



: the art gallery in a shoebox

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## **Coming of Age** by John Shapter

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### **Exhibition notes**

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`?

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 2006**