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## Whose Museums?

Robert Coles

"This museum belongs to you," I heard an earnest, conscientious official of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts tell a group of schoolchildren in 1981, and he obviously felt in his heart and believed in his mind what he said. As if to make clear his sincerity, he offered an explanation of his assertion—he told his listeners, a mix of black and white girls and boys around ten years old, that the museum where they then sat, seemingly attentive, was "open to everyone" and, playing on that phrase to escalate its significance, "meant for everyone." The children weren't about to question that declaration; in fact, I had begun to notice, they had their own shrewd ways of paying more attention to one another than to any well-intentioned adult who addressed them. They winked, or smiled, or frowned—facial maneuvers meant to tell their seated friends and neighbors, rather than the few standing adults, what was crossing their minds. When the above remarks were spoken, I noted a number of raised eyebrows and a grimace or two. I wondered what those youngsters meant through such signaling.

A few days later, as I talked with some of those children (whom I was getting to know in the course of a study I was doing on school desegregation and its impact on those taking part in it), I asked about that visit to the museum—what various children experienced, chose to remember, and had to say. A sturdy, athletic black boy, from whom I did not expect any great flowering of fond memories about that museum visit, was at pains to let me know that he had, in fact, had a most memorable time: "I've never been to such a place. I never knew there was such a place. They had all those pictures, and they showed them to us. Then they brought us to a room and they said we could come back—anytime. I thought to myself, sure thing, tomorrow! They kept saying we should make the place our home, and I thought, wow, one room in this place is bigger than anyone's home I've seen.

"The pictures were nice. We saw so many, you forget a lot. There was one I remember—of George Washington, because George is my name, too, and my daddy was born in Washington, and my mom, too, and we go there a lot. When we got back to school, the teacher asked us what we saw, and I told her, and she said there's a lot of museums in Washington, too, and I should go see them. I didn't tell her, but that's not high on my list. When I go, I go to see my cousins, and there's usually a basketball game they're in at their high school.

"I'm not a guy who ever was very good in art. I used to like to draw the sky and the sun, I remember that—mainly because it was easy, to tell you the truth. I had trouble



drawing people. I couldn't get it straight, how to do that. I'd always mess up. We had this teacher in the third grade, and she was a nut about detail. She always used that word and said that we should put lots of 'detail' into what we were drawing. I never could figure out what she meant, until one day she came to my desk and sat down with me, and she showed me how I could put in clouds, all different kinds of them, and I could give the sun some 'character,' and sure enough, she showed me how. She gave the sun a face, and she used orange and red, as well as yellow, for the rays, and then she put these black marks there, on the sky, the blue, and I remember I didn't know what she was doing, so I told her she was ruining it, my picture, and she said, 'No son, I'm not,' and then she explained it was birds—she was putting all those birds in the sky. That was a great idea! I liked that because I could draw birds—that's easier. So, I drew a lot of skies, and once, in class, the teacher had me show a few of them. She tacked them up on a board, and the kids

laughed, and they clapped, and you know what? One guy said I'd drawn 'us,' and the blue, that's 'them,' and no one knew what he was talking about, but the teacher figured it out real fast, and she said, 'Yes, in a way,' but we couldn't follow her, so she had to back up and explain it to us—that we're the blackbirds, you see, and the white folks, a lot of them have blue eyes, and that's what the guy meant. I don't know what happened to him. His father was 'fancy.' He was aiming to teach in some college, I recall someone told me. They moved away a year or so later. I'll bet *they*, they're the kind who go to those museums a lot. You listen to the people there, and you get the feeling that if one of us folks, a black dude, walked into their place, they'd pin a medal on him and clap their hands off, and they'd be real proud of themselves. But you know what? They'd be nervous, I know they would."

He was not anxious to expand on that last matter. Trying not to appear overly curious, I casually asked him why such nervousness might occur if a young black visited the Boston Museum of Fine Arts—which is, in fact, only a few blocks from a substantial ghetto. He shrugged his shoulders, feigning ignorance. I hesitated to pursue the question any further for fear of offending him. We were no strangers to each other, but I worried that he might feel I was trying to get him to say the obvious. On the other hand, I sensed that he wanted to tell me something, to address the subject more fully, or else he wouldn't have gone as far as he did. So, a bit nervous myself, I asked about the nervousness he had evoked in the scene he had just described. His answer was longer and more wide-ranging than I had anticipated: "It's window dressing they want, that's what I think. You can tell, they're wanting to convince themselves that they're not stuck-up, so they invite all of us kids. It's not just the black folks they try to get to come. They get others, white kids, and those kids aren't going to come back either. They want every school to come visit, and maybe they'll have us there a few times, but if I went alone, I'll tell you, they'd worry I'd be intending to steal their pictures, I'm sure of it! It's their museum, not ours!"

I saw those guards watching over us as if they thought any second we'd pull out our knives or our guns! If we were white kids, they still would be ready to tackle us! They size you up! They have these ideas about you before you even get by the entrance and pay your money, if you're going to pay. We got in free, I think, but they were afraid we might try to take something, and if we'd paid double the admission, they'd still be afraid, I'm sure of it. It makes you want to go away and not come back! That's how it goes, if you're from a family like mine and there's no money, people will look down on you, and no matter how nice one of the teachers is, they'll keep looking down their noses at you, those guards. My daddy says someone who has just a little, he'll be the one to find folks that have less just so he can dump on them!"

By then, needless to say, I was all ears as we both carried the discussion along, he bearing most of the weight in the form of a mighty incisive and clear-headed inquiry into the sociological issues often summarized by such single words as *race* and *class*. A youth not doing well in school, though obviously bright, was letting me know how observant he could be and, beyond that, how analytically perceptive. He had by no means been a mere sheep, taking a prescribed walk through those museum corridors. Perhaps he had been unfair to the intent of his hosts—too quick to condemn them and sadly unwilling to give them credit for comprehending some of the same difficulties he had noticed. When I tried to make that point by acknowledging the truth of his comments while expressing some faith in the favorable possibilities that might arise if he were to make a return visit to the museum by himself, he hesitated, then went along: "I guess it's true. They might be suspicious. They'd follow me around, but they wouldn't try to throw me out, and if I just



kept looking at the pictures, then left, they'd probably ask me to come back *again*, and pretty soon, I'd be a regular customer!"

A charming scenario, I thought, and he could tell by the look on my face that I was pleased. A personal breakthrough, I believed, for him—an enlargement, really, of his social imagination, as well as his moral imagination. Not that he was totally convinced that things would work out that way, and not that I had any right, then or now, to be clapping my hands with the barely concealed, smug satisfaction of noblesse oblige, as experienced by yet another practitioner of "social activism," of "mentoring." (I was working as a volunteer fourth- and fifth-grade teacher in the school he attended.) Still, a lad with plenty of reason for skepticism was able to let his mind wander and wonder, to summon a scene less of harmony and reconciliation than of shared doubt, like breaths mutually held in some hope—a truce of sorts.

*"You listen to the people there, and you get the feeling that if one of us folks, a black dude, walked into their place, they'd pin a medal on him and clap their hands off, and they'd be real proud of themselves."*

maybe, through a school program, the second or third) as was the case for my young friend and teacher. Often enough, we who watch such events are intrigued and pleased. We have known our moments of self-accusation—a dissatisfaction based on the knowledge that we have the run of a place while others, equally entitled to its opportunities and pleasures, are oblivious to what might be theirs too. Or they stay away from, even shun, what they know to exist, having been "taken through," as the expression goes, in the manner my young student experienced: "a cultural experiment program," the museum's officials called it. On the other hand, many of us, like him, can see all too clearly the limits of such well-intentioned efforts and even fathom for ourselves—standing there in those grand halls and those beautifully appointed rooms, with, say, a Renoir or a Gauguin nearby and "lots of furniture from way back" (my student's nice way of telling a friend about a big bunch of French antiques he'd seen)—how indelibly we all get marked by the very dividing elements in our society he had mentioned to me, indirectly, at first, and then with a vivid power that finally brought me up short. No wonder, then, at *our* nervousness, never mind the kind he had experienced for a half a day, then shrugged off. I could easily imagine him saying, "Hey, man, I'll never go back to that scene again!"

Later, more than a little frustrated by the aforementioned swirl of conflicting attitudes or realizations, I turned to a group of children (the youngster quoted here among them) and asked them for their advice. I described the dilemma one of their classmates had posed and noticed that no one was surprised or inclined to take issue with the analysis he had made—no one, that is, except me. *I* was the one who initially felt confronted by that child's unduly harsh and unforgiving, even strident, point of view, hence my hemming and hawing, my anxious inability to know quite what to think or say. As I watched the universal assent in the room, the savvy that greeted my recapitulation not only of an event but of a boy's interpretation of an event, I felt, yet again, that earlier combination of perplexity, melancholy, even shame spawned by an awareness of all that has contributed to such a separation of citizens and the impasse that gets spelled out as racial, social, and cultural—those modifiers that, each one, have so many stories to haunt and bedevil us, despite the victories and achievements of recent decades in a country still the envy of so many the world over.

I often think of the educational moment that student offered me as I walk in one or another museum and take note not only of who is there or who is not there, but of those who are obviously there for the first time (or,

As all that ran across my mind, I threw the class open to the children and awaited their comments and suggestions, for which I'd directly asked. But they were not at all forthcoming during what seemed like an eternity to their teacher. Once they had registered, through lifted eyebrows, tilted heads, knowing smiles, and grim frowns, their street-smart knowledge, they fell into an unyielding silence. I poked at it and prodded it, with my questions and remarks, to no avail. Finally, I was ready to call it quits, apologizing for bringing the entire matter up, and then trying to explain why I had done so. I told the class of my own childhood, of my mother's trips to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts with my brother and me, of the pictures she'd taught us to love, of the moments I, too, had had with those guards, and of my dad's memorable response to my complaint about the guards "following" us around: "They're probably bored, don't you see." The last phrase in

*The enormity and splendor of many museums bears down on the eyes and ears, strained to see and hear so much under such awesome and, yes, constrained or regulated circumstances. But for many children from poor neighborhoods, there has been no introduction to such a world.*

that comment was one he had brought with him from his native England and was now poignantly used—an effort to get me to *see* (as opposed to the offer of a didactic explanation). He went on to ask me to put myself in the shoes of those guards, to think of myself as having to don a uniform, stand all day, look at people with some skepticism, and keep them under scrutiny, all for rather low wages. By the time he'd finished, I wasn't exactly ready to feel sorry for those guards, but I sure knew that I didn't want to be one of them. My dad, seeing that knowledge cross my mind and reveal itself in my lowered eyes, then asked for a bit more—some sense, some understanding, some realization on my part of who those guards might be and why they made their living that way. When he was through and through with me, I was even able to remember the one guard who had been not only courteous (most of them were that) but also instructive to my mother: he'd told her things to tell us and done so, I would later realize, with tact as well as his own kind of intelligent self-assurance.

I guess I had lapsed into more of an extended apologia on behalf of those guards than I had realized, because a voice suddenly interrupted my anxious soliloquy: "You're trying to make us feel sorry for the guards in those places!" I was taken aback and then about to apologize (all too quickly) when another voice was heard: "My dad has a night job. He guards a store, and what your dad said, it's right, it's true." Then, in summation, he stated simply, "That's how it is," responding to the desperate nostalgia of a teacher trying to get something going, himself trying to learn as he got others to learn. Soon, there were plenty of opinions expressed, none more telling, I thought, than that of my first informant: "Well, you see, we've got a long way to go before it's better, but it's nice they have all those pictures hanging there, and maybe they should guard them all the time, *all* the time, or else someone would steal them, and then no one would see them, except the robber, and that wouldn't be fair."

Justice and equality had made an entry into the classroom, even as the guards had become, after a fashion, defenders of that justice rather than gratuitous, condescending agents of privilege, power, and the status quo. These children weren't about to go rushing back to the museum now that we had all made it a successful subject for classroom discussion. But they had used an experience and their memory of that experience in such a way that enabled them to connect one of their parents and his job to what they had seen, not on the walls of a museum but in the flesh, so to speak: a warehouse guard and a museum guard, a black man on the night shift and a white man on the day shift—a



Fred Wilson, *Guarded View*, installation view of mannequins wearing guard uniforms of four New York City museums, Metro Pictures, March 1991

connection, I had begun to understand, that was a kind of “art” all its own, born of all the mixed and sometimes turbulent emotions a visit to the museum could prompt.

Still, those children had given their attention not only to a museum’s guards or even to its pictures. I can, even now, remember the description I heard of the enormous rooms, the marble floors, the hushed silence that threatened to envelop the children, so they felt, and dared in them the urge to make noise as a statement of self-assertion: “It was the hugest place I’ve ever been in,” a girl said, adding, “It was like—well, everyone was holding his breath, and so we were whispering at first, and then we giggled, and then we really spoke up, and then

people would stare at us, and they didn’t stop, but we wouldn’t stop talking either. A friend of mine—she said she wanted to scream so everything would be more ‘real,’ like it is where we live.”

This sense of disparity between the world of museums and that of the ghetto is not, of course, utterly different from a similar sense of incongruity that even young people from well-to-do families might experience. The enormity and splendor of many museums bears down on the eyes and ears, strained to see and hear so much under such awesome and, yes, constrained or regulated circumstances. But for many children from poor neighborhoods, there has been no introduction to such a world, and so a museum visit can prompt a surprised, even stunned reaction: “The steps going upstairs are huge, and they put wood around those pictures, fancy wood frames, and there’s a store, and they have big books, lots of them, and the guards, they’re nervous. Not just about us, but about their bosses. They must own the pictures, and the guards would lose their jobs if anything bad happens.”

That last observation, a child’s intuition, touches on so very much—that the guards (so easily criticized or scapegoated by a new young visitor, because they are *there*, constantly watching and, if necessary, speaking up) are really at the very bottom of a ladder that becomes increasingly invisible, yet powerful, as one climbs the rungs. Needless to say, it is the curators and the trustees who are the “bosses” the boy mentioned—“rich white folks,” he later called them when asked to be more specific. Perhaps the guards’ fierce, fearful possessiveness, which some of the children made a point of citing in their descriptions of museum trips, is not all that unique. Rather, it has to do with those on the top of a hierarchy who convey a particular attitude and set of assumptions, which are most certainly understood by others who work, as the expression goes, down the line.