

**Cultural Representation in Museums:
Where are We Now?**

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Introduction

In the fall of 1998, I was a Peace Corps Volunteer in Mali, West Africa travelling through the famed Dogon country with a friend. It was hot in Mali that September. Well, it's always hot in Mali: around 115 degrees with no air conditioning, no fans, and no electricity in most parts of the country. We hiked about an hour to a village where we would be staying that night. We arrived around sunset, climbed a simple tree branch ladder to the roof of our lodging and ate dinner while admiring the waterfalls and massive cliffs around us.

For those unfamiliar with the Dogon, they are a cliff-dwelling group in central Mali. Their masks, doors, and ladders are represented in many of our art museums, often as central pieces to African collections. They still practice many of their ancient rituals of cliff funerals, mask ceremonies, and celebrations. On our trip, we heard the drums of a wedding, saw an indigo wrapped corpse lifted hundreds of feet in the air to a tiny opening in the cliff face, and learned about the doors and masks for which the group is famous.

I remained in Mali for about another six months. My friend returned home and sent me an email about a West African exhibit that he thought I should see when I returned. He mentioned some of the Dogon pieces that were on display.

The next spring, I returned home and was beginning to think about my career in the arts. One Thursday, I decided to go see the exhibit. The art museum displayed most pieces traditionally, numbered in glass cases and identified on plain white panels. Any idea of context was limited to a few photographs and maps. I found myself searching for the Mali pieces, craving some sort of connection with my experience. On a back wall, a strange case was filled with larger objects. Most of them were Dogon in origin, including a simple tree branch ladder like the one we had climbed to reach the roof in 1999.

The ladders are simply large “Y” shaped logs with notches for one’s feet. The “Y” shape allows the ladder to rest easily on the wall of the structure as one climbs it to the roof for leisure or sleeping, particularly in the warm seasons. It is practical, as it can be moved easily. It requires minimal engineering and less wood than any other ladder in an area where wood is sometimes worth more than gold. I was not surprised to see one of these ladders in the museum because they embody a clean beauty and innovative design.

But I *was* surprised when I read the label. The date, materials, and ethnic group were all correct, but the description implied that the ladder had spiritual significance. It was said to represent a figure with arms reaching up towards the sky. The seven notches represented a number spiritually significant to the Dogon. I was astonished.

Do not misunderstand me. I am sure that the curator of this internationally recognized art museum had done his or her research, had probably come across some information that is accurately recorded somewhere, and had determined its accuracy. But I could not help but think that there was something missing from the description. Someone who had never traveled to Mali, whose only information about the Dogon is from this label, has only a small picture of their culture. Granted, we aim to keep labels short, and calling a log a spiritual icon is intriguing to many viewers. But without any idea of the context so much was lost. No one could ever conceive of that beautiful sunset, the sweltering heat, or the view of the waterfalls from the roof of a mud house.

My frustration is common among those of us who have lived in other cultures and return to see television shows, movies, books, and even museums tell only part of the story of the lands we have come to know well. It’s almost an affliction. We have to tell ourselves to stop correcting people, stop ranting and raving, and simply try to educate as gracefully as we can.

I decided upon graduate school in arts management with a focus in museum studies. Here I have learned that the museum community claims the need to place objects in context and to represent cultures with respect, accuracy, and dignity. Yet, at the same time, I have seen more and more exhibits tell only part of the story. Research is sometimes taken from one ancient book, and curators and exhibit designers are more concerned with the mysteries and secrets of the cultures on display than with their everyday lives. While there is still much debate as to whether we should even attempt to interpret such objects, it is commonly agreed that, when we do, we should do so as completely as possible.

The contradictions have perplexed me, and, as I came to narrow my masters research, I knew that there were some questions I needed to have answered. As a museum professional in training, these are some important issues that should be addressed in my coursework. The following is a synthesis of what we are being taught today, inside and outside the classroom, about cultures on display.

Literature Review and Coursework

Background

The purpose of this paper is to explore the selected theories that guide museum professionals in interpreting and displaying everyday cultural objects. The content from several classes taken at the University of Oregon during the 2002-2003 academic year and from current literature on the topic, I have developed a clear idea of what museum professionals are being taught today.

It is not surprising that museum professionals find cultural objects interesting. The objects of far away and seemingly mysterious places have intrigued western visitors since the days of early European explorers. Oliver Impey and Arthur MacGregor note, “the opening of the New World and

the opening up of contacts with Africa, South-East Asia and the Far East revolutionized the way which people saw the world and their own place in it” (1985, p.2). This awakening gave birth to the very beginnings of museums as we know them. The above passage was taken from *Origins of Museums*, which argues that the curiosity cabinets of the Renaissance were, in essence, early museums. What is interesting, though, is that many of them were filled with everyday objects:

...[T]okens or emblems of societies whose very existence was a source of astonishment to the intensely parochial European public. Clothing, weapons and utensils of all sorts, often made of unfamiliar materials found their way to collectors through the major ports and, in time, through dealers. (Impey & MacGregor, 1985, p.2)

Whether we are examining a spoon, a tool, or an item of clothing, we cannot seem to satiate our curiosity about how others adapt to the daily needs all humans have. While we would never think of hanging our own work shirts on the wall unless we were making some sort of artistic, dadaesque statement, we have had no qualms about displaying everyday clothing from distant places. G. Ellis Burcaw notes that there are specific museum collections devoted to the everyday objects from faraway lands because, “[t]wo related natural tendencies or instincts’ of people seems to be universal and timeless. These are the desire accumulate objects and the desire to show them to other people” (1997, p.24-25).

Western museum professionals come from a long tradition of curiosity regarding everyday cultural objects. Just as our European ancestors did when they first began to explore the far reaches of the globe, we find the unique objects from faraway lands intriguing. As a result, we bring items into our museums, galleries, and homes the same way people of privilege may have brought pillaged treasures home hundreds of years ago. The question is, though, how do we move beyond

the curiosity cabinets of our ancestors to create museum settings that tell the visitor something about the cultures from which the objects have come?

Some may wonder why this should be a subject of scholarly inquiry. There is, in fact, an innate beauty and aesthetic value to many of these objects. This may not raise an ethical issue for those who wish to appreciate art for art's sake. The dada movement at the turn of the twentieth century introduced a modernist way of looking at art out of context. While context is still given in many exhibitions, this movement affects the way many works have been interpreted and displayed to the visitor.

Art museums, natural history museums, and cultural museums all too easily make curatorial decisions that place items such as a West African ladder out of context, at the forefront of an exhibition. The purpose of this study is to uncover the reasons behind exhibiting such objects in cultural institutions. Since the early twentieth century, museums have been collectively exploring issues relating to ethics and the interpretation of objects. They have sought ways to make sound decisions that will inform the public and provide them a context in which to examine another culture. Serious documentation of this practice began with the establishment of the International Council of Museums in 1946 (ICOM web site, <http://www.icom.org>, 2002). Since then, international and local efforts have reacted to this need to reevaluate the role of the museum as it relates to the visitor, the scholar, the artist or craftsman, and the object under examination.

In Richard Kurin's book, *Reflections of a Culture Broker: A View from the Smithsonian*, he recalls working with the Smithsonian's Folklife Festival in 1991. Senegal was the featured nation of the festival that year and Kurin was fortunate to have a meeting with the current president of Senegal, Abdou Diouf:

I stood to speak. “Mr. President,” I said, unfurling a site map of the Mall and the planned Senegal festival presentation, “this is how we will represent Senegal to the American people.”

President Diouf, a tall, dignified man, turned his head to look up at me and with a most gentle smile responded, “My dear, that is my job. It is why the people of Senegal elected me president!” (1997, p.12)

Kurin agrees that the president was right. At the same time, he acknowledges that:

Very few museums, television stations, book publishers, or theater producers would likely stand aside and give the president of any nation free reign to do anything he or she wanted to do over the host country’s media. That would be an abdication of professional responsibility by curators, program managers, editors and directors. (1997, p.12-13)

This story illustrates the dilemma this paper hopes to address. We rely on our museums to translate other cultures for us:

[A museum] serves to fulfill the constant human need for pleasure of understanding and widening of experiences...and will act toward the wise, harmonious development in the given environment. (Edson, 1997, p.172)

While we depend on museums to give us the understanding we need to function in today’s growing international environment, they often fall short of this grand mission: “The fact is...that museums...seldom take part in real life activities, nor do they try to influence the life or destiny of their respective community” (Edson, 1997, 175). The practice of taking museum objects out of context compounds this problem:

“Almost nothing displayed in museums was made to be seen in them. Museums provide an experience of most of the world’s art and artifacts that does not bear even the remotest resemblance to what their makers intended.” (Vogel quoted by Edson, 1997, p.220)

Museum professionals face a dilemma: they must protect the integrity of other cultures while continuing to preserve the modernist approach of appreciating art for art’s sake. We attempt to establish standards to which we can all adhere through professional organizations, publications, and policies such as section nine in the Code of Ethics for Museums set forth by the British Museums Association (2002, p. 18-19). Although we establish decrees and edicts, we do not often follow them in practice.

As museum professionals seek to understand and, more importantly, interpret international communities, it is essential that we explore the most sensitive approach to these matters. This paper will address some ways museum professionals are putting new ideas about interpretation into practice. In this day of growing international cooperation and partnership, it is critical that we do so.

Coursework

As a museum professional in training, I had hoped that my coursework would answer many of these questions. I attended the University of Oregon Arts and Administration program with a focus in museum studies. The following is a synthesis of relevant information from courses specifically having to do with museums: Planning Interpretive Exhibits, Museology, and The Anthropology Museum. Due to the background of each professor, I was able to get an idea of these issues in a several different museum settings: the history museum, the natural history museum, and the art museum.

History museums.¹

The first course I took was Planning Interpretive Exhibits taught by Alice Parman. Parman works for Formations, an exhibit design firm based out of Portland. While her work has varied, much of it has been done for interpretive centers and historical museums. Some examples are the Steinbeck Center, the Oregon Sports Hall of Fame, and the Springfield Museum.

The title of the course implied a strong emphasis on interpretation. Parman tried to introduce in two weekend workshops all sorts of interpretive techniques focusing on adapting exhibits to meet a wide range of audiences, learning styles, and senses. She relied heavily on examples of work she had done with Formations. These examples showed exhibits with multi-layered panels, interactive pieces, and highly contextual environments.

Parman tried to present the entire process of exhibit planning with a client. She discussed determining big ideas, conceptual plans and research. Early on, I began to have some concerns. She mentioned only brief meetings with museum staff and experts. My concerns grew as I began to understand that public educational institutions might have exhibits designed by professionals who had been only briefly introduced to the subject matter. I knew that nothing would be built without the consent of the institution, yet the entire process seemed to be missing something: expert guidance in context. I had been eager to learn how exhibits are actually planned, and I thought to myself, “Is this really it?”

Halfway through the second weekend, I asked Parman some direct questions that concerned me about the process. She assured me that experts were available to her at all steps along the way.

¹ The following information was compiled during the University of Oregon’s course entitled “Planning Interpretive Exhibits. The course was taken from October to December of 2002 and was taught by Alice Parman.

But my major question was still unanswered. I asked what she and her colleagues did when they found themselves presenting a culture not represented on the planning committee.

Parman explained to me that in circumstances such as that, there was actually a protocol that was followed. She mentioned that *whenever* possible cultural focus groups were brought in to evaluate the exhibit before it was installed. Focus groups were comprised of local representatives from the population whose stories were being told. The example she used was when depicting the farming community near the Steinbeck Center in California, Mexican immigrant farmers were brought in to the planning process. Not only did this allow for accurate cultural representation, but it had the added benefit of oral history that could be used in the exhibit itself. I was relieved and I began to believe that, in certain instances, there is an attempt to create sensitive cultural representation.

The remaining concern I had after this class was that, in planning exhibits that were so heavily interpretive, the object was being lost. Small spaces were crowded with didactic panels, videos, and sensory experiences. In the history settings presented, centers were relying on new artifacts, and the authentic everyday object was only used when necessary to help create a dynamic environment. Of course, this is not always the case in history settings. Historic house museums have done a wonderful job of incorporating objects and context into one space. Unfortunately, they often tell only one story of one family with exhibits dictated by the space and the objects.

Consultants such as Parman are used frequently by many museums. While I believe my concerns are valid, the process of using an outside firm can often be what the museum makes of it. G.E. Burcaw, in *Introduction to Museum Work*, notes a couple of important points regarding

consultants: "It is more economic and efficient, resulting in better products and services, to hire outside experts for particular needs"(1997, p.141). But he warns:

The museum professional staff members must not give up their responsibilities in basic museum work and in public education because a band of outsiders is temporarily in charge of exhibit production, regardless of the euphoria of the board and laymen at getting new, crowd-pleasing installations. (1997, p.141)

We are all finding ways to streamline our work in difficult economic times that have resulted in staff cutbacks. A design firm can be a savior for many museums, but Burcaw is correct. We, the experts of our own institutions must maintain control.

Maintaining control is of greater concern for history museums as they often have the most complex stories to tell. While it was once easy to present the stories of "great men"(and sometimes women), the relatively recent acceptance of social history -- the consideration of all cultures and socio-economic classes in the historical discipline -- has had a significant impact on history museums. The broadening of stories, while admirable and necessary, has created some real problems for curators and educators in history museums. First, some stories are controversial and emotional for many groups. In a desire to bring underrepresented stories to the foreground, many museums have found themselves telling *only* the other side. An article in the *British Museums Journal* exploring emotional exhibits having to do with extreme times in history notes that, "By definition, victims have little freedom to act; exhibitions that mainly present history from the point of view of the victim do not enable us to understand how crimes against humanity came to be committed"(Lincoln, 2003, p.29).

Alternative media and documents can be powerful tools in telling the bigger story. Oral histories and videos illuminate more recent events in history. While this may seem to replace

objects that do not speak, that should not be the primary concern for history museum professionals trying to tell a fuller story. A piece entitled, “Locating Authenticity: Fragments of a Dialogue” in *Exhibiting Cultures* explores how the rise of social history has affected exhibition design in history museums (Crew & Sims, 1991, pp. 159-175). The authors note that:

Responding to the new information uncovered by social historians and creating exhibitions that reflected the heterogeneous nature of American society was not a simple process. As museum professionals discovered, the holdings within their institutions created major stumbling blocks. Many times the collections did not contain the objects they needed. (pp. 164-165)

As we know, many museums have come into existence because of an individual needing a place to house and display his or her collections. Until recently, the objects of larger segments of the population have held little value in the eyes of collectors. As a result, the lack of relevant objects becomes a serious issue for history museums that want to tell the whole story. Crew and Sims raise the question of how exhibits should be handled in such circumstances:

Creators of exhibitions have several choices when faced with a shortage of artifacts with the proper provenance. They can delay producing exhibitions with social-history content until they acquire enough authentic artifacts. They can produce social-history exhibitions that overlook issues for which authentic artifacts do not exist. Or they can break from the concept of object-driven exhibitions and produce presentations controlled by historical themes rather than by available objects. (1991, p.167)

The issue boils down to weighing the importance of objects in exhibits versus the importance of telling timely stories that reflect current historical research and findings. I feel the authors do not come to any sort of conclusion to this complex question, but it is an important one to consider as

history museums struggle to represent often overlooked cultures in their exhibits. The lack of relevant artifacts could surely answer my question as to why the exhibits Parman presented to our class seemed so objectless.

Two issues arise, then, that must be kept in mind when dealing with the complex information presented in history museums, especially when representing multiple cultural viewpoints. First, history museums *must* embrace the team approach of exhibition design. While many museums have done so, recent results of a survey published in *Exhibitionist* show that history museums are the least likely to use the team approach in exhibit design (Rounds & McIlcaney, 2000, p.5). When content is heavy and objects scarce, staff must work together to create an exhibit that will tell a complete story and that will be understood by the audience. Also, history museums need to remember that they are ultimately concerned with *events*. The interpretation of these events includes many viewpoints that should be considered in the exhibit.

It is the event that is primary, not the things or even our directed thoughts about them. And it is in the place/time of the event that the audience takes part, becoming cocreators of social meaning. Authenticity is located in the event. (Crew & Sims, 1991, p.174)

While this may seem like a trite response to a complex issue, the above statement reminds us that when we are dealing with complex issues in a history setting that includes cultural representation, we must remember our mission and the primary thing is that we, as an institution, are trying to do.

*Natural history museums.*²

The next class I took was the Anthropology Museum taught by staff of the University of Oregon Museum of Natural History. The purpose of the class was to understand the inner workings of a natural history museum, using the Museum of Natural History as a laboratory. This is an

institution towards which I have some bias, since January 2002, I have been working there as an assistant volunteer coordinator and now education coordinator. I enjoy and work well with the staff. I have observed NAGPRA visits by local tribes on a regular basis³.

The University of Oregon Museum of Natural History is more than a science museum that examines rocks and natural occurrences. It preserves and interprets the natural and cultural history of Oregon and also of other countries. Since 1935, the museum has been the state repository for all archeological objects found on state (and some federal) lands. They have done a wonderful job of creating relationships with local tribes in Oregon and working with the native communities.

Working with other cultures is a regular occurrence for the museum and, as a result, I think it was taken for granted in the classroom setting. Staff did highlight its relationships with local tribes, but the fact that these relationships are so deeply established kept staff from addressing how to build such a relationship. The fact that there are several tribal members on staff and on the board added to the unique situation. While this can be viewed by learning by example, it was hard to conceive of how a museum that was not as established in the native community would achieve the success the University of Oregon Museum of Natural History has enjoyed..

Occasionally, the museum will have exhibits that highlight cultures outside of Oregon. Museum exhibit designer Cindi Budlong gave the class a presentation of some of the exhibits she had designed. One of these was inspired by a trip she had taken to Guatemala. Cindi was taken with the bright colors and energy in Guatemalan markets and wanted to do an exhibit that would capture the essence of this environment, knowing that the museum had some collections from the country.

² The following information was taken from the University of Oregon's course entitled "The Anthropology Museum." The course was taken from January to April 2003 and was taught primarily by Dr. Mel Aikens and Patricia Krier.

³ NAGPRA is the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. A main function of the Act is to return objects or the authority of their use back to the cultures from which they hail.

Unfortunately, she was limited to the archaic display cases in the exhibit area. Despite this obstacle, Cindi worked with some local Guatemalan refugee and cultural groups to create a truly dynamic space. Each case was transformed into a vendor's booth. Photographs from her trip and from the trip of a museum member were used to create life-sized figures of market vendors. The open space was scattered with carts and other objects that would be found in the market. Booths were filled with tapestries, blankets and clothing. A local Guatemalan crafts group came in to sell their pieces in the exhibit space on certain days of the week. I was inspired by the creativity and willingness to work with the local community. But again, many of the pieces in the exhibit were not from the collection and had been purchased solely for the exhibit itself. I began to fear a "death-of-object-centered-education."

Natural history and anthropology museums, by subject matter alone, are often sites for debate. They have often objectified the "other" in a way that is demeaning and placed them along side exhibits of animals and ancient fossils creating an association that can be quite problematic. While this does not seem to be the case in the Museum of Natural History, I believe it is an issue and that is important to note when discussing this genre of museums. Human relationships with the natural environment are an important part of our natural history, but this story has created real issues for cultural representation. Treating human cultures as specimens has perpetuated a sense of otherness by associating "savages" and pre-historic man with cultural groups that still exist today.

But this inherent conflict has also allowed natural history museums to move to the forefront of discussions regarding cultural representation. As shown through the example of the Museum of Natural History, legislation has simply forced many natural history museums into relationships with indigenous groups. But while history museums have had to learn to include these groups in their

stories, natural history museums face the opposite dilemma. Some feel that cultural representation should be taken out of natural history museums all together: “By continuing to display Native American cultures in a natural history context of a former national agenda, and under a discredited social evolutionary paradigm, we do great injustice to Native peoples”(Fitzhugh, 1997, p.236). K. Hudson feels that we should do away with the concept of natural history museums and create climate and region museums. He believes that the different context would more accurately describe the intent of the institutions (1991, p.462). Finally, some believe that the setting of the museum dictates the need for different kinds of cultural displays. In “Ali’i and Maka’ainana” The author notes that when presenting Hawaiian objects, different displays are necessary for different settings. In Hawai’i, the museum is for local people and a few tourists, and there is a need to create a space that encourages local identity building. In the U.S. the museum serves a melting pot of people trying to understand one another. In Europe, Hawaii is still a far away and exotic place, and Europeans desire basic cultural information about it (Kaeppler, 1992, p.474).

Many ethnographic museums have plenty of objects, especially if they have a general focus. Much has been written about the “ethnographic object.” This is essentially any artifact that can help document the thoughts, practices, skills, beliefs, or personalities of a culture. Such objects have been at the center of the debate regarding cultural representation in the natural history museum. Unfortunately, despite what many would like to believe, the objects cannot speak for themselves: “If ethnology has something to tell us, the ethnographic object remains, for its part, all too frequently silent”(Grognet, 2001, p.54).

Many objects are taken out of context in the museum setting, so much of the story regarding the culture is lost. One author puts it quite well: “Though once multiple, in becoming ethnographic many objects become singular, and the more singular they become, the more readily are they

reclassified and exhibited as art” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1991, p391). As art objects, ethnographic pieces become valued for new reasons, not for their value in describing a culture.

The issue of context versus object will be discussed later, but it is important to note two things. First, the placement of the object can simply redefine it. Second, as natural history museums seek to explain the cultures of the world, context becomes even more important. But even with these two points in mind, the natural history museum finds itself at a crossroads regarding its relevance in representing cultures:

...[M]y major criticism of ethnographical museums: that by their overconcentration on ‘traditional cultures,’ they encourage a patronizing and escapist attitude toward the people involved. What matters to Africans, South Americans, Eskimos, and everyone else struggling to exist in the modern world is to find ways of adapting to new technologies and of protecting themselves against constant attempts to exploit them. They do not enjoy being poor, however attractive certain aspects of that poverty may appear to tourists from richer parts of the world, and the main challenge facing ethnographical museums today is to discover ways of exporting the visual evidence of their struggle in a form that makes sense abroad. (Hudson, 1991, p.464)

This statement reflects well what I believe natural history museums will become in the future: cultural interpretive centers. And, most likely, they will have new names.

*Art museums.*⁴

Since my initial question arose due to an experience at an art museum with the Dogon ladder, I was most interested in what I would learn in Museology. Staff of the University of Oregon Museum of Art were the primary teachers of the class. The goal of this class was exactly the same

as that of the Anthropology Museum, but the Museum of Art was our learning tool. The Museum of Art has a collection of 12,000 objects and its specialty is Asian art.

An art museum serves a different purpose, in some respects, than history or natural history museums. While the latter two can be quite effective educational institutions with relatively few objects, the art museum still has the obligation to highlight the objects that it holds and to build education and interpretation around them. It was clear through the course that the museum is trying to introduce more interpretation through a Discovery Gallery included in its major renovation plan, but this space is separated from the objects and is concerned almost entirely with *how* art is made.

The concept of cross-cultural interpretation first came up during a lecture by the museum's education staff. During a discussion about an exhibit covering a controversial time period in China, I asked the staff how they approach sensitive subject matter such as this. The discussion eventually led to the way they display cultures that are not represented by staff members. I was assured that the museum tries to include international students to review all materials associated with an exhibit. This would allow for accuracy and sensitivity when displaying cultural objects.

But the art museum is not as concerned with contextual exhibits as are the other two examples. It is focused on the display of what one staff member referred to as "museum quality" pieces. When questioned as to what this meant, he stated that they were essentially pieces that were in good condition and that held a certain artistic value. This term worried me.

To make this point even more clear, staff explained that they had deaccessioned their "ethnographic" collections and had given them to the Museum of Natural History. On the first round of inquiry regarding this, I was told that these were objects that were utilitarian rather than

⁴ The following information was gathered in the University of Oregon's course entitled "Museology." The course was taken from January to April 2003 and was taught by the staff of the University of Oregon Museum of Art.

artistic in nature. The staff member and I both realized that the museum does, in fact, have items that are not purely decorative. They have a large collection of Asian objects that include clothing, weaponry, and other ceremonial pieces. In order to clarify this issue, he stated that the museum simply wanted to return to its Asian focus and the “ethnographic” collection given to the Museum of Natural History consisted of items such as Oceania, New World Pottery, and Central American works.

In the course of this discussion, though, several other terms were used that made me wonder about how sensitive the museum was to issues of cultural representation. The same staff member used the word “primitive” to refer to African pieces. This is a term that I was taught as an undergraduate art history student was extremely loaded. It was to be used only to refer to works by the Cubists that were inspired by African art. In another instance, the “ethnographic” collections were said to be comprised of those objects that have a “tribal” provenance.

Despite the loaded terminology used by this one staff member, the museum was conscious of the fact that sensitive cultural representation is an important issue even though they are still concerned with object-centered displays and education. The art museum, so dependent on objects to accomplish its mission, is still struggling with the concept of context. This is due, in part, to the curious fact that so many utilitarian cultural objects have made their way into art museums. This is no doubt related to the fact that museums are often built upon private collections. In an art museum setting, missions are often concerned with the presentation of “art.” The issue of art versus artifact is perpetuated by this conflict. Suddenly spoons, clothing and, yes, even ladders are appropriated as aesthetic objects in order to serve the mission of the museum. The recognition of these objects by the art history field has helped to complicate the matter even more in terms of interpretation and

curation. It was believed that, “The incorporation of non-Western objects into the disciplinary fold of art history that began around the middle of the twentieth century was a liberal gesture of inclusion typical of its era”(Phillips & Steiner, 1999, p.6).

The conflict is one that art museums have tried to accept and adapt to as gracefully as possible. It is a conflict that is difficult to ignore: ”Despite the increasing diversity incorporated in art museums, curators and exhibition designers still are struggling to invent ways to accommodate alternative perspectives. This is especially true where exhibitions go beyond the individual artist and make some claim to present a culture or group”(Lavine & Karp, 1991, p.4). But the art museum does not have the luxury of losing focus on the object. Several approaches to this problem have been taken that seem to be working.

One is simply trying to include cultural representatives in exhibit planning. This is of utmost importance in the art setting. Second is the approach of organizing the artwork in a way that allows the visitor to glean some sort of context from it. Lavine and Karp suggest:

[W]e need experiments in which the artwork is organized according to the aesthetic categories of the cultures from which it derives. One such experiment, *Essence of Indian Art*, an exhibition mounted at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco in 1984, arranged work according to the various *rasas* (sentiments) of Indian tradition. (1991, p.7)

Another example, taken from the history museum, is the aesthetic organization of period rooms:

Some of the earliest experiments in...environments are still extremely effective. Art museums such as the Metropolitan, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, and many others have long presented walk-in period rooms, sometimes as a framework for collections. Walk-in environments are an expected part of history and natural history exhibitions...(Bedno & Bedno, 1999, p.42)

A concept of which I was originally unaware of has been used frequently by the University of Oregon Museum of Art. This is the use of the Discovery or Activity Gallery/Room. The idea is to display the artwork in a traditional way and then allow the visitor to explore the context of the work in a separate space that does not interfere with the works themselves. A recent example was used in a display of textiles from Madagascar at the National Museum of African Art (NMAfA):

Throughout the exhibition, photographs from NMAfA's Elisofon Archives show how cloth was (and is) used and worn. Wise visitors of all ages will spend time in the interactive Activity Room, which allows people to touch and wear textiles; small samples of coffee, vanilla, cinnamon, and a perfume base called *ylang-ylang*; and hear popular and traditional music—a recreation of the islands culture in the museum environment. (Lusaka, 2002, p.70)

While these rooms can be quite effective, separating the object from the context makes the simple idea of building cultural context around the object quite difficult.

Finally, many art museums are simply acknowledging the conflict and offering qualifications where they can. Orientation panels that describe the intentions and perspectives of the curators and exhibit designers can help the viewer understand why they are seeing what they are seeing. A wise author notes: "When we become aware of the ways in which we view art from our own perspective, it's much more interesting, because suddenly the art object is much more than just something that hangs on the wall. It's something that has real function" (Esner, 2001, p.16). As we begin to accept our dilemmas, there may in fact be solutions that we are unaware of, even in the complex world of the art museum.

Current Literature and Views

I concluded my courses with many unanswered questions. I was happy to hear that all the museums placed some value on community participation in exhibit planning, but at the same time,

this was *only* information given to me upon further questioning. In each instance, there was much discussion about the importance of interpretation, hands-on learning, and context, but I quickly found this to be a much more confusing issue than instructors indicated.

For clarification of these issues, I turned to current and relevant literature in the field today. I reviewed recent editions of widely read journals and influential books on cultural representation. What I found was perplexing: often a series of questions with few real answers, and, in the end, I realized that we need to act. The issue of cultural representation is complicated by a variety of factors that overlap with other issues being debated in the museum world including community participation, effective exhibit design, and the role of the object.

Issues surrounding sensitive cultural representation are serious topics of consideration in even the most general of museum studies texts. Burcaw's *Introduction to Museum Work* clearly states that, "Care must be taken by all museums to avoid bias in exhibits"(1997, p.140). But the book offers few clear ideas on how to approach bias. It simply accepts of a variety of vague approaches.

The issue of sensitive cultural representation has emerged because of the rise of multiculturalism in the late twentieth century:

Multiculturalism has attracted museum attention at both national and international levels, presenting different scenarios among both "developed" and "developing" countries, or in the relationships between former colonial powers and their colonies that are now independent nation states. (Edson, 1997, p.131)

My initial thinking was that museums should find a way to provide a full and total picture of the culture being represented. But there is no feasible way of accomplishing this goal. "Reality is far too rich, too dense to ever be presented whole. To chronicle accurately what all the people of even

one small village did, thought, said and felt on even a single day would be a daunting task”(Weil, 1995, p. 16).

Few authors have outlined specific ways cultures should be represented and interpreted in a museum environment. Richard Kurin has done a great deal of thinking on the topic during his tenure at the Smithsonian. As a result, he created a “Code of Conduct” for museums to follow when dealing with the interpretation and display of culture:

Public cultural representations that purport to be educational or scholarly in nature should, to the extent appropriate, possible, and necessary, have the consent and collaboration of those represented as expressed by the people involved and/or their legitimate and recognized authorities.

Public cultural representations should be based on sound knowledge and research as practiced by the scholarly community. They should be accurate and fair.

Producers of cultural representations should be explicit about the agencies involved in sponsoring, supporting, and implementing those activities. They should be willing to answer questions about their authority and qualifications and about the scope of their involvement. (1997, p.24-25)

Lavine and Karp support much of Kurin’s thinking:

[T]he museum world needs movement in at least three arenas: (1) the strengthening of institutions that give populations a chance to exert control over the way they are presented in museums; (2) the expansion of the expertise of established museums in the presentation of non-Western cultures and minority cultures in the United States; and (3) experiments with exhibition design that will allow museums to offer multiple perspectives or to reveal the tendentiousness of the approach taken. (1999, p.6)

These writers call for collaboration with community members and sound research. They mention the need to be explicit about possible influences on exhibit design and object selection. Other literature on the subject supports these two authors.

But thinking can vary according to institutions and the approach to cultural exhibition can vary accordingly:

Exhibition makers may choose any number of approaches. They may wish to forge a sense of national identity, to celebrate diverse identities, to consolidate a community, or to create a sense of commonality through a shared museum experience. Whatever approach they take, good intentions must be met with careful planning and well-developed exhibition development strategies that seek to include community voices and bear community interests in mind. (Kreamer, 1992, p.380)

Some authors are not as convinced that sensitive cultural representation can be so easily outlined. Alpers, for example (1991, p.31-32) and Arnoldi (1997, p.71) notes that many exhibits say more about the designer or curator than the culture being represented. Hudson believes that this is because there is no way to present a truly objective exhibit: "I doubt if it is ever going to be possible to present a foreign culture without some degree of bias or without considering the political consequences to some extent" (1991, p.463). And even when guidelines are followed, each individual visitor will interpret the most well planned exhibit differently. In an article describing the process of developing the *Peopling of London* exhibit, staff at the London Museum noted that there was little consensus in visitor responses (Merriman, 1997, p. 144).

So what is it that complicates seemingly simple guidelines to effective cultural representation? For one thing, the concept of community participation is much more difficult in practice and implementation than it may seem. Many thoughts on the subject are positive and offer

suggestions. In *Museum Ethics*, Edson states that there are three different ways to involve community participation in museums: informants, partners, and decision makers (1997, pp.151-153). Each model is useful depending on the context. Herle argues that including the community can do more than simply assure sensitive representation in exhibits:

It is becoming common practice for exhibitions, within anthropology, to involve some level of consultation with members of the communities that are being represented. Not simply a matter of political diplomacy, this practice also has the potential of developing and strengthening productive relationships and cross-cultural insights. (2001, p.11)

The current trend of the team approach in exhibit design has proven to ensure more insightful exhibits (Rounds & McIlvaney, 2000, p.7).

Despite so many positive reactions to community involvement, there still remains skepticism in some museums. Even Kurin admits that the Smithsonian does not often consult subject communities: “We give a primacy to the object that we control, but we often forget about the people who have investments in these objects as their originators, users and audience”(1997, p.60). Even when there is a commitment, lack of training in teamwork can create problems. The *Exhibitionist* survey of museums that use the team approach found that, “Several people pointed to a lack of training in team dynamics as a root of conflict....and most people could learn it with some proper training”(Rounds & McIlvaney, 2000, p.6). The issue is which team members will have ultimate control:

Some curators advocate direct involvement in order to prevent ‘inaccurate’ or unbalanced representations, while others warn against interfering so that communities can decide how to represent themselves. The limits of understanding the situation in this way need to be better understood. (Witcomb, 2003, p.101)

The other issue complicating cultural representation in the museum is current thinking regarding exhibit design and the role of the object. A review of the numerous articles and texts I compiled showed an even division among advocates for the primacy of the object, advocates for the primacy of interpretive spaces, even at the expense of the object, and finally, those that call for compromise on the issue. This issue has the possibility of turning the entire concept of museums upside down.

At one extreme are those who wish to maintain the power of the object in museum exhibits. This is associated with a desire to maintain the status quo, although the argument exists on many more levels. The first is the simple realization that, even the museums with object driven exhibits are still able to display only a fraction of their holdings. One Smithsonian staff member notes:

This stark elimination of the capacity of the museum to present the unique cultures of the Americas, using the great collections at our disposal, is a grievous loss not only to our visitors, both national and foreign, but to the Native peoples whose ancestral cultures can be displayed only at the few institutions having resources such as ours. (Fitzhugh, 1997, p238)

The inability to display all of the objects in museum collections affects most institutions. But there are also those that advocate for the object simply because of the problematic nature of interpretive spaces:

[T]he attempt to recreate a setting may give a confusing impression of being there without really being there...Furthermore, [the contextual] approach tends to present large numbers of objects created specially for the exhibition, interspersing such items created for purely decorative or recontextualizing purposes with 'authentic' artefacts created for reasons quite remote from museum display. Indeed, it will be noted that this museographical trend is

today frequently equated by the scientific community with the ‘disneylandization’ of museums. (Grognet, 2001, p.53)

Finally, some advocate for the object because they do not wish to alienate their audiences. Blockbuster shows that focus on objects have made money for museums for years, and some wonder why we should risk such a significant revenue builder for museums. This is a valid concern in today’s economic climate.

Science centers have long had to use created environments in order to relay information.

The success of these centers as well as children’s museums has caused professionals in other museum settings to rethink the role of the object. The assumed need for interactive elements has helped to perpetuate this thinking: “...[I]t is increasingly obvious that a considerable percentage of visitors will have a much more profound museum experience if offered hands-on activities, they have become part of almost every type of museum exhibit”(Bedno & Bedno, 1999, p.41). Gurian even argues for replacing the object with such experiences: “Objects did not provide the definitional bedrock [of museums] in the past, although museum staffs thought they did. I will show that museum may not need them any longer to justify their work”(1999, p.165). Even Stephen Weil implies that the object has lost its importance in the museum setting: “In a museum, a collection, as distinguished from beauty, can never be its own excuse for being”(2003, p.29).

Many of us are beginning to call for an approach that includes both interpretive elements as well as the object. Kathleen McLean’s exhibit design book was my first exposure to a text related to interpretive exhibits. Perhaps she feels responsible for some of the misinterpretations of works such as hers and responded to the overuse of interpretive elements in museum exhibits:

Many people, when recalling childhood museum memories, describe strange things in jars, sculptures larger than life, and chicken eggs hatching every few minutes. These unusual and

amazing things have the powerful capacity to surprise, fascinate and inspire people- something that may be overlooked in the rush to prove the educational and marketing values of exhibitions (values that can translate into funding). Some would argue that in shifting our emphasis from a temple. . .to forum. . .,we have lost the essential qualities that make museums unique. (1999, p.104)

Beyond the sentimentality associated with objects in museums, there are also some philosophical and intellectual bases for a mixed display. Burcaw notes that there is a need for a “combined approach” to exhibit design so as to avoid the pitfalls of either extreme, that is, all objects or all interpretation (1997, p.134). While this approach can be complicated, Kurin urges us to find effective ways to implement it in order to clarify meaning-making in our institutions: “...[O]ur failure to develop fully the methods of inquiry to deal with this complexity-the subjective, and intersubjective or social, world of meaning-does not mean we should write off the phenomena of meaning making or consign it to some epiphenomenal status”(1997, p.59).

The complexities of cultural representation are exacerbated by current debates regarding community involvement and the role of the object in exhibit design. While we are thinking hard about these issues, there are many more questions to be answered. They are questions we cannot ignore if we ever want to more fully understand appropriate cultural representation.

Conclusion

Current literature suggests that museum professionals are, in fact, very seriously considering issues related to cultural representation in our institutions. Unfortunately, there is very little consensus about context and the role of the object. Despite all of this information, why was it a second thought for my professors in the museum class setting? My conclusion is this: The task of

finding sensitive approaches to the display and interpretation of cultural objects is daunting, to say the least, and highly complex. It has the potential of turning our entire institutional structure and authority into question. It is a subject that will require continuous dialogue, experimentation, and questioning. Perhaps it was just too difficult to broach in the classroom.

Recommendations

The situation is not as bleak as it may seem. We have begun to find approaches to this issue that work in a variety of settings. Below are some things we can do when planning cultural exhibits:

Involve the community being represented.

While this is a debated issue we must include the presented community in the decision making as exhibits are planned. But we should not turn things over to them. We do not need to be “in charge,” but we can be wonderful facilitators among the needs of the museum, the object, the community, and the audience. Museum professionals need training in working in groups of this kind so that the community participants understand their role. Turning over an exhibit plan for comments from community members does not always work as planned. This is illustrated by one museum’s experience in trying to include Torres Straight Islanders in an exhibit of their works. When sixty community consultants were given the exhibit plan, there were few changes or recommendations: “There were no specific objects or recommended additions to the exhibition brief, which may reflect the careful research that went into its preparation or simply disinterest and unfamiliarity with museum practice”(Herle, 2001, p.12). We must embrace our roles as facilitators and invite community representatives into our teams as equals, respecting their backgrounds and encouraging their ideas.

Allow visitors to speak their minds.

Encourage comments from visitors. Corkboards for public comments have been quite popular in many exhibits. They allow us to gauge exhibit effectiveness and allow visitors to engage in important conversations about a variety of issues.

Approach exhibit design creatively.

Embrace the creative possibilities of interpretive exhibits that do not exclude the object. The biggest, smallest, oldest, most rare, and even the most progressive have been housed in our museums and still draw many visitors. We should not exclude the object, regardless of recent designs that emphasize didactic panels and interpretive elements. There are such things as balanced exhibits. We must learn from them and try to make each one we do better.

Encourage audiences to form an opinion.

Ask questions in displays. Get visitors to think about how they feel and possibly get them to talk about the exhibit with their friends, family, and maybe even strangers. One thing I learned in my museum classes is that conversation can be one of the most powerful learning tools in an exhibit.

Tell them what you are thinking.

State the purpose of the exhibit clearly at the entrance to the space. A statement of intent at the museum entrance can be helpful as well. This reminds the viewer that there is a perspective and reasoning behind what was created. None of us are as objective as we may like to believe, and we owe it to the visitor to be clear about this, especially when dealing with cultural representation in exhibits. Potter explains this process as “appropriating” the visitor:

When I suggest that museums should appropriate their visitors, what I mean to say is that museum exhibitions should state, as explicitly as possible: why they have been opened for

public consumption; and what, specifically, their creators want visitors to do as a result of having visited. (1994, p. 116)

Gurian notes that this also is an effective way to make the visitor feel included in the exhibit: “An alternative exhibition strategy...[that] allows the visitor to feel included involves creating an exhibition in which each object has been personally selected by an identifiable source, who self-consciously reveals the decisions surrounding each item”(1991, p.187). If that is not convincing, consider some thinking from one of the most influential museum minds today, Stephen Weil:

What we need to acknowledge. . .is the humanity of our choices. The Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago recently began to display, right alongside some of its new exhibits, photographs of the staff members who were responsible for those exhibits. The message was clear. This exhibit did not just tumble down from out of the sky in some complete and final form. To the contrary, it was and is a human product-with all the limitations that involves-and these are the particular people we entrusted to produce it. (1995, p.16)

By humanizing our exhibits, we make them more accessible to our visitors and give them a face and idea to communicate with and ponder.

The Fate of the Ladder

I return now to the story of the Dogon ladder. Susan Vogel notes that African art has provided a rich case study for examining museum exhibitions:

African art provides a useful and particularly sharp instance of the distortion produced by exhibiting in museums objects made for quite different purposes. African art has not been included in art museums long enough for its presence to be accepted unthinkingly. If the audience knows one thing about African art, it knows these objects were never meant to be

seen in museum buildings. This makes it a fruitful subject for exploring museum presentations, or dislocations-or, as we might most profitably consider it, the recontextualization of objects in museums. (1991, p.192)

My understanding of the ladder's display has been greatly enhanced by an article in *Exhibiting Cultures*, by Peter Marzio, director of the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, Texas, where I saw the ladder displayed as an icon. His explanation of their education and interpretation philosophy has enabled me to view the exhibit in a new light:

In our ongoing programs related to the permanent collection we follow a fairly rigid philosophy. Exhibition labels are kept to a minimal size to encourage visitors to focus on the works of art themselves. We do not believe in installations that try to place art in context by installing large reproductions or long labels that "explain" the art. This approach is balanced by our Education Department, which aggressively provides visitors with tours, pamphlets, catalogues, films, teacher-student packets and other pedagogical tools. This translates into the belief that minority artwork should be able to stand alone-apart from its cultural context, if you will-just the way a panel painting from a Renaissance predella, for example, may hang alone, out of context, in a museum. In our philosophy, the context is supplied in educational materials. (1991, p. 125-126)

While I still believe that more could be said about the ladder in this setting, the lack of context is easier to comprehend now that I know that it was not due to lazy exhibit planning. Marzio's explanation helps me know how to find more information if I so desire and will help me understand future exhibits at the museum.

I also learned through my research that Alpha Oumar Konare, the former president of Mali was the president for the International Council on Museums in the early 1990's (Abungu, 2002,

p30). I wonder what he would think of the Museum of Fine Arts' exhibit of the Dogon ladder. I suspect that he would like to see his country's artifacts displayed in the most noble and accurate manner.

A fair representation would be a display such as the Seattle Art Museum's *Art From Africa: Long Steps Never Broke a Back* presented in early 2002. In my opinion, curator Pam McClusky's carefully curated show is the direction that museum exhibition should be heading. The show included quite a few objects, mostly from West Africa. McClusky was able to maintain the integrity of the objects by creating context through music, audio stories, videos, and, remarkably, no labels (Hackett, 2002). African advisors became guest curators and created case histories for the objects represented. Regarding these case histories, McClusky states she "devised [them] to encourage an American audience to collapse the juju fetish witch doctor in the savage spaces of the mind"(2002, p.14).

McClusky proves that museum professionals need to keep thinking creatively in order to find new ways to present cultures in a sensitive manner. Sufficient context can be provided without losing the object. She proves Gurian's point that, "Good exhibitions are often conceptually simple"(1991, p.181). It is the beauty of this simplicity that should give us hope and courage to continue to face issues of cultural representation head on. It is our responsibility as public institutions to engage the public in these debates and encourage dialogue regarding outside cultures. In today's world, it is one of the museum's responsibilities to give society the skills to deal with an increasingly global community.

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