

## Book Reviews

*Curators and Culture: The Museum Movement in America, 1740-1870*, by Joel J. Orosz. History of American Science and Technology Series. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1990. xii, 304 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 cloth.

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Joel J. Orosz examines the histories of eleven American museums and places them in the context of the communities they served. He describes a century-and-a-half-long effort by museum directors and curators to establish institutions devoted to science, art, and history that could also prosper in an environment that was often indifferent to their goals. He argues that from 1740 to 1870 American museums passed through six distinct ages, in each of which a different facet of the museum was dominant. From 1820 to 1840, for example, American museums were directed primarily toward popular education, while from 1840 to 1850, the public interest suffered at the expense of the demands of professional scientists. Finally, by 1870 the conflicting goals of popular education and professional research had been balanced in a uniquely American fashion that Orosz calls the American Compromise. That compromise, he says, has shaped the course of American museums ever since.

Museum history is a small but growing specialty of great potential, and this book makes a genuine contribution to the field. Orosz demonstrates that there was a dynamic museum culture in America earlier than we have usually recognized. He concentrates on museums in Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, and New York, and more briefly looks at museums in other cities, including Cincinnati and Charleston, South Carolina. Most of these institutions were dedicated to natural science, while a smaller number focused on art and history.

Orosz is at his best when he explains what he has discovered about the changing fortunes of the museums from his careful examination of their archives. He shows how their owners and directors struggled to define the character of each museum, and how their plans often failed to develop as expected. In doing so, he raises questions that have confronted and continue to confront all museum professionals. Why should this museum exist? Who is the intended audi-

ence for the museum and how should it serve them? How can a museum present its material in a way that is at once intellectually rigorous and accessible to the casual visitor? To what extent is it justified in presenting exhibits that are merely entertaining, and not educational?

I had two main problems with Orosz's interpretation of his material. First, in order to make his point that a new balance between research and popular education—the American Compromise—emerged at the end of his six periods, he overstates the differences among the approaches the museums took in each period. As early as 1800, Philadelphian Charles Willson Peale had already decided that his museum should be a school to educate and enlighten “an ignorant people” (55). At the same time, he saw it as an institution to help scientists further their research. Although the context is very different, Peale's concept of the museum as a place of research and popular education does not seem to me sufficiently different from the American Compromise later achieved by such museums as the Smithsonian Institution and the Metropolitan Museum of Art to justify Orosz's developmental argument. As a result, his conclusion that the American Compromise transformed museum history after 1870 is also suspect.

The second problem is with Orosz's efforts to connect the actions and opinions of individual curators to broader characteristics in American society. His attempt is praiseworthy, but it is not as sophisticated as this type of analysis demands. He relies too heavily on the unsatisfying concept of “cultural imperative” as a motivation for change. I did not find it useful to read of a “cultural imperative for professional science” in the 1840s (144), or a “cultural imperative to synthesize popular education and professional scholarship in museums” in the 1860s (218). Who held these attitudes and why? How did they exert pressure on museum curators?

Despite these shortcomings, *Curators and Culture* is an informative and thought-provoking book. Orosz does an excellent job of discussing what nineteenth-century curators wanted their museums to be, and the roles they hoped their museums would play in the advancement of the arts and sciences, as well as of American society. He raises important questions about the role of museums in their communities. Those questions are relevant both to the past and the present. Thus, this book deserves the attention of historians as well as museum professionals and, indeed, anyone who enjoys museums.

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