Museums in the Material World

Edited by
Simon J. Knell

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Museums in the Material World seeks to both introduce classic and thought-provoking pieces and contrast them with articles which reveal grounded practice. The articles are selected from across the full breadth of museum disciplines and are linked by a logical narrative, as detailed in the introductions.

The choice of articles reveals how the debate has opened up on disciplinary practice, how the practices of the past have been critiqued and in some cases replaced, how it has become necessary to look beyond and outside disciplinary boundaries and how old practices can in many circumstances continue to have validity.

Museums in the Material World clarifies and expands the horizons of material culture studies as they pertain to museums and opens the eyes of students from a range of disciplines to a much broader understanding of the complexities and subtleties of the museum engagement with the material world. Museums in the Material World is about broadening horizons and moving museum studies students, and others, beyond the narrow confines of their own disciplinary thinking or indeed any narrow conception of collections. In essence, this is a book about the practice of interpretation and will therefore be of great use to those students of museums and museum practitioners.

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Leicester Readers in Museum Studies
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For Sue Pearce

Contents

Series preface

Leicester Readers in Museum Studies provide students of museums – whether employed in the museum, engaged in a museum studies programme or studying in a cognate area – with a selection of focused readings in core areas of museum thought and practice. Each book has been compiled by a specialist in that field, but all share the Leicester Department's belief that the development and effectiveness of museums relies upon informed and creative practice. The series as a whole reflects the core Leicester curriculum which is now visible in programmes around the world and which grew, 40 years ago, from a desire to train working professionals, and students prior to entry into the museum, in the technical aspects of museum practice. In some respects the curriculum taught then looks similar to what we teach today. The following, for example, was included in the curriculum in 1968: history and development of the museum movement; the purpose of museums; types of museum and their functions; the law as it relates to museums; staff appointments and duties, sources of funding; preparation of estimates; bye-laws and regulations; local, regional, etc., bodies; buildings; heating, ventilation and cleaning; lighting; security systems; control of stores, and so on. Some of the language and focus here, however, indicates a very different world. A single component of the course, for example, focused on collections and dealt with collection management, conservation and exhibitions. Another component covered 'museum activities' from enquiry services to lectures, films, and so on. There was also training in specialist areas, such as local history, and many practical classes which included making plaster casts and models. Many museum workers around the world will recognise these kinds of curriculum topics; they certainly resonate with my early experiences of working in museums.

While the skeleton of that curriculum in some respects remains, there has been a fundamental shift in the flesh we hang upon it. One cannot help but think that the museum world has grown remarkably sophisticated: practices are now

regulated by equal opportunities, child protection, cultural property and wildlife conservation laws; collections are now exposed to material culture analysis, contemporary documentation projects, digital capture, and so on; communication is now multimedia, inclusive, evaluated and theorised. The museum has over that time become intellectually fashionable, technologically advanced and developed a new social relevance. *Leicester Readers in Museum Studies* address this change. They deal with practice as it is relevant to the museum today, but they are also about expanding horizons beyond one's own experiences. They reflect a more professionalised world and one that has thought very deeply about this wonderfully interesting and significant institution. Museum studies remains a vocational subject but it is now very different. It is, however, sobering to think that the Leicester course was founded in the year Michel Foucault published *The Order of Things* – a book that greatly influenced the way we think about the museum today. The writing was on the wall even then.

Simon J. Knell
Series Editor 2007

Preface

This Reader situates the museum in the material world by examining and interrelating four quite distinct aspects of its engagement. The first is the museum in its traditional role as repository of facts. The second concerns the democratisation of museum interpretation and the admission of subjective meanings which resulted from the museum's examination under the lenses of postmodernism. The third area of engagement places the museum in a social world of ubiquitous consumption, and in the fourth, the very act of keeping – so integral to the concept of the museum – is questioned. This book follows a change of intellectual focus from object to subject, from fixity to fluidity. In order to reveal this change, I have adopted a historical approach, selecting articles from key moments or relating to important issues, although I have not attempted to construct a history. I believe it is important for the student of the museum to understand this change and yet also understand that the change is not what it seems: we have not abandoned object-oriented, reality-centred, practice in order to pursue dreams and myths. Rather, the changes suggested here are about re-evaluation and cumulative diversification. In order to do the 'new', we need to preserve old values but also better understand them. This is, then, not a material culture reader in the traditional sense, and there is currently no book in the museological literature that does what this Reader attempts to do.

A casual glance at the readings in this book might suggest that this is not a book about practice – but it is, indeed, I would suggest it discusses the most fundamental of all museum practices. Essentially this book is about understanding why and how museums engage with the world through objects. How should museum people think about objects? What do objects contain? How can they be used? At the heart of these questions is the issue of interpretation – how we read and communicate using material things. This lies at the heart of decision-making when using collections or managing museums in such actions as collecting and disposal, outreach and educa-

tion sessions, gallery interpretation, and so on. In order to work, this book should ideally be read from beginning to end. In selecting a range of disciplinary perspectives it is not my intention that scientists dip into the science, and archaeologists into the archaeology. The real story here cuts across the disciplines, so the art historian, for example, can consider some of the issues of connoisseurship and cultural debate that have surrounded his or her discipline, but yet also ponder if paintings are 'vouchers', how consumption practices play a role, how interpretation can shape or dissolve notions of authenticity. The introductory chapter attempts to give a sense of this complex, pluralistic and changing engagement.

In making the selections for this volume, I have been resolute in attempting to capture the essence of this period of change. I have not attempted to corral the great and the good – there are many Readers, for example, collecting together Foucault and his contemporaries. I have exercised a preference for those works where individuals have engaged with issues on the ground using their discipline, rather than including museological syntheses. I have tried to steer clear of areas covered by other Readers in this series but this has not resulted in any major omission: there are articles on interpretation and exhibition here, but a Further Reader is also planned. The ownership of the material culture of other societies is discussed here but will be treated more fully in a collections management Reader. There is also a more object-oriented material culture reader planned, but many of these ideas are introduced here. I have not discussed museum collecting in any detail as the topics discussed here really inform collecting activity. I have dealt with museum collecting more extensively in *Museums and the Future of Collecting* (2nd edn, Ashgate, 2004).

Simon J. Knell

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Chapter 1

Museums, reality and the material world

Simon J. Knell

> 'I have a question for you,' he said, taking out of his pocket a crumpled piece of paper on which he had scribbled a few key words. He took a breath: 'Do you believe in reality?' 'But of course!' I laughed . . . Has reality truly become something people have to believe in, I wondered, the answer to a serious question asked in a hushed and embarrassed tone? Is reality something like God, the topic of a confession reached after a long and intimate discussion? Are there people on earth who *don't* believe in reality? . . . his relief proved clearly enough that he had anticipated a *negative* reply, something like 'Of course not! Do you think I am that naïve?' This was not a joke, then: he really was concerned.
>
> (Bruno Latour 1999: 1–2)

IN THE CLOSING DECADES of the twentieth century, scientists found themselves at war, embroiled in disputes over method, authority, the sanctity of evidence, the hand of God, and even the certainties of reality. Bruno Latour, in this opening passage from *Pandora's Hope*, knew well enough the propaganda and misinformation which confused both sides in the Science Wars; despite his indignation he knew that the 'highly respected psychologist' who asked him this question was not alone in being unsure about the level of subjectivity and relativism the other side was willing to admit. Some had certainly denied a knowable reality. Scientists, however, remained resolute in their methods and beliefs. Once wholly scientific, many anthropologists were by then taking large doses of such mind-altering drugs as feminism and postcolonialism, in an attempt to destroy their inner devils: objectification, homogenization, exoticization (Heshusius and Ballard 1996; Rapport and Overing 2000: 98). 'The history of ethnography', Roth (1989: 556) claimed, 'is one of successive constitution and dissolution of "modes of ethnographic authority" '; Herzfeld (1997: 302) called it a 'crisis of representation'. Such were the maladies of archaeologists, as they made their 'New Archaeology' old, that they were willing to take any drug they could lay their hands on. 'How do we do archaeology at

all?' they exclaimed as they strove to establish their own disciplinary identity beyond the natural sciences, anthropology and history (Hodder and Hutson 2004: 4). Historians, who once considered their own discipline scientific, now found themselves rematerialised in a world of relativistic constructivism. What point was there to history if any possibility of reconstruction was an illusion? In Australia particularly, but also elsewhere, a 'postcolonial breeze' began to alter interpretations of the past, forcing historians into wars of their own (Macintyre and Clark 2003). In contrast, historians of art for the most part seemed as sure of their field as the scientists, although some were, they felt, staring into the face of disciplinary oblivion: 'Is the undoing of modernity the end of art history as we know it?' Preziosi (1998: 277) asked. The artist was now playing with the art world. Anthropologist Alfred Gell (1996) saw the rise of conceptual art as 'the final convergence of art-making, art history, art philosophy and art criticism' – the replacement of aesthetics with reactionism; art was now an 'evocation of complex intentionalities'. While some, as they climbed into Tracey Emin's bed, saw the traditions of still life and classical sculpture in Damien Hirst's 'over-exposed' shark, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991), others saw Hirst's pickled fish as the embodiment of the postmodern condition: cynical and mocking through the very objects and institutions which underpinned modernity and permitted his work to be displayed as art (Spring 1997).

Onlookers, like Latour's psychologist, might well have believed that the intellectual world had been consumed in a pandemic of politicised subjectivity which saw former authorities rise up, zombie-like, with the single aim of destroying their structured and empirical existence. They might also have imagined – had not museums already slipped into the intellectual backwater, residues of a modernity now surpassed in the relentless pursuit of progress – that these institutions, the icons of Enlightenment thinking, would be the first port of call for the angry mob. A few, it is true, charged around the galleries, smashing cases with barbed words, in old neglected galleries which still promoted a nineteenth-century racism or modern ones which discussed the atom bomb, slavery or living 'Others' without recognising a new need for inclusive engagement. But others, on opening the doors to the museum, were amazed to find, in the smell of wood polish, among the serried rows of fossils, in the photograph that sat beside the weaving frame and in the lever waggling interactive placed beneath the ceiling-hung aeroplanes, a treasure house of a rather different kind. Not one of a million ordered facts or of a chaos of curiosities, but rather the very essence of everything that was 'modern' in buildings that also spoke of modernity's antiquity. Many of those who made this discovery were not strangers to the museum at all: they had lived their lives there as professionals or as museum studies academics, but suddenly they found a veil had been lifted and the museum had changed.

Others slipped in sideways, opening a side door in such disciplines as sociology, history and anthropology, to discover the museum's strange practices, hidden powers, and extraordinary collections for the first time. If the museum was a physical embodiment of Enlightenment thinking, it was now also the subject of a new enlightenment, that of postmodernism. For one could now annotate the institution, its position in society, its processes, values, and so on with the labels of that

penetratingly cynical mode of thinking – identity, power, legitimisation, subjugation, representation, construction – and diagrammatically show the nebulous and reflexive structure of postmodernism itself. The museum revealed a new kind of order; the latest phase in a history of ordering: postmodernism's body, apparently composed of nebulous doubting subjectivity, had buried within it its own universal anatomy – an anatomy no less judgmental, authoritative and pervasive as the metanarratived modernism which some wished to render dead.

The museum became what it had rarely been: delightfully contentious. Gone, so it seemed, was any notion of the museum as trusted purveyor of knowledge and learning – 'disinterested' and apolitical; who now could claim anything as neutral? The annotations of postmodernism soon became a political agenda for actual change. The museum was to be a place of pluralism and inclusion. The broadcasting of supposedly unmediated and objective facts was to be replaced by opportunities for 'meaning making'. History was now identity, to be democratised and performed in a 'dreamspace' where one's very being could be re-invented and mythologised. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill's (2000: 152–3) notion of the 'post-museum' saw a future less concerned with the tangible, which was unbounded (both physically and intellectually) in the experiences it could offer. More radical still was the proposed 'feminisation' of the museum: 'Rather than upholding the values of objectivity, rationality, order and distance, the post-museum will negotiate responsiveness, encourage mutually nurturing partnerships, and celebrate diversity.' Hooper-Greenhill noted that this new kind of museum was not likely to emerge in those Western centres of the 'modernist museum' but elsewhere. Fearing the force of repatriation in postmodernism's postcolonial backwash, the most powerful museums then turned the manly universalism of Enlightenment to political effect: the 'Enlightenment museum' was to be reinvented as the 'museum of everyman', democratised, worldly and inclusive. The material world, so carefully bottled and boxed in a museum history stretching over centuries, now had its own 'home guard'; and it now had more politics than it ever cared to know.

Museum Studies, once a vehicle for the training of students in established professional practices and standards (Singleton 1966), had become, in the process, an intellectual playground. Only vaguely bounded, it claimed an interest in all societies, in most disciplines, in the material world in totality, and most aspects of education and communication. In the true sense of architectural postmodernism, museum studies became eclectic and fostered illusions. Those who did not enter it believed it was simply a place where people learned how to accumulate things and put them in glass cases; those who did take a look inside, however, now found a discipline debating representation and censorship or social practice and the Enlightenment mission, and relating these to thoughtful practices that would indeed support the diverse needs of disciplinary knowledge, inclusive societies and cultural preservation. Some mockingly suggested that this was an indulgence in theory, but they failed to see that the field had grown sophisticated and more responsive. One could not continue thinking old thoughts and doing old things, at least not without asking 'why?' It wasn't that museums needed a revolution, they simply needed understanding. Only then could their future be assured, nurtured by a creative and responsive workforce.

The subjective world: politics, culture, interpretation

This is, admittedly, an impressionistic picture of intellectual change as the tide of postmodernism swept through. It took a while for people to get to grips with relativism, to understand that it too was relative, and sometimes relatively unimportant. As with Latour's psychologist, the change simultaneously confused and liberated, its nebulous form often polarising thought. The museum, as with all public and many private institutions, changed, though that change was driven as much by the faltering rise of liberal politics as it was by the intellectual shift that rise engendered. But was this really a moment as extraordinary for museums as it was for museum studies?

We should perhaps take a moment to consider a longer period and, as we travel from then to now, do what the historian of museums can often fail to do, that is look outside and observe the changing museum context. We need not go too far back, two hundred years will do. And so as not to over-generalise, we shall travel through the English landscape. The journey itself, if an overall impression of the evolving landscape could be captured, would reveal a broad trend of liberalisation accompanying the development of the modern museum, not just over the past 40 years but over the whole period.

Two hundred years ago, the birth of Britain's provincial museums drew upon an emergent middle class, which included many who had risen on enterprise and now demanded the rights and freedoms previously reserved for those of the state religion and in possession of land. Although exclusive to modern eyes, the (learned) societies which built these museums exploited exclusivity to foster inclusivity: the society and its museum became a means of social adjustment, which helped, to some degree, prevent the new bourgeoisie from leading their riotous underlings in revolution (Knell 2000). Population growth, industrialisation and mass urbanisation produced social and intellectual conditions of revolutionary potential across Europe. But while much of the rest of that continent realised that potential in the middle of that century, Britain managed to avert calamity. A series of major political reforms in the 1830s helped make this possible, but we should not forget the role played by museums. Nearly every major industrial town established or possessed a philosophical society in the 1820s where politically and religiously neutral topics – such as the 'brand new' and fashionable science of geology (which had less religious opposition than is traditionally thought) – were discussed. In so doing, these societies performed acts of social adjustment which overcame political and religious difference and which brought together new blood with blue blood. These acts of inclusive engagement made the societies, and the museums they fostered, tick. It gave them social relevance.

However, by the middle of the century, social commentators were criticising the elitism of these societies and their museums having rather forgotten their necessity, 30 years earlier, as 'local parliaments'. Now social change and the push for a democratic and educated society called for greater inclusion and the throwing open of museum doors to the masses. The museum was to be reinvented in this era of mechanics institutes – institutions aimed at a different social class but remaining largely middle-class inventions and manipulations. Educational opportunity was progressively filtering down in society, slowly permitting the eradication

of the social imprisonments of class, race and gender. Only through education could an individual realise his or her potential; but also, so it was thought (and the argument was still being made by Public Understanding of Science advocates in the 1980s), only through education could the citizen become an informed democrat rather than a subjective political anarchist. Those who made museums in the 1870s did so in a rather different context of mixed gender field clubs of a kind that would have seemed quite alien to the gentlemen who made their local parliaments a half century before. Accompanying and following the field clubs, the notion of the 'educational museum' took hold, with that at Haslemere in Surrey acting as an exemplar. It offered a more inclusive view of education; the museum was now more inclusively inclusive.

Had a field of museum studies accompanied these social changes of the nineteenth century, its theoretical framework would have had to have shifted quite drastically at least every 30 years; as it was, ideas about museums changed continually, though there were, indeed, also periods of revolt as I have indicated. They were also not immune from relentless technological 'progress'. Today, from my office in the UK, I can visit a museum in New Zealand, virtually, in a second or so – something I could not do when I moved to this university in 1992. But this is little different from the Victorian scientist who could in 1842 catch an 'extravagantly cheap' train into the distant wilds of England, collect some key objects and return home in time for supper. Previously such activity was far more expensive both in time and cost. Charles Dickens captured this change perfectly in *Bleak House*:

> Railroads shall soon traverse all this country, and with a rattle and a glare the engine and train shall shoot like a meteor over the wide night-landscape, turning the moon paler; but as yet such things are non-existent in these parts, though not wholly unexpected. Preparations are afoot, measurements are made, ground is staked out. Bridges are begun, and their not yet united piers desolately look at one another over roads and streams like brick and mortar couples with an obstacle to their union; fragments of embankments are thrown up and left as precipices with torrents of rusty carts and barrows tumbling over them; tripods of tall poles appear on hilltops, where there are rumours of tunnels; everything looks chaotic and abandoned in full hopelessness. Along the freezing roads, and through the night, the post-chaise makes its way without a railroad on its mind. (Dickens 1853)

Dickens began writing *Bleak House* in 1851, the year the Great Exhibition opened in London, a moment when the British public's sense of self and world utterly changed. Dickens's sketch, similarly, describes the moment before a revolution which many of his readers had experienced. Here distances measured by post-chaise were to shrink under locomotive wheels; the interpretive frame by which people understood the world was about to expand. Simultaneously, the English rural idyll was to be hopelessly displaced by noisy, smoky machines; normality had shifted and what was there before now seemed increasingly worthy of museum preservation. Towns and museums once out of reach were now simply an affordable day trip away, and if museums really were nodes on a nationwide network of knowledge,

as was claimed in the 1820s, then the Victorians had now learned to surf. And as they surfed into these museums, their heads conceiving an already shrinking world, they would look through eyes that were also changed in other ways, perhaps also altered by Dickens's cynical contempt for social injustice.

So, before we begin to consider the relationship of the museum to the modern material world, we must put aside any notion that we exist in an era unlike any other in terms of experiencing change or changing ways of seeing. We don't see as our predecessors did, but nor did they as theirs did. To see postmodernism as the rail buffers into which 'the Enlightenment project' crashed is to suffer delusions. A little cynicism never hurt anyone, and through it society puts in place the checks and balances it feels it needs. In our time, museums have responded with pluralism to counter inequality and localism to defend against the homogenising influence of globalism, identity to foster personal conceptions of value and democracy to check the power of privilege. These don't seem particularly peculiar or threatening actions. To a liberal mind, they seem right. But are these postmodernist or postcolonial outcomes so vastly different from the humanism for which Dickens was admired?

Postmodernism has been about adjusting the interpretive frame, about questioning and exposing our *modern* interpretive workhouses. It has been about making the implicit explicit. For those concerned with culture, postmodernism, and the plethora of philosophies and ideologies it has hidden beneath its umbrella, represented a big and pervasive change of interpretive frame. If the museum founders' formational dance of patronage and membership of nearly two centuries ago was performed to the music of contemporary expectation, music everyone understood but few articulated (Bulwer-Lytton 1830), some thirty years later its elitist heart was exposed. Today, we have no difficulty in exposing that social underbelly; postmodernism has ensured that we have all become sociologists. So if we see postmodernism as an interpretive frame, then we can relate it to other such frames, or ways of seeing. Science, like all disciplines, changes its interpretive frameworks all the time, generally in piecemeal fashion but also by revolution. For example, if, to evolutionists, Darwin was alive in the late nineteenth century, he was 'dead' in the early twentieth (at least in the USA), but reincarnated in the middle of that century (Simpson 1978: 114; Larson 2004: 224); a catastrophic view of the formation of the Earth was abandoned in the 1820s, but reawakened in 1980; in the 1990s catastrophism was shaping evolutionary thinking. Darwin would have understood both concepts but would have been extraordinarily surprised by this turn of events.

Postmodernism as an interpretive shift was no respecter of disciplinary boundaries; it seemed to challenge everything, even disciplinarity itself. Interpretation, that central act of 'reading' and 'presenting' performed in all museum actions, was built around that disciplinarity, but postmodernism – and particularly postcolonialism (broadly defined) – challenged its absolute right to dominate museum making and museum practice. Postmodernism, as with every other interpretive frame, placed spectacles before the eyes of the interpreter giving visual acuteness to those things considered important and throwing out of focus things that now became superfluous and irrelevant 'noise'. This wearing of different spectacles opens the mind, and one feels compelled to try others. Many modern students of the material world, for example, have been quick to pick up the antique spectacles of such

late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century workers as Mauss and Simmel, and their resulting work has revealed the utility of changing one's glasses from time to time, and, indeed, that sometimes it is useful to combine new minds with old 'specs'. This book, then, is a book of spectacles: spectacles to look through and spectacles to look at. It is an opportunity to see things differently and to question what is implicit in the lenses of our own interpretive glasses.

Museums and material culture studies

So is the museum a cathedral to materialism, to Enlightenment knowledge, to modernity? The buildings and ordered collections that we have inherited speak of such things, but they do so because we can no longer see the makers, only the made. It is easy as a result to adopt a view that presupposes a museum engagement with the material world which had the abstract sterility of the science laboratory. The science laboratory, of course, was long ago debunked as a place of scientific purity and there really is no reason to perpetuate this myth of museums either. The museum has always had that same mix of intellectual (in startlingly varying degrees) aspiration and social politics. The supposedly objective collection conceals irrational passions, poetry, debts, claims, and so on, mixed with all those museum inadequacies and vices: neglect, territorialism, bias, poverty, ignorance, and misunderstanding. And while we rightly push objects and collections to the fore as the distinguishing features of museums, we need to remember that if those objects *are* 'made to speak', they do so through a human act of authorship with all its editing, contextual manipulation, and censorship. This combines in an interpretive coupling of speaker and listener where both are manipulating meaning, often unknowingly. But in this 'conversation', is the object active or passive? Does it embody and communicate some aspect of ourselves or is it simply a slave to our words and thoughts?

Perhaps the answer lies not in the setting of the museum exhibition, but behind the scenes where some museum workers use objects to make knowledge. Natural scientists, archaeologists and art historians, in some respects, share a similar engagement with objects: they build whole subjects from material things. Their disciplines are largely shaped by rules of engagement with the material world, but, rather curiously, the uniting discipline of the museum is history, for in its keeping the museum makes things old and creates a past. But why have I not listed history amongst these disciplines? Thirty years ago, historian Cary Carson pondered this question in the American context and concluded:

> No matter what standard measure objective scholars use they can hardly avoid the conclusion that the study of artifacts has contributed to the *main themes* of American history almost not at all. Yes, of course, historians use artifacts all the time to *teach* . . . But the monumental fact remains unbudged that *things* have seldom been a source of *ideas* for historians. (Carson 1978: 42)

Carson recalled how seminal art historian Rudolf Wittkower, when asked what he thought of the Winterthur Museum in Delaware, remarked: 'An unmatched

collection . . . of anthropological curiosities' (Carson 1978: 44). So history cannot claim the same intellectual relationship to the museum as, say, biology or archaeology or the history of art? The answer is rather more opaque than that. In some respects history is all about objects – Dickens's historical sketch above, for example, is just that.

It is true, however, that this was pretty much the relationship between 'history proper' and museum history in Carson's time. However, consider Carson's dismissal of a queen's, or a tollbooth's, receipts, or a list of the identifying marks of royal swans:

> It is not that these documents are beneath historical notice; but until historians find something to do with them, they languish in a mass of unenfranchised facts. Facts do not become historical evidence until someone thinks up something for them to prove or disprove.

Museums are full of such things, but at the time of Carson's comments, they were not calling to the historian for attention. Since then, however, the academic field has continued to swell (not least in the number of active academics attempting to make their intellectual mark) and with it has grown an interest in the unfashionable and obscure. Increasingly it has become possible to ask questions of these once peculiar things and to derive perspectives far exceeding mere object description. However, it is an illusion to believe that these new perspectives have been won by the analysis of objects alone. My own historical studies of the uses of fossils in the making of museums, society and science, for example, in which fossils are not so far removed from tollbooth receipts, drew heavily on contemporary documents, and not on the fossils themselves. One reason is that decades or even centuries of resource-starved keeping and 'miscuration' can leave just about any collection of objects decontextualised and historically unreliable. By contrast, the meaning of seemingly more fragile collections of words on paper in archives and libraries (and museum files) survives abuse far more readily. The fossils – provided they could still be located – gave useful insights into what my actors saw and acquired, but all else relied upon what my actors *wrote*. As recorded and purposeful communications they are less ambiguous, more easily interpreted and directly quotable. Using these kinds of materials, historians believe they can permit their actors to speak with their own words and thus recover something of the truth of the past. Whether we study the objects themselves in museums or the words written about them, these are both what are termed 'material culture studies'.

I should perhaps explain the term 'material culture' here, as some have used it in a restricted sense to mean man-made artefacts. Today it tends to be used to refer to all 'things' people come to know and possess, and indeed make – intellectually if not physically – including fossils, blue tits, landscapes and paintings. (A later contribution to this series of Readers will engage more fully with material culture studies and consider the place of other objectified 'things' such as concepts, songs, dances and memories, and debate the often overstated differences between the tangible and intangible.)

Some historians did attempt to utilise objects in their work. In the vanguard was Thomas Schlereth (1982, 1985), who initially sought appropriate methods in

anthropology and archaeology, drawing upon their functionalist, behaviourist and environmental schools. In doing so, Schlereth was not aiming merely to describe objects:

> [W]e must always remember that it is the culture, rather than the material, that should interest the material culture researchers. As Brooke Hindle reminds his fellow historians: 'It is the spatial and analytical understanding offered by artifacts, not the things themselves, that is the historian's goal. He has to see through the objects to the historical meaning to which they relate.' (Schlereth 1985: 23)

Schlereth understood that simple object fetishism led nowhere. It was a key point also long understood by those other more object-oriented disciplines, but which was so rarely understood by museum makers. Through Schlereth's work, history now legitimately joined these other disciplines in perceiving collections as factual repositories useful to the derivation of knowledge. Though, to this day and for reasons Carson fully understood, they remain relatively weak resources for constructing history because history is about actions and to extract these from objects requires far greater interpretation and thus invokes far more debatable 'truths'. One only need see an archaeologist's joy at locating an object containing a written word (as I did in my last museum) to understand how envious that discipline is of its literature-rich sister subject.

Nevertheless, archaeology and the sciences, and historians of art, technology and design, do make use of objects and these rather disparate disciplines have established rather similar ways to establish reasonably reliable interpretations, at least at a fundamental level. We should take a moment to consider some of them and demonstrate that, in the museum, even the arts and sciences are joined at the hip.

The objective world: reality, context, expertise

The key attribute of the object, giving it both intellectual and poetic possibilities, is a relationship to the external world, to an original context. The gathering of an object is an act of gathering a piece of that context. Note the object is not surrounded by 'context' but part of it. For this reason, the natural and medical sciences incorporated the museum into their disciplinary make-up from the very beginning. Here natural objects were given names, and particular examples given status as name carriers, known as holotypes. The names themselves were opinions and tied to a literature of images and descriptions which captured the author's own scholarship, preferences and biases (McOuat 2001). However, it was the object, and not the published description, that was the final authority; the object was the reality, the only truth. Thus science understood that truth was only inadequately captured in language.

This idea that objects were a material embodiment of the real world meant that science could progress even before it had established the basics of language and concept. Again this can be seen in the British case where a preoccupation with fossils accompanied the birth of the modern museum. In the early nineteenth

century, it was recognised that there was a consistent natural order or sequence to rocks and that each had its own peculiar fossils. However, few fossils or rocks had reliable names. They acquired them through an act of collecting and by reproducing the order of the natural world in the arrangement of the museum collection (Knell 2000). The fossils were literally 'hard facts', and became the foundations of interpretations which made these objects active, experimental and newsworthy. The structure and nomenclature of the lithological world were by this means established, and they became sufficiently stable to be considered universal and long term: the plastic in our computers, the metals that make up our jewellery, the petrol in our cars, all owe a debt to this museum effort.

This embodiment of truth within collections becomes apparent if one examines those moments of interpretive revolution, such as when Darwin saw the monkey in us. It had always been a fairly straightforward matter to see rational order in the natural world, right back to Aristotle's 'Great Chain of Being', which locked species into a hierarchical 'chain' stretching from the inorganic world to the perfection of God, and which included such natural things as angels and demons. By the early nineteenth century, European museums were moving beyond this simple classification but yet many still believed they were engaged in an activity to discover a divine plan which might reveal something of their Christian God. It was as if the divine plan was fact and could be pieced together from the multitude of smaller facts that composed it. Natural systems of classification, which seemed to reflect creation, had been perfected a century earlier, by Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus who published his *Systema Naturae* in 1735. Linnaeus's ideas gave science a simple, universal and commonsensical language for naming animals and plants, which included in its logic a means to represent the order and relationships of the natural world. The museum was able to realise this order with physical examples, but it was also engaged in collecting examples supporting the diversifying interests of science including variants and freaks, reproductive and growth stages, biological dependences and geographical distributions. Collections of natural objects became multidimensional embodiments of the real ordered by contemporary knowledge, which for many favoured the hand of God to some degree. By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, this exploration of the natural world required and saw no divine being. Time now extended back beyond human comprehension and theories of evolution and extinction revealed a world where revolution was natural and the constancy of the status quo unthinkable. The interpretive frame that had shaped the first phases of collecting had led to knowledge that meant the collections themselves required complete reinterpretation. But this is the critical point, for it was the interpretation and not the collection that was changed. As embodiments of reality, how could they be changed? They were, after all, the final tests of theory, and while they could be called upon to play a role in theory as 'evidence' – that is data marshalled into argument – those theories only really existed in the communications of scientists, they were never an inherent part of the objects and collections themselves. Thus, the collection as final test, sat quietly as an unarticulated argument, only to be read and called to support or oppose a view when technology and intellect permitted.

Changing explanations, which continued to accommodate the truth of the collection, assured museums that the material world was finite and knowable. The

collection could thus also be finite, and by the 1870s, after half a century of collecting, many British museums felt they had moved to the final stages of gap filling in the natural sciences. By the mid-century archaeology had found its science and overtook the now professionalised science of geology as the height of intellectual fashion. New civic museums also began to collect art, which had previously been locked away in private estates along with valuable antiquities. Later still, museums would notice the disappearance of the everyday world and gather the artefacts of vanishing trades and crafts either as anthropologists or social historians. In every case – whether painting or plough – the collecting served the same purpose: to keep in order to understand; to preserve a moment, a fugitive context. Collecting followed the pattern of the natural sciences. Each object was, at one level, a fact or piece of data which had a relationship to other data from its original context whether also collected or recorded in notebooks or on film. Measurement, drawing and photography were the preferred supplements to collecting as they too ensured supposedly interpretation-free data gathering. Thus, the object was part of a dataset. Yet, examining the object in greater detail reveals that the object itself can be conceived as a container of information (the various characteristics of the object) and was thus a dataset. Thus each object maintains a complex of data. To consider it as a single piece of the real or a thing set in a context is rather to underestimate the extent and complexity of its baggage.

Aside from the factual qualities associated with the object as a captured context, the object in the museum also develops a more theoretical relationship to those concepts the museum constructs in its drawers, display cases and exhibition galleries such as in a classification of furniture. This adds still further to the things the object carries, though here we enter, more obviously, the world of interpretation and we already understand from our previous discussion that these interpretations do not reside in the object in the same way as those things which define it as context. There is a relationship, however. Some of the information derived from context and also present as inherent qualities of the object itself, such as ornament, is useful for such things as placing a Japanese chest in a furniture history. It permits the object to be the subject of formal 'stylistic analysis' (Prown 1993: 4). Other characteristics, such as where it was used or who used it, might assist a museum in deciding whether it has relevance to that museum's own peculiar objectives but have little role to play in these more abstract intellectual concepts, such as classification. Other characteristics still, such as the colour of the wood from which the chest is made, may perform aesthetically – simply adding values which act on our more subjective tastes.

The valuing of each different 'character' and the recognition of its various 'states' (possibilities of form) in such a thing as a classification of furniture is a matter of choice, a reflection of scholarship and experience which we might better know as expertise or connoisseurship. Objects under the action of expertise can be organised, with judgements shaped by the 'resolution' of perception. Resolution defines the degree to which the viewer focuses in on and takes account of, or even perceives, detail. Those who select, sort, organise, and give meaning, aim also to generalise and group. Low resolution analysis results in large heterogeneous groups: at low resolution all chairs are chairs. At higher resolution, groups become more numerous and each more homogeneous: chairs can be divided by material,

maker, era, style, and so on. (Another way to look at grouping is to consider it as the construction of boundaries or discontinuities between things.) The result of all this museological activity is a hierarchical grouping of things which relies upon these things being pieces of context (that is having a relationship to the real – the real within (the object) and without (its original place in the world)). Hierarchies and groups permit museums to act rationally in collecting, managing and exhibiting the world. They make it possible for one thing to speak for many, thus one of Monet's haystack paintings can be made to 'represent' the whole series, Impressionism, or even French painting.

But before we become too comfortable with this clean and logical system, we should consider how securely we know these things in collections. We now have all kinds of ideas and data attached to objects and we can soon begin to lose sight of which bits we can trust and which we cannot. Here we must introduce 'probability', a quality of interpretation that attempts to move from subjectivity to a possible truth. Science knows this as 'degrees of confidence', a statistical term. Take, for example, a piece of nineteenth-century pottery with maker's name and a serial number stamped on its base which links it directly to a documentary record giving the date and place of manufacture. As a collected piece of reality we could desire little more. What then of an unmarked pot with identical glaze and style excavated at the site of one of the old kilns, or a mere fragment of a very similar pot found on a rubbish dump 200 miles away? All these things might find their way into museums, all might be given the same identification and attached to a raft of secondary data relating to that particular ceramics company, but clearly they are all rather different in terms of their reliability. All three objects are understood by a process of interpretation, but one of these objects, we would hopefully agree, has a greater chance of being correctly interpreted, and another I would be more than happy to countenance as likely true; the third, however, depends far more on expertise and in that regard I would look at the interpreter far more than the object before accepting a judgement! In museums – as in all other places of interpretation (newspapers, television, academic research) – people are pushed to interpret, to draw conclusions, to make decisions, to go that one stage beyond. In such circumstances, one can easily lose sight of an essential 'might' and replace it with certainty. In the museum, then, object–context–meaning associations can become thrown into a black box. Recorded contexts can become confused with interpreted contexts, and the truth of the collection as a result can become compromised. It is so easily done, and in Britain presented a particularly grave risk as Victorian collections were called upon to supply data for the information age ideal of comprehensive computer catalogues. How well I remember the dataless collection of specimens in a small museum which became data rich during cataloguing as the inexperienced operatives interpreted the examples given in identification manuals as offering a singular truth which could then be imposed on the objects themselves. Or indeed the helpful volunteer who threw away those useless old Victorian labels as he modernised the collection. A day, a week, a decade later, who would know the trueness of the reality now contained in those collections? Experience has told me to interpret the neglected collection as perhaps holding a more probable truth than a recently established neat and tidy store, though in doing so I realise I am exploiting my own subjective (and perhaps unjustifiable) connoisseurship.

For the museum, as for scientific method more generally, repeated observation, triangulation of information, and good record keeping can often resolve these kinds of issues by revealing those objects that appear to lie. But one cannot discount connoisseurship as a vitally important curatorial attribute which is rather irrationally undervalued these days. Connoisseurship grows from these notions of classification, object characters, and collections as real and true; connoisseurship is not restricted to those who deal in 'antiques', it is the most essential of curatorial traits, not as a 'high art' but merely as a reflection of experience. To some degree we are all connoisseurs of something: chocolate, wine, cars, music or video games. And in suggesting this, I would not wish to confuse this with mere taste. My children, for example, believe they can distinguish fake, authentic and rare pokémon figures and cards but they also have favourite pokémon. Connoisseurs, it is believed, can recover missing information, such as in the case of our collected pottery. A connoisseur might on the basis of experience conclude that the ceramic from the dump truly is a production of this company. He or she may believe they have seen every type of pot that might be confused with such items. This expertise may as a result be able to completely eradicate doubt or merely contribute an authoritative view. Such expertise is, of course, fallible, not least because connoisseurs can sometimes believe they know more than they do. In its worst excesses, connoisseurship is little more than social posture; a good connoisseur should be disinterested and cautious.

So given its logic and framing constraints, has this form of collecting and keeping really served any larger purpose? Can we justify the museum's peculiarly objective engagement with the material world? A reader of this book, who has most likely already made, at very least, an intellectual commitment to the museum, will have already answered this question I suspect, but evidence for confidence in the museum project is not hard to find. A classic example concerns the peregrine falcon, a bird edging towards extinction in the early 1960s. Research, however, revealed that parents crushed their eggs prior to hatching. Comparison with museum specimens showed that this was a new phenomenon and that the egg shells had thinned and that this thinning could be associated with the introduction of the persistent pesticide DDT (Ratcliffe 1967). At the top of the food chain, falcons, hawks and eagles were concentrating pesticide residues from seed dressings consumed by their grain-eating prey. The celebrated eradication of this pesticide has seen the recovery of these bird populations and, in this, museum egg collections – so often the product of collector avarice rather than scientific investigation (but yet real things all the same) – proved of key importance. Similarly, museum specimens of moss have, rather surprisingly, provided evidence of changing levels of lead in the environment, and contributed to arguments to have this health-damaging substance removed from petrol.

One final proof of the validity of the museum in this regard concerns the role of specimens as 'vouchers', that is things that vouch for the correctness of a statement and permit verification. When discovered in 1913, a skull and jaw permitted the construction of a hominid which filled a gap in the fossil record between apes and humans. In 1953, fluorine tests raised questions of authenticity. Re-examination revealed the jaw to be that of an orang-utan and the skull to be that of a man, both from the Middle Ages. The Piltdown Man was, as a result, no

more, but the specimens remain important vouchers now verifying a rather different interpretation.

This empirical tradition continues in museums today, indeed, it absolutely dominates museum engagement with the material world. Without it, museums could make no claims to do with reality and all would be aesthetics. This museum tradition, then, permits us to see, make and represent a structured world (a world that is structured in reality by nature and manufacture) – this structure is vital to rationalism, policy-making, interpretation, commerce. It also provides us with a language through which we can communicate and extend knowledge, while maintaining a secure reality to which we can return for verification or testing. This requires the preservation of context – indeed, seeing the object as a piece of context – so it is always more than its material self. The approach permits us to utilise representatives, to permit one to speak for all, to seek generalisation. All these things work together and reflect wider social and cultural desires. Often funded from the public purse, museums were to be apolitical purveyors of truth and for this reason they have become institutions that generally steer clear of controversy. Their aim and their implicit claim are objectivity, and the rejection of the interestedness of personal, party or commercial politics.

However, rarely did these objects exist as purely intellectual entities; collections invariably required an emotive response, objects had a poetry and people engaged for individualistic reasons and sought progress and social positioning through participation. One cannot presume that the museum achieved its rational goals with the purity and simplicity method alone seems to suggest. It is time to return to our earlier theme and put real people back in the picture.

The subjective world revisited

Since the mid-1960s there has been a challenge to this uncomplicated view of knowledge building and that challenge has really come about by a change of focus, from object to interpreter. Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things* (1966) and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) made knowledge, understanding, meaning, value, and the material fabric of society, a product of local circumstance in time and space. What we value, such as the word of science, has been determined by society, not by God or natural law. With everything man-made, universal truth ceased to exist; truth was determined by systems of value existing at a particular time and place. Why, then, it could be argued, should a White Christian Enlightenment truth be any more valid than one produced in an entirely different culture a world away? In terms of conducting one's life, one's values and making sense of the world, the imposition of such an external view is nothing less than cultural imperialism. Reason and truth were now not to be understood as objective but rather at the command of the powerful. This was as true of the production and interpretation of the past as it was of other cultures. It invoked a postcolonial perspective which today is forming a new disciplinary locus, and especially so for museum studies.

This democratising thrust, as it pushed the object into the background, also reconstituted the public as individuals and social groups far beyond the divisions of class which had previously permitted the analysis of a visiting public. This increased

sense of audience focus has permitted museums to step away from a rigorous and controlled engagement of the type discussed above and value the more subjective qualities of objects. This subjective engagement, however, still relied upon an underlying truth held within collections; it was simply another interpretive frame. As Prown (1993: 4–5) remarked: 'A chair is Philadelphia of the 1760s because it embodies elements of what was believed in Philadelphia in the 1760s, and that formal pattern is what enables an analyst to determine the truth of the chair.' For Prown, the assumptions and beliefs of a moment of creation are captured in the 'style' of the chair. These are unarticulated things but available for extraction:

> Perhaps if we had access to a culture's dream world, we could discover and analyze some of these hidden beliefs. In the absence of that, I suggest that some of these beliefs are encapsulated in the form of things, and there they can be discerned and analyzed.

From these beginnings in empirical representation, then, Prown moves on to consider the more subjective, metaphorical and poetic meanings one might attribute to objects through material culture analysis, in the hope that one might 'see with their eyes and touch with their hands' (Prown 1993: 17). It seems improbable that we can recover these things, but nevertheless we might see and we might believe, and that might be enough. By this means we can engage with the object at a more powerful level, perhaps far more powerful than the historian's rigorously researched narrative. It is here in a dimension beyond what we see, and about which we have difficulty articulating questions, that objects can reveal what the museum really possesses. Here we move beyond the written record, beyond the boundaries of literacy or literary expediency, beyond the read and enter the real of the sensed. Here history takes on a vivid reality.

To admit such things is not to move from our objective museum world into a world of fiction. Certainly museums can be places of fictional engagement, but here the truth of the object as a piece of real-world context remains – regardless of whether we can ever extract it. It is simply a change in the way we see; much as with the Darwinian revolution, the collection and the processes by which it is formed remain largely unchanged. Asante objects on display at the American Museum of Natural History or on show at the living museum in Kumasi, Ghana, are valid for the same reason: their authenticity. That the American audience might engage with these objects through the disciplinary eyes of anthropology and the Asante with an awareness of things in life, does not remove the need for the objects to be real and true. What it does change, however, are perceptions of the context of which the object is part. If Western museums admit other valid engagements with the real world, then they must at very least respect them and reflect them in their perception of context, and if they intend to collect them, then they will need to understand them, and that may require further changes in terms of who collects or interprets, and how. This applies not just to objects in alien societies but also to the understanding of objects in the everyday life of our own societies. It places disciplinary engagement in a real world, and admits that such things as science or art are messy, that the objective and subjective generally work together: the scientist who never visualises *T. rex* as anything more than a heap of bones is never really going to achieve

much in science. This brief discussion naturally brings us into the source of our accepting and valuing subjective things, the social world which might be best understood as a world of consumption. This forms the third section in this book.

The consumed world: society, belief, identity

> The things of the world are incorporated into social interaction and provide an embodiment of social structures reflecting back the nature and form of our social world . . . All objects are social agents in the limited sense that they *extend human action* and *mediate meanings* between humans.
>
> (Dant 1999: 2, 13)

We engage with the material world from the moment we are born, we learn intuitively what it is, we make it physically, we shape it emotionally, we create meanings, consume objects and meanings together, and even give those objects, and perhaps even those meanings, to others. This is a world of objects participating in lives, rather than simply in ideas, and it has been a particularly keen area of interest for anthropologists, sociologists and historians for the past two decades. It is important to the museum professional for fairly obvious reasons as museum visitors engage in the socialised world of objects far more than they do in a world of disciplinary abstraction. Anthropologists, in particular, have been keen to see the present era as one defined by the consumption of material culture: never has society been so enabled to consume. Initially, this interest in consumption focused particularly on consumerism and comparing, contrasting and even uniting such work with other long-established interests in object exchange, particularly gift giving. Increasingly, consumption became a far broader concept to the point that everything could be seen in a world of consumption. We consume through purchase, through the receipt of gifts, but also through looking, visiting, engaging – museums are consumed and museums consume. Consumption became one of the grand structuring concepts of postmodernism and it had a natural twin in another: identity. Indeed, much of this work has centred on the construction and reinforcement of identities. Museums were quick to pick up on this and now history can be consumed in an act of community identity-making. But one needs to be careful not to lose the specificity here. Identity-making happens all the time, as indeed does consumption; to use identity as a bland notion to justify museums is a risky strategy. When I walk into my local city centre with its mix of architectures and monuments, with their origins stretching back centuries, the very environment seems to conjure up pasts that speak of my youth in the brutalist world of *Get Carter* (1971) and a deep-rooted Englishness in the city's castle mound (c.1068) and Guildhall (c.1390) which seem to belong to that Romantic England of Walter de la Mare poetry and *Greensleeves* (c.1580) which children are exposed to in primary education. Museums cannot really compete with this engagement with real things in the real places where real events really occurred. Buildings collected and preserved in heritage parks are the architectural equivalent of the museum, claiming an authenticity of materials but not of location or interrelationship; a pastiche not so far removed from the film set of *Pride and Prejudice* (this is discussed in rich detail by Gable and Handler in Chapter 25

in this book; see also Bruner, Chapter 24). That is not to deny the power of such places, but it is also to fear the intrusion of illusion – an illusion more starkly demonstrated in many a modern shopping mall where all is imitation – architectural signification of a purely superficial kind. What the museum has, in this world of meaning making, is authenticity but that authenticity – as in the heritage park – needs careful understanding and control; authenticity is a fugitive quality easily lost.

One cannot, then, blandly claim the museum as a special place of meaning making through material things. Consumption and identity creation are implicit in the human condition and museums will only ever play a tiny role. Similarly, meaning making, more generally, and learning are ubiquitous and interrelated because we cannot know the world by any other means, and without further qualification, the terms themselves become meaningless. As spectacles they are undoubtedly useful for looking at things differently, but they do not displace the contextual necessities of museum things; they still require objects to be bits of the real maintained by disciplinary rigour and integrity.

That is not, however, to suggest unchanging disciplinarity. What we consider rigorous or appropriate at the moment is rather different from how things seemed in the past. Consider, for example, the entry of identity into the museum consciousness. Identity became a key aspect of British museum engagement as historians adopted the new history of the French Annales School back in the 1960s and 1970s. The resulting rise of social history transformed objects previously classified as 'folk life', giving them historiographic context, disciplinary credibility, and a politics of interpretation slightly to the left. It made historians increasingly aware of contemporary society and the role of history in its shaping. There was now new interest in representing working lives and so, in a Britain entering a post-industrial phase, mills and factories were converted into museums, manufacturing narratives which spoke of skill, dedication, community and hardship. These were sometimes 'living museums' but at other times sobering war memorials to those who had given their lives in the trenches of industrialisation. Britain was by then actively preserving the houses and estates of the aristocracy, and permitting the majority to view the opulence of the minority and believe it was theirs too. Access had been driven by changes to the British tax system, which led the assault on wealth, privilege and power dating back to the Norman Conquest nearly a millennium before. The industrial museums were in many regards about redressing the balance, a counterweight to a portrayal of British society as gentrified. By the early 1990s, the social historians were turning to living popular culture, and museums across Britain opened 'People's Shows', which exhibited the collections of ordinary people. In some respects these were unproblematic as museums could claim that collectors were part of a shared community of practice in which the museum had a senior role. They could also be justified as an act of democratisation when such notions seemed far less complicated: exhibitions of the people, for the people, though often not by the people. Such shows repeated today might draw a rather different reaction, for if one did not visit out of consumer or collector empathy, then the sight of someone fetishising porcelain figures and cuddly toys risks objectifying individuals as exotic and weird in a fashion once popular in London's Egyptian Hall nearly two centuries ago. The industrial museums were rather different: people were the blood that flowed through industrial heritage in the form of oral histories and images. They were doing what

they had to do; museums were not exposing their foibles. The problem for the museum engaging in the contemporary, however, is that it joins the ranks of the mass media. It is not dealing with an objectified past (which has by this means been neutralised), but a political present. Though what this means in terms of museum representation is quite uncertain. Museums require, at very least, consent, and hopefully full engagement, but such considerations have given us *Big Brother*, *Pop Idol*, Spencer Tunick's massed nudes and Gunther von Hagen's *Body Worlds*. People are thirsty for celebrity, even if they become manipulated and manufactured, objectified and exhibited. People as much as objects now ask to be consumed, they have become indistinguishable in a world of consumption. (Although even 200 years ago people wished to be consumed as heroic, cultured, savants – the phenomenon is not as new as it sometimes seems, it simply reaches deeper into society.)

As museum historians' interests moved from objects to their more natural subjects (that is, people) many people-centred academics were looking in the opposite direction: increasing their focus on objects and their consumption. Their work opened up new ways for museums to think about objects and contexts. Take, for example, a simple purse with a Hello Kitty motif. Typical museum practice would perceive this as a late twentieth-century costume accessory which might be collected systematically recording individual and moment but never really thinking beyond that local context. For an adolescent girl, however, buying such a purse might also permit her to enter into a circle of friends. It also places her in a world-wide community of owners who share a relationship with this motif, and it also places her in a relationship to an older generation who are now courted by fashion houses using the motif to evoke nostalgia. If Hello Kitty becomes associated with a distinctive social group, then in a reflexive way it becomes representative of that group, and as a commodity it is surely then far more complex than the object a museum professional might perceive. The shops which sell these objects might also gain meaning and status (identity) in this object-centred world – mere shops they are not.

Marketing now not only sells such things but attempts to sell by gaining sociological understanding of its audience. So what does a museum collect if it collects the purse? Just to collect it as an example of 'today' is to get drawn into an unacknowledged illusion. The owner of the purse is in fact part of global business, her tastes captured and reflected. Consumption here represents a sophisticated symbiosis between identity and big business. Like *The Fashion System* exposed by Roland Barthes in 1967, this whole business is built around mythology; not pointless mythology but mythology which permits society to function as a social entity. Thus, the association between the thing and its owner is not as museums tend to read it. (Hello Kitty is explored in Chapter 17 in this book). Similarly, Shove and Southerton's (2000) investigation of the domestic freezer showed how the object's changing form reflected not just technological change or fashion but a fundamental change in the place of this object in lives during its period of adoption and integration: from food glut handling, to household management, to time management. In this last phase, the freezer adopted a critical twin – the microwave – which, from a museum perspective, demonstrates the continuing validity of Susan Pearce's (1992: 171) interpretive idea (which draws upon a structuralist literature) that objects can be more effectively communicated if we understand their natural relationships. In a

structuralist sense, objects work together to form communication, much as words, governed by rules, form effective sentences.

In this world of consumption, it is frequently noted that free choice is an illusion. Daniel Miller, for example, noted that Britain's social housing – the council house – was regarded as standing for the identity of the country's lower classes. He pointed out, however, that the council house is a middle-class invention, a thing given by the empowered rather than a thing representing working-class desires. Nevertheless, this is where working-class and lower middle-class lives shaped their own environment. Ironically, with the selling off of the housing stock, and rising house prices, many (former) council houses are now home to that middle class which designs and manages our social housing. The problem, of course, is that one cannot chase out middle-class intervention in the production of goods: by definition, it is the middle classes who design, manage and sell. Museums are encapsulations of middle class values – the relationship is axiomatic.

Consumption, then, produces a world of interrelatedness and reflexivity shaped by the production, possession and movement of people and things. Indeed, objects acquire values simply by moving between people. This is often more important to the object's purpose or meaning than any implicit qualities it might have. Research has shown that those who buy things construct themselves by that act (Miller 1998; Miller *et al.* 1998). Those who collect similarly construct and display themselves; they bring order to their lives and build homes (Pearce 1998). And outside of Western societies objects are involved in acts of gifting and exchange which construct identities and distribute power, perhaps by a process of indebtedness or through complex interlocking networks that see transactions repeated year after year. Objects exist in socialised worlds, interwoven into the fabric of place, and shaped by societies' interconnectivity.

By this means, these worlds of consumption – which involve movements of things in which values of various kinds are created and manipulated – can become structured and formalised, and draw in the museum as a major participant. The art world, whether conceived as having theoretical, commercial or sociological interconnectivity, is the most studied example of such a structure. In this world, artists shape the objects at its heart. Only for them, it might seem, is there truly a relationship between person and the materiality of the thing. But if the artist desires success, then he or she must offer some form of engagement with the art world. The paradoxical aspect of this engagement, however (if they are to avoid that jobbing life which once paid the way for the Victorian portrait painter) is that they must offer up a degree of resistance. One cannot begin an artistic career on the artistic edge, one must be beyond it, a node on a trajectory of art history which only becomes apparent through the production of the work and its 'discovery'. Its acceptance is possible only through an act of legitimising consumption whether by dealer, collector, critic or museum. It is a kind of courtship, where disdain can be a useful affectation. The aim, however, is intimate engagement: radicalism accepted on its own terms, not through compromise on the part of the artist, yet accepted nonetheless. Legitimising consumption is an act of admittance whether an intellectual acquisition in response to art historical theory, as suggested by Danto, or admittance by entry into an institution of art, as discussed by Dickie, or simply a product of a powerful individual exercising taste politically, as proposed by Bourdieu.

It was Pierre Bourdieu (1984) who most forcibly drove a stake into the heart of art world judgement in a book that at first sight seems only concerned with that seemingly innocuous social attribute, 'taste'. In Bourdieu's study, taste unifies social groups and excludes others; it legitimises particular objects and practices, and by this means forges identities. In his view, it was by this means that museums came to represent the tastes of the educated and wealthy. Patronage and social power turn things into symbols which conspicuously radiate qualities that socially position participants. It is a form of conspicuous consumption of a kind Veenis (1999: 102) recognised in the former East Germany, where participants understood its superficiality but could not withdraw. Of course, it is the idea that this is a purely superficial engagement which is an illusion – conspicuous consumption has real social (political) depth (though clearly appearing ridiculous to those outside that social group).

The art museum likes to believe it exists outside this world of personal interest and the marketplace, but it cannot escape its influence on perceptions of value and price. Art museums legitimise old works as well as new. As one art curator put it: 'I find it exciting to bet on a young and undiscovered artist, to know my backing may help him' (Walker 1974: xvii). Greenfeld (1989: 96) found that, like critics, curators believed they were creative, that they were not there to satisfy the aesthetic needs of the public but to create new needs by exercising their judgement (and power). However, the problem for the curator acquiring or showing contemporary art is the lack of objective or rational criteria (on which, see Vickery in Chapter 16 in this book) – they might instead need to rely upon their own subjective tastes. Some have suggested waiting 50 years, and then deciding whether an artwork should be kept, but this presupposes a fairly objective art historical process, uninfluenced by museum possession or the 'serious speech acts' of the institutionally empowered expert (Bundgaard 1999; Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983: 48). Museums need to believe that such things are possible – that the reflexive and interconnected world of value creation has no perverting effect. But that art world includes value-creating organisations and individuals that are entirely self-interested: art dealers attempting to make a living; wealthy collectors, but self-confessed art novices, like Charles Saatchi; auction houses with their chandelier bids, dominated by the recently indicted Sotheby's and Christie's; governments defining and protecting a country's national heritage; and fakers and thieves who distort and corrupt. The art museum must believe it can extract itself from all of these influences for to do otherwise is, perhaps, to take that suicidal leap that Donald Preziosi ponders in Chapter 9 in this book. That the art museum cannot entirely disentangle itself from this world may not matter, however. Science sometimes finds itself in a similar tangle – the best example being the scandal surrounding the *T. rex* skeleton named 'Sue'. Here political aspiration, Native American land rights, dealer identity, corporate and national interest, and museum desire, all conspired to create a modern sensation of extraordinary proportions (Fiffer 2000). The object which ended up in the museum was by that time no less contentious than the Parthenon Marbles, but yet still sufficiently intact to be transferred into a world of rational science. Now the object begins a process of naturalisation, as occurs with the painting on the art museum wall, where the history of its selection and acquisition is progressively lost. Like money laundering, the museum makes cultural objects legitimate.

In recent years, the hidden politics and judgements behind museum things have called into question museum practices in a number of areas, but these are matters which must be defined by professional integrity, from which one must disentangle the rationale for intellectual engagement. While many would debate the British Museum's retention of the Parthenon Marbles, few would object to that museum's recognition that these are objects worthy of museum possession and public engagement. That is not to suggest that the intellectual and political entanglement is so easily unravelled. Consider Berlo and Phillips's Chapter 10 in this book which calls for an elevation in the status of Native American arts in museums and academic art history courses, while delineating all the impropriety which has created collections of these materials in the past. They do not, however, see the task as insurmountable: the intellectual desire is unwavering, but the means by which this can be most effectively and appropriately achieved requires new levels of professionalism and inclusive practice. The power given to the curator – beyond the ethical issues which professional organisations seek to manage through codes of conduct – results from an appointment made by society for the purposes of developing expertise and utilising judgement for the public good. This isn't the role of a mere functionary but one reliant on creativity in order to provide a paying (whether by entrance fee or taxation) public with visual and intellectual delights and challenges. Curators should not be defensive about their empowerment but simply understand the professional responsibilities and risks which come with it. As Alan Trachtenberg discusses in an exhibition review in Chapter 23 in this book, curators must be permitted such freedoms even if they pay the price of bad review.

The opposite side of this empowerment and acquisition is potential disenfranchisement and loss. The act of selecting one thing is always accompanied by a sister act of rejecting countless others. Loss is an inevitability of acquisition in a multitude of ways. It is a process very much at the heart of museums, though one frequently overlooked. It forms the final theme in this chapter and book.

The transient world: keeping, losing, changing

Loss is pervasive, an inevitable product of change, and change is implicit in consumption. As Daniel Miller (1987) noted, people and things interact to create identities; neither are something but are becoming and developing each other. In a world of consumption, people and things are in constant movement, and meanings in a constant state of flux.

> Within each local circumstance, specific meanings will be mobilised that have provisional significance within the site concerned. These meanings may change radically as the object is moved from one site of semiosis to another. As the moves take place in time, and across space, earlier meanings may be lost or recovered, overlaid by new significations, or reinterpreted by different interpreters. (Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 153)

What, then, of the museum as a place of keeping, is it immune from this constancy of change, can it really keep vouchers or preserve keepsakes? The presumption we