

ANOTHER VIEW OF THE ELEPHANT

Alan Solem

We live in a world of instant communication and constant social turmoil, where ideas or suggestions expressed in London or New York today may echo in Tokyo or Sydney tomorrow, and where no institution, idea or ideal is safe from challenge. We live in a very complex world of choices, trivia and great needs, where a desire for air-conditioned summer comfort can be satisfied only by an increase in air pollution from the generation of more electricity, and where poverty plus hunger must compete for attention with the threat of nuclear holocaust and the battle of the hemlines.

The simple slogans and easy choices of yesterday are replaced by rejection of old values, calls for contemporary relevance and a search for new solutions. Because major problems remain unsolved, a natural cry is heard for change in existing institutions to meet the great problems of today. "Museums in a Changing World" by Lothar Witteborg, printed in the November *Bulletin*, summarizes some of the current ideas about museums in regard to their direct public services. It proposes "contemporary involvement and immediacy" in the problems of today. The goals of service to society are exemplary, but how best can a natural history museum serve? In his autobiography, Harlow Shapley, the famous astronomer of Harvard University, wrote concerning his early career, "I realized that I could do things other people could not or would not do, and therefore I was useful."

What can a natural history museum do that other institutions cannot or will not? Where can we be useful? There will

be as many views of this as by the protagonists in John Godfrey Saxe's "The Blind Men and the Elephant." Since the fighting elephants in Stanley Field Hall for half a century have been our symbol to the public, this parable has contemporary relevance. Six blind men came near an elephant. Each man blundered into a different part—side, trunk, tusk, knee, ear and tail. Each man thought his one part picture of the elephant was *truth* and the other views were *error*. Saxe did not record the elephant's reaction to twelve clutching hands and sixty fumbling fingers, but the resulting squabble of the blind men is mildly famous.

Few people are competent in more than a limited sphere. We live in an age of experts and specialists, requiring the cooperation of many to reach an agreed goal. Field Museum is no exception. We have about as diverse an assemblage of esoteric specialties as exists. The sum total of their activity is Field Museum in society. But what *is* our agreed goal? Along with all institutions, we are reviewing our role in society, our immediate functions, and the allocation of scarce resources

among competing needs. Lothar Witteborg speaks from one view. I speak from another segment of Field Museum and focus on a different part of this "allegorical elephant."

What are the unique aspects of Field Museum as an institution? Collections, library, trained staff. Our collections of natural history and ethnographic objects bring scientists and students from all parts of the world to study in Chicago and are utilized on a loan basis by scholars in every continent except Antarctica. Our library is equally fine. Our staff of scientists and technicians makes use of these collections and library resources on a daily basis. Their work cannot be done at an institution without these facilities. Only natural history museums provide them. Universities do not, businesses cannot, only museums can.

Sometimes our research involves immediately relevant problems—medically important ectoparasites of Venezuela or a forest resource survey of Amazonian Peru. Usually we work on basic problems whose practical applications may be decades away or undreamt of at the time of study. The call for work on critical problems of the moment must not blind us from the need to do work that may help solve the problems that arise in the decades to come.

But this is not an attempt to justify the research and collection activities of Field Museum. Our acknowledged function is not just to discover, collect and correlate knowledge, but also to disseminate knowledge. This can be through technical literature, through popular writing, but more directly through the parts of the Museum used by the public—the exhibition halls, the school programs, the public lectures, the traveling school exhibits, and even university level teaching.

What can we offer our audience that other institutions and media cannot? Objects. Natural history specimens and human artifacts. The treasures of the collections and library (the Audubon "elephant" folio naturally comes to mind) can be shared with our audience.

Photographs can be reproduced in books, magazines, and newspapers. Movies and television can show the motion of living creatures and the wonders of foreign lands far better than we can, while the sounds of man and

nature also can be spread on that lively anachronism, radio. These media can reach to the smallest town and isolated hollow, or into the heart of urban ghettos. Their offerings are reproducible or transmittable over distances. Our objects mostly are not transmittable or reproducible at a reasonable cost. Many are unique and priceless. The Audubon folio and the huge topaz must stay here. Our audience must come to them.

Our audience. A simple phrase that covers an infinite variety. We have no single audience, but a multiplicity of audiences. Its spectrum goes from the pre-school child to the university professor, from the dedicated amateur specialist to the casual tourist, from the retarded handicapped to the college class.

What have we been offering them? Basically a sampling of nature's variety and the diversity of man's ingenuity in making artifacts. We have halls of "three dimensional color portraits" (habitat groups), halls showing life in past eras, halls showing cultural objects and artifacts, and a few halls that tend towards the textbookish. Rarely do we have more than a fraction of our collection riches shown. No one else has the variety of nature and man's work, no one else can show it. This is and should remain a prime function.

Yet is it enough? Certainly not. When the halls of Field Museum were being filled, the Scopes trial had not been held and evolution was a controversial theory. The overwhelming proof of evolution came from use of specimens such as we specialize in and through

work such as our scientists are doing today. These collection resources are uniquely capable of showing stages in the development of the varied living world and man's cultures. Evolution, change through time, is the process that resulted in this diversity. Evolution is a theme that can unify and make sense of the overwhelming diversity that our public halls present. It is not yet being used extensively.

To many people, evolution is old hat. Not modern enough. Not contemporary enough. Pollution, population problems, poverty, and politics engage their minds. They think that museums should address themselves to the solutions of these problems as a knight in shining armour leading the way. As a biologist, I look at the first three "P's" as the inevitable *results* of basic difficulties, symptoms of these difficulties, but not the root causes. I also agree completely with the views of Garrett Hardin in "The Tragedy of the Commons" (*Science*, 162:1243-48, 1968) and Beryl Crowe in "The Tragedy of the Commons Revisited" (*Science*, 166:1103-07, 1969) that pollution and population problems are not subject to *technical solutions*. By technical solutions, I mean scientific discoveries, technological improvements, or organizational efficiencies, not requiring profound social, ethical and political changes.

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Growing recognition of the root cause to our problems may prove to be the one significant result from the expensive space program of the last decade. The idea of "spaceship earth," that our planet and its inhabitants form a functioning unit with limited resources, that the actions of a crop duster in Iowa can affect the fisheries in Louisiana bayous, and that we truly are "one world" represents a revolutionary view of man and his future. Few people are ready to accept the consequences of this insight. John Fisher, in an article, "How I Got Radicalized: the Making of an Agitator for Zero" (*Harper's Magazine*, April 1970, pp. 18-29), recently outlined some of them—the impossibility of non-stop growth of any kind, that technology creates at least two new problems for each one it solves, and that destroying our best farm lands for factories and housing is suicidal insanity. All the glorious visions and noble dreams of mankind will be for naught unless we adjust to the limits of our planet.

And herein lies yet another unique capability and possibility for Field Museum to serve society. We can show in environmental exhibits how the world functions. How it is based on energy from the sun, converted by plants and either used immediately (food for animals or decay organisms), or stored for future use (coal, oil and gas, the "fossil fuels"). We can show

with our cultural objects and natural history specimens how climate, soil, water, and topography limit the activities and abundance of all species, including man. In other words, museums can interpret the ecology of earth. We are not doing this at present.

Diversity of life and man, its origin through the mechanism of evolution, and explanation of the limits to "spaceship earth" represent three ways whereby Field Museum can be useful to society in disseminating knowledge. Our resources for doing so are limited and the needs in these areas are great. How can we coordinate our efforts with the similar institutions in Chicago and the Midwest—Shedd Aquarium, Adler Planetarium, Chicago Academy of Sciences, Museum of Science and Industry, Hinsdale Health Museum, Milwaukee Museum, Illinois State Museum, etc.? These problems are part of our re-evaluation in search of agreed goals.

While in retrospect it is perhaps simple to distinguish fashion and fad from style and taste, at the time it is not so easy. Remember fins on cars and miniskirts on Michigan Avenue mannequins? The McLuhanesque '60's and the show techniques from Montreal Expo with their slides, sounds, impressions and fantasia of sensory assaults may be a new style or a dying fashion. With the best of will and greatly increased funds, redoing the exhibits of Field Museum will take years of effort once goals are established. To mistake fashion for style will cause infinite problems. To confuse techniques of presentation with the concepts to be disseminated would be tragic.

Remember our diverse audiences. Our exhibits must allow for many levels of interest. For the pre-school child and the functional illiterate—a shape, a color, a pattern, an object. For the grade

school child—simple ideas of difference, variety, basic ecology, and object use that will extend their horizons. For the high school student—concepts of relationships, patterns of variety, the overall functioning of our earth. For the adult and collegian—cultural context and influences, mechanics and pathways of evolution, the complexities of our earth. For the casual tourist—exposure to the diversity of nature and primitive societies, the ecology of earth.

These can be our aims, and are within our capabilities. These are things we can do better than others and be useful to society. But we cannot be all things and serve all functions in society. Sociology, economics, technology and contemporary culture are not our bag. Before moving in new directions of current concern, let us pause and make certain that we do not move beyond the bounds of our special capabilities to the neglect of our unique potential. In my view of the "allegorical elephant," fulfillment of these basic useful functions have priority.

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