I have been asked to “rethink” the “functions” of an art museum library. To do this it is necessary to think about museums and their staffs, and what is more to think about them honestly and frankly. “Things and actions are what they are, and the consequences of them will be what they will be: Why then should we desire to be deceived?” (Bishop Butler’s Sermon on Balaam.)

Different as art museums are from one another, they are alike in one basic but rarely recognized aspect. Museums are not mere buildings, not mere collections; they are groups of men who use those things as tools for public enlightenment. These groups of men are the museum staffs. What the staffs need most for their task is rarely new buildings, new money, or new collections—but all the time they desperately need an influx of understanding and real ideas, things, that is, that cannot be wangled, that cannot be borrowed, that cannot be given by donors, and that cannot be bought with money. Understanding and ideas exist only as part of the characters of men who have won them by patient, passionate, and hard analytical study of ideas. To a great extent our museums have been dominated by men who have been so busy with their wangling and their pedantry that they have had no time to waste on basic ideas. Practically all the trouble in which our museums find themselves can be traced back to this simple fact. And the crops of trouble have barely begun to come in.

The most efficient tools the world has ever discovered for the gathering and dissemination of knowledge and ideas are books and photographs. Because of this, the physical thing that distinguishes the real museums from the institutions that masquerade under the name is that they have libraries in being.

As no museum can be better than its staff, and no staff can be better than its books, the primary necessity for intellectual efficiency in a museum is not merely a good special library but the best library of general ideas it can possibly afford. Furthermore, as no man can read effectively in the intervals between appointments and telephone calls, museum libraries to be real must lend their books freely to their staffs. In this respect there is no difference between a museum and a university. So long as a museum’s library lacks books that should be of intellectual value to its staff it is a betrayal of the museum’s public function to buy books for any other group or purpose. Books of wisdom and ideas are not luxuries in a museum, they are absolute necessities. If their presence does not necessarily make a museum good, their absence definitively blocks the way to its becoming good.

It may be good commercial advertising to talk as much as we do about the educational work done by our art museums, but unless museum education begins and continues at home it is certain to be frivolous. It is said that men who borrow their opinions never repay their debts, but what can be said of men who don’t even know that what they call their opinions are merely a jumble of patched, worn, and inconsistent second-hand slogans of unknown parentage and previous use? As remarked by Professor Tawney, “Ideas have a pedigree which, if realized, would often embarrass their exponents.”

There can be little doubt that the museum
Pythagoras. Sculpture from the Royal Portal of Chartres Cathedral. Reproduced from Étienne Houvet's “Monographie de la Cathédrale de Chartres”
staffs of the country—and when I say staff I include the director and the last little child in the educational department—are composed of adequately amiable, energetic, and well-meaning people; but also there can be very little doubt that we of the museum staffs are a frighteningly woolly-minded and illiterate group. One test of it is that so many of our mouths are full of hybrid, ugly words without meaning. Jargons are never necessary for basic ideas on a museum level. Just compare the sweet sound and sense of Hylas and Philonous or the poignant phrases of Pascal with the ignorant, formless nonsense of so much of the talk and writing that come out of our museums.¹

The simple fact is that we of the museums are so busy about silly things that we are not on our intellectual jobs. So far as I am aware none of our museum libraries provides the opportunity to understand the intellectual and emotional backgrounds of our subjects, and on the whole it does not seem that we care very much whether they do or not. To carry the matter further and strike at the very heart of the business, we have little acquaintance with either analytical philosophy or English literature, that is, we have no habit of reading and wrestling with the books that are the only sources of the ability to think critically, talk simply, and write clear, cogent, persuasive English. In the good old-fashioned sense of the word we are not humane, and with rare individual exceptions we make slight effort to become so. The responsibility for it all lies on a few obvious shoulders.

The only cures for this are books and books and still more books, and time and active directorial leadership and encouragement for our staffs to become familiar with the ideas that are between their covers. As Montaigne said, “La verité et la raison sont communes à un chascun, et ne sont non plus à qui les dictes premiérement, qu’à qui les dict aprez;

¹ One museum man told me that he knew about Pascal and Philonous, but asked who was Hylas?
ce n'est non plus selon Platon que selon moy, puisque luy et moy l'entendons et voyons de même."

To judge by what I am told, our smaller museum libraries are pitiful. The few larger ones that I have seen contain mixed lots of elementary textbooks, cyclopedias, sales and collection catalogues, German periodicals, and special studies; but, even so, I doubt if a dozen of our museums, large and small, contain both Thieme-Becker and Pauly-Wissowa, those Poor Manuals of our trade. This, however, is not the worst of it.

The study of books specifically about artists and works of art does not provide a background of humane knowledge and understanding. These books tell no more about art and its values and human implications than the bibliographies and auction records of first editions tell about the glory and the wonder of English poetry. Our museum libraries do not contain the books of the humanities and our staffs are too poor and too lacking in interest to buy them for themselves. The result at best can only be described politely as pedantic barbarism, though there are other and shorter words for it.

As examples of the kind of books I refer to: there are four little texts that go closer to the Greek mind than all the learned books about Greek archaeology put together—the Anthology, the Peloponnesian War, the Theaetetus, and the Timaeus. As an introduction to the study of Greek art they are infinitely more apposite than any wallowing around in a lot of German bookkeeping and guesswork. It's an easy bet that most of our museums have none of them. The best single book for an understanding of Michelangelo is doubtless the little volume of his Rhymes, just as the only essential book for an understanding of Dürrer is Lange and Fuhse. I wonder how many of our museums have both? Among the best writers on the French renaissance mind are Du Bellay, Palissy, Pasquier, Rabelais, and Montaigne; but how many of our mu-
seum libraries contain them? When it comes to a matter of such immediate technical artistic interest as perspective, do you suppose there is a single museum that has the basic texts of Alberti, Piero della Francesca, Pel-lerin, Dürer, Cousin, Danti, Guidobaldo, and Bosse? Our shelves sag under the torpid weight of learned books about the baroque; but how many of our museums boast copies of Cartari, Valeriano, and Ripa, let alone Father Paul’s history, Teresa’s Life and Way of Perfection, and the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius? When it comes to the serious books of the present time do you suppose that there are two great art museums in all this broad land that have Whitehead’s Science and the Modern World, Haldane’s Life, Mechanism, and Personality, Tawney’s Religion and the Rise of Capitalism, and Rashdall’s Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages? Or a single art museum that has either Meyerson’s De l’Explication dans les sciences or Mach’s Erkenntnis und Irrtum? I wonder how many members of our museum staffs have read Riegli’s Stillfragen.

The fact is that our museum libraries are the standing proofs of how tragically we have misunderstood the essential nature and problem of our calling. The intellectual poverty of our libraries is our own fault and especially that of our directors, who have had the immediate control over them; and it can be blamed on no other people. We have made our museum libraries in our own narrowly acquisitive and broadly ignorant and inhumane images.

If you have any doubt about this you have only to look at the catalogues of our collections and special exhibitions and at our explanatory labels. They show as nothing else the way our minds run. What conceivable bearing on art or culture have the facts that an object once belonged to the Duke of Dufflebury, that it was shown at the Sanitary Fair, that it was in such and such auctions, and that Doctors Kleinwitz and Rondedecuir disagree as to the year in which it was made? Such stuff as this is neither scholarship nor learning, it is mere bookkeeping, and it is awfully dull and stupid and entirely aside from all cultural issues. Of course, we of the profession have to labor with things of that kind, just as we have to wash our teeth and make out our income tax returns; but because we have nothing more than that to tell the public as a justification of our belief that the object is important or has a serious cultural value, the public yawns at us and goes to a movie or a baseball game. And the public is right.

Overwhelmed by the distant sound and weight of German specialized “learning,” we, like the Germans themselves, have missed the point of the art we purport to serve. As was said by Georg Brandes, when writing about Nietzsche in 1888, “To have learned much and to know much about learning is, as he shows, neither a necessary means to culture nor an evidence of culture: both go wonderfully with barbarism” (Menschen und Werke, Berlin, 1900, p. 143). Logically and practically, all our cataloguing schemes and objective scientific methods can bring no more understanding and appreciation of art than of Château Margaux or of the lines beginning

“Love, thou art Absolute, sole Lord
Of Life and Death.”

The factual details of an artist’s life are probably the least interesting and least important things we can know about him. The thing of real importance is the intellectual, imaginative background which formed him and out of which he came. And that we make no attempt to become acquainted with.

We have squabbled so busily about the correct ways of making our entries in the inventories that we have lost all first-hand acquaintance with the adventure and the wonder of the world. Some of us have actually come to think adventures and wonders are merely headings for accounts in museum ledgers. In our concentration on the bookkeeping of the bills of lading we have forgotten how to understand the far-venturing captains who carried the cargoes and knew the Antipodes.

The only doors through which we can regain that understanding are those of our museum libraries, and yet we keep those doors
tight shut to everything but the technology of the physical object, the dead pages of the inventories, and the periodical flow of professional advertisement and polemic. If we are ever to succeed in our cultural task we have got to break open the doors and the windows of our libraries and let in, like a fresh wind, the books that lead to a critical examination of ideas and to cultural and historical understanding. Two or three thousand carefully selected volumes would do the trick amazingly well, they would take up comparatively little space, and they would cost less than two dud special exhibitions or one half-baked experiment in education.

We need to know the books that are philosophically critical of modes of thought and assumptions, and we need to know the old road books that guided the great artists on their way to Xanadu, Arcadia, and Heaven. Without those knowledges all we have to say is words and then nothing.

If I have seemed to speak bitterly it is because of the sickening realization of my own failure in that critical and never ending search for understanding which is the only excuse for a job in a museum.

Savonarola writing in his cell. Woodcut from Savonarola's "Libro . . . della Vita Christiana. . . ." Florence, 31 October, 1496