

DRAFT – and written as a speech, not a paper:

Museum Exhibits as Vehicles for Public Interest Anthropology.

AAA Panel: Public and Public Interest Anthropology, New Orleans, 2002.

Paula Sabloff, University of Pennsylvania

Museum exhibits about human groups and artifacts in the United States started as exhibitions of curiosities intended to titillate viewers. While they were built *for* the public, they certainly were not *public interest* exhibits. The most famous – or infamous – public exhibits were found in Scudder's American Museum on Broadway, later owned by P.T. Barnum. Under Barnum's direction, it exhibited "500,000 natural and artificial curiosities from every corner of the globe" (Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey 2002). He did not start the circus until his second museum burned down in 1868 (Osgood 1979:14).

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, scholarly museum exhibits such as those at the Smithsonian and the Peabody Museums of Yale and Harvard sought to educate the public with cultural anthropology exhibits that generally used the culture trait concept to organize the artifacts and text panels. They grouped artifacts according to culture area and then topic: religion, food preparation, government, etc. Archaeological artifacts were arranged in chronological and topical order to give visual representation of the concept of unilineal evolution (ibid.: 39-40, Reynolds 1884:9). These exhibits presented typologies of artifacts and cultures for comparison; more often than not such displays enabled visitors to feel superior to other societies. The presentations were educational by design – although we now disagree with the lessons taught – and didactic in tone. Visitors were viewers who had come to learn from the experts; they were not required to question their own lives.

Boas changed this approach. He added *public interest* to public exhibits when he built ethnographic rather than culture-trait exhibits at the American Museum of Natural History in New York in the 1890s. He was the first to recreate the lifeway of a people for visitors to see. He used dioramas, text panels and sundry artifacts to build a *visual ethnography* of a people. And he used the visual ethnography format to make public the major lesson of anthropology for his time, namely that cultures should be judged by their moral and ethical configurations, not by their technological development (Harris 1968:163, Cole 1983:33). His conceptualization of cultural relativism, in opposition to the racism of unilineal evolution, was the beginning of public interest anthropology in the context of US museum exhibits. In short, Boas married anthropological material and theory to moral judgment to give us public interest exhibits.

In the early decades of the twentieth century when there was rapid expansion of museums with some anthropological content, Boas' idea of visual ethnography spread through anthropological exhibits (Osgood 1979). The early ethnographic exhibits pulled the audience into the worldview of a particular society, but they presented a culture from the voice of the curator only. Like

Kroeber, the curators had often learned a culture from a few old men who were often asked to re-create a dying tradition. The exhibits presented an entire culture from their perspective, never taking into account the views of others. Boas provided the rationale for this approach when he wrote that Truth could be found through anthropological research and disseminated to the public in order to influence public culture (Cole 1983:33).

This description is an oversimplification of a simpler time in anthropology. Today we accept that culture is contested even among the members of a small group of people. Men and women, children and adults, the empowered and the powerless interpret their culture differently (Wright 1998). And parts of a culture constantly change over time even as other parts remain constant. How, then, do we anthropologists visually represent a culture, thus providing visual, aural, and tactile experience of public interest anthropology? Or do we abandon the public interest anthropology exhibit and stick to writing books and articles?

I think we all agree that anthropology cannot afford to abandon exhibit production, especially at a time when the public already considers anthropology irrelevant to public discussion. I believe we also agree that anthropology should not abandon exhibit production, for we know we have important things to say to the public and the public likes exhibits. Large numbers of people visit museums, wandering the exhibits and halls, visualizing anthropological concepts, and consuming anthropological materials in the gift shops. The National Museum of Natural History at the Smithsonian averages 8 to 10 million visitors a year. Our museum, the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Philadelphia, has over 40,000 school children study exhibits with their classes each year. We estimate that about 74,000 people viewed my exhibit on Modern Mongolia between October 2001 and June 2002.

If exhibits are truly “sites for the popularization of knowledge” as Dias writes (Dias 2001:103) and therefore excellent vehicles to convey PIA messages to the public, a major question then becomes: How do we present exhibits in the public interest when we no longer accept Boas’ idea that there is one Truth – or, for some, that there is any truth at all (Shelton 2001:146)? Specifically, we must deal with the question of who should represent a culture or society. This is not an idle issue, for it affects the credibility of the exhibit – for anthropology colleagues and for the public. It is the old validity issue: why would audiences believe the ideas put forth in the exhibit? Why would visitors accept the exhibit’s portrayal of a culture as accurate?

This concern leads to the corollary question: How can we make audiences receptive to the public interest themes that drive some exhibits? These themes include the rejection of race but the presentation of the negative consequences of racism, the idea that different cultures view democracy and capitalism differently from the U.S., and the knowledge that gender is socially constructed. How do we get the lay public to at least entertain anthropological perspectives on these issues?

Recent exhibits have tried to cope with the issue of voice and therefore credibility in different ways. I would like to give you three illustrations.

The first is a permanent exhibit in the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Our exhibit on the Southwest, called “Living in Balance,” uses many beautiful artifacts from our collection. Its curator, Dr. Dorothy Washburn, used Native American consultants from the Hopi, Navajo, Zuni and White Mountain Apache. The text panels present the consultants’ voices – “my people, we, etc.” -- to give the variability among Southwest cultures in life cycle ceremonies, clothing, food preparation, and origin myths.

The second example comes from the Field Museum in Chicago where the new Center for Cultural Understanding and Change provides a model for us all. The Center has built four exhibits and contributed content development and public involvement to five more. In planning and building the permanent exhibit “Living Together: Common Concerns, Different Responses,” Dr. Alaka Wali integrated the Chicago community and anthropologists. It addresses a PIA theme: people have been drawn closer together in the twenty-first century because of information technology and the global economy. Yet they have become more fearful of cultural differences. What can we do to combat people’s fears? The exhibit presents an anthropological definition of culture and uses it to show that cultural differences are simply various ways of solving life’s problems – a classic universalist approach presented in a modern framework. Using the voices of “us, we, our” and posing questions directly to the visitor by asking, “Why do you...?,” the exhibit engages the audience in thinking about the benefits of cultural diversity.

The third example is the traveling exhibit that I curated with my colleagues at the National Museum of Mongolian History in Ulaanbaatar, *Modern Mongolia: Reclaiming Genghis Khan*. The exhibit was first shown at the University of Pennsylvania Museum; it is currently at the Smithsonian and will travel to Middlebury College before returning to Mongolia. It has three themes, that Genghis Khan is viewed differently by Mongolians than by the people he conquered, the universalist theme that Mongolians – nomads though they may be -- share culture and a historical trajectory with the United States, and the true PIA theme that democracy is worth preserving in our own society. How to address these themes in a voice that makes the public receptive to them?

The book that accompanied the exhibit (Sabloff 2001) was easy: there are four chapters, two authored by Mongolians and two authored by Americans. As editor, I had every author speak in her own voice and through her own experience, whether she was presenting background material, twentieth-century history, changing material culture, or recent anthropological research.

The exhibit, however, was more difficult, and we agonized over this quite a bit. The main section had to have one voice to give it a unifying frame. Because the exhibit showed daily life under Mongolia’s three governments in the twentieth century, we used the curatorial voice of “the Mongolians.” But every sentence was checked by the National Museum’s Director, Dr. Idshinnorov, and its Curator of 20th century history, Dr. Bumaa. In this way, the curatorial voice is not that of the head curator – me, an American anthropologist – but us – social science scholars from the US and Mongolia. And one of the most powerful parts of the exhibit is a 12-minute video of 6 Mongolians talking about their life, their ideas on

socialism and democracy, and their views of Genghis Khan. Shot in Mongolia, the visuals of an urban teenager, businessman and market saleswoman along with a rural teacher and retired craftsman and nomadic herder illustrate our speakers' different lifestyles and give voice to a range of Mongolians on the themes of the exhibit.

How did we work together to build the exhibit? Our experience illustrates the public interest anthropology themes in the exhibit. The original idea was mine. I wanted American audiences to get to know Mongolians – and yes, love Mongolians as I do. I wanted our audiences to see the commonalities between Mongolians and the U.S. I knew that the exhibits I remembered best from my childhood were the dioramas in the American Museum of Natural History and so I proposed that we use dioramas to illustrate life under Mongolia's three governments in the twentieth century. Idshinnorov, Bumaa, Eliot Bikales, Gill Wakely and I elaborated on these ideas in a bumpy jeep ride through Mongolia's countryside one rainy Sunday in 1999.

I returned to Philadelphia and started finalizing the design and data with our designer, Kevin Lamp. Bumaa and I worked on the text panels together; Eliot – an American volunteer at the Mongolian National Museum – worked with Bumaa on the labels for all the artifacts. I emailed all plans, text panels and labels to Bumaa and Idshinnorov to check. And as we built the dioramas and cases, I emailed jpegs to them to check for accuracy of presentation. I brought Bat-Erdene, an old Mongolian friend studying in Pittsburgh, to erect the main yurt. And later a new Mongolian friend, Arima Marder, and her mother, who actually lives in a yurt in the Mongolian countryside, arranged all the artifacts in the three yurts. Finally, Bumaa and Idshinnorov arrived a few days before the exhibit opening and made the final adjustments. Thus the exhibit was a true collaboration between Americans and Mongolians, and it presented both the united voice of scholars and the varied voices of Mongolians to the American audience.

This experience has led me to conclude that public interest anthropology exhibits can be used successfully to stimulate public discussion and debate. Even when anthropologists hold different views and have different databases and even when contested meanings are evident, there are ways to present material that allow the complexity of culture to be represented. Perhaps anthropology – with its love of context and its ability to present real people to others – has a greater chance of success at presenting complexity and variability than some other social sciences.

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