

Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture

First published 2000 by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

© 2000 Eilean Hooper-Greenhill

Typeset in Sabon by Keystroke, Jacaranda Lodge, Wolverhampton
Printed and bound in Great Britain by TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or
reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic,
mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented,
including photocopying and recording, or in any
information storage or retrieval system, without permission
in writing from the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data
Hooper-Greenhill, Eilean, 1945–

Museums and the interpretation of visual culture / Eilean Hooper-Greenhill.
p. cm. — (Museum meanings ; 4)

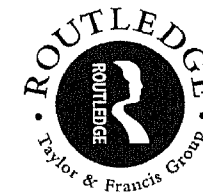
Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Museums—Philosophy. 2. Museums—Educational aspects. 3. Museum exhibits.
4. Visual communication. 5. Visual learning. 6. Visual perception. 7. Communication
and culture. I. Title. II. Series.

AM7 .H655 2000
069'.01—dc21
00-032182

ISBN 0-415-08632-9 (hbk)
ISBN 0-415-08633-7 (pbk)

Eilean Hooper-Greenhill



London and New York

Exhibitions and interpretation

Museum pedagogy and cultural change

Reformulating museum pedagogy

The discussion of the interpretation of visual culture in museums has up till now concentrated on objects and their meanings, which have been discussed through the themes of visual narrative, cultural difference, identity, and interpretive processes. One further strand remains to be brought out – the theme of museum pedagogy.

The interpretation of visual culture in museums may be considered from two points of view: that of the curator, or the museum, and that of the visitor. Curators display objects in groups along with associated images and texts, and thereby produce interpretations for visitors; meanwhile visitors deploy their own interpretive strategies and repertoires to make sense of the objects, the displays and the experience of the museum as a whole.

Museum pedagogy is structured through the narratives produced through the displays, and also through the style in which these narratives are presented. Many museums use methods other than those of display as part of their educational provision; these might, for example, include dramatic events and workshops for children and families. Frequently these methods are very creative and successful; however, for most visitors most of the time, it is the exhibitions and displays that make up the educational experience of the museum, and it is this aspect that is the focus in this chapter.

The curatorial meanings of objects in museums are produced through complex and multi-layered museological processes where museum objectives, collecting policies, classification methods, display styles, artefactual groupings and textual frameworks come together in articulation. The knowledge produced through displays has the character of inevitability, but is the result of complex decision-making processes. The meanings made by museum visitors from the visual cultures of display are a product of both individual and social interpretive processes and are complex and unpredictable.

Objects in museums are subject to curatorial procedures of registration, documentation, and classification which have, in the main, resulted in their allocation to a fixed physical and conceptual position within the collections, which in turn has

tended to generate a fixed meaning. This single fixed meaning, almost always relating to an academic discipline (art history, or archaeology for example), has seemed the correct and only way in which the object should be interpreted. Recently, however, the contingent character of meaning has begun to be admitted, and new ways of thinking about how objects could be grouped, and how they might be spoken about, are emerging.

What counts as knowledge in the museum is being reconsidered, as the uses of objects are reviewed and reassessed. The ways that displays might be presented have also changed in recent years. Both the content and the style of museum pedagogy are changing, although the change in narrative content is of a lesser degree. Both these matters entail the renegotiation of the relationships between museums and their audiences.

This chapter reviews changes in museum pedagogy from a perspective based on communication and educational theory. The review is necessarily broad and in outline only. It offers a way of understanding and accounting for the major shifts in the public face of museums that occurred in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Two paradigmatic pedagogic formations are presented; pedagogy as transmission and pedagogy as culture. I locate these pedagogic formations in relation to two metaphors – the modernist museum and the post-museum.

Both of these tropes were introduced in Chapter 1. They serve as complex and multi-faceted organisational metaphors that enable the discussion of ideas about the roles played by museums in the construction of histories and cultures. In this chapter it is suggested that the pedagogic approach of the modernist museum was (and is) based on an understanding of communication as transmission; while the pedagogic approaches being developed by the post-museum can be analysed by understanding communication as an integral part of culture as a whole.

The modernist museum, which emerged during the nineteenth century and reached its apogee by the beginning of the twentieth, understood its visitors as deficient. They were those who were in search of something they did not have, who lacked information, who were in need of instruction, and who were intended to act as receivers of knowledge, empty vessels to be filled. These visitors were represented as an undifferentiated mass, as ‘the general public’. Today, museum audiences are being reconceptualised. The mass is being broken down and differentiated, but new ways of thinking about visitors are themselves not yet sufficiently sophisticated. Marketing approaches address audiences as ‘visitors’ or ‘non-visitors’, demographic target groups which are subject to ‘niche marketing’. Although these approaches can lead to a review of the ‘products’ of the museum in relation to the needs of each target group, this does not go far enough. An approach based on the concept of critical pedagogy, which embraces the issues of narrative, difference, identity and voice, demands a recognition both of the processes of interpretation actively used by multi-cultural audiences and of the political implications of the use of the visual culture of the museum.

Pedagogy in the modernist museum

The nineteenth-century public museum can be seen as one of the emblematic institutions of the modern period. Based on a model that was European in origin, but which would be exported world-wide, the modernist museum was tasked with the production and dissemination of authoritative knowledge. Master narratives were constructed through a range of collection-related disciplines (art, natural history, geology, archaeology, ethnography). Museums could offer opportunities for self-education and self-elevation at a time when schooling was not available for all and when there were few other opportunities for self-improvement. Although the idea of the museum as an educational institution had emerged some time before, the Victoria and Albert Museum was the first national collection in England to be explicitly founded as an agent of instruction. As the First Report of the Department of Practical Art stated: 'a Museum presents probably the only effectual means of educating the adult'.¹

Museum pedagogy was based on the idea of the possibility of the realisation through objects of universal laws that could be taught in the same way at all times and in all places. The concept of universal law was pervasive in Victorian culture: politics, morals, history, economics, art, and education, were all governed, it was thought, by universal laws or principles true for all times and places. In 1855, in a speech given at Birmingham Town Hall, Prince Albert declared that: 'The Fine Arts . . . rest on the application of the laws of form and colour, and what may be called the science of the beautiful.'² Henry Cole, in the consideration of the educational role of the museum at South Kensington, also spoke about the application of laws to regulate beauty.³ The visual culture of nineteenth-century museums illustrated those universal laws in the arts and the sciences that could be construed from arrangements of material things.

The modernist museum was intended to be encyclopaedic, to draw together a complete collection, to act as a universal archive. It was structured through deep-rooted binary divisions. Its spaces were divided between those that were private and those that were public. The private spaces were the spaces for knowledge production, irrevocably separated from the public spaces for knowledge consumption. The private spaces were spaces where specialist knowledge was deployed, where scholarly research was carried out, and where products such as exhibitions and catalogues were fashioned. The bodies occupying these spaces were professionalised, specialised and differentiated, each with its own necessary mental freight which justified its presence. The public spaces, on the other hand, were available, in theory at least, to the mass of the general public; undifferentiated bodies that assembled to partake of the specialist information laid out for them in the galleries. The galleries were spaces of consumption, of viewing and of learning. They were also spaces of controlled behaviour, guarded and surveyed by warders who would eject those who behaved in an unruly fashion.

Although critical histories of museums are still in their infancy, and histories of the pedagogic approaches developed by museums are even rarer, the historical work to date suggests that by the end of the nineteenth century specific pedagogic

approaches had been developed. These pedagogic approaches operated through concepts and technologies that would remain in place until the last quarter of the twentieth century, and which would become curatorial orthodoxies, some of which remain current today. For example, many of the practices introduced into the nineteenth-century art museum are still seen as the foundation of curatorial practice.⁴

Modernist museum pedagogy was based on an understanding of objects as sites for the construction of knowledge and meaning; a view of knowledge as unified, objective, and transferable; a didactic approach of expert-to-novice transmission; and the conceptualisation of the museum and its audience as separate spheres, with, in addition, the museum as a place for learning that was held apart from the popular culture of the everyday. Although the application of these ideas varied according to specific disciplines, the basic philosophy remained constant across them. These approaches to knowledge and to the relationships between teacher and learner, which had developed by the end of the nineteenth century, were to remain largely in place until very recent years. In some places they still persist.

During the modern period, objects were viewed as sources of knowledge in themselves,⁵ which through their 'proper arrangements'⁶ would reveal the basic structures of natural history, history, science or art. If laid out in the correct way, both the meanings of the individual objects and a substantive body of information about particular disciplines would be explicit in the relationships between the objects. Knowledge was imagined as a classificatory table, on which all living things could find their correct position.⁷ The experience of the world could be analysed in terms of order, identity, difference and measurement.⁸ Analysis, comparison, enumeration, and classification were essential strategies for knowing. Finite schemes of knowledge were thought to be possible. These ideas were feasible because of a basic assumption that words and things had a single unique correspondence, and that the naming of things located them, once and for all, on the table of differences and similarities.⁹

The collection, observation, description and classification of artefacts and specimens was of major importance as this resulted in the discovery of their interrelationships, and led to knowledge about specific disciplinary or subject areas. Within the fields of botany and geology, for example, close and careful work with specimens was necessary in order to grasp the basic structures of the natural world.

The discourses of objectivity that formed the mode of enquiry for natural history were used in the description and classification of other classes of objects. In the work of authenticating the portraits at the National Portrait Gallery in London, for example, George Scharf used comparative and evidence-based methods that would have seemed familiar to geologists. The evolutionary story of national progress told through displayed portraits would also have resonated with scientists.¹⁰

The empirical approaches developed for the study of natural specimens were re-deployed for the study of people as part of the development of the social sciences

of history, archaeology and anthropology that took place during the second half of the nineteenth century; archaeology, for example, adapted geology's stratigraphical methods.¹¹ In museums, these links to natural history were made explicit in the display of objects. General Pitt-Rivers in the 1850s, for example, treated artefacts as specimens in displaying boomerangs to emphasise their morphologies and the connections of form.¹² Throughout the nineteenth century, different types of objects, (including those people who were seen as objects), were subject to similar methods of systematic categorisation through objective classification. Museums, as sites for the collection and care of these objects, were understood as perfect sites for the development of knowledge. Natural history museums, for example, stood at the cutting edge of scientific understanding throughout the nineteenth century.¹³

Classification and discourses of objectivity were also used as the basis of museum displays. The guiding principle of the visual layout of displays was accuracy and clarity in the exposition of the structure of the subject concerned. At the National Gallery, London, it was thought desirable as early as 1836 that the collections should be ordered historically, geographically and biographically. Information should be given to the public by:

fixing its name over every separate school, and, under every picture, the name, with the time of the birth and death, of the painter; the name also of the master, or the most celebrated pupil, of the artist, might in certain cases be added. This ready (though limited) information is important to those whose time is much absorbed by mental or bodily labour.¹⁴

The Royal Picture Gallery in Berlin and the Munich Pinakothek acted as exemplars. At the Gallery in Munich the paintings were placed so that each school of painting could be observed in its own discrete space without the distraction of others.¹⁵ In art museums, the works of art presented the histories of art.¹⁶

In the natural history museum, classification automatically provided the principles of display layout.¹⁷ In the galleries of the British Museum (Natural History) in the 1880s, for example, the specimens displayed in the Bird Galleries demonstrated their places on the classificatory epistemological table through the display design.¹⁸ During the same period, the University Museum of Turin was organised as a 'universal Natural History . . . seen at a glance . . . as one great and well accomplished open book'.¹⁹ Almost all provincial museums in Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century adopted the same approach to the display of geological specimens, which was systematic, geographical or temporal; the arrangements of the public displays were based on the same principles.²⁰

Structures of some subjects changed over the period, and where possible museums presented to their publics the most up-to-date research through their exhibitions.²¹ However, no attention was paid to the needs of individual visitors, who were in effect treated as a mass, and were all expected to learn in the same way. It was assumed that visitors would learn if the expository style of the display was such that the objects themselves were clearly visible and if the statements made by the relationships between the objects were sufficiently well articulated. The

relationships between the items in the collections, rather than the objects themselves, were the priority. A walk through the museum galleries meant a walk through the structures of specific disciplines. At the National Portrait Gallery a single linear path was laid out based on chronology;²² other museums used other organising principles to set out clear spatial directions through the museum.²³ It was assumed that, having carried out the walk, visitors would have absorbed the relationships between the objects, carefully crafted in the display itself, and would be able to understand their significance.

In order to achieve the required level of articulation of these relationships which were both concrete and abstract at the same time, and also to offer the necessary clarity of vision, the galleries themselves needed to conform to certain principles. They needed to be well lit, with the objects well positioned and spaced, with visitors able to use a measured walk, and careful and controlled looking. In the National Gallery in London, for example, the pictures were made visually accessible by being placed in a good light. In Munich, the pictures were separated from the sculptures because they responded so differently to the play of light, and the paintings were hung at specific ideal heights, with the ideal distance from which they should be viewed specified.²⁴

Vision is the master sense of the modern era.²⁵ Modernity is inseparable from the making of the observer, who is described by Crary as one who sees within a set of rules and conventions.²⁶ In the museum it was these rules and conventions that constituted museum pedagogy. The ideal gaze of the visitor had certain characteristics in common with the gaze of the curator who had generated the display. It was calm and measured, as neutral as possible. It engaged the rational mind directly, but, in the same way as Descartes' disembodied eye²⁷ was not susceptible to emotion or to passion. Knowledge which could be spoken and thereby used in evaluation and judgement was preferred over tacit, unexpressed, emotive knowledge.²⁸ At the same time, other characteristics positioned the museum visitor as quite distinct from the curator. The relationship was one of expert to novice, or of teacher to taught; displays took the form of the lecture without the lecturer.²⁹

Visitors were imagined as an abstract mass, unitary and ostensibly classless.³⁰ When numbers were very low and museum spaces were limited, as in the first few years of the National Portrait Gallery, London, it was possible to observe and comment on specific groups of visitors, but as numbers grew the individuals were reduced to ciphers, faceless numbers in the monthly museum census.³¹

The experience of a visitor to the collections was that of a quantified observation of a rationalised, visual order. Vision is the most distancing of the senses, and in museums this meant that visitors kept their distance from the displays. In art galleries paintings were hung at what was considered an optimum height and distance for viewing; in museums, the glass case performed the function of defining the appropriate viewing conditions and distance. The display cases acted as ways of dividing up both the objects and the statements made by the grouped objects – the cases acted as punctuation marks to better articulate the message of the museum.³² The museum halls were arranged with carefully spaced and

ordered identical display cases, each with its own group of objects systematically placed in their proper places, thus (it was thought) enabling the absorption of a large quantity of material. The spatial arrangements were straightforward and easy to see and comprehend and the relationship of the visitor to the knowledge offered was as far as possible direct and unmediated.

The modernist museum provides a perfect example of what Basil Bernstein has called the 'collection code'.³³ In analysing the relationships of power and control in the school curriculum, Bernstein sets out the concepts of 'classification' (the construction and maintenance of boundaries between curriculum contents), and 'frame' (the degree of control teacher and pupil possess over the selection, organisation, pacing and timing of the knowledge transmitted and received). These oddly museological metaphors enable the analysis of the grammar of the educational system, the rules of joining together and setting apart of categories of people and knowledge. In the modernist museum clear-cut, strong boundaries are observed between different classes of contents, which are so well insulated from each other that different institutions are required to house objects classified as art, history, anthropology or natural history. It is inconceivable that Impressionist paintings should be collected as part of the natural history museum, although those paintings that depict specimens would be deemed appropriate. The frame of the material to be transmitted was cold, clear and analytical; limited texts accompanied the objects, but other media were cut away to present a cool and rational display. Colour, texture, and sound were not included – the sensory regime of the museum was restricted. What was regarded as appropriate for pedagogic content was tightly controlled by curatorial and academic professionalism, the expectations of governing bodies, and the broader social and cultural networks of male clubs, groups and societies.

During the nineteenth century, museum philosophies were part of the general move towards positivism which involved cutting away all that could not be observed and measured, seen and validated. Rationality was defined as science and knowledge was understood as objective and therefore external to the knower. An epistemological realism resulted in what Jay describes as:

a scientific world view that no longer hermeneutically read the world as a divine text, but rather saw it as situated in a mathematically regular spatio-temporal order filled with natural objects that could only be observed from without by the dispassionate eye of the neutral researcher.³⁴

The idealised space of the modernist museum was positivist, objective, rational, evaluative, distanced, and set aside from the real world. The museum visitor was accorded the status of the neutral observer, walking in an ordered fashion through galleries that were in themselves ordered, well-lit, and laid out for the acquisition of knowledge – the knowledge that could be construed from objects, that, once properly arranged in the neutral space, would speak for themselves.³⁵

In order to achieve this ideal space, museum pedagogy was intended to address the body as well as the mind. The space of the museum was one among a number

that were developed during the nineteenth century to regulate health, cleanliness and good behaviour. In cities the provision of parks and open spaces for athletics, combined with the provision of libraries and museums, was intended to enable the development of healthy minds in healthy bodies. The opening of national museums and galleries has been described as 'the state . . . sanctifying a set of procedures that sought to regulate the urban profusion and guide its medical, moral and political order; in effect to make that order, and the sphere of culture, one'.³⁶ The clean, ordered spaces of the galleries, with their clean, well-disciplined works, and their unambiguous closed pedagogic codes, were intended to encourage similar efforts on the part of the audience to clean, regulate and internally discipline themselves.³⁷

The founding of many museums, like that of the National Gallery, London, offered an opportunity to link culture to citizenship and to the nation itself.³⁸ The pedagogical intentions were generalised, abstract and more to do with creating a sense of taste, a cast of mind, an awareness of culture and a set of values than of teaching specific tightly defined parts of subject matter.

Pedagogy in the modernist museum was controlled and ordered at several levels. The first level was that of the subject matter to be learnt, which was limited to facts and information grasped through cognition. The rational mind was expected to act as a unified and focused organ of learning, limited to the reception of pre-existing information that once absorbed would add incrementally to the store of knowledge already lodged in the visitor's mind. Rationality, on the part of the museum visitor, was non-interpretive; rationality meant the recognition and acceptance of given truths.

The second level was how this information was to be gained, how it could be apprehended or learnt. The controlled body, walking at a measured pace, acted as the support for a perception that in itself acted only as a vehicle to convey sense impressions to the mind. These sense impressions, once correctly decoded by the mind, would facilitate the transfer of the authoritative factual information prepared in advance by the professional curatorial expert.

And the third level was that of the use of this information. Public museums were intended, at least in part, to convert raw humanity to civil society, to create clean and docile bodies.³⁹ The epistemological messages of the museum were envisioned as useful to instil better behaviour, to create model citizens, to enable self-improvement within the rigidly demarcated social structures of the Victorian age. It was not anticipated by museum founders or curators that those who learnt in museums would use the knowledge gained to seize hold of their own futures, to rewrite their own histories, or to step outside of the conventions of the age to rearrange them.

Pedagogy in the modernist museum can be summarised as based on objects which, if properly disposed, spoke for themselves. The visual arrangements on the walls, and the objects grouped in glass cases ready for inspection, carried the messages prepared in advance by the curatorial expert, sanctioned by his peers. These stories had the character of master narratives, of evolutionary progress, or of the

encyclopaedic mapping and classifying of the natural and material world. These authoritative master narratives were transmitted to a generalised public, whom it was assumed would benefit through a structured visual promenade through the museum galleries where their neutral gazes would be deployed in a rational manner. An abstract rhetorical educational intention was one of the primary ideals of the museum.

Pedagogy as transmission

The pedagogic approach of the modernist museum and its implications can be analysed using communication and educational theory. Although generally not linked in practice, communication and education theory are intimately connected in their underpinning assumptions about people and social process. Two paradigmatic ways of thinking about communication can be identified⁴⁰ – communication understood as a process of information transmission and communication seen much more broadly as part of culture. The first of these, an understanding of communication as transmission, offers useful concepts in the consideration of the modernist museum as a communicator.

The transmission approach has been discussed since the 1970s in the museum literature. A debate between Cameron⁴¹ and Knez and Wright⁴² about how to understand communication in museums coincided with the discussion of communication as information-processing in relation to computer technology. Miles⁴³ pointed out some of the problems of approaching communication in this way within museums. The concept itself has recently been reused and critiqued by Bicknell and McManus.⁴⁴

Communication approached as a process of transmission is characteristic of mass communication, communication to a mass of people, to groups larger than crowds who are unknown to each other, and who do not necessarily occupy the same space at the same time. In Britain, mass communication began to be observed as a phenomenon towards the end of the first half of the nineteenth century,⁴⁵ and the museum can be described as one of the first institutions of the mass media.

The transmission view of communication is defined by terms such as ‘imparting’, ‘transmitting’, and ‘sending’. A geographical metaphor is used – that of sending information across space, from one point to another. This is a metaphor of transportation; the sending of signals and messages over a distance for the purposes of control. The model focuses on the technological processes of communication.

American mass communication research, based on this approach to communication, was stimulated primarily by concern over the political influence of the mass press and (later) over the moral and social consequences of film and radio.⁴⁶ More general communication research was concerned with testing efficiency and effectiveness in the fields of education, propaganda, telecommunications, advertising and public relations. This research developed in the United States, a country moving rapidly during the twentieth century from social

and political experiments in colonisation to a leadership position within the Western world.⁴⁷ During the 1950s in the United States a ‘science of communication’ began to be discussed, and in a fertile climate of conceptual model-building, a model for communication as transmission was developed.

The basics of the model are straightforward: a communicator (sender, or transmitter), sends a message through a medium to a receiver. The focus is on the technical act of transferring data from a source to a receiver, with the telephone system as an example. One of the first depictions of the model of communication as transmission was that of Lasswell, who famously once said that any act of communication could be understood as by answering the questions: Who? Says what? In which channel? To whom? With what effect?⁴⁸

Underlying this approach to communication is a particular view of knowledge, and of learning. Knowledge is seen as factual, objective, singular and value-free, and therefore able to be transferred from those who are knowledgeable to those who are not. The ‘transmission’ model of communication understands communication as a linear process of information transfer from an authoritative source to an uninformed receiver. This model of communication is frequently referred to as the ‘hypodermic needle’, ‘bull’s eye’ or ‘magic bullet’ model. The receiver of the message to be communicated is conceptualised as open to the reception of the message, which is received more or less efficiently, and in the same way by all.

This approach to communication is based upon a behaviourist explanation of education.⁴⁹ Behaviourism proposes that learning takes place through a response following a stimulus. According to this simple model of learning, effects are specific reactions to specific stimuli, so that one can both expect and predict a close correspondence between what is learnt and what is taught, or, to put it another way, between media message and audience reaction. The role of the teacher, as a knowledgeable and authoritative expert, is to structure the subject matter to be mastered so that the learners may absorb it.⁵⁰ Sometimes called the banking approach to education,⁵¹ and very powerful in America,⁵² this approach to teaching and learning separates the school from the world outside its gates. The appeal of what has been called the simple model of communication can be related to social interests in effects and effectiveness, and to the ubiquity of the stimulus–response model of learning that was fundamental to educational psychology.⁵³ Much of the work of communication research, both in the museum field and elsewhere, has been concerned with the question of effectiveness.⁵⁴

The transmission model explains rather well the model used by modernist museums in the construction of displays. It was the curator as scholar, expert on the collections and knowledgeable about the relevant discipline, who led the project, chose the objects for display and decided on what to say in the text panels and labels. The audience for the exhibition was rarely defined beyond the catch-all ‘general public’. A generalised mass audience was envisioned.⁵⁵

The transmission model of communication also explains the moral imperative that underlay much of the use of culture during the nineteenth century. The somewhat secular metaphors of transmission hide the link to moral and religious

practices such as philanthropy or evangelism, which were driven by similar conceptions of people, social processes and relationships. This moral component, of purportedly improving patterns of life, of making things 'better' for others by the giving of new information, underlies communication conceived as transmission. It can be found in nineteenth-century missionary work, paternalism, in gender relations, and in forms of education. As discussed in Chapter 2, as museums were established one of their most prominent functions lay in the field of education. Education was understood as a process of imparting information and, through this, values, such as to constitute the subject as an ideal citizen. The National Portrait Gallery in the 1850s and 1860s was a prime example of this.

Many of the values of the modernist museum can be explained by the transmission approach to communication. These include naturalised assumptions of separation from the quotidian, an emphasis on scholarly values which focus on collection research, the ordering of displays and exhibitions according to the structures of an academic discipline, and an abstract impressionistic view of the audiences for these displays and of the use to which the viewing of the displays might be put. These values, which became established during the later years of the nineteenth century, became the basic assumptions from which most museums operated during most of the twentieth. For many museums, these are still the values that inform everyday working methods today.

However, the understanding of the processes of communication as a process of transmission is severely limited. This approach proposes that communication is bounded by technical processes, and ignores the social and cultural aspects of these processes. It does not explain well the extremely complex relationships that structure acts of understanding between people, and it fails to take account of the active character of the interpretive strategies that are used to make meaning.

In the transmission approach, the complex, ambiguous, multidimensional and fluid processes of communication are reduced to a single, one-way, linear cognitive trajectory with the function of transporting a finite piece of information, a 'message'. Individuals within the communication process are characterised as though operating at both ends of a single axis. The selection, definition, and control of the 'message', and therefore of the meaning of the content of the communicative act, lies with the communicator, who is therefore the power-broker in the transaction. The 'receiver of the message' is considered only in so far as a judgement is made in relation to the correct reception of the message. The receiver, from this perspective, is rendered cognitively passive.

Transmission pedagogy is based on universal laws and models that can be imitated or repeated anywhere. The content to be learnt is structured according to the internal logic of the subject matter or discipline with few concessions to any relationship to the experience or knowledge of the learners. Learners are 'empty vessels to be filled', with the 'knowledge' that learners bring with them into the learning situation dismissed as irrelevant. Underlying this approach is, as we have seen, a behaviourist view of learning, with individuals conceived as atomistic. Atomism asserts that people are separate individuals constituted by their own unique states of consciousness, and by their own capacities and needs. It views

the self as a monad, an impermeable integral entity radically different from all others, and, at the extreme, cut off from all others. The atomistic view of the self ignores the degree to which the self is shaped by shared meanings, inflected through experience, has the capacity to change and modify itself through learning, and may objectively consider and develop itself. In other words, people are seen as individuals without curiosity, without capacity to change, and as merely the absorbers of external stimuli.⁵⁶

The transmission approach operates within a functionalist definition of the individual as part of a technologically driven society. Functionalism likened society to a machine, with the constituent parts each carrying out their particular function such that the smooth running of the whole is assured. A normative approach such as this does not encourage critical reflection about existing social institutions, power relations, or specific historical circumstances. Communication research that operated using this model of communication saw itself as 'a practical art in a practical context',⁵⁷ and as such consisted of unreflexive and ahistorical empirical studies.

As a communicator, the modernist museum is subject to the same criticisms that have already been identified in relation to the model itself. In the modernist museum, communication is considered as a technical process: which paintings shall be hung, which objects placed in which cases, in which arrangement, and with which attached texts. The information considered appropriate for inclusion in the labels is shorn of any everyday reference, any anecdotal story, any reference to the viewing process itself. It encodes factual information drawn from the field of study within which the object has been placed, frequently expressed in unfamiliar specialist vocabulary. There is little appreciation of the relevance of displays to visitors, and no investigation into the actual response of visitors to such displays.

The modernist period produced museums that, by the mid-twentieth century, were closed, hermetic and self-referential institutions that took for granted their right to an elite authoritative social position. Their pedagogic role, at least in Britain, was assumed through their being open to the public, and in many instances professional practices lapsed.⁵⁸ Markham, reporting on the state of museums in Britain in 1938, called them 'indescribably drab', and 'one of the most neglected and least understood of all civic services'.⁵⁹ Active provision for visitors was taken less and less seriously as collection and care of collections began to define the work of curators;⁶⁰ methods of display remained constant and became outmoded and irrelevant to many potential visitors.

Since mid-century much has changed, but in many traditionally displayed museum galleries the results of understanding communication as transmission is still evident. Specialist knowledge and a curatorial focus of interest lie behind the displays which lay out the themes and parameters of specific specialist areas of knowledge. The facts may be absorbed by visitors, if they themselves can make connections with the material provided. The language of labels is academic, and uses an aesthetic or scientific register. The collections may be enjoyed if visitors understand their context or appreciate their aesthetic qualities. Whether this is

done or not is unknown, as there is no audience research and therefore no information on the effectiveness of the display.

An example of a contemporary museum label that embodies the modernist approach makes the point. The National Museum of Ireland in Dublin has a nineteenth-century foundation and still produces formal displays of a rather traditional nature. The text below is from a single display-case used to show recent acquisitions (in 1998), with one item in it:

The Altartate Cauldron.

The Altartate Cauldron, found in a bog near Clones, Co. Monaghan during turf cutting in 1993, is made of poplar with yew handles. The find suggests the continuation of certain Later Bronze Age traditions into the Early Iron Age, although its form differs from that of later Bronze Age cauldrons. A band of ornament below the rim, which may be compared closely with that found on certain Iron Age spears, suggests that the cauldron may have been carved during the 2nd Century BC.

The language here suggests that the writer, and by implication the museum itself, has not seriously considered the readers at all. The vocabulary, although not difficult in itself, is that of archaeology. The cauldron is a 'find'; the Bronze Age is the technical expression for a certain specialist approach to periodisation. The level of knowledge assumed is very high. Readers are expected to be able to compare the Later Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age. They are expected to be able to compare cauldrons with other cauldrons, but also with spears of a specific date. It is assumed that the ornament can be analysed from prior collection-based knowledge. The language is not dynamic; rather it is cautious, and uses a rather pedantic academic style ('may have been carved at a certain time'; 'suggests that'). It is formal ('may be compared with'), and oblique ('certain traditions'). The style of address is that of a textbook; this is the teacher giving factual information. But the text does not have the clarity of the address of a good teacher; the tone of the text is confusing; it is uncertain, speculative even, and invites the reader to join in the discussion from the point of view of assumed knowledge and experience. In summary, the text is little more than a curatorial musing. It has little to do with any attempt at communication. This museum has not considered the relationship between the knowledge it has produced and its use by real people. If asked who this text was written for, the writer would almost certainly respond: 'For the general public'.

In the modernist museological approach the communication process is one-way. The processes of viewing, or of decoding the message, are not considered, and still less anticipated are the interpretive procedures that museum visitors might employ. In the concentration on acquiring, documenting and researching collections, and on the complex and lengthy internal processes of display development, the users of the displays are simply forgotten. For the modernist curator, the end-product of the process of display or exhibition development is the exhibition itself. Once one display is completed, the work on another begins. Typically, the developmental process is highly complex,⁶¹ involving a range of specialists such as designers, builders, electricians, painters, lighting experts, insurers, conservators,

catalogue writers and editors – in addition to the curators. Several of these agents may be contracted in from outside the museum, a number of different deadlines will be running concurrently, and the whole process may take several months or years. Timing and funding is generally very tight and it is all too easy to see the whole event as something which has internal relevance, with the visitors as optional extras.

The museum workers involved in the production of displays all have their specific expertise, but few of them are communicators. Designers were not common in museums in Britain until the 1970s, and even when designers joined the production team, their expertise lay more in the aesthetic or technical aspects of design. Design training rarely includes matters to do with interpretive processes of the users of design products. In some museums, museum educators are now a valued part of the exhibition team, but in a great many this is not the case. Exhibition plans that do not specify intended audiences, and that do not include research into the knowledge and interests these audiences have in the exhibition themes, are likely only to attract those people whose level of specialist knowledge almost matches that of the exhibition's curators. The organising principles and the display codes of these exhibitions are likely to prove problematic for visitors who are unfamiliar with the subject matter, or who do not know how to respond to exhibition techniques. Potential visitors exclude themselves where they fear they will feel inadequate.

As a visitor to French art museums put it in Bourdieu and Darbel's classic study:

It's hard for someone who wants to take an interest. You only see paintings and dates. To be able to see the differences between things, you need a guidebook. Otherwise everything looks the same.

I prefer to visit the museum with a guide who explains and helps ordinary mortals understand the obscure points.⁶²

More recent research with first-time art museum visitors supports these findings,⁶³ as does recent research with teenagers in Britain. In a recent study one girl said: 'people stand there admiring it when I haven't a clue what they are looking at'.⁶⁴

In this approach to museum communication, as the transmission model reveals, the curator, as leader of the display development team, is the power-broker. The curator will make decisions about the content of the display, the conceptual level at which verbal statements will be placed, and the perspective from which the material will be approached. Decisions will also be made about the technology to be used to transmit the information (artefact, text, image, sound, film, interactive device) and the design or style of the display (use of colour, texture, space, two- and three-dimensional exhibits). Content, perspective, technology, and stylistics may all be agreed upon with no accompanying discussion about who the display is intended for. Planning exhibitions and writing texts in the absence of an intended and researched viewer and reader at best results in displays that please those who have the same frameworks of intelligibility and strategies of interpretation as the curator.

The adequacy of a transmission approach to communication has been seriously called into question by communication theorists. In communication studies, frequently using television as the field for research, the concept of 'the active audience' has developed.⁶⁵ The transmission model of communication, based on the stimulus/response model of education, assumed the possibility of a universal effect on the targets (receivers) of the message, who were thought to be open to the persuasions of the mass media. Following a range of research studies of these assumed 'effects', mostly in relation to television,⁶⁶ it was gradually realised that people were not merely passive absorbers of the media. The media–audience relationship was found to be complex and multi-faceted, mediated by factors external to the technical process of information transfer.

In those very few museums in Britain which have carried out audience research on a consistent basis, it took until the 1990s to be able to admit that in the development of exhibitions that would communicate effectively the agenda of the audience was important. In attempting to develop a reliable technology for effective exhibitions 'the initial emphasis had been entirely on the subject matter and the efficient transmission of information, and it was only later that we began to understand and respond to the meaning of a museum visit to the visitor'.⁶⁷

The meaning of a museum visit to the visitor is the product of complex processes of interpretation. The transmission view of communication does not adequately accommodate these processes. The second view of communication goes some way to accounting for interpretive processes, and it relates well to some of these issues that have already been discussed in previous chapters. It is to this second conceptualisation of communication as part of culture that we now turn.

Communication as culture

In social and cultural theory, the turn towards acknowledging the significance of the interpretive paradigm and the growing recognition of the generative power of culture and communication⁶⁸ leads to an insistence that representation does not reflect reality, but grants meaning and confers value;⁶⁹ in this way it is constitutive of reality.⁷⁰ The 'cultural turn' signals a sharper analytical focus on matters connected to the making of meaning, the diversity of interpretation, and the power that these have to shape social life.

Contemporary ways of understanding communication focus on the meaning-making activities of individuals and groups. Communication is understood as integral to the production and reproduction of culture. Carey⁷¹ describes this broad approach to communication as a form of secular ritual, as a process of sharing, participation, fellowship and association. Carey's view of communication (and society) is overly harmonious; however, many cultural and communication theorists agree that communication is best understood as a series of processes and symbols whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired and transformed.⁷² The realities experienced by different individuals, groups and communities, are shaped by class, gender and race. Symbolic systems, such as those of art or science,

shape, express and communicate our attitudes and interpretations of our experience. As beliefs and values are represented through cultural symbols (words, maps, models), so realities are constructed.

The emphasis on communication from this perspective is on its symbolic and interpretive potential. Where the concept of communication as transmission⁷³ focused on the most efficient way to transfer ideas across space, frequently in the context of the control of people or distance as part of society seen as a political or economic organisation,⁷⁴ the cultural view of communication addresses the methods by which what counts as 'common sense', 'art', or 'science' at any one time is brought into being. Within this view, communication is a much broader process, one which examines ideas in their historical, social and institutional matrices.⁷⁵ The significance of communication is as an integral part of culture. Culture itself arises from and is embedded within words, images, symbols, ideas and actions that in their articulation result in social effects. Naming, classifying and displaying, the basis on which museums operate, have what Hacking has called 'looping effects';⁷⁶ tacit or explicit choices made by people to adapt or resist cultural classifications that affect their lives and identities.

The view of communication as culture can be linked to some of the ideas of hermeneutics and of constructivism. Hermeneutics, as we saw in Chapter 5, concerns how understanding can be achieved and suggests that interpretation is dialogic, relational. Relational means that words and objects become meaningful within contextual and generative frameworks, but does not mean that such meaning is entirely relative. The attack on theories of meaning characterised by the expression 'anything goes' refuses to acknowledge the extremely important distinction between relational meaning, and relative meaning.

Constructivist learning theory points out that learning is both personal and social; meaning is mediated through interpretive communities. Meanings are in large part controlled by the validation accorded them by the relevant interpretive community. It is the authority of the interpretive community that enables meaning. At the same time, interpretations may differ between interpretive communities. Different systems of knowledge (art, science, history), different ontological or epistemological perspectives in relation to these systems, cultural or ethnic differences, and gendered approaches create differentiated communities whose interpretations of their experiences vary. Interpretive communities have differential access to social networks and resources, and the power to access and control these matrixes influences which meanings are heard most strongly.

In this approach to communication, the focus is on how meaning is constructed through social life by active individual agents, within social networks. Meanings are understood to be negotiated through cognitive frameworks, interpretive strategies and interpretive communities, and are plural, contingent and open to challenge. Within this second approach to communication and learning, communicators act as enablers and facilitators. The task for communicators – or, in the museum, curators, educators and exhibition developers – is to provide experiences that invite visitors to make meaning through deploying and extending their existing interpretive strategies and repertoires, using their prior knowledge

and their preferred learning styles,⁷⁷ and testing their hypotheses against those of others, including those of experts. The task is to produce opportunities for visitors to use what they know already to build new knowledge and new confidence in themselves as learners and as social agents.

In understanding communication as cultural through and through, and in seeking to understand what this might mean within the museum context, Giroux's concept of critical pedagogy is useful.⁷⁸ Critical pedagogy is based on the acknowledgement of culture not as monolithic and unchanging, but, as Giroux describes, as a site of multiple and heterogeneous borders where different histories, languages, experiences and voices come together amidst diverse relations of power and privilege.⁷⁹ Cultural studies⁸⁰ provides the basis for understanding pedagogy as a form of cultural production rather than as the transmission of a particular skill, body of knowledge or set of values. Critical pedagogy is proposed by Giroux as a cultural practice engaged in the production of knowledge, identities and desires.

Museums may be seen as cultural borderlands, where a range of practices are possible, a language of possibilities is a potential, and where diverse groups and sub-groups, cultures and subcultures may push against and permeate the allegedly unproblematic and homogeneous borders of dominant cultural practices. By viewing museums as a form of cultural politics, museum workers can bring together the concepts of narrative, difference, identity and interpretive strategies in such a way as to create strategies for negotiating these practices. In the post-museum, multiple subjectivities and identities can exist as part of a cultural practice that provides the potential to expand the politics of democratic community and solidarity. By being able to listen critically, museum workers can become border-crossers by making different narratives available, by bridging between disciplines, by working in the liminal spaces that modernist museum practices have produced.

Challenging the canon

Museums are one of the West's signifying systems that have been used to construct dominant canons. At the present time, the ostensibly timeless ideals of the Enlightenment (beauty, truth, knowledge) are being modified,⁸¹ and those structures created by the modernist state, such as the public museum, are being forced to re-examine their purposes.⁸² Today, cultural maps are being re-plotted and re-territorialised. Re-plotting involves bringing to visibility nodes of significance that were formerly subsumed and rendered invisible within large Western-derived universal narratives; and re-territorialisation entails the projection and exploration of new territories formerly left off the cultural map.

Feminist critique has exposed modernist master narratives, one of which is the primacy of the male, as unsustainable;⁸³ post-colonial approaches have demonstrated the Eurocentric core of much of the history and culture that we take for granted in the West.⁸⁴ Knowledge is now understood as historically contingent and context-specific; the site from which knowledge is produced relates

to what is accepted as rational. Knowledge is seen as situated or positioned, and as part of culture.⁸⁵ Knowledge is also seen as provisional, which enables the acknowledgement of the unstable character of meaning. The certainties of modernism have been replaced by the fluidity of post-modernism, with its indeterminacies, fragmentation, decanonisation, hybridisation and constructionism.⁸⁶

The binary oppositions of Cartesian philosophy that imposed fixed ordering structures such as same/other, centre/margin, mind/body, black/white, are seen as redundant in a move to embrace multi-culturalism and hybridity.⁸⁷ The dualistic way of thinking that conceives questions as 'either' one option 'or' another has been called into question,⁸⁸ and is deposed in favour of a more dialectical approach where differences are not absolute or finite. Today, concepts of both/and rather than either/or seem to offer more useful explanations.

A 'vast, revisionary will in the western world, unsettling/resetting codes, canons, procedures, beliefs'⁸⁹ can be observed. As part of this, museums today are seen as sites of cultural struggle and as a result the stories that are told in museums of history, culture, science and beauty are no longer accepted as naturally authoritative. The modernist museum is being reviewed, reassessed, and reformulated to enable it to be more sensitive to competing narratives and to local circumstances; to be more useful to diverse groups; to fit current times more closely. As one critic put it: 'The museums set up to demonstrate the ideals of the Enlightenment have served their purpose . . . it is easy to see the immense contribution [these museums] have made to the Enlightenment mind. But now it is over.'⁹⁰

The challenge to modernist museum values takes place through a number of strategies. Some of the most revealing are those used by artists. Modernist display styles, codes and narratives have been commented on by Richard Wentworth and Fred Wilson. Richard Wentworth produced a small installation at the British Museum as part of 'Collected', a multi-site exhibition curated by Neil Cummings based at the Photographers' Gallery in London. The exhibition aimed to question how and why some collections became more valued than others and how some people are able to turn their private culture, tastes and habits into public culture, to the exclusion of others.⁹¹

Richard Wentworth produced a display case in one of the main Egyptian galleries at the British Museum that perfectly mimicked the codes of display used throughout the museum. The material on the upper shelf was carefully selected from the collection of Egyptian Antiquities in the British Museum, spanned a period of more than 4,000 years, and originated from throughout the territory covered by ancient Egypt. All the material on the lower two shelves of this display was collected from the streets immediately surrounding the British Museum during March and April 1997, immediately prior to the exhibition. The Egyptian material was displayed as it would normally be within the museum, with texts that focused on objects' functions and the material from which the objects were made. The contemporary objects were treated in the same way:

A. Aluminium capped, machine moulded glass bottle in generalised form of fruit with embossed surface simulating peel.

B. Polypropylene capped, machine moulded clear glass bottle with wide mouth disguised with polyvinyl chloride, shrink sleeve decorated with six-colour printing. Adapted to rubbish container by last user – contains empty crisps packet.

M. Vacuum-formed polystyrene throw-away stacking cups with rolled lip. Coloured beige to match a variety of possible contents.

Treating the familiar throw-away objects as though they were museum objects (which, of course, they became) revealed the terse, two-dimensional, essentially useless information produced by an apparently objective and scientific approach. Public culture, in this installation, was exposed as constructed through discourses, the main purpose of which is to embody privilege through empty claims to epistemological authority.

Fred Wilson exposed some of the destructive social values that museums unconsciously accept and uncritically recycle by, in one example, taking the nineteenth-century wooden sculptures of 'cigar-store Indians' that he found in the Maryland Historical Society and turning them round to face the wall. By doing this he signalled a refusal to accept the stereotype of the 'Indian' that they represented and that was endorsed by the museum in hanging them. The wall the sculptures faced was hung with photographs, that he had brought into the institution of contemporary Native Americans from Maryland; he had been told when he asked: 'There are no Indians in Maryland.'⁹²

Contemporary culture is analysed as post-modern, post-colonial, and post-structural. What will be the character of culture and pedagogy in the post-museum? Some themes and ways of working which indicate some of the shape of this new museum idea are discussed in the penultimate section of this chapter.

Reorganising museum culture: provisional positions in the post-museum

The reorganisation of culture in the post-museum focuses on what counts as knowledge and how it may be known; this is one vital aspect of a renegotiation of the relationship of the museum to its audiences. One of the characteristics of the post-modern period is that cultural organisations have become much closer to their audiences⁹³ and have become more conscious of those to whom they are speaking. The politics of address⁹⁴ and the concept of voice have become significant. Who is being addressed, how they are spoken to, and who is speaking and how, have become major targets for analyses. These matters raise questions of identity and subjectivity. Subjectivity needs to be understood as something in process, and not as fixed and autonomous, outside history; subjectivity is always gendered, and based in class, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation.⁹⁵

In the modernist museum, knowledge was understood to be disciplinary, or subject-based. Museums were natural history textbooks,⁹⁶ or displayed histories of art.⁹⁷ In the post-museum, specialist knowledge remains important, but it is integrated with knowledge based on the everyday human experience of visitors

and non-specialists. Where the modernist museum transmitted factual information, the post-museum also tries to involve the emotions and the imaginations of visitors.

The Buried Village is a visitor attraction with a small exhibition on the site of Te Wairoa, the village at which Hinemihi was built in 1880. The exhibition tells the story of the volcanic eruption. It begins with an account of Maori life before the arrival of the missionaries, describes the consequences of that event, and moves quickly to its main subject, the eruption of Tarawera and its aftermath. In the deep display cases that are concerned with the eruption itself, the exhibition appeals directly to the feelings and imagination of visitors. Many of the exhibits, which are of domestic items (bits of broken bedstead, crockery, bottles), still remain caked in lava. The exhibition text panels use the words of the survivors to describe the experience of the earthquake, and the words of parents whose children died as the lava covered them all (see Figure 6.1). The exhibits are, of course, the results of the archaeological excavation of the site; displays at the end of the exhibition introduce archaeology as a way of investigating what happened to the houses and the people (see Figure 6.2). Geology is also presented as one way of understanding the movement of the earth and the subsequent reshaping of the landscape. Specialist knowledge is used to answer the question of how to

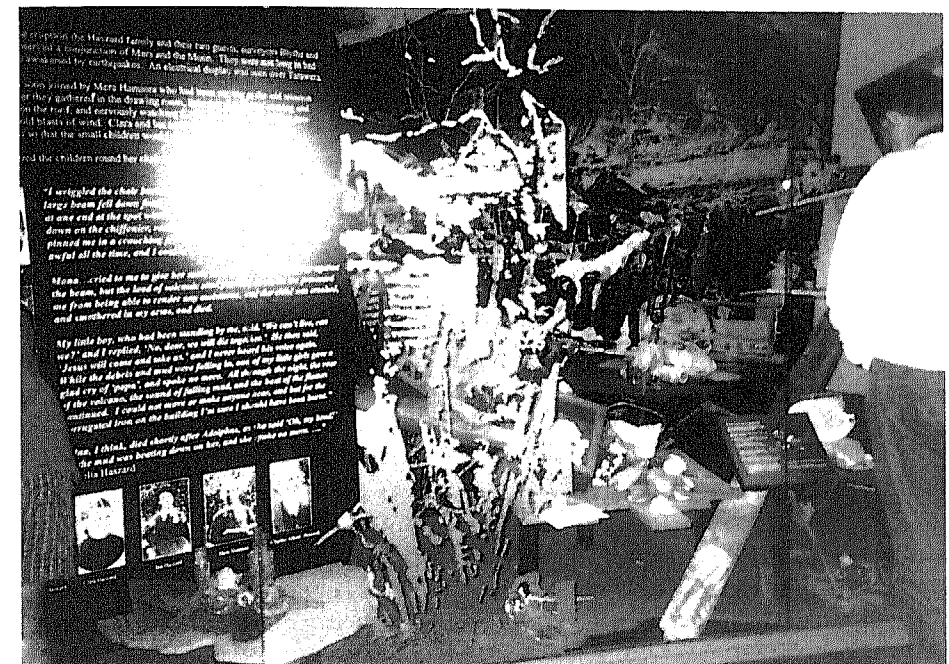


Figure 6.1 One of the displays at the new exhibition at The Buried Village near Rotorua. The display shows lava-covered household objects and makes them vividly significant through the reported words of Mrs Hazard as she talks to her children during the eruption. (See also Stafford, 1977: 33.)

Photo Eilean Hooper-Greenhill.

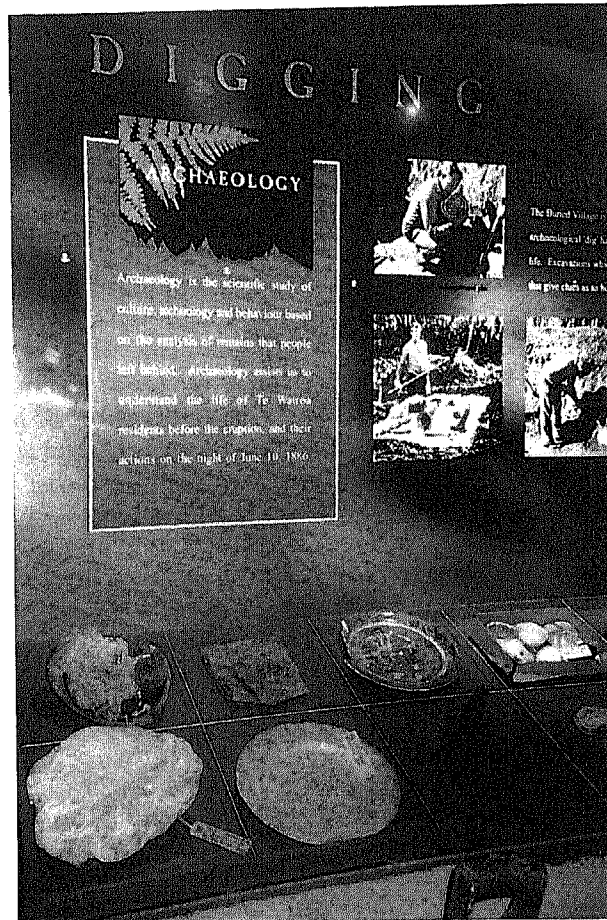


Figure 6.2 A display panel which presents the use of archaeology to understand the life of the people at Te Wairoa before the eruption and their actions on the night of 10 June 1886.

understand the dreadful things that happened here once the question has arisen through empathy with the sufferers.

In the post-museum, many voices are heard. At the exhibition 'Torres Strait Islanders'⁹⁸ at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge in 1998, the introductory panel pointed out that the expedition to the Torres Straits in 1898 was part of several distinct but intersecting histories. The exhibition reviewed the expedition and its legacies, presented 'the strength and richness of Torres Strait Islander *kastom*', and highlighted different types of knowledge. It pointed out that the objects, photographs and quotations displayed carried 'rich and varied meanings through time and across cultures'.⁹⁹

Many voices are heard in the exhibition, drawn from many different kinds of sources. The first section of the exhibition is entitled 'The Sea: Local Knowledge', and the text panel begins with a version of the legend of Gelam, abbreviated from

the account told to the anthropologist A. C. Haddon by Jimmy Dei from Mer in 1898. The voice is that of an Islander; he is named and the place where he came from is named in the indigenous language (it is also known as Murray Island). The exhibition includes quotations from anthropologists such as Haddon and Rivers, missionaries and Islanders, and from Islander songs, anthropological journals, and books. Next to a case showing a turtle-shell mask is a video-clip of Ephraim Bani telling the story of the mask. The video was made on the occasion of his visit to the museum from the Torres Straits in 1995. Background research for the exhibition reopened a dialogue between the museum and Island representatives.¹⁰⁰

The exhibition uses its space well: housed on a circular balcony, it is constructed so that visitors may begin either to the right, and the time of the expedition one hundred years ago, or to the left, to the very recent past and the struggle of the Islanders for self-determination within Australia. The Torres Strait Regional Authority *Annual Report 1997* makes clear the achievement of the Mabo case of 1994,¹⁰¹ which is also referenced through photographs in the display case nearby.

There is a sense in the exhibition of diverse people acknowledging their connected histories and working together to both analyse it carefully and use it in the present. The exhibition acts to construct a useful past for the present, both within the exhibition and, more importantly, in the events that were entailed in its preparation that will enable a better knowledge of the past in the future.

In the post-museum, histories that have been hidden away are being brought to light, and in this, modernist master narratives are being challenged. The significance of histories which intersect, and of reciprocal historical and cultural effects, are emphasised by the exhibition at the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. At the National Portrait Gallery in London, for five months in early 1997, some of the interconnections between eighteenth-century London society and the African slave trade were being mapped out through an exhibition on Ignatius Sancho.¹⁰²

The Sancho exhibition was set in the context of contemporary challenges to the idea of eighteenth-century culture as monolithic. The life-story of Ignatius Sancho 'enriches and diversifies' a sense of what is or is not possible. Sancho was born on a slave ship, was presented as a gift to two sisters in Greenwich, became a servant to the Montague family, a writer and musician, a friend to Laurence Sterne and David Garrick, a sitter to Thomas Gainsborough, and subsequently a grocer. The book that gave a more permanent form to the research for the exhibition was intended to contribute to the literature of Black Studies.¹⁰³

The exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery enabled Sancho to enter the pantheon of English heroes. His former presence in a museum could be seen as less illustrious. A life-cast of his head and face was part of the collection in the museum of the Royal College of Surgeons since the eighteenth century until the museum was bombed during the Second World War.¹⁰⁴ It is catalogued along with casts of other body parts of African people, and also that of 'a Shetland pony, the integuments of which have been removed on one side, to expose the superficial muscles'.¹⁰⁵ The museum contained medical specimens such as skulls

and anatomical dissections, along with paintings of people seen as exotic oddities and curiosities; these included dwarfs, albinos, early visitors from the Pacific, Native Americans and Africans. In the eighteenth century and until the middle of the twentieth, Ignatius Sancho was classified museologically as a medical specimen, a curiosity. Even in 1968, things had not changed a great deal. In a report to the Trustees of the museum Sancho's portrait by Gainsborough was illustrated next to a specimen of *Pentacrinus caput-medusae*.¹⁰⁶ These kinds of associations, though not intentionally hurtful, can be experienced as such.

For the exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery, Sancho's biography and the circumstances of his life in London were researched.¹⁰⁷ Objects were used to stand as witness to the events of the period. This meant refocusing their significance. A coffee cup was displayed in the exhibition. Instead of being presented as a piece of 'cream-ware', dated 1760, and seen as a piece of decorative art, it was read for its historical references and the text drew attention to the use of transfer-printed cream-ware to serve tea, coffee and chocolate. The print on the cup showed a black servant engaged in such an act.

One of the portraits familiar from the permanent display of seventeenth-century paintings was also presented in a radically different way (see Figure 6.3). The portrait of the Duchess of Portsmouth had the following label in the permanent galleries:¹⁰⁸

Louise Renee de Penancoet de Kéroualle, Duchess of Portsmouth and Aubigny 1649–1734.

Mistress of Charles II; came to England in 1670 as maid of honour to Charles' sister, the Duchess of Orleans; returned to become the King's mistress in 1671, with the encouragement of the French government, who hoped she would be a diplomatic asset; created Duchess 1673; Evelyn noted her 'childish, simple and baby face'.

By Pierre Mignard (1612–95)

Oil on canvas, signed, inscribed and dated 1682

In her portrait the Duchess is perhaps portrayed as the sea-nymph Thetis, mother of the hero Achilles, in allusion to her son by the King, the Duke of Richmond.

The prior information required to understand this text fully includes a good knowledge of English history, of Greek mythology and their interrelationships. The information focuses directly on the biography of the main sitter, and on the way in which she is portrayed. The black child also portrayed is ignored.

In the Sancho exhibition, part of the text placed next to the painting read:

Ignatius Sancho was born on a slave ship crossing the Atlantic in 1729. Following the death of his mother, he was brought to England aged two and given as an exotic present to three sisters in Greenwich. Sancho was deeply unhappy in his situation as a slave-servant, where his natural abilities were discouraged. He ran away and was helped by the family of the Duke of Montagu.



Figure 6.3 Louise de Kéroualle, Duchess of Portsmouth (1649–1734) and unnamed child, by Pierre Mignard, 1682 (NPG 497).

Photo by courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London.

The painting is used as a historical document that stands, not for itself, but for the social relationships and cultural practices that it does in fact illustrate, but which have been formerly ignored. The black child in the portrait is not Sancho, but was treated historically like Sancho. The painting worked through analogy.

This is very different from the place in the continuous chronological progression of English history that the painting was used to construct in its earlier position. The exhibition was adventurous in the way it grouped and placed objects. In a prominent position stood a harpsichord. As this was contemplated, harpsichord music, composed by Sancho, could be heard. Set within the dais on which the instrument stood was a set of slave shackles, a whip and a slave collar (see Figure 6.4). The harpsichord had been borrowed from the Victoria and Albert Museum and the other items from Northampton Museum and Art Gallery. The text read:

Instruments of restraint and torture were essential to slavery. These examples were brought from Jamaica to Northampton in 1860 by the Reverend John Turland of the Baptist Missionary Society to demonstrate the cruelty of the slave system. Despite their kindness to Sancho the Montagues, whose family home was in Northamptonshire, had in the early 18th century, owned estates and slaves in St. Lucia and Antigua.

The ways in which objects are selected, put together, and written or spoken about have political effects. These effects are not those of the objects *per se*; it is the use made of these objects and their interpretive frameworks that can open up or close down historical, social and cultural possibilities. By making marginal cultures visible, and by legitimating difference, museum pedagogy can become a critical pedagogy. By exposing the interrelationships between eighteenth-century culture and society and the slave-trade, the exhibition acknowledged a part of British history that has been ignored until recently.

The reorganisation of museum culture is premised on a new relationship between the museum and its audience, and a major part of this is a new and more dynamic approach to the encounter between the visitor and the museum narratives. Formerly austere spaces, established as sites for the use of the eye, have been reinvented as spaces with more colour, more noise, and which are more physically complex. This represents a shift in what Bennett calls 'the ratio of the senses'.¹⁰⁹ Museums are also using the World Wide Web to link communities, cultures and collections across the world; the Sancho exhibition, for example, had a linked website. Objects have become mobilisers of both actual and virtual conversations.

The knowledge that visitors bring with them is actively being considered in the development of approaches to exhibition content. 'Seeing Salvation', an exhibition at the National Gallery, London, in the spring of 2000, rearranged the collections to open up new possibilities. The Director set out his rationale in the introduction to the catalogue of the exhibition:

All great collections of European painting are inevitably also collections of Christian art . . . Yet if a third of our paintings are Christian, many of our visitors now are not . . . Addressing questions of slender concern to those of other – or no – beliefs, [the paintings] seem to many irrecoverably remote . . . We have put some of the Gallery's religious

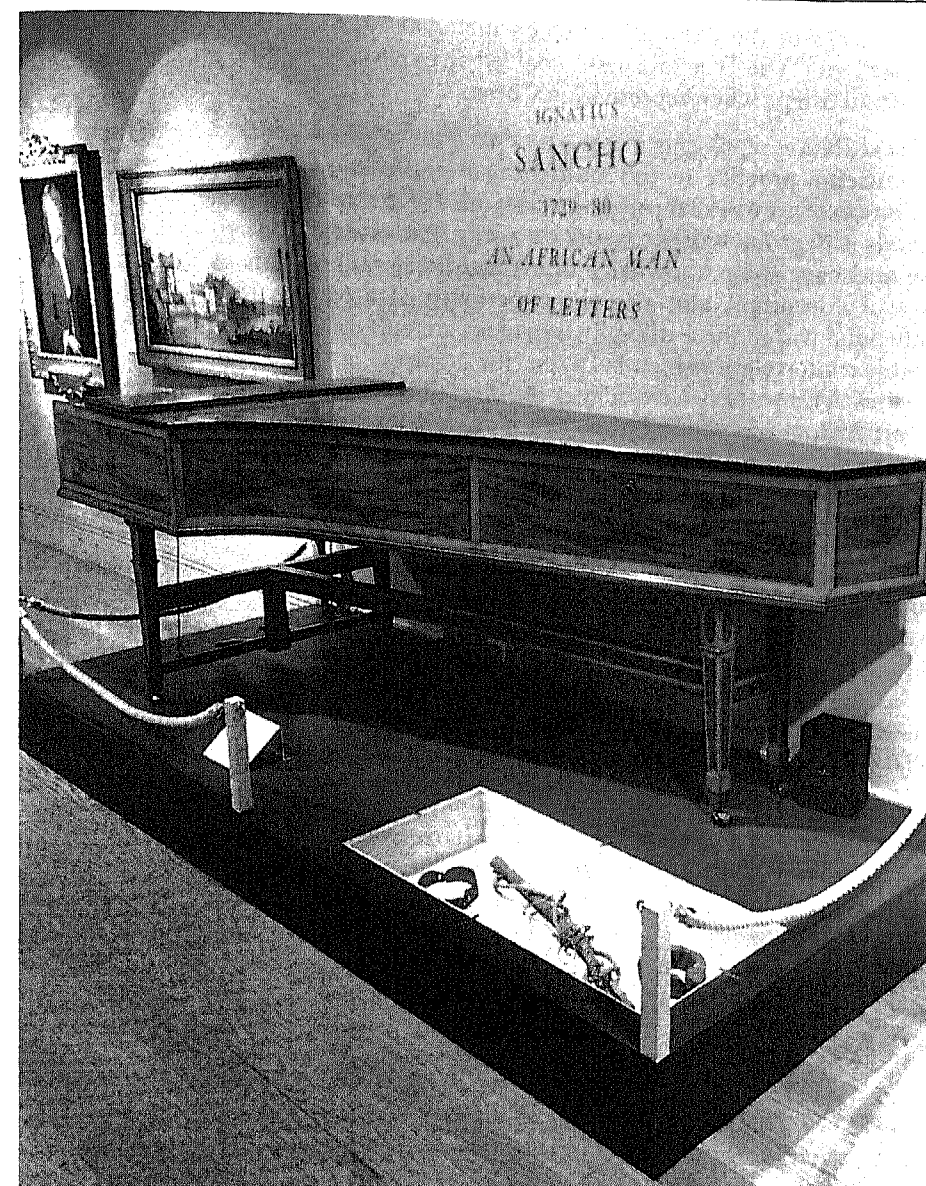


Figure 6.4 The assemblage of the harpsichord and the slave items at the Ignatius Sancho exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery, London. Photo Eilean Hooper-Greenhill.

pictures in a new context, not – as in other exhibitions – beside works by the same artist or from the same period, but in the company of other works of art which have explored the same kinds of questions across the centuries. A new neighbour for a painting allows us to have a different dialogue with it.¹¹⁰

The themes of the exhibition, which included 'Sign and Symbol', 'The Dual Nature', and 'The True Likeness', enabled an exploration of the difficulties facing Christian artists when representing Christ.

This exhibition represents a reassessment of the relevance and meaningfulness of art museum practice to the multicultural audience of today. To structure an exhibition of art works through the categories of artists' biographies and historical periods is to group works together in a way that assumes that visitors will recognise and have some knowledge of art-historical values. This assumes a certain level of education, and also the experience of a certain form of education. Embedded within these disciplinary values are cultural values which conceal the complex interrelationships between, for example, art and religion in Western societies. Visitors may have neither the disciplinary background to make sense of the art-history based exhibition structure, nor the cultural knowledge to grasp the significance of the individual paintings. In focusing on the content of the objects in a direct way, and in grouping them in themes that arise from this content, the ideological framework for the objects is made more open and explicit.

Communication in the modernist museum was understood as a process of transmitting information; the pedagogic approach was formal, didactic, and based on disciplinary knowledge. The museum audience was treated as a unified group, and the museum given the function of both educating and elevating. Dynamic in its day, by the middle of the twentieth century, at least in Britain, the modernist museum was regarded as stultified and was no longer seen to be relevant to broad social needs.

During the twentieth century newer forms of visual media such as film, television, photography and the World Wide Web, have usurped some of the expository functions of the museum. Why is it necessary to go to a museum to see a stuffed dead animal in a glass case when a living one can be seen playing in its natural setting by turning on the TV? Why make an expensive and tiring journey to see an original painting when a high-quality reproduction can be bought on the high street? Learner-centred approaches to teaching introduced over the last thirty years have encouraged critical and questioning visitors, who are not content to be told what to think; an emphasis on consumer power has resulted in a demand for high standards of visitor facilities. At the same time, post-colonial societies generate new cultural needs which affect museum collections. Moves towards reconciliation and reparation following the destructive events of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries require museums to review their holdings and the stance they take towards them.

Faced with these challenges, museums have begun to re-evaluate their social roles, and to reposition themselves in relation to their audiences. New forms of museum pedagogy are demanded. The understanding that communication is the basis on which culture is both maintained and transformed; the acceptance that culture has political effects and can be either empowering or inhibiting; the recognition of the significance of objects in relation to the construction of the self, and for the development of cultural identity, all set new challenges for the interpretation of visual culture in the museum.