

# Beyond the Pedestal: Creating Culturally Relevant Exhibitions

by Darcie A. MacMahon

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For millennia, people all over the world have "curated" objects that are important to them. And while many of us think of museums as a Western invention, we barely have to stretch the definition to see that for most of human history (Marean, 2010), people have set standards about what objects are culturally important, what gets curated and how, what is shared with others and how, and what is interpreted and how. Objects have always been a means of passing along cultural information and conveying both individual and group identity. All of this to say—are we prepared as exhibition designers and developers to waltz into other cultures and decide how cultural objects should be integrated into museum exhibitions? And are we prepared to tell their story? Whose stuff and whose story is it anyway?

## A Shift in Perspective

These questions erupted for me when traveling in Nepal about fifteen years ago. I spent a few days with Rehana Banu Syed, the director of the National Museum of Nepal, and her Department of Archaeology colleague, Sarala Manandhar, who generously toured me through the museum and its satellite sites—some of the most amazing places of cultural heritage I have ever visited. Supported by the Nepali government and other nations, organizations, and individuals around the world, these sites showcased exhibitions that featured many standard Western museum practices. At one site, the then newly renovated Patan Museum with its stunning displays of ancient religious statuary, I learned of an upcoming religious festival related to the museum. Participants would remove objects from display, carry them into the community, use them in religious rituals, and later return them to

their museum pedestals and vitrines until the next year. Rituals would include treating the sculptures with ceremonial ointments and other substances, and the grounds of the museum itself would be used in rituals that included animal sacrifices. Following the ceremonies, the blood would be washed from the site and the statues returned to display. I realized at that moment that I saw museums and their role through my own cultural lens.

My experience in Nepal shook the very foundation of my museum training. In the West, we strive to treat exhibited objects with an approach to care based on established and shared professional standards that address variables such as lighting, relative humidity, mounting strategies and protection from handling, to name a few. These standards have developed from the ethical premise, cited at length in the AAM and ICOM Codes of Ethics (AAM 1993, ICOM 2004) and in most museum vision statements and collections policies, that museums are responsible for the protection, preservation, and interpretation of the collections they hold in the public trust.

The notion of "public trust," however, may clearly take on different meanings in other countries and lead to different standards of care. My experience in Nepal illustrated that exhibited objects may have shared identities, securely cared for and displayed in museum settings for much of the year, while also serving a "living" function as part of time-honored cultural practices. My understanding of the word "care" also had to be altered: part of the continuing care of these objects was the religious ceremony. In fact, the museum sites themselves had become integrated into a living practice.

By some mechanism, the Nepali community had worked with the museum to make decisions and develop shared standard practices. And the museum held a recognized role within the community to preserve objects of cultural heritage and their meanings for the benefit of both the community and the world. The museum was not so much the authority as it was a partner in heritage preservation.

### Reflecting on My Experience

Since my trip to Nepal, I have seen and read about similar examples in other places, and a growing body of literature has explored these issues in more depth. But I've also seen examples of exhibitions in other cultures that were clearly developed by Westerners and bore little relation to their culture of origin. Do we really want to transport Western exhibitions to other places, like transplanting a McDonald's into the heart of Beijing? In our rush to join a rapidly growing global marketplace of exhibition development, I wonder if we have the tools we need, or more importantly the will, to tackle these cultural complexities.

To be fair, cultural complexities are not exactly new to us in the West. Many museums once developed by colonial governing powers have shifted practices and points of view. Anthropologists and others involved in international "development" efforts have written about needed changes to our standards and approaches (I list a few good ones under references). UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) has addressed some fundamental issues (1996). Even in the United States, we now question the authority of our standards following the 1990 passage of NAGPRA (the Native American Graves Protection and



*The Patan Museum, Nepal, showcases an amazing collection of sculpture. Courtesy of the author.*

Repatriation Act). NAGPRA presented, and for many continues to present, some really chewy and sometimes thorny dilemmas. It prompted questions such as: Who owns items of cultural heritage? Who has the authority to decide how cultural objects are curated, displayed, and interpreted? What is the role of museums in relation to living cultures?

These are really big questions. Yet those of us involved in exhibition design and development are sometimes on the perimeter of these conversations, often held in parallel but non-overlapping literature, and thus can be a bit slow to catch the wave. We may be aware of NAGPRA concerns, but have we made similar leaps with international work? Nations invite us in to develop Western-style exhibitions, and that's something we know how to do well. We enter the scene, look at the project through our own cultural lens, and imagine and propose what these exhibitions should be, informed by our own standard practices. But does this make

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*A Buddha on display at the Patan Museum. Courtesy of the author.*

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for the best exhibitions in other places? Does it do the museum or nation justice? Have we challenged ourselves to ask the tough questions? And what are the questions we should ask? Can we have a dialogue that will improve our practice when working in other cultures? Can we imagine new approaches?

### **Some Questions to Consider**

My goal here is to propose some questions we can ask ourselves and clients when working on international projects, and to open the door for more discussion. Such questions also may make sense for projects in the United States, given the increased diversity of its population and its museum-going public. I'd like to challenge us, as professionals invited to work on projects in other cultures, to develop exhibitions that contribute to the ongoing conversation about

the role of museums in a cultural heritage context. And I encourage those of you with more on-the-ground cross-cultural experience to jump in and talk.

While these questions may be best asked of projects with a cultural or historical bent, they can inform art, science, and natural history projects as well. Indeed, we should be asking such questions for any exhibition that is at all grounded in place or hopes to have relevance to the local community. Say, for example, the history of science or technology in Country A, or the future of environmental conservation in Country B. Or a local history museum in the United States. In short, cultural relevance is important to pretty much any story.

### **Question #1: What is the mission of the museum and this project?**

This is an easy start—this is a question we already ask. But delve a little deeper. Does the museum already define itself in relation to its cultural stakeholders? Who are these stakeholders? Does it already share authority with others? If not, then tease out more information with another question.

### **Question #2: Who is the target audience?**

This is another question we're used to asking, but this time read between the lines. Does the museum believe its goal is to attract tourists and serve a non-local audience? Ask specifically about local audiences and the museum's expectations about visitation and participation. Are all the people who can answer these questions at the table? Talking with the museum education team may provide insights different from those of administrators and other staff.

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**Question #3: What stories should be told and what collections support them?**

Here is where we always focus, and this is the place to really start probing. The story should guide the use of collections—who defines the story? Are there national or local laws that govern the ownership, care, and display of collections? What about ethics that guide object display? Do people regard the objects as alive? Can they be closed in cases or do they need to “breathe”? Can they be touched, displayed in light, displayed as a whole or in parts, shown with other objects, shown at all? Are there objects that still play a role in community heritage practices? Does the design somehow need to accommodate current cultural practices? There are numerous avenues of discussion; prod around as deeply as you can.

**Question #4: Who are the cultural community stakeholders?**

If the museum knows what objects it wants to display and stories it wants to tell, the stakeholders may be obvious. Is the museum open to inviting them to the table? Does the museum and design team have the experience and skills to do so? What are the relevant politics and challenges? Whose story is it to tell? Defining stakeholders is the first step toward sharing authority and making a culturally relevant exhibition.

**Question #5: How can we involve community in the design/development process?**

We can pretty much assume it makes sense to do so, but does the museum agree and what is our role in trying to make that happen? Has the museum collaborated with community in the past? Which staff members were involved and can they assist this project? Can we encourage collaboration in the early stages? What can we

do to diminish any perceived “threats” to the institution and the project? How can we foster collaboration? What cultural barriers might discourage or prevent community members from participating? By involving stakeholders early, the story may become altogether



Participants in the Cow Festival, Patan, Nepal (1997), carry religious sculptures on litters through crowded streets. Courtesy of David Harlos.

## Are all the people who can answer these questions at the table?

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### References and Recommended Readings:

American Association of Museums. (1993). *Code of ethics for museums*. Retrieved July 2010 from <http://www.aam-us.org>.

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International Council of Museums. (2004). *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums*. Retrieved July 2010 from <http://icom-museum> (See Item 6. Museums work in close collaboration with the communities from which their collections originate as well as those they serve.)

different, potentially richer and more nuanced as well as relevant.

### **Question #6: Whose voice(s) will guide and deliver the story?**

If the story is about people and their stuff, shouldn't they contribute to the story? This has everything to do with how we design and develop an exhibition, and we're sure to stumble upon surprising (and potentially inspiring) differences in perspective. Are there obvious spokespersons? Does the museum already interact with community around the use and meaning of their collections? Is the museum open to sharing curatorial authority? Who selects the objects and creates the story? Could the museum assemble a small group to advise the design-development process?

### **Question #7: Can we use all objects for education?**

The museum may own the collection and the curator (or you) may wish to use it in the exhibition. But is it appropriate? Would the creators of these objects (and their cultural heirs) want them to be displayed? Are they appropriate for all audiences? Can we get beyond polarized views to meet in the middle and talk about possibilities? Can both the community and the museum find common ground for reaching their goals? Forging a true partnership with cultural experts can avoid



Two goats nibble on offerings left on a religious sculpture in an open-air temple, Patan, Nepal. Courtesy of David Harlos.

problems and make the exhibition accepted and used as well as a source of pride.

### **Question #8: How might cultural context influence design?**

This is where it gets juicy for those of us who love creating exhibitions. Are there traditional places where cultural objects are used, stored, and displayed, and what do they look like? What are the daily or ritual contexts? Are there limits to the ways objects are used and who uses or sees them? Are there special colors, textures, and graphics that would make the exhibition culturally relevant? Are there inappropriate colors, graphics, or symbols? Might the exhibition need two doors, one for men and one for women? By going out of our way to ask such questions, we can inspire design with a

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traditional sense of place and practice to make the exhibition more comfortable, authentic, and inviting to the cultural community.

**Question #9: What exhibition tools best deliver this story to the target audiences?**

We've got a lot of possibilities in our toolkit. How can we use them to make the story compelling but also culturally appropriate and inspiring to the target audience? Is the use of film and other technology inspiring or offensive, and in what ways? Are hands-on interactives appropriate and how? What role might audio have? How can lighting effectively contribute? Do labels need to be in more than one language? Should there be a plan for live interpreters and if so, can community help develop that plan? Can the museum sustain the level of care required for our design strategies given its resources? We may need to navigate cultural preferences and customs, in addition to resource realities, to determine what tools can be used and how.

**Question #10: Is involving community part of our scope? Can it be?**

We know well that successful collaboration takes time and resources, and that while projects are always the better for it, we may not have the resources to make it happen. The reality is you may be hired to do a project that has a defined scope, perhaps defined precisely in a Request for Proposal, and you may be competing with others to perform this job at a

reasonable cost. Can we really expect ourselves to be the drivers behind cultural collaborations? Can we imagine some ways to use these and other questions in our work? Can we work to reinvent how these projects are defined? While it may seem unlikely or even impossible at first, perhaps if we begin to ask such questions we can influence the nature of our practice.

**Can We Stretch Our Practice?**

These ten questions are just a start, and by no means the only (or the best) questions we can or should ask when creating international exhibitions. But assuming that we strive for excellence both at home and abroad, I believe we should stretch our practice to acknowledge the importance of cultural collaborations and to at least begin asking ourselves some new questions. Our professional community is known for its creativity and expertise, and we all enjoy growing with new challenges. So rather than simply overlay our practices onto another culture's story, can we strive to look through the lens of that culture to inspire and inform our work? After all, in the end we depart the scene and leave the museum to its own devices, and its success is based in part on our contributions. In the best of all possible worlds, our work positions the museum as a platform for participation, and can ultimately define the institution as an essential cultural partner within a living community. Isn't that what counts? ✨

**References and Recommended Readings continued:**

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