Across Anthropology

Sansi, Roger, Appadurai, Arjun, Tinius, Jonas, Oswald, Margareta von

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I am honoured to provide a preface to this timely, stimulating, and courageous volume, animated by thinkers and practitioners who value museums as a form but are worried about many of their existing deformations. Rather than speak for them (which I am not qualified to do in any case), I offer a provocation which grows out of reading this volume.

We generally agree that the ethnological museum as an institution emerges from ideas of collection, display, learning, and taste with deep roots in Europe’s troubled encounters with those societies that were under Imperial rule or came under some sort of Western sovereignty. Though the history of most Western ethnological museums has indisputably come out of prior histories of conquest, commerce, and political exploitation, the museum has struggled from its beginnings to be a forum for the broadening of knowledge and for the transformation of curiosities into popular experiences of the Savage Sublime. It joins the university, the scientific laboratory, the archive, the church and the prison in a complex of institutions devoted to the collected and researchable Sublime. The governing ideology of this evolution is of the best values of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment: knowledge, learning, curiosity, discovery. In short, it is understanding across languages, cultures, and social experiences.

But a funny thing happened to Western museums on the way to the twentieth century. They became sites of deep misunderstanding of both the European self and the colonised, objectified other. These misunderstandings are multiple, and they tell us something of the archaeology of our current ambivalence about museums. One such misunderstanding is about the difference and the similarity between the museum of fine art and the ethnological museum. Since fine art in the modern world is a product of the canonical discipline of art history (in alliance with archaeology in some cases), the distaste for ethnological museums among fine art curators and patrons reveals in fact both a distaste for the objects of the Savage Sublime and a distaste
for anthropology, whether ethnographic or ethnological. This distaste has gradually become mutual, and the Savage Sublime is hostage to this misunderstanding. This is a misunderstanding which has not yet been resolved, as we can see in the strange spectacle of the Humboldt Forum, where several classical fine art museums encircle the newly arrived ethnological specimens from the periphery of Berlin. Much earlier, the controversial exhibition on “Primitivism” in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern (1984/1985) at the MoMA in 1984 both revealed and exploited this profound mutual misunderstanding.

Another such misunderstanding was about the very categories into which the objects of the Savage Sublime could be divided: functional, ritual, art, craft, shamanic, decorative, and more categories were invented to help group, store, archive and (occasionally) display these objects. Here the tectonic struggle is between ethnological museums and natural history museums, since they do not agree on how and where to draw the line between human and non-human others, a struggle first captured by Donna Haraway in her pioneering work on the American Museum of Natural History in New York. The dioramas in major natural history museums express the heart of this confusion in their effort to capture the living environments, in which various objects of material culture may have had a social life, but their effect is to create strange spaces which look more like cartoons or caricatures of non-modernity. The misunderstanding of the Savage Sublime is thus a three-way misunderstanding between the disciplines of ethnology, natural history, and art history, each of which is in fact a product of the Age of Empire and has a different stake in the proper understanding of the objects of the Other.

The other misunderstanding that has plagued modern museums is the notion that they are also sites of research and teaching, similar to universities and colleges. Hence the busloads of school children that arrive at many Western museums (from the British Museum to the Rijksmuseum) today, to be taught how to enjoy exotic objects and cultures or to develop the ideas of taste that the museum patrons, curators, and docents think fit for young minds. This pedagogical ambition has its roots in figures such as Alexander von Humboldt (and his many replicas) who combined travel, science, research, and collecting as seamlessly linked activities in their lives. But is the museum really meant to be a classroom? Can it entertain and educate at the same time? Is the taste of the elite collectors, patrons, and curators who support the museum really what the middle and working classes need? Is this an illusion of cultural elites confused by the modern idea that their taste has to be the arbiter of all taste, and that their learning needs to be the canonical source of a broad democratic ideology? Does the museum really have the
capacities to foster critical thinking and new knowledge in the manner of the best modern universities?

And then we have the sense of the museum as a sacred place, a place of icons, silence, transcendental experiences, a church for those whom a Christian god has failed or become unavailable. Notwithstanding the recent efforts of modern museums to become more interactive, user-friendly, sociable, and welcoming, the truth is that noise, loud commentary, playful explorations of museum spaces, jokes about signage, vulgarities about iconic objects, are strictly discouraged. In this regard, museums continue to think of themselves as churches, in which a powerful clergy provides sacraments and glimpses of the divine to ordinary humans, who for a brief period of time, are lifted into the space of the Savage Sublime or the more elevated Kantian Sublime. They are transported out of the grime and stress of everyday life into the hushed sanctity of the great cathedrals, churches, and shrines of this world. It is also true that the great cathedrals and churches have become museums in their own right, but that is another story. So here lies another foundational misunderstanding about the museum, which propels its strategies, energies, and failures.

I said earlier that there were other categorical errors in the history of the modern museum. It is also sometimes viewed as an archive or repository of Otherness, or as a scientific laboratory for restoration, repair, and recovery of special materials, tools, styles, and forms. These confusions are also tied up with the tension between natural history and art history, and between museums and universities.

Thus, the fundamental contradictions, confusions and conundrums surrounding modern museums are products of a foundational misunderstanding which is about whether the museum is a university, a church, a laboratory, or a place of entertainment. The many debates surrounding museums in Europe and the United States today, including the recent one about the repatriation of objects taken from the sites of Euro-American empire, have roots in our failure to probe whether the museum can be a space for the sacred, the scientific, the educational, and the spectacular, all at the same time. Until we develop a simpler, leaner, more distinctive idea of what the museum ought to be, our dilemmas as scholars, curators, artists, and activists will not be resolved. The doors to engaging these misunderstandings and moving past them in the coming years have been brilliantly opened by the contributors to this collection.