

# What Is a Museum's Purpose?

by Robert J. Gary (CA)

A wealthy philanthropist who gives millions each year to education was obviously unaware of the very purpose and mission of museums when he said that donating to museums is abhorrent, because there are many other needs in the world.

A museum is not a warehouse of unused things; it is not a storage lot for things past. It is an active—often interactive—fluid, educational experience. Just as desks, white boards, and books in classrooms are merely a teacher's tools, the items housed in museums are tools used to teach history, math, geometry, culture, astronomy, and engineering — just for starters.

Our National Watch and Clock Museum is a fine example of this principle. Students of all ages and backgrounds are introduced to a wide range of disciplines and experiences by exploring the collection housed therein.

The field of study most commonly associated with museums is history. This is, of course, because museums provide a physical link to a society's past. Visitors observe the actual items touched and used by previous generations to survive, learn, entertain, build, and prosper. They see objects that were the precursors of the ones they use in their own lives and can thus understand the direct links between them and the wondrous gadgets available in today's world.

People of different ages and experiences will view the same exhibit with different eyes. At the clock museum, a young child may comprehend, through a hands-on activity, that a swinging pendulum somehow makes a second hand turn in a circle. An older child may see that the turning gears transmit the momentum of the pendulum to the clock's hands. A teenager may wonder how the clockmaker knew how to make those gears and what size to make them. An engineer may



be enthralled by the mathematics, tools, and skills required to make these devices by hand, long before modern machinery and education existed. The researcher may be driven to search out every bit of recorded information on the specific part, tool, invention, innovation, or individual involved in the creation of a timepiece, sundial, globe, astrolabe, or orrery in the collection. An artist may see and be inspired by the sheer beauty of these horological masterpieces.

A youth fascinated by the stars in the night sky might learn, while wandering through our museum,

that it was a similar fascination with celestial movement that first drew humans to develop the concept of time. Later, that concept allowed explorers to travel the globe and to invent a gnomon to create a shadow from the sun to mark the passing of the day. Mathematicians use their calculations in myriad educational disciplines, from the orbits of the planets and stars to the sizes and parameters of the wheel train of a clock to the workings of a modern GPS system.

All this is based on the study of time. Within the walls of the Museum, these concepts are brought to life in ways that are often superior to the confines of the classroom. Would our wealthy philanthropist say that donating textbooks to schools was "abhorrent?"

Supporting museums is central to the ongoing education of our population—especially the young. Museums give us unique insight. If we are to understand what is possible in the future, we cannot divorce ourselves from the past. It is essential that we provide the funding and support necessary to keep our museums alive.

## About the Author

Robert J. Gary is a member of the NAWCC Board of Directors, the Chair of the Development Committee, and a member of the For All Time Capital Campaign Committee. He has been an NAWCC member since 1999.



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