

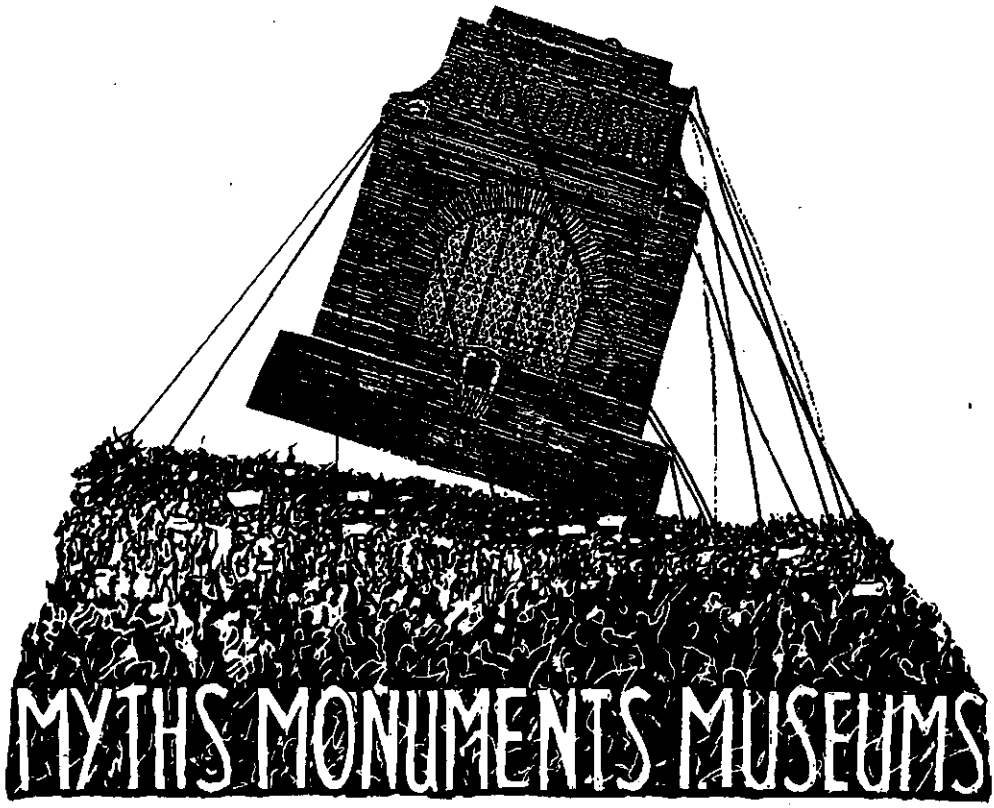
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Reading exhibitions: towards an understanding of popular responses to museum representations of other cultures

Davison, Patricia

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READING EXHIBITIONS: TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF POPULAR RESPONSES TO MUSEUM REPRESENTATIONS OF OTHER CULTURES



Patricia Davison

South African Museum

AFRICANA

WORKSHOP ON PUBLIC HISTORY, UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, 16-18 JULY 1992

MYTHS, MONUMENTS AND MUSEUMS

READING EXHIBITIONS: TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF POPULAR RESPONSES TO MUSEUM REPRESENTATIONS OF OTHER CULTURES

Patricia Davison
South African Museum

Abstract

Over the past decade museum representations of other cultures have become the subject of academic critique. It can now be assumed that exhibitions are complex artefacts of museum practice, which can be deconstructed to reveal the conceptual positions and authority of the professionals responsible for selecting, scripting and designing exhibitions. A weakness of this critique is that it has tended to generalize about 'the museum visitor' and to overlook or understate the varied perspectives of visitors and their actual responses to particular exhibitions. In this paper I argue that more attention should be given to understanding how exhibitions are read and interpreted by members of a diverse viewing public. A case study of visitor responses to a diorama in the South African Museum, depicting a nineteenth-century hunter-gatherer camp in the Karoo, is presented as a basis for discussion. It is suggested that aspects of reception theory may be usefully applied to museum discourse.

INTRODUCTION

During the past decade ethnographic texts and museum representations of other cultures have provided cultural anthropologists with a field of study closer to home than the remote regions that constituted the classic areas of ethnographic study. It has become part of the new orthodoxy to regard museum exhibitions as cultural texts which can be analysed to reveal different layers of meaning and intent, including that of museum professionals. The central insight of this introspective awareness is that both visual and written texts are essentially artefacts of western cultural practice situated within the powerful domains of academic and museological discourse. Professional practice always involves the exercise of power, or as Bourdieu has shown, of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1980).

In the case of anthropology this has resulted in the production of ethnographic texts that give their authors' objects of study, ironically also referred to as the subject of the text, a more circumscribed form than they ever had in practice. The author of the text creates and controls the written subject, and in so doing reduces the human subjects described to objects of professional practice. The influential volume *Writing Culture. The poetics and politics of ethnography* (Clifford & Marcus 1986) explored these ideas and the nature of ethnographic writing, while the authors in Karp & Lavine's *Exhibiting Cultures. The poetics and politics of museum display* (1991) were concerned with similar issues of authority and authorship in museum presentations of other cultures.

Few people would contest that exhibitions are shaped by the curators and other museum professionals who produce them and thus, in principle at least, they are always open to evaluation in terms of concept and realization. In practice, however, authorship is seldom acknowledged in exhibitions but instead, by default, an anonymous professional authority prevails. Together with expectations of authenticity among museum viewers, the authority of museum presentations tends to deflect or reduce critical response. If museum discourse consists of an interaction between viewer and exhibition, it would be fair to argue that this is an unequal exchange, with the balance of power favouring the unseen forces behind the exhibition. Such is the theory, but it has seldom been tested in the field, as it were.

In reviewing *Exhibiting Cultures*, Burton Benedict (1991: 311) noted that most of the 22 papers would have 'benefitted from more fieldwork among museum visitors.' He went on to add:

> ...they treat museum visitors as *tabulae rasae* upon whom exhibition planners, curators, and other powers-that-be exercise their will. There is little attempt to find out how exhibitions affect the visitor either immediately or in the longer term. Admittedly such information is not easy to obtain, but without it can one really judge the effectiveness of exhibiting cultures?

The lack of data on visitor responses weakens many academic critiques of museum practice, and within museums it reduces the prospect of more enlightened exhibition practice. The success of an exhibition tends to be measured only in visitor numbers and generalizations about 'the museum visitor' tend to prevail. Clearly there is a need to disaggregate this generalization and to gather more fine-grained data on the diverse viewing public and their interpretations of particular exhibitions.

As part of a long-term planning project at the South African Museum[1], it was decided to evaluate visitor responses to a diorama display depicting a nineteenth century hunter-gatherer camp scene in the Karoo. The 'Bushman' diorama, as it became known, was completed in 1960 and soon became one of the most popular exhibits in the Museum (Lotter & Botha 1962) but it also evoked some academic criticism, mainly because of its situation in a museum devoted primarily to natural history (Hudson 1975; Smith 1984). Until 1989 no attempt had been made to elicit the views of members of the visiting public on this issue. In this paper I shall discuss a series of interviews conducted in the Ethnography Gallery, and briefly present the results of a year-long survey of visitor responses to the diorama. Before doing so I shall outline my own theoretical position.

READING EXHIBITIONS: POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS

My focus here is not on meaning as constructed by museum professionals but on the reception of these constructs by the visiting public ('consumers' of museum displays). Of course, museum visitors also construct meanings but these are individual and personal rather than generalized or with any claim to universality. The knowledge generated by museum practice on the other hand is widely regarded as being universally true, wherein lies much of its authority. Nonetheless, it would be wrong to assume that visitors to museums were unknowing victims of the authority of museum-generated knowledge.

Drawing on aspects of reception theory, as expounded by Jauss (1982), I assume that the visual text of an exhibition is 'read' or interpreted differently by different viewers in terms of their 'horizons of expectation', and their existing knowledge and values. An exhibition is always received subjectively by viewers who re-interpret what they see within their own frames of reference, and response is far more complex than a passive acceptance of didactic messages. Visual response engages the emotions as well as the intellect. The production of meaning is best conceptualized as occurring through a 'conversation' between receivers and producers of museum displays, even though the latter are seldom present in person at the moment of interaction.

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The SAM was founded in 1825 as a general museum but since the late 1960s, when the collections pertaining to colonial history were tranferred to a separate institution, it has included the fields of natural history and anthropology. I have discussed the division between the ethnographic collections and the cultural history collections elsewhere (Davison 1990).

Within the current debate on museum practice there is increasing recognition that a value-free representation of history is not possible (Saumarez Smith 1989). Instead all exhibitions are regarded as being conceptually positioned. This does not, however, mean that they are deliberately biased. The notion of 'bias' is problematic because it presupposes that objectivity or neutrality of interpretation is possible. Bias is 'more an index of controversy than a tool of analysis' (Lumley 1988: 6).

Constructing a display, and thereby producing meaning, is a project that always involves a number of levels of conceptual and visual interpretation within a particular spatial setting. However, there is no certainty that viewers will receive the meaning as conceived by the producers nor that spatial parameters will determine the way visitors read exhibitions. Although the physical setting undoubtedly exerts an influence on perception, and spatial relationships form an integral part of any exhibition, received meanings cannot be reduced to these factors.

> No text is read in isolation; all reading occurs within frameworks of 'inter-textuality' as well as in settings involving drawing upon mutual knowledge (Giddens 1987:107).

Certain museum exhibitions, for example those natural history displays based on taxonomic principles, tend to evoke a sense of closure or fixity of meaning by using conventions of classification and annotation that leave little room for questioning. Frequently the aesthetic conventions and spatial arrangements of such exhibitions compound the sense of ordered knowledge (Peponis & Hedin 1982). However, there is a noticeable trend in current international museum practice towards encouraging openness in interpretation (Vergo 1989). With regard to history a more participatory approach to display would allow visitors to be co-authors in constructing the story of the past from available sources. This would accord with what Shanks & Tilley (1987: 97) have called a 'redemptive aesthetic' for museums. This ideal presupposes both that museum practice would be less authoritative and that visitors would be willing and confident enough to engage in independent interpretation.

Although some might argue that museums are fated to become obsolete, this view is overtly contradicted by the world-wide popularity of museums and heritage resources of various kinds, which seem to be playing increasingly important roles in contemporary society (Merriman 1989a, 1989b; Hodder 1990). Even critics of museum practice do not deny the popularity of museums. This is so despite the fact that

museums have their roots in the political context of nineteenth century nationalism and colonialism.

While noting the general popularity of museums, it is important to recognize the existence of conditions that might constrain creative response. Perhaps the most important factors to consider in the South African context are the pervasiveness of racism and the deeply politicized nature of the state education system, which has been manipulated to ensure the continued supremacy of the white minority (Wilson & Ramphele 1989:341). School children are seldom encouraged to use educational resources creatively and independently; museum visits are undertaken as part of the curriculum, and respect for the authority of school and text-book is almost automatically transferred to museum exhibits and labels. None the less, it would be simplistic to claim that all state-subsidized institutions perpetuate the hegemony of the state. Patently this is not so.

Ideological critique of museums has tended to be counter-productive in that it has operated mainly at a level of rhetoric uninformed by actual museum practice and, therefore, has not been taken seriously within the museum profession. This is so both locally and abroad, as Durrans (1988:155) has noted:

> ...often the criticism is naive precisely because so little is known about how museums influence their public relative to people's prior assumptions and the impact of other media. Critics might therefore claim that a given exhibition 'represents' something unintended by the curator; but while this is probably true, it is hard to specify and substantiate and would remain a risk in any kind of exhibition.

Although this is true in general, in the particular case of South Africa the presentation of African history has been so distorted that it is open to valid criticism. Increasingly, exhibitions with a covert political agenda, have been criticised from within the profession (Wright & Mazel 1987; Wanless & Brown 1990) but not necessarily by members of the viewing public who tend to expect museums to present 'the truth'.

The challenge for those who exhibit material from other cultures seems to centre on the degree to which such exhibitions can evoke a sense of shared humanity while at the same time promoting a respect for cultural diversity and an understanding of cultural processes. One way of doing the latter would be to use existing ethnographic collections to illustrate how material culture has been used historically in the construction of meaning(s). By showing the active and changing use of cultural resources the notion of primordial cultural distinctiveness would be subverted. A project of this nature would also have the advantage of illustrating

the inseparability of social and cultural relations.

POPULAR RESPONSES TO THE ETHNOGRAPHY GALLERY AT THE SOUTH AFRICAN MUSEUM

It must be noted at the start that any survey undertaken within a museum can only evaluate the opinions of museum-goers, not the wider public. Although this is an obvious point, it is not always taken into account when assessing the success of museum programmes. It is often assumed that attendance figures provide a measure of success, while the factors that deter people from visiting and affect their attitudes to museums remain uninvestigated. In a divided society such as South Africa, large sections of the population may not be reached at all by museum programmes; some may perceive museums negatively and stay away, and those who do visit museums may find the experience less than enjoyable. Although entrance to the South African Museum (SAM) has never been restricted on the basis of race, public perceptions do not necessarily coincide with that reality, as shown in a newspaper cartoon in 1960 that depicted the Museum as being for 'Europeans Only' (fig). Mistaken as this was, it none the less shows that the Museum was *perceived* at the time as being segregated.

It is significant that there was no precedent at the SAM for attempting to evaluate the range of meanings conveyed by a particular display or gallery. In the 175 years of the Museum's existence the main index of public response has been attendance figures, which do not give any indication of qualitative experience. No demographic or attitude study of the non-visiting public has ever been undertaken and there is, therefore, no information available on the factors that might deter people from visiting. As far as I could establish, the only formal survey commissioned was a pilot study in January 1962 intended to provide demographic data on visitors, their motivation for visiting, and their preferred displays (Lotter & Botha 1962).

There had been no previous attempt to evaluate the reasons for the impact on the public of particular displays, nor indeed to evaluate public responses to any aspect of the Museum, from the impressive facade of the building to the provision of facilities for visitor comfort and enjoyment[2]. This lacuna suggests an attitude of

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2 Kenneth Hudson, editor of The Good Museums Guide and assessor of museums world-wide, considers museums as encompassing a 'package' of qualities including: the building; the collections; the presentation and interpretation of material on display; museum publications; the museum shop; educational programmes; publicity; management and attention to the physical comfort of visitors. Highly rated museums not only had interesting displays but impeccable toilets, sufficient seating, comfortable temperature levels, a good coffee shop, friendly assistants and a welcoming atmosphere (Hudson 1985). None of these qualities has ever been formally evaluated at the South African Museum.

complacency, at best, and indifference to the public, at worst. Indeed, engaging in matters relating to public service may not be considered to be in the interests of museum professionals whose primary commitment is to scientific research. It may be convenient not to know how visitors respond to exhibitions and to the museum in general (Hooper-Greenhill 1988; Wright 1989). On the other hand, curators may assume that to have produced an exhibition is sufficient in itself, irrespective of its reception.

During January and February 1989 I undertook a series of interviews in the Ethnography Gallery as a preliminary study of visitor responses to the exhibitions. Later in the year a second survey was initiated aimed specifically at responses to the 'Bushman Diorama', a realistic scene of a nineteenth century hunter-gatherer encampment, which includes 13 life-casts of people who had been cast in 1912 in Prieska village in the northern Cape.

Both surveys were aimed at qualitative evaluation of responses, and were not directed at achieving results of quantitative statistical significance. It was hoped, however, that the questionnaires together with interviews would provide a fair indication of visitor perceptions.

Survey 1: responses to the displays on African cultures.

The aims of the first survey were as follows:

> To gain some qualitative insight into how visitors perceived the Ethnography Gallery as a whole in relation to the rest of the Museum.
>
> To ascertain whether viewers perceived certain displays as depicting a particular historical period, or whether the use of the ethnographic present conflated time into a generalized atemporality.
>
> To gauge visitors' opinions about what was not shown in the Ethnography Gallery. This was assessed indirectly by asking interviewees to indicate their interest in a range of possible topics for new displays.

The survey was undertaken as a series of short interviews[3] in the Ethnography Gallery. Each respondent completed a questionnaire after I had explained that we were trying to assess visitors responses to the existing gallery as part of an evaluation project that would have bearing on planning future displays.

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[3] In most cases the interview lasted between 10 and 15 minutes, but in a few cases up to an hour. I spoke to people as they were leaving the Ethnography Gallery; only one person refused to comply. Survey results are lodged in the Department of Ethnography at the South African Museum.

Of 72 interviewees, 39% lived in the predominantly white residential areas of the western Cape, 19% lived on the Cape Flats, 18% were visitors from other parts of South Africa and 24% were visitors from abroad. Other demographic features of the sample are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic profile of interviewees in Survey 1 (n=72).

Age	%	Percentage Female	Male	Percentage English	Afrikaans	Other
14-19	9.7	6.9	2.8	2.8	6.9	0
20-29	25.0	9.7	15.3	9.7	6.9	8.3
30-39	19.4	8.3	11.1	13.9	5.6	0
40-49	18.1	12.5	5.6	12.5	4.2	1.4
50-59	11.1	6.9	4.2	11.1	0	0
60-69	13.9	4.2	9.7	9.7	4.2	0
70+	2.8	0	2.8	2.8	0	0
Total	100.0	48.5	51.5	62.5	27.8	9.7

The occupational status of respondents in both surveys, as shown in Table 2, was weighted in favour of students and professional people. However, in the first survey, in which people were interviewed in person, the spread of occupations was more even than in the second survey which was voluntary. The inflated percentage of students and professionals in the second sample will be discussed later in association with the results of the second survey.

Table 2: Occupation of respondents in Surveys 1 and 2.

Occupation	Survey 1 % of total (n=72)	Survey 2 % of total (n=500)
Professional	17	32
Managerial	0	5
Clerical/sales	11	2
Labour/technical	10	2
Homemaker	10	4
Students/pupil	19	40
Retired	10	3
Self-employed	8	5
Unemployed	7	3
No reply	n.a.	4

Although the sample is not statistically representative of the visiting population as a whole, it does represent a range of qualitative opinions. The

results for the sample as a whole indicated that 57% of respondents considered that the displays on African cultures fitted in well with the rest of the Museum, 32% were uncertain (some people had not yet seen the rest of the museum) and 11% considered that these displays should be in a different museum and not associated with natural history.

Positive comments included those that said the Museum was 'okay' just as it was and that nothing should be changed, one that stated that the gallery dealing with African people 'had always been there' and should, therefore, remain unchanged, and a number that noted that cultural and natural history were linked - 'the natural world is the human environment'(Survey 1/23). Negative comments included those which stated that the gallery did not fit in with the rest of the museum, those that said a separate museum should be made to display African cultures, and those that emphasized that the rest of the Museum dealt with natural history. Only one of the black respondents felt that displays on African cultures should not be in a natural history museum. An Afrikaans-speaking 'coloured' labourer commented that 'man can't live without nature' (Survey 1/38), he also said that he would like to see the culture of white South Africans included in the exhibitions. In interviewing people I got the impression that, although relatively few visitors were aware of the debates surrounding the representation of other cultures, most people wanted to see a more integrated interpretation of history in the Museum.

Visitors were asked to indicate their interest in a range of topics not currently addressed directly in the displays. These were as follows: history, African art, people and environment, political issues, white South African culture (integrated view of culture), crafts, township culture (contemporary, urban African culture) and how museums make exhibitions. The results for the total sample are summarized below:

Topic	positive (%)	indifferent(%)
History	64	36
African art	53	47
People and environment	47	53
Political issues	25	75
Integrate S.Afr.culture	58	42
Crafts	31	69
'Township' culture	69	31
About making displays	47	53

Ambivalent responses to the idea of including displays on political issues were frequent. A number of people, who were opposed to the idea of current political issues being addressed, were in favour of political history being interpreted and displayed in the Museum. Current political issues, which most people thought of as party politics, were generally considered too recent to be objectively presented. A strand that ran through the verbal responses was that people had not come to the Museum to be informed about political issues, as one person said 'you can read the newspaper to learn about politics'. The very word politics was offensive to some respondents who thought that this was a sphere of activity that museums should avoid. However, when in discussion political issues were defined more broadly to include the play of power in many different spheres, people were less negative. Awareness of the politics of representation was very limited and most of the people interviewed assumed that museum displays were simply factual and accurate. The widespead illusion that 'scientific' knowledge is unmediated seemed to pertain here, and this was compounded by the conventional museum rhetoric.

To counter this tendency Shanks & Tilley (1987: 98) have recommended that political content should be introduced into conventional archaeological displays to 'show how the past may be manipulated and misrepresented for present purposes', but this would surely be yet another representation open to the same critique. If the authority of professionalism is inherent to museum practice, which I maintain it is, the conventions themselves must be made more flexible and open. Here, in accord with the above writers, I would emphasize authorship and the process of producing meanings in displays. The practical challenge is to find new ways of displaying objects, a new display vocabulary, so that the visual rhetoric will encourage an awareness of multiple views and not reduce the complex presence of an artefact to a single, authoritative interpretation. The use of interactive video has been successfully used to achieve this in the Gallery 33 project at the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery (Peirson-Jones 1992).

It should be noted that the interviews were conducted a year before the release of Nelson Mandela, and before the ideal of a non-racial South Africa was supported by the prevailing government. The affirmation by most interviewees of the desirability for exhibitions that showed an integrated view of South African culture and history seemed to echo a shift in popular opinion towards 'Africanizing' local culture. From the early 1980s there had been a conspicuous tendency for increasing numbers of progressive white South Africans to respond positively to African culture as

expressed in art, music and dance*. The motivation for this may have been ambivalent, including insecurity about the future, but it also seemed to express an aspiration to identify with what was perceived as being rooted in Africa. I have suggested elsewhere that this appropriation of African culture represents a symbolic claim to a shared heritage (Davison 1987). In talking to visitors it was clear that the recognition of, and interest in, ethnic diversity did not preclude an interest in cross-cultural displays that would draw attention to human similarities.

Another question at issue was whether the displays were perceived as being ahistorical or whether they were seen as representing a specific historical period. Underlying this question was the wish to assess if the diorama perpetuated the widely held misconception that Bushmen still live today as pristine hunter-gatherers. As Biesele (1990: 5) has recently remarked:

> One of many pernicious myths about Bushman people, exacerbated by films like 'The Gods Must Be Crazy', is that they still live in a never-never land without unfulfilled desires. The reality is that all but 3% of the Bushmen people in Namibia are completely dispossessed and must struggle unremittingly to survive.

It had been suggested in informal discussion among colleagues that if the diorama were interpreted as showing the way of life of contemporary hunter-gatherers it would be giving credence to this myth (A.Smith 1989, pers.comm.). However, the survey indicated that relatively few viewers regarded the scene as being contemporary. Only 8% of respondents placed the diorama in the time period 1950 to the present; 50% placed it in the last century, 15% early this century, and 26% were uncertain or considered that there was no specific intended time setting for the diorama. However, although few viewers thought that the display depicted the contemporary situation of hunter-gatherers, there was a fairly high degree of uncertainty and only half of the respondents interpreted the historical setting as intended. Subsequently a head-line label stating that the display represents an early-nineteenth-century scene was installed.

In general visitor responses to the questions about the depicted scenes seemed to be based as much on prior knowledge or experience as on reading museum labels. The degree of variation in responses would seem to negate the notion that visitors to

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Geometric design motifs derived from vernacular beadwork and mural design have been so widely reproduced in fashion accessories that they have been reduced to visual cliches. In 1989 a Democratic Party speaker in a parliamentary debate on the Cultural Affairs Bill claimed that township art and Johnny Clegg's music represented an inclusive 'South African culture'(The Argus 18/5/89).

exhibitions are passive recipients of museum-generated knowledge, and to confirm that displays were read subjectively. Jordanova (1989: 33) and others have suggested that certain representational conventions such as dioramas, which strive to be 'literal, life-like, exact, telling it as it was', tend to be less encouraging of alternative readings than conventions that draw attention reflexively to the means of representation, but the diorama seemed to retain a degree of ambiguity for viewers despite its realism. However, as the initial survey did not address responses to the diorama specifically, it was decided to follow this up with a second survey, which would be focused directly on the diorama. A small display about the production of the diorama was also planned to provide viewers with a wider frame of reference, and to draw attention to current debates about ethnographic representation. This resulted in a documentary display entitled About the diorama which is a modest attempt to counter the illusion of unmediated truth that the diorama might otherwise have fostered. Viewers, however, were not presumed to be unduly gullible. As Saumarez Smith (1989:18) has noted:

> Museum visitors are probably much more sophisticated than is generally recognised in comprehending the boundary between what is being represented as real and what is being shown as convenient fiction;...

The documentary display was completed in October 1989, and the second survey of visitor responses was started in the same month. The broad objective was to gain some specific insight into viewers' perceptions of the Bushman diorama, which for many Capetonians has become synonymous with the South African Museum. Below I present the responses received up to October 1990.

Survey 2: visitor responses to the Bushman Diorama.

> These life casts have been in the museum for SO LONG that the museum is famous for them. Imagine the disappointment and frustration of tourists coming here expecting to see the famous casts and finding they had been moved....Keep the San figures here. It's their traditional home. (Survey 2/249)

> It has imbued me with a sense of disinheritance...I think we forget that the diorama is about real people and not casts. (Survey 2/328)

The second survey was more narrowly focused than the previous survey in being directed specifically at the Bushman diorama and the display 'About the diorama'. It also differed in that respondents were not interviewed or asked in person to complete the questionnaire. A small desk with posting-slot was positioned adjacent to the diorama, and visitors were invited to complete a short questionnaire. The questionnaire was deliberately kept to a single page, and only one question required

a discursive reply. The introductory label, written in English, Xhosa and Afrikaans, reads as follows:

> What is your response?
> Since the 1970s the diorama has increasingly become the focus of critical attention. We would like to know what you think about the diorama and the special exhibition on the right. Please fill in the form provided and post it in the slot.

No attempt was made to sample opinion randomly among all the visitors to the gallery over a certain period of time. The survey was voluntary and the results represent only the very small number of viewers who elected to respond. The long duration of the survey, however, meant that it sampled visitors throughout the year and not only at peak holiday season, as in the previous survey. We estimated that less than 5% of viewers completed the questionnaire. Although the survey only represents the views of people who chose to respond to the questionnaire, it was anticipated that visitors holding stong opinions, either positive or negative, would be likely to respond[5]. By the nature of the survey people who could not read or write were precluded. The questionnaire was presented only in English, although people replied in Afrikaans as well as English. Demographic data are presented below:

Table 4: Demographic profile of sample in Survey 2 (n=500)

		Percentage			Percentage		
Age	%	Fem	Male	N.R.	English	Afrikaans	Other
14-19	35.0	20.2	12.2	2.6	22.2	10.2	2.6
20-29	25.2	11.6	11.2	2.4	16.4	5.4	3.4
30-39	15.2	6.4	7.2	1.6	10.4	3.0	1.8
40-49	11.4	5.8	5.4	0.2	8.8	1.0	1.6
50-59	6.8	3.4	3.2	0.2	5.2	0.6	1.0
60-69	5.0	1.6	2.2	1.2	3.0	1.0	1.0
70+	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
No reply	1.4	0.8	0.0	0.6	1.4	0.0	0.0
Total	100.0	49.8	41.4	8.8	67.4	21.2	11.4

Status was assessed on the basis of occupation as previously shown in Table 3. It is not surprising that those who responded were primarily students or of professional status. People who were accustomed to expressing themselves in writing and were confident of their views were most likely to respond, and this was the

5 The experience of the Opinion Survey Centre of the Human Sciences Research Council in Pretoria has shown that voluntary questionnaires tend to be ignored but that those people interested in the topic respond (Schnetler 1989). This was confirmed.

case. A factor that may have had bearing on the high percentage of students in the survey is that during 1990 a number of University of Cape Town undergraduates undertook critical analyses of museum discourse. Without data on the visiting population as a whole it is impossible to compare the demographic profile of respondents with that of visitors to the Museum in general.

Studies from other parts of the world have indicated that museums attract the better educated and upwardly mobile sector of society. Merriman (1989b), drawing on Bourdieu's earlier work, has noted that people who are not socialized into museum 'competence' will tend to exclude themselves from this possibility by projecting a negative stereotype onto museums. This may well apply here too, as suggested by the survey sample, but one cannot generalize from so limited a study. The data available from the 1962 survey indicate that the majority of museum visitors have secondary school education or higher[6]. It is clear from the very low response that, irrespective of status, most visitors chose not to respond to the questionnaire; but most of those who did respond were from the better educated sector of the population. This must be borne in mind when considering the results of the survey. However, the fact that those who did respond were mainly from the professional and student sector gives the sample a more equal balance with curatorial professionalism and authority. Simply stated, the sample can be taken to reflect mainly the opinions of an informed minority within the visiting population.

In order to systematize the qualitative responses to the diorama a number of themes were identified and coded. The main divisions were: positive, negative, indifferent and ambivalent. The positive and negative responses were then more finely sub-divided to indicate the reason for the particular response. The qualitative responses to the question, 'What message does the diorama convey to you?', were coded from 1 to 9 as follows:

Key to response types
1 - positive, without further qualification
2 - positive, accuracy, realism or technical excellence
3 - positive, survival in harsh conditions, ecological balance
4 - positive, of educational, historical value; empowering
5 - negative, without further qualification
6 - negative, inappropriate association with natural history
7 - negative, racist, eurocentric, static, paternalistic
8 - indifferent
9 - ambivalent

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6 Results indicated that 17% of visitors had a university education, 69% had been to secondary school or technical college, and 14% were outside of these categories. In a more recent survey of public responses to displays dealing with evolution, 34% of the SAM sample had tertiary education (degree or diploma), and 49% had secondary schooling (Mathers 1990).

The overall responses in the four main divisions were as follows: positive responses were received from 76% of all respondents, negative responses from 7%, indifferent from 7% and ambivalent from 14%. The more nuanced responses will be discussed in conjunction with the question that asked respondents to express an affirmative or negative response to the following suggestions: leave the diorama as it is; dismantle it completely; change the scenario; add more written information; add a video of present-day Kalahari San. Responses to these questions frequently provided confirmation of the more open-ended comments but in some cases they also indicated ambiguities or contradictions. The results are presented below.

	yes (%)	no (%)	no reply (%)
Retain	76	12	12
Dismantle	10	58	32
Change	16	48	36
Amplify	62	17	21
Add video	74	9	17

On the basis of responses to the above questions it can be concluded that most respondents received the diorama positively, they were impressed by the technical excellence, and found the scene convincing. It seems that the diorama confirmed viewers expectations regarding the hunter-gatherer way of life. However, the majority of viewers also wanted additional information in written form and on video about the social history of the people who were represented in the diorama, as well as information on contemporary hunter-gatherers. My attempt to raise awareness of museum practice and to stimulate critical responses to the diorama through the display about the diorama seems to have been largely, although not entirely, unsuccessful.

A number of respondents reacted to critical accounts of the diorama by suggesting that displays showing the culture of <u>all</u> South Africans should be included in the same gallery, as the following exemplify:

> My response would be to establish a broad collection that indicates the cultural developments and contributions of <u>all</u> the peoples of our country <u>together</u>. (Survey 2/32)

> Where there is no problem someone must create one - if critics feel happy, put a display of white people here too. We are all part of mankind and history of mankind for goodness sake! (Survey 2/268)

> Appreciate the 'objections' but feel they are invalid. Museum could set up similar displays depicting other 'groups' - may defuse situation. (Survey 2/457)

Other respondents were less tolerant and suggested that the critics simply be ignored. (Survey 2/153)

A recurring sub-theme within the positive responses to the 'message' of the diorama was that the Bushmen lived in harmony with their environment.

> [The diorama conveys] a picture of the life of the Bushmen as it was - simple, with its own dignity - a folk who had their own ways of surviving despite the vicissitudes of the terrain and the attacks they endured at the hands of others. The diorama has its own integrity. To change it would be to impose transitory viewpoints/issues which seek to rewrite history in the image of current ideologies. By all means show the present life of the Bushmen but do not interfere with an exceptional depiction. (Survey 2/266)

> ...we ought to re-learn the unity with nature that other peoples have. (Survey 2/227)

Possibly influenced by the media coverage of Kalahari hunter-gatherers in films such as those by Laurens van der Post, many viewers had idealized views about the Bushmen, and expressed sadness that their former way of life was no longer viable. Some respondents felt that the diorama conveyed dignity, suffering, hardship and frugality; others emphasized the educational value of the diorama.

> I feel it gives a very realistic impression of how these people lived, providing an excellent educational opportunity for children of all ages and adults. (Survey 2/355)

> Extremely informative display of what life was like for the now vanished Bushmen. Thank goodness it has been captured for posterity (Survey 2/218)

The use here of the word 'captured' unwittingly suggests cultural appropriation despite the overtly positive comment. From a different perspective a student, who considered that the diorama should be retained, said:

> It tells me what my ancestors looked like (Survey 2/428).

In the same vein a young professional man living in Athlone commented:

> I find the diorama very interesting and reminds me of the ancestors of the early age. And how we were brought up by our parents; that this was nothing such as living rich. ...excellent work keep it up like that. (Survey 2/47)

The predominantly favourable interaction with the diorama, as expressed in the survey, confirmed that the display is successful in attracting attention and

stimulating a range of mainly positive responses. It could be argued that the perception of respondents was ideologically conditioned by the museum setting to start with and, therefore, the result was to be expected. However, this would imply that viewers did not think for themselves even when presented with a range of possible alternative views. It would deny viewers the possibility of creative thought and reduce them to passive recipients of authoritative knowledge. The subjective variation among responses suggests that this was not the case.

The overall positive response does, however, indicate that the picture of hunter-gatherer life represented in the diorama accorded with the preconceptions of most respondents. By the second half of the twentieth century hunter-gatherers in southern Africa had been romanticized as an 'endangered' and fragile reminder of a mode of subsistence that all humanity once shared. Many respondents regarded the museum as preserving a record of this past way of life. This, of course, is consistent with the popular idea of what museums do - they preserve the past. An 'invented' idealized past seemed to accord with popular perceptions among viewers.

However, the survey also showed that many positive respondents wanted to know about the contemporary social and political conditions of the Kalahari San. A labourer from Mitchell's Plain commented ambiguously that the diorama 'shows the ways of the Bushmen but tells us very little about them' (Survey 2/310). Furthermore, sensitivity to the critical issues surrounding museum practice and the representation of Others was not completely lacking. Awareness of the implicit ideology in the spatial grouping of anthropology with natural history was shown in the response of a professional art-historian:

> Confusion generated...engaging excellence of display but discomfort at presentation of people in this fashion. Case detailing history and controversy goes some way towards contextualizing issues but insufficient....I find the juxtaposition of displays of dinosaurs and <u>some</u> people alarming and irresponsible as regards the dangers of entrenching problems of attitude such as paternalism, racial superiority and discrimination (Survey 2/6).

A number of respondents found the display historically inadequate, by omitting to show contact between Khoisan people and white settlers. A Xhosa-speaking man studying in Cape Town remarked on the static nature of the display.

> It represents the old way of life of these people [San hunter-gatherers] without showing any change. The transition from that kind of tradition/culture should be displayed. ... The Dutch must also be shown here to show how change occurred... (Survey 2/274).

An extremely negative response came from a young woman student, who felt that the display expressed 'cultural colonialism' and should be dismantled completely.

> Why do whites first exterminate indigenous populations and animals and then afterwards try to 'preserve' them behind glass cases.... Why don't you say that people were exterminated / and their resistance (Survey 2/300)

Attention was also drawn to the flaw of only asking the opinion of those who came to the Museum. A student from England suggested that the debate should be extended to include non-visitors and more black people.

> It is important that this issue is not reduced to the intellectualizing of white middle class citizens (Survey 2/455).

This is a pertinent comment especially considering the occupational profile of the sample. It is also important to acknowledge that the results of a survey of this kind cannot fully convey visitor responses. Written comments do not necessarily capture the emotive, non-discursive dimension of viewing the diorama. Moreover, in reducing responses to a set number of concerns, inevitably nuance is lost. What then can be learnt from the survey?

TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING VISITOR RESPONSES

The survey results lend support to the theoretical position that received meanings do not necessarily coincide with intended meanings. To generalize about museum hegemony is to reduce the range of contextual meanings that museums may evoke. With the exception of school groups, people come willingly to museums and it can be assumed that they choose to visit because they have a positive image of the experience that museums offer. However, we need to know a great deal more about visitor attitudes and responses as a prerequisite for more sensitive museum practice.

One of the underlying intentions of the display 'About the diorama' and the second survey was to raise critical awareness of museum practice. The results, however, showed that relatively few viewers saw the diorama more critically in the light of the display. A factor that must be considered here is that most visitors spend only between three and five minutes looking at the display. Nonetheless, for those who were interested the display served to underline the constructed nature of the diorama and it provided a wider frame of reference for the diorama, albeit in a documentary convention that is less visually compelling than the diorama itself. If the method is part of the message, the diorama method, which is pure artifice, seems to communicate far more effectively than labelled artefacts and photographs. But

the apparent realism of the diorama does not seem to blurr the distinction between reality and representation, as shown by a respondent who termed the diorama a ' very realistic replica'. Ideally, the exhibition would provide insight into a past way of life, and simultaneously into the way this version of the past had been shaped by museum practice - it would communicate as a representation that revealed its constructed nature. Finding practical ways of achieving this ideal remains work in progress.

In support of my argument that popular responses to museum representations of other cultures are unpredictable and open to individual interpretation, I conclude with a quote from the novel, *In the Fog of the Season's End*, by the late African writer, Alex la Guma[7]. The character Beukes recalls waiting for a fellow political activist at the South African Museum. In the zoological gallery, 'He had been alone, a stranger in a lost dead world...' but in the anthropology section he had mused:

> These Bushmen had hunted with bows and tiny arrows behind glass; red-yellow dwarfs with peppercorn hair and beady eyes. Beukes had thought sentimentally that they were the first to fight.
> (La Guma 1972, cited in Voss 1990:66)

La Guma goes on to describe, 'the still hunters holding their primitive bows in petrified readiness'. This response to the exhibited casts gives cause for guarding against making assumptions about the way the display might be received. Although static and enclosed by a glass case, the exhibition remains unbounded in the realm of the mind.

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7 Alex la Guma, born in 1925, was son of Jimmy la Guma, President of the Coloured People's Congress. As well as being a journalist and novelist, he was a political activist and Communist ideologue. He was accused of treason and banned in South Africa. He died in exile in Cuba. I am grateful to Tony Voss for drawing my attention to this reference.

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