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MUSEUMS, PREJUDICE AND THE REFRAMING OF DIFFERENCE

Richard Sandell

LONDON AND NEW YORK

3

PURPOSE, MEDIA AND MESSAGE

The St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art and the Anne Frank House

In December 1999, the leaders of ten historic sites including the Lower East Side Tenement Museum (United States), the Workhouse (England), the Gulag Museum (Russia), the Slave House (Senegal) and the District Six Museum (South Africa) signed and issued a statement which read:

> We are historic site museums in many different parts of the world, at many stages of development, presenting and interpreting a wide variety of historic issues, events and people. We hold in common the belief that it is the obligation of historic sites to assist the public in drawing connections between the history of our sites and its contemporary implications. We view stimulating dialogue on pressing social issues and promoting humanitarian and democratic values as a primary function. To advance this concept, we have formed an International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience to work with one another.
>
> (Abram 2002: 125)

The formation of the Coalition (and, indeed, its subsequent increased membership and profile) is reflective of a growing international interest in the potential for museums, and their agential capacities, to be brought to bear on wide-ranging social issues and concerns. This interest is evidenced in a number of trends: through widespread initiatives intended to broaden museum visitorships to include previously excluded or underrepresented communities; increasing professional debate around the social purpose and value of cultural organisations; the espousal of policies which position museums as agents of cross-cultural understanding; and demands for representation and for more inclusive and democratic museum practices from diverse constituencies.

The idea of the museum as an agent of social change and, more particularly, as a 'reformatory apparatus' (Bennett 2003) capable of shaping ways of seeing,

thinking and behaving, is by no means new. Tony Bennett's historical analyses of museum policies and practices highlight the connections that can be drawn between nineteenth-century uses of museums and their contemporary conceptions as 'differencing machines' (2005) with the capacity to function as agents of cross-cultural understanding. For example, nineteenth-century ethnology exhibitions, he argues:

> were meant to demonstrate hierarchically organised relations of inequality between different people by exhibiting them as racial types, leading from the primitive to the civilised. Such exhibitions were also meant to display the power of western nations over colonised peoples: the power to command cultural material and frequently bodies too, and to exhibit these without any regard to the sensibilities or opinions of the peoples from whom they were taken.
>
> (ibid.: 4)

Nevertheless, in recent years, the idea of the museum as a technology for (democratising, empowering, liberatory) social change has become a powerful determinant of contemporary international museum rhetoric and policy. Moreover, the rise of business managerialism within the publicly funded cultural sector since the late 1970s has encouraged many museums to seek more clearly to define their purpose and to communicate this more widely to constituencies. These statements of purpose or mission vary immensely but increasingly reflect a belief in the museum's social (as well as economic and intrinsic cultural) value.

Although inevitably rooted in their own histories which account for their unique circumstances, the St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art and the Anne Frank House – the sites in which I chose to investigate the ways in which audiences responded to exhibitions designed to counter prejudice – can be seen as part of this broader trend towards articulating the purpose of museums in social terms. This chapter provides some background on the establishment, missions and strategic goals of these two organisations and describes the exhibitions and displays which visitors encounter there. The visiting agenda and motivations of the individuals and small groups that I interviewed there are also considered.

The St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art

> St Mungo's is not an objective museum. It exists explicitly to promote a set of values: respect for the diversity of human beliefs.
>
> (O'Neill 1995: 50)

> In terms of interpreting and inspiring society afresh, the St Mungo Museum is probably the most important museum to have opened in Britain since the V & A.
>
> (Artley 1993: 51)

Background

When the St Mungo Museum first opened on 1 April 1993 it attracted considerable interest from the media, wide-ranging groups in Glasgow, the visiting public and the international museum community. The museum attracted controversy and criticism as well as considerable praise and recognition for its groundbreaking and innovative approach to displaying objects with religious significance.

The museum grew out of opportunism rather than long term planning, a factor which had considerable influence, much of it positive, on the way the museum project subsequently took shape. The building which now houses St Mungo's was originally intended to be a visitor centre for the adjacent cathedral, a project led by Glasgow's Friends of the Cathedral. However, when the project ran into financial difficulties the local government, Glasgow City Council, stepped in and began to consider a range of uses for the building. The idea for a museum of religious life and art gathered momentum as the Council realised its potential to address a number of strategic priorities for both the museum service and the city.

A range of social, political and economic factors can be seen to have shaped the decision to develop a museum of religious life and art with a specific, socially driven purpose based on the promotion of understanding between different faith groups. The City Council saw that the museum had the potential to be a unique, 'world class' tourist attraction, to complement other museums in the service and to support Glasgow's ambitions to develop its cultural facilities for the international tourism market. It was also felt that the museum could be an important resource for local people, 'for all of whom religion was part of their cultural background, even though many were no longer believers' (O'Neill 1995: 50). Moreover, the idea of a museum of religious life and art provided a means of developing more inclusive cultural services that would better reflect the multicultural nature of Glasgow. As Mark O'Neill, the leader of the team that created the museum stated, 'One of the things that was most noticeably missing [from the existing galleries and museums within the service] was that Glasgow was a multicultural society. Religion seemed an interesting way of approaching the problem' (O'Neill cited in Gledhill 1993: 29). More specifically, the project was viewed from the outset as an opportunity to contribute to the combating of racism and religious sectarianism in the city. As Jem Fraser observes, 'St Mungo's Museum was a brave step in a city whose image has never

been helped by the depth of animosity between its two rival football teams traditionally associated with the two largest denominations of Christianity – the Catholic Celtic and the protestant Rangers – whose warring armies of fans clash with monotonous regularity' (2005: 92). This goal can be seen to mesh with broader strategic imperatives which were emerging at a national government level. In the 1990s, the Scottish Office and since 1998 the Scottish Executive, have introduced a number of initiatives aimed at combating racism in Scotland. The *One Scotland Many Cultures* campaign continues today to highlight the Scottish Executive's concern for social cohesion.[1]

Mission and purpose

The museum's mission statement was developed early on in the project and has not subsequently been changed.

> The St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art, Glasgow Museums, explores the importance of religion in people's everyday lives across the world and across time, aiming to promote mutual understanding and respect between people of different faiths, and of none.

This statement of purpose is prominently displayed to visitors in the entrance to the building and appears on the museum's website and on most promotional materials. Soon after the museum opened, O'Neill stated in an interview in *The Times* newspaper, 'Our aim is to promote mutual respect and understanding of different religions. We are trying to get rid of prejudice, on the grounds that it is mostly based on ignorance' (Gledhill 1993: 29).

Although the museum's purpose and social goals can be seen to have been shaped by a range of socio-political factors at local and national levels, it is nonetheless important to recognise the significance of individual actors in shaping this project. Mark O'Neill, who led the St Mungo's development team, came to the project with considerable experience of community based museum projects and held strong views about the potential for museums to address social concerns. Indeed, soon after the museum opened in 1993, O'Neill explicitly acknowledged the significance of the personal values and opinions held by individual contributors in shaping the final museum, stating that 'Many of the staff shared a conviction that if people understood more about each other's beliefs, mutual respect would be more possible' (1994: 28). This belief in the potential for museums to engage with contemporary social issues (whilst also fulfilling roles in relation to tourism development and other agendas) underpinned the way in which the museum developed, its mission statement and the shape and tone of the displays which were finally installed.

Figure 3.1: The *Gallery of Religious Art*, St Mungo Museum
Source: Photograph by kind permission of Glasgow Museums

The displays

The museum is composed of three main permanent galleries and a temporary exhibitions space, each with a distinctive atmosphere and appearance. The *Gallery of Religious Art* is generally the first gallery that visitors encounter and it displays objects that communicate 'something of the meaning of the religions they represent directly through their aesthetic power' (O'Neill 1995: 50). Unusually, objects linked to a range of religions are displayed alongside each other within a shared gallery space (Fig. 3.1). As O'Neill explains:

> This created startling juxtapositions, with Salvador Dali's *Christ of St John of the Cross* in the same room as an ancestral screen from the Kalibari people of Nigeria, a seventeenth-century Turkish

Figure 3.2: Thematic cases within the *Gallery of Religious Life* juxtapose objects and images from different faiths to examine the ways in which religion pervades many aspects of daily life

Source: Photograph by kind permission of Glasgow Museums

> prayer rug and an Australian Aboriginal dreamtime painting. The room was shaped by the architects so that, even though the objects were of greatly differing scales and visual qualities, all were seen to be treated with equal respect.
>
> (ibid.: 50–51)

The *Gallery of Religious Life*, situated through a doorway off the art gallery, offers a very different visual experience. In contrast with the relatively bright, spacious and open room that houses the art objects, visitors to this gallery are directed along a U-shaped route in a dimly lit room to view cases densely filled with objects (Fig. 3.2). Objects here are displayed in two main ways. Thematic cases located around the edge of the gallery juxtapose objects and images from different faiths to examine the ways in which religion pervades many aspects of daily life. In keeping with the museum's purpose, these thematic cases can be understood to privilege concepts of sameness between different religions. As curator Harry Dunlop explains, 'The gallery attempts to communicate what people believe and share in common (such as Rites of Passage) and what is unique and special in each cultural tradition' (2002: 8).

Differences between the practices and beliefs of the main faith groups are largely highlighted in ways which avoid controversy or the apportioning of criticism to specific religions. However, negative or controversial aspects of religion more generally are by no means neglected. Rather, as O'Neill

explains, the interdisciplinary and thematic approach enabled the museum to more readily tackle controversial topics without compromising the mission to promote mutual understanding and respect. 'Displays on Birth, through Coming of Age and Marriage to Death and the Afterlife, gave a structure within which we could also deal with Missionaries, Divine Rule, Peace, War and Persecution' (1993: 11). Whilst questions of balance and parity are inevitably critical in a museum of this kind, they are most clearly rendered visible to the public in this particular gallery. While the thematic cases attempt to maintain a broad balance in representing the main religions, the centre of the gallery houses six equally sized display cases, each of which is devoted to one of the six most practised world religions – Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism.

The *Gallery of Religious Life* also features what the museum refers to as 'talkback boards' which, though increasingly used in museums today, were far less widespread when St Mungo's first opened. As Harry Dunlop explains, 'we included a talkback board in the *Gallery of Religious Life* which invites visitors to add their own opinion to the displays. Since most people have an opinion on at least some aspect of religion, these have proved extremely successful. Visitors love having a good read and an argument with each other' (Dunlop 2003). One reviewer of the museum, shortly after it opened, commented on the effectiveness of this particular interpretive device:

> To deflect possible vandalism in this gallery, the curators have wisely provided notice-boards which encourage visitors to pin up their own reactions to the exhibits. I found it almost impossible to get near the boards. 'Religion should be shown for what it is – garbage. Show the wars, famines, in the name of spurious Gods' wrote William Walsh of Kelvinside Gardens. 'Lovely painting by Dali showing Jesus as he is – "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life",' enthused another visitor. 'Moving and inspiring – another first for Glasgow,' said a third. I have never seen people so absorbed and excited by a museum exhibition.
>
> (Artley 1993: 51)

The third main gallery on the top floor of the museum looks more closely at religion in Scotland. The *Scottish Gallery* takes a thematic approach addressing such topics as 'Keeping the Faith' (how religion is maintained across generations), 'People and Places' (how Scottish people have connections with a range of holy places in other parts of the world), the role of missionaries and the sensitive subject of ongoing conflict between Protestants and Catholics in Scotland.

The fourth main gallery is used for changing exhibitions. Significantly, this provides an opportunity for the museum both to address specific themes and issues and to include particular faiths which are not

Figure 3.3: *Faithfully Yours*, a temporary exhibition, which marked the museum's ten-year anniversary

represented in the permanent galleries. During the period in which fieldwork was undertaken, the exhibition on display was *Faithfully Yours* (Fig. 3.3). This exhibition, which marked the museum's ten-year anniversary, comprised photographs by Glasgow Museums' photographer, Jim Dunn, who had been commissioned to capture the rich diversity of faith and religious practice across Glasgow.

In addition to the main galleries, the museum also has an introductory video featuring testimonials from people of different faiths, a small Education gallery (situated off the Scottish Gallery, which provides children's activities), and, outside, Britain's first Zen garden.

Collaboration and consultation

The project had to be developed very quickly with St Mungo's opening just two and a half years after its conception. Though this presented many logistical challenges it also freed the curatorial team to take more risks than might otherwise have been possible if there had been time for a full feasibility study and long term planning (O'Neill 1994). Despite the time constraints, it was recognised early on that consultation with a range of stakeholder groups, though time consuming, was necessary if the museum was to have

widespread credibility and if it was to achieve its mission of promoting respect between different faith communities. Mark O'Neill explains the importance of community collaboration in bringing the project to fruition:

> If the aim was to communicate something of the meaning of the objects, we had to reverse the usual process in museums of draining them of their dangerous meanings to render them safely aesthetic, historical or anthropological. In the case of religion, 'meaning' has an emotional or spiritual dimension that can be described much more powerfully by those who experience it than those who have simply studied it. Some sort of consultation or collaboration with believers was therefore required.
>
> (1994: 28)

This process achieved a number of important outcomes. Not only did it help to garner support for the museum from wide-ranging constituencies but it also generated oral testimonies which were used to provide both written quotations and audio commentaries alongside the exhibits. 'We included these diverse responses and opinions as injections of human emotion,' explains Harry Dunlop, 'in an attempt to allow visitors to empathise with the issues being raised in a deeply personal way' (2003). (This particular interpretive device, as we shall see in due course, plays a significant role in enabling visitors to make connections with the subjects on display.)

The process of collaboration continues to be important in the way the museum develops its programmes today. *Meet your Neighbour*, a series of public events programmed by St Mungo's each year, is organised in partnership with a range of organisations which share the museum's overarching goals. The fieldwork undertaken for this study coincided with the *Meet Your Neighbour* festival in 2003 – a programme of workshops, musical performances and discussions for visitors and school groups that was organised in conjunction with a range of inter-faith agencies including the Churches Agency for Interfaith Relations in Scotland, Glasgow Sharing of Faiths, the Jewish Representative Council, and Sense over Sectarianism.

Admission to St Mungo's (and indeed to all of the museums within the Glasgow Museums service) is free to all visitors and the museum attracts approximately 150,000 visits each year. Visitors' written comments on the cards displayed in the *Gallery of Religious Life* are collected and recorded in a database by the museum and these show that responses to the museum are 'overwhelmingly positive' (Glasgow City Council 2001). Whilst most critical visitor responses have generally taken a written form, using comments cards in the gallery or complaint letters sent to the museum, it is nevertheless worth noting that the displays have also prompted rather more visceral hostile responses. Just a few months after the museum opened in 1993 a member of the public attacked the large nineteenth-century South Indian

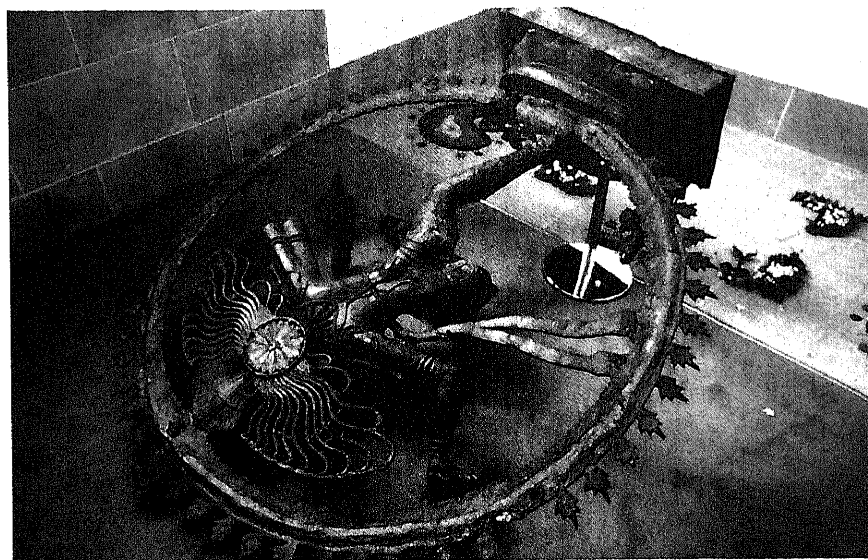

Figure 3.4: Just a few months after St Mungo's Museum opened, a member of the public attacked the nineteenth-century South Indian bronze statue of the Hindu deity Shiva Nataraja

Source: Photograph by kind permission of Glasgow Museums

bronze statue of the Hindu deity, Shiva Nataraja; a powerful illustration of the potential for visitors to respond in ways which are directly counter to those intended by the museum (Fig. 3.4). As Mark O'Neill explains:

> He pulled this bronze object, weighing about 500 kilos over onto its face, severely damaging its arm. When asked by the member of staff who detained him why he did this he said he did it for Christ. This confirmed our conviction that a museum like St Mungo's was necessary.
>
> (1994: 31)

The Anne Frank House

> [T]he visitors to the Anne Frank House should not be left with the sad but comforting feeling that it was 'all over' in 1945 with the end of the Nazi era. They should have the uneasy feeling that what happened to Anne Frank might happen just as easily and unreasonably to themselves; that the only way to prevent this is to take an active and serious stand for equality and democracy.
>
> (van der Wal 1985: 56)

When the house on Prinsengracht, Amsterdam, in which Anne Frank wrote her diary was threatened with demolition in 1957, the Anne Frank House organisation was established to secure its future. The original charter set out the dual purposes of the House which continue to guide the organisation's mission today.

> The Anne Frank House is dedicated to the preservation of the property at 263 Prinsengracht in Amsterdam, and especially of the attached Annex, as well as to the propagation of the ideals left as legacy to the world in 'The Diary of Anne Frank'. The House endeavours to further advance these goals by combating prejudice, discrimination and oppression and by striving for a democratic society, both in form and content, as described in the 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights.'
>
> (Anne Frank House 2000: 25)

Whilst the dual purposes of the organisation have remained broadly constant, the ways in which it seeks to fulfil its mission have evolved to meet shifting social and political conditions (van der Wal 1985). Today, the Anne Frank House manages a number of activities alongside the museum including the mounting of international travelling exhibitions and development of a resource-rich website, ongoing research into manifestations of Right-wing extremism and racism in the Netherlands, wide-ranging educational projects including resources for schools, anti-discrimination training for police and other professional groups, and initiatives in partnership with a range of employers, aimed at promoting equality of opportunity for minority ethnic communities in the Dutch labour market.

The Anne Frank House opened as a museum to the public on 3 May 1960. The museum includes the Secret Annex where Anne Frank wrote her diary and where she and seven others hid from the Nazis during the Second World War. In its first year, admission to the museum was free and it attracted 9,000 visitors. Ten years later the annual attendance had risen to 180,000, forcing the museum to close for several months in 1970 to undertake essential maintenance and repairs to the building. When the museum reopened in 1971, despite the introduction of an admission charge, visitation continued to increase and the organisation expanded its educational activities beyond the museum.

In 1990, when the number of visitors per year exceeded 600,000, the museum decided to redevelop the site to increase floor space for improved museum facilities whilst also undertaking restoration work to return the front of the building at 263 Prinsengracht to its original condition. The new museum finally opened in 1999. The Secret Annex where Anne Frank was in hiding during the war remains at the heart of the museum but there are

also expanded museum facilities including changing exhibitions and event spaces, a shop and café.

Mission and purpose

> *On 10 October 1998, Matthew Shepard is buried in Caspar, Wyoming, in the United States. Matthew was a young homosexual who was a victim of a shocking crime, committed out of hatred. He was assaulted and murdered because of his sexual nature. At Matthew's funeral, Fred Phelps, a minister of a Baptist church in Kansas holds a demonstration. He and a number of his followers want to express their view that homosexuality should be opposed. The demonstrators at Matthew's funeral carry signs with the words 'Matthew burns in hell' and 'Aids cures faggots'. What's more important?*
>
> ***Freedom of speech:*** *In this case, Minister Phelps' freedom to freely deplore homosexuals in direct confrontation with them or:*
>
> ***The right to be protected from discrimination.*** *In this case the right of family and friends of the victim to be spared such discrimination. It's your choice.*

This statement is taken from the interpretive booklet which accompanied the temporary exhibition, *Grensgevallen* (translated by the museum as *Out of Line*), which was showing at the museum during the period in which fieldwork for this study was conducted.

On my first visit to the Anne Frank House in 2002 I was intrigued to find this exhibition which invited visitors to engage with a series of real-life contemporary scenarios concerned with wide-ranging forms of prejudice and discrimination, to make decisions relating to these, and to share their personal opinions with other visitors. I recall the mixed emotions, the considerable discomfort as well as intrigue which I felt at the realisation that – of the ten visitors in the exhibition at that time – I was alone in expressing the opinion that protection from discrimination should prevail over freedom of speech when the far-right religious group carried offensive banners at the funeral of Matthew Shepard.

Most of the nearly one million visitors to the Anne Frank House each year are similarly surprised (some are intrigued, some delighted and others angered) to encounter temporary exhibitions such as *Out of Line* which invite them to share their views on such wide-ranging topics as neo-Nazis on the internet, the lyrics of Eminem and Ku Klux Klan demonstrations in Texas. So well known is the story of Anne Frank that most visitors have at

least some idea in mind of what they will encounter during their visit to the House. For many, having read the diary often many years earlier, the opportunity to visit the Secret Annex where Anne Frank and seven others hid during the Nazi occupation of Holland in World War II is something of a secular pilgrimage. Visitors anticipate that the House will provide an opportunity to learn more about the events of the time and perhaps the chance to reflect, through the relative safety and comfort provided by historical distance, on the life and experiences of the young Jewish girl whose diaries have become known worldwide.

The House certainly fulfils these expectations but there is little in the way of advance warning, from guide books or clues from the outside of the building itself, to suggest that the museum is committed not only to preserving, presenting and interpreting the building where Anne Frank and her family hid but also to disrupting visitors' sense of distance and detachment and to challenging them to make connections with their own lives. As Jan van Kooten (2003), Head of the Educational Department, explains:

> There is a danger that people, however emotionally charged their visit, may simply feel pity for Anne and sadness for the circumstances which led to her death. We don't want people to leave without being triggered to realise that her story is also about today. We want to challenge people's indifference to contemporary prejudice and intolerance.

The museum designed the exhibition *Out of Line*, situated towards the end of the visit, specifically with this purpose in mind. Having followed a prescribed route through the rooms inhabited by the Frank family while in hiding, the visitors emerge from the house itself and enter a distinctly contemporary space. This contrasts sharply with the intimate and historic character of the earlier part of the visit to the Annex, signalling a return to the present day. The accompanying booklet, made available to visitors at the entrance to the exhibition, explains its premise.

> *Out of Line* is an interactive exhibition that deals with contemporary issues. The exhibition focuses on two basic rights: freedom of expression and the right to be protected against discrimination. In western democracies these are now regarded as fundamental rights most citizens take for granted. But what happens when these two basic rights clash? Which right carries the most weight? The visitors to the exhibition will have a chance to speak out on this topic.

Examples of these clashing rights, featured in the exhibition, are wide ranging. Alongside scenarios that relate to contemporary racism and anti-Semitism are others that consider prejudice and discrimination on the basis of disability,

Figure 3.5: The interactive exhibition *Out of Line* at the Anne Frank House

Source: Photographer: Klaas Fopma. By kind permission of the Anne Frank Stichtung

faith, gender and sexual orientation. I felt this was especially significant for my study because, while most visitors to the House might reasonably be assumed to be (at least partially) receptive to anti-racist sentiments, they may nevertheless find themselves facing issues around other forms of prejudice with which they are less comfortable and on which their views are less resolved.

The exhibition occupied a stark, dimly lit room with a metal floor and bare walls and visitors could choose either to take a seat or stand to face two large screens that covered much of the far wall (Fig. 3.5). A mixture of news footage and other material for each scenario was provided through an audio-visual presentation, accompanied by narration that argued alternately for 'freedom of expression' (shown on the left hand screen with accompanying red graphics) and 'protection from discrimination' (shown on the right in green graphics). Each scenario lasted for approximately three to four minutes during which time visitors heard the case for both points of view. A few visitors, perhaps inevitably, found the arguments too brief and simplistic to do justice to the complex issues in question. However, given the location of the exhibition after the physically and emotionally tiring experience of the House, the relatively speedy turnover of examples appeared to work well in engaging the diverse audience (especially in terms of age and nationality) and in overcoming the considerable challenges of accommodating the high number of visitors.

In 2005, *Out of Line* was replaced with *Free2Choose*, an exhibition which similarly invites visitors to make choices concerning contemporary social issues. The presentation of opposing points of view on the same issue provides an opportunity for the Anne Frank House to dispense with the measured, 'impartial', curatorial voice that most museums strive for. This device certainly succeeds in provoking responses from visitors. In *Out of Line*, after both sides of the issue had been presented, those who were seated (with access to a console in front of them) were asked to make a choice – to press the red button if they believed that, in this particular situation, the right to freedom of expression outweighed the right to protection from discrimination, or vice versa by pressing the green button. The results of the vote were displayed through red and green neon bars on the ceiling that lit up according to the number of votes cast.

Though the message of the Anne Frank House is one that aims to promote equal human rights and to challenge prejudice, there are, of course, a whole range of factors that are likely to impact upon the extent to which this message is accepted, rejected or turned around by visitors. Not surprisingly, as we shall see in the following chapters, reactions are extremely diverse. However, whilst visitors are inevitably free to articulate prejudiced remarks to other members of their group or may even choose to write them in the visitors' book, the opportunities for expressing these views through the exhibition itself are, in effect, prohibited by the museum through the voting format. In *Out of Line*, visitors had only two choices – both of which were predicated upon notions of equal human rights for all. The voting format of the exhibition did not enable visitors to express their support or endorsement of, for example, racist or homophobic viewpoints – only for the right of individuals and groups to express those opinions. (The significance of this framing device and the issue of choice is discussed more fully in chapter 5.) Encouraging visitors to respond by casting a vote for one of two neatly categorised, opposing options might, at first glance, appear to be reductive and limiting. However, the strength of this format lay in the invitation to visitors to consider a range of scenarios and to explore the particular situations in which they might feel compelled to switch positions – for example, to understand the conditions and circumstances which might lead them to move from support for 'freedom of expression' to support for 'protection from discrimination'.

Although some visitors commented that, in some scenarios, the content was biased, this may say as much about their own values, attitudes and life experiences as it does about the bias of the exhibition's creators. *Out of Line* was not intended to lead towards one particular conclusion – the right to freedom of expression and the right to protection from discrimination were presented as equally important, though frequently conflicting, features of a democratic society. Indeed, new, updated examples were only included in the exhibition when, having been trialled with the staff of the museum, they

succeeded in dividing opinion (van Kooten 2003). The museum's Director, Hans Westra, explains the shift in intention that has occurred within the organisation and which is embodied within its approach to temporary exhibitions such as *Out of Line*. 'Until five years ago we wanted people to leave taking on board a number of statements – the world according to the Anne Frank House. Now we put questions at the centre. The aim is to develop both compassion and critical thinking' (Vallely 2002: 6).

It is also interesting to consider the extent to which responses to *Out of Line* and *Free2Choose* are framed by the emotionally charged visit to the Secret Annex. Many visitors make a connection between the message offered by the first part of their visit to the House and the contemporary issues in the exhibition, illustrating the museum's potential to provoke, and perhaps to inform, discussion and reflection. For example, Freddie, a web developer from England in his late forties, said:

> I think what the museum is trying to do is to give the whole picture, both political, historical, emotional. And the last section, where we went in and it was asking you to vote, I think is a good way of expressing that, in fact, this is one pebble dropped in a stream in 1945 but it's ongoing, it's still with us. We've still got prejudice, we've still got war, look at Ireland, it's still here, we're still living through it. Although we don't suffer from it, other people do. I think it's a good conscience pricker, you come away thinking 'how should I feel, how should I react if that happened to me?'

It is interesting to note that, after the fieldwork for this study was undertaken, the House continued to update the exhibition introducing new content including some especially controversial examples which turn the spotlight directly on recent high-profile events in Holland and on increasingly apparent tensions in Dutch society. Whilst some researchers have argued that the Dutch reputation for tolerance masks a rather different reality,[2] the image of Holland as a harmonious and accepting society, at ease with its multicultural demography, has nevertheless endured until relatively recently. In the last few years, events that have received high-profile international media coverage have undoubtedly damaged this reputation and sparked national debates around immigration, integration and freedom of speech. In 2004, the Anne Frank House introduced a scenario into *Out of Line* that focused on Pim Fortuyn, the Dutch politician, murdered in 2001, who believed that Article 1 of the Dutch Constitution which concerns anti-discrimination, needed to be abolished. A further scenario considers the controversial attacks on Islam and, in particular, its treatment of women, by a Dutch member of parliament, Ayaan Hirsi Ali. As the Anne Frank House later noted in its 2004 Annual Report, 'This particular addition to the exhibition became startlingly timely in November when Dutch filmmaker Theo

van Gogh was murdered and politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali had to go into hiding because of her controversial statements' (Anne Frank House 2005: 13).

While many visitors enjoy these exhibitions, spending some considerable time working through each of the examples, the museum acknowledges that not all visitors feel that they complement the experience of visiting the Secret Annex (van Kooten 2003). Indeed some visitors, as we shall see, feel that the Anne Frank House (and indeed museums in general) are no place to address contentious contemporary issues.

Getting the message?

Visitors at both sites, interviewed at the end of their visit, were asked – 'Do you feel the museum is trying to communicate any particular message? If so, what would you say that is?' Responses to this question took two main forms. For some visitors, the presence of a 'message' implied partiality, intentionality and manipulation, characteristics which they did not generally associate with the idea of the museum. Although perceptions that the museum was not attempting to convey a particular message were evident in the data from visitor interviews at both sites, they were most frequently and forcefully expressed at the Anne Frank House. For example, Clive, a teacher in his late forties from Middlesex, commented:

> I saw it as information rather than a particular message. It was saying something about what it was like to be in these streets, looking out on that canal as a child, not being able to speak, not being able to flush the toilets, no fresh air, so it does bring about what tyranny and oppression might be like; occupation by another group of people bringing their ideas, what it might be like to be dominated, oppressed. Those kinds of things.

Nigel, a retired school principal visiting from Australia, similarly questioned the idea that the museum attempted to influence visitors in a purposive manner:

> I didn't think that it was trying to say anything to us. I felt it was presenting things as they were and then, especially with the last bit, getting people to make up their own mind. I don't think there was any sort of brainwashing, it was just presented as it is or as it was.

And Nathalie, a computer technician from Germany, stated:

> No. I think it's pretty neutral. You can make up your own mind. It really only shows how it was. Maybe you're led to a certain opinion, but you're not influenced really, you're just told the facts.

At St Mungo's, although visitors were more likely to identify the presence of a particular message, some nevertheless expressed sentiments which echoed those above. Anna, a young student from Finland, stated:

> Maybe the whole idea of this museum is, in my point of view, to offer people information and maybe stop people for a little while – you know to understand other people's point of view because they come from a different background and different religions and wars have been happening for religious reasons. I don't know, I didn't catch a particular message. I can't say one thing.

Further on in the interview, visitors were asked about their perceptions of museums (in general and in comparison with other forms of media) as providers of knowledge and information. Here, the idea that museums are generally viewed as unbiased and reliable (especially in comparison with other media sources) resurfaced. I return to this particular issue, and the implications it holds for understanding the role of museums in countering prejudice, more fully in chapter 5.

In contrast with the responses which questioned the existence of a particular message, many other visitors (at both sites) appeared comfortable with the idea that the museums were attempting to put forward particular viewpoints. Many visitors readily identified at least some key features of the intended messages. Typical responses at the Anne Frank House included:

> I think the message is that the smallest things may lead to big things, like, who would have imagined a small thing of just discriminating against people would lead to a whole of bunch of people dying because of it. I guess that's what the message is, that small things can lead to big things.

> Don't repeat what's happened. I think that's an important message. You can't let it happen again. Be aware of the kind of society you want to live in.

> I think possibly there's an anti-discrimination message that runs through the whole exhibition.

And at St Mungo's, many visitors similarly identified themes linked to the museum's intended message of mutual understanding and respect, although these were often inflected in different ways:

> Glasgow is a multicultural society and having it all under one roof is kind of saying we're all neighbours and should all try and get on even though we're all from different backgrounds and religions.

> It's a multicultural country. We actually spoke about it earlier on. We used to say Great Britain is a Christian country and, to a degree, I believe that but because there's that much different cultures within it, I think this place is trying to learn people about other cultures, other religions.

> Well, I suppose it's trying to say we should all live in harmony, you know, there are all these religions in the world. Yeah, just express yourself and people try and express themselves in different ways and there's not a wrong way or a right way, just try and get on together. We shouldn't be pushing against each other. I think that's what it's trying to say.

Whilst many visitors may have recognised and acknowledged at least some of the main features of the museums' intended messages, it would be naïve to equate this with audience compliance or consensus or to suggest that these messages were internalized or appropriated as their own. As we shall see in due course, textual determinism cannot simply be read off from widespread audience recognition of the key elements inscribed within the exhibitions. Indeed, the discussion in chapter 4 reveals how visitors engaged with the messages they recognised in variable, complex and unpredictable ways.

The visiting agenda

I was initially surprised at the ease with which many visitors 'correctly' identified the main features of the museums' intended messages, not because I questioned the capacity for audiences to understand and interpret what they saw but because, as the interviews unfolded, it became clear that most had approached their visit with little or no awareness of the sites' atypical, socially driven purposes.

Most interviewees linked their motivation for visiting to leisure-based agendas – the opportunity to see a particular painting, simply somewhere to spend free time or somewhere to share with visiting friends or relatives – rather than a conscious desire to learn more about different cultures or to engage with issues of prejudice. Significantly, most approached their visit to the Anne Frank House or St Mungo's in much the same way as they would a visit to any other museum.[3] At St Mungo's Museum, the allure of the famous Salvador Dali painting, 'Christ of St John of the Cross' (Fig. 3.6), proved especially powerful.[4]

> I'm visiting with my parents, they're up to visit Glasgow for a week. We knew about the Salvador Dali painting and my Dad wanted to

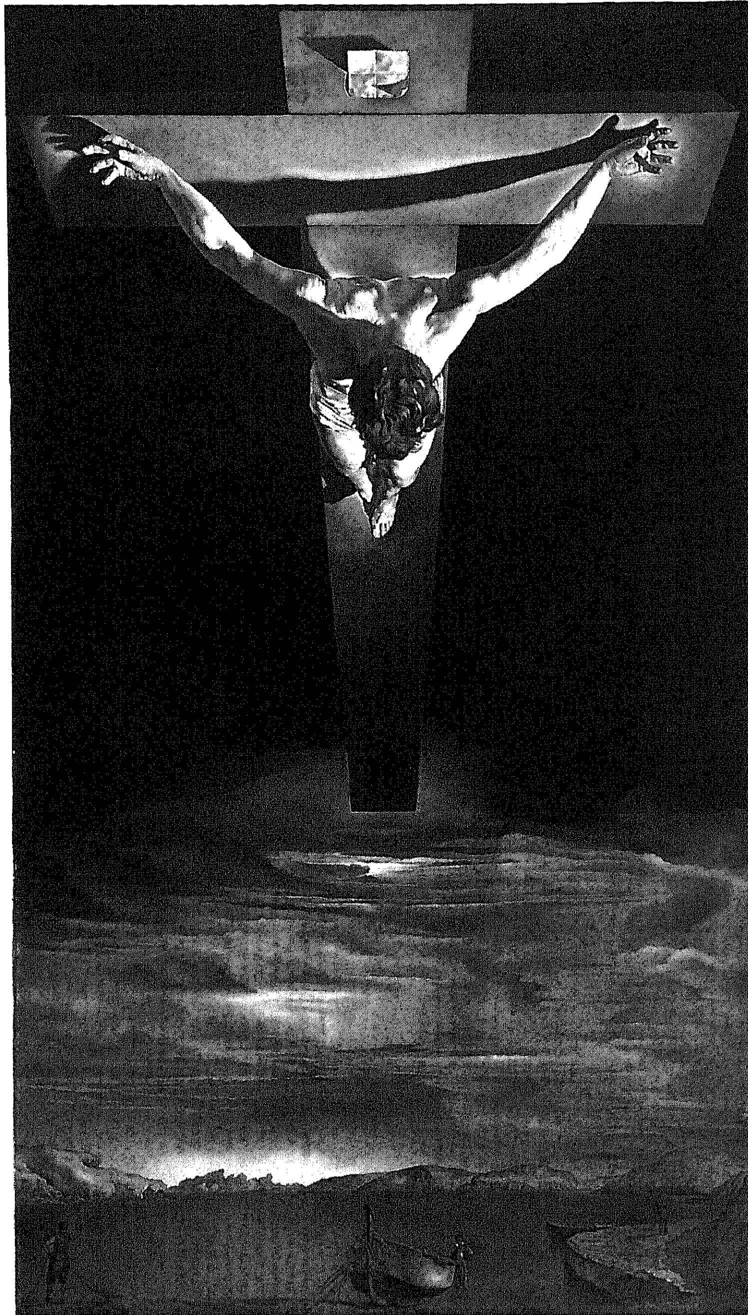

Figure 3.6: 'Christ of St John of the Cross' by Salvador Dali

Source: By kind permission of Glasgow Museums

> see it and my Mum and I wanted to look round the museum and visit the cathedral
>
> (Ruth, a housewife from Glasgow).

Jim, an accountant on holiday with his wife, said:

> We were on the tour bus and were going to come back and see the cathedral but I remembered a friend had mentioned the Salvador Dali. They said it was in here so we wanted to come and see it.

Several visitors were less purposive, more casual in their decision to visit St Mungo's:

> The receptionist at the hotel ... we asked what was interesting to go and have a look at and she suggested coming here. It was well worth it.
>
> (Valerie, visiting with her daughter)

Eunice, a woman who worked in the catering industry and lived in Bradford, England, was visiting Glasgow by herself:

> I didn't know the museum was here, I came to look at the cathedral so it was a shock to find this here.

Many first-time visitors to St Mungo's appeared to come with rather inchoate expectations, with a considerable degree of uncertainty about what a museum of religious life and art might contain. In contrast, visitors to the Anne Frank House tended to have very clear expectations of what they would encounter. These expectations, no doubt, were drawn from wide-ranging sources – the diaries which many visitors mentioned that they had read, conversations with acquaintances who had previously visited and a multitude of documentaries and dramatic productions based on Anne Frank's life. Whilst a significant proportion of visitors to St Mungo's had made a relatively spontaneous decision to 'drop in', visitors to the Anne Frank House had generally made a more purposeful and conscious decision to visit and many had gone to considerable efforts to do so (Fig. 3.7). This difference is, in all likelihood, a function of the sites' different circumstances. While St Mungo's is free of charge and visitors are unlikely to be required to queue to gain admission, the Anne Frank House is a charging museum which generally requires standing in line for a significant amount of time to gain entry. The iconic status of Anne Frank can account for most visitors' decisions to visit the House:

Figure 3.7: Visitors very often queue around the building to gain admission to the Anne Frank House

> I've always wanted to come here after reading the book ... just amazing and when I found out that the house was here and there was an exhibition, I was very interested to come and see.
>
> (Lindsey, a carer from Sydney, visiting with friends)

> It's well publicised. To be honest, that's all there is to it. We got the 'Amsterdam Pass' and there's lots of other museums that I've never heard of that are probably just as interesting but this is the one that's publicised worldwide. We've got the Diary, so ... and that's all there is to it.
>
> (Robert, from Derby, visiting with his family)

In some ways, its unrivalled status on the tourist map of Amsterdam can sometimes mean that people feel almost obliged to visit the House. Betty, a retired schoolteacher from Colorado, visiting with her friend, explained:

> It's part of history. You come to Amsterdam and you go to Anne Frank's. Everybody goes to Anne Frank's house.

Similarly, Simon, a teacher from Germany, commented:

> Anne Frank is well known and maybe it's a duty to visit this house. I read about her and I'm also a history teacher so maybe for me it's just absolutely necessary.

Encountering the unexpected

Visitors, then, approached their museum experiences with wide-ranging motivations and intentions. Only a very small minority of interviewees (to whom I shall return in chapter 5) offered reasons for visiting which suggested a purposive desire to gain a better understanding of cultural differences. Despite this, many appeared receptive to unanticipated, even unsettling aspects of the visit. Deborah, an office manager from Tyneside, England, visiting with her daughter, stated:

> I just came to look at the [Salvador Dali] painting so that was the main reason, but I quite enjoyed looking at the different religions, at different perceptions of life, death and marriage and everything on the same floor as the painting, that was quite interesting.

Similarly Michael, a community worker in his fifties visiting the Anne Frank House from the United States, observed:

> You come out of here uneasy and I think that's good. People don't ordinarily like to go to places where you come out uneasy but I think there's something attractive about this little girl, young woman, that draws you in, seduces you in and then you say, 'I can't leave now I've got to face something that I maybe don't want to.'

However, some other visitors were distinctly uncomfortable with some aspects of the exhibition encounter which were at odds with their expectations and their views on what was appropriate in the museum context. Tom, a telecommunications engineer in his fifties and his wife, Lynette, an educational administrator, discussed their reactions to the *Out of Line* exhibition:

> TOM: Clearly there's a greater freedom or acceptance over here in Holland of gays and lesbians and their rights under the law. I don't know if that's progressive and the rest of the world is catching up or not but...
> LYNETTE (*interjecting*): I thought it was out of place. I suppose it was a shock, it was out of context of having gone round in a sombre atmosphere, the lighting and all that keeps it low key and then suddenly you're sat in a theatre and you're seeing a discussion on the rights and

> wrongs of gays and lesbians in the context of the Muslim religions. I thought it was out of context.

At St Mungo's, the section of the *Gallery of Religious Life* that deals with the 'Coming of Age' includes a photograph depicting a young girl accompanied by the following text:

> Ritual removal of the clitoris, Cairo, Egypt, 1980s. Female genital mutilation affects over 70 million in Africa and the Middle East. The World Health Organisation has condemned the practice, and it has recently been outlawed by many governments including those of Egypt and Mali.

This particular exhibit has consistently provoked responses from visitors, many of whom are uncomfortable with discovering it in the museum. One visitor pinned their comments to the gallery's 'talkback boards' on 20 April 2003.

> What purpose does the exhibition of the picture of a sexually mutilated girl in the 'coming of age' section serve? How would you like to be tortured, photographed while it all happens and then being publicly displayed? Would you like to see your face up there? It totally destroys the credibility of the whole exhibition. It's bad enough that these things happen. Do you have to display them and condone them? I am disgusted.

A number of interviewees also commented on the photograph but opinion as to whether this was an appropriate topic for the museum to include was, not surprisingly, divided. Comments made by Eleanor, a retired anthropologist from Leicester, England, suggest support for the museum's decision to address this disturbing issue:

> I mean that, to me, will be a lasting image. Do you know the photograph I'm referring to? I have always just thought that was the most appalling event in a girl's life and to actually see a photograph of it happening ... is even more shocking than reading about it and that it still goes on and there must be terrible infection and death caused by it quite apart from the horrible event ... but I mean it's a good thing to see isn't it?

In contrast, a number of responses revealed some visitors' discomfort at unexpectedly encountering difficult or painful subjects within the museum. These responses, collected during the period of my study, were not unusual. In an article in the *Museums Journal* less than a year after the museum

opened, Mark O'Neill (1994: 31) highlighted the photograph as an especially provocative and controversial element of the displays:

> [A] major controversy associated with the museum was the way it handled the issue of female genital mutilation. Two local feminist groups issued a press release saying that this was a gender not a religious issue and that the museum was trivialising it by treating it in the section of the museum dealing with coming of age. They picketed the museum the next day, and argued that we should remove a photograph showing a young girl immediately after a clitoridectomy had been performed, her face full of pain, puzzlement and betrayal. Of the many drafts of the label, the final version used the term circumcision and did not condemn the practice; the photograph spoke volumes. After an hour-long discussion on the steps of the museum the protestors agreed to meet with museum staff more formally. While the staff were prepared to revise the label, they were certain that they had the right, indeed the duty, to deal with the issue.

Conclusion

The St Mungo Museum and the Anne Frank House present ambitious missions that reflect a shared belief in the idea of the museum as a force for positive societal change. Although the topics they address and the interpretive devices they employ are in many ways distinctive, both sites present exhibitions that confront highly emotive and politicised issues. As a consequence they are perhaps more likely to attract criticism than other museums which very often side-step difficult issues, especially where these relate to topics which continue to provoke divided public opinion.

The exhibitions they present, while stimulating debate (and, indeed, explicitly inviting visitors to articulate and contribute their own opinions), are nevertheless underpinned by (and attempt to privilege and engender support for) concepts of social justice and equal human rights. While the museums are unapologetically uncompromising in their adoption of particular moral standpoints, at the same time, they also appear appropriately cautious of claiming that the values and positions that they espouse are straightforwardly communicated to, and adopted by, audiences. Rather, they are concerned to engage visitors in dialogue and to challenge them to think about complex and challenging questions.

The exhibition encounter, as we shall see, generates wide-ranging reactions among visitors but to what extent, if at all, might these responses constitute the combating of prejudice? In the next two chapters I address this central question through detailed analysis and interpretation of the

conversations and written comments of visitors, stimulated by their engagement with the exhibitions I have described. I draw, in particular, on theories that have emerged from sociology and cultural studies to interrogate processes of reception and to understand the relationship between diverse media forms and their audiences. In doing so, my intention is to explore the social consequences and effects, as they relate to questions of prejudice, of visitors' engagement with museums.

3 PURPOSE, MEDIA AND MESSAGE

1 The 'One Scotland: no place for racism' website quotes Jack McConnell, head of the devolved Scottish government: 'This campaign promotes a Scotland of many cultures. It highlights the need for all of us to examine critically our attitudes. It urges us to challenge racism, whatever form it takes' (Scottish Executive 2005).
2 See, for example, Essed 1991.
3 It might be argued that visitors to museums which more overtly convey their social purpose and their moral position to potential audiences prior to arrival through their title, publicity materials and reputation (for example, peace museums, tolerance museums and human rights museums) might, in doing so, filter out those audiences who feel that these kinds of places are 'not for them'. In contrast, the Anne Frank House, St Mungo's and many other museums with social missions which are not necessarily evident prior to visiting might, to a greater or lesser extent, 'catch visitors unawares' and may therefore reach some of those who might otherwise self-exclude.
4 In 2006, the painting was relocated to Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery, part of Glasgow Museums, where it had previously been on display before St Mungo's was created.

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MUSEUMS, PREJUDICE AND THE REFRAMING OF DIFFERENCE

Richard Sandell

LONDON AND NEW YORK