

Response to 'Freud's Antiquities' by Richard D. Lane and Karen L. Weihs *Psychodynamic Practice* Vol 16, No. 1, February 2010, 77-78

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Biography

Dr Myna Trustram studied history at the universities of Essex and Bristol. Her book, *Women of the Regiment: Marriage and the Victorian Army* was published by Cambridge University Press in 1984 and re-printed in 2008. She has worked in museums for over twenty years, holding curatorial, management and research posts in London, Southampton, Preston and Manchester. In 2008 she completed the Tavistock Clinic's MA in psychoanalytic approaches to consultancy and in 2009 the Institute of Group Analysis introductory course in group analysis. Her writing attempts to integrate these strands of professional and personal interests.

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Lane and Weih's tantalising article brings attention to Freud's collection of Greek, Roman and Egyptian antiquities which in their turn evoke the dialogue between material objects and psychic objects within psychoanalytic method. Lane and Weih describe the former 'buried treasure' in Freud's consulting room which was positioned so that he could contemplate it during psychoanalytic sessions. They say that Freud believed bringing the contents of the unconscious into conscious awareness was akin to recovering 'buried treasure', in other words to working as an archaeologist (2010, p. 77).

Lane and Weih argue that this comparison between the mental contents of the unconscious and antiquities, and between the methods of therapists and archaeologists, 'creates a misimpression about the nature of the unconscious' (2010, p.77). They say the contents of the unconscious and artefacts under the ground cannot be compared because objects in the unconscious are undifferentiated whereas artefacts are fully formed when they are excavated. Secondly the method employed by the therapist and the archaeologist are not similar since the therapist is 'engaged in a mutually creative process with the

patient'; it is the interaction between therapist and patient that elicits any treasure (2010, p77).

It is worth lingering though with this potent image of Freud's antiquities in his consulting room. It offers a hook on which to hang thoughts I have had for some time now about links between the two practices of psychoanalysis and museums.

In 1909 Freud reported that he said to the patient known as the 'Rat Man'

...that everything conscious was subject to a process of wearing-away, while what was unconscious was relatively unchangeable; and I illustrated my remarks by pointing to the antiques standing about in my room. They were, in fact, I said, only objects found in a tomb, and their burial had been their preservation: the destruction of Pompeii was only beginning now that it had been dug up. (as cited in Forrester 1994, p. 176)

Lane and Weihs use a much later source, *Constructions in Analysis* (1937), to assert Freud's belief in the similarities between the archaeologist's excavations and the analyst's construction of the unconscious:

...just as the archaeologist builds up the walls of the building from the foundations that have remained standing...and reconstructs the mural decorations and paintings from the remains found in the debris, so does the analyst proceed when he draws his inferences from the fragments of memories, from the associations and from the behaviour of the subject of the analysis. (1937, p. 259)

Earlier in *Civilisation and its Discontents* (1930/1975) Freud proposed the *object* of the archaeologist's excavations, the city, as opposed to his or her method as a metaphor for the unconscious. However he concluded that the metaphor was not valid because, unlike the city, the unconscious is a fixed entity where 'everything past is preserved' (1930/1975, p. 8).

Christopher Bollas suggests that if Freud had persevered with the metaphor 'its dialectic would have worked...For obliterations are indeed part of one's unconscious life – so much so that depending on how one wanted to look at the Rome of one's unconscious life, one could see both the preserved and the destroyed' (Bollas, 2009, p. 48).

These images - of ancient objects in Freud's consulting room, of archaeologists excavating ancient sites, of timeless layers in the unconscious, of crumbled but alive ancient cities – stimulate thoughts about mental and material objects and our relations to them, of objects preserved and destroyed. Such thoughts are facilitated by the work of Bollas (1987, 1992, 2009) who disregards distinctions between material and mental objects and thus frees our thinking to include material objects, such as Freud's antiquities or ancient cities, within the territory of psychoanalytic object relations theory.¹ Bollas describes how

¹ That museums now care for the 'intangible heritage' as well as the tangible further dissolves the distinction between material and mental objects.

As we inhabit this world of ours, we amble about in a field of pregnant objects that contribute to the dense psychic textures that constitute self experience (Bollas, 1992, p. 3).

Would a more appropriate metaphor for the unconscious, which also resides in this same territory of preservation, destruction, timelessness and material objects be the idea of the museum? The *idea* of the museum is immutable. Like cities, museum buildings and their collections can be destroyed and yet the curator's burden is to maintain the museum in perpetuity. The collections are there forever because their task is to represent immortality, timelessness. Perhaps it is helpful to think of both the museum and the unconscious as 'the changing same' (Hoggett, Beedell, Jimenez, Mayo & Miller 2006, p. 699)? They both have a core which remains the same but the objects and the subject's relations with them change.

Freud the curator

That the founder of psychoanalysis was also a collector, whose collection is now housed in a museum, is an excuse, if one is needed, to contemplate together the two practices of psychoanalysis and museums. Freud furnished his work rooms, as opposed to his domestic rooms, with his objects. Like all of us he ambled about engaging with objects but he also assembled objects into a collection, cared for them (in both senses of the word), displayed them and interpreted them. In other words he was a curator² (rather than an

² Note though that his collection was not assembled systematically. Each object was acquired on the basis of its intrinsic merits rather than because it fitted into an order, he was not seeking completeness or universality (Forrester, 1994, p. 229) Neither did he prepare a catalogue of the collection.

archaeologist) of his collection, of the unconscious and perhaps of his patients' psychic objects. Freud collected dreams, slips and jokes as well as 3,000 antiquities (Forrester, 1994). Forrester argues that the antiquities embodied universal cultural and historical traditions and ideals whilst in contrast his collections of dreams, slips, jokes might be compared to eccentric accumulations of apparently insignificant objects like bottle-tops (1994, p. 241). And yet, as Forrester shows, it is these collections of the mind's detritus that Freud transformed into a theory of the human mind which now takes its place within respected cultural and scientific tradition.

In fact, the metaphor of buried treasure is as inappropriate for antiquities or other museum objects as it is for the unconscious. Both psychoanalysis and museology now share an understanding that meaning is acquired, not intrinsic. The recently discovered Staffordshire Hoard of Anglo-Saxon objects acquires its status as treasure because of the social meanings we apply to it (Staffordshire Hoard 2010). The meaning for the hoarder is different from that of the 21st century metal detector who found it. Just as the unconscious has been modelled as a fixed entity waiting to be uncovered by the analyst, so antiquities are seen to have a fixed, single meaning which can best be unlocked by the museum's experts. Just as a relational turn has taken place within psychoanalysis (Clarke, Hahn & Hoggett, 2008) so a similar relational turn is taking place within museums; dynamic relationships are seen to exist between people and objects and between museum staff and members of the public

Progressive museum practice today promotes the 'co-construction' of meanings by curators and visitors, rather than the single authoritative

meaning of the curator. Lane and Weihs describe how the role of the analyst is no longer understood as that of displaying the already existing contents of the unconscious to the patient. Similarly, the archaeologist does not unearth objects which spring from the earth with their meaning known. The progressive curator does not display and interpret objects *for* people, rather he or she co-curates or co-constructs the meanings with people.

I will use the rest of this 'open space' to explore an example of co-curation in the hope that it might illustrate this 'mutually creative' process of shared meaning making that Lane and Weihs describe. Perhaps there are parallels with what could be called the co-curation of psychic objects carried out by analysts and patients?

The bonbonniere at Manchester Art Gallery

2007 was the bicentenary of the British abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. As part of a programme called *Revealing Histories: Remembering Slavery*, Manchester Art Gallery worked with members of the public to interpret and display an 18th century bonbonniere. The decorative art curators produced meanings for the object which were quite different from the meanings developed by others. Curators wrote the following about the bonbonniere:

Bonbonniere is a French word, meaning container for 'bonbons' or sweets.

This tiny little box, decorated with painted scenes of idealised English landscapes, was made during the 1760s, and would once have held small, breath-freshening minted sweets. At this time, sugar was still a highly

valuable commodity and could only be afforded by the wealthy. The sweets it contained were almost certainly made from sugar cane that was cut and processed by enslaved Africans on British owned plantations in the Caribbean. (Revealing Histories 2010)

The performance poet Tina Tamsho-Thomas wrote the following response to the bonbonniere (this is an extract from a longer poem):

I am Bonbonniere,
made in my masters' image,
elegant, delicate, decorative, attractive, delightful,
venerated, refined, ornate, beautiful.
Emblem of Europe's plundered wealth and power.

I am Bonbonniere,
possessed by prosperous, profiteering, predatory pirates
who made their heap, their pile, their mint, their ill-gotten gains
from madness, insanity, misery, cruelty,
base inhumanity, bastard brutality,
butchery, debauchery, depravity, iniquity,
gluttony and greed. (Revealing Histories 2010)

These two pieces were written separately and no one would claim this was pure co-construction of meanings or co-curation, but the participants did work together on the project and the meanings are on the website, together. In fact though, I am tempted (as Freud did) to change my mind and suggest that co-curation is an impossible ideal unless socio-economic inequalities are

also tackled. The language of co-curation and co-construction within arts and heritage practice is redolent of government attempts to make life appear 'fair' which do not take into account unequal distributions of wealth and power. We are in danger of hoping that simply through acknowledging difference we will all become equal (Foster, Dickinson, Bishop & Klein, 2006, p. 7). Dibley questions the idea that the museum can be redeemed from its legacy of racism, classism and sexism through such strategies (Dibley, 2005).

But to return to the bonbonniere. Now imagine it in Freud's consulting room and we can begin to identify similarities between analysts and curators, if not archaeologists. They are both interested in the symbolic meaning of objects; they both curate (from the Latin cura, care) and in so doing create meanings. They both create and curate a sacred, ritualised space within the consulting³ room or the museum which enables meanings to be constructed. They both work in a transitional space and with transitional objects. We can also begin to contemplate the complexities of either analysts or curators working across issues of social and cultural difference.

³ Note that government policy encourages museums to 'consult' their audiences about the services they provide.



Permission for this image from Manchester Art Gallery

And to go back to Lane and Weihs. Their brief discussion risks leaving us with an impression of Freud as just another eccentric collector, attempting to accumulate immortality. Forrester's account of Freud's collecting describes how his collections had a public function and helps us further understand 'the interplay between the mental and the material in his method' (1994, p. 238). That Freud's antiquities do not fit with our current understanding of the nature of the psychoanalytic process misses the point of the collection which is its dynamic relationship with his psychoanalytic work (Forrester, 1994, p. 248). Through his collections 'Freud wished to establish dreams, jokes, symptoms, and their material symbol, his collection of antiquities, as emblematic of a shared and universal humanity, neither economic, nor quite aesthetic or

ethical' (1994, p. 249). He turned his collection of seemingly inconsequential trivia and shameful objects into science. His antiquities embodied cultural and intellectual traditions to which he aspired to add his theory of the mind:

...and it is their possession that realizes Freud's desire to be a universal and public citizen of this world, walking through the Museum of history and culture. Collectors are often extremely private, especially when they collect such strange objects as dreams. In contrast, all of Freud's collections were permeated by a public and enlightenment ideal (1994, p. 241).

Bollas describes how we encounter objects in the environment as if by accident but that we also seek out particular objects which 'promote inner experience' (1992, p. 4). In the contained space of the museum we encounter objects as we amble through the galleries but we can also seek particular objects. But the objects we find have been selected by curators so despite the public nature of museums they are quite undemocratic. In analysis, that most private of practices, the patient seeks out the great wide world of objects, not just those that are selected, held and contained by the museum.

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