



Anthropology museums and museum anthropology

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This entry provides an overview of the history, politics and changing roles of anthropology museums. It explores the developing field of museum anthropology, which encompasses the work that anthropologists do within museums and the anthropological study of museums. Museum anthropology is situated within recent theoretical frameworks that underpin the study of objects and the relation between people and things. A central concern is the changing relationship between the museum, the people from whom museum collections originated, and diverse audiences. Recent work in museum anthropology has highlighted the far-reaching potential of the museum for interdisciplinary research, experimentation, and community engagement.

Introduction

Anthropology museums are often defined by their collections, which typically originate from non-Western and often small-scale communities from around the world. Their approach tends to prioritise objects' cultural and historical contexts. Museum anthropology refers to the work that anthropologists do within museums as well as the anthropological study of museums as important institutions within modern society. It encompasses a broad range of academic and professional concerns. In both theory and practice, museum anthropology straddles overlapping interests in field research and public outreach, metropolitan centres and (post) colonial peripheries, diverse international communities and local audiences, material culture studies and artistic sensibilities.

From the late nineteenth century, museums with ethnographic collections, particularly those based in universities, were core institutions in the development of anthropology as a specialist discipline. While anthropological interests in museums and material culture studies waned from the 1920s, over the last few decades there has been a remarkable revitalization. On-going changes have been prompted by new approaches to museum theory and practice: the development of an anthropology of museums; a renewed academic concern with objects, materiality, and the relations between persons and things; the interests of 'source' communities; and a growing recognition of the potential of museums as central institutions in universities and civil society.

History of anthropology museums

Principles of collection, classification, and exhibition have long influenced the ways that knowledge of human beings is formed. From the sixteenth century, European explorers collected natural and 'artificial' curiosities as a means of trying to understand the diversity of the world and its peoples. Objects were also collected as trophies of far-flung adventures and conquests. Originally displayed in palaces and then arranged in gentlemen's cabinets of curiosities, this juxtaposition of diverse materials was intended to provide insights into the godlike ordering of the natural and human world. Collecting was propelled by curiosity and a growing scientific interest in classification. The idea that Europeans had the right to collect and classify the world was also part of a nascent imperialism, which was often justified by ethnocentric claims of superiority. From the beginnings of public museums in the eighteenth century to the great age of museum collecting in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, ethnographic objects and their associated information were accumulated in museums where they were used to consolidate forms of knowledge that underpinned scientific, institutional and colonial authority. (Bennett 1995). The material culture of non-Western peoples was often classified and displayed in ways that positioned non-Western peoples as less-developed in a fictitious hierarchy which privileged Euro-Americans. Objects assembled and used for colonial agendas were transferred to museums, at times providing the foundation for the creation of new museums. The Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie began as the 1931 Paris colonial exposition, which featured material from Africa and Oceania gathered to celebrate the achievements of French colonial regimes. These objects later comprised one of the founding collections for the Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac, when it opened in 2007 (Price 2007: 98-101).

Anthropology museums as distinct institutions or separate departments within larger civic and national museums were developed during the rapid expansion of public museums in the late nineteenth century. The boundaries and affiliations with what counted as 'anthropology', or more frequently 'ethnography', varied over time and in different places, resulting in the designation of certain types of people (historically defined as 'primitive' or 'exotic') as ethnographic subjects. While the terms 'anthropology' and 'ethnography' are often used interchangeably, the former implies a more analytical and often comparative approach, whereas the latter tends to be primarily descriptive. The positioning of ethnography within museums reveals changing and at times prejudicial attitudes. Ethnographic collections were often displayed alongside European archaeology, implying a similarity between people from the distant past and the contemporary lives of non-western peoples. At the British Museum, ethnography moved between the divisions of Pre-history, Medieval, and later Oriental Antiquities until a separate Ethnology department was established in 1946 (Wilson 2002: 279). Elsewhere, as is common in the United States, anthropology was included within natural history museums where systems of classification developed for the study of plants and animals were then applied to artefacts and sometimes people. In institutions such as the American Museum of Natural History in New York, Native Americans and other indigenous groups were often presented in dioramas that firmly placed them within a fabricated 'natural' environment.

There are numerous overlapping and often contradictory historical contexts and trajectories through which objects entered museum collections and were put on public display. Artefacts were acquired from many different sources – explorers, traders, colonial officials, missionaries, artists, and anthropologists – and resulted from different kinds of engagements. While much material was collected in circumstances of great inequality, at times stolen or seized as part of colonial loot, many objects were readily exchanged, sold, or gifted. An attention to the particularities of objects – their materiality, originating contexts, and histories of collection, circulation, and interpretation – provides unique insights into larger issues of sociality, history, politics, art, and environment.

In addition to providing a wealth of information about the people from whom the collections originated, research on ethnographic collections provides a richer understanding of the development of the anthropological field and the history of the discipline. Much of the material in anthropology museums, particularly in university or national institutions, was systematically assembled during the course of intensive fieldwork and is greatly enhanced by corresponding photographs and detailed associated documentation. Intensive fieldwork typically involves a close engagement between anthropologists and local hosts and assistants, who are often actively involved in processes of documentation and collecting. Many of the objects in anthropology collections were selectively exchanged or given to researchers by their producers and owners. Some of the materials collected during fieldwork, such as models, commissioned pieces, tourist art, and photographs, were themselves produced by the interactions between fieldworkers and local assistants. Considering the processes of collecting often highlights indigenous agency in the co-production of anthropological knowledge. A salient example is the extensive collection of objects, photographs, drawings, audio recordings, film, and documents made by Alfred Haddon and the 1898 Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to the Torres Strait and now in the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA) at the University of Cambridge (Herle 2012). At the time of Haddon's fieldwork, many Torres Strait Islander elders were concerned about the rapid changes in the region and the potential loss of customary knowledge as a result of the influence of traders, missionaries, and colonial officials. Islanders actively assisted Haddon and the Expedition members in the project to document aspects of their culture while still withholding information and objects that were deemed secret or private. Much of the knowledge that was recorded and the materials that were collected were attributed to named Islanders and their families. Today, these collections are seen as a crucial resource for Islander knowledge about the past and a source of inspiration for younger generations. The importance of the Haddon collection has been reinforced by recent political events, in which the materials collected by the Expedition have been used as crucial evidence in the success of recent land and sea claims. Over the last twenty years, museum staff have been involved in numerous collaborative projects with Islanders, both in Cambridge and in the Torres Strait (Herle 2003).

The interest in assembling large collections during field research was influenced by practices developed in

the natural sciences. Comprehensive collections were initially understood as providing the basis for compiling comparative ethnographic information and developing anthropological theories of evolution and diffusion. Evolution aimed to explain how different kinds of living organisms (including people) developed and diversified, while diffusion focused on the dissemination of physical and cultural traits between different groups, typically through a comparative examination of material culture, language, and human physical characteristics. With the development of social anthropology in the 1920s, these paradigms were no longer considered valid or adequate. Academic interests in objects and museums declined, yet many leading social anthropologists, from Reginald Radcliffe Brown and Bronislaw Malinowski to Marilyn Strathern, made significant collections during their fieldwork which were used to illustrate the special characteristics of particular cultural groups. At MAA and elsewhere, the tradition of staff and graduate students assembling well-documented field-based collections has continued to the present day, supplemented by donations and commissions from artists and local producers. The historic collections retain wide-ranging value for researchers and cultural descendants, and alongside newer acquisitions are mediators in developing and maintaining productive relations between museums, producers, source communities, and diverse audiences.

As with contemporary social anthropology, today anthropology museums – frequently re-branded as institutions of ‘world cultures’ – research and present a wide variety of topics, incorporating Euro-American traditions, science, and contemporary art. While museums retain responsibility for the legacies of the collections under their care, today this material is not only understood as representative of the beliefs and practices of the people from whom it originated. Collections from around the world also provide insights into the complexity and nuances of local and global histories of encounter, exchange, empire, migration, and disciplinary formation.



Artwork by Maori artist Lisa Reihana, *he tautoko* (2006)^[1]

Theoretical and methodological frameworks

Innovative work by curators and museum anthropologists has been informed by and has in turn influenced underlying shifts in the discipline of anthropology as well as in museum theory and practice. The post-modern turn foregrounded the literary and political aspects of [ethnographic](#) writing and challenged the authority of anthropologists who, largely for their own intellectual purposes, were charged with documenting and analyzing the beliefs and practices of typically remote groups of people (Clifford & Marcus 1986). Anthropology museums were criticised for the [colonial](#) contexts of many of their collections as well as for ethno-centric presentations that implicitly asserted the authority of the museum over the peoples it represented (Clifford 1988; Price 1989; Karp & Levine 1991). While many of these critiques failed to recognise the collaborative nature of much fieldwork, they drew attention to the politics and

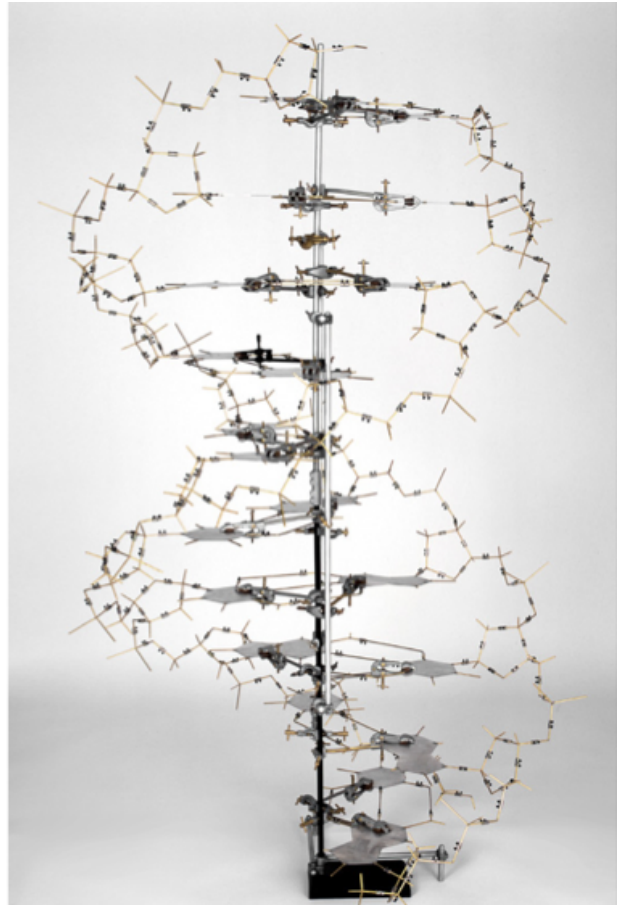
poetics of museum display, and encouraged a more self-aware approach to the production and dissemination of anthropological knowledge. The concurrent development of an anthropology of museums took the museum itself as an artefact of society and as a subject for sustained analysis, highlighting the challenges and renewed potential of museums for both anthropology and community engagement (Ames 1986). A new 'museology' emerged that was reflexive and primarily concerned with epistemology, the recognition that every aspect of museum work – collecting, documentation, research, and display – was both informed by and perpetuated particular ways of knowing (Vergo 1989). Different kinds of museums, from prominent Euro-American institutions of [history](#), [science](#), and [art](#) to indigenous cultural centres, have become field sites. Influential examples include Sharon MacDonald's analysis of the complex political and institutional negotiations in the production of public culture 'behind the scenes' at the Science Museum in London (2002), James Clifford's reflections on ethnographic museums as highly charged 'contact zones' for interactions between museum staff and members of the numerous 'source' communities from which museum collections originated (Clifford 1997) and Jennifer Shannon's ethnography of the 'Our Lives' inaugural exhibition at the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington (2014). While central museum activities continue to focus on the collection, preservation, interpretation, and display of valued objects, professional practice has been influenced by an increased self-awareness of the knowledge, assumptions, and political [relations](#) that inform routine museum work as well as by the recognition of numerous stake-holders in museum collections.

The contemporary field of museum anthropology draws on a number of theoretical premises that underpin the study of objects and assemblages. Tracking the social life of things – the distinct biographies of particular objects from their creation to their use and circulation – illuminates their personal and social contexts by revealing complex and changing meanings that are attached to objects as they move between people and places over time (Appadurai 1986). The development of relational models within anthropology shifted the focus away from objectified and fixed entities exclusively owned by individuals and institutions to a more nuanced understanding of the dynamic links between people and things. A central premise is that entities (both people and objects) are given substance, meaning, and value through the relations in which they are enmeshed. Rather than simply being seen as static items of material culture, objects can be understood and analyzed as materializations of social relations, a dynamic process that involves the interweaving of human actions, beliefs, skills, and materials to create physical objects (Bell & Geismar 2009). A close analysis of processes such as basket weaving reveals the maker's sensuous and skilled engagement with the inherent properties of the fibrous material used in its construction, challenging the common distinction between form and substance (Ingold 2000). Concerns with agency have moved attention away from what objects mean to the effects they have on people as part of a system of social relations involving various kinds of human intentions and activities (Gell 1998). Perspectives from actor-network-theory position artefacts, alongside [technologies](#) and people, as 'actants' or active entities in complex and intersecting networks (Latour 2005). Objects that are devised to guide human actions, such as

a Berlin key that is designed to replace a human caretaker by making its user lock the door at night in order to retrieve their key from the lock, demonstrate the interpenetration of the sociological and technological in their creation and use (Latour 2000). Relational models have been productively applied to the museum itself, which can be analysed as a multi-layered and dynamic transcultural artefact composed of historic and on-going relations between objects, producers, source communities, collectors, anthropologists, donors, and museum staff (Gosden & Larson 2007). This type of analysis highlights the complexity and nuances of museum histories, and provides insights into the different types of agencies that resulted in the formation and interpretation of museum collections. Ultimately the aim is to activate the potential of the collections for research and community engagement.

Museum theory informs practice in the development of methodologies to identify, care for, and interpret collections. A close examination of the physical characteristics of objects and the materials and skills they embody has been enhanced by combining anthropological and historical expertise with new technologies for scientific investigation, such as radiocarbon dating, intra-red spectroscopy, and 3-D scanning. The methodological potency of the apparently routine activities involved in curation has been aptly described as 'the museum as method' (Thomas 2010), an approach which draws on open-ended discovery and multiple levels of contextualization and connection. Exhibition projects have developed a range of creative approaches, moving from the didactic to the inquisitive and dialogical, incorporating multiple perspectives and enabling others – outside specialists, artists, and community groups – to tell their own stories (Raymond & Salmon 2006).

Curating exhibitions is not simply an opportunity to display knowledge generated elsewhere through fieldwork, texts, and liaisons with various specialists. The very creation of exhibitions, involving processes of assembly and juxtaposition, can itself be part of a research process that generates new ideas and understandings (Herle 2013). For example, Malangan funerary effigies from New Ireland, Papua New Guinea, are one of the most prevalent types of ethnographic objects found in museum collections. Originally intended to be destroyed after ritual use, they continue to be produced by specialist carvers to commemorate the recently deceased and represent salient aspects of their life, including their clan relations (Strathern 2001). A Malangan sculpture can be imagined as a second skin, a porous membrane that first contains and then releases the life force of the deceased after a period of mourning. Like any object, a Malangan sculpture can be presented in innumerable ways, each presentation providing the opportunity for different kinds of associations. Positioning a Malangan sculpture alongside a double helix model of DNA, for example, draws attention to the different ways that the particular characteristics of individuals are understood, represented, and passed on to descendants. In this sense the Malangan sculpture and the double helix can both be understood as formidable technologies for the transmission of knowledge, bodily substance, sociality, and property between generations.



Malangan effigy alongside a model of the DNA double helix^[2]

Museums and source communities

While museums are often criticised as sites of appropriation, their trajectory over the last few centuries can also be understood as part of a democratising process, with access to highly valued collections gradually opening up for broader publics. A shift of focus to actively nourishing productive [relations](#) between museums and various kinds of communities is part of a wider trend for museums to be more responsive to the varied concerns held by multiple stakeholders in their collections. Over the last few decades, the special and enduring interests of lineal or cultural descendants of the people from whom specific collections originated have been widely acknowledged. The term 'source communities' (Peers & Brown 2003) has gained parlance in the context of museums with [ethnographic](#) collections originating from self-identifying indigenous or ethnic groups, including people living on ancestral lands, diasporic populations, and immigrants. Its use highlights the overlapping histories embodied in collections and the responsibilities that museums have to the people they represent.

The developing relations between museums and source communities over the last three decades have ranged from indifference and confrontation to remarkable exchanges of knowledge, innovative

collaborations, and multi-vocal exhibitions, which highlight different perspectives on the material on display. Many people retain strong emotional and political attachments to objects associated with their ancestors and linked to land and custom. These attachments are often amplified by specific collection, settler, and [colonial](#) histories. Objects such as Maori *Tāonga* (ancestral treasures) and Blackfoot shirts are seen by cultural descendants as living entities that embody the spirits of their ancestors (Peers & Brown 2016). Reconnecting with objects from the past can be a crucial aspect of knowledge [sharing](#), cultural healing, revitalization, [artistic](#) inspiration, and political redress (Krmpotich & Peers 2013). Objects may also be mobilised as ambassadors, providing opportunities for source communities to assert their presence in museums around the world. Groups such as the Maori are routinely involved in the presentation of materials originating from their homelands, actively contributing to the interpretation of the material on display and conducting ceremonies to mark the opening of exhibitions.



UK based Fijian dancers with nineteenth century club^[3]

While acknowledging the heartfelt connections that many source community members have to objects in museum collections, there is not necessarily a direct or an inevitable relationship between contemporary peoples and material that originated from their homelands. Attention to object biographies reveals that in many instances objects cannot be linked to a singular point of production or use. Even when there is a clear

historical connection, people may express disinterest or ambivalence towards the material culture of previous generations. Some may actively chose to distance themselves from things associated with a remote or pre-Christian past. Evangelical converts are likely to disdain or even fear objects originally associated with ancestor cults, [divination](#), or sorcery. For example, many Christian Fijians believe that historic objects in the National Museum's collections contain spirits that could adversely affect their well-being and they avoid being near certain objects and are reluctant to visit the Museum. Between 2003 and 2005, some Protestant churches encouraged their members to burn heirlooms, including clubs and *tabua* (presentation whale's teeth), in order to protect themselves from danger and strengthen their faith. In response, the Fiji Museum advertised in local newspapers to encourage people to deposit their heirlooms in the storerooms of the Museum rather than destroy them. Museum staff have encountered the spiritual aspects of these objects on various levels. As devout Christians themselves, responsible for protecting the nation's cultural heritage, many have sought help from church members to pray for their protection and the well-being of the Museum and its collections (Buadromo & Igglesden 2015).

The diverse relations between museums and source communities reflect the nuances of entangled histories, from encounter and colonialization to fieldwork and friendship. Museum visitors and researchers increasingly include members of source communities, with many travelling great distances to engage with objects associated with their past. Many museums now proactively share information about the material in their collections, provide direct and indirect access to objects and associated documentation, and collaborate with cultural experts in the development of research projects and exhibitions. It is now common practice for curators, academic researchers, and graduate students to visit communities around the world with details and photographs of related museum collections as a means of sharing and eliciting information as well as opening up relationships for future collaboration. New digital technologies also provide opportunities for sharing information about museum collections and developing online research environments. Numerous collaborative websites have been developed worldwide, some providing privileged access to members of source communities. Outstanding examples include the Reciprocal Research Network (RRN) based at the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, which was co-developed in partnership with four Northwest Coast First Nations groups and includes catalogue information of Northwest Coast collections from museums in Canada, the United States and the UK (Rowley 2013), and the website 'Returning Photos: Australian Aboriginal Photographs from European Collections'.

Providing access to collections may include using artefacts, both within and outside the museum, in culturally appropriate ways, at times challenging conventional conservation standards. In order to connect with the ancestral past and the spiritual presence of sacred objects, it may be important to touch fragile materials and use museum artefacts in rituals and performances. Acknowledging the authority of source community representatives may occasionally restrict access to others. Culturally sensitive material,

including some secret-sacred objects or those containing human remains, may be deemed inappropriate for public display in galleries or on the Internet. Some objects may require special storage conditions or ritual protocols, or be the subject of claims for return. Despite the popular focus on repatriation, often fuelled by ill-informed media accounts, claims for return are relatively few and successful cases demonstrate that repatriation often strengthens relationships within communities and between communities and the museum, prompting new exchanges and collaborative projects. While mainstream museums still maintain positions of relative authority, the impact of source communities on traditional museum goals and practices has been far-reaching. In settler societies such as Australia and Canada, museums are key sites for the re-articulation of political relationships between indigenous communities and civil society, resulting in a growing indigenization of museums (Phillips 2011). Many Aboriginal and First Nations groups have also developed their own museums and cultural centres. For mainstream museums, developing productive relations with source communities and indigenous cultural centres opens up new areas for research and also affords privileged opportunities for curators and researchers to work within host communities, often providing access to people, places, and knowledge from which they would otherwise be excluded.

Museum anthropology, research and civil society

Changes in museology and museum anthropology have greatly strengthened the position and potential of museums for sustained research, experimentation and engagement with a wide variety of communities, variously defined. Museums are not simply about objects; rather, they prompt scholarship on complex [relations](#) among people and things. Innovative museum-based projects, exhibitions, and activities have become more inclusive and receptive, attracting increasing numbers of visitors and targeting diverse audiences. In addition to the long-standing role of museums in public education, new perceptions among policy makers and funding bodies increasingly expect museums to act as political agents by actively contributing to agendas for social inclusion, community regeneration, and responsive [citizenship](#). While the museum's potential for research, teaching, and engagement goes far beyond these direct and immediate political goals, museums have become much more audience-centred and have worked to develop new collaborative paradigms which acknowledge the special needs and interests of marginalised groups (Golding & Modest 2013).

Within academia, university museums are re-gaining central positions as institutions which bring together interdisciplinary research in the social sciences, [arts](#) and humanities, and the [sciences](#). In addition to contributing to specialist research, museums provide a public face for the broader work of the university and contribute to government-sponsored impact agendas. Drawing on the wealth of their collections and the general ethos of the academy, university museums tend to provide more opportunities for experimentation, risk-taking and debate. Anthropology museums are centrally involved in these challenging and rewarding revitalization processes. Perspectives from museum anthropology, both within and outside

the museum, offer a well-positioned critique of the wide-ranging implications of these transformations.

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[1] The installation repositions a carved wooden ancestral figure, *tetoteko* (MAA 1939.70), originally attached to a house gable in the Bay of Islands, the homeland of the artist's father. The carving was collected in the 1830's by Karl von Hügel and donated by his son Anatole von Hügel, MAA's founding Curator. The figure is wearing headphones plugged into a listening post and positioned in front of a video screen, which references landscape, Maori *tāonga* (ancestral treasures), and the artist's movement between Aotearoa New Zealand and Cambridge. The visuals, songs and stories animate the figure, highlighting its continued ancestral presence and ongoing connections to past and contemporary events.

[2] This picture shows a funerary effigy from New Ireland, Papua New Guinea (MAA 1890.177) alongside a replica of Crick and Watson's model of the Double Helix from the Cambridge Laboratory of Molecular Biology Images from the introductory section of the exhibition 'Assembling Bodies: Art Science and Imagination' (MAA 2009 - 2010; MAA 1890.177). The juxtaposition stimulated discussions about the ways that the distinctive characteristics of individuals are represented, contained, and distributed.

[3] Picture taken on 6 June 2013 during the opening of the MAA exhibition 'Chiefs & Governors: Art and Power in Fiji'. The dancer at the back holds a nineteenth century Fijian club from MAA's collections borrowed for the event. There are over 10,000 Fijians living in the UK, many of whom are attached to the British army. Photograph courtesy of Gordon Brown.