

IS IT REAL? LISTENING FOR IMPORTANT QUESTIONS ABOUT THE PAST

by M. Elaine Davis



Is it real? Anyone involved in public archaeology or museum education is probably familiar with this question; it may, in fact, be the question most frequently asked by members of the public. At Crow Canyon Archaeological Center where I am director of education, the question of “realness” arises so often that it has almost achieved a taken-for-granted status. It is unfortunate that redundancy often works to make things seem less, rather than more, important. Twenty-five years of experience in the field of education has taught me that the persistent questions students pose can provide valuable insight into how they construct knowledge and how they make meaning of it.

It is important to examine frequently asked questions and doing so can lead to more appropriate and effective instructional strategies. In this article I examine the question, “Is it real?” by looking at when the question is asked, where it is asked, by whom, and what is meant by the word “real.”

“Is it real?” is asked numerous times each day by students enrolled in Crow Canyon’s public archaeology programs. The question always comes up when students are involved in the inquiry lesson where artifact assemblages are used to represent different time periods in Pueblo cultural history. When children pick up a replica of a Mesa Verde Black-on-White mug and ask if it is real, educators sometimes answer, “Of course it’s real, it’s a real replica.” The students are then forced to clarify their meaning and will often rephrase the question, saying, “What we meant was, is it really old?” The question of realness is also brought up on visits to archaeological sites. These are generally not active research sites but, rather, sites that have been previously excavated, stabilized, and cleaned up for public visitation. When we take visitors to tour Cliff Palace or one of the other cliff dwellings at Mesa Verde National Park, they understand that they are viewing an actual ruin, but they want to know what

parts of the ruin are, in their words, real. What are these interested members of the public trying to ask and why are they so concerned with the realness of objects? In this case, as in the one of the artifact assemblages, I think they are asking the same thing: they want to understand the authenticity, the genuineness, of the objects and architecture they have come into contact with. When children say they want to know, if the mug is old, they are really trying to understand who actually constructed it. They want to know if it was an ancestral Pueblo person or if it was some contemporary person who just copied it.

Authenticity is important to students, adults and children alike, for at least two reasons. The first has to do with evidence. When students at Crow Canyon examine artifact assemblages or when visitors at Mesa Verde are standing in a cliff dwelling, they are **not** simply receiving and trusting information from a tour guide or educator. They are participating in the act of constructing the past. Interrogating evidence and thinking critically about its meaning are fundamental to archaeological and historical inquiry.

The second reason for asking, “Is it real?” is not so much intellectual as it is personal and emotional. When people witness for the first time the 800 year-old fingerprints in a corrugated vessel or an ancient hand print in a cliff dwelling, they are often struck with awe. Such items help us make a direct connection, not only with an ancient culture, but also with ancient individuals. A modern reproduction, no matter how closely it resembles the original, does not have the power to trigger the kind of emotional response that the real object evokes. The meaning of the replica and the meaning of the original—the authentic artifact—are very different.

Perspectives on Realness

It is important to note that although most of the students who come to Crow Canyon are concerned with the realness of the objects they encounter, and they have a similar understanding of the term “real,” they do not all have the same motive for asking the question. Approximately 300 Native American students visit Crow Canyon annually; the majority

of these young people are Navajo. When they raise the question "Is it real?", they are likely doing so for very different reasons. If they are from families who practice traditional cultural beliefs, they are asking the question in order to determine which objects they should not touch or perhaps come into contact with at all. For these students ancient artifacts made and used by people who lived and died hundreds of years ago are things to be very careful around. The traditional belief is that these objects might cause illness, and contact with these objects would require they go through a lengthy, and sometimes expensive, ceremony. Replicas provide an acceptable alternative for these groups of Navajo students: when they ask, "Is it real?" educators at the Center can say "no" and both they and the students feel relieved.

Another perspective on the realness of objects comes from collectors. There are probably not a lot of artifact collectors who participate in programs at Crow Canyon, or if they are collectors, they may actively conceal that information. When collectors ask if something is real, they are also referring to authenticity but for yet another reason. For collectors, the value placed on the real thing is probably not intellectual, emotional, or cultural, but economic. The real thing, whether it is a piece of art or an ancient pot, is associated with monetary value. The specific value is determined by criteria such as scarcity, condition of preservation, and quality of craftsmanship. Again, a replica identical to the original in every way does not have the same value as the original. The difference that makes a difference for collectors, as with the students previously mentioned, is with the hand that made the object.

Archaeologists, archaeological educators, and interpreters are also among the group of people who are concerned with the question of realness. Educators are cognizant of the importance of concrete objects—be they authentic or imitation—to the learning experience. Hands-on or experiential education is grounded in this understanding. Educators recognize the value of multisensory approaches to instruction in general, with some modalities, as they are referred to in the world of education, carrying more information than others. Visual and auditory top the list of sensory methods

used in traditional instruction; the tactile or kinesthetic approaches that are prominent in experiential education increase the ways in which information can be passed on to students. From an educational perspective, real objects, as well as well-executed replicas, are powerful tools for teaching about the human past. However, it is because of this power that great care must be taken in the construction and display of replicas, and thought must be given to how they will be used to achieve educational objectives. Whether intentionally or accidentally, replicas and reproductions can, in some cases, cause harm. They can instill or reinforce negative stereotypes; they can be used to achieve political agendas; they can be commodified for economic gain. Parker Potter, Peter Stone and others have addressed these risks and raised the question of how we can use the real as well as the reproduction, without, in a sense, fooling people. In Peter Stone and Phillippe Planel's *The Constructed Past*, Sommer says:

To make the past accessible, to help visitors to start a discourse of their own, we have to create images, albeit that they will always be false. The question we have to solve is how to make this obvious (1999: 166).

I would have to agree with Ulrike Sommer. We are never reconstructing the past but always constructing it or, at best, catching some partial reflection of it. Our responsibility as educators, archaeologists, historians or interpreters is to make obvious our role in the making of that history.

At Crow Canyon

Moving back to my own work at Crow Canyon Archaeological Center, I will confess that just when I thought I had reached a comfortable understanding of the issues surrounding the question of realness, I have encountered yet another perspective not previously considered. The Center for the last fifteen or so years has used a replicated Basketmaker pithouse as the setting for teaching students about the ancient technologies associated with that time period. In that setting students attempt to make fires

using a hearth board and spindle stick; they practice spear throwing with an atlatl; they grind corn; and sometimes they try weaving using yucca fiber. About three years ago a colleague and I were assessing student knowledge of Pueblo cultural chronology and were surprised to find that the Basketmaker period seemed to be much clearer in their minds than any of the other time periods. In a task analysis of our curriculum, the explanation for this became obvious; the pithouse itself created such vivid images in students' minds that they were learning about that time period at the expense of earlier or subsequent ones. In contrast with Basketmaker, the other time periods were merely fuzzy impressions for many of the children. This finding motivated us to revive a plan that had been discussed years earlier for building a structure that would represent a twelfth-century Pueblo house. This structure would provide an instructional tool comparable to that of the pithouse, which we could use to broaden our students' knowledge of Pueblo history.

It is our practice at Crow Canyon to conduct our work in consultation with the Center's Native American Advisory Group. It was when we began discussing the building of the structure with the advisory group that I realized I didn't know all there was to know about the question of realness. One of the things I have come to appreciate more through these discussions is how meaning is conveyed through objects and structures regardless of whether or not they are, as students say, really old. I even have come to wonder if these things become more problematic as they come closer and closer to resembling the real thing. Considering this causes me, once again, to call into question the definition of real. Maybe real does not always mean authentic or maybe authentic does not always mean old. Can a replica be real? Maybe an object is real based on its own characteristics and not necessarily on its creator? I have not yet reached clarity on these issues but pondering the nature of realness and the importance of this question to so many people has helped me understand the social complexity of using objects for teaching about the past—those that are real and those that are sometimes real.

In conclusion, I would like to return to the subtitle for this paper: *Listening for the Important Questions Asked About the Past*. I have tried to show that simple questions like "Is it real?" are anything **but** simple. They may very well carry some of the most important messages that we, as archaeological educators, need to hear. Listening to them and taking a reflexive view of them can provide valuable instructional clues. For example, I know that it is important to provide most of our students at Crow Canyon with opportunities to come into contact with authentic artifacts and the remains of ancient structures. We need to help them understand how the forces of time might have altered the objects, and we need to help them remember that we are all perceiving these objects through our own culture, our world views, and ourselves. I also know that it is just as important that certain other students not come into contact with the so-called, real thing, so as to not place them in a situation where they will feel harm might come to them. We need to provide good alternatives that increase their knowledge about the human past but that do not, in their mind, place them at risk. In any case, I do know that "real" is important, that "real" has multiple meanings, and that "real" evokes different responses in the contexts of different

Further Reading

Potter Jr., Parker B. 1994. *Public Archaeology in Annapolis*. Smithsonian Institution Press.

Stone, Peter G. and Phillippe G. Planel, eds. 1999. *The Constructed Past: Experimental Archaeology, Education, and the Public*. Routledge.

Sommer, Ulrike. 1999. "Slavonic Archaeology; GroB Raden, An Open Air Museum in a Unified Germany." In *The Constructed Past: Experimental Archaeology, Education, and the Public*, pp. 157-170. Routledge.

Elaine Davis is Director of Education at the Crow Canyon Archaeological Center, Cortez, Colorado.