

# BOOKS

## *Civilizing the Museum: The Collected Writings of Elaine Heumann Gurian*

By Elaine Heumann Gurian

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The recent passing of Stephen Weil, an emeritus scholar at the Smithsonian and the American museum profession's one-man think tank, superego, and progressive prod, has left a vacancy that many have predicted will be impossible to fill. Elaine Gurian, a close friend of Weil's as well as a kindred spirit in her museological concerns, would probably be the first to say she's not a candidate for the role. But on the evidence of her new collection of essays, *Civilizing the Museum: The Collected Writings of Elaine Heumann Gurian*, she proves to be an equally indispensable and eloquent champion of aligning museum practice with museum rhetoric—and of bravely rethinking that rhetoric in the first place.

The book gathers 22 essays written by Gurian between 1981 and 2005 as keynote speeches, book chapters, and journal articles; a few were first published in *Curator*. During that period, Gurian held senior positions at the Boston Children's Museum, the National Museum of the American Indian at the Smithsonian, and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, then began an international consulting career. Readers who encountered the original versions of these pieces over the years may be unprepared for the ethical and pragmatic

punch they pack when taken together, especially with the benefit of Gurian's present-day afterwords and emendations. Her thinking turns out to be all of a piece. Despite the diversity of topics and occasions that prompted these writings and the collection's careful organization into thematic sections (on museums and society, exhibition development, space planning, spirituality, and so on), a single über-argument—or more accurately, an über-vision—emerges.

If, as the twentieth-century British philosopher Isaiah Berlin has it, the world of thinkers is divided up into “hedgehogs” and “foxes”—those who relate everything to a central, totalizing theme and those who pursue a vast variety of seemingly unrelated ideas—then Gurian is certainly a hedgehog. Her tenacity of purpose during the quarter century spanned by these essays is both laudable and remarkable, and it loses nothing from her occasional about-face on a specific position or prescription as the museum scene has changed. Indeed, one of the lessons we can draw from this compilation, and especially from Gurian's newly-written backward glances, is how little the museum scene *has* changed, at least in the areas most important to Gurian: inclusivity and social service. Her call has remained consistent because most of the museum world hasn't heeded it yet. In fact, as she laments, some of the gains she participated in or witnessed have subsequently been lost. In that context, the durability of her ideals is all the more impressive.

For Gurian, the notion of social responsibility is bound up with the very definition of the museum; everything else, including the idea that museums must become more welcoming to all segments of society, can be read as a means to that end. Because museums belong to the class of organizations that exist to transmit cultural information (a class Gurian calls “institutions of memory” and which also includes “libraries, archives, religious organizations, sacred places, elders. . . schools of all kinds, guilds and societies, courts and systems of law, [and] historic houses”), they are essentially civic organizations, mechanisms for gathering people together to study and learn from the past, “alter current understandings accordingly, and pass accumulated wisdom on to the future.” That act of gathering is not incidental to the process. In coming together in a shared public space like a museum—a “congregant space,” in Gurian’s coinage—people learn “the organized consensual rules of interaction” that help maintain civil society. What Gurian is worried about, at the deepest level, isn’t the future of museums, it’s the future of *us*: individuals living in the plural and trying, against our natures, to get along. It’s a somewhat Hobbesian view, at bottom, which is only partially obscured by the liberal optimism Gurian also voices in these pages. We humans “tend to be violent and aggressive,” she writes, and we need those rules and the institutions that teach them in order to “become individually safer, more disciplined and productive, and more communally responsible.”

There’s a tension here. Gurian approvingly cites Michel Foucault and postmodern cultural theory in general on several occasions, for instance when she argues for a broadening of the museum’s univocal and “objective” authority to speak for

its objects and when she calls for museums to become less forbidding to non-users who “worry that they may not behave correctly.” Yet she cherishes museums in no small part for their ability to teach people how to behave correctly—to create the conditions for a coherent and peaceful society. It’s an ideal that carries reminders of late-nineteenth century museum rhetoric about acculturating and elevating the (mostly immigrant) masses to foster a harmonious whole. Certainly the postmodernist critique of museums rejects that implicit power imbalance. The notion of discipline plays a central role in Foucault’s own work, and cultural theorist Tony Bennet has applied it explicitly to museums (whose development he compares with that of prisons).

No reader of Gurian’s essays would confuse her with a conservative, especially since, in museum circles, that term refers to a primary focus on the object and on the inward-looking institutional priorities of scholarship, conservation, and further collection. It’s the progressives, like Gurian and also Weil, who focus on the *use* of those objects and their attendant stories in serving the needs of individuals and communities. But it is interesting to note that this progressive impulse, seen through a wider and perhaps older political lens, can have at its roots an essentially conservative idea: that institutions are necessary to convey the traditions and values of the past and reinforce the norms of positive social conduct. “Societies build these institutions because they reinforce the social contract,” Gurian writes, sounding pretty far from the hippie-era liberal she describes herself as in the book’s introduction. This tension is an example of how subtly Gurian’s writings resist pigeonholing; she has thought too long and well about these issues to produce predictable cant of any political stripe. It is

also, I think, crucial to our understanding of her work, because it's the source of her supremely confident but nuanced vision of what museums ought to look like.

Gurian wants museums to be for everybody. Why, she wonders, should train stations see a broader demographic mix of users pass through their doors than do museums? This makes sense, given her emphasis on congregant activity and social responsibility. Museums can't confer those socializing benefits (nor the more familiar educational ones) on people who don't feel welcome enough to visit or for whom the entry fee is a deterrent. To be museologically disenfranchised is to be socially disenfranchised, not just the other way around.

And Gurian is uncommonly good at intuiting how museums are perceived and experienced by those who do stay away or visit only rarely. Some distrust, or simply find boring, the museum's anonymity and purported neutrality—its reluctance to explain or even acknowledge its own processes and assumptions in, for example, choosing which objects it will display, and more generally its orientation toward “timeless truths and well-researched facts.” Many in the lower economic classes “are skittish about authority and venturing out into unfamiliar environments that have clearly been organized for others.” When it comes to art museums, novice visitors are left to struggle alone with their “lack of understanding of the cultural aesthetics that the art on display either challenges or affirms.”

For some, even the most basic premise of museums—the collection, preservation, and display of artifacts in a place set aside for such a purpose—seems by no means natural, as Gurian learned while working with representatives from Native American communities during the development of the

National Museum of the American Indian. Songs, stories, or dances can be more important than physical objects; the spiritual properties that make some physical objects important can be transferred to successor objects, for instance when the first object wears out (problematizing Western notions of “original” and “authentic” upon which much museum practice is based); and objects are venerated in their use rather than in defunctionalized display.

Lowering those kinds of inadvertent barriers and making museums more egalitarian is the idea behind most of Gurian's challenges and questions to the profession. She wants museums—or at least many of them, since variety is also to be cherished—to become more “lively, funny, noisy, inclusionary places that offer human interactions, civic discourse, and social service in addition to their more expected exhibitions and programs.” She wants them to explore eliminating entry fees and redesign their policies and spaces to encourage casual, everyday use, since “the museum that is used only on special occasions or for an organized day out will never become the forum, the meeting ground, the crossroads, the town square that we are fond of talking about.” She wants museums to pay more attention to how a town square actually works, in part by reading communitarian social theorists such as Jane Jacobs (of the 1960s new urbanism movement), Ray Oldenburg (of “third place” fame), and Robert Putnam (author of *Bowling Alone*).

She wants exhibits to become more passionate, personal, and transparent, adopting explicit points of view and attributing authorship to the curators and designers responsible. Reminding us of the radical, hands-on exhibit principles developed by Exploratorium founder Frank Oppenheimer and Boston Children's Museum

director Michael Spock (and nicely linking those principles to the power-to-the-people politics of the day), Gurian argues that exhibits should facilitate a wider range of possible visitor receptions—including skepticism, which for Gurian is a healthy sign that the visitor is an active partner in the experience and not a “passive student to be preached to.”

Above all, Gurian wants museums to more consciously and creatively embrace their role as social service organizations in the broadest sense. “What if our organizations intentionally enhanced the formation of group cohesion and responsibility?” Gurian asks. “Docent-led groups in historic houses could begin by having individuals introduce themselves to each other.” Museums could provide “informal areas for public debate,” and become quicker themselves about responding to contemporary issues with programs or exhibitions. They could also, if they took their civic role more seriously, participate in the unsexy activities we associate with the phrase “social service,” such as blood drives and voter registration.

So what is the status of objects and collections—of content generally—in Gurian’s vision of the museum? Avoiding dogmatism and binary oppositions, she argues on behalf of an additive conception of the museum’s mission:

I do not advocate that we discard the traditional elements of museums—collections and their preservation; contemplation; and excellence—and the methods of presentation these values represent. We must treasure the old and honor the elder while steadily integrating the new to make museums more central and relevant to a society in which we want to live. However, we cannot allow tradition to cover for intractability.

She understands that not every museum will, or even should, embrace community-building to the same degree or in the same way. A few should remain “temples of the contemplative,” although this will also mean they remain “the provinces of the initiated.” But she hopes that most museums will question the old assumptions. “Does contemplation need to be a silent and antisocial activity?” Can learning take place with “joy and humor,” and can the institution be associated with pleasure? The object is a necessary part of the equation, but it’s not enough. Museums must become places that synthesize opposites—“factual and emotive material,” rationality and spirituality, object and story, learning and gathering—in order to “become more effective storehouses of cultural information.” Doing so will further blur the boundaries between museums and other kinds of organizations, from libraries and memorials to public parks and shopping malls. But that’s all for the good, in Gurian’s view. She suggests that museums’ struggles over the last few decades to differentiate themselves from everyday culture have only helped entrench them as bastions of irrelevance. In order to truly be of civic use, they have to be *of* the culture as well as *about* it.

It’s that insistence on duality and complexity, summed up in the title of one of the essays here, “The Importance of ‘And,’” that makes Gurian’s case so compelling. It’s also what sets her apart from other museum observers who have touched on some of the same themes, including David Carr (who would agree with Gurian, I suspect) and James Cuno (who would not). She lets us follow her from assertion to second thought, thereby modeling the intellectual transparency she demands of museums. “Trial and revision allow one the freedom to be wrong, and we are often

wrong!” she writes in a passage about exhibit design that also points to one of her own strengths. And she’s tougher on herself than on others; when she criticizes museums she says “we,” and when she praises she names names.

*Civilizing the Museum* does have flaws, notably its redundancy. We might expect some repetition from essays written for different audiences over the years, but we can also wish that Gurian’s editors had culled some of the many references in the text to the same facts and examples. Word that the demographics of U.K. museum audiences didn’t change much after free admission was instituted is interesting the first time but not the fifth; certainly we don’t need to read that news twice in the same essay, as happens in one case.

But that amounts to a mere annoyance. This is a rich vein of thoughtful analysis and prescription, rooted in the realities of museum practice and illuminated with telling anecdotes and lessons from Gurian’s career. She has given the museum field the gift of making its assumptions seem

strange, which is a prerequisite to changing them. This is something Weil also did well, but by different means. Where Weil’s style was rhetorically sly and businesslike, Gurian’s is direct and often personal. She locates the source of her concern for the excluded in her biography. The daughter of German-Jewish immigrants born in the 1930s, she grew up around adults “worried about their trapped families in Holocaust Europe. . . [and] constantly fearful that every Christian they met, at any activity, could become an irrational enemy in the blink of an eye.” Gurian’s mother, she remembers, was particularly afraid of public spaces where she would encounter strangers. “In retrospect,” Gurian writes in her introduction, “I have unconsciously dedicated my career to making museums safe and inviting enough so that my reluctant mother, now dead, might have chosen to enter.” So the title of this collection resonates in both directions: Gurian has been working to civilize the museum in part so that the museum can help civilize the society we strangers share.