

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Exhibition Ethics - An Overview of Major Issues

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Museum ethics are about value judgements. In making such judgements museum personnel is constantly valuing one option over another. This holds true for every aspect of museum work; from collecting policies and conservation to store priorities and exhibition. In recent decades there has been a growing concern in addressing ethical issues in museums as museum workers have developed cultural sensitivity and social responsiveness to a degree unseen before. Most codes of ethics urge museums to give appropriate consideration to represented groups or beliefs. In light of this, it has been recognised that exhibition of sensitive material, for example, must be done with great tact and respect for the feelings of religious, ethnic or other groups represented. Another issue concerns the display of unprovenanced material and repatriation.

Yet, these are not the only ethical issues which exhibition developers are faced with. As museum workers we should constantly be reminded that exhibitions are active agents in the construction of knowledge. This paper discusses the hidden assumptions on which museum presentation and interpretation are often based. Decisions about what to include and what to exclude, what is valued and what is not, the means of presentation, language, and so on, all lead to presentational styles which may shape the public's perception in unintended ways.

**Keywords:** museum ethics; human remains; sacred objects; exhibition content; interpretation

### What Are Exhibition Ethics?

Questions about ethical issues are often confused by reference to law. Yet, while laws control human activities and define methods of compliance, ethics define standards of integrity and competence beyond that required by law (Edson 2007; 2009).

In the museum world ethics are generally seen as a set of guiding principles of good practice that museum professionals are advised to adopt in their various activities. Museum ethics have no enforcement power - they are intended as a way of thinking, as a set of ideals that is shared by museum personnel and helps them to judge existing practices, discourage wrongdoing, and make decisions (Besterman 2011, Edson 2007; Edson 2009; Sola 2007; Wylie 2003). Museum ethics are about personal commitment and a sense of moral accountability to the various groups that museums serve.

As they go about their daily routine, museum professionals are constantly making decisions. These decisions may range from the more mundane aspects of collections management to the heated debate concerning the exhibition of disputed material. All decisions, however, involve value judgments, as one option must inevitably be valued

over another. Museum ethics are preeminently about values, and ethical questions often arise from having to deal with competing values (Edson 2009: 13). Ethical issues may also arise 'when taken-for-granted conventions of practice are disrupted' (Wylie 2003: 4).

Ethics are not carved in stone - at different times and different places in different cultures people go about sensitive issues in different ways, and different moral values apply. If, then, the notion of 'value' is culturally specific, no particular system of ethics may be said to be absolutely right or wrong. Indeed, it has been suggested that ethical questions should primarily be understood as conflicts in cultural values (Goldstein and Kintigh 1990). Even within the same culture ethics change as the needs and values of society, and museums, change. What was acceptable or 'right' in the past is not anymore, and today's ethical standards may not apply in the future. How, then, can museums deal with ethical issues on a global scale?

Museum and exhibition ethics are mainly about social responsiveness and honesty to the various audiences museums serve; they can be effective only if they are well known and members of the museum community abide by them (Chelius Stark 2011: 37). In this paper I will argue that adherence to particular codes of ethics or sets of ethical principles may be constructive only if coupled with a revised reflexivity on the role of museums in the contemporary world, a desire for openness, and a heightened sensitivity to the different cultural values of the groups

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represented in museums. Indeed, as most researchers now accept, the complex reality of museums today calls for a reconceptualization of the museum ethics discourse (Marstine 2011).

### Why do Ethics Matter?

Exhibitions are one of the main grounds on which ethical battles in museums are fought. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, exhibitions are to a large extent about objects, and museum objects are by nature imbued with different values. Values may concern an object's creation or ownership, its original use or subsequent uses, cultural appropriation, or research; they may be aesthetic, symbolic, educational, scholarly, cultural, political, or economic. When objects are put on public display some of the values associated with them are opted for over others and this often leads to heated debates among the various parties involved (museums, curators, citizens, indigenous peoples, governments or nations, collectors, art dealers and so on; cf. Warren 1999: 1). Secondly, exhibitions are very powerful representations and as such are responsible for shaping the public's perception in many, often unintended, ways.

This paper is intended as a brief outline of significant ethical issues at play in museum exhibitions. Some of these issues are obvious and heatedly (and repeatedly) debated, but others are neither obvious nor discussed. The text is therefore organised around two axes which may be viewed as corresponding to the 'evident' and the 'concealed' aspects of exhibition making: a) exhibition content with special reference to 'sensitive' material; and b) exhibition interpretation and presentation with an emphasis on museum language.

### Ethics in Museum Exhibitions

Exhibitions are active agents in the construction of knowledge (Moser 2010: 22). Decisions about what to include and what to exclude, what is valued and what is not, who is ascribing value, the means of presentation, space, design, language, and so on, are critical as they all lead to presentational styles which influence the public's perception in many ways.

In addition, the very act of presentation is primarily interpretive. In interpreting objects and themes, exhibitions create new worlds which are usually perceived by visitors as 'true' and 'authentic' because of the museum's status and cultural authority. Even when they make claims to scientific objectivity and precision, exhibitions inevitably reflect the beliefs, assumptions and ethical values of the persons making the decisions. In this way they inevitably promote some truths at the expense of others. This is usually not understood by visitors as information presented in museums is normally perceived as accurate and true (Dean 2007: 218, 221; Edson 2007: 216).

Two decades ago, Vogel (1991: 201) urged museum professionals to:

'inform the public that what it sees is ... material *filtered through* the tastes, interests, politics, and

state of knowledge of particular presenters at a particular moment in time' and to 'allow the public to know that [the museum] is ... a *tightly focused lens* that shows the visitor a *particular* point of view' [emphasis added].

As a manifestation of professional self-consciousness and sensitivity to the public, there has lately been a trend for 'signing' exhibitions. This usually involves a visible statement by the exhibition curators that the content presented represents their own thoughts and beliefs, and that it is as accurate and true as current state-of-the-art knowledge of the subject allows. Whether one agrees with this practice or not, this may be seen as a sign of openness which encourages the public to reflect on the difference between the 'accuracy', or the 'honesty' of what is presented. Accuracy is about presenting up-to-date information, whereas honesty refers to the approach endorsed in presenting that information to the public (Dean 2007: 219).

I believe that the concept of honesty may play a key part in resolving the tensions and ethical dilemmas involved in all exhibition work. In the text that follows I will try to address this issue and examine what it may entail for both museums and the visiting public.

### Content

Decisions about exhibition content bring about a whole set of crucial questions which may be divided into two groups. The first set of questions revolves around the need to provide content with context: How to approach the subject at hand? What objects or themes to include, and why? What information to choose for labelling, and why? Whose voice is it to be heard? How much room is there for alternative voices or interpretations? And so on and so forth.

In dealing with these questions we should not forget that the objects that end up on an exhibition pedestal or in a display case are not necessarily the most representative of, or the most important for the subject matter in question; rather, as it is normally the case, museum objects may become exhibits for a series of reasons which are unrelated to an exhibition's theme. For instance, although object A is an excellent specimen or it illustrates a desired point better, object B is exhibited instead because it is better preserved, or because it is more attractive visually. Occasionally, an object may be selected for inclusion to an exhibition because it simply fits better in the space available. None of the above is ever explained to visitors, who simply think that if an object is displayed in a museum then it must have some significance and/or value.

The second set of questions leads us to the heart of the ethics discussion, especially if the content in question qualifies as 'sensitive'. For example: Shall we display the dead? And if yes, which is the best practice? Are we allowed to display objects of cultural or sacred significance for another culture as mere *curios*? Do we tell visitors the whole story behind collections that ended up in our museum in dubious or contested ways?



**Fig. 1:** Display of a male human body in the Egyptian galleries of the British Museum (photograph by the author).

Clearly, these are complex issues which cannot be dealt with in detail in the confined space of this paper; a brief overview of the main points is offered below.

### **Human remains<sup>1</sup>**

Putting human remains on display has traditionally been seen as having considerable educational potential for the visiting public, let alone their scientific interest (Alberti *et al.* 2009). There are also other reasons for using them in displays, such as to educate medical practitioners, to explain burial practices, to bring people into physical contact with a past people, and to encourage reflection (DCMS 2005: 19).

Displays of ancient human remains, in particular, are a unique attraction, and many people expect to find them in museums (Kilmister 2003). Popular examples include Egyptian mummies on show in many museums (**Figure 1**), 'bog bodies'<sup>2</sup> such as *Tollund Man* displayed at the Silkeborg Museum in Denmark, or *Lindow Man* on display at the British Museum (**Figure 2**), and other skeletal material often displayed in many archaeological museums.

A standard justification for exhibiting ancient human remains is that they come from cultures long dead. Another justification is that nobody today makes claims for the ownership and possible return of such remains.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, feelings and reactions change when it comes to displays of recent human remains as the highly controversial *Body Worlds* exhibition<sup>4</sup> clearly attests. Why, then, are we so sensitive about displaying recent corpses, and not so if the bodies are old enough or ancient? Is distance in time the only concern? The answer cannot be positive, and in fact there are voices against putting even ancient human remains on display.<sup>5</sup>

A further issue concerns material from other cultures, particularly non-western. Material from early Native American burials or Maori shrunken heads, for example, have become the subject of heated international debate concerning their removal from display and possible repatriation and reburial (Simpson 2002: 178). As a result, many countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom have passed



**Fig. 2:** Display of the so-called 'Lindow Man' at the British Museum (photograph by the author).

legislation in relation to the care and management of human remains (see, among others, McManamon 2006).

Criticism and debate about the display of human remains has also influenced museological practice: most Native American remains have been removed from display in North America, and Australian museums no longer display Aboriginal remains. In the UK, *The Human Tissue Act* endorsed in 2004 permitted for the first time nine national museums to deaccession human remains held in their collections (HTA 2004: section 47).

Most Codes of Ethics urge museums to consider such material with great caution and respect for the beliefs of the cultures involved (examples include AAM 2000, CMA 2006, CurCom 2009, MA 2008). The ICOM Code of Ethics, in particular, states that the display of human remains should take into account 'the interests and beliefs of members of the community ... from whom the objects originated', and that this should be done with 'great tact and respect for the feelings of human dignity held by all people' (ICOM 2004: section 4.3). In the UK, the DCMS *Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums* further stresses that 'those planning displays should consider how best to prepare visitors to view them respectfully or to warn those who may not wish to see them at all' (DCMS 2005: 20).

In response to the above, some museums have begun to adopt specific policies, and to approach their display in a different manner (see, among others, Lohman and Goodnow 2006). The Petrie Museum of Archaeology, for example, put Egyptian human remains on display behind a shroud that visitors lifted if they so wished (Swain 2007: 163). The Museum of London adopted a policy according to which 'skeletons will not be on "open display" but located in such a way as to provide them some "privacy"...' (Museum of London 2006).

Concern that all human remains should be subject to new codes and practices is growing. At the same time, it is clear that there are no ready-made or universally applicable solutions (for an all-encompassing discussion see Jenkins 2011). A way forward may be to sensitize the public on ethical issues related to the display of human remains,



and share professional concerns with them. To this end some museums, such as the Bristol City Museum & Art Gallery, have introduced sections entitled *The Ethics of Displaying the Dead*, while other museums, such as Croydon Clocktower, have started installing visitor comments cards when dealing with controversial issues (Vaswani 2001: 34).

### **Objects of sacred significance**

Defining sacred objects is not an easy task. The very notion of sacred is subject to change. Furthermore, sacred objects in museum collections are removed from their original context and it is very difficult to associate them with sacred meanings.<sup>6</sup> In most instances these are objects of cultural importance to non-western people that have flooded western museums as a result of colonial, conflict, or trading activities.<sup>7</sup> Both ethnographic research and ethnographic displays have traditionally employed a clearly western *ethos* of looking at indigenous artefacts as inanimate material beings and overlooked the objects' significance to its source communities. Increasingly, however, museum staff are recognising and showing sensitivity to indigenous views, and the museum community is urged to realize that sacred objects are of even greater value to indigenous cultures than they are to museum professionals.

Problems relating to the display of sacred objects are varied,<sup>8</sup> but it seems that one of the main concerns is that in some indigenous cultures special ceremonies should be conducted or offerings made for sacred objects. Museums are urged to consult with the cultural and religious leaders of indigenous communities in order to ensure that an object can be treated in the museum or exhibition space without offending a community's religious beliefs or practices.

In the United States museums work with native peoples to make arrangements for the proper care of sacred objects. Some museums apply tribal cultural practices to their collections care. In some instances tribal religious leaders have instructed museums about the care of objects. In other cases, museum staff have observed or witnessed the practices of tribal representatives who have offered to care for the objects (Peers and Brown 2003: 21–22; Sadongei 2006), or complied with traditional practices as recommended by the relevant native groups (Rosoff 2003: 72, 75).

In New Zealand, awareness of Maori beliefs about the spirituality of their *taonga* (treasures)<sup>9</sup> has led museums to exercise an increased respect: great care is given in handling the objects, ceremonies are performed to bless the *taonga*, and in some cases a bowl of water is placed at the entrance to galleries where *taonga* are displayed so that those who wish to do so may sprinkle water on themselves as a protection against the strong spiritual powers of the *taonga* (Simpson 2002: 197). *Te Papa Tongarewa*, New Zealand's National Museum, is perhaps the best example of a museum which has incorporated Maori traditions in all its aspects, including the display of objects which are seen as living ancestors (Kreps 2003: 69–73; for the Maori-tribal perspectives to such collaborations see Tapsell 2011).

Moreover, exhibitions organised in consultation or collaboration with the communities represented is now a reality in many museums, especially in North America and Australia. Members of the community are often invited as consultants or as guest curators; in some cases curatorship is entirely done by community members (Simpson 2002: 51–69).

Collaborative exhibitions usually follow two models, which Phillips (2003: 163–164) terms the 'community-based exhibit' and the 'multivocal exhibit'. In community-based exhibitions the professional museum curator acts as a facilitator who puts his or her expertise at the service of community members, so that their messages can be disseminated clearly and effectively (see also Peers and Brown 2003: 24). In multivocal exhibitions both museum staff and community consultants work towards accommodating multiple perspectives, and try to bring to the fore the multiple meanings attributed to objects and events by both scientists and community members.

Clearly exhibitions of both human remains and sacred objects require acute sensitivity on the part of museum curators as tensions and conflicts may easily arise. In both cases, however, exhibition organisers may find it useful to think in terms of the concept of 'profound offence'. As Young and Brunk (2009: 5) observe, profound offence strikes at a person's or a society's core values, such as those pertaining to cultural or religious symbols, or profound cultural norms. As a rule of thumb, museums must make sure that they do not cause 'profound offence' to any group represented or any stakeholder involved.

### **Unprovenanced / looted material**

When selecting content for an exhibition, curators must also be aware of items that have been unethically collected and/or illegally held. In most cases visitors are completely unaware of this. Let us ask: How common are exhibitions that explain how the objects came into the museum? How many displays of Cycladic figurines or Benin bronzes around the world tell the story of looting? How clear is it to visitors to the large universal museums such as the British Museum, the MET or the Pergamum Museum that considerable numbers of their exhibits are the product of plunder or illicit activities? As very few museum visitors are knowledgeable in topics of provenance, it is the museum's responsibility to be frank about both the history of its collections and its current practices.

A point to consider is that museum exhibitions may raise visibility and spark interest in specific categories of objects. As many cases have illustrated, exhibiting illicit material can generate considerable bad publicity, which in some instances may lead to increased looting of source areas (Brodie *et al.* 2000: 53). The ICOM Code of Ethics stipulates that 'museums should avoid displaying ... material of questionable origin or lacking provenance. They should be aware that such displays or usage can be seen to condone and contribute to the illicit trade in cultural property'.<sup>10</sup>

Renfrew (2000: 11) went a step further when he warned that 'it is generally prudent to follow the principle that unprovenanced antiquities are looted antiquities'.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, many museums have endorsed a position against

undocumented antiquities. But this does not seem to disturb everybody. Despite increasing criticism and many instances of bad practice involving prestigious museums, many curators and directors (especially in large universal institutions) still believe that museums should acquire antiquities even if they are unexcavated or have incomplete provenance. Arguments in favour of this practice include the contribution of objects to furthering our understanding of a common ancient past, and the responsibility of museums in providing the public with original works of art (Cuno 2009; de Montebello 2009).

In contrast, some museums have been experimenting with new and innovative ways of adding to their collections and displays without having to resort to dubious acquisition practices. Experimentation of this sort may take the form of partnerships with people whose cultures museums represent, or of exchanges among collections and programmes of inter-museum loans (for interesting examples see Brodie *et al.* 2000: 53–54). There seems to be considerable support in favour of the view that temporary exchanges should replace acquisition (Gerstenblith 2000). A further argument in favour of such practices is that a decrease in acquisitions may encourage museums to provide much-needed resources for the existing collections. In fact, as some now believe, museums may need to promote 'a new "culture" of collecting' (Gerstenblith 2000; Hallman 2005).

### Interpretation and Presentation

Beyond issues of content and the approach taken to it, lies the matter of how to physically present both exhibition concept and exhibition content; that is, how to organise an exhibition's visual and verbal expression (Dean 2007: 222). It is important to remember that exhibitions create a representation system through an articulation of objects, texts, visual representations, reconstructions and sounds (Lidchi 1997: 168). Everything around the object has an impact on how the visitor reacts, interprets and assimilates information. Hence decisions about space, style, methods of presentation, and language are critical in meaning making on the part of the visitor.

We also need to recognise that museum exhibitions are only interpretations which tell more about us than about the subject matter on show (Wood and Cotton 1999: 29). It is our ethical responsibility to be as honest as possible when presenting such interpretations.

### Language

Language is a powerful means of museum interpretation, not only because it conveys information, but mainly because it *constructs* knowledge about objects or themes on display. Thus, museum texts create pictures of the world. In creating such pictures curators have traditionally employed language which reflected their own curatorial conceptual framework or world view, and remained unaware of the power of language in proliferating assumptions and stereotypes embedded in it. Moreover, curators have customarily downplayed or completely ignored the – usually concealed – ethical dimensions of museum text (cf. Ferguson *et al.* 1995: 6).

Consider the following questions: What criteria do we use when selecting information for inclusion in museum text? What about those elements we choose *not* to mention? For instance, why is it more important for a caption to include a catalogue number or information such as 'found on the floor of chamber 3', rather than information about the objects' cultural biography and overall significance both for the culture it originated from and for us today? And so on and so forth. Are we aware of the degree to which such decisions – among others – condition the visitors' perception of the subject presented?

In writing museum text, particular attention should be paid to how objects, people or events are portrayed, and the implications of such choices. These include choice of style, of genre, of voice, lexical and grammatical choices made in individual clauses, and so on. Ravelli (2006: 112) stresses that all choices, apparently even mundane ones, contribute to an overall picture. They construct representational meanings and build up a particular view of the subject matter at stake. The way in which meanings are constructed through the use of language creates a 'representational framework' which has great impact on visitors' understanding.

For example, third-person reference and the passive voice convey institutional voice by removing human agency from the text, which thus acquires a 'neutral', supposedly objective character. Of course, there is no such thing as an objective text; rather, what is usually perceived as 'objective' is a text 'where the subjectivity has been hidden, or where the point of view presented is not disagreed with, and so it is not noticed as being a point of view' (Ravelli 2006: 89). An impersonal, institutional tone is very often – and unquestionably – adopted as a way of emphasizing authority and the right of museum curators to speak 'for' or 'about' a subject. Furthermore, text written in an academic and scholarly way, can also 'intimidate visitors and render them more passive in their interaction with the exhibition' (Moser 2010: 27).

On the contrary, first-person reference and the use of active voice convey a more personal, first-hand-experience style. This personal tone may be enhanced by the use of personal pronouns such as 'we' and 'ours', which museum text has been increasingly employing in an attempt to bring audiences closer. Ravelli (2006: 86) warns us, however, that careless use of these pronouns may have serious implications as some visitors will identify with the cultural group presented, and hence feel that the exhibition is addressing them, but others will not and may therefore feel excluded.

Another consideration is the choice of genre (Ferguson *et al.* 1995: 57–61; Ravelli 2006: 19–30), which may be relevant or irrelevant to a particular audience. Genres like recount, narration, report, explanation, or discussion are culturally specific and what is suitable for one community may be unsuitable for another. In its *Bunjilaka Gallery* which presents indigenous Australian culture, the Melbourne Museum has resolved this problem by using two different ways of conveying information: an impersonal, institutional voice and the actual voices of Indigenous Australians (Ravelli 2006: 29).

The question of information inclusion is of even greater importance as by its very nature museum text is brief. How then can we project an object's multiple meanings? Can a label possibly evoke its emotional, spiritual, religious, or other qualities? (McClusky 2011: 299–302)

### **Whose voice?**

Further questions of fundamental importance are: Who talks in museum text and what does she or he say? How much room is there for *other*, different voices? Are we ready to question our hidden assumptions, and start delegating some of our curatorial power? Surely, the last 20 to 25 years have seen a growing realization of the need to negotiate or share some of this power but there is certainly a long way ahead.

Examples from museums worldwide make clear that such efforts are welcome by the public and lead to more open and more inclusive displays. For instance, *Lindow Man: A Bog Body Mystery* at the Manchester Museum, a temporary exhibition based on the loan of *Lindow Man's* body from the British Museum, was hailed as 'an exercise in polyvocality' (Rees Leahy 2008) in which the meanings of *Lindow Man* were narrated from seven different perspectives, instead of a single curatorial voice. These perspectives included, among others, the views of a local woman, a Druid priestess and the museum's own curator of archaeology (Sitch 2009). Likewise, some museums invite visitors to write their own labels. The winning labels are then displayed in the galleries next to the official ones (see, among others, Seattle Art Museum 2011). Others place the focus of interpretation on stories that are usually left behind in object files. Occasionally, labels may be even substituted with conversations on the subject on show (McClusky 2011).

By sharing expertise and authority, a museum does not only become more inclusive, but may also help the public accept the lack of absolute facts and acknowledge the validity of multiple perspectives.

### **Reconstructions**

Reconstructions are depictions of some aspects of the world and our activities in it, be it natural sciences, archaeology, ethnography or history. They may range from two-dimensional illustrations to full-scale dioramas or working three-dimensional models, not to mention computer graphics and virtual reality. Whatever the case may be, reconstructions tend to fix strong visual images in the visitor's mind and are thus responsible for creating or perpetuating myths and illusions. This is mainly due to the fact that visual images select and organise information, compress time and space 'and tidy away the unconventional and the complex in the interests of compelling vision' (Smiles and Moser 2005: 6). In this way, visual representations in museums 'take on a life of their own, conveying ideas that are not explicitly stated elsewhere' (Moser 1999: 95).

Museums have an ethical responsibility to inform the public that reconstructions 'represent ... varying degrees of informed speculation' (James 1999: 118), and that what is

offered – be it a sketch showing how an object works or a full-scale model of a prehistoric hut – is not the *real thing* but only 'one possible version of events' (Swain 2007: 230), based on the best evidence available.

A successful approach comes from museums that invite visitors to realize that while archaeological exhibits may be regarded as 'objective' artefacts, any interpretation of them is necessarily subjective and always open to question and modification (Stone 1994: 197–200).

A further question is: How open or honest should we be about reconstruction methods or techniques used? Often the objects used in grave reconstructions, for instance, do not belong together but are taken from similar contexts or are simply replicas. This is usually neither evident nor indicated to the visitor who may be easily led to misconceptions. Having to reconcile the need for scientific accuracy on the one hand with the desire to give a 'representative' or 'compelling' picture on the other is certainly a main concern. The question is not only what we choose to reconstruct, but also how we do it, for whom, and to which end.

### **Space, layout and design**

The basic means in mounting an exhibition are objects or themes, words, pictures and all the relevant constructions that are used in order to support the exhibition story as already discussed. But, there is something more. It is the way in which all the above elements are combined and enhanced by the use of space, colour and light that creates a context for the display (Swain 2007: 217). Visitors' perception of an exhibition's subject is greatly influenced by exhibition design. In fact, it has been argued that design plays a crucial role 'not just in presenting content, but in actually creating it' (Serrell 2006: 33).

The impact of space on the construction of meaning, and the way not only objects, but whole cultures are perceived is a well-studied topic whose discussion exceeds the scope of this paper (see, among others, Fleming 2005; McLeod 2005; Psarra 2005; Moser 2010; and Tzortzi 2010). Questions to consider include: How are objects distributed in space? What kind of circulation patterns is created? How is design employed? Is the use of space and design in line with the exhibition's conceptual framework? Or, do they generate confusing messages?

A basic factor is the size of exhibition spaces. Displays in large galleries may look 'grand' and thus assume more importance and authority, while those in small spaces are usually perceived as more intimate. As Moser (2010: 25) remarks, large spaces normally look more impersonal, focusing on the presentation of grand authoritative accounts, while small spaces offer 'stories' that can engage visitors on a more personal and questioning level.

Space may also be used in order to demarcate and distinguish between different cultural groups (Sandell 2005: 188). This is particularly common in many large universal museums where space allocation may invoke cultural difference. In the words of Karp and Kratz (2000: 194): 'the invented Other is often placed downstairs from the upstairs ... European and American ... traditions'.

An exhibition's layout and space organisation also contribute to the potential interpretation of an exhibition's subject matter, and not all interpretations are equally valued. For example, linear, sequential placement of objects may convey a sense of progression from simple to complex societies, whereas centralised placement may be employed to give objects significance. Furthermore, placement of objects along a vertical axis may elevate them at the status of 'Ideal' or position them at the level of 'Real', thus according them different value (Ravelli 2006: 128).

Certainly, this sketchy reference does not do justice to a vast topic. The point I wish to make is that space and design matters have an ethical dimension which is critical to the representational meanings produced in museum exhibitions, and that attention to these issues should be a concern shared not only by designers and architects, but by all those involved in exhibition making.

### Discussion

For the larger part of the visiting public, museums are places of truth. People come to museums to see the 'real thing', to experience aspects of the past, to come to terms with 'difficult' heritage and so on.

The ethical responsibilities facing exhibition organizers are obvious, and yet often overlooked. What we put on display and what we say about it is critical in shaping visitors' perceptions. In other words, what we exhibit and what we say authorizes, authenticates, and soothes, or, in contrast, offends, disturbs, and irritates. It is important to remember that exhibitions communicate values, and that these values are often competing or contested. As this chapter has made clear, the notion of 'value' is a key element in any discussion on exhibition ethics, and no code of ethics or ethical standards may resolve contested issues if there is no room for mutual respect and sensitivity. Overall, it is only through the process of systematically reflecting on, and assessing our ethical commitment to our diverse audiences, that we may eliminate some practices as unjustifiable, offensive, or wrong (Wylie 2003: 13).

It has further been suggested that a key ethical principle guiding all exhibition work should be openness and honesty. For the museum this may mean increased social responsiveness, delegating curatorial power through collaboration with interested parties, interrogating customary routines, and instigating dialogue (cf. Merrimann 2000). For the visiting public this may entail empowerment, increased sensitivity towards delicate issues, exploring new ideas, and the breaking of stereotypes. Moreover, as Wood and Cotton (1999: 38) pointed out, evidence presented honestly and open-endedly invites visitors into the interpretive process and allows them opportunities to challenge both the views of the curator and their own preconceptions.

The ethics of museum exhibitions is not only about sensitive or disputed content, it is also about our beliefs, our assumptions, and our image of the world. So far as we, museum professionals, are ready to recognise the ethical dimension underlying most museum activities and to question taken-for-granted or unintentional prac-

tices, museums may become a ground for reflexivity and respectful thinking.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> According to the DCMS's *Guidelines* 'the term human remains is used to mean the bodies, and parts of bodies, of once living people from the species *Homo sapiens*. This includes osteological material (whole or part skeletons, individual bones or fragments of bone and teeth), soft tissue including organs and skin, embryos and slide preparations of human tissue. The definition does not include hair and nails. Human remains also include any of the above that may have been modified in some way by human skill and/or may be physically bound-up with other non-human materials to form an artefact composed of several materials. Another, much smaller, category is that of artworks composed of human bodily fluids and soft tissue' DCMS (2005: 9).
- <sup>2</sup> 'Bog bodies', also known as 'bog people', are naturally preserved human corpses found in bogs in Northern Europe. Due to the unusual conditions of the surrounding area (highly acidic water, low temperature, lack of oxygen), bog bodies have retained internal organs and their skin, although severely tanned, but not their bones.
- <sup>3</sup> In the UK, however, there has been a campaign for the reburial of pagans and Druids from the British Isles, and an organization called *Honouring the Dead* formed in order to promote the case (see <http://www.honour.org.uk/>).
- <sup>4</sup> The exhibition, which has been on show in many countries since 1996, presents human bodies that have been dissected to various degrees and preserved using plastination; a method which replaces the water in the body with solvent, and then introduces polymer compounds to preserve it and make it rigid. The controversy surrounding *Body Worlds* concerns issues of human dignity and respect for the dead as well as the value of the exhibition as education or entertainment, art or anatomy, science or sensationalism (Eklund and de Trafford 2002). Walter (2004, where rich bibliography) takes the argument a step further by examining whether plastination could be accepted as a means of disposing of the body.
- <sup>5</sup> For instance, plans to display 500-year-old mummies of children from the Andes in the Museum of High Altitude Archaeology in Argentina, 'led to opposition from indigenous groups who viewed this as an insult to their ancestors' (Swain 2007: 155).
- <sup>6</sup> For their *Report of the AAMD Subcommittee on the Acquisition and Stewardship of Sacred Objects*, which was endorsed in 2006, the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD) drew a distinction between works that merely express religious ideas or feelings and those that are 'created for use in ritual or ceremonial practice'. Yet, as these nuances are difficult to discern in practice, the report stresses the need for consultation and close collaboration with the groups involved.



<sup>7</sup> The history of the acquisition and changing perceptions of Indigenous artefacts in the West is a well-covered topic: such artefacts were first regarded as trophies which reflected the experience and mastery of a traveller (Thomas 1991: 143); they were then viewed and assembled as signs of cultural differentiation, as evidence of *otherness*, or, as material signs of victory and conquest; and, they were later employed for the articulation of an information archive which was intended to act as an agent of social control (Shelton 2000: 157–158; Classen and Howes 2006: 209). In all cases, however, both ethnographic research and ethnographic displays employed a clearly western *ethos* of looking at Indigenous artefacts as inanimate material beings and overlooked the objects' significance to source communities.

<sup>8</sup> For example, some sacred objects of the native peoples of the western United States should be stored with sage to ensure their spiritual well-being. Faced with the issue that fresh sage could cause conservation problems, museum conservators placed freeze-dried sage with these objects, thereby meeting both conservation and cultural beliefs (AAMD 2006: 2).

<sup>9</sup> In his book on the display of Maori material in museums from the 19<sup>th</sup> c. to date, McCarthy (2007) reveals how the concept of Maori objects was transforming through time: from *curios*, to ethnographic specimens, to art, to *taonga* (highly-prized ancestral treasures).

<sup>10</sup> In an effort to help museums and all other interested parties in the identification of objects that may have been illegally exported from countries of origin, ICOM has also designed a series of *Red Lists of Endangered Cultural Objects* as well as the *One Hundred Missing Objects Series*. Details of both programmes are available at: <http://icom.museum/what-we-do/programmes/fighting-illicit-traffic.html>

<sup>11</sup> As reported in Brodie *et al* (2000: 21) 'over 1,600 marble figurines are known from early Bronze Age graves of the Cyclades, but only about 150 were recovered in archaeological excavations. Many may be fakes but the remainder can only have been obtained through the looting of cemeteries and it has been estimated that over 12,000 graves have been ransacked'.

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