

Thinking through the 'Other': Comparing Representations of Cultural Alterity at the British Museum and the Shanghai Museum

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In this paper, I wish to analyse and compare the process through which cultural diversity is constructed and represented in national museums in the UK and in China.

I contend that the museum representation of alterity reflects not only specific culturally and historically determined configurations of the political, social and economic spheres, but also, and more to the point, contemporary processes of change in the perception of the past, the organisation of knowledge and systems of value. As case studies, I will consider the British Museum and the Shanghai Museum.

I want to ask: who is the 'Other'? What forces, *ratio* and intellectual stances implicitly inform its museum representation? What is the role of the colonial experience (as a colonizer in one case and as a colonized in the other) in shaping the representation of alterity?

I show that the Shanghai Museum and the British Museum offer two quite different paradigms of representation of the 'Other'. In the case of the Shanghai Museum, I maintain that the 'Other' is represented by Chinese ethnic minorities. Conversely, I argue that in the British Museum the category of 'Other' is multiple and open – indeed, the 'Other' is everywhere, scattered in the different museum sections in a confusion of museological and disciplinary approaches. Aiming at making explicit and discussing the curatorial decisions informing the representation of alterity, the comparison will focus on the organisation of the collections, the selection of objects, the display techniques, as well as the amount and quality of information supplied by exhibitions.

The investigation confirms that the differences between the two paradigms are the result of different historical and cultural trajectories. Yet, I want to argue that these two differing approaches may also be understood as responses to different

challenges: of inclusion and national cohesion in the case of Shanghai Museum, and of distancing from the colonial past in the case of the British Museum. In this sense, the representations of alterity in the two museums share a major feature: a generalized emphasis on the past and on aesthetics. I hold that the historicisation and aesthetisation of the 'Other' are strategies to elude engagement with politically or socially delicate issues that might threaten domestic social cohesion and/or the harmony of international relations.

“The challenge now is to reinvent the museum as an institution that can orchestrate new relations and perceptions of difference that both break free from the hierarchically organized forms of stigmatic othering that characterized the exhibitionary complex and provide more socially invigorating and, from a civic perspective, more beneficial interfaces between different cultures” (Bennett, 2006:59)

Introduction

In this paper, I wish to analyse and compare the representations of cultural diversity¹ in two major national museums, the British Museum and the Shanghai Museum.

Through the comparative analysis of these case studies, I aim at showing how the museum representation of alterity reflects not only specific culturally and historically determined configurations of the political, social and economic spheres, but also, and more to the point, contemporary processes of transformation affecting the perception of cultural and national identities, the organisation of knowledge and the underlying systems of value.

We are used to think that colonialism plays a key role in shaping the approaches to the cultural Other, and I subscribe to this vision. Yet, through my analysis I wish to show that the future challenges facing the nation, and by extension national museums, are at least as important as the nation's past in conceptualizing and representing the Other. I contend that increasingly, museums – even when presenting divergent historical trajectories and attending to different domestic agendas, as in the case studies below – are faced by the same kind of challenges (to mention but a few, satisfaction of the public, response to contentious issues such as questions of repatriation, social inclusion and legitimacy of representation). To these, I argue, they are responding with a similar museological strategy that I define as 'aesthetization', which emphasises the aesthetics of objects in their museum presentation.

The comparison between the displays of the Other in the British Museum and the Shanghai Museum appears of particular interest at the light of the unique features of these institutions as well as of the specific historical itineraries of the two countries. On the one hand, the British Museum, a key institution of the British colonial apparatus, since its inception in 1753 and for at least a century and a half operated as a showcase of colonial trophies. On the other, the Shanghai Museum, created at the end of the 19th century by the British, was the very manifestation of the colonial presence in China, and as such it became, to the eyes of the Chinese, and for the first half of the 20th century, an emblem of colonization.

Such diverse historical backgrounds cast light on different museological approaches, and more relevantly for this discussion, on different representations of alterity.

Who is the 'Other'? What logics inform its museum representation? What is the role of the colonial experience in shaping the representation of alterity? What other factors concur to this

1 Throughout the text I use interchangeably the terms 'cultural diversity', 'alterity', 'Other' and 'Otherness'. The multifaceted, blurred and fluid character of the notion of Other (and of identity for that matter) amplified by the constantly shifting references to the local, regional, national, transnational and global realms, challenges the very operativeness of this concept. Indeed, to account for the heterogeneity of cultural forms in both time and space, it would be more appropriate to refer to a plural 'Others'. The use of the singular throughout this paper, is not meant to subscribe to a linguistic form of essentialization, but responds to a concern for simplicity.

process? In a nutshell, how can we 'read' what we see today in these two museums and how are we to make sense of the different approaches to alterity?

I will show that the Shanghai Museum and the British Museum offer two quite different paradigms of representation of the Other. In the case of the Shanghai Museum, I maintain that the Other is represented by Chinese ethnic minorities, whilst in the British Museum the category of 'Other' is multiple and open. Indeed, the 'Other' is literally everywhere, scattered in the different museum sections in a confusion of museological and disciplinary categories.

Aiming at making explicit and discussing the curatorial decisions informing the representation of alterity, the comparison between the Shanghai Museum and the British Museum will focus on the organisation of the collections, the selection of objects, the display techniques, as well as the amount and quality of information supplied by exhibitions. The fieldwork observations conducted at the Shanghai Museum in the context of my doctoral research will allow me to put into perspective the data collected at the British Museum.

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My reflection takes as departing point a provocative question: (why) do museums need to represent the Other? Before embarking in the discussion of how the Other is represented, I pause a moment to attempt to sketch the elements of an answer to this difficult question. I then turn to the consideration of China's relation to the Other at the light of the colonial experience, as a prologue to the first case study, the Shanghai Museum. A brief historical excursus introduces the discussion of the Museum's approach to the ethnic Other through the analysis of the 'Kadoorie gallery of Chinese minority and nationalities arts'. The focus moves then to the British Museum. Building on a critical examination of the Asian, North American and African Galleries, I discuss the internal coherence of the galleries and their articulation in relation to the broader issue of the representation of cultural diversity. Finally, setting the two case studies one against the other, I draw the conclusive remarks.

Museums and the Making of the Other

Material culture helps us to create images and narratives for intangible, abstract concepts such as nation and national identity, culture and civilisation. National museums have since their inception used the authority, trust and credibility of which they are endowed to validate such images and narratives as 'true' and 'authentic'. What I am most concerned with, here, is attempting to decode the subtle, complex and mostly hidden processes through which such narratives and images are shaped and presented to museum audiences. I will concentrate on the creation and display not so much of images and narratives of national identity but of their counterpart, the Other.

My analysis of the museum representation of cultural diversity is informed by the idea that museums, precisely as the images they project, are cultural artefacts in their own right. The fact that, regardless the claims to 'objectivity', 'scientism', 'rationality' and 'neutrality' of museum displays, these remain the outcome of specific historical, cultural, political and personal imprints, cannot be emphasised enough. Brian Wallis reminds us: "through the engineered overproduction of certain types of images or the censorship or suppression of others, and through controlling the way images are viewed or by determining which are preserved, cultural representations can also be used to produce a certain view of a nation's history"(Wallis, 1991:86). I hold that such considerations may be extended to the nation's Other, to the extent the self and the Other are ultimately mutually constituting categories. Daniel Miller corroborates this argument when he writes "since meaning is often defined through oppositions, dominant groups may often be found not only to construct material representations of their own interests, but also to project models of those which they define themselves in opposition"(Miller, 1991:58).

In the colonial context, the depiction of the Other as uncivilized, barbarian and primitive was instrumental to the legitimation of the colonizer authority, often framed in terms of 'civilizing mission'. Today, the demarcation line between 'us' and 'them' has become blurred: the Other is no longer far, distant, absent. As James Clifford aptly reminds us "cultural difference is no longer a stable, exotic 'otherness'; self-other relations are matters of power and rhetoric rather than of essence" (Clifford, 1988:14).

As a result of migration, integration and globalisation, 'us' and 'them' as subject categories have fully blended. One of the consequences of this is that curatorial accountability is heightened and displays are increasingly subject to scrutiny (to some extent, this very paper testifies to that). In a process of internalization of these changes, museum depictions of cultural alterity no longer radicalise differences, but tend to normalize them as 'cultural variants'. Displays of Otherness are thus inevitably caught in the tension between the requirement to interpret, adapt and simplify the Other in order to make it intelligible (and palatable?) and the necessity to preserve a margin of difference to satisfy the sustained demand for the exotic; complexities, nuances and inconsistencies are hence ironed out to the benefit of an unproblematic cultural consumption. Gone is the taste for the unusual, the anomalous, the deformed, and the grotesque: the alterity that museums present us with is no longer menacing, troubling, disturbing or disconcerting. Rather, the approach to the Other is increasingly framed as a benevolent, philanthropic gaze onto human condition. Cultural differences no longer divide but connect peoples *because* they are being transcended and transfigured into the 'universal' values of Beauty, Truth and Authenticity. Only once domesticated, cultural difference finds its way into the museum, where it continues to fulfil a basic human need: it seems to me that portraying cultural alterity, crystallizing, perpetuating, thus assuring cultural variety, museums counter the spectre of the dullness of a world without diversity – a world of standards and of countless imitations of standards.

China and Its 'Others'

It seems worth prefixing the discussion of the representation of the cultural Other in the Shanghai Museum with a note on the Chinese colonial experience, if only because as relatively few other countries, China has been almost simultaneously a victim of colonialism and a colonial power itself. It has to be noted though that China has experienced quite a peculiar form of colonialism, whereby the foreign administration of resources did not extend to the whole Chinese territory, but concentrated geographically (on important harbours such as Tianjin, Shanghai, Hong-Kong and Macau) and thematically (the colonial presence mainly focused on the control of trade and trade-related institutions – banks, markets and stock exchange). Without underestimating the traumatic consequences of the forced opening of Chinese ports (sanctioned by the Nanjing Treaty in 1842), the colonial presence in China remained contained in time and space. As a result, it did not lead to a radical, overall disruption of the country's traditions, nor to the annihilation of its cultural coordinates.

Conversely, as a colonizer, China has mainly a history of contiguous colonization, understood not so much in terms of physical extension of the empire's geo-political frontiers (which throughout China's millenarian history have remained remarkably stable) but as a gradual process of cultural assimilation of the peoples inhabiting its peripheral regions. On these bases, China is defined as a "unified, multinational state" (*duominzu guojia*) (Fei, 1979:3), this formulation conflating the themes of continuity and unity, on the one hand, and cultural diversity, on the other.² Ethnic minorities are hence caught in what some scholars

2 To this day, 56 nationalities have been officially recognized, the Han representing the large majority of the population (over 90%). See WANG Can, 2004, *Ethnic groups in China*, China Intercontinental Press, Beijing, p.6.

have called 'internal colonialism'(Jonsson, 2000:74), a combination of the 'civilizing mission' that Chinese central authorities claim to carry on to the benefit of minorities, and of 'Chinese Orientalism', implying varying amounts of exoticisation (Gladney, 1994:92-123) and essentialisation (Dahl, Stade, 2000:159) of the ethnic Other.

These considerations cast light on the position of cultural strength that China enjoyed vis-à-vis the foreign and the 'domestic' Other – an element that we should bear in mind in considering the approach to the cultural Other in the Shanghai Museum.

The Development of the Shanghai Museum

Before proceeding with the analysis of the museum representation of alterity in the Shanghai Museum, I wish to briefly outline the origins and the development of this institution in view to compare its historical itinerary to that of the British Museum. In so doing, I aim at bringing to the fore the impact that the respective socio-political frameworks exerted on the development of these institutions and on their approaches to cultural diversity.

In 1871, the North China section of the Asian Royal Society³ initiated collection activities that were to constitute the core of the collections of the future Shanghai Museum (Wei, Kolbas, 2007:79). We know little of the first decades of existence of this institution, except that its collections were severely damaged and mostly got dispersed following the war against Japan (1937). With the creation of the People's Republic in 1949, the museum became a Chinese institution; under the leadership of the then mayor of Shanghai, general Chen Yi, the Museum was reconstituted, and its collections refurbished.⁴ The 'new' Shanghai Museum opened its doors in 1952, in a symbolically charged location: the horse racing club, an emblem of (British) colonial rule. The gesture was an unmistakable political statement: the Shanghai local government was determined to erase any trace of colonial presence by re-appropriating the very symbols of the foreigner's rule. The same rationale lies behind move, in 1959, to a building previously occupied by a Western bank.

With an "awkward design and increasingly dilapidate infrastructure" (Doran, 1997:26), the bank building was far from an appropriate museum location. What's more, the museum endured the upheavals and the dramatic events of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), when, as the former director Ma Chenyuan recalls, it was necessary to protect cultural relics from the devastation of the Red Guards⁵ (Doran, 1997:30).

Until well into the 1980s, despite the value of the relics and the efforts of the museum staff, the Shanghai Museum was largely unknown to Chinese audiences and mostly ignored by the scant tourists. In spite of the need for refurbishment, it was hard to persuade the Shanghai government to fund the construction of a new building for the museum. It was thanks to the initiative, the efficiency, the originality and the managerial capacities of the curatorial staff – in particular of the director Ma Chenyuan and vice director Wang Qingtheng – that, towards the end of the 1980s the first steps were taken to gather the necessary funds. Exploiting all their connections and professional expertise, the two directors succeeded in tapping into the reservoir of overseas private collections of ancient Chinese art that had fled the country at time of the establishment of the Communist government in 1949 and later,

3 The North China section of the Asian Royal Society was founded in 1857 as a branch of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, a scholarly society devoted to the study of Asian culture.

4 Prof. Qian Zonghao, director of the Department of Research, Shanghai History Museum. Personal communication, August 2004.

5 Indeed, Mr. Ma put his own life at stake in attempting to protect the Museum cultural relics from the destruction frenzy of the Red Guards. He was tortured and later sent to work in a re-education camp in Hubei Province for five years, only to be recalled by the government in the early 1970s, when his expertise in ancient bronze relics was needed to set up an exhibition of Chinese ancient bronzes destined to tour the United States, as a follow up of the visit to China of the US president Richard Nixon.

during the Cultural Revolution. Many masterpieces thought to have been lost to China for ever, made their return to the mainland as donations to the Museum.⁶ Through an unprecedented (by Chinese standards at least) combination of public and private funds (mainly coming from private benefactors of the Chinese diaspora in Hong Kong, Taiwan and North America), the necessary capital was collected and the new Shanghai Museum, now located on the central People's square, was inaugurated in October 1996.

Considered by many experts as the finest museum of Chinese art in the world, the collections of the Shanghai Museum include some 120,000 objects ranging from the Neolithic (5000-1500 BC) to the twentieth century. Once more, the location of the new Shanghai Museum is charged with meaning. The erection of the majestic building, on the People's Square, right at the core of Shanghai, is a firm (re-)assertion of the centrality of Chinese culture in the national project.

As we can see, over the history of the Shanghai Museum, the support provided by the Chinese government has been discontinuous and conditioned. The State was at best un-supportive (and at worst accomplice) in the partial destruction of the collections during the Cultural Revolution. Conversely, it was thanks to the initiative of individuals that the Museum flourished – I refer here to mayor Chen Yi who re-opened the Museum in 1952, director Ma Chenyuan who orchestrated its revamp and the many overseas private donors who made it possible. Yet, in spite of the central government's reluctance to support it, the institution has definitely played a role in the post-colonial transition: through its symbolically pregnant relocations, the Shanghai Museum has been a locus of expression of the process of nation building pursued *via* the re-appropriation of Chinese cultural heritage and the celebration of the artistic achievements of this millenarian civilisation.

The Other at the Shanghai Museum

The presence of a gallery devoted to Chinese national minorities' arts in an art-history institution such as the Shanghai Museum might be somewhat surprising. One might expect that the 'Kadoorie gallery of Chinese minority and nationalities arts' constitute a separate (for instance anthropological or ethnographic) section of the Museum. This is precisely not the case. Drawing from the analysis of the representation of ethnic minorities in other Chinese museums, I argue that minority cultures are not so much framed by the gaze that is purported on them (anthropological rather than historical, artistic or scientific) as by their very materiality: minorities' costumes and implements are solely items of Chinese material culture. In this logic, the Shanghai Museum's choice to introduce a gallery of ethnic minorities' arts next to the other galleries devoted respectively to bronzes, sculpture, calligraphy, furniture, painting, coins, jade and ceramic works, is meant to inscribe ethnic minorities, or better, *their materiality*, within the framework of the Chinese nation.

This approach is clearly stated in the opening (and main) text of the Gallery – an introduction that unmistakably sets the tone of the exhibition, underpinning the discourses on unity and diversity of the Chinese nation:

our splendid and glorious Chinese civilization is the result of the assimilation of various nationalities that have lived in China. Due to varying social conditions and means of livelihood, the different nationalities in China have developed quite diverse cultures. The unique features of each culture are best expressed through their decorative arts. The

6 Not surprising, donors are quite extensively mentioned throughout the museum: the ten galleries, the exhibition halls and the library are all named after donors, and a complete list of benefactors' names is engraved on the marble walls of the Museum entrance hall. In some special cases, the Museum has even embarked in the publication of a brochure (on sale in the Museum's bookshop) introducing the donor and the content of his/her donation.

numerous different artifacts, often magnificently coloured, exhibit diverse skills and reflect the flavour of each culture's rich and varied lifestyle. The unusual and original arts and crafts of minority cultures have made great contribution to the culture and art of the Chinese nation.⁷

Here, in tune with the Marxist-Leninist theory of evolution, the cultural variations of ethnic minorities are causally linked to their different stage of development, of which material culture (notably decorative arts) are the evidence.

The Kadoorie gallery exhibits mainly textiles (including clothes, embroideries, batik, weaving, woollens and prints) and a small number of decorative items (hats and masks) and everyday tools (smoke pipes, tea sets and food containers). Most costumes are exhibited in glass cases lining the walls, though some are worn by mannequins – almost all female – displayed in individual glass boxes (below).

Figure 1. Ethnic minorities' costumes in the Kadoorie gallery of Chinese minority and nationalities arts, Shanghai Museum.



Photo: The Author.

Interestingly, the depiction of the minority differs from an ethnic group to the other. Whilst most of the 56 officially recognized ethnic groups are not represented, others, notably the Miao of Guizhou Province, are given great prominence (possibly by reason of their spectacular costumes). Similarly, some minorities are represented by relatively recent (20th century) or even contemporary objects, while others, as in the case of the Manchu, are

7 Shanghai Museum. Last visited in May 2006.

represented exclusively by more ancient relics (dating of the late Qing dynasty). This suggests an implicit association with the (Manchu) Qing Imperial dynasty – a link that no doubt exists in the collective imagery, although this representation hinders a full acknowledgement of change over time, denying the Manchu the right to a present (and a future) as a self-standing cultural community.

Museum texts assert that “each nationality has distinct costumes and adornments with different styles and patterns (...) These differences are useful in distinguishing the different cultures”. This text echoed in my mind when I stood in front of the two mannequins portraying Tibetan nationals. 'Tibetans' are presented barefoot, with outfits composed of fur garments, ancient swords, spears and 'necklaces' made of animal teeth. I sensed that the whole image was constructed to suggest ideas of roughness, hostility and archaism. When I further read that “Tibetan designs are strong and robust, manifesting the esoteric nature of the Buddhist images. The Dai silverware are elegant, exquisite and elegantly carved (...)”⁸, I felt tempted to think that the characteristics attributed to the material culture are being extended to the ethnic group.

The exhibition in the Kadoorie Gallery also presents an intriguing attempt to group objects according to similarity. For instance, headdresses of Tibetan and Mongol origin – similar in colour and shape – are exhibited together. One might wonder whether this association of objects of material culture is implicitly meant to pinpoint the common traits among the various minorities, reinforcing the rhetoric of continuity and unity, and the ideas of 'belonging' to the Chinese nation.

Display methods do not re-create the contexts of production and use of the artifacts – for instance with photos, videos or detailed labels. The visitor is denied the possibility of a greater depth into the cultural individuality of the group depicted. No reference is made to the political, hierarchic, ritual, religious, or social meaning of the objects. Nor to the fact, for instance, that a rigid hierarchy informs the relations among minority groups, resulting in at times harsh conflicts. All this information is evacuated to the benefit of a uniform, smooth picture where minorities simply co-exist harmoniously. As a result, the visitor is not allowed to imagine, lest to understand, the society from which the objects on display originate. Rather, the public is invited to take them at face value, as artworks that one appreciates for their formal properties, their beauty, the skills involved in their creation – elements that are presented as ultimately reverberating the splendour of Chinese civilisation.

My reading of the representation of the ethnic Other in the galleries of the Shanghai Museum develops along the following considerations.

Firstly, the narratives on cultural diversity underscore a selective incorporation of cultural features to the idea of Chinese nation. Customs and traditions of minorities are at times emphasized as evidence of the variety and richness of Chinese culture, and at other times, in the case for instance of marital or funerary rites, described as marks of backwardness. Whilst some features are strained, preserved and 'folkloricized' as 'traditional' (*chuantongde*), others are dismissed as 'feudal superstitions'. Secondly, ethnic minorities' identities are constructed as spatially anchored. The displays of the Shanghai Museum attribute to each ethnic group a precise, unique geographic area of settlement. The cultural homogeneity over the territory thus artificially constructed rules out migration, overlapping and cohabitation of various groups. Thirdly, ethnic groups are depicted as ethnically homogeneous and stable. Exchanges among groups, hybrid cultural forms and blurred boundaries are strategically underplayed. Fourthly, ethnic groups are represented as entertaining harmonious relations, no reference is made to hierarchies among groups or conflicts. Discriminations based on political power, cultural or religious systems for the access to educational, professional and other social

8 Both quotes from the Shanghai Museum, last visited May 2006.

benefits, are flattened or completely edited out. Fifthly, and finally, minorities are pictured in a time-less dimension, as if impermeable to change. They are thought as not only isolated in space (they live at the 'borders') but also in time.

Thus constructed, aestheticized and crystallized in time and space, the image of the ethnic Other is made manageable, domesticated, therefore instrumental to the processes of homogenization, generalization, comparison and ultimately assimilation to the Chinese national identity. From this angle, the display of ethnic minorities in the Shanghai Museum subscribes to governmental discursive practices aiming at constructing the alterity of the ethnic group *in reference to* (rather than *versus*) the Chinese nation. In other words, the identity of the ethnic group is inscribed within the cultural, historic and institutional framework of the Chinese nation (Jonsson, 2000:60). In this way, the Chinese government factually annihilates the potential of minorities' cultural reproduction, whilst 'authenticating' their identity as part of the Chinese nation.

The Historico-Political Background of the British Museum

If we now turn to the consideration of the British Museum and the historical conditions of its origins and development, we are faced with an extraordinary instance of an institution at the service of colonial ideology. Needless to say, the political, economic, and cultural dimensions of colonialism deeply affected the British Museum's approaches to cultural alterity. Yet it would be myopic to confine the analysis to the colonial paradigm. It is my contention that the representation of the Other at the British Museum suggests that the institution is actually coming to terms with its colonial past, endeavouring to transcend national taxonomies and construct a platform where global identities may find expression.

Founded in 1753 on the collections that Sir Hans Sloane bequeathed to the British nation, since its inception the British Museum asserted its nature of public institution, open to everyone and with no admission fee. Its 'national' character may also be found in its collections, firmly grounded in a concept of national heritage, including natural history specimen (transferred to the Natural History Museum in the 1880s) as well as books and manuscripts (disincorporated from the main collections to constitute the British Library in 1973). Its donors were not private collectors as in the case of the Shanghai Museum, but diplomats, explorers, missionaries and anthropologists at the service of Her Majesty. The British government played a crucial role in providing the Museum with appropriate spaces for its collections, from the original site of the Montagu House (purchased through the income of a national lottery) to the transfer of Ethnographic collections to the former Senate House of London University in 1970, from the creation of a new separate building for the British Library in 1998 to the spectacular re-development of the Great Court in 2000, marking also the return of the Ethnographic collections to Bloomsbury.

Already from these concise notes we can see how, historically, the relationship State-museum has taken different configurations in the two case studies: weak, discontinuous and conditioned in the case of the Shanghai Museum, and uninterrupted and strong in the case of the British Museum. If this contributes to explain the differences in the identification of the Other (who the Other is), it nevertheless leaves open the question of the similarity in the two museums' approach to alterity (how the Other is represented).

I will return to this point in the conclusion.

The Other in the British Museum

Who is the Other in the British Museum? To begin with, it is difficult to say who is the 'us' in the British Museum. Narratives of British national identity shun the Museum's exhibition rooms. Craig Clunas acutely noted: "[*in the*] museums of imperial and post-imperial Britain [...] the refusal to privilege the presentation of distinctively 'British' material (and if anything

rather the reverse) within the collections is constitutive of an identity that eschews national definition in favour of a claim of universal hegemony, as a transcendent fixed point which observes all other 'cultures'. The British Museum could never be restricted to British things, for to do so would set a limit to the reach of British power”(1997:414). In the same vein, Magnus Fiskesjö asserts that the nation (referring here to Sweden) uses foreign collections to “capture the image of its intrepid self in the world” (Fiskesjö 2007:7).

It seems to me that the exhibitions at the British Museum point at a plurality of Others. Indeed, as the Museum defines itself an history rather than an art institution (Wilson, 2001:13), the main Other would be an historical entity. However, given the purpose of comparison with the Shanghai Museum, where the Other is an actualised, contemporary entity, I will be mainly concerned with the displays of living cultures.

Taking as a starting point the Museum's plan, one can notice that, set aside ancient civilisation, the remaining 'living cultures' have been grouped into three geographic areas: Asian cultures (including the Joseph Hotung gallery for China, India, South Asia and South-East Asia, as well as the Korean and Japanese galleries), the Americas (the JP Morgan Chase Gallery of North America) the Middle East (the John Addis Gallery entitled “The Islamic World”) and Africa (in the Sainsbury Galleries). For reasons of space, I will confine the analysis to the Asian, the North American and African galleries.⁹

The Asian Galleries

Elsewhere I have discussed the museological approach adopted in the Joseph Hotung Gallery of Oriental Antiquities with reference to the Chinese collections.¹⁰ Here, I wish to focus on the other artifacts exhibited in that room (from India, South and South-East Asia), as well as on the Korean and Japanese Galleries. Together, they constitute the Asian¹¹ section of the Museum.

The organisation of exhibits in the Indian and South East Asian section of the Joseph Hotung Gallery mainly follows a chronological criterion. The display here privileges religious sculpture. Roughly half of the exhibition space is occupied by Indian artifacts, the remaining space being shared among several other South Asian countries including Nepal, Thailand, Cambodia and Java. The display presents a mainly didactic art-historical concern; objects are grouped by function and sequences of variations of the same object show the development of techniques and styles.

Museum texts illustrate the chronological development of the various sculptural styles, but no reference is made to the conditions of accession of such artifacts or, for instance, to the context of production and exhibition of the sculptures: were they destined to a public gaze or to private enjoyment? What do they tell us about the societies they portray? And what can we say about the technical achievements and the craft skills of their makers? These are just examples of questions that the exhibition might have raised, although it might legitimately be countered that these aspects simply go beyond the angle of presentation chosen by the curators.

9 For the same reason, I cannot discuss here the permanent ethnographic exhibition “Living and Dying” in the Wellcome Trust Gallery, though relevant elements for the analysis could be found in that context too.

10 I discussed the display of Chinese art in the Joseph Hotung Gallery in a conference paper entitled “Representing and 'consuming' the Chinese Other at the British Museum” presented at *NaMu III: National Museums in a Global World*, Department of Culture Studies and Oriental languages, University of Oslo, Norway, 19-21 November 2007.

11 I adopt here the denomination used in the British Museum museum map.

Figure 2. The glass cases in the Joseph Hotung Gallery of Oriental Antiquities, Indian section, British Museum.



Photo: The Author.

All in all, it seems to me that the 'South Asian Other', as it appears from the Joseph Hotung Gallery, is refined, seductive and mysterious. But it is also a silent Other, an entity that seems to come to us from a distant past, and with seemingly no present, almost as if South Asia, likewise the Assyrian or the Romans, were an ancient civilisation forever lost to the world.

Leaving the South Asian galleries and heading upstairs, one finds the Korean Foundation Gallery. In a soft and intimate atmosphere, the relatively small and airy exhibition room presents ceramics, prints, paintings, decorative and utilitarian items, including the reconstruction of a traditional scholars' study and a temporary exhibition of contemporary Korean art in the lobby. It is difficult to define the exhibitionary mode: this is a mixture of aesthetics (objects have clearly been selected for their formal characteristics, which are maximized by the rarefied layout and the precise lighting, inviting a close examination), historical (a chronological order is respected), and thematic approaches (objects are organised in clusters of materials: ceramics, prints, paintings and so on). The predictable prominence of ceramics is counterbalanced by the less predictable exhibition of contemporary art. Similarly, the scholars' study has been constructed according to traditional rules but by contemporary craftsmen. Decorative and literati items are juxtaposed to everyday objects in a dialogue between past and present, tradition and creativity, formality and spontaneity. The ensuing image of Korea (one might rightly infer that we are talking more precisely of South Korea) is one of evolution within tradition – the Korean Other, seems to tell us the exhibition, is conscious of its past but also well grounded into its present.

Just as the Korean Gallery bathes in a soft light, the Japanese Gallery is immersed in a dark, essential and solemn atmosphere. Objects are exhibited in uncluttered glass cases, illustrated by unobtrusive, essential texts. The effect of visual purity and essentiality is further reinforced by the widespread use of all-glass exhibition cases, which create an optic effect of objects seemingly 'floating' in the space. This layout contributes to create an impression of lightness that reverberates on the overall encounter with Japanese artifacts. The introductory panels promise to explore “how continuity and change have shaped Japan's past and present and its relationship with the rest of the world”.¹² The exhibition structure follows a chronological order coupled with a thematic criteria – each section is introduced by a key object. The result is a story-telling effect, where each temporal section is 'narrated' through the objects on display. The fact that most of the artifacts chosen for the exhibition are decorative items mirrors the image of a civilisation with a sharp aesthetic sense.

In this regard, the exhibition on Japan rejoins those of the other Asian galleries (Indian, South East Asian, Chinese and Korean) in shaping a consistent image of the Asian Other. Although the Indian and South Asian Gallery stress an art historical dimension, the Asian galleries share an emphasis on the exquisite craftsmanship of artifacts, depicted as expression of an epistemology of art and material culture imbued of the philosophical ideals of beauty, purity, balance and harmony. It follows that – we are told – Asian cultures are best appreciated under the angle of their sense of aesthetics. I feel that underlying this proposition rests a key assumption: Asian culture is here equated to Asian civilisation¹³, understood (and constructed) as an abstract entity divorced from the contemporary socio-political and economic realities of Asian countries. In turn, Asian civilisation is indexed by its artistic production, thus being itself objectified and reduced to a 'beautiful object'. In this sense, I share Antony Shelton's concern, “if essentialising discourses have largely retreated from ethnographic exhibitions, they have re-grouped in a dangerous, new exhibition genre which treats culture as heritage, and objects as the embodiment of the cultural genius and identity of a distinct group or peoples”(Shelton 2001:48).

The JP Morgan Chase North American Gallery

In contrast with the art historical approach of the Indian and South East Asian Gallery, and the aesthetic angle of the Korean and Japanese Galleries, upon entering the JP Morgan Chase gallery of North America, one finds oneself in the presence of the familiar museological style of ethnographic exhibitions.

Visually, the first impact is one of abundance of both objects and text. Objects include some 'classic' ethnographic categories: masks, everyday tools (knives, fishing equipment, pottery), handicrafts (basketry, wood carvings), skins and furs, ethnic costumes and textiles. They are mainly grouped according to a combination of geographical and functional criteria. Exhibits are interspersed with panels bearing a wealth of information: texts, maps and photos explore aspects of local lifestyle, production methods and consumption/use of artifacts. Particularly revelatory of the ethnographic approach is the normative tone of the texts illustrating, for instance, what people inhabiting the North West Coast do, where they live, what they eat, what their kinship structures are and so on. The North American Other is then museologically framed as relatively a more 'primitive' Other, seemingly frozen at the moment of the European encounter, and upon which the Museum purports an ethnographic gaze set on the 'we-explain-it-to-you' mode.

12 Japan Gallery, British Museum. Last visited in December 2007.

13 I use the term civilisation here as meaning “a relatively high level of cultural and technological development; *specifically*: the stage of cultural development at which writing and the keeping of written records is attained”. Definition provided by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary.

The Sainsbury African Gallery

Opened in March 2001 with funds from the Sainsbury Trust and the Henry Moore Foundation, the African Gallery presents itself as a mixture of artistic and ethnographic approaches to African culture. In the words of the curators “the installation itself is highly aesthetic (...) The information panels and labels, on the other hand, are strongly ethnographic so that the exhibition can work at both levels”(Spring, Barley, Hudson, 2001:37).

As on a white canvas, the objects of the African Gallery seem to emerge from a candid background in all their communicative strength. Indeed, one is taken aback by the range, quality and originality of the objects chosen to represent the African continent. Exhibits are organised in different sections according to the double logic of their material (textiles, pottery, woodcarving, metal, brass casting) and topic (masquerade, personal adornment). An aesthetic concern is clear from the characteristics of the items selected and their measured, balanced, studied juxtaposition.

Figure 3. The entrance of the Sainsbury African Gallery, British Museum.



Photo: The Author.

But the exhibition aims at reaching far beyond an aesthetic appraisal of African art. Objects are in fact complemented by a wealth of information in the form of texts and video documentaries exploring specific issues from an ethnographic angle.

The iconographic wooden sculptures of human heads and figures are relatively scarce in this exhibition, displaced by the works of contemporary African artists. To the extent that these works elude categorizations and defy the canons of what is considered African art in the west,

their selection for this exhibition does not fail to surprise the visitor, shaking and displacing pre-existing stereotypes, whilst refreshing one's ideas of African art.

But again, it is African art, more than African culture, that is at stake here. The African Other has finally dismissed its 'primitive', 'savage', 'traditional', 'authentic' aura, and is finally apprehended in its multifaceted, dynamic and creative dimensions. Yet, pondering the Sainsbury African Gallery, one wonders to what extent the image of the continent that emerges from the exhibition is filtered through Western eyes. What we witness is an Africa seen from the west, the Africa of the contemporary African-born artists living in London who, among others, contributed the objects in the contemporary art section, the Africa we know through the exotic restaurants in our towns, through independent movies, ethnic music and fair trade shops – are we facing an African Other ultimately modelled for our own consumption?

That said, the African Gallery is a large and complex exhibition, bearing various layers of interpretation (ethnographic, artistic, technico-material, historical and geo-political to mention a few) and I cannot discount that these few notes certainly do not render justice to this complexity.

* * *

Drawing from what precedes, I am lead to conclude that the British Museum addresses a plurality of 'Others', and does so in a plurality of ways.

There is obviously an inconsistency in the museological approaches of the various galleries. In part, this is to ascribe to the tensions deriving from the juxtaposition of galleries bearing different museological rationales – I refer namely to the binomial fine art *versus* ethnographic approach. In this respect, it is relevant to note that the ethnographic collections (the American, African and Oceanic collections that we see today in the North American and African Galleries) were separated from the rest of the Museum's collections in 1970, whilst the curatorship of Asian artifacts remained under the competence of the Department of Oriental Antiquities. The displaced ethnographic collections developed and operated for thirty years under an independent (ethnographic) logic and as a distinct entity (the Museum of Mankind). They were re-incorporated in the British Museum in 2000 and juxtaposed to pre-existing galleries imprinted by a clear fine art approach (still manifest in the Mexican Gallery and the Asian Galleries). The result, oversimplifying only a bit, is that the Other is framed through the lenses of art history in the case of Asia, of ethnography in the case of North America, and through a mixture of ethnography and art in the case of Africa. The 'difference' of (and among) the Other(s) is acknowledged but forced into disciplinary and museological moulds.

This confusion of registers nevertheless suggests an attempt to disfranchise museum representations from the historico-colonial perspective bringing together the wealth of information of anthropological exhibitions and the emphasis on aesthetics proper to fine art displays. It must be said that the most challenging and engaging gallery, the African Gallery, is a clear attempt to reshuffle classification criteria and transcend disciplinary categories. I have the feeling that faced with the limits of both the 'universal survey' museum formula and the rigid taxonomies imposed by academic disciplines, and struggling with the impossibility to truly render the complexity of world cultures, the British Museum is experimenting with new ways to depict and narrate other cultures.

Closing Remarks

Through this comparative analysis of the representation of the cultural Other at the British Museum and the Shanghai Museum, I hope I have shed light over the logics underlying different paradigms of museum representation of cultural diversity.

On an incidental note, it is interesting to note that both the British Museum and the Shanghai Museum underwent a process of considerable refurbishment during the 1990s (with stunning architectural results). These interventions testify to the position of iconic cultural institutions that they are determined to maintain within their respective cultural, economic and socio-political contexts. Both museums boast collections of exceptional value, and as a result, both aspire today to a status of excellence in the museum field, aiming at addressing a global audience.

Sure enough, the two institutions simply *cannot afford* not to address the question of the Other. As we have seen, in the case of the Shanghai Museum, the Other is instrumental to the process of nation building, since the narrative on the Chinese national identity is constructed through the double movement of differentiation and assimilation of the Other-ethnic minority. Conversely, as mentioned, in the British Museum it is difficult to locate narratives of national identity. Indeed it is the very aspiration of the Museum to transcend nations and locate itself on a global arena: for the British Museum it is crucial to sustain its image of global, universal institution, '*the* Museum of museums'. As a result, in depicting Otherness, the nation (of the viewer or of the viewed) is no longer the basic referent. In their polyphony, the multiple narratives of Otherness in the British Museum map a 'global identity' that eschews definitions.

Whilst in the case of the Shanghai Museum the exhibitions unfold along a discourse of inclusion – the Other is integrated, assimilated and ultimately annihilated, forced to merge with the majority 'us' – in the exhibitions of the British Museum it is the idea of nation that evaporates, making room for multiple, global identities, and contextually securing a place for the British Museum in this new globalized landscape.

The divergences between the two museums representations that the comparison has brought to the fore are undoubtedly the result of different historical and cultural trajectories combined with different domestic agendas: of inclusion and national cohesion in the case of the Shanghai Museum, and of distancing from the colonial past in the case of the British Museum.

Yet, even in geographically and culturally distant countries with different past itineraries and different contemporary national agendas, museums are confronted with similar challenges – among the most important, the satisfaction of their increasingly informed, demanding and cosmopolitan audiences. I argue that 'aesthetization' is one of the strategies that museums deploy to meet such challenges.

It is not accidental that in both museums the objects appear severed from the living cultures they represent, and there is no reflexive conceptualisation of the biography of objects, on how they entered the museum collections and what they mean today for the people they represent. Crucially, this evasion of the responsibility for objects' meanings, stories, associations and references is in both cases attained through an emphasis on aesthetics. It may be argued that as a 'universal' category, the appreciation of Beauty bears the advantage of appeasing contentious issues of appropriation, interpretation or legitimacy. But I rather tend to think that the aesthetisation of the 'Other' is a strategy to elude engagement with politically or socially delicate issues that might threaten domestic social cohesion and/or the harmony of international relations. Recast in this light, the representation of cultural diversity configures as one of the tools through which nations, *via* national museums, negotiate their past and their ideological positions in a global context where these are increasingly scrutinised by a closer, informed, cosmopolitan and multicultural Other.

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