J. J. Brody: On Museums

J.J. Brody continues to cut a wide swath through the study, appreciation, and understanding of American Indian cultures in the Southwest. He has worked in New Mexico educational institutions for thirty-four years, and anyone who has studied the Native peoples of the Río Grande has come across Brody’s work in articles, exhibits, and such books as Anasazi and Pueblo Painting; Mimbres Painted Pottery, and Beauty from Earth.

Retired from the University of New Mexico where he was a professor of Art History and of Anthropology and Director at the Maxwell Museum, this renowned expert on Anasazi art and culture continues to write and consult, always with a deep passion for the meanings of objects and a profound obligation to share his enthusiasm with all who demonstrate an interest. Without leaving his patio, Jerry Brody guided his visitor through thirty years of his state’s cultural history, much of which he helped to shape.

DG: Why are you here? Was it a fascination with Native American cultures that led you to the Southwest?

JJB: I had been an art student at The Cooper Union in New York and had always been intrigued by objects from small societies. I have no idea why, and I have spent my whole life trying to figure out why these things appeal to me in such a basic way. I was overseas in the service in 1952–54. After the truce in Korea and Eisenhower’s election, soldiers were allowed an early discharge if they were enrolled in a legitimate university. So I found the earliest opening session in the country—a summer session at the University of New Mexico.

I left for my first museum job in the summer of 1957. That was in Scranton, Pennsylvania, of all places, and from there to New Orleans, which was a truly traumatic experience. In 1961, I came back to Santa Fe and have been in New Mexico since.

DG: New Mexico seems to have a proliferation of museums—the Museum of New Mexico itself has been around for eighty-six years. What were they like when you first arrived?

JJB: The Museum of New Mexico included the Laboratory of Anthropology and the Palace of the Governors, the history museum. There was an ethnology museum behind the Palace of the Governors in what is now the photo archives, and the Museum of Fine Arts was there on the Plaza. The Lab had a small exhibit area and open collections storage. It was marvelous. Back then, the stuff had such little monetary value that nobody stole it; security was not an issue. The Museum of International Folk Art only opened its doors in 1953. The Wheelwright Museum—it’s not part of the state museum system—was called the Museum of Navajo Ceremonial Art. As far as I know, that’s all there was in Santa Fe.

In Albuquerque the only museums were on the UNM campus. The anthropology museum was just some cases in the hallway of the administration building. The geology museum was essentially a departmental museum—rocks in cases in a hallway. There was supposed to have been a biology museum, but I don’t know where it was. These were essentially teaching collections of university departments that dealt with tangible things. That was it. There was no municipal museum then.

DG: Were the museums part of the communities?

JJB: On campus, the museum was a place for research. Beginning geology students went to the museum with a guide book and a worksheet to find this or that kind of rock or fossil. In anthropology, the museum served as a storehouse of objects that the professors brought to class. Teachers with school kids in tow periodically came to the administration building to use the exhibit cases in the hallways. Professor W.W. Hill (called Nibs), who was chairman of the anthropology department, would grab a student in the hallway and have him guide these school kids through the exhibits. That was it. Incidentally, that use of the campus museum by the schools of Albuquerque was what triggered the growth of the museums on campus. It’s also what triggered the growth of the anthropology museum.

Jumping ahead, when the Maxwell Museum opened in 1963 with 3,000 square feet of exhibit space filled with stuff,

By Donald Garfield  Photography by Mary Philipp
public school classes started to come. We had to do something about it. In 1964 or '65, after not thinking at all about public use of the museum beyond the university community, we were faced with this dilemma: either stop the school kids coming on campus or do something to direct their activities. We opted to control and direct, and created an education division.

DG: What did you do first after returning from New Orleans?

JJB: I went to work at the Museum of International Folk Art. That was my first experience of living in Santa Fe. I discovered then that my tolerance for Santa Fe was about ten months long. (There is much about Albuquerque that I prefer to Santa Fe. You can buy a nice house in Albuquerque for $150,000, while you can't buy anything for that price in Santa Fe.) I was asked to take the first professional museum job at the University of New Mexico's department of anthropology. I jumped at it. I didn't even ask what the salary was. Meanwhile, I was teaching. In the mid-'60s there was the need for someone to take over the archaeology field schools for a couple of years, and I did that—two seasons up at Taos.

Then I gave up archaeology and began to teach museum courses. I had a joint appointment in the art department since I'm really an art historian teaching American Indian art courses. This was still the mid-'60s. I had work-study students working on the collections, and I got them interested in the meanings of objects. Sometimes we would come at the object from anthropology, raising theoretical questions: What does this object tell us about human behavior? Or from the art historical point of view, which was my view: What was it about this object that I find so damn fascinating? At some point both of those questions meet, of course.

DG: When did the museum there at UNM start to make connections with the Native American communities?

JJB: What we did back then in the '50s, in retrospect, is inexcusable, like pulling a shrunken head out of your pocket when talking to little kids. Sure, they loved it. We put together exhibits that focused on human burial and mummification. It was the two-headed-cow tradition of museums. A lot of that was going on. I first became aware of the bizarre quality of the things we were doing when a student from Taos Pueblo came up to me in the hallway and said, "Hey, look, those are my ancestors. What are you doing?"

Members of the anthropology department became sensitized to the new rules at different points in time. Because we are so close to really strong Native American communities, the museum became a national trendsetter. The Pueblo community maintains its political strength to a greater degree than most other Native peoples.

Fortunately, in New Mexico there are Native people who

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are working in museums. Ed Ladd [Curator of Ethnology at the Laboratory of Anthropology in Santa Fe] was working on his master’s at UNM when I was there in 1954. That is another aspect of working in New Mexico: You have contact with Native American academics, so you become aware of the rightness of positions that sound bizarre when you first hear them. For example, Ed has convinced me that one of the fundamental notions of museum practices—the integrity of objects and the duty to preserve them in perpetuity—is a fallacy. In terms of objects made for social purposes, [preserving it] may deny the purpose of the object, which is certainly true of certain Pueblo materials. For instance, Zuni War Gods are not fulfilled until they naturally disintegrate—part of the normal cycle of life. Museums interfere with the cycle. It’s a kind of social arrogance.

**DG:** Has increased tourism affected the nature of culture here?

**JJB:** I think so, yes. And maybe even more influential has been the influx of newcomers. I say this as a newcomer myself; I have been here only since 1954, and in residence since 1962. We haven’t been here that long compared to other New Mexicans who’ve lived here for generations. The influx of newcomers has had a shocking effect. We see it in the language. For example, some of the terminology tears me up: “the kiva fireplace” for a corner fireplace. What does an Hispanic corner fireplace have to do with a Pueblo ritual space, for heaven’s sake! I have heard the state logo referred to as a “zia.” No awareness that Zia is a pueblo, a community. People come in without the will to learn about these long-established communities. I’m sure that is what locals felt in the first few decades of the century.

**DG:** It seems that during the ’70s the museum field changed and became a legitimate career pursuit for those who had studied in universities but were not independently wealthy.

**JJB:** Yes; it wasn’t so when I started out. I worked with George Ewing, Director of the Museum of New Mexico and head of the Office of Cultural Affairs, and a fellow named Frank Crabtree, the first Director of the Albuquerque Museum, to get the New Mexico Museum Association established. We were active in the Mountain-Plains Museum Association and supporters of Kyran McGrath, the first American Association of Museums Director to be retained from outside the field and whose objective was to professionalize the organization. When I came to the field in 1957, a belief in accreditation was just starting. The objections in the field were so strong and so visceral—to have anyone come in to tell me how to run my museum, and what the standards should be. It appeared as though getting an accreditation system in place would never happen. It took years.

These changes in museums paralleled the democratization of the universities following World War II. The phenomenon you talk about in the ’70s was in part a response to the Civil
Rights Movement, maybe an important part. Until then museums were lily white, male, essentially WASP organizations, elitist in economic and social terms.

Nobody works in a museum for money, nor ever has. Shoot, I remember a board member telling me, looking at the pitance that was my salary, "If you are not rich enough to work in a museum, then get out of the field." He was right. That is the way it used to be.

DG: There are still museums that seem to have an elitist bent.

JJB: There are museums within the profession where this is the case. I have a hard time feeling good about art museums. My first two museum jobs were essentially in art museums, and I got out of that business because I knew I couldn't deal with it. It was the whole notion that still pervades the art history business: that art is somehow above or beyond social life; that there is a universal value and meaning of certain types of objects we call art that totally transcend any sort of social origin. I just don't believe that; I know it is not true. As a consequence, when I was in the art museum, I was unable to take the objects as seriously as people would want me to. And at the same time, I wanted to push other kinds of objects into the system. I still remember when the folk art museum would not buy a painted VW when they could have had one cheap. So anthropology seemed much more my thing.

DG: In an anthropological context, anything is worthy of consideration. Isn't that true?

JJB: You begin by saying things don't mean anything; meaning is given by people. Everything in an anthropology museum is evidence of certain kinds of behavior.

DG: Pierre Bourdieu says in *Love of Art* that art is just a class construct. His ideas must be horrifying for art museums.

JJB: What we have to do is get past the horror and back to asking the question: Okay, why do these certain objects continue to create meanings across broad social lines and through time?

DG: In the '80s, there was new emphasis on management and financial matters in museums.

JJB: Accountability. It is an across-the-board issue. You know this whole business of Patrick Houlihan [former director of the Southwest Museum in Los Angeles, who was convicted of illegally selling collections material from that museum]. I'll never know why he sold off part of the collection without letting the board know. Whether it's for the good of the collection or whatever, it doesn't matter. You don't do that anymore.

When I came into the business, it was done all the time. I got fired from my job in New Orleans because I had an ongoing, silent fight with our director. As she pulled objects from the collection and put them in the pile to be auctioned, I would go through them and pull some out and put them back where they belonged. Mostly paintings by Taos masters like Irving Couse. If you can't trust a museum to act responsibly for its collections, then you can't trust anybody. It has only been in the past twenty-five years or so that this attitude has become dominant in the museum business.

In the West, and particularly in New Mexico, our version of modern museum ethics and practices is really rather easy to implement because, with the exception of the Museum of New Mexico, we have such a short history of museology here. We're not burdened as are some of the East Coast and far-Western institutions with old attitudes. If you look at the history of the Museum of New Mexico, I don't think there ever was a museum administrator as generous with his collections as Edgar Hewett [the founding director of the Museum of New Mexico]. He distributed collections from the Museum of New Mexico to museums as far away as the San Diego Museum of Man, which got its start when Hewett gave a bunch of objects from his collection. His fundamental attitude was to share. The notion of intellectual property was abhorrent to Hewett, just as it is to me. I can't imagine copyrighting my thoughts.

DG: Are you optimistic about museums in these tight times?

JJB: Oh, sure, I feel sanguine about them. The big problem now is money and downsizing certain activities. You don't need a lot of money to do a decent exhibit. I'm not saying that all my exhibits were decent. Look, we put on a marvelous show of Mimbres pottery in 1976 with the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center. The installation was just superb and under $10,000. You don't have to spend the kind of money you can spend.

I know it can be very hard, because I was in at the beginning of downsizing at the Maxwell when the crunch began in the late '70s and early '80s. I know how difficult it is. You have to lower certain expectations about quality, particularly technical quality. The fact of the matter is that most of the time, visitors won't notice if you use second-rate building materials for a temporary exhibit. So it's not going to be any big deal to downsize on exhibit installation. I don't think it will be a big deal to downsize on collections maintenance. Over the past five to ten years, from what I have been able to observe, we have been spending very inefficiently in collections maintenance. We have been doing the last two percent—the most expensive—to make it a little bit better. And that is not necessary. Unfortunately, the initial impulse in downsizing is to cut down on research instead of these other kinds of product costs. Research and staff should be the last to be cut.

Donald Garfield lives and works in Washington, D.C., where he writes and edits a national magazine on museums.