

The power of museums

This is the integral text of the presentation held by Ms. Esther Sloof on the 2003 ACSN seminar. For more information, please visit <http://www.acsn.nl>

1. Introduction

In this presentation I would like to discuss some of the outcomes of the research I have undertaken for my thesis in Cultural Anthropology, which deals with the influences between museums and audience groups.

In this presentation I will concentrate on the power of museums and the position of minority groups in dealing with museums that hold their cultural heritage.

To do so, I will start out by introducing some museological studies that suggest that museums hold an underestimated power over their public. Also, I will show what the public can do to limit this power.

Next, I will tell a bit more about my own experience when I studied the organisation of an exhibition of ancient Chinese Art at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto and looked into the way the ROM and the large group of Canadian-Chinese citizens of Toronto worked together.

Then, with these findings at hand, I will revisit the subject of the power of museums and reconsider it, which will bring me to one of the conclusions that I draw from my thesis.

First, however, I would like to say something about the Blackfoot exhibition that we will visit today, as it makes an interesting introduction to my subject.

The Blackfoot exhibition that we will visit today starts with a sign that welcomes us to the exhibition. It says:

Hello, we call ourselves nitsitapii; real people, but we are also called Blackfoot.

This is our story. It is the story that was given to us by our ancestors. It is a story that we would like to share with you. It deals with our traditions, our beliefs, our culture and our history. It deals with our place in the universe and our ties with creation. Our

story deals with the struggle to keep our identity, our beliefs, our language and our ways.

What is interesting about this sign is that it suggests that the Blackfoot themselves made the exhibition. It is a very personal welcome, speaking in first person, like they are actually talking to us.

However, museums are from origin western institutes and a lot of museums that hold art from indigenous peoples around the world are still run by people from western origin. Most of the Blackfoot heritage that is shown here is on loan from the Glenbow Museums in Calgary; not from the Blackfoot themselves.

It is therefore hard to say that this exhibition is all Blackfoot. In fact, it points out the awkwardness of the situation that the Blackfoot find themselves in. They are depending on a western institute to tell the stories of their culture, using their objects, while it is those western institutions that have taken away the objects of their heritage. They use this western medium to tell a story of how western cultures that moved into Canada suppressed them.

On a more positive note, this exhibition is also an example of changing times. The Blackfoot have been very involved in the making of this exhibition. Throughout the exhibition there are audio and video installations where Blackfoot people tell the stories of their culture. This way they are not only represented but also personally present in the exhibition. This point is stressed by the fact that there was a delegation of Blackfoot people present at the opening of the exhibition. Another example of changing times in museology is the repatriation of some of the Blackfoot collection of the Glenbow museum.

The Blackfoot exhibition is not the only exhibition where public groups whose heritage is displayed are involved in the making of the exhibition. It seems that western museums make an effort to become more democratic institutions where it is not just the experts that decide what will be shown, in what way and with what message, but where the public groups that are historically and culturally connected to the objects on display get their say as well.

To better understand why this is happening, it is necessary to take a closer look at museums and what they do with objects.

2. Museums as powerful institutes

Museum objects and their meaning

When objects enter museums something special happens to them. They are no longer used for what they initially were made for. We don't expect the clocks to show us what time it is, we don't sit on the chairs nor drink tea out of the china cups. The objects have lost their utility. But that doesn't mean that they are meaningless; they haven't lost their value. Paradoxically, museum objects are preserved for their original function and meaning, but by preserving them they lose their function and their meaning gets altered. As soon as an object enters the museum, it is not the same object anymore.

Meaning in objects is dynamic, it changes through time and place and depends on who looks at it. The same blue vase can be a desirable luxurious object to one person, an emotional keepsake for the next, and a useless piece of junk to another. The meanings of objects are determined by people.

Although meaning of objects is dynamic, institutions like museums do present the object with a certain meaning. They choose one or more of the objects' meanings and display the object accordingly.

Classification & context

The indication of meaning by museums starts when the object enters the museum. What museum it ends up in is already of influence on what meaning will be stressed in the object. Museums are divided into different groups. Among others, there are art museums, anthropological museums, historical museums and natural history museums. Each of these types of museums have their own ideas on collecting and their own ways of presentation. When an object enters a museum, the museum chooses those meanings of the object that suit the museum's own context. So the same painting might be displayed as a piece of a famous artist in an art museum, an illustration of costumes in a certain age in a historical museum or a piece of ethnic art, showing the style of painting of a certain cultural group.

The museum chooses in which one of her collections the object belongs, whether it will be displayed or saved in a depot, and what name the object will receive on its label. They decide what story they want to tell with the object, which meaning will be put forward. With this creation of a new context for the object, the museum classifies the object and gives it new meaning.

Most of the objects shown in the Blackfoot exhibition are displayed in an anthropological context. They are used to tell a story about the Blackfoot and their way of life. They support the story and are not the main focus themselves. This is shown by the amount of explaining texts that accompany the object and by the way the objects are presented. They are displayed so that it looks as if we are actually visiting the Blackfoot in their country. We see the countryside, we see their clothes, the tipi, their ways of life. The same objects could be shown in an empty room, with little text on the labels, glass cases and brighter lighting. In that context the same objects would be perceived as art. And many of the objects could very well be pieces of art. There are very skilful embroideries made of colourful beads and painted pieces as well.

As the museum classifies objects and chooses the context in which they show them to the public, they choose the meaning of the object that they show us. But that is not all, different meanings are not valued equally. Both the different types of museums and museum objects are subject to a certain hierarchy. In general art museums are valued higher than anthropological museums and authentic masterpieces are thought to be more valuable than inauthentic artefacts. So when museums have an important say in deciding to which category objects belong they also have an important say in their value.

Presentation

One of the most obvious ways in which museums can express classification and context for their objects is by presenting them in a museum display. Museum displays give the audience clues on the meaning of the object. These clues are not lost on the public, as is shown in a very interesting project of Susan Vogel. ('Art/Artefact: African Art in anthropology collections' in the Center for African Art in New York, 1988)

In this project African art and artefacts were shown in various typical museological presentations. The first room was a typical formal room, with just a few object shown in a large white room and text on labels were limited to a minimum. The next room was a reconstructed cabinet of curiosities, and another room was a natural history room, where lots of objects, pictures and text were shown together, implying that the objects weren't very valuable, but put together could serve as an anthropological insight in material culture. In the last room the objects were protected by Plexiglas, suggesting great monetary value.

As it turned out, the public was easily fooled. Several collectors of African art enquired at the museum and at art dealers after the Zande hunting net, which was on display in the formal room but in fact a functional object of everyday Zande life. On the other hand, precious and very valuable African art objects that were on display in the natural history room were not recognised for what they were.

When classification and context have such a big influence on how objects are perceived by the audience, museums have an important influence on the public because they provide objects a context and classify them.

As an institute that preserves and presents heritage they have the authority to choose which objects and what knowledge are important enough to be preserved for the future. By choosing objects and the way that they are presented, they decide over our history and over our truths. They decide what and who is included in our history and which role different cultural groups get.

That museums deal with real objects and curators are supposed to be experts in their field, only adds to the museums' authority.

The public

Even though museums have a certain power over their audience, this doesn't mean that the public is powerless. Museums need the public to be able to afford their business of preservation and presentation. They need an audience to sell tickets, to attract investors and to authorize their work of preserving and presenting. The power of the museum is therefore limited because it must cater for an audience.

So the public holds a certain power over museums. It decides whether an exhibition is a success or a failure. When the audience disagrees with the museum's work they have other media to make their dissatisfaction known. Some exhibitions have endured major opposition from the public and have caused great damage to the reputation of the museum or curators who were involved.

A good example of this is the case of the exhibition '*Into the Heart of Africa*', which was on display at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto in 1989. Curator Jane Cannizo, an anthropologist and Africa-expert, wanted to make an exhibition that would criticize the way

black people were treated during the times of colonization. By showing how white people in those days thought about the black people they encountered in Africa and making ironic statements about these thoughts, she hoped to show the audience how stupid this line of thinking was and how ignorant most white people in these days were on this subject. However, despite her good intentions, the exhibition backfired on her. Her ironic comments were not perceived as irony, but true feelings about the way things were. As a result, a part of the black community in Canada started to protest against the exhibition. With a lot of media attention, they marched in front of the ROM and at one point even moved their protest indoors. As a result of the protest the exhibition couldn't go on its intended tour; as other museums didn't want to be associated with it anymore. The whole episode did not only mean a financial setback for the museum, but, much worse than that, a setback of its reputation.

This shows us that the public is to some degree also powerful over museums and increasingly comes to realise this. It uses its influence on museums to demand some degree of participation in museums and exhibition making. Some groups demand their heritage back so they can start their own museums and tell their own stories with it, others want the museum to include their ideas in exhibitions. This shows that the public recognises the power of museums and try to make use of this power themselves.

Especially since incidents like the Africa exhibition at the ROM, museums have become more sensitive towards public opinion and consult community groups when making exhibitions about their heritage. It has become a necessity for their survival.

3. Treasures from a Lost Civilization

In the summer of 2002, just 13 years after the disastrous Into the Heart of Africa exhibition, the ROM featured a major exhibition on ancient Chinese art. Because Toronto has such a large Chinese community I went over there to see how the ROM and the Chinese would work together in this exhibition. Since the unfortunate outcome of the Africa exhibition, the ROM has worked more tightly with community groups, so this exhibition promised to be a good case study for my thesis.

However, I proved to be wrong. There was hardly any involvement from the Chinese community at all. There were some prominent people from the Chinese community invited to the opening gala and there were Chinese musicians, but that was about it. No Chinese brochures or posters to attract them as an audience group, no contact with Chinese

organisations to invite them, and no inquiries about what the Chinese thought of this exhibition.

What struck me even more was that the Chinese really didn't seem to care about this. I interviewed various people from the Chinese community, both people who worked for Chinese organisations and people in the street, but none of them felt that the museum exhibition and the objects on display really had to do with them.

This unexpected finding made me wonder what was going on here. Why didn't the ROM pay more attention to the Chinese community? Nowadays, the museum is known as a museum with a lot of community involvement.

And why didn't the Chinese care about how the ROM treated their heritage. Why didn't they feel the need to have a say in their own story, like the Blackfoot in this exhibition? Why didn't the Chinese even seem interested in this heritage at all?

To figure this out, it was important to have a closer look at the exhibition and revisit museological theories. I realised that the answer was hidden in my earlier statements on meaning in objects.

As I stated earlier on, classification and context have great influence on the meaning of objects. This is also true for the exhibition 'Treasures from a lost Civilization', which shows a rare collection of objects from a lost civilization who lived in China's province Sichuan about 3000 years ago. The famous collection was found in two burial pits and is especially known for its selection of bronze masks, which are unique in their kind.

The exhibition presents the objects as great archaeological treasures: it is stressed how special these objects are and how little we know about them. In a video we learn about the excavation and the province of Sichuan and accompanying text labels tell us about the early history of Chinese empire. Some of the masks are displayed as if they were art: they have a case to themselves, with special lighting and there is Plexiglas to protect them, which suggests great value.

The link with today's China is very limited in this presentation. The title of the exhibition suggests that the civilization that is responsible for these impressive objects is lost. In other words; they have nothing to do with present day China or present day's Chinese.

But this isn't the only explanation of the lack of interest of the Chinese. Exhibitions of archaeological findings and especially of art have always attracted a specific public. They attract not the people from the street, but people who are higher educated or with a special

interest in archaeology or art. This is because you need quite a lot of background information to really understand and appreciate this kind of exhibition. Museums usually haven't got the time and place to provide their audience with this information and when they do, the museum visitor usually doesn't want to read such a bulk of information. These exhibitions are therefore lost on a large part of the public.

Ancient Chinese art is one of these objects that need a lot of background information to really understand it. To acknowledge the rarity of the objects that are shown, one must not only know something about the history of China and the history of archaeology in China, but also of Chinese art history. One must know about burial practices, recognise the different forms of different sacrificial vessels etc.

When looked at it from this angle, it is not very surprising that most of the Chinese community of Toronto didn't seem to be very interested in the exhibition. Like any other cultural group, the Chinese community of Toronto does not just consist of higher educated people with a special interest in Chinese art.

In fact, a lot of the older generation have not been very highly educated either through the lack of proper education in Mao's time or because they come from families that lacked the finances for education, nor did they have a lot of time to study art as they were trying to make a living in Canada. The younger people of the Chinese community of Toronto, or the Canadian Born Chinese as they call themselves, are better educated, but most of them lack the special training in Chinese history and art. So, from the entire Chinese population of Toronto, only a small proportion would be interested and educated enough to appreciate the exhibition. As it didn't appeal to the Chinese community as a whole, it wasn't the type of exhibition to interfere with.

By classifying the objects as art and archaeological objects, the ROM has put an invisible barrier in place that will keep less educated people, including a majority of the Chinese, away. By providing an art or archaeological context the museum discourages certain audiences.

When the same objects would be used in a historical context, which shows how people lived back then, they might have attracted a larger audience, including more Chinese. The Chinese community might have been more interested in getting involved with such an exhibition.

In fact, the ROM did make an effort to provide more background information and make the objects alive. In text and paintings they did try to show what life was like back then, but they were limited because we know very little about these objects. Because the classification as archaeological and art objects prevailed, the exhibition did not attract a wide Chinese audience.

4. Conclusion

Museums have a certain power over the meaning of objects because they classify them and provide the context in which they show the objects to the public.

The museum uses objects to tell her audience stories about cultures, history and science. The museum chooses which version of the truth they display and which meaning in objects they use to tell this story.

This means that museums have the power to include and exclude events and people from their version of the truth.

Since museums deal with real, authentic objects and curators are regarded as experts in their field, the stories that museums tell have authority; people regard them as the truth.

As the public has come to realise this power of museums, they have been demanding more influence on the stories that museums tell. Especially minority groups whose heritage is in the hands of western museums try to regain some authority over their heritage. They want to use the museum objects to tell their own stories of their culture.

The Blackfoot exhibition is an example of how museums and community groups can cooperate. By allowing the Blackfoot to participate in the creation of the exhibition the museum has returned some of the authority of the Blackfoot over their own heritage. And the museum has gained some expertise of the community to tell a profound story of their history and culture.

However, not all exhibitions are suitable for community involvement. Some exhibitions feature stories that won't appeal to an entire community. Art exhibitions attract a limited, usually higher educated, audience. As they only appeal to a limited part of a community, these kinds of exhibitions are not very suitable to community involvement.

Communities might be indifferent of what happens with their heritage when it is classified as art. They will feel that it has nothing to do with them, as art is usually connected with people from higher classes.

So, even though community involvement is such a big issue in today's museological studies, it is the classification and context of exhibition that decides whether they are really suitable for this.