



Museums: In Search of a Usable Future

By Alma Wittlin

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Museums: In Search of a Usable Future By Alma Wittlin

This comprehensive study offers an analysis of the museum as a public institution, provides an account of its historical roots, and gives a forecast of its future.

In the Foreword, S. Dillon Ripley, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, states: "Museums are becoming more and more important. For one thing, as Dr. Wittlin points out, museums provide immediate encounters with authenticity, or a reasonable simulacrum of it. They provide new ways of teaching and learning, and an introduction to processes of lifelong education, now a priority for everyone."

An earlier book by Dr. Wittlin, *The Museum: Its History and Its Tasks in Education*, was the direct predecessor of the present work. The historical chapters have been expanded, and whereas the former volume ended with the outbreak of the Second World War, this study considers the achievements that took place in all parts of the world from 1945 up to the present time. The author's earlier work, published in England, gained international acclaim as a definitive publication in the field and was praised for its philosophical depth, historical breadth, and perceptive insights into the character of a complex institution.

Museological events of a scope without precedent are today in a stage of drafting and building. Dr. Wittlin examines all aspects of a museum's function: from the traditional functions as a depository, a center of research, and an educational agency to the newer, perhaps peripheral, functions that the author summarizes under the term "cultural center." All these purposes, though valid, must be constantly reexamined in the light of the "extending frontiers of knowledge, rising standards of general education, and of access to new techniques based on scientific advances."

In a chapter on a "Twelve-Point Program for Museum Renewal" the main, broad facets of the institution are clearly and concisely discussed. Dr. Wittlin begins with a definition of the term *museum* established by the International Council of Museums and describes problems of institutional identity and funding, training of personnel, and determining visitor population. She also points up the fallacies in the assumption that mere exposure to exhibits results in learning and stimulation.

This book is an impressive and scholarly presentation of the museum pictured through its past and examined in its present functioning as well as what it may offer in the foreseeable future. It is also entertainingly written.

The "hottest" current issue, as Dr. Wittlin calls it, is ecology, the study of the interdependence of all living things not only among themselves but with the organic environment. The museum's role in this issue is postulated and discussed.

The work is amply illustrated.

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