

'Things' will Never be the Same Again
The curious case study of A History of the World in 100 Objects

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There are very few examples from recent years of exhibitions that manage to cross the threshold of being both avant-garde yet populist, experimental yet flat, clever yet dumb, progressive yet hegemonic, quite in the same ways as *A History of the World in 100 Objects*. Jointly organised by the British Museum and the BBC, *A History of the World in 100 Objects* was a multi-platform initiative with mass appeal, that was presumably several years in the making. Though on first instance it could have been dismissed as a rather reductive project about humanity and historiography, *A History of the World in 100 Objects* could (and should) actually be seen as a significant example of the way museum practices are quite likely to shift – particularly when we focus on how they will seek to engage with their audiences, how they will treat objects and objecthood, and how they will utilise their collections along with the narratives of their collections. *A History of the World in 100 Objects* should be seen as a significant case study for all museum institutions to take a critically-engaged position towards.

This collaboration between the British Museum and the BBC was, as its rather guileless title sounds, actually an extremely fearless curatorial concept. It is actually a difficult exhibition to categorise – in fact, it may not have even been an exhibition at all – but could be described, somewhat clumsily, as a kind of semi-exhibition-based interactive human history survey. *A History of the World in 100 Objects* was a bit like foregrounding one of those museum audio-guides that most culturally savvy people are too embarrassed to be seen using. Sidelining the physical experience of viewing the actual selected objects in question and foregrounding interpretation, it was a technology- and language-centered project, composed through narration by Neil MacGregor, Director of the British Museum, in three 15-minute daily radio broadcasts on BBC Radio 4. It was also accompanied by an extremely slick interactive website in which the selected artifacts could be found within a time-portal that visitors could virtually fly through. Together these two platforms gradually unfolded a historical narrative that spanned over a period of a year. The ambitions here were multiple – not just in terms of providing an unflinching portrayal of a concise and linear world order, but also navigating all the hegemonic and imperialistic antagonisms that a historical museum such as the British Museum has come to embody..

"Most of us, if we come back to a museum that we visited as a child, have the sense that 'we' have changed enormously, whilst the 'things' have stayed serenely the same". This is one of the general assumptions about visiting a museum that MacGregor asks us to reconsider during the first installment of *A History of the World in 100 Objects*. His suggestion is that, over time, museum artifacts provide communicative "signals from the past" through what new technologies decipher, and subsequently contribute towards learning about the history of humanity. It is this idea that was at the centre of this unusual initiative, which attempted to synthesise all the key social, organisational and economic developments in cultures globally, or at least those represented in the British Museum, into a single project, through an acutely concise selection of just 100 objects from the British Museum's historic collection of artifacts.

From the first broadcast, MacGregor raised colonial antagonisms immediately. He began not at the very birth of humanity, but with an artifact he recalls from childhood visits to a museum – an Egyptian casket known as The Mummy of Hjordjitef (c.3rd century BC). The commentary around this artifact also included a soundbite from renowned Egyptian novelist Ahdaf Soueif who suggests

that housing the artifacts of the world's civilisations in the British Museum was "no bad thing" in that they serve as reminders of Britain's colonialism. From this decisive conclusion, the narration proceeds through selected objects of art, industry, weaponry and technology – from the earliest stonecutting tools, to statuettes and mathematical papyrus, through Chinese Zhou Dynasty ritual vessels, the Rosetta Stone, Spanish Hebrew Astrolabes and even a Hockney painting (*In The Dull Village*, 1966–7)—eventually arriving at objects that represent the present. Leaps of such magnitude might only otherwise be seen in science fiction, but here they are part of an undaunted grand chronology. The narrative is always meticulously careful, articulating connections between cultures. Seemingly aiming to transpose today's context of globalisation onto the past, MacGregor looked to dispel the normative view of the 'clash of the civilisations' and replace it with one about co-dependency between cultures and a more fluid notion of cultural geography.

Throughout our multimedia journey across the centuries, the selection of objects in *A History of the World in 100 Objects* varied greatly towards the representation of their own time and culture. The penultimate object to have its story 'revealed' was an HSBC credit card accredited to a person named Tariq Adel. It was somehow not quite imaginable as an actual collection item at the British Museum, but presumably intended to comment on today's economy and culture of credit, consumerism and debt. The given 'meaning' that the objects were meant to embody was put in the foreground, and their objecthood become momentarily irrelevant. In fact, high-resolution images of the objects positioned in front of plain backgrounds stood in for the artifacts themselves. As the project was not specifically about the physical experience of an exhibition, it was produced on a representational level. However it was still possible for visitors to view the objects individually at the British Museum within the ethnographic displays they normally belong to. Nonetheless, *A History of the World in 100 Objects* was not strictly a tangible relationship between narrative and object.

The overall effect of *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, across its dual verbal and virtual formats, is not unlike that of the currently hypothetical 'Internet of things'. The Internet of Things, to quote writer Bruce Sterling's futuristic concept, is a concept that is very much in development, yet it seems will soon become a distinct technological reality. It could be described as a system to integrate a network of apparently unrelated objects, facilitated by a technology framework that supports the interaction between them, and their lifecycles and statuses tracked in real-time. The things could be physical and/or virtual and they could have physical attributes, virtual personalities and intelligent interfaces that give them a new possibility – such as the ability to communicate. This intelligent virtual representation bears certain parallels with the ideas André Malraux drew out in his seminal book *Museum Without Walls* (*Le Musée Imaginaire*), which considered the narrative potential that occurred through the juxtaposition of images of artworks. But the Internet of Things would be for actual objects as well as their images in tandem. If realised, the Internet of Things could mean profound changes for collecting institutions as well as also for the aesthetic experience of objects – or the aesthetic 'communication' between objects – in a similar way to what *A History of the World in 100 Objects* has demonstrated. In the case of this exhibition, it resembles a network across symbolic values, continents and millennia.

Being only in part an exhibition-based project – which, in reality, feels wholly incidental – it's clear that *A History of the World in 100 Objects* was a highly contemporary example of curating segments of knowledge in place of artifacts. And a highly performative example it was too, with MacGregor stressing that it is 'a' history and not 'the' history, which still here privileged his own interpretation

of said history. Whilst constantly running the risk of reducing human anthropology to something anecdotal and occasionally anonymous, the grand narrative of *A History of the World in 100 Objects* balanced the fine line between profundity and absurdity. It was certainly a thought-provoking, experimental and accessible way of disseminating knowledge, yet what makes it an intriguing curatorial case study for the future is its breathtaking audaciousness in using a few select objects to extract and synthesize millennia of every facet of humanity, culture, politics, history, technology and society into trim sound-bites, all set to wistful incidental music. The stories here will remain long after the official end of *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, with, for example, each radio broadcast being available as free podcasts via iTunes and the BBC's website.

A History of the World in 100 Objects might be considered a project that ultimately rests upon storytelling. Museums continue to be obsessed with the stories – the stories of their own institutions, the stories behind their objects and artefacts, and the stories around how they came to acquire them. Often these stories become more important to an institution than the actual content and aesthetics of artifacts. And when a project focuses on these kinds of stories, joining them all together in this way, all the while employing the traditional voice of authority, it becomes a sort of proxy artistic statement of sorts – the kind of which we may need to get accustomed to happening more in the future. Yet this methodology could very much be considered curatorial work as it is still based on art historical expertise. Moreover it suggests that technology is causing some sort of shift in curatorial work from the traditional exhibition-making towards something more closely resembling editorial work. And here, the presence of the British Museum and in particular the objects in its collection, functioned a bit like the BBC always has done – reaching directly into people's homes. 'Things' will never be the same again.

Links:

http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/a_history_of_the_world.aspx

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/ahistoryoftheworld/>

<https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/history-world-in-100-objects/id351096296>