Changing histories: museums, sexuality and the future of the past

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Abstract

The dawning of the new Millennium coincided with intense change within museums, as new technologies and new approaches towards history and the past raised profound questions about the identity and direction of UK museums. The paper discusses these matters in terms of the construction and reception of museum exhibitions. The first part, which draws on 49 exploratory interviews with a sample of staff in UK museums, considers the processes determining both the choice of appropriate exhibition topics and the inclusion or exclusion of particular artefacts and perspectives. The second part, drawing on the core findings from 200 semi-structured interviews with visitors, argues that many museum visitors are highly active and discerning in their interpretation of exhibitions and museum-mediated histories. An implication of the findings is that the preferences of visitors may have a proactive influence upon the flavour and direction of museum accounts. The final part considers the implications of the data for contemporary museum practice and its context. It concentrates upon the increasing validity of sexuality as topic within UK museums and as way of illustrating the shifting milieu within which museums are currently working. Ultimately, museum accounts of the past may never be the same again.

Introduction

History, as an open-ended experience, is invariably organized and constructed for consumption in certain ways, particularly in museums. It is less clear, however, as to just *how* this history is constructed and *what* constitutes the rationale behind it. Museums often have enormous stocks of material and whilst some smaller museums may display their collections in their entirety, more often decisions have to be made both about what to display and what not to display and, more fundamentally, which general and specific themes, topics and messages the museum will attempt to convey through its exhibitions. It is on the nature of this decision-making process that the first part of this paper focuses. This paper, which responds to the widespread recognition of the need for qualitative data about the processes of exhibition construction (e. g. Hooper-Greenhill 1995, Fyfe and Ross 1996) and which also draws on the experiences of other qualitative researchers (e. g. Gable 1996), reports preliminary findings from exploratory interviews with museum professionals and semi-structured interviews with visitors. (See the methodological note).[1]

Determining exhibitions

Perhaps the first point to make is that the factors which variously affect the construction of museum exhibitions are not fixed or immutable. A myriad of issues determine how museum exhibitions are put together and what is or is not included. The relative importance of these factors can vary enormously depending on a number of circumstances and, of course, can dramatically shift over time and in different contexts. For this reason, and particularly because of the sheer heterogeneity of museums, outlining the specific role of each factor is difficult.

Nonetheless, a number of themes clearly appear from my empirical research to influence the development and direction of museum exhibitions.

One of the most striking themes was the increasing impact of commercial considerations in framing decisions within museums. It is certainly an issue which has - rightly or wrongly - come to pervade almost every aspect of museum work. As Pearce (1991:1) notes, this has led to intense discussion about the manner in which museums should be financed and managed in a climate of scarce resources. This is an important question and raises a plethora of related issues such as how one might assess efficiency and 'value for money' and just what this may mean in the context of a cultural body such as a museum.

Although these concerns have permeated all museum sectors, staff from local and particularly national museums tended to be far more reticent in acknowledging the growing influence of commercialism - in marked contrast to the independent sector:

> At the end of the day, we're a business. So you're not here for the good of your health. You're here, at the end of the day, to survive and to make money. You've got to pay the wages. You've got to be able to develop the new exhibits. (Director, Independent Museum)

> Before you do anything, it has to pay for itself. When it comes to funding things, we have various guidelines and one of the principles is that it has to pay for itself within a year. If it can pay for itself within a year and earn a lot of money, then we'll do it. (Manager, Independent Museum)

National museums, in contrast, have generally managed to stay fairly aloof from more fundamental moves towards commercialism. The traditional research focus embodied by many national museums, such as the Imperial War Museum, has meant that they have often been able to justify their existence almost regardless of any commercial rationale. Nonetheless, it is still evident that even national museums have been affected by the moves towards commercialism and the marketization of the past:

> Having been brought up in the free museum tradition, which no-longer exists, commercial factors do play a more important part than they use to and if you have got something to sell ... you've got to have something like that to pull the punters in. It's the bums on seats thing. (Historian, National Museum)

Local museums, on the other hand, have found that they are generally far more susceptible to commercial pressures. With the widespread reduction in local authority spending, local museums have found their very existence being fundamentally challenged from commercial perspectives. Where local authorities find themselves having to make dramatic spending cuts local museums are frequently the prime candidates. This appears to have had a profound impact upon the manner in which exhibitions in local museums are initiated and developed:

> There is a definite movement within museums now to make as much as you can without compromising the museum function. So in the last year, we've opened a shop on the ground floor, which we didn't have before. That's doing really well. ... I think what councils like to see now is that you are being business like and not wasting money, although I don't think many museums ever had any money to waste, to be honest with you. (Director, Local Museum)

Commercial considerations, in terms of both the revenue generated and the number of visitors attracted, are increasingly playing a part in the development of local exhibitions and in the kinds of issues which are being developed, much to the ambivalence of some staff in local museums:

> We have to continually justify our position and attract business in, so there's much more of an element here of just getting punters through the doors. That's a sort of cynical thing that most people involved in this place would not really go along with but, of course, to improve the displays, to improve the experience, you have to get more people in, and generate more revenue. So, commercial considerations are very important here. (Education Officer, Local Museum)

The issue of marketing is, in many respects, the key to some of the wider developments here. The debates about marketing in the museum world are complex and have been touched upon elsewhere (see McLean 1997; Andersen 2001). However, in the free market context within which museums are increasingly operating, marketing has an undeniable importance - not simply for informing the public of what the museum has to offer, but also in terms of informing the museum of what the public wants from them. The implication is an important one - that museums may be increasingly changing and modifying their practices in an attempt to match public demand.

Certainly, many museums are increasingly emphasising the importance of marketing for their work and ultimately their survival in a tight fiscal climate. This issue has pervaded all museum sectors, although unsurprisingly its importance is most explicit in the independent sector:

> If you look at the definition of marketing, basically, you supply the right product at the right time to the right people in the right place. There's no point having a product if it is not what is needed, or if you're trying to give it to the wrong people. So marketing must play an important part and a lot of the decisions have to marketing led. If they are not marketing led, then you are really wasting your time -it will fail without it. (General Manager, Independent Museum)

In short, museums are increasingly matching their products to the demands of the market. What this implies is that visitor preferences are being accorded far greater significance (at least in theory) than they were once, which in turn has impacted upon the choice of appropriate topics for display and exhibition, as museums attempt to match their products to their market.

One striking illustration of this in the UK has been the growing importance attached to the educational market. Many museums readily acknowledge the potential of the educational market for increasing visitors and revenue - both directly and indirectly – and this has certainly framed some of their work. The potential relevance of an exhibition to the National Curriculum,[2] for instance, appears to be an almost universal consideration when exhibitions are being initiated and constructed:

> ... over the last few years, the whole of the school visits area, has really focused on the school curriculum, matching what there is in the museums collections with the National Curriculum, pointing out links between them. (Education Officer, National Museum)

What has made the National Curriculum so influential, however, is the manner in which it prescribes the precise topics and areas that schools should be studying. In turn, this removes for museums a large part of the uncertainty of trying to gauge the needs and demands of their potential market, which is an important consideration when developing new and hopefully popular exhibitions. In other words, the National Curriculum is prescribing not just what should be taught in schools, but is also determining museum decisions about appropriate topics for exhibition, as the following respondents acknowledge:

> Any exhibitions that are done now are first looked at very closely in terms of the National Curriculum, and how schools can use them. We are very much geared towards the National Curriculum - it is a tremendously good part of our business. (Education Officer, Local Museum)

> The school syllabus has always been enormously important to us ... but the National Curriculum has meant that we now know, for certain, that a large number of schools at say Key Stage 2[3] are going to be doing something. So we know now that there is going to be a definite interest in anything that we provide on that topic, whereas before we had to try and work it out for ourselves. (Education Officer, National Museum)

In short, museums appear to be attaching far greater significance to understanding, and catering for, their market. In light of the fact that museums have been drawn heavily into the commercial arena, the preferences of visitors and potential visitors have begun to take precedence, more so than ever before. Museum charges[4] have clearly played a role here, not least in terms of promoting the perception of visitors as consumers. This development has a potentially significant impact upon exhibition policies, as museums increasingly adopt their exhibitions to what they believe visitors want to see:

> Gradually, over the years, our displays have evolved and are becoming much more visitor led and we know from visitor surveys what people want to see and we know what they like and what they don't like. (Exhibitions Officer, National Museum)

Certainly, many of my respondents were keen to emphasise the central position to which visitor preferences have been elevated in the inception and development of many displays. This should not be particularly surprising - a popular exhibition is clearly a major success for a museum, both from commercial and publicity perspectives. However, these developments have not been uniformly welcomed. On the contrary, some commentators have been very troubled by these changes in museum practice. Patrick Boylan (1992), for instance, notes with interest the growing application of market research techniques, such as visitor surveys, in the work of the contemporary museum. Coupled with the perception of visitors as 'consumers', these features have now firmly pervaded the work of many museums and heritage centres. Yet the approach towards museum visits as 'a market commodity within a 'leisure' market-place' (Boylan 1992: 11) has become a real and pressing concern for many within the museum and heritage professions. Nonetheless, some interesting and important attempts have been made to involve visitors more fully in the development of displays (see Morris 2001). Clearly, museum visitors and their preferences can and do influence the practices of some museums, a process Appleyard (1999: 4) describes as the 'power shift from the sacredness of the collection to the sanctity of the consumer'. The growing importance of visitors in the exhibition process, at least in theory, has had important implications for the work of many museums, not least in terms of helping to legitimise moves towards displaying issues, topics and areas once deemed to be largely inappropriate for museums to display, such as women's history. These issues are illustrated by the following quote from a female Exhibitions Officer at a national museum:

> There is influence from the general public. The strongest one at the moment is coming from women visitors who feel that we don't do enough about the role of women in the two world wars. This is something which, when we were planning our displays, we did feel should be represented. Our problem is that our team of historians are all men and don't take kindly to what they regard as peripheral subjects...

Ultimately, however, these themes are operationalized by museum staff themselves and much museum decision-making is often highly pragmatic. Many different museum staff are usually involved in the development of any specific exhibition and eliciting just why they made the decisions they did is difficult when one considers that so much is the result of personal compromise and agreement:

> In the end, no matter what you say, it will come down to personal agreement and personal compromise being struck. A lot of what you do, when it gets done, is because you might get on with someone, in a way that you can work with. (Education Officer, National Museum)

The fact that involved individuals such as designers, curators, educationalists, marketing managers and even historical consultants are all bringing diverse and even contradictory perspectives to the development of exhibitions is significant, not least because it illustrates the importance of the negotiation process in putting most exhibitions together. In simple terms, museum exhibitions are almost always the result of drawn out and complex negotiation.

Yet while different museum staff may bring very different perspectives, they nonetheless often share a common occupational culture, even if the nature of this culture may vary dramatically between museums. This notion of an occupational culture is clearly interesting, not least because it may help to explain why some themes and perspectives, such as women's history for instance, were traditionally almost uniformly excluded from museum coverage and yet are now seen as fundamental to holistic historical accounts. The most obvious way to explain this may be by reference to particular staff personalities. After all, as Karp and Levine note in the opening sentence of their book on museum display:

> Every museum exhibition, whatever its overt subject, inevitably draws on the cultural assumptions and resources of the people who make it. (Karp and Levine 1991: 1)

What remains to be seen, however, is just how the cultural assumptions of museum professionals are shaped. My empirical material raises a number of pertinent complexities here, not least the fact that some museum staff appear to be particularly amenable to innovative and challenging displays and are highly progressive in their approach to constructing exhibitions. In contrast, some museum staff appear to be quite the opposite, as the following respondents highlight:

> We know that the historians are always going to come up with a male dominated storyline, because war is essentially male dominated, and because all their training is as historians and to see everything with an overview, they find it hard to take into account new trends in interpretation and new trends in what schools are studying. ... Probably the new generation of historians coming up are getting much more open to these sorts of interpretations. (Exhibitions Officer, National Museum)

> We tend to be much keener on the social history aspects. So we tend to push for more on social history and more on women basically. But others parts of the museum will say 'Yes, but we've got to have this battle or that battle' and so it is a terrible balancing act. We get listened to up to a point. (Education Officer, National Museum)

The issue, of course, is why are some museum professionals so much more receptive to new issues and approaches than others? A number of my respondents related this in different ways to the manner in which museum staff are trained which, in turn, is also intrinsically linked to wider developments in history and approaches to the past. Of course, some staff, such as curators, may have entered the profession directly from the discipline of history, where such approaches are now firmly established. Many others, however, have come to consider and adopt these ideas and perspectives through alternative means, not least through informal training on the job:

> In a sense, there is very little training that goes on. Just on-the-job-training. (Director, Museum Training Organization)

> I think how I have learnt best is just by working with some really good people, people that I admire and I have looked up to and they haven't necessarily been training me, but it was just observation and working with them, you learn very much through doing the job and working with them. (Curator, Local Museum)

The implication of such informal training on the job is interesting. While this may be a route through which new and innovative ideas may permeate through the museum world, it clearly has its disadvantages, as the same curator noted:

> It is incredibly hit-and-miss and that is why I think the museums in this country range from new displays which are brilliant and others which are appalling. There just doesn't seem to be an objective standard because of the ad hoc training and sharing of knowledge.

In contrast, some commentators have even argued that the disparate and patchy nature of museum training, which has long been a feature of the museum world, has actually served to encourage more innovative and challenging approaches. After all, the fact that many members of staff are not specifically trained in museum work suggests, by implication, that they are 'not bound by its conventions and limitations' (Porter 1996: 120).

In any event, over the past twenty years or so, there has undoubtedly been a sea change in professional approaches to history and the past. In particular, there has been a growing consensus about the impossibility of neutral and objective museum presentations and the necessarily value laden nature of history, coupled with a broadening of the themes deemed to be appropriate subjects for museum displays. These developments certainly appear to account for the growing inclusion of women's history in museums:

> It has taken a whole host of issues for museums to take on women's history, like post-war generation women like myself getting into positions of authority within a certain level of the museum occupation, whereby there are now more women who will not have their history covered up any more so that it has got to the point whereby you now have exhibitions on the subject. (Curator, Local museum)

> I mean 20 years ago, women's history was never considered seriously by professional historians. Now most professional historians would regard it as an extremely important element in almost anything they're doing. It just takes time for this to percolate downwards…. (Curator, Local Museum)

In this sense, there has been a tangible shift in the attitudes of many museum staff. Shifting concepts of history have certainly begun to make a difference to museums: in terms of the work conducted by museums and their staff, and in terms of the inclusion of particular themes or exhibitions which may once have been largely frowned upon as inappropriate.
There is, therefore, no doubt that there have been very significant changes in the work of UK history museums - from the growing penetration of commercialism, to the greater importance attached to visitor preferences, to the pervasion of new ideas about history and the past. All of these developments are interesting in their own right, not least because they may have some important implications for the flavour and direction of future museum exhibitions.

Interpreting Exhibitions

A concern which has long animated much academic interest in museums, for obvious reasons, is the vexed question of how visitors interpret museum displays and exhibitions. A traditional assumption, tacitly held as it may often be, perceives most museum visitors as inherently unsophisticated consumers of history who almost necessarily view museum representations as objective and neutral. But is this actually the case? As part of my research into audience reception within museums, I conducted 200 semi-structured interviews with visitors to four exhibitions concerned with the Blitz and Second World War in national, local and independent museums. It soon became evident that many museum visitors are more conscious of the history-making process than has been acknowledged. Indeed, when one considers the wider shifts in academic approaches to history that have increasingly permeated popular understandings of the past, coupled with the fact that museum visitors disproportionately come from higher social classes and tend to be better educated than the population as a whole, this finding should not be especially revelatory. We clearly have to acknowledge that history museums are ultimately only one agent in the processes by which society understands its past and heritage. Indeed, one can go further and suggest that the museum is ultimately the embodiment of the formal and public past - the way in which individuals publicly come to terms with the past. Yet it is important to realise that many of the ways in which individuals come to know, understand and appreciate historical issues, particularly historical issues within the confines of a lived memory, can be much more informal and private, involving the reminiscences and recollections of family and friends.

It is essential not to consider museum visiting in isolation. On the contrary, the meanings which visitors bring to exhibitions are often mediated by their experiences and knowledge drawn from the wider society in which they live. This is a crucial point, because it would seem to support the idea that the existing knowledge and experience of museum visitors could be an important determinant of the manner in which they make sense of museum messages and images. The growing body of work on cultural audiences and the mass media similarly suggests that cultural reception can be heavily mediated by a range of other influences:

> ... men and women live in second-hand worlds ... The quality of their lives is determined by meanings they have received from others. Everyone lives in a world of such meanings. (C. Wright Mills, cited in Negrine 1989: 4)

In other words, museum visitors are not passive consumers of museum images and messages, but can interpret museum presentations in a myriad of diverse ways, often resonating with their existing knowledge. Following the large body of work that has explored cultural reception in the wider context of television, this conclusion is not particularly surprising. Yet, just how sophisticated are museum visitors in their consumption of exhibitions? Are they aware, for instance, that they are witnessing the selective organization of the past? The assumption has often been that visitors are remarkably undiscerning in their perception of exhibitions, and largely unaware of the history-making process. After all, the professional codes and day-to-day practice of many museum staff have traditionally been built on the premise of objectivity and neutrality. The manifestation of these themes in exhibitions is hardly conducive to encouraging challenge from visitors. After all:

> Museums claim to show the past as it really was - to re-present history. In this simple claim, the medium of the museum and the process of making collections and displays are rendered invisible in a relationship of authenticity and truth. (Porter 1996: 108)

But is this perception really justified? One of the issues that I was especially interested in was how aware visitors are of the museum decision-making process and whether they simply accept as somehow objectively neutral whatever is presented to them. With this in mind, all visitors were asked the following question, which was a qualitative attempt to explore whether or not the audience had any sense that there were some issues or themes which, for whatever reason, had been excluded:

> Do you think that there was anything that this museum did not want to display?

The results were intriguing, and it was surprising that more than half of the 200 visitors interviewed immediately suggested that there was something that the museum had, for whatever reason, decided not to display. These findings would certainly appear to challenge the notion of the visitor as an unquestioning dupe. Interesting as these figures may be, it is really only through the qualitative data that one gets a true sense of how some visitors felt that they were seeing only a partial representation of the past. Significant numbers of visitors in all of the museums were acutely aware that the displays were invariably excluding the full horror of war. In fact, this tended to be the most consistent observation throughout the interviews:

> **Visitor 59**: A lot of the dying part is left out, rightly so.
>
> **Visitor 191**: War is a brutal thing - there would be things that people would not like to see and I would expect them not to put in any in an exhibition.

These quotes are particularly revealing, not least because it does indicate that an acknowledgement of something being excluded is not necessarily a criticism of the museum. On the contrary, it is perhaps more indicative of an appreciation of the difficulties that face museums in dealing with sensitive subjects like warfare.

A number of respondents, however, went far beyond this in identifying and specifying the terms of what they felt was not being displayed and how the museum was displaying only a partial representation of the past:

> **Visitor 107**: You never see the enemy! It is always the same. You never show the enemy and by this the enemy then becomes an evil…

> **Visitor 53**: We all know that there are a lot of secrets from the war that are never going to be told. The thing with history is that you only really look back on the good things!

> **Visitor 100**: There's always something left out. There's always something that someone doesn't want you to see!

> **Visitor 16**: I don't think that they ever tell the full story to the public - it's hidden from us…

Although these findings are evidently open to interpretation, what this data may indicate is that many museum visitors are actually far more conscious and discerning than they are credited with being by many writers on museums. Although there is a sense in which these findings may be particularly pronounced in the context of this research, given the specific concern with museum presentations of the 'lived past', where visitors may come with personal experience, the implications are nonetheless intriguing and appear to challenge the traditional assumptions of many museum commentators. However, these assumptions are by no means held by all museum professionals. For instance, one of my staff respondents - an historical consultant for a large exhibition in a national museum - felt strongly that many museum visitors are more discerning:

> There is a more sophisticated public out there who will look for something different and who will get a kick out of thinking that they are getting different messages out of their visit.

Of course, these points are not new. As Porter observes, the attacks on museums and heritage in the late 1980s by individuals like Hewison (1987) were critiqued for their inherently flawed and simplistic perception of visitors:

> The visitor is much more critical than many commentators would allow…. So some of the arguments of people like Hewison were poorly formed. In fact, some of them were quite insulting to members of the general public. They saw the general public as being taken in by all this, which was absolute nonsense. (Curator, Local Museum)

When coupled with the core influences on the construction of museum exhibitions, these tentative findings may have important implications for the work of museums.

Contemporary Museum Practice and its Context

I have suggested elsewhere that the assorted developments in museum practice that I have explored in this research have potentially profound implications for the future work of museums and their exhibiting policies (Liddiard 1996). I am not alone in suggesting that the work and role of museums is set to undergo significant change in the early twenty-first century (see Kavanagh 1996). Similarly, Porter, in her examination of the treatment of gender relations by museums, describes how exhibitions in Britain and Northern Europe are increasingly: '... breaking new ground in museum exhibition-making, developing new methods, forms of expression and themes' (Porter 1996:105). Arguably, one of the most pertinent illustrations of this is the changing treatment of sexuality by museums.

It is difficult to make general observations about the ways in which museums present sexuality, given that they are so heterogeneous. Nevertheless, it is intriguing that in spite of the wide variety of museum forms, with their highly diverse collecting and exhibiting policies, the theme of sexuality has long been almost uniformly ignored in museum displays and exhibitions, a point which has been noted before (see, for example, Bourne 1994; Bourne 1996; Liddiard 1996; Fussell 2000; Frost 2001). The implication for the work of museums, however, is profound, implying that museums are consequently 'failing to address their responsibility to represent the cultural diversity of society' (Clayton 1997: 17). Indeed, there is good evidence to suggest that many museums actively seek to censor any explicit allusion to the topic. In a sense, however, this exclusion is intriguing given that sexuality has come to pervade our culture so thoroughly in almost every other medium of communication.

If we accept that museums have seriously neglected sexuality as a topic of importance, how then can we account for this? In some respects, this question appears to be a rather superficial one. Given the heavy reliance of museums on historical resources and the often hidden and subterranean nature of human sexuality, one obvious answer is to do with a paucity of material on which to base displays and exhibitions. Fenton Bailey, the producer of the 1999 six-part television series *Pornography:The Secret History of Civilisation* (Channel 4, UK) made the following observation:

> For every object preserved in a museum, secret or otherwise, countless others have been destroyed... Because pornography's heritage has been so relentlessly destroyed and mutilated through the ages, what we are allowed to glimpse today are but the fragments of a lost history of civilization (Bailey 1999: 16)

Similarly, as Bourne explains: 'Most social history museums in the UK do not even collect material relating to gay lives, let alone display it' (Bourne 1996: 28).

In light of the traditionally veiled nature of much sexual behaviour, the extensive historical material which forms the basis for many museum exhibitions may be largely lacking in the context of sexuality. However, it would be erroneous to attach too much importance to this issue in accounting for the widespread absence of exhibitions on sexuality. As Clayton notes:

> Far from being devoid of collectable artefacts, there is a wealth of material culture which relates to the lives of lesbians and gay men which should be celebrated by museums. (1997: 17)

There is certainly a large collection of relevant material held by the British Museum (see Fryer 1966; Kearney 1981), while the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris and many university libraries have erotica collections of some sort (see Kearney 1982). Indeed, as Tang (1999) noted, the history of pornography is a topic both rich with historical resources and extremely revealing for considering the history of wider societal changes and attitudes. Yet this has not generally resulted in exhibitions on the theme of sexuality.

Is there really any public appetite for museum coverage of histories of sexuality? After all, the neglect of this topic by museums might be explained by the lack of a tangible market. Nonetheless, there are compelling reasons to suppose that there is considerable public interest in histories of sexuality. In recent years, for example, we have seen the history of sexuality develop considerably as an area of public interest and fascination, which has now come to thoroughly permeate the medium of television. The recent profusion of television coverage of this area has been particularly revealing, with a wide range of programmes examining a diverse array of issues, such as the history of pornography; the history of courtship and romance; the history of homosexuality and the history of sex on television. Some of these programmes have been publicly and critically acclaimed, such as *The Secret History of Sex,* which was regarded as- ground-breaking when it was first shown in the late 1980s, or *The Sexual Century*, shown in 1999. These programmes have all attracted a considerable audience. Indeed, some have proved to be ratings hits. Shown in 2002, *Sex on TV*, a series of three hour-long documentaries examining how the portrayal of sex on television has shifted considerably over the years, drew a significant 16 per cent audience share at 10 pm (Cozens 2002). The treatment of these historical themes and issues by television, however, evidently has a bearing on the work of museums and the encouragement of an interpretivist perception of history. After all, Samuel (1994) notes that history has never been the sole prerogative of the historian or the museum and goes on to argue that increasingly television must have 'pride of place' (Samuel 1994:13) as the medium through which we remember and understand the past. Moreover, he goes on to note the very real significance of images of the past in contemporary television programming, not least because of their potential impact upon popular perceptions of history and its treatment by museums:

> Memory-keeping is a function increasingly assigned to the electronic media, while a new awareness of the artifice of representation casts a cloud of suspicion over the documentation of the past. (Samuel 1994: 25)

Public attitudes towards sex in the UK also seem to have shifted considerably. In his commentary on the opening of 'Erotica', which claimed to be Britain's first sex exhibition, Tredre (1997) makes the claim that 'erotica is back in vogue'. With the growth through the 1990s of a new generation of often raunchy lifestyle magazines, and the remarkable success and public demand for the *Erotic Print Society Review,* Tredre is not alone is suggesting that the UK has been undergoing a transformation in public attitudes towards sex. A number of opinion polls, for example, seem to show a marked softening of sexual attitudes in the UK. When asked to say, for example, what had changed for the better in Britain, of the 505 respondents, 76 per cent cited a greater tolerance of homosexuality (MORI 2000). Indeed, it is probably no coincidence that museum representations of homosexuality have been one of the most notable areas in which museum displays and exhibitions have successfully begun to engage with sexuality.

Moreover, a number of public attitude surveys have shown that public distaste over excessive sex and violence on television is increasingly directed and focused on gratuitous violence. A large proportion of the public appear to be increasingly comfortable with sexual representations on television. The British Social Attitudes Survey is particularly interesting here and found that attitudes to sex in the media has become considerably more relaxed than there were (see Jowell 1996). For example, when asked what they would make of a 'frank sex scene in a film showing a man and woman character having sex', just 27 per cent supported a total ban for mainstream television, while this figure dropped to just 19 per cent in the context of the cinema. Indeed, up to 5 per cent were happy to allow frank sex portrayals for viewing by anyone aged over 12 or after 8pm. Certainly, sex is viewed as more acceptable when in context and just 12 per cent would ban sex scenes which were justified by the plot. Interestingly, these findings also confirm a growing acceptance of homosexuality. Whereas in 1987, at the height of the AIDS scare, some 75 per cent disapproved of portrayals of sex between homosexuals, by the mid-1990s, this had dropped to 55 per cent.

Similarly, there has been an explosion of written interest in histories of sexuality with a wide variety of publications on almost every conceivable aspect of sexuality, further fuelling an insatiable interest in this area. The wealth of recent books, for instance, is striking by its diversity. Notable contributions to our knowledge in this area include examinations of sex in prehistory (Taylor 1997); the history of erotic literature (Kearney 1982); the twentieth century history of sex and the British (Ferris 1993); the history of gay men's dress (Cole 2000); the history of the bra (Hawthorne 1992) and the history of the bottom (Hennig 1995). If nothing else, these books illustrate the sheer wealth of topics and resources available to museums interested in engagement with this area. Indeed, there have also been a wide array of publications examining many features of contemporary sexuality, such as Diamond (1984), to the results of the first ever authoritative survey of sexual behaviour in Britain (Wellings et al. 1994). In short, the evidence appears to be compelling - there does appear to be a very lively public interest in both sexuality and histories of sexuality.

Of course, even if there is a public appetite for this topic, it does not necessarily follow that museums are viewed as an appropriate forum for considering it. Issues of public sensitivity remain a real issue here and most of the specific sex museums to be opened across the world have attracted mixed public reception and sometimes marked hostility from some quarters. The 2002 opening of the Museum of Sex in Manhattan, New York , for example, was vocally opposed by Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and many of his supporters, who had invested considerable time and resources in attempting to 'clean up' New York (Corrin and Moore 2002). The establishment of a prostitution museum in Kalgoorlie, Australia, also met with significant public opposition, which ultimately divided the local community (see Farnsworth 1997; Booth 1998).

Some have argued that a fear of complaints and controversy is one reason why museums have often been reticent to engage with women's history and sexuality, as part of a 'general avoidance on the part of the museum community of potentially controversial exhibit coverage' (Harvey 1994). Yet these problems are not new and have long been faced by art galleries in hosting exhibitions that have sharply divided public opinion. In 1989, for example, the first posthumous exhibition of Robert Mapplethorpe's homo-erotic photographs was met by police action and the host museum was indicted on counts of obscenity and child pornography (see Aiden 1999). The case studies examined by Walker (1999) in his thought-provoking book about art that has shocked or caused offence, pertinently illustrate that the issues raised by sexually explicit imagery are neither new nor insurmountable. The fact that some museum themes have the power to incite mixed public reaction, and even hostility, is not new. Yet it has not precluded a wide range of thoughtful and sensitive museum coverage. Histories of sexuality may demand particular sensitivity and consideration in their inclusion in museum displays and exhibitions, a point examined by Van Lakerveld (1994) and Frost (2001), but this should nonetheless not be a reason for museums to exclude all reference to this area.

Indeed, it is fair to say that the history of sexuality is an emerging theme in the work of many museums, in the UK and elsewhere. A growing number of mainstream museums, for instance, have now successfully mounted displays and exhibitions on this topic, which have consistently attracted media and public interest, as well as critical praise. One such example was the British Museum and their £1.8 million purchase of the Warren Cup in 1999, a fascinating piece of first century Roman silverware most notable for its decoration with scenes of male homosexual intercourse. As one newspaper noted:

> Nothing sells like sex and the museum might privately have hoped for a bit of a fuss. (*The Guardian*, May 10th 1999: 17)

In this context, the marketing potential of just one purchase of significance to the history of sexuality was remarkable and the British Museum enjoyed many column inches of free coverage by virtue of an intrinsic public and media interest in the issue. However, this example is also important for what it suggests about the legitimacy of museum engagement with this area. As the same leader writer notes:

> The cup may shock, it may titillate. It may prompt all sorts of deep questions about the relative nature of pictorial representation as method and subject matter changes through time. But isn't that precisely what defines art? (*The Guardian*, May 10th 1999: 17)

The commercial potential of displays on the history of sexuality is hardly a source of contention. For this reason alone, it has clearly begun to attract the attention of the sex industry, which is notoriously good at exploiting such commercial possibilities. There is certainly no doubt that the past ten years have witnessed a profusion of new sex museums being established and consolidated not simply in Europe, in cities such as Amsterdam, Barcelona, Berlin, Copenhagen, Hamburg and Paris, but also across the globe in places such as New York and Canberra, Australia. Indeed, it is interesting that the 2001 opening of the National Museum of Erotica in Canberra actually stole the national media spotlight from the National Museum of Australia, which opened at the same time. Many of these 'sex museums' have been described in some detail by other commentators (see, in particular, Beck and Hafferkamp 2001; Frost 2001). While some of these 'museums' are ostensibly little more than marketing tools for sex stores, such as the Antique Vibrator Museum in the US, it is difficult to dismiss them all so easily.

The establishment in 1996 of the Beate Uhse Museum of Erotic Art in Berlin, for example, was notable for its sheer size, with more than 3,000 exhibits displayed across 2,500 square metres of an old department store, and which attracted 10,000 visitors on its opening day alone (Staunton 1996). Indeed, the museum now attracts a quarter of a million visitors annually and is one of the top five visited museums in Berlin (Beck and Hafferkamp 2001). It is certainly interesting that the proprietor suggested that the rationale behind the establishment of this museum was 'all a matter of economics' (cited in Staunton 1996).

I have argued before (see Liddiard 1996) that it was important for mainstream museums to engage with sexuality, if only to ensure that the sex industry did not set the agenda. However, Frost makes the interesting point that 'sex museums' do not, in fact, necessarily share the same market place as more mainstream museums:

> The prevalence and success of Europe's sex museums demonstrates that there is a significant market for what they offer but they are not in competition with other museums (Frost 2001: 42)

Certainly, both the rise in museums specifically devoted to sex and the public interest that they have attracted has been striking. Yet it is also notable how readily many mainstream museums have also begun to engage with the broad topic of sexuality. In the UK, for example, the Museum of London has been particularly proactive in its engagement with histories of sexuality, especially with its focus upon histories of gay and lesbian London. The 1999 exhibition *Pride and Prejudice: Lesbian and Gay London* was critically acclaimed and its examination of the history of homosexual culture in London was, frankly, overdue. Drawing upon the success of this exhibition, the Museum of London also offered a talk in February 2001 about the history of sex in London, entitled *Sex in the City*, which similarly attracted considerable interest and coverage (see Lutyens 2001).

It is notable that many of the most striking moves by museums into the realm of sexuality have focused upon homosexuality. On one hand, this may reflect crude commercial considerations - the economic value of the 'pink pound' has now been realized in many arenas. Coupled with greater public tolerance of homosexuality touched upon earlier, it is not surprising that museums have increasingly acknowledged a market for coverage of this area. Yet this is just part of the picture. The shifting culture of museums has certainly seen the recognition of multiple histories and an attempt to include historical representations of those minorities traditionally excluded from mainstream museum accounts. The growing inclusion of homosexual histories in museums is just one element of this process and should be roundly welcomed, not least because:

> The main reason why museums should give sex and sexuality accurate representation in their exhibitions and events is related to honesty, accuracy, relevance and integrity. An exhibition which did not explore the significance of sex and sexuality where this was relevant would contribute to inaccurate and misleading history. (Frost 2001: 42)

In fact, other countries have already made significant moves in this direction. For example, Museums Australia, an amalgamation of museum associations in Australia, already has a policy actively encouraging curators to do more to represent gay and lesbian culture in their collections (Museums Australia 1999). A number of commentators in the UK have similarly sought to encourage greater focus on this issue by museums (see Bourne 1994; Bourne 1996; Cole 1997; Fussell 2000). Yet homosexuality is not the only area to have attracted greater museum attention. The *Forces Sweethearts* exhibition in 1993 at the Imperial War Museum, for example, focused specifically upon the history of love, romance and courtship during wartime. The wide variety of displays - from graphic love letters to pornographic magazines issued to troops - made for a poignant and thoughtful exhibition and, arguably, helped to herald the arrival of sexuality as a valid, legitimate and appropriate topic for museum coverage.

Conclusion

These findings evidently have a wider implication for museums. In many respects, the conventional idea is that the role of museums is to simply react to shifts in mainstream ideas and beliefs, albeit with a time-lag during which ideas about history and historical interpretation first become well established. In other words, the role of the museum is very much a *reactive* one, slowly reacting to shifts in popular thinking. However, in the context of the history of sexuality, it may well be that museums also have the capacity to act in a *proactive* manner, vigorously promoting alternative and innovative interpretations of the past. In other words, it may well be that museums are at the forefront, or at least have the potential for being at the forefront, of new and potentially challenging interpretations of the past. After all, as Riegel observes, 'museums not only reflect culture, they also help make it' (Riegel 1996: 89).

Notes

[1] This paper is based upon Phd fieldwork conducted between 1993 and 1994, as well as a small number of exploratory interviews conducted in 1999. The research took two broad forms. The first component focused upon the processes of museum exhibition-making in the context of UK history museums and unravelling the assorted influences upon this. I conducted some 49 exploratory interviews with a wide range of museum staff across national, local and independent museum sectors. However, I particularly concentrated upon the construction of four exhibitions, all concerned with museum representations of the Blitz and the Second World War. The participating museums were the Imperial War Museum; the National Army Museum; Dover Museum and Eden Camp, an independent museum in Yorkshire. These interviews were taped and then fully transcribed. The second component focused upon exploring visitor reception in the context of UK history museums. I conducted 200 semi-structured interviews with visitors to my four selected exhibitions – 50 respondents in each museum – and explored in some detail the manner in which visitors interpret the various images and messages they are presented with in museum exhibitions.

[2] The Education Act of 1988 established a standardized National Curriculum, for England and Wales, of prescribed subjects for pupils in state schools with a sequence of tests at ages 7, 11, 14 and 16 (so-called key stages).

[3] The National Curriculum divides a child's school career up into four Key Stages. At the end of each Key Stage - at the ages of 7, 11, 14 and 16 – pupils are tested. For each test, the government has established levels of attainment which are expected of all pupils in state schools at a particular Key Stage. Key Stage 2 is for 10 to 11 eleven year old children and covers only the so-called core subjects of Mathematics, Science and English.

[4] The story of visitor charges to British museums is a complex one which begins with the Conservative Heath administration of 1970-74 when enabling legislation permitted National Museums and Galleries to make admission charges. Whilst the Labour government of 1974-79 abolished charges it left the enabling legislation intact. From 1979, with the return of Conservative governments, the decision over charges was confirmed as a matter for individual museum boards and by the late 1990s about 50 per cent of museums were charging for admission to their core collections (Selwood 2001: 352. Also see Creigh-Tyte and Thomas (2001: 125-9). Thus at the time my interviews were conducted a number of national institutions were levying admission charges. Following an agreement struck between the Treasury and the Department of Media, Culture and Sport, entrance charges to national museums were abandoned in December 2001.

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