

# MUSEUMS AND INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITIES

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In recent times much work in both the theory and practice of museums has focussed on the meanings constructed from museums and their collections.<sup>1</sup> This focus marks a new approach to the way in which audiences are conceptualised and researched. Earlier approaches focussed on 'evaluation of the visitor'<sup>2</sup>, using more or less explicitly behaviourist theories. The questions such researchers asked included: Had 'the visitor' correctly learnt the message of the displays? What behaviour did the visitor exhibit? The visitor was conceptualised as 'the general public', with a very limited analysis beyond demographic variables<sup>3</sup>. The new approach is marked by a more concrete and individualised characterisation of audiences, an understanding that visitors bring their own agendas to the holistic experience of the visit, and the acceptance that communication processes are more complex than has been acknowledged in the past. The research questions are likely to focus on generating hypotheses based on the words and feelings of specific individuals selected as part of a small sample population. This new focus leads to a need to reconsider the approach to 'interpretation' taken by museums and a need to consider the relationship between personal and social meanings.

This paper explores the concept of museum interpretation and relates it to constructivist learning theory. It suggests that 'interpretation' is the process in which visitors engage in order to make sense of the experience of the museum and its collections. Although at one level this is an individual matter, the interpretations we make are mediated through the communities of interpretation to which we belong. In acknowledging the concept of 'interpretive communities', a museum accepts the active processes of meaning-making that visitors deploy, and accepts that communication is a partnership between the museum staff as producers of exhibitions and (other 'products'), and visitors, who construct their own experience of the exhibition according to their interpretive strategies and repertoires. Research into the strategies and repertoires of a range of interpretive communities enables museum producers to develop exhibitions that give individual members of those communities the opportunity to use their preferred strategies and their existing areas of knowledge. It is only by building on what is already known that learning can take place. By developing a complex response to the strategies and repertoires of a range of interpretive communities, museums can become multi-faceted learning environments. In carrying out the

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Silverman, L. Visitor meaning-making in museums for a new age, *Curator*, 38 (3), 161-170, 1995; Falk, J., Moussouri, T. and Coulson, D. The effect of visitors agendas on museum learning, *Curator*, 41 (2), 107-120, June 1998; Worts, D. Extending the frame: forging a new partnership with the public, *Art in museums - new research in museum studies*, 5, 164-191, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Loomis, R. *Museum visitor evaluation: new tool for management*, American Association for State and Local History, Nashville, Tennessee, 1987.

<sup>3</sup> See for example Miles, R. and Tout, A. Outline of a technology for effective science exhibits, in Hooper-Greenhill, E. *The educational role of the museum* (first edition), Routledge, 87-101, 1994, and Miles, R. and Tout, A. Impact of research on the approach to the visiting public at the Natural History Museum, London, in the same collection, 101-106. These papers were originally written in 1979 and 1991. While the difference in understanding of those matters that 'the public' might bring to any museum visit is significant, the underpinning conceptualisation remains of a mass undifferentiated audience.

necessary audience research, reviewing and assessing the outcomes of this research, and evaluating the effectiveness of the resulting learning opportunities offered, the museum itself becomes a learning organisation. The learning museum is the museum model which will survive best in the unpredictable environment of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **The use of the concept ‘interpretation’ in museums**

In the museum context, the concept of ‘interpretation’ is generally deployed to discuss matters of design and display, with the emphasis being on the work of museum personnel, who decide on the interpretive approach. An ‘Interpretation Officer’ generally has something to do with the communicative approach of exhibitions, for example. A definition of the meaning of ‘interpretation’ from a recent SIBH leaflet proposes a commonly accepted meaning:

‘Interpretation is the process of communicating to people the significance of a place or object, so that they enjoy it more and understand their heritage and environment better’<sup>4</sup>

Whenever it is used in the museum context, interpretation is something that is done for others, or to others – pointing out the significance of certain works, buildings or sites, for example. To discuss the approach to ‘interpretation’ that will be adopted in an exhibition is to discuss the conceptual approach taken by the exhibition developers. Or it means reviewing the choice of display technologies – continuous narrative or independent exhibits; object-rich, or using a range of additional media such as photographs or models; the style to be used in the exhibition text.

It is rarer that we discuss the interpretive strategies that might be used by visitors, or consider, on the basis of audience research, how the exhibition concepts and techniques will encourage visitors in their own interpretations.

The use of the concept ‘interpretation’ within the museum context is, I think, unusual. In other spheres it is used to refer to the active decoding and recoding of experience in which all human beings necessarily engage in order to live on a daily basis. One of the clearest expressions of this is within hermeneutic philosophy. An awareness of this way of using the concept of ‘interpretation’ alerts museum professionals both to debates that are currently taking place in the wider intellectual field, and enables a more analytical approach to the relationship between museums and their audiences.

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<sup>4</sup> Society for the Interpretation of Britain’s Heritage pamphlet Interpret Britain Awards 1998 & a New Special Category Entry for Education Provision, SIBH, 1998,

## Alternative approaches to ‘interpretation’ – hermeneutic philosophy

Much of the focus of hermeneutics, or interpretive philosophy, concerns how understanding can be achieved. ‘Interpretation’ is seen as a process of arriving at an understanding; it is concerned with coming to a fuller understanding of how things mean. Much of the focus of the various hermeneutic approaches centres on this process of ‘interpretation’, which is located in the relationship between, typically, a reader and a text<sup>5</sup>. If we substitute ‘museum visitor’ and ‘museum object’ (or even ‘museum’) for ‘reader’ and ‘text’ we can begin to work out a new way of using ‘interpretation’ within the museum context – a way which enables us to access and call on writings in philosophy, cultural studies, sociology and communication theory. These insights can be useful in enabling a deeper investigation of the processes by which visitors make meaning within museums.

Gadamer is particularly interesting for museums in his thoughts on how meaning is made from objects. He uses the concept of the ‘hermeneutic circle’ to discuss and describe the way in which meaning is made. The process of making meaning moves both between the whole and the part of the object and between the present and the past, simultaneously. A dialogue is established between the whole and the part, the past and the present, which enables continual checking and rechecking of understanding, and the revision and assessment of ideas. Gadamer emphasises the significance of prior knowledge in the encounter.<sup>6</sup>

The process of constructing meaning from a painting, for example, is circular and dialogic. We are in a question-and-answer mode, a continuous process as the answers build on those questions that have already been asked and answered. This circular movement involves both the whole and the part, but also the present and the past. Meaning is constructed through this circular dialogic action, with modification to the sense we construct being made constantly. The trajectory, or route, of the conversation, is in large part determined by what is already known, by prior knowledge. As long as our prior knowledge sustains the enquiry, it will continue. If we can no longer find a relevance, the enquiry is likely to stop.

In the case of any portrait of Queen Elizabeth I, for example, prior knowledge in this case might include English history, English myth, English painting, portraiture in general, the portraits of Elizabeth I, clothing and costume, literature (Shakespeare), queens and their images, children’s stories<sup>7</sup>. The content, length and depth of a conversation with a portrait of Queen Elizabeth I will depend on how much is known about any one or more of the areas of knowledge suggested. Clearly, the meaning that is constructed will vary among individuals. Interpretation, the development of understanding is therefore variable, and contingent, depending on prior knowledge. It also depends on what Bourdieu calls ‘cultural competence’<sup>8</sup>. It depends on what resources, cognitive, cultural and social, the visitor as interpreter brings to the encounter. These resources underpin the interpretive strategies that visitors might use.

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<sup>5</sup> Gallagher, S. *Hermeneutics and education*, State University of New York Press, 1992.

<sup>6</sup> Gadamer, H-G. The historicity of understanding, in Connerton, P. (ed) *Critical Sociology*, Penguin Books, 1976, 117-133.

<sup>7</sup> Hooper-Greenhill, E. Learning in art museums: strategies of interpretation, in Hooper-Greenhill, E. (ed) *The Educational Role of the Museum: second edition*, Routledge, London and New York, 44-52.

<sup>8</sup> Bourdieu, P. *The field of cultural production*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1993.

Any interpretation is provisional. It is never fully complete. There is always more to say, and what is said may always be changed. The hermeneutic circle, the process of interpretation, remains open to these possibilities and in this sense, meaning is never static. Meaning is never static in another sense too. All interpretation is necessarily historically situated. Our own position in history, our own culture, affects meaning. Meaning is constructed through and in culture. Perception (what we see), memory (what we choose to remember) and logical thinking (the sense we choose to attribute to things) differ culturally because they are cultural constructs<sup>9</sup>. Prior cultural and historical knowledge and experience contribute differentiated meanings.

Hermeneutic philosophy finds many echoes in modern learning theory, which emphasises the necessity of an active mind in acquiring new knowledge<sup>10</sup>. Many learning theorists, particularly those concerned with lifelong learning, point out how problem-solving and question-posing constitute successful learning, and indeed, that this is necessary for life itself.

Both hermeneutics and constructivism propose that knowledge is constructed through active interpretations of experience. The meaning constructed relates in part to the relationship between the experience, the object, and the active interpreter. Thus nine-year-old children will know a portrait of Elizabeth I through the group art work they produce. Advertisers appropriated the image for use in a different way, for propaganda purposes, and readers of the Independent newspaper viewed the image through a complex mediation involving the original image, its use to advertise shopping in Sainsbury's supermarket (for potatoes) and its graphic reproduction as broadsheet newsprint. Knowledge is not a single, self-contained body of facts that can be transmitted, unchanged, from one individual to another. Knowledge is plural, and fluid, brought into being by the processes of knowing.

Both hermeneutics and constructivism assert that knowers, or learners, are active in the process of making sense of experience (including the formal and informal experience of learning). Both mental and bodily actions are important in learning processes, and learners will use differentiated learning strategies to both perceive and process information and experience. Individual learners will combine concrete and abstract modes of perception, and active and reflective processes of accommodating and assimilating knowledge, according to their preferred approach to learning<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Ogbu, J. U. *The influence of culture on learning and behaviour*, in Falk, J. and Dierking, L.D. (eds) *Public institutions for personal learning: establishing a research agenda*, American Association of Museums, Washington, 1995, 79-96.

<sup>10</sup> Roschelle, J. *Learning in interactive environments: prior knowledge and new experience*, in Falk, J. and Dierking, L. (eds) *Public institutions for personal learning*, American Association of Museums, Washington, 37-51, 1995.

<sup>11</sup> McCarthy, B. and Leflar, S. *Amat in action: creative lesson plans for teaching to learning styles with right/left mode techniques*, Excel; Gunther, C. F. *Museum-goers: life-styles and learning characteristics*, in Hooper-Greenhill, E. (ed) *The educational role of the museum*, Routledge, London, 1994, 286-197.

However, meaning-making is not an entirely individual process. Although each of us is active in interpreting our own experience, using our individual strategies, capabilities, and preferred learning styles, the interpretation that we make is not ours alone. It is mediated, tested and developed within the context of communities of interpretation. Constructivist learning theory tells us that learning is both personal and social<sup>12</sup>. The concept of ‘interpretive communities’ enables a focus on how this social aspect to learning might be understood.

The meanings constructed from information and experience emerge from a complex network of mediation. Personal interpretations are forged through social and cultural environments, through local communities and through location in social structures. Although none of these elements are immutable, personal meanings and interpretations do have social dimensions. Individual meaning-making is tested in the context of interpretive communities. What we ‘know’ is produced through interpretations of individual experience, but also through the testing and refining of our interpretation within those communities that are significant to us.

## Interpretive communities

Stanley Fish<sup>13</sup> defines an ‘interpretive community’ as those who share the same strategies for reading texts and assigning meaning:

Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions<sup>14</sup>.

These strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read. The interpreting reader, acting with purposes and concerns, which have emerged through pre-existing experience and learning, determines what counts as the facts to be observed<sup>15</sup>.

Systems of intelligibility constrain and fashion us and furnish us with categories of understanding with which we fashion the entities to which we then point<sup>16</sup>

Fish refers to ‘writing’ texts, but he is using this expression in a metaphorical way. In reading a piece of written material, the interpretive strategies that determine what counts as significant effectively reproduce the text in a specific and potentially unique way – the texts are thus ‘written’ by readers, rather than ‘read’ by them.

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<sup>12</sup> Falk, J. and Dierking, L. *The museum experience*, Whalesback Books, 1992.

<sup>13</sup> Fish, S. *Is there a text in this class? The authority of interpretive communities*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England, 1980.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 171.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 8.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 332.

An interpretive community can be identified where the same systems of intelligibility are being used, where the same categories of understanding are employed and the same significant entities are recognised. For example, we might call an association of art historians, or a group of professional scientists, an 'interpretive community'. Both of these groups share (different) ways of identifying what is important in the world, and share learnt assumptions of what is significant and what is trivial. As professional groups, they speak a common language and share common frameworks of making sense of their subject-matter (systems of intelligibility).

Fish wishes to show how meaning is not inherent in the text (or the object or exhibition), but is brought into being through the interpretive strategies used by the reader (viewer, visitor). These meanings, however, are not relative or subjective, but are in large part controlled by the validation accorded them by the relevant interpretive community. The challenge for interpreters is to test personal interpretations against those of respected interpretive communities. If the interpretation is accepted by such a community, it will stand, at least for the moment.

Fish is concerned with interpretive communities in relation to ways of reading English literature. He focuses on levels and forms of specialist knowledge. Other writers have used the concept for more general purposes, and that is how I am using it here. I use the concept for two purposes, firstly to emphasise that there is no one 'true' meaning for an object. This is an old museum fallacy, but one that can still be found in the way in which curators conceptualise objects and their interpretation. Secondly, I want to point out that, contrary to the views of some recent writers, meaning-making is not a uniquely personal business. Although individuals are active in the construction of what appears to make sense to them in any specific situation, the sense that is made is mediated through external structures of validation.

The meaning, or understanding, of an object, is not constant or static. Meaning will vary according to who is looking. The meaning constructed will vary depending on a range of factors which include sociological, epistemological, cultural and linguistic factors. The interpretation of any object will be constructed in relation to the personal biography of the observer, their position in history, culture and knowledge, their cultural competence, and their interpretive strategies, all of which will have been forged within a range of interpretive communities.

## Interpreting Hinemihi

An example of this is *Hinemihi* the Maori meeting house at Clandon Park, a National Trust House in Surrey, England<sup>17</sup>. *Hinemihi* is interpreted in a very different way according to the position in history and culture from which she is viewed.

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<sup>17</sup> Hooper-Greenhill, E. *Perspectives on Hinemihi – a Maori meeting house*, in Barringer, T. and Flynn, T. *Colonialism and the object*, Routledge, London and New York, 129-143, 1998; and Gallop, A. *The house with the golden eyes*, Running Horse Books, Middlesex, 1998.

To National Trust in England, the house is a ‘work of art in our care’; a collection of carved posts which they own and have a custodial duty towards. To the Maori community in England - she is someone who you should come and see when you are sick and unhappy and who will restore your sense of Maori identity<sup>18</sup>. She is Hinemihi, an important and well-remembered woman of the Ngati Hinimihi tribe. These are two very different interpretations, which stem from different attitudes to art, and different positions in history.

The differences are summarised, for the purposes of this paper, in Figure 1.

The Western and the Maori position in history are in some ways diametrically opposed - the coloniser and the colonised<sup>19</sup>. In 19th century New Zealand, this house represented elements from the past to both groups, but the past used and understood in two very different ways.

To British colonisers, the house was a sign of the heroic Maori of the past, the earlier purer race whose last feeble and weakened remains were dying out. Bringing Hinemihi to England meant saving this relic from the extinction to which the race was doomed (not least because of the effects of colonisation). The lack of continuity with the past was used to justify the appropriation of Hinemihi for the outgoing governor’s collection.

To the Maori tribe who built it, it also represented a link back to the past in that its construction was related to older models of the meeting house<sup>20</sup>. However, at the time of its erection (1880s), it was used to entertain paying tourists who had come to see the eighth wonder of the world, the silica terraces close to Rotorua. It was built as a business venture, among other things. The tourist venture was extremely successful and the business acumen of the Maoris was much resented by the European tourists, who objected to paying up to ‘the natives’. The past here is both celebrated as something to be kept fully in mind and in view, as Maori cosmologies promote, but it was also something to be exploited in an entrepreneurial way. Hinimihi was ‘Hinimihi of the golden eyes’, a reference to the golden sovereigns that were used instead of paua shell for the eyes of the ancestor figures.

For the Maori community in Britain today, Hinemihi is one of the two major sites that are visited to maintain Maori identity – the other being the grave of Maggie Papakura in Oddington Churchyard. In both these sites, identity is sustained through the performance of Maori culture, sometimes literally.

To contemporary Britons, knowing nothing of the history of the house, it is a carved house, a work of art, a garden folly, a summerhouse. There is no information about the house on display, and so many people cannot even identify its country of origin<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> Conversation with Rachel Windsor, London, 09.08.95.

<sup>19</sup> Walker, R. *Ka whawhai tonu matou – struggle without end*, Penguin Books, Auckland, 1990.

<sup>20</sup> Neich, R. *Painted histories: early Maori figurative painting*, Auckland University Press, Auckland, 221-241, 1994.

<sup>21</sup> Gallop, A. *The house with the golden eyes*, Running Horse Books, Middlesex, England, 1998, 9.

There is not a great deal of communality or communication between two positions. Each position in history and culture is sustained through its own repertoire of concepts, information and knowledge, and each works through different systems of intelligibility to construct frameworks of interpretation.

We can see at least two contemporary ‘interpretive communities’: that of the legal owners of the meeting house, who have a custodial duty towards it, and that of the Maori community in England, who relate to Hinemihi as part of their national, cultural and personal identity. The interpretation of each of the contemporary communities is deeply embedded in the experience of the earlier interpretations. The past and the present work dialogically to make meaning today. The object that is looked at is the same, but the object that is seen is very different. Hinemihi is perceived, remembered and logically considered in completely different ways, and yet to each of these groups of interpreters, their way is ‘common sense’. Different interpretive strategies and repertoires are employed and through the processes of interpretation, meanings are actualised, brought into being, through the negotiation of the objects by the viewers<sup>22</sup>.

Fish is concerned to point out that interpretive communities themselves are fluid and open to change. They are not closed, determining categories; but they do offer a way of going beyond personal meaning making in a way that has a useful application in museums.

## **The use of ‘interpretive communities’ in museums**

I have hinted at some of the ways in which the concept of ‘interpretive communities’ can be used in museums. We have already talked about how it illuminates the differentiated meanings for objects, linking this with both Gadamer’s and Bourdieu’s theorisation of the construction of meaning. The idea of ‘interpretive communities’ also works to remind us that the museum’s familiar ‘general public’ is in fact a differentiated group. We have become accustomed in recent years to thinking about ‘target audiences’, and know that each target group needs to be considered separately. We tend to talk about school-groups, families, tourists, people with disabilities and so on. The concept ‘target group’ is a marketing term which enables the division of museum visitors on the basis of demographic variables such as age, disability or life-stage. ‘Interpretive communities’ takes this a step further by focussing on those varying strategies of interpretation that differentiated visitors will use to make sense of the experience of the museum.

The concept of ‘interpretive communities’ encourages a more complex approach to exhibition development – one that acknowledges the active interpretation people will make, and that requires research into how this might work. It means, I think, a reformulation of communication in museums.

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<sup>22</sup> ‘Meaning is actualised, brought into being, by the negotiation of the objects by the viewer’, Fish, op.cit. 2.

During the modernist period museums worked from a transmission approach to communication; the curator as the specialist authority defined the interpretive approach of the exhibition, and wrote authoritative texts that transmitted essential information about the various artefacts. The content of the display was constructed within the parameters of the subject discipline (art history, evolution) and displays frequently had the character of a textbook. The audience was not considered as part of the construction of the exhibition, and was expected to passively receive the pre-selected significant facts and learn them, often being required to move slowly through an exhibition reading enough factual information to fill a complete catalogue. In fact, frequently, the exhibition was a three-dimensional version of the catalogue.

We know now that this transmission approach to communication, which is based on a behaviourist theory of education, does not work. It doesn't work in the classroom and it doesn't work in the museum.

Today we use a broader approach to communication, which sees it as integral to the whole of culture, and which insists on the constructed character of both culture and communication<sup>23</sup>.

This more recently developed cultural model understands communication as a set of negotiated processes of making meaning as part of the complex and unequal culture of everyday life. It is accepted that there are many, sometimes conflicting, perspectives from which to explain the world. In the negotiation of culture, the active interpretive strategies for the perception and processing of knowledge and the differentiated agendas that participants bring to cultural experiences are acknowledged.

The cultural approach shows communication to be a much more unreliable business than we are used to. In the transmission model communicators handed over ready-made or prefabricated meanings. However, if there are no fixed meanings, and if interpretive strategies are learned and not natural, what do communicators (writers, speakers) do? How can communication be achieved? Stanley Fish's answer to this question is that communicators give hearers and readers (or museum visitors) the opportunity to make meanings by inviting them to put into execution a set of strategies. It is presumed that the invitation will be recognised and this presumption rests on the a projection on the part of the communicator of the moves he/she would make if she was confronted by the sounds she hears or marks she sets down<sup>24</sup>.

However, these interpretive strategies will only be employed if they are already in place. The opportunity to make meaning will only be recognised if the strategies exist to respond to it. And it is only those within the same interpretive community who will have the relevant interpretive strategies. A writer, or communicator, hazards her projection, (her text, her exhibition) not because of something 'in' the marks that make up the text, but because of something she assumes to be in the reader (something similar to what she

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<sup>23</sup> Jensen, K.B. *Humanistic scholarship as qualitative science: contributions to mass communication research*, in Jensen, K.B. and Jankowski, N. W. (eds) *A handbook of qualitative methodologies for mass communication research*, Routledge, London, 17-43, 1991.

<sup>24</sup> Fish, *op.cit.*172-3.

perceives within herself). The very existence of the 'marks' is a function of an interpretive community, for they will be recognised (that is made) only by its members. Those outside the interpretive community will employ a different set of strategies, and may, therefore, find themselves unable to recognise the appropriate strategies for the specific communicative event.

Fish is working in the context of reading written texts. Although there is a good deal to say about the difference between written texts and the collections and spaces of museums, these ideas about interpretive communities pose more questions for museums. A first question to ask is: do museums attract their own interpretive communities, who use the same interpretive strategies as the community of professional museum people? If so, at what level and to what degree are these strategies used? And do different types of museum attract different interpretive communities? If, for example, an art curator has a doctorate in art history and several years of experience as a curator, and uses the interpretive strategies that feel comfortable, does that mean that all visitors, in order to benefit fully from a visit to an art gallery, need the same level of specialist knowledge and expertise? Do museums represent a self-perpetuating community? What would be necessary to open the museum to new audiences who might belong to different interpretive communities? What might their systems of intelligibility be, and how would they assign meaning?

It seems to me that, as museum professionals, we have the responsibility to begin to address and analyse the interpretive strategies that are required by our displays. What interpretive repertoires do they demand? And how do these relate to the various existing interpretive communities that we might find represented in our museum audience? And which interpretive communities do we exclude by our strategies? The objective, is, I think, to be able to produce an exhibition that offers visitors from a range of interpretive communities the opportunity to put their interpretive strategies into operation. The answers to the questions will require some in-depth audience research. They will not be answered very quickly. We need to talk to people about their experiences within museums, and in fact, a large-scale research agenda would need to be developed. This might seem tiresome, but in fact, this work has to some extent begun. Many museums are engaged in looking at the actual experience of museum visitors, and some use this research to inform their provision.

The Glenbow Museum in Calgary, Canada, for example, in planning an exhibition of their African collection, talked to a range of communities who were likely to adopt different perspectives towards the collection. Fellow curators of African exhibitions were found to have mainly adopted an aesthetic approach to the display of objects, which were not by any means always intended as 'art'. White Calgary residents confessed to knowing very little about West Africa, the geographical area of origin of much of the collection; and members of Afro-Caribbean community expressed a fear of continuing negative stereotyping. The resulting exhibition was called *Where symbols meet: a celebration of West African achievement*. The exhibition gave more information than is usual on how to look at African artefacts, and maps naming and locating the countries concerned were included as part of the display. Overall, one third of the exhibition space was given over to contextualising the exhibits and orientating the visitor. A range of interpretive strategies

were suggested in the texts – questions to ask of the objects were posed, and answers given that would enable a richer understanding<sup>25</sup>.

In other areas of museum collections, the same principles hold good. If we assess exhibition plans from the point of view of the various interpretive communities, researching their interpretive repertoires and strategies, the range of interpretive perspectives that will exist in an interplay with the exhibition will come into sharper focus. In planning exhibitions, if these are taken into account, our exhibitions are likely to be more successful, and to offer more people opportunities of engaging, in their own way, with the collections and ideas. If a range of interpretive communities are addressed, we can also offer what Vygotsky calls ‘scaffolding’ experiences, to enable people to reach beyond what they know at present, to transcend the interpretive community in which they would locate themselves at present.

This paper has discussed the active character of the interpretation that museum visitors make of their museum experiences through linking hermeneutic philosophy and constructivist theories of education. We have considered the idea that meaning making is not merely a personal matter, but that personal interpretations are mediated through interpretive communities. The concept of interpretive communities has been examined for potential applications in museum practice. Thank you for listening.

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<sup>25</sup> For example: ‘How do you recognise achievement? In West Africa, as elsewhere, achievement is recognised by social status, political and spiritual knowledge or artistic reputation’. The information panels set out to teach visitors how to recognise the symbols in West African objects. Smith, S. D. Reflections of West Africa: designing *Where symbols meet*, in *Where symbols meet: a celebration of West African achievement*, Glenbow, Spring Issue, 1994, 4-5.