

Palace or Powerstation? Museums Today

Mr Duncan Robinson, former Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, delivered the 2007 Isaiah Berlin Lecture. In this edited extract he describes some of the challenges that museums face today.

MUSEUMS are, fundamentally, about images and about objects. There is always a temptation to define them in terms of what they do, socially and economically, but we must not confuse cause and effect: what museums are with what they can achieve. *Collections* differentiate museums from all other public institutions and acquisitions are the life-blood of collecting institutions. They come in all shapes and sizes, from a variety of sources including gifts, bequests and purchases. At times acquiring them can be difficult, expensive and also controversial. Take for instance that incomparable painting by Raphael, 'The Madonna of the Pinks' purchased by the National Gallery in 2004 (Figure 1). I did not envy the Director as he shouldered the particularly difficult task of raising public money to pay for a very small, very expensive, cult object – by that I mean a picture of a subject unfamiliar to many and offensive to some. But of course history will side with the Director and Trustees, because they took the lead in saving for the nation a pre-eminent work of art, an object of enduring beauty which will inspire and uplift visitors to the National Gallery from all over the world for years to come. It takes courage to declare that works like these are literally priceless – worth far more than even the hideously inflated prices their owners sometimes demand.

Two years ago in Cambridge we faced a similar, though in some ways easier, challenge. The Macclesfield Psalter was seen as a national treasure not least because it was produced in this country. On the other hand, because it was small and bound, it was difficult to answer all of those questions about accessibility and impact that are now considered to be of such crucial importance by the funding bodies. It is I am afraid a feature of the current climate, one consistent with my fears about defining museums in terms of their utility, that funders tend to place more emphasis upon the immediate, measurable benefits to be derived from their



Figure 1: Raphael, *The Madonna of the Pinks* ('*La Madonna dei Garofani*'). (The National Gallery, London)

investments in objects, than upon their intrinsic qualities, or the long-term benefits they hold in store for future generations. The same is true, I might add, in the case of the conditional exemption of pre-eminent works of art from capital taxation.

However, in the case of the Macclesfield Psalter I need not have worried as much as I did. The response to the Museum's efforts, and to the national appeal launched on its

behalf by the Art Fund, demonstrated a surprising level of public support; sufficient, in the end, to convince the Trustees of the National Heritage Memorial Fund to commit to the purchase. And in what seemed at the time to be a vindication of the Museum's efforts, when the psalter finally returned to the east of England, its region of origin, and was placed on display, for several days thousands of people queued to catch a

The curator wields enormous power, simply by selecting the exhibits and less simply by arranging them. To illustrate the point, I offer a comparison of two photographs taken at different times of the same paintings in the same space. The Courtauld Gallery in the Fitzwilliam Museum was designed in the 1930s. The earlier photograph (*top*, taken c. 1970) shows the gallery as Sydney Cockerell installed it initially, applying the somewhat austere aesthetic of the Arts and Crafts movement including truth to materials. The more recent one (*bottom*) shows it after it was refurbished by Michael Jaffé, in 1975. His aim was to increase the impact of these three great masterpieces from the Founder's collection by suggesting the opulence of their original settings – in the Emperor's palace in Prague for instance, or the Palais d'Orleans – not so much an attempt at accurate, historical reconstruction, as an act of empathy and evocation.



glimpse of this rare treasure of medieval art. So much for presuppositions about wall-power.

Allow me to offer one more example of a recent acquisition, of Barbara Hepworth's three figures from her 'Family of Man', to make a related point, albeit about an object acquired by a different route (see Figure 2 – next page). The group was standing on the

salt marshes next to the Maltings at Snape in 2000 when it was accepted by H M Treasury in lieu of capital taxes. The figures were placed there originally to mark the bonds of mutual respect and friendship that united the sculptor with the musicians Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears, the *genii loci* so to speak. So, while the sculptures are not site-specific in the strict sense, their present siting adds meaning as well as resonance to them. In

allocating them to the Fitzwilliam Museum, the Department of Culture, Media and Sport therefore stipulated that they should remain *in situ*, unless some over-riding consideration arose to necessitate their removal to the Museum. Let us hope it will not, for here I suggest we have a clear demonstration of one way in which museums can play important regional roles *fuori le mure*, or museums without walls!



Figure 2: *Three figures from the Family of Man. Ancestor I, Ancestor II & Parent I, c. 1970 (bronze) Barbara Hepworth (1903–75). (On loan to the Maltings, Snape, Suffolk/ The Fitzwilliam Museum/ Bowness, Hepworth Estate)*

To retain the regional focus for a moment, there have been two highly positive developments during the past decade: the ‘designation’ of collections as being of national importance irrespective of their ownership and location; and ‘Renaissance in the Regions’, an initiative designed to build regional museums services not as free-standing entities but as museum-based networks throughout the country. With only three of the nine regional hubs fully funded, and the other six capacity-building and in waiting, it is already clear that renaissance works, that it delivers in terms of government’s priorities, socially and economically. In his foreword to ‘Understanding the Future: Priorities for England’s Museums’, published in October 2006, Arts Minister David Lammy writes about museums as ‘community spaces, as mediators between the past and the present, and as agents in a dialogue about who we are and what we might become or achieve’. For those of us within these heterotopia, we could not wish for a more ringing endorsement of our aims and ambitions. On

the other hand I do think that we have to be careful to maintain that distinction I have already emphasised, between what museums are, collections-based institutions devoted to the study and appreciation of the past through material culture surviving into the present – and what they can achieve.

The museum today looks outward, not inward, and in spite of the problems they face in terms of resources, museums have succeeded in moving closer to the centre of the stage of public life. That incurs risks, of increasing regulation for example, and the growing expectation on the part of governments that museums will earn their keep by promoting specific social agendas. While not for one moment denying the importance of those, what museum professionals have to do is remind our funders and stakeholders, tactfully but persistently, that people do not visit museums in order to comply with public policies. As we know from our visitor surveys, their pretexts differ: from schoolchildren following the national curriculum to members of the University of the Third Age;

life-long learners, united in their personal and above all pleasurable pursuit of that ‘increase of learning’ which is integral to the definition of the museum; local residents from across the social spectrum, regular visitors for whom ‘their’ museum is a source of pride and joy; tourists from near and far for some of whom at least their visit is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. I could go on expanding this list, but for all of the above there is one common cause: palace or powerstation, or ideally a combination of the two, unlike so many museologists who cannot see the wood for the trees, millions of museum visitors every year know that the museum is what it is.

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