

Presenting Cultures to Children -

Doing Things the Way the Indians Did

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I'd like to describe for you today what we at the Children's Museum in Boston, feel is an effective way of exposing children to objects from other cultures. For the sake of clarity, I'm limiting my remarks to objects from the Algonquin Indian culture of Southern New England but I think you will see that the principle can be applied to objects from all cultures. The principle or approach that we use is to remove these objects from glass cases and whenever possible, use them as they were once used by the people that created them.

How did we arrive at this rather un-conventional approach and why do we consider it important? Our audience at the Museum consists mainly of parents with their children and teachers with their classes. We feel that this approach best serves their needs. Why? I'd like to reconstruct for you what their experience in a conventional museum might be. Imagine if you will a teacher who has been asked to present a unit on these Algonquin Indians. The standard textbook deals briefly with the First Thanksgiving, perhaps mentions Squanto, and at best, refers to the gift of maize from Indian to Pilgrim. Even if additional curriculum materials are provided, the teacher most often finds that words alone have not convinced the children that these people were

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ever real, that they did not act or look like TV Indians, and that they had to solve the same basic problems of survival that we're still struggling with today. So, in an attempt to give these people substance, she and the class go off to the museum where direct, concrete evidence of these people can be found. But frustration continues. Perhaps some of you have seen a class of about 30 children crammed in front of a glass case, shoving and pushing, frantically trying to see . . . what the teacher is pointing to. It's hardly what you could call a satisfying museum experience. And the teacher must not only keep the class's attention and maintain a certain degree of order, she must also interpret the labels for the children. This kind of interpretation may hardly seem necessary for you as anthropologists because you are familiar with the terminology. Terms like awl or flesher, pestle, loincloth quickly conjure up in your minds the images necessary to complete the picture. But for a non-anthropologist, it can be very difficult to bring these objects back to life. A parent who brings his child to the museum is faced with the same task of interpreting and reviving alien artifacts. But unlike the teacher who has a captive audience, the parent is apt to lose the attention of his offspring unless he can quickly and effectively explain the object.

In the museum situation that I've been describing, labels are the media used to restore the lost context to the objects. But why not eliminate this kind of verbal description and allow the object to explain itself through use. The user will then not only have a better sense of what the object

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can do, but perhaps be more convinced that it was once "real" and used by real people to solve real problems.

Let me illustrate with some slides. Rather than point to this mortar and pestle and read a label stating that it was used in the preparation of corn foods, let a child really use this tool. We've found that the child who does, knows what it feels like to grind corn and how effective a method of grinding corn it really was. Most important, through the act of grinding corn, the child gains a deeper understanding of one specific aspect of Algonquin material culture. An object as common as a skin scraper, when housed in a glass case, can present an even greater mystery. The scraper label stated that these were "skin dressing tools, used on the inside of skin to remove fat and hair." For someone who has never seen a bloody skin stretched out to dry, this description cannot be very meaningful. Why not restore the necessary context to the scraper by providing the stretched skin. Then, give the child a skin scraper and see if he can make sense out of the total operation. As should be evident from the next slide this little girl has just discovered that if you scrape away the excess fat and tissue, you have the beginnings of leather.

We have been actively working with this method of direct use of objects for about five years and have found that it can be applied to exhibits, to programs for visiting school classes and that it can even be exported and used in a classroom.

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Most recently at the Museum we've been experimenting with the idea that objects make the most sense and reveal the most about a people's way of life if they are restored not only to their specific tasks, but also to the larger cultural context in which they existed. In other words, a scraper or a mortar and pestle was not used by itself - in a vacuum - it was used and kept in a wigwam, in a village together with a great many other family belongings and supplies. It is admittedly time consuming and expensive to research, equip, and reconstruct an Algonquin wigwam, but having just done so we now feel that it is well worth the effort. Rather than have to write lengthy, probably esoteric labels about the origins, use and inter-relationships of objects, the objects can simply be placed in their cultural setting. In such a simulated setting, the objects are more accessible and it is easy to believe that they were used in the daily lives of a real people. Moreover, in a wigwam, the magic of another place is evoked - inviting people to enter and participate. Children, set apart from the rest of the Museum, enclosed by an Algonquin setting, are more willing to project themselves into that world. Some do try to imagine what life might really have been like. Having tried an activity themselves, they talk about how long it must have taken an Indian to really grind corn, or how skillful he must have been to successfully shape a tool. Of course, these children are, most probably, not feeling what an Algonquin felt doing these same daily tasks, but they are gaining respect and appreciation for another people's solutions. But even for those who don't attain this kind of empathy, they experience the feel and space of a

wigwam and, we hope, see it as a reasonable solution to the problem of creating a home. This kind of simulated cultural setting also frees the staff from long winded verbal explanations and allows them to work directly with the children, encouraging them to work with and think about the objects.

Rather than spend any more time verbalizing, I'd like to show you what I mean. This is the wigwam we built at the Museum. It is in use both as a walk-in exhibit and as a setting for visiting school classes. Children feel free in this environment to stir a pot of imaginary stew or remove the cradle board from its place and try it on. Even the boys are not hesitant about it. And someone may even discover in the process that if you wear a cradle board, arms and hands are free for other tasks.

With our school classes, because we have them as a group for about an hour, we feel that we can extend this experience even further to bring about a more complete immersion in the Algonquin world. We use a carefully structured, dramatic theme and encourage the children to role play. Right now, and I say that because we are still perfecting this theme, children enter the wigwam and are asked to prepare a feast for a neighboring village. Mortars and pestles are used to grind corn, strainers sift unground kernels from the ground ones, berries are added to the corn, a chief dresses for the occasion, greets the visitors, accepts gifts from the visitors, and finally, visitors and hosts sample Indian foods. At all times there is a great sense of working together, a great sense of involvement, and most often the

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magic leap from the reality of the Children's Museum to the world of the Algonquin village.

Although we cannot bring the wigwam to the classroom, the Museum has, under a grant from the Office of Education, developed a series of loan kits, known as MATCH Boxes, that contain combinations of activities and real objects for use in the classroom. The Algonquin MATCH Box, one of 16 titles developed, again encourages the class to use the objects as they were meant to be used by the culture that created them. As at the Museum, children can grind corn, scrape a skin, or try on an Indian necklace. They can even set up a model of a figure four trap trigger and learn for themselves that a trap is precariously balanced, that it is set up under tension and that when it is released by the action of an animal - WATCH OUT.

Up to this point, I've painted a rosy picture of our operation. Our new Visitor Center, which contains the wigwam and other exhibits that encourage participation with objects, has been very well received. Teachers are pleased with the programs for school classes, of which the wigwam program is an example, and other museums are interested in what we're doing. But there are unresolved questions. We have not formally evaluated the impact of this kind of approach. Of course, we feel from watching and listening to the children that it is highly effective, but, as yet, we cannot prove it. One of the next steps for the Museum is to get answers to such questions as: is learning more meaningful, more transferable, more lasting?

Is subsequent classroom teaching made easier? And most important, do the children have a greater appreciation and respect for the cultural solutions of people different from themselves. Another question - one I would guess you're anxious to challenge me on - is the question of responsibility - do we, as a museum, have the right to USE our artifacts or is it our responsibility only to preserve them for future generations of children to look at. First, let me assure you that we recognize this responsibility and have just completed a thorough evaluation of our collections of about 50,000 objects, withdrawing with the aid of culture area specialists, those objects that were clearly of scholarly interest and belong in a research-oriented museum. Our remaining collection has been divided into two parts - those objects that can be used by the children, referred to as the WORKING collection - mortars and pestle, spoons, scrapers are just a few of the authentic artifacts that we feel can withstand children's use - and those objects that should be treated with respect and handled only by staff members, referred to as the RESERVE collection. If an object from the reserve collection is needed for a particular program, it is usually copied, to our specifications, by a craftsman. But even then, there are problems. What if these copies are made in the traditional manner by the descendants of the original creators? Are they then still only reproductions? Can we happily use up a basswood fibre bag or bullrush mat woven especially for us by Ojibwa Indians even though we know that someday even these artifacts will no longer be available. We have decided that we can

and that the task of collecting these artifacts before even they are extinct rests with the research institution.

But what of the research oriented museum. Does it have a responsibility to the general public as well as to the scholar? Can such a method be used in this type of museum? Should it be? If and when such institutions decide that visual exposure to alien objects is not enough for the general public, then there are indeed ways to bring these objects back to life. Expendable materials like skins, sinew, berries, could be displayed together with the authentic artifacts to supply more of the original context. Reproductions could be made for use while the real artifact remained protected. Cultural settings could be built for groupings of associated objects. Exhibits such as these would be welcomed by adults, not only by children. Teachers and even parents, most often when they think no one is looking, experiment with and use the objects at the Children's Museum and then admit to really understanding them for the very first time.

I would like to leave you with the thought that the idea of restoring objects to their specific use and even to their cultural context need not be the exclusive domain of a children's museum. It could be incorporated into non-child oriented exhibits. I hope that someday it will be.

The Children's Museum

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