COLLECTED IMPRESSIONS

Gallery Guide

perspectives on the exhibition from the curators -- students in Exhibit Development, a course offered this Spring by ASU’s Museum Anthropology Program

January 17 through March 10, 2008

ASU Museum of Anthropology
I was inspired by the bottles that were excavated from the site of the Laird and Dines Drug Store, a hallmark establishment in the city of Tempe. It was then that I decided to explore the evolution of medicine. Visually, with the *Impressions* exhibit, I am trying to span those three junctures, the pre-historic, historic and present day and in turn visit the connotations that accompany all three examples. Hopefully, by calling attention to the examples viewers will extrapolate and make greater social connections.

This belt is intentionally displayed as a single belt. I have chosen to exclude specific information regarding the belt's cultural origins to avoid imposing my interpretation of the belt, therefore allowing the visitor to determine for him/herself what statement this belt makes. This display represents the multi-vocality of a single object, while reinforcing the significance of material culture and it's importance to museums.

*The Ceramics of Kalen Dar* is an exhibit that presents false information as factual. Experimental ceramic sherds are displayed here as if they were very rare pieces of the world's most ancient calendar from which our current calendar system is based. The goal is for viewers to become ever more skeptical of the knowledge that is being imparted to them so that they may exercise caution in the museum setting during future visits. The exhibit is meant to be an ironic and an aesthetic evaluation that relies on a sharp discordance between the real and the ideal, which serves as the exhibit’s central appeal.
Ban Chiang is an archaeological and UNESCO World Heritage site in Thailand, which when excavated in 1967, resulted in the discovery of a previously unknown dynamic culture dating back 5000 years. Evidence of early agriculture and metallurgy, including bronze, distinctive decorative pottery, ornaments, and elaborate burial offerings stunned the world. In 2008, Ban Chiang was again in the headlines, given that many of its treasures were looted, taken out of the country illegally, sold to private dealers and collectors and eventually found their way into the collections of major world museums. Who owns this cultural patrimony?

With this exhibition label, it is my intention to bring to light the concept of undocumented objects in museum collections to the visitor. I initially chose this object, a Hohokam Santa Cruz red-on-buff jar, because of the obvious conservation it had undergone and to play off the idea of how in addition to being rebuilt physically, it has also been rebuilt conceptually. When I discovered that there was no provenience file for this object, I was inspired to tell the audience the fact that the history had been lost, and significant details of the jar’s origin could never be recovered, much like the missing shards.

These dental casts, from individuals all over the world, are only a small sample of the casts in the collection. The collection was started by Albert A. Dalhberg over 50 years ago, and has continued to grow with the help of ASU professors such as Christy G. Turner II and Diane Hawkey. Through the different variations in the teeth, anthropologists can tell who the individuals are related to, where they lived, what culture they belonged to, and much more. Today, as well as in the past, this collection has been used by students and professors for study and research.
One of two in the ASU collection, this Australian Aboriginal Woomera was found near Alice Springs, Northern Territory, Australia and donated to ASU in 1990.

In the presentation of this piece, I wanted to represent the value of this artifact for the cultures of the world that adopted its use. Only the most practical and effective tools would have traversed the world and withstood the test of time.

The funerary customs/beliefs and the preservation of the body and ample provisions for the after-life of the ancient Egyptians have always intrigued me. The mumification process was used to preserve the body for the purpose of keeping the soul intact for the journey through the Afterlife; so I selected Ancient Egyptian funerary objects from the SHESC collection. Rather than just displaying these objects as funerary objects, I wanted to show a parallel of the ancient Egyptian process of preservation to that of the museums process of preserving objects in their collections.

I chose these four Kachina dolls to exhibit because I was intrigued by their ability to ask more questions than they can answer. These diverse questions, which I tried to address in my label, cover a wide spectrum. Who made them and for what exhibit? Why were they allowed to become a part of the museum’s collection? And, perhaps most curiously, should they be considered real Kachina dolls?
What is valued as an artifact with artistic or historic merit? Most curators choose not to exhibit damaged and poorly preserved artifacts. I believe such artifacts can nevertheless provide important information to museum visitors, particularly when well-preserved examples are not available, as is the case with the pre-historic Sityatki jar presented here.

In addition to allowing visitors to experience the historic and artistic value of this artifact in relation to the relatively modern example included in the case, the damaged jar allows visitors to see the various attempts that have been made to preserve this jar, and thus to extend its life as an exhibitable object.

For my exhibit I chose two Kachina dolls from our collection. The Kachina imagery is quite prolific in the American Southwest but it was not always this way. The dolls emerged from Pueblo Indian religious ceremonies of which Kachinas themselves were the center. Until the late 1800s the only way to obtain a doll was to be a young girl, gifted one by a Kachina at a ceremony. Today we see many commodified versions of the Kachina doll and imagery. I chose these dolls from the collections to emphasize how almost nothing today is safe from transformation into a commodity and being a commodity affects the meaning and value of objects.

The goal of my pottery display is to highlight the multiple layers of meaning that objects have and to make viewers aware of the choices a curator must make when exhibiting an object. Objects do not speak for themselves. Viewers understand objects by considering them in relationship to textual information, spatial arrangements, visual effects, and their proximity to other objects.

In this way, through their methods of display, museums encourage particular ways of seeing and thinking about objects.
13 These colorfully decorated fiber bundle hair brushes were added to the museum collection over 40 years ago. They were crafted by Araucanian natives of Highland Chile and may not be instantly recognizable as personal grooming items. However, they are not that different from instruments used daily by most of us to groom our hair.

14 The opium weights displayed here are part of an extensive collection of ethnographic artifacts from Laos. While opium weights were used to measure a variety of products that were bought and sold such as food and raw materials, these particular weights were in fact used to buy and sell opium. Opium weights are most commonly associated with Burma but were also used throughout South-east Asia and as well as in parts of Southern China. These weights were made in Burma and used by Shan merchants that traveled to northwest Laos to buy and sell opium. They are made of lead and molded in the image of a "Singh" or Lion, one of the three most common shapes for opium weights (along with the Burmese Crane and the Brahmani Duck). In general opium weights are always made in the shape of an animal or bird.

15 How much is an object worth and are there different types of value? My exhibit examines these questions by presenting three silver necklaces, objects normally associated with material wealth and value. In addition to this value, I believe that pieces of jewelry, in our culture and others, including the examples I provide of the Hmong Khao, Hmong Lai, and Mien cultures of Laos, contain a deeper, more personal value for its owner that has the power to transcend what is traditionally viewed as a sign of wealth.

16 For my exhibition I chose to display three Persian tiles from the collection. I find these works to be aesthetically and intellectually fascinating. However, these beautiful objects were designed to be functional and most have some tile work in their home. Tiles in Persia were designed to weatherproof and decorate the interior and exterior of buildings. Many details surrounding the tiles are unknown and yet they are not needed. The tiles can be appreciated for their beauty and similarities can be surmised from tiles in the viewers’ surroundings.