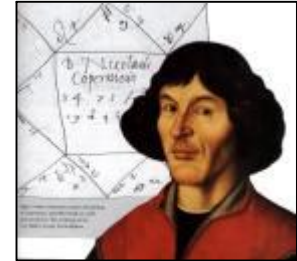


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## The Divine Scientist

At primary issue in any museum exhibit is the display of ancient, possibly sacred objects belonging to a culture whose descendants currently inhabit the area of excavation. Museums have been seen as instruments of the conquering culture, objectifying natives in order to



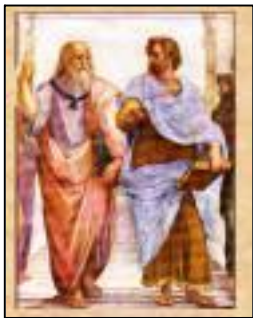
dominate them. “Museum exhibition techniques continue to impose academic classifications – our ‘glass boxes’ of interpretation - upon diverse cultures” (Ames, 140). Such displays have increasingly come under fire, resulting in provisions including NAGPRA to be put in place, demanding the repatriation of human remains and items of cultural significance to the descendants of those people who deposited them. Museums are being scrutinized by a public ever more aware of these issues. Exhibitions must adhere to stringent guidelines, demonstrating a level of respect for cultures and their objects not previously seen. Any suggestion of propagation of empiricism and dominance over the culture under study, however subtle, on the part of the museum, is no longer being tolerated. New methods of display are constantly being sought by modern curators.

In its southwestern exhibit, the Maxwell Museum-goer views artifacts of local Native Americans from the perspective of the archaeologist. The exhibit is presented as an archaeological dig, complete with field notes, a diorama of a native adobe structure during the excavation process, photographs of students working on the site, and text describing research and interpretation

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processes. Artefacts extracted from this excavation are presented in this context, scattered throughout the display both in fragmented form as discovered *in situ*, and reconstituted into their “original” or whole form before deposition or before decay which may have taken place after deposition.

Every museum display places the museum-goer in a pre-determined standpoint from which to



view the objects. The Maxwell museum-goer (hereafter referred to as “viewer”) is placed by the designers of this exhibition in the place of the archaeologist, privy to inside information previously inaccessible to the general public. The viewer engages in the excavation from start to finish, viewing artifacts as they are unearthed, in pieces and *in situ*. The viewer

steps onto the site as a member of the scientific team. There are few interpretations of excavated objects offered by the exhibition. This invites the viewer to form her own conclusions, possibly suggesting further engagement as a member of the scientific team.

Thus, the display becomes an encapsulization of “us” studying the “other” rather than simply an encapsulization of the “other.” It is a study of “us.” This relies on the basic assumption that the viewer is not identifiable with the “other” (is not herself a member of the native culture under study (under study)).

One benefit of this display method is that the viewer becomes an active participant in the site, interacting with the ancient landscape and architecture. The display mimics a holistic excavation process with open discourse between all excavators and onlookers. Julian Thomas envisions an

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“anarchist collective excavation” involving a “community of people” engaged in constant communication so there is “no separation between analysis and description...and interpretation” (Thomas, pers. comm.). This provides the possibility of embodied interpretation. The viewer is “having a conversation with the site itself,” getting an embodied experience of the topography, weather, etc. that may be similar to the ancient people’s (Thomas, pers. comm.). “It is these inhabited conditions which the archaeologist must investigate” (Barrett 2001, 156).

Meaning is produced in the dynamic working of the relationships between people, things and places. What has been significant about the ‘phenomenology of landscape’...is that it advocates an encounter between the archaeologist and the places and monuments that they study. This encounter may be real and physical, or imagined. But in either case what we are effectively doing is entering into the same set of material relationships in which people found themselves in the past, in order to produce our own interpretation. This interpretation may be...dismissed as ‘surrogate’: I would prefer to describe it as an allegory, a present-day understanding which ‘stands for’ the past meaning. We cannot ‘get at’ a past meaning, and we certainly cannot get inside the heads of past people through an act of empathy. But we can put ourselves inside a set of material circumstances which were integral to a meaningful world in the past. (Thomas, 2001, 180-1)

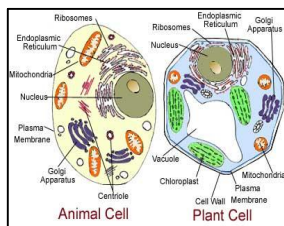
Engagement with the excavation and, by proxy, the landscape of the site, may lead to fuller understanding of its ancient inhabitants. This may promote compassion and reverence for that culture.



Grave problems arise, however, from that very same placement of viewer-as-archaeologist. The very problems that the exhibition’s designers may have been attempting to mitigate, namely the implied intellectual and cultural dominance of the conquering empire over the native peoples, have simply been more subversively (and possibly more harmfully) reiterated.

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Aristotle is considered to be the inventor of empirical science. His methods of inquiry are firmly embedded in western consciousness: that the whole may be known by the sum of its parts as ascertained by dissection, classification, analysis and naming, and that these results can be applied to other situations using inductive reasoning (through observation of many natural occurrences, laws and theories may be ascertained which may be applied to *all* natural occurrences). Simply put, Aristotle believed that the world could be known by observing its visible aspects. Aristotle's scientific method is the basis for all modern science.



The natural way of doing this is to start from the things which are more knowable and clear to us and to proceed towards those which are clearer and more knowable by nature; for the same things are not knowable relatively to us and knowable without qualification. So we must follow this method and advance from what is more obscure by nature, but clearer to us, towards what is more clear and more knowable by nature. (*Physics*, 1, 1.)

The scientist, associated with reason and culture, becomes the "... active subject who observes a passive nature, the object of science. Furthermore, the valorization of human beings as the *bearers of reason* creates an imperative to construe nature as something which exists *for* them: at once a home and a store of resources" (Thomas, 2001, 167, italics mine). This sets the scientist up in a position of power over the object of study. "Power-as-domination is likely to be linked quite directly with strategies of objectification because the thing to be dominated requires an initial definition as a thing, named and categorized" (Barrett 2001, 150).

Eventually, through diligent study of all nature, of all the *effects* of god or Aristotle's "Prime Mover," the scientist can come to know the Prime Mover, albeit obliquely. "Although modernity

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has eventually seen the divine supplanted by Man, humanity first assumed the position of the deity's privileged interpreter" (Thomas, 2001, 168).

Scientific inquiry became intimately connected to western theology in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century when St. Thomas Aquinas applied newly re-discovered Aristotlian philosophy to Christian theology. The intellect was seen as proof of a soul and therefore proof of a divine creator. This bound western spirituality to reason and logic.

Thus, the scientist holds a unique place in western culture, being the symbol of logic and reason, with an almost mystical presence. For the most part, scientific findings are revered, unquestioned, held as gospel by the public. Advertising agencies rely on this belief system to sell countless potions for billions of dollars every year.



Pythagoras'  
world

Coming from the perspective of the scientist, then, with both divine and worldly authority, the viewer of the southwestern exhibit at the Maxwell Museum does not question her right to be on the site, her right to extract objects or her right to submit the objects and the native culture to her own interpretations. The viewer is invited to personally take part in the study, and as "to *study* a thing is to be involved in a process of objectification" (Barrett 2001, 147), the viewer has a right to objectify the culture under study.

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Museums have been seen as tools of the empire, rewriting and manipulating native cultures' histories (especially their demise), and assuming those histories as part of their own in order to validate claims on the land and to create a national identity. Control of an object is control of history.

... objects are, along with everything else, expressions of power relationships. Reconstruction involves repowering the object, investing it with the authority and privilege of those currently possessing it, who then impose upon it (and upon those whom it represents) their own histories. The process of reconstruction thus entails a shift in power and status of the object and of those formerly and presently associated with it. Once an object has been acquired by a museum, Balfe (1987:4) says in reference to 'art' objects, that context attracts the power plays of status seekers who appropriate art to their own ends: 'Not surprisingly, like individual patrons, both corporations and governments seek the reflected glory, the gilt by association, with artworks supposedly beyond price and above politics. At the same time, such sponsors seek to re-embed the decontextualized art in wider systems of meaning which they (more or less) control.' (Ames, 144).

The meta-narrative set up by this exhibition is merely another form of objectification "...where the process of knowledge-building is turned into a thing to be studied. The significant point is that the process of objectification is a discursive practice where practitioners deliberately strike a position outside of, or in opposition to, that which has been selected for study" (Barrett 2001, 148). To study the study, as the Maxwell Museum exhibition does, may even be seen as a more complete form of objectification where the subject (she who studies) gazes at, objectifies, opposes or acquires the object. In this case, the artifacts of native culture have been assimilated into the object of study (the archaeological dig). They have no apparent life outside of the dig, and thereby are claimed as part of the manifest destiny of the dominating culture which seeks to claim territorial rights over the natives it has conquered.

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