Chapter 1  Encountering a Chinese horse: engaging with the thingness of things

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THE HORSE AND THE POWER OF OBJECT ENCOUNTER

In 2010, I visited for the first time the art gallery at Compton Verney in Warwickshire, England. As well as notable collections of Neopolitan, British, northern European and folk art, Compton Verney holds one of the top three Chinese collections in Europe, centred on bronze ritual vessels and other objects. I did not know this, however, as my visit began and as I walked into the first room of Chinese artefacts. The room was lined with sparsely filled and elegantly lit cases of bronze vessels, and alone, facing the entrance to the room, on a plinth in the middle of the floor and without any glass around it, stood what to me seemed an extraordinarily beautiful and animated, bronze figure of a horse. The horse was green, over a metre high, and stood considerably higher still as a result of its plinth. I was utterly spellbound by its majestic form, its power, and, as I began to look at it closely, its material details: its greenish colour, its textured surface, the small areas of damage. I wanted to touch it, though of course I could not – but that did not stop me imagining how it would feel to stroke it, or how it would sound if I could tap the metal, or how heavy it would be if I could try to pick it up. I was, in other words, sensorially exploring the object, even though I had to intuit and imagine rather than directly experience most of the encounter. There was no label at all adjacent to the object, only a small number which correlated to the interpretive text on the gallery hand
guide that I had not yet picked up. I still knew nothing at all about this artefact, other than that it clearly represented a horse and that I guessed it was made of bronze; nonetheless, its three-dimensionality, tactility and sheer power had literally moved me to tears. I allowed myself considerable time to reflect upon that feeling and upon the object, before I picked up the hand guide.

When eventually I did retrieve the text, I read:

Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220):
Heavenly Horse, tian ma. Bronze.
This large horse would have been a funerary offering for the tomb of an élite Chinese man, the intention being for the owner of the tomb to use the horse to pull his chariot in the afterlife. Such large bronze horses were very rare during the Western Han period, becoming more popular during the Eastern Han. It was extremely difficult to produce such large bronze figures in one mould, therefore this stallion is cast in nine close fitting pieces and joined together, an expensive method in terms of labour and material.

I was left breathless all over again. That this wonderful object was so intimately associated with someone’s death, that it was so ancient, and that it was so rare, further intensified its power over me. I looked for the joins and counted the pieces, and studied the detail of the surface even more intently than I had before.
My initial response to the horse was a fundamental, emotional, sensory, even visceral, one to its form, materials, colour, scale and texture. Had the information about the horse been displayed next to it in the form of a label or text panel, I am certain it would have interfered with, even prevented altogether, the powerful and moving reaction I had to the object for its own sake: I would have been distracted by the text, would have been drawn to read it first, and would not have had the opportunity to experience and sensorially explore the artefact’s physicality for its own sake. That is, I would not have had the powerful experience that I did, had the object been displayed in a way that impeded my ability to encounter it alone, in and of itself, before I discovered the crucial, contextual information the gallery had provided for it.

So what, if any, was the significance of that initial, pre-knowledge encounter with the physical object? Was it of no purpose beyond something purely personal to an individual visitor, of no wider relevance to other visitors and the gallery? Or was it a kind of personally transformative event that should be encouraged in museums? Utilising sensory and emotional aspects in the museum environment certainly has an established value in relation to learning and is evident in some contemporary educational activities and exhibition strategies (e.g. Golding 2010, Wehner and Sear 2010). It certainly made a major difference to how I subsequently reacted to the information I read about the object: because I was already emotionally receptive to the artefact, I had an empathic as well as purely cognitive response to, and thus a greater interest in, its history. Furthermore, as the temporal distance between the present moment and my encounter with the horse has increased, I find I can remember
a surprising amount about it – something I can only explain by the personal impact it made upon me.

But what about the value of a powerful response to an object just for itself, rather than only because of how it might enhance learning or appreciation of the wider aspects of an exhibition? The opportunity to be moved to tears, tickled pink, shocked or disgusted by a museum object, or simply to reflect upon it, as a result of sensory and emotional engagement with its physicality before necessarily knowing anything at all about it, is itself a powerful component of what a museum experience can offer – not just as a step on the journey towards cognitive understanding of the story the object helps to tell, but as a potent and sometimes transformative phenomenon in its own right. This does not mean that cognitive understanding and stories are unimportant; only that the physicality of the object itself can be too, because they can trigger personal, emotional and sensory responses that may have a significance of their own as well as in enhancing subsequent understanding. This argument has resonances with James Clifford’s suggestion that we should ‘return to [museum objects] … their lost status as fetishes. Our fetishes. This tactic, necessarily personal, would accord to things in collections the power to fixate, rather than simply the capacity to edify or inform’ (1985: 244; emphasis added).3 The word ‘return’ is important: museums in the past often displayed some objects at least, principally to captivate or inculcate a sense of wonder rather than or as well as to educate. Indeed, arguably many still do this to some extent with some of their objects, as my experience at Compton Verney or a visit to some of the ‘treasures’ at national museums and galleries demonstrates.
Many of us would not question this notion of the object’s ‘power to fixate’ if it concerned only the fine and decorative arts, or some genres thereof at least. We can accept, for example, that some conceptual may set out precisely to move, shock, amuse or puzzle us, just as some products of design may seek to stimulate our acquisitiveness, our desire to possess. We are also familiar with such elemental responses to objects in the consumption practices that run through our daily lives – and of course, such responses are well understood and manipulated in the commercial sector by advertisers and retailers. This is less so in the world of museum practice, however. Yet encounters with objects can, in themselves, serve to enhance wellbeing and have a range of positive impacts, as an increasing array of empirical research is beginning to demonstrate.4 Objects matter within museum practice, of course – but where once some of them at least would have been used to awe and inspire visitors, today they more often feature as, effectively, grammatical marks punctuating a story being told, rather than as powerful items in their own right. The effort expended by museums to render objects and interpretation accessible and to enable visitors to identify meaning and context, is laudable and important; yet arguably it may sometimes be the strategies employed in that very effort which prevent or limit the opportunities for directly encountering and responding to objects in and of themselves, prior or in addition to cognitively exploring the stories they have to tell. The challenge lies in producing successful and accessible interpretive interventions which simultaneously do not act to dilute, if not remove altogether, the sense of magic, mystery and excitement that objects can also convey.

THE OBJECT IN MATERIAL CULTURE STUDIES AND MUSEUM STUDIES
How best, then, might one begin to explore and understand more about how people and things in museums interact? Eleven years ago, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill wrote that ‘material culture studies … have very little to say about the relationship between objects and museum visitors’ (2000: 107). My contention is that, if material culture studies are broad and flexible enough, the opposite is true and they can make substantial contributions to understanding the relationships between objects and museum visitors, precisely because the links between people and things are, or could be, at their very heart.

Material culture studies comprise a large subject. There are now, for example, many metres of library shelves of texts from an impressively wide range of disciplinary perspectives addressing objects in relation to their role as commodities or gifts and their importance in social and economic relations – indeed their importance as arrays of relations (c.f. Law 2000). The material nature of objects and how they are perceived and experienced has, with some notable exceptions referred to later in this essay, on the whole been less significant in the literature than discussions of exchange, meaning and value; i.e. the majority of sources tend to emphasise the (equally complex and important) cultural rather than the material aspects of objects and their roles in the human world. The last two or more decades have, for example, produced many useful studies of the meanings and values imputed to material objects embedded within social life – indeed, credited with having their own ‘social life’ (Appadurai 1986, Kopytoff 1986). Yet there are far fewer studies looking at the role played by the material actuality of the objects in question – the role of surface, material, density, colour, texture and so on – to the extent that Paul Graves-Brown
accused much of the literature as having a tendency to see objects as just a ‘world of surfaces on to which we project significance’ (2000: 3-4). Instead, the focus has primarily been on human agency, ideology, concepts, signifiers and signifieds (this is true even of most work that addresses what it refers to as ‘materiality’, as Ingold points out [2007]).

These sorts of material culture studies are highly valuable in the cultural, social and historical insights they provide, but, because their emphasis does not lie primarily on the material per se, they are limited in helping us to understand how people actually experience and interact with objects on a physical, sensory or emotional level, whether in a museum or not. Hooper-Greenhill’s claim is thus true for many of these studies, useful though they are in other ways. Furthermore, while it may not be the intention, because the focus of this work lies at the cultural rather than the material end of the material cultural continuum, in some of it objects appear at least to be reduced to materialisations of abstract human ideas, instead of rounded elements of a material world that influences our ideas and feelings too, that has and is a ‘physicality which resists and enables’ in a two-way relationship (Boivin 2004: 64).

In museum studies meanwhile, some notable contributions have focused on the making of meaning, influenced by hermeneutical and reception aesthetics approaches such as those of Stanley Fish (1980; e.g. Hooper-Greenhill 2000), in which meaning and interpretation are primarily in the mind of the viewer and the influence of the object (or text, for Fish) and its qualities are markedly diminished or absent in the analysis. Such postmodernist critiques have been important in illuminating the role of the viewer and the significance of their sociocultural context and pre-existing
knowledge in determining how the world – including material objects – is experienced. Indeed, the ontological perspective brought by these studies, and elsewhere by the insights of social and cultural anthropology, is essential to understanding the relationship between the different actors and elements that make up our world and in explaining the situated, contingent and shifting values and meanings objects and people give to each other, in museums and elsewhere.

To augment this perspective further with sensitivity to the real, material qualities of things and to the corporeal, culturally nuanced, sensory modalities through which those qualities are experienced and valued, is something I argue that a truly material, material culture studies approach can bring. It is time to see a materially focused, material culture studies back in the centre of museum practice and museum studies. It has not held such a place since the late nineteenth century and it deserves to return – not in the positivist, static form and role it held in the past, but through a gentle, twenty-first century revolution in which the object is once more at the heart of the museum, this time as a material focus of experience and opportunity, a subtle and nuanced, constructed, shifting thing, but also physical, ever-present, beating pulse of potential, quickening the institution and all that it is and could be.

OBJECTS AND SUBJECTS

My emphasis, then, is essentially on objects themselves: things as things, stuff as stuff. It is worthwhile probing a little further what objects are, and how they relate to the perceiving subject. I am using ‘object’ and ‘thing’ interchangeably; nonetheless, the reader should be aware that there are some areas of scholarship – particularly
literary thing theory (e.g. Brown 2001) and psychological object theory (e.g. Hood and Santos 2009) – in which they have distinct and sometimes opposite meanings.

The focus here is on physical objects, primarily in order to make some particular points about sensory experience and its relationship to the material characteristics of things – texture, shape, colour, density, and so on. However, both museums and the category ‘material culture’ include objects without clear, bounded material form; furthermore, we experience objects without fixed, three-dimensional material form (such as songs, dance performances, digital images, and so on) in multi-sensory ways – indeed, many of the points made in this essay can and should be extended to thinking about other sorts of things in museums and beyond.

The English word ‘object’ is most often assumed to refer to something tangible, measurable, visible and limited – something that extends through physical space, but is also defined, discrete, bounded. Thus people think naturally of jugs, necklaces, fossils or swords as objects, but often find it hard to conceive similarly of something that is equally physically tangible but spatially far more extensive, such as a landscape. Everyday parlance of the term also tends to imply something man-made, artefactual – hence for most, bowls spring to mind more readily than butterflies – though as with other initial assumptions, there is often a strong and unsurprising influence from particular disciplinary backgrounds, so those with a science background do conceive of pieces of the natural world as objects as easily as they think of hand-made and manufactured artefacts. To interrogate and problematise these notions about objects is useful for thinking about practice in museums, ethnography or elsewhere. In relation to museums, it provokes reflection upon how many different kinds of things institutions hold, beyond those traditionally thought of as constituting
the stuff of their collections. But it can also initiate some contemplation of the nature of museum practice itself – or at least, consideration of both what it is that museums do, and what it is they do it with and about. If objects can encompass so diverse a gathering of things, from a historical photographic print to a dinosaur tooth, a silver trophy to a digital film, an Iron Age hill fort to an archive sound recording, a live dance performance to a digitally recorded collection of community memories, what can possibly bring all these things together into one category? What, in other words, defines ‘the object’ in such a setting?

In part, it is interpretation: the object is, or is potentially, interpreted; it is an object, in the grammatical sense, of the interpretive process – something acted upon, something influenced by the action of the subject: I hugged her; the curator wrote a text panel about the canoe. Material and non-material things alike can all be interpreted in museum or other interpretive practice. Indeed, such interpretation goes hand-in-glove with the fundamental role of objects in human social and cultural life: in the Kula gift-exchange in the Trobriand Islands, famously first described by Malinowski (1922), ceremonial mwali arm-ornaments and soulava necklaces are the central artefacts in a formalised set of ongoing exchange processes that establish and maintain trading and political relationships amongst men within and between islands; thus so long as these items remain in the islands, they are passed around between individuals as the objects at the centre of this ritualised exchange system; then once in the museum, they are interpreted so as to explain that former role. The Compton Verney horse was interpreted by the gallery in the text that I eventually read.
But in museums, many such things often end up being used as accessories within the interpretation of something else – as props in the telling of a story rather than as the focus of the story themselves. Thus letters and black-edged calling cards from the archive, and items of Whitby jet jewellery are used to punctuate an exhibition on death in Victorian times, in which the main items are the hearse and the mourning dress; abundant oral histories are edited and run in extract form on an audio guide as background between key points on a coal mining heritage trail; richly woven textiles, cowrie shells and unusual coins are scattered as examples, but unexplored in themselves, throughout a display about trade across cultures and history. Those items’ own particular epistemological or narrative potential may lie mostly unexplored and unrevealed.

Yet there is still an (often unintended) experiential dimension to the presence of those things, still a possibility to engage with them in surprisingly direct and sensorially and emotionally valid ways. The colours, textures, intricacy and sheer beauty of the textile; the gravelly, flat, yet surprisingly moving voice of a miner now dead, recalling the camaraderie of life in the pits; the sombre power of the now fragile letters of condolence written long ago … these objects may be peripheral to the narrative of the exhibitions in which they appear, little more than structural components in a much larger story, yet individually too they have the power to arrest, to captivate, to startle. This capability of things – material or otherwise – to produce experience in the perceiving subject, is also an aspect of what I would argue defines the object: it is an object of experience, as well as an object of interpretation. Indeed, in this dimension the passive, grammatical sense of the word ‘object’ becomes more tenuous. As we shall see, objects begin to seem quite active, and even to blur with subjects, because
of the ability of the sensible, material characteristics of objects to trigger our particular sensory experience.

Certainly, as constructivism as shown us, our interpretations of our sense perceptions are socially, culturally, personally and historically situated and contingent; that is, they are heavily influenced by who we are and the prior knowledge, experiences, feelings and so on we bring to bear. Yet the sense perceptions we interpret, also have a biological reality in our neurological responses to physical stimuli. In other words, we do not entirely invent our experiences, but hear, touch or see what we do partly because of the personal and cultural baggage we carry, and partly because of the physical reality of ourselves and the material world within which we live. We are not only constructivist creatures (though that is an important element); we are also packages of flesh and nerve cells, bodily interacting with other physical things (including other people). We have the sensory experiences we do partly because of an artefact having particular material qualities – bigness, blueness, roundness, smoothness, and so on. Two different people will certainly demonstrate the subjectivity and contingency of experience by responding to the same object in different ways (and they will assess, interpret and attribute meaning and value to bigness, blueness, roundness and smoothness differently); but for both of them, part at least of their engagement with the object will be determined by its material characteristics – *their reactions would not be as they are (whatever they may be), if the object were not what it is*. This experiential step in our engagement with an object is so fundamental and so basic, that it is often missed in exploration of the socioculturally and historically constituted and situated nature of our emotional and cognitive responses to objects. Up to a point this is entirely valid: many studies, as we
have seen, emphasise the cultural rather than the material side of the equation and make high valuable contributions in the process. But if we are fully to probe the processes at work when people encounter things, we need not only to understand the subjectivities involved in human cognitive response, but also to examine what, if any, material, sensory and emotional factors are at work (some studies do attempt both aspects strongly; e.g. Ingold 2000, Keane 2005, Tilley 2004).

An object’s actual, material qualities, then, are basic to both what it is and how it is experienced. The quantitative (height, weight, etc.) and qualitative (colour, texture, shape, smell, sound) characteristics of the object, and their internal relations within it (cf Merleau-Ponty 1962, Tilley 2004), simultaneously physically define the object and inform the sensorially derived data processed in the perceiving subject’s mind. Indeed, before we formulate any (socioculturally and historically contingent) ideas about an object, we can and do experience more fundamental physical and emotional responses to it – feelings that can include awe, disgust, hilarity, horror, sadness and much more. Sometimes these effects only transpire through a combination of the object’s material characteristics and other, culturally and historically situated, associations the viewer already has. They can also, however, be a result simply of reactions to the physical qualities of the thing before us – reactions that can sometimes be very potent, even transformative (c.f. Greenblatt’s notion of wonder, 1991; see also De Bolla 2005), and can be felt and evidenced physically as well as emotionally. My initial, overwhelming, emotional reaction to the Chinese horse was entirely as a result of its material characteristics. The history and fame across the Trobriand islands of particular Kula objects, and thus the awe inspired by some of them, meanwhile, can be physically seen and felt by all those who handle them as part
of the Kula exchange because they are material realities as a result of the wearing away of the shell epidermis over time and the appearance of red striations: ‘[t]ime is literally inscribed into the shell surface which increases in value with age’ (Rowlands 1993: 149, citing Campbell 1983). For islanders to recognise and be awed by a particularly special mwali or soulava object, is to see and feel such actual, physical qualities and at the same time to interpret them within a particular cultural framework. Such actualities can also be experienced by museum visitors from other parts of the world – but their powerful cultural meanings in the Trobriands, of course, will need to be explained.

It is in the engagement between object and subject, in their very confluence, that sensory responses, emotions and ideas are generated. It is also only in this engagement, I suggest, that subjects and objects come fully into being at all. The process of encounter bridges the two, causing them, at the instant of perception, to exist only in relation to each other. The perceiving subject and the perceived object become real to each other, in that moment (c.f. Tilley 2004). The feelings and thoughts initiated during that interaction, not only have the potential to have an ongoing influence on the subject; they may also affect the fate of the object. Indeed, we could say that in that engagement the two form each other, in the sense of their new hybrid forms: subject+perception of object+evolving interpretation of object; and perceived+interpreted object. In this mutually constitutive process, and this evolving state of hybridity, the object is as much a part of the totality of the experience as the subject (see also Gell 1998, Gosden 2005, Pearce 1994). To paraphrase Marilyn Strathern, persons and things alike are actualised in the active relationships that connect them to each other (1988, 1999).
In a museum context or elsewhere, then, envisioning the relationships between people and things in a newly material way emphasises firstly, the sensory and emotional, pre-cognitive ways in which an object is experienced; secondly, the mutual embeddedness of the object’s physical qualities and the subject’s sensory modalities; and thirdly, the materiality of not only the object but also the subject, who experiences the world through a physical body and interprets it with a material mind.\textsuperscript{12} Put simply, this is a view that focuses on (i) how people respond to things before they even know or ask anything about them, and the influence on those responses of (ii) the object’s often overlooked, particular characteristics (as well as the more conventionally considered matters of exhibition design, object juxtaposition, lighting, textual interpretation, and so on) and (iii) the physicality of the subject themselves. This is an area of research being pursued elsewhere (e.g. Dudley forthcoming; see also Quian Quiroga, Dudley and Binnie 2011), that seeks to move away from a Cartesian view of subject-object duality both theoretically and empirically. To consider the realms of subject and object as not really separate at all, may be more than a useful heuristic; it may open up new and creative approaches to understanding people and things, and to enhancing experience in museums.

**EXHIBITED OBJECTS**

One way in which experience may be enhanced through rethinking the relationships between subjects and objects, is as part of an endeavour by the museum to reduce the sense of distance that often seems to be inherent in museum displays, particularly those of social and cultural history and ethnography (c.f. Alpers 1991 and Baxandall
1991, both of whom refer to museum displays of cultures as divided from – other than – the viewer by either space or time or both). If museums seek to reduce this distance between person and thing, if displays and interpretations are constructed in such a way as to facilitate a wider or deeper sensory and emotional engagement with an object, rather than simply to enable intellectual comprehension of a story or set of facts presented by the museum and merely illustrated or punctuated by the object, might visitors actually be enabled to appreciate more aspects of both the object and its story? Kirsten Wehner and Martha Sear, curators of the new Australian Journeys gallery at the National Museum of Australia, have recently attempted to facilitate precisely these kinds of bodily, multisensory and emotional – as well as purely cognitive – interactions with the objects chosen for an exhibition which seeks to tell some of the many and diverse stories of migrating to Australia (Wehner and Sear 2010). They sought to connect ‘visitors to the richness and detail of others’ life worlds’, to invite ‘visitors to engage imaginatively with others’ subjective experiences and understandings’, to enable objects to ‘connect people … to their own historical selves’ (2010: 143), as well as to the past of others. They wanted their exhibition to be ‘object-centred’, rather than a largely text-based, story-telling exercise accessorised by objects – which is how they characterise previous exhibitions at their museum and, indeed, how one might characterise many other exhibitions elsewhere. As they explain, in the latter kind of exhibition objects merely illustrate stories – the actual, real work of communication is done mainly by words, not things. Wehner and Sear wanted to change this, to make a less bland exhibition that allowed visitors to rediscover the capacity of objects to ‘inspire that slightly dislocating delight that comes from recognising that an object was “there” at another time and … place and is
now “here” in this time and … place and in our own life’. They wanted to give objects back their ‘particularity’, their ‘power to excite and inspire curiosity’ (2010: 145).

Choosing objects with particular aesthetic qualities or resonances and drama because of their association with certain events or persons, the curators of Australian Journeys constructed object biographies for their selected artefacts, focusing especially on how objects participated in the movements of people to and from Australia. What they did not want to do, however, was then construct a display in which the objects’ stories were relayed through large amounts of text. Rather, they wanted to let the objects and their juxtapositions do much of the communicating. They facilitated this by bringing about what they call an ‘intense, interactive’ kind of looking that gets visitors first to focus on the physical qualities of the objects, ‘to dwell in the process of collecting sensory data’, before reflecting on what an object might be, what it could be for, and who might have used it for what, when and where (2010: 153). They wanted to stimulate visitors’ empathy for and imagination of other lives – but they were sensible enough too to realise that they still needed to provide context. Their strategy involved dividing the exhibition into forty smaller exhibits, and centring each of those on one key object with a number of other objects leading off from it in order to evoke different strands of the stories concerned, encouraging visitors to concentrate primarily on objects and the relationships between them. They worked hard to separate necessary text from the objects themselves, in order not to detract from the artefacts and not to distract the visitor from properly and primarily engaging with the physical things before them – indeed, they tried (though they did not always succeed) to have no interpretive text in the glass cases at all, placing it instead as a ‘ribbon’ running along one side only of each case. They also installed ‘sensory stations’ to
accompany each exhibit, trying to facilitate not just superficial explorations of objects but more lasting, imaginative and empathic engagements through the stimulation of the bodily senses. Visitors can, for example, smell sea cucumbers when looking at cauldrons used by Indonesian fishermen, or trace with their finger the stitches on an embroidered map that is a copy of the original displayed adjacent to it.

The curators of Australian Journeys have tried to engage visitors with objects more directly and sensually, and through those objects to reach a state of deeper and more subtle engagement with the past people, places and events associated with the artefacts. They have indicated historical uses and significances of the objects they used, but avoided creating clear-cut, singular historical contexts for the objects. They felt that to pin ‘objects to singular times and places’ would ‘close down the imaginative possibilities’ the objects offered – the chance for visitors simultaneously to attempt to empathise with the sensations of people and in the past, and recognise the subjectivity of their own responses in the present (2010: 159). Instead, through encouraging direct, multi-sensorial engagements with the physical objects and through carefully restricting the extent and position of textual interpretation, they have enabled their visitors to respond to objects in their own way and at the same time to imagine, through those objects, how it felt to be someone in the past. Visitors to Australian Journeys thus have the opportunity to encounter objects that are at as little distance from them as possible (literally and metaphorically), and are provided with enough (but not too much) context to be able not only to ‘place’ and understand an object but also to experience real emotional responses to it. The individual encounters visitors can have are wrapped up in the experiential possibilities of objects that can result from interacting directly – whether physically or emotionally or both – with
objects themselves as well as with the context of those objects. The objects can be engaged with directly, rather than simply encountered along the way as mere illustrators or punctuators of stories communicated by other means.

This freeing up of the possibilities of direct encounters with objects contrasts with the manner in which they are so often conceptualised and utilised in museum settings as mere illustrators or punctuators. This is one way in which museums distance objects from visitors and diminish the possibilities for engagement between the two. Information or context, for example, important though it is, can become so central that museums and visitors alike grow so focused on the story overlying the physical thing, they may inadvertently close off other, perhaps equally significant potentials in things. Specifically, museums often (though not always) close off the potential to produce powerful emotional and other personal responses in individual visitors through physical, real-time, sensory engagement between people and things. Yet to ignore the potential of those interactions, in and of themselves, may be to miss out on something very compelling in the museum experience.

Active, two-way engagements between people and things that are as full, material, and sensory as feasible, on the other hand, are rich with possibility. Partly, this is because they will enrich the ways in which visitors are able to connect with the people, stories and emotions of the past. More radically, as I have tried to argue above, the experiential possibilities of objects are important in themselves. It is through these possibilities that objects can ‘speak’ to us, even when we know nothing about them at all. This only partially contradicts the established view that objects are mute unless they are enabled to ‘speak’ through effective interpretation such as
exhibition text and design: the latter interpretive strategies reveal the stories that objects represent or help to tell, but objects alone can also, sometimes at least, have a significance, a relevance, a meaning, for visitors, for their experiential value too. It is a suggestion that risks accusations of elitism – accusations that would be justified were one invoking connoisseurial or ‘pure, detached, aesthetic’ responses to things (O’Neill 2006: 104), as such responses depend or are expected to depend upon a prior set of knowledge and cultivated tastes (c.f. Bourdieu 1984). But there is nothing elitist about avoiding the inhibition of individual, subjective, embodied, physical and emotional responses. These are very different sorts of experience to those elicited by either the foregrounding of things as illustrators of information and stories or by a purist, aesthetic focus. They are instead potential reactions that fall into a space somewhere in between, where the thing does not ‘dissolve into meanings’ (Hein 2006:2; emphasis added) and context does not inhibit our opportunities to engage with things, even those we know nothing about.\textsuperscript{13}

Museums cannot necessarily predict and effectively enable powerful responses to objects – they will not happen for all of us all of the time, nor even in response to the same artefacts – but they can seek to place the object once more at the heart of the museum endeavour, and work to avoid the inhibition of emotional and sensory interactions wherever possible. They can think a little more closely about what happens and what might happen when people encounter objects on display. They can ponder what it would be like for visitors more often than not to be able properly, bodily, emotionally to engage with an object rather than look at it half-heartedly prior to, or even after, reading a text panel on a wall or a label in a case. Of course, their duty to conserve objects means that museums cannot usually permit visitors to pick
up, listen to, lick and sniff the things in their care. But museums would do well to remember that visitors can and do still imagine many of the material qualities of the objects they see. I can see that the oil painting’s surface is three-dimensional, and while I may not be allowed to actually touch it, by drawing on my own sense memories of other textured surfaces I can imagine, even feel in my fingertips, what the sensation would be if I did handle it. Yes, I might get it wrong – but equally I might not. And maybe it does not matter, so long as I am not inhibited from engaging with and responding to an object in some way beyond passively looking, reading a label, and moving on, uninspired and unengaged. Yet a museum preference for the informational over the material, and for a narrowly defined learning over a broader and more fundamental conception of enhancing personal experience, may lead to the production of displays that actually inhibit and even preclude emotional and personal response.

To call for a museum return to the material reality of the material, to shift attention back to objects as objects, focusing again on aspects of those things’ apparently trivial and obvious material qualities and the possibilities of directly, physically, emotionally engaging with them, is not a faint plea from the back of a nineteenth century card catalogue drawer. It is an active agenda for creatively enhancing the twenty-first century museum visit, acknowledging that embodied and emotional engagements with objects should be its fundamental building block. It is not an advocacy for museums to go back to being dusty elitist places that fail to think about multiple audiences and accessibility, or to lose anything they have learned about interpretation and telling stories; but it is a plea to regain something powerful about the magic of things themselves – something that is central to what museums can offer and yet much of
which has somehow been lost along the way. It is a manifesto that seeks not to detract from the now established approaches to learning and social inclusion in museums, but to add to them. If museums keep open the space that lies *between* artefacts being either carriers of information or objects of detached contemplation, they also keep open the possibility that visitors can reflect creatively, even transformatively, upon both things and themselves.

REFERENCES


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NOTES


3 I explore ideas of the power of the object, and the object as fetish, further elsewhere (Dudley forthcoming).

4 E.g. Kaplan et al. 1993, Noble and Chatterjee 2008, Chatterjee et al. 2009. Ongoing doctoral research by Jennifer Binnie at the University of Leicester, co-sponsored by the Art Fund and the Arts and Humanities Research Council, explores the impact on wellbeing of visual encounters with artworks in the gallery; see Quian Quiroga, Dudley and Binnie 2011.
Chris Gosden puts it thus: ‘[p]eople crystallize out in the interstices between objects, taking up the space allowed them by the object world, with [their] senses and emotions educated by the object world’ (2005: 196).

Siân Jones makes a not dissimilar argument in relation to heritage studies, our understandings of ‘authenticity’ and why people like old things, urging a ‘return to the materiality of objects, sites and places – an aspect that has been rather neglected by constructivist critiques, and indeed by much of the recent research focusing on the experience of heritage’ (2010: 183).

Conversely, I avoid use of the term ‘materiality’ here as it has a range of meanings depending on the context in which it is used, and its academic connotations do not necessarily coincide with its more everyday implications. For an interesting debate on the term and its relationship to materials, see Ingold 2007, Tilley 2007, Knappett 2007, Miller 2007, Nilsson 2007.

Other theorists may use yet other terms, in addition or alternatively; hence Heidegger, for example, distinguishes between three kinds of objects: things, works and equipment (2002).

The statements made in this section are based largely on observations made during eight years’ material culture teaching of an internationally diverse postgraduate student body at the University of Leicester.

It also provokes reflection on the conventional distinction between ‘tangible’ and ‘intangible’. Intangibility implies the lack of physical, material presence – literally, there is nothing that can be touched. But depending on the ‘intangible’ in question, one might still able to hear, smell, see or taste it. And where is the cut-off between the intangible and the tangible? Material objects and places (the ‘tangible’) are embedded within and embody aspects of culture (the ‘intangible’), and terminologically to divide
the two does not reflect life as it is lived. Equally, ‘intangibility’ can be subjective/context-dependent: things considered intangible from one perspective are tangible from another (e.g. nature spirits may be tangible to those who believe in them but intangible to outsiders). See also Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004 for further discussion of the problematic nature of the notion of ‘intangible heritage’.

11 It was also, of course, interpreted in being selected and in the way in which the gallery had chosen to display it.

12 C.f. Ingold’s critique of Renfrew’s ‘material engagement theory’ (e.g. Renfrew 2001), in which, Ingold says, ‘the [problem of the] polarity of mind and matter remains. For the engagement of which he speaks does not bring the flesh and blood of human bodies into corporeal contact with materials of other kinds, whether organic or inorganic. Rather, it brings incorporeal minds into contact with a material world’ (Ingold 2007: 3).

13 Of course, even if museums work hard not to obscure the object itself and to allow visitors the opportunity for direct experiences of it before they know anything about it, the object cannot ‘speak’ unhindered and uninfluenced for itself: one’s encounter with it is always influenced by the museum, by the fact that it has been selected, by how it has been positioned, lit and juxtaposed with other objects, and so on. In other words, as Susan Vogel and others have pointed out, the object on display always speaks in part of the museum values dominating at the time (Vogel 1991).