Exhibition Reviews


Reviewed by Christopher B. Steiner

When Harvey, the main character in Saki's short story "The Toys of Peace" (1923), returns from a visit to the Hague he brings back as a gift for his small nephews a model of the Peace Palace. The model comes complete with miniature replicas of the tools of industry (a wheelbarrow and hoe), a tiny ballot box for municipal elections, and a series of small lead figures representing distinguished civilians—a noted woman poet, the man who introduced the system of penny postage, an eminent astrologer, and John Stuart Mill. The nephews are left alone in their room to play: to educate themselves in the ideals of political democracy. Standing at the door of the boys' room an hour later, Harvey witnesses his lesson in civil liberty vanishing before his eyes. The astrologer had become Louis the Fourteenth, the poetess was now Madame de Maintenon, and the famous political economist was heard shouting a battle cry in the voice of Marshal Saxe. The Peace Palace was drenched in the blood of red ink, and the little hoes were pointed like little cannons through holes pierced in the side of the Young Women's Christian Association building. The toys of peace had become the toys of war—a miniature landscape embellished and transformed by youthful minds and fertile imaginations.

Worlds in Miniature, Worlds Apart, an exhibition currently on view at Harvard's Peabody Museum, explores the landscape of anthropological imagination which historically has been played out in miniature through the construction and display of models or dioramas of non-Western societies. This exhibition can be interpreted in at least two different ways. On the one hand, it can be understood as a celebratory history of the diorama—a history which commemorates the role of a meticulous form of art in shaping museum anthropology and the contextualization of material culture—or, on the other hand, it can be understood as a critical history of the diorama—a history which provides a unique window onto current issues and debates in social anthropology, including, the politics of representation and the construction of the Other. In this review, I have chosen to concentrate largely on this second interpretation of the exhibition.

Coined in the 1820s by its Victorian inventors, the term "diorama" was used originally to described a transparency exhibited under the changing effect of light and shadow. In the 1930s, the same term was used to describe miniature museum displays or habitats which were set in illuminated cabinets. Both in its original usage to describe a rotating light show and in its later sense of a three-dimensional tableau vivant, the diorama represented an unparalleled scientific and artistic achievement—an emblem of modernity whose craft had been perfected by the first decades of this century. Ironically, this modern technological feat found one of its principal applications in the display cases of ethnographic museums where it was used to represent the supposedly "primitive" technologies of non-industrialized peoples. The lessons which were to be drawn from the exhibitions, with their implied Victorian model of evolutionary cultural development, were thus being underscored by the medium of communication itself—a dazzling achievement of fin-de-siècle industrial technology and craftsmanship.

Worlds in Miniature, Worlds Apart was organized collaboratively by Ian Brown, Lea McChesney, Robert Preucel, Richard Riccio, Susan Shumaker, and Stephen Williams. The dioramas, many of them over half a century old, were restored to their original condition by an able staff of conservators and exhibition preparators. Clear and carefully crafted label copy, drawn largely from archival

sources, elucidates the history of dioramas in American museums of anthropology in general, and in particular their place in one of the oldest such institutions, the Peabody Museum at Harvard.

The exhibition is devoted largely to dioramas constructed in the first decades of this century representing both ethnographic and archaeological sites. Much of the work on the dioramas was begun at the Peabody in the late 1890s under the direction of F.W. Putnam. By 1930 most of the dioramas were on display in the permanent halls of the museum. Because of the Peabody's historical emphasis on research among indigenous American populations, a large part of the models represent scenes drawn from either Native American societies or archaeological field sites in North and Central America. The gallery holds approximately a dozen free-standing display cases with models of both indigenous populations and archaeological excavations. Lining either side of the main gallery are six large wall cases which serve to explore broader themes associated with the history of dioramas: biographies of their advocates and their creators, methods of both miniature model-making and the casting of life-size ('lay') figures, and the role of the diorama in the making of the anthropological museum. A number of smaller cases contain panoramic models meant to be viewed from the front, framed by painted scenic backdrops. Also displayed in some of these smaller cases are models of material culture created by indigenous artists themselves.

Most of the miniature ethnographic dioramas in free-standing cases which were chosen for this exhibit represent village scenes with "typical" houses, utilitarian objects, vegetation, foods, and people (almost always engaged in a productive activity). The titles of the labels—which are the original dark wooden plaques with gold lettering—highlight the architectural focus of the dioramas: "Houses of the Siusu Indians," "Houses of the Pomo Indians," "Houses of the Haida Indians," etc. The attention to architecture grows out of an association in early American anthropology between a society's technology of house-building and its putative level of cultural complexity or development. The choice of the house as a theme of the ethnographic diorama was, therefore, not an arbitrary one but fit into a whole series of assumptions about the history of aesthetics and technology and the principle of cultural adaptation (cf. Mead 1928). Writing in the pages of the American Anthropologist in 1890, one observer of the anthropology of architecture noted some of the following differences between the rudimentary technology of the "primitive" hut and the futuristic delights of "modern" civilization:

To us, with our comfortable homes, our huge hotels, our gigantic office buildings, our churches, our theaters, our railway stations, our factories, our elevators, our steam heat, our electric light, and the thousand and one conveniences and necessities of modern life, the structures of primitive peoples appear mean and insufficient. It should be remembered however, that many of our modern conveniences are intended to supply artificial wants and that the necessities of to-day were unknown the day before yesterday. The hut of the Adamese [sic] doubtless answers all his ideas of comfort and is eminently adapted to the life he leads. (Ferree 1890:157; cf. Rykwert 1972)

The diorama cases which fill the central space of the gallery are situated in historical context by explanatory text and displays in wall cases on either side of the room. A number of interesting themes are raised in these displays. One case, entitled "Lives in Art and Science," points to the intimate relationship in the construction of dioramas between artistic talent and scientific accuracy. Two figures who played a prominent part in the history of dioramas at the Peabody, Charles Clark Willoughby and Samuel J. Guernsey, are shown to be products of the early, more eclectic days of anthropology "when the distinction between art and science was not clearly drawn." Another case, on "Women Artists at the Peabody Museum," remembers the women artists—Alice Willoughby, Vilma Russel, Elizabeth Gleason, and Madeline Brown—who created many of the dioramas shown in the exhibition. As in so many other enterprises during this period of history, the recognition of women was obscured by the shadow of men. Because of the invisibility of their participation in the creative process, information about the lives of the women artists is "scant at best."

Finally, there are two cases which underscore the commercial aspect of diorama manufacture and trade. Like so many other artforms, the diorama was embedded in a market economy characterized by specialized production and exchange. In 1929, two scientist/artists,
Eskimo woman fishing through the ice. A 1929 photograph of a diorama at the American Museum of Natural History. Courtesy of AMNH photo archives.

Samuel J. Guernsey and Theodore Baldwin Pitman, opened a studio for modelling in Harvard Square: an enterprise which was described in a contemporary newspaper article as being "as unique as it is profitable." Because of its relative monopoly in the field, Guernsey, Pitman & Co. was not only able to survive the Great Depression but was responsible for supplying many of the dioramas housed in some of America's most prestigious cultural institutions, including a magnificent series on the history of Harvard College, exhibited at Widener Library, which has remained to this day a popular stop on the campus tour.

Forged in the crucible of industrial culture, the museum diorama sought to preserve in vivid visual form the "natural" condition of humankind. During the early decades of this century—an era of rapid social change and growing infrastructure—the diorama of the ethnographic museum helped conserve culture and architecture in what was thought to be its most pristine form (a similar point is made by Haraway 1990 in reference to animal habitat dioramas at the American Museum of Natural History). The contrast between this burgeoning steel metropolis and the idyllic primordial hut is brought out nicely in the following passage (some of which is quoted in the exhibition) which appeared in Natural History magazine in 1931:

In the present age of skyscrapers a community of gigantic proportions is being constructed in the heart of

New York—Radio City. At the American Museum of Natural History another community of equally astonishing dimensions has just been completed. No towering skyscrapers here, but diminutive dwellings approximately a foot in height; no tremendous masses of steel and cement, but gracefully curved structures of wood and thatch. . . . [The diorama affords] a striking contrast to the turmoil of western civilization that lies outside the Museum's doors. (Edwards 1931:549-50)

The diorama not only preserved a moment in "evolutionary" time, which could be set in contrast to a rapidly expanding world of moral and architectural danger just outside the museum walls, but the model also froze a moment of physical action: an instant of suspended animation which viewers could come to see again and again. This sense of immutability was perhaps best captured by Holden Caulfield, the adolescent protagonist of J.D. Salinger's classic The Catcher in the Rye. Recounting his visit to the American Museum of Natural History, Caulfield remarks:

The best thing, though, in that museum was that everything always stayed right where it was. Nobody'd move. You could go there a hundred thousand times, and that Eskimo would still be just finished catching those two fish, the birds would still be on their way south, the deers [sic] would still be drinking out of that water hole. . . . and that squaw with the naked bosom would still be weaving that same blanket. Nobody'd be different. (1964 ed.:121)

Not only was the diorama static, but its inhabitants could be viewed candidly without any chance of the viewer ever being seen. Bodies, often stripped of their full attire, were made available to the observer's gaze, and the roofs of homes were peeled back to allow the visitor to peer inside—to see what would otherwise be unseen. As Salinger's hero remarks elsewhere in the novel, "The squaw that was weaving the blanket was sort of
bending over, and you could see her bosom at all. We all used to sneak a good look at it, even the girls, because they were only little kids and they didn't have any more bosom than we did* (ibid.:121). In addition to whatever else the diorama communicates, one could argue that this special mode of viewing culture breeds a kind of voyeurism in which silent subjects can be scrutinized at a comfortable distance, and in which youthful laughter nervously masks adolescent fantasies in front of naked bodies that never look back.

If the diorama was intended by its makers to be a historical record of the societies they sought to reconstruct, in this exhibition the diorama is intended to provide a historical record of a formative period in museum anthropology which its organizers have sought to deconstruct. In recent years, the discipline of anthropology has begun to turn its gaze increasingly upon itself, taking pause at a reflexive turn to observe the politics and poetics of its own craft. Following from this trend, Worlds in Miniature, Worlds Apart suggests to the field of museum anthropology a new way of looking critically at itself and its past. Artifacts of other cultures have been put aside temporarily to be replaced by the artifacts of museum culture itself. Dioramas which once served to tell a story about far-away peoples and places now tell a story about subjects much closer to home.

References
Ferre, Barr
Haraway, Donna
Mead, Margaret
Rukwert, Joseph

Saki (H.H. Munro)
Salinger, J.D.

Caribbean Festival Arts, at The Minneapolis Institute of Arts (2/10/91 to 4/14/91), Royal Ontario Museum (6/1/91 to 9/15/91), Fort Lauderdale Museum of Art (10/21/91 to 1/2/92), and Seattle Art Museum (2/20/92 to 5/3/92).

Reviewed by Phyllis Mauch Messenger and Susan O. Michelman

In 1988, under the direction of Evan Maunder, the Minneapolis Institute of Arts embarked on a program to increase the breadth and diversity of its constituent audience. In particular, the Institute began to address the needs and interests of the ethnically diverse inner-city neighborhood that surrounds it. Entrance fees were eliminated, and periodic Sunday family days were initiated; these have become popular events, drawing the local community to the museum for hands-on art activities, music, dance and food.

Outreach has not been restricted to admissions and special events, but has also been part of program development, and here non-western materials have played a prominent role. A project to redesign the African, Oceanic and New World Cultures exhibits, under the direction of curator Louise Lincoln, included extensive dialogue with three multi-ethnic advisory committees. Their goal was to help shape the reinstallation of the exhibits, in order "to give a voice to the cultures they represent" (Arts, July 1990). Committee members wanted the museum to offer its visitors "the cultural experience as well as the artistic approach," including addressing issues of slavery, colonization and oppression. Reflecting these concerns, the new exhibits of non-western materials now include a great deal more contextual information than past Institute installations.

In harmony with the goal of addressing a culturally diverse audience, the Institute scheduled the recent installation of Caribbean Festival Arts—a timely vehicle for its revitalized educational and outreach missions. This was the fourth of six venues for this traveling exhibition, which originated at the St. Louis Art Museum under the curatorship of John W. Nunley and Judith Bettelheim. It was originally designed by Alex Castro and Carolyn Castro. The exhibit focuses on three major festivals: the Islamic festival of Hosay celebrated by East Indian communities in the Caribbean, the Christmas festival Jonkonnu, and the pre-Lenten festival of Carnival, as well as lesser-known variations.

The exhibit addresses the cultural transformation of Caribbean festivals into North American and European settings by including several costumes and masks of festivals in Toronto, New Orleans, Brooklyn and London. Video interviews reveal how participants in the United States festivals use these celebrations as ways of maintaining cultural connections with their Caribbean homelands.

The exhibit includes thirty-six complete costume ensembles, ranging from human scale to 16-feet high. The costumes embody the vibrancy of these Caribbean celebrations, as well as revealing their evolution through influences from Europe, Africa and Asia. For example, wire screen masks were originally exported to the Caribbean during the late 1800s from the Tyrol region of Austria; today the masks are made by local performers for Jonkonnu. Anthropomorphic creatures, architectural constructions, and historical parodies are assembled using mirrors, sequins, plastic whistles, feathers, Christmas balls and magazine cutouts. This aesthetic of assemblage is closely associated with the African tradition of masquerade. In the exhibit setting, the costumes are displayed on unnervingly lifelike mannequins (which are traveling with the exhibition), technically superb life-casts of Caribbean dancers, conveying individual characteristics with a realism that emphasizes the uniqueness of festival participants.

The festival costumes are made for one-time wearing: they lose their form.

Museum Anthropology, Vol.15, no. 2