



# *Coming of Age*

an insight into the mysterious 'Bay People' of Orkney

an installation by

**John Shapter**

Saturday the 29th of July to Friday the 29th of September 2006  
at the Peedie Gallery in the Orkney Museum, Kirkwall



### **An Introduction to 'Coming of Age' by John Shapter**

The proposed venue for the Peedie Gallery made me consider the nature of museums and in particular, displaying material of a historical nature. This is not an exercise in being critical of museums, but it is purely about challenging and questioning a number of things about the way we view artefacts on display. Firstly, we see objects in the context of our own culture, and I wonder if this alters their significance, certainly in cultural terms. Secondly, we view these objects within the confines of both the museum and probably a glass case. We are forced to interpret their meaning, as seen in these surroundings. We also do so without the help of other real-time communications, which are used in our society, such as a user-manual, filmed images or even contemporary stories.

It seems that our museums are organised as a result of the Victorian obsession with collecting, categorising and boxing artefacts. It is presumed that there is a recognised methodology for selecting and categorising objects for each display. However, does the selection process itself alter the significance of individual objects? Further, does the position and relationship of objects within a case alter their importance? It is possible that placing two objects together on a shelf makes a connection between them which did not exist in real life. Placing objects under glass, so forcing a distance and an inability to touch, intensifies the sense of them being from a time gone by, a place we can no longer go to. Does this put an almost religious importance on them, which is unjustifiable?

One aspect that I would like to highlight, is that of the museum as a gallery. Every artefact can be considered a piece of art, in that it is either formed by an action or represents a performance (however mundane). Just as a drawing is the trace of a past activity or is the proposition for an idea, an artefact implicates the past in the present. An object in a museum can exist on two levels, either as a decorative object or an educational device. Is the line blurred between the ultimate `found-object-as-art` and something which connects us with a living past?

I think there is also a scientific issue. We view both physical art and historical objects by sensing reflected radiation on the back of our eyes. I was interested to read recently that there is no certainty we all see things the same way, just that we are all consistent in our own way. In other words, my blue might be your orange but our individual palettes are the same for our lifetime. Deeper still, is our cognitive understanding of what we see the same for each individual? Does this mean that our interpretation of historical objects might be different to other people with different internal `filters`?

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I would like to quote from a Finnish artist, Outi Turpeinen:

“An exhibition is always a spatial experience... A museum exhibition is always mounted by someone with a particular world-view regardless of whether he/she is conscious of it or not. Meanings and mental impressions are created from comprehensive visibility, which is produced with visual elements of light and colour in relation to space and a place.”

She goes on to say - “...there seems to be a clear functional use for conceptual artistic installations in cultural history museums, which can confer new associations and meanings on exhibition artefacts.”

***John Shapter***



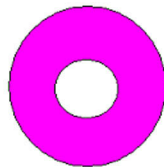
**Coming of Age**

Three found-objects are displayed in the Peedie Gallery. These have been discovered, as a group, on an Orkney shoreline. Historically, they have been attributed to a mysterious and mythical society, known as the `Bay-People`, which flourished on the coast sometime in the past. A description and explanation of each artefact is included in the display.

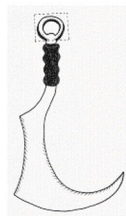
Coincidentally, the shape of each object forms a symbol, three of the twenty eight used in the language of the Bay-people. These symbols spell a word, the closest meaning of which is `coming of age` or `reaching maturity`. It is a matter of conjecture, whether these objects were placed in this pattern deliberately as part of a ritual.



**Object 1a**



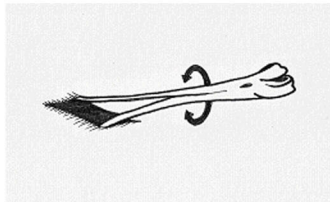
This ring is thought to be part of the hilt of a `Schlabe` (as reconstructed from this artefact in the illustration below). A fearful weapon which hung from the belt of a Bay-soldier, when not being used in battle or the mandatory castration of prisoners.



**Object 1b**



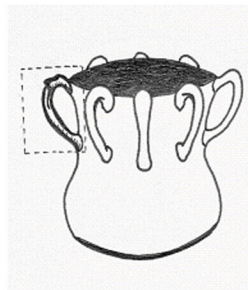
We believe this possible surgical instrument to be one of the first means of treating infected wounds. The carefully carved ends were inserted into the wound and then rotated 90 degrees, so widening the opening and allowing pus and debris to drain out (see below). This would have given enormous relief to the sufferer and helped in the healing process.



**Object 1c**



This handle belongs to a drinking vessel. So many of these are found at village sites, that we surmise each vessel was multi-handled. Designed to be held by quite a number of people, it was probably used for drinking locally brewed beer prior to ritualistic orgies.









**John Chapter** was born in Shropshire in 1955, and has been creating art and writing poetry for most of his life.

**Public Works**

`Hard Verse` City Council, Coventry 1986.  
Poetry cut into limestone slabs and placed in the floor of a shopping mall.

**In Print**

`Spring Sunshine`, book published 1988, and various magazines before and since.

**Exhibitions, lately**

2005 Summer Exhibition - Loft Gallery, Orkney; 2005 Summer Exhibition - Strond Gallery, Orkney; 2005 - 2006 Ortak Factory Kirkwall, Orkney.





: the art gallery in a shoebox

For further information about the Peedie Gallery, or to view the current exhibition online, visit the gallery website: [www.peediegallery.co.uk](http://www.peediegallery.co.uk)

*Exhibition supported by:*



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