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TOWARD A PROFESSION

by Wilbur H. Glover

Whether we should set up a museum profession is no longer too thorny a question, since many of the requisite tasks are already being done. The learned literature is being published, training programs are operating, meetings are on established schedules, and exclusive professional associations of the initiated are beginning to appear.

Most significant of all the signs of a budding profession, the practitioners themselves are aware of their position; we regard ourselves as the most agreeable people imaginable, but we no longer can accept with equanimity the blunders of the uninitiated. We agree with Louis Jones' emphatic conclusion to his condemnation of some fairly prosperous amateur floundering, "It is our business."

It may be difficult to police museum activity, one that is strongly rooted in diverse collecting enthusiasms, but there are areas that may be claimed as a public interest for which a self-aware profession must speak, and the proposals to define and openly identify public museums is a long step in that direction. Since these proposals are likewise being carried into action by the American Association of Museums and in pending state-aid legislation endorsed by the New York State Department of Education we can recognize, if we will, signs of vigor in our move toward professional status.

Agreement has likewise been reached, by the mass of museum practitioners, that standards of performance have been developed of which respect for the public interest demands enforcement, and that those who have developed the standards have thereby established a claim for distinction under the time-honored canons of professionalism.

The new year seems an appropriate time for the museum profession, like Janus, to look back at the past and forward to the future. The Janus we use is from a Roman coin of the Third Century B. C. Dr. Glover's remarks, however, are up-to-date suggestions for the profession. The Director of the Hancock Shaker Village, Hancock, Massachusetts, Dr. Glover has served on the AAM Council, and is a member of various New England museum committees and boards

There is no longer any serious debate as to the acceptability of casual collections of relics in the guise of museums. Obstacles do not appear to bar adoption of other accepted characteristics of a profession: guarantees of the integrity of practitioners under the rules of conduct of their associations, guarantees of skill through minimum requirements for training and experience, and enrollment of practitioners in an established organization. There is no problem of practitioners advertising their services in unacceptable commercial ways. As to the final evidence of established professionalism, exclusion of the unqualified, we largely agree on the ultimate necessity of considerably tighter organization of the profession to encourage exclusive patronage of its ranks, but certainly not immediately and perhaps not without governmental certification.

If we ask ourselves as a practical matter whether we may hope to win the kind of recognition and protection from the competition of the unqualified enjoyed by other professions we may feel a shock of discouragement at the apparent difficulties. The success won by lawyers and physicians, and the arduousness of their struggles, may suggest that we, less indispensable to society than they, could not hope to achieve similar success. It would be healthier to recognize the advantage to us in their having found out how to organize. It is not even correct to assume that we are in all respects in the

rear of a prolonged historical movement, everyone else having long ago organized, set up educational programs, established the apparatus of learning, and gained privilege. Professional schooling is not the tradition of centuries, even if one accepts the dubious proposition that it is in all cases now soundly adjusted to its conditions; it hardly existed at all before 1850 except as colleges were primarily designed to produce clergymen. Law, medicine, pharmacy, and technology had each a very few schools before that date, and until 1900 their scope was notoriously narrow and their facilities even to their graduates recognizably inadequate. Proper inspection and accreditation of professional schools in the United States date roughly from the movement in the medical profession represented by the Flexner reports of 1903-1910. There is no reason in history to assume any attitude but satisfaction that we are in time for our purposes and have rich experience to draw upon in making our own arrangements.

The Museum Board

There have been innumerable private discussions of the problems faced by the profession in its relations with the Boards which govern museums, and a few bold spirits have put their observations into print. Further repetition is not particularly needed here, although the point is crucial in a discussion of the need for a strong profession. It may serve by way of summary to state that professional workers frequently complain, and the facts are seldom in question, that in the technical matters of design and interpretation their freedom has been arbitrarily curtailed because of conflicts set up by the special interests and tastes of governing bodies. To admit the fact need not constitute any condemnation of the many thousands of people who provide indispensable support to the museum movement, and in our present situation it might wisely be concluded that in any way to risk discouraging the many really generous and distinguished figures in this admirable group would threaten more harm than achievement of professional status could compensate. But, if we hold to a belief in the competence of our profession we must acknowledge the problem and assert our responsibility.

It would be Utopia indeed if capable and conscientious Board members whose vocations had acquainted them with some of the procedures used by museums, having reached conclusions on technical matters, should never seek their adoption. It would be unfortunate if their advice were not of-

fered; but from that point misunderstanding can easily develop. Insistence on one side and inflexibility on the other have resulted in conflict with great frequency. Such mishaps may arise as often between curator and professor as between curator and business administrator or lawyer. The literary bias of the academic can occasion disagreements even as to the necessity of interpretation in the museum sense, since the professor by habit prefers the verbal. But the spreading of books on museum walls in the guise of labels is bad, and must be opposed as any other distortion of museum method.

The Collector

No group has put museums more in its debt than collectors, and to criticise them in any way is likewise an ungrateful task. But it must be acknowledged that frequently enough they have proved to be their own worst enemies through their insistence on making the extent of their collections the point when they exhibit them, to the detriment of true comprehension. In their insistence on recognition of their achievement in assembling the collections, which they usually richly deserve, they tend to ignore the broader usefulness of the objects when properly interpreted in modern museum practice as a presentation of a field of learning. The collector's attitude has, in the past, dominated whole museums—and we have the responsibility of continuing to replace this with a positive drive to make museums serve educational purposes. Curators are not made by crossing busy magpies with orderly housekeepers. We must oppose distorting pretensions of collectors, and we cannot admit that a collector is by virtue of his expertise a professional.

It has been suggested on numberless occasions that the education of these well-meaning and useful people should be taken in hand; if we did not believe in education we would hardly be engaged in our profession. Naturally many of our coadjutors have become educated, but it is unwise to assume that the problem is likely to be abolished by an ordinary process of education. Education is self-education, and when the basic attitudes of the individual deny the need there is little use in persuasion or indoctrination. The acquisitive collector, aggressive business man, or self-contained scholar is motivated inaccessibly in most cases unless some accidental factor exposes him to discipline, such as sudden impoverishment and appointment to a post in a museum. To resolve the differences over museum procedures the "education" of Boards is

likely to continue to be less effective than the assignment of technical tasks to trained personnel protected by the canons of a profession. Such action tends to eliminate infringements upon the areas of technical responsibility and reduces the opportunity of interference by the untrained in operations that should be in the hands of the qualified. Irrelevant personal motives will be restrained, and not always to the detriment of the amateur.

It must be acknowledged that it is not only standards of performance that suffer from amateur competition, but pay levels as well. As long as amateurs succeed in simulating satisfactory performance there will be little recognition of any need to pay for professional competence. There is no need for modestly hiding the consideration of pay; the workman is worthy of his hire, or, people in authority must have status and status is related to income.

A further peculiarity of the American environment should be taken into account. Professional men in Europe are often astonished by the rigid regulations applied to the professions in the United States, and even American professional men among doctors and lawyers who profit by the regulations are often embarrassed to defend them. American professional men set up systems of privilege that defy the attitude held by most of our citizens, whose loyalty to anti-monopoly movements indicate their hostility to privilege as a matter of political tradition, and the contradiction needs to be understood by anyone who is interested, as we are, in creating regulations that will recognize and protect their own special knowledge and capacities. How do these same people condemn privilege and spawn the world's toughest regulations to protect it?

The answer is not as obscure as a glance at the apparent contradiction would suggest. The liberal attitude has created a difficult problem for the professions, and its solution inevitably takes an extreme form because of the difficulty. And it is not only the liberal ideal, the wish to extend opportunity to all in the freest manner, that makes creating a profession so troublesome. The anti-intellectual bent of our citizens adds its bit; it is not a vague dissatisfaction among our teacher over salary levels and a depressed social position that has called forth repeated statements that anti-intellectualism is a mark of our society, but sane observation by responsible critics. We value initiative, capacity to organize, and willingness to try the new above merely scholarly and philosophical adventure, a preference that is justified by accomplishments in government and industry so overwhelming that con-

demnation would be puerile. Professionals must simply arm themselves with a determination to act as these conditions demand.


Certainly this condition does not preclude the possibility of our setting up professional qualifications that exclude as is necessary, but also admit with a flexibility that answers our need to continue to recruit broadly. More reliance might be placed on examination procedures than other professions have shown; civil service commissions have accumulated a large body of experience in examining, not excluding personal records of accomplishment, and from this we may devise what we need without risking atrophy in the iron hand of academic training programs too hastily fabricated.

How To Adjust

How, then, are we to set about adjusting a profession already modestly organized to the conditions we perceive? As we have already observed, the learned and technical literature of the profession is increasing notably in volume and quality. In the museum field there are a number of organizations that are now publishing journals, and some provision for the systematic control of this literature through a regularly published annual bibliography, in the manner of other professions, would seem to be indicated. A reasonably current control of the professional literature in a field is both essential to practitioners and an effective way of convincing the layman that here is an activity that ranks as a profession.

Another indication of the emergence of professional status is seen in the class specifications that large civil service commissions establish for the allocation of positions in various fields of activity. The United States Civil Service Commission promulgated its specifications for the museum series in 1949, and established a museum aide series for subprofessional workers in 1957. Experience in such states as New York might also be illuminating.

We must find a key to the problem of training and of assessing the value of the training to museum use. It has been agreed among students of professionalism that skills based on learning are the foundation for every profession, the obvious examples of the giants of the field of law and medicine establishing the rule firmly and finally. The learning of these giants has intimidated investigators, who may, however, regard the scholarly authority of a Justice Holmes or a Doctor Osler with tranquillity since such massive power is plainly very exceptional and not in any sense a standard of admittance to



their professions. What we must concern ourselves with is the minimal learning that will enable a man to be useful in his profession *if coupled with the skill to apply it*. It is precisely this skill that is customarily dropped from sight as the giants of learning are admired, and yet no profession neglects its arts when the apparatus of training and examination is set up, with the possible exception of the law, which has become so specialized that masters of very small fields may succeed in firms that tend to deny the individualistic ideals of professionalism by a frankly industrial division of labor. Doctors serve hospital internships, teachers practice under supervision, and others serve similar apprenticeships to develop and test the aspirants' practical skills.

Dr. Parr's learned discussion of the problems of establishing a museum profession demonstrated the weakness of our position, based as it is upon a multiplicity of fields of learning, as well as upon utilization of a variety of artistic skills. His elucidation of the point developed a positive attitude that also contains its embarrassments: it is plain that in the present phase of swiftly developing museum technology there could be much damage from a rigid exclusion on narrow grounds of creative people capable of making further valuable contributions. It is a most serious danger and the utmost caution is indicated. But the basic difficulty, the variegated company of specialists, is precisely the same as is faced by the teaching profession, which is if possible even more diversified in the disciplines it must embrace, and, it may also be, is showing signs of atrophy from dependence on an artificial standard of exclusion, namely, denial of opportunity to those who cannot stomach the "education" courses, a very large class indeed.

But this must be left to the schoolmen. It may be possible for use to discover a key to our own situation that will permit us to establish proper standards without risking the loss of valuable personnel who will not submit to training requirements that appear to them vacuous and irrelevant, mere initiation ceremonies without either practical or scholarly utility. While many fields of art, science, and history furnish the basis for participation in museum work, there is one skill that offers itself as the practical art in which the aspirant should qualify himself, and that is interpretation.

Finding the story that unites the elements represented by the objects to be used in a given exhibit, a story that the objects themselves help to tell (a sketch and approximate definition of "interpreta-

tion"), may appear to be a rudimentary exercise in logic. Nevertheless it has only recently been developed and widely used and it still defeats the imagination of too many, as testified by the vacuous assemblages of local relics, beach idlers' shells, or paintings of a given century remaining in museum halls scattered from coast to coast. Fortunately we can rejoice in the arrival to maturity of the art of interpretation, even to the climax of a superb statement of its meaning in Freeman Tilden's "Interpreting Our Heritage." To select examples of its triumphs in the absence of a critical literature would be beyond the power of individuals, but all of us have rejoiced in exhibitions of paintings that comment on artistic vision, or skill, or imagination, or of primitive art that reveal something of the character of a people. We have stood in the carefully preserved fadedness of rooms that kept the feeling of a devoted family, or walked through restored villages that reflected the culture of another day. Curators of science have made us wonder at the complexities of life or become aware of the structure of hills that have previously been mere obstacles to our travels.

Interpretation of objects for instruction is the hard core of museum thinking as it has developed in recent decades and lies at the root of the success of museums in winning a place among educational institutions. It is a process nearly exclusive to the profession, it is acquired by contact with museum work, and it is inextricably joined to the learning of the practitioner, who must know in order to interpret. Without this skill the most learned will fail to use the resources of museums successfully, as they do at present only too frequently because it has not been made a requirement—and they will in the future frequently enough because it is a difficult art to practice, although it can be agreed that they must not be allowed to fail because they have never been required to acquaint themselves with it.

There are no doubt many other obtrusive aspects to the situation in which we find ourselves. But the capstone of bibliography for our literature, a consideration of a broadly approved system of basic examinations, and a resolute scrutiny of our situation and of the nature of our craft seem to be the minimum called for at present, in addition to unremitting efforts to continue the training programs already established and enlarge them as it becomes practical. The swift expansion of public support is likely to bring us face to face with the necessity of declaring and guaranteeing professional standards in a shorter time than will be comfortable. *