

'Sugaring the Pill': Rockefeller Support for the Communicative Turn in Science Museums

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Focusing on the case of the Buffalo Museum of Science, along with that of the Brooklyn Museum and the New Museum of Science and Industry, this paper will show how the American museums' growing interest in commercial exhibits and the development of their communicative functions in the 1930's are directly related to the early media studies funded by the Humanities Division (HD) of the Rockefeller Foundation (RF).

In the late nineteenth century, a visit to the world's fair or a visit to a museum meant " seeing objects ". But in the beginning of the 1930's, going to the fair and going to the museum were two completely different experiences. The rise of commercialism, the valuation of brands, and the development of advertising radically transformed the world's fair. Thus, in the 1933 Century of Progress exposition, companies were not primary trying to sell objects: they were creating a special relationship with their clientèle. Exhibitors were communicating.

Concurrently, this period became a turning point for museology. It just took more time for museums than for world's fairs to embrace their new communicative function. One museum recognized as having been one of the main pioneers in the development of communicative exhibits was the Buffalo Museum of Science. Perhaps the most notable accomplishment of this museum was an important exhibition survey produced by the curator Carlos Cummings.

He was assisted by a group of young professionals, selected from other museums, who had been sponsored by a training grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. The survey was the basis for *East is East and West is West* (Cummings, 1940). It analysed the exhibition techniques used in the two 1939 world's fairs (namely the New York World's Fair and the International Golden Gate Exposition in San Francisco), and their potential application to museums. It was undertaken in conjunction with the New York Museum of Science and Industry, which also produced its own text: *Exhibition Techniques: A Summary of Exhibition Practice* (1940).

Cummings' study is often described as a turning point because it was the first work to stress the importance of a storyline for communicating the message of exhibits. We will see later that the museums sponsored by the RF were already making use of the storyline technique well before the 1939 fairs. In any case, the idea of studying two world expositions -- both of which were highly permeated by advertising-- was a radical change in how the interest of visitors was assessed. For the first time, researchers studied how an exhibit, in the same manner as an advertising message, could influence attitudes. But this in and of itself doesn't explain why the transformation of exhibition practices became congruent with the development of communications research. Commentators tend to attribute the relation between museology and communications studies to the far-reaching influence of Paul Lazarsfeld's research on audiences and media efficacy. While this kind of interpretation is not far from the truth, it doesn't take into account that Cummings' study and Lazarsfeld's work were interconnected parts of the program in communication

supported by the Division of Humanities of the Rockefeller Foundation. My research seeks to demonstrate how the designs of the Rockefeller Foundation informed these museological practices.

In the early 1930's, the financial circumstances of the Depression forced museums to extend their educational activities to a wider audience, and to define themselves as "active agencies for adult education". This orientation was in line with the new program of the Humanities Division of the Rockefeller Foundation in 1935 which gave aid "to selected community institutions in demonstrating methods for widening the field of public appreciation". Less emphasis was given to the research interest of scholars and more to the means of cultural diffusion and to the "ways of communicating what is known". Museums were seen as community institutions capable of reaching a public comparable in size to that reached by drama, motion picture, or radio.

The officers of the Rockefeller Foundation thought that the museums of natural sciences, and of science and industry were much more advanced than art museums in terms of the development of exhibition techniques that were, at once, popular and educational. The Brooklyn Museum, which had formerly been a general museum covering the fields of archeology, anthropology, natural history, and arts, was said to be "the center of a number of experiments in special museum techniques and educational activities". The Buffalo Museum of Science was described as "one the most alert and progressive institutions of its kind in the country", specially because of its exhibit halls which were arranged in systematic and logical sequence. The Rockefeller officers saw in the work of these museums -- and that of the New York Museum of Science

and Industry -- unusual opportunities to aid experiments in training personnel and testing methods of display.

In September 1935, an initial grant of \$44,000 for the training of personnel was appropriated to the Brooklyn Museum. In the eyes of the RF, the greatest asset of the Brooklyn Museum was that its new policy was oriented towards the perceived needs of the public. The original plan of Philip Youtz, the new director of the Brooklyn Museum, was to organize what was to be shown to the visitors in a manner corresponding to their own experience. A store-window dresser from a Fifth Avenue shop had been hired to assist in arranging the exhibits, an initiative which was praised by the RF. Techniques of commercial display were closely studied and adapted, another good point in the eyes of the RF. According to Youtz, this was, above all, a way of democratizing the museum, so it could be intelligible to the average person. He even had it in mind to undertake a "sociological museum program". He found it unfortunate that, in the United States, the methods of visual presentation had been left to the advertiser and the cinema while in Russia the Soviet government had found the museums one of its most effective means of educational practice. Criticizing the fact that art in the U.S. tended to be the exclusive property of the wealthy, Youtz had in mind the transformation of the Brooklyn museum into a "socially oriented museum".. He thought that the young appointees had to learn not only methods of displaying material to the public but had above all to become "acutely conscious of their obligation to the public".

Youtz's use of the equation "advertising-education" within the context of the social democratization of knowledge was perfectly in tune with the

Rockefeller tendency to support projects which took the commercial framework as a point of reference. As noted by Buxton (1998: 184), this "tension between accepting the commercial framework and moving beyond it" characterized the Rockefeller programs in communication.

Among the experimental methods used by the Brooklyn museum and praised by the RF officers was the arrangement of the material in a chronological, geographical or technological order. This suggests that the use of narrative techniques was by no means exclusive to the Buffalo Museum of Science, and, indeed, seems to have been one the main criteria for getting aid from the RF. Because of the importance these techniques seem to have to the eyes of the RF officers, they deserve a bit more attention.

It is well known that after World War I, European technological museums, such as the Deutsches Museum, served as a model for how sequential displays could be used. In fact, the representation of chronology in museums dates as far back as the French Revolution and the invention of democratic culture. The development of ideas of progress and the emergence of historical disciplines in the nineteenth century engaged European modern museums into linear, didactic, and evolutionary representations of the past. The taxonomic enterprise of natural history set the tone. However, exhibits were used as visual supports for what students learned from lectures and textbooks. The emergent paradigm in the use of narratives in museums was one of education.

This phase differed from a later one, described by Post and Mollela (1997), which we may call “interpretive” characterised by the idea that stories have a constructed nature and that alternative narratives are conceivable. According to these authors, the emphasis upon context in the planning of exhibits inevitably led to politicisation: involving an ongoing negotiation of historical representations between museums and parties with an interest in museum content.

Keeping in mind this close connection between advertising and museum narratives, the fact (as suggested by Post and Mollela) that museums felt more obliged to negotiate their historical representations with outsiders cannot be explained by their having a more contextual approach alone. I argue that between the earlier education approach and the more recent interpretive orientation lies another mode of conceiving the so-called museum of ideas, namely that based on audience awareness and communication. What was new about the storyline technique developed by the Buffalo Museum of Science and other institutions sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation was the conception of the display as a self-contained story meant to reach the imagination of an audience, and one might even say, the conception of the museum as a story teller --hence, as a communicator.

Little attention has been given to the fact that the main inspiration for the exacerbation of teleological progressivist representations in American museums was the extensively used story-telling formula from advertising. The most effective advertisement was thought to be the one that told a moving human story filled with symbols that were familiar to the public. A story-telling

technique of this kind was evident in what Marchand (1985) called *social tableaux*. The comic-strip style of advertising was one of its most popular forms.

The beginning of a convergence between museum education and advertising appears even more clearly in the case of the New York Museum of Science and Industry (that I will subsequently refer to as the NYMSI). The Rockefeller support came at a moment when the NYMSI was in the process of reorganizing its staff and was about to move to the R.C.A. building, in the Rockefeller Center. The first grant of \$50, 000 was made in September 1935 for the development of new methods of museum exhibition (1936-1938), and the second in December 1939, totaling \$25,000 was to be used for the museum's general budget.

The new director of the NYMSI, Robert P. Shaw had a vision of the communicative functions of museums which was also consonant with that of the Rockefeller Foundation. One of his mottos was that the exhibition had to "sugar-coat the educational pill" and this could be done by entertaining museum visitors. As he expressed it in an issue of *The Scientific Monthly*: it "progressed a long way since the days when "half a mile of canned tomatoes" represented a high point in exhibition ideas" (Shaw, 1937: 443). In Shaw's opinion, the Chicago Century of Progress played an important part in the raising of the level of exhibition techniques. Since that time, an exhibit dealing with canned tomatoes, instead of piling up cans row upon row, would rather present the product in its historical context of development and then explain where it belongs in people's everyday life. Having said this, Shaw described the

storyline technique as one of a number of progressive exhibit methods that had been developed at the NYMSI and had been applied most intensively in the electrotechnology division : the story of electricity was told "in a series of exhibit units, each one of which deals with an outstanding phase of that story and leaves it ready to be taken up by the next unit".

The common interest of the NYMSI and the Buffalo Museum of Science in display evaluation brought them to collaborate in collecting data of value in museum display from the two fairs of 1939. Following the survey work the NYMSI produced its own book, *Exhibition Techniques: A Summary of Exhibition Practice* (1940), which appears at the same time as the book published by the BMS, namely *East is East and West is West, The Exhibit News Letter*, a monthly bulletin published by the NYMSI and which was designated primarily for executives of business and industrial corporations, described the book *Exhibition Techniques* as "*an invaluable aid to every executive concerned with advertising, promotion, exhibits or public relations in any of their multitudinous phases.*"

One can understand that the instrumentalist tone of the NYMSI book was different from the more literary work approach favoured by the Buffalo Museum of Science. As part of its plan of industrial cooperation, the NYMSI had invited private corporations to put in representative exhibits "done in a educational manner as part of a long range public relations activity". It would be an exaggeration to say that the NYMSI wanted to transform itself into a rental space for public-relation exhibits. The Rockefeller Foundation emphasized that modern museums such as the NYMSI could be, at least in part, self-supporting,

and that this was to be done with the cooperation of industry. But all the same, the officers also praised the fact that the museum kept full control of methods for displaying publicity --in those instances when large industries were given or rented space-- and that it determined the amount of time and space in each allotment. Consequently, what the NYMSI offered to companies in exchange for their pledges was its help in bringing their stories to the public. This corresponded closely to the museum's educative purpose which, according to a statement made by Frank B Jewett, President of the NYMSI, and quoted approvingly by the RF Board of Trustees as reflecting their beliefs, "is to give to lay people and technical people a comprehensive view of the development of scientific and industrial skills from their first primitive appearance to their present state, and to indicate clearly that the present state is but the latest step in a continuously expanding evolution". Therefore, the use of the storyline technique in the context of a science museum was more than a merely effective and modern method of display: it appears to have been the perfect vehicle for ideas of progress, the essence of American confidence in its industrial development. Moreover, the use of a narrative was seen as both an excellent educational device and an attractive tool for public relations. It allowed for the reconciliation of the two antagonistic tendencies which lay at the heart of the Rockefeller Foundation, education and profitability, without falling pray to the vulgarity of advertising and commercial domination.

In any event, the application of the storyline technique to a series of anthropological exhibits had an entirely different dimension as well. This was the case for the Buffalo Museum. During a visit to Chauncey J. Hamlin (the

president of the BMS) in 1937, John Marshall, assistant director of the Humanities Division, was particularly impressed by the museum's success in "organizing its exhibits with a view to conveying to its public certain important underlying ideas, not only in the fields of the natural sciences, but of social science, and of general culture as well." (Marshall, 1937) Moreover, Marshall described the Hall of Man as one of its best features. Purely evolutionist in tone, this exhibit attempted to trace the developing course of civilization, picturing the agricultural society as being primitive and the "contemporary civilization" as the ultimate achievement of humankind. The attempt by Franz Boas, in the late nineteenth century, to move the museum method of anthropology toward a more contextual and relative perspective had largely been ignored (Jackman, 1985). The idea that the whole museum should tell a story in order to be more attractive was clearly reinforcing the evolutionist view on civilizations. The Rockefeller officers saw in it "a view to the vivid illustration of ideas rather than the display of a multitude objects". Their enthusiasm for this view is evident in the 1937 annual report which quotes Hamlin's scheme of presentation:

What we are doing is to try to write and illustrate the whole fascinating story of modern science in our document -our museum- chapter by chapter, in our various exhibit halls, each exhibit leading naturally into the next, and each forming a part of a logical whole. We start the story with an account of the essential unity of different forms of matter, and conclude it with a demonstration of the final goal of civilization, the essential unity of mankind in our interdependent complex of modern life (*Rockefeller Annual Report*, 1937: 314-315).

The chapter about the storyline technique in Cumming's *East is East and West is West* is certainly the most well known part of this book. The idea of a narrative may not have actually originated in the survey of the world's fairs (as is generally thought to be the case). But it is certain that the Rockefeller Foundation, through its museum program, was unabashedly one of its main boosters.

The Rockefeller views on the modernization of museums through communication techniques certainly got a far-reaching influence since Hamlin (the president of the BMS) became principal founder of the International Council of Museums (ICOM), in 1946, serving as a President from then until 1953, and member of the U.S. delegation to UNESCO, just before ICOM became operated under UNESCO aegis.

In a report concerning the totality of the financial aid given to museums up to the 1950's, John Marshall evaluates the grants to the Brooklyn Museum and the BMS for "internships" as being the most effective and significant ones. The idea of developing new methods for reaching an audience, which had been ahead of its time, was now prevailing in museum circles even if the most formerly staid institutions such as the Metropolitan Museum in New York and the Louvre in Paris. Most of the interns, who had remained in museum work and had held important and influential posts, carried out the idea to other museums. Knowing this, it seemed amusing for Marshall that the grant to the Brooklyn Museum was said to provide training in "mere window dressing". Today, museum professionals are still resistant to the idea that their practice might have something to do with advertising. Without knowing about the past,

they fear for the future of public education. More than ever, the growing commercialization of museums is still a danger. But the real threat is to ignore how the communicative function has grown out of the commercial realm, and how museum people have themselves built a bridge between education and advertising. In this sense, through recognizing and confronting this historical linkage, they can learn from the past and give a more appropriate orientation to the democratization of knowledge.

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