

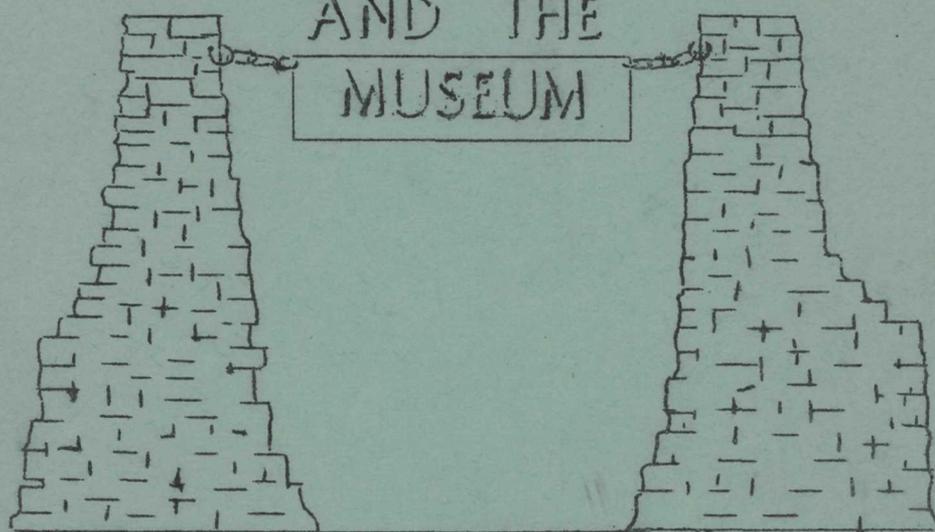
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ANTHROPOLOGY

AND THE

MUSEUM



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ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE MUSEUM

By Katharine Bartlett

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Perhaps a discussion of museums is out of place on a scientific program, but I do not believe that it is for there is hardly a Southwestern anthropologist who is not connected with a museum of some kind -- university, state, national park, or private.

A museum is a place where the finds of anthropology should be interpreted to the public. A museum should be like the conclusion of a scientific book where the results of research are summed up and not, as in the body of the book, where all of the evidence is presented. The evidence must be known, of course, and placed where it may be seen by any person who wishes. There are very few museums like this.

Anthropological museums are divided into two groups: those that present anthropology as art, and those that present anthropology as a science. The first group exhibits archeology and ethnology as art, and in that they seem to be much more successful, as museums, than the second group. Only the best and finest objects are exhibited, usually in tastefully chosen settings that enhance their beauty and interest. The scientific museums, on the other hand, tend to show all of their material, good and bad alike, poorly arranged and with uninteresting backgrounds.

It is with scientific anthropological exhibits for the public that we are particularly concerned here. Museums of anthropology, one of the oldest classes of museums, have been excessively slow to profit by new museum methods, especially in the United States. In

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recent years, art museums, natural history museums, and science and industry museums have outdistanced anthropology and history museums in pleasing and instructive presentation of material. They are employing the most up-to-date methods.

A good museum exhibit of any kind, whether one case or a gallery, should tell a story, or, in other words, present a few definite and clearly expressed ideas, and only a few. It is impossible for a museum visitor to absorb in the short time at his disposal very much information, but if he goes away enriched with a few clearly defined ideas, then he has not wasted his time.

As I was going around in a large eastern museum where there were endless cases full of objects, I noticed an ordinary man and woman. The woman was obviously bored, but her husband was intently studying every case. Finally said she, "Henry, if you stop to look at everything, we'll never get out of here!" This sentiment expresses perfectly the spirit of most archaeology and ethnology exhibits--a multiplicity of objects.

Let us take the Southwest as an example. Of course, it is needless to remark that Southwestern archaeology has made great strides and we now have a sequence of well defined cultural periods, practically all dated. Even a few museums realize this, and they exhibit in sequence the objects of material culture from Basket Maker through Pueblo IV, or Pioneer through Classic Hohokam. Unfortunately, to the general public, these objects all look about the same, except perhaps the pottery which looks different from period to period. Take Pueblo III for example. To a Southwestern archaeologist it immediately brings up ideas like this: "1100 to 1300 A.D.; large Pueblos--Wupatki, Betatakin, Aztec, Pueblo Bonito, Cliff Palace; finely made pottery with great local variation; distribution less extensive than in Pueblo II; kivas and development of religion; beginning of complex social organization; abrupt ending caused by great drought of 1275 to 1299." We forget that the public does not know all that this period designation means to us and consequently any intended time sequence is lost and the exhibit appears flat and lacking in perspective. Dwellings, religious life, social evolution and other intangible evidence, etc. are not there. It is this lack of time perspective that makes archaeological exhibits so dull from the visitor's point of view, yet is the very thing archaeologists are striving to bring out.

I represent the general public in search of knowledge when I look at exhibits of the archaeology of Middle and South America, Europe, Greece, Egypt, and the East, and China. One knows from the literature that a great deal of research has been undertaken, and chronologies and sequences of cultural periods have been established in many parts of the world, but it is practically impossible to find

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a museum where such finds are interpreted intelligently, if at all. One of the best examples, is the new National Museum in Copenhagen. Here the prehistory and history of Denmark is set forth from the end of the Old Stone Age through Maglemosian, Kitchen Midden, Neolithic, Bronze, Celtic Iron, Roman Iron, Migration, Viking, German, and Historic Periods to the 19th Century. After looking at this splendid exhibit, one can understand the present day culture of Denmark, even though all labels are in Danish.

Another fine museum which, though devoted only to history, is worth of emulation, is the Haus den Rheinischen Heimat in Cologne. Here the history of the Rhine Valley is excellently treated according to various subjects--the historical and political development of the Rhineland, the Church and Church estates, the Rhenish city and its people, the Rhenish peasantry, and Commerce and Industry.

The third example is the new Hall of the Natural History of Man, at the American Museum of Natural history, which depicts in a very simple but comprehensive manner the physical evolution of man. This exhibit is somewhat like the Deutsches Hygiene Museum in Dresden which is devoted to Human Physiology.

In the museums which are the most interesting and instructive one finds simple, well thought-out exhibits, carefully labeled, extensively amplified with charts, maps, diagrams, and models, used in connection with carefully selected material. In showing a sequence of objects or cultures, it is the differences, and not the likenesses, which are the most significant.

One eastern university museum maintains that it is not faced with the same problems as ordinary public museums, and that it is proper for them to exhibit all their material so that the students can study it. If carefully prepared exhibits, no matter on what minute detail of anthropology, were available, I believe students as well as public would profit by it. Such exhibits should, of course, be augmented with easily available study collections.

In fact, a university museum is an opportunity for any anthropology department. By encouraging advanced students to prepare synoptic exhibits on any phase of the subject, the museum might build up a fine series of exhibits on its research problems. Many good students, who from lack of opportunity will never be able to be field archaeologists, can find positions in the vast number of museums springing up in the country--every city, town, county, and state must have them. Many of these local museums are being run by people who have not the slightest conception of what a good exhibit should be. Certainly a good exhibit would be worth as much as a term paper from a student, and requires as much research. Also a museologist with good anthropological knowledge is better than a jobless anthropologist.

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In concluding, I wish to say that as anthropologists we should take the trouble to interpret to the layman what we learn through the dark and devious ways of research. By means of very simple, clear exhibits carefully labeled and augmented with charts and diagrams, the most intricate problems can be successfully "put over", remembering all the while that the differences are more important than the obvious likenesses. We should make an effort to present the anthropology of the Southwest as a predigested subject in three dimensions rather than as a mass of undigested material that satiates the public mind, and in so doing train our students to prepare such exhibits. We cannot expect a museum visitor -- even the most interested -- to expend much grey matter upon what he sees, and therefore we must do this thinking for him, in advance.

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