

interpreter

Measuring the Good Museum

Mr. Kenneth Hudson is the author of the UNESCO-sponsored Museums for the 1980s (1977), which was based on the worldwide research he undertook for the project. His other books include A Social History of Museums (1975) and two editions of The Good Museums Guide. Every five years he compiles Macmillan's international Directory of Museums and Living Displays, and he is presently working on a book entitled Museums of Influence, which will be published by the Cambridge University Press. This book will include surveys of institutions that Mr. Hudson feels are the most influential museums of the world. Colonial Williamsburg is included.

I suppose a simple definition of a good museum would be a museum from which one went out feeling better than when one went in. A bad museum would have the reverse effect. One could, I suppose, rate a concert or a theater performance in the same way, which amounts to saying that the whole business of assessment must inevitably be, to a large extent, subjective. There is, fortunately or unfortunately, no agreed standard by which to measure the goodness or badness of a museum. The same museum can appear exceedingly boring to a group of teenagers and yet provide a visiting scholar with everything he asks for.

For the past ten years or so I have wrestled with the problems involved in trying to compare one museum with another, in editing *The Good Museums Guide*, as a member of the jury of the Museum of the Year Award in Great Britain, and as the creator and administrator of the European Museum of the Year Award. I have come to the conclusion that the only way of going about the job is to consider each museum as a package of qualities and to allocate a certain number of points for each item in the package.

After a good deal of experiment and modification, my museum package has come to include eleven elements: the building; the collections; the presentation and interpretation of the material on display; museum publications and the shop; the educational programs, activities, other than those that are deliberately and obviously educational; publicity and marketing; management; attention to the physical comfort of visitors; the general atmosphere of the museum; and a somewhat elusive but important quality that goes under the heading of "ideas, imagination."

One can quarrel endlessly about this approach, but it does at least provide a method of comparing small museums with big ones and, say, a museum of lawn mowers with the National Portrait Gallery. Large and prestigious museums may not come out of the process very well, partly because they are in the habit of believing that their collections are everything, or almost everything, and partly because they have had no great incentive to tailor themselves to the modern world. The British Museum and the Louvre, for example, have enormous and important collections, but their total points on a package basis would almost certainly be considerably lower than the one received by Scunthorpe Borough Museum, Chatterley Whitfield Mining Museum, or Quarry Bank Mill, Styal. They would score low on presentation and interpretation, on management, on attention to the physical comfort of visitors, on general atmosphere, on activities, and on ideas and imagination.

Faced with this, the Louvre, the British Museum, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, and most of the world's other major museums would say that to be attractive to visitors is only a part of their duty—and probably the least

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not finally
not applicable

Good Museums, *continued*

important part. Their prime task, as they see it, is to collect, conserve, and make available for study. They are intellectual powerhouses, mini-universities, and the public galleries are little more than the icing on the cake, the license to operate.

The real problem is that the quality of the big public museums has so rarely been questioned. There is no recognized body of professional museum critics to keep them on their toes. Because armies of tourists and school-children flock into the British Museum, the Science Museum, the Roman Baths at Bath, the Tower of London, and the rest, the excellence of these institutions is taken for granted. It is a dangerous and unjustified assumption and one that prevents the places in question from being as good as they could be. One is reminded of the advertising slogan used for so many years by Rolls Royce, that they made the best or the finest car in the world. Few people took the trouble to turn this claim upside down and look into it. In what ways was a Rolls Royce so superior to other cars? What did it actually do better? Was it more reliable, more comfortable, easier to drive, safer? It was certainly very expensive, it drank fuel as a cow drinks water, and it cost a great deal to service. But it had other more practical disadvantages. I remember once talking to a well-to-do Rolls Royce-owning doctor during a winter when there was a lot of snow and ice about. He had, he confessed to me, left the Rolls behind in the garage and was transporting himself in his wife's Mini because it was "so much better on snow and ice."

"But," I said, "surely a Rolls is the best car in the world?"

"Better for some things," he replied, "like arriving at the hospital or leaving it parked outside in Harley Street."

The British Museum and the Louvre are among the Rolls Royces of the museum world, but this does not and should not mean that they are out of the competition. As public museums, they are in the marketplace like all the others, competing for the leisure time of the people who voluntarily visit them. But, unfortunately, quite a high proportion of their visitors are not volunteers in the strict sense of the word. Most school groups are made up of conscripts. They may well prefer a day at the Science Museum to a day at school, but they have little say about being in either place.

They have to take what comes. And so it is with a great many tourists. If they are in Paris, it is unthinkable that they should not spend a few minutes at the Louvre. It is on the list of any tourist organization that wishes to stay in business, so a bus dumps them there and they pay their respects to it, as medieval pilgrims did at the shrine of a saint. The fact that they appear in their tens of thousands proves nothing about the quality of the museum. They go to the Louvre and its equivalents in other countries because tradition demands it, not because they have made a conscious and reasoned decision to go. The situation suits the management very well. The crowds keep coming, the museum shop keeps selling, and the Mona Lisa keeps smiling.

Most of the world's major museums—and "major," one should emphasize, is not a synonym for "best"—have carried out research at one time or another to discover who their visitors are and what they think about the museum. But they rarely encourage the kind of remark that allows praise or blame to be expressed in concrete terms, and as a result the value of the investigation is very limited. It is one thing to know that in July and August 62 percent of one's visitors come from abroad or that on a given day in December 36 percent of the people who arrived had had some form of higher education, but quite another to discover that someone resented the rudeness of a uniformed attendant or longed for a seat where weary feet could be rested. Up to now, research among museum visitors has relied far too much on easily analyzed generalizations. This is certainly one field in which the computer is all too likely to be the enemy, rather than the friend.

But, given the opportunity, what kind of comments does the non-professional visitor feel inclined to make about a museum? In preparing *The Good Museums Guide*, I relied heavily on reports sent in by people who lived not more than twenty miles from the museums they had been to see on the *Guide's* behalf, their local museums. They were told to assume nothing, spare nothing, and say exactly and honestly what they thought. There are about 2,000 museums in the British Isles, and the 400 that achieved the most satisfactory packages earned a place in the *Guide*. A number of the largest and best known museums were excluded, simply because their

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Ten Years and Counting

This section of the *Interpreter* will update all interpreters on the development of new Colonial Williamsburg Foundation programs. You can look forward to future articles on interpretive plans for the Magazine, the Wren Building, Wetherburn's Tavern, and Carter's Grove mansion just to name a few. The Geddy project represents an example of a new planning process in which interpreters are part of the decision-making process as well as participants in the implementation and evaluation of programs. The Geddy plan also demonstrates what can happen when interpreters, historians, instructors, architectural historians, and curators work together as a team to determine not only the significance of the site's history but also innovative ways to tell it.

The plan for the Geddy site includes some fresh approaches to interpretation. Only actual testing in the field followed by reactions from interpreters and visitors will determine the success of the plan. From our experiences there, we hope to learn more that will aid us in developing interpretations at other sites. Come visit the Geddy and observe its growth. Most of all, think about how it fits into the interpretation of your particular site or program, and help all of us help our visitors see the Geddy site as one part of an active, diverse, and growing eighteenth-century community.

—Conny Graft

The James Geddy Site Interpretation

Gary Brumfield, master of the gunsmith shop, brings us up to date on plans for the Geddy site. Gary is chairman of the Geddy Site Interpretive Planning Team with members Dan Berg, John Caramia, Jim Curtis, John Davis, Bob Gerling, and Doc (George) Hassell.

The history of the James Geddy House since it opened as an interpretive site in 1968 is almost as complex as that of the site's eighteenth-century occupation by the Geddy family.

When it first opened, the three west rooms were interpreted by the Department of Exhibition Buildings, while the foundry, silversmith shop, and silver sales area were operated by the Craft Programs Department. Budget problems caused by the 1973 gas shortage threatened the continued operation of the house as two separate interpretive units, and Craft Programs took over the entire site. Thus began an eleven-year search for a combination of craft work and visitor traffic flow that would make the most effective use of this singular interpretive opportunity.

During the 1970s various combinations of the Geddy family's metal working trades including silversmithing, clockmaking, and engraving were featured in the two east rooms of the house. The store attached to the house became a retail outlet for silver and was transferred to the Products Division.

Whenever a craft was practiced in the house, the visitors who wanted to watch the work or talk about it stopped the flow of traffic. Coping with this problem led to some imaginative solutions—including moving the silversmith's workbench outside under a tree. Jimmy Curtis, master of the Golden Ball, recalls this period as the time when "we tried everything except bringing people down the chimney."

By 1980, most of the silversmith's work had moved to the Golden Ball, leaving the Geddy House interpretation to focus more on the domestic and business aspects of a craft family. With less interpretation of silversmithing on the site, interest also turned to the other metal working trades of the Geddys. A proposal was developed for showing two of these trades by moving the gunsmiths to the Geddy site and expanding their work to include cutlery. Reopening of an eighteenth-century door to Palace Street and reconstruction of the shed room across the back of the house were proposed as solutions to the visitor traffic problems.

Research and reevaluation stimulated by this proposal brought to light inconsistencies between the details of the surviving interior of the house and the documentary evidence of its use in the 1750s as a work complex. In 1984 a scientist from Virginia Tech helped to clear up the confusion. By taking samples of the growth rings in the timbers used to frame the house and matching them with known patterns of dry and wet years—a process called

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Geddy Site, *continued*

dendrochronology—he dated the cutting of the house timbers at 1762.

Thus, instead of dating from the 1750s as originally conjectured, the surviving house now appears to have been built after James Geddy, Jr., the silversmith, purchased the property in 1760. This new information ended thoughts of exhibiting gunsmithing and cutlery inside the house, because most of those activities predate the construction of the present structure.

At the end of 1984 the house closed for the winter, and budget cuts prevented opening it in 1985. A house with so much to offer our visitors could not remain closed for long, and money was allocated in the 1986 budget to reopen the Geddy House on a ten-month schedule.

Rather than reopen with the 1984 program, a planning team was formed to evaluate and revise the interpretation in accordance with the Geddy site's place in the "Family and Community" subtheme of the ten-year plan. When it reopens this spring, the Geddy will be the first craft site to have undergone a complete reevaluation in light of the long-range educational plan for Colonial Williamsburg.

The Interpretive Planning Team began meeting in November and, armed with a charter document outlining the objectives for the site and volumes of research materials, attacked the problem of developing a workable plan in time to open the house this spring. In addition to conforming to the theme, the new plan had to offer a solution to the traffic flow problems and include the most current thinking on room use and furnishings. A summary of the main points of the team's plan is presented here to inform you about the changes and help you link your interpretation to that of the Geddy site.

There are four interpretive goals: (1) to show the business aspects of James Geddy, Jr.'s life and place his shop and work in relationship to the community; (2) to illustrate the social status and life-style of a successful tradesman and his family; (3) to explain the changing relationships within a craftsman's family and their relationship to the community; and (4) to show the nature of the Geddys' work and how it affected their lives. To see how these goals will be accomplished requires a brief room-by-room look at the new furnishings and interpretation.

In the summer months the Geddy House tour will begin outside at the east front door (staff and weather permitting), where an introduction to the site's history will be a part of the orientation process. The group will gather on the porch in preparation for entering Room A. (See site plan.)

Room A will be shown as James Geddy, Jr.'s retail sales area or "shop" with furnishings that support an interpretation of his business rather than showing the craft of silver-smithing. Examples of some of the topics that might be discussed in this room include: the nature of the work and work force, the selling of both custom-made and imported goods, the increasing availability of and demand for "de-cencies," and the business aspects of being a successful tradesman.

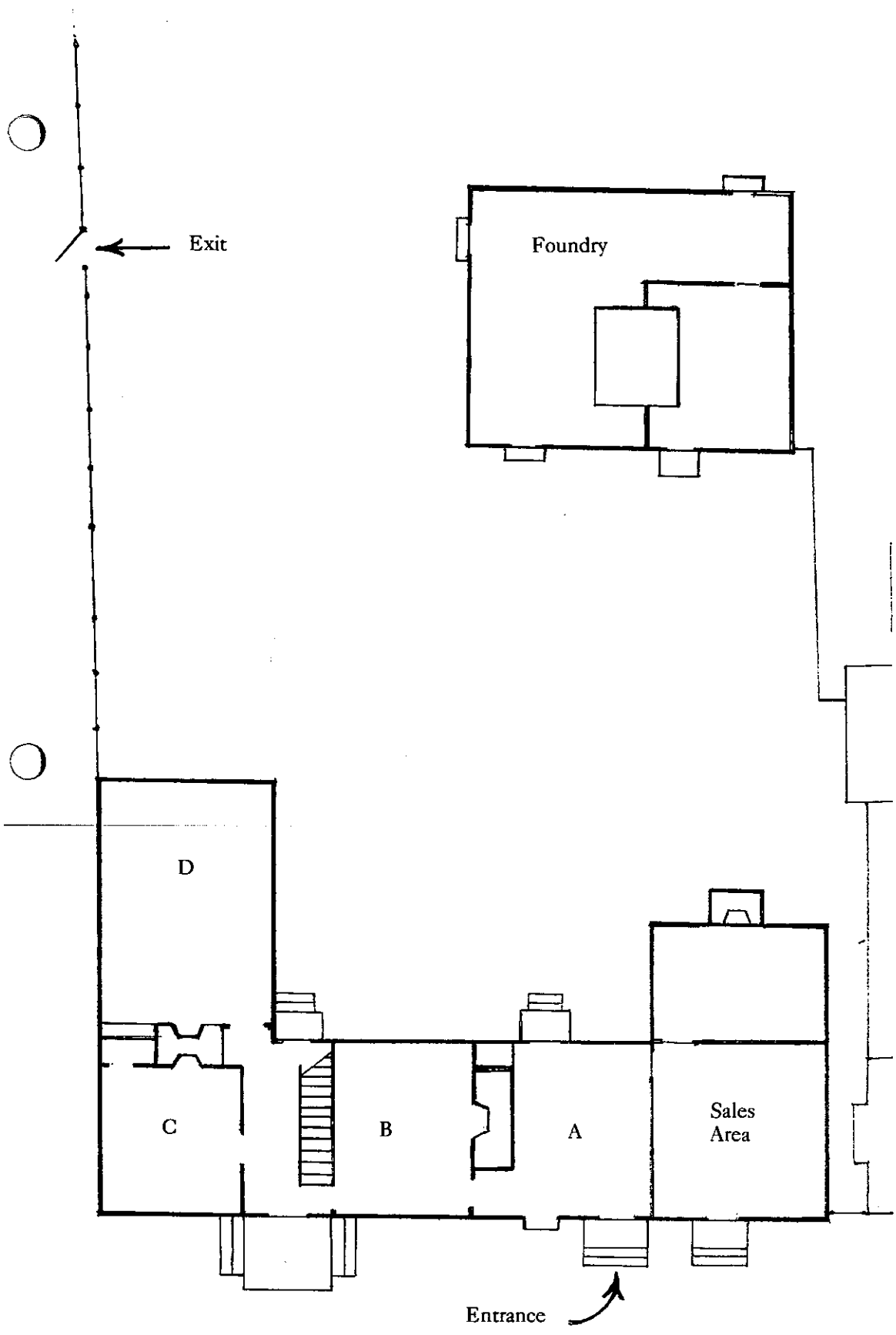
Room B (formerly shown as a workroom) will be presented as the bedchamber of James, his wife, Elizabeth, and an infant. While our visitors may find the placement of the bedchamber next to the public space of the shop a bit surprising, both interior detail and evidence from other complexes support this arrangement.

Room C (formerly the bedchamber) will be furnished as a parlor. This room has a cornice and wainscoting below a chair rail, features which none of the other rooms have, and these, when combined with the elaborate door and window frames, suggest its use as a formal parlor or hall.

Bedchamber and parlor interpretation will be done in the passage. It will explain the organization of social and domestic space in the house and might include topics such as house layout and function, who lived and worked there, and the significance of these particular rooms.

Room D, the largest and second-most elaborate, will be exhibited as a dining room, with the barrier removed so visitors can step into the room. The furnishings will include a set of reproduction chairs made at the Hay Shop so that some of the group can sit down. The room and its furnishings will be used to discuss the period use of this type of space and, in so doing, to illustrate intrafamily relationships and the social relationships of the Geddy family to the community. Topics that might be discussed include: entertainment and dining, education of children, and comparisons of the Geddys with other families.

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Geddy House and Foundry

Geddy Site, *continued*

Exiting into the backyard, visitors will see the foundry at their own pace. In addition to interpreting the tools and technology of casting and finishing metal, the foundry will provide information on topics such as the specialization of labor, the interdependence of trades, and the structure of the work force.

At this writing the plan must still be approved by the Program Planning and Review Committee, and it may undergo noticeable change even before the house opens. If a full staff is not available in time for the scheduled opening, the plan may be implemented in phases.

The first months after opening will be a time for experimentation with group size, tour length, and additional interpretive methods. In addition to the formally structured third-person tour most visitors will take, there are plans to continue using the Geddy as the starting point for Mary Wiseman's "According to the Ladies" tour and a place for testing other first-person interpretations in the house and yard. With its focus on family and community, the site is also expected to attract many school groups; it will be added to the evening Lanthorn Tour program in the fall. Products Division is considering plans to reflect the same period in the sales area as well.

Long-range plans for the site include the reconstruction of the shed room across the back of the house as James Geddy's work shop and the development of a "for kids only" interpretation in one of the upstairs rooms.

Donald Kline, a historical interpreter, reflects on Mr. Wythe and philosophy.

Mr. Wythe and the Bees

Come along, boy, and
I'll show you
a mystery.
I'll hold you up to
See through the glass
How the bees live.

There you see the
Alpha and omega of
The mind's adventure.

Learning's been
A sweet mistress, but
Never a wife.

She'll give you the
Ecstasy of discovery, and
The consolations of philosophy.

But know this, dear boy:
She can never give you
The final joy of
Touching
The secret thoughts
Of God.

Good Museums, *continued*

package mark wasn't high enough. Several of them were very annoyed and said so publicly and loudly. With such a marvellous collection of Art Deco or Spode or steam engines or whatever, they had a divine right to a place and to keep them out just because their labels were faded, their attendants offhand, their selection of postcards poor, and their lavatories below standard was a scandal. And didn't I realize that their Keeper of Prints and Drawings was one of the greatest authorities in the country and that all that prevented them from cleaning up and modernizing the place was a chronic shortage of money, which was rather like a restaurant defending a disgraceful meal on the grounds that the chef was off sick.

Anyway, I played very fair. The favorable comments were included in the relevant entries, and the mud and misery were reserved for a special section called *Why they didn't make it*, in such a way that it was impossible to identify the offenders. Both the plus and minus criticism make illuminating reading, and the more impressive because the reporters' remarks were not paraphrased. They appeared as they were made and make the public's concept of good, bad, and indifferent museums very clear.

Why did so many museums, including a number of the most respected, fail to make the grade? The comments need no explanation or amplification. "Extremely cold. This curtailed the reporter's visit."

"Empty frames left around in the galleries."

"Educational, but so uninspiring."

"A well cared for lumber room of items."

"Lighting marred by Woolworth's lampshades."

"Showcases with labels for non-existent objects."

"Suffers from a clapped-out curator. The sooner this museum is closed down the better."

"Man at counter appeared shell-shocked by school parties."

"The person in charge belonged to the Parks Department."

"Distracted by playing of radio sports results by the caretaker."

"There were odd seats about. They mostly seemed to be occupied by attendants."

"Several of the labels were falling off, or

were crooked, and some of the documents and badges had dropped off their pins."

"The outside loos were very chilly in February."

And what was there to say on the other side? Why were the good museums good?

"A pleasantly amateur flavor about parts of it, but you can't help being infected by the enthusiasm of these people."

"An honest place, which leaves the visitor in no doubt that art means wealth."

"Children find ready answers to their queries at the desk."

"Plenty of seating for those who wish to rest."

"An excellent cafeteria, with homemade cakes and good coffee."

"The staff are very helpful."

"Cheerful, relaxed atmosphere."

"Wonderful photographs on cheap postcards."

"A friendly welcome and advice on where to leave one's bicycle in safety, so that the custodian could keep an eye on it."

"The kitchen-sink, do-it-yourself flavor of early scientific research really comes across here."

"All the staff seem to have a lively interest in the museum."

After assembling a few thousand comments like these, one begins to build up something like an identikit picture of what the British public regards as a good museum. It is not so big as to present an impossible challenge, it has a friendly, welcoming, helpful staff, a pleasant cafeteria, and a shop stocked with the kind of items both adults and children want to buy, at prices they can afford. The exhibition rooms are clean, bright, and cheerful, not too hot in summer and not too cold in winter. The washrooms are impeccable and easy to find. Texts and captions are clearly written and easy to follow. There are plenty of seats, well distributed around the building. Children are not treated as potential criminals or as destroyers of an atmosphere of holy peace and quiet.

Above all, the museum should not give the impression of existing for the benefit of people different from oneself. It should not feel like enemy territory. There are many museums, particularly art museums, that appear to have been planned on the assumption that every visitor is or should be preparing for an

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Weekly Events March 11–May 31, 1986

- Tuesdays:** *Militia Reviews* 5:15 P.M.
beginning March 11
Salutes to States during Militia Reviews 5:15 P.M. beginning May 20
- Wednesdays:** *Evening of Military Life* 7:00 P.M. from April 9–May 23
(Note: Eighteenth-century plays will be performed at 8:30 P.M. on Wednesdays beginning June 4)
- Thursdays:** *Salute to States during Militia Reviews* 5:15 P.M. beginning May 22
Palace Concerts 8:00 and 9:30 P.M. on March 27; April 3–May 29 at 8:30 P.M.
- Fridays:** *Retreat Programs* 5:15 P.M. beginning March 28
Capitol Evening 7:00, 8:00 and 9:00 P.M. on March 28; beginning April 25 at 7:30 and 8:30 P.M.
- Saturdays:** *Fife and Drum Parades* at NOON beginning March 29
Eighteenth-century Plays 8:30 P.M. beginning March 15
(A new play, *The Lying Valet*, opens on May 31)
- Sundays:** *Capitol Concerts* 8:00 and 9:15 P.M. on March 30; April 6–May 25 at 8:30 P.M.

Special Programs and Events

- March 8–23 Canada Time
March 29 *Easter Review* 8:45 A.M.
May 15 *Prelude to Independence* 5:30 P.M.
May 26 *Memorial Day Review* 8:45 A.M.

Good Museums, *continued*

examination of some kind and that browsing and aimless enjoyment are sinful.

But the museum Puritans are finding the going harder than they did ten or twenty years ago. I spent a delightful three hours in Glasgow last summer going round the Burrell Collection with its adventurous director, who described himself to me as “a refugee from the British Museum.” The place was full of all kinds and ages of people, wandering round casually looking at the interesting objects on show, much as they would have done in a medieval cathedral or the Roman Forum. At the end of my visit, I said to the director, “This is the first time I’ve ever spent a thoroughly pleasant half day in a museum and learned absolutely nothing. You’ve created something new and enormously stimulating, a thinking man’s leisure center.” He accepted the compliment with some surprise but a good grace, pointing out that if I wanted to learn something, the catalog was at my service. Perhaps “a thinking man’s leisure center” is a reasonable definition of a good modern museum.

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