Museums as Status Symbols III:
A Speculative Examination of Motives Among Those Who Love Being in Museums, Those Who Go to "Have Been" and Those Who Refuse to Go

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Introduction

My research and writing interests have, especially within the past decade, centered on the consumption of cultural objects and cultural experiences. While that subject encompasses a bit more than museums and museum visiting, there is a very substantial overlap and I have participated in perhaps two dozen empirical studies of museum visitors and non-visitors (i.e., those who express a distinct preference not to visit museums). I have also produced a series of papers, published in the journals of a variety of disciplines, on museum visitors and visiting behaviors (Kelly, 1986). Here, I would like to present one set of generalizations on visitor stratification that have grown out of that work.

The Redundancy of Demographic Studies

My first observation will come as no surprise to most of you. It is that museum visitor studies primarily concerned with demographics are likely to produce little of theoretical or strategic interest. We know from the hundreds of studies conducted in North America, Western Europe, and among Pacific Rim nations that museum visitors usually have higher levels of educational attainment, more elevated occupational status, and higher incomes than the average citizen in the countries in question (see Note 1). In the hundreds of studies I have reviewed, not one deviates significantly from this pattern. Despite the considerable efforts of some museum professionals to broaden their appeal, museums have traditionally been and continue to be elitist institutions.

Making Distinctions Among Visitors

Despite the apparent homogeneity of the museum visitor population, not all visitors are alike. Are there meaningful ways in which visitors may be distinguished from one another? Since not all well-educated, affluent

individuals visit museums, how may we explain who will and who will not visit museums?

Sheldon Annis (1974) and Nelson Graburn (1977) have each characterized the museum as a "behavioral space." They suggest there are social, cognitive, and even sacred reasons for visiting museums. Their classification scheme is useful for many purposes but does little towards explaining why a given museum was chosen or in distinguishing among museum visitors, since a given individual may at one time or another employ museums for each of those reasons. Other schemes such as Robbins and Robbins' (1981) frequent-visitor, infrequent-visitor, non-visitor classifications serve to distinguish among visitor subpopulations but are not particularly helpful when attempting to discover why one visits a given museum. Among the most informative approaches I have seen for fitting the museum-visit decision in perspective is Hood's (1983), which employs psychographics techniques to link life-style preferences and museum visiting. Of course, no single analytical technique is likely to tell us everything we want to know about a given visitor decision outcome. The approach I am describing today is certainly no exception, but I have found it useful in thinking about the motives underlying museum visits and/or museum behaviors and I hope it will serve as a stimulus for discussion in this session. It distinguishes between those who visit museums because they love being there and those who visit in order to attain a state of "having been."

Those who go to museums because they enjoy being there bring with them sufficient information (through past experience and/or education) to relate in a meaningful manner to the objects in the museum's collection. Such persons possess what Bourdieu (1984) has called "the code" (i.e., the academic models by which art objects or artifacts are to be interpreted) and they have been socially conditioned to define museum visiting as "meaningful leisure" (Felson, 1976). They embody the qualities curators and designers presuppose when they are designing museum exhibitions and programming, even though they are becoming a smaller and smaller segment of the overall museum visitor population. For lack of a more imaginative label, I will refer to these visitors as "Traditional Visitors." Traditional Visitors are likely to possess two qualities that distinguish them from other visitors: (1) They have been conditioned from childhood to be a museum visitor, and (2) their post-secondary education is likely to be in the arts and humanities.

Social symbolism underlies museum visits motivated by the desire to attain a state of "having been." The most likely "having-been" motive is based upon the recommendation of "significant others" (Reisman, Glazer, and Denney,1950). For example, if I mention to a friend (or someone I would like as a friend) that I will be going to Paris, I am immediately informed that I *must* visit The Musée D'Orsay or The Rodin or The Louvre or the Pompidou Centre. I feel I must make the visit even if there is little

inherent interest for me in that museum. Otherwise I will appear indifferent to my friend's advice (and taste). This helps account for the 30% to 35% of visitors to well-known museums in North America and Western Europe who do not actually enter the galleries. It also helps explain the large number of individuals who visit museums while travelling but who never visit the museums in their home city (Graburn, 1982).

One might also seek to "acquire" a visit to a given museum simply because it is presumed to be consistent with ones standing in a community (i.e., it is status congruent). Museum visiting and the participation in what Gans (1974) refers to as "high culture" is associated by visitors and non- visitors alike with high social status. This has been confirmed by Kohn (1977), Lipset (1979) and Mason (1981); by visitor and non-visitor respondent groups in several studies in which I have participated; and, of course, by all the demographically-based visitor studies referred to above.

In some respects, one may characterize those who seek to attain a state of "having been" as pilgrims. They wish to be transformed through their museum visit (although this would rarely if ever be verbalized). No longer are they relegated to the group among their peers who have yet to visit the Musée D'Orsay. Like Haji, they are not changed in kind, but they are somehow more worthy among their kind. They have established "communitas" with their fellow visitors. This analog to pilgrimage has attracted a great deal of attention among anthropologists and at least one scholar has drawn a stage-by-stage comparison between a visit to Mecca and a visit to a cultural tourism destination (Moore, 1980).

Whether one visits to gain the approval of ones significant others or because it seems appropriate for someone of standing in the community, social visibility is a critical factor. This is the non-market-driven equivalent of Veblen's (1899) "conspicuous consumption " (i.e., pragmatically useless forms of behavior requiring many years to learn). It is not sufficient to visit a given museum; one must also acquire evidence of having visited (MacCannell, 1976). Virtually all museum visitors who avoid the exhibitions (and a high proportion of all visitors) visit the museum shop and/or bookstore. Note, also, that those who visit a given museum for symbolic purposes need visit only once, unlike traditional visitors who may return many times to a given museum. There are a number of other significant differences between symbolic and traditional visitors, but time will not permit a full discussion of those differences.

In previous studies I have labeled those who visit museums for symbolic purposes as "New Visitors." Although I have subsequently realized that some symbolic visitors are not new visitors, for purposes of consistency I will stick with that term. New Visitors represent a significant and growing segment of all museum visitors. An explanation for why the New Visitor segment is growing is presented below.

Change in the Character of Educational Attainment

A higher proportion of our population is attaining university-level education. In doing so they become part of what Linder (1970) refers to as "the harried leisure class" or what I have labelled as New Visitors. They acquire status and, with it, a new set of prescribed discretionary leisure activities. Principal among those are a variety of high-culture activities. In the past, a high level of educational attainment would have involved acquisition of the curatorial code as well (Kelly, 1987), and an increase in the ranks of Traditional Visitors. That no longer holds, however. In the technological or "Post-Modern" age, education for the bulk of our young people is not focussed on the arts and the humanities. It is, instead, technically based. They are not getting the "code." So, on the one hand, they are going to museums because that is what educated people are expected to do but, on the other, they have neither the understanding nor the motivation required to appreciate museum exhibitions and programming. Interviews of museum visitors who *do not* view exhibitions on a given visit reveal a preponderance of technically-oriented persons.

Post-Modernism and Its Implications

Post-modernism is characterized by a related phenomenon of importance to the nature of museum visiting (Halpin, 1987). Visitors wish to experience rather than to acquire knowledge of the museum and its collection. They wish to interpret rather than have objects interpreted for them. This implies a very different set of expectations among museum new visitors than has been traditional. It means that affect may be more important than cognition and participation more critical than outcome. This is diametrically opposed to the expectations museum professionals have of their visitors.

Why Do the Vast Majority of the Population Avoid Museums?

This is easy. They avoid museums because they prefer to spend their discretionary leisure time doing something other than visiting museums. Leisure time is valued time. They prefer activities other than museum visiting because they perceive those other activities to be more worthwhile. One can neither benefit from nor enjoy experiences one does not understand. So long as museum professionals produce exhibitions and programs intellectually accessible to a small (and dwindling) proportion of the population, that 20% to 25% of the potential audience is all that will visit museums. This is true not because curators and designers are indifferent, but because they are unwilling to modify the manner of presentation and the interpretation of their collections so those without "the

code" can make sense of their offerings. To the museum community, any deviation from traditional methods of interpretation or exhibit design constitutes a compromise – a diminution of quality (c.f., Ames, 1986). The end result are presentations intelligible only to other museum professionals, university students in the disciplines covered by the museum in question, and a few exceptionally well-informed outsiders. This is particularly true of fine arts museums, of which the National Gallery of Canada is a conspicuous example, and even more particularly true in the presentation of contemporary art. Two classes of reasons are given for avoiding fine arts museums: (1) Total lack of understanding of non-representational art. It is seen as being bizarre or "silly;" and (2) A sense that the viewer is being "put down" . . . the curator and the artist are enjoying a joke at the visitor's expense. Most non-visitors indicate that they would not resent contemporary art exhibits (and "resent" is the appropriate term) if some explanation were given for why an object was selected or why it was seen as being "art" by those designing the exhibition. If any explanation is given at all, it is likely unintelligible to all but a handful of viewers and (based on personal experience) may be beyond the understanding of the artist as well.

My belief is that museum exhibitions and programming are inaccessible as much through ineffectualness as through inherent difficulties in understanding the subject matter. Curators and designers are extremely reluctant to articulate exhibition or program objectives in such a way that success or failure in attaining their own objectives can be assessed. They are even more reluctant to actually attempt such an assessment. I don't wish to minimize the difficulties of articulating exhibition goals nor in their measurement, but so long as museum professionals do not receive feedback from those for whom their exhibitions are ostensibly intended, their audiences will be limited.

The consequences of inaccessibility include not only limited visitor populations but limited public support as well. Any museum that *appears* indifferent to negative public reaction in a country where over 95% of museum resources come from some level of government must have an institutional death wish – especially when that government is looking for every possible excuse to withdraw financial support. This comment holds for public response to controversial or pioneering work as well. The Jessie Helms and Felix Holtmanns of this world would not enjoy the press coverage they obtain nor risk negative public reaction to their redneck antics if they did not have substantial public support.

At least in Canada, there are few signs that the inherent elitism associated with most museums will diminish. I base that comment on the response of the Canadian museum community to efforts of the Canadian Museum of Civilization to attract a more diversified audience.

The Case of the Canadian Museum of Civilization

The Canadian Museum of Civilization (referred to hereafter as the CMC) has just entered its third year in its new building across the river from Ottawa. The CMC is one of four national museums in Canada and has as its central focus human history. It was known as the Museum of Man until just before it moved into its new (incredibly expensive) home.

CMC's Mission Statement expressed a commitment to cover the history of all Canadians for all Canadians. For George MacDonald, CMC's Director, serving all Canadians represented a serious commitment and he sought new methods of interpretation and programming in theatre, from new communication technologies, and from exhibition-centered tourist attractions such as Epcot Center and the West Edmonton Mall that drew large numbers of visitors. He also arranged for representatives of those Canadian peoples whose artifacts are central to the collection to organize and present interpretive materials. Unfortunately, he also stated on several public occasions that curators usually have about the same degree of understanding of the cultures on which they are "experts" as a three-year old from that culture. George also indicated that he felt the total fixation on the collection was counterproductive; too much (up to two-thirds) of the museum budget had to be devoted to maintenance of the reserve collection. He recommended large scale deaccessioning of the large national collections to regional and local museums less fortunate in their ability to acquire important artifacts. His observations may or may not be valid, but they certainly did little towards winning support for himself or the CMC.

Others within CMC were heavily involved in the planning process, of course, although not all with the degree of enthusiasm Dr. MacDonald demonstrated; in fact, many were vocal in their opposition to his vision and worked to prevent deviations from conventional museum practices. At the same time, the museum community and the majority of journalists specializing in cultural affairs were quite critical of what they began referring to as "Disneyworld North." Mention the Museum of Civilization or George MacDonald at a gathering of the Canadian Museums Association and it was like repeating the punchline of an old and well known joke, it was unnecessary to say anything else in order to get a big laugh.

I have included this brief description of the CMC experience in this paper partially because it illustrates that the difficulties associated with attracting non-traditional visitors to museums are, in some respects, self-imposed. Also, I participated in both the formalization of the CMC Mission or Vision Statement and the planning directed towards attracting non-traditional visitors to the museum. George MacDonald had read several of my papers on traditional vs. new visitors and cultural tourism and, based upon at least some acceptance of my ideas, he asked me to develop a plan directed towards attracting non-traditional visitors and tourists to the CMC. I accepted without hesitation. Not only was this a once-in-a-lifetime

opportunity to test some of the propositions put forward earlier in this paper, I genuinely believe National Museums such as the CMC have a moral obligation to make their collections and programming accessible to all those whose cultures are represented.

Given the success that CMC has had in attracting non-traditional visitors and in sustaining its visitor levels once the novelty of the new building began to wear off, it would be very satisfying to say that my work on marketing strategy was directly responsible. In fact, although the spirit of my recommendations on programming has been implemented, little of the marketing was ever implemented.

The financial overrides on the building construction delays and the political hassles following a premature opening (dictated by political rather than curatorial or directorial expediencies) more than exhausted their operating funds. Only now, two years after opening, do they have that portion of the collection on exhibit that was planned for the opening. Only now, two years after opening, do any of the staff have the breathing space to ask themselves about public responses. And only now, two years after opening, have exhibitions based on the CMC's collection become as important as it was intended to be at the time of opening. About all I can say is that nothing that has occurred thus far refutes the new visitor hypotheses and there is most definitely evidence that non-traditional visitors can not only be attracted to a museum, they also can be enticed to return again and again. Overall, one might say that the CMC is a critical failure and a popular success and, sooner or later, the opportunity may still present itself for a more systematic test of the hypotheses growing out of my visitor research.

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Note

1. This refers to visitors to museums of fine art, human history, and natural history. Science centers, heritage centers, historical villages, and similar attractions have somewhat more egalitarian visitor populations.