

Julian Spalding

Why the Louvre is the World's Worst Museum

I've chosen this title as a tribute to Kenneth Hudson, who didn't like art museums. He promoted the idea that there could be a best museum. Well, if there can be a best museum - there can be a worst museum. I chose an art museum in his memory.

I want to talk about quality - to ask questions about quality. If it's stimulating to think why a museum can be good - it's equally stimulating to think why a museum can be bad.

I've only one thing I want to say to you: museums...but I must make one thing clear before I say it: when I talk about museums I'm talking as well about art galleries and heritage sites, any place where the public go to find out something they didn't know before.

That's what museums are - they are places where people go to find out something they didn't know.

I'm not talking about research centres - study centres - reference libraries - archives - they are places where people go to find out something more about what they already know. I'm all in favour of that activity. But there's a subtle but very significant difference between people wanting to discover something totally new for the first time, and those who want to extend their existing knowledge.

By far the majority of museum visitors are first time visitors - even though most museums are actually run for the tiny proportion of specialist researchers who use them again and again. A lot of museums still couldn't really care less about the masses of the ignorant unwashed who come through their doors. But it's these people I want to talk about - and the museum's responsibility to them.

I have only one thing I want to say to you: museums are responsible for what *all* their visitors gain from their visit. They've come to get something - and museums are responsible for giving them something.

And what museums give them is ... well, there are many phrases that visitors come out with when they're asked to describe what they've gained from a museum visit:

'that was rewarding' they might say - but that doesn't tell you much - it's a bit general and vague, even a bit worthy;

They might say that the experience was 'life-enhancing' and 'unforgettable' - that's better;

For some the visit might even have been 'life-changing' - that's more like it, but we can't expect museums to do that everyday.

Then there are the blander phrases like 'that was interesting.' What does that really mean? That's a bit like saying - 'well I wasn't bored' or 'that was quite a nice way to spend the time'.

Then there's the more positive 'I really enjoyed that.' But that could be true of a slice of cake - or a sail in a boat on a lake. It's usually that sort of experience they're referring to - not the 'I really enjoyed that' that you hear when people leave a cinema, their sides aching with laughter, if they've

just seen a comedy, or with tears in their eyes, if they've just seen a romance with a happy ending, or with their hands shaking, if they've just seen the latest remake of Alien.

That sort of enjoyment is only entertainment - and everyone agrees, I think, that museums are not in the entertainment business - or at least not *only* in the entertainment business - they're educational as well. We're all agreed about that.

And our visitors expect to be educated, too. But if museums are about education - the word is derived from the Latin - *ducere* - to lead. If museums are about educating their visitors - where are they leading them to?

What do they want their visitors to leave with?

This is the only question I want to ask you - and the only question I want you to ask - what do you give your visitors?

It is in this and only in this that the quality of your museum - your heritage centre, art gallery, science centre, zoo - it is only in what the visitor gains from their visit that the quality of your museum lies. You might have the finest collection in the world of Meissen, mangles or moose, but if the visitors who come and see it leave bored out of their minds, or worse, never wanting to see a dish of Meissen, a mangle or a moose ever again in their lives, then you've failed - unless, of course that was your intention. But if your intention was to sow a seed of delight - that would last life time - in looking at moose, mangles and meissen, then you've failed - failed so disastrously that you'd have been better never existing. You might have quality things in your museum, but you haven't got a quality museum.

This conference is about quality in museums - about museums that are so good they win prizes. I want to ask some questions about what we think is prize-winning in museums. What does the museum business actually think is the best of what it does? This conference is dedicated to the memory of Kenneth Hudson, who did so much to put that challenging question on the agenda for museums, and, as I've said, by implication also raised the question: what is the worst of what we do?

We like of course to pat ourselves on the back - as everyone does. Awards are part of that process - a form of encouragement to museums - a positive process of encouraging us to do better. But they can also be excuses for complacency. For one has always to remember, as the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw put it, all professions are conspiracies against the public.

You can see why my career in museums has been somewhat controversial - because I have argued, as I still do, that museums can only be judged by how well they serve their public - and there are so many ways in which they can serve the public better.

You can understand, too, why I was so popular with my colleagues in the museums I ran - when I used to justify my perpetual criticism of what they'd done by saying, with an infuriating smile on my face, 'but there's always a better way of doing something.' I hope I laced my remarks with enough praise - but I was always more interested in 'what next?'

I had a very great honour a couple of years ago - I got a phone call from the Dutch museums association - their Director Annemarie Vels Heijn was retiring and they'd asked her what she would like as a leaving present - she said a talk by me! She'd read my book - the Poetic Museum - and thought she'd like me to be invited to go round museums in the Netherlands and give a talk about what I thought they'd achieved. I said yes on the spot - well wouldn't you? It was only when I'd

put the phone down that I thought, what have I agreed to? What if I don't like the things I see? I'd been asked to give my talk at her leaving party - she wanted it to be serious -and last an hour - I was her leaving present to her colleagues. All the museum directors in the Netherlands would be there. I realised I was going to stand up and say what I thought about museums around the country - publicly in front of them - and what was worse in front of their colleagues. Well no-one in his right mind would do that. Well I did. I leave you to consider what that says about my mind.

In fact it didn't go down too badly. I criticised everyone from the Rijksmuseum up - so they all got into the swing of it - and they are Dutch. But I was actually extremely critical - again and again I found displays that bewildered, cudgelled, or worse, ignored their public. As a museum worker I always look at the public as well as the objects in a museum. I look to see how the public are behaving. I sketched scenes as I went round - and was able to use them to illustrate my talk - I have some copies of it here if anyone is interested - it's free - which just shows you how in demand it is!

Why am I telling you this? To make the point that it is unusual for museum professionals to criticise each other's work - at least in public. It's just not done. But unless it is, how can we get on? My audience in Amsterdam were polite - they are well educated - but I know many did not like it.

My point is that we need to be much more openly critical - with ourselves and others - about what we are actually achieving. I would in a way have preferred to give this talk at the end - and tell you all what I thought of your prize-winning projects. But fortunately I was not asked to do that.

The other point I want to make that emerged very clearly from my presentation in Amsterdam is that people were able to dismiss my comments because they thought they were just about presentation - about education - about communication - about marketing - you know that stuff we have a separate department to deal with in the museum. My criticisms weren't fundamental - they thought - they weren't about what the museum was itself - they weren't criticisms of the work of the director. But the quality of the education, communication and marketing of a museum depends on the quality of its product. And the quality of a museum's product can only be judged by the quality of what it gives its visitors.

But who in the museum, then, is responsible for what the museums gives its visitors? I would suggest that in most museums the answer is no-one, whereas, in my view, it should be everyone's responsibility - above all, the director's.

The fact that it isn't - the fact that the public's response to the museum is a marginal concern of most museums is the reason why museums - despite the growing hunger for unique tourist attractions - for anything genuinely old - museums are becoming socially and culturally increasingly marginal.

Museums think that if they own a Botticelli, or the first steam engine, or the biggest dinosaur, they've done their job. It's up to the public to make of it what they want - even to visit whether or not they want. But objects without people looking at them are in storage. They only become objects in a museum when people are looking at them. If people gain nothing from them then they're in a bad museum. If people gain a lot from them, they're in a good museum. It's as simple as that. So the quality of a museum lies not actually in its collections but in what it gives its public.

The art museums of course think they're above such things as dinosaurs. They think that they only have to have great works of art and people will come and get great experiences from them. The art will do the museum's work for it - and they don't have to do anything. I don't agree.

Of course, they are right up to a point. There is nothing the Louvre can do to actually *add* to the profundity of feeling and thought that Leonardo poured into the Mona Lisa. There is nothing the Louvre can do to make this a greater work of art - nothing the Louvre can do to take credit for what the Mona Lisa says to their visitors. They can't add a flick of paint to make that smile a little ...more jolly, perhaps? - to cheer people up. Museums are not in the business of falsifying the truth.

Mind you, they do it much more often than they care to admit - there's a whole chapter in my book *The Poetic Museum* about that - almost everything you can actually see in almost all car museums is totally fake. But generally museums are not in the business of faking things - they don't create their own exhibits - though some are increasingly coming to think they can - there's another chapter about that.

But most of us are agreed, generally, that museums are in the business of showing what's true - of showing real artefacts from the past - un-tarted up - warts and all - worn and torn by time - with the ravages of the past etched deep into them - those rare, real, un-cleaned-up surviving shards and fragments that wear their history on their faces - like Dubrovnik.

Museums present authentic evidence. This is true of museums of art as it is of museums of archaeology, social history, engineering or natural history. The question is: what is the quality of that evidence? Not just how true is it but how significant is it. It can't be significant if it isn't true - but it can be true and irrelevant.

What museums look for and want to show are things that are both true and profoundly significant. Well you can't find many things that are truer and more profoundly significant than the Mona Lisa. The Mona Lisa is authentic evidence of the workings of Leonardo's mind.

The Louvre argues - or it would if it deigned to discuss the matter - that there's nothing it can do to enhance the authentic evidence of the workings of Leonardo's mind as manifested in the Mona Lisa. Nor should it try, it argues - if it would deign to argue - to interpret what its visitors get from looking at the Mona Lisa - because this would interfere with , and certainly therefore reduce, the meaning that Leonardo wanted to convey through his great work of art. So they sit back and do nothing and think they've done their job. Most art museums are basically like this.

It's true that works of art are more self-contained communicators than other exhibits of authentic evidence from the past. I use the word exhibit as it is used in a law court - exhibit number one - the gun. Museums 'exhibit' authentic evidence precisely in this sense - to give weight to the case they are making. The question is - and it is back to the main question of this paper - what case is the museum making? What story do they want to tell their public? What do they want to give their public?

It is true, as I said, that some art objects are more helpful in providing built-in interpretation than other exhibits of authentic evidence. I showed a reproduction of the Mona Lisa to some six year old kids who had never seen it before - and didn't really know what a 'painting' was and hadn't a clue what the Renaissance was. One said the Mona Lisa looked as though a man had just asked her to marry him, and she'd just heard at the same time that her best friend had died. Not a bad response.

But if I'd showed these same kids an old, child's shoe - they'd have thought I'd fished it from a pond, or found it in an attic, some might think it came from someone who was poor who'd had to go on wearing old shoes. They'd look at it totally differently if I told them it was taken off a girl who was about to be gassed, especially if I explained who the Nazi's were and what they believed and did. They might never forget looking at that shoe and seeing the mark where the girl's big toe

had almost pressed through the leather and where the heel was worn unevenly on one side - the trace of a life snuffed out. They might remember that sight more intensely than seeing the Mona Lisa - and it might affect their lives more directly.

What I'm saying here is that authentic evidence from the past isn't less valuable because it needs some explanation. What I'm trying to do is to put paid to the arrogance of art museums. Museums without any art in them might well be more valuable museums - make a greater contribution to people's lives - be of greater quality as museums than an art gallery full of priceless old masters.

I don't in fact think that *any* authentic evidence from the past can communicate its full meaning without some interpretation. Even things from the recent past existed in a different world environment, and already require something of an imaginative leap to fully understand them. We will now never be able to view the once world-famous pre-9.11 skyline of New York in the same way that people did only three years ago. If this is true now of any old postcard of Manhattan, how much more is it true of the Mona Lisa, which was painted a century before Galileo looked at the moon through a telescope and Harvey discovered the circulation of the blood.

The seven year old might have put her finger on part of the meaning of the Moan Lisa - but all the evidence suggests that Leonardo was not just trying to capture a moment of joy mingled with sadness. You'll have to read my next book - the Art of Wonder - A History of Seeing - forgive me for mentioning another of my books - as a freelancer I have to take advantage of every opportunity - you'll have to read my next book to appreciate the small but crucial role the Mona Lisa played in the development of humanity's modern world picture.

I don't think you have a hope-in-hell's chance of beginning to grasp the meaning of the Mona Lisa - any more than if it was an old slipper - if you can't make the imaginative leap in your mind back to a time when people thought the world was fixed in the centre of the universe, that god had created everything we can see and what we could see was surrounded by mystery, that human beings were the link between heaven above and creatures below, and that people like Leonardo believed that if you looked very closely at the universe you were sure, eventually, to see the divine source of creation. That's what he's tried to paint - the mysterious smile hovering on the lips of the Mona Lisa. A smile was then believed to be the soul lighting up the face. What Leonardo has tried to paint is the soul of the world.

There is a real problem for museums - for all organisations involved in interpreting our heritage: how do you bridge the gap that separates our current world picture from that of people in the past? How do you persuade people to un-know what they know - that the earth is flat, not a sphere, that it's still, not spinning around the sun, that the stars are souls in heaven not other suns, that human beings are not a disease spreading over the earth and beginning to swarm - but god's greatest gift to the world?

This was a problem that I became more and more intensely aware of the longer I worked in museums - almost all the object we preserved - even from the recent past - were products of a world picture so different from our own, and could only be properly understood within the context of that world picture - just as the shoe only made sense when you knew it had been taken from a pile outside the gas chambers at Auschwitz. It was to try to describe this changing mental picture that I wrote my book on the History of Seeing that's about to be published. You can tell this story in a book - but how do you do it in a museum? This is not easy - but in my view it's absolutely essential.

The Mona Lisa simply doesn't make sense if you look at it knowing what we do today. It's hardly surprising that many people ask themselves why did a man as clever as Leonardo waste his time

painting, when he could have got us to the moon. The truth was that painting was *the* height of his ambition - and it never occurred to him that anyone would want to go to the moon - or indeed that the moon was a solid sphere that anyone could actually stand on.

Yet the Louvre thinks it needs to do nothing. The result is that millions of people from all over the world file past the Mona Lisa every year - and are vaguely surprised by its smallness and its greenness - and spend a second having their photo taken in front of it - to send to their friends to show them they were there - and then pass on - having gained, I would say, in the vast majority of cases nothing - absolutely nothing - from having been in the presence of the one of the greatest and profoundest evidences of humanity's attempt to understand the nature of life. Is their failure their failure? I don't think so.

And I don't think its Leonardo's. He did what he could - and the Louvre would help by cleaning the discoloured varnish off the top that has nothing to do with him - but that's another debate - and one I would love to win. If the public's failure to fully appreciate and enjoy and benefit from the Mona Lisa is not their fault - nor Leonardo's fault - whose fault is it?

There is only one answer: it's the Louvre's.

It's not easy, I know, to lead one's visitors through a process that enables them to appreciate what was in Leonardo's mind when he painted the Mona Lisa - but it's certainly worth a try. But the Louvre doesn't think that's its job. That's why I would vote the Louvre the worst museum in the world. It has some of the world's greatest art and therefore has the greatest responsibility to ensure that as many people as possible get the most they can out of the opportunity of seeing this art. That's why the Louvre - which would generally be described as a museum of quality - is actually a museum without quality. It's a bad museum. The worst museum, in fact, because it throws away the opportunity to help millions of people every year understand the best object a museum could ever have.

I've been arguing in this talk that the quality of a museum resides in the quality of what it gives its public. Of course museums would argue that they don't just exist for what they do for the public - they exist for scholars. I do not want to go into the use of museum collection for research - I deal with that fully in my book *The Poetic Museum* - where I explain how the role of museums has changed since the Enlightenment, and how these changes have affected in particular their research activities. Of course many museums are still stuck in the Enlightenment - when museums were at their height - and don't realise that that debates of the Enlightenment have, in almost all respects, been won and not only scholars but the general public have moved on. But in this company I will leave such benighted institutions aside, and assume you all agree with me that the public role of museums - the public benefit they bring - is now by far their most important attribute - and the only one that they can build on in the future. I hear no objections. What a pleasure to be in such an enlightened company! I can only apologise for spending your time trying to persuade you to agree with a view you already agree with.

So I will conclude my remarks by talking about that future. The question remains the same: what do museums want to give their visitors - in the future? Or, to put the question from the visitor's point of view: what will people in the future need to find out about the past? And, therefore, by implication, what authentic evidence do museums need to collect to ensure that they can give their public what they need in the future?

The question: 'what do museums give their visitors?' is limited if it is thought to apply only to what the museum has been given. Many curators find this limitation comforting - we can't give our visitors evidence of things we haven't got. So if your local museums happens to specialise in

collecting spiders, or sewing kits, or early smelting instruments and you're interested in the history of sex - hard luck. You could always move somewhere else - though I've yet to see a museum that does anything like justice to sex - surely one of the most pertinent of all subjects.

As I said, most museums are content with what they've been given - and give their public what they can with that. Museums have given up collecting. And by doing so they are giving up their future.

Those museums that still collect tend to add to what they've already got. They're not just full of old things but full of old thoughts - stuck on the tramlines of people's thinking in the past - thinking that reflects, they forget, a very different world picture from their own - let alone from their publics - most of whom have never been inside their museum - nor ever wanted to do so. Old ideas that are not only light years away from the general public who don't come - but even further away from generations that are now being born.

The idea that museums should think about what their public needs - rather than what they have - is deeply disturbing to many curators, but reflects the swelling currents of interest out there in which their museum will eventually have to swim, or sink. This doesn't mean that museums have to abandon what they've got - it just means that they don't have to limit themselves to what they've got - they don't have to add a bit to their coral reef - they can start another atoll. It's perfectly reasonable for any museum to start to collect the history of sex if it thinks its public and especially its future public will be interested in it.

I'm arguing that museums need to take a much more active role in improving the quality of what they give their public - and if developing their collection in totally new ways enables them to do that - so be it! Great! Then museums will become a creative force in society again.

I think there will always be a social need - well, as long as there are still societies, which are of course not guaranteed fixtures - there will always be as social need to preserve crucial authentic evidence from our past. Some societies won't like it - and will want to destroy that evidence - but museums can only exist in societies where there is a shared belief in the value of the search for the truth. And I think - and here I come to my final point - that museums have to help to create those societies.

I think the holocaust museums helped to do that - particularly Jeshajahu Weinberg's masterpiece - the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. It really does give its visitors an unforgettable, life changing experience. And I will be interested to see the presentations about the House of Terror museum and the Gulag exhibition - and see how the experience of dealing with this subject can be extended to the genocide under Soviet communism.

Death makes us want to remember. The graveyards of the world are a testament to this trait in human nature. But museums are not just about keeping memories alive. They are about increasing understanding. They can't only be memorials to a tragedy - they have to ask, in addition, the difficult question: why?

Shortly after 9.11 the New York State Museum, with admirable foresight, decided to start collecting material evidence from the tragedy, after the tons of debris had been sifted for human remains and incriminating evidence. The museum collected items like a seatbelt from one of the planes, a stars and stripes saved from the building, a fire-fighter's jacket. When the public began to hear about what the museum was doing, personal memorabilia began to be brought in - items like the wallet of a man still containing \$600 dollars which his widow didn't want to touch, and hundreds of personal stories, accounts of tragic loss and a few miraculous rescues. The display is drawing crowds to the museum. Surely this is a quality museum in my terms - but is it?

What are the public being given - emotional memories, together with a greater understanding? No. Nowhere in this display is the question why even asked. It's as though it is a forbidden subject that could undermine the legitimacy of the grief.

There is nothing about the terrorists or about Osama Bin Laden - nothing that would, according to the museum, 'give prominence to their cause.' The museum thinks that that it might do that in the future - after the wounds have healed. But this exhibition is not a museum display - nor a museum collection - it's a memorial - not a museum. A Holocaust museum would be an absurdity without Hitler and racism. So is a museum display about 9.11 without Islam and al-Qa'eda. Visitors gain nothing - except sympathy for the sufferers. They could go to a graveyard for that - not a museum. When I made this point at a museum conference in America last year - one of the delegates suggested I should go back to Europe.

I know these issues are difficult, and I don't want to suggest that it is right to ignore people's feelings, but treating people's feeling with respect isn't the same as letting them dictate. Many new 'native culture' museums are beginning, I think, to make this mistake. It is right that museums are not just about facts but also about feelings - that is a key argument in my book *The Poetic Museum* - and partly why I called it that. But feelings and thoughts are not separate. Museums need to stimulate both in their visitor's minds - but they can only do this once they begin to take responsibility for how they affect their visitor's minds.

I am not unusual - coming as I do from a comfortable, comparatively secure society - I am not unusual in taking a pessimistic view of the future of mankind. Politics will, I think, increasingly become the politics not of trying to make the world a better place but the politics of survival. The politics of dreams has been discarded for the politics of pragmatism. This is a shift that museums need to think about. In the future it's my guess, new generations will become interested in the politics of dreams - and of what went wrong - and museums need to collect these histories from both sides.

The recent growth in what I believed is caused Dark Tourism is one side of this developing interest - all the holocaust museums - the Gulag projects - the genocide museum in Rwanda, the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg - and now the museum to 9.11. Dreams have been discredited. But you cannot understand these horrors without understanding the dreams - the dreams of racial purity, of human equality, of religious humility, however uncomfortable those heavens might be to the victims of their corresponding hells. I think dreams will begin to interest people again.

I have argued for some years now that the history of communism needs to be collected, now - before all the evidence is lost - not just the gulag but the hopes. The obvious museum to do this is the British Museum - which claims to be a museum of world culture - and communism certainly changed the culture of the world in the twentieth century. And what better museum is there to do this - because Marx actually cooked the whole thing up within its walls? Communism is part of the British Museum's own history - a product, like itself, of the European Enlightenment. But the British Museum aren't interested because they're not thinking of what their public will need in the future to find out about the past.

The answer to the question: what do you want to give your visitors, changes everything a museum does - how it's run, what its staff do, what it shows and how it shows it and even, and most importantly I think, what it collects.

I therefore want to leave you with a question. I know introductory speakers like me are supposed to say their piece and then shut. But I, naively, still want to change the world. So the challenge I would

like to throw down to all the speakers in this conference - all of you, when you give your presentations about your prize winning schemes - I would like to hear from you all what you wanted your public to gain from what you did, and how well your ambitions were fulfilled - and, and this is most important, how far they fell short.

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