'Do museums still need objects?'

When first confronted with the question of ‘Do museums still need objects?’ I was intrigued to see what had been written on the subject of museum objects and whether anyone had argued that objects are now a completely redundant entity in the museum world. It seemed implausible to me that a museum could even begin to function with no objects in it at all. However after reading some of the literature on the subject of museum objects and museum collections, it started to become clear that there was not a simple yes or no answer to the question of the need for objects in museums, and that the function of museum collections is an incredibly complex issue.¹ There are no definitive answers given to this question, there is instead a focus on the changing nature of the relationship between museums and their collections over the centuries. This idea of the changing role of objects in museums and the different roles they play depending on the type of museum they are in is the area of the question of the need for object I intend to explore. I will aim to explore how and why museums saw the need to specifically consider the function of the objects placed in a museums display; why different types of museums, for example art galleries and natural history museums, view objects in different ways; and if objects are not as prominent in a museum’s function as they once were, what alternatives routes are there for museums?

When people visit museums, objects, in some shape or form, are what they expect to see. When museums first emerged as public institutions in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries they were simply a place in which to house the collections of keen individual collectors, who wished to share their finds with the public. Over the course of the nineteenth century, as new museums began to emerge and existing museums started to expand, “museums could not make rational sense out of the world unless they devoted themselves to collecting, organising, and displaying particular categories of knowledge.”² Museums began to make much more of a concerted effort to engage with their collections and think much more carefully about the function of objects within museum displays. “Objects were catalogued, stored, and researched. They were subject not only to classification and categorisation – an extended natural history that included artefacts and instruments – but also to analysis and comparison.”³ In effect objects were not just there to be glanced, but ideally they would

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² Conn, Ibid, p.21
invoke some sort of reaction from visitors and engage them further with the subject matter being covered.

It was out of a real necessity that museums began to use the objects within their collections differently and Simon Knell argues that this idea of continual reinterpretation and re-evaluation is imperative and states that, “We need museums to remain those object-centred oases in a world of change, but in order to achieve this they too must change.” In order to achieve the changes needed, museums have had to alter the approach they take when deciding on what objects to display and how exactly to display them. In addition to reconsidering the objects they already possess, it has been necessary for them to think more carefully about the objects they choose to add to their existing collections. To start with, during the twentieth century, many museums began to reduce the number of objects they displayed, the effects of which can still be witnessed in museums today; art galleries no longer have walls covered with paintings from floor to ceiling and natural history museums have moved away from displaying their complete collections of every specimen they own. This reduction of objects put on display to the public seems like a sensible idea on the surface, because it is important for museums not to overwhelm visitors with too many objects. As surely this invites less of a chance for detailed interpretation and risks ending up being merely a room with an entire collection on display but no real explanation of why it is there. Steven Conn argues, that by using less objects, these remaining objects then have more work to do to successfully tell the intended stories and perhaps this then leads to fewer opportunities for alternative stories to be told. He also says that this has in turn led to exhibits now being much more carefully curated but it has also meant that there are higher expectations regarding the effectiveness of objects to tell stories. This belief in the need for objects to be able to communicate effectively with visitors is echoed by Gaynor Kavanagh who argues that, “Objects do not speak for themselves, unless on some psychic level to which few of us are attuned.”

Another issue which museums have had to contend with over the years, is getting to grips with the varied content of the collections they own. In many instances, where a museum had been founded to showcase the collection of just one person, the range of objects could be quite diverse would perhaps later go on to be placed in different categories from one another. In a discussion of the use of anthropological objects in museums Conn states that “some natural history museums find themselves

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4 Knell, op. cit., p.46  
5 See for example, Conn, op. cit., or Knell, op. cit.  
6 Conn, op. cit., p.22  
7 Conn, op. cit., p.23  
tending collections many probably wish they did not own”⁹, and that objects which were once categorised as anthropological have now moved to being considered and displayed as art instead.¹⁰ It makes sense to do this though as it is surely all part of the continuing reinterpretation of objects “Many objects in natural science collections may have little use to modern science but are rather objects of history and culture.”¹¹ If an object can still be used to communicate a narrative to visitors, even if this is different to the one originally perceived, then there is no reason why this should not be made possible. It must be important to remember that many objects were collected by a singular person to fulfil the needs of their particular interest and that they would not have necessarily considered how that object would be used many years after it first came into their hands.

It is very important during any attempt at the reinterpretation of an object that its original context is remembered, that is, the culture or place it is from and perhaps what it represents. It may be that an object has multiple stories to tell but its origins should never be forgotten, otherwise there is a chance that a false impression of it will be given to visitors. Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall argue that an object’s origins and the collection it ends up in are linked though and states that, “Objects can be understood only through looking at the cultural contexts which originally produced them and the new circumstances into which they later moved.”¹² A slightly different approach is taken regarding the cultural context of objects in non-western museums though, as they have different views to western museums on the nature of collecting. Malcolm McLeod points out that in some cultures collecting is viewed as not being that good or useful and could actually be seen to destroy rather than preserve a particular culture.¹³ Christina Kreps echoes this viewpoint and argues that, “Access to knowledge about certain objects and rights to their interpretations may also be restricted in some societies due to the sacred nature of the objects.”¹⁴ This goes some way to explain why many non-western museums, whilst still making use of objects, do not actually have their own collections. McLeod states that, “some cultures have ways of preserving and displaying their past which need not involve the

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⁹ Conn, op. cit., p.34
¹⁰ Conn, op. cit., p.34
¹¹ Knell, op. cit., p.28
formation of museum collections,” instead museums will borrow objects for their displays or produce replicas.

Regarding the current position objects appear to occupy within museums Conn states that, “In some cases, objects continue to play a central role in the functions of museums; in others, their role is clearly a reduced one; in still others, objects have virtually disappeared from galleries, replaced by other didactic devices – audio-visual, interactive technologies, and so on.” It is certainly true that in recent years museums have begun to look towards different ways to represent and narrate the stories they are aiming to tell visitors. The Benjamin Franklin House in London has made use of the new technology available for its Historical Experience Show which follows along the lines of reimagining the museum as theatre. The house Benjamin Franklin once inhabited whilst in London acts as the stage for telling the story of Franklin’s life and his most important achievements, and uses a mixture of audio-visual and live performance in order to do this. As a visitor, it was a completely different to what I had expected or had ever experienced at a museum before however I thought it was incredibly innovative and I probably learned much more about Franklin than I would have from it, than if it had been a more conventionally set up historic house. Having also worked as an intern at the house, many visitors had similar reactions to mine and praised the different approach that had been taken, although there were others who admitted they would have preferred there to be furniture and other objects in the rooms to give them a sense of how Franklin had lived whilst in London.

Other museums also make varying levels of use out of the new technologies available but will often use these alongside their existing objects. As Steven Conn states rather emphatically in the introduction to his book, “the place of objects in museums has shrunk as people have lost faith in the ability of objects alone to tell stories and convey knowledge.” The rising use of interactivity in museums does not have to signal the end of the use of objects though, it is a beneficial addition to help visitors to explore the meanings and stories of the objects further. As Hilde Hein states when discussing the visitor experience given by The Exploratorium, in San Francisco, and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, in Washington D.C., “Both institutions preserve continuity with the traditional object-oriented museum while moving forward into a new dimension of interactivity.” As long as the elements of interactivity being used do not conflict with the narrative an object has been

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15 McLeod, op. cit., p.52
16 Conn, op. cit., p.20
intended to impart to visitors, then the chance for people to explore these narratives further can only be a good thing, especially since the aim to be educational is such a core function of museums now.

In conclusion it would appear that far from stating that the place of objects in museums is now obsolete, the existing literature on this subject in the main argues that the nature of how objects are used has changed quite dramatically over time, as museums’ functions have evolved. This does not mean to say that objects are a diminishing force within museums; as long as museums exist there will always be a place and a need for objects, however as Knell rightly states, “Objects must have other values aside from age which give them worth.”19 Objects need to be able to communicate with visitors and encourage a higher level of engagement from them than they did when museums first opened their doors to the public. Donald Preziosi states that, “Walking (through) a museum appears to resemble walking through history: we move in and among a succession of objects, pantomiming not only the passage of time but also appearing to exemplify evolutionary changes or even the progressive developments in form, style, invention, value, or mentality.”20 There is no harm in this, and many would share this view and argue that objects are still a key component in enhancing the visitor experience in museums. “Objects, the argument runs, are capable of reinterpretation, which is what gives collections their importance and utility”21, it is vital then that museums continue to assess the objects in their collections and make sure that they are still communicating effectively to visitors, but to not be afraid that the narrative they are or can be a part of may differ. Ultimately though, going back to the original question of the need for objects in museums, it seems clear to me that they do. However it is also apparent that much continual concerted effort is needed in order for objects to prove their worth by helping to educate visitors and communicate stories to them on a variety of subjects.

Word Count: 2,355

19 Knell, op. cit., p.32
21 Knell, op. cit., p.38
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