



## Museums in contemporary society

*Redefining the V&A perspective" Laurajane Smith*

### **Laurajane Smith:**

What comes across for me in that video is against the sense of treasure, and there was a quick flash about how they were also collecting low culture. We got one quick flash of a film poster, I think it was, and then they were moved on to the more traditional objects that the V&A is renowned for holding. I didn't get a sense that what the British Gallery was offering was anything other than the typical sort of sense of aesthetically pleasing objects that belong to elite social experiences, so it seemed to be more of the same.

The revelations that Sarah Medlam has in that video are important, the new way that she says that she's looking at things following her experiences with the British Galleries. I think that as curators begin to lose a sense of authority, that they are the authoritative figure that will make pronouncements, that audiences should listen to and start to engage more in dialogue with their audiences, I think that's a good thing because I think that to start to make changes in the way heritage is understood and preserved, and the consequences ultimately that it has, that that change has got to start with dialogue, it's got to start with the sorts of realisations that Sarah has and a lot of museum curators are engaging with.

There is a trend, which the British Galleries is part of, of trying to make heritage more accessible, of opening heritage up so it's more inclusive, but that's never going to achieve anything if it doesn't change the very basics of how it's defining heritage. It's all very well to say we want more people to come and look at a sense of history and heritage that doesn't speak to the groups that you want to come and include, you have to change the message, you have to be more inclusive of the collections that you're developing, so if you're only collecting those objects that need a certain aesthetic appeal, you will appeal to those people who share that aesthetic appeal but you will never appeal to the people who don't. If you want to get those excluded people into the cultural sector then you have to compromise, you have to go some way to understanding their perspectives, and enter into dialogue with those groups that you want to engage with about what they think is important, what they think heritage is about, what they want to see, and decide whether, you know, that is something that you want to do, you want to engage in and if, having decided that it is, then you need to incorporate that sense of heritage and understanding in what you do, you have to engage with those people to become curators with you, and to incorporate their sense of social and cultural experiences into what you're doing.

Once you've done that, then you will be more inclusive, but to come and say simply to people come and have a look at, you know, what I think is important isn't going to achieve anything. It's really important for organisations like the V&A who are leading authoritative institutions that they do change because they have the power to make that change happen. However I could see that it would be very frightening for them to do so, because they do that and they're likely to alienate those people who find what the V&A does comfortable, comforting, and reaffirming their own sense of identity, sense of aesthetic and sense of heritage, but it doesn't mean that they shouldn't try, and it doesn't mean that how they try to bring about those changes is going to mean managing and engaging with their traditional audiences and bringing them along. Now how you do that, of course, is difficult but I think worth a try. If museums and heritage managers, if they claim that one of their roles, as they do, is to educate and to challenge, then no matter how hard that is you have to do it; not to do so and all you become as a heritage manager is part of the machinery, part of the whole processes of propagating certain cultural myths and the social and cultural status quo.