

To Inform or to Delight ? The Vision of a Modern Museum in Changing World

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I want to discuss a double role of two kinds of museums presenting some examples for both kinds of them. There are museums of fine arts and so-called narrative ones devoted mainly to history but also to techniques, nature etc. Which of them should inform and what kind of information could they provide? Which of them should delight and what exactly could they offer us? If we needn't fine arts museums what should we do with such masterpieces as *Mona Lisa* by Leonardo or *David* by Michelangelo? And what to do with narrative museums created to memory such important events in a history as Holocaust or the Second World War?

All these questions seem to be very important now, when the economy situation in the world isn't so good. As we all know, cultural institutions are expensive ones so we have to know clearly if they are necessary or not.

Museum is often seen as a very conservative institution. An adjective "museal" is mainly understood as something old-fashioned, covered with dust, even completely dead. A good metaphor of that conviction was a very interesting work of Polish artist Cezary Bodzianowski entitled *An Island of the Dead*, corresponding with the well-known painting by Arnold Boecklin. It is a video film with the artist floating in a boat with his head covered by a white sheet towards Museums Insel in Berlin. The artist pointed out that the island with museums on it is in fact the island of the dead. The film was presented first time on the Berlin Biennial of Art in 2008.

Recently the situation is slightly getting to change because of setting many so-called narrative museums presenting something different than works of art. The museums are connected with important historical events like the Holocaust and the Second World War I. The museums are much attractive for the audience – they are full of electronics and films and also provide interactive games.

Quite another matter appears when it comes to fine arts museums. They are full of paintings, sculptures, prints, drawings, photographs and decorative art (tapestries, ceramics, jewellery, furniture, etc.). You come to them to contemplate art and have some metaphysical and esthetic experience. The most famous is Louvre in Paris, National Gallery in London, Gemaelde Galerie in Berlin, The Hermitage in St Petersburg, Vatican Museums in Rome, Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, Metropolitan Museum in New York, National Gallery of Art in Washington DC and many others. For me the closest is the National Museum in Warsaw, Poland, because I have been working there for almost 30 years.

But even these art museums need additional factors to attract an audience. Art is expensive – every institution needs money to live. Museums have to pay taxes, for using a building, an electricity, water, staff's salaries, documentation etc. Stephen Weil (2000) counted a year maintenance of one object in the museum's cost – over 86 USD [1]. And as Nathalie Heinich and Michael Pollak have counted, an organizing of one big exhibition in the Parisian Centre Pompidou in 1990s cost the same what one mid-budget film's production in Hollywood [2]. So we, art

historians working at the fine arts museums, need audience and of course sponsors and finding them is far more difficult than obtaining money for the Hollywood film.

But, at the same time, we can not forget that the most important is art work not electronic gadgets (although sometimes new media art works ARE also electronic gadgets!). We have to remember that old masters' works need to be contemplated individually the best and in quiet and silence [3]...

Fine Arts Museums

Traditionally art works at fine arts museum are divided in periods (Antiquity, Middle Ages, Early Modernity and Contemporary), geographic sections (Western Art – European and American, Oriental, Pre-Columbian), kinds of art (paintings, sculptures, prints and drawings, photographs, decorative art, numismatics – sometimes mixed) usually arranged in a chronological order. Sometimes the orders are mixed – modern or contemporary art works are set together with ancient ones to present some similarities in forms or an intellectual content of the items originated from different epochs. But it is rare practice in arranging of permanent exhibitions – they usually serve for educational goals rather and need to be “in trim” and easy to understand as much as possible.

So every big European and American museum has quite traditional display informing an audience about a development of art in various countries (or world's areas) from the earliest time up to now. Inside the order we can see differences between art of various countries – France and Germany, England and Netherlands, Spain and Italy and so on. It is certainly an informative aspect of each art museum. But inside that we have of course highlights – masterpieces. Each museum has one at least. As masterpieces are seen works by Leonardo mainly (*Mona Lisa* in Louvre, *Portrait of Ginevra de Benci* in the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC, *Madonna among the Rocks* in the National Gallery in London, *Portrait of Cecilia Gallerani* in Czartoryski Museum in Cracow) what are exhibited in special way – separately and in a central place of a room (often with a special security). All of that to assure people the best conditions to see and contemplate them. It is evidently “delighting” aspect of museums.

At the National Museum in Warsaw the most important object (and physically the largest one – 426 cm high and 987 cm wide) is an oil painting *The Battle of Grunwald* by Jan Matejko from 1878 depicting a great Polish victory over German Knights in 1410. It has its own room with some smaller works by the same artist and even several armchairs set in front of the painting for contemplating it in comfort.

The rest of the gallery is arranged as it was said above – all the items are divided by countries (or schools) and we can see them in a chronological order.

So to conclude that part of my paper – the general function of fine arts museum is informing by presenting art works in an informative orders with particular items serving to delight by selecting them and presenting in a special way.

Narrative Museums

The most important narrative museums in my opinion are mentioned above three Holocaust/Jewish museums – in Berlin, Washington DC and in Jerusalem. They all remind us the great tragedy of the Jewish nation during the Second World War and at the same time warn everybody against the danger of a genocide. Very significant are places of setting that museums – Berlin, the capital of the state what was a cradle of nazis, Washington – the capital of the state in which a great number of Jews (often Holocaust survivors) live and Jerusalem – the capital of Israel, the Jewish state. In a case of that three museum we of course can't speak of “delighting” because of the main topic of them – the tragedy, so they surely serve to inform. But at the same time a way of giving the information could be and even must be attractive although it has to be also a very difficult and painful “attraction”.

So let's see how is the Jewish Museum in Berlin arranged? It occupies two buildings stuck up together – an old one and a new. The former one contains occasional exhibitions, offices and cafes. The latter building, the new one, was designed by Daniel Libeskind in a modern style as a high glass blue tower with windows looking from outside as dark dramatic diagonal slits. This part contains a main permanent exhibition depicting a history of Jews living in Germany from Middle Ages up to now arranged as linear narration presenting documents, paintings, photographs, films, texts and also some items like clothing, shoes, tools and other everyday things. But the “Time of the Contempt” is arranged in quite another way. In the lowest level of the building (it is significant!) we have some showcases with things (suitcases, musical instruments, parts of clothing) originated from the extermination camps. Further we go to a high dark narrow room with a small single light put highly under a black ceiling. The goal of that arrangement is written before the entrance – we have to feel lonely and frightened as victims of extermination camps in the gas cells. After that experience we go outside to “The Garden of Exiles” – a place with vertical blocks with creepers on them. Among the blocks there are narrow corridors to go in and once more you feel lonely and frightened... The last experience is walking on the moving stones shaped like human skulls. I couldn't do that but many people did. For me – it was a strong exaggeration but perhaps necessary for people to understand fully and really feel what Holocaust really was.

The Holocaust Museum in Washington DC is mostly informative. Four levels full of photographs, documents and films – everything you need to study the problem and its history. The most impressive were for me of course films with survivors' stories ordered in “thematic” sequences – extermination camps, ghettos, escapes, death marches, conspiracy, partisan struggles, anti-semitism and even prostitutes. But also in the Washington museum there is one place “attracted” your feelings – a high narrow room with plenty of small photographs of no-survivors displayed on its walls from a floor to a ceiling with no gaps between them. It of course is a kind of reminder of a crematory chimney in an extermination camp – all the depicted people passed away through it.

Another part of the Holocaust Museum in Washington where your feelings are engaged is a part devoted to Daniel – small Jewish boy living in Berlin who firstly experienced a good life before the Nazi era and everything after that. We can see his nice room with toys, bicycle and normal furniture and then follow his life after the Crystal Night towards a complete degradation.

Yad Vashem in Jerusalem is similar but except main building containing the history of Holocaust we have there also the whole big garden with thousands of trees of Righteous, Valley of the Nations and the most thrilling – Children's Memorial. Of course our feelings are moved here in a very high degree.

During the Second World War the largest European Ghetto there was in Warsaw, the capital of Poland. In April of 1943 Jewish Uprising against Nazis broke out. Alas, the Uprising fell down and almost all the Jews were killed. So it is quite good reason to have a museum to memorize that. The Jewish Museum in Warsaw is under construction and will be finished within the nearest few years.

Another important event of that time was Warsaw Uprising of civil people against Nazis in August 1944. The museum memorizing that was established in 2004. It presents a history of the event in a very attractive way – particularly thrilling is Little Insurgent's Room presenting children's participation in the Uprising (they were usually used as runners but also nurses).

So, to conclude – some narrative museums inform but also move our feelings.

But some narrative museums can also entertain us. The good example of that is the Spy International Museum in Washington DC. Its informative role is surely important (particularly we can learn plenty of the cold war) but we also can have a great fun playing “spying games” – passing “exams” to be a spy, watch plenty of items serving real spies in their job.

Conclusions

After looking through the several examples presented above we can come to a conclusion that the question given in the title of my paper is out of sense. But I think that – as we often say in Poland – there are no stupid questions, but only stupid answers exist.

We can see that all the museums – each kind of them – have to inform us and equally delight or move our feelings. Their role in our modern multiform world has to be multiform either because multiplicity is a leading feature of our time [4]. We want to learn and to be informed and at the same time we want to have leisure. We like to have our feelings moved because we understand everything better if something moves us. And museums are the places where everything that is possible.

References

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- [4] W. Welsch, *Unsere postmoderne Moderne*, (1987) Weinheim.