

Public Exhibits, Education, and Outreach

TWO QUESTIONS THAT might be asked about the Penn Museum are: Why should we have a major public focus on exhibits, education, and outreach? And why should people from Philadelphia and from the U.S. Northeast visit us?


The answers rest upon the Museum's mission, which exists on several levels. Our basic mission, like that of many museums, is to preserve and protect our collection of cultural properties from around the world. This function, however, cannot be the primary focus of the Museum's activities and programs. A second, much more elaborate mission is our research on human societies past and present. Therefore, our curators, faculty, researchers, students (both graduate and undergraduate), and volunteers conduct research in almost every corner of the globe. To pick one example, we can learn much by studying the impact of hurricanes, floods, and droughts upon different societies.

This leads to the third part of the Museum's mission—outreach and education. Our understanding of past and present societies is not just for our researchers, it is a critical piece of our educational program at the University of Pennsylvania. As a museum, we have a much larger constituency than just Penn's students and staff: we must communicate to a much wider audience, including K-12 students from eastern Pennsylvania, the general public of the Northeast, and the interested public from the U.S. and beyond.

So why should you visit the Penn Museum? Come to the Museum, not just for the Egyptian mummies, the Roman and Etruscan galleries, and the Native Alaskan ritual objects and clothing. Rather, come to the Museum to see these and to learn about the most current thinking on these past and present societies. Learn about King Tut and his father's attempt to change the nature of Egyptian religion and politics. Learn about Central America's ancient Maya kings as the Museum leads the way in translating ancient Maya script. Learn about Native American communities and their attempt to claim



their past and create a new and current identity. And learn about the destruction of the world's cultural past and the impact this destruction has upon the modern world.

As I have written in this column before, this Museum is not a collection of dead objects from ancient cultures. Rather, it is a museum about the living and about ourselves—our past, our present, and even our future. 

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