



Personal Reflections on Museums

Gary Steuer, President & CEO, Bonfils-Stanton Foundation

In thinking about what to speak to you about today, since you are all experts in museums and I am more of an observer of museums, I decided what might be most helpful is to share my personal reflections, based on my experience and a lifetime of interacting with museums. There is probably nothing I can tell you about the technical aspects of operating a museum, dealing with curation, conservation and management that you don't already know.

I grew up in New York City, in Manhattan, with parents who while not working in the arts were stereotypical New York City culture vultures. From a very young age I was being taken to museums – MoMA, the Met, Museum of Natural History, the Whitney, Guggenheim. I also grew up in an era when even New York City public schools had regular art class for all students. Museums for me became

these places of magic, of mystery, and also in many ways, an alternative playground.

At a young age, perhaps about 8, I began taking art classes at the Museum of Modern Art, which at that time had a full-blown art school as part of their education program. This whet my appetite for art even more, as I began actively making art, not just looking at it. A few years later, when I was maybe about 11, my great aunt Selma took me on a visit to MoMA, when there was a major retrospective of Diane Arbus – and this story has now become part of my family lore. As we strolled through the show, my aunt became more and more concerned because of the challenging nature of Arbus's photographs. I, however, seemed totally unperturbed until I looked at one photo, read the wall signage, and then said "Aunt Selma, what's a transvestite?" Neither of us remember exactly what she answered, but it clearly caused considerable consternation for my aunt as she struggled to find a way to talk to me about transvestites. But isn't that a great example of what is great about art? We were enjoying an intergenerational bonding experience, and appreciating the art of photography from an aesthetic perspective. But then we were also having a serious, honest conversation about an important subject, gender identity.

When I was in middle school, I will admit I was not the most diligent student and a group of us kids would sometimes skip school (I know – a shocking admission!). Where did we go to hang out, especially if it was too cold or rainy to go to the park? The Museum of Natural History, which was right across the street. I spent many hours roaming the halls and exploring the exhibits, and probably learned more than if I had been in class.

I later went on to attend LaGuardia High School for the Arts, as an art major, so of course this deepened even more my immersion in art. I remember we had a special January break program where we got to do special projects outside of the school. One year I spent time experiencing the conservation and storage side of the Met Museum. I also remember visiting Push Pin Studios, the graphic design firm of Milton Glaser, a LaGuardia alum, giving me an introduction to the commercial side of art.

This was also the height of the anti-war movement, the Black Panthers, the Puerto Rican independence movement, the Chicano movement, so we were all steeped in both art and social action. I think this stayed with me as an influence, and increasingly artists and arts organizations are working at the intersection of art and social justice.

In some ways, this deep career-driven immersion in art from a very young age also ended up in some ways damaging me. What do I mean by that? I felt that if I were to be an artist I must be a Michelangelo, a Picasso, a Jackson Pollack. Just making art and seeing where it might go did not work. The pressure I put on myself as an artist eventually became so great I could no longer really make art, and I began to explore other art forms like theatre. I also became more interested in politics. I spent a year abroad in England, studying British literature, theatre and cinema, and of course also visiting museums.

But when I returned to the States and graduated college I ended up working for a United States congressman, seemingly leaving the fine arts for the political arts, though as the “arts guy” on staff I was given the job or working on any arts-related issues. This included working on a project that many years later became

what is now The High Line. One day, the chief of staff for the Congressman asked I would be interested in doing a side project. A good friend of hers was directing the education department of MoMA, which was presenting its first big blockbuster show, Van Gogh at Arles, and the education staff was overwhelmed. So, I began moonlighting at MoMA, working to create slide lectures to be used by teachers bringing in school groups. Remember slide carousels? All of a sudden a light bulb went off – despite having grown up around art as a consumer, and even as an art maker, I had never really thought about the fact that museums were also businesses, that there were people writing press releases, balancing budgets, creating education materials, raising money. For me this was the “Toto pulling back the curtain and exposing the Wizard of Oz” moment. This got me rethinking my decision to leave the arts and I began exploring graduate arts administration programs. These programs may be ubiquitous now, but back in the 70’s there were maybe half a dozen of them in the country.

I ended up doing the Masters in Arts Administration Program at NYU, and thus began my professional career in the arts. Don’t worry, I am not going to recount my entire career in excruciating detail. But I am going to try and touch on moments, stories that relate to my feelings about museums.

After a few years and a few jobs largely in the theatre world, I ended up with my first job in philanthropy, running the capital funding program for the New York State Council on the Arts. This work proved especially influential for me. It involved extensive travel for site visits throughout New York State, including very rural communities, as well as communities of color.

This is when I got to know museums and cultural groups like the Adirondack Museum in Blue Mountain Lake, the Hyde Collection in Glens Falls, the Albright-Knox in Buffalo, Eastman House in Rochester, the Queens Museum, the Bronx Museum, the Corning Museum, the Fenimore Museum, and Alice Austen House on Staten Island.

I developed a much deeper appreciation of the riches available in every corner of our country, and the outsized role that museums and cultural center could play in the lives of rural communities, as well as poor urban communities.

I also developed a deeper understanding of the facilities aspects of museums. Perhaps more than any other art form, museums are about buildings, about this envelope, this receptacle, that must contain and protect the art, but also must be comfortable and welcoming. I remember one particular project very well, where a major regional art museum had been renovated with a new climate control system. Years later they noticed that some of their paintings in certain galleries had developed a filmy coating that required cleaning. After it became clear this was not an isolated problem but systemic, they tried to figure out what was causing it and were stumped. Finally, a maintenance person figured out that the climate control vents had been installed along the edges of the walls in certain galleries, with the return registers along the floor directly below. So, air was being, in effect, washed along the surfaces of the paintings 24/7, where even minor impurities were building up deposits on the canvas.

We also supported some very big projects, like the restoration of the Guggenheim Museum. There I learned that on top of the many challenges of the iconic Frank Lloyd Wright Building, like the outward slanting walls along the rotunda, that they

were also having major water infiltration problems. This was not just due to the age of the building. The big problem was that Wright had designed the exterior of the building to be pure poured concrete, but after it was built someone had decided the building needed a waterproof coating, and this coating over time had trapped water in the concrete, which with freezing and thawing had opened up cracks in the concrete. Our support helped strip the offending coating, repair the cracks and restore the exterior closer to the way Wright had intended.

Later jobs helped me develop an even broader appreciation of museums and their extraordinary civic value, and also the growing diversity of types of museums – places like Dia Beacon, Mass Moca and Storm King that were entirely about large scale art, or temporary installations or outdoor sculpture and earth art. And working at the national scale allowed me to go far beyond New York and get to know museums like the Milwaukee Art Museum, LACMA, the Perez Museum, the Gardner Museum, Seattle Art Museum, SF MoMA, the Wing Luke Museum, Art Institute of Chicago, National Museum of Mexican Art, again just to name a few. I have probably visited literally hundreds of museums, large and small, rural and urban, art museums, science museums, children's museums, history museums and historic houses. I was trying to calculate how many states, and I think I have visited museums in about 40 states. I became such a connoisseur of museum gift shops that a few years ago I actually wrote a whole series of blog posts about my favorite museum gift shops through the country, and became a connoisseur of museum gift shop ties, one of which I am wearing today.

During five years in Philadelphia as Chief Cultural Officer for the City, I served on the boards of the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Pennsylvania Academy of

Fine Arts, so I developed a Trustee's perspective as well. Now I serve on the board of the Clyfford Still Museum in Denver, which our foundation played a major role in creating.

While in Philadelphia the board of PMA grappled with a major leadership change with the sudden passing of a long-time beloved director, as well as a serious debate about the merits of a long-standing huge capital project designed by Frank Gehry. Would the \$500-750 million total to be raised for the capital project be better spent on investment in programs and digital technology? Was the focus on the building distracting from needed attention on innovative programming? There was a fractious debate about this at the board level.

And the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, the nation's oldest art school and oldest museum, historically devoted to classic figurative art like Eakins and Cassatt, had to grapple with two big decisions – would they begin teaching and exhibiting new art forms like digital art, conceptual and performance art? And the acquisitions committee proposed the purchase of a major work of video art – the first piece of video art ever to be acquired by the museum. In the end, the board authorized the acquisition, but not without considerable debate and concern. Here we had two major museums with deep histories grappling with how to best serve the art and communities of today. This change is not easy, and there are often Trustees who may resist change, who see themselves as the keepers of a tradition, a legacy, who may not understand or appreciate new art forms or new ways of connecting art to the public.

Over the past fifty years or so we have seen an incredible geographic democratization of art, with important museums and collections much more

uniformly distributed throughout the country. There is no such thing as a flyover state from an art standpoint anymore.

We have seen the growth of single collection museums – not a new phenomenon of course. Institutions like the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum have been around for a long time – in their case since 1903. And in Philadelphia we had the Barnes Collection. But now we also have the Nasher, the Broad, the Brant Collection, and here in Denver the Anschutz Western Art collection. I am not sure this is necessarily a bad thing – as I said, it has always been with us. People who amass large collections will sometimes want to donate it to existing museums, but I can understand that sometimes they may feel they assembled work with a cohesive collecting vision that would be lost if it was absorbed into an existing museum, and if they have the money and ego to build a building and properly fund staff and endow their own museum, why not. Personally, I really enjoy getting insight into a collector's personal, idiosyncratic vision of art. Whether Barnes, or Gardner, or Broad, it is just a different kind of museum experience.

Here are some of my museum memories – images or experiences that have stayed with me...

- The extraordinary beautiful collection of classic Adirondack lake boats at the Adirondack Museum
- The beautiful setting and eclectic collection of the Shelburne Museum in Vermont, especially the folk art circus collection
- The wings of the Santiago Calatrava designed Milwaukee Art Museum opening on a beautiful sunlit morning, reflected in the water below.

- The Seattle Art Museum's Olympic Sculpture Park, where you have no sense it essentially extends on a bridge over a highway.
- The awe-inspiring Richard Serras at Dia Beacon
- The Gees Bend Quilt exhibition at the Whitney
- The Aboriginal Art Collection of the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne Australia
- The Asian Art collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, including the pillared temple hall from India and the Japanese teahouse
- The diorama cases at the American Museum of Natural History – as tired and old as they may be, I still love them – part of my childhood
- The medical oddities of the Mutter Museum
- While it is more about the architecture than the art, walking up the staircase at the Aspen Art Museum between the outer woven wall and the inner wall of the museum.
- Watching my toddler daughter fall in love with Nick Cave's art at the Denver Art Museum
- Hanging out on the roof of MCA Denver with Mark Mothersbough listening to a local band play, and talking about art, music, and cities.

I feel like museums have been a thread, a through-line for my life, the imprinted memories functioning almost like invisible tattoos that I carry with me. I am sure if I was younger, I would be covered with actual tattoos! I wish that experience for everyone. And while I have had the privilege of growing up in a family that nurtured my love art, and also have the privilege of special access through my work, this is not an experience, a way of life, that is reserved for the privileged. What do I see as the trends in museums, from my vantage point as a funder, a

policy person, an avid consumer of museum content? What are the barriers to having museums for all people as much a part of life as going to work, or going to the supermarket – or to speak to the specific community we are in, as much a part of life as skiing, hiking or mountain biking? Here is a list, in no particular order:

- **The cost barrier** – While it is not just about the money, we can't ignore that money is a factor. When the Denver Museum and the Children's Museum of Denver eliminated price barriers for kids and families, visitorship spiked. On SCFD "free" days, visitorship at the major museums reflect the diversity of our communities, and they are so crowded that members and other donors try to avoid those days. How do we ensure that every day is like that? I know it is complicated, that having a cost can place a sense of value on something, and that having admission also drives memberships, where free admission is a key benefit. I don't have an easy answer but I do think we must continue to explore how we can eliminate cost as a barrier for those for who cost IS a real factor.
- **The image barrier** – Museums, especially art museums, are perceived by people who did not grow up with exposure to them, as intimidating, as scary – not something that could ever be a comfortable part of their life. A blogger just wrote a piece called "Ten things in the arts that should die" and one of them was hovering gallery guards who treat you as a criminal and not so discretely follow you around the museum, like a security guard in a department store who stalks you as a potential shoplifter. This is real, and I have seen it happen, most recently when I was at MFA Houston. Here is a non-museum example: I was attending a meeting at a country club with

several other people. Three of us happened to arrive independently but at the same time, all walking from our cars to the front door simultaneously. One of the group was a woman and the third an African American man, dressed, as I was, in a jacket and tie. The guard at the front door walked straight up to this man and asked him why he was there. Did not even attempt to question me or the woman. The moment the guard saw that I and the woman knew this man he backed off, but it was a stark reminder that people of color, no matter how successful, deal with these “micro-aggressions” every day. So while this phenomenon is not always about race, it can be. Museums must relentlessly impress upon their staff and volunteers to always make visitors feel welcome.

- Related to my previous point, **everybody is part of the customer service team** – my experience at a museum is immensely enhanced by staff that seems happy, enthusiastic, knowledgeable – but not too pushy. Many larger museums may outsource security, custodial or food service to outside contractors. Even if in the short run this is cost-effective I think this can be a huge challenge as you lose control of the customer service piece. They are no longer part of your team, but part of someone else’s team.
- **It’s OK to have kids in the galleries** – a year or two ago an art critic and blogger wrote a rather testy piece about how too many art museums these days were overrun with children, making it harder to enjoy quiet contemplation of the art. My position is that while it can sometimes be distracting, and some parents can do a better job of ensuring their kids don’t treat museum galleries like playrooms, I will take those downsides ANY DAY. Please do not limit kids and family programs to specialized

education areas far away from the galleries. I LOVE that the Denver Art Museum has family activity areas spread throughout the museum, and their backpack program where young children can explore sections of the museum with their accompanying adults through a sort of activity treasure hunt. And I see the delight on the faces of most visitors without kids when they see kids doing an activity in a gallery. We need MORE, not LESS of this. Sorry, critic who shall not be named – you are wrong!

- **Get out of your building** – Museums are by their nature place-based, about buildings and real estate as well as art. And we spend so much time trying to get “THEM” into our buildings. But one thing research has repeatedly shown is that poor communities, communities of color, really want cultural opportunities in their neighborhood. Figure out how you can get more programs, even less fragile/valuable objects from your collections, out into the community. Think about community satellite locations, or touring exhibitions to community centers, schools, social clubs.
- **Take Equity seriously and make it a total organization commitment** – This can be difficult work and can make many board and staff uncomfortable. Someone commented recently about the growing presence of “diversity, equity and inclusion” in arts conferences, that “this is not a track,” meaning conference should not be creating equity tracks, where attendees can choose whether or not to attend such sessions. It should be woven into the fabric of the conference – keynotes, staffing, sessions NOT on equity topics. I have often heard from the staff-people running diversity or community outreach departments at museums that they feel marginalized. They may be the only professional staff of color. They may feel a “box was checked”

by hiring them and creating such a program. Does the organization, from the Board, to the President or Director, to curators and department heads, embrace this work. Are these issues something you think about in hiring, in vendor selection, in marketing and communications, in wayfinding and facility design? And related to this, if to reach communities of color you partner with organizations from those communities, truly partner with them and pay them for their time. Another thing I hear often from smaller, culturally-specific arts orgs is that now every major arts organization in town wants to partner with them on both programming and marketing. However, there is little recognition of how much these partnerships involve in terms of staff time, for orgs already stretched thin with less access to resources.

- **Have Fun and Take Risks** – Museums can be thought of as stuffy, serious places. How to you blow up that stereotype? Adam Lerner at MCA Denver has been a master at this, and in fact they just got a big grant from Mellon to sort of share that secret sauce with museum staff from around the country. Not to be flip, but “Be Like Adam.” I remember when I was in Philly the Philadelphia Museum of Art did very traditional opening gala receptions for all major exhibitions – business attire or black tie, cocktails and canapes, maybe a chamber ensemble playing lovely classical music. The guests were trustees and patrons. Average age of probably 75. But one year they decided to give their first ever solo show to a local artist – photographer Zoe Strauss. Zoe specialized in photographing the people of Philadelphia who the patrons of the museum probably never see, as well as the people of poor, challenged communities in places like Mississippi and Louisiana. To

Director Timothy Rub's credit, he realized the traditional opening party would be wildly at odds with the values and work of Zoe. So, he assembled a cross departmental team of the 20-somethings on staff, gave them the opening reception budget and said – throw the kind of party you and your friends would want to go to. And they did. Tickets were \$10 and it was promoted entirely via social media, selling out easily. Patron types and board members were basically told, if you don't like it, you don't have to come. The people who came were almost entirely in their 20's and 30's, many of whom had never been to the museum before. The entertainment began with one of the city's top drumlines and dance teams from a local largely-Black high school marching through the crowd and parting it like the Red Sea, followed by a dance party DJ'd by Questlove of the Roots. It was an amazing party, like nothing the museum had ever done before, and opened it up to a whole new audience.

- **Signage** – I know a lot of curators don't like to distract you from the art with signage or labels that are too large. But speaking as a fairly sophisticated museum-goer, I like signage that helps give me more info and more context, and is large enough to easily read. Now imagine the experience of someone less comfortable with the museum experience. I also really appreciate signage that helps put work into historical or cultural context. I think sometimes curators or exhibit designers take too much for granted. Because something is obvious to them they forget it may be less obvious to others. I think they also tend to shy away from what can be difficult conversations. An anecdote here – a museum mounted an exhibit of beautiful paintings of Southwestern scenes from the early 20th Century

featuring many paintings of local Indians. The artists were not themselves native. While I very much enjoyed the work, I found it interesting that there was no signage talking about the issue of cultural appropriation. What did the Indians feel about being painted in this way? I happened to run into the Director in the gallery and asked him what the Indian community thought of this work, or the show, and he said “Oh, they hate it of course.” Now I am not arguing that this means the show should not be done. But what if there was an information panel in the exhibit that presented a contemporary Indian point of view on this work?

- **Hours and Amenities** – Be Starbucks. Now by that I don’t just mean serve over-priced coffee – many of you probably do that already. What I mean is take a cue from the famous Starbucks “third place” goal – being the third place for people to hang out, after work and home. Have free WiFi in all your public areas, have comfy sofas and chairs. And stay open later. Can’t tell you how many times I rushed to get to a museum by 3:30 or 4 and then am hustled out at 4:45 as the museum tries to clear the galleries by 5. I know there are costs to this, but I am urging you to find a way to make it happen, and not just on a first Friday once a month, or even every Thursday or Friday as some museums do. Experiment, find out what works, and don’t forget to also let people know you are doing it. And be patient – it takes time for people to modify their default behavior. A non-museum example. When the Guthrie theatre in Minneapolis opened their new theatre a few years – a significant very cool building that included a glass bottom cantilevered bridge over a river – they designed it to welcome people all day and late into the evening, even on days and times when there were no

performances. The building had full free wifi throughout. It also had many seating areas. You did not have to have a ticket to get into the building, only into a theatre space itself when there was a show. They had one or two coffee stations that switched over into bars in the evening. They had a full service restaurant that again was open regular restaurant hours, not just ties to when there was a show. The Guthrie became a hugely popular place in the city just to hang out, to meet people. Now I don't have stats on whether it led to a measurable increase in audiences, but I can tell you being in that building just felt right, and when I did see a show the audience looked more like the crowd hanging out in the lobby areas, sipping a latte and working on their laptop.

Of course, many museums already do many if not all of these things I am recommending, but many do not. And as I said at the outset, I speak as a passionate layperson, as a consumer and supporter of museums, not as a museum professional.

I believe deeply in the power of museums to educate and enlighten us, to challenge us, to spark dialogue and conversation, to connect us with the sweep of human civilization and natural beauty this world has to offer.

So, I close by saluting all of you, for what you do, day in and day out, to make that magic happen, often toiling hidden behind that curtain like the Wizard of Oz.

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