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Bully Pulpit: What are Museums for?

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When I first began to think about the question, “What are museums for?” my initial response was to reflect upon the textbook/historical definition of museums and their missions—to collect, preserve, and research objects; to mount exhibitions; and, to educate the public about history and culture in its various forms. Upon further consideration, I realized that although museums may ostensibly be created to provide all of these services, museums can be so much more than the sum of these parts. Museums can also be spaces where memories are created; where a wide range of identities and experiences can be explored and validated; where people can engage with new ideas and perspectives; where individuals can connect with their past, reflect upon their present, and imagine their future; and where people can interact with one another in a deeply profound or an enjoyably casual manner.

In order for any museum to successfully harness most (if not all) of these tangible and intangible qualities, they must be committed to providing a sense of cultural relevancy to all of their constituencies. For decades, studies have shown that one of the most effective methods to engage visitors is to show how the museum collection, exhibitions, programming, etc., connect with the present-day lives and experiences of individuals as well as communities. Although I feel that most museums strive for relevancy and community engagement, it is not always an easy task and we are not always successful.

Almost every museum has a segment of their local constituency that they do not serve well for reasons including race, class, economics, changing demographics, lack of public engagement, etc. Additionally, many people may not consider entering a museum because they feel that the very mission of the institution does not intersect with their interests, background, or cultural group. For example, a white visitor may not enter a culturally specific museum because they think that the subject explored within has no bearing upon their lived experience; a person who loves military history may not feel that there is anything in an art museum that they would find appealing; and an art connoisseur may find the concept of attending an institution dedicated to documenting the history of flight to be a thoroughly uninteresting prospect. However we, as museum professionals, know that all of these subject areas can be interesting and relevant to a wide variety of people, regardless of their prior knowledge of the subject, ethnic background, or preconceived ideas. We can reveal how the history and culture of African Americans shaped and transformed the history and culture of white Americans. We can create an art exhibition that explores how the military commissioned enlisted artists to create a visual record of battles during times of war. And, we make provocative connections between space exploration, science fiction, and the emergence of Afro-Futurism in visual art.

So, what are museums for? Museums exist for a wide range of purposes, but perhaps the most important of these is to make the seemingly uninteresting interesting, the unknown familiar, and make those whom we have rejected and/or ignored feel welcome and embraced. Museums should reflect and engage our lives, our communities, and our histories. By challenging ourselves as well as our constituencies to move beyond our comfort zones, museums can become greater than the sum of their parts to become places of memory, reflection, connection, and exploration for all segments of our society.