

There is No Essential Museum

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As a museologist, and having worked many years in museums of cultural history and on museum exhibitions, I always find it very inspiring and highly interesting to read well-thought-out texts about actual museum exhibitions, and Søren M. Sindbæk's (2022) article 'Pirates in the Age of Populism – New Viking Exhibitions in Stockholm and Copenhagen' is no exception. Well written, and with a clear stance, Sindbæk gives us a vivid overview, and an engaged review, of two recently opened Scandinavian exhibitions about the Vikings.

If museums and museum exhibitions are to have an opportunity to develop, feedback of this sort is highly valuable. Heritage exhibition reviews are – at least in a Swedish context, with the now well-established digital museum magazine *Utställningskritik*, Exhibition Critique, at the forefront – entering the realm of professional criticism where reviews of literature, art and music have for ages created discussion and sparked debate, and this is just amazing. Sindbæk guides us through the two exhibitions with wit and authority; I have no problem at all in relating to his feeling of 'metal fatigue', having seen exhibitions with way too many objects in that material category.

Another, more heartbreaking, highlight is Sindbæk's beautifully-captured reflection on the mounting of a block-lifted child's grave, the Birka Girl, in the exhibition at the Swedish History Museum. The 'star of the former exhibition', Sindbæk (2022:13–14) writes, now seems a bit oddly placed: 'She is waiting in the corridor as you leave the last room, penned in

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a corner framed by wooden rafters. The scene may be meant to show her as hanging out by the farm fence; but it presents a disquieting image of a defiant orphan, separated from her parentage and habitat, and fenced-in like an inconvenient truth'. This could have been the tale of every museum object ever collected, and hence disconnected, but this observation also shows the power that the room, the location and the audience-flow carry in the museum exhibition, and then we have all the other objects on display. Here, merely by being organized and situated just the way they are, these spatial manifestations may awaken feelings and thoughts of almost existential proportions.

This is, furthermore, a very concrete example of how potent the museum medium doubtlessly is, and it shows the complexities of the museum exhibition as a communication strategy. Finally, Sindbæk (2022) sums up the article by developing his observations and drawing the conclusion that museums are about to lose track of their role, but are they really? What I want to focus on here – besides pointing out the fact that a museum visit is incredibly multifaceted and very hard to capture in a few lines – are some of the inherent dualities that a museum carries. Sindbæk sheds light on them, but rather than debating how to create the perfect museum, I will argue that the dynamics between the many facets of a museum form the most central part of what a museum is, or rather: what a museum *does*.

On the one hand, the museum is very familiar to many of us; we simply know exactly what we can expect when we plan a visit to a museum and as we take part in their current exhibitions. On the other hand, what the museum is and what it does is not that simple. This also leads to my main objection to Sindbæk's (2022) article: his argumentation would have been more effective and accurate if he had first given the vast field of museology some proper attention. To me, as a museologist, it is informative that Sindbæk makes the same mistake as others who engage in debating the nature and purpose of the museum. Namely, they do not consider the complexity of this fascinating institution, organization or organism. This, in turn, shows the importance of better communicating various aspects of museum studies; personally, I find this to be a never-ending source of inspiration.

Books, articles and conferences in museology, exhibition production and design, museum (exhibition) pedagogy, conservation and collection management, (critical) heritage studies, environmental humanities and even psychology have for decades been dedicated to the manifold and multilayered aspects of museums, cultural heritage, exhibitions and visual or corporeal communication (see for instance Bennett 1995; Bergsdóttir 2016; Bohman & Palmqvist eds 1997; Bäckström 2016; Cameron & Neilson eds 2015; Clavir 2002; DeSilvey 2017; Dudley ed. 2010; Fredengren 2015; Gustafsson Reinius 2018; Harrison ed. 2020; Hyltén-Cavallius & Svanberg 2016;

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Macdonald ed. 2006; Muñoz Viñas 2005; Smeds 2015; Sutton 2020). Still, nothing of this is mentioned or referred to in Sindbæk's (2022) article.

This was also the case in the heated museums debate that took place in Swedish media a couple of years ago, initiated by another museum critic, the journalist Ola Wong, who sparked an intense and at times harsh debate about the museum's role, and how exhibitions should be made. This debate was compiled and analyzed by Mika Handelsman-Nielsen (2018:6) and her conclusions are unequivocal: 'The discussion could have ended before it took off if the debaters had listened to the researchers in the field and the museum professionals. That did not happen and that is remarkable'.

Let's move on to a couple of examples to explore how this article could have been further developed with a little help from, say, museology. In Sindbæk's (2022) analysis we are presented with two types of dichotomized museum ideals. First, we have the one that engages in public service 'curating and presenting important, public-held assets, and preserving and disseminating knowledge' versus the 'visitor attractions with the core task of sustaining income' (Sindbæk 2022:19). Secondly, there is the academic and 'elitist' museum in opposition to the museum for 'the general populace'. A central point in sociologist Tony Bennett's (1995) reasoning in the book *The Birth of the Museum* resonates with Sindbæk's: there is a tension within museums, whether they should provide pleasure and enjoyment for the public, or mainly work towards knowledge production. Probably most museums do both, more or less. Clearly, no museum would ever argue that they only take an interest in one of these aspects. Museums, and the heritage sector, want to attract tourists, in this case with exhibitions about Vikings, and this, argues Sindbæk (2022:11), is evidence that museums are now adapting 'in order to thrive in the age of populism, consumerism and privatization'.

I agree with Sindbæk in the sad fact that society at large, and hence also the museum as an institution, is cast in a capitalist form, turning all of us into consumers, but I would rather follow Robert Janes' (2009) argumentation that points to how museums of today are embracing the values of consumption that in turn underlie our greatest planetary difficulties. That would put an effective focus on the larger picture where museums operate, and hence, where they have a potentially positive role to play as a model for the rest of society in times of climate change and the challenges that follow on from this.

It might have been good if Sindbæk had reflected on, and tried to identify, what he would say 'the museum' is; just by doing so he probably would have realized how difficult it is to draw conclusions about where the 'museum' is headed based on his current empirical material alone. Furthermore, he

would not have been the only one to have wrestled with finding a proper definition for writing about ‘the museum’. The international museum organization ICOM finally agreed upon an updated one, after many years of committed worldwide discussions, but does it really cover everything? And, is it both stable enough and flexible for change? Here Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (1992:191) is worth citing: ‘There is no essential museum. The museum is not a pre-constituted entity that is produced in the same way at all times’.

No doubt, a museum is connected to the ideals of its temporal context and actual place. Cultural politics is, of course, important, but there are also more subtle aspects. For instance, what role does the great interest in the Vikings, due to popular tv-series, play in the article’s examples of the museums’ choice of narrative? More importantly: is this an attempt to attract an audience that usually does not choose to visit a museum, since that in itself is an important museum mission. The Swedish museologist Kerstin Smeds (2012:54) highlights the important fact that ‘an exhibition is always also an argument; some even call it an “act of speech” – be written text involved in it or not’, and in a recently published anthology Harrison and colleagues (2020:4–5) argue that by reframing the notion of heritage ‘as a processual and discursive, as well as material, legacy’, heritage studies more explicitly may be oriented as ‘a study of future-making or worlding practices’. This could also be true for the museum and even more clearly the exhibition; it is not merely a place, or even a noun. Rather, it is a way of doing things, or an act of making worlds, but certainly not foremost communicating ‘facts’ or the one and only true story. Finally, this resonates well with Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s (2000:11) idea that will conclude this brief overview: ‘Think of the museum, not as a place to which one brings technology, but as a technology in its own right – a set of skills, techniques, and methods. Think of the museum as a distinctive medium, not as an empty vessel for all kinds of musealia. Consider it as a medium in its own right’.

By looking at the two Viking-exhibitions with some of the museological tools mentioned here, a more complex picture emerges. Museums are part of history, but they also have their own trajectory, both as cultural institutions and mass media. Furthermore, they are deeply and intentionally entangled in society. An important aspect that Sindbæk (2022) touches upon is the anonymity of the museum-sender; it is sometimes hard to know whose voice we encounter in the exhibition, and with whom we shall enter into dialogue. If the allegedly transparent museum would let us investigate its machinery and reveal its flexible and ever-changing core, I think the museum debates would spark even broader interest. This could also shift the focus away from fundamentally distracting questions about the ‘right’ way to do museums, which risk suffocating the very idea of the museum.

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