

The Museum as Sensescape: Western Sensibilities and Indigenous Artifacts

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This chapter develops a set of interrelated themes concerning the sensorial dimensions of indigenous artifacts and the sensory typologies of their European collectors. These themes include the importance of touch in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European collections compared to the dominance of sight in the modern museum; the Western association of the “lower” races with the “lower” senses; the links between museum display and imperialism; and, the complex sensory lives of indigenous artifacts in their cultures of origin. The discussion here builds on the theoretical approach of the anthropology of the senses (Howes 1991, 2003; Classen 1993a, 1997; Seremetakis 1994), extending it to the analysis of the cultural and sensory transfigurations which indigenous artifacts undergo upon accession by Western museums.

The anthropology of the senses emerged as a focus for cultural studies in the early 1990s, partly in reaction to the excesses of “textualism” and “ocularcentrism” in conventional social scientific accounts of meaning, but more fundamentally as a positive attempt to explore some of the basic sensual and existential dimensions of the human condition. The senses are constructed and lived differently in different societies, such that

When we examine the meanings associated with various sensory faculties and sensations in different cultures we find a cornucopia of potent sensory symbolism. Sight may be linked to reason or to witchcraft, taste may be used as a metaphor for aesthetic discrimination or for sexual

experience, an odour may signify sanctity or sin, political power or social exclusion. Together, these sensory meanings and values form the sensory model espoused by a society, according to which the members of that society “make sense” of the world, or translate sensory perceptions and concepts into a particular “worldview”. There will likely be challenges to this model from within the society, persons and groups who differ on certain sensory values, yet this model will provide the basic perceptual paradigm to be followed or resisted. (Classen 1997:402)

The anthropology of the senses is particularly germane to material culture studies, since every artifact embodies a particular sensory mix. It does so in terms of its production (given the particular sensory skills and values that go into its making), its circulation (given the way its properties appeal to the senses and so constitute it as an object of desire or aversion), and its consumption (which is conditioned by the meanings and uses people perceive in it according to the sensory order of their culture or subculture). In short, artifacts body forth specific “ways of sensing” and they must be approached through the senses, rather than as “texts” to be read or mere visual “signs” to be decoded. Otherwise put, things have sensory as well as social biographies (Howes forthcoming).

In Western museum settings, artifacts are preeminently objects for the eye. Often, in fact, it is only the most visually-striking artifacts which are put on display. Less visually prepossessing objects are hidden in the museum storeroom, no matter how rich their auditory, tactile, or olfactory intricacies. (If they are “nothing to look at,” they must be consigned to obscurity.) Susan Stewart has noted that modern museums are “so obviously – so, one might say, naturally, empires of sight that it barely occurs to us to imagine them as being organized around any other sense or senses” (Stewart 1999:28). The same holds true for the artifacts displayed, which become so evidently *visual* signs that it is difficult to attribute any other sensory values to them. Within the museum’s empire of sight, objects are colonized by the gaze.

Within their cultures of origin, however, visual appearance usually forms only one part – and often not the most important part – of an artifact’s sensory significance. The sensory values of an artifact, furthermore, do not reside in the artifact alone but in its social use and environmental context. This dynamic web of sensuous and social meaning is broken when an artifact is removed from its cultural setting and inserted within the visual symbol system of the museum. (Of course, much has been written about the “complexities” of visual culture in modernity,

and much, no doubt, remains to be written. Yet our academic focus on vision must not be allowed to defer indefinitely the investigation of the social life of nonvisual sensory phenomena.)

To say that an artifact in a museum plays a different role than it did in its culture of production may appear to be stating the obvious – and, indeed, the inevitable. Yet there are many questions and concerns surrounding this process which have, as yet, scarcely been addressed. How is the collection and presentation of indigenous artifacts related to Western notions of the sense lives of indigenous peoples? What are the symbolic attributes and social history of the “sensescape” of the museum? What is missing from, or repressed within, museum representations? What are the implications of the notion of artifacts as multi-sensory embodiments of meaning, as advocated in this chapter, for the redesign of museums? To what extent can one ever apprehend the sensory world of the “other”?

Handling the Collection

In modernity it is usually only owners who have the power to touch collections. It is understood that collections which are not our own are not to be handled. Prior to the mid-nineteenth century this was not the case. Both private and public collections were often touched by visitors, and indeed experienced through a range of sensory channels. The seventeenth-century English diarist John Evelyn, who was an avid visitor to collections across Europe, records feeling objects, shaking them, lifting them to test their weight, and smelling them. In 1702 the English traveler Celia Fiennes recorded a visit she made to the Ashmolean Museum of Oxford:

there is a Cane which looks like a solid heavy thing but if you take it in your hands it's as light as a feather ... there are several Loadstones and it is pretty to see how the steel clings or follows it, hold it on the top at some distance the needles stand quite upright ... (Fiennes 1949:33)

The Ashmolean's curators at this time were not unconcerned about the deterioration of their collections caused by too much handling. Nonetheless, they were unwilling to forbid such handling, due to the notion that touch provided an essential – and expected – means of acquiring knowledge.

More than eighty years after Celia Fiennes's visit to the Ashmolean, in 1786 the European traveler Sophie de la Roche wrote of her visit to the British Museum:

With what sensations one handles a Carthaginian helmet excavated near Capua, household utensils from Herculaneum ... There are mirrors too, belonging to Roman matrons ... with one of these mirrors in my hand I looked amongst the urns, thinking meanwhile, "Maybe chance has preserved amongst these remains some part of the dust from the fine eyes of a Greek or Roman lady, who so many centuries ago surveyed herself in this mirror ..." Nor could I restrain my desire to touch the ashes of an urn on which a female figure was being mourned. I felt it gently, with great feeling ... I pressed the grain of dust between my fingers tenderly, just as her best friend might once have grasped her hand ... (de la Roche 1933:107–8)

In this remarkable passage Sophie de la Roche indicates how essential her sense of touch was to her experience of the museum collection and how she employed touch as a medium for annihilating time and space and establishing an imaginative intimacy with the former possessors of the articles she surveyed, an intimacy heightened by de la Roche's sensation of coming into direct contact with their bodily remains.

The importance given to touch prior to the mid-nineteenth century and the freedom allowed to its exercise within a museum context is alien to us today. Touch, however, was generally believed to provide a necessary supplement to sight, which sense was understood to be limited to surface appearances. Solely viewing a collection was considered a superficial means of apprehending it. Taking the time to touch artifacts, to turn them over in one's hands, showed a more profound interest. Touch, furthermore, was believed to have access to interior truths of which sight was unaware. Celia Fiennes notes that the cane on display in the Ashmolean looked heavy, but when she picked it up she found that it was light. The deceptions of sight are corrected by touch (see further Harvey 2002).

As the example of Sophie de la Roche strongly illustrates, touch functioned as an important medium of intimacy between the visitor to the collection and the collection itself. Through touch the visitor and the collected are united, physically joined together. Touch provides the satisfaction of a corporeal encounter. By touching a collected object the hand of the visitor also encounters the traces of the hand of the object's creator and former owners. One seems to feel what others have felt and bodies seem to be linked to bodies through the medium of the materiality of the object they have shared.

Exotic Sensations

The objects which particularly elicited a tactile response from early museum visitors were sculptures and artifacts from exotic or ancient lands. With sculptures the lifelike nature of the forms – the drapery which looked so real, the skin which seemed so supple – seemed to invite touching. While appearing real, their inanimacy meant that sculptures – even those of the most august emperor or the fiercest lion – could not resent or resist being touched. Through the three-dimensionality of sculpture one could therefore experience a simulacrum of intimate sensations which one would be unlikely to experience in real life. One could also verify, through touch, that sculptures were, in fact, inanimate, that the lion did not bite back, that the body which looked so soft and supple was indeed cold and hard. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century visitors to the antiquities of Italy routinely prodded the apparently plump mattress on which lay the statue called “The Hermaphrodite” to feel for themselves its stony hardness, and caressed the spiky bristles of the marble “Wild Boar” until these became shiny with handling (Haskell and Penny 1981:163, 235). Touching statues was not just a question of idle curiosity, however, but of aesthetic appreciation. As the Renaissance sculptor Ghiberti put it: “Touch only can discover [sculpture’s] beauties, which escape the sense of sight in any light” (cited in Symonds 1935:649).

Artifacts from exotic lands offered Europeans the possibility of experiencing a safe but nonetheless potent contact with the “other worlds” from which they sprang. It mattered little in many cases what the actual uses and meanings of these artifacts were in their own societies; what mattered was rather the ways in which they could confirm Western representations of non-Western cultures and serve as a springboard for the Western imagination. Thus, for example, what were perceived as distorted, exaggerated features of native masks and statuary were imagined to correspond to a similarly distorted and exaggerated sensuality. A lolling tongue or bulging eyes on a mask or statue invited commentary on the gluttonous or lascivious nature of the society which produced it.

Masks, clubs, “idols,” and other characteristic artifacts found in collections fascinated Europeans with their implications of savagery. Touching and holding such “barbarous” objects with their own hands enabled Westerners to vicariously participate in, and confront their fear of, the supposedly brutal lifestyles of “primitive” peoples (see Thomas 1991).

While they often stimulated visceral sensations of horror and disgust, indigenous artifacts might also inspire loftier sentiments. An attractive example of this is the eighteenth-century writer Horace Walpole's reaction to a *quipu*, a recording device employed by the Incas. The *quipu* was a set of knotted cords of different colors hung on a string. The position and size of the knots and the difference of colors served to reference information which the Incas considered worthy of note, from population counts to prayers.

The *quipu* was a very sensual medium, engaging touch and rhythm in the tying of the knots, and involving a wide range of colors and patterns (Classen 1993b:125). The *quipu*, furthermore, was not flat and linear – as is writing. In *Code of the Quipu* Marcia and Robert Ascher write:

The quipumaker's strings present no surface at all ... A group of strings occupy a space that has no definite orientation; as the quipumaker connected strings to each other, the space became defined by the points where the strings were attached ... The relative positions of the strings were set by their points of attachment, and it is the relative position, along with the colors and knots, that render the recording meaningful. Essentially then the quipumaker had to have the ability to conceive and execute a recording in three dimensions with color. (Ascher and Ascher 1981:62)

Intrigued by a *quipu* which had been sent to him by a collector of antiquities, Walpole could see in it possibilities for new sensory idioms, such as a language of colors or a tactile language in which one could weave poems and knot rhymes. He wrote to his correspondent that trying to understand the colorful *quipu* was like trying to "hold a dialogue with a rainbow by the help of its grammar a prism, for I have not yet discovered which is the first or last verse of four lines that hang like ropes of onions" (Walpole 1965:261–3).

Walpole goes on to imagine the nature of a language of colors, dwelling on the possibility of making puns through overlapping hues, or of expressing nuances through delicate variations in shade. "A vermilion *A* must denote a weaker passion than one of crimson, and a straw-color *U* be much more tender than one approaching to orange" (ibid.).

The tactile qualities of the *quipu* inspired similar reveries in Walpole. "I perceive it is a very soft language," he wrote, "though at first I tangled the poem and spoiled the rhymes." Indeed, Walpole professed to be "so pleased with the idea of knotting verses, which is vastly preferable to

anagrams and acrostics, that if I were to begin life again, I would use a shuttle instead of a pen" (ibid).

Finally the *quipu*, its strings impregnated with ancient odors, led Walpole to reflect on the subject of an olfactory language. He wrote:

Why should not there be a language for the nose? ... A rose, jessamine, a pink, a jonquil and a honeysuckle might signify the vowels; the consonants to be represented by other flowers. The Cape jasmine, which has two smells, was born a diphthong. How charming it would be to smell an ode from a nosegay, and to scent one's handkerchief with a favourite song! (ibid.)

In this flight of fancy Walpole is obviously not accessing any of the indigenous meanings encoded in the *quipu*. Nor does he pretend to. He knows only that the *quipu* was used as a recording device by the Incas. Handling this multisensorial form of "writing" served Walpole as a stimulus to develop ideas about sensory correspondences which were coming into vogue in Europe and which would find further elaboration in the Symbolist movement in the nineteenth century (Classen 1998). However, his physical contact with the *quipu* did potentially bring Walpole closer to the *quipu*'s indigenous significance in at least one sense. Walpole was able to conceive that different sensory aspects of the *quipu* might be used for encoding information, a notion that would later be suppressed by more visualist ethnographic interpretations of the *quipu*.

Significantly, European collectors and travelers not only brought home specimens of the cultures they'd visited, they frequently had themselves represented as actually embodying those cultures. Thus, in the eighteenth century, Lady Mary Worsely Montagu commissioned a portrait of herself in Turkish costume after her extensive travels in Turkey, while the botanist Joseph Banks was painted wearing a Polynesian bark-cloth cape after his explorations in the South Pacific. In the latter painting Banks holds up a corner of the cape in one hand and points to it with the other, directing us to acknowledge the cloak as tangible proof of his travels and inviting us vicariously to feel the curious weave (Thomas 1991:142–3). Embodying the peoples of other lands through putting on their clothing enabled Europeans to pretend an intimate knowledge of their cultures and played with the European fascination with "going native." Only played with it because the observers of this charade understood that, though the trappings were exotic, the European sensibilities underneath were intact.

The Tactility of the Natives

Europeans perceived themselves to be the rational, civilized, elite among the peoples of the world. As reason and sensuality were traditionally opposed in Western thought, non-Westerners were, by contrast, imagined to be irrational and sensuous. At the same time as they deprecated sensuality, however, Europeans exhibited a vivid interest in, and even longing for, more sensuous ways of life. The sensuous life of the other, to the European mind, was either one of refinement and pleasure or of brutish degradation. The Orient typically served as an imaginary place of exquisite sensory refinements, while Africa was stereotyped as a land of sensory brutality. Both places were, alas, understood to be amoral. However, this only added to their fascination, to their speculative potential as alternatives to Western norms, since none of the social constraints which limited the actions of Europeans need apply.

When Europeans imagined non-Westerners to be more sensuous than themselves, the senses they particularly had in mind were the so-called lower senses of smell, taste, and touch. According to Western sensory symbolism, sight was the highest of the senses and the one most closely associated with reason. As “lower” senses, smell, taste and touch were associated with the body, and with those peoples imagined to live a life of the body, rather than a life of the mind.

Early accounts of indigenous peoples are full of references to their reliance on the proximity senses of smell, taste, and touch. The inhabitants of India are said to have a remarkable tactile acuity, African peoples are described as being ruled by their stomachs, Native Americans are stated to have extraordinary powers of smell, “rivaling that of the lower animals” in the words of one writer (cited in Classen 1997:403).

Many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophers and anthropologists were concerned to depict the “animalistic” importance of smell, taste, and touch in non-Western societies. In his study of aesthetics, for example, Friedrich Schiller stated that “as long as man is still a savage” aesthetic enjoyment occurs by means of touch, taste, and smell, rather than through the “higher” senses of sight and hearing (Schiller 1982:195). In the early nineteenth century the natural historian Lorenz Oken invented a sensory hierarchy of human races, with the European “eye-man” at the top, followed by the Asian “ear-man,” the Native American “nose-man,” the Australian “tongue-man,” and the African “skin-man” (cited in Howes 2003:5).

Their supposed reliance on the “lower” senses, indeed, led indigenous peoples to be likened to the blind by Western theorists. The nineteenth-century physician William B. Carpenter associated the apparent tactile acuity of the blind with the tactile sensitivity of weavers in India. Carpenter added:

A like improvement is also occasionally noticed in regard to Smell, which may acquire an acuteness rivaling that of the lower animals; and this not only in the blind, but among the races of men whose existence depends upon such discriminative power. Thus we are told by Humboldt that the Peruvian Indians in the darkest night cannot merely perceive through their scent the approach of a stranger whilst yet far distant, but can say whether he is an Indian, European, or Negro. (Carpenter 1874:141)

Similarly to the blind, indigenous peoples were seen as living – both literally and figuratively – in the dark. They were imagined to inhabit dark huts, in dark forests, in dark continents, and to pursue their unenlightened lives in “the gloomy shade” of “absolute barbarism” (cited by Thomas 1991:129).

The Museum of Sight

The more that Europeans emphasized the distinction between the “noble” sense of sight and the “base” proximity senses, the less the latter were deemed suitable for the appreciation and understanding of art and artifacts. In contrast to the multisensory modes of previous centuries, in the 1800s sight was increasingly considered to be only appropriate sense for aesthetic appreciation for “civilized” adults. Thus in 1844 the popular art writer Anna Jameson remarked:

We can all remember the public days at the Grosvenor Gallery and Bridgewater House, we can all remember the loiterers and loungers ... people who, instead of moving among the wonders and beauties with reverence and gratitude, strutted about as if they had a right to be there; talking, flirting; touching the ornaments – and even the pictures!” (cited by Hermann 1972:126)

Half a century earlier Sophie de la Roche had felt entirely comfortable fingering the exhibits in a museum. By the mid-nineteenth century such behavior had become a sign of vulgarity and insubordination – of a lack of civilized behavior.

The nineteenth century was an era of rising visualism in many ways. Sight was closely allied with scientific practice and ideology, the social importance of which grew immensely during this era. The visual arts were definitively detached from craftwork, which (despite the efforts of the Arts and Crafts movement) was negatively perceived by many as emphasizing the hand over the eye and functional considerations over aesthetic form. The development of industrial capitalism emphasized the visual display of goods, both as a sales incentive and as a sign of material plenty. Visual surveillance, particularly within the context of modern social institutions such as the school and the prison, became a key means of maintaining public order. Furthermore, new visual technologies such as photography made visual representation increasingly central to Western cultural and intellectual life (Classen 2001).

The nineteenth century was also the era of the public museum, and, in its development, the museum reflected many of the visualizing trends of the day. Museums were important sites for testing and presenting visualizing scientific paradigms. They were major sites of display: wealthy capitalist nations needed showcases of cultural capital. Museums were also sites of surveillance and public order. Strict bodily discipline was required from museum visitors who were expected to become as close to pure spectators as possible: not to touch, not to eat, not to speak loudly, or in any way to assert an intrusive multisensorial presence.

Touching the collection was not only deemed to be “uncivilized” in the nineteenth century, it was also considered to be unacceptably damaging. In earlier centuries the distintegration of the less durable parts of collections through handling and haphazard upkeep was common. There was, indeed, relatively little emphasis on conservation. As more and more people gained access to museums during the nineteenth century, however, the potential damage to collections through handling became more dramatically apparent. Since the preservation of collections for posterity was emphasized as a *raison d’être* of the modern museum, it was deemed necessary for collections to be hands-off. Requiring visitors to keep their hands off the exhibits was also believed to have the benefit of fostering an attitude of respect toward collections and their collectors, an attitude that Anna Jameson found so sadly lacking in her early gallery experiences. As in the new era of heightened visualism touch was no longer generally believed to furnish important aesthetic or intellectual insights, the restriction of touch in the museum was not considered to be any great loss. The important thing was to see.

The Colonized Collection

Collecting is a form of conquest and collected artifacts are material signs of victory over their former owners and places of origin. From an early age non-Western artifacts brought home by soldiers, travelers, and antiquity hunters had played the role of spoils. What the modern museum particularly developed, in conjunction with this paradigm of conquest, was a model of colonization, of foreign dominion (Bennet 1995).

Colonel Pitt Rivers, the founder of the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, for example, wished to create a display of artifacts which would show the social evolution of technology from primitive cultures to modern Western civilization. His ideal scheme of display was that of concentric circles, which he believed to be particularly suited to “the exhibition of the expanding varieties of an evolutionary arrangement” (cited in Chapman 1985:38–9). In this system, artifacts from around the world were situated solely on the basis of selected formal criteria (and without regard for their relevant cultural contexts) in an evolutionary scale which culminated in Victorian England as the pinnacle of human achievement. What we see here is clearly more a case of the West (as represented by Pitt Rivers) trying to create a satisfying and self-fulfilling identity for itself through institutional display than a meaningful depiction of the cultures of others (see Figure 7.1).

According to the colonial model of the collection, once artifacts have been acquired or “conquered,” they must be integrated into a new social order and made to conform to a new set of values imposed by their governor – the collector or curator. The collection is an unruly mass of displaced natives that has to be disciplined and rendered subservient to its masters. This regulation of artifactual bodies by the regimen of the museum was presented by collectors and curators as being for their own good. Nineteenth-century collectors often justified their removal of native artifacts from their cultures of origin to be placed in Western collections by saying that they were rescuing them from obscurity and neglect. In the words of one collector, the indigenous artifacts he gathered would be “far more valuable amongst the records and treasures of a museum than in the dinginess and filth of their [native homes]” (cited by Thomas 1991:181).

Artifacts were better off in the clean, bright, protected environment of the museum under the aegis of knowledgeable Western scholars. Ironically, the implied conclusion was that indigenous artifacts were misused by their original owners and that it was only when they entered

Image not available

the Western museum that they were used properly. The ethnographic museum was a model of an ideal colonial empire in which perfect law and order was imposed upon the natives. This colonial modeling was made even more explicit in the nineteenth-century world fairs in which fake colonial villages with specimen natives were exhibited (see Mitchell 1988).

The visual emphasis of the museum contributed to the model of colonization in several ways. Artifacts were required to conform to the sensory order of their new home. This meant being reduced to the visual, or – from a Western perspective – being civilized into the visual. As the artifacts in the museum represented cultures, the peoples providing them also symbolically had their senses and sensory presences

disciplined. Through their representative artifacts they were rendered touchless, speechless, and smell-less.

The visual order of the museum enabled artifacts to be examined by scholars according to Western scientific standards, something which was deemed to be difficult within the “dinginess and filth” – and cultural strictures – of their indigenous environments. The ethnographic museum usually also functioned as a kind of laboratory in which artifacts might be made to reveal their secrets to the penetrating gaze of the scientist. The visual display of the artifacts in their glass cases further allowed visitors to dominate the collection through their gaze (Bennett 1995). In the colonial empire of the museum it is not only the curators who are the governors but also the visitors, who can assert their superiority to the collection and masterfully survey the kingdom conquered by their own civilization. The visitors can come and go as they please. The collection remains trapped, captive – the canoe hangs still from the ceiling, the drum is silent on the wall, the amulet is powerless in its case.

Outside the Glass Case

One anthropologist of the 1920s, trying to explain to a European readership the indigenous value of certain religious objects from Papua New Guinea, wrote that, while such artifacts might appear to be simply “absurd creations of wicker-work,” they were “possessed of another meaning in the dimness and obscurity of their own environment” (cited by Thomas 1991:182). The unintended implication of this position was that, if natives could only see more clearly, they would give up their absurd wicker-work and create Western-style artworks. In the meantime it was the task of the anthropologist to try to shed light on their dim practices.

Even when anthropology left behind crude Victorian typologies of natives, the multisensory dynamics of indigenous cultures remained obscure – and often unimportant – to Westerners. For example, when the creative styles of non-Western cultures began to influence Western art in the twentieth century (such as the influence of African masks on Cubism), their varied sensory dimensions were typically ignored, and only a semblance of their visual façade retained. This was not a negative development in itself, as migrant artifacts must necessarily begin a new cultural and sensory life in their new home, but it contributed to a one-sided representation of indigenous cultures.

Indigenous artistry eluded Western concepts of aesthetics in the complexity of its cultural values and in its engagement of a plurality of senses. The visual, museum model of the artifact is what in most cases entered the Western imagination, not the dynamic multisensory life of the artifact in its culture of origin.

This remains generally true today. In some ways it has been heightened by contemporary anthropology's rejection of the trope of indigenous peoples as tactile beings who place a "bestial" emphasis on the lower senses. It was partly to avoid this stigma that many anthropologists came to treat indigenous peoples and their artifacts as though they were as visually oriented (and therefore civilized) as Westerners (Howes 2003).

Furthermore, Western anthropologists have studied indigenous cultures through the visualist models which dominate in their own society, notably photographs, films, and texts. Visual Anthropology developed as an important subfield of Anthropology. There is no Tactile Anthropology. Therefore it should not surprise us to learn that, for example, a cross-cultural analysis of the aesthetic values of even so apparently tactile an art form as pottery is undertaken by Western scholars entirely on the basis of photographs of pots (see for example Iwao and Child 1966).

The anthropology of the senses, as developed in the last decade or so (Howes 1991, 2003; Classen 1993b, 1997), asserts that every society has its own sensory order – that is, its own unique mode of distinguishing, valuing, and combining the senses. Material culture gives expression to this sensory order; every artifact embodies a culturally salient, sensory combination. This is what makes the study of indigenous artifacts in situations of "cross-cultural consumption," like that of the museum, so potentially problematic and at the same time so revealing of imputed intentions and unintended uses (Howes 1996).

What might happen if we were to conceptually remove indigenous artifacts from their glass cases and try to understand them within their original cultural and sensory contexts? Is there really that much more to learn about a Tukano basket or a Navajo sandpainting, for example, than what we can see of them in a museum?

Sensography of Basketry and Sandpainting

The basketry created by the Tukano people of the Colombian rainforest can serve a variety of purposes. In fact, it includes not just baskets, but also mats, fans, sieves, and even houses, which may have walls of

interwoven palm leaves. Aside from its practical functions, basketry plays an important symbolic role in Tukano culture. The process of weaving basketwork is compared by the Tukano to the life process. The act of procreation is likened to pressing grated manioc through a sieve. The fetus is said to float in the “river” of the amniotic fluid wrapped up in a plaited mat. When shamans are undertaking a curing ritual, they often invoke magical woven screens which will admit only healing colors. The cosmos itself is conceptualized as a weaving of threads of light and wind (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1985:6–23).

All the sensory elements of their basketwork have meaning for the Tukano. The different odors, shapes, and textures of the reeds, vines, wood fibers, and palm fronds which are used in basketry refer to elements of Tukano mythology. The red, yellow, and brown colors employed are respectively symbolic of male fertility, female fertility, and maturity. When a basket turns from green to brown in the process of drying, it is said to represent a transformation from immaturity to a state of procreative ripeness. The geometric patterns of the different weavings reflect patterns the Tukano see in their hallucinogenic visions. The shapes of different baskets, trays, and mats refer to such culturally charged concepts as food, wombs, animals, and constellations of stars. The seeping of water, smoke, and other fluids through the baskets and trays stands for the dynamic relationship between the Tukano and their environment (ibid.:24–39).

The aesthetics of Tukano artifacts lies not in the perfection of their form, but in their ability to evoke fundamental cultural ideals through all of their sensory attributes:

[Tukano art] is never an end in itself; it can never be more than a means through which the highest cultural values and truths can be expressed. For this reason, artistic and technical skill are not of the essence ... What counts is not form but content; not performance but meaning ... In fact, shamans warn people not to be too form-perfect; not to be too impressed by appearances. (ibid.:17)

As it is meaning that is valued rather than form, there is no attempt by the Tukano to conserve their artifacts. Whatever happens to the artifacts, the ideals and meanings they embody will remain untouched.

Tukano basketry is not greatly valued by first-world collectors and tourists because of its unassuming appearance. The subtle combinations of smell, texture, shape, and pattern, and the myriad cultural meanings which these encode, are usually beside the point for collectors, who

look primarily for visual display. In this regard the more ornamented and colorful baskets of certain neighboring Amazonian peoples are much more to the taste of foreign buyers (ibid.:40). This emphasis on the visual reflects the role that an Amazonian basket will play when it enters Western culture: it will above all be something to *see*.

Navajo sandpaintings, by contrast, have been greatly admired in the West as an ingenious, primitive form of visual art. Sandpaintings, however, are created by the Navajo for purposes of healing rather than for aesthetic display. The shaman covers the floor of a ceremonial house or *hogan* with dry sand and sprinkles colored pigments on top to create an image of the cosmos. He sings as he works, calling the deities to inhabit their representations in the sand. When the painting is complete and vibrant with divine energy the patient enters and sits in the center. The shaman transfers the positive energy of the painting to the patient by rubbing sand from the different parts of the picture onto the patient's body. After the ritual is finished the sandpainting is swept away (Gill 1982:63).

While the importance of the sandpainting for the Navajo lies in its ability to channel healing power, it has primarily been appreciated by Westerners as an exotic counterpart to a Western painting – a work of “primitive art” preservation. (See Witherspoon 1977 on art as dynamic process rather than timeless object in Navajo aesthetics.) In order to incorporate sandpaintings into Western aesthetics, however, it is essential to make them durable, for a painting made out of sand defies the whole Western system of art collection and preservation. The sandpainting must furthermore be changed from something one sits on (the last thing one would do with a Western painting) to something at which one simply looks.

The simplest way of accomplishing this transformation is to photograph or draw sandpaintings. For the Navajo, the correct view of a sandpainting is that of the patient sitting at the center. From a Western perspective, however, the only satisfying view of a sandpainting is the view from above, which allows the painting to be seen in its entirety. Photographers who wished to capture “complete” images of sandpaintings were therefore obliged to climb on top of the hogan and photograph the sandpainting below from a hole in the roof (Gill 1982:64–6; Parezco 1983:31). Another method of preserving sandpaintings is to glue them to a canvas. Once it is fixed in place, the sandpainting, like a Western painting, can be hung on the wall, bought and sold, and preserved for all time. Several ethnographic museums have tried to achieve greater authenticity by having the sandpainting created within

the museum and then covered with a glass case (although in such cases vibrations eventually cause the sands to shift) (Parezco 1983:39).

Traditionally, sandpaintings were destroyed by the Navajo by sundown of the day in which they are made. Blindness, in fact, was held to be the punishment for looking at the sacred symbols for too long (ibid.:38, 48). As with so many other creations of indigenous cultures, however, the influence of Western aesthetic and market values has had the effect of abstracting sandpaintings from their traditional cultural context, divesting them of their multisensory meanings, and transforming them into static visual images, at which one can apparently gaze indefinitely with no fear of reprisal.

The case of the Navajo sandpaintings demonstrates that museum exhibits not only desensualize objects as regards their extension in space, they desensualize them as regards their development through time. Few objects live the artificially atemporal life of museum artifacts. Sandpaintings are eminently ephemeral, created of shifting sands and disassembled the day they are made. Their sensuality unfolds within a sequence of ritual events which are key to their cultural significance. The same point can be made of a Japanese tea bowl, for example. In the tea ceremony the bowl is incorporated into a complex series of rites in which visual and auditory sensations recede and sensations of smell, touch, and taste are brought to the fore (Kondo 2004). When an artifact such as a tea bowl is “frozen” within a museum setting, this sequentiality of sensory experience is disrupted. It seems possible to encompass the nature of the artifact with a glance. In fact, one could say that it is only *when* an artifact is frozen within a museum setting – like a still, stuffed carcass in a nature display – that it *becomes possible* to master it through sight alone. Outside the museum, other sensory dimensions and possibilities intrude. Hence, the museum “holds still” the objects in its collection so that they can be visually appropriated, and then “holds still” the process of sensory revelation at the moment of visual epiphany. The beauty of “letting go” (see Ouzman, this volume chapter 10) is not well understood or appreciated.

Contemporary ethnological museums have sometimes attempted to create more interactive environments for their collections. In some cases these innovations have been the result of pressure put on museums by indigenous groups. For example, under its Sacred Materials Programme, the Canadian Museum of Civilization has “an agreement with the Hodenosaunee to provide corn meal mush and burn tobacco for the false face masks and other sacred objects from the Six Nations Confederacy in the museum, and representatives come to the museum twice a year

at the museum's expense to do so" (Laforet 2004). In general, however, what *The [London] Times* wrote of the World Exhibition of 1851 still holds true today: "We want to place everything we can lay our hands on under glass cases, and to stare our fill" (cited by Mitchell 1988:20). Despite a number of innovative challenges to the glass-case model, an increasing reliance on visual technologies for documentation and dissemination (as in the case of the "virtual museum") make museums more sight-bound than ever. In her study of the role of photography in museums, Elizabeth Edwards describes the standard accession practices of the modern ethnographic museum. She observes that the museum object is

defined by a series of documenting photographic practices: accession photographs, conservation photographs, X-ray and infra-red photographs revealing unseen depths of the object – procedures that often address the part, rather than the whole of the object. There is a sense in which the museum object becomes a sum of its photographs. (Edwards 2001:77)

Edwards suggests that there is a "seamless continuum" between photography and museum display.

In this context one can understand how many curators would hardly see the point of allowing visitors access to the non-visual dimensions of artifacts which they have not seen fit to consider themselves. The issue of tactile access to collections is usually only raised as regards the visually impaired (Candlin 2004), the assumption being that those who can see have no need to touch. (Indeed, with even curators donning gloves to handle artifacts, who can now test the veracity of Ghiberti's statement that certain works can only be properly appreciated by touch?) It is, in fact (except occasionally in the case of musical instruments), not a question of exploring the non-visual values of collections, but rather of using ever-expanding visual technologies to gain ever more "insights" into artifacts. It might be argued that the untouchability of the modern museum is due to a purely "practical" concern for conservation, rather than to a shift in sensory values. Yet the increased concern over conservation in modernity is not a "natural" museological development, but is itself the expression of a changing ideological and sensory model according to which preserving artifacts for future view is more important than physically interacting with them in the present (see Classen 2005). It has been claimed, furthermore, that curatorial practice often has more to do with the conservation of expertise than with the conservation of objects (Candlin 2004).

Despite the hypervisualism of contemporary culture, however, most museum-goers are not solely interested in apprehending the formal appearance of the artifacts on display, but in establishing a connection with those artifacts and with the people who created them. (Why else would the average museum visitor balk if told, for example, that every item on display was merely an excellent replica of the original artifacts safeguarded in the museum storeroom?) Museum-goers do not just want to visually process information. Like Sophie de la Roche in the eighteenth century, museum-goers want to feel physically linked – “in touch” – with other peoples and worlds through their material effects. A case in point would be the “Touch Me” exhibition presented at the Victoria and Albert Museum as this book goes to press. The starting point for this exhibition of contemporary designer objects is “the idea that we live in a touch-starved society and that the quality of touch interaction with most products is nothing to what it might be.” By showcasing the work of craft makers, and encouraging haptic interaction with the collection, the curators “aim to show that we all have a latent capability for more creative and communicative touch” (see at <http://www.hughalderseywilliams.com/projects/touchme.htm>).

Alternative Paradigms of Perception

The task facing anyone who wishes to explore the sensory dimensions of artifacts across cultural borders is complex. On the one hand, there is the difficulty of transcending one’s own cultural sensory model with all of its potent symbolic associations in order to become open to the alternative paradigms of perception that may be embodied in artifacts from other cultures. On the other hand, there is the difficulty of conveying the multisensory nature of indigenous artifacts by means of the prevalent visual or audio-visual media of communication in use today. Even if a variety of sensory channels are used, to what extent can the intricate symbolism embedded in artifacts by their cultures of origin be rendered comprehensible to members of another culture?

In a nineteenth-century novel, Thomas Edison is presented as musing on the metaphorical blindness of native peoples with respect to the values of Western art: he asks himself

suppose I place the *Mona Lisa* of Leonardo da Vinci in front of a Pawnee Indian or a Kaffir tribesman. However powerful the glasses or lenses with which I improve the eyesight of these children of nature, can I ever make them really see what they’re looking at? (L’Isle-Adam 1982:15)

The same might be said in reverse of Westerners. However much we are encouraged to handle indigenous artifacts, can we ever really understand what we are touching?

The answer must almost certainly be that we who are cultural outsiders cannot. Yet we can recognize what the limits of our understanding have been and we can try to grasp more than we have in the past. It is on this basis that some of the most innovative work in material culture is currently being undertaken. From Marcia Pointon's (1999) examination of the tactile values of Victorian hair jewelry to Nicholas Saunders's (1999) comparison of the sensuous and social values of pearls in Native America and Europe to Sven Ouzman's (2001) analysis of the nonvisual qualities of African rock art, the groundwork is being laid for a full-bodied approach to the study of artifacts which is responsive to the interrelationship between their sensuous materiality and their cultural import (see also Seremetakis 1994; Dant 1999; MacGregor 1999; Stahl 2002). Even the Inca *quipu*, so long silenced, is being revisited as a medium of communication which functioned on several sensory levels. The *quipu* scholar Robert Ascher writes that if Western academics had a less visualist sensory order

we might understand [*quipu*] writing as simultaneously tactile and visual, and probably more. Being that we are who we are, it is difficult to internalize this notion so that it becomes a part of us, but I think that it is the next step that must be taken in the study of Inka writing. (Ascher 2002:113)

Sensorially-minded curators of ethnographic collections, in turn, must grapple with the fact that, while museums are true to their own cultural background – that is, they are clear products of Western social history – they are untrue to the other cultures they represent. The traditional glass cases of the museum present little impediment to the eye but they are not ideologically transparent. As we have seen, glass cases are ideological framing devices within the larger frame of the museum itself.

The “solution” to this problem (which can never be completely solved given the ultimate incommensurability of cultures) is not necessarily to oppose the visual model of the museum with a “synaesthetic” model of sensory totality (Sullivan 1986). This would be to follow the example of the “open-air” museum or exotic theme park and attempt to create an encompassing cultural and sensory environment, where artifacts are displayed within a mock village, with typical houses, food, music, and

“inhabitant”-guides. One difficulty with this model is that the sensuous, simulated reality of the display site might appear to encapsulate, and vie for authenticity with, the actual culture represented. At least when artifacts are presented in vitrines, most visitors realize that they are not seeing the “whole picture.” If a whole “living” village is represented, the distinction is less clear.

It is impossible to create a museological model which is free of issues of domination and misrepresentation. The museum is, after all, a tightly controlled site of containment, a cultural zoo, however naturalistic its setting may be made to appear. One intermediate alternative to the “museum of sight,” however, would be to allow visitors more possibilities for dynamic interaction with, and a contextual understanding of, the collection, without making a pretense of total sensory immersion. Visitors could be drawn into the physical space of other cultures through full-scale replicas of local buildings, without necessarily creating (or perhaps deliberately inhibiting) an illusion of actual cultural relocation. The issue of conservation might be addressed by having a place within the museum where visitors could handle reproductions of the objects on display. As noted above, however, mere tactile engagement with an artifact will not necessarily deepen one’s understanding of its cultural role. Sensory content, therefore, would need to be placed in cultural context. This could be accomplished through such aids as descriptive texts, audiotapes, films, and interactive computer programs – and potentially through other sensory stimuli such as incense – as well as by live presentations and workshops (in which artifacts might occasionally leave their cases). Here the seemingly atemporal character of museum artifacts – and, by extension, of their cultures of origin – could be countered by reference to their social and material mutability and to the realities of cultural change. Of key importance would be to bring out some of the political and social history behind how the artifacts came to be in the museum in the first place (see Gosden and Knowles 2001). A museum exhibit might be most effective when visitors realize that it’s not simply a “pretty picture,” that it shows the marks of social contacts and conflicts.

This diathetical mode of museum display might be called “stereoscopic” or “bisensual,” for it promotes an interplay of Western and non-Western “worldviews,” or “sensory cosmologies.” It does not simply strip artifacts of their sensory identities in order to reinscribe them within a hegemonic visual regime – as in the traditional ethnological museum. Nor does it attempt to create an illusion of cultural authenticity by masking the signs of external control and mediation – as in an

"open-air"-style cultural recreation. It acknowledges the ideological and sensory trajectory and limitations of the conventional museological model on the one hand, while on the other it opens a breach in that model to allow for a more dynamic, multisensorial, and culturally aware museum experience.

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