Reflecting on Representation in Museum Practice

Dr Sandra Dudley
Department of Museum Studies
University of Leicester

Collecting and interpretive practices in the museum arguably always – even in natural history and science settings – represent human subjects, directly or indirectly, intentionally or not. A lateral application of postcolonial-style critique to museum collections indicates that they inevitably reveal – or at least hold the potential to allude to – stories which, strictly speaking, are not the museum’s to tell. In other words, however hard the museum tries to make it otherwise, stories are told or indicated partially, in voices other than those of all the human subjects with a pre-museum claim to be in some way associated with the particular object. How can we begin to unpick this in practice? Who is being represented, directly and indirectly? Who determines the subjects of representation and why? What processes and powers are involved, to what effect? This article briefly reflects on these issues through the lens created by my anthropological disciplinary background as well as my former museum practice and my current teaching in Interpretation, Representation and Heritage at the University of Leicester.

As every professional knows, practice is different from theory. However, producing as effective and appropriate an interpretation as possible necessitates being critically aware of certain conceptual issues. In the intense distillation of reality by which one or a few objects come to stand for wider aspects of the rich tapestry of human life, a complex array of subjective decisions and value-judgements are made – both about the object itself, and about those whom it is made to represent. Both the represent-er and the act of representing something – be it the work of a famous scientist in a museum display, the religion of another culture in a cultural institute’s temporary exhibition, or a twenty-first century English rural landscape in a modern painting – cannot be wholly free of historically and culturally situated influences on their ways of seeing, interpreting, imagining and depicting.

The interpretive process itself is thus multi-layered and always, I would argue, subjective. The museum object is continually undergoing some form of interpretation by someone, from its collection and selection, through documentation, exhibition design and the production of textual and other forms of interpretation for the public, to the public’s own reception of the displayed object. Throughout all those steps, the object is enmeshed in a fluid web of socially, historically, economically and culturally constituted meanings and values – just as it was in its pre-museum life too (c.f. Appadurai 1986, Kopytoff 1986). What an object actually is, what and whom it is for, and why, are all notions that may differ with – and indeed, variously impact upon – whom and when one asks.

And if the interpretation of a single museum object is potentially so multiple and mutable, what of the idea, activity, event, period, person(s) or even entire community which the object is made to represent in a museum display? What of all those myriad beliefs, feelings and lives, condensed so radically into a single object or display by the representational process? In most interpretive practice, all the diverse associations
of an object become distilled into a particular essence, represented as the key context(s) or characteristics of the object. Representation generally, then, involves the intentional or unintentional convey ing of something’s essence – or rather, the assumed or imagined or politically expedient ‘essence’, and not necessarily the ‘real’ essence (if such a thing exists) at all.

Defining and communicating what something is about, also involves implying what it is not. Identities of objects and people alike are defined in relation to what they are not, as well as that which they are: I am female; therefore I am not male. In museums and other interpretive contexts much (though not all) of the time, interpretations and representations are of an other – other, that is, than the curators and the socio-cultural groups and periods whence they come. Spivak (1985) defined ‘the other’ as ‘the subject who is mastered or excluded by a discourse of power’. Spivak was referring specifically to the other in colonial contexts, where the ‘discourse of power’ refers to the dominant language, texts, cultural norms and social, political and legal frameworks as mainly determined by the colonisers. Clearly, in a colonial setting the colonisers are the people with most of the power. This power – and the norms, descriptions and expectations that it produces in society – reinforces itself and as part of doing so puts at a distance those who do not fit within its dominant framework. This distancing process, or ‘othering’, argues Spivak, renders powerless those who are affected by it: they have little power to change the ways in which they are perceived, described and treated.

Othering is a process we can identify in many contexts beyond the colonial. Otherness might, for example, be defined in terms of gender, sexuality, able-bodiedness, age, and so on. In real life we all ‘other’ someone, and are ourselves ‘othered’, all the time. Much of this may not seem to matter very much – but when it comes to any form of professional interpretive practice, it is a phenomenon of which we have to be keenly and critically aware if we are to have any chance of producing as sensitive, nuanced and balanced an interpretation as we can. This is most obvious in the case of ethnographic museums and displays, but applies too to any historical display: ‘otherness’ can be created across distances of time as well as those of space and culture. That is, people not only ‘other’ those who are ethnically and otherwise distinct from them in their own time, they also do it when interpreting and representing those who lived in previous times (even when those past peoples may be the direct forebears of those doing the othering). When we interpret other people of whatever origin and time, it is easy to essentialise and homogenise them, to assume them to be very different from us and to reduce them to a few flat categories. But in the process of doing this, of course, we also essentialise and homogenise aspects of what they consider to be our own identity, too. To put it simply, in creating the ‘other’ we also create ourselves (identity is relational, meaningless unless it is conceived of in relation to something else) – and as part of creating ourselves, we select and enhance the significance of the particular characteristics we think are essential components of who and what we are. Interpretations in museums, then, deliberately or not may communicate more about the identities of their creators than their subjects.

Furthermore, given that different people ‘see’ things in different ways and that not everyone will respond in the same way to a particular style of exhibition, painting or anything else, any representational act and its product(s) are fraught with potential pitfalls, controversies and, as every museum curator knows, the likelihood that some
people will simply not like them. Representations are not fixed, final, passive illustrations of simple truths, but as mutable in meaning as whatever it is they claim to represent. This mutability is course problematic for the interpreter, but it also contains a power which can be harnessed politically and practically with the explicit purpose of changing or contributing to what they represent/what surrounds them (c.f. Sandell 2002).

Of course, any conscious attempt by a museum or other interpretive setting to convey ‘all sides’ of a story, to represent hitherto unheard stories, or to change contemporary attitudes, will be beset by challenges. Not least amongst the reasons for these is the increasing sophistication with which oppressed or formerly oppressed groups, for example, are aware of the political currency of having ‘an identity’ and of manipulating that identity and representations of it, for political purpose. The self-conscious awareness of ‘identity’ only comes about through exposure to those who are different – and in that process of realisation, identity for any group becomes a shifting, fluid, manipulable, political thing. Anand, for example, writes that ‘it is not only Westerners who have exoticised Tibet and the Tibetans; the Tibetan diaspora too have invested heavily in such (neo)orientalist representation strategies for their own tactical purposes’ (2000: 271).

The ways in which interpretation professionals address these and wider issues and challenges in their practice, usually says much about their own socio-cultural, disciplinary and personal backgrounds. Those backgrounds shape views, responses and strategies. And thus ultimately, beyond the stance an interpreter may take in a particular context (radical or socially proactive or not), their practice and its outputs – the interpretations and representations for which they are responsible – in part at least are about them. The outputs, in other words, reflect back on those who produced them, sometimes overtly and sometimes cryptically – but if we can read them critically, we can perceive this in almost all interpretations. No interpreter ever fully escapes the ‘baggage’ they come with.

Human diversity in perceiving and understanding the external world makes, inevitably, for some potential dissonance and other problems in interpretive practice. How can we, for example, ensure that we are facilitating all possible perspectives and ways of seeing, never mind representing all the potential attitudes and values that stem from them? Of course, in reality we can never – and sometimes may not want to – facilitate and represent ‘all’ perspectives and opinions, but we can seek to cover as broad a range as possible. One way for interpretive practice to address this diversity is to confront it directly, even embrace it. Indeed, the encounters between different perspectives that can happen in the interpretive setting, although often uncomfortable, can be directly engaged with in the interpretation – as opposed to side-stepped in a vain attempt to pretend they don’t exist. This is an extension of the idea of museums and other locations and media of interpretation and representation not as unified places, but as multiple and heterogeneous contact zones (Clifford 1999). Such heterogeneous settings are places where different histories, languages, experiences and voices intermingle amidst diverse relations of power and privilege.

The encounters that can happen, planned or not, range from those that occur the moment someone from a formerly colonised land walks into a national museum in the ex-colonising country, to others between different perspectives within what is
apparently one community which includes the museum interpreter but which is in reality split by differences based on socio-economic class, educational background, gender, sexuality, and so on. How does the museum or any other interpretive setting turn such tensions and oppositions to interpretive advantage in practice? What strategies might be used to enhance and nuance interpretations so they reflect multiple perspectives and identities in a dynamic and creative way? Simply to seek to present different viewpoints in large amounts of text accompanying the exhibition, for example, is a simplistic, uncreative and unchallenging response. Factual text may of course be important, but so too may be commissioned poems, contemporary and historical images, sounds, textures, juxtapositions and physical placement of objects, for example. Important too may be involvement with different communities, local and otherwise – and an involvement which is real, sustained and honest, as opposed to token efforts to talk to ‘representatives’ (whoever has the power to select such representatives…) of a community. Certain research and working methods – especially, perhaps, ethnographic ones – may also play an important role in reaching new levels of understanding of the multiple layers relevant to any piece of interpretation. Furthermore, some interpretive settings in particular have chosen to explore interesting – and, often, controversial and problematic – ways of embracing cross-cultural (and other) encounters. The Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg (Sweden), for example, has set about working with communities and developing resultant interpretations and representations in very dynamic and sometimes controversial ways (Lagerkvist 2006; for examples elsewhere, see Bolton 2003, Witcomb 2007).

Notions of the ‘other’, difference, ownership and power in interpretive and representational practice, then, are complex, and can operate across temporal as well as spatial and cultural boundaries. They are also affected by different approaches to knowledge and to interpretation. When we set out to interpret and represent ‘others’ – especially those whose views and ideologies may differ fundamentally to ours – using representational systems and practices specific to our own cultures, particular opportunities and difficulties may arise. At the same time, designing our interpretations to represent ‘other’ approaches to and experiences of the world and to address apparent inequalities of voice, presents particular challenges.

References


**Sandra Dudley** is Programme Director of the MA (by distance learning) in Interpretation, Representation and Heritage in the Department of Museum Studies, University of Leicester. She has a DPhil in social anthropology from the University of Oxford and has worked since 1996 with Karenni refugees from Burma (Myanmar) now living in camps in Thailand. Sandra is author of the forthcoming book Materialising Exile (Berghahn). She worked for over ten years in various research and curatorial capacities at the University of Oxford’s Pitt Rivers Museum, has made significant field collections of contemporary ethnographic objects for two major UK museums, and is a former Smithsonian Graduate Fellow.