

In the public consciousness, museums are irrefutably linked with education, but they must surely be one of the most under-used resources in this country. Their popular image is that of slightly tired and worn out public institutions, faded and crumbling a bit around the edges. With the vast amounts of research available into the processes of learning, museums could offer a range of active and passive teaching experiences to the whole community.

Not only could they teach what is traditionally expected of a museum education service, but they could break new ground by exploring creative ways of experiencing and interpreting the world in which we live.

In this country only about 24% of the population visit museums with any recurring frequency. This 24% tends to be the most affluent, socially mobile and highly educated sector of the community. This bears out the accusation that is often levelled at museums by traditional socialists - that they are elitist institutions, perpetuating the status quo, being created by the wealthy for the wealthy. In contrast, museums in the United States and Canada, which are more materially affluent societies than our own, are visited by up to 50% of the general public. In this country a great many museums, especially those in the provinces and those specialising in the fine and decorative arts, tend to make themselves unapproachable to the majority of people, assuming a level of knowledge and education that is far above the general average.

This manifests itself in a great many art exhibitions. The paintings are hung with a label beside them, on which only the name of the artist and the subject of the painting will be listed. Additionally, a large and dauntingly complex catalogue may be available for sale at a price that the majority of people cannot afford. As likely as not, there will be no information displayed about the artist, the place and society in which s/he lived, the subject of the works, the way in which s/he worked and the relevance of the works to other works of art and art movements. Even though this will have been collated in the production of the catalogue and would only cost a marginal amount in expense and effort compared to the total exhibition budget, it will not be freely available to the visiting public, who are quite likely to have paid an entrance fee to the exhibition.

Moreover, there will be little or no attempt on the part of the curatorial or teaching staff of the museum or art gallery, to explain to interested visitors, school parties or any other groups, why the exhibition was chosen, its special relevance, why they personally enjoy the works, and why a child of six could not have done just as well. The lack of public accountability of both curatorial staff and the artists themselves does give a great deal of freedom of action. At the same time, every attempt should be made to explain works of art in non-financial terms, discouraging a perception of art values that is purely based on a capitalist market system.

The majority of museums were founded during the first Museum Boom of the late 19th century, when money and patronage was available from successful capitalists who could afford to be philanthropic towards the community as a whole. Museums were set up as places where the ordinary working man could improve his knowledge, and so his chance of self improvement, while his wife could gaze enviously at beautiful old china, and the children could gape incredulously at strange wonders from distant cultures. Also the vast paintings of the Victorian period fulfilled a visual and narrative function that was later superceded by cinema and television.

Plymouth was at the tail end of the first Museum Boom, the Municipal Museum and Art Gallery being founded in 1887 and moving to the new building in Tavistock Road in 1910, opening on 24th October that year. The curiosity of the inhabitants was not unnaturally aroused by this new development, and over 54,000 people visited the institution in the two months remaining that year. The museum also had a commendable education policy, in that it expected every Elementary School child to have made a formal visit to it at least three times during their school career. Today the same building is lucky if it receives more than 60,000 visitors a year, has no formal education policy, receives no money from the education authority and is a living example of what many people think of as a 'boring old museum'.

While Plymouth City Council and Devon County Council will hopefully not allow the Plymouth museums to gradually rot into the 21st century, knowledge about the learning processes is revolutionising museums in other parts of the country. The 1980s seem to be witnessing a second Museum Boom, where the whole range of museum functions and roles is being critically examined, both within the museum profession itself and by its critics, social scientists, educationalists, economists, and artists and designers. The changes taking place are well exemplified by the Hall of Human Biology in the British Museum, Natural History. This has been set out so that the casual visitor to the museum can wander in and find out about the processes that make people function as biological machines. It is designed so that the visitor has a part to play in the exhibition, with demonstrations, physical and mental tests - all part of the process that makes interactive learning interesting. The Victorian concept of learning through threat has been abandoned in favour of the idea

that people will only learn what they are interested in, and that there are no specific limits to what people can become interested in if the material is attractively presented.

Another idea that is central to the role of museums is that everyone does, all the time, pick up a lot of casual information, without being particularly aware of it. The old concept that a rigid formalised structure is necessary for learning has been dropped in favour of people learning randomly and spontaneously within a loosely organised framework. Recent research into the seemingly random operation of brain functions, especially when dreaming, tend to affirm this view. In the same way a casual visitor to a museum will learn something just by seeing an object, not formalised facts but a sensation of shape, colour or age that is picked up by the visual senses.

Museums and art galleries have a major responsibility in helping form people's attitudes and awareness towards both the past and art, and consequently life in general, and their own and other societies in particular. While this is the passive side of museum education, the active role of museums in teaching people is also of major importance. The difference between learning history just out of a text book and, for example, being shown a recreation of an 18th century kitchen is immense. While some conceptual framework is necessary to provide an understanding of the past, the use of particular authentic objects from that past, of the type held in museums, gives that sense of tangible reality that history books can only suggest. In this way museums can function as an important resource in the teaching of a variety of subjects and to a whole range of age and ability levels.

Art is a response to life, and has a special validity in that it exists as visible, visual artefacts and not as written language. A painting shows a reality that has existed and as such is a valid document, of one person's response both to the cultural framework of their period as well as a response to a particular scene, time or emotion. But the majority of people in this country today are practically visually illiterate. Just as you would not expect a child who has not been taught to read to be able to understand this page of printed text, why should you expect an adult who has had no training in visual understanding and perception to have a sympathetic attitude towards abstract painting? While we are taught to listen to sounds for pleasure in the form of music, as well as for information in the form of spoken language, we are not taught to use our eyes for visual pleasure but only to gather useful visual information. Everyone is able to recognise a beauty spot when they are out in the countryside, but people are not taught to perceive clearly and without prejudice their immediate surroundings. The art of this century is very much a critical examination of the world we live in. The story of its development is both intellectually exciting and extremely complex. It is unfair on both artists and the general public to put on an exhibition of modern art and expect it to be sympathetically received without any attempt at explanation.

Every school in this country today has its own computer, but no education authority treats art and visual education with the same seriousness. Matisse, on writing about his first experience of painting at the age of twenty, said, "... then I was free, solitary, quiet." Art should provide a special contemplative space in our modern society and should teach the ability to see the world in which we live in clearly and without fear. Children are taught painting both before and at primary school and the creative process is totally forgotten once they have to start thinking about the adult world. But it is the child-like quality of so many of the great 20th century painters that we most cherish. If society is going to develop as more caring, more aware and more supportive, it is through giving an importance to the inner as well as the material life, by giving credence to visual perception as well as spoken language, and by believing in values that are human and emotive as well as financial and logical. Museums and art galleries should be playing a vital role in re-educating people in the post-industrial age.