Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Objects of Ethnography," in Exhibiting Cultures (1991)

Objects of Ethnography

Moon rocks, a few small strips of meat dried Hidatsa-style before 1918, dust from Jerusalem, "a knot tied by the wind in a storm at sea," bottle caps filled with melted crayon made for skelley (a New York City street game), "a drop of the Virgin's milk," pieces of the dismantled Berlin Wall.[1] Each object is shown to the public eye protected and enshrined. Were the criterion of "visual interest" to determine what should be exhibited, such rocks, bits of meat, dust, knots, and toys, if saved at all, would await attention of another kind—perhaps by microscope, telescope, laboratory test, nutritional analysis, written description, diagram, or report of miracles. Why save, let alone display, things that are of little visual interest? Why ask the museum visitor to look closely at something whose value lies somewhere other than in its appearance?

To suggest that objects lacking visual interest might be of historical or cultural or religious or scientific interest, while seeming to offer an answer, actually compounds the problem because it leaves unexplored several fundamental assumptions, first among them the notion of artifactual autonomy. It is precisely this autonomy that makes it possible to display objects in and of themselves, even when there is little to inspect with the eye.[2]

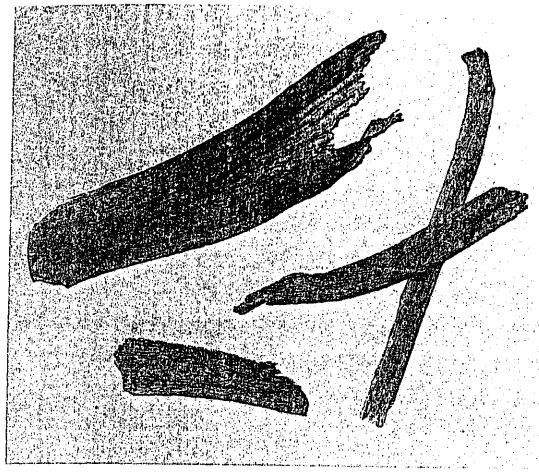
Ethnographic artifacts are objects of ethnography. They are artifacts created by ethnographers. Such objects become ethnographic by virtue of

being defined, segmented, detached, and carried away by ethnographers. They are ethnographic, not because they were found in a Hungarian peasant household, Kwakiutl village, or Rajasthani market rather than in Buckingham Palace or Michelangelo's studio, but by virtue of the manner in which they have been detached, for disciplines make their objects and in the process make themselves. It is one thing, however, when ethnography is inscribed in books or displayed behind glass, at a remove in space, time, and language from the site described. It is quite another when people are themselves the medium of ethnographic representation, when they perform themselves, whether at home to tourists or at world's fairs, homelands entertainments, or folklife festivals—when they become living signs of themselves.

Exhibiting the Fragment

The artfulness of the ethnographic object is an art of excision, of detachment, an art of the excerpt. Where does the object begin, and where does it end? This I see as an essentially surgical issue. Shall we exhibit the cup with the saucer, the tea, the cream and sugar, the spoon, the napkin and placemat, the table and chair, the rug? Where do we make the cut?

Perhaps we should speak not of the ethnographic object but of the ethnographic fragment. Like the ruin, the ethnographic fragment is informed by a poetics of detachment. Detachment refers not only to the physical act of producing fragments but also to the detached attitude that makes that fragmentation and its appreciation possible. Lovers of ruins in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England understood the distinctive pleasure afforded by architectural fragments, once enough time had passed for a detached attitude to form. The antiquarian John Aubrey valued the ruin as much as he did the earlier intact structure.[3] Ruins inspired the feelings of melancholy and wonder associated with the sublime. They stimulated the viewer to imagine the building in its former pristine state. They offered the pleasure of longing for the irretrievable object of one's fantasy. Nor were ruins left to accidental formation. Aesthetic principles guided the selective demolition of ruins and, where a ruin was lacking, the building of artificial ones.[4] Restoration may be resisted in cases in which the power of the ruin is its capacity to signify the destructive circumstances of its creation; the skeleton of the Atomic Bomb Dome in Hiroshima does just this. In the case of the Ellis Island restoration, a fragment of the ruin is exhibited as such, in a vitrine, as part of the story of the site. A history of the poetics of the fragment is yet to be written, for fragments are not simply a necessity of which we make a virtue, a vicissitude of history, or a response to limitations on our ability to bring the world indoors. We make fragments.[5]



"Dried meat, Hidatsa style. Collected by Gilbert Wilson, pre-1918? Beef."

From the exhibition *The Way to Independence: Memories of a Hidatsa Indian Family*, 1987. Photo by Randy Croce, Minnesota Historical Society.

In Situ

In considering the problem of the ethnographic object, it is useful to distinguish *in situ* from *in context*, a pair of terms that call into question the nature of the whole, the burden of interpretation, and the location of meaning.

The notion of in situ entails metonymy and mimesis: the object is a part that stands in a contiguous relation to an absent whole that may or may not be re-created. The art of the metonym is an art that accepts the inherently fragmentary nature of the object. Showing it in all its partiality

enhances the aura of its "realness." The danger, of course, is that museums amass collections and are, in a sense, condemned ever after to exhibit them. Collection-driven exhibitions often suffer from ethnographic atrophy because they tend to focus on what could be, and was, physically detached and carried away. As a result, what one has is what one shows. Very often what is shown is the collection, whether highlights, masterpieces, or everything in it. The tendency increases for such objects to be presented as art.

The art of mimesis, whether in the form of period rooms, ethnographic villages, re-created environments, reenacted rituals, or photomurals, places objects (or replicas of them) in situ. In situ approaches to installation enlarge the ethnographic object by expanding its boundaries to include more of what was left behind, even if only in replica, after the object was excised from its physical, social, and cultural settings. Because the metonymic nature of ethnographic objects invites mimetic evocations of what was left behind, in situ approaches to installation tend toward environmental and re-creative displays. Such displays, which tend toward the monographic, appeal to those who argue that cultures are coherent wholes in their own right, that environment plays a significant role in cultural formation, and that displays should present process and not just products. At their most mimetic, in situ installations include live persons, preferably actual representatives of the cultures on display.

In-situ installations, no matter how mimetic, are not neutral. They are not a slice of life lifted from the everyday world and inserted into the museum gallery, though this is the rhetoric of the mimetic mode. On the contrary, those who construct the display also constitute the subject, even when they seem to do nothing more than relocate an entire house and its contents, brick by brick, board by board, chair by chair. Just as the ethnographic object is the creation of the ethnographer, so too are the putative cultural wholes of which they are part. The exhibition may reconstruct Kwakiutl life as the ethnographer envisions it before contact with Europeans, or Hungarian peasant interiors, region by region, as they are thought to have existed before industrialization. Or the display may project a utopian national whole that harmoniously integrates regional diversity, a favorite theme of national ethnographic museums and American pageants of democracy during the first decades of this century. "Wholes" are not given but constituted, and often they are hotly contested.[6]

Representational conventions guide mimetic displays, despite the illusion of close fit, if not identity, between the representation and that which is represented.[7] Indeed, mimetic displays may be so dazzling in their realistic effects as to subvert curatorial efforts to focus the viewer's attention on particular ideas or objects. There is the danger that theatrical spectacle will displace scientific seriousness, that the artifice of the installation will overwhelm ethnographic artifact and curatorial intention.

In Context

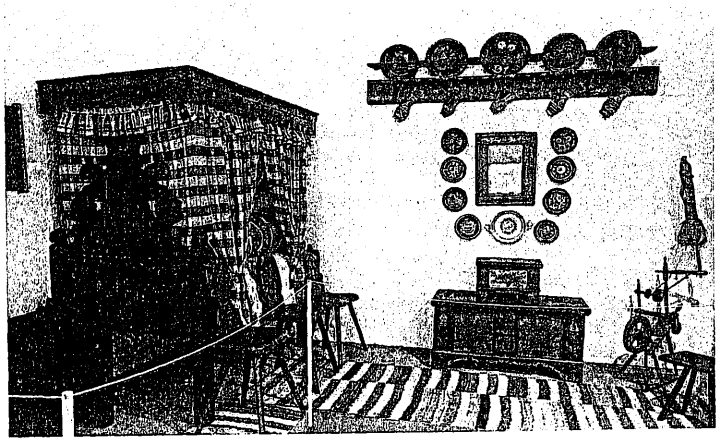
The notion of in context, which poses the interpretive problem of theoretical frame of reference, uses particular techniques of arrangement and explanation to convey ideas. The notion expressed in a 1911 history of the British Museum that "the multifarious objects in the Ethnographical Gallery represent so many starting-points in the world's civilization" places those objects in context, not in situ.[8] That context is signaled by the title of the chapter devoted to the Ethnographical Gallery, "Civilization in the Making."

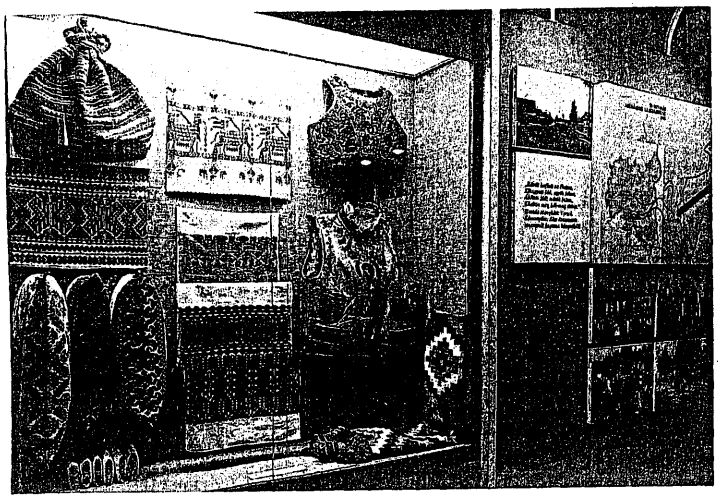
Objects are set in context by means of long labels, charts, diagrams, commentary delivered via earphones, explanatory audiovisual programs, docents conducting tours, booklets and catalogs, educational programs, lectures and performances. Objects are also set in context by means of other objects, often in relation to a classification or schematic arrangement of some kind, based on typologies of form or proposed historical relationships. In-context approaches to installation establish a theoretical frame of reference for the viewer, offer explanations, provide historical background, make comparisons, pose questions, and sometimes even extend to the circumstances of excavation, collection, and conservation of the objects on display. There are as many contexts for an object as there are interpretive strategies.

In-context approaches exert strong cognitive control over the objects, asserting the power of classification and arrangement to order large num-

"Room of Sárköz from the second half of the nineteenth century."

Béri Balogh Ádám Museum. Photo by Gabler Csaba. Copyright Képzömüvészeti Alap Kiadóvállalata, Budapest.





"Popular art relics of the Bukovinian Székelys."

Béri Balogh Ádám Museum. Photo by Gabler Csaba. Copyright Képzömüvészeti Alap Kiadóvállalata, Budapest.

bers of artifacts from diverse cultural and historical settings and to position them in relation to one another. Plants and animals arranged according to the Linnaean classification affirmed the goodness of the divine plan in Charles Willson Peale's museum in Philadelphia during the late eighteenth and nineteenth century. A. H. L. F. Pitt Rivers preferred to arrange his series of weapons according to formal criteria, from the simplest to the most complex, to tell the story of mankind's inexorable evolution through stages of racial and cultural development.[9] Even when the objects themselves are not arranged according to such conceptual schemes but according to geographic area, the viewer may be encouraged to "frame for himself a few general principles for which he can seek out specimens."[10]

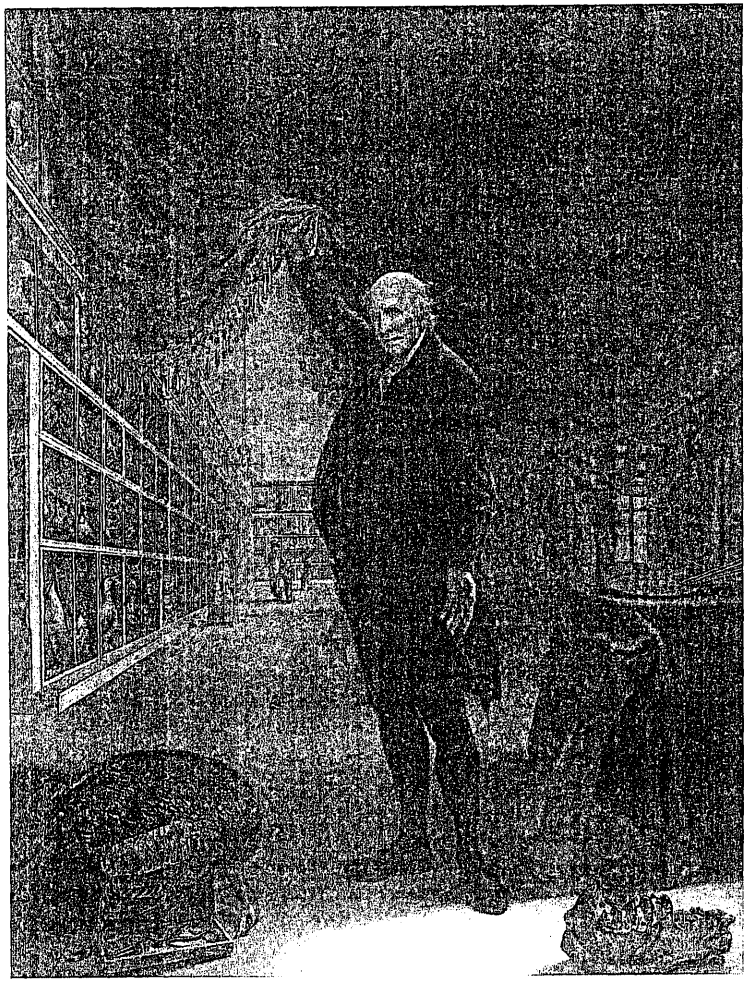
Whether they guide the physical arrangement of objects or structure the way viewers look at otherwise amorphous accumulations, exhibition classifications create serious interest where it might otherwise be lacking. "Than the Ethnographical Gallery in the British Museum there is no department the educational significance of which is so likely to be unappreciated," wrote Henry C. Shelley in 1911, adding that visitors are inclined to indulge in laughter and jokes when confronted with "objects illustrating the manners and customs of what are known as the savage races."[11] For instruction to supplant amusement, viewers needed principles for looking. They required a context, or framework, for transforming apparently grotesque, rude, strange, and vulgar artifacts into object lessons. Having been saved from oblivion, the ethnographic fragment now needed to be rescued from trivialization. One way of doing this was to treat the specimen as a document.

Rescuing the Fragment from Trivialization

The problematic relationship of in situ and in context, which are by no means mutually exclusive approaches, is signaled by Oleg Grabar in his comment about Islamic objects: "[T]hey are in fact to be seen as ethnographic documents, closely tied to life, even a reconstructed life, and more meaningful in large numbers and series than as single creations."[12] Such objects, in Grabar's view, are inherently multiple, documentary, and con-

The Artist in His Museum.

1822, by Charles Willson Peale. Oil on canvas, 103 3/4 in. × 79 7/8 in. Acc. no.: 1878.1.2. Courtesy of the Museum of American Art of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia. Gift of Mrs. Sarah Harrison (The Joseph Harrison, Jr. Collection).



tingent. They were never intended to hold up to scrutiny as singular creations. Moreover, they are at their most documentary when presented in their multiplicity, that is, as a collection. Grabar diffuses their status as artifacts by according them higher value as "documents," as signs that point away from themselves to something else, to "life." At the same time, he hyperbolizes their status as artifacts by advocating that they be examined in "large numbers and series," a task anticipated and facilitated by the collecting process itself and well suited to typological exhibition arrangements.

Though once multiple, many ethnographic objects become singular, and the more singular they become, the more readily are they reclassified and exhibited as art. The many become one by virtue of the collection process itself. First, collecting induces rarity by creating scarcity: escalating demand reduces the availability of objects. Second, collectors create categories that from the outset, even before there is demand, are marked by the challenges they pose to acquisition: "By creating their own categories, all collectors create their own rarities."[13] Third, the very ubiquity of the kinds of objects that interest ethnographers contributes to their ephemerality. Commonplace things are worn to oblivion and replaced with new objects, or are viewed as too trivial in their own time to be removed from circulation, to be alienated from their practical and social purposes, and saved for posterity.[14] But no matter how singular the ethnographic object becomes, it retains its contingency, even when, by a process of radical detachment, it is reclassified and exhibited as art.[15]

Indeed, the litmus test of art seems to be whether an object can be stripped of contingency and still hold up. The universalizing rhetoric of "art," the insistence that great works are universal, that they transcend space and time, is predicated on the irrelevance of contingency. But the ability to stand alone says less about the nature of the object than about our categories and attitudes, which may account for the minimalist installation style of exhibitions of "primitive art." By suppressing contingency and presenting the objects on their own, such installations lay claims to the universality of the exhibited objects as works of art.

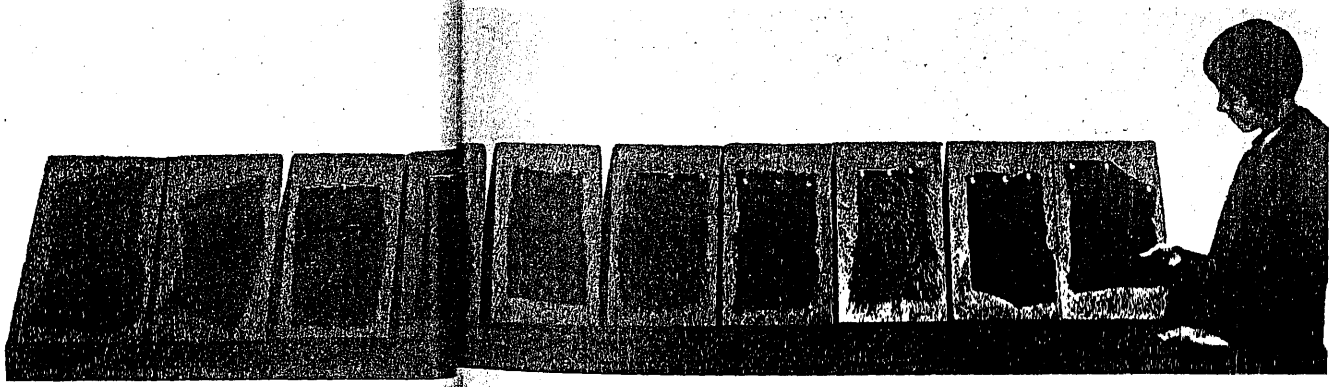
Ethnographic objects move from curio to specimen to art, though not necessarily in that order. As curiosities, objects are anomalous. By definition, they defy classification. Nineteenth-century advocates of scientific

approaches to museum exhibition complained repeatedly about collections of curiosities that were displayed without systematic arrangement. But how could exhibitors be expected to arrange systematically objects that in their terms were unclassifiable? In what category might one exhibit the knot tied by the wind during a storm at sea that was donated to Peale's Museum at the end of the eighteenth century? Probably indistinguishable in appearance from a knot tied by human hands on land during calm weather, this object was an episode in an amazing story waiting to be retold rather than a member of a class of objects relevant to scientific taxonomies of the period.

What we see here are objects that had outlasted the curatorial classifications that once accommodated them in Renaissance cabinets and galleries. Singularities, chance formations that resulted from the "shuffle of things," did fall into a broad category, namely, *mirabilia*.[16] This category included the very large and the very small, the misshapen and the miraculous, and the historically unique: for example, a hat with bullet holes associated with a specific historic event.[17] By the nineteenth century, such objects were anomalous to natural historians interested in taxonomies of the normal, not the singularities of chance formation, though figures such as Joseph Dorfeuille continued to make teratology (the study of the malformed or monstrous) a major attraction in their museums.[18]

Exhibition classifications, whether Linnaean or evolutionary, shift the grounds of singularity from the object to a category within a particular taxonomy. For a curiosity to become classifiable it had to qualify as representative of a distinguishable class of objects. Peale, for example, was reluctant to show items that fell outside the Linnaean classification according to which he arranged objects in his museum in Philadelphia during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. His exhibits of plants and animals were normative: they featured typical members of each class. The comprehensiveness of the classification and orderly arrangement of Peale's collection testified to the purposiveness and goodness of God's creation, a message reinforced by quotations from the Bible mounted on the walls. With his fine American specimens, Peale intended to refute the view of Buffon, an eighteenth-century naturalist, that New World species were inferior to those of Europe. A mark of the seriousness and scientific nature of such exhibitions was the absence of freakish aberrations.[19]

In contrast, the exhibit for the International Eugenics Conference at the American Museum of Natural History in 1932 subjected to orderly arrangement the very anomalies (trembling guinea pigs, triplets, a picture drawn by a color-blind man, deformed eyeballs) that a century earlier would have appeared as curiosities defying classification. The structure of genetic inheritance now provided the matrix for the orderly display of nature's mistakes, long an attraction in cabinets and freak shows, and for eliminating such errors in the future—sterilization, antimiscegenation laws, and selective mating.[20] A logical outgrowth of the exhibition of racial types and the evolution of mankind, such eugenics exhibitions offered classifications that included the visitors themselves. These were interactive displays, for attendants handed out pedigree charts and blank schedules issued by the Eugenics Record Office and encouraged visitors to take tests for taste threshold and artistic capacity, for example, to rank fur samples. A "Eugenic Sterilization" exhibit was nearby.



"Specialized Tests for Sense of Elegance. Quality in Fur. . . . Arrange these ten samples in the order of your feeling for their elegance if made into a woman's 'best coat'. . . . Be guided by your own personal liking or feeling of appreciation. . . . Be not influenced by knowledge of cost or fashion—try to respond to real quality."

Displays in the dime museum tested credulity—Ripley's Believe It or Not. Scientific exhibits struggled to achieve intelligibility—the object lessons of Dr. George Brown Goode, director of the U.S. National Museum. Exhibitions of art faced a different challenge. Refusing to define the objects in his collection either as curios (singular anomalies) or as ethnographic artifacts (representative examples of a class of objects), Hadji Ephraim Benguiat, a prime lender of Jewish ceremonial art to the Smithsonian Institution at the turn of the century, thought of his possessions as objects of art, a status derived from their perfection and his connoisseurship. Benguiat identified the classificatory skills of the art collector with his powers of discrimination. At the climactic instant of acquisition—each time he or she accepts or rejects an object—the collector "classifies." Benguiat was interested in only one category, the perfect. This category was coterminous with his entire collection, seen as a supreme singularity made up of many singular artifacts. They were displayed accordingly.

Jewels and gems dazzle. They invite appreciation, not analysis. There is no place in this empire of things, ruled by the collector of collectors, for copies, photographs, models, homologues, dioramas, or tableaus. There is no place here for displaying continuous series of objects—without regard for the artistic excellence of each and every one—to make some historical point, no place for a system of classification that would array objects within theoretical hierarchies. Unmitigated excellence in everything shown, ubiquitous singularity, and the unifying principle of the collector's power—this is the message of the jewel box.

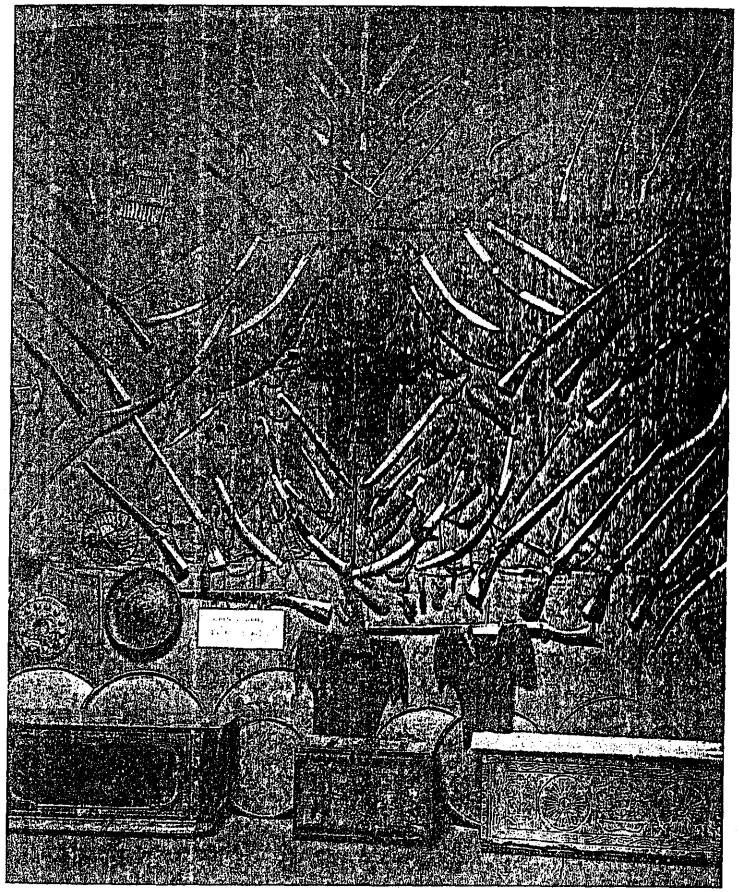
No matter how perfect this collection and each object within it, however, Benguiat's treasures could be reclassified for scientific purposes, and in the various exhibitions where they were featured, they moved from category to category.[21]

The Limits of Detachment

Not all that the ethnographic surgeon subjects to cognitive excision can be physically detached, carried away, and installed for viewing. What happens to the intangible, the ephemeral, the immovable, and the animate? The in-

"Collection of Oriental Arms and Armor." Some of the arms shown here "belonged to the notorious brigand 'Katirjiani,' who was such a lover of fine arms that he frequently attacked a caravan and sacrificed the lives of his men just to acquire other specimens of arms, as the jewelled or inlaid decoration was always executed according to the personal taste of the owner, so that there are seldom two alike."

From *Fine Art Portfolio Illustrating Some of the Exhibits of the H. Ephraim Benguiat Museum Collection and the Historical Damascus Palace* (St. Louis: Louisiana Purchase Exposition, 1904), 29.



tangible, which includes such classic ethnographic subjects as kinship, worldview, cosmology, values, and attitudes, cannot be carried away. The ephemeral encompasses all forms of behavior—everyday activities, storytelling, ritual, dance, speech, performance of all kinds. Now you see it, now you don't. The immovable, whether a mesa, pyramid, cliff dwelling, or landform, can be recorded in photographs but presents formidable logistical obstacles to those who would detach and carry it away. The animate has been collected, both dead and alive. Dried, pickled, or stuffed, botanical and zoological specimens become artifacts for the museum. Alive, flora and fauna present storage problems that are solved by gardens and zoos in which living collections are on view. But what about people? Bones and mummies, body parts in alcohol, and plaster death masks may be found in museums. Living human specimens have been displayed in zoos, formal exhibitions, festivals, and other popular amusements.

If we cannot carry away the intangible, ephemeral, immovable, and animate, what have we done instead? Typically, we have inscribed what we cannot carry away, whether in field notes, recordings, photographs, films, or drawings. We have created ethnographic documents. Like ethnographic objects, these documents are also artifacts of ethnography, but true to what I would call the fetish-of-the-true-cross approach, ethnographic objects, those material fragments that we can carry away, are accorded a higher quotient of realness. Only the artifacts, the tangible metonyms, are really real. All the rest is mimetic, second order, a representation, an account undeniably of our own making. We have here the legacy of Renaissance antiquarians, for whom "visible remains" were used to corroborate written accounts. Objects, according to Giambattista Vico, were "manifest testimony" and carried greater authority than texts, even contemporaneous ones.[22]

Textualizing Objects/Objectifying Texts

The priority of objects over texts in museum settings was reversed during the second half of the nineteenth century. Goode operated according to the dictum that "the most important thing about an exhibition was the label," a point restated by many who worked with him.[23]

> The people's museum should be much more than a house of specimens in glass cases. It should be a house full of ideas, arranged with the strictest attention to system.
>
> I once tried to express this thought by saying "*An efficient educational museum may be described as a collection of instructive labels, each illustrated by a well-selected specimen* (emphasis in original).[24]

Museums were to teach "by means of object lessons," but objects could not be relied on to speak for themselves.[25]

The curatorial charge was to create exhibitions that would "furnish an intelligent train of thought" by using objects to illustrate ideas.[26] Reacting to the apparent lack of logical arrangement in displays of art collections in many European museums and the low status to which so many private museums in America had descended, Goode had long insisted that the museum of the past was to be transformed from "a cemetery of bric-a-brac into a nursery of living thoughts."[27] His model for the public museum was the public library, though he believed that exhibitions had even greater potential as a medium of popular education. Objects were to be read like books: "Professor Huxley has described the museum as a 'consultative library of objects.'"[28] Curators were to objectify texts and textualize objects, hence the importance of an organizational scheme for arranging objects and labels to explain them and the willing acceptance of copies, casts, impressions, photographs, diagrams, and other surrogates for primary artifacts. Since the main purpose of a public museum was to educate, "for the purposes of study a cast was as good as an original," and in some cases better.[29] Copies came to play a special role.

Though proclaimed as a new approach to the exhibiting of objects, the textualized object was not new; it had been featured in demonstrations and illustrated lectures for centuries. Anatomy lessons were conducted at public dissections as early as the fourteenth century in Bologna, where, as the scholar read the anatomy text, the demonstrator dissected the body, and the ostensor, the one who showed, pointed a wand at the part of the body under consideration.[30] The French anatomy lesson during the seventeenth century was "a great social event that the whole town attended, with masks, refreshments, and diversions."[31]

The increasing emphasis on ostension—on showing—during the nineteenth century suggests a shift in the foundation of authoritative knowledge from a reliance primarily on rhetoric to an emphasis on information, particularly in the form of visual facts.[32] By the end of the eighteenth century, Peale could boast that in the lecture room of his museum, presentations were illustrated with real specimens from his collection, consistent with Jean-Jacques Rousseau's admonition that "teachers never substitute representation for reality, show for substance—to teach, in short, from actual objects."[33] In this respect, Peale was in tune with a more general tendency of the period toward the "decidedly empirical or evidential nature of lecturing," though even under the guise of science, objects were used for their dramatic effect: "William Hazlitt was appalled at one of Carlisle's lectures on human emotions to find a dissected heart and brain being circulated among the audience."[34]

In many ways, the approach to museum exhibitions advocated by Goode during the latter part of the nineteenth century should be seen in relation to the illustrated lecture, its history and requirements. Complaining in 1891 about the decline of "entertainments worthy of civilized communities—concerts, readings, lectures"—and the rise of illustration, including the diagram, blackboard, and stereopticon, Goode wanted the museum to fill the gap left by the decline of lectures and scientific, literary, and artistic societies.[35] The written label in an exhibition was a surrogate for the words of an absent lecturer, with the added advantage that the exhibited objects, rather than appear briefly to illustrate a lecture, could be seen by a large public for a longer period of time.

It is precisely in these terms that Washington Matthews introduced his lecture "Some Sacred Objects of the Navajo Rites" at the Third International Folk-Lore Congress of the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893.

> Someone has said that a first-class museum would consist of a series of satisfactory labels with specimens attached. This saying might be rendered: "The label is more important than the specimen." When I have finished reading this paper, you may admit that this is true in the case of the little museum which I have here to show: A basket, a fascicle of plant fibres; a few rudely painted sticks, some beads and feathers put together as if by children in their meaningless play, for the total of the collection. You would scarcely pick these trifles up if you saw them lying in the gutter, yet when I have told all I have to tell about them, I trust they may seem of greater importance, and that some among you would be as glad to possess them as I am. I might have added largely to this collection had I time to discourse about them, for I possess many more of their kind. It is not a question of things, but of time. I shall do scant justice to this little pile within an hour. An hour it will be to you, and a tiresome hour, no doubt; but you may pass it with greater patience when you learn that this hour's monologue represents to me twelve years of hard and oft-baffled investigation. Such dry facts as I have to relate are not to be obtained by rushing up to the first Indian you meet, notebook in hand. But I have no time for further preliminary remarks, and must proceed at once to my descriptions.[36]

In this demonstration of connoisseurship, the ethnographer is a detective who toils long and hard to decipher material clues. This master of induction competes both with the native informant and with other ethnographers, not for the objects, but for the facts that comprise his descriptions. His lecture is a long label, a performed description that elevates what would otherwise be viewed as "trifles." Neither the modest specimens nor the dry facts are expected to interest the listener. Rather, it is the ethnographer's own expenditure of time and effort—his expertise—that creates value.

This effect is achieved rhetorically, for the more unprepossessing the evidence, the more impressive the ethnographic description. Characterizing his own recounting of the facts as "minute to a tedious degree" and "not one half the particulars that I might appropriately have told you," Matthews admits to having reached the limits of his ability to describe when challenged by the drumstick on the table. Not even the Navajo can describe in words how the drumstick is made, "so intricate are the rules pertaining to its construction." Apologizing for not having fresh yucca on hand with which to demonstrate the process, Matthews offers to take anyone who is interested to the "yucca-covered deserts of Arizona" where he can "show him how to make a drum stick." In this way, Matthews con-

fronts two basic problems in ethnographic display. First he makes the apparently trivial interesting by performing ethnography (the illustrated lecture). Then he addresses the limitations of verbal description by offering to play Indian (the demonstration).[37] The profusion of facts that Matthews presents to his listeners, his apologies for their dry and tedious character notwithstanding, is a classic case of what Neil Harris has identified as the operational aesthetic—"a delight in observing process and examining for literal truth."[38]

Exhibiting Humans

Not only inanimate artifacts but also humans are detachable, fragmentable, and replicable in a variety of materials. The inherently performative nature of live specimens veers exhibits of them strongly in the direction of spectacle, blurring still further the line between morbid curiosity and scientific interest, chamber of horrors and medical exhibition, circus and zoological garden, theater and living ethnographic display, scholarly lecture and dramatic monologue, cultural performance and staged re-creation. The blurring of this line was particularly useful in England and the United States during the early nineteenth century because performances that would be objectionable to conservative Protestants if staged in a theater were acceptable when presented in a museum, even if there was virtually nothing else to distinguish them. This reframing of performance in terms of nature, science, and education rendered it respectable, particularly during the first half of the nineteenth century. If in the scientific lecture the exhibitor was the performer, ethnographic displays shifted the locus of performance to the exhibit proper and in so doing, made ample use of patently theatrical genres and techniques to display people and their things.

In what might be characterized as a reciprocity of means and complementarity of function, museums used theatrical crafts of scene painting for exhibits and staged performances in their lecture rooms, while theaters used the subjects presented in museums, including live exotic animals and humans, and the technologies demonstrated there in their stage productions. Museums served as surrogate theaters during periods when

theaters came under attack for religious reasons, while theaters brought a note of seriousness to their offerings by presenting edifying entertainment. In the drama of the specimen, the curator was a ventriloquist whose task it was to make the object speak. Through scenarios of production and function, curators converted objects into stories: they showed the process by which ceramics and textiles were manufactured, step-by-step, or how they were used in daily life and ceremony. The Smithsonian anthropologist Otis T. Mason was explicit on this point in 1891 when he defined "the important elements of the specimen" as "the dramatis personae and incidents."[39]

Living or Dead

Human displays teeter-totter on a kind of semiotic seesaw, equipoised between the animate and the inanimate, the living and the dead. The semiotic complexity of exhibits of people, particularly those of an ethnographic character, may be seen in reciprocities between exhibiting the dead as if they are alive and the living as if they are dead, reciprocities that hold for the art of the undertaker as well as the art of the museum preparator.

Ethnographic displays are part of a larger history of human display, in which the themes of death, dissection, torture, and martyrdom are intermingled. This history includes the exhibition of dead bodies in cemeteries, catacombs, homes, and theaters, the public dissection of cadavers in anatomy lessons, the vivisection of torture victims using such anatomical techniques as flaying, public executions by guillotine or gibbet, heads of criminals impaled on stakes, public extractions of teeth, and displays of body parts and fetuses in anatomical and other museums, whether in the flesh, in wax, or in plaster cast.[40] The body parts arrived not only as by-products of dissections but also as a result of amputations, for example, the trigger finger of a villain.[41] Effigies of men tortured and executed in the very cages in which they were displayed were an attraction at the Münster Zoo.[42]

Ethnographic subjects were easily incorporated into such modes of display.[43] The remains of the dead—tattooed Maori heads, Aztec skulls, and

bones removed from Indian graves—had long been excavated and shown as ethnographic specimens. Live subjects provided expanded opportunities for ethnographic display. While live, human rarities figured in museological dramas of cognitive vivisection. When dead, their corpses were anatomized and their bones and fleshy body parts incorporated into anatomical exhibits. The *vanitas mundi* was a way of exhibiting dissected materials: one such anatomical allegory was created out of the skeleton of a fetus, tiny kidney stones, a dried artery, and a hardened vas deferens. Articulated skeletons, taxidermy, wax models, and live specimens also offered conceptual links between anatomy and death in what might be considered museums of mortality.[44]

"Specimens on Shelf." Wax models, circa 1850–1920. Top, left to right: Recklinghausen's disease of breast; active erysipelas on face; gangrenous ulceration of lip and nares; rupia (tertiary syphilis) of face. Bottom, left to right: arms of infants bearing vaccinia (cowpox) on sixth to eighth day, on ninth to tenth day, and on fourteenth to sixteenth day; arm bearing roseola varicella (chicken pox).

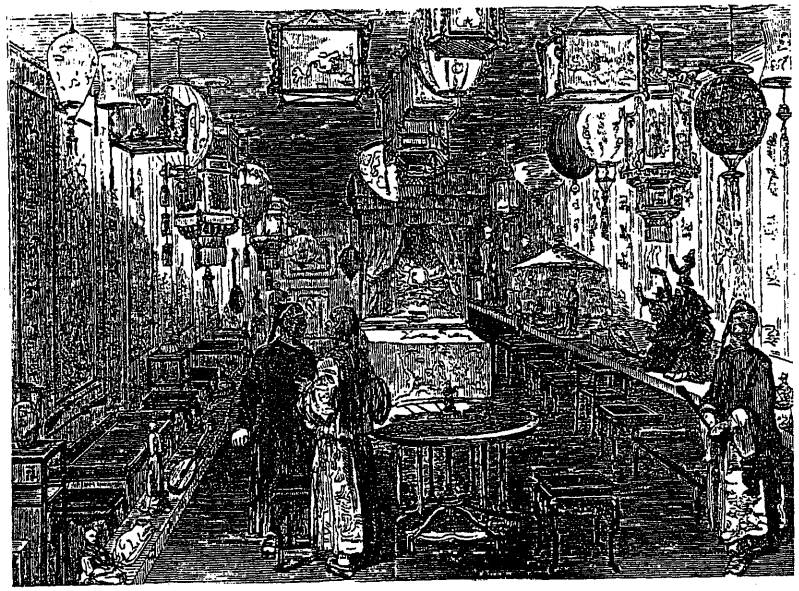
Collection of the Mütter Museum of The College of Physicians of Philadelphia. Photo Arne Svenson, copyright 1993.

Wax models as a form of three-dimensional anatomical illustration were commonly used to teach medicine, especially pathologies of the skin, and were featured in anatomical displays open to the public. Rackstrow's Museum of Anatomy and Curiosities, which was popular in London during the mid-eighteenth century, offered visitors wax replicas of the human body in various states of health and disease, inside and out, including reproductive organs and fetuses, some of them preserved in alcohol rather than represented in wax.[45] With the rising interest in racial typologies and evolution during the mid-nineteenth century, Sarti's Museum of Pathological Anatomy in London, and others like it, became the place to exhibit culturally constructed anatomical pathologies (parts of a Moorish woman's anatomy), missing links in the evolutionary sequence (wax figures of African "savages" with tails), and wax tableaus of ethnographic scenes.[46] As early as 1797, Peale had completed wax figures for "a group of contrasting races of mankind" that included natives from North and South America, the Sandwich Islands, Otaheite, and China. The faces are thought to have been made from life casts. The figures were outfitted with appropriate clothing and artifacts. Half a century later, the Gallery of All Nations in Reimer's Anatomical and Ethnological Museum in London featured "the varied types of the Great Human Family," including the Aztec Lilliputians that shortly before had appeared live in the Liverpool Zoo.[47]

The "gallery of nations" idea, which since the late sixteenth century had served as the organizing principle for books devoted to customs, manners, religions, costumes, and other ethnographic topics, was easily adapted to the exhibition of ethnographic specimens.[48] A logical spinoff was the monographic display. Nathan Dunn's celebrated Chinese collection, which was installed in Peale's museum in 1838 and moved to London in 1841, offered, according to a diarist of the period, "a perfect picture of Chinese life."

> Figures of natural size, admirably executed in clay, all of them portraits of individuals, are there to be seen, dressed in the appropriate costume, engaged in their various avocations and surrounded by the furniture, implements and material objects of daily existence. The faces are expressive, the

attitudes natural, the situation & grouping well conceived, and the aspect of the whole very striking and lifelike. Mandarins, priests, soldiers, ladies of quality, gentlemen of rank, play-actors and slaves; a barber, a shoemaker and a blacksmith employed in their trades; the shop of a merchant with purchasers buying goods, the drawing room of a man of fortune with his visitors smoking and drinking tea & servants in attendance; all sitting, standing, almost talking, with the dress, furniture and accompaniments of actual life. Some of the costumes are of the richest and most gorgeous description. Models of country houses and boats, weapons, lamps, pictures, vases, images of Gods, and porcelain vessels, many of them most curious and beautiful, and in number, infinite. Mr. Dunn was in the room himself and explained to us the nature and uses of things.[49]



Saloon of a Chinese junk.

From *Illustrated London News*, 20 May 1948. Photo courtesy Guildhall Library, Corporation of London.

The attention in this description to the individuation of faces reflects the more general preoccupation with "types" and the notion of physiognomy as a key to moral character.[50]

Physiognomic types and their racial implications were presented not only in galleries of nations and in the later "types of mankind" exhibitions but also in crowd scenes and group portraits of life in contemporary European and American cities, as well as in the literature of the period. So great was the fascination with physiognomy that at Peale's museum, where portraits of great men "etched the outlines of genius" and those of "savages" revealed their physiognomy, museum visitors could take home as a souvenir their own silhouette, made with great exactitude thanks to a mechanical device, the "physiognotrace," invented in 1803 and demonstrated in the museum gallery.[51]

Dunn's Chinese exhibition inspired other such displays, notably, scenes of daily life at the Oriental and Turkish Museum during the 1850s in London. Viewers were astonished by the wax figures, which a journalist of the time praised for their realism: "[T]he arms and legs of males are rough with real hair, most delicately applied—actual drops of perspiration are on the brows of the porters."[52] Clearly, the mannequins were more than clothes hangers, for not only ethnographic artifacts but also physiognomy was on display.

It is precisely the mimetic perfection of such installations, and perhaps also their preoccupation with physiognomy, that so disturbed Franz Boas, who resisted the use of realistic wax mannequins in ethnographic recreations. They were so lifelike they were deathlike. Boas objected to "the ghastly impression such as we notice in wax-figures," an effect that he thought was heightened when absolutely lifelike figures lacked motion.[53] Furthermore, wax as a medium more nearly captured the color and quality of dead than living flesh, and in their frozen pose and silence wax figures were reminiscent of the undertaker's art, a connection that wax museums capitalized on in deathbed and open casket scenes featuring famous persons.

Fear of verisimilitude did not inhibit Artur Hazelius, who in his effort to present Sweden "in summary" began installing wax tableaus—"folk-life pictures"—in the 1870s. Inspired by genre paintings, these senti-

mental scenes in wax integrated costumes, furniture, and utensils that Hazelius had collected in Sweden and other parts of Scandinavia. Featured not only in his Museum of Scandinavian Ethnography, which opened in 1873, but also at world's fairs in 1876 (Philadelphia) and 1878 (Paris), these displays utilized techniques Hazelius had seen at the many international expositions and museums he visited. He used the habitat group, a fixture of natural history museums. He turned to the wax tableau, which, like the *tableau vivant*, was often modeled on a painting or sculpture and captured a dramatic moment in a narrative. He also drew on the period room and travel panorama. By 1891, he had realized his dream of exhibiting Swedish folklife in "living style" at Skansen, his open-air museum. In addition to buildings, plants, and animals, the museum featured peasants in native dress, traditional musicians and artisans,

The Infant's Death, one of several "Swedish character groups" in the main building of the Centennial Exposition, Philadelphia, 1876. This "living picture" was based on Amalia Lindegren's painting (1858) and was shown again in 1878 at the *Exposition Universelle* in Paris.

From *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, 26 August 1876, p. 409.

costumed receptionists and guides, restaurants, craft demonstrations, and festivals. Hazelius's Skansen museum became the prototype for hundreds of other open-air museums throughout Europe, many of them still functioning today.[54]

Animal or Actor

People have been displayed as living rarities from as early as 1501, when live Eskimos were exhibited in Bristol. A Brazilian village built by Indians in Rouen in the 1580s was burned down by French soldiers, an event that pleased the king so much that it was restaged the following day.[55] "Virginians" were featured on the Thames in 1603.[56] Over a period of five centuries, audiences flocked to see Tahitians, Laplanders, "Aztecs," Iro-

Open-air museum of Skansen.

quois, Cherokees, Ojibways, Iowas, Mohawks, Botocudos, Guianese, Hottentots, Kaffirs, Nubians, Somalis, Sinhalese, Patagonians, Tierra del Fuegans, Ilongots, Kalmucks, Amapondans, Zulus, Bushmen, Australian aborigines, Japanese, and East Indians. They could be seen in various cities in England and on the Continent, in taverns and at fairs, on the stage in theatrical productions, at Whitehall, Piccadilly, and Vauxhall Gardens, along the Thames, at William Bullock's London Museum (better known as Egyptian Hall because of its architectural style), in zoos and circuses, and, by the latter half of the nineteenth century, at world's fairs.[57]

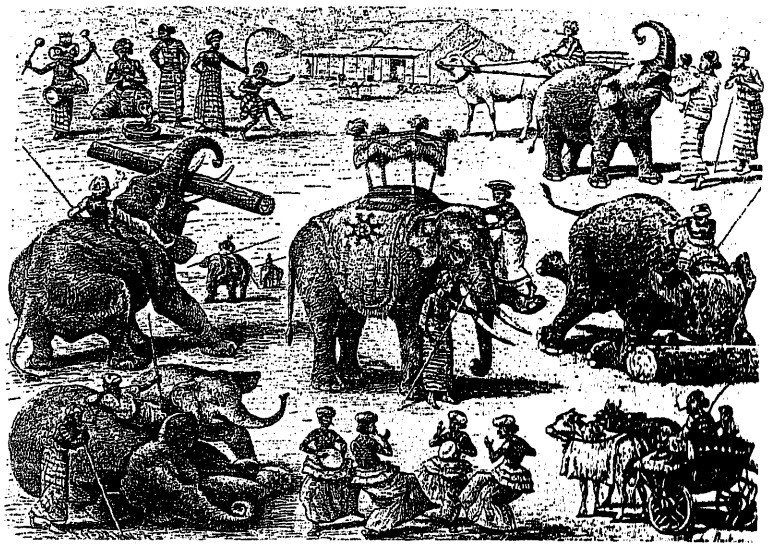
Basically, there were two options for exhibiting living ethnographic specimens: the zoological and the theatrical. During the first half of the nineteenth century, the distinction between zoological and theatrical approaches was often unclear and both were implicated in the staging of wildness, particularly in Carl Hagenbeck's productions. The zoological option depended on traditions of displaying exotic animals, including the circus, which featured trained animals, and the zoo, where live exotic specimens were shown in cages, in fantastic buildings, and, eventually, in settings re-creating their habitat in realistic detail, though here too animal acts could be found. It was not uncommon in the nineteenth century for a living human rarity to be booked into a variety of venues—theaters, exhibition halls, concert rooms, museums, and zoos—in the course of several weeks or months as part of a tour.

London Museum, or Egyptian Hall, was dubbed the "ark of zoological wonders" by at least one observer of the period, because of the wide range of live exhibits, human and animal, presented there.[58] While the term "ark" evokes the discourse of natural theology, as opposed to natural history, and suggests that the sheer variety of divine creation rather than scientific classification was the focus, Bullock found in environmental displays a fine way to combine theatrical effect, the experience of travel, and geographic principles.

During the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, geography was also an omnibus discipline devoted to all that is on the earth's surface, including people in their environment; geography subsumed anthropology and ethnography as subfields. Location on the earth's globe and relationships of specimens to landforms, climate, and local flora and fauna offered an alternative principle for arranging exhibitions of animals and people

Carl Hagenbeck's Sinhalese caravan.

From *Die Gartenlaube*, no. 34 (1884).

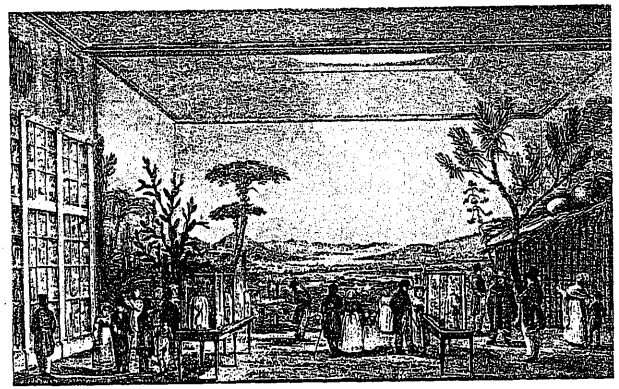


and encouraged environmental displays that showed the interrelation of elements in a habitat. Those who collected their own specimens, had firsthand knowledge of their habitat, and controlled how their materials were exhibited were more likely to present animals and people in their home environments. Like Bullock, who collected material for his displays while traveling and then tried to re-create the places he had visited, Peale hunted for many of his specimens himself, mounted them, and created settings for them based on his observations while hunting.

The passion for close visual observation on the spot had transformed how landscapes were experienced and described during the eighteenth century and shaped how specimens brought into galleries were exhibited, to the point that the experience of travel became the model for exhibitions about other places.[59] Visitors were offered the display as a surrogate for travel, and displays in turn participated in the discourse of travel, the

subject of chapter 5. Billed as travel experiences, panoramas were narrated by travelers who served as guides-at-a-distance through landscapes they had personally traversed. Individuals who had assisted hunters and collectors abroad were brought into exhibitions both to complete the scene and to comment on it, thus transferring to the re-created travel setting the roles of native guide and animal handler.

Returning from Mexico in 1823 with casts of ancient remains, ethnographic objects, specimens of plants and animals, and a Mexican Indian youth, Bullock designed an exhibition that would make visitors feel like they were in Mexico enjoying a panoramic view of Mexico City (painted on the wall) and intimate contact with its inhabitants. An observer of the period reported that "[i]n order to heighten the deception, and to bring the spectator actually amidst the scenes represented, [he presented] a *fac simile* [*sic*] of a Mexican cottage and garden, with a tree, flowers, and fruit; they are exactly the size of their natural models, and bear an identity not to be mistaken." To complete the effect, Bullock installed the Mexican Indian youth in the cottage and had him describe objects to the visitors "as far as his knowledge of our language permits," thus making him do double duty as ethnographic specimen and museum docent.[60]



William Bullock's exhibit of Mexico.

Lithograph by A. Aiglo, 1825. Photo courtesy Guildhall Library, Corporation of London.

The moment live people are included in such displays the issue arises: what will they do? In considering the options for presenting people in "living style," it is useful to distinguish staged re-creations of cultural performances (wedding, funeral, hunt, martial arts display, shamanic ritual) and the drama of the quotidian (nursing a baby, cooking, smoking, spitting, tending a fire, washing, carving, weaving).[61]

In a highly popular African display mounted in 1853 at St. George's Gallery, Hyde Park, thirteen Kaffirs "portrayed 'the whole drama of Caffre life' against a series of scenes painted by Charles Marshall. They ate meals with enormous spoons, held a conference with a 'witch-finder' . . . , and enacted a wedding, a hunt, and a military expedition, 'all with characteristic dances,' the whole ending with a programmed general mêlée between the rival tribes."[62] Two decades earlier, in 1822, Bullock had a Laplander family and live reindeer perform at Egyptian Hall, where they drove their sledge around a frosty panorama fitted out with their tents, utensils, and weapons. The Laplanders had been brought to care for the reindeer, who, it was hoped, could be introduced into England, but when this proved impractical, the Laplanders were recycled as ethnographic exhibits.[63] Ethnologists in London kept track of new ethnographic arrivals and took advantage of their presence for their research.[64]

Whereas the notion that native life was inherently dramatic allowed it to be staged and billed as theater, the ability of natives to perform, and particularly to mime, was taken by some viewers as evidence of their humanity. Charles Dickens, who was otherwise disdainful of the people in live ethnographic displays, commented on seeing the Bushmen in Egyptian Hall in 1847, "Who that saw the four grim, stunted, abject Bush-people at the Egyptian Hall—with two natural actors among them out of that number, one a male and the other a female—can forget how something human and imaginative gradually broke out in the ugly little man, when he was roused from crouching over the charcoal fire, into giving a dramatic representation of the tracking of a beast, the shooting of it with poisoned arrows, and the creature's death."[65] The Bushmen were installed against a scenic African background, and in addition to offering the "cultural performances" that so captivated Dickens, they slept and smoked, nursed an infant, and otherwise went about the business of daily

William Bullock's exhibit of Laplanders.

Engraving by Thomas Rowlandson, 1822. Photo courtesy Guildhall Library, Corporation of London.

Bushmen, with their agent, on display at Egyptian Hall.

From *Illustrated London News*, 12 June 1847. Photo courtesy Guildhall Library, Corporation of London.

life.[66] What is so extraordinary about Dickens's statement is the implication that what makes the Bushmen human is not their ability to hunt but their ability to mime the hunt—that is, their ability to represent.

As the everyday life of others came into focus as a subject for exhibition, ethnography offered, at least for some, a critique of civilization. In his 1911 account of the British Museum, Henry C. Shelley commented, "Perhaps the hilarity with which the ordinary visitor regards the object lessons of ethnography arises from his overweening conceit of the value and importance of his own particular form of civilization. No doubt he has much in common with that traveller who lost his way on his journey and described the climax of his experience in these words: 'After having walked eleven hours without having traced the print of a human foot, to my great comfort and delight, I saw a man hanging upon a gibbet; my pleasure at the cheering prospect was inexpressible, for it convinced me that I was in a civilized country.'"[67] This is the ethnological effect in reverse: our own barbarity is experienced as civilized.

Exhibiting the Quotidian

Genre Errors

The drama of the quotidian feeds on what John MacAloon calls a genre error: one man's life is another man's spectacle.[68] Exhibitions institutionalize this error by producing the quotidian as spectacle, and they do this by building the role of the observer into the structure of events that, left to their own devices, are not subject to formal viewing. Following Dean MacCannell's analysis of "staged authenticity," such exhibitions "stage the back region," thereby creating a new front region.[69] In what is a logical corollary of the autonomous object, people, their realia and activities, are mounted in a hermetic aesthetic space—fenced off in a zoological garden, raised up on a platform in a gallery, placed on a stage, or ensconced in a reconstructed village on the lawn of the exhibition grounds—and visitors are invited to look.

There is something about the seamlessness of the commonsense world, its elusiveness, that makes such genre errors so appealing. For the quotidian, by virtue of its taken-for-grantedness, presents itself as given, natural,

homelands exhibitions and festivals, immigrant organizations were already doing a good job of supporting a wide variety of cultural activities. "National festivals" organized by immigrant groups in American cities during the last decades of the nineteenth century attracted tens of thousands of participants. In the homelands exhibitions and festivals organized during the first half of this century, "cooperation" between Americanization agencies and immigrant groups, however well-intentioned, also involved co-optation. Homelands exhibitions were designed to gain the trust of immigrants, who, it was hoped, would allow themselves to be helped by Americanization organizations. These events were not simply displays of immigrant gifts—crafts, music, dance, and wholesome values. Equally important—and the organizers were explicit on this point—they were good public relations for the Americanization workers and social reformers, who were themselves on display. Through such exhibits and festivals, they could show their success in working with immigrants and lobby for increased support.

Exhibitions, whether of objects or people, are displays of the artifacts of our disciplines. They are for this reason also exhibits of those who make them, no matter what their ostensible subject. The first order of business is therefore to examine critically the conventions guiding ethnographic display, to explicate how displays constitute subjects and with what implications for those who see and those who are seen. Museum exhibitions, folkloric performances, and folklife festivals are guided by a poetics of detachment, in the sense not only of material fragments but also of a distanced attitude. The question is not whether an object is of visual interest, but rather how interest of any kind is created. All interest is vested.