

Digesting Museums

Please sit back - and relax - and let your food digest.

I want to talk to you about digesting museums.

If the very idea makes you suddenly feel constipated - don't worry!

I have a little pill - that - in just a quarter of an hour - will enable you to think about museums *and* digest your food with perfect equanimity.

But first, I'm afraid, I have to give you a little discomfort. I want you to think about museums as they are - not what they could become.

What could be more indigestible than a museum?

Have you ever seen your visitors leaving with smiles of contentment on their faces, as they feel the mental food they've just received stimulate their hungry minds? They're more likely to look exhausted and slightly dazed - glancing around to see where they can sit down and have a nice cup of tea.

Museums are about nothing if they're not about mental stimulation. But today they're more about mental constipation. That's hardly surprising because the food they serve is almost always unprepared.

Who cooks the food museums give their visitors? Who thinks of the menu - let alone whether or not it offers a balanced diet? Who thinks of the appetiser, the main protein, the vegetables, and the pudding, let alone the liquid refreshment that will help it go down - and turn the whole meal into an inspiration?

Instead, all most museums do for their visitors is to open the door to the larder.

There's a very contemporary, Reality-TV, egalitarianism about this approach - just open the larder and let anyone who wants to make their own food. But I have to ask, would you want to eat what they make?

Of course there are some visitors to museums who know exactly what to do - like I do and like I should imagine most of you. When I visit a museum I haven't been to before I very quickly get a feel for the whole cupboard - no matter how small or big - and choose what I want to look at - what will give me most mental stimulation. I then look at it in the order I want - and leave. I don't feel I have to look at everything - I'm that well fed.

Or well bred? Middle-class children in Britain used to be taught to leave a little food on their plates - in the days when there were plates - to show that they didn't *need* to eat everything. In working-class families, however, it was a public disgrace not to eat everything you were given.

But when people like us go round museums, we're not just upper middle class - we're bloody aristocrats. Rembrandt? - Oh, I'm not in the mood for him today.

As for starting at the shelf nearest the door, and reading every label - do you mind? Can't you see? It's only a bloody larder!

The vast majority of museum visitors start looking at everything - they quite reasonably think that's what museums want them to do. But they soon get indigestion - so would you after the tenth helping of different varieties of carrot.

Then they begin to drift - searching, often in vain, for something to alleviate their mental constipation. Failing to find any, they usually fall back on a trip to the café. Now there's a thought! Could the degree of a museum's failure be measured by the size of its café?

But I'm talking here about food for the mind, not the stomach.

I'm trying to make museums mentally digestible.

First we need to check that what museums have on offer is actually food.

Museums might have every type of wine glass - but they've not a drop of wine. Their larders are full of things whose use has been drained out of them - beached shards left by the tide of history.

Museums want to hold onto these objects still because they give us glimpses into - into what? The objects in our museums can only be valued for the mental stimulus they provide.

This has always been true of museum collections - but, till now, their meaning has stayed more or less the same. This has led to the illusion that the value of museums lies in their collections - not in the meaning of their collections. Things get stuck, thoughts flow.

The single most important thing that museums have to realise today is that the meaning of their collections is changing - not marginally, but fundamentally.

Museums began as bi-products of the Enlightenment. It made sense to put coins in chronological rows. Whole dynasties of Emperors were discovered by this simple process. Charles Darwin collected every type of barnacle and worked out the theory of Evolution. But scientific research has long gone beyond what's materially collectable - even what's visible. Many museums blindly act as if it hadn't. The British Museum's coin department is now collecting credit cards. What does this museum - which claims to be one of the world's greatest repositories of human culture - think it's doing?

Most museums, however, have virtually given up collecting. Faced with the plethora of contemporary production, they don't know where to begin. That's because they've given up thinking what they're collections could mean.

The social meaning of museums has changed. They're no longer primarily institutions collecting evidence for research - though they still have this function in part - a little part. As far as the public is concerned, their primary and *urgent* function is to collect our meaningful past.

There is an urgency about this because younger generations are losing their link with the past. It is one of the jobs of museums to maintain that link.

One of the most significant developments in recent history has been Communism. The vital evidence that can bring its history to life - with all its hopes and terrors - is, as we digest, being lost. But what museum could take on such task - one in Russia? Russia is too partial - and doesn't at present have the political appetite for such a task. There's one obvious candidate. The British Museum claims to be a museum of world culture - and Communism was cooked up in its own Reading Room! Communism is part of that museums' history. Like Nazism, it was a late product of the Enlightenment.

The British Museum argues that by continuing to collect in the categories it does - coins, ceramics and works on paper - it will amass the evidence of communism along with everything else. Who's it kidding? The history of the 20th century is on film. But the British Museum doesn't collect film - why not? - because it wasn't invented in the Enlightenment.

All categories of collecting - including the totally anachronistic division between archives and museums - are irrelevant to modern society. Meaning is the only category for collecting - and the significance of their collections will be only thing that will ensure museums have any meaning for future generations.

What's all this to do with the theme of this conference? Everything - because movability is everything.

As the nurse used to put it politely - have you had a motion? Museums haven't had a motion for years.

If you had to absorb everything you've just eaten, you'd soon feel constipated. That's exactly what museums feel today. But they're not just constipated with old things - they're constipated with old thoughts.

So here's my little pill.

I hasten to say it's *not* a restructure - we all tried that in the eighties and nineties and learnt it made no difference. People were given different job titles but always found a way to wriggle round and go on doing what they'd always done.

What's needed is not a restructure, but a change in attitude - above all towards lending - because lending is a museum on the move. Lending's the wrong word for a start - because museums don't own their collections - the public does - so we can really only talk about public borrowing, not museum lending. We can only talk about the right to borrow - not the right to lend, or not to lend.

In my view, museums do not have the right to say no to a request to put on safe public display any item that is currently in storage. In the modern age of museums, public need must take precedence over the needs of the scholar, who can anyway travel to see an object on public display wherever it is.

Safety of access is of course important because we do not want to lose or damage the relics we treasure. But it's no good preserving something if no-one can ever see it. Which is why the conservator's job - the museum conservator that is, not the private conservator - they're different but you'd hardly know it - the museum conservator's job is not just to make the collections safe - but to make them safely accessible.

Museum conservators need to be given targets to increase access as well as safety. That'll sort them! I didn't mean that! This is not a re-structure; this is a change in attitude. Conservation staff will, in future, welcome applications for loans - they'll even help to generate them - 'Come and borrow from us. Please!' they'll plead - because loans will be an excellent way of making their collections more accessible - which is all they ever dream of achieving!

Museums, as a whole, in the future will instinctively want to say yes, not no - because their ambition will be to increase access - not to increase access for its own sake of course - how belittling! - but to increase access to meaning.

Now I hope you begin to feel the power of that little pill. When a museum begins to think about meaning it begins to loosen up. It begins to see its collections not as a dead weight in its gut, but as food for thought.

The waste product is then free to move.

But I'm not suggesting we flush our reserve collections down the toilet. What is of little interest to people today may fascinate many tomorrow.

I suggest museums put what they aren't using - what the public isn't currently primarily interested in - into jointly-owned resource centres - where safe access to all material evidence from the past will be managed by a new breed of archival curators - whose job will be to facilitate research - and not just barricade their own! - and who will encourage loans to safe public venues - anywhere from community centres to major museums.

I envisage, in time, networks of such resource centres within countries and then across Europe and eventually across the world - providing a vast accessible resource to world history. Their existence will free museums to move their collections without feeling they're losing them.

The great shift in attitude will come when curators see their collections - and the collections of all museums - as a resource for public use. There needs to be no change in ownership - only in attitude. And changes in attitude cost nothing in themselves - though they will lead to different sorts of public expenditure in future.

This change in attitude that I dream of - I'm a dreamer, I know, but I'm dangerous, because, as it was said of Karl Marx, I'm a dreamer who thinks. I deal with the practicalities in my *The Poetic Museum*. There's no such thing as a free lunch - or dinner.

The huge hidden resource of museum collections will be opened up for use - to their own communities and then to the whole world. Europe has, in storage, the heritage of the world. It has a responsibility to the world - but it can start by being responsible to the citizens from many cultures who live within its borders.

Lending, in future, will not be spoon-feeding - because it will be borrower-led, much as we set up the Open Museum in Glasgow when people were invited into our stores to make exhibitions of what interested them for their own communities. Imagine the impact of that, just within the museum community across Europe!

This ambition to increase public understanding can't be realised by museums as they are organised today. The categories in which their collections are arranged are too restrictive. The stories they tell are highly specialised, and for most people, frankly, boring.

Wonderful, fascinating stories of the history of man's relationship to women, of mankind's relationship to nature, of the history of government and of religion - all of them vital issues today - lie untold and cut-up between our scientific, historical and art museums.

The categories in which museums are currently organised are barriers to the growth of public interest. These barriers will be most quickly broken down by changing attitudes to lending. *To the barricades! Aux armes, Citoyens!* That's my only French.

Museums - on the move - will at last be able to think creatively about what they mean. They won't just ask the question, as they do now, what can my collection give to the public - but ask the much more challenging question - what do the public need to be given. And who knows, with their bowels loosened, museums might start to collect again.

My little pill is a simple one. I hope you're sitting comfortably. Your minds are now free to think not just about how you would like to use your own museum collections for the benefit of your public - but how you would like to use your neighbour's.

Now doesn't that thought go nicely with the digestive juices in your stomach?