

Museum
Quarterly

Ontario
Museum
Association
executive
and council

Ontario
Museum
Association
secretariat

Editor
Lynne Teather

President
Margaret L. May, Toronto Historical Board

Vice President
Bill Barber, Region of Peel Museum

Past President
Ken Doherty, Peterborough Centennial Museum and Arch

Secretary
Ian Kerr-Wilson, Hamilton Museum of Steam and Techn

Treasurer
Andrew Brough, Ernst and Young

Councillors
Karen Bachmann, Timmins Museum: National Exhibition
Centre
Leah Gardner, Dryden and District Museum
Laurence Grant, Strathroy-Middlesex Museum
Susan Hughes, Todmorden Mills Heritage Museum and
Arts Centre
Sharon McDonald, Metropolitan Toronto Police Museum
Elmer Pilon, Cumberland Museum

Managing Director
Barbara Efrat

Executive Assistant
Sarah Walker

Communications Coordinator
Andrea Ott

Trillium Project Manager
Jim Leonard

Professional Development Coordinator
Stephen Posner

Professional Development Assistant
Janet Chessell

Museum
Quarterly

volume 18
number 4
november 1990

mailed October 1991

the journal of the
Ontario Museum
Association

- 2 Editor's message
by Lynne Teather

**museum meanings:
in search of museum voices**

- 3 Grime, crime and slime:
Museum stories and their limits
by Lynne Kurylo
- 9 In search of meaning:
"Reflective practice" and museums
by Douglas Worts
- 21 The role of museums in natural
history conservation:
A western Canadian perspective
by Bruce McGillivray
- 26 Scientific literacy and museums:
A place for emotion
by Robin Whittal
- 35 Interpreting the environment:
Turning the past into the future
by Paul Martinovich

book review

- 41 Do it yourself visitor surveys: A review
of two visitor surveying manuals
by Terry Cheney

technical column

- 44 Beyond Gutenberg:
Hypermedia in museums
by Steve Neufeld

individuals who are seeking to use museums for their own self-seeking ends. It is not appropriate to use museum resources to try to resolve political struggles which have been centuries in the making and which have the potential to distract museums from their broader educational mission. Instead, museums must seek out and work with those members of the public who value the democratic process and wish to work cooperatively for the benefit of the wider society.

Museums have to commit their resources to creating and pursuing conversations with the public about what new roles museums can play in a rapidly changing physical and social environment. Finally, museums should encourage a broad public involvement by promoting careers in museum work within the education system, by educating the public about the traditional and changing role of museums and by visibly contributing at many levels to the quality of life in their communities.

I am not sure all of us are ready for this emerging brand of museology but, with the stakes this high, we had better be. Museum workers have worked hard to obtain and honour the public trust vested in museums and we will have to continue to work hard not to lose it.

MQ

Selected Bibliography

- Axell, James. *After Columbus: Essays in the Ethnohistory of Colonial North America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Brown, Ellsworth H. "Keynote Address." In *Museum Curatorship, Rhetoric vs. Reality* (Proceedings of the Eighth Museum Studies Conference), edited by Bryant F. Tolles. Newark: University of Delaware, 1987.
- Cameron, Duncan. "Values in Conflict and Social Re-definition." *Muse* 8, no.3 (Fall 1990):14-19.
- Hewison, Robert. *The Heritage Industry*. London: Methuen, 1988.
- Hudson, Kenneth. *Museums of Influence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- Lowenthal, David. *The Past is a Foreign Country*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- Schlereth, Thomas J. "History and Material Culture." In *History Museums in the United States*, edited by Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987.
- Tilden, Freeman. *Interpreting Our Heritage*. Revised edition. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982.
- See also issues of *Material History Bulletin* (now renamed *Material History Review*) published by the National Museum of Science and Technology, Ottawa, and *Museum Quarterly* 18, no.2 (May 1990).

In search of meaning: "Reflective practice" and museums

Douglas Worts

To this museum educator/evaluator, cultural institutions such as museums are essentially charged with the responsibility of facilitating a process of human growth (be it intellectual, emotional, spiritual or social) that can and does occur when people interact in a "meaningful" way with objects that are at once both unique and highly symbolic. It is through this growth that an individual can develop a sense of his/her own personal identity, as well as an understanding of his/her relationship to a set of collective values, beliefs and behaviours. Quite a mission for a museum!

This paper is organized on two levels. Beginning the analysis are some of the broad contemporary issues facing museum professionals, particularly educators, as viewed through the notion of "reflective practice" introduced at the 1990 AAM Conference by Mary Ellen Munley. A parallel discussion, presented as an annotated model of the complexity of the visitor experience, offers a departure for the examination of the role of museums both in society and in the lives of individuals.

Museums have traditionally performed two basic functions in their efforts to contribute to the well-being of society. Both are in need of review. The first is the selection/collection of cultural objects that contain meaning and significance on a scale that warrant their being held in trust by a museum. The criteria for the requisite assessment of desirability or "quality", particularly within the realm of art, remains largely unarticulated and therefore continues to be something of a mystery for most individuals in society. The second major function that museums must perform, and the main subject here, is that of



Douglas Worts is an educator at the Art Gallery of Ontario, working primarily in the area of exhibit development and audience research.

"Reflective Practice"... is one practical way of consciously acknowledging the myriad issues that influence visitor experiences...

creating an adequate scenario – a container if you will – for a meaningful experience to take place between a visitor and the artworks. This notion of meaningful experience is yet another area where there is great mystery, largely because we as museum professionals have not been able to articulate the components and the contributing forces of such experiences. It is difficult to be sure when, or if, they happen.

Recent research and evaluation in exhibit and programme development has unquestionably yielded new insights into the complexity of the visitor experience. Yet, for this educator, forays into museum research and evaluation have additionally led to ever more difficult questions about the very nature of "meaning" in human lives. It is increasingly clear that paths of enquiry into these foundational issues can be drawn from the work of other disciplines, potentially offering museum professionals new ways of understanding the challenges of cultural institutions. Cognitive Science, Environmental Psychology, Communications, Sociology, Anthropology and Depth Psychology are some of these paths. Yet it remains a daunting task to integrate these disciplines into the operation of museums.

"Reflective Practice", which is an exciting form of public programme development in museums that Mary Ellen Munley discussed at the 1990 AAM Conference, is one practical way of consciously acknowledging the myriad issues that influence visitor experiences while proceeding with the business of operating public programmes in museums. It seems

"From Humble Beginnings: A Traditional Belief"

Art Object
traditional source of "meaning"

Figure 1 It is a long-standing, traditional notion that museums exist to represent the interests of the culturally significant things that they collect. There are many assumptions inherent in this notion that are increasingly being challenged by museum professionals. One of these assumptions is that objects somehow contain "meaning". Another is that the public education function of museums is to transfer the knowledge about objects from the object/museum to the visitor. A third traditional notion is that "understanding" about culturally significant things is an objective truth. These and many other assumptions are no longer taken for granted within museums, and there is a major movement afoot that is attempting to redefine the very nature of the museum experience within a more holistic framework.

that a discipline-based approach to understanding how meaning is generated in museums is critical if we as museum professionals are to fully and consciously comprehend our task. Yet it may be impossible to construct a theoretical framework for

continued on page 14...

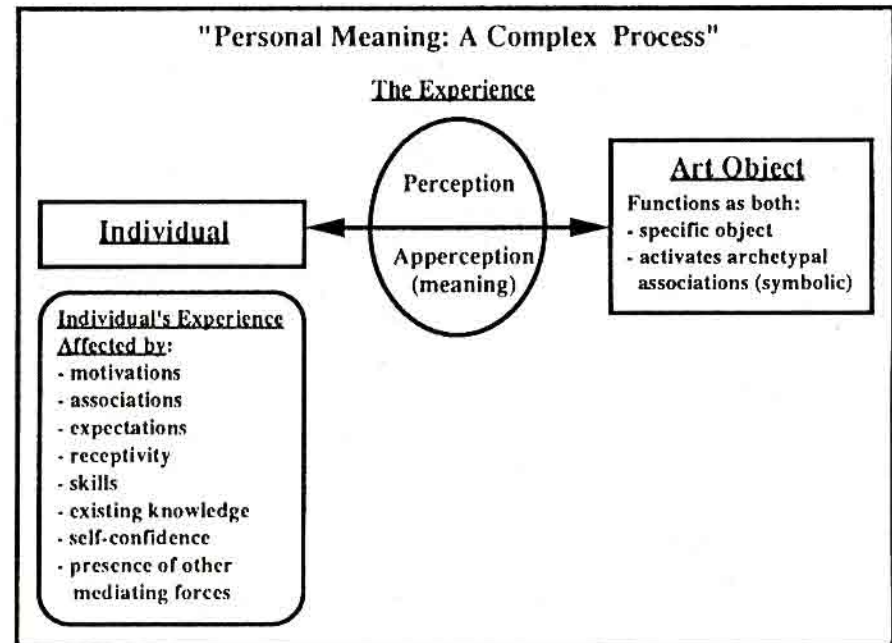


Figure 2 It is a simple enough concept to understand that the museum experience is not based on the visitor absorbing "knowledge" from an outer source (e.g. an art object or contextual material), but rather is the result of a process of exchange in which the visitor's sense perception brings a range of information into his or her mind, where it is processed with all of that person's past experiences, intuition, feelings, imagination, intellectual resources and capabilities, to produce "meaning" (apperception). Mixed into the process are the powerful presences of such forces as expectations, motivations, associations, and self-confidence, which bear heavily on how the visitor sorts and assesses the information received through the senses. This notion is a radical departure from the traditional belief in the object being the focus of museum concerns. It suggests that, while there is a critical role for the cultural object, the museum experience itself is a process that occurs within the individual. It is also important to recognize that, although an individual relates to a museum object very specifically and concretely, that object also functions as a symbol activating archetypal associations within the visitor (e.g. beauty, grief, aggression, spirituality, etc.). The implication of this broadening of focus beyond the object is that we, as museum professionals, must better understand the very nature of how people make sense and meaning of their world. In order to do this, we must look to a range of other disciplines for clues. Some of these include cognitive science, sociology, depth psychology, communications, environmental psychology, and more.

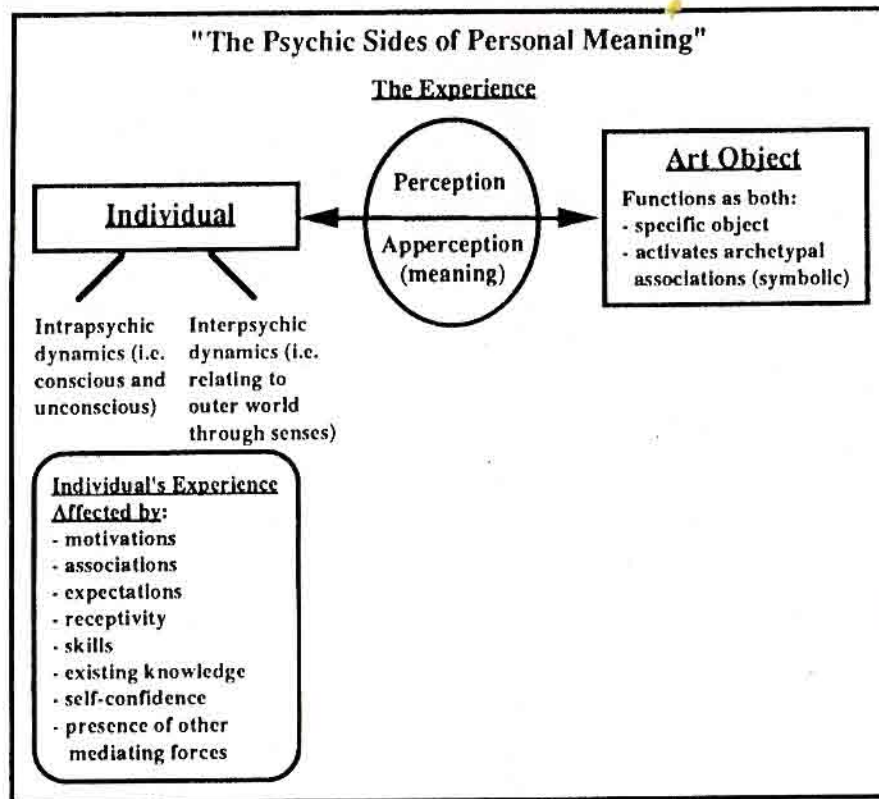


Figure 3 Beyond the numerous components that inform an individual's personal experience is the daunting complexity of the psychic process that channels the individual's energy towards the establishment of a sense of "meaning". The dynamics that occur between individuals and the world outside themselves (in this case museum objects, museum environments, contextual information, other people, etc.) is one very important dimension of experience – the Interspsychic, for lack of a better term. By drawing on the experience of many related disciplines, (e.g. cognitive science, communications, environmental psychology, etc.) museums can help themselves to better understand how to create public programmes, especially exhibits, that will have optimal interspsychic results with our audiences. A second area of psychic dynamic that is critical to understanding more about museum experiences is the interaction between the conscious and unconscious realms of an individual – the Intrapsychic. Recently, many museum educators have recognized that emotional responses of visitors are extremely important aspects of museum experience. These responses are not consciously controlled by the individual, but rather spring from the unconscious, and are either accepted or rejected by the conscious "self". Similarly, the unconscious can create imaginal responses to any given situation which are significant for the individual, quite apart from whatever "objective" learning that might result from the acquisition of any given factual information. These two related areas of psychic dynamics lie at the core of human experience. Museum professionals need to better understand the nature of these psychic processes if they are to support individuals in finding optimal levels of personal meaning with cultural objects.

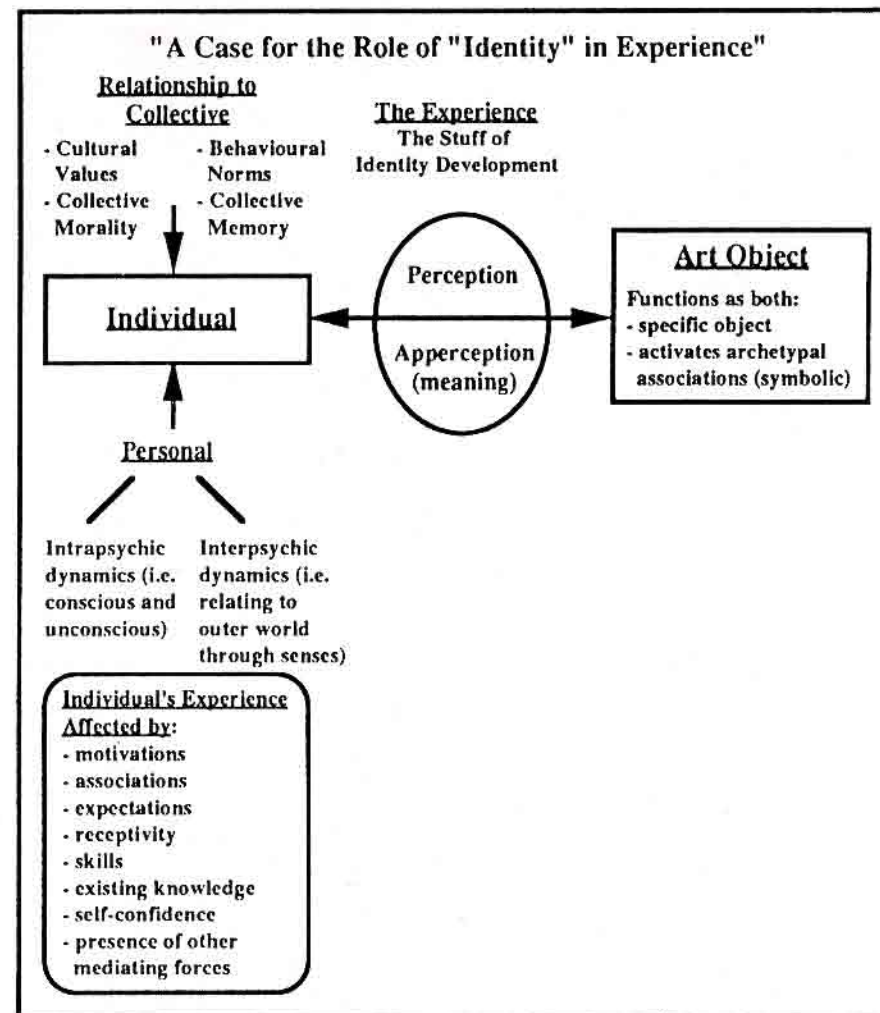


Figure 4 As individuals experience the world around them, they develop an increasingly complex sense of who they are, both as individuals and as members of a collective, be it a community, an ethnic group, or more generally as a human being. Within this latter frame of collective identification, a person's experiences with culturally significant objects can help develop their sense of identification with one cultural group and a sense of both similarity with, and differences from, other cultural groups. Having a sense of belonging to a group is a very important aspect of the psychic needs of every individual. But purely cultural identities are far from homogeneous, largely because they are affected by other forces within the social fabric. An example of this is economic status. For example, if two people are developing their ties with a cultural tradition, and one of these people lives within a lower economic stratum while the second lives in affluence, the ways in which these individuals relate to the cultural group may be strikingly different. This type of modern stress on cultural frameworks is made

continued on bottom of page 14...

Museums are mediators – facilitating, focussing and amplifying the interactions of people, things and ideas...

action, given the complexity of the museum experience, by drawing on other disciplines and past experience. This is where the notion of the "reflective practitioner" is useful. Mary Ellen credits Donald Schön, and his book entitled *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*, as key to this concept. She elaborated on what the term means to her in the following way:

"The process Schön tells us is one of conducting what he calls a reflective conversation with a unique and uncertain situation. Say you have to create an exhibit or a lesson or a program. You frame the problem, it's not given to you. You may even have to reframe it. You suggest a direction for reshaping it. The practitioner steps into the situation and becomes very close. You are part of it. And then you conduct an experiment to discover what consequences and implications follow from the way that you see what's going on. Teaching recognizes this process, especially when you are doing teaching that involves genuine interaction with the people that you are working with. And the reflective conversations yield some new discoveries which call for new reflection and action. That's intelligent practice."

In this way, the body of knowledge in the field actually springs from work in the field. It seems clear that, beyond the exploratory work that occurs in this process of reflective practice, the reflective practitioner also needs to be aware of and consciously integrate pertinent knowledge gained from other disciplines – to temper the theory with practice and the practice with theory. No theoretical framework will ever be perfect, but struggling to achieve a common language of understanding within the profession will help us to advance.

An important issue emerges (one that may complicate our musings about how best to facilitate meaningful experiences for visitors) when we consider this process within the context of the museum setting. Museums are mediators – facilitating, focusing and amplifying the interactions of people, things and ideas. If meaningful experiences are understood as contributing to the growth of the individual by leading to a realization of both one's personal

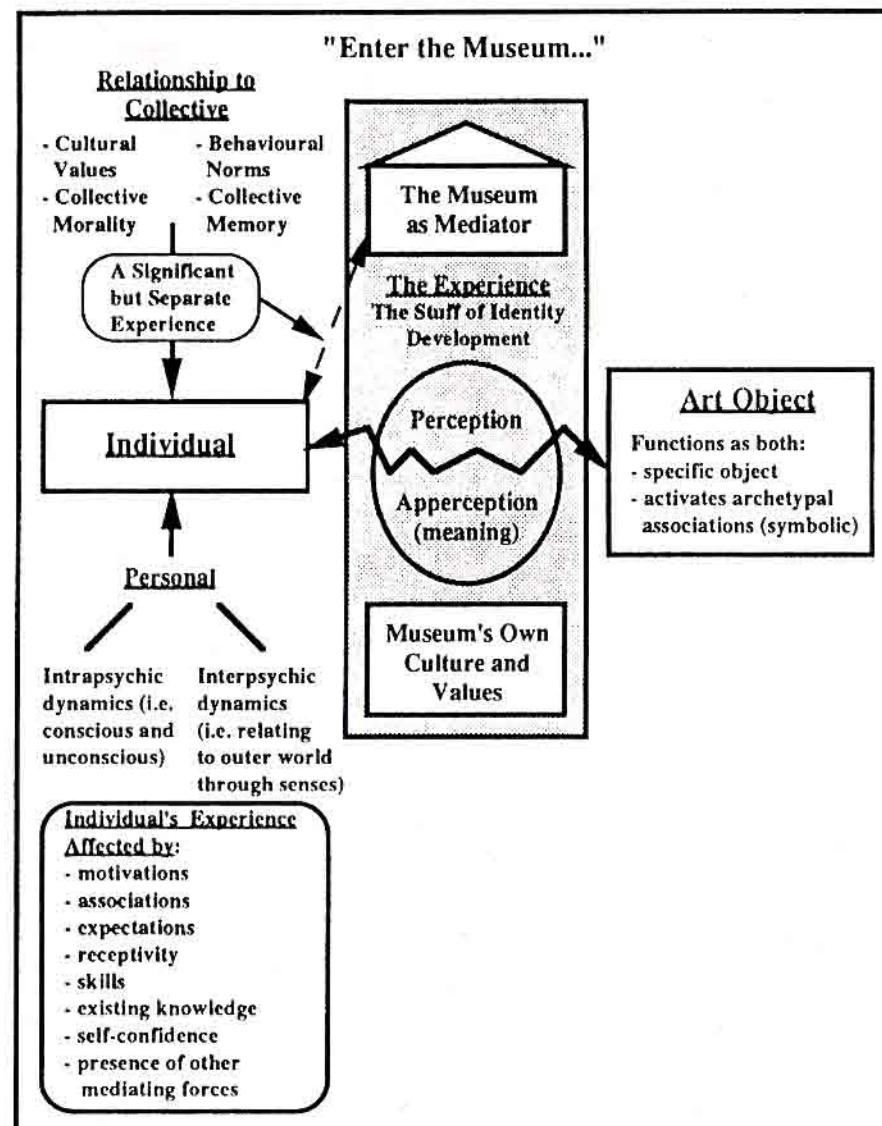


Figure 5 The museum experience is not only affected by the personal and collective values that any one individual has evolved during their lifetime, but is also affected by the agents of collective values, in this case the museum, which plays a large role in determining issues of quality and significance within the realm of art and history. The presence of the museum as a mediator of an individual's experience is not insignificant. This is particularly true when the associations with the mediator has its own distinct character. When individuals associate such a mediator as authoritative and unchallengeable, then the personal response of a visitor to a particular exhibit may be affected. This is not an argument for the elimination of such mediating agencies, but rather an argument for making the role of these agencies clear and public, so individuals can relate to them as best they can.

continued from page 13...

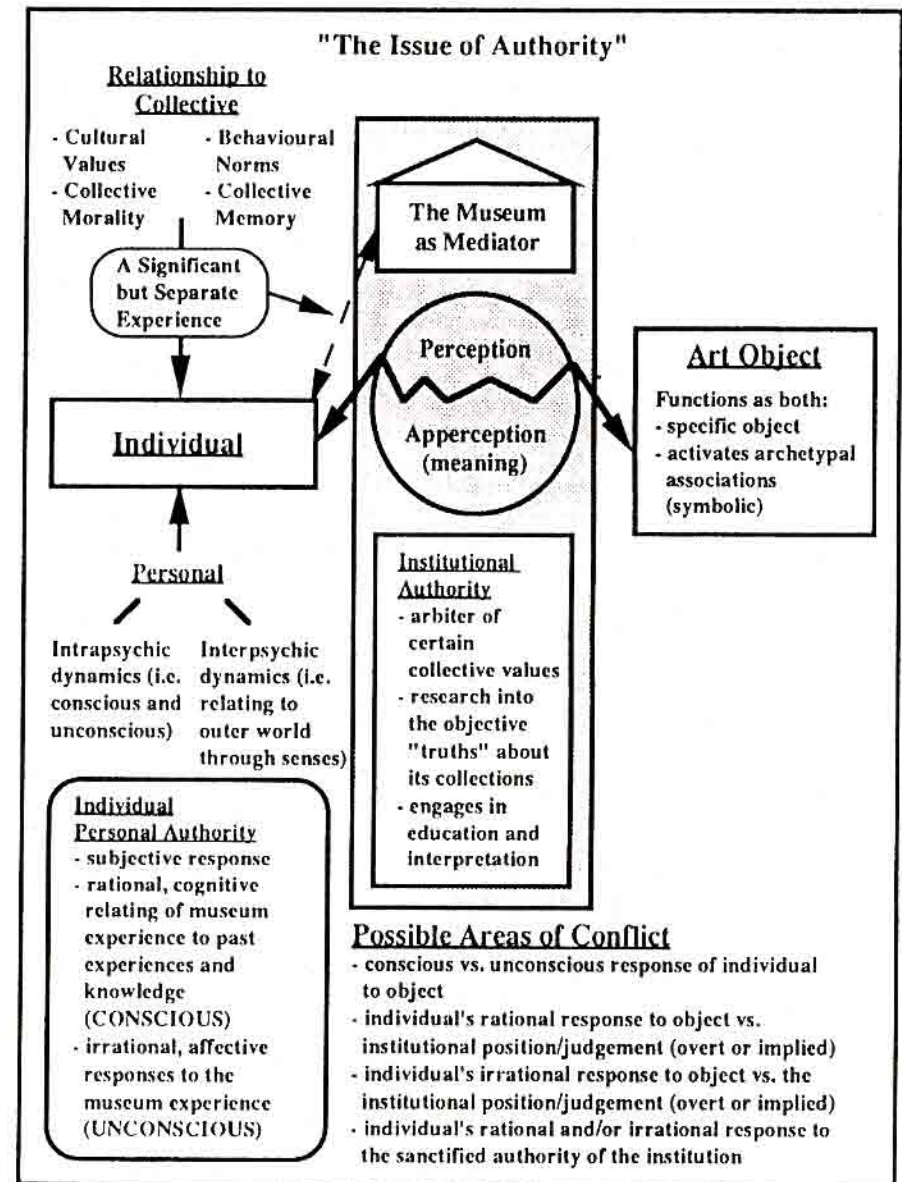
even more intense by the increasing reality of the global village. Therefore, the museum experience should be understood as a complex phenomena in which personal and collective forces are functioning within the individual and mediating the way in which a cultural object comes to have meaning for them. This process forms part, but not all, of the *prima materia* of identity development in the individual.

authority and one's relationship to collective values, then where does the notion of museum as mediator fit? Museums are by their very nature authoritative structures that represent the perspective of the collective. How does an individual retain a sense of personal authority and responsibility for their experiences if the museum's authority is overbearing? It may be that the institutionalization of culture within museums has created a confusing and problematic split between "subjective" and "objective" meanings during visitor experiences. As museum professionals, we need to remain aware of the source of psychic energy that lies at the heart of human experiences if we are to understand how best to optimize the museum environment. Experimental programme development and innovative audience research will be critical aspects of this work. It should be noted, however, that great care must be taken to ensure that sufficient importance is given to subjective and idiosyncratic meaning-making during museum visits, as well as to the more traditional orientation to collective meanings.

Exhibit and programme developers need to step back from the existing models of learning and become more experimental in their interactions with the public – reflecting on and documenting the strategies they are using as well as the reactions they stimulate in visitors. If this tack is taken, then new models of museum learning, based on relevancy of the experience for the visitor, may be developed with results that differ from some of the existing learning models which are aggressively cognitive or behavioural. One conceivable model, possibly based on the elimination of those obstacles within the institutions that inhibit people from making personal connections, might

better encourage and support the internal motivation of the visitor to find their own highly personal meaning (which may in fact turn out to be a gateway into more cognitive learning experiences). Another possibility might be a model of proactively supporting the visitor (e.g. through a specially designed computer

Figure 6 There are several ways in which the issue of authority bears on the museum experience. Within the psyche of the individual, a museum experience can provoke conflict between the rational/cognitive, the affective, and the imaginal responses to an exhibit. For example, a contemporary art exhibit may produce certain emotional or imaginal responses within a visitor, but these responses may be suppressed because the drive to rationally understand the artist's intentions dominates that individual. In a sense, individuals will often deny their own subjectively generated meanings in deference to the "objective" truth that they associate with the museum and expect should exist in all art museum experiences. In this way, the issue of authority needs to be seen both as a tension within the individual (a matter of self-confidence in one's own abilities, particularly the subjective and irrational abilities), and as a tension between the authority of the individual and that of the museum as a mediating force within society. Mediating forces can have profound influence on how a person experiences something and it takes a strong sense of self-confidence on the part of the individual to stand up to the authority of a socially sanctioned institution.



... museums
have the
capacity to
play an
important,
catalytic
role...

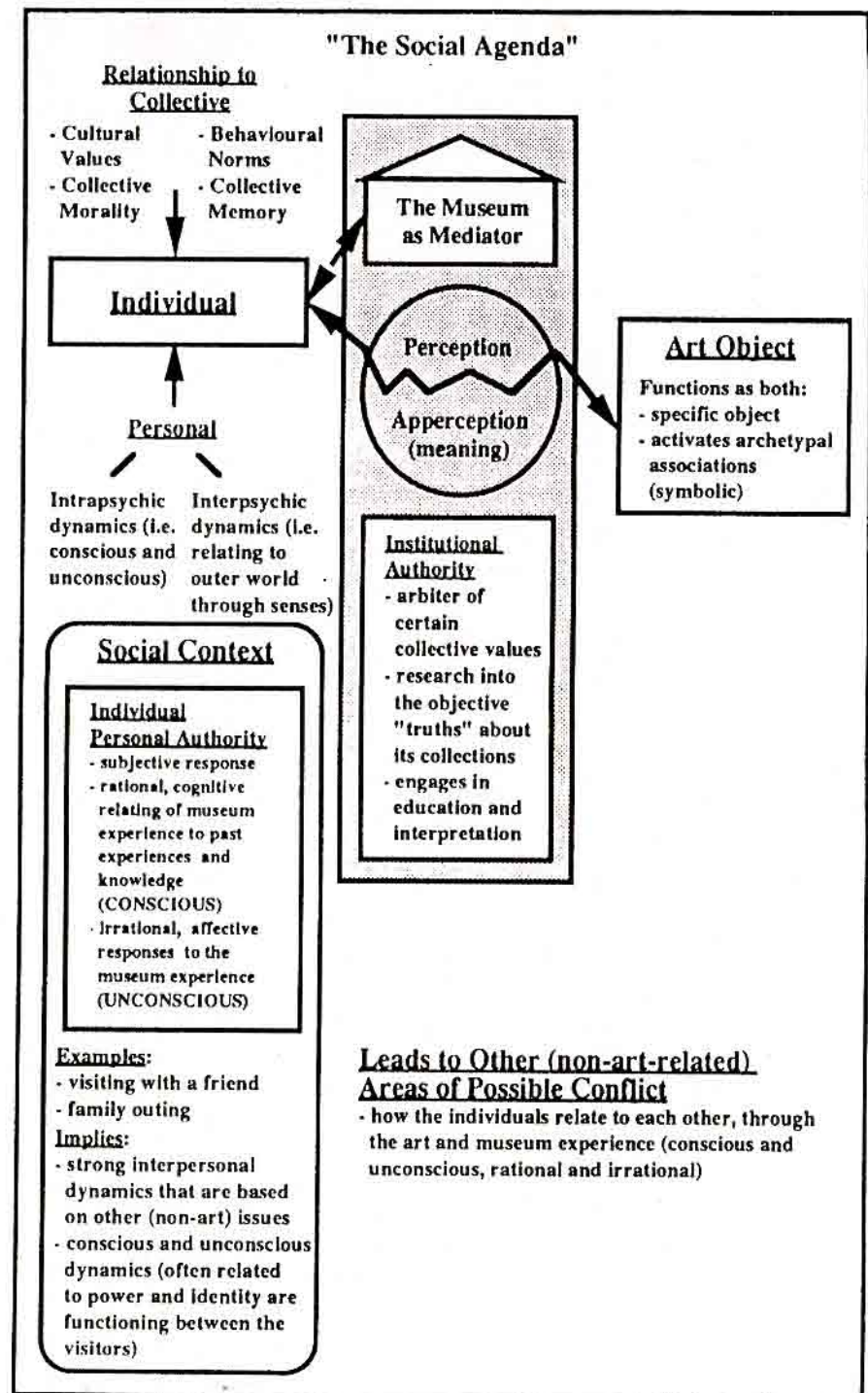
program) in determining their own very subjective path of enquiry – empowering visitors to take responsibility for their experience rather than expecting the institution to “teach” them something. (See Figures 1-7 and accompanying discussion for such a model and the discussion surrounding it.)

Through an attitudinal shift amongst museum staff, towards questioning the larger issues of how a person's personal and cultural identity evolves and is reinforced, as well as through a renewed commitment to the collaboration between educators and evaluators, I am convinced that museums have the capacity to play an important, catalytic role in how members of our society develop a sense of identity – both personal identity and their relationship to a collective.

The Art Gallery of Ontario is attempting to bring an awareness of these “reflective practice” issues into its current programme development. It is bringing museum and non-museum expertise together in order to support museological progress. In order for advances to be made, it seems very important that museums acknowledge that there is much to learn about the human needs that museum experiences can help meet. This may well require that museums relinquish some of their traditional claims of knowledge of, and authority over, its collections, in order to establish a more functional relationship to individuals and collectives. It will take all of the cooperation we can muster – between curators, educators, evaluators, conservators, and many others – if we are to position ourselves at the point of maximum relevancy for our publics. The challenges are great, but the potential seems even greater!

MQ

Figure 7 It is very clear from museological and other research (e.g. Silverman, 1990) that people do not visit museums simply to have interactions with culturally significant objects. One very important item on the agendas of many visitors is the social dimension of a museum experience. People use museum visits to help define, develop and affirm their relationships with others – family, friends, lovers, etc. This social agenda provides an important and powerful context for experience that museums need to know more about if they are to support experiences that include culturally significant objects as critical touchstones. This need to know more about the social dimension of museum experiences is not simply to be able to better use this powerful context, but also to acknowledge that there are many authority issues within the social agenda that need to be more clearly understood and acknowledged by all involved. For example, it is not uncommon to encounter visiting couples or families that contain one “expert” who is seen as the guide through the experience. There is some evidence that there is a link within families between this authority figure and the father. If museums aim to empower individuals to find and express their own authority and realize their own potentials, then there must be a recognition that the social agenda is a complex force to be reckoned with.



Suggested Bibliography

- Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*. Second Edition. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1968.
- Csikszentmihalyi, Mihalyi. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper and Row, 1990.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. and E. Rochberg-Halton. *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
- UNESCO. *Culture and the Future*. Report of the 1982 Conference on Cultural Policies, held in Mexico City, 1982.
- Frye, Northrop. *The Educated Imagination*. Toronto: CBC Enterprises, 1963.
- Gardner, Howard. *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. New York: Basic Books, 1983.
- Jung, Carl. *Man and His Symbols*. New York: Doubleday, 1964.
- Kelly, R. "Museums as Status Symbols II: Attaining a State of Having Been." In *Nonprofit Marketing*, edited by R. Belk. Greenwich, Connecticut: JAI Press, 1987.
- McDermott-Lewis, M. "Through Their Eyes: What Novices Value in Art Experiences." In *Program Sourcebook*. Washington: American Association of Museums, 1988.
- Miles, Roger, et al. *The Design of Educational Exhibits*. London: Unwin Hyman Ltd., 1982.
- Munley, Mary Ellen. *Catalysts for Change*. Washington: The Kellogg Projects in Museum Education, 1986.
- Neumann, Erich. *Art and the Creative Unconscious*. Princeton: Bollingen Series, 1959.
- Rivard, Rene. "Opening Up the Museum." In *Sourcebook*. Chicago: American Association of Museums, 1990.
- Scardamalia, Marlene. "Computer-Supported Intentional Learning Environments." *Journal of Educational Computing Research* 5, no.1 (1989):51-68.
- Screven, C. G. "Exhibitions and Information Centers: Some Principles and Approaches." *Curator* 29, no.2 (1986):109-137.
- Schön, Donald. *Educating the Reflective Practitioner: Toward a New Design for Teaching and Learning in the Professions*. California: Jossey-Bass Publications, 1987.
- Silverman, Lois. "Of Us and Other 'Things': The Content and Functions of Talk by Adult Visitor Pairs in an Art and a History Museum." PhD Dissertation (Communications), University of Pennsylvania, 1990.
- Teather, L. "Museum Studies: Reflecting on Reflective Practice." *Journal of Museum Management* 10, no.4 (Dec.1991).
- Vygotsky, L. S. *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Boston: Harvard University Press, 1978.
- Williams, P. "Educational Excellence in Art Museums: An Agenda for Reform." *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 19, no.2 (1985):105-123.
- Worts, D. "Shaking the Foundations: Recent Audience Research at the Art Gallery of Ontario." In *Visitor Studies: Theory, Research and Practice, Volume 2* (Proceedings of the 1989 Visitor Studies Conference). Jacksonville: Centre for Social Design, 1989, pp.203-210.
- Worts, D. "The Computer as Catalyst: Experiences at the Art Gallery of Ontario." *ILVS Review* 1, no.2 (1990):91-108.

The role of museums in natural history conservation: A western Canadian perspective

W. Bruce McGillivray

Western Canada is a region that assimilates much biological and cultural diversity under a single rubric. Generally it includes the three prairie provinces – Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta – but excludes British Columbia as a biological and cultural outlier.

The prairie provinces share parts of three large natural regions – the grasslands, aspen parkland and boreal forest. All three regions can be considered threatened habitats. It is estimated that in Alberta, two-thirds of the Mixed Grassland and 95% of the Northern Fescue Grassland have been lost.(1) Ninety-five percent of the Aspen Parkland is gone and extensive logging leases granted recently for development in the boreal forest are a concern to conservationists. Comparable figures for losses of particular habitats in Saskatchewan and Manitoba are given by Rowe(1) and Coupland.(2)

Concomitant with habitat loss is the disappearance of species that are habitat specialists. Several prairie species have either been extirpated recently or are threatened with extinction. Well-known examples include Swift Fox (*Vulpes velox* – extirpated but reintroduced), Greater Prairie Chicken (*Tympanuchus cupido* – extirpated), Black-footed Ferret (*Mustela nigripes* – extirpated), Burrowing Owl (*Athene cunicularia* – threatened), Baird's Sparrow (*Ammodramus bairdi* – threatened) and Mountain Plover (*Charadrius montanus* – endangered).(3)

Museums are rarely considered to be significant players in either the study or conservation of endangered habitats and species. In fact, museum



W. Bruce McGillivray received his PhD degree in Systematics and Ecology from the University of Kansas. He was Curator of Ornithology at the Provincial Museum of Alberta from 1983-1990. Currently, he is Assistant Director, Natural History at the PMA.