

Inside the Cabinet of Curiosities

Architecture provides an apt metaphor for envisioning a reenergized U.S. cultural-diplomacy home base. Today's frequent open floor plans, widespread redefinition of "living room," and home offices suggest a world whose boundaries are different from those of 1950. And as for today's museum, sophisticated electronics and visitor-friendly displays have replaced many of "Please Do Not Touch" signs and shrine-like cases of yesterday¹.

The sentient U.S. practitioner of cultural diplomacy recognizes that the ways and places in which Americans live, work, and experience the arts have changed since 1950. We understand that cultural diplomacy endures even amid a lack of support for federal cultural diplomacy programs² and shrinking finances for private initiatives³. We think about the types of initiatives that defined the Cold War years and we think about where cultural diplomacy lives today.

Obviously the virtual world does its work as people all over the world get to know each other from home. And museums, in their eclectic modern incarnation, engage hearts and minds of Americans and many foreign visitors in issues and topics that clearly transcend national borders.

And so in these two places—home and museums—cultural diplomacy would seem to be alive and well. But just as the architecture of American lives has changed, so has the look and feel of cultural diplomacy. In some cases, chaos prevails, and in others careful curation drives the process. As difficult as always to measure, cultural awareness and understanding seem to be flourishing.

So revisiting the architecture metaphor, one might observe that today's hosts, at home and in the museum, have found new ways to make their guests feel at home. Wordlessly gesturing a guest toward a giant flatscreen TV in the living room might bewilder a guest from an earlier generation. Asking bold questions about a fellow Xbox player might provoke a parent in the next room. Or inviting children to climb all over a museum display might horrify a grandparent. But such host behaviors are based on "understanding visitor behavior," as a museum director might be quick to point out.

¹ Associated Press, "Art Museums Retiring the 'Do Not Touch Signs,'" *The Augusta Chronicle*, Feb. 11, 2006, Jan. 2, 2013 http://chronicle.augusta.com/stories/2006/02/11/art_54900.shtml

² Natalia Grincheva, "U.S. Arts and Cultural Diplomacy: Post-Cold War Decline and the Twenty-First Century Debate (Washington, D.C.: American University), p. 172

³ Interview András Szántó of the Sotheby's Institute of Art in New York, *Brunswick Review*, Issue 4, Summer 2011
http://www.brunswickgroup.com/files/html/brunswickreviewIssue4/assets/pdf/cultural_diplomacy.pdf

In fact, just as before, many host activities are designed to make the visitor feel to be part of a familiar environment. And hosts of the home and the museum very often consider this to be an overriding aim. Certainly, a curator might seek to shake up visitor thinking, but more often the nice welcoming signs and engaging displays do not exactly chase away guests.

Contemporary museums bring to bear a vast array of experts, from architects to educators to curators to audience advocates. The modern home may not be as carefully orchestrated but certainly reflects the input of planners whose talents may not have been anticipated back in 1950.

And of course, meanwhile, on the other side of the world, social-media friends and museum partners form another part of the scene. The sheer range of cultural discoveries is as varied as the rooms where these events take place.

Of course not all events are planned and not all are “curated.” U.S. culture is making its way into the Amazon, onto Moscow city streets, onstage in Nairobi, in the marketplace in Dhaka. Chance exchanges via social media are changing lives.

The kinds of cultural exchanges at play lead one to wonder about the role of wonder in modern U.S. cultural diplomacy.

“Porcelain teapots, small medals, intaglio gems, pottery shards, drawn and engraved portraits, masks, carved ivory, pickled monsters, religious utensils, and multicultural remains cacophonously 'chatted' among themselves and with the spectator. Like shapeless pigment stains or confusing blots, their manifest incompleteness precluded incorporation into a seamless narrative and controlling taxonomy. Delighting the amateur whilst defying the classifier, these collections were anamorphic.”

—Barbara Maria Stafford, *Artful Science: Enlightenment Entertainment and the Eclipse of Visual Education*, 1996⁴

Museums may have long abandoned the organizing concept of the *wunderkammer*, or cabinet of curiosities,⁵ but many a veteran tourist can describe the sheer thrill of wandering into unknown cultural territory. Those seeking to build bonds between any two cultures may do well to give the concept of a “wonder room”—a curated microcosm of a culture designed as much to amaze as to educate. The juxtaposition of disparate objects for sensory effect not only captures the eye but also suggests the dynamic nature of culture.

⁴ Barbara Maria Stafford, *Artful Science: Enlightenment Entertainment and the Eclipse of Visual Education* (MIT Press), 1996, p. 238

⁵ Paul Grinke, *From Wunderkammer to Museum* (Bernard Quaritch Ltd), 2006

Obviously, many countries struggle with the sense of feeling invisible to the United States.

Take the Caucasus country of Azerbaijan, for example, which, despite a vibrant and distinctive culture is off the radar for many Americans. Certainly few Americans can point out Azerbaijan on the map, can cite Azerbaijan's dominant role in the design of "Oriental carpets," or can recognize the sophisticated strains of the Azerbaijani folkloric *mugham* idiom. Many ironic twists of history have made it so that the word *Azerbaijan* does not appear where it should in carpet showrooms, museums, and other bastions of culture.

Even if the culture of Azerbaijan, or, say, of Kyrgyzstan or Mongolia or Kazakhstan, were to be fully recognized and integrated into U.S. museums, the presentation likely would lack the, in the absence of a better word, idiosyncratic context needed in order for the uninitiated to understand the underpinnings of the country's traditions. For sure, a Museum of [Your Country Here] History in the United States would go a long way in conveying the country's portfolio and contributions to world heritage. Such a museum done well would fill in the gaps in American knowledge and would help erase some of the distortions wrought by the traditional mostly European orientalist approach, which is felt to exoticize, romanticize, and otherwise change Eastern realities.

Those who seek to connect Americans and Easterners and the United States and Eastern countries via cultural diplomacy recognize the need for Eastern cultures to have places, real and/or virtual, that cannot seem to disappear in a larger narrative. These presentations need to be a place where onlookers can recognize an entirely "new" context, where subtleties make themselves understood, where others more powerful cannot intrude on or stamp out insider and outsider realities of the culture.

In the information age, all eyes remain on the Web. And while virtual museums and exhibits abound, the true "blockbusters" with "lines around the block" are the viral videos and memes. The explosion of creativity on the web, along with trends of globalization in general, have fed increasingly sophisticated and/or hungry audiences. The definition of culture, and the definition of curator, have been stretched in so many directions.

The word *wunderkammer* has made it back into the lexicon of the cultural world. What is YouTube if not a series of *wunderkammern*, curated by an unprecedented range of cultural "practitioners"?⁶

It is perhaps ironic that bricks-and-mortar museums have worked so hard in the past 20 years to become more scientific in their approach to engaging visitors. While taking on social, international, and global issues, they take pains to learn what visitors already know, want to

⁶ audreyobscura, DIY Wunderkammer, Jan. 2, 2013, <http://www.instructables.com/id/DIY-Wunderkammer/>

know, need to know, and so forth. And they use techniques designed to target intended audiences.

YouTube contributors spring from many sources, from the slick marketing world to the slacker universe. Like the *wunderkammer* of old, YouTube manifests curation but also a kind of infectious chaos. In this wonder room environment, being made to feel comfortable is not necessarily the aim. Unlike museums, the actors of YouTube and they like generally do not classify themselves into carefully delineated departments or categories.⁷

As museums and social media borrow from each other, cabinets of curiosities are again seen as a viable means of engaging one culture in another. Museums seek to capture some of the immediacy and the evident spontaneity of the web world. They recognize, for example, the power of the web to engage via spectacular effects and to avoid being weighed down by necessary contextual presentations--context that the visitor can access elsewhere at the click of a button.

On the virtual side, places such as YouTube generate a sense of place even in the absence of four walls. Such social media have found ways, by invoking wonder and even a sense of shock, to compete with the experience of walking into an awe-inspiring museum gallery.

Connecting Americans with other cultures takes visionaries who know how to blend the web's manifesto of amazement with museum's more understated creed of reaching out to each visitor on multiple levels. Artifacts in cases, no matter how carefully interpreted and contextualized, most often will fail to capture the individual roller coaster of other countries' histories and the specific cultural meanings of certain touchstones.

At one time museums might have thought that the best way of connecting Americans with another country would have been to provide sensory experiences that meet the qualifications of museum "interactives." But the intention behind the use of museum interactives must be reassessed in the wake of new and emerging technologies. Perhaps the purpose should not be to immerse the visitor in cultural experiences. Perhaps the goal of stimulating the visitor into a sense of experience should instead be a goal to reinforce the visitor's sense of distance from the target culture—to serve as a cultural electric shock that precedes a journey of discovery.

The forces that have obscured many cultures from Americans' view are overwhelming, from orientalism to rich and powerful enemies to a "faraway" location to outsider cultural hegemony. The forces that compete for Americans' attention are legendary. Representing these cultures will require a dramatic entrance onto the cultural stage—entrance into one kind of wonder room or another.

⁷ About Wunderkammer, Wunderkammer magazine, Jan. 2, 2013
http://www.wunderkammermag.com/invis/%5Bfield_review-raw%5D

Those of determined to make such cultural connections are considering the *wunderkammer* approach of yore alongside all of the latest museum techniques in our own practice of cultural diplomacy. In the faces and voices of Americans encountering other cultures for the first time, we have captured not just pleasure but also surprise. We believe that wonder is uniquely equipped to inspire Americans toward a deep, long-term connection with seemingly “foreign” cultures.

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