The Responsibilities of Museums in the Representation of the Past and Present: The Need for Communication and Context

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Abstract: This article investigates a range of case studies focusing on the display of Pre-Columbian artifacts in Texas and Mexico City by visiting six museums housing permanent Pre-Columbian collections. For each institution, I focused on two modes of communication. The first was the amount of information the museum provided to the public through the set-up and organization of the galleries. This included the size of the exhibit, the number of cultures portrayed, and the types of visual tools utilized (videos, computers, dioramas, reconstructed buildings, etc). For the second part, I documented the textual information about the collections and the represented cultures. I conducted a content analysis on this text, looking in particular at the vocabulary used to describe each culture. I wanted to know how these institutions dealt with the flow of information between museum and visitor and how they functioned in representing the diversity of Pre-Columbian groups and their cultural traditions. Here, in the interest of space, I focus on one institution, the San Antonio Museum of Art. Ultimately, I determined that the San Antonio Museum of Art, and museums in general, should incorporate anthropological outlooks in their portrayals of other cultures. They have a responsibility to communicate information that reflects a multiplicity of viewpoints because of their roles as sites of identity construction.
Museums in the United States often take different approaches to representation. Some institutions provide the visitor with little information in order to let them draw their own conclusions about the objects on display while others narrate a very specific story. For both approaches, museums need to be aware of the stories they create and the messages they pass along to their visitors. Traditionally, there has been a strong focus on “Western” perspectives in exhibits of cultural material, but, in order to create a more balanced representation that embraces a plurality of viewpoints, museums need to incorporate an anthropological approach to the exhibit of cultural material. If museums are in a position to determine how a cultural group is perceived through displays of material culture, especially by a public that may not know much about the culture whose material they are viewing, they have a responsibility to communicate as much information as possible to their visitors in a way that respects the uniqueness of each culture.

Museums fulfill an important role since visitors use “learning as a vehicle for building personal identity” (Falk 2009:59). Personal identity thus can be created in a museum environment. Jacobs explains, “Ethnicity forms an integral part of personal identity. Possessing an ethnic assignment allows people to divide ‘us’ from ‘them,’ to structure intricate social interactions, and to determine their place in an increasingly complicated world” (2009:85). Even though some might see problems in encouraging people to identify with specific cultural groups, such as creating more divisions between cultural groups, I argue many people do this naturally as a way to define themselves and create their own identities. Visitors go to museums to learn about their own history and the history of other cultures, taking the ideas presented in museums and using them to make sense of the world. Because of this powerful position, museums have a responsibility to be very clear about which messages they are communicating and how these messages portray various cultures (Coxall 1991:93).

Museums have a duty to foster an appreciation and respect for other cultures through the process of communicating knowledge to their visitors. But, a traditional focus on “Western” perspectives in museum representation has driven certain “target” groups of visitors, such as minorities, away from museums because the outlooks and perspectives of these groups have not been accommodated (Gurian 1991:184). In order to address this issue, museums should borrow from the field of anthropology. Anthropologists are taught to use a relativistic approach to representing cultures, where each culture is looked at based on its own merits. Admittedly, anthropologists also have a dubious history of misrepresentation that has distorted the truth about indigenous cultures. But, they, like many museums, have initiated steps to correct these misconceptions and foster an environment of greater communication between anthropologists and the public. Sullivan and Childs claim that a greater degree of collaboration between museum professionals and anthropologists, both in the field and in the museum, would permit a plurality of viewpoints to emerge (2003:34). This would allow museum professionals to get a better idea regarding the importance of placing objects in a cultural context and allow anthropologists to realize the practical challenges involved in displaying cultural material.

Representation in a museum setting can be a complicated and multifaceted issue dependent on many factors. “The display and interpretation of collections not only educates and fascinates, but influences and, in some cases, reinforces current stereotypical attitudes” concerning different cultures (Coxall 1991:92), reflecting the importance of carefully considering what image is being portrayed and described for a viewer. When consideration is not given to the issue of representation, serious misconceptions can arise. For example, Castañeda notes the impressions tourists get when visiting archaeological sites; these visitors often confuse what has been reconstructed by archaeologists with the objects’ “natural” state, or how it would have appeared to ancient peoples (1996:104). This is the same kind of impression that strikes visitors upon viewing museum exhibits. Visitors believe that the way they see objects in a museum is how they would
have appeared to the people using the object. For the most part, however, this is a false impression. Archaeological sites have been interpreted in a certain way by archaeologists and then presented to the public in order to convey a message. Museums present messages to visitors in a similar fashion and thus have to be just as careful about what these messages are saying about the cultures they represent.

For my senior thesis project, I investigated a range of case studies focusing on the display of Pre-Columbian artifacts in Texas and Mexico City by visiting six museums housing permanent Pre-Columbian collections. For each institution, I focused on two modes of communication. The first was the amount of information the museum provided to the public through the set-up and organization of the galleries. This included the size of the exhibit, the number of cultures portrayed, and the types of visual tools utilized (videos, computers, dioramas, reconstructed buildings, etc). For the second part, I documented the textual information about the collections and the represented cultures. I conducted a content analysis on this text, looking in particular at the vocabulary used to describe each culture. I wanted to know how these institutions dealt with the flow of information between museum and visitor and how they functioned in representing the diversity of Pre-Columbian groups and their cultural traditions. Here, in the interest of space, I will only focus on one institution, the San Antonio Museum of Art.

The San Antonio Museum of Art (SAMA) in San Antonio, TX has five galleries devoted to Pre-Columbian objects. The first room is the Patricia Galt Steves Gallery, which provides an introduction to the collection and general information on the history of Central and South America. The four rooms that follow this gallery are specifically geared towards Pre-Columbian artifacts, with a different regional focus for each room. There are a large number of objects (total of about 350) from a wide range of cultures, and the exhibit is organized to reflect a general chronology of these Pre-Columbian cultures. The first of the rooms portrays the Tlatilco, Colima, Jalisco, Nayarit, Maya, and Chupicuaro cultures while the second room focuses on “The Classic Maya” including some Zapotec and Mixtec objects. The third room contains a conglomeration of artifacts including objects from the Classic Veracruz culture, Huastecs, Mixtec, Aztec, Manibi culture of Ecuador, the Atlantic Watershed Zone from Costa Rica, Tarascan, and Tolima culture of Columbia. The fourth and final room focuses on “The People of the Andes,” a geographic region that I will not be addressing here. Like items from each culture are grouped together, with only a few cases combining objects from different cultures.

Traditionally, when communicating about objects, most museums rely on a three-part sender-message-receiver model: the visitor interprets a message, and if there are any problems or confusions when doing this, it is the fault of the visitor, or receiver (McManus 1991:42). The more anthropological model McManus proposes, and which I suggest museums such as SAMA adopt, incorporates “linguistic and psychological understandings” where it is not always the message so much as the process of communicating that is important (McManus 1991:43-44). According to this model, museums should envision the viewer as a partner in the communication process rather than just a passive recipient of information (McManus 1991:43-44). The lack of this dialogue and understanding is what leads to frustrations and miscommunications between museums and their visitors (McManus 1991:43).

Museums consciously or unconsciously limit the learning potential of their visitors by assuming the visitors are incapable or unwilling to break away from traditional outlooks on history (Gurian 1991:176). This problem can be resolved by helping visitors make sense of objects through creative displays and educational tools. Information must not only be informative but also thought-provoking to truly engage the viewer in relating to objects and cultures (Baxandall 1991:33-34). Of course, it is impossible to put something on display without imposing some kind of construction on it. As Coxall eloquently indicates, meanings do not
inherently exist within objects (1991:92). In order for objects to be understood, there must be an interpretive framework or context. Often, however, museums remove objects from any sort of context, making a true appreciation for the object and the people that created the object more difficult. Some institutions utilize reconstructions, models, videos, computers, dioramas, and other interesting and engaging displays to recreate this context and facilitate learning. A closer look at the way the galleries in SAMA are organized will allow us to further explore how they approach the problem of representation and what room for improvement exists.

The introductory gallery in SAMA has an overtly educational purpose. A wall-sized illustrative timeline demonstrates how Pre-Columbian cultures compare to other civilizations around the world with regards to cultural developments, placing Pre-Columbian groups in the context of more well-known cultures such as Egypt or Rome. There are also two large collages of modern indigenous peoples that illustrate how the descendants of these ancient groups display vibrant cultural traditions even today. The walls of this room are covered in text panels and quotes from primary sources, providing a general look at the history of the collection as well as discussing the continued existence of many of these cultures, thus connecting the galleries of Pre-Columbian objects to the modern Latin American folk art galleries nearby. This introductory gallery, however, appears to the visitor to be closed. It is dimly lit and contains eight non-functional video displays with a sign on the wall stating that the gallery is under renovation. I assumed this meant, eventually, these videos would be restored to their former functioning glory. In an interview with a museum employee, however, I discovered there was no intention of fixing the videos because they were considered an “eyesore.” According to this individual, these video tools were engaging individuals, particularly children, and providing a cultural context for the objects. But, after they experienced some technological problems, the museum did not want to pay to have them repaired. Consequently, the introductory gallery appears closed, discouraging visitors from entering and exploring the treasure-trove of information within.

The other Pre-Columbian rooms at SAMA provide few visual tools to allow people to make sense of the objects on display. There are no decorative elements or reconstructions to bring the exhibit to life. There are no paintings or images on the walls demonstrating what life might have been like for these ancient peoples. Even the text panels have neutral colored backgrounds that make them blend into the light walls. There are no videos or computer displays to provide a more interactive visitor experience. Only one text panel, at the beginning of the first main room, shows a general map of Central and South America, but this map conveys very little actual information. Two text panels in the third room illustrate, respectively, a site plan of Teotihuacan and a diagram of the talud-tablero style of architecture. Both visually demonstrate what is being discussed in the accompanying text. This is the extent of the visual aids provided to visitors.

One way SAMA could facilitate greater communication between the museum and visitors about the interesting history of Pre-Columbian cultures would be to take full advantage of visual tools such as illustrative drawings, reconstructions, or models. These kinds of creative tools visually demonstrate ideas and concepts as an alternative method to assimilating information solely through reading text. Even computers and videos, in our technological age, can be developed to fit a museum’s goals. Instead of being seen as “eyesores,” video and computer displays should be recognized for their educational potential. Utilizing these different techniques would significantly increase the ability of a museum to communicate knowledge and ideas to visitors.

The way museums display objects can also communicate specific ideas. Many museums throughout the world create a feeling of separateness between the objects on display and the visitors, in an effort to eliminate
all external distractions and concentrate the viewer’s attention solely on the individual object before them. This results in art “appearing out of time, or beyond time” (O’Doherty 1986:7-8). Through the manner of their display, SAMA emphasizes a detachment between object and viewer. The neutral colored walls provide a sterile feel and make the visitor conscious of their separateness while the text panels, situated in somewhat obscure locations, do not encourage the viewer to read and learn. All objects are exhibited as isolated entities, without anything to tie them together or place them in any context. The seeming timelessness and isolation of the art makes it more difficult for individual people to relate to the objects (O’Doherty 1986:9) and thus the culture that created them. Knudson states an object placed inside a case by itself is seen differently than an object displayed as a part of a scene, which physically demonstrates the use and meaning of the object (1999:249). The “proximity of things to one another perhaps has more authority, more readable meaning than the things themselves” (Crew 1991:163). SAMA needs to give more consideration to the importance of context in a visitor’s comprehension of an object. This consideration would create a dialogue with the museum visitor, an important step because, if visitors cannot understand or cannot relate to what they see in an exhibit, they have no incentive to return to the museum.

The style of representation can thus either empower or disenfranchise visitors by getting them involved with the material. Instead of museums representing “their own superiority and their right to an exclusive domain” (Gurian 1991:177), they should place objects in an understandable context, allowing visitors to draw conclusions for themselves and providing the visitors with more interpretive power in the situation. There is, of course, the possibility of museums creating inaccurate contextual scenes, but, if sufficient consideration is given to an exhibit and to the research involved with creating an exhibit, the possibility of this should be minimalized.

The importance of text in the communication process cannot be ignored. Coxall claims we must recognize the socially constructed nature of the underlying ideologies of language that we take for granted if we want to stop perpetuating them and foster greater understanding (1991:88). At SAMA, only certain cultures, the “primary” cultures, are discussed in the text. The Maya are mentioned eighteen times, the Olmec twelve times, the Zapotecs ten times, the Aztecs eight times, and the Toltecs four times. Colima, Jalisco, and Nayarit are only mentioned once despite the large number of objects in this collection from these three areas, and the other cultures with material represented (Tlatilco, Chupicuaro, Classic Veracruz, Manibi, Tolima, and Tarascan) are not discussed at all. A visitor, if they have no previous experience with Pre-Columbian cultures, could therefore become very confused. For instance, when looking at an object labeled “Colima Dog Figurine,” if there is no indication about where Colima is located, how the Colima culture differed from the cultures of say the Maya or Aztec, or why they made dog figurines, the visitor would have no way to understand the object. More information is needed, and it is the responsibility of the museum to provide that information.

Through text, the SAMA exhibit does not communicate a well-rounded image of ancient Pre-Columbian peoples. For many of the cultures depicted, there is an emphasis on ritual and war, with the repeated use of the words “sacrifice,” “ritual,” “ceremonial,” and “war.” Such a specific focus does not demonstrate the political, economic, and artistic advances of these groups, concepts that could easily spark the imagination of a visitor and foster a greater overall understanding of these multifaceted cultures. SAMA’s informative approach in the introductory gallery with the use of interesting primary source quotes could have been adopted in the rest of the Pre-Columbian rooms to create a more attention-grabbing avenue of communication. This would better educate the public and promote more respect and understanding of these ancient cultures. For example, one text panel in the second room implies that the Maya people died out: “The demise of the Maya in the eighth and ninth centuries remains a mystery.” This would lead any visitor to assume that the Maya culture no longer exists. In actuality, it, along with other indigenous
cultures, still thrive in Latin America. A rewording of this statement to use a word like “decline” instead of “demise” would easily correct this issue. Furthermore, the text panels utilize many generalizations such as: Ancient Latin Americans developed great cities and built elaborate temples and palaces. They created a calendar system, and were aware of astronomical phenomena. They lived in competing city-states that warred over territory and resources and they had extensive trade routes that allowed them to move goods over long distances [SAMA Text Panel].

This statement makes it seem like each of the Latin American cultures were essentially interchangeable when the diversity among these cultures was actually profound. The temples and palaces of the Maya differed dramatically from those of the Aztec in both style and purpose while the goods traded by the Olmec were different from those traded by the people of Teotihuacan. These cultures did have similarities, but they should not be reduced to those similarities. They should be envisioned and portrayed to visitors as unique cultures in their own right.

When creating museum labels, most museums usually either use too little text to allow a person to interpret an object for themselves or they use too much complex language, making the text difficult to understand (Gurian 1991:185-186). These approaches defeat the purpose of educating the public when average visitors cannot comprehend what they are reading or viewing. In addition to general text panels at SAMA, there are individual labels for each object. These labels rarely provide any information beyond a donor, the general date, a name for the object, and the culture of origin (if known). When more descriptive information is provided, it is usually just a visual analysis of the object, including an explanation of the symbols or figures without any discussion of what the symbols meant to the culture that created the object. This removes the artifact from its original context, making it more difficult to understand in terms of real, once-living people. As a result, viewers feel more separated, more remote from these cultures. Granted, it is difficult to write about a specific object, such as an Olmec jade figurine, when very little is known about it. Yet, museums like SAMA could acknowledge that little is known about the specific figurine while still providing some ideas about how ancient peoples could have used it, even including the importance jade had for the Olmec people in general. There are only a couple of instances in the Pre-Columbian galleries of SAMA where a more informative approach was utilized. Two replicas of ancient codices, the Dresden codex and the Codex Féjérváry-Mayer, are situated in the second and third rooms, respectively. The accompanying text and diagrams describe some of the symbology, communicating something to the viewer about how to interpret these objects and what they meant to the cultures who created them. These detailed descriptions, interestingly, only accompany facsimiles, while most of the actual ancient objects displayed in the surrounding cases have little if any textual or visual information accompanying them.

Therefore, more thought and deliberation needs to go into the planning and writing of museum labels and text panels while remembering that “the scholarly interest of the curator should seek to maintain the integrity of the subject matter” (Hooper-Greenhill 1994:135). If museums only represent certain aspects of these ancient cultures or do not ensure that accurate information is provided to the viewer, they cannot claim to be truly educating the public. There are many different perspectives other than just the often-represented “Western” viewpoint of many museum exhibits and their curators. Hooper-Greenhill states “There are a number of ways of presenting information other than in the words of the curator. Words can be drawn from the results of oral history, from documents, from poems and from a wide range of sources” (1994:120). She even mentions how these alternative sources have a “poignancy and immediacy” that adds to the exhibit (Hooper-Greenhill 1994:121). Text writers also need to remember how the text will be positioned within the exhibit since they set the pace and the mood for the exhibit (Hooper-Greenhill 1994:135) and have the possibility of creating a connection with the visitor. Through text, museums could
even put objects in more modern terms to facilitate understanding, drawing a parallel between a menacing Toltec statue from a temple and a gargoyle figure from a medieval church, both of which were thought to ward off evil. This would be an excellent method to engage visitors and force them to really contemplate the meanings behind objects on display. Museum text must be incorporated into an overall representative program that emphasizes context while ensuring open communication between museum and visitor.

There is an overall lack of context in SAMA, a problem common in many museums. But this lack of context is symptomatic of a greater problem rather than a simple lack of information. Whether intentional or not, it demonstrates a lack of effort on the part of the museum to communicate to viewers the importance of the cultures that created all of the objects in their collection. The presence of more information about the Pre-Columbian cultures in SAMA would illustrate the importance of these cultures and indicate a respect and appreciation for them on behalf of the museum. The integration of these suggestions, while representing a daunting task, would facilitate greater communication and understanding about Pre-Columbian cultures while providing more information to the public on the importance and relevance of these cultures to their own lives.

Museums need to acknowledge their roles as preservers of the past as well as vehicles of learning and identity construction. They should take steps to incorporate anthropological ideas and work to foster an environment of responsible representation of other cultures, specifically as it relates to the idea of context. This will communicate to the public comprehensive information that reflects a multiplicity of views, enriching their knowledge base and hopefully allowing them to form their own identities with an eye towards recognizing and appreciating the cultural identities of other groups.

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