

**A Study of the Built Environment and Exhibition at the Bob Bullock Texas State History
Museum**

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Abstract

The makeup of a history museum's audience informs a visitor what content the museum may display, or give a telling to what type of narrative will be given. Adversely, the audience is informed of history and current reality through the ways in which the museum is physically structured and portrays narratives through objects. Looking specifically at systems of control (control of visitors, control of history, and control of culture) informs us how audiences interact with history museums. The Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum performs these information systems through panopticism, while the visitors perform their own controls within a museum through their gaze. As an exhibitionary complex, the Bullock Museum continues its control of history and context it projects to its visitors by capitalizing on selected object choices and curated narratives. By exploring and understanding these systems, it is seen that history museums perform more than historical education, but implement controls onto their audience with specific outcomes. To explore this, the systems that affect visitors along with the objects and content within the Bullock Museum will be considered. For this paper, "audience" and "visitor" are synonymous.

Introduction

Historical museums are traditionally seen as memory centers that provide not only education of the past, but evidence of it too. Further reaching than classrooms, museums are tools that provide history lessons and entertainment, along with cultural representations to foreign visitors. However, deeper than rare artifacts or creative interactions, museums act as information centers that inform not merely superficial historical events, but direct societal behavior

norms, standardize history, and present culture as a hierarchy. These systems are seen through panopticism,¹ and exhibitionary complexes,² amongst other nuanced information systems, which subconsciously influence how visitors should not only learn about the past, but how to exist in the present and perceive current society. Using the Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum as an example, this paper will explore these systems and how they perpetuate behavior norms, history and cultural hierarchy.

Systems of Control

Panopticism

Systems of control are implemented in our daily lives in almost every facet of our interaction within a society. From social media algorithms to traditional advertising, systems informing us how we should act in society are constantly enforced, both directly and indirectly. One way museums perform this function is through panopticism, an intangible mechanism employed to feel as if you are being watched or potentially being watched.³ This impression is imposed through dome shaped buildings, which traditionally sit at the highest elevation in a city, or in the center of a population.⁴ These buildings are visually seen as domineering by shape and location, and have the ability to impose control over its inhabitants due to its structure and encompassing gaze.⁵ Through this perpetual feeling of gaze performed by panopticism, visitors of the building self-regulate their actions in accordance with the rules or laws of their society,

¹ Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, "Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture," 104-109, (2001).

² David Boswell and Jessica Evans, Eds., "Representing the Nation: A Reader: Histories, Heritages, and Museums," 332-359, (1999).

³ Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, "Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture," 104, (2001).

⁴ Mark Leone and Barbara Little, "Artifacts as Expressions of Society and Culture: Subversive Genealogy and the Value of History," 163, (1993).

⁵ David Boswell and Jessica Evans, Eds., "Representing the Nation: A Reader: Histories, Heritages, and Museums," 359, (1999).

even without the rules and laws being actively enforced upon them.⁶ These conforming actions occur through panopticism.

The Bullock museum employs this exact mechanism in its building shape and stature. Situated in the center of Austin, Texas, and shaped as a dome with three circular stories, panopticism is felt at every floor level and at each exhibit. Not a single display is out of sight from an additional visitor, a potential camera, or security guard. Through this building structure, visitors are informed to regulate their actions, such as standing appropriate distances from artifacts, keeping their hands near their bodies, and not lingering “too long” at exhibits, all actions to ensure that they are not acting suspiciously to other visitors and employees of the museum that, as deemed by American standards. By the structure of a panopticon, visitors are informed that they are being watched, in reality or theory, and therein become self-regulating when visiting the museum.

The Gaze

Under the same idea of panopticism, there is an additional gaze occurring due to a museum's function. Visitors visiting a museum are doing their own watching; the watching of other cultures and histories through displays, and understanding them as separate from themselves. A visitor's gaze upon others reflects another information system of control and power seen in museums.⁷ The visitor is granted power in their gaze of the ‘other’ when viewing displays, as they garnish the ability to interpret the piece and understand it through their own means, rather than through the culture on display's means.⁸ The culture on display in a museum

⁶ Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, “Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture,” 106, (2001).

⁷ Ibid, 104.

⁸ Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, “Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture,” 104, (2001).

is not given the privilege to provide the visitor with knowledge in their own form, as this privilege typically resides with a single curator, who is typically not of the culture on display, or is forced to conform to a particular museum's layout, mission, or agenda. Additionally, displays and their interpretation is constructed and contextualized by other surrounding displays and space in which it resides.

For example, the Bullock Museum attempts to display history of multiple peoples, cultures, and time periods. By doing so in an inherently limited space, a culture on display in one exhibit will unavoidably be situated by another, either in chronological order or by a culture that is similar to the one currently viewed. The viewer will inevitably view one culture on display and then continue to the next display beside the previous one. Although the two displays may be different in content, the fact that they are next to each other informs the visitor of their history, content, and context in a degree of congruence. Nonetheless, the first display will be further removed in similarity to the last display, creating a disillusion on the constructed education the visitor is conducting from the viewing of culture on display. Therefore, this information system of the visitor's gaze imposed onto cultures situates them into contexts they may not have originally been associated with or conferred upon, or ever been realistically structured as.

Additionally, once the visitor is granted viewing of the pieces on display and its constructed culture, a layer of spectacle is added to the display, and the culture therein forms into the preconceived notions the visitor may have once arriving to the exhibit. The visitor's personal notions about how life is structured, whether it be via time construct, social relations, or the like, are therein opposed onto the culture one is viewing and changes that culture's history or meaning to the visitor.⁹ In turn, it is realized that each visitor will take away different histories or

⁹ Ibid, 105.

understandings for the same culture or object due to the discrepancies in its display, its neighboring displays, preconceived notions of life, and or the all-encompassing gaze in which the visitor acts upon the display.

The panopticism systems of control upon visitors, to the gaze visitors put forth upon another culture, are found at historical museums underneath their surficial intent of educating the public on past events. While these intentions are not implicitly stated, nor is it a specific reason for attending the museum, these behavioral controls are subconsciously enacted through panopticism and “the gaze”, and begins to reveal the power dynamics history museums like the Bullock Museum function in, and who is in control of the audience.

Exhibitionary Complex

Museums performing as exhibitionary complexes were outlined by Tony Bennett as “the transfer of objects and bodies from the enclosed and private domain in which they had previously been displayed (but to a restricted public) into progressively more open and public arenas where, through the representations to which they were subjected, they formed vehicles for inscribing and broadcasting the messages of power throughout society.”¹⁰

In the 19th century museums began to take shape and open their cabinets of curiosities to not just the wealthy, but to the general public. This transformed how the general public was controlled and taught to behave in their society, and gave adverse power to those who wielded the displays to control such a population.¹¹ During the Great Exhibition in 1853 “the exhibition transformed the many-headed mob into an ordered crowd, a part of the spectacle and a sight of

¹⁰ David Boswell and Jessica Evans, Eds., “Representing the Nation: A Reader: Histories, Heritages, and Museums,” 333, (1999).

¹¹ Ibid, 334.

pleasure itself...”¹² This movement of objects being placed into museums “helped form a new public and inscribe it in new relations of sign and vision.”¹³ By creating museums as exhibitionary complexes, the public garnered an understanding for who they were as a society (as dictated by the museum), and what was the “other” in their society (as in, what was on display).

The Bullock Museum preforms this complex in a very traditional way, as the Bullock is a rotating museum and changes their exhibits every six to twelve months, showcasing artifacts and histories typically found in Texas archives, repositories, or small museums. The Bullock quite literally “opens the doors” of previously unviewed items stored in places such as the Texas Archaeological Research Laboratory or the General Land Office. While both of these entities are accessible, in a sense, to the public, their holdings are not granted the exhibition nor gaze of the public that the Bullock retains. By the Bullock Museum displaying items from starkly seen repositories, the museum is able to show their visitors what the “other” is, while informing the audience of who they are within the juxtaposition.

Power Through Structure

Michael Baxandall states “there is no exhibition without construction and therefore - in an extended sense – appropriation.”¹⁴ The nature of museums and their showcases of individual objects, quite literally put on pedestals, gives a false sense of importance¹⁵ and totality to histories and cultures, and therein power to that culture, or control by another. By selecting histories and

¹² Ibid, 345.

¹³ Ibid, 345.

¹⁴ Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine, “Exhibiting Cultures: the Poetics and Politics of Museum Display,” 34, (1991).

¹⁵ Susan Pearce, “interpreting Objects and Collections,” 20, (1994).

their complimentary objects or artifacts, museums inform visitors of narrowed and skewed public memories.

History as Progress

History museums were born out of the Europe Renaissance and began with cabinets of curiosities.¹⁶ These cabinets maintained rare and unique artifacts and animals from conquered lands and provided the colonizing country a form of a physical token of conquest and power in the holding and display of them.¹⁷ Later came the first World's Fair in London starting in 1851, where artifacts and appropriated cultures were on display in exhibit halls such as the Crystal Palace and dubbed The Great Exhibition.¹⁸ From these World's Fair's came the history museums we are familiar with today in Western society; public buildings which teach linear histories of (typically other) cultures in a way that shows history as progressive, and showcases said history as an all-encompassing totality.¹⁹ This is done in the view that history is linear, and each day, month, year, or decade, is portrayed as a positive progression of the society that existed before it, and is coupled by American's teaching of history through the chronology of politics or military feats.²⁰ By imposing American ideals of history as progress, it inflicts on the viewer a dimension of reality, but not reality itself. Further, cultures that do not align with this agenda are indirectly seen of lesser ability, due to the nature of progress as highlighted, and failure as muted.²¹ In this function, history museums deter from the public the notion of downfalls society faces, or the

¹⁶ Mark Leone and Barbara Little, "Artifacts as Expressions of Society and Culture: Subversive Genealogy and the Value of History," 163, (1993).

¹⁷ Ibid, 168.

¹⁸ Ibid, 169.

¹⁹ Ibid, 169.

²⁰ Thomas Schlereth, "Collecting Ideas and Artifacts: Common Problems of History Museums and History Texts," 2, (1978).

²¹ Thomas Schlereth, "Collecting Ideas and Artifacts: Common Problems of History Museums and History Texts," 1, 3, (1978).

backtracking of progression, and even disservices those communities negatively affected by the attempt of another society seeking their own form progress.

This is most plainly seen in history museums through the layout of their displays. The Bullock Museum, for example, maintains three floors and begins with the earliest found artifact on what is now politically Texas soil, and proceeds in a linear timeline throughout the displays and floors to end at the top of the museum with 'current cultures', such as the efforts of NASA. On the third floor there is no mention of the cultures that resided on the first; Native Americans, the French, and the Spanish are erased from the narrative of progress seen at the top of the museum, and a cultural hierarchy of power and importance, of those who have 'successfully' progressed are represented instead, showing not only an intellectual hierarchy of culture, but an panopticon of gaze upon the Bullock's construction of Texas history. While Native Americans, the French, and the Spanish still exist and contribute to Texas history in the present, they are not represented as such, and are even indirectly seen as the past and not contributors to the present nor future. Reflecting history and culture as linear informs the visitor of fallacies on how history and life realistically commences, and reinforces progress as optimal and necessary for society, while deterring from those who have suffered from the progress others have ensued.

Conclusion

Traditional museums aim to educate the public on past events, but are constructed through Western ideals of historic timelines which reveal cultural power dynamics. Additionally, behavior controls are employed through panopticism and exhibitionary complexes to inform the public how to act within their society. From the physical layout of museums, to the intellectual

discourse provided, the American history museum informs the visitor of how to behave in society, and who is important to society through these means.

While museums inform the public of histories as linear and progressive, community and postmodern museums have begun to explore how to change this projection. Museums are traditionally headed by exclusive curators and design teams, which rarely call on the public for input on what history should be showcased or how. While it has been difficult for curators to relinquish this control, community museums have been striving to incorporate the public into the exhibits and mission of the museum, ultimately changing the entire information systems audiences receive from these institutions.²² These participatory museums actively seek out communities and their needs, and begin to bend the rules of traditional museums.²³ Some are using current displays with a rewritten narrative,²⁴ while others re-contextualize the objects to reveal discrimination or the oppression of minorities conducted through past exhibits in an artistic way.²⁵ By understanding the underlying messages history museums traditionally give, these community museums are able to showcase cultures more authentically than previously displayed, and reveal the injustices they have faced not just in their past history, but the injustices within the information systems most history museums currently function through.

²² Nina Simon, "The Participatory Museum," 1-7, (2010).

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Amy Levin and Joshua Adair, "Defining Memory: Local Museums and the Construction of History in America's Changing Communities," 63-74, (2017).

²⁵ Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene, and Laura Koloski, "Letting Go: Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World," 230-241 (2011).

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