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OPPORTUNITIES FOR MUSEUM RESEARCH IN ANTHROPOLOGY: Are They Really Dead or Were They Only Sleeping?

Arthur H. Wolf

The decline of anthropological research in museums has been in part attributed to the changing goals of anthropology and the increase in the numbers of university anthropology departments. In recent years many suggestions for increasing museum research potentials have been put forward by Anthropologists interested in its resurgence. An increasing cooperation between museums and university departments is seen as a necessary condition for this resurgence and could lead to more programs which include and train museum anthropologists.

In the 1930's someone suggested that the United States Patent Office be closed because everything worthwhile had been invented. The same line of thought has been applied to museum research in Anthropology (Mori and Mori 1972). This paper will attempt to show that possibilities for anthropologists to be active in museum work in some research and/or teaching capacity are not as scarce as has been thought for the past thirty years. The research potentials have been in the collections, and it is to them that both scholars and students should turn.

DECLINE OF MUSEUM RESEARCH

Much ink has been spilled over the waning research potential for anthropologists working in museums. An adequate description of the glory that was museum anthropology in the first quarter of this century can be gotten from any number of sources (Collier and Tschopik 1954; Fenton 1960; Nammour 1967).

As more and more anthropologists left the museums in the 1930's for universities and public service jobs, and the emphasis in the museums shifted from describing new theories of culture to "educating" the public through exhibits, the museum collections were given up for dead when it came to research. Whereas museums remained conservative and emphasized the historical approach, anthropology had moved on to the functional approach to cultural systems (Collier and Tschopik 1954:773).

This situation put the museum anthropologist in a curious position, that of trying to maintain a professional

standing in a rapidly expanding discipline while still being responsible for the curation of collections. The collections most often suffered in that case. As the locus of research moved on to the universities and the trends were more to specialization, it became the opinion of many university anthropologists that museums had nothing to offer the students and that the museums had indeed failed to keep up with theoretical developments (Collier and Tschopik 1954:775).

SUGGESTIONS FOR INCREASE

Many suggestions were offered in print for instigating a resurgence in museum research during the late 1950's and 1960's. Some advocated integration with the work of other disciplines, such as art, and all implied cooperation with university-trained anthropologists and their departments (Collier and Tschopik 1954:775-777; Shapiro 1958:49; Fenton 1960:337; Collier 1962:323).

Most of the suggestions pertained to ethnology, as the archaeologists had never gotten that far from strictly object-oriented study of collections, if indeed some had at all. A need was expressed for renewed interest in areas of research such as culture change, evolution, values and symboling as reflected in material culture (Collier 1962:323).

Plans for salvaging ethnological data from fast disappearing cultures were put forward, always emphasizing the need for teams of anthropologists (linguists, ethnologists, archaeologists) to bring back collections (not only artifacts, but other abstract ideas as recorded on film and tape). The idea was to have the museums store the collections and to have the anthropologists utilize them for further research (Collier 1962:324; Fenton 1960:345; Collier and Tschopik 1954:775).

Contributions to theory from the study of existing collections were sought, especially in the way of general statements on man's biology, the nature of culture, growth and change, and cultural ecology. The collections could also, it was suggested, be used to teach the ethnography and culture history of specific groups (Collier and Tschopik 1954: 778).

If there was to be renewed research, it was argued, there would also be a need for a technical staff to care for the collections, thus freeing the curator for his research (Fenton 1960:337). For this the techniques of museum work would need to be perfected. Some writers saw this need as an area for applied research in problems such as visitor behavior and preservation techniques (Daifuku 1960:69; Collier and Tschopik 1954:776).

Some of the suggestions given then have been followed,

while others have had the groundwork put down for them and some will never become practical.

APPLICATIONS AND EFFORTS

Many of the suggestions given by earlier writers have been implemented with success. For example, the integration of anthropology and aesthetic but sterile exhibits of "primitive art" has led to several successful teaching exhibitions (Van Dyke 1973; Seligman 1974).

One article mentioned that museums should publish catalogues of their holdings, giving the cultural significance of each object as well as displaying the "best pieces" (Dark 1969:1131). A number of museums have done so for years, the Denver Art Museum being among them with its Indian Leaflet Series and Material Culture Notes (Denver Art Museum 1930-1953; 1962; 1969). Of course, time and money prohibit most museums from doing this kind of research.

In 1967 one survey of ethnological items was proposed, and one was published, as a guide for scholars with interest in a specific area (Ricciardelli 1967; Hunter 1967).

That trend, of surveys to determine the strength of available collections, still continues today. A current survey is being circulated by the Southeast Asia Research Council for its national organization, The Association for Asian Studies. It is being done with the cooperation of the Textile Museum in Washington and asks for finer distinctions as to provenience and age than have earlier surveys. These efforts are valuable to the anthropologist who does do research in museums and who wants to know where collections of interest to him are reposited.

Salvage ethnology has perhaps a larger appeal in areas other than North America, where opportunities are relatively few outside of the arctic areas. Recent laws concerning the export of antiquities by various countries also make foreign museums the most likely repositories for cultural items which are collected in those countries (Nunoo 1971). This should not preclude serious studies being done by workers not native to those countries.

In reference to the perfection of museum techniques and processes such as preservation and exhibition, studies have been done on the effectiveness of exhibits as reflected in visitor behavior (Parsons 1965) and training courses have been established at a number of institutions (Burcaw 1967b: 26-27; Williams 1969).

NEED FOR MUSEUM-UNIVERSITY COOPERATION

All of these types of activity have brought the museums closer to the university academic departments. The ways they interact, the emphases they purvey, and the quality of their programs vary, but the increase in cooperation between the two has been the brightest development in the last twenty-five years (Gilborn 1971:36).

This closeness, however, puts the university museum especially in a position that is both advantageous and somewhat awkward. The potential resources of the university departments, when combined with the research opportunities in the museums, should offer splendid educational possibilities for the student. Problems may occur if either the museums of the university departments think they have a monopoly on available resources. Everyone concerned should realize that no object in a museum collection has only one potential use, and that the advancement of knowledge should take precedence over strictly personal interests (Munroe 1959:252; Burcaw 1972:35).

The anthropology museum must also have cooperation with the university departments. In some cases this is not even a potential problem, as where the department operates the museum (Williams 1969). Cooperation should extend to the planning of museum training courses as well as to the planning of individual research programs of students. This would insure that qualified personnel are used and that decisions would benefit both institutions equally. A lack of cooperation may create divided loyalties because of status on the periphery of academic professions, or vice versa (Golburn 1971:38).

TRAINING COURSES AND CURRICULUM PLANNING

As mentioned previously, the planning of museum courses and the decision of what to teach - research techniques in museums, or only specific curatorial skills, or both - should be a mutual concern of the institutions involved.

There are a number of museum training courses available in anthropology, including some which make extensive use of media techniques as teaching aides (Burcaw 1967a; 1967b; 1972). However, museum educators and anthropologists would do well to heed Barzun (1967:17-21) when he warns against using too much on a multi-media approach to education through exhibits. This warning should also apply to the training courses. Perhaps the best way of training museum anthropologists is to provide a program which integrates anthropological theory with practical museum experiences.

As far as purely scholarly research goes, there may be a trend among museum anthropologists to do a more "popular"

scholarship, although just as thorough. This would be in the way of planning for conceptual exhibition practices which utilize the museum collections for cross-cultural or synthesizing displays. These types of exhibits would benefit both the student and the public, especially in university museums. Other areas of consideration are lectures and exhibits coordinated with both college and high school curriculums (Rath 1967:19-22; Reimann 1967:39). Examples of attempts of this nature have been published recently (Pearce 1973; Ruppel 1969).

As far as current research interest in the areas suggested previously is concerned, the museum which attracts anthropology students, both undergraduates and graduates, has a number of things to offer. Many of these museums contain archaeological and ethnological collections which were made in the years before and directly after 1930. Many of these collections have never been worked on, and those which have could be looked at again. At any rate they do require care and cataloguing if they are to be available for the next generation of students to study (Fenton 1960:344).

A combination of art and anthropology or history and anthropology might serve as a basis for a project with ethnological collections, while perhaps hypotheses of a more general nature could be tested on them as well (Mori and Mori 1972). The possibilities for the use of the collections as lecture aids and study examples are unlimited except for the size and scope of a particular collection.

Some of the suggestions made by concerned people in anthropology towards increasing the research and teaching function of museums have been presented, as well as the practical applications of some of them. It is hoped that the reader will be made aware of the crucial nature of museum-university cooperation in regard to the furthering of museum research and teaching, and that the opportunities listed will perhaps inspire someone to make use of a museum collection in some facet of their own research.

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