

THE MUSEUM AS TEACHER:

THE *We Humans* EXHIBIT

by James L. Swauger

IT HAS RECENTLY been argued in these pages by Marcus Goldstein (CA 9:247-69) that museums are not as effective in "transmitting the lessons of anthropology to the public as they perhaps could be"—a statement with which I am in full accord—largely because museum displays "seldom are clearly relevant to current life situations or problems." We at Carnegie Museum have experience in presenting and evaluating an exhibit that *is* relevant to current life; I should like to describe that experience here.

HISTORY

I had a relatively inconspicuous part in a seminar on human relations sponsored by the United Steelworkers of America at the Pennsylvania State University in October, 1951. I was present to demonstrate the use I thought might be made of museum objects in attempting to present anthropological attitudes toward minority problems. As a result of this meeting, Frank (Francis C.) Shane, then Secretary of the Steelworkers' Committee on Civil Rights, asked me several times to speak to Steelworkers groups concerning anthropological attitudes as I understood them toward minority problems in the United States. Frequently I used specimens, physical data, to illustrate application of the abstract ideas I had to present. I can't say my use of the objects was always truly pertinent to my themes, but having the objects on hand was effective in arousing curiosity about what I had to say about them.

Convinced by the reaction of the Steelworkers at the seminar and at the later group talks that there was worth in the use of physical objects to attract the interest of people to the presentation of ideas, Shane suggested that Carnegie Museum prepare a traveling exhibit to demonstrate anthropological attitudes toward minority problems.

Discussion between Shane and me began in 1953, as I recall. In April, 1956, the Museum contracted with the Mayor's Civic Unity Council (now the Commission on Human Relations) for production of a traveling exhibit of the sort mentioned above. The exhibit was sponsored by the Pittsburgh public schools, Carnegie Museum, the Com-

mission on Human Relations, and the Steelworkers. The Steelworkers financed the project.

The exhibit went on display in the foyer of the City-County Building in the heart of Pittsburgh in February, 1956. After some months there, it toured the city high schools for two- and three-month stands. Eventually it was returned to the Museum, where it still stands, allowing us who designed its intellectual content to contemplate the mistakes we made and wish we'd been as wise in 1955 as we are now.

My colleague, Don W. Dragoo, and I (with the help of others) wrote a brochure called *We Humans* for distribution to teachers using the exhibit. The Steelworkers financed publication and distribution of the brochure.

Reaction to the exhibit, not only by the agencies with whom we'd worked to make it reality, but also by users, was so favorable that the Steelworkers asked us to make two small traveling exhibits of the same sort for their use. This we did, building two eight-panel exhibits patterned after the large exhibit so that *We Humans* could be used with it. Sturdy enough for transport by train or truck, the exhibits were built so that they fit into the trunk of an ordinary car and could easily be transported from school to school or from union hall to union hall for use as a focus of discussion. One of these exhibits was used on the East Coast, one on the West, with use of one or the other in the center of the country on demand. Upon occasion they were returned to the museum for cleaning and repair. One has now been retired, but the other is still in use by the Steelworkers.

CONTENT

The exhibits were made up of eight panels. Four were concerned with physical anthropology or closely related matters, four with cultural anthropology. We presented the following eight points:

1. People differ physically, but, for the layman, distinguishing among physical types isn't always easy.

2. When one is labeling another person as to physical characteristics, he is very often deciding on the labeling by cultural

characteristics rather than by physical ones, and he doesn't even know it.

3. Racial differences exist because of separation of peoples into isolated, inbreeding groups in which the forces of natural and social selection and heredity and mutation have operated to change us from our probable common origin.

4. Disease does not distinguish among races; all of us get the same diseases. Further, the conquest of disease is carried forward by people of all races and physical types, and no race has a monopoly on brains and ability in this respect.

5. People are and have always been ethnocentric, but those whom we in Western civilization most admire plead for recognition of the common humanity of all men.

6. One way to judge a person's worth is by what he can make with his hands, and the layman can't distinguish the racial origin of producers of fine stonework, beadwork, or basketry.

7. Prejudice and discrimination are selective, but we don't follow the dictates of prejudice when they would deprive us of something we want.

8. All peoples everywhere and in all times have managed, in one way or another, to solve certain universal problems—the gaining of food, clothing, and shelter; family and governmental organization; and the like.

DEVELOPMENT

A good teacher is one who so excites the interest of a student that he is not content until he learns more about the subject being taught. While it is true that a good teacher must also impart facts, suggest their organization and interpretation, and guide the student as he reaches out for more information and differing interpretations, to my mind arousing interest is his most important task.

The same is true of museum exhibits; an exhibit is really good only if it makes people go away wanting to learn more about its subject. The specimens and their arrangement serve to draw people to the panels to read the labels. The labels, in turn, should intrigue, amuse, interest people, excite them to think and talk about the exhibit, its physical and intellectual content.

In the *We Humans* exhibit, we used a sort of shock treatment to get people to read labels once the objects and the technique of display had drawn them to the cases. I'd discovered in speaking to groups that more curiosity about minority problems was aroused when I took the point of view that no matter what the Chinese said, we white Americans were not an inferior people than when I tried

to tell the white Americans that black Americans were not inferior. We applied this idea to the show.

Our efforts to shock and intrigue sometimes met with objections from representatives of the other institutions we were working with. For instance, on the panel dealing with ethnocentrism, I wanted the headline "Are You Human? Do You Hate Your Neighbors?" This was rejected by the School Board people, and we ended up with the somewhat weaker "Are You Human? Do You Believe *You* and *Yours* Are Just Naturally Better Than the Other Fellow and His?"

We did, however, get to use most of our ideas. In the case saying "physical differences do occur, but they're not always easy for a layman to distinguish," we had three sculptured heads, unlabeled—a Sioux Indian, a Hindu, and a Masai—each wearing the same kind of hat. We invited viewers to name the three great racial divisions represented. From my observations as I stood by the cases or joined with groups going by, I know that most people who took an interest in the case finally said to their companions that they'd thought it would be an easy task but they finally had to admit they weren't really sure of their conclusions. Actually, most of them were right most of the time, but the important thing to me was that their confidence in their ability to make snap judgments as to race was shaken.

A case containing handicraft work was headed "Are You a Wizard?" We said that only a wizard could know the racial origin of the makers of stone tools, baskets, beadwork. Visitors were invited to try to guess the races of the craftsmen. We didn't give them the answers. Again, visitors said they couldn't distinguish, and, in this instance, they really couldn't. Important to me here was that the laymen trying to guess correctly began to realize that while specialists could assign these cultural objects properly to the people who made them, nonspecialists just didn't know enough to make dependable decisions.

And so it went with all the cases. Our goal was always to stimulate interest. The objects used, the words presented were means of arousing curiosity, not ends in themselves. Many people spent

far more than the supposed standard 30 seconds per exhibit case as they viewed this show. I believe it was because the labels were so different from what they had expected a museum to produce.

REACTION

The sponsoring bodies were pleased with the exhibit and with its usefulness in advertising what we all considered correct attitudes. The Steelworkers in particular made a conscious effort to evaluate reactions among union members, the general public, students, and teachers.

Reaction varied from those who saw it as false and misleading propaganda by a coterie of rascally revolutionaries to those who were ecstatic over it as an answer to all minority-majority problems. Some people in all four categories of viewers mentioned above held these extreme views.

Most answers to queries as to its use and value, however, said the display and its ideas were interesting, entertaining, and provocative. Most teachers felt the brochure had given them sufficient information to be able to use the exhibit effectively in discussing minority and racial problems with their classes from sixth through twelfth grade.

In the main, most who used it found it useful in opening the way to discussion and thinking. Numerous requests for use of the original as well as the traveling exhibits or even just the brochure taught us that a significant number of people who had used, seen, or read about the exhibit were talking about it and suggesting its use by others. My records show that, in addition to numerous local inquiries, between the opening of the exhibit and June, 1966 we had received 27 extra-regional requests for use of the show or for the brochure, from such disparate centers as Dallas, Coconut Grove, Chicago, Cambridge (Mass.), and Haifa.

We who built the exhibit were not wholly satisfied with it when we built it, nor are we now. We had to take complex, abstract concepts and present them as bald statements that would arouse curiosity in a viewer. Unlike the textbook writer or the speaker, we could not present all the varying interpretations of

the statements we made so confidently. We could not reveal our doubts and reservations as to the universal validity of a label. Students from a neighboring university reportedly studied the exhibit and found many flaws. If they had come to us, we could have given them a similar, and probably longer, list of flaws as we saw them.

CONCLUSION

This was a good exhibit. It made people think. It provoked reaction, both favorable and unfavorable. It affected a significant number of viewers. It made some people come to us for further information. It made some go to a library to read.

This sort of thing is what museums can contribute to general education, and museums alone can perform this sort of service. I am in agreement with Goldstein that motion pictures and other devices can be used to impart anthropological knowledge, but museums alone have the depth and breadth of materials and the skills and knowledge that, combined, result in attractive exhibits that can stimulate people to learn.

If the museum world and the anthropologists working in museums will admit that a course in anthropology cannot be mounted in museum exhibit halls, we will have made a great stride forward. Our audience is composed overwhelmingly of people who are not students of anthropology in any formal way. When our show was in the City-County Building, it had to attract and hold stenographers, newsboys, county commissioners, policemen, janitors, lawyers, visiting contingents from foreign countries here to see how an American city is operated, etc. By experience we know that we did stop a goodly number of such people, that they did look and read, and that they did walk away mumbling to themselves or to each other about the display.

We in the museum world can intrigue and stimulate people to learning about anthropology and what anthropology has to say about current problems; and this is how we can make that "... significant impression on the thought and behavior of the community" that Goldstein and I consider so important.