



Museums in contemporary society

NMS: Reflecting Scotland

Extracts from 'One Nation, Five Million Voices', NMS
I'd definitely describe myself as Scottish.

People ask you where are you from, and when you say Scotland it's normally a pretty good answer.

I think in recent times it's easier to be a Scot. We seem to have come out from the shadow of our bigger neighbour.

Oh I think I'm Scottish actually, we will never surrender "wir chibs" (dialect)

I don't like the fact that we're a subjugated nation.

(Gaelic here)

We've really rediscovered our national identity, and there's a feeling that you know the best is still to come.

Studio link

Walking down George IV Bridge from Edinburgh's Royal Mile you soon become aware that there's a building on the opposite corner that's quite unlike any other around. It's the modern extension to the National Museum of Scotland. David Clarke, the Museum's Keeper of Archaeology.

David Clarke:

It's a very striking modern building with a tower on the corner, and the walls essentially clad in Clashach sandstone. The idea, I think, was to echo aspects of Scotland's past architecture, so there's all sorts of references in the building.

Studio link

The principle for a national museum of Scotland had been under discussion for forty years, but it only came to fruition with the prospect of political devolution in the late 1990's. This background sets Scotland apart from other small European nations.

David Clarke

The fact that Scotland didn't have a national museum is in itself quite interesting, when you think of most European small European nations, that was one of the first things that they got in the middle of the nineteenth century big time, one of the ways they asserted their national identity was to build another national museum.

Studio link

What difference does having this museum make to Scotland today? And how has an increased sense of nationhood affected the way the Scots have chosen to portray their history?

Studio link

Inside the museum, there are seven levels of galleries, arranged chronologically from bottom to top. Let's start at the bottom with David Clarke's "Early People" gallery.

David Clarke

The opening moments are a set of figures by Eduardo Paolozzi with objects within them, in cases built into the figures, and there are four groups of figures representing the four conceptual themes in the exhibition.

Studio link

The sculptor Eduardo Paolozzi was born in Edinburgh, made his name in London, and has a global reputation. By commissioning Paolozzi, David Clarke could be sure of a strong statement to set the tone for the rest of his gallery. But the figures also carry some educational messages.

David Clarke

First of all they allow us to avoid all the things we can't talk about like did these guys have long hair or short hair, did the men have beards or not? Most of the time we don't know what clothes people wore in pre-history and early history, and again Paolozzi enables us to avoid those issues. The jewellery because it's, so to speak, worn by people who are essentially the same size as us, by the time you've put a case round it, to keep everything in scale, the figures have to be one and a quarter life size, so the sort of un-stated message, because we know from our focus groups, that most people think of people in pre-history as sort of squat, grunting savages, is that there's a sort of sub-text here of these guys are big, and they're bigger than you, you're looking up to them.

Studio link

And there's another fundamental reason for the Paolozzis: to inject a bit of humanity into the exhibition.

David Clarke

Human groups arrive when the ice melts around 8000 BC. But for the first 8,000 years of the 9,000 years this gallery is concerned with, for reasons we don't understand, they don't make human images, and so there's a real danger that apart from the Romans in the post-Roman period, you know, you're going through a display that's without any sense of humanity. The objects become sort of, you know, almost devoid of, so I wanted to start with this really big, bold statement about humans.

Studio link

One decision, controversial when the gallery first opened, was to reveal a political dimension in archaeological evidence.

David Clarke

I was always interested in power and social organisation as expressed in the archaeological record, and so we tried to construct a set of themes, which reflect that, which er start with warfare, and then go to imperialism because of course upstairs you see the Scots as, so to speak, significant players in the British Empire, and we thought it was important to remind them that they had once been the toe end of somebody else's empire.

Studio link

One of the results of this approach was that the display labelling identifies the ancient residents of Scotland as "we" set against the waves of invaders who are defined as "them". For David, this was partly down to a shortage of information.

David Clarke

I used to go to meetings of our education group, who used to complain that I couldn't give them the names of people, that the only people that were named were the aliens, if I could put it that way, like Romans or Vikings, yeah, people from outside. So we deliberately adopted 'we' to cover all those people we don't have a name for and to try and suggest that they are alongside us guys, they are our ancestors, then we could consciously name the Romans and Vikings from time to time, and they appear as different.

Studio link

But for some people, the decision to use "them" and "us" actively fosters a stronger sense of Scottish identity.

David Clarke

In one sense of course, the displays are a commentary on Scottish identity, but their very existence now is a factor in the development of future identity. Because what they've brought to people will change their perceptions about what they think about Scotland. I don't think that we discussed the idea that this was a creation of Scottish identity, but I think it was always there. And it was always there because this is something truly momentous. Most curators never get a chance to do even major galleries. Even fewer get the chance to create a national museum. You know, so I think that everyone was conscious of this. The team was small, and consequently had a huge amount of work to do. I mean I think all of them felt this was a moment which would never be repeated. Yeah? Building a new national museum, I mean my God!

Studio link

From David's "Early People" in the basement you have to climb to the top of the building to bring Scotland's story up to date. In 2008 a new gallery opened. Called "Scotland, a Changing Nation", it chronicles the period from the First World War to the present day. Here's Maureen Barrie, a key member of the gallery design team.

Maureen Barrie

The idea behind the gallery is to not explore a history of Scotland in the last century, but aspects and themes that have affected those, who are not just Scots, but those living and working in Scotland today and in the past hundred years, so we want to chart different themes. You can't do a gallery on the 20th and 21st century without tapping into film and poetry and music, and have all the films in the gallery; you have to take advantage of that. In the gallery there are twenty-nine personal stories, that are not life stories but they tell peoples' experience at a certain time.

Studio link

Designing a twentieth century gallery brings many new challenges and opportunities. And Maureen brings a correspondingly different set of professional skills.

Maureen Barrie

My job on this particular project was storyteller. I had to find a narrative through the stories, pull that together, and make it cohesive, get a continuity for the visitor going through the displays, and that's what I enjoy, I enjoy storytelling. Objects are fantastic, don't get me wrong, I absolutely love objects, but they are nothing without the story behind them, they need the person there telling their own story, and in their own voice, that's very important.

Extract from 'One Nation, Five Million Voices'

"I think of myself as Scottish even though its part of Great Britain"

"Oh I think I'm Scottish actually. We will never surrender wir chibs...."

Studio link

Half way round the gallery there's a place where you can sit for a while, in front of three giant video screens displaying, well, just ordinary Scottish people talking about their lives, their country and their feelings.

Maureen Barrie

One of the things that we did for the gallery was have a specially commissioned film, "One Nation, Five Million Voices", and it's been incredibly popular because it allows people's voices to be heard, and languages and dialect, and words peculiar to Scotland and people's interpretation of them. It also asks people to explain a bit about the Scottish character and that's really interesting, it's worked incredibly well for us because it very much gives the gallery a voice.

Extract from 'One Nation, Five Million Voices'

"We've really rediscovered our national identity and there's a feeling that the best is still to come."

Studio link

We asked Ian Donnachie, Reader in History at the Open University in Scotland, what he thought of the new gallery?

Ian Donnachie

Well of course it is a highly selective exhibition but within the constraints of a relatively small and quite difficult space I think that the themes have been very well selected, and the upshot of that is that there's an extremely strong emphasis on Scotland's role in the modern world, and its triumphs, but not forgetting the tribulations and indeed what we might describe as difficult heritage, all sorts of social issues about poverty, about poor housing, about poor health, and all the rest of it. These issues which are tricky and difficult in terms of museum presentation and interpretation are certainly not sidelined, not by any means, and I think one comes away with an impression that not only have the themes been extremely well selected, but the artefacts and the interpretation of these things has been extremely judicious, and the presentation is lively and entertaining, and highly interactive.

Maureen Barrie

We're now on the roof terrace of the National Museum of Scotland. We're surrounded by culture and heritage. When we come up here; we can see the Castle, we can see the Royal Mile; it's a fantastic view and it really immerses you in that culture and history.

Studio link

You can see almost everything from the roof terrace, except the Parliament building itself. But it's hard to visit the museum without feeling the Parliament's presence.

Maureen Barrie

I think when we started to work on the gallery the presence of the Scottish Parliament became significant. We borrowed a lot of material from the Parliament itself, from the Mace model to Donald Dewar material, and so on; we had fantastic access. I think it made the curator who was working on the section, he developed it much more than he would have, I think, originally because of the material that he was given and the material that he had.

Studio link

So how much of the museum's confidence and exuberance derive from it's being designed at a time when Scotland was flexing its political muscles?

Maureen Barrie

We've always had a voice in Scotland, from the Declaration of Arbroath to present day; we've always been vocal and taken our politics very, very seriously. The Parliament has given us a renewed interest in politics and it's seen, I think, young people take a real interest in politics. I think in *One Nation, Five Million Voices*, the film, you hear people talking about that, and young people talking about politics in Scotland, and how they feel about how the nation's developing. It's a fantastic thing to see. I have a fondness for the parliamentary model, the model of the Scottish Parliament that sits inside the tent, the tent that went round Scotland to canvas for votes for a Scottish parliament. It's scaffolding poles and plastic sheeting, and it's set up in the gallery as it was when it did its travels round Scotland, but the fantastic thing is inside it sits a model of the new Scottish Parliament. To me, that's the icing on the cake.

Studio link

Ian Donnachie does see a connection between what's going on in the museum and changes in the wider political context.

Ian Donnachie

I think in general terms there's very little doubt that the political context in Scotland, you know, has very much influenced what's going on in the museums and heritage institutions in this country. It seems to me that the pace has gathered very rapidly since 1999 with the establishment of the Parliament, and I think particularly so in the past year or eighteen months. In 2008, at this point in time, there's very little doubt whatsoever that the impetus for addressing nationalist issues and issues of Scottish identity is very, very much more acute

than it was previously. And we see in the new display at the National Museum I think a consciousness of that, an awareness that, you know, people and their ordinary, everyday things that Scottish achievements, that Scottish failures, need to be clearly articulated, and at the same time celebrated. One commiserates with the difficult heritage, one recognises that there are major social and economic issues in this country, but nonetheless one celebrates the achievements, and one particularly celebrates the Scottish people and their desire, apparent further desire and aspirations to nationhood, and possible independence.

Studio link

After ten years at the “Early People” gallery, David Clarke believes he too can see evidence of a developing sense of Scottish identity.

David Clarke

Until very recently, Scotland didn't actually teach its children Scottish history. It taught them British history, which is essentially English history. So I think when we opened, for a lot of Scots it was like a revelation that there was that much history to tell about Scotland.

Studio link

Maureen Barrie hopes that the new gallery will continue this process of changing outlooks and challenging assumptions over time.

Maureen Barrie

I would like the visitors to come to the gallery and have an experience that they've possibly not had in an exhibition before. I want them to go away and think that they're important, that their story's important, that they matter, but there is a huge buzz. Since the Parliament opened in 1998, and coming up for that tenth year, I think Scotland has gone through some remarkable changes - and a lot of them for the good.