22 *The crisis of representation in archaeological museums*

NICK MERRIMAN

There is now an extensive literature concerned with the representation of the past through museums (e.g. Hewison 1987; Shanks and Tilley 1987; Lumley 1988; Vergo 1989; Gathercole and Lowenthal 1990; Karp and Lavine 1991; MacDonald and Fyfe 1996). The essential critique that emerges from this literature is that museums represent a partial, commodified and mythical past. This serves to legitimate the dominant forces that brought it into being, and to exclude other versions of history that might provide a different perspective on the apparent inevitability of the contemporary social structure.

Such a perspective has often been coupled with critiques grouped together under the umbrella 'post-modernist', which have challenged the whole basis of approaches to rationality, truth and evidence on which museums and archaeology have been based. In the works of Baudrillard, Derrida and Foucault, the apparent certainties of modernist thought, such as origin, evolution, progress, tradition and value become replaced by the concepts of transformation, discontinuity, rupture, disorder and chaos. Many have described how these writings relate to the post-modern condition of public history, which is considered to be a depthless 'heritage' devoid of critical content and meaningless other than as a commodity to be bought and sold (Crimp 1985; Pearce 1992: 229–38; Walsh 1992; Negrin 1993; Thomas 1993).

In a similar vein, it has long been recognized that archaeological and historical interpretations are fundamentally informed by the social context in which they are developed. Trigger's (1984) classification of nationalist, colonialist and imperialist traditions, for example, has helped to emphasize the diversity of archaeological approaches across their world, and their contingency on changing political circumstances.

From this perspective, it can be seen that the overarching effect of archaeological interpretive traditions has been the production of historical myths that have served the needs of different interest groups to construct identities for themselves and those around them. The myths exhibited in archaeological museums tend to be those that receive establishment and academic approval. These coexist with a series of non-establishment myths that exist outside

official institutions and which develop to provide a past for disenfranchised groups with no access to official media of representation. One example of the latter in Britain would be the various interpretations of Stonehenge put forward by non-academics (Chippindale *et al.* 1990). Another would be the stories that have circulated amongst the present-day black communities of Bristol and Liverpool that local caves were used to house slaves believed to have been brought to the port in the days of the slave trade (Mehmood 1990).[1]

Although many working within the western tradition of objective rational analysis in archaeology would dispute the term 'myth' when applied to current interpretations of archaeological evidence, a glance at the history of archaeological writing and representation shows how much they have provided contemporary societies with identity-affirming origin myths. For example, Demoule (1982) has shown how the Gallic myth in French archaeology came to the fore particularly during the Second Empire, when Napoleon III was attempting to situate his regime on a nationalist and populist base. He also notes that the myth of the 'pit dwellings' – holes in which prehistoric people were supposed to have lived – persisted far beyond the time that the archaeological evidence could support it, because people took so long to relinquish the 'primitivist' notion that enabled them to dissociate themselves from their prehistoric ancestors. Similarly, recently renewed interest in critical histories of British archaeology has pointed out, for example, the myths surrounding the Anglo-Saxons and their use in developing notions of Englishness (Lucy and Hill 1993), and the ways in which the idea of Celticness has been used in identity construction (Merriman 1987).

Like it or not, museums continue to be used to construct new national and ethnic myths and to form new identities to mould together historically disparate interest groups. In the former communist countries, old museums are being given facelifts as new versions of history are given prominence. The importance of museums and heritage in the construction of identity has been no more forcefully depicted than in the former Yugoslavia, where their destruction has gone hand in hand with processes of 'ethnic cleansing' (Chapman 1994). With the end of the conflict, no doubt new museum displays are being constructed to legitimate new ethnic identities and boundaries.

As a result, the representation of the past in museums has come in for intense critical scrutiny over the last decade. The core of this scrutiny relates to the question of whether museums, developing from a background of white, western, imperialist, monolithic and modernist attitudes, can serve a valid function in a culturally diverse, post-modern, post-colonial world.

One of the more pervasive myths created by museums has been that of the superiority of the western world. This myth, justifying and maintaining western global expansion and exploitation, is reflected in formerly colonized countries where museums developed as part of the colonial apparatus; in the colonizing countries, such as Britain, where museum collections reflected

the looting of the Empire; and in still-colonized countries, such as Canada, the USA, Australia and New Zealand, which have a majority white population of colonist origin existing alongside strong, living, indigenous traditions. The ways in which anthropologists have responded to this problem (e.g. Ames 1986) are instructive for the possible approaches that archaeologists might adopt.

Realization of the problematical nature of the historical inheritance of ethnographic collections, in the light of the critiques enunciated above, has created what has been termed a 'crisis of representation' in museum anthropology (McManus 1991). To a large part, this has come about because of external pressure on museums from groups not represented on museum staff. As a result, indigenous peoples have, in many museums, become an integral element of exhibition teams, and some have trained as curators (Ames 1990; Butts 1990; O'Regan 1990). As well as from indigenous groups, protests have come from other minority groups normally not given a voice in museum history displays. For example, protests by the black community in Ontario about an exhibition on the colonial experience, 'Into the Heart of Africa' (Schildkrout 1991; Young 1993) caused the cancellation of its tour, and criticism in Britain about the absence of representations of cultural diversity (Ramamurthy 1990) has led to a number of initiatives, including a gallery on the Transatlantic slave trade at Merseyside Maritime Museum.

The conjunction of political pressure and academic critique has prompted anthropologists in museums to re-evaluate their notions of representation, which had until relatively recently seemed a transparent and value-free exercise. In archaeology, however, the absence of an external political imperative to make a thorough review of representation has meant that this self-critical re-examination has been slower to take hold. There have, of course, been some notable exceptions, such as the work of Mark Leone and his colleagues at Annapolis (Leone 1984; Potter 1994), and the wide-ranging feminist critique (e.g. Chabot 1989; Jones and Pay 1990; Kirby 1996), but despite an extensive literature dealing with interpretation and representation within academic archaeology, little impact has been made on everyday interpretation in museums, which continue to interpret archaeological material as if it were an objective reality. In ignoring the partial and historical contingency of their representations, museum archaeologists are doing themselves and their publics a disservice, and by continuing to present the past as if it had an objective reality, they might find themselves ignored as quaint anachronisms by the public, and isolated from their peers. If museum archaeology does, however, assimilate the debates going on elsewhere in the social sciences, how should this affect the way in which the past is displayed to the public? It is this dilemma that could be called a 'crisis of representation' in archaeology.

The principal characteristic of the 'crisis of representation' is the notion that there is an objective and monolithic past that awaits revelation by the informed expert. This perspective has been challenged and replaced by the view that there are many versions of the past, all constructed in relation to the present and hence changeable. This then leads to a challenge to the authority of the academic or curator, whose version of the past can be seen as just one amongst many competing versions. This in turn results in a challenging of the role of the academic and a questioning as to whom he or she speaks for, as alternative views of the past, and the perspectives of other interest groups, receive greater prominence.

There are two possible reactions to this shift. The first is to retreat further into the familiar territory of academic scholarship and to hope that the debate over representation is a passing fad. The second is to take the critique seriously and to work constructively with it in order to transform notions of archaeological representation in museums into something more responsive to the needs of the coming century. This latter view is, without doubt, the one that bodes better for the future of museums. How, then, might we go about doing it?

The first step must be to examine the notions of objectivity and subjectivity in museum display. Does the challenging of the notion of objectivity and progress mean that narrative should be abandoned, that subjectivity reigns supreme and that anyone's view of the past is as good as anyone else's? Does this mean the figurative 'death of the curator'?

Narrative and evidence

It is the role of museums to enable visitors to depart with some idea of 'What happened in history'. In the Museum of London, my previous employer wanted visitors to learn something about the development of the city in the Roman period, and to follow its cycles of rise and decline in order to understand something of the city today. Museums would be failing in their aims if they did not attempt to tell some stories about the past.

However, what museums have not hitherto done on any appreciable scale is to suggest that there may be many different stories, and that they are all historically contingent. A major step towards taking account of this would be to see museums not just as places where stories are told, but also as places where people learn to evaluate evidence. This means that we must also examine the museum as an institution and archaeology as a discipline within the context of the displays. The collections of foreign archaeology in British museums, for example, could be presented within the context of global exploration, trade and empire, which might reveal something of the attitudes and motivations of the collectors and the partiality of their collections. Westernized countries could be explored in their colonial context. Possibly, the relationship between these museums and indigenous concepts of heritage could be explored to see whether elements can be incorporated into a non-western museum (Butts 1990; Ronning 1990).

Even more significantly, a critical self-awareness in museum display must involve exposing the hitherto hidden process whereby one moves from evidence to interpretation. In academic writings, it is normal practice to assemble a wide range of evidence to support an argument that can be critically

evaluated, and the theoretical perspective behind the interpretation is usually explicit. In museums, however, this process is generally completely invisible. Evidence, in the form of material culture, is presented and then assertions are given as to its meaning, with no indication of how these assertions are arrived at, or that they might be anything other than completely objective and true. This approach rather denigrates the public, and it is not surprising that some remain sceptical as to the validity of the statements made and prefer to explore alternative explanations (cf. the popularity of 'astro-archaeology' and interest in 'strange phenomena'). The challenge for museums lies in generating ways in which to give people an understanding of the process of interpretation in a way that is accessible and enables them to look at the source material in a critical way.

One way of doing this might be to develop an area within the museum that is complementary to the narrative artefactual displays, which deals with archaeological and museological theory and process, rather in the manner in which the Science Centre, dealing with scientific principles, complements museum displays of the history of science and technology. The aim of the centre would be twofold: to look at material culture, particularly as archaeological and historical evidence, and to look at the cultural and historical context of the museum and its collections.

A leader in the first aim has been the Archaeological Resource Centre in York (Jones 1995), where visitors handle archaeological material from excavations, sort it into different materials, and gain some understanding of how it is used to say something about the past. This initiative could easily be widened to include a more critical perspective on the types of interpretation offered. It would also be possible to show something of the normally hidden museum processes of collecting, documentation, conservation, storage and display, particularly by concentrating on the collecting instinct that is followed by such large numbers of the public.

Multiple interpretations

From giving visitors an understanding of how the evidence used in exhibitions is generated, and an understanding of the historical context of the disciplines they are generated in, and of the institution they are displayed in, it is then possible to give some indication of how different interpretations are arrived at. The potential mechanisms for doing this are many and varied, and can also be used in the more conventional narrative exhibitions.

It would be possible to show how, through time, the same evidence has been differently interpreted (e.g. the Neanderthals, as shown by Stringer and Gamble [1993]), or to present a number of different views of the same evidence. For example, it would be instructive to set out indigenous peoples' views of their origins alongside the archaeologists' views, or to show popular views of monuments along with 'official' interpretations. The technology for exploring multiple interpretations need not be daunting. In Britain, archaeologist Barbara Bender has produced a panel-exhibition on different groups' interpretations of Stonehenge (Bender 1998), and the Birmingham Museum has produced an interactive video giving four different perspectives on a group of New Guinean ethnographic material (Peirson Jones 1992). 'Multivocalism' therefore need not mean large amounts of text. It is also now possible to use solid-state, hand-held sound guides as 'talking labels' that can introduce a variety of perspectives. At the low-tech end of the spectrum, revolving labels on drums or lift-up flaps can fulfil the same functions.

The introduction of 'multivocalism' into museums has the possibility of transforming the whole of the museum enterprise. From a history of conducting a monologue with a largely passive visiting public, there emerges the potential for the museum to conduct an active dialogue with the public. From the transmission of facts, the aim of the museum now becomes the exploration of the nature of evidence and interpretation of the past, leading to a critically informed judgement about the past. Potter has termed a similar – but not identical – process 'appropriating the visitor' (Potter 1994). By embracing the idea of dialogue, it could become possible for museums to transform themselves from vehicles for the transmission of myths to places where myths can be critically evaluated and challenged, and thus places where communities can come together for mutual self-understanding.

The museum of dialogue

The notion of the museum of dialogue, or the active and interactive museum, necessitates a rethinking of the relationship between the museum and the public. From being passive receivers of information, the public become perceived as active participants and informants, who are collaborators in the interpretive process. For example, intensive study through quantitative market research and focus groups of the perceptions of non-specialists of archaeological and historical subjects, can inform presentations that incorporate alternative views of archaeological sites and periods. Sometimes the collections shown in the museum are highly emotive, and elicit quite differing responses depending on the context of the display and the visitor. A display of classical sculptures in Britain will mean something quite different to a similar display in Greece, and all will be interpreted quite differently by Greeks in Greece, Greeks living in Britain, British tourists in Greece, and British people in Britain. Surveying the subjective and emotional responses of visitors to displays, and incorporating this into the interpretive process, can potentially add quite another dimension to the rather impersonal and distanced tone usually adopted by museum displays. In the Art Gallery of Ontario, visitors have been encouraged to describe their reactions to the paintings and even sketch their own versions of them, which has revealed quite different interpretations than those envisaged by the curators, and these have been incorporated into the display itself (Worts 1995). There is no reason why this approach could not also be adopted in archaeological displays.

As well as dialogue occurring in an indirect sense through market research, the incorporation of different viewpoints and through invitations to comm...

on the displays, it can also occur more directly in a dialogue with museum staff. Interpretation by living people rather than by labels and pictures is nothing new, but tends to have been developed principally in living history museums. However, given that the museum label and panel is essentially a poor substitute for the voice of the curator, there is no reason why 'live' interpretation cannot be used successfully in archaeological displays. There is no reason at all, either, why it has to be restricted to costumed interpreters adopting a 'first person' stance, pretending to be living in the past. 'Live' interpretation can include dialogues with curators and educators in the galleries, full-time trained interpreters to promote discussion and present different viewpoints and theatrical programmes designed to stimulate discussion of the interpretive process in museums, such as has been successfully carried out at the Canadian Museum of Civilization (Cannizzo and Parry 1994).

The essential point is that museum galleries become no longer a 'temple' where knowledge is reverentially passed on uncritically, but instead become a 'forum' for public dialogue and debate (Cameron 1971). If the debate can link to current issues such as the environment, land use, population and city planning, then the displays are likely to be seen as even more relevant and interesting. By breaking down artificial subject boundaries between natural history, geology, archaeology, ethnography and social history, and dealing with contemporary issues in the long term using evidence from all disciplines, museums have the potential to promote highly relevant dialogues by a community with itself on issues that matter to itself rather than just the curators. One example recently undertaken was the 'Peopling of London' exhibition at the Museum of London, which used archaeological and historical evidence to place recent immigration from overseas into long-term context and to make the explicit point that immigration was a normal aspect of London's life and not a recent, post-war problem (Merriman 1997).

The role of the expert

The embracing of the concepts of multivocalism and dialogue in museums leads to a final problem: the role of the expert, and the validity of different interpretations.

In such a vision for museums as described above, the role of the curator or educator becomes firstly that of the enabler, the person who organizes community input into exhibitions and who solicits different interpretations of the material available. However, this does not mean that the curator has no individual voice. It is crucial that museum staff consult widely in their programmes and invite different perspectives from members of different communities, However, this does not mean that only certain people can 'speak' about particular cultural matters. As Potter (1994: 105) notes, carried to its logical extreme, this approach leads to paralysis: 'If Americans ought not interpret Africans but only other Americans, should Californians interpret Ohioans? Should Los Angeleans interpret San Diegans?' His solution is

to be explicit about the agenda of any exhibition and, in doing so, to encourage visitors explicitly to agree with or reject the stance taken. This need not be the only approach: some exhibitions will benefit from an explicit and univocal storyline; others will benefit from a multiple interpretation where no opinion is offered as to the relative merits of each one. However, the danger in any open system such as this is that it has the potential to be hijacked by particular groups. The curator therefore has a role in the exercise of expertise to challenge the manipulation of museums in overt ways, perhaps by showing alternative interpretations of the same evidence.

The ultimate issue, therefore, is not whether the curator has a right to speak on certain issues or not. The good curator will have both the expertise to be able to marshal and present convincing evidence, will have the imagination and vision to consult widely and incorporate alternative views when they are widely shared and held with conviction, and will have the independence and courage to take a stand on certain issues. What is needed perhaps more than anything to achieve a good balance in the interpretation of the archaeological past in museums, is to broaden the base of recruitment into the field through the proper implementation of equal opportunities and training policies, and to encourage the active recruitment or collaboration of indigenous people and other interest groups, as has successfully happened in anthropology.

CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, I have argued that museum archaeology can no longer ignore the implications of many years of debate and criticism in archaeology and anthropology on the nature of representation. However, in doing so it is not necessary to take a pessimistic view that anarchy prevails and true knowledge is not possible. By looking at subjectivity and historical contingency, it is possible to envisage a new and more dynamic future for archaeological museums in which they work actively with their publics in a process that involves dialogue and a variety of perspectives. In seeing museums as places in which evidence is assessed, as well as where narratives are told, it will be possible to show that some versions of the past are less likely than others, and so avoid a descent into relativism. As a result, the curator or educator has a new role, which is that of the enabler, arbitrator and critic.

NOTE

1 There is no evidence that ships carrying slaves sailed from West Africa directly to Britain. The triangular slave trade involved ships sailing from British ports laden with commodities that were exchanged in West Africa for slaves. The ships then sailed to the Caribbean where the slaves were sold, and the ships loaded with the produce of the plantations, which was transported to Britain.

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