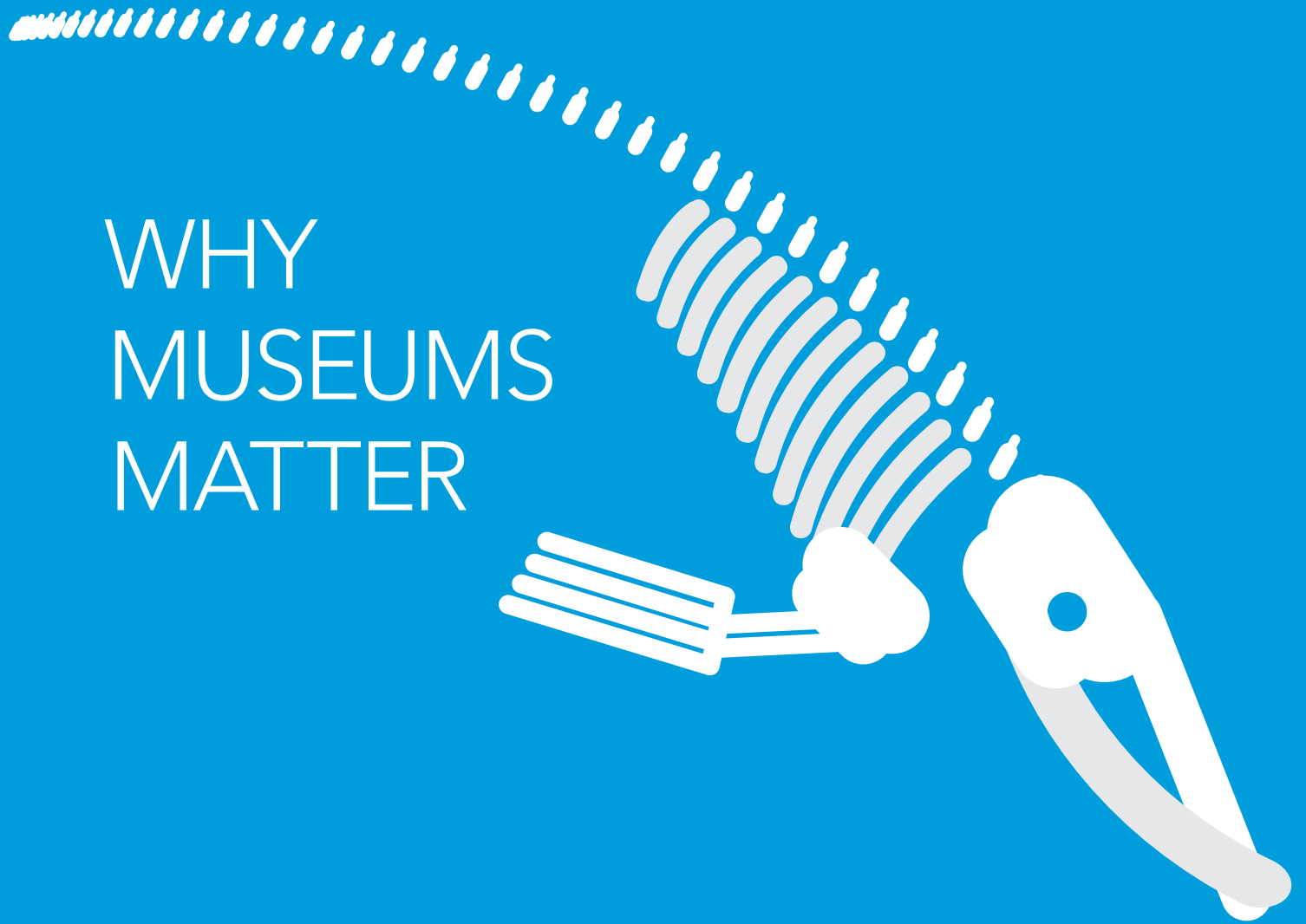


WHY MUSEUMS MATTER



A Reflection on the Value of Museums

Mat Sinclair, MPA, President/CEO of The Discovery

FORWARD

My journey into the museum field started when I was a very small child. I grew up in Portland, Oregon but one set of my grandparents lived in the San Francisco Bay Area. When I was six years old my dad took two weeks off in the summer so we could go down to visit them. It was a big deal! It was also a road trip. Before the sun dared to show its first rays in the morning dawn, Dad packed my mother, brother and a very car-sick prone dog all up in our Ford Pinto station wagon and we headed west.

That's right... for those geography buffs out there you're thinking "isn't San Francisco south of Portland?" Yes, yes it is. But my father decided that a proper road trip was needed and that meant taking highway 101 from Astoria at the mouth of the Columbia River all the way down the Oregon and Northern California coastline. A 12-hour car ride on I-5 just became a 3-day sojourn on the Pacific coast highway.



Exploring the Oregon coastline during one of our many stops

Of course, it wasn't all bad. We camped at state parks on the beach, we ate things we weren't normally allowed to eat, and according to my mother's meticulous record keeping, my brother and I went 87 minutes straight without fighting. A record that holds to this day!

This is where my first memories of museums begins. There was not a historic marker, scenic loop or wide spot on the road that my father skipped. We stood in the footsteps of Lewis and Clark and posed with our hands shading our eyes as we scanned the horizon. We weaved some reed baskets at the Clatsop Nation interpretive center. And most notably for me anyway, we descended into a coastal cave where we witnessed the largest, smelliest, and most fascinating collection of California Sea Lions. That last one was such an accomplishment that upon our departure we slapped a giant yellow bumper sticker on our Pinto declaring to all that we had "Survived Sea Lion Caves!"

Attending museums and informal learning experiences would become a hallmark of my upbringing. A school field trip to our local zoo each spring would mark the assentation of a grade at my elementary school. An evening at our county's historical society meant the acquisition of another rank in Cub Scouts or a merit badge as a Boy Scout a few years later. And of course, my family's regular visits to an enormous science center in my hometown were so frequent that I

began to assume that we were part owners of the place.

It wasn't until my teenage years that I became aware that a job working in a museum was something people could do. I discovered this as I was watching a movie. In an effort to assuage his two restless sons, my father finally broke down and got cable... with HBO! Young people, ask your parents what I mean when I say cable. There was a time before wireless and it... was... GLORIOUS!

So there I sat watching my favorite archeologist/professor who was lashed to the mast of a steam ship pitching in the waves of a storm while the fedora clad villain slapped him around. In one of the most dramatic cinematic moments in all of film, our good guy whose name is Dr. Indiana Jones, slowly lifts his head, blood dripping from his split lip, and looks the baddy in the eyes and declares, "that belongs in a museum!"

I jumped off the couch and yelled, "Damn right Indy!" That was a big moment for me for two reasons. One, it was the first time I swore in front of my mother and as I suspected it would be the last for about the next three decades. It was also a defining moment, as this is when I learned that there were people whose job it was to travel the world with a bull whip, revolver, and leather jacket to gather and protect humanity's history and gather artifacts to put in the museums I was visiting.

Now before we go any further, I want to say that I understand the incredibly complex and troublesome nature of many collections and

artifacts in museums around the world. We'll revisit that later. I also want to assure you that teenaged me was fully aware that Dr. Indiana Jones was a fictional character played by an actor named Han Solo. I'm not dumb. But the seed was planted. The idea that I could possibly have a career in informal education and wander the halls of museums and get paid doing it overtook my other and more obvious career trajectory of joining the ranks of major league baseball.

But how? There was no career fair for museums. My guidance counselor in high school was more concerned with my ability to graduate than the possibility of greater academic pursuits. I didn't even know anybody who worked in a museum to tell me how the magic trick worked of getting one of these coveted jobs. What I did have was a volunteer requirement before I could graduate high school and a science center with a teen volunteer program. And so, the journey of a thousand miles began with this first step.

Entrance into the hallowed ranks of the teen volunteer docent program at my local science center consisted of a rigorous entrance exam that included filling out a form and getting my parents to write a check for \$25 for my uniform and lanyard. Again, younger readers, ask your parents what a check book is and how we used to use these for currency. Once these steps were completed, my career as a museum professional began!

After successful completion in the volunteer program, and more notably my graduation from high school, my museum career took its next step forward... camp counselor. Oh, the power!

WHY MUSEUMS MATTER

I sat upon the throne of awesomeness with dominion over my charges. Even though my frontal cortex was not yet fully developed, my betters had deemed me worthy of overseeing 24 young souls and to impart knowledge on the blank slates of their minds. In retrospect it's possible that some of said knowledge imparted may have had some factual errors. I will spend the balance of my life trying to correct those wrongs, but that's not what this story is about so let's move on.

To the utter surprise of my high school guidance counselor, and I'm willing to bet several others in my orbit at the time, I did indeed gain access to the halls of higher education and began my college career in the pursuit of an education that would advance my plans to stay in the museum profession. I would go on to become a bonified educator and museum administrator. A fedora, bull whip and leather jacket were within my grasp!

The next 17 years read like so many stories from my museum colleagues. One battlefield commission after another I rose in the ranks from part time educator to full time senior leadership. For the past 15 years I have enjoyed the incredible pleasure of leading a few different museums. While it has been said before, I owe a great debt to those who went before me and who gave me opportunities to grow and contribute at every step of my museum career.

Today I live in fear that someone, someday is going to realize that what I do for a living is not a real job and I will be forced to work for a living. A prospect I do not readily welcome. I say this of course



Putting in a hard day's work as Executive Director at Hoyt Arboretum

somewhat in jest, but also because museum work is much more than a career, it's a calling.

To fully understand what I am going on about, I need to explain why museums matter. To do that, we have to break down this incredible body of work into its base components and share some stories and examples to put this thesis into context.

After 25 years of working in the museum field, or a quarter of a century, whichever one makes me sound distinguished but not old, I have gathered some thoughts and some mildly strong opinions about why museums matter. These thoughts and ideas have been slowly collected and gathered over the years, discussed with friends and colleagues, and even occasionally presented as something approaching a fact...or at least a strongly informed idea.

But in the spring of 2020, the board of directors at the Terry Lee Wells Nevada Discovery Museum

(The Discovery) gave me an opportunity to deepen my understanding of this thesis and saw fit to award me with a once in a career opportunity. They sent me on a study sabbatical. I would set off across the country to visit more than 50 museums, to learn their stories, to experience their halls and galleries, and to share ideas.



Terry Lee Wells Nevada Discovery Museum in Reno, Nevada

I am assuming that this paper will be studied by generations of museum professionals and that museum leaders and professors will build entire training programs around my findings, so let me add this critical historical note to provide some context. While my sabbatical was planned for the summer of 2020, in February of the same year the entire globe descended into the global SARS-COVID 19 pandemic. Travel and visiting with my peers would be postponed for the next two years.

After enough of humanity had regained their senses and the war on science subsided (somewhat), and countless members of our community had suffered terrible loss, the pandemic began to ease. The virus started to become manageable, and my studies on this topic could continue. I hold that my thesis is more relevant in a “post-pandemic” world, but only time will tell.

One final note; while I have written and defended a graduate thesis, this is not that. This is intended as a narrative of my observations and the culmination of 25 years of working in the field (with another 25 to go?). There are no footnotes, no citations, and a metric ton of opinions. Take or leave these findings as you will, but I would ask you to consider your own experience visiting museums and layer these filters over your memories and see what rings true.

And to my museum friends and colleagues who met with me on sabbatical or have worked with me, for me, or near me over the years. I thank you for your time. I thank you for sharing your ideas and passions with me. I thank you for teaching me and shaping me into the museum professional that I am today and will be tomorrow. This is a special fraternity to be in because I have never met another museum colleague who wasn't willing to share their time and experience with me. So... most of what follows is your fault. For that I owe you a great debt.

So why do museums matter? I am so very happy you asked. Museums matter because they provide three essential functions. Museums matter because they:

1. Curate the human experience
2. Create unique learning environments
3. Cultivate curiosity and inspiration

To understand what I mean, let's take a deeper dive into each of these ideas and examine the complexities and curiosities of each. ■

CURATE THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Perhaps the most recognizable museum job to the lay person is the museum curator. It is a job title that almost anyone can recognize but almost nobody can describe when pressed to do so. Much like the job title, most visitors to museums understand the idea that the museum has “curated” items for display but have little to no understanding of what goes on behind the scenes prior to an exhibit opening in a museum gallery.

To curate simply means to select, organize and display objects or works of art in a museum or gallery setting. Of course, this work is anything but simple and the people who do this work do so in a very thoughtful and intentional way. Often this means dealing with priceless works of art, history, and science, but it can often involve the creation of brand-new artifacts and objects of current or recent human activities that will have significance for generations to come. It is the job of the curator

to know which items, content and experiences are meaningful and significant, and which are not. Curators are some of the most insightful and intelligent people I have ever had the pleasure of meeting.

It is at this point that we need to address a substantial elephant in the room. I want to acknowledge the incredibly troubled history that many great museums around the globe are facing. The sad and ugly truth of those with priceless artifacts and works of art is that in some cases they have those items through dubious and sometimes nefarious means. The galleries and collection rooms of some of the most recognizable museums around the world are housing and displaying items that are the result of expeditions mounted and funded by wealthy elites who “found” the treasures of ancient artistic masters and long past dynasties of indigenous peoples, and straight up took them home as the spoils of their expeditions. In the words of a kindergarten philosopher “finders keepers” was the attitude of the time.

These artifacts were taken from people, cultures and governments who lacked either the skills, means, or ability to prevent the looting of national treasures and cultural artifacts. Others came about as the result of the spoils of war. Some of the most heinous offenses were committed by the Nazis in their invasion of Europe, but they do not stand alone in their offenses. Still others came about through man’s age-old sin of greed, power and



Ricky Gervais playing the role of the world’s most grumpy curator in “A Night at the Museum”.

status. Regardless of the means, many museums find themselves in possession of ill-gotten gains and are wrestling with the challenge of what to do in an age of reconciliation. This is a story that is continuing to be written.

While these collections tend to show up prominently in art and natural history galleries, the issue is not limited to this genre of museum. Items are routinely donated to museums of all types and sizes, and few have the resources to verify the provenance of donated items. Fewer still know that they need to do this work. It is the uglier side of museum work, but one that is receiving a great deal of attention and there are reasons to be optimistic.

While on sabbatical I had the honor of spending time at one of the great natural history museums of the world. Greater still was the time I spent with its director. He was a brilliant and insightful man who has dedicated his career and life's work to the museum field. As a classically trained archeologist he was quite candid with me as he shared his struggles with this issue and acknowledged that probably more than half of the over six million items in their collections had some degree of problematic provenance. Some much worse than others, but it gives a sense of scale to the issue.

His museum had recently decided to repatriate an entire set of artifacts that, bluntly put, was stolen from an African nation nearly a century ago. The collections were comprised of significant cultural artifacts and by any reasonable measure are considered priceless. Through a long and complicated process, these items were returned

to the nation of origin only to be loaned back to the museum for display. While this may seem superficial in nature, it is a significant act. These artifacts are no longer the property of the museum, and the loaning nation can recall the items at any time. Ownership and power were restored through this act. Furthermore, the museum has incorporated the story of repatriation and the history of its journey to the museum into its current display of artifacts. Even our ugly past is deserving of curation and display and should be used in the education of future museum visitors.

There is another story of curators working diligently to protect and restore artifacts to their proper place and owners that is often overlooked. By now we have all heard the stories of "The Greatest Generation." The young men and women of free nations around the globe who responded to the call for service during World War II. For the most part the stories we know and celebrate are of the men who went to the front lines and the women who stepped onto factory floors to supply the machines of war. Young men and women from every city, town and village answered the call.

But there was another group that heard the call to service and viewed the horrors of war through a different lens. As the Nazis and the Fuhrer stripped Europe and its residents of their lives, they added to their crimes by stealing and hoarding art and artifacts from every nation and home they invaded. Museum directors and professionals understood immediately that these symbols, relics, and places of historic value were critical and needed saving and protecting. The rebuilding of nations and the citizens who called them home

WHY MUSEUMS MATTER

would never be made whole without their art, culture and historically symbolic sites preserved and restored. And before the first boots landed on Omaha and Utah beaches in Normandy, France, the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Architecture (or MFAA) unit was formed. They were referred to as The Monuments Men.



MFAA members recovering art in the salt mines in Germany

In a nod to history and the times of the day, the name of the unit is largely accurate in that most of the 40 plus roster of the initial unit was comprised of men. And not particularly spry ones. The average age of the MFAA unit was 41 and despite most members holding advanced degrees, only a few were made officers. That is not to say that there were no women involved. In fact, one woman in particular, Ms. Rose Valland, played a critical role in tracking and restoring looted art. This came at great personal risk and under the watchful and paranoid eyes of the SS and Herman Goring. Her work as a curator is worthy of its own telling and you should look up her story and learn more about one of the least known and arguably most significant curators to ever live.

The task of the Monuments Men was to follow along with the front lines of the war, and sometimes in front of the front lines, to help allied troops avoid the unnecessary destruction of architectural sites that were significant to the cultures and communities that were under attack. Often this coincided with protecting the artifacts and precious works of art within those buildings. While the act of protecting what was left was a crucial mission, more vital was the recovery of stolen art and artifacts that the Nazi war machine had systematically looted and was in the act of sending home to the father land.

It's a quirky if not downright silly mission on its surface. A bunch of middle-aged men trampling around in the ruins of war, often right under the hail of bullets, looking for Michael Angelo's "Madonna" or a priceless altarpiece stolen from European churches. But dig deeper and you can see the mission of the museum curator. To go to extreme lengths to preserve at all costs the few and remaining vestiges of those that had gone before. The fragile record of humanity that could so easily slip through the fingers of our everyday lives was left to the curators of the world to capture, preserve, and protect. The work of the MFAA would provide the cultural seedlings that a new and healing Europe would so desperately need following the war. And today, you and I can go to some of the world's most recognizable museums and historic sites and benefit from their work and sacrifice.

Of course, not every story of curation begins with a rare artifact or historic site. Afterall, the act of curation at its core elements means no more

than to select, organize and display objects in a museum or gallery setting. No more is this reality brought to life than in the halls and galleries of science and children's museums. While we are still likely to find items behind glass or on a high shelf that may be rare and priceless, safe from the reach of untrained hands, in these museums the act of curation begins in the minds of the people who make and create the museum experience, often from scratch.

Take for example one of the very first, and most prestigious children's museums found on the east coast of the United States. In this museum, the staff were inspired and empowered with an idea. One meeting followed another. One dollar was raised and then another. A partnership halfway around the world was formed, and before long an entire museum gallery was transformed into a REAL Japanese house. Now this may not sound like a big accomplishment, but let's think about this through the eyes of a 5-year-old museum visitor.

Many of us have been blessed with the opportunity to travel. Can you remember the time you first visited a truly foreign nation? I'm not talking about one that speaks the same language and perhaps has some subtle differences in customs and cuisines. I'm talking a foreign land with completely different languages, customs, and environments. It is scary, it is exciting, it is disorienting. And more times than not, memories and experiences are formed that create lasting impressions and lifelong learnings.

And that's exactly what the curators at this children's museum have done. They have completely recreated to the last crucial details a "day in the life" of someone living in a country and a culture half a world away. Children can simply step inside an exhibit gallery and be transported tens of thousands of miles away into the home of a typical Japanese family and immediately be immersed in the sights, sounds, and experiences of a foreign land without ever leaving the familiarity of their local museum.

Science museums do this work exceedingly well. Rather than creating places that allow us to learn through play and imagination, science museum curators use the wonders of the natural world, and the science behind them, to create immersive hands-on interactive learning experiences.

Whether that's stepping into a mini tornado or utilizing a giant Tesla coil to simulate a lightning storm INSIDE the building, these museums are designing, engineering and building their artifacts in basements and workshops in order to provide the same sense of wonder and excitement found standing in front of an ancient marble statue or an articulated dinosaur skeleton.

One more great example of curation can be found in the world's public gardens, zoos, and aquariums where curation takes on a whole new meaning and value. In this context the collection of artifacts and the subsequent education and inspiration they bring takes on an entirely different significance. Curators in this context are quite often involved in the preservation of life itself.

WHY MUSEUMS MATTER

Paintings and sculptures are amazing, and I love a dinosaur skeleton, but a rare, endangered animal or the bloom of a near extinct flower or tree demonstrates the value of curation better than any prior example. On my travels I had the rare opportunity to come (near) face to face with a critically endangered black rhinoceros. At first, he did what most animals do in the afternoon heat of a mid-western zoo...he was laying in the mud keeping cool. Then, without warning, he slowly got to his feet and began to trot around his enclosure, stopping occasionally to take in his surroundings and assess his situation.



A black rhino checking out visitors at the Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago

I could not take my eyes off him. These are animals that are so critically endangered in the wild that armed rangers roam the savanna living alongside them to protect them from poachers. The sad truth is that it is possible the last wild living example of these magnificent creatures could disappear in my lifetime, and here was one staring me in the eyes. The zoo in which he was living was active in a breeding program as well as educating the millions of visitors that come each year about the rhino's story and how similar ones are playing out across the globe. The power of this experience would not exist without the dedicated efforts of a curator.

The first time I became the chief executive of a museum, it was of a 250-acre botanical garden called an arboretum. Trees were our specialty, and we had more than 2,300 species represented in our collection, including 67 that are considered rare or endangered. The prized item in our collections was prominently displayed in our visitor center, it was the original map and landscape plan designed by none other than John Olmstead. This piece would be at home hanging in the gallery of the MET in New York or the Museum of Fine Art in Boston, but here it was hanging in a visitor center in Portland, Oregon.

But the map wasn't the prize. Travel down a steep trail into the conifer collection, and planted along the ravine are a collection of Meta Sequoias, or Giant Red Woods that were planted in the 1920's. These trees tower over you today and live up to their name, and yet they are still practically infants as they will live for several hundred more years. Tucked further into the collection you will find a rare sub-species called the Dawn Redwood. This is a tree that science long ago confirmed grew only in a remote part of China and was believed to be extinct, only to be found in the fossil records. And yet, here stands a handful of living legends.

An earlier expedition to China during the turn of the last century came across a bunch of scattered seeds. Misidentified, they were planted as a different known redwood species and only in maturity and with a century of science was it confirmed that these trees were back from the dead. Still incredibly rare, we have the ability to visit a museum and reach back to a time before... well, us to be blunt, and experience the world as it once was.

The curator who worked at that arboretum when I was there shared this amazing story with me. He is still there, tending to the trees. He is a real living Lorax. He is among the many hard-working men and women who work in the back halls of museums around the globe. Experts in fields we don't even know exist, they go to painstaking lengths to select, organize and display objects or works of human creation and those of the natural world in our museum halls, galleries and trails. And they do this work for one simple reason: to make us cry.

Ok, it might just be me, but I cried in art museums staring at the works of the great masters. I cried in an Arthur exhibit in a children's museum recalling the memories of reading the children's classic books with my own kids. I cried in the presence of a black rhino as I saw him stand in his own majestic beauty under the shadow of his grim demise. I

cried in the botanical gardens smelling the sweet end of summer blossoms of the trees and flowers in the collections (though that one could have been allergies). I cried in the immense shadow of the most complete T-rex ever discovered and wondered what it must have been like to see her in real life.

And all of that is the fault of a curator doing the important work of knitting together and putting on display the content and collections of their museum for all to see and learn. Museums matter because they curate our collective human experience. ■

CREATE UNIQUE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

When I was in grade school, Hasbro Toys figured out the best way to sell their products was to create a cartoon series that kids would want to watch so they would beg their parents to buy them the corresponding toys at the store, allowing them to continue the fun at home and on their own terms. Basically, cartoons were the gateway drug to the more hardcore action of toy collecting. And brother I was hooked! My drug of choice at the time was G.I. Joe. I'm not talking the manly version of the Ken doll with kung fu grip. No, for me it was the next generation of action figure, the 3.75-inch (or 95 MM for those of us in the community) that captured my attention.



One of the first of many to join my carefully curated collection

There were a couple of reasons for this. First, the characters I watched on the screen were replicated in this new scale and held an impressive amount of detail. Second, they were cheap and easy to obtain given my limited income from my bi-monthly allowance. And third, they rivaled my brother's collection of Star Wars figures, but my guys could bend their elbows and knees and come with extra gear! I mean come on!

In my backyard, in the corner, behind a deck, was a mound of dirt. On the reconnaissance map that I drew in my bedroom it was called "Freedom Mountain." I was given authority by the local government (my father) to excavate the mountain and build roads, bridges, and other landscape features needed to approximate the scenes I saw on TV and the sadistically attractive set ups in the commercials used to sell me my drug of choice. My model building skills, combined with my scaled approach to micro-landscaping, made Freedom Mountain a destination for every grade school kid within a three-block radius. To summarize, I was cool.

What I didn't know at the time, and would learn later in my career, is that I was a maker. I was envisioning a scene in my mind and then using tools and materials around me to turn that vision into a reality. What I was making I would also later learn was something called a diorama. This was no shoe box with sad play dough figures my friends. No sir, I had created an entire military base at

3 ¾" scale. There was a guard house painstakingly constructed out of craft sticks. Radio towers erected from tin foil-wrapped cardboard tubes. A river (stream really) with a beach where actual water lapped at the shoreline. If one was forced to sum it all up, what I made was magnificent.

And then I had the opportunity to visit a natural history museum. You can imagine the rollercoaster of emotions I experienced as my young eyes fell upon a diorama constructed by a museum. As a fellow maker and builder, I doffed my cap to whomever had constructed the scene in front of my eyes. A 5 mm scale model of an ancient civilization laid out in perfect detail, all behind a pristine sheet of glass and expertly lit. I stood in front of the work of some great master and my mind was filled with wonder, and blind jealousy at the exacting expert craftsmanship and superior material choices. Can you believe there wasn't so much as a hint of tin foil in their display?

Dioramas are a staple in the museum community, and while they are trending out of style, I will still drive at least 200 miles from wherever I currently am to see a well-made diorama. Time has not been gentle to this medium as they are very difficult to update and change as our learning evolves. But they stand as a testament to the museum field's seemingly endless ability to create amazing and unique learning environments.

If it is the curator's job to research and collect artifacts for a museum and its collections, then it is the job of the exhibit designers and museum educators to understand how to display those items, manufacture original artifacts and content,

and communicate the significance of the exhibit to the visitor. It is this ecosystem of museum professionals that are responsible for creating what we often refer to as the "ah-ha" moments so often found in museums. If you've not had one of these moments, first let me say I'm sorry that your life is not yet complete.

But if you have, or you're wondering what I mean, the "ah-ha" moment is that precise spot in space-time when you as a visitor in a museum are struck by a thunderbolt of knowledge, understanding, or dare I say enlightenment. It's the experience when you say something like, "I never knew that," or "wow, that's pretty amazing." In another context it can take on a heavier meaning like, "that must have been so terrible," or "how could that have happened?" It is a moment of profound understanding, and no one delivers these better or more frequently than the staff at your favorite museum.

One of the greatest challenges I have in serving as a museum professional is explaining to partners and donors the incredible complexity involved in the exhibit design and creation process. It is easy for the uninitiated to look at an exhibit somewhere and think, "how hard is that?" After all, nearly every one of us at some point had to spend a frantic weekend with a dried-out glue stick, some ribbon from mom's sewing room, a few of dad's *Sports Illustrated* magazines and some poster board to create an exhibition describing the harrowing journey of The Oregon Trail or the reproductive cycle of the Earth worm. At least those were my areas of expertise in the fourth grade. I have no idea what you were studying at the time, but I am

WHY MUSEUMS MATTER

all but certain it involved a similar weekend with similar materials and deadlines.

What the non-museum professional does not fully grasp is that every word of text, every material choice made, the images selected, the content itself has been painstakingly researched, focus grouped, and bench tested in a shop somewhere before it ever hits the gallery floor. If we've done our job well, it should look simple, succinct, and sublime. So, we should forgive those ignorant of the process from concluding that the product, and the process that created it, is relatively simple and straight forward.

While each museum clearly has a different focus and purpose, generally speaking, we all follow a similar pathway in creating our exhibitions. Obviously, a gallery housing a priceless Monet will take a different path and consider different aspects than a gallery that houses a polar bear at a zoo, or a giant floating warship of the navy, or a simulated tornado funnel you can reach in and touch with YOUR HAND! And yet, in all cases there are questions to be asked and answered about the items on display, the learning outcomes and experiences we want our visitors to have, and how to maximize the "ah-ha" moment that we seek. Let's explore some of the steps involved in making this magic trick work.

Let's start with the obvious. To quote a famous movie line we must start with "SHOW ME THE MONEY!" Museums are funded in a variety of ways. Many receive funds from local, state, or federal governments and in some cases, they get support from all three or some mix. This is great

and usually means those are your tax dollars hard at work for you. However, a great deal of museums do not receive ANY tax dollars of any kind. Private nonprofit museums do some of the heaviest lifting in the museum world as they rely on earned income, things like admissions and store sales, as well as philanthropic support from donors. Those donors can be foundations, corporations, and individuals just like you. Speaking of which, have you thought about your charitable giving lately? Give me a call when you're done reading this and let's talk.

Many of the largest museums in the world have endowments that generate perpetual income. It's not everything they need, but it helps secure a significant portion of the museum's operating budget and subsequently insulates the museum from a lot of financial turbulence. I met with one museum director who shared that their endowment had recently passed the \$600 million mark! I found myself with serious endowment envy until I traveled to yet a larger museum where I was informed their current endowment is in the low \$1 billion (with a "B") mark. Sufficient to say few museums are operating with that level of support and to build a new exhibit or gallery we all must first embark on a fundraising campaign to secure the needed funds.

Here's how I like to help people understand the cost of building an exhibit. Think of it like building a house. If I tell you I can build you a house for \$120 per square foot you know that your house will have walls, windows, a roof, and clean running water. You know, the basics of any new home. Now, if I tell you that I can build you a house for \$850 per

square foot you know that your house will still have walls, windows, a roof, and clean running water. But you also understand that those are two very different houses. Building exhibitions and galleries are very similar. An exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art is probably going to run a bit more than the one at your local historical society. But as a ratio or percentage of effort and resources, exhibit production is no small effort for any museum.

With funding in hand, we get to move on to the next step. Pick a topic, any topic, and we can fill an entire museum on that topic and still not cover everything. I once did a thought exercise with a colleague to test this idea. Our topic, hammers. Yup, over the course of one dinner (and a few libations) we had managed to fill a museum with exhibits and ideas related to hammers. The history of hammers. An interactive exhibit where you hit things with hammers. The art of the hammer. Make a hammer station. The hammer IMAX movie. Monkeys with hammers...granted this one has some serious logistical issues we have yet to work out. But you can see where I'm going with this right? We must get focused.

So when we do pick a topic or focus for an exhibit the very next thing we do is some initial research and begin to narrow our vision. In this stage of work we need to define our big idea. What do we want the visitor to walk away thinking or feeling? What do we want their experience to be? In many cases we need to define the audience. Some exhibits are designed with very specific audiences in mind, while others are for the all encompassing "everyone." Even when we design for "everyone"

we need to understand that "everyone" is still a specific audience.

In the first stages of exhibit creation and ideation we also need to collect a group of experts in the subject area to form an advisory panel. Not too long ago at my current museum we created an entire gallery on the topic of health and anatomy. Our big idea was that we wanted visitors to walk away with the understanding that the human body is a complex machine that works through a series of interdependent systems. None of the exhibit design team or educators went to medical school. None of us had any medical training. So we gathered an advisory panel of experts to keep us honest and to help shape the direction of the exhibition. On the flip side of that equation, none of our experts were museum professionals. They did not understand that we had to limit the amount of text in the exhibits because NOBODY wants to read a textbook at a museum! And that's just part of how the exhibit sausage is made.

Once we have all the initial research completed, we move into concepting. Think of this as that moment when you dump all the Legos out on the floor and you just start building. We know we want to build a spaceship so we start collecting the pieces we think will work and begin fitting them together. Maybe we change a part here or a part there, but soon we have something that looks like a spaceship. We run down the hall and show mom. She says something super helpful and supportive like "wow, that's the best school bus you've ever made." Thanks mom. She doesn't get it. Then our older brother chimes in with way more useful feedback that sounds like "that sucks,

you're an idiot, why would you put a stabilizer wing there?" You must sift through the first part to get to the useable second part, but he's right, nobody in their right mind puts a stabilizer wing in that spot. So we incorporate the feedback and make a change.

The concepting stage is very similar. We sketch out ideas and core concepts. Maybe we put them in some kind of order or grouping. This is also the stage where the look and feel of our design begins to take shape. Color pallets and material choices are pulled together. Arguments over font styles and sizes are made. Logistical considerations are factored. The gladiator fight between exhibit designer and exhibit builder are waged. This is where the statement is inevitably uttered "that can't be made!" A classic argument that is partial to the "hands-on" museum community.

And then we share our ideas with the experts, and they tell us which parts suck (that's a technical term) and where there are good ideas. This is an iterative process and it's not for the faint of heart. Concepting means being prepared to have your spaceship design torn apart and risk going back to a pile of bricks only to try again. But this is a critical phase of work in the birth of an exhibition.

Once the concepts are accepted and the exhibit parameters are well defined, the work of turning the magic trick into reality takes place. In this stage we lift the ideas off the paper and build prototypes and models to test with our visitors. Because the final product must endure and succeed in delivering our core ideas and experiences, we have to test them in the early stages with the

audience we're building them for. This might take the shape of a rudimentary version of some exhibit component being put on display and asking visitors to provide some feedback, or it might involve some early version of an exhibit being deployed and observing how it performs. In a classic and creepy version this might involve one way glass, in others it could include an invitation into a back room or shop of the museum where visitors get a behind the scenes look and can provide meaningful feedback. The bottom line is that we test and verify before spending the big money on fabrication.

While I would like to say every exhibit endures endless prototyping and testing, few museums are blessed with that level of resource. In some cases the testing is limited to the child of a museum staff member who tries their best to break something, or a hastily organized focus group with stale cookies and warm coffee. The point being that we do actually test these ideas before we deploy them on our gallery floors. Once prototyping and testing are complete, we get to the finer points of graphic design, copy editing, and where needed turning concept images into shop drawings.

Now when I say copy editing, I don't mean hand your paper to the student behind you to check for proper spelling and grammar (though that is done too, many, many times). Copy editing in this context means painstakingly pouring over the meaning and intent in every single word. Even in the most academic of exhibitions, we are left with painfully little space to convey content and meaning to the visitor. Making this situation worse is the knowledge that most of you will not read the

thoughtfully curated selection of words we have published in an exhibit. It's true, most of you won't read half of what we put in an exhibit. If you're still reading this paper, then you're probably one of the elite few who read our text panels and for that you should be congratulated. But look at the person you brought with you to the museum. Are they reading everything too? Probably not!

This is one of the museum professional's worst nightmares. We have gone to extraordinary lengths to research this topic. Whatever the topic is we've put in hours of work and distilled the knowledge down into the easiest and most concise nuggets of knowledge. We can make you THE MOST INTERESTING person around if you just stop and read the three sentences we've strung together. And the images...do you know how many images didn't make the cut? Thousands! No, I'm not being dramatic. Thousands of innocent pictures did not make the cut in order for that one image you're staring at to be there. That picture has meaning!

Ok, let's pause for a minute so we can recap the process. Up to this point we've spent maybe a third of our total project budget. We've sat in a lot of meetings and read more books, websites, and obscure journals to become experts on an artist, an animal, an idea. We've gathered input, refined our thinking, tested ideas, and painstakingly sorted through this mess to get the best possible final design for our exhibit. A lot has happened up until this point and we have exactly NOTHING to show for it...yet.

Now we have arrived at the part of the exhibit

project that most people think is the starting point: fabrication. That's just a big scary "F" word that means we get to make something now. Fabrication usually involves several skill sets spread out over several artisans, craftspeople, and trades. Painters and carpenters have made some of the world's most compelling exhibitions. Welders and graphic designers bring long extinct dinosaurs to life. Electricians and botanists create grand avenues leading into groves of learning gardens. Did you know a lighting technician was a job? Well it is and they can paint an entire gallery with photons. I have watched arborists prune a collection tree to showcase it's unique shape and structure. I have stared endlessly into an ocelot enclosure never once glimpsing the kitty because they blend so well with their seemingly natural habitat that a biologist and gardener created. This is the magic trick come to life through the art of fabrication.



My favorite tool in the toolbox, the ribbon cutting scissors!

One might think that a ribbon cutting at the conclusion of an exhibit installation is the last step. But if you've been following along and paying attention you should be realizing about now that we're not done. Despite all our best efforts, exhibits are never fully done. Even after all the

painstaking work done in the previous steps, we inevitably miss something. Some visitor will find a way to break our exhibit. The astute volunteer docent will catch a spelling error (remember we did all that painstaking copy editing...and we still made a mistake)! Our content advisor will realize that we have completely misidentified the species or perhaps mounted an x-ray image upside down. That last one happened to me. I tried to pass it off as just a different perspective of looking at the patient, but it was a no go.

These errors are to be expected. In fact, when they don't show up, I get nervous because we never get anything perfect, and it means a much bigger error is looming beneath the surface. It's not a great feeling. Let's just find the mistake and fix it so we can all go on with our lives.

Sometimes those mistakes don't show up for years or decades. Usually, those errors tend to be linked to a deeper understanding of the materials we have presented or an appreciation for their origins. A major natural history museum on the east coast of the United States recently renamed and redesigned an entire gallery to more properly reflect the indigenous population represented in the space. Fifty years ago, the original version of this gallery used language and perspectives prevalent of the day that were wrong then, but widely accepted. Fast forward and the new version of the gallery and its artifacts are presented in an entirely different light. Advisors from the indigenous population represented in the exhibition led the process, chose the language, and endorsed the entirely new presentation. Once an exhibition is installed and exits the

shakedown period where we do some fine tuning and remediation. The last step of the creative process is evaluation. Again, not all museums are on the same footing here so evaluation can take many forms. The most robust involves trained evaluation staff who will conduct observational studies where they set up the proverbial duck blind and watch how visitors behave. Another form of evaluation can include intercept interviews where evaluators will "capture" visitors as they leave an exhibit space to assess their experience and where appropriate gained new knowledge. There are several tools at the evaluators disposal which also include things like focus groups, surveys, and comment cards.

Again, results may vary depending on the museum and available resources, but all of us try to check our work and use the information gathered to refine the guest experience in our museums. Evaluation is the final step of the exhibit creation process and serves as the feedback loop for our next project. As learning institutions, we want to ensure that we are presenting to you (our visitor) the best possible experience. Even knowing all of this, some of you will still shrug your shoulders. That's ok, I get it. There are exhibits that I have literally spent years working on only to find that visitors have met it with mild interest, and in one case total disdain. And some of the best exhibits I have ever played a role in creating have happened almost by accident or on a whim. The point here being, it's not a perfect process, but it's the one we use and by all measures it's a pretty good one.

Up to this point all the museums I have referenced, and the amazing people that work in them, have

remained anonymous or somewhat generic. I've done that because I want to give an honest telling of my perspectives and experience in the field of museums without calling any of my peer institutions or colleagues out. But I want to provide you with some incredible examples of the creative process I've laid out and demonstrate for you how they result in a unique learning environment. So, for this next section, I will depart from this rule and give you some examples for your consideration. Let's start at one of my all-time favorite museums, The Field Museum in Chicago.

Founded more than 150 years ago with a lead gift of \$1 million from Marshal Field, the museum began its life as a titan in the natural history community. Let's just start by acknowledging that very few of the millions of artifacts in the collections of The Field originated in the Chicago area. And with a 150-year history it is very safe to assume that some of their collections have a troubled past. Whether that means they were stolen, harvested from the natural environment, or some other dubious means there is a troubled past with some items on display. The good news is that

the current leadership and staff of the museum are doing the hard work of repatriating significant portions of their collections, acknowledging some of the more troublesome aspects of early naturalist's work, and otherwise working to tell the complete story of conservation through some very tough lessons learned. It's not easy work, and it's only just begun.

If you have been to The Field, or even heard of it, you probably know that perhaps the most famous artifact on display is a dinosaur named Sue. This isn't any old dinosaur. Sue is the most complete Tyrannosaurs Rex ever discovered. Even Sue is not without a troubled history involving the courts and ownership rights, but thankfully The Field Museum and their donors are the good guys in this story. Once Sue went on the Sotheby's auction block, The Field Museum and their donors went to extraordinary means to ensure that Sue would not be lost to the hands of a private collector and instead would be on display in a museum for millions to see and experience every single year.

Today Sue sits in her own private gallery on the second floor of the museum after nearly two decades of greeting visitors in the dramatic main atrium. In her new home on the second floor, visitors first travel a virtual timeline of the age of dinosaurs. The reveal comes when you enter Sue's private gallery where you see a fully articulated skeleton of an 18-million-year-old fossil. She is the most complete T-rex ever discovered. I'm sorry, do you need a minute to compose yourself? You do not have



The Field Museum in Chicago, Illinois



SUE the T. rex at The Field Museum

to be a dino nerd to appreciate this presentation. You don't have to be a science honors student. All you have to be is a human to be moved by this experience. This was a living creature roaming the planet 18 million years ago. This was an animal larger than a FedEx truck, with an insatiable appetite that hunted... everything. Modern day humans spent years in the middle of Montana painstakingly extracting her fossil, removing one grain of dirt and sand at a time to bring her back to life. And now you can stand in front of her experiencing that all so important "ah-ha" moment! That didn't just happen by accident. Perhaps dinosaurs don't do it for you. I'm not sure what's wrong with you, but fine. Let me hit you with another amazing example. Have you heard of the Air and Space Museum in Washington DC?

It's part of the Smithsonian collection of museums on the national mall. If you don't know about these, you should because you pay for them. These incredible museums are funded through your federal taxes, and you could spend the rest of your natural life exploring them and still not see everything, and you can do it completely for free! I saw one for the first time as an eleven year-old Boy Scout touring the nation's capital. It is said that if a person spent eight hours a day in the gallery's of all 19 museums and national zoo it would take more than a decade to see, read and experience everything they have to offer.

It is impossible to pick one example from the Smithsonian to call out but consider the scale of work necessary to curate and display that many items and artifacts. So, let's take a trip to the other side of the country for a deeply personal experience I recently had while on sabbatical.

At the California Science Center in sunny Los Angeles, California in the back of the museum rests a massive orange cylinder. If you don't know what you're looking at, it's not a particularly remarkable sight. But for me, who was born at the tail end of the Apollo program and missions, I instantly recognized the giant bright orange sausage as an external fuel tank for a NASA space shuttle. I have distinct memories of watching the live launch of the Shuttle Columbia in 1981 on our living room TV. For my generation, the space race and the symbol of scientific exploration was the shuttle program.

At the California Science Center, the external fuel tank for the shuttle currently resides outside the museum and serves as a teaser for what lies

within. I was restless the night before visiting because I was so excited, and downright giddy as we approached the building that houses the USS Endeavor. Upon entering a giant cavernous building, you are immediately standing in the shadow of the shuttle which sits mounted 20 feet above your head and cocked at a slight angle to give the illusion of flight. The scale of the shuttle and the proximity to a piece of history is awe inspiring. I had watched this very vessel take off for space and return through the atmosphere countless times, and here it was right in front of me.

Around the perimeter of the room is a visual timeline of every mission from the initial launch

of Columbia to the final mission of Atlantis. Every crew, every mission name and purpose, every date of more than 30 years of missions. It was like standing in the hall of fame of science! “Ah-ha” moments seldom come for me anymore because I have spent my entire career in the museum field. I’m very spoiled, and as a result hard to impress. And yet standing there in the shadow of so much scientific and human history, my childhood dreams of serving in the astronaut corps all came rushing back into my heart and mind. It was a very special “ah-ha” moment that I will treasure the rest of my life!

If you’re not moved by dinosaurs or space shuttles, let me give you one more example that might



USS Endeavour at the California Science Center

WHY MUSEUMS MATTER

speak to your senses. I love museums of every shape, size and color. I've never been to one where I didn't learn something new or see something I hadn't seen before. I'm more of a hands-on learner, so I gravitate to those kinds of experiences, but I value all museums. There are some museums that frown on hands-on experiences and typically that's because the thing you're trying to put your hands on are priceless works of art. I recently was almost removed from a museum as I leaned too far beyond a velvet rope and may have extended my hand to catch a glimpse of how one of these priceless works was secured to the wall.

I was duly impressed with the speed and determination of the museum guard who placed a very firm grip around my forearm and politely addressed me as "sir." That was the entire exchange. A simple "sir" combined with limiting the blood flow to my arm said everything that was needed. After a brief explanation that my actions were "ok" because like him, I too was a museum professional, I was released on bail and allowed to continue my visit...but that's not really the point here. The point is, I like art, and I like art museums. I like that they make me think. I like that I don't understand what I'm looking at sometimes. Left on my own I'm more likely to spend time in front of Emanuel Leutze's "Washington Crossing the Delaware" over Edvard Munch's "The Scream." And still, art museums are full of those "ah-ha" moments.

In Boston, right next to Simmons University, sits the Isabella Stewart

Gardner Museum (ISG). Many people have become familiar with the museum because it has a very famous story about a heist that took place in 1990. Several artifacts were stolen and it remains one of the most expensive and unsolved art heists in history. To this day there is an open and active investigation. But the ISG Museum is a proper art museum. And it is a truly unique art museum in some very important ways.

The ISG's founder, Isabella Stewart Gardner herself, started the museum and personally curated every gallery. Unlike other art museums that tend to organize themselves by genre, artists, or time periods, Ms. Gardner carefully collected and curated art from around the world and organized it into curious collections in each gallery. She was so invested in the museum that her personal residence was on the third floor until her passing. When she died, her extensive personal wealth all went to the museum along with a VERY specific directive. The museum shall remain exactly how she left it...nothing added, nothing



Interior garden in the atrium of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum

changed. The museum is a living time capsule of the mind of its greatest curator and benefactor. As you navigate the halls and galleries of the ISG you are treated to a veritable cornucopia of art. There are few to no signs or curatorial notes in the galleries themselves. The visitor is left to explore with their curiosity. It is both jarring and empowering. It's as if Ms. Gardner is there with you, daring you to ask questions and open your mind. It is an "ah-ha" of an entirely different kind than what you find a few blocks away at the Museum of Modern Art, Boston.

And it's worth noting that the ISG board and staff found a creative way to remain relevant and

expand the learning opportunities at the museum. While Ms. Gardner was specific about nothing being changed in the original museum, she was silent on any future endeavors. The museum has now expanded to include a library, theater, classroom spaces and even more gallery space to expand on the legacy and impact of the ISG. The entire ISG experience is a brilliant example of the work of museum professionals creating truly remarkable and special learning places in our communities. ■

CULTIVATE CURIOSITY AND INSPIRATION

A great deal of what I have written about to this point focusses on the “who” and the “what” of the museum world. Now there’s a whole lot of important stuff in the who’s and what’s of our work but it leads to the natural conclusion of why? Why do museums matter? Or put in a more articulate fashion “so what?” This is always my favorite question to ask. First, it allows one to channel your inner five-year-old. Rather than repeatedly asking “why,” you can ask “so what” until you have utterly exhausted your prey. I also like this question because it puts in your hand an intellectual shovel that allows you to keep digging until you hit the paydirt of your inquiry. Cultivating curiosity and providing a source of inspiration is the real answer to the question of why museums matter.

A great deal of criticism has been leveled at the museum community over the years (decades, perhaps even centuries). Things have been said like “it is a place for elitist snobs who just want to show off” or “academics think they know everything.” The most heartbreaking one of all is “it’s not a place for me.” While it’s painful to write, these criticisms are not without merit. There is some degree of truth in those words that as museum professionals we must hear and address.

But there is another side to the story. In 2021 the American Alliance of Museums commissioned a study that found 9 out of 10 Americans rank museums as highly trustworthy. This most recent study is one in a series of studies conducted

throughout the beginning of the 21st century that tracked sustained high levels of public trust in museums. These studies find that people trust museums as a truthful and accurate source of information and that museums ranked higher than researchers and scientists, other nonprofits and NGOs, news agencies, the government, corporations and businesses, and social media (in that order)!

So what? What can we make of this wild dichotomy? Even if museums carry some social stigma about their benefactors or need to overcome and reconcile issues around collections and representations, and even if we all need to continue the important work of diversity, equity, and inclusion to ensure that everyone feels welcome in our spaces, there is still this overwhelming value that the people we seek to serve see and recognize the field as a highly trusted source of information.

After visiting so many museums of various makes, models, and sizes, ranging in age from a few years old to century(s) old, it is clear that the reason people value their museums so much is because they are incubators for curiosity and inspiration. They are places where visitors can come and explore any number of topics and experience learning in a way that has been painstakingly researched and diligently curated and created to match their learning style and preferences. Museums are a place free of judgment and

preaching. They are a place to ponder and present new ideas and understandings. They are the place where the holy grail of the “Ah-Ha” moment is sought after and discovered. Museums open doors and minds to ideas and questions that visitors have long held or just discovered. Museums are places where curiosity and inspiration are highly infectious.

Speaking of museums, let’s take a minute to talk about grandfathers. I know, you’re super impressed by my seamless transitions. But stick with me, I promise there’s a point to this part of the story. I had the great fortune to grow up with four living grandparents. Two that lived a short drive from the home I grew up in, and the others who were the payoff for enduring my father’s scenic drives to the San Francisco Bay area. Eventually those grandparents moved to spend their final years closer to us and were also a short drive from my home. In the years where distance was a factor and we couldn’t drive south, they would journey north and visit us in what I considered one of the great wonders of the world, a motor home!

Growing up with two grandfathers was a blessing that even as a child I could appreciate. A great deal of life’s mysteries were revealed to me in candid moments with my grandfathers. One grandfather would handsomely reward a hard day’s labor on his property with a small feast and good wages. The other taught me the tough lesson of gambling and the joy found in being generous to others. Both taught me the value of a good clean joke, and both shared their faith and demonstrated fidelity and love to their wives (two amazing grandmothers that deserve their own chapter). What is interesting

about these two titans in my life is that they both served in World War II and neither of them ever told me a single war story. There were occasional passing references to men they served with or places they had seen. But there were no great stories of fighting the enemy or the horrors of war.

The younger version of myself knew two things about these members of the “Greatest Generation.” One of them was in the army, and one was in the navy. That was it. At least that was it until the last few years of their lives. While I understood that no one lives forever, I was confronted with the sting of death when my father’s mother was the first one to pass. We all doubled down in spending time with my newly widowed grandfather, and it was in one of these moments that he told me about his experience when his unit came in contact with their first liberated “work camp” deep in Germany. Turns out he was also something of an amateur photographer and he had documented much of his time in the European Theater of Operations. Today I am the holder of his war time legacy and have his photos of young men smiling sitting on the barrels of a Sherman tank, and a few pages later there are photos of mass graves and the horrors of the holocaust.

The photos he took and the detailed documentation that he typed out while on occupation duty in Berchtesgaden following the war are worthy of a museum display in and of itself. But more importantly, and more to the point I’m working up to, I was struck by curiosity and inspiration. What else was there to learn and know about this man? How had he been sitting in front of

me all this time and I knew nothing of his service? And what about the other living giant in my life. I knew a few things about the war in the Pacific, but precious little.

My curiosity turned to obsession, and I picked up every book I could find and began cautiously probing my elders to secure every last memory and detail I could about their time in the service. Unfortunately, the last few sands in their hourglass slipped through and all four of my living grandparents fell in pretty quick succession. I was left with more questions and curiosities than I was expecting so I continued to piece their service records together and building my historical knowledge of World War II. At the same time in my life it was becoming clear that I was a bonified museum professional and that this is the space where I would spend my career. This also afforded me access to professional resources to deepen my understanding of these two men and their experiences.

One of the books I stumbled across took these elements of my life and seamlessly blended them together. In the opening of this paper, I referenced the men and women of the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Architecture (or MFAA) unit of the combined allied forces in Europe during World War II. The book was called *The Monuments Men: Allied Heroes, Nazi Thieves and the Greatest Treasure Hunt in History*, and it was written by Robert Edsel. It chronicled the work of the MFAA in the efforts to both protect still standing sites of historic and architectural significance along with the (partial) recovery of countless works of art and artifacts stolen by the Nazis. Through my research and

putting pieces of the puzzle together I came to realize that my grandfather was in some of the very same locations and literally crossed paths with members of the MFAA.

In the book, Edsel is trying to explain the epic task of the MFAA and tried to answer in part the same thesis I am putting forward to you now: why do museums matter? Why was the work of this group so important? Why risk life and limb for a painting or an old building? More succinctly, so what? And here is what he wrote:

"If, in times of peace, our museums and art galleries are important to the community, in times of war they are doubly valuable. For then, when the petty and the trivial fall away and we are face to face with final and lasting values, we must summon to our defense all our intellectual and spiritual resources. We must guard jealously all we have inherited from a long past, all we are capable of creating in a trying present, and all we are determined to preserve in a foreseeable future. Arts and culture is the imperishable and dynamic expression of these aims. It is, and always has been, the visible evidence of the activity of free minds."

This was written about the work of a group of men and women in 1940's Europe, but the words

hold true today. What greater seed of inspiration can there be? These men and women traversing Europe in the middle of a war to chase down art, artifacts and protecting historic sites for no greater purpose than to inspire free minds, and to protect the work of the past, the present and the future.

The work of the men and women of the MFAA would largely go unknown for decades to come because, like my grandfathers and all their contemporaries, they did not seek acknowledgement or accolades for their work. As a museum professional I was unaware of these efforts until I became curious and inspired by the final stories told by my living ancestors. And yet you and I and generations to come will continue to be inspired and have our curiosity fed thanks to the work of these amazing people who responded to the call to action, and more importantly understood in every fiber of their being the importance of museums.

So much of the work of museums is about the stuff, and the things we put inside them (or outside in the case of gardens and zoos). But let's consider the museums themselves. A museum is a place of local, regional, and national pride. A museum is a place for reconciliation and understanding. A museum is a place to connect with the past and dream of the future. A museum is a place to become curious and inspired.

While traveling on sabbatical one thing became very clear, every museum I went to was the best. That's not just my opinion. Oh no, not at all. Every director, board member, donor, docent and volunteer I met oozed with pride and confidence

that their museum was...honestly, no exaggeration here...simply the best! Sure, a few of those organizations have a history and reputation that I think we might all categorize them as (one of) the best, but this sentiment was more than that. Great cities and great communities have great museums. It's not just New York or London. Casper, Wyoming has a great science museum. Detroit, Michigan has a great zoo. Tulsa, Oklahoma has some great art museums. Everywhere you have a museum you have a great community.

The two are intrinsically connected and it's because museums help create a sense of place. You feel a sense of pride and connectedness if you live in a community with a museum. Memories are made at museums and passed down generationally. I remember standing in front of the elephants at the Oregon Zoo in Portland and hearing my mom tell me about her early memories of coming to the zoo to see the exact same elephants! At my current museum which is little more than a decade old, I regularly hear members of our community say to me how much they wished something like this was here when they were a kid. And in another decade, we will see the first group of visitors come through our door with their children who will be able to share their early memories of coming here as a young visitor. Museums bring status to their communities and becomes *of* the community.

Beyond being a source of pride, museums are a special place for reconciliation and understanding. The former can be equal parts challenging and healing. In Germany former holocaust sites are now museums. They are not there to celebrate but

WHY MUSEUMS MATTER

to remind and educate. They stand as a memorial and a stark reminder of the unchecked horrors mankind is capable of if left to our worst impulses. Arlington National Cemetery in Washington DC is technically a museum. There are historic figures buried in those hallowed grounds right next to everyday Americans who paid the ultimate price for their country. It is rich in history and tradition. The Mt. St. Helens observatory stands in the shadow of a massive volcanic explosion with a panoramic view of the crater left behind and a front row seat to nature reclaiming what is and will always be hers.

But museums are much more than that. They are places to connect with the past and dream of the future. The Freedom Trail in downtown Boston is two and a half miles long and includes 16 historic spots that were instrumental in the birth of our nation. Embedded in the sidewalks is a very real red brick line that you follow from one spot to the next. I sat in the Sam Adams Brewery tap room enjoying one of Sam's very own original recipes



My feet literally standing on the Freedom Trail in Boston

while staring across a busy intersection at the site of the Boston massacre. The juxtaposition was surreal. Later on, down the trail I popped into Paul Revere's house and parked outside was a Tesla! While mind-numbing at times this experience really was amazing. Right in the heart of a major modern city, preserved and protected is the legacy of the founding of a nation. It's easy to forget how significant the founding of this nation is in the history of humankind. But in Boston, you can't forget. You literally stand in the footsteps of major historical figures and moments in time. And it's only through the work of the historical societies and museum professionals that this experience remains.

Another source of inspiration is that museums of all kinds are full of genuine artifacts and collection items. I have already discussed the fact that many museums are struggling with the hard work of reconciling with their collections.



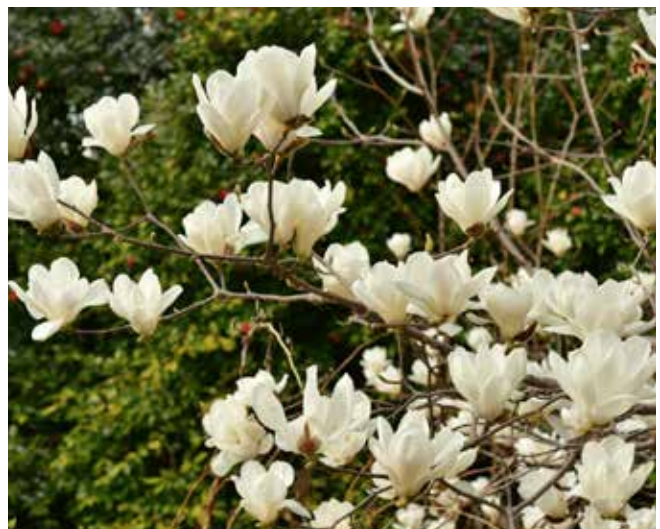
The view from Johnston Ridge Observatory at Mt. St. Helens National Park

That work includes the repatriation of artifacts, updating the context and images in stories told, and rethinking the people represented in the galleries of museums. For now, let's recognize this is a genuine issue worthy of much more conversations and move on to some less troublesome examples.

My experience standing under the wings of the space shuttle at the California Science Center was special not just because of the size of the shuttle, or the stories of the missions it had run. It was powerful because it was the real deal. Right there...right in front of me just out of arms reach was THE SHUTTLE! I had the exact same experience when I was at the National Archives as a young Boy Scout staring at the Declaration of Independence under about four inches of bullet proof (heck...probably everything proof) glass. It wasn't a replication or an artist's rendering, it was the real thing. The power of being so close to something so iconic and recognizable is a difficult feeling to describe. These are the artifacts of some of humankind's greatest accomplishments.

But this feeling extends beyond physical and iconic artifacts. At Hoyt Arboretum in Portland Oregon, another museum I had the pleasure to serve, in the Magnolia collection stands a species of Magnolia that is incredibly endangered. Magnolia's are important botanically because they are the first known flowering trees in the fossil record and pre-date flying insects. It's why the petals of a Magnolia flower are so thick; they had to withstand the massive weight of large beetles for the sake of pollination. There, in the middle of a grove of multiple different species stands this one

very rare, very endangered tree. For its own health and well-being, I won't name it here but trust me, it's really there. For several years it did not even bloom. But then, one spring the yellow flowers emerged and standing below the lowest branches I was eye to eye with something on the brink of extinction and this tree museum was engaged in a desperate act of preservation. What an incredibly powerful moment!



Endangered Magnolia blooms at Hoyt Arboretum in Portland

Artifacts need not be rare or one of a kind to be a source of great inspiration. I remarked earlier that I am fortunate in my experience of running science museums in that I rarely have to contend with issues of provenance and repatriation of artifacts. Climate controls and special security are a rarity in our galleries. Instead, we get to make our very own artifacts! Right now, in my museum I have a leaf blower with a paint roller attached at the end (in a very classy kind of way). After a brief explanation of Brunei's principle is given, a role of toilet paper is added to the paint roller and with a flip of the switch a classic demonstration of the physical attributes that keep a modern airplane

WHY MUSEUMS MATTER

aloft is presented to the great delight and giggles of the assembled visitors. The point here being of course is that artifacts of any kind, be it natural, hand painted by a master, a relic of early man, or a science teacher in a museum basement can be a source of wonder and inspiration. The things in museums matter!

And these “things” can be found in museums of every shape and size. It is said that you can wander the halls of the Smithsonian’s for a decade and still not see everything. I believe this to be true because I have been fortunate to visit these museums many times and feel I have only experienced a small portion of what they have to offer. And down the road from my current museum on the campus of the University of Nevada sits the Keck Museum. This is an amazing “old-school” museum tucked into the back corner of an academic building in the School of Minerals and Mines. In its collections is nearly every rock and mineral known to man. Nothing in the collections has changed in any significant way over the years



The W.M. Keck Museum found on the campus of the University of Nevada, Reno

and yet it is amazing! Sure, rocks cater to a certain type of museum goer, but even if they aren’t your thing, this small obscure mineral museum will inspire even the most stubborn of visitor.



Dr. Julian Siggers, Director of The Field Museum graciously spending time with me on my visit

Perhaps the greatest source of inspiration found in museums is the notion that they are places full of learning, and learning is an evolutionary practice. Museums recognize that they are not perfect. While traveling on sabbatical I was struck by how many museums are reinventing themselves. The term “best practices” is much more than a way to run an organization, it is a way of life for museum professionals. The industry is full of professional development and shallow on jealousies and rivalries.

Visitor studies and evaluation practices can be found in big and small organizations. The Science Museum of Boston is the lead agency in a program called The Collaboration for Ongoing Visitor

Experience Studies or COVES. It is designed to unite museums across the country to systematically collect, analyze and report on visitor experience data. Currently 37 museums are participating, and the data is shared as a resource to better inform the experiences we are curating and creating for our visitors. We are using data to refine the process to get to bigger and better “ah-ha” moments!



Amy Spar and Natalie Bortoli showing me around the Chicago Children's Museum

There has never been a single day in my career when I haven't been able to pick up the phone and call (or text) a peer and not get a response with a fast and free flow of information and support. The museum industry supports its sister institutions because we are all pulling in the same direction, we all want the same outcome. We are not perfect institutions, but we are always learning as organizations and striving to do better.

From inquiry-based learning in science museums, to natural habitats and breeding programs in zoos, to the repatriation of art and artifacts in natural history museums, we are all on a journey to present the most ethical, impactful, and powerful learning experiences we can that result in that single moment of inspiration. In that “ah-ha” moment we hope to cultivate curiosity and inspiration. ■

MUSEUMS MATTER

A little while ago you asked me the question “why do museums matter?” Ok, maybe you didn’t ask the question so much as I inferred it, but I’m still so happy you asked! I have done my best to make my case, but here’s a reminder. Museums matter because they:

1. Curate the human experience
2. Create unique learning environments
3. Cultivate curiosity and inspiration

Let me make one more closing argument regarding the greatness of museums. Consider the folly of the app. No, not the yummy kind that comes in bite size servings, but the “application” you can download on your hand-held electronic device. Some people call them phones, but let’s be honest, anymore phone calls are a feature rather than the intended focus or purpose of the device. With the explosion of the smart phone came a second wave, the development of applications. Entire campaigns were organized around the idea that “there’s an app for that.” Everyone you went to college with became either an app developer or a social media expert. You were an idiot if you didn’t have an app already available or in development, whether you needed it or not.

Museums were not immune from this trend. In fairness, a virtual digital universe presented an unparalleled opportunity to provide access to collections, content, and even visitor engagement.

The old audio tour was getting a serious upgrade! Countless museums hired programmers and raised funds for the expensive work of developing a custom app. Painstaking research was done, focus groups held, and roll outs and campaigns to launch this new platform for engagement. I saw, used, and experienced countless numbers of these apps and all of them were impressive and achieved the goals of deepening the guest experience. So can you guess what the number one feature utilized in these apps was? If you guessed map, you are correct, by an overwhelming margin.

You see, all the amazing work we have done as museum professionals appears to be the one thing that allows us to break our addiction to our smart devices. Visitors largely do not use all those amazing features and instead simply look up from their screens and engage in our galleries and spaces. Now for my peers who have worked hard and created amazing apps hold on the angry email and comments. Of course, I am speaking in hyperbole here and there are plenty of users of your very amazing apps...but still, your museum and the experience you’ve created is the star of the show.

Perhaps I’ve made my case and made a believer and champion out of you. Perhaps you need some more convincing and time in a museum to see these things for yourself and consider your own experiences. But consider this as you reflect on

museums; at the time of me writing this piece, the science center in Ukraine is being used as a field hospital for wounded civilians and soldiers fighting an unprovoked war raged by their Russian neighbors. Let us hope that by the time you are reading this, families are once again in the galleries laughing and learning. I point this out as a reminder that we cannot take our museums for granted.

Or maybe this little piece of information is helpful; In June of 2020 the American Alliance of Museums issued a report that perhaps as many as 30% of American museums would not endure through the global COVID pandemic. The good news appears to be that the tally is closer to 12%, but that's still an alarming amount of museums that have closed their doors due to economic pressures and other factors. Those are museums we have lost forever.

At the start of this piece, I shared the story of road tripping from Portland to San Francisco via the 101 Pacific Coast Highway. I'm quite sure that I had visited other museums prior to that trip, but that was the summer that I went from 6 years old to 7 and it's really the earliest memories I hold of visiting museums. I sat down years later, firmly into my museum career and started a list of all the museums I had visited to that point in my life, and I have painstakingly kept track ever since. Today, the tally stands at 147, and very shortly I will be adding additional museums to the list. How many have you visited? If it's more than one, congratulations, you're a museum goer and you know from personal experience that museums matter. If the answer is none, then wow, kudos on reading this whole thing, but also go visit your local museum.

With so many museums stamped in my museum passport, I am the first to admit that when I visit a museum today I am going as much as a critic as I am an open minded visitor. I am looking for new techniques and ideas to poach for my own galleries and programs. I go peaking behind velvet ropes and prying back text panels. I ask poor unsuspecting museum staff way too many questions. In short, I'm a pain in the ass as a visitor. It's hard to impress me anymore, but as I have shared earlier, it still happens. I hold an overwhelmingly healthy dose of respect and admiration for all my museum peers and colleagues. I've never met a museum person I didn't like and think was amazing.

And I still get those "ah-ha" moments. I had one standing in the gallery of the Museum of Fine Art in Boston. I didn't really know it at the time. I was staring at a relatively obscure piece of art by an artist that is not a household name. For some reason it drew me in, and when I read the little tag below, I knew I recognized the artist but couldn't place it in my memory. I walked away with a mild shrug and moved on with our visit. Three months later while sitting on my deck and reading a book the whole experience came to me like a bolt of lightning. That painting was one that was recovered by the MFAA from deep in a salt mine in Germany. All these pieces of the puzzle came together, and I was the direct beneficiary of the work and sacrifice of the MFAA. Museums really do matter.

Here's one final thought. Great communities deserve great museums. That doesn't mean big cities get big museums. I have traveled and seen

WHY MUSEUMS MATTER

some truly great museums that are no larger than my garage. And there is something all museums have in common: the people that create and sustain them. There are some amazing stories about titans of industry who amassed a great fortune and then founded a museum. Indeed, some of the most well-known museums came into being following this origin story. Others were founded by community volunteers with a strong vision and passion to create something great. Either way, great people are needed to make great museums.

Every museum is founded and sustained by people who freely give of their time, their talents, and their treasures. You need not be a larger-than-life philanthropist, or a Ph.D. in a subject matter to get involved. Your museum needs you! It needs you as a volunteer. It needs you as a visitor. It needs you as a donor. It needs you as a champion in your community.

When given the opportunity I implore you to visit your local museum(s). The next trip you take, set aside a few extra hours and a few extra dollars and go visit a museum you wouldn't otherwise see. On your next date night or day out with the family, go visit a museum. When you're deciding between a round of mini golf or a museum visit, always pick the museum (sorry mini golf operators... maybe if the course wasn't so damn hard I would have picked a different example). I promise you won't regret your choice. Countless painstaking hours and resources have gone into curating the human experience to create a unique learning environment that cultivates your curiosity and leaves you with a source of inspiration. **And that's why museums matter. ■**

YOUR THOUGHTS AND REFLECTIONS HERE:

MAT SINCLAIR, MPA

President/CEO, The Discovery

Mat Sinclair began his career as a schoolteacher, but quickly found himself at the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry (OMSI) in Portland, Oregon. Over the course of 15 years he was promoted to the position of Vice President of Education, overseeing a staff of 320 and managing a budget of \$22 million. He created and drove a large, comprehensive education program at the museum that overlapped with exhibits.

From OMIS, Sinclair's desire to find an executive level position led him to take the role of Executive Director at Hoyt Arboretum, a 200-acre public garden/arboretum in Portland. In this role he made substantial improvements to Hoyt's website, visitor center, expanded the sponsorship program, and oversaw two major capital projects in order to create awareness and attract visitors.

Sinclair's work was drawing the attention of city leaders and in April 2010, the City of Portland recruited him to a much larger position where he was the liaison between the city and more than 120 nonprofit partners like Hoyt Arboretum. He informed public policy, headed up fundraising, and managed the relationships with all the nonprofit and business partners who provided services to the city.



In 2013, Sinclair moved to Reno, Nevada and became President/CEO of the Terry Lee Wells Nevada Discovery Museum (The Discovery). Under his leadership, The Discovery has made a major impact in the region and has gained national recognition for its programs, exhibitions and rapid growth as a cultural asset. In 2017, the museum welcomed more than 190,000 visitors, surpassing 1.2 million visitors since opening to the public in late 2011.

