

HISTORY IN MUSEUMS

Their Role In Community Education

[By J. T. WOODS, M.Sc., Director, Queensland Museum,
Brisbane]

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In museums the whole gamut of history may be variously presented, ranging through the geological history of this planet of perhaps 5,000 million years to man's prehistory, as revealed by archaeology, and on to the story of modern man as told by his written and other records. The task is infinite—and the events of today become history tomorrow. In my museum career I started with an interest in historical geology, particularly in palaeontology, but as the years go on I find myself becoming increasingly interested in the history of modern man and his works.

FUNCTIONS OF A MUSEUM

My definition of a museum, which I shall express in terms of its functions, is also a wide one. Firstly, a museum should function as a repository for valuable and interesting items—this is the preservation of our cultural heritage; secondly, to incorporate a proportion of these items in displays to enlighten and delight their viewers; thirdly, to provide educational programmes and facilities in addition to the displayed collections; and fourthly, to carry out original research in its fields of interest. Naturally the relative emphasis given to these individual functions is going to vary tremendously from place to place.

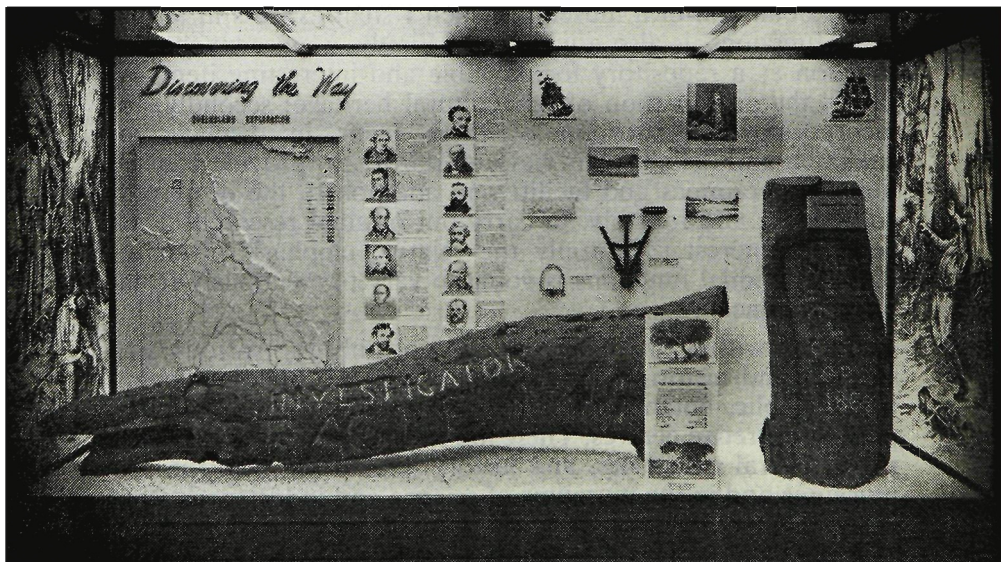
Falling within this definition are not only the various art, science, and historical museums, but historic buildings open to the public, botanical and zoological gardens, and national park interpretive centres. There are no sharp barriers between these several categories, and history finds a place in the art museums and in the museums of science and industry, as well as in the many kinds of historical museums in the more strictly accepted sense. This was emphasised to me when I recently participated in a study tour of museums of the eastern United States, organised by the American Association of Museums and the U.S. Department of State.

OVERSEA MUSEUMS

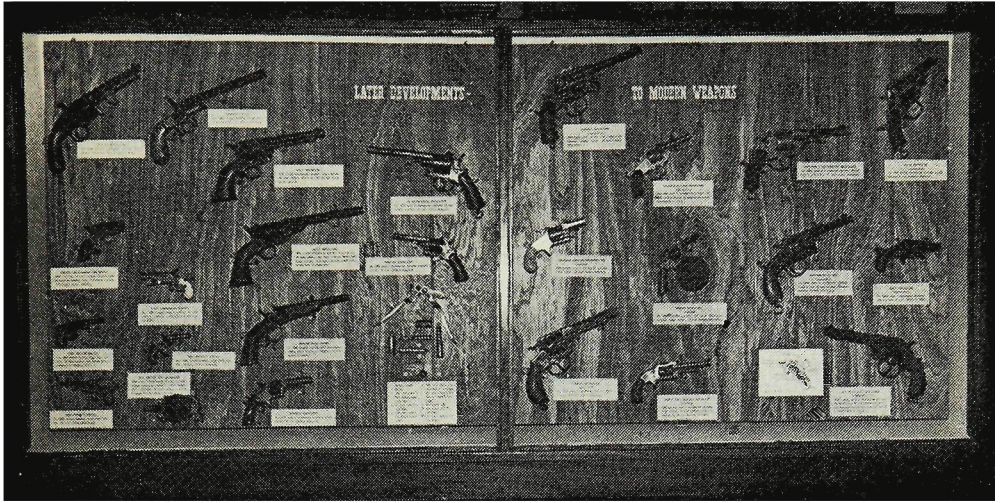
The museums of the United States receive good public support and are generally flourishing, in response to increasing recognition of their major role in community education at all levels. I was given the opportunity in the United States not only of studying museum buildings and the collections they house, but also to compare the methods by which the various types of museums carry out their respective functions, and judge the public reaction to them.

Art museums often display a proportion of historical material. While such items are of intrinsic interest, they are often not exhibited in their historical context, and there may be little attempt at interpretation by means of detailed explanatory labelling. However, when these things qualify as works of art at the same time, they may convey impressions of the moods and manners of their provenance that is sometimes lacking in an historical museum.

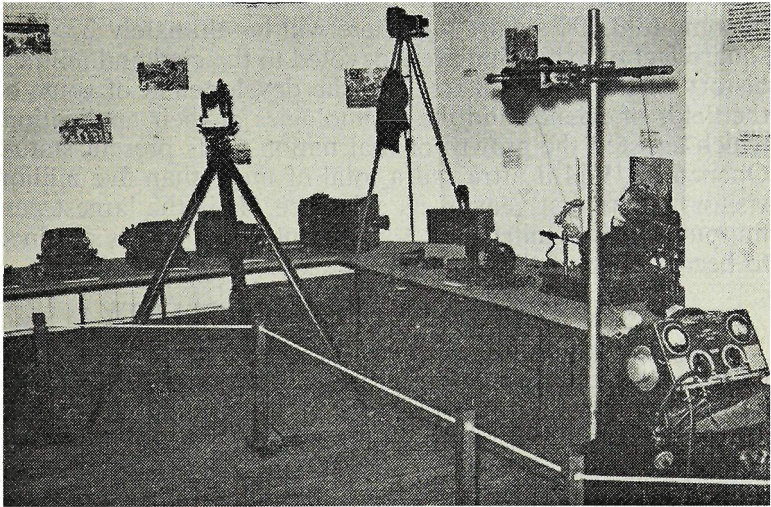
In the presentation of furnished period rooms there is often a direct overlap between museums of art and history. Furthermore, items primarily of anthropological significance, especially archaeological relics, may be seen in museums of natural science, or in those devoted mainly to history or art. The displaying of arms and armour is similarly not the prerogative of any particular category of museum.



Display dealing with Queensland Exploration at the Queensland Museum, including the famous tree from Sweer's Island, marked by the crew of the *Investigator* in 1802, and the *Beagle* in 1849.



History in technology—two of the panels from the display of firearms, Queensland Museum.



Portion of a temporary display of technological items, including photographic and X-ray equipment, Queensland Museum.

The presentation of the historical development of science and technology is often the major theme of museums of science and industry. The largest, the most comprehensive, and the most satisfying of these is the renowned Deutsches Museum in Munich. Its aim is to acquaint its visitors with the fundamental phenomena of the exact natural sciences and to show the historical evolution of scientific knowledge and its technical application—and it succeeds. Its many treasures in the history of science and engineering include the original Magdeburg hemispheres and Guericke's exhaust pump of 1663, the first Siemens dynamo of 1866, the first motorcar by Benz in 1885, and the first Diesel engine of 1897.

Almost equalling it in the wealth and scope of its collections is the well-known Science Museum in South Kensington, London. Again the historical treatment of the sciences is emphasised.

VITAL EDUCATIONAL ROLE

In this technological age the museums of science and industry play a vital educational role, and at the same time ensure the preservation of some of the apparatus and the experimental machines of the scientists who made it all possible, and whose pioneering efforts are too easily forgotten.

The recognition of the close tie between cultural and technological development is implicit in the decision of the United States to build a National Museum of History and Technology in Washington. In the magnificent new building of some 600,000 square feet there will be ultimately 275,000 square feet of exhibition area, devoted to the civil and military history of the United States and the development of some of the fields of science and the technologies of their application, which assisted the growth of that nation to its present status. Opened in 1964 it attracted a total of more than five million visitors in the first year of its existence. It is the largest new museum in the United States in recent years and is destined to become one of the great museums of the world.

PRESERVING CULTURAL PROPERTY

Historical museums as a class are very much concerned with the preservation of cultural property, and I gained the impression that it is in this field in the United States that private resources, applied either through the activities of individuals or societies, are making their greatest contribution to museum work. In Connecticut alone there are more than 80 historical societies, preserving and maintaining historic buildings, and some of them entering into other museum activities as well. For the whole nation it was reported that in 1962 nearly 68 per cent of the preservation projects were

in private hands; while the Federal Government accounted for only slightly more than 5 per cent of the projects.¹ Nevertheless the Government is undertaking some particularly valuable work in its contribution through the National Park Service. A major project of restoration followed the establishment in 1948 of Independence National Historical Park, in Philadelphia. In this area of more than four blocks near the heart of the city the preservation is under way of some of the nation's most important historic buildings, including Independence Hall, which housed the first Congress.

IMPORTANCE OF INTERPRETATION

While preservation is a fundamental function of historical museums, the teaching of history demands interpretation, and museums which involve themselves in the presentation of items of historical significance should contrive to display these items so their proper context may be appreciated. However, the materials of history often refer to fragments of a very complex story and most historical museums have a proportion of miscellanea among their displays.

In their presentation and interpretation of matter of national significance, historical museums can make an important contribution to the national ethos. Also, and not so intangibly, they contribute to the tourist industry. It has been reported that a survey made by the United States Department of Commerce revealed that an average of only 28 tourists a day visiting a town with historic attractions will bring in as much money during the year as a new industry or business with a \$100,000 annual payroll.²

George Washington lived and died at Mount Vernon, situated twelve miles from the heart of Washington, D.C., and I am sure that to the majority of the one million annual visitors to the home of the first President their visit is something of a pilgrimage. The buildings and gardens are immaculately maintained by the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union, and it is easy to understand why Washington himself said "No estate in the United America is more pleasantly situated than this."

WILLIAMSBURG RECONSTRUCTED

Life in those troubled days preceding the achievement of independence of the American colonies is magnificently interpreted at Williamsburg, the colonial capital of Virginia between 1699 and 1780. This preservation project was initiated with the generous financial support of the late

1. Wittman, O., 1965. Points of View. *Museum News*, 43(8), p. 9.

2. *Ibid.*

John D. Rockefeller, Jr., who provided funds amounting to almost 70 million dollars. To date, 83 buildings have been restored to their eighteenth century condition and many others, which had not survived, have been reconstructed. This reconstruction has been based on detailed archival research and preceded by archaeological work in the area. Apart from exposing foundations, the archaeologists have revealed many relics relating to the everyday lives of the inhabitants of the period. In all, a very serious attempt has been made to restore the eighteenth century atmosphere as accurately as possible in the buildings and their furnishings, throughout the restored area, which covers some 130 acres. The practice and public demonstration of some of the crafts of the time, and the costuming of the craftsmen and the hostess staff, all contribute to the visitors' impression of the life of the times.

FOLK MUSEUMS

The portrayal of the domestic life and culture of a particular period within a chosen area has resulted in the development of the so-called "folk museums" or "open-air museums," which present material with historical, ethnographical, and artistic aspects. Museums of this broad category have been most extensively and most successfully developed in Scandinavia. However, the concept is now virtually world-wide, and embraces the presentation of folk-life in structures varying from single-roomed museums of local history to ambitious attempts at comprehensive displays in reconstructed or restored towns and villages.

In Australia the place of history in museums has been relatively neglected. The only major museum concerned with our national heritage is the Australian War Memorial Museum in Canberra and, while this is a most impressive institution, meeting with a justifiably good public response, it deals only with our military history. In addition, some historical societies have done very good work, and with increasing membership and support are intensifying their efforts in recording data and preserving buildings and materials of interest. In fact, the last decade has happily produced evidence of greater public concern, shown in the birth and development of several local historical societies and the setting up of National Trusts in all States. There is also increasing coverage of history in some of the State museums, with a widening of their fields of interest.

At the Queensland Museum, a start has been made in the development of a technological section, and since a proportion of this material is of historical significance the presen-

tation of these displays will have historic overtones. Conversely, a series of displays planned to show the development of the State of Queensland will emphasise technological aspects. It is my earnest belief that a museum which presents a mingling of cultural interests can add an extra dimension to community education at all levels.