

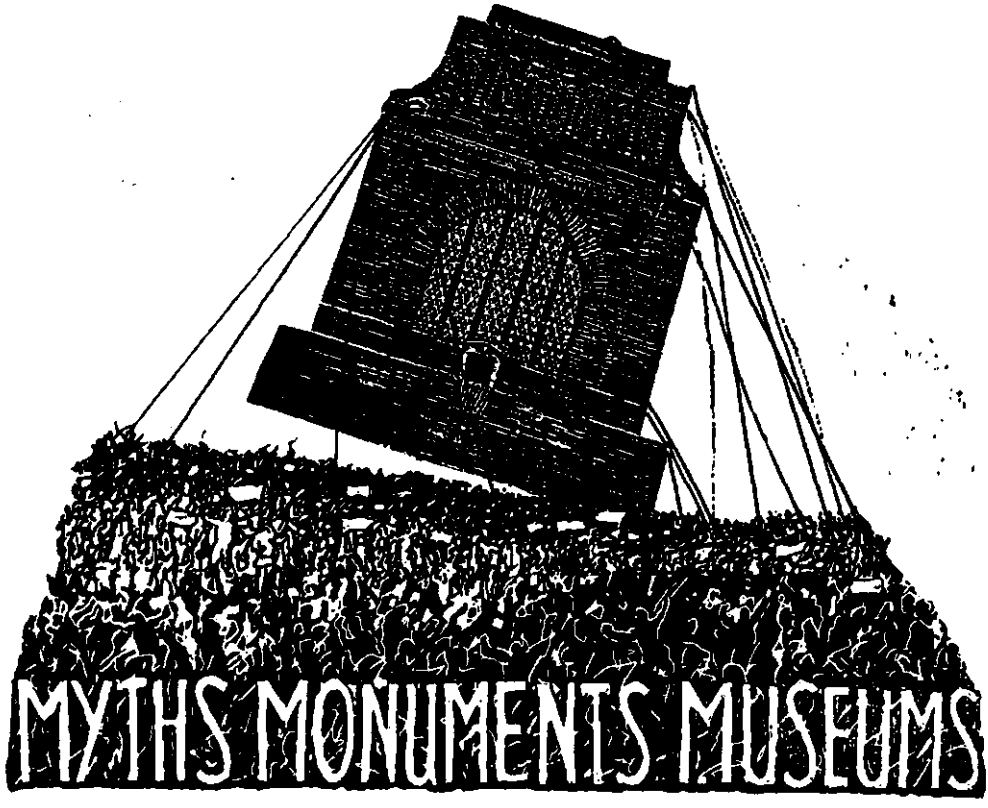
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Media representations of museums: a public viewing

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UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND
HISTORY WORKSHOP

MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF MUSEUMS:
A PUBLIC VIEWING



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SA NATIONAL GALLERY
CAPE TOWN.

AFRICANA

MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF MUSEUMS: A PUBLIC VIEWING

Nicolaas Vergunst



Illustration from *Building Services* (1979) Su

Introduction

This paper examines the representation of museums in the mass media, particularly ways in which art galleries are represented in popular journals, magazines, newspapers, television advertisements and commercial films. It goes on to illustrate how media representations not only reflect public opinion, but also reproduce social attitudes, suggesting that these opinions and attitudes are not merely *given* but are *made*. In this way images in the media partly inform and shape what the public feel and think about museums, especially when it comes to collecting, exhibiting and displaying artefacts. Yet media representations are often at odds with what museum staff wish to portray about museology as a professional practice. There is thus a gap between the profession's projection of itself and the public's reception of museums. These discrepancies and contradictions will be the main focus of this paper.

Museums and the media

The mission of the South African National Gallery is governed by its function as a museum concerned with the visual arts. Its function - like most other museums - is to collect, curate, document, conserve, exhibit, educate, research and publish. But, it would seem that visitors expect something quite different. For them a museum's function is to stay open on public holidays, to sell ethnic gifts for tourists, and to serve decaf coffee in the cafeteria.

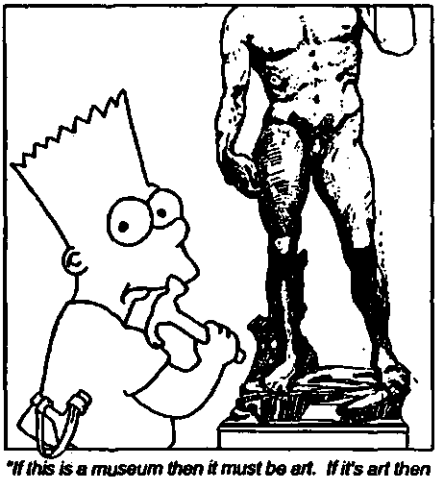


"What about you doing that side while I do this one, and meet at the cafeteria?"

Caption from *Punch* (c1970's) Scully

Museum visitors do not only express their own opinions but also reproduce those attitudes most prevalent in society. They are informed by constructs of class and gender, by assumptions about law and religion, and by notions of race and nation. All people, including museum visitors, are socially, historically and culturally positioned - their attitudes are thus shaped by values which are never neutral, static or even indisputable.

For instance, the Simpson family reproduces a jaundiced mix of modern middle-class attitudes prevalent in America. Here art is always controversial. In a recent episode from this popular TV series, Homer and Marge Simpson visit the Springfield Museum of Art to see Michaelangelo's *David*. According to Homer, all children should be forced to see it!



"If this is a museum then it must be art. If it's art then it can't be pornography. If it's not porno then there's no need for censorship"

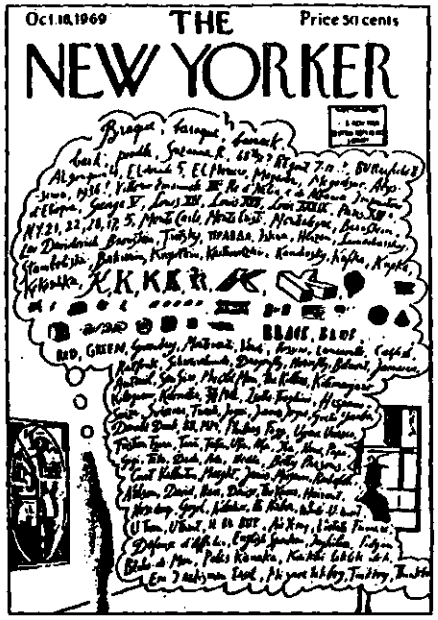
Illustration of 'David' from *Private Eye* (1969) Steadman

However, not all visitors react in the same way. While museum exhibits and displays are ambiguous, visitors react with ambivalence. Although opinions and attitudes may differ, these differences are still contained within the dominant discourses at the social centre.



"How corny!" *"What rubbish!"*

Die Deutche in seine karikaturs (c1930's) Garvens



"Braque, baroque, barrack . . ."

The New Yorker (1969) Steinberg

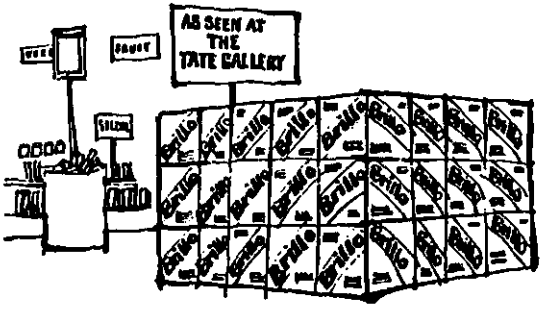


Advertising contributes to the reproduction of the ideological interests and practices of this hegemonic discourse. In this Estée Lauder advertisement, designer clothing and styled accessories are depicted as being both rare and collectable. But simultaneously, rare and collectable art becomes fashionable. Here the museum is projected as a fashion boutique while culture is framed as a capitalist commodity.

Consumer advertising does not merely reflect what people like, but in fact, it produces what people *should* like. In the same way the media does not only reflect *consensus*, it also produces *consent*.

Cosmopolitan (1985)

The ideological motivation behind advertisements can be seen in the 1992 Bakers' Biscuits TV ad and the 1985 magazine ad for Lu Biscuits, both of which depict consumer products as art objects. Thus museums become supermarkets, while shop stocks become art objects.





Punch (1971) Lowry

It is no surprise that director Adrian Lyne also made TV commercials before making the film *9½ Weeks* (1986). Inasmuch as this film explores the erotic exploits of a curator from a New York art gallery, it also promotes a trendy lifestyle - catering to a hi-tech materialism and flirting with the matt-black sado-masochism of the eighties. Commercial films, like advertisements, also set about projecting and framing the interests and practices of the socially off-centre - incorporating their ambivalence to, and deviance from, the hegemony of the dominant discourse in society.



Benson and Hedges Art Gallery

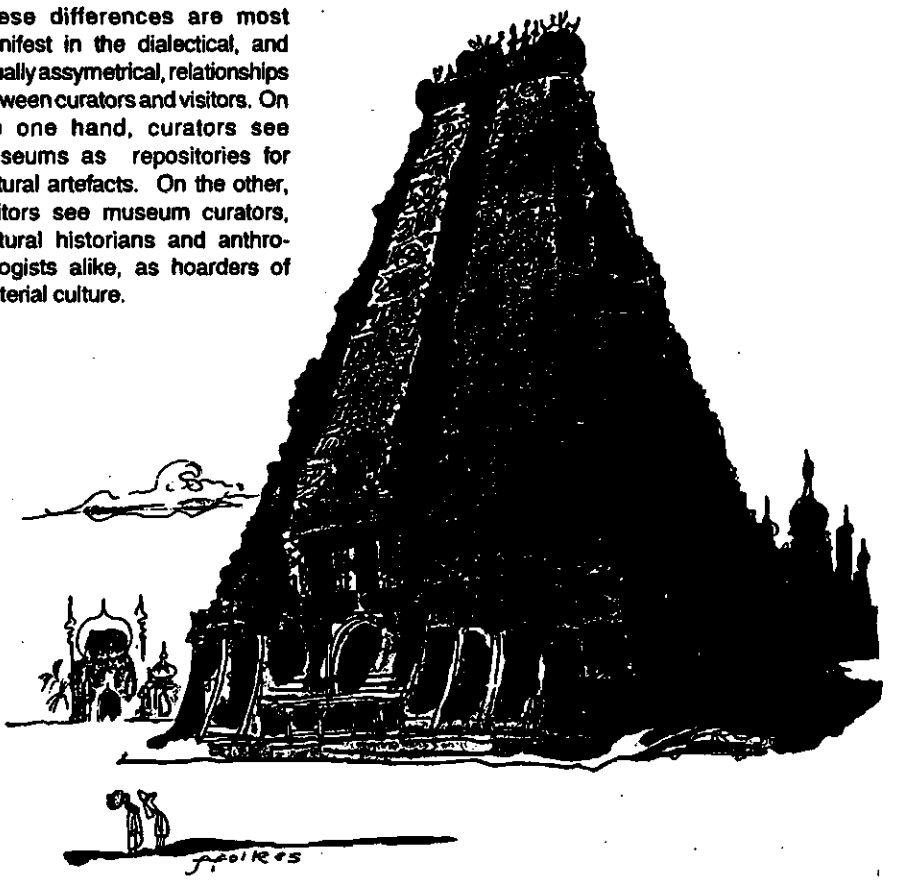
Campaign (1978) Collett Dickenson Pearce & Partners

Although museums usually belong to the main hegemonic group in society, museologists do not necessarily constitute an homogenous grouping. The media, likewise, is controlled by the same hegemonic grouping. Usually, this grouping has a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Semiotically, media re-presentations of museums are most often indicative of a deeply conservative, if not even reactionary, set of interests and practices.

Inevitably, the portrayal of museums in the media is at odds with the the projection of a museum profession. For instance, no curator would advocate smoking inside a museum. Yet, in spite of this, the B&H advertisement won a DADA (Design and Art Direction Award) for one of the best consumer poster campaigns in 1978. Such an image reinforces the gap between what a museum offers and what the public expects.

Whereas TV, films, advertisements and cartoons signify meaning through the media, signification in museum practice is mediated through exhibits and displays. Although meaning in the museum context is *encoded* by staff and *decoded* by the public, fundamental discrepancies, even contradictions, exist between professional projection and public reception, between signification and interpretation.

These differences are most manifest in the dialectical, and usually assymetrical, relationships between curators and visitors. On the one hand, curators see museums as repositories for cultural artefacts. On the other, visitors see museum curators, cultural historians and anthropologists alike, as hoarders of material culture.



"The original is in the British Museum" *Punch* (1971) Ffolkes



"Anthropologists! Anthropologists!"
The Far Side Gallery (1989) Larson



Murray is caught desecrating the secret appliance burial grounds Larson

Museologists and anthropologists are seen to be like Indiana Jones. The artefacts pursued are seen as commodities for appropriation and investment, while museum exhibits become coveted objects.



"The stuff is beautiful, but I know it'd be just too butch for me"

Punch (1975) Blake



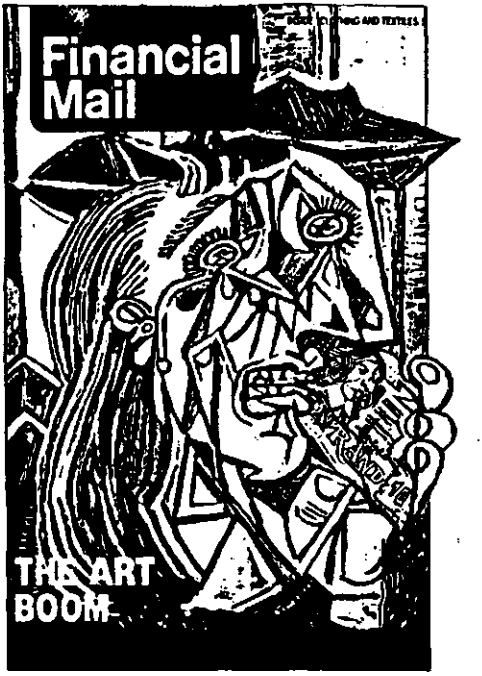
"And if you take the place you'll not just be getting a splendid, roomy, home. You'll also be making a very sound investment in contemporary art"

Punch (1976) Fisher

For the public and private collector an investment always has a market value. When, in 1974, the Johannesburg Art Gallery bought Pablo Picasso's *Harlequin* the press registered alarm at the amount spent by the museum on a single purchase.



"R28 000 for a harlequin? For that price they could have bought a whole circus!"
Die Transvaler (1974) Henning



The Art Boom
Financial Mail (1984) After Picasso

So what *is* art worth? Well, the media usually signifies the *value* of art in straight monetary terms. Today art is a purchasable commodity with an even greater exchange value in an ever expanding market. For instance, Gordan Gecko (Michael Douglas), the arbitrator in *Wall Street* (1987), claims that a painting by Joan Miró can be bought for $60 000 and sold again for $600 000. This film reflects recent developments in the art market, particularly the absurd auction sales of the late eighties, which indicate a new 'value' for art - namely, *symbolic capital*. For young Bud (Charlie Sheen), the *Wall Street* inside trader, a modernist painting is no different to a yuppie appliance - both symbolise status and success. For him a Julian Schnabel and a sushi-maker all have the same value. But value is also constructed around notions of 'uniqueness' and 'individuality', and it's usually assumed that the value of art is related to an artefact being 'authentic'.



"I hate to mention this, but there are two S's in Picasso"
Punch (1972) Ffolkes

The film and advertising industries continue to construct criteria and priorities unambiguously: art colludes best with money. But art is presented no longer as a mere investment, it *is* a major currency. In *Legal Eagles* (1986) a New York gallery owner (Terence Stamp) claims that a fire destroyed almost all the work produced by a Mark Rothko-like painter. However, he has been hoarding these artworks because, as he is shrewdly aware, their 'rarity' pushes up their value. For him the only good art dealer-cum-curator - financially speaking - is one who can appropriate all the work of an artist, and the only good artist - commercially speaking - is a dead one. The deceased artist's daughter (Daryl Hannah) is suspected of trying to steal her father's paintings. In her defence, the film's legal smart guys (Robert Redford and Debra Winger) investigate the case and discover a stolen goods racket operating from behind the facade of a respectable Soho art gallery.



"I've spent most of my life wishing I could paint - now I know I needn't have bothered"

Punch (1983) Heath

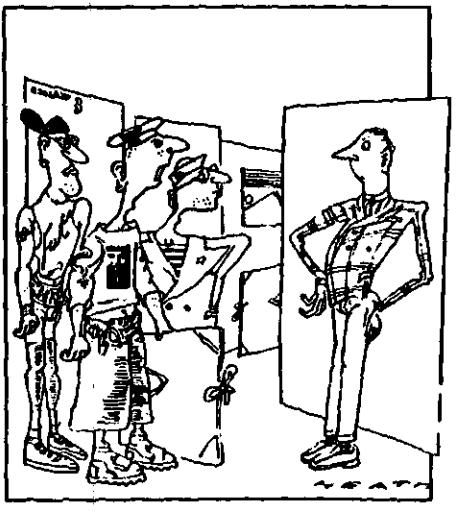
Similarly, in the rough-edged *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984) a Los Angeles art dealer uses his gallery as a front for his flourishing cocaine cartel. Art and drugs are thus seen as part of the same enterprise which, so the film would have us believe, should be restricted or even prohibited. When Eddie Murphy looks at the Ed Kienholz-like sculptural installation and scoffs at it, he signals to us that he won't become an accomplice to this rip-off trade. According to this movie, art curators and drug dealers are, by mutual association, seen to perpetrate pretension and to perpetuate fraud.

Here, as in other films, art is seen as something you can buy and sell, like sex and drugs. Public museums and commercial galleries are thus conflated as being part of the same corrupt business, the former buys art while the latter sells it. Whether bought or sold, the value of art is determined by its authenticity. But 'originality' and 'genuineness' aren't the only criteria for collecting art.



"Ah, but are you unknown enough?"

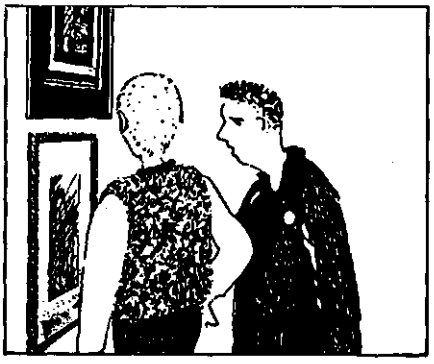
Punch (1982) Donegan



"Protest art? But I don't wanna become an irrelevant artist!"

Caption from *Punch* (c1970's) Heath

However, a museum should not only service its collection, it should also serve the public. But, what *do* people expect from a visit to the museum? What *do* they think about exhibits and displays!



"I don't know much about art, but I know what I'm supposed to like"
Caption from *Woody Allen* (1979) Hample



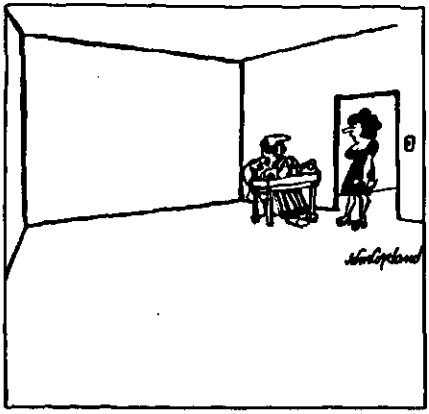
"I don't know much about art but I know what it's OK to talk about"
Caption from *Punch* (1976) Heath.

Some visitors use galleries and museums as settings for expressing their social identity or for exploring romantic relationships. Several movies reinforce this habit, such as *Bad Timing* (1984) and *Voyager* (1991). Consider also an episode from the TV series *thirtysomething* (1991) wherein Ellyn and Geoffrey meet unexpectedly at an exhibition opening, and the nervous romance of Woody Allen's *Manhattan* (1979) where the chic metropolitan intelligentsia of New York join the museum cocktail circuit. Here Isaac (Woody Allen) is a sit-com playwright turned 'serious' novelist who goes to a conceptual-cum-minimalist art exhibition and meets Mary (Dianne Keaton), a so-called 'cultural' journalist. She, in some impenetrable artspeak, says: "That steel cube was brilliant. It was perfectly integrated and it had a marvelous negative capability".

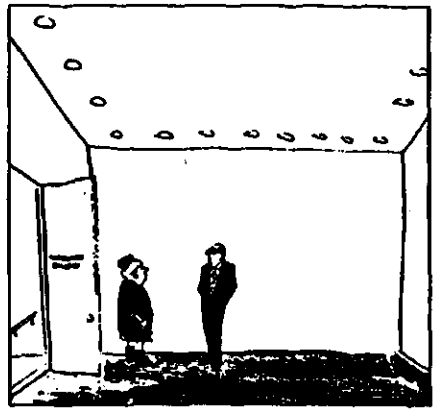


Woody Allen tries flirting with an aloof Dianne Keaton in MOMA's sculpture garden in *Manhattan* (1979), from United Artists, courtesy Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archives.

Some visitors are not even sure what to do when they arrive at the gallery or museum. This is often a result of not knowing where an exhibition begins and when it ends.



"Excuse me, is this gallery just empty, or is this an exhibition?"
Punch (1975) Copeland



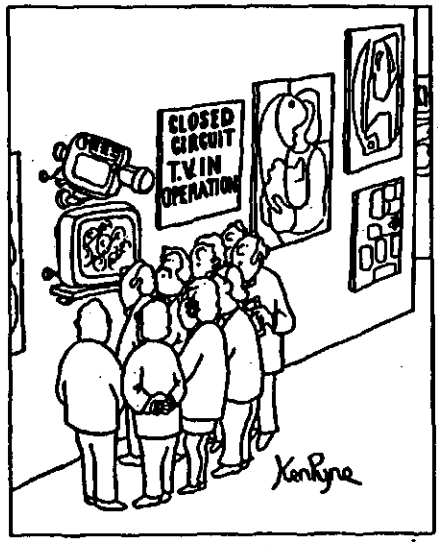
"This is the show, Madam"
The New Yorker (1967) Stevenson

Most visitors are dependant upon signs and labels for their understanding of an exhibit or display. So inappropriate signage and labelling can cause more confusion and discomfort than when none are used at all.

Visitors are not passive subjects of ideological propagation in museum discourse: they are active agents engaged in processess of interpretation - they are, in fact, re-interpreting selective interpretations presented by museums. Furthermore, the meanings ascribed to exhibits and displays are not necessarily consistent with the meanings attributed to them by the public.



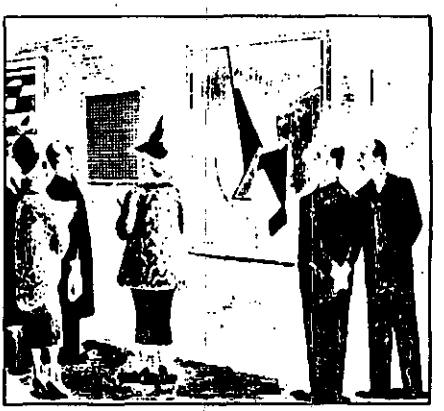
Mother and child
The New Yorker (1955) Soglow



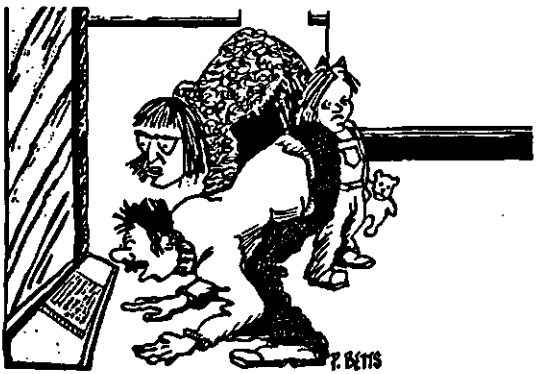
Closed circuit TV
Punch (c1980's) Pyne



"It says 'Air Conditioning by Ajax'"
Sketch (1952) Scully

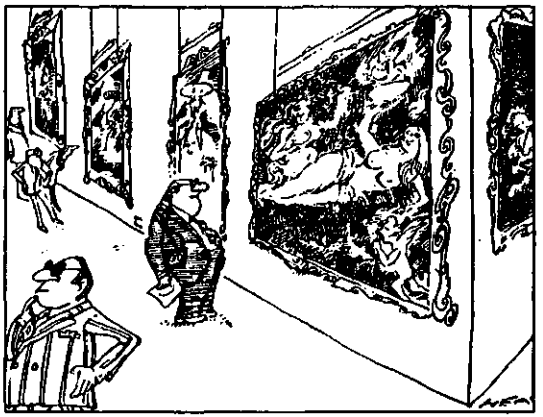


"I'm not going to tell 'em it's a ventilator"
The New Yorker (1947) Taylor



"It says here that this recently accessioned acquisition has been interpreted through museological study as being of both votive and liturgical significance" Betts

Yet signs and labels confer a sense of authenticity upon artefacts. As museums are publically perceived to be authoritative institutions, these artefacts come to be seen as both *authentic* and *authenticated*. The discourse of museums reinforces perceptions that curatorial neutrality, and indeed, even the credibility of 'truth' can be taken as indisputable and inviolate. The anonymous curator is not only credited with specialised knowledge, but also with unbiased authority. And *authority* is present even when *authorship* is absent.



"Listen, you don't know much about art but we think you'll like this one"
Punch (1980) Heath



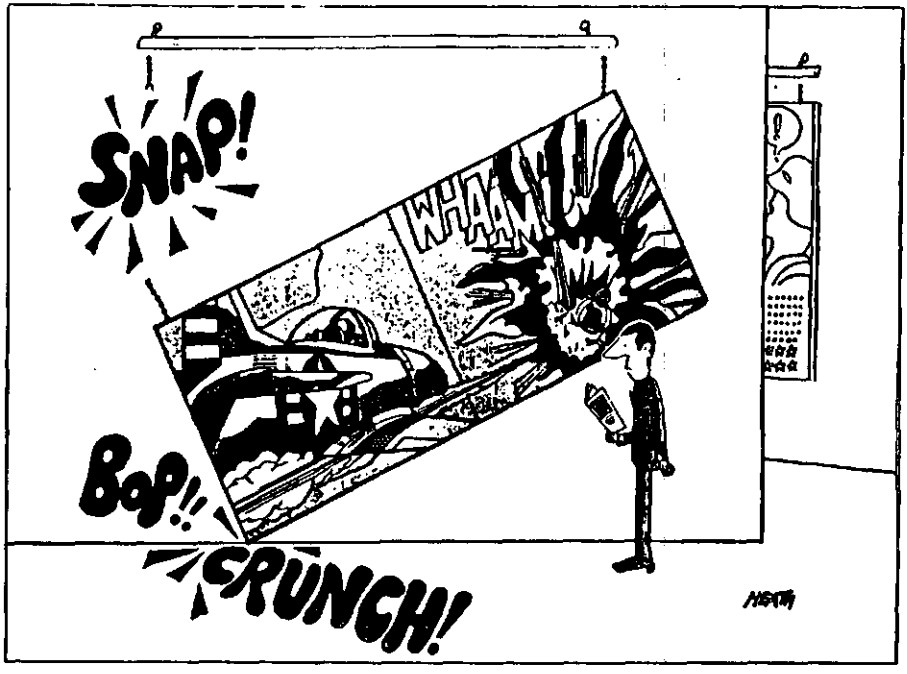
"Here we have a bit of blank wall, or, as we say in the trade, negative space"
Punch (c1980's) Handelsman



"Yes, certainly, sir. Turn right here, along the passage and it's behind a big rock in the corner. You can't miss it"
Punch (1988) Williams

Ever since the earliest museums opened to the public, signs directing visitors to the public amenities have hardly been adequate.

There are many other problems that need to be dealt with when exhibiting or displaying works of art. And the media provides plenty of scenarios to illustrate this.



Punch (1967) Heath

This includes having to deal with the complaints, the criticism and the curiosity of a visiting public.



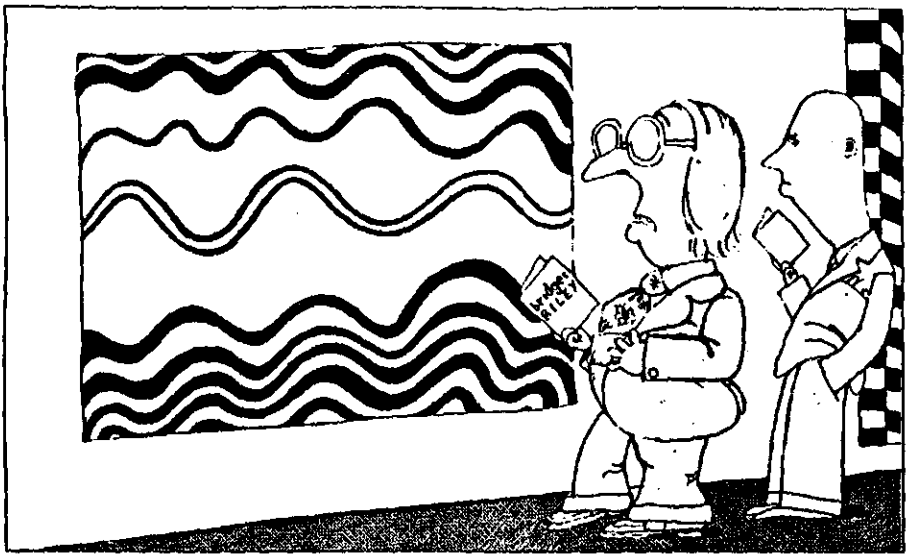
"If he has hidden talent, it's so well hidden it'll never be found."

Sunday Times (c1980's) Sax



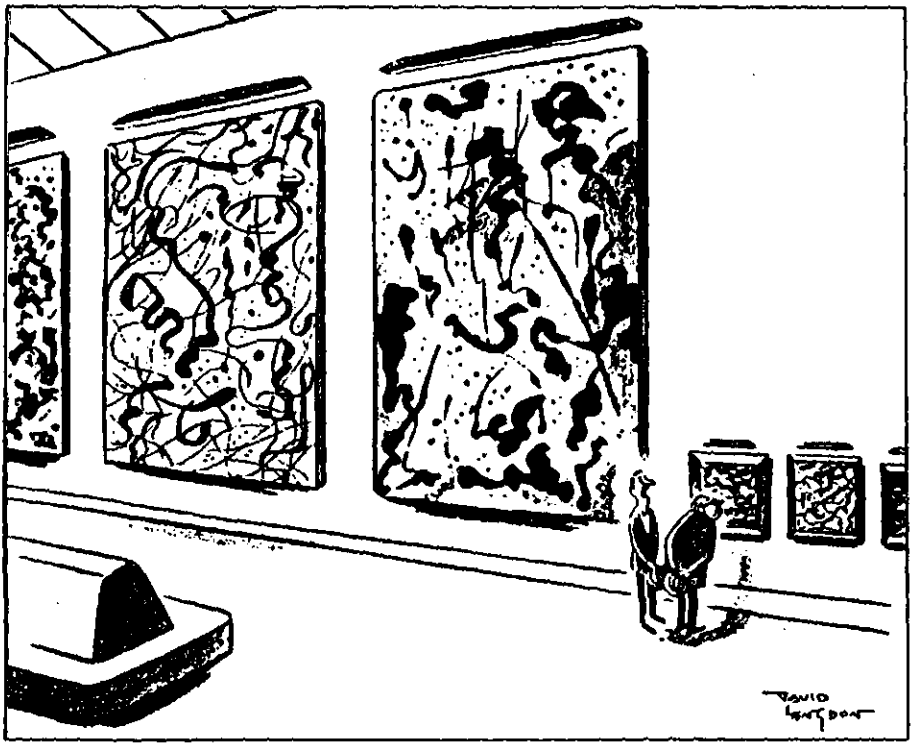
"His spatter is masterful, but his dribbles lack conviction"

The New Yorker (1953) Arno



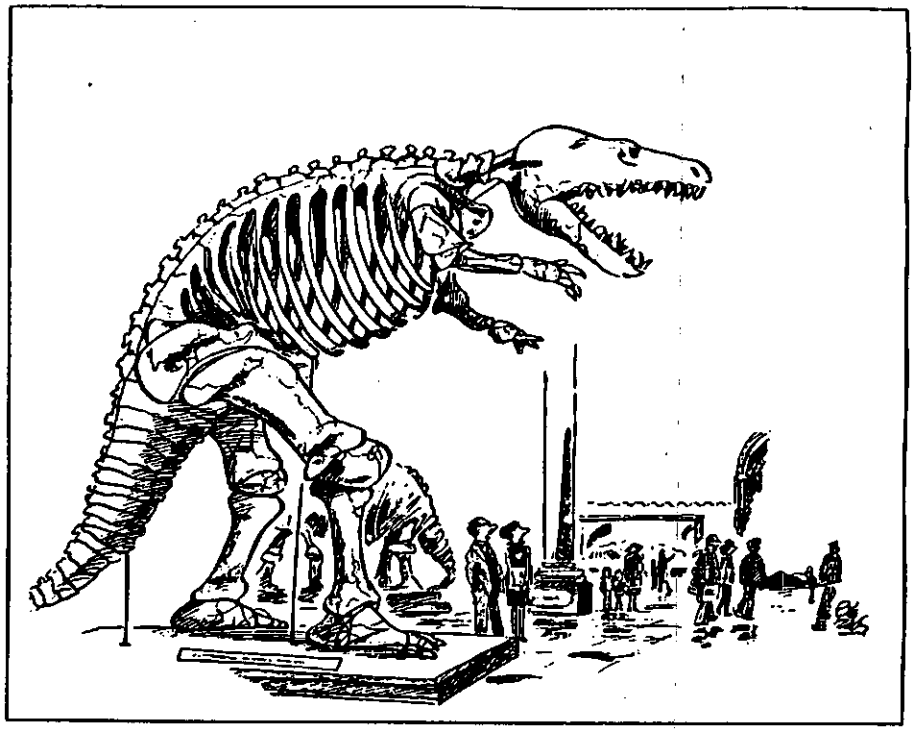
"Her paintings have always been my bête noire et blanche"

The Listener (1971) Fantoni



"I think it was along about here that he slipped a disc"

The New Yorker (1959) Langdon



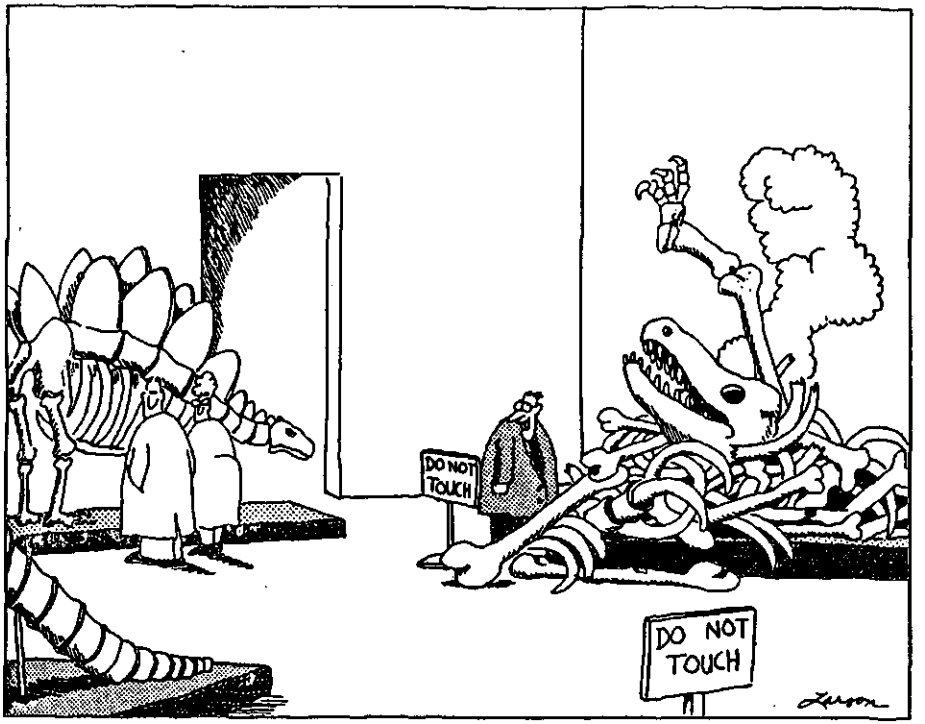
Punch (1992) Tidy



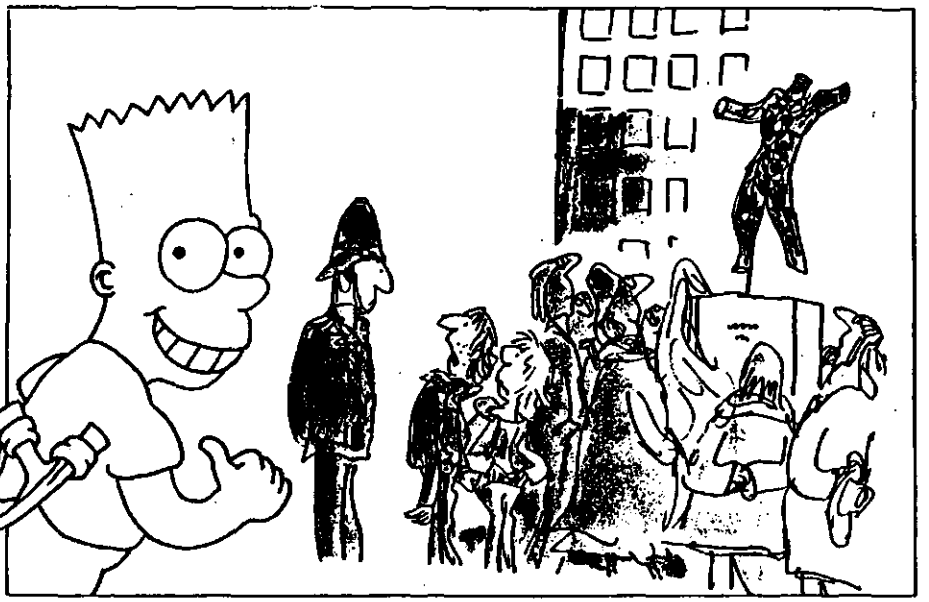
"Most peculiar, Sidney . . . another scattering of cub scout attire"
The Far Side Gallery 1 (1989) Larson

The security of exhibits, the safety of visitors, and the sanity of museum staff are amongst those problems depicted in the media.

But disregarding safety, security and sanity in museums, the public do feel that they should be permitted to see their favourite exhibits at any time, and that they should be allowed to touch at least some of these exhibits all the time. This is particularly so in natural and cultural history museums, although there is seldom an art gallery which does not have to cope with this problem as well. Problematic though these requests may be, visitors also complain about slippery floors, the lack of benches, and their limited access to toilets. Though most visitors criticise the inadequate provision of amenities, their derogatory comments are never so well articulated as when recorded in the visitors' book: "Saw the Vermeer, the Rembrandt, and the Peter Paul, but couldn't find the John".



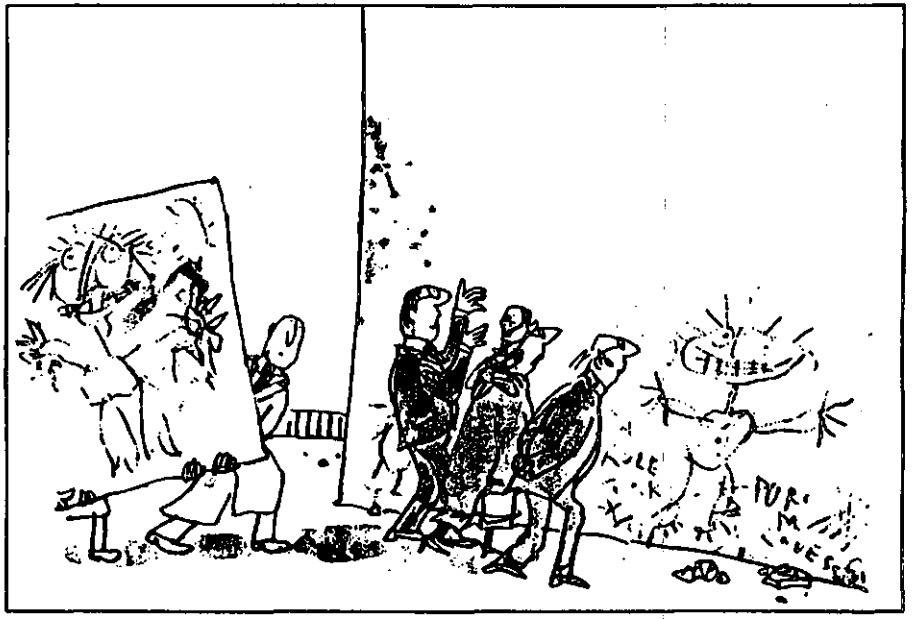
The Far Side Gallery 2 (1989) Larson



"We never done it"

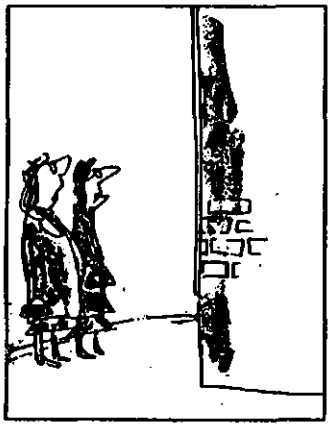
Illustration of urban sculpture from *Punch* (1979) Blake

Many museums have initiated so-called 'outreach' programmes within their respective communities, including the use of transportable study and loan collections. Some museums have also taken the initiative to make art more visible in city squares and public buildings. But this has not been without its own set of problems. Usually urban sculptures have been erected through public competitions and council commissions, often confirming the political, least of all the aesthetic (if any), sensibility of the funding committees. Needless to say, local authorities have joined the rush to immortalise themselves through the patronage they provide.



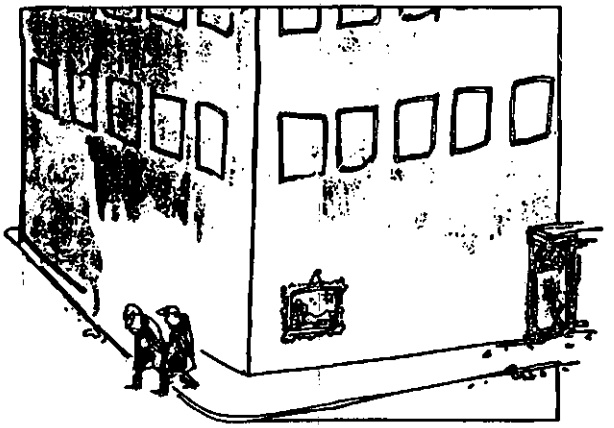
"We thought we'd sight it about here . . ."

Punch (1979) Blake



You can tell it's a council job alright - hopeless drawing, crude chiaroscuro, no tonality . . ."

Punch (1979) Blake



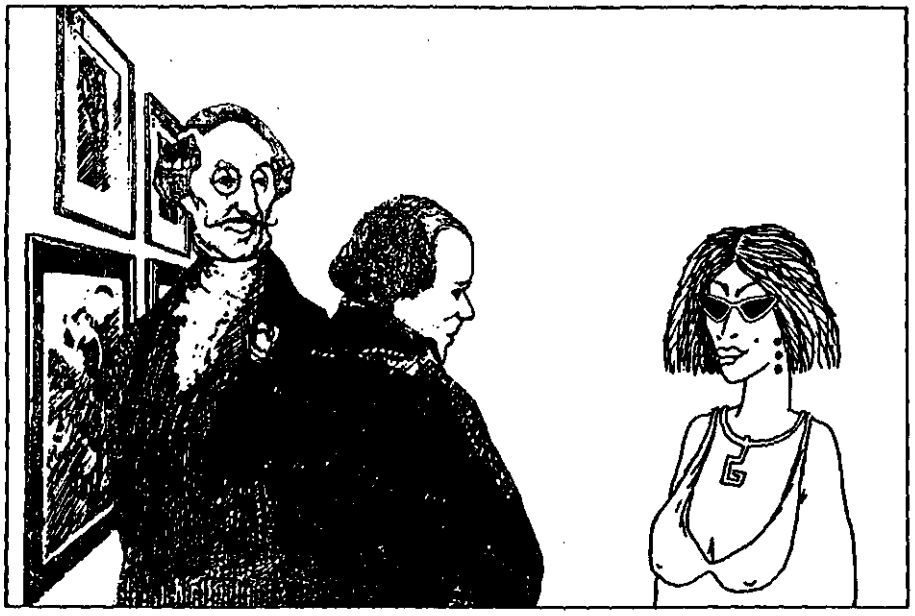
"I told you we should never have given the job to an R.A."

Punch (1979) Blake

Conclusion

This paper has, in quite general terms, examined the use of film and video, as well as the print and broadcast media, in representing particular perceptions of museums. It has, I hope, also illustrated how these representations reflect public opinion and reproduce social attitudes about the function of museums, particularly those concerned with the visual arts.

In this regard I have tried to problematise how the media represents what the public feel and think about collections, exhibitions and displays. As we have seen, such representations are often at odds with what curators themselves wish to portray about museology as a professional practice. If the gap between professional projection and public reception is to be reduced, then more imaginative publicity and assertive marketing strategies will be necessary. Furthermore, if the museum profession is to intervene and reconstruct perceptions, then more innovative cultural policies and more challenging educational programmes need to be implemented. Herewith the public - collectively and organisationally - could become more involved with various aspects of museum practice, while reciprocally, museum staff should be engaged in the social, historical and cultural processes of those communities it - institutionally - represents.



"So hows 'bout you and me becommin' more involved"

At the outset of this paper I referred to the function of museums, including that of the South African National Gallery, and would like to add in conclusion that museum communication and education must remain open-ended: meanings, values, even symbols, need to be negotiated. Finally, as a cultural repository, as a resource centre, or as an information network, even as a cultural artefact in itself, the museum must provide an *open*, rather than a *closed*, learning experience for all enquiring visitors.

END