

## NEW DIRECTIONS

The Director Writes

It's all very well to write somewhat owlishly about 'reserve collections' and 'the horizontal' versus 'the vertical' approach to museum displays, but it's just so much blarney unless people visit the museum. I'm not talking here about the student or the research worker who comes to fulfill quite specific objectives (and whose needs I want to discuss in the next issue), but rather about the general public, whether from the University community, or the city, or the region at large.

What makes people visit museums? I don't mean their basic motivation, but rather what triggers that latent interest almost everyone has in distant times and far-off places, in ways of life recognizably, even recently, ancestral to our own, or in adaptations so strange that only a shared humanity serves as a bridge to comprehension. The University Museum is face to face with this question at this very moment. Why, after many years of comfortably populated Saturdays and Sundays, are our galleries suddenly crowded, on occasion to the point of discomfort? Answer: because we have a special show, 'The Search for Ancient Egypt.' Obviously, we're pleased, but I think we all look round at the standing exhibits—at the royal gold of Ur, the T'ang sculptures, the Maya stelae, the Pitcairn Niké—and wonder rather wistfully why people don't come in such numbers or so regularly to see the really outstanding treasures of world renown that are on view every day (except Mondays).

Clearly, this has a lot to do with the way these things are displayed—and we have much to do about this in the years ahead—but that is clearly not the whole story. All museums, I think, experience the same situation to some, perhaps considerable, extent. *However* outstanding the objects, and however well they are displayed, in terms both of educative content and taste, it is the special shows 'that bring them in.' And almost always, to be a 'real' success financially, and in the number of visitors, these shows have to be accompanied by a massive P.R. operation which can, if not properly handled, descend to the rankly commercial. In the end, the special shows can become the tail that wags the museum dog and their very brilliance can titillate the visitor so that it becomes even more difficult to attract people to come and see the basic displays without a continuous fanfare.

We all have this problem. It is simply another of the fundamental issues which has to be fairly faced and sensibly handled as we tackle the task of bringing new life to this great and famous but not always fully appreciated University Museum.

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