

## Beyond Management: Making Museums Matter

If somebody -- one of those hypothetical Martians visitors, for example, that almost invariably turn up in keynote addresses like this -- were to ask which one of us was the worthiest person in this room, most of us would unhesitatingly dismiss the question as nonsensical. Alternately, we might respond that we were **each** worthy, and moreover worthy in the same degree -- not on some comparative scale. From at least the Renaissance onward, the notion that all human beings are created essentially equal, that every human being has an intrinsic worth, an inherent and basic dignity, has increasingly established itself as one of the foundations of our humanist tradition -- as the very cornerstone, in fact, of our civil rights and our fundamental political freedoms.

But what, though, if our hypothetical Martian visitor were to ask a different question? What if she were to ask instead about the worthiness of the museums from which those in this room have come? What if she wanted to know which of **those** was the worthiest? Could we answer **that** question as well in such an unhesitating and unanimous way? My guess is: not. My guess is we would have to tell her something like this:

First: That individuals and institutions, in terms of intrinsic worth, are in no way analogous. Unlike individuals, institutions -- and that includes museums -- **have** no inherent worth or dignity. No matter how venerable, noble or encrusted with tradition any particular museum may be, at bottom it is still nothing more than a human fabrication, an organizational contrivance through which some group or other hopes to achieve some short or long-term objective. Whatever worthiness a museum may ultimately have derives from what it does, not from what it is.

Second: Given that museums truly do differ substantially from one another in what they accomplish -- not only in the magnitude of what they are seeking to do but also in the degree to which they may or may not be successful in that effort -- the likelihood that all museums might be of equal worth is simply nil. Bitter as that admission may be to those of a more collegial temperament, the reality is that -- when judged in terms of what they do -- some museums may be worthier than others, and some museums may not be worthy at all. And, finally

Third: That being said, the awkward fact still remains that, for a variety of reasons, the museum field has never really agreed -- or, at least until recently, has scarcely even ever sought to agree -- on some standard by which the relative worthiness or merit or excellence of its constituent member institution might be measured.

In the hope of providing some better answer to our Martian visitor, what I want to propose this morning is a framework within which we might at least begin to formulate such a standard. In doing so, I will ask you to accept a pair of interdependent concepts that may perhaps be more familiar with respect to political science or moral philosophy than in the context of museums. Those are the concepts of "ends" and "means". "Ends" will be used to describe those positive differences in -- those ultimate impacts on -- the lives of its community and the community's members that a museum is deliberately trying to bring about through its activities. "Ends" are the objectives for the sake of which it does everything else that it does. In tandem with that definition, "means" will then refer to everything else -- all of the money, staff, collections and other things that a museum has to have; all of the exhibitions, scholarship, conservation and other things that it has to do -- in order to achieve its ends.

Ultimately to be argued is that the comparative worthiness of any museum must be determined, first, by reference to the particular ends it seeks to accomplish, not to the means it employs toward those ends, and, second, that such a determination must take into account **both** the significance of those particular ends **and** the museum's relative success in their achievement.

From the very outset, though, we encounter a complication. As any number of commentators have pointed out, one of the distinguishing characteristics of the past century has been the enormous emphasis given to the improvement and development of means -- technical means in particular -- and the relatively scant attention paid to ends. This neglect of ends has had several consequences. In some cases -- particularly those of so-called "technological determinism" -- ends seem to have evaporated entirely; provided with a stream of remarkable new gadgets and other playtoys, people find themselves doing things for no better reason than that they can. In other cases, we find instances in which people are pursuing means with such single-minded vigor that they eventually come to confuse those means with ends.

The museum field has not been immune from this confusion. All too frequently, those called upon to make judgements about museums -- not only funders, donors, critics and others outside the field, but sometimes those actually within the field as well -- have failed to concentrate on what ultimately matters -- ends -- and focused their attention instead on means. Four instances of that confusion with respect to museums seem to me worth special attention: (1) when a museum's worthiness is judged primarily by the magnitude of the resources within its control; (2) when a museum's worthiness is judged primarily by the depth and sincerity of the charitable impulses behind its establishment and operation; (3) when a museum's worthiness is judged primarily through an evaluation of its public programming; and (4) lastly, but perhaps most insidiously, when a museum's worthiness is judged primarily by the quality of its management.

Before turning to those four instances, though, let me deal quickly with a fifth: the notion that simply the maintenance of a museum's institutional continuity -- in short, its survival -- is in and of itself an end, i.e., an appropriate institutional goal. Such a notion might only be plausible if you were also to believe -- which I doubt that most of you do -- that museums really **are** inherently valuable institutions, that a world with one more museum in it -- no matter how

threadbare, dilapidated and dormant that one more museum might be -- would be per se a richer and better world than a world without that one more museum.

From an opposing point-of-view -- the point-of-view, for example, that undergirds this morning's argument that the worth of a museum lies not in its nature but in its accomplishments - the mere maintenance on institutional life-support of an otherwise comatose institution is in no sense a public service. Worse, it may well be a public **dis**service -- a waste of scarce public resources. And yet...more than a few of us here have encountered that very situation in which -- desperate to make ends meet or to overcome an accumulated deficit -- a museum has bit-by-bit drifted away from its original objectives in order to pursue one short-term revenue-producing project after another. Invariably, these projects are justified in the name of survival, notwithstanding that the institution which finally survives may -- as a museum -- have long since lost anything worth preserving.

In my own case, one memorable episode involved a museum that, through no fault of its own, had fallen on truly hard times. It was situated in a one-employer town from which the one employer had long since relocated. Now, the townspeople -- they made up most of the attendance -- were also moving away. No relief was in sight. The Museum's Board was resolute, though. No matter what -- if they had to close down its programs, lock the galleries, fire the staff, even sell off chunks of the collection -- it was determined that the museum survive. At one meeting I attended, a Trustee solemnly argued that this was precisely what it meant to have a fiduciary duty: to see to it that the institution was preserved. Wholly lost from sight -- and this refrain will be repeated as we examine each of these instances in which means have been confused with ends -- was that survival was indeed a necessary precondition to making the museum worthwhile, but that survival in and of itself was not enough. Unless the survival plan also contemplated that the museum could one day be restored to usefulness, at bottom its survival was pointless.

Moving along, then, the first instance in which means are frequently confused with ends concerns institutional resources. In its crudest form, this misunderstanding simply equates more with better. Consider the case of the Alpha and Beta Museums. The Alpha Museum has a highly credentialed staff, a splendid collection, a solid and elegant building, an ample endowment, a superb library, a devoted Board of Trustees and an appreciative and generous community. The Beta Museum has less of each. By any "more-is-better" reckoning, the Alpha Museum would certainly have to be considered the "better" of the two. By ignoring ends, though, and concentrating wholly instead on means, what such a reckoning might miss is that the Beta Museum not only has more ambitious goals than does the Alpha Museum but that it also has a consistently better record in meeting those goals. Measured by ends, the Beta Museum might well be thought the worthier institution.

Confusion with respect to fiscal resources is particularly widespread. A number of factors contribute to this. In some instances, it may be attributable to a failure -- especially among Board members and outside donors -- fully to understand the differences between business organizations in which money is an end and not-for-profit ones in which it is only a means. Compounding that failure may also be the current vogue for discussing not-for-profit

organizational strategies in such borrowed corporate terms as "business plans," "market penetration" and "profit centers". In both instances, better mentoring might ease the problem.

Also contributing to this confusion may be the fact that in museums -- as in all large organizations -- systems of internal planning and control are almost inevitably expressed in fiscal terms. As a practical matter, no other language is readily available. Notwithstanding that the various alternatives among which a museum's management might routinely have to make choices -- whether to use a particular space, for example, for a loan exhibition, for an exhibition drawn from the permanent collection, or for a children's workshop -- may all be program decisions, there will almost invariably be some intermediate stage where those alternatives appear instead as potential budget items with dollar signs attached.

As Professor Robert N. Anthony of the Harvard Business School has pointed out in this regard, "[m]oney is the only common denominator by means of which the heterogeneous elements of outputs and inputs (e.g., hours of labor, type of labor, quantity and quality of material, amount and kind of product produced) can be combined and compared...The only way of relating all these elements for the purpose of selecting the best alternative is to reduce them to financial terms."<sup>1</sup> What causes confusion here is when the medium is mistaken for the message, when this transient use of fiscal terms for planning purposes is somehow mistaken as a reflection of the museum's ultimate objectives.

A fourth and final source of this confusion between fiscal means and institutional ends may conceivably lie in our mutual failure to develop a more adequate set of non-quantitative measures by which to describe how well or poorly our individual museums are performing during any given time period. If those of us within museums who are most familiar with their aspirations and accomplishments continue to fail -- as we have largely failed to date -- to find ways in which to communicate those, is it any wonder that others, our Trustees or regulators or funders, should fall back instead on other criteria? If we are no longer content to have our work judged by such mechanical and means-oriented performance indicators as annual attendance, variance from budget projections or success in annual and other fund-raising, then it ought be incumbent on us in the field to provide some alternative set of measures, some set of measures that would be responsive to our institutional ends, not just to our institutional means.

Essential as a corrective is that all those connected with the museum enterprise understand that -- no matter in how "business-like" a fashion a museum may legitimately be called upon to operate -- it is still not a business, and to produce a positive financial outcome is not its goal. To repeat: in a museum, money is not an end in itself -- it is only a means. Like survival, it may be an essential means -- a necessary condition -- but also, and again like survival, in and of itself it is not sufficient to provide the museum with value. That must come from elsewhere.

Museum collections can also be a source of confusion. Where this confusion most typically surfaces is in the curatorial mindset that envisions those collections as ends in

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<sup>1</sup>. Robert N. Anthony, Planning and Control Systems: A Framework for Analysis (Boston: Division of Research, Graduate School of Business Administration, Harvard University, 1965), 41-42.

themselves and not as means to be employed for some larger institutional end. Where these attitudes -- collections as ends and collections as means -- most frequently come into conflict is over decisions to accession or deaccession particular objects.

The "collection as end" attitude may manifest itself in a curator's desire to shape the collection in pleasing ways, to give it a certain balance and harmony, as if the collection itself was an organic entity, itself the ultimate object to be contemplated. The "collection as means" attitude, by contrast, tends to manifest itself in questions about the degree to which any particular object may or may not be of future use in carrying out the museum's program. Except with respect to those institutions that conceive their missions to be primarily archival, the "collection as means" attitude certainly seems more consistent with a museum's public service role. A well-rounded collection may be desirable, but unless it is also a well-used collection it would no more be an indication of institutional worthiness than would be a well-fattened endowment or a splendid new building.

A second source of confusion between ends and means comes from the fact that so many museums -- at least in the Anglo-American sphere -- have had their origins in the charitable sector. Remnants of those charitable beginnings -- an occasional odor of sanctity here, a faint whiff of piety there -- still linger in their galleries. Consider, for example, some of the curiously misleading language that we employ in discussing museums. To begin with, the word "charitable" is itself problematic. Notwithstanding that in its technical legal sense it can embrace an enormous range of publicly beneficial activities including the advancement of education or science and the maintenance of public buildings, its more popular everyday use is a good deal narrower. Generally it pertains specifically to generosity -- a generosity that is often religiously inspired or even religiously mandated -- toward the underprivileged, the indigent, the helpless and the distressed. It means giving alms. Whether or not that's what museums were ever about, it's clearly not what they're about today.

Two other words often used to describe museums and museum-like organizations can be similarly problematic: "benevolent" and "philanthropic". "Benevolent" -- translated from the Latin -- literally means well-wishing, means to have a desire to do good for others. And "philanthropic" -- with its Greek origin -- is nearly its equivalent. It refers to activities that are motivated by an affection for other human beings. What makes words like "charitable", "benevolent" and "philanthropic" so misleading when they are applied to museums is the degree to which they focus on the indisputable generosity and good intentions of those who support such institutions to the almost total exclusion of what it is that those institutions might actually be trying to do, and for whom. In those words, the donor is all.

To some extent, this emphasis on high-minded benevolence may simply be a hangover from the earliest days of museums when they frequently **were** elitist institutions created by the wealthy for the uplift of the deserving poor. That was certainly the case in the United States in the years immediately following our Civil War. As I recently wrote elsewhere:

"Museums were created and maintained by the high for the low, by the couth for the uncouth, by the washed for the unwashed, by those who knew for those who didn't but needed to know and who would come to learn."<sup>2</sup>

That description is no longer apt. During the century-and-a-quarter since, the museum has evolved into a wholly different institution. No longer dependent on the noblesse oblige of some patrician class, museums today are far more likely to be something that we ourselves -- all of us, as a community -- create **for** ourselves. As such, words like charitable, benevolent and philanthropic may no longer be appropriate. More accurate, perhaps, might be the descriptive phrase increasingly used in the United States -- that museums are "not-for-profit organizations".

A second -- and certainly beneficial -- consequence of reducing the perception of museums as charitable might be to increase public respect for the professional skills of those who work on their staffs. Too often today museums are still seen as operating in a volunteer-dominated charitable domain that lacks the rigor, drive and bedrock seriousness of the for-profit sector -- a domain of bumbling and absent-minded church wardens and flibbertigibbet chairladies like the one that Brian O'Connell of Independent Sector once satirized, the chairlady who gave as her annual report "Any organization made up of such bright people, who are so dedicated and who have worked so hard, must [certainly] be doing a great deal of good". By recasting themselves in a different mold, museums might better be able to project themselves as purposive and result-oriented organizations that are no less intent on accomplishing their goals than any of their for-profit counterparts.

In any event, the theme is constant. Regardless of the generosity and/or enthusiasm with which a museum may be supported, those qualities in themselves are neither what the institution is ultimately about nor can they serve in any way as measures of its worthiness. Like survival, like fiscal and other resources, good will is a means -- beyond any question, an essential means -- but not an end in itself. Like them it is a necessary but not a sufficient condition.

When we turn, though, to our third instance of confusion -- public programming, the principal point of contact between the museum and those upon whom its activities are intended to have some impact -- we do get closer to the mark. In the United States, at least, the notion that a museum's public programs might in and of themselves serve as a surrogate measure for its overall worthiness can be traced almost directly back to some of the federal and state funding agencies that were created in the 1960s. Common to many was the use of program grants. Rather than award or deny grants to museums on the basis of what they **were** (i.e., well-regarded or not-so-well-regarded), those decisions were to be based instead on what they intended to **do** (i.e. the future programs they planned). At the National Endowment for the Arts -- one of the largest and most influential of these agencies -- judgments as to the relative merits of competing grant proposals were made by what came to be called "peer review panels". The primary basis for judgment was the "quality and significance" of a proposed project together with an estimate of the applicant's ability to carry it out.

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<sup>2</sup>. Stephen E. Weil, "The Museum and the Public", Museum Management and Curatorship, Vol. 16, No. 3, pp. 257-271, 1997, 257.

Why, then, didn't these panel recommendations provide at least **some** tentative indication of a museum's worthiness? Primarily, I think, because they were so wholly prospective. Just as we earlier saw curators looking at collections as if their internal coherence or perfection was what was really counted, here we had peer review panelists making judgments about exhibitions that only existed only in theory, exhibitions that might not be reality-tested for months or even years. Clearly, the only true test of these programs -- a test that might have genuinely served as some reasonable indicator of institutional worthiness -- was not how well or poorly they looked on paper but how well or poorly they ultimately impacted on the public.

Here, though, we come to another complication. As museums have increasingly sought to measure the impact of their exhibitions and other public programs, the question of impact has turned out to be far more complex than at first imagined. Addressing this in the Summer, 1999 museum issue of Daedalus, John H. Falk wrote:

"The overwhelming majority of earlier investigations of museum learning were predicated on historical, primarily behaviorist views of learning. In this traditional view...individuals were assessed to determine whether they learned specific, predetermined information, much as someone would test learning in a traditional classroom. Although well-thought-out exhibitions and programs can facilitate visitor learning of predetermined topics, the inherent complexity and choice offered by the museum environment, coupled with the widely varying experiences and knowledge levels of museum visitors, yields a far greater range of possible learning outcomes than can be accommodated by the assessment strategies created for the older absorption-transmission model. In addition...people in museums rarely spend time reflecting upon or synthesizing their experiences. As a consequence, significant conceptual change is unlikely to occur within a single visit. It may take days, weeks, or months for the experience to be sufficiently integrated with prior knowledge for learning to be noticeable even to the learner himself, let alone measurable. Finally, most learning, but certainly most learning that occurs in museums, has more to do with consolidation and reinforcement of previously understood ideas than with the creation of totally new knowledge structures."<sup>3</sup>

As assessment techniques continue to be refined, a day may well come when an evaluation of a museum's public programs -- not as those appear prospectively on paper, but carefully made after the fact and in terms of their impact -- can be used as a practical proxy for some overall assessment of its institutional worthiness. For now, though, public programs -- along with our lengthening list of other means: survival, resources, and good will -- must be understood as simply one more of those ingredients through which a museum's ultimate objectives can be achieved. Again, like those others, necessary but not in itself sufficient.

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<sup>3</sup>. John H. Falk, "Museums as Institutions for Personal Learning", Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Summer, 1999, 259-275, 260.

The last of what you might call these "false indicators" is management. The confusion to be countered here is the notion that a well-managed museum must necessarily be, i.e., for that reason alone, a good or a worthy museum. Three points will be argued. First, that good management today is more than merely desirable; it is essential. Second, notwithstanding its necessity, that good management is no more a guarantee of institutional worthiness than any other resource. And third, that the price of good management is the risk that it may sometimes begin to crowd out purpose, and that this is a danger against which a museum must always be on its guard.

Let me begin with an observation by Peter Drucker, the widely-respected management consultant. Speaking of the for-profit enterprise, Drucker once said that it was not merely **privileged** to make a profit but that it was actually **obligated** to do so. The reason he gave was this: that by withdrawing the resources it required to operate from the overall pool of resources generally available to the community, such an enterprise had incurred a corresponding obligation to use those resources productively. Not to do so, i.e., to take resources out of public circulation without returning them with some added value, would -- he said -- constitute an irresponsible instance of waste.

If Drucker's rationale is correct, then it must also hold true for such not-for-profit organizations as museums. Between their land, buildings, equipment, collections and endowments, museums represent a substantial communal investment. To fail to make productive use of that investment would -- in Drucker's terms -- constitute waste. It would be socially irresponsible. Since the reduction of waste -- or, to put it in positive terms, the effort to achieve and maintain cost effectiveness -- is one of the core tasks of any management, then the necessity that museums be well managed might be said to rest on that one consideration alone -- that they have a social obligation to operate in an effective and efficient manner.

In the United States, at least, the decade from 1970 to 1980 can now be seen in retrospect as the period when contemporary management practices began to be widely incorporated into museums. In 1970, the American Association of Museums established its Accreditation Program, a program that -- at least in its earliest phase -- was to put considerable emphasis on the introduction and maintenance of sound management practices. In 1971, the Association of Art Museum Directors published Professional Practices in Art Museums. The first Museum Law Conference took place in 1973. In 1976, the Association of Science-Technology Centers published the Museum Accounting Guidelines, and those in turn were incorporated into the Museum Accounting Handbook issued by the AAM in 1978. In 1977, the first planning meeting for the Museum Management Institute -- now incorporated into the Getty Leadership Institute for Museum Management -- was held in Seattle. The Institute itself was launched in 1979. The first new ethics code in over 50 years was published in 1978. Finally, 1980 saw the publication, also by AAM, of the first personnel handbook designed specifically for museums. By 1980, as well, collections management policies -- an important form of internal control almost wholly unknown at the start of the decade -- were becoming ubiquitous.

Driving these developments, I think, was the increasing need of government funders, corporate sponsors and other donors to be assured that the considerable sums they were pumping



into museums were being well-employed and for the purposes intended. Within the museum community itself, there was also a certain apprehension that museums, together with the economic, social and legal environments in which they operated, were becoming increasingly complex and that many of the more casual management practices of earlier days were no longer adequate. One threat to be headed off, or so it was widely believed at the time, was the importation of professional managers from other sectors. By way of defense, museum workers themselves needed learn new managerial skills. As a 1978 AAMD report on the training needs of museum directors put it:

"It makes more sense to train art historians to be managers than to train administrators -- who are not naturally inclined toward the visual arts -- to understand and be sympathetic to art or to comprehend the role of museums."

That good management cannot in itself guarantee a museum's worthiness seems evident. In some instances, a museum's underlying purposes may be so muddled or feeble that -- the efforts of its good management notwithstanding -- its activities constitute little more beyond wheel-spinning. In others, the ends that the museum is pursuing -- although strong and clear -- may be antagonistic to the values of those called upon to judge its worthiness. How many of us here would, for example, be prepared to find a museum of white supremacy to be a worthy institution, no matter how well managed it might be?

Not so evident by any means, though, is the risk that good management may pose -- the risk that it may tend to crowd out purpose. In its modern manifestation, management no longer means simply hiring some people, furnishing them with desks and pencils and telling them what to do. It has emerged, rather, as a full-fledged technique -- "an ensemble of practices," to use Harold Lasswell's definition, "by which one uses available resources to achieve value".

As the French sociologist Jacques Ellul, among others, has pointed out, techniques are far more than simply the rationally refined means by which we can accomplish certain recurring tasks. Techniques have an internal dynamic of their own, a dynamic pursuant to which they can ultimately obscure the very objectives that they were originally designed to serve and become instead ends in themselves.<sup>4</sup> The Columbia University sociologist Robert K. Merton has made the same point: that techniques tend to turn means into ends so that "know-how" can become an ultimate value.<sup>5</sup> For the unwary museum that fails to maintain a healthy balance between its purposes and its processes -- that fails constantly to remind itself that management is only a means and that its institutional ends lie elsewhere -- the danger is that, over time, management may simply become an end in itself, an end that may compete with or even overshadow the purposes with which the museum originally began.

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<sup>4</sup>. See Jacques Ellul, The Technological Society (New York: Vintage Books, 1964).

<sup>5</sup>. *Ibid.*, Foreword, vi.

Again we return to the question: by what criterion might we judge a museum's worthiness? On examination, the claim that good management is the hallmark of a worthy museum turns out to be no more valid than were the similar claims for survival, for ample resources, for good will and for public programs. Like each, good management is of course necessary -- for a poorly managed museum to be worthy in any sustained fashion would be remarkable -- but in and of itself no management, not even the most superb one, is sufficient. Worthiness comes from elsewhere -- from what museums do, not from how they do it.

Does that seem too utopian? Is worthiness simply some vague and misty ideal, a kind of museological holy grail to be given lip-service at the start of every museum conference and then put aside for more practical things? I would argue, exactly to the contrary, that this notion of worthiness is, in fact, the single most practical matter on which any such conference could possibly focus. Like it or not, the world in which we operate -- a world, not incidentally, upon which almost every one of our museums depends for support -- that world is crowding ever more closely: imposing new rules, asking sharper questions, demanding more services. Our Martian visitor is not alone in wanting to know about our worthiness. Earthlings too want to know -- most of all, perhaps, those very special Earthlings -- corporations, foundations, corporations and individuals -- who help us to pay our bills.

More than ever, museums must compete for support -- not only with one another but also with a wide range of other institutions. Where funders might once have been satisfied by other criteria -- by staff competence, by sound public programming, by a healthy balance sheet, or by a glittering collection; in other words, by those very things that we have discussed this morning as "means" -- what they are increasingly looking at today are "ends". Now they ask questions like: When the day was over, the sun had set and the crowds gone home, what had you accomplished? What difference had you made? In what ways had the world been improved? How had somebody's life been made a little better?

If the comparative worthiness of museums is to be determined by considering both the ends they are seeking to achieve and their relative success in doing so, are they then being forced into some kind of a pattern, some lockstep in which they must all march together for fear that they'll otherwise lose their funding? Again: not!! Within such a formula, museums would still have the latitude to pursue a virtual infinity of different goals and objectives subject only to the requirement -- if the standard of worthiness is fully to be met -- that they also begin to include within their programs some mechanisms to determine whether those programs are, in fact, having their intended effect.

What **are** some of the these ends that museums might pursue. In a talk to the British Museums Association at its annual meeting in Edinburgh this past September, I tried to suggest just how broad that list of institutional choices might be:

"When we finally do turn, then, to see what the possible purposes of museums might be, what we find shining through is the incomparable richness of this field in which we work. In the range of purposes that they can pursue -- in the range of the community needs that

they can meet: educational needs and spiritual ones, social and physical needs, psychological and economic ones -- museums are among the most remarkably flexible organizational types that a modern society has available for its use. Museums can provide forms of public service that are all but infinite in their variety. Museums can inspire individual achievement in the arts and in science, they can serve to strengthen family and other personal ties, they can help communities to achieve and maintain social stability, they can act as advocates or play the role of mediator, they can inspire respect for the natural environment, they can generate self-respect and mutual respect, they can provide safe environments for self-exploration, they can be sites for informal learning, and ever so much more. In every realm, museums can truly serve as places to remember, as places to discover, as places to imagine."<sup>6</sup>

A recent suggestion by Professor Mike Wallace of the City University of New York might nicely supplement that list. Discussing the social utility of history museums, he proposed that perhaps their greatest contribution could be in "helping visitors develop their historical sensibilities, strengthening their ability to locate themselves in time, and enhancing their capacity as citizens to be historically informed makers of history".<sup>7</sup> The central thrust of that -- that a history museum might enhance the capacity of its visitors to meet their civic responsibilities in a better informed way -- could be just as applicable to art museums, to natural history museums and to science centers. The larger notion -- that museums might play an important role in determining how well or poorly the citizens of a democratic society succeed in governing themselves -- seems to me one well worth further exploration.

Each of you, though, could certainly extend these lists further. In a sense, the particular content doesn't really matter. The hallmark of the worthy or meritorious or excellent museum -- the one about which our Martian visitor was asking; the one about which our Earthling funders have also been asking -- is not in any particular purpose or discipline or even scale or form of organization or source of funding. It is, rather, in a combination -- a blend -- of ambition and competence: the institutional ambition to do something that is going to make a positive difference in the quality of individual lives and in the well-being of the community -- and the institutional competence, the skill and determination to convert that ambition into accomplishment.

From those ingredients, we ought finally be able to develop a standard by which the merit of our museums could fairly be measured. We might, as well, finally be able to give some decent and responsive answers to those hypothetical space aliens that continue to turn up at our meetings.

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<sup>6</sup>. The full text of this talk was subsequently published under the title "Transformed from a Cemetery of Bric-a-Brac" in Perspectives on Outcome Based Evaluation in Libraries and Museums (Washington: Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2000), 4-15.

<sup>7</sup>. Mike Wallace, "Museums and Controversy", Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 115-129, 128.