

# MUSEUMS & AUTHENTICITY

By B. JOSEPH PINE II and JAMES H. GILMORE

People increasingly see the world in terms of real or fake, and want to buy the real from the genuine, not the fake from some phony. Authenticity is becoming, in other words, the new consumer sensibility.

But why is this happening? How did we get to a point where many people, and we think most, place the authenticity of what they desire above price and even quality? While many factors contribute, the one that most influences the prominence of authenticity is the rise of the Experience Economy. As we've detailed before (see "The Experience Economy," *Museum News*, May/June 1999), as goods and services everywhere become commoditized, what people want today are *experiences*—memorable events that engage them in an inherently personal way. In the eight years since we wrote about it on these pages, the shift to the Experience Economy has become unmistakable and is now prevalent in almost any industry you could name, with ever new and wondrous venues and events on the scene competing for attention.

People now decide *where* and *when* to spend their money and, more importantly, their time—the currency of experiences—as much if

not more than they deliberate on *what* and *how* to buy (the previous purview of goods and services). But in a world increasingly filled with deliberately and sensationally staged experiences—an increasingly *unreal* world—consumers choose to buy or not buy based on how *real* they perceive an offering to be.

This applies just as much to the museum world as to the world of business, for museums have always been an experience. Today, however, they compete with every other experience out there for the time, attention and money of individuals, whether consumers, guests or patrons. As a *Los Angeles Times* journalist put it in her review of the latest in museum technology, "The biggest kaboom you hear in these places isn't from artillery or space rocks. It's from the wall falling down between museums and theme parks."<sup>1</sup>

Museums must therefore learn to understand, manage and excel at *rendering authenticity*. Finding ways to tap into authenticity as the emerging standard will become essential. To be blunt: Museums must get real. The #1 challenge today is the *management of the customer perception of authenticity*. In an age when consumers want what's real, this becomes the new imperative.

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B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, co-authors of *The Experience Economy*, are co-founders of *Strategic Horizons LLP*, Aurora, Ohio. This article is based on concepts from their forthcoming book *Authenticity: What Consumers Really Want*, to be published this fall by Harvard Business School Press. Pine will speak on this topic at AAM's annual meeting in Chicago on May 15.







## Whither Authenticity

There are three primary levels to consider in thinking about museums and authenticity: artifacts, edifices and encounters. There is of course a long history of scholarship on what makes artifacts authentic or inauthentic. Not being experts ourselves, we will not delve into the subject other than to point out that while businesses necessarily must content themselves with artificial props for their experiences, museums do have real artifacts. However, artifacts are the product of *artifice*, if not at their creation or when in situ, then when artificially placed within the confines of a museum.

Many museum directors, curators and docents are justifiably proud of the buildings in which their artifacts reside, and the rise of the Experience Economy has brought increased competition for experiential edifices, including the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, the Rose Center for Earth and Space in New York, the Denver Art Museum and the Milwaukee Art Museum—just a sample of a long list growing year by year. Such places—as well as such classic buildings as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York or the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam—can in and of themselves render authenticity for all that lies within; as architect professor Michael Benedikt writes in *For an Architecture of Reality*, “in our media-saturated times it falls to architecture to have the direct esthetic experience of the real at the center of its concerns.”<sup>2</sup> But edifices, too, are artifice, constructed increasingly for engaging entertainment value as much as for any functional purpose.

Of course, our encounters with artifacts within those edifices are, indeed, authentic, for there is no such thing as an inauthentic experience. Why? Because experiences happen inside of us; they’re our internal reaction to the events that unfold around us. How we react to what happens at a particular venue—whether museum or theme park—depends on who we are, what we’ve experienced before, our mood at the time, whom we’re with and a host of other factors. Now, the environment that serves as stimuli for the experience may be more or less artificial, more or less natural. But this is more a matter of degree, not of kind, for the experiential stimuli at any locale are never purely natural, devoid of human intervention. There’s always some manmade element involved, in every museum just as much as in any business. Our encounters with all museums are the product of modern man, produced with the height of advanced technology, offered for money (whether via admissions, donations or grants).

All museums, therefore—as with all businesses—are fake, fake, fake. We realize many, perhaps most, readers will not like this conclusion, and others won’t agree with it. Some may even rebel at it. But all should understand that it is simply the logical conclusion that follows from centuries of thought on authenticity, where philosophers assert that being of Man (following society’s dictates), of Machine (using technology) and of Money (“selling out” rather than acting from the heart) make any one, and any thing, inauthentic.

Even though museums are generally nonprofits rather than strictly commercial endeavors—although the charging of admission does in fact turn the museum-going experience into an economic offering, even for a so-called nonprofit—still they are fake, and ontologically so. Consider, for its larger implications, how in 2001 the Tenement Museum on the Lower East Side of Manhattan announced that it wanted to use eminent domain to take over the building next door with which it shared a wall. An editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* excoriated the museum by pointing out its complete and utter fakeness:

The two buildings on Orchard Street share a common past, but one is devoted to nostalgically installed memorabilia meant to invoke the immigrant experience, while the other has real people living real lives in a real building that has been restored and recycled for the kind of continuity and vitality that make a real city. . . . What is real would be destroyed for what is, documentation notwithstanding, not real at all. The idea of taking a building from its owners and forcing tenants out to create a facsimile of what might have been is a stunning perversion of reality.<sup>3</sup>

This was before the infamous *Kelo v. New London* Supreme Court decision stirred up great animosity for using eminent domain for such activities, with a significant majority now viewing such takings as fake uses of government power. And the point applies to all museums, no matter how they obtained their land: Museums are not real at all.

But do not despair. Remember: There is no such thing as an inauthentic experience because that experience happens inside of us. Therefore, as human beings we are free to view the experience with any artifact, any edifice and any encounter as authentic—or as inauthentic. That is why museums should focus on creating the *perception* of authenticity in the minds of people, and why precisely the right word to describe this process is the one we introduced earlier: *render*. Museums can render themselves, phenomenologically, as authentic. And since



authenticity is becoming the new consumer sensibility, museums must do so, and do so with intention.

## The Key Dimensions of Authenticity

So how does one render museums as authentic? Two key dimensions compose the essence of what it means to be authentic. The first is readily apparent: *being true to one's own self*. Since at least the time of Shakespeare's Hamlet this phrase and its many variations have been recognized as core to what it means to be authentically human. As for individual human beings, so too for museums and all economic offerings. This dimension focuses on one's perception of self, involving such *self-directed* traits as being earnest and consistent and a follower of one's own path in the world.

There is a second dimension, however, that is just as important: *being what you say you are to others*. The focus here lies on one's behavior toward others, involving such *other-focused* qualities as being trustworthy and honest and concernedly caring for others in the world.

Both dimensions together compose the essence of being authentic, dividing what is admittedly a rather amorphous subject into a much more concrete dichotomy. To get real, museums must confront these two standards for all of their artifacts, edifices and encounters:

- (A) Is it true to itself?
- (B) Is it what it says it is?

To be perceived as authentic in the first dimension, understand what you really are as a museum—specifically taking into account the essence of your enterprise; the nature of your artifacts, edifices and encounters; the effects of your heritage; your sense of purpose; and your body of values—and then ensure that everything you do coincides with this identity. The easiest way to be perceived as phony on this dimension of authenticity is to repudiate your heritage—to do something antithetical to what you really are.

To be perceived as authentic on the second dimension, understand everything you represent your museum to be—considering your assigned names, expressed statements, established places, declared motivations and displayed appearances—and then ensure that there is no disconnect between what you say you are and what people actually experience in your museum. Recognize that the easiest way to be perceived as phony here is to advertise things you are not.

The secret of being perceived as authentic, therefore, can be found in the old Shaker motto: “Be what you seem

to be, and seem to be what you really are.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, be true to what you say you are.

## Real or Fake?

The British Museum, The Louvre and The Smithsonian certainly render themselves real, at least in the eyes of most knowledgeable people (the *The's* provide a dead giveaway). However, most museums around the world, especially specialty museums and so-called “little” museums, do not enjoy the stature of these iconic institutions. All struggle to maintain donors and patrons and to refresh their exhibits to encourage repeat visitation. As a result, many have turned to infusing interactivity and entertainment into the traditional exhibit fare, perhaps nowhere more evident than in children's museums. The Association of Children's Museums defines the genre as places “where play inspires creativity and lifelong learning.”<sup>5</sup> Rigorous pursuit of this aim results in venues that really aren't very museum-like, aren't what they say they are—but perhaps fulfill their purpose all the more, for people (especially kids) tend to learn better by doing, not just seeing or reading.

Some have taken to removing “Museum” from their name—such as Exploris in Raleigh, N.C.<sup>6</sup>—to stop saying what they're not. Such name changes are not limited to children's museums; Heineken renamed its corporate Heineken Museum in Amsterdam as “The Heineken Experience” when it remodeled the place to be, well, more of a beer experience than a museum. (Our favorite part: the Be-the-Beer-Bottle simulation ride.) While the move clearly rendered the venue more authentic, by being what it says it is, it came at the expense of a more staid and befitting display of the brand's rich history, which may very well make it less true to self.

Many museums focus on this first dimension of authenticity. For example, the Fort Worth Museum of Science and History (which developed the successful traveling exhibit the “Whodunit?” and, interestingly, started as the Fort Worth Children's Museum) asks this question of all its programs: “Do Fort Worth's exhibits reflect the Fort Worth Museum of Science and History?”<sup>7</sup> It then backs up its answer by specifically evaluating exhibits against its core values and especially its core purpose: providing extraordinary learning environments.

One clear route to being perceived as phony on both dimensions comes from displaying fake artifacts. Museums have long had to guard against forgery, ensuring inauthentic artifacts do not enter their collec-



tions—while comfortably selling faithful reproductions in their gift shops, which in more and more museums are becoming so large as to encroach on the exhibits. If such places become viewed as existing primarily to sell merchandise, they run the risk of being perceived as inauthentic. It's no wonder a Museum of Fakes opened in Salerno, Italy, to display modern art masterpiece forgeries. Curator Salvatore Casillo, who also works at the University of Salerno's Center for the Study of Forgery, makes its mission clear: "We only collect fakes. The better the fake, the better for us."<sup>8</sup>

At least one museum is itself a complete and utter fake—but for reasons that render it authentic, or at least what one may call fauxthentic. The famous Lascaux cave in Dordogne, France, is so fragile that it's been closed to the public since 1963, but so filled with splendid specimens of prehistoric cave paintings that France opened a duplicate of the cave a few hundred yards from the original in 1983. It's called Lascaux II, with complete acknowledgment that it is not the real one (many call it Faux Lascaux). The hurriedness with which the paintings were copied decades ago didn't result in quite the authentic reproduction envisioned, however, so currently an exact replica—Lascaux III (which would make it Faux Lascaux II)—is being made not only of the paintings but the entire cave, right down to precise distances measured with lasers. Planned to be completed late this year, the new (fake) cave will even be separated into panels for easy transport to locations around the world, so everyone can experience (copies of) the renowned paintings in the (replicated) surroundings of the Lascaux cave. One of the workers copying the cave commented, "You see Lascaux better in the workshop than you do at the site."<sup>9</sup> And now everyone will have that opportunity.

Actually, there are many museums filled entirely with reproductions—"virtual museums." We expect the first fully synthetic museum to open for visiting by avatars any time now—the Guggenheim Museum Second Life, perhaps?

## Museum or Experience?

One museum with widely disparate views on its authenticity is the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum in Springfield, Ill. It opened in April 2005 to much trepidation in the museum and history communities, for it reaches a new zenith in experience wizardry id. Indeed, it's really an "experience museum," in the words of Bob Rogers, founder of BRC Imagination Arts, the experience design firm that designed and produced the place with all of its attractions. He told us his goal was to

"marry the most appropriate experience technology that would serve the purpose of getting people—particularly kids—hooked on Abraham Lincoln and thirsting for more." That the place most assuredly does. Amongst its many exhibits are a multimedia show called "Lincoln's Eyes" where special effects perfected in the theme park industry provide a historical panorama of Lincoln's life and times; dioramas of important points in that history, with full three-dimensional models of Lincoln, his family and many others (including his enemies); a theatrical presentation called "Ghosts in the Library" involving both a live actor and BRC's "Holavision" (holographic) technology to impart why examining the artifacts of history is so very important; a projected map, "The Civil War in Four Minutes," that traces the changing battle lines of the Civil War at a rate of one week per second, with running totals—based on new research commissioned for the exhibit—of the number of casualties on each side; and "Campaign 1860," hosted by television journalist Tim Russert, that presents the four presidential candidates of that year as if the campaign were of the modern era, replete with 30-second TV commercials.

Before even seeing it themselves many historians were aghast at the very idea of the place. John Y. Simon, professor of history at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, called it "Six Flags over Lincoln" and "Las Vegas East"<sup>10</sup> and told us that "museums are places to display the authentic, not the Disney versions" of history. A museum architecture critic called it "The blurring of history for the sake of entertainment" in his review and wrote that "some of the museum is history, and some of it is not. Some of it is 'experience,' and some of it is true."<sup>11</sup> Such people would reflexively view the place as completely inauthentic—not a real museum, and not true to the history of the times or the man—and many will surely agree.

However, everything presented—the historical facts and museum artifacts—was scrupulously vetted by a commission of world-renowned Lincoln scholars and overseen by Illinois State Historian Thomas F. Schwartz, PhD. And, yes, a few things were "invented" (although based on scholarly research, such as the reactions of individuals to the Emancipation Proclamation), and many things that are said, or easily assumed, to be actual artifacts are in fact precise replicas. (We daresay it's not the only museum in that regard.)

But the Lincoln Museum has a marvelous cohesiveness, from the outside architecture linking the public museum with the more research-oriented library down

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## Authenticity

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to the historic details on every button on display, and from the wide, panoramic views of the Civil War down to the relationship between yet-to-be-President Lincoln and his young sons. The designers created this cohesiveness from a storyline that brings it all together in a way that would cause many, including us, to say it indeed is true to self. As State Historian Schwartz told us, "There's nothing fake about the story. Some historians confused the techniques of storytelling with the story itself. Visitors have never been confused or distracted by the techniques; they focus on the story, which is true." History teacher James Percoco confirmed the impact of the museum in writing for the Organization of American Historians:

Although there have been a fair share of naysayers—some historians have criticized the museum for

'Disney-fying' the Lincoln story—I found this to be the most fulfilling museum visit I have ever had in all my years of trundling students through museums. It was a pure delight to witness students enjoying history for history's sake. . . . Though surrounded by twenty-first-century light, sound, bells and whistles, the museum preserves Lincoln's humanity.<sup>12</sup>

Further, it is the place it says it is, for as the American Association of Museums states it in its Code of Ethics, "Museums make their unique contribution to the public by collecting, preserving, and interpreting the things of this world."<sup>13</sup> The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum does that and more.

The "more" is how well it engages all visitors to immerse them in the life and times of President Lincoln and instill within a desire to learn even more (as at-

tested to by the approximately \$700,000 of books sold in the gift shop its first year, almost a quarter of total sales). As Rogers related, "Yes, we've had more than a few vocal critics who hated the very idea of the place. Most changed their views when they actually visited the place, and those that brought children with them could see the real, emotional impact it had. We'll never satisfy the old-school purists, but the expressions that we see on the face nearly every visitor, including the tears in the eyes, more than justifies the experience staging techniques we used." We can vouch for that ourselves—including the tears in the eyes.

To determine your own views—real or fake?—we encourage you to head to Springfield and experience the place for yourself, as more than 600,000 people did in its first year, doubling projections and far surpassing any other presidential library. We recognize that many new mu-

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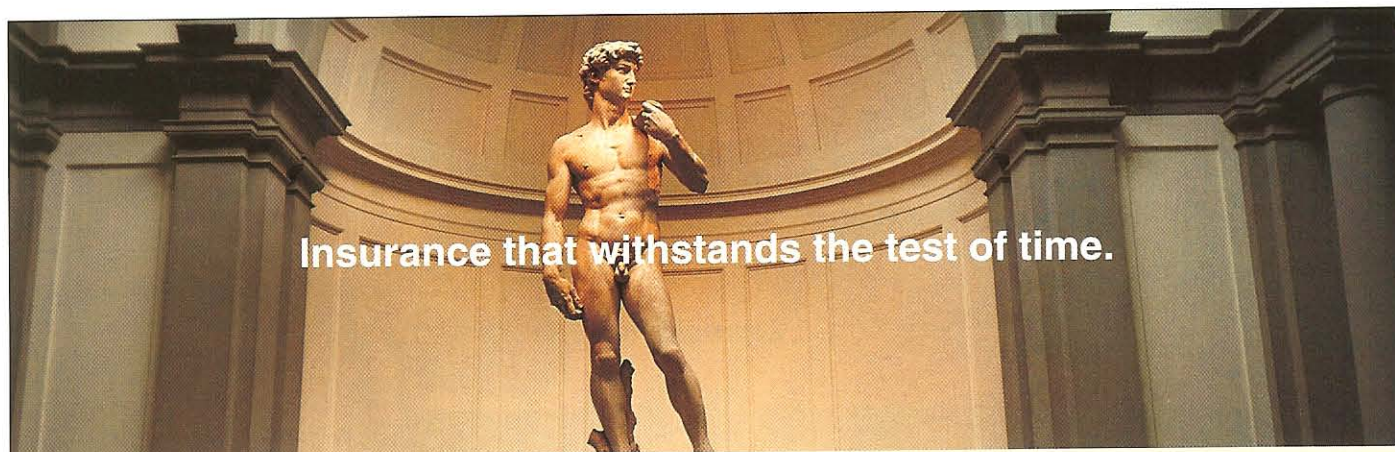


seums find success in their first year of operations only to see patronage at the turnstile (and the gift shop) dwindle thereafter. But we'll go out on a real limb here and predict that the Abraham Presidential Lincoln Library and Museum won't suffer that same fate (or at least not one as pronounced) precisely because it renders real value to citizen-consumers despite some perceptions of being fake by certain industry curator-critics.

Whether or not you agree with how this museum fulfills its purpose, whether or not you even like the experience it provides or how it uses that experience to educate, do learn from how it renders itself real. Then work to ensure that your museum—whatever its purpose, however you fulfill it—renders itself real. **M**

## End Notes

1. Jane Engle, "History with Special Effects: Is It Museum or Haunted Mansion?," *Los Angeles Times*, March 19, 2006.
2. Michael Benedikt, *For an Architecture of Reality* (New York: Lumen Books, 1987), p. 4.
3. "Comment: Museums," *Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 9, 2002.
4. This motto was related to us by John Stahl-Wert of the Pittsburgh Leadership Foundation, who is acquainted with the Shakers. We found it in numerous spots online, including attributed to a Father James at [www.sacred-texts.com/chr/shaker/sc/sc.htm](http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/shaker/sc/sc.htm).
5. The Association of Children's Museum home page, [www.childrensmuseums.org/about/employment.htm](http://www.childrensmuseums.org/about/employment.htm).
6. Exploris does still carry the term in its tagline, "Interactive Museum About the World," but it's sufficiently relegated to lesser prominence to allow the institution to be more aligned with what it says it is.
7. Charlie H. Walter, "Creating Extraordinary Learning Environments," *Curator* 45/4, October 2002, p. 286.
8. Daniel Williams, "Sure, It's Real! Real Fake! In the Edifice of Art, Copies Forge a Niche," *Washington Post* (Foreign Service), Sept. 12, 2004.
9. Coolsience, "Rebuilding France's Lascaux Cave," Aug. 12, 2005, available at: <http://cooltech.iafrica.com/science/471950.htm>.
10. Quoted in Bob Thompson, "Histrionics And History: Lincoln Library's High-Tech Exhibits Have Scholars Choosing Sides," *Washington Post*, February 15, 2005.
11. Edward Rothstein, "Strumming the Mystic Chords of Memory," *New York Times*, April 19, 2005.
12. James A. Percoco, "A Lincoln Pilgrimage," *Organization of American Historians Newsletter*, No. 34, August 2006, available at [www.oah.org/pubs/nl/2006aug/percoco.html?emtdmo806b](http://www.oah.org/pubs/nl/2006aug/percoco.html?emtdmo806b).
13. "Code of Ethics for Museums," American Association of Museums, [www.aam-us.org/museumresources/ethics/coe.cfm](http://www.aam-us.org/museumresources/ethics/coe.cfm).



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