COMMENTARY

THE MUSEUM AS METHOD

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ABSTRACT
This speculative comment considers the potential worth of raising questions that appear simple but may be rewardingly complex. It asks whether routine aspects of curatorial work, such as captioning objects and juxtaposing them in displays, may not have more suggestive dimensions than has been recognized previously. It asks what the implications of a conception of "the museum as method" might have for current approaches to public exhibition. [Keywords: museum, curation, exhibition]

The spaces of, and between, museums and anthropology today are full of paradoxes. Museums cannot escape the association of anachronism; they connote colonial dustiness. Yet in the early 21st century they are probably more successful than ever before—they attract more visitors, they loom larger in cultural life, and they are better resourced financially, in general, than they have been at any time in the past. This is true in Britain, notably because of the allocation of a share of national lottery proceeds (through the Heritage Lottery Fund) to museum redevelopment. Virtually every major, and many smaller, institutions have had major extensions or improvements at some time over the last 20 years. Yet in many other countries, too, museums and art institutions have been, in recent decades, the recipients of investment on a grand scale. National cultural and historical museums have received this support, in many cases, because what they now exhibit and affirm is multiculturalism—a civic project that is resonant of an anthropological legacy.

It is a commonplace of the history of anthropology that the academic discipline was once firmly based in the ethnographic museum but moved steadily away from it with the ascendancy of sociological questions from the 1920s onward. Although the 1980s and 1990s saw a revival of debate around art and material culture, mainstream anthropology arguably continues to drift away from the museum as a research resource or site of analysis. The paradox here is that at the same time, the public have come to know anthropology almost exclusively through the museum. Up to and during the 1960s and 1970s, anthropologists such as Margaret Mead enjoyed mass audiences and Lévi-Strauss was required reading across the humanities, but anthropology books today are read mainly by anthropologists (if there are, needless to say, distinguished exceptions). Similarly, in the 1970s and 1980s, ethnographic films were widely broadcast, but that television slot is now firmly occupied by so-called "reality" programming, which is cheaper and more sensational. Hence, anthropology is scarcely either read or watched by a broader public, but the numbers of visitors to specifically anthropological collections and survey museums that include extensive anthropological displays have risen very dramatically. The British Museum, which draws nearly six million people a year, is exceptional, but an institution such as the Pitt Rivers Museum, which, 20 years ago, was more a university facility than a genuinely public museum, can now attract close to 300 thousand people.

The issues surrounding ethnographic collecting, collections, and museums have been much debated, but the current "success" of museums brings new questions into focus. Here I am not concerned with what lies behind the creation and resourcing of Te Papa, the Musée du quai Branly, or the National Museum of Australia, the ascendancy of the British Museum, or the increase in museum-friendly policies on the part of governments and local authorities—though of course there is much to be said about new conceptions of culture and governance, and the growing preoccupation with tourism as a driver for urban regeneration and economic growth. Rather, I am interested in how we (i.e., curators of ethnographic collections) conceive of what we are doing if our institutions are embedded less in academic anthropology and more in a domain of public engagement. Does anthropology remain the discipline that informs anthropological collections—to be, in turn, informed by them? What kinds of knowledge underpin the interpretation of collections? What methods does that interpretation involve, and what knowledge does it generate? And—to move from theory and research to public engagement—how in the early 21st century should anthropological collections be displayed?

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What stories should they tell? What questions should they raise?

These issues are related to but are somewhat different from those that have been conspicuous in the museum studies literature over recent years. This literature has been broadly divided between studies that might be considered technical, which range from documentation through conservation and display to public education, and those that engage a more critical, historical, and theoretical discourse. Scholars who employ critical discourse have tracked (and often lambasted) the project of colonial collecting, diagnosed museums as disciplinary formations (in Michel Foucault's terms), interrogated primitivist representations in display, and otherwise explored the politics of institutions and exhibits.

If the issues that critical discourse scholars identified remain present, it makes a difference now that many of the poachers have turned gatekeepers. Critics, including indigenous activists, have become curators, and the newer generation of curators has been trained by critics. A postcolonial understanding of the ethnographic museum has entered the mindset, not of the whole of the museum profession but of most of those who deal with ethnographic material and contemporary native art. Hence, in many institutions, though certainly not universally, it is anticipated that originating communities are consulted around exhibition or research projects, and they are indeed increasingly full collaborators. If this has become business as usual, then it is surely positive, but it is perhaps also a sign that the issue of representation is no longer the right place to start from.

At one time it was self-evident that a museum anthropologist used anthropology to contextualize and interpret museum collections—that anthropology was the discipline that "went with" the anthropological collection. Yet the activity and method of museum work was and is profoundly different from that of the academic discipline. Broadly, the academic project begins with theories and questions that are brought, through research methods, to the analysis of a particular case. Although, obviously, the museum worker carries conceptual baggage, the practical project tends to start from, and stop with, the object. (Objects are its "stoppages," in Alfred Gell's (1998) sense, who elaborated on the ideas of Marcel Duchamp.) There is something to be gained, I argue, from reflecting on the simplest of practices, such as writing a label, which of course are not simple at all.

If the museum is not only an institution or a collection but also a method—a kind of activity—then that activity has its moments. The moments we might reflect on are those of the discovery, the caption, and the juxtaposition.

It goes without saying that curators choose or select objects for display (or for other purposes such as loan, publication, reproduction on a postcard, or whatever), but these terms imply operations more rational than might be apt. "Discovery" is more ambiguous; it often involves finding things that were not lost, identifying things that were known to others, or disclosing what was hidden or repressed. What needs to be considered is not the "selection" of artifacts and art works, but their discovery, the encounter with arrays of objects, and the destabilization that encounter may give rise to. For example, the search for a "good" or "representative" piece may put at risk one's sense of a genre or place. One may be distracted by another work or by some aspect of the provenance or story of an object that is not good or not typical. This is, in one sense, entirely unremarkable; it reflects the contingency of dealing with things, but, in another sense, it represents a method—powerful because it is unpredictable.

To assert that there might be value in looking for, at, or into things, in a manner only weakly guided by theory, or literally misguided, in the sense that the direction given by theory is abandoned as things are encountered along the way—all this sounds like the affirmation of an antiquarian curiosity, an indiscriminate and eclectic form of knowledge, one surely long superseded by rigorous disciplines and critical theories. But there are two reasons why "happening upon" things might have methodological potency. The first is that a preparedness to encounter things and consider them amounts to a responsiveness to forms of material evidence beneath or at odds with canonical ethnographies, national histories, reifications of local heritage—and subaltern narratives. In other words, "happening upon" brings the question of "what else is there?" to the fore. That question has confronted, and should continue to confront, claims about great art, cultural traditions, historical progress, and celebrated acts of resistance.

Second, the antiquarianism that this discovery licenses is not that of George Eliot's Casaubon but W. G. Sebald (2001). Not the self-aggrandizing accumulation of ancient citations or specimens but a distracted meditation on larger histories of culture, empire, commerce, and military enterprise, marked by madness, violence, and loss, as well as more obscure personal projects, humanitarian missions, and idiosyncratic inquiries. If this is an eclectic antiquarianism, it is one that throws wide open the questions of history—what, out of all that has happened in the past, are we to remember and consider significant? What presence and what bearing do histories and their residues have in our various lives?

If the moment of discovery gives us a good deal to think about, then these thoughts must be carefully and deliberately depleted in the act of captioning. By captioning, I mean not only the literal composition of a line of text that might accompany an image or object, but the business of description and the discursive contextualization of any museum piece. There have been a great many circular arguments about whether ethnographic artifacts should be described and presented as works of art or contextualized anthropologically (as though these were the only, and mutually exclusive, options). I am interested not in this sort of debate but in the point that labeling or captioning, like discovery, involves a particular kind of research that turns on simple questions, such as "what is it?" Is a certain object a decorated barkcloth or a painting? Is a shield a weapon? Is a toy canoe or a diminutive spirit house a model canoe or model house? Is a walking stick an orator's staff or a souvenir? Is a certain carving a spirit figure or a copy of a spirit figure commissioned by an ethnologist? The question is asked, only incidentally to get the answer right, for the particular piece. The method is the use of the object in the exploration of what these categories and distinctions might mean, where they come from, where they mislead, and where they remain useful or unavoidable.

The moment of juxtaposition arises because objects are seldom exhibited on their own. Whatever "it" may be, one has to ask what it goes with, what it may be placed in a series with, or what it may be opposed to. Again, it goes without saying that a chronological ordering of works by a single artist, or an assemblage representing a particular culture, asks objects to speak to different conventions. My interest is not in the burden these classificatory or narrative conventions carry, but in the moment in which other possibilities are present, and the scope for the "simple" question to become a question of itself. Can objects that belonged to the secret, esoteric, ritual life of mature men (please not "of a community") be placed with quotidian tools? Where does difference become incommensurability? When is it wrong, and when might it be right, to put incommensurable things together?

If it has been taken for granted for several generations that the locus of innovation in disciplines such as anthropology has been "theory," there is now scope to think differently and to revalue practices that appeared to be, but were actually never, subtheoretical. This comment has not tried to map out in any rigorous way what an understanding of "the museum as method" might entail. My general point is simply that one can work with contingencies, with the specific qualities and histories of artifacts and works of art, in ways that challenge many everyday or scholarly understandings of what things are and what they represent.

This work has diverse products, including cataloging data made use of mainly by museum insiders. But among the most important are displays and exhibitions that make wider statements for diverse public audiences. In this context the question of how, today, ethnographic collections are to be shown and interpreted is, in practice, answered. In the United Kingdom the most general response employs the "world cultures" rubric. Material from diverse parts of the world presents diverse cultures side by side, not least in order to represent and affirm the cultural heritages of immigrant, ethnic minority communities. At some level, there is no problem with this; it is broadly desirable and, to some extent anyway, unavoidable—even a lightly contextualized array of material from around the world must, in effect, present and offer for comparison a set of "world cultures."

If, however, this is the primary paradigm, it may sell a collection short and fail to capitalize on its most fertile associations and their salience to cultural and historical debate today. Anthropological collections are always also historical collections; they are the products of, the evidence for, and maybe even the

Figure 1. Mark Adams, *Gweagal Spears, Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge University, England*. 2002. C type print from 10×8 inch C41 negative. Courtesy of the artist.

memorials to entangled histories. In the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA) in Cambridge, important collections were made by explorers such as James Cook and George Vancouver, by the missionaries who followed them and sought actively to transform local ways of life, and by colonial administrators and travelers who, in some cases, saw themselves as part-time anthropologists (Figure 1). For the most part, 20th century additions to the collections were made by Cambridge fieldworkers. All of this material speaks to the history of empire, travel, and exploration, to contacts that inaugurated colonial histories in Australia and New Zealand, to subsequent, enduringly contentious violence in, for example, Benin.

The collections bear witness, as well, to the formation of disciplines such as archaeology and anthropology, and to the emergence of influential ideas and arguments (such as those of A. R. Radcliffe-Brown in central Australia, Gregory Bateson in the Sepik, Meyer Fortes in Ghana, and so forth), albeit through object transactions and fieldwork images often forgotten or suppressed in formal publications and at the level of theory (Figure 2). Ethnographic collections may, as it were, inadvertently enable audiences to reinstate the "co-evalness" that, Johannes Fabian (1983) has taught us, anthropological discourse chronically denied.

In the British context, anthropological collections speak not only of and to "cultures" in various remote parts of the world, and to the "cultures" of, for example, west African and south Asian immigrants, they also evoke engagements between the dominant (and itself heterogeneous) British population and the rest of the world over the last few hundred years. MAA in Cambridge is, as much as anything else, a museum of the formation of modern Britain, from a vantage point that may appear oblique for those with a more traditional understanding of "English" history, yet one that must also be considered fundamental, given the profoundly global character of British economy and society from the 17th century onwards. Cook's Botany Bay spears belong not only in a display dedicated to Aboriginal life but with contemporaneous artifacts such as Gainsborough's *Blue Boy* and Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*—all three reflect aspects of a wealthy, experimental, dynamic, and dangerous imperial society.

All good exhibitions should make material accessible at multiple levels, and it would be neither possible nor desirable to make the history of globalization the sole or the predominant interpretive

Figure 2. Five young Tallensi women, photograph by Sonia Fortes, Upper East Region, Ghana, January 1937. MAA N.102347.MF.

frame for anthropological displays at MAA or elsewhere. But it is worth considering how the histories of particular objects and of particular collections, and those of the institution as a whole could become lenses through which to view much larger questions of cross-cultural and colonial history. This would mean raising issues that are certainly difficult, from the point of view of the institution. Some members of the public assume that the material they encounter in ethnographic museums is essentially imperial loot. Although this is generally false, certain collections do include material seized in the aftermath of conflict, and the difficult histories of those collections, and the legacies of those histories, need to be acknowledged and explained.

Yet, historically evocative displays would be provocative in other senses too. They would reveal empire—not just as dominance, not just as a one-way street, not as a set of wrongs that should or simply can be apologized for now. Objects such as gifts to missionaries, and novel, post-Christian forms such as Niue *hiapo* (barkcloth) or Cook Islands and Tahitian *tivaivai* (a Polynesian art form) demonstrate the complex creativity engendered by these global exchanges that have changed what was "the West" as well as many other societies throughout the world. It is widely appreciated that museums work when they offer their audiences problems rather than solutions. It might be added that they work best when they allow their audiences to discover things, to be drawn into their unexpected, perhaps disturbing stories. Curiosity has a fraught history but also an interesting future.

Acknowledgments

Since this is a comment, not a scholarly article, extensive citations do not seem appropriate. I have made a few references to those authors that I explicitly cite, though I am, needless to say, very much aware of, and have been inspired by, a stimulating literature to which many colleagues have contributed. I am also grateful to Ruth Phillips, the editors of this journal, and to the referees for comments and encouragement.

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