Two Noble Kinsmen: Libraries and Museums

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In his Gesta Grayorum (1594), the young polymath Francis Bacon summarized the surroundings appropriate to the life of a learned gentleman. He stipulated four different environments, and gave pride of place to a library, like the bookish sort of man he was. His gentleman should collect “a most perfect and general library, wherein whosoever the wit of man hath heretofore committed to books of worth...may be contributory to your wisdom.” He then recommended a splendid garden, filled with an immense variety of botanical and zoological specimens. Next, he called for “a goodly, huge cabinet, wherein whatsoever the hand of man by exquisite art or engine has made rare in stuff, form, or motion...shall be sorted and included.” Finally, he prescribed “such a stillhouse, so furnished with mills, instruments, furnaces, and vessels as may be a palace fit for a philosopher’s stone.”

Bacon here has deftly delineated the institutional forms through which Western societies have sought to preserve their cultural heritages, as well as to make them available to new generations. Libraries; arboretums, zoos, wetlands, and parks; museums of the several arts, sciences, and natural history; institutions devoted to technology and the applied sciences—all of these staples of the modern cultural smorgasbord are prefigured by the Baconian banquet. However, the recipes have become much more elaborate over nearly four centuries, as the “special collections” of the late Renaissance have evolved into the diverse, laminated institutions around us. Thus, the private individual’s “cabinet of curiosities” or “Wunderkammer” has shed its carapace of elite, sequestered elegance and been metamorphosed into the museum, with its “blockbuster” exhibitions,

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its mixed-media programmatic extravaganzas, its elaborate aural and written guides to the vagrant perplexed, its multinational politics and diplomacy. Meanwhile, Bacon’s “most perfect and general library” evolved from its classical, patristic, medieval and Renaissance origins into the modern storehouse of information—interactive, polyglot, and virtually unbounded in substantive scope and intellectual range.

While both kinds of institutions developed along parallel tracks from private enclave to public entity, museums and libraries tended to adopt, if only implicitly, divergent assumptions about the nature of their public roles. Like two noble kinsmen, they reflect a common ancestry, but have evolved separately, so that their relationship to one another may not be readily apparent. For example, although it has always been considered ideal that they would both be open to the public free of charge, museum officials have long accepted the notion that their collections were of interest to a large segment of the public, which ought by right to have access to it. Administrators of libraries, in contrast, have tended to operate on the premise that aside from serious users of their collections, the public at large would have relatively little interest, and even less claim, on the time, energy, and attention of the curatorial staff, or access to the principal works. Such early American subscription libraries as the Boston Athenaeum, where a limited number of members pay for the privilege of using the collections, has few if any analogues in the museum world.

No librarian would be at a loss to suggest some explanations for this traditional distinction. In the first place, although books and manuscripts may undeniably be works of art, a great many of them are not. Their artifactual status therefore differs from objects in museums. These may be atrocious, or unintelligible, but they have for better or worse been subsumed under the category of some authority’s definition of art. Secondly, textual materials constitute for the most part forms of expression which are verbal, in contrast to objects in museums which are largely non-verbal, notwithstanding the vigorous existence of book illustration and manuscript illumination on the one hand, and on the other, paintings and sculptures that incorporate inscriptions, texts, and other scribal or typographical elements. We know that folklore values a picture over a very great number of words, and that is a relative theory of value that even today is quite sensitively reflected in the auction markets, and not only there. Some may recall the extensive nationwide ceremonies and publicity that attended the twentieth anniversary, in 1986, of the National Endowment for the Arts. Hardly any of the articles dealing with this notable event bothered to acknowledge the same milestone for the National Endowment for the Humanities, which was established by the same piece of legislation. The difference, also reflected in a gap of about $10 million in the annual appropriations of the two agencies, clearly relates to the greater visibility of the arts, and therefore their greater political appeal.
In addition, it is natural to think of paintings and sculptures purely as aesthetic objects, and therefore to set them on a higher plain than books, with their more overtly utilitarian function. This distinction within what might be called the mentality of our culture is reinforced by the actual distance between creators of various objects and those artifacts. Viewers may look at a painting or sculpture and feel that they are confronted by an authorial presence in a very immediate way. Botticelli or Brancusi personally fashioned that work, or so we believe. With texts, unless one is looking at an autograph manuscript, there is a greater distance, and a poly-authorial structure. The writer, who may be totally removed in time, space, and language from the text, is abetted by an often anonymous regiment of translators, editors, illustrators, copyists, typographers, printers, binders, and so on. He or she is mediated to us through an industrial or proto-industrial process which in addition tends to produce multiples, rather than unique copies.

Perhaps these observations may help in part to explain the phenomenon in our recent history that libraries have tended to become free as museums have begun to charge admission (or, in the doublespeak of our times “request voluntary contributions”). For people in significant numbers will more or less gladly pay to enter a place they can consider to be an aesthetic space, while the notion of a library may have almost primal negative connotations, evoking latent memories of enforced silence, tedious assignments, and late night vigils.

Given the obviousness of these points, it may seem surprising that most libraries have been slow to act upon the implications, and start behaving more like museums. But in fact, their reluctance is understandable, and on many levels. In practical terms, most libraries are not well prepared to mount exhibitions and the kinds of ancillary programs that are much in vogue. Funds tend to be scarce, personnel limited, often the needed substantive expertise may be lacking. Then, too, there are the issues of security and conservation, and the relentless demands of reader services, demands which must be met regardless of other programs and goals. Beyond these practical issues, the culture of libraries creates a sense of ambivalence about their role as exhibitors. We like to think of our institutions as houses of study, places where movement and noise are unwelcome distractions. Those who choose library careers experience as congenial the relatively quiet world of reading rooms and stacks which most—dare one say ordinary?—people might find dull, or even alienating.

Yet there is no doubt that librarians sometimes look invidiously at their colleagues in museums. We would not mind if our places were a bit more visible, more chic, more appealing to more people. We recognize that our natural constituencies, while small, are very committed to what we do, yet we all have moments when we would consider sacrificing a bit of learned seclusion for a healthy dose of more broadly-based participation and appreciation. At the same time,
we know that both change and adherence to the comfort of established practices have their price. It is clearly desirable that more people come to appreciate and enjoy the riches of our great collections of books and manuscripts, and that they do so in the special sanctuaries where those collections are sheltered. At the same time, there are limits to the demographic pressures—both of visitors and users—that libraries can absorb, without risk of loss to their effectiveness in fulfilling their primary mission. Each library, in fashioning its public persona, has the opportunity, perhaps the need, to strike a balance between the antithetical claims of introversion and extroversion. It is worth recognizing that along this continuum, there are many intermediate positions between the two extremes of indifference to the general public and wholesale pandering to the least common denominator. Most libraries will evolve a comfortable niche somewhere in the middle.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to assume that the extremes are merely theoretical. Here are a few examples from each category, none of which is unique. A splendid, state-owned library in Europe possesses one of the world’s greatest collections of Renaissance books and manuscripts. While housed in a sixteenth-century palace, the library’s interior spaces have been modernized, and its facilities and reader services are current and efficient. There is a room devoted to exhibiting some treasures, but it is kept locked, and opened only by special request. The show never changes, and the mouldering case cards provide only author, title, and call number. Similarly, but in the United States, I once wandered into a great research library. A request to be directed to the exhibition area drew a puzzled stare from the security guard. After further inquiries, I found my way to a sad little room with a few cases in which some forgettable, and in fact forgotten, volumes were displayed. Almost all of them were closed, although the bindings were not especially notable. To describe the case cards as perfunctory would be an understatement.

Surprisingly, perhaps, there are libraries at the opposite extreme, sometimes driven there by the relentless search for philanthropic support, or occasionally by the grandiose visions of a restless or imaginative director. I once went to such an institution to examine a manuscript, bearing all the usual credentials. It was a place that had developed an elaborate program of exhibitions, which tended to attract sizable if perhaps unusually genteel crowds. It was soon made clear to me that I had violated some unwritten rule of protocol by showing up at that library without a reservation, in the misguided belief that its raison d’etre was to foster scholarly research. Accessibility of the collections had taken second place behind a strong commitment to organizing and presenting their highlights to the public.

That suggests that the appeal of some current museum practice may be limited in the context of rare book libraries. One would hesitate to follow the example of some museums, where bread is now routinely accompanied by circuses.
Last fall, I gave over a Saturday to visiting a notable museum in a city some miles from Washington, in order to see its extensive holdings of American and European paintings and decorative arts. When I entered the lobby, I encountered a number of clowns in whiteface, a juggler, and a comedian in a stovepipe hat, performing on stilts before a crowd of perhaps two hundred onlookers. It was the kind of scene that has become normal fare in the outdoor plaza in front of the Centre Pompidou, but has not yet, as far as I know, taken over the interior. It then emerged that at the entrance to each of the museum’s wings, which radiated from a central courtyard, there was a refreshment table, distributing punch, cookies, and cider to whoever cared to partake. The air of carnival, although intrusive, was itself not unpleasant, but even a slightly serious visitor would have experienced some frustration upon discovering that there was not a single gallery in the whole place where one could escape the amplified sound emanating from the “performance artists” in that lobby. Some enterprising and well-meaning person in this museum had gone to considerable trouble and expense to cater to a notion of fun that doomed to farce or failure any attempt to concentrate on the experience of encountering art.

If that were an everyday occurrence, one would worry for the soul of that museum. In fact, it was probably undergoing one of those paroxysms of showmanship that some of us occasionally (and perhaps justifiably) find attractive as a way of disarming the legions who stand ready to accuse both museums and libraries of elitism, on the grounds that they tend to value and foster such dubious attributes as literacy, taste, and a sense of quality—attributes that challenge the cultural relativism currently pervasive here and there. Libraries, for the most part, are not (or at least not yet) inclined to indulge the more extreme of these temptations. But some libraries choose to skate rather near the edge, and the Folger Shakespeare Library offers an interesting example of an institution manifesting something like what psychiatrists call “multiple personalities.”

Over the past twenty years, the Folger has developed and proceeded to refine a set of complex public roles. Recently, a major goal of the library’s administration has been to integrate these “multiple personalities” into a unified identity, an institution that speaks on many levels and in various tones, but with one voice.

When Henry Clay Folger described his goals in establishing a Shakespeare Memorial in Washington, just before his death in 1930, he noted that the institution should be “first, and foremost, a library.” But he also envisaged it as a shrine both to Shakespeare and to himself and his wife, and a living symbol of the English cultural heritage in the United States. Paul Philippe Cret’s design for the building carefully embodied the visual symbolism of these messages. The exterior of the building has something of the character of a great ancient mausoleum, complete with inscriptions and bas-reliefs of almost Augustan gravity, a kind of art deco version of the Ara Pacis in Rome. The interior, by contrast, evokes the
oaken grandeur of a noble Elizabethan palace. The original reading room makes a complex and ambiguous visual statement, combining the character of a sixteenth-century Oxford or Cambridge college library with unmistakably ecclesiastical elements. The West wall features a large stained-glass window whose general lineaments might be found in any of hundreds of late-Gothic churches, except that what is depicted here is the seven ages of man, from *As You Like It*. Toward the East, an exact replica of the funerary bust of Shakespeare in Trinity Church, Stratford, surmounts a brass plaque, inscribed “To the glory of William Shakespeare and the greater glory of God.” The ashes of Mr. and Mrs. Folger repose in a niche behind that plaque, and impressive donor portraits flank it on either side. A handsome new reading room, designed by Hartman-Cox and resolutely secular, provides a striking alternative to readers who prefer a slightly less traditional ambiance.

It is clear that the founders of the Folger were thinking in terms of a world in which few would have the opportunity to visit the great houses and monuments of England. The library would provide the next best thing. It thus included an exhibition gallery and a replica of an Elizabethan theatre, which was to be used for lectures and, according to Mrs. Folger’s expressed hope, elocution classes. Since 1970, it has become the home of a resident classical acting company, originally a division of the Library, but in more recent times a separate nonprofit corporation independent of and entirely distinct from its parent organization.

For the first forty years of its history, the Folger was in fact “first, and foremost a library.” During the late thirties, and then again after the war, a vigorous acquisitions program expanded the collections far beyond their original Shakespearean focus. The acquisition of the library of Sir Leicester Harmsworth in 1938 gave the collections immense resources in non-Shakespearean English books, and during the tenure of Louis B. Wright, the Folger’s extensive holdings in Italian, French, German and Dutch publications took shape. By 1968, when Dr. Wright retired, the collections had nearly tripled in size, but the Folger was anything but an open, broadly-based institution. A program of grants permitted many deserving scholars a period of residence, but the readership was basically a gentlemen’s club of English professors, for the most part philologists and editors.

All this began to change rapidly after the tumultuous events of the late sixties, including the prolonged and very menacing riots in Washington following the assassination of Dr. King. Under the direction of Dr. O.B. Hardison, Jr., the Folger, like many other cultural institutions, moved rapidly and properly to demonstrate a commitment to more diverse constituencies. The theatre program was perhaps the most conspicuous effort to create a public role. During the same time, a Department of Public Programs was established, and out of it grew a full range of activities—educational programs for teachers and elementary and high school students; a resident consort for early music; a corps of docents trained to
welcome and inform visitors and work with school groups; public readings and workshops by leading poets and novelists; and last, but also in many ways least, a modest program of exhibitions.

Concurrently, a Division of Academic Programs came into being, for the purpose of exploiting the library's potential as a center for scholarly discussion and collaborative effort in the various humanistic disciplines involved in Renaissance and early modern studies. That sector of the Folger now manages a consortium comprising twenty-three universities in the region, organizes and administers five to seven graduate seminars held at the Folger each semester, publishes the *Shakespeare Quarterly* and sponsors a wide range of conferences, lectures, symposia, and evening colloquia. These offerings provide an intellectual lifeline to many scholars working on relatively esoteric topics on campuses where (even in big, prestigious places) they often have nobody to talk to who really understands and cares about their work. In addition, we have over the last four years created a program of endowed fellowships for postdoctoral scholars. Supplemented by generous support from the research division of NEH, these funds now enable us to bring as many as twenty people to the Folger from around the world, for periods ranging from one to nine months.

Obviously, the explosive development of the Folger from serene scholarly retreat to mixed-media extravaganza raised many problems. Within ten years, the library went from living well within the income from its endowment to needing to raise half its operating budget, the situation in which we still find ourselves today. Moreover, many of the programs I have described flourished at the expense of essential library functions. Upon retiring, for example, research bibliographers were replaced by a succession of theatrical managers, who proceeded to generate deficits that had to be covered by over $2 million of endowment principal. In 1984, when I arrived at the Folger, the acquisitions budget was $115,500, only 15% more than it had been sixteen inflation-ridden years earlier. Fourteen staff members were earning less than $10,000 annually, and the staff turnover rate was over 30 percent. Despite outstanding growth in the endowment, its purchasing power was far below what it had been ten years earlier, because of the need to cover operating losses. Moreover, no fellowships had been given since 1975. The scholarly community, and also the book world, properly questioned the seriousness of the Folger's commitment to learning, despite the impressive extension and modernization of the reading room and stacks. This state of affairs had come about despite a clearly articulated policy, asserting that the library and its functions were and must remain the first priority.

The changes that were required to honor that commitment were a good deal easier to identify than implement. To put the task in very general terms, we had to restore the absolute primacy of the library while preserving all that we could that was best among its related programs. Equally important were the goals of
rebuilding the morale and economic well-being of the staff, and eliminating budgetary deficits that had long troubled trustees as well as foundations and individual donors. It was clear that many changes needed to be made. To help manage these, I was extremely fortunate in having the full support of our board, which is The Trustees of Amherst College, and of two particularly talented and dedicated Chairmen, Mrs. Caspar Weinberger and Mr. Charles R. Longsworth.

I came to this assignment with one article of faith, derived from many years as a prowler in libraries and archives and as a trustee of the Rosenbach Museum and Library. I believed that the most important aspect of the public face of a library should be its exhibitions. From that perspective, the Folger offered great opportunities for growth and change. For years, the exhibitions program had been eclipsed by the more visible public events previously cited. The staff of approximately eighty lacked anyone specifically responsible for organizing exhibitions, or with professional training in that field. The Great Hall, as the original Exhibition Gallery had come to be known, presented many problems, including antiquated lighting, awkward and unsafe cases, and a dingy, cluttered atmosphere. What was worse, the entire budget for exhibitions, including openings, was $3,000 a year. No exhibition in the library had ever been funded, and few catalogues had been produced. No loan exhibition had ever come to the Great Hall. Indeed, the Folger had a policy of neither lending nor borrowing anything, which would have flattered Polonius but did little to enhance the exhibitions, or the library's standing among peer institutions.

Starting in the fall of 1984, the Folger embarked on a multivalent attack on this knotty complex of problems, the most immediate of which was the recurrent and troubling deficits of what was then known as the Folger Theatre Group. To resolve this long-standing problem, we established an ad hoc committee comprised largely of trustees. After due deliberation, it was decided that the concept of a resident company would have to be abandoned, and that other, less costly ways of bringing professional theatre to our stage be sought. As a result of biased and incompetent reporting, this was widely misinterpreted as a decision to close the theatre altogether. That made the new director few friends in the District of Columbia, but by the same token it motivated some people to work with us in creating an excellent solution. The theatre would immediately reconstitute itself as a separate nonprofit corporation, with its own board and a new name. During a two-year period of transition, it would receive a limited subvention from the library. Thereafter, it was on its own. We were convinced that both theatre and library would emerge financially and programmatically stronger as a result of the separation, and that has now been amply demonstrated.

While moving aggressively to raise salaries, trim marginal programs, and increase funds for acquisitions, we embarked on an ambitious search for new en-
dowment funds, drawing on the energy and professionalism of a new development team that had been painstakingly assembled during that first summer. For the first time in its history, the Library was raising money for fellowship and acquisitions endowments. Many private donors responded generously, and two timely challenge grants, from NEH and the Mellon Foundation, added important leverage to our efforts at persuasion. On another front, we embarked on a major effort to bring the library's exhibition space up to the highest standards of visual appeal, security, and temperature, humidity and light control. Clifford La Fontaine, one of the nation's most environmentally sensitive museum designers, worked with us to renovate and reconfigure an historic but antiquated space. Major funding from the Mabel Pew Myrin Memorial Trust and the Kresge Foundation enabled us to redo the lighting, install handsome new cases, refurbish the oak-panelled walls, remove a half-century of varnish (half-an-inch thick) from the terra-cotta floor, cover the nine eighteen-foot windows with translucent ultra-violet light filters and over 400 yards of curtains, replace an obsolete sound system, and more. The Hewlett Foundation provided additional support when it was most needed, and a private foundation underwrote the opening exhibition for the new facility, "Folger's Choice: Favorites on our Fifty-Fifth Anniversary," together with its attractive catalogue. Four colleagues and I shared the curatorial duties, each of us choosing eleven books or manuscripts for that show, and producing the case cards and catalogue entries.

The process of creating more imaginative, focused, and ambitious exhibitions actually began while these works were in progress. In the absence of an exhibitions curator, volunteers from the library staff have always produced these programs. Now, we created an exhibitions committee, to stimulate new thinking and broaden the base of participation. Junior members of the staff were invited to help curate shows, a role that they had not been actively encouraged to assume earlier. They were found to be smart, and energetic, and creative, just as one might expect. Grants were raised to help with the costs of exhibitions, including good catalogues, splashier openings, colorful banners, and loans of objects and even entire shows. Skeptical curators went along with my plan for a show honoring Emily Dickinson on the one hundredth anniversary of her death. Important clocks were borrowed from the Time Museum in Rockford, Illinois, to illustrate "Time in the Renaissance," the catalogue of which received a First Division award from the American Library Association in 1988 (see p. 00 of this issue). The Guild of Book Workers' juried decennial exhibition brought books of uncommon interest to Washington. The Rosenbach's fascinating materials celebrating Marianne Moore's centenary have just left after an enthusiastic reception from all except our docents, who were pressed to explain her presence in an institution so closely associated with an earlier and very different bard. All of this has helped to educate the public to the breadth of the Folger's mission—it is
much more than a Shakespeare library—and free up some staff time to plan more effectively for our own presentations.

It is worth noting that our public programs staff has served as a catalyst throughout this modest cultural revolution, by helping to design clear displays, coordinating the production of catalogues, and producing events of substance and appeal for the general public. The new exhibitions program has, in fact, contributed along with other influences to a gradual breakdown of the territorialism that often complicates life within institutions, and has fostered a more interactive and collegial approach. During the time when all of these changes were taking effect, the Folger was acquiring a new generation of computing and word-processing equipment. After the initial period of transition, this technological factor has also played a small but effective part in increasing our staff's efficiency, and compensating somewhat for a limited supply of secretarial support.

The Folger remains "first, and foremost, a library." In fact, with the new emphasis on building endowments for fellowships, acquisitions, and curatorships, the library’s primacy is assured. On the whole, this emphasis on the core functions of the institution has lent additional integrity to the related programs. Yet there is no doubt that we have also acknowledged our responsibilities as a museum in ways that had not been previously seriously considered, let alone explored. For one thing, there is now a budget—small but not minuscule—for exhibitions. For another, both the director and the development office regard exhibition funding as a priority. Most important, though, is a change in the way in which we approach our role as museum people.

Instead of approaching the job of exhibitions grudgingly, as an added burden and a necessary evil, we are excited about them. People no longer have to be coaxed or dragged into working on them. Because we are now planning two to three years ahead, instead of limping along from one show to the next, we can enjoy the job more, and learn more from it. Satisfaction is enhanced by viewing exhibitions under much better conditions, seeing the enthused response of the public and the media, and enjoying the sense of permanence which derives from less fugitive and ephemeral publications. The pleasures and benefits of this program have even spilled over to the most privileged members of the Folger community—the readers. Several have offered their expert knowledge in the past, and members of the evening colloquium on women in the Renaissance, now in its fourth year, have volunteered to work on an exhibition on that topic, scheduled for autumn 1989.

All of this suggests that for research libraries, there may be important gains from placing fresh emphasis on exhibits. Above all, there is the actualization of something that we all know—that a great book collection is a museum, at least potentially. On the most obvious level, it is a museum of the book, a showcase of
one of the most significant of all cultural artifacts. But it also has the capacity to use books in uniquely innovative and illuminating ways as carriers of civilization, as the tools by which we may open up new lines of sight into an unlimited array of topics and genres, ideas and movements, societies and individuals. Learning to understand, use and present the vast resources we control is, or ought to be, among the highest rewards and challenges of rare book librarians. For in a real sense, our twin missions as conservators and communicators, while engaging us in distinct and distinguishable kinds of activities, are one and the same.

NOTES


3. That library administrators have taken due notice of this point lately is the theme of Diantha Dow Schull, "Shhh...owtime at the Library," Museum News, April 1985, pp. 36–41, where the influential examples of the Folger, the Huntington, and the New York Public Library are summarized as of that moment.
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