

Its all about objects

Neil Cossons*

There is one and only one characteristic that distinguishes museums from other places of scholarship, education, inspiration, or entertainment; museums hold collections of objects. They are *about* objects and *for* people. To many this might appear to be a self-evident truth and to the public at large it is certainly how they see and perceive museums.

Public museums have been with us for more than three hundred years. They are without doubt among the most enduring of cultural institutions. Throughout that time their role as collectors of objects has been unquestioned. And, it has been their responsibilities as keepers of those collections that has accorded them their most convincing and persuasive right to permanence.

But, increasingly, I hear museums described as something else and especially by new generations of museum professionals. They see museums as being about messages and narratives - not in itself a bad thing - but are content to see objects as playing a merely

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supportive or illustrative role. In the case of historical museums in particular I have been challenged in recent years by curators who say museums are about people first and objects second, or, increasingly, that objects are not central to the spirit, purpose or function of a museum, that knowing about objects is peripheral and that scholarship and research about them is no longer essential in order for a museum to fulfill its true function – of making socially relevant pronouncements.

This may sound like a plea for a return to ‘traditional values’, whatever they might be. On the contrary. My contention is that it is through objects that museums make their most compelling statements, it is from objects that they derive their wisdom and so it is in objects that their value rests. I feel especially confident in expressing these thoughts here in the Musée des Arts et Métiers, a place rich in collections and where objects are presented for what they are as a source of meaning, message and metaphor.

There are of course real issues about the primacy of objects in museums of science and technology, faced as they are with the challenge of - and demand for - interactivity. Add to this the fact that the scholarly community is a small one and that the epicentre of its research lies in fields for which collections are often of little relevance, and it is easy to be dismissive of collections and their worth. It is equally easy for museums themselves to marginalise their collections by consigning them to permanent and often inaccessible storage. From that it is one short step for collections to be seen not as a

source of wisdom but as a burdensome cost. This is especially the case with industrial collections where their scale (often leading to them being stored dis-assembled) coupled with lack of curatorial knowledge and minimal likelihood of public display, means that they are difficult to justify or appreciate.

Many – and probably most - museums present fewer objects to the public than they once did. In too many museums objects have become a distraction that gets in the way of the museum's social and narrative role. Add to this the increasing belief on the part of museum authorities that their new museum needs to be an iconic signature building in which, again, collections may be a side show or an irrelevance, and it seems that we have some hard thinking to do. In the case of many art museums the building is the primary exhibit, the symbol of its presence, the signature that of the architect not the curator. Content may be entirely evanescent.

Seek out the section on museums in a good bookshop and you will see what I mean. Here you find books about buildings and their architects, rarely about collections or how the building contributes to the public's appreciation of what it is there to present. The champions of this new world of museums are household names: Calatrava, Chipperfield, Foster, Gehry, Hadid, Liebeskind, Rogers. And, many of these buildings are profoundly unsuitable for the purposes of being a museum but, at least for the time being, they fulfill another function; it might be summed up as the Bilbao effect.

And, paradoxically, it can be buildings originally designed for other purposes that can accomplish real museum success in presenting objects in a simple and clear and compelling manner. The Smithsonian American Art Museum and National Portrait Gallery in the Old Patent Office Building in Washington DC (further enhanced with Norman Foster's Kogod Courtyard in 2007), and the National Museum in Collins Barracks, Dublin are excellent examples.

But, if I am right and collections have become marginalised in the minds of museum proponents and their acolytes, the pendulum is I believe beginning to swing back. For the rest of this year, every weekday on BBC Radio 4, Neil McGregor, Director of the British Museum, presents a fifteen-minute programme about an object from the collections in his museum. The series allows him to explore and explain one hundred objects in the museum's collections that trace the history of humanity. After breakfast each morning and repeated again late each evening, this compelling series, at once intellectually robust and accessible, is one of the most popular evocations there has been in recent years for the value of objects and through them for the value of museums. That it is through the medium of radio, rather than television, makes it all the more influential.

So, my simple message is that we need to revive our faith in objects, to know about them and be experts in their meanings and the cultural values that attach to them. But, as important, we need to hone our abilities to communicate not just about objects but through objects. Here is a lost art. In a simpler age our forebears understood the

power of revelation through objects; we need to rediscover it and refine it for today. In the face of the new visual media the object offers an incomparably refined experience, contemplative and challenging. For museums their role, overlooked but essential, is to cultivate an understanding of the cerebral encounter with the veracity of the real thing. John Pope-Hennessy, a former Director of the Victoria & Albert Museum, summed it up in the title of his autobiography, *Learning to Look*.