

Social History in Museums

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Editor's Foreword

'Too hot to handle' was the title of the 2007 Social History Curator's group conference, where some of the papers in this volume were first presented. The conference was dedicated to discussing the ways in which museums can address topics which could be considered to be 'sensitive' in some way, possibly arousing in the visitor various negative emotions. Fiona Cameron, in the first article in this volume and the opening paper at the conference, draws on extensive research with museum visitors and staff to ask what the museum's role is with these 'unsafe' histories.

Of course 2007 gave many of us the opportunity, through various commemorative activities to mark the bicentenary of the passage of the parliamentary act to abolish the slave trade, to explore one particular subject matter which caused public controversy. My own article looks at the various ways of managing sensitivities at the National Maritime Museum during the development of the Atlantic Worlds gallery. The grandfather of Heritage Interpretation, Freeman Tilden, wrote in 1957 that 'interpretation is not instruction, but provocation', and in this spirit the careful, consultative approaches employed by the NMM is questioned by Andrew Deathe, who asks whether in our sensitivity to various sensitivities we have become bland and disengaging.

2007 was a bumper year for anniversaries, as we also celebrated (or commemorated) the 300th anniversary of the Act of Union between Scotland and England which formally established the entity known as Great Britain. Ireland was not included in the 1707 treaty, but it has been a theatre where many of the historical issues around 'British' national identity have been played out. Two articles in this volume examine the representation of what has been at times a bloody and a painful history: Trevor Parkhill looks at how the National Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland have attempted to present, in his words 'a contested past to a divided society'. Kris Brown, on the other hand, has looked at the other end of the museum spectrum, where many small, local and sectional museums have developed their own representations of the turbulent recent past.

Although some hot topics might be highlighted by an anniversary, other topics need no such prompt. In other articles Sarah Batsford describes the Imperial War Museum's approach to one of the twentieth century's most traumatic events, the holocaust, Annette Day describes the Museum of London's negotiation of the contemporary politics of immigration through a project with refugee communities in modern London, and Jim Gledhill reminds us of the difficulties in attempting to portray that most easily sentimentalised of subjects - childhood. Many of us are also sensitive, one way or the other, about our origins, particularly if they are in an unfashionable location. It is this problem that Georgina Young examines in her article, describing the challenge of building a positive sense of place and identity in a town derided for being, well, 'crap', and how the new Museum of Croydon attempts to redress this in its new exhibitions. Finally, display and interpretive approaches are also examined by Jack Kirby, who compares display of science and technology at four leading museums, seeing how modern museological trends are being realised in very different ways.

As ever, the rich diversity of these articles fulfils the SHCG's commitment to be a forum for lively and topical debate on issues relating to the theory and practice of social history in museums. The Journal welcomes contributions from any and all, and if you feel the need to share your thoughts, case studies and research with others, I'd be delighted to hear from you.

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Editor

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Safe places for unsafe ideas? History and science museums, hot topics and moral predicaments

Dr Fiona Cameron is Research Fellow in Museum and Cultural Heritage Studies at the Centre for Cultural Research at the University of Western Sydney. In this paper she examines the role of museums as places for the discussion of controversial and political topics.

Contemporary discourse casts museums as socially responsible (Janes and Conaty 2005), as organizations with the capacity to sustain societal health (Anderson 2005; Sutter and Worts 2005: 132) and improve the human condition. Similarly, the American Association of Museums study *Mastering Civic Engagement* presents museums as sites that can exert greater influence in society, as places where values are generated and as incubators for change (Hirzy 2002: 9). Interestingly, the desire to improve the human condition, to act as sites for the formation of values and incubators for change, appears reminiscent of the older and now unacceptable moralising and reforming treatise.

Museums have always acted as sites of social transformation and social responsibility. According to theorist Tony Bennett (1995; 1998), the history of the modern museum is that of instilling dominant moral codes of conduct, values, and reforming behaviours. Working alongside other institutions of symbolic, coercive, political and economic power such as the penitentiary, the police, church, state, education system and the media, museums were established for the delivery of moralising and reforming discourses. All this raises interesting questions. Are the contemporary discourses of social responsibility simply a revisionist version of the older ideal? What roles do museums perform as moralising and reforming spaces in contemporary society? And how do audiences imagine museum roles and the shifting foundations of museum authority and legitimacy?

The induction of contentious and divisive topics such as 'hot' contemporary issues, political topics, and revisionist histories into museum exhibitions offers an ideal starting point to examine the contemporary roles of history and science museums as moral and reforming technologies. Such topics raise moral dilemmas, questions about what is right and wrong and circumscribe acceptable forms of behaviour. They engage the self in ways other topics may not, as they speak to values, beliefs and moral position.

In this paper I draw on the findings from the international research project 'Exhibitions as Contested Sites – the roles of museums in contemporary societies' to examine these questions. This project examined the relevance, plausibility and practical operation of history and science museums as civic centres for the engagement of contentious topics. To do this, we used a range of research methods including literature review, quantitative and qualitative research. Quantitative research involved telephone surveys in Sydney and Canberra drawing on a sample of 500 respondents. We asked participants to respond to 16 topics that Australians might consider controversial and to a series of role positioning statements using a five-point Likert scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree). Exit surveys were conducted at the Australian Museum and the Australian War Memorial with 197 and 248 visitors respectively, and at three Canadian Museums with a total of 286 visitors. Here participants were asked to respond to a range of questions comparable to the phone survey. Surveys were then analysed using SPSS (data analysis software) to compare data sets. The qualitative phase of the research involved five visitor focus groups (40 participants) in Sydney and Canberra. Here we discussed the findings of our quantitative research, museum visiting experiences, functions and activities, and notions of authority, expertise, trust and censorship.

We also investigated the perspectives of museum staff, stakeholders and media using an online survey, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with over 100 participants in 26 institutions in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, USA and UK. Participants were asked to identify topics that might be considered controversial for their institution and country in order to capture current thinking about museum roles and emerging controversies. Other questions related to museums and social responsibility, authority, expertise and censorship, controversies and their impact on institutional functioning, as well as successful programming and funding arrangements. In comparing geo-political, social, cultural and institutional contexts we were able to illuminate the multifarious challenges, limitations and opportunities that institutions face in presenting contentious subjects. Our research revealed a diversity of opinions about museums as sites for cultural politics, characterized broadly by an apolitical/political divide.

Apoliticality

Opinions about whether museums have a responsibility to represent contentious topics are founded on the belief that museums are apolitical. For those that saw museums as having such a role (60 per cent in phone surveys in Sydney and Canberra) maintaining an apolitical position was imperative to securing institutional legitimacy and trust (Market Attitude Research Services 2002a; Market Attitude Research Services 2002b). Stronger support, around 80 per cent, was given to this apolitical position by visitors sampled through exit surveys at the Australian Museum (AM), the Australian War Memorial (AWM), the Museum of Anthropology (MoA), Vancouver, the Canadian War Museum (CWM), Ottawa, and the Musée d'Art (MA), Montreal. So how is apoliticality perceived as an exhibitory strategy and what are the implications for institutional power, legitimacy and trust?

According to 90 per cent of focus group participants, apoliticality is linked to a museum's information credibility factor. Participants identified museums as places that present trusted and reliable information; 'the museum has always been factual – we can rely on it...' (Sydney Adults 30-49). Knowledge claims are factual because of collections. As one visitor commented, 'If history is facts why cloud it with viewpoints... Museums have artefacts why cloud it with opinions' (Exit Survey CWM). Similarly, exhibitions are perceived as based on quality and rigorous scholarship. Typical responses included, '...museums have a reputation like university professors, you expect to show things which have the backing of scientific method. It is not just propaganda, it's a well thought out established viewpoint' (Sydney Adults 18-30).

Apoliticality is predicated on the belief that a museum's voice is impartial and value neutral. As one participant stated, 'In principle museums should deal with something confrontational in a non-judgmental way... it's not there to manipulate, it's simply there to say here it is' (Sydney Adults 30-49). Impartiality refers to maintaining a non-judgemental position where the ability for audiences to self-regulate has primacy. For one participant this meant that '...museums give a non-biased view and allow people to form their own opinions' (Exit Survey CWM). And impartiality is about emotional distance; 'Museums need to be distanced from public opinion. To base museum information on public opinion can be a false premise...' (Sydney Adults 50-64).

In Bennett's (1998) analysis of nineteenth-century museums as pedagogical civilizing institutions, the normative belief was that museums should be accessible to all citizens. This idealized notion of access for all is linked to concepts of the museum as apolitical and as a space where all values are equal; 'Museums should present for the largest number of people and not for certain categories' (Canberra Adults 50-64). In taking a political stance on hot topics, some respondents feared that this right of access might be violated. For example, one visitor commented, 'with an exhibition about asylum

seekers ...people might use it to push their own political angle...you've got to be very careful' (Sydney Adults 18-30).

Apoliticality refers to museums as safe, physically protected, calm and civil spaces for people to interact; 'Museums are a protected environment you can't get anywhere else for dealing with contentious topics' (Exit Survey MoA). Safeness also relates to values and beliefs; 'The challenge for museums is to put something forward that holds up to all our values and truths' (Sydney Adults 30-49). Legitimacy is a key factor in this. Legitimacy can be undermined when museums present unsubstantiated opinions and openly engage in a partisan debate; 'As long as you present the facts, both sides but as soon as anything political comes up, someone's extreme view, it won't be a success' (Canberra Adults 50-64).

Clearly, many audiences have a utopian view of museums as democratic spaces, although this is changing. For some, the apolitical-political divide is becoming less certain. This confusion is sustained by a longing for objectivity on one hand and the realisation that topics and their interpretation are contingent and subjective. As one participant stated, 'when you talk about these things emotion comes into it and you may not be able to present the facts. Depending on who is presenting the exhibition... they put their own point of view so you have to be careful' (Canberra Adults 50-64). [Still others, while acknowledging that objectivity no longer exists, fear museums may suffer from government interference. One focus group participant commented, 'The information provided on a topic is going to depend on what government is in and who is funding an exhibit' (Sydney Adults 30-49). The blurring of the boundaries between an apolitical and political stance and the potential for social manipulation for many is summed up by one focus group participant, 'My concern with a lot of topics is that there is tremendous scope for social engineering...' (Sydney Adults 30-49).

Apoliticality is about the power museums hold as cultural authorities, and underscores institutional legitimacy. Many staff expressed the need to uphold this belief otherwise institutional power and credibility is relinquished. As one member of staff noted, 'we should be inciting debate not championing single points of view. If we become too politicized we lose our power and perhaps our funding' (Staff Web Survey). The belief in apoliticality and in particular aperspectual objectivity is shared widely; 'This museum should be a place of neutrality, the places for contestation in western societies are academia' (Staff, national museum USA). Apoliticality is synonymous with Elaine Gurian's observation that 'museums are safe places for the exploration of unsafe ideas' (Gurian 1995: 33).

Politicality

Our research suggests that many history and science museums, when engaging contentious subjects, are inextricably political, acting as moralising technologies for stakeholder values. According to Bennett (1995) the work of museums as moral technologies in the nineteenth century operated from within government, culture and an economic rationale to influence and modify thoughts and behaviours. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1977: 30, 101, 110) refers to this process of civilising espoused by Colquhoun as a new technology of power over the mind where pedagogy becomes one of the tools of ideology.

Since recreation is necessary to Civilised Society, all Public Exhibitions should be rendered subservient to improvement of morals, and to the means of infusing into the mind a love of the Constitution, and a reverence and respect for the Laws...' (Colquhoun 1806: 347-8 quoted in Bennett 1995: 19).

Antonio Gramsci (1971: 261) extends moral hegemony in civil society to the bourgeoisie as they possess the economic power to recruit for moral projects. Moreover, Gramsci (1971) views moral hegemony as descending flows of cultural and ideological power

countervailed from below. Foucault (1977) and Bennett (1995; 1998) on the other hand, direct their attention to institutional properties and mechanisms that frame and facilitate moral projects. Our research reveals that the moralising apparatus in contemporary museums is governmental and class, but also extends beyond to include the moral projects of a range of diverse social groups. It engages ideological struggles from above and below and technologies such as exhibitions for framing public morality.

Robert Janes (2005: 12), in his introduction to *Looking Reality in the Eye: Museums and Social Responsibility*, states that museums are among the most free and creative work environments and, unlike the public sector, are not forced to administer unpopular government policy. Our research refutes this and suggests that moral projects are still mobilised by government to serve political agendas and secure economic advantage. As one UK director explained, the political and moral values of conservative boards and politicians is one of the major defining acts of moral leadership for extending political power although this varies. This reflects Bennett's interpretation of 'governmentality' and Gramsci's ruling class recruitment for moral projects.

...museum boards and politicians, often funders, tend to be conservatives... active in politics and socially upwardly mobile. They support their own values in their work to get approval. Everything comes down to values, will, determination, money and politics.

The relationship between morality, political agendas, capitalist aspirations and exhibition content is clearly expressed in the case of one state museum in Canada. Here, economic and political drivers were instrumental in recruiting the museum to support neo-liberal government policy on the clear felling of forests.

The current government is very pro-business, right-wing. It is now possible in Ontario to clear thousands of hectares of forests but the museum can't talk about that because we get so much money from the province. In the environmental community this is a very serious issue (Staff, Canadian state museum).

Moral projects may also be counter-governmental, at times leading to undesirable consequences. The Aboriginal Gallery at the National Museum of Australia, in presenting revisionist histories of frontier conflict and massacres of Aborigines over neo-liberal discourses of European settlement, was deemed at odds with the conservative right and the Howard government's political position (Edwards 2003; McDonald 2003). This controversy sparked a review that re-cast exhibitions on the nation's post-1788 history in a more celebratory tone and resulted in the loss of the Director's job (Attwood 2003; National Museum of Australia 2003; McDonald 2003).

The Museum was planning a major Aboriginal Gallery for a nation...public figures had been claiming that Aboriginal people had received preferential treatment... Massacres had been exaggerated or even invented. There was no stolen generation, and if Aboriginal children had been removed from their families, it was for their own good (management, national museum, Australia).

The induction and support of moral projects by museums beyond government and class into the broader ideological and cultural apparatus of civil society is highlighted by the 2003 *Treasures of Palestine* exhibition at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney. Under pressure from the Jewish lobby, this travelling exhibition promoted Jewish political aspirations in the Middle East by the removal of controversial photos and documentaries showing Palestinian dispossession and life under Israeli military occupation (ABC Online 2003: 1; Legislative Council General Purpose Standing Committee 2003). The exhibition was transformed into a celebration of Palestinian art and culture (Abdul-Nabi 2003). Similarly, the diversity of moral projects serving social groups can originate from below. This was highlighted by the exhibition

Anita and Beyond at the Penrith Regional Gallery on the rape and murder of Anita Cobby in 1986 (Loxley 2002; 2003). Framed according to the sensibilities of the family, the exhibition of artworks, video and personal memorabilia was used as an introduction to a discussion of the repercussions of the rape and murder for the community rather than the violence itself or the forensics surrounding the murder.

The selection of moral projects for image marketing and to legitimize the aspirations of particular social groups above those of audiences is illustrated with the Australian War Memorial. Here the values of ex-service personnel prevail and are mobilized to legitimize and affirm their service while excluding discussions of the moral and political implications of conflicts even though 80 per cent of audiences surveyed wanted these topics discussed (Exit Survey AWM).

Our mission statement is very loaded and says to commemorate the sacrifice of Australians in war. The word sacrifice...can be moulded to exclude controversial views that might upset some stake-holders...We are not a war museum so you can't easily look at the political motives why Australians went to war. We are in danger of hiding the truth... (Staff AWM).

The promotion of a moral project to serve diverse ideological, political, economic and social ends, from the support of government agendas, to the protection and legitimisation of the values and experiences of stakeholders was evident with the exhibition: *September 11: Bearing Witness to History* at the National Museum of American History. Changes were made by the curatorial team to the number of people who died in the aircraft that hit the Pentagon from 64 to 59 innocent people. This reflected the views of victim's families, affirmed the Bush administration's discourses of the US as the innocent victim, while legitimising the War on Terror.

We had a controversial issue about the number of people who died in the airplane that hit the Pentagon, we said 64 and the families said they did not want the terrorists counted in that number, we changed it to 59 innocent people. They wanted to remember what happened to Americans...not to give terrorists credence...The American public did not want us to explain to them why Islamic fundamentalists hate Americans – not on September 11th ...it's not a role that the museum could play at this moment (Staff, national museum USA).

Here the process of exhibition development acted as a vehicle for mapping out the discursive territory, a moral universal wherein moral boundaries and values were drawn that had purchase in the collective consciousness of the time. In this sense the National Museum of American History helped set the agenda for discussion as part of the wider cultural and moral conversation around terrorism. That is, not as a definable and closed text but as a series of symbolic hooks on which to make anxieties around terrorism and loss representable. This included the mapping of discourses around American supremacy and innocence and the construction of a moral angle to stake out the limits of transgression in which to formulate collective solutions, the War on Terror and for the cultural policing of Muslims as potential terrorists.

Many institutions, when exhibiting contentious subjects, act as moral guides as part of a broader process of social moralization, to valorise, affirm and represent moral values that structure social life in certain ways. Exhibitions act as tools for constructing and justifying a moral system in a tangible form by constructing a field of visibility through the choice of topics, content including material objects, the moral angle and censorship decisions. For example, *Treasures of Palestine* constructed a visible field that omitted reference to the Israeli occupation and the plight of Palestinians.

The confluence of contentious topics and moral projects suggests a broadening of moral authority to a range of social groups beyond government and class reflecting

institutional commitments and pressures to engage diversity and the complex interests museums mediate. Institutions surveyed however, still tend to define moral projects around contentious topics as lessons according to one dominant moral universal. Moral projects are selected according to the perceived and actual symbolic, social, economic, political and cultural power of specific individuals or groups and the persuasiveness and functionality of a particular moral angle. For example Anita Cobby, the murdered Blacktown nurse and beauty queen, accrued symbolic power by being posthumously sanctified as a symbol for all victims of sexual violence (Taylor 2004). The exhibition used Anita's story as a symbolic hook to set a moral agenda around sexual violence, to validate and reassert accepted values and act as a reflexive agent for a discussion about its negative impact in the community.

Overwhelmingly, the economic, political power and interests of the ruling classes as argued by Foucault (1977) and Bennett (1998) in the nineteenth century still tends to be the defining logic behind the representation of a particular moral universal. These groups have the clout to pursue their own interests and to intervene in exhibition development. The National Museum of Australia example shows how a clash of moralities and the political objectives of government can coalesce to re-define moral projects for exhibitions. Recommendations for the revision of the Horizons gallery sought to re-define its content to project Australian society's 'sense of itself' according to a celebratory vision detailing exemplary individual, group and institutional achievements (National Museum of Australia 2003: 6).

Therefore, it is useful to conceptualise institutional cultures as moralising, as a hierarchical, complex and dispersed web of values held by heterogeneous actors. These are moralising spaces that are created, opened, closed and reshaped according to the topics and the values institutions select to achieve particular political, social, economic and cultural ends.

Audiences and the legitimisation of a moral paradigm

Surprisingly many audiences sanctioned the strategic deployment of power by museums to define moral projects. Although many focus group participants expressed the importance of museums to be non-judgmental, to show both sides, there are some topics like terrorism and drug use that were deemed unworthy of a balanced consideration (Ferguson 2006). In these cases, presenting the 'other side' was seen as legitimizing certain 'extremist' values and 'deviant' behaviours; for example, in relation to the 9/11 perpetrators or drug use. One participant stated, 'presenting these topics could give legitimacy to something that has no legitimacy' (Sydney Adults 50-64).

Clearly topics with a certain moral force, those symptomatic of particular social problems or which threaten a dominant moral universal, are deemed problematic. This suggests that museums have a role as moral protector. That is, in setting moral standards, offering moral certainty, in providing lessons that protect the dominant morality against violation and avoiding moral panic by curating topics according to a certain moral angle. Here safeness refers to the protection of moral standards against deviation.

Reforming agendas, a moral and responsible society

Museum reforming agendas are integral to the moral apparatus. In analysing nineteenth-century reformatories Foucault (1977: 126, 238-9) argues that these institutions acted as mechanisms directed to the future, to prevent crime and transform the criminal in habits, behaviour, morality and conscience. Likewise, in engaging contentious topics in museums, the concept of reform is centred around morality and the deployment of tools such as exhibitions for providing moral direction in reforming future conduct.

Bennett (1998: 67) argues that modern systems of rule are distinguished from their predecessors in terms of the degree and kind of interest they display in the conditions

of life of the population. Contemporaneously, this interest according to Bennett (1998) and Witcomb (2003) has shifted from instilling a sense of morality and good behaviour to fostering an acceptance of cultural diversity. Our research suggests that the acceptance of cultural diversity is just one reforming agenda, but rather broadly embraces the idea of improving society by producing moral and responsible citizens. And reform, 'the betterment of society', is replaced by the terms social change and social responsibility. According to a UK museum director, in discussing edgy topics, museums have a role in defining, creating and promoting the views, values and activities of an open and tolerant society:

To institute change on a broad scale we need to work with other organizations, who are working towards a more tolerant, open society that's honest about difficult issues. Museums can provide the backdrop for raising these issues. We have to think about what sort of society a museum aspires to help create.

Reform, like moral direction, often operates from within government - as Bennett argued of the nineteenth century. For example, the social inclusion agenda under New Labour mobilized museums as reformers in response to government discourses of access and equity (Department of Culture, Media and Sport 2000). An older notion of civic reform within government based on a pedagogical format still prevails, especially for national museums. Curators at the Smithsonian are under pressure to produce exhibitions that portray national history in a celebratory tone and produce a shared national identity that excludes controversy and difference, affirms civic pride and forms better citizens.

There is a notion that we need national civic lessons and that the Smithsonian Institution is one of the few national institutions administering this... we are a place where you understand American history in such a way that makes you a better citizen and creates a shared ideal that excludes controversy and difference (Staff, national museum USA).

Reforming projects like moral ones are diverse and can be initiated from below. The Lower East Side Tenement Museum for example, a museum of urban immigrant history in New York, uses history to help create a more equitable society by challenging prejudices, promoting tolerance and encouraging humanitarian and democratic values (Abram 2005: 19-42).

Defining and promoting what a better, more open, morally responsible society might be depends on the topic, an institution's mission and the values and interests promoted. Reform, the cultural shaping of the population, is generally predicated on a moral universal and can encompass a range of objectives from political affirmation and persuasion, image marketing to civilising rituals and self improvement projects.

Audiences, reform and technologies of self

Prevailing discourses on museums as reformers (Bennett 1995; 1998) engage with the concept of institutions as technologies of power where the power of the state submits individuals to strong ideological manipulation. Foucault's (1988) technologies of self, is less well known and offers a useful tool for understanding the complex relationships between museums, audiences and reforming agendas. Technologies of self acknowledge an individual's ability to transform themselves, their conduct and way of being, through their own means or with the help of others (Foucault 1988: 18). Overwhelmingly, audiences in focus group discussions share a similar interest in reforming self and society. Here it is useful to embrace Foucault's later definition of 'governmentality' to understand the link between the strategic deployment of museum power and how this works with technologies of self in co-determining reform.

For around 25 per cent of focus group participants, reform equates with historical reflexivity. Here museums act as sites for information on contentious topics and events in the historical record. Audiences use this symbolic content to look and learn about the past by engaging their capacities for inner reflection to evaluate their own values and beliefs; 'Museums are reflective, there is...an opportunity to reflect on the past' (Sydney Adults 30-49). This is similar to Thompson's (1995: 42-3) analysis of media content. He argues that audiences appropriate messages and make them their own in a process of self formation and self understanding.

Current hot topics were seen as too political, emotionally charged, value laden and opinion based having the potential to undermine a museum's reputation as 'impartial', 'safe', 'apolitical' and 'trustworthy' information sources.

...a museum is not there to foster discussion on contemporary issues. Contemporary issues become historical issues with the passage of time, a lot of these are very political, very contemporary and to me they just don't fall into the gambit of a museum (Canberra Adults 50-64).

This reflective reasoning is based on the idea that topics become safer with time, when opinions and views have been carefully considered and a body of scholarly information has time to emerge.

Many staff endorsed historical reflexivity, providing shape and form to what people remember, as a reforming agenda where collections and scholarly information act as impartial tools for reflection; 'We have a role retrospectively, ...by giving a context and shape to what they remember...everyone remembers market scenes in Sarajevo but they are not quite sure who was being killed and who was killing and who was fighting' (Sydney Adults 50-64).

Likewise, many staff reiterated the relationship between historical reflexivity and the emergence of scholarly information in constructing reliable information; 'A certain amount of time should pass for reflecting on events so we have time to shift through the scholarship' (Staff, national museum Australia). Clearly a tension emerges between audience views of the impartiality of information and the role of staff in shaping reforming projects.

For the majority, 55 per cent, contextualization acts as a reforming tool. Applied to current as well as historical topics and events, this approach enables audiences to understand their origin, complexities and likely ramifications; 'with September 11 and the Bali bombing for example, a museum's role is to build up a historical picture of where these events originated...' (Canberra Adults 50-64).

Symbolic content is deployed for locating, constructing and reforming self, understanding others, in reshaping stocks of knowledge, testing feelings and attitudes, re-evaluating moral positions and expanding horizons of experience; 'It is important to get some reference to where you sit in the scheme of things - where is my place in all this' (Canberra Adults 50-64). It resonates with diagnostic reporting by deconstructing problems, analysing causes and in portraying the context in which the story is taking place (Tester 2001: 39). Several staff expressed a similar diagnostic treatise of past-present-future options and opinions; 'Historical museums can pick topics that can allow you to understand why you have come to the place that you are now in the dialogue...' (Staff, history museum USA).

For around 20 per cent, reforming agendas also involve the active re-shaping of individuals' behaviour to bring about change. That is, by opening people's minds to alternative views on a given topic and offering suggestions on how audiences might become active to bring about change; 'If museums are to continue to exist as people friendly institutions, they have to have programs to educate people about the history of

terrorism, why it happens and the role of civil society to combat terrorism...’ (Canberra Adults 50-64). Here symbolic content acts with self to interrogate choices, motivations and frame action. As one participant stated, ‘I like the idea of an exhibition being empowering – in presenting good ideas and how do you turn that into action’ (Sydney Adults 18-30).

For staff, reform also involved inciting audiences to perform a morally right action; ‘Its not simply preserving the past or doing the housekeeping well. It’s also what we think of the future, what are the options, are there things we should be doing that might be ameliorating damage, and improving the situations’ (Director, national museum UK).

The instrumental nature of curatorial endeavour in influencing thoughts and action around contentious topics is expressed by one participant, ‘Museums are sanctuaries from the raging world. We also need to offer the other alternatives, the other perspectives, ideas in order to get them better prepared to go out there with a better perspective’ (Staff, state history museum USA). All this resonates with a public service institutional model. It positions museums as uniquely qualified to judge what matters in society, what audiences need to know in order to act as good citizens and make informed choices, and in defining the morality on which action is based.

Conclusion

Clearly reform and the relationships between museums and audiences require a new account of self as a symbolic project that is self-acting, more open-ended and reflexive than Bennett’s concept of self as a product of an external system of power. According to 80 per cent of audiences surveyed institutions are seen as having the power to challenge people’s ways of thinking and shift an individual’s point of view. The means of constituting and reforming self, however, refers to a greater ability to self regulate, evaluate and process a range of information on their own terms; ‘museums should not express an opinion, they should provide good information and arguments....We have our own opinions’ (Sydney Adults 30-49). For 90 per cent, this also refers to offering opportunities to express their opinion, to engage with other visitors, the institution and to leave evidence of debates in exhibitions; ‘with more discussion, people would be better informed and therefore form their own opinions’ (Market Attitude Services 2002: 20). And for 70 per cent, strategies involve techniques that facilitate critical thinking and personal resolution. That is, providing carefully selected and authoritative scholarly information, multiple perspectives and opinions on given subjects, source transparency, interpretive guidance and the framing of content to show how judgements are formed and decisions made.

To this end, audiences avail themselves of museums as systems of expertise to construct autobiographical narratives such as self identity, moral position, attitudes, values and action around certain topics and events. Museum information is utilized along with a stock of resources such as face to face dialogue and alternative perspectives to construct these narratives; ‘everything that you read is somebody’s opinion. The best you can do is try and get as many different opinions as you can and try and formulate your own...’ (Sydney Adults 18-30). Here museums’ symbolic power is mobilized to persuade and confront, to influence actions and beliefs and to cultivate trust and shape the course of actions. Thompson (1995: 215) calls this the paradox of reflexivity/individualism and dependency/ institutionalisation. And as Foucault puts it, the technologies of domination, in this instance museums as spaces for structuring and shaping of a field of action, have recourse to the processes in which the individual acts upon themselves

Our research suggests that museums have a strong moralising and reforming task to perform as a system of social, cultural and self development. On one hand audiences want open debate and a range of perspectives, but on the other require museums to

set moral standards and reforming agendas that can be used to understand and evaluate societal conduct. The belief in many institutions as apolitical or aperspectual is located within institutional practices and civic purposes that are rooted in the pedagogic genre. These practices have served as a useful tool to disguise institutional politicality, frame institutional legitimacy and trust with audiences and to orchestrate consent for moralising and reforming practices. As symbolic forms, museums have been successful in sustaining a belief in legitimacy, although this is changing.

Historian Dipesh Chakrabarty (2002) argues that admitting emotion and embodied experiences into the museum's repertoire offers an antidote to analytic pedagogic knowledge and reasoning, and has the potential to democratize museums. However, our research reveals that the majority do not want a radical democracy. Rather, a pedagogic and authoritative system of relations is still longed for when engaging contentious topics countervailed by new technologies for self regulation, reflexivity and self consciousness.

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Endnotes

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Curators, content and consultation: Developing the *Atlantic Worlds* gallery at the National Maritime Museum

Michael Terwey, Senior Exhibitions Manager at the National Maritime Museum Greenwich, examines some of the interpretation and content development issues encountered in the creation of the Atlantic Worlds gallery

Introduction

This paper is mainly about how we at the National Maritime Museum have set about creating our new *Atlantic Worlds* gallery, rather than what we have created. There are a number of reasons for this focus on process rather than product. Firstly this paper was drafted in the Summer of 2007 and the gallery itself was not completed until November that year. Secondly as Project Manager, process was my specific area of responsibility. But mainly I think that the 'what' of exhibitions are specific to an institution (its collections, its curatorial expertise) while the 'how' is much more universal. And although institutions like the NMM have advantages of time, money and staff that other museums do not, I think the conclusions drawn in this article will have more than a little relevance to others who try to attempt similar exhibition projects. Therefore, in this paper I will be looking at the ways in which we have used our collections, the skills of our team and the experience and knowledge of our audiences to create the new gallery.

Background

The National Maritime Museum was founded in 1937 to preserve the nation's maritime heritage, relating to the Royal Navy, the merchant navy and the fishing fleet. It inherited, in the Greenwich Hospital Collection, a large and significant collection of maritime art. With the acquisition of the Royal Observatory in 1960, the museum considerably expanded its scientific collections. Today the museum holds some 2.5 million objects, with important collections of maritime art (both British and 17th-century Dutch), cartography, manuscripts (including official public records), ship models and plans, scientific and navigational instruments, time-keeping and astronomy. Our remit, as articulated in our current mission statement, is 'to illustrate for everyone the importance of the sea, ships, time and the stars and their relationship with people.'

One of our core subject areas, to which we return time and again through almost every area of our collections, is the history of the British Empire, especially in the 18th and 19th centuries. After all, the British Empire was a seaborne enterprise, built on the power of the Royal Navy and maritime commerce. Our painting collection depicts and in many cases glorifies the empire, our manuscripts collection documents the rise and fall of empire, and the lives of those who built it, and our astronomy and navigational instrument collections show the technological developments in seafaring which made the empire possible. Crucially, the museum itself is a product of empire, its foundation a consequence of imperial sensibilities, a significant portion of its collection acquired by imperial agents.

It's not my purpose in this paper to go into the myriad of ways in which the British Empire can be seen as a controversial topic. It is, however, worth noting that in recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in the history of the British Empire – academically, popularly, and in museums like the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum in Bristol.

The Museum's last attempt to draw on its collections and look at empire began in the late 1990s, with the Neptune Court development. This large capital project included the refurbishment of all the galleries in the main museum building, including a gallery entitled *Trade and Empire*.

The context of how *Trade and Empire* was produced is significant, for it demonstrates some of the dangers of a perhaps overly simplified development process, and it illustrates how much these processes have changed over the last 8 years. *Trade and Empire* was created by a curator and a designer, at a time when the museum's staff were stretched thinly by the demands of the major building work. It was also developed without the input of specialist education and interpretation staff, and perhaps represents a pure realisation of a curator's view of the subject. This is of course not an unsophisticated view, it is balanced, nuanced and, if one were to read every graphic and label, I doubt many would take issue with the gallery content.

But audiences can miss nuance, nobody reads every label, and a sophisticated narrative can go over the head of the visitor. The following quotes are a selection of the responses and reviews we received to *Trade and Empire*:

"Rather than being proud of what we achieved [during the empire]...the emphasis is on guilt and shame. The chance to celebrate maritime greatness is pushed aside...The museum should be giving us a strongly positive sense of national identity"

Chris McGovern, History Teacher, 1999

"At Trade and Empire the designers had depersonalised the non-white presence... What is needed in the parts of the gallery which deal with slavery is an attempt to engage with the stories of real people, who, although they ended up as chattel, were born free."

Ratan Vaswani, Museums Journal May 2000

"Politically correct...appalling misrepresentation...we are being grossly misled... we are urged to toe-a-line of national self-depreciation and depart feeling ashamed of our past"

Lawrence James, Daily Telegraph 1999

"All reasonable men know the British Empire was a creation of arrogance, ignorance, violence and greed. You should perhaps clarify the objective of your exhibition. In particular, is there an element of glorification therein? Shame on you if there is."

Visitor comment, September 2006

"The politically correct view of the British Empire as presented in the new Trade and Empire gallery, with its apologetic emphasis on the discreditable, is deplorable. Contempt and hatred could be inspired in the children of this country's ethnic minorities, for whom this distortion seems to have been designed"

Tom Pocock, Daily Telegraph, 1999

It is not the purpose of this paper to dwell too long or offer an analysis of the controversy sparked by *Trade and Empire*. Suffice to say, seven subsequent alterations were made to the gallery in response to the criticism, and when the 1999 generation of galleries began to reach the end of their life-span, *Trade and Empire* was at the top of the list for refurbishment. And in an attempt to avoid the degree of criticism encountered in 1999, the museum went about the project in a very different way.

Uncompromising objects and the gap between narrative and material

We are a museum whose remit is broader than its collection. We aim to tell the story of 'sea, time, ships and stars', while our collections, though extensive, are partial. It became immediately obvious that there were profound weaknesses in our collection which could undermine the attempt to tell a balanced and full history of the Atlantic World in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Particular areas of concern were: African and native American material, representations and perspectives; material relating to the development of a trading network across the Atlantic in the 17th and 18th centuries; material relating to European emigration to the Americas; material relating to slave resistance and revolts; and material relating to the cultural legacy of the period. On the other hand, we were very strong in: naval material, in particular fine art; material on the abolitionist movement in the UK; and European visualisations and representations of the Atlantic World. As a permanent gallery, we were also inclined to limit the number of loans from other institutions that would complement our own collections.

The first step to overcoming these challenges was to identify and understand the 'gaps' which we could not fill with collections material. These were then debated, and we have used a variety of interpretive media, graphics, the ubiquitous flip-book, online materials and so on, to plug these gaps. We have also commissioned artistic interventions to specifically address our own weakness in cultural legacies and African perspectives. Identifying these gaps has also helped the long-term development of the museum by informing the collections development strategy.

Museum specialisation, roles, collaboration and compromise

Since *Trade and Empire* had been produced, the NMM, like many UK museums, has seen its internal staffing structures adapted to meet the needs of the changing context we find ourselves in. The museum had developed in the intervening years to include expanded Exhibitions and Learning & Interpretation departments, specialist curators of 18th and 19th century imperial and maritime history, and had a large department dedicated to the development of exhibitions and displays. And with no noteworthy demands on staff time from a major capital redevelopment, a project team from all departments could be assembled.

However, in the multi-disciplinary museum, who develops content? The shift from a model of curatorial authorship and direction, to a collaborative process was far from easy. The change was also compounded by high staff turnover – we lost two curators and one project manager mid-process. So a team that had initially formed around the strengths, weaknesses, and personalities of one set of people, had to be re-formed around another. This brought up a number of key questions for the project team, many of which will, I'm sure be familiar to anyone who has been through a similar process in the last five years. Who was responsible for the 'curatorial' selection of objects from the museum's collection? Who was responsible for developing 'key messages'? What did we mean by 'interpretation'? How do these processes relate to each other? And, crucially, who would do the work, and who would get to sign-off?

It became clear very early on in the process that while project team members may hold particular positions within the museum, that did not necessarily mean they had the skills and experience to perform the role implied by that position on the team. One curator, with a distinguished background as an academic historian, was less comfortable with material culture, leading to an excellent, comprehensive gallery narrative, which could not be delivered with the museum's collections. Another team member had a background in the contemporary art sector, and had little experience of history exhibitions. Furthermore, as the gallery is the first attempt to develop a new

permanent history gallery in the museum since 1999, there was no institutional memory or protocols for resolving conflicts or disputes over roles and responsibilities.

There was no neat resolution to these issues. Our solution was founded on the basis of teamwork, close collaboration and collective responsibility, particularly in the 'core content team'. It has been successful largely, I believe, because the team have developed excellent working relationships with each other and no internal hierarchy to unbalance the discussions. Future NMM projects will follow with this model, but will depend on a better definition of roles, depending on the strengths of the particular team members rather than on their job titles, to be agreed at the outset.

Researching, Consulting and engaging with audiences and communities

Increasingly museums are using methodologies which seek to engage audiences, potential audiences, local communities, and other interested parties in exhibition projects. These methodologies can be driven by different motivations, and fall into perhaps three broad categories: research; consultation; and involvement.

Market and/or Visitor Research is perhaps the most structured of these techniques, typically employing social science methods to produce quantitative or qualitative data for study and interpretation by the museum. Market research can perhaps be best thought of as a key part of 'product development'; giving the museum information on how the market might respond. At the NMM, we run programs of visitor and non-visitor research. In 2004, we also ran a specific research project on the newly acquired Michael Graham-Stewart collection. This research has informed our approach, and given us some useful indicators of how different audience groups might be pre-disposed to respond to the issues of slavery and empire. It was also noticeable that,

"No option emerged from the focus groups in which slavery could be presented as a palatable theme for existing white museum attenders whilst also satisfying the expectations and needs of Black and Asian attenders" (MHM: 2004)

Consultation methods are also commonly used. These tend to involve a direct dialogue between the museum and a segment of its audience, either self-selecting (such as in an open day), or pre-selected by the museum (in the case of panels). As part of the Atlantic Gallery project we have used consultation methods extensively, recruiting a panel of 'Cultural Advisors' to inform our approach, design and content development processes. This group consists of academics, cultural commentators, artists, community leaders and two of the museum's Gallery Assistants, and met six times over the course of the project.

Finally there are methodologies of 'engagement' or 'involvement' These tend to move beyond the dialogue of consultation and closer towards a kind of 'co-production' in which the interplay between the specialists of the museum and the interests of the audience resulting in some kind of mutually agreed output. We have used this technique as part of our public programme for the 2007 Bicentenary of the abolition of the slaver trade, through a number of community arts projects based in and facilitated by the museum, resulting in number of creative outputs which, although not ultimately finding a place in the gallery itself, have certainly informed our creative and aesthetic approach.

Using a plethora of methodologies has given us a broad range of data, and undoubtedly a better understanding of our audience than was available to the curators of *Trade and Empire* in the 1990s. It also poses a number of interesting questions.

Firstly, composition and representation. One person on a consultation panel, or in a focus group, or as part of an engagement project ultimately represents only themselves rather than their gender, ethnicity, religion, age or background. White middle-class

conservative views were heard during our market research, but were conspicuously absent during the more detailed discussions through the Cultural Advisory Group. Should we have recruited Daily Mail readers onto our panel to provide 'balance'? Or were the white, middle-class museum staff meant to provide that 'balance'?

Secondly, schedules and timescales. Projects have timetables, deadlines and milestones. Many people involved in consultation have difficulty at the beginning of their projects in getting their participants to visualise new displays which have not yet been designed, objects which have not yet been selected, and text that has not yet been written. Yet it is at the start of a project that there is most scope for shaping the approach, influencing the design brief and other formative developments. Once designs have been developed in detail, there is often little scope for change without affecting both schedule and budget. Delays in establishing our Cultural Advisory Group meant that it first met in January this year, after concept design sign-off.

Thirdly, conflict. What happens when the curator disagrees with the panel? What happens when the panel members disagree with each other? What happens when everyone disagrees with everyone else? There are power relations between museum and consulted, but there is a danger that they can be mystified, and hence the possibility that one party or other feels their views are being ignored by a over powerful curator, or by uncritical acceptance by the museum of views expressed by the panel. We had disagreements on a number of issues, from the terminology we should use to whether we should include a memorial to those enslaved Africans who died in the middle passage. We resolved these on a case-by-case basis, usually through the judgement of the project team, though we were at risk of a disgruntled member of the panel denouncing the museum for not 'listening' to them.

Our solutions to these issues, again, have been incomplete and are probably best characterised as a reactive strategy based on an evolving situation. It is in this area that we have perhaps most to learn, from our own experience and from the experiences of others.

Conclusions and lessons learned

Different people are sensitive to different historical subjects. The areas that turned out to be difficult were note ones that we would necessarily have anticipated in advance. We anticipated the history of the Slave Trade might cause sensitivities among black audiences, but our research and consultation told us that the subject, although emotive for black audiences, was actually more controversial among white British visitors. This is where consultation actually proves its worth. Consequently as we look to the development of future galleries, we will be embedding forms of research and consultation into all projects.

Consultation needs to be strategic, planned, sustained and embedded into the project schedules and structure. This is most effectively done by making it a prerequisite of the project, as non-negotiable as cost reporting and design stage approvals. If it becomes seen as an add-on, it will be vulnerable to being ignored and cut.

Importantly, we need to recognise that exhibitions are the product of the people who are involved in them – staff, trustees, consultants and consulted – as well as the institutional cultures which influence them. We can, and should, push these boundaries as far as we can, but there are limits.

Finally, as well as recognising our own parameters, we have to recognise the limits of what we are doing. Museums cannot control meaning – we simply create the context in which people interact with material culture from the past. Museums are only one way in which people experience history, and a great many other factors such as family and cultural background, social class, education and life experience have much more of

an impact on the way people view the past than their visit to the museum. We won't change people's entire world views, but we might just plant a seed of interest which might germinate into something more fundamental.

In winter 2006 I attended a consultation evening run by Hackney Museums and listened to the passionate contributions of people from the local Afro-Caribbean community. They were unhappy about poverty, they were frustrated by inequality, and they were angry with the racism they experienced in their lives. No exhibition on Slavery can solve these problems, just as the *Atlantic Worlds* gallery can't atone for the sins of British Imperialism. But as museum professionals, we do have a duty to do our jobs well and to approach the task of representing the past in a balanced and impartial way, confident in our motives and sensitive to the needs, beliefs, and expectations of our visitors and the communities we serve. This article has sought to outline some of the ways in which we can do so.

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Shock and Awe: using controversy in museum displays to provoke audience engagement

Andrew Deathe, Gallery Author at the National Waterfront Museum in Swansea argues that provocation is a valuable tool in museum interpretation.

Museums and museum professionals make much of their institutions as spaces for everyone. We want to welcome and please visitors from across the demographics of our countries, regardless of age, colour, creed or any other potentially divisive category. This of course isn't a bad thing. The high minded academia of the old style museum and its tone of 'if you don't think this is interesting or relevant to you, you shouldn't be here anyway' is one we should all be pleased to see the back of. But in our rush to be neutral, inclusive by not being exclusive, not wanting to upset anyone, have we become too bland to engage anyone?

This past year has seen a huge number of exhibitions dealing with the theme of slavery, specifically the enslavement of Africans to the Americas. An admirable and emotive subject to cover. Researching and reading up on the subject for Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales' exhibition produced in Swansea – was a heavy going affair due to the harshness of the subject matter. Like many others, we linked our story to the exploitation of humans in industries today, illustrating how everyone in Britain in the 19th century who bought coffee, sugar, tobacco or cotton (i.e. *everybody*) was as complicit in the slave trade as we are today when browsing the shelves of Primark or Tesco.

An early idea to emphasise how so many people today can subscribe to an unwitting acceptance of slavery, was to use quotes from sacred writings from across the world. The quotes underlined the religious tolerance of the concept of slavery (neither the Koran or Bible condemns it explicitly at any point). Most followers of Christianity or Islam would certainly not like to be thought of as advocates for slavery and the exhibition would then have gone on to explain how adherents to the religion took major parts in abolishing the trade.

Under this proposal, visitors would see, writ large on a banner in bold clear headline style;

...you may purchase male or female slaves from among the foreigners who live among you. You may also purchase the children of such resident foreigners, including those who have been born in your land.

And then be presented with the fact that it comes from a belief system they might well subscribe to (in this case the Jewish Torah and Christian Old Testament, Leviticus 25:44-46).

The idea was dropped early in the design of the exhibition on the grounds that it could cause offence. In some ways however, that was my reasoning behind it. Not in a childish and offensive manner to say "Look how bad Christians are", but to promote an emotional response from the visitor – alarming them that the museum should make such a statement, worrying them that it came from their sacred texts and seemed stark and isolated, and then encouraging them to look further into the exhibition and seek a reason for this seemingly negative quote. In this way I believe we can engage the visitor more quickly and intimately, making the exhibition about them, rather than some old dead people from the past.

What we ended up with, and what was common across so many of the slavery exhibitions, was a blandness around the subject matter, a detachment of the people

of the past. It was easy to dismiss slavers with “That was what they believed back then” rather than as humans the same as us, working to the same moral definers followed by so many today.

Museums need to maintain a neutrality of opinion and wide appeal but I believe that doesn't mean rejecting facts and statements which may cause offence. Instead I think we can only create neutrality by presenting these matters in a fully contextualised way. FACT: Slavery is a dreadful concept. FACT: The Book of Leviticus condones slavery. FACT: Theologians have dealt with this issue for many years in many ways. How can this be offensive? We have presented all the facts, we have shown both sides of a story, we have injected a rush of interest and involvement into the visitor and we have engaged them in the history we are telling.

I realise that this approach isn't as simple as it sounds. Working with any difficult subject requires tact and delicacy as well as the involvement of groups affected by the material. In the example given here, it would have been interesting to develop the display with the assistance of a black Christian group for example – how do they reconcile their faith and the treatment of their ancestors? I sincerely believe however that too many museums reduce display on difficult subjects to an intellectual shade of magnolia, when we should be making more use of bold splashes of primary colours to make an idea really come to life.

Can a contested history be exhibited to a divided society?

Trevor Parkhill, Keeper of History at the Ulster Museum looks at the lessons from the 'Conflict: The Irish at War' exhibition.

Introduction

The exhibition *Conflict. The Irish at War*, was displayed in the Ulster Museum from December 2003 until the museum closed for extensive refurbishment on 1 October 2006. It sought to provide a suitably historical context for the often-violent and certainly contested nature of Irish history from the time of the arrival of the first immigrants 10,000 years ago, to the very recent past. The attention of the visiting public was understandably (though, from a historical perspective, irritatingly) focused on the 'Troubles' from 1968. From a history curator's perspective, the dilemma posed was along the lines of 'how can a suitably distanced, objective approach be adopted to events that still live painfully in collective and individual memories?' If it is 'contemporary', can it also be regarded as 'historical', conundrums facing history curators regardless of the political or geographical context in which they find themselves? The experience of the Ulster museum is, hopefully, not too particular or even peculiar that some generally applicable lessons cannot be usefully shared.

Context

'Conflict' was not our first experience of an exhibition about a divisive event or epoch in Irish history that has been understood from differing perspectives by the two main traditions. In 1990 the tercentenary of the Battle of the Boyne was commemorated and in 1998 the 'Up in Arms!' exhibition marked the bicentenary of the 1798 rebellion. Using EU Peace and Reconciliation funding, an Outreach Officer was appointed for this exhibition. Our first experience of a dedicated outreach post left two lasting impressions. First, the reminder that history and the understanding of what occurred, or is alleged to have occurred, in the past, was one of the factors that have contributed to a divided society. The 1690 tercentenary looked at the long-lasting effects of the Protestant Ascendancy it had heralded. The 1798 rebellion could be said to have ushered in the birth of constitutional nationalism, the concept of 'armed struggle' in Ireland, and the ideology associated with Unionism, since the Act of Union, introduced within two years, remains the *raison d'être* of the Unionist community. Yet the popular conception among the Unionist community was that '1798' was 'their' (meaning the other side's, the Nationalists') history.

Museum, a neutral venue

This experience also made us aware of the extent to which the museum was seen by community groups to be neutral territory, where engagement with the past was possible. This was particularly evident for those groups who came not only from a single-identity background but who used the visit to the exhibition as a means of bringing together two traditions who co-existed in the same neighbourhood but who had had traditionally little contact with the other. This was the case in a visit from the town of Crumlin in County Antrim where a young local Catholic man had been brutally murdered by Loyalist extremists. The response of the two communities in the town – Catholic and Protestant – was to come together to express their revulsion at the atrocity. The community worker, who advised and counselled them, in association with their clergymen, led a visit to the exhibition as a means of trying to explain something of their shared yet diverse past. It was in this context, of two traditions in the same community coming together in an attempt to understand their own and the other's past history, that the neutrality of the museum proved to be so significant. It was a non-

threatening environment where people could relate to each other. This capacity was subsequently developed in the 'Conflict' exhibition which received visits from over 200 community groups where, interestingly, there was a greater representation of groups reflecting the strong sense of victimhood that has become apparent in what is now a post-conflict society.

Free Access

It was also something of a shock – indicating perhaps how sheltered our professional lives had been – to hear the frequent responses of people whose visit to the Ulster Museum was their first to any museum. 'Do you mean anyone can just walk in here?' This was 1998, in the first flush of the new Labour government (now there's contemporary history for you) with its rousing cry of 'free museums'. George Walden's recent article in *The Times* (19 June 2007) marked what might turn out to be the beginning of a reassessment of the impact of free access to museums ten years after the measure was introduced. In Walden's view 'rising numbers consist not so much of the previously 'excluded' but of multiple visits by the affluent middle-classes.' As we have seen from our different museum perspectives, the measurement of the quality of the visitor engagement is manifestly more important, and certainly more problematic, than the simplistic 'head count' formula that has tended to dominate the debate.

Specimen Selection

One of the means by which we began to feel at ease with the specimens that were to be displayed – and these included, for example, a roll of honour made by prisoners of IRA activists killed in action, posters of loyalist prisoners of war, as they called themselves, at The Maze Prison Camp, Mairead Corrigan's 1976 Nobel Peace Prize medal for her work with the Peace People – was the consultation with community groups about the items we had selected for display. The first reaction of many was 'there's nothing there for us'. When we did respond to their observations and include material that they could identify with more easily, I began to feel more comfortable with the display. In other words, community involvement in the selection of material turned out to be effective because there was a shared responsibility for what was on view. Equally important was the fact that interpretation of the objects, and the context in which they were displayed, remained singularly a curatorial responsibility. This curatorial independence remained evident not only in the text of labels and panels but also in the production of the illustrated guide that, with the aid of funding from the Victims' Commission, was produced and issued free of charge to visitors to the exhibition. This funding was also used to produce, for £9,000, a thoroughgoing evaluation of visitor response to the exhibition.

Shared Future/Shared Past

The influential publication produced for the Northern Ireland Legislative Assembly in March 2005, 'A Shared Future', outlined a role for museums by directing that 'Museums will contribute to the good relations policy by ... ensuring that both permanent and temporary exhibitions represent and examine the interests of all the communities that the museum chiefly serves'. This of course was issued at a time when the Assembly was in cold storage. The purposeful, and very surprising, political developments that saw the restoration in May 2007 of a power-sharing administration at Stormont has re-focused attention on the concept of a shared future arising out of a divided past. What the 1798 rebellion exhibition and more recently the 'Conflict' exhibition have demonstrated was the extent to which museums in Northern Ireland can assist with the better understanding at all levels of a divided community of the concept of a 'shared past'. The challenge for the Museum will be to continue these purposeful contacts in making it 'relevant' to the ongoing needs of society even though the EU Peace and Reconciliation funding has ceased. However, our recent experience of visitor engagement on sensitive historical topics has indicated that the museum's

history exhibitions have been acknowledged as being balanced enough to serve as a forum for community dialogue. This creates the expectation for the museum to contribute meaningfully to the long-term mediation process required in attaining the *Shared Future* vision of 'a society where there is equity, respect for diversity etc'. To what extent this expectation might compromise the shibboleth of curatorial independence, however that may be identified, remains to be seen.

The Ulster Museum approach was also informed by the *Report*, published in June 2002, of the 'Healing Through Remembering' Project that had been instigated by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFM/DFM). The report's vision of a museum appears at first sight to go well beyond the accepted museum concept. It would serve 'as an international centre of excellence, acting as a focus for intellectual work on interpreting our violent past and designing peaceful solutions'. 'Healing Through Remembering' has an understandable emphasis on recounting the story of the many victims of the thirty years of civil disorder until the paramilitary ceasefires of the mid-1990s, and even beyond. And of course, a case can be made that many of the perpetrators of the violence were themselves victims. With the help of a grant from the Victims' Fund, we provided a facility in the 'Conflict' exhibition that enabled visitors to listen to the views and experiences of people who were victims of or participants in the 'Troubles'. Using the contacts we had developed through our outreach work, we contacted a number of people who, as victims, perpetrators or witnesses had had a closer-than-normal association with Troubles. They included clergymen, prison officers, RUC widows etc. They viewed the specimens that were to go on display and then we recorded their observations on one particular example. They did not concentrate on the modern period. This was an exhibit that was effectively a study-through-time of the theme of conflict from the time of the first settlers. So, for example, a clergyman commented on a Mesolithic stone axe that resembled a baseball bat used in punishment beatings. These observations were then made available on wands to the visiting public, a good proportion of whom appreciated this third-party voice in their ear as they themselves went through the exhibition.

Beyond Orange and Green

The OFM/DFM policy document of March 2005 also stipulates that museums have a responsibility to ensure 'that the collections are representative of the diversity which have been and are present' in the area served by the museum. This imposes an additional awareness for the Museum's collecting strategy to bear in mind and is a reminder that we must seek to move beyond the concern about the orange and green imbalance evident in the museum's collections. The arrival of ethnic groupings from different parts of southern and eastern Europe places a responsibility on the museum to ensure that our collections reflect this increased diversity with a view to their inclusion in future display. One of the novel features that were developed in the 'Conflict' exhibition was the posting on a notice-board in the Contemplation area at the end of the display, a series of comments from visitors. One of the first to be displayed read 'Very Good Belfast. You are managing your sectarianism. Now you must deal with your racism', an observation that disturbed any smugness about a feature that otherwise proved to be very successful. It developed something of a dialogue, if only to encourage comments from people returning home after many years abroad along the lines of 'now I can see why I left' and 'nothing has changed'.

Visitors' Comments

The collection of over 2,000 visitors' comments provided us with purposeful observations on features of which visitors have approved and disapproved. Uppermost has been our need for reassurance on the overall balance. The exhibition covers 10,000 years but most comments have focused, inevitably, on the twentieth century. Many local people have acknowledged that there was much in it, usually relating to 'the other

side's' story, of which they had been unaware, itself a reflection of the partial and selective nature of the history curriculum in schools in the immediate post-war generation. Foreign visitors' comments have tended to express gratitude for an outline of the context of the paramilitary and political struggles that has been fought out on their TV screens over the last four decades. The notice-board in the Contemplation area also generated a generally fruitful debate, as much about the comments themselves as about the exhibition. This is perhaps best seen in the disgust expressed by local people at the narrowness of comments written from either a nationalist or unionist perspective and echoing the need for a dispassionate treatment of a history story where myth and selective remembrance are integral parts of our cultural identity.

Contemplation Area

Designed as much to provide space for spiritual reflection as for physical renewal, the provision of a Contemplation area addressed the regular complaint that there are not enough seated areas in the gallery. A range of reference books helped visitors to follow up ideas suggested by what they have seen in the exhibition. Particularly poignant is the use that is made of David McKitterick's monumental, in every sense of the word, *Lost Lives*, an account of the known circumstances of each of the 3,700 deaths in the period from 1969. Film extracts of events since 1968 were made available by Screen, the Northern Ireland Digital Film Archive, as were the contents of 'Legacy' a BBC Radio Ulster series of two-minute contributions by victims and others associated with life in Northern Ireland in the same period.

The Vision Thing

By June 2009 the vision is that a new fit-for-purpose museum, in terms of greater accessibility, particularly for families, disabled people and so on and one better adapted for visitor engagement etc., will be unveiled. My responsibility is to deliver a history gallery that tells the story of the island of Ireland, and the particular story of the area encompassed in the historic province of Ulster, from c.1550 until the present day. Equally important, building on the programme of visitor engagement outlined here, a principal preoccupation will be to take whatever steps are necessary to ensure that the narrative that unfolds in the gallery is respected by a broad cross-section not only of the two main traditions in Northern Ireland but also makes contact with the increasingly diverse ethnic character of the island. The third 'client', if I may be permitted to use the term, is the increasing number of foreign visitors to our shores, many of whom arrive at the Museum seeking a one-stop-shop account of Irish history and some of whose working knowledge of Irish history has been informed almost exclusively by the televisual images on their screens over the last generation, a period the *Times* of London consistently referred to as 'a suppressed civil war'. Indeed, they might well be interested only in the Troubles gallery. Indeed, whatever the interest in the most recent period, the story of Ulster from the Plantation in the early seventeenth century needs to be told, if only to demonstrate the connectedness of its history. The Troubles just did not arise out of the blue. They were preceded by a series of inter-linking movements and events, the memorialising of which in the folk memory has engendered an opaque mist of understanding and popular belief, in the middle of which history finds itself. In these circumstances, there is an additional necessity for the curator to make apparent in the gallery the realisation that the bones of Irish history are inter-connected without falling into the 'book on the wall' trap.

Post-1969 Gallery

'Contemporary history' is something of an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. By general agreement, it is difficult to have a truly historical perspective on, for example, an event as recent as the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, never mind the recent, astonishing development of a power-sharing assembly between opponents as extreme as Sinn Fein and the Democratic Unionist Party. And yet the story we are seeking to tell

is not complete without it. This issue itself raises a much broader one, on how the 'contemporary' can be collected, and the collections managed, when dealing with the same problems of perspective and sensitivity. One example will suffice. Faced with the question of relating the story of the bomb in Omagh in August 1998, when 29 people were killed in the worst single atrocity post-1969, the exhibition displayed the award given to Dominic Pinto, the surgeon on duty at Omagh Hospital that day. He was on the golf course, heard the bomb and went immediately to the hospital. Having donned gown and gloves, the first casualty he attended to was the daughter of the man he had just been playing golf with. This instance captures the in-built problems associated with recounting in a museum context, historical events that are painful as much as the personal as at the community level.

Advisory Panel

In these circumstances it makes sense to have an advisory panel to guide the humble curator through the minefield of sensitivities and 'whataboutery' that are manifestly evident in the design of this gallery. It remains to be seen if they will have a pro-active part to play in the selection of specimens, but there are other features of the community engagement evident in the 'Conflict' exhibition, such as the use of commentaries on wands that might accompany the visitor in what may well become a stand-alone gallery. The narrative approach that will tell the story in the post 1600 gallery will be replaced by a more thematic presentation that hopefully will remind people of, for example, Northern Ireland's sporting culture that from time to time throws up athletes capable of competing on the world stage.

Conclusion

Addressing the question in the title, whether museums can and should contribute to post-conflict reconstruction by means of its exhibitions programme, the contention remains that, by closer consultation with local communities, including those groupings who have been introduced to the museum as a result of Outreach activities with recent exhibitions, it can be possible for curators to become more closely and meaningfully engaged with social and political issues of current concern, without undue risk to the curator's integrity. Whether they should is still a moot point but, in any case, we may not have any choice in the matter, in view of the role increasingly articulated at government level for museums to have a more pro-active role in the direction of post-conflict rapprochement and better community understanding and co-existence. In the context of a divided society, where not only is the history contested but has also been subject to selective remembrance and understanding to the extent that history itself has been a constant contributor to community division, it is no surprise to find that the museum curator is increasingly expected to be a 'hands-on' mediator between that history and the society he serves. How comfortable we are with this imposition will depend on the extent to which we feel that curatorial integrity remains respected.

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Living with History: Conflict, Commemoration and Exhibitions in Northern Ireland – the Case of Sectional Displays

Dr Kris Brown, Research Fellow at Queens University Belfast looks at the various ways in which sectional museums in Northern Ireland are representing the history of the recent 'troubles'.

In regions of conflict, museums must deal with the difficult depiction of political violence and war, a particularly difficult task given that in many instances communities remain fractured, and thus histories are contested and used as political weapons in ongoing struggles in the present. Not all museums consciously attempt to exhibit in an *inclusive* fashion, but rather seek to project messages from one communal or group point of view; recent history is thus used as a valuable resource from which ideological or political props can be forged. This paper examines museums which approach the recent history of the Northern Irish 'Troubles' from a *sectional* viewpoint. In doing so, I will describe a series of lenses through which their approach to conflict and contested history can be analysed and dissected; these comprise an examination of exhibitions in terms of their **Narrative**, the **Message Projection**, the **Commemorative Style**, and the **Depiction of the 'Other'**.

Sectional Museums and the Representation of Conflict

Sectional museums represent one communal, group or political voice. In sectional museums, the narrative structure is expressly didactic and often explicitly moralistic, you, the visitor, are being given information and there is little room to debate this or reach out for an alternative interpretation. The narrative is self sufficient and encapsulated, and the exhibitions and texts are created in such a way as to protect against any sense of dislocation and destabilisation, which might be felt by the primary audience, which is the community or group that is being depicted. Narrative themes in sectional museums are also purposefully binding across two axis, stressing contemporary unity within the communal or group voice, and its continuity with the imagined community of the past. This tussle over history has been apparent in other museums in divided societies, such as Cyprus, where competing exhibitions have effectively engaged in a rigid and didactic boundary formation, and in deleting or swamping conflicting identities through the use of chronology and historical appeals to the parent nations of Greece and Turkey (Papadakis: 1994).

An expressly didactic narrative which aims to reach back into the past, threading various strands up into the present is explicit in the travelling National Hunger Strike exhibition, mounted by the National Hunger Strike Commemoration Committee, an Irish Republican organisation set up to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the 1981 hunger strike, in which 10 protesting prisoners died. The main organisers of the Committee are associated with the dominant Provisional wing of Republicanism, and their narrative places the 1981 hunger strike firmly in the context of other Republican hunger strikes in history, stretching back through the recent decades of conflict through the prison protests of the 1940s and into the 1920s. Beyond this, the 25th anniversary of the Hunger Strike also coincides with the 75th anniversary of the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin, historically the most defining moment of martyrdom and sacrifice in modern Republican history. This symbolic conjunction was certainly not lost on one of the commemoration's organisers, Jim Mc Veigh, himself an ex-Republican prisoner, who claimed that

Like the Volunteers of 1916, the Hunger Strikers were fighting for the Republic, not just political status. As I have already said, the Hunger Strikers were this generation's 1916. Like those who participated in the rising, they inspired a whole new generation to strike out for the Republic, We will be making this point all the time and we will be drawing clear parallels between the two events. I think it is a very positive thing that these two landmark anniversaries fall together. It certainly adds a context and a historical continuity to the events (An Phoblacht:2006).

The exhibition itself comprised smuggled prison letters, called 'comms', written on cigarette and toilet paper, smuggled prison art, contemporary posters, a homemade contraband radio, and recently produced pieces of artwork commemorating the prison struggle and also, the 1916 Rising. Whilst the material culture worked as a fairly effective visual hook, the narrative backbone of the exhibit comprised a series of more than 50 well illustrated and scripted mounted display posters detailing not only the history of the Hunger Strikes but also enmeshing them within a highly sympathetic history Republicanism in the twentieth century. The exhibition was structurally simple and univocal, with vignettes of moments in the commemorated prison protest complemented with other facets and snapshots of Republican struggle, its simplicity allowing a free circulation of the theme of continuity. A kind of chorus was on hand with the playing of recorded Republican laments or a running video history of the Hunger Strikes and funerals. Biographies of the hunger strikers emphasised their ordinariness as members of the Nationalist community together with their political and military commitment to the cause, often explained against a backdrop of alienation and state repression. Here are martyrs and heroes, but also figures with which people can identify, as well as venerate. Whilst the visitor, and it is an exhibition essentially aimed at the Nationalist community, can connect with the presented figures, they are also drawn back by allusion to similar prison protests, through modern Republican history, right back to the martyred pantheon of Easter 1916. Given the divestment of numerous articles of Republican principle in the Northern Ireland peace process, the exhibitions iteration of essentially non violent acts of Republican resistance are a means of cohering the grass roots Republican community with tropes of revered sacrifice by Republican volunteers, whilst holding newer constituencies' attention and interest with safely historical narratives of committed struggle by men who were prepared to die for their principles. Linking to Republican struggles and sacrificial acts pre 1981 is a means of expressing a sense of political, even national, continuity and thus amplifying the legitimacy of the Republican profile in the present. This continuity can never be lightly assumed but must be created as a narrative, for any attempt to define an ideological kernel, transmitted down the line of modern republican history is most difficult. According to Republican academic Anthony McIntyre, such a view 'ascribes a continuity to Republicanism which does not in fact exist, or at least, is so fractured by periodisation that continuity as a concept is seriously flawed.' (McIntyre:1995, 201).

Another travelling exhibition which attempts to maintain communal coherence and continuity through the presentation of an historical narrative is the work of the Ulster Culture and Historical Society. The Society has toured its exhibition of artefacts which relate to Ulster Protestant culture around some two hundred venues, a large number of which are Orange Order halls; the exhibition itself is thus largely targeted at the community it depicts. One of the principal reasons for the exhibition is to communicate a sense of history to the Ulster Protestant faithful which the organisers think is in many ways partial or lacking. Noel McIlfratrick, a founding member of the Society defines the exhibition as a means of showing 'the richness of culture' so that Ulster Protestants can have 'a sense of confidence' (Noel McIlfratrick :2006); underlining an anxiety often expressed publicly that Ulster protestant culture 'requires a higher and much more positive profile' and that there is a need to 'demonstrate to all that as a community we have a rich and varied history and culture' as that cultural voice has been 'misrepresented, misunderstood and much maligned'(Ballymacarret Arts & Cultural

Society: 1997, 4). The exhibits comprise the familiar trappings and material culture of the Loyal Orders including banners, flags, sashes, collarettes and badges together with relevant prints, photos and artwork that depict this, and also the emergence and consolidation of Ulster Unionism; Narrative boards in orange, red, white and blue intone the celebratory, commemorative, fraternal and religious prescriptions of Orangeism in bold lettering with no room for alternative interpretations; but another narrative connected with the exhibition is that of military service or armed organisation by Ulster Protestants over the centuries.

The exhibits are packed with militaria such as medals, badges, guns and commemorative artwork that charts this history and is a narrative which winds seamlessly through the other tropes of Orangeism and political Unionism. Uniforms displayed, which have also been worn by members of the society when giving 'walk on' historical talks at exhibitions, include that of Williamite soldier, Peep O' Day Boy, old Ulster Volunteer Force, Young Citizen Volunteer, Royal Ulster Constabulary, Special Constabulary and member of the Ulster Defence Regiment. Each represents the Ulster Protestant community in arms, whether under state sanction or through unofficial communal initiative. The narrative theme, elaborated verbally by this military chorus, is of a continuity of Ulster Protestant mobilisation against threat and in demonstration of loyalty to the state, even though the organisations depicted are separated by hundreds of years and differing shades of legality. Many of the well illustrated narrative boards refer specifically to Ulster Protestant sacrifice during the battle of the Somme, again underlining Ulster connection with Britain via military service; indeed the Scottish experience on the Somme is explicitly compared with that of Ulster Protestants. Time and again, via artefact or text, military service in the British army is linked to Orangeism and political Unionism, in both cases largely by telling the story of the incorporation of the Unionist militia of the UVF into the 36th Ulster Division which fought in the first world war. What is presented is a narrative stressing continuity of threat, defence and loyalty over the centuries as experienced by Ulster Protestants, together with membership of the wider British family of nations, as mediated by shared military sacrifice and demonstrations of fealty. Like other sectional narratives its didactic structure precludes difficult questions and thematically emphasises unity and continuity of the depicted community.

The Museum of the Royal Irish Regiment comprises an exhibition which portrays not a political constituency or community, but a group – in this case members of the locally raised British Army security forces; but this is a group which has been politically controversial and heavily linked to one community, that of Ulster Protestants. The Royal Irish Regiment was created in 1992, from an amalgamation of the Royal Irish Rangers, a regiment debarred from internal security duties in Northern Ireland, and the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR), a force, almost homogeneously Ulster Protestant, whose only duty was to act in support of the police in Northern Ireland. The latter was much mistrusted and despised by Nationalists and Republicans as an essentially partisan militia, whilst for Unionists it was a corps of patriotic and law abiding citizen soldiers, many of whom served as part timers and were particularly vulnerable to assassination as they went about their daily civilian routine. The narrative structure of the museum forms an essentially chronological 'time tunnel' pattern, again with a largely dry, factual approach to the depiction of the Regiment's history which utterly eschews the many criticisms levelled at the Regiment; this structure again allows little teasing out of the more controversial side of its history, and sets that contested history, via recent links with the uncontroversial Royal Irish Rangers, in the context of a putative 300 year lineage, which serves to dilute criticism of more recent incarnations. However, it may be instructive that the first soldier depicted is shown in Williamite dress 'as he might have appeared at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690', perhaps an acknowledgement that continuity exists with past mobilisations of the Ulster Protestant community.

The Regiment's contemporary social links with the wider Ulster Protestant community are implicitly recognised by the exhibition text's statement that 47,000 men and women served in the 22 years of the UDR's existence. Much of the exhibits follow the technical and prosaic display of military museums which helps emphasise one of the central narrative themes of the museum, the professionalism of the Ulster Defence Regiment and the Royal Irish Regiment. Maps and story boards chart the success of a large scale search operation in 1974 carried out with co-ordination and precision, whilst documentation such as the 'yellow card' outlining the precise circumstances under which a soldier could open fire, and the 'blue card' describing proper arrest procedures are prominently displayed, sitting amongst other documents which explain procedures for search operations, intelligence operations or courtesy calling cards to be left with those who had their premises searched. The theme is one of a professional, restrained force bounded by regulations and the rule of law, a regiment which 'provided essential support to the Royal Ulster Constabulary and built up an outstanding expertise in counter-terrorist operations' This is a much different interpretation than would be made by many nationalists and republicans. A number of UDR soldiers were convicted of terrorist offences over the years, including membership of loyalist paramilitary groups and murder. This contested history of the regiment, whose membership was a prime target for doorstep assassination by Republicans, represents a shifting of the battle field from housing estates and country lanes, to the realms of memory and posterity. In the words of one former officer 'another battle has started, the history of our legacy' (former UDR/Royal Irish officer: 2006) Again narrative themes and structures are sculpted to avoid dislocation and disjuncture by the omission of difficult histories and an emphasis on ordered behaviour, whilst continuity with British army tradition is heavily underscored. This latter is done not simply in recognition of the political preference of its largely Unionist membership past and present, but as a way of deflecting criticism of it as a Protestant militia, the B specials in combat fatigues.

Message Projection by Sectional Museums

Sectional museums project a strong message; most usually an assertion of claims and victim hood, or a declaration of values and the defensive nature of their political position. The central message is that their depicted group or constituency is the injured party, menaced by the communal or political other.¹ Fortitude and martyrdom against uncompromised aggression is expressed, as is the relative weakness of the represented constituency. The Hunger Strike exhibition illustrates through smuggled prison art and letters the brutal treatment of Republican prisoners by the forces of the state, and attaches this message, by photography and narrative text, to the forcible suppression of civilian protest in the wake of the hunger strikers' funerals, by the states both north and south of the border. A notional community of suffering is thus created running from the H-Blocks of the past to the wider nationalist community of both past and present. In contrast to the violence of the state, the hunger strikers are depicted as having no weapon other than their bodies and political commitment. The message is an evangelising one of re-birth and re-dedication that is projected with enthusiasm. Jim McVeigh, of the Commemoration Committee, asserts that the hunger strikers were such models of bravery that they can 'become an icon for a new generation... we intend to be outside or inside any event that attracts young people. We should be active on this in every college in the country and the local communities should target colleges and schools in their areas.' (*An Phoblacht*: 2006)

1 The two national struggle museums in Cyprus are dogged in portraying either Greek or Turkish Cypriots as victims of unadulterated aggression; another Turkish Cypriot museum, the Museum of Barbarism raises the sense of injury to voyeuristic levels, and is the preservation of a site of mass murder by Greek Cypriots, a house where a Turkish family including women and children were killed and their bodies dumped in the bathroom. A sign marks the preserved but fading gore with the message 'the marks on the ceiling are brain pieces and blood spots belonging to the murdered' (Doob: 1986, 388)

Vulnerability is not only the preserve of those starving or naked but for a blanket. The Royal Irish Regiment museum pointedly noted the vulnerability of its part time citizen soldiery to attack, its narrative underlining that 79% of its casualties were killed while they were off duty, in daytime occupations such as 'postman or school bus driver'. A trope which underlines not only their vulnerability, but their ordinariness. Whilst noting that a particular danger was the booby trap bomb placed under the family car, the narrative lists the security precautions necessary for many living in exposed border areas including being given body armour, radios, personal issue weapons, and having signal flares fixed to the house roof. The display includes representations of death threats sent to family homes of UDR members; and photographs show the mangled wreckage of armoured cars lying in landmine craters. The visual subtext is clear - even when on duty, the soldier's rifle was of little effect against the high explosive of the enemy. The obvious message is that this was a war with only one aggressor. Even the storyboard of the successful and professional search operation is presaged with the note that it was undertaken after a UDR member was shot whilst on patrol.

There are few obvious tropes of physical threat by the 'other' in the Ulster Culture and Historical Society exhibition although the narrative of communal mobilisation through the ages, and the display of service medals, hints strongly at this. Rather the sense of injury and victim hood is more diffuse, a case of vilification and misrepresentation of cultural expression, to be righted by the stark assertion of the Christian, civic and fraternal values implicit within Orangeism in the exhibition text, with banners and sashes acting as colourful hooks for the eye. The message is carried with an evangelical sense of purpose by the Society, who insist that its target audience, particularly the young, 'don't know anything about their own culture' and if 'they'll not go to see it, you have to go to them' (McIlpatrick: 2006). But sacrifice is of course explicit, in the society's narrative of the Somme bloodshed. Ulster Protestants are pictured as victims of a brutal conflagration into which they were propelled by patriotism and loyalty. The cause of the European bloodbath is little dwelt upon, what matters is their sacrifice in time of Britain's need.

The Museum of Free Derry perhaps most clearly asserts victim hood and vilification; the attack by the police on the Bogside at the beginning of the conflict, the shooting of civilians by the Parachute regiment, and the defamation of those dead in a controversial inquiry have created a sense of communal injustice for which the museum seeks to provide another voice, one which will by preserving the history of that period 'tell it in the way that the community would like it to be told', to 'correct imbalance' (Kerr: 2006). Much as the District 6 Museum in Cape Town, the museum sees its job not simply to tell the stories of local inhabitants but to redress wrongs and aid in the assertion of political claims and the need for reparation; the Museum is essentially an outgrowth of the Bloody Sunday Trust, a campaigning group set up to campaign for justice and to provide a voice for those injured and bereaved in the shootings.

The projection of defensiveness and victim hood remains an intrinsic part of sectional museums, reflecting not only the subjective truth of their constituencies, but also providing them with a necessary edge in the vital contests of divided history. Representing the non aggressive nature of their constituency's action, whilst maintaining themes of bravery and commitment is important, and in the Hunger Strike and Royal Irish exhibitions both, this is highlighted by incorporating displays on the privations and sacrifices of female volunteers. The displays are at once soldierly, showing women in Cumann na mBan (the women's section of the IRA) or Greenfinch uniform, but also emphasize non-aggression. Greenfinches were killed, yet were routinely unarmed, whilst the privations of female Republicans as protesting prisoners, subjected to violating strip searches, is made clear. Counterpoising the representation of women in military uniform, is imagery of frail looking republican female prisoners in their cells, whilst a Greenfinch killed is represented in civilian clothes, in what might be

a family photograph. Here the central message is made clear; we are committed but we are not aggressive or militaristic, and we have suffered.

Commemoration in Sectional Museums and the Place of the Other

In sectional museums, commemoration is an important process and heavily signified process. Many of the museums such as the Royal Irish Regiment Museum and the Museum of Free Derry, are themselves in sites of memory adjacent to memorials marking the fallen. A packed exhibition of Republican material culture is housed in the Roddy McCorley Social Club, in the grounds of which are no less than three Republican monuments, as well as trees planted for each of the hunger strikers. In the Club proper there is a form of political shrine to Tom Williams, an IRA member executed in 1942. The Museum of Free Derry building is itself a memorial artefact, and strike marks from Bloody Sunday are still visible on its walls. It is located in an area framed by massive wall murals by the Bogside artists, which Graham Dawson asserts

...contribute to the cultural and psychic function of the memorial space as a whole, in its symbolic reclaiming and "detoxifying" of the site of the atrocity, a contaminated space of trauma and death, by and for the local community (Dawson: 2005, 1666)

The Museum fulfils a similar function. Inside the Museum the exhibition is weighted toward Bloody Sunday and the commemoration of each of those killed, by means of photograph, text and artefact. The Hunger Strike exhibition is of course expressly commemorative, and formed one peripatetic segment of a plethora of organised events across Ireland. Each of the hunger strikers has his story told and is presented in terms which emphasize the heroism and suffering of ordinary young men. Here is heroism, but sprung from the roots of the modern nationalist community and tied to the now historic pantheon of 1916. Lionisation is explicit, and eventual political canonisation hinted at. This is commemoration with an expressly political cutting edge. The commemorative side to the Ulster Culture and Historical Society is heavily, but not exclusively, weighted to remembrance of the Somme, a defining period in the political consciousness of Unionism and one which reflects, the proving ground for the 'paradigmatic model of the ideal Ulsterman' in the popular mind. Thus commemoration is used not simply as a means in itself, but to educate and increase confidence in a modern community sometimes unsure of its future orientation, by reminding it of its past historic deeds. Banners and artwork displaying this memory are large in number, and their meaning fleshed out by text on large boards. Personal possessions of the most famous Victoria Cross winner, the iconic Billy McFadzean, are political relics encapsulating the sacrifice in an individual's form. Myths of heroism are promulgated, and individuals valourised. Commemoration is confidence building capital, its intent to firmly anchor the exhibition viewer in a historical narrative of heroism, patriotism and sacrifice.

The Presence of the 'Other' is illuminating in sectional museums, ironic in the sense that it is usually presented in a hazy and partial manner. In almost all the exhibitions discussed above, the 'other', be it antagonistic community or state force, is largely depicted in the form of what it has done to the depicted constituency. Photographs and pictorial representations show killings, attacks, beatings, repression whilst artefacts generally comprise gun sand militaria. The 'other' is defined simply by what it does to the depicted constituency, seldom in any other terms. It exists as a nebulous threatening force; a representation which cuts away at its humanity. Captured weapons are used to display aggressive intent and capability, or as trophies, to show successful communal resistance.

Conclusion

It is too easy to criticise sectional exhibitions for being partisan. Memories of the conflict are fresh, and identity politics, still prevalent in Northern Ireland will always need to feed upon history. Sectional museums do provide a strong narrative which often holds a sense of purpose and authenticity for its host community. What is disheartening is that in a still segregated society, few from other communities will get to hear these challenging voices. Museums and exhibitions which attempt a more inclusive approach, are at least attempting to create a forum which will allow conflicting and difficult messages to spark off, and balance against, one another. In sectional exhibitions the presence of reflexive criticism is easily summarised. It is almost totally absent. The Royal Irish Museum, for example, does not confront documented issues of illegality and collusion, the Hunger Strike exhibition avoids the toll of killings by Republicans that accompanied the prison protest. The Ulster Culture and Historical Society does not debate the issue of violent protest by Orangemen and their supporters, and the instances of sectarian abuse and harassment by the same. The reason is clear. These museums are presenting a moral story, a narrative of communal fidelity. Disjuncture and dislocation are to be avoided at all costs. Museums are 'Temples' projecting a fixed, subjective model, with little room for critique (Cameron: 1972, 201). Sectional museums are strong in getting a point across, but entirely weak in tuning in to conflicting narratives. This runs against a common unspoken thread within Northern Irish society, if there is one thing we all know, it is that our history is complex.

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Exhibiting the Holocaust

Sarah Batsford, Research Assistant in the Holocaust Exhibition Project Office at the Imperial War Museum, describes some of the issues faced by the Museum in setting up the Exhibition and maintaining its upkeep

The Holocaust Exhibition at the Imperial War Museum was established in June 2000 – the IWM's contribution to Millennium Year. While the persecution and murder of the Jews of Europe by the Nazis is its principal focus, other groups targeted by the Nazis on the grounds of their perceived racial, political or biological inferiority are also included: the Roma and Sinti (gypsies), the disabled, Soviet prisoners of war, Jehovah's Witnesses and homosexuals. The 1,200 square metre narrative display spreads over two floors of the Museum. Both the Exhibition and the Museum's Education Office remain permanent sources of information and learning on the Holocaust.

The Holocaust Exhibition Project

The Exhibition was five years in the making, and full accounts of this effort can be read on the Museum's website. The chief challenge to the Exhibition team was to create a display which was historically sound, while at the same time being sensitive to the needs of visitors - many of whom would be unfamiliar with the background history and quite possibly put off by its traumatic content. A dedicated team travelled Europe seeking material which would support the Exhibition's twenty nine sections, and then worked this material up into a coherent display. The team were helped in their work by an Advisory Group comprising historians of the Holocaust Sir Martin Gilbert and Professor David Cesarani; survivors Ben Helfgott and Rabbi Hugo Gryn, and Martin Smith, a television documentary maker who had worked on the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington.

Each section was given careful consideration. What would the visitor have learned by this stage of the Exhibition? How would the essential facts of this section be best conveyed? With archival film? With photos? With personal stories? Such a subject matter also raised ethical issues: was it right to show photographs of individuals in extreme states of humiliation or terror? There was also concern that particularly disturbing artefacts - such as torture instruments – would cause too much distress to the visitor. Against this came the argument that *not* to show the brutality of the Nazi terror in its real light would do an injustice both to the subject and to those who suffered at their hands.

The interaction between the artefacts and the design of the Exhibition were important considerations. Documents, objects, survivor testimony, film, photos and narrative text form the substance of the Exhibition, but the design, architecture and the sombre atmosphere create a setting within which these contents sit. It was decided that the Exhibition would be predominantly chronological in format, although certain topics - the role of propaganda and the effects of this on the population of Germany; the basic principles of Nazi race theory and their use of the bureaucratic machine in respect of the working-out of the 'Final Solution' – are dealt with thematically.

Whilst the overall tone is deliberately sober, eighteen Holocaust survivors inject powerful emotion into the Exhibition by delivering their own personal testimony on monitors. We have an ongoing relationship with survivors and their descendants, and from the beginning this regular contact has helped root the Exhibition in the story it tells. It is intensely rewarding to meet these people: to hear their stories of survival is a special privilege. I remember one particular meeting. I had spent quite some time preparing the text for the story of a survivor, Janina Fischler-Martinho. As a child she had escaped the Krakow ghetto through the city's sewer system, and spent the

remaining years of the war working as a farmhand in the surrounding countryside. Mrs Fischler-Martinho devotes much of her time to visiting schools and addressing classes about her experiences. Her tireless efforts to ensure that the suffering of that time is not forgotten made me realise that this is anything but history consigned to textbooks.

The Exhibition starts by looking at pre-war Jewish life, and the variety of exhibits reflects the diversity of Jewish culture throughout Europe at that time. It then looks at the build-up to the Nazi war against the Jews: the political situation in Europe after the First World War and, after Hitler came to power in 1933, the increasing amount of legislation and discrimination. The Exhibition goes on to show attempts by Jews to seek refuge abroad, the events of *Kristallnacht* and the beginnings of the Nazi 'Euthanasia' programme – termed '*Aktion T4*'. Descending to the Exhibition's lower floor, the visitor reaches a deliberately darker, more enclosed and 'threatening' space. Here they find out about the terrifying developments that unfolded after the Nazi invasion of Poland in September 1939: mass-shootings of Jews by *Einsatzgruppen* in the East and the entrapment of Jews in ghettos in central and western Europe. The mass deportation of Jews from all over Europe to the East is documented with last letters – in some cases thrown from trains.

Having worked their way through the harrowing section detailing life inside the camps, the visitor is confronted with the terrible privations of the final months of the war – as surviving camp inmates are forced onto 'death marches' and the camps are liberated.

Careful consideration was given to how to represent Britain's role in the Holocaust. The events documented in the Exhibition happened on mainland Europe, but chilling reports of Nazi atrocities were available in the US and in Britain from early on in the war. It was important therefore to convey what news reached Britain, and how the authorities – diplomats, news editors, politicians - responded. This need is met by the four 'News Reaches Britain' showcases with their newspaper articles, pamphlets and reports.

Ongoing collecting

The Holocaust Exhibition Office is in a race against time to acquire and preserve artefacts and documents in our field. It is vital that these items – which are both the 'stuff of history' and treasured family records – are preserved and not lost as one generation passes to the next. For the longevity of the Holocaust Exhibition it is also important that they are available for the replenishment of the displays, and maintaining the Exhibition's rich collection of approximately 600 artefacts, documents and photographs is an important part of my day-to-day role.

We recently acquired an especially poignant collection - a bracelet and tie-pin once owned by one Marek Kellerman. A Jewish brushmaker in Bratislava, Kellerman tried to safeguard his family's wealth from seizure by the Nazis by depositing some of it with Barclays Bank when on a trip to London shortly before the outbreak of war. Marek Kellerman was not the only person to do this, and by 1945 the British Government was presiding over enemy property with a value of £370 million. Marek Kellerman's jewellery was never claimed, despite a widely publicized effort from 1998 to 2004 by the Department of Trade and Industry to find its owner. It now sits in a showcase dealing with the confiscation of property from Jews – a lesser known aspect of the Nazi persecution policies.

At the start of 2007 the Office received its largest ever donation in the form of the Gianfranco Moscati Collection. Amassed over sixty years by its Naples-based collector, this collection of nearly 1,500 items allows us to address the persecution of the Jews in Italy – a subject previously absent from the Exhibition. We now tell the story of a Jewish Italian lawyer, Emilio Sacerdote. Barred from his profession, Sacerdote joined the Italian resistance, but was arrested and sent to the concentration camp at Flossenbug. The Exhibition now features the last letter he wrote to his family in 1944.

The Imperial War Museum might at first sight seem an unlikely home for religious objects, but in 2007 we acquired a Jewish Torah Scroll with a particularly unusual story. Isaac Levy was the Senior Jewish Chaplain to the British Army of the Rhine in 1945 and reached Bergen-Belsen three days after the first British troops entered the camp. Over 10,000 bodies were buried in the following days and Levy was one of the chaplains who conducted burial services over the mass graves. Whilst there, he found the burnt Torah Scroll abandoned in a schoolhouse along with other desecrated items of Judaica. His son recently gave it to the Museum and it now sits in a showcase in the section on Liberation.

Events and advice

The Holocaust Exhibition team nurture interest in our field with a series of events held at intervals through the year. Last year for example, we hosted the launch of survivor Roman Halter's memoir; a lecture by the Director of Yad Vashem Museum in Jerusalem; the reading of the diary of a death-march survivor and, most recently, a reunion of German and Austrian refugees who fought in the British Army against the Nazis. Conferences and seminars are also hosted by the Museum, and we receive visits and requests for advice from other museum professionals embarking on similar projects. The Director of the Exhibition Suzanne Bardgett, recently used that expertise to provide guidance for a memorial room for the Srebrenica massacre in Bosnia Herzegovina.

Education

The Exhibition is supported by a busy Holocaust Education programme. Last year alone 770 teaching sessions took place, with approximately 23,000 students receiving education sessions. Students require careful and thorough preparation for their visit, and a comprehensive service - devised by the Museum's Holocaust Education Coordinator Paul Salmons - means all school groups visiting the Exhibition receive a pre-visit video, a briefing on arrival, the option of a sound guide, and a post-visit debrief. In their pre- and post-Exhibition sessions with specialist Holocaust educators, pupils are encouraged to see the complexities of the world in which choices were made and decisions taken. Just exhibiting the Holocaust is not enough - it is important that a forum for education and discussion is made available.

Visitor feedback

Finally, it is significant that visitors are given the opportunity to voice their thoughts. Over two million people have now been through the Exhibition, and they are able to write their comments down when they reach the last section - the 'reflections space'. These comments reinforce the call that existed before the Exhibition opened: no matter how impossible it might be to explain the inexplicable, with sobriety and humility we must try. Here is a small sample of some such comments:

One of the best aspects of the exhibit is the personal nature of the individual stories. The small photos and biographies of individuals are so touching. At the thought of millions in mass graves the human mind steps back, unable to take it all in. But to focus on one person, this woman or that child, hits you very very hard.

A very moving and brutally honest history of one of the worst periods of time. It still, thank God, has the power to shock all these years afterwards. The strength of the human spirit to overcome even these terrible crimes is an inspiration.

This is a touching and upsetting Exhibition. It makes your heart stop with fear, your eyes fill with tears and you hope never to allow this to happen ever again.

Belonging: voices of London's refugees

Annette Day, Senior Curator of Oral History and Contemporary Collecting, Museum of London, discusses the approach and responses to an exhibition based on refugees experiences in London.

Belonging: voices of London's refugees was a major exhibition held at Museum of London between 27 October 2006 and 25 February 2007. The exhibition had a number of key aims: to provide a public space where personal narratives and perspectives of refugees could be heard; to support visitors from all backgrounds in better understanding the realities of life for refugees and the contributions they have made to London; to offer visitors from refugee backgrounds a source of pride and inspiration; and to reflect the complexity and multiplicity of experiences, opinions and identities among refugees.

Belonging was part of the Refugee Communities History Project, a two-and-a-half year oral history project led by the Evelyn Oldfield Unit in partnership with Museum of London, London Metropolitan University and fifteen refugee community organisations (RCOs). This groundbreaking project collected, documented and archived more than 150 in-depth oral history interviews, recorded in more than fifteen languages. It then produced a wide range of community-based outputs informed by and drawing on the interviews, including films, CD-Roms, exhibitions and events, as well as the exhibition at Museum of London. *Belonging* also incorporated work created through collaborations between local museums and RCOs as part of a separate project, the London Museums Hub Refugee Heritage Programme.

The subject of refugees is a challenging, contested and emotive one. This article will look at why the project partners were committed to creating this exhibition and reflect upon approaches and processes used to address some of the issues and challenges involved. As will become clear, *Belonging* was profoundly shaped by the partners and partnerships involved and collaborative processes established, by the emphasis on oral history, and by the climate of political, media and public opinion in which it was developed.

Partnership

The Refugee Communities History Project was initiated and managed by the Evelyn Oldfield Unit, a refugee-led agency which provides professional support and training for RCOs to help them tackle the immediate and pressing needs of their communities. The idea for the project was conceived during discussions within the Unit's Management Committee about how it could address sustained negative reporting by parts of the media about refugees and asylum seekers and challenge widely held public misconceptions that create barriers to integration. The answer they reached was to initiate an oral history and exhibition project, approaching Museum of London and London Metropolitan University to collaborate with them on its development and implementation. That this was their proposed solution suggests a recognition that museums have the position and capacity to engage with and offer clarity and balance regarding contemporary issues, providing they are willing to adopt such a role and accept the responsibility with which it is accompanied. This genesis for the project meant that it retained a specific set of social purposes, to challenge prevalent negative public perceptions and portrayals, encourage pride and inspiration, and promote greater understanding, empathy and appreciation. These were aims to which the Museum was willing to commit, as part of its mission to 'reach all of London's communities through playing a role in the debate about London'.

From the outset it was essential that refugee communities, through the medium of RCOs, were directly involved in owning and steering the project. A structure was established which resulted in fifteen RCOs becoming partners in the project, joining through an open application process. Each partner RCO nominated a representative to sit on the project's steering group; hosted and supported a fieldworker; helped to identify and select interviewees from their communities; developed community-based outputs; and collaborated in the development of *Belonging*. The insights that the RCO partners brought to the discussions about aims, messages, themes and content were instrumental in the shaping of the exhibition, helping to ensure that it was led by refugee perspectives and priorities.

The project also employed and trained fifteen fieldworkers on ten-month full-time contracts – seven in the first year of the project, and eight in the second year. It was important that the project supported paid fieldworkers, as RCOs often have limited resources and pressing demands and expecting them to have been able to contribute extensive staff or volunteer time would have been unrealistic. Each fieldworker was hosted by one of the RCOs, with representatives from the RCOs involved in their recruitment. Fieldworkers were required to have language skills (to ensure that potential interviewees were not excluded on the basis of their language ability) and knowledge specific to the community with which they would work. This meant that the fieldworkers largely came from the communities with which they worked, the majority were refugees themselves, and all had prior experience within the refugee sector. What was notable was the number of applicants offering valuable education, skills and work experience that they had not been able to transfer to UK-based employment. This served to reinforce one of the intangible aims of the project: to provide employment and skills-building opportunities for refugees. The fieldworkers undertook MA-level accredited training in life history research and media production at London Metropolitan University before each collecting and documenting at least ten oral history interviews and working with their RCO to create community-based outputs. This helped to ensure a high quality of interviewing, as well as benefiting the fieldworkers concerned.

It is not possible here to rehearse in any detail the debates about the respective merits of 'insider' versus 'outsider' interviewing. However the project was conscious of these issues, and the training included discussion about the challenges that can be faced by 'insider' interviewers and strategies for mitigating them – for example the barriers that cultural etiquette can erect concerning what is discussed, and the possibility that shared knowledge between interviewer and interviewee can lead to omissions in interviews. It was vitally important for the project that the fieldworkers did come from or were closely connected to the communities with which they worked, offering advantages in terms of levels of trust on the part of interviewees, understanding and empathy on the part of interviewers, the ability to communicate in community languages, and understanding of culturally specific values and etiquette. It also meant that fieldworkers were well placed to contribute to the development of the exhibition, feeding in both what they were learning from interviewees, and insights gained from their own personal experiences.

Purpose and voice

Belonging was the outcome of a highly collaborative process. At the heart of this was a programme of fortnightly meetings involving Museum of London and Evelyn Oldfield Unit staff and fieldworkers over two years, together with regular steering group meetings, and a phase of formative evaluation. The exhibition was the result of more than one hundred hours of discussion between Museum staff, fieldworkers and partners. Importantly, it was also the result of shared decision-making.

Throughout the discussions and the formative evaluation process, the value of the project's fundamental aims was continually reinforced and there was consistency of commitment to them across all participants. In implementing them, an area of particularly interesting and important discussion focused on the balance in emphasis on 'contribution' (defined throughout the project in the most inclusive way possible, for example incorporating making a new home and bringing up a family as well as through work, politics, culture and so on) and on the difficulties, challenges and traumas faced by refugees. There were inevitably shades of difference in the views of different participants in the project, and this delicate balance was actively discussed and considered at great length.

The key influence on the final shape of the exhibition was the importance placed on ensuring that it was directly informed by the interviews, rather than being imposed on them. This was a fundamental principle from the outset, to ensure that the exhibition was a reflection of the experiences and perspectives of refugees, rather than a manipulation or exploitation of them. At a time when refugees are so often denied a genuine voice or a chance to be heard in the public domain, this was essential. For this reason, although there was ongoing discussion, the key decision-making was delayed until a considerable proportion of the interviews had been collected, and decisions were revisited and refined throughout the interviewing period and indeed right up to the final confirmation of the exhibition's content. In shaping the exhibition, part of the challenge, and equally part of the answer, lay in the complexity and multiplicity of the experiences related by the interviewees.

At the entrance to *Belonging*, there was a clear and transparent statement both about what the exhibition was, and what it was not. A prominent introductory panel read:

'Being a refugee is devastating and traumatic. Refugees face huge challenges and barriers in building new lives in London, and their achievements are hard won. Yet they make enormous contributions to the capital - politically, economically, and culturally. They help to shape the city we know today.'

'This exhibition is not a history of refugees in London. Instead it shares the voices, memories and successes of people who have found refuge in the capital. While all have certain experiences and concerns in common, each person's story is unique. They offer different perspectives on being a refugee, on London, and on what it means to belong.'

Raising awareness about the achievements and contributions of refugees to London was important, especially at a time when the reporting on asylum seekers and refugees by parts of media is marked by so much misconception, stereotyping and sometimes outright hostility, and when the word 'refugee' has negative associations for many people. This was as important for interviewees as for project partners. At the same time it was important not to overlook or under-estimate the immense traumas, difficulties and barriers with which refugees have to contend and which marked the interviews. Reflecting these was also part of challenging misconceptions and encouraging greater cross-cultural understanding and empathy. It was also important not to suggest that refugees have to 'earn' their place in Britain by being higher achievers than the rest of the population, but to be clear that asylum is a fundamental human right. The overall aim thus was to create an exhibition that would encourage visitors to leave with a more positive view of refugees, but one that did not gloss over the difficulties they face, or lose its claims to legitimacy by being over-'campaigning'.

Underlying all of this was a more fundamental aim that visitors leave with a sense of refugees as ordinary people. This may seem a simple aim, but it was an important one given how dehumanising media and political debates and academic studies can be. The exhibition emphasised that refugees are individuals with their own unique life stories

which cannot be reduced to a single convenient 'refugee experience' or 'refugee narrative'. During the development process there was much talk about stereotypes – not just about the stereotypes that currently exist in the public domain, but also that the exhibition should not simply replace one set of stereotypes with another. *Belonging* therefore embraced diversity and complexity, not trying to create any form of simple narrative, but presenting a multiplicity of different and sometimes contradictory experiences and perspectives.

In all of this, it was vital to be sensitive and respectful to the interviewees who had so generously and courageously told their stories and agreed for them to be shared in such a public space. The fieldworkers, who knew them best, stressed the importance of not exploiting their stories by over-'politicising' the way in which they were used. For many interviewees, their main reason for participating was simply that they wanted people to better understand them, their lives, their concerns, their achievements and their hopes, and the exhibition prioritised and foregrounded their stories. The voice of the 'museum' (effectively here the public face of the partners) was deliberately light in presence and touch. Only in the introductory and concluding panels did the museum voice come to the fore, and only in the conclusion was it strong in statement and tone. There were two reasons for this. Firstly, the partners concluded that an aggressive challenge to visitors would only offend visitors who were already sympathetic to refugees, and encourage those who were not, to put up barriers which would have been self-defeating (it should be noted here that just as the partners did not want to stereotype refugees, they also did not want to stereotype visitors). But perhaps more importantly, the aim was for the exhibition to very genuinely provide a space for the interviewees to be heard, without being overwhelmed by loud institutional agendas or calls for attention – this exhibition was not about institutional voices, but about individual ones.

Conclusion

The exhibition attracted more one hundred items of overwhelmingly positive press, itself a contribution to achieving the project's aims. During its four-month run, *Belonging* was visited by more than 32,000 people. In-depth summative evaluation was undertaken by an external evaluator who concluded that, 'Participants across all the visitor groups described the exhibition as *important, emotional, informative, and as giving a voice*.... It is rare, as a visitor researcher, to encounter such engagement and impact during and as the result of one single experience of an exhibition. This is unique and extraordinary and shows the power of museums to move, engage, educate and inspire into action' (Johnsson: 2007).

The exhibition was based on an unrivalled collection of more than 150 oral history interviews, and was created by a unique partnership involving a refugee agency, a museum, a university and fifteen refugee community organisations. It aimed to present a fair, evidenced and reasoned portrayal of refugees. What it did not do was give a voice to anti-refugee sentiment or arguments, though it did provide an uncensored space for visitors to leave their own views. The partners felt that negative arguments are well rehearsed in the public domain and that it was reasonable to assume that visitors would come to the exhibition well aware of such views. Thus, rather than reflecting a debate from a distance or creating an exhibition in isolation from ongoing public debate, the Museum effectively entered that debate. Some might argue that this is not the role of a museum. But museums are in a position to contribute to such debates, and, as the Evelyn Oldfield Unit recognised when they first conceived the project, that contribution can make a difference. Perhaps the most notable comment on the exhibition actually appeared in the *Evening Standard*, where columnist Francis Wheen commented, 'As an antidote to the ceaseless vilification of all "asylum-seekers"', the exhibition couldn't be more timely – or inspirational'.

References

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Endnotes

1. Partners included Afghan Association of London, African Community Health and Research Organisation, with the Lwo Cultural Group, Bosnian Resource Information Centre Kosovar Support, Chinese Information and Advice Centre, Council for Assisting Refugee Academics, Eritrean Education and Publication Trust, Ethiopian Community in Britain, Haringey Somali Community and Cultural Association, Imece Turkish Speaking Women's Group, Iraqi Community Association, Kurdish Association, Latin American Association, Latin American Women's Rights Service, with Latin American Disabled People's Project and Latin American Elderly People's Project, Roma Support Group, Tamil Relief Centre. The project was funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, City Parochial Foundation and Trust for London.
2. The exhibition's website is still live at www.museumoflondon.org.uk/belonging and there is also a project website at www.refugeestories.org

Who do we think we were? Some theoretical perspectives on interpreting childhood.

Jim Gledhill, Curatorial Assistant at The Foundling Museum, looks at the how museums display the histories of childhood.

In contemporary society the concept of childhood is often marked by a profound duality. In the tabloid media children usually appear in binary form as either angelic innocents or ASBO recipients. In an increasingly violent and fragmented society politicians and parents are driven by conflicting impulses both to protect and to punish the young via legal means. The last three decades have seen children granted a raft of new legal rights that have brought them a greater degree of self-determination (Cunningham, 2005, 203-204). At the same time government policy makers are considering increasing young people's dependence on the state by requiring them to remain in school or training to the age of eighteen.

In the last volume of this journal Sharon Roberts provided a timely and thought-provoking analysis of how the theme of childhood is being interpreted in social history museums entitled *Is Social History Still in Wonderland?* This article does not offer a parallel survey either of Britain's dedicated museums of childhood or those that represent childhood in broader social historical narratives; it will instead consider some of the issues raised by the previous article from a theoretical perspective. Roberts acknowledges the 'growing inclusion of children and interpretation of childhood in our museums' but argues that children are still largely ignored in the 'representation of social groups in terms of equity, empowerment and authenticity' and the portrayal of 'hidden histories' (Roberts, 2006, 45). She also contends that, 'many museums are still using imagery of a nostalgic middle class childhood filled with expensive toys to represent children in the past' (Ibid, 45). This article will consider whether or not this is actually the case by examining the potential uses of material culture and the museum space itself in interpreting the social history of childhood.

The job of portraying the 'hidden histories' of social groups has been made easier by the fact that most groups previously marginalised or excluded in museum exhibition narratives have traditionally self-organised in social and political movements familiar to the social historian, such as campaigning organisations, trade unions and political parties. These movements have left a significant trail of material culture behind in their wake. Examples of children self-organising independently of adults in history are rare. However, this has not prevented social historians from seeking to identify 'children's voices' in the search for an 'historical authenticity' of childhood (Jordanova, 1989, 5-6). Diaries, letters, autobiographies and children's literature, have been examined by social historians at length in their attempts to analyse childhood in the past (Pollock, 1983, 264). However, the material culture of childhood has a poor survival rate, which has often led to a reliance on publicly available 'adult' sources, such as official documents and literary reminiscences (Heywood, 2001, 6).

The Imperial War Museum London's current exhibition *The Children's War* features both audio recordings of adults recollecting their childhood experiences of World War Two as well as children's diaries, letters and artwork. The exhibition juxtaposes public, 'official' material, such as National Registration Cards and wartime propaganda posters, with private, personal ephemera, such as diaries and letters written by evacuees to their families. It also juxtaposes 'adult' art representing evacuees leaving London with contemporary artistic representations by working class children leaving the East End of London for the countryside. The audio recordings also describe the experiences of children wanting to participate in the war, such as those who entered the Local

Defence Volunteers under-age. These testimonies are contrasted with official propaganda, such as the Ministry of Health poster, which proclaims 'Leave this to us sonny – you ought to be out of London'. The visitor encounters other working class children, who worked in Britain's wartime industry and agriculture. This is a long way from a 'nostalgic middle class childhood' and reflects the profound impact of social history on museums whereby the history of the Second World War is now generally portrayed as a war fought by ordinary people and not by an anonymous, homogenous nation led by Winston Churchill. Through the thematic interplay of class, gender and age, girls working in industry for the war effort are revealed to be at once working class and female and children. This exhibition is significant in these respects because it partially short-circuits the more traditional motif of children as passive victims of war.

Another exhibition that provides us with the negative image of a 'nostalgic middle class childhood' is the permanent exhibition, *Coram's Children*, at the Foundling Museum in London. The exhibition portrays the history of the Foundling Hospital, Britain's first institution for housing abandoned children founded in 1739. The Foundling Hospital was an institution founded as both a result of the growth of moral philanthropy and the exigencies of Britain's rapidly expanding economy in the eighteenth century. The Foundling Museum portrays the lives of children who experienced only the bare rudiments of a childhood in the modern sense. There are no toys on display; instead the exhibition features functional objects, such as cutlery, crockery, a handwriting exercise book and apprenticeship certificates. The exhibition displays the clothes the Foundling children wore, which consist of uniforms for 'little adults.' These uniforms resemble those worn by soldiers and domestic servants, which were the primary occupations the Hospital authorities prepared the children prepared for. These 'official' objects issued to the children are contrasted with the highly personal collection of tokens; keepsakes left by the children's mothers as a means of identifying their children if they came back to the Hospital to reclaim them at a later date. The Foundling Hospital finally closed its doors in 1953, an anachronism with the advent of the Welfare State. The exhibition features audio recordings of the personal experiences of three twentieth century Foundlings, which reflect the harsh and often traumatic history of an institutionalised 'childhood.'

The above exhibitions illustrate some of the difficulties social history curators face when interpreting childhood, such as finding personal objects to tell stories without a constant recourse to 'official' material. Using adult recollections of childhood in the form of interviews or recorded reminiscences may also be problematic as these can be distorted by the fallibility of human memory. How can social historians and curators avoid portraying a narrow or subjective image of childhood in the past given the scarcity of material available to us? Pollock has argued that we must evaluate sources, such as diaries, in their totality and not just cherry pick from them to prove specific points. A more comprehensive approach can often expose how isolated events, such as punishments, may prove the exception rather than the rule to 'what life was like' in a previous era (Pollock, 1983, 67). A thorough approach to recording oral histories utilising a wide range of questions can also be crucial because despite the vagaries of human memory interviews can tell us 'what ordinary people remember of big events as distinct from what their betters think they should remember' (Hobsbawm, 1998, 273). This is especially true of children who are constantly being told what's happening and what to think by adults.

The practice of interviewing subjects for oral history recordings, a common feature in exhibitions today, reflects the significant influence of other social sciences, namely social anthropology, on the field of social history. Deriving techniques from other disciplines can equip social history curators with a more sophisticated toolkit for interpretation. Curators should conduct more in-depth interviews with children, in order to learn more about contemporary experiences of childhood, children's perceptions of

historical events and social change. Through this process we can discover more about children's motives and aspirations as historical agents and their interaction with material culture in a variety of social spheres, including education, domestic life and leisure. This can reveal more about the social realities facing children today, which may provide both contrasts and parallels with past experiences of childhood as recalled by adults.

We should be aware that children interact with all forms of material culture and not just those we traditionally associate with childhood (Derevenski, 2000, 7). Social history curators have tended to focus on toys because they are usually purpose built for children. Toys however, do not wholly encompass the 'spontaneous and independent world of play' (Walvin, 1982, 196), which may utilise found objects, or forms of play that possess both institutional and spontaneous dimensions, such as football which is played both formally at school and informally in parks and streets. In modern society new forms of play have emerged which are common to both adults and children, such as computer games. This has produced a shared material culture common to both groups (Meyrowitz, 1985, 227). This is also true of other forms of popular culture, which have an intergenerational appeal, such as music, film and television. Music in the form of CDs and vinyl records are now commonly displayed in social history exhibitions about popular culture. Long running television programmes, such as Dr Who, have also been shown to have a significant intergenerational appeal.

It should be emphasised that the material culture of play possesses a broad spectrum of meaning for people of different age, gender and class backgrounds. The socio-economic significance of toys for example, has changed dramatically during the course of the last century. Toy production has been shaped by the growth of market forces and the emergence of consumer society. As commodities toys have been adapted by manufacturers in response to 'the changing attitudes, social conditions, and practices of daily life including the media-intensive environment of contemporary childhood' (Kline, 1998, 358). During the latter half of the twentieth century rising living standards, advertising and changing social norms created a genuine mass market for toys (Brown, 1996, 224). The primary mode of production had shifted from a craft based industry to the assembly line, utilising new techniques and materials, which meant that some toys became available at lower prices and were therefore more accessible to working class children. Often these toys took the form of cheaper mass produced versions of those handmade for upper and middle class children. The toys on display in the Childhood Galleries at the V&A Museum of Childhood range from expensive handmade objects to toys mass-produced for the post-war consumer market. Several of the expensive handmade dolls' houses on display were originally made for adult collectors rather than children. These 'toys' are therefore not representative of a 'nostalgic middle class childhood' at all, but have been reinterpreted in the museum context so that contemporary child visitors from different social backgrounds can both enjoy and learn from the once exclusive objects of previous eras.

The materiality of childrens' lives is closely related to the role of the museum space in providing a conduit for the interplay of different narratives. Roberts argues that 'Adults...create the social, intellectual and emotional spaces that children are obliged to inhabit' (Roberts, 2006, 46). Whereas this is true to the extent that museum professionals who create exhibitions are adults, we should not overlook the trend of involving children in the production of exhibitions in the same way that it is now quite common to involve other social groups and communities in this process.

In the Childhood Galleries at the V&A's Museum of Childhood there is certainly evidence of 'expensive toys' from the Victorian era, but in the same space we can see a much more diverse representation of childhood in which children have actively participated. *The World in the East End* component of the gallery features objects chosen by children from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds, which reflects the cultural

diversity of the urban working class area in which the Museum is situated. Material culture ranging from religious artefacts to a West Ham football shirt have been chosen by local children to illustrate their personal stories, which explore social and familial relationships and the experience of immigration through the eyes of younger generations. We can also see a sectioned model of a tower block, entitled 'A Room With a View' made by pupils from a local primary school, which is a reinterpretation of the dolls' houses on display elsewhere in the gallery. Returning to the notion of 'equity, empowerment and authenticity' in the representation of social groups, this approach has allowed children of both sexes and of diverse ethnic backgrounds to choose their own material culture for display and therefore to act as curators of their own social history.

Involving children and young people in creating exhibitions raises the fundamental question of how museum spaces are used by adults to regulate access to information. Meyrowitz has argued that social status distinctions are preserved through regulating access to information and that 'children are walked up the ladder of adult information' (Meyrowitz, 1985, 235). He also argued that the introduction of television to households destroyed adults' ability to control access to information and to reinforce a 'bipolar reality' wherein they determined actual and idealised versions of society (Ibid, 255-56).

The introduction of the Internet and mobile phones may have empowered children and young people further in this regard in that they now have new means to access information and to communicate with each other. So to what extent do museums walk children 'up the ladder of adult information' and indeed should they? This poses a difficult ethical question because museums like schools have a 'duty of care' responsibility to children. For example it would be inappropriate for museums to allow unregulated access to the Internet on public access computers. At the same time involving children and young people in both the creation of exhibitions through consultation groups and spreading information about museum activities through these new forms of communication are both vital for attracting new audiences but are also increasingly a prerequisite for funding (Birkett, 2007, 30). Initiatives, such as the Artforum project at Wolverhampton Art Gallery, a young people's consultative group which has participated in the Pop Art gallery development, are important because they not only open new information channels, but also bridge the gap between young people's actual social experiences and perceptions, and those of older social history curators. In this respect 'Wonderland' does not simply represent the magical world of the 'Edwardian nursery' for social history curators, but can also signify our own perceptions of youth transfigured by time, geography and social change.

This article began by reflecting on the duality of childhood in the popular imagination. If social history curators in the past perpetuated imagery of a 'nostalgic middle class childhood' they perhaps did so in order to preserve a state of innocence in what they perceived to be an age marked by a 'disappearing childhood' (Hendrick 1997, 94-95). We now find ourselves in an era where 'a public discourse which argues that children are persons with rights to a degree of autonomy is at odds with the remnants of the romantic view that the right of a child is to be a child' (Cunningham, 2005, 205). The Childhood Galleries at the V&A Museum of Childhood could be said to reflect that conflict. The museum space both empowers children to explore their own realities by contributing to the displays, whilst preserving areas dedicated to childhood innocence, such as a sand pit for them to play in. The idea that the museum space itself is dedicated to children is implicit in certain sections, which ask questions such as "Who will I be?" This is a question addressed directly to children, although adults may perhaps re-interpret it to mean, "What have I become?" Social history exhibitions, like all great children's fiction, should therefore aim to speak to both children and adults at once, albeit on different levels of an information ladder that we climb together.

In conclusion Sharon Roberts has made a most welcome call for more consideration of how to 'better collect, interpret, represent and exhibit' children's lives (Roberts, 2006, 47). However, in her article she has perhaps overlooked the more imaginative and nuanced approaches being adopted currently in both the use of material culture and museum spaces. Moreover it is important to recognise the way in which the theme of childhood is being integrated into larger social historical narratives, such as the experience of ordinary British people in the Second World War, which are clearly far removed from the 'Victorian schoolroom and the Edwardian nursery'. If the role of social history is to dramatise ordinary peoples' lives and to reveal the distinct traces they have left on the fabric of human society, then children will continue to feature in exhibitions, because as Roberts acknowledges, 'everybody is or has been a child even if they have not had a childhood' (Ibid).

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Is Croydon Crap? A case study on the representation of place in social history museums

Georgina Young, formerly Assistant Museums Officer at Croydon Museums, looks at the challenges in overcoming negative perceptions of a place, and how museums can play a role in improving that image.

Social history museums have a responsibility for the representation of place; exploring the relationships that people have with the places they come from, live in or pass through. The public image of Croydon as a place is bad and negative images of Croydon are often interwoven with the stereotyping of Croydon people. The Museum of Croydon recognises the negative perceptions that exist and this case study reflects on the ways that it has begun to approach and challenge them.

We aim to improve the quality of life for everyone in Croydon: to promote a sense of place, a feeling of belonging, local pride and to enhance Croydon's image regionally, nationally and internationally. (London Borough of Croydon: 2007)

This Croydon Museum and Heritage Service mission statement was a founding principle of Lifetimes, the interactive museum about Croydon people, when it opened in 1994 and of its 2006 successor, the Museum of Croydon. The statement acts as a declaration of intent in relation to the representation of place. It is explicit that the Museum has a duty to the image of Croydon and implicit that Croydon has an image problem.

The image problem

What do you know about Croydon? Common totems of Croydon's public image include tower blocks, Kate Moss, commuters, the Home Office, binge drinkers and Ikea. Generic visions of suburban sprawl and a dislocated population dominate popular media representations of Croydon. Angela Fussell summarised the consensus at the point when Lifetimes was first proposed:

By the 1980s, the name Croydon had become a byword for boring, bland and mediocre. The Councillors were convinced that a dynamic image had an important part to play in economic success. They saw a museum as playing a key part in establishing that image. (Fussell: 1997:39)

As part of the formative evaluation for Lifetimes, negative perceptions of Croydon were exposed in several studies commissioned by the London Borough of Croydon and carried out by the Susie Fisher Group. One of the goals of the research was to establish people's feelings about Croydon and the degree to which they identified with the Borough:

Croydon comes in for a lot of criticism. It has its uses but they are limited. Oddly, although Croydon is a focus for many surrounding communities (for example Sydenham or Crystal Palace) people use Croydon without compunction and reserve their loyalties and identities for their own immediate communities.

IMPLICATION: There is little sense of emotional involvement with Croydon, to propel curiosity about its history or to stimulate people to create (Susie Fisher Group: 1993).

The negative popular image of Croydon is resilient and persistent. One of its most obvious recent manifestations was the labelling of Croydon as the 15th crappiest town in the UK in the Idler Book of Crap Towns (Jordison & Kieran: 2003). There was clearly still work for the Museum of Croydon to do.

Does Croydon have a history?

"Young white adult, 'You're not history till you're dead'." (Susie Fisher Group: 1993)

One of the most striking conclusions to come out of the Susie Fisher Group reports was that a lot of Croydon people felt that Croydon did not have any history worth showing and certainly did not imagine themselves to be part of that history. The Museum of Croydon had to challenge those beliefs if it was to have an impact on Croydon people's sense of place and belonging. The strongest expression of this intent in the new Museum of Croydon is at the entrance, where visitors are faced with a choice between two entrance doors, titled 'Now' and 'Then'. Between the two entrances visitors can move chronologically or counter-chronologically through the content of the museum, arranged into six time-bound display areas.

The 'Then' door takes visitors to a gallery that tells Croydon's stories from 1800 – 1899. Lifetimes had begun its history of Croydon in the 1830s, but the Museum of Croydon took an earlier start point in response to demand from local historical groups for it to cover well-known historical topics such as the early railways. The 1800 – 1899 area sets up the story of Croydon as integrated with nationally and internationally significant historical trends and starts to associate Croydon with subjects that visitors might recognise as valid and established histories.

The 'Now' door takes visitors into a changing contemporary community exhibition area. It sets up the position of the Museum of Croydon in a radically different way. The content of 'Now' changes regularly, but it always showcases outreach activities and the Museum's engagement with contemporary issues through active contemporary collecting and research. 'Now' attempts to establish that history is being made at the moment and that you do not sit outside the process. It also strives to have relevance to Croydon people's lived day-to-day experience and by doing so develops one of the suggestions in a Lifetimes summative evaluation report, again produced by the Susie Fisher Group: 'It is worth taking special care to have something accurate, relevant and evocative to say about today, as well as the past' (Susie Fisher Group: 1995).

When does Croydon become crap?

1900 – 1938

*Fresh hay lingers on
Freshly painted homes spring up
wisteria forlorn*
(Booker: 2006)

The negative perception of Croydon as a place is not a-historical, it is a product of a particular time. As people move through time in the Museum of Croydon, there are a series of emotional and attitudinal shifts in their relationship with the place and its history. To give an emotional tone to each of the six time-bound displays within the Museum of Croydon, the poet Malika Booker was commissioned to write a set of haiku. These poems sit high in the interpretative hierarchy, at the same level as the framing dates for each display. The haiku do something different, but complimentary; they catch a moment, mood or feeling, subtly varying the identity of Croydon to fit each time period.

1939 – 1959

*shop shelves fill with dust
ivy climb empty houses
frocks bebop all night*
(Booker: 2006)

Tell Me Something I Don't Know

The massive changes in Croydon must have caused people to take a greater interest in their heritage, in their past. Because they can see it slipping away from them or being taken away from them in large chunks. I think the majority of people regretted the parting of the old Croydon, but they regretted it too late. (Woodhams: no date)

The totems of Croydon's bad image tend to cluster around the period of post-war reconstruction. The built environment that resulted is often emphasized in accounts of Croydon's crappiness, sometimes for its brutally modern appearance, sometimes for its lack of relationship with what went before and sometimes for its blatant commercialism. Rather than interpreting the post-war built environment of Croydon as monolithic, the Museum of Croydon presents it as a stimulus for debate and a hook for Croydon people's memories.

The interpretative approach to this subject is indicative of a style across the Museum of Croydon. The Museum has a physical timeline running through it that carries a short history of Croydon and can be read either chronologically or counter-chronologically. It carries key objects and associated oral histories. For the post-war urban environment, the key timeline feature is a large scale graphic of a Croydon skyscraper drawn by Malcolm McLaren while he was attending Croydon Art School. It is both iconic and personal but its timeline message is kept simple: in the 1960s Croydon was a boom town, 49 new office blocks and the Whitgift Shopping Centre created a modern skyline.

The timeline relates to a wall of modular display cases for each of the six time-bound displays. The majority of objects and associated oral histories are in these modular cases. They give a greater breadth of stories and provide counter-points to the short history of Croydon carried by the timeline. Alternative stories of the built environment that play off against Malcolm's Skyscraper Drawing include Dan's Pitching Tool, which Dan Dempsey used to cut kerbs when he was a labourer working on the construction of Croydon flyover and Bryan's Fireman's Helmet:

There was a lot of derelict buildings in Croydon, they were like tinderboxes, and sometimes there'd be tramps asleep in them. The worst part of the job is when you've got people that have died in a fire and other people have come out and they're still looking for them." (Cooke: no date)

Taking Croydon Up a Peg or Two

'A Croydon person means someone living, working in, or visiting Croydon.' (London Borough of Croydon: 2007)

'Articles about her [Kate Moss] always mentioned her Croydon roots, although the suspicion in hindsight is that this was probably to sneer, as if her origins made her beauty all the more extraordinary.' (Wikipedia: 2006)

The negative image of Croydon is linked with a criticism of Croydon people. It's not only Kate Moss who is sneered at for being a Croydon person, there are a series of terms of abuse for Croydon as a place, e.g. Chav Capital, that intrinsically reference and insult the population. The Museum of Croydon inverts the logic of using Croydon to take people down a peg or two and uses people to take Croydon up a peg or two.

Croydon Museum and Heritage Service starts with oral history as a basis for collecting. Its collections development work is structured to ensure the diversity of themes covered and of people represented. This collecting policy translates into an on-gallery interpretation framework that ensures the presence of people's voices and identities. Each object in the Museum of Croydon belongs to somebody. Ray Harvey-Amer has loaned a handbag that he used to take with him on gay rights protests. Instead of being

labelled as a handbag, it is named as Ray's Handbag. This naming convention is applied throughout the Museum of Croydon, privileging the owner or user of a thing over the thing in itself and, by extension, highlighting the context(s) and human stories of the material on display.

Aside from this basic label, each object also has four elements of interpretation delivered through multimedia touch-screens embedded in the displays. The headings Show, Tell, Explain and Explore relate to the object label, associated oral history or primary source, historical context and further sources of information respectively. The translation of active and innovative contemporary collecting into this framework gives Croydon people a chance to articulate their relationship with the place in subtle and surprising ways.

Negative representations of Croydon's youth

Negative perceptions of Croydon are often interwoven with the stereotyping and misrepresentation of Croydon people. This combination is particularly potent when it intersects with other negative representations such as those surrounding young people:

This report shows just how strongly we as young people feel about the way we are viewed in today's society. We actively consume the news in this country and yet have little voice in it, so it isn't surprising that such a large percentage of us feel that we are constantly represented as being anti-social. (YouthNet & British Youth Council:2006)

Targeted projects were undertaken under the umbrella of the Museum of Croydon to address such areas of compounded negative representation. As part of the Clocktower venue, the Museum of Croydon adopted an audience development plan for young people aged 14 to 19 and the Museum of Croydon developed the first exhibitions in its Now contemporary space in partnership with this audience. The Clocktower Arts Ambassadors group developed their own exhibition of artwork created in response to Croydon. With support from artist Emma Hart, each member created a cabinet and worked collaboratively on a film capturing young people engaged in creative activity on the streets of Croydon. As well as appearing on-gallery, the film was uploaded to YouTube and true to form, immediately sparked an online debate about the merits of the place.

Summary

The Museum of Croydon, like Lifetimes before it, can't claim to have overturned negative representations of Croydon. Nevertheless, it has met Croydon's image problem head-on and used its collecting and interpretation strategies to encourage debate around, and participation in, the making of Croydon's histories and identities.

The Museum of Croydon has positioned itself as an agent of change and uses that position to make a difference to misrepresentations of Croydon and Croydon people. As one of the participants in the first 'Now' exhibition noted:

Yes, okay, you can think me mad if you so desire, but I realized that I really do like Croydon. It has its fair share of problems (trust me, my Mum works in Croydon Police Station – I know what goes down, innit?) but there are lots of good points about Croydon that get overlooked which is a shame. Never mind. I'm sure our wonderful exhibition will change everyone's minds and celebrities will be queuing up to buy houses round here. ;-) (I Who Have Nothing: 2006).

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Icons and impacts: current approaches to making histories of industry and technology in museums

Jack Kirby is Collections Interpretation Manager at Thinktank, Birmingham science museum. In this article he compares the interpretive approaches of four displays of industry and technology.

This article looks at changing interpretations of the history of technology through an examination of recently completed permanent industrial and technological history galleries at four museums located across the United Kingdom.

When I moved from social to industrial history curatorship in 2005, I found that although there were many reviews of specific galleries and exhibitions, there was little recent comparative analysis of industrial and technological galleries. My aim was therefore to identify the current trends in museological interpretation. By interpretation, I mean both the historical messages that a museum wishes to convey to visitors and the range of techniques (including text, graphics, design, mechanical and computer interactive exhibits, audio and video) used to explain and contextualise artefacts. These messages and techniques are combined in an interpretive approach – the way that a museum organises the elements that make up an exhibition in order to encourage visitors to make meaning. An interpretive approach may or may not incorporate a narrative – a sequential story told through text and other media.

The article starts by setting out the museological background, then reviews the four museums individually, and finally concludes that a range of approaches to industrial and technological history is currently in use, though there are common trends such as low-density displays and links to contemporary technologies and issues that increase visitors' levels of engagement with artefacts.

Background

The challenge of interpreting the history of technology and industry has increased over the last sixty years. For example, when the Birmingham Museum of Science & Industry was being planned in 1950, the intended audience was 'engineers and others, filling the gap between the workshop and the university' (Brookes, 1992, 99). In the succeeding decades, this audience shrank as extractive and manufacturing industries declined in Britain and visitors could therefore be left 'alienated, confused and exhausted' by interpretation aimed at the technologically knowledgeable (Kavanagh, 1992, 81). The 1980s saw the development of hands-on science centres to improve scientific literacy but even within museums they generally interpreted scientific principles without setting them in any historical context (Butler, 1992, 106, 131), which did not help visitors to understand historical artefacts.

In museums, a Whiggish interpretation of the history of technology as a progressive series of developments led by great men, had predominated long after historiographical fashions had changed (Bishop, 2000). As late as 1980, the guidebook of the Science Museum in London still contained a chapter entitled *The Power and the Glory*, describing 'those men whose genius and ingenuity really laid the foundations of the modern world' (van Riemsdijk, 1980, 2). Such celebratory accounts were tempered by the influence of outdoor industrial museums at Ironbridge and Beamish that aimed to present a human context (Kavanagh, 1990, 43-44), and by the 1980s and 1990s there was a social historical approach emphasising the impact of technology on people's lives, although technical facts could still predominate in interpretation (Fitzgerald, 1996, 123-124).

As families and schools have become increasingly important audiences for museums in the early 21st century, interpretation has evolved in response. Broadly social historical themes resonate with non-specialist audiences (Morris Hargreaves McIntyre, 2004, 28-29), and family audiences welcome interactivity, while schools demand links to the National Curriculum. Galleries such as Manchester Science at the Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester have placed interactive exhibits within historical galleries, therefore drawing together the science centre and social historical approaches (Shinn, 2004).

Contemporary interpretation of artefacts for audiences without knowledge of the history of technology (families, schools, and most adults) therefore has to balance identification and function (what is it, what did it do, and how did it do it?), impact and significance (why is it important?) and resonance (why should I be interested in it?) within an interpretive approach. The galleries studied in this article opened in 2005 or 2006, and each takes a different approach. I have labelled these approaches as chronological, technological, thematic and iconic.

A chronological approach

Energy Hall, Science Museum, London

The Energy Hall is a major redisplay of the Science Museum's East Hall. Despite the curriculum-friendly 'energy' name, the gallery is actually about steam power and the introductory panel describes it as 'the story of steam and how it shaped the world we live in today'. The interpretive approach was limited by the need to work around existing artefacts; this is an update rather than a completely new gallery, and had the museum had a blank canvas it might have taken a different approach.

The solution to the constraints of updating a gallery of fixed exhibits is a chronological narrative ('the story of how steam engines developed over time'), slightly hamstrung by the pre-existing placement of the massive engines so that the numbered sections of the gallery do not follow an exactly continuous route. An additional limitation is the gallery doubles as a major through route. Something of the alternative approach that might have been taken without these constraints can be seen on the associated website (<http://www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/on-line/energyhall/index.asp>), which starts with the chronological story but also looks at personalities and economic and social impacts of steam technology.

In the gallery, the narrative is based around the significant stationary steam engines. It is inevitably a story of technological developments, but the text tries to balance this by emphasising the personalities of engineers and the impact that engines had on workers. The narrative does not ignore setbacks; for example James Watt's 1777 engine gave trouble and was initially nicknamed 'Beelzebub'.

Despite the practical limitations, the redesign has successfully increased the visibility of the engines. Most of the eleven sections contain an engine, smaller artefacts and models, and a computer interactive (whose content is reproduced on the website). The interactives contain additional narrative, but the draw for most users is very clear animations zooming in on each stage of the operating cycle to explain how the engines worked.

Ultimately, the story of steam power is important, but challenging for a modern audience unfamiliar with power generation. My observations in the gallery showed that the use of computer interactives and to a lesser extent working models, succeeds in attracting visitors (including school groups) to use or watch them, though relatively few visitors follow the whole narrative. The story ends with an 1884 steam turbine, and while the text references modern energy production and usage, developing this aspect could further extend the appeal to younger visitors.

A technological approach

ExtraOrdinary, Snibston Discovery Park, Leicestershire

ExtraOrdinary replaced a gallery that explored scientific phenomena, which was popular but failed to convey learning messages because the interactive content was irrelevant or inappropriate to visitors' level of knowledge (Kennedy, 2006). Funded by the Millennium Commission's ReDiscover science centre renewal programme, ExtraOrdinary is consequently more technologically focused than the other galleries reviewed here. However, the history of technology has influenced the choice of themes in the gallery.

The gallery's subtitle is 'Technology Changes Lives' and the introduction explains that technologies shape our lives at home, at work and at play. After a 'My Life' section exploring technology in the home, the wheel, printing and fire are examined – the last with a spectacular interactive that produces a jet of flame.

The 'wow' factor is key to the gallery's engagement strategy, from using rollers to move a large boulder to using an electromagnet to lift and drop a Mini. Technologies covered thematically include pipes, wireless, audio, computing, electricity, mechanics and mass production. The mostly mechanical interactives work well and have exceptionally good instructions throughout. The gallery has an emphasis on visitors' opinions, culminating in voting for the most important of 100 technologies.

A timeline of inventions and innovations provides some historical context. The gallery features about 150 essentially social history artefacts, picking up the theme of technological products in familiar areas such as home and sport. However, most of the objects are placed around the gallery perimeter. This separation was intended to engage adult visitors who might be put off by interactives, yet the use of artefacts is most successful where they are in close proximity to one of the themes: for example a case of communications items placed next to an interactive about the radio spectrum. Better integration of the artefacts and interactives would further increase the gallery's obvious success at engaging visitors.

A thematic approach

National Waterfront Museum, Swansea

The National Waterfront Museum is a partnership between National Museum Wales (NMW) and the City and County of Swansea, replacing the Swansea Maritime and Industrial Museum and the Cardiff-based Welsh Industrial and Maritime Museum.

I have considered the museum as a whole as the galleries make most sense collectively as representing facets of Welsh industrial history. I have called this a thematic approach, though it is also a social and economic history approach, given the museum's promise to tell the story of how industry and innovation have affected the lives of people in Wales over three hundred years. The thematic approach is an additional contribution to what Rhiannon Mason has called 'a collective understanding of Wales' histories, identities and cultures' (Mason, 2005[2], 12) told across NMW's museums focussing on coal, wool and slate, and through the buildings relating to industry at the National History Museum, St Fagans (Mason, 2005[1], 23).

The museum's fifteen themed zones have a strong economic and social history flavour: Energy, Landscape, People, Sea, Communities, Organisations, Achievers [famous people], Money, Day's Work, Networks [transport and communication], Transformations [metalworking]; Land, Coal, Metals, and Frontiers [current research and development]. The content therefore offers a broader and more rounded interpretation of industrial history than that of a traditional industrial museum.

The overall thrust of the interpretation is on impact rather than technological development. There has been some criticism of the museum's extensive use of audiovisual and interactive technology (Flynn, 2005; Weeks, 2006) as subsuming the artefacts. In fact, although the interactive interfaces are sometimes gimmicky, the technology is not generally oppressive. It is more that the objects are part of stories, which are 'concept, rather than object-centred' (Bevins and Mastoris, 2006).

There are very few 'iconic' objects, with the majority of zones containing what the promotional material calls 'real, everyday objects' interpreted through text, images and oral history. The pièce de résistance is the People section, utilising data from the 1851 census and a virtual reconstruction of streets and houses to contextualise household objects. This is the museum at its most social historical. Downstairs in the Metals section there is more emphasis on technology with interpretation stressing the properties and uses of metals.

The gallery guide states 'there is so much fascinating information here!' Occasionally there can seem to be too much information, although it is mostly layered for different users. Overall, visitors are able to use this information to construct their own understanding of Welsh industrialisation rather than industry (Mastoris, 2007). What is missing is the sense of toil and labour associated with industrialisation, which is well represented at other NMW sites. If this could be integrated, the learning potential of the museum would be increased.

An iconic approach

Connect, National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh

Connect is a family-friendly gallery showcasing highlights of the National Museums of Scotland's science and technology collection. The name might imply that the gallery is about communications, but this topic is covered in another gallery. There is no introduction in Connect, but the accompanying book highlights the focus on discoveries, inventions and creativity (National Museums of Scotland, 2006, 7) that has underpinned the selection of objects. There are also web pages about the gallery at <http://www.nms.ac.uk/connectgallery.aspx>.

I have called the approach iconic, because the objects featured in the gallery's five sections are generally large and recognisable (if not precisely identifiable), including a racing car, Dolly the cloned sheep, a rocket, a steam engine and a robot. This selection of highlights is wisely used as a jumping off point to explore issues around each theme rather than to cram in related artefacts.

The physical and intellectual integration of interactives and artefacts is highly successful; for example, a participatory voting interactive that engages users with scientific arguments for, and ethical objections against, cloning is placed by Dolly the sheep. There is also an area for science shows. Audiences with a deeper interest are catered for through detailed information on touchscreens.

The gallery has a strong topical ethical and environmental undertone, with the interactives considering current issues such as alternatives to fossil fuels. The transport section considers the impact of travel choices, although an opportunity is missed to examine the environmental impact of the racing car. A simulator by the car skews the circulation in the gallery as it attracts long queues. Despite this, the gallery overall provides an excellent introduction to the collection. It is inevitably a partial story: hopefully future galleries will continue to take an interactive approach to explore the collection in greater depth.

Discussion

It is to some extent invidious to compare these galleries as the subject of each has informed the interpretive approach. However, it is clear that the history of technology as a story of progress is out of fashion. Even where a chronological approach has been retained (due of physical constraints) at the Science Museum there is a greater emphasis on setbacks and social impact within the narrative. In common with all the galleries studied, there are no highly technical labels for the exhibits, but rather clear, explanatory interpretation of the function of the artefacts. It is only a shame that this gallery does not have space to bring the story up to date to increase the resonance for visitors.

This more nuanced chronological approach is a reminder that despite newer interpretive strategies, an understanding of technological developments over time retains validity. While museums can present the social, economic and political impacts of technology, as an applied science technology builds on earlier developments. However, while there is still a justification for the chronological approach in galleries, many visitors lack a good grasp of chronology (Hein, 1991) and the approach must be used with caution.

The technological approach at Snibston Discovery Park is more functional than chronological. Resonance is achieved through the introductory section on the impact of technology and the 'wow' factor provided by the more dramatic interactives. The risk with this approach is that artefacts can become secondary to technologies: the historical messages are subsumed by the scientific. Nevertheless, the appeal of the physical interactives provides a good way of introducing technological themes appropriate to a gallery focussing on science rather than history.

The thematic approach at the National Waterfront Museum is the most diverse of the four interpretive strategies that I have identified. The emphasis is on social history rather than technology, focussing on impact rather than function. The theme titles are mostly starting points that do not imply conclusions; visitors assemble their own understanding of Welsh industrial history aided by interpretation and interactives. The only obvious omission is the sense of toil; introducing this would increase the resonance of the museum.

The most selective approach is the iconic angle taken by the National Museum of Scotland. The interpretation concentrates on impact and significance rather than function, with themes designed around the large, star objects, in contrast to the National Waterfront Museum's approach of choosing everyday objects to fit predetermined themes. The iconic exhibits are appealing in themselves, and while they tell an inevitably partial story, setting them in contemporary contexts of ethics and the environment increases their resonance.

Conclusions

When I started researching this article, I wondered if I would find common trends in interpretation. There are common threads: the focus on a non-specialist audience; the prevalence of interactives; clear, non-technical text. However, each of the galleries has taken a different interpretive approach. Chronological, technological, thematic and iconic approaches all have something to tell today's audiences about industrial and technological history. Variety between and within museums is a key to holding visitors' attention and the museological pluralism of the galleries studied is a strength.

Another trend running through all the museums studied is the incorporation of connections to contemporary technology and industry. From the Science Museum's references to contemporary energy production, to a gallery on current research and development at the National Waterfront Museum, linking past and present is increasingly a standard feature of museums covering the history of industry and

technology. At Snibston and the National Museum of Scotland, there are both implicit and explicit links made between familiar objects and past artefacts and technologies. This is evidence of the influence of constructivist learning theories stressing that learning builds on existing knowledge (Hein, 1990; Roschell, 1995, 49).

Connect was my favourite gallery, for its neat integration of objects and interactives, and the resonance of the interpretation considering modern environmental and ethical issues. Connect manages to be both fun and intellectually stimulating, and avoids information overload. However, the Connect approach would not work with every artefact or collection; visitors are hooked partly by the 'wow' factor of the large artefacts. The National Waterfront Museum's linking of smaller objects with other historical data represents another useful way of exploring and contextualising artefacts.

It is noticeable that none of the galleries has high-density displays of objects. In part this reflects the proportion of larger artefacts on display. However, it also raises questions about how museums use their collections. Research has suggested that to make meaning from artefacts, the majority of visitors to galleries and websites need to see fewer objects with better interpretation and contextualisation (Morris Hargreaves McIntyre, 2004, 33). The galleries reviewed all convey messages about broad subjects and are perhaps more likely to stimulate visitors' interest in exploring these broader topics further rather than collections and artefacts.

The value and purpose of stored collections is the subject of much debate (Keene, 2005; National Museum Directors Conference, 2003; Museums Association, 2005, 2007) but on the evidence of these displays a very small proportion of industrial and technological (and by the same token social) history collections is likely to be displayed permanently. Temporary exhibitions and updating permanent galleries are partial solutions, but users beyond galleries must be increased if the costs of storing extensive collections are to be justified.

One subject that needs more research is the meanings that visitors are making from galleries in which messages are less didactic than those in traditional museums. These galleries do not draw many explicit conclusions, and the National Waterfront Museum actively 'encourages visitors to come to their own conclusions and indeed challenge... the curatorial narrative' (Mastoris, 2007) based on supplying a lot of information. Studies of how individual visitors and different audiences (families, schools, adults) are making meanings from the material supplied by museums would be useful.

The next stage for museum galleries may be represented by the National Museum of Scotland's consideration of modern day energy and transport debates. By introducing current issues in this way, historical artefacts are seen in a continuum in which the technologies of past and present are not isolated but have real impacts on both environments and people. If the history of industry and technology is to be made relevant to audiences increasingly used to highly interactive new technologies and service economies, then explicitly linking past to present is essential. However, the pluralist approaches seen in the galleries studied for this article suggest that histories of technology and industry will continue to be interpreted through several prisms: social historical, economic, technological, and perhaps increasingly environmental.

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Notes for contributors

Social History in Museums is published annually, and the editor welcomes proposals for articles from museum professionals, researchers, academics and students. Please send an abstract of no more than 200 words to michael.tervey@nationalmediamuseum.org.uk. Articles should be between 2,000, and 4,000 words long.