. Recording Devices**

Video cameras as a way of monitoring rooms without a security guard are a now familiar technology. Increasingly subtle recording devices are also being used to study the changing patterns of climate within a room: how humidity, temperature and solar radiation changes and how the air changes in terms of nitrogen oxides, carbon dioxides, sulphur dioxide, ozone, ammonium and particulate matter as crowds come and go.<sup>1</sup>

Some individuals connected with galleries, such as Doug Worts (Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto)<sup>2</sup> see the new technologies as a means of recording viewers' impressions of paintings. Here the computer can function as a notebook whereby an individual visitor can share their personal reactions to a painting and make these available to other viewers.

## **4. Documentation versus Interpretation**

In the traditional organization of the seven liberal arts, a *trivium* of three was devoted to grammar (structure), dialectic (logic) and rhetoric (effect) while the *quadrivium* was devoted to the sciences: arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy. One of the phenomena that fascinated McLuhan was the way in which emphasis shifted to different aspects of the *trivium* as the medium of communication shifted. He noted that in Antiquity, with its emphasis on oral communication, there was considerable attention to rhetoric: i.e. the effects of a passage. With the advent of printing in the Renaissance, he argued there was a shift towards logic and structure. The rise of electronic media, in the form of television, he claimed, brought with it renewed attention to rhetoric: to the effects one had, on seeming rather than on substance, on the image one portrayed rather than what one was.

The shift from documentation (structure, logic) to interpretation (effect) might be seen as another manifestation of the trend that McLuhan identified. There is no doubt that the interest in voices, in all the points of view, is an attempt to bring into focus very different ways in which the same document or object affects or has effects on various members of the audience and not just those of a privileged few who happen to be curators.

## **5. Credentials and CVs**

This has advantages but also brings new dangers. A positive consequence is that there are now many more viewpoints, many of them fresh, unexpected and stimulating. The dangers lie that we no longer have any certainty of the reliability or even the discipline level of the new voices. In the old system, it took a great deal of effort to become a curator. The individual might have had a difficult personality, one might have had doubts about their personal life, but one had a clear notion of where they had studied with whom and thus had a clear notion of their level of intellectual rigour. On an Internet where everyone can comment equally about Michelangelo or Plato, one needs to have new methods for distinguishing between those authors who are making it up as they go along and those who are basing their claims on a careful study of Michelangelo's Italian or Plato's Greek. This helps to explain why in the scholarly world there is an increasing emphasis on the distinction between refereed and non-refereed journals.

Some, of course, would argue that these kinds of distinctions are no longer important or even valid. It is instructive to observe how the champions of this view react when one suggests that their approach be applied across the board to include practical domains of their own life: the proposal, for instance, that some random person off the street should be called in to repair their stereo set, their television, their best suit or their automobile. There is a general reaction of horror which is witnessed equally in cases applying to public utilities: if a radio station, a television studio, a hydro electric plant or an atomic energy plant is in need of repair, would they call upon the next passer by or would they ask for an expert? They would almost certainly call for an expert, because it is important to have a well trained individual who knows the complexities of the subject at hand. Yet when it comes to the world of the mind, of ideas, they would have us believe, training counts for nought: all claims are equally valid. In our own view, everyone may be entitled to an opinion, but if they wish to make it public then they owe it to their future

readers to give them some background about their education, training and qualifications for their claims. We expect a curriculum vitae from anyone who proposes to work for or with us. Why should we not expect the same for anyone who wishes us to work with what they have written?

## **6. Veracity Checks**

Connected with this need for checking the credentials of authors is a growing need to establish the authenticity or veracity of the texts and images that they produce. Is an image based directly on the original or is it perhaps a photograph of a slide, based on an image from a book, based on a photograph from a major archive which is taken from the original. Needed are three things: electronic equivalents of watermarks to assure that images are based directly on an original-- on which IBM and Kodak are working; a means of assuring that this image has not been tampered with and represents a faithful copy of the original--on which Kodak is working-- and methods for identifying how many generations an image is removed from the original.

## **7. Databanks and Networks**

A number of galleries have begun to translate basic materials from their file cards into databases. As a result some descriptions of paintings which were traditionally printed poster-like on the walls of galleries are now being made available through interactive kiosks with touch screens. A few museums have begun putting their materials onto the Internet. In Canada, for instance, the Canadian Heritage Information Network (CHIN) has been working at making available sample materials from most of the major museums. In Europe a project called Remote Access to Museum Archives (RAMA) is leading to a project termed Open Multimedia Access to the World's Cultural Heritage (HOMER), which intends to link with the International Museum Information Network (IMIN). A framework for museum links at the global scale is thus emerging.

Parallel with these developments have been efforts by a number of major players in the private sector to control or at least influence this market. These include major media companies (e.g. Time Warner, Ted Turner), computer companies (e.g. Digital, who are trying to control; IBM, who wish to influence), and even software companies (such as Microsoft, who are trying to control). This raises new questions concerning the great collections. Since they have mainly been paid for by taxpayers' monies, should they be viewed as part of our heritage and thus accessible to all the public as their right or should these materials be seen as yet another area open to exploitation by business?

## **8. Local, National and International**

Canada was the first country in the world to create a nationwide database of its museum collections through CHIN some 22 years ago. The initial vision statement which led to

CHIN called for the "creation of an inventory of the major scientific and cultural collections of Canadian Museums". In a presentation to its Collections Management Clients" on 16 May, 1995, responding directly to recent cuts, CHIN revealed a series of new directions whereby it will abandon this earlier role as responsible for a national inventory and suggested eleven possible services with which it might become involved in future:

- 1) Provide technology assessment service
- 2) Provide assistance with commercial partnering
- 3) Make national database more functional and more friendly
- 4) Maintain standards for community
- 5) Involve clients in planning and governance
- 6) Provide assistance to museums for staff development
- 7) Provide Internet connectivity for museums
- 8) Implement distributed architectures/in-house collections management
- 9) Establish clearinghouse for rights: for use of the National databases and image thumbnails, public access, access by schools/universities
- 10) Provide worldwide access to Canadian museums: directory of museums, exhibitions collections
- 11) Represent Canadian museums in national/international policy.

One result of these new directions is that the onus of actually doing the documentation and its management is being increasingly relegated to local museums. This poses a new danger that local interests and concerns will lead to a series of solutions that work on a small scale but which cannot adequately cope with international networks.

Connected with this is the problem of who will pay for all these wonderful possibilities? There are two main schools: one would have us make of everything a business proposition: the other claims that heritage was paid for by the public, belongs to the public and should therefore be dealt with using government funds. Then the question arises which government funds. There is a clear pattern, in Canada at least, to shift responsibility from the federal to the local level. Unfortunately, the local level is too often concerned overwhelmingly with local problems. So galleries find themselves in a curious crossroads wherein the problems they face are increasing global in scale and of a type that might most reasonably be dealt with by international committees such as RAMA, HOMER and IMIN while at the same time the monies and political force to do things is retreating back to the local level.

Those who favour the business proposition tend to look at reality strictly in terms of direct losses and gains. Building a beautiful gallery such as the National Gallery of Canada may cost amount  $x$  and attendance may not bring back a higher sum directly. From a narrow business view this is therefore a bad proposition. From a wider viewpoint, however, the presence of a beautiful gallery attracts donors and in turn tourists who increase the economy, which leads to an environment less conducive to crime and destruction, which means that the gallery is an excellent business proposition as long as the terms of reference are taken widely enough. The problem is that local scale decisions tend to focus on the narrow business picture while the national and international scales

tend to understand the bigger picture. At a time when the big picture is ever more necessary, the decisions are being made by those active in small pictures. This, not new technologies, may well be the greatest threat to our notions of public galleries and museums.

At the same time the local scale is where the objects are and it is of vital importance that each local level keeps reminding us how the particularities of this level contradict the glib generalizations that are all too often made at the international level. Global networks must reflect local riches, not just prize pieces.

On the positive side there are wonderful new prospects opened up by the new technologies. In the past the public part of a museum traditionally included only one to five percent of the full collection. This fraction typically reflected the particular fashions of the day. A majority of the holdings of great galleries is in storage. Electronic versions potentially allow public access to all these works presently in storage and thereby imply a transformation of what gallery and museum materials are public. To put it differently: we are all accustomed to making claims about styles of art, about cultural periods, about works in a given province or city, but very often these claims are based on acquaintance with only a very small sample of the materials that are extant. Electronic media offer an enormous opportunity of increasing the sample on which our claims are based.

This seemingly simple fact could transform the very meaning of public. In the past public has meant not just a number of persons meeting in some communal space, but has depended on their having some common ground in background knowledge when standing in front of a painting, else there could not sensibly be tour guides. Imagine if a person taking a group around the Uffizi had to explain who the Virgin Mary and all the other saints were as they went through the halls of Renaissance art. Persons can talk about art publicly because there is a certain level of context which they have in common. Electronic media offer a means of making that corpus available to individuals all over the world, of increasing the scope and depth of that which they can have in common and in this sense electronic media are changing what public means.

## **9. Private Public and Public Private**

The increasing accessibility of materials from galleries and museums in electronic form means that individuals are now able to view or rather pre-view these items in the privacy of their homes before they go to the public gallery or museum. Those who fear that this private process will replace a desire for the public experience would be well advised to recall earlier experiences. The advent of travel books and museum guides did not replace the need for or desire for going to the great galleries. If anything this corpus of literature increased the yearning to see the great sights, not least because it helped to define a corpus of paintings and monuments which were considered part of a cultured person's horizons. While the quality of electronic images continues to improve there is little likelihood that they will become serious surrogates of the originals. These electronic versions do, however, permit members of the public to study the works they wish to visit privately. In this sense the public will become private. At the same time because the

public areas will offer new contexts for private comments to be viewed publicly, there will be a tendency for the private to become public.

## **10. Conclusions.**

Electronic media are transforming many aspects of the art and museum world. They are introducing new types of interactive art and recording devices. They are stimulating a shift from strict documentation towards interpretation. They bring new needs for attention to credentials and cv's on the part of users and veracity tests with respect to the sources themselves. Electronic media also bring a new linking of materials through databanks and networks, which will transform some of our notions of local and international and indeed our very definition of private and public.

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<sup>1</sup> See: *Uffizi Project*, ed. V. Cappellini, Florence: Dipartimento di Ingegneria Elettronica, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Douglas Worts, "Extending the frame: forging a new partnership with the public", *New Trends in Museum Studies*, February 1994.