

IT IS NOT A SMALL WORLD AFTER ALL
15 February 2005
paper delivered for the New England Museums Conference
Elaine Heumann Gurian

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The current popular understanding of cultural and ethnic harmony could be exemplified by the Disney anthem "It's a Small World After All." That song and the philosophy that inspired it suggest that only ignorance and superficial differences divide us. We have come to understand that we live in a multicultural world but we are only beginning to appreciate how many profoundly different world views there are.

The consequence of acknowledging and attempting to reconcile these dissimilarities affects the way we do our museum business. Recently we have come to realize that differing world view affects our exhibitions topic choice, collections selection, ownership of objects and interpretation methods. We are only beginning to understand that these differences also effect our personnel policy, our strategy for doing research and our collections care. We are often at a loss about how to proceed.

INTRODUCTION

When I was a young student I was taught that the Indians who met Peter Styvescent were gullible because they sold Manhattan for twenty-four dollars worth of trinkets. It was a story of the superiority of the European. I remembered the story for the rest of my life because I never met any person (much less a group of people) who I considered that gullible.

When I met Native people first at the Boston Children's Museum and then at the National Museum of the American Indian, I learned another version of the story. I learned that when the Dutch met Indians, who were hunting on what is now Manhattan Island, they insisted on giving them trinkets. From the Indian standpoint, it was the Europeans who were gullible. For those Indians, land could never be owned by anyone but was, and is, part of the cosmos of Mother Earth and, as such, was free to be navigated by those who had access to it. The Indians, therefore, happily relieved the Dutch of their trinkets but, for them, that exchange certainly did not convey ownership of land because land was not anything that could be conveyed.

That is a story of concept ships passing in the night.

We, in the museum field, have long acted as if we believed that the people of individual civilizations were much alike. We promulgated or implied that people are fundamentally the same and merely have different solutions for universal needs. Thus, it made sense to exhibit cultures by focusing on their physical products displayed as creative inventive adaptations that worked well each within their specific environment. We all wear clothing, but those in hot climates wear different ones than those in freezing climates. We all eat -- some use forks, some chopsticks, etc. We all sleep but the beds differ over time and community. The examples seem endless.

This widely-held assumption about the basic commonality of people -- we all need warmth, clothing, food, nurture, and shelter -- also had, and continues to have, a

positive political correlate -- if we knew each other better, we would recognize our brotherhood and would get along better. Much of the civil rights progress in the United States was based on the belief that the root cause of conflict must be ignorance about one another and that we all shared a common humanity.

Museums, then, along with social studies school curricula, magazine and media stories could aid world peace by reducing interpersonal wariness bred by innocent ignorance by bringing unfamiliar lifestyles to our attention. Familiarity would reduce xenophobia. In some ways, that is the basic idea of the Discovery Channel and National Geographic. We continue to believe that tourism is a fundamental good leading to a positive outcome.

Today, no matter how we may wish it otherwise, we are forced to admit that cultural differences are not superficial but profound, and that they arise from the least tangible portions of any culture -- its basic values. There is enormous variability in how people treat each other, what is considered honor, love, work, time, and good.

If, it is a big and complex world rather than a small one after all, one in which many people fundamentally do not understand one another, then, of course, their issues with each other are much more tenacious and difficult to resolve. That would help to explain why, after learning more about each other, we still live in a factionalized and hostile environment around the globe. And, witness Bosnia and Rwanda, we continue to find neighbors who understand each other very well, still engaged in violent warfare. Thus,

while exposure may sometimes help, understanding another culture's physical material does not necessarily reduce tension.

Many of us, while fancying ourselves sophisticated travelers, find that many concepts we have held dearly, but unconsciously, become challenged as we try to navigate our way through foreign countries. Think of the many different indecipherable actions you have witnessed when trying to wait in line or decode the rules of proper behavior in public transport while in a land not your own.

So now, exposed to the stubborn complexity of multicultural understanding, let us focus on Museums and try to ascertain the consequences of cultural differences in our work.

IT'S NONE OF YOUR BUSINESS

Museums (and tourism) have been based on a kind of voyeurism -- that all information and all objects we deem interesting should be available. In the course of the history of museum creation and collecting, museum makers have had a variety of motivations. As wealthy and powerful rulers, they impressed their subjects with exotic wealth. As colonizers, they reinforced their putative superiority. As wealthy newly rich patrons, they bought social respectability. As victors in battle, they showed the spoils of war. Our profession sometimes created a longing for the noble savage. We helped inculcate foreign immigrants in national identity and good citizenship. We taught the aesthetic of the powerful to others. And as minority peoples we sometimes reinforced

our worth by displaying our own views of our materials. But underlying all of these motivations, there implicitly remained a presumed right to have access to anything we wished to see and know and to pass that information along to others.

When we embraced the small world theory, the intention of cultural display was to expose us to as many cultures as possible. That allowed many museums to allow visitors access to fascinating material that they would not otherwise see without far flung travel. I know that I personally benefited from and am grateful for that experience.

Now we are hearing from various cultures, who created some of those objects, that information is an earned privilege not a right. "It is none of your business" turns out to be the belief of many peoples. If, as some museum professionals now believe, control and even ownership of the object and its use is in the hands of the descendants of the creators, then visitors will not get to see everything -- nor should they expect to.

At the Museum of Puppetry in Atlanta, I viewed a well lighted empty vitrine on a pedestal. It had a label that read :

"(Object not acquired) When one society openly displays a figure that another regards as sacred and secret, a trust is violated. Where the first society defines the exhibit as benignly informative and educational, the second -- the one to whom the figure "belongs" -- feels itself demeaned and its beliefs profaned. There is ongoing debate over any museum's right to "own" or display such figures."

SPIRITUALITY

In modern times, an underpinning of all our exhibition constructions (as well as in our public discourse) has been a belief in rational thinking. Certainly we have laid stress on scientific logic with its hypotheses and repeatable provable conclusions. Such has been the basis of our education. While we recognized that explanations which relied on the spiritual non-rational world were important to many people, we compartmentalized our lives, relegating that information to categories called faith, legend, fiction and myth which needed to be differentiated from science and truth.

Now a quiet revolution is taking place in the world, including the world of museums. Doctors are studying the healing power of prayer, art study in school is being correlated with better scholastic performance, and more than a majority of people in the United States believe in Angels. In exhibitions today we are putting both spiritual and scientific explanations side-by-side in the same exhibitions with equal weight, no differentiation and no fuss. Witness the many exhibitions about Aboriginal peoples in Australia or the Punja exhibition at the Smithsonian's Sachler Gallery that treat the spiritual and rational world as quite undifferentiated.

We had believed that things animate and inanimate were easily separated. The categories used in *Endings*, an exhibition about death and loss for children at the Boston Children's Museum, were "once alive, alive, and never alive." Unless we are

talking about zoos or botanical gardens, museum objects always fit in the once- or never-alive categories. In the past, it would have been considered unthinkable to ascribe contemporary animate power to objects in our exhibitions unless we were presenting that understanding in the third person -- "Indians believe....". We now recognize that many current cultures do not make these easy differentiations. Spirits can dwell in, emanate and transfer from objects we would classify under the old scheme as once- or never-alive. In the negotiations with native peoples about their objects, we have come to accept that the way we take care of, display and write about objects must take these broader views into account. Accepting these views has changed, in a profound way, the very fundamental relationship we have with museum collections and our responsibilities for their well being. At the Museum of New Zealand, the Maori place living branches on every case of objects every day. And there are American Native peoples who need their collections "fed".

A collections piece was returned to a Maori tribe at their request. This object reputedly came from one of the eight original boats (Waka) that brought the Maori to Aotearoa. That would make the object nearly 1,000 years old. But the piece was carbon dated and the scientists found it was been made in the Victorian era, and let the tribe know of their findings. If it is believed, as in this case, that the spirit or "Mana" of the original piece could and would have moved to the new object, then the new piece is "identical" to the older one. What date, therefore, should the museum record use?

How do we allow collections pieces to sing and dance at night if they are wrapped in bubble wrap? How do we isolate the pieces from those who are not allowed to see them. Who owns the piece? Should museums continue to keep pieces that they can never show?

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE OBJECT

The very basis of museums -- the collection and preservation of tangible objects -- is changing. For example, museum objects are being used, when appropriate, for the purposes for which they were created. It is no longer unusual for a tribe to ask for and receive an object that is needed for a specific ceremony. The object, obviously, has been used when it is returned and its condition altered by that use. This does not seem to worry curators as much as it used to.

The transmission of information is for many cultures neither object dependent nor exclusively visual. We, in museum exhibitions, have long known that, but we have been limited our own ground rules which placed primary importance not only on objects but on the specific objects we had available to display.

There is, in many cultures, a high importance placed on oral tradition, on environments and places, on dance, on music and song, on language and rhetoric, on protocol, on smell and other physical interactions. Not the stuff we are particularly good at presenting in exhibitions. We have begun to experiment with other forms of exhibition

design, mostly by borrowing from our for-profit neighbors, to add new elements into our exhibition palette. In the future, I think, we will see increasing interest in new exhibition techniques which add additional interpretive emphases that are better able to transmit these other forms of information.□

The new African American Museum in Detroit relies on sound, photos and movies, on constructions and on very few artifacts. It is a museum that has tried to adapt the technique of exhibition design to tell a story for which our culture has very few saved materials. The African American tradition has always relied on sound as a major cultural transmission, oratory and music being predominate. Accordingly, the techniques used concentrate on those methods.

SOCIAL SERVICE:

Now, let me address the notion of the museum as a living civic space -- not just a repository. History and tradition are part of the living fabric of community. Some cultures and religions teach tradition in order to heal the sick, repair the damage of adversity, and help enable a more stable and peaceful society. These cultures, especially, need their museums to become a more integral part of community civic space, integrated and even merged with other civic organizations and even to participate more fully in social service.

I was just in England during the extraordinary period of mourning for Princess Diana. This was a time when the British, almost in spite of themselves and to their individual surprise, invented tableaux of public grief in public spaces. Among those I visited was the Princess Of Wales hothouse in Kew Gardens outside London. There, in a building named for a different princess, intended to display botanical specimens of a far away land, sat an official condolence book and a pastiche of flowers and tributes. It was one of the few official spaces that openly welcomed the reflection of personal grief then gripping the country. Museums need to explore, in fact I think exploit, the community's need to use symbolically important public spaces during a plethora of highly charged circumstances. There are a few path-finding organizations leading the way there for the rest of us.

MANAGEMENT

And ending on a more mundane note, I would remind us that multicultural management is very difficult. It is difficult because we, as employees, don't all share the same sense of work, the same sense of success, of truthfulness, of timeliness, of tidiness, etc. We don't share it as individuals, and while we may intuit the values of our own culture (whatever that may be) we do not adequately know others, and so we have difficulty differentiating between individual deviance and cultural difference. Seemingly simple decisions about time off become complex when we find we don't all have the same holidays, Sabbaths, and traditions for mourning. The definition of family vary by culture.

Clan and tribe, while having no meaning for some employees, determine the activity of others.

Even more complicated, we do not all share the same values of engagement, of group interaction, of authority and hierarchy, or of successful group outcome. We do not all believe that group problem solving is good or that we are entitled to access information equally. In a European culture in which I have worked, all members of the group believed that individual shaming was a good, that the “enthusiast” who stuck his neck out deserved to have it chopped off. A good time was had by all, but in an American sense no work was accomplished.

Over the years I have learned that group process is not a natural human activity across, or even within, cultures. Rather it has to be trained from childhood if people are to excel in the process or even to accept the process itself. Thus, the team approach for exhibition design, a tenuous process at its best, does not work at all for those who don't feel safe working within a group or who are more accustomed to firmly based hierarchies.

Further consensus decision making, when truly believed in, brings with it the concomitant value of patience. Consensus building coupled with a predetermined tight schedule (which we use in project management) is an oxymoron.

In America, we are trained to honor a civic process that allows for full and free debate but coalesces around the will of the majority, which often then expresses itself in the hierarchy of elected leadership. Thus consensus-decision making, so trendy now in the form of self directed groups and flattened management structures, does arise naturally out of our training.

Furthermore, we tenaciously understand that efficient management is easiest to achieve when groups have similar sets of shared experiences, are composed of one class, or one culture, or one gender. They are easier to manage and may even be more productive. Our reluctance to really diversify our work force may come from this intuitive understanding. The end result of broadened work forces, especially in places like museums, certainly allows for more cultural sensitivity in our presentations and our policies but we must be willing to sacrifice speed in accomplishing tasks until we have learned more about and adjust better to each other. We rarely add time to our project plans for this but we should.

So that is where we are now. Living in a complicated world where there are widely divergent world views, coupled with an understandable unease about cultural relativism. Yet I am excited and not dismayed by this. I still believe, perhaps naively, that people of good will, patience and respect for the humanity of others will find accommodations, expediciencies and approximations that will work. They will be different for each purpose, but they will move us forward. If we wish peace we will

have it. But there is no blueprint, no mold and no absolutes, no definitional certainties for what museums should do next.

This is not the time to be a “neat nick” for we live in a messy interesting time and we have learned that it is not a small world after all.