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Issue 32–35: *What is a Museum?*

“Just because you do not take an interest in politics doesn’t mean politics won’t take an interest in you.” – Pericles

I. Imagined Communities

Museums are imaginary. They are figments and fantasies. They are cartoonish *wonder barns* of pretty objects, splattered paintings framed and unframed, errands in the wilderness of the empty human mind; pabulum for the comatose, screen-tranced, and social media-fixated commoner; a distraction to improve an afternoon of ennui. Of course, I don’t really believe all this. But some do, and that’s what led me to Tuscaloosa—a place of dueling legacies, immaculately manicured university lawns, the pachyderm topiary of “Big Al” (right)—the UAT’s mascot, the third largest football stadium in the South, and a melancholic tragedy of art and society.



The lamentable story of a distinguished and now closed museum is a tale of succumbence to its circumstances and a submission to donut shops and non-Roman gladiatorial combat as the few remaining forms of local culture. So, what about Tuscaloosa?

Before I try to answer this question and dive deeply into the complex realm of Alabama business lore, local political drama, and the vicissitudes of the late entrepreneur Jack Warner, let’s step back and consider a few things related to the whole issue of museums: how they came about, how they evolved, how they have been perceived, understood, and misunderstood, and how they have been controlled by disparate centers of power, which often have conflicting visions of not just management, but of the world itself. The nationalism scholar Benedict

Anderson, who was well-known for his thesis on the origins of *the nation* provides a simple suggestion for us. His consideration may be summed up in the very title of his most famous book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*—effectively that nations are in part brought into existence by the collective imagining of a group. That is a simplistic reduction but gives us a subtle glimpse into how we might think similarly about the existence of museums, as well as

their connections to the state—as imagined communities.

Throughout the world, even in antiquity, individuals and groups founded museums to reflect, promote, and bolster some idea. In most cases it was tied to *collecting* something, and usually that *something* was aesthetic, unique,

valuable, symbolic, or all of these things. In the Age of Exploration, such objects proliferated and were acquired by those with means or great wealth and had prominence in their societies. Thus, the emergence of the *Wunderkammer* and late Renaissance collections reflected not just the individual, but extensions of the individual, their wealth, their curiosities, their habits, their connections to commerce and the state, and the empire within which they were part or even came to represent. The colonial means of expansion and acquisitions by force, accident, or legerdemain have been inextricably linked then to collecting, demonstrating, exhibiting, and narrating. The power and importance of the social *gaze* upon these riches also became central to one’s standing in society forever after. And to this day, what remains is a legacy tied to collecting that is imbued with

power politics, gradations of representation, and questions of fairness. The museum has been *imagined* and *willed into existence* by these many forces and frames.

It is no surprise then that the word *museum* itself has a fairly, though not exclusively, uniform definition with a few particular exceptions. Among the only European languages where “museum” is derived from another root that sounds nothing like “museum” are Icelandic, Welsh, and Scottish Gaelic.

Safn in Icelandic comes from “Old Norse *safna*, a by-form of *samna*” (*to collect, assemble*), from Proto-Germanic

**samnōna* (*to gather, collect*).” In Scottish Gaelic

taigh-tasgaidh is the word used and can be broken into “house (of) investment” or “hoard house.” Even in an Indo-European language like Hindi, the root (*saṅgrah*)

of the word for museum (*saṅgrahālay*) means “collecting, compiling,” thus making the term mean “house of collecting.” Curiously, the common Chinese word (*bówùguǎn*) can be translated as “natural history pavilion.” And within Arabic-speaking cultures, the word for museum (*muthaf*) has as its root the word (*tuhfa*), which can be translated as “gift, masterpiece, artwork, or rarity,” indicating a particular sense of meaning and value.

Every few years the International Council of Museums (ICOM) has sought to revise their definition of *museum*, in order to keep up with the changing world and our evolving social perceptions. What each of these new definitions expresses is less about museums and more about individuals in decision making positions, power brokers, and the socio-political landscape of a given moment. This was most apparent in the latest round of rewrites by the ICOM, which by most accounts began as a hopeful revision of the definition of *museum* and ended up as an unwieldy statement that enflamed factions and by some accounts cost the ICOM president her job.

The ICOM was founded in 1946 and has a long history of these regular discussions to reevaluate definitions, though over the years these parameters became sprawling, clunky, and so expansive that a term like *museum* itself could simply come to mean the entire world. Suffering from postmodernity, we are situated in that position where we *know it when we see it* but *can’t actually properly define anything* because no definition is adequate. Yet, by looking at these various definitions over time, we may be better

equipped to articulate both the sophisticated visions of museums as ideas and entities *and* have a view of how societies themselves have changed in those three quarters of a century. Some of the most interesting examples are the changes made in the early 1960s, which reflect a greater awareness of the



environment and planet, when botanical gardens (above, Fort Worth Botanic Garden) and nature preserves were included as *museums*. It was a time when thinkers like Marjorie Stoneman Douglas, Rachel Carson, and Roderick Nash wrote eloquently about nature and the burgeoning environmental movements; the 1970s, when science centers and planetaria were added to the definitions, just as the Space Age was in full swing; or the ballooning and nearly all-inclusive definitions of the 1990s and early 2000s, which reflected the growth of major academic disciplines and subfields that then expanded the definition of *museum* to include regions, intangible heritage resources like biological organisms, and “digital creative activity;” and finally 2019, when issues addressing traditional power and moral responsibility of global equity became central discussion points in defining museums as society’s *moral compasses*. This most recent period has been marked by emphases on socio-economic inequities, injustices, and systemic harms suffered by peoples

on a global scale, which have led to some institutional self-reflections and adjustments.

My own approach to evaluating our question is to look at this philosophically *and* in particular, ontologically—because the question *what is a museum?* is an inquiry not into what is actually being included in these evolving definitions, per se, but more *how and why* it is being included. Yes, the contents, presentations, and narratives of museums will always be changing, but the one real constant is *that they change*—and the reason they change is because we change as people and societies. I frankly don't worry too much about any of these definitions, because they are extraneous in details—details that will always be fought over. Some details will be at the center of discussions and debates, some will be placed above others, and at the end of another round of negotiations, what is written and publicized is the newest demonstrable reflection of board members, executive directors, presidents, and curators seeking to broker power among each other and the society in which they want to make their mark. And whether we consider the Metropolitan, the Everglades, the San Diego Zoo, William Faulkner's grave (right), and a collection of Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs) all as museums is of little concern, because there will no doubt be a fight over whether they can each be designated as equal asset categories of description.



What really matters is that this is a process of reflecting society. In so many ways, a museum *is* society, a museum *is* people, a museum *is* us, no matter how we try to re-define it. Because it is our own human mirror—we reflect it and it reflects us, in a constant dialectic. Through the preservation, cultivation, exhibition, public face, and marketed narrative of institutions, we display these reflections. In this way we negotiate our assumptions about time, about the past, present, and future. And these assumptions about time are directly relevant to how we educate youth, because it is in children, adolescents, and young adults from whom the future critics and judges of our own

actions shall come, especially when it means how we steward and shepherd the balances of fairness.

Narratives around historical discourses shall run and rage forever, but what is singularly important in every generation is the recognition that museums are both physical entities *and* ideas that require constant attention. Issues of representation, negotiations and struggles of power and powerlessness, fundraising and allocations of financial resources, and politics will always course through the *exhibitional veins* of an institution. In the core of all this, of these microcosms, I would argue, is the constant negotiation over identity, recognition, and remembrance. And the idea of negotiation itself is rooted in the Latin literally meaning “not easy” or “lacking leisure,” because— and let us be frank: *dealing with people is not easy!* But that's life itself. Negotiation, ultimately, is about dealing with balance, equity, and fairness.

As a parent, I see the distillation of global affairs in the very raw and real power negotiations that express themselves in my own daughters' struggles growing up with one another and in society where *fairness* is always the key word—it's not fair “this one got such an outfit” or “that one got some play date” or “another got ice cream and I didn't.” Similarly, in the media bazaar we hear the echoes of progressive anti-billionaire mantras, wealth taxes, expanded social services, balanced by counter claims of freedom and self-reliance. We also hear about fairness in the workplace with pronouncements around shared office spaces, equal pay, and workloads. From governments to employers to individual relationships (*who's turn is it to do the dishes?*), nearly all forms of negotiation and concern come down to a matter of perceiving fairness. As for museums, the issue of fairness entails questions about the *what, how, why, and when* of representation, custodianship, stewardship, and memory. All of these are crucially important to both the relevance and future sustainability of institutions however they may be defined.

A recent example of this in Bridwell’s collections is that of the Egyptian mummy from the A.V. Lane Collection, long on exhibit at the Dallas Museum of Art (DMA). The collection itself (examples below) is older than Bridwell and was assembled by Dr. Alvin Valentine Lane (1860-1938), who gave



the artifacts to SMU between 1917 and 1926, after which the university established and opened as the Lane Museum. Now a century later, it is no longer a museum as such and the Egyptological contents are mostly on display at the DMA. The current discussions for Bridwell and SMU Art History faculty have been around representation, curation, and display of the mummy itself. In recent years, a common deliberation has concerned the ethical practices around displaying human remains, especially of non-Western persons in European or American institutions—the presumption being that



colonial or postcolonial powers should not control the narratives or bodies of other people (cf. the *decolonization* movement). In the case of the Bridwell mummy, the DMA has the work on display with the mummy’s feet exposed for patron viewing. At the very time we had been having discussions about the implications of this, I happened to be in the DMA and ran into a North African couple from Libya, whom I then spoke to about this very issue. They spoke favorably of the exhibit and showing the body and its feet. Yet, even this does not

provide the adequate roadmap for how to navigate the difficult terrain of representation, cultural sensitivity, and displays rooted in postcolonial legacies. Even if those tourists have more of a physical and even perhaps genetic connection to the chthonic identity of that mummy than any North American curator, they are but one voice; and there may be far more voices who would disagree with their positions.

As we come to recognize museums as reflections of *us* and *society*, the question becomes “which us?” and “which society?” And who is really telling which story and from what angle? That is what is imperative to how any museum or institution must work, or else we are liable to face far more challenges ahead. The expansive spectrum of dormant to vibrant museums will all be under this microscope, as we look to discern and evaluate narratives into the 21st century (below left: a quiet Rock School Museum, Mineral Wells, TX; below right: a bustling Mint Museum, Charlotte, NC).

II. A Common Good?

With this in mind, another necessary point to be aware of is the existence of markedly dichotomous visions among different stakeholders, which seem often, though not always, to divide roughly along political lines. That vision is one which reflects how we come to understand ourselves, our spaces, and the integrity of defining ourselves in those very spaces. Simply put, there are what I would call the *sentimentalists* and the *futurists*. This discernable fissure plays out in many unique ways but can be boiled down to those who look backward in history with admiration, respect, honor, and pride (the *sentimentalists*), in contrast to those who look at the past with suspicion, error, and contempt (the *futurists*) and find the outlay of today’s problems rooted in the fault of our collective ancestors. For this latter group, the future is what lies ahead and must be of most concern, while for the former, the future is uncertain, problematic, and corrupting a past of glory with disrespect and



an anything goes attitude. Readers may immediately make the connection to the debates around statues and monuments. It is somewhat difficult to articulate these differences and contrasting visions, because most attempts seem to flounder in accusatory lambastes or devolve into a cacophony that alienates us all into compartmentalized pods of isolation and self-centeredness. For the most part, our own visions of the world, how we self-identify as either sentimentalist or futurist will determine how we read a statue, envision a special collections library, or interpret a museum: that they must be preserved lest we forget any part of the past *or* that they need to be demolished actually *and* metaphorically and rebuilt in order to alleviate the structural and inherent sins of our world and ancestors—indeed, sounding surprisingly Calvinistic in its hamartiological purging! The empathic connections to stone, paper, and image as conveyers of history clash with the sympathies and righteous declarations for justice in the form of fairness—because everyone will define what is fair in their own way, never agreeing on much of anything. And as much as we may presume all people are for *a common good*, it's either too diffuse to determine what that common good is *or* we no longer believe there actually *is* a common good—like the confounding management of COVID-19 and the political fallout and cacophony over mask mandates and vaccine rollouts. (Above: the Illinois Monument at Vicksburg National Military Park—a century old vision of *a common good* through memorializing in stone).



The noted economist Mancur Olson, Jr. once posited in his 1965 book *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups* that despite the shared benefits of the common good, our individual interests and demands for self-centered desires will most often undermine and potentially negate that common good. Our myopias will lead

us and our solipsism will doom us, no matter what side of this we are on. The paradox of democracy is that it is meant to represent the common good so that the majority does not exploit the few, but in reality, according to Olson, the opposite is just as easy to occur, where the majority is exploited and the common good is not achieved.

This is where the museum or cultural institution as *common good* comes into focus. Some estimates have the United States government (local to federal) spending about \$1.39B (2019) on the arts, while

Germany spent close to \$12B in the same period—nearly ten times as much. Thus, within our American context, our understanding of *common good* needs to face the real facts about sustainability, maintenance, and acquisitions—and the money question is *the* question, perhaps even more than our principal inquiry: *what is a museum?* The common good idea per capita does not translate highly in the arts for government contributions, but instead echoes our country's financial system of capital rewards—we spend

around \$4.19 a person per year on the arts. In contrast, Americans gave over \$410B in donations to various charities, including nearly \$21B to “arts, culture, and humanities”—or roughly \$63 a person.

The uneasy tango of cultural institutions and their funding is central to the entire idea of a museum. Anyone who goes into museum work must be inducted into the fine arts of what has been called the *Charity-Industrial Complex*. Many museums do not have the deep pockets for purchasing works that are now prohibitively expensive and are acquired by a select few (e.g. *Salvator Mundi* that sold for \$450M in 2017 to the Saudi Crown Prince). The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Financial Report that same year had its *total* operating expenses at \$305M—of which \$232.2M came from philanthropy, dues, and the U.S. government. While there is a notion of *a common good*, it is tied to the antique tradition of donors. Even as the word

donor itself comes from the Latin root meaning *to give*, it is a word embodied by its relationship to other things, which have implicit and tacit understandings. You cannot *give* something unless there is a *recipient* of that action. And while many such gifts come from the love and kindness residing in the wellsprings of a person’s heart, there are always a variety of reasons—even for the anonymous donor—why people give. Gratitude, appreciation, recognition, distinction, tax breaks, and a common good. But to give *on any level* is an exercise in power and where there is power there will be questions of balance, equity, and fairness soon to follow. This is where the role of the museum becomes a space of negotiation, but also a lesson in ethics, because there are extents to which an institution may go to accommodate the wishes of those who wield measures of control; and there are extents *at* which the institution’s own experts and leadership must assume responsibility and demonstrate best practices that do not compromise the institution’s integrity and ethical standards.

The role of donor is just one aspect of money and finance, though, because those who oversee the daily, monthly, quarterly, and yearly fiscal needs of an institution will always look at the bottom line, but only sometimes consider *a common good*. If an institution is losing money, a finance committee and CFO will force cuts, which are often undesirable in the eyes of the staff, public, or patrons. And sometimes, the salves to money problems are popularizing ideas that are fringe to the customary arts or traditional museums—as in the case of the Indianapolis Museum of Art’s controversial conversion to *Nenfields* and all of its glittering trappings, multi-age activities, and interactive spaces; or the Columbus (Ohio) Museum of Art’s Lego exhibition (above).



The idea of sustainability and survival go hand-in-hand with relevance, because if we continue to operate in a fashion that is no longer relevant, or is

not adaptable, or does not keep pace with current trends and needs, our institutions will suffer incalculable losses, the battle lines will be drawn, and the doomsayers will demolish these museums—think what could have happened to the Detroit Institute of Arts, after an Emergency Manager was installed in 2013, and it was suggested that the city auction off its world-class collections. Cultural heritage and capital often fall victim to the realities of debt and financial woes, especially when creative solutions are not thought of quickly. This is another reason why such institutions need to have solid and demonstrable arguments to secure their futures and legacies.

The idea of a common good may be elusive, but we know that most people like to think that their communities have something to offer in the way of arts and culture—even if that means sports. Within the walls of museums, battles continue about the acquisition of collections, preservation of objects, delegation of responsibilities, and curation of materials. Every place is unique and has its own

structural and institutional challenges, but these are best thought of as opportunities for growth and development. As human beings, we all have our limits and these are exercised through our work and adaptability. Recognizing value in each of our institutions comes with both pride and sarcasm, because our

human nature is not simply to accept, but to negotiate what we think is right, and this expresses itself in a spectrum of emotions and criticisms. Even among my suggested categories of the *sentimentalists* and *futurists*, there are equal opportunity pronouncements about our institutions from “we need to preserve everything!” to “throw away all this old crap!” The common good, then, has its own limits, because we hit our limits around what can be preserved, acknowledged, recognized, and seen as important. The next frontier then is value itself—our approach

to and understanding of what constitutes value, what has value, and what does not. This is the challenge of axiology—or the study of value. And as human beings, we assign gradations of value to everything, which is, effectively, both the problem *and* solution.

III. Axiology: Being, Time, and Nothingness

One of the most notorious works that demonstrates foundational differences in values *and* is specifically directed at museums, cultural institutions, and libraries is Nicholson Baker's controversial and vituperative work *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper* published in 2001 by Random House. In short, Baker places value on the physical objects in our world that comprise our collective documented histories, and criticizes the library profession, among others, for destroying this physical heritage in exchange for non-physical surrogates (microforms, films, and later digital replicas). Whether or not you buy what he says, his arguments are based in a valuation of the physical, temporal, and meaningful objects that populate all portions of our lives and our institutions.

On the most philosophical level the struggle here is the perpetual tension between ourselves and time—but also, to conflate Heidegger and Sartre, the very real potential of negation in our lives and a future ontological nothingness. Even if not a single librarian, or curator, or museum official *thinks* in these terms, there is something very real about how we view ourselves in relationship to the objects of our workplaces *or* to objects that may comport meanings in our world. Baker believed there was in fact inherent, intrinsic, and important value in every single historical object, while his adversaries and detractors in cultural institutions, whom he presumed *should have been protecting* all physical



objects like helpless newborns, were tossing those newborns into dumpsters and only keeping their traces, their content, their technologized shadows, if that at all. The extreme opposite case might be seen in the extraordinary work done by David Karpeles and the extensive network of his namesake Manuscript Library Museums in over a dozen cities. Karpeles alone has amassed the world's largest private manuscript collection with more than a million written items and has demonstrated in one man the distinction between independent, autocephalous museums and the majority dominated by communities, boards, and donors. With Karpeles and his museums, just as with local or national museums, we see that an understanding of values is the focal point. And someone like Nicholson Baker demonstrates that these values are disparate, contested, and fractious.

The conflicting values in these cases are very real and happen in most institutions. Libraries still discard books, museums and historical societies

still sell, auction, or give away materials and artifacts if they need money, have duplicates, or seek to develop donor relations. And in an increasingly digital world with avatars and surrogate options that make physical specimens of paper, ink, wood, metal, or ceramics look better online, we have an

uphill battle to fight. Furthermore, the complexities of a pandemic and technological ease have moved patron behaviors toward self-directed, on-demand, any-time options for viewing their cultural spaces or institutions. But this should not be the death knell of museums, instead it should be the opportunity for adaptation, reform, and greater relevance. The focus must be on *value* itself and what that means to constituent groups.

Having traveled all over the world and visited scores, if not hundreds, of museums in my life, I

have often taken notes and observed the intricacies of special exhibits, patron interaction layouts, space designs, and the objects on display themselves.

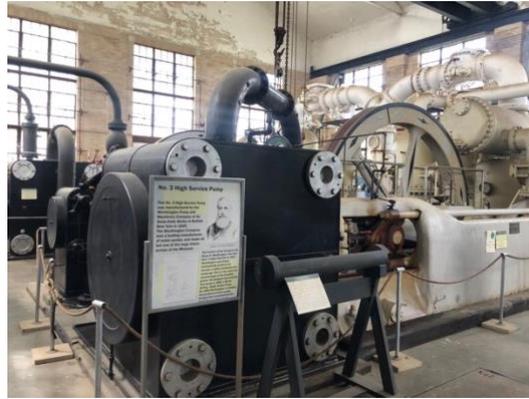
Art museums are often my favorite, because of how they represent a wide variety of human expressions in the most aesthetic and varied ways. I am moved by colors and compositions and the visual encounter similar to the way that certain music affects me. I usually come away with a profound sense of joy and inspiration. I also

very much enjoy the distinct and peculiar museums which reflect the particular sensibilities of their creators—those local museums, private museums, pet-project museums, roadside homes or gardens turned into museums like the Hole-In-The-Rock Home on Highway 191 near Moab, Utah; the



Chandor Gardens in Weatherford, Texas (p. 7); the Platen Press Museum in Zion, Illinois; the Marlene Yu Museum (p. 9) and the Water Works Museum and McNeil Street Pumping Station, both in Shreveport, Louisiana (above and below); even the exhibit of moonshine memoirist “Popcorn” Sutton at Binion’s Roadhouse and Saloon in Hendersonville, NC (left) is some kind of micro-museum. Each of these possesses an essence of the individuals or communities who created them, their ideologies, their spirit and reflection of a particular age, which may be anything from elegiac and quirky to profound.

There are many other distinct and unusual institutions worth mentioning here: the City Museum in St. Louis; the Mary Kay Museum in Dallas; the Museum of Bad Art in Somerville, MA; the Museum of



Nothing and No Show Museum displaying “invisible art works” in Zurich; the Johnny Cash Museum in Nashville (below right); the Dog Collar

Museum in Kent, England; the Bata Shoe Museum in Toronto; the Museum of Toilets in New Delhi, India; and perhaps the most unorthodox: the Icelandic Phallogical Museum in Reykjavik. Various Flight and Aeronautics museums (like the Chenault Museum in Monroe, LA), presidential libraries and museums (Andrew Jackson’s

Hermitage, p. 10), and natural history museums are also among some remarkable places to visit.

In all of these places, the sense of value is tempered with our relationship to and with time. Each

museum space and its contents afford us the opportunity to relate to the past in the way that it is imagined and preserved, and in some cases restored, by its interlocutors and curators. In each space, the founders, oversight boards, staff, and local communities put value on the contents of their museums, reflecting their own identities in relation to their own understanding of the past and how they want to preserve that for the future.



The question of value must also be asked not just of the museum’s leadership, but of those who come. We assume that museums *are* something, *mean* something, and *convey* something. But those assumptions are different for every person, every visitor. The encounter and interaction of the visitor is one of great importance, because without an audience, per se, what is a museum? If we are to recognize museums as

reflections of ourselves and our societies, we actually *need society* to be present, a willing partner in the experiment and enterprise of museum making. So, what do we actually get out of the museum experience? And what might that mean in the context of all kinds of institutions?

Entering museums, walking through museums, sensing the full holistic and sensory experience viscerally in museums, and then leaving museums—the feelings and thoughts that linger once you’ve left that museum—these are all part of the entire experience we need to reflect on. What do we get out of seeing some old piece of fabric that belonged to a famous person in a museum, or an object that existed in some location at some important date? Do we come away with some new sense of understanding, or something that changes our perceptions, opinions, or even ourselves as human beings? Or does nothing happen? Do we



pass by objects and exhibits with blasé attitudes to expel the time, bored actors looking for eye candy? Presumably, we seek always to learn,

to grow, to evolve, to become better human beings. The Carter Presidential Center in Atlanta, GA has one of the most promising and humane missions of any museum I have come across, a reflection of the former president himself—the key line being: *[the Center] is guided by a fundamental commitment to human rights and the alleviation of human suffering.* Shouldn’t that be all missions in our world—to value human life and alleviate human suffering? Indeed, this reminds me of comments made by someone who once said “why should anyone care if there’s a \$5-million-dollar object in a museum, when people are suffering in the world?” They aren’t mutually exclusive, though selling off art or culture will, in my estimation, actually *increase* and *amplify* human suffering, because art and culture are part of the balm of human suffering.

Yet, we know that not all museums will have the same mission as the Carter Center. They are object-centered, and when objects are a focus, we

have to construct narratives about those objects as curators, but also articulate our reactions as visitors.



If I go into a museum and I see things that have almost no relevance, meaning, or interest to me, I move on, quickly forgetting them. Do I care about old railroad spikes, embossed leather satchels, or a plethora of pedestrian toy models? Probably not. The values of the curators do not always meet the values of the visitor, and that’s fine. That will always happen. Yet, there is something more deeply telling in some of these examples and exhibits, which has to do with our earlier discussions on worldviews and the divisions between *sentimentalists* and *futurists*—and that is how our assumptions about exhibits often play out implicitly. What is *not said* or *written* is sometimes more powerful than what *is said* or *written*. Take for example the idea of pioneer museums or frontier exhibits and what I call the *pioneer’s first nail* theory.

Most of us have likely come upon one of these local museums—the first homestead in Fredericksburg, TX, for example, or first cabin in Arkansas (the Jacob Wolf House in Baxter County). We see the ramshackle structures, the rough-hewn boards, the clay and sand chinking, and the wavy panes of antique glass windows. Somewhere there’s a piece of wood, some nail pounded into it—the remaining original wall or first piece of the cabin. The significance of these remnants has different meanings. At first glance, they are merely pieces of wood, and to many of us they are inert, undefined, inanimate fixtures of metal and hardened cellulose. But because of *time*, because of *place*, and because of that uncanny mixture within the greater state, we are somehow compelled to attach meaning even as visitors to these spots. Admittedly, I usually pass these places with mild curiosity, and perceive their historicity and meaning with vague interest, and quickly consign that experience to the dustbin of my mind—soon forgotten. Yet, there is something significant about those nails and those wooden boards and that cabin. We are meant to project the

simplicity, smallness, and rustic nascence of a place onto the contrasting global projection of power, dominance, and greatness of this nation, as an exercise in glorification.

Making the connection between this modest, ancient nail that was hammered into a piece of wood by some wholesome, hardscrabble, persevering pioneers, and the behemoth of the modern state is an expression of the temporal indebtedness we are somehow meant to acknowledge. Whether we accept it is another story. For some—like the *sentimentalists*—we must somehow be appreciative of this experience because we have to

recognize the simplicity in the origins of our past and how that simple act of hammering a nail into the board or the piece of wood has led to the glorious expansive wealth of our American experiment. To deny this then may be seen as apathetic, maybe even unpatriotic to some. And for others, we must recognize, the contrast is not for a glorious nation, but a problematic empire that subjugated human beings and brought pain, suffering, and moral decrepitude upon us all. These differences in values are expressions of politics and power. And as the Greek philosopher Pericles once said: “just because you do not take an interest in politics doesn’t mean politics won’t take an interest in you.” We are dualists after all, because for most of us, we see this yes/no, good/bad, admiration/disdain duality, which boils over into the political; a particularity of opposites is far easier to understand and embrace than the nuances of messy history that impels us to feel uncomfortable.



IV. Tradition in Tuscaloosa

This finally brings us to Tuscaloosa and the tragedy of a man with a passion for fine art, who saw his legacy in the cultural development of Tuscaloosa’s former art museum disappear in the final years of his life. I had been driving back from Lake

Junaluska, NC, where I had been at the final gathering and transfer ceremony of the World Methodist Museum, which had closed just a few months earlier, and was preparing to send its collections to SMU. Driving through Atlanta and then onto Birmingham, I’d considered stopping at what appeared to be an exceptionally fine art museum in Tuscaloosa, but when I did a little more research, I’d come up with another story altogether. It was a story that intrigued and perplexed me, because this remarkable gem of artistic culture was no longer open—and it wasn’t because of the pandemic, but because of money, worldviews, and conflicts in values.

Tuscaloosa is a lovely small city, which has some very beautiful landmarks. The university is remarkably expansive and well-manicured. The topiary and statue of UA mascot “Big Al” stand in prominent spots around the campus. The stadium is gargantuan and the day I was there the authorities had already blocked off dozens of side streets hours before the game was to start. I drove around the sprawling grounds and parts of the city to find that the art museum was actually closed in 2018, but that the city’s main museum attraction appeared to be the Paul W. Bryant Museum—a museum dedicated to the University of Alabama’s football team, and specifically its longtime and acclaimed coach Paul William “Bear” Bryant (1913-1983). Opened in 1988, the museum is an exponent of Bryant’s legacy



and Alabama’s seminal role in American collegiate football. The size of the museum is similar to a large mechanic’s garage and can be toured in fifteen minutes—depending on how interested you are. Remarkably, this small museum, which is likely

similar in size to the U.S. President James K. Polk’s modest museum (p. 10) in Charlotte, NC, saw record daily attendance on a game day—April 21, 2007—which hit 4,367 unique visitors. That’s more than an average day at the Guggenheim in NYC, and a fraction of the latter’s size.

This *Valballa* of sorts was a pilgrimage site. It held relics and tokens of yesteryears, film footage of press conferences, enlarged facsimiles of Bryant’s



signature and inspirational quotes stenciled onto oversized wall fixtures. His office (above) was reconstructed in all the glory of its 1960s furniture down to the very notepads, telephone, and pencils on his desk. The remarkable success of all of this, of Bryant, and of Alabama and its football, is heralded in this museum. And though I may have been surprised that a football museum as such not only existed in Tuscaloosa, but still thrives, while a once equally remarkable and globally recognized American fine art collection had vanished, my reflections upon this distinction and contrast are complex and torn about the very issues we’ve raised throughout this piece: values, politics, money, the individual, and community. The first obvious distinction between these museums has to do with the role of each institution’s theme and contents. Both were the result of two exceptional men, who did remarkable things in their lives. Yet, for Warner, it was a passion of his own, his self-directed goal and mission to acquire, collect, and accumulate one of the world’s greatest private art collections, for which he was recognized by the world’s top arts organizations and for whom he built to share with his community; as for Bryant, the museum was built *to honor him* and his

accomplishments, both of which are inextricably linked to football, and specifically Alabama football. The core of culture in much of this country, and much of the world, is sports—in the sense of *culture* meaning *that which makes us grow*. Perhaps that’s a stretch for some, but collegiate football as culture is something that focuses on a collective, on a legacy and a future that is embodied in local and regional identities. And Bryant was part of building that massive structure of group identity. The contrast here is stark, and with Warner’s individual successes in art collecting would eventually come a legacy that was tied to nothing collective, except perhaps a vague expectation that his heirs might share in his dreams or his community would rally to support the continuation of his museum, neither of which came true.

Jack Warner’s museum (below: former location in Tuscaloosa) and its collections capitulated to a host of circumstantial factors, including his advanced age, corporate dynamics and communications, and tax loopholes on assets like fine art that the government made available after the 2008 financial crisis. Subsequent accounts of the discreet and confidential sell-off describe the 94-year-old collector as slumped



over in his chair, quietly mourning his life’s work being dispersed. The prized possessions of the collection were works by Thomas Cole and Asher Durand, which are believed to have been sold for tens of millions of dollars. But there is much more to this story, which the public will most likely never know. Even an article from the New York Times back on May 29, 1978 hints at an internal family conflict over the use and allocation of funds, especially toward art, which paints Warner in contrasting terms. The lesson here, and the lesson about museums and collecting, is that it can never really be done alone. Even the wealthiest individuals require networks and communities to succeed, and trust in others to build a legacy. *It takes a village* is no throwaway phrase. It is an imperative.

Many things came together in Tuscaloosa—the ideas and visions of museums; the disparate, but also shared values of different kinds of people; and the role of money, donors, and corporate visions. And yet, two unique museums had two very different outcomes. When we noted earlier the distinctions between the *sentimentalists* and the *futurists*, the idea was that there were both overlapping and competing visions of the world that would each conclude in either the celebration or demise of museum culture. In some ways, this played out in Tuscaloosa, as we’ve seen here. But did anyone *win*? And was there even a contest to speak of?

The vision of the Warner art museum was rooted in something that was future oriented, even while it celebrated the past—but it was a past in something perceived as static (“traditional art”). And it met its end in the hands of the fiscal gremlins; there was no perceived *common good*, because there was no constructed community. In contrast, the *sentimentalists*, who revere Bryant, recreate his office, and place him high on the pedestal of lauds and historic praise all deal in the arts of so-called “great men” histories. “Great men” histories are the target practice for the *futurists*, who often seethe at the notion that “individuals” have power, especially those who benefited from privilege, wealth, and society. “Great men” (and the corollary museum conundrum of the “portraiture problem” or as Rachel Maddow derisively calls them “the dude walls,” where abundant paintings of all-white men populate clubs, university dining halls, and church offices) are seen as the problem and, therefore must be denuded and emasculated in favor of more communal inclusivity. Even if Bryant was a “great man,” he also fostered a community. So, in some ways, the museum bearing his name succeeded because it married the individual “great man” to a communal legacy that was future oriented. Warner did not.

My offering of the dichotomous spirits distilled in the *sentimentalist* and *futurist* are ultimately artificial. As human beings we cannot be fully compartmentalized, labeled, and reduced to such categories unilaterally, at least most of us don’t wish to be. Instead, these characterizations reflect

tendencies that I have seen over the years, but do not demand by fiat any such absolute delineation of the museum world. However, divisions remain and often seem to grow and become more contentious. History, by its nature, is that way—a battle for ideas, representation, equity, and fairness. And how we show or play that history out for our children and generations to come will be part of the challenge we pose ourselves.

I have assumed a lot in this essay. I recognize many of these points are debatable, but I am willing to take that risk, because I hope that these questions, distinctions, and assertions can generate a discussion about the real meanings behind the idea of a museum.

What is a Museum, then? It is not simply a building or an exhibit, nor a place to learn or to educate, *per se*—though, these are ancillary exigencies and ontologies; no, a Museum, in truth *is us*. We are Museums, and they are us. Museums are the extensions and truth tellers of our own morbidity, the battlegrounds of cultural space, the fossilization of our spirits. They represent our fight toward death and beyond, where we may attain fairness and equity even long after we cease to exist; and the imperative *not to forget* that we somehow once existed and mattered. Museums then are akin to our temporal and physical gods, because like religion, museums seem to be the refuge of our last resort—the place we want our ideas, beliefs, and legacies to endure into eternity.

Pax vobiscum! ~ AJE

Anthony J. Elia, Director and J.S. Bridwell Foundation Endowed Librarian

aelia@smu.edu



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