

NATIONAL MUSEUM
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REMOVING THE DUSTSHEET

Could Britain's provincial museums be made into more exciting centres of local cultural life - as museums are, for example, in Holland?

A room that is musty and ill-lit. In the far corner, two moulting owls staring gloomily from their glass case at a pile of Victorian bric-a-bac: on the floor, some interesting iron and wood-work almost hidden beneath a ragged display of local remains. This is the conventional, and too often the correct, impression that most people carry around with them of their local museum. Examples of good and well-labelled collections of English furniture or paintings are occasionally to be found; enthusiastic displays of local archaeology are rather more common; some of the large provincial museums even house major works of art. But a formidable effort will be required before the standard of the bulk of the country's museums can be raised to anything like an acceptable level.

The plight of the provincial museums reflects the plight of Britain's art life outside London generally. There is little enough cultural enthusiasm to build on in the provinces nowadays, and what there is is sucked inexorably towards London. This is true of the theatre, music and painting, but is illustrated most painfully by museums. In London, the great national art collections housed in the National Gallery, the Tate, the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert, and the other Kensington museums are fairly well financed, very well displayed and usually well attended. But the 800 or so provincial museums are always short of funds; usually short of good exhibits (though not as short as the generally appalling layout would lead one to believe); and, above all, because the local museums service has too often been the last resort of those who have failed at everything else, they are desperately short of enterprising management.

The shortage of money and management in museums starts a vicious circle. Outside London, the total of local authority grants to museums in 1956 was £1.6 million; private grants and bequests might have brought this total up to £2 million. The only other source of funds is the grant (now £15,000 a year) made available through the Victoria and Albert to help art purchases in the provinces. Spread over 800 museums, these sources enable an "average" provincial museum to spend rather over £2,000 a year; but since almost half the total funds goes to the twenty largest provincial galleries (notably those in Birmingham, Liverpool, Glasgow, Leicester and Manchester) most museums have much less to spend than this. Few are able to keep their exhibits in proper repair, let alone buy new ones; they survive, if at all, only because some elderly person has found in museum work a pleasant if unremunerative retreat from the cares of the world.

The shortage of money might not in fact be so acute if museum management were in better hands; there is support to be tapped if museums could be made to seem more worthwhile. Under the Local Government Act of 1948, local authorities are authorised to spend the equivalent of a 6d rate on art patronage; their actual expenditure in 1958 - an average of a $\frac{3}{4}$ d. rate on museums and galleries and $\frac{1}{5}$ th d. on music and drama - means that they were spending less than one-sixth of the amount allowed. (The block grant system, by discouraging marginal spending by local authorities, may have reduced this figure still further). In places where museum management has been good, however, the money made available has come much closer to the ceiling; Birmingham alone spent £164,000 on its museum in the year ended in March, 1958. But good management is impossible with salaries at their present levels. Even for quite senior posts, a typical appointment is advertised as for "university graduate with Museums Association diploma: salary £650-£725 a year." For junior posts, only the bottom rates negotiated by NALGO (the union of local government officers) operate.

One poor old curator was recently discovered in the west country earning only £120 a year. Since the quality of a museum is so much a matter of what its curator makes of it, there is little wonder that many of them make it so bad.

They manage things much better in some places abroad. In Holland, the interpretation given to the word "museum" - a temple of the Muses, or of all the arts makes possible a great variety of displays aimed largely at familiarising ordinary people with all types of art. Dutch museums often have excellent restaurants and contain such treasures as the Van Beuningen collection, bought last year for £2 million by the Rotterdam City Council. In the United States also, many museums have succeeded in becoming centres of the community. The Baltimore Museum of Art, among others, has succeeded in making art chic and museum membership a distinction. On its income of about £100,000 a year the museum runs exhibitions of all sorts, lecture courses, a picture-hire service, a music group and an annual ball, as well as staging the more serious displays that are every gallery's staple diet. All these activities are highly successful. The same interest in amateur arts also exists in Britain, as the overflowing classes of adult painters and the booming sales of "teach yourself" books show. The difference is that almost none of the enthusiasm is ever channelled into a museum.

The idea of making museums the centre of a revived provincial art life in England is in itself respectable enough. It was the main recommendation of the Bridges Committee to the Gulbenkian foundation this spring that the foundation should support this; the anti-ugly pamphlets of both political parties before the election carried the idea a stage further. The Conservative "Challenge of Leisure" recommended that both the National Gallery and the Victoria and Albert museum should circulate more of their works around the country and that an emergency fund of £75,000 a year for five years should be set up to stimulate provincial art life. These are really minimum requirements, though they could have the incidental effect of making local councils pay more attention, and thus more money, to the museums in their area. But looking further ahead, changes in the museum service itself may be even more important.

Some of the changes that are needed are already beginning to take place. The first need is clearly to find out what the provincial museums actually contain. Nobody knows this at present; until they do, little can be done either to build up museum collections where they are weak or to get rid of rubbish. (A modification of the rather rigid rules governing disposal would help here). Such a survey is now being conducted by the Museums Association, the co-ordinator and pressure group for museum activities.

In the long run it may well lead to good collections being built up in a much smaller number of galleries than at present, and to these being circulated regularly among the towns in their area. This would be helped if the Treasury accepted the sensible suggestion, made by the hitherto rather sleepy Standing Commission on Museums and Galleries, that all good art - and not, as at present, only the very best - should be accepted in place of death duties. There is a good chance that it may. If so, the precedent set when the Chatsworth pictures were acquired for the nation in 1958 could most usefully be extended to cover lesser works of art found missing from provincial collections.

If this process of artistic decentralisation is to work in practice, there must be regional bodies in the museums service to receive the gifts and other forms of government aid. This is just what there conspicuously has not been in the past. Some grouping, though not enough, is now going on. The museums in the south western counties from Cornwall to Wiltshire have formed themselves into a single federation and a highly successful exhibition of old masters has already been circulated to both Plymouth and Bristol. Other regions may follow later. But the pace is slow and the major task of shaping the collections into a form suitable not only for schools and adult education, but also for the enjoyment of the public as a whole, has hardly begun.

The key to this, and to so many other of the museums' problems, is once again personnel. Drastic changes here will have to be made if the museums of today are to become more like the artistic coffee houses of tomorrow. Much more use than now could be made of part-time work in the museums, both of married women on a few afternoons a week and of university students in their vacations. (A knowledgeable guide, such as a student can quickly become, is usually much better appreciated than an old worthy reciting his lines.) But just as long as curatorship is a sinecure and the average pay a pittance, no real life can ever be breathed into the provincial museums. The money to provide a much higher salary scale is probably the museums' basic requirement. It should be given to every one that can show an exciting plan for its stewardship.