

## **The Ethics of Museum Exhibitions**

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#### **Summary**

Museum ethics are about value judgements. In making such judgements museum personnel is constantly valuing one option over another. This holds true for every aspect of museum work from collecting policies and conservation to store priorities and exhibition. Very often decision making entails a choice between competing values and this often raises ethical questions. These questions are not about what is good and what is bad; rather, they are about what is morally accepted by interested parties.

In recent decades there has been a growing concern in addressing ethical issues in museums as museum workers have developed cultural sensitivity and social responsiveness to a degree unseen before. Most codes of ethics urge museums to give appropriate consideration to represented groups or beliefs especially if these are different from the one to which the museum belongs. In light of this, it has been recognised that exhibition of sensitive material such as human remains and objects of sacred significance, for example, must be done with great tact and respect for the feelings of religious, ethnic or other groups represented. Another issue that has drawn international attention concerns the display of unprovenanced material and repatriation.

Yet, these are not the only ethical issues which exhibition developers are faced with. As museum workers we should constantly be reminded that exhibitions are active agents in the construction of knowledge. The very act of presentation is fundamentally interpretive. In interpreting objects and themes exhibitions create new worlds which are often perceived by visitors as “true” and “authentic” because of the museum’s status as a community’s memory bank and heritage keeper. Thus, even when they make claims to objectivity and scientific soberness, exhibitions inevitably reflect the assumptions and ethical values of the persons making the decisions.

In this paper I am particularly interested in discussing the hidden assumptions on which museum interpretation is often based. Decisions about what to include and what to exclude, about what is valued and what is not, about the means of presentation, about language, etc., all lead to presentational styles which may shape the public’s perception in unintended ways.