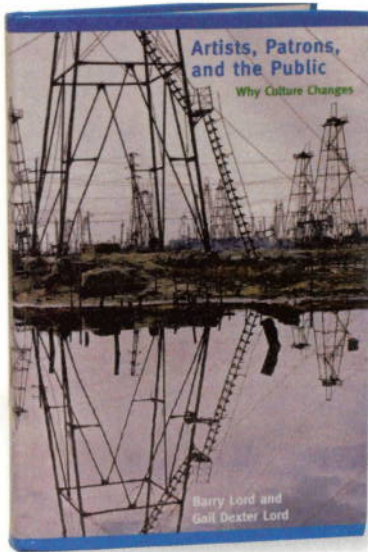


The Modern Patron

By Scott Kratz



Artists, Patrons, and the Public: Why Culture Changes.

By Barry Lord and Gail Dexter Lord. Lanham, Md.: AltaMira Press, 2010. 226 pp., hardcover, \$44.95.

In the late 1970s, there was a wonderful Canadian documentary television program called “Connections.” Host and historian James Burke would begin the show by discussing, say, how Normans used stirrups for horse riding in the Middle Ages and, in the short span of an hour, would explain how that led to modern-day telecommunications. The show demonstrated that history is not linear but a series of events with unexpected links. Barry Lord and Gail Dexter Lord’s new book, *Artists, Patrons, and the Public: Why Culture Changes*, is also about such connections—linking history, people, art, museums and culture. Through a series of fascinating historical journeys, they provide a thought-provoking explanation of how societies change and the unique role of museums in that process.

The authors are the founders of Lord Cultural Resources, which specializes in the planning and management of cultural institutions. Their work spans the globe, from Toronto to Bilbao to the United Arab Emirates. They have authored a body of work for museum professionals, including such titles as *The Manual of Museum Planning*, *The Manual of Museum Management* and *The Manual of Museum Exhibitions*. With this latest 194-page book, they tackle the intriguing question of culture and why it changes over time.

Culture, of course, changes for many reasons. There are generational shifts, technological innovations and economic upheavals that can serve as catalysts. The authors compellingly argue that one of the biggest drivers of cultural change involves artistic patronage, and they explore key principles that govern those changes, not only in the interpretation of works of art, but also in their creation.

The Lords first define what we mean by “culture,” creating four distinct categories: material culture (tools for survival); physical culture (health, medicine, reproduction); social-political culture (hierarchical structures, government, religion); and aesthetic culture, the meanings created by objects or actions that are “apprehended, understood, and appreciated by our senses and/or imagination.” This includes visual arts, music and design. The authors theorize that these four cultures are all connected and influence one another. For instance, a hunting knife is used to catch game but also might be elaborately carved and hold aesthetic value. And a stained-glass window in a cathedral can be an example of social-political culture as it conveys biblical stories while being admired for its inherent aesthetic merits.

These definitions provide a strong intellectual framework for our collective work in museums, and the Lords suggest that exhibitions and public programming are most successful when organized around combinations of these four cultures. Exhibitions with meaningful cultural context engage visitors through artifacts or artwork. The authors provide several examples, including the Tate Modern’s reinstallation of its collection through the lens of physical, social-political and aesthetic culture using such themes as the wonderfully titled display of “Sex and Death in Victorian Painting: 1870-90.”

At the heart of the book, the Lords provide a fascinating history of art patronage from the earliest tools to abstract art today. They argue that the pace of cultural

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transition depends on the rate of change of patron groups. For example, with the rise of the 16th-century merchant class in Europe, this new demographic enjoyed expanded wealth and chose to support artists that reflected their new status. This was a stark contrast to artists supported by the crown or the church. The bourgeoisie's growing identity with individual roles in society led to a transformation of aesthetic culture. For example, chamber music in Italy transitioned from collective choral work that idealized the group to a greater presence of solos that reflected individual musicians. This new class of patron also encouraged more non-European themes in visual art that reflected increased travel and trade.

The Lords define patronage beyond those who purchase or commission works of art to more broadly include those with the time and inclination to notice the

artwork around us. They remind us that "paying critical attention and providing the opportunity for influential people to hear or see what the artist can do" is important in the creation of art. Of course, museum visitors and members fit into this category. With their influence, the book says, our collections can be "laboratories for studying the phenomenon of cultural change."

Like the merchant class of the 16th century, today's art patrons are part of larger social groups that change and shift, and in doing so change the artwork they support. We often define ourselves as members of multiple social groups—for example, by profession or gender. Rarely are such groups static; they are ever changing as they gain wealth and status. Some social groups exert greater influence, allowing the dominant groups a more developed identity and sense of

cohesion. Other groups may see their cultures suppressed as dominant groups seek to invalidate them.

Groups can certainly influence one another through contact, and the Lords use several new museum projects as examples of this. With the recent oil wealth of the Middle East, they suggest, many countries have established new institutions to emphasize their cultures, including the I.M. Pei-designed Museum of Islamic Art in Qatar and what is soon to be the world's largest cultural district, now being constructed on Abu Dhabi's Saadiyat Island. Both of these countries are positioning themselves as a 21st-century crossroads of culture, and these museums play a major role in this effort.

Perhaps the most valuable chapter to museum professionals is one near the end of the book that explores contemporary cultural change. The Lords apply their

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previous premises on art, culture and patronage to today's trends, and specifically to museums and municipalities. They examine how museums are experimenting with new ways to present their collections and, in turn, showcase culture and patronage and create more engaged citizens.

They describe one such project, the Manchester Ship Canal, for which museum staff worked with city leaders to transform a dirty shipping hub into a cultural destination called Salford Quays. The joint effort has helped create a new artistic community and served as a catalyst for economic development. The authors also describe an ailing 1980s Glasgow, where leaders made a deliberate and thoughtful choice to create a city of culture. There were many skeptics at the time, but through careful policies that developed cultural institutions and

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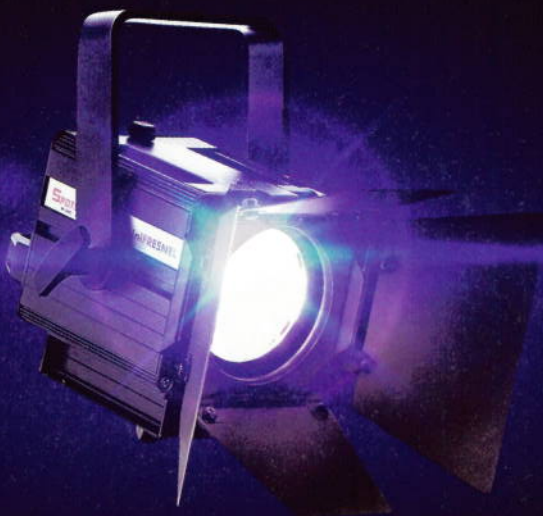
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encouraged a thriving artistic community, the city won the coveted designation of "European Capital of Culture." Glasgow remains a template for how culture can transform a city and become a significant economic generator.


As the world becomes smaller and more tightly connected, cultures are changing with rising intensity and rapidity. This requires museum professionals to be acutely aware of these cultural shifts and be more flexible than in the past as we respond to such transformations. "Cultural institutions can be on the vanguard, at other times merely in the grip of cultural change," the authors write. And much like that TV show taught a generation of viewers to appreciate the connective arc of history, this book explores the way our profession can anticipate today's transformative trends and better connect to our audiences, patrons and the world. ●

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