

Types of Museums

Art Museums

The first museums in the United States were art museums, and most of the iconic museums you think about in this country today are art museums—the Guggenheim, the Met, the National Gallery. Art museums often have larger budgets than other types of museums; the objects they care for tend to be very valuable financially as well as culturally, and acquiring the objects needed for an art exhibition can cost millions of dollars. Some art museums are “generalists,” covering a broad spectrum of art across different cultures and eras. Others focus on a particular type of art (i.e. the Corning Glass Museum, or the Smithsonian African Art Museum). Many members of an art museum staff have art history or fine art degrees; it is harder to break into these museums without this educational background.

Botanical Gardens

Botanical gardens care for and display different species of plant life. Some botanical gardens focus on regional plants; others have complex greenhouse systems in place in order to share plants from all over the world with their visitors. Many botanical gardens are connected to historic structures, and began as formal gardens or landscapes surrounding a private residence (i.e. Longwood Gardens, Blithewold, Lewis Ginter Botanical Gardens). Sometimes those historic structures are interpreted as historic houses, which can make for a very diverse staff—some with science backgrounds, some with history or museum backgrounds.

Children’s Museums

Children’s Museums are an unusual entry in the museum category, because they do not generally hold collections of artifacts, and they “break all the rules” of traditional museums— children’s museums are entirely about touching and interacting with the exhibits. However, if you think about the second half of the definition listed above (“communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment”), children’s museums fit very well into the museum world. They are dedicated to teaching children about all elements of their environment, and normally their exhibits encourage learning about history, civics, nature, art and science. A greater percentage of children’s museum staff have elementary education backgrounds as compared to other museums, to prepare them to best serve their audience.

History Museums

History museums are probably the most ubiquitous in the United States. Of all the museums in Virginia, for example, over 60% are history museums of some kind. History museums can be huge, covering many

different eras of history and collecting millions of objects and documents (i.e. the Smithsonian Museum of American History), or they can be small, and dedicated to one era of history, one area of the country, or one person or set of people (i.e. Virginia Holocaust Museum, Ralph Stanley Museum). Exhibits and programs at history museums cover endless topics, but their common thread is to use artifacts to teach visitors about the past, to use the past to share lessons about how to better live the future. Staff at history museums often have museum studies backgrounds, or history degrees.

Historic Houses/ Sites

An historic house can be a stand-alone museum, or can be a part of a larger museum complex like a botanical garden, history museum or historic site. Historic houses generally hold small collections of artifacts that directly relate to the history of the house itself or the people who lived in the house. Historic houses were saved for specific reasons; because a famous individual or family lived in the house at a given time in history (i.e. Mount Vernon, Monticello), a famous architect designed the home (Frank Lloyd Wright's Pope Leighey House), or because the house represents an iconic type of structure—an architectural style or a “typical” home of a specific class or region of the country (i.e. The Lower East Side Tenement Museum). An historic site can represent a building, a set of buildings, a battlefield or other important landscape.

Historical Societies

History museums and historical societies are often considered interchangeable, and to some extent that is true. Some historical societies, like the Virginia Historical Society, have museums or historic houses as their primary public face. However, most historical societies are small, volunteer-driven, local institutions. They are very closely tied to individual communities; in fact, the definition of an historical society is “an organization of people associated because of their common interest in the history of an area.” They often have small exhibit spaces and some have extensive collections of artifacts related to their local area, but what sets them apart is their extensive archival and genealogical collections. They often serve the role of community research center.

Living History Sites

Living history sites are often also historic sites. Living history is a type of history museum that is dedicated to, quite literally, bringing history to life. The site is generally a collection of buildings and landscapes that create an historic atmosphere that visitors can “get lost in.” These sites can include both original structures and reproduction buildings, and are populated by interpreters who add to the atmosphere by dressing to the appropriate era. These interpreters are often going about daily life in whatever era their site represents, and can either be first person interpreters, who pretend they actually are living in that era, or third person interpreters, those who are dressed appropriately to the era but speak and act in our era. The power of living history sites is the ability for visitors to actually experience the past in an active way. The challenge of living history sites is making sure the work of keeping a museum, collections care, cleaning, etc, does not interfere with the atmosphere the site is projecting to their visitors. Many staff at living history sites has history backgrounds, though interpreters themselves often have acting experience.

Military Museums/ Battlefields

Military museums focus specifically on the history and actions of military troops. A military museum might be dedicated to a particular branch of the Armed Services (the National Museum of the Marine Corps or the US Army Women's Museum) or to a particular conflict or battle. Exhibits at military museums could cover anything from movements of troops in a certain battle to how military families survive on the home front.

Natural History Museums

When you think of natural history museums, the first thing that comes to mind are the huge reconstructed dinosaur skeletons that often serve as the centerpieces of this type of museum. Natural history museums are devoted to collecting specimens of all types of living things, from ants and butterflies to the extinct dodo bird and yes, dinosaur. They also collect other pieces of our natural world, like rocks, precious stones, and minerals. Natural history museums normally have huge collections, the vast majority of which are not on display. Many staff members of natural history museums have science backgrounds.

Science Museums/ Science Centers

Science museums generally use interactive exhibits to demonstrate scientific processes and introduce basic concepts of science to a wide audience. Most exhibits are family friendly, though many science museums also offer IMAX films, planetaria, or traveling exhibits that might appeal more to an adult audience. Like children's museums, most science museums do not hold collections of artifacts, but instead rely on replicas or constructed pieces in order to share their story. Staff who work with exhibits or education at science museums generally have science backgrounds.

Special Interest Museums

Some museums do not really fit neatly into a particular category of museum. They cater to specific audiences or a special interest group that doesn't necessarily correlate to the community they exist within. For example, the CIA Museum is dedicated to collecting and sharing the history of the intelligence agency. However, the museum is not generally open to the public; its main audience is the staff of the agency itself.

University Museums

University museums can encompass any of the many types of museums we have already discussed. However, they deserve their own subset here because these unique institutions have an additional role to play beyond that of most museums. Whether the campus museum is an art gallery (and the majority of university museums fall into this category), historic house or natural history museum, it normally acts

as a teaching institution within the campus environment. The director of the museum often teaches academic classes (and as such, these directors are the most likely to have doctorate degrees), and the majority of museum volunteers tend to be students. These museums also have unique challenges; they are rarely operated independently of the university, and hence can be controlled by a Board of Trustees not familiar with museum practice.

Zoos

Not everyone agrees that a zoo is a type of museum. But the main goals of most zoos correlate very closely to the goals of any museum: to care for the collections that have been entrusted to them (in this case, animals), and to educate the public about those collections. Zoos can be accredited by the American Zoological Association. This accreditation signifies that the zoo meets stringent standards for the care of animals, and participates in conservation programs that help to ensure the future of endangered animals. "Traditional" zoos, with animals in concrete pens and tight quarters, are facing more and more opposition from animal welfare and zoological experts; this type of museum is likely to continue to undergo changes as we learn more about different animals and how they can best be protected. Most zoo employees come from science backgrounds, rather than museum studies.