



## First Word

Ivan Karp

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- In Spain, shortly before the 1992 Summer Olympics, African Ambassadors meet to consider boycotting the games because a Spanish village refuses to take a stuffed African off display in the local natural history museum. The village responds by asserting that he is "their African" and sells T-shirts and caps supporting their position.
- In Alice Springs, Central Australia, the Walpiri people gather up their sacred objects in order to prevent them from being looted, and place them in houses called "Men's Museum" and "Women's Museum."
- Benedict Anderson revises *Imagined Communities*, his pioneering book on the origins and consequences of nationalism, and adds a chapter on museums as national icons.
- The official guide to the Metropolitan Museum of Art tells us: "The Metropolitan Museum is a living encyclopedia of world art. Every culture from every part of the world—from Florence to Thebes to Papua New Guinea—from the earliest times to the present and in every medium is represented, frequently at the highest levels of quality and invention" (1983, p. 6).
- Russell Means, a prominent Native American activist, is photographed in front of models of Spanish armor and the *Niña*, the *Pinta*, and the *Santa Maria* with a placard stating, "Fight racism at the Florida State Museum."

As these examples show, cultural diversity can no more be eliminated from museums—all types of museums—than museums can exist outside society. But they also demonstrate that the politics of identity through which communities define themselves these days makes everyone into an anthropologist manqué, and sometimes into critics of museums as well.

Recently an anthropologist declared in a review of yet another book about museums that "this is the decade of the museum." If so, it is not because they are successful and thriving institutions. They are experiencing the same fiscal crisis that colleges and universities are undergoing, and their spaces are as much an arena for the politics of identity as any campus. Perhaps more so. Many museums are more accessible to the general public than institutions of higher education, and the public, suddenly, has shown a surprising interest in what is displayed and said there.

*Continued on page 6*

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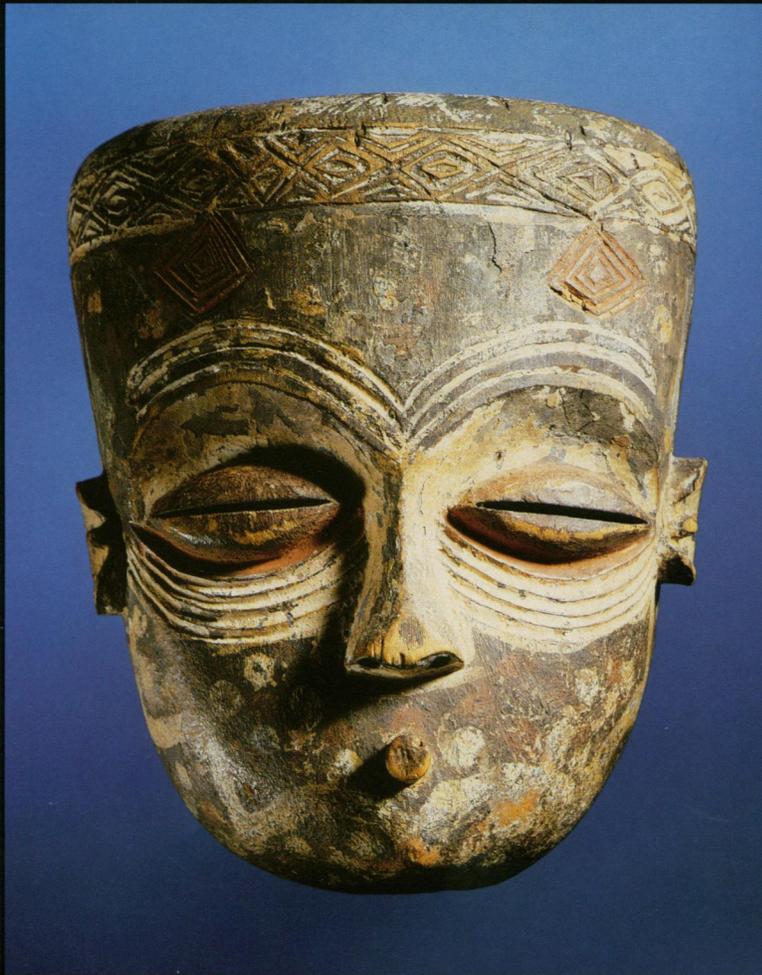
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Inspect recent issues of any major museum journal, such as *Museum News*. Its contents include such "hot" issues as the repatriation of American Indian materials, the proper relationship between artists and exhibitors, the sometimes conflicting responsibilities of boards of trustees to the public and to the mission and mandate of the institution. The January/February 1993 issue of *Museum News*, for example, contains articles on how to utilize new theories of learning in museum exhibitions, "the cross-cultural mediator," the crisis over an exhibition of sacred American Indian pipes at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, a furor over sexually explicit and socially critical art at the Alexandria (Louisiana) Museum of Art, and the usual materials about identifying the mandate of a museum in an age of change. This is the stuff of the current debates. These debates take their coloration not entirely from the traditional activities of museums—"collecting, preserving, studying, interpreting, and exhibiting"—but from the way these activities are related to the other institutions and communities that make up the social order.

When people enter museums they do not leave their cultures and identities in the cloakroom, nor do they respond passively to museum displays or museum policies. They interpret exhibitions through their prior experiences, through culturally learned beliefs, values, and perceptual skills, and through memberships in multiple communities. What Stephen Weil, Deputy Director of the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum of Contemporary Art, says of museums in the United States is true worldwide: "While American museums may be exempt from taxes, they are in no way exempt from history" ("The Multiple Crises in Our Museums," in *Beauty and the Beasts*, 1983).

Museums share with many other cultural institutions the quality of mediating among the multiple social groups, identities, and power centers that make up a civil society. As repositories of knowledge and forums for the expression of central values, they have claimed to play a critical role in cultural production and reproduction, in this country often asserting that they compensate for the failures of formal education at all levels. More and more, however, museums are being held accountable for their claims. Because they profess to be central cultural institutions, what they keep and what they display is increasingly disputed. Trickle-down culture, the elite museum theory of education, is no longer unthinkingly accepted either by museum professionals or by audiences. Museums have been asked to open up their collections and exhibitions to new forms and new inputs.

What does this process of opening up entail? How do museums challenge the canons they were originally designed to cherish? Most will not simply declare themselves out of the business of collecting, preserving, exhibiting, and educating. Some will continue as before, others will engage in token



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“multicultural” activities, and some will reflect and change how they collect, exhibit, and educate as they continue these activities.

These changes reveal themselves most in exhibitions and programming, the most public and overtly political arena in the museum world. Every exhibition, whatever its subject, inevitably draws on the cultural assumptions and resources of the people who make it. Decisions are made to emphasize one element and downplay others, to assert some truths and ignore others. The assumptions underpinning these decisions vary according to culture and over time, place, and type of museum or exhibition. Exhibitions made today may seem appropriate to some viewers precisely because those viewers share the same attitudes as the exhibition makers and the displays are cloaked in familiar installation styles—the “boutique lighting” derived from department stores being only one example. We discover the artifice when we look at older installations or those made in other cultural contexts. By their very nature, then, exhibitions are open to question, and the questions are typically about cultural diversity—about social context, history, identity, and the media used to produce an exhibitionary form.

Nor are the arts exempted from these questions. Some of the most exciting work in contemporary art uses performance and installation to question the claims made by the sites at which the art is exhibited.

“Mining the Museum” by Fred Wilson and work by Adrienne Piper and Andrea Fraser, all installation artists, make ironic commentary on the ways art and history museums have claimed to define the cultural and aesthetic canon. Sometimes even the notion of a canon is denied, but almost always, questions are asked about how some arts are redefined as crafts or portrayed as subordinate streams to the great Western traditions. More telling is the accusation that museums act simply to exclude the works of non-Western and minority peoples from the celebrations that museums make possible. Wilson, for example, is able to show that major American historical societies have systematically ignored black and Native Americans in their displays, even when the materials for making exhibitions about black experience were available in the collections.

This sort of message is not entirely new in art circles. More than twenty years ago, Hans Haacke and his contemporaries lay the groundwork for the more precise and ironic exhibitions we are seeing today. There is considerable evidence of a real convergence between the current public and scholarly focus on museums that argues that they are institutions of power, acting to define not only what is valuable and beautiful, but also who is entitled to make claims about the valuable and beautiful in society. Museums operate, as Haacke once said, as “Managers of Consciousness.” But we must remember

that even in a democratic society power is not only inevitable but can be good. Power not only controls but enables people to make statements, assertions, even art. Who among us would want to destroy all the storehouses of goods and knowledge we call museums? Surely consciousness sometimes needs shaping, if not management.

The present moment is characterized by a heightened interest in multicultural and intercultural issues, and the inherent contestability of museum exhibitions and collections is bound to open heated debate on past and present choices made in collecting and exhibiting. 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. Inevitably, even those curators and museum directors who respond to these concerns find themselves in difficult territory, fearful of the passion of the debates and often insufficiently aware of the unconscious assumptions that underlie their own exhibitions.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s “Te Maori” is a case in point. The organizers of this 1984 exhibition consulted with Maori elders to secure consent for their *taonga* (treasures) to travel. Because all but one of the



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*taonga* already were the property of museums, this process was not strictly necessary, but rather reflected the feeling among white, middle-class New Zealanders that their identity was traceable to the Maori and that the Maori still had spiritual right to the *taonga*. The ultimate effect of the consultation was to increase the Maori's awareness of the status of their *taonga* as art objects and to focus their attention on the ways their culture was presented in museums. Tensions rose especially over the ethnological and historical background provided in the exhibition catalogue, which the Maori elders considered pure nonsense.

In the wake of the exhibition, pressures mounted in New Zealand to develop procedures and institutions that would allow the Maori to define their own heritage. The question became, as my colleague Adrienne Kaeppler said, how imaginative museums in New Zealand would be in response to the situation: "Are Maoris and their heritage to be considered separate from...other Pacific islanders who make New Zealand their home? Will museums be on the forefront of cultivating new kinds of identity and educating the population about them?...Should they echo the political climate or should they be a force for change?" ("Paradise Regained: The Role of Pacific Museums in Forging National Identity," in *Museums and National Identity: The Importance of Objects in the Formation of Nation-States*, ed. Flora Kaplan, forthcoming).

Curators are beginning to focus on how cultural diversity and definitions of self and other are presented not only in art but in everyday life. The Center (now Museum) for African Art in New York City mounted a series of exhibitions that exposed the constructed nature of the collecting and exhibiting process. In "Perspectives: Angles on African Art," eight different "curators" chose objects and elaborated on the basis for their choices, both personal and professional. The much praised "Art/artifact" displayed many of the same objects in different settings: a "curiosity cabinet," an art gallery, a natural history museum diorama, and an art museum.

The ways in which displays of people and cultures define cultural differences have even become a topic of contemporary art. Fred Wilson has mounted a series of installations that play with the idea of culture and how it is defined by museum practices. In "The Other Museum" he places African masks on a wall and covers their eyes with tattered flags of colonial powers. Under the masks are labels such as "Loaned courtesy of the Musée de l'Homme." In "Mining the Museum" he makes the point that many well-known paintings are actually named by curators and not by artists. An American colonial painting of a white family being served a picnic by a black servant is given both its museum title, *Dinner on the Lawn*, and Wilson's title, *Frederick Serving Fruit to His Masters*. The performance artists Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco display themselves in a gilded cage as Caribbean Indians familiar with the debris of Western civilization through posing as pirates over the course of 200 years.

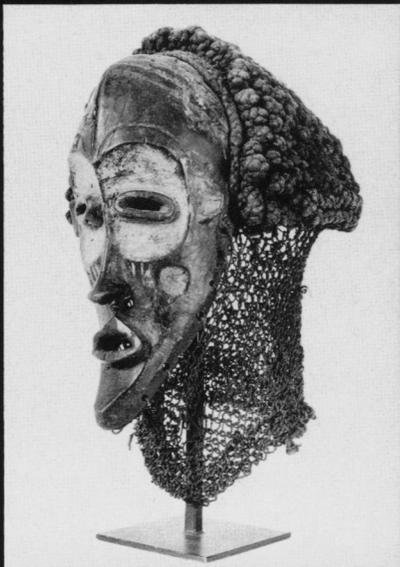


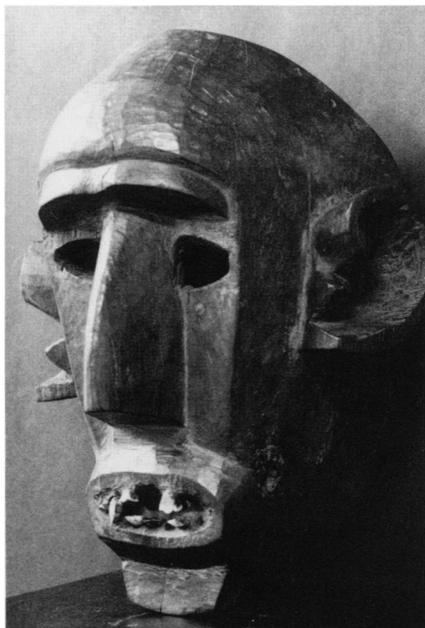
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Gómez-Peña dresses in Guatemalan shorts, wears a mask, and carries a briefcase, while Fusco wears a bikini and grass skirt and plays with a laptop computer. For a small fee, one can arrange for a photograph by saying loudly, "Photo, photo." When they performed at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History, the responses ranged from acute pleasure to puzzlement to real outrage. Some curators were distressed by the parody of science enacted in the museum, and the Humane Society received a number of complaints about the display of live humans in a cage.

How are cultural differences defined? What is the colonial legacy in museums? How do culturally based categories such as the Chicano concept of *La Raza* affect the aesthetic experience, and how does the past determine the politics of the present? These are questions that could be derived from the curricula of a good university. Yet they are also part and parcel of some current museum displays. The fashionable interest in the politics of identity and forms of resistance is as easily manifested in museums as in academies, and just as easily dismissed by establishment critics with cries of "politically correct."

The point I wish to make is that much excellent work is beginning to appear in museums and other settings that display cultural artifacts. Very few of them, however, show that there is an anthropology of museums or consider museums themselves as

instruments of cultural production that present and manage received wisdom about cultural and historical differences and diversity. All types of museums are such instruments, not only those which are classically anthropological, and all types of museums should be considered in an anthropology of museums. The encyclopedic declarations of the Metropolitan Museum put it in direct competition with the American Museum of Natural History—especially since the canon claimed by one ("every culture from every part of the world") does not fully overlap with the canon claimed by the other. Neither comes near to achieving their stated goals of displaying all cultures of the world, unless they are also asserting that the products of some people do not qualify as culture. But this is hardly the sort of idea one hears expressed in polite museum society. It is a claim only made by implication nowadays, more suggested than asserted, for example, in the many halls of Western Civilization that dot the interiors of great museums.

Yet museums have lost none of their importance for society. People may not go to them, or they may go to them only episodically, but they remain passionately interested in them. Their continued proliferation is not only an American or European phenomenon. Museums are becoming major sites for the production and reproduction of cultural forms in other societies as well. Benedict Anderson relates this development to emerging nationalism, but museums can also be major settings for critical research and cultural protest. The Walpiri example provides an instance of a Fourth World people using a museum to resist the crudest form of cultural appropriation. It shows that museums are not only places for contemplation, passive learning, and jingoistic celebration, but also settings for conflict and debates about art, culture, and society.

These debates will take place not only in academic journals, but in forums, such as museum displays, that are directed toward a broad public. Currently the Brooklyn Historical Society is developing an exhibition called "Bridging Eastern Parkway" that will address the systemic conflicts in the Crown Heights community that have occupied so much recent public attention. This is a project fraught with difficulties, one that cries out for certain kinds of skills and sensitivities. The organizers are not unaware of what they may need. All exhibitions would benefit from knowledge about how collections are made and an awareness of the multiple stories that can be told about objects and other museum materials. All these figure in a fine-grained understanding of what museums hold and exhibit, but such an understanding is currently missing from much of the writing and thinking going on in museums. The next generation of curators, art historians, and anthropologists have a great challenge facing them. Turn to the reviews of exhibitions in future issues of *African Arts* to find out how they have done. □

Ivan Karp