

Opinion

When It Comes to Museums Are You a Troglodyte?

When I was a boy, I often visited my local public libraries. There, I had access to treasures of information, constrained only by the rules about how many books I could check out at one time. Sometimes I was on a mission to research a term paper, but other times I just went there to browse and to dream. These days, libraries have had a makeover. The books are still there, though they have been thinned to make space for more computer workstations. Librarians are now experts at helping find information online, just as they used to be sleuths in the Dewey decimal catalog. But libraries are still places for users to browse and dream in a soft cocoon surrounded by words.

Museums are sort of like libraries. They also offer their human users pupation and metamorphosis, but in images, not words. Unlike libraries, which are usually publicly supported, museums depend on admission fees and donations to defray their operating costs. So when museums put their collections online, with free access, they lose a critical source of income. But if the goal is to enhance access of the masses to the great collections of history and art, free online access must be viewed as a positive trend.

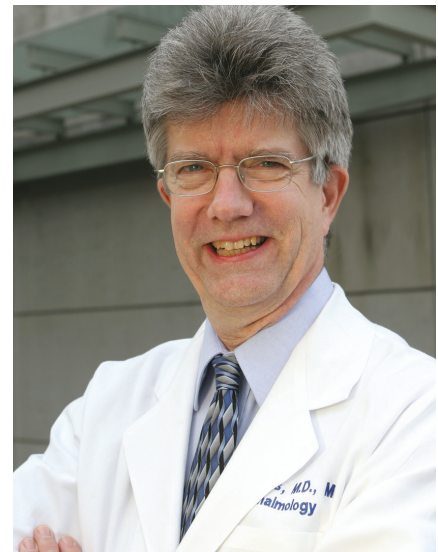
Fortunately, the Academy Foundation's museum of vision has never charged admission, and is embracing the change to online availability. It's entirely supported by donations

and bequests, not Academy dues. It boasts an amazing collection, begun 30 years ago through the foresight of Fred Blodi, then Academy president. When I first experienced it, it was a bunch of spectacles in a set of glass cases at Academy headquarters on Fillmore Street in San Francisco. Since then, it has grown to 38,000 items related to ophthalmic history, including art, furniture, instruments, stamps, coins, medals, memorabilia, literature, pharmaceuticals and vision aids. Not to mention the Academy Archives, featuring sentinel events in the history of the Academy. Now, you don't have to go to San Francisco to experience the treasures of the Museum, except if you are a scholar intrigued by whether spectacle frames of the 1800s had clockwise or counterclockwise threads to the temple piece screws, and you have to unscrew them to find out. Most of the collection is available online at www.museumofvision.org, where museum director Jenny Benjamin has assembled high-quality photographs of many pieces in the collection.

But the Museum of Vision isn't just about physical objects. In a landmark effort begun last fall, the Academy has partnered with StoryCorps to record oral histories of prominent Academy leaders. As they are completed, excerpts are available for listening and full transcripts are available at www.museumofvision.org/bios/. To whet

your appetite, the first two are Mel Rubin in conversation with Stan Truhlsen (a major museum benefactor), and Dunbar Hoskins speaking with Alice McPherson, first lady of retina. Soon to come is the one I had the privilege of doing, interviewing the father of the Academy public service programs, B. Thomas Hutchinson. They make fascinating listening, as most oral history is when viewed through the concave lens of the retrospectoscope.

So if you are one of those troglodytes who think you have to spend an afternoon at a building to visit a museum, check out the new online Museum of Vision and lose yourself in your cocoon.



RICHARD P. MILLS, MD, MPH
CHIEF MEDICAL EDITOR, EYENET