

A POINT OF VIEW ABOUT THE MUSEUM OF THE HISTORY OF MEDICINE AND PHARMACY

Objects, not reproductions

A museum is not a book. The thrill a history museum is to see the actual objects that people used in the actual place the museum is in.

[...] Since a museum is not a book, I don't want it to show me a lot of reproductions, artists' ideas, and waxworks. [...]

Cutting out the dull bits

Since a museum is not a book, it need not present me the whole history of a place or a topic. There may be a century when the Turks left little alive, or when a Christian church set about the destruction of all vestige of another Christian church. In that case there will be few three-dimensional objects to show. Well, then, show what you have and no more, in a single case if need be. I really don't want walls of stuff in two dimensions, photocopied off documents in Latin and Turkish that can barely be made out. I do read German, but even in German printed matter is pretty dull. A museum is not an archive, and books and photocopies are easier to read sitting down, at home.

I am told that a special feature of Central Europe is that in Stalin and Brezhnev's days some commissar or other decreed that museums of history should cover the whole history of a place or topic, as seen from the official viewpoint. Certainly, East Berlin used to boast in the Zeughaus a remarkable museum of the history of the German people, made up almost entirely of photocopies and twentieth century documents, with hardly an object in sight — I mean a real object, in three dimensions. Nowadays, in museums in the Balkans I sniff some attempt to persuade me of the truth of various kinds of national history. Again, if you'll show me the objects you have, I'll be glad to draw my own conclusions. (May I contradict myself a bit and add that I am sorry they closed the museum in the Zeughaus: it was like the Royal Albert Hall in London, a complete and accurate relic of a past ideology. Happily, there's still one such museum in Belgrade).

A note to rich directors. The wish to see real objects leads to a low value for videos, computer programmes, and virtual reality in museums. They all have their place, but they are all second hand, they are all somebody's idea of the past. The real object is a real piece of the past.

Children

Where are the children? In central Europe, do museum staff talk with local teachers, find what will be under discussion in class, and offer one-hour visits to a room or two (not the whole museum) to see the

objects that relate to that discussion? When children in Brno start on Darwinism do they go to see the very moving city museum on Gregor Mendel? When children in Ruse start on the Industrial Revolution do they go to see the city's small and delightful railway museum? And if they do, are visits properly prepared, with a pre-visit by the class teacher, question sheets for children to fill in during the visit, and a time for children to quiz an informed staff member? Do any central European museum staff take a short or part-time course in methods for teaching young children? (Some quite unqualified gallery attendants are natural teachers and would need little encouragement. In the museum of farm history in Keszthely a motherly attendant showed some children there on holiday how a corn chaffer worked: she enthralled them). Or are there few visits, with unhappy children trying to cover a whole museum in a draggy four-hour visit?

This matters. The cold war protected central Europe from a flood of global culture — Coca Cola, Canton cuisine, and the Chicago Bulls (whatever they are: I see their hats everywhere). Now it is up to us in Europe to present to the young at once the globe that is their village and also our own European history and traditions, and to celebrate them. In London in January I was walking through a room in the National Gallery. I found twenty children aged ten seated on the floor while a staff member led them to look at a history painting from the Italian Renaissance — to look, to look carefully, to look repeatedly. Adults passed by, children from other schools ran by, and the class sat enraptured, and full of answers to questions put to them. In years of visiting museums in central Europe I have seen little sign that the museums play the role they can in the maintenance among children of the spirit of Europe.

Lighting

The city museum in Oradea has many engravings by Dürer. But you can't see them. They tell me that they put them on show every five years, to avoid exposure to light. Is that right? Clearly, there's a conflict here between keeping things and showing them — between this generation and later ones. But Oradea does in fact show the prints sometimes, and what they need is simply a more even rationing system. Could they set up a sequence of two rooms, one darkened and the other dark, with lights that switch on only when a sensor detects movement in the room? Could they change the display each six months, showing twenty engravings at a time? All this is technical stuff, and for specialists like you to answer.

Not specialist is the general question of lighting of such durable objects as statues and ironware. Many central European galleries are blacked out, with solid panels covering windows, and artificial lighting. If the lighting were good this wouldn't matter. But many museums cannot afford enough light bulbs, and cannot pay for electricity for all rooms all the time. Perhaps museum directors think that their floor staff switch lights on and off for every visitor: I'm afraid staff are only human, and don't. What to do?

- could you replace screens with louvres and curtains, and ask attendants when they visit rooms hourly to check both that rooms have enough natural lighting and that no direct sunlight reaches any room?
 - some central European museums have installed sensors that switch lights on when somebody's in the room: could you do that?
 - could you issue visitors with hand torches?
- You will not get tourists and visitors to museums if they cannot see.

Access

[...] London's museums are not perfect, and central Europe's [...] had great times in central Europe. Two points for people from west Europe.

Central European museums have many more objects than west European museums do that are out on a shelf or on a wall, not behind glass. Maybe this reflects greater national discipline, or the lack of child visitors. But you might like to ask central European colleagues how they manage it, and whether there are lessons for you. Some western museums have displays designed for the blind to handle, so it's clear that you'd like us to get closer to objects you show. Can you change anything?

Central European museums often offer translations of all labels. At the door you get sheets of paper, one sheet per room, cased in plastic, tied in the top corner with string, which give you versions in English, German or French of each label. They often show signs of grammatical error and of age: no matter. Somebody has seen the need, and made us foreigners welcome. I have never seen such a thing in London. The Museum of the Moving Image is 200 metres from the train station for Paris, the early history of cinema is part of the history of France, and neither that museum nor (if I'm right) any of you issues loan sets of translated labels. Naturally, I don't care whether the translations are on paper or on tape: you may prefer to use tape. But in that case please just give the facts, not stretches of music which try to tell visitors what their emotions ought to be.

[...]

One meaning of the victory of 1989 is that now again all the professionals of our common European homeland can talk, and can help one another. [...]

BEN HAINES