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## Section One

# Introduction

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# 1

## Defining Museums (and Museum Studies)

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### What Is a Museum?

Before exploring the ins and outs of museum studies, it is necessary to establish some basic definitions. Most people probably have some idea of what a museum is, but upon closer consideration, it is not a simple, clear-cut issue. The shades of grey discussed here are the defining elements of museums—complexity and diversity are among the characteristics that make museums unique institutions in society. This chapter begins with an exploration of the etymology of the word *museum* and then examines some current definitions of the institution, before arriving at a working definition that is used throughout this book. The parameters of museum studies as a field are considered in the second half of the chapter.

### Etymology of the Word *Museum*

The word *museum* is derived from the Greek word *mouseion*, meaning the place where the muses dwell. The muses were sister-goddesses responsible for entrancing and inspiring literature, science, and the arts, and were believed to be the sources of knowledge for poets, musicians, historians, dancers, astronomers, and others. Although the Temple of the Muses, the *Mouseion*—an institution founded by Ptolemy Soter in the third century BC in Alexandria—was more like a university than a museum by today’s standards, it represents the first formal association of objects and learning. Although the *Mouseion* wasn’t open to the public in the modern sense, it was open to learned professors and their students.

The word *museum* appeared in the fifteenth century in reference to the collections of the Medici family in Florence, Italy, who are credited by some as the creators of the first museum (Hooper-Greenhill 1992). The first published use of the word *museum* in English occurred in 1615 in a travel book by George Sandys (1578–1644), referring to the ruins of the Temple of the Muses in Alexandria: “that famous Musaeum founded by Philadelphus” and “that renowned Library” (the Library of Alexandria). From the 1600s

onward the word museum was used to refer to institutions that collected and exhibited objects.

### Defining Museum

Note that while there are many definitions of the word *museum*, there is no general agreement (by those who work in, with, and on museums) about what makes a museum a museum. Throughout history people have questioned the purpose of museums, and they still do so today. The reason for this is really quite simple; museums are dynamic institutions that respond to societal trends, beliefs, and cultural paradigms. It is therefore important to note that a single definition is not set in stone, nor is there agreement today on the ultimate description defining that institution, *museum*. Therefore, it is important to consider a variety of definitions before settling on one. To arrive at a working definition for this book, two sets of descriptions are evaluated: (1) the definitions of museums from professional organizations and (2) models of museums.

### Definitions from Professional Organizations

When defining what a museum is, many people look to the major professional organizations for guidance. A professional association is an organization formed to unite and inform people who work in the same occupation, help establish and maintain standards, act as a communicative body, and represent shared beliefs about the profession in discussions with other bodies. The definitions offered by several core museum organizations from around the world are examined below.

This is the International Council of Museums' current definition of museum, according to the ICOM Statutes (adopted at the 21st General Conference in 2007):

A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study, and enjoyment. (ICOM n.d.)

The American Alliance of Museums (AAM; formerly the American Association of Museums) does not have an official definition of *museum*, but considers organizations such as archaeological parks (Figure 1.1), zoological parks (Figure 1.2), and botanical gardens (Figure 1.3) to be museums. The AAM accreditation committee does have a definition of museum that it has used since the 1970s, which states that a museum is

an organized and permanent nonprofit institution, essentially educational or esthetic in a purpose, with professional staff, that owns or uses tangible objects, cares for them and exhibits them to the public on some regular schedule. (quoted in Alexander and Alexander 2008)

Further insight into this organization's notion of *museum* can be found in the AAM list of accreditation criteria (American Alliance of Museums 2013) which, among other things, states that a museum must

**Figure 1.1** An archaeological site as a museum: Prasat Hin Phimai Historic Park (Phimai, Thailand). Photograph by the authors.



- be a legally organized nonprofit institution or part of a nonprofit organization or government entity;
- be essentially educational in nature;
- have a formally stated and approved mission;
- use and interpret objects and/or be a site for the public presentation of regularly scheduled programs and exhibits;

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**Figure 1.2** Is a zoo a museum? Giraffes enjoying a sunny day at the Taronga Park Zoo in Sydney, Australia. Photograph by the authors.



**Figure 1.3** Is a botanical garden a museum? The Hortus Botanicus in Leiden (The Netherlands) is one of the oldest botanical gardens in the world. Photograph by the authors.



- have a formal and appropriate program of documentation, care, and use of collections and/or objects;
- carry out the above functions primarily at a physical facility/site;
- have been open to the public for at least two years;
- be open to the public at least 1,000 hours a year;
- have accessioned 80 percent of its permanent collection;
- have at least one paid professional staff member with museum knowledge and experience;
- have a full-time director to whom authority is delegated for day-to-day operations; and
- have financial resources sufficient to operate effectively.

The Canadian Museums Association (2013) offers another definition:

Museums are institutions created in the public interest. They engage their visitors, foster deeper understanding and promote the enjoyment and sharing of authentic cultural and natural heritage. Museums acquire, preserve, research, interpret and exhibit the tangible and intangible evidence of society and nature. As educational institutions, museums provide a physical forum for critical inquiry and investigation.

Finally, the United Kingdom’s Museums Association (2013) states:

Museums enable people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment. They are institutions that collect, safeguard and make accessible artefacts and specimens, which they hold in trust for society.

While it does not come from a professional organization, in the United States a legal definition of *museum* can be found in the legislation authorizing the establishment of the federal Institute of Museum Services (now the Institute of Museum and Library Services, or IMLS):

A public or private nonprofit agency or institution organized on a permanent basis for essentially educational or aesthetic purposes, which, utilizing a professional staff, owns or utilizes tangible objects, cares for them, and exhibits them to the public on a regular basis. (Museum Services Act 1976)

In all of these definitions, there are patterns and similarities, but also a few differences. The “public” is present in all whether they are to be exhibited to, educated, or entertained—what the museum does is for the public benefit or in the public interest. Another theme is the notion of material evidence, which is to be cared for, interpreted, and preserved. The last point that comes out in most of the professional definitions is that these activities are done in a regular and consistent manner by trained staff.

## Museum Models

The definitions above are helpful, but they are very straightforward and lack nuance and detail. Museums are highly complicated institutions,

so more detail is needed to arrive at an adequate definition for use in this book. To simplify a complicated issue, two broad categories that have been used to sort out museums from similar institutions—function and type—are considered here. Below are some of the common functions and types of museums:

*Function:* to collect, to conserve, to educate, to interpret, to exhibit, to research, to serve

*Type:* art, art center, anthropology, aquarium, arboretum, botanical garden, children's, herbarium, history, historic house, natural history, science center, science and technology, planetarium, gallery, zoo

It is human nature to divide and categorize, so each of these types of museums has developed its own character and culture. Although there is by no means a single way to describe an art museum, for example, there are certain things art museums have in common that set them apart from other museums. The collection of an art museum is quite different from that of a zoo or a history museum. Art carries with it its own interesting issues, including questions of what a particular work means, its relationship with the artist, and the notion of beauty. The same goes for other museums. For instance, natural history museums collect the natural evidence of the world, and with that comes classification, biological research, and vastly different storage issues.

At the same time, all museums have similar functions in common—such as collecting, cataloging, caring for collections, and interpreting them for the public—so although there are differences, there are also characteristics shared among even the most diverse types of institutions.

A thought-provoking article by Adam Gopnik presents an interesting and different way to model museums that might give us insight into their dynamic nature. In *The Mindful Museum* (2007) he describes five kinds of museums and considers them in a historical progression:

*Museum as Mausoleum*—a place where you go to see old things, to find yourself as an aesthete or scholar; above all a place connected to the past; a silent experience for the individual.

*Museum as Machine*—not mechanical, but productive; where you go to be transformed, to learn (about the present); you emerge informed, educated, changed; a place of quiet, significant instruction.

*Museum as Metaphor*—extravagant, flamboyant, romantic; a museum that no longer pursues an audience but provides us with a central arena of sociability.

*Museum as Mall*—exclusively devoted to pleasure; overcrowded, overmerchandised; the collection becomes a commodity.

*Museum as Mindful*—aware of itself; obviously and primarily about the objects it contains; objects are intrinsic to the experience; encourages conversation but does not force information.

Gopnik's point is that museums should strive to be mindful. Whether you agree with that assertion or not, it should be clear by now that museums are complex and that there really is no single kind of museum, or one single model that describes them all. In today's world, the museum must

be adaptable and will probably serve multiple roles for varied audiences. Understanding the museum's functions must happen at one level; understanding the types of collections it holds will happen at another level; and whether it serves as mausoleum, machine, metaphor, mall, or mindful museum will depend on the time, the exhibit topics, the staff, the audience, and the programs. From one perspective or another, each of these kinds of museums may describe the same museum.

## The Legal Organization of Museums

Before moving on to a working definition for this book, the position of the museum as a legal entity must be considered. In the United States, museums can be either public or private institutions. This distinction is important because it determines who owns the collections and who is legally liable for their care. Private museums are created by individuals and managed by a board and museum officers, but public museums are established and managed by federal, state, or local governments.

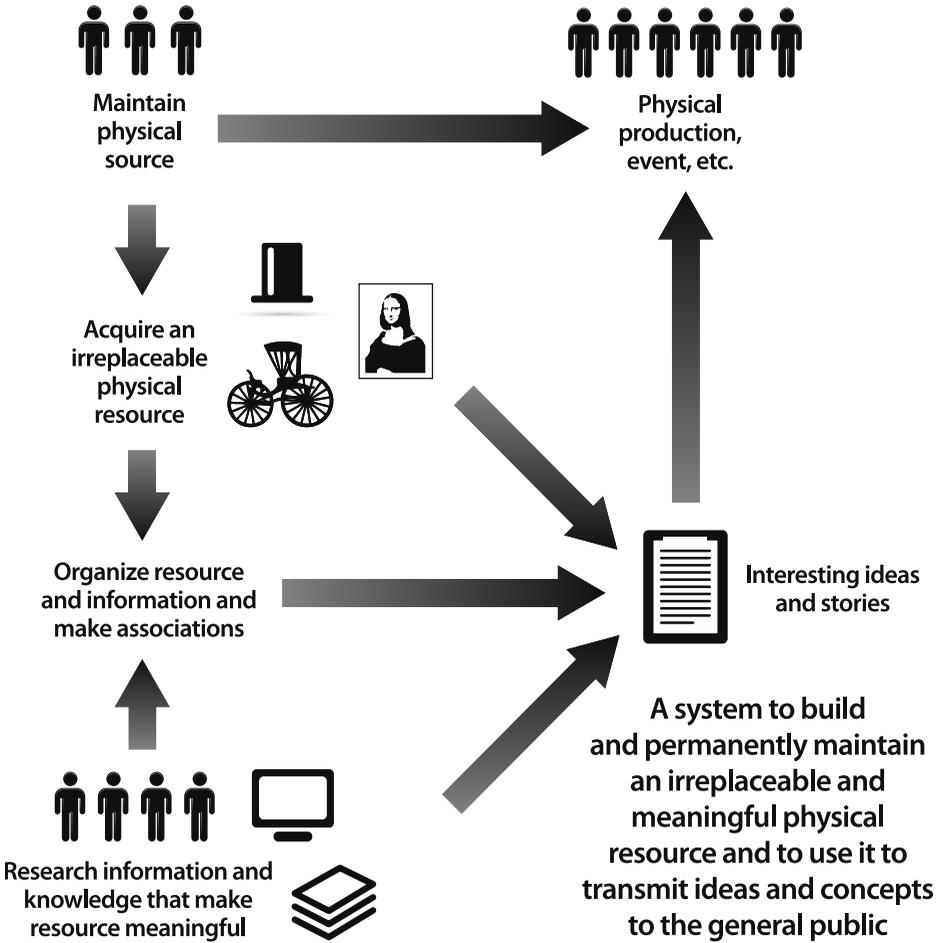
Most private museums have nonprofit status; are organized as tax-exempt organizations; are controlled by their members; and are organized as trusts, associations, or corporations. *Nonprofit* means that an organization is exempt from paying most taxes; it is operated for specific, stated purposes; and the money the organization earns is invested in the organization itself. By contrast, the money earned by a private, for-profit museum is paid to the museum's owners or shareholders. The main difference between nonprofit and for-profit museums is that the collections of nonprofit museums are held in the public trust, whereas the collections of for-profit museums are legally corporate assets that may be sold (and the proceeds may be paid to the owners or shareholders of the museum).

It is important to understand the differences between trusts, associations, and corporations when learning about museums. *Trusts* are arrangements in which the management of the trust property is the obligation of the trustees, for the benefit of the beneficiaries of the trust. In a museum, this means that the trustees (the board) have a legal obligation (and the power) to properly manage the museum (the trust property). *Associations* are unincorporated organizations that are formed by a group of members who agree to support a common purpose. Generally speaking, associations cannot receive or hold property. *Corporations* are legal entities that are created by and operated under the laws of a particular state and may acquire property in a way similar to how an individual can own property. The board of directors of a corporation does not have the same legal responsibilities as do the trustees of a trust—the board of a corporation has a duty to be loyal to the corporation, while the board of a trust has a duty to be loyal to the intention of the trust (Phelan 2014). In practice, this means that the board of a museum that is an organized trust does not have as much flexibility in how it runs the museum as does a museum that is organized as a nonprofit corporation, because the terms of the trust limit what the board can do. Most museums in the United States are organized as nonprofit corporations that hold their collections in the public trust.

## A Working Definition

Alexander and Alexander (2008) point out that the fulcrum for the multiplicity of definitions seems to be between the museum as a repository for objects and the museum as a place for learning. Indeed, the contemporary

Figure 1.4 Keene’s model of the museum system. Adapted from Keene (2002).



museum must manage a balancing act between these two important roles, as can be seen in the elements present in all the definitions above. In an attempt to make these two facets work together more clearly, Keene defines a museum as “a system to build and permanently maintain an irreplaceable and meaningful physical resource and to use it to transmit ideas and concepts to the public” (2002, 90). In Keene’s view, a museum is not simply a place with objects that are accessible to everyone, because the accessible things act in a system of inputs and outputs, which involves particular processes and takes into account outside pressures from the world (see Figure 1.4).

As Keene points out, a museum is not an island, but exists within a complex web of societal expectations, past traditions, and interwoven levels of meaning. Because Keene’s definition takes into account all of these things—systems, external influences, inputs (objects and information), outputs (exhibits, programs), people—it is used throughout this book to discuss museums.

**Museum:** a system to build and permanently maintain an irreplaceable and meaningful physical resource and use it to transmit ideas and concepts to the public.

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Keep in mind that this is not the perfect definition of a museum; there are debatable portions, such as the notion of permanence and the seemingly unidirectional nature of transmission, which are tackled in other sections of this book. Two components of this definition are reviewed next: the public and the meaningful physical resource. Chapter 3 delves further into the system that builds and maintains these components.

## The Public

It seems axiomatic that museums exist to serve the public. But if museums do exist to serve the public, how do they do it, and who is *the public*? What makes some museums public museums and others private—and do both actually serve *the public*? These are not idle questions, as sometimes the museum board doesn't do its duty and neglects to properly manage the museum as a public trust; when this happens, the board can be held legally responsible for its failure of duty. Knowing what *public* means in this definition is crucial at all levels, including understanding the concept of public trust and the social responsibilities of museums in society.

### What Is the Public Trust?

Since the advent of democracy, the idea that certain activities are carried out for the benefit of the public has been a broadly used (though complicated) concept. While the idea of a public trust is not unique to the United States, it plays a more significant role in public institutions here than in most other countries. In the United States the concept of public trust is at the center of defining museums. From the museum perspective, public trust can be seen in two ways: legally (as an aspect of common law) and conceptually (as an ethical concern).

The nonprofit museum has a fiduciary relationship with the public, meaning that the museum holds property (the collections) that is administered for the benefit of others (the public) (Malaro and DeAngelis 2012). This relationship means that no one individual can use the property for personal gain, and that the assets can only benefit the group that is the beneficiary of the trust. Museum officials serve as the *trustees*, and the public are the *beneficiaries*. Malaro and DeAngelis (2012) make the point, based on legal standards, that museums have a duty of care, a duty of loyalty, and a duty of obedience to their beneficiaries. Because museums exist to protect, preserve, and increase the trust's assets, museums in the United States are said to operate *in the public trust*. This relationship is tightly wrapped up with the second meaning of public trust as an ethical concern.

Public trust museums in the United States are grounded in the notion of public service: museums hold their collections as public trusts, as a benefit to those they were established to serve (e.g., as outlined in the AAM Code of Ethics). But upholding public trust responsibilities entails more than simply following the law. It means that museums must be loyal to their missions and must garner the respect and integrity necessary to warrant public confidence. This is where a code of ethics comes in. Professional ethics are guidelines for behavior that are based on experience and refined by being tested through experience. The purpose of a code of ethics is to raise the level of professional practice to a standard that is above the law. The idea of a code of ethics for museum professionals dates back to 1892, when George Brown Goode, the secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, proposed that museums should formulate standards of correct and ethical behavior and

professional duty. The first formal code of ethics for museum professionals, *Code of Ethics for Museum Workers*, published by the American Association of Museums, was adopted in 1925. It was based on the practical wisdom and collective experience of people working in museums. The AAM code was revised in 1987 and again in 1993–1994. Another significant code of ethics for museums is the ICOM code, first promulgated in 1986 and revised in 2004, which is widely followed by non-U.S. museums.

### Social Responsibility

A perennial issue that confronts museums, particularly public museums, is the role that they should play in society. Should museums be passive holders of knowledge that store, preserve, and display objects and just give basic information to the public? Or should museums take an active role in bringing issues, sometimes controversial, to the fore? Should museums be catalysts for asking questions, inspiring and producing new knowledge, and stimulating dialogue?

Community and social responsibility have become increasingly important to the usefulness and value of today's museum institutions. *Community responsibility* refers to more local involvement in one's own constituency. Many museums have become more involved in their communities and in return have asked for more involvement from them. Support from locals, as both visitors and volunteers, may be the difference between staying open and closing the doors of a museum. Depending on the kind of museum, funding sources may be entirely local, and forging a good relationship with one's neighbors may help increase the long-term value of the site.

*Social responsibility* refers to a larger purpose, a national or perhaps cultural duty to the museum's overall audience, present and future. Some museums have begun to view their role in society as being an active question-asking entity, a place where assumptions are questioned and issues are raised. Some museums go so far as to position themselves to intentionally address controversial issues. In the past, many museums in the United States took a somewhat passive role when it came to controversy. They would either stay away from hot issues or only present "the facts," the safer components of a story. Today some museums continue this pattern, but others have chosen to stimulate conversation by purposefully designing contentious exhibitions.

### The Meaningful Physical Resource

Museums are stewards of the world's natural and cultural common resources and are therefore compelled to advance understanding and foster appreciation of that diverse world and how to preserve it. Many people tend to associate museums with a particular subject-matter, content, or discipline, but as can be seen from the above exploration with respect to defining the institution, the subject-matter is not the whole picture. Collecting objects of a certain period, place, type, or association is important and relates to the all-important mission. However, the meaningful physical resource is more than subject-matter: institutions must *have or use* objects, provide public access to those objects in some way, and be open to present them on a regular basis in order to *be* museums. The objects themselves are what make a museum. Other institutions do not put physical, three-dimensional collections at the center of their functioning the way museums do. This

positioning makes the museum a unique institution in society. Even so, this aspect of the museum definition continues to be contested, especially in the digital age. The following discussion introduces several issues surrounding the collection that have been the topic of much debate in museums: whether the museum needs to own a physical collection of objects, what those objects mean in the museum context, and the role of the virtual in a physical world.

## Collection Required?

The presence or absence of collections as a defining characteristic of a museum has been debated in the museum community for a number of years. Many institutions that do not own collections but exhibit them are considered museums because of the interpretive, educational, and public nature of their programs; these institutions, after all, *use* objects to do this work. This leads to the question: Must an institution own a collection in order to be a museum? Or does *using* objects (the individual contents of a collection) also count? For example, what about a science center? Such institutions are usually centered around “hands-on” activities designed to instruct visitors about some aspect of the physical universe, but often the only objects they hold are the reproductions, models, and interactives built for the specific purpose of teaching various concepts. Nevertheless, these exhibits are filled with physical, three-dimensional representations used to demonstrate such concepts. In other words, these institutions *use objects*, a meaningful physical resource, to transmit ideas and concepts to the public. Even though the objects in these institutions are not preserved and are not specifically representative of some time, culture, or species, they are nevertheless integral to the concept of the museum. In the end, science centers *use objects to convey ideas to their audiences*. Keene’s definition, however, says that these physical resources must be irreplaceable. Is this necessary, or is the use of replaceable objects just as valid?

Some institutions have objects that many would not immediately perceive as parts of collections or might even find difficult to call *objects*. For example, zoos hold collections of animals. Are zoos museums? Zoos collect, systematically care for their collections (live ones though they be), educate the public about them, and are regularly open to the public.

Yet another species of potential museum are those institutions that hold collections but do not provide public access to them. As an example, the Museum of Vertebrate Paleontology at the University of California in Berkeley contains thousands of fossil specimens but is not considered a museum (according to most definitions) because it has no exhibits open to the public. The Web site for the museum includes virtual exhibits, but there are no physical exhibits. Some people would argue that having a Web site makes the collection publicly accessible, and that virtual exhibitions are the equivalent of three-dimensional exhibits in the transmission of ideas and concepts to the public, per Keene’s definition.

## Access vs. Meaning

In today’s world, many key issues for libraries, archives, and museums boil down to access versus meaning. The digital revolution has made possible greater access to more things than ever before in human history. For example, archival institutions can digitize their materials and make them available on a Web site for anyone in the world to access. If you are doing your family’s genealogy from Cape Town, South Africa, you may not have

to fly 8,800 miles to Virginia to find out about your great-great grandfather who emigrated to America in 1895. If the appropriate materials have been digitized and made accessible by an archival institution in Virginia, you can access them from your dining room table in Cape Town. There is a sense of freedom with this incredible access, but there is evidence that accessing the material online is different than actually experiencing the material—physical access provides a different kind of information to users. For example, Duff and Cherry (2000) found that people distinguished between getting information from an actual document versus seeing a digital image of the document. They reported that 41.3 percent of the participants who used original paper, microfiche, and digital formats liked the paper format most—some saying that the experience was qualitatively different if they were in the same room with the object and could hold it in their hands. These physical object experiences are generally more meaningful to people and can leave deep impressions on their memories, perceptions, and emotions. Recent work by Latham (2009, 2013) found that deeply felt experiences with museum objects were more meaningful to people when they were in the presence of the physical things rather than through some other representation of them. In these examples, people distinguished between quick, convenient access to information and meaningful, more deeply connective experiences; it is almost as if the two are on opposite ends of a spectrum.

An example that reveals the complex nature of access and meaning is the Google Art Project, through which anyone from anywhere in the world can access paintings from around the globe and zoom in to see artworks closer even than a visitor could while physically standing in front of them. Although the viewer is not in the same physical space as the object, there is a certain level of intimate access through the Google Art Project that one cannot achieve when in the actual presence of the artworks. The Google Art Project allows a user to zoom very close to a painting, close enough that the brushstrokes can be seen (an important feature mentioned by those in the Latham study who were discussing meaningful physical encounters). While it has yet to be demonstrated whether or not this creates similar meaning for users, it does provide a level of access that is deeper than has been seen previously in other digitally accessed material.

### The Virtual Museum

Much debate and discussion surrounds the concept of the virtual museum. This is not a simple issue, as what is considered *virtual* in the museum context actually falls on a continuum from a collection of digitized objects available online to an immersion experience utilizing high-tech equipment to make people feel as if they were *in* a museum. Several years ago, many museums jumped on the Second Life bandwagon, taking advantage of what they thought would be new paths to reach untapped audiences. Many of these ventures did not amount to much, and few of these virtual museums have endured. Still, some worry that the virtual version will someday replace the physical version of the museum, although this concern seems to be subsiding as it becomes clear that humans continue to need physical and social interactions in the presence of actual objects. Others contend that the physical museum—the building, objects, people, and exhibits—will always be more important to society than a virtual representation. It is difficult to predict what will happen, because a younger generation is growing up more accustomed to virtual and digital access. How will this affect the future of

the physical museum as technology allows greater (and different kinds of) access to museums and their collections?

It is less expensive and perhaps easier (or at least quicker) to build virtual exhibitions than to build physical ones. Digital storage of objects is far less expensive than physical storage, which requires infrastructure, labor, and maintenance. It is indeed tantalizing to consider such efficiency. But physical collections provide something that cannot be found in digital form, as discussed above. Several studies cite the importance of seeing the real thing (e.g., Moore 1997; Reach 2004; Latham 2014) and being in the presence of a complete exhibit, surrounded by artifacts, design, lights, colors, and sounds. Furthermore, research by Falk and Dierking (1992, 2000) and others has shown that learning in museums is mediated by the social group that the visitor is part of during the museum visit, but virtual visits almost always lack this dimension of the experience. The jury is still out on the question of physical versus virtual museums, but it is an important one for anyone entering the museum field to consider carefully and thoughtfully.

## What Is Museum Studies?

*Museum studies* is a broad, multi- and interdisciplinary field that involves both theory and practice. It is a community that shares common values, allowing its various subdivisions to filter into each other, maintaining and feeding the connection through a common focus on underlying similarities. In library and information science (LIS), this is referred to as a discourse community. Just as defining the word museum is complicated, the terminology surrounding museum studies is equally complex. The traditional meaning of *museology* in English refers to the study of museums. In international use, however, museology is more often used to refer to “anything relating to museums” (Desvallées and Mairesse 2010), which includes museum studies. In English, *museography* is traditionally defined as the description of the contents of a museum, but in international use museography refers to the practical (applied) aspects of museology, or “the techniques which have been developed to fulfill museal operations” (Desvallées and Mairesse 2010). For purposes of this book, museum studies includes both museology (theory) and museography (practice).

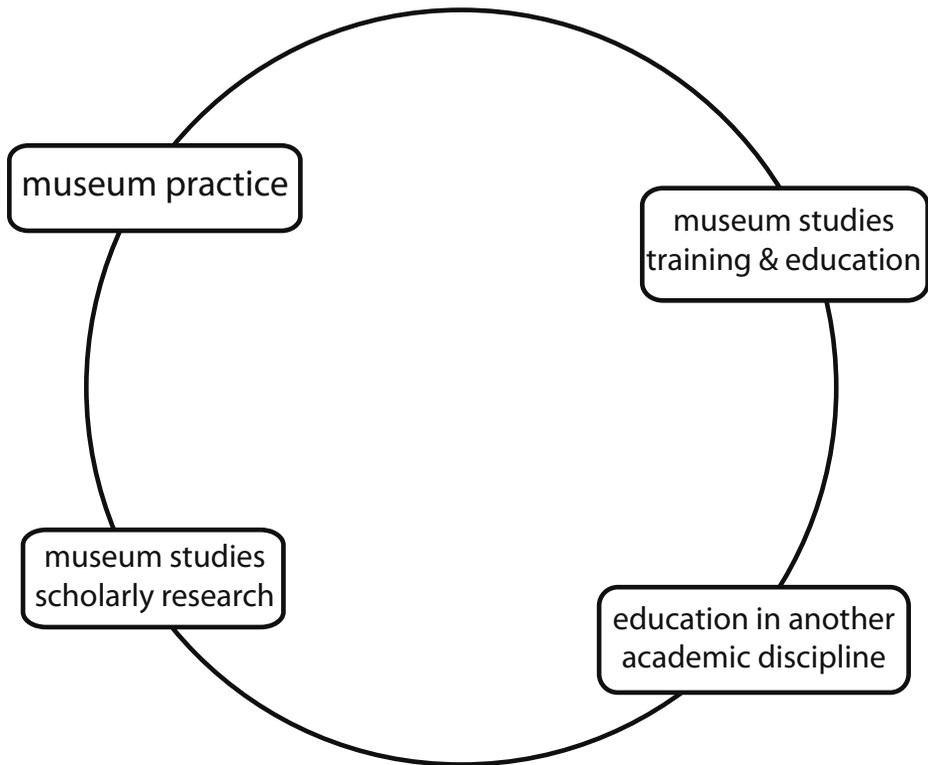
Museum studies = Museology (theory) + Museography (practice).

The next portion considers the character of museum studies, how museum professionals are trained, and the relationship between theory and practice in the field, then explores the notion of museum studies as a science and the unique terminology that belongs to this field.

### The Character of the Field

It has already been shown just how complex and varied museums are as institutions. This complexity continues in the field that studies museums and trains its professionals. Museum studies traverses many disciplines and comprises both theory and practice. It is characterized by a history that continues to drive the training of its professionals as well as the inquiries it makes. The field is as dynamic and rich as the types and functions of

**Figure 1.5** A conceptual model of museum studies. From Simmons (2006).



museums found within its purview. While it is difficult to make a sweeping statement about its character, there are a few core features of museum studies (and the institutions it examines) that characterize and therefore drive and sculpt the nature of inquiries undertaken. Museum studies can be characterized by six features:

- It is inherently interdisciplinary.
- It is a combination of theory and its application in practice.
- It acknowledges that much of the work undertaken in museums is hidden or taken for granted.
- The museum community that is studied is small and close-knit, yet subdivided into many traditional categories.
- Networking and the free and open sharing of information are characteristic of the museum community.
- Because so many collections are held in the public trust, the museum community strives for transparency and accountability.

A conceptual model of the field that integrates the many, often disparate, elements of museum studies (practice, training and education, scholarly research, and education in another discipline) is provided as Figure 1.5.

Although there is still some disagreement within the U.S. museum community about whether or not a degree in museum studies is the best

training for the profession, the prevalence of museum studies programs in the United States and internationally indicates how highly the academic discipline of museum studies is now valued. Through a combination of coursework and hands-on experience, many museum studies programs have attempted to resolve the dilemma of whether museum work is best learned in an experiential or academic framework by combining the two in a model that emphasizes interdisciplinary approaches, research, theory, and practice.

## Theory and Practice in Museum Studies

Why does museum studies need theory? Does museum studies need its own terminology? A theory provides a frame of reference for analyzing and synthesizing ideas and concepts, a means of comparing and contrasting, and a context for rigorous analysis. Theory is often seen as the opposite of practice, but in truth, practice should be the application of theory and theory should be looking to practice to know what questions to ask. The opposition between theory and practice “is as old as Western philosophy itself” (Macey 2000, 379). In modern practice, theory became established in the 1950s and 1960s as an alternative means of analysis to skepticism and empiricism. What would theory be applied to if there were no practice, and how would practice continue to grow, evolve, and progress without the conceptual investigations of theory to draw upon?

For many years museums have been immersed in the practical application of how to collect, preserve, study, and exhibit objects (Maroević 2000). According to Teather (1991), much museum research exists as primary research presented without a framework (or presented by borrowing other disciplines’ frameworks) rather than being formed from the domains of museum studies thought and method. Even so, museum practitioners tend not to access theory, and if they do, they often are uncomfortable with jargon that may be difficult to make sense of in the context of their own working lives.

Since Teather (1991) pointed out the lack of a framework more than twenty years ago, a lot has happened in museum theory. Both the quantity of museum field-specific literature and the kind of research emerging show that the museum field is creating its own self-sustaining body of work. Furthermore, studies (e.g., Rounds 2001) show that the field does not show signs of dividing itself between those who produce museum theory (academics) and those who perform practical museum work (practitioners); rather, both sets of workers share and use each other’s work.

Museum professionals seem to subscribe to a common understanding of what museum studies means, even if that meaning remains tacit. At the same time, the field is subdivided into groups based on content (types) and practice (jobs) that form their own character and knowledge webs. This is not to say that the groups do not communicate. It is important to note that, although the field may be divided into many specializations, these subdivisions are all connected, in practice and in theory.

At the heart of this divide is intentionality. Museum practitioners who use skills and techniques without a philosophy of work are not being intentional about their work. Where theory, or conceptual thinking, becomes important in museum work is in the intentional choices and awareness of those choices about how to do work that take it to a different level. This means that theory feeds practice and practice feeds theory—in a feedback loop.

## Is Museum Studies a Science or an Art?

The distinction between science and art can be confusing, as each of these words means many things to many people. Broadly speaking, science refers to the application of systematic, organized, and objective principles; by contrast, art refers to nonsystematic, creative endeavors. Maroević (1998) extends this dichotomy to differentiate between cultural information, which he characterizes as synthetic, and scientific information, which he characterizes as analytic. In this broader sense, museum studies (which has a theoretical basis) is a science; by contrast, much of museum practice can be said to be an art.

One of the arguments for why museum studies is not a science is that it consists mostly of practical work and therefore does not have a unique body of theory. This argument extends to the question of whether or not museum studies can be called a discipline, a debate that has been raging almost since museum studies entered the academic scene in the early 1900s. In 1991 Teather called for a stop to this “tired” dispute (409), claiming that it is counterproductive and takes attention away from substantive discussions about the field of study. Teather’s point is important, because museum studies includes *both* theory and practice, as pointed out above. Nevertheless, the debate continues despite the fact that it has been repeatedly demonstrated that museum studies is a scientific discipline grounded in its own trans-disciplinary body of conceptual knowledge. (The evidence for this includes the growing number of publications and the number of scholars who study museums as museums, rather than the content of museums.)

Because science is systematic and organized inquiry about the world, museum studies is a science and a clearly defined field of study. With museality (see below) at the center of inquiry, museum studies has an extensive body of literature unique to its own topics and a group of scholars dedicated to asking museological questions who use theory from other fields (learning theory, design theory, information science, etc.) to their advantage and both feed on and learn from practice.

## The “M” Words: Museality, Musealization, and Musealia

Specialized terminology is critical to a field for the discussion of unique concepts that arise in professional dialogue. Although museum studies has drawn much of its terminology from other fields (because of its highly interdisciplinary nature), several important concepts have grown out of the study of museums that have produced new vocabulary. In the 1970s the European museology community began to develop the new science of museum studies. Among the concepts that were articulated during this exploration are the terms *museal*, *musealia*, *musealization*, and *museality*. This terminology has become important in European and Latin American museum studies literature. *Museal* means “of museums.” *Museality* is “the characteristic of something that in one reality documents another reality” (Stransky in Van Mensch 1992). *Museal* can be used as an adjective to qualify certain aspects of something or to describe the field of reference in which creation, development, and operation of the museum as an institution take place. *Musealia* refers to the objects that are the heritage of humanity, those things that are chosen to document some event, person, time, or idea (musealia includes artifacts, biological specimens, historic sites, and more). *Musealization* describes the processes by which an object becomes part of musealia. In referring to a “specific aspect of reality” (Stransky in Van Mensch 1990), the

concept of museality has been used as a theoretical point of reference meant to frame thinking about objects of culture. The concept is useful in understanding the role of museum objects, the meaning of collecting, and human experience with things. Museal things, however, are not necessarily only found in museums; museal can refer to things outside of a museum that have been musealized, such as monuments, sites, buildings, and even cities. The use of this suite of terms (they are referred to as the “M words” in this book) has generally not taken hold in U.S. museum studies programs, and especially not in U.S. museum practice. But in actual application and use, these unique terms are very useful in the museum context.

## Why Museum Studies in LIS?

In this book, museums are discussed as systems (Chapter 3), objects as documents (Chapter 6), exhibits as ecologies, and so forth. Much of this conceptual structure is drawn from the extensive world of LIS, which includes the study of libraries, archives, information science, user experience design, document studies, informatics, knowledge management, and more. With further exploration, one can see that museums naturally fall within the purview of LIS studies, an approach many European LIS schools have been taking for years. Recently Marcia Bates, a well-known LIS scholar, offered a framework for understanding information professions in light of societal, technological, and cognitive changes that have occurred in the past few years (Bates 2012). Building on her previous work (e.g., Bates 1999), she noted that some fields cut across the traditional spectrum of content disciplines (e.g., the arts, humanities, social and behavioral sciences, natural science, and math):

There are some fields, however, that cut all the way across this spectrum; they deal with every traditional subject matter, but do so from a particular perspective. These fields organize themselves around some particular social purpose or interest, which then becomes the lens through which the subject fields, such as literature, geology, etc., are regarded. There are both theoretical and research questions to study, looking through that lens, and practical, professional matters to address. I call these fields “meta-disciplines.” (Bates 2012, 2)

These meta-disciplines include, for example, information disciplines, communication, journalism, and education. The information disciplines focus on the collection, organization, retrieval, use, representation, and presentation of information in diverse contexts and situations, potentially cutting across all traditional disciplines. LIS—and museum studies within it—are meta-disciplines. Bates says that all information disciplines are becoming more applicable to a broader range of information solutions as people begin to understand them in this light. In fact, the 2010 edition of the *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Sciences* includes an entry for museum studies.

### LAM: The Convergence of Libraries, Archives, and Museums

While Bates and others have been discussing the meta-disciplines, there has been a movement dubbed the “convergence of the LAMs,” an acronym

for libraries, archives, and museums. Traditionally, libraries, archives, and museums have divided their content into “piecemeal offerings” based on the nature and focus of their collections (Zorich, Waibel, and Erway 2008, 8). In recent years, however, the desire to bring these different, yet interrelated, services together has gained prominence. At its core, the goal of convergence is to create a system that will allow access to information across all collections in either a unified digital system or, in some cases, a single physical location. This spirit of collaboration is driven by the desire to create a fuller, more comprehensive experience for users of these institutions.

According to Given and McTavish (2010), the current trend toward convergence is more accurately described as reconvergence. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, libraries, archives, and museums often shared space, resources, and personnel. Over time, changes in funding, education, and public perception slowly separated these institutions from one another. As the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth, new ideas about information management led to the separation of these three different institutions. According to Waibel and Erway (2009), things have now come full circle to a point of collaboration. This returning trend of LAM convergence, in theory, can better fulfill the joint mission of libraries, archives, and museums by allowing them to operate together as comprehensive memory institutions that provide a more complete and enhanced user experience.

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# 2

## The Origins of Museums

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### A Brief History of Museums and Collections

Museums developed in response to the human need to understand the world. Collecting objects is a near-universal human trait, with collection-making found in a diverse array of human cultures. For example, archaeological evidence indicates that Neanderthals collected tools, worked shells and other objects, and carefully arranged them in their burial sites, and a 4,000-year-old Bronze Age grave in England included a collection of fossil sea urchins. The accumulation, organization, and interpretation of objects are all ways that humans make sense of the chaotic world around them. Making connections between objects is a way of finding order, a fundamental step in learning and understanding one's world. As Stephen Jay Gould (Gould and Purcell 1987) has argued, the way people classify objects is a reflection of human thought, and the study of classification assists in understanding the history of human perception.

Simply accumulating objects is different from collecting them. What distinguishes a collection from an assemblage is that collections are made for a purpose, while assemblages occur by chance. All collections have some sort of order, even though the order may be comprehensible only to the collectors. Because collections are gathered with intention, the history of collecting can reveal much about the evolution of the perception and use of objects over time. However, as Eileen Hooper-Greenhill (1992) argues in *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, the history of museums cannot be understood as a linear trajectory of development, because collectors have had different motivations and directions at different times, with the result that collections themselves have historically specific natures. As discussed in more detail below, although many aspects of the early history of museums are obscure, the making of personal collections is a very old practice.

In European cultures the accumulation of personal collections that began in antiquity continued through the late Middle Ages and into the Renaissance. During this time some individuals amassed impressive collections that they used to demonstrate their wealth and power; other personal collections became the property of religious institutions. At the end of the Renaissance some of these personal collections became the property of the state, which ultimately led to collections that became increasingly more

accessible to the public. Following the Renaissance, particularly during the Enlightenment, many of the state-owned collections evolved into modern museums.

## Collections in the Ancient World

People made collections long before there were museums to put them in. This distinction is important because a collection can exist without a museum, but museums cannot exist without objects. In fact, many of the activities that define today's museums can be found before the first museum institutions existed. Developing and exhibiting collections, as well as preserving objects in collections, all occurred in the precursors to museums.

Europe is often credited as being the cradle of museums, although the earliest known collecting traditions developed in antiquity in Africa, Arabia, and Asia. The oldest identified example of a documented collection of objects is from the ancient Sumerian city of Ur of the Chaldees (located in present-day Iraq). Archaeological excavations by C. L. Woolsey and others in the early 1900s unearthed a collection of antiquities that dates to around 530 BC. Some of the objects in the collection were associated with clay tablets that served as object labels, recording where the objects were from, who had found them, and who had collected them. Some other very early examples are

- an extensive collection of more than 20,000 clay tablets written in cuneiform script that were accumulated in the state archives at Ebla, about 2250 BC;
- collections of inscriptions from the second millennium in Mesopotamia, used to teach scribes how to make records (an early example of the association of objects and learning);
- art, antiquities, flora, and fauna from Asia collected by Tuthmosis III (1481–1425 BC) of Egypt;
- a fossil sea urchin in a collection made around 2500 BC in Heliopolis, Egypt, inscribed with hieroglyphs giving the name of its collector and the location where it was found;
- gold and bronze artifacts collected during the Shang dynasty (ca. 1600–1025 BC) in China; and
- large private collections of the Babylonian kings Nebuchadnezzar (ca. 634–562 BC) and Nabonidus (ca. 620–539 BC), which included art objects, antiquities, and probably natural history specimens.

The exhibition of objects also began before the appearance of the modern museum. Art collections in ancient Greece took the form of exhibitions of paintings and sculptures in the entrance peristyles and porches of temples, in areas known as *pinakotheke*, or picture galleries. Wealthy Roman citizens collected paintings and other objects that were considered unusual, including fossils, and exhibited them in their homes. Several private collections of exotic seashells were found during the excavation of the ruins of Pompeii, preserved when the city was buried in volcanic ash from Mount Vesuvius in AD 79. These sorts of collections—of fossils, precious stones, decorative objects, and antiquities—have been found in numerous ancient Greek and Roman cities, revealing the extent of this activity. Although the interpretation

of objects is closely related to their exhibition, very little is known about how the actual objects in these early collections were interpreted.

The preservation of collection objects was also a concern in the ancient world. For example, the Egyptians used cedar oil and dried chrysanthemums (which contain pyrethrums, a natural pest repellent) to protect mummies from pests; the ancient Chinese used camphor extracted from tree sap inside scroll boxes in the royal archives to preserve written documents; and organic objects were dehydrated and sometimes coated with wax or varnish for preservation. In the *Odyssey*, Homer mentions the practice of burning sulfur to fumigate buildings.

## The Origin of the Word *Museum*

The modern concept of the museum has its roots in antiquity in the Temple of the Muses, a place that embodied the concept of learning from objects. The temple flourished in Alexandria from around 330 to 30 BC. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the word *museum* is derived from the Greek *mouseion*, meaning seat of the muses, the Greek sister-goddesses (see Table 2.1) who were the personification of knowledge in various areas and said to inspire artists, poets, philosophers, and others.

The Temple of the Muses was founded by the ruler of Alexandria, Ptolemy Sotor (305–283 BC), and the collections are reported to have included objects of art and natural history, a zoo, and a botanical garden, along with the largest library in the ancient world (Empereur 2002). The temple was an important center of Hellenistic intellectual life, and many significant thinkers were associated with it. For example, Euclid (325–265 BC) lived in Alexandria when he invented geometry; the first steam-powered device was invented by Hero (ca. AD 10–70) when he taught at the temple; the first map to use latitudinal and longitudinal lines was drawn in Alexandria by Claudius Ptolemy (ca. AD 90–168); and the first accurate estimate of the circumference of the earth was made in Alexandria by Eratosthenes (276–195 BC). Unfortunately, the Temple of the Muses was destroyed in a large fire that swept through Alexandria around 48 BC. Although the Temple was more like a modern university than a modern museum, it is important because it represents the early association of objects (including texts) with learning. When the word *museum* was later used to describe the collections of the Medici family of Florence, it was in recognition of the importance of objects in the accumulation of knowledge and the encyclopedic scope of the Medici collections, as seen in the Temple of the Muses.

**Table 2.1** The Muses

Name of the Muse	Area of Influence
Clio	History
Euterpe	Music
Thalia	Comedy
Melpomene	Tragedy
Terpsichore	Dance and choral song
Erato	Lyric and love poetry
Polyhymnia	Sacred song
Urania	Astronomy
Calliope	Epic poetry

## Collections during Medieval Times

In Europe following the collapse of the Roman Empire, many personal collections became the property of the church, which was then the most powerful and influential institution in society and the center of intellectual activity. In addition, travelers returning from the Holy Land often brought back objects that were exhibited in churches, including art objects and religious relics as well as nonsacred objects, classical statuary, and historical artifacts. For example, Henry of Blois (1099–1171), the bishop of Winchester and the abbot of Glastonbury, brought a collection of classical statuary back from Rome in 1151 that was then exhibited in his church. Some of the church collections were quite fantastic: the Milan cathedral boasted a hair from the beard of Noah; the Halberstadt cathedral exhibited a bone from the whale that swallowed Jonah; and the Brunswick cathedral collection included a griffin's claw, brought back from Palestine by Duke Henry the Lion. Such objects were accepted in the church collections because they were unusual and because it was believed they were evidence of a divine presence in the world. Consider a popular object during this period, ostrich eggs—at a time when very few Europeans had seen an ostrich or an illustration of an ostrich, these unusually large eggs were sometimes believed to be eggs of the mythical griffin, but at other times ostrich eggs were accepted as proof of the creatures that were mentioned in the biblical book of Job.

In the Middle East a period of intense intellectual activity took place between about AD 900 and 1200 that led to the translation of many classical Greek texts into Arabic and to the development of extensive archives and collections of artistic works. During this time a collecting tradition was formalized based on the Islamic concept of property, *waqf* (Lewis 1992), that was given for the public good. There is a long tradition of pilgrims bringing gifts to be exhibited at the shrine of Imam Aliar-Rida at Meshed (in what is now northeast Iran). Collections were also accumulated as the spoils of war, such as the works of art, textiles, weapons, and glass objects obtained by the Abbasid caliphs of Baghdad following their defeat of the Umayyad caliphs of Damascus in the middle of the eighth century.

The work of the Arabic scholars and translators reached Europe during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries when the Arabic translations of Greek texts were translated into Latin, initiating an admiration for the works of classical antiquity in Europe, which in turn played an important part in bringing about the Renaissance in Europe.

## Collections in the Renaissance

The intellectual curiosity of Renaissance scholars and royalty stimulated the growth of personal collections in Europe. It was in this period from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries that the first cabinets of curiosities (also called *kunstkammer*, *wunderkammer*, *cabinets de curieux*, and *studioli*) appeared in Europe. Wealthy citizens, members of royal families, lawyers, physicians, and apothecaries privately owned the cabinets of curiosities. The name comes from the fact that the collections originally were housed in cabinets—pieces of furniture—but many grew to occupy entire rooms or suites of rooms. The collections in the cabinets varied by owner, but often included objects interpreted as unicorn horns, giants' bones, griffins' claws, and giant snake tongues, along with jewels, coins, maps and manuscripts, religious relics, classical art, statuary, and the occasional artifact from Asia or Africa. Many of the objects were highly prized for their

alchemical properties, such as healing stones and mummy dust. From contemporary descriptions and depictions and from studies of surviving collections, it is now known that unicorn horns were really narwhal tusks, the bones of giants were from elephants or mastodons, goat and antelope horns were thought to be griffins' claws, and fossil sharks' teeth were taken for giant snake tongues. Some of the cabinets of curiosities were made to demonstrate the prestige of the owners, but others were formed with scholarly purposes. For example, the cabinet of curiosities of Ferrante Imperato (ca. 1525–1615), an apothecary in Naples, included specimens that he used in conjunction with his library for teaching purposes and that formed the basis for his 1599 book, *Dell'Historia Naturale*; the cabinet assembled by Ulisse Aldrovandi (1522–1605), a professor at the University of Bologna, contained artifacts and natural history specimens used in teaching.

#### REALITY CHECK

### Witnessing the Past

While in Italy teaching my course Museum Origins, I made a day trip to Bologna to see the Aldrovandi collection. Ulisse Aldrovandi is known by some as the founder of modern natural history. Housed in the same university where he started the collection, this “theater” or “microcosm of nature” was a highlight of all my visits to Italy. Imagine wandering the same campus (often named as the first university in the world) where Aldrovandi assembled one of the first collections for the distinct purpose of study (in a university setting). Aldrovandi believed that firsthand observation, seeing “the things of nature,” was indispensable for research and teaching. In a rich period of discovery—the sixteenth century—he brought the world to Bologna by collecting and preserving natural things from Italy and beyond. And there I stood among the objects used during this amazing period in the history of museums. I suppose one of the things that makes this collection so special to me is that Aldrovandi truly appreciated the value of seeing the actual objects in order to teach and learn from them. (KFL)

Although the collections in many of the cabinets may seem to be random and disconnected objects, in fact they reflected their owners' notions of art, nature, and divinity, and the idea that nature was formulated by divine agency. The use of symbols and allegory in the cabinets permitted the representation in miniature of the universe in the form of the collection (sometimes called a memory theater), while a theory of the innate meaning of objects determined their relationships. To the Renaissance collectors, their collections of objects were a microcosm of the universe that pointed to the divinely sanctioned, ideal order of the world. What collectors wanted were not ordinary, common objects, but objects that were rare or exotic and could be interpreted as evidence of a divine presence in the world, as well as show the owner's magnificence in owning such rare items.

Collections such as those of the Medici were used for study by their owners and displayed to family members, friends, and visitors. Much of what is known about the objects in the cabinets and their arrangements (classification) comes from contemporary depictions in drawings, prints, and paintings. Susan Pearce (1992), an expert on collecting, has pointed out that the collecting of objects is a complex material practice and that a collection is steeped in ideology and function; collections are a form of creation of a self-identity that reinforces or undermines the dominant categories of the

society in which the collection appears. As did the collections in the Temple of the Muses, the cabinets served as information resources to enlighten viewers about the meaning of the world around them, but also to aid in the owner's self-identity.

During the Renaissance the belief in the power of objects greatly influenced what was sought after and preserved. The collections in the Medici palace in Florence, for example, were intended to show off the wealth and power of the Medici family by using the past to glorify the current family members. By possessing objects that were believed to have great power, the Medici family showed that it, too, had great power (Hooper-Greenhill 1992). The Medici collections were officially opened to the public at the Uffizi Palace in 1582 and ultimately were bequeathed to the state of Tuscany in 1743. Similarly, between 1523 and 1582 another well-known Renaissance family, the Grimani family, donated most of their collections to the Venetian Republic, and many of these objects can now be found in the Museo d'Antichità, in the Doge's Palace in Venice.

#### REALITY CHECK

### Witnessing the Past: The Medici and the Origin of Museums

During the summer I teach a course in Florence, Italy, on the origins of museums. During my first full class on-site in Florence, I found myself completely fascinated with the Medici family (as did my students) and truly understood the extent to which they have influenced museums around the world. Many of the political, propagandistic, and personal choices that members of this family made have come to affect the modern museum in significant ways, most especially their belief in the power of objects as representations of power and knowledge. In fact, once you become aware of the Medici influence, you would be surprised how often they are still mentioned, not only in museal contexts, but in many other daily activities and institutions across the world. This one family, beginning with Cosimo the Elder in the fifteenth century, helped set the stage for many museum activities and processes that we have come to take for granted in museums, such as collecting systematically, exhibiting objects, inventorying collections, and interpreting the meaning of objects to visitors. (KFL)

### Early Classification Schemes and Catalogs

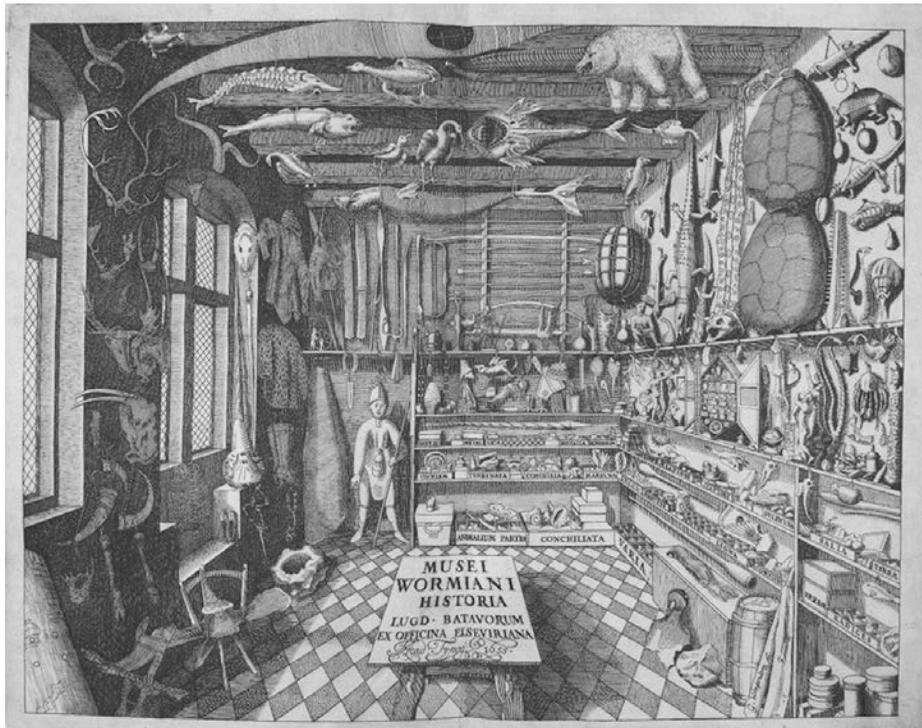
As objects amassed in the private cabinets of curiosities in Europe from about the 1400s on, classification schemes were needed to give order to the objects. Initially objects were simply perceived as *mirabilia* (finite marvels) and *miracula* (infinite or divine marvels), or *artificialia* and *naturalia*. As the collections grew larger and more complex, new categories were added, such as *antiquitas* for objects of historical import. The contents of the cabinets were highly varied. The philosopher Francis Bacon (1561–1626) described a typical cabinet of curiosities as containing “whatsoever the hand of man by exquisite art or engine has made rare in stuff, form, or motion; whatsoever singularity, chance and the shuffle of things hath produced; whatsoever Nature has wrought in things that want life and may be kept” (Bacon 1594). The diversity of objects in the collections of the cabinets and the attempts at classification seemed to confirm the existence of a divine being and demonstrated to their collectors that there was a divine order in nature.

The first museum catalogs, which were handwritten, were little more than descriptive inventories of collections, but rapidly evolved into detailed listings of museum contents, often with illustrations and histories of important objects after the introduction of printing with moveable type. Ulisse Aldrovandi (1522–1605) went so far with his museum cataloging as to also produce a *Catalogus virorum qui vistarunt Musaeum nostrum*, in which he categorized his visitors according to their geographical origins and social standing.

One of the first printed books about museums was written by Samuel von Quiccheberg (1529–1567), a physician in Antwerp, and published in Munich in 1565. Von Quiccheberg's book was titled *Vel Tituli Theatri Amplissimi* (Inscriptions of the immense theater); it was written in German despite its Latin title. Von Quiccheberg wrote that a collection should be a systematic classification of the materials of the universe, and he provided guidelines for assembling what he considered to be an ideal cabinet of curiosities, proposing an organizational scheme that classified objects into groups that correlate with modern museum divisions: material glorifying the founder and hand-crafts from antiquity (historic objects), natural specimens (natural history materials), technical and cultural objects (applied art and crafts), and paintings and sacred objects (fine art). Von Quiccheberg perceived the collections as objects to be studied to gain knowledge and provoke a sense of wonder.

The collection compiled by Olaus Worm (1588–1654) in Copenhagen beginning in 1620 was described in an extensive catalog, *Museum Wormianum*, published in 1655. Worm's catalog included a woodcut depicting the main room of Worm's museum that has been widely reproduced in publications about museums (see Figure 2.1).

**Figure 2.1** The Museum Olaus Worm.



## The Enlightenment and the Birth of the Modern European Museum

As the Renaissance gave way to the Enlightenment, beginning around 1650 the collections that had begun as cabinets of curiosities grew larger and became better known through the circulation of catalogs. As knowledge of the world beyond Europe spread, the objects that were collected gradually shifted from the unusual to the typical and usual, which changed the nature of the collections in profound ways. In the atmosphere of the Enlightenment the study of objects evolved as a way to understand the unknown. Objects arriving in Europe from Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Australia became valued for the information they carried about unknown territories. This was an era when systems and scientific methods were being applied to understand both human culture and nature. For example, Francis Bacon (1561–1626) argued for the application of inductive empiricism to the cataloging of knowledge, and René Descartes (1596–1650) sought to rationalize science and religion, developments that were reflected in the evolution of museum collections. In his study of the development of museums in the United States, Joel Orosz (1990) noted that during the Enlightenment, objects took on a new importance as collections were recognized as preserving works of art, historical artifacts, and natural history specimens that served as the evidence required to substantiate the claims of scholarly reason.

An example of a collection that grew from a cabinet of curiosities into a modern museum is that of John Tradescant the Elder (ca. 1570–1638) and his son, John Tradescant the Younger (1608–1662), in England. The Tradescants' extensive collection included natural history specimens, precious stones, weapons, coins, carvings, paintings, and medallions, which were exhibited to the public for a fee. As their collection grew, the Tradescants sought the services of Elias Ashmole (1617–1692) to catalog it. Ashmole's catalog of the collection was published in 1656 under the title *Musaeum Tradescantianum*. After the death of both Tradescants, Ashmole gained control of the collection and donated it to Oxford University, renaming it after himself (Swann 2001). After its opening in 1683, the Ashmolean Museum established the pattern for what eventually became the modern university museum, with space for exhibition and storage of collections as well as offices for the teaching staff associated with the university.

## Modern Museums

Museums were numerous enough in Europe after 1700 that a museum object dealer from Hamburg named Caspar Neikelius (a pseudonym for Kaspar Freidrich Jenequel) published a book called *Museographica* (1727), considered to be the first museologically focused work. Neikelius provided guidance for acquisitions; addressed problems of classification of the objects in the collection; presented techniques for caring for collections; and suggested putting a table in the middle of each room, "where things brought from the repository could be studied." He also recommended that museum objects be stored in dry conditions and kept out of direct sunlight, and that museums should have an accession book and a general catalog. Neikelius was the first to articulate the difference between viewing objects clustered in a small room (e.g., as in a cabinet of curiosities) and those displayed in a long room (an exhibition hall derived from the *grande salle* of French medieval chateaux). In 1753 David Hultman published his recommendations for museums, stating that a museum building should be made of brick, be

longer than it is wide, and have windows facing north to provide indirect sunlight.

As museums grew larger and more complex in the eighteenth century, they began to diverge into specialized institutions (e.g., art, ethnographic, history, military, natural history, technology), based on the characteristics of their collections and the systems of order used to categorize the objects in their collection. For example, natural history collections were influenced greatly by the advent of new taxonomic classification systems for plants (in 1735) and animals (in 1758) developed by the Swedish naturalist, Carl Linnaeus (1707–1778). This efficient, modern classification system quickly became the principle around which natural history collections were organized and collection growth was directed. An equivalent common universal cataloging taxonomy for human-made objects did not become available until 1978. By contrast, the Dewey Decimal system for the cataloging of library materials in ten major classes first appeared in 1876, the Library of Congress system (using twenty-one classes) was first published in 1897, and the Universal Decimal Classification was published in Europe in 1895.

### **The Continuing Development of the European Modern Museum: Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries**

The development of mercantilism, the rise of an affluent merchant class, and the decline of royal patronage systems together led to a greater public interest in the arts beginning early in the eighteenth century. By the middle of the eighteenth century, the dawning Industrial Revolution sparked public interest in technology and science. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, as people realized that museums could contribute to the formation of national consciousness, came the recognition that the museum was the appropriate institution for the preservation of a nation's history and heritage, which brought about a period of museum-building in Europe. So much museum growth occurred during this time that the nineteenth century has been called "The Golden Age of Museums," because nearly every country in Western Europe opened a comprehensive museum during this time. Many of the new modern museums were less encyclopedic than their precursors and more focused in their collections, such as the first of what are now the Vatican Museums, the Museo Sacro, which opened in Rome in 1756. A number of museums specializing in art, history, and natural history were also founded at this time. In 1773 Pope Clement XIV opened the first museum devoted exclusively to art, the Pio Clemente Museum in Rome (the museum's holdings are now part of the Vatican collections); in the same year the Louvre in Paris began to admit public visitors to the collections.

Most early European museums started with collections assembled by happenstance, but some were planned more thoroughly. For example, the first modern art museum was the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, Russia, which was established in 1764; the Czartoryski Museum (Krakow) was founded in 1776 to make collections from the aristocracy accessible to the general public. Several museums in this period established standards that still affect museum practice, such as the suggestion in 1779 by Christian Von Mechel that the Belvedere Museum in Vienna be arranged to present "a visible history of art," in a chronological framework, which was followed by the Altes Museum in Berlin (1830), also designed to show a chronological history of art. The Alte Pinakothek (a reference to the Greek concept of objects assembled for use in teaching) in Munich (1836) went a step further and opened with a chronological exhibit of art organized by schools, with

gallery spaces designed to protect the artwork from fire, dust, and vibration, with north-facing windows and moderate heat in the winter.

A number of significant museums were founded in the late 1700s and early 1800s. The British Museum was opened to the public in 1759 (with free admission), with its collections of art, anthropology, history, science, and a library, making it a universal institution. Charles III of Spain brought together works of art and natural history in 1785 as a museum of natural science, which eventually became the Prado in 1819. The Louvre opened to the public as the Musée Central des Artes in Paris in 1793, shortly after the French Revolution, exhibiting royal collections that had previously been unavailable to the public, outside of an occasional special exhibition. The new French museum grew rapidly as Napoleon appropriated objects for the collections during his European campaigns (most of this material was later repatriated, after the Congress of Vienna in 1815).

The first ethnology museum opened in Leiden in 1837. Historic house museums first appeared in the mid-nineteenth century in Europe and the United States, dedicated to preserving buildings because of their significant architecture or association with a significant person or historical event. Open-air museums or living museums, which usually include period architecture and historical reenactors, were first developed in the late nineteenth century in Scandinavia; the first one opened in 1881 near Oslo, Norway, to exhibit the collections of King Oscar II. In 1891 Arthur Hazelius founded the Skansen museum in Stockholm, Sweden, which became the model for subsequent open-air museums around the world. And the first mobile museum was developed in Liverpool, England, in 1884 to serve schoolchildren.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century museums were recast as primarily educational institutions as the “new museum idea”—the separation of study collections from exhibition collections—took hold. Sir William Henry Flower, director of the British Museum, formally articulated the new museum idea by proposing that museums be organized around the dual purposes of research and public education. Until this time, museums had been expected to put all of their collections on display, with the result that exhibit halls were often vast arrays of carefully labeled and arranged objects in ordered cases. Although it has become fashionable to criticize this style of exhibit, it was very popular with visitors who sought out museums to see things that they had never seen before, arranged in a way that made sense of the chaos around them. The second half of the nineteenth century was also the first period of major growth in museums, with more than one hundred new museums opening in the United Kingdom and at least fifty new museums in Germany, and many significant museums opening in the Americas.

## Museums in the Americas

The Enlightenment idea of the modern museum became established in the American colonies in the late eighteenth century. The Charleston (South Carolina) Library Society started the first museum in the United States (the society’s collections were later moved to the College of Charleston). In 1785 Charles Willson Peale (1741–1827) founded in his home in Philadelphia the first museum regularly open to the public in the United States. Based on the European concept of a museum, Peale’s innovation was his democratic intention to provide instruction and entertainment to all classes of people (provided they paid the entrance fee). Peale’s museum included paintings by himself and his sons, taxidermy mounts, fossils, a mastodon skeleton, ethnographic objects, and live animals. The museum eventually failed when

it was confronted with many of the same problems that many museums face today: lack of funding, insufficient audience, and a presentation of the collection that failed to bring in repeat visitors. The Peale collections were dispersed at auction in 1858.

Another influential museum pioneer in the United States was Phineas T. Barnum (1810–1891), later to become the well-known circus magnate, who opened a huge public museum called The American Museum in New York City. The museum had been founded by the Tammany Society in 1790 and purchased by John Scudder (1775–1821) in 1802, who operated it as Scudder’s American Museum. Barnum purchased the collection from Scudder in 1841 and operated it as The American Museum until 1865, when it burned down. In his museum Barnum exhibited more than 600,000 objects, but he finally gave up on museums and went into the circus business after more disastrous museum fires.

Although two significant American museums were founded in 1870—the Metropolitan Museum in New York and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston—only 4 percent of museums known today in the United States were in existence before 1900. At least 75 percent of today’s museums in the United States were founded after 1950, and 40 percent were founded after 1970.

The first outdoor museums in the United States were the historic environments known as Colonial Williamsburg, established in 1926, and Henry Ford’s Greenfield Village, which opened in Dearborn, Michigan, in 1929. Founded in 1850 in Newburgh, New York, the first historic house museum in the United States was Hasbrouck House, once the headquarters of General George Washington.

The mid- to late nineteenth century was a time for museum growth in much of the Western world. The first museum in Latin America, the Museo de Historia Natural in Mexico City, was founded in 1790, followed by the Museo de Historia Natural in Buenos Aires in 1812, with national museums being founded in most of the other Latin American countries before the end of the nineteenth century.

During the twentieth century museums in the Americas (and in several other regions), particularly in the United States, prospered and diversified into the variety of museums seen today, including children’s museums, commercial museums, science centers, community and regional museums, and specialty museums, as discussed in Chapter 5.

## Non-Western Museums: Beyond Colonialism

Although the idea of the modern public museum is essentially European in origin, it was successfully exported to other parts of the world through trade and colonialism. There was a great period of growth in Asian museums in the 1800s and in African museums in the early 1900s (e.g., national museums were founded in what is now Zimbabwe in 1901 and in Uganda in 1908). Many colonial-era museums have evolved into important national museums, particularly in South America and Asia. For example, the Asiatic Society of Bengal opened a museum in 1814 in Calcutta, India, that became a national museum following the independence of India in 1947, and the first museum in Africa was the South African Museum, founded in Cape Town in 1825. As independent nations emerged from their colonial roots, some museums became important agencies for developing national identity by offering interpretations of their collections that reflected feelings of national ownership (e.g., defined national culture), as well as defined nationality compared to other nations and cultures.

Some of these museums played a significant role in the rejection of colonialism. For example, during the 1970s many Caribbean museums shifted their emphasis from a strong focus on their society's colonial past to present more inclusive cultural and natural histories. The last decade has seen a growth in what are called "museos de memoria" (museums of memory), institutions dedicated to bringing closure to such events as civil wars, violent political oppression, and prolonged periods of prejudice.

## The Importance of Roots

Museums, libraries, and archives share a common past. As discussed earlier in this chapter, some of the oldest collections in the world were clay tablets written in the second and third millennia in cuneiform and other scripts. Tablets remaining from these early archives have been found by archaeologists at Ebla and Mari (in modern-day Syria), Amarna (Egypt), Hattusa (Turkey), and Pylos (Greece). The ancient Babylonians, Chinese, and Romans also kept archival and library collections, and the institution that gave us the concept of the museum (the Temple of the Muses in Alexandria) included the largest library in the ancient world. It was largely the translation of textual materials by the Arabs during the period AD 900 to 1200 that stimulated the Renaissance in Europe and led to the development of modern museums, libraries, and archives. The development of libraries and museums is also closely linked to the introduction of printing with moveable type in Europe around 1450 and the rise of universities during the 1600s, as exemplified by the Bodleian library at Oxford University and the library of the British Museum. The introduction of printing made it possible for museums to circulate their catalogs and thus gain a wider audience for their collections. History shows that museums, along with archives and libraries, have evolved to serve different needs at different times, but have always played a significant role in interpreting nature and culture. Museums will continue to serve a significant role in society as long as humans remain curious about the world around them.

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