

CHAPTER 2

Visiting the empire at the provincial museum, 1900–50

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Over the last twenty years, the museum has increasingly been positioned as a ‘committed participant’ in the British imperial project.¹ Scholars have persuasively insisted on the link between the institutionalised display of non-Western material culture and Western imperial agendas.² Due to the paucity of recorded popular reaction to such representations, much of the scholarship which has interrogated the mechanics of these display paradigms has necessarily focused upon intended interpretation, or official constructions of meaning.

Critiques of ‘official’ interpretations developed by public institutions and curators tell us much about the histories of academic thought and the intended approaches of such organisations. This chapter, however, focuses on how these official agendas were actually received in practice. Pervasive Foucauldian scholarship emphasising the hegemony of the museum as a technology of power and as an architect of singular knowledge is slowly being countered.³ New calls have been made to reveal the inconsistencies and failures in authority of such ‘disciplinary regimes’.⁴ Others have highlighted the need to credit a broader variety of human agents in the study of meaning-making in museums.⁵

This chapter will contribute to this scholarship and emphasise the extent to which discrepancies between intended meaning and popular understanding of museum displays occurred. I will use a discussion of visitor engagement with non-European material cultures in the provincial museum to critique the assumption of the pervasive nature of curatorial control of audience reception. Instead, I explore how museum publics form individual responses to cultural heritage, sometimes rejecting official interpretation and drawing upon wider cultural references and experiences. Collections of non-European material culture were important in establishing British perceptions about the peoples

of their empire: through objects, visitors were able to glean information about diverse peoples' cultures and climates, make assumptions about their relative positions in socio-evolutionary hierarchies, and justify their own political and economic subjugation of such peoples. However, such collections were not consumed in isolation; their meanings were informed and contextualised by alternative experiences of empire and non-European material culture found outside the museum.

In order to demonstrate this phenomenon, this chapter will focus on the indicative example of Brighton Museum in the first half of the twentieth century. In his 1938 survey of British museums, S. F. Markham commented on this seaside town in the south of England, describing its museum's ethnographical collections as 'amazingly rich in objects that cannot now be acquired for love nor money'.⁶ More recently, in 1997, the 'World Art and Anthropology' collections of the now renamed Royal Pavilion and Museums, Brighton & Hove, were designated a pre-eminent collection of national and international importance by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council. Host to an outstanding collection of ethnographic material, and held at the heart of a community with a particular flair for documenting and celebrating the British Empire (as we shall see), this museum and its audiences provide a particularly fruitful example with which to explore museum visitors' engagements with non-European material culture and the British Empire.

In focusing on the historically specific situation of one provincial museum, the town to which it belonged, and its curatorial and visiting experiences, it is also my aim to scrutinise those claims of an ideological coherence in the development of Western museums which have been made by some pan-institutional, highly theoretical museology.⁷ Moreover, although much scholarship to date has focused on the national museum as a key resource, here I argue that if the full complexity of museum history is to be ascertained, the specific financial and organisational circumstances of the provincial museum must also be explored.⁸

This chapter will first briefly introduce the intentions that Brighton Museum's staff had when constructing their particular displays of non-European material culture. Following this outline, the latter half of the chapter will argue that the official, institution-led interpretations of the ethnography collections at Brighton Museum formed only half of the story. Firstly, focusing specifically on the museum, it will be suggested that practical problems and confused displays provided a barrier to visitors struggling to comprehend intended curatorial messages. Secondly, this research will show how impressions and objects encountered away from the museum were often preferred by visitors.

Scientific displays were often rejected entirely or simply formed a non-specific backdrop upon which to project images of popular culture formed elsewhere.

Research into the reactions of museum visitors of the past is notoriously difficult. Given the paucity of literature which has attempted to document or engage with the thoughts and responses of the historic museum visitor, a note on potential methodologies may be welcome here. Visitors' books, used in museums from the sixteenth century onwards, may be conceived of as a useful source, but it was not until the interwar years of the twentieth century that their role changed from being a record of the signatures, professions and addresses of visitors to providing a space for personal comment and opinion.⁹ Even then the impact of illiteracy and the tendency of dominant parties to speak for diverse audiences, in both past and present (i.e. the husband for the family, the school teacher for the class, etc.), must be taken into account.¹⁰ Sharon MacDonald, in her discussion of the potential advantages and drawbacks of the visitors' book as a source, has summarised wider analyses of visitor book comments, describing them as socially situated performative acts not necessarily rooted in sincerity.¹¹ Similarly, travel accounts, diaries, handwritten postcards and personal photographs can be invaluable resources, but they are rare gems and often preserved for the nation in particularly unrepresentative ways.

Oral testimonies from visitors and staff members can form rich material for analysis of audience engagement with museums: despite the performative nature of such interviews and the subjective character of memory, they necessarily document opinions and perspectives, and reward our search for documentation on the experiences of individuals¹² The possibility of this option, of course, depends on the period under investigation: for this study, it has been possible to conduct interviews with staff members working from the 1930s onwards, and these happily provide rich insight into the conditions of the museum's exhibition spaces during this period. The opinions of staff members could generally be characterised as 'official' and not necessarily in tune with visitors' perspectives. Here, however, the comments made by ex-staff members are surprisingly candid and move beyond the duty-bound statements of the council employee.

Conversely, another potential resource, the official minutes of museum committees, tend to offer sanitised versions of staff intent and activity. Within this format, they do occasionally record the comments of notable dignitaries and, particularly with provincial museums accountable to their rate payers, often include detailed visitor statistics. These insights, however, again tend to provide the researcher with upper-middle-class, white, male, polite opinion, or quantitative

information which cannot inform an examination of diverse visitor reaction to specific exhibits or events. Popular tourist guides can offer an insight into the perceptions and value-judgements of a specific author, but tend to provide a descriptive, brief list of 'highlights', usually comprising the most valuable or aesthetically pleasing items on display.

National and local newspapers, however, are a useful source with which to supplement this uneven terrain. Rosemary Flanders has documented the impact of the press in a 'new communicative relationship' between cultural institutions and their civic audiences in the nineteenth century: letters pages, editorials and press reports of town council meetings provided an important space for debate about the value and role of museums.¹³ Reports of events, lectures and major donations to museums were consistently covered in the local press, particularly in newspapers with a focus on culture and the civic life of the town or city. Naturally, the tendency of newspapers to focus on significant events rather than the everyday, and the agenda of the popular press with its interest in attracting readers through attention-grabbing and marketable stories, is a somewhat 'imperfect indicator' of public opinion.¹⁴ Newspapers inevitably offer a selective version of reality governed by media conventions.¹⁵ However, given the paucity of information about historical visitor responses, the press provides us with a valuable if partial lens on patterns of interpretation formed by those who visited the museum and those who formed opinions from the outside. Indeed, successful journalism is also about more than 'telling a good story': 'It is about telling stories that contain significant civic unity.'¹⁶ The 'agenda-setting ability' of the press must also be acknowledged: where the press took a particular approach to museum displays and events, this is likely to have formed the cue for many museum audiences. Accordingly, despite the degree of journalistic whimsy and assumption to be found in the popular media, there must also be a marked value in the use of this material as an insight into public opinion both before and after the media had influenced personal perspectives.

This chapter draws heavily upon public opinion submitted to and reported upon in the *Brighton Herald and Hove Chronicle* (hereafter *Herald*).¹⁷ As the first newspaper to be established in Brighton, in 1806, and as a paper with a particular interest in and good coverage of cultural events in the locality, the *Herald* provides unparalleled insight into visitors' experiences of the museum. As suggested, any newspaper inevitably offers a selective version of reality governed by media conventions, but reports and letters uncovered through a sampling of the newspaper from 1900 to 1950 can help to give an indication of a range

of regional perceptions.

Moreover, an examination of the local press has also supported the development of a new and fruitful method of uncovering the perceptions and experiences of actual and potential museum visitors. This chapter will advocate the merits of placing museum-visiting in a wider context of public cultural production and consumption. Audiences do not visit museums with a perceptive *tabula rasa*; they develop understanding by building upon established knowledge and experience.¹⁸ As evidence from the *Herald* will show, Brightonians viewed their museum in relation to a variety of other opportunities for education, entertainment and cultural stimulation in the region. Specifically, within this framework, the museum as a public forum for engaging with the British Empire and its peoples was supplemented and informed by other events centred upon this theme. Meaning for the visitor is made through a differentiating process: particularly in this case, the museum was defined by what it offered in comparison to other institutions and events and, indeed, by what it did not. By sourcing commentaries on these other cultural proceedings – the missionary fair, the charity bazaar, the theatre and the public lecture – a comparative picture or ‘contextual shadow’ can be built and used to inform our understanding of public notions of museum-going.

*‘Behind the scenes’: official interpretations at
Brighton Museum*

Notwithstanding its earlier transformations from fishing village to fashionable Regency health resort, and eventually to Victorian day-trippers’ destination of choice, by 1900 Brighton had a year-round population of over 120,000.¹⁹ By the early twentieth century, Brighton and its neighbour Hove had again changed, this time into a regional service centre with a permanent population swelled by returned colonial officials and middle-class professionals.²⁰ Within this context a new sense of civic pride emerged, and cultural facilities, including a public museum, were established. Following a gestation period in upper rooms of the Royal Pavilion, Brighton’s Public Museum, along with a Library and Picture Gallery, was eventually inaugurated in 1873 on Church Street, on the site of the old stabling and coach houses of the Pavilion estate. Rate-supported and operating under the Pavilion Purchase Act of 1850, which provided financial support for the upkeep of the larger Pavilion estate, it was administered by a Library, Museum and Fine Arts Committee and a specific sub-committee appointed by the town’s council.²¹

Following a major refurbishment in 1902, non-European material



2.1 Postcard of the Archaeological Room at Brighton Museum, c. 1912, showing series of comparative displays. The label 'Modern Savage Stone Tools' is partially visible behind the wild-flower table.

culture was exhibited in various galleries throughout the museum.²² Room IV housed the main ethnography gallery: the contents of the cases were roughly grouped in terms of their geographical provenance and limited interpretative analysis informed visitors about how the displayed objects came to be there, or how they were manufactured and employed.²³ Elsewhere, non-European material culture was used slightly differently: in one of the three archaeology galleries, Herbert S. Toms, the museum's curator, displayed ethnography alongside archaeology collections in order to celebrate the socio-evolutionary comparative paradigm common at the time (see Figure 2.1). Juxtaposing Māori and Tasmanian stone tools and prehistoric European implements in successive cases, Toms sought to inform visitors not only of the basic likeness in all human nature but also of the so-called 'advances' that had been made in Europe compared with other cultures or societies. A series of 'full descriptive labels' inserted into the cases, written by Toms and highlighted in the *Official Guide*, instructed visitors as to the purpose of this arrangement.²⁴ While these documents no longer survive, the scientific rationale of the display and the evolutionary perspective he was known to have 'staunchly supported all his life' were recorded in a number of the public lectures given by Toms during this period.²⁵ Many of the presentations he made both to general audiences and to specialist groups emphasised how 'Ethnography ... as a study of the present ... ha[d] in numerous instances proved an invaluable key to problems connected with the past.'²⁶ Discussing subjects such as 'The Marvels of Savage Art' (May 1909), 'Flint Chips by Neolithic Man' (April 1907), and 'Prehistoric Man' (January 1908), he consistently aimed to demonstrate the educational value of the presentations: 'the study of the modern savage is imperative if we desire to obtain an idea as to those primitive conditions of life which gave birth to the arts, sciences, and religions we now enjoy'.²⁷

Other elements of this gallery had other, more specific scientific claims to make: before coming to Brighton, Toms had received his training in archaeology as a field assistant under the tutelage of Lieutenant-General Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt Rivers. He was familiar with Pitt Rivers's thesis on the typological arrangement of material culture and was influenced firmly by his former employer.²⁸ For example, Toms used the gallery's 'Modern Savage Stone Tools' case to distinguish between the Māori objects, which he considered to be marked by a specific 'beauty and delicacy', and those exhibits he termed 'the less obvious flakes and scrapers of the extinct Tasmanians'.²⁹ Pitt Rivers's assertions that objects could be 'arranged in sequence' in order to demonstrate 'the successive ideas by which the minds of men in a primitive condition of culture have progressed', were echoed in displays

in which Toms arranged comparable objects 'in descending order from the most highly developed forms to the lowest'.³⁰ Presenting an albeit narrow section of what Edward Burnett Tylor, Pitt Rivers and others had envisioned as a wider, unbroken 'line of continuity between the lowest savagery and the highest civilization', the stone tools' display demonstrates Toms's aim to implement the theoretical perspectives promoted by his peers and colleagues.³¹

In the event, however, any intellectual debates or curatorial messages with which Toms wished to engage were tempered by a series of practical problems. Tony Bennett has explored some of the general problems involved in the reading of evolutionary sequences in museums, but a close reading of the museum's sub-committee minutes and annual reports between 1900 and 1940 also highlights other extreme instabilities in the curating of the collection during this period.³² Substantial levels of acquisitions were approved by the sub-committee on a monthly basis, while loans of individual objects and significant collections moved into and out of the museum with surprising speed.³³ Toms consistently sought to display much of this incoming material with immediate effect and, as a result, each monthly curator's report described how particular objects and displays had been 'reclassified', 'overhauled', 'rearranged', 'temporarily stored', 'modified' or 'removed' in order to accommodate the fluid contents of the museum's holdings.³⁴ Museum documentation noted how 'questions of space' had often made it 'impossible to arrange the specimens in educational series'.³⁵ By 1913, miscellaneous ethnographic objects had been physically 'crowded out' of the main ethnography gallery and on to the walls of two other archaeology galleries.³⁶

With the advent of the First World War, and as museums all over the country entered the 'difficult years' which followed in its wake, this confused and inconsistent presentation of Brighton's holdings began to intensify.³⁷ Gaynor Kavanagh has described how, in the inter-war period, as local governments became increasingly responsible for education services and their budgets became ever more stretched, museums became 'the least valued of the municipal services' in their care.³⁸ Brighton seems to have felt the immobilising results of this difficult situation keenly: longstanding, ageing members of the museum's sub-committee and staff, including Toms, marked time, working slowly towards the end of their careers at the same institution in cramped, understaffed, and underfunded conditions.³⁹ There seems to have been little opportunity for strategic change and progress at management level, and this wider stagnation of the museum was typified by the director's republication of his *A Brief Synopsis of the Contents of the Brighton Public Library, Museums and Fine Art Galleries of*

1908–9 almost word for word, twenty years later, for the conference of the Library Association in 1929. Under such circumstances, the ethnography gallery was described as ‘a mess’: a former museum assistant recalls the cases as ‘absolutely cluttered with stuff’, reminiscing how objects would ‘hang from the roofs of the cases’, and how ‘you could spend a whole day just looking at one case!’⁴⁰ Contemporary scholarship has identified the stabilisation of meaning that occurs when an object moves into a museum.⁴¹ But the formation of a singular knowledge, or the development of a continuous theme which ‘fixed’ the meaning of these objects, is difficult to identify in the context of this particular provincial museum: plagued by a high acquisition rate early in the century, increasingly cramped conditions, and a ‘moribund’ inter-war existence, cogent socio-evolutionary perspectives at Brighton, whether typological or geographical, seem to have been contested.⁴²

*Democracy in the museum: patterns of ‘unofficial’
interpretation at Brighton Museum*

Away from the museum, however, there was plenty of additional opportunity to engage with the peoples of the British Empire and their material cultures. Brighton was one of the UK’s most prominent centres for the returned colonial elite.⁴³ As a result, local cultural events celebrating empire had a particular flavour, infused, for example, by the input of people who were able to share their direct experiences of the colonies. Moreover, the particular popularity of the local charity bazaar in the Brighton area seems also to have provided Brightonians with a specific arena and a special set of tools with which to engage with the empire. Usually organised by groups of wealthy, female members of society, these events were given a particular theme, often encompassing ‘Empire’ or ‘the East’. In these contexts, ex-colonial officials, and particularly the women who had accompanied them abroad, shared their knowledge and experiences of colonial life. The organiser of one ‘Indian Bazaar’ held in 1903 ‘had recently come from India’ where her husband was a member of the Indian Council, and was able to supply a set of fabrics, brass and silverware for consideration by and sale to visitors to the bazaar.⁴⁴ Similarly, at a ‘Chinese Fair’, held in the Brighton Dome in aid of the Royal Sussex County Hospital in 1920, ‘people who ha[d] had the closest of relationships with China’ provided audiences with their personal costume collections as an introduction to the region.⁴⁵ Away from the museum, perceptions of non-Europeans were thus moderated by the people who had actually visited these far-flung locales.

Indeed, human engagement was central to the concept of these

bazaars: their staging provided an important opportunity for personal interaction and for the fostering of local community spirit.⁴⁶ Such occasions were seen as ‘the big events of the year’.⁴⁷ They promoted ‘sociability among the members’ of particular organisations and a ‘common enthusiasm’ for a particular cause or theme.⁴⁸ An emphasis was put upon human interaction and social contact. Whether the attraction was an English person dressed up in imitation of someone from another culture, or an authentic representative of another culture (a Chinese guest, for example, who had been invited to open an event⁴⁹), or whether those speaking were ‘those who know because they have been to see’, these events provided Brighton residents with a chance to communicate and engage with peers, friends, amateurs and specialists.⁵⁰ Crucially, discussion and engagement with other *people* was actively fostered.⁵¹

Other successful events which promoted learning about and engagement with other countries also tended to incorporate an element of the personal encounter in their programmes. Lectures, talks and lantern-slide shows on themes of empire and non-European cultures were frequently advertised and reported upon in the local press. There was seemingly a regular audience, formed either from the general public or from specialist groups, for presentations on subjects such as ‘The Native Races of South Africa’, ‘India under King Asoka’ and ‘Life in New Zealand’.⁵² Praise for these occasions focused on the ability of a live speaker to deliver ‘intimate knowledge’ or ‘first-hand information’ to their audiences.⁵³ Live speakers were able to draw ‘a most alluring picture’ and present ‘a vivid idea’ of their subject matter.⁵⁴

Similarly, the attraction of the live performance as a mode of disseminating information about non-European cultures could also be found in local theatre productions: the themes of ‘Britannia and her Colonies’ and ‘The Masque of Empire’ were common subjects for the productions of local youth groups.⁵⁵ Throughout the 1930s, the Brighton and Hove Harmonic Society brought Thomas Fairbairn’s London production of *Hiawatha* to Brighton (see Figure 2.2). Featuring both the famed Mohawk baritone, Chief Os-ke-non-ton, ‘curiously impressive, because he is the real thing’, and the pupils of a number of Brighton’s local dance schools, such events were the perfect combination of presumed authenticity, human interest and local participation.⁵⁶ The production of knowledge and understanding of the ‘other’ in the context of this sociable, dynamic environment, ripe for individual involvement and group participation, can be seen as an important aspect of how Brightonians viewed the outside world.

Bazaars also provided Brighton’s residents with opportunities to perform and demonstrate their creativity and imagination with regard



2.2 Miss Mavis Bennett as Minnehaha, Mr Joseph Farrington as Hiawatha and 'Chief Os-ke-non-ton' as the Medicine Man.

to the depiction of the empire's peoples. At the 'Lure of the Orient' bazaar, which raised funds for Hove Hospital in 1924, a painting of the Taj Mahal formed the backdrop for a performance in which 'a typical Eastern melody was played at the organ ... followed by a long retinue of ladies and gentlemen in Oriental dresses'.⁵⁷ An 'Eastern Bazaar', held in November 1909, included a similar pageant featuring 'Stately Egyptian water-carriers of alluring charm, turbaned Hindoos of grave demeanour, dapper little Japs, sprightly Turks with the complexion of coffee, and winsome geisha borrowed from the Japanese tea-house', each played by local residents.⁵⁸ The stars of such shows may or may not have visited the countries represented in their productions and costumes, but one suspects that Master E. W. Dixon's 'Canadian Indian' and Master Leonard Harrison's 'fearful and wonderful Zulu, black as night', who 'kept guard' at the Imperial Market in 1909, were actually the products of a home-grown imagination and fantasy, linked instead to popular stereotypes proliferated by popular culture about the 'Wild West' and the Boer Wars.⁵⁹ Indeed, popular books such as Ardern Holt's *Fancy Dresses Described*, which gave advice to those who wished to produce costumes for 'fancy balls' or similar events, combined a desire for authenticity with a need for practicality and social etiquette: he openly suggested of his own creations that 'no one would probably view them with more curiosity than the peasantry they are intended to portray'.⁶⁰

This sense of creativity, fantasy and performance was not limited to such theatricals – objects also formed an important part of these cross-cultural negotiations. The commodities sold at the bazaars were subject to the creative efforts of charitable local women.⁶¹ At a 'Chinese Fair', a journalist for the *Herald* documented a process where, at the

hands of the organising committee, 'humbler things' were transformed into realistic 'articles of the greatest beauty and interest' available for sale: a cigar box was fashioned into 'some rare casket inlaid with mother-o'-pearl and costly woods', and 'what was once a jam pot is now resplendent as a piece of Venetian ware'.⁶² Similarly, for their costumed cantata of 'Britannia and her Colonies', the boys from York Place School had made their own tomahawks and 'scalping knives', using 'wood covered with tinfoil' for their spears and shields.⁶³

The perceptions and modes of learning formed in the world away from the museum, then, were very different from those presented by Toms and his staff. Michael Baxandall has advocated a model for exhibition analysis in which the agency of the visitor forms a crucial element of how an exhibit is received.⁶⁴ The varying learning styles, life experiences, and complex motivations of museum audiences complicate even the most cogent and coherent curatorial and design mechanisms. The modern museum's 'master narrative' as described by Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, or at least its successful reception, can be difficult to locate⁶⁵. Certainly in Brighton, where Toms's displays were blighted by high acquisition rates, cramped conditions, low budgets and understaffing, his scientific arguments often became only one potential influence among many.

A general picture of public reaction to the museum's collection, built up through references sourced in the *Herald*, reveals how semblances of the creativity, imagination and participation demonstrated in the region's celebrations of empire are easier to identify than the scientific or geographical interpretations instigated by Toms. Popular visions of the 'other' as dramatised in the local bazaar, or on the amateur's stage, seem to have been projected on to the contents of the museum. Adding layers which often superseded or simplified Toms's complex scientific correlations between material form and socio-evolutionary hierarchy, audiences saw savagery, comedy and the supernatural in their own conceptions of a more generalised 'other'.

In a report of a public tour of the museum, it was those objects most closely representing the 'bizarre barbaric devices' employed as stage props for the Brighton and Hove Harmonic Society's performance of *Hiawatha*, or the handmade accompaniments for York Place School's cantata, for example, that were chosen for detailed description.⁶⁶ From the entire ethnography collection, it was a 'a real cannibal man-catcher, warranted to work, ... a Red Indian tomahawk ... [and] the poisoned darts used by the aborigines of the Malay Peninsula' that were selected for comment.⁶⁷ At the reopening of the museum in 1902 and the unveiling of Toms's anthropological series, the contents of the ethnography galleries were described as that 'which gener-

ally works out as a collection of the war-clubs, poisoned arrows, and more peaceful implements of savages'.⁶⁸ An article covering Toms's lecture on the contribution of Māori artefacts to evolutionary theory was entitled 'Marvels of savage art: Comedy in the Cannibal Islands', emphasising the popular attraction of cannibalism as a subject, and the wider appeal that anthropology had as a source of entertainment, over Toms's careful argument.⁶⁹ Toms himself was included in this picture: the *Herald* described his 'wondrous stories' and knowledge of the Stone Age, pausing to imagine him as 'a reincarnation of one of its medicine men'.⁷⁰ Another article, suitably entitled 'In darkest Sussex', presented a curious, mystical picture of Toms 'wearing a red fez ... and surrounded by curios from Egypt, Africa, Polynesia, and [other] equally thrilling relics ... [as he] chatted ... about witchcraft.'⁷¹

However, while some visitors and commentators were able to transfer their experiences on to the museum and glean something positive from their visit, others were less imaginative. Instead, for them, the museum was simply marked out as a space which failed to support the popular participatory and people-focused methods of engagement provided by the bazaar, the lecture hall and the theatre; indeed, the museum disappointed as a result. In a report of a missionary exhibition at Hove Town Hall in 1920, the scene was described as 'laden like a museum with all manner of curiosities belonging intimately to the life and religion of the people'.⁷² But these comparisons were short-lived:

[The fair] was, however, much more than a museum, for each section was in charge of a missionary who could, and did, speak with personal experience of life and labour in the land: and the frequent round of talks and explanations gave the exhibition abundant vitality.⁷³

Professional concerns in the museum world were voiced about how 'the very word "museum" excite[d] the wrong impression in the minds of people', and how this was 'not surprising when one consider[ed] how dull many of them ha[d] become and how low the worst of them ha[d] sunk'.⁷⁴ Some Brightonians saw the town's museum as a 'shelter in wet weather'.⁷⁵ Others regarded it as a repository of 'old bones and stones'.⁷⁶ Despite the presence of Toms as a public figure, it would appear that the museum's publics needed more participation and personal input into the learning experience. Envisioned as quiet, didactic, strictly monitored funeral parlours, museums such as that at Brighton had an alternative 'reputation for being dusty places where dead objects rested'.⁷⁷ The experts, live shows, performances and participation of the fairs and bazaars were sorely missed at the museum.

Of course, the alienation caused by this lack of opportunity for personal involvement in the construction of knowledge is at the heart of

current debates in contemporary visitor and learning studies. Increasingly, models for object- and gallery-based experiences which accept 'the possibility of socially mediated learning' have influenced best practice in the heritage industry.⁷⁸ In his 'Constructivist Museum', George Hein 'makes provision for social interaction', designing spaces, constructing exhibitions, and organising programs which 'deliberately capitalize on learning as a social activity'.⁷⁹ Jeremy Roschelle asserts that 'learning proceeds primarily from prior knowledge and only secondarily from the presented materials', highlighting the distortion that can occur if the two entities are at odds with each other.⁸⁰ The methods of engagement with Brighton Museum's ethnography collections as discussed in this chapter highlight the desire for personal involvement and demonstration of prior knowledge during the learning experience, thus lending an eloquent historical case study to such discussions.

Certainly, the museum was a major protagonist in the circulation of wider impressions of empire and imperial narratives within Brighton. Toms, as a museum curator, lent an institutional authority that was distinct from the first-hand but subjective experiences of the missionaries and colonial officials who had spent time in the colonies, and separate from the whimsy of the town's amateur dramatic clubs and bazaar organisers. Despite the issues raised, the museum and its ethnographic collections did provide an important opportunity to expand existing understandings of the 'Oriental' or 'savage' 'other', supplying an alternative framework within which to reaffirm these ideas and narratives, and presenting a creative forum for projecting and exploring them further. The museum's collections may well have directly inspired the creativity of local audiences and, as objects made and perhaps used by non-Europeans in their indigenous contexts, they had the capacity to evoke the agency and creative choices of their source communities in ways that the props manufactured by Brightonians could not. The rich and multiple histories of many of the museum's objects – visually clear through the erosions and alterations to their physical states, and highlighted in their associated interpretation and documentation – evoked different meanings from the pristine, unused items sold at the missionary exhibitions and charity bazaars.

This volume seeks to test the impact of the individual curator on the dynamics of empire. In Toms's case, his success in informing and instructing his publics as to the evolutionary status of man and the diversity of humanity throughout the British Empire was limited. Certainly, Toms's address would have resonated with the select elements of his audience who were familiar with these issues. However, for his wider, more general audience, his 'disciplinary technologies' and

experiments with objects as indicators of socio-evolutionary theory became blurred by the practical problems of the provincial museum. In practice, audiences combined their own expectations and learning requirements with messages put forward by the museum's displays, forming a complex amalgam of impressions about the world which were no means dominated by the museum. Both inside and away from the museum, individual perspectives were rife; different audiences had nuanced and particular attitudes to both the museum and the diverse peoples of the empire. The peoples of the empire were not collated to form a single 'other': the imagined 'winsome geisha' of the bazaar was not equated with the 'primeval' cast of Hiawatha, just as the museum's Japanese pottery collection was conceptually distinct from the cannibal man-catchers highlighted during a tour of the museum.⁸¹ For many in Brighton Museum, however, 'science' seems to have been largely shunned, and popular types forged in the outside world appear to have reigned supreme.

Notes

- 1 Tim Barringer and Tom Flynn, 'Introduction', in Tim Barringer and Tom Flynn (eds), *Colonialism and the Object: Empire, Material Culture and the Museum* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 1–8, p. 4.
- 2 See, for example, James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); Annie Coombes, *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture and Popular Imagination in Late-Victorian and Edwardian England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994).
- 3 The important contributions of Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995), and Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1992), have been particularly influenced by Michel Foucault's principles of disciplined surveillance and power/knowledge as applied in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Allen Lane, 1977).
- 4 Kate Hill, *Culture and Class in English Public Museums, 1850–1914* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 6; Lara Kriegel, 'After the exhibitionary complex: Museum histories and the future of the Victorian past', *Victorian Studies*, 48:4 (2006), 681–704.
- 5 Mark Elliott, 'Behind the scenes at the magic house: An ethnography of the Indian Museum, Calcutta', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2003, p. 18.
- 6 S. F. Markham, *The Museums and Galleries of the British Isles* (Edinburgh: Carnegie United Kingdom Trust, 1938), p. 47.
- 7 Scholars have identified the need for such studies. See Marcia Pointon: 'Introduction', in Marcia Pointon (ed.), *Art Apart: Art Institutions and Ideology in England and North America from 1800 to the Present* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), pp. 1–5, pp. 2–3, and Nick Prior, *Museums and Modernity: Art Galleries and the Making of Modern Culture* (Oxford: Berg, 2002), p. 6.
- 8 Samuel J. M. M. Alberti, 'Placing nature: Natural history collections and their owners in provincial nineteenth-century England', *British Journal for the History of Science*, 35 (2002), 291–311; Hill, *Culture and Class*, p. 6.
- 9 Paula Findlen, *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 136–46. Findlen's discussions are based on visitors' books attached to early modern natu-

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- ralists' private museums. Liesbet Nys, 'The public's signatures: Visitors' books in nineteenth-century museums', *Museum History Journal*, 2:2 (2009), 143–61. Nys's discussions are based on Belgian visitors' books.
- 10 Nys, 'The public's signatures', p. 155; Findlen, *Possessing Nature*, pp. 143–4; Sharon MacDonald, 'Accessing audiences: Visiting visitor books', *Museum and Society*, 3:3 (2005), 119–36, p. 125.
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