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*Museologica Brunensia*. 2017, vol. 6, iss. 1, pp. 12-20

ISSN 1805-4722 (print); ISSN 2464-5362 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/MuB2017-1-2>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/137194>

Access Date: 29. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

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## STUDIE/ARTICLES

## BEYOND THE “OBJECT-ORIENTED VS. VISITOR/IDEA-ORIENTED MUSEUM” DIVIDE: THE VALUE OF OBJECTS FOR MUSEUM EXPERIENCES

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<https://doi.org/10.5817/MuB2017-1-2>

## ABSTRACT/ABSTRAKT:

Ever since the so-called New Museology times (1980s–1990s), the idea of a divide between “object-oriented” and “visitor/ideas-oriented” museums became pervasive. This view oversimplified deeper and more complex discussions that were taking place, and created an artificial rift between the two indispensable elements of the museum experience: objects and visitors. Furthermore, the divide de-historicised museums and fostered an uncritical use of labels such as “traditional” and “modern”. However, significant efforts have been made over the past decade to rethink material culture and, thus, museum history and the use of objects in exhibitionary practices. All of which is having a positive impact on the way objects are being conceived and used to generate richer museum experiences for the visitors.

**Jak překonat rozpor mezi rozdělením muzeí na muzea zaměřená na objekty a muzea zaměřená na návštěvníky/myšlenky: význam objektů pro muzejní zážitky**

Dělení muzeí na muzea zaměřená na objekty a muzea zaměřená na návštěvníky/myšlenky je v muzeologii všudypřítomné už od dob tzv. nové muzeologie (80. a 90. léta 20. století). Tento pohled však až příliš zjednodušuje hlubší a komplexnější diskusi, a vytváří umělý rozpor mezi dvěma nepostradatelnými

součástmi muzejních zážitků, tj. mezi objektem a divákem. Toto rozdělení dále zbavuje muzea jejich historického charakteru a zavádí nekritické používání nálepek jako „tradiční“ a „moderní“. Avšak řada badatelů podnikla v posledních deseti letech významné kroky ke změně postoje k materiální kultuře, historii muzeí a užití objektů ve výstavních praktikách, a toto vše má pozitivní dopad na způsob, jakým jsou objekty utvářeny a používány k tomu, aby návštěvníkům poskytl bohatší zážitky.

## KEY WORDS/KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA:

*material culture – New Museology – “visitor-oriented” exhibitions – “object-oriented” exhibitions – object biography – materiality – wonder materiální kultura – nová muzeologie – výstavy zaměřené na návštěvníky – výstavy zaměřené na objekty – objektová biografie – materiálnost – úžas*

## INTRODUCTION

This article will address some of the issues concerning the meaning, place and purpose of material culture in museums. It will take a critical stance towards some of the existing debates; especially, those which consider objects to be in *opposition* to ideas or visitors (for example, by claiming that “idea/visitor-centred” exhibitions are better than “object-oriented” ones), and those that consider museums focused on objects as “traditional”

or uninterested in their audiences. By reviewing developments since the late 20th century and looking into three different approaches, the article will argue for the importance of *both* objects and ideas in creating engaging museum experiences. It will look into three of the many alternatives that have been developed, including specific references to current exhibitions, to potentiate the benefits of using material culture in museums.

## The Times of the New Museology

In 1988, Stephen Weil, a well-known USA museum professional, published a paper entitled ‘*The Proper Business of the Museum. Ideas or things?*’.<sup>1</sup> The title summed up a recurrent theme of certain museological discussions taking place in the late twentieth century – the times of the so-called New Museology. This was the case, for example, of a conference held in 1988 at the Smithsonian (which went on to become a well-known book), where there was debate on “*whether to privilege context or object*” and several participants “*tended to think of exhibitions as conforming to one of two models: either a vehicle for the display of objects or a space*

1 WEIL, Stephen. *The Proper Business of the Museum. Ideas or things? In WEIL, Stephen. Rethinking the museum and other meditations. Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990, pp. 43–56.*

for telling a history”.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, in his article included in the seminal book entitled *The New Museology*, Peter Vergo presented an opposition between advocates of “aesthetic exhibitions” and those of “contextual” ones.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, museological texts from the 1980s and 1990s included academic discussions that referred to different approaches to exhibitions and, critically, to the role of objects within them. The problem, however, was that these discussions became over-simplified and eventually became encapsulated into a supposed opposition between two “blocks”: the “visitor-centred” or “idea-centred” exhibition/museum vs. the “object-centred” one. Furthermore, moral judgements were applied to each block in such a way that the former somehow became identified with “modern” (and therefore, *better*) institutions, whilst the later with “traditional” (therefore *out-dated*) museums.<sup>4</sup>

When going back to those texts from the New Museology times, however, it transpires that authors had a more complex view on the issue, and that those short-cut simplifications (embodied in terms such as “visitor-centred” and “object-centred”) were secondary reinterpretations that did not adequately reflect the richness of their debate. In the late 1990s there was, indeed, an evaluation of different aspects of exhibitions, objects and the nature of interpretation. Thus, for example, there was discussion

on whether “*artefacts can be, and should be divorced from their original context of ownership and use, and redisplayed in a different context of meaning [...]*”;<sup>5</sup> equally, there was questioning of ideas such as the “*taken-for granted link between viewing items in a museum and the acquisition of knowledge – the assumed function of museums*”.<sup>6</sup> But carrying out such evaluations is more of an epistemological discussion (e. g., how we understand and perceive objects impacts on the way we exhibit them) than an outright rejection of the centrality of the object in museums. Terms such as “visitor-oriented” and “object/idea-centred” not only simplified debates that were initially very rich, they also de-historicised museums and exhibitions by creating a distorted view according to which old museums – so it goes – did not care about their visitors and modern museum did not care about objects.

The argument that it is possible to differentiate museums over time with clear-cut categories of “object-oriented” (museums from the past) and “visitor/idea-oriented” (those from the present) is questionable for various reasons. In the first place, all objects placed in museums are part of a larger narrative. They are not placed randomly or by their own, although it may seem so; they are always “[...] *elements of a narrative, forming part of a thread of discourse which is itself one element in a more complex web of meanings*”.<sup>7</sup> Thus, even behind those exhibitions that may appear to be “object-oriented” there is always an idea behind

them. In the second place, any museum exhibition is, by nature, purposely addressing an audience – it is *public*. Objects are placed with an understanding – often unconscious – that somebody will look at them and get something out of visiting the museum; furthermore, the material is exhibited in order to *elucidate*. Therefore, a relationship with (or implication of) the visitor is always present in museums.<sup>8</sup>

### Rethinking Objects: the Material Culture Turn in Museums

In the last few years, diverse authors have published research that has helped change not only our view of objects themselves, but also, more specifically, of their role in museums over time. A significant number of texts now focus on the history of museums – an area of research that had hitherto remained underdeveloped – in a nuanced and detailed way, enabling us to better understand practices of curatorship, learning, exhibition and museum architecture in their particular contexts.<sup>9</sup> For example, historicising museums facilitated identifying that the concept of what constitutes an object or “education” changes over time, hence exhibitions must be understood within their original context. What may seem “traditional” now might have been revolutionary at the time. This is why it is essential to unpick these perceptions in the literature that have been taken as facts, and start doing more historicised and nuanced readings of museums in the past.

2 KARP, Ivan. Culture and representation. In KARP, Ivan and Steven D. LAVINE (eds.). *Exhibiting Cultures. The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*. Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991, pp. 11–24.

3 VERGO, Peter. The Reticent Object. In VERGO, Peter (ed.). *The New Museology*. London: Reaktion Books, 1989, p. 48.

4 WITCOMB, Andrea. On the Side of the Object: an Alternative Approach to Debates About Ideas, Objects and Museums. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 1997, vol. 16, no. 4, pp. 383–399.

5 SAUMAREZ SMITH, Charles. Museums, Artefacts, and Meanings. In VERGO, Peter (ed.). *The New Museology*. London: Reaktion Books, 1989, p. 9.

6 JORDANOVA, Ludmilla. Objects of Knowledge: A Historical Perspective on Museums. In VERGO, Peter (ed.). *The New Museology*. London: Reaktion Books, 1989, p. 22.

7 VERGO, Peter (ed.). *The New Museology*. London: Reaktion Books, 1989, p. 46.

8 Ibid.

9 See ALBERTI, Sam. *Nature and Culture: Objects, Disciplines and the Manchester Museum*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009; MACLEOD, Suzanne. *Museum Architecture. A New Biography*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2013; HILL, Kate (ed.). *Museums and Biographies. Stories, Objects, Identities*. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2012.

Already in texts dating from the early 1990s, such as one contained in the book *The New Museology*, there was recognition of the value of objects:

*“[...] they are triggers of chains of ideas and images that go far beyond their initial starting point. Feelings about the antiquity, the authenticity, the beauty, the craftsmanship, the poignancy of objects are the stepping-stones towards fantasies, which can have aesthetic, historical, macabre or a thousand other attributes. These strings of responses should not be accorded the status of ‘knowledge’, however, but should be understood in terms of their own distinctive logic. The ‘knowledge’ that museums facilitate has the quality of fantasy because it is only possible via an imaginative process.”*<sup>10</sup>

Recent academic literature on museum studies has deepened our understanding of material culture and, as such, has been able to question several perceptions that have prevailed for the past decades.<sup>11</sup> In the first place, it has shown the potential of objects to generate a broad range of experiences, not only intellectual but also emotional; it can foster surprise, curiosity, sadness, rage, joy, laughter, as much as enlightenment. In the second place, objects can thus be a very effective and powerful tool for museums to connect with their visitors and with their concerns and interests. Object-people interactions are the basis of the museum experience, and accordingly, both are equally important and deserve our attention.

10 JORDANOVA, Ludmilla. Objects of Knowledge: A Historical Perspective on Museums. In VERGO, Peter (ed.). *The New Museology*. London: Reaktion Books, 1989, p. 23.

11 DUDLEY, Sandra (ed.). *Museum Materialities. Objects, Engagements, Interpretations*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2010; WOOD, Elizabeth and Kiersten LATHAM. *The Objects of Experience. Transforming Visitor-Object Encounters in Museums*. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2014; KNELL, Simon (ed.). *Museums in the Material World*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2007.

## Understanding the Notions of *Material Culture* and *Objects*

Originating in the nineteenth-century anthropological and archaeological fields, but also in the collections (museums) realm, the study of material culture now constitutes a broad, multidisciplinary field of enquiry. Definitions of what material culture is and approaches to studying it vary according to disciplinary perspectives.<sup>12</sup> There is no consensus on some of the central questions of this field: What is material culture? What is the difference (if any) between material culture, objects and artefacts? These questions have been answered in different ways, from the straightforward to the more obscure. So, for example, Berger considers material culture to be the world of things that people make, possess, buy and encounter; and within those, objects in particular are those that are relatively simple and not too large.<sup>13</sup> For other authors the distinction between material culture and objects is not central to their understanding of the topic; furthermore, they claim that both materiality and material culture “defy strict definitions”.<sup>14</sup> Miller, for example, argues that attempting to define and understand the artefactual by distinguishing it from the supposedly “natural” is both pointless and misleading.<sup>15</sup>

Museum literature has also engaged with these discussions, but several authors have taken a more pragmatic stance that has

12 Introduction. In *Handbook of Material Culture*. London: Sage, 2006, p. 1.

13 BERGER, Arthur A. *What Objects Mean. An Introduction to Material Culture*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2014, p. 16, 17.

14 *Handbook of Material Culture*. London: Sage, 2006, p. 4.

15 MILLER, Daniel. Artefacts and the Meaning of Things. In KNELL, Simon (ed.). *Museums in the Material World*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2007, p. 168.

allowed the discussion to move forward. For example, Wood and Latham consider that rather than “worrying about what constitutes a true museum artefact”, it is more important to understand how museums have used and conceived them – whether in exhibitions or in their public programmes.<sup>16</sup> In a similar vein, Heumann Gurian has demonstrated that the concept of a museum object has always been unfixed and relative (context-dependant), in such a way that there are different criteria not only from institution to institution (for example, between what an art and a science museum would consider part of their collection) but across time. Objects are very “elusive [...] even as they remain the central element embedded within all definitions of museums”.<sup>17</sup> This open definition of what constitutes a museum object seems to me the essential starting point to achieve a more benign and creative approach to the possibilities of material culture for engaging visitors.

## Things, ‘Good to Think’:<sup>18</sup> Diverse Possibilities

In this section, I will review three different approaches to material culture that have enriched the way we can think about museum objects.

### 1. *The object biography: the social life of things*

Igor Kopytoff’s seminal text on the cultural biography of things (1986) became the basis for much rethinking about material culture.

16 WOOD, Elizabeth and Kiersten LATHAM. *The Objects of Experience. Transforming Visitor-Object Encounters in Museums*. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2014, p. 11.

17 HEUMANN GURIAN, Elaine. What is the Object of this Exercise? A Meandering Exploration of the Many Meanings of Objects in Museums. *Daedalus*, 1999, vol. 128, no. 3, p. 165.

18 Lévi Strauss cited in *Handbook of Material Culture*. London: Sage, 2006, p. 2.

He suggested that objects had “lives”, by entering and exiting through different contexts of meaning and value throughout time. Looking at those movements could provide valuable information about social relations and about the interaction between the individuals and the physical environment.<sup>19</sup> Kopytoff also argued that objects were not only the result of, but themselves producers of, social interaction.

The life of an object is a complex process that we have generally ignored or only looked at partially, and thus we have failed to account for all the changes in its meaning, exits and entrances, struggles, ownerships, economic valuations, etc., that it has undergone throughout time, from its creation to its exhibition in a museum room.<sup>20</sup> The approach of the object biography looks at the way in which things acquire layers of value with each change. Some of these layers may be lost to our knowledge, especially when there is no documentation of the changes, but other times it is possible to trace the journey. By analysing these layers, we can reach out to untapped information about how an object was valued, used and interpreted, and in so doing, acquire insight into the people that owned it, sold it, bought it and, even, exhibited it. This is why “*the life cycle of an artefact is its most important property*”.<sup>21</sup>

Understanding the “life” of a museum object means looking

19 SAUMAREZ SMITH, Charles. Museums, Artefacts, and Meanings. In VERGO, Peter (ed.). *The New Museology*. London: Reaktion Books, 1989, p. 21.

20 KOPYTOFF, Igor. The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process. In APPADURAI, Arjun (ed.). *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 66, 67.

21 SAUMAREZ SMITH, Charles. Museums, Artefacts, and Meanings. In VERGO, Peter (ed.). *The New Museology*. London: Reaktion Books, 1989, p. 20.



Fig. 1: Entrance to the temporary exhibition “The National Coat of Arms. Flora, Fauna and Biodiversity” at the National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City.

not only at whatever information we might have about its change in uses, owners, places and meanings before entering the institution, but also, after it became accessioned in the collection. This is why Kopytoff’s text proved central for the development of museum literature that sought to shed new light on collections by analysing the layering of stories and processes behind them.<sup>22</sup> These texts, broadly considered, try to address a larger question that had often been overlooked: what journey did a particular object take from its original departure point up to becoming part of a museum collection, and once inside the museum, within the different areas or departments? This meant looking at its inception (for example, where and how it was produced), but most importantly, tracing the path it followed as

22 See TYTHACOTT, Louise. *Classifying China: Shifting Interpretations of Buddhist Bronzes in Liverpool Museum, 1867–1997*. In HILL, Kate (ed.). *Museums and Biographies. Stories, Objects, Identities*. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2012, pp. 173–185; GOSDEN, Chris and Yvonne MARSHALL. *The Cultural Biography of Objects. World Archaeology*, 1999, vol. 31, no. 2, pp. 169–178.

a museum object: which mid-destinations did it end up in, why and how was it interpreted, displayed and taken care of at those destinations?, among others.

Looking at changes in the way a museum object is interpreted and exhibited refutes the idea that once inside a collection, the meaning of objects is stable or fixed. It sanctions questioning the belief that museums “*will provide a safe and neutral environment in which artefacts will be removed from the day-to-day transactions*”; it also enables accepting that collections are in a constant state of change, by losing and gaining new interpretations about their meaning (epistemology) and use (function).<sup>23</sup> Although designed as institutions meant to keep, museums are places where objects are in a constant state of loss.<sup>24</sup> The analysis of an object can, thus, provide valuable

23 SAUMAREZ SMITH, Charles. Museums, Artefacts, and Meanings. In VERGO, Peter (ed.). *The New Museology*. London: Reaktion Books, 1989, p. 9.

24 KNELL, Simon (ed.). *Museums in the Material World*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2007, p. 23, 24.



Fig. 2: A panel displaying in detail the differences between three images from different periods, which depict some of the central elements of the coat of arms (such as the eagle and the cactus).

understanding of how museums have operated, the changing values of epistemology, curatorship and exhibitionary practices, and even public expectations.

A recent example of this trend is a temporary exhibition at the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City called ‘*The National Coat of Arms. Flora, Fauna and Biodiversity*’, displayed from March to May 2017. Considering the coat of arms as an object, the display addressed how it was created (the symbols from which it originated), the different formats and media through which it was disseminated, the relationship it holds with other objects, the places and contexts where it has featured, and the ways in which it has been used in different spheres, whether popular culture or politics (Figs. 1 and 2). Thus, this exhibition took a single object as a departure point and used it as a resource to establish a connection with a broad range of other issues.

## 2. Materiality and the senses

Materiality is a complex term that can be broadly used to denote an idea of *substance*, that of which

the physical world is made of.<sup>25</sup> It can also refer to its properties, how they change and, notably, the relationship between these two and how the body of the subject (for example the visitor) reacts and relates to it. An analysis of the constitutive elements of an object can shed light on unknown or previously unseen aspects, and can thus help trigger a series of positive responses in visitors. For example, the materiality of an object can be a starting point to talk about manufacture and handicraft, pigments, aging conditions (wear and tear), body and shape, value, etc.; it can also be the starting point for a range of sensorial responses beyond sight, such as touch and smell.

Critics have often noted that objects “do not speak” and, so, they only provide an “illusion” of knowledge; in other words, they argue that just by looking at objects it is impossible to “extract” information so as to generate knowledge.<sup>26</sup> But objects are able to generate memories,

<sup>25</sup> *Handbook of Material Culture*. London: Sage, 2006, p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> For example, WEIL, Stephen. The Proper Business of the Museum. Ideas or things? In WEIL, Stephen. *Rethinking the museum and other meditations*. Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990, p. 47.

associations and fantasies, as well as bodily responses based on their materiality. This approach suggests that objects do have some level of agency: their nature (size, colour, material, etc.) has the power to generate particular responses or to evoke certain feelings. Sandra Dudley has extensively developed a case for how a ‘pre-knowledge’ encounter between visitors and objects (that which happens before a visitor looks for more information on an object that captured his/her interest) can be a powerful, transformative experience.<sup>27</sup> Objects, with their particular materialities, have the capacity to affect and move people, and museums should harness this potential in their favour, to better engage their visitors. Museums can create opportunities to encourage visitors to engage with the physicality of objects, but this will only happen if they stop being used merely as “illustrations” or as “evidence” of broader socio-cultural issues.

Another approach amongst authors interested in material culture is that expressed by Tim Ingold. Unlike others, he is not interested in the notion of *materiality* but in that of *material*; that is to say, in the particularities, physical characteristics and transformation of matter through time and contact with the environment.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, he does not advocate for the concept of object agency but, rather, the transformation of matter due to its contact with the environment. Hence he considers that an essential approach to material culture and its place in the social world must emphasize the materials out of which it is

<sup>27</sup> DUDLEY, Sandra. Encountering a Chinese Horse. Engaging with the Thingness of Things. In DUDLEY, Sandra (ed.). *Museum Objects: Experiencing the Property of Things*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2012, p. 2.

<sup>28</sup> INGOLD, Tim. Materials against Materiality. *Archaeological Dialogues*, 2007, vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 1–16.



Fig. 3: The interactive panel inside Tate Modern's "Materials and Objects" permanent collection display.

made. So, for example, we must look at what something is made of, what particular circumstances are derived from that original matter, what meanings can be extracted from it, how its properties and appearance have changed over time or through interaction with other agents and materials, etc. All this applies as much to a piece of printed cloth or a hut made of particular leaves, to a marble sculpture.

An example of this trend can be seen in Tate Modern's current display of the permanent collection, in the room entitled 'Materials and Objects'. This section is devoted to presenting works of art from the perspective of how and from which materials they were made. The connecting thread between them all is the power of engagement that is derived from their materiality, whether human hair, metal, wood, cloth or other. Furthermore, there is an interactive installation that encourages reflections on the materiality of art through displaying examples of the materials from which works have

been made, or questions about how they impact on the artistic process (Fig. 3).

### 3. *Aura, wonder and numinosity*

This approach also suggests that objects have some level of agency, but to a greater extent: they have the power to amaze us and to trigger introspective experiences that go beyond rational explanation. There has been a preconception, largely due to a positivist reading of museums, that the exhibition of objects has generally been about "rational" approaches that foster cognition and understanding through the act of showing and looking. Yet, as Knell argues, there has always been in museums a tension between more "scientific" and poetic, irrational or emotional approaches to material culture.<sup>29</sup> Another reason for the degree of wariness to recognise this type of approach in museums is the difficulty – not to say impossibility – of capturing

<sup>29</sup> KNELL, Simon. Museums, Reality and the Material World. In KNELL, Simon (ed.). *Museums in the Material World*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2007, p. 7.

and evaluating this type of visitor experience. Unlike other visitor responses, wonder or numinosity are very difficult to put into words and, therefore, be understood by museum staff in order to "tame" and reproduce them. For Dudley, not all museum experiences can be measured or controlled; yet, there must always be room in museums for those unknown or ungraspable experiences.<sup>30</sup>

Walter Benjamin coined the term *aura* to refer to the capacity of objects to project a certain special allure.<sup>31</sup> However, other authors have taken on this original idea and explored it further, including Greenblatt, who devised the terms *resonance* and *wonder*. The former refers to the capacity of certain objects to transport us to other contexts because of their power to evoke them. Wonder refers to an opposite process: the objects' capacity to absorb the viewer into time and space, as if all else disappeared.<sup>32</sup> Both processes have in common that they "stop people in their tracks"; they create a response which is more intense, introspective and often difficult to explain than the mere cognitive, or even emotional, responses.

Latham and Wood have taken this tradition further, but with a slight twist, by discussing the *numinous* experience with museum objects. These authors demonstrated that in specific instances and contexts, objects have been able to trigger numinosity; that is, "*a holistic*

<sup>30</sup> DUDLEY, Sandra. Encountering a Chinese Horse. Engaging with the Thingness of Things. In DUDLEY, Sandra (ed.). *Museum Objects: Experiencing the Property of Things*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2012, p. 11.

<sup>31</sup> BENJAMIN, Walter. The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction. In BENJAMIN, Walter. *Illuminations*. Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1977 [1936].

<sup>32</sup> GREENBLATT, Stephen. Resonance and Wonder. In KARP, Ivan and Steven D. LAVINE (eds.). *Exhibiting Cultures. The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*. Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991, pp. 42–56.

uniting of intellect and affect, with a direct link to the tangible and symbolic nature of the object, a feeling of being transported, and intensely profound connections with the past, self and spirit”.<sup>33</sup> They recognise that these experiences are rare, but when they do occur, they are characterised by their power to change or impact visitors to such an extent that they remember them for the rest of their lives. Because the numinous

in visitors. Of course, this can happen with any object, depending on the visitors’ own memories and background. However, it is also possible that certain objects might have a greater power of engagement; this is the case, for example, of religious items or items worn by famous and admired public figures (whether politicians, priests, artists, etc.), and also, historical items that are associated with landmark events or that

Imperial War Museum (IWM) in London, opened in 2014 for the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemorations. The exhibition design is loaded with a wide and abundant range of resources, both digital and non-digital, up to the point of saturation. Yet, there are also “islands” or contemplation spaces where the visitors can sit down to relax or reflect, and, as I will now show, to observe a particular object in detail. These spaces for



Fig. 4: Detail of the first contemplation space at the IWM’s First World War Galleries. At the centre is a small glass case containing a shrunken glove, with and a video showing landscapes of the trenches behind.



Fig. 5: General view of the second contemplation space. A concrete circular bench surrounds the small glass case containing the perforated helmet.

experiences have more to do with, for example, feeling a deeper and broader connection with the world, with feelings of alterations of time and place, and even with bodily (sensorial) responses, it is more reasonable to conceive them as mystical experiences, rather than traditional learning ones.<sup>34</sup>

According to the authors mentioned in this section, objects can have a strong tokenistic presence that can foster particular responses

33 WOOD, Elizabeth and Kiersten LATHAM. Numinous Experiences with Museum Objects. *Visitor Studies*, 2013, vol. 16, no. 1, p. 3.

34 Ibidem, p. 11.

“transmit” a strong sense of the past. In this case, visitors often use the objects “as means of entering into and living vicariously in a past time”, and thus, as an attempt to “recreate” the experience from the past.<sup>35</sup> However artificial or inaccurate this sense of the past may be, it can act as a gateway to deep engagements and positive experiences.

An example of this approach can be found at the recently refurbished First World War Galleries at the

35 JORDANOVA, Ludmilla. Objects of Knowledge: A Historical Perspective on Museums. In VERGO, Peter (ed.). *The New Museology*. London: Reaktion Books, 1989, p. 25.

contemplation are round benches made of concrete, at the back of which there is a projection with audio and, at the centre, a small glass case that holds a single object – in the first space is a leather glove shrunken by the effects of tear gas, and in the second, a helmet perforated by a bullet (Figs. 4 and 5). The objects are isolated in their glass cases but close enough to allow the visitors’ contact and inspection. In addition, they are illuminated with a directed light that creates a special atmosphere. The dramatic and highly focalised way in which these two objects that reflect pain



and suffering are exhibited seems to foster an intense, numinous, encounter.

## CONCLUSION

In this article I have argued for a rethinking of the role of objects in museums. To do so, it was first necessary to show how literature has often used concepts such as “visitor-centred” or “object-centred”, which do not do justice to, or account for, the complexity of the museum experience. As briefly reviewed, there now exists a significant number of studies that have fostered a different understanding of material culture in museums. For example, some have analysed the connections between objects and the construction of knowledge throughout time, and the implications of this for epistemologies, curatorship and interpretation. Others have provided insight into the role of objects in the perception of the world and of social relationships. Finally, there are authors who have argued that objects can be an entry point to a series of powerful experiences beyond the mere cognitive, which can positively and transcendently impact visitors.

It seems likely that in the coming years, all these enriching perspectives on the value of material culture for museums will not only change the way we look at the history of museums but also positively impact on everyday exhibitionary practice. Objects have the power to generate discussion and to foster an approach to the world that surrounds human beings. They can trigger empathy, wonder, curiosity, and other valuable responses if museum professionals better engage with them and seek creative ways to unharness that potential.

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