Voices Heard in Museums

Exhibiting Cultures. The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display. IVAN KARP and STEVEN D. LAVINE, Eds. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, DC, 1991. x, 468 pp., illus. $42; paper, $15.95. From a conference, Washington, DC, Sept. 1988.

In 1986 the British Museum mounted an exhibition of 20 or 30 sculptures from many cultures which visitors were invited to touch. As I wandered around the exhibition, I noticed the behavior of other visitors. They seemed reluctant to touch the sculptures, as though the pieces were fragile, though they were made of porphyry or other nearly indestructible materials. No doubt touching was further inhibited by visitors' being required to wear cotton gloves furnished at the door. Entranced, I sat on a bench to further my observations. Some visitors did not touch at all. Those who did touched the faces of the figures with occasional forays to the shoulders. Female breasts were avoided by all but two or three of the very daring. There was no touching below the waist. At this point I became aware that the guard was watching me and felt constrained to abandon my fieldwork.

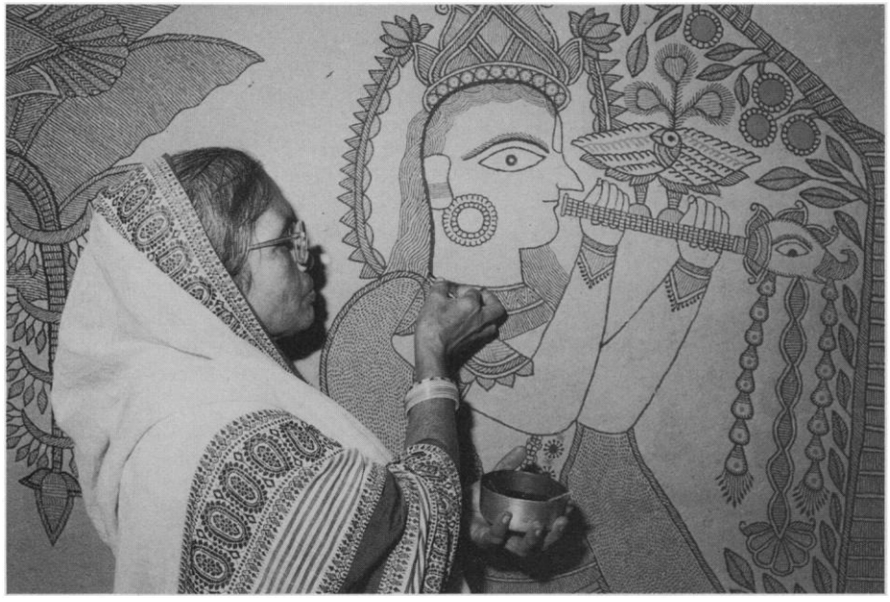
Most of the generalizations in the 22 papers in this volume would have benefited from more fieldwork among museum visitors. With a few honorable exceptions (especially the paper by Elaine Heumann Gurian of the National Museum of the American Indian at the Smithsonian), they treat museum visitors as *tabulae rasae* upon whom exhibition planners, curators, and other powers-that-be exercise their will. There is little attempt to find out how exhibitions affect the visitor either immediately or in the longer term. Admittedly such information is not easy to obtain, but without it can one really judge the effectiveness of exhibiting cultures?

My own fieldwork, limited as it was, demonstrated just how strong museum-going conventions are: DO NOT TOUCH. YOU ARE BEING WATCHED. BE QUIET. LOOK AT THE OBJECTS WITH RESPECT. *Exhibiting Cultures* examines many of these conventions and sometimes suggests ways of breaking loose from them. Despite the considerable efforts of its editors, the book suffers from the defects of too many cooks (26 authors in 464 pages). Nevertheless some common themes emerge.

One has to do with whether or to what extent an object speaks for itself as against the degree to which it should be explained either by words or by the setting in which it is shown. This controversy has been around as long as there have been both art and ethnographic museums. Berkeley art historian Svetlana Alpers argues eloquently for letting the visitor and the object confront each other free from clutter, but this stance leads her to the highly ethnocentric view that "some cultures lack artifacts of visual interest" (p. 30). It depends on who is looking. Her arguments, like those of many art historians, assume that visitors share a common culture (usually middle class and Eurocentric) and that the culture from which an object comes is to be measured against that common culture. This is just what a number of papers in this volume bring into question.

The antithesis of the object in isolation is the object in context. Often this context is provided by a label of varying length. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, a professor of

Event in a museum, Brisbane, Australia. [From *Exhibiting Cultures*; photograph by Eckhard Supp]



"Aditi artist Ganga Devi creates an artifact on the redone walls of the National Museum of Natural History by painting a traditional *khobar*, or wall painting, heralding marriage." [From Richard Kurin's account of the Festival of India Folklife Exhibitions in *Exhibiting Cultures*; photograph courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution]

performance studies at New York University, quotes George Brown Goode of the Smithsonian, who, writing in 1889, characterized an educational museum as "a collection of instructive labels each illustrated by a well-selected specimen" (p. 395). Kirshenblatt-Gimblett examines in detail the problems of providing context for objects, whether by means of label, association with other objects, or "natural" settings or by means of historical reenactments, folk festivals, or audiovisual aids. She points out that many objects seen in historical, ethnographic, or natural history museums have little or no meaning without explanation. Yet there are dangers, for explanation requires interpretation and interpretation is not neutral. This is what concerns art historian Michael Baxandall as he examines the relationships among the exhibitor, the label, and the visitor. Exhibitors are always being selective, but they "cannot *represent* cultures" (p. 41). They can only stimulate and attempt not to mislead (easier said than done). Baxandall recognizes that the visitor is an active agent operating with the object, with the label, and in the crucial area between the two.

Yet another aspect of the debate over art in isolation versus objects in context can be seen in the three papers that deal with an exhibition of Hispanic art in the United States. Should ethnic art be treated simply as art to be measured against common standards, or should its ethnic origins be taken into account? If exhibiting cultures implies showing cultures other than those of visitors, then this "otherness" must be faced. The exhibition of Hispanic art shown in Houston and elsewhere presented Hispanic art as ART with a deemphasized, almost concealed ethnic element. But Chicano art, as discussed by Tomas Ybarra-Frausto, a scholar of Latin American art and culture, is trying to distinguish itself from the mainstream. It revels in its "otherness." To lose ethnicity is to lose identity. As anthropologist Ivan Karp points out (p. 375), exhibitors seem to have a choice between assimilating and exoticizing what they present. Assimilation runs the risk of losing the diversity of cultures, but exoticizing may serve to perpetuate myths above the strangeness and perhaps even the inhumanness of cultures other than our own.

The discussion of Chicano art highlights the political aspect of exhibiting. Ybarra-Frausto argues that Chicano art is inseparable from its political content. He writes that Chicano art "intends that its viewers respond both to the aesthetic object and the social reality reflected in it" (p. 128). This contrasts with the concern of curators Jane Livingston and John Beardsley, who worried that their exhibition "would be dismissed as purely political and therefore become *artistically* invisible" (their emphasis, p. 112).

It is not just the political content of an exhibition or festival that concerns a number of authors but the political significance of the museum itself. Historian Carol Duncan sees public art museums as "necessary fixtures of a well-furnished state." They become as much the markers of a new nation as a dam or an airline. She and several other authors point to the history of museums as elite institutions symbolizing the power of the ruler and later of the state. Duncan maintains that "the art museum gives citizenship and civic virtue content without having to redistribute real power" (p. 94). Again fieldwork could test such a notion. Spencer R. Crew and James E. Sims of the Smithsonian examine the locus of authenticity in museums and point out that authenticity is not about factuality or reality but about authority, and that the museum is the authority. This authority appears notably in history museums and reconstructed historic villages. In what sense are these authentic? It is doubtful whether Williamsburg smells the way it did in the 18th century. It certainly didn't have a gift shop.

Solemn discussions about museums, galleries, and festivals often fail to analyze the entertainment factor. Stephen Greenblatt, a Renaissance scholar and critic from Berkeley, discusses wonder, which occurs "when the act of attention draws a circle around itself from which everything but the object is excluded" (p. 49). It is surely one of the main things that draws us to a museum, whether we look at a Rembrandt or a moon rock. Susan Vogel, director of the Center for African Art in New York, is also concerned with intensified seeing when she manipulates the contexts in which she shows African art. Elaine Heumann Gurian points to the similarity between an exhibition and a theatrical production. But to what extent should entertainment drive our museums? When does a museum become a theme park? Historian Curtis Hinsley's paper on the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 shows how what were planned as educational exhibits showing exotic cultures turned into sideshows driven by the profit motive. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett observes that "for instruction to redeem amusement, viewers need principles for looking" (p. 390). Unlike Alpers, she maintains that mere visual interest is insufficient.

It is clear we like museums. A new one opens every week. But we need to examine what we are doing in them. The recent controversies about the Mapplethorpe exhibition and the exhibition The West as America, which challenges some myths about the American expansion westward, show that the museum has become contested ground. How other cultures are depicted is not just a matter for museum curators to decide; both the "subjects" of the exhibition and the visitors also have voices. Some of these voices are heard in *Exhibiting Cultures*.

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