



# What, if Anything, Is a Museum?

by Eugene Dillenburg

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**B**ack in the 1950s a debate raged through the taxonomic world: were the lagomorphs—rabbits, hares, assorted fuzzy bunnies—a homogenous phylogenetic group with unique defining features? Or were they just a rag-tag collection of random rodents with some superficial similarity, but which really had nothing special in common? In 1957, paleontologist Albert Woods marshaled the physical evidence and concluded that Flopsy, Mopsy, and Peter did indeed constitute a coherent taxon. He published his findings in the delightfully titled paper, *What, if Anything, Is a Rabbit?*

Today, we apply this same question to museums. The term adheres to institutions representing a broad range of sizes and disciplines. Most have collections, but many do not. Some hire trained professional staff, while others are run by experienced, knowledgeable volunteers. Historic houses, interpretive centers, zoos, and aquariums are part of the family, while libraries, commercial art galleries and private collections generally are excluded.

Thanks to our expansive First Amendment and (thus far) blessed lack of licensing restrictions, anybody who wants to call themselves a museum can do so. I have seen the word attached to rock shops, roadside attractions and, in at least one instance, a restaurant. In fact, the word “museum” covers such a bewildering variety of sins that it's difficult to suss out exactly what all these diverse organizations have in common. What is it that makes us who we are? What, if anything, is a museum?

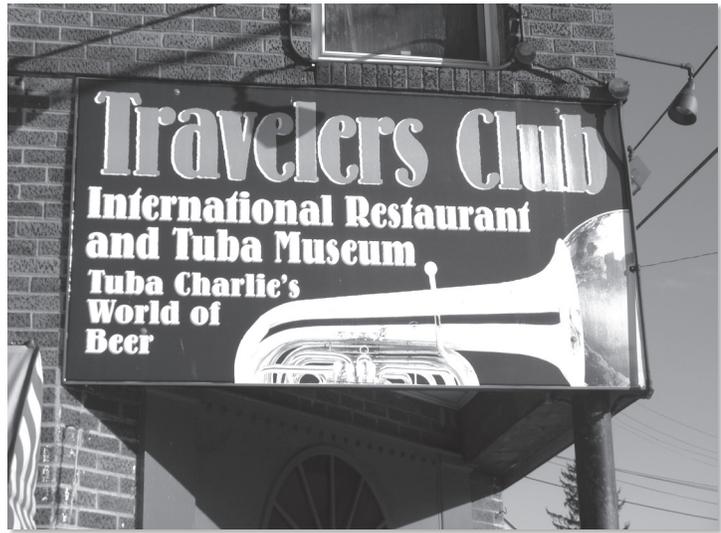
## Surveying the Literature

In my museum studies courses, we take a

formalist approach and seek the unique, diagnostic features which distinguish museums from all other institutions. Of course, we are not the first people to attempt this exercise. The American Association of Museums' website (2011) contains a page entitled “What is a Museum?” where we find:

- The AAM assertion that “the common denominator is making a 'unique contribution to the public by collecting, preserving, and interpreting the things of this world.'”
- The International Council on Museums declaring a museum is “a non-profit-making, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment.”
- The Museum and Library Services Act describing a museum as “a public or private nonprofit agency or institution organized on a permanent basis for essentially educational or aesthetic purposes, which, utilizing a professional staff, owns or utilizes tangible objects, cares for them, and exhibits them to the public on a regular basis.”
- And back in the non-virtual world, the American Heritage Dictionary defines the term as “an institution for the acquisition, preservation, study and exhibition of works of artistic, historical or scientific value.”

These diverse definitions can be boiled down to



*It's a museum if I say it's a museum. Courtesy of Eugene Dillenburg.*

a half-a-dozen common themes:

- Non-profit
- Permanent
- Open to the public
- Public service (including aesthetics, enjoyment, and most especially education)
- Collections (covering acquisition, preservation and research)
- Exhibits (embracing communication and interpretation)

Yet, while these features are descriptive, they are not dispositive. None are unique to museums: schools, hospitals, libraries, etc. are all permanent, non-profit, public-service organizations. There are non-museum entities with collections and even exhibits. No single item on this list stands as the bright, white line between “museum” and “not museum.” Furthermore, I would argue that half of these items are not even necessary—that a museum can operate perfectly well without them—and that the essence of museum-ness actually lies in a unique combination of the other three.

### Deconstructing the Definitions

Let us start at the top: must a museum be **non-profit**? For various legal reasons, museum professional organizations only admit non-profit members. But the real world doesn't care. There is no reason why a market enterprise can't perform the functions of a museum as well as, if not better than, a state bureaucracy or a cash-strapped 501(c)(3). Besides, any definition of “museum” that excludes for-profit entities

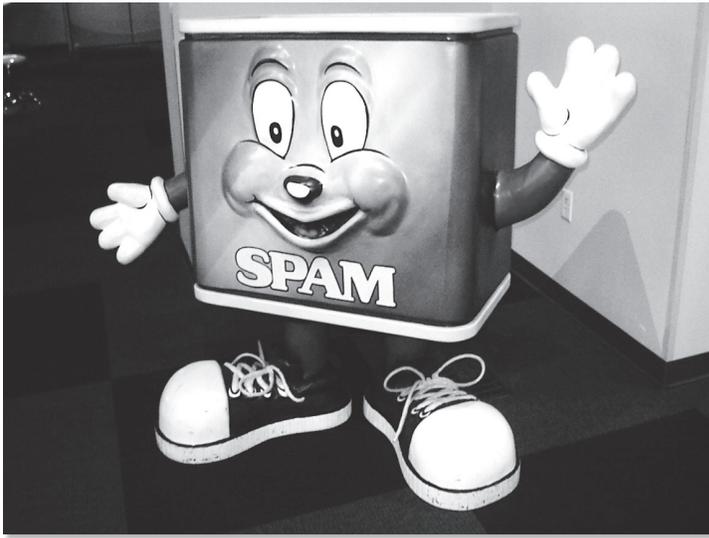
such as the City Museum, the Spy Museum, or the magnificent SPAM Museum is simply not to be taken seriously. He who pays the piper calls the tune, and whether the museum dances for the public market or private donors, for corporate masters or government largess, makes no difference that I can see.

**Permanent:** This confuses me. Paul Martin of the Science Museum of Minnesota has a saying: museums are a business; they can and have failed. Furthermore, it is possible to imagine an organization that does museum work being established on a temporary basis—a “pioneer institution,” if you will, filling a need until a more robust agency can take hold. I see no reason why museum work should be any less valid simply because it is done ad hoc rather than ad infinitum.

**Open to the public:** That one I buy, but for reasons I prefer to explain later. For now, I'll just say that a museum is not a private collection or club. (Many years ago on Museum-L, I put forth the proposition that only institutions which are open to the public can properly be called “museums.” This prompted another member to ask, in all seriousness, if this meant a museum stops being a museum when it closes its doors at 5:00? He must have been a great trial to his poor mother.)

**Collections:** Let's not mince words: collections are wonderful and important things. But any

I have seen the word [museum] attached to rock shops, roadside attractions and, in at least one instance, a restaurant.



Love, money and respect, but I'll settle for two out of three. Courtesy of Eugene Dillenburg.

(continued from page 9)

Any definition of “museum” that excludes for-profit entities such as the City Museum, the Spy Museum, or the magnificent SPAM Museum is simply not to be taken seriously.

claim that collections and collections-based activities are the defining feature of a museum is self-evidently wrong. Our universe teems with non-collecting science centers and children’s museums. There have been museums that held no permanent collections, but simply mounted shows from loans. Many museums conduct no research; for some, “preservation” consists of little more than storage shelves in a dark room.

The best demonstration I have ever seen that collections are not diagnostic of a museum came from an exhibit that, ironically, was trying to prove that they were. A museum turned over a gallery to its Collections Department to highlight their work. Their exhibit prominently featured a sign with the following quotation:

Museums exist by virtue of their collections. In fact, a collection is the hallmark of a museum—the criterion distinguishing it from any other scientific, cultural or educational institution. Deprive a museum of its collections and that museum will cease to exist.  
—C. K. Brain, Director, Transvaal Museum, Pretoria, South Africa, 1990

How utterly noble. And what utter rubbish. For not five feet from this sign, illustrating the concept of collecting, sat a shelf of miniature teapots, amassed by a staff member as her personal hobby. Well, if collections make a museum, and if this person collects teapots, then she must, *ipso facto*, live in a museum!

Palpable nonsense. *Pace* Dr. Brain, collections don't make you a museum.

Aw, c'mon, some will say. That's not a collection—that's just a bunch of stuff in her house. A collection is cataloged, conserved, curated. Fine. She can hire someone to do all that stuff. That still wouldn't make her cupboard a museum. It would just be a private collection. She could even hire experts to study the teapots and publish their findings for the betterment of society. That would make it a research collection, but still not a museum. Simply having stuff doesn't make you a museum. It's what you do with the stuff that makes the difference.

And what is it we do? **Public service.** The museum exists, collections and all, to serve the public. This has been true for centuries, ever since the royal collections first threw their doors open to the hoi polloi. In recent decades public service has taken on even greater importance, as museums recognize their need for attendance, public funding and general good will. The late Stephen Weil wrote, eloquently and at length, on the modern museum's moral imperative to serve the public.

Our primary way of serving the public is through education. It has become central to virtually all of our missions. Yet here, too, we must be careful, for education occurs in other places as well—schools being one well-known example. Informal and/or object-based learning occurs in libraries, community centers, hardware stores, even on-line. Public service through education, while central to a museum definition, is not alone sufficient. (Lately some museums have expanded their public service missions in an attempt to become the new

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“town square” or “information commons.” Whatever the merits of this approach, it doesn’t sharpen our definition. For communities have long gathered to address issues and exchange information in any variety of non-museum settings.)

Thus far, a clear definition of “museum” remains vague and elusive. But we still have one card left to turn.

### The Heart of the Matter

**Exhibits**, I will argue, are *the* defining feature of the museum. They are what make us different from every other type of public service organization. Exhibits are how we educate. Exhibits are what we do with our collections. Yes, we do other things as well, and those things—research, publication, outreach, programming—are very important. But those things are not unique to the museum. Only the museum uses exhibits as its primary means of fulfilling its public service mission.

Thus, a more robust definition of a museum might be: ***an institution whose core function includes the presentation of public exhibits for the public good.*** A museum can do many things, but to merit that title it must do exhibits.<sup>1</sup>

Allow me to illustrate. At one point in the dim and distant, I worked for an aquarium. And one of the husbandry guys posed a thought experiment: imagine that the aquarium falls on hard times, and has to close every department but one. Which would be the last to go? His answer, of course, was Fish. Because without fish, you don't have an aquarium.

True enough, I replied, but wrong on three counts. First of all, do not underestimate the

ability of upper management to hang on for dear life while jettisoning everything else. Trust me, the last person out the door is going to be some suit with a corner office, not some schlub who scrubs the tanks. (This is not meant as a knock on the administration of this particular aquarium. At least, not entirely. Rather, it’s an observation on how managers in any business possess a finely-honed sense of self-preservation.)



*I am a little tea pot, both diminutive and rotund. Courtesy of Eugene Dillenburg.*

Second, good luck running the place without Payroll, Maintenance, Accounts Payable—for that matter, without Development and Admissions.

But let’s say they did cut every department except Fish. The minute we closed our doors to the public—the minute we stopped exhibiting—



An unnamed but famous aquarium, Chicago, Illinois. Courtesy of Eugene Dillenburg.

(continued from page 11)

we stopped being an aquarium, and transitioned into being the world's largest fish tank, run for private amusement. Which, if you are privately amused by fish, is no mean thing to be. But it is not a museum.

Being open to the public is a necessary condition of an exhibit, and thus a necessary condition of a museum. (I understand that there are research collections, mostly on university campuses, which are not open to the public, and yet call themselves “museums.” One would think that our institutions of higher learning would be more careful with language. One would be disappointed.)

But however we define the rabbit of museums, it seems evident that exhibits must remain their one irreplaceable feature.

Now, like education, like collections, exhibits are not unique to museums, either. Libraries have exhibits, as do some airports. Even Hard Rock Cafe has artifacts on its walls. Yet few would consider these to be museums.<sup>2</sup> An airport with an art collection on display is still an airport; its primary purpose is the takeoff and landing of planes. Adding exhibits may make it a slightly nicer place to cool your heels between full-body pat-downs, but that doesn't change its function. However, remove the exhibits from a museum, and what do you have? Maybe you have a research institution, or a storage facility, or some sort of educational agency. But you no longer have a museum—the fundamental nature of the place has changed.

So, you can have exhibits without a museum, but you cannot have a museum without exhibits. And this leads us to another question: what, if anything, is an exhibit? Like Potter Stewart and pornography, we know it when we see it, but what is it?

### What Is an Exhibit?

In class, we view exhibits as a medium of communication. And, like all media, exhibits have formal characteristics which distinguish them, setting them apart from others.

“Exhibit” is a noun, but it is also a verb, meaning to show or display. Show or display what? Stuff. Not pictures of stuff or descriptions of stuff, but stuff. And the use of real, physical stuff (whether accessioned collections or not) is what sets exhibits apart from books, TV, the Internet, etc. This requirement to have “stuff” imposes on the exhibit other essential features.

First and foremost, an exhibit is a **physical**

**environment.** This is the single, most crucial, most fundamental point. That stuff—objects, interactives, props, what-have-you—is dimensional. It takes up space. This, more than anything else, separates exhibits from all other forms of communication: exhibits are the medium you actually walk into.

Because of that, an exhibit is an **experience.** Visitors do not receive it passively. They do not sit quietly and let it wash over them. Rather, they experience the exhibit with their full bodies, with all of their senses, sharing and exploring and moving through the space. And the information the exhibit contains—the public-service education—comes to them through all of those channels.

Furthermore, the information is not just presented, but **embedded.** The space itself and its physical contents are meaningful. The choice of objects, their juxtapositions, the angle of display, their ordering, the built environment, the color of the walls, the use of light—every facet of the environment contains meaning, which visitors access through their experience.

This doesn't happen by accident, but by **design.** An exhibit is more than a room full of stuff—that describes my living room—but rather a room full of stuff with a specific purpose: to serve the public through education. It must have this effect as its primary intent.

So, I give my students the following definition of the most critical museum function: ***an exhibit is a physical environment designed for the experience of embedded knowledge.***

Dan Spock, Director of the Minnesota History center, has noted that exhibition is “the medium of media”—it utilizes the written word, sound,



Wayne Golek to the white courtesy telephone. Wayne Golek, white courtesy phone, please. Courtesy of Eugene Dillenburg.

image, moving image, performance, installation, and most recently digital electronics. It has absorbed all of these, and yet retains its inherent “exhibit-ness.” No one would ever confuse a TV show with an exhibit, nor an exhibit with a book (critiques of bad exhibits as “a book on the wall” notwithstanding).

Today, there is much discussion over the role of web-based technology in museums, and whether an exhibit can exist solely on the Internet. Other articles in this volume will examine that issue in depth. But from a formalist perspective, the answer is clear. The defining characteristic of exhibits is their physicality. They exist in three dimensions. Websites, for all their wonders, exist in two. They are words and images on a flat screen. Even if haptic technology were to advance to the point of creating a convincing virtual reality, it would remain just that—virtual, not real, and thus not an exhibit.

Of course, there are more ways than the formalist to define exhibits, or, for that matter, museums. Other authors in this issue will provide other definitions, based on other criteria. But however we define the rabbit of museums, it seems evident that exhibits must remain their one irreplaceable feature. ✨

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#### Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> This, it will be noted, is a content-free definition, as formalism by definition is. Weill's Toothpick Museum may not be a very good museum, but it is still a “museum” nonetheless.

<sup>2</sup> As recently as 2003, ICOM included libraries in their expanded definition of “museum,” but only those with permanent exhibit galleries. Thus are exhibits acknowledged as the required feature of a museum.