

Past and Present – Multimodal Constructions of Identity in Two Exhibitions

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Introduction

In museums, exhibitions are shaped as a result of professional strivings but also in relation to the political agenda. An exhibition is in that sense not only a representation of for example history, but also a response to the interests in the present society (Aronsson, 2008). Today's museums are changing, as a response to the demands from a society in transition. This change is visible in several ways and on several levels; in the museum's identity and its mission, and in exhibitions. The museum's identity is visible in the museums presentation of itself (on websites, in advertisement, in booklets etc.) and in the way it addresses its visitors in exhibitions. Aspects of identity, in terms of existential questions, may be one of the things that are emphasized in the efforts to make exhibitions that aim at providing new perspectives on history. What seem to be new in exhibitions are also the narratives of nationhood. In a globalized world, the territorial nation-states naturally loose some of its significance; and it is now apparent that a multicultural discourse dominates museum policy (Bier-de Haan 2006, Aronsson, 2008, Smeds 2007).

As for history museums, the changes can be compared to the changes in the discipline of history itself, where over the past thirty years there has been a shift from a political and economical focus toward cultural and micro-history. In museums, this is visible in exhibitions, where the old emphasis on facts and grand histories of nation-states in many cases have been replaced by an emphasis on description of contexts, emotions and everyday themes (Bier-de Haan, 2006). While earlier interpretations of material culture often were about the identification of specific "cultures" (especially in archaeology), we can now notice that interpretation has become more complex and nuanced (Pettersson, 2004). On a meta-level, the change has been described by Smeds as different exhibition rationalities or "systems". The shift is made visible by contrasting different keywords of the different systems. System 1 starts in the beginning of the 18th century, and is still prevalent when System 2 appears around 1890/1920. Traces of both systems can still be found when System 3 made an entrance during the 1990's. Some of the key words for system 2 and 3 are put in contrast to another; where history, (national) narrative, truth, normative and homogeneity in System 2 is replaced by stories/histories, messages, poly-vocal (dialogue), reflexivity and diversity in system 3.

As we can see, museums have started a search for new identities beyond those of ethnicity. According to Beier-de Haan (2006) there is a tendency in museums internationally, to present polyvalent or non-national identities (Beier-de Haan, 2006). In different ways, unity and heterogeneity is promoted. One example is the German Historical Museum in Berlin, where the idea is to promote, not a global, but a transnational identity, and to present different perspectives on history, connections and diversity in a European context. Aronsson (2008) has shown how the multi-cultural standpoint prevails in Sweden. The cultural agenda concerning civil virtues and human rights seems to promote all kinds of identities, except for the national, which according to Aronsson is perceived as a threat to democracy, unity and integration. Within Swedish cultural heritage work, there is a focus on access and on broadly humane questions, which are relevant to people in all times, and in the present society (Pettersson, 2004).

In what follows, we approach these issues from a didactic perspective¹, based on a multimodal and social semiotic view of communication and meaning making.

Aim

The aim of this paper is to offer a method for studying the narration and construction of different messages, such as national identity, in two present time museum exhibitions. We approach these issues from a multimodal perspective and will compare the exhibitions in terms of narrative, organization and form of address. In the one case it has to do with the identity of one self, and in the other about identity in relation to the other. Apart from representations of identity at a national level, this approach also enables us to illuminate other aspects of identity, found at different levels in the exhibitions.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

A multimodal and social semiotic perspective emphasizes the social aspects of all communication, and pays special attention to the interplay between different modes of communication (i.e. speech, writing, images, gestures etc.). Modes are conceived of as semiotic resources for representation that can be used in the making of signs of some sort. Social semiotics departs from 'traditional' strands of semiotics in the view that all signs are socially motivated (Kress, 1993). Signmaking can thus be thought of as a process where a signified is connected with an apt signifier – a connection between form and content. These can never be completely separated as they give meaning to each other. The form of a representation affects the content of a message, in that we say something about how we perceive of things through the way we design a message (Kress, 2003; Selander & Rostvall 2008). A different design gives a different message.

Another key element within social semiotics and multimodality is the notion of *metafunctions*, which stems from Halliday's functional linguistic theory. According to this notion all communicational systems must be able to produce three different forms of meaning simultaneously (Kress et al. 2001). They must be able to represent some aspect of the world (the *ideational* metafunction), represent and construct social relations between the participants in communication (the *interpersonal* metafunction), and produce texts that appear coherently by themselves and in relation to other text within a certain context (the *textual* metafunction). These metafunctions appear in all forms of texts – books, verbal communication, exhibitions etc.

The Ideational Metafunction

Since our interest here is directed towards aspects regarding identity, our main effort will be concentrated on analyses of the ideational meanings constructed in the two exhibitions. However, exhibitions are modally complex as they communicate through a number of modes and are organised in time and space. In semiotic terms, they can be looked upon as complex signs which construe ideational meaning at a number of levels, or in different layers. In this text we will present brief analyses of three of these layers, here referred to as *container layer*, *content layer* and *ideo-logical layer*. We will account for them chronologically, in the same order as they would be encountered with by a visitor.

1 We see didactics as a discipline dealing with all questions located in the intersection of, on the one hand a specific area of knowledge and, on the other hand, how the learner is developing and becoming competent within different situations and settings.

1. Container layer – overall design of the exhibition “surface”.
2. Content layer
 - a. Pre-textual – historical and archaeological artefacts, material level.
 - b. Pro-textual – other resources, discursive and didactic level.
3. Ideo-logical layer – brings coherence and closure. A ‘grand narrative’ of the exhibition.

The *container layer* has to do with the design of the exhibition as a whole, encountered by the visitor at the entrance of the exhibition space. In a way, this layer can be compared to the cover of a book, which not only fulfils a function in keeping the pages together in a certain order but also adds meaning through graphic design and other information.

The next layer of meaning is more closely connected to aspects regarding the ‘contents’ of the exhibition: the archaeological artefacts on display, informative texts and other constructed representations. A seemingly awkward but yet fertile idea in respect to the use of pre-existing objects within a text of some sort stem from the writing of film theorist Christian Metz, who distinguishes between different materials in a (filmed) representation (Metz, 1974). He argues that, on the one hand, there are materials that exist prior to, but used in, the making of a film text (*pre-filmic material*). Other forms of materials are those that are constructed specifically for the specific film text (*pro-filmic material*). In the context of museological research, equivalents of these two forms of materials can be discerned in the division between historical artefacts on the one hand and informational texts, images and similar representations produced for the specific exhibition on the other. We will here address these forms of materials as *pre-textual* and *pro-textual* contents. Both of these can be seen to represent layers of meaning within the exhibition, but they also correspond with different practices in the making of it.

In terms of ideational meaning at the pre-textual level, what becomes interesting is the selection of objects on display. What objects are selected as representative of something – both in terms of singular objects in each display case and in terms of the entity of objects throughout the exhibition?

In terms of pro-textual contents it becomes interesting to look at what these texts say something about. In that sense, these texts are of a discursive or didactic nature as they serve to direct our attention towards certain aspects of the themes that are dealt with in the exhibition.

The ideo-logical layer appears when representations and objects are accounted for at a more general level within the exhibition as a whole. This has to do with the more or less obvious storyline or narrative that serves to bring coherence to the exhibition. This layer works to present the selections and connections made by the curator. We have chosen the term ideo-logical for this layer since it serves an ideological purpose in that it projects a sense of logic to way the exhibition represent the world.

The Interpersonal and the Textual Metafunctions

At the same time we are interested in other aspects of the museums’ communication with their visitors. The two other metafunctions enable us to say something about identity at other levels than merely in terms of thematical approaches within the exhibitions. The interpersonal metafunction directs our attention towards questions concerning identity in terms of the subject positions on offer in the social relation constructed between the visitor and the museum/exhibition.

An analysis of aspects regarding the textual metafunction tells us something about qualities of the exhibition as a text and how the textual organisation influences the construction of visitor identities.

The Historical Background of Two Museums

The Museum of National Antiquities is not a national museum in the sense that its collections cover the entire Swedish history. Its first prehistoric antiquity was acquired in the 17th century, but the collections remained relatively sparse until the 19th century, when an interest in Sweden's early history was awakened. In 1919 the museum was conformed to the organisational forms of state responsibility. At that time, the cultural heritage in museums became a matter of the state, as part of the ambition to construct the image of the Swedish people, or Folk (Hillström, 2006, Aronsson, 2007). Since the end of the Second World War, the museum has acquired a large part of its collections through the growth of rescue archaeology (Andersson & Jansson, 1984). The museum is responsible for the prehistoric collection and ecclesiastical objects from The Middle Ages. Its area of responsibility in terms of collections and objects reaches until the 16th Century, when Sweden became a Lutheran state during the rule of Gustav Vasa. In 1943, the museum was opened at its present address on Narvavägen. Since then, the nation-state has lost its significance, and the rapid changes in society have shaped the museum in many ways. As part of the central museum agency the National Historical Museums, its task is to preserve and promote Sweden's cultural heritage and provide perspectives on social development and on the present (<http://www.shmm.se/>). The aim for the museums' exhibitions is to provide new perspectives on history (<http://www.historiska.se/home/exhibitions/>).

The history of *the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* began in China during the 1920s, when the Swedish archaeologist Johan Andersson found painted ceramics from China's agricultural Stone Age. These collections formed the basis for the museum, which was instituted by the Swedish parliament in 1926. The collections were merged with the National Museum of Fine Arts' collections of Far Eastern and Indian arts and crafts in 1959, which led to the opening of a new museum, located in its present habitat on the island Skeppsholmen. Since 1999 the museum has been one of four Swedish museums that constitute the National Museums of World Culture. The aim of these museums is to "present and bring to life the worlds cultures and offer a perspective on our world." (<http://www.ostasiatiska.se/smvk/jsp/polopoly.jsp?d=138&a=6293>). Similarly to the situation of the *The Museum of National Antiquities*, the *Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* finds itself in a cultural context that has changed since the time of its inauguration. Museum director Sanne Houby-Nielsen addresses this fact when she states that:

Today, over 40 years later, we find ourselves living in a different world altogether. Parallel to ongoing globalisation and the expansion of trade, growing numbers of Swedes have become acquainted, through tourism and business travel, with China's cultural treasures and historic places. In the light of these developments, the historical Chinese collections of the *Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* have acquired a decisively new and important position. The thousand or so exhibits on display in "The Middle Kingdom" were produced in China, but as a collection have no counterpart in the world, not even in China itself, the reason being that this Museum's collections represent a history of Swedish acquisitions and have come about through the special contracts forged between Sweden and China. (Houby-Nielsen, 2007, p 6)

Prehistories 1 – An Exhibition about Scandinavian Prehistory through Eight Life Stories

The permanent exhibition Prehistories 1 was completed in November 2005, as part one of two connected exhibitions about prehistory. It is presented on the museums' website as an exhibition where you can get to know many different stories from different periods of time, from the woman from Bäckaskog in the Early Stone Age (7000 B.C) to the man from Vendel in the Iron Age (600 A.D). The exhibition is about the lives of the people that, for thousands of years, have populated the land we today call Sweden. We are encouraged to examine the similarities between those people and ourselves. In the exhibition, the visitor encounter a time which gives a background of today's Sweden, an exhibition which answers questions of how one looked upon life, on relations and on death during prehistory and at the same time provokes thoughts about how we live today.

(<http://www.historiska.se/besokmuseet/ommuseet>).

On a signboard in the beginning of the actual exhibition, it is said to be an exhibition about the people who lived here before us. The museum wants to put humans in the centre, by presenting eight life stories as frozen moments in history. In this way the exhibition represents different times, different places and different circumstances, where the visitor's own identity is an important aspect.

An Introduction to Prehistories 1

The exhibition is characterised by worked-through scenery, where the archaeological material is arranged chronologically around the different life stories in different settings. As a visitor, you are being drawn into these settings with its multitude of resources: e.g. sound, images, materiality and light. Often, the artefacts are placed in display cases which are integrated into the scenery. The exhibition is rather dim which gives a mystified tone to it all.

The exhibition consists of seven rather small rooms, placed in sequence, one after another. It starts with an illustration of a time-line in the "introduction" (the Ice age). This introduction is an open space just before the actual exhibition, where a large sign board tells the visitor about the exhibition and its overall theme with eight individuals. Inside the first room there is a film with the life stories that the exhibition is constructed around. While standing there, you can hear music, babies crying and birds singing. The first room is followed by six more rooms. In the last room, there is a shorter version of the introduction of the exhibition, meant for those who begin their visit the other way. The film is also shown, but in a smaller scale. This layout with rooms in a row makes it impossible for visitors to deviate from the general path; they must either continue all the way through to the last room, or go back the same way they came from.

The exhibition can be said to contain representations of particular milieus, places, periods and humans. For instance, we meet in the first room the woman from Bäckaskog, placed in woodland in Early Stone Age. Later on in the Stone Age, there is the old man and the child from Skateholm, which is arranged as a settlement by the sea. In yet another room we meet The Iron Age ruler from Vendel, in a room just like a large hall building, with the throne and a fire place.

Ideational Analysis: Aspects of Nation and Identity

The container level, which has to do with the overall design of the exhibition, demands a more careful analysis in this case, since the layout with different small rooms makes it hard to get an overview of the exhibition before actually entering it. At first glance, there are no obvious symbols or signs that tells us as visitors what we are about to see. In the first small room before the actual exhibition, there is nothing that indicates that this has to do with humans during prehistory. What we see there is a reduced glimpse of the Ice Age, with blue

“blocks of ice”, a reindeer horn and a small tool, which is not what the exhibition is really about. Through the sliding glass doors, it is possible to see a glimpse of the film with the eight individuals, which can be seen as a more obvious sign of the overall theme in the exhibition. The film gives us an idea of “what it means to be human” in different times in history. But to get a full understanding of what the exhibition is really about, the visitor must enter and engage in the exhibition room by room.

Pre-Textual Content – The Selection of Archaeological Artefacts

The pre-textual aspect of the content layer concerns the already existing resources for meaning making, which are the authentic, archaeological artefacts. The selection of objects has been made in the way that all included objects are possible to attribute to the eight individuals. There are many different objects for everyday use, like ceramics and axes, but also weapons and objects which can be identified as ceremonial or connected to higher classes in society, such as jewellery and imported goods. The objects function as an essential way to stage the different life worlds that the visitor meet, which also works as a way for visitors to start reflecting upon their own identity and position in the world. At the same time, the selection of artefacts also tells us something about the national. On labels next to the display cases, each finding is mentioned by name, together with dating and the name of the place where it was found. One can notice that these objects all were found on Swedish grounds. But instead of the overall nationhood, it is the local identity that is being emphasized. From the site where the archaeological material was found, there is even talk about the Stone Age people as “Skateholmers”. The eight individuals are equally “local” in their identity; as they are called “The people from Rössberga”, “The woman from Köpingsvik” and “The man from Kvissleby”.

Pro-Textual Content – Representations of Prehistoric Scandinavia

The pro-textual aspect of the content layer focuses on materials which have been added to the already existing materials in the exhibition. Here, the curators have produced written texts and other resources which are there to make a comment upon the selected artefacts. Their function is to create a narrative around the objects. National identity is in a way part of that narrative, even though it only appears in very subtle ways. The question of nationhood is vaguely addressed in the beginning, where a large sign board informs the visitor about the exhibition. It is an exhibition “about the people who lived here before us” (our emphasis). The written texts in the exhibition don’t talk about a specific territory, it is just assumed that “here” represents the land that we today call Sweden. The word Sweden or Swedish is never explicitly mentioned. So in this case, national identity seems to be a topic that’s almost avoided in the exhibition.

But the national appears in contrast to “the other”; that is to other nations or areas. In texts, we can read about similarities between finds presented in the exhibition (which are mentioned together with the names of the places where they were found), and finds from Denmark. As a part of the smaller theme “living together” it is mentioned that on a bone from Denmark, there is an engraving that represents a group of people, which has been interpreted as a family. Implied is that there are similarities between areas that go beyond borders and countries. Another way of representing “us” is as part of something that’s mutual. In texts, we can also read about finds, which are the eldest one discovered in Scandinavia. If we look at the written texts, we can conclude that the exhibition narrates the story of a common Scandinavian heritage, but never actually mentions national identity.

If we take a look at the different images, we are facing a prehistory which is in a sense presented to us as a story of a fixed place. This fixed place can be identified as somewhere in Scandinavia. There are large photographic pictures which represent landscapes like a forest, a

wintery snowy landscape, shore or plain. Most images in the exhibition are easily identified as representing “Scandinavian nature”. There is a strong sense of the setting being a Scandinavian place, with actual actors who are presented as “Scandinavian”. In one room, though, there is a strong break against the overall narration. Here, the scenery is changed completely, and we are suddenly in a Roman setting, with columns and images of Roman soldiers. The idea is to show that there were strong connections between “us” and the Roman Empire. In the exhibition, written texts tell the story of a process, where Sweden as a nation did not exist, and where similarities over areas and exchange between people were a common feature of society.

Ideo-Logical Level

The ideo-logical level has to do with how coherence is created on a general level. The logic behind the organisation of the multimodal ensemble is about the creation of a room which allows for visitors to engage with different aspects of identity. The entire room with the worked-through scenery, the many open questions in signboards and on labels and the different life-worlds in different ways relates to questions of identity. A dialogue with the visitor is created, by allowing for the visitor to encounter different life-worlds which are possible to compare with the life-world of one self. This existential feature, where the visitor can question what it means to be human, is important in the overarching narrative. A more peripheral feature is the part which concerns the national. What emerges are a Scandinavian community and an emphasis on contact between cultures (compare Aronsson 2008). In the exhibition, the relation to other people and to other parts of the world is emphasized through the selection of objects from other parts of the world.

Interpersonal Analysis: The Relation to the Visitor

The interpersonal meta-function is a function of enacting social interactions as social relations between participants in communication (Halliday, 2004; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996/2006).

The written texts in *Prehistories* are written in a non-formal style with many open questions, which allows for a dialogue where the visitor is invited to contribute with own reflections and interpretations. The texts are written with direct address, which works as a way to create a connection to the reader. In the text, there is an introduction telling us about the eight individuals. It says: “You meet them as frozen moments in time”, and further “It could have been you who lived at that time”. We are connected in a fellowship where “there are similarities with us and our time”.

In images, the system of gaze is important to create social interaction. If a person in an image looks at the viewers, that participant establishes an imaginary relation with the viewers, in a way demanding something from the viewer (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996/2006, van Leeuwen 2005). The images of the eight individuals are mostly arranged so that the participant looks directly at the viewer. Each person is depicted as someone to engage with, and as visitors we can imagine that these (prehistoric) people were just like us. Most of the persons are given a very serious expression and sometimes also an imperious look (arms crossed, hand on spear), which though creates a certain distance to us as viewers.

Textual Analysis: Organization and Coherence

The textual meta-function has to do with how a text is presented as coherent to the “reader” (Halliday 2004, Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996/2006). The exhibition *Prehistories* is structured in at least two levels. On the first level is the very linear structure with the chronology through the seven rooms; you either start from Ice Age/Stone age and continue through Bronze Age and then end at Iron Age, or go through it the other way around. It has a narrative with a given start and a given end, depending on which way you start your visit. The beginning at Ice Age

– Stone Age is more elaborated, and can be seen as the “proper” start. Once inside the exhibition, you can’t deviate from the path, unless you go back the same way you came or if you quickly go through it till the end. So partly, Prehistories can be seen as a rather closed text.

The second level is the organisation of resources within each room. Unlike the structure on the first level, there are many possible ways of engaging with the resources inside each room. There are images, large sign boards and objects that the visitor can choose to engage with, and there is an arrangement with links to different written texts, like poems and interviews. You can choose to read some texts but skip others. There is also a possibility to get even further information through an audio guide.

The text is coherent in several ways, and the structure in levels is one example of how this is done. Another example is the function of the film, which presents information about the eight individuals. The same images that are included in the film, reoccurs along the way, as a sign of the overall exhibition.

The themes of the exhibition is not just consistent regarding the different elements within the present text, but they are consistent also in relation to the context of other exhibitions, and other representations of national identity in society at large. This connects to both the multicultural discourse that we see in museums today, and also to the globalisation and European integration that is apparent in both politics and society today.

The Middle Kingdom – An Exhibition about Chinese History and Worldwide Relations in a Historic Past

The permanent exhibition the Middle Kingdom was completed in September 2007. It presents aspects of Chinese history through a selection of dynasties, ranging from Shang (1600 – 1050 B.C) to Qing (1644 – 1911 A.D.). It is presented as a continuation of the exhibition China before China, which describes the oldest known Chinese civilisations. Taken together, the two exhibitions present glimpses of 5000 years of Chinese history and show more than 1200 objects on display (Houby-Nielsen, 2007, p 6). However, despite the vast number of historically interesting objects on display the exhibition is not focused solely on China and Chinese history. Other issues are accounted for against the backdrop of the Middle Kingdom and its rich heritage, for example aspects of Swedish cultural history related to the trading companies and the impact of Chinese cultural artefacts within the Swedish bourgeoisie. Another aspect of the exhibition deals with the role of the museum itself in terms of obtaining knowledge about the historical past. And so on. In this way, the exhibition can be seen to deal with themes concerning both nation and identity in different ways and at different levels. Apart from the themes accounted for, the exhibition itself is also presented as historically coherent with previous exhibitions:

The exhibition “The Middle Kingdom” signals the reopening of the doors to the Chinese collections at the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities. The collections were first put on show at the Museums inauguration in 1963, in a beautiful exhibition which quickly gained a very special reputation both in Sweden and abroad.” (Houby-Nielsen, 2007, p 6)

Houby-Nielsens statement also indicates the role of the museums own collection in The Middle Kingdom, which is interesting in relation to the idea of *pre-* versus *pro-*textual material.

An Introduction to the Middle Kingdom

The Middle Kingdom is staged in a large, subtly lit room with a vast number of display cases along the walls. Floors, ceiling, walls and backgrounds are black. All texts are written in white letters on a black background. The room is divided by a long (approximately 20 metres) conceptually designed “dragon” in red and black, created by a well-known Swedish

architectural group. Apart from its symbolic and aesthetic value, the dragon serves to define the exhibition space and the walking path as the exhibition is organized in a path around it. The dragon also contains a number of display cases. The front end of the dragon, which faces the visitor at the entrance, contains a display case with a sculptural head of a woman. This sculpture is portrayed in posters, advertisements and other representations of the exhibition.

Once inside the exhibition room, the visitor can either go to the right or to the left. However, the exhibition is chronologically ordered, beginning to the left.



The first display cases present objects from the Shang dynasty. A written text explains the ritual use of the objects during the time of their origin. Each of the display cases throughout the exhibition are arranged with one to five shelves with objects from the different represented dynasties. Informational texts give insight into different aspects of the objects and civilisations presented. The name of each represented dynasty is written on the floor.

Each dynasty is presented with a small map of its territory in relation to present-day China, a mark on a timeline and an explanatory text concerning the historical circumstances.

There is a slight change in terms of focus as we approach the time when the technique to produce objects in porcelain is discovered. Apart from the introductions to the dynasties, the informational texts are increasingly focused on aspects concerning porcelain items and china. Trade is also introduced as a theme at this point.

Once we reach the end of the room and begin to walk back on the other side of the dragon, Sweden is brought more and more into the picture. We are presented with the East Asian Company which imported vast amounts of china to Sweden, and we are told about famous collectors, the status of china in Swedish upper-class environments, and so on. In this way, the larger part of the second half of the exhibition deals with Chinese crafts from a Swedish cultural historical perspective.

Ideational Analysis: Aspects of Nation and Identity

To begin with the container layer, the overall design of the exhibition can be seen as a way of embodying the idea of ancient China through the use of some of the symbols and semiotic takes that are commonly associated with it – such as the dragon, Chinese signs and the use of red and black colours. The dim lighting and the dark surfaces add to a sense of mysticism and historicity. In terms of identity, the selection of elements used to signify China is interesting in the way it tells us something about how we construct “the other”, both in terms of nation/culture and historical time. The image of China that is expressed here is marked by a general sense of mysticism and mythology. It is also interesting to note how well these few signifiers work in order to represent China as a nation. They become efficient markers in the construction of ‘Chinese identity as a sign’. The way this is performed aesthetically in the exhibition - through the modern design – contribute with certain qualities to the representation, as they serve to portray China as an interesting nation.

Simultaneously, the design at this level also signifies the exhibition itself, at a meta-level. It tells us that we are approaching ancient China in a new and appealing way. In this way, the design of these aspects of the exhibition can be seen as a form of self-presentation of the exhibition itself. In the same way as clothing and other aspects related to ‘style’ are important in the construction of personal identity, the aesthetic design of the exhibition is a way of performing museum identity.

Pre-Textual Content – Historical Artefacts

The meaning-making within this layer is, of course, closely dependent on the access to historical artefacts. In the *Middle Kingdom* all historical objects stem from the museums own collections.

The objects on display predominately consist of various forms of vessels, tools, weapons, jewellery, musical instruments, sculptures, china/porcelain, lacquer ware and handicraft products from different times. A change can be discerned throughout the exhibition, in terms of the type of objects displayed and in terms of materials. The earlier parts of the exhibition (representing the time from 1600 B.C. to 618 A.D.) show vessels, tools, musical instruments and weapons of various kinds. All objects are made either in metal of some kind or ceramics.

From the account of the Tang dynasty (618 A.D to 906 A.D) and onwards, the majority of the objects are made in porcelain. A gradual shift can be seen to occur from a dominance of sculptures to various forms of items in porcelain (vases, dishes, plates, bowls etc.). In the second half of the exhibition, (mainly Swedish) collections or sets of china are dominant. Apart from these, some display cases display furniture and in the later part of the exhibition objects of glass, lacquer and other materials are introduced. At the very end of the exhibition female clothing is presented as a theme. Taken together, we can see a gradual shift of materials, from bronze, silver and ceramics to porcelain, glass, lacquer, textile and other materials suitable for handicrafts. However, the main part of the objects displayed are made either in some kind of metal, pottery or porcelain. A gradual shift can also be discerned in terms of the kind of objects that are shown – from tools, ritually used vessels and other culturally significant artefacts to china.

To us, as visitors, the selections and displays of the various objects appears to have been made with an intention to demonstrate historical progression within different areas – in terms of technology, cultural customs etc. The places of origin within the different dynasties indicates a continuous transition of what China ‘is’ at different points in time.

Pro-Textual Content – Representations of Ancient China

Apart from the objects themselves, several of the display cases are accompanied by informational texts that shed light either to the specific objects and their cultural and historical contexts or to aspects of the history of the dynasties in focus. These texts contribute with a didactic or discursive layer of meanings, since they direct our attention to specific aspects of Chinese history in regard to the presented objects on display.

We can discern a few different types of texts, as they either present the objects on display and aspects related to their use and significance during a specific dynasty or present historical information concerning the dynasties themselves. Parallel to the displayed objects, a sense of progression can be seen within the themes that are introduced.

Once we reach the parts of the exhibition more thoroughly focused on porcelain and china, the texts also become more focused on this specific side of Chinese material culture. Besides presentations of how techniques are enhanced and refined through developments of new forms of glazes and through differences in terms of artistic freedom between different dynasties and so on, international trade is brought into the picture. Halfway through the exhibition the Swedish East-Asian trading company is introduced, followed by a number of texts about Swedish collectors and specific sets of china made for Swedish royal families and other prominent families in Sweden. Texts also inform of the recent making of a replica of one of the old Swedish ships used in the trade with China during the 18th century. In this way, the exhibition leaves room for the visitor to partake in the construction of Swedish identity.

Other aspects that are accounted for in the texts has to do with archaeological scientific work and of achievements made by early Swedish archaeologists in tracing aspects of a Chinese past through the remains on display in the exhibition. This can be seen as another way for the museum to perform its own identity.

The texts and maps that inform about the various dynasties are of particular interest in terms of national identity. Taken together they give an idea of China as a nation in constant transition, both in terms of its changing geographical boundaries and in terms of the diverse groups of people (culturally and ethnically) that are represented as Chinese at different points in time.

Ideo-Logical Layer – Bringing the Pieces Together

In the Middle Kingdom the ideological layer works as a way to bring the different parts of the exhibition together and construe a sense of coherence between the quite different aspects that are dealt with. The exhibition can primarily be seen to consist of two main parts – one consisting of Chinese historical artefacts from different points in time and another part more closely connected to Swedish cultural history. These are brought together through a gradual change of the themes presented in the informational texts. One such theme has to do with materials and technology. In the first part of the exhibition we are invited to follow the progression from clay pottery and the use of bronze vessels, to other more sophisticated technologies and materials. Once we reach the time of the introduction of porcelain, the narrative shifts from a national to an international focus. Trade is gradually brought into the picture, at first within Asia, then in more global terms. The logical continuation once we reach Europe is to present the Swedish trading companies and their travels to China. From there on, the narrative is more dominated by Swedish perspectives.

Interpersonal Analysis

The organisation of space in relation to the chronological structure of the exhibition plays an important role in establishing the relationship between the visitor and the producers. The directionality of the tags with dynasties written on the floor indicates where the exhibition begins and once the visitor decides to follow the indicated path the “dragon” prevents her or

him to leave that route for own excursions. The visitors are, of course, free to dispose of their own time and they can move freely within each part of the exhibition, but the narrow and corridor-like organisation of the exhibition spaces - where one thing is presented after another – implies a certain reading order and an intended directionality of flow. Viewed as a text, the exhibition thereby appears to be rather closed in relation to the visitors and in that sense it reminds of older forms of pedagogic texts, where the author has the authority and the reader is subjected to the organisation of the text. In similar ways the producers here construct an interpersonal relation where the visitors are subjected to the organisation of the exhibition.

A closer look at the texts that appear in display cases throughout the exhibition confirms this relationship between producers and visitors. The texts are informative and written in a formal language. As visitors we are never invited to reflect or pose questions, but are merely ‘told’ about the things that the producers have decided to tell us something about. The visitors are not able to take part in a quest for new answers of any kind and is thereby deprived of their agency. Another way of inviting a reader to a joint possession of a text is to use personal pronouns, such as ‘you’, ‘we’ and so on – thereby making the reader a part of a community in relation to the text. In the exhibitional texts the pronoun ‘we’ is used at ten instances. At each of these instances, however, ‘we’ is used to signify the producers and the scientific community they are part of, thus leaving the reader/visitor outside. Again, the visitors are subjected to the interests of the producers, which reinforce the unequal relationship between them.

Quotes from - and references to - ancient Chinese texts function as modality markers which indicates seriosity and a familiarity with historical sources within the field. Apart from using these sources in order to inform about different aspects of ancient China, they serve to establish the producers as authorities. In relation to the visitor this implies a difference in knowledge and can simultaneously be seen as a way of establishing the social hierarchy within the exhibition.

Similar to the way that organisation of space influences the interpersonal relations between visitors and producers, the organisational aspects of informational texts have a social impact. The texts in this exhibition are written in quite small letters, and most of them are placed quite low within the display cases. To be able to read, one has to stand close to the glass. In other words, the visitor needs to engage with effort to be able to read the texts. This can be seen as yet another way to demand something from the visitor – you need to be docile in order to gain something from the texts.

Textual Analysis

The textual aspects of the exhibition are closely connected with the other forms of meaning that we have presented so far. Many aspects relating to the textual organisation of the exhibition has already been touched upon within the previous analyses. What we can state here is that the exhibition gains coherence through the interplay of three-dimensional design, the organisation of space, the historical artefacts and the informative texts. Each of these parts are organised coherently within their own specific fields of communication, but they are brought together through the overriding design on a general level and through the written texts in terms of the thematical issues that are dealt with. The chronological and thematical organisation of the exhibition in a circular path from left to right through the exhibition space are important in relation to the other aspects of both meaning-making and construction presented earlier. We are gradually led along the narrative path through diverse forms of pre-Chinese items and contexts towards more familiar items and context in the parts of the exhibition focused more closely on Swedish cultural history. The design of the container layer also contribute textually with a sense of coherence, as it brings all of the different themes presented throughout the exhibition together as parts of the complex Chinese sign.

Comparison and Discussion

In this concluding paragraph we will point at some of the differences between the two exhibitions. From this comparison a few conclusions have evolved.

As a first observation both exhibitions respond to features that are characteristic of the postmodern condition at large. In *Prehistories* this can be perceived through the focus on local identity while in the *Middle Kingdom*, there is a focus on globalisation and transnational flows.

The exhibitions approach identity in different ways and emphasises different aspects. In *Prehistories* there is a focus on existential issues as the prehistoric life-worlds invite the visitor to reflect upon her or his own life situation. Through the direct address and open questions in the written texts, the visitor is also invited to take part in the interpretation of the prehistoric life-worlds. In this sense the *Middle Kingdom* is more closed in relation to the visitor. The formal address and the overall structure of the exhibition as a closed text keep the visitor at a distance. Identities are not negotiable in the same sense as in *Prehistories*.

In “*The Middle Kingdom*”, time is represented as an even flow. The narrative and the presentation of objects create a sense of historical progress. In “*Prehistories*” there is, on a macro level, a chronological wholeness, and on a micro level, sections where time appears as more intense. The narration stops in a sense, in order to communicate with the visitor in a dialogue around specific themes and issues in the exhibition.

National identity is not foregrounded in “*Prehistories*” in the same way as it is in “*The Middle Kingdom*”. In the first exhibition, the overall theme is more about time; where each room tells the story of a specific time. This can be compared to the overall design of the surface in *Middle Kingdom*, which uses many different symbols and signs which are easily identified as “Chinese”.

Both exhibitions set out to represent a time when nations did not exist. However, a difference between them can be seen in their approach to national identity. It appears to be more problematic to represent aspects of nationhood when it comes to one's own cultural heritage.

The results from the analysis can be related to what Pettersson (2003) has brought forward in his research on the fundamental values of Swedish cultural heritage preservation. His research suggests that national identity is articulated first in representations of the Middle Ages and even more strongly in representations concerning the period after the 16th century. In prehistoric exhibitions, for instance, there seems to be a tendency to leave out the national in favour of a representation that's especially focusing human beings as social creatures, in order to provide perspective on our existence. Questions of identity may be dealt with in more common terms, or as part of the regional or the local. As Aronsson (2008) stated, the dominance of the multi-cultural standpoint within cultural heritage work in Sweden makes it problematic to promote the national.

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