

# Peopling the Powwow: Community Involvement in a Cultural Diorama

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## Deconstructing Monvocality in Museums

The museum world continues to take major steps toward moving past its colonially threaded roots, thus distancing itself from its early connection with “legitimizing racial exploitation at home and the creation of an empire abroad” (Kahn 324). As a result of postmodern self-reflection, globalization, and the burgeoning public voices of more than one population, the museum world is reaching new, enlightened, and fair portrayals of the cultures and peoples it represents in its exhibit halls. Part of distancing oneself from the colonial paradigm is to move toward a multivocal approach in exhibits. This means including the community being represented instead of relying on a single voice from the curator or the museum. This paper presents the story of a traditional Western museum and its 1993 exhibit, A Tribute to Survival, as an example of community involvement in the planning and construction of a new introduction to the museum’s Native American halls.

Many traditional cultural exhibits in Western museums still embody antiquated and often derogatory visions of other cultures. Representations of non-western peoples reflect biologically and culturally construed perspectives, as the exhibits had often been constructed with Western motivations. Whether unconscious or not, these motivations promoted ideas of an elusive past, Western/European superiority, vanishing peoples, the “noble savage” (Sahlins 1968), and the paradigm of the pristine, isolated cultures. In other words, we have here what Mikhail Bakhtin

termed a *chronotope* (Bakhtin 1981). For the most part, these cultures are still being represented as they existed decades or even centuries ago.

Culture is often also presented in terms of Western aesthetics in the exhibits. Differences in cultural schemes of organization and concepts of design, not to mention indigenous vs. museum ideas of object categorization and use can present an inaccurate and disrespectful image of a particular culture. In worst-case scenarios there is no regard for materials considered taboo or sacred to that respective culture. These items are only to be viewed by an initiated audience, and their display in museum exhibitions, though distanced from their original cultural context, still warrants the same considerations.

*Heterotopic Dissonance* (Kahn 1998) serves as an example of two approaches to representing the “other” in Western museums, the Field Museum and the American Museum of Natural History. The article presents two different approaches to representing similar cultural material, and points out the flaws in each final product.

In its exhibit entitled *Culture Contact* (1970s) The American Museum of Natural History strove to provide a light, airy, “islandy” feel in the exhibit, and came into problems regarding the organization of the artifacts as either ethnographic items or art. Kahn writes that “the cultures are laid out before our eyes as though the assemblage of unrelated bits and pieces adds up to a whole” (1998: 327) and adds that there is a feeling of scientific urgency in the exhibit to “save these cultures from total destruction and disappearance” (1998: 328). She closes by writing that *Culture Contact* is the “best example of a confusing temporal framework that jolts us from a static past into an unexplained present” (Ibid.).

The Field Museum’s *Traveling the Pacific* (1990s) started off with the best intentions--developed to replace the 1940s exhibit and peoples “views of an idyllic South Pacific” (1998: 329) with a more contemporary and complex picture. It uses sensory immersion to entice visitors, instead of the dissection technique of the American Museum. As successful as the Field’s exhibit is in taking the visitor to today’s South Pacific, there is a complete absence of Pacific peoples in the exhibit. Kahn writes, “this is especially remarkable in light of the current concern with representing multiple voices” (1998: 332). Also, there are two pervading temporal frameworks to the exhibit: 1910 and today, with only minimal connection drawn between the two.

In a cultural diorama the aforementioned issues can be more of a problem because of several factors. Museums with such exhibits do not merely display objects; they represent the people themselves. By its nature the diorama is much more of a pronounced snapshot in time and space than more two-dimensional forms. Budget constraints often result in compromises in quality, attention to detail, and cultural consistency in the exhibit material. Lastly, and perhaps most simply, what was standard museum practice decades and centuries ago is often not appropriate today.

### ***A Tribute to Survival: Education in Collaboration***

The Milwaukee Public Museum (MPM) was among some half dozen major American museums of natural and human history established during the last half of the 19th century. Officially chartered in 1882, the museum's roots reach back to 1851 with the founding of the German-English Academy that stressed learning directly from objects. Student field trips in the local area garnered organic, geological, and archeological specimens, while alumni and friends of the school contributed objects from their travels, including historical and ethnological specimens. By 1857, the collection and the interest taken in it by many adults prompted Engelmann to organize a natural history society to curate the collection and systematize its expansion.

The tradition of innovative exhibits, dubbed "The Milwaukee Style," began with the work of Carl Akeley, the "father" of modern taxidermy who started his career in Milwaukee. Although others had included props and backgrounds in cases holding taxidermy specimens, Akeley's muskrat colony, completed in 1890, is considered the museum world's first total habitat diorama.

The "Milwaukee Style" of exhibition at the Milwaukee Public Museum has relied less on labeling than on displays made rich with context, often through diorama-constructs. As a result, any exhibit is open to a variety of interpretations. Each museum patron brings his and her own experiences to a viewing, and so is inclined toward one or another understanding of the display.

The challenge faced by the museum is to pry patrons away from the comfortable interpretations generated at first glance, and to stimulate visitors to consider alternatives.

*A Tribute to Survival* connects to the older Native American culture areas of the museum. It consists of six thematic areas and was introduced by *Indian Country*, a contemporary powwow scene on a turntable.

The powwow is a (usually annual) celebration of social, spiritual and personal connections between people, nature and the Earth. They include singing, dance, drumming and other communal events. Powwows also play a pedagogical role in the transmission of culture to younger generations. More than merely homage to a great ancestry, the Powwow is an event of contemporary significance for the individuals and communities making up the hundreds of Native American nations. This is a time to renew thoughts of the old ways and to preserve a rich heritage (TPT 2006, powwow-power.com 2001).

*A Tribute to Survival* was an attempt to change the antiquated museum voice approach to cultural exhibits. It not only modeled the powwow figures after actual members of local Native American communities, but also involved them throughout the entire planning and construction process. The brainchild of then curator and head of the department, Nancy Lurie, the exhibit was completed in 1993, only two years after NAGPRA was passed. This law had helped to bring Native American rights with regard to their cultural material to the national spotlight. This exhibit followed in the same footsteps and was thus met with much approval and enthusiasm by the public and by the museum world for its groundbreaking approach.

There are six federally recognized Native American tribes in Wisconsin: the Ho-Chunk (Winnebago), Ojibwa/Chippewa, Menominee, Potawatomi, Oneida and Fox and Sauk, each of which was represented in *Tribute*. For the purposes of this exhibit an intertribal council was developed of individuals from all six tribes interested in helping with the exhibit, a total of about 300 people.

Monthly meetings were held with MPM's exhibit staff, collections, and curators to plan the exhibit. The community was contacted about everything, from the exhibit script, to the artifacts exhibited, to the organization of the exhibit, to every detail about the powwow scene in general. Meetings often ran long due to the democratic decision-making process of the Native groups involved.

The turntable includes thirty-seven life-sized replicas of actual individuals from the Wisconsin tribes. It was crucial to Lurie to use casts of actual people instead of using mannequins to deconstruct any romanticized and distanced vision of Native American culture. Lurie wished to emphasize that the individuals represented are living, breathing and working people just like the visitors seeing the exhibit. Also, just as important as tribal codes and emblems in powwow dress are expressions of

individual identity. The visitor is able to appreciate these differences this way, as well as learning about which costumes correlate with which dances.

It was of paramount importance to the museum and to the intertribal council that the contemporary powwow scene be the introduction to the entire hall of Native American exhibits. This way the museum was able to break out of a linear organizational approach laced with colonial implications of progress and disappearing cultures. Instead, the visitor is confronted with the positive message of diverse and thriving peoples with a rich history.

Just as the exhibit process does not end on opening day, MPM's collaboration with the intertribal council did not end when the exhibit opened to the public. Those members of the Native American communities involved regarding the exhibit outcome, whether messages were conveyed successfully or not, how often they have visited the exhibit with family, and what should be changed, took surveys. An almost unified suggestion was to update the powwow costumes, since a lot has changed in the powwow world since 1994.

Since the exhibit opening, there have been small initiatives at MPM to make the suggested changes. Budget constraints have made large-scale changes challenging, but the museum has been able to modernize the powwow scene some by adding a laptop and other technological items to the display.

### **Community Involvement: How Much is Too Much?**

Developing a collaborative relationship with communities represented in museum exhibits is a crucial, long-overdue, yet still all-too-rare addition to museum practice. However, there are certain questions museums must consider when commencing with such a process: How does one determine which should remain museum decisions and what creative control lies with community involved? When faced with this challenge again and again, MPM determined that when conservation, overall design, and the exhibit script were called into question, the museum had to step in and make final decisions. Depending on the size, staff, and capabilities of the museum, however, these points can vary. Secondly, how does a museum work with multivocality *within* the involved community? In MPM's case, there were often more disparate viewpoints within the intertribal council than between this group and the museum. Thirdly, how does a museum field personal motivation in the exhibit while retaining its own vision, character, and means? MPM's collections manager, Dawn

Scher Thomaе, recommends having everything laid out in writing as early in the process as possible.

### **Conclusions: One Step in the Right Direction, but Now What?**

On my final visit to *Tribute* before leaving for Miami, I was standing at the Powwow turntable, playing the fly on the wall and observing the ways that visitors were engaging (or bypassing) the exhibit. A woman walked through with several children about nine-twelve years old. The group moved to a different portion of the exhibit, but the girl ran up toward the turntable. She glanced at it and yelled out, “hey, I didn’t think they had coolers back then!” and ran back to the group.

I eagerly scribbled down her words. To me, this denotes that there is still a deeply ensconced paradigm of the vanished past to this child, and probably to most of her peers as well. Instead of seeing the cooler and understanding that this represents a contemporary scene, she instead started wondering if they maybe did have coolers “back then.” Part of MPM’s mission is to entice visitors to spend more than the standard several seconds in front of its exhibits; to draw them in and leave them wanting to learn more on their own. What could have been changed about *Tribute* so that this child might have stayed the extra few seconds to correct her initial assumption about the culture? How groundbreaking can this exhibit be in deconstructing antiquated visions of Native peoples if visitor experiences of the exhibit still function to confirm ingrained stereotypes? How can the museum minimize differences in motivations for museum visits and still reach the largest audience possible with deeper messages? An exhibit such as *Tribute* with large-scale social and cultural motivations, must take larger steps in learning to weave its message adeptly into the fabric of a likewise entertaining and aesthetically pleasing display.

Collaborations between community and museum can be set aside as time-consuming and implausible projects with a small and over-worked staff. However, in order for the museum world to continue to work in tandem with contemporary standards and practice in the cultural realm, to progress beyond a biased and problematic vision of culture, this sort of project is precisely the sort of undertaking to which museums must commit.

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