

The Student and the Museum

The director of the University's Museum discusses the changing scope of a campus museum. Under his guidance, O.U.'s is becoming a vital part of the University.

By STEPHAN F. DE BORHEGYI

If the term "museum" strikes terror in the heart of the average individual, it is because it is all too commonly thought to mean a glorified attic or junkheap where bearded and bespectacled figures guard heaps of old bones and look and act as fossilized as the objects with which they are entrusted. The average man on the street has the impression that a museum is a convenient scrap basket for the rubbish that has collected in the attics and basements of the wealthy and that this material belongs to a dead and musty past and has nothing whatsoever to do with the present or the future.

While it is perfectly true that at the turn of the century the average museum was just such a static storeroom of antiquities and art objects, this situation has become increasingly rare. In the last twenty years there has been a decided change in the orientation of museums in regard to the public. More and more they have sought to enter the life of the community with the result that the museum of today is becoming increasingly more important as a center of artistic and intellectual activity. This trend was initiated by the large metropolitan museums, but it was soon absorbed by the smaller civic museums and of late has even penetrated the ivy-covered walls of the University or campus museums.



Bo Bolinger, All American guard from Muskogee, examines one of the implements used in a ball game of the Plains Indians of the Sooner State.

IN 1942 Dr. Lawrence Vail Coleman, Director of the American Association of Museums, in his book on *College and University Museums* stated that "a properly managed campus museum should not be a gathering place for alma mater's windfalls, it should not be a pacifier for alumni and friends who have made gifts, or a diversion for parents at commencement time." According to him, "the campus museum should be, above all, an instrument of teaching or research, or both."

While Dr. Coleman has set forth the basic aims of a university museum, certain trends have become increasingly apparent since 1942, which warrant a re-evaluation of the above scope of university museums. There are about 700 university museums in this country. The statistics and data gathered from the University of Oklahoma Museum (officially known as the J. Willis Stovall Museum) are thought to be, however, fairly representative of the general situation. Therefore, the problems in public relations we have encountered and the ways in which we are attempting to solve them, should be of interest to the directors of other college and university museums and to the museums in general.

Since Dr. Coleman's survey in 1942, one alarming problem has been faced by university museums. The majority of the visitors are no longer students or campus personnel but are people from neighboring communities, high-school and elementary students, and out-of-state visitors. The ratio at the University of Oklahoma Museum is 23:2 in favor of off-campus visitors. Although the needs of these visitors cannot and should not be ignored, the major emphasis of college museums must still be on student education. At the present time only one student in five visits the University of Oklahoma Museum during each school year. Among these visitors, the majority are girls (68%). Our records also show that more freshmen (40%) than sophomores (30%) and graduates (30%) come to see and study the museum exhibits. From all this it is apparent that unless new techniques are devised to attract the University students to their campus museum it will lose its basic function as an instrument of teaching or research.

Dr. Coleman stated quite decisively that the college and university museum should not be run in the spirit of a public museum. However, its function as a research and educational instrument is limited by the interest and participation of students and faculty.



The Museum is just East of the Women's Quadrangle and South of the Stadium. The author says it is more than a glorified attic. He is attempting to make the museum a more vital and interesting part of student life at the University.

Unless some ways are devised to lure them both into the museum in greater numbers, its existence can be justified only by its obvious service to the general public. Before we can find ways to increase the student and faculty attendance, we must study some of the reasons why interest in our museum and its facilities has been lacking.

1. The few students who come to the museum are those with specific problems assigned to them by their professors, but very few professors take advantage of the facilities of the museum. The students who come of their own free will are definitely in the minority.

2. Students carrying heavy academic schedules are thoroughly "fed up" with education at the end of a full day and seek relaxation and diversion with dates and in social activities. Free periods between classes are spent studying in the library or dormitory, or in the cafeteria having a "coke." Week ends are spent on shopping, athletic events, dormitory clean-up, and socializing. Except for a few hours of class preparation for Monday there is a horror of anything remotely "educational" on these free days. Since most university museums offer no recreational facilities, the students do not visit them in their free hours for the purpose of relaxation. Nor will they visit it for educational purposes unless specifically assigned a project involving some aspect of the museum facilities. The fault therefore lies partly with the professors who fail to make maximum use of the opportunities for research and teaching offered. On the other hand, many professors are so burdened with heavy teaching loads that even they find it almost impossible to spend time in the museum. Some do not even know where it is located.

This situation may be remedied in two ways. First, the faculty should be made more aware of the possibilities for teaching and research offered by the museum. This can be accomplished through personal contact, circulars, and a course in museum techniques, cross-listed throughout the departments related to the divisions in the museum. An interdisciplinary course of this nature with different aspects of museum work presented by the faculty of different departments should certainly result in a better understanding and appreciation of the goals of the university museum.

Secondly, since we cannot hope for the majority of students to come into the museum for strictly educational purposes, we must make use of techniques which will attract them. This, however, necessitates a drastic change in the generally accepted public relations policy of campus museums. In spite of the fact that the university museum should be primarily an educational and research institution, the means to the end requires techniques employed effectively by the public and children's museums. Dynamic

participation in the community, the tool of public museums to attract visitors, may therefore be used with equal success to attract students to the campus museums. Once within the museum, the student will be educated without being particularly aware that this is happening to him. Why should these devious tactics be necessary now when they were not twenty years ago? The answer may lie in the fact that American society has become essentially child-oriented. During the formative years of a child's life he finds himself the focal point of recreational programs and school activities. He has become the most important consideration in family, school and community life, and parents are constantly striving to give him more responsibility and opportunity to develop his own personality. All through his childhood he finds adults ready and eager to please him; he accepts this as the natural order of things, and carries this attitude into high-school and college life. He continues to expect the adult world to re-orient itself to his advantage with the result that he loses initiative. Whether this situation is right is beside the point. It exists and if the student will not seek the museum then the museum must either seek the student or play a very minor role in college education. How can this painless education be accomplished? How can we bring the student to the museum? We cannot put Marilyn Monroe in an exhibition case nor can we bring Tommy Dorsey to perform. On the other hand we can bring the museum to the students! The university museum if possible should permeate every aspect of student life. Let us cite a few examples of how this can be done.

- a) The University of Oklahoma Museum, for instance, takes an active part in campus activities such as Pan-American Week, Asian Week, Frontier Week, and major holidays such as Christmas, Thanksgiving, and Easter. Special topical exhibits are put up in different places on the campus which are frequented by the students: the Student Union, the cafeteria, and the Library. These exhibits are a form of advertisement for the more complete special exhibits on the same topic in the Museum itself.
- b) The Museum participates in many of the social events of students. This next year we plan to enter the Homecoming Decoration contest. The Museum lends costumes and paraphernalia for parades and performances put on by student groups. Duplicate material has been selected for this purpose from our large collection of American Indian costumes.
- c) Competition and contests are essential parts of university life. The University of Oklahoma Museum therefore designed a "mystery object" contest entitled "Stump the Ex-

Continued page 13

Another pupil, Dick Anderson, sang this past summer with the Pittsburgh Opera Workshop, where he was immediately chosen for the principal roles.

Judy Coleman won the Catherine Long award and is now teaching at Kansas State college. Nelva Templeton, another successful student, received a Rotary International scholarship in 1954 to study one year in Italy.

Miss Turner is as dedicated to teaching as she has always been dedicated to everything she does. As one of her pupils says,

"Yes, she's a hard taskmaster, but her own vitality and enthusiasm make you *want* to work and to succeed. She's a perfectionist, but you love her for it, because she is so wholeheartedly interested in every one of her students."

Eva Turner is a dynamic and forceful, yet a warmly sympathetic person. She has had a fulfilling life. As one critic said, "No English singer, man or woman, has earned greater admiration and respect in the opera houses of the world than Eva Turner."

Yet she is humble and unassuming. She

wants most of all to see young people realize their own potentialities.

As she expresses it: "If you want to achieve, everything else must be put aside. You must go straight ahead, always toward your objective. This must be your goal, and you must keep to it. There is *no other way*."

For Eva Turner—prima donna, teacher, and person—there was no other way. For those who follow after her to achieve the full measure of success, there will be no other way.

The Student and the Museum . . .

Continued from page 7

perts." Every month a new object of scientific or historical interest is put on display in a special case in the Museum. Students may buy entry blanks to the contest for a dime. The winner who identifies the object collects all the money accumulated during the month from the sale of these entry blanks.

- d) The Museum lecture and conference room is open for use by student clubs that are also free to use the screen and projector of the Museum while in this room.
- e) Since the students have so little time to visit the Museum during class hours, the Museum is now open from 7-10 on Monday evenings. This has resulted in a significant increase in student attendance (489 individuals in five months). The Museum is also open before and after foot-

ball and basketball games and spot announcements are made to this effect during the games.

- f) The University Museum co-operates with the student newspaper. Student reporters visit the Museum twice a week for news items on museum activities. Whenever possible, photographs of new exhibits or acquisitions to the Museum are made with pretty and popular co-eds or campus sports heroes.
- g) Members of the Museum staff frequently participate in the University radio and television programs. On the television program students appeared in costumes and displayed objects from the Museum collections.
- h) There is a bulletin board by the main door of the Museum which displays comic cartoons related to Museum matters. This proved to be an attraction to students passing by and frequently served to draw them into the Museum.
- i) The installation of a sales desk created quite a bit of interest among the students because of the attractive replicas of ancient jewelry. Besides attracting students to the Museum, we also succeeded in selling numerous Museum publications on scientific subjects to those who came to see the jewelry.
- j) The University Museum has inaugurated a monthly Lecture Series in which scientific subjects relating to material in the Museum are presented in a semi-popular form, frequently with the aid of slides and movies. At the beginning of the series faculty and townspeople far outnumbered the students in the audience, but this situation has gradually reversed itself during the course of the year.
- k) Personnel of the Museum frequently are invited to give talks to student clubs at which time special mention is made of current museum activities.
- l) Each semester the University Museum holds an "open house" in the evening and serves simple refreshments. Faculty, students, and townspeople are invited. We have noticed that student attendance is steadily increasing.

Since these efforts have been made for a closer and freer cooperation between students and the University Museum we have received a correspondingly greater number of gifts and loans from students who have collected items of interest while abroad or from foreign students who are studying in this country. Several students have even come into the Museum to inquire what they could collect for the Museum while on vacation in Latin America, Canada, or Europe. We consider this to be an unexpected success and a direct result of our efforts to bring the Museum closer to the students. Another point which must not be underestimated is that the student who becomes interested in his Museum while at the University will one day become an alumnus and a potential patron of the University. We certainly want him to be proud of his museum as he undoubtedly is of his football team.

IMAGE IS NOT AVAILABLE ONLINE DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS.

A paper copy of this issue is available at call number LH 1 .06S6 in Bizzell Memorial Library.