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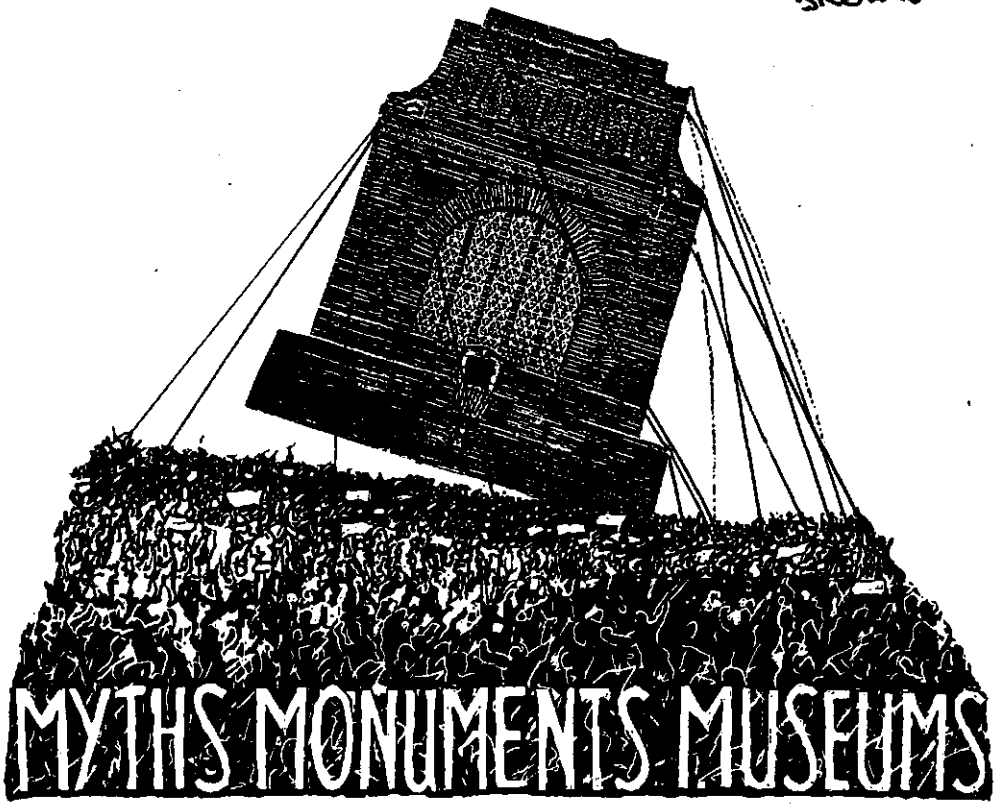

NEW PREMISES?

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UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND

HISTORY WORKSHOP

MUSEUM DISPLAY - FRACTIONS OF A TRUTH



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AFRICANA

Museum Display - Fractions of a Truth

by

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Introduction

This paper deals with an exhibition to be held concurrently with the 1992 History Workshop Conference in July at Wits. The theme chosen for the 1992 meeting is Myths, Museums and Monuments.

In August 1991 the notice for the Conference was circulated to the workshop's target audience as well as to the Museums on Wits Campus. This prompted enquiries by one of the authors (AB) who discovered that *no member of the Southern African Museums* Association (SAMA) was involved in the organisation of the conference, nor had the Museum community as a whole been invited to participate. The Conference organisers were delighted, however, to hear that issues of representation of history and of "other" cultures were of great concern to the Museum Community, and they were interested to learn that such issues had already been debated at several SAMA Conferences. Cynthia Kros, convenor of the 1992

Workshop, addressed the Transvaal Branch of SAMA and explained that the Committee was unaware of developments within the Museum Community, and extended an invitation to SAMA Members to attend the Conference. A sub-committee (which included the authors) was convened to formulate the Museums' section of the History Workshop. Circulars were sent to all institutional members of SAMA and papers were called for.

In keeping with the spirit of public participation the Museums' sub-committee decided to hold an exhibition to accompany the academic session. One of the issues which has concerned the authors[1] is the problem of historical displays in South Africa. What better way to explore this problem than through an experimental museum display? Similar issues will be raised in the academic session.

Truth and Museum Display

As Karp and Lavine have examined in their book *Exhibiting Cultures*[2] each individual has their own understanding of the nature of truth, which is part of their belief system. This personal perception is expressed, whether we are aware of it or not, in our museum displays. It is now an established premise that no account of an event will present "the truth." Similarly no historian can be

objective, their interpretation of history is always influenced by their frame of reference. R F Atkinson[1] states the problem:

> *The possibility of making true statements about the past is by general consent insufficient to guarantee objective history...there must...also be selection and summary, not to say interpretation. And it is here that the real doubts about objectivity arise. It is feared that in making their selections historians will be expressing their personal and class prejudices, their moral, political or religious attitudes; that what purport to be accounts of the past are shaped less by what happened then than by influences operative in the historian's present.*

Many of us also consider that the physical reality of objects encapsulate a single truth. Objects in museums, however, have been subjected to selection and the ideology of the curator or the museum collection policy. Furthermore the meaning of each object is relative to each viewer. Adams plays with this concept in his Science Fiction novel *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*:

'But you know there's a whole Universe out there!'...'You can't dodge your responsibilities by saying they don't exist'...

'I don't know. I've never met all these people you speak of...They only exist in words we hear. It is folly to say you know what is happening to other people. Only they know, if they exist. They have their own Universes of their eyes and ears.'[4]

The character in the novel insists that reality only exists in experience. Furthermore reality shifts and changes according to daily experience. We would not take it this far, but we do recognise that since everyone has different perceptions, governed by their own frames of reference, there are an infinite number of interpretations.

Museums have inherited objects which represent particular renditions of the past. As soon as these objects are named and classified we have interpreted them in terms of our own cultural and educational background. The name indicates to us a function and meaning which is dictated by our culture. Imagine trying to interpret an object without previous knowledge. This is also illustrated by Adams:

He picked up from the table a piece of paper and a stub of a pencil. He held one in one hand and the other in the other, and experimented with different ways of bringing them together. He tried holding the pencil under the paper, then over the paper, then next to the paper. He tried wrapping the paper round the pencil, he tried rubbing the stubby end of the pencil against the paper and then the sharp end of the pencil against the paper. It made a mark, and he was delighted with the discovery, as he was every day.[5]

You may think that this is taking it to extremes, but isn't this the dilemma which faces many museum visitors, especially if they are illiterate. The museum visitor has a totally different perception and expectation of a museum. This is often not acknowledged or even considered by the curator. The majority of our population have no museum heritage or culture, it is a European phenomenon. The visitor's understanding of what museums do is limited, for example, at the Africana Museum Black visitors were horrified but not surprised to see life casts of Black people, which they assumed were real people who had been collected, killed, skinned and stuffed.

Our backgrounds not only dictate the classification[6] of the object but also how we select the object. Objects are selected by museum curators because:

1. They are a fragment of a reality that museum curators consider relevant. Although their choice can also be constrained by factors such as availability, the museum's budget etc.

2. Objects can be used to attempt to reconstruct that reality in displays.

3. Museum curators assume that their selected objects will be relevant to researchers needs.

Another problem is that objects are not always acquired with displays in mind, and this is further restricted by the museum's collection policy, which is determined to a certain extent by the organisation's political ideology. (eg. The collection policy of the Wits University Art Gallery collection). When the Museum attempts to display concepts that are currently relevant, numerous problems arise because the objects were collected in previous decades. What was important in the past isn't necessarily going to have much significance or could even be an undesirable object in

the present or future. (eg. sacred material, photos of private ceremonies).

As Patricia Davidson has written:

> *The irony of museums is that, although they offer an experience of "real things" and receive much of their credibility by promoting this attribute, the context in which these real things are presented is entirely artificial. "Authentic specimens" are interpreted for the general public within constructed settings comprising visual, written, spatial and sometimes aural elements. This changes the contextual relationships that are implicated in the generation of meaning for viewers. In short, museum displays offer representations, mediated versions of reality.*[7]

This "mediated version" is then interpreted, yet again, by the viewer. The intended message might be understood if the curator and the viewer have the same frame of reference. In any society, however, there are different cultural backgrounds and levels of education and therefore no curator can safely assume that their interpretation will be universally understood.

Museums must guard against using their authority to convey loaded messages, and must recognise their own ideological backgrounds and that they are telling but one version of a story.[8] In *Interpreting the Past*, a paper given by Brown and Wanless at the 1990 SAMA Conference, the problem of truth, objectivity, the influence of the academic training and the ideology of the curator was discussed. We said that:

> *While it is not the function of a museum display to be deliberately controversial, we do have the responsibility to counteract the effects of a poor education system, and of mistaken beliefs which have been fostered in our environment. There can be no question that we have an obligation to present an interpretation of the facts and to be able to distinguish these from the fallacies.*[9]

The History Workshop Exhibition

We have said that displays are products of the curator's education and cultural identity, so, obviously is <u>our</u> display. For the History Workshop we wanted a range of approaches and chose participants accordingly. This is a Wits project so the majority of the people are Wits academics, not necessarily with museum training, although three of them <u>do</u> have the museum diploma. The

particular disciplines and aspects chosen were important to us as they allowed us to enter multi-cultural debates. It is this multi-disciplinary approach which will illustrate, in display form, the problems of objectivity and interpretation. Time, space and money were, as always,. obvious constraints.

The exhibition will consist of interpretations by participants from various disciplines of a key set of objects. The objects chosen are a set of divining bones collected by the Reverend H A Junod, a missionary from Switzerland, who worked among the Tsonga at the turn of the century. (Africana Museum Accession Number 39/515). The central display will also include a brief account on Junod and will discuss the motives of early collectors. Junod account of divination is also included:

> *The...bones play a considerable part in the life of the tribe...[They] may be divided into two kinds: the bones...most of which are astragalus...and...various objects which are not bone.*
>
> *The diviner asks the bones questions about the patient, what caused the disease, which spirit is causing the disease...maternal or paternal...etc. until the spirit is identified. Then the bones are asked why the spirit is angry and what must be done to appease the spirit. The*

illness can also be caused by a witch or wizard or by contamination. Sometimes the bones refuse to "speak" and the diviner has to move the mat to another place until the bones consent to "speak".[10]

Junod mounted the bones on card and annotated them in French. They were positioned in the way in which they fell when they were thrown by a diviner for a patient. The diviner's diagnosis was translated into English for Junod's book *Life of a South African Tribe*, which was first published in 1912 and updated in 1927.[11]

Each participant was asked to do a museum display with the starting point as the bones collected by Junod. Two participants were asked to deal with specific subjects - social dynamics and the ethics of displaying sacred material. We tried not to influence the other participants and merely invited them to interpret the Junod collection according to their academic training or experience. We did, however, have hopes that they would explore certain areas.

Initially the exhibition was designed to have 10 sections consisting of 10 different interpretations of our central display of divining bones. From this we hoped to make visually apparent the concept that a number of different realities can be extracted from one set of objects.

1. Professor Hammond-Tooke, retired head of the Social Anthropology Department, University of the Witwatersrand. Professor Hammond-Tooke, is interested in African religions and he was asked to show an anthropological perspective of the place of divination in an African world view.

2. Secondly Fiona Barber, of the Duggin-Cronan Museum, Kimberley. was approached as a member of the SAMA committee which deals with the ethics of displaying sacred materials. Since the display centred around sacred material we wanted to have a section dealing with the ethics of such display, given the need for sensitivity when dealing with this kind of material. Another ethical issue arises with the use of a life cast in the section of the display by one of the authors (AB). Life casts have caused much controversy which will be explored in the exhibition.

3. Thirdly an Archaeozoological perspective will be provided by Ms R Engela (Archaeology Department, Wits) who will be expected to analyse the animal bones in the Junod collection and possibly make a statement about the environment which existed at the time.

4. There will also be an interpretation from the curator of the Wits Art Gallery. Art galleries traditionally exhibit decorated objects with an aesthetic appeal. Individual

artists are also important due to the concern with individual genius. This may be a limitation for other disciplines concerned with context, Art Galleries, however, invite the visitor to focus on and contemplate the object. The visitor is encouraged to attain their own level of response.

5. Art History is yet another angle from which the bones can be viewed. Professor A Nettleton (Art History Department, Wits) explore the connection between form and meaning through a comparison of a number of objects related to divination.

6. An Ethnological viewpoint will be given by Mrs A Wanless (Africana Museum, Johannesburg). Divining devices are used by traditional healers throughout southern Africa. A comparison of the different types of divining bones and dice could produce some interesting insights.

7. As this was part of the History Workshop we felt that a historical display was a necessity, although we don't quite know what to expect from Dr P Delius (Hisory Department, Wits).

8. Another interesting way of viewing the bones will be provided by Mr H Paterson of the South African National Museum of Military History. We are aware that diviners played a

crucial role in conflicts throughout the sub-continent and this important function must be included.

9. A Medical Historical perspective will be given by one of the authors (AB). Traditional healing has been neglected in the study of South African medical history. Medical histories tend to concentrate on the Western allopathic medical tradition and ignore methods of healing that have been practised for thousands of years and which still are a vitally important factor in Black life. It is estimated that 95% of Blacks consult traditional healers before being referred to or going to Western-trained doctors. The life cast issue will also be examined here.

10. Finally a Zoological interpretation will be covered by Mrs C Crump of the Wits Zoology Museum. We hope that this display will cover the environmental impact of traditional healers.

There are two other sections to the display which are not linked to academic disciplines but were important additions.

Once we had identified the participants, we realised that, yet again, a group of White academics were attempting to interpret and display Black culture. We felt that this needed to be remedied and so we invited a specialist in the field, Mr Masheyela Maseko,

who is a practising Sangoma. Mr Maseko was particularly suitable because of his long standing association with, and interest in the Africana and the Adler Museums.

We are also acutely aware that there were no available trained Black senior museum personnel for us to consult due to the obvious reasons of unequal education, the general lack of awareness of the function of Museums and of few job opportunities.

The other important issue was commercialism, which has led to many new developments, few of which appear in museum displays. Traditional healers are now seeking legitimacy by establishing professional bodies. Many of those practising in urban areas are no longer collecting their own medicines as thhese have become commercially available. It is now possible to Dial-a-Sangoma.

Another issue is the recent overseas interest in this country. Suddenly South African material has become a commercial proposition, this has led to dealers collecting more sacred and other material, much of which is being sent out of the country. Ironically Museums have played a part, as by putting something in a Museum we immediately elevate its status and increase its commercial value.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a number of issues and problems have been raised in this paper and we have yet to see if an exhibition of this nature will address them successfully. In our exhibition, which is attempting to meet the expectations of the history workshop, we hope to have raised some issues about the nature of reality. While the multidisciplinary approach is a tool for exploring fractions of a truth, we are aware of the fact that it may lead to confusion. Controversial areas such as ethics, commercialism, life casts and reality are rarely examined through the medium of display and we hope that this will lead to new insights.

Public response will be tested in many ways, including the use of a visitor survey. We are hoping to move the exhibition to the Johannesburg Library to expose it to another sector of the public, and the possibility of taking it to Soweto and Alexandra is also being investigated.

We see this exhibition as an opportunity to communicate the fact that museum community <u>is</u> debating such issues as objectivity and interdisciplinary co-operation. This debate is not obvious in present museum displays. The History Workshop is an ideal opportunity to reach a community other than museologists, because the audience are teachers, museum visitors, students, academics etc.

Having tried to put theory into practice we are waiting to see whether the exploration of the various disciplinary fractions will lead to greater understanding of the multi-faceted complexity of these objects.

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