



Museums in contemporary society

NMS perspective: Tim Benton

Narrator:

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Tim Benton:

A very distinctive feature about the creation of the National Museum of Scotland is that it came about in the specific political and cultural context of Devolution, and the resources for it and the will to do it, and so forth, were absolutely linked to this creation of a separate identity at a time when this was of course controversial, not every Scottish person wants to be thought of separately from England and Wales and Northern Ireland. What's really fascinating is that this idea of wanting to represent Scottish national identity is carried through the museum displays from the basement, which deals with the Viking and Celtic origins, if you like, of Scotland right through to the last gallery to be opened, which we talk about, which is about the 20th Century and Scottish Identity where there is, and where they commissioned a film which is precisely about identity, 'Who Are We, the Scots?' and it's just talking heads, people saying what they think about being Scottish, about the language, and the food, and the weather, and so forth.

What's really fascinating is that you find in the Early People's displays the sophisticated attempt to ask the question in what ways are these finds, these archaeological finds of Vikings hoards of gold and silver, and so forth, distinctively Scottish? And there's a play with the idea of 'them' and 'us', you know, them being the various invaders, typically the Romans, but which to a Scottish viewer is associated with the idea of the English as an occupying power in Scotland. And also in the Early People's Gallery with this idea about the literate Romans versus the illiterate peoples that inhabited the Scottish Peninsula and this, I think, is an extraordinarily powerful way of stimulating the imagination to understand early archaeological remains, I mean not just in the Scottish context, but perhaps in any kind of context, for example, drawing attention to the fact that we don't really know what people looked like before the Roman invasion. We have clothing, fragments of clothing, we have buckles and swords, and all that sort of thing, but we don't know whether they had beards or not, we don't really know how tall they were, and so forth, and so this big problem comes up – how do you represent a people to the general public without having people to show, you know, there are no sculptures, not like if you have Roman or Greeks in relation to sculptures of people so you can see them? And they came up with this extraordinarily, I think, innovative idea of asking the sculpture Eduardo Paolozzi to create these figures which were deliberately larger than life size but not realistic, where objects of personal decoration could be displayed, but which could represent a sense of Scottishness without a kind of specificity which was not possible.

In the 20th Century Gallery the policy has been adopted of telling stories partly through the biographies of individual people, many of them women, and so you are introduced to people who are in many cases people from all levels of society who, there are some aristocratic women, working class women, and so forth, and their stories are told with just a picture and some information, and some objects that demonstrate their lives, and it's quite small. This is a classic example of how you can use a very historical selection of bits of information to represent a culture rather than being dictated by objects that you have in your display. A lot of the 20th Century Gallery consists not of priceless objects, but of quite ordinary, common objects, many of them bought from junk shops and from people's collections, or donated

specifically for this display which, if you like, represents the 'warp and woof' of Scottish society rather than just the high points of the culture.