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For Quarto

### PIONEERING

Most people today have no idea of just how dreary and unimaginative museums used to be. Three out of every four museums in Britain today simply didn't exist when the Second World War ended in 1945. The explosion which happened from the 1960s onwards changed not only the quantity of museums, but their quality as well. The emphasis shifted from putting objects on display to making those exhibitions attractive and persuading the public to come and see them. For the first time, museums began to be marketed and sold, an approach which was almost inconceivable before the War, when the take it or leave it approach was pretty general and few museums cared, or needed to care, whether they had five, fifty or five hundred visitors a day. Once the situation became competitive, however, with museums fighting for the public's leisure time and for the money available in a society characterised by full employment, greatly improved wages and paid holidays, the way was wide open for a new breed of enterprising and in many cases entrepreneurial curators to look for completely different ways of going about the business. Utterly strange concepts like giving value for money began to reveal themselves, with striking results.

I find it fascinating to study pre-1939 photographs of prestigious museums. In those days the Science Museum in South Kensington would have considered itself an avant-garde establishment, but most of what one sees in the photographs would be inconceivable today. Gallery 18, for instance, consisted of two rows of cars and motorcycles, packed together as tightly as possible and with railings at each side to keep visitors at a safe distance. On the other side of the railings there was a narrow passageway and behind that, along the walls, a continuous row of cases containing small objects. There was nothing extraordinary about this. One found exactly the same system at the Natural History Museum, the British Museum, Birmingham City Museum and any other museum, great or small. Members of

the public were regarded as dangerous predatory animals, liable to steal, damage or deface exhibits without warning and needing to be kept under the strictest possible control. Museums, cases and warders were synonymous.

During the 1939-45 war, people had more than enough of controls and regulations and one of the consequences of peace was a much greater demand for freedom in every field of human activity. One reflection of this was the range of people and organisations who demanded and received the right to set up a museum, a right which had previously been reserved almost exclusively to State organisations, local authorities and a handful of very wealthy individuals. If a subject, a person or a crusade was felt to be interesting, then a museum was a natural corollary. Moreover, the rapid growth of car ownership made it unnecessary and even undesirable for a new museum to be in a city. It could equally well be in a small town or a village or, not infrequently, in a remote place miles from anywhere. Most important of all, perhaps, was the fact that so many of the people who created these new museums did not come from the museum world at all. They had been teachers, engineers, architects, doctors, farmers, artists and a whole range of other things. What they had in common was enthusiasm, which they wanted to communicate and to share with others, together, of course, with a profound dissatisfaction with the way matters had been organised so far.

Abbot Hall and the person responsible for getting it off the ground, Mary Burkett, typified the museum revolution. Their museum was not in a big city, it was not controlled by a local authority and it was not staffed by people who saw themselves first and foremost as scholars and only secondly and incidentally, and perhaps regrettably as servants of the public. Mary Burkett and her colleagues and supporters were committed to bringing into being a museum which people would want to visit, partly because they needed the public's money and partly because they were convinced that they had something good to sell. Time has proved that their ideas were right and their faith was justified. They were close to the bottom of a rising wave. Their vision of a museum which would be welcoming, friendly, comfortable

and elegant, as well as informative, was in the spirit of the times. They were not showcase people and they were willing to take risks in order to get customers. In one way, of course, they had it easy. Kendal and the Lake District have, or at any rate, used to have an above-average type of visitor who might be expected to be sympathetic to the atmosphere at the infant Abbot Hall and to the themes and interests around which it was built.

The Museum of the Year Award was also an infant learning to walk in 1973. The impresario behind it, John Letts, would admit now that he had only a very vague idea of what he was trying to do when he founded it. He sensed, of course, that the museum climate was changing fast and that the strange crop of new museums deserved recognition and encouragement. He also realised the advantages as well as the risks of being identified with experiment and possibly heresy. By setting up National Heritage, with the Museum of the Year Award scheme as its most up-front activity and with an impressive assortment of the Great and the Good to serve on its Council and Committee, he achieved the miracle of making experiment seem respectable, in much the same way as the Festival of Britain did. It was no accident that Sir Hugh Casson, the presiding genius over the Festival, was also closely linked from the beginning with the Museum of the Year Award. 'Adventurous, but not freakish' could have been the motto on the coat of arms of both organisations. There has always been something very, very British about the Museum of the Year Award, which is no doubt why it took off so successfully and why it has survived so well.

National Heritage cut its teeth on Abbot Hall and learnt a great deal in the process. It discovered, or began to discover, a completely new set of rules by which to assess the merits of a museum in the post-war world. It became aware of the peculiar qualities required of a judge for this completely new kind of task. It found out quite quickly which mistakes were disastrous, which instructive and which merely silly. It also saw how much power it had to make or break a museum's reputation .

Both Abbot Hall, the first winner of the Museum of the year Award,

and Mary Burkett, the first person to hold it in her hands, can congratulate themselves on having come through the ordeal rather well. They were good guinea pigs. They can take most encouragement, perhaps, from the fact that the judges have never regretted their decision, green as they were when they took it. They had the wisdom of innocence, and they often congratulate themselves that their first-born has turned out so well.

Note: Kenneth Hudson, the Director of the European Museum of the Year Award, is a long-serving member of the Judging Panel for the British, National Heritage, Award.