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## Museums and Philosophy--Of Art, and Many Other Things. Part 2.

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<b>Citation</b>	Gaskell, Ivan. 2012. Museums and philosophy--of art, and many other things. Part 2. <i>Philosophy Compass</i> 7(2): 85-102 .
<b>Published Version</b>	<a href="https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-9991.2011.00469.x">doi:10.1111/j.1747-9991.2011.00469.x</a>
<b>Accessed</b>	February 19, 2015 9:27:28 AM EST
<b>Citable Link</b>	<a href="http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:8360413">http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:8360413</a>
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## Museums and Philosophy—Of Art, and Many Other Things Part II

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Museums and philosophy do not seem readily to go together. Few philosophers have attended seriously to museums, and few museum scholars have explored philosophical issues. Philosophers have only occasionally set foot in museums in such a way as to leave a trace. In 1990, Jacques Derrida curated the exhibition *Mémoires d'aveugle: L'autoportrait et autres ruines* ("Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins") from the holdings of the Department of Graphic Arts of the Musée du Louvre. It was the first in a series entitled *Parti pris* ("Taking Sides") organized by curator Régis Michel, but the only one by a philosopher.<sup>1</sup> Even so, Derrida's focus was the blind, visionaries, and the European mythical foundation of drawing, not the museum or museums as such. In "Museums and Philosophy—Of Art, and Many Other Things, Part I," I broached the issue of why philosophy and museums should have so little to do with each other, avoiding one another even when scholars from each institution, such as Derrida and Michel, chose to work together closely. I suggested that perhaps in the nineteenth century museums were too self-evidently sites of scholarship to attract philosophical attention, whereas in the twentieth and beyond their precipitate fall from epistemological grace has rendered them irrelevant. Among museum scholars, devotion to a governing discipline from among an A to Z of appropriate fields—from anthropology to zoology—has precluded any serious involvement with philosophy in all but a very few cases. I explored these matters, and why philosophers might have good reason to engage with museums, under three headings: *Cultural Variety*, *Taxonomy*, and *Epistemology*; and continue the exploration here under a further three: *Teleology*, *Ethics*, and *Therapeutics and Aesthetics*.

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<sup>1</sup> The exhibition was held between October 1990 and January 1991 at the Musée du Louvre, Paris. See Jacques Derrida *Mémoires d'aveugle: L'autoportrait et autres ruines* (Paris Réunion des musées nationaux, 1990), published in English translation as *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993). Filmmaker Peter Greenaway, and literary scholars Julia Kristeva and Jean Starobinski, curated other exhibitions in the series. Régis Michel is one of the relatively small number of intellectually expansive art museum scholars worldwide.

## II.1. *Teleology*

What are the purposes or functions of museums? They vary among museums and among kinds of museums, but almost invariably include the following six, which although individually distinguishable, clearly enjoy close conceptual and practical relationships with each other. They are (in alphabetical order): collection (as an activity), conservation, display or exhibition, publication, public education (including, in some cases, group identity affirmation), and scholarly research. Display or exhibition, which we began to examine in Part I of this study, is but one of six functions within the teleology of museums.

Although some museum collections are closed—that is, their terms prohibit the addition of further accessions—most are not, and curators expend considerable effort defining methodical criteria for the continuation of collection building. Some fields that in the past were major sources for hegemonic collections, such as archaeological excavations conducted on a partage system, are no longer, for source communities increasingly retain all excavated items.<sup>2</sup> These frequently enter local subaltern museums or the regional or national museums of developing countries where the excavations are conducted. Some types of museum continue to conduct field expeditions leading to the methodical enhancement of collections, notably in natural history. Others are in large part dependent on the largesse of private collectors who donate or bequeath items to museums that take great pains to cultivate their favors, often over many years. While the interests of everyone concerned may well benefit, including the public who must be the ultimate beneficiaries of all institutions of civil society, reliance on such patronage can have a corrupting effect. By this I do not mean that patronage necessarily induces moral delinquency in museum personnel (though it can), but that it can shape institutional behavior to the detriment of such ideals as the pursuit of disinterested scholarship. There are other ways in which collection building is fraught, and I shall discuss some of them below under the heading of ethics.

The second function of museums to consider is conservation. This is a field dominated by a largely technical literature shaped by practical questions rather than by philosophical reflection. This is not to say that conservators in all areas do not consider at least some fundamental questions concerning the character of their work, of the things in which they intervene—from paintings by Poussin to stuffed parrots—and of the possible consequences of their actions.<sup>3</sup> However, few philosophers offer aid or

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<sup>2</sup> Partage was the system under which excavated artifacts were divided among sponsoring institutions (often museums), patrons (who financed the excavation), and the host territory. It has been largely, though not entirely, superseded, though there are those, such as James Cuno, president of the J. Paul Getty Trust, who are its advocates: see James Cuno, *Who Owns Antiquity? Museums and the Battle over our Ancient Heritage* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008), and consider: To whom does “our” in the title refer?

<sup>3</sup> *Historical and Philosophical Issues in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage*, ed. Nicholas Stanley Price, M. Kirby Talley Jr., and Alessandro Melucco Vaccaro (Marina del Rey: Getty Conservation Institute, 1996).

guidance in this field. Conservators have to consider a wide range of issues, beginning with materials, and how they change over time through various agencies that cause damage and decay. The long-standing philosophical problem of material constitution is unavoidable. Further, the role and consequences of technical examination raises philosophical puzzles as well as practical questions.<sup>4</sup> There are legitimate controversies over deception in conservation, as well as the commission of honest errors.<sup>5</sup> The nature of intervention—conservation versus restoration—is a philosophically fraught topic, though scarcely, if at all, touched on by philosophers.<sup>6</sup> Intention obviously has a considerable philosophical literature, but not in relation to conservation.<sup>7</sup> The variety of cultural values represented by different conservation regimes (or their purposeful absence) is another topic requiring philosophical discussion, so far absent.<sup>8</sup> Finally, the particular status of contemporary hegemonic artworld art has prompted some philosophical commentary—most notably by Sherri Irvin—as well as views offered by some conservators, curators, and artists.<sup>9</sup>

Departing from the alphabetical order of my list of museum functions, we should recognize the single most important among them, without which none of the others could be sustained: scholarly research. This takes many forms, and obviously varies in its substance among different kinds of museums. However, all scholarly research in museums shares one common feature: it derives in large part—though ideally far from exclusively—from the collections of any given museum concerned, and from consideration of the nature and responsibilities of that museum, and others. That is, a museum’s collection anchors the scholarly research conducted within it, but does not

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<sup>4</sup> Jerry Podany, and David Scott, “Looking through Both Sides of the Lens: Why Scientists and Conservators should Know Each Other’s Business,” *The Interface Between Science and Conservation (British Museum Occasional Paper 116)*, ed. Susan Bradley (London: British Museum, 1997), pp. 211-220.

<sup>5</sup> Isabelle Brajer, “Taking the Wrong Path: Learning from Oversights, Misconceptions, Failures and Mistakes in Conservation,” *CeROArt (Conservation, Exposition, Restoration d’Objets d’Art): Revue électronique 3*, 2009: <http://ceroart.revues.org/index1127.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Dinah Eastop and M. Brooks, “To Clean or Not to Clean: The Value of Soils and Creases,” *Preprints of the International Council of Museums Committee for Conservation, 11th Triennial Meeting, Edinburgh, Scotland* (London: ICOM, 1996), II, pp. 687-691.

<sup>7</sup> However, see: Steven W. Dykstra, “The Artist’s Intentions and the Intentional Fallacy in Fine Arts Conservation,” *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation 35*, 1996, pp. 197-218.

<sup>8</sup> For instance, see Miriam Clavir “First Nations Perspectives on Preservation and Museums,” *Preserving What is Valued: Museums, Conservation, and First Nations* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2002), pp. 69-97; and H. Jones-Amin, et al, “Gamelan: Can a Conservation-Conceived Protocol Protect it Spiritually and Physically in a Museum?” *The Object in Context: Crossing Conservation Boundaries: Contributions to the Munich Congress, 28 August-1 September 2006*, ed. David Saunders, Joyce H. Townsend and Sally Woodcock (London: International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, 2006), pp. 138-143.

<sup>9</sup> See especially, Sherri Irvin, “The Artist’s sanction in contemporary art,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 63*, 2005, pp. 315-326; and Sherri Irvin, “Museums and the shaping of contemporary artworks,” *Museum Management and Curatorship 21*, 2006, pp. 143-156. See also: Bill Viola, “Permanent impermanence,” *Mortality Immortality? The Legacy of 20th Century Art*, ed. Miguel Angel Corzo (Marina del Rey: Getty Conservation Institute, 1999), pp. 85-94; and Glenn Wharton and Harvey Molotch, “The Challenge of Installation Art,” *Conservation: Principles, Dilemmas And Uncomfortable Truths*, ed. Alison Bracker and Alison Richmond (London: Elsevier, 2009), pp. 210-222.

limit the scope of that research. Neither need that research be limited to the purely material aspects of things in the collections, or elsewhere, nor to material factors alone or even at all. The assumption that museum scholars ought not to consider issues beyond the material aspects of things in their own collections is especially pernicious and destructive of the capacity of museums for scholarship, yet is all too common among senior museum administrators.<sup>10</sup> Further, museums themselves should be the object of study of scholars within them no less than their collections and any other things and abstract issues that relate to them. Finally, museums as sites of scholarship should be self-reflective institutions. In spite of taking a purposefully expansive view of the scope of museum scholarship, I acknowledge that much scholarly effort within them must and should be devoted to establishing basic knowledge about the things in any given collection, whether paintings or parrots. In order to accomplish this, curators frequently collaborate with conservators and analytical scientists in the laboratories without which most museums would be bereft. Research areas include identification of things, the analysis of their materials, the relationship of any given thing to others in the collection or elsewhere, and the significance of the thing to larger fields of knowledge, from anthropology to zoology. While some scholarly research is quite properly the preserve of curators educated to the doctoral level in a pertinent academic subject—whether art history, paleontology or one of many other disciplines—other topics are equally properly explored by conservators and analytical scientists using advanced techniques in their museum laboratories. Some of the most interesting work, though, is collaborative among representatives of all these areas, and with others outside museums themselves, including, on occasion, university scholars.

Among the most important collaborations between museum scholars and other knowledgeable people are those that result from developing relationships between museums and subaltern, especially Indigenous, groups. This is a practice being developed in those museums Goode designates as museums of anthropology. Collaborations can occur locally, or even internationally, as was the case with the development of the long-term exhibit, *Our Universes* (opened 2004) at the National Museum of the American Indian. The curator responsible, Emil Her Many Horses, and his team collaborated with elders and other representatives of Native peoples throughout the Americas under the deliberately empowering designation *community curators*. Together, they conceived and implemented an exhibit setting out aspects of selected Native cosmologies.

Relationships across the boundaries of kinds of institution, and beyond institutions, can be fruitful, but are sometimes fraught. This is especially so because two distinct Western academic cultures—museums and universities—have developed since the early twentieth century.<sup>11</sup> Because of scholarly jealousies, emphasis on display in museums, and a loss of scholarly initiative on the part of museums to universities since

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<sup>10</sup> See, further, Ivan Gaskell, “Being True to Rubens,” *Art, Music and Spectacle in the Age of Rubens*, ed. Anna Knaap and Michael Putnam (Antwerp and London: Brepols/Harvey Miller, forthcoming).

<sup>11</sup> For an extended discussion of the two academic cultures in the study of art as an example, see *The Two Art Histories: The Museum and the University*, ed. Charles W. Haxthausen (Williamstown, MA: Clark Art Institute, and New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002).

the early twentieth century, many people are simply unaware of the broad scholarly role of museums of every kind. This role is openly acknowledged to be as good as “secret,” as specified in the subtitle of Richard Fortey’s book on scholarship at the Natural History Museum, London: *Dry Storeroom No. 1: The Secret Life of the Natural History Museum* (2008).<sup>12</sup> Steven Asma had earlier discussed the vital role in the development of the fundamental conceptual framework for the study of natural history in nineteenth-century museums, but his discussion, as is almost invariably the case, emphasizes display at the expense of other museum functions.<sup>13</sup> Tellingly, Fortey, a paleontologist, is a museum scholar, whereas Asma, a professor of philosophy and interdisciplinary humanities, is not.

Three major museum functions depend directly on scholarship conducted within museums: publication, public education, and display. They are closely related. Larger museums have their own publication departments that either work independently (such as the Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press) or with distribution agreements with university presses. Some are for-profit subsidiaries, such as British Museum Publications Limited, although the British Museum also continues to publish directly with its British Museum Research Publications series.<sup>14</sup> Increasingly, museums publish electronically, including ever-revised databases of their collections. These are beginning to supersede hard copy collection catalogues, yet talk of “making collections available on-line” is wrong-headed. What is being made available is *information* about the things that constitute collections. When hurriedly assembled, that information is often presented without reflection, and is frequently far from comprehensive, as well as inaccurate. Too often collection databases can be as misleading as they are useful. The work that goes into them is often as good as wasted, taking attention away from either deeper scholarly investigations of things, or—more insidiously and perniciously—from the will to pursue critical examination of the assumptions that underlie such procedures.<sup>15</sup> Cataloguing the things for which they are responsible has always been a core task of collection curators, but it is best done unhurriedly. The perceived need to publish comprehensive information on collections in the form of on-line databases detracts from thought.,

A good deal of museum publication effort is quite properly directed at a general rather than at a scholarly readership. Books such as *The Rarest of the Rare: Stories Behind the Treasures at the Harvard Museum of Natural History* (2004) by a non-museum professional writer, Nancy Pick, and photographer Mark Sloan, certainly

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<sup>12</sup> Richard Fortey, *Dry Storeroom No. 1: The Secret Life of the Natural History Museum* (New York: Knopf, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Stephen T. Asma, *Stuffed Animals and Pickled Heads: The Culture and Evolution of Natural History Museums* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>14</sup> Over 150 titles have been published on various aspects of the collection, such as, for example, Helen Wang, *Chairman Mao Badges: Symbols and Slogans of the Cultural Revolution*, Research Publication 169 (London: British Museum, 2008). This is among the title available for free download as PDF files from: [http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/research\\_publications/online\\_research\\_publications.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/research_publications/online_research_publications.aspx) (accessed July 21, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> These remarks on online databases and cataloguing are repeated from Gaskell, “Being True to Rubens.”

introduce general readers to collections, but at the expense of using stereotypical designations, such as “treasures,” which inhibit rather than encourage serious critical engagement, let alone philosophical reflection.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, publication for a general readership, and for children of various ages, aligns appropriately with public education, of which more below.

The exhibition catalogue has become central to the dissemination of museum scholarship. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, catalogues published to accompany temporary exhibitions of all kinds expanded to become what are often compendia of the latest scholarship both within and beyond museums on the topic concerned. While exhibition curators usually take the lead, they and their colleagues often commission chapters from other prominent scholars in the field who may or may not be museum scholars. These publications, especially when based on new research, frequently add considerably to bodies of knowledge. However, because they are published as close to the opening of the exhibition as possible, they cannot usually take account of what might have been learned either from the opportunity to study things assembled for the exhibition beforehand—ideally in a laboratory—or from what might yet be learned from the discursive and often revelatory arrangement of the exhibition itself.<sup>17</sup> Such considerations sometimes find expression in contributions to scholarly symposia that frequently accompany major exhibitions, the proceedings of which are often published by the museum or elsewhere.

Public education is a major component of the work of museums. This has been the case since the opening of museums to the general public, rather than only to persons deemed qualified, since the later eighteenth century. This change contributed to the development of the exhibit as a strategy for making materials available, rather than by appointment in study rooms, which in turn encouraged museums increasingly to accommodate visitors who may be curious but puzzled about what they could see. Some museums developed with the specific aim of proselytizing visitors, seeking to persuade them to think about issues in particular ways, or even to modify their own behavior. This was explicitly so in the case of the Newark Museum, founded in 1909 by John Cotton Dana and directed by him until his death in 1929. In this museum, Dana attempted to educate visitors as consumers of everyday commodities by inviting them to attend to design issues. He was also able to add substantial groups of Asian, notably Tibetan, artifacts that at the time were ignored by the artworld. He thereby brought to public attention a far broader range of things associated with people’s daily lives than

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<sup>16</sup> Nancy Pick and Mark Sloan, *The Rarest of the Rare: Stories Behind the Treasures at the Harvard Museum of Natural History* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004).

<sup>17</sup> There are distinguished exceptions, for example: Harry Cooper and Ron Spronk, *Mondrian: The Transatlantic Paintings*, exhibition catalogue: Harvard University Art Museums, and the Dallas Museum of Art, 2001 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Art Museums, and New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001). The authors received the 2002 College Art Association/Heritage Preservation Award for Distinction in Scholarship and Conservation. They have both since left the Harvard Art Museums, as have many other curators.

would have been the case had he confined the collection to Euro-American things.<sup>18</sup> The Barnes Foundation, long in Lower Merion, Pennsylvania (in the process of moving to Philadelphia), is a rare example of an art museum where the collections are displayed on philosophical rather than on art historical principles.<sup>19</sup> From the opening of its gallery in 1925, the seemingly disparate and unusually displayed collection of art assembled by Albert Barnes, ranging from French postimpressionist and New Mexican devotional paintings to Pennsylvania Dutch chests and West African carvings, was used in popular art theory and aesthetics classes based on Barnes's book, *The Art in Painting* (1925), which had in turn been inspired by John Dewey's philosophy of art.<sup>20</sup>

As well as conducting their own programs for a wide range of visitors, educators in museums now often work with exhibit designers and curators to produce interpretive materials: labels, text panels, and various kinds of audio guides. The apparatus of new technology is slowly superseding the kind of docent led tour satirized by performance artist Andrea Fraser in her 1989 impersonation of a docent at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, *Museum Highlights*.<sup>21</sup> Public education in all media has become increasingly important to museums of every kind in the light of recent developments. These include, first, the transfer to museums of some formal educational provision for school-age children in some areas. Second, an ever increasing perceived political need to serve wide publics in consideration of receipt of public funding, whether directly, or indirectly through tax relief for institutions and donors. In the case of subaltern museums, there is often a shared desire that such institutions should be prominent in redefining and reasserting the cultural identity of disadvantaged social groups, such as Indigenous peoples. This is so whether on a local scale, as in the case of, for instance, the U'Mista Cultural Centre, mentioned above, or internationally, as is exemplified by the National Museum of the American Indian. Its principal public venue since 2004 on the National Mall in Washington, DC emphasizes its political role. Owing to all the factors mentioned above, there has been a change in emphasis at many museums (especially science and technology museums) in favor of public education all too often based on diluted and derivative information and ideas rather than on museums' own original scholarship and research. While superficially appearing to advance some social goals, this development

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<sup>18</sup> See Dana's extensive publications, including *The New Museum* (Woodstock, VT: Elm Tree Press, 1917); *The Gloom of the Museum* (Woodstock, VT: Elm Tree Press, 1917); and *A Plan for a New Museum* (Woodstock, VT: Elm Tree Press, 1920). See also Richard Grove, "Pioneers in American Museums: John Cotton Dana," *Museum News* 56, 5, May–June 1978, pp. 32–39, 86–88; Valrae Reynolds, "The Oriental Collections" in *The Dana Influence: The Newark Museum Collections (The Newark Museum Quarterly* 30, 4, 1979), p. 45; and Ivan Gaskell, "Sacred to Profane and Back Again," *Art and its Publics: Museum Studies at the Millennium*, ed. Andrew McClellan, Oxford and Malden: Blackwell, 2003, pp. 149–162.

<sup>19</sup> For the development of those art historical principles in eighteenth and nineteenth-century museums, see Andrew McClellan, *Inventing the Louvre: Art, Politics, and the Origins of the Modern Museum in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1994).

<sup>20</sup> Albert C. Barnes, *The Art in Painting* (Merion, PA: Barnes Foundation Press, 1925); John Dewey, Albert C. Barnes, Laurence Buermeier, & al., *Art and Education* (Merion, PA: Barnes Foundation Press, 1929; 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1947).

<sup>21</sup> Andrea Fraser, *Museum Highlights* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 2005).



has contributed to the continuing subversion of the scholarly work of museums, which alone can sustain long-term, high quality public education.

The final museum function, the subject of too much attention without regard to how it relates to other museum functions, is display. As Richard Fortey observes: “Public galleries take up much less than half of the space of the Natural History Museum,” London, and the same could be said of many museums worldwide. He continues: “Tucked away, mostly out of view, there is a warren of corridors, obsolete galleries, offices, libraries and above all, collections”—to which he might have added laboratories, study rooms, and staging areas—“This is the natural habitat of the curator.”<sup>22</sup> Galleries are too, but only once in a while, and usually while they are closed to the public during reinstallation. Nonetheless, curators (with the collaboration of others, including designers, mount makers, installers, lighting specialists, conservators, and educators) contrive the exhibits that the public sees. Generally, they can be divided into two types: long-term (sometimes misleadingly called permanent) and temporary. Both can be of a vast variety of scales, ranging from the temporary introduction of a single thing into an existing display, to the reinstallation of an entire building. Ways in which museums regulate visitors, enforce social norms, and inculcate values by means of displays have been much discussed. David Carrier’s thorough consideration of this issue in the case of art museums can be extended to other kinds of museums, and requires no further comment here.<sup>23</sup> Several issues do require mention, however. First, we should realize clearly that exhibits are invariably selective, discursive by means of their physical arrangement—even if unaccompanied by text of any kind—and authored. This is so even if a museum conceals that authorship in the interests of projecting its authority through the apparent inevitability of the choice of things and their arrangement. The ability to do just this is enhanced by the expunging of earlier exhibits so that only contemporaneity of display remains available. This is a state of affairs recognized by Hein, who writes: “Museums are not supposed to have a history; that would make them susceptible to investigation and so to becoming ‘museum objects’ themselves.”<sup>24</sup> Archives of previous, superseded exhibits are scant at best. The only apparent exception is the temporary exhibition accompanied by a catalogue; though such publications very rarely actually give any idea—beyond a list of things shown—of the character of the exhibit itself, such as its discursive arrangement.

Design elements of exhibits, both long-term and temporary, can be so conspicuous as to overwhelm or effectively upstage the accessioned objects they are supposed to present. This is so particularly where curators and their colleagues aim at providing what is often described as an *experience* (whether for education or entertainment) rather than an opportunity to examine things and think about them independently or with minimal guidance. This is a topic addressed by Hein, and by Conn, who asks in the title

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<sup>22</sup> Fortey, *Dry Storeroom No. 1*, p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> Carrier, *Museum Skepticism*.

<sup>24</sup> Hilde S. Hein, Review of *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, ed. Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65, 2007, p. 252.

of his latest book: *Do Museums Still Need Objects?* (2010).<sup>25</sup> This, in turn, raises the first-order question: What, precisely, is an object?

We have seen how museums define by convention an accessioned museum object, whether a unique artwork or a specimen. By this means, things of all kinds become objects, a term that offends some of those who view these things differently from many hegemonic museum scholars, for it implicitly denies their complex status as numinous or animate in the senses described above. (For this reason I generally avoid the term *object*.) We should regard things in museums, then, as highly complex. In the first place, they are tokens of a matrix of various factors including material and immaterial constituents, reproductions both real and virtual, and personal and collective memories and their projected characteristics. The accessioned thing—the *prototype*—is but one aspect of this complex entity. Although certain kinds of knowledge claim are viable without direct access to the prototype (from a photograph or digital image, for instance), others are not. Therefore the prototype is irreplaceable, even when merely on display rather than in a study room or laboratory. Further, this matrix of prototype and related entities is invariably and perpetually unstable. This is so materially, for things are constantly subject to physical and chemical change, as well as immaterially, for they are also constantly subject to conceptual redesignation. This is so among peoples, and across time. “One person’s god is another’s idol, which, to yet another, is an archaeological find, and to yet another, a work of art. One person’s pet is another’s dinner.”<sup>26</sup> Things, therefore, are “entangled,” to use the term chosen by anthropologist, Nicholas Thomas. They are subject to “imbroglio,” as described by art historian Ruth Phillips.<sup>27</sup> Hein certainly recognizes this radical instability: “Valued as sites of variable meaning rather than as material things with fixed identities, collected objects provoke controversy at every intersection.”<sup>28</sup> Yet she makes no proposals for practice in its light.

We need to develop sets of circumstances in which museums no longer invariably conform to the categories noted by Goode in 1895, which are still essentially in place, ossifying their teleological potential. Even though museums continue to produce impressive incremental scholarship, in terms of big thinking their lack of adaptability in the association of things of all kinds with ideas has helped relegate them to the status of scholarly backwaters. Conn rightly notes that the resignation of the anthropologist Franz

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<sup>25</sup> Hein, *The Museum in Transition*; Steven Conn, *Do Museums Still Need Objects?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

<sup>26</sup> Ivan Gaskell, “Ethical Judgments in Museums,” *Art and Ethical Criticism*, ed. Garry L. Hagberg (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), p. 229.

<sup>27</sup> Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); Ruth B. Phillips, “The Museum of Art-thropology: Twenty-First Century Imbrolios,” in *Museums—Crossing Boundaries*, ed. Ivan Gaskell and Jeffrey Quilter, *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 52, 2007, pp. 8-19. Both Thomas and Phillips are museum scholars: Thomas is director of the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology; Phillips was director of the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver before her appointment to a Canada Research Chair at Carleton University, Ottawa.

<sup>28</sup> Hilde S. Hein, Review of Marjorie Schwarzer, *Riches, Rivals, and Radicals: 100 Years of Museums in America* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 2006), *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65, 2007, p. 336.

Boas from the American Museum of Natural History in 1905 to teach full time at Columbia University symbolically marks the supersession of the authority of a nineteenth-century museum epistemology based on observation and classification by a twentieth-century epistemology predominantly reliant on Western abstractions.<sup>29</sup> Conn remarks that only in art museums did curators retain a more widely recognized scholarly standing, and even there only for a time. Again in retrospect, we can see the 1965 departure of the curator Michael Baxandall from the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, to return to the Warburg Institute of London University, where he accepted a faculty position, as marking the final transfer of scholarly credibility and authority from art museums to universities. Only at the Warburg was Baxandall able to develop his examination of the epistemological circumstances of the creation and early use of artworks—the “period eye”—based on his curatorial research conducted while at the Victoria and Albert Museum on sixteenth-century German limewood sculpture.<sup>30</sup>

How can museums regain the initiative they have lost? In 1907, Boas counter-intuitively noted that small museums with varied collections were far better able than large ones to address scholarly issues, owing to their greater capacity for adaptability.<sup>31</sup> Adaptability is the key quality required, as new generations of curators—perhaps even with some philosophical education!—experimentally use things from collections of all kinds in novel relationships not sanctioned by traditional empirical disciplines in order to explore human relationships through the agency of the things people make, use, and repeatedly reuse, both contemporaneously and across time. Museums certainly have a future as sites of scholarship—including by means of display—but only if they are recast as far more adaptable institutions not held back by the constraining aspects of their collections, and dominated, as they still are, by nineteenth-century concerns.

## II.2. *Ethics*

Discussion of ethics in museums is dominated not by standards of propriety to which individual museum scholars are held by their institutions and professional bodies, nor by the sometimes shameful treatment of museum scholars by their institutions in the absence of academic tenure. Rather, the dominant topic concerns accessioned museum objects as property. Many museums control things that other people want. Concepts of things in terms of their control vary greatly over time and among societies. The Western concept of chattel property subject to alienation by a variety of means, including gift, bequest, barter, sale, legal seizure, compensatory restitution, and theft subject to statute of limitation, is often at odds with concepts and practices in other societies. The same is clearly true of land, regarded among Westerners as real property.<sup>32</sup> Even where

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<sup>29</sup> Conn, *Museums and American Intellectual Life*, pp. 102-12.

<sup>30</sup> Michael Baxandall, *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980). This point is elaborated in Gaskell, “Being True to Rubens.”

<sup>31</sup> Franz Boas, “Some Principles of Museum Administration,” *Science*, N. S. 25, 650, 1907, 921-933.

<sup>32</sup> The classic discussion of aspects of the American case is William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (revised edition, New York: Hill & Wang, 2003; 1<sup>st</sup> edition,

there is agreement regarding means of exchange of things, there may be disagreement over the rights of parties to exercise it. This can affect the perception of the propriety or otherwise of transactions that occurred generations ago. This set of issues is the subject of a vast literature, little of it philosophical: Kwame Anthony Appiah's various contributions are a rare exception.<sup>33</sup> However, all consideration inevitably must take account of the fundamental philosophical work on the character of tangible things, notably as commodities, by Karl Marx, "our major philosopher on the nature of material objects," as Elaine Scarry aptly reminds us.<sup>34</sup> The most significant single philosophical elaboration of Marx's ideas, as far as the role of museums in the disposition and social use of tangible things is concerned, is Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony. This occasions coercion by consent, as well as, and in certain circumstances in lieu of, by force or threat.<sup>35</sup> Some seek to defend the privileges of hegemonic, so-called encyclopedic museums against the claims of subaltern and otherwise disadvantaged claimants, on the grounds that the former uphold and embody universal values. In defending hegemonic privilege, they seem capable only of offering "distended and flimsy" arguments, as cultural theorist Nick James wrote of museum director turned trust president James Cuno's polemic, *Who Owns Antiquity?* (2008).<sup>36</sup>

There is little point in citing familiar cases and rehearsing tired arguments. However, it is worth mentioning one philosophical intervention and the commentary to which it gave rise. Constantine Sandis identifies three premises subtending the claims of apologists of universal museums. Rather than addressing the extremist position taken

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1983). See also Stuart Banner, *How the Indians Lost Their Land: Law and Power on the Frontier* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2005), and Stuart Banner, *Possessing the Pacific: Land, Settlers, and Indigenous People from Australia to Alaska* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>33</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton, NJ and London: Princeton University Press, 2005); Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006): see, especially, pp. 115-36; Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Politics of Culture, the Politics of Identity* (Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum, 2008); Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Whose Culture Is It?" *Whose Culture? The Promise of Museums and the Debate over Antiquities*, ed. James Cuno (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009), pp. 71-86.

<sup>34</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes, Introduction by Ernest Mandel (London: Penguin, 1976; first published as *Das Kapital, Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, 1867), notably Book 1, Part 1, Chapter 1 "The Commodity" (pp. 125-77); Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 179: "Marx is in the United States so often narrowly perceived in his capacity as critic of western economic structures that it is sometimes forgotten that he is our major philosopher on the nature of material objects."

<sup>35</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Lettere dal carcere*, ed. Sergio Caprioglio and Elsa Fubini (Turin: Einaudi, 1965) published in English as *Letters from Prison*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal, ed. Frank Rosengarten (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

<sup>36</sup> N. James, Review of James Cuno, *Who Owns Antiquity? Museums and the Battle over our Ancient Heritage* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008), *Antiquity* 83, 2009, p. 537. Cuno, the most notorious apologist of hegemonic privilege, was until recently president and director of the Art Institute of Chicago. The eminent archaeologist Colin Renfrew reportedly described Cuno's recent appointment as president of the J. Paul Getty Trust with characteristic British understated contempt, as "seemingly an odd choice."

by Cuno—an easy target—he takes on that of the more moderate Neil MacGregor, director of the British Museum. MacGregor is in the unenviable position of bearing the brunt of claims for the return of the Parthenon Marbles to Greece. These sculptures were removed between 1801 and 1812 from Athens at the behest of Lord Elgin while Greece was part of the Ottoman Empire. Sandis identifies three premises on which MacGregor bases his argument for the retention in London of these things. First: “Only universal museums can fully promote cultural understanding.” Second: “A museum is universal if and only if it does the encyclopaedic job of displaying all of its work against examples of earlier cultures which influenced it and any later cultural achievement(s) which may be indebted to it.” Third: “Most local museums and archaeological sites contain many artefacts and/or monuments which are (a) impossible to appreciate fully outside such global contexts and (b) required for the encyclopaedic job of universal museums.” From these it follows, claims Sandis, that “most local museums and archaeological sites are obstacles to the full promotion of cultural understanding,” an implied claim he attempts to refute, thereby opening the way for the consignment of the Parthenon Marbles by a universal museum—the British Museum—to a local museum—the New Acropolis Museum—completed in 2007 to house them in Athens.<sup>37</sup> In the pages that follow Sandis’s article, four scholars in turn comment on his argument. Among them is the museum anthropologist Neil Curtis. Curtis concludes by radically proposing: “Rather than reducing one side of an argument about the role of museums to absurdity, we should instead recognise the essential absurdity of museums themselves. Rather than being rational institutions, museums have arisen out of eclecticism and change more than deliberate strategy and learning. That way we might be better able to take a less biased view of the social and symbolic role of museums today.”<sup>38</sup> This is a salutary reminder that human institutions—even Western hegemonic scholarly institutions such as museums, as well as universities—are never wholly the result of “deliberate strategy and learning,” in Curtis’s terms. Many other factors contribute to their usually incremental development, some of which may be at odds with their scholarly pretensions.

Even if the Parthenon Marbles may not be repatriated, many other things once in museum collections have been. In the USA much of this has been accomplished under the terms the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 (NAGPRA). This act compels the return by institutions in receipt of federal funds to recognized successor communities on request of certain classes of things, including human remains, grave goods, and things used in religious observance. The literature on NAGPRA is immense, little of it (to my knowledge) philosophical.<sup>39</sup> Curtis argues in favor of repatriation in the face of universalist claims on behalf of so-called universal

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<sup>37</sup> Constantine Sandis, “Two Tales of One City: Cultural Understanding and the Parthenon Sculptures,” *Museum Management and Curatorship* 23, 2008, pp. 5-8.

<sup>38</sup> Neil G.W. Curtis, “Comment: The Absurdity of Museums; Local and Universal,” *Museum Management and Curatorship* 23, 2008, pp. 10-13.

<sup>39</sup> For some considerations, see Eaton and Gaskell, “Do Subaltern Artifacts Belong in Art Museums?” pp. 239-40, 251; Gaskell, “Sacred to Profane and Back Again,” pp. 149-62; Gaskell, “Ethical Judgments in Museums,” pp. 232-36.

museums of the kind advanced by Cuno (intemperately) and MacGregor (respectfully). He suggests that claims of universalism reveal an essentialist approach that derives from a particular Western perspective, rather than being truly universal. Further, he argues that the repatriation of certain kinds of things in museums to their source communities results in an increase in knowledge and understanding, rather than its destruction, through the fostering of relationships between museums and their scholars, and Indigenous or subaltern communities.<sup>40</sup> This is perfectly reasonable, as far as it goes, but is a view from an exclusively hegemonic standpoint. How might it look to members of Indigenous and subaltern communities? Many are struggling to retain, recover, and strengthen their very identity in the face of what Justice Murray Sinclair, chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, accurately described as cultural genocide.<sup>41</sup> Such retention, and—for now, above all—recovery of ancestral remains and cultural goods in the face of continuing social and political disadvantage is essential for the very survival of Indigenous peoples. Numbers of Western museum scholars, perhaps seeking to expiate the sins of many of their anthropologist predecessors, are not only embracing opportunities to return things to Indigenous communities, but, when those things remain in museums, are taking particular pains to institute their appropriate ritual care.<sup>42</sup> Some Western museum scholars are also striving to compensate for their inability for legal reasons to return things to Indigenous communities. For instance, in 2010 five men's shirts of the Niitsítapi (Blackfoot Confederacy), acquired in 1841 by Sir George Simpson, governor of the Hudson's Bay Company, and in the Pitt-Rivers Museum of the University of Oxford since 1893, were exhibited at the Glenbow Museum, Calgary, and the Galt Museum, Lethbridge, Alberta. Shown under the title, *Kaahsinnooniksi Ao'toksisawooyawa. Our Ancestors have come to Visit: Reconnections with Historic Blackfoot Shirts*, handling sessions were arranged beforehand.<sup>43</sup> This visit enhances a continuing relationship between museum and university scholars in Britain and Alberta, and the Indigenous communities.

Indigenous peoples are not necessarily wholly separated from their things. The sacred potlatch materials recovered from various museums by the Kwakwaka'wakw mentioned above are one example, and have been used to create a project that sets an encouraging precedent in museum practice. An exhibition of 67 masks, vessels, and items of regalia from this collection was held in Dresden at the Kunsthalle im Lipsiusbau

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<sup>40</sup> Neil G.W. Curtis, "Universal Museums, Museum Objects and Repatriation: The Tangled Stories of Things," *Museum Management and Curatorship* 21, 2006, pp. 117-27.

<sup>41</sup> In the course of discussion following his presentation on the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission at the Harvard University Native American Program, August 12, 2009. The Commission was established as a consequence of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement. The work of the Commission has helped many of Indigenous heritage to come to terms with the dislocation attendant on colonization. I include myself among them, and should like to record my gratitude to Justice Sinclair.

<sup>42</sup> Discussed in detail by Eaton and Gaskell, "Do Subaltern Artifacts Belong in Art Museums?" pp. 238-40, where it is pointed out (n. 8) that this is now an obligation recognized in the USA by the Association of Art Museum Directors: "Report of the AAMD Subcommittee on the Stewardship of Sacred Objects," adopted June, 2006, posted August 9, 2006: <http://aamd.org/papers>.

<sup>43</sup> See the Glenbow Museum website: <http://www.glenbow.org/exhibitions/past/2010-2011/index.cfm> (accessed July 22, 2011).

in 2011, *Die Macht des Schenkens: Der Potlatch im Großen Haus der Kwakwaka'wakw an der kanadischen Nordwestküste* (The Power of Giving: The Potlatch in the Big House of the Kwakwaka'wakw on the Canadian Northwest Coast). Simultaneously, an exhibition, *The Power of Giving: Gifts at the Saxon Rulers' Court in Dresden and the Kwakwaka'wakw Big House*, was held at the U'Mista Cultural Centre, Alert Bay, British Columbia. It comprised 61 diplomatic and princely gifts, including ceremonial weapons and porcelain from the collections of the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden. This equal exchange between a large, celebrated, and powerful universal museum, and a small, Indigenous, subaltern museum sets a new ethical as well as a new practical standard for relations between both kinds of institution and their communities. The statement by Bill Cranmer, chief of the 'Namgis and chair of the Board of Directors of the U'Mista Cultural Society, captures the attitude of mutual respect and recognition of dignity by both parties to the project: "We are pleased to be able to extend that tradition [of gift exchange] with the German people and exchange with them cherished items from our collection, while welcoming the gifts exchanged by their people hundreds of years ago."<sup>44</sup>

These ethical issues, which could be complemented by discussion of other kinds of restitution, such as that of artworks seized or sold under duress in Germany and German-occupied Europe during the Nazi era, 1933-45, have their own epistemological consequences. The most important is the challenge they provide to Western assumptions regarding the status not only of Western artifacts, but of ways of thinking. Not only are tangible things unstable and multivalent, as we saw above; ideas are, too. Western museum scholars, notably in anthropology museums, are coming to accept that things have characteristics simultaneously—those perceived by Indigenous people and post-Enlightenment Westerners respectively—that are not mutually compatible by Western standards. Indeed, incompatibility extends to prohibitions on certain kinds of knowledge, including of things. This is a state of affairs Westerners find hard to accept. The recent complaint of the Council of the Haida Nation, the Aboriginal Sovereign Authority and Government of the Haida Nation within Canada, about Robert Bringhurst's publication of his translations of stories recorded in 1900 reminds us that deep sensibilities are involved. These are stories that contain privileged knowledge, and are the exclusive prerogative of certain lines of descent.<sup>45</sup> As usual, Ralph Waldo Emerson can help us with his observation, no less true for being overly familiar: "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul simply has nothing to do. He

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<sup>44</sup> Quoted on the U'Mista Cultural Society website: <http://www.umista.org/> (accessed July 22, 2011).

<sup>45</sup> Robert Bringhurst, *A Story as Sharp as a Knife: The Classical Haida Mythtellers and Their World* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1999): see James O. Young, "The Ethics of Cultural Appropriation," *The Dalhousie Review*, 80, 3, 2000, pp. 306-8, and James O. Young, "Profound Offence and Cultural Appropriation," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 63, 2005, pp. 138, 145, both with further references. I repeat this observation from Ivan Gaskell, "Some Cherokee and Chitimacha Baskets: Problems of Interpretation," *Iconographies Without Texts*, ed. Paul Taylor (London: Warburg Institute and Turin: Nino Aragno Editore, 2008), p. 175.

may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall.”<sup>46</sup> Yet we can surely reconcile at least some instances of incompatibility by invoking the principle of responsibility. You may have the right to examine the contents of my medicine bundle, just as I may have the right to examine the contents of yours; but we may agree that to exercise those rights—if rights they be (which I do not concede)—would be irresponsible, giving, as it would, profound offense.<sup>47</sup> Museums have often given, and in some cases continue to give, profound offense. In the light of recent developments in best practice, they have no excuse for continuing to do so.

### II.3. *Therapeutics and Aesthetics*

Franz Boas acknowledged the function of museums as places of entertainment, and this remains one of their important public purposes. It is a perfectly noble purpose. To entertain well is not in the least degrading; though, like scholarship, entertainment can be trivial or bad as well as what Boas termed “healthy”.<sup>48</sup>

As well as being places of entertainment, museums of all kinds are also places of refuge. The orderly calm of their public galleries offers reassurance in times of stress no less than does the opportunity to contemplate things that themselves can reassure, comfort, and inspire. This applies to artworks, other human contrivances (certain scientific instruments, for instance), and things in nature. This aspect of the lives of museums has received little scholarly attention, even in the wake of popular discussions following the use made of museums by many people in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington, DC.<sup>49</sup> As well as hegemonic museums serving people troubled whether individually or collectively, subaltern museums provide vital cultural and social reassurance to communities at a disadvantage in relation to dominant—notably recent settler—societies, such as Australia, Aotearoa (New Zealand), the new North American polities (the USA and Canada), and occupied Palestine.<sup>50</sup> This is a field that requires philosophical attention.

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<sup>46</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” *The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: The Modern Library, 1992; first published in book form in *Essays: First Series*, 1841), p. 138.

<sup>47</sup> See, in particular, James O. Young, “Profound Offence and Cultural Appropriation.”

<sup>48</sup> Boas, “Some Principles of Museum Administration,” pp. 921-25.

<sup>49</sup> My own discussion of the therapeutics of museums was published before these events: Ivan Gaskell, *Vermeer’s Wager: Speculations on Art History, Theory, and Art Museums* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), pp. 197-209.

<sup>50</sup> The latter is the most deprived: see, for example, the Museum of Palestine, Matchouk, Lebanon (Robert Fisk, “The Museum of Palestine: Keys to the Past,” *The Independent*, July 20, 2005: <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/fisk/the-museum-of-palestine-keys-to-the-past-499456.html>, accessed July 23, 2001); artist Khalil Rabbah’s New Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind, part of the exhibition *The Grand Promenade*, curated by Anna Kafetsi for the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens, 2006; and the yet-to-be-built Palestinian Holocaust Memorial Museum, launched online in 2008: [http://palestinianholocaust.net/English/In\\_Depth/GazaHolocaustMuseum/index.shtml](http://palestinianholocaust.net/English/In_Depth/GazaHolocaustMuseum/index.shtml) (accessed July 23, 2011).



One might have expected aesthetics to be a major field of consideration when discussing museums, but it is not. Museum buildings, inside and out, which have effects on their contents, have been discussed in terms of aesthetics, as mentioned above. Aesthetics is also obviously concerned with art; but aesthetic consideration of art in museums (whether on display or not) scarcely differs from its consideration elsewhere, or nowhere in particular (the latter being the case in most discussion of art in aesthetics). The sole pertinent issue concerns the claim that inclusion of a thing in a museum brings about an aestheticizing *museum effect*, a term coined by Svetlana Alpers. She proposes that anything exhibited in a museum thereby becomes an “object of visual interest.” Her first example is a giant crab exhibited in a zoology museum.<sup>51</sup> Part of that interest is aesthetic. One could argue that Alpers’s observation is an illustration of the contention of St. Augustine, of which we are reminded by Arthur Danto, that we can choose to regard anything—the teeth of a dead dog, for example—from an aesthetic viewpoint.<sup>52</sup> The setting of a museum, where varieties of aesthetic attention prevail, encourages us to do just this. This can be no less a question of the sublime in a natural history museum when confronting a giant dinosaur skeleton, than of the beautiful when contemplating an East Asian brush-and-ink landscape painting in an art museum.

Alpers’s use of the term *object of visual interest* coincides with that of Michael Baxandall in his discussion of intention in relation to artists and artworks. Baxandall not only defines circumstances in which artists and initial users interact and make choices—a process in which artists’ intentions play a role—but establishes that artworks are not so much expressions of ideas as objects of visual interest.<sup>53</sup> The interest viewers take in things that exhibit the consequences of makers’ intentions—artworks—is not confined, though, to characteristics of those things that may be the result of makers’ actions. Those human-made things as often as not exhibit aesthetically engaging characteristics that cannot be ascribed to human action: characteristics that can broadly be grouped under the description *degradation*. Some instances of degradation are themselves the result of human action, whether accidental or deliberate; others are entirely natural (such as the photochemical effects of light on dyed fabrics, or of burial on glass to produce iridescence). Aesthetic attention to objects of visual interest engages with things that are not necessarily clearly or exclusively human-made, as well as those that are. The dinosaur skeleton in a natural history museum is as much an artifact of human contrivance as it is a natural thing, no less than is the Roman baroque sculpture in an art

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<sup>51</sup> Svetlana Alpers, “The Museum as a Way of Seeing,” *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington, D.C. and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), pp. 25-32.

<sup>52</sup> Arthur Danto, “Art and Artifact in Africa,” in *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1992), p. 94; first published in *Art/artifact: African Art in Anthropology Collections* (New York and Munich: Center for African Art and Prestel Verlag, 1988).

<sup>53</sup> Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985); see, further, the review by Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 27 (1987), pp. 188-90.

museum an example of natural degradation as well as of human contrivance. Both may owe their status as objects of visual interest to both of these factors.

Baxandall and Alpers's term stresses visual factors, as must be the case when considering things encountered in museum exhibits, but our interest extends to the other senses, when opportunity arises. It usually does not in museum displays. Only museum scholars (curators, conservators, and analytical scientists) are able regularly to touch and smell accessioned things in study rooms and laboratories. It is unfortunate but incontestable that looking is the form of human engagement with museum things that presents least risk to those things themselves.

In sum, the sole point worth making here about aesthetics in relation to museums is that it concerns things of all kinds in museums of all kinds—all of Goode's categories—and that to attend to art alone in art museums is to miss the point of the potential for interchangeability among things of all kinds among museums of all kinds.

#### *II.4. In Place of a Conclusion*

In attempting to give an—admittedly partisan—account of aspects of philosophical engagement—or lack thereof—with museums, I have purposefully—some may think perversely—stressed the importance of scholarship to these institutions, whether hegemonic or subaltern, large or small, whatever their field. Most philosophical commentators focus almost exclusively or wholly on art museums. In the light of my contention that museums have far more in common with one another as sites of intellectual endeavor than each kind may have with other types of institution where cognate fields are examined—science and technological museums with science and technology departments in universities, for instance—it seems inadvisable to isolate particular kinds of museum for analysis. However, Conn's scarcely controvertible observation that museums as a whole have lost the scholarly initiative to universities as a consequence of changes in hegemonic Western epistemology, presents a particular challenge when considering the future of museums.

Although historians know only too well to steer clear of foretelling the future, philosophically it strikes me that further epistemological change is under way: one in which tangible things and intangible concepts are acknowledged to be far more interdependent—and far less exclusively subject to unquestioned Western definition and manipulation—than was recently the case. However, to use those tangible things well and effectively in these emerging intellectual circumstances entails release from the confining structures of museums—Goode's categories of museums, which yet persist. These circumstances require a far greater fluidity and adaptability in the use of museum things than their aggregate current structures readily permit. The boundaries that currently separate types of museums must in future become far more permeable. The scholarship that crosses those boundaries, both within and beyond museums, must fully acknowledge the multivalency and instability of things within and outside them. While building on the huge achievements of past generations of museum scholars in all kinds of museums, scholars now must be able to draw on things regardless of the field

supposedly embodied by their individual repositories. Only then will the transdisciplinary work be possible that will not only contribute big ideas to the scholarly world, but also undergird all other public aspects of museum endeavors. And that transdisciplinary, trans-museum, scholarly work must be informed by both Western philosophical thinking *and* an openness to subaltern concepts, even if apparent contradictions arise in consequence. Consistency is for those content to remain in subjection to hegemony.

### *Acknowledgement*

I shall not reiterate here the debt of gratitude I owe to the many colleagues with whom I have discussed museum scholarship and other aspects of museum work. The reader is referred to “Museums and Philosophy—Of Art, and Many Other Things Part 1.” I shall, however, once again gratefully mention that the award of the Beinecke Fellowship at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts for the fall semester, 2011 enabled me to complete this article. I shall also repeat the dedication: To Jane Whitehead, who remains my most perceptive and severe critic, in scholarship and in all else.

### *Short Biography*

Ivan Gaskell is Professor of Cultural History, and of Museum Studies at the Bard Graduate Center, New York City. He has extensive curatorial experience, mostly at Harvard University where he remains Research Associate of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. His many publications include *Vermeer's Wager: Speculations on Art History, Theory, and Art Museums*, and six co-edited books in the series *Cambridge Studies in Philosophy and the Arts*. He has made numerous contributions to journals and edited volumes, and has curated many experimental exhibitions, mostly at Harvard.