Displaying Death: The Ethics of Museums and Morbid Objects

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Abstract: In this paper, I discuss the ethical issues with museums' display of objects associated with death. I call these artifacts "morbid objects," and argue that they provoke significant reactions from visitors because of their connection to a specific narrative in the past. Attitudes towards death promoted by museums' treatment of morbid objects as mere entertainment can be unhealthy, violating the museum's obligation to its visitors as well as to the represented dead. I conclude that museums can more ethically avoid unhealthy morbidity by displaying these objects in such a way that viewers can understand the historical death as well as their own mortality in terms of a meaningful narrative.

Introduction

Historically valuable objects help the past come alive for audiences, which can be problematic when the past event is a death. Morbid objects draw on both historical value and the macabre to cultivate visitors' interests in a specific death, and museums must be careful when handling those interests. With a purist and constructivist approach to museum learning, it becomes clear that museums have an obligation to refrain from turning death into entertainment. This is especially the case when museums can provide meaningful narratives that allow visitors to find greater ontological security by coming to terms with the presence of death in their lives. Museums must take thus responsibility for their role in visitor understanding of death.

Specific Deaths and Morbid Objects

Historical museums, almost by definition, are associated with death. Displays of everything from ancient Egypt to Victorian England are necessarily displays of objects constructed and used by people who are now dead. The same is true of objects and artwork concerned with war, which are also concerned with death. Memento mori, burial goods, and numerous other objects in museums are specifically related to death, but this paper will focus on objects related to specific deaths.

Examples of objects associated with specific deaths can be found all over the world. The Latter-day

Saint Church History Museum in Salt Lake City, Utah prominently displays the clothes worn by one of the church's early leaders when he was killed. Bullet holes and bloodstains are visible. The guns used in Alexander Hamilton's fatal duel have been displayed in New York. Mount Stuart House on the Isle of Bute has the diary that was on the scaffold when Mary Queen of Scots was executed, our only source for the events of that day. These objects certainly have historical value: the diary has important information about a landmark political moment, the guns help educate about early 19th century dueling culture, and the clothes provide a verification of oral accounts of the martyrdom.

But each of these objects also has an emotional value rooted in the macabre. The spark of morbid curiosity can be detected in the National Parks Foundation's description of objects related to Abraham Lincoln's assassination: "The bloodstained pillow that cushioned Abraham Lincoln's head and the .44-caliber 'pocket cannon' that fired the fatal shot are what most captivate visitors to Ford's Theatre National Historic Site in Washington, D.C., as they imagine the events of April 14, 1865."[1] This process of visitors imagining the night of the assassination by using the gun to connect themselves with the very moment of killing is both a dark secret and the very essence of the attraction.

For the purposes of this analysis, I will refer to these objects as "morbid objects," and intend that classification to apply to objects associated with a specific

historical death. This paper argues that objects associated with death provoke morbid impulses in viewers, hence the label. Objects can engage morbid curiosity in varying degrees. Oxford Castle displays the shackles worn by notorious murderer Mary Blandy before her execution, which, while not present at the moment of her death, are prominently displayed along with detailed descriptions of her death and the death she caused. We must also consider the question of human remains, which are objects associated with death that clearly inspire morbid curiosity. Much has been written on this subject, and it is relevant to this study. However, the majority of this paper will focus on objects associated with individual deaths like those discussed in the previous paragraphs.

Witnessing History

Objects can have value on a number of different levels: aesthetic, cultural, historical, economic, and educational, to name a few.[2] Each of these values comes into play in museum presentation. Museums may choose to highlight different values both in the way their displays are designed and in the objects they choose to display. A plaque discussing the artistic details on a vase would emphasize aesthetic value, mentioning various sale prices would emphasize economic, and placing it within broader cultural movements would be educational. Similarly, selecting the oldest vase, or the most ornate vase, or the vase that was

owned by Louis XIV would also demonstrate different value priorities.

The value that seems most relevant to morbid objects is historical value. Randall Mason writes, "Historical value can accrue in several ways: from the heritage material's age, from its association with people or events, from its rarity and/or uniqueness, from its technological qualities, or from its archival/documentary potential".[3] Morbid objects derive their significance from association with people or events, and specifically death events. Mason adds, "some kind of historic value is represented by – inherent in – some truly old and thus authentic material (authentic in that it was witness to history and carries the authority of this witness)."[4] Historical objects carry with them the presence of the past and the memory of the distant people who made and used them.

It's often said that such objects "bring the past alive" by verifying historical accounts and making them matter to us in ways that mere textbooks never could. Michael Shanks comments, "The objects have presence, human presence – the features of the burial mask, the thumb-print on the pot. This presence constitutes the object's authority, its authenticity. The presence of the past – the past endures and reaches out to touch us."[5] Historical objects function as windows into the past by making us feel closer to the historical Other as we see the object as a sort of shared experience between us

and them.

History as Specific Narrative

These shared experiences are more potent when they are more specific. In one study of student engagement in a museum display about the Holocaust, researchers found that displaying objects associated with specific stories – for example, the bracelet an Auschwitz survivor used to cover up her tattoo – "acted as triggers that generated interest,"[6] while generic objects not "explicitly related to a specific personal recollection, such as a Star of David or military equipment, did not trigger as much engagement."[7] Students told researchers that these specific objects "made them realize that 'it actually happened.'"[8] These findings make intuitive sense: the more specific the narrative, the easier it is for the past to come alive. Even given a plethora of objects from daily life in Rome, imagining daily life is much more difficult than imagining the day Julius Caesar was assassinated. The narrative detail present in specific events helps to animate objects as part of the story.

Each of the elements discussed above comes into play when understanding the appeal of morbid objects. They have witnessed the past – the diary, for example, was present when Mary Queen of Scots was beheaded – and by virtue of their witness they can help that past come alive for the viewer. As we have already seen in the description of John Wilkes Booth's gun, the object

serves as a sort of window through which visitors can watch and rewatch the assassination. As the National Parks museum curator notes, "It's not so much the gun that fascinates people, but rather that Booth used it to change the course of history of the country."[9] In general, historical objects act as windows into a remote past, helping audiences to imagine what it was like for the people who populated it. Morbid objects act as a window into a specific event, helping audiences to imagine what death was like for the people who experienced it.

Constructing Meaning in the Museum

All this comes into play when thinking about the place of morbid objects in museums. Museums, after all, are places of learning. How and what, then, ought museums to teach their visitors? Reinhard Bernbeck lays out two competing models: the pragmatist museum and the purist one. Pragmatists see education as part of a larger goal to distract an increasingly anxiety-ridden public from their inauthentic, consumerist present by entertaining them with authentic past experiences.[10] Purists want museums to provoke critical questioning of the world, educating their audiences by providing them with frameworks with which to recontextualize their lives.[11] Pragmatists design museums with massive amounts of contextualizing information in order to make the experience of the past as thorough as possible, while purists forego much of that information to focus on the museum's "potential to de-contex-

tualise [sic] objects and then to re-contextualise [sic] them freely."[12]

The purist view proves ultimately more compelling, as it recognizes that museums can never provide authenticity, but only "a more or less intricate, beautified facade" of the past.[13] As Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago write, "museums are performances."[14] Museums are not unbiased conveyors of objective truth, but spaces of ever-changing stories. Preziosi and Farago continue, "all museums stage their collected and preserved relics in such a way as to enhance the facticity of these surviving objects, documents, and monuments."[15] They arrange them with similar objects to give a sense of being present in the past, or contrasting objects from different times or cultures to engage various narratives about the way the past has developed. They present only the most exemplary objects, creating a fantasy space where every item is special and important. Museums are constructed spaces.

George Hein uses this perspective to argue that constructed museums ought also to engage with "constructivist" models of learning, which see the viewer as an active participant in meaning-making rather than a passive sponge for information.[16] Instead of printing long signs that tell audiences precisely how to understand each object, constructivist museums present "multiple voices rather than being singularly authoritative,"[17] or even silence the authoritative voice altogether by providing as little extraneous information as

possible. This ensures that the visitor cannot be a mere consumer of facts, but a creator, engaged in the museum experience and producing their own meaning.

The end goal of the purist, constructivist museum is to allow the visitor to interact with the past in a way that informs their present experience. Philosopher of education John Dewey wrote that education ought to "shape the experiences of the young so that instead of reproducing current habits, better habits shall be formed, and thus the future adult society be an improvement on their own."[18] Museums, then, have an obligation as educational institutions to inform their visitors morally as well as factually; the narratives museums provide, as well as the experiences they intend to provoke, should inspire rather than merely entertain.

Morbidity in the Museum

One crucial concept for constructivists is that of "entrance narratives," "the 'internal story' that [visitors] bring with them into the museum."[19] Because the process of meaning-making necessarily interacts with the visitor's prior experiences, interests, and frameworks, museum displays must be able to accommodate a variety of different perspectives. Chloe Paver argues that visitors who have previous knowledge of events on display often look for confirmation of their entrance narratives in museum presentations. Those without prior knowledge find it more difficult to engage be-

cause the historical and cultural value of objects is less apparent to those without it.

Let us use the concept of entrance narratives to conceptualize the dual role of morbid objects as both having emotional value and triggering morbid curiosity. Those whose entrance narratives do not include the event with which the morbid object is associated might experience less interest in the morbid object because they do not have the details that make the past come alive by interacting with it. The importance of detail helps us make sense of a set of intuitions. Displaying a beautiful, ornate knife will generate some interest from visitors. Labeling a knife, "This knife killed four men in war" will generate more interest; labeling it, "This is the knife used by Jack the Ripper" would merit its own section of the display room.

This complicates the constructivist model examined above, because it reveals that the value of morbid objects is only accessible through context and presentation. Where aesthetic objects can be appreciated on their visual merits alone, historical objects, especially those associated with specific events, need the authoritative voice of the museum to convey their meaning. In the case of morbid objects, this means that the museum is forced to articulate their morbid value. Indeed, this burden grows even greater when we consider how viewers see museums: a study by the Museum Association noted that participants trusted museums, seeing them "as the guardians of factual information and as

presenting all sides of the story."[20] Where a constructivist might like to avoid responsibility for the meaning a visitor takes from a display by claiming they are making their own meaning, morbid objects require museums to take responsibility for the way they approach death.

Morbidity in Society

In order to understand whether and how to display morbid objects, we must examine different societal responses to death. Using historical objects to draw closer to death makes us instinctively uncomfortable since we have been socialized to find death uncomfortable. Phillip R. Stone and Geoffrey Gorer argue that this is because over the course of the last century, death has been removed from most people's lives and hidden away in hospitals. While almost everyone in any other era would have witnessed the death throes of a close relative, few people today share those experiences. Yet death still remains an ever-present part of our lives. This is in part because hiding death away does nothing to prevent us from experiencing it, but also because death saturates our media. Gorer makes a distinction here, arguing that, "While natural death became more and more smothered in prudery, violent death has played an ever-growing part in the fantasies offered to mass audiences-detective stories, thrillers, Westerns, war stories, spy stories, science fiction, and eventually horror comics."[21] Morbid objects often ca-

ter to this violent death: Lincoln's bloodstained pillow generates much more visitor interest than his deathbed pillow would have had he died thirty years later of natural causes.

Morbidity is addicting; criminologist Scott Bohn notes that activities like watching true crime shows produce an adrenaline rush, which the brain takes as evidence that the activity is good and should be repeated.[22] Whole industries exist to satiate – or even create – this desire for sensational death. Websites like FindADeath.com have thousands of users reading, writing, and adding photos of celebrity deaths, and the phenomenon of "dark tourism" brings people to book the hotel room where Janis Joplin overdosed and tour sites of massacres. Stone suggests that eventually commodifying death is inevitable, as death "requires inoculation and thus rendering into something else that is comfortable and safe to deal with and to contemplate."[23] The clean, sanitized museum environment helps to do that for dead bodies and bloodstained pillows alike. At the same time as morbid objects bring us closer to the past, they also provide us with distance, allowing us to experience violence in the context of a carefully curated environment that feels utterly removed from our lives. This, however, can also be deeply unhealthy. Gorer argues that modern taboos surrounding natural death have created in their stead a "pornography of death," writing:

> There seem to be a number of parallels between the fantasies which titillate our curiosity about the mystery of sex, and those which titillate our curiosity about the mystery of death. In both types of fantasy, the emotions which are typically concomitant of the acts – love or grief – are paid little or no attention, while the sensations are enhanced as much as a customary poverty of language permits.[24]

Display of morbid objects makes violent death safe at a distance at the expense of our ability to acknowledge and accept natural death. It also runs the risk of normalizing violent death to the point where we are unable to understand it as a tragedy. One example is the display of John Lennon's bloodstained clothes and glasses from the day he was killed. Yoko Ono, Lennon's widow, displayed the objects, as well as the bloodstained paper bag in which they were delivered, in an exhibition she framed as a tribute to victims of gun violence.[25] Yet many claimed that the display was a voyeuristic exploitation of Lennon's death, especially after Ono sold replicas of the bloody clothes and glasses for tens of thousands of pounds. The horror of gun violence, some argued, is sufficiently clear without such gruesome displays, and to commodify and fetishize the dead is to reduce rather than increase that horror.

The Dangers of Dealing with Death

As Stone points out, dealing with death is no small issue: how cultures treat death reveals the how the view life.[26] Because modern society lacks the re-

ligious structures that used to help us make sense of death, we are now left searching for that meaning. The absence of publically sanctioned spaces to contemplate our own mortality inspires an existential dread, which drives us to sanitize spaces like the museum and sensationalize spaces like the front pages of magazines. We will all experience the deaths of those close to us, as well as our own eventual demise, and so the meaning we make from death impacts us socially and existentially. Presenting morbid objects as sensationalized or sanitized deaths at a distance, then, inspires a number of objections.

First, because morbid objects almost without exception have to do with violent death, there is always the fear of copycat killers. If John Lennon's death became an exciting celebrity symbol rather than a tragedy, future killers could be motivated to create that experience again. Second, morbid objects run the risk of turning fact into fiction. By playing too much on the sensationalized aspects of the death, or by embedding the object too deeply into a distant historical narrative, morbid objects remove the morbidity from the fact of real death itself. In cases of violent death, this often involves celebrating the story of the killer without recognizing the reality of the victims. This means that viewers are not actually asked to contemplate their own mortality, instead pretending that their own death, like the death presented to them behind the glass, is a mere fiction.

Finally, there is the problem of associating violence with pleasure. Dark tourism spaces like the London Dungeon make torture into sport, and museums run the risk of turning murder weapons and blood-stained relics into romanticized, highly-anticipated exhibits. Studies of violent video games provide evidence that exposing people to distant, sensationalized violence decreases their empathy,[27] making them less able to respond healthily to real tragedy on a personal or global scale. It is hardly disputed that we have a moral obligation to take seriously the suffering of others and to prevent it to a reasonable degree. If Holocaust museums become exciting attractions, distancing their visitors from the horrors of genocide, then it will be easier for those visitors to later dismiss reports of current genocide. If war museums glamorize war, it will be easier for people to support violent conflict. If morbid objects transform an individual's tragic murder into an exotic thrill, then visitors may find themselves utterly unprepared to deal with the realities of personal tragedy. Or worse, they may respond to it callously, with the mere morbid curiosity museums and magazines have encouraged all their lives.

Obligations to the Dead

Much of the concern about morbid curiosity comes not just from concern about the health of the living, but from concern about the dead. Given the context of morbid objects, we can consider our obligations

to the dead in light of Kantian arguments about animals. Kant argues that we ought to treat animals well and humanely because to act otherwise would be to disrespect our own humanity.[28] We do not owe anything to the animals themselves, but if we refuse to respect the value of the ways in which they are like us, we might lose touch with the value of others that are like us, and risk mistreating human beings.

Given modern knowledge about the cognitive and sensory capacities of animals, this argument no longer seems applicable to them, but the core concept is applicable to other non-persons. The dead may not exist as persons to be harmed, but if we treat the dead as mere objects or commodities despite all the ways in which they are like us –and indeed, once were us – we risk treating the living in the same way. Commodifying death is problematic because it diminishes respect for life; objectifying the dead is only a few steps away from objectifying the living. If Lennon's bloodstained glasses glamorize gun violence through this celebrity association, we lose the moral weight that such tragedies ought to carry. In Gorer's language, pornography of death exploits both the living and the dead.

Pragmatism and Human Remains

A useful focal point for crystallizing the obligations of museums in response to this is the display of human remains. The British Museum released a book on the display and care of human remains which seems

in large part intended to justify their own practice of using human remains for display and research purposes. They make a number of arguments already familiar to us: human remains "individualize and populate a past that may otherwise seem rather remote and impersonal,"[29] they are useful for educational are research purposes. But one repeated claim is particularly noteworthy. Authors consistently use the idea that audiences enjoy seeing human remains. "The public increasingly wishes, and indeed expects, to see displays featuring archaeological human remains when they visit museums."[30] One particularly telling paragraph reads:

> When Tollund Man was recovered in Denmark in 1950, the National Museum of Denmark initially felt that the body might be too 'macabre' for public view. When the remains were finally placed on display, this assessment proved spectacularly out of tune with public attitudes with 18,000 people visiting the exhibition in ten days. This disconnect between academic discourse and attitudes of the museum-going public all too often persists today.[31]

This is a clear example of the pragmatist museum model, and we have already seen that that is insufficient when dealing with morbid objects. The argument made here is that evidence of public enjoyment is evidence of a good display. The logical leap between noting huge visitor turnout and arguing that bog bodies are not macabre is enormous – throughout the book, authors fail to consider the idea that the public wishes

to see human remains because of the macabre, rather than despite of it. To assume that public support for displays certifies those displays as ethical is irresponsible. The disconnect between academic discourse and the public may not come down to what each party considers macabre but to whether or not they consider the displaying macabre objects ethically permissible.

Healthy Morbidity

Despite all this, fascination with death is universal and unsurprising. Morbid curiosity is an expression of our deep, desperate desire to make meaning out of death. Though there are many ways to go wrong, museums, as spaces that construct meaning and narrative for their viewers, can also help to create healthy meaning.

Phillip Stone argues that it is possible for dark tourism to help "engender personal meaningfulness and ontological security"[32] by providing viewers with socially sanctioned spaces to contemplate their own deaths. Rather than only encountering the dead in sensationalized presentations designed to shield us from our mortality, it is possible to surround the dead with narratives to help us make sense of the living. Stone argues that the fact that we only display non-routine deaths that are difficult to understand can be a virtue, because if we can make sense out of those deaths, we can make sense out of all death. In that vein, Holocaust museums can provide moral narratives about

tolerance, with "the poetic use of shock… provid[ing] a deeper, more critically alert awareness of things-as-they-were, and an anticipation that such genocide can never occur again."[33] The National Parks Foundation can focus on Lincoln's murder as one part of a tragic narrative about leadership and hatred, using the gun to remind us how terrible it is to respond with violence. The connection that morbid objects offer to the past can help individuals better grasp the present as they see the bloodstains and recognize the similarity to their own blood.

By providing authorized community spaces for this contemplation, morbid objects mediate taboos around death. They allow viewers to face their own mortality through the mortality of others, without attempting to turn the other's death into a simple adrenaline rush. Rather, by incorporating another's death into a real narrative about the way the world works or the work we need to do in the world, museums can give audiences a way to understand their own lives and eventual deaths as having a similar narrative. The museum constructs the narrative, and the viewer constructs the meaning, allowing them to return home with a more secure sense of both self and other.

Contemplating Mortality in the Museum

In order to have these positive effects, museums must take responsibility for their role in viewer's understanding of death. They must balance purist and

constructivist models of museum education and focus on cultivating visitors' morality and providing audiences with frameworks to critically question the past as well as the present. They cannot allow death to become mere entertainment or safe fiction, but must acknowledge that death is an essential part of life and can be made meaningful.

It is clear that museum presentation and visitor reactions do not always align. In his study of 19th century anatomical museums, Samuel Alberti notes that though "pathologists and anatomists intended their collections to be edifying,"[34] visitor responses included "horror, disgust, and titillation…[as well as] anger and violence."[35] It seems reasonable to claim that museums have both a vested interest and an ethical obligation to minimize the distance between intended and actual visitor responses. If a museum displays a bog body to help people learn about life in ancient England, then finds that visitors are really ogling the garrote around his neck, it cannot simply dismiss these reactions for the sake of higher visitor numbers. Rather, it ought either to acknowledge that element of the display, taking the dirty secret of death out into the open and allowing a healthier space for viewers to engage with mortality, or it ought to redesign the display to inspire the critical questioning and learning it intended without morbid distractions.

One concrete step that museums can take when evaluating whether to display morbid objects is to fo-

cus on the morbid object's historical value. When the London Metropolitan Police decided to put on a limited display from their "black museum" of crime artifacts, an ethics committee was formed to approve every object. Some objects, like the stove upon which Dennis Nilsen boiled the heads of young men he murdered in the 1970s, were not approved, despite the fact that visitors would flock to see them. The committee argued that "there was nothing new about either the crime or its detection,[36] and thus it had little historical value to merit display. Museums displaying morbid objects in the name of education must make sure they are actually educating.

Finally, avoiding Gorer's pornography of death and creating instead a space where viewers can engage with death in socially and morally sanctioned ways seems to be not just a possibility but an obligation for museums. Morbid objects help the past come alive to us and can thus enable educational contemplation of death and the circumstances surrounding specific deaths if museums can fully acknowledge and properly frame the macabre elements of those objects in narrative. The diary recording Mary Queen of Scots' execution can become part of a narrative of governmental upheaval and personal tragedy, where one cousin was forced to kill another out of political necessity. The Latter-day Saint leader's bloodstained clothes can tell a story of fervent faith and sacrifice. Alexander Hamilton's guns can become the heartbreaking capstone of

an passionate individual life. Through morbid objects, we can see the dead as people, and thus engage our moral capacity to treat all persons as people as well.

Museums are sometimes called "cathedrals of learning," with the implication that they are the chapels of the modern era. Indeed, museums often seem like sacred spaces, full of treasures and relics of the dead. Most importantly, museums organize those treasures to construct meaning, letting their audiences experience spiritual communion with the past that grants them peace and greater understanding of the present. With death, our most important and incomprehensible human experience, museums have the potential to fill the void religious structures have left by situating death within meaningful narratives through their display of morbid objects. However, abusing that power in the name of entertainment can be deeply unhealthy, especially given the trust that visitors place in museums. Museums can validate this trust and create a healthier society by using morbid objects to give the dead a voice and their deaths a story. This will help individuals come to terms with the past and their own future demise.

Notes

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18. John Dewey, Democracy and Education (New York: Free Press, 1916): 79, quoted in Hein, "Museum Education," 349.
19. Savenije and Bruijn, "Historical Empathy in a Museum," 834.
20. "Public Perceptions," 3.

21. Geoffrey Gorer, "The Pornography of Death," Encounter 25 (1955): 51. My emphasis.
22. Stuart Jeffries, "'We're All Car-Crash Snoopers Now': the Truth about the TV True-Crime Wave." The Guardian, Guardian News and Media, March 4, 2017, accessed January 10, 2018. www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2017/mar/04/serial-jinx-making-murderer-rillington-place.
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25. Ed Pilkington, "John Lennon Exhibit Opens at the New York Annex of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame," Guardian News and Media, May 12, 2009, accessed January 9, 2018. www.theguardian.com/music/2009/may/12/john-lennon-exhibit-new-york-yoko-ono.
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31. Ibid., 2.
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33. Ibid., 1581.
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35. Ibid.
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