

“A New Era for Museums”: Professionalism and
Ideology in the American Association of Museums,
1906-1935

by

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Introduction

As of January 2009, seven hundred and seventy-six museums in the United States are accredited by the American Association of Museums (AAM). According to the AAM's website, status as an accredited museum signifies the institution "has undergone a rigorous process of self-assessment as well as review by its peers; ... fulfills its obligations to the public as set forth in its mission; ... [and] recognizes a museum's commitment to excellence, accountability, high professional standards, and continued institutional improvement."¹ Accreditation is a stamp of approval museums can advertise in fundraising efforts and promotional materials, and it can elevate struggling, small, or isolated museums to new levels of renown and use. Losing accreditation can hurt the public's faith in an institution, ending in disgrace or at least embarrassment.

What gives the AAM this power? How did they become the gatekeepers for excellence in museums? I first began to consider these questions while interning with both the AAM's Publications Department and the Museum Assessment Program in the summer of 2007. As an undergraduate, I had only a vague knowledge of the AAM before pursuing the internship and I was oblivious to its clout and status in the museum field. In trying to answer the questions that continually arose from my daily work that summer, I found myself looking further and further back into the association's history. I discovered that, while the AAM had produced an extensive

¹ "A Higher Standard: The AAM Museum Accreditation Program," American Association of Museums, http://aam-us.org/museumresources/accred/accred_more.cfm, (accessed March 27, 2009).

quantity of documents across its history, from its magazine to records of its annual meetings, historians have paid little attention to the organization other than in its relevance to other works of museum history. A research project was born.

This thesis examines the early history of the AAM, its ideology, its practices, and how the association fits into concurrent themes in American history, including the rise of professionalism, scientific authority, and popular education. The AAM wields considerable influence within the museum field and the history of its formation and its early projects is not irrelevant to the values and priorities it broadcasts today. As a consolidating force for museum workers, the AAM has redefined their jobs as professional careers and molded the concept of the museum through a dialogue among peer members. The AAM has had lasting importance in the changes museums in the United States have undergone over the twentieth century, and a better understanding of its origins is a necessary addition to narratives of museum history.

I began my research at the Smithsonian Institution Archives and the Library of Congress, which together hold most of the AAM's early publications, including *Museum News* magazine, annual reports, and commissioned studies and books. I was impressed by how many of these publications were produced by the same group of a few individuals. These men, most of whom were not present at the founding meeting, joined the AAM the 1910s and 1920s and quickly rose to prominence, writing books and articles for the association and many serving as presidents as well. Nearly all of them had long careers as curators or directors at major art and science museums in

eastern cities, the types of museums best represented in the AAM from its beginning. In their individual works, they thanked each other and cited or directly responded to the works of their peers. The AAM's projects and publications from the 1920s and 1930s represent the work of a group of mostly like-minded individuals. Their shared priorities, occasional differences, and resulting debates shaped the organization and the field. I focus on works by these figures to demonstrate both the kind of organization the AAM's leaders were attempting to build as well as the collegial, professional manner in which debates were held and problems solved.

Very little has been written about the AAM from a scholarly perspective, though nearly all histories of twentieth-century museums in the United States include AAM-produced documents among their primary sources. The scholarly work in which the AAM plays the biggest role is sociologist Paul DiMaggio's 1991 article, "Constructing an Organizational Field as a Professional Project: U. S. Art Museums, 1920–1940." Published in the anthology *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*, DiMaggio's work is not focused on the history of the museum field as a whole, but on the role of the AAM in promoting professionalism and a unified field among art museums.² DiMaggio argues that the AAM, by legitimizing the museum "form" through its status as a professional organization, "empowered and authorized the museum reform movement, which offered delegitimizing criticism of existing museums. In other words, institutionalization bears, if not the seeds of its own

² Paul J. DiMaggio, "Constructing an Organizational Field as a Professional Project: U. S. Art Museums, 1920–1940," in *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*, Paul J. DiMaggio and Walter W. Powell, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 267-292.

destruction, at least openings for substantial change.”³ This is a provocative idea I deal with more seriously in my second chapter, but in terms of literature on the AAM, DiMaggio really uses the organization as an example to fit his exploration of abstract theories of institutionalization, structuration, and professionalism—not for the history of museums.

In contrast, historians have had little say about the AAM as an organization, though much about its most prominent members. In the AAM’s own history of American museums, Marjorie Schwarzer’s *Riches, Rivals and Radicals: 100 Years of Museums in America*, published in honor of its own centennial celebration, the formation of the AAM receives but a single paragraph in the preface. Schwarzer writes that the founding members of the AAM “no doubt . . . knew it was a historic moment.”⁴ I agree, which is why I find it so interesting this subject has been omitted from the major histories of museums. These histories tend either to focus on museum theory and the philosophy and meaning of running a museum today, or to examine specific institutions, locations, or museum types.

Scholars in a variety of fields, including anthropology and art history, have written on museum theory. This work has been heavily influenced by Michel Foucault. Architectural historian Carla Yanni writes that Foucault has “cast a long shadow over the history of visibility, museum studies, and even that most elusive of concepts, ‘space,’”⁵ and this assessment seems apt. Foucault’s theories about the

³ DiMaggio, 287.

⁴ Marjorie Schwarzer, *Riches, Rivals and Radicals: 100 Years of Museums in America* (Washington: American Association of Museums, 2006), ix.

⁵ Carla Yanni, *Nature’s Museums: Victorian Science and the Architecture of Display* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 8.

dependent relationship between power and knowledge and the construction of systems of classification are readily applicable to museums, institutions designed to classify and disseminate knowledge. Museums derive their intellectual and cultural authority through the construction of these systems. As historian Steven Conn puts it, “The walls these museums put around bodies of knowledge did not or do not represent immutable truths. Here, Foucault and others are surely right.”⁶ The way museums have presented bodies of knowledge, whether or not they are objectively true, reveal the priorities and biases of museums’ curators, patrons, and benefactors.

Museum theorists frequently focus on the way museums construct and reinforce systems of knowledge and implicit cultural values. Tony Bennett’s *The Birth of the Museum* is a Foucauldian analysis of the power derived by museums through their authoritative dissemination of knowledge and their role as institutions asserting some form of social regulation. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill deals with similar ideas in her *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*; both these writers examine a range of historical examples to chart the “genealogy” of the modern western museum. This kind of analysis has been particularly useful to those studying the relationship between the exhibited and the exhibitor in ethnological and art museums. Yanni notes that one way in which Foucault has been useful to the museum field at large is that his work “caused museum scholars to consider the high political stakes of exhibitions, especially exhibitions that claim an internal logic based on supposed neutrality.”⁷ She sums up a key change in the museum world in the late twentieth century, in which

⁶ Steven Conn, *Museums and American Intellectual Life, 1876-1926* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 253.

⁷ Yanni, 8.

advocates for social justice critiqued museums and the construction of knowledge they claimed to represent. This has not only affected the way museum professionals conduct their business today, but it has also prompted scholars to read theories of power and authority back onto history and see how contemporary standards were established.

In this vein, anthropologist James Clifford investigates the construction of concepts of “art” and “artifact,” and the museum’s role as a “contact zone” between exhibited and exhibiting cultures across the world. Clifford’s *The Predicament of Culture* and *Routes* include essays that illuminate the effects of practical decisions of layout, lighting, or labeling on a museum visitor’s experience, a task members of the AAM set themselves to in the early twentieth century, albeit with less theoretical discipline. Clifford and many others who write about museums also write about material culture. Walter Benjamin has been influential in thinking about how objects convey memory and what motivates people to collect them. Scholars like Henry Glassie and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett examine how objects are imbued with layers of meaning and curated by people in their own lives. Material culture theory is somewhat distant from the history of the AAM I reconstruct, but it is in many ways integral to museum theory. Familiarity with the literature on material culture has aided me in understanding early twentieth-century conceptions of the object and the museum’s responsibility to it. Recent anthologies, *Reinventing the Museum* edited by Gail Anderson, *Museum Revolutions* edited by Simon Knell, Suzanne MacLeod, and Sheila Watson, and *New Museum Theories and Practices* edited by Janet Marstine, include essays tackling similar topics of material culture and museum theory.

Along with theory, scholars have created an immense body of work on museum history in the United States and Europe. Much of this scholarship focuses on the development and diversification of museums in the nineteenth century and earlier. Though there are fewer studies of museums written for the period I focus on, these earlier works provide useful context for the formation of the AAM. As Steven Conn discusses in *Museums and American Intellectual Life, 1876–1926*, the mid and late nineteenth century witnessed great development for museums, including the founding of some of the institutions that dominate the field today. Men at these museums would go on to found the AAM. Edward P. Alexander, former president of the AAM, wrote three books on key figures and institutions in museum history: *Museum Masters*, *Museums in Motion*, and *The Museum in America*. These are straightforward histories that contribute biographical and background information. Other works of museum history focus on prominent institutions. David Brownlee’s *Making A Modern Classic* and *Building the City Beautiful* both examine the Philadelphia Museum of Art with a close eye to its architecture, a technique also employed by Carla Yanni in *Nature’s Museums*, which considers the major natural history museums in Britain. The areas of focus for some of these works are distant from the topic at hand, but have provided useful context and historical background.

Among museum histories, Joel J. Orosz’s *Curators and Culture: The Museum Movement in America, 1740–1870* stands out. Orosz charts museum history from the colonial period, and he outlines a debate that was important for the formation of the AAM and existed in the museum community from its earliest days. Orosz notes museums faced “conflicting demands for popular education on the one hand and

professionalism on the other” in the mid nineteenth century, a tension that has found and continues to find many ways of resolving itself in different contexts.⁸ Orosz argues that the two main criticisms lodged by museum workers against their peers and predecessors, that American museums were either undemocratic or unprofessional, were both exaggerated, and perhaps overly reliant on imagined European prototypes. Orosz shows that museums have been far more complex on these points and the frequently invoked paradigms of P. T. Barnum’s museum or elite “curiosity cabinets” were perhaps never so pervasive as later critics made them out to be. The AAM was formed by people making and responding to these critiques. Even in the twentieth century, members of the AAM make these same criticisms to serve their visions of what role museums should play in society and how they should be reformed.

In my first chapter, I examine the precedents for professional organizations before the AAM was founded. The most significant precedent is the Museums Association in the United Kingdom, which American museum leaders referenced explicitly and implicitly when calling for their own organization. Dialogue between museum professionals on both sides of the Atlantic was influential in the AAM’s founding specifically and in discussions of the professionalism of museum work generally. In the late nineteenth century many trades were elevating their social status to careers through professional organizations much like the AAM—the American Bar Association and American Medical Association are two prominent examples.

⁸ Joel J. Orosz, *Curators and Culture: The Museum Movement in America, 1740-1870* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1990), ix.

Professional identity for doctors and lawyers was not exactly the same as professional identity for museum workers, however, and I find comparison with the American Library Association to be the most useful. Libraries and museums have many shared goals, something museum leaders were keen to point out when looking for solutions for their own field.

Next, I consider the founding of the AAM in 1906 and its initial projects. This chapter examines what the AAM's early efforts reflected about the organization's priorities: a space to consolidate professional identity, to debate and promote issues important to museum workers, and to forge new standards and solutions that could benefit museums as a field. The Carnegie Corporation served as the AAM's major source of funding in this period, introducing another organization with specific goals that shaped how the AAM conducted its projects. The hiring of Laurence Vail Coleman as director in 1927 signifies an affirmation of these priorities as under Coleman's tenure the AAM increased its output of publications, both in *Museum News* and in books. Coleman himself wrote many guides on how museums should be run, and his work set a tone for the organization of committed professionalism and scholarly methods.

From long before the AAM was founded, museum leaders had debated the philosophy of museums and their role in society. In the third chapter, I investigate the shape these debates took for members of the AAM. I am not the first to contrast the ideas of Benjamin Ives Gilman of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and John Cotton Dana of the Newark Museum, as these two men's writings are frequently invoked to represent how divided opinion was on the function of the museum in society. Both

Gilman and Dana wanted to reform and improve museums, but in different ways; Gilman, the traditionalist, wanted to preserve the atmosphere of the temple of beautiful objects, whereas Dana, the populist, famously suggested a glass of water could be used to teach aesthetics just as well. Leaders of the AAM needed to solidify their position on this debate to be effective as an advocacy organization and efficiently provide support for their members.

With my inclusion of Paul Marshall Rea, a man who moved between science and art museums when not presiding over AAM himself, I frame the philosophical debate about museums' purposes in a new way. Rea wrote *The Museum and the Community* in 1932, using methods of social science to measure how sample museums currently served their communities. I argue that the methodology of Rea's work was a departure from the lofty debates perpetuated by figures like Gilman and Dana, and also that the publication of his study signifies the AAM's decision, at least on the part of its leadership, if not all its members, to side with education and accessibility. This links museum reform to movements to increase educational opportunities for adults outside the classroom, the museum being one of the key venues for these efforts.

As the third chapter examines the debates on museum theory, the fourth looks at the AAM's prescriptions for museum practice and how members attempted to apply those theories to tangible work. If the AAM wanted to promote museums run by the principles of social science, professionalism, and a unified field, its members had to articulate what that meant for the daily activities of museum employees. Contributors to the AAM's annual meetings and its publications did this largely

through observational studies of their own museums, the findings of which they would report back to the organization for the benefit of all. Topics included methods of display, color choice, and layout of museum buildings. The articles in which people reported on their own experiences demonstrate how the AAM championed scientific methods of observation as well as the collaborative process of building industry standards from multiple sources of information and experience.

Emphasis on scientific study occurred outside the museum world as well, as advertisers and department store owners also explored ways to understand and to use the way people process their visual experiences to the marketers' advantage. The comparisons between the commercial and non-commercial entities concerned with issues of display have been made before, but without a particular look at the AAM. The AAM's role in sponsoring Yale psychologist Edward S. Robinson's "museum fatigue" study and supporting Pennsylvania Museum of Art director Fiske Kimball's extensive visitor observation studies were influential in the field, inspiring people at smaller museums to apply similar methods to their own institutions and report on those as well.

In sum, this thesis constructs a narrative of the AAM's foundation and first decades of existence. The AAM's members sparred with each other over the philosophy of museums and worked together to determine the best practices and methods for daily museum work, whether following examples set by their peers or by people in other fields. The AAM provided a venue for these conflicts and campaigns to occur and in doing so set the stage for museum progress and reform in the twentieth-century United States.

Chapter One: Precedents

When the founders of the AAM held their first meeting in 1906, it was the product of years of discussion in the field over museum philosophy and practice. To understand the context in which the AAM was formed, it is necessary to look at some of the precedents for the development of professional organizations generally and of organizations for museum workers in particular. The Museums Association in Britain was founded in 1886 and served as an example for Americans designing a similar organization. Dialogue between American museum advocates like George Brown Goode at the Smithsonian Institution and his British counterparts inspired interest in an American professional group.

Museum workers looked outside their field as well. Goode spoke at scientific and other academic associations on the subject of museums, and his talks were often reproduced in journals like *Science* that reached a broad audience. This invited individuals who did not necessarily work in museums but were interested in the future of the institution to contribute to the discussion, bringing their own trainings and backgrounds to bear. Scientists were intrigued by the uses of natural history museums in university settings, but their interests extended to museums generally as educational institutions. Principles associated with science like objectivity, the scientific method, and standardized practices bolstered the idea of the museum worker as a professional with specialized skills that enabled him to do his job. The rhetoric of science has stayed with the museum field for a long time, particularly now with scientific studies of conservation and collections maintenance. In the late

nineteenth century, it contributed to the concept of museum work as a profession, an attribute with significant cultural weight.

Among the many professional organizations formed in the late nineteenth century, the American Library Association, founded in 1876, stood out as another model for museum advocates. The library and museum fields held common goals of maintaining and sharing their collections, and librarians and curators shared a leader of both communities in John Cotton Dana. Dana spent decades as a librarian before he founded the Newark Museum, and he pushed for professionalization and reform in both fields. Figures like Goode and Dana and groups like the Museums Association and the American Library Association laid some of the groundwork for the eventual founding of the AAM. Understanding these contexts reveals what standards, paradigms, and symbols of professional development the AAM's founders chose to uphold and reject when they designed their own organization.

George Brown Goode and the Museums Association

As Assistant Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, George Brown Goode held the attention of the museum field in the late nineteenth century, and his writings on museum administration illuminate some of the prevailing attitudes about museums. In 1895 and 1896, *Science* printed two papers by Goode titled, "The Relationships and Responsibilities of Museums" and "On the Classification of

Museums,” both excerpted from a presentation given by Goode at a meeting of the British Museums Association in 1895.^{*9}

These papers show Goode’s thinking on museums a decade before the foundation of the AAM, and they especially highlight how Goode was engaged with and influenced by the Museums Association. Goode introduced the first excerpt by framing it as response to an 1883 article by British economist William Stanley Jevons titled “The use and abuse of Museums,” in which the author reflected that it was “a remarkable fact that ... hardly anything has been written about [museums’] general principles of management and economy.”¹⁰

Jevons was very concerned with these principles himself, as he critiqued the South Kensington museum’s confusing layout, crowded galleries, and his resulting “mental state ... of perplexity and vagueness, together with some impression of sore feet and aching heads.”¹¹ Jevons’s description is a precursor to studies of “museum fatigue” that would come in the 1920s, but his essay is important for the closing remarks, in which he suggested the formation of a Museums Association, “along the lines of the well-known Librarians’ Association.” Jevons’s reference to libraries is

* *Science* printed many articles about museums before the AAM developed its own publications in the 1920s. The academic journal was founded in 1880 with a donation from Thomas Edison and eventually became associated with the American Association for the Advancement of Science. *Science* published papers on a wide array of topics, including the minutes of different associations’ meetings. Its chronology fits with the trend of establishing venues for professional dialogue.

⁹ George Brown Goode, “The Relationships and Responsibilities of Museums.” *Science* 2, no. 34 (Aug. 23, 1895): 197. George Brown Goode, “On the Classification of Museums,” *Science* 3, no. 25 (Jan. 31, 1896): 154.

¹⁰ William Stanley Jevons, “The Use and Abuse of Museums,” *Methods of Social Reform and Other Papers* (London: MacMillan Co., 1883). In *Museum Origins: Readings in Early Museum History and Philosophy*, Hugh H. Genoways and Mary Anne Andrew, eds. (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2008), 99.

¹¹ Jevons, 104.

one of many similar comparisons made by museum advocates in this period. Jevons continued, writing a manifesto for his proposed association:

If curators of all the public Museums would follow the example of other professional bodies, and put their heads together in a conference, they might evolve out of the existing chaos some unity of ideas and action. At any rate they would take the first important step of asserting their own existence.¹²

Here, Jevons articulated the goals of a professional museum organization that would contribute constructively to the field by sharing knowledge and experience to solve common problems. Additionally, by forming a professional organization, museum officials would be “asserting their own existence”—Jevons recognized that merely having a professional group suggested that museum workers were discerning, had certain standards and expectations, and were committed to the betterment of their field.

In Goode’s response, he agreed with Jevons’s goals, writing that he wanted to begin “the codification of the accepted principles of museum administration.”¹³

Goode listed his “principles” on a range of subjects, from the difference between museums and world’s fairs, to the assertion that because museums were “more closely in touch with the masses than the university and learned society, and quite as much so as the public library ... therefore, the public museum is a necessity in every highly civilized community.”¹⁴ To this, Goode added the reminder (in all capital letters) that the work of a museum was never done, for “a finished museum is a dead

¹² Jevons, 108-109.

¹³ Goode, “Relationships and Responsibilities,” 198.

* Fairs were “primarily for the promotion of industry and commerce,” where museums were “for the advancement of learning.”

¹⁴ Goode, “Relationships and Responsibilities,” 200.

museum, and a dead museum is a useless museum.”¹⁵ Goode argued museum administration had become a profession, and so should “a lofty professional standard should be established.”¹⁶ Overall, Goode focused on the role of the museum in increasing and diffusing knowledge and its responsibility to remain relevant and accessible to its patrons. By establishing these principles in a formal way, presenting them at the meeting of the Museums Association, Goode reinforced the idea that museum work was not approached casually or as a hobby, but was based on clear principles derived by consensus in the field, the mark of any true profession. Goode summed up his report by placing high stakes on this work: “The degree of civilization to which any nation, city or province has attained is well indicated by the character of its public museums and the liberality with which they are supported.”¹⁷ Goode valued museums as a cultural priority and wanted them to be treated as such.

In the second excerpt, “On the Classification of Museums,” Goode outlined several types of museums—art, science, history, anthropology, and so on—and gave examples of institutions eminent in their category and suggestions as to some of their individual priorities. Here it is important to note that Goode presented this paper abroad. He did so in part because there was no exact American counterpart—which is why, in the United States, the paper was also given at a Philosophy Society meeting and reprinted in *Science*. Goode’s system of classification for museums was not specific to Britain and his presentation of it there underscored the need for such an association in America that would provide a venue for ideas and discussions like the

¹⁵ Goode, “Relationships and Responsibilities,” 201.

¹⁶ Goode, “Relationships and Responsibilities,” 207.

¹⁷ Goode, “Relationships and Responsibilities,” 209.

ones Goode provoked. From the way these papers were circulated, there was clearly an audience for this kind of work. Goode wanted to consolidate them in one, national organization.

Goode wrote descriptively and prescriptively about museums in the United States specifically. His 1889 lecture at the Brooklyn Institute, “The Museums of the Future,” bemoaned the state of American museums:

The work of organizing museums has not kept pace with the times. The United States is far behind the spirit of its own people, and less progressive than England, Germany, France, Italy, or Japan. . . . The museum of the future must stand side by side with the library and the laboratory, as a part of the teaching equipment of the college and university, and in the great cities cooperate with the public library as one of the principal agencies for the enlightenment of the people.¹⁸

Goode emphasized the role of the education in museums, either formally for universities or casually for the visiting public, and compared their societal and cultural role to that of the library, a theme that recurs in the rhetoric of museum reform and philosophy well into the twentieth century. Goode compared the situation of American museums to those of England, and noted that the English had taken the opportunity of the Exhibition of 1851 to install a network of great, government-sponsored museums in London, and how Americans had failed to act similarly for the occasion of their own Centennial Exhibition of 1876. The Centennial Exhibition, as with most world’s fairs, included displays designed for the public with many of the same concerns as museums in terms of exhibition practices and pedagogical attitudes.

Though the Exhibition marked the founding of the Pennsylvania Museum of Art,

¹⁸ George Brown Goode, “The Museums of the Future: A lecture delivered at the Brooklyn Institute, February 28, 1889,” *The Origins of Natural Science in America: The Essays of George Brown Goode*, Sally Gregory Kohlstedt, ed. (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 322.

Goode considered this to be a regional rather than national accomplishment, perhaps tapping into a longstanding American insecurity about the standing of its cultural monuments when compared with those of Europe.¹⁹

Inspired by the South Kensington museums, Goode envisioned great national museums for the United States that would be accessible to the public. Art historian Annie E. Coombes notes that education based on “the careful observation and study of museum collections” had been part of the South Kensington from their inception, and that this goal was taken up by the British Museums Association in the early twentieth century.²⁰ Coombes writes:

[I]t is evident as early as 1902 that museums’ concern with constructing their image as an organ for popular education was, indeed, specifically calculated to ensure that they had a recognized part to play in what was acknowledged at the Museums Association annual conference that year, as the “one great national work, the building up of the Empire through the elevation of the communities and the individual.”²¹

Coombes focuses her work on the role of museums in spreading the ideology of the British Empire, but it is still relevant here as the model American museum officials certainly knew of and had in mind at the foundation of AAM. The educational mission of museums and the Museums Association in Britain—their roles in building national identity based on the Empire aside—was much in line with Goode’s ideal in which the American museum “cultivates the powers of observation, and the casual visitor even makes discoveries for himself and under the guidance of the labels forms

¹⁹ Goode, “The Museums of the Future,” 326-7.

²⁰ Annie E. Coombes, “Museums and the Formation of National and Cultural Identities,” *Oxford Art Journal* 11, no. 2 (1988), 63.

²¹ Coombes, 64. Quote is from *Museums Journal*, vol. 2, July 1902, p. 13, publication of the Museums Association.

his own impressions.”²² This kind of educational program, particularly with the emphasis on observation, was envisioned by museum leaders in Britain, perpetuated and disseminated by those in the Museums Association, and adopted by Goode and others to be applied to American institutions. The effects of this are seen in the persistence of education as one of the central topics of debate within museum philosophy.

Working for the Smithsonian, it may not be surprising that Goode would privilege a system of educational museums, but in fact as Assistant Secretary Goode only oversaw a single museum, the United States National Museum which exhibited a mix of natural history and patriotic artifacts. In the nineteenth century, the Smithsonian Institution functioned a venue for scientific research, and Goode was one of its earliest employees to investigate the Institution’s museum practices. Goode died in 1896, and so he did not participate in AAM’s founding a decade later. Still, it was sentiments like his, viewing museums as changing institutions worthy of and in fact needful of concerted investment by their caretakers, that spurred on the foundation of the museum community’s own professional organization.

N. H. Winchell: “Modern science is the savior and promoter of modern institutions”

Goode’s connection to the Smithsonian made him a particularly prominent museum thinker, but he was not the only one to address issues of museum administration and philosophy. Demonstrating how these questions spread across the country, geologist N. H. Winchell gave a speech on the subject at a meeting of the

²² Goode, “The Museums of the Future,” 331.

Academy of Sciences of St. Paul, Minnesota in 1891. The text was later reprinted in *Science*, another example of considerations of museum function and practice found at meetings of scientific associations and published in scientific journals. Winchell was known for his geological studies and was affiliated with the Minnesota Historical Society, but that was the extent of his connection to museums. In his speech, he explained his conception of three types of museums, those for entertainment, for the “instruction of the visitor,” and for research.²³ Of particular interest is his statement on the first type:

The modern so-called “dime museum” ... is a place of “curos’ties” and monstrosities, of cheap theatricals and legerdemain. ... Here the visitor is wholly passive under the manipulation of the presiding genius of the place. He may enter the presence with any foreign, or even adverse sentiment. He is simply amused for half an hour.²⁴

P. T. Barnum’s Museum, in which natural history specimens were displayed beside unexplained phenomena and freaks, was cited as the “most noted” example of such a museum in the United States. To Winchell, entertainment museums were to be regarded with the skepticism—the phrase “so-called,” and the quotation marks around “dime museum” and “curos’ties,” the latter word rendered in some vague vernacular—and distaste of an academic such as himself at such “passive” amusement.

Museums of instruction, on the other hand, Winchell conceived to have “a somewhat higher function and rank.”²⁵ He continued:

²³ N. H. Winchell, “Museums and Their Purposes,” *Science* 18, no. 442 (Jul. 24, 1891): 43.

²⁴ Winchell, “Museums,” 43.

²⁵ Winchell, “Museums,” 43.

Such museums discharge an important function in education, and particularly in scientific education, and to this day they express the popular idea of a perfect museum. They may sometimes partake of the elements that characterize the third class, or the museum for research, and, in so far as they do, their sphere is raised nearer to the true ideal.²⁶

For Winchell, the “ideal” museum was closer to the “cardinal idea of the Grecian museum”—that which, dedicated to the muses, inspires as well as instructs its visitors, and a reference Goode invoked as well in “Museums of the Future.” Though Greek museums may not have featured a muse of science as Winchell understood it, that was the discipline he praised, in quite soaring language compared to his earlier critique, for its great value and service to society: “Modern science is the savior and promoter of modern institutions, the generator and sustainer of modern civilization.”²⁷ As a scientist, it is logical that Winchell would privilege his own discipline and prefer a museum that supported the furtherance of that discipline’s priorities in a collections- and research-based institution rather than exhibition- and instruction-based institution. The idea that science was the “savior” and “promoter of modern institutions” points to the rise of science as an acceptable way of understanding life, and as an occupation that garnered respect, both ideas on the rise in the late nineteenth century. Winchell’s evaluation of the current state of museums and proposed “ideal” that modern institutions could work toward represents the efforts of many, in the academy and elsewhere, to claim those institutions for themselves and their intellectual pursuits.

That Winchell, a geologist, delivered a speech on museums also suggests the subject’s pervasiveness, and the growing feeling among academics or intellectuals

²⁶ Winchell, “Museums,” 43.

²⁷ Winchell, “Museums,” 44.

that museums were a cultural presence that required some attention. Goode and Winchell represent two different kinds of figures within the museum field who were engaged with ideas about museums and concerned about their future. They expressed these concerns to colleagues through academic and professional associations related to the sciences, but lacked any way to broaden their audience to include the increasing number of museum employees who were not already a part of these associations.

Professionalism

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, enterprising individuals from a range of fields established professional organizations like the American Association of Museums with increasing frequency. Historian Burton J. Bledstein counts two hundred societies formed in the 1870s and 1880s alone, encompassing careers in electrical engineering, forestry, and specialized medical practice. By 1915, Abraham Flexner, author of the 1910 critique of medical education that dramatically altered the curriculum, wrote:

Almost any occupation not obviously a business is apt to classify itself as a profession. Doctors, lawyers, preachers, musicians, engineers, journalists, trained nurses, trapeze and dancing masters, equestrians, and chiropodists—all speak of their *profession*.²⁸

What better way to speak of assign oneself the label of “professional” than through an association of peers, all similarly credentialed and qualified, and able to create the

²⁸ Abraham Flexner, “Is Social Work a Profession?” *Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Corrections* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1915), 577, quoted in Burton J. Bledstein, “Discussing Terms: Professions, Professionals, Professionalism,” *Prospects* vol. 10—Essays, Jack Salzman, ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 2.

cachet of expertise? Flexner was disdainful of the ease with which professional status was claimed, and perhaps a bit mocking, but it was meaningful to many, as Bledstein explains: “Mid-Victorians appreciated the value to career of membership in professional associations with ‘distinguished’ titles,” and this was an element of the attraction of professional societies.²⁹ Professionalism was an important part of educated middle class identity, and professional associations served to publicly acknowledge that identity.

The role of science was particularly important in professionalism generally, as Bledstein writes:

Science as a source for professional authority transcended the favoritism of politics, the corruption of personality, and the exclusiveness of partisanship. And science as an attitude for professional discipline required inner control and an individual respect for rules, proven experience, and a system of hygienic laws concerned with such habits as diet, bathing, sex, dress, work, or recreation.³⁰

Science could lend professional identity the idea of impartiality, and as a method of acquiring and sharing knowledge, reinforce middle class values. The “respect for rules” and “proven experience” among professionals provide two reasons for the existence of professional associations—rules could only be written, and experience shared, by a group of peers who could approve of ideas or practices and induct them into a set of standards for the industry. Museum officials, most of whom had academic training in the arts or sciences and many of whom worked jointly in

²⁹ Burton J. Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1976), 86.

³⁰ Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism*, 91.

academic positions if their museums were part of a university, were not immune to these attractions.

Bledstein's analysis contextualizes N. H. Winchell's comment that science was to be the "savior and promoter of modern institutions," revealing Winchell's faith in science to not be just the bias to his own field but a function of class identity among professionals. Winchell thought scientific methods were most appropriate for the running and reform of museums because scientific methods were appropriate to nearly all "modern institutions." Professional standards supported by scientific observation and interpretation led not only to better museums but also a better class, one with "distinguished titles," and other markers. Winchell's essay demonstrates the pervasiveness of the ideals of professionalism and thus the extent to which professionalism was embedded in class values of education, expertise, and public service.

The American Library Association

The trend of professionalization in the late nineteenth century is often tied by historians to fields like medicine and law which developed rigorous credentialing standards to determine who was a professional and who was not. Museum advocates had goals in common across professionalizing fields, but they had the most in common with the founders of the American Library Association (ALA) than with the nation's doctors and lawyers.* Librarians also came from a variety of scholarly

* One key difference is that museum advocates did not immediately press for specific, field-wide credentials on the scale of a Juris Doctor degree. Education was always a

backgrounds, and also saw their institution's goals as a mixture of public education and collections preservation. Additionally, nineteenth-century libraries, like museums, were undergoing a transformation from what had previously been private, elite collections to more publicly-minded ventures.

The ALA was formed in 1876 in concert with the Centennial Exhibition that Goode was so disappointed did not bring change for museums. The founding meeting took place after related professional associations had already been formed, like the American Book Trade Association. Library historian Dennis Thomison reports, "many professional meetings were scheduled during the centennial celebration in Philadelphia, and it seemed logical for librarians to go along with this trend"—certainly this would put librarians in encouraging company for the future of their own effort.³¹ Early ALA projects included suggesting collections for new public libraries, determining how libraries should most appropriately be lit and heated, and discussing how to catalogue books.^{*32} As with the AAM, minutes from the ALA's annual meetings were printed in *Science* until the ALA instituted their own body of publications.

The ALA was concerned with how to run libraries efficiently and best serve their public. In 1919, the ALA moved to conduct a survey of American libraries that ALA president William Warner Bishop envisioned as the equivalent to the Flexner

topic of interest, but discussion of standard degrees like many museum studies programs offer today did not begin in earnest until the 1970s.

³¹ Dennis Thomison, *A History of the American Library Association: 1876-1972* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1978), 5.

* This question answered in part by ALA co-founder Melvil Dewey's now-familiar Dewey decimal system, also presented at the ALA's founding meeting in 1876.

³² David P. Todd, "The American Library Association," *Science* 8 no. 181 (Jul 23 1886): 70.

report on medical education. Library scholar Arthur P. Young writes, “Bishop wanted specific facts, not ‘hortatory or theoretical’ information. The resultant data would provide the library profession, for the first time, with the information needed to establish standards for buildings, equipment, services, and salaries.”³³ Notable also is the ALA’s use of a survey to determine how libraries currently operated and therefore what worked and what did not. This kind of careful observation and the assumption that what was useful or productive for some libraries may be useful for all was a hallmark of professional organizations based in scientific reasoning.

Strong links between the ALA and the AAM are embodied in the figure of John Cotton Dana, a prominent member of both organizations. Dana responded to the proposed survey by commenting that, in Young’s words, the ALA “should consider not what libraries were but what they ought to be; what needed to be studied then was not library activities but rather ‘the place of the library phenomenon in a print-using society.’”³⁴ Dana was known and admired for his efforts to increase accessibility at the Denver Public Library, Newark Public Library, and Newark Museum, the latter of which he founded. His comment that the ALA should focus on goals for the future and the “ideal” library became the focus of parallel discussions in the AAM, and many of the talks given at annual meetings and sponsored publications were centered on the question of what the function of a museum in society should be. While Dana was influential, his questions were on many museum directors’ minds as well. The

³³ Arthur P. Young, “Aftermath of a Crusade: World War I and the Enlarged Program of the American Library Association,” *Library Quarterly* 50 no. 2 (Apr. 1980): 194.

³⁴ Young, 195.

variety of answers proposed for both museums and libraries tapped into issues of education, preservation, and public service, debates that affected them both.

The founders of the AAM were not attempting to duplicate the ALA for their own field, and did not follow every step the ALA had done. Yet the two associations held much in common in their quests to determine the role of their institutions in modern life. The AAM also sponsored surveys to assess how effective museums were and attempted to develop standard practices that would benefit all their member institutions. Libraries were also influential in the subject of “branch museums.” Many museum officials advocated for the idea that museums must do as libraries had done and open satellite institutions to increase access and flexibility of their collections. This model worked extremely well for libraries but did not take off for museums in the same way. Here it is useful to point out that, though the AAM does not fit into the traditional narrative of professionalization in some ways, lacking credentials and standards of that kind, it falls more neatly into another tradition of building professional associations with the purpose of creating venues for discussion of the big questions governing their field.

Chapter Two: Founding

The nation's earliest museums, dating from the colonial period in Charleston and Philadelphia, mixed collections of specimens of natural history with objects associated with the elite and paintings of political figures. The all-purpose model had fallen out of favor a generation ago, and museum workers needed new ways to articulate the aims and practices of their new museums. These institutions differentiated themselves based on content and mission and emphasized public education in a new way. The foundation of the AAM tapped into specific needs felt by those in the museum field as well as broader discourses about the importance of professionalism and access to educational institutions in American culture. The AAM's first projects, from establishing committees to working out in the field, demonstrate its goal to build a network of museums, the collective knowledge of which would be a boon for the entire community. This attitude was embodied in AAM executive secretary and later director Laurence Vail Coleman, whose efforts to collect and process museum data were unparalleled. His efforts to observe, assess, and improve museums through his own writings and others' works he supported typify the AAM's ideology of promoting scientific observation and discourse among peers.

The American Association of Museums was founded at a meeting of museum officials at the American Museum of Natural History in 1906. It was called by nine museum directors and curators with the intention of "discussing the advisability of

endeavoring to establish an association of the museums of America.”³⁵ These men had met informally the previous year and begun planning the AAM’s first meeting under the leadership of Hermon Bumpus, director of the American Museum of Natural History. * Of the first formal meeting, *Science* reported that “it is doubtful whether any movement for the formation of an international association of this kind has ever been larger or more enthusiastic.”³⁶

The report noted which museums had sent representatives (including the American Museum of Natural History, the Field Museum of Natural History, the United States National Museum, and the Carnegie Museum, many of which were represented in the original nine), and while most of the participants came from established institutions in big cities in the eastern United States, representatives from museums in Utah and Hawaii were present as well. Those present elected officers and councilors, and defined the roles of “active,” “sustaining,” “associate,” and “honorary” members in the association, as determined by the degree to which they were “*actively engaged in the work of museums*” (italics original). What “active

³⁵ “W. J. Holland and the Founding of the American Association of Museums,” Carnegie Museum of Natural History. <http://www.carnegiemnh.org/anthro/AAM/html/haamfounding.htm> (accessed March 28, 2009).

* Aside from Bumpus, the other nine were Richard Rathbun (Assistant Secretary, Smithsonian Institution), W. P. Wilson (Director, Philadelphia Museums), F. A. Lucas (Curator-in-Chief, Brooklyn Institute), N. L. Britton (Director, New York Botanical Garden), F. J. H. Skiff (Director, Field Museum of Natural History), W. J. McGee (Director, St. Louis Public Museum), Samuel Henshaw (Curator, Museum of Comparative Zoology), and W. J. Holland (Director, Carnegie Museum). Bumpus was appointed temporary chairman of the AAM at the 1906 meeting.

³⁶ “The American Association of Museums,” *Science* 23, no. 596 (June 1, 1906): 859-860.

engagement” in museum work constituted was not explicitly stated, and defining what that work was precisely the AAM’s goal in its first decades.³⁷

The AAM would provide a venue in which to share ideas about “the work of museums” to share those ideas with museum employees around the country—and around the world, as the AAM made a point of its goal to serve North and South America.* The director of the Museums Association in Britain sent a telegram to the first meeting congratulating its new sibling organization.³⁸ Museum officials in the United States sought a forum for exchanging ideas and space to consider the purpose of the “new museum,” as institutions struggled to shake of the memory of Barnumesque sideshows and elite collections in the nineteenth century.

Funding: The Carnegie Corporation

From annual meetings to the sponsoring of studies in the field, all of the AAM’s work required funding, and before delving in to these projects is necessary to briefly consider the AAM’s biggest resource for funds, the Carnegie Corporation. The Carnegie Corporation, founded by Andrew Carnegie in 1911, was designed as “a grant-making institution dedicated to doing good ‘in perpetuity,’” and it provided AAM with grants to fund various projects throughout this period.³⁹ Carnegie, the famous steel magnate and philanthropist, had by this time already funded the

³⁷ “The American Association of Museums,” 860.

* There is little evidence of non-American involvement on a big scale until Laurence Vail Coleman published his *Directory of South American Museums* in 1929, and even this was quite one-sided.

³⁸ “The American Association of Museums,” 860. The British Museums Association was founded in 1889.

³⁹ “Timeline,” Carnegie Corporation of New York, <http://www.carnegie.org/sub/about/time-line.html> (accessed January 16, 2009).

establishment of many public libraries around the United States and Britain and founded the Carnegie Institution of Science. Historian Sally Gregory Kohlstedt argues Carnegie “unquestionably established an influential precedent with his continued financial support of the Carnegie Institution, initially providing small grants to individuals but eventually concentrating on the institution’s own departments, laboratories, and observatories.”⁴⁰ While the Institution had different goals than the Corporation, there is similarity across the Carnegie model generally, as the Corporation granted funds to the AAM for specific projects and later assumed one-third of the association’s general operating expenses through the 1930s.⁴¹

In sociologist Paul DiMaggio’s study of the relationship between the Carnegie Corporation and the AAM, with a focus on art museums, DiMaggio concludes the Corporation trustees believed they were working toward an art museum as essential to society as the public library, and they worked with the AAM particularly because “their faith in central planning made it logical for [Corporation President] Keppel and his colleagues to aid organizations that operated at the national level; their confidence in experts drew them to universities and professionals.”⁴² Because the Corporation’s financial support was responsible for so much of what the AAM did in its early years, and because the Corporation’s values lined up with those of the national, professional association the AAM aimed to be, the Corporation was in part responsible for what DiMaggio calls the “structuration” of the AAM. He defines this as the infrastructure and bureaucracy that allowed the AAM to build its professional stature and provide

⁴⁰ Sally Gregory Kohlstedt, “Institutional History,” *Osiris* 2nd series, vol. 2 Historical Writing on American Science (1985), 29.

⁴¹ DiMaggio, 276.

⁴² DiMaggio, 275.

services for its members. By sponsoring AAM projects, DiMaggio writes, “the Carnegie Corporation program reinforced the awareness of museum professionals and trustees that they were part of a collective enterprise, and thus the likelihood that they would look to one another as models and as sources of innovation.”⁴³ Though DiMaggio’s work looks specifically at art museums, his conclusions are useful in a broader sense as well. AAM was developed by museum officials who wanted to provide for their field a unified, professional network, and the Carnegie Corporation’s literal financial resources as well as their philosophical or rhetorical resources from the values they espoused, aided in this process.

Early Projects: Annual Meetings, Magazines, and Books

In the AAM’s first decades, it instituted many projects that are markers of a professional organization: annual meetings, newsletters, and the occasional sponsored study or other publication. The magazine, *Museum News*, and other publications emerged in the organization’s development with the hiring of Laurence Vail Coleman, a particularly efficient bureaucrat, as executive secretary in 1923. Until that point, the bulk of the AAM’s communication came through the annual meeting. There, members convened to work in committees, read and hear papers on museum-related topics by their peers, and share information and experiences.

Minutes from the AAM’s annual meetings depict a group of individuals as much concerned about the development of procedure and protocol for museums as about the development of those things for their organization. In 1908, for example,

⁴³ DiMaggio, 277.

several pages of minutes are taken up with the question of whether or not the committee created “to endeavor to secure the benefit of second-class postal rates for publications of museums issued at irregular intervals” should continue.⁴⁴ This exchange also serves as a glimpse into how dialogues were conducted both on the workings of museums and the workings of the AAM. AAM President William M. R. French of the Art Institute of Chicago was in favor of dissolving the committee, stating, “[The] whole matter, I may say, appears to be so discouraging from our experience in our own institution, that I scarcely think it is possible to do anything about it. ... I do not think there is much use in continuing it.”⁴⁵ Frederick J. V. Skiff of the Field Museum defended the existence of the committee, arguing that “investigations at Washington ... do not present an altogether hopeless aspect” and that the incoming Taft administration may have “sympathies ... as thoroughly in accord with the dissemination of knowledge as the present one,” making the continuation of the committee worthwhile as “this question of postal classification makes a great difference in the expenses of some institutions.”⁴⁶ This debate was thoroughly administrative, both for the existence of the committee at AAM and for the way museums mailed their publications. The motion to discharge the committee was withdrawn and President French requested someone else take his seat on it.

⁴⁴ “Reports of Committees,” *Proceedings of the American Association of Museums Vol. II, May 5-7, 1908*, Paul M. Rea, ed. (Baltimore: The Waverly Press, 1908), 7.

* President French also admitted, “I was not aware until I had received the Proceedings that I was on this committee,” which may have influenced his low opinion of it.

⁴⁵ “Reports of Committees,” 7.

⁴⁶ “Reports of Committees,” 7-8.

On an issue like postage, small but truly significant to some museums, AAM members could compare their personal experiences and delegate projects like working with the postal service to one person or committee who could make gains that would benefit everyone. The topics for discussion at annual meetings covered all manner of issues, including some much more general and philosophical ones that will be discussed later in this chapter. This example stands out because it highlights AAM members' concern for details, and engagement with topics perhaps less inspiring than grand theories of museum philosophy. Nevertheless, issues like postage costs effected museum workers in their daily lives. These are the kinds of concerns for which a professional organization is perfect, the kinds of concerns that cannot be solved by a talk at a tangentially related function.

The AAM had to strike a balance between dealing with the administrative details of museum work and the broader philosophical debates on the museum's place in society because its members were affected by both of these topics. As an organization, the AAM represented new opportunities to exchange ideas on all manner of subjects. Over time, the changes in *Museum News*, the twice-monthly newsletter sent out to all AAM members, reflect some of the changes in the AAM as an organization and the methods it used to try to meet its goals. In the 1920s, *Museum News* was a short publication, usually four pages, containing what amounted to news bulletins about the association and its member museums, covering new hires, building projects, the agenda for the upcoming annual meeting, and so on. The changing of the AAM's officers was announced, as well as changes in AAM policy, as when it changed the title of its series of short publications from *Museum Work* to *Publications*

of the *American Association of Museums* in 1926.⁴⁷ These short announcements served to keep members abreast of each other's and the association's activities, but consisted mostly of administrative updates. There was a philosophy behind this technique. In an announcement of the first edition of *Museum News* in 1924 (printed in *Science*, of course), executive secretary Coleman wrote:

[F]rom the standpoint of its editorial policy and its appearance, the News is an innovation. It publishes news, not articles. It states facts, not opinions. It features what is important. By virtue of its newsiness, it is proof against the historical and the descriptive type of item which so frequently mars the current notes in a bulletin.⁴⁸

Coleman's initial vision for *Museum News* was that it would leave philosophizing for others (perhaps at the annual meeting), and the absence of the "historical and descriptive type of item" that Coleman believed "marred" news of real worth would show *Museum News* was serious in its goals, not the mouthpiece for a nostalgic editor.

Later, in 1929, *Museum News* expanded significantly, adding pages dedicated to reviewing books and other publications by museums as well as a "magazine" section that printed papers given at annual meetings. The magazine section permitted those members who could not attend annual meetings or buy the published minutes an opportunity to still benefit from their content through the newsletter. *Museum News* also published new essays on a range of topics, from "Modernizing the Museum Label" to "Do what you can *now* with what you have: Mounting a whale

⁴⁷ "New serial will be published by the Association." *Museum News* 4, no. 9 (October 15, 1926): 1.

⁴⁸ Laurence Vail Coleman, "A Newspaper for Museumists," *Science* vol. 59, no. 118 (Feb. 1, 1924), 126.

skeleton”—some of these topics being more universally applicable than others.⁴⁹ The articles all did have in common their authorship by museum employees in the United States, usually written based on their personal experiences with the idea that the knowledge they had gained would be translatable and useful to others. The subject matter of articles in the expanded *Museum News* did not hold to Coleman’s original idea, and the reason for this change is unclear. In 1927 Coleman was promoted to director of the AAM, and relinquished some of his editorial responsibilities to the newsletter, having other matters that required his attention. Additionally, the changes in *Museum News* may have been a response to reader feedback as membership in AAM grew but not all members could attend annual meetings. Reprinting papers given at meetings in *Museum News* gave them a bigger audience, even if their content may have lacked “newsiness.”

Working for the organization in some capacity from 1923-1958, Coleman witnessed, and in fact stewarded, many of the great changes in the AAM’s program of work. Prior to working at the AAM, Coleman worked as an assistant in public health and later chief of exhibits at the American Museum of Natural History and as director of the American Museum of Safety. His record in these jobs with administrative focus must have suggested him to AAM councilors as the right person to oversee bureaucratic innovation for the association. In 1923, coinciding with Coleman’s hiring, the AAM moved its headquarters from New York to Washington, an act

⁴⁹ Arthur Ohlman. “Modernizing the museum label.” *Museum News* 7, no. 13 (January 1, 1930): 6-7. H. H. Brimley. “Do what you can *now* with what you have: Mounting a whale skeleton.” *Museum News* 8, no. 10 (November 15, 1930): 8-12.

Coleman reported to *Science* as the beginning of “a new era for museums.”⁵⁰ The AAM now operated with a staff out of the Smithsonian Institution’s Arts and Sciences building, giving it national stature with the closest thing the United States had to a “national museum.”

Coleman compared the move to similar nationalizing actions in other fields, writing:

Organization on a national scale to the end of maintaining a staff to work for a common cause has been found highly advantageous by local units in many fields. Most widespread interest has attached to industrial and commercial developments along these lines, but the same methods have been equally successful in fields of social, civic, religious and educational endeavor. The recourse by museums to organized cooperation is therefore not surprising, but it is a clear indication of the hopeful trend in museum affairs.⁵¹

With this statement, Coleman recast the AAM’s founding principles and purposes in a new light, where the AAM now had the administrative support (in the form of Coleman himself, though he did not put it that way) to carry out and accomplish these goals. The AAM had always aimed to be a national organization and intended to enable the sharing of experience and ideas between its members—this “hopeful trend” had been ongoing for seventeen years. Coleman’s announcement reveals how the AAM now envisioned itself as able to achieve what it had set out to do in a much more concrete way. Beginning in the mid-1920s, it did so, sponsoring increasing numbers of studies and books that were not projects one could create sitting at a desk and contemplating the state of museums and positing ideas for change. From Edward S. Robinson’s *The Behavior of the Museum Visitor* to Coleman’s survey of historic

⁵⁰ Laurence Vail Coleman, “A New Era for American Museums,” *Science* 58, no. 1497 (Sep. 7, 1923): 172.

⁵¹ Coleman, “A New Era,” 172.

house museums, these projects required the ability to travel, to hire support staff, and to be present on the ground in the daily experiences of museum work.

A few months after Coleman became director, the AAM published his *Manual for Small Museums*, his first guidebook on running museums. This kind of work, which *Museum News* called “a rounded account of museum work—a verbal picture drawn for the trustee or general reader quite as much as for the professional,” was published and promoted at a higher volume during the years of Coleman’s leadership.⁵² *Museum News* updated readers on Coleman’s activities, including trips to Europe to meet with museum leaders “for discussion of methods by which museum interaction may be furthered throughout the world, and for promotion of new national or regional museum associations which are needed as links in the chain of international relations,”⁵³ and to South America, where Coleman conducted research for his directory of museums there.⁵⁴ Coleman’s engagement with the international community of museums was not unique, but the effect of these kinds of bulletins in the newsletter, particularly about projects of his personal initiative like the South American directory, brought AAM members together with a vision of what their organization and thus, their field, was doing in the world.

Writing manuals was one of Coleman’s key projects as director, and after *Manual for Small Museums* came *Historic House Museums* (1933), *The Museum in America: A Critical Study* (1939), *College and University Museums* (1942), *Company*

⁵² “Coleman’s manual for small museums issues from press.” *Museum News* 5, no. 6 (September 1, 1927): 1.

⁵³ “Director Coleman sails for conferences in Paris and London.” *Museum News* 5, no. 9 (October 15, 1927): 1.

⁵⁴ “Museums mission to South American suggests new work.” *Museum News* 6, no. 12 (December 1, 1928): 1.

Museums (1943), and *Museum Buildings* (1950). The idea that running a museum could be crystallized to a science such that someone like Coleman—whose administrative experience in actual museums was fairly limited—could write multiple how-to guides to a variety of types of museums—none of which represented the kinds of museums at which Coleman had worked—was a significant part of the bureaucratic AAM ideology. It is notable Coleman did not write about art or science museums generally, the two kinds of museums to diversify the earliest, and thus, the most established.

Coleman wrote about types of museums that were only emerging in the early twentieth century, or that he saw as emerging. In a 1965 letter to Charles Hosmer, chronicler of the historic preservation movement in the United States, Coleman wrote of *Historic House Museums*:

As you know the concept of the house as an institution was new and not generally grasped in 1932, and however obvious the name “historic house museum” may seem now, I had to coin it to take the place of expressions such as “places like Mount Vernon, old houses open to the public, historical shrines, et al.”⁵⁵

The tradition of historic houses stretches back to the mid-nineteenth century, with the campaign to preserve George Washington’s estate, Mount Vernon, began in the 1850s. Preservationists had formed their own societies dedicated to historic sites from the turn of the century. For Coleman to claim that these institutions had no name before he gave them one indicates the AAM’s authoritative and even condescending attitude to smaller institutions and of supreme confidence in their own project of

⁵⁵ Charles Hosmer, *Preservation Comes of Age: From Williamsburg to the National Trust, 1926-1949*, vol. 2 (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia for the Preservation Press, 1981), 894.

professionalization and nationalization. Small museums, and especially historic house museums, were not usually the subjects of the AAM's bigger studies, nor were they viewed as good sources for sharing experience.

Coleman and other leaders of AAM aimed to take their knowledge gained from studies and speakers from great institutions and extend them out, usually westward, to provincial historic houses and museums. Coleman did genuinely want to help these museums to be more effective and attract more visitors, and his condescending tone should not be read too harshly. Still, Coleman, who had never worked in a historic house museum, felt he could encapsulate in approximately one hundred pages the scope rules of running such an institution. This is just one example of how the AAM privileged certain kinds of "universal" knowledge that could be easily processed and categorized, sometimes shortchanging museums as a result.

The AAM provided museum employees from a variety of institutions a venue for exchanging ideas and resources related to their shared work—"the work of museums." In the decades following the AAM's founding, the question for many was to determine what that meant—what *is* the work of museums? What is the museum's function in society, and so to what end should directors and curators be striving for in their daily work? This took two forms: administration and philosophy. In terms of administration, as a professional organization with officers, committees, annual meetings, and publications, the AAM embodied the organization and bureaucracy many wanted to instill in its member institutions as well. This is seen from the way it conducted annual meetings to the content of its publications. As for philosophy,

AAM's role was important in facilitating these discussions and considerations, through literal opportunities—*Museum News*, annual meetings, books and studies—and more abstract ones, as the organization's presence on the landscape of American museums also encouraged thinking about those institutions as a community.

Chapter 3: Philosophy

The AAM worked to achieve two goals: to determine an ideology of purpose and practice for museums in the United States and to develop professional standards for the daily activities of those museums based on experience and scientific study. To the first of those two aims, the philosophical considerations by AAM leaders and their changing views as they moved into the twentieth century, members of the AAM dedicated much time and thought. The nineteenth century witnessed the decline of private museums which frequently represented a medley of topics reflecting their curators' personal interests, historical, artistic, and natural objects displayed side by side. Replacing this model came the public museum, frequently founded by philanthropists with the idea of benefiting the citizens of major cities with focused collections of art or science—examples include the American Museum of Natural History, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Pennsylvania Museum of Art, the Field Museum of Natural History, and the Art Institute of Chicago. This new, diversified model for museums required consideration as to its purpose in society, as these public museums aimed to serve society more broadly than before. It should be noted that the majority of AAM members and officers came from these large institutions, which likely added to their privilege within the association.

The primary debate over the museum's purpose in society was, and in some ways remains today, one of preservation and elite research versus education and democratic access. The tension between these obligations to the scholar and the lay-visitor, often framed in opposition to each other, was the cause of some anxiety to

museum leaders in navigating the future of their field, nervous about compromising the academic ideals in which most of them had been trained. The focus of most museums today on interpretive programs and child-friendly exhibitions reveals on which side the debate was decided, but it was not without some considerable negotiation. When former AAM president Paul Marshall Rea attempted to study these questions using scientific and statistical methods, he was operating in the context of a years-long debate, conducted by prominent AAM members. How the AAM's leaders articulated the museum's social role would have a ripple effect, touching on the status of museum professionals, forms of public or adult education, and the role of philanthropy, among other issues.

Paul Marshall Rea: The Museum and the Community

“The essential idea that animates all museums is the acquisition, preservation, and use of objects. This is undoubtedly one of the oldest forms of education in the world.”⁵⁶

Paul Marshall Rea penned this assertion in 1930 in an article titled “What Are Museums For?” in the *Journal of Adult Education*. A prominent museum director and former president of AAM, Rea was at the forefront of the effort to articulate a functional definition or vision of the museum's purpose in American society, balancing values of education, preservation, and research. Rea published extensively on the subject and his work serves as a lens through which to examine these debates that spanned from the foundation of AAM until today—though in Rea's lifetime, only through the 1940s. These two sentences reveal some of Rea's methods as he distilled

⁵⁶ Paul Marshall Rea, “What Are Museums For?” *Journal of Adult Education* (June 1930): 265.

the daily tasks of museum work to a philosophical list of values—acquisition, preservation, use—set against a backdrop of education as the overall goal. Rea’s ideas were not unanimously approved, however, and though he styled himself as speaking philosophical truth, there was plenty of room for debate among his contemporaries, as well as a lingering obligation to both accommodate and dismiss elements of earlier philosophies.

Rea came to prominence as the director of the Charleston Museum where he worked from 1903 to 1920, while teaching biology at the College of Charleston. Rea served as the president of AAM from 1919 to 1921 while also director of the Cleveland Museum of Natural History. He resigned in 1928 over philosophical differences to work under Fiske Kimball at the Pennsylvania Museum of Art.⁵⁷ Though trained as a scientist, Rea fit in at the Pennsylvania Museum in his new role as a museum professional who could speak generally to museum problems that superseded the focus of an institution’s collections. Rea returned to his biologist roots when he became the director of the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History a few years later, but in the mid-1920s and early 1930s he dedicated himself to promoting his vision of museums’ social purpose and also produced his most influential writings. Rea is important not only for the volume of work he produced, but his engagement with projects surrounding other kinds of museums than his own was unusual and important in bringing him to the fore as a leader of an increasingly united museum field.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ DiMaggio, 280.

⁵⁸ Mary A Bingham, ed., *Who’s Who in the Membership of the American Association of Museums* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1933), 36.

Rea's background at the Charleston Museum, founded in 1773 and conventionally thought of as the first museum in North America, played a role in the attention he paid to museum history and how he positioned his work within that context. In 1923, the AAM held its annual meeting in Charleston, in part to honor the Charleston Museum's one hundred and fiftieth anniversary, and therefore, as Rea put it in his address, the "anniversary of the inception of the museum idea in the New World."⁵⁹ Rea noted that "the museum idea," the whole project of instituting and running museums, had not developed in the same way across the country, but had developed "more or less independently and under somewhat different auspices in widely scattered places."⁶⁰ This is a theme Rea would return to in later works. The non-linear approach to museum history provided an explanation for the varied states of development in which museums existed in Rea's day and acknowledged the variety of motives and backgrounds driving the foundation of the increasingly diverse institutions that fell under the museum label—from science museums to art galleries to historic houses. Rea sought to discover what these places had in common outside of their specific historical contexts and to idealize the "new" museum that could be governed by near-universal standards which the AAM would establish.

In this 1923 address, Rea asserted that the best museums currently operating had been founded only in the past fifty years. Older museums established by universities had fallen into decline, he argued, because they no longer fit the needs of

⁵⁹ Paul Marshall Rea, "One Hundred and Fifty Years of Museum History," *Science* 47 no. 1485 (June 15, 1923): 677. This address from the annual meeting was reprinted in *Science*.

⁶⁰ Rea, "One Hundred and Fifty Years," 680.

their governing institutions, and the stereotypes created by those dusty halls were what the AAM was now called to amend and advocate against:

It is essential that we recognize that these museums filled a vital place in the life of their time. Their deterioration was the result of fundamentally changed conditions. They are largely responsible for the widespread popular concept of museums as static and somewhat dreary things. One of the tasks in which we are making progress is that of changing this concept in the minds of the people.⁶¹

Part of Rea's project was to "re-brand" museums, to develop a new "museum idea" that responded to the needs of modern communities. This was the ultimate goal of Rea's 1932 study, *The Museum and the Community*, sponsored and published by Advisory Group on Museum Education of the Carnegie Corporation. Rea focused mainly on attendance and finance of a variety of museums in different types of environments throughout the country in 1930, with a look to what size or type of museum best served what size or type of community—urban, rural, and so on—measuring how they were used in terms of attendance numbers.

This statistical approach to studying museums was very popular in the 1920s and 30s, and lent Rea's work a kind of scientific legitimacy that AAM sought in many of its projects. As Paul DiMaggio writes, no one objected to the assumptions Rea made in his study, which "reflected the professional ideology of scientific efficiency in the service of social improvement. ... [I]mplicit in Rea's exclusive focus on attendance figures was the assumption that the art museum's overriding goal was educating the mass public."⁶² DiMaggio notes that the philosophy of museums Rea constructed was representative of AAM's values and goals, and the way Rea

⁶¹ Rea, "One Hundred Fifty Years," 680.

⁶² DiMaggio, 281. It should be noted that while DiMaggio writes that Rea considered art museums, Rea's book included all types of museums.

constructed it also represented those goals, particularly in terms of his scientific methods used to measure the efficiency and use of museums. Additionally, DiMaggio's point that Rea used attendance figures because he was concerned with "educating the mass public" is important because this kind of sentiment was newly meaningful in the twentieth century with the rise of the public museum.

Rea concluded that the fluctuation, and often decline, of museum attendance in communities of varying populations was a function of efficiency and the accessibility of museums in those changing populations. The solution he proposed was based on a model libraries had used as their collections became public and librarians sought to improve access: the branch model. This was an attractive idea to many museum leaders in the 1920s and 1930s, but here the ideology behind Rea's project is of interest. Rea dedicated a chapter to the historical relationship between museums and their communities, and his conception of the historical progression of museums, steeped in scientific rhetoric of evolution and improvement, reveals about how the AAM and new museum professionals saw their place in history. Rea also attempts to answer the question he had posed so simply—"what are museums for?"—and the philosophy he devised for this study was influential for the AAM's projects of self-definition.

For Rea, the history of American museums was "not unlike that of biological evolution, in which expansion of a group is marked by the rise and fall of successive species, each an advance over its predecessors but retaining some of their imperfections."⁶³ The comparison with a biological phenomenon lends the sense of a

⁶³ Rea, *The Museum and the Community*, 5.

decline in the museum world status as “natural,” too. Rea even compared the decline of the public museum, which he felt America was witnessing in 1930, to the earlier decline of college and society museums, sixty years earlier. Each type of museum was moving on a sixty-year cycle, falling out of favor as a new type of museum because the best fit for the new American society. Rea continued with the evolution comparison:

When [a museum] fails to make this adaptation it is replaced. Museums have experienced many profound changes of environment to which adaptation has not been easy. Frequently these changes have led to the replacement of old types by new, with great wastage in the process. By combining an understanding of these catastrophes of the past with a more alert recognition of impending changes, we may reasonably hope in the future to make more successful adaptations to new conditions and to save much of the wastage.⁶⁴

Rea’s concern was to ensure the smoothest adaptation, eliminating “wastage,” and his study was one contribution that museums undergoing great changes could certainly turn to for assistance in their transitions. Rea’s highly rational, scientific approach is also notable, urging museums to adapt and reach upward to the best and most up-to-date practices in a unifying field that supported and facilitated this “self-improvement” more than it ever had before.

The Museum and the Community focused on continuity and change in the museum field and Rea examined museum history as a hint toward its future.

Touching on some of the same issues as he had in the speech at Charleston’s anniversary, he wrote:

The fact that museums were among our earliest social institutions, and have persisted and extended themselves during our whole history as a nation, evidences the vitality of the idea they represent and its importance in the social economy. That they have not become even more important institutions

⁶⁴ Rea, *The Museum and the Community*, 5.

may well be due to the casual way in which they have developed. They have neglected to rationalize their rich and illuminating experience, and their success hitherto has been due more to the intrinsic value of the museum idea than to the skill with which it has been developed as a social science.⁶⁵

A “casual” reliance on the “intrinsic value of the museum idea” was not enough to sustain museums, Rea argued, through a time of transition for the industry particularly or depression of the economy generally. Rea faulted museums for having “neglected to rationalize their rich and illuminating experience,” or “to define their objectives, to measure their results, and to analyze their experience.”⁶⁶ These are exactly the things that Rea and the AAM at large were attempting to do.

Aside from the “casual,” decentralized development of museums prior to the existence of the AAM, there was another reason Rea and his contemporaries were better fit to achieve these goals: they believed that museums of different subject matter still shared a singular purpose, and this differentiated them from their predecessors in the museum world. This is not to say that Rea and others did not acknowledge the different considerations individual institutions had to take into account, but part of the “nationalizing” project of the AAM, bringing together museums of all types from all around the country, was to minimize these differences, capitalize on commonalities, and work toward gains that could benefit the whole field. Because this was also a period in which museums had specialized their collections and research, it is important to note that the broad philosophies Rea proposed and the commonalities they highlighted were not the result of museums actually becoming more alike. Rather, it was the result of efforts by the AAM and its

⁶⁵ Rea, *The Museum and the Community*, 18.

⁶⁶ Rea, *The Museum and the Community*, 4.

members to emphasize those shared experiences and goals and to bring the museum community together to work more effectively.

Rea saw the role museums played in society as essentially educational, dedicated to their collections and communities. He wrote:

The purpose of museums is to acquire, preserve, and use objects. The acquisition of objects is a purely preliminary function. The preservation of objects is an important function when the objects are either unique or seriously decreasing in availability, but even in these cases preservation is important only for potential use. The outstanding function of museums is, therefore, the use of objects.⁶⁷

Rea ordered the functions of museums and, in doing so, tried to move the discourse on museums forward, freeing them from earlier stereotypes of the curio cabinet and static, cluttered display cases. The sentiment that the museum is the “apostle of the object” is a common phrase in Rea’s works, reflecting his desire for all museums, regardless of their focus, to be dedicated to their collections and to teach through those rather than through extensive lectures or labels. When Rea wrote, “The vitality of the museum idea is not surprising when it is realized that it deals with an immemorial interest of mankind and with one of the oldest forms of education,”⁶⁸ he emphasized the enduring habits among people to collect and preserve physical objects. But to truly be “apostles of the object” in the twentieth century, museums had to adapt to their new situations, which to Rea meant their status as public institutions:

[Museums] had necessarily to take upon themselves a new function of interpreting their subjects and collections and of arousing and developing interest. In short, they became educational institutions because their public was, as a whole, no longer already educated in their particular fields.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Rea, *The Museum and the Community*, 25.

⁶⁸ Rea, *The Museum and the Community*, 25.

⁶⁹ Rea, *The Museum and the Community*, 28.

Rea recognized that the museum field had shifted from what he called “culture for the cultured” to “potentially popular universities that may enroll the whole population almost literally from the cradle to the grave.”⁷⁰ Rea’s vision of the museum as an educational institution accessible to all recalls Goode’s goals for the field made decades earlier.

For Rea, museums could not just acquire and preserve objects for future generations, they also had to investigate and interpret them for current visitors, diffuse as well as increase knowledge. It came down to education. In 1930, Rea questioned whether the museum community was ready to develop in this direction:

Perhaps American museums as a whole are now chiefly in the accumulative stage. Perhaps the elaboration of their educational possibilities belongs to a later stage. All the money expended by museums is the gift of the people. The decision as to how these conflicting obligations of growth and service shall be adjusted depends upon the attitude of the people as well as upon the temperament and ingenuity of museum administrators in the years to come.⁷¹

Even if Rea was being genuine in doubt museums’ abilities to adapt, and there is the sense in the passage that he was exaggerating, the responsiveness Rea demands of museums to “the attitude of the people” sums up the rising belief on museums of the age, invested in serving their communities, broadly defined.

Context: Benjamin Ives Gilman and John Cotton Dana

Rea constructed much of his work around the history of American museums, and this served two purposes, to play into a scientific model of evolution and

⁷⁰ Rea, *The Museum and the Community*, 30-31.

⁷¹ Rea, “What Are Museums For?,” 271.

adaptation, and also to respond to the philosophizing about museums that had gone on before Rea's time. Benjamin Ives Gilman, secretary of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, was a member of the AAM at the same time as Rea and spoke at annual meetings where Rea served as secretary, yet Gilman's views, crystallized in his 1918 *Museum Ideals of Purpose and Method*, place him in a much different context from Rea. Gilman's background in art museums also illuminates some of the different priorities between curators and directors of art and science museums, something Gilman emphasized more than Rea ever did—this in itself is a trait that sets Gilman apart.

John Cotton Dana also had an art museum background as founder and director of the Newark Museum after leaving his career as a librarian. Where Gilman in many ways represented traditional art museum ideology, Dana was the revolutionary, his lectures at AAM annual meetings prompting lively debate. Today Dana is frequently championed by museum leaders for his efforts to democratize art museums, making them more accessible and more relevant to the average visitor's life. In his own lifetime, Dana was a controversial figure, but the influence of his ideals of education and accessibility are seen in Rea's work. Gilman and Dana represent two leaders within AAM and the museum field generally who dedicated considerable time to the question as Rea would ask it—"what are museums for?"—and their widely diverging answers highlight some of the subjects and ideas Rea was implicitly responding to when he undertook the question in the following decades.

Though Benjamin Ives Gilman wrote on museums only a decade earlier than Rea, the philosophy of museums he proposed represents an earlier point of museum

history, a direction which the AAM could have developed, but did not. Gilman recognized the decades of the early twentieth century as a turning point in the history of museums, but he articulated his vision for moving forward somewhat differently than Rea would. Gilman wrote:

Wealthy men have done a great deal in providing collections and buildings to house them; but the important thing for the future is to use money for increasing the efficiency of these acquisitions, and obtaining results from them. Growth has been the paramount care hitherto of our museums. The use of growth needs to become our paramount care instead.⁷²

Like Rea, Gilman acknowledged the great collections that had been acquired by museums, but note that, for Gilman, the key point is the “efficiency of these acquisitions,” “the use of growth” rather than growth itself. This is a similar sentiment to Rea’s, but is not exactly the same. Rea emphasized learning from objects and using them to teach, but Gilman was more abstract, privileging an aesthetic, cultural experience from viewing art.

Of the collection-building of art museums, historian Neil Harris writes, “by the early twentieth century, even more clearly by the 1920s, art museums had apparently abandoned their lay clients; according to critics they had turned into storehouses, paradise for the curator or researcher, but hell for the serious amateur and the ordinary visitor,”⁷³ and this is basically the state of museums to which both Gilman and Rea responded. Gilman’s proposal was far less aggressive than Rea’s, however, as he celebrated some of the traditional aspects of art museums that had increasingly dominated the field: the uninterrupted (and therefore un-interpreted, un-

⁷² Benjamin Ives Gilman, *Museum Ideals of Purpose and Method* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1918), ix.

⁷³ Neil Harris, *Cultural Excursions: Marketing Appetites and Cultural Tastes in Modern America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 58.

contextualized) aesthetic experience that could in theory be held and appreciated by all.

Gilman's background was in art museums, and, unlike Rea and later writers, he repeatedly emphasized the differences between art and science museums. He questioned whether the two had enough in common to even be given the same name:

As a matter of convenience collections of science and collections of art are alike called museums. Yet it may be claimed both that collections of art have a better right to the title and that a radical difference between them calls for the independent naming of collections of science. Although there were no muses of painting or sculpture, it was the realm of fancy over which the sisters presided, and not the domain of fact.⁷⁴

Gilman connected museums back to their classical past and the realm of the muses, faulting the naming of science collections as “museums” when there had never been a muse to science. The paradigm of the classical museum, invoked decades earlier by N. H. Winchell in his discussion of museum types, retained its hold on the imaginations of many museum officials.

In contrasting art and science museums alone, Gilman himself was referring to an even earlier tradition of museum philosophy, one that he used to articulate his own vision and further differentiate the purpose of art museums from others. An early chapter in *Museum Ideals* is titled “Dr. Goode's Thesis and its Antithesis,” a response to Goode's work from the late nineteenth century about the function of museums as educational institutions. Gilman used Goode's assertion that “An efficient educational museum may be described as a collection of instructive labels each illustrated by a well-selected specimen” as the basis for the type of science museum Gilman was

⁷⁴ Gilman, *Museum Ideals*, ix-x.

constructing his image of the art museum against.⁷⁵ Gilman wrote, “In speaking of museums of art Dr. Goode’s thesis must be dropped and an antithesis substituted. Their essential nature is not that of collections of abstractions illuminated for us by examples, but that of collections of concrete things introduced to us by ideas.”⁷⁶ Art museums represented such a different kind of collection and experience that the philosophies Goode had proposed did not apply. Science and art museums had too little in common to be conceived of in the same ways—in fact, Gilman chose to conceive them in oppositional ways. Art museums have no “specimens” to be interpreted and explained by accompanying labels, but offer an aesthetic experience.

To Gilman, the science museum was an educational institution and the art museum, an artistic one. This was the product of the inherent differences in the types of objects in their collections and the goals behind displaying them: an artistic object “has value for perceptive purposes pure and simple, independently of any others, whether instructive or not. Its worth differs from that of an instructive object in that it is immediate instead of prospective.”⁷⁷ In other words, there was an immediate benefit or result from contemplating a work of art; a scientific specimen or other object, on the other hand, had to be interpreted, the viewer had to be educated, to gain something from the experience of observing it.

The “radical difference” between art and science was a common theme for Gilman, which he articulated in a series of comparisons. It is worth quoting at length

⁷⁵ Gilman, *Museum Ideals*, 77.

⁷⁶ Gilman, *Museum Ideals*, 80.

⁷⁷ Gilman, *Museum Ideals*, 93.

to showcase Gilman's ostentatious writing style and highlight the differences he thought were most important:

A museum of science is a place of pleasant thought; a museum of art a place of thoughtful pleasure. A scientific museum is devoted to observations, an art museum to valuations. A collection of science is gathered primarily in the interest of the real; a collection of art primarily in the interest of the ideal. The former is a panorama of fact, the latter a paradise of fancy. In the former we learn, in the latter we admire. A museum of science is in essence a school; a museum of art in essence a temple. Minerva presides over the one, sacred to the reason; Apollo over the other, sacred to the imagination.⁷⁸

Several of these comparisons stand out.. First, with the references to Minerva and Apollo, Gilman again conceived of modern institutions in terms of their classical antecedents and invoking a tradition rich in inquiry and idealized scholarly pursuits. The idea of the art museum as a "temple," another image from antiquity, was resonant with neoclassical architecture of art museums, frequently called up both by people like Gilman, who wanted to celebrate the noble and respectful atmosphere of traditional art museums, and by pro-education museum advocates, who saw the temple model as indicative of the rarefied and exclusive atmosphere of art museums that prevented them from being widely accessible. Second, the dichotomy of fact and fancy were terms Gilman returned to repeatedly. In the context of the art world, "fancy" was not meant to be frivolous, but to express an elevated world of imagination, enjoyment, and the "sympathetic response" that comprised the world of culture.⁷⁹

The state of culture in the United States was of great concern to Gilman, who worried that there existed "among our elaborately instructed classes an abundant

⁷⁸ Gilman, *Museum Ideals*, 80-81.

⁷⁹ Gilman, *Museum Ideals*, xii.

growth of hollow mockeries of culture. Hence an intellectual snobbery which, instead of actually liking things, likes only to seem to like them.”⁸⁰ The solution to this snobbery, these “popular delusions,” was a renewed investment in what Gilman called “almost the sole foundations representative of culture as distinguished from education,” the art museums. Gilman called for a refocusing of art museums’ goals along the lines of his own ideas, writing, “In our larger communities especially, from the beginning homes of the higher instruction, the doctrine that enjoyment is the chief aim of museums of art, instruction a secondary aim, need to be preached as this book seeks to preach it.”⁸¹ Gilman saw himself as a crusader for a particular vision of art museums, one which did not relate to museums of other subjects—he does not mention history museums or industrial museums at all—and one that privileged the emotional and physical experience of art rather than an academic interpretation of it.

Gilman’s *Museum Ideals* represents a traditional approach to art museums, capitalizing on what was specific to their collections, patrons, and visitors, but he was not the only person to speak from an art museum background. In contrast, John Cotton Dana, was known for his efforts to open up the libraries and museum where he worked to make them more accessible to more people. Today Dana’s emphasis on using collections in new ways and increasing access to exhibitions is often seen as ahead of his time, and it is true that his peers did not always respond to his ideas sympathetically. Still, he remained an important and provocative figure until his death in 1929, challenging his fellow museum workers with the idea that, “It is easy for a

⁸⁰ Gilman, *Museum Ideals*, xiii.

⁸¹ Gilman, *Museum Ideals*, xiv.

museum to get objects; it is hard for a museum to get brains.”⁸² Rea’s work responded to Gilman by emphasizing museums’ commonalities rather than differences and scientific methods in line with the AAM’s image as a modern, professional organization—but the more populist leanings behind Rea’s pro-education, pro-community message were clearly influenced by Dana.

In 1916, Dana gave a paper at the AAM’s annual meeting titled, “Increasing the Usefulness of Museums” in which he challenged museum workers to think creatively about what to do with their collections now that they had acquired them—“getting brains,” as he said. In the history of museums, it has marked a major shift in the conceptions and function of a museum when curators shift focus from collecting objects for the sake of collecting to collecting objects to share and interpret them, and this is the idea with which Dana, and later Rea, was engaging. Dana wrote,

A museum is good only in so far as it is of use. It is easy to evade the importance of this obvious fact by airy talk of the uplift value of architectural facades in the classic manner, of priceless antiques, of paintings by masters, and of ancient porcelains, jades, and lacquers, to say nothing of replicas of whales, Indians, and mastodons. But the evasion does not serve. Common sense demands that a publicly supported institution do something for its supporters, and that some part at least of what it does be capable of clear description and downright valuation.⁸³

Dana’s argument that the aesthetics of the museum experience are merely an “evasion” in the face of true, measurable educational efforts was a bit extreme for some of his peers.

⁸² John Cotton Dana, “Increasing the Usefulness of Museums,” *Proceedings of the American Association of Museums, 1916*. In John Cotton Dana, *The New Museum: The Selected Writings of John Cotton Dana*, William A. Peniston, ed. (Newark: The Newark Museum Association and the American Association of Museums, 1999), 99.

⁸³ Dana, “Increasing the Usefulness of Museums,” 102.

Dana was speaking two years before the publication of *Museum Ideals*, but his indictment of “airy talk of the uplift value” of art collections brings Gilman to mind immediately, especially when considering some chapters of Gilman’s book had been published previously in other venues. After Dana delivered his talk, Gilman responded with some concern:

What is the museum man? He is an apostle of the object. We are all apostles of the object, and Mr. Dana has described the future possibilities with regard to what apostles of the object might do. He has called his vision an institute of visual instruction. Yet it is only what has previously been called object teaching. It seems to me, however, that with the institute of visual instruction in the future there must remain the possibly somewhat less active institution which we call a museum.⁸⁴

To Gilman, visual instruction and the “use” for education of objects like those one would find in a museum collection was a fine idea, just not perhaps for museums themselves—again emphasizing that museums ought to be artistic rather than instructive institutions. His understanding of the meaning of the phrase, “apostle of the object,” did not entail the interpretation or introduction Rea would later assign it.

Gilman went on to liken the museum to an attic such as “every well regulated family ought to have.” Gilman argued humans would always have need for an “attic,” a separate entity from an “institute of visual instruction.”⁸⁵ But an “attic” was precisely what Dana did not want museums to be, the location of dusty, passive, subdued admiration of a collection of old things. Dana may have been slightly beyond the majority of AAM members that issue, but the level of discussion in the 1910s and 1920s suggests that museum officials had great interest in doing something with their

⁸⁴ From the responses following John Cotton Dana, “Increasing the Usefulness of Museums” *Proceedings of the American Association of Museums*, vol. 10 (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 1916), 88.

⁸⁵ From the responses following Dana, “Increasing the Usefulness of Museums,” 88.

collections other than assembling an attic, Gilman included, though Gilman's attic was an exceptionally well cared for and highly trafficked one. Gilman used the analogy of the attic not because he wanted to collect for collecting's sake, something he made clear in his book, but because it was a more appropriate analogy to him than that of the school. Dana's ideas were seen as unserious to traditionalists like Gilman, and added to the controversy that often surrounded Dana's criticisms of the field. However, it was Dana's sense of responsibility to the public, particularly for a publicly funded museum, that was most influential, implying the role of the curator or director as being dedicated to the service of the museum's patrons as much as to the objects. This is the key idea Rea and later museum leaders would take from Dana, as the concept that museums had obligations to their communities underscored the need for an intentional, well-conceived educational program.

Rea responded to both Dana and Gilman's ideas, affirming some and rejecting others, and this alone shows that the project, encouraged and sometimes directly sponsored by the AAM, to define the museum's purpose and role in society was going strong by the early 1930s. As the AAM grew in members and stature, its identity as a national professional organization that valued scientific methods and the benefits of shared experience was increasingly solidified, and it embraced the vision for museums Rea espoused, one based on the increase *and* diffusion of knowledge through direct work with an institution's collection. Rea did not stand out from AAM's normative ideology in any particular way, but he was representative of it as the organization's leader, and helped shape and reinforce it through his individual experiences and personality. As museums became increasingly public and accessible,

it is no wonder Rea's education-based vision took hold, and so many AAM members followed his lead.

Education in Museums

Rea's interpretation of the role of museums as responsible to their communities and therefore to education and interpretation on a broad level was influential in several ways, the most obvious being the ongoing presence and consideration of museum education departments. Rea was as much a part of the museum education movement as he was a leader of it—as president of the AAM and director of several important museums, he had more opportunities to speak to a wider audience, but he was not departing dramatically from what others were saying in *Museum News*, annual meetings, and other contexts. Part of this movement, too, was the American Association for Adult Education (AAAE), a group founded by president of the Carnegie Corporation in 1926. The AAAE was funded exclusively by the Carnegie Corporation for the first fourteen years of its existence and was designed to focus on adult education beyond basics like literacy, somewhat analogous to “continuing education” programs today.⁸⁶ The Carnegie Corporation brought the AAAE and the AAM together on multiple projects as education advocates began to see museums as a viable location for educational work and museum officials began to see some education as part of their duty to provide.

At the 1934 annual meeting of the AAM, curator of botany at the Carnegie Museum, O. E. Jennings, weighed in on the rising support for education in museums,

⁸⁶ Sharan B. Merriam and Ralph Grover Brockett, *The Profession and Practice of Adult Education: An Introduction* (New York: Wiley, 1997), 222.

looking specifically to defining the term “adult education.” Jennings noted that “we are more and more speaking of the museum as an educational institution,” and which had led him to participate in some conferences on the subject at the University of Pittsburgh. As to the definition of the term, he admitted he was “rather hazy” on that point “unless we draw an arbitrary line and say that any education after the person has become an adult or has graduated from high-school or from college should be called adult education. This does not seem to be a very satisfactory kind of a definition.”⁸⁷ Jennings’s curiosity and confusion illustrate the newness of ideas about education in museums on a concrete level—it may have been easy to agree with Rea’s broad philosophies and see that museums should use their collection to abstractly “increase and diffuse knowledge,” but what that meant for curators’ daily activities was difference.

Jennings described his awareness of the trend toward educational exhibitions among American museums:

More and more in the various papers and talks in the meetings of the American Association of Museums and in the pages of *The Museum News* and other publications there is ample evidence of the rapid change of museum exhibits all over the country from dull, tedious, over-technical displays to bright, attractive, easily understood, and yet educational set ups, whether by means of diagrams, models, individual specimens, or elaborate groups of an ecological character.⁸⁸

This comment is interesting first because Jennings listed “papers and talks” from annual meetings as well as *Museum News* as his named sources of information from diffuse sources that constitute a trend. By 1934, the AAM’s influence was such that

⁸⁷ O. E. Jennings. “The place of the natural history museum in adult education.” *Museum News* 16, no. 2 (May 15, 1938): 6. Though this text was not published in *Museum News* until 1938, Jennings originally presented it at the 1934 meeting.

⁸⁸ Jennings, 7.

its publications and events were read as representative of the field by its own members. Second, Jennings noted that, in terms of the trend toward education reported by museums, “educational” was synonymous with “bright, attractive, [and] easily understood,” while earlier methods “dull, tedious, [and] over-technical.” Immediately the anxiety over education in museums on a practical level is understood, as curators like Jennings certainly did want to be responsible to their communities as Rea would have understood it, but did not want to be perceived as dumbing down their exhibitions.

Jennings questioned whether more complex ideas could not be presented still, comparing the educational purpose of museums to that of crossword puzzles (a newish phenomenon still in the early 1930s):

Some of my friends are devotees of the cross-word puzzle. They like to match their wits against that puzzle; and to a certain extent they are educating themselves. If the puzzles were *very* simple they would not be attractive. We want our museum visitors to come back again and again, and to profit by each visit. Are we giving them really educational exhibits?⁸⁹

Jennings’s observation marked a question that museums continue to face today, that of how to meet the needs of the “lowest common denominator,” and making exhibitions accessible, but still interesting to audiences representing a range of age levels, learning types, and academic backgrounds. The problems of adult education—not school programs or programs otherwise aimed at children which had some earlier precedents—were just being teased out in the 1920s and 1930s, and Jennings’s desire to represent complex ideas and the best and most interesting content his collections had to offer while still serving the average visitor are representative of that struggle.

⁸⁹ Jennings, 7.

One AAAE and AAM member, Philip N. Youtz, director of the Brooklyn Museum, took up the question of education specifically with regard to art museums, perhaps recognizing that so much literature on the subject had come in the context of science museums. In a 1930 lecture at the AAM annual meeting, Youtz argued, “Times are ripe, I think, for dealing with art as a vital part of the social process. Too long we have treated art as if it were a totally separate and unrelated phenomenon. As a result, art education has been scholastic and thin.”⁹⁰ Youtz saw the twentieth century as “turning toward the social sciences” in the same way the eighteenth century had been influenced by physical sciences, and the nineteenth by the biological—for Youtz, it was time for art museums to catch up. Youtz pointed out the benefits of science, that it was “verifiable,” “discussable and teachable in a way that aesthetic experience is not.”⁹¹

Youtz believed that one could (and should) study society through art, so that the museum would be a “laboratory” for sociologists, economists, and historians (for whom, Youtz noted, the museum would offer “not only visual history but real history,” perhaps showing discipline bias there).⁹² Youtz constructed and engaged with an entire hierarchy of forms of knowledge and methods of learning within these few points, one that remained centered on his peers, fellow professionals and scholars. This was not the class of people the AAAE and more populist museum education theorists like Dana had sought to bring into the fold, so to speak. However, Youtz’s text shows the extent to which the values of social science were infiltrating

⁹⁰ Philip N. Youtz, “The social science approach to art in adult education.” *Museum News* 8, no. 8 (October 15, 1930): 8.

⁹¹ Youtz, “The social science approach,” 9.

⁹² Youtz, “The social science approach,” 10.

the tradition of the art museum—the idea that the scientific study of art was “teachable in a way that aesthetic experience is not” was not an idea that would have sat well with Gilman, and so this shows the breadth to which education as a value had spread.

In the 1920s and 1930s, AAM members worked to articulate a field-wide vision of the museum’s purpose, what its role it played in communities, and how that role must be calibrated with changes in society. For many, this meant a departure from the concept of the museum-as-temple, an “attic” for storing mankind’s treasures, which would be as useful, as Rea said, as King Tut’s tomb—a find centuries later, but of little consequence to contemporary visitors other than scholars.⁹³ The new emphasis on responsibility to one’s community and the concentration on interpretation rather than acquisition were the result of the AAM’s increasingly influential ideology of museums. Museums made up a single field, that even with some variations in type, and should have the same goals of increasing and diffusing knowledge through exhibitions that were accessible to all.

The adult education movement also challenged curators who had been trained in an earlier, more academically focused tradition to consider the ramifications of a philosophy like Rea’s, and what it would really mean to run a museum whose first priority was education. These discussions and the struggle to agree on a set of standards and best practices, as determined through scientific methods of professional study are the subject of the next chapter. The importance of the museum-philosophers

⁹³ Rea, “What Are Museums For?,” 265.

of the early twentieth century was their efforts to provide an ideology on which those discussions and struggles would be based, and to reinforce their values for the field simultaneously—as Rea wrote, to “rationalize their rich and illuminating experience.”⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Rea, *The Museum and the Community*, 18.

Chapter 4: Practice

The AAM's goal was to provide a venue for museum professionals to exchange ideas and confer on shared challenges, from the philosophical and abstract to the daily tasks and routines. After ironing out the purposes and values of museums through conversations held at annual meetings and in print publications, the question remained as to how these priorities and ideals could be carried out. Examining the practical considerations taken by members of the AAM to fulfill their philosophical goals reveals the AAM's priorities and values in navigating the tension between theory and practice.

At the Pennsylvania Museum of Art, director Fiske Kimball was a leader in innovating museum practices, from exhibition layout to visitor surveys. In 1928, AAM published Yale professor of psychology Edward S. Robinson's findings on the phenomenon of "museum fatigue" in *The Behavior of the Museum Visitor*, an influential study that inspired museum workers to observe their own visitors' actions and cater to patrons' habits. *Museum News* frequently published missives from people in the field working to refine their exhibition practices, and these reveal the ways the AAM's values and ideology filtered through members' work. Museum officials chose to use scientific or social-scientific methods to study visitors' experiences and determine the optimal conditions for an exhibition. That the AAM reprinted and shared this information, some of it originally presented at annual meetings, reinforced members' beliefs that these studies could be useful to more than the original museum

where it had been conducted, again emphasizing what was shared by museums rather than their differences.

Many of the ideas behind museum experiments in new kinds of display were an echo of studies on color, light, and psychology going on in other industries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Department stores and world's fairs held visual display and visitor experience among their top priorities. Print advertisers were also interested in visual culture and techniques that would draw the readers' eyes to their product. These three sectors of society had some common concerns with museums, particularly in enticing people to experience whatever they were "selling," literally or figuratively. Museum employees borrowed many techniques that had been tested and refined not only by their peers but by professionals in other emerging fields, from the department store to print advertising. Influences from within the AAM and outside it combined in shaping how AAM members worked to determine a set of best practices..

Fiske Kimball and the Pennsylvania Museum of Art

When appointed director of the Pennsylvania Museum of Art, Fiske Kimball, was best known for his studies of colonial architecture and particularly his role in the restoration of Jefferson's Monticello. Always the professional, at Monticello Kimball's methods caused some stir, as historian Patricia West reports:

His values were clear: The period room should be more than a romanticized, inspirational "shrine"; it should be based on sound historical research to present as accurate a picture of the past as possible. ... Yet since Kimball was "unalterably opposed" to using reproductions or period pieces without a Jeffersonian provenance, the house appeared "unhomelike," "cold," "museumlike," or, as Gibboney described it, simply "bare." Kimball

nonetheless was prepared to encounter opposition to his professional standards.⁹⁵

Kimball's attitude toward professionalism was clear in how he performed this work and the example of Monticello illustrates one obstacle or conflict that arose in the face of professionalizing museum men: alternative traditions of historic preservation which were run by volunteers, usually women, and with goals that strayed from the "scientized history" West attributes to Kimball. Kimball's position became the accepted one within the AAM on the subject of historic preservation, however, as Laurence Vail Coleman quoted a manuscript by Kimball in *Historic House Museums*, the second of his guidebooks:

A great danger is that, in any work which is undertaken, our modern preferences in artistic matters be indulged, when really we should follow the evidence as to how things *were*, whether *we* would have made them that way or not. Thus if the evidence is that certain interior finish was painted from the start, we should not leave it unpainted just because "It seems a shame to cover up such beautiful grain"; or if we find a certain original color, change it because *we* don't like it, and pretend it must have faded!⁹⁶

The debates over historic preservation methodology should be conducted, and the sometimes-competing priorities of historical accuracy and the feeling or atmosphere within a period room would continue, Kimball having established the "professional's" position on the subject.

When Kimball was hired as director of the Pennsylvania Museum in 1925, his previous experience had been largely in the field of architectural history, teaching at the University of Illinois, University of Michigan, University of Virginia, and New

⁹⁵ Patricia West, *Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America's House Museums* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999), 125.

⁹⁶ From a manuscript report by Fiske Kimball, quoted in Laurence Vail Coleman, *Historic House Museums* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1933), 56.

York University.⁹⁷ At the latter two, he had also served as the campus architect. A new building for the Pennsylvania Museum was in the process of being built at the time Kimball joined the museum, and he was able to have great influence in the layout over the next year before it opened in 1928. Art historian David Brownlee points out that Kimball was aware of his lack of museum experience from the administrative perspective, writing that Kimball, “sensing his need to catch up,” spent a summer touring and observing European museums before taking his position as director in Philadelphia.⁹⁸ Kimball pursued experience-based knowledge and expertise to bolster his position as director, qualities valued by the AAM in their members.

Brownlee argues that Kimball’s hiring signified a shift for the museum, as “[it] was to be reoriented toward the public and equipped with a building that ingeniously served a knowledge- and entertainment-hungry general population as well as a growing body of professional scholars.”⁹⁹ Kimball aimed to accomplish this reorientation through the completion of the new building as well as through his writings in the museum’s *Bulletin*, in which he wrote about museum projects and his own view of the role of the curator, director, or museum at large within the community. Brownlee’s assessment rings true with Rea’s ideas as explored in the previous chapter, and though Kimball came to the Pennsylvania Museum with limited museum experience, his values of professionalism, education, and responsiveness to

⁹⁷ Bingham, ed., *Who’s Who*, 27.

⁹⁸ David B. Brownlee, *Making a Modern Classic: The Architecture of the Philadelphia Museum of Art* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1997), 99.

⁹⁹ Brownlee, 99.

the community's needs were in line with the direction in which the AAM was moving.

Kimball envisioned a plan for the museum that would include a floor of period rooms in which paintings, sculpture, and furniture all from the same period would be displayed together. These rooms would be organized chronologically in a “main street of period rooms” on one floor, with a second floor dedicated to study collections for students and scholars where objects were organized by medium and style. Kimball took inspiration from museums in Europe, specifically the chronologically arranged rooms with mixed art media in the Kaiser-Friedrich Museum in Berlin and the study collections at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.¹⁰⁰ Kimball's design represented the practical application of multiple ideals for museums that are often framed in opposition to each other. With such an immense space, Kimball was able to appeal to the average visitor with period rooms and simultaneously appease scholars looking for a rigorous, academic layout.

In addition to European models, Kimball undertook his own experiments to ensure this layout would be satisfactory. In 1928, the AAM published the “Preliminary Report from the Pennsylvania Museum” by Horace H. F. Jayne, Chief of the Division of Eastern Art.* The report summarized experiments undertaken in some of the displays at Memorial Hall, the museum's home while construction was ongoing, designed to test Kimball's preference for period rooms with mixed media against the public's tastes. Jayne found that visitors spent an average of 9.43 seconds

¹⁰⁰ Brownlee, 99.

* This was published in conjunction with Edward S. Robinson's, *The Behavior of the Museum Visitor*.

viewing a table set with varied objects and only an average of 5.45 seconds viewing a table set with similar objects (these objects include sculpture, pottery, metalwork, and textiles).¹⁰¹ Jayne also tested other combinations, like groups of objects of similar form but with different colors. He found visitors spent more time than they had at the tables of all similar objects, but less than those that were more varied. Jayne noted such incremental differences were not the best statistics, writing:

Although it must be confessed that a difference of two seconds fails to stand as convincing proof ... yet the four seconds difference between the two extreme cases is surely significant ... and it does not seem improper to conclude from this series of experiments that, within limits, the greater the variation, the greater observation time per group of objects, and the greater, too, the attracting power of such an arrangement.¹⁰²

Jayne drew his conclusions with some hesitance, revealing his desire to adhere to the rules of statistics and careful not to overstate his claims. He was aware of the science behind the museum's finding and wanted to present his findings in similar framework or language, with scientific buzz words like "proof," "variation," "significant," "experiment," and "observation."

Jayne took a similar attitude to a second experiment conducted at Memorial Hall comparing visitor response to galleries filled with only paintings, only furniture, or paintings and furniture. Here, Jayne found that the presence of paintings, either alone or in a room of mixed objects, drew more visitors for a longer period of time. Visitors also spent more time in galleries with varied objects than in those without—furniture, in particular, was quite unpopular as the single focus for a room, deemed to

¹⁰¹ Horace H. F. Jayne, "A Preliminary Report From the Pennsylvania Museum," from Edward Stevens Robinson, *The Behavior of the Museum Visitor* (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 1928), 70.

¹⁰² Jayne, 70.

be the interest only of the student or connoisseur. As period rooms were designed for the Pennsylvania Museum, this was information that could be taken into account, certified as the result of scientific observation, to make the best period rooms possible.

The data from the studies at Memorial Hall was also integrated into Kimball's plans for the new interior of the museum. Jayne wrote that the problem with many contemporary museums was the architecture itself, as "large galleries, high ceilings, oppressive architectural detail combine to diminish people's attention to the actual things on exhibition."¹⁰³ Marjorie Schwarzer explains Kimball's goal in combating this problem. In Kimball's museum, she writes,

There would be no numbing corridors or suites of identical galleries. Rather, rooms would be different sizes and shapes (and sometimes reflect the measurements of specific works of art). Instead of straight avenues of movement, frequent turns would create intimacy and a sense of discovery. Electric lighting would combine with outside skylights and windows for brighter viewing spaces.¹⁰⁴

This plan was based on discovery, as she notes, and variation, for just as visitors preferred variation on the small scale of tables or single galleries, it also prolonged their interest in the museum as a whole. Electric lighting represented technological innovation on no small scale, and the Pennsylvania Museum was the first major museum to install such a system.

During Kimball's first years as director, he, like many of his peers, was concerned with defining the role of his museum to satisfy curators and students of art as well as the public at large. A 1928 article on "The Museum Curator and the

¹⁰³ Jayne, 68.

¹⁰⁴ Schwarzer, 37.

Public” shows Kimball’s interest in the operations of a museum on multiple levels, as he was not a curator himself, but was still engaged in considering the role and its meaning. Kimball likened the curator to “a profession like that of the doctor, the lawyer, or the architect, with an exacting preparation, and very real public duties and responsibilities,” a comparison that promoted the view of museum men as professionals, elevating and legitimizing it.¹⁰⁵ This was less of a controversial stand to take in 1928 than it may have been at the time of the AAM’s founding, but it shows the extent to which the AAM’s message had infiltrated and shaped its members’ ideas just decades later. Kimball also wrote that the curator ought be concerned with the way his choices for acquisitions and exhibitions might best serve the public, a priority that reverberates with those Rea was proposing in his work.

In 1929, Kimball wrote an article titled “A Museum For All the People,” in which he outlined some questions about museum audiences, including “what types of people utilize the service of the many institutions devoted to art, as to the attractive force which museums exert upon the public, as to the best methods for the display of objects,” in addition to other questions about a museum’s “public service.” To these questions, Kimball argued, past solutions had been “haphazard at best, based upon isolated instances which seldom permitted accurate generalizations.”¹⁰⁶ This problem Kimball proposed to remedy with the results of the Pennsylvania Museum’s visitor survey, undertaken in 1929 and designed to guide the “public relations” of the museum. The survey was conducted with a statistically sound sample of one thousand

¹⁰⁵ Fiske Kimball, “The Museum Curator and the Public,” *Bulletin of the Pennsylvania Museum* 24, No. 123 (Dec., 1928), 29.

¹⁰⁶ Fiske Kimball, “A Museum For All the People,” *Bulletin of the Pennsylvania Museum* 25, no. 130 (Dec., 1929): 1.

visitors, divided and analyzed them by sex, occupation, transportation, and preferred exhibitions. Subjects were asked what they thought the museum could improve upon, and were met with strong support for more lectures, guided tours, and publicity, especially relating to linked sites like the historic houses in Fairmount Park.

This data was used to make several conclusions, including that the museum “appealed to all groups” of people, but especially those who used principles of art and design in their work, including artists, teachers, students, craftsmen, architects, and engineers. Criticism from visitors, as well as improved knowledge of visitor demographics could help the museum to better serve their audience. The attention paid to audience desires, both by simply taking a survey and by heeding its conclusions, shows the extent to which Kimball and the museum more generally were part of the movement to make education a prime focus of museums. Interestingly, the printed survey results in the *Bulletin* are interspersed with images from the Pennsylvania Museum’s collection, including a photo of the museum’s impressive façade as well as works of sculpture and paintings, as if to remind the reader that the museum’s strength was still in its objects, not its statistical reports. Kimball noted that this was perhaps the first time a museum had used such a survey, and it was something that would certainly become mainstream.

Edward S. Robinson’s “Museum Fatigue” Study

As directors like Kimball emphasized the scientific basis for the way their museums operated, they were bolstered by those both within and outside the museum community who undertook scientific study of museum practices and published them

for the benefit of everyone in the field. One of these, *The Behavior of the Museum Visitor*, Yale psychology professor Edward S. Robinson, was widely read and the inspiration for visitor surveys like the one at the Pennsylvania Museum of Industrial Art. Robinson was inspired by AAM director Charles R. Richards to study the museum visitor and, in particular, the phenomenon of “museum fatigue” and how it could be avoided.* The study was funded by the Carnegie Corporation and published by the AAM, with assistance from Richards and Laurence Vail Coleman in selecting three museums of varied size and location in which visitors would be observed. The observers chose subjects at random, omitting children, people with children, and the “obviously infirm,” followed them on their trip through the museum and noted how much time they spent on each object, the number of galleries they entered, and similar data.

Robinson described the concerns of those, like himself, who had “bolder hopes for the public museum”:

There are those who are interested in that casual, self-conscious crowd which, on Saturday and Sunday afternoons, moves like some inanimate current from picture to picture and from glass case to glass case. It is at this point that decision through intuition and through argument become untrustworthy. It is here that light must be sought in an observation of the facts.¹⁰⁷

This was a project invested in the purpose of the public museum, a museum beholden to its visitors and their interests and habits, even as they move through galleries in “some inanimate current.” The “casual, self-conscious crowd” made up a

* Robinson described the symptoms of museum fatigue as “characterized by aching muscles, tired neck and eyes, and by the vague but insistent desire to escape from too many pictures or too much sculpture.” Robinson, 31.

¹⁰⁷ Edward Stevens Robinson. *The Behavior of the Museum Visitor*. Publications of the American Association of Museums. New Series, No. 5. Washington, D.C., 1928, 7.

considerable portion of museum visitors, and therefore, Robinson argued, deserved conscientious attention of museum officials. The image of the “inanimate current” represents a certain attitude on Robinson’s part in which the actions of large groups of people are convoluted and mysterious, even to themselves, and must be studied by outside observers. Of course, Robinson would advocate for visitor surveys of the type Kimball instituted at the Pennsylvania Museum as well, but studying the “crowd” who moved from object to object was just not the same as studying the “visiting connoisseur” who will anyway likely “get a certain wholesome joy out of detecting the imperfections of the tout ensemble.”¹⁰⁸ The crowd of casual visitors both had motives and desires that were trickier for museum officials to comprehend and were especially deserving of study.

Robinson laid out his research question thusly:

What does the “average” man do in a museum? He wanders aimlessly, yes, but not blindly. His attention is drawn to this and distracted from that. He must have glimmering interests which might be fanned into overt enjoyment. Yet, this casual visitor is in the main a mystery and, if he is to be dealt with effectively, there needs to be added to the talking about him and thinking about him deliberate observation of his behavior.¹⁰⁹

The focus on the “average man” is a testament to the attention of these museums, particularly the large institutions from which many of AAM’s leading members came, in serving the “casual visitor,” not someone who necessarily already had great knowledge of the museum’s collections. That Robinson, an academic in an unrelated field, expressed these interests demonstrates how museum advocates were using established priorities and techniques from other social sciences and applying them

¹⁰⁸ Robinson, 7.

¹⁰⁹ Robinson, 7.

onto their own field—concern for adult education, for scientific methods, and for understanding the needs of the average consumer or patron among these. The fact that observers were instructed to choose adult subjects not accompanied by children particularly suggests Robinson and his colleagues were interested in the museum as a site of adult education rather than of childhood education or family outing, arguably quite a difference from the concerns of museums today. Robinson presented himself as present to fill a gap in the work museum advocates had accomplished so far—he would orchestrate the “deliberate observation” of casual visitors’ behavior, where before those concerned about the issue had merely been “talked” and “thought” about it, hardly an “effective” process. Robinson’s priorities and goals as he presented them match well with the AAM’s goals in this same period, professionalizing and legitimizing the museum field with social science, and treating questions and challenges with action and tested methods.

After observing visitors at his sample museums, Robinson concluded museum fatigue could not be remedied for all museums with a single solution.¹¹⁰ In fact, Robinson discovered, “*interest may suffer either because the context in which the picture is observed is too homogenous or too heterogeneous*” (italics original), suggesting there was no magic formula or ratio curators could apply to their collections. For all of the AAM’s efforts to emphasize what museums had in common and what they could learn from each other, they were not unwilling to indicate where individual, tailored assessments ought to be made. Early in his report, Robinson cautioned his reader:

¹¹⁰ Robinson, 31.

We have no formulas of easy applicability to this or to that specific museum situation. We believe that the understanding museum man who goes through our work will gather unto himself a stop watch and a note book in order that he may begin to discover how his particular museum is functioning. This man is our hope. We advise the seeker after easy cures for museum ills to swallow his sorrow as best he can and quietly pass us by.¹¹¹

Robinson's tone and language conveys the seriousness with which he regarded this project, and his acknowledgment that true results, the kind that could be useful in the daily running of museums, would only come as the result of hard work by committed individuals. Preventing museum fatigue, Robinson wrote, "is a task left for the curator. He must determine for his own public, his own pictures, and his own walls where lies that optimal, intermediate zone in which the variety is sufficient to prevent boredom and monotony, and insufficient to create the strain of too frequent distraction."¹¹² Robinson's research revealed that layout and scale of museums affected how visitors used them—in larger museums, visitors were more likely to rush through, attempting to see a great number of objects, but usually seeing fewer proportionately than visitors at small museums who moved a more "leisurely" pace. With such different conditions, museum fatigue could not be linked to a single cause, nor could it be eradicated with a single solution that would work equally well for all museums.

Visitor Behavior and Minimizing Fatigue

More broadly influential from Robinson's work was the idea that museum fatigue and visitor response more generally, both negative and positive, could be

¹¹¹ Robinson, 14.

¹¹² Robinson, 52.

altered through conscious decisions by museum officials that would shape visitor experience. The scientific method of visitor observation and surveys would provide museums with methods to determine the best orientation for their own institution that would enhance visitors' time there. AAM publications from the next decades include many examples of these kinds of efforts.

From early on, prominent figures like Benjamin Ives Gilman weighed in on the subject of museum practices as well as museum philosophy. In 1913, Gilman presented his "Observations in European Museums" at the AAM's annual meeting, noting conventions of lighting, paint colors, and labels in museums abroad. Gilman shared with Robinson and later researchers a concern with the visual experience of the museum, writing, "A museum is a place for the use of the eyes. The word 'visitor' derives from the visual powers, and their economy is a prime desideratum of museum methods. At present they are lavishly wasted."¹¹³ While Gilman shared the belief that museums had a lot of work to do to be more effective, his "observations" were derived differently from Robinson's would be, and were based on the former's own experience and opinions.

Gilman noted that rather than varying wall colors, "There is one tone of color, a light gray-brown or dull yellow-gray which both experience and reason approve for many if not most museum purposes. ... A creamy gray is favorably noted in the report of the commission sent to Europe by the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, as the color often given the walls of his interiors by Peter de Hooch."¹¹⁴ Gilman based

¹¹³ Benjamin Ives Gilman, "Observations in European Museums," *Proceedings of the American Association of Museums* (Charleston, 1913), 20-21.

¹¹⁴ Gilman, "Observations," 20.

his opinions on experience, but it was his personal experience or that of colleagues whom he presumably knew personally—not a scientized, categorized, and analyzed experience like Robinson would privilege. The reference of Peter (or Pieter) de Hooch typifies Gilman’s methods—de Hooch was a seventeenth-century Dutch painter known for his portraits and domestic scenes. Gilman validated the choice of “creamy gray” for museum walls by virtue of the same hue having been used by a celebrated artist whose aesthetic tastes were presumed to be above questioning. This differs greatly from the later approaches in which museum officials and researchers would present their findings with an eye toward objectivity and scientific principles—a far cry from invoking the examples of great artists.

As it did for so many issues, *Museum News* served as the publication for many discussions on techniques for running museums. Following the desire to improve visitor experience and invest in the mission of museums to serve their communities, many of these studies and observations had to do with standards for exhibitions and methods of display rather than what went on behind the scenes. In 1930, Arthur Ohlman, an artist at the American Museum of Natural History, contributed a piece titled, “Modernizing the Museum Label.” Ohlman recommended the use of complementary and contrasting colors, citing an example at the museum in which the reptile exhibition, where “the prevailing tone is light greenish-gray,” stood in contrast to red silk threads linking labels to the models to which they referred.¹¹⁵ The color contrast would make labels stand out and be easier to read. Ohlman also detailed how he transferred a diagram of the ancestry of living and fossil reptiles from paper to the

¹¹⁵ Arthur Ohlman. “Modernizing the museum label.” *Museum News* 7, no. 13 (January 1, 1930): 7.

wall using chalk and pencil, and then completed in the image with oil paints.

Ohlman's description was technical and intended to be clear enough that others could replicate his techniques just by reading the article.

While Ohlman did not conduct studies or visitor observations to confirm that his methods were more efficient with scientific methods, his use of a kind of color theory seems like a more sophisticated approach to the matter than copying the style of a centuries-old painter. The word "modernizing" in the title of the article conveys Ohlman's intentions as on the same page as his peers in terms of improving the museum experience. Few museums had the resources to conduct projects on the scale of Robinson's or the Pennsylvania Museum's, and even at the American Museum of Natural History, an artist in the Department of Preparation would not likely be able to set out seeking answers that would be widely applicable. On one hand, Ohlman's article represents what Robinson encouraged curators to do, to find solutions on a small scale that would improve their institutions. On the other, it is an example of the AAM's larger project of bringing museums together. Not every reader of *Museum News* came from a museum with a similarly "greenish-gray" reptile exhibition, but the advice about color theory and technique for transferring a drawing from paper to the wall could be more broadly useful.

Other museum workers reported on their experiments and what they had observed in their own institutions as well. James A. McCabe, Superintendent of the Art Institute of Chicago, weighed in on the issue of museum fatigue in 1933, noting, "Perhaps no problem in recent years has occupied the attention of museum authorities

more than the question of fatigue.”¹¹⁶ McCabe thought the answer lay in the height of display cases. He wrote:

From my own observation in this field, I have reached the conclusion that museum fatigue cannot be entirely eliminated until the center lines of the case exhibits are on the level with the eye line of the average adult visitor, which is 60 inches from the floor.¹¹⁷

Perhaps following Robinson’s study, McCabe recognized that exhibition design could create or prevent museum fatigue. His suggestion brought precision and uniformity to dealing with one aspect of exhibition design, a solution that could easily be replicated. The article was accompanied by photographs of glass cases in different configurations, rare for *Museum News*, but that illustrated plainly to readers the optimal height per McCabe’s recommendation.

Harold L. Madison, director of the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, shared his story, in an article titled, “Color and Light.” Madison recounted his museum’s study with enthusiasm:

We tried an experiment. A case was lined with scarlet velvet before which was set a mounted brown pelican whose gray plumage harmonized well with the red. Then for a month we checked the number of persons who actually stopped and looked at the pelican. The number was negligible. ... Then we changed the background to a dark but clear green. Immediately the count went up, visitors stopped and saw the pelican. When the red background was there we are convinced that visitors actually did not see the pelican; that the red was so insistent it alone registered and the passerby went on because his eyes recorded only a familiar color.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ James A. McCabe. “Museum cases to minimize fatigue.” *Museum News* 10, no. 18 (March 15, 1933): 7.

¹¹⁷ McCabe, 8.

¹¹⁸ Harold L. Madison. “Color and light.” *Museum News* 15, no. 5 (September 1, 1937): 11.

Like Ohlman, Madison noted the effectiveness of contrasting colors in drawing attention to the object. By experimenting with the museum's own collection and finding what type of display would work best it, Madison was carrying out exactly the type of work Robinson had called for a decade earlier. Madison was delighted with his experience, crowing at the results of their experiment, "You should see our peacock! ... We were a month finding the brick red velvet drop hanging behind him. ... To the blue and green of the peacock it is perfectly complementary and it makes the copper spots in the peacock's tail 'sing.'"¹¹⁹ Madison had only studied the effect of contrasting colors with the pelican, but was able to apply his findings to other objects in the collection—and also to other collections, as he first presented his study at an AAM annual meeting and then printed them in *Museum News*. Like other writers on the subject of museum practices, Madison was obligated to navigate the balance between individually tailored study with respect for particular institutions' circumstances and the mission of AAM to promote shared knowledge that could be used by all types of museums.

A lively writer, Madison had his own opinion of display cases. He preferred vertical cases, writing, "We think all horizontal cases should be in purgatory where they may be used to induce eye-strain, back-ache, leg-ache, and various other types of fatigue which his highness might devise,"¹²⁰—here was Madison's own characterization of museum fatigue. Madison and McCabe's condemnation of cases that were not vertical and, specifically, at eye level, must have been in part a reaction to dominant models in museums in the late nineteenth century. The History of the

¹¹⁹ Madison, 11.

¹²⁰ Madison, 12.

United States Hall at the Arts and Industries building of the Smithsonian Institution was a sea of glass cases, described by historian Gary Kulik as “dense, cluttered affairs ... Row on row of ‘glass-covered boxes of uniform size’ greeted the public.”¹²¹ This model was related in part to the Pitt-Rivers Museum in England, an early anthropological museum in which archaeological and other artifacts of material culture were arrayed in a continuum from simple to complex, showing what was perceived as the development of civilization through a culture’s grasp of stone or metal technology. It also seemed more academic and scholarly than contrived habitats or mannequins, which might bring up Barnumesque connotations.¹²² This kind of vast exhibition required viewers to crane their necks and bend over displays to read the labels next to objects, doubtless creating some of the symptoms of museum fatigue early on. Madison and his peers were fighting against this stereotype by enlivening displays through contrasting colors, and by inviting the visitor to easily and comfortably examine displays that were conveniently placed at eye level.

Madison took these ideas a step further, writing that though the economic depression had restricted great investments in exhibition backgrounds for natural history displays, “we have tried to suggest through the use of color and lighting the sort of atmosphere in which the animal would naturally be found.”¹²³ When a naturalistic setting could not be afforded, a substitution could be made that would fulfill a similar purpose by making the specimen look as though it belonged. This is

¹²¹ Gary Kulik, “Designing the Past: History Museum Exhibitions from Peale to the Present,” *History Museums in the United States: A Critical Assessment*, Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig, eds. (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1989), 10.

¹²² Kulik, 10.

¹²³ Madison, 12.

quite a different theory from that of contrasting colors, which merely served to make an object “sing,” visually speaking. Madison here suggested something more complex by creating an atmosphere that would add to what visitors learned from the object, as they now had a hint at the animal’s natural habitat. Madison wrote explicitly that economic circumstances were the reason the museum had not actually constructed any mock habitats for their specimens, and offered a cheaper alternative that could still add to the didactic presentation of an exhibition.

It is worth noting also that Madison, McCabe, and Ohlman represented both art and natural history museums, the two largest groups of museums in the AAM, and so the similarities in their suggestions cannot be attributed to needs of a single field. These techniques, based on observation, experiments, and some theory, were outgrowths of large-scale studies like Edward S. Robinson’s, but they did not limit themselves to the specific suggestions Robinson made. Robinson concluded, “we should like to see museum directors generally become experimental psychologists. . . . It would mean merely the acceptance of the fact that the behavior of the public is too complicated an affair to guess about while the possibilities of observation are open.”¹²⁴ Perhaps they were not acting exactly as experimental psychologists, but museum workers were eager to contribute to the conversation about improving visitors’ experience. These were not just directors, or others who were concerned with what would today be called “visitor services,” but members in a variety of museum jobs. They focused on their own collections and knowledge to determine what angle from which they could best write. Museum fatigue was not only caused by

¹²⁴ Robinson, 66.

psychological factors—seemingly endless hallways, repetitive layout, dull colors—but also physical ones like awkward cases or poorly placed labels.

The worry over museum fatigue dominates the examples given here, but AAM was providing a space in which other elements of running a museum could be discussed and developed as well. In one example, members of the New York State Historical Association wrote about their observations of visitors' reactions to a replica of a historic house from Boston recreated in Ticonderoga—visitors found the reproduced architecture delightful and educational, but were taken aback by similarly reproduced antique furniture or other objects on the interior. Julian P. and Grace W. Boyd, writing on behalf the association, elaborated on this reaction: “There was more than a lack of interest in this feeling: there was something in it akin to hostility, as if the museum administrator had in some diabolic way taken advantage of his public.”¹²⁵ The Boyds attributed this seeming inconsistency to the rising popularity of American antiques and the frequent preference by the general public for pieces with intriguing “historic, patriotic, and sentimental associations” rather than “the art of an object.”¹²⁶ Their experience is an example of how observing the public could shape exhibition decisions and techniques, and for a whole range of concerns beyond just making an easily accessible and inviting exhibit space.

¹²⁵ Julian P. and Grace W. Boyd. “Popular reactions to reproductions of interiors and furnishings.” *Museum News* 11, no. 2 (May 15, 1933): 7.

¹²⁶ Boyd and Boyd, 7.

Beyond Museums

The AAM was not alone in its encouragement of scientific methods and observation regarding visitor behavior. Commercial entities like department stores and print advertisers similarly studied the way aspects of display could be used to enhance a visitor or reader's experience. The relationship between museums and department stores in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is well-documented. John Wanamaker, founder of the Wanamaker's department store, crowed, "In museums ... most everything looks like junk even when it isn't, because there is no care or thought in the display. If women would wear their fine clothes like galleries wear their pictures, they'd be laughed at."¹²⁷ Wanamaker was famous for his luxurious stores, filled with modern art expertly arranged around the merchandise, and home to restaurants, cafés, and other perks. Wanamaker's assertion that the design of his store was superior to that of museums because museum officials took "no care or thought" in their exhibits is rather grand, but the criticism that museums were not living up to the standards of their commercial counterparts was not uncommon.

Criticism for museums came from sources other than the owners of successful department stores as well. In 1926, Forest H. Cooke wrote in *Century Magazine* that museum's galleries should be "of great beauty ... well ventilated, restful, and inviting leisure. They should contain very few objects of exhibition, and these should be so placed as not to detract from each other. There should be comfortable, movable

¹²⁷ Herbert Gibbons, *John Wanamaker* (2 vols.; New York and London: Harper & Bros., 1926), 2:81. Quoted in Neil Harris, *Cultural Excursions: Marketing Appetites and Cultural Tastes in Modern America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 65.

chairs.”¹²⁸ Cooke sought for many of the same changes those fighting museum fatigue were after, though Neil Harris argues Cooke framed it in terms of “the new standards of customer service that the stores had developed.”¹²⁹ Harris summarizes this critique as museums “projecting a civilization based on quantitative rather than qualitative criteria”—a familiar-sounding argument as had also come from within the ranks of the AAM as well.¹³⁰ While those within the museum field were likely to draw comparisons to libraries to suggest how museums could improve, those from outside the field pointed to department stores, especially for issues of visual culture and display.

In addition to principles of visual appeal and visitor services, professionalism also played a role in the work of commercial display. L. Frank Baum, now famous for writing *The Wizard of Oz*, founded the National Association of Window Trimmers, a trade association tasked with “the uplifting of mercantile decorating to the level of a profession” in 1898.¹³¹ Baum advocated for the singling out of individual eye-catching objects in window displays, rather than a crowded mass. In 1900, Baum wrote that objects should be made to “‘come alive’ as if they were figures on the stage” by virtue of how they were arranged, which calls to mind Harold Madison’s advice about invoking natural habitats, and his delight in seeing the peacock

¹²⁸ Forest H. Cooke, “Culture and Fatigue” in *Century Magazine* vol. 3 (January 1926): 295, quoted in Neil Harris, *Cultural Excursions*, 73.

¹²⁹ Harris, 73.

¹³⁰ Harris, 73.

¹³¹ *Merchants’ Record and Show Window* 21 (January 1908): 58. Quoted in William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 60.

“sing!”¹³² Baum wanted to professionalize the window display trade by encouraging designers to be more thoughtful in their displays and consider what attributes or arrangements would invite customers into a store.

As stated above, the relationship between attitudes toward display in department stores and in museums has been written about extensively, but the role of the AAM therein has not. Without the AAM, the project of museums studying visitor reactions to their own exhibitions and reporting their findings back to the field at large would not have been possible, or at least not as efficient. *Museum News* served as a trade publication in much the same way the *Dry Goods Economist* or *Merchants' Record and Show Window* did for shops.

Print advertising underwent a similar transition, as historian William Leach describes:

Before the late 1880s, visual advertising was looked down on as linked to circuses and P. T. Barnum hokum. Newspapers and magazines, in fact, offered little or no advertising, and what they did print was small-scale and with small-agate type, visually unappealing, words jammed closely together into single columns, and with scant illustration and display.¹³³

Leach taps into several parallels with museums here, the reference to P. T. Barnum being only the most obvious. His description of newspaper and magazine ads, cramped and with little rhyme or reason as to their order, recalls many complaints about museums from the same period.

Historian Roland Marchand also references the famous showman in telling the history of advertising, arguing that the trade was tarnished by “recollections of

¹³² L. Frank Baum, *The Art of Decorating Dry Goods Windows and Interiors* (Chicago, 1900), 15. Quoted in William Leach, *Land of Desire*, 60.

¹³³ Leach, 42.

carnival barkers, snake-oil salesmen, and such celebrated promoters of ballyhoo and humbug as P. T. Barnum.”¹³⁴ Barnum’s pervasiveness as a cultural touchstone aside, it is notable that the advertising industry sought to distance itself from its past in a similar way to museum leaders. Marchand argues advertisers combated the “public suspicion of their craft” with movements to professionalize and seem respectable by elevating their trade to a science in the early years of the twentieth century.¹³⁵ In 1925, Columbia psychologist Albert Poffenberger published *Psychology in Advertising*, which he introduced with this observation: “One of the conspicuous achievements of our generation has been the steady advance in the application of psychological knowledge and technique to practical problems.”¹³⁶ It is doubtful Edward S. Robinson could have agreed more. Poffenberger studied color preferences by gender and the effect of different ratios and layout of image and text on getting a reader’s attention and keeping it. He also studied the “feeling-tone” of words and color combinations by asking subjects to evaluate images or phrases. It is easy to see how Poffenberger’s work could have developed into a “social science of advertising” just as Rea had advocated for museums, with a set of established, tested standards which had been derived using scientific methods and could be used to match any situation with which an advertiser might be faced.

¹³⁴ Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 8.

¹³⁵ Marchand, 8.

¹³⁶ Albert T. Poffenberger, *Psychology in Advertising* (Chicago: A. W. Shaw and Company, 1925), iii.

From department stores to advertisements, psychology to color theory, museum professionals attempted to legitimize and streamline their daily work using scientific methods, either from highly educated academics who assisted them with psychological studies, or by adopting scientific thought about color and display that had become mainstream in the commercial arena. It was important that the standards developed from these studies also reflect the priorities of the AAM for museums generally as well—hence the focus on avoiding fatigue, increasing interest and accessibility of information, and being responsive to visitor preferences.

Conclusion

To report on the growth of institutions is to record something of social change. This, on the face of it, is a hopeful task as the social order seems in the long run to improve.¹³⁷

In 1939, the AAM published Laurence Vail Coleman's most ambitious work: *The Museum in America: A Critical Study*. Coleman began his nearly seven hundred-page tome with this optimistic maxim about institutional and social change. In *Museum in America*, Coleman attempted to condense his knowledge about all aspects of museums into a single volume, consolidating all the data the AAM had collected on them in the past three decades. Coleman examined museum history by type and region, and broke down contemporary practices and problems in the running of museums. After running through the myriad types of science museums, special concerns of university museums, effective examples of architecture, and priorities for trustees, Coleman appended a directory of all the museums in the United States. They were classified by field, governance, specialties, and geography, enabling the reader to find whatever institution he sought with efficiency. Coleman attempted to understand the museum field by following the principles the AAM upheld, including observation, experience, and exchange of ideas among peers. In the foreword, Coleman stated he was not attempting to write "a manual, but a commentary on the

¹³⁷ Laurence Vail Coleman, *The Museum in America: A Critical Study* (Washington, D.C: The American Association of Museums, 1939), 3.

condition, the strengths and weaknesses, and the limitations and opportunities of museums.”¹³⁸ Assessing museums in this way was one of the AAM’s top priorities.

Though Coleman downplayed the idea of writing a manual, the AAM moved more and more in that direction over the course of the twentieth century and Coleman was part of this movement. Retiring in 1958, Coleman served as director of the AAM for thirty-one years. His influence cannot be underestimated, as he orchestrated the proliferation of studies and other literature on museum philosophy and practice, including his own. From including longer articles in *Museum News* to commissioning stand-alone books, Coleman was committed to developing the museum field with the AAM as a guiding force. His long tenure ensured a continuing presence of the same priorities and debates the AAM tackled in its early years, and it suggests why we have so many of the same debates today.

As leaders of the AAM, Coleman included, sought to discern what made museums work and what the goals of the field should be, increased attention to standardization and a focus on practice arose in the mid-twentieth century. In 1962, the first steps were taken toward developing a system of accreditation for museums that met the AAM’s standards of professionalism, though no museums were accredited until 1970. At the time, accreditation was created to help government agencies differentiate between institutions when considering which to fund. In the context of the upheaval brought by civil rights and other social justice movements at mid century, the concept that museums could necessarily speak with authority about their subjects came under fire. From exhibits of Native American culture in natural

¹³⁸ Coleman, *Museum In America*, iii.

history museums to divisions of “primitive” artifacts and “civilized” art objects, it was clear curators and directors needed to reevaluate their assumptions about the worldview their exhibitions reinforced and the attitudes of their audiences.

This process of occurred in museums all over the world, but in the United States it is typified by the work of those advocating for the repatriation of Native American objects and human remains, and cooperation between current Native American groups and the museums that want to exhibit their culture. In the 1980s and 1990s, Native American leaders and their allies fought for a series of reforms in museum policy, culminating thus far in the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 (NAGPRA). This law required museums to assess their collections and return any objects or human remains with Native American connections that had not been rightfully acquired. NAGPRA has not solved all problems in how museums and the cultures they exhibit interact, but it instituted some bureaucracy for mediating conflict.

Critiques of museums in the late twentieth century presented a stumbling block for the AAM, coming as they did largely from people outside the field. Native American advocacy groups have not been the only ones to raise questions, as other people have challenged the treatment of class, race, and gender in traditional narratives of American history. How does one interpret the presence of slaves at Mount Vernon or Monticello, homes of two of the most revered founding fathers? The museum field has had to deal with questions like these only in the past few decades. The AAM has responded tentatively, supporting their member institutions while accepting the validity of some criticism. The result has been that the AAM has

retreated from its position as the place where new museum philosophy develops. As cited in the introduction, most of the museum theory written today comes from academics, and while some are affiliated with museums, they are in the minority. In contrast, the AAM has strengthened its support for refining museum practices. Its recommendation of museum standards and best practices has prominent placement on the AAM website. A glance at the program for the upcoming 2009 annual meeting or at the AAM's online bookstore shows the breadth of the discussion on exhibit practices, education ideas, and conservation techniques.

The tension between theory and practice has been a part of the AAM from its inception and I do not wish to suggest its members have abandoned that. When Brandeis University announced the closure of its Rose Art Museum and sale of its collection to recoup lost funds, AAM president Ford W. Bell released a statement that the AAM was "alarmed and dismayed at the decision." He continued, "By selling its art collection for cash to the highest bidder to erase a temporary deficit, Brandeis University is in fundamental violation of the public trust responsibilities it accepted the day it founded the Rose Museum."¹³⁹ The AAM continues to respond to the values and priorities of its members and to uphold high standards for museums across the country. The AAM's early years were dominated by a much smaller group of individuals representing a much smaller assemblage of institutions than the association does today, and contemporary leaders of the AAM have maintained and rejected parts of that legacy as necessary.

¹³⁹ Ford W. Bell, "AAM Press Release, Washington, DC, 1/29/2009," American Association of Museums, <http://www.aam-us.org/pressreleases.cfm?mode=list&id=153> (accessed April 10, 2009).

Coleman believed that to write the history of institutions was to chart social change, for people imbue their institutions with the priorities and values of their society. Coleman also imagined he was charting progress and improvement, what he called “a hopeful task.” Looking at its first three decades, the history of the AAM does reveal social change, both within the field and outside it. How the AAM’s members conceptualized the museum’s role in society illuminates more general values of professionalism, education, and scientific principles.

Today, the AAM holds significant power in the field and is an important advocate for museums and their employees. It has also faced challenges its founders likely could not have imagined. The current economic crisis poses great tests for museums, the Rose Art Museum being only one of the casualties. Museum leaders now must find ways to make their institutions expertly professional but still relevant, accessible and exciting but without becoming theme parks. Looking to the AAM’s past shows how these dilemmas have been navigated before, and also that they must be navigated and re-navigated constantly. The AAM’s early projects demonstrate that its members considered competing priorities with nuance. They left an organization that can continue to encourage its members to do the same—a “hopeful task” for today’s museum professionals.

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