

Representing archaeological knowledge in museums

Exhibiting human origins and strategies for change

Stephanie Moser

ABSTRACT

Archaeological representation is a relatively new field of inquiry in the discipline, focusing on the construction of knowledge by the diverse range of 'non-academic' media that present the past. In this analysis the subject of museum display and the construction of disciplinary knowledge is addressed, with a case study on the way the subject of human origins has been exhibited. After an initial discussion outlining the manner in which displays construct the past, I proceed to establish that displays of human origins have created a highly formulaic and restrictive version of our evolution as a species. This critique is then followed by a set of five proposed strategies for dismantling the display canon so firmly entrenched in museum practice. These are: 1) engaging the present; 2) challenging the iconography; 3) abandoning the narrative; 4) telling different stories; and 5) harnessing emotion.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years researchers in museum studies have begun to look at how exhibitions have participated in a complex process of meaning-making (e.g. Dean, 1997; Moore, 1997; Roberts, 1997; Caulton, 1998; Hein, 1998; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; Macdonald, 2002). Historians of science and culture have also explored how exhibitions have a significant role not just in reflecting ideas about the natural and cultural world, but also in creating them (e.g. Findlen, 1994; Bennett, 1995). It is in anthropology, however, and in the study of how non-Western cultures have been portrayed in museums, that we have seen the greatest amount of discussion on the power of exhibitions to create meaning. An interest in the cultural construction of knowledge, and a concern to take into account

views expressed by indigenous groups about their representation in museums, have led anthropologists to examine how exhibitions function to define cultures (e.g. Karp and Lavine, 1991; Ames, 1992; Coombes, 1994; Jenkins, 1994; Henderson and Kaeppler, 1997; Lidchi, 1997; McLoughlin, 1999; Herle, 2000; Davison, 2001).

Despite this increasing acknowledgement that museums have a role in the production of knowledge, the ways in which museum displays contribute to this process still remain poorly understood. Too often, academics make the mistake of thinking that displays are simply designed for popular consumption and that they are somehow irrelevant to the 'real business' of learning about a subject. Worse still is the notion that the evaluation of museum displays and how they communicate ideas is a common sense exercise, not requir-

ing any specific theoretical or methodological skills. As Asma (2001: xii) noted in his recent study of natural history museums, both the public and professionals lack an understanding of the philosophy behind museum displays:

Museum presentations are three-dimensional windows into the world of ideas. But while observers successfully perceive and contemplate the factual tidbits that are placed in focus by the 'window', they frequently fail to notice the presentation frame itself. (Asma, 2001: xii)

We need to scrutinize the role of the 'presentation frame' and examine how displays function to create meaning. This paper seeks to address how museum displays contribute to the knowledge construction process by presenting a case study on the representation of human origins. This is a particularly appropriate example because our understanding of human origins has been intimately connected to the way in which the subject has been brought to life in visual representations such as museum displays. The representation of human origins also warrants consideration because it raises the issue of how representations can restrain or suppress new thinking about a subject. For instance, recent displays of human origins continue to use a highly formulaic visual canon that was established early on this century. It appears that developments in museum display that have led to the creation of new understandings of science and culture have escaped human origins exhibits because there has been so little criticism or reflective thought on their nature as representational and interpretive devices. In this discussion I outline the display canon for presenting human origins and suggest ways in which this can be challenged. My attempt to achieve these goals is informed by a research project on the exhibition of archaeology from the Renaissance to the end of the 19th century (Moser, forthcoming). Here it has been established that museum displays have been vital to the production of knowledge in archaeology, where the arrangement of ancient material culture for visual consumption has created interpretive frameworks that have served to structure ideas. More specifically, I have argued that the presentation of archaeological material in museums creates a 'picture' that facilitates the under-

standing of a particular theme, cultural group or historical episode.

This discussion on displays of human origins is also informed by the concept of representation, which acknowledges the significance of 'non-academic' discourses in shaping our understanding of particular phenomena (Moser, 2001). The theory of representation asserts that such forms of presentation (e.g. visual images) are not merely by-products of academic research, but rather, that they have their own distinctive ways of participating in the process of making meaning. Furthermore, the theory of representation is based on the premise that knowledge is not simply established by scholars/scientists and then filtered down into the popular realm, as if these were two separate activities where one is a result of the other. Rather, knowledge is seen to be created through an interaction between scholarly discourse and popular culture. Central to research in this area is the recognition that scientists (and archaeologists and anthropologists) are exposed to popular representations before, during and after their training as professionals. For instance, as children, scientists would have read illustrated books, visited museum displays and watched films relating to the past; all of which would have created impressions that influenced them and fuelled their desire to pursue studies in the area. As students, these scientists would have continued to have been exposed to ideas conveyed in popular representations, many of which they translated into their own interpretations. As qualified professionals, these individuals would then continue to consume popular representations, often unconsciously incorporating the entrenched assumptions and ideas embodied within them in their own research. In this sense museum displays could serve to influence their work by reinforcing assumed knowledge, and making some interpretations seem more plausible than others.

EXHIBITIONS ON HUMAN ORIGINS

The first exhibitions on human evolution grew out of displays of the natural world and ethnology (Moser, 1999). While skulls and models of newly discovered ancestors appeared at World Fairs, such as the World Exhibition in Paris in 1900 (Fig.

1), the first major permanent exhibition on human evolution was Henry Fairfield Osborn's exhibit at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. In the 1920s he installed an entire gallery devoted to presenting new finds on human ancestry. Entitled 'The Hall of the Age of Man', it included cases with artefacts, casts of hominid ancestors and reconstructed busts of the 'races' of ancient humans. These reconstructed busts were embellished with hair to make them appear more realistic and appealing to visitors. However, the highlight of this exhibition were the three large murals featuring our distant relatives produced by Charles Knight (Moser, 1998: 158–9). These murals established Osborn's vision of human evolution far more effectively than did the other more static displays because they constituted such comprehensive pictorial arguments. With their strong emphasis on the visually interpretive element of palaeoanthropology, the murals set the agenda for the following proliferation of displays on the subject of human evolution.

The next major exhibition on human evolution was the 'Hall of the Stone Age of the Old World' at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, which was opened in 1933. Another important step was taken here when a set of eight life-size dioramas were installed, telling the story of human evolution in the form of a coherent picture-narrative (Figs 2–5). The curators aimed to create the same effect as had been achieved in Karl Akeley's famous 'Hall of Africa' at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, where animal specimens were mounted and displayed with highly detailed painted backdrops and modelled environmental props. These visions of animals in their natural habitats still enthrall visitors today, despite the fact that they do not move or make noises like contemporary animatronic exhibits. What makes these older displays so appealing is the depth of detail and precision that has been invested in their representation, and although similar kinds of exhibits had been created earlier in the 19th century, it was around this time (the 1930s) and in association with the Akeley exhibition in New York, that life-size dioramas became the favoured way of presenting natural history. The success of the Chicago exhibition on human evolution lay in the extensive use of this

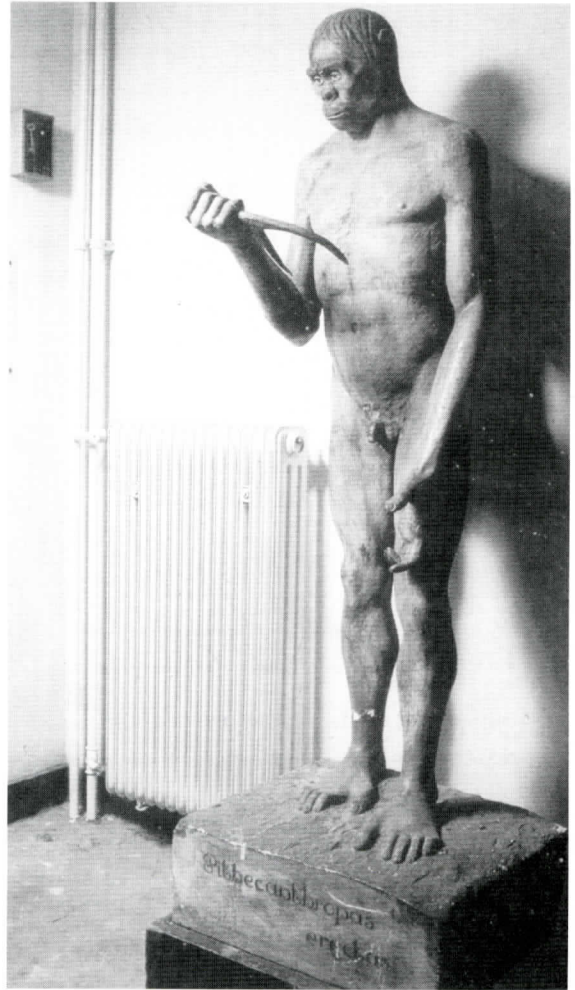


Figure 1. Display of *Pithecanthropus* from the World Exhibition in Paris, 1900.

genre of representation, with the diorama of the Neanderthal family becoming a famous icon in its own right. It was at this exhibition that the display themes for human evolution became canonised, having a remarkably pervasive effect on subsequent displays.

Since the Chicago precedent, exhibitions on human evolution have been set up in natural history museums and other museums all over the world. While there is some degree of variation in these exhibitions, they tend to be characterised by a remarkable uniformity. Indeed, a distinctive display canon has been adhered to, which is characterised by its dependence on visually interpretive displays such as the diorama. Having

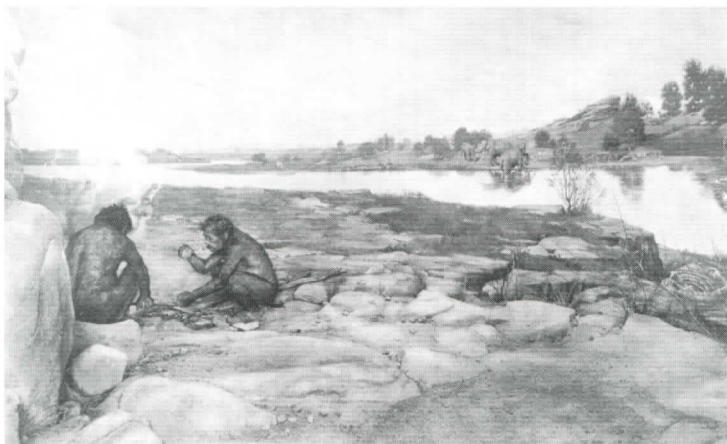


Figure 2. Display of *Homo erectus* from the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, 1933 (©The Field Museum, CSA76851).



Figure 3. Display of the Neanderthals from the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, 1933 (©The Field Museum, CSA76895_Ac).



Figure 4. Display of the earliest humans from the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, 1933 (©The Field Museum, A102513c).

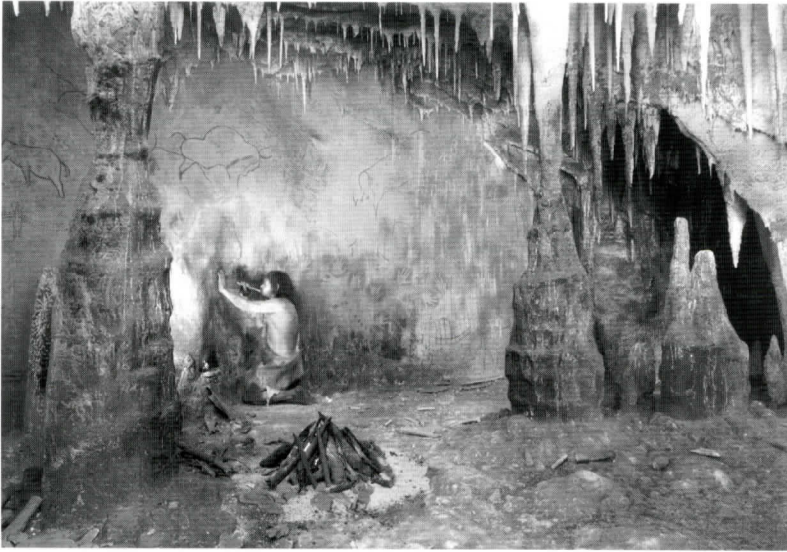


Figure 5. Display of rock art from the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, 1933 (©The Field Museum, CSA76950).

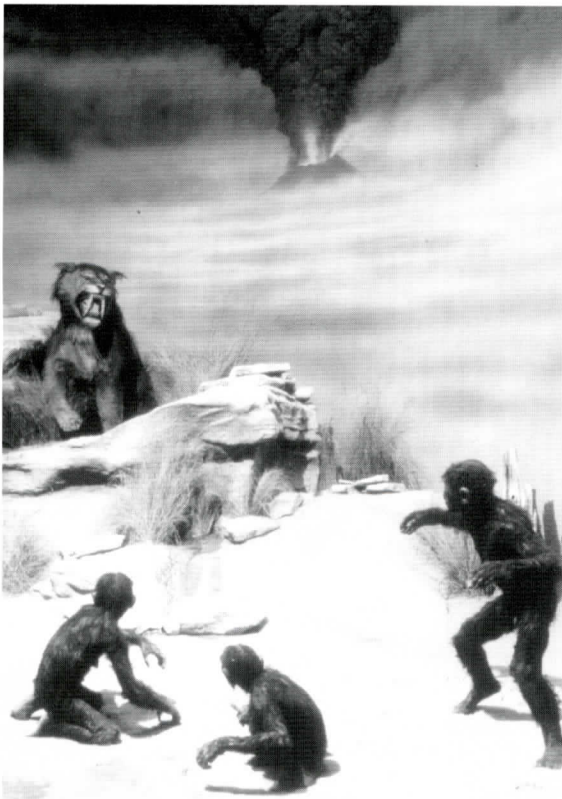


Figure 6. Display of the australopithecines at Laetoli from the 'Tracks through Time' exhibition at the Australian Museum, 1988 (Photo AA-37175).

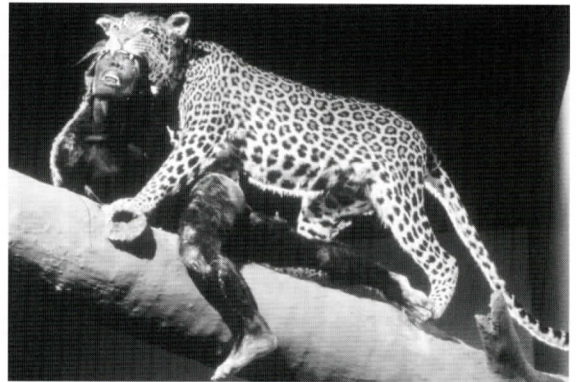


Figure 7. Display of the australopithecines from the 'Tracks through Time' exhibition at the Australian Museum, 1988 (Photo AA5-37174).

asserted this, it would be unfair to say that there have been no significant developments in the way human ancestry has been portrayed in museum displays. Examples worth mentioning are the 'Tracks through Time' display opened in the Australian Museum in 1988 (Figs 6 and 7), the 'Hall of Human Biology and Evolution' exhibit opened at the American Museum of Natural History in 1993 (Figs 8–10) and the 'Missing Links Alive' travelling exhibition, which toured Britain in 1997 (Figs 11 and 12). In addition to challenging out-dated views on the appearance and behav-

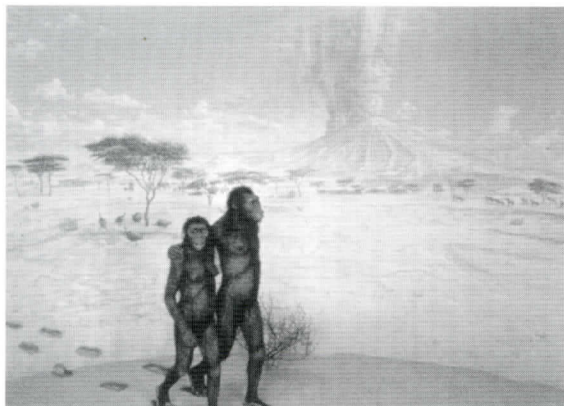


Figure 8. Display of the australopithecines at Laetoli from the Hall of Human Biology at the American Museum of Natural History, 1993 (Neg. K16740).



Figure 11. Display of the Neanderthals from the 'Missing-Links Alive' exhibition, 1997 (©United Exhibits™ Group).



Figure 9. Display of *Homo erectus* from the Hall of Human Biology at the American Museum of Natural History, 1993 (Neg. K17271).



Figure 12. Display of modern humans from the 'Missing-Links Alive' exhibition, 1997 (©United Exhibits™ Group).



Figure 10. Display of the Neanderthals from the Hall of Human Biology at the American Museum of Natural History, 1993 (Neg. K17268).

ions of certain ancestors, these exhibitions also aimed to communicate something about the nature of archaeological investigation and the controversial nature of some of the arguments in the field of human palaeoanthropology (see Moser, 1996; 1999). Also worth mentioning is the 1993 exhibition on *Pithecanthropus/Homo erectus* held in Leiden, where a display of historical images of apes was used to raise questions about the cultural context in which an understanding of the 'missing link' was developed (Bouquet, 1995). Despite such examples, however, exhibitions on human evolution remain dependent on the display canon established earlier in the century, in which our early ancestors are typically depicted as slouched hairy

cave men making tools and living in caves. This canon or exhibition strategy incorporates several core elements. First is the ever-repeated formula of tool-making, hunting, fire-making, burial and art depicted as the key events in the story of human evolution. Second is the dependence on an established iconography, which sees the use of an age-old set of pictorial motifs such as clubs, animal skins and caves to convey a 'primitive' versus 'civilised' status. Third is the monolithic or grand narrative, which sees the story of human evolution presented in a seemingly uncomplicated linear sequence. Fourth is the dependence on the traditional diorama display, where knowledge is conveyed in the form of an interpretive assemblage of data, theory and visual spectacle. Finally, there is the underlying conservatism of the exhibitions, where the subject of human evolution is presented as being divorced from the present and its politics.

STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE

There are a number of ways in which we can work towards dismantling the display canon for exhibitions on human evolution. The rest of this paper focuses on outlining five strategies for change including engaging with the present, challenging the iconography, abandoning the narrative, telling different stories and harnessing emotion. Many of the suggestions are inspired by changes in museological practice that have been taking place over the last decade. One of the most significant of these changes is the recognition that in order to survive museums need to acquire greater social value in the community. Recent research has indicated how museums are beginning to see themselves as institutions that are involved in dialogues with their visitors (e.g. see Caulton, 1998; Weil, 2002). More specifically, many museums now recognise that their role is not to impose their views, but to participate in debates with the range of different audiences they seek to attract. Thus the politics of display has become a topic of some interest among museum researchers (e.g. Macdonald, 1998). The role of museums is also being redefined in the sense that concern is being increasingly expressed with how exhibitions can promote social change and inclusion (e.g. see Sandell, 2002). This is reflected in the concern to

carry out 'front-end' evaluations of exhibition ideas, where establishing visitors' interests and needs is a starting point rather than an after-thought. Associated with this is the realisation that visitors come to exhibitions with an array of assumptions and beliefs about a subject, and that these can strongly affect their learning/viewing experience (e.g. see Lord and Lord, 2002). This is particularly the case with the way cultural identity and heritage is perceived, and it is here that museums can play an important role in challenging cultural stereotypes and the social inequality that results from these. Another important development in museological practice that is relevant to this discussion is the way in which exhibitions have sought to inform visitors about the ways in which meanings are accorded to objects. In this context the role of collectors and the complex life-history of objects has been highlighted (e.g. Moore, 1997; Shelton, 2001).

The exhibition strategies that are outlined here also emerge from a research interest in community museums, which is central to the creation of the Community Archaeology Project at Quseir, Egypt (Moser et al, 2002). This project, which centres on the creation of a community museum for the city of Quseir in Egypt, has demonstrated the vital importance of community consultation, where ideas about the strategies of exhibition have been significantly revised as a result of employing community representatives as project members. Furthermore, the establishment of partnerships with local organisations has taught us much about how our curatorial expertise can benefit from and be enriched by local knowledge. This is a development that has been reported by others seeking to incorporate diverse cultural perspectives in their exhibitions (e.g. papers in Hooper-Greenhill, 1997; Rosoff, 1998; Fienup-Riordan, 1999; McLoughlin, 1999; Herle, 2000; papers in Sandell, 2002).

Finally, while museum displays incorporate both text and graphic components, the focus of discussion here is on the visual dimension of the exhibits as these have been shown to be far more central in communicating messages to museum audiences (e.g. Belcher, 1991; Dean, 1997). Furthermore, because the archaeological record of human evolution is relatively limited when compared to that of other periods of antiquity, curators

tend to rely on visually interpretative displays, such as reconstruction drawings and dioramas in the presentation of this subject.

Engaging with the present

An important transformation that needs to take place in exhibitions of human origins is the acknowledgement of the politics of human origins research and the implications that displays of ancient ancestors have for the perception and treatment of people in the present. As numerous historians of science have demonstrated, every domain of scientific study has a political dimension, and the study of human evolution is certainly no exception. The idea that the presentation of this subject in museums should acknowledge its connection with the present is related to the tendency over the past decade for museums to become more politically reflective. Although initially reluctant to address the social and political aspects of their specialist subjects, curators are increasingly recognising the potential of their exhibitions to encourage debate, stimulate critical thinking and promote social action. Having said this, the reluctance of curators openly to reflect on how the study of human evolution is intimately connected to the politics of defining race is understandable. Professionals need to be clear about their disciplinary identity and palaeoanthropologists are scientists, not cultural critics. However, recent research has shown that visitors to exhibitions on human evolution bring a number of disturbing assumptions with them about race and ancestry (see below), and curators need to address this problem in order that the pervasive stereotypes about race associated with their subject are challenged.

Many museum visitors assume that the subject of human evolution does not have a contemporary political dimension because it is about extremely ancient specimens living in the very distant past. This is a false assumption, because displays about hominid ancestors have an influence on perceptions of racial difference and the links between contemporary populations and 'primitive' ancestors. Like contemporary ethnographic displays, displays of human ancestors influence how the cultural histories of indigenous communities are

understood. Of relevance here are the studies on the role of museums in defining cultural difference (e.g. Karp and Lavine, 1991; Kaeppler, 1992; Ames, 1992; Coombes, 1994; Simpson, 1996; Henderson and Kaeppler, 1997; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998; Maxwell, 1999). This body of work reveals how displays in Europe, North America, Canada and Australia have played a critical role in defining indigenous peoples, particularly through their portrayal of non-Western cultures as static and without history. Increasing acknowledgement of these problems has resulted in indigenous communities taking a role in the creation of exhibitions, where they have provided alternative visions to the traditional representations of their ancestors living a simple and unchanging life (e.g. Jenkins, 1994; Arnoldi, 1999; Fienup-Riordan, 1999; Specht and MacLulich, 2000; Kelly and Gordon, 2002). Displays of ancient human ancestors have yet to involve the contemporary cultural groups who are most affected by their representations, particularly people of African descent.

Another related problem with exhibitions of human evolution is that visitors make a connection between them and the ethnographic exhibits that are often featured in the same natural history museums. For instance, visitors often assume that there are parallels between the living communities represented in the ethnographic displays and the ancient ancestors represented in the hominid displays. As a result, visitors are subconsciously encouraged to make the assumption that the modern communities who still use 'primitive' material culture signify an earlier phase of evolution. Indigenous populations are thus seen by many as being representative of lesser-evolved species; the fact that they are depicted differently from Western populations is emphasised by the fact that their material culture is associated with natural history exhibitions, whereas the latter are more typically featured in museums of art.

Recognition of the political dimensions of presenting human origins demands some understanding of what visitors think about the displays and the preconceptions they have about the subject. As museum researchers have argued, visitors come with a wealth of previously acquired knowledge, interests, skills and beliefs (e.g. Falk and Dierking,

2000: 87). Research on the way visitors understand human evolution exhibits and the role that their views and assumptions play in taking messages from the visit has been recently carried out by Scott (2002). Based on interviews at human evolution exhibitions in London and Kenya, she has shown how visitor's beliefs about race are still intimately connected to their ideas about evolution. In addition to seeing African peoples as evolutionary relics, visitors see evolution as being a process from the simple to the complex; the earlier, more 'primitive', forms of evolution occurring in Africa, and the later more complex phases of human evolution occurring in Europe. As Scott argues, museums fail to challenge the sense of inevitable progress from the deep dark past of Africa to the enlightened European present. While the scholarly community has addressed these issues in research on evolution, we have not been proactive in asserting these ideas in the museum. Although some curators would see their responsibility as presenting the latest information available on the subject of human evolution, it could also be argued that they have the responsibility of addressing the assumptions and outdated ideas that affect and, indeed, stifle visitors' interpretations of the subject. The vast amount of work on race and representation should not just be acknowledged in ethnographic exhibits, but in human origins displays as well. Visitors need to be informed not just about new 'facts', but about important conceptual developments, such as how nations have been constructed within museums (e.g. see Coombes, 1994).

The fact that natural history exhibitions have also started to engage more openly with the political dimensions of their content offers a further incentive for adopting this practice in exhibitions on human evolution. Natural history exhibitions have sought to engage with the present by addressing environmental and conservation issues, where visitors are encouraged to contemplate the effect of their behaviour on biological diversity (see Asma, 2001, for example). Exhibitions on human evolution displays can similarly engage with the present by showing the connection between stereotypes of our ancestors and modern assumptions about race and technological progress. One way of achieving this would be to show how

historic images of ancestors that emphasised their primitive qualities (e.g. hairiness, hunched posture, nakedness) attributed them with many features of African people, and that the legacy of this practice lives on because such images continue to be reinforced in popular representations. Visitors should be encouraged to acknowledge this bias and challenge the associations that are still made between hominid ancestors and living populations. This could be done by alerting visitors to the fact that the skin colour chosen when depicting ancient ancestors has contemporary implications for people in the present. Another way to encourage acknowledgement of bias is to include examples of recent media representations of indigenous people that emphasise their 'primitive' ways of life.

Furthermore, we should be relating the findings from research that demonstrates the central role museums have had in the creation of power relations within colonial contexts. One way of translating these findings into a display would be to show the striking parallels between the staged studio portraits of 19th-century ethnographic photography (see Edwards, 1992) and the scenarios of our hominid ancestors. If we are to make any progress in the presentation of the early human past this connection needs to be acknowledged, identified as a problem and then severed.

Challenging the iconography

Closely related to the idea of engaging with the present is the need to challenge the pervasive and deeply rooted iconography of human evolution. Research has already demonstrated the powerful effect of images of the prehistoric past on disciplinary thought. For instance, it has been shown that a visual vocabulary for explaining our origins was created in classical times (Moser, 1998); a vocabulary that has had a permanent 20th century have found difficult, if not impossible, to replace. The reason why images have been so successful in accounting for human evolution is that the artists and illustrators working in classical, medieval, Renaissance and antiquarian traditions singled out a set of pictorial symbols or icons that communicated what was thought to be the essence of our primal existence. Archaeologists and

palaeoanthropologists, like the many scholars before them, have not discarded these visions but continue to slot their ideas into the established pictorial frameworks. This is also the case with exhibitions on human evolution, which although attempting to present new data and ideas, have done so through a very established and limited visual language.

One of the biggest problems with the prevailing iconography of human origins is that the diversity of the early human experience cannot be adequately conveyed. Associated with this is the problem that because the iconography has become so familiar, it conveys messages that tend to overshadow any new concepts presented in the display. A recent example of this was in an exhibition on prehistory at the Museum of London, where a display featuring stereotypical icons of the Palaeolithic was created in order to address visitor assumptions about the past. An image of Raquel Welch in a furry bikini from the film *1 Million Years BC* (1965), was accompanied by a classic 1950s illustration of a hunch-backed Neanderthal and a picture of a dinosaur, in order to strip away preconceptions about prehistory, especially the commonly held view that dinosaurs co-existed with ancient hominids (Cotton and Wood, 1996: 63). However, while the accompanying text questioned the audience about the images, asking 'how accurate are they?', the use of these familiar icons at the beginning of the exhibition inadvertently reinforced the preconceptions that the curators wanted to challenge.

Exhibitions on human evolution should address the fact that the subject has acquired its own distinctive iconography and that this has influenced how we understand the past. Developments in anthropological exhibits may provide some guidance here in the sense that they have begun to explore the nature of visual representation in relation to the production of meaning about their subject. For instance, artists' interventions into exhibitions have provided visitors with completely new perspectives on how to engage with other cultures (e.g. see Pearce, 1999; Shelton, 2001). With regard to human evolution exhibits, new perspectives could be achieved by creating a display on the popular imagery of human origins in which a select group of iconic stereotypes are

traced back in time; making the point that such icons come from age-old visual traditions. For example, the fascinating history of the cave-man icon could be told, beginning with ancient Greek images of Heracles wearing his animal skin and wielding a large knotted club. These early images would show how the club, nakedness, wild hair and the animal skin garment were used as a means of signifying primitiveness and an outsider status long ago. Medieval images of hairy cave men wielding clubs would also reveal how the prehistoric cave man existed long before scientific acknowledgement of hominid ancestors occurred. Such a display would not only communicate how we have used existing images in order to understand new evidence, but would demonstrate how such images had specific social and political roles (e.g. to designate inferiority). In this sense visitors would thus be encouraged to appreciate the social context in which the subject has evolved.

In demonstrating where the current images of ancestors come from and the inherent problems in using them, it is also important to avoid using iconic images throughout the rest of the exhibition. We need to invest in producing alternative images that are not recycled from other sources, and which look distinctly different from those featured in the proposed 'iconography display' (see above). For example, curators should ensure that the familiar cave settings and hunting scenes are replaced with other less stereotypical moments in the lives of our ancestors (see below). Related to this is the notion that challenging the iconography of displays on human evolution does not just require the construction of alternative images of our ancestors, but that it is also concerned with resisting the current trend of employing visual spectacle in museums. For instance, the pressure museums have faced to increase visitor numbers in recent years has led to the adoption of presentation techniques resembling those used in the retail and leisure industries. This has resulted in a reliance on technological 'gimmicks' such as robotics, which are designed to have an immediate sensory impact on the visitor. The extensive funds that are used to create these kinds of displays would be better spent on creating a series of alternative visual reconstructions of ancestors in different habitats, for example.

Abandoning the narrative

One of the key problems with exhibitions on human origins is that a master narrative tends to be featured in which the process of evolution appears to be simplistically unilinear and sequential. It is very difficult for such exhibitions to avoid the sense of chronological ordering that emerges as a result of placing different but more evolved species on display. However, when visitors see the now standard dioramas of the earliest hominids on the savannah, Neanderthals in the cave, and early modern humans painting cave walls, the impression they get is that one species evolved out of the other. Despite efforts to explain that this may not have been the case in the text accompanying these visual exhibits, visitors still get a sense of human evolution being unilinear because the displays are presented in a chronological sequence. The presentation of findings in human origins research via this narrative and linear approach is also problematic because it tends to see artefacts being relegated to a secondary, almost illustrative role. For instance, the ancient material residues of human behaviour seem to function as props in the narrative, rather than as key characters. Finally, and most importantly, the problem with presenting our ancient ancestors in a sequential format is that the process of evolution appears to be centrally about progress; a process that comes across as an inevitable and unproblematic part of human evolution. As Gamble (1998: xxiv) has asserted, 'there will be no fresh images [of human evolution] until we finally abandon the idea that the study of human origins is a celebration of progress'. Associated with this is the widespread use of the 'line-up of ancestors' illustration, where each ancestor is featured along a line, eventually ending up with modern humans. This image, which often serves as a time-line or orientation graphic, reinforces the idea that evolution is linear and progressive (see Gould, 1989; Moser and Gamble, 1997).

While to a certain extent the presentation of the story of human evolution in a narrative-like format is related to the narrative structure employed to construct theories of evolution in the 19th century (see Landau, 1991), this presentation emerges predominantly out of the 19th-century practice of museums to structure exhibitions

chronologically. In recent years however, both history and natural history exhibitions have increasingly moved away from a reliance on chronology as the primary means of organising their displays. Indeed, exhibition creators have sought to replace the traditional emphasis on teleological historical development with thematic approaches. While some have theorised that it is post-modern thought and its emphasis on being anti-chronological, anti-ordered and anti-classificatory that has led to a rejection of the narrative-like ordering of exhibitions (Schubert, 2000: 66), the change also reflects how museum practitioners are responding to the audience's interest in learning about selected topics within a subject.

Strategies for addressing the problem of the prevalence of the 'master narrative' of human evolution could include avoiding featuring the earliest known species at the beginning of exhibitions and placing the various ancestors 'out of order'. Illustrations and dioramas of the key species could be presented according to themes such as the different strategies for survival they employed in contrasting environmental contexts. Having said this, it is important not to completely abandon chronology to the extent that the exhibition lacks structure. As specialists in museum education have demonstrated, visitors organise and absorb information more effectively if it has some sense of narrative format (e.g. Roberts, 1997; Hein, 1998; Falk and Dierking, 2000). Furthermore, when telling the story of human evolution through exhibitions it is our responsibility not only to challenge the dominance of chronology, but also to inform audiences that there is a diachronic element to the human experience where time creates change. Indeed, conveying some sense of chronology is particularly important in the representation of human origins because the depth of time that the subject covers is difficult to conceptualise and we need some sense of temporal orientation. Thus, while it would not be responsible to omit the time element entirely, we should at least try to present it differently, so that the concept of progress does not emerge as the central underlying theme. For example, in addition to replacing the standard sequence of earliest to most recent hominids with more thematic exhibits, a display that addresses the concept of progress

could be incorporated into the exhibition. Here visitors could be encouraged to reflect on what the word 'progress' implies, by showing them that different ways of living are not necessarily less or more progressive, but rather, are the most appropriate physical and cultural solution to that particular situation.

Another way of disrupting the monolithic narrative, which is often reinforced by the tendency to encourage visitors to proceed through exhibitions along a linear path, would be to give visitors the opportunity to make choices about which path they will take. A 'bushy tree', for instance, could be used as a basis for structuring visits, where individuals could choose to follow a number of directions that lead to the evolution of different hominid behaviours. Here a path representing the phylogenetic tree with nodes or branching points that indicated the appearance of key features could be created. Within this scheme choices could be offered to the visitor, such as 'if you want to know about early language turn here'. The benefit of this kind of adaptive radiation 'pathway' is that it could replace the linear model but still give a sense of temporal change.

Finally, with regard to the 'line-up of ancestors' graphic, it is extremely difficult to see how an alternative way of presenting the hominid lineage could be presented in such a quick and easy format. While one strategy would be to abandon using it altogether, a new 'tree-like' icon could be created, with the 'old' and outdated linear line-up being reappropriated to feature within the suggested display on problematising progress. Here a sample of the many advertising images that utilise this icon could be provided, showing how it has been widely used to convey improvement through technology.

Telling new stories

A key problem with exhibitions on human evolution is that they have tended to present the same scenarios of ancient human life. Scenes in the cave, of tool-making, hunting, butchering, burying the dead and making art have become all too familiar, with particular sites acquiring an iconic status as favoured subjects for display (e.g. the site of Laetoli is famous as the location for the first

preserved footsteps of early humans). When featured together, such scenes act to tell a story where prehistory is characterised by a limited set of behaviours. Furthermore, these scenes and the iconography contained within them have become stereotypes, their constant repetition making them so familiar that new details are not noticed. More specifically, new findings and ideas tend to be slotted into these established pictorial frameworks, resulting in their impact being lost.

It has already been argued that a preoccupation with the details in displays of human origins has tended to divert curators from revising the traditional stereotypes and settings that prevail (Moser, 1999). However, it is worth reiterating this point here because it should be appreciated how difficult it actually is to compose a completely new scene. On the surface there is nothing wrong with resorting to scenes that have more dramatic interest and allow for more informational content to be included. For example, a hunting scene is full of action and provides an opportunity to feature a suite of material culture. Thus while it is understandable that curators want to incorporate as much 'data' or ancient material culture as they possibly can in their displays, the problem of stereotypes will never be addressed if we do not do something more radical than just revising the existing scenes. While it is much easier to add new details into an existing scene, rather than using them as the basis to tell a different story, there remains a strong need to challenge the familiarity of the human origins story by providing different glimpses into the past.

Telling new stories does not simply refer to the replacement of one set of images with another. It is also part of the wider aim of redefining the museum as a place where visitors will be encouraged to ask questions and actively participate in the process of learning. In this context, the museum is no longer seen as a place where visitors are presented with facts, answers and definitions, but rather as a place for engaging with debates and having a unique experience. One strategy for addressing the 'familiar story – familiar scenes' problem would be to replace the scenes of cave life, hunting, butchering and art, with scenes of completely new and unfamiliar topics. For example, scenarios depicting sickness, reproduction,

play, socialising, resting and life at night-time would constitute a welcome change to the formula we know so well. For example, displays featuring our ancestors on a night watch, or focusing on the preoccupations of juvenile hominids, would provide an interesting alternative to the common scenes of adults making tools and butchering animal carcasses. Similar strategies have been adopted in the displays of indigenous groups such as the Inuit, which typically used to feature them in association with snow houses or 'primitive art' (see Fitzhugh, 1997). Another strategy would be to present two completely different versions of the same ancestor or data; an approach which has already been attempted in some museum displays of prehistory with great success (e.g. Stone, 1994). Another idea would be to have an interactive display that involves visitors in deciding the more questionable, least known, features of our ancestors' appearance, such as hair and skin colour. For instance, a visitor could manipulate such attributes on a computer screen, having access to a database of how other visitors have envisaged the physical appearance of various hominids. Strategies such as these would not only provide visitors with the opportunity to make decisions about what scenarios they find more plausible, but would also enable them to challenge the way gender roles have been naturalised in human origins displays. Here it has been shown that males are typically featured in association with hunting and tool-making, whereas females have been typically shown scraping skins or nurturing the young (Gifford-Gonzales, 1993; Moser, 1993).

Related to the strategy of telling new stories is the idea of incorporating displays on the biography or life history of artefacts, where stories about how particular objects were made, discarded, discovered, excavated, catalogued and then put on display could be presented. This suggestion reflects a wider trend in museum studies, where a concern to communicate the different contexts in which objects can be understood is increasingly being expressed. For example, Moore (1997) proposed a model that aims to show audiences the processes by which objects make history. The life history approach to understanding objects, and which has recently been promoted in history and

archaeology (e.g. Hoskins, 1998; Gosden and Marshall, 1999), could also be usefully incorporated in human origins exhibits, where the artefacts often assume a secondary status. As Holtorf (2000: 208) has argued, 'Learning about subsequent episodes in the often stormy life-history of an archaeological site or artefact and critically reflecting about its modern use, is not only much more appealing to visitors, but also more educational than the rather simple learning content of a site's or artefact's location when found, age, former appearance and function'. Such an approach could be adopted in a display on Palaeolithic artefacts that have gained meaning in a modern context; for example, the prehistoric figurines that have been appropriated by women's groups as symbols of female power.

Another aspect of telling different stories in exhibitions on human origins concerns the idea of reflecting upon the exhibition-making process. We need to be more open about our role as participants in and directors of the creation of knowledge about ancient humanity, informing museum audiences that the subject is not just about discovery and description, and rather that is about interpretation and explanation (Gamble, 1998: xxi). Furthermore, some discussion of how the displays were conceived, who created them, and their aims and objectives, could be featured as a story within the exhibition itself. This approach has been advocated in relation to the representation of non-western cultures in museums, where the story of the creation of the exhibition has become a useful way of communicating how museums construct, as opposed to simply transmit, knowledge (e.g. Lidchi, 1997). This practice also challenges the way in which museums have traditionally sought to present definitive answers, revealing that knowledge on a subject is always changing. However, this does not mean that providing answers should be completely avoided; research on natural history museums has raised the issue of the tension between showing the end results and conveying the process by which the experts got there (e.g. Yanni, 1999). It seems that the appropriate strategy would be to maintain a balance, where both definitive statements and explanations about the context of creation are combined.

Harnessing emotion

One feature of exhibitions on human evolution is that curators are reluctant to enlist emotion as a means of informing visitors about their origins. This not only reflects a concern to avoid anthropomorphising our most distant relatives, but reveals how the scientifically trained curators responsible for the content of the exhibition feel uncomfortable about venturing into the realms of art, imagination and emotion. Understandably, these professionals believe it is their responsibility to restrict themselves to the data available, and to refrain from addressing the topics for which there is little or no evidence. However, the result of this strict allegiance to the data is that displays are often limited to a set of topics that can be very unengaging. For example, repeated scenes of ancestors preparing food and eating can be quite mundane. Furthermore, the expressions on the faces of our ancestors are usually very docile; the result being that they appear to lack any sense of personality or 'life'. While accuracy is a fundamental goal in representing the past this does not mean that we have to abandon the imaginative element of reconstructing the past. Museums are increasingly harnessing the power of emotion as a way of communicating with visitors, having established that if exhibitions make a personal connection with their audiences, the latter will gain more out of them. Exhibitions on human evolution could benefit from adopting some of these strategies in their displays in order to present the subject in a more enlivening way.

Related to the use of emotion in museum exhibitions is the concern with the way displays are becoming increasingly theatrical. Academics in both the sciences and humanities have criticised the trend of museums to sacrifice knowledge or exhibition content for the sake of presenting spectacular and entertaining experiences. This is not a new problem, however. When dramatic displays were introduced in the 1600s (in the form of monstrous curiosities), scientists and scholars then reacted to the way in which they distracted the visitor from the lessons to be learnt (e.g. see Olmi, 1985; 1993). Similarly, when national museums presented their collections in the 1700s, scholars criticised the way vain displays were designed to

satisfy idle curiosity (e.g. see McClellan, 1994, on the Louvre). The introduction of more entertaining displays in the 1800s, particularly in natural history exhibitions, where large beasts were stuffed and featured in combat scenes, also attracted negative comments from scholars (e.g. see Wonders, 1993; Brigham, 1995). Despite such resistance, by the end of the 19th century it was common for museums to create displays that looked like stage sets, and the men of science who had 'tried to keep natural knowledge safe from encroaching theatricality' (Yanni, 1999: 30), had to reluctantly accept that museums were places where people came to be entertained. Thus, the current trend in museums to be more theatrical is a recent manifestation of a persisting theme, and while the pressure to become commercially viable is one reason for this increasing trend, also relevant is the increasing involvement of designers and 'visual professionals' in the display creation process. Although this had led to some positive developments (e.g. displays do not suffer from visual overload as much as they used to), many displays are now so slick and retail-like in their appearance that they have lost their distinctiveness.

One of the results of the ever-increasing commercialism of museum exhibitions is that despite becoming more visually impressive, displays still seem to lack any sense of emotional depth. So rather than perceiving the 'entertainment versus knowledge' issue simply in terms of theatre and spectacle versus science and education, we need to devise strategies for enlisting emotion to communicate knowledge about the subject. As Asma (2001: 35) has argued, we need to recognise the role that emotions play in driving and informing our intellectual pursuits. In addition to this, we should be clear about what kinds of emotions museums should cultivate in their exhibitions. Asma (2001) reiterates this point in relation to natural history displays, where he suggests that, as opposed to shocking and frightening people with roaring dinosaurs, we should provide visitors with an experiential encounter with the sublime, such as an awe-inspiring sense of nature's diversity. It is this sense of wonder, more than a sense of fear or shock, which has potential for presenting human evolution.

Strategies for harnessing emotion in exhibitions of human evolution centre on making a connec-

tion between visitors and the displays. This is difficult when the images of our ancestors in exhibitions show no self-awareness and seem very two-dimensional and anonymous. Furthermore, they are usually depicted as very serious, lacklustre individuals who are always focused on the practicalities of life. One way of addressing this would be to focus more on relationships between individuals, and to attribute ancestors with some sense of individuality and personality. To a certain extent this was attempted in the exhibition hosted by American Museum of Natural History, where a 'couple' of australopithecines were featured at Laetoli engaged in a gesture of affection (Fig. 8). While the anthropomorphism of this display made the curators uncomfortable, they agreed that the impact of the display was such that it was worth retaining (Tattersall, 1992). However, within one exhibition not all displays have to be engaging at this level. Another idea would be to convey a sense of awe at the ability many of our ancestors showed to survive. Enduring a blizzard, for example, would challenge the familiar scenes of comfort and homeliness that we see in representations of cave life. A 'useful' emotional response can also be stimulated by appealing to the sensory, such as touch and sound, where the ability to feel artefacts and listen to a possible form of early communication might generate a deeper fascination with our ancestors.

Finally, a sense of fun and humour, which has been increasingly used in museum displays (see Serrell, 1996: 86), could be incorporated in human evolution exhibits. The fact that humour is particularly relevant to the story of human origins is demonstrated by the extent to which 'missing links' and ancient ancestors have featured in cartoons since the mid 19th century (Moser and Gamble, 1997). Indeed, this tradition has become a flourishing industry, with leading contemporary cartoonists such as Gary Larson using human evolution as one of their favourite topics. This use of humour could be used as a way of addressing particular topics, such as the way in which stereotypes of ancestors have led to the perception of living communities being more primitive than others. Such approaches have already been attempted in relation to the display of indigenous communities. A good example of this was the

'Baba Kiueria' display in the *Aboriginal Australia* exhibition at the Australian Museum. Here a film depicts the white invasion of 1788, with the roles reversed so that the Aboriginal people, rather than the Europeans, act as the invaders. On arrival the Aboriginal invaders encounter a group of white people holding a barbecue and ask them what the name of this place is. The white inhabitants respond that it is a 'barbecue area', which the Aboriginal invaders understand to be the name of the 'new' country they have discovered (Specht and MacLulich, 2000: 44). With regard to exhibitions on human evolution, one suggestion would be to create a display based on the large number of greeting cards featuring our ancestors as a source of fun. Here some of the characters from the past could be shown designing their own such cards, where the people of the future (i.e. us) are depicted as bizarre aliens with strange habits.

A sense of fun could also be introduced into particular displays to show another dimension of ancient social life. For example, as opposed to only showing children at play and having fun, an adult male and female could be shown engaged in a game involving some kind of gaming pieces made from stones or bones. Such a display would also challenge the stereotypical depiction of sexual division of labour so characteristic of human origins exhibits. Another 'fun but serious' type of display that could be created would be an arrangement of items of popular culture relating to human origins. Museologists specialising in the exhibition of social history have challenged the way curators fail to take popular culture seriously. As Moore (1997: 77) has noted, curators tend to see popular culture as a bit of light relief set apart from the more serious themes of the exhibition, rather than acknowledging the vast corpus of studies that show how central it is to the making of meaning. Archaeologists have also recognised that displays focusing on souvenirs and popular culture are an important component of an exhibition because they reveal the way the remains of ancient communities are controlled and defined (e.g. Dowson and Lewis-Williams 1993: 58). In a human origins exhibit, the toys of cave men and primitive weapons could be used to make an important point. While they will probably initially generate a laugh or a snigger, large striking captions along

the lines of 'TOYS ARE DANGEROUS' could alert people to the fact that these toys perpetuate stereotypes that restrict our ability to envisage the past in different ways. A recent example of this approach can be seen in the Museum of Ethnography in Berlin, where toys of American Indians are shown to convey how pervasive the Plains warrior stereotype still is. The challenge of this type of display is to change established practice by contradicting the assumption that science is only serious, and that popular culture is always fun.

CONCLUSION

The presentation of the subject of human evolution in museums faces many challenges. Over the past decade exhibitions on science, culture and history have been transformed by new museological approaches, some of which can be effectively used to challenge the formulaic vision of our evolution that continues to prevail. In the discussion above, five general strategies for dismantling the display canon have been outlined. The suggestions made for revising and revitalising displays have been inspired by recent research on the potential of museums to address social values, the significance of understanding our audiences and the role of representation in the construction of knowledge. Changes that have taken place in the representation of non-Western cultures and the natural world have been particularly instrumental in leading the way, and because both have very close connections with exhibitions on human evolution, they offer some guidance and inspiration for engaging with the political and emotional dimensions of the subject.

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Stephanie Moser is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Archaeology at Southampton University. She is currently engaged in two major research projects: one on the history of museum display and archaeology, soon to be published as the book *Exhibiting Objects and Creating Knowledge*, and the other on community archaeology and the creation of a Heritage Centre in Quseir, Egypt, recently published in *World Archaeology*. Her teaching centres on undergraduate courses on archaeological representation, and museum display, and the MA programme in the Archaeology of Art and Representation.

Contact address: Department of Archaeology, University of Southampton, Avenue Campus, Highfield, Southampton SO17 1BF, UK. Tel: +44 23 8059 4439; fax: +44 23 8059 3132; email: sm1@soton.ac.uk

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