

Words, Museums and Experience Of Physical Substance

Many years ago when I was jumping through a hoop of psychology tests devised by the army, I had to say immediately what came into my mind when, one after another, words were flashed upon a screen. Whether or not the word, 'Museum' came up I do not recall, but it would have been interesting to know the results if it had. What do you think of at the sight of the word 'Museum'?

In 1931 the Government's Board of Education published a pamphlet called 'Memorandum on the Possibility of Increased Co-operation Between Public Museums and Public Education Institutions'. The pamphlet in its final paragraph stated:

'It may be suggested, in conclusion, that the word 'museum' is perhaps in part responsible for the present unsatisfactory state of affairs. Does it not suggest a depressing decaying institution, the last resting place of travellers' mementos and of fossils which have undeservedly survived from ages long ago? The existing prejudice is deeply rooted in the touch soil of our language and in the popular mind, but it would most surely be overcome if a generation of children were given systematic opportunities of enjoying the treasures of modern museums'. When I discussed this with an eminent member of the museum profession he said 'I am not sure that as a profession we don't do ourselves a disservice in perpetuating the 'dusty museum' image. Even small towns these days are often swinging'. Is this really so? Can we honestly say that this is the image the word 'museum' creates in the minds of ordinary people, the majority? Do ordinary men and women fill our museums making them buzz with life and activity? Does not the word 'museum' still bring to the ordinary person's mind a picture of a large imposing building, probably like a Greek Temple, a flight of steps, stone pillars and all? You ascend the steps, go through the entrance. If you are a man and wearing a hat you feel you must take it off; if you are a woman without a hat you feel perhaps you should have one on. You lower your voice, for here is surely the body of knowledge of all time. I heard a small child who, when entering the British Museum (Natural History) said to its grandmother in hushed tones, 'Is this the Church for animals?'

I have been concerned up to now with one particular word and the image it portrays for the ordinary person. But who is this 'ordinary person' I have in mind? I refer to the majority, the large mass of people who are still usually known as the working class, not because of how much money they earn but rather because of what they do to earn it. What I am saying is that unfortunately working class people still think of museums and art galleries as places which are not for them, and that this is apparent by the fact that the majority do not go to museums often, if at all. Why is this? It is I believe very largely due to the extreme emphasis society puts upon the importance and value of the written word. I need to explain. Parents and especially ambitious parents, worry about how soon their young child speaks. The earlier he or

she speaks their first word, the better, the sooner they can read, the better, the sooner they can write, the better. One can even buy books to help you to teach your baby to read. This concern for the written word is not by any means a modern phenomena, a point to which I shall return shortly. Firstly let me explain the connection I see between the importance attributed to words and the ordinary person's disinclination to go to Museums and art galleries. In Museums, a great respect is shown for the read and written word. The practical man of the working class does not have the same respect for what is written. I find it strange that in museums and art galleries words are the predominant medium of thought. Museums and art galleries contain things, objects made of tangible, material things and objects which express ideas which could not be expressed in words. To understand these things and objects deeply, it is necessary to understand the material, the stuff of which they are made, at close quarters, and to do this one has to use tools and experience the qualities of the materials and the techniques employed. By their very nature one cannot hope to fully understand the things in museums and art galleries by talking, reading or writing about them. Words can help, but not to experience the stuff itself. There is some truth in the idea that visiting a museum to read about the objects is like going to the concert hall to read about the music. Consider what was until recently a common enough experience, that of sharpening a pencil. The experience of sharpening a pencil can be described in words, spoken and written, but however vivid is the description, the experience itself is in essence different from the experience of reading about it. Recall the way in which the quality of the wood, and the hardness or softness of the lead, affects the feel of a sharp knife's sliding action. The feeling can be described, but to know it in one's very being one has to experience the feeling. One has to sharpen a pencil. In the same way, to come to know and understand an object, the man who made it as well as the society in which he lived, one needs to

experience the materials and techniques used in its forming and shaping. Yet even in museums and art galleries, society's undue regard for words has caused a stratification in the staff structure. At the top is the academic, the scholar, the writer, the unpractical man or woman anxious to publish, whilst beneath him is the technician, the practical person.

Think of two kinds of men. One is an academic, a teacher, a solicitor, highly skilled in the use of words, but who with no shame or even much regret, says, or even boasts, 'I'm no good with my hands'. The other man is a mechanic, a joiner, a welder, highly skilled with materials and tools but who with great regret, even immense shame says he cannot read and write. The contrast between the attitudes of these two men is striking. What has created the social climate to which these attitudes exist?

Can Plato, the denigrator of manual work, really be blamed for all this? Earlier I said this was not just a modern phenomena. Did Plato really believe that 'It is more noble to think than to do'. Certainly it would seem society has from very early times attached a great deal of importance to the word. In 'The Miraculous Birth of Language', Professor R.A. Wilson wrote, many years ago, 'The Hebrew writer of the Genesis narrative had observed the fact that of the gifts which God had bestowed on man language was one of the most significant. Man had come into possession of the unique power of naming and classifying the things of the world; and in attempting an explanation of how this naming process was actually accomplished, the early writer put it in the following manner: 'And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam, to see what he would call them; and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof. And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field'. That is the Hebrew writer's brief and naive story of the birth of language; a story which the modern child of ten years will still accept at literal face value, which the man of twenty who puts away childish things will reject, and which the philosopher of forty, who has grown in discernment as well as knowledge, will re-accept with some surprise at the amount of factual truth contained in it'.

We still today venerate the word, and I believe, at our expense, for it causes us to disregard the qualities of thought experienced through the whole body and mind being involved with matter. The development of a full personality can only take place through the interaction of the body, mind and the physical substance of the world around us. A person who becomes physically handicapped realises that he has to make compensatory efforts to be involved with material, for he knows that if he does not he will be mentally handicapped also. Similarly, a mentally handicapped or mentally ill person is encouraged to do practical work to help him to develop or be cured. And a child born

very seriously handicapped can be in a desperate situation, for his mental development from the beginning is so inhibited by the physical handicap that all one can see is a totally handicapped child unable to develop at all. Yet we speak disparagingly of physical work and work with our hands and say the educated man is, 'A man of letters', who no doubt went to a 'Grammar' school. He goes on to 'Read' a degree (even if it is Physics he 'reads' it rather than 'does' it!). And if he did well, or should I say 'read' well, he became a Clerk (of a Council) and was highly paid (now he becomes a Chief Executive and is highly paid). 'Letters', 'Grammar', 'Read', 'Clerk', what an emphasis on words! Tragically, this same educated man may well say without any regret, 'I'm no good with my hands', he may even say it with some pride. But to turn from the minority (who see themselves as the elite) to the majority, we see the workers, the working class, the manual worker, the doer, the factory 'hand'. But we do not see him in the Museum and Art Gallery, at least not in large numbers.

Leonardo Da Vinci knew about the problem! He wrote in one of his notebooks, 'I am fully aware that the fact of my not being a man of letters may cause certain presumptuous persons to think that they may with reason blame me, alleging that I am a man without learning. Foolish folk! Do they not know that I might retort by saying, as did Marius to the Roman Patricians: 'They who adorn themselves in the labours of others will not permit me my own! They will say that because I have no book learning, I cannot properly express what I desire to treat of - but they do not know that my subjects require for their exposition experience rather than the words of others. Experience has been the mistress of whoever has written well; and so as mistress I will cite her in all cases'.

I plead therefore for more emphasis to be placed upon practical experience in Museums and Art Galleries. Opportunities and facilities should be provided where ordinary people can become extraordinary people who not only 'know' through reading and looking, but also 'know' through doing and through participation. Ordinary people should not only be able to write and talk about what they have found out, and so develop their personality through the medium of words, but they should also be able to make what they know and so develop a balanced personality through the handling of tools and materials. The balance between the academic and the practical produces completeness. Incidentally, watching someone else do something as in a demonstration, is not sufficient.

Clearly such facilities could not be provided in a single building, where not only Museum and Art Gallery objects would be needed, but where workshops and libraries on a vast scale would be required. But some approach to the development of a 'learning by experience' style of Public Museum and Art Gallery Service is being made already through the closer relationships which are being established between the Museum and Education

professions. More Museums and Art Galleries are providing special facilities for children and young people where they can do practical work. Unfortunately the number of such Museums and Galleries is still very small in this country and I know of none where adults are provided with such facilities. Yet, when I think about it, certain adults are provided with the necessary facilities for the study of Museum objects and works of art. These adults know the need for these facilities. They are of course the staffs of Museums and Art Galleries. I should emphasise immediately that I am not saying that the laboratories and workshops of Museums and Galleries should be opened up for public use. Clearly this would be nonsense. (But, incidentally, it would attract enormous interest if the public could see, if only through large windows, technical work in progress in Museum and Art Gallery laboratories and workshops). What I am saying is that the staffs of Museums and Galleries prove by their own way of working, that for a further understanding of the product of an art or craft, and for the fuller understanding of an artist or craftsman and the culture in which he lived or lives, practical work is necessary with the facilities which makes the practical work possible. At the moment the staffs of Museums and Galleries are the ones who learn most in these places. But, as I have said previously, even in Art Galleries and Museums we find on the one hand the 'technician' and on the other the 'scholar'.

I am seeking a way in which the public can learn, appreciate and enjoy more. I believe the way is through greater participation generally, and in practical work in particular.

There are very large numbers of workshops and laboratories in schools and Further Education establishments. Many of these are already used by the public in Further Education classes run by LEA's. By closer co-operation between Museums, Further Education, WEA and University Extension staffs, it might be possible to make use of these school workshops. But what must be avoided by each profession is any paternalistic authoritarian attitude. This might result in a continuation of the lecturing tradition which has never had a great attraction to the majority of people in our society and has an appeal only to a very few today. To understand and appreciate an Elizabethan dress make a replica and wear it!

Museums' and Art Galleries' staff have still the vitally important tasks of collecting, conserving, researching and publishing but I believe they must do more than they do at present to encourage the public to participate in these tasks. I can hear many saying that more money will be needed, more staff, more facilities. Is this so? It may be possible to find more staff and more facilities by becoming more closely associated with the public education system. The first step is I think to bring the museum and education profession more closely together through informal contacts, courses, and meetings where understanding, friendship and respect for

each other can be developed. This is happening to some extent but it needs to happen more.

That Board of Education pamphlet referred to at the beginning also said in 1931:

'Here, as in other American museums, passive looking at objects is held to be insufficient and in the long run boring and uncreative; materials and tools are available by means of which the children can undertake active work suggested by the exhibits. Some of the exhibits are, in fact, the work of the young people themselves'.

'From modest beginnings there has arisen a carefully organised system of co-operation between the Cleveland Board of Education and the museums which typifies the arrangements in a large number of American cities. Teachers, employed by the Board of Education but under the direction of the museum authorities, arrange with the schools for programmes of museum study, meet the classes at the museum and guide their work. The arrangements are not forced on the schools, but depend entirely upon the willing co-operation of head teachers, teachers, parents and museum officials, between whom there is regular and systematic consultation. The actual work of a class in the museum building is particularly interesting because the children themselves are active. Only for a small part of the time are they studying the contents of glass cases while the teacher lectures to them. For the most part they are actually handling objects, making drawings, enacting scenes suggested by the exhibits, and so on. At the Museum of Natural History, for example, they make feeding stands, bird baths and the like, and keep records of such things as the growth of plants or the visits of birds throughout the season. This museum is as much a laboratory as a museum, so far as the children are concerned, but it is a laboratory with infinitely wider resources ready at hand than any single school could possibly provide. In the Museums of Art and History, the children similarly make such things as vases and models of the buildings of former ages, enact historical plays, dress dolls in historical costumes and are active in a variety of other ways'.

Where in our Museums and Art Galleries in this country, 47 years later, are children, young people and adults from all parts of the community, having such rich and rewarding real experience? There is a place in Yorkshire, where a very good start has been made. It is Clarke Hall Educational Museum, Wakefield, run by a Consortium of Yorkshire Education Authorities. This Museum won the 1977 Pilgrim Trust Museum of the Year Award incidentally.

Clarke Hall is a 17th Century farmer's house which still appears as it did in the 1680's. Due to its prolonged use as a tenant farm the Hall has kept many features which have rarely survived in other Yorkshire homes of this period. In 1971 the old West Riding County Council with splendid and not untypical vision began the restoration of the house and its grounds. In 1975 the Hall was ready for use. Now began, for both adults and children, the real

experience of spinning, weaving, butter-making, cooking 17th Century meals and other crafts which late 17th Century houses would have known. No mere academic second-hand knowledge here but the real experience of wool in ones hands, cream churning in the churn, chickens rotating on the spit in the kitchen open-fire. But also the discovery of words too. Yes! Real words! The real meaning of 'Come on, it's your turn' dawns when one is tired of churning the cream, turning the handle four hundred, five hundred, six hundred times. 'It's done to a turn'. What a precise expression of good cooking when the spit handle has been turned from half-past-one until seven o'clock to roast that piglet! The integration of the academic and the practical is realised through such experiences. No room now for the hierarchy of the academic and the practical, for the manager and the worker, they are one. Where did we forget? Why did we forget?

Publishers Announcement

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