



Museums in contemporary society

Secrets of the V&A perspective: Laurajane Smith

Laurajane Smith:

I think the V&A itself is one of those authorising institutions of heritage. The name Victoria and Albert it conjures all the sort of cultural triggers that scream authority in Britain along the side that it's, you know it's a museum of great importance, it attracts tourism, and it undertakes research, it's one of those authorising institutions. They're beautiful collections that the Victoria and Albert has, and I think it very much is quintessentially AHD. A lot of the stuff comes from elite history-led experiences; they're collections that have been collected by many of the grand and the great, and the good in England. They express high forms of culture, high forms of design, and I think in that sense the museum is a significant example of the AHD, and the curators become embroiled in that, of course, because they work for those institutions that become part of the system and the structures that support that, and I know myself from working as a heritage consultant many years ago back in Australia that it can be very hard to subvert that system. It doesn't mean that you don't try and that, you know, but you become part of that process and it becomes very easy to take on the values of the institutions that you work for.

I mean it's interesting and I think it's important that they're acknowledging that museums' visitors bring ideas with them, that they bring their own bi-cultural and social baggage with them. They want to engage the audience in a deeper level than they have done so far, and they want to engender a sense of belonging, but that's what museums always have done. Museums were created as part of the whole process of guiding conduct, of regulating, governing conduct, of generating the good citizen, the citizen that understood sense and taste, and all the values that underpinned that certain sense of aesthetic taste. Museums have always done that.

The fact that they're a little bit more critical about that is great, you know it's seriously important that we do understand that that's what museums do, but I think there has to be a further questioning of well who is being asked to belong, and to belong to what? What is that sense of place, that sense of belonging that you're offering? To what extent does it speak to everyone in British society? There's nothing inherently wrong with the V&A itself but I think it needs to be understood that the V&A and other museums like it are just one example, that there are other examples of heritage that need also to be validated and authorised.

The problem with the V&A is not of its existence but the position that it takes as the dominant and the real authority in legitimising a sense of what heritage is, I mean it doesn't allow diversity and that's the problem. I understand that what is driving a lot of the changes in museums, and I suspect what's happening here at the V&A, is a desire to be more socially inclusive, you know since 1997 there's been quite a drive in the cultural sector for it to be more inclusive, to get more people from the demographics that are traditionally excluded from the cultural sector, such as working class people, ethnic minorities and so on, to get into museums and I can see that there is an attempt to do that by making the museum more hands on. I suspect that it probably didn't work, that they may have got more people coming to the museums but they would be people who would be coming from the traditional demographics, and I would suspect it doesn't work because they're not changing their attitude, their inclusive attitude to their collection. The collections are still the same, they're still the collections of elite, there's a certain aesthetic sense of history and heritage.

If social inclusion is really going to work in museums, in the cultural sector more generally, there has to be a change in the sense of what is heritage. Social inclusion should not be about getting more people from excluded demographics to come to museums to be told about

the Authorised Heritage Discourse, to be told about how heritage is about the great men doing great deeds, that it's about a certain aesthetic. Why would people want to come to that if that is not their experience of what heritage is? I think social inclusion should be really about getting middle class people to understand, and ruling classes to understand that there are other versions of heritage in history out there, that there are other social and cultural values and experiences and that those other values matter, you know it's not about getting more people into the V&A.

I think it's about getting more people from the, you know the one's, the two's, and three's socio-economic categories into museums like the National Coal Mining Museum, or Beamish, or Tolpuddle, or the People's Museum in Manchester or wherever, or going to see, you know, the Notting Hill Carnival, or the Castleford Heritage Festival. I'm not saying that social inclusion means the assimilation so that, for instance, the history, for instance, becomes the national narrative of British identity, but rather to understand the diversity of culture, class, gender, ethnic identity and experience in this country, understanding that there are many experiences, there's many sense of place, there's many sense of value – why is it that the dominant sense of aristocratic elite experience and sense of history, sense of cultural value and aesthetic – why is that dominant, why should it be dominant, why should that be the national narrative when Britain is a diverse culture?