
INTRODUCTION

When I began working in museums more than fifty years ago, I didn't think about their role in Western culture or their social purpose, and I don't think most of my elders and betters did either. During my years at the Museum of Mankind I found opportunities and responsibilities to shift public understandings of cultures around the world that the British still viewed from a colonial perspective and museums treated as 'ethnographic'. Some of my colleagues had similar ambitions, but we were not informed by any debate on museum history, theory or practice. In the meantime, 'museum studies' was developing into a discipline in its own right, providing a retrospective academic background for our personal experiences in an ever increasing literature. This memoir's contribution is the history and ethnography of an important museum experiment, capturing institutional and personal memories and airing opinions. It does not engage in the complex theories that can make museum studies such hard work, but it offers material for others to theorise, as well as some relief from the theory. That said, it may be useful to begin with an overview of developments in museum ethnography during the lifetime of the Museum of Mankind.

The Museum of Mankind was founded as an offshoot of the very conservative British Museum, inheriting a culture of collecting, preserving, classifying and documenting artefacts as 'specimens' as an end in itself. With this came an ethos of public service in making collections and curatorial knowledge available through exhibitions and consultation. In time there was a shift towards self-critical reflection on museum practice, revealed by certain curators in their exhibitions and publications, and a developing sense of responsibility to explain the societies that the Museum represented. But there was little dis-

cussion about the role of museums in cultural reproduction, whether in maintaining or challenging the prevailing values of our own society or in supporting the source communities of our collections in such endeavours.

The Museum of Mankind's most notable achievement was its very active exhibition programme, particularly the reconstructions that presented artefacts as introductions to places and peoples rather than simply as collections of objects. Some of the education programmes that accompanied particular exhibitions took this further to actively engage visitors with the cultures concerned. This was what the Museum of Mankind was remembered for by its visitors, but it depended as much on the initiatives of individual curators and educators as on any concerted policy. The stored collections were accessible to researchers as a longstanding public obligation, as was the Library, but under bureaucratic procedure rather than active outreach, so their cultural potential was seldom realised. Despite its hierarchical administration, the Museum seemed to proceed under a vague general consensus, masking various disagreements and contradictions, rather than by a shared set of principles and policies. The result was a mixture of great achievements, routine mediocrity and a few embarrassing mistakes, under ambivalent leadership.

The most persistent contradiction in curatorial policy, in the Museum of Mankind and elsewhere, was between employing collections as 'ethnography', to interpret exotic culture and possibly reflect on Western values, and as 'art', for the appreciation of exotic forms in terms of Western aesthetics with its associated values of authenticity and markets. These tendencies, widely debated in museums from the 1980s, sometimes complemented each other in the Museum of Mankind's exhibitions and both inherited the colonial taint of primitivism and a denial of history. Ethnographic projects challenged these problems more effectively than art ones, but over the history of the Museum of Mankind, art eventually gained ascendancy as intellectually and practically expedient within the increasingly dominant culture of the Western art world, encouraged by commercial sponsorship as it replaced public funding.

The art–ethnography debate ran parallel with another major issue that developed during the lifetime of the Museum of

Mankind: how to respond to claims on the collections by the communities they originated from. The questionable means by which many ethnographic collections were acquired and the way in which they were curated were first drawn to public attention in the settler colonies of North America and Australasia by indigenous minorities who had gained enough experience of the majority societies to make their voices heard. It took longer for these groups to gain the attention of the distant museums of Europe, but in the meantime former colonies in Africa and their diaspora communities were also questioning the ownership of colonial collections, and advocates for more remote indigenous minorities were seeking to engage museums in cultural issues. As the cost of global travel decreased and communications improved with digital technology, these political pressures increased and ethnography curators responded, sometimes defensively but often positively and creatively. The Museum of Mankind welcomed indigenous researchers, craft demonstrators and educators and worked increasingly on collaborative projects with members of source communities, even as it warded off claims for the repatriation of collections, according to British Museum policy. It tried to address indigenous concerns for both cultural heritage and participation in the art world even as it neglected questions of Western cultural hegemony.

These issues represent one way of looking at the history of the Museum of Mankind. Another is the story of the scores of men and women who worked there, many of them quite unconcerned with curatorial policy. Most were focused on the practicalities of preserving the collections, departmental administration, building exhibitions and caring for the public that came to see them, all of which allowed the senior curators to make museum history. Again, they seem to have developed their methods and practices as much by personal initiative as by management policy, often creating their own jobs and working with limited resources. They also showed how an interest in museum work and a sense of useful public service could compensate for poor wages and limited career opportunities. As a memoir, this book gives them credit for their essential contributions through the personal relationships that sustained them in their work and made the Museum of Mankind

the achievement that it was. Maybe their personalities and experiences also hold lessons for more academic museum studies, which seldom touch on the influence of junior curators, technical and service staff in shaping the institutional culture and ethos of museums.

Most of these people have since moved on, retired or died, leaving me as the oldest and longest-serving member of what was the Ethnography Department and is now the Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas of the British Museum. But my memory is personal and partial. Some colleagues have shared their recollections with me but others have not, so there is plenty of scope for further studies to complement or correct this memoir of the Museum of Mankind.