



The Imperial Educator A new museum breed?

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The notions of education and education services still have a negative image in certain circles. They are associated with:

- Doing something nice with children; a refined nursery.
- A didactic way of giving information: we know everything and you know nothing .

Due to the over-emphasis laid on lessons in museums for school groups, education is sometimes identified with activities for schools. That is a pity, as schools are just one of the target groups of education services.

Education is a difficult word to define and even more difficult to translate. In its various contexts it means formal instruction, the acquisition of knowledge and the development of personal culture.

Kenneth Hudson, 1999.

Before WWII, enlightened pedagogues/educationalists saw the possibilities that museums could offer to the then so-called education of the masses. As a case in point let me mention my first museum, the Museon. At that time it was called Museum for Education. In 1938 in Great Britain, Markham pointed out the important role which museums could perform in upbringing.

In the minds eye one can see organised throughout the length and breadth of the country temples of vision, where young enthusiasts will find a ready welcome and a helping hand with a colossal book of knowledge; schools will have auxiliaries on the cultural side not less than those which playing-fields now give them on the physical side, and adults will find in these centres a combination of relaxation, interest, and ever-widening horizons.

From: A report on the Museums and Art Galleries of the British Isles (other than the National museums), by S. F. Markham, pp iii + 179 +24 plates. (Dunfermline: Carnegie United Kingdom Trust, 1938)

But these were still exceptions. Some 50 years ago most museums hardly spent or even did not spend any time on education. Only at the end of the 1970s was education introduced in a large number of museums. The traditional conducted tour was the most often used education medium.

The position of an educator was not exactly equivalent to that of a curator at that time. In the 1980s this image changed completely. Some tendencies came into being:

- a. The professional or scientific approach. The starting point being the explanation of the collection or the field of collection. This is still applied in its most pure form in art museums.
- b. The thematic approach. The aim is to explain the themes or principles with reference to the assembled objects by means of objects from the collection. This often led up to an offer of subjects with no relation whatsoever to the exhibited collection. These themes were part of the programme only because students liked them. A lesson on magnetism was the most applied for subject in the Museon, though nothing in the museum related to that. The museum replaced the school, and that cannot and must not be the target of a museum.
- c. The social emancipatorical approach. The aim is to attract groups of public whom, looking at their different backgrounds, would in principle never visit a museum. A welfare ideological objective which is the most remote

from the nature of a museum (no relation with collection or themes). Quite a big logical error is made with this approach as you cannot possibly change a way of thinking, an attitude, by one or two visits to a museum.

At that time, contents and level differed strongly in the practice of the museums. Often educational workers were looked upon as some sort of assistant by their colleagues - Nice boys and girls with a magic lantern .

In the 1990s the influence on the line of policy of the education workers has grown in relation with, for instance, determining the acquisition policy. They become members of project teams for exhibitions together with curators, they write exhibition texts, organise manifestations and events for different target groups, and so on.

With this new approach the role of the educator changed. Whereas up to then active presentation was emphasised the direct accompaniment of groups of visitors - now the educators also were allotted the task of passive presentation; meaning the co-preparation of exhibitions and giving guidance to the individual visitor.

Today the importance of educational museum work is common knowledge. In all museums you will find educational departments. The educators even begin to supersede the imperial curator . The social developments are working in their favour. Museums are more and more looked upon as cultural enterprises. Sometimes they become self supporting/ independent as the Rijksmuseums in Holland. But all museums gradually have to account for the results of numbers of visitors, the profit in shops and restaurants, the amount of sponsoring money and friends.

Museums have changed their focus from the collection to the visitor. The majority of museums today have become visitor-centred. Thanks to this development the role of educators becomes predominant to the role of curators as appears from a law accepted by the A.A.M.

In 1992 the A.A.M. (American Association of Museums) adopted the report Excellence and Equity . The report states that excellence and equity can only be achieved through institution-wide commitment to education. To realise the ideals of E and E, museums must examine the management of their operations and expand the effectiveness of their communication with the public. A plan for action was presented in ten commandments (my words: the plan calls them ten principles).

The First Commandment is:

Assert that museums place education at the centre of their public service role. Assure that the commitment to serve the public is clearly stated in every museum s mission and central to every museum s activities.

Museums are no longer looked upon as the prerogative of the elite, but are expected to be accessible, understood and enjoyed by the people from all walks of life. They are accepted as a powerful media of vital communication and education. That s true, but this statement denies that education is just one of the driving forces of a museum and not the driving force.

Maybe, I would have recognised the ten commandments when I was director of the Museon in The Hague (until 1991), the museum with the most emphasis on education in the Netherlands. Since I became director of Naturalis, the National Museum of Natural History the most scientific museum in the Netherlands - my point of view has changed accordingly

In my view the principal interest of curators/scientists should not be in museum education. They must know that they can t have a museum without educational programmes. And, in any case, they must offer all that help and support education needs to develop good programmes. Of course, a major research-driven natural history museum, a regional science centre, an encyclopaedic art museum or a local historical museum don t have similar missions, goals and strategies. Every individual museum must be judged on its distinctive ability to provide value to society in a way that builds on its unique strengths. That s what I learned from my two directorates, Museon and Naturalis. Nowadays, all museum professionals will agree that no museum can adequately accomplish its tasks without educational activities. Granted, the basis of all museum activities is its collection. But the accessibility of the collection to a large extent depends on the display of the objects. This involves more than a mere aesthetically sound presentation of objects, a presentation increasingly en vogue, notably in modern art museums. And the present (financial and cultural) climate seems to foster such an elitist approach. In my opinion this deprives the visitors of their due.

The eternal dichotomy between the curators scholars, scientists and the interpreters of their disciplines, the educators, still exists in some places in particular in modern art museums. Most of the time, the curators get the blame for this. They

are rooted in their work and are too much focussed on their own specialities. I don't think this criticism is justified. Because educational services can get over-creative sometimes in the rat-race for the favour of the public. In my opinion, it is logical that the curators in their turn protest against this.

In a visitor-oriented museum the educators are indispensable. With their activities they can add depth and insight, and make a museum visit a wonderful experience. To achieve this all curators should be educators and all educators curators! Being involved in museums for 30 years, I know this will not happen easily.

In the larger museums, some different blood types will not cease to exist in the near future: members of the old guard - the curators - and the new draft of museum employees - the educators, marketers etc.

Cultural heritage is a collective property, of immense value and impact. Therefore the thresholds to this heritage should be negligible. This means that a museum should focus on as broad a public as possible, and not primarily on a cultural elite. However, true participation in culture presupposes knowledge and information. Therefore there is evidently a need for education. During the last 15 years museums have become more and more public oriented institutions. They provide a fundamental contribution to the cultural *Bildung* of an ever growing public. Educational activities have enabled them to reach many people that had never before visited a museum, although admittedly the percentage of Dutch people that never visits a museum exceeds that of those who do (60%-40%). Moreover, the public that does visit a museum is, on the whole, relatively well-educated and well-to-do. Quite a few thresholds are still to be levelled out.

For instance, by changing the methods. The gradual transition from transfer models or learning methods derived from formal education to actual experience like interactive projects, forms of simulation and dramatic expression has revolutionised the educational approach in museums. We let visitors experience the subjects, we let them actively perceive and understand. Hands-on participation and interpretation that incorporate humour, evoke curiosity and stimulate creative thinking in innovating ways, stimulates and attracts the visitor.

This is where the danger threatens. when the methodology dominates and the message is not received any more. This often happens in Science Centres. Instead of being an educational-recreational centre they change, or should I say, deteriorate into recreational-educational centres. Children will have great fun playing with computer games and doing all sorts of tests and experiments. Afterwards it appears that they did not understand one bit of the idea behind these experiments.

Nothing, however, is more destructive than a class of schoolchildren. Just watch and see how many things do not function after their visit. The museum annex/read amusement park has turned into a battlefield. Everything is pulled and pushed and climbed on. It looks like a fancy fair. The balance is completely gone. The educators have overshot their mark.

Also my museum, Naturalis, ran this risk. This did not happen however, as witnessed by the jury report of the Prince Bernhard Fund Museum Award. A couple of quotations from this report are:

- a. The jury felt that museum Naturalis in Leiden has succeeded best in building the desired bridge to the public and simultaneously being an institute of great importance to scientific education and research.
- b. The presentation is not emphatically educational, it is various and on a large scale new media and conveyance techniques are applied. The way in which museum Naturalis conveys its knowledge does justice to its scientific background. The presentations and the explanations thereupon are stimulating without straining the necessary objectivity. The concept is clear and inviting, even in spite of a routing which is not quite evident.
- c. Notwithstanding the impressive dimension of the total presentation the visitor can choose his/her own level of deepening. This purpose results in a presentation in which the theme and collection of the museum in connection with the content and experience is outbalanced and is useful to visitors as well as students and scientists.
- d. The jury did notice, however, that the largest appreciation of the public relates to those parts of the presentation where education and pleasure closely meet. This way of presentation is called *edutainment* in museum jargon. It can cause a tension between content and message on the one side and form and design on the other side. It is quite an achievement that Naturalis has succeeded in controlling/mastering that tension.

Excuse me for this self advertisement/blowing my own trumpet for my museum. The jury consisted of five objective experts who visited the museum incognito, so I did not have any influence on their decision. Mind you, however, that apart from that the prize had not been awarded since 1994.

In what manner did Naturalis achieve this balance between recreation, education and science? It was achieved by applying a working method that, believe it or not, was nicely expressed in the Mission Statement of Science Place in

Dallas - not directly a place which I would choose as a first destination in the USA. I visited this Science Place in February last to look at an exhibition on Microbes of which a European version is now in production.. And that could be of interest to Naturalis.

The Science Place Mission Statement: The S.C. exists to demystify science, make it accessible and understandable to adults and children, to promote the public understanding of science, and to educate and entertain using hands-on or participatory techniques.

Why did this mission affect me? It is because the word education is placed where it belongs; closing ranks after demystify, accessible, understandable. That is how in Naturalis education is interweaved/implemented in the concept.

To be astonished, to be surprised, is starting to understand

José Ortega y Gasset, *La Rebelión de las masas*, 1929.

This expression formed the guiding principle for the setting up of Naturalis.

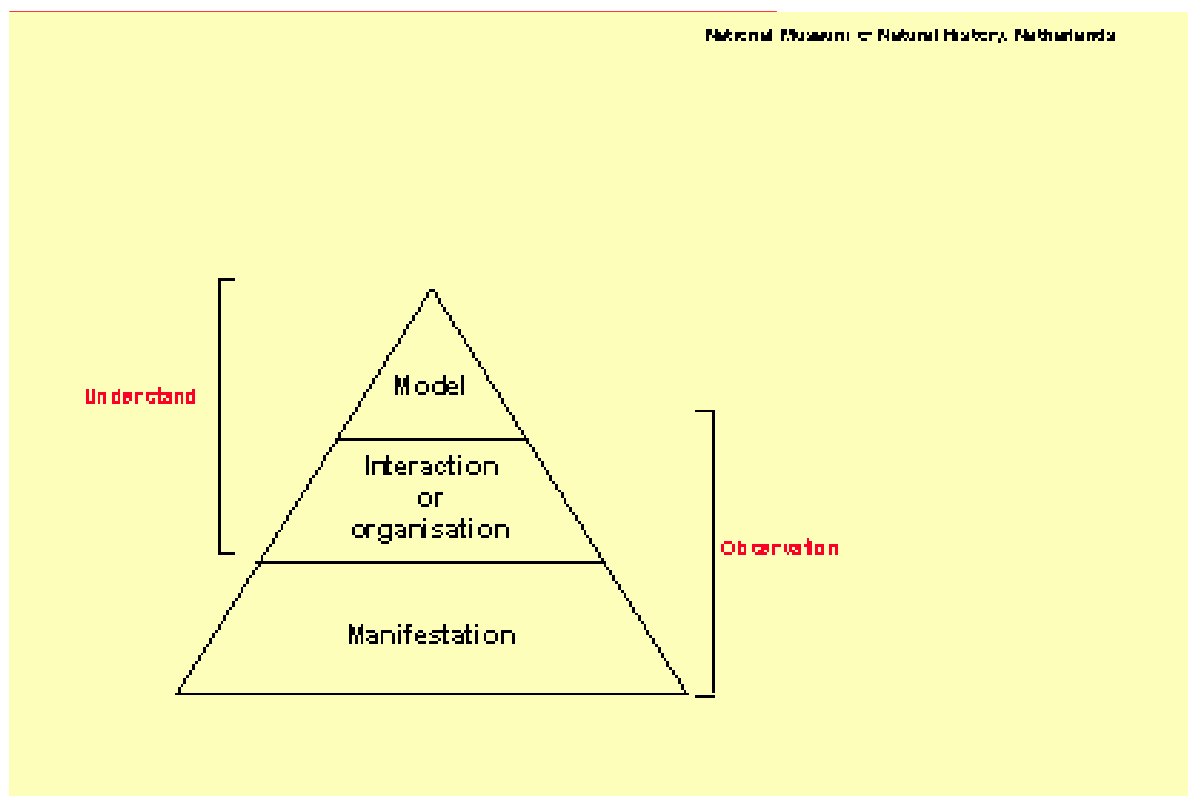
Partly in order to prevent visitors breaking down physically or mentally within the first hour, a deliberate decision was made by the Naturalis people in designing the layout to split the exhibitions into three levels:

- Looking, feeling
- Seeing, understanding
- Explaining, searching

We aimed to create an atmosphere in which the educational process is more rather than less likely to take place.

The basic model adopted for development of the display is illustrated in this figure.

Abstract



Concrete

It is characterised by two major concepts: from concrete to abstract (form manifestation in reality to the theoretical model) and from the observation of displayed items to the comprehension of the processes involved.

The challenge for the exhibition team was to prove that displays based on sound scientific facts and research could be exciting and thrilling at the same time, and not to lose sight of the basic concept that the core function of a museum display is to show real objects to the visitors. To achieve the best result the displays development team consisted of an art-director, another designer, three display developers - not being curators - with scientific backgrounds (geology, zoology, botany) and two educational officers.

It facilitated an optimal exchange between scientific expertise, design and education.

The scientists/curators duty during the process was to give all the information needed, to select the right specimens for exposure, and to reread the labels, made by the educators in order to prevent mistakes.

In this context I cannot go into details. Therefore, to illustrate how it worked out I will give you one example concerning the labelling.

Texts in museums are often too difficult or too long. Scientists have a habit of making differentiations, whereas this is not quite relevant to the public. (It is, for their scientific colleagues). That is why all texts have been screened by a reading committee consisting of specialists and laymen. I belonged to this last category. As a historian and manager I am ignorant in the eyes of the curators. That suited the educators who were and still are for the final editing of all texts. Their duty is to reduce everything to its essence - the art of leaving out - and to persuade the scientists to address the basic question what do we want to sell? Or even better "Does it interest the museum visitor or not? So I was very useful, being rather ignorant in natural history.

From the beginning the educators have been involved in converting the museum from a scientific institution into a popular scientific museum. In all concepts, developments and realisations as equal partners. Not until today they are coming to the programming of educational activities for schools. But that is not their main task.

Nowadays too many museums regard themselves as primarily educational establishments. They are part of the educational system already or try to become it. So, a museum becomes an extension of schools. Ecsite (The European Collaborative for Science Industry and Technology Exhibitions) admits science centres are, I quote: As educational institutions, most science centres have specific school programmes; they produce educational materials, and are involved in teacher-training programmes. (Winter 1998, issue 37, page 10). Do they hope this policy gives them better access to the national or local educational budgets? When money is short, this approach can be appealing!

In Holland plans exist to give schools some extra money. With this money they can visit those museums which they think link up best with the school curriculum. That is why schools go shopping in different museums, which is a dangerous development, because as a result museums tend to conform their activities to the wishes of the schools, losing sight of their own mission and collection. Schools will then get a disproportionate amount of attention.

Also, it gives great, unreasonable power to a museum s educational department. Education in museums should never replace school education. It should be a valuable supplement to schooling and not a copy of a class situation. For, however it may be:

Museums have to serve a variety of customers or users. These include both children and adults, students, family parties, tourists, people who visit the museum for pleasure, and those who use it as a kind of club. The needs of the different types of users have to be kept in balance.

One of the best definitions of a museum I ever heard, is A museum is framed experience rooted in authenticity. Using this definition as a starting point for all our activities means in my view that all staff members, curators and educators alike must be aware that raising awareness, stimulating a spirit of inquiry, being a centre of knowledge is the best way to serve people from all walks of life. For the socially responsible museum will pay equal attention to what is, in the broad sense of

the word, the education of all its visitors. We have to ensure that all visitors find, what they are seeking. And we also have to think about the needs of the blind, the deaf, the handicapped.

That is why a museum should pay attention to all visitors of any age or background next to school activities. Information centres, libraries, CD-ROMs, websites, digital access to the collections, lectures, symposiums; these are just a couple of examples with which the educators can serve the individual visitor. With this in mind, the Educational Services Section of the NMV (the Dutch Museum Society) has just recently changed its name to the Public and Presentation Section. The notation education was seen as too limited and too scholastic.

Museums are very effective platforms for non-formal education. They have to reschedule its priorities regularly according to societal developments. Museums can't be any more just factories of exhibitions, showing parts of the collection. They must zero in on society-related issues and matters that occupy their visitors' minds. I'll illustrate what I mean with two examples.

Biotechnology, genetic modification is nowadays a hot item all over the world. People refuse to eat modified food. Just for emotional reasons? Because they don't know what exactly happens? The genetically-modified bull Herman is the prototype of biotechnology in Holland. Recently we decided that this bull will be kept in a stable in our museum garden. Why? Because it gives the opportunity to be a platform of discussion and debate between biotechnological companies, organisations of nature protection and animal welfare and the visitor. Naturalis doesn't say what's right or wrong. Because we don't know it yet. But as an independent institution in between nature organisations and genetic-companies we offer a stage. So we are a change agent in society and in the individual life of our visitor. (By the way, Herman will be stuffed, when he has passed away.)

My second example is a quite different one.

Museums in Western Europe mostly attract highly educated, white people of over 40 years of age. In the four largest cities in the Netherlands nowadays about 60% of the new generation does not originate from Holland. It is only rarely that museums separately focus their attention to these (so-called) newcomers; at best in ethnological or cultural historical museums. In that case, however, they limit themselves by showing only one or two cultures of origin of foreigners. There is hardly any or no question of modern development of interaction with the culture they are living in. An interesting and instructive attempt in that direction was made by the St. Mungo's Museum of Religious life in Glasgow.

Representatives of all religions living in Glasgow have co-operated in developing the concept of this museum. The result is that it enables the visitor to compare rituals, habits, customs and objects which are used with births, marriages, funerals, war and peace. It appears that foreigners do find their way to the museum because of the presentation of their own culture in comparison with others. And not just compulsorily, during extra curricular activities imposed by school.

We are not concerned here with a large number, however. Your marketing specialists will undoubtedly remark that getting in this kind of public is quite an expensive investment. This compared to, for instance, stimulating a second visit of regular museum visitors. In my opinion this should not play a role. Cultural participation by foreigners or - let me put it more nicely - new citizens is in our present global village, mainly in Western Europe, one of the most important tasks of museums. To accomplish that, educators should/must be imperial. They can see to it that newcomers can recognise themselves in our museums. Indeed, when in doing so one originates from modern reality and one does not slide back on traditions which are often partly or completely lost, something that still occurs all too often in ethnological museums.

Museums should be encouraged to develop this role as centres for promoting social cohesion and understanding between people.

Liverpool, March 1998

Recommendation: *European Museums beyond the Millennium.*

Finally: many museums in many countries appear to be handing over control of their activities to their education departments. This is dangerous. I tried to explain in this lecture that museum educational facilities should be in balance to all other duties of a museum. Museum people have to learn and grow in order to keep the museum also in the next century as a central place of challenging entertainment and in the meantime keep their function of broadly based institutions conveying fundamental knowledge.

The Imperial Educator -a new museum breed

There should be neither imperial curators nor imperial educators. Both are essential parts of the museum mix.

W. van der Weiden

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