

Visiting the British Galleries-A Personal View

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The relationship that a visitor has with a museum exhibition is an extremely personal thing.

A number of years ago Duncan Cameron¹ proposed two alternative types of museum, the Temple and the Forum, and maintained that whilst debate with the public was possible in the latter, the former excluded this possibility. In reality this classification is too rigid, as all those who visit a museum have the intrinsic desire to create their own dialogue with the contents, be they presented in a religiously solemn form or offered as elements for discussion. Furthermore, unlike others,² I am convinced that a museum is rarely an open forum, i.e. prepared to abdicate its internal culture. A visit to a museum, even the quickest and most superficial, is always a dialectic process. What is exhibited – objects, ideas, stories – is the result of a selection made by those in charge of the exhibition and their interpretation and thus represents the culture of the museum. During a visit to a museum, this internal culture interacts with the visitors' culture. The result is that what the museum transmits is often understood, or reinterpreted, differently from how the transmitters would have wanted, and differently from person to person.

I was engrossed by the British Galleries which portrayed for me the history of British design, industrial production, commercial relations, and architecture, which, as a paleontologist, I knew nothing about; my knowledge being limited to Crystal Palace built for the Universal Exhibition of 1851, and the dinosaurs created under the supervision of Richard Owen which were displayed there when the palace was transferred to Sydenham³ in 1854. In the British Galleries I felt enveloped by the museum's desire to communicate its culture to me and, as a former museum director, I tried to understand, on a strictly professional level, which elements made my visit so pleasurable and stimulating.

A temporary or permanent museum exhibition can be analysed from many different points of view: it is possible to consider separately or jointly: the subject of the exhibition, the way in which it is dealt with, the quality of the exhibits, the meanings attributed to the individual objects or to groups of objects, the quality of the information and iconographic systems, the overall style of the design and so on. However, I, have chosen a point of view which goes beyond the elements I listed – content, style, quality – and which has led me to look for the general philosophy behind the exhibition, i.e. understand the motives, the driving forces from the museum's internal culture, the aims which led to the realisation of the exhibition and what type of relationship with the public the museum has chosen when communicating the contents of the exhibition. By relationship with the public I do not

¹ Cameron D. F., 1971 – *The museum, a Temple or the Forum*. Curator, 14(1):11-24.

²“(…) now, few serious museums would see themselves as anything but fora” (Augustus Casely-Hayford, *A Way of Being: Some Reflections on the Sainsbury African Galleries*. Journal of Museum Ethnography 2002).

³ Colbert E.H., 1984 – *The Great Dinosaur Hunters and Their Discoveries*. Dover, New York.

mean the choice of this or that style of communication, but where this relationship comes on a scale of values which goes from total submission of the visitor to the authoritativeness of the museum, to a jovial conversation between the museum and the public, to dull scholastic education, to historical narration, to the telling of tales or, to finish, to the playful interaction between museum and public. I have also tried to place the exhibition in relation to the tradition and exhibition design style of museums in the United Kingdom.

Not all museum permanent exhibitions are the product of a philosophy which is coherent with the scientific and cultural tradition of the museum and their historical mission. This is only the case for those exhibitions which have been planned within the museum and, consequently, express the nature of the museum. A complex museum, like the V&A is, is a whole of collections and intellects which interact to create what I call *the museum's culture*, a highly dynamic culture which is specific for each institution, which makes every museum different from all others and which is transmitted through all the means of communication that it possesses, first and foremost through the permanent exhibitions. In any given museum the permanent exhibition is the result of its internal culture and is also the vehicle through which this culture affects society, contributing to the creation of the cultural heritage.

The creation of cultural heritage and its communication to society are the cornerstones of a museum's action. Indeed, if we consider that each object comprises two parts, its physical aspect (shape, colour, dimensions, material etc.) and its meaning (which derives from the historical events it has experienced, the interpretation given to it, the relationship formed with those who come into contact with it, the capacity to link the present to the past, etc.), it becomes clear that in treating objects and their meanings in a selective fashion, the museum is not only a conserver, but above all a creator of cultural heritage. Each action the museum performs – collection, conservation, documentation, scientific study, communication – is in fact selective and, therefore, from a Darwinian point of view, creative. To the point that we can say that the creation of cultural heritage and its communication to society are the cornerstones of a museum's action.

However, for the exhibitions to reflect the museum's internal culture, and contribute, therefore, to the creation of heritage and the communication of its meaning, it must meet two requirements: it must be thought out and planned by the museum's scientific staff⁴, and it must be realised in close intellectual collaboration between the curators and the designers. Every display or exhibition that is not designed and realised on the basis of these two premises has no tie with the museum, does not contribute to the process of creating heritage and to the process of spreading culture, the aims of which are society's cultural growth and awareness of historical and social identity.

In a book on theoretical museology published a few years ago⁵, drawing on a text by Andrée Malraux⁶, the sociologist Kevin Hetherington, wrote *the museum is a spatial relation that is principally involved in a process of ordering that takes place in*

⁴ Curators in the sense reported as instance by Gail Dexter Lord and Barry Lord, *Manual of Museum Management*, Atamira Press, Walnut Creek, 1997.

⁵ Macdonald S., Fyfe G. (eds.), 1996 – *Theorizing Museums*. Blackwell Publishers, Oxford.

⁶ Malraux A., 1954 – *The Museums Without Walls*. In *Voices of Silence*, Secker and Warburg, London, pp.13.128.

or around certain sites or buildings, and added museums as spatial relations are not just involved in ordering and classifying cultural works and artifacts, they are also expressions of the ordering of the social⁷. It seems clear to me that this definition of a museum is coherent with my idea of the museum as an elaborator of culture and a producer of heritage, and, coming to the subject of my contribution, I am convinced that at the heart of the new British Galleries is a creative process developed within the V&A, in the long and successful Anglo-American museological tradition. However, my observation is not original; Christopher Wilk, responsible for the project, and Sarah Medlam⁸ have pointed out that the British Galleries are the result of research into the history of design and deep reflection on the objects by the museum's staff. The British Galleries are then the result of the process of intellectual ordering and classification within the museum which Hetherington and Malraux consider the basis for defining the museum's cultural action. The British galleries are also the result of the organisation of the Victoria and Albert Museum which has made possible both the intellectual coordination of this research⁹, and the creation of a cultural relationship between the creators of the mining of the objects and the interpretation of the history, i.e. curators, and those have shaped them into the display galleries, i.e. designers.

From a museological point of view, these have been the most important elements in determining the new exhibition at the V&A, as they have influenced both the contents and the exhibition design, they have guided the choice of exhibits, the relationship between objects, their arrangement, the information systems and the unfolding of the exhibition.

If, excluding autocratic constraints¹⁰, there is a single reason for programming a permanent exhibition, and that is society's intrinsic need to create and know its own cultural heritage – a need in which the museum acts as mediator – there are many ways for its practical realisation. Personally I believe that a museum can choose between three different types of exhibition to communicate its culture; three communication philosophies each of which has a different way of interpreting and using the exhibits and a different attitude towards the visitors and their individual culture. I call these three types of exhibition *museology of wonder*, *rational museology* and *dogmatic museology*.

The *museology of wonder* is based on the interpretation of the objects in the essentially aesthetic light of the idealistic philosophy. It tends to transport the visitor outside the realm of reality and immerse him in an aesthetically ideal universe. Such museology, the main instrument of which is seduction and the immersion of the visitor in an foreign or marvellous environment, pervades many artistic museums and almost all picture-galleries (but also many archaeological museums) and has ancient roots, as it can be traced back to cabinets of curiosity, to the Kunst und

⁷ Hetherington K., 1996 – *The utopics of social ordering – Stonehenge as a museum without walls*. In: Macdonald S., Fyfe G., op. cit. pp.153-176

⁸ Wilk C., Medlam S. 2002 - *Quatre siècles d'art britannique au Victoria and Albert Museum*. L'Estampille (February 2002), pp.40-47.

⁹ The coordination of the various intellectual components is a fundamental process in the internal dynamics of the museum, as it is at the heart of the creation of the *unitary* culture. The unitary culture in turn, determines the success or failure of the exhibitions, and therefore the validity of the museum's communication process.

¹⁰ For an analysis of the relationship between politics and museums see Pinna G., 2001 - *El control político de los museos*. Experimenta, Madrid 36, pp.111-114.

Wunderkammern where collections of a mixture of *artificialia e naturalia*, were exhibited with the aim of amazing the visitor and immersing him in an unreal microcosm¹¹.

Rational museology, on the other hand, does not consider the aesthetic value of the objects but interprets them instead as deriving from symbolic meanings. It uses what Greenblatt calls *resonance*¹², which makes the exhibits capable of relating the past to the present, of linking different worlds and thus of evoking events and situations¹³. Conceived for a more profoundly social use of museums, rational museology does not reveal axiomatic truths, but tries to convince the public of its theories through the use of arguments which are hard to refute. It also tries to subjugate the public with an elegant and unusually refined ambiance. This museology is typical of many modern archaeological museums and, of course, history museums.

Finally, *dogmatic museology* has the same desire to interpret the objects as rational museology, but with one major difference: it provides direct, axiomatic information, the truth of which is guaranteed by the intrinsic authoritativeness of the museum. Dogmatic museology does not try to convince, it clearly places the museum over and above the individual culture of the visitors. It uses communicative systems which aim to subjugate the public, it imposes its intellectual superiority, for example by maintaining a highly specialized level, supplying an overdose of technical data or using scientific terms which are unknown to most people. Sometimes it attacks the public with methods typical of aggressive advertising, direct slogans, shocking colours and images. Typical above all of scientific museums, this museology has its roots in the principles of the positivist philosophy.

It is of course difficult to demarcate the three exhibition philosophies, as an exhibition can be partly rational, partly dogmatic and partly wondrous. Furthermore, political manipulation of museums can use all three exhibition types, cutting through the boundaries between them. However, I consider this classification useful for understanding what culture a museum has developed internally and which philosophy is at the heart of that culture.

It has been written that in the V&A 1951 display of the British design, *the aim had been to present a series of "masterpieces", each set against neutral colours and plain backgrounds in the belief that they would "speak for themselves". The values were those of the world and the emphasis was firmly on the aesthetic.* This was a clear example of the museology of wonder. Today the same objects are displayed in the new British Galleries in a totally different light. The aesthetics of the individual objects and its artistic importance, have given way to its social and historical interpretation. The exhibits are not displayed in the new galleries so that each of them interacts individually with the public on an aesthetical level, arousing admiration for the shape, delicacy or complexity of the work. Each object is displayed to represent a

¹¹ Flinden P., 1994 – *Possessing Nature. Museums, Collections, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy*. University of California Press, Berkeley.

¹² "the power that the exhibit has to go beyond its own formal boundaries and assume a wider dimension, evoking in those who look at it the complex and dynamic cultural forces from which it emerged and of which the observer can consider it to be a representative sample" Stephen Greenblatt in Karp I., Lavine S.D., 1991 – *Exhibiting Cultures, The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*. Smithsonian Institution Press., Washington.

¹³ Pomian C., 1987 – *Collectionneurs, amateurs et curieux*. Gallimard, Paris.

piece of the economic, social and productive history of the nation, a starting point for reconstructing the customs of British society from the 16th century to the end of the Victorian period, during which time Britain moved from being a net importer of luxury goods to the “workshop of the world”.

(From when, as the conservators of the museum have expressed with pride in the exhibition rooms, England was an importing country, subjected to the fashions in the rest of Europe, to when the industrial revolution imposed it on all the world.)

The museology of wonder has, then, given way to a museology which tells a story reconstructed in the libraries and curators’ studies; a story which is, of course, interpreted, and therefore partial, but which is the result of the museum’s culture. A culture which has modified the interpretation of the collections and the individual objects, and has shifted the emphasis from the aesthetic to the social, cultural and historical.

The stories told in the galleries of a museum are always conditioned by two elements: by the nature of the collections and by the interpretation of history. Since history is always interpreted on the basis of physical objects, be they artifacts or documents, the collections are the element which determines the scope of the story. Just as a museum of rural traditions, whose collections consist of agricultural tools, cannot fail to illustrate the rural life of the lower classes, so the destiny of the V&A’s collections, which are the result of a selection of quality objects, is to tell the story of the aristocratic, cultural and economic élites. This is just what has happened: in the sinuous historical and chronological display designed by Casson Mann the story of four centuries of British design and production unfolds, however, only in relation to the influences these had on the customs of England’s nobility and in the latter parts of the gallery the bourgeoisie. Of course this elitist story has its social limits, but it is also has a clear educational and, if you like, political aim. In this the V&A has not denied its origins, its historical tradition and the mission it was assigned when it was founded. So then, the British Galleries as an “economic” mission and as a display of national pride and identity? Yes, but with style! Nothing in the British Galleries is exalted. There are no heroes, but there emerge groups of people and actions that contributed to the freedom and power of the nation, and also to a pleasant life. No exhibit is displayed as a single work of art either. Each element is put into context through its relationship with other exhibits, places or trends. They are all part of a production process which aims first and foremost to relate and interpret rather than be artistic. Hendel’s statue relates the fashion of pleasure gardens, Canova’s Three Graces introduce collecting in the neoclassical period, and the paintings by Turner, Roberts, Redgrave and Constable, the labels for which do not give pre-eminence to the artists’ names¹⁴, are displayed as they were bought in 1857, works by contemporary artists as models for the students of the National Gallery of British Art in South Kensington.

The public is prompted to discover, to follow the repeated rhythm used in the galleries – Style, Who Led Taste?, Fashionable Living, What Was New?- imposed on the exhibition, to follow the panels which introduce each section, to read the texts, to use the touch screens in order to go into the subjects in depth, and to try to do the quizzes provided on some of the some showcases. The abundance of information, the

¹⁴ These labels indicate the subject of the painting first, then the date, the explanation of the painting and finally the artist’s name.

sheer size of the exhibition and the thousands of exhibits on display, all invite the public to return to the museum many times. From this point of view it is a traditional museum exhibition which I love very much, going totally against the tendency in many European museums to give in to the demands of mass tourism. While in Berlin a gallery is being built which will cross all of the Museum Insel, so that tourists who are in a hurry can see just the principal masterpieces of the city's museums¹⁵, the V&A is proposing an exhibition which must be looked at, read and commented on, which does not appear didactic and which, above all, avoids spectacularity, apart from that caused by the sheer beauty of the exhibits. This shows a decision to distance itself from an exhibition style which was fashionable in the 80s and 90s, and which in England was adopted by important museums such as the Greenwich Maritime Museum, the London Natural History Museum and the Science Museum. It is an aggressive style which uses the communication methods of the advertising world, the visual impact of the setting and the colourful aggressiveness of Pop Art, which strikes and stuns the spectator, simplifies concepts and treats all visitors like children and in which, in my opinion, lies the seed of cultural globalisation.

The British Galleries have been built to seduce the visitor with the beauty of the individual exhibits, the clear result of careful choice, but also with the exhibition's organisation and design, and with attention to detail. A new printing font has been devised for the information panels. Casson Mann have divided up the available space, creating a series of more intimate rooms, in which the visitor does not run the risk of getting lost or losing the thread. The colours, bold, but soft enough not to interact with the exhibits, also determine the spaces and the sequence of the story. This unfolds in a succession of showcases and display panels in which objects are mixed regardless of typologies, the only guide being the sense of the story. Classification by type has been abandoned in favour of the story; just as in reality no object is truly isolated, each is shown in relation to other objects. I regard this as major museological revolution, perhaps equal only to the one natural history museums were obliged to undergo after the Darwinian revolution which swept away the fixedness of the organic world and its schematic organisation, to make way for a dynamic intertaxonomic vision of the world. In the exhibition there is no giving in to monumentalism or sensationalism popular with many great continental museums which are constantly trying to attract an increasingly large public and in which, more times than not, one feels immersed in a world which is totally alien to daily life. In the British Galleries the public is invited to feel at home, it is not bombarded with continuous stimuli, it can photograph the exhibits which are monitored discreetly, and is free to use all the information facilities devised by the museum, without feeling guilty if it chooses not to.

Seduced by the refinery of the exhibits, the delicate balance achieved in presenting them and by the delicacy of communication, the visitors become in some way captive to the exhibition. This is the museum's subtle stratagem to impose its own interpretation of history and society, without accepting discussion from the outside world. From this point of view, as far as the British Galleries are concerned,

¹⁵ Poor Nefertiti, twice removed from her own story! First she was taken from Tell el Amarna, her natural environment, and then from the archaeological context of the German missions, exhibited as a coherent whole in the Egyptian Museum in Charlottenbourg.

the V&A is not a Temple, neither is it a Forum, while the new exhibition is a good example of what I call *rational museology*.

C.Wilk, N.Humphrey, Creating the British Galleries at the V&A. A study in museology. V&A Publications, London 2004: 219-224.