



Museums in contemporary society

Museums and the AHD

Narrator

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One of the reasons frankly for choosing a major museum as the subject of these two video sections was that normally it's in museums that the Authorised Heritage Discourse is represented in its most perfect form for the reasons that I've been discussing, in other words the fact that there's no permanent collection, that curators have very strong professional formations, and so forth. It was very interesting that the people we interviewed in the V&A from the Director downwards did not represent those views in their purist form. The purist form of AHD that a museum curator would mix these statements together, basically, that the value of objects is inherent in the things themselves so that a very beautiful vase is just beautiful, and unique, and authentic, and so forth, and these characteristics are in the object, and in a sense don't need representing and explaining to the public. Secondly, that the judgements that should go towards selecting what to put on display come from professionals who are the best qualified to judge, so it's not up to the public, it's up to the professionals to decide which are the best objects, which should be put on display, how they should be displayed, and so forth. And then thirdly, that this should link up with ideas of nationalism, so the idea that this certainty of expertise of the curators, and this conviction that qualities are inherent in objects, is linked to the idea that these objects are inherently British or English, or Scottish or Welsh, that they have an identity which is fixed and irreversible, and putting all these things together, I mean for example, the V&A in the seventies was pretty much like that. You went into the V&A and you were shown displays, there was no explanation about why they were like they were, and you accepted them as just being the best of their kind, and that was it, you didn't have a kind of dialogue with them. Now what we heard, from the Director downwards, was museum professionals were very aware that this wasn't acceptable now, they were aware that the public had to be taken into account, that telling stories is very important, that the demographic of the visiting public was important, that they were trying to attract more children and also a wider ethnic diversity of visitor, and that they were trying to do it in a way that was pleasurable, so they were putting their professional expertise, if you like, in the mix with other people, for example an educationalist and an historian who are both involved in the design of the British Galleries, which we looked at in one of the video clips. So that was surprising in a way and what it makes me think is that although the AHD in its classic form is not now how museum professionals speak, there is a new and revised AHD, one which if you like, like politicians today speak a language of openness and democracy, and the client is always right, and so forth, while at the same time achieving their own aims of maintaining what they think of as the, are the important values in the collection, and also maintaining their view of history. So in the end, transforming from presenting objects which are wonderful in themselves to telling stories, there is a different authority that lies behind telling stories. These changes in approach, if you like, from presenting objects and telling stories, reflects changes in society and in culture, which are very widespread. Some of these changes are political and economic, that is to say the museums have become since the eighties accountable in a way that they weren't before. They have to meet targets, like everything else, and these targets in terms of the demographic mix of visitors and the number of visitors, and so forth, is set by government. So a lot of this is driven by external, necessary external forces. I don't think there's any question of this being a phenomenon of deceit or of a kind of selling out to some sort of external thing, I think there's a very strong, self-controlling, intellectual development which has taken place. But there's also a cultural change which is to do with the intellectual business, you know the articles and books that have been written.

There was a movement in the seventies called the new museography and all these people today were part of that movement, they were reforming the museums as they saw them which they felt had become too authoritarian, too rigid and so forth, so this is the new generation of people who have themselves helped to raise barricades, if you like, in their institutions over the years, and they're now trying to be much more sophisticated in the way that they deploy objects in the face of the public.