

The future of ethnographic exhibitions*

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Abstract. This paper highlights the interpretive role of museums and the challenges it faces in consumer societies. How the role of ethnographic museums, in particular, will be played in the future depends on how the "ethnographic subject" is defined, on developments in representational practice, and on the refinement of the exhibition itself as a special form of communication. The paper concludes that ethnographic exhibitions of some kind will probably continue as long as people try to solve their problems through shared activity using knowledge based on evidence.

It is possible that the day of the ethnographic museum has already gone.
Kenneth Hudson. *Museums of influence*

The report of my death was an exaggeration.
Mark Twain

Museums not only collect and store fragments of culture; they themselves are part of culture (Prossler 1991): a special zone where living culture dies and dead culture springs to life. Other societies have paraded their trophies and stored their relics, but, unlike ourselves, they did not collect samples of their own and other people's material culture, at considerable and continuing expense, for the declared purpose of learning about the human condition. A good indication of the central importance of objects to the purpose of a museum is the persistence with which critics and others seek to displace them with "education" or "ideas" or "people" (e.g., Finlay 1977), as if collections somehow exclude these obviously essential elements of museum work.

Holism and making sense

The key rationale of museum activity is holistic. By generalising from specific instances it discloses systems of meaning to which objects indirectly refer through the beliefs they express or the actions they perform.

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