

JAMES S. SNYDER

The Role and Relevance of Museums Today: From the Universal to the Particular



MUSEUMS have been a part of the fabric of history for a long time. In the Western world, they range from the great European royal collections that evolved into national museums to the local, regional, and metropolitan museums and historical societies that have emerged across America over the past 150 years. Their role is to serve as custodians of culture, preserving works of art and artifacts of life from different time periods and contextualizing them within ever-changing perspectives. Museums can be universal and all-embracing or, like Jewish museums, particular in their focus. Each has the potential to place the material heritage of individual cultures into a broader context, producing powerfully illustrative stories of communal connection with special meaning in their own time as well as for us today.

Many of us first experienced museums as children, traveling on school buses for group visits that may or may not have left an impression, or as young adults traveling internationally and making obligatory stops to see icons of world culture. With the proliferation of smartphones, these stops have often devolved into Instagram moments, sometimes without the museumgoer casting even a glance at the object or work of art itself or absorbing when it was created, why, or by whom.

Museums have also always had devoted followers who appreciate, on their own, the importance of the timeline of material culture as an illuminating narrative of world history. Whether as patrons, collectors, scholars, or devoted visitors, these audiences have enabled museums to become a flourishing part of the global landscape. They have also stimulated a robust culture for creative making in our own time—contemporary art—and a market that embraces an impressively broad following with an interest in emerging visual culture.

The past few years have presented challenges that call into question the meaning of museums today, the role they play in our lives, and the purposes they serve. Covid put on hold the opportunity for a live museum experience at the same time that we are losing our ability to experience material culture firsthand as museums increasingly embrace the digital world's capacity to create museum-like experiences online. While the virtual museum experience cannot replace the live experience, this shift only underscores the question of how and why museums can and should remain relevant to us in our increasingly virtual era.

By way of context, my own experience began in a rural setting, not far from a major city whose encyclopedic museum—the Carnegie Museum of Art—offered an opportunity to see works of art and objects of antiquity and to think of them as illustrations of the cultures and periods in history when they were created. My academic path took me to literature and art history, and the study of the connection between words written in different periods of

time and objects of art that illustrate the history of those times. I focused particularly on the middle of the 19th century, when art not only told stories in a literal way but began to offer visual vocabularies that would, over the succeeding century, create the story of modern, classic-contemporary, and contemporary art.

Good fortune brought me to the start of my professional life at the Museum of Modern Art, where I had the privilege to absorb the wondrous unfolding of the invention of modernism from the 19th century to the present and across all disciplines of the fine arts. By the time of MoMA's founding in 1929, these disciplines had already grown to include photography, film, and architecture and design as relevant modernist mediums. Throughout my MoMA years, I focused on 1850 or thereabouts as the stage on which the narrative of modernism—from that moment to the present—would play out. This experience was revelatory, allowing me to understand and appreciate the role that visual culture in any medium might play in illuminating our times—resonating as well with the social and political phenomena that shape our lives and become our history. The immediacy of modernism also underscored the connection between art and politics, helping us grasp how the social and political developments of any given moment might influence the art produced at that time, and how the art of any given moment might in turn help shape social and political perspectives.

When I was invited to become director of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem—not just an encyclopedic museum, but rather a universal museum—my perspective shifted dramatically to the full narrative of material cultural history from 1.5 million years ago to the present, embracing cultures from around the world. This was another revelatory moment, as was the evolving definition of the “universal” museum as one whose collections were deep and extensive enough to connect cultural history—from the first evidence of human hands touching matter in a creative way—to the present, while also looking at art's resonance among cultures globally.

Today the Israel Museum's collection galleries tell a remark-

Museums dedicated to specific cultures, like Jewish museums and others devoted to singular themes or subjects, can and should take advantage of the opportunity to look at examples of their cultures in the context of when and where they were created.

able tale. They are divided among the archeology of the ancient Near East, principally the ancient Land of Israel and its neighboring cultures; Jewish art and life, being the story of sacred and secular Jewish practice from the Middle Ages onward and across the global Diaspora; and the fine arts, being the Western art traditions from the Renaissance to the present and the arts of Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas. The message that unfolds across the museum's galleries is that all things connect across time and geography—from man's first encounters with materiality to the seeds of existential reflection and the invention of monotheism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; then to the story of the Jewish Diaspora from the Holy Land to the east and west from the end of the Byzantine era to the present; and then to the parallel narratives of the fine arts worldwide.

Because the Israel Museum covers within its broad brief the archeology and history of the ancient Land of Israel and the story of Jewish culture worldwide, there is also a dimension of its mandate that easily connects with the foundational mandate for all Jewish museums. For me, this personal trajectory—from a museum such as MoMA devoted to the phenomenon of modernism to a museum whose reach is universal and yet includes an important Jewish-

Few cultures have ever existed in isolation, and how they live, work, and create is always subject to the influence of those living, working, and creating around them.

museum component—may offer some special insights into the essential role that museums can and should play today.

To say that we live in complex times is an understatement. Not just because of Covid, but also because of political shifts globally, we are experiencing a kind of turbulence that we have not known since emerging from World War II. We are seeing in some parts of the world a drift toward nationalism and accompanying trends of supremacism and racism, and in other parts of the world a social awakening that underscores the importance of diversity and inclusiveness. Pervasive everywhere is also the phenomenon of global migration that is creating a culture of exile—of exile as home—at a level that is without precedent in modern times.

In this context, while art and politics remain distinct, art has become increasingly engaged with social activism. Art and art history offer examples for this phenomenon, and museums such as MoMA and the Israel Museum are able to tell these stories with clarity. As an example, the political upheaval of the period between World War I and World War II in Europe produced the Dada and Surrealist movements which forged a new definition of artists as creative practitioners. These creative makers expanded their mediums and their ways of working, forging an engagement between art



Canaanite sarcophagi at the entrance to the Israel Museum's Samuel and Saidye Bronfman Archeology Wing
(Photo © The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Elie Posner)

and activism that then spread globally with the migration of artists from Europe to the Americas and to the emerging Soviet Union. This phenomenon remains foundational for art-making today.

The notion that all things connect across time and geography could not be more meaningful than in an era as complex as ours. Universal museums embrace distinct cultures globally and demonstrate how these cultures resonate with others that share their place on the timeline of history. A museum such as the Israel Museum notably demonstrates how the world is always a mosaic of cultures—an example of definitional diversity—and the stories it tells place these distinct cultures in the context of others. Often these stories also demonstrate the cross-cultural engagement among individual cultures that history otherwise might portray as disconnected. An iconic example might be the museum's 2016 exhibition *Pharaoh in Canaan: The Untold Story*, telling the story of the time around 1,600 B.C.E. when the Canaanites lived in Egypt and then, a century or so later, when the Egyptians ruled in the land of Canaan. Their practices and aesthetics became merged—and even the seeds



Installation views of *New York: 1962–1964* at the Jewish Museum, New York. July 22, 2022 – January 8, 2023. (Photo © Frederick Charles)

of monotheistic belief were formed in this time—and these two cultures became integrated and engaged. In today’s divisive world, examples like this can be enlightening.

In the same way, museums dedicated to specific cultures, like Jewish museums and others devoted to singular themes or subjects, can

and should take advantage of the opportunity to look at examples of their cultures in the context of when and where they were created. This practice exactly defines inclusiveness. Given today’s world climate, demonstrating this phenomenon of diversity and inclusion throughout history could not have more meaning.

Subject-specific museums abound across the American and European landscape. Historically, they have tended to look at their subjects in isolation, often elevating their content to a platform of identity and appreciation that may serve their own culturally specific audiences but rarely reaching beyond to attract and educate others. They are often also site-centric, highlighting the achievements of their own community within the geography where they reside.

This is certainly the case for many local and regional Jewish museums, raising the question of the role and relevance of these institutions today and even the question of whether they should exist at all. In my view, the answer is yes—and the path to relevant engagement and success may be to follow the example of universal museums such as the Israel Museum in looking at specific cultures and their unique attributes in the context of history and in relation to other cultures and communities around them in their era. Few cultures have ever existed in isolation, and how they live, work, and create is always subject to the influence of those living, working, and creating around them.

Stories emerging through this lens can inspire us to celebrate diversity and embrace inclusiveness. Again, taking Jewish museums as an example, placing such stories into context enables Jewish audiences to appreciate Jewish achievement in the setting of where and when it took place. This approach can also engage other audiences and help them understand and appreciate the foreignness of Jewish culture. Embracing diversity through cultural narratives in museum settings, rather than through political narratives in the public arena, can also offer an important model today.

For example, just now at the Jewish Museum in New York, the exhibition *New York: 1962–1964* explores the seminal role of the

Jewish Museum in the early 1960s in pivoting the global spotlight on emerging contemporary art from Paris and Europe to New York and the United States. It illustrates an important moment in the history of postwar contemporary art, and it amplifies a subtext about the exodus of creative makers from Europe to America during and after World War II. While its subject is not specifically Jewish, there is much to explore in the meaning of the Jewish Museum's role in this phenomenon and the part played by artists of Jewish heritage for whom America became home during and after the war. For museum professionals, as well as for patrons and museum audiences, this kind of expansive reflection can be engaging and energizing.

With regard to the broader phenomenon of the social awakening in America that seeks to bring diversity, equality, and inclusion to communities that have been overlooked and underrepresented, the traditional mechanisms of museum practice can and are playing a critical role. As an example, the museums of Historically Black Colleges and Universities across the country actively mine their collections to surface artists and art movements that are central to the stories that American and international museums need to tell.

The Venice Biennale has also played a role here for a very long time, with exhibitions percolating from the work of museum curators worldwide. The central exhibition of this past year's Biennale, *Milk of Dreams*, looked back at the invention of Surrealism during the period of social and political unrest and uncertainty between World War I and World War II, and then at how artists are responding to the same circumstances of unrest and uncertainty weighing on the world today. More than 80 percent of the participating artists were women—and from cultures worldwide—and their work was anchored in the achievements of the avant-gardists of nearly 100 years ago, whose work shines masterfully today and sets the stage for identifying and displaying artists from across a much broader playing field.

In these times of social and communal awakening, museums

have a responsibility to follow examples like these. With the level of cultural engagement that has flourished worldwide since World War II, they can open the door to cultural diplomacy as an antidote to the fractiousness of today's increasingly extreme politics. For them to assert their relevance, they need to tell stories drawn from diverse cultures around the world, and explore and celebrate the wonders of social and communal inclusion and integration that give strength to the backbone of world history. *