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BCG SPECIALIST SESSION, PORTSMOUTH, 1979

The following papers were presented at the B. C. G. Specialist Session of the Museums Association Annual Conference, on July 11th 1979, at Portsmouth Polytechnic. The theme of Conference was 'museums in the leisure age' and session speakers were asked to discuss the problems of new displays and old collections.

The summary of the papers and subsequent discussion presented at Conference at their 'Hot News' session by Dr. John Gray of Bolton Museum was included in the September Newsletter.

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MUSEUMS AND LEISURE

'The working classes have but little time for study; their leisure hours are, and always must be, comparatively brief'

Thus General Pitt Rivers in a speech to the Society of Arts in 1891 when he expressed his views on the social importance and the role of the educational museum, a place where, in his words again, 'the visitors can instruct themselves'.

Earlier Pitt Rivers had presented 14,000 archaeological and ethnographic specimens to the University of Oxford stipulating only that they should always be displayed on the basis of evolutionary typology. Today we would balk at the idea of actually displaying 14,000 specimens yet Pitt Rivers was simply expressing the contemporary view of the role of a museum in educating the masses. While he was prepared to accept that artefacts evolve, Pitt Rivers was clearly unable to foresee the radical social changes of the 20th century; attitudes and ideas about the communications of knowledge were of necessity confined to 19th century horizons.

Now, as Roger Miles has already described the approach to exhibitions at the BM (NH), as well as the underlying philosophy, there is no need to go over the same ground again. I would like, in this brief paper, to extend some of his arguments in picking on certain aspects of the role of museums in an age of increased leisure. I would also like to say something about the respective functions of national and non-national museums in the context of displays and collections.

I suppose it is a sociological commonplace now to make the observation that we have more leisure than General Pitt Rivers could have dreamed of and that, moreover, increased leisure is seen by some as yet another

problem. Museum people certainly shouldn't see this as a problem. Surely it is going to be a challenge to reconsider our functions in the future. It will be a challenge for every museum whatever its size and resources. Let's consider the Natural History Museum. I imagine everyone here knows broadly what goes on behind the scenes. Firstly, about 80% of the Museum's financial resources are devoted to its work as a major national and international institution for taxonomic research. The total staff complement is nearly 800 of which 70 make up the Department of Public Services. This is the department concerned with all the 'public' aspects of the Museum, namely exhibitions, education and so on. The Department is responsible for the preparation of printed material supplementing the exhibitions and it also works closely with the Publications section of the Department of Central Services. Having said that it shouldn't be necessary to remind you that the five scientific departments of the museum are not remote from the public, leaving the Department of Public Services to deal with all those people who crowd in through the front door.

The five other departments deal with enquiries at all levels and are constantly receiving visitors from here and abroad. There is a further aspect that is not often appreciated. Museum specialists are often called upon to advise on the scientific content of TV programmes and exhibitions and in this sense Museum expertise and scientific authority can reach a TV audience of many millions - the 'invisible public' in Frank Greenaway's words.

There is a further point that should be emphasised as it touches upon the relationship between the scientific departments and the Department of Public Services. For each of the first three phases of our new exhibition programme a number of staff from the scientific departments were seconded for periods of up to 18 months to the Department of Public Services to work with the designers in developing exhibition themes.

To return to our visitors. Since the Hall of Human Biology opened two years ago a number of surveys have been conducted to find out who our visitors are, where they come from and what their expectations are. In particular we are also studying their reactions to the new exhibitions in order to find out how effective the various components of the displays are. We are also interested in the extent to which visitors make repeat visits. All this helps us in our thinking about the future and anyone who has visited the museum recently and struggled through the crowds will understand the reasons why we need to expand our visitor facilities on the South Kensington site. We are now awaiting the outcome of the recent public enquiry into the proposed development of the south east galleries.

As you know we have received bouquets and brickbats aimed largely at the first phase 'Human Biology' but if you look at the next two phases that have been completed you will appreciate, I hope, that 'Human

Biology' was an experiment in many senses. We are criticised for the absence of 'real' material but this absence was surely a consequence of the choice of the theme. On the other hand I think no-one could challenge the choice of 'Ecology' as an exhibition theme at the Natural History Museum, an exhibition that includes about 200 specimens. We are currently working on an exhibition dealing with man and his ancestors, a story that will depend very much on specimens and casts.

I would like briefly to say something about the objection that has been raised concerning taxonomic displays in a National museum. Now in an ideal world it would be very nice if we had the space for taxonomic displays in the public part of the museum, but separated from the thematic displays like those in the Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires. Yet think for a moment of the space requirement for the display of all groups, for in my view it would have to be all or nothing. The collections of named organisms, the taxonomic base, the 'vocabulary' as it were of the natural sciences, it readily accessible to anyone who knocks on the door of the appropriate department. As Roger Miles has said, as far as interpretation for the layman is concerned, we are more interested today in the relationships between organisms. The new exhibitions thus seek to convey these relationships.

Even though we are undertaking large-scale thematic exhibitions we are also maintaining smaller galleries covering particular topics. Examples are the British Bird Pavilion, refurbished about five years ago, and a recently completed Gallery of Marine Invertebrates. Both of these are, in a sense legacies from the past, survivors of Owen's master-scheme for the division of the Museum's plan according to then current ideas of classification. Nevertheless even these galleries must be considered to have a finite life.

This, then, is what we are doing at South Kensington. We are able to embark on this programme because we have been provided with the resources and staff - scientists, designers, modelmakers, taxidermists and so on. Does our policy offer any guideline for smaller non-national museum with natural history collections? Can the latter ever be a scaled-down version of the national museum? How should the smaller museum divide its resources between the curatorial and display functions?

To those of you who are closer to the problems of the small museum my remarks will probably sound obvious or trite and should be taken simply as personal observations. I am also going to side-step the question of exotica represented in the collections of many small museums, whilst not, at the same time, ignoring the fact that such material can have a potent capacity to excite the curiosity of younger minds.

Museums are all different and may they always be so! Even though in broad terms we are all concerned with acquisition, documentation,

conservation and interpretation, the national museum, its scale of operations and international coverage, will always be a species distinct from all other museums. Our visitors come, literally, from everywhere. The strength of the small museum clearly lies in other directions: a sense of identification with a region or locality and, indeed, a local population. Even with minimal resources such museums should be able to portray a local ecology; it should be able to initiate all kinds of activities ranging from biological recording to Saturday morning clubs for children. I know much of this sort of thing is going on already.

Finally I would emphasise that obviously whatever the size of the museum the curatorial function must be the priority. Interpretation follows and here I would like to be mildly controversial. There is a tendency I think to equate natural history displays with taxidermy, and that there should be more taxidermists around. Yet, if you will forgive a mixed metaphor, birds and mammals are not the only pebbles on the beach. There are certainly not enough good taxidermists to satisfy demands so it seems to me that the small museum should logically make plenty of use of the services offered by the Area Services.

General Pitt Rivers, if he were around today would be very surprised at the many functions that museums have taken unto themselves, yet we may well have to take on even more functions to if we are to meet the need of more people with more time on their hands.

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DISPLAYS AND COLLECTIONS IN A LEISURE AGE

Any attempt to make today's talk relevant to the title of the conference must involve a brief analysis of the past, present (which I am assuming to be a leisure age) and the future. Only the recent past will be examined to relate the trends which have affected the work of curators to the attitudes and priorities they have had to adopt.

The 1920's and 30's appear to have been a fairly stagnant period in the development of the natural sciences in museums. The second world war, however, left a great deal of work, with the majority of effort after 1945 having gone into displays and the rehabilitation of museums in general. A new approach to display and the relationship of the museums with the general public developed culminating in the employment of "in-service" design teams in the larger museums or in the smaller museums the involvement of external specialist bodies. This new approach,