21ST CENTURY ROLES OF NATIONAL MUSEUMS: A CONVERSATION IN PROGRESS

October 2002

Smithsonian Institution

Office of Policy and Analysis
Washington, DC 20560-0039

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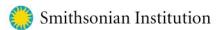*The 21st Century Roles of National Museums: A Conversation in Progress* does not offer a clear path about what national museums should do. Instead, it presents a large body of research that synthesizes ideas about the future of national museums and draws on examples from around the world. Because the idea of reconceptualization is a central theme, three different ways of looking at reframing the roles of national museums are emphasized.

As noted in the Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A) previous white papers, preparation of these papers is a team effort. All staff provided valuable insights, criticism, and support. However, Kathleen Ernst wrested as much as she could from the material she's had to work with in between completing other assignments with great attention to detail and a keen sense of order. Whitney Watriss and Zahava D. Doering who were trained in different disciplines and often disagree on views of organizations and their purposes, provided distinctive and illuminating slants. I thank them and other staff for their continuing patience, interest, and suggestions.

Carole M. P. Neves
Director
Office of Policy and Analysis

[The great 21st century museums] *are the museums breaking new ground in redefining their national identity, becoming more inclusive and accessible, and establishing themselves quite consciously as a forum for the debate of contemporary issues.*

- Dawn Casey, Director, National Museum of Australia

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper will examine some of the emerging roles of national and other publicly funded museums as they look to apply their unique resources of collections, knowledge, and building spaces to services that are responsive to the public. It is written within the context of a seismic shift, in the course of a generation, in how museums view their central purpose – from being inwardly focused on their collections to being outwardly focused on providing services to their audiences. Two widespread trends in government have had a profound effect on national museums: the response of political bodies to the demand of underrepresented indigenous and immigrant populations to have a greater voice in government; and the call for accountability for how public funds are spent. Museums and other cultural institutions and their funding bodies increasingly recognize the potential to positively affect society through new, or newly emphasized, roles. In the dialogue, the three interconnected roles of *facilitator of civic engagement, agent of social change* and *moderator of sensitive social issues* are especially important.

Through the subject matter and populations given voice in their programs, national museums, through both inclusion and exclusion, have always played a role in defining who is part of the nation, what ideas and issues can be discussed, who benefits from museum programs, and whose voices matter. As museums reinvent themselves, they are paying increasing attention to the importance of developing a new *reflexive relationship* with their audiences and other stakeholders in order to stay *relevant* and provide the kinds of services that best serve the *public interest*.

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II.   BACKGROUND: IMPETUS FOR CHANGE

Hudson (1999) said that discussions held at the 1974 International Council of Museums (ICOM) conference in Copenhagen marked the beginnings of the universally acknowledged shift in the focus of museums from "self-contained professional units" to "cultural centers for the communities within which they operate." Then and now, economic and socio-political forces, and changing demographic compositions of populations, as well as the professionalization of museums and multicultural movements, have impacted the discussion.

Shrinking funds and the performance and accountability movement

At the same time as the number of museums has greatly increased, there has been a decrease in government funding that has had profound implications. Museums have to rely more on income from visitors such as entrance fees and shop and restaurant sales, and on individual, corporate, and foundation funding for program activities.[1] This reliance has meant that, by necessity, they have had to be more attuned to visitors' and funders' perspectives, needs, and expectations (Weil, 2002).

Fiscal concerns are also the driving force behind the performance movement, primarily in western industrialized countries, which gained momentum in the early 1990s. It called for greater efficiency and accountability on the part of not-for profit organizations and taxpayer-funded government agencies for how public monies are spent, as well as a reappraisal of benefits to ensure distribution to a larger public and not merely an elite. In the "third sector," the United Way of America pioneered the requirement that agencies seeking funding define *outcomes*, meaning what positive differences they proposed to make in the quality of life of individuals or communities (Weil, 2002). Continued funding depended in part on their ability to show that they had accomplished those outcomes. In the public sector, national museums were coming under the performance and accountability mandates of federal legislation and policy guidance:

- In the United States, the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA, 1993) was passed in 1993 to "improve Federal program effectiveness and public accountability by promoting a new focus on results, service quality, and customer satisfaction."

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[1] For discussions of these issues, see Office of Policy and Analysis (2002a; 2002b).

- In England, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's Funding Agreements with its sponsored bodies should "focus measurement on what the funding has achieved in terms of outcomes, rather than simply volumes of activity" (QUEST, 2000).

- The Treasury Board of Canada's management agenda, *Results for Canadians* (1999), requires public managers to "continually focus attention on results achievement, measure performance regularly and objectively, learn from this information and adjust to improve efficiency and effectiveness."

Performance and accountability are underscored by an emphasis on the public service role of museums by professional organizations such as ICOM and the American Association of Museums (AAM).

Professionalization

Ironically, the professionalization of museums may have had the confounding effect of thwarting the advancement of the public interest. As Skramstad explained at the *Museums for the New Millennium* conference, Federal support for arts and humanities institutions over the past 30 years (by the Institute for Museum Services, the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities) and the peer-review process used in securing the competitive grants have resulted in the scholarly-informed, contextual, interpretive programs found in American museums. He observed that:

> What we are now beginning to recognize is that the same process of intense professionalization and internal standard raising in the museum community has had another effect: widening the disconnect between museums and the general public audiences that they purport to serve. Ironically the peer review process, essential to assure this massive Federal support, exacerbated this trend, imposing academic standards as the primary standard for museum public programs (Skramstad, 1996).

The changing museum audience

About fifteen years ago, Wilson (1996) described the national museum client as "generally intelligent and able to read and even use libraries to look up background information…the national museum Director is usually catering for the intelligent child or adult." Today, by contrast, no assumptions are made and a common objective is engaged

participation on the part of all visitors: to "treat all visitors, existing and potential, with equal respect, and provide access appropriate to their background, level of education, ability and life experience" (O'Neill, 2002).

Hudson describes a fundamental change over the past 25 years in the museum-going public and their expectations:

> Its range of interests has widened, it is far less reverent and respectful in its attitudes, it expects to find electronic and other modern technical facilities adequately used, it distinguishes less and less between a museum and an exhibition, it considers the intellect to be no more prestigious or respectable than the emotions, and it sees no reason to pay attention to the subject-division and specialisms which are so dear to academics (Hudson, 1999).

III. REDEFINING TRADITIONAL ROLES

In today's wide spectrum of museum philosophies, the two end states seem to be (1) a curator-driven, collections-based museum with a passive stance on public programs, and (2) an audience-driven, educationally-active museum that positions itself as a relevant community resource.

> \- Emlyn H. Koster (1999)

Traditional roles of national museums

Wilson (1986) describes the roles of national museums according to three recognizable types – monolithic museums, specialist national institutions and state museums of national culture:

Monolithic museums are large public collections that were created as or became national museums. Their collections were assembled according to eighteenth century philosophies of the encyclopedia and the Enlightenment, and as such they exist mostly in Western developed nations. The primary role of monolithic museums is to present a universal view of humanity's achievement or knowledge. For example, the British Museum "is a museum of the world, and its purpose is to display the works of mankind of all periods and of all places." Similarly, the Hermitage Museum "present[s] the

development of the world culture and art from the Stone Age to the 20th century." And the Louvre "incorporate[s] works dating from the birth of the great antique civilisations right up to the first half of the XIXth century, thereby confirming its encyclopedic vocation."

The chief role of *specialist national institutions* is to provide high-level academic support for a body of scholarship that serves a national and international audience. Scholarly research activities tend to take precedence over exhibitions. The functions and philosophies of specialist national institutions are often clearly perceived in their title, for example, the National Portrait Gallery in London and the Greek National Archaeological Museum in Athens (Wilson, 1986).

State museums of national culture serve to preserve national historic traditions and instill an appreciation of national language and culture. National culture museums embodying the history and art of a nation are important vehicles in building or reconstructing national identity, particularly in emerging nations (Higueras, 2001). At times, such museums have been used for expressly nationalistic purposes; for example, national culture museums such as the Hungarian National Museum, the National Museum of Helsinki, and the National Museum of Ireland have used exhibitions and other museum programs, and even architectural style, as rallying points in difficult times of war and political upheaval.

Wilson's analysis of national museums is written from the perspective of what they do – present an encyclopedic view of the natural world, crystallize national identity through the preservation and display of material culture, and further scholarship in a specialized subject area. While national and other public museums continue to define themselves according to traditional roles, the socio-political, economic, and cultural forces for change described above have caused them also to define themselves, to varying degrees, according to new roles that are directed towards the benefits museums offer to their audiences.

Education mission

Somewhat related to the shift in audience has been the increased sensitivity of museums to their role as a partner in the nation's educational enterprise. In the early 1980s, AAM organized a task force to assess museums' readiness for the future. The resulting task force report, *Museums for a New Century* (Commission on Museums for a New Century, 1984), concluded that museums had failed in meeting their educational potential and that organizational change and a change in priorities were called for. AAM, in response,

established another task force to propose actions that would strengthen the museums' educational role. Several years later, the resultant report, *Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums* (AAM, 1992), defined education as "central to museum's public service."

Validator of belonging in national culture

In Western countries many public museums were established by the dominant social classes, whites of European ancestry, and minority racial/ethnic groups did not have or did not seek representation. In the United States, going back to the social changes spurred by the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, racial/ethnic groups have sought participation in the nation's institutions, including museums. Public denial of cultural identity and belonging has made many African Americans and other minorities suspicious toward museums (Karp, 1992). Gaither points out, "As more formerly invisible social groups exercise political expression, public support by virtue of our tax laws will have to become more accountable to and reflective of a broader segment of the public."

Reinforcing this demand for inclusiveness is the fact that the makeup of many national populations is rapidly changing because of extensive, ongoing immigration. In the United States for example, unless major changes occur, immigration and natural growth mean that by the year 2050 the current minority racial/ethnic groups will comprise the majority.

During the 1970s, in part following the lead of other English-speaking countries, Australian museums were criticized for their lack of treatment of women's culture and experience and well as that of working class communities, ethnic minorities, and Indigenous Australians. These groups not only wanted equal representation in the national museum but an opportunity to participate in governing museum collections and producing museum exhibitions and programs (Casey, 2001b). In response, the government's "Pigott Report" in 1975 called for the National Museum to include the narrative of Indigenous peoples: "The argument for a major display of Aboriginal history is overwhelming…If the human history of Australia were to be marked on a twelve hour clock face, the era of the white man would run for only the last three or four minutes" (Casey 2001a).

For most groups, especially members of racial/ethnic minorities, being "part of the story" will inevitably involve compromises they may not be willing to make. In fact, the "American way" has been for these groups to establish their own museums (Doering,

2002). Jewish museums, African-American museums, and Native American museums are increasing. At the national level, Washington, D.C. is home to the United Status Holocaust Memorial Museum and the National Museum for Women in the Arts. At the Smithsonian, the National Museum of the American Indian is scheduled to open in several years. Latinos are negotiating for representation, as are Asian Americans. Early this year, after a 30-year effort, legislation was passed to create a National African-American Museum.

In these separate institutions, each group is in a position to tell its own story, to reinforce the framework it finds compelling, and to show its difference from others. Some, however, argue against "ghettoization." Gaither (1992), an African-American, says that we must honor the comprehensive character of American experience: "We belong inseparably both to ourselves and to the whole. We are our own community while also being part of the larger community."

The thrust of the American conversation about representation has revolved around members of racial/ethnic minority groups. Other voices, for example gays and lesbians, are still marginalized by most museums. In addition, scant attention is paid to groups with less well-defined boundaries such as people with disabilities or the poor. There are exceptions. For example, the Smithsonian hosted *History Through Deaf Eyes*, an exhibition that has been touring the nation and depicts nearly 200 years of U.S. history from the perspective of deaf people. A recent exhibition at the National Museum of American History, *Paint By Number: Accounting for Taste in the 1950s*, legitimized "everyday" middle-class, hobbies, and values, describing paint by numbers as "a peculiarly American virtue."

Community partner

> *Only by deconstructing many of the existing boundaries that define our thinking as museum professionals, and by involving, systematically and consistently, those who sit outside of museums but within the communities that we serve and of which we are a part, can we begin, truly and effectively, to contemplate, dream about, envision, and formulate the 21st-century possibilities regarding museums and community.*
>
> -W. Richard West, Director, National Museum of the American Indian (AAM, 2000)

The last ten years has seen an increase of studies, conferences, and initiatives that explore how museums can best play an active role in their communities and build relationships with community partners. Communities can refer to communities of cultural self-identification such as the Latino community or gay community. More recently, "community" describes a museum's geographic community and the different cultural groups that comprise it.

- The Canadian Museums Association's Cultural Diversity and Museums II and Canadian Image projects have explored ways that museums can build lasting relationships with "cultural communities."

- AAM's Museums and Community Initiative (M&C), begun in 1998, is a national initiative "to explore the potential for dynamic engagement between American communities and their museums." M&C held six community dialogues throughout the country with 700 participants, weighted in favor of the community perspective, with corporate leaders, educators, social service representatives, philanthropists, politicians, and other community leaders. Essays and observations resulting from the dialogues were published in *Mastering Civic Engagement: A Challenge to Museums* (AAM, 2002).

- Grants programs have further encouraged and provided incentive to museums to establish community programs and partnerships. The Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS), a federal agency, provides funding to museums under the Museums in the Community category of its National Leadership Grants for "partnerships that improve the social and economic conditions of their communities." The Pew Charitable Trusts' Program for Art Museums and Communities (PAMC) has awarded grants to 11 museums since 1995 to create projects that are examples of effective partnerships between museums and their communities. In a sense, these grantors and sponsors of activities are advocates for furthering the public interest through fostering of citizen participation.

- Many of the Smithsonian museums work with community groups in planning public programs and some exhibitions. For example, the National Museum of Natural History involved dozens of organizations in the development of the *African Voices* hall, as did the National Museum of American History in *American Encounters*. The National Museum of the American Indian has become a model for community involvement and consultation with relevant stakeholders in all aspects of operations. Other museums have done likewise, an example being the Shedd Aquarium in Chicago. Its *Amazon Rising* involved communities in both Chicago and the Amazon basin.

IV.   RECONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF THE ROLES OF MUSEUMS

Universalism has been dethroned in almost every field of contemporary culture…It is now seen as an anxious and pretentious yet ultimately futile effort to enforce rigor and uniformity in an unruly and luxuriant world.

- Albert Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* (1992)

If museums are now to see themselves as "part of the living culture of their time" and members of the public are no longer to be viewed as "passive observers of exhibitions that have been supposedly created for their benefit" (Hudson 1998), what are the roles and responsibilities of museums, and in particular national museums, vis a vis their actual and prospective audiences? Three interconnected roles have emerged for museums: *facilitator of civic engagement, agent of social change, and moderator of sensitive social issues.*

These emerging roles, which respond to a public service mandate, call into question the "modern" values of stability and permanence, authenticity, and grand narratives long attributed to museums (Macdonald and Fyfe, 1996). The new public-centered roles embrace such hallmarks of postmodernism as *de-differentiation*, (e.g., the blurring of the boundaries between high and popular culture and between museums and other institutions,) and *new forms of integration,* including reconnection of the producer and the consumer, and relationships between people within organizations regardless of status or position (Bergquist, 1993).

Discussion of the emerging roles is prominent among academia, international and national museum associations, government funding bodies, and national and other public museums. However, the evidence is that actual implementation is occurring at the margins, in small museums that are not necessarily publicly supported and in organizations that are a cross between community organizations and museum-like places. This is no surprise, given that the underlying postmodern precepts of the emerging roles include anti-authorship, flexibility, and adaptation. Nevertheless, the emerging roles are especially applicable to public museums. As holders of the material and natural culture that serves to define national identity, national museums have the greatest responsibility not only to be representative of their publics but also to provide services that best promote the public good.

Museums as Facilitators of Civic Engagement

> *Every decision of the future is to be based not on my needs or yours, nor on a compromise between them or an addition to them, but on the recognition of the community between us...it is only the dictate of the whole which can be binding on the whole.*
>
> > \- Mary Parker Follett, *The New State* (1918)

The idea of civic association as a precondition of political democracy is well recognized in the United States. Alexis de Tocqueville, after visiting the United States in the 1830s, related the American people's unprecedented ability to make democracy work with their propensity for forming civic and political associations. Mary Parker Follett, writing in 1918, espoused the idea that the collective thought that emerges from the group process (as distinguished from the unthinking unanimity of a crowd) is the chief technique of democracy.

In 1995, Putnam's article "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," generated worldwide interest and discussion. Putnam maintained that America's long tradition of civic engagement is declining, at least as measured by affiliation with such organizations as churches and synagogues, labor unions, the PTA, and civic and fraternal organizations such the League of Women Voters, the Boy Scouts, and Lions and Elks Clubs. Subsequent research showed similar downward trends in the last 30 years in other kinds of social involvement, including going on picnics, having dinner parties, going to bars, playing cards, attending religious services, and having dinner with your own family (Putnam, 2001).

Putnam linked this research about the decline in civic engagement and social connectiveness to a discussion about the threat to democracy. In his argument, he defined *social capital*. Like physical and human capital, social capital refers to the value-added that comes from social networks. Social networks have external effects, namely "sturdy norms of generalized reciprocity and ...social trust" that amount to a public good. The more communities are bound by horizontal ties of reciprocity and cooperation, rather than vertical ties of authority and dependency, the closer they are to the ideals of political equality among citizens and democratic self-governance. The plunge in social capital in the course of a generation can be seen as fundamentally debasing our democracy.[2]

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[2] See Putnam, 1993, 1995, 1996, and 2001 for a discussion of these ideas.

Putnam's prime causal suspects for the dramatic fall in civic engagement are suburban sprawl/commuting, television, and working families. A similar steep decline in social capital at the turn of the century attributed to the Industrial Revolution, urbanization, and immigration was reversed by the creation of most of the major civic institutions in American communities today. Between 1890 and 1910, for example, the Boy Scouts, the Red Cross, the League of Women Voters, the NAACP, the Urban League, the Knights of Columbus, the Hadas, the Rotary, and the Community Chest (which became the United Way) were established. According to Putnam, to reverse the troubling erosion of social capital seen today, we need to "invent new ways of connecting that fit the way we've come to live" (Putnam, 2001).

Putnam distinguishes between *bonding* social capital – the connections that link like people, and *bridging* social capital – the connections that link unlike people. Bridging social capital, the harder of the two to build, is more essential to democratic societies. It is in effect the group process described by Follett (1918) whereby citizens participate in a collective endeavor to define the public interest. Putnam challenges us to invent new forms of connections that "reach out to bridge different parts of American society, different races, different ethnic groups, different generations, different social classes and so on" (Putnam, 2001).

Due in part to Putnam's and others' popularization of the desirability of social capital and its link with public benefits, museums (and cultural/arts enterprises in general) are coming slowly to be seen as uniquely equipped to be the new institutions for bridging social capital: "Because the arts provide a neutral meeting ground and inherently involve dialogue and cooperation, they are especially conducive to bridging socio-economic, ethnic, generational, and educational differences" (Saguaro, 1999).

AAM's *Mastering Civic Engagement, A Challenge to Museums,* concludes that museums are civic enterprises with substantial but unrealized potential. Although communities recognize museums' capacity to increase social capital, museums are less sure about their own potential to play a civic role beyond that of cultural symbol and economic engine. A real barrier that emerged from the AAM dialogues is that museums are handicapped by the perception that they control knowledge, expertise, and learning. Museums are challenged to move beyond community-oriented strategies to fostering deep civic engagement: "Working together or diversifying audiences is not enough. What is needed are reciprocal, co-created relationships that connect the assets and purposes of organizations." Episodic partnerships should be replaced by comprehensive, flexible, and sustained organization-to-organization relationships (Hirzy, 2002).

Casey (2002a) believes museums can be the new civic space for people to gather and talk about hot issues and the news of the day. According to Casey, museums are ideally situated for this role for several reasons: museums offer a reflective space where people can consider issues against the backdrop of their history; museums' foundation in scholarship and research allows them to contribute to an informed debate that can't be had in a newspaper or pub; and museums are "safe" in that they offer neutral, calm, and comfortable venues where the rules of engagement are grounded in respect for multiple viewpoints.

Blackwell (2001) projects that "Museums, in concert with their educational emphasis may also become the…'social condensers' where ideas are explored, tensions are resolved, and decisions affecting the community are made. They may serve as the 'new town square.'"

The funding and oversight body for England's national museums, the Department of Culture Media and Sport (DCMS), spells out this new dimension of public service in its policy guidance for publicly funded museums, galleries, and archives:

> Cultural activities can be pivotal to social cohesion and social change, helping to generate community identity and pride, celebrate cultural and ethnic diversity, and improve educational attainment. Museums, galleries and archives provide a special social and learning environment. Collections can be a starting point, with individuals relating to objects and displays that trigger their interest, but the experience can also involve interacting with others and learning social skills, increasing motivation, developing numeracy and literacy skills, and raising self-esteem [emphasis added] (DCMS, 2000).

Museum forums that bring people from different racial, ethnic, age, and social class groups together, and thus enable the building of bridging social capital, are often hybrids of exhibitions and festivals. The Smithsonian Folklife Festival, initiated in 1967, is an example. The 2002 Festival, *The Silk Road: Connecting Cultures, Creating Trust,* brought more than 1.3 million visitors to the National Mall to interact with 375 artists, cooks, musicians, and presenters, among them Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Taoists, Shintoists, Jews, and Sikhs, drawn from more than two dozen nations and speaking more than 30 languages. The Festival could help Americans understand the cultures, histories, and traditions of the people living in the "stans" and in other nations prominent in the daily news. It was "a clear affirmation of the right and desire to assemble for the purposes of civic expression and enjoyment" (Kennedy, 2002).

Spirit & Place is an annual civic festival of the arts, humanities, and religion in the American Midwest. Organizations around central Indiana collaborate to produce ten days of programs – concerts, tours, plays, exhibits, readings, and discussions – that amount to a citywide conversation about the "spirit" or identity of the place called home. According to its website: "*Spirit & Place* brings together citizens, thinkers, and artists to entertain ideas that are meaningful for the common good. The centerpiece of the festival is a Public Conversation featuring three nationally known speakers. The guiding sub-theme of the 2002 festival is Breaking Silence." Now in its seventh year, the festival models an ongoing dialogue about American civic identity, with the arts, humanities, and religion as touchstones.

Minnesota A to Z, at the Minnesota Historical Society History Center, is an example of an exhibition that promotes civic engagement as well social interaction. Objects from the state's history are organized around the letters of the alphabet, each with a different theme ("B is for Baseball," "J is for Journey," etc.) "Q is for Quilts" includes quilts from the museum's collections as well as quilts made by volunteers and visitors. Visiting quilters supervised by volunteer hosts demonstrate the art of hand quilting and invite visitors of all ages to join them around the quilt.

The seventh meeting of the Saguaro Seminars on Civic Engagement in America focused specifically on the arts and civic engagement. It asked, "What can art museums do to increase visitors' social capital?" Some art museums are attracting different audiences through later hours and expanded programming, including singles nights, musical soirees, and theme dinners. Some are shifting from episodic encounters to more sustained activities, such as The Walker Art Center's Teen Arts Council, a group of teenagers who meet weekly to discuss ways to make the museum relevant to their age group (Saguaro, 1999). The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston sends buses to Hispanic neighborhoods so that families can visit the museum.

Other museums involve new groups in being an interface between the museum and communities. One such example is the *Bringing the Lessons Home: Holocaust Education for the Community* program at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM). Started in 1994, USHMM has developed long-term partnerships with 20 high schools and middle schools that serve the Washington metropolitan area. Through these partnerships, more than 25,000 students, teachers and parents have received special programming and participated in discussions; more than 600 local educators have attended workshops; and more than 200 students, primarily African-Americans, have completed internships and serve as docents (Ambassadors) for their community, peers and the general public. In another example, a team of Chinese-American teenagers who are enrolled in the weekend Chinese Experimental School in Reston, Virginia, and the

Gaithersburg Chinese School were involved in activities which led to panels in the *Worshiping the Ancestors: Chinese Commemorative Portraits* exhibition at the Sackler Gallery of Art. The goal of the activity was to show the continuity of tradition in Chinese and Chinese-American communities.

Ethnic and community-based museums are prototypes for the role of facilitating civic engagement. They have "set the standard by establishing deep and meaningful civic involvement as their founding principle" (Hirzy, 2002). Community-based museums live the "reality where partners can genuinely co-create or confidently and fully share authority and resources" (Thelen, 2001).

Chew (2000b) describes a "community response exhibition" that uses a faster, less academic, "journalistic approach" of presenting topics of relevance and interest to large segments of the general public. He suggests that museums look to libraries and colleges as models of public institutions that present low-tech exhibitions linked to contemporary issues. Exhibitions that opened on the one-year anniversary of the September 11 attacks, such as *September 11: Bearing Witness to History* at the National Museum of American History and *Here is New York: A Democracy of Photographs* at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, illustrate the community response model where a topical subject is presented in a timely fashion with the input of the community. Less analytical and interpretive, these were "commemorative shows – expressions of remembrance and shared pain" (O'Sullivan, 2002).

Museums as Agents of Social Change

A museum role related to one of creating an environment where bridging social capital can occur is the role of offering exhibitions and programs designed to effect social change. This role is couched in the understanding that the social change being addressed is one that is for the "common good."

Sandell (2002) cautions that a museum's potential to contribute to positive social change does not imply that combating inequality be its sole aim, or that museums are merely a tool for government social engineering. Rather, museums should, in concert with other agents, ascertain their impact on society, and shape that impact through programs based on contemporary values and a commitment to social equality.

Combating social exclusion. DCMS in England has taken a step beyond holding publicly funded cultural institutions accountable for achieving *self-defined* outcomes: its policy guidance ties funding to accomplishment of specific Department objectives such

as "combating social exclusion." In its policy document, *Centres for Social Change: Museums, Galleries and Archives*, DCMS alleges a direct link between museum programs, the benefits derived by users of those programs, and strategic outcomes of social good: "The cultural sector is an important source of informal learning; learning can be a powerful agent in combating social exclusion; more social inclusion will result in better educational achievement, increased employment prospects, improved health and reduced crime" (DCMS, 2000).

DCMS is explicit about how *exhibitions* can support the role of national museums in combating social exclusion through involving audiences in exhibition planning and production:

> Programmes can draw in specific groups within the communities that they serve, including marginalized groups. Exploring the context of their community can allow people to come to a greater understanding of themselves and stimulate their interest in society more generally. Being involved in creating an exhibition, including hands-on creation of objects to go in it, can help enormously to increase individuals' self worth, value and motivation. It can also release latent creative abilities and enhance imagination, vocabulary and self-expression. This in turn gives them the confidence to engage more fully in society and helps to reduce their experience of exclusion (DCMS, 2000).

Promoting sustainable development. The AAM Conference "Museums and Sustainable Communities of the Americas" (1998) affirmed the role of museums in development: "In preserving and exhibiting the cultural heart of the community, they help sustain it; indeed the very act of telling the 'story' about a place can contribute to the community flourishing culturally, economically and socially."

A recent DCMS conference also explored the role that museums and galleries could play in promoting public engagement with "sustainable development": "Museums, galleries and libraries can provide neutral spaces where discussion can take place. We can engage the public in understanding the past, and in thinking about what might happen in the future to make our society more sustainable" (Blackstone, 2002).

Environmentalism. Koster (1999) suggests that a "major, even urgent" role for natural history museums is to point to the evidence of global warming and its human cause, and present the harmful human impact on natural biodiversity and habitats. He notes that this effort is currently underway at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. For well over a decade, museums have developed environmental exhibitions. At the

Smithsonian, *Tropical Rainforests: A Disappearing Treasure* opened in 1988 and traveled until 1994. *Ocean Planet* opened in 1995, traveled for several years and simultaneously became the Institution's first on-line exhibition.

Since 1993, the National Museum of American History (NMAH) has sponsored an environmental film series to coincide with the Environmental Film Festival in Washington, D.C. The series is oriented around how a historical perspective can assist society in addressing major concerns relating to natural resources, public health, and the environment. NMAH also organized the "Forum on Environmental Justice" in 1994, again from the perspective of the history of this phenomenon in the United States. The series of noontime talks, co-sponsored with the Environmental Protection Agency, brought together representatives from national environmental groups, public health researchers, community activists, academics, and government officials around such topics as environmental justice among Native Americans, environmental and economic injustice within Latino communities, and political dimensions of the environmental justice movement in the United States.

Museums as Moderators of Sensitive Social Issues

Intertwined with the roles of facilitating civic engagement and offering programs designed to effect social change is the role of neutral moderator of sensitive, and sometimes controversial, social issues – what Gurian has termed "safe places for unsafe ideas." From another perspective, Kimmelman (2001) sees museums today as "cathedrals for a secular culture…where we increasingly want to spend our free time and thrash out big issues (the religious debate over *Sensations* in Brooklyn, the atomic bomb argument at the Smithsonian, multiculturalism, taxes and public morality."

Sandahl, director of the planned National Museum of World Cultures in Gothenburg, Sweden, describes a changing mission for her museum away from being solely led by collections and toward being led by the fluidity of world events: "AIDS and how a country's economy determines the disease's effects may be addressed, or how fashion has led to the integration of communities" (Heywood, 2002).

Casey (2001b) notes the potential conflict for public institutions that must answer to both a diverse public and the governments that fund them. It is the nature of a democratic society that the two will not always agree. Well-known examples of exhibitions that incurred public censure and threats of withholding public funding include those involving material deemed morally objectionable (the Robert Mapplethorpe exhibit turned down by the Corcoran Gallery of Art and *Sensations* at the Brooklyn Museum), and those

involving interpretations of history deemed to be slanted unfairly toward a single interpretation (the *Enola Gay* and *West as America* exhibitions at the Smithsonian's Air and Space and American Art museums, respectively). The powerful and well-received exhibition *Without Sanction: Lynching Photography in America* was shown at the New York Historical Society, among other venues. The United Nations ultimately deemed parts of a Japanese exhibition on the bombing of Hiroshima to be too graphic to install at its headquarters. These kinds of exhibitions pit the First Amendment rights of artists and exhibit creators to express themselves, and of some members of the public to explore fully all aspects of their world, against social and political arbiters who believe the public should be protected from what they see as unacceptable materials or viewpoints.

Skramstad (1999) advises that museums can avoid the kind of controversy and public censure those shows provoked if they have a strong culture of "connectedness," which he describes as the process of a close, continuous, long-term connection between an organization and its audience. It is only through such connectedness that a museum will be trusted. Museums will need to master the skill of listening and be able to respond to what they learn from listening to their audiences. And, if museums are to stay connected and relevant in an increasingly pluralistic society, both the governance and the staff of American museums will have to become much more diverse.

Australia offers two examples of popular and successful exhibitions that took on sensitive topics. *Taking Precautions: the story of contraception* is a traveling exhibition from the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney. It documents contraception from ancient times to the present. The museum felt it was an appropriate time for such an exhibition, after legislative attacks on women's reproductive rights in Western Australia and the Australian Capital Territory. The exhibition implicitly and explicitly dismisses the notion that the number of abortions will decrease if abortion outlawed. *Body Art*, an exhibition at the Australian Museum that was limited to visitors over age 15, generated considerable protest from the right but generally received strong popular support. The exhibition explores the many different ways, both temporary and permanent, in which people "modify, change, decorate and adorn their bodies."

Martha Morris (2002), the former deputy director of NMAH, says that museums can and should address controversial topics but must do so through a *balanced set of messages*. To achieve balance, museums can pre-test controversial subjects with stakeholders, use a variety of funding sources, and incorporate all relevant voices in the script. A good example of a careful treatment of a sensitive topic in an exhibition is in the 1999 NMAH exhibition *Between a Rock and a Hard Place: The History of American Sweatshops, 1820-Present*. The exhibition included a curatorial voice in the history section, and the voices of participants – both workers and law enforcement officers – in the El Monte

section. The video gave industry a voice and another section allowed "national leaders" (from manufacturing, labor, government, etc.) to provide written comments. Planning involved consultation with industry representatives to assure that the exhibition would not present the mainstream clothing industry in a "bad light." In spite of the approach and a closely held script, problems did arise. However, the industry's position that it was unfairly represented, its image tarnished, and its values threatened did not gain significant support. In the case of *Sweatshops*, political support, including a petition by 45 members of Congress, rallied behind the exhibition (Doering, 1992; Dubin, 1999).

Although *Brain: The World Inside Your Head*, an exhibition sponsored by Pfizer, Inc. and produced by BBH, Inc. in collaboration with the National Institutes of Health, did not originate at the Smithsonian, it was installed at a Smithsonian venue. The exhibition addressed a societal issue – mental illness – that was heretofore taboo. The exhibition went beyond a presentation of the facts to destigmatize and demystify brain-based disorders, including depression, anxiety disorders, and Alzheimer's disease, and provide information on how to address mental illness.

Examples of Smithsonian exhibitions that explicitly serve to moderate sensitive issues are, however, fairly limited. It is more common to find contemporary or controversial events and social issues addressed in non-exhibition public programs whose audience is a "self-selected" one with a pre-existing interest in the subject matter. A typical example of how sensitive issues are addressed is the *Crossroads* monthly program series. Sponsored by the National Museum of American History from November 2001 through September 2002, it provided a public forum for discussion of current issues related to September 11 within a broader historical context. Programs included "Islam in the Global Community," "The American Flag: Symbolism and Conflict," "Beyond the Veil: Women's Minds and Politics in the Middle East," and "Race, Rights, and National Security."

Also in the wake of September 11, The Freer Gallery of Art sponsored two curator-led gallery talks, "Understanding Islamic Culture through Art," that examined how "the sacred and the secular, the abstract and the figurative, and the religious and the political have found expression in the arts of Islam."

The Three R's: Relevance, Reflexiveness, and Responsibility

Throughout the literature reviewed for this paper, three concepts came up repeatedly as important principles underlying the reconceptualized roles for museums. First, museums must sustain relevance in a changing environment. Second, they must adopt a reflexive

relationship with their audiences and communities. Finally, they must view the public interest as their prime responsibility.

Relevance. Staying relevant has social, political, and ultimately, economic implications for museums. Hudson (1998) tells us that the use of the word "customer" in relation to museums would have been unthinkable 50 years ago. Today, however, "social attitudes, educational standards and methods of communication are constantly changing, and in their displays and assumptions museums have to keep pace or lose customers."

DCMS's policy guidance to funded cultural agencies states that to achieve goals of social inclusion, museums, galleries and archives must be seen to be relevant, and must act in innovative and adventurous ways. The director of The Quality, Efficiency and Standards Team (QUEST) of DCMS explains how the stated purposes in the new funding agreements of "being approachable and relevant to society" and "encouraging the widest possible audience," challenge sponsored bodies to be "looking not just at the satisfaction with which their current customers view them, but the wider perception of their relevance and approachability among those they do not reach" [emphasis added] (Selwood, 1999).

The new Gulbenkian Prize in the UK, an annual 100,000 prize for most innovative program in a museum or gallery, was established to celebrate the money spent on making museums "relevant to the broadening 21st century audiences."

Reflexive relationships. John Blackwell raises this emerging issue of the changing model of the museum. The old model conveys meaning from the museum (and its curators) to the public for a variety of purposes such as educational, moral, and civic. In the new model, which is imbedded in postmodernism, the meaning of the curation resides with the audience's experience. Museums become a place for the audience to interpret, reinforce, and modify their own worldviews, rather than accepting the curated version (Blackwell, 2001). Mary Parker Follett (1918) called this "creative synthesis" or testing of preferences with those of clients.

AAM's Museums and Community Initiative (2002) has sought through its discussions to effect a change in dynamic from what had previously been *unilateral* relationships to *bilateral* relationships. W. Richard West has used the term "inreach" to describe the processes by which communities are encouraged to reach into museums and significantly influence agendas (AAM, 2002).

Reflexive relationships imply an exchange of values – as communities benefit from the sense of belonging and cultural identity they get from reaching into the museums, so, too,

the museum benefits from having a public conscience and sounding board for ideas in the community.

In the introduction to *Mastering Civic Engagement,* Archibald captures the essence of the reflexive relationship as well the internal barriers that museums need to overcome:

> I realized that the ability of museums to expand community service depends upon the creation of new and really collaborative relationships, where we do not presume to know what audiences need. In these new relationships we will regard ourselves as reservoirs of information and expertise and will relinquish our traditional authoritarian roles in favor of new responsibilities as both resources and facilitators of dialogue about those things that matter most to people (AAM, 2002).

Responsibility. Hirano (2002) suggests that we talk a lot about corporate responsibility; by the same token museums have a *responsibility* as community partners; it is part of the public service museums should expect of themselves (Hirano, 2002).

Assuming responsibility, often referred to as "walking the walk," is an ethical dimension that involves accountability. Gurian proposed that museums build programs that encourage more civil interactions. But in order to create a safe environment, museums must examine the subtle aspects of their presentation:

> Do the building guards think all people are equally welcome? Does the signage use words that assume a certain education level or specialized knowledge without explanation? Can a non-English speaker decode the message? Are staff members sufficiently representative so that the public has a sense that everyone is not only welcome but potentially understood? Are employees sensitized to the wide range of acceptable, culturally specific, behaviours in a public space? (Gurian, 1996)

V. CONCLUSION

I am motivated by the conviction that art, history, and culture can make a profound difference in the lives of ordinary people, that creative discourse and learning can inspire individuals and communities to imagine a world more responsible, tolerant, and just than the one to which we fall heir.

- Ron Chew, Director, Wing Luke Asian Museum

Economic and social trends, some worldwide, other internal to particular nations, as well as trends within the museum world, have created very different operating environments for national museums. Those museums have responded in different ways. Great Britain has explicitly charged its national museums with serving as agents of social change. The Smithsonian is a quasi-governmental trust instrumentality that does not report directly to an executive branch agency. Perhaps for that reason, it has adhered to the more traditional roles of preserver and displayer of national cultural and natural heritage. Recently and to varying degrees, however, its museums have adopted some of the changes taking place in the museum world, such as the shift to a visitor focus and the establishment of strong linkages with specific communities. These changes have been visible in some of the Smithsonian's exhibition-related programming.

As national museums move further into the 21st century, the same forces, and undoubtedly many new ones, will continue to push national museums, the Smithsonian among them, and their governing bodies to answer some core questions. It is unlikely that there will be enduring answers to these questions. Rather, they will need to be revisited and grappled with over time:

- What does inclusiveness mean? What is the proper balance among different audience groups? The answers to these questions will help shape the composition of a national museum's exhibition program.

- What is the role of national museums in addressing controversial or difficult events or periods both in a nation's history and its contemporary life, and in portraying the divergent experiences of different cultural and ethnic groups? That is, to what extent should national museums actively serve, through the medium of exhibitions, to encourage social dialogue and understanding? This question is particularly important to exhibitions, which are freely open to anyone (as distinct from many public programs that occur once at a set time).

- How should national museums be guided by their publics in terms of their offerings? This question, too, affects the composition of exhibition programming, how national museums go about developing exhibitions, and the role or place they assign to potential audiences.

- Where the private sector provides funding for the exhibitions of national museums – which it does extensively in most American museums – what role should governing bodies have in determining the appropriateness of the content? Conversely, if governing bodies establish specific roles for their national museums, what is their obligation to fund the implementation of those roles?

- How are conflicts to be resolved between the sometimes more conservative views of governing bodies and the willingness and desire of many exhibition visitors to be challenged? Are national museums an instrument of the body politic or the political body?

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