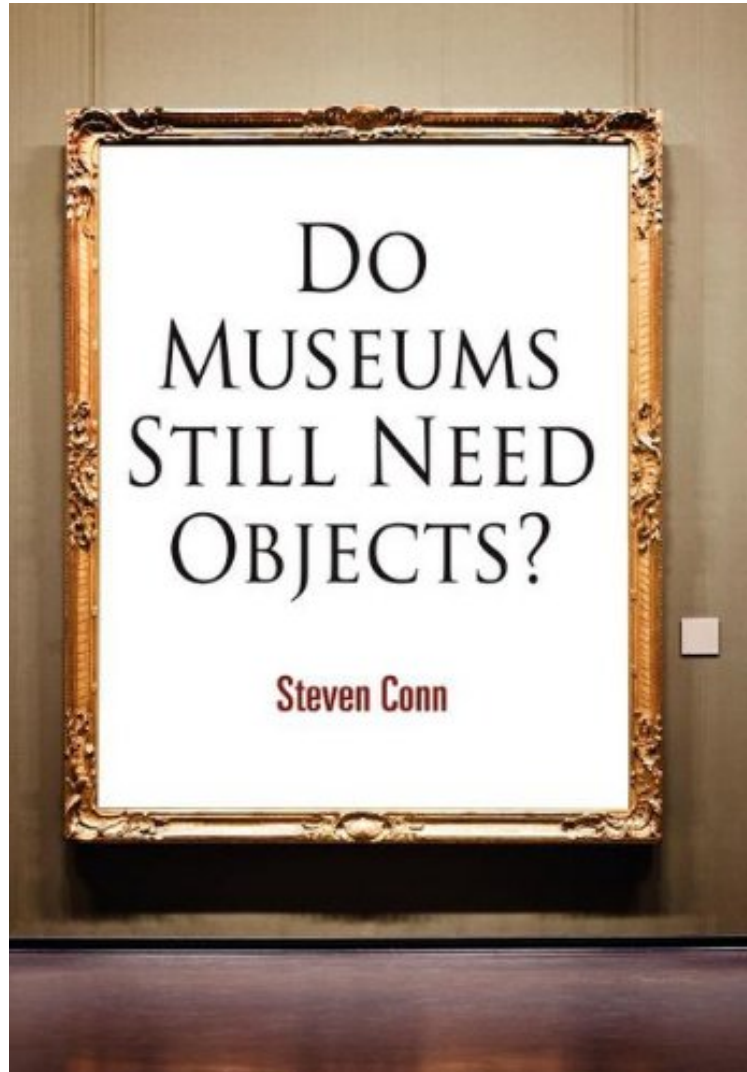


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Steven Conn

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Steven Conn : Do Museums Still Need Objects? (The Arts and Intellectual Life in Modern America) before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Do Museums Still Need Objects? (The Arts and Intellectual Life in Modern America):

7 of 7 people found the following review helpful. That's a good question still...By Fidel SotoI was a bit disappointed by this book. In my perspective the title was not appropriate. I was looking for a book to discuss more intimately the meaning of objects in a more and more digitized world. Instead it gives more a resume of the museum and its history. Very interesting in general how museums came about and how some objects were used. A great book for

historians. Fidel Soto, Norway BA(Hons) product design, MA in material culture and didacticism 3 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Valuable Museums Studies text By Anonymous This book may be the most valuable reading in the field of museum studies that I have completed. Conn references the other scholars I have read, and it is true that this reading might not have been as useful to me without knowledge of the scholarship he builds on. However, Conn brought the disparate theories together for me into a cohesive dialect on the status and nature of museums. Conn sees a disconnect within museum studies, between the historic boom in museums and the downcast tone of those who write about museums. He finds fault the lack of distinction between culture and politics within the museum power paradigm, and discerns a need to remember the intellectual component of museums (as opposed to amusement). With attention to how architecture influences museum experiences, as well as an interest in how objects function in different museological contexts, concern for the rigidity of set disciplinary boundaries. Lastly, Conn examines the increased absence of objects (including repatriation to cultures of origins), and the opposite problem of permanency and stagnation. Conn sees the substitution of museums and culture for politics, as well as the "business of culture" - using museums (and similar institutions) as an economic replacement for manufacturing, and the dilemmas of nostalgia and the need to forget, as the perils of the "museum age." 1 of 2 people found the following review helpful. It's not that I didn't like this book By T. Tamsen It's not that I didn't like this book, but I did think the author went off topic on too many occasions. Especially in the chapter "Where is the East". If I wanted all the historical background on how / why Asian objects made their way into the West, I'd read a book on Japanisme. He'd have done well to have kept his arguments tighter, and add a chapter on the digital object.

"We live in a museum age," writes Steven Conn in *Do Museums Still Need Objects?* And indeed, at the turn of the twenty-first century, more people are visiting museums than ever before. There are now over 17,500 accredited museums in the United States, averaging approximately 865 million visits a year, more than two million visits a day. New museums have proliferated across the cultural landscape even as older ones have undergone transformational additions: from the Museum of Modern Art and the Morgan in New York to the High in Atlanta and the Getty in Los Angeles. If the golden age of museum-building came a century ago, when the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the American Museum of Natural History, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Field Museum of Natural History, and others were created, then it is fair to say that in the last generation we have witnessed a second golden age. By closely observing the cultural, intellectual, and political roles that museums play in contemporary society, while also delving deeply into their institutional histories, historian Steven Conn demonstrates that museums are no longer seen simply as houses for collections of objects. Conn ranges across a wide variety of museum types from art and anthropology to science and commercial museums asking questions about the relationship between museums and knowledge, about the connection between culture and politics, about the role of museums in representing non-Western societies, and about public institutions and the changing nature of their constituencies. Elegantly written and deeply researched, *Do Museums Still Need Objects?* is essential reading for historians, museum professionals, and those who love to visit museums.

"Steven Conn provides an eclectic, provocative, and extremely readable tour of the history of museums in the twentieth-century United States. . . . The easy erudition and wit of *Do Museums Still Need Objects?* Will appeal to lay readers and museum practitioners, and its hardheaded historical approach and bold opinions will raise debate among scholars in the field of museum studies and cultural history." *Journal of American History* "Steven Conn offers a refreshing look at museums and many of the debates surrounding their development and practices over the past forty years. He is right to frame his inquiry by asking if museums still need objects. Too often these debates have ignored the very characteristic that defines museums and distinguishes them from all other cultural institutions: they collect, preserve, and present things. This is an important, timely book." James Cuno, President and Director, Art Institute of Chicago "In this provocative and engaging book, Steven Conn considers the continuing role museums play in contemporary American society. Despite recent shifts in their priorities, Conn argues that museums and their collections possess tremendous potential as sites of learning and places where civic identity is shaped and sustained. *Do Museums Still Need Objects?* is a must-read for anyone thinking about the social and cultural significance of museums at the beginning of the twenty-first century." Raymond Silverman, University of Michigan "Conn's well-written essays centralize objects as the defining feature of museums as they shifted (albeit incompletely) from being places of public instruction to being places of private consumption, from taxonomic exhibits to narrative ones, influenced by the development of the academic disciplines of science, anthropology, and art history. . . . An interesting and significant contribution to the literatures of museum studies and public history." *American Historical Association* About the Author Steven Conn is the author of *Metropolitan Philadelphia: Living with the Presence of the Past*, also available from the University of Pennsylvania Press. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. Introduction Thinking about Museums We live in a museum age. At the turn of the twenty-first century more people are going to more museums than at any time in the past, and simultaneously more scholars, critics, and others are writing and talking about museums. The two phenomena are almost certainly related, but it does not seem to be a happy relationship. Even

as museums enjoy more and more success measured at the gate, in philanthropic giving, and in the cultural influence they command many who write about them express varying degrees of foreboding. On the one hand, I think the New York Times was right when it proclaimed in 2002 that all over the world we are enjoying a "Golden Age of Museums." From Berlin to Beijing, from the United States to the Gulf States, the last quarter of the twentieth century saw the creation of whole new museum institutions, some modest and some quite audacious. Major cities have added significant new museums to their already crowded cultural landscapes, while more modest metropolises like Kansas City and Denver have recently opened museums big enough and ambitious enough to have garnered national attention. Indeed, all this new museum building, often showcasing the work of a fashionable architect, or "starchitect," hasn't simply added to the inventory of museums. The openings of many of these new museums have been treated as major cultural, geopolitical, or economic events, an enthusiasm captured by the oft-used phrase the "Bilbao effect." In fact, we are witnessing a second "golden age" of museum building in the United States (and, really, around the world). The first came one hundred years ago during the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth, and included the construction of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the American Museum of Natural History, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the Field Museum of Natural History, to name just a few. Many of these older institutions have participated in this second golden age by undergoing transformational additions or renovations, such as the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), the Morgan Library in New York, and the Tate in London. According to one report, \$4 to \$5 billion has been spent on construction in American museums over a ten-year period, and that report came out in 1998. Nothing in the first decade of the twenty-first century suggests that the pace of building has slackened. At the beginning of the new century, according to the American Association of Museums, there were more than 17,500 accredited museums in the United States, although the association acknowledges that the count is probably incomplete. And while some in the cultural world fret that this number is probably unsustainable, the turnstiles continue to turn: according to a 1999 study by Lake, Snell and Perry, "American museums average approximately 865 million visits per year or 2.3 million visits per day." It is not exaggerating to say that there have never been as many museums doing as many things and attracting as many people as is the case right now. The best of times indeed. But you wouldn't know it by reading much of the writing produced about museums by historians, sociologists, anthropologists, "media critics," and others. Causally or coincidentally, the building boom in the museum world has corresponded with an equally large boom in the writing about them. Late into the 1980s, the museum remained largely unvisited by scholars, covered, as sociologist Eilean Hooper-Greenhill wrote, in a "blanket of critical silence." Almost all of the writing about museums had been done by and for those professionals who worked there. My own reading suggests that as far back as the 1930s such a literature began to develop about museum education designed for those who were museum educators or schoolteachers who wanted to use museums for schoolchildren and for adult education programs. Individual museums might have their own hagiographies, but those tended to substitute celebration for critical attention. By the 1990s, however, scholars were no longer silent on the subject of museums. By 2006, Sharon Macdonald, a leading figure in the field, could announce, "Museum Studies has come of age. . . . It has moved from being an unusual and minority subject into the mainstream." Certainly over the last two decades, books, articles, anthologies, conference proceedings, and symposia on museums have proliferated to daunting quantities for anyone who would try to keep up with it. Happily, for our purposes, I don't have to repeat it all here. In 2005, Renaissance historian Randolph Starn, playing the role of an academic Roger Tory Peterson, provided historians with an indispensable field guide to museum studies scholarship. Offering to navigate historians through what he calls the "tidal wave of museum studies," Starn divides his historiographic survey into four broad sections: "the genealogy of museums; the shifting status of the museum object; the politics of museum culture from the ideal of universality to 'museum wars' over cultural difference; the past and future of the 'museum experience.'" These seem perfectly sensible groupings to me, encompassing virtually all of the important work that has been done in the last two decades. Rather than summarize Starn's essay, however, let me add some additional thoughts about museum scholarship to help clarify the way I have approached the history of museums in the chapters that follow. I will keep my scholarly squabbles to a minimum, but my approach to the history of museums differs in important ways from much of what is now current in museum criticism. Any casual perusal of the literature reveals that French historian and critic Michel Foucault stands as the patron saint of the new museum studies, and much of what his disciples have produced is pretty bleak, filled with what Ivan Gaskell calls "nave outrage" and "museophobia." Eilean Hooper-Greenhill and Tony Bennett stand among the first and certainly most influential of those who brought Foucault to the museum. Bennett's work is nuanced, thoughtful, and provocative. Many who have followed in his path have been less so. They have seen museums crudely as part of an apparatus of cultural and political hegemony, to borrow from some of their language, as instruments of the nation-state reifying itself and naturalizing its behavior in insidious places, or, as Douglas Crimp has called the modern art museum, places of "confinement." As far as I am aware Foucault wrote about museums only in the posthumously published essay "Of Other Spaces," but his work on other institutions—prisons, asylums, and hospitals—became the model for analyzing them. No wonder, then, that in some of this literature museums resemble penitentiaries, but with better interior decorating. There is, of course, an obvious problem in a critical stance that posits museums as places where people go to get disciplined and punished. Treating museums as part of the same

institutional constellation as prisons, asylums, and hospitals simply begs the question of why people would ever go, because, of course, only schoolchildren are forced to. We can acknowledge that there may have been social pressures of bourgeois emulation at work in the nineteenth century and in the twenty-first that directed people through the doors of museums. But to write, as Timothy Luke does of the entertainment role of museums, that there are "powerful carceral implications that suggest a practice of containment and confinement" is simply absurd. As any resident of the former Soviet Union will happily tell you, a day at the Hermitage is not the same thing as a day in the Gulag. To conflate the two insults the intelligence of those who come to museums and the dignity of those who have suffered real imprisonment. In a similar vein, a number of critics, some following the lead of another French critic, Jean Baudrillard, have seen museums as being thick in the muck of a postmodern consumer culture, itself a kind of comfortable, well-appointed prison. So, for example, sociologist Nick Prior sounds an almost apocalyptic death knell for the museum project: "In essence, the museum, the theme park, the bank lobby, and the mall are transferable, all equally appreciated in a state of distraction. By this transformation, the foundational principles of the museum—the pure aesthetic, bourgeois contemplation, the disciplinary efforts of the nation-state—disintegrate. I. M. Pei's glass pyramid becomes a headstone on the grave of the project of the museum." Andreas Huyssen has nicely summarized this shift in the critique of museums. Critics of museums, he writes, have been "surprisingly homogeneous in their attack on ossification, reification and cultural hegemony even if the focus of the attack may be quite different now from what it once was: then the museum as bastion of high culture, now, very differently, as the new kingpin of the culture industry." Museum directors might be forgiven a certain frustration here. They have addressed charges of elitism leveled by an earlier generation and increased their audience by adding cafs, shops, performance events, and so forth, only to find themselves accused of turning museums into Disneyland. As even this quick gloss suggests, and Starn's essay elaborates, much of the poststructuralist analysis of museums amounts to social critique. That there is a relationship between culture and politics is a truism, but much of this scholarship makes the two synonymous and they are not. For those on the left, especially the academic left, largely disconnected from the real politics of governing and economic power, the petit politics of the academy and the museum substitute rhetorically and practically. Only in such a fundamental confusion could one academic critic write of museum work: "Representation is a political act. Sponsorship is a political act. Curation is a political act. Working in a museum is a political act." Pity the poor intern updating the collection database who is not able to translate her experience into an influential lobbying job on K Street. Understanding the intersection of culture and politics is vital for both the past and the present. Understanding the difference between the two is equally important. To continue to elide the two therefore cheapens real culture and avoids real politics. In the chapters that follow I try to respect the integrity of each. Two final observations about the state of museum scholarship. The vast bulk of writing about museums focuses on art museums and anthropological collections. That too is not surprising, as these museums lend themselves most readily to the kinds of analysis scholars want to impose on them. Perhaps most museum scholars would rather spend time in art and anthropology museums, sneaking off guiltily to the caf or to the gift shop; perhaps these humanists suffer like so many of us from a general scientific illiteracy. But ignoring science museums is curious and regrettable given how central science museums have been in the West since the nineteenth century. As Sally Kohlstedt has observed, ironically, insofar as twentieth-century historians of science considered museums in their accounts of the natural sciences, they focused largely on collecting activity and taxonomic results, without much attention to the institutions that sponsored and facilitated such work. Historians of biology have tended to ignore or be dismissive of the work of naturalists done either in the field or in museums, instead documenting the establishment of laboratory science. Historians who were key in formulating the history of natural science in North America, though often attentive to other institutional development including that of universities and corporate laboratories, virtually ignored museums. And in the United States, at least, they attract far and away the largest number of visitors. I will have more to say about science museums in Chapters 1 and 6, but for now suffice it to note that I believe a more thorough examination of the history and practice of science museums will yield a different set of questions about the nature of museums, about the relationship between knowledge and display, and about museums and the public than has been asked thus far. Finally, my sense is that the lion's share of work in the new museum studies has been written about the European experience. No surprise, perhaps, given the richness of that history and its length. Further, much of this European history has been written by scholars other than historians. In the European context, museum studies includes work by sociologists, anthropologists, and those who have gathered under the somewhat leaky umbrella of "cultural studies." My approach is more prosaically historical, by which I mean simply that I prefer to begin with the messy particularities and work my way up to larger conclusions and observations rather than start with a broad critical position before moving down. More specifically, I treat the development of museums as an episode in the history of ideas. While I am fully aware of the social, economic, and political roles museums have played, I want to take museums seriously as places of ideas—places where knowledge is given shape through the use of objects and exhibitions. I will describe the themes that run through this book more fully in a moment, but let me say here that, as the subtitle of the book suggests, I approach museums as places uniquely situated at the intersection of objects, ideas, and public space. As the subsequent chapters will demonstrate, exploring that intersection raises interesting questions not just about museums themselves but about knowledge production, about the

changing nature of American cities, and about the American public across time. This, then, is the state of our museum age: museums proliferating and thriving, attracting record numbers, enjoying a building boom and sitting atop our cultural hierarchy. At the same time, museums are being attacked and challenged in a whole host of ways, walking a perilously fine line between their nonprofit ethos and the world of corporate money, between education and "infotainment," between opening up and being overrun. With all this in mind, museums have probably never been quite so exciting. A word about the nature of this book. In the Soviet era, Russian writers used to describe work destined for the *dolgiy yashchik* "the long drawer" work they knew would never see the light of publication. I can't claim anything quite so heroic for these chapters, but I should acknowledge at the outset that four of them began their lives as public presentations and lectures given over the last few years, and after I delivered them they wound up in that long drawer. Pulling them out one afternoon, I decided that, with substantial revisions and expansions, and with the addition of three more, they fit nicely together and would make a timely and useful book. The chapters assembled here, then, do not constitute a comprehensive history of American museums in the twentieth century. Rather, they explore an interlocking set of themes, grounded in the particularities of history. They refer back to one another and provide, I hope, a sustained and coherent argument. Tying these chapters together are several themes that interest me particularly. First and perhaps foremost among of them is the role objects play in museums of all kinds. In an earlier work, I argued that the organization and display of objects was central to the conception of museums in the late nineteenth century. Further, I suggested that behind those exhibitionary practices lay a faith in the power of objects to convey knowledge, meaning, and understanding if they were properly collected, classified, and arranged. I refer several times to what I term an "object-based epistemology" in the following chapters. That notion will serve as a benchmark to measure how the function of objects in museums changed over the course of the twentieth century. My contention will be that the place of objects in museums has shrunk as people have lost faith in the ability of objects alone to tell stories and convey knowledge. In addition, my focus on objects reacts to the drift in museum scholarship toward the literary that I mentioned previously. As I suggested, some scholars have brought to the museum pre-asked questions, formulated originally in other scholarly contexts. This importation risks, among other things, missing some of the particularities in the nature, function, and purpose of museums. Sharon Macdonald is right, I believe, when she reminds us that treating museums simply as another kind of "text" risks denying what makes museums and the objects they display different from other "texts." She writes, "We also need to move towards further elaboration of ways in which museums are unlike texts." And in particular we need to consider "the centrality of material culture, the durability and solidity of objects, the non-verbal nature of so many of their messages." So too art historian Alan Wallach has observed that "a successful exhibition is not a book on the wall, a narrative with objects as illustrations, but a carefully orchestrated deployment of objects, images, and texts that gives viewers opportunities to look, to reflect, and to work out meanings." In several of these chapters, directly and indirectly, I have asked questions about how objects have been used to convey meaning, about the differences between scientific and aesthetic objects, and about how the nature of objects in different kinds of museums changed over the twentieth century. Likewise, I am interested in how museums, and the objects they collect and display, help define particular bodies of knowledge. Or fail to, as Chapters 5 and 6 look at science museums and the ill-fated Philadelphia Commercial Museum. While it is important to recognize the role museums play now in the realms of commerce, tourism, and entertainment, I think it is equally important to examine the role museums have played and continue to play in our intellectual life; to look at the relationship between objects and ideas, museums and education; and to see how those relationships have changed over time and in different kinds of museums. In the United States, George Brown Goode probably gave this categorical imperative its most thorough articulation. Born in 1851, Goode began his professional life as an ichthyologist. He worked with the United States Fish Commission and eventually as the assistant secretary of the Smithsonian in charge of the United States National Museum. In an 1895 essay Goode outlined six types of museums: "A. museums of art; B. historical museums; C. anthropological museums; D. natural history museums; E. technological museums; F. commercial museums." Goode was something of a visionary. Art museums and natural history museums would have been familiar organizations already in 1895; however, the notion of a historical museum had not yet moved beyond domestic shrines like Mount Vernon, technological museums had been built in Europe but not yet in the United States, and anthropological museums and commercial museums would have struck Americans as wholly novel. Taken together, Goode suggested, these six types constituted a kind of encyclopedia set of institutions and represented the categories of knowledge that could be given physical form in the museum. In the logic of an object-based epistemology, the objects collected and displayed in each museum stand as synecdoches for the larger body of knowledge, and ideally the correspondence between that body of knowledge and the objects on display would be seamless. With the exception of "commercial museums," Goode's categories have proved remarkably enduring over the last century, though as I will discuss a great deal later, their boundaries have been stretched. (In the United States, only Philadelphia built a commercial museum, and it lasted as such only until the 1930s. I discuss the rise and fall of the Philadelphia Commercial Museum in Chapter 6.) The American Association of Museums' (AAM) Code of Ethics lists "museums of anthropology, art history and natural history . . . historic sites . . . science and technology centers, and zoos." (Goode did not include zoos in his original scheme, but in their impulse to collect, organize, and display, zoos certainly did

mirror the intellectual architecture of late nineteenth-century museums.) I use Goode's hypothetical encyclopedia set as a way of mapping the changing boundaries between museums and the bodies of knowledge they institutionalized over the course of the twentieth century. Americans by the millions love to visit museums. My research suggests that they always have. Yet this assertion flies in the face of what has come to be a truism about museums: their fundamental elitism. Almost from the moment of their opening and certainly by the 1920s and 1930s the grand art museums of the late nineteenth century were accused of being little more than monuments to the taste of wealthy plutocrats. This accusation was brought particularly by artists the Futurists in Europe, members of the Ash Can group in the United States whose work did not yet hang in those mausoleums of art. Those first accusations of elitism had vaguely class overtones. Over the last generation or so, the charge of elitism has taken on a new flavor, growing out of the identity politics of the 1960s. More specifically, certain critics have insisted that in multicultural societies museums have ignored or alienated an increasingly diverse audience and, further, that they have a responsibility to fix the situation. In the United States and increasingly in Europe, these complaints are made largely in terms of ethnicity and race. They arise out of the larger phenomenon of identity politics and identity academics and participate in what the hugely influential critic Edward Said called the "ominous trend" of "the fetishization and relentless celebration of 'difference' and 'otherness.'" One solution to this problem has been to broaden the museum's appeal, to target new audiences and to shed the museum's traditional goal of timelessness and universalism, replacing it with a notion of contemporary relevance that responds to the particular concerns of those committed to difference above and beyond commonality. Indeed, for some the very notion of "difference" defined at an altitude-defying level of abstraction is at the heart of the entire museum enterprise. Daniel Sherman, in his introduction to a recent anthology, writes that museums should be studied with "an approach based on a phenomenological notion of alterity one that takes difference as the essence of museums, and museums as the essence of difference must recognize that difference . . . does not exist in itself, and cannot be analyzed apart from its historical instantiations." Somewhere between the galleries and the gift shop we began to walk in circles. I investigate the nature of museum audiences in several chapters, but most explicitly in Chapters 4 and 6. In these explorations, I find myself disagreeing with the view that museums are oppressive, repressive, and otherwise controlling. My own sense of what it means to be a "public," informed by the work of sociologist Richard Sennett among others, and my sense of how museums have related to the public leads me to believe that museums have indeed been a vital part of what we call the public sphere and that they have worked hard to make good on their promises of democratic access. Following is an example, a British one, to illustrate my point: In the 1850s Parliament began to worry that the paintings in the National Gallery might be destroyed by the abundant crowds that came to see them and by the even more abundant air pollution in the center of London. Perhaps, Parliament wondered, the gallery ought to be moved farther out, to Kensington, say, or Highgate. This raised a furor that the paintings would then be too far away from the working people who came to see them. So in 1857 Parliament surveyed the employers in and around Westminster to see how many of their employees had gone to the National Gallery, the Natural History Museum, and the British Museum in the previous year. The results were definitive: Hooper the Coach Makers' 46 employees had made 66 visits to the National Gallery in 1856; the 338 men who worked for Jackson's Builders made 583 visits. Still, simply demonstrating that the National Gallery was well visited by the workers of central London did not allay the concerns of those who worried for the safety of the paintings. That question was addressed head on by High Court Justice Coleridge, who weighed in on the issue and whose opinion is worth quoting at some length: "But after all, if it were demonstrable that the pictures in their present position must absolutely perish sooner than at Kensington, I conceive that this would conclude nothing. The existence of the pictures is not the end of the collection but a means to give the people ennobling enjoyment. If while so employed a great picture perished in the using, it could not be said that the picture had not fulfilled the best purpose of its purchase or that it had been lost in its results to the nation." It is a stunning conclusion better that the paintings be ruined while being enjoyed than to be preserved by being removed from their audience. One can hardly imagine even the most populist museum curator today taking a similar position, and Justice Coleridge's opinion ought to challenge our too-easy assumption that these nineteenth-century museums existed only as vaults to preserve the treasures of the wealthy for the wealthy. Needless to say, the pictures stayed exactly where they were, the public having won a victory of access to them. A related phenomenon with which historians will have to wrestle is the relationship between museums, objects, and changing ideas about architectural space. The museums of the first golden age stand in a magnificent sameness. Almost without exception, these museums speak the language of Beaux-Arts neoclassicism. From the 1890s through the 1940s, that language dominated American museum architecture. Quite by contrast, the museums of the late twentieth century, the major ones at least, each attempted to make a distinctive architectural statement, and museums competed fiercely to outdo each other with their buildings. As architecture critic Martin Filler noted, reviewing Renzo Piano's Broad Museum in Los Angeles, "During the past three decades . . . the museum has superceded the skyscraper as an architect's dream. . . . [Museums have become] the defining architectural category of our time." In this sense, while most museums though certainly not all are built to house and display objects, the museum building itself has increasingly been treated as an object, and, some might snidely argue, a more significant one than the pieces inside. While major architects at the turn of the twentieth century, such as the firms of McKim, Mead and

White, and Carrere and Hastings, built museums, libraries, and other cultural edifices, they worked by and large within an architectural consensus about form and style. I think it is fair to say, and I explore this further in Chapter 6, that Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum of 1959 broke this mold. The statement he made with his cylindrical volume on Fifth Avenue was all the more dramatic because he put it in the middle of a Beaux-Arts streetscape, just up the road from the greatest Beaux-Arts bastion of all, the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Wright's Guggenheim influenced museum building in two mutually reinforcing directions. After the Guggenheim, museum trustees increasingly demanded "signature" buildings that would attract publicity, visitors, and donors. At the same time, Wright freed other architects to explore any number of architectural possibilities. Museums no longer had to be well-appointed Beaux-Arts boxes. The post-Guggenheim era, then, has seen an extraordinary flourishing of museum architecture. This is not to say that all the buildings that have resulted have succeeded by any stretch, but the variety has been remarkable. I think it is also fair to say that museums constitute some of the very best work of architects ranging from Louis Kahn to Robert Venturi to Renzo Piano. It is fitting, too, that perhaps the most heralded building of the recent past has been Frank Gehry's Guggenheim in Bilbao, Spain. The two-part question that historians will have to address, as we evaluate the legacy of this era of museum architecture, is how all these architectural experiments have shaped, or reshaped, what goes on inside museums now. It seems clear that these buildings have altered the way visitors move and pause as they tour the galleries. They have attracted people who come for the experience of the building itself. That experience now routinely includes food, shopping, music, social gatherings, movies, and the like, all made possible by the spaces dedicated to these other-than-exhibition uses. Further, the galleries in these new buildings have created different relationships between viewers and objects. Museums are now much more concerned about lighting and other atmospherics, traffic flow, and flexible exhibition space than was the case in the late nineteenth century. As a result, I suspect we look differently at objects than our museum-going predecessors did. At the same time, we should examine how museum commissions have influenced the direction of contemporary architecture as a whole and trace how all this high-profile museum building has affected other kinds of projects as well. If Filler is right, and I think he is, we should explore how libraries, concert halls, university buildings, and even skyscrapers have come to resemble museums, at least at the level of architecture. We might well discover that the museum is the defining architectural form of this cultural moment. Objects, spaces, ideas there are surely other facets to the history of the American museum in the twentieth century. The question of money of funding, philanthropy, and patronage is one of them; the professionalization of the museum is another. But these three broad themes encompass what I feel to be the most compelling issues that museums have faced and continue to face, and these themes knit the following chapters together. They are, in my view, the concepts that best enable us to examine what museums do and how they do it. Chapter 1 provides a broad overview of the role of the object in different kinds of museums across the twentieth century. If in the late nineteenth century museums were imagined primarily as houses (some might say warehouses) for collections of objects, that is no longer the case. In this chapter I examine the changing place and use of the object inside the museum. In so doing, I study the way different kinds of objects have functioned in different kinds of museums, the ways in which museums use objects to define areas of knowledge, and how objects participate in the redefinition of those boundaries. I also examine the ways in which objects have receded or disappeared altogether from museums. The second chapter continues this focus on the role of objects by looking at them from a different direction. While we think of museums as places where objects enter, never to leave, in Chapter 2 I look at the small but significant phenomenon of repatriation, the process by which museum objects have been leaving museum collections. A few American art museums have found themselves in the middle of these controversies as foreign governments the Italians most aggressively have demanded the return of antiquities. More commonly, however, Native American objects have been returned from anthropological collections housed in natural history museums, art museums, and anthropological and archaeological museums. Specifically, I am interested in putting repatriation into two contexts, one political, the other disciplinary. First, I want to ask why the repatriation movement succeeded in this country when it did, an exploration of the politics behind repatriation. Second, I am interested in how repatriation is connected to the changing role of the "ethnological" object in anthropological theory and practice. Chapter 3 continues the examination of how non-Western cultures have been represented in American museums by looking at the case of the East. If museums used the frameworks and tropes of "primitivism" to represent Native Americans, Africans, and others, then Eastern cultures have posed a more complicated set of categorical problems to Western museums. Clearly not Western but clearly not savage either, the East confounded those collectors and museum builders who tried to fit it into easy hierarchies and categories. Chapter 3 looks at the presentation and representation of the East in American museums from the nineteenth century through the first third of the twentieth century. More specifically, it explores what I see as the two competing, but not contradictory, strategies used to display Asia. The first has been to create a framework and apparatus of Asian art as art that corresponds roughly to the frameworks used to present Western art. The other is to use objects in a less systematic, taxonomic way to convey some sense of Asian experience often spiritual or religious experience that satisfies the yearnings Westerners have had. Broadly speaking, this chapter asks the question "What is the idea of the East, and how has that been defined in the museum setting?" Chapter 4 tackles the question of museum audience and, specifically, the audience in science museums. By looking at three case studies the American Museum of

Natural History, the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago, and Philadelphia's Franklin Institute Science Museum. I chart how science museums came to be places catering almost entirely to children. Further, I look at how that decision to focus on children as their primary constituency was connected to how these museums saw their relationship to the changing nature of scientific research. Science as a discipline, more so than art or anthropology, has changed radically since the big science museums were founded in that first golden age of museums, and this chapter examines how three struggled to adapt to those changes. Chapter 5 examines how one museum died. While we have a good understanding now of the birth of the museum, the Philadelphia Commercial Museum provides a remarkable opportunity to examine how a once-great institution faded away. Founded as the first, and only, museum in the United States devoted to commerce, the Philadelphia Commercial Museum thrived in the early twentieth century and then died a slow death. My contention in this chapter is that the Commercial Museum's failure to survive was rooted in the inability of its objects to embody a coherent body of knowledge about commerce. In the end, the museum could not display "commerce," and unable to do so, the museum lost its role as a place for the "scientific" study and promotion of commerce to other kinds of institutions. In this sense, Chapter 5 brings us full circle to the role of objects in museums. The final chapter pulls our lens back a bit. It moves from the objects in museums to the space of the museum itself. Chapter 6 explores the role of the museum as public space and as part of the urban public sphere that emerged during the Progressive Era. As I have already indicated, my argument runs counter to the conventional wisdom about the relationship between the museum and the public. Museums are elitist bastions, so the wisdom goes; they are alienating or off-putting to the public and designed to be so. Temples or mausoleums, take your pick, but not intended for ordinary folks. (This line of thinking refers to art museums, of course. Science museums, as I have already mentioned, have been largely ignored by most writers.) Two things about this perception strike me as worth interrogating further. First, to what extent is this charge of elitism fair, and to what extent have museumseven art museums made an honest attempt to fulfill their democratic purpose? As I have already suggested, my research indicates that the elitist museum may have been less forbidding than we have assumed. Further, in claiming that the museum has intimidated or excluded the "public," we have assumed that the very idea of the public's definition and constitution, its demands and expectations remained the same over the course of the twentieth century, waiting for museum practice to catch up with it. My own sense is that this isn't quite true either. My belief is that the nature of the "public" has changed significantly since the late nineteenth century, and in this final chapter I argue that museums have responded to those changes. Indeed, I believe that periods of perceived crisis in museumsand there have been at least three since that first golden age: in the late 1920s and early 1930s, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and at the turn of the twenty-first centurycorrespond to those moments when the nature of the American public shifted in significant ways and museums faced the challenge of responding to those changes. They did so, as I will discuss, in several ways: by reshaping the space inside museums, by paying more attention to the demands made by visitors, and by changing the experience visitors had to objects on display. As this brief gloss indicates, I have ranged across several different kinds of museums, trading a certain depth of treatment for a greater breadth. Part of this choice results simply from my own interests in all these places. Part of it, however, is driven by a sense that most museum scholarship remains tightly focused on specific kinds of museums without exploring the interesting comparisons that might come from moving from art museums, say, to science museums, and then to historic house museums. Some while ago Sally Kohlstedt challenged historians of museums to take up comparative studies of museums that would highlight "both the curious parallels that existed among museums and those characteristics that mark out individual institutions." This collection makes at least some of those comparisons and invites readers to draw even more. As I have probably made clear already, I am not interested in indicting museums for their alleged crimes against culture. I am not a museophobic historian; in fact, I quite like museums and visit them as often as I can. I especially enjoy bringing my two children. But there are some things about the role museums play in this cultural moment that do trouble me. Call them the perils of the museum age. On the one hand, museums are being asked to substitute for politics. Over the last two decades we have watched museums used as the stage sets for badly conceived morality plays where right-wing culture warriors fume and fulminate against Robert Mapplethorpe in Cincinnati, against "The West as America," and against the Enola Gay exhibit in Washington to name three. Simultaneously, museum studies critics demand political penance from museums for the sins of colonialism and capitalism and redress for the complaints that arise out of identity politics. Too left-wing for some, not nearly left-wing enough for others, but at the end of the day, the real facts of politics remain unaltered. I worry that forcing museums into this realm of faux politics detracts from the real cultural, scientific, and educational work of museums that is precious and important on its own terms. On the other hand, museums are also being asked to serve as economic engines in postindustrial cities hoping to replace manufacturing with culture. It is more than a little ironic that while critics and curators develop their critique of the museum, politicians, business leaders, and others view museums more and more as central to the postindustrial economy. In 2008, for example, the new 81,000-square-foot addition to the Art Museum of Western Virginia opened in downtown Roanoke, Virginia, to great expectations and not a little controversy. At a cost of roughly \$66 million, the museum is certainly a high-stakes gamble for a small city with tight financial resources. Proponents have touted the museum's economic potential for the city and the region. As Nicholas Taubman, a major contributor to the project

put it: "I think the museum will be a hinge on which the economic future of downtown Roanoke will swing, as well as the region." Roanoke, of course, could be any number of cities banking on high-profile cultural projects especially museums and performing arts centers to reinvigorate their local economies. And there is no question that "culture" has become a major part of any urban revitalization strategy, not just in this country but in Europe as well. In a postindustrial society, so the rationale goes, culture becomes the product cities have to sell. It clearly works in some places and under some circumstances. Bilbao has been transformed by its museum; North Adams, Massachusetts, is now a cultural destination thanks to MassMOCA. But in other places and under different circumstances it isn't guaranteed that museums can ride to the rescue of local economies. Several years ago, for example, the Milwaukee Museum added a stunning wing designed by Santiago Calatrava. Attendance increased initially but has subsequently fallen back to earlier levels. Either way, perhaps it is too early to pronounce a verdict on this strategy of using museums for urban redevelopment. Still, expecting museums to save cities, especially those smaller places that have experienced years of job losses and disinvestment, seems to me to expect too much. My concern is that to ask museums to solve our political and economic problems is to set them up for inevitable failure and to set us up for inevitable disappointment. My final unease about our current museum moment is this: Regardless of what fills their galleries, regardless of what bodies of knowledge museums were or are built to represent, they stand, finally, as historical projects: the history of art, the history of the natural world, the history of technology, and the history of cultures now changed. This is certainly true today, and it was true during that first great age of museum building, despite the confidence with which those museums displayed the unity of knowledge and the continuity between past and present. Museums are places where we can measure the distance between then and now. In other words, whether they mean to or not, all museums race against "the acceleration of history." The phrase is Pierre Nora's, taken from his enormously provocative and influential chapter "Between Memory and History." Nora included museums among his litany of "lieux de memoire," places of memory that substitute for what he saw as the whole, integrated memory of preindustrial, premodern societies. As he put it, with a certain Gallic overstatement: "Museums, archives, cemeteries, festivals, anniversaries, treaties, depositions, monuments, sanctuaries, fraternal orders these are the boundary stones of another age, illusions of eternity. It is the nostalgic dimension of these devotional institutions that make them seem beleaguered and cold they mark the rituals of a society without ritual; integral particularities in a society that levels particularity; signs of distinction and of group membership in a society that tends to recognize individuals only as identical and equal." Nora sees history as the archenemy of memory, writing, "At the heart of history is a critical discourse that is antithetical to spontaneous memory. History is perpetually suspicious of memory, and its true mission is to suppress and destroy it." Of course, we don't need Nora to point out the effects of the acceleration of history. It is what Henry Adams struggled with through the entirety of his autobiography, *The Education of Henry Adams*. After searching for "a dynamic theory of history," he settled on and titled his penultimate chapter, dated 1904, "A Law of Acceleration." There, surveying a world governed by power without purpose, force without direction, he predicted: "At the rate of progress since 1800, every American who lived into the year 2000 would know how to control unlimited power. He would think in complexities unimaginable to an earlier mind. He would deal with problems altogether beyond the range of earlier society. To him the nineteenth century would stand on the same plane with the fourth." Adams, who in the book's most famous chapter, "found himself lying in the Gallery of Machines at the Great Exposition of 1900 his historical neck broken by the sudden irruption of forces totally new," fully understood the rupture between unity and fragmentation, between memory and history that Nora observed nearly one hundred years later. It is too easy a dichotomy but useful nonetheless for thinking about what drives much of this new golden age of museum building. Whatever their economic hopes or political goals, many of these new museums promise to function as places of our collective memory. They attempt to straddle that line between memory and history, whether the exhibits deal with the traumatic or the comparatively trivial: the Holocaust or slavery, rock and roll or Star Wars. They use the frameworks of history to ensure that we never forget, even as the anxiety that we will forget increases the urgency to build museums in the first place. Indeed, the urgency may come from the fact that more and more of us know less and less of our collective past. As Tony Judt has nicely put it, talking about the European context: "Whereas until recently . . . the point of a museum, a memorial plaque, or a monument was to remind people of what they already knew or that they knew, today these things serve a different end. They are there to tell people about things they may not know, things they have forgotten or never learned." In this sense, museums are not being asked simply to stand in for memory but to stand in between memory and oblivion. "The struggle of man against power," Milan Kundera wrote, "is the struggle of memory against forgetting." And yet, perhaps in our mad race against the acceleration of history, we have forgotten the importance of forgetting. As Paul Ricoeur has wisely noted, "We shun the specter of a memory that would never forget anything. We even consider it to be monstrous." He wonders whether and how we might achieve some sort of balance between remembering and forgetting: "Could there then be a measure in the use of human memory, a 'never in excess' in accordance with the dictum of ancient wisdom? Could forgetting then no longer be in every respect an enemy of memory, and could memory have to negotiate with forgetting, groping to find the right measure in its balance with forgetting?" We certainly recognize the need for individuals to forget, to forgive, to let go, to move on. At a collective level, the risk in our attempt to "never forget" is that our landscape,

metaphorically and literally, becomes so cluttered with our attempts to remember the past that they crowd out our capacity to imagine the future. Museums certainly can't solve all these dilemmas. But I do think they can be places where these questions and others can be asked. Places where people can come to explore the extent of our differences and of the things we all share; to measure the distance, short or long, between past and present; and to contemplate the meanings of continuity and change. These are the challenges and the possibilities of living in a museum age.