http://www.natsca.org

NatSCA News

Title: Ethics and Authenticity in natural history exhibits: the public wants what the public gets

Author(s): Lindsay, W.

Source: Lindsay, W. (2007). Ethics and Authenticity in natural history exhibits: the public wants what the public gets. *NatSCA News*, *Issue 11*, 21 - 24.

URL: http://www.natsca.org/article/220

NatSCA supports open access publication as part of its mission is to promote and support natural science collections. NatSCA uses the Creative Commons Attribution License (CCAL) http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/ for all works we publish. Under CCAL authors retain ownership of the copyright for their article, but authors allow anyone to download, reuse, reprint, modify, distribute, and/or copy articles in NatSCA publications, so long as the original authors and source are cited.

Ethics and Authenticity in natural history exhibits: the public wants what the public gets

- William Lindsay, Royal College of Art

Notions of authenticity and objectivity underpin the aims of natural history displays in museums. These ideals present themselves at many levels, from the materiality of the objects presented to the explanatory narrative that they convey. However, public perception may not always reflect the realities of the message offered. This paper considers the extent to which these ideals are actually achieved and what this may mean for the public for whom museum professionals aspire to the highest ethics of investigation, exhibition and explanation.

Introduction

Susan Crane (2000), writes of her relationship to museums:

> *I don't enjoy visiting museums anymore, or at least not the way I did before I began to study them. Too close a proximity to the subject has produced a familiarity akin to contempt…The expectation of having a particular cultural experience prevents all but the random joy of discovering something as "new"…*

One museum that confounded her expectations is the Museum of Jurassic Technology (MJT), Los Angeles. With its display of "Protective Auditory Mimicry" illustrated by a beetle that has evolved to sound like a visually similar pebble, and the bat, *Myotis lucifugus*, that flies through walls by virtue of the frequency of its sound emission, this is a fantastic (in the true sense of the word) museum experience. Presented as an educational institution dedicated to the advancement of knowledge and the public appreciation of the Lower Jurassic, MJT's creator, David Wilson, comments

> *We're definitely interested in presenting phenomena that other natural history museums seem unwilling to present* (Weschler, 1995)

The experience of the MJT is confounding because it creates its own world within which it is disconcertingly consistent and authentic; the reality that seems out of place is that of the visitor.

Fantastic objects, such as dressed Mexican fleas, or *homo diluvii testis*, the supposed human witness to biblical flood (in fact a Miocene fossil salamander), are not uncommon in natural history museums. The fleas serve as whimsical self-parody to illustrate the seriousness of organized science, the salamander to illustrate the belief system that science has nullified; both give authenticity and legitimacy to the taxonomic and classificatory systems that govern understanding of natural history collections.

However, authenticity in natural history museum exhibits can be unclear to their audiences. The mastodon skull presented in The Natural History Museum, London (NHM) as a possible source of the myth of Cyclops prompts one couple's conversation:

> *What is it? Is it a dinosaur? What is it? Why has it only got one eye?*
> *- Well, it's a… it's, well, obviously it's only got one eye because half the face is missing.*

Authenticity and natural history

How is authenticity established in the display of natural history specimens? In art, particularly with regard to paintings, a range of sources are cited in support of authenticity: chemical composition of paint to indicate age and provenance, the structure of paint layers as a reference to the artist's technique. Or the opinion of a committee of experts, as in the case of the Rembrandt Research Project (RRP) and Liverpool's Walker Art Gallery, where authenticity and attribution come with a high impact on reputation, as well as finance:

> *The Walker Art Gallery's portrait of 'Rembrandt as a young man' is possibly not a self-portrait by*

Rembrandt… based solely on a comparison of seeming differences in brush-style… Prof. van de Wetering (chair of the RRP) himself admits that the RRP's view is solely an opinion and a changeable one, "which anybody can take or leave in cases where the arguments … concern no more than style and quality "… (Walker Art Gallery, 2005)

In the context of natural history museums three aspects of authenticity seem most prominent:

a. authenticity in the object
b. authenticity in the narrative
c. authenticity in the experience

Authenticity in the object

Real has importance in a museum context. People like to see *real* things, we are concerned with the preservation of the *real* thing and conservation must guard against altering the *real* object. However, terms such as forgery and fake (Jones, 1994), replica and reconstruction, original and imitation, should not be taken at face value. It has long been a tradition in the curation, research and display of natural history that something other than original material composition can be valid. A copy of the Mona Lisa might not satisfy the viewing public but *Archaeopteryx*, arguably the single most important specimen among the 70 million specimens within the NHM, is commonly represented by a high quality glass fibre copy. In the world of art, market price as a vector of value would be recognized as a legitimate reason for putting a painting on display, as with the exhibition tour of the National Gallery's 'Madonna of the Pinks' (National Gallery, 2004). But, with *Archaeopteryx* valued somewhere between £1million – £10million, different standards must apply in the relationship between natural history museums and their public. The source of that difference is probably the same as that which defines our attitude to copies and imitations, and lies in issues of uniqueness and systematization and, perhaps fundamentally, in the notion that a natural history museum experience is a didactic experience and the museum chooses what is best for its public.

Hein (2000) described the conflicting ideals that have motivated museum collections as "a fascination with the unique", and "an interest in the universal… so that their [specimens] individual differences can be reconciled with their generic oneness". Uniqueness positions a specimen within an organizational system, but this also makes it a representative of other specimens. And if the specimen is only a representation, the messenger and not the message, perhaps that helps to accommodate other kinds of representations, such as three-dimensional replicas, illustrations, and computer visualizations.
The enforcement of truth that Muñoz Viñas (2005) identifies as a goal of classical theories of conservation is undermined in the study of natural history where a tradition of highly interventive investigation is difficult to reconcile with the conservation process in other fields. The alteration of a specimen by irreversible preparation for study, perhaps accompanied by the inclusion of replica parts indistinguishable to the eye, reinforces its authenticity and 'truth' ultimately by establishing or correcting its taxonomic position.

Natural history exhibitions are full of composite objects. Plastics, plaster, iron, synthetic hair, stuffing that gives shape to taxidermy specimens – all contribute to the fakes on show. And, although intended to deceive in order to present informative completeness, observers may still be disappointed to find out that the specimen is not 'real', even although in other cases they may assign greater legitimacy to reconstructions based on slim evidence.

Accuracy is not a prerequisite for authenticity in natural history museums; many knowingly incorrect reconstructions can be found on display, sometimes highlighted by the corrections that have taken place. The continued display of unalterable dinosaur reconstructions alongside those refashioned in the 1980s to lift their tailsin the 1980s means that the public must contend with the epistemology of dinosaur studies, as well as issues of ecological authenticity.

Authenticity in the narrative

The distinction between the natural history specimen as representative of a group and as a unique individual may not be clear in a museum's overall approach to the narrative it offers. Didacticism is the intention, but 'internal coherence' is sometimes lacking (Hein, 2000). Orphaned specimens may be displayed, disconnected from the narrative around them. As a consequence they may take on iconic status (Alberti, 2005)

through deliberate intention, or by popular acclaim, as with the walrus at the Horniman Museum (2006) or the Blue Whale model at the NHM, of through the lack of connection.

Objects do not tell their own story, especially when they become icons by default. When the narrative is the story of life and its diversity, the exhibition of natural history specimens is problematic; the one thing that qualifies a specimen to illustrate life is the one thing that they are singularly lacking - life.

The reconstructed plaster and metal skeleton of the giant sloth, *Megatherium*, isolated in gallery 30 of the NHM is an example. Visitors are drawn to it, partly because it is unexpected. It plays no part in the narrative presented by the reptiles on display alongside. But the museum is known for its dinosaur displays, marketed repeatedly as the essence of a 'good day out' and promoted as icons. Unsurprisingly, visitors can be overheard referring to *Megatherium* as a dinosaur, as they pose for their souvenir photos. 'Large animal skeleton', has come to mean 'dinosaur', just as 'hoover' means 'vacuum cleaner'. In part, *Megatherium* is where it is because it did not fit into any exhibition scheme and cannot be dismantled without causing much damage.

Authenticity in Experience

The exhibition of natural history specimens to enhance learning and understanding confers a particular legitimacy and authenticity on them. But while the learning experience promotes one value other experiences may confuse this. Hein (2000), speaking of newer approaches to display, states

> *Everyone loves dinosaurs…but if numbers are a clue, museum visitors are happy with cleverly engineered models that roar and move as with the carefully researched and reassembled paleobiological specimens found in traditional natural history museums.*

And she notes that design and spectacle appear as central elements, sometimes pre-empting narrative order for dramatic delivery. However, narrative order is not only pre-empted by spectacle, but spectacle can also undermine authenticity. Numbers are not themselves a measure of quality.

Animatronic dinosaurs are the preeminent *dramatis personae* of the museum 'great day out'. Elsewhere experiences such as Weald & Downland Museum or Colonial Williamsburg place authenticity of object and accuracy of use at the centre of their aims to give experience of history and custom. Beneath the theatricals and boiled sweets, the aim is to convey knowledge rather than to create what Hein (2000) calls, the "self-vindicating' experience of the theme park. But there cannot be authenticity in the experience of a human encounter with a dinosaur and, anyway, what experience do we wish the public to draw on to make sense of this?

The diversity of messages now on offer in natural history museums can be seen as the antidote to the museum experience of yesteryear. But in the discordance created, this diversity may not be understood and the 'experience' of fantasy may distract from the rest.

Ethical perspectives

Since the objects displayed in natural history museums are not necessarily real but may be presented as such, since they may disrupt and conflict with the intention to educate, and since the learning experience may be reduced to a self-fulfilling TV reality show, the ethical dimension seems relevant.

Many museum organisations promulgate codes of ethics e.g. the International Council of Museums (ICOM, 2006), European Confederation of Conservator-Restorers' Organisations (E.C.C.O., 2002), and the Curators Committee of the American Association of Museums (Curcom 1996); to be professional is, apparently, to be ethical. Even the USA's Central Intelligence Agency has an ethics programme, for which it was awarded the Outstanding Ethics Program Award from the USA's Office of Government Ethics. Clearly what is ethical - and professional – is not absolute or universal, and while "Ethics is about how we ought to live" (Singer, 1994), 'how' and 'ought' allow considerable room for manoeuvre. Edson's (1997) view that public trust is the basis of museums, and upholding this is an ethical concern, is advanced by Sola (1997) when he writes that the ICOM code of Professional Ethics could go beyond functional concerns by 'stating

that truth should be the basis of any message or image used'.

Museums do engage with the public on ethical issues. For example, they may justify their use of incomplete or damaged specimens from the perspective of an ethical balance sheet. Drawing attention to the damage that has occurred in the museum to the displayed taxidermy specimen, the museum expresses its concern for wildlife conservation by rejecting the collection of a new specimen; no recently living creature was killed in the making of this display

Conclusion

Assumptions are made about museums representing science: that they are truthful about their objects and that these represent something authentic in their material, their message, and their experience. Perhaps this is why the Museum of Jurassic Technology is so disconcerting; its authenticity comes from the sincerity with which it welcomes the assumptions of its visitors.

References

Alberti, S.J.M.M. 2005. Objects and the museum. In : Focus: museums and the history of science. *Isis* 96:4.
Carpet and Fabricare Institute. *The CFI code of ethics*. http://www.carpet9.org/ethics.asp accessed at 5 April 2006.
Central Intelligence Agency. 2000. *CIA receives award for outstanding ethics program.* Press Releases and statements. https://www.cia.gov/cia/public_affairs/press_release/2000/pr10052000.html accessed 8 April 2006.
Crane, S. A. 2000. Curious Cabinets and Imaginary Museums. In: Crane, S. A. (ed.) *Museums and Memory*. Stanford University Press, California.
Curators Committee. 1996. *Curators code of ethics (1996).* http://www.curcom.org/ethics.php accessed at 19 January 2007.
E.C.C.O. 2002. *Professional guidelines*. http://www.ecco-eu.info/matador/eccosite/ecco_contents.php?doc_id=170 accessed at 19 January 2007
Edson, G. 1997. Ethics and Museums. In: Edson, G. (ed.) *Museum Ethics*. Routledge, London.
Hein, H. S. 2000. *The museum in transition: a philosophical perspective*. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington.
Horniman Museum. 2006. *Current Exhibitions*. http://www.horniman.ac.uk/exhibitions/featured_detail.php?exhib_id=21&recordID=19 accessed 8 April 2006.
ICOM. 2004. *ICOM Code of ethics for museums, 2006*. http://icom.museum/ethics.html accessed at 8 April 2006.
Jones, M. 1994. Why fakes? In: Pearce, S.M. (ed) *Interpreting Objects and Collections*. Routledge, Oxford.
Muñoz Viñas, S. 2005. *Contemporary theory of conservation*. Elsevier Butterworth_Heinemann, Oxford.
National Gallery. 2004. *Raphael's 'Madonna of the Pinks' – what happens next?* National Gallery, London http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/about/press/2004/raph_pinks_next.htm accessed at 6 January 2007.
Singer, P. 1994. *Ethics*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
Sola, T. 1997. Ethics and museology. In: Edson, G. (ed.) *Museum Ethics*. Routledge, London.
Walker Art Gallery, 2005. *Latest reattribution by the Rembrandt Research Project Statement regarding Walker Art Gallery painting.* http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/about/news/newsarticle.asp?id=498 accessed 8 April 2006.
Weschler, L. 1995. *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet Of Wonder: Pronged Ants, Horned Humans, Mice on Toast, and Other Marvels of Jurassic Technology*. Random House, New York.
Weschler, L. 1996. *Museum of Jurassic Technology*, radio broadcast, 6 December 1996, on *All Things Considered.* Transcript http://www.soundportraits.org/on-air/museum_of_jurassic_technology/transcript.php3 accessed 8 April 2006.