The Rhetorical Challenge of the Everyday Object: 'Þjóð verða til' at the National Museum of Iceland

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Abstract: *A museum exhibition communicates meaning at various levels, some more obvious than others. The author of this article spent several weeks at the new permanent exhibition of the National Museum of Iceland, exploring it as a visitor would, and offers a reading of the various meanings that the exhibition conveys, both verbally and non-verbally. Of special interest is the use of everyday objects to convey important themes for the nationalistic agenda of the exhibition.*

Key words: Iceland, national museums, non-verbal communication, object interpretation, exhibition techniques.

Meaning-making in exhibitions is no easy matter: it is a well-known interplay of various factors (e.g. Greenblatt 1991), and it is one in which visitors are normally given primacy. Their free movement among the case furniture uniquely randomizes each visitor's experience, thus altering meaning, especially when coupled with the extreme variety of visitors' own background and interest. An exhibition is also normally curated by a team of scholars, and designed by a firm employing a further half-dozen, so that claims of "authorship" and intentionality are hard to sustain, thus obfuscating one nexus of meaning generation. Museum professionals take some solace in that anonymity, and, ironically, in how that anonymity heightens, rather than diminishes, an exhibit's rhetorical power: both allow the

claims it makes to seem natural, shared, or intuitive. The exhibit's message in effect becomes unquestionable because there is no single individual perspective to criticize – there is no author. This combined with the critical role of a visitor's own background, in fact allows some to naively assume that there is no rhetoric at all being employed by museums, only the "conveying" of information. Recent developments in the field of museology, especially in reference to national museums,¹ have demonstrated how such an impression is completely false. National museums serve national agendas and the trust they project imbibes their exhibitions with a level of authority that severely impacts the visitor's ability to independently make meaning.

The following analysis of the National Mu-

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seum of Iceland's new permanent exhibition discusses that exhibition's rhetorical strategies for conveying a certain impression of the Icelandic nation. Some of these strategies are well-known in the museum field, like the use of imposing architecture and a narrative line that mirrors the physical layout of the exhibition. But I believe the exhibition may be somewhat novel for the degree to which it engages the visitor's somatic response, and in so doing reverses expectations about what constitutes museum-worthy objects for display. In this paper,² I will review the overall structure of the exhibition; its physical organization within the space of the gallery; what topics are next to each other and which are spatially separated by case layout; and which themes are carried throughout the exhibition in the form of repeated object motifs. The paper will end with a discussion of what I call the "rhetorical challenge of the everyday object," which springs from a confidence in the ontological status of objects as independent conveyors of meaning.

BACKGROUND

The National Museum of Iceland began operating out of its current facility in 1944; establishing that facility was one of the first acts of the newly independent Icelandic Republic.³ In 1998, it closed for major renovations, and although some politicians expected it to reopen in 2000, it did not in fact reopen until late 2004.⁴ During these five years, the collections were inventoried, photographed, and moved. The third floor of the building was converted into exhibition space, an extension was added onto the building, and of course, the entire main exhibition was redone. A curatorial team consisting not only of museum professionals, but also of Icelandic archaeologists and histo-

rians, determined what the content of the new exhibition should be, as a result of a series of meetings and discussions. A Swedish design firm was brought on board, multimedia components were developed, and beautiful exhibition case furniture was made. The result won recognition from the European Council of Europe's for one of the best new exhibitions in 2005.

The title of the new permanent main exhibition is "Þjóð verða til" which they translate as "The Making of a Nation: Icelandic History and Heritage over 1200 years." It occupies the 2nd and 3rd floors of the main building. The first floor houses a coffee shop, gift shop, lecture hall, and a changing exhibition gallery that primarily focuses on more modern works and photography. On the 2nd floor is another small gallery for changing exhibitions, which usually draws on artifacts from the museum's own collection.

OVERALL EXHIBITION LAYOUT

Any exhibition with the title "The Making of a Nation" is certainly not apologetic about its nationalistic agenda, and indeed this – the main theme of the exhibition – is carried at the primary level of organization, the total layout of the exhibit. Upon entering the museum, a visitor is immediately confronted with a large, semi-circular staircase that leads directly up to the second floor and the beginning of the permanent exhibition, clearly suggesting to visitors that this exhibition should be the main attraction. The unambiguous title emblazoned in black and white across the wall at the top of the stairs makes no apologies for the nationalistic intention of the exhibition and asserts the authoritative stance that will follow.

The exhibition on the 2nd floor covers the

periods 800 to 1600, and according to the signage, is divided into 200-year sections that progress chronologically in order as one walks from one end of the hall to the other, logically enough. One then takes a staircase at the back end of this hall up to the third floor. Interestingly enough, there is no way down to the first floor from the back of the second floor exhibit. It is a stairway that only leads up, just as the stairway greeting visitors upon entering the building only leads up. One either turns around at the end of the 2nd floor exhibition, or one proceeds through the 3rd floor exhibition space. The exhibition on the third floor covers the periods 1600 to today, and is divided into 100-year sections according to the signage. It ends in a display of modern items (including Nike shoes from the year 2000), cleverly shown on a conveyor belt that is somewhat disconcertingly not spinning, and a huge wall of rotating images of Icelandic people, photographs of just their faces.

Let me just pause here to make a note of this linear progress, of its ability to non-verbally communicate meaning. Educators who research visitor behavior in exhibitions have determined that visitors' attention decreases sharply after the first half-hour in an exhibition, and thus it is only the introductory text and first few exhibition components that curators can reasonably assume all visitors will notice (Hein 1998, p. 138). The layout of this exhibition therefore places emphasis on the period from 800 to 1000, because there is no introductory overview area; almost no one could walk through this exhibition and fail to notice Iceland was settled by Vikings, and it may be the only thing people really read about. The last 100 years of Icelandic history is also given special treatment by a radical departure in display techniques, clearly an at-

tempt to recapture visitor attention. It seems to me also, and here I am thinking of Merleau-Ponty's notion of embodied significance (1945, see also Pilario 2005, esp. pp. 131-133) and modern architectural understandings of how buildings affect the emotional states of visitors, that these two sections, the first 200 years and the last 100 years, also engender heightened attention by virtue of their physical placement within the building. Visitors tacitly, bodily orient themselves as they navigate the building, realizing that the main exhibition begins and ends at the front of the museum. They also notice that they can only escape from the chronological march of history by completing the loop. This further, non-verbally, privileges these two time periods, the first and the last. Anyone with an appreciation of Icelandic history will likely notice the nationalistic point being made here, that the first settlers were freedom lovers fleeing kingly power, and the current Icelandic nation is also free and independent. Even if visitors do not intellectually understand this, they will nevertheless come away with the impression that these two time periods are especially significant.

The overall layout of the exhibition therefore reinforces the articulated nationalistic agenda of the exhibition; this will not strike a museum professional as novel, since it is a sign of effective planning. However, in order to make other, more subtle statements, the curators had to creatively play with the notion of objects and art objects on display and to welcome, rather than resist, objects as beings in the world.

THEMES ON A CASE BY CASE LEVEL

At an intermediate level, between the overall exhibit layout and the staging of individual

objects, lies the organizations of cases within a particular room. I'd like to dwell a moment upon the message the organization of the cases conveys, again to see whether or not that meshes with the text, and to further appreciate where objects convey meaning versus where cases or layout convey meaning. Let's then take a close look at the organization of the 2nd floor itself. Upon mounting the opening staircase from the first to the second floor, a visitor sees a large white wall, bearing the name of the exhibit, to their right. To their left is a series of cases made of dark wood and glass, aligned along the left side wall. The wall to the right, along with a number of cases and smaller walls bearing text scattered throughout the room, are presented to the visitor at an angle. Barely perceptible except in the physical response one has to these cases and walls jutting out at one, seemingly piercing one's chest, one nevertheless can notice that the angularity all emerges from the right hand side of the room. (se Fig. 1.) On the left, the cases are presented either along the wall, or at right angles to the wall, in a rather orderly fashion, recognizably divided chronologically. The left hand side is thus the comfortable half of the room to be in, a pattern established immediately at the top of the steps, where the cases on the left greet and welcome visitors, unlike the wall confronting visitors to the right. Each half, left and right, utilizes the same red-letter dates to mark sections of linear, chronological time, belying, perhaps even purposely obfuscating, the non-verbal division the room has along its central axis. If the left side of the room is being privileged over the right in terms of bodily comfort, how does that contribute to the meaningful experience of the exhibit as a whole? The material presented on the left hand side of this room is all related to Icelandic "daily

Fig. 1. Floor plan for the first floor, National Museum of Iceland permanent exhibition. Courtesy National Museum of Iceland.

life", to economic activities like weaving and fishing, the production of export goods, and materials from house complexes throughout the period, whereas the right hand side begins with a discussion, right behind the confrontational initial wall, of the changes to Icelandic flora, fauna, and soil deposition after the arrival of humans. This should perhaps be more rightly be associated with daily life, since environmental degradation was caused by the exploitation of resources, but instead this display is adjacent to cases containing typical Viking Age weapons. The message here is one of change, and of destruction, and a feeling of discomfort, almost sorrow, emerges, reinforced by the angular walls. The nearby display of three pagan period burials – one of a man interred with his horse, and slightly to the right of that, a middle aged woman and then the grave of a small infant – complete with skeletons and associated artifacts, though very cleverly presented at ones feet and made visible through a glass floor, does nothing to dispel the sense of unease in this section of the room. A model of Skálholt cathedral – but only showing the wooden framing of the building, and thus very pointy and unwelcoming

– begins the discussion of the conversion to Christianity and is likewise presented at an angle to the visitor on the right. That the discussion of the medieval church is contained on the right hand side of the room, the more aggressive side of the room, suggests an anti-church sentiment, a visual statement that the church was an invasion into Iceland, the equivalent of weapons and environmental degradation, and death. One object in particular, prominently presented at the end of the 2nd floor, but with very subtle signage, brings home this association. It is the chasuble worn by Bishop Jón Arason, the last Catholic bishop of Iceland, who was beheaded in 1551.

OBJECTS TO THE FORE

An object of this sort, beautifully embroidered, indeed originally intended for the kind of intensive looking Svetlana Alpers (1991) refers to, and having a clearly important historical provenance, conveys meaning at both the level of wonderment and resonance, both visually and mentally (Greenblatt 1991). But museums seldom have the luxury of such items in their collections, and must make do with what they do have available when creating exhibits.

The National Museum of Iceland's exhibit has been particularly bold in envisioning new ways to use objects to convey meanings, if one considers that national museums in general are quite conservative. I doubt anyone would find anything particularly radical in the text itself, though there are a few sentences here and there that make hostile claims against, for instance, the Norwegian king who "saw it as his right to control trade" during the 14th century. Rather it is the use of objects that strikes me as particularly radical.

Fig. 2. Photograph of first floor, showing the burial of a Viking Age woman. Courtesy National Museum of Iceland.

One case in particular, on the left hand "daily life" side of the room, early on establishes the exhibition's program of stretching the rhetorical power of objects. Centered above a low series of cases, encased all in glass, are twelve baseball sized, irregularly-shaped, brownish grey rocks, each with one hole in the middle. These are normal indigenous Icelandic rocks, pierced so that they might be hung at the bottom of an upright Icelandic loom used to weave *vadmál*, a fabric that was the main Icelandic export well into the 14th century. In the display, they are stacked on top of one another, and in fact look very casual, but because they are centered, lighted, and most of all encased in an oversized glass box, they are clearly meant to be seen as valuable. I must actually admit that perhaps this was a bit overdoing it, since even a teenager in the exhibit with me recently commented on how strange it was to have these items displayed in this manner. The guards also regularly sit next

10 to this case, reading a book, or chatting with friends, which I believe is a sign that it is not garnishing the respect originally intended. And yet the visitor must try to make sense of it, especially in contrast to cases across from it of elaborately woven church items, similarly displayed behind glass with special lighting. I believe the curatorial team was trying to make a claim about the value of the everyday over the value of artistry, about the value of worked items rather than seen items. Another case that reiterates this stance is seen on the left hand side of the room, a large glass case containing mostly beautifully worked church items, such as ivory crosses. At the bottom of this case rests a large, and rough, bowl made of native Icelandic stone, used as a holy water font. In one sense it is not out of place, but in another sense it is very much out of place with the other, finely made import items. The rhetoric here is that this stone item is the foundation, the anchor, for all the others, based on native Icelandic goods and made for practicality, not for visual effect.

This rhetorical play with the value of something made to be seen versus the value of something made to be used continues, and is indeed heightened, on the 3rd floor. Immediately as one ascends from the 2nd to the 3rd floor, one is greeted by a series of painted wooden church pieces that are not in cases nor do they have signage. At first one must question whether or not these are even part of the exhibit, especially since the signaling of value through the use of glass-enclosures had been so clear on the 2nd floor, but as one enters the 3rd floor gallery, one notices that there are many items displayed *au naturel*, without any casing or railing, though usually upon some sort of platform. Of course there are a few practical reasons for this: many items in this

area are of more recent vintage, and therefore less fragile, and several items, including a full size rowing ship and a full-size (though small by today's standards) Icelandic cabin, are simply too large to be placed under a glass covering. But surely there is another reason also. The text at one point mentions how colorful painted items were almost exclusively used in churches, in other words, these items were intended for display, for looking at, like the priest garb. But the display technique undermines the visuality of these items by showing them open air and full scale. A good many items subject to this open-air display technique on the 3rd floor share another characteristic: they in fact invite bodily interaction. They include pulpits priests stood at, chairs priest and other high ranking officials sat in, and the benches parishioners used, and it is no difficult mental task to see one's own body conforming into the cavities contained in these pieces, nor indeed to imagine oneself bound inside the shackles or laying at the guillotine also displayed in this open air technique. Objects which could be displayed in such a way to enhance their visuality are instead displayed in such a way to enhance their usability.

Along with the pervasive tendency to privilege the utilitarian over the artistic, there is also a clear rhetoric stressing the importance of women over the importance of men. Nowhere in the text will you find an explicate discussion of the "role of women", but there does not need to be, because there is a pattern throughout the exhibit of showing many items directly associated only with women, often in preferential display techniques. For instance, the very first case at the top of the stairs contains broken bits of iron, a few small beads, the iron teeth of a wool comb, some bone fragments – hardly the impressive ope-

ning salvo most exhibitions go for. But the text reveals that the items on the first shelf came from a woman's burial, and the items on the bottom shelf, including a beaded necklace, came from a boat burial whose skeletal remains were not found, but clearly the curators are arguing here that the boat burial also belonged to a woman. This is important because boat burials are considered the highest status sort of burial in the Viking Age. The prominent display of weaving items, repeated several times on the left hand side of the exhibit and including the case mentioned earlier, also establishes the valuable role of women. On the third floor, a series of women's costumes continues this association between women and weaving. Though the first costume one encounters in the exhibit is the aforementioned priest garb, and the second costume that of a Danish soldier, complete with a musket, the visitor is then presented with four women's costumes, one from the early 1700s, one from the 1800s, one from the 1900s, and then one made out of plastic, from today. Although this may be an obvious point, museum curators are particularly aware of the power of presenting costumes, of the conjuring ability of something life size, especially as I said because museum exhibitions are very much about bodies navigating in space. The only men presented here is one who was killed and another who did some killing, but the women carry the flow of history on their shoulders, visually linking all of the 3rd floor and providing a crucial link to the 2nd floor displays of weaving items.

But what of the anti-church sentiment identified on the 2nd floor? Does that carry over on to the 3rd floor? A less hostile stance begins to emerge right after the discussion of the Reformation: the end of the 2nd floor fea-

tures several paintings of Guðbrandur, the first Lutheran bishop of Iceland, and indeed the only individual portrayed on the 2nd floor. His pulpit is also one of the few non-encased objects on the 2nd floor. As one enters the 3rd floor, the continued presentation of church-items outside of glass enclosures begins to make them more accessible, less hostile, though of course also less visually "wonderful." They begin to become *hverdagslegur* (everyday, ordinary) whereas on the 2nd floor they were clearly juxtaposed to the daily home life.

Let me however go up a level of generality, away from the presentation of individual objects, back again to the level of the overall organization of the 3rd floor. Unlike the 2nd floor, which had a perceptible central axis dividing the room lengthwise, the 3rd floor has a palpably different orientation. One notices more cases in the middle of the room, including most noticeably a reconstructed woman's costume. A narrow passage between the costume and a case discussing the development of Reykjavík as a city allows the visitor to get to the next section of the exhibit. At this point, the room suddenly and dramatically opens up, to allow for the full size display of large rowing boat, and directly across from this, a *baðstofa*, a typical wooden house of the pre-industrial era. The axis therefore shifts at this point from being lengthwise down the room to breadth-wise across the room. And yet there is also a display centered just beyond these two full-size emersions, itself a sort of recreation of a whole environment, in this case the office of Jón Sigurðsson, the first president of the Icelandic parliament after Iceland gained limited homerule from Denmark. Together with the display of a ladies costume next to the discussion of Reykjavík, we have here in fact four exhibits, arranged in a cross-like pat-

12 tern, which together form the whole of the modern Icelandic identity. The boat represents the sea, the house represents the land, Reykavík and women represent the cultural center of Iceland, and of course Icelandic independence is epitomized in no one so much as Jón Sigurðsson, whose birthdate serves as the National Day in Iceland. I would argue that in their alignment in this way, they form a cross, a new religion, a religion of national identity. In fact, it seems to me that the whole of the 3rd floor is organized exactly as Skálholt cathedral was laid out. The 3rd floor is a shrine to the nation as religion.

The final display at the end of the 3rd floor, just beyond Jón's reconstructed office, is fascinating, and rather novel: an airport luggage carousel upon which rests 25 plates containing objects from each decade of the 20th century (usually 2 per decade, though not always). What can one make of this exhibit technique? First of all, it is open air, and throughout the exhibit, the curators have been playing with this potentiality. By prefacing this display by showing very valuable items open-air, and very ordinary items encased in glass, the visitor is not immediately inclined to think of these objects as everyday; rather they have benefited from the earlier displays so that their ordinariness now seems instinctively valuable. Almost without exception, each of these 25 has some sort of eating implement or drinking vessel; even, very bizarrely, the discussion of World War II in Iceland, symbolized naturally enough by a gas mask and bullet riddled metal plate, also includes bubble gum and ladies' stockings. Clearly this maintains the emphasis on women even here, and the repetition of coffee cups in particular suggest continuity despite change. Though the carousel does not rotate, clearly

modern visitors know that it could or should. Instead the visitor themselves have to walk around it. In this physical circling, a link between the past and present is mimicked, similar in fact to the loop the visitor has to make from the 2nd to the 3rd floor. On the wall over this carousel is a continuous loop of photographs from the 1900s to the present on television screens showing a cross section of Icelanders, some famous, some kids, some couples. Icelanders coming to this exhibit will surely recognize a number of these individuals, though foreigners would not. By this point in the exhibit, the curatorial rhetoric has reached a very advanced stage. The Icelandic people have been shown to be common, neither high-class nor low-class, and a powerful visual link has been made across the generations of Icelanders, not only from 1900 to the present, but indeed from the moment of settlement until the present. The overall affect of displaying everyday objects associated with women repeatedly throughout an exhibition with a specific national agenda, and the invitation to bodily interaction with these objects, peaks with the unconscious realization that the Icelandic nation was primarily built through the bodies of non-elite, secular women, quietly going about their daily lives.

DISCUSSION

The foregoing is but one reading of the new permanent exhibition at the National Museum of Iceland. Given the variability of individual visitor's experience, and the diffuse nature of curatorial sourcing, museum exhibitions have a dizzying array of potential meanings and a surfeit of ready analytical perches. As a particularly well informed visitor – I have studied Icelandic history for almost 20 years

Fig. 3. Photograph of second floor from the top of the stairs. Notice the open exhibition technique. Courtesy National Museum of Iceland.

and know personally a number of the people on the curatorial team⁵ – I feel secure in offering these as unstated but intentional messages latent in the exhibition. This particular curatorial group, which was in fact mostly comprised of women, intended for the importance of the female to come across as a corrective to so much traditional history privileging men, especially important for a country that boast of having the first female president. I also believe an emphasis on the everyday was not just a nod towards trends in history which shift the focus from privileged men in power to the lives of ordinary citizens, but was also a practical necessity for the staff. The collections at the National Museum of Iceland are not particularly rich in gold or jewels or fancy ornamentation, and thus a practical matter turned into a necessary rhetorical move to acclimate visitors to valuing objects differently.

But despite whatever local concerns the exhibition was answering to, I believe it raises interesting questions about how much meaning can be carried in objects in association with other objects, outside of text or even context. How much independent power do objects have to say something additional, or even contrary to, the overall exhibition message carefully crafted in the text? Curators are certainly aware of how much meaning emer-

ges from the tension of placing objects on display, taking them out of one context and into another. When Svetlana Alpers (1991) effectively framed the discussion, it seemed clear that objects recontextualized within a museum exhibit – through placement on a pedestal, specialized lighting, unobtrusive text, and encasement within a glass box – become, regardless of their origin or original purpose, reinterpreted as art objects, objects whose main function is to be looked at. This emphasis on the visibility of objects has had a lasting effect on museum exhibition practice, and it seems natural and unavoidable that objects primarily be utilized in this manner. But Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (1992) argues that emphasizing the visual register of an object is an act stemming from a particularly modern episteme of knowledge dependant on subject-object relations. Mark Sandberg (2003) further suggests that most modern museum display techniques arose as part of a program to train the modern mental *habitus* in such a way as to make viewing films or traveling thousands of miles in a day comprehensible. In other words, by normalizing the practice of seeing objects out of context, museums have contributed to development of the modernist way of viewing the world encapsulated indeed by the term objective.

But the above analysis of the exhibition “Þjóð verða til” demonstrates that objects in exhibition do not interact with visitors solely at a visual register. There is also a perhaps underutilized way in which object’s physical mass in relation to the bodies of the visitors and their circulation through the exhibition also makes meaning. I would like to suggest that this latent ability of objects to communicate outside of the visual range rests on the special ontological status of objects in the modern period to be free carriers of meaning in and of themselves, outside of context. Objects have gained this status through the museum exhibition techniques identified by Alpers, but an emphasis on the visual is not the only outcome of taking objects out of context and placing them on display. The objects also take on a heightened ability to be free-carriers of meaning. Walter Benjamin (1982) and others have noted that objects in museums have become especially fraught with this potentiality. As the “real thing” (the ownership of which bolsters museums’ own institutional authority), they have acquired a profound secularized link to the past, and to authenticity, which may ironically allow modernist tendencies towards commodification to have free reign elsewhere in society. In exhibitions which display these artifacts, the full weight of the museum and these objects as “real” give them a heightened value, a rhetorical value all their own. It is perhaps possible that some objects may have acquired a rhetorical power which outstrips our modern attempts to confine it.

Curators attempt to, as Elaine Heumann Gurian puts it, “present and organize meaning in some sensory form” (2004: 273), and by and large those attempts come in the form of reading texts, hearing recordings, and, in good exhibitions, through an exhibition floor plan

that allows a visitor to navigate the space in such a way that it reinforces the exhibition themes. Curators are part of the visually-centered modern world and are not typically trained to utilize their physical bodies when examining objects. But the new permanent exhibition at the National Museum of Iceland has tried – and rather successfully in my opinion – to harness the meaning potentiality latent in visitors’ bodily interaction with objects as they navigate through the museum, to acknowledge that objects still exist in space, as do the bodies of the visitors, and not just on the visual plane. In that process, they have managed to say something deeply personal about women, history, and the Icelandic nation.

NOTES

1. The series of workshops held by NaMu (<http://www.namu.se>) are indicative of this heightened awareness of the unique status of national museums. See also Ostow 2008.
2. My time at the museum in 2007 was sponsored by a grant from the American Scandinavian Foundation, and my initial review of the exhibition was reported at the Society for the Advancement of Scandinavian Studies annual meeting in Fairbanks, Alaska, 2008.
3. Iceland had been a part of the Danish kingdom until that time, although calls for independence began in the mid 19th century.
4. For an overview of the museum renovation process, see *Hlutavelta Tímans*.
5. I also sent this paper to the State Antiquarian, Margrét Hallgrímssdóttir, to give her an opportunity to correct any misinterpretations on my part. She had no editorial suggestions.

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