Beginning in the fifteenth century, when artifacts from Africa and the New World were being brought back to Europe by explorers and ship captains, members of the European elite began to display these objects in small cases or even entire rooms known in German as Wunderkammer, or cabinets of curiosities. No distinction was made in this early period between the fruits of nature and objects created by human hands. A nautilus shell, for example, could sit comfortably on the same shelf as a Brazilian feather headdress; a stuffed crocodile could readily share its space with an African carved figure. Each object, whether created by nature or crafted by man, attested to the mystery of God’s creations and the magnificence of His work.

As royal collections, the cabinets of curiosities also attested to the global power and interests of the reigning monarchy and its political rule. But as royal dynasties gave way to popular republics in the eighteenth century, many of these private collections were absorbed into the newly emerging public museums of modern European nation-states. Thus, for example, the cabinet of curiosities of the Danish kings led to the founding of the National Museum of Copenhagen, while the collections of the electors of Brandenburg and kings of Prussia formed the nucleus of the Berlin Ethnographic Museum.

The shift from private collections to public museums had two significant consequences for the history of representing other cultures. First, it meant that these representations were no longer exclusively for the aristocracy who had sole access to private cabinets, but were now available to the public-at-large to view and reach their own conclusions about “exotic” cultures outside of Europe. And, second it meant that these collections were now to form the core of academic learning rather than courtly posturing. Yet, it is important to note that although these new public museums were in theory open to the masses, many of them were less then welcoming in their early years of operation. Soon after the British Museum opened its doors to the public in 1759, for example, it demanded something like a mathematical calculation to determine when the building was open.
Witness, for example, the following notice which was posted to the public regarding the hours of operation at the British Museum:

The museum is open every day except Saturday and Sunday in each week; likewise except Christmas Day and one week after ... also except the week after Easter and the week after Whit Sunday and except Good Friday and all days which are now, or shall hereafter be specially appointed Thanksgivings or fasts by public authority. Furthermore, between the months of September and April inclusive, from Monday to Friday the museum shall be opened from nine o'clock till three and likewise at the same hours on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday in May, June, July, and August but on Monday and Friday only from one o'clock to eight in the afternoon.

Even if the public could figure out when the museum was open, the visitor was advised that no more than 10 people could be admitted at any one time, and that they would be escorted around in groups for a 30-minute tour.

Science not Art

One of the reasons early museums were not quick to welcome the public was that although these institutions were no longer considered the sole privilege of royalty they now viewed themselves as scientific institutions where scholars dedicated their lives to the study and classification of the museum's collections. The scientific interest in using artifacts to identify "types" of societies rather than illustrate detailed, historical views of discrete cultures became the model of representation used up until 50 years ago in most ethnographic museums around the world. Thus, just as natural history museums organized their collections of stuffed birds, for example, into linear rows so that viewers could immediately identify the salient characteristics of the variations among closely related species; so too museums presented multiple examples of ethnographic objects to allow viewers to identify the "typical" qualities of a culture's masks or statues.

By the beginning of the 20th century, the scientific role of museums was clearly established as a working model for any museum involved in the representation of other cultures. What changed by this time, however, was that museums were also seen as potential educational institutions from which the public could learn and benefit. Rather than making it as difficult as possible to get into public museums, new exhibit strategies and technologies were devised to try to attract museum visitors. One of the most successful and compelling exhibit designs created in this century is the "diorama" which situates both people and animals in their indigenous habitat. The science and art of the diorama was perfected in the 1930s largely in natural museums such as the American Museum of Natural History in New York, the Field Museum in Chicago and the Peabody Museums at Harvard and Yale. In both the animal and human examples of dioramas the model-makers were generally aiming to represent ideal "types": either a typical example of a gorilla as seen in its natural forest environment, or a typical "native" village scene with "typical" houses, utilitarian objects, vegetation, foods, and people. While animals were generally frozen in specific motions (either marching, hunting, flying, etc.) people were almost always depicted as engaged in some sort of productive activity (hunting, cooking, nursing, or house-building).

Invented in the crucible of industrial culture, the museum diorama sought to preserve in visual form the "natural" condition of humankind. During the early decades of this century, characterized as they were by 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. Visitors to the American Museum of Natural History were struck by the awesome contrast between the burgeoning steel metropolis of New York City and the idyllic primordial huts preserved in the quiet halls of the museum. 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 that viewers could come to see again and again. This sense of preservation and immutability was perhaps most famously captured by Holden Caulfield, the adolescent protagonist of J.D. Salinger’s classic 1951 novel *The Catcher in the Rye*. Recounting his visit to the American Museum of Natural History, Caulfield (the young boy) 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 there way south, the deers would still be drinking out of the water hole, ... and that squaw with the naked bosom would still be weaving that same blanket. Nobody’d be different.*

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 and 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.” In addition to whatever else the diorama communicated, 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 half-naked bodies that never risk looking back.

More recently, on several occasions from 1987 to 1990, Diego/Luiseño artist James Luna combined elements of installation and performance art when he placed himself in an exhibition case in a San Diego Museum of Man hall containing conventional ethnographic displays about American Indians. His lifeless body, covered with a simple loin cloth, and resting on a bed of sand evoked the “death of Native cultures” which Luna perceives as characteristic of such ethnographic halls. Labels pointed to marks on his own body received in drinking and fighting incidents. The piece thus subverted the museum objectification and romantic stereotyping of Native people while drawing attention to their actual problems.

**Art Not Science**

In 1941, the Museum of Modern Art in New York opened an exhibition entitled “Indian Art of the United States,” which grew directly out of the work of the Indian Arts and Crafts Board created in 1935 as part of the Roosevelt administration’s New Deal. The exhibition filled the entire three floors of the Museum of Modern Art and was divided into three sections “Prehistoric Art,” “Living Traditions,” and “Indian Art for Modern Living.” Unlike the dioramas which dominated the current exhibits at the Museum of Natural History across town, the Museum of Modern Art exhibit focused on the formal aesthetic qualities of the works without trying to contextualize them in their indigenous cultures. More recently, in
the early 1980s, the Metropolitan Museum of Art opened the Rockefeller Wing of Primitive Art. Like the Museum of Modern Art exhibit of a half-century earlier, the Rockefeller Wing presents the public with as little ethnographic information as possible. Object labels are sparse, providing only ethnic provenance, estimated age, and donor. The objects are otherwise, as it were, left to their own devices.

Art installations such as these, of both Native American and African arts, are meant to side-step the problems which James Luna identified as the hollow ring of ethnographic displays. Since it is seemingly hopeless to contextualize a culture properly, with the appropriate nuance and richness that would make the representation accurate or meaningful, an alternative model which has emerged in the mid to late 20th century is to allow objects to simply “speak for themselves.” The problem with this approach is that because the representation of other cultures always involves a complex process of translation, it is impossible to convey an accurate image when museum viewers have no knowledge of the “language” (both literal and metaphorical) of the culture they are attempting to read. By not providing any context at all, the process of translation is essentially short-circuited and results, in some cases, in a gross mistranslation of culture rather than the more neutral aim of no translation.

**Indigenous Voice**

The only way around these problems of cultural translation is to allow people (as opposed to objects) to speak for themselves. When the Holocaust Museum in Washington opened in 1993, it would have been unthinkable to present the story of the Holocaust from anything but the perspective of its victims. Could you imagine a Holocaust Museum in the nation’s capital from the perspective of Nazi Germany? Although the museum bears witness to history through some artifacts, it is primarily a narrative museum; the impact of its story is both intellectual and emotional. The voices in the museum are both inscribed in the text on the walls and are also present in the headphones one can wear in the “Voices of Auschwitz,” for example. How could that story told by anyone else but the survivors?

To my mind, the new Mashantucket Pequot Museum here in southeastern Connecticut is also a narrative museum which tells a story from and through an indigenous voice. What makes this so different from the Native American representations we have looked at so far? While the museum uses dioramas extensively, the 22,000-square-foot immersion diorama recreating a 16th-century coastal Pequot village disrupts the fixed gaze of earlier natural history models. Rather than positioning viewers in the “correct” spot and directing their gaze in a specific manner, the immersion diorama allows the visitor to walk around the recreated life settings, thereby not privileging a single perspective, but rather allowing multiple points of entry into the historic Pequot world. Furthermore, by allowing visitors to select from a variety of voices on portable digital audio wands, the exhibit neither recounts a story of Native history as told by others nor simply allows the exhibit to “speak for itself.” Finally, the museum is not wedged awkwardly between a distant moment in geologic time or an exhibit of primates or birds. Rather the museum installations are framed between two readings of the present: on the front end we move through the Pequot Nation Gallery which establishes the present issues of land ownership and Pequot sovereignty and at the tail end we experience the voices and photographs of contemporary tribal members. Ironically, one of the last artifacts visitors see in the museum is the electric typewriter used by Richard “Skip” Hayward to successfully achieve federal recognition in 1983. The statement seems clear: Pequot material culture of symbolic importance includes not only ancient basketry and arrowpoints but items that define Native identity in the present — items which might be found in almost anyone’s home.

Without the voice of the subject in the exhibition, Skip Hayward’s electric typewriter would just be another typewriter: no different from yours or mine.

**For further reading:**


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