

ENGAGING WITH PASTS IN THE PRESENT: Curators, Communities, and Exhibition Practice

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ABSTRACT

Arising from a one-day symposium entitled “Ancient and Modern: Exhibiting the Past in the Present” at the University of East Anglia, United Kingdom, the theme for this special issue of *Museum Anthropology* focuses on contemporary museum practice. The contributors are specifically interested in the challenges of exhibiting “pasts” in the “present” while doing justice to the historical and modern peoples and cultures represented in exhibitions. The authors also explore related ideas about collaboration with source communities and how collecting practices have determined what is considered valuable and thus worthy of display in public museums. [museum practice, collaboration, source communities, ethnographic collections]

Museum exhibitions are always “contested terrains” involving decisions about how to choose, display, and interpret objects and themes based on cultural assumptions that vary over time, place, and institutional context (Lavine and Karp 1991:1). In recent decades, exhibitions have been the stage for “confrontation, experimentation, and debate,” often presenting audiences with new ideas based on individual research and fieldwork (Cameron 1972:197; see also Basu and Macdonald 2007). How this research translates into a practical application, such as an exhibition, depends on the nature of collaboration among curators, museum staff, and other partners during the planning stages, a process that can itself be a kind of research (Bouquet 2001). When this collaboration happens between Euro-American curators and indigenous artists, consultants, and curators on exhibitions involving the latter’s own art and cultural heritage, traditional exhibition practices are challenged and new ways of interpreting cultural “difference” emerge.¹

This special issue of *Museum Anthropology* focuses on contemporary museum practice, and, specifically, the challenges of exhibiting the “past” in the “present” while doing justice to the peoples and

cultures represented in exhibitions. The essays also explore related ideas about collaboration with source communities and how collecting practices determine what museum professionals and collectors, past and present, consider valuable and thus worthy of display in public museums.² It is necessary at the outset to acknowledge that the term “source communities” is inherently problematic. It can mean different things to different people, including members of so-called source communities who may not see themselves as belonging to such an entity. It also runs the risk of being, or appearing to be, patronizing. It is used in this volume, in the absence of another suitable general term, to indicate an awareness among some curators that there are people connected biologically or culturally to the original makers and transactors of the materials in question. These curators recognize that such individuals may often have legitimate views that could be shared with a broader public, which leads to an interest in engaging with these communities.

The theme for this volume arose from a one-day symposium entitled “Ancient and Modern: Exhibiting the Past in the Present,” which took place on March 18, 2010, at the Sainsbury Research Unit for the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas (SRU) at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, England. The symposium developed as the result of an invitation to Nelson Graburn, Professor Emeritus at the University of California at Berkeley and Curator of North American Ethnology at the Phoebe Hearst Museum of Anthropology, to give a seminar at the SRU. He proposed to speak about the implications of attempting to exhibit traditional Native Alaskan material in the present, which was of interest to museum professionals and others involved with collections management and care. It was decided that a symposium could be organized with Graburn as keynote speaker accompanied by seven additional museum professionals and academics. They were invited to discuss their experiences of exhibiting the “past” in the “present” with exhibitions they had recently curated in Europe and North America involving ethnographic material from Africa, Oceania, and the Americas.

The speakers included Anne-Marie Bouttiaux, Curator and Head of the Ethnography Division at the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren,

Belgium; Henry Drewal, Professor of Art History and African-American Studies, and Adjunct Curator at the Chazen Museum of Art at the University of Wisconsin at Madison; Magali Mélandri, Assistant Curator for Oceania at the Musée du quai Branly in Paris; Wayne Modest of the Horniman Museum, London (now Head of the Curatorial Department at the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam); and representing the Sainsbury Research Unit at the University of East Anglia, Steven Hooper (Director of the SRU and Professor of Visual Arts), Karen Jacobs (Lecturer in the Arts of the Pacific) and myself (Ph.D. candidate in the arts of Mexico). Our presentations explored the different challenges involved in displaying, researching, and caring for ethnographic collections, and reflected on why these collections exist, or, in some cases, do not exist (see Modest, this volume).

With these concerns in mind, the original conference papers were reworked and submitted for this special issue of *Museum Anthropology*. Each contributor is mindful of the fact that behind all these material collections are the people who made and used them, both the historical groups and their living descendants. This empathy is clearly a theme that unites the articles as the authors discuss their experiences collaborating with source communities and explore the ways we as guest curators and museum professionals value and understand art and material culture from these source communities. In the articles that discuss specific exhibitions, collaboration of this kind affected the author's vision for the way the exhibit was to be organized and presented as well as how the museum visitors interacted with and made sense of the works on display. Therefore, in choosing a theme for the volume, it seemed fitting to examine the role of empathy and engagement with source communities during the exhibition process within contemporary museum practices. That is not to say that the authors are unaware of the larger sphere within which they are operating—namely, as the inheritors of privilege and power in a Western museum context formerly associated with colonialism, racism, and exploitation—that continues to provoke contestation and debate. The specific case studies presented here reflect the larger issues that concern museums in general. The authors speak to the ways museums are broadening their perspectives and dealing with their colonial past by working with the material heritage of

collectors and the peoples from whom the objects were originally collected. They understand that their role as curators is not simply to encourage empathy and engagement but rather to transform this larger, inherited past from within (see O'Hanlon and Welsch 2001; Stocking 1985). While engagement is not the central theme of all the articles, it is a recurring discussion among them and an important challenge for museum professionals (whether indigenous or not) who work with or plan exhibitions of the material cultures of others. For these reasons, I would like to explore it further in this introduction.

THE CONTEXT

In relation to the discussions that occurred during the original "Ancient and Modern" symposium, the contributors investigate the histories of collecting materials from the "other"; new methods for exhibiting, enlivening, and contextualizing ethnographic material; and the benefits and drawbacks of working collaboratively on exhibitions with members of source communities. Collaboration is a timely subject, perhaps now more than ever, as museums are redefining their place and purpose in response to an increasingly globalized, pluralistic, and connected world (Phillips 2003:155). This has prompted some museums to reinstall entire permanent gallery spaces in their desire to move toward greater inclusivity of native populations (Phillips 2011:252–276). Museum staff recognize that source communities are now among the key audiences for exhibitions about their own cultural histories, and relationships between them and museum professionals are being built on knowledge sharing, the documentation of that knowledge, and sometimes the repatriation of cultural artifacts to communities (see Graburn this volume; Peers and Brown 2003:1). The formation of relationships of trust and cooperation, rather than those of exclusion or superiority, has also influenced anthropological methodology, ethnographers, and the communities they study (Clifford 1997:208).

Community engagement and collaboration as a museum practice is a relatively recent development that is quickly becoming the standard, especially in ethnographic exhibitions. This engagement follows what was known as the "crisis of representation," a turning point in philosophy and art theory that had a

major impact in several disciplines, especially post-modern anthropology (Baudrillard 1994; Clifford and Marcus 1986). In anthropology this “crisis” provoked an increased sensitivity for questioning the authority of modern ethnographers to represent cultural “others” (Clifford 1988; Marcus and Fischer 1986). As Basu and Macdonald point out, “the very concept of otherness [was] perceived as a construction of the discipline’s own practices” (2007:6).

James Clifford (1988) was one of the harbingers of the “predicaments” of representing the “other.” He was concerned with how anthropology and museum displays have a tendency to freeze the history of indigenous peoples in a timeless past or present, precluding the possibility that they might ever find creative ways to respond to modernity and carve out their own futures. Clifford was particularly opposed to the idea that there were essentially two ways to represent indigenous peoples: as premodern, ahistorical, and traditional; or as modern peoples assimilated into Western culture and thus “inauthentic” cultural representatives (Clifford 1988:213, 273). Often paired with historical artifacts or photographs, these dichotomies frequently “serve to reify rather than challenge notions of historical authority” regarding what native art and culture should look like (Mithlo 2003:157; see also Chaat Smith 2009).

Engagement and collaboration have contributed to the modernist museum’s shift to the more politicized sphere that Hooper-Greenhill (2002:152–153) calls the “post-museum,” a term that denotes a process rather than a building and one that Phillips believes imparts a “sense of rupture with historical traditions of museology” (2003:161). The growing literature on museums’ collaboration with source communities is wide ranging; many scholars debate the merits of traditional ethnographic displays organized by non-native curators as opposed to the relinquishing of curatorial authority in community-led exhibitions. They question just how much collaboration is appropriate or desirable for an accurate portrayal of culture, which can range from full-scale intervention to shared authority and organization to minor consultation. Some trends include the decentralization of authority and power sharing and efforts to move toward dialogue with communities as compared with the monologism of the earlier curatorial vision (Ames 2003; Fienup-Riordan 1999;

Salvador 1997); the creation of indigenous advisory committees (Kahn 2000); and more transparency in the exhibition-making process (Bal 2007; Weibel and Latour 2007). This also includes giving due credit to all collaborators and revealing information that may be contradictory to a certain “vision” of the past (Bouquet 2001:182; Phillips 2003:165–166; also see Phillips 2011:272–274).

These steps have helped many museums re-establish themselves as places of research, with the focus being more on the process of making an exhibition instead of the blockbuster potential of the product (Bouquet 2001:178; Phillips 2003:158, 161). This includes the activities organized throughout the collaborative process, namely, educational workshops and lectures, performances, museological training for source community partners, and, in some cases, ongoing political support to protect collaborators’ cultural heritage and rights (Phillips 2003:161). This kind of “agency” found in the activities and relationships between people, between people and objects, and between people and spaces (Gell 1998), is fundamental to reflexive museology. It allows for other processes that can communicate an exhibition’s messages to the public rather than just the physical arrangement of objects and their explanatory text. The museum thus becomes what Pratt (1992) called a “contact zone,” where Clifford notes “peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations” (1997:192). Finding ways to translate these messages in a coherent way that accurately reflects the changing and fluid nature of the cultural situation in question is the challenge, as opposed to creating a facsimile or “mechanical reproduction” of some ideal version of the original (Asad 1986:156; Benjamin 2008). In collaborative exhibitions, this translation can become complicated when competing agendas are at stake and the compromises made blur messages, create contradictions, or otherwise lead to simplistic conclusions about a people and their history (Kahn 2000:71; Peers and Brown 2003:11; Phillips 2003:166).

Phillips (2003:158) finds that there is no single model for collaborative exhibitions; rather, they are based on different levels of collaboration. She identifies two possible types, the community-based (decentralization of curatorial authority; the museum serves

as the venue and the curator and staff facilitate the wishes of the source community in designing and organizing the project) and the multivocal (where museum staff and community members work together to present multiple perspectives and reflections on the same cultural subject). Some scholars argue that adding multiple voices is not enough in the context of the “new museology,” the discourse they use to explore social relationships and stimulate consciousness regarding the ethnography of representation (cf. Vergo 2000:21). They believe the full-scale collaboration found in the community-led exhibition and participation at every level of the museum is necessary for cultural, moral, and historical accuracy (Bouquet 2001; Kahn 2000:71; Peers and Brown 2003:2, 7–8; but see Dubin 2002:98; Zimmerman 2010). While critics of multivocal exhibitions might argue that there are too many different voices claiming authority over history, multivocality may also overcome some stereotypical attitudes by acknowledging that everyone has some knowledge to share (Phillips 2003:162). Where multivocality can produce either harmony or cacophony, community-led projects can likewise reveal either common purposes or hotly disputed interpretations. However, both types of collaborative exhibitions may help forge new and long-term relationships, and allow fresh interpretations of material collections and cultural histories (Peers and Brown 2003:9–10).

Nevertheless, more accountability by museum staff and increased accessibility to collections for source community members helps lead to positive changes that pave the way for greater engagement with source communities, empowering them while educating the wider public. But we also must not be naïve in thinking that more engagement and collaboration are the only way forward in combating curatorial elitism and prejudice. Over-romanticizing source communities can do equal disservice to the realities of peoples’ lives and to cultural productions in the past and the present. Current exhibition-making practices, when they are good, are as much exploratory journeys as finite objects. The essays in this volume reveal different journeys in different cultural situations that exemplify how empathetic engagement with collaborators and the subject matter of an exhibition can lead to instructive and productive outcomes.

THE ESSAYS

The contributors to this volume made great efforts to include diverse voices, particularly indigenous voices, in their work through collaboration, fieldwork, interviews, archival research, publication, and other preparations. This is not tokenism (see Dubin 2002:98) but humanization through the attribution of information and histories to formerly nameless and marginalized peoples (see Herle 2003:201). The case studies on specific exhibitions relating to a particular native group or cultural region (whether historic, contemporary, or both) present the collaborative approaches used, the new museological strategies guiding design and organization, and the fundamental goals or questions raised in these endeavors. Despite the geographical distances between the contributors, based in Europe or North America, and the source communities they worked with in the Pacific, Africa, Mexico, and Alaska, these curators found creative ways to engage with native and diaspora artists, scholars, curators, public officials, performers, and other community members. The strength of this diverse grouping lies in the wide range of issues in contemporary museum practice and collecting histories that they address across several world regions.

Steven Hooper and Karen Jacobs, along with guest co-authors George Nuku and Maia Jessop, examine how early collecting and exchange practices between the original makers and the Europeans who collected their objects determined notions of value cross-culturally. Using their exhibition *Pacific Encounters: Art and Divinity in Polynesia 1760–1860* at the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts in 2006 as their case study, they examine how engagement helped the descendants of these groups to establish new relationships and feelings of kinship during the exhibition process. The “past” represented by the 18th- and 19th-century artworks or *taonga* displayed contain spiritual and ancestral power, which is still relevant for many modern Polynesians. The presence of Polynesian artists, curators, public officials, and dancers helped ritually activate this spiritual essence through public and private ceremonies, performances, artist residencies, school tours, and other activities. The turn from the presentation of culture to its “enactment” resulted in an exhibition that was “transformed from a space of representation into a space of encounter” (Basu and Macdonald 2007:14; see also Weibel and Latour

2007). However, what remains at the center of the larger “contact zone” of the gallery space are the collections themselves, which become a kind of “contact zone” as they renew their role as mediators of cultural knowledge, history, and relationships (Peers and Brown 2003:5).

Magali Mélandri seeks to answer at what point we can separate the “contemporary” from the “traditional,” especially when the subject of inquiry is the art of an indigenous culture. Mélandri sought to address this question as co-curator of the collaborative exhibition *Kwoma Red* at the Musée du quai Branly in Paris in 2008. The exhibition featured the paintings of creation myths by three contemporary Kwoma artists from the Sepik River region of Papua New Guinea, as well as older works representing Kwoma mythology collected during the 20th century. Through a careful chronicling of French Museum practices and a detailed narrative about the planning of *Kwoma Red*, Mélandri shows how the exhibition was built on collaboration with the artists and others from their Kwoma community, an important move that challenged established curator-led exhibitions of ethnographic “others” that until very recently characterized museum practice and anthropology in France. In addition to efforts to include members of the source community, a goal of the exhibition was to show how “traditional” myths are part of an ever-changing present. Adapting to the political, technological, and social forces of the modern world has always been the nature of Kwoma art, whose aesthetic is based in older styles but is constantly evolving to meet contemporary demands (cf. Clifford 1988:207 on Igbo art). The artists are thus both “traditional” and “contemporary” as they not only embody the “changing state of awareness” of their present historical moment (Mélandri, this volume) but also demonstrate through their work the necessity of communicating Kwoma values and older forms of knowledge to new audiences.

Anne-Marie Bouttiaux discusses the importance of multi-sensory awareness at masquerades among the Guro of the Ivory Coast in Africa. Bouttiaux’s fieldwork at these masquerades became one of the subjects of an exhibition she curated called *Persona, Masks of Africa: Identities Hidden and Revealed*. In addition to other masks and costumes from regions south of the Sahara, she displayed a number of Guro

masks, the designs of which have changed little over many years. Guro dancers, however, in their efforts to create a “persona” and distinguish themselves from their competition, incorporate popular night club or street dance moves into an otherwise traditional and choreographed performance. The effect is mesmerizing; it was this kind of artist–audience relationship through performance that Bouttiaux wanted to establish in the gallery setting to evoke the Guro “voice” in these vibrant performances. However, she argues that the “deadening effect” museums have on the objects of living cultures is severe; passive observation by gallery viewers cannot replace actively experiencing the dynamism of a masquerade. She finds that attempts to enliven the masks through careful display strategies and the inclusion of additional media from her fieldwork (e.g., films, photographs, sound) in some ways only further decontextualized them and placed them in a timeless past or present. She explores how contemporary exhibition practices and display can be addressed to avoid the “othering” of a society whose modern masquerades represent the convergence of urban and rural culture.

From his years of fieldwork in the Republic of Benin, Nigeria, Ghana, and Togo, Henry Drewal has observed and participated in the interactive performance tradition known as *call and response*, a kind of awareness and dialogic engagement in ritual events and daily life. As guest curator of the traveling exhibition *Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and its Diaspora* (Mami Wata is pidgin English for “Mother Water”), Drewal, like Bouttiaux, wanted to utilize this kind of multi-sensory experience, or “sensiotics,” as he calls it, to engage sight, sound, smell, touch, and even more personal senses such as emotions and feelings. The activation of these senses was the foundation for encouraging dialogue between viewers and the works on display, learning about the history of different historical representations of Mami Wata and other water spirits in Africa, providing a metaphor for a history of slavery made possible by water transport, and reflecting on how water usage is affecting the health of the planet for which we are all accountable. Different sections of the exhibition were designed to provoke different kinds of responses, creating an active and interactive space for museum visitors. Historical and

contemporary imagery provided multiple “voices” or perspectives of Mami Wata, but it was the final section that truly formed a link between past and present. Several current African and African diaspora artists were invited to install their contemporary interpretations of Mami Wata, with their reflections about her providing the basis for much of the catalogue text. Their interaction and collaboration with Drewal during the planning stages of the exhibition included preparing grant applications, delineating the essential goals of the exhibition, and planning an exit piece—all aimed at reaching diverse audiences. But as with any exhibition, trying to engage viewers is a major challenge. For Drewal, this engagement is crucial because it is the gateway to deeper understanding, reflection, and insight based on disparate personal histories and experiences.

Building on his several decades of fieldwork among Native Alaskan peoples, Nelson Graburn gives a detailed account of an exhibition that in fact never materialized. He reveals how this project, because of the various obstacles that precluded it from ever being displayed, was a learning opportunity for him and his team of organizers in working collaboratively with Native Alaskans, themselves serving as co-curators. Graburn situates the specific changing exhibition and collections practices at the Hearst Museum within broader trends, including the introduction of national repatriation legislation, the establishment of independently run museums by native peoples, and the upward trend of collaborative museum–community exhibitions, to show how these important turning points have helped indigenous peoples begin to confront and come to terms with the sometimes traumatic events of their colonial past. Although never exhibited, planning for the exhibit involved local Native Alaskan artists and scholars in the process of making an exhibition and put them in contact with cultural artifacts long held in museum storerooms. This engagement was instrumental in establishing positive relationships between the Hearst Museum and Native Alaskan communities. The re-introduction of communities to formerly inaccessible material heritage and documents (e.g., photographs) not only provides evidence of one’s heritage and cultural identity but can also “prompt the re-learning of forgotten knowledge and skills, [and] provide opportunities to piece together fragmented historical narratives”

(Peers and Brown 2003:6; see also Herle 2003:201). Collaboration with community members in the exhibition process, particularly in the planning and interpretation, did just that and also proved to be an enlightening experience for the museum staff who were involved.

I look at the tensions between the “traditional” and the contemporary by describing my experience co-curating an exhibition of Maya tourist art. *Crafting Maya Identity: Contemporary Wood Sculptures from the Puuc Region of Yucatán, Mexico*, presented the woodcarvings of four Maya artisans with whom I collaborated during several years of field research in preparation for the exhibition. A major goal of the exhibition was to show how these “tourist arts” were culturally and aesthetically complex modern Maya sculptures that, along with other relegated examples of tourist art, deserve more art historical attention. The exhibition also provided evidence (via video interviews, personal testimonies in signage, and the exhibition catalogue, et cetera) that the production of these kinds of tourist arts promotes the continuation of traditional ideas that contribute to ongoing notions of a “Maya” identity. The presence of the artisans at all three of the U.S. and Mexican venues where the exhibition traveled between 2009 and 2011 served as further evidence, as they spoke about their identity and heritage in gallery talks and tours, gave woodcarving demonstrations to art students, and had conversations with school children, donors, newspaper and radio reporters, museum and academic staff, and the general public. With the public profile of these artisans suddenly raised to a level that contrasted with the relatively quiet lives they lead in rural Yucatán, there was concern that they may have felt as though they were on display. Thus, following the final leg of the exhibition in Yucatán in 2011, I spoke to each of them at length, asking what were highs and lows, successes, and failures. While some aspects of the process might have been handled differently, the challenges, problems, and unexpected situations that arose were also learning experiences for all involved.

The historical exchange relations and collecting practices of Europeans, central to *Pacific Encounters*, are also central to Wayne Modest’s investigation of how and why we value what is now called ethnographic material. Modest provides a thoughtful

reflection on what happens when things are not valued enough to be collected in the first place and the implications of this lacuna for the future. Looking at broader concepts of “ancient” and “modern,” Modest examines the historical attitudes that shaped early collecting practices in Jamaica. As a former curator of a Jamaican museum, he presents an insightful and revisionist argument about this scantily researched area of Jamaican history. During colonial times, Jamaica was seen as a place of nature, not culture, because the “authentic” indigenous peoples (the Taino) had been decimated by disease and slavery. The Black Africans brought in to replace them were the products of colonization, and thus not quite “primitive” but also not quite “modern” either. The collecting practices of early missionaries, colonizers, entrepreneurs, and other collectors helped create a nation that is steeped in ambiguity as they found scientific specimens of flora and fauna more worthy of preservation than the material culture of Black Jamaica, the resident colonial immigrants. Through a survey of ethnographic holdings in numerous British museums, Modest reports relatively few Taino artifacts and almost nothing associated with colonial Black Jamaican culture. This history of non-collecting continues to foster Jamaica’s ambiguous identity as both modern and primitive, and has negatively impacted opportunities to learn about the past via the kinds of exhibitions that would be possible today. The importance of this essay is that it encourages reflection on our own collecting and exhibiting practices and existing prejudices concerning what is deemed valuable in a culture and its history.

In essence, exploration of these prejudices is a principal concern of all the contributors to this volume. They argue that the future of exhibition practice must be one where curators and those whose cultures are on display develop relationships, whether through collaboration, dialogue, or reconceptualizing history. Engagement and communication will help all sides come to terms with a problematic past and create fresh perspectives on how to interpret this past and the contemporary culture of its inheritors. Making dialogue and collaboration standard practice between Euro-American and source community scholars, artists, and museum professionals will ensure that exhibitions of cultural histories take account of, and

are respectful of, the people, cultures, and arts represented.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The goal of this volume, as well as the symposium that preceded it at the University of East Anglia, is to present some recent strategies in museum- and exhibition-making practices. In the exhibitions we organize, being mindful of how collecting practices have shaped our perceptions and prejudices about a culture is just as important as prioritizing engagement with and empathy for source communities. Given practical constraints, convening a larger forum with greater representation by scholars and professionals from source communities around the world was not possible. We recognize that more debate and dialogue on this topic is needed from all practitioners and stakeholders involved in the “field of cultural production” (Bourdieu 1993:37). A complementary volume about recent exhibitions curated by indigenous curators and their own exploratory journeys would most certainly be instructive and move the debate about collaboration forward.

At present, we offer this special issue of *Museum Anthropology* as a small step toward thinking about the future of exhibitions of ethnographic collections. Educating the gallery viewer about the contemporary realities of the groups and cultures on display is crucial for bringing these societies out of the realm of “timelessness” and misrepresentation. Each of these authors, often combining empathy for, collaboration with, and insights of source communities, has taken steps to create opportunities for interested parties to have a greater voice, allowing the members of different cultures to find mutual understanding and, as Shelton has said, to “sit well with each other” (2003:192).

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NOTES

1. For debates about the validity of the term “art” cross-culturally, please see Morphy (1994).
2. The term “source community” as defined by Peers and Brown (2003:2) broadly relates to the historical indigenous, immigrant, diasporic, and religious groups living in an area prior to the colonization of their land, as well as the descendants of these peoples.

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