

POINTS OF VIEW: MULTICULTURALISM AND MUSEUMS

The last decade has witnessed heated national debate on multicultural issues--debate causing unrest on our nation's campuses and arguments in our nation's classrooms and museums. What we teach, what we exhibit, what students read, who should be responsible for the teaching, the exhibiting and the writing--all has become, in the parlance of the day, "contested terrain." As Steven Lavine and Ivan Karp explain in their introduction to *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (1991):

Groups attempting to establish and maintain a sense of community and to assert their social, political, and economic claims in the larger world challenge the right of established institutions to control the presentation of their cultures. They challenge exhibitions that overlap with their concerns, demand real power within existing institutions, and establish alternative institutions (pp. 1-2).

The Smithsonian Institution, as the largest museum complex in the world, as well as one of our nation's most important research centers, has witnessed and participated in the creative energy of the multiculturalism debate, renewing its mandate to serve and

represent all of America's people. In its 1992 statement to the United States Congress, the Institution articulated its commitment to cultural pluralism:

The Smithsonian has deliberately adopted, in all aspects of its work, a viewpoint that is inclusive of the many cultures that form the Nation's heritage. Major new initiatives, such as the Institution's observance of the Columbus Quincentenary, the future National Museum of the American Indian, and the proposed national African American Museum exemplify the Smithsonian's commitment to preserving and presenting the expressions of the Nation's culturally diverse peoples. (Budget Justifications for Fiscal Year 1993:8)

In addition to planning entire new museums, the Institution has established new programs and new ties with various communities across the country.

In 1988 and 1990 the Rockefeller Foundation and the Smithsonian convened two conferences, "The Poetics and Politics of Representation" and "Museums and Communities," "charged with examining how museums exhibit cultures and relate to the multiple communities in which they are situated" (Karp, Kreamer, and Lavine:1). In 1990 a third conference was held, partially funded by the Ford Foundation, "Gender



CONTESTED TERRAIN

Perspectives: The Impact of Women on Museums." All three conferences considered multiculturalism issues as they impact on museums and all three conferences resulted in publications. The Gender Perspectives conference gave rise to a "Gender Issues Action Group" at the National Museum of American History that has created a set of Draft Guidelines and Questions ("Fulfilling the Mission: Incorporating Gender") to redress gender inequities in exhibits. The guidelines explain that:

Gender, defined in current scholarship as the social construction of 'man' and 'woman' is an important analytical tool which offers critical insights into historical processes. Like class and race, gender forces a consideration of power and diversity--diverse experiences, diverse perspectives, and the diverse impact of any event, technology, or era we attempt to understand and exhibit. (p. 2)

According to the Action Group, since gender pervades every museum exhibit, exhibits that do not recognize gender issues from the outset of planning tend to perpetuate stereotypes. As Robert Sullivan, Associate Director for Public Programs at the National Museum of Natural History and one of the Action Group's supporters, points out about his museum's anthropology cases, "95% of the women shown are seated or squatting in a position lower than men. Even in the case showing lions, the male lion is shown poised for the hunt, while the female rests curled around her young cubs, even though in reality it is the female lion that does most of the hunting." (Rebecca Browning, "Gender Messages in Museum Exhibitions," *Four Star Newsletter*:6). One of the exhibits Sullivan would like to change is an exhibit of Capt. John Smith trading with Powhatan Indians on the James River in 1607. In the exhibit, Capt. Smith stands in a commanding pose on his boat as a bare-breasted Powhatan woman gazes adoringly up at him from a canoe.

The goal throughout the Guidelines is to sensitize audiences to the "hidden messages"

of representation in exhibits, and while the focus is on gender, the guidelines make clear that similar guidelines could be developed for race and other issues of cultural diversity. The Guidelines urge people to think about familiar situations in a new way:

Many topics are understood as feminine or masculine. What is the dominant gender identification of your topic and why? Could your topic be broadened to be more inclusive (i.e. "tractors", a masculine topic can be broadened to "rural life," that is more inclusive)? Why is science considered masculine? How does masculinity shape science, and how is masculinity defined by science? Do women and men have different experiences and attitudes towards science? How will exhibits involving science deal with these gender issues? (p. 4)

Ivan Karp, in an Introductory Essay "Culture and Representation" asks the same basic question that the Smithsonian's Gender Equity Action Group is asking: "What do exhibitions represent and how do they do so?" (*Exhibiting Cultures*:11). Most people think of exhibits as either a neutral vehicle for displaying objects or a space for telling stories, but the hidden assumptions behind every exhibit, as behind every textbook, tell a different story; *Exhibiting Cultures* and the "Points of View Guidelines" help lift this "veil of hidden assumptions."

What an exhibitor chooses to display, how the objects or figures are arranged, how and what story is told or not told, who and what is included or not included--all these represent or misrepresent reality. As Karp explains, "Museums and their exhibitions are morally neutral in principle, but in practice always make moral statements." Furthermore, it is the alleged neutrality (and authority) of exhibitions that is the "very quality that enables them to become instruments of power as well as instruments of education and experience." (p. 14)

Students assume the authority of the textbook author much as visitors assume the authority of the exhibit curator--but knowledge changes almost daily, information is not frozen in time, and scholarship is filled with debate and informed by new perspectives, such as the new social history that is changing the way both men and women view our past. Since it can take ten or even twenty years to redo major museum exhibits, the "authority" behind these exhibits can be particularly problematical for young students, whose textbooks may be only five years out of date, but whose museum visits may be to exhibits even twenty years out-of-date.

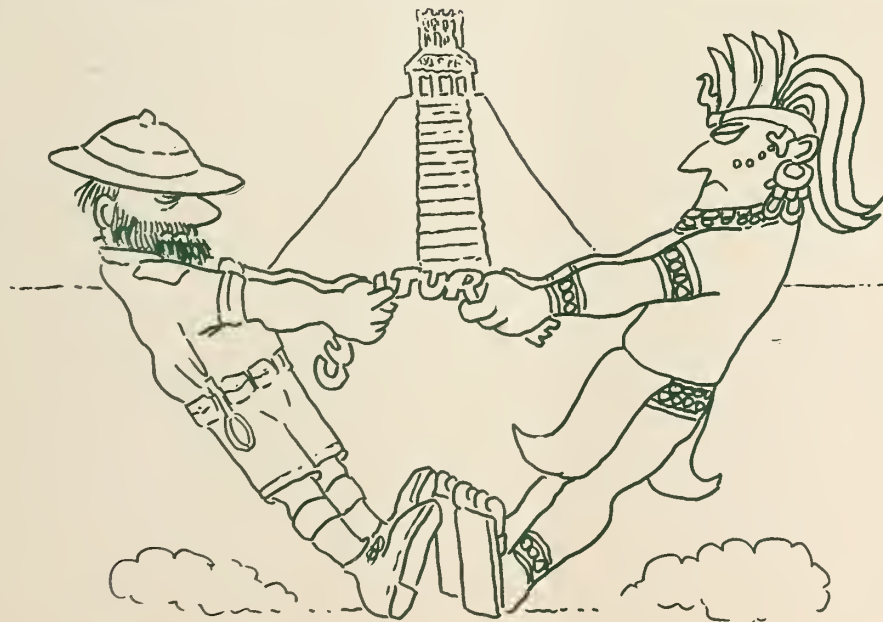
Exhibitions, like textbooks, convey more than neutral information or facts. Like map projections, perspectives and values are represented in exhibitions and textbooks, particularly social studies textbooks. And here as well the insights from Lavine and Karp's volume, *Exhibiting Cultures*, are instructive: "the struggle is not only over what is to be represented, but over who will control the means of representing" (p. 15). Several of the volume's essays speak to this issue of control and creation, and it appears that the most powerful agent in the construction of exhibitions is "neither the producers of the objects nor the audience, but the exhibition makers themselves" (p.15). The objects (or facts or figures) are not neutral, and it is the exhibition creators (or textbook writers) who are actually

creating the reality. When these creators are dealing with the identity of "others," the debate over who should be creating that reality can become intense and divisive, such as when western anthropologists create exhibits describing non-western "tribal" peoples.

In Michael Baxandall's essay, titled "Exhibiting Intentions..." in *Exhibiting Cultures*, he likens an exhibit to a game in which there are three independent players--the original object maker, the object exhibitor, and the exhibit viewer--but "each of the three is playing, so to speak, a different game in the field" (p. 36). The object maker is a member of his or her own culture that is understood to the maker as to any insider; the exhibitor is the classic "outsider" attempting to understand the object and the culture from which it comes; and the exhibit viewer, more likely to share in the culture of the exhibitor, brings the first two players together. Baxandall's major point is that the viewer comes to the exhibit with his or her own set of assumptions and is thereby an active agent in the interpretation of the exhibit. Baxandall draws several prescriptive conclusions from his analysis:

- 1) that objects and artifacts least likely to be misunderstood are those made for exhibition (such as works of art);

(continued on next page)



2) that exhibitors should be explicit about the cross-cultural aspect of most exhibitions, including the viewer's cultural background;

3) that the exhibitor should emphasize factual material and leave interpretation and conclusions as much as possible to the viewer who is an active agent in the field of exhibition.

In this way the exhibitor will recognize that he or she "cannot represent cultures," and that "the activity the exhibition exists for is between viewer and maker (p. 41)."

Baxandall's conclusions, of course, relate as much to teaching as they do to exhibiting (just substitute the word teacher for exhibitor, student for viewer, and subject matter for object maker.) One can easily transfer Baxandall's analysis to the classroom since students come to any subject with their own assumptions and understandings, and what they take away from the classroom is a blend of what they discover anew and what they bring to the experience from their own past.

Teaching students about other cultures can be as daunting as creating exhibits to inform the public about other cultures. As Ivan Karp explains in his introductory essay, "Culture and Representation":

Cross-cultural exhibitions present such stark contrasts between what we know and what we need to know that the challenge of reorganizing our knowledge becomes an aspect of exhibition experience...Almost by definition, audiences do not bring to exhibitions the full range of cultural resources necessary to comprehend them; otherwise, there would be no point to exhibiting. Audiences are left with two choices: either they define their experience of the exhibition to fit with their existing categories of knowledge or they reorganize their categories to fit better with their experience. (p. 22)

But how can audiences, any more than students, be encouraged to "reorganize their categories," to shift their values and beliefs to fully understand other cultures' ways of dealing with the world, to understand that other voices, other ways of understanding the world exist? The challenge, according to Karp, is "to provide within exhibitions the contexts and resources that enable audiences to choose to reorganize their knowledge" (pp. 22-23). Many of the essays in the volume offer specific avenues through which exhibitors can, in fact, offer context and resources through which new voices can be heard, new voices can be represented and finally understood.

Voice, like representation, is a major theme in *Exhibiting Cultures*. Whose voices are represented in any exhibit (or, for that matter, in any account of the past)? In his introductory essay to Part 3, "Museum Practices," Steven D. Lavine asks several pertinent questions regarding voice:

How can the voice of an exhibition honestly reflect the evolving understanding of current scholarship and the multiple voices within any discipline? How can museums make space for the voices of indigenous experts, members of communities represented in exhibitions, and artists? How can the widely varying voices of museum visitors be heard by exhibition makers and reflected in their designs? Can an exhibition contain more than one voice, or can a voice exhibit more than one message? (p. 151).

Whose voices need to be heard? Just as some educators argue that students should have a larger role in determining curriculum, and that teaching should respond more directly to students' learning styles, so Elaine Heumann Gurian argues that because museum visitors are creators of meaning during their museum visits, so their voices should be heard in the planning, design, and development of exhibits. In a paper entitled "Noodling

Around with Exhibition Opportunities," Gurian argues that exhibition makers should enfranchise the learner, that "exhibition content and presentation are inseparable," and that "choice of style is an expression of intention" (pp. 176-77). Gurian argues for exhibitions that reach audiences through various learning styles and for exhibitions that use experimental, imaginative, affective, theatrical, entertaining, and hands-on approaches, such as those pioneered by Michael Spock and Gurian at the Boston Children's Museum and by Frank Oppenheimer at the San Francisco Exploratorium. "Regardless of exhibition content, producers can choose strategies that can make some portion of the public feel either empowered or isolated" (p. 177), and Gurian's approach strongly encourages museums to reach out to hear and respond to the widest possible diverse voices.

Audience, Voice, Multiple Perspectives, Representation, Empowerment, Contested Terrain - these are the key concepts animating the debate that continues to enliven museum exhibit halls and classrooms across America in the 1990's. *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, like the conference from which it came, illuminates much of this debate, that perhaps, in the end, is really about identity--the identity of our nation and ourselves, the identity of various groups struggling for their right to determine how they will be represented in our museums, in our classrooms, in our history books. As Ivan Karp explains:

What is at stake in struggles for control over objects and the modes of exhibiting them, finally, is the articulation of identity. Exhibitions represent identity, either directly, through assertion, or indirectly, by implication. When cultural "others" are implicated, exhibitions tell us who we are and perhaps most significant, who we are not. Exhibitions [or classrooms, or textbooks] are privileged arenas for presenting images of self and "other." (p. 15)

Considering issues of representation and reality, audience and voice, multiculturalism and cultural diversity, enables educators and exhibitors alike--whether in museums, schools, colleges or universities--to re-examine the impact of their work, and to ask what messages, hidden or otherwise, they are communicating--through exhibitions, textbooks, and classroom dialogue. The last two decades of our nation's debate over multiculturalism has, if nothing else, forced upon museum and school professionals alike a re-examination that undoubtedly will influence our disciplines and our professions for decades to come.

REFERENCES

Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display, edited by Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine. Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991.

Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture, edited by Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer, and Steven D. Lavine. Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992.

(Both books can be obtained by writing Smithsonian Institution Press, Department 900, Blue Ridge Summit, PA 17294-0900, or call (717) 794-2148. *Gender Perspectives: The Impact Of Women on Museums* will be published by the SI Press but is not yet available.)

"Fulfilling The Mission: Incorporating Gender," Draft Guidelines of the Gender Issues Action Group, National Museum of American History. (These are not available; we will announce in *Anthro.Notes* if and when they become available to the general public.)

"Gender Messages in Museum Exhibitions" by Rebecca Browning. *Four Star*, Newsletter of the Smithsonian Institution's Women's Council, Fall, 1992.

Ruth O. Selig