Rather Trivial Things? Finding the Precious in an Alternative Museum History

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Although national institutions such as the British Museum or the National Gallery are seen as treasure houses, preserving the most valuable objects we have, there are a huge range of smaller museums which have had, over time, very different approaches to the questions of what to collect, how to display, and what audiences to address. Exploring these museums shows us what was valued and seen as precious at a level beyond the national, and demonstrate how subjective, flexible, and historically variable the concept of value is. It also shows that museums have never been totally divorced from what their visitors see as precious or valuable, and have responded to changing popular views.

In this lecture I cover three case studies which show this in different ways, in a roughly but not strictly chronological order.

1. ‘Nothing of intrinsic value’? Bethnal Green Museum

Bethnal Green Museum opened as a branch of the main Victoria and Albert Museum (then known as the South Kensington Museum) in a working-class area in 1872, and was clearly regarded as less valuable than the main museum. It was constructed out of surplus prefabricated constructions that were replaced by a new building in South Kensington, and its exhibits were largely those displays no longer wanted at the main museum. Moreover, South Kensington curators repeatedly recommended objects for Bethnal Green which they saw as ‘trivial’ and of low value.

However, the museum proved very popular, on occasion attracting more visitors than the main museum. This was because it had a much closer relationship with its audience, and because staff were forced, through lack of money, to be resourceful and experimental in filling their galleries. The quick turnover of very varied loan exhibitions, along with a growing focus on local material, meant they offered unique and interesting collections despite their lack of financial worth. They catered extensively to the large number of unaccompanied children who visited, accepting at that time unusual donations of toys and dolls, and making extensive provision for school visits.

2. Living nature in museums

From around 1900, small urban museums (often also branch museums) started displaying living natural specimens, including fish, birds, amphibians such as birds and newts, and even mammals like hedgehogs and monkeys. These were mostly local specimens gathered locally, so again had little to no financial value. Indeed, they contrasted notably with most of the features of the ‘museum specimen’, generally understood – they were in no way permanent and could not be preserved, and in fact died and needed replenishing frequently. In the case of the very widespread local wildflower display, specimens needed replacing weekly throughout the flowering season, and a large amount of volunteer labour was needed to keep them going.

Yet volunteers were plentiful and visitors loved ‘living nature’ displays. By contrast, nineteenth-century cases of taxidermy fell out of favour as they came to be seen as dull, dead and dusty. Visitors valued liveliness and ‘real’ nature in museums, arguably as such natural qualities disappeared further from urban environments.

3. Museums for enchantment – Highlands and islands

In the 1930s a brand new type of museum appeared in the British Isles – the open air folk museum, represented by the Cregneash Open Air Folk Museum on the Isle of Man, and the Highland Folk Museum (originally on Iona then in the mainland Highlands), both opening around 1938. These took the idea of the 'period room' reconstruction which had become popular by the 1930s, and took it further to turn entire buildings and parts of villages into museums, or to reconstruct traditional buildings the same way. Museums like this spread rapidly – and where existing museums could not expand to include open air exhibits, they started to build more room reconstructions, and even street reconstructions.

Museums like this offered a very different visitor experience, with smells, sounds, different textures underfoot and available for touching. They were lit and heated differently from normal museums (or, when actually in a modern museum, gave the illusion of 'cottage' lighting and heating). They invited a more emotional, memory-based response; visitors recorded how smells and sounds made them feel about the past. Nor was this simply a bittersweet nostalgic feeling – it felt magical, spiritual, and like a communion with the past.

Despite their popularity, though, there was a view from the cultural elite that they were too fake or unscholarly to be of value. Their creators were often not trained or qualified as curators and they did not accord with high cultural taste. Yet they are as distinctive a product of the mid-twentieth century as someone like T.S. Eliot, and clearly show that in a modern age, people wanted a different kind of relationship with the past.

Conclusion

These were often relatively short-lived museum enthusiasms, and museum practice has moved on. They show us, therefore, that museums are dynamic and fluid entities, despite their projection of permanence and preservation. Museums are products of their time and always have been – they change constantly, even the ones that seem literally set in stone. They are obliged to, because their visitors change. Ultimately, what museum history tells us is that visitors, and what is precious to them, determine museums, rather than museums determining what is valuable and precious.

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