6-1997

History, Mission, and Visitors at the Kalamazoo Valley Museum in Kalamazoo, Michigan: A Study of the Museum as Cultural Practice

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HISTORY, MISSION, AND VISITORS AT THE KALAMAZOO VALLEY MUSEUM IN KALAMAZOO, MICHIGAN: A STUDY OF THE MUSEUM AS CULTURAL PRACTICE

by

Lynnette Z. King

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of The Graduate College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts Department of Anthropology

Western Michigan University Kalamazoo, Michigan June 1997
This study investigates the interrelationship between the museum, its mission, and its visitors. The history of museums in general and the Kalamazoo Valley Museum in particular shows how the mission developed in relationship to culture, community, and individuals. Observations and ethnographic interviews of visitors and staff, as well as drawings made by school children who had visited the museum were used to identify viewers’ perceptions of the museum and its mission. The museum is guided by an official stated mission as well as various staff and administrative interpretations of the mission. Although the museum and its mission have changed through time according to changing contexts, visitors understand the museum by bringing exhibits into their own personal framework of experiences and expectations. This work contributes to other research in the area of museum and visitor studies and offers feedback to the Kalamazoo Valley Museum as to the success of its efforts.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My greatest debt goes to the many people who had a role in this study. I am grateful to the administration and staff at the Kalamazoo Valley Museum, in particular Patrick Norris, who have made this study possible. They made my time at the museum both informative and pleasurable.

I am also grateful to the members of my thesis committee—Dr. Erika Loeffler, Dr. Ann Miles, and Dr. Art Helweg—for guidance, advice, and willingness to participate. During the rough stages of this thesis, I benefited greatly from the comments of Erika Loeffler, whose patience and persistence I greatly appreciate. I also thank Dr. Bob Sundick for his support and endurance through the course of my program.

A last note of thanks to the people behind the scenes of this project: my family, my children, and the assistance of their many caretakers, drivers, and teachers.

Lynnette Z. King
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INTRODUCTION

Purpose of Study

Today there are approximately 5,000 museums in America. According to the "American Association of Museums Report (1992), an estimated 565.8 million people visited museums in 1989" (Falk 1995:41). The average number of annual visitors to the Smithsonian Institution is 26 million (Adams 1994:6). Museums have flourished and become a large part of American culture and tourism and a popular medium of communication. However, museum-going is only an occasional activity for most Americans (Falk 1995:57). It is estimated that less than 40% of the American population visit museum-like settings at least once per year (DiMaggio and Ostrower 1990, cited in Falk 1995:57). Therefore, museums must continuously work for their share of Americans' leisure time.

It is obvious that museums are not static institutions and that they are in a new predicament today. Museum professionals face insecurities concerning their possible replacement by large entertainment spectacles like Disney (MacDonald 1987; Terrell 1991). Competition for grants, changes in tax laws, and fixed endowment earnings all mean that income is increasingly a problem. Therefore, museums must concern themselves with market demands; visitors have become consumers, exhibits have become commodities, and visitor studies have become market studies (Greene 1996:272; Harris 1990b; Pearce 1991b). Tensions between public culture and academic culture continue, as well as questions about how to face pluralism, repatriation, and multiculturalism. One way to examine the dynamic
relationship between the public and the museum is to analyze the way the mission of the museum has changed through time and to observe the way museum visitors and staff perceive the mission.

The mission was chosen as a starting point in this study because it is a statement of purpose that guides museum practices so as to attract visitors and elicit specific kinds of thinking, feeling, or acting among visitors. Mission statements are clues to the human principles that organize exhibitions. Indeed, the mission itself is an ideal, and an investigation into visitor perceptions of the museum and its mission identifies how people view cultural ideals.

In this thesis I offer an examination of the way the museum and its mission have changed through time. Even though many people visit museums, few consciously analyze their experience. Therefore, in addition, I show that although the museum and its mission have changed through time according to respective historical contexts, visitors understand the museum by bringing exhibits into their own personal framework within the limits of the museum structure. A small body of research looks at the way visitors personalize museum exhibits (Falk and Dierking 1992; Franco 1994; Kahn 1995; MacDonald 1987; Perin 1992), and this paper contributes to research on visitors’ actual perceptions as they relate to the Kalamazoo Valley Museum. By identifying individual perceptions of the museum, including visitors, staff, administrators, and children, I hope to contribute to the on-going dialogue about the visitor and the museum as well as give feedback to the Kalamazoo Valley Museum as to the success of its efforts.

The focus of this research is on the history and mission the Kalamazoo Valley Museum and how its visitors and staff perceive it. The Kalamazoo Valley Museum is a recently built public museum focusing on history, science, and technology. This
small local museum presents to the public stories of the growth of the city of Kalamazoo, its local businesses and citizens, and recent technological and scientific innovations. It is also a relic of the museums of the past, and visitor experience as well as the exhibits themselves remains marked by continuous interest in the control, status, curiosity, communication, and desire to organize knowledge and objects.

Methodology

The setting of this research is the Kalamazoo Valley Museum in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Between 1984 and its reopening in a new building on February 17, 1996, it has undergone significant changes in administration, governance, exhibitions, location, staff, size, and focus. For example, the Kalamazoo Valley Museum had no formal mission statement from when its small collection began in 1881 until 1985, when the Museum staff of 10 developed its mission statement so the Museum would be recognized by the American Association of Museums. This Museum was chosen for research because of its size, location, and focus. Small size and close proximity made it possible to complete a study in a satisfactory time frame, while the Museum's recent changes made it possible to examine the interrelationships between change, mission, and perceptions.

My initial research questions addressed how the mission of the Museum has changed through time, what the context of the mission has been, what has influenced its changes, and how visitors perceive the Museum and its mission. This required historical, qualitative, and ethnographic analysis. The most significant element of this research is identifying visitors responses to the Kalamazoo Valley Museum and how these are related to the administrative mission.
Situating the Museum in its historical context is essential to show how different levels of analysis are interrelated to each other. Museums today have not developed linearly, but each museum has selected from a range of choices provided by various interest groups. Therefore, museums are marked by local influences as well as the intellectual idea of "the museum." An historical perspective is also important since museums involve the acquisition, conservation, study, presentation, and communication of history.

The first level of data collection, therefore, included a review of how museums and visitors have been approached theoretically in the past, the development of the museum in general, and the changes within the Kalamazoo Valley Museum in particular. Sources used included old newspapers articles, primary documents in community libraries, and local materials related to the community library and museum.

In addition, this study follows others who have conducted ethnographic research of museums (for example, Falk 1995; Macdonald 1995; Perin 1992), and is based on participant observation. Participant observation requires the researcher to get close to the activities and everyday experiences of other people. Accordingly, I spent many hours in the Museum observing and talking to visitors and staff.

Ethnographic information was collected from 33 interviews with visitors, 25 hours of interviews and observation of visitors and staff, and 64 drawings and comments by school children about the Museum. I approached visitors as they wandered about the Museum. When I talked to a viewer, I used an interview guide but not a questionnaire. The guide gave me direction during conversation, without overly structuring it. Interviews thus were informal and impromptu and resembled a dialogue more than a question-and-answer session. I began by asking visitors their
age, level of education, occupation, location they traveled from, size of their household, number and make-up of their group, and impressions and attitudes concerning the Museum. I inquired about the activity of museum-going with specific questions about why visitors came and what they planned to do at the Museum. Each interview lasted approximately 10–15 minutes depending on the responsiveness and interest of participants. The final number of interviews was determined by the point at which new data began to repeat previously collected information. I also talked to administrators and staff about their views of the Museum’s mission. These were prearranged by telephone and also semistructured.

Combined with interviews were close observations of viewers as they explored the Museum setting. This is the least invasive form of research and permitted me to observe visitors' reactions to displays, interactions between various groups of people, and spontaneous verbal reactions to what visitors saw.

A final element of the ethnographic part of this research is the drawings and comments collected from students who visited the Museum with their teachers. I met with a group of 64 elementary and junior high school students in their classrooms after their Museum visit. I asked students in grades kindergarten through four to draw a picture of what they saw. Then I asked them to explain the picture to me while I wrote their responses. Students in grades five through eight were asked to write what they remembered about their Museum visit without making a drawing.

This research was qualitative, which is a departure from the traditional analysis of museum visitors. Quantitative research on museums is typically conducted through formal written or telephone surveys in order to acquire demographic and responsive data. Studies arranged by the Kalamazoo Valley Museum like the Joint Survey Project: Demographics and Perceptions of Michigan History Museums (Korn
1994) and the Regional Perceptions and Visitation of Seven Cultural Facilities in the Battle Creek and Kalamazoo Metro Area (Crull, Meyers, Moore, and Stokes 1995) are considered helpful for the Museum administration to determine if its goals are being met. However, quantitative data still require interpretation and leave many questions unanswered. For example, in the Randi Korn (1994: iv) study, the top three reasons why people visited the Museum were “(1) to have a social outing with family and friends (56%), (2) to learn about history (48%), and (3) to be in a special/beautiful place (25%).” These three top choices were determined from a questionnaire in which interviewees had a choice of 11 reasons. This information does not tell us why families choose the Museum out of a range of possible places to go out together, why people choose to look at history at the Museum instead of on the Discovery Channel, or why they find this way to enjoy a beautiful place instead of going to a park. In other words, quantitative studies do not address the reasoning behind visitor responses.

On the other hand, qualitative research attempts to get at information outside the range of formal surveys. Open-ended questions permit more in-depth responses with the possibility of attaining new information or making new connections (Shafer-Thyen 1996:3). For example, student drawings evoke spontaneous and reflective expressions of children. Specifically in this study, qualitative methods were useful in uncovering viewers’ own perceptions of the Museum and its purposes. This, in turn, enables us to generate theories about museum-visitor interaction. Another aim of qualitative research is to explore the relationships between data, as opposed to focusing on one person, group or set of data. It attempts to do justice to the astonishing variations among visitor perceptions, recognizing that visitors do not have one general voice but many voices, and that both collective and individual
voices need to be heard in order to understand visitor attitudes and opinions about the museum.

Several problems were encountered in data collection. Some visitors were very brief and even vague in their responses. They were at times critical of the Museum building or the number and condition of exhibits, but rarely of the content. The exception to this was a few visitors who complained of a lack of depth of the material in the Museum. The administration has observed that the higher the education, the more likely the visitor is to be disappointed in the depth of an exhibit (Patrick Norris, Director, Kalamazoo Valley Museum, personal communication, 1997). Not one visitor examined the contextual, political, or cultural content of the exhibits. Macdonald (1995:15) noted in her qualitative study of 42 groups at a science museum that when asked directly, visitors will question the universalism, interests, and consequences of science in general, but they do not extend such questioning to the exhibition itself. Since responses were repetitive and short, I relied on observations and student drawings in order to get at the underlying themes.

Another problem became apparent in collecting data from the school children in their classrooms. Often the teachers had their own idea of what the children ought to think about the Museum and attempted to direct the students' responses. Although I appreciated the teachers' help with students, I also could not eliminate their strong influence over students. Student drawings were the most natural for the children and the least influenced by the teacher. In contrast, older students who wrote more about the Museum tended to give textbook definitions of "the museum."
THEORETICAL AND HISTORICAL ORIENTATION

Theoretical Background

Until 1982 there was very little critical research on the role of the museum (Greene 1996:267). Anthropologists examined the relationship between material culture and society in general (Appadurai 1986; Bourdieu 1984; Douglas and Isherwood 1979), but museum studies remained within the museum profession where most of the work that was done discussed exhibition procedures or complained about the marginality of the field (Greene 1996:267–268).

Research has recently been extended into a scholarly interest in museums and how they shape visitor perceptions about themselves and others (for recent overviews see Greene 1996; Hooper-Greenhill 1992; Jones 1993; Kaplan 1994; Karp and Lavine 1991; Karp, Kreamer, and Lavine 1992). Museum analysis, now undertaken by groups of scholars from such disciplines as American studies, anthropology, archeology, history, material culture studies, museum and visitor studies, philosophy, and sociology, is quite broad in scope. A number of studies focus on political struggles over museum exhibits or the relationship between exhibition and national and regional identity (Ames 1986, 1992; Broyles 1989; Handler 1985, 1988; Kaplan 1994). Other works look at the museum as a site of the consumption of popular cultural ideals (Macdonald 1995; Miller 1987). Still others examine struggles over who has the authority to endorse one interpretation over another and the implications of these power struggles (Bennett 1994; Haraway 1994; Leone, Potter, and Shackel 1987).
However, much of the research on museum visitors is quantitative and does not examine the full range of visitor perceptions and behavior. This includes much of the literature in the field of museum visitor studies (for bibliographic references see Benefield, Bitgood, and Shettel 1992; Borun 1975; deBorhegyi and Hanson 1968; Draper 1977; Elliot and Loomis 1973; Falk and Dierking 1992; Screven 1979). Museum visitor research includes time allocation studies, visitor behavior studies, pre- and post-visit questionnaires, formal surveys, telephone questionnaires, observational studies, and open-ended interviews. In large measure, this literature attempts to get beyond a stereotypic view of the museum public. It also works toward identifying museum strengths and weaknesses, understanding how museums function, assessing the museum experience, and identifying the museum’s role in cultural production. The main goal, however, is to offer feedback to museum professionals on the success of the museum’s exhibits.

A small body of research is qualitative and contributes to our understanding of what people actually do at museums (Falk 1995; Falk and Dierking 1992; Franco 1994; Kahn 1995; MacDonald 1987; Perin 1992). These studies are quite varied and include the identification of different styles of parent involvement with children (Brown 1995), the relationship between empathy and emotion in creating a learning environment (Falk and Dierking 1992; Franco 1994:161–162; Perin 1992), the role of museums in not only interpreting but also selling the past (Shaw 1992), characteristics of museum audiences (Hedon, Costa, and Rosenberg 1989), factors that influence museum visiting (Falk 1995), or the relationship between authority and reception (Perin 1992). According to Perin (1992:208–209), visitors resist unfamiliar displays and are drawn to exhibits that resonate with their current experiences and interests. They assimilate knowledge by personalizing and identifying with the themes
presented (Perin 1992:210). In this way, the museum experience for many reinforces what they already know (Perin 1992:212).

Other researchers examine the messages that museums display in relation to visitors’ perceptions. According to Kahn (1995), museums present mixed messages of past/present, art/artifact, order/disorder, and fact/interpretation, which disorient and exhaust viewers. She suggests that museums become a space for community members to arrange their own exhibitions in order to make them more meaningful. Perin (1992:209) and Franco (1994:161–162) also agree with Kahn (1995) that visitor identification with an exhibit leads to visitors’ ability and willingness to analyze the information presented. Brown (1995) acknowledges that active involvement is an important component of education and concludes that parent involvement is important for children to get the most out of their experience.

However, much of the work on visitor reception is conducted in large city museums. According to social historian Thomas Schlereth (1990:306), “We need a great deal more careful research—at the level of the individual history museum.” This paper, then, adds to our understanding of how visitors connect with exhibits in the specific case of the Kalamazoo Valley Museum.

Many studies note that visitors’ perceptions and behavior occur within the limits of the structure of the museum and its exhibits. For example, museums are shown to be conservative about presenting the past (Haraway 1994; Leone et al. 1987; Macdonald 1995; Nickolai 1994). Haraway (1994) and Macdonald (1995) present a view of science in museums as an organizing trope, making difference, history, and nationalism seem natural, universal, and therefore uncritically accepted. For example, disease, violence, poverty, and racial issues are often left out of museum presentations. Generally, the past presented in museums is an idealized and
romanticized one that reproduces popular ideas of equality, progress, and opportunity, although recently museums have attempted to include problems of race, ethnicity, environmental issues, and diversity in their exhibits.

Cameron (1971:17) and Haraway (1994) compare museums metaphorically to temples of society that enshrine those things that are significant and valuable in ways that are accepted as statements of truth. Therefore, the proper way to order history, nature, and culture is on display and serves as a corrective to individual interpretations. In this way, museums have been said to be “rituals of citizenship” that legitimatize the authority of the modern state (Duncan and Wallach 1980:451; Karp and Lavine 1991:3). Bennett (1994) links state control of museums to an ordering of knowledge and objects, and therefore an ordering of the public. Visitor perceptions continuously reflect existing power relations and dominant cultural assumptions (Greene 1996:275; Nickolai 1994).

Leone et al. (1987) and Potter (1994) look at the relationship between the past and its social and political reproduction in the Annapolis Historical District. Their approach is informed by critical theory. In other words, they look at how history is presented as ideology, with political aims, and they want to demystify the way this past is constructed. Potter and Leone (1992:478) suggest that the museum is not a trip back in time but enmeshes people more deeply in the social structure of the present. According to this perspective, the reason museums are conservative institutions that leave out some aspects of history is that they are creating an ideology that keeps current social structures unquestioned.

Museums are about communication between visitors, visitors and staff, and visitors and objects. Postman (1984) suggests that communication is regulated by the kinds of discourse permitted in a society. For example, in the 19th century, print was
the dominant discursive vehicle. People read more, read longer, and discussed what they read at length. With the growth of multimedia technology, particularly television, discourse is conducted primarily through visual imagery rather than the written word. Consequently, the content of politics, religion, education, and museums is changed. Electronic technology favors short, entertaining, trivial messages, and people have come to expect these. Museums now have shorter and fewer labels, and exhibits are usually accompanied by computers, video clips, audio stories, buttons and levers. The type of media used in exhibits is related to the kind of questions visitors do and do not ask.

Other works look at how people appropriate different meanings from museums. By looking at how people invent culture, visitors are viewed as “bricoleurs” of meaning as opposed to passively reacting to external forces. The museum is assumed to be an empty sign that viewers fill with meaning. However, this approach overlooks the fact that since people continuously make meanings, something is limiting or influencing the selection of one meaning over another.

Studies have shown that visitors are not critical in their thinking (Bruner 1994; Macdonald 1995). According to Karp and Lavine (1991:22), audiences almost by definition “do not bring the full range of cultural resources necessary for comprehending them; otherwise there would be no point to exhibition.” Even so, rather than placing the emphasis on human creativity and ability to invent culture and meaning, attention needs to be turned to what limits and constrains meaning-making.

Historical Background

The story of any local museum is situated within the story of the emergence of the museum in general. The history of the museum as an institution has been a
major theme in literature on museums (Alexander 1979; Ames 1986, 1992; Bennett 1994; Broyles 1989; Cameron 1971; Haraway 1994; Harris 1990a; Impey and MacGregor 1985; Pearce 1991a, 1992; Ripley 1969; Stocking 1985; Wallace 1981; Whittlin 1970). This history shows that the museum and its mission have changed through time due to the shifting “interests, predilections, and even prejudices of a given generation” (Rickeson 1979). The museum grew from European antecedents, which continue to provide innovation for museum makers. From the ancient Greek museum, “the ecclesiastical collections in the Middle Ages, the princely and baronial collections of the Renaissance, to the creation of special ‘museums’ starting in the eighteenth century in Western Europe” (Aagard-Morgensen 1988:8), the museum mission has included the desire to collect and categorize nature, to satisfy human curiosity, and to exert control over the unknown, rare, or unfamiliar. These same themes continue today in the Kalamazoo Valley Museum.

A brief review of the historical development of the museum reveals themes that are significant in understanding the local Museum. The combined factors of trade, population, economic development, and endeavors in scholarship, education, travel, and religion have created the milieu in which the museum arose. The word museum owes to a Greek word, meaning “site of the nine Muses.” Muse was also a Greek goddess of learning and art. In fact, the most famous museum of antiquity was the Hellenistic museum at Alexandria, founded in the third century B.C. with the mission of advancing research and philosophical learning (Woodhead and Standfield 1994:5). Thus, a museum was a place for thought and meditation, a building devoted to learning and art. The legacy of these meanings was dramatized to me in a fieldwork incident when a student said that in the Museum “you could just sit and think.” He was inspired to muse, but we do not know what his musings were about.
Interest in collecting was a strong motivator in the formation of museums. The modern museum as we know it arose in Europe out of collections accumulated in “cabinets of curiosities” (Alexander 1979:8; Ames 1992; Broyles 1989; Hooper-Greenhill 1992; Pearce 1992). “Curios” included stuffed animals, botanical rarities, small works of art such as statuettes, and artifacts which were usually kept in square-shaped rooms or “cabinets” (from Italian gabinetto; Wunderkammer or Kuriositätenkabinett in German; Alexander 1979:8). Cabinets were the private collections of individuals, universities, library societies, royalty, and churches in the 16th and 17th centuries and were rarely open to the public. There was a great interest in acquiring, categorizing, and ordering items that were hoarded for their economic value, curiosity, or social prestige. Some rarities were treated as currency; others were valued for their imagined magical powers or for the human ingenuity they displayed. Cabinets were meant to represent and catalogue the world, store items still believed to have magical or medicinal purposes, hold knowledge, and satisfy or stimulate personal curiosity.

During the early Renaissance, cabinets became open to the public and patronage shifted from public and religious buildings and works backed by groups of patrons to glorify God, to private, singular, and secular buildings dedicated to the glory of man, the patron (Hooper-Greenhill 1992:47). Cabinets became public either through the opening up of royal collections or the influence of learned scientific societies. One of the first public museums in Europe was a botanical garden with “rarities” at South Lambeth, England.

As European expansion grew, collections grew in size and complexity, and so did the need to manage them (Ames 1992:16). When new lands were discovered, people became interested in strange animals, people, and customs. As knowledge of
museum objects became more specialized, the gap between specialized and popular knowledge widened. There was little guidance for the general public as to how to interpret exhibits. Experience was marked by the lack of relevance of exhibits to visitors' own experiences and by the visitors' lack of education.

The relationship between the museum and the public changed due to the growing middle class, industrialization, invention of the printing press, spread of education, and movement to cities. A public culture developed that included the museum. Most public museums were established in Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries, although the first public museum in Britain was the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford in 1683. The Viennese Royal Collection was moved out of the palace in 1776; the Royal Collection of Düsseldorf and the Dresden Gallery opened in the middle of the 18th century. The British Museum became public in 1759, and in 1792 the revolutionary government of France made the Royal Collection in the old Louvre Palace into the Museum of the Republic (Alexander 1979:8; Pearce 1992:100).

Later museums were formed from collections organized in the World Fairs and served to position objects and native "others" in an imagined unitary landscape, while placing the spectator in a position of imagined control and order (Breckenridge 1989). As the public viewed these exhibits, they became a part of colonial identity. Looking at others created a Western sense of self. Visitors by the millions interpreted the images presented by the stories and stereotypes they brought with them, and the boundaries between here/there, us/them, wildness/civility, nature/culture, chaos/order were created, re-worked, and maintained (Corbey 1993).

Whether evolving from cabinets of curiosities, World Fairs, or independently, collecting the rare, the curious, and the beautiful was the inspiration for these first museums (Alexander 1979:9). The mission of these museums was to preserve the
past, to reflect individual collectors’ enthusiasms and conquests, and to be a repository of knowledge. Nineteenth-century museums also reflect the increasing stress on the importance of the individual, an organizing frame of mind, the growth of the middle class, and the development of contemporary capitalism (see Pearce 1992:92). For example, museums give the public a message that celebrates how far modern humans have progressed and their scientific and technological achievements. Early on, the museum aimed to elevate the working class into an awareness of beauty and progress. Now, the museum was expected to serve its diverse public and provide an “objective history” (Broyles 1989:56). A new relationship between material objects and the public was formed.

As these collections became organized into museums, the museums themselves became “scientized,” professionalized, and turned into places of systematic cataloging and research. The mission expanded beyond collecting to thorough examination and research (Alexander 1979:10; Ames 1986:4; Broyles 1989:57; Stocking 1985). There was a shift from arbitrary organization to scientific classification according to the idea of evolution. As scientific objects, it was assumed that curiosities contained an element of truth, that “material evidence” paralleled truth, and that meaning was transparent (Weil 1990:46, cited in Harrison 1993:160). Curiosities became commodities as they were bought and resold for museum collections or utilized as a medium of exchange for scholarly research. In addition, museums created a museum culture that was a product of collaborative labor of patrons, trustees, administrators, curators, scientific assistants, preparators, custodians, and visitors.

The period of museum growth between 1850-1890 is often called the museum period (Stocking 1985; Sturtevant 1969:622). “In 1800 there were fewer
than a dozen public museums ... by 1850 there were nearly sixty; by 1887 at least 240; and by 1928 over 500" (Pearce 1992:107). The 1880s was also a time of struggle between privileged social classes and "immigrant workers, discontented artisans, and disgruntled small farmers" (Wallace 1981:66). Therefore, the large increase in museums in the 19th century is also related to a kind of American nationalism that defended American values against agitators and class struggle (Wallace 1981:66). With the growing number of museums and visitors, the mission expanded to include class self-identification and education.

Anthropologist Nelson Grabum (1977:7) points out that the inclusion of the wider public into elitist domains like the museum did not occur smoothly. According to Grabum (1977:7) this transition was influenced by a "moral-educational movement spurred on by Thomas Cook (a Methodist minister) [who] sought to widen the travel, exhibition and museum experiences of the urban masses." One example is the Smithsonian Institution, which was started under the inspiration of the Englishman James Smithson in 1846, who requested that it serve the purpose of increasing and diffusing knowledge (Alexander 1979:11).

Today there are so many museums in American that one is within easy reach of most families (Brown 1995:65). They are used for visiting exhibits but also as a place for eating, seeing films, holding discussions, and wedding receptions (see Lumley 1988). With the growth of museums, the mission of educating and entertaining the public has been increasingly emphasized. Public donor money that supported museums in the past has dried up, and museums now need strong community support to survive. Thus, interest has shifted from the acquisition of objects to the utilization of objects for public benefit, education, and communication. In the 20th century, the museum has become a cultural center, a facilitator of the
relationship between people and objects, and a locus for political identification and struggle.

Kalamazoo Valley Museum and Mission

The Kalamazoo Valley Museum began in 1927 when a small collection of unidentified rocks, minerals, and musty birds was acquired by the Public School District Library (Kalamazoo Gazette 1976; Museum Report 1945). It evolved at a time when the city of Kalamazoo was growing into the cultural center of southwestern Michigan, and its growth is linked to that of the city. Indeed, the Museum has taken upon itself the task of representing city and regional history.

Institutions like the Museum or the library that it was part of did not simply appear but were among the forces bringing about change in Kalamazoo at the time. Likewise, history, science, or technology as exhibited in the Museum and the mission that guides their presentation have changed according to the intellectual and social trends of each decade.

Local history is usually made up of stories of founding fathers, village settlements, land purchases, place names, successful businesses, and local heroes. Kalamazoo is no exception. These stories, along with characteristics of the local environment and ecology, are represented in exhibits at the Museum. An interactive computer program guides the visitor along the 100-mile-long Kalamazoo River system between Jackson County and Lake Michigan in Saugatuck, Michigan. Seasonal displays, diaries of farmlife, and a typical produce stand highlight the influence of weather and land on everyday life in the region. Local businesses such as the Kalamazoo Vegetable Parchment Company, Upjohn Company, Kellogg Company, and Stryker Corporation are represented in displays of what it was like to
work in Kalamazoo. City growth, however, is related to the Museum in several other ways.

The Museum is interconnected to the growth of the library. The library's roots can be traced to two women who decided to meet once a week to read to each other in 1844. In the 19th century, fewer and fewer middle class and upper class women worked outside their homes, and they began to devote more time to social organizations and causes (Nickolai 1994:10). The ethos of the time also included the separation of male and female domains, where men were primarily associated with politics, law, banking, and trade, while women were thought to be the preservers of social bonds in the midst of the harsh realities of the business world (Cott 1977:199; Hymowitz and Weissman 1981:95; Nickolai 1994:10; Wallace 1981:65). The reading club the women formed grew and eventually became the Ladies Library Association, with a mission to promote literacy, culture, and a library. Library growth is linked to the increase in printing, newspapers, schools, social organizations, churches, and city population. Eventually, the library was given collections that became the future Museum.

Local reports claim that the nucleus of the Museum formed when a personal collection of corals, shells, marbles, and fossils was given to the library in 1881 (Kalamazoo Gazette 1976). According to the Board of Education minutes (P. Norris, personal communication, 1997), when the School Board accepted these items, they had the explicit intention of beginning a "cabinet of curiosities" to commemorate the town's establishment as a city in 1884. This coincided with a large number of American cities that also organized museums at this time. To become a city meant arrival at a higher level of economic growth and progress, and the Museum became a metaphor for the transformation from village to city. Such an optimistic outlook on
city growth overlooked opposing views of history, and it was not until the 1930s that
the exclusion of disease, poverty, labor struggles, and economic strife in museums
were contested. The first mission, then, consisted of both curiosity in natural history
and a celebration of the success of the city. The School Board desired to emulate
European cabinets which were places for keeping valuables and demonstrated one’s
knowledge and control over the world. In addition, its purpose was to offer the city
meaning and direction and to tell the public that all of the city’s municipal efforts
were fruitful (Frisch 1989:40).

Materials that became the backbone for the Museum were donated by middle
and upper class individuals who were successful and had a keen curiosity about
natural science and the exotic, or were connoisseurs of art and literature. In fact,
most museums that developed in the 19th century were constructed by members of
the dominant classes who also had some influence on the interpretation and
presentation of the objects (Wallace 1981:63). As a result, the identity presented was
elite middle and upper class identity. Between 1890–1893, the library kept growing
and the Museum continued to accept donations from individuals, such as curios
brought back from vacations, and as a result, the Museum represented the interests
and social status of its individual donors. One of these, Donald Boudeman, donated
the Egyptian mummy that remains central to the Museum’s primary archeological and
anthropological exhibit. Since the Museum readily accepted these items, its collection
became an eclectic assembly of items including “pebbles from Little Traverse Bay,
copper ore specimens from Alpena, or jaws of a blue shark from the far Pacific”
(Potts 1979:34).

In 1890, Dr. and Mrs. E. H. Van Deusen donated $50,000 for the
construction of a new building for the growing collection. Dr. Edwin H. Van Deusen
was the first superintendent of one of the earliest institutions for the insane in Michigan, and he gave the donation with the stipulation that a room be set aside for use by the Academy of Medicine (Dunbar 1960:76, 122).

Another benefactor was A. M. Todd, a wealthy businessman in the production of peppermint and other essential oils. He was also an avid traveler and collector of works of art, rare books, paintings, sculptures, furniture, statues, photographs, and musical instruments. His extensive private collections were well known, and he offered them on display to the public in his 20-room private museum. As these were lent out or became part of the public museum and other institutions, he hoped to sway local votes in favor of the public ownership of the city's electric and light plant (Kalamazoo Gazette 1925). One observer considered his donation to have helped establish the Museum (Encore 1981:28), and the Museum today has a room devoted to the display of Todd's artifacts. Thus, the Museum was influenced by the nature of the objects donated, the interests of the donors themselves, along with local interpretations of its European antecedents.

Museums are also linked to the political, social, and economic situation at any given time. For example, in 1950, the Kalamazoo Museum consisted of 25 habitat groups, 69 display cases, about 3,000 specimens of wildflowers and plants, and pictures and objects worth between one-third to one-half million dollars (Museum Report 1945). However, the 1950s were a time of decline and deterioration of the city. A Downtown Kalamazoo Association was set up to create a new image for the city and rejuvenate the downtown. They decided that this included the construction of a pedestrian mall to bring more revenue to the downtown and the planning of a new library-museum building (Dunbar 1960:217).
In the 1960s and 1970s, the field of museum studies was undergoing massive changes. Due to Sputnik, the science race, Civil Rights, critiques of urbanization, and the new social history, museums began to develop more extensive science programs, bottom-up representations of history, and more interest in documenting local heritages. In addition, there was a decrease in the market for academic historians and an increase in the need for museum administrators. Exposure of museums to the general public increased due to more extensive television coverage and an overall upsurge in education, cultural awareness, and tourism. Museum attendance rose across the country and, therefore, it was not difficult to market expansion of the Museum in Kalamazoo.

The most significant changes in the Museum took place between 1984–1996 when the Museum was transformed from a $300,000 adjunct to the library into a $20 million modern institution. Between these years, the Museum changed administration, location, and name; developed an official mission statement; and created a public image. These are all necessary for museum survival today. The principal changes are based on local interests in increasing downtown retail revenues, professionalization of the Museum, and heightened public interest.

Before 1984, the school board was responsible for three institutions: the school system, the public library, and the Museum, each with specific agendas and goals. Since the field of library science and the field of museum studies had grown, one board could not cover all administrative duties of these institutions. The library and Museum had different foci, and it was thought that their interests would best be served by separate administrations. For example, library staff is trained in library methods with knowledge of books, whereas museum staff is trained in visual aids with a focus on the education of children and untrained adults (Museum Report
1945). Separation became reality in 1984, when the library and its museum were separated from the school board, and each given each the authority to make changes and grow.

Once separated, the Museum was still funded by a millage, to be renewed by community vote every three years. Therefore, administrators still had to convince the community every three years that the Museum was important. As an alternative, administrators tried to obtain financing by developing promotional activities such as brochures, special exhibits, and corporate meetings on site. People become connected through new corporate, philanthropic, and educational relationships. Due to their investment of time, Museum supporters, volunteers, and planners have an interest in the future direction the Museum takes. Therefore, the Museum creates different sets of overlapping influences in the community which, in turn, influence how objects are presented in the Museum.

In 1985, the Museum hired a new director and began a process of professionalization. By professionalizing, the Museum joined ranks with 6,000 other museums as part of the American Association of Museums and was able to apply for grants. In this way, the Museum could enhance its standards and recognition. In 1991, it became governed by the Kalamazoo Valley Community College, which separated it more fully from the library, secured more governmental funding, and began planning a new modern Museum building. The Museum now took on an image more akin to what the community expected of a museum. In 1992, the Museum arranged focus groups to research exhibit changes in the new building. More than 60 community members representing various interest groups (i.e., the African-American community, academic historians, Museum volunteers, teachers, doctors, and neighborhood businesses) were brought together in small groups to discuss what
makes Kalamazoo and the Museum unique. They were asked for their opinions on what kinds of exhibits are the most important and what role the Museum should play in the community. From these discussions new directions were developed for the Museum within the guidelines of the new mission statement developed in 1985.

The mission statement developed in 1985 states,

The Kalamazoo Valley Museum is a participatory museum of history, science and technology linking southwestern Michigan to the world through collections, exhibitions, media and programs. Its purpose is to offer learning experiences that foster understanding of significant issues shaping our regional community. (Board of Trustees 1994)

This statement serves to clarify Museum goals to sponsors and the community. It also narrows the scope of the Museum. For example, in its early days, the Museum readily accepted donations of items, while now it has professional standards for collecting and exhibiting. The mission also represents an interplay between the college, the Museum, and the public. Before 1985, the Museum’s goals were subsumed under the goals of institutions like the public library and the Ladies Library Association; currently, part of the Museum’s purpose is to fulfill the aims of the Kalamazoo Valley Community College.

The administration of the community college is not the only influence on the direction of the Museum. Today, museums have to compete with large amusement parks and other colossal cultural entertainments. Recently, other local institutions in Kalamazoo, like the Art Center, focusing on art history and art, and the Nature Center, focusing on natural history and ecology, have moved into new buildings modeled after museums. Customers want an experience that is a “good exchange of their time” (P. Norris, personal communication, 1997). Competition for visitors’ time puts pressure on the Museum to incorporate changes that meet public demands for entertainment but still stay within mission and budget constraints. Therefore, the
Museum has increasingly incorporated “hands-on” exhibits, computer simulations and exercises, audio and video tape recordings, and a number of dials, buttons, and knobs for visitors to manipulate. In addition to permanent exhibits, it has added a 1,000-square-foot gift shop, an interactive learning hall, a theater and planetarium, a space station learning center, a larger visiting exhibition hall, and classes held on site or at the Arcadia Commons campus next door. All these aspects are hoped to fulfill the goals of participation and education.

Another aim of the museum is to introduce viewers to the wider world. Before mass media technology, the museum could show its audience objects that people could not see without extensive traveling. Today, foreign countries and cultures are visible through television, videos, and computers. People consider themselves familiar with African, Alaskan, and Asian cultures, yet they know little about local history (P. Norris, personal communication, 1997). In response, the Kalamazoo Valley Museum has had to find a new niche for itself and to make itself distinctive. Its main focus has become local and regional history.

The Museum has changed its focus from city to region in order to promote the concept of community and reach a wider audience. The assumption is that increasing urbanization and division of the area into smaller demographically and politically drawn units leads to a loss of a sense of community. According to Allen (1990:2), a region must include a place, the organization of people around the environmental condition of that place, a shared history and experiences related to that place, and its distinctiveness from surrounding areas in order to provide a sense of community.

One aspect of the Museum’s mission is a hope to recreate this sense of community identity. The Museum’s location near the Arcadia Commons campus of
the Kalamazoo Valley Community College illustrates this aim. The name Arcadia was selected to recreate a lost image of the past. It was the name given to the nearby creek by Kalamazoo's founder. The creek later became so polluted that it was channeled underground. Combined with "commons," the name was meant to create a romantic image of unified community efforts similar to those in the rural days gone by. Part of the downtown was redeveloped by exposing and beautifying the creek, building the Museum, and creating the Arcadia Commons campus, including an open pedestrian square. The Museum also attempts to elicit community and regional consciousness and identity in its exhibits. Exhibits on natural resources, climate, weather, the creek and Kalamazoo River, local flora and fauna, and local industries, tourism, and history all attempt to connect the viewer to a sense of place.
ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

Mission Statements, Staff, and Visitors

Previous studies arranged by the Museum provide a demographic profile of visitors but reveal little about how the mission figures into a museum visit. In a sample of 2,402 visitors in the old Museum location, most visitors (67%) were local (Korn 1994:iii). The majority of visitors was female (55%), had completed a bachelor’s degree or higher degrees (nearly half), had a household income below $50,000, selected the ethnic designation “White” (86%), and were repeat visitors (76%) (Korn 1994:iii). The sample presented in this study, although not statistically significant, still supports these findings. The majority of visitors are from the local area (57%), female (55%), and Caucasian (82%), although less than half had finished college (42%).

In the Korn (1994:iv) study, the top three reasons why people visited the Museum were “(1) ‘to have a social outing with family and friends’ (56%), (2) ‘to learn about history’ (48%), and (3) ‘to be in a special/beautiful place’ (25%).” A later survey of 1,245 telephone interviews showed that visitors came to the Museum out of (a) interest (54.6%), (b) to socialize with family and friends (11.2%), and (c) out of curiosity (10.6%) (Crull et al. 1995:13). Most visitors in this study came with family or friends rather than alone; some came with work colleagues. The purposes for visiting in this study were diverse but followed the top reasons given by the two quantitative studies of Korn (1994) and Crull et al. (1995). The aim of this thesis is, however, to find the relationship between the mission and the visitor, to identify
visitor perceptions, and to discover the underlying factors that permit or limit museum purposes. Visitors do not always come to the museum with the same goals as administrators and do not always act on their ideals. It is this contrast between the aims of the cultural institution and the visitors’ expectations that I seek to examine first.

I first found that the mission of the Museum is more than the written statement devised by a committee. In fact, the official mission for some staff members does not figure into their everyday work experiences. For example, often when I questioned staff members about the mission, they said that they hadn’t read it lately and referred me to the plaque downstairs. Additionally, by interviewing administrators and staff, I found that they have their own interpretations of the Museum’s mission. These “unofficial” goals are as much a factor in how the Museum functions as are the official ones. Officially, the Museum’s aim is “to offer learning experiences.” According to my interviews with the administration, the aim (or “pull”) is first, entertainment, and second, learning, although it is thought that education and entertainment are not separate from one another. The Museum needs to change in response to audience demands. According to one administrator, the Museum needs “to get people into the habit of coming to the Museum. To have people think, ‘Let’s do something different—let’s go to the Museum.’” This is done by offering exhibits that enable participation and, therefore, entertainment and learning.

The administrative focus on entertainment is also a focus of visitors. Indeed, data from overheard conversations, observations, and discussions with viewers attest to the visitors’ quest for entertainment. The theme, however, is not only “having fun,” “playing,” or “killing time,” but doing these activities with others. Entertainment is interconnected more closely with spending time together in the
Museum than with learning. Only 5 out of the 33 interviewed visitors came to the Museum alone. Groups ranged from pairs to groups of 3, families of 4 and 5, a Boy Scout group of 8, a wedding group of 8, 6 relatives rained out of a health fair, and 24 relatives rained out of an auto festival. The Museum visit was an activity for friends and relatives to do together. For example, an elderly mother who is hard of hearing and her daughter visited the Museum while their car was being repaired. The Museum served to facilitate conversation and activity. In another case, two women, one from Kalamazoo and one from out-of-town, said that each time they get together they go to a museum. Museums are places to meet friends, and the visit was often tied in with another activity, such as jury duty, car repair, dentist appointment, conference, lunch, wedding, health fair, or a festival. Many groups came to play. Two moms and their preschoolers walked past the exhibits to get to the preschool area for their children. Visitors said they came “to learn and have fun, not like in school,” “to do what kids want to do,” and “to play with them [kids].” Families were observed playing chess, interacting over levers and buttons, taking turns, and showing off to one another.

A staff member pointed out that the Museum today needs to supply different kinds of learning since people learn in different ways. Multiple ages and multiple backgrounds are represented among visitors. Exhibits in the history section were arranged by museum designers to present layers of knowledge revolving around the themes of land, work, and community. According to the staff and administration, exhibits are meant to cognitively “hook” visitors into learning, foster communication, and supply an “aha experience.”

These aims were also observed among the visitors. The multimedia presentation of exhibit materials led to responses of “wow,” or enabled viewers to
explore different levels of knowledge. For example, in the history exhibition, computer games were available to illustrate the way artifacts give us clues to history. In the words of one visitor, “The computer pulled me into it, you know, into the story. I did the whole thing, and I don’t have a computer at home yet.” Computers made the exhibit intriguing and challenging and offered a novel experience for this visitor.

Other aims mentioned by staff that were not in the official mission were preservation, service, outreach, and authority. One staff member pointed out that museums “tell you how to behave, and teach you how to use this space.” Visitors also demonstrated an acceptance in the authority of the Museum to exhibit and interpret items on display. They often referred to other large museums when discussing their own local one, as the authority of small museums originated in these larger cultural institutions. Students also referred to museums as sovereign spaces that contain the proper ordering of knowledge. In the words of a 12-year-old, “For a person who had never been [here], this could be one of the most memorable times in your life, you could learn so much and even revise what you know.” Another 12-year-old stated, “I like museums a lot; they help me understand other people’s choices and mistakes.”

A staff member involved with younger children said museums were for “taking the mystique out of the museum,” that “they are magical places,” and “they promote interaction and creative exploration.” Many visitors expressed an interest in exploration and the exotic. For example, for many, the Egyptian mummy was the highlight of their visit.
Visitor Perceptions

Visitor perceptions are useful in assessing the relationship between the mission and visitor experience. The mission statement is composed of four main themes: (1) to enable participation in history, science, and technology; (2) to promote a world perspective; (3) to educate; and (4) to highlight regional identity and issues. These themes overlap with one another, but by looking at them individually, it becomes clear that visitors bring to the museum their own agendas, although they are influenced by the aims of museum makers. I will look at how visitors perceive these four aspects of the mission; then I will look at what the school children’s drawings and comments reveal about how children experience the Museum.

1. The first area of the mission is participation. Interviews and observational data suggest that visitors come to the Museum to experience the “hands-on” aspects of Museum presentation. The kind of participation they are doing is not so much participation in history, science, and technology, but interaction with each other and with the objects they can manipulate. They are learning how to manipulate museum settings and how to utilize them for purposes of entertainment and communication. The following responses were often given: “This Museum is great because it is hands on”; “Its purpose is to be hands on”; “It is on the cutting edge”; “Hands-on is a better way to learn.”

Only seven girls and five boys drew pictures of themselves in Museum exhibits. All these had to do with exhibits that could be manipulated. For example, in the tower on the second floor stands a 23-foot tall sculpture with several cranks. As participants turn the cranks, they change the arrangement and shape of the structure and produce various sounds. Children drew themselves, hands stretched out, turning
cranks, and one student drew himself and three other children interacting with the structure together. Others drew pictures of themselves in the planetarium. In the planetarium show they were able to vote on which planet to visit by selecting one of three buttons on the arm of their chairs. Students drew themselves reclined in planetarium chairs, and some drew the three buttons. Others drew themselves playing with an interactive game in the science section that involved catching moving molecules or balls into cups.

Visitors wandered freely through the Museum, stopping, starting, skipping some exhibits, repeating others, turning on video and audio messages and walking away, manipulating levers even while talking about a non-related topic with a friend. Hands-on exhibits engaged them. In addition, the Museum is arranged to encourage free movement. One enters into a large open lobby and is confronted with a three story staircase facing a wall of shadow boxes containing numerous historical objects. Beyond the stairway and wall display one can see various large exhibits set against the backdrop of murals depicting a naturalistic landscape of sea, sand, and sky. Therefore, the visitor has to choose whether to climb the stairs, observe the collections in the wall or move to the large exploratory exhibits further on. Participation includes the freedom of choice.

Associated with participation in Museum media is participation with friends and relatives. Visitors interacted with each other, staff, and objects. The dominant kind of communication was personal, sentimental, and social. Often they called out, "Hey, Mom," "Follow me," "Come look at this," "Isn't this neat? If you turn these dials it changes." They read display messages aloud to each other. Communication was the underlying thread that connected the wide range of Museum activities. It is
more “fun” to watch and do together than alone because one can talk about what is seen and manipulated.

2. The second area of the mission is the promotion of a world perspective. The mission states that “the Kalamazoo Valley Museum is a participatory museum of history, science, and technology linking southwestern Michigan to the world through collections, exhibitions, media and programs” (Board of Trustees 1994). It is difficult to assess whether visitors were interested in making global connections from the exhibits. From this research I could find no evidence for visitors seeking or developing a global perspective. Although they were interested in the Egyptian mummy exhibit, it was couched in terms of curiosity with the unfamiliar rather than linking southwestern Michigan to the world. Observations did suggest that instead of creating a link between the local and global, visitors linked exhibits to their personal interests and some linked the past with the future. Visitors are primarily concerned with exhibits that resonate with their personal interests, often interpreting them in a sentimental manner. They also refer to several exhibits as “future exhibits” or exhibits that depict not only how far we have come as a city or a nation, but how technology will influence life in the future.

Many visitors contrasted history with technology, and the past with the future. A woman between 55–64 years old called the science and technology exhibit a “future exhibit.” According to her, science and technology exhibits told “about the future, where we are going,” and were meant “to show kids the modern stuff about the future.” Children, in their explanations of their drawings, linked together past and present. The planetarium is juxtaposed with history, the modern with the ancient. They knew that the Museum is about old and new, past and future, and that they should be educated about both. As visitors filter the information presented, they
attempt to connect unrelated topics sometimes according to the order in which they observed them. The past and future were disconnected from the present, making the past exotic and foreign. A 13-year-old wrote, "We looked at things that were so new that they haven't been put on the market yet." One said he saw "ancient and semi-ancient artifacts."

Visitors also relate to the Museum by making objects and displays personal. Visitors I observed spent most of their time with exhibits that could be manipulated. The second major attraction was exhibits that they could fit into their personal value system and experiences. Unfamiliar or abstract topics were passed over quickly. Reminiscing, nostalgia, and personalized accounts represent much of the themes in my fieldnotes. A 45–54-year-old woman who had traveled two hours to see the Museum was very interested in the antiques displayed in the history section. She said:

I remember these things; I used them. I was only five when electricity was put into my house. I can look at these things and be glad that I don't have to milk cows anymore. My daughter is going to be different; she wants to be a career girl.

Visitors were drawn to topics in which they had experience or previous interest and, therefore, information was put into their own personal context. As one man said, "I am nostalgic; I love history." A son told his father and godfather about himself through the exhibit on medical equipment made by the Stryker Corporation. He told them what he knew about medicine, Kalamazoo, people, and places. A new resident found one of his relatives in a photo in the history exhibit. He was excited and quickly told his companions. It illustrated his connection to Kalamazoo. These narratives relate to the "good old days," people's heritage or place in history. Visitors often do this in ways not planned by museum creators (Macdonald 1995:21). Graburn (1977:7) and Falk and Dierking (1992) point out that visitor expectations
increasingly come from the personal domain. Macdonald (1995) labels these reactions "cultural orientations" since visitors bring exhibits into the framework of their respective cultural biases and persuasions. Visitors use these personal or cultural orientations to connect together diverse exhibits and to create their own stories. According to Graburn (1977, cited in Falk and Dierking 1992:15), museum experiences are sought out because the public needs a "a personal experience with something higher, more sacred, and out of the ordinary than home and work are able to supply." Personal experience is related to personal tastes, economic capabilities, and previous cultural experiences. The main point is that visitors believe the connections and conclusions they make are the ones the Museum has intended. They legitimate the authority of the Museum even if the interpretation they come away with is contrary to the exhibit.

Children, too, personalize exhibits. This can be seen in the descriptions of their drawings, especially since at times the children had no idea of what it was they had seen. The structure in the tower is one example. It was intended by its makers to symbolize community effort since several people can change the structure and make it produce sounds together. To the children, it was an unfamiliar yet fun "thing." They called the structure in the tower a "wheel thing," "the thing where you turn those wheels and they go up and down," and a "spinning wheel." They did not see in it community effort; rather they appreciated it as something fun.

3. The third area of the mission is education. It is clear from this study that visitors think they are learning something. Most visitors verbalized the educational mission of the Museum. Museums "bring back history," "make history come alive," "show science," and "are for all ages." Visitors reveal that not only are entertainment and learning interconnected, but so are authority and learning.
Museums have the unquestioned authority to tell students what they need to know. According to a local high school student, “In here is the stuff I need to know. ’Cause I want to go to college and be smart. I know I will forget some stuff, but it was in my head so it will help me.” Others said they came “to find out more about Kalamazoo.” Two teachers investigated the Challenger program before bringing their students to “experience problem solving on their own.” Another was “amazed at how much energy Michigan uses up,” adding, “I was intrigued to learn so much about energy.” Clearly this visitor had learned something new.

Many visitors mentioned the difference between school learning and museum learning. Curiosity and fascination with the magical and mysterious are a part of the historical interest in museums where learning involves a visual experience. In the Museum, visitors can “see what a real mummy looks like,” tie a corset, or play with sand. One student said that in the Museum “you could just sit and think, or you could play.” Students said they learned how to scientifically reconstruct the face of a mummy, what it was like to live at different times, that Jupiter was the biggest planet, that Kalamazoo made a taxi cab that was used nationwide, “stuff” about the universe, or that museums are hard to make. In museums, learning is both entertaining and personal.

4. The fourth area of the mission is regional awareness and identification. The mission states that the aim of the Museum is to “foster understanding of significant issues shaping our regional community.” This is also part of the museum experience for some visitors. A mother and daughter said they came because they love museums, specifically this Museum. They have seen it change and they relate to it as their Museum. To one visitor, the new Museum building meant “This is Kalamazoo;
Kalamazoo is getting big.” Two friends came “to learn more about Kalamazoo;” one called the Museum “beautiful.”

The tower containing the cranks which the children enjoyed was appreciated for a different reason by some adults. The room containing the tower is surrounded by high windows overlooking the street and city. Two women from outside Michigan commented to each other on the view of the city from the tower, “This is exquisite. I think anyone who comes here is lucky.” This parallels the concept of the Arcadia Commons, which was developed in part to give residents a sense of community and a sense of place. The Museum gave the two friends a new, beautiful view of the city. Schlereth (1990:221) called museums “middle landscapes” not only because they are the result of middle class support, but also because they create a landscape that is positioned between the primitive and civilized, the wild and the over-refined. Or in this case, the city, with its blocks of hotels, churches, banks, and office buildings, is juxtaposed with the educational landscape of the Museum. Museums, in this sense, are residues of nature because they are set apart from the hazards of the workplace and are solemn spaces filled with nature-oriented displays. In addition, they become “symbolic repositor[ies] of economic, political, religious, and aesthetic values such as a concern for self-education, the value of the arts, the self-enrichment of recreation, the moral precept of Protestant Christianity, and the impact of physical environment on human behavior” (Schlereth 1990:221). The Museum then is educating its audience about how to feel about community and city landscapes. It reinforces cultural ideals, yet more work needs to be done to find out how people act on these ideals.

As much as the Museum may conjure up regional identity, it also builds on individual identity. Feelings associated with statements like “This is my town, my
museum,” “I am of this generation,” “This is a picture of my relative,” “My friend donated this item,” “I participated in this project on behalf of the Museum” all evoke personal identity and position in relation to the topics presented in the Museum. The Museum leads visitors toward creating meaning, but those meanings are regulated by culture, media, individual persuasions, and accepted authority.

Students on school field trips make up a large percentage of Museum visitors. Trips are linked to student identity since they are a part of the experience of being a student. The primary goal of children was “fun.” Having fun, however, was associated with making things happen, seeing how things move, touching, and investigating the mysterious, foreign, and frightening. Children were drawn to things that looked and felt real, and if they were scary, they appreciated that they were not real.

The most popular exhibits were the tornado, planetarium, mummy, and tower sculpture. The tornado is an exhibit in the exploratorium section meant to demonstrate Michigan weather and seasons. A funnel of wind and mist is created in an open case by fans. The whirlwind abruptly fades away when touched and is recreated without warning. Many students mentioned how much they liked touching the tornado and watching it form. All the students except one drew the tornado framed in an enclosure. One student drew the gray mass of a tornado free on his white page, and his caption states, “I liked the tornado because I could destroy it with my hand.” Another student mentioned that he learned how a tornado could be made in a controlled area. Children are literal-minded and are involved in a powerful world that they cannot control. One possible intellectual reaction when pitted against something powerful is to see how it is made and how it can be controlled. For the students, touching something dangerous in a controlled environment was a thrill.
Many children also drew and wrote about the planetarium. They mentioned how real it was to feel like they were in space, or described the feeling of moving or of objects moving at them. Pictures depicted the openness of space, black holes, and planets. However, many drew their chairs and the door complete with the word “exit” written above it. This could be because the word “exit” was lighted in the dark room, but it may also suggest an element of fear, be it fear of the unknown, space, or the newness of the experience of a planetarium. Studies of children in museums have shown that novel experiences and unfamiliar settings can cause anxiety (see Falk and Dierking 1992:50). Children, however, are drawn to exhibits demonstrating powerful natural forces.

The mummy was also spoken of as mysterious. One student mentioned, “I liked seeing a mummy because I like to see dead people.” In contrast, most drawings of the dead mummy were done in bright colors, some with stereotypical or “Barbie” faces or even flowers. Seeing dead people is not an everyday experience and it was put into a personal framework that was at once understandable and acceptable to the children. Children are intrigued with the unfamiliar since it is not part of their everyday experience. Therefore, rather than taking the mystique out of the museum, as one staff worker mentioned, it is mystique that interests the students. More research in children’s perceptions and what they might mean for museum exhibits is warranted.
SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Ethnographic research in the Kalamazoo Valley Museum, including drawings and comments of children, provide insights into the social phenomenon of museum visiting. Visitors to the Kalamazoo Valley Museum emerge as a diverse group with a wide range of intentions. They perceive exhibits through the selective filter of their own needs and interests. Visitors are most interested in the interactive qualities of exhibits, in exhibits that resonate with their personal experience, and with exhibits that carry an element of curiosity and mystery. I found that a combination of communication and entertainment takes precedence over all other visitor activities.

The aims of the Museum makers, as stated in the official mission, influence the Museum experience of visitors. One aim of the mission statement, namely, to promote a world perspective, seems unimportant to visitors' museum experience. However, visitors are interested in participation, learning, and issues of regional identity. Visitors come in order to learn, but they learn more about how to manipulate museum spaces to meet goals of entertainment and socializing than about exhibit content. It seems that visitors come to the Museum to reinforce what they already know and like. It is clear that exhibits that enable visitors' participation and allow visitors to link exhibits to personal experiences will be most successful.

The Kalamazoo Valley Museum, its mission, and messages are linked historically to interests in collecting, fascination with the unfamiliar, and the desire to control nature and the unknown. In the United States, museums are products of 19th-century society with its underlying themes of objectivity, industrialism, and progress.
that includes a strong educational component. Indeed, the history of the Kalamazoo Valley Museum grew out of these concerns, and visitors show the same interests. For example, visitors are amused by the exotic mummy, the tornado which spins in a controlled space, and the planetarium which typifies the conquest of nature.

Visitors understand the museum by bringing exhibits into their own personal framework. The museum limits and structures experience by the choice of objects, the type of media employed, and the stories told. In addition, the museum message is marked by the historical, economic, and social circumstances of each age.

Results of this study reinforce the conclusions of other researchers (Falk and Dierking 1992; Kahn 1995; Macdonald 1995; Perin 1992). As administrators structure the Kalamazoo Valley Museum to meet the goals of participation and entertainment, they create an atmosphere of freedom of choice with few labels and little direction for the visitors. On the one hand, visitor reactions I recorded support Kahn’s (1995) observation that mixed messages with little guidance can frustrate viewers. On the other hand, visitors combine unrelated topics by fitting them into their own experiences as suggested by Perin (1992) and Falk and Dierking (1992). Also, I found that the Museum staff's decisions about exhibits are not questioned by visitors. This confirms Macdonald’s observation about the relationship between context and viewer attitudes toward knowledge: knowledge in the museum is set into the context of the museum’s authority and of viewer itineraries of socializing and recreation. This atmosphere regulates the kinds of questions asked and not asked by viewers: the more questions viewers are encouraged to ask, the more engaged they will be. Thus, further research is needed to examine the relationship between types of exhibits and the questions and responses they generate among visitors. This would
help museum administrators to create exhibits that capture visitors' imagination and kindle their curiosity.

Children's drawings proved to be extremely useful in this research. In drawings, children have the most freedom to express themselves. From a child's perspective, the Museum is entertaining, thrilling, and mysterious. Children are drawn to exhibits that demonstrate powerful natural forces and may experience some anxiety in novel museum settings.

This research suggests that museums have come a long way from being repositories of curios for the enjoyment of elites to being sites where the general public, as consumers of cultural ideals, can learn and be entertained. Yet, it also suggests that museums have further to go toward understanding the relationships between their stated purpose and the public's expectations. Further ethnographic research ought to address how these ideals are worked out in actual behavior and how they are influenced by cultural, historical, and economic factors in the community so as to make museums truly relevant to the public that supports them.
Appendix A

Human Subjects Institutional Review Board
Protocol Approval
To: Dr. Erika Loeffler  
Lynnette King

From: Richard A. Wright, Chair  
Human Subjects Institutional Review Board

Subject: HSIRB Project # 96-08-24

Date: September 3, 1996

This is to inform you that your project entitled “The Museum as Cultural Practice,” has been approved under the exempt category of research. This approval is based upon your proposal as presented to the HSIRB, and you may utilize human subjects only in accord with this approved proposal.

Your project is approved for a period of one year from the above date. If you should revise any procedures relative to human subjects or materials, you must resubmit those changes for review in order to retain approval. Should any untoward incidents or unanticipated adverse reactions occur with the subjects in the process of this study, you must suspend the study and notify me immediately. The HSIRB will then determine whether or not the study may continue.

Please be reminded that all research involving human subjects must be accomplished in full accord with the policies and procedures of Western Michigan University, as well as all applicable local, state, and federal laws and regulations. Any deviation from those policies, procedures, laws or regulations may cause immediate termination of approval for this project.

Thank you for your cooperation. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Project Expiration Date: September 3, 1997
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