

21A.501

Assignment 4

Harvard Museum of Natural History Visit

Never thought I could bike back in time, but a few minutes up Mass Ave and through the doors of Harvard's Museum of Natural History I was back in a world where woolly mammoths, dinosaurs, and indigenous cultures were at their peak around the globe. I had made a plan before coming to the museum, but stopping on the way to appreciate different exhibits is what led to my 2.5 hour visit.

What most notably shaped my experience were the varied exhibit layouts: display cases and scenic exhibits. The display cases such as the Earth minerals and the glass flowers were neat to see, but I found that I was mentally fatigued trying to read every bit of displayed information to try to answer my questions: What were they? How and why were they made? From where were they sourced and what is the story of their collection? The intricately crafted flowers and the unearthly appearing Earth were neat to see, but I was not interested enough in ecology and geology to be drawn in without a storyline. In reflection now, I realize with some concern that perhaps the culture of instant-gratification led to my brain fatigue from reading every plaque and eventually lost interest. Nonetheless, my experience validates the point in the Rieppel reading about the importance of creating a scene to entertain audiences at museums. I had previously read this sentiment thinking of entertainment as a trivial aspect, but it holds merit when considering the audience wouldn't otherwise stop to observe and learn. In the age-old debate of form vs function, function in this case is practically irrelevant if the exhibit doesn't successfully funnel an audience from their individual worlds to the world displayed before them.

In contrast to the show cases, there were a few rooms that were either partially or fully arranged to give the experience of entering a different realm. Two that stood out were the New England Forests exhibit and the Peabody dining exhibit. Switching from the passive museum academic mode to playing the role of explorer was a lot of fun. With information displayed implicitly through context and stimulation engaging multiple senses, it felt a lot more natural to interact with and learn what was going on. By engaging multiple senses and incorporating a tangible and visual storyline, I have found those exhibits a lot easier to remember.

For example in the Peabody museum, the dining exhibit showed cooking shows through the decades, a kitchen set from a century ago, and a Harvard dining table and menus. The combination of media, being able to jump from observing the setting to reading up on details as if "google searching" the walls, made for a more interactive and less systematic experience.

When I get mentally tired of words, I can still glance and glean so much. I felt the Peabody museum was especially captivating—perhaps because it was anthropocentric and therefore I could use my familiarities as reference to spot what seemed notably unusual. I wanted to keep reading about the personal stories and histories behind the settings, who the people were that interacted with this setting and how, how their upbringing brought them here, what the halls sounded like, what they cared and worried about.... This list could fill a page. Whatever seemed mundane and unworthy of being noted, is exactly what would have been most intriguing to me. But alas, there were no audio recordings or people to speak to, and one could never be sure how the remaining trinkets were used or how they came into the museum's possession.

Museum exhibits are a static representation of a dynamic environment—dynamic in both interactions and evolutions, but preserved in a single state determined by present understanding. Though scenic exhibits may call for more active engagement than display cases, at their core they both share this static quality. Given the inherent bias used to make judgements on a display with limited context, I probably should have been a more inquisitive onlooker. How did the curator know to arrange things the way they did? How was I to know that I implicitly picked up the right details in a scene? It was only when I came to the Peabody section of the museum that I started questioning these things—likely because meal times and student life were topics I had a direct reference to.¹ My skepticism, or lack of it, reminded me of the Riepel reading, where it was discussed at length people's skepticism of dinosaur displays and how museums versus movies sought trust when illustrating their take on reality. Museum crowds in the past either were or were perceived to be much more skeptical of exhibits than I had been. Perhaps with no internet and higher education being less mainstream, people were less familiar with the Earth's diversity and thus more likely to defend their preconceived structures of the world. But because I know these exhibits are a product of iterations and efforts by archaeologists, anthropologists, historians, engineers coming together over decades and sometimes centuries to piece storylines together, I feel it is fair that I have more trust. Open-minded or gullible, maybe I'll find out when a modern-day version of Riepel's reading exposes the guesswork behind these exhibits.

Finally, I want to touch on the Great Mammal Hall, which I believe was the most notable attraction when the museum first came together. The name was quite accurate. These mammals were huge and magnificent in a way that I had never before been able to appreciate from reference diagrams and pictures. Though the room was filled with display cases, they were clustered together. The cluster of monkeys in particular reminded me of Donna Haraway's reading about Akeley's relationship with gorillas.² This chimp had an expression on its face that just looked terrified and I was left wondering if its musculature was positioned this way or if it was frozen in time. I paid its respects and quickly moved on. As I moved towards the lioness, I stepped closer in awe and felt a jerking feeling that it was wrong to be this close. There is no

¹ Specifically, the dining menus that were archived were likely the fanciest ones. Must have been. No matter how posh Hahvahd is, there's no way these students were served these gluttonous three-course meals daily.

² Shooting them after looking them straight in the eye, what the

other way in the natural world that I would actually be able to view these animals up close. In reflection, should it be left that way? Why is it that humans go to all this effort to take the lives of these animals just to try to give them a new immortal “life” for generations of humans to observe? Thinking more about our culture, it was interesting to note that this exhibit was almost entirely visual. There were a few short plaques but perhaps the museum curators knew that people like me might have too much to take in with these large animals to also be reading. But the sounds and smells of their habitats for example, were not preserved in this way. Neither was their gait or interactions. Does our culture value visual forms over other senses? Or perhaps other senses are simply too difficult to preserve? I think it was this out of place-ness, and the act of going to a museum to see these displaced alive-dead animals that seemed to strengthen the division between our anthropocentric world and the natural world. This museum visit felt a bit like acknowledging the incompatibility of our worlds. Donna Haraway also touched on this separation of “nature and culture,” describing the interaction between humans and the animals on display as if it were a spiritual encounter. I’m including the full excerpt because the craft and flow of these sentences expertly highlight the otherworldly-ness of the moment I was feeling, and ultimately answered my wonders about the calling that humans felt/feel to make these museums.

Oh, this is Gaze? I Can you read that?

The glass front of the diorama forbids the body's entry, but the gaze invites his visual penetration. The animal is frozen in a moment of supreme life, and man is transfixed. No merely living organism could accomplish this act. The specular commerce between man and animal at the interface of two evolutionary ages is completed. The animals in the dioramas have transcended mortal life, and hold their pose forever, with muscles tensed, noses aquiver, veins in the face and delicate ankles and folds in the supple skin all prominent. No visitor to a merely physical Africa could see these animals. This is a spiritual vision made possible only by their death and literal re-presentation. Only then could the essence of their life be present. Only then could the hygiene of nature cure the sick vision of civilized man. Taxidermy fulfills the fatal desire to represent, to be whole; it is a politics of reproduction (25).

It was indeed stunning to see the colossal size of “real” animals up close, though I do wonder whether museums could create these mesmerizing displays with artificial representations and spare real animals. Knowing that these were artificial instead of taxidermy, I know I would have felt more at ease and unguarded to “gaze.” There is a particular irony in the efforts modern humans have made to isolate and sterilize ourselves from the natural world, while also being drawn to microdosed “nature” in a “desire to be whole.”³

It was hard to leave the museum, hence the 2.5 hour visit. I had this feeling like I needed to pay respects by fully appreciating and observing all aspects of every living object and story before me. This is an odd and familiar feeling that I remembered from being at museums as a young child but didn’t have the analytical maturity to express the emotion and ultimately led to

³ We clean and take antibiotics doses to rid ourselves of anything “dirty” and natural, but then at the same time need microdoses of intense “natural” interaction to feel whole and pretend we are one with the world.

weeping. As I biked back, it truly felt like I was coming from traveling—filled with something new but unable to be articulated when questioned “what did you take away” from a roommate. I think I will journey back, hopefully with my mom. Exploring human experience with a close connection that knows me so well, and hearing the reactions and past experiences it brings up for her, would make for an entirely different experience and reflection. With her unencumbered articulations and our shared entwined connection with the spirit of the natural world, I wonder what deeper understanding or thoughts about ways of life we may come to.

MIT OpenCourseWare
<https://ocw.mit.edu/>

21A.501J / STS.074J Art, Craft, Science
Fall 2024

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <https://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.