



The Poetics
and Politics
of Museum
Display

Edited by
Ivan Karp and
Steven D. Lavine

EXHIBITING CULTURES

Smithsonian
Institution
Press
Washington
and London

Copyright © 1991 by Smithsonian Institution

The introduction to this book first appeared as "Museums and Multiculturalism: Who Is in Control?" in *Museum News*, March/April 1989, copyright © 1989 by the American Association of Museums. All rights are reserved. Reprinted with permission.

A portion of chapter 17 first appeared as "Making Exhibitions Indian: Aditi and Mela at the Smithsonian Institution," in Michael Meister, ed., *Making Things in South Asia: The Role of Artists and Craftsmen*, copyright © 1988 by the South Asia Regional Studies Program, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. Reprinted with permission.

Chapter 20 copyright © 1990 by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett.

All other rights are reserved.

Designed by Linda McKnight.

Edited by Susan Warga.

Production editing by Rebecca Browning.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Exhibiting cultures : the poetics and politics of museum display /

edited by Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine.

p. cm.

Based on papers presented at a conference entitled 'Poetics and Politics of Representation,' held at the International Center of Smithsonian Institution, Sept. 26-28, 1988; sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation and other institutions.

ISBN 1-56098-020-6 (cloth).—ISBN 1-56098-021-4 (paper)

1. Exhibitions—Evaluation—Congresses. 2. Museum techniques—Evaluation—Congresses. 3. Museums—Public relations—Congresses. 4. Culture diffusion—Congresses. 5. Museums—Educational aspects—Congresses. I. Karp, Ivan. II. Lavine, Steven, 1947—. III. Rockefeller Foundation.

AM151.E94 1991

069'.5—dc20

90-10188

British Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

Manufactured in the United States of America.

5 4 3 2

95 94 93 92

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials Z39.48-1984.

For permission to reproduce individual illustrations appearing in this book, please correspond directly with the owners of the works, as listed in the captions. The Smithsonian Institution Press does not retain reproduction rights for these illustrations or maintain a file of addresses for photo sources.

On the cover and title page: *Aboriginal dancers at the opening ceremonies of the Commonwealth Games, Brisbane, Australia, 1982.* Photo by Eckhard Supp. Reproduced by permission of the photographer.

Contents

Acknowledgements ix

Introduction: Museums and Multiculturalism 1

STEVEN D. LAVINE AND IVAN KARP

PART I: Culture and Representation 11

IVAN KARP

CHAPTER 1: The Museum as a Way of Seeing 25

SVETLANA ALPERS

CHAPTER 2: Exhibiting Intention: Some Preconditions of the Visual Display of Culturally Purposeful Objects 33

MICHAEL BAXANDALL

CHAPTER 3: Resonance and Wonder 42

STEPHEN GREENBLATT

CHAPTER 4: The Poetics of Exhibition in Japanese Culture 57

MASAO YAMAGUCHI

CHAPTER 5: Another Past, Another Context: Exhibiting Indian Art Abroad 68

B. N. GOSWAMY

PART 2: Art Museums, National Identity, and the Status of Minority Cultures: The Case of Hispanic Art in the United States 79

STEVEN D. LAVINE

Culture and Representation

IVAN KARP

What do exhibitions represent and how do they do so? Exhibitions are placed in

museums that differ in age, collections, content, target audiences, national and regional orientations, and ambitions. The type or genre of museum may be a difference that cuts across all these other variables: art museums, cultural-history museums, and natural-history museums have different justifications for their activities and radically different conceptions of how to use and present their collections. Even within a single museum the staff may have differing attitudes and orientations; moreover, because they are organizations composed of diverse personnel with different interests, museums have difficulty developing an internal consensus and clearly defined objectives.

These are only some of the historical and institutional dimensions that affect exhibiting and museum practices. All exhibitions

are inevitably organized on the basis of assumptions about the intentions of the objects' producers, the cultural skills and qualifications of the audience, the claims to authoritativeness made by the exhibition, and judgments of the aesthetic merit or authenticity of the objects or settings exhibited.¹

These issues arise within the boundaries of the Western traditions out of which museums emerged. They do not even begin to consider problems that arise when different cultures and perspectives come into contact, as they inevitably do. The multiple gazes found within and among cultures make far more complicated the great debates of the museum world, which were echoed and referenced in the papers and discussions of the conference that resulted in this volume. These debates include arguments about whether to privilege context or object, whether to highlight the aesthetics of objects or propositional knowledge about them, or whether a curator's message about the history of an object and its original context is more authentic than the provenance of the object itself.

Still, these debates do not interrogate fundamental assumptions about the exhibition as a medium of and setting for representation. The theme of this section, "Culture and Representation," allows us to examine the implicit definition of the exhibition as a forum for the re-presentation of other experiences and to begin to search for a more active definition of the exhibiting process. This quest is also taken up in more specific form in Part 3 of this volume, "Museum Practices."

In the conference itself, issues that were debated during the first session, "Culture and Representation," continued to be disputed throughout the conference. The participants tended to think of exhibitions as conforming to one of two models: either a vehicle for the display of objects or a space for telling a story. This in itself con-

formed to the great divide between participants from art museums and participants from cultural-history museums that was found among the paper presenters and in the audience as well. Of course, many participants recognized that it is not possible to have an exhibition that does not have traces of both models in it. Even the most rigorous defense made at the conference of museums as bastions of the aesthetic experience—Svetlana Alpers's argument that exhibitions bring out the "visual distinction" of crafted objects—assumes that the "museum effect," as Alpers calls it, has the potential to aid audiences to reexperience the act of craftsmanship. What we can conclude is that even aesthetic response must be based on experiences and skills derived from settings external to the singular experience of appreciating an object.

Alpers's paper is an impassioned defense of the discipline and training involved in appreciating the fashioning of visual art. She objects to the distractions of labels and wishes that the exhibition's story be told in a setting separated from the objects themselves. Even Alpers, however, acknowledges that the reception of the story depends on the degree to which knowledge and perceptual skills are shared between the artists and their audience. While she argues that the Musée d'Orsay's installation disturbs the appreciation of objects of "greater visual interest" in the museum, she acknowledges that some schools of art can benefit from displays that communicate something other than chronology and visual interest. For example, seventeenth-century Dutch landscape art resists being presented in terms of chronology, because the representational intentions of its artists have far more to do with other things than exhibition of chronology and individual artistry can tell us. The museum effect is clearly a force that is independent of the objects themselves. The mode of installation, the subtle messages communi-

cated through design, arrangement, and assemblage, can either aid or impede our appreciation and understanding of the visual, cultural, social, and political interest of the objects and stories exhibited in museums.

The consequences of putting objects into even the Spartan context of the art gallery makes the museum effect into an apparatus of power. If it can aid or impede our understanding of what artists intend and how art means, then its subtle messages can serve masters other than the aesthetic and cultural interests of the producers and appreciators of art. Surely this is why museums historically have been such important instruments for articulating national identity, a theme taken up in Carol Duncan's paper in Part 2.

The messages communicated through the museum effect do not have a predetermined content. Museums and their exhibitions are morally neutral in principle, but in practice always make moral statements; even the assertion that "art" is exempt from moral, social, and political judgments implies ideas about what is and is not subject to certain forms of criticism. The alleged innate neutrality of museums and exhibitions, however, is the very quality that enables them to become instruments of power as well as instruments of education and experience.

How the exhibition moves from neutrality to instrumentality is described in Michael Baxandall's contribution in this section. Baxandall describes exhibition as a field in which the intentions of the object's producer, the exhibitor's arrangement and display of the objects, and the assumptions the museumgoer brings to the exhibit all come into play. The parts of this set are always in complex and dynamic relationship to one another and change from exhibition to exhibition. Baxandall's formulation of these analytical categories allows us to perceive with special clarity that any exhibition experi-

ence is the end product of the mixing of different capacities and effects. The actors involved in the process bring to the making and experiencing of exhibitions different abilities, assumptions, desires, and interests. What each derives from the exhibition, in the end, is surely not entirely what he or she intended. The exhibition is inevitably the contested terrain Steven Lavine and I describe in our introduction to this volume. The struggle is not only over what is to be represented, but over who will control the means of representing. Other papers in this volume, especially Dawson Munjeri's account in Part 5 of the colonial formation of the museum in Zimbabwe, describe the struggle over objects and identities in stark terms. 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 are privileged arenas for presenting images of self and "other."

From one point of view the most powerful agents in the construction of identity appear to be neither the producers of objects nor the audience but the exhibition makers themselves, who have the power to mediate among parties who will not come into face-to-face contact. Still, the audience has its ways of escaping control, from refusing to follow the exhibition plan to seeing *their* assumptions about identity confirmed in the design and arrangement of objects. In his comments on the conference session, Michael Spock argued forcefully for including "surrogates" for the visitor in the process of exhibition design, a process he acknowledged as explicitly political in that it generates disputes over interpretation among parties with rather different interests. This approach is advocated by

Elaine Heumann Gurian in her paper in Part 3, "Museum Practices."

Alpers and Baxandall are concerned with the museum as a Western cultural institution. The papers by Yamaguchi and Goswami in this section raise the question of whether the museum effect has been produced in other cultures. If not, then we are forced to ask whether it is appropriate to attempt to display objects drawn from other times and places. The easy answer is no. We could argue that the museum is a uniquely Western institution, that exotic objects displayed in museums are there only because of the history of Western imperialism and colonial appropriation, and that the only story such objects can tell is the history of their status as trophies of imperial conquest. In the case of exotic objects, the museum effect becomes an "aura," as Walter Benjamin called it,² the consequence of which is to mask the intentions, meanings, and skills integral to the production and appreciation of the objects. These become irretrievably lost to the exhibition audience.

No participant in the conference took so pessimistic a position, and many of the papers provide examples of how to successfully exhibit meanings and intentions across cultural boundaries. More than any other paper, Stephen Greenblatt's account in this section of the contours of experience available to the exhibition audience provides a solution to the impasse of confronting an unintelligible world. Greenblatt describes two modes of experience available in an exhibition. The first is resonance, "the power of the displayed object to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic forces from which it has emerged and for which it may be taken by a viewer to stand." The opposite mode is wonder, "the power of the displayed object to stop the viewer in his or her tracks, to convey an arresting sense of

uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention." Resonance and wonder are idealized distinctions that have the merit of isolating for us aspects of how an exhibition is experienced in the real world of exhibition-going. Through examining resonance and wonder we can think more systematically about the options available for making and experiencing exhibitions.

Greenblatt desires to defend wonder against what he sees as the extremes of context-oriented art exhibitions that deny to the audience the experience of appreciating the object for itself. But Greenblatt does not define wonder as an eternal, universal experience sought through the connoisseur's approach to art; rather, he historicizes and contextualizes the sense of wonder by arguing that wonder has a history and a content that changes over time. Greenblatt first shows that wonder is an experiential goal that has provided grounds for the display of objects from the Renaissance through the contemporary period. In the early Renaissance, wonder was manifested in the display of sumptuous and expensive objects. Eventually the definition of wonder changed from sumptuous display to the appreciation of crafted form that Svetlana Alpers argues is definitive of the museum effect. Greenblatt describes this historical movement as "a transformation of the experience of wonder from the spectacle of proprietorship to the mystique of the object." Michael Baxandall³ demonstrates that a similar change in attitude occurred even within the Italian Renaissance itself, where the emphasis on expensive materials specified by the artists' patrons gave way to an appreciation of the effects on the viewer produced by the artists' command of consummate skill. The beginnings of change in the sense of wonder may have come rather early; the change occurred over a long period of time and the transformation is still incomplete.

Greenblatt's account enables us to conclude that such seemingly invariant experiences as "wonder" must be set within the context of their own cultural formations, subject to change over time and from place to place. Nor can we assume that wonder is not affected by the techniques of display. Greenblatt describes the contemporary use of "boutique lighting" as an attempt to impart wonder from outside, to give the object a sense of mystery that is derived not from itself but from the apparatus of commercial display. Boutique lighting thus provides an instance in which the spectacle of possession is presented as if it were the mystique of the object. Greenblatt almost suggests that the future history of the sense of wonder may be for it to return to its roots as a spectacle of possession. If this earlier sense of wonder coexists with wonder as the mystique of the object, then tension always exists between these two modes of aesthetic experience, and exhibitions have to struggle to resolve the tension in favor of one definition of wonder over the other.

Greenblatt succeeds in demonstrating that both wonder and resonance have a history. This achievement solves the dilemma of cross-cultural translatability raised above and provides a stronger foundation for the display of objects of other cultures in exhibitions that can combine both aesthetics and context. The difference between Greenblatt's approach and the assertion of universal aesthetic values that is so characteristic of the great survey museums is that for Greenblatt it becomes the responsibility of the exhibitors to construct for their audiences displays that show continuities and differences between the aesthetic evaluations and contexts in which the objects can be appreciated. The historicizing gaze advocated by Greenblatt implies that knowing and experiencing other times, other places, and other cultural formations can be achieved only by con-

trast and comparison. (Michael Baxandall also advocates using contrasting elements in exhibitions in his piece in this section.) This contrast and comparison is the only solution I see to the seeming impasse of being unable to present the objects of an "other" without replacing their view of how an object means with ours.⁴ But this requires an exquisite degree of self-consciousness on the part of the exhibitors about their own assumptions and how they organize the representation of other cultures.⁵

If resonance and wonder can alter so much over time even within one culture and historical period, how much difference within these concepts can be discovered when we examine other cultures? Marshall Sahlins says of the worldview of the Hawaiian people that "Hawaiian history repeats itself, since only the second time is [something] an event. The first time it is myth."⁶ He argues that the Hawaiians who killed Captain Cook were sacrificing a god whose appearance in the guise of Captain Cook was the fulfillment of a mythic prophecy. Cook and his crew were incorporated into a Hawaiian pantheon in a fashion that showed that the Hawaiians were guided in their response to historical events by the reality they attributed to myth. After Cook's death his relics became objects of ritual display. This Hawaiian attitude finds its echoes in Masao Yamaguchi's paper on Japanese attitudes toward display. Yamaguchi shows that in Japan objects are not transparently defined as simple elements of the material world. The very word for object, *mono*, formerly had the additional meaning of "spiritlike." This attitude is related to the Japanese technique of *mitate*, the art of citation, in which an object or reference is taken to stand for another time, place, or meaning. Yamaguchi finds this technique manifested in such diverse activities as parades and shop displays. For example, *mitate* is manifested in the wonderful Japanese art of creating imita-

tion culinary displays that serve as a means of advertising restaurant meals.

In Japanese display, objects are not so much appreciated for the crafted form they can be shown to exhibit, but for the degree to which they reproduce a mythic world. Crafted form is not an end in itself but is put in the service of representation. This may be a case in which resonance controls wonder. The strongest parallel Yamaguchi can find for the display of objects is with performance genres such as kabuki in Japan, in which fidelity to a script is highly valued. The result is that the object is not valued in and for itself, but for how well it represents the nonempirical imagined world. What appears to be at stake in the Japanese display of objects is resonance with shared cultural knowledge about mythic worlds. An exhibition of Japanese art that takes as its theme the evolving skills of the artists would miss the Japanese point of view, much as a chronological exhibit of Dutch landscape art would miss the intentions of the artists and their original audiences.

Yamaguchi concludes that the skill in representation so highly valued by contemporary Japanese is manifested not only in their arts but also in such quotidian settings as shop displays of toys. One can see parallels between his paper and Michael Baxandall's account of the three agents involved in exhibition. The producer, the exhibitor, and the audience must share a set of skills utilized in producing and appreciating objects if exhibitions are to achieve their effects. Baxandall may be drawing on his earlier account of Renaissance art⁷ in which he showed that skills such as perspective were acquired by artist and audience alike in ordinary settings such as mathematics education, and that these skills were culturally based and very different from our own. The possible differences in cultural resources that are involved in the production and apprecia-

tion of objects we regard as being in our own tradition must make us wary of projecting our current assumptions onto objects drawn from other cultures. Nor can we blandly assume that the way we experience exotic objects in contemporary settings is similar to the way such objects are or were experienced in their original settings. Affinities need to be demonstrated rather than asserted. If in Japan objects are secondary and immaterial forms such as myths primary, what is the museum exhibitor to do?

A rigorous attempt to resolve problems of translation and to present another culture's aesthetic standards is described in Goswamy's paper on his curatorial role in the design of two exhibitions that were organized according to an indigenous Indian aesthetic concept called *rasa*. The concept of *rasa* is related to an Indian aesthetic theory based on immediate emotional response, known only in broad outline terms to the average Indian exhibit-goer but having an elaborate intellectual history known primarily to specialists. *Rasa* is one of those protean cultural concepts that have more or less content depending upon the context of use and the training of the user. Goswamy set as his theme the nine *rasas* of Indian art. His two exhibitions were organized not according to chronology, type of object, or artist, but by the aesthetic response of the viewer. A *rasa* is quite complex. It invokes synesthesia and is associated not only with feeling but with taste and color. Each *rasa* has its counterpart in a more specific feeling, called *bhava*, which is generated out of the experience of a specific object. Thus given the proper preconditions, the immediate feeling or mood (*bhava*) of love may be swiftly and blindingly transformed into an intense erotic sentiment (*rasa*). This is a good example of a difference in the cultural resources used to produce and appreciate objects. The emotional and aesthetic progress mandated by the theory of *rasa* exhibits an order

that is the reverse of that expected in the Western theory of personhood, in which the elevation of erotic feelings over love is thought to be rather adolescent.

Goswamy organized his exhibition into sections defined by different *rasas*. (In the San Francisco installation, the designers cooperated with him more than in Paris.⁸) The experience of the exhibition was heightened by having each room painted in a color associated with the *rasa*. Still, how was it possible for an American audience to experience the exhibition as an Indian audience would? One answer that will come up again in the section on exhibition practices is that the failure of conventional expectations to work may give rise to an imaginative attempt by the audience to experience exhibitions in other than familiar ways. The experience of contrast or shock can lead to a reorganization of knowledge and experience, just as it does for the anthropologist in an alien culture or for those of us entering a new occupational setting.⁹

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. This challenge may be experienced in its strongest form in cross-cultural exhibitions, but it should be raised by any exhibition. Almost by definition, audiences do not bring to exhibitions the full range of cultural resources necessary for comprehending 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. Ideally, it is the shock of nonrecognition that enables the audience to choose the latter alternative. The challenge for exhibition makers is to provide within exhibitions the contexts and resources that enable audi-

ences to choose to reorganize their knowledge. What these contexts and resources should be is the debate that animates the papers in this volume.

NOTES

1. Natural-history exhibits display objects that are not produced by human agents who have goals and intentions. The theory of evolution is used in natural-history exhibitions to explain how species evolve. These exhibitions do not examine the intentions of plants and animals. Problems arise when objects made by humans are exhibited in natural-history museums and the exhibitors believe that theories of nature can substitute for accounts of cultural factors such as beliefs, values, and intentions. A good example of the problems that arise is provided by the diorama, an exhibiting form that claims to present nature in an ideal form (see Donna Haraway, "Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, 1908–1936," *Social Text* 11 [Winter 1984–85].) Not only are intentions presumed rather than exhibited, but the history of culture and society is wiped from the record as persons and things become ideal examples of certain types. In this way, the cultural and historical specificity of the human society is turned into an example of a universal natural history.
2. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1969).
3. Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972).
4. See James Clifford, "Histories of the Tribal and the Modern," *Art in America* 74, no. 4 (Apr. 1985), on the concept of affinity used to justify the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition "Primitivism" in Twentieth-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern.
5. Anthropology has recently gone through this exercise, and numerous texts exist that describe the complex situation of fieldwork (see, for example, Ivan Karp and Martha Kendall, "Reflexivity in Fieldwork," in Paul Secord, ed., *Explaining Human Behavior* [Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 1982]), the assumptions that underlie the classificatory schemes into which cultures are slotted (see, for example, Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1983]), and how the rhetorical and literary devices used in writing about cultures communicate assumptions about them (see, for example, James Clifford and George Marcus, *Writing Culture* [Berkeley: University of California Press,

1986)). One of the goals of this volume is to extend the insights of this literature to forms other than the written text for representing cultures.

6. Marshall Sahlins, *Historical Myths and Mythical Realities* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981), 9.

7. Baxandall, *Painting and Experience*.

8. The history of different installations of the same exhibition raises interesting issues we were unable to cover in this conference and volume. In our discussion we have tended to collapse the curator and designer into one category—the undifferentiated “exhibitor.” Yet conflicts between people concerned with content and those responsible for execution are notorious in the museum world. Very often claims are made to represent important interests in these disputes, such as artistic integrity, the views of the audience, the values of the cultures to be represented, the integrity of a disciplinary point of view, and so on. These disputes are moments when the ideological armature that justifies different genres of museums often is brought into play, and much is heard from curators about “aesthetic values” (the art museum), “authenticity” (the history museum), or “science” (the natural-history or science-and-technology museum). How this affects the actual installation of exhibitions is a history yet to be written. James Clifford raises a very important and neglected dimension in his contribution to this volume, “Four Northwest Coast Museums: Travel Reflections.” The genres he discerns are majority and minority museums, types that cut across the art/context distinction (though see his caveat about the term *minority*). He sees a difference in the visual narratives of these types of museums. Majority institutions tell a story that tends to universals, while minority and community institutions tend to personalize and express their narrative in terms of oppositional culture. Clifford puts his distinction forward as no more than a hypothesis, but he has brought into focus one of the effects that the relationship between museum and community can have on exhibiting practices.

9. Ivan Karp and Martha Kendall, “Reflexivity in Fieldwork.”

CHAPTER I

The Museum as a Way of Seeing

SVETLANA ALPERS

One of the clearest memories from museum visits of my childhood is of a crab. It was a giant crab, to be precise, which was in a glass case, a quite hard-to-find case, in the Peabody Museum (actually, in the Museum of Comparative Zoology) in Cambridge. As I remember, it was the scale that was so astonishing. I had never seen a crab that size and had therefore not imagined that it was possible. It was not only the size of the whole but of each of its individual parts. One could see the way it was made: huge claws, bulging eyes, feelers, raised bumps of shell, knobbly joints, hairs that extended out around them. It was placed at the corner of a case so that one could walk around from the front to the side and take it in from another view: a smallish main body delicately supported on improbably long legs, like the tines of some huge fork or rake.

I could attend to a crab in this way because it was still, exposed to view, dead. Its habitat and habits of rest, eating, and moving were absent. I had no idea how it had been caught. I am describing looking at it as an artifact and in that sense like a work of art. The museum had transformed the crab—had heightened, by isolating, these aspects, had encouraged one to look at it in this way. The museum had made it an object of visual interest.

The museums of Europe have a long history of encouraging at-