



Materiality Matters: Experiencing the Displayed Object

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Materiality Matters: Experiencing the Displayed Object

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Introduction

This paper is about things and what it means for us to experience them, particularly in a museum setting.¹ It focuses on physical things, although of course museums often hold and interpret many other sorts of things, too. During the first part of the paper, I treat the physical thing as synonymous or at least interchangeable with the ‘object;’ later, however, I probe the relationship between the two a little further.

We are all part of a material world. We live in, through and with things. We inhabit houses, wear clothes, use crockery, cutlery, laptops, appliances and tools, talk on mobile phones, walk through artefactual landscapes, drive cars, treasure old photographs and appreciate art. Indeed, we interact with animals and other people in ways dependent on our own physicality and sensuality: when we shake hands, embrace, listen, dance or simply avoid intruding on another person’s personal space, we do so in ways defined by our own material presence, our physical extendedness in space. Rather than the disembodied minds floating in space that we appear to be in much social theory, we are, and we know, nothing, if not through our physical position in space and our bodily senses. Our experience of the material world is dependent upon our location, our movement and our interpretations of the data we receive from our senses. And of course, the interpretations we make of what we see, hear, smell, touch or taste are strongly influenced by our cultural and personal experiences and by pre-existing knowledge we may have about a particular object.

Academic studies of these engagements with and interpretations of the material world have been strongly resurgent over the past twenty years—more so than at any time since the 19th century. Material culture studies in anthropology and other disciplines have significantly deepened our understandings of how people respond to objects and give value and meaning to inanimate things

and, in turn, of how objects influence and cement human relationships and societies. Yet much of this scholarship has been so preoccupied with relationships, meanings, values, contexts, representation and communication, that the physical, sensory ways in which we engage with material things, have, more often than not, been overlooked. Overlooked too has been the physicality, the very thingness, of the objects themselves. To read much of the literature in so-called material culture studies, including in the context of museums, you could be forgiven for wondering where the material objects actually are. Nonetheless it is objects themselves of course that, together with our location, movement and interpretations, determine how we engage with them, what we make of them and how they influence us. The material qualities of objects—their shape, colour, density, weight, texture, surface, size and so on—define our sensory responses to them. I see a green pea differently than I see a children’s red ball. This much is obvious, of course. It is pervasive in our everyday life. Yet outside sensory culture studies and some areas of aesthetics, it is surprisingly marginal in most studies of how people engage with the material world. Instead, objects are present as merely, to quote Paul Graves-Brown, a “world of surfaces on to which we project significance” (Graves-Brown 2000: 3-4).

So why does this absence of a proper focus on the physicality of objects matter? In scholarship on human culture, it matters because by missing such a fundamental component in what makes objects and our world what they are, we also miss how far the form and materials of objects influence how, in the real world of day-to-day life, we actually engage with objects and attribute meanings and values to them. In museums, I argue that it constitutes a serious missed opportunity. Of course, first impressions could be that, unlike in much material culture scholarship, in museums the object is not missed out or overlooked. After all, we think of museums as places that hold, care for and display things – museums are temples of objects, material institutions par excellence. Yet ironically, the very rationale and modus operandi of museums act to limit the extent to which people can directly, physically, engage with the things on display.

* I am very grateful to Bradley L. Taylor and Raymond Silverman of the Museum Studies Program at the University of Michigan for inviting me to visit and to give an earlier version of this paper as a lecture.

Display

Most obviously, objects in museum spaces are usually physically distanced from museum visitors. We are all familiar with the way in which glass cases, picture frames, ropes and “please do not touch” signs ensure that people and objects are prevented from directly coming into contact with each other in museum spaces. The kinds of interaction an object might have had with person or persons in its pre-museum existence—the mutual, intimate engagement of clothing and body, liquid, lips and cup, or indeed chair and backside—are, once the object has been selected, accessioned, conserved and stored and displayed as a museum object, for most people off limits in perpetuity. Of course, limitations are often imposed on our engagements with objects outside museums, too. Social conventions mean it is usually no more appropriate for me to stroke or smell someone else’s clothes when they are wearing them, than when they are adorning a mannequin in a museum. Similarly, I would be no more likely to caress, strike or lick a ceramic bowl in a friend’s house than if it were installed in a public institution. Becoming a museum object, however, usually sets something apart from us even more clearly. Yet touching, tapping, smelling and so on is often precisely what one might instinctively like to do if one could—not least because doing so can confirm or contradict the evidence of one’s eyes. We have probably all experienced, in real life, that feeling of surprise when picking up something that looked so much lighter than it turns out to be, or indeed of tasting something that we find to be far less sweet than it looked. Indeed, at least some such encounters used to be commonplace in museums long ago, as Constance Classen and David Howes show us by recounting the experience, in 1702, of one Celia Fiennes who, on visiting the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, noted in her diary her surprise that a cane that looked heavy, was actually so light when she actually picked it up—as was permitted in those days (Fiennes 1949: 33, quoted in Classen and Howes 2006: 201).

In most of our museums today, however, such multi-sensory access is usually unavailable to all but a few fortunate museum workers; visitors must rely on just their vision and the interpretation provided by the museum. Unfortunately, this sense of vision on which museums tend to expect us to rely, can be both mistaken and limited. Certainly, I can look at something and form an impression of its size, colour, shape, luminosity and so on. But unless I can hold it in my hands I cannot be sure of, let alone appreciate, the weight, density, musicality, coldness and surface texture of an engraved silver cup, just as I cannot know the heaviness of a girdle decorated all over with smooth, glossy cowrie shells and experience the way it ripples when it moves, unless I can touch and flex it. What is more, touching an

object is a two-way process: when I hold and stroke or tap something, I not only touch, I am touched, too. My fingertips actively connect with the object before me, and they are simultaneously, passively impacted upon by the object’s surface. That two-way interaction allows me an intimacy with the material thing I hold—an intimacy I cannot feel if I only gaze at the thing on a plinth behind a sheet of glass.

However museums choose to present objects, it is, then, inherent in the very nature of the museum that the material things displayed are almost always distanced from the viewer in ways that do not replicate human relationships with things in the outside world. The dominance of vision, and the concern to protect objects from deterioration as a result of handling, prevent me from feeling the undulations and grooves of hand-adzed wood or the emotional charge of holding Henry VIII’s seal in my palm just as he did long ago. Such distance makes it harder to imagine and empathize with, to quote Stephen Greenblatt, “the feelings of those who originally held the objects, cherished them, collected them, possessed them” (Greenblatt 1991: 45). Of course, many institutions have explored wider sensory approaches to their objects. Education departments, for example, have long known the value of allowing people to interact physically with ‘the real thing,’ as have more recent initiatives such as the Victoria and Albert Museum’s Touch Me exhibition in 2005.² Museums have also used touch in reminiscence and therapeutic outreach work, and others are exploring new, digital technologies that simulate sensory experience beyond the visual—particularly touch.

Nonetheless, unlike the Ashmolean Museum at the time of Celia Fiennes’ visit in the eighteenth century, museums have become established as essentially visual, don’t-touch places—places where you and I are prevented from touching what others have touched, from physically encountering the past. “[P]reserving artefacts for future view,” to quote Constance Classen and David Howes, has become “more important than physically interacting with them in the present” (2006: 216). Yet this object stasis in museums, just like the distance between object and museum visitor, stands in significant contrast to everyday life, in which objects are held and change and decay. In real life, we can interact with objects in ways that allow us to experience their materiality and changes in material states—qualities that themselves have meaning for us and enable us to relate to objects, and their cultural and temporal contexts, in multiple ways (c.f. Ouzman 2006). But when things become museum objects, the object-person engagements in which they can participate shift and become limited. If I cannot stroke my fingertips over the thickened, textured surface of a hand-woven skirt-cloth embellished with supplementary weft in yarn spun from

goat's hair, I can neither make a physical connection with the tangible remains of the weaver's productive action nor realise the extra warmth, as well as embellishment, that the technique has given to the garment. If I cannot tap my fingernails, never mind strike a hammer, against a bronze bell, I cannot hear how musical it sounds or intuit something about the thickness and density of the object and material.

Experiencing Objects: Enhancing Stories

If museums seek to reduce this distance between person and thing, if displays and interpretations are constructed in such a way as to facilitate a wider or deeper sensory and emotional engagement with an object, rather than simply to enable intellectual comprehension of a set of facts presented by the museum and illustrated or punctuated by the object, might visitors actually be enabled to appreciate more aspects of the object and its story? Kirsten Wehner and Martha Sear, curators of the new Australian Journeys gallery at the National Museum of Australia, have recently attempted to facilitate precisely these kinds of bodily, multisensory and emotional—as well as purely cognitive—interactions with the objects they chose for an exhibition which seeks to tell some of the many and diverse stories of migrating to Australia (Wehner and Sear 2010). They sought to connect “visitors to the richness and detail of others’ life worlds,” to invite “visitors to engage imaginatively with others’ subjective experiences and understandings,” to enable objects to “connect people ... to their own historical selves” (2010: 143), as well as to the pasts of others. They wanted their exhibition to be ‘object-centred,’ rather than a largely text-based, story-telling exercise accessorised by objects, which is how they characterise previous exhibitions at their museum and, indeed, how one might characterise many exhibitions at museums around the world. As they explain, in the latter kind of exhibition objects merely illustrate stories; the actual, real work of communication is done mainly by words, not things. Wehner and Sear wanted to change this, to make a less bland exhibition that allowed visitors to rediscover the capacity of objects to “inspire that slightly dislocating delight that comes from recognising that an object was ‘there’ at another time and ... place and is now ‘here’ in this time and ... place and in our own life.” They wanted to give objects back their “particularity,” their “power to excite and inspire curiosity” (2010: 145).

Choosing objects with particular aesthetic qualities or resonances and drama because of their association with certain events or persons, the curators constructed object biographies for their selected artefacts, focusing especially on how objects participated in the movements of people to

and from Australia. What they didn't want to do, however, was then construct a display in which the objects' stories were relayed through large amounts of text. Rather, they wanted to let the objects and their juxtapositions do much of the communicating. They facilitated this by bringing about what they call an “intense, interactive” kind of looking that gets visitors first to focus on the physical qualities of the objects, “to dwell in the process of collecting sensory data,” before reflecting on what an object might be, what it could be for, and who might have used it for what, when and where (2010: 153). They wanted to stimulate visitors' empathy for and imagination of other lives, but they were sensible enough too to realise that they still needed to provide context. Their strategy involved dividing the exhibition into 40 smaller exhibits, and centring each of those on one key object with a number of other objects leading off from it in order to evoke different strands of the stories concerned, encouraging visitors to concentrate primarily on objects and the relationships between them. They worked hard to separate necessary text from the objects themselves, in order not to detract from the artefacts and not to distract the visitor from properly and primarily engaging with the physical things before them. Indeed, they tried (though they did not always succeed) to have no interpretive texts in the glass cases at all, placing it instead as a “ribbon” running along only one side of each case. They also installed “sensory stations” to accompany each exhibit, trying to facilitate not just superficial explorations of objects but more lasting, imaginative and empathic engagements through the stimulation of the bodily senses. Visitors can, for example, smell sea cucumbers when looking at cauldrons used by Indonesian fishermen, or trace with their finger the stitches on an embroidered map that is a copy of the original displayed adjacent to it.

What the curators of Australian Journeys have done, is to try to engage visitors with objects more directly and sensually, and through those objects to reach a state of deeper and more subtle engagement with the past people, places and events associated with the artefacts. They have indicated historical uses and significances of the objects they used, but avoided creating clear-cut, singular historical contexts for the objects. They felt that to pin “objects to singular times and places” would “close down the imaginative possibilities” the objects offered—the chance for visitors simultaneously to attempt to empathise with the sensations of people and in the past, and recognise the subjectivity of their own responses in the present (2010: 159). Instead, through encouraging direct, multi-sensorial engagements with the physical objects and through carefully restricting the extent and position of textual interpretation, they have enabled their visitors to respond to objects in their own way and at the same time to imagine, through those objects, how it felt to be someone in the past.

Similarly powerful and empathic connections with objects and the stories associated with them, have been described by others, not necessarily as connections deliberately engineered by the museum and its particular exhibitionary approach, but sometimes simply as enabled by a combination of a powerful object and/or direct sensory interaction with it, and the provision of sufficient knowledge of the object's origin or other contexts. Andrea Witcomb, for example, writes of the affective power she felt when encountering a model of the Treblinka concentration camp—a model now in the Jewish Holocaust Museum and Research Centre in Melbourne, handmade by a man who survived Treblinka but lost his wife and daughter there. The power of the resonance of this object, and its ability to evoke a very strong emotional reaction in Witcomb, for her stands in great contrast to the numbness she felt on encountering other models of concentration camps. Witcomb puts this down not to greater sensory access—this model, like the others, is behind glass—but to its highly personal rendition by its maker and to the fact that it is given enough space to enact its power, “to affect people in a visceral, physical way,” in combination with sufficient museum interpretation to allow the viewer to know what the model is of and to place it, and the initial affective response to it, within a framework of cognitive understanding (Witcomb 2010: 51).

Having sufficient information or context to be able not only to ‘place’ and understand an object but also to experience powerful emotional responses is evocatively described by Nuala Hancock in her narration of encountering Virginia Woolf's spectacles in storage at Charleston, the house in which Woolf lived and which is now a house museum. Having located the storage box and slowly, tentatively unwrapped layers of tissue paper, Hancock encounters a long black spectacle case, lined in purple velvet. Taking the spectacles themselves out of the case, she ponders their physical form, the small area of damage they show, and speculates about the biography of these glasses as a material object. She extends this into a metaphorical reflection on how Woolf saw the world, on the nature of her “poetic vision” (Hancock 2010: 117), and connects her experience of the spectacles with Woolf's understanding of the interconnectivity of sensory experience and, especially, of the visual and the visceral. And lastly, Hancock admits that while Woolf's spectacles “offer us something tangible of her material existence,” their status as something that had such an intimate relationship with someone who so hated to be scrutinised leaves us glimpsing, yet somehow uncomfortably intruding into the private world of another's life. Hancock's reflections are evocative and moving, but they and the experiences with which they are concerned only have their power because of the information to which we are already privileged—the fact that these spectacles belonged to a famous and ultimately tragic writer.

Objects or Object-Information Packages?

In different ways, then, the Australian Journeys exhibition and individual encounters with the model of Treblinka or Virginia Woolf's glasses, are concerned with the experiential possibilities of objects that can result from interacting directly—whether physically or emotionally or both—with objects themselves as well as with the context of those objects. The objects in these examples have been engaged with directly, rather than simply encountered along the way as mere illustrators or punctuators of stories communicated by other means.

Yet it is precisely as mere illustrators or punctuators that objects so often seem to be conceptualised and utilised in museum settings, and this is, I would argue, another way in which museums distance objects from visitors and diminish the possibilities for engagement between the two. There is a dominant view in both the academy and practice that museums are really about information and that the physical object is just a part—and indeed, not always even an essential part—of that information. This is a perspective that is assumed, explicitly or implicitly, in most discussions about museums, whether those discussions are about learning, curation or any other area of museum practice. It is a view in which objects are meaningless, valueless and silent unless they are placed in context, accompanied by information, and used to tell stories identified by the museum as relevant and worth telling (e.g. Kavanagh 1989). The object by itself is, in this view, useless and redundant; it only has significance as part of an object-information package. Indeed, the museum object in such a framework is properly conceived not as a physical thing per se, but as a composite in which the physical thing is but one element in “a molecule of interconnecting [equally important] pieces of information,” only one of which is the material object (Parry 2007: 80). That material thing is seen as nothing without information about it, and the ‘object’ properly defined is a composite of the thing and the information or context that gives it meaning.

This conventional view of museums and objects underpins the idea that what museums do is care for and interpret historically established data-sets comprised of objects and their documentation—data-sets which are available both for reinterpretation by scholars in the future, and for the edification of ordinary visitors in the present. And of course, this is fair enough: I am not trying to claim that the social, cultural, historical and scientific meanings, values and contexts of things are unimportant. We all quite rightly assume, instinctively, that they are, and contemporary and late twentieth century scholarship has well established that they are crucial to interpretive theory and practice in museums and elsewhere. My argument is that,

frequently, museums and visitors alike are so concerned with information—with the story overlying the physical thing—that they can inadvertently close off other, perhaps equally significant potentials of things. Specifically, they close off the potential to produce powerful emotional and other personal responses in individual visitors as a result of physical, real-time, sensory engagements. We are sometimes, I suggest, missing a great deal if we ignore the power of the object itself.

Indeed, perhaps we should redefine what we mean by the ‘object.’ This means understanding that it is more complex than simply the physical thing before us. But it also means not seeing it as a composite of thing plus contextual information. We can instead think of the object as a different sort of composite—one that consists of the interaction between the thing being observed and the human subject doing the perceiving. In the moment in which a material thing is perceived, there is an engagement between an inanimate physical artefact, and a conscious person. For you as the museum visitor, it is only through that engagement that the thing becomes properly manifest to you; in a sense, it is only within that engagement that the object comes to exist at all (c.f. Tilley 2004). For any individual, their perception of and responses to an artefact define or delimit what the object per se is; at the same time, while different people’s perceptions and responses vary, they would not be what they are without the influence of the thing and its material, physical, sensible qualities and possibilities. Thus the object in its fullest sense exists not in the artefact nor in our mind, but somewhere in the middle, in the engagements between them. To paraphrase Marilyn Strathern, persons and things alike are actualised in the active relationships that connect them to each other (Strathern 1988, 1999).

So in a museum context, this means that yes, the contemporary paradigms that tell us that interpretation is subjective (i.e. meaning is in the eye of the beholder) are perhaps partially right. Perception and interpretation are indeed subjective: your eyes and mine, your ears and mine, work in the same basic neurological way; but we each bring different sets of expertise and interest, different cultural and personal backgrounds, and indeed different physical and mental states on different days. All of that, all of our personal baggage, determines how we perceive and respond to things and their contexts: how we interpret and react to the limited data our senses are able to collect. It is in the eye of the beholder. Nonetheless, objects too have effects on how we respond; they have agency and power in the process of engagement between them and us in that the sensory data we gather would not be what they are, were objects not as they are.

Object Possibilities: Transformative Experiences

In museums, we can and should exploit this active, two-way engagement between people and things. We should enable that engagement to be as full, as material, and as sensory as possible. And we should do so not only in order to enrich the ways in which visitors are able to connect with the people, stories and emotions of the past, but for another, more radical reason too. Specifically, we need to recognise that the experiential possibilities of objects are important and objects can often ‘speak’ to us, even when we know nothing about them at all. To even hint at this, of course, contradicts an established view in museum studies and museum practice that objects are mute unless they are enabled to ‘speak’ through effective interpretation such as exhibition text and design. Indeed, my suggestion that objects can, sometimes at least, have a voice, a significance, a relevance, a meaning, for visitors without the provision of context and interpretation, would be described by many as obfuscation or fetishism, and even risks accusations of elitism (e.g. O’Neill 2006).

My interest is not, however, in Kantian or connoisseurial emphases on “pure, detached, aesthetic” responses to things (O’Neill 2006: 104). In fact I am trying to get at the opposite, at the scope for very personal, very individual, very subjective, very physical and very emotional responses to material things: responses which have the potential to be very powerful indeed, but which are inhibited by so much of what museums do and are expected to do. These are very different sorts of response to those elicited by either the conventional museum foregrounding of things as illustrators of information and stories or by a purist, unemotional aesthetic focus. They are instead potential responses to things that fall into a space somewhere in between these two extremes—a space where, although we recognise that, of course, context matters, the thing must not be lost, things must not “dissolve into meanings” (Hein 2006: 2). The emphasis on context must not, in other words, act to inhibit our opportunities to engage with things, even—and here’s the rub—those we know nothing about.

To give you an example from my own experience, I recently visited for the first time the art gallery at Compton Verney in Warwickshire, England. As well as notable collections of Neapolitan, British, northern European and folk art, Compton Verney holds one of the top three Chinese collections in Europe, centred on bronze ritual vessels and other objects.³ I did not know this as my visit began, and as I walked into the first room of Chinese artefacts. The room was lined with sparsely filled and elegantly lit cases of bronze vessels, and alone, facing the

entrance to the room, on a plinth in the middle of the floor and without any glass around it, stood what to me seemed an extraordinarily beautiful and animated bronze figure of a horse. The horse was over a metre high, and stood considerably higher still as a result of its plinth. I was utterly spellbound by its majestic form, its power, and, as I began to look at it closely, its material details: its greenish colour, its textured surface, the small areas of damage. I wanted to touch it, though of course I could not—but that did not stop me imagining how it would feel to stroke it, or how it would sound if I could tap the metal, or how heavy it would be if I could try to pick it up. I was, in other words, sensorially exploring the object, even though I was having to intuit rather than directly experience some of the sensory experiences. There was no label at all adjacent to the object, only a tiny number which correlated to the interpretive text on the gallery hand guide which I had not yet picked up. I still knew nothing about this artefact, but its three-dimensionality, tactility and sheer power had literally moved me to tears. I allowed myself considerable time to reflect on that feeling and the object before I picked up the hand guide. When eventually I did pick up the interpretive text, I read:

Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220):

Heavenly Horse, *tian ma*. Bronze.

This large horse would have been a funerary offering for the tomb of an elite Chinese man, the intention being for the owner of the tomb to use the horse to pull his chariot in the afterlife. Such large bronze horses were very rare during the Western Han period, becoming more popular during the Eastern Han. It was extremely difficult to produce such large bronze figures in one mould, therefore this stallion is cast in nine close fitting pieces and joined together, an expensive method in terms of labour and material.

I was left breathless all over again: that this wonderful object was so intimately associated with someone's death, that it was so old, and that it was so rare, further intensified its power over me. I looked for the joins and counted the pieces, and studied the detail of the surface even more intently than I had before.

My initial response to the horse was a fundamental, emotional, sensory—even visceral—one. Had the information about the horse been displayed next to it in the form of a label or text panel, I am certain it would have interfered with, even prevented altogether, the powerful and moving reaction I had to the object for its own sake: I would have been distracted by the text, would have

been drawn to read it first, and would not have had the opportunity to experience and sensorially explore the artefact's physicality. So what was the value of that initial encounter? It certainly made a significant difference to how I subsequently reacted to the information I read about the object: I was already emotionally receptive, and I had an empathic as well as purely cognitive response to the artefact's history. Utilising such emotional aspects in the museum environment is of course something that has a value in learning contexts, and is also related to the kinds of strategies Wehner and Sear tried to implement in their Australian Journeys exhibition. But what about the value of a powerful response to an object just for itself, and not because of how it might enhance learning or appreciation of the wider aspects of an exhibition? Is there any such value in a museum environment? My view is that the opportunity to be moved to tears, tickled pink, shocked, or even disgusted to the point of nausea by a museum object is itself a powerful component of what a museum experience can offer—not just as a step on the journey to cognitive understanding of an object's history or indeed of our own, but simply as a potent and sometimes transformative phenomenon in its own right. Many of us would not question this claim if it concerned only art, or perhaps conceptual art at least—we can accept that the role of such art is precisely to move, shock, amuse or puzzle us, or even to stimulate our acquisitiveness, our desire to possess the object. We accept such elemental responses too in the consumption practices that run through our daily lives—and of course, such responses are well understood and manipulated in the commercial sector by advertisers and retailers.

These are not generally understood and used within the world of museums, however. Objects matter within museums, of course—but so often they feature as mere illustrations punctuating the story being told, rather than as powerful items in their own right, too. The effort expended by museums to render objects and interpretation accessible, the work done to enable visitors to identify meaning and context, is laudable and important; yet it can sometimes be the strategies employed in that very effort which prevent or limit the opportunities for directly encountering and responding to objects in and of themselves, prior to cognitively exploring the stories they have to tell. Textual interpretation in particular can act to dilute, if not remove altogether, the sense of magic and mystery that objects can so often convey. This is not to say that textual interpretation should be absent, of course; but if it is located so as to not stand in the way of an initial engagement with the object, and if access to it is easy but optional, visitors can if they wish concentrate primarily on the artefact itself, the thing in front of them, before they ask what it is, what it was for, who made it and where it came from.

Museums cannot necessarily predict and effectively enable powerful responses to objects—they will not happen for all of us all the time, nor even in response to the same artefacts—but they can seek to place the object once more at the heart of the museum endeavour, and work to avoid the inhibition of emotional and sensory interactions wherever possible. They can think a little more closely about what happens and what might happen when people encounter objects on display. They can ponder what it would be like for visitors to be able properly, bodily, emotionally to engage with an object rather than look at it half-heartedly prior to, or even after, reading a text panel on a wall or a label in a case.

Of course, their duty to conserve objects means that museums cannot in reality allow visitors to pick up, listen to, lick and sniff the objects. But where this cannot be allowed, the museum would do well to remember that visitors can and do still imagine some of the qualities of the objects they see. I can see that the oil painting's surface is three-dimensional, and while I may not be allowed to actually touch it, by drawing on my own sense memories of other textured surfaces I can imagine, even feel in my fingertips, what the sensation would be if I did. Yes, like Celia Fiennes I might get it wrong—but equally I might not. And maybe it does not matter, so long as I am not inhibited from engaging with and responding to an object in some way beyond passively looking at it, reading a label, and moving on, uninspired and unengaged. Yet so often, in reality museums' preference for the informational over the material and for learning over personal experience more broadly and fundamentally defined, may lead to the production of displays that actually inhibit and even preclude emotional and personal responses.

I want to see this change, to return to the materiality of the material, to shift some long overdue attention back to objects themselves, as objects, focusing again on aspects of those objects' apparently trivial and obvious material qualities and the possibilities of directly, physically, emotionally engaging with them. Creative, material-focused, embodied and emotional engagements with objects should be a fundamental building block of the museum visitor's experience. I am not advocating that museums go back to being dusty elitist places that fail to think about multiple audiences and accessibility; but I am saying that in the drive to interpret, to be open to all and to tell stories, something powerful about things themselves has often been lost. Perhaps we should admit that while dusty, elitist museums were often intimidating, dull and not very informative, very occasionally at least they did allow the magic, the mystery of displayed things, to be felt more powerfully than it so often is in the more accessible museums of today. If museums keep open the space that

lies between artefacts being either carriers of information or objects of detached contemplation, they keep open the possibility that visitors can reflect creatively, sometimes even transformatively, on things and themselves.

Notes

1. Some parts of this paper appear in earlier forms in Dudley 2010. Some other parts have subsequently appeared in Dudley 2012.
2. http://www.vam.ac.uk/vastatic/microsites/1376_touch_me/ Last accessed 2 March 2009.
3. <http://www.comptonverney.org.uk/collections/chinese.aspx> Last accessed 12 March 2011.

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