Museums should "begin with people first..."

—ARTHUR C. PARKER, FOUNDING DIRECTOR, ROCHESTER MUSEUM OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Members of the Charleston, S.C., city council could relax at last. They'd just appointed the Charleston Museum's new director, a "bluestocking New England spinster" named Laura Bragg (1881-1978), the museum's former curator of public instruction. The date was Aug. 6, 1920, and the council was optimistic about the institution's future. It was, after all, the oldest museum in the country—an important feature of a city that was undergoing a dramatic cultural renaissance. But the new director's five-and-a-half-year tenure would give Charleston society more grief than joy.

Despite her museum experience, Laura Bragg was an unusual choice for the director's post. Unlike most women working in museums in the 1920s, she had few personal financial resources. She suffered a disability—severe hearing loss. And to the dismay of Charleston's upper crust, she bravely stood up to the city's Jim Crow laws, opening the museum's doors to African Americans at a time when South Carolina schools had two sets of textbooks, one for whites, the other for blacks.

Aghast, the city fathers overturned her efforts, passing a statute decreeing that the "Museum and its use is for white citizens of Charleston." But Bragg was not deterred. Determined to introduce the wonders of the museum to everyone, she developed traveling kits, later called "Bragg Boxes," which contained lessons on history, geography, nature study, home economics and conservation. These she continued to circulate to
both black and white schools. Bragg’s goal was “to end the apathy and ignorance of schoolchildren. She hoped that they would become educated adults who would visit the museum and bring their [own] children.”

That Laura Bragg could be such a social activist when women had little influence in other spheres says much about the museum’s status in the early 20th-century. The field was largely disorganized, with each institution marching to the beat of its own drum. Museums could be used to advocate for social reform because, in truth, they had little political power and virtually no collective influence on society. Very different from other organizations in the cutthroat and masculine business world, most museums were quirky places, run more like private clubs than public institutions.

For one, “museum” was not yet a profession. Few publications described how museums could become more efficient, organize artifacts and exhibitions or serve the public better. Facilities were often grimy and poorly lit. Public amenities were scarce. Displays of collections often overwhelmed the average visitor. Lectures, tours and even children’s story hours could be dreadfully dull.

Yet the people came—individually and by the dozens. Children flocked to the free lantern slide shows at the Toledo Art Museum. Adults went to public lectures on civics offered by the Georgia Historical Society and exhibitions of foreign postage stamps at the State Historical Museum of Wisconsin. Teachers took students to the Brooklyn Children’s Museum, where they could learn to use a butterfly net. Professors sent their students to the galleries on the campuses of Smith College, Cornell University and Michigan State, where they learned about the Old Masters by copying their works into sketchbooks.

“The public response has justified the experience,” wrote one director about a 1913 exhibition of locally produced clay products. “The attendance, 25,000 visitors during the six weeks, included manufacturers and builders . . . men interested in South American trade, art potters . . . teachers of ceramics and china . . . [w]omen’s clubs, groups of saleswomen from the department stores, and classes of schoolchildren . . . .”

Schoolchildren line up to see an exhibition about tuberculosis organized by the American Museum of Natural History in 1907.
From their earliest days, American museums have bustled with activity, serving as places of education and encounter, enlightenment and entertainment, and "intensely human institutions, dedicated to serving the broad-ranging interests of a diverse audience." Whether known today for its buildings, collections or exhibitions, every American museum also is a reflection of the people—the founders, workers, supporters, politicians and visitors—who shaped its journey through the 20th century.

In those early years, as the field tried to find its footing, men and women with any sort of museum experience were in short supply. News journals published letters to the editor beseeching industrialists to stop founding new museums until they could adequately train a workforce. In that way, wrote one correspondent, "the public will find that museums accomplish something more than the mere storing of private collections." A few visionary workers tried to define a national "museum sense" by founding the American Association of Museums in 1906. And responding to what he called museums' "slipshod and haphazard business methods," in 1910 librarian Henry Watson Kent developed filing systems for organizing and keeping track of collection records. But what visitors might encounter or experience in a museum on any given day depended largely on the idiosyncratic whims of individuals, especially the people who were footing the bills.

Many 19th-century museums had been established to educate the masses, but by the early years of the 20th century "service to the public" was a distant goal. Focused as they were on their own legacies and social stature, wealthy founders didn't always look for or try to train qualified workers. To staff their fledgling institutions many resorted to the time-honored hiring methods of nepotism, intuition and luck. At some museums "wayward" nephews and "spinsters" daughters suddenly found themselves with the title of "director," charged with tasks like uncrating collections, dusting them off, fitting them into cases and turning on the lights when visitors arrived.

Other institutions managed to hire more talented personnel. Perhaps it was a combination of luck and intuition, for example, that led the Brooklyn Children's Museum to recruit Anna
Billings Gallup (1872–1956) as a curator in 1903. Or maybe it was just good business sense. A Mayflower descendant, Gallup held a degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, a rarity for a woman at that time. Due to her skills as a science teacher as well as her dedication, she soon ascended to the director's seat. She spent the next 35 years charting the direction of children's museums nationwide and advocating for the needs of young people in all museums.

Even without training or experience, early museum staff—both men and women—embraced their work. Some even doubled as benefactors, donating their own collections or money to keep their institutions afloat or doing without a salary, content simply to participate in a world of beautiful things. They understood that they were running unique organizations. Exhibitions and collections had to change continuously if they were to keep up with the aspirations of the growing nation.

Smithsonian curator George Brown Goode (1851–96) expressed their feelings succinctly. "A finished museum is a dead museum," he wrote. These unique institutions were living breathing organisms that required workers who possessed a "museum sense" to arrange constantly changing exhibitions and collections in ways that could expose more and more people to the world of culture and knowledge.

Gradually the concept of a museum workplace started to develop, though it was a concept that reflected the standards of the day. The ideal museum director or curator needed what financier and art collector J. P. Morgan called "gentlemanly qualities," which included a charming European accent and a burning desire to build an empire of collections. One such gentleman was a German-born, former Civil War lieutenant named Carl Doerflinger (1843–1909). As the first director of the Milwaukee Public Museum, he coaxied a well-known but financially strapped dealer from upstate New York into selling the museum an extraordinary natural
history collection for a pittance. Eventually the dealer's son, Henry I. Ward, moved to Milwaukee to direct the museum that held his father's beloved collections—the only way he could get close to them.

Other directors eliminated the middle man and doubled as private dealers themselves. The first director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art was Col. Emanuele Pietro Paolo Maria Luigi Palma di Cesnola (1831-1904), an antiquities dealer born in Italy. He sold the Met his own collection of Greek antiquities, many at a profit, some allegedly fake. "In those times," explains Thomas W. Leavitt, first director of the museum division, National Endowment for the Arts, "directors were riding high, hobnobbing with the very rich, seldom challenged by scholars, much less by a public which never felt completely at home in [museum] palaces."

Through the years, however, increasing numbers of directors began to use their "museum sense" to move their institutions toward the higher ideal of public service and education. Arthur C. Parker (1881-1955), the founding director of the Rochester Museum of Arts and Sciences, didn't mince words when he described his vision for museums. Most museums in the years between the world wars were collections of "relics and rubbish... monuments of confusion and mosaic[s] of conceit," he said. They should "begin with people first and by showing an interest in human beings bring a more appreciative interest in what the museum does and has to show."
Putting people first was also the mantra of the outspoken and irascible John Cotton Dana (1856-1929), founder of New Jersey’s Newark Museum. Described by his colleagues as pungent, provocative, mischievous, mordant, kind, critical and then some, Dana came from an established Vermont family. His interest in public service began when as a recent college graduate he ventured westward and took a job at the Denver Public Library, where he developed the nation’s first children’s reading room.

Moving to Newark, he pioneered the open-stack system at the city’s public library and in 1909 persuaded local collectors to display their art and specimens in its halls. Dana then talked city officials into turning part of the library into a community museum, with exhibitions and programs for the growing population of factory workers, African Americans, Catholics and Jews, who often did not feel welcome in other museums. Like Laura Bragg in South Carolina, he believed profoundly that museums should open their doors to everyone, and the Newark Museum became a beacon in the field. There, visitors could find “attendants ready to guide groups and explain collections” and show school teachers how to use museum resources in their classrooms. Dana believed in a museum that “aroused[ed] in casual visitors more than a casual interest in the objects they see.”

Female museum directors at the 1923 meeting of the American Association of Museums in Charleston, S.C. Courtesy of the Charleston Museum, Charleston, S.C.
He also believed that women were the key to providing better services to the public. While most outside the field viewed the museum merely as an acceptable hobby for the genteel lady, Dana encouraged women to think in terms of a career. Women were less likely to embroil themselves in collecting showmanship and more likely to care about educating people, he said: “A director should have common sense, enthusiasm for education in all its forms, and an eagerness to learn of the good work a museum can do for a community. . . . In almost every community, large or small today, it will be easier to find a woman than a man who is fitted to the director’s task and is willing to take it.”

Since the mid-19th century, hundreds of women had played key roles in the historic preservation movement and organized period room and colonial kitchen displays at world’s fairs. In fact, decades before they had the right to vote, women like Anna Billings Gallup were running museums. Their influence extended well beyond the obvious purview of children’s education. Many women were accomplished naturalists, especially in the areas of botany and ornithology, and led some of the nation’s first natural science museums, including the Worcester Natural History Society (now EcoTarium) in Massachusetts, Fairbanks Museum (and Planetarium) in St. Johnsbury, Vt., and the Museum of Vertebrate Paleontology at the University of California, Berkeley. In Texas, Ellen Schulz Quillin (1892-1970)—a high-school teacher, avid birder and expert in wildflowers and cacti—helped organize San Antonio’s Witte Museum in 1927. She later established the Reptile Garden, one of the museum’s most endearing attractions and a certified crowd pleaser—the perfect combination of serious scholarship and public entertainment.

True to Dana’s words, women used their museum positions to help the underprivileged. Several considered themselves social reformers. Nobel Peace Prize winner Jane Addams (1860-1935) founded Chicago’s Hull House Labor Museum, which offered immigrant women cooking and shopping classes that taught them to be “more American.” At the Burke Museum on the campus of Seattle’s University of Washington, anthropologist Erna Gunther (1896-1982) used her director’s pulpit to call attention to the injustices waged upon Native Americans at a time when it was impolitic to bring such issues to light. Women also helped launch museums that exposed Americans to modern art and ideas, including the Whitney, Guggenheim and Museum of Modern Art in New York, Cincinnati Contemporary Art Center and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.
Not possessing "gentlemanly qualities" was a professional handicap that was difficult for most women to overcome. The Guggenheim's first director, artist Hilla Rebay von Ehrenwiesen (1890-1967), claimed to be of Alsatian nobility and used the title "Baroness." A "close confidante" of founder Solomon Guggenheim, Rebay had a profound influence on the museum's collecting practices and architecture. Yet she frequently was derided in the press and described as "a prima donna . . . and buxom hausfrau."

A notable battle of the sexes took place between Alfred Barr, Jr., MoMA's first director, and the inimitable Adelyn Breeskin (1896-1986), director of the Baltimore Museum of Art and a divorced mother raising three children. During the 1930s Barr made frequent trips to Baltimore to court a collection of works owned by two wealthy sisters, Dr. Claribel and Miss Etta Cone. The masterpieces included canvases by Matisse and Picasso and, Barr claimed, were too exquisite to remain in the dull backwater of Baltimore. But Breeskin held tough and scored the donation for the people of her city. The Cone Collection can be seen at the Baltimore Art Museum today.

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In the roaring 1920s new economic forces began to break the control wealthy collectors had over museums. Middle-class citizens who lacked vast sources of cash to purchase their own collections banded into "friends" groups, pooling their money to purchase objects and collectively influence the direction of museums such as the Cleveland Museum of Art. Reaping the benefits were curatorial departments with lesser prestige (those focused on American or decorative arts, for example) than those concentrating on European Old Masters. By supporting displays of Americana, the middle class now had a modicum of influence on what the public could see in museums.

At the same time, a new form of the philanthropic organization was starting to exert its own influence. The charitable foundation was a funding source established by wealthy families to support civic projects, benefit society and, by the way, reduce their tax burden. The first one in the United States was the Carnegie Corporation (1911); the second, the Rockefeller Foundation, was founded in 1913, the same year Congress passed the federal income tax act. Although they pledged to do good, charitable foundations were not without their critics. Skeptics accused the foundations of manipulating the country's educational and social structure and wealthy people of dodging taxes by financing ventures—i.e., libraries, parks and museums—that the government eventually would have to maintain. Museums were especially vulnerable to this criticism, since municipalities already had donated buildings, land and, in some cases, local tax revenues to what some people considered extravagant private playpens.
In face of such doubts, those in charge of foundations realized that museums needed to do a better job of promoting their societal value. The best way to accomplish this was to develop an independent network of trained museum workers who clearly were dedicated to working on the public's behalf.

The foundations turned to the American Association of Museums, which in 1923 received its first grant from the Laura Spellman Rockefeller Foundation, a branch of the organization founded in 1913. The grant allowed the association to establish a permanent office in Washington, D.C., launch a four-page national journal for museum workers and write the field's first professional code of ethics (1925). This two-page document promoted a standard of professional behavior and, among other things, encouraged museum staff to refrain from "jealous acts, gossip, inquisitiveness, sarcasm [and] practical jokes."

In 1922 Frederick Keppel, formerly dean at Columbia University and assistant secretary of war, became head of the Carnegie Corporation. No doubt influenced by his Columbia colleague, educational philosopher John Dewey, Keppel believed foundations could help museums and universities create formal training programs that would expand the pool of qualified curators and directors. He steered Carnegie funds to the first serious museum training course in the country, established by Paul Sachs at Harvard University in 1922. Sachs, son of a founder of the financial firm Goldman/Sachs, joined up with Edward Waldo Forbes (1873-1969), grandson of poet Ralph Waldo Emerson. At Harvard they trained art connoisseurs and restorers through the 1940s, developing a rigorous curriculum that covered

![Image: By the 1920s and 30s art museums were designing exhibitions to appeal to large numbers of people. Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.](image)
During the 1930s museums developed courses to promote art appreciation. Pictured here, schoolchildren visiting the Minneapolis Institute of Arts in 1935. Courtesy of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

museum history, philosophy and management. The program's illustrious students eventually would direct some of America's most prestigious art museums, including the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Saint Louis Art Museum and Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Museums also started apprenticeship programs in the more community-oriented aspects of their work: teaching children, providing materials for researchers and designing appealing shows for the masses. In 1923 the Newark Museum launched a course in museum education that attracted young women from wealthy East Coast families; some of its graduates later established the curatorial and registration departments at the Museum of Modern Art. Starting in 1929, with funds from the Rockefeller Foundation, the Buffalo Museum of Science trained budding designers and builders of dioramas, which were gaining in popularity in science and nature museums around the country. Graduates of Buffalo's program later influenced the development of museums in the national parks and elsewhere.

These newly trained men and women shared practices with one another and organized regional support groups, beginning in 1927 with the Association of Midwest Museums. Until this point the field's professional literature had featured such inspiring topics as "how to mount an African Warthog" and "how to fluff a vulture's feathers." Now museum pamphlets began to talk about civic value, urging staff to abandon the "insidious decadence" of collectors and instead bridge the worlds of "high" and "low" culture for the public. Furthermore, the first psychological studies of museums showed how visitors really behaved in the galleries. Between 1924 and 1928 Yale University professors Edward Stevens Robinson and Arthur Melton and their students documented the insidious
condition known as "museum fatigue"—the exhaustion felt after even a few minutes of navigating interminable rows of displays, galleries and flights of stairs.

The combination of training and research led to action. Museum workers uncluttered exhibitions and created more attractive habitat dioramas and period rooms. They fought with architects to minimize the number of stairs people had to climb and ensure there were fewer confusing spaces. They invented such devices as "portable museum stools" to help visitors combat their fatigue. They developed public courses to promote art appreciation.

In the 1930s, with funds from the Carnegie Foundation, large urban museums established branches in suburbs, designed to be more intimate and less intimidating than the marble palaces in the cities. Philadelphians, for example, could venture to a storefront branch of the Philadelphia Museum of Art in Upper Darby, Pa. With window displays opening out to the street, the museum produced 17 exhibits in its first 12 months and stayed open until 10 p.m. every night, including Sunday. Supported by the Carnegie, Rockefeller and other foundations, museums also sent exhibitions to the nation's black colleges, reaching out to students who had restricted access to traditional urban art museums. Though these short-lived experiments ended when the Great Depression set in, they set the stage for later experimental practices that aimed to introduce museums to a broader part of the population.

Old-style directors, however, were appalled by the crowds of people who came to educational programs. Watching large groups of boisterous children arrive for the popular 1920s Saturday classes at the Public Museum of Grand Rapids, Director Henry
L. Ward exclaimed, "The whole thing is wrong; unbecoming a city department; inimical to gentlemanly and ladylike deportment; dangerous to health and to life and limb." But museums had never been more popular.

With the stock market crash of 1929 and the onset of the Great Depression, the nation seemingly had little time to worry about museums. People were "hungry, desperate and angry"; by 1933 the nationwide unemployment rate had skyrocketed to its all-time high of 25 percent.

Yet museums did play a large public service role during those grim years. Due to cuts in school funding, they experienced a sharp demand for children's classes. Adults, too, were drawn to free cultural events and visited museums in larger numbers than ever before; attendance numbers climbed by 50 percent. Most surprising, benefactors who lost large fortunes in the crash actually donated more money to museums in the 1930s than they had in the roaring 1920s.

An important boost to museums came from President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's job creation program, the Works Progress Administration (WPA), established in 1935. WPA funds led to a huge expansion of the National Park Service (NPS), including new museums along park trails around the country. At a centralized design studio in Berkeley, Calif., NPS artists created

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Holger Cahill with Georgia O'Keeffe and Maria Chabot, 1942. Under Cahill's leadership the Federal Arts Project employed thousands of artists—many in museums—during the worst years of the Depression. Courtesy of Palace of the Governors, Museum of New Mexico. Negative no. 165669.
relief maps and other exhibits for these museums. In 1937 its exhibit-building activities were so widespread that NPS inaugurated a museum division; its first chief, Ned J. Burns (1899-1953), was a master diorama maker and exhibition designer. Create exciting displays that looked "lived-in, not died-in," Burns urged the hundreds of illustrators and artisans under his supervision. "Exhibits should be dynamic and fresh as today's newspaper."

Another WPA program, the Federal Art Project (FAP), represented the largest infusion of federal cash the arts community had ever seen, and the first federal monies to go directly to the nation's museums. In 1935 Holger Cahill, who built the Newark Museum's American art collection in the 1920s, was called to Washington, D.C., to head the FAP. "It'll be terrible, with a dead cat coming your way every few minutes," warned Cahill's friend Francis Henry Taylor, director of the Worcester Art Museum. "Congressmen will have you up on the carpet every other minute, but of course you've got to take the job!"

Under Cahill's leadership FAP employed almost 40,000 artists, many in museums. They excavated and documented historic sites, organized and catalogued paintings and sculptures, repaired and cleaned specimens, and designed and installed exhibits, dioramas and period rooms. Thousands of artists participated in this dynamic work program, including Jacob Lawrence, Lee Krasner, Wilhelm de Kooning and Jackson Pollock.

The general public benefited immensely from the FAP. During this period residents of small Midwestern towns could visit local history museums spruced up with new cases and furniture built by FAP artisans. City dwellers flocked to see new exhibits such as the wildlife dioramas at what is now the Denver Museum of Nature and Science and the meticulously restored Chinese Buddhist shrine at the Milwaukee Public Museum. In Boise, Idaho, they watched workers construct a new building for the local art museum and attended exhibitions organized by the WPA-sponsored Indian Arts and Crafts Board. Other people enrolled in painting and sculpture classes at community centers in Roswell, N.Mex., and Raleigh, N.C., which later were turned into permanent museums. The exuberant activity of the FAP years, notes historian Howard Zinn was "an exciting flowering of arts for the people, such as had never happened before in American history, and which has not been duplicated since."

FAP was dismissed as "radical," however, mainly because its participants included New York-based artists and African Americans, Native Americans, Jews and other minorities. Red-baiting politicians claimed that a photography exhibition documenting housing squalor in Oklahoma City and similar projects were "tools of the Communist party designed to breed class hatred in the United States." Others disapproved of the program's racially integrated classes. Still others felt that with a war on the horizon, there would be plenty of work for everyone and the job-creation program no longer would be necessary.
Unable to withstand the political pressure, WPA folded in 1943. However, it had a lasting museum legacy, contributing almost $20 million to projects across the country and proving that museums were much more than just playgrounds for the rich. Most important, many Americans entered museums for the first time in their lives and discovered that art and culture can nurture the spirit during difficult times.

As the nation prepared for war, museums vanished from the federal radar. In this era of patriotic sacrifice, the U.S. government classified museums as recreational, not educational—that is, non-essential. That meant that museums did not merit special rations, such as gasoline or tires. Some were forced to suspend operations and shut their doors. A few were converted into temporary hospital wards or bomb shelters, with their collections stored off site.

The government’s approach was exactly right, agreed one progressive educator. Museums didn’t deserve special treatment. In neglecting their obligations to the “common man” while their institutions received “tax privileges,” the men and women who controlled museums were as guilty as “the dictators in Europe and Asia” of betraying “democratic ideals.” Theodore Low of the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore reminded his colleagues that government officials would not “support a cultural Fort Knox.”

But others understood that museums could be essential gathering places for their communities, especially during wartime. The staff at the Bishop Museum in Honolulu exemplified this commitment. In December 1941, as “dense columns of black smoke continued to rise from Pearl Harbor,” the shell-shocked staff was in high gear, securing the museum. Within days they had arranged new exhibits and developed creative art classes for children unable to attend school. “I believe the museum is going to play a more important
part than ever as a morale builder for the community," wrote the Bishop's director, Peter H. Buck. The can-do attitude carried over to the mainland. Two weeks after the attack several museum directors gathered at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and resolved "to do their utmost in the service of the people in this country during the present conflict." Museums should strive to "be sources of inspiration illuminating the past and vivifying the present [so] that they will fortify the spirit on which Victory depends." Within months hundreds of museums had launched programs to help people cope with the stresses of wartime.

During the World War II years, visitors viewed exhibitions about military strategy and civil defense, such as the Walker Art Center's "Halls of Montezuma," "Airways to Peace" at the Museum of Modern Art and the Franklin Institute's large-scale exhibition about the art and science of camouflage. They visited museums at night, as institutions like the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art adjusted their hours to consider wartime work schedules, blacking out windows to guard against the possibility of enemy attack.

Soldiers listened to lectures about the values of democracy, a required part of their military training, at Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia. Navy and Army recruits learned about celestial navigation at the Hayden Planetarium in New York. G.I.'s stationed at Florida's Morrison Field Airbase gave public band concerts at the Norton Gallery of Art in West Palm Beach. Military personnel on leave could spend time at art museums across the nation, in special "smoking rooms" that invited them to learn how to paint, see a film or sample refreshments—all free of charge.

*Saturday craft classes at the Public Museum of Grand Rapids, 1950s. Courtesy of the Public Museum of Grand Rapids.*
Women enrolled in Red Cross sewing classes at the Philbrook Art Center in Oklahoma, learned how to plant victory gardens at the Berkshire Museum in Massachusetts and prepared surgical dressings for the armed forces at the New-York Historical Society. Children sometimes spent entire days at the local museum, enrolled in free programs such as the Syracuse Museum of Fine Art's "Playschool."

Offering these services was both patriotic and practical. "Museums had to convince politicians and those who controlled the purse strings that they were contributing to economic recovery, to the fight against totalitarianism, and to winning the war," explains historian Terry Zeller. The strategy worked. During the 1940s two-thirds of museums reported increased financial support from their municipalities; a few were even able to construct new facilities to accommodate expanded public use.

Michigan's Public Museum of Grand Rapids was one of several institutions that transformed itself during the war years. In 1939 its visionary new director, science teacher Frank "Dewey" DuMond (1898-1989) launched a campaign for a new building for the crumbling 84-year-old institution. "We do not wish to stand aloof," DuMond declared. "Our aim is... to give the taxpayers a lot for the little they invest..." The museum produced flyers that showed citizens how to spot enemy planes and donated a Spanish-American war cannon to be

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Adding this suit of armor to the collections of the Public Museum of Grand Rapids in 1951 so thrilled Director Frank DuMond, he had to try it on—something that no museum professional would dare attempt today. Courtesy of the Public Museum of Grand Rapids.
melted down for the “Salvage of Victory Clean-up.” After the war, the museum created a brochure titled “Servicemen: What of Those Souvenirs?” that encouraged the donation of war-related artifacts for the benefit of future generations. By 1947 the building project was a rousing success. The museum had expanded services, reached new audiences and doubled its budget through “legitimate promotional stunts and publicity.” It was, DuMond said with pride, “accessible as a dime store and friendly as your next door neighbor.”

Other directors realized that their institutions could serve as valuable public relations tools—and not just for wartime concerns. Exhibitions, for example, could help businesses sell products by showing how appliances worked or goods were designed. During the 1940s Lemnox Lohr, director of the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago, brokered deals with companies to create exhibits about consumer goods, including “Electric Theater” with Commonwealth Edison and a B. F. Goodrich display on the wonders of rubber and latex. At the same time, the Museum of Modern Art and other contemporary art museums worked with department stores to promote modern designs of home furnishings, appliances and utensils.

As the Cold War loomed politicians saw that museums could help them present certain messages to the public, and the government commissioned exhibitions that aimed to soothe people’s fears about atomic testing and Soviet nuclear attack. The federal government opened the American Museum of Atomic Energy in Oak Ridge, Tenn., in 1949—the year it revealed that the city was a site of the atomic-bomb-producing Manhattan Project. There, an exhibition called “Atoms for Peace” contained a diorama
about mining uranium and bombastic prose about the promise of atomic energy. The show traveled around the country. In the early 1950s, to further put the nation at ease and promote the country’s technological and military superiority, the Smithsonian opened several exhibitions about U.S. military history and triumphs.

Behind the scenes curators and scientists focused on their research and paid little attention to the public. Museum directors sank back into a comfortable “old boys” network. “Museums are the last places where Captains of Industry can act with no government meddling,” proclaimed an editorial in Art News. “This is the last area where Big Money, and in the older cities, Old Money, has its nineteenth-century prerogatives.” But the postwar political and economic climate was about to change.

America in the 1950s was “the affluent society,” wrote economist John Kenneth Galbraith, a time of booming educational opportunities and material wealth for all. One result of middle-class prosperity was a new labor force for museums: white female volunteers. With their husbands at work, their children enrolled in high-quality public schools and their leisure time increased due to labor-saving appliances, more and more women lent their energies to museums as volunteers. During the 1950s women’s committees were indispensable to day-to-day operations. At a time when exhibition improvements lagged due to curatorial indifference, energetic volunteers kept the museum connected to its public.
The volunteer transformed the American museum and became the antidote to the stereotypical stern-faced uniformed guard. She greeted visitors at the front door, cheerfully answered questions at the information desk, guided people through exhibitions, ran rental galleries and invited middle-class patrons to afternoon teas, special concerts and glittering galas organized by the women’s committee. Finally the museum had a friendly face, and a rather fashionable one at that. Volunteers were considered so glamorous that the July 1952 issue of *Vogue* featured two of them, the chic Mrs. C. Matthews Dick, Jr., and Mrs. Edward B. Smith, posing in front of a painting at the Art Institute of Chicago. That same year a young doctor’s wife named Mary Naquin Sharp wandered into the Baltimore Art Museum because “it was what everyone I knew was doing at the time.” She remained an indispensable docent for more than 50 years. “We were doing everything,” she recalls, “including lots of things that paid staff do now.”

At many museums women volunteers outnumbered paid male staff two-to-one. In 1952 their numbers were so great that Sharp and others organized the American Association of Museum Volunteers, which was based at the Saint Louis Museum of Art. Soon volunteers founded their own museums. Thirteen volunteers in southern California founded a new institution in 1962: the Newport Harbor Art Museum, now part of the Orange County Museum of Art. Children’s museums also benefited enormously from women’s service organizations, most notably Junior Leagues whose members launched scores of youth-oriented institutions during the latter part of the century.

With growing attendance and backed up by their volunteer corps, directors renewed calls for federal dollars. A government agency would become an important player in this regard, though museums were the furthest things from President Harry S Truman’s mind when he signed legislation creating the National Science Foundation (NSF) in 1950. Truman saw NSF as a way to support scientific research for national defense during the Cold War. Within the next few years, however, the agency would fund more than 200 biology research projects in natural history museums and botanical gardens. By the 1957 launching of *Sputnik*, the foundation and museums were sharing a mutual interest educating the public about careers in science.

The government also took a few small steps toward supporting arts and culture museums. In 1954 President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the Excise Tax Reduction Act, which exempted museums from paying taxes on admissions charges. Ike was an amateur painter; his secretary of the treasury, Douglas Dillon, was a collector and trustee of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. But though the president professed an interest in museums, he did not push for more systematic funding. Direct federal support was politically unfeasible, due to Cold War paranoia about communism. In 1949 Michigan Rep. George Dondero delivered a speech on the House floor titled “Communist Conspiracy in Art Threatening American Museums.”
accusing museums of displaying “dangerous” abstract art created by artists with “foreign names” as a “rich source for hidden conspiracy.” Sen. Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin took up the cause and blacklisted artists he believed were “un-American.”

Even though the U.S. Senate condemned McCarthy’s tactics in 1954, the ripples of McCarthyism were strong. In 1955 a local women’s luncheon club presented trustees of the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts (now the Dallas Museum of Art) with a list of “suspected communist sympathizers” and asked that their works be removed from display. The trustees refused. The museum’s director, noted Texas artist Jerry Bywaters (1906-89), later received a special commendation from the American Association of Art Museum Directors for “withstanding the assault.”

The next year an even-larger group, the Dallas County Patriotic Council, pressured the city to withdraw the museum’s maintenance funds. The reason: a traveling exhibition called “Sport in Art,” sponsored by Sports Illustrated, contained works by artists who allegedly were affiliated with “communist-front activities”; images included paintings of a fisherman and an ice skater. “The Reds are moving in upon us,” warned the council. “Let those who would plant a red picture supplant it with the red, white, and blue. White for purity, blue for fidelity, as blue as our Texas bluebonnets.”

Again, the trustees and the exhibit’s local sponsor, department store magnate Stanley Marcus, held fast. “Museum says Reds can stay,” announced the Dallas Morning News. “Sport in Art” opened as planned, its galleries flanked by armed guards. It drew larger than usual crowds and resulted in dozens of new memberships to the museum. Yet city officials acknowledged that the “main issue was far from being settled for good.”

Fears of communism dominated the Cold War years and led to increased international showmanship. To highlight American ingenuity and democratic values, the United States Information Agency (USIA) toured exhibitions like the Museum of Modern Art’s immensely popular “Family of Man” to Europe and the USSR. (The USIA tour of “Sport in Art,” was cancelled, however, because of its association with “subversive” elements.) In 1959 congressmen and senators began to advocate for funding the arts at home. The next year the nation elected John F. Kennedy, who promised to advance the values of progress, education and social equity.

Strictly speaking, the arts and culture funding boom that followed JFK’s election was the result of a confluence of astute lobbying, Cold War politics, economic good times and complex negotiations regarding tax laws. American hearts, however, were won over through a major public relations event.
In December 1962 French Minister of Cultural Affairs André Malraux flew from Paris to Washington, D.C. His traveling companion was a small canvas with a big appeal—Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*—which came to the United States on a two-and-a-half-month loan orchestrated by the Kennedy White House. Amid great fanfare President and Mrs. Kennedy attended the opening at *Mona Lisa’s* first stop, the National Gallery of Art. For the next 26 days, 518,000 people waited in line to glimpse the famous canvas, installed on a baffle draped in red velvet and guarded by Marines around the clock. Even with extended evening hours the museum could barely manage the crowds; sometimes the wait in line was over two hours—in freezing winter temperatures. The painting then traveled to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where more than a million people paid homage to the woman with the enigmatic smile. *Mona Lisa’s* triumphant tour helped the White House garner popular support for a federal arts and culture policy.

On the morning of Nov. 22, 1963, the *New York Times* featured two long articles detailing JFK’s plan to create an arts council to “bolster the cultural resources of the nation.” This goal was so important to Kennedy that he planned to appoint several prominent members of his cabinet as well as artists and arts leaders to the council. The elaborate scheme would never come to pass. That afternoon, in Dallas, the president was assassinated.
Vice President Lyndon Baines Johnson inherited a grieving nation on the brink of unrest. Civil rights issues loomed; there was a strong sense that the old order had to go. It was time to create, as LBJ called it, "A Great Society that . . . rests on abundance and liberty for all, where the city of man serves not only the needs of the body and the demands for commerce, but the desire for beauty and the hunger for community." His vision included federal programs and reform intended to bring the nation's arts and culture to all of its citizens.

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"Sometime around 1965," sociologist Victoria Alexander tells us, "a rumble was heard in the museum world. It was the sound of an old funding system cracking as a new one emerged to displace it." The momentous system was a combination of brand-new federal agencies, foundation and changing corporate interests.

On the federal side, working closely with Rhode Island Sen. Claiborne Pell, President Johnson invited the directors of the Museum of Modern Art, Houston Museum of Fine Arts and Toledo Art Museum to join arts luminaries like singer Marian Anderson, composer Leonard Bernstein and author John Steinbeck on a National Council of Arts and Humanities. In 1965 LBJ signed the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) into existence. A year later, he signed the
National Museum Act, whose funds for training and research would be administered by
the Smithsonian Institution. Foundations soon were required to make their records public
and donate a certain percentage of their annual earnings to bona fide charities, thanks to
the 1969 Tax Reform Act. Businesses were making changes, too. In response to accusations
that corporations abused labor, the environment and consumers, corporate managers
introduced the concept of “social responsibility.” It made good business sense. A logical way
to contribute to the welfare of communities and present the corporation’s human side was to
support that most human of activities, the arts.

“The emergence of the corporation as the controller of an enormous new medium of world-
wide communications,” said George Weissman, chairman of Philip Morris, “the growing
awareness of the corporation’s potential and responsibility for enlightenment, the ever-
widening scope of the corporation’s horizons—these are the factors that will cement lasting
relationships to the arts.” In 1967 David Rockefeller, chairman of Chase Manhattan Bank,
founded the Business Committee for the Arts. Rockefeller’s goal was to encourage more
business leaders to give money to cultural organizations.

The opening of federal, foundation and corporate coffers was the equivalent of a Texas-size
oil gusher for museums. High-society museum patrons were glad to have others step up
to the plate, and many testified before Congress in support of the NEA. But first there was
another hurdle to clear. The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) still clung to its World War II
classification, designating museums as recreational, not educational. As a result, they were
denied the tax benefits and grants enjoyed by other nonprofits. Museums needed to organize
if they hoped to truly benefit from the new funding opportunities and expand their reach.

And organize they did. In 1967, 12 directors from art and science museums, large and
small, gathered at a country estate in Belmont, Md., at a meeting convened by the American
Association of Museums (AAM). Led by E. Leland Webber, director of Chicago’s Field
Museum, they were joined by a rising star, Nancy Hanks, executive secretary for the
Rockefeller Brothers Fund. The outcome was a landmark document known as The Belmont
Report, essentially a pitch for “substantial national aid” in the form of tax benefits and direct
federal dollars. It opened by reminding its readers of the field’s educational and research
impact on the American people: groundbreaking scientific discoveries, life-altering moments
for children and adults, the power of collections objects to inspire.

The Belmont Report also documented the poor condition of museum buildings and
collections, the lack of staffing, sharply rising costs and scant government and foundation
support. Then came the message to Congress: “The Federal Government has an obligation, as
yet unmet, to assist in preserving, maintaining and wisely utilizing the national treasure in
museums on behalf of all the American people.”
Thanks in part to *The Belmont Report*, Congress was convinced that museums were educational organizations. With the 1969 Tax Reform Act, they qualified for an avalanche of financial support.

To bolster the report’s claims AAM strived to help museum workers do their jobs better. Beginning in 1970 it launched programs that encouraged museums to aim toward the highest standards and helped staff elevate their professional practice. To the typical museum visitor, however, the legislative victories and structural systems were barely noticeable. With few exceptions, museums looked and felt much the same as they had a decade earlier. Outside on the streets, Americans were marching for civil rights, free speech and peace. But inside, museums remained ivory towers removed from the nation’s turmoil. Docents retained their matronly styles. Art museum directors focused on upholding the upper-class values of their trustees, 60 percent of whom were over the age of 60.

Exhibits also did not reflect the public’s mood. The Field Museum’s “Races of Mankind” had remained unchanged since the 1930s, unapologetically presenting the idea of racial hierarchy. Chicago’s Museum of Science and Industry developed an exhibition supporting the country’s escalating military presence in Vietnam. It displayed a Huey helicopter with a machine gun pointing at a diorama of a Vietnamese village. Visitors could sit in the copter and electronically aim the gun at a thatched hut, which presumably hid members of the Viet Cong. In the language of the times, it is fair to say that at the close of the 1960s, museums were the “establishment” and bastions of “square” values.

But the field could not remain immune to the country’s growing concerns about the Vietnam War, bigotry, sexism and poor conditions in the workplace. Idealistic young activists and artists began to take on museums. In 1968 civil rights activists conducted a letter-writing campaign that persuaded the Field to dismantle “Races of Mankind.” That same year, war protesters swarmed MSI and forced the removal of the Huey helicopter. New York artists marched on the city’s major art institutions. Forming groups like the Artists and Workers’ Coalition and Women Artists in Revolution, they staged such unruly actions as unleashing cockroaches at a white-glove event at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and bursting bags of cow blood on the floor of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) while they shouted “rape.”

Inside museums, staff began to voice their concerns. “We were passionate about the Great Society and all the new possibilities that were opening up around us,” recalls Bonnie Pitman, former director at the Dallas Museum of Art, who began her museum career in 1968. “And we were not afraid of standing up and saying that things have to change.”

On June 1, 1970, the museum “establishment” and young political activists faced off at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York, where luminaries in the federal funding world had
gathered to address the American Association of Museums' annual convention. Suddenly, 30 protesters stormed the halls with signs bearing the words "Art Strike Against Racism, Sexism, Repression and War." Rafael Montanez Ortiz, director of New York's El Museo del Barrio, a museum founded by Puerto Rican activists, grabbed the mike and spoke to the shocked audience. He accused museums of "complicity with the atrocities of the times."

The dialogue became loud and contentious. Half of the audience began to pour out their frustrations about museums failing to confront the larger political issues of the day, especially the Vietnam War. The other half was furious, painting the protesters as "abrasive extremists."

Was it right to lash out at the government just as it was about to open its coffers to museums?

The discussions continued into the next day, evolving from the war overseas to workplace conditions at home, especially hiring practices in museums. "Discrimination in the museum field certainly is prevalent," John Hightower, MoMA's director, admitted to the delegates. "Someone recently objected to a museum being referred to as racist. I replied that I knew the particular museum was not consciously anti-black or anti-Puerto Rican, only anti-Semitic. As far as the exploitation of women is concerned, the museum profession is notorious . . . museums hire bright, well-educated and talented women for extremely responsible jobs because it does not cost as much. This attitude is true throughout the country."

In the weeks and months that followed museum professionals continued to raise similar issues. In an editorial in ArtNews, Thomas B. Hess, a former curator at MoMA, laid bare the field's anti-Semitism, what he called "the most widely known, unspoken fact in the field."

According to Hess, trustees were having a hard enough time dealing with American Jews
inching their way onto boards and
“brushing aside Jockey Club protocols.”
Hess’s conclusion: “No Jew need apply”
for a director job, “unless he has changed
his name and religion.” In the grassroots
journal Ramparts, critic Barry Schwartz
launched an even more scathing exposé.
No African American or Hispanic need
apply for any museum job, other than
guard or janitor. Schwartz took on the
Oakland Museum, based in a California
city that was 45 percent black and
birthplace of the 1960s radical group, the
Black Panthers. The “lily-white museum
commission” (most of whom did not even
reside in Oakland) recently had fired the
museum’s director for hiring the wife of
a local black militant in a professional position. Schwartz noted that there was hope through
activism; the Oakland Black Caucus had called for a boycott of the museum.

Women, too, fought for their rights to equal pay and advancement opportunities, an outgrowth
of the feminist movement. In 1971, 20 female employees at the Metropolitan Museum of Art
filed complaints of sex discrimination with the State of New York Civil Rights Bureau, with
dozens more supporting their claims about a glass ceiling. The double standard could be seen
throughout the field. In 1975 Susan Stitt, later the first female director of the 150-year old
Historical Society of Pennsylvania, published the first data on the economic status of women
museum workers. She documented a salary gap of 30 percent, as well as at least one case where
a museum (illegally) offered pensions to men but not to women.

One issue that all museum workers had in common, no matter their race or gender, was
their low paycheks. In 1971, PASTA/MOMA—the Professional and Administrative Staff
of MoMA—organized a strike at the Museum of Modern Art, demanding fair wages and
arguing that poorly paid workers were subsidizing the social status of wealthy patrons. The
Teamsters took their side, refusing to cross PASTA’s picket line to deliver food to MoMA’s
restaurant, leaving that task to volunteer “matrons in station wagons.” MoMA unionized and
workers at museums around the nation began to organize. But strikes and worker dissent
would continue to flare up for years as livable wages and the gender pay gap remained major
challenges for the museum field.

Throughout the 1970s the “change in museums occurred so quickly . . . that it was hard to
grasp,” wrote art critic Sophy Burnham in The Art Crowd, her 1973 tell-all book about those
radical years. The combination of idealistic, energetic workers and a new influx of funds launched museums into an era of unprecedented idealism and growth, both inside and out.

If a museum visitor had fallen into a decade-long Rip Van Winkle style nap circa 1968, waking up at the end of the decade, she would have found herself in a radically changed environment. At a large urban art museum she would have witnessed crowds of tourists lining up to see great treasures from abroad assembled into blockbuster shows. She could visit an array of historical sites newly renovated for the 1976 bicentennial celebration or one of the many new ethnic museums like the Mexican Museum in San Francisco (1975) or the Afro-American Historical and Cultural Museum (now African American Museum) in Philadelphia (1976). She might have been shocked by the freewheeling atmosphere of a new kind of museum called the “hands-on science center,” a far cry from the rows of specimens laid out in glass cases that she'd seen in the late 1960s.

Inside all of these institutions she could read signs with words like “funded by the National Endowment for the Arts” or “made possible by the Mobil Oil Foundation.” She would have picked up a free map and a glossy calendar filled with notices of educational events: papernaking workshops, yoga classes, a foreign film series. Peeking inside offices she would have spied workers frantically typing out grant proposals to fund new educational programs. She might have met a graduate student completing a summer internship as part of a new kind of curriculum called “museum studies.” She might even have seen the museum’s director heading to the airport, on his way to a meeting at a funding agency in Washington, D.C., part of his plan for keeping the whole enterprise afloat.

All over the country museums were exerting their influence on Capitol Hill. They were aided in their efforts by the first chair of the National Endowment for the Arts, Nancy Hanks (1927-83) had no museum experience to speak of, other than her participation in The Belmont Report. But she turned out to possess a remarkable “museum sense” and the impeccable political credentials needed to advocate in the corridors of power. Hanks was from a conservative Southern family, a distant relation of Abraham Lincoln and once was a close confidante of Nelson Rockefeller, then governor of New York. She was, by all accounts, charismatic, gracious and a workaholic, making her a perfect candidate to get things done in Washington.
One of her first actions was to allocate NEA money in equal amounts to state arts councils (regardless of the state’s population) to encourage the spread of arts and culture across the nation; that won her almost 100 friends in the Senate. Hanks then appointed as her deputy Michael Whitney Straight, a collector with family ties to the Whitney Museum of Art. That won her friends among the East Coast cognoscenti. (In an intriguing historical footnote, Straight later would admit that he was a former Communist spy who had passed classified materials to the Soviets.) Hanks ensured that arts and humanities experts—rather than bureaucrats or politicians—reviewed funding requests from artists and cultural organizations. That befriended her to the arts community. She also supported the idea that every federal dollar needed to be matched from another funding source, which encouraged corporations and foundations to donate more money to the arts. With Nancy Hanks at the helm, the great era of cultural democracy had begun.

The funding edifice in the nation’s capital grew vigorously. In 1971, with a budget of just under $2 million, NEA distributed its first round of museum grants—103 in all, averaging about $3,000 each—to organizations ranging from the tiny Pacific Grove Natural History Museum in California to the huge Cleveland Museum of Art. That same year Rep. John Brademas of Indiana introduced the Museum Services Act, a bill to establish a separate federal agency devoted to shoring up museums’ internal operations. By 1972 NEA’s budget for museum projects had swelled from $927,000 to $4.4 million and allowed museum workers to create a vast array of new educational programs not only for their institutions but for hospitals, prisons, rural elementary schools and senior centers. Likewise, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) began to fund art and history museum exhibitions, community education and training of museum personnel.

The funds each museum received may have been small but the hopes the money engendered were large: programs for children, senior citizens, low-income citizens and minorities. But directors still faced severe staffing shortages, astronomical insurance premiums and the rising costs of day to day operations.

In 1973 Congress held a series of special hearings about the financial stresses museums were facing. In testimony that transcribed into almost 800 single-spaced pages, director upon director informed Congress of their continued woes. “It was as if a great release valve had opened,” noted one observer.
Congress responded with a new program to reduce the costs of insuring international exhibitions. As the Nixon administration brokered diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China, the government underwrote insurance for a traveling exhibition of ancient Chinese jade, porcelain and statuary, meant to create good will between the two nations. It was so successful that in 1974 NEA inaugurated its Arts and Artifacts Indemnity Program, which reduced museums' insurance costs (some say by as much as $400,000 per show) for many of the international blockbusters of the 1970s, including "Treasures of Tutankhamun," "The Splendors of Dresden" and "Dead Sea Scrolls." Blockbuster shows also benefited from an emerging and promising method of funding called "corporate sponsorship."

A native of Grand Rapids, Mich., Nixon's successor Gerald Ford had warm memories of courting his wife Betty on dates at the Public Museum. His vice president was Nelson Rockefeller, son of the founders of Colonial Williamsburg and the Museum of Modern Art. Under Presidents Nixon and Ford federal budgets for arts and culture soared, sometimes doubling in one year, sometimes "only" increasing by 25 percent, but always growing. As Jimmy Carter entered office in 1977, Nancy Hanks ended her dynamic tenure at the NEA. Under her watch the number of applications for funding increased by a factor of nine and the agency's total budget grew at an even faster rate, from an initial $2 million to $115 million.

During the Carter administration support for museums continued to flourish. Joan Mondale, wife of Carter's Vice President Walter Mondale, became a leading spokesperson for all things cultural and artistic, earning the nickname "Joan of Art." Before becoming a political spouse Mrs. Mondale had worked at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts and the Minnesota Institute of the Arts. In 1977 she helped launch the Institute of Museum Services—whose legislation had been signed by Ford—at the Brooklyn Children's Museum. For the first time in history museums had an agency devoted solely to them, run by a vivacious Washington socialite, Lee Kimche McGrath (1934-2002).

An engineer by training, President Carter was committed to developing a more competitive workforce in the science professions and increased funding for the National Science Foundation (NSF). Science-center leaders like Frank Oppenheimer of the Exploratorium and Joel Bloom of the Franklin Institute traveled to Washington, D.C., to make the case that hands-on science centers could inspire young people to become
scientists. By 1978 NSF money was supporting interactive exhibitions and curriculum development at science centers.

By the end of the decade museums of all disciplines and sizes had become part of a vast public process. Grants spilled forth from state and federal agencies. Still federal money represented only a small part of museums’ overall budgets—an average of 3 percent—particularly when compared to the sums European governments devoted to their cultural institutions. At its peak in the late 1970s NEA spent about $1.10 per American, whereas Great Britain spent $4 and France $10 per citizen in their respective nations. But federal funds were an important catalyst for broad cultural development whose reverberations still are felt today. Museums now were able to fill “multiple responsibilities,” said Nancy Hanks, “to the public, to their collections, to their staffs, to artists, scientists, and historians, and to the past, as well as the present and future.”

Along with federal dollars came federal reporting requirements that forced museums to clean up their sloppy business practices. Administrators had to implement financial audits, pay attention to employment laws, keep accurate records and straighten out filing systems. The National Endowment for the Humanities required museums to consult with outside academic experts to enhance the content of their exhibitions. As relationships with universities increased, museum scholarship became more rigorous. Curators and educators were exposed to the postmodernism and social history that was sweeping college campuses and began to incorporate these perspectives in their exhibitions and programs.

Museum workers began to share ideas with each other more freely, forming or revamping specialized professional committees and organizations devoted to their specific job functions, disciplines and regions. These groups included the Association of Art Museum Directors, Association of Science and Technology Centers and Association of Children’s Museums. Like the American Association of Museums, all of these organizations continue to thrive today, advocating for museums and helping their staff and trustees deliver programs for the public.

Current and future museum professionals benefited from a fledgling discipline called “museum studies” that focused on museum work as a career and not as an afterthought. People without specialized degrees benefited from workshops and books that explained the intricacies of collections care, legal issues and nonprofit administration.

Trained staff were joined by long-time volunteers and people who wandered into museums through the proverbial back door. They came from the worlds of theater, journalism and political activism, among other areas. Museums were becoming filled with bright, enthusiastic staff. In the 1890s George Brown Goode had called on workers to possess a “museum sense.” By 1980 Milwaukee Public Museum Director Kenneth Starr
Stephen E. Weil taught, wrote and thought constantly and insightfully about museums, art and the law, noting in particular how the field had changed “from being about something to being for somebody.” Courtesy of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution.

could report that workers had “a sense of profession,” an ever heightening awareness of our common character and purposes, and an ever greater understanding of who we are and what we are about.”

Growing professionalism led to a deeper concern about ethical issues. The code of ethics issued by the American Association of Museums in 1925 sat forgotten in many a file drawer. Yet museums were under scrutiny for all kinds of dubious activities—deaccessioning, acquiring looted objects, partaking in insider transactions, tampering with wills, violating copyright law—which sometimes landed them in court. “In my first years as a [museum] director,” stated E. Leland Webber, former head of the Field Museum, “I consulted a lawyer only a few times a year; by 1981 it seemed daily.” Understanding the letter of the law was becoming essential to leading a museum. Trials not only drained financial and staff resources, they threatened to erode public confidence at a time when museums were rising in popularity and visibility.

Two lawyers led the way for reform. In 1971 Marie Malaro became associate general counsel to the Smithsonian. She would go on to head the museum studies graduate program at George Washington University and write the standard legal primer for managing museum collections. In 1974 Stephen E. Weil (1928-2005) joined the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden as deputy director. A prolific author on legal, ethical and philosophical challenges facing museums, Weil would serve as councilor-at-large, vice president and treasurer of the American Association of Museums as well as scholar emeritus at the Smithsonian Institution. Lawyers such as Weil and Malaro joined registrars, conservators and other museum leaders in instituting firmer ethical and legal guidelines for museums.

In 1978, after much haggling, the field finally agreed to a more substantial ethical code. The stakes were high. Even though “on matters of both substance and wording, [museums] were in total accord on few if any issues,” the new code meant business. It called museum workers “professionals” and sought their loyalty not only to their place of work but to the larger goal of preserving humankind’s culture and heritage. Adherence to ethical principles would help determine whether a museum could receive accreditation from the American Association of Museums, i.e., assurance that the institution was meeting the highest standards of public service. Loyalty to the museum’s mission was now more important than loyalty to a donor, a trustee or even one’s boss.
In less than two years the new code of ethics was put to the test. In the mid-1960s Jack Morris had been hired to direct the Greenville County Museum of Art in South Carolina, then a sleepy organization located in an old house on the edge of town. By all accounts Morris was adept at charming donors, collectors and art dealers. By 1979 the Greenville museum was scarcely recognizable. Under Morris’s leadership it had moved into a state-of-the-art building. Its display of Andrew Wyeth paintings drew crowds. It had professional staff and proudly displayed the coveted AAM accreditation decal.

But it turned out that Morris had pocketed kickbacks from dealers—$200,000, in fact—in return for helping the museum’s leading patrons purchase the Wyeth works. In 1980 two employees questioned Morris’s financial dealings, calling them a violation of the professional ethics that forbade museum employees from profiting on collections dealings. They further alleged that they had suffered harassment and reprisals for attempting to confront Morris directly. Distraught, they asked the museum’s board to intervene and also turned to AAM for help. Under the field’s new ethical guidelines all museums were responsible for ensuring that their peer institutions operated solely to benefit the public trust.

Testifying in South Carolina before an investigative panel organized by the museum’s board was H. J. Swinney, director of Rochester’s Strong Museum and a member of AAM’s own board of directors. By accepting accreditation, Swinney said, the Greenville board was “obligated to resolve the situation, to do something.” Morris resigned, and the museum’s board adopted a code of professional conduct. It was becoming increasingly hard to do business the old way, particularly after the code of ethics was tightened in 1991 and again in 1994.

Questions also were raised about a growing trend in museums: the increased presence of corporate logos and names in exhibition galleries. With museum visitorship growing, corporations saw the benefits of associating their products with museums. They hired public relations firms to create exhibitions that then were packaged and offered to museums. From 1971 to 1977, for example, the Campbell Soup Company arranged a touring exhibition of antique soup tureens and other soup-related paraphernalia, picking up all expenses for any museum that agreed to host the show. Around the same time cigarette manufacturer Philip Morris circulated a show called “Two Hundred Years of American Indian Art,” tying the topic to its core product, tobacco. “At Philip Morris,” noted the exhibition catalogue, “we have a great debt to repay to the North American Indians . . . who first cultivated tobacco and helped to found the oldest industry in the West.”

Some curators questioned the ethics of these arrangements. They worried that museums were giving up too much control, that corporate managers were more concerned with product placement than scholarship and artistic integrity. To make matters more complicated, industries with tarnished images—tobacco, chemical and oil—and even some corporations doing business with South Africa during apartheid began to sponsor

Artists continued to hammer museums for their growing willingness to “sell out.” In the mid-1970s Hans Haacke created a series of political artworks about corporate funding that had titles like *The Road to Profits is Paved with Culture* (1976). One thing was clear: museums no longer sat on the sidelines of American society. As more and more groups of people worked to establish their role in the nation’s story, museums found themselves at the heart of the debate over cultural politics. This public role would only grow in the decades to come.

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The country’s priorities changed in the 1980s as the public pulled away from the seemingly freewheeling years of the previous decade and started to worry about gas shortages, high inflation and government integrity, thanks to the Watergate scandal. Promising to restore America’s traditional values and make the country strong and prosperous again, Ronald Reagan was elected president in 1980. Intent on streamlining the government and cutting most non-military federal spending, the former actor saw federal support of the arts as unnecessary and even harmful. “The arts should do what they do best,” Reagan said, “and leave the politics to the government.”

Reagan set about dismantling government programs and appointed a Taskforce on Arts and Humanities to recommend ways the private sector could make up for his proposed cuts. In 1981 the president announced 50-percent cutbacks to the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities, with the goal of phasing out both agencies. Citing an earlier controversy over the theory of evolution, Reagan eliminated the science education division of the National Science Foundation.

Within a year more than half of the museums in the country were reporting cuts in personnel and programs. As the age of entrepreneurship and “enlightened self interest” dawned, museums sought ways to stay afloat. Many began to charge admissions fees and market themselves through paid advertising for the first time. In 1979 no U.S. museum had allocated a budget for advertising. By the mid-1980s more than half of the nation’s museums were purchasing ads.

Politicians began to battle over the fate of the federal cultural agencies. To run the Institute for Museum Services (IMS), which provided valuable financial support for museum operations, Reagan appointed Lilla Tower, an attorney and wife of a Texas senator. Tower got to work immediately, spending the next three years trying to shut the agency down. But museums were protected by Rep. Sidney Yates of Illinois, who repeatedly took their side.
Performing “minor miracles of political maneuvering,” Yates saved the agency.

To head the National Endowment for the Humanities, Reagan chose William Bennett, director of the North Carolina Humanities Council. In 1986 when Bennett was promoted to secretary of education, Lynne Cheney, wife of the future vice president, took the helm at NEH. As articulate, well-educated neoconservatives, Bennett and Cheney believed that museums’ newfound interest in multiculturalism and social history diluted the intellectual and aesthetic standards of Western history. Both later testified in favor of eliminating the NEH.

Appointed as director of the National Endowment for the Arts was Frank Hodsoll, a career foreign service officer. Although he professed to know nothing about the arts, Hodsoll proved to be a skillful negotiator who withstood attempts to cut the agency’s budget. During his eight years as NEA chief he funded studies that showed how much museums contributed—in dollars and jobs—to their local regions and finessed new programs focused on conservation, outreach and job training for minorities. He also approved a grant for an exhibition that would later launch a thousand hate letters and several lawsuits: a show that included sexually explicit photographs taken by Robert Mapplethorpe.

Science and children’s museums fared better than their counterparts in art, culture and history largely due to an alarm sounded by the National Science Board about the quality of science education. Research showed that schools in the United States were failing to motivate students to pursue careers in science. Faced with a shortage of trained scientists and engineers, 1980s America was losing its competitive edge to Japan.

In response Congress not only reinstated the science education funds to the National Science Foundation but quadrupled them, from about $50 million in 1984 to $200 million in 1989. Many of the funds went to science centers and children’s museums, whose leaders made a convincing case that their hands-on exhibits and teaching techniques inspired large audiences.

Residents of small communities now could visit their local science centers and view exhibits created from easy-to-assemble traveling kits from major institutions like the Boston Children’s Museum and Exploratorium. High school students’ understanding of science was enhanced.
through programs like the one at the Center of Science and Industry (COSI) in Columbus, Ohio, which trained youths to explain scientific principles to the public. Public school science teachers attended summer teaching institutes at places like the Pacific Science Center in Seattle and used the hands-on curriculum written by staff at the Lawrence Hall of Science in Berkeley. The additional NSF funds made all of these activities, and more, possible.

Carefully navigating the political waters, science centers justified their funds with attendance figures and evaluation reports. As former NSF division head George Tressel explains, "You can have the best exhibit or educational program in the world, but if there’s no audience for it, as far as NSF was concerned, we hadn’t bought anything." The practice of measuring a program’s success with its audience dovetailed with museums’ shift toward customer service.

Corporations stepped up to help art and culture museums. "With the government giving less for art and education, somebody’s got to give,” explained an advertisement for Chase Manhattan Bank. “And that somebody is America’s corporations.” Throughout the 1980s the art of corporate sponsorship matured. When David Rockefeller founded Business Committee for the Arts in 1967, private companies were donating about $22 million to the arts annually. By the mid-1980s that number had climbed to $700 million. Museum exhibitions were the top beneficiaries on the list. Businesses made it clear, however, that they wanted their names prominently displayed on credit panels and in advertising campaigns—sometimes as large or even larger than the institution they were supporting. "There’s not much P.R. potential in funding a shelter for abused women,” admitted one executive, "You get the best visibility from art [exhibitions].”

Some exhibitions directly supported a company’s advertising campaign. The 1985 traveling exhibition “India!” was linked to products at Bloomingdale’s; a series of 1988 shows of gems, silver and jewelry was tied to Tiffany & Company’s 150th anniversary. Within a decade museum walls were adorned permanently with corporate names, such as the Omaha Steaks Room at the Joslyn Art Museum, the Altoids Curiously Strong collection at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, the Coca-Cola Café at the Atlanta History Center and the Taco Bell Discovery Science Center in Santa Ana, Calif.

Consumers could participate in a new advertising technique called “cause-related

"Tiffany: 150 Years of Gems and Jewelry” helped mark the company’s 150th anniversary in 1987. The show was on view at the American Museum of Natural History, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and the Field Museum, pictured here. GN850276 © The Field Museum.
marketing. Each time they purchased a certain product or used a designated credit card, the company made a donation to a museum. Other schemes seemed over the top; one example—placing a new car in a museum lobby in exchange for a donation from an auto manufacturer. Soon museum professionals and the press began to question the fine line between corporate sponsorships and blatant advertising. Shouldn’t museums be respite from corporate logos and advertising messages? “He who would ride the tiger may end up inside,” warned J. Carter Brown (1934-2002), director of the National Gallery of Art.

Meanwhile, art and history museums found themselves battling a fiercer tiger. Conservative politicians and citizen’s groups once again began to question the museum’s role in American society. Who determined whether an artist’s creation was art, blasphemy or pornography? How should museums present American history? The central issue at stake was the appropriate use of federal funds. Elected officials argued that federally funded exhibitions and artworks should reflect traditional values, including those of rising conservative watchdog groups like the Moral Majority and the American Family Association (AFA), a membership organization whose mission is to “motivate and equip citizens to change the culture to reflect Biblical Truth.” Cultural historians and artists, on the other hand, believed that museums had an obligation to all Americans and operated in a gray area where objects have multiple and complex meanings. In the late 1980s two defining episodes placed museums squarely on the front lines of these culture wars.

The first episode nearly destroyed the National Endowment for the Arts and almost landed a museum director in prison. In 1987, the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston Salem, N.C., received a $15,000 NEA grant for a traveling exhibition that included a work called Piss Christ by photographer Andres Serrano. Piss Christ was an image of a plastic crucifix submerged in urine, symbolizing the artist’s ambivalence toward religion. It traveled with the show to various sites with little notice, until it reached the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in 1989. There, a visitor outraged by the photograph wrote a letter to the local paper, attracting the attention of Rev. Donald Wildmon, head of the AFA.

Declaring that “the bias and bigotry against Christians which has dominated television and the movies has now moved over to art museums,” Wildmon launched a mail campaign to stop federal support of “anti-Christian” art. He soon gained the support of an influential senator, Jesse Helms of North Carolina, who had long opposed the NEA, spoke out against Serrano on the Senate floor. Within days, 107 congressmen and 39 senators had signed a letter protesting the exhibit.

Around the same time another NEA grantee, the University of Pennsylvania’s Institute of Contemporary Arts, was organizing “The Perfect Moment,” a retrospective of 175 photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe. The show featured formal compositions of flowers, portraits of children and adults, and what the photographer dubbed his “sex photos,” which
included graphic images of sadomasochism. Like the Serrano photo, the Mapplethorpe works were displayed without incident in their first venues.

That is, until another AFA mass mailing dubbed the show “child pornography” and Robert Dornan, a California congressman, denounced the show on the floor of the House. Wary of the political fallout, the show’s next venue, the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., cancelled it. Artists and gay rights activists protested, attracting national attention to Mapplethorpe (who died from AIDS in 1989 at the age of 43), museums and the NEA. The night before the show was to have opened at the Corcoran, protesters held a vigil outside and projected several Mapplethorpe photos, including one of a threadbare American flag, onto the building’s façade. “The projection indicted the Corcoran’s cancellation of ‘The Perfect Moment,’” says art historian Richard Meyer, “by ironically simulating the museum’s official function—the public display of art.” The protest made national headlines. The Corcoran’s director and other staff members resigned and the museum’s membership plummeted.

Under congressional pressure NEA withdrew two new grants from the Institute of Contemporary Art, the museum that organized “The Perfect Moment.” During the 1990 Senate appropriation hearings Helms introduced an amendment to withhold federal funds from “obscene or indecent materials . . . including but not limited to depictions of sadomasochism, homoeroticism, the exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sex acts.” After much debate the amendment passed; all organizations receiving NEA grants would have to comply. President George H. W. Bush supported the actions and, in deference to proponents of “family values,” fired the NEA’s chief, John Frohnmayer.

One museum director refused to comply. The Mapplethorpe show was scheduled to open in April 1990 at the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) in Cincinnati, a city that had banned adult bookstores, X-rated theatres and nude dancing parlors. A group called Citizens for Community Values demanded its cancellation, calling it “the kind of thing you expect to find in a porno shop in somebody else’s town.” CAC’s director Dennis Barrie decided that the show must go on, a position that subjected his family to death threats and his museum to economic blackmail. Even before the show arrived “the groups began a campaign of economic intimidation against our board,” Barrie recalled. “The chairman eventually resigned from the board because the bank of which he was an officer was under tremendous pressure . . .” On opening day, police evacuated the museum, shut it down and led Barrie away in handcuffs as several hundred of his supporters chanted “Gestapo go home.” He was indicted on charges of pandering obscenity and child pornography, the first museum director prosecuted because of an exhibition’s content.

The controversy revealed, however, that the American public was not ready to censor museums or artists in this way. As Barrie’s colleagues spoke out on his behalf, public sentiment came out on the side of the museum. CAC’s membership nearly doubled, Mapplethorpe’s estate tripled
in value and a jury acquitted Barrie, who went on to direct the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland and the International Spy Museum in Washington, D.C.

Still, despite the legal victory in Cincinnati, Helms’s obscenity clause went into effect and most organizations receiving NEA funds complied. Fifteen grantees refused to sign the oath; of these, only two were museums—the Lehman College Art Gallery at the City University of New York and the Newport Harbor Art Museum (now Orange County Museum of Art) in southern California, which took the strongest action of all. Located in the district of Robert Dornan, the congressman who had railed against Mapplethorpe, the museum sued the NEA for violating the First and Fifth Amendments. The judge ruled in the museum’s favor, citing the obscenity clause’s vagueness as well as its “chilling effect” on artistic expression.

The culture wars raged on. Museums remained front and center in the larger national debate about the interpretation of history that was taking place across the country—on college campuses, among veterans’ groups, in churches and in the media. In 1991 Native American activists made headlines with a 16-day, 24-hour encampment at the Florida Museum of Natural History in Gainesville. They were protesting the absence of Native American perspectives in an exhibition designed to celebrate the quincentennial of Christopher Columbus’s voyage and funded by the National Endowment for the
Humanities. When "First Encounters: Spanish Exploration in the Caribbean and U.S.: 1492-1570" traveled to the Science Museum of Minnesota, protesters threw a vial of blood on it to symbolize the legacy of Columbus's conquest. The museum responded by augmenting the exhibition with labels, a video and a separate show about Native American resistance to colonial rule. Reacting to such controversies, former NEH chair Lynne Cheney would go on to accuse museums of being "in the business of debunking greatness, Western society and even history itself" and advancing politically correct "anti-culture" values.


Veterans groups also took issue with museum displays. In 1992 at Anchorage Alaska's Visual Arts Center, they complained to city officials about an installation by artist Dread Scott. The veterans said that "What Is the Proper Way to Display a U.S. Flag?" was unpatriotic because it featured an American flag spread out on the floor. An even larger group of veterans, the 180,000-member Air Force Association, went head-to-head with the Smithsonian Institution over the display of one of the most profound military icons of the 20th century—the 

Enola Gay, the B-29 aircraft that dropped the world's first atomic bomb over Hiroshima, Japan. The controversy that ensued marked the second defining episode of the culture wars.

WWII veterans had raised funds to restore the plane, which sat disassembled in a storage facility. Looking ahead to the 50th anniversary commemoration of the war's end, the vets envisioned a mint-condition aircraft proudly on display at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum (NASM). But NASM Director Martin Harwit, a WWII veteran, and his curators saw a different

Above: Constructing a balanced exhibition about the Enola Gay proved to be impossible during the culture wars of the 1990s. Photo by Eric Long/OIPP, National Air and Space Museum; image # 512003-29268-S, © Smithsonian Institution.

role for the exhibition, which was to be called "The Last Act: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II." "[We] worried that a massive, gleaming Enola Gay would give the impression that the museum was celebrating raw power," Harwit recalled. "To avoid this perception we needed to show that the bomb had caused unimaginable damage and suffering."

For five years the exhibition's curators wrestled with the daunting task of constructing a balanced story about the Enola Gay that described the events of 1945 but also questioned the decision to drop the bomb. The Air Force Association accused the Smithsonian of political-bias and political-correctness. Air Force Magazine declared the proposed exhibit "unpatriotic" and "designed for shock value" rather than objective education. Eight thousand veterans signed a petition denouncing the show.

Because at the time the Smithsonian received 70 percent of its budget from federal appropriations, the veterans took their concerns directly to Congress. Taking up their cause was Sen. Stevens, who was joined by 80 members of the House. When the veterans and the curators were unable to reach a compromise, the Smithsonian aborted the show and Harwit resigned. The fuselage of the Enola Gay went on exhibit, on a smaller scale than had been envisioned, remaining on view until 1998. In 2003 the Smithsonian moved the restored plane to NASM's Udvar-Hazy annex in Virginia in an exhibition that focused on the technology of the B-29.

Politicians and historians used the Enola Gay controversy to voice their own points of view. "You are seeing . . . a renewal of American civilization," said then Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich. "The Enola Gay was a fight, in effect, over the reassertion by most Americans that they're sick and tired of being told by some cultural elite that they ought to be ashamed of their country." Hiroshima's mayor, on the other hand, called the cancellation "extremely regrettable" and noted that the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki "simply hoped to heighten public opinions toward the building of a world free of nuclear weapons." University of North Carolina historian Richard Kohn said the Smithsonian's decision was "the worst tragedy to befall the public presentation of history in the United States in this generation. In displaying the Enola Gay without analysis of the event that gave the airplane its significance, the Smithsonian Institution forfeited . . . an opportunity to educate a worldwide audience in the millions about one of this century's defining experiences." Newspapers around the country ran political cartoons and editorials that reflected all three perspectives.

Although the public was visiting museums in higher numbers than ever, the Enola Gay and "Perfect Moment" controversies hurt the field's ability to garner outside support for educational programs. Politicians were questioning museum professional standards and, in some cases, threatening jobs and institutional budgets. Funding agencies survived, but in a weakened state.
When President Bill Clinton took office in 1992, his administration focused on reducing the federal deficit and balancing the budget rather than on restoring cultural funding. In 1997 the administration merged Institute of Museum Services with the Institute of Library Services, to become "one efficient, centrally managed" agency: the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS). During the 1990s IMLS slowly rebuilt itself, distributing over 40,000 grants for museum operations and collections conservation, conducting two nationwide surveys of museums' work with schools and jumpstarting several digitization projects that helped make collection objects accessible online. Likewise, the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities reshuffled their priorities. NEH funded exhibitions on "safe" topics like German Expressionist Art and Japanese teenage life, two exhibitions that would have been controversial during the World War II years. NEA concentrated on multicultural projects; during the late 1990s over three-quarters of its grants went to exhibitions or conservation projects involving Asian, African-American, Native American, Latino or female artists. In 2003 the agency gave $3.6 million—equivalent to the annual operating budget of a medium-sized museum—to 91 museum projects. Its 2005 priority, under the administration of President George W. Bush, was "American Masterpieces: Three Centuries of Genius."

Opponents of federal funding for arts and culture won a key battle of the culture wars: lower budget appropriations. Yet in a larger sense, they lost the war. The troubles in Cincinnati became a lightning rod for activism over the next decade, especially gay rights, civil liberties and freedom of expression. Museum professionals resolved to present multiple viewpoints in exhibitions and tell fuller stories of the human condition. They developed new exhibition presentation methods that incorporated community perspectives through advisory boards and focus groups, and enlisted the help of public relations experts to anticipate and diffuse controversy.

Even before the culture wars, museums saw that the safety net of old money donors and generous federal grants was dissolving. Only 25 percent of museums, mostly art institutions, had an endowment. Most existed year to year, with the ever-present possibility that one natural disaster could put them out of business. Money, always an issue, became a top concern. Once again, the professional literature shifted its tone. Articles in Museum News offered strategies for fund raising, often in a business-like jargon, previously unseen on the magazine's pages.

An obvious solution was to spend less and earn more. To cut costs some institutions banded together, forming consortia. National organizations like the Science Museum Exhibition Collaborative (1988) and the Youth Museum Exhibition Consortium (1991) allowed organizations to divide the costs of creating high-quality shows, such as a traveling
A mother and daughter examine ceramics from ancient South America at the Art Institute of Chicago, one of the 11 institutions that participated in the Pew Charitable Trusts’ “Art Museums and Communities” Initiative. © The Art Institute of Chicago.

exhibition about AIDS prevention that went to many science museums and the popular Magic School Bus exhibitions that toured children’s museums.

As in the rest of the nonprofit world, the marketing and development departments in museums grew in size and sophistication, hiring more staff with business and fund-raising skills. Donors also became more sophisticated and generous, making gifts that were more targeted to specific programs. Computer technologies opened up the world of mass mailings, databases and other techniques that turned fund-raising from a social art into a social science. Membership—a money-losing service that museums had offered since the late 19th century—now was viewed as a way to “capture” names and build a base of “supporters” who could be “cultivated” to give larger donations in the future. Museum members found themselves the targets of increasingly clever fund-raising drives; their support was rewarded with perks like special events and hours, gift-shop savings and preference on tickets for blockbusters.

Like the rest of Reagan-era America, museums embraced the spirit of entrepreneurship. Directors increasingly used words like “product development” and “leveraged assets” instead of “masterpiece” and “NEA grant.” Museums used their largest physical asset, the building, to generate revenue. There were new shopping and dining opportunities. Capital campaigns were centered on bold iconic buildings that would attract attention, large audiences and large donations. And as they functioned more and more like businesses, museums leveraged their most intangible and valuable quality: their allure, their trustworthiness, their reputation—the very word “museum.”
Though museums seemed increasingly commercial, a far more profound revolution was simultaneously taking place. Professionals who had come of age during LBJ’s Great Society were now in leadership positions. With a grander vision for museums than mere economic survival, these leaders called on museums to respond to societal change by opening their doors wider. Led by task forces of directors, curators and educators, the American Association of Museums published two seminal reports—*Museums for a New Century* (1984) and *Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums* (1992)—that reasserted the museum’s public role. These publications, widely circulated within the profession, argued that museums should “help to create a sense of inclusive community that is often missing in our society [and] be a welcoming place for all people.”

To find innovative ways to reach out to a changing population, museums turned to their long-time partners, philanthropic foundations, whose bank accounts were swelling due to the bullish stock market of the 1980s and ’90s. As the president of the Wallace Foundation M. Christine DeVita put it, foundations could be “non-ideological ‘honest brokers’ of solutions” to the nation’s problems. A host of multi-million dollar initiatives from foundations like W. K. Kellogg, Ford, Howard Hughes Medical Institute and the J. Paul Getty Trust underwrote new research, staff training, exhibitions and educational programs.

Through an initiative called “Art Museums and Communities,” the Pew Charitable Trusts helped 11 art museums study their visitors’ needs and develop programs that served ethnically diverse audiences. The DeWitt and Lila Wallace Reader’s Digest Funds (now the Wallace Foundation) created the “Museum Collections Accessibility Initiative,” donating nearly $330 million to 29 art museums to help them attract new audiences by creating clearer labels and more appealing arrangements of their permanent collections. Wallace also financed Youth Achievement through Learning, Involvement, Volunteering and Employment (Youth ALIVE!), which trained hundreds of young people, mostly from low-income families of color, to work in 52 science centers and children’s museums around the country. Some participants advanced to full-time staff positions.

Many of the foundation-sponsored programs aimed not only to impart knowledge but also to break down racial stereotypes. In communities around the nation audiences and staff slowly began to reflect the growing diversity of the American population. Not everyone, however, looked kindly on this transformation. Conservatives accused foundation officers of “philanthropical correctness”—that is, having a “liberal and multiculturalist agenda.” Inside museums, skeptics said that foundations had too much power and too little knowledge of how museums really worked. Moreover, most of the projects folded when funds ran dry, especially when foundation endowments shrank during the stock market tumble of the early 2000s. Still educators agreed that the foundation projects pointed their organizations toward a future of “truly collaborating with audiences, partner organizations, artists and colleagues alike.”
All the while museums were increasing their public visibility in ways that would have astonished their 19th-century founders. They courted cab drivers and hotel concierges, who could encourage cultural tourists and conventioneers to visit nearby museums. They placed promotional exhibitions in airport lobbies and restaurants. They hosted radio giveaways and purchased Internet pop-up ads. They advertised on supermarket bags, coffee cups, anywhere and everywhere.

To appeal to America’s growing population of single, educated adults, art museums began to sponsor evening events such as the Asian Art Museum’s 1999 “Sex, Sushi and Sake” and the Walker Art Center’s “Mix, Mingle and Muse” the following year. By 2000, 80 percent of art museums were offering programming targeted to young single adults; about half were billed as “mixers,” featuring after-hours cocktails and live music. Others, like the Dallas Museum of Art, appealed to the all-night crowd, sponsoring a 33-hour marathon exhibition party, with a midnight jazz concert, 2 a.m. tours for insomniacs and sunrise events for early risers. Historical house museums capitalized on the seasonal allure of ghost stories, the occult and 19th-century culture, sponsoring “haunted house” tours during Halloween season and “authentic” Victorian candlelight tours during the winter holidays.

Museums worked especially hard to appeal to inveterate shoppers, hiring buyers and retailing experts to develop specially targeted merchandise. Art museums sold trendy accessories, refashioning bits of old exhibition banners into fashionable purses and producing lines of artful jewelry. Botanical gardens sold unusual and hard-to-find plants. Children’s museums repackaged discarded industrial materials as recycled supplies for art and science projects. Planetaria did a hot business in space food sticks and astronaut ice cream, science museums in polished rocks and beanie babies. Even elephants generously contributed to the zoo’s bottom line: their dung was repackaged and sold as garden fertilizer.
By the late 1990s the museum had become a diversified economy with a formula for success: "great collections, great architecture, a great special exhibition, a great second exhibition, two shopping opportunities, two eating opportunities, a high-tech interface via the Internet, and economies of scale via a global network." So stated the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum's Thomas Krens, poster child for the new entrepreneurial director. In 1998, with funding from BMW, Krens staged "The Art of the Motorcycle," a shiny ode to biker culture that broke box-office records by mixing the leather crowd with the art effete. In an effort to replicate the Guggenheim's numbers, museums around the country assembled their own displays of vintage hotrods and stylish bikes. Three years later Krens turned the museum's iconic spiral ramp into a showcase for fashions by Giorgio Armani. Was this really art, critics wondered? Did anyone really care as long as the crowds came? The answer was "no," at least until one museum crossed a line.

In 1999 the decades-old ethical debates about insider dealing, censorship and blasphemy resurfaced at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, where entrepreneurial director Arnold Lehman presented an exhibition called "Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection." Some critics accused Charles Saatchi, a private dealer who helped finance the show, of having an implicit goal: to associate his collection with prestigious museums and increase the market value of the artworks he owned. But "Sensation" garnered more attention than the Brooklyn Museum had bargained for due to a painting on display: Chris Ofili's The Holy Virgin Mary (1996), which was embellished with elephant dung. Many Roman Catholics were offended by the work, including
Mayor Rudolph Giuliani who threatened to cut $7.2 million from the museum’s budget and evict it from its city-leased space. In the end, the museum stayed, attendance boomed and the art increased in value. It was a stunning example of how museums now occupied a high-profile position in American society. They were, more than ever before, both destinations and targets for criticism.

Museums now needed leaders who were not only scholars and educators but could deftly navigate financial and political waters. Universities introduced new training programs in arts administration and museum studies, but the gap was almost too large to fill. Newspaper headlines about blowups between directors and boards replaced stories about controversial buildings and exhibitions; dismissals of directors became commonplace. Like museums, directors had to be all things to all people: scholars, educators, fund raisers, pillars of the community, social butterflies, political animals. With such an impossible set of demands, they were burning out. Once a museum directorship had been seen as a lifelong post; now the average tenure shrank to four years. Many directors were so frustrated that they gave only two weeks notice; half said they never wanted the job again. But when some museums sought out directors from the corporate world, that fueled even more discontent. It seemed that boards were abandoning decades of hard-fought gains in professional practice.

The post Sept. 11 economy brought additional worries. Like everything else in the country, museums struggled to recover from the disaster. Attendance dropped when tourism plummeted. Foundation grants dropped due to plummeting stock portfolios. Corporate grants dropped due to mergers and weakening profits. State funding for the arts dropped by more than 10 percent, city funding by even more. Layoffs were rampant, even at Krens’s flashy Guggenheim. In 2004 a Johns Hopkins University study found that 91 percent of the museums surveyed were in fiscal trouble, with over one-quarter describing their situation as very severe.

Still, the public sought solace in museums, and the field reacted with its characteristic generosity and humanity. Within minutes of the crashes on Sept. 11, 2001, staff at the New York City Fire Museum, located only one mile north of the World Trade Center, rushed to help in the rescue effort. Within hours, staff at other nearby museums were providing water and shelter. Within days, museums around the country were opening their doors free of charge to grief-stricken citizens seeking a respite in their own community. "As we gaze on the symbols of our shattered world we seek assurance in those things and values that bond us as members of the human family," Robert R. Macdonald, then director of the Museum of the City of New York, wrote only a few days after the tragedy. "Museums have provided this confirmation throughout their history."
Indeed it was confirmed almost four years later to the day, in September 2005, as Louisiana and Mississippi experienced the worst days of Hurricane Katrina. In New Orleans, staff at the Museum of Art and other museums remained on duty, heroically protecting the city's beloved collections from the ravaging floods. Within days of the natural disaster, museum workers nationwide were organizing fund-raising drives and expert assistance so that institutions in the devastated areas could reopen their doors as quickly as possible.

As the 21st century unfolds it is clear that museums in the United States have undergone enormous change in the past century. It is a transformation as profound and far reaching as the one experienced by American society in the same period. And how could it be otherwise? Museums at their best have come to reflect society, not stand above it or aloof from it. In the words of the museum scholar Stephen E. Weil, the successful museum has gone from being about something to being for someone, a human place filled not primarily with things but more importantly with our memories, our stories and our emotions. The American public has at last developed a profound "museum sense" that goes well beyond the riches, rivals and radicals that shaped museums in the previous century. We demand more of our museums. We treasure them as public forums that allow us to acknowledge our differences, feed our curiosity and nourish our souls. We aspire for museums to be trusted, transparent and flexible institutions that reflect a nation, and indeed a world, that transforms itself constantly, often taking us by surprise.

A sign of hope and optimism about the future outside what remained of Beauvoir after Hurricane Katrina. The Biloxi, Miss., estate was once the home of Confederate President Jefferson Davis. Courtesy of the Beauvoir staff.