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The Representation of Objects in Museums

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Museum exhibits and collections can be presented in a variety of ways. Studying how museum displays have developed over the years can tell us much about the history of science.

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Back in the 1990s, the museum-studies scholar Eilean Hooper-Greenhill put forward the argument that museums could be seen as reflections of the changing developments playing out within academic disciplines. Her enigmatic remark implied that throughout their long history, museums maintained close relations with academies of sciences and universities in order to display, in their halls and galleries, the theories and problems currently being discussed by researchers.

Indeed, if we look at the history of museums from this perspective, we can see that they have often helped scholars to visually present, in digestible form, complex problems and visions of the world that would later become current and common knowledge. This strong relationship between museums and academia was born as early as Antiquity and evolved throughout the successive centuries. It was not until the Age of Enlightenment, or the mid-eighteenth century, that museums started to be understood as cultural institutions that collect, develop, preserve, and provide access to its collections. However, earlier institutions, similar in their profile to museums, had also retained close relations with the scientific milieu.

Science and museums

Already the first scientific institution in the ancient world, the Mouseion of Alexandria, points us to a cen-

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An example of the style of presenting archaeological artifacts that developed in the nineteenth century

turies-old tradition that combines doing science with exhibiting museum collections. Although the ancient Mouseion ("home to the muses") included a library, an observatory, and gardens in which ancient scholars followed their intellectual pursuits, the adoption of the same name by exhibition-focused institutions in later times should prompt us to reflect on the marriage of museums and academia. This relationship was nurtured in various forms in the times of the Roman Empire. Examples include the traditional displaying of various collections, including war trophies, in bathhouses, where lectures and scientific meetings were also held. The relationship between museums and academia changed in the Middle Ages, when collections were not accessible to the public at large. However, they were still governed by a certain logic related to the intellectual atmosphere of the time: collections were meant to serve divine glory and thus fully reflected the main concepts of that era, centered around religiousness.

The Renaissance brought a resurgence in the concept of collecting, with wealthy individuals creating special rooms or "cabinets" where they stored their collections. Such cabinets comprised works of art (*Kunstkammer*), antiquities (*Antiquitäten-Kammer*), or "curiosities" (*Wunderkammer*). In the opinion of many researchers, such cabinets of curiosities were macrocosms of their age – by means of collections arranged into various sections, they illustrated the world order of the time. Cabinets of curiosities could include carefully crafted pieces of furniture, unique minerals, fragments of ancient statues, as well as preserved specimens of plant and animal species brought back from overseas conquests. The Age of Enlightenment put an end to these places for seemingly chaotic encounters with haphazardly gathered objects of culture and nature. The mid-eighteenth century instead marked the beginning of the age of museums: institutions that use their collections to teach, educate, and present the current state of knowledge.

MATTHIAS KABEL/WIKIPEDIA.PL

The Venus of Willendorf, from the collection of the Natural History Museum in Vienna

Modern museums were formed on the wave of encyclopedism, in the atmosphere of the Enlightenment-era development of academies and universities. It was at that time that such museums as the Louvre and British Museum were established. Those institutions were model examples of "encyclopedic" museums, which used objects to broadly illustrate the state of knowledge at the time, such as the chronological order of historical time periods and the relationship between countries and the territories they had conquered. These institutions, intended to function like encyclopedia illustrations, in the following century began to be supplanted by more specialized museums. In the nineteenth century, as scientific disciplines at academies and universities became increasingly differentiated, museums began to specialize and support the activity of scientific institutions by teaching, explaining, and elaborating on the prevailing worldviews

and scientific theories in specific fields. That period witnessed the emergence of museums of art, natural history, and archaeology. Excellent illustrations of this chapter in the history of museums are provided by two Viennese institutions: the Natural History Museum (*Naturhistorisches Museum*) and Museum of Art History (*Kunshistorisches Museum*), designed as twin buildings built opposite each other in the heart of Austria's capital.

Interestingly, the ways of exhibiting certain collections developed at that time continue to be used in specialized museums until the present. For example, the model of exhibiting works of art based on chronological and geographical divisions, established in the nineteenth century, can still be found in numerous European museums. Their halls are arranged by epochs (Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and so on) and by regions (e.g. Italian painting, Flemish painting) or by schools (e.g. Rubens's school). Does this suggest, however, that the theories and approaches in certain scientific disciplines have remained unchanged since the nineteenth century?

Presentation of archaeological finds

An interesting answer to this question is provided by the history of archaeological museums. In modern museums, ancient objects collected since the earliest times, variously held in cabinets of art/curiosities and specially designated galleries of antiquities and sculpture gardens (*lapidaria*), have been divided between art museums and natural history museums. Good examples include the archaeological collections in the two Viennese museums mentioned above. The Egyptian and Greco-Roman collections found a home in the Museum of Art History, whereas the prehistoric collection (including the famous Venus of Willendorf) joined the collections of the Natural History Museum. However, specialized archaeological museums, which date back to the mid-nineteenth century, had different origins.

M. CHOHAN/WIKIPEDIA.PL

Another example of the style of presenting archaeological artifacts that developed in the nineteenth century – the British Museum, London

In an impressive publication devoted to the history of archaeology, leading scholars Michael Shanks, Bjørnar Olsen, Timothy Webmoor, and Christopher Witmore link the birth of academic archaeology, as a field in its own right, to the arrival of modern museums. They point out that the actual subject of archeological study was demonstrated by archaeological finds – tangible and authentic objects from the first methodical excavations, which were convincing because they showed visible traces of the passage of time and were exhibited in museums in keeping with the newly emerging classification of artifacts. Here museums played a role that was far more important than merely providing simple illustrations for scientific theory – instead, they were meant to prove that archaeology was a separate academic discipline, with its own subject of study and research tools. Consequently, the museums of the nineteenth century, together with the emerging scientific apparatus of archaeology, resembled a kind of public laboratory presenting concrete evidence – the real objects of scientific investigation that helped usher archaeology into academia. Museums served to legitimize the role of archeology, then a fledgling academic discipline, by lending scientific credibility to a field that had until then been viewed as merely auxiliary to history.

Such scientific credentials were created by visual and pedagogical representations of the research methods of the first archaeologists, which replaced the chaos of the cabinets of curiosities. Historical artifacts, which had hard-to-understand functions and were often not easy to name or identify, were arranged in display cases in visually appealing sequences. Such engaging presentation was dictated above all by the nature of the research tools of the time and the first regular theories used in archaeology. The basic principles of exhibiting archaeological objects, still largely followed to this day, were laid out by Christian Jürgensen Thomsen and Johann Joachim Winckelmann.

The former was a Danish antiquarian. In the first quarter of the nineteenth century, he proposed the chronological presentation of artifacts based on the materials from which they were made. Thomsen's system was compelling for reasons related to the presentation of large amounts of archaeological evidence. Once arranged in keeping with Thomsen's concept, prehistoric finds, difficult and ambiguous in their interpretation, unexpectedly revealed similarities and could be categorized into collections. Such presen-

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The building of the Museum of Art History in Vienna

tation of archeological finds was also supported by the work of another prominent scholar of the time, Johann Joachim Winckelmann, a pioneer of art history as an academic discipline and one of the fathers of classical archaeology.

Winckelmann became famous as the author of the first systematic artistic and historical study of the history of ancient art. His *History of the Art in Antiquity* not only played an enormous role in the establishment of art history as an academic discipline, but also impacted greatly on how classical archaeology was practiced. Citing historical and geographical arguments, Winckelmann outlined a compelling theory of Greek art based on the search for common stylistic features, allowing specific styles to be distinguished in the art of the ancient Greeks. Winckelmann's method proved revolutionary in that he studied not individual objects and their distinguishing characteristics, but rather searched for common features shared by all objects, which made it possible to draw general conclusions and outline evolutionary stages in the development of art.

Consequently, nineteenth-century archaeological museums presented obscure and enigmatic artifacts in logical sequences. Visitors could observe the development of the forms of these objects, as well as the succession of eras or cultures. Even today we often encounter this model of archaeological exhibitions; many of the world's museums opt for this traditional method of presenting exhibits. However, some try to reestablish anew the relationship between archaeological museums and academic reflection, drawing upon contemporary approaches and perspectives rather than antiquated theories.

The new scientific perspectives that archaeological museums attempt to illustrate range from specialized studies of human and animal remains and the past environments and landscapes to new approaches in archaeology, such as juxtaposing archaeological objects and contemporary artworks in order to encourage subjective reflection on the nature of the past, of time, and of objects themselves. These alternative methods of presenting archaeological finds demonstrate the multitude of theories and perspectives this interdisciplinary area of knowledge invokes today. They also suggest that museums can indeed successfully play the role of mirrors and continue to bring visitors closer to scientific innovations. ■

Further reading:

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