

When I visited the Human and Culture Halls of the American Museum of Natural History, I was particularly interested in the South American Peoples Hall and the Margaret Mead Hall of Pacific Peoples.

At first, I was pleasantly surprised by how inclusive and perfect the museum seemed. Whenever they put out an announcement over the PA, it was repeated in at least 7 different languages. There were maps that were color coded by section (like Human and Culture), and there was, at least for the most part, a relatively helpful and friendly staff.

However, This turned around when I visited the Margaret Mead Hall of Pacific Peoples. I was originally attracted to the hall because of the fact that we learned about Margaret Mead in class. When one walks into the hall, the first thing they're exposed to is an enormous picture of Margaret Mead, and then a short biography of her life, as well as videos and other various artifacts of her life. I was quite perturbed here, since they seemed to have a need to justify the Pacific Peoples Hall-a need to convince people to go and visit it-that was, in my opinion, quite derogatory. Although there definitely exists a need to "convince" people to visit the hall-or any hall, for that matter-I don't think they went about it in the right way. By making an American anthropologist the first thing one sees when entering the Pacific People's Hall, they're taking up space and money that could've been used to further explore the Pacific Peoples themselves. There was so much space dedicated to arbitrary facts about her visage and persona that could very easily have held information or displays about her work or the subjects thereof.

When I entered the actually informational part of the Hall, it struck me how inefficiently it was laid out. Most of the people visiting the exhibit walked straight down the central aisle, completely ignoring all the small paths branching off to the side. It would've made much more sense to have a singular path (or two, like a lot of other halls did) that ran through the entire hall. This could possibly prevent people from running straight to the Moai head at the back of the hall while whispering "dum dum gum gum" to each other excitedly. People practically ignored everything else, which may have been due to a lack of immersive dioramas. Throughout all of the halls, people were significantly more interested by the in situ exhibits, taking pictures and staring into the glass. Most of the text remained completely unread, and the Pacific Peoples Hall would have done well to add some colorful scenes from Pacific life.

This disparity between the way people regarded in context exhibits as opposed to those shown in situ was made glaringly obvious by the South American Peoples Hall. The section that highlighted the Andean civilizations was all but deserted, with a guard that was falling asleep and literally no people looking around. All of the exhibits were accompanied solely by text, and the clearly visible effect was that the entire area was void of any interested people. On the other hand, the Amazonian Peoples area that was right behind it was full of people talking, pointing, and taking pictures of everything. The assortment of artifacts shown in situ interested and engaged people, piquing their interest in everything from warfare tactics to everyday life and religious garb. This isn't to say that there was nothing wrong with the Amazonian Peoples area. The way they depicted tribal warfare made it seem primitive and savage. This stereotype is only further strengthened by our media's mainstream depiction of these peoples, and I think it's the purpose of the museum to counter misconceptions, not accentuate them.