

The Museum Library— Nucleus of a Study Collection?

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THE LIBRARY in the museum had its inception as a reference collection of books for the curatorial staff. To catalog properly and label, to understand properly and expound the art placed in his care, the curator needed the printed material which forms the background of research. Though its services have been largely taken for granted (a situation only too usual in the library field), with the result that it has often suffered from neglect, the usefulness of the library has never been questioned. Fortunately in recent years museum administrators, like college and university administrators, have come to recognize the genuine importance of the library in the setup of the museum as a whole.

As the museum library developed, its functions expanded. While continuing to have as its primary purpose service to the museum staff, the library has become, over the years, an important center of research to the outside scholar and student as well. With a view to determining more accurately the nature of its clientele so that its future development might be more readily planned, the Metropolitan Museum of Art Library made a survey of its public over a period of four months,

December 1941 through March 1942. The results of this survey showed that the majority of those using the library were art scholars, artists, designers, students, etc.—ranging from the specialist deeply absorbed in Egyptian archeology to the young student of some local fashion school. Furthermore, this majority was made up of “repeaters:” people who returned day after day, week after week, people to whom art in some one of its many aspects is a profession. The minority was composed of people who came to pursue an avocation, to get information to aid in furnishing a home, to find material for a school or club paper, etc. These people were not repeaters: they came only on the rare occasion when faced with some particular problem.

A very few people came just “to read about art.” It is probable that most laymen in the art field (including those who attend museum lectures and tours) find their art books in their local circulating libraries. It is also probable that most people, busy as they are at making a living, think of art as an occasional visual experience, not as something to be studied in books, and the little time they allocate to art is spent viewing the originals rather than reading about them in the library. Though it may be heresy for a librarian to say so, this would seem to be all to the good, for in art as in life there is no real

substitute for direct experience.

Though suggestions for changes and improvements were invited in the survey and while a few hopes were expressed that the library might be open in the evening, not one request was made for a change in policy to permit the circulation of its books. From the evidence gathered then it would seem clear that the clientele of the library is composed predominantly of people who come to do research of one kind or another. It may be concluded, therefore, that the library is serving its proper function as a reference library, and it is with the further development of this function that the writer is primarily concerned.

Division of Materials

With the collections in American museums expanding at a rapid rate, the division of these collections into exhibition material and study material is coming more and more into favor. These study collections vary considerably in the problems they pose. Some may be composed of objects taking up considerable space and difficult to move (such as furniture, sculpture, etc.); others, of objects easily stored in a relatively small space and readily carried about (ceramics, drawings, prints, textiles, etc.). One thing they have in common, however, is the necessity for having books available to make real study of the material possible.

It would seem probable that the clientele of the study rooms would closely resemble that of the library—mostly scholars, designers, and students doing research work, with a minority coming in for the answer to some immediate problem and a still smaller group just “wanting to see more.” In fact, the very purpose of the

study room arrangement is at once to free the exhibition galleries of second-rate and duplicate material, *i.e.*, study material, so that the layman may the more readily enjoy the fine things shown, and to bring the hitherto inaccessibly stored material out of dead storage and make it available to scholars, students, etc. For, as Mr. Coleman has pointed out, “There is a growing need of material organized for reference and study.”¹ Since the library is already the reference center of the museum, it would seem natural that it should expand still further in this direction with the development of study collections having essentially a similar function. The following is offered then as a possible “ideal” plan, at least from a librarian’s point of view, for such future development.

Center of Reference Collection

The idea basic to this plan is that the library should be the physical and functional center of the whole reference collection of the museum. Physically it should serve as the nucleus of a series of special study rooms, rooms directly accessible from the library (though independently accessible as well). Each of these study rooms would contain a carefully selected reference collection of books related to the particular field of art to which the room was devoted. Nearby, in space directly accessible from these study rooms and spreading out from this center, the art objects would be stored, in as compact a space as their nature will allow. The exact location of this storage space would be dependent upon the conditions necessary for the safety of the various collections, the possibilities of air condi-

¹ Coleman, Lawrence Vail. *The Museum in America*. American Association of Museums, Washington, D.C., 1939, v. 2, p. 255.

tioning, and so on. In the storage rooms in which large and difficult-to-move objects are kept, some desk space similar to the carrell in the library stack would probably prove convenient. For the store-rooms of objects easily and safely carried, such provision would not be necessary, as this material could be brought right into the study room.

The reference collection of photographs should also be a part of this study ensemble, as should the photographs of the museum's own collections and those parts of the museum records bearing on the history and bibliography of the objects which can be made freely available to the public. The curatorial offices should certainly be close to the study rooms, and this whole aggregation of the library, study rooms, and offices should be convenient to the main entrance of the museum.² Thus, both the study collections and their curatorial staffs will be readily available to the casual visitor as well as the student, both on entering and leaving the building. It is to be supposed that a modern architect, accustomed to thinking in terms of function and use, would find an answer to the architectural problems involved.

Here then would be a complex but compact arrangement of all of the study material in the museum, all readily available to staff and public alike. Its compactness would avoid the difficulties which have so long beset the college libraries with their widely scattered departmental libraries.³ The library would be

able to supervise the book collections of all the study rooms. Books in the main library would be readily available to the study rooms, and, conversely, books in the study rooms could be easily obtained for those working in the reading rooms of the library. This is a most important consideration as it would tend to solve the problem of the duplication of expensive reference sets as well as a host of other slightly less expensive but equally important volumes. For, unfortunately, both writers and artists have a way of disregarding the various attempts at the classification of knowledge or of art. Should a book on Rembrandt go into the paintings study room or the prints study room? Books on collections; sale catalogs; books covering periods rather than types of art (for example, the eighteenth century); books covering the development of a single art, such as ceramics or sculpture, through various countries and periods—these, as well as most art periodicals, present a host of problems. Because of these problems of classification, is it not likely that the public, and the staff in search of additional or collateral material, would continue to find it necessary to consult the main library catalog before going to a study room when looking for printed material? Is it not probable, too, that the books needed would often be located in two or more places or that the book material would be in a study room while the periodical material would be in the main library? The same difficulties would face both the library and the study room staffs when confronted by a difficult piece of reference work. Should the proposed study rooms with their collections of books be dispersed throughout the museum, these problems would most certainly prove to be extremely serious. It

² We might, for example, picture storage rooms on the basement or ground floor, the reference center on the main floor, and the curatorial offices on the second floor.

³ For a good historical discussion of the rise and decline of the departmental library see Lawrence Thompson's "The Historical Background of Departmental and Collegiate Libraries," *Library Quarterly* 12:49, January 1942. For a discussion of the difficulties involved see Louis T. Ibbotson's "Departmental Libraries," *Library Journal* 50:853, Oct. 15, 1925.

is the writer's belief that the centralized plan suggested would, on the other hand, minimize them.

Interdependence in Art Fields

The increasing interdependence of the fields of art might also be noted. The tendency toward too minute specialization is being reversed and both curatorial and educational staffs are looking over ever widening fields. In addition more and more interest is being evidenced by scholars in getting an over-all picture of the social situations which were the settings for the arts they are studying, as the demand for books in the fields of history, travel, philosophy, sociology, psychology, etc., bears witness. Synthesis is coming to take its rightful place alongside analysis in the field of scholarship. A reference center such as is here suggested, with the whole rather than specialized segments of the book collection available, would surely tend to assist in developing such a broadened outlook on the part of both staff and public.⁴

In addition, the problems of cataloging and administration would be vastly simplified. Centralized cataloging is generally recognized as essential. With the study rooms adjacent to the main library, their book collections could be kept to a minimum and there would be no necessity for additional card catalogs in each room. Small book collections in the study rooms would also result in a considerable saving of space since the library stack is surely the most efficient and economical manner of storing books.⁵

⁴ Balet, Leo. "The History of Art of the Future." *The Journal of Aesthetics*, nos. 2, 3, p. 42, fall 1941.

⁵ With the books in the library so readily available, it is believed that any vast expansion of the study room book collections would prove to be unnecessary and, if adequate space were left for the future erection of additional stacks in the main library, that this would undoubtedly care for the in-

Economy in administration would also be achieved without loss of the value of the library as a reference center. One of the most serious problems of the college departmental libraries has been the expense of having a sufficiently large trained staff to keep them open at all times that the central library was open. Under the proposed plan the storage space could be locked up at such times as the study rooms were closed, while the books in the study rooms could be obtained by the library staff for use in the reading room of the library.

Answers to Objections

It must be taken for granted that objections will be raised to this strong centralization. The principal one to be anticipated is that the study collection should be in close proximity to its related exhibition material. Without attempting an exhaustive examination of this proposition, several points may be made in reply:

1. If the clientele of the study collections proves to be similar to that of the library, as the writer believes it will, such proximity is not necessary.

2. Any extensive collection of art objects will occupy a number of exhibition galleries, and the study room would be at best only one small entrance in one of these galleries. It might not, therefore, prove to be necessarily more convenient to the public than a centrally located study room would be.

3. The growth of museums in the past would lead to the conclusion that the study collection material would increase much more rapidly than the first-class exhibition material. Consequently, stor-

evitable growth of the book collection as a whole. Providing for additional book space in each study room would be much more complicated.

age space will need to be expanded much more rapidly than exhibition space. It would seem obvious that such future expansion of storage space could be planned for more readily if that space were unified and centralized than if it were scattered throughout the building where expansion might prove to be extremely difficult. To draw a comparison with the library, the librarian has learned through bitter experience that the book collection grows more rapidly than the other needs of the library. In planning libraries today both he and the architect see to it that provision is made to allow for future stack expansion while the rest of the building may remain unchanged.

4. Allied to this idea is the ever-present possibility of the necessity of drastically rearranging the collections in the exhibition galleries due to unexpected additions to the collections, etc. As a result of such changes the study room in a central location might very well prove to be more conveniently located in the long run than one placed for the moment in the midst of its exhibition galleries.

5. Writing of this idea of "locating department offices and laboratories near the related exhibitions," Mr. Coleman has this to say: "This is advantageous in one way, but it has the evil effect of sticking curators into separate corners where they can entrench themselves and defy their colleagues."⁶

⁶ *Op. cit.*, v. 1, p. 212.

Though I have run across no such scheme as is here suggested for the centralization of reference material, Mr. Coleman⁷ has suggested that in the future the reference library would take a larger part in the organization of the museum as a whole. He has even gone so far as to say that it is the library that promises to take a central place, physically, in the museum. He adds that the librarian, in the new setting, may partly assume the role of general guide. With the modern librarian, by the very nature of his profession trained to give service and to seek out the best sources of information, placing the library in the center of a vast study collection would only be a further extension of the reference function it has at present.

It may be that the scheme proposed is too "ideal" to be possible, particularly within the limitations imposed by buildings already erected. Still, if it would, as the author believes, solve many of the problems facing both the museum and the museum library, it should be given careful consideration. Certainly it would provide a really tremendous collection of reference materials, of books, photographs, and art objects, in a relatively compact and readily available form. And with a vast program of public works possible after the war, it may not be too much to hope that somewhere the plan will meet with approval and will be tried.

⁷ *Op. cit.*, v. 1, p. 215.