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MUSINGS AND VISIONS FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

**"museum: an institution devoted to the procurement, care, and display
of objects of lasting interest or value."**

Webster's Third New International Dictionary

One of the most important and worthy goals of an archaeology/anthropology museum is to preserve a material record of the past. However, museums also must strive to show how aspects of that record are relevant to today's world. This mission clearly can be accomplished in many ways, through educational outreach, lectures, and exhibitions. It is particularly challenging to create exhibitions that show the relevance of objects from the past, but when successful, these can be tremendously rewarding for both the public and museum staff alike.

The relevance of the past (from the far distant to the very recent) for people today can be illustrated in many ways. First, an exhibit can highlight the accomplishments—esthetic, technical, or organizational—of a past culture. It can focus the viewer's attention on, say, how a culture overcame technical and environmental limitations to produce architectural triumphs that are still marveled at today. Angkor, whose celebrated technological and artistic achievements are featured in this issue, provides a good example. In so doing, the exhibit can foster an appreciation of cultures other than our own, in general, and the achievements of these cultures in circumstances far different from those of the modern world, in particular.

Second, the study of the past can provide useful perspectives on problems facing the world today. That is to say, museum exhibits can and should explore "the lessons of history" that recent archaeological scholarship has shed light on. For example, as I have argued elsewhere, new understandings of the demise of Classic Maya civilization in the southern Yucatan Peninsula offer important insights into the long-term potential and limitations of rainforest environments and the consequences of large population growth, forest clearance, and agricultural intensification.

Third, an exhibit can point out the direct utility of the past. New archaeological research has begun to reveal practical applications of some scholarly finds, as I mentioned a couple of months ago in this column. For instance, Dr. Clark Erickson's fieldwork in the southern Andes and most recently near the headwaters of the Amazon has uncovered the workings and advantages of raised field agriculture. He and other colleagues have been able to reintroduce this productive technology to modern peasants in the areas.

Fourth, archaeological and ethnographic research has often revealed interesting cultural continuities (and discontinuities) over long periods of time and these can be presented through exhibits. Such exhibits can help illuminate the nature of various cultures around today's globe, and can lead viewers to a better understanding and appreciation of modern cultural practices. Our new permanent exhibit on "Living in Balance," now on display in the Ruth and Earl Scott Gallery, offers some nice illustrations of how studies of both the past and present can offer insights into modern cultures of the American Southwest.

By emphasizing the relevance of their research and collections, archaeology/anthropology museums can help show visitors why "procurement, care, and display" of objects of the past and present can and should make such material culture have "lasting value."

Jeremy A. Sabloff

The Charles K. Williams II Director



The 12th century A.D. Temple of Angkor Wat, Cambodia.

Photo by Thierry Zéphir, 1993