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Defining a Museum: Suggestions for an Alternative Approach

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1. Introduction

"Probably no more useless public institution, useless relative to its cost, was ever devised than that popular ideal, the classical building of a museum of art, filled with rare and costly objects. And it adds to its inutility a certain power of harm." This is what J.C. Dana (1920)—one of the most renowned American museologists—wrote in 1920, but there is little doubt that similar if not identical assessments could still be made today. Museums are (usually) heavily subsidised public institutions. Their number has dramatically increased over the last fifty years, and their role—as well as the cost considerations to which they are subjected—is even more open to question today than during the 1920s. This is probably in part a consequence of differing views as to the definition of the term 'museum'.

There is no single definition, but when the word is invoked, most of us think of large and well known institutions such as the Louvre in Paris, the National Gallery in London or the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Since in most countries there is no 'statutory' protection for the label 'museum', in practice anyone can set up a firm, construct a factory or restore a cemetery and call it a museum. The word carries prestige and attracts the attention of many groups of people, tourists as well as citizens needing cultural recreation, and local politicians. Demand for new museums is relatively large and this leads entrepreneurs to increase the supply. It is therefore not surprising that 'serious' museologists call for a 'serious' definition, especially if public subsidies are to be diverted by local politicians in search of prestigious undertakings.

According to the International Council of Museums (ICOM), a museum is "a non-profit making, permanent institution, in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches and communicates, and exhibits for the purpose of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment."[1] The Museums Association (United Kingdom) and the American Association of Museums have introduced definitions which are slightly different. There exist many more definitions,[2] but their common point is to insist upon the activities of a museum which make it differ from other institutions: conservation, research and communication. This is the basis upon which peer committees decide to include an institution, which would then in theory have the right to receive public funds. However, as noted by Weil (1990) with his Toothpick Museum, any organisation that conserves,

researches and exhibits could then pretend to be recognised, even if the objects it collects (here toothpicks) are of dubious, if any, interest. This is what many small institutions which mimick traditional museums have come to understand very well.[3]

On the other hand, a certain number of serious institutions cannot pretend to be called museums if one chooses to interpret the ICOM definition in its narrowest sense. Is it absolutely necessary for a 'museum' to possess a collection of objects? Is conservation necessarily one of the top priorities? Is the Barnes Collection not a museum because it cannot acquire additional works? Some criteria are perhaps superfluous, while others could be usefully added. In some cases, and for some trustees or managers, promoting tourism is a function which may be more important than genuine research. Van Mensch (1987) makes this very clear by noting that "one result of these developments is the arising of a series of new institutions, either transformed traditional institutions or completely new ones. These new institutions often maintain or adopt the denomination 'museum'. There is an increasing tension between the criteria mentioned in the ICOM definition and the structure of the institutions that call themselves 'museum'. On the other hand, many genuine museums call themselves differently [. . .]. The field seems chaotic." Therefore, defining a museum *a priori* leads to a deadend, and if we follow Weil (1990), it should be the institution's objectives and not its activities that should be taken into account when defining it as a museum. This is also the idea followed by certain British and American museums which stress the importance of the 'mission statement',[4] though the present authors think that most mission statements are too general and do not identify priorities. Instead we suggest that the process be started from the other end, that is by listening to how the curators of the institutions which call themselves museums, without excluding anyone on *a priori* grounds, rank their own objectives and priorities. We experimented with the idea by running a survey in the French-speaking region of Belgium. Though the territory is small ($17,000 \, \text{km}^2$) and its population not very large (4,250,000 inhabitants), we identified[5] over 350 'museums', without making any claim to be comprehensive. The final list includes museums of international reputation (such as the Musées Royaux des Beaux Arts in Brussels) as well as very small and only locally known (or unknown) institutions.

Section 2 briefly describes the questionnaire and the way the survey was conducted. Section 3 discusses the extraordinary diversity of the institutions which have come to be called museums. In Section 4, we proceed by giving a first analysis of what museums see as their core missions. This analysis is pursued in Section 5, where we go deeper, using tools borrowed from econometrics. This makes it possible to analyse the responses of curators according to various criteria (dimension of the museum, its age, the type of collection, etc.), by controlling for other criteria, as if all museums were identical with respect to these other criteria. The results of this analysis are reported in Section 6. Section 7 concludes the paper.

2. The Survey

The questionnaire contains mainly closed-ended questions. We listed seventeen activities (called 'missions' in the remainder of the paper) which could be carried

out by a museum and each curator was asked to rank each of the missions. By listing these 17 activities, we tried to be as exhaustive as possible (but we also left the possibility for a curator to list one more activity and rank it on the same scale). The list is based on classic ideas about what a museum should be, as well as on the less classic analyses carried out by the supporters of what has come to be called the New Museology.[6] We have also included criteria used by governmental bodies (such as the British Audit Commission (1991)) in judging the performance of a museum. The final list of missions includes: acquisitions, financial autonomy, conservation, leisure, economic development, education, temporary exhibitions and rotation of permanent collections, management of collections, cultural identity, visual image of the museum, permanence, prestige, promotion of new talents, quality of life, research, social role, tourism and 'other' (the only open-ended question).[7] The missions are briefly described in the questionnaire and curators had to rank each mission on a five-degree scale: (1) should not be considered at all; (2) secondary; (3) worth considering; (4) important; (5) should be given high priority. A few other questions were also included (such as what their ideal budget breakdown would be), but are of no concern to us here. Finally, there were questions meant to characterise the museum, such as year of its foundation, the number of full- and part-time employees, its budget, the size of the collection, the area available for the display of exhibits and the number of visitors. These will be used, in connection with the answers on the ranking of missions, to distinguish, if possible, classes of museums.

The questionnaire was sent out to 366 museums in January 1996. We received 223 answers, out of which 193 could be used.[8] This large response rate suggests that many museum curators at least found the idea interesting.

3. Museum Diversity

The first finding that is striking is the great diversity of the institutions in the sample, most of which were established very recently: Half of the 193 museums did not exist 20 years ago, and 20% opened less than 10 years ago. This is comparable to the situation in most other countries, and demonstrates that many institutions have almost no experience and, of course, almost no independent financial resources. Indeed, turning to budgets, we found that 38% of these museums have an annual operating budget (excluding personnel) of less than $10,000 (BF 300,000), and 75% of them have to manage with less than $83,000 (BF 2.5 million). Half of the museums employ at the most three full-time (equivalent[9]) employees, only two of which are paid, and the third is offering his time of charge free. Only 10% of these museums have more than 15 employees. Half of the museums have less than 5500 visitors per year, less than 1500 objects in their permanent collection, and space available for displays of less than 300 square metres.

Figures 1 to 5 provide a more comprehensive picture of the situation. Each figure is constructed in the same way. The vertical axis describes the percentage of the total number of museums in the sample for which the criterion, represented on the horizontal axis, is satisfied. For example, Figure 1 shows that less than 30% of current museums existed before 1960. It also shows the very impressive rate of increase in new foundations between 1970 and today. The other figures can be interpreted along similar lines.
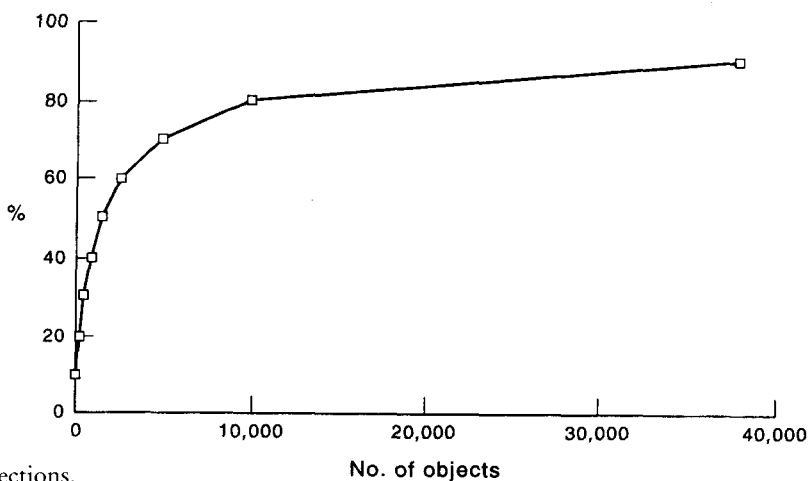
Defining a Museum
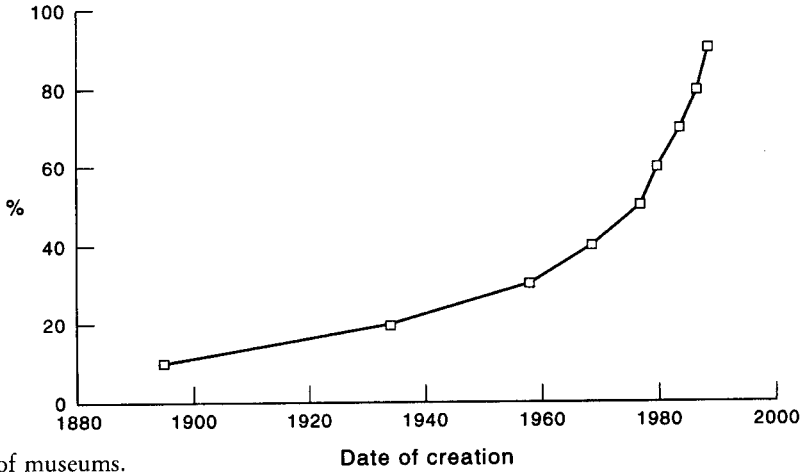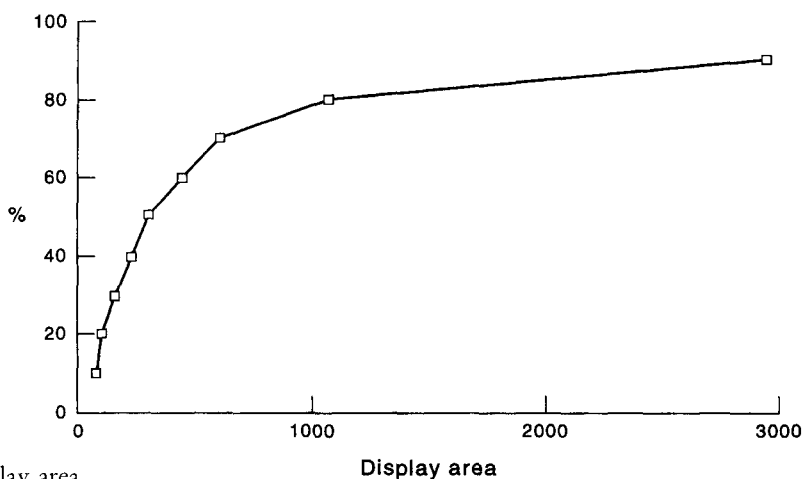

1. Age of museums.
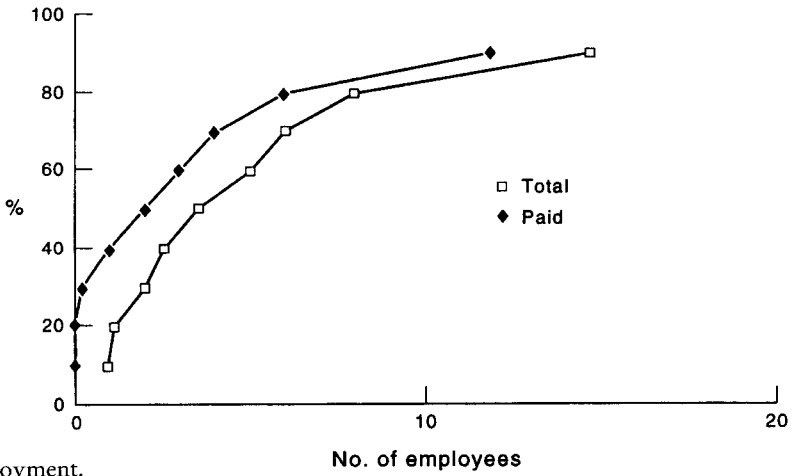
2. Employment.
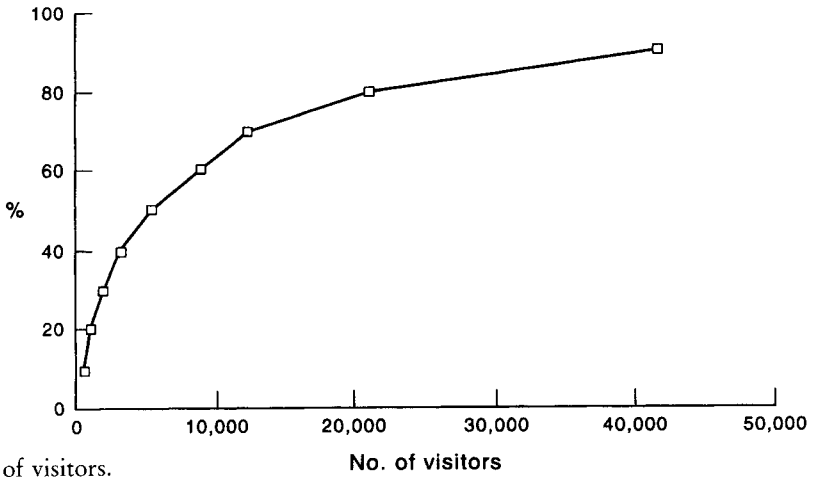
3. No. of visitors.

4. Collections.

5. Display area.

A plethora of recent foundations is, as we have said, a situation that is common to many countries, but the rest of the description is also comparable to what happened during the 1970s and 1980s in most other countries.[10]

4. A First Analysis of Core Missions

In our questionnaire, we asked respondents to rank 17 possible missions on a five-degree scale. The highest degree (5) corresponds to top priorities, while the lowest (1) to missions which should not be carried out. Figure 6 illustrates the median judgements of curators belonging to all museums[11] and to large museums,[12] defined here as managing an operating budget of no less than BF 2.5 million ($83,000); they represent 22.4% of the total number. The ranking suggested by large museums is consistent with the one made by all museums,
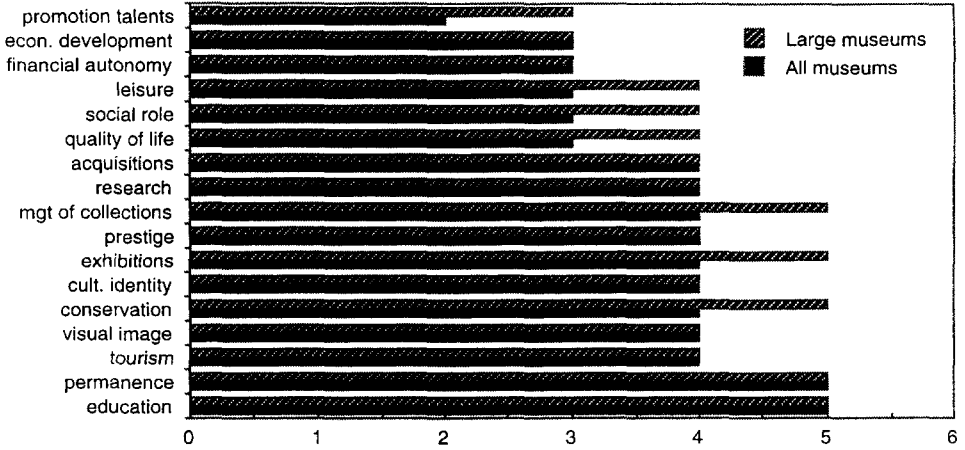
6. Assessing core missions (median judgement).

except that large museums seem to have a systematic upward bias. Their median judgement is in all cases as large as the overall median one. Almost the same holds for the average judgements in Figure 7, except that large museums are less interested in tourism (since they are usually located in large cities, they benefit from tourists anyway) and in cultural identity (here again, museums in large cities feel less association with the local community than smaller museums located in villages).

Education and permanence (i.e. ensuring that collections are preserved for future generations) are the highest rated missions by the great majority of museums, small or large. Large institutions also put weight on conservation (air conditioning, controlled lighting conditions, etc.), the organisation of temporary exhibitions (including the rotation of permanent collections), the management of collections and access to them (inventories, catalogues), and the visual image of the museum (i.e. its architecture, the design of rooms). This is not too surprising,
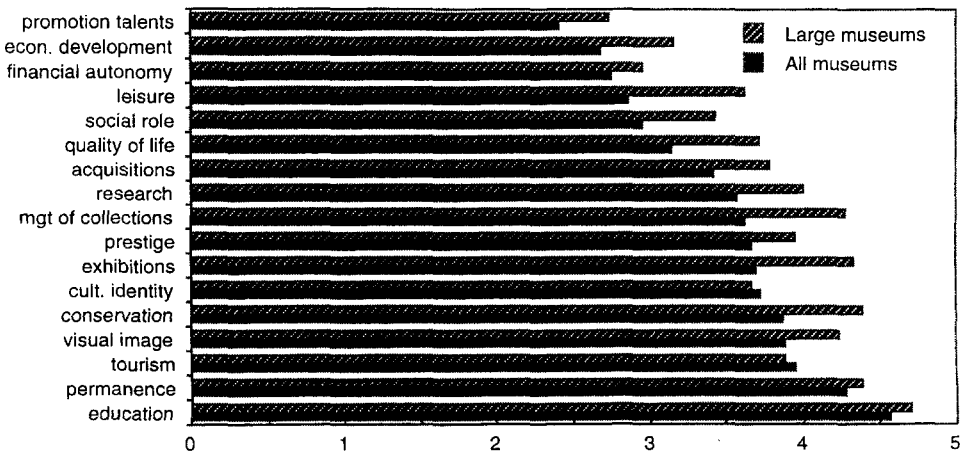
7. Assessing core missions (average judgement).

since smaller museums usually have less precious collections which need less costly conservation and require less cataloguing. These seldom have the means to organise large scale temporary exhibitions and, given their more modest resources, they have little choice as far as good outdoors and indoors architectural design is concerned. What came as a surprise is that research and acquisitions, two of the pillars in the ICOM definition, are not judged as top priorities: According to their average ranking, they come as 10th and 11th respectively. This may, however, be the consequence of the restrictive cultural policies that are being pursued in Belgium. Though the question asked was what the curators thought was important, irrespective of the situation they were facing, they may have in fact taken into account the 'real world' in which they have to live, with almost no public funding for acquisitions, and insufficient curators to deal with research as well as day-to-day management. Acquisitions and research come after the development of tourism, for example, an activity which public authorities are probably more inclined to approve of and support than academic research. Missions which are at the root of the New Museology current, such as quality of life (enriching the intellectual life of the local community) and social role are not ignored, but they are assigned fairly low priority. This is the same for leisure (the museum as more of a 'playground'). Finally, economic missions—which are often considered very important in the Anglo-Saxon countries—such as financial self-sufficiency (the price of entry tickets should finance the museum) or the role a museum could have in the economic development of the region, are in Belgium also considered as secondary.[13] This is probably the consequence of the very different museum model prevailing in continental Europe that museums are public assets freely accessible and supported by public funding.[14]

5. Categories of Museums and Core Missions, some Econometrics

In the previous section, we pointed out that curators of large museums (i.e. museums with a large budget) seem to have a ranking of missions which is different from that of museums in general. A question which immediately comes to mind is whether these differences are significant or whether they are due to sampling errors (since we do not have the total population of museums). We could check for this difference by testing whether the means of the responses are identical or not. There are, however, two problems with this approach. The first is that the chosen dichotomisation (based on budgets) is not unique: We could choose to base our analysis on other museum characteristics, such as the number of visitors, or the number of objects in the collection, and this could perhaps lead to different answers. The second problem, is that each museum can be described by a string of characteristics, and not by a single one, so that projecting the differences based on a unique characteristic (budget, or number of visitors for example) may hide the fact that several characteristics contribute simultaneously to the ranking of missions by curators. For example, if we analyse their answers according to the operating budget only, the differences we trace may be due to the fact that the art museums tend to be older than the others, and possibly have had more time to organise to collect public funds. The analysis reported below makes it possible to attribute differences in the perception of missions to each criterion, the influence of other criteria having been controlled.

The tool we use consists of explaining the variety of answers to each question (on each mission) by as many characteristics as possible and *a priori* could be thought to have had an impact. Listed below are the variables assumed to explain—at least partially—the answers:

(a) type of museum (5 categories: art, including decorative and religious art; history and archaeology; ethnography; science and technology; others, including mixed museums);
(b) financial status (4 categories, based on the main source of funding: central or federal government, provinces, regions, universities; towns and communities; other subsidised; nonsubsidised and private);
(c) operational budget (3 categories: under BF 300,000; between BF 300,000 and BF 2.5 million; more than BF 2.5 million);
(d) date of foundation (calendar date[15]);
(e) annual number of visitors (in thousands);
(f) total number of employees (in units);
(g) number of unpaid workers (in units).

For technical reasons, the five possible answers (mission that should be given high priority, important mission, mission which could be considered, secondary mission, mission that should not be carried out) have been aggregated into two possibilities: high priority and important; all other.[16] This is the variable to be explained; it takes the value 1 if the answer is "high priority or important" and the value 0 otherwise.

We can now assume that there is a linear relationship between the dichotomous variable which we have to explain (is the mission important or not?) and the various explanatory variables listed above, and we estimate this relation using an econometric method known as the logit model.[17] In the case of, say three explanatory variables (x_1, the number of visitors, x_2 the date of creation of the museum and x_3 the number of employees), this relation can be written:

$$\text{Prob}[y_i = 1] = \frac{\exp(z_i)}{1 + \exp(z_i)}.$$

In this equation, $\text{Prob}[y_i = 1]$ is the probability that museum i, described by characteristics (x_{1i}, x_{2i}, x_{3i}) answers "the mission is important," $z_i = \beta_1 x_{1i} + \beta_2 x_{2i} + \beta_3 x_{3i}$, where the β are the estimated parameters which measure the impact of each variable on the answer $\text{Prob}[y_i = 1]$. By calculating the right-hand side of the equation for a specific museum i described by x_{1i}, x_{2i} and x_{3i}, we obtain a value $\text{Prob}[y_i = 1]$ which, given the estimation method used, will take a value between 0 and 1, and can thus be interpreted as a probability: The higher its value, the closer the answer is to "the mission is important." A large (positive) coefficient β_1 say, implies that characteristic x_1 has a positive impact on the probability of the answer being "important". Of course, some parameters may be negative. Then, the effect of the variable is to decrease the probability. As is obvious from the equation, β_1 for example, gives the impact of variable x_1, keeping constant the influence of x_2 and x_3. Some explanatory variables could be options in a common category, for example, types of museums. Assume there are two such types (art museums and other) represented by the variables z_1 and z_2;

z_{1i} takes the value 1 if museum i deals with art, and the value 0 otherwise; likewise, z_{2i} takes the value 0 for an art museum, and 1 otherwise. The estimated parameters which will be associated with these (so-called dummy) variables can be interpreted along the same lines as before. However, it is also important to know whether an effect is significant, or whether it is simply due to the random character of the sample.

Statisticians have devised tests, i.e. confidence intervals around each estimated coefficient. If this interval contains the value zero [for example, if the coefficient β is equal to 0.75 and the confidence interval is (−0.35z to 1.85)], we may conclude that the estimated coefficient is not significantly different from zero, so that the variable does not significantly influence the answer.

When there are categorical variables describing several options (such as type of museum), we are interested in knowing whether the various options have identical effects or not. If the effects are the same whatever the option, then distinguishing among these is not important and does not contribute in explaining the answer. For technical reasons, this testing is carried out as follows. One of the options is left out of the model (and can thus be thought of as picking a coefficient equal to zero) and the coefficients picked by the remaining options are measured as deviations with respect to the one that is left out. To check whether options have differentiated effects, one then simply tests whether all the estimated coefficients are (simultaneously) significantly different from zero (i.e. from the coefficient of the option left out). If so, the possible differences in the answers are not due to the different options taken by this specific variable.

Finally, we are interested in how well the equation predicts. For this, we simply compare the observed number of 'ones' (high priority or important) and 'zeroes' (other answers) with the number of outcomes predicted by the model. However, since the model predicts probabilities (numbers between zero and one), we count 'one', if the predicted value is higher than 1/2 and 'zero' otherwise. The percentage of 'correct' predictions will be used in evaluating the model. Note that if answers tend to be identical (many 'ones', for example), the model will have little or nothing to predict, and obviously, the variables are useless in discriminating, since all museums appear to agree.

6. Categories of Museums and Core Missions, Econometric Results

Tables 1, 2 and 3 show which variables influence the answers in a significant way. These are reported in italics. The tables also give the observed number of 'ones' and 'zeroes', the percentage of correct predictions of 'ones' and 'zeroes' as well as the total number of correct predictions.

All Museums

Results are reported in Table 1. Observe first that for 11 (out of the 17) missions, the equation predicts the correct answer for more than 70% of the 162 museums (which have given complete answers). Most of these cases are located at the top or at the bottom of the table, where a large majority of answers is either 'one' (top) or 'zero' (bottom): museums in the sample do agree on the important or less important character of the mission. Two thirds at least agree that education, permanence, tourism and visual image are important, while two thirds agree that

Table 1. Test values. All museums

	All variables[a]	Type of museum[b]	Origin of budget[c]	Budget[d]	Creation date	No. of visitors	Personnel Total	Unpaid	Obs. zeros	%	Obs. ones	%	Obs. total	%
Education	19.10	2.83	6.74	*14.64*	0.08	0.78	1.34	0.95	11	9	151	100	162	94
Permanence	19.09	2.95	1.29	3.84	1.83	0.19	0.24	0.60	29	0	133	100	162	82
Tourism	12.35	2.10	3.54	7.80	0.54	0.82	0.18	0.02	45	9	117	100	162	75
Visual image	*29.41*	*12.84*	*10.37*	5.56	0.12	0.24	0.94	0.47	48	27	114	96	162	76
Conservation	*36.78*	5.24	2.07	8.69	0.89	0.73	1.55	1.69	61	51	101	82	162	70
Cultural identity	18.97	1.80	4.10	1.53	0.74	1.03	1.66	0.78	61	25	101	89	162	65
Exhibitions	28.98	1.94	6.76	3.93	0.02	0.49	2.30	0.65	59	47	103	82	162	69
Prestige	7.57	0.90	1.54	2.84	0.58	0.30	0.68	0.06	61	7	101	98	162	64
Mgt collections	*49.61*	7.72	2.48	*16.45*	2.62	2.05	1.98	1.17	65	63	97	82	162	75
Research	*34.17*	*11.95*	1.81	6.76	1.55	1.53	1.05	2.21	69	61	93	77	162	70
Acquisitions	18.08	4.33	1.45	2.97	0.76	0.89	0.10	2.24	69	35	93	80	162	60
Quality of life	21.28	5.78	5.01	6.91	0.67	0.19	0.83	0.99	96	84	66	48	162	70
Social role	18.85	5.50	4.91	6.21	0.51	0.60	1.04	1.26	92	82	70	50	162	68
Leisure	11.96	2.48	2.90	2.30	0.59	0.88	0.01	0.66	105	92	57	16	162	65
Financial auton.	26.26	4.88	6.94	5.29	1.33	0.63	0.73	1.28	120	98	42	33	162	80
Econ. developmt	18.27	4.74	2.97	5.14	0.91	0.93	1.14	1.00	121	98	41	17	162	77
Prom. talents	19.36	8.17	4.94	1.15	0.39	1.04	1.44	0.11	125	97	37	8	162	77

Observed answers (no.) and correct predictions (%) span the last six columns (Obs. zeros, %, Obs. ones, %, Obs. total, %).

Numbers in italics show that the impact of the variable(s) is significant. The number of coefficients tested is 13 for [a], 4 for [b], 3 for [c], 2 for [d] and 1 in other cases. The following tabulated test-statistics are used: For groups of coefficients: χ-square test (22.36 for [a]; 9.49 for [b]; 7.82 for [c]; 5.99 for [d]). For individual coefficients: Student t test (1.96 at the 5% level).

leisure, financial autonomy, economic development and the promotion of young talents should not be considered as top priorities. The interesting cases are those in which answers are more evenly spread and for which museum characteristics jointly provide an explanation for the heterogeneity of the answers. These are: conservation, exhibitions, the management of collections and research, but it is only for the management of collections and research that more than one characteristic (or group of characteristics) explains the differences in a significant way.

The variable which is significant in the largest number of cases is the value of the operating budget (7 times), followed by the type of museum (3 times), and personnel (3 times). Museums with very small budgets (less than BF 0.3 million) tend to pay less attention to the importance of the various missions:[18] coefficients are negative, except for education, which is very highly valued, and, to some extent, leisure. Museums with medium-sized budgets (BF 0.3–2.5 million), however, react more positively than the more richly funded (whose influence is normalised to 0), implying that they are perhaps more dynamic than larger and older museums. Type of museum seems important in explaining differences of perception for the management of collections and research. Science museums seem to attach little importance to both missions, which is somewhat surprising, while none of the 'pure' museums ('mixed' museums are absent from the equation) cares too much about research, and science museums even less so. Finally, though visual image is thought to be important by a majority of museums, responses vary according to the type of museum; in particular, science museums do not stress this mission as too important.

Since operating budgets as well as type of museum seem to be at the root of some of the differences in valuing missions, we decided to look into some more details. Table 2 reports on the results for museums whose operating budget is larger than BF 0.3 million, omitting the 58 very small ones. This leaves us with 104 responses. Table 3 reports on the differences for the 65 art and history museums.

Museums with Larger Operating Budgets

The general picture is more uniform than if all museums are taken into account. Here, museums agree with a two-thirds majority on education, permanence, tourism, visual image, conservation, exhibitions and collection management as being important, and on social role, leisure, financial autonomy, economic development and promoting talents as secondary. Differences in operating expenses and numbers of voluntary workers are the factors which are most often significant in explaining differences for the remaining missions (research, acquisitions and quality of life) as well as for conservation, exhibitions and the management of collections. Interestingly, but for reasons that can be understood, a greater number of unpaid workers reduces, in all cases, the probability of the answer being "the mission is important."

Art and History Museums

There is less consensus among art and history museums than among museums with larger operating budgets, and no more consensus than in general. Indeed,

Table 2. Test values. Museums with budget larger than BF 0.3 million

	All variables[a]	Type of museum[b]	Origin of budget[c]	Budget	Creation date	No. of visitors	Personnel Total	Personnel Unpaid	Obs. zeros	%	Obs. ones	%	Obs. total	%
Education	16.08	4.04	5.66	3.00	0.05	0.96	1.46	0.90	9	11	95	100	104	92
Permanence	11.69	5.94	0.40	0.31	0.96	0.76	0.11	1.30	13	0	91	99	104	87
Tourism	10.79	3.88	2.04	2.59	0.40	0.52	0.24	0.09	25	16	79	99	104	79
Visual image	21.36	9.80	7.66	2.39	0.01	0.07	0.71	0.34	25	32	79	94	104	79
Conservation	24.56	5.82	2.46	2.07	1.47	0.31	1.37	2.11	29	24	75	91	104	74
Cultural identity	14.56	1.98	1.02	0.91	0.73	0.94	1.58	2.22	41	24	63	89	104	63
Exhibitions	22.33	2.86	8.40	2.13	0.28	0.39	1.58	0.31	29	24	75	93	104	74
Prestige	10.90	4.34	0.72	1.74	0.45	0.25	0.58	1.10	38	32	66	85	104	65
Mgt collections	38.30	6.60	2.78	2.74	2.65	2.67	1.89	2.22	30	57	74	91	104	81
Research	22.75	5.32	0.56	0.53	1.42	1.72	1.14	2.23	36	39	68	84	104	68
Acquisitions	21.48	5.88	1.22	1.24	0.96	1.26	0.58	2.37	41	41	63	88	104	69
Quality of life	21.33	9.74	7.52	1.99	0.78	0.13	0.80	1.86	52	48	52	69	104	59
Social role	12.89	4.14	6.22	1.16	0.42	0.76	0.78	1.25	51	71	53	60	104	65
Leisure	7.10	0.48	2.30	1.14	0.59	0.80	0.32	0.67	60	80	44	19	104	54
Financial auton.	18.02	3.38	5.42	0.93	0.66	0.40	0.83	0.84	73	96	31	29	104	76
Econ. developmt	11.82	4.72	4.98	1.78	0.96	0.87	1.31	1.16	70	96	34	29	104	74
Prom. talents	16.26	7.18	3.18	0.82	0.40	0.98	1.37	0.57	76	92	28	25	104	74

Observed answers (no.) and correct predictions (%)

Numbers in italics show that the impact of the variable(s) is significant. The number of coefficients tested is 12 for [a], 4 for [b], 3 for [c], and 1 in other cases. The following tabulated test-statistics are used: For groups of coefficients: χ-square test (21.03 for [a]; 9.49 for [b], 7.82 for [c]). For individual coefficients: Student t test (1.96 at the 5% level).

Table 3. Test values. Art and history museums

| | All variables[a] | Type of museum | Origin of budget[b] | Budget[c] | Creation date | No. of visitors | Personnel | | Observed answers (no.) and correct predictions (%) | | | | | |
							Total	Unpaid	Obs. zeros	%	Obs. ones	%	Obs. total	%
Education									0	0	65	100	65	100
Permanence									0	0	65	100	65	100
Tourism	22.04	0.28	12.80	12.64	1.82	0.75	0.27	0.29	18	61	47	89	65	82
Visual image	15.33	0.14	8.14	3.86	1.87	0.27	0.62	0.93	18	17	47	91	65	71
Conservation	22.66	1.43	10.92	7.58	1.26	0.74	0.41	1.20	19	53	46	89	65	78
Cultural identity	12.87	1.17	0.44	2.42	0.13	1.53	1.62	0.52	26	42	39	90	65	71
Exhibitions	13.09	0.24	4.32	3.16	1.23	0.09	1.40	0.16	25	48	40	75	65	65
Prestige	9.88	0.40	4.62	4.80	0.14	0.27	0.67	1.05	23	22	42	88	65	65
Mgt collections	24.33	0.73	1.06	10.46	1.32	2.02	1.66	1.41	19	63	46	91	65	83
Research	23.30	0.14	3.74	4.22	1.96	1.80	0.98	2.11	23	57	42	83	65	74
Acquisitions	18.48	0.80	7.24	1.96	0.30	0.17	0.44	1.65	25	56	40	85	65	74
Quality of life	17.23	2.25	3.84	4.32	0.62	0.05	1.37	1.21	37	73	28	82	65	77
Social role	7.81	0.24	3.52	2.22	1.58	0.53	0.32	1.28	34	71	31	68	65	69
Leisure	7.49	0.24	0.34	0.84	1.19	1.22	0.80	0.14	40	93	25	24	65	66
Financial auton.	13.04	0.10	5.00	3.34	1.28	0.65	0.32	1.13	43	88	22	41	65	72
Econ. developmt	14.63	0.60	8.54	4.46	0.31	0.93	1.02	0.97	44	91	21	38	65	74
Prom. talents	14.65	1.56	4.50	1.00	0.40	0.88	0.39	1.32	48	92	17	41	65	78

Numbers in italics show that the impact of the variable(s) is significant. The number of coefficients tested is 10 for [a], 3 for [b], 2 for [c], and 1 in other cases. The following tabulated test-statistics are used: χ-square test (18.31 for [a]; 7.82 for [b]; 5.99 for [c]). For individual coefficients: Student t test (1.96 at the 5% level).

these museums agree (with the usual two-thirds majority) on nine issues only, though they unanimously agree on the importance of education and permanence. The fit obtained by the equation is better (70% of correct predictions at least for 13 among the 17 missions), but there is also less heterogeneity to be explained. In this case, it is the origin of the budget (state, city, other) that is most often significant in explaining differences, though this happens only three times.

A Tentatively Comprehensive Assessment

There is a consensus across all types of museums in the sample (large or small, with larger or smaller operating budgets, whatever their type of collection— art, history, science, etc.) to agree on the importance of certain missions. Education and permanence are apparently top values for most of them (and unanimously so for art and history museums). These are obviously the functions which are currently perceived to be the ultimate mission of a museum. Acquisitions, research and conservation would appear to be con- sidered to be ancillary, though doing without these a museum can hardly survive in the long term. It would be understandable to see young and small institutions not ranking these missions as priorities, but it is surprising to find that this is also the case for larger as well as for art and history museums. Tourism and visual image are also looked upon favourably, and not only by the smaller museums. Finally, larger and older institutions are more concerned with conservation and collections management. Promoting the economic development of the region and discovering the new talents are often considered as being unimportant. And so is the idea of financial autonomy (especially, and not surprisingly, in the larger museums and in art museums), in spite of the pressure being put on most public institutions. In this respect, the small museums are probably more realistic in expecting only limited help from public funds.

7. Conclusions

Dana (1920) had a very precise idea about what he wanted a museum to be. He thought that only eighty American institutions were "useful to the commu- nity",[19] while the others probably did not deserve to be called museums. These were ideas which were of course not shared by many institutions.[20] Con- troversies on what should be called museum had started already during the course of the 19th century, if not earlier, and the meaning of the word kept changing over the years. And indeed, how should one characterise a fluid concept which can be used simultaneously to mean temple, forum, school or church? The easiest solution is to produce a strict definition that describes some obvious characteristics: Collecting, conserving, researching, exhibiting. However, such an approach freezes the essence of many museums and limits their evolution, even if that is thought to be wide enough. This is exactly the problem to be encountered with the concepts defined by ICOM, the Museums Association and the American Association of Museums. The reason is that the characteristics suggested by these definitions are concerned with technical and functional aspects (conservation, research, communication), but not with the very reason for a museum to exist (the 'project').

The alternative developed in this paper is related to the various missions pursued by an institution identifying itself as a museum. We started with the idea that several competing projects could originate from a single concept,[21] and ended up with a photography of existing museums, using 17 possible colours. Though this view is still rigid and imprecise, it is richer since it is closer to the existing situation. Clearly, some of the museums in our sample follow the norm set by international associations, but they also try to pursue other missions which are not part of that norm. Moreover, some institutions would be rejected as museums, though they pursue missions which are very close to the norm. The various characteristics which we took into account in order to understand why some museums favour specific missions are very sketchy. We did not succeed in describing why museums pursue different missions, but it is evident that size, infrastructure and age do not explain differences in perception.

At this point, it may be useful to ask why museums tend to look for a (narrow) definition. Public choice theoretical arguments would suggest that curators of large and older museums behave as rent-seekers. Most large museums are subsidised by governments or private fundations. These are precisely the museums whose curators meet during conventions where definitions which reproduce their own behaviour patterns are coined, and these should clearly be angled towards reducing the number of institutions which could, sooner or later, become competitors for the same (decreasing) pool of funds. This economic behaviour generates a definition which looks very appealing to the intellectual elite—conservation for future generations, research, education—but it does obviously restrict entry and ends up perpetuating a somewhat old-fashioned image of museums.

Curators and museum directors have, however, another and perhaps more convincing explanation: Visitors may feel cheated if they do not find what they expect a museum should provide. This model needs more elaboration, probably through obtaining visitors' views on what they think about the missions of a museum since in Belgium this topic is usually not given much attention in visitors' surveys. In particular, it would be interesting to know whether visitors split missions in the same way as the curators do, depending on the type of museum they patronise. This is the topic for some further research.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. See Ambrose and Pain (1993).
2. See e.g. Alexander (1979) and Burcaw (1983).
3. See Van Mensch (1993) and Eco (1985).
4. See American Association of Museums (1984) as well as Ambrose and Ruynard (1991).
5. The list was compiled on the basis of the Guide des Musées de la Communauté Française (see Communauté Francaise de Belgique, 1993) and an inventory used by the Brussels Council of Museums (Conseil Bruxellois des Musées).

6. We use the term "New Museology" in the French sense (Desvallées 1992) and not in the sense suggested by Vergo (1989). See Harrison (1993).
7. See Appendix 1 for details about the questionnaire.
8. Interestingly enough, a few institutions (listed as museums) considered that they should not be called museum, and did react but without answering the questionnaire.
9. A full-time equivalent may be made up of several part-time employees, whose time adds up to one full-time person.
10. See the report of the Association of American Museums (1992) and Prince and Higgins (1987).
11. The minimal number of answers is 185 (out of 192 usable answers).
12. The minimal number of answers is 40 (out of 43 usable answers).
13. See Cannon-Brookes (1996) and Grampp (1996) on these issues.
14. See Griffin (1987), Kovach (1989) and Beer (1990).
15. For the sake of clarity, divided by 100 in Tables 1 to 3 that follow.
16. The reason is that, if five categories of answers are accounted for, the number of observations is too small to consider a polytomous logit model.
17. See Maddala (1985) for an extensive treatment of the logit model and the testing procedure.
18. Estimated coefficients are reported in Appendix 2.
19. On this, see Alexander (1983).
20. See Gilman (1923).
21. Note that such projects are not necessarily very original. Tourism as a mission was already described during the 18th century, while, at the end of the 17th century, Leibnitz played with the idea of economic development as a mission for a museum.

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Appendix 1. The questionnaire

A. *Activities of a museum*

In the following table, we list (in the alphabetical order of the French words) a certain number of activities (or notions determining activities) that one could find in a museum. For each of these, could you indicate how you value it in and for your own museum.

1. *Acquisitions.* Activity concerned with collecting, buying and looking for donations and bequests.
2. *Financial autonomy.* A museum could be organised in such a way that entry fees and side activities generate enough resources so that there is no need for public support.
3. *Conservation.* Activity concerned with managing the environment within the museum (temperature, humidity, light conditions, etc.), security against theft, fire, etc.
4. *Leisure.* Activity which implies that the visitor of the museum feels comfortable and pleased. This includes services such as restaurant, cafeteria, playing possibilities for children, etc.
5. *Economic development.* Given the resources a museum generates, it could contribute to the development of a region, by indirectly employment (through shops that locate in the neighborhood of the museum), buying its inputs within the region, etc.
6. *Education.* A museum has a pedagogic role, organises guided tours and other activities for various types of visitors (schools, adults, groups, etc.).
7. *Exhibitions.* Activity concerned with temporary exhibitions and the rotation of permanent collections, including the definition of messages that should be conveyed by the exhibition(s).
8. *Management of collections.* Activity concerned with cataloguing and inventory taking.
9. *Cultural identity.* A museum could be of help in reflecting the cultural identity of a community, a city, a region or a country, by pointing to the significant aspects which make it differ from other groups. It could even contribute to regroup a community, a city, a region around this identity.
10. *Visual image.* Activities that contribute to make the museum itself into an art object, by caring for its architecture, its interior decoration, etc.
11. *Permanence.* A museum is an institution that is created for the current as well as for future generations. As a consequence, deaccessioning should not be allowed.
12. *Prestige.* A museum can contribute to make its region renowned by showing its present and past achievements.

13. *Promoting new talents.* A museum can play a role in promoting young talented artists (or others) by showing and/or buying their work.
14. *Quality of life.* A museum can enrich the quality of life in a region.
15. *Research.* This activity encompasses writing articles and books on the collections, laboratory activities, collaborating with universities.
16. *Social role.* Activity that leads the museum to take part in the social and political debates of the community.
17. *Tourism.* Attract and promote touristic activities of—and in—the region.
18. *Any other.* An option left for the curator to add to the list.

For each activity, one among the following choices had to be made. The activity:

(1) should not be considered at all;
(2) is secondary;
(3) is worth considering;
(4) is important;
(5) should be given high priority.

B. *Description of the museum*

1. *Name of the museum*
2. *Date of foundation*
3. *Personnel.* How many persons work in the museum. Convert part-time personnel into full-time equivalents (for example two employees who work half-time make one full-time). How many of these are paid? How many provide their time voluntarily, without being paid.
4. *Size of the operating budget.* The museum had to choose one among ten possibilities.
5. *Size of the collection* (number of specimens).
6. *Area available for displays* (in square metres).
7. *Number of visitors in 1995.*
8. *Identity of the person who answered the survey.*

Appendix 2 overleaf

Appendix 2. Parameter values. All museums

	Type of museum[1]				Origin of budget[2]			Budget[3]		Other variables				
	Art	History	Ethnogr.	Science	State	City	O. subsid.	< 0.3	0.3–2.5	Creation	Visitors	Person.	Unpaid	Intercept
Education	0.024	-1.321	-0.724	0.637	0.959	1.074	13.081	3.518	1.851	0.017	-0.007	0.177	0.132	-0.643
Permanence	-1.136	-0.965	-0.426	-1.058	-0.057	-0.071	0.845	-0.953	0.032	-1.800	0.002	0.013	-0.041	38.113
Tourism	0.567	0.521	0.653	0.878	-0.582	0.260	0.455	-0.244	0.708	-0.061	0.004	-0.002	-0.001	1.459
Visual image	-0.491	-0.384	-0.044	-2.106	1.350	0.200	1.722	-0.304	0.313	0.014	-0.001	0.034	0.030	0.413
Conservation	1.122	0.279	0.367	-0.206	0.061	0.137	0.783	-0.479	0.489	-0.510	0.010	0.088	-0.103	9.893
Cultural identity	-0.435	0.171	0.156	0.135	-0.736	-0.514	0.408	-0.540	-0.408	-0.084	0.003	-0.039	0.056	2.915
Exhibitions	-0.638	-0.715	-0.692	-0.431	-0.085	-0.483	1.047	-0.247	0.256	-0.024	-0.003	0.126	0.044	0.647
Prestige	0.464	0.192	0.181	0.388	-0.077	0.222	0.572	0.076	-0.068	-0.140	0.001	0.008	0.003	2.843
Mgt collections	0.970	1.216	0.527	-0.362	-0.176	0.643	0.308	-0.777	0.786	-1.900	-0.010	0.082	-0.074	36.729
Research	-0.611	-0.605	-1.290	-1.927	0.071	0.102	-0.620	-1.065	-0.162	-0.850	-0.003	0.013	-0.178	18.765
Acquisitions	0.289	-0.217	-0.135	-0.862	-0.242	-0.231	-0.646	-0.250	0.257	0.170	0.005	-0.001	-0.176	-2.387
Quality of life	0.903	-0.250	0.010	0.423	0.302	-0.190	0.953	-0.452	0.459	-0.090	0.000	0.007	-0.063	0.968
Social role	0.142	0.321	0.147	-0.972	0.589	-0.400	0.439	-0.444	0.450	-0.230	-0.001	0.009	-0.081	4.259
Leisure	-0.135	-0.321	-0.715	0.083	-0.630	-0.451	-0.258	0.263	-0.001	0.000	-0.074	-0.037	-0.038	1.386
Financial auton.	1.285	1.318	0.931	0.571	-0.561	-1.485	-0.217	-0.470	0.477	-0.710	-0.002	-0.008	0.095	12.286
Econ. developmt	1.322	0.932	0.695	0.644	0.935	0.568	0.869	-0.483	0.489	-0.150	0.003	-0.018	0.060	0.405
Prom. talents	0.392	-0.681	-1.267	-0.468	-0.316	0.594	-0.687	-0.203	0.209	0.200	-0.008	0.020	0.007	-4.765

[1] Other museums are the omitted option.
[2] Privately financed museums are the omitted option.
[3] Museums with a budget over 2.5 millions are the omitted option.