If museums are to meet the needs of the man of today and tomorrow, they must involve themselves in every area of human existence. This is a responsibility that challenges their most creative resources. Instead they stand accused on three points:

1. failing to respond to the needs of the majority of people;
2. failing to relate the knowledge of the past to the grave issues confronting us today or to participate in meeting those issues; and
3. failing to overcome not only their blatant disregard of minority cultures but their outright racism, which is all too apparent in what they collect, study and exhibit and in whom they employ.

Museum people surround themselves with artifacts to remind us of man’s glorious past – it is always the glorious past and the beautiful painting – when from their vantage point the errors of past generations can be seen all too clearly. The traditional museums have difficulty relinquishing their illusions and facing present-day realities. They can and must tell men the truth about life if the future is to be more promising, not just for the few, but for everyone.

The collection, study, interpretation and display of historical artifacts should not be the museum’s sole responsibility. One isolated object occupying a museum case with a label attached tells only a very small part of the story. Not everyone is object-oriented, and even for those who are, this is not enough. If the average man is to understand what it is that the museum is trying to convey, if he is to comprehend the full importance and impact of this object on his life, there is much more he will need to know.

Data and objects that tell the story of how men lived together, economically, politically, socially and every other way need to be collected. Museum experts need to analyze the difference between past civilizations and life today and from this analysis, forecast the outcome of our present course. Based on this research, museums should then offer alternatives to society’s problems through exhibits that not only encourage their audience to think but also
stir their emotions; that offer not only a learning experience but a pleasurable one as well.

The everyday life of everyday women and men has not concerned museum directors and curators whose interest lie with the well-to-do and their private collections. The museum’s function and purpose – the manner of presentation – are patterned after a 15th century definition of man, the princely man. Administrators of museums and the members of their boards are either immobilized by this traditional concept of what a museum must be, or uncertain (if not unwilling) about how to change. Since it is hardly possible not to know what’s going on in the world today, it must be that they do not care.

Even today, museum buildings are constructed with cold marble and high ceilings that lack the common touch. The museum must no longer be the sacred preserve of the rich and those who can afford to collect works of art. It is these people who decide museum policy. Museums are their playthings while the great issues of our day go begging. The well-to-do are not alone in this. Museum professionals aid and abet them by acting as their purchasing agents.

If, in fact, the museum were the center of our lives and we understood its mission with respect to the past, the present and the future, the needs of the man of today and tomorrow would be paramount in our discussion. What does modern man want and need? How shall museums approach these problems?

While the experts collect and study objects exemplifying the best of past civilizations, what about the members of today’s society who are continuously exploited – who are malnourished, uneducated, ill-housed, and ill-treated? What about our polluted air and water? What about the population explosion that is so serious in some areas that people are starving? What about the savagery of war? Should we stand silent and watch the genocide that continues for no logical reason? Who profits from all this?

Museums must demonstrate how the power of knowledge, the power of science, the power of history, the power of what is in the earth and what happens when we curse the earth, can transform man’s life. There is much that needs to be done and it needs to be done soon. All the technical and artistic media at the disposal of museums – films, slides, recordings, art shows, lectures, the performing arts – must be used to tell the story so effectively that even a child can get the message.

If there is any compassion, if there is any concern for the man of today and the man of tomorrow, museums must be created to serve the people. If the established institutions cannot break with tradition and follow this new direction, they should sponsor a supplementary agency – a neighborhood museum – to serve as an intermediary between the museum and the community.

The neighborhood museum must understand the nature of its environment – the problems and aspirations of the residents of the area – so that its program can be planned in response to their interests. The community plays an active part in these plans, and through this interchange, the museum becomes the means where the quality of life in the area is enhanced.

The Anacostia Neighborhood Museum, a bureau of the Smithsonian Institution, is responsible to the people of Anacostia – a community of about 257,000 predominantly black residents. Membership on the Museum’s Advisory Committee is open to all who wish to participate. Not a few of these same people were
part of the original group who met with the Smithsonian officials early in 1967 to request that a neighborhood museum be established in Anacostia.

The Advisory Committee expressed the desire of the community when they said, "We want and need exhibits and programs on the history of black people because that is what we know so little of." The museum has met this need. Of equal importance was the community's request for an exhibit on the history of Anacostia since a study of what life was like in Anacostia in earlier years, particularly for the black population, could place present problems in a new perspective and lead to possible solutions. An exhibit on the five problems of major concern (crime, drugs, housing, unemployment and education) were to follow.

What began quietly from one man's imaginative foresight is growing in significance, at least for the people of Anacostia. Men's spirits have been lifted by the great challenges of life — the difficulties and the sadness that they see. If museum people cannot open their eyes to the blight and the suffering — to the real truth about life — there is no hope for the museum. It will become atrophied like one of its ancient relics. The day when established institutions can deny their responsibilities and cheat the masses is swiftly coming to an end. If museum people do not realize this, they only demonstrate their blindness and lack of concern for humanity.

When we are asked — what of this present age? where shall we go? which direction shall we take? — how shall we answer? What shall museums present — a large bag of objects and call them precious treasures? The awesome judgment shall be, "Depart form me you unworthy and fruitless servant. For have you not learnt that those who serve their fellow man must serve in spirit and truth?"

(Texten återgiven efter Museum News, May 1972)