For Love and Money:
A Comparison of the Cleveland Museum of Art
and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum

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Cleveland is amazing. For a community of relatively small size, it boasts an unusually high proportion of high-quality cultural institutions. Why? The obvious reason is that the citizens of the city and the region have a great hunger for art, theater, dance, poetry, performance and music of all kinds.

A deeper reason is that the city’s business, civic and philanthropic leadership has always seen that larger purposes can be served by supporting the arts. Over the century, those purposes have changed dramatically. The shift is made abundantly clear in a comparison of the city’s two principal museums: The 79-year-old Cleveland Museum of Art and the brand new Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum. The former was founded for love, the latter for money.

The Cleveland Museum of Art was founded because its supporters believed in essence that art is good for the soul. The Rock Hall was founded because its supporters believe it will put Cleveland on the map as an international tourist destination. The difference between the two is the difference between altruism and market logic.

It is not coincidental that the rock hall—and its underlying economic purpose—has emerged at a time when Congress is in the process of killing the National Endowment for the Arts. The new Republican majority in Congress is busy making sure that government will no longer provide unconditional support for art for art’s sake, and in fact, may not provide any support at all. But at the same time, in the same political climate, Republicans and Democrats alike at the local, state and federal levels have funneled massive government support into the Rock Hall. The message: If culture can be good for business, the government will support it enthusiastically.

But what kind of culture will we get if our cultural institutions submit everything they do to economic logic? This question hasn’t changed since 1840 when Alexis de Tocqueville wrote that “Democratic nations will habitually prefer the useful to the beautiful, and they will require that the beautiful should be useful.” The uses of the Rock Hall and the art museum are many. But they are profoundly different.

At the art museum, visitors can see unique, priceless, one of a kind objects as frequently as they like, for free. At the Rock Hall, visitors already own the art. They can hear it whenever they want, by slipping a cassette into a tape deck or a disc into a CD player. Consequently, the aim of the Rock Hall is to provide a deeper knowledge of rock music. But it must also entertain, evoke nostalgia and appeal to the spending instincts of the baby boomer generation.

To be sure, civic ego played a role in the founding of the Cleveland Museum of Art, just as it has in the Rock Hall. The turn-of-the-century Cleveland industrialists who bequeathed their great fortunes to the museum believed that civic pride was at stake. They wanted Cleveland to have a cultural jewel like the already existing museums in Buffalo, Chicago, New York, Boston and Philadelphia. They also wanted to capitalize on a unique cultural moment, in which great art collections from Europe and Asia were suddenly up for grabs as a result of war, economic dislocation and the declining fortunes of aristocracy.

But in supporting the art museum, Cleveland’s industrialists also believed there was a strong educational purpose to be served in making beautiful art and craft objects available to the working men and women of Cleveland. Hence the museum’s strong and continuing commitment to the decorative arts. The arts, it was believed, would help civilize the immigrant labor force flooding into the city from Europe. A textile worker could be inspired by a collection of European lace. An ironworker would be motivated by the sight of a medieval suit of armor.

If there was an element of paternalism in the museum’s original philosophy, it was more than balanced by the willingness of the museum’s donors to hire top-flight professional directors and curators and to give them an enormous measure of freedom in shaping the museum’s collection and programs. As the museum has grown over the 79 years since its founding, that educational mission has remained absolutely central to the museum’s purpose.

The driving motivations behind the Rock Hall are different. Ohio Gov. George Voinovich threw his vital support behind the project not because he was a fan of rock music, but because he saw that the rock
hall would spur tourism and economic development by drawing an estimated million visitors a year to Cleveland.

Of course, it was important that 660,000 Greater Clevelanders signed petitions to bring the Rock Hall to Cleveland, and that 110,000 seconded the emotion in a telephone poll sponsored by U.S.A. Today, burying Memphis, Tennessee, which came in a distant second with less than 10,000 votes. But public enthusiasm was not decisive. Money was. Cleveland won the nod from the New York-based Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Foundation to build the Rock Hall because it put up the lion's share of cash. Strong public support for the project gave political and civic leaders the political cover they needed to raise those funds.

As it was at the turn of the century, symbolism is still vital, but for different reasons. Cleveland's goal in supporting the rock hall is to erase forever the memories of the Cuyahoga River burning in 1969 and the city's default in 1978. Architect I.M. Pei's photogenic design, whose thrusting geometric forms are intended to embody rock's rebellious energy, is a Great Lakes equivalent of the Sydney Opera House. The architecture promotes an energetic, vibrant image of Cleveland on the rebound.

Such imagery is expensive, and Cleveland paid dearly for it in a bidding war with other cities who recognized the tourism potential of the rock hall. In the end, Cleveland triumphed over Memphis, New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles because it put up more cash. The fight was analogous to the tug of war over major league sports teams, in which wealthy team owners essentially extort concessions from financially strapped municipalities.

More than two thirds of the rock hall's $92 million cost comes from Ohio sources, while recording industry executives contributed a relatively paltry $5 million. The museum's cost does not include $5.25 million in local funds for a rail line to shuttle visitors to the lakefront from the city's transit hub at Tower City Center. Many millions of dollars more will be needed to create a greater sense of physical linkage between the rock hall's lakefront site and the central business district, which are separated by a 50-foot drop in elevation and by a gash of highways and railroads.

Meanwhile, poverty and crime thrive in city neighborhoods and the state has taken over the city's school system, because voters angry over waste and mismanagement shot down tax levy increases as routinely as children die from gunfire on city streets. At the same time, Cleveland and its inner suburbs continue to suffer a slow bleed of residents moving from the center to the urban edge.

Given such a backdrop, it might seem questionable that so much government support—a form of public philanthropy—is going to the Rock Hall. The Rock Hall can't cure what ails the city. Cleveland's problems are too deep-seated to be turned around by a single glamorous new cultural institution. But the backers of the Rock Hall believe it can help by providing trickle down jobs in the city's hotels, restaurants and downtown shopping malls. Bringing in the tourists—and making them pay—is job one.

With all the pressure to succeed economically, it would be understandable if the Rock Hall simply pandered to its audience. But the rock hall's supporters recognized, correctly, that they must offer quality in order to win respect and long term support for their venture. To that end, the Rock Hall's board hired Dennis Barrie, former director of the Contemporary Art Center in Cincinnati, as the Rock Hall's director. Barrie's credentials as a champion of artistic free speech are beyond reproach. He was tried and acquitted in Cincinnati on charges of obscenity after daring to display Robert Mapplethorpe photographs in a notoriously conservative community.

As director of the Rock Hall, Barrie faces a different kind of battle. He must find a balance between the needs of corporate and civic sponsors for positive image-making, and the rebellious, anti-establishment essence of rock and roll, an art form in which musicians occasionally do the equivalent of immersing a crucifix in urine.

The tension between the Rock Hall's higher aspirations and its underlying financial realities will permeate the writing of every exhibit label, every display. Is the wording euphemistic enough? Will it offend? Has the Rock Hall adequately asserted intellectual independence from its sponsors? No matter how exhibits are framed, mass appeal is key. Barrie wants the Rock Hall to become a true museum of culture. But he will be judged on whether he can keep the turnstiles turning and corporate sponsors content.

Under the circumstances, it would be difficult for the Rock Hall to justify the musical equivalent of, say, the Cleveland Museum of Art's superb 1991 exhibition of 16th-century Japanese screens, which only drew a relatively modest 30,000 visitors in 10 weeks. Nor would it be easy to support programming analogous to the courageous and innovative efforts of the Cleveland Orchestra under Music Director Christoph von Dohnanyi, who focuses on difficult 20th century composers.
Despite its enviable $400 million endowment, the art museum faces many of the same pressures as the Rock Hall. To bolster a case for corporate and private philanthropy, the museum must assert its role as a contributor to the economy of Northeast Ohio. As a result, the museum conducted studies showing that its 75th-anniversary exhibitions pumped more than $30 million into the city’s economy, and that it is part of a cultural industry that contributes as much or more to the regional economy than professional sports. Given the pragmatic nature of politics, corporate and charitable philanthropy, the arts must show that they serve an economic purpose.

But at the rock hall, education and enlightenment will be less important than attracting tourists and separating them from the dollars in their wallets. If it sounds mercenary, it’s a result of the changing political and social environment for cultural institutions in the market-friendly, post-NEA era. The role for private philanthropy in this climate is to ensure that market logic doesn’t permeate all of the city’s cultural institutions. There must be a place for cultural institutions that nurture artistic expressions that don’t have to pass the test of mass appeal to prove their worth.