

The Reticent Object

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Museums exist in order to acquire, safeguard, conserve and display objects, artefacts and works of art of various kinds.¹ This at least would be a conventional definition of their function. There are, of course, numerous other kinds of activity in which most museums engage. Some see themselves more and more as commercial enterprises – partly because, in this country at least, they have been compelled to do so. Thus, the running of the museum shop or restaurant may occupy as much time, energy and thought as the work of a curatorial department. Education staff now proliferate in nearly every institution that wishes to claim the serious attention of the public, the press and the media, of public or private funding bodies or sponsors. Newly appointed Keepers of Education find themselves torn between the demands of curators whose prime concern is the care and conservation of the objects in their charge, and the expectations of an ever more diverse public: foreign visitors, school parties, ethnic minorities, visiting scholars, art college students. There are also, increasingly, new definitions of what museums are, or should be, as well as new kinds of museums: museums of the moving image, museums without walls, museums – even – without objects. Yet despite the bewildering array of present-day museums, and the range of activities in which they are involved, the principal tasks of most such institutions remain those defined above.

This essay is in any case concerned primarily with conventional museums – indeed, for the most part, with only one aspect of their activity. It is not about acquisition policy, nor about administrative questions. It is not about funding and sponsorship. It is not about conservation, nor the physical security of the objects permanently or temporarily in the care of the museum. Nor do I take into account those secondary activities referred to earlier, such as the commercial side of running a museum, or the work of its Education Department – though all these considerations may, in one way or another, impinge on the subject discussed here. What

does interest me is the display of objects, artefacts and works of art both within and outside the museum context, their public presentation: in other words, the making of exhibitions.

Virtually all museums are preoccupied in one way or another with the display of their collections – or perhaps one should say more accurately, of part of their collections. Such displays are themselves ephemeral: rarely does a decade elapse, even in the most conservative institution, without the rehanging, rearrangement, relocation or even total reconstruction of the 'main' or 'primary' galleries. Moreover, most major museums, alongside what many people would regard as their principal function as repositories of objects, works of art or artefacts, are engaging more and more frequently in the making of purely temporary exhibitions. The Tate Gallery has always done so; the V & A, though it has withdrawn (for the time being?) from the international trade in major loan exhibitions, still mounts a dozen or so smaller 'in-house' exhibitions every year; the National Gallery has begun to include in its programme more and more special exhibitions, albeit on an intimate scale – an activity which will doubtless assume a new dimension with the completion of the Sainsbury wing, giving the gallery, for the first time in its history, a custom-built temporary exhibition space. Then, of course, there are institutions which are not museums, such as the Hayward Gallery or the Barbican Art Gallery in London, which have no collections of their own, but exist solely for the display of temporary exhibitions. In addition to which, there is the commercial sector: the dealers and auctioneers who are in their way just as much occupied with the making of exhibitions as their counterparts in the museums. Indeed, some commercial galleries such as Agnew's and Fischer Fine Art in London, or the Galerie St Etienne in New York, have established a reputation for putting on, from time to time, exhibitions every bit as 'scholarly' as those staged by publicly funded institutions: a record all the more remarkable when one considers that such galleries receive no public subsidy to encourage them to risk staging 'unpopular' shows.

Even leaving aside the commercial sector, the sheer number of other exhibition-making organisations and institutions is immense. Take as a case study even London alone, and think of the Barbican Art Gallery and the Hayward Gallery and the Royal Academy and the major national institutions such as the National Gallery, the Tate Gallery, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the British Museum, the Museum of Mankind, the Science and Natural History Museums, the National Maritime Museum, the War Museum, the Army Museum, to say nothing of the local and

municipal museums, the various independent and 'private' museums and collections, the Courtauld Institute Galleries, the Wallace Collection, the Museum of London, and reflect on how many people are involved at any one time in designing, discussing, putting up or taking down more or less temporary displays and exhibitions of one kind or another, and then attempt to calculate how many people come to see these exhibitions and displays, reminding yourself meanwhile that London is only one city, and that these activities are replicated, albeit on a smaller scale, in towns and cities all over the British Isles. It will come as something of a shock to realise quite how large are the numbers of people involved in the making and consuming of exhibitions. Indeed, given the enormous amounts of time and energy, the colossal human and material and financial resources that are expended on making exhibitions, it is tempting to decide that there can scarcely be another more expensive cultural activity, apart perhaps from the staging of opera.

Yet both the creating and the consuming of exhibitions remain, to my mind at least, curiously unreflective activities. The public somehow assumes that any large town or city, any cultural centre worthy of the name, will have a frequent and varied programme of exhibitions; yet why this should be so is a question that goes for the most part unexamined. Even were one simply to accept exhibitions as a fact of cultural life, it would seem nonetheless pertinent to ask, how do they come about? By what means, and with what resources, are they created? Under what circumstances, and for what reasons? More precisely, what kinds of exhibitions, and what exhibitions, will a particular institution mount? What considerations determine the choice of an exhibition programme, of a particular exhibition within a given programme, the selection of certain kinds of material within the context of a given exhibition? Yet such questions are, by and large, greeted with a singular diffidence, with seeming incomprehension, even on occasion with alarm by those responsible for the making of exhibitions.

There are, of course, reasons for this kind of response, reasons which one can to some extent understand. To examine how, and why, exhibitions are made means taking a magnifying glass to any number of sensitive, often problematic, sometimes fraught relationships: between the institution and its Trustees, its paymasters and sponsors; between the museum (or gallery) and its public; between the public and the objects on display; between conservation staff and curators on the one hand, and imported (by which I mean specially commissioned) makers of exhibitions (sometimes referred to as 'guest curators' – usually scholars or

experts in some particular field) on the other; between the avowed or unspoken policies of the institution, and the ambitions and enthusiasms of the individual scholar or curator or designer.

These relationships, and the tensions they generate, often play a significant rôle in determining what exhibitions, and what kinds of exhibitions, a particular institution will choose to put on. But there are other, equally important criteria. There is the specific character of the institution, both as perceived by itself, and as it presents itself to its public. The National Army Museum, for example, is unlikely to mount a show of minimal art. The Tate Gallery, defined as the national collection of British and of twentieth-century art, could equally well mount exhibitions of the late works of Picasso and of paintings by Hogarth (as indeed happened during 1987–8), but it could not, without redefining its character and rôle, put on an exhibition of Caravaggio. Even if the nature of the particular institution does not impose constraints upon the kinds of exhibitions that institution may devise, there may be other, more temporary constraints, for example those of programming. If a proposed exhibition is part of a continuing programme, rather than just a 'one-off', then that programme itself constitutes a context or framework that determines whether the proposal is likely to be accepted or rejected as appropriate or inappropriate. A museum that has just put on a unique exhibition of Ming vases is hardly likely, within the foreseeable future, to put on another unique exhibition of Ming vases.

Even after the subject has been decided, a museum is still faced with a number of choices in staging any kind of temporary exhibition. It may decide to draw exclusively on its own collections, or to arrange what is predominantly a loan exhibition but which includes, nonetheless, a number of items in its own possession, or to stage a purely loan exhibition. Such decisions will be affected by political, or financial, or curatorial considerations, which will in turn have a 'knock-on' effect in influencing the specific character and content of the show. The available budget, and to what extent sponsorship can be relied upon to bridge the gap between aspiration and fulfilment, will likewise play a large part in determining the show's final appearance. And, increasingly, considerations such as security and environmental controls assume a crucial rôle in deciding whether a desired object can be loaned for the purpose of a temporary exhibition. A picture, say, of unique importance or historical interest, by which you set great store, may simply not be available for your exhibition, though to your irritation you may find that it can be made available for someone else's – because they have better security,

a better physical environment for the display of the painting in question or, sometimes, simply more prestige or more money. And then there are what I think of as the 'purely mindless' criteria, such as sheer size. A painting which is simply too large to get through any of the doors or windows giving access to the gallery is, unless one is prepared to take the roof off, ruled out on those grounds alone – however appropriate it might be to the subject of the exhibition.

I have suggested earlier that there may well be good reasons why many of the considerations which play such an essential rôle in the making of exhibitions are so rarely articulated, and even more rarely discussed in public. That they should be both articulated and discussed seems to me essential to the health of the museum profession. To be clear about the criteria which govern our choices in exhibition-making, and how those choices will affect what we are trying to do, is to be clear about our goals and ambitions, our moral or intellectual or political purposes in making exhibitions in the first place. How else, after all, are we to have any measure of the success or failure which attends our efforts (other than the sheer number of visitors who pass through the turnstiles), whether all this time and money and energy has been well spent, save in terms of working towards some precise aim, some identifiable goal, even if that goal is, in the end, self-imposed?

To some, such questions may seem not to matter. Others may take them for granted, to the extent that they are considered hardly worth discussing. This is true, of course, so long as one is creating exhibitions out of unworthy or debased motives. An editorial in the *Burlington Magazine*, which followed hard on the heels of the November 1987 conference organised by the Association of Art Historians under the title 'Why Exhibitions?', spelled out some of the 'acceptable' reasons for exhibition-making: 'to make accessible the rarely seen, to alter or enhance perception of the already known, to unite comparable works', contrasting these with what are all too often the actual reasons for so many 'high-profile', 'prestige' exhibitions: 'to raise money, to celebrate meaningless anniversaries, to cement diplomatic alliances, to promote the careers of museum directors – how often are these the real motives?'²

It is, however, probably still the case that the vast majority of exhibition-makers would concede that the activity in which they are engaged is one which is at best both serious and purposive. What they are not in general good at is defining their intellectual or educative or social aims, even if they can sometimes be persuaded, grudgingly, to give some account of why they might wish to include or exclude certain kinds of material as

appropriate or inappropriate to their chosen subject, in terms of some definition of stylistic congruity, of the nature of the medium employed, of historical or social relevance, and so on. Yet, on closer examination, it quickly becomes clear that the criteria for the selection or rejection of material for an exhibition are neither random nor arbitrary – on the contrary, that they are based on an underlying though usually unspoken sense of purpose. If, for example, a particular object turns out to be unavailable for loan, for one of the reasons discussed above, and has to be replaced by another, it soon becomes obvious that it cannot simply be replaced by any other: there will be some objects which, even if their owners will lend them, even if the borrowing institution can afford to pay for transport and insurance, even if they will fit into the gallery, are nonetheless inappropriate to the 'theme' of the exhibition. This point, seemingly self-evident, is important because it makes clear that, in the case of most exhibitions at least, objects are brought together not simply for the sake of their physical manifestation or juxtaposition, but because they are part of a story one is trying to tell. The 'context' of the exhibition confers upon them a 'meaning' beyond any significance they may already possess as cultural artefacts or objects of aesthetic contemplation. Through being incorporated into an exhibition, they become not merely works of art or tokens of a certain culture or society, but elements of a narrative, forming part of a thread of discourse which is itself one element in a more complex web of meanings.

But exhibitions are purposive in a second, more extended sense. Most of us, I think, share some notion that, through the medium of exhibitions, we are *addressing* the visitor, the public, however diverse that public might be; and we also tend to believe that the people who go to exhibitions 'get something out of them', even if we are hard put to define what that 'something' is. Indeed, it would be a very strange kind of exhibition-maker who was indifferent to whether the visitor 'got anything' out of the exhibition or not. Moreover, we would probably all agree that one of the functions of the maker of exhibitions is to offer some measure of elucidation of the material which is being exhibited – even if, in the exhibition itself, such elucidation consists of little more than simple identification, with perhaps a brief note of the provenance of the object displayed, its date, or the material of which it is made. We have also come increasingly to accept that any show with serious scholarly pretensions will be accompanied by a weighty catalogue containing not merely detailed notes on the exhibits, but a succession of essays on various aspects of the subject and even, if we are really lucky, a general introduction explaining the background to the exhibition, and setting



Interior of the exhibition 'Crossroads Vienna', shown in the foyer of the Royal Festival Hall, London, November–December 1988.

the scene for the show as a whole.

It is, however, worth reminding ourselves that this notion of the function of display is a distinctively modern one. Kenneth Hudson, in his admirable *Social History of Museums*, quotes the recollections of an eighteenth-century bookseller by the name of Hutton who, having gone to some trouble to gain admission to the British Museum, and having the temerity to enquire precisely what the objects were past which the appointed guide was leading the little group of visitors at such speed, was given clearly to understand that any such explanation was not the function of the museum's staff. "What! would you have me tell you everything in the Museum? How is it possible? Besides, are not the names written upon many of them?" I was much too humbled by this reply to utter another word. The company seemed influenced; they made haste, and were silent.' And Hutton added his own sad comment on what seemed to him in retrospect a wasted opportunity: 'If I see wonders which I do not understand, they are no wonders to me. Should a piece of withered paper lie on the floor, I should, without regard, shuffle it from under my feet. But if I am told it is a letter written by Edward the Sixth, that information sets a value upon the piece, it becomes a choice *morceau*

of antiquity, and I seize it with rapture. The history must go together; if one is wanting, the other is of little value. It grieved me to think how much I lost for want of a little information.³

The attitude that objects on display were best left to speak for themselves persisted, however, until well into the nineteenth century; indeed, to some extent it is still with us today. We, from our superior vantage point, tend to look with disdain at what we think of as the primitive educational attitudes of the past. Yet our own attitudes to the question of the educative function of exhibitions (I use the term 'educative' in the widest sense) are, it seems to me, also open to debate. The frequent success of present exhibitions in terms of numbers of visitors and income generated merely masks a profound disquiet within the profession regarding some of the most fundamental assumptions of the activity in which we are engaged. We may, as I have suggested, all agree that exhibitions, in some manner, address themselves to an audience, and that their aim is, in the broadest terms, educational. Yet opinions diverge widely as to how that aim is best achieved – in particular, over the question as to the level of information or explication appropriate or desirable in the context of a given exhibition.

At one end of the spectrum of opinion, we have the proponents of what I shall call for brevity's sake 'aesthetic' exhibitions. For them, the object itself – usually, though not always, a work of painting, sculpture or graphic art – is of paramount importance. 'Understanding' is essentially a process of private communion between ourselves and the work of art; we are supposed merely to 'experience' it, though quite what that experience is meant to consist of, no one seems prepared to say. For such people, any kind of adjunct material, by which I mean lengthy captions, information panels, audiovisual displays, photographic reconstructions and so on, is at best a necessary evil, at worst a jangling intrusion into our silent contemplation of the work itself. If visitors want that kind of information, so the argument goes, they can always buy the catalogue.

At the other end of the scale, we find the advocates of what I shall term, again for brevity's sake, 'contextual' exhibitions. For such people – usually, though not always, historians, archaeologists, anthropologists – the object displayed is of relatively little intrinsic significance, regarded purely as an object of contemplation. Rather, its presence within the exhibition is justified by its importance as a token of a particular age, a particular culture, a particular political or social system, as being representative of certain ideas or beliefs. In such exhibitions, original

objects coexist, sometimes uneasily, with a bewildering variety of other kinds of material: informative, comparative, explicative, much of it in written form – one is inevitably reminded of the American Brown Goode's much-quoted definition of what he called the 'efficient' educational exhibition as 'a collection of instructive labels, each illustrated by a well-chosen specimen'.⁴

Let us consider first the aesthetic view – a view which seems to me seriously flawed in a number of quite obvious ways. It is, above all, an attitude that is both arrogant and uncompromising, which takes for granted a certain level of education and sensitivity on the part of the spectator, making no concessions to visitors from other social and cultural backgrounds, to the intellectually curious but uninformed. The notion that works of art, in particular, should be left to speak for themselves takes no account of the fact that such works are, for most visitors, remarkably taciturn objects. Left to speak for themselves, they often say very little; and a sometimes quite considerable effort is required on the part of the historian, the art historian, the critic or the viewer to coax them into eloquence.

More seriously, the aesthetic view assumes that our visual perception is a somehow coherent, even objective process, as if all that is necessary is to 'see properly', without taking any account of how complicated and problematic a process 'seeing' is, nor how easy it is to misconstrue even the most elementary kinds of visual experience. I am reminded of an example which occurs in a book I first read many years ago, though it is not very fashionable today, Eric Newton's *The Meaning of Beauty*. The author asks us to imagine ourselves entering upon a meadow of lush grass which at first sight appeared to be generously interspersed with buttercups and ox-eye daisies, and the feeling of aesthetic pleasure such an experience might induce, only to be supplanted a moment later by revulsion as we 'saw' that the buttercups and daisies were in fact empty Gold Flake packets and torn-up scraps of paper.⁵ Yet neither the phenomenon itself nor our process of visual perception has been subjected to any kind of physical interference; what has happened is that recognition has taken place, a change in our mental apprehension of the phenomenon, and a consequent change in our aesthetic response. How much more complex, then, is our apprehension of works of art – a picture, for example, where what we 'see' is, strictly speaking, patterns and textures of pigment; one is reminded of the Nabi painter Maurice Denis's famous dictum, that a painting, before being a representation of a nude, a warhorse or any other kind of subject, is in essence a flat

canvas covered with colours arranged in a certain order. What enables us to 'see in' (Wollheim's phrase) these patterns and textures representations of natural forms is our knowledge of a certain pictorial convention, without which our visual experience would be limited indeed. And how much more complex still our 'understanding' of, shall we say, paintings by Hogarth such as those shown recently at the Tate Gallery, satirising the manners and morals of eighteenth-century English society – more complex not merely because of the sophistication of the visual witticisms and puns Hogarth so relished, but because so many of the allusions which would have been perfectly obvious to a contemporary audience have been lost to our sight, and need to be laboriously reconstructed, and then somehow conveyed to a culturally and intellectually diverse audience.

Here, I should at least mention in passing one argument that is frequently put forward against supplying this kind of information. It is often said that this cannot be the task of the exhibition itself, that in any case people do not read while viewing exhibitions, or at least will not read texts of more than a certain length – 180 words is the figure often cited in this connection – and that there is a kind of obligation on the inquisitive viewer to read around the subject, by which is meant outside the context of the exhibition, including reading the catalogue. Against this view, it has to be said that certain preliminary surveys seem to indicate that the exhibition-going public is by no means identical with the reading public,⁶ and that one certainly cannot rely on a kind of automatic recourse to books and other associated materials as a way of making up for the deficiencies of an exhibition. Moreover, while people may indeed read the catalogue if it is cheap enough, attractive enough, well put together and interesting, they almost certainly will not read it while visiting the exhibition so that, as a way of structuring the immediate experience of exhibition-going, it is virtually useless.

It is the failure adequately to structure this experience for the casual visitor that seems to me by far the greatest failing of the unrepentantly 'aesthetic' exhibition. I cannot help thinking of the fascinating but frustrating exhibition of Scandinavian painting held a couple of years ago at the Hayward Gallery in London under the title 'Dreams of a Summer Night' – fascinating in that it presented a whole range of work few of us in this country had ever seen before, frustrating in its refusal to extend even the most perfunctory helping hand to the viewer eager to make sense of an unfamiliar succession of names, an alien culture, a bewildering variety of dissimilar styles of painting. There were no information panels, minimal captions, no adjunct material of any kind, not even a map of

the Scandinavian countries: most of us have by now had it dinned into us that such things interfere with the pure aesthetic experience of the works themselves – or so the orthodoxy goes. But what about the layout? The design of the exhibition? According to what principles had the paintings come to be on the walls at all, since there was no evident dividing up of work either into chronological groupings, or by artist, or by subject matter, or by national school?

Yet equally unsatisfactory, it seems to me, is the over-contextualised display: musty with documentation, laden with earnest didacticism, any occasion for private meditation drowned out by the whirr and clatter of the audiovisual programme. Certain kinds of material, moreover, demand so many layers of explication that one begins to wonder whether the game is worth the candle. Here, I have in mind not an exhibition that actually happened but one that could easily have happened: an exhibition of medieval art, in which a significant part of the show is taken up with a display of illuminated manuscripts. Imagine that the organisers especially wanted to include one small item, a prayer book, rich in lapis and gold, exquisite in itself but with unusual marginal annotations, some clearly by a later hand. The book is tiny, the Latin text (medieval Latin at that) hard to read, the marginalia even smaller and more illegible. I find it easy to visualise the book in question, even now, since some years ago I was fortunate enough to have just such an item in my hands.⁷ The marginalia, interestingly enough, turned out to be observations of a pharmacological nature, including what was unmistakably a remedy for syphilis – though whether from a priestly hand or not it was impossible to say.

The book, as I say, is tiny. It is also extremely valuable, highly fragile, and susceptible to light. It would almost certainly be displayed in an alarmed showcase, behind armoured glass, and exposed to very low light-levels. It would, frankly, be virtually impossible to see. In order to reveal any degree of the detail present in the original, our cunning designer would arrange for an enlarged colour photograph, of the best quality, to be displayed alongside the object. The Latin text, and especially the marginalia, would however still be more or less illegible, because of the handwriting, so it would be important to have a transcription – nicely printed, of course – which could be placed alongside the photograph. Unfortunately, since so few people speak Latin these days, it would also be necessary to have a translation, while a further text might comment on the historical significance of the item in question, the unusual content of the marginal annotations, on matters such as provenance and dating.

At which point, one begins to wonder about the fate of the poor little object, swamped by adjacent material so extensive, so much larger, so much more demanding of our attention. Is it really best served by such a manner of presentation? And if this wealth of adjunct material is really so important, does one need, one dares ask, to have the original object physically present at all?

One evident cause of our difficulties, to my mind, is the fact that most exhibition-makers think too much about the content and presentation of their exhibition, and too little about their intended audience; indeed, most exhibition-makers would, I believe, be hard put to define their audience at all. Yet we will never succeed in making more 'efficient' exhibitions, to use Brown Goode's phrase, unless we know a good deal more about the character of that audience, and about the levels of knowledge and understanding one may reasonably assume the visitor to have. Although there have been innumerable surveys of the *numbers* of visitors to exhibitions and to museums, including identifying their social origins, very little has been done to determine the mental set, or indeed the expectations, of that audience. I also think that those of us who make exhibitions seriously overestimate the extent of ordinary everyday general knowledge we can reasonably expect our visitors to possess. I am reminded of a student at my own university (and university students supposedly represent the intellectual élite of the population) who, it turned out, was quite unaware that Russia had been involved in the Second World War. This gave me pause for thought. Not to know which side Russia was on during the war might be not altogether surprising, since of course she was at one time and another both ally and enemy. But not to know that she was involved at all poses problems of a quite different order for a curator at an institution such as the Imperial War Museum who might wish to create the kind of display that would make sophisticated and interesting points about, shall we say, the character of wartime propaganda imagery. If one is forced to admit that it is possible that a sizeable proportion of visitors to such an exhibition might have no idea who the protagonists were in this quite recent conflict (other than the vague notion that they were probably England and Germany), then one's starting-point in deciding upon the manner of display, let alone what kinds of information and adjunct material might be appropriate, will be significantly different. How much more complex, then, must be the problems confronting the organisers of an exhibition dealing with an historically remote period: England in the Age of the Plantagenets, the American War of Independence, pre-conquest Peru?

The second most serious problem contributing to our present difficulties is, in my view, a persistent belief that elucidation must necessarily take the form of words. The same fusty arguments are trotted out again and again, about people not being willing to read anything more than the shortest introductory texts, and about texts generally getting in the way of our aesthetic experience of objects. Even where the designer's imagination stretches beyond the conventional use of wall texts or information panels to embrace such explicative devices as acousti-guides, audiovisual displays or the much-used *petit journal*, it has to be remembered that these, too, rely largely on verbal means, and are thus exposed to the same objections. Yet rarely is much consideration given, as far as I can see, to the possibility of employing other kinds of visual material, other resources in order to make the same points more vividly, more economically, less intrusively. In an exhibition held in Austria in 1984, devoted to the life and times of the Emperor Franz Joseph, one of the rooms including material relating to the Imperial family contained virtually no written information at all but, instead, a small number of objects of great evocative significance, including a beautifully printed family tree, with portraits of the principal members of the house of Habsburg.⁸ Such an object, comprising no more than fifteen or so written words, can 'stand for' a whole essay on genealogy, which can thus be safely relegated to the catalogue, to be read at leisure on another occasion, by conveying to the visitor some sense of historical context on setting foot in the exhibition itself.

There are any number of such types of predominantly non-verbal material that one can use, ranging from maps and diagrams, the ephemera of daily life, illustrations and photographs, to slides and films showing, for example, an implement in use, as opposed to in a showcase, or the techniques employed in the creation of the objects or works of art on display. To take, for once, an example which is both 'real' and hypothetical: among the paintings displayed in the exhibition 'Dreams of a Summer Night' were several by the Finnish artist Akseli Gallen-Kallela, rather different from his more Symbolist-influenced work and evidently the product of an intense interest in Finnish folk art. How easy it would have been to juxtapose these paintings with, perhaps, just one costume of the kind shown in the Museum of Mankind's earlier exhibition, 'Folk Costumes of Finnish Karelia'. Vivid and attractive in itself, easily available, affording an obvious point of comparison with some of the apparel represented in the paintings, such a costume would have immeasurably aided the comprehension of the inquisitive but non-expert viewer, by

providing a simple point of visual reference. All that would have been needed would have been a two-line caption; even to make the point verbally, about the influence of folk art, would have been unnecessary. In this instance, the works displayed would indeed have 'spoken for themselves' – the reticent object for once coaxed into loquacity by the efforts of selector and designer.

In the creation of 'efficient' educational exhibitions, the relationship between selector and designer is clearly of crucial importance. Unfortunately it happens all too often that exhibition designers see the kind of high-profile, prestige show so common today as a vehicle for realising their own aesthetic ambitions, rather than as an opportunity for devising the most telling, most instructive, most advantageous display of the objects in question. I find this especially sad because it means that relatively few designers are capable of seeing how truly creative their rôle can be. It is the design of the exhibition, the layout of the material, and the context which the designer creates for that material, just as much as the actual selection of objects, which 'tell the story', and this 'story-telling' rôle carries through into the smallest details: the choice of display lettering, of materials and colours for wall-coverings, the design of the catalogue, of the poster, of related advertisements and publicity material. If, as seems to me essential, the designer has been involved from the outset in discussions with the selector as to the theme of the show, if he has researched the social or aesthetic or historical background, even taken a hand in the selection of the work to be displayed, he will be infinitely better able to capture the attention of his audience, and to hold that attention while he unravels the particular story that is the *raison d'être* of the exhibition.⁹ Because, of course, there are any number of possible stories to be told, depending not merely on the nature of the material but also on the particular aims and ambitions of the organisers. The same material can be made to tell quite different stories not just by means of captions or information panels or explanatory texts but by the sequence in which works are displayed, the very way the material itself is divided up, above all the physical and associative context.

Let us take a slightly lurid example: if we peruse the contents of the notorious 'Degenerate Art' exhibition organised by the Nazis and shown in Munich and other German cities during the course of 1937–8, it might seem to us, from our particular vantage point, a truly spectacular display of some of the finest twentieth-century German and foreign paintings, including the work of virtually all the leading Expressionists: Nolde, Heckel, Schmidt-Rottluff, Pechstein.¹⁰ Were the same paintings to be

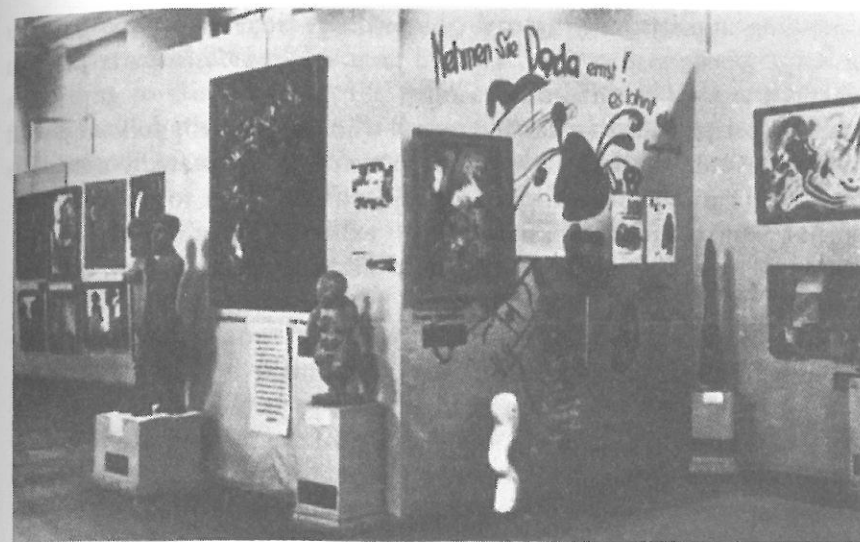
shown today, what points one might seek to convey about the stylistic evolution of German art in this century, about the use of expressive colour and form, about the influences of primitive and tribal art which provided these painters with a previously unexplored arsenal of expressive means.

Showing these works to their best advantage was not, however, among the aims of the organisers of the 1937 exhibition. Not just the use of slogans and captions, wall texts and quotations from Hitler's speeches, but also the way in which the show was designed and hung, indeed every element associated with the publicising and presenting of the exhibition was calculated to hammer home propaganda about cultural bolshevism and military sabotage, about physical and moral degeneracy, about race, about 'Jewishness' in art. Not only did the title given to the exhibition make specific reference to the 'Jewish demolition' of artistic values: the poster, too, juxtaposed without further comment a mask-like 'Expressionist' head with, immediately behind, a shadowy but unmistakably Semitic, slightly leering countenance.¹¹ Even the layout of the exhibition, the dividing up of the material section by section, was deliberately both didactic and thematic. Works were arranged, not chronologically, nor by artist, by school, or by any known art-historical principle. Instead, paintings by different artists were grouped together according to 'tendencies' defined in terms of the organisers' perverted political and aesthetic creed: the wilful distortion of colour and form, the undermining of religious belief, incitement of political anarchy and the 'class war', a section which compared the work of the 'degenerates' with that of 'idiots and cretins', and a final section entitled 'Utter Madness' comprising a survey of most of the principal 'modern movements', from Dada and Constructivism to Surrealism.

As Ian Dunlop observes, the 'Degenerate Art' exhibition, conceived as an anti-art demonstration, with its slogans mocking the commercialisation of art, was ironically the greatest Dada event of them all.¹² No less ironic is the fact that, however morally deplorable its aims may have been, it was nonetheless one of the most elaborately conceived, carefully-thought-out 'educational' exhibitions ever staged, every detail calculated to reinforce the intended propaganda message. Only the works themselves remained curiously resistant to this kind of treatment. Embarrassingly, the exhibition, held in the cramped and unsuitable surroundings of Munich's Municipal Archaeological Institute, attracted far larger crowds than the rival showing of officially approved art held at the newly completed Haus der Deutschen Kunst, and inaugurated with lengthy speeches by the Führer himself. Unintentionally, the organisers of 'Degenerate Art' had



Poster by 'Hermann' for the 'Degenerate Art' exhibition, 1937-8
(Hamburg showing).



Interior view of the 'Degenerate Art' exhibition, Munich, 1937.

created an exhibition which produced, on some visitors at least, a quite overwhelming impact simply by virtue of the quality, the emotive power of the works on display. Such a reaction, naturally, was quite unacceptable. Some foreigners, like Cyril Connolly, who paused too long before masterpieces by Kirchner or Nolde, were even shooed away by the guards, who had been given special orders to watch out for members of the public who appeared to show too much interest in the actual paintings, or who didn't laugh loudly enough.¹³

These days, relatively few exhibitions are born out of such overtly, such unashamedly political ambitions. Our own political or intellectual or social attitudes may well exert a significant influence on the kinds of exhibitions we make, and indeed determine to some extent the reactions of the public, the consumers of the product. But just like our educative or didactic purposes in exhibition-making, such underlying attitudes and presuppositions remain unspoken, unarticulated, not least because we have probably thought little about them, relying on 'performance indicators' such as the numbers of visitors, the box-office take, and the extent of commercial sponsorship to gauge the success of exhibitions. The notion of achieving a balance between education and diversion, the sententious aim expressed by the Duke of Argyll on opening the Imperial International Exhibition held at the White City in London in 1909, of

combining 'amusement without excess and knowledge without fatigue',¹⁴ has largely been lost to sight. The old Janus-headed '*instruire et plaire*' has given way to bread and circuses.

It may perhaps have struck the reader who has patiently followed the arguments and examples adduced so far that I have repeatedly used the words 'educational', 'instructive' or 'didactic' in order to describe the aims of exhibition-making; to which the exhibition-goer or critic might object: 'Why educational?' Why should the purpose of making exhibitions not be simply to give pleasure, to provide entertainment or diversion, to afford a rare opportunity for reflection or quiet contemplation in our otherwise turbulent lives? One reply might be that it is in any case far from easy to draw a rigid distinction between these various kinds of experience. Certainly, the question of the relationship between instruction and entertainment is one which has vexed generations of exhibition-makers, as Paul Greenhalgh's essay in the present volume demonstrates. One of the many things to emerge from his fascinating study of the Great Exhibitions, Expositions Universelles and World's Fairs which were a persistent feature of cultural and political life during the last half of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth is that, while educating wider and wider sections of the populace remained a significant aim of such exhibition-making throughout the period in question, in general entertainment was found to pay whereas education did not; and that getting the right mix of instruction and diversion was as enduring and intractable a problem for the Victorians and Edwardians as it is for ourselves.¹⁵

Yet, on another level, it might equally well be argued that, no matter what the aims of the organisers might be, all exhibitions – even those devised principally as entertainment – are educational, in a wider and more profound sense. I have already attempted to define what museums might be, in terms of the various essential activities in which they engage. To Henry Cole, the great founder of what was to become one of the most important educational institutions in the world, the Victoria and Albert Museum, it was equally clear that there were a number of things that museums were not – that they were not, for example, places for 'idle loungers'. Museum-going was not to be equated with mindless gawping. Even the most cursory glance at the objects presented for our inspection, the most private act of communion between ourselves and a work of art represents a broadening of our intellectual horizons, a deepening and enriching of our experience – and hence of our education. The temporary exhibition or museum display will succeed or fail in reinforcing

that experience and making it more vivid, more memorable, more lasting, not in terms of some 'objective' standard imposed from outside, but according to criteria which the exhibition itself and those responsible for its making must propose. To devise a better methodology for defining such criteria is surely one of the more urgent tasks of the new museology.