

Charles S. Stanish

*on museums in a
postmodern world*

In the spirit of trying to make our academic research more socially engaging, my colleagues and I have supported the construction or rehabilitation of small, community-based archaeological and ethnographic museums in Bolivia and Peru over the last twenty years. These museums are run by local institutions at the village or town level, and serve as a focal point for cultural pride and sense of ownership over their history. In spite of their modest size and scope, these site museums function like their larger counterparts in the United States and Europe.

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Natural history or anthropological museums, both large and small, are some of the most important but overlooked and misunderstood institutions in contemporary society. From an academic perspective, museums can be viewed as a space where social scientific theory must confront the tangible. From the late 1960s into the early 1990s, however, many observers declared that museums were becoming an anachronistic form of communication or education. Others argued that an increased focus on 'heritage' was a sign of social decline, a kind of desperate secular revitalization movement. The postmodern critique in anthropology was perhaps the most serious, arguing that museums essentialized non-Western peoples and were nothing more than colonialist narratives given institutional form.

Yet, in spite of all the distractions afforded by modern life on one side, and the academic critiques that museums generate on the other, museums are flourishing throughout the world, both industrialized and emerging. We can safely conclude that museums are not historically transient phenomena confined to the West. There is indeed no substitute for a physical space where people can congregate to look at, and occasionally touch, objects of cultural, historical, and personal meaning. The nature of these museums varies enormously from culture to culture and from place to place. But since at least the beginning of urban life several millennia ago, in both the eastern and western hemispheres, people have created spaces to house meaningful objects that serve to materialize shared histories and group identities. Simply put, museums and museum-like spaces are central to our lives as social beings; they will never disappear, and as such, must be embraced by social scientists as fundamental ad-

juncts to our research, not naively dismissed as colonial legacies of a bygone age.

Today, large art and natural history museums dominate the cultural landscape of the West as well as richer non-Western countries, like India and China. However, these countries and the rest of the world are also full of very small and medium-sized museums that in the aggregate have a much greater effect on people's lives. For example, the United States alone has almost 1,500 'official' museums, as listed on a website of the International Council of Museums. But it also has thousands of other smaller museums – some just one or two rooms with a humble library and/or some exhibits – that are dedicated to virtually any aspect of the human condition.

Museums are never politically or culturally neutral. Lurking behind every exhibit is an ideology, the result of many conscious or unconscious acts of selecting what to include and what to exclude. In anthropological terms, museums are highly contested institutions that reflect the social and political biases of the people in those societies that create museums. By contested, I mean that the ones who form these institutions often have different, and oftentimes competing, aspirations and goals. Those conflicting interests are reflected in the museum exhibit and collections. To the uninitiated, small ethnic museums are quaint expressions of the parochial aspirations of a relatively small group of people. However, to those who are aware of the deeper cultural meanings reflected in these places, the humble exhibit and weathered label copy oftentimes reflect the turbulent social tensions lying just under the surface.

Why do we promote small museums in Latin America? As in other places around the world, the postcolonial peo-

ples of Latin America developed museums as a source of national pride in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The large museums were based on European models, beginning first as private collections of the elite and then later as great national institutions supported by the state or church. These national institutions reflected the ideologies of the political elites, stressing both nationalism and independence from their colonial past, but also creating a gulf between a 'primitive' indigenous people and a 'civilized' European-derived elite culture.

This same distinction was found in the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century museums in Europe and America. The great art museums housed the work of Euro-American artists, while the art of indigenous peoples were housed in natural history museums. Even the academic divisions in the natural history museums – anthropology, botany, geology, and zoology – imparted a not-so-subtle ideological perspective that placed the accomplishments of the indigenous peoples in a 'state of nature.' Primitive nature – embodied by exhibits of animals, plants, minerals, and indigenous peoples – was separated from Western civilization – embodied by great art, usually European masters. When art museums did indeed begin to collect indigenous art, the exhibits, collections, and curatorial staffs were housed in separate departments usually known as 'primitive art.'

In the last thirty years or so, this ideology has changed in at least North America, Australia, and most countries in Europe. In the exhibit halls of the great natural history museums, European cultures are commingled with non-European ones, and the exhibits have broken down the nineteenth-century crypto-racist frameworks. Many art museums

now appropriately exhibit non-Western art alongside Western art, and do not separate it as some primitive precursor to the rest of the exhibits. The wealthier Latin American countries such as Argentina, Mexico, Chile, Peru, and Brazil have likewise reformed their museum exhibits to reflect these new social realities stressing indigenous pedigrees in past national movements of independence as well as the present role of indigenous peoples in their societies.

In our work in Latin America, we scholars have become much more aware of the power of small, community-based museums to affect peoples' daily lives positively. In the past two decades or so, 'site museums' (those focused on a narrow geographical and topical theme, such as an archaeological site or region) have emerged as one of the principal means by which indigenous peoples and their descendants have resisted many of the negative cultural effects of globalization. These museums are small, but they are powerful. Site museums give people one more tool to maintain their often-precarious cultural identity in the face of increased cultural homogenization. When successful, they create new identities crafted not by outsiders or a distant political elite, but by local people themselves.

It may seem incredible that a 1,500-square-foot exhibit space in a remote village can be so socially engaging and relevant. But it is. On the Island of the Sun in the southern side of Lake Titicaca in western Bolivia, our archaeological team collaborated with a community to build a center for tourism, lodging, and ethnographic exhibits. This center was built with private contributions from anonymous North American donors and the volunteer labor of the community. Students from the main university in La Paz who call this village their home created

the architectural design. The museum is now in the guidebooks. It is a true success story: the people of this community on this island are able to present their culture in the way they want to the thousands of foreigners who visit each year.

A second museum was built in the municipal building in the town of Taraco in the northern Titicaca Basin. Funded again by North American donors, and conceived and executed by my colleagues Cecilia Chávez and Edmundo de la Vega, the museum is run by the local mayor's office as a public service. Exquisite carved stone stela over two thousand years old are now preserved in the small building. School groups and other civic organizations regularly use the museum. It, too, is emerging as a significant component of municipal life in the area. Finally, many of my colleagues have collaborated with the local Ministry of Education officials to rehabilitate existing museums in the municipality of Pukara.

By promoting local site museums, social scientists can help to create spaces where ethnographic and archaeological objects can be properly housed locally and controlled by the people whose ancestors made them. We are a modest component in a larger process of people around the world reclaiming and controlling their own proud past.

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