

NEW DIRECTIONS

The Director Writes

In the Summer issue of *Expedition*, in writing about the University Museum's collections, I touched on the question of acquisitions in the light of the developing awareness with which each country now rightly approaches its own past. It is clear that our collections are not likely to increase much in the immediate future, at least from overseas, and for the Museum this is no bad thing. What we already have is so rich, so extensive, and provides such an immense challenge in its proper storage, inventory and display, that we have work ahead for many years and many hundreds of thousands of dollars.

In the next issue I shall write about the ideas we have for displaying the tip of the iceberg: that small portion of its total holdings which is all that any museum like ours can actually put on show at any one time. Here, I want to look at what is the truly fundamental problem, the handling of our collections *en masse*.

Members of the general public often have very curious ideas about the nature of museum basements, what is in them and why. Donors—or the descendants of donors—expect *their* objects to be always on view; supporters wonder why their money is needed for all those *duplicates* no one ever sees; rumors abound—mostly good-hearted, but not without a caring and right sense of concern—of objects not seen for decades, rather like the drummer-boy whose taps can be heard on a still night as he wanders disconsolate in the caverns below Richmond Castle.

To give some frame of reference to the problem: just how many objects does the University Museum hold? To be brutally honest, we don't know, but there are some 250,000 catalogue entries—and these may represent as many as 4,000,000 individual items.

Why do we need so many objects? The answer has two parts. First, a museum is like an archive or a library, a place to study and to carry on research. A museum of man such as the University Museum is a repository of human material culture in all its variety, in most places, and in many ages. To study the range of this achievement, to preserve for the future the character and variety of man's creation, demands not a selection (on what basis?) but an attempt, without clogging duplication, to represent both what is typical and what is atypical, in other words what is ordinary and what is not. Excellence, as I wrote last time, or at least the achievement it represents, can truly be appreciated only in the context of its time and place.

Today the museum's function of preservation is vital as never before. First, it is only in the museum basements of the world that much of man's past achievement will ever survive as a resource for our growing understanding of man's courses—only here will tomorrow be able to answer the questions today does not know how to ask.

Second, a museum is a place to teach. And our displays—the tip of the iceberg—can be truly challenging, inspiring, and educative only if we can select in different ways at different times from a vast resource such as our basements hold—a resource which is much better called our 'reserve collection.' This question of display, and how we are thinking about it, is what I want to write about in the next *Expedition*.

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