

OPENING THE MUSEUM

THE PEABODY MUSEUM
OF
ARCHAEOLOGY AND ETHNOLOGY

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Peabody Museum, late nineteenth century.

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DURING THE 1990s, museum attendance skyrocketed. On August 9, 1995, the *New York Times* reported that more people attended museums than all sporting events combined. Whether one thinks this newfound popularity has been beneficial or not, it is clear that visitors now demand a great deal from their museum experience. Museums are expected to combine education and entertainment, commemorate heroic deeds, document “real history,” give voice to the strivings of minorities, and provide a forum in which new (and sometimes unpopular) ideas can be discussed. Museums have become places where national and regional cultures are celebrated, criticized, and, on occasion, refashioned. Many public museums offer a host of cultural and commercial services, including exhibits, films, shopping, restaurants, concerts, and even a safe place where urban “singles” can mix and match. All this must be done with limited resources, making the pursuit of funds necessary and pervasive.

Small regional museums have struggled to find a special niche in this changing environment, and some have been spectacularly successful in capturing a dedicated following for their exhibits and programs. In this brave new world, university research museums have kept to the sidelines or looked for ways to adapt. Although few have gone so far as to add cappuccino bars or singles evenings, some university museums have acknowledged that they serve multiple audiences and—given years of neglect and limited resources—have struggled mightily to decide how best to meet new challenges.

What are museums like the Peabody for? A textbook answer to this question would include the following: the purpose of museums is to acquire, house, preserve, and interpret their collections. Museums like the Peabody, which maintain extensive research collections, have further responsibilities to provide access to researchers and to disseminate research results through publications and teaching.

Indeed, during its 135-year history, the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology has performed the required tasks; it has acquired, housed, preserved, interpreted, taught, and researched its collections. Unfortunately, the Peabody has no written history—official or unofficial. Little attention has been paid to how or why the Peabody came to be what it is today. In the following brief account, I draw a sketch of the museum at three moments in its history: 1877,

1928, and 2001. Although this sketch is based on the museum's annual reports, directors' correspondence, and archives, my primary source is the Peabody Museum building itself. I propose to treat the museum building at 11 Divinity Avenue as an artifact. The arrangement of bricks and mortar, display cases, storage areas, and laboratories tells us a great deal about the Peabody as well as the ideas and values of those who have labored here.

Before proceeding, a cautionary note may be useful. Change, not stasis, has been the order of the day during the Peabody's long history. Since the 1870s, two large extensions were added to the original building and exhibits have been fashioned and refashioned as collections have been moved from one gallery to another to make room for new arrivals. From the 1890s when anthropology was first formally taught at Harvard, the quest for teaching space, faculty offices, and laboratories has been ceaseless. But amidst the "make-do" changes and shifts, certain patterns can be discerned, and, I believe, these patterns are instructive of the history of museums and of anthropology. Although the three snapshots provided here highlight important information and benchmarks, they do not tell the entire story. For that, more than a brief article is required.

The Peabody Museum, the oldest museum of anthropology in the Americas, was established by George Peabody—a New Englander, a self-made man, and a cotton merchant with extensive business contacts in England. On October 8, 1866, Peabody committed \$150,000 to be used, according to the terms of the trust, to establish the position of Peabody Professor-Curator, to purchase artifacts, and to construct a building to house its collections. Peabody directed his trustees to organize the construction of "a suitable fire-proof museum building, upon land to be given for that purpose, free of cost or rental, by the President and Fellows of Harvard College."¹ In 1877, the long-awaited museum building was completed and ready for occupancy.

The Museum's early acquisition and exhibit rationale is well described by its longest serving director, F. W. Putnam. Writing in 1877 soon after becoming director, Putnam summarized a decade of achievements: "In conformity with Mr. Peabody's expressed wish, much has been done . . . toward the accumulation of material for the

proper understanding of the condition of the early inhabitants of America, and their relation to those of other parts of the world. For this purpose special explorations in America have been made with marked success, and large and valuable collections from abroad have been secured for the purpose of comparison.”² According to Putnam, the originating vision was of a museum focused on the Americas but broadly defined so that artifacts from “other parts of the world” could be included. By means of comparative methodologies, Putnam implied, the still fledgling study of New World cultures would expand and deepen.

Collections: Go Forth and Acquire

The Peabody Museum was established in the heyday of nineteenth-century collecting, when the world was becoming smaller and people of vastly different backgrounds and cultures were coming into regular contact with each other. Of course, the collecting impulse is almost as old as human history itself, but during the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries *what* was being collected, *how* it was being collected, and the *object* of collecting were all significantly different from earlier eras. A move from curio and religiously motivated collecting was taking place, although, of course, these earlier forms never disappeared.

By the early 1800s, the quaint, the curious, and the beautiful were being joined by massive collections of the ordinary and mundane. Increasingly, collections were expected to represent the earth and its fauna, flora, and cultures. Systematic collecting was done not to amaze or to glorify spiritual truths but for purposes of study and research. The collections that were being amassed by scientists were routinely documented with field notes and maps detailing the natural or historical contexts of specimens and artifacts. Photographs, precise measurements, and elaborate descriptions based on agreed-upon standards supported museum collections. During these institution-building decades, type collections set the standards by which classifications of New World crops, Mimbres pottery, or hand axes were established, thus making it possible for scholars to compare and speak intelligently to each other.



View of gallery, circa 1900.

Nineteenth-century museums of science, a designation that Director Putnam would have unself-consciously embraced, were attempting to manage what has been described as an “empirical explosion” brought about by voyages of discovery, increased travel, and enhanced forms of communication.³ During the 1700s and 1800s, as ideas of comparison and comparative methodologies were being established, direct observation and “knowing by seeing” became a privileged epistemology. Museums emerged during this period as places where comparison and observation could be done and where the results of those comparisons could be made manifest. Sharon MacDonald neatly summarizes the impact of this transformation in the introduction to her edited volume *The Politics of Display*: “What the museum offered was a site in which scientific findings were . . . open to a general public as well as to a community of scientists: here [in the museum], ‘*anybody*’ might come and survey the evidence of science.”⁴ Displays in the great natural and cultural history museums of the day involved thousands of specimens arranged according to principles based on and allowing for direct comparative observation. During the nineteenth century, museums were places where knowledge was created and revealed to an interested public.⁵



Frederick Putnam breaking ground for the 1913 addition.

A History of Peabody Displays: 1877

The Annual Report of 1878 provides a detailed description of the newly opened Peabody Museum building and its internal arrangements. The museum's architect, Robert Slack, gives us a description that is charming in its detail and simplicity: "The outside walls are built of dark red brick, laid in black mortar, with brown stone belts, window sills, caps and main cornice, with granite steps and underpinning. The external dimensions are 87 ft. from North to South and 44 ft. from East to West. The First floor is about 5 ft. above the ground, the main cornice 52 ft., the top of Mansard story at gutter about 61 ft., and the highest point of roof 72 ft."⁶ Slack goes on to describe the building's interior, which was organized on six floors with galleries on the second and fourth levels opening onto the floors below them. This was the heyday of the nineteenth-century version of "visible storage" when *seeing was believing* and massive arrays of specimens lined the walls of all the best museums.

In 1877, the Peabody staff was keen to display the collections—all the collections—ordered primarily by regional-cultural origin

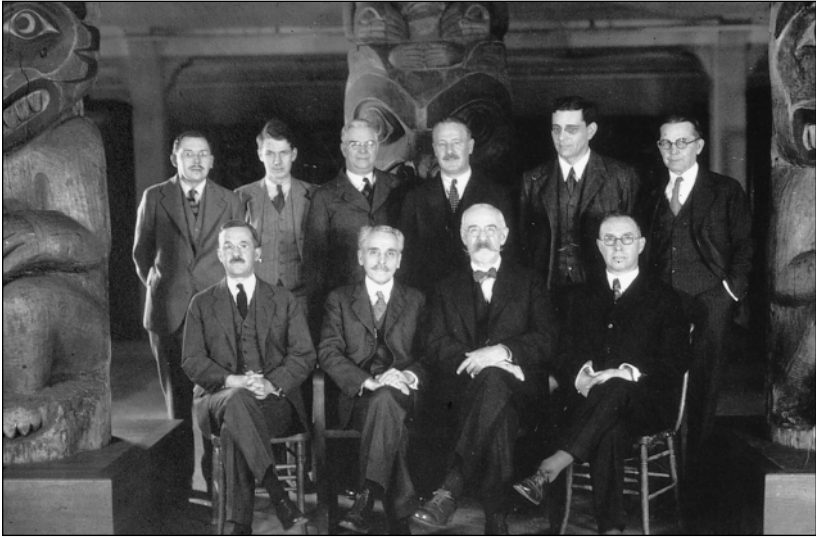
(e.g., North America, Swiss Lakes, Pacific Islands) and secondarily by object type or function (e.g., mortars, stone axes, pottery).⁷ Thousands of artifacts were displayed with minimal or no use of labels. The message—or interpretative principles as we would say today—was not offered in words printed on text panels; instead it was encoded in the *arrangement* of the artifacts themselves. Artifacts were not exhibited but “arranged,” and visitors were expected to draw the same conclusions from these arrangements that scientists had drawn from their comparative studies.

As collections increased from a few thousand items in 1866 to nearly five million by the 1930s, cases were rearranged and new ones were added. In 1888 and again in 1913, additions to the original building (adding nearly 50,000 square feet) helped to alleviate space problems, but these additions, which allowed for a purpose-built storage area in the basement and laboratory spaces on the fifth floor, appear to have had little impact on the internal arrangements of the museum’s collections. The ordering principles of geography and artifact type prevailed.

According to many sources, it is clear that from 1877 until the 1920s scientists working at the Peabody Museum taught students, trained their own replacements, conducted research, managed artifacts, wrote learned articles, and met the public amidst the museum’s collections. In 1877 and for many years thereafter, the Peabody was a museum where anthropology was produced and where those productions were displayed for all to see. The visual and, very likely, practical effect was of a “library of objects”—the cases forming “stacks” where artifacts were shelved in full view and ready for use.

The Peabody Museum: 1928

During the late 1920s and 1930s, artifacts continued to be presented in arrangements rather than exhibits, and more continued to be better, but anthropology museums, including the Peabody, were changing. Anthropology became a university-based discipline during the 1890s, and gradually throughout the first decades of the twentieth century, professional anthropologists found employment in newly established anthropology departments. With departmental status



Director Reynolds and Peabody Staff, 1930.

came obligations to provide students with regular classroom instruction and to train the next generation of professionals. By the 1930s, highly specialized research facilities (with laboratories, professional seminars, and disciplinary journals) had emerged—all of which were effectively off limits to the public. During this period, artifacts at the Peabody were moved into increasingly inaccessible closed storage to make way for laboratories, offices, classrooms, storage rooms, and processing areas.

The Peabody Museum is still recovering from this “putting away” of artifacts, which was done in haste and with little attention to issues of access. A 1934 document entitled “Case Plans Showing Numbers” reminds us, however, that thousands of cased artifacts remained open to researchers, faculty, students, and visitors. In fact, according to these plans no fewer than 2,098 display cases were arranged throughout the museum. A nineteenth-century visitor miraculously transported to the Peabody of 1934 would have noticed changes. Faculty offices and labs were being carved from the galleries, but the “arrangements” would have been familiar. However, the manner and purpose of the arrangements were beginning to change.

These changes were first signaled by a new, activist director, Edward Reynolds, who declared in his first annual report (1928) that “a rearrangement of the collection on a more modern and scientific system would make the Museum a far more efficient teaching implement—the essential reason for the existence of any university museum.”⁸ This rearrangement, he continued, “should be accompanied . . . by the preparation of very many thousands of descriptive labels so arranged as to cover everything on exhibition. The present almost complete absence of such labels,” Reynolds lamented, “greatly lessens its value to the public, and, what seems of more importance, to the students who should use it.”⁹ In 1929, Reynolds laid out ambitious plans for a rearrangement of exhibitions and spaces. Although Reynolds was director for only four years, some of his plans were implemented. Interestingly, he placed museum-based teaching for Harvard students and public education on his agenda. Although neither of these concerns was new to the Peabody, Reynolds signaled a change in emphasis.

During his tenure, Putnam operated a kind of apprentice-training system, in which students of all ages and backgrounds were given a mentor and a research space and put to work on special projects. Gradually, this gave way to more formal teaching. (The Department of American Archaeology and Ethnology was formed at Harvard in 1890; in 1903 the title was changed to the Department of Anthropology.)¹⁰ Although the museum had always been open to the public, Reynolds demonstrated a new concern for what visitors were making of all those “arrangements.” In 1928, display cases still dominated the museum building, but object labels were now deemed necessary for proper understanding.

Reynolds did not manage to remake the Peabody Museum, but his writings suggest an approach very different from Putnam’s. Apparently, he lacked Putnam’s confidence in the ability of visitors to “read” the wordless and artifact-heavy arrangements. Or, perhaps, he cared more than Putnam that they got the “correct” message. He may also have been responding to anthropology’s retreat from public view into restricted laboratories, private offices, classrooms for fee-paying students, and professional societies. No longer were museums the primary locus of anthropological research and teaching. As

knowledge production moved into evermore jealously guarded departmental strongholds, museums became more reactive and the job of translating scholarly research more demanding. Into this changing environment, Reynolds interjected two innovations, explanatory texts and special “synoptic collection” displays. The newly organized synoptic room was firmly based on an evolutionary schema—from Stone Age to Iron Age to Bronze Age to Civilization—expressed through the arrangement of artifacts from cultures throughout the world. Reynolds’ synoptic display was intended as a kind of interpretative guidebook, which would equip visitors with the information they needed to “read” the Peabody Museum’s galleries.¹¹ On the research front, during the Reynolds and immediate post-Reynolds years, the Peabody continued to sponsor large research projects,¹² but these were increasingly led by faculty-curators ever more closely tied to the department.

Peabody Museum: 2001

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Peabody Museum building is bursting at the seams. Currently, a growing and fully functioning museum as well as a substantial portion of Harvard’s Department of Anthropology are housed there. Just under one-fifth of the building is devoted to exhibits, which display less than one-half of one percent of the Peabody’s collections. Faculty offices, laboratories, and classrooms take up approximately 30 percent, while collections storage (about 45 percent of total space) and museum services¹³ account for the remainder. Most of the archaeology collections are temporarily stored off-site.

The way collections are housed and exhibited has changed dramatically since the 1920s. Collections are currently held in secured storage areas where light, humidity, and temperature can be better controlled. These collections, I hasten to add, are available for special programming efforts and to users of all kinds, including researchers and members of communities from which objects originated. But, unfortunately, fewer than 3,000 objects are exhibited, and these tend to be heavily interpreted via labels, text panels, photographs, and videos. In 1877 and 1928 the goal was to display all or most of the



Storage area, 1980s.

collections, but since the 1970s artifacts have been increasingly presented within an elaborate matrix of interpretation. It would appear that since the 1930s Peabody directors have embraced the view that visitors need all the interpretative help they can get.

Today the Peabody Museum building is dominated by two entities: the Department of Anthropology and the collections. In many important respects, the relationship between the two mirrors the changing relationship between university museums and academe. For some faculty-curators the collections remain vital to their research and teaching, and for others the collections are utilized mostly for teaching and graduate training. For many years, cultural anthropologists and historians maintained a distance from artifact collections.¹⁴ However, since the 1980s, cultural studies and a reengagement with “things,” borne in part by a rapprochement between archaeology and cultural anthropology, gave new vitality to a rather tired, but now more broadly defined, study of visual anthropology.



Peabody Museum staff members Anna Dhody (left) and Amy Groleau (right) preparing for inventory work in the Peabody Museum Annex.

In this redefinition, artifacts have been transformed into visual culture and deemed worthy of serious anthropological research. Increasingly, the tangible past is seen to provide valuable clues to the study of ethnicity and nationalism, the history of heretofore “silent groups,” and colonialism. Interest in globalization and emerging consumer cultures has opened up the study of material culture to new ideas and methodologies. There is no doubt that the wholesale transformation of many classes of artifacts into art (masks from Africa or Northwest Coast carvings are good examples) has contributed significantly to a newfound interest in anthropology museums.

In 1928, anthropology, like many other academic disciplines, was already in retreat from public view. Seventy-three years later that

retreat is even more pronounced. The gap between those who do research and those who do not is greater than ever. Museums like the Peabody can play a vital role not only in translating recent research for the public¹⁵ but also in producing research; university museums offer especially fertile grounds for cross-discipline research and discussion. This is a job that is increasingly important as scholars struggle to free themselves from the straightjacket of outmoded departmental architectures established during the early twentieth century.

In my view, one of the most telling criticisms leveled at contemporary museums is the lack of openness. This critique appears in many forms, from “museums are hegemonic appropriators of other peoples’ culture” to “I can’t figure out how to get an appointment to see the XX collection.” One cannot please everyone, but museums can do a better job of opening collections to those who want to engage them. Members of indigenous communities, including artists, must have a place in the twenty-first-century museum. Their perspectives are essential, and it is especially important that they be given opportunities to communicate those perspectives.

The Peabody is working to achieve a cherished dream of creating a new kind of institution that can open its collections to the many communities it serves. Visible storage is part of this “opening” process, although I hasten to add that the Peabody has no intention of recreating the densely packed “arrangements” of the 1880s. By 2004, the museum will have a fully searchable electronic database of its artifact collections. Digital images of all-important collections—tens of thousands of images—will form an integral part of that database. The Peabody Web site will make the collections available to students, faculty, researchers, indigenous artists, tribal elders, schoolchildren, teachers, and members of the public. Anyone who is interested and has access to the Internet will be able to explore the Peabody’s collections. Of course, digital images can never replace seeing the artifacts with one’s own eyes, but electronic access will make it possible for many people to use the collections more efficiently.¹⁶

Few museums can contemplate displaying their entire collections, no matter how much they might wish to achieve such a lofty goal. But, by means of a creatively orchestrated Web site, innovative

forms of visible storage, and thematically interpreted exhibits, the Peabody's collections can and will be opened. Visitor figures and media coverage make it clear that the demands on museums are ever growing, but the ways that museums present the objects under their care are still locked into the 1980s. Many museum visitors do not feel challenged and resent being spoon-fed. They expect to be entertained, but they also want to be informed in challenging ways. University museums, I believe, have a special responsibility not only to present their collections to visitors, but also to ground those presentations in the context of new research. University-based museums should not compete with but, rather, complement the work of large public museums by enhancing (and, when appropriate, by challenging) common understandings of how and why research is done.

As the Peabody enters the twenty-first century, the collections that it houses are recognized (and utilized) as one of the world's great resources for the study of the human past. Many of these collections are unique and could not be assembled today. Indeed, those who steward these collections recognize that they have significant responsibilities toward the artifacts themselves and to the many communities these collections serve.¹⁷ University museums should contribute to the great civic debates that are taking place in America's cultural institutions, but they cannot do this if collections remain hidden and exhibits continue to be encumbered by overlays of heavy-handed interpretative agendas. Electronic access, visible storage, and thoughtful exhibits are the foundations upon which a new kind of museum can be built—one that allows for engagement within an atmosphere of respect for individual exploration and for the originating communities whose visible past is, in part, contained within museum collections.

Notes

1. *Eleventh Annual Report of the Trustees of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology*, 1878, p. 185.
2. *Tenth Annual Report of the Trustees of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology*, 1877, p. 8.
3. See P. Findlen, *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994, p. 3).

4. See Sharon MacDonald, "Exhibitions of Power and Powers of Exhibition: An Introduction to the Politics of Display," in *The Politics of Display: Museums, Science, Culture*, ed. Sharon MacDonald (London: Routledge, 1998, p. 8).

5. See Steven Conn, *Museums and American Intellectual Life, 1876-1926* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

6. *Eleventh Annual Report*, 1878, p. 185.

7. *Eleventh Annual Report*, 1878, pp. 191-3.

8. *Sixty-third Report on the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, 1928-29*, p. 2.

9. *Sixty-third Report*, 1928-29, p. 2.

10. See Curtis Hinsley, "The Museum Origins of Harvard Anthropology 1866-1915," in *Science of Harvard University: Historical Perspectives*, eds. Clark Elliott and Margaret Rossitor (Bethlehem, Pa.: Lehigh University Press, 1992).

11. *Sixty-third Report*, 1928-29, p. 3.

12. See J. O. Brew, *People and Projects of the Peabody Museum, 1866-1966* (Cambridge, Mass.: Peabody Museum Press, 1966); and *Early Days of the Peabody Museum at Harvard University* (Cambridge, Mass.: Peabody Museum Press, 1966).

13. Including conservation, information technology, collections management and records, publications, security, human resources, and finance.

14. In part, cultural anthropologists were reacting to the excesses of nineteenth-century "armchair anthropology."

15. For example, in the study of human origins, nationalism and cultural diversity, looting of archaeological sites, environmental issues.

16. It will also help teachers prepare their charges for museum visits and build upon what they learned when they return to the classroom. And, Internet linkage will provide an open and inexpensive way for members of native communities to acquaint themselves with the museum's holdings and resources.

17. In the next issue of *Symbols*, I will discuss in detail the role that the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) has played in reinvigorating the Peabody's contacts with Native American communities.