

What in the World

A TELEVISION INSTITUTION

By GEORGE DESSART

In the realms with which *Expedition* is normally concerned, eleven years is not a long time. To the anthropologist, it is half a generation; to the archaeologist, it is scarcely a moment. But to a thirteen-year-old child, or to the television industry, eleven years is more than half a lifetime.

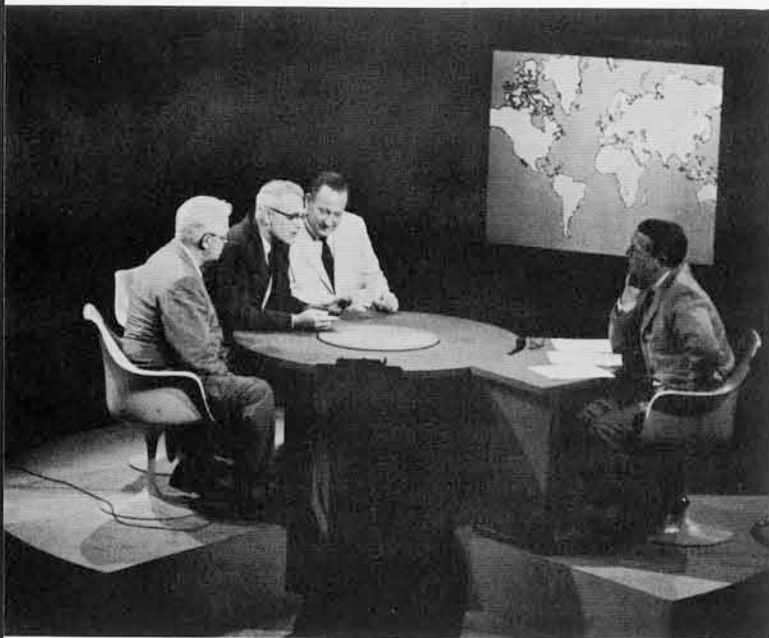
To us in television, still struggling through what Lewis Mumford would call our "paleotechnic age," *What in the World*, the University Museum's weekly television venture, is more than just another program. *What in the World* was first seen in Philadelphia in 1951, and despite the fact that it has been off the air for several periods, it comes close to being one of the oldest programs on television. Certainly, it has set some sort of record for a program involving the cooperative efforts of a museum and a commercial station. In 1952, it received the Peabody Award, television's most coveted honor, "for a superb blending of the academic and the entertaining." It has appeared on as many as eighty-nine stations of the CBS television network, and it has served as a model for programs throughout the United States and elsewhere. Since February the fifth of this year, it has once again been shown in Boston over the facilities of WGBH. Even after eleven years, the program elicits a steady stream of mail and seems to have a growing audience.

With such a record, *What in the World* has become an institution on television and since cultural institutions are the proper concern of this journal and its readers, perhaps it would be well, at the beginning of *What in the World's* eleventh season, to reflect on the nature of its seeming viability in a medium so notoriously destructive of institutions as to have produced legendary Grand Old Men (i.e., fondly remembered but nonetheless unemployed former favorites) within little more than its first decade.

Such an examination may well take the form of a paean since I confess to an overwhelming fondness for the program in question. Furthermore, there is a rather delicate question of taste involved: even faint praise might appear unseemly coming from the program's producer. To both objections I regretfully offer the defense that the program's virtues antedate both my acquaintance and my professional connection with it.

The most obvious reason for *What in the World's* longevity is the indisputable fact that it dares to be popular without being condescending; it has clearly demonstrated that a television program need not assume that it addresses itself to an audience of thirteen year olds. Additionally, some of the program's success must be ascribed to the fortuitous fact that the University Museum is immoderately rich in television personalities. The learned gentlemen and ladies will not take offense when it is pointed out that each of them could have had careers in some form of entertainment. But the primary reason for its viability resides in the fact that *What in the World* consists of a uniquely successful translation of the museum's collections into effective television.

Museums, we all recognize to be the repositories for the most definitive statements of man's grasp of plastic and visual values in the world in which he lives. Since television is primarily a visual medium, it would seem that the museums represent the best possible sources of visual materials, and that their mere presentation on television would ensure that the broadcasting medium would be put in the service of the highest culture. All that would be required would be to move the television cameras into a museum, warm them up, and walk down the halls. The fallacy in this thinking is readily apparent. In the first place, it would fail to do justice to the material being presented. The twenty-four inch box in the living room is not a museum and the simple



act of turning it on does not require the kind of participation which is essential if museum-going is to be a meaningful experience. Paintings would suffer a kind of vitiating which might render the viewer forevermore insensitive to them. Even with color television, the process of transmuting light values into units of electric energy reduces the possible gradation from black to white in any given color from the more than two hundred which the human eye can perceive, to less than ten. Furthermore, a television receiver frames every picture in a rigid three by four proportion regardless of that which the painter selected, or the subject matter seems to dictate. Even sculpture, which is less subject to violation in terms of light values, suffers from this arbitrary subdivision into three by four units.

But beyond these purely technological limitations, the more important fallacy in the camera tour through the gallery is that it fails to take into account the nature of the transmitting medium. If there has been any body of aesthetic built up for television, there are two tenets which are central to it. The first is that television, if it is ever to become an art, must be considered a time art and its rhythms must arise from its own demands rather than from what seems appropriate to the material itself when viewed other than over the television system. This is, of course, one of the reasons why television is so voracious; something which might normally sustain our interest for several hours is frequently dismissed by the camera in a matter of minutes.

The second principle which seems to have emerged is that television exists in confrontation. Whether it be between man and man, man and idea, or man and object, this is unique to the medium and absolutely central to it. It is this quality which makes television so remarkably revealing of personality. Whereas film has an aspect of reporting, of bringing the personality to us, there is implicit in television the extension of our senses. The camera serves to probe for us the people, places, and things which it enables us to see. It is this quality, too, which is responsible for the kind of third dimensional movement characteristic of the style of the best television dramatic series. Whenever this sense of confrontation has been most apparent, whether in those series, in the recent pre-election debates, or the camera's threading through the crowds to catch the arrival of the survivors of the *Andrea Doria*, intercut with the simultaneous sinking of the ship itself, the potential effect of the medium has been most clearly realized.

It is this sense of confrontation, more than any other single value, which is responsible for *What in the World's* continuing interest for an audience. Like these other examples of effective television, *What in the World* has certain values which are absolutely exclusive to television. It is highly unlikely that even the most inveterate museum-goer would ever have the opportunity of looking over the shoulders of an archaeologist or an anthropologist at the very moment when he first confronts an object for identification. And there is a quality to this act which makes it far more enticing to the average viewer than a mere display of erudition. The ability to discriminate between a Giotto and a Corregio might indeed be impressive. But the result of this discrimination would affect at most only the market value of the painting. Its intrinsic value, its value to the beholder, would be unchanged. No one, however, can resist the sight of men at work, and it soon becomes apparent, even to the uninitiated, that the extrapolation of a culture from the tactile and visual examination of a fragment is the very nature of the work of the archaeologist and the anthropologist. The erudition of the experts becomes acceptable because they are not merely showing off, but actually going about their business. Here indeed, is a program which exists in confrontation. The identification of the objects, in itself a meaningful task, becomes the primary source of interest. The presence of colorful and attractive personalities and the quiz format become secondary, the latter serving to insure that the program's rhythm is determined by

its own time sense and partially diminishing the gap between viewer and expert by making the viewer privy to the answer which the expert seeks.

What in the World is, by any standards, good television and it is also good education. It is solidly based on values which can only be developed in this medium, and, while never ceasing to be entertaining, it nonetheless brings its audience into touch with a body of knowledge with which they might not otherwise have contact. The letters received by WCAU-TV tell again and again of people with no prior interest in archaeology or anthropology who have developed through watching the program a genuine delight in their growing ability to recognize certain styles and periods.

There are some who would quibble with this as a criterion of the program's worth. John Canaday recently devoted his Sunday column in the *New York Times* to a searing indictment of what he called "stamp collectors"—the ostentatiously under-informed whose idea of a trip to a museum consists of making loud pronouncements regarding the authorship or provenience of each piece and then delightedly comparing their identification with the museum's before passing quickly on to the next challenger. This is, Mr. Canaday points out, a most tragic confusion between brute memory and genuine appreciation. But one might well ask how a child can learn to appreciate without first learning the letters of the alphabet? To a three-year-old, the ability to differentiate between an 'O' and a 'C' is a genuine intellectual and sensory achievement. Even Carlyle and Durrell must have passed through such a stage and which of us would have chosen to silence the squeals of delight in their nurseries?

In any case, many of *What in the World's* viewers have obviously gone beyond the stage of stamp collecting and become thoroughly respectable museum-goers as a result of their weekly exposure to the museum's treasures. Undoubtedly, part of the University Museum's willingness to subject itself to the unremitting pressure of finding objects which have never before been seen by the panel and which are unusual enough to provide a genuine challenge (an inordinately difficult task since the panel, too, have been sharpened by the program) is occasioned by its understandable desire to publicize the museum and attract a larger audience. To an even greater extent, it rests on the museum's realization that the use of a medium with the power and scope of television is part of its mandate to make its material and its scholarship

On each What in the World program, four or five objects are presented to a panel of experts who are asked to tell what each piece is, where it comes from, how old it is, how it is used. Objects are selected from the storerooms of various museums and have never before been seen by the panel. After they have completed their identification and the moderator, Froelich Rainey, Director of the University Museum, has told them whether they are right and if not, given the correct identification, photographs and detail maps are shown on the screen to give additional information.

In the picture, Dr. Rainey looks on as the regular panel members, Carleton S. Coon (left) and Alfred Kidder II (right), discuss with guest panelist Gordon F. Ekholm a sword hilt in human form made by the Paiwan people of Formosa.

available to the area which it serves. Eleven years ago this museum was almost alone in this view. Fortunately, since that time, an increasing number of museums throughout the country have recognized that television is not a tangential activity in which to be engaged. There is now an excellent series emanating from the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. The American Museum of Natural History cooperated in the production of *Adventure*. The City Art Museum of St. Louis and the Walter's Art Gallery of Baltimore also have been active. If the experience of the ballet companies in this country which have attracted unprecedented live audiences largely as a result of television is any indication, an increase in museum television programs would be one of the best things that could happen for museums. Certainly, the commercial broadcasters, with television's increased interest in public service, are anxious for program material. But both they and the museums must refuse to have anything to do with indiscriminate dilettantism. If the museum's contribution is to be at all meaningful, the museum must demand meticulous production and it must be willing to make the sacrifices in time and effort required to insure the best possible translation of its material into effective television. If *What in the World* has proved anything in its first decade, it has established for all time that neither the broadcaster nor the museum need settle for vaguely well-meaning art appreciation for the sort of program that descends into a recounting of what Berenson scathingly refers to as "the domestic arrangements of the painters."