

# Do museums merit the vast sums of money spent on them?

By Tan Jia Yi, Nicolette (16S31)

A museum, described in technical terms, is simply a building to hold and display curiosities and objects from the past for the consumption of the public. Yet, its uses stretch far beyond simply providing a simple display to the public. Museums spark the imagination of many who step through their doors and act as our link between the past and present in ways unmatched by the Internet and other mediums. For such functions, the growth of the human mind and commemoration of its fruits, no price for the upkeep and updating of museums is too great. Hence, I do believe that museums merit the vast sums of money spent on them.

Some may question the need for such exorbitant sums of money to be lavished on the maintenance of museums. After all, the tangible and physical experiences derived from museums may now be experienced online in the form of the Internet. As such, the great sums spent on the design of displays, the architecture and maintenance of museums will be surely unnecessary. The World Wide Web is the largest encyclopedia that has ever existed on the planet. There is almost nothing that cannot be learnt or discovered from it if one punches in the necessary keywords into a search engine. The price of discovery and education has become inexpensive with the advent of the Internet, removing the need for museums.

Yet another argument exists against the merit of museums. Such an argument puts forward that much money should not be spent on them due to the fact that museums are no longer places to learn and be educated on culture and anything else worth learning. This is due to the fact that museums have begun to dumb down their exhibits and the like to appeal to the lowest common denominator, allowing them to henceforth sell more tickets. Museum exhibits no longer provide one with the insights that are valuable but rather with reams of useless and meaningless trivia. As such, if museums are to be like businesses, pumping out information that does not serve to improve the mind, it should also be so that their funding from the state should be equivalent to that of private businesses... close to nothing. For example, natural history museums have moved away from informative text on exhibits to Steve Irwin style gobblets of trivia to appeal to the public. Hence, museums, according to this argument, are undeserving of the large sums lavished on them.

Yet, the aforementioned two arguments have failed to address that museums, though they may be guilty on the above two counts, act as the bearers of dream and imagination. It is true that the Internet is able to provide one with information equivalent to anything found in a museum. However, a simple webpage or interactive experience online where information is simply harvested will never be the same as the experience of being in a museum while taking in its sights, smells and sounds. Museum exhibits are not only fields to be grazed for information but they are designed especially for one to derive maximum pleasure from the exhibit. For example, the Singapore ArtScience museum spends millions every year on making sure that their exhibits are of the highest quality. For instance, the ArtScience museum held an exhibit on MS Escher, an artist revolutionary for his use of tessellations to illustrate mathematical concepts of geometry and infinity. Within the exhibit, human-sized installations were present to help the visitors appreciate the geometry of his

artwork literally, providing one with a greater sense of understanding and pleasure derived from his work than a webpage ever could, providing fertile ground for inspiration. One would almost feel as though one were in a waking dream, when encountering the artistry and craft of such museum exhibits, making them worth the hefty investment for the artistic inspiration garnered.

With respect to the argument regarding the dumbing down of museums, the worthiness and presentation of information displayed in museums remain subjective to different people. To one who is a fan of topics leaning towards science, natural history museums and museums commemorating scientific achievements may seem sacred. He or she would believe, most likely, that information should be placed in a certain manner in accordance with his or her own narrow viewpoint. Likewise, he or she may believe museums commemorating achievements in pop culture trivial and a way of feeding the less highbrow minds of the common denominator. Pop culture museums such as the Studio Ghibli museum commemorate the production of feats of animation accomplished by Hayao Miyazaki's Spirited Away and Princess Mononoke, and museums such as New York's Museum of Natural History commemorate the path of evolution that mankind has taken since the dawn of the earth. When viewed through lens unclouded by subjectivity, both types of museums have their own great value in shaping and filling the minds of generations with wonder and inspiration.

At the same time, the 'dumbing down' of museums may not be entirely detrimental; it may simply be a way to make information more accessible to all denominators of the public, even if it is an unintended consequence of selling more tickets. Museums are not the first to 'dumb down' exhibits, with tours around other national landmarks such as Alcatraz in the United States of America which rely on shock value renditions of horrendous prison conditions to garner more unwilling visitors. If such national historical landmarks warrant funding, being guilty of the same sin as some museums, it is conceivable that museums are too deserving of much funding for the same purpose of education and inspiration through what they present.

On another note, museums are worthy of the large sums of money spent on them due to the role they play in research - a role often unsung by the public due to ignorance. Curators and scientists in museums, when they are not keeping exhibits in order, analyse and study the contents of exhibits to uncover trends in the evolution of nature and possibly new discoveries in science. For example, in natural history museums, the study of pollen grains from fossilized plants shows one the effect of climate change in the way that plants may adapt their methods of reproduction via transmission of pollen grains. This, in turn, allows humans of the present to predict how landscapes may change as climate fluctuates, providing ample opportunity for the innovation of strategies to cope with a changing planet. If funding of museums should shut down, strides in research would be lost forever. Therefore, hefty investment in museums are worthwhile and highly deserved.

Museums also act as our link between the past and the present, making the triumphs and horrors of the past eternal and forever raw in the human psyche. Museums specific to countries show citizens their heritage, allowing them to appreciate a rich and sustained heritage or to mourn its loss keenly, maintaining a sense of identity in an otherwise soulless nation. For example, in Singapore, the National Gallery and Museum used

to be the old Supreme Court while the palace of the Sultan was converted into the Malay Heritage Centre. This ensures that Singapore, a globalized metropolis, captures a fleeting national identity. At the same time, museums commemorating wars or victories hold great meaning for the world, whether or not they are specific to a country. The Holocaust Museums in Auschwitz, Germany situated in concentration camps ravaged by the vestiges of time and sullied with the blood of a million Jews serve as a chilling reminder to the world of the consequences of genocide and racial cleansing and why such travesties should never be repeated. On a more personal level, they communicate to one the sanctity of life and the precious, fragile nature of peace. Museums are our link to our humanity and identity, even as on the surface they may simply appear to commemorate world events. As such, the vast sums of money spent on museums are definitely merited, for the remembrance of peace and humanity is priceless.

In conclusion, I believe that museums do merit the vast sums spent on them owing to the functions they serve in inspiring the populace, feeding the imagination, acting as hubs of discovery and finally acting as a physical reminder of what it means to be human. In that, museums are special that they serve the same function as the various laboratories, national landmarks, homes, places of worship, cinemas and every other buildings of significance worldwide, except that they encapsulate all of these establishments in a single place, promoting wonder, peace and discovery. Museums pass the souls of humanity's ancestors to the current generation. For that, I believe that museums do not only merit the large sums of money spent on them, they are priceless.

**Comments:**

*A very engaging piece even though the introduction could have been better! Excellent use of language.*



