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Face to Face with the Lewis Chessmen

an exploration of children's engagement with material heritage at the National Museum of Scotland

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Abstract

Museums can be productive sites for the study of society, because they are spaces where the constitution of knowledge about the past is made visible through public display. Playing an important role in the performance and legitimisation of national culture, museums in Scotland pay particular attention to the education of children. It is often claimed that children can gain an understanding of their history through physical engagement with museum collections. Both the 'past' and the 'future' are thus constituted within the museum. Through an exploration of children's education at the National Museum of Scotland and *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked* touring exhibition, I argue that efforts by museums to exert control over ongoing processes through which subjects and objects, past and future, nations and heritage are constituted can be deeply challenged by children and museum objects, both of whose status remain inherently dynamic and unstable.

Despite the museum's claims to have "real things [objects] revealing stories", objects rarely reveal narratives beyond those exerted upon them. They are, instead, materially and relationally constituted in particular places, at particular times. The same 'instability' applies to children visiting the museum. Children engage with the material stuff of the museum in surprising and unpredictable ways. This dynamic, multisensory interaction enables children to pursue personal projects, which do not necessarily adhere to the agendas of the museum. Yet, children often do go along with the museum's narratives, commonly accepting what they are told by adults about the objects they are handling. They are also deeply concerned with the authenticity of these objects. Whether an objects is 'real' or not, however, is not necessarily judged by the same standards shared with the museum. Children's awareness of a 'real' object's metonymical presence not only enables an experiential encounter with the past, but also enables them to work out their own positions within the power structures of the museum; testing their own concerns relating to trust, truth, value and the process of becoming adults.

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Preface

> *"I could see it all – the things… and like a shaman who can see the souls of things, I could feel their stories flickering inside me."* (Pamuk 2010:512)

As a child, I spent a large proportion of my daylight hours in what was then the Royal Scottish Museum in Edinburgh - playing hide and seek amongst the birds, feeding the goldfish in the grand gallery and exploring undiscovered passageways full of Persian carpets and Japanese spider crabs. After many intervening years pursuing the study of anthropology and archaeology at the universities of Oxford and Edinburgh, it is perhaps, no surprise that I have returned to the Museum to research children's encounters with the material past.

I believe that my previous research into people's engagement with museum representations in both Spain and Scotland, along with several years' personal experience of working within the profession itself, have left me well situated to undertake such an endeavour. They have also afforded me rich and diverse insight into the issues currently affecting this important field. Research undertaken with the City of Edinburgh Council Museums' Service as part of a preparatory MSc by Research (funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council) at the University of Edinburgh has also contributed towards some of the contextual grounding of this thesis.

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Author's Declaration

I undertook the research for this thesis and am alone responsible for the composition.

N. Lucy Bull

Chapter I: Setting the Scene

> *"Museums are for a lot of things but one of the things that I thought was to remind people of the past and to remind them the past is not so different."* (Boas[1], 10 years, 08/03/11)

Not unlike an ancient battlefield, the gallery floor is in disarray. There are foam mats spread about the place in untidy, disorganised clusters. Swathed in togas, children are fighting over Roman pottery using a replica *gladius* sword[2]. In the face of Hector's open scepticism, the class teacher is struggling to regain control and answer Tabitha's question about whether or not the coins in the museum's handling box are 'real'.

School workshops at the National Museum of Scotland currently emphasise the importance of children's interrogation of objects in order to discover the stories they can tell. This thesis analyses the different factors at work in this process, making a unique ethnographic contribution to existing research in this field by prioritising the concerns of the children themselves.

Tabitha's concern over whether museum objects were 'real' or not and her appreciation of the capacity of museum artefacts to conjure up an authentic experience of the past highlighted a surprising acknowledgement of the affective presence of 'things'; their relational capacity which extends beyond their social constitution as museum 'objects'. Shamira commented;

> *"Museums are for ancient things like dinosaurs and precious things. They're to remind people about the past and for keeping ancient artefacts. Museums can help little kids to know things about the past that they didn't know about."* (10 years, 08/03/11)

How, then, do 'objects' carry history with them and how do children engage with these objects and that history? Within the contested space of the contemporary museum, children's negotiation of their own status, entangled with their physical and

[1] The names of all of my informants referenced in this thesis have been changed in order to preserve their anonymity.
[2] [See Figure 19].

intellectual engagement with the museum's objects and representations is an under-researched area.

When Dr Irving Finkel, world expert on ancient games and Assistant Keeper of Ancient Mesopotamian script, languages and cultures at the British Museum, remarked in a seminar delivered at the Shetland Museum, that *"Small children visiting the British Museum can only see trouser legs!"* (17/02/11), he struck a chord with his audience which also resonated with my experiences of researching with children in museums. The excited atmosphere in the packed auditorium and the ties of kinship, which bound the audience together, exuded a warmth which belied the cold, wet and windy conditions outside the museum on that wild February night. It seemed to me, an outsider, that at least half of the islands' population had turned up to hear what this man had to say about the famous objects which had recently arrived on Shetland's shores. *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked*, an exhibition funded by the Scottish Government and produced by the National Museum of Scotland was in the middle of the third stage of its tour around Scotland. Dr Finkel's opinion about the accessibility of museums for younger audiences had already been shared by other adults visiting the exhibition at the Shetland Museum. Although the glass shelves upon which the Chessmen sat in the display cases were too high for the under-fives to see directly into, however, this did not mean that they were unable to see the figures at all.

Later that week, Laura, a shy girl of about 7 years of age, whom I had already met when she had visited the exhibition on a school trip, showed me the Chessmen from a child's perspective. As I ducked down beneath the glass shelf and craned my neck upwards to look into the case, she pointed out that the Chessmen were a different colour. The consequences of this "view from below" were such that small children not only perceived the Chessmen as being of a darker, warmer colour than the pale walrus ivory that was exaggerated by the exhibition's spotlights, but they also appeared bigger than they actually were. Younger children were also unable to look the Chessmen directly in the eyes and arguably, in this way, the comic humanity of these objects was ill-conveyed. These children were thereby forced to maintain a

view of the objects as distanced and precious, placed upon a pedestal of importance which was too high for them to reach. This opportunity to share a small child's perspective of 'being in the world' thus revealed the objects in a different light, both physically and conceptually.

The physical obstacle for young children presented by the exhibition serves as a useful metaphor for the complicated relationships that are continually negotiated between children, objects and the museum itself. Over the past few decades, much work has been done to assert children's agency as active participants in civil society with rights to engage in decision making processes which affect their own lives (e.g. Tisdall et al 2009). Rather than 'less than humans' or 'adult-becomings', children have come to be represented as valuable informants about the social world in their own right. Despite the methodological inroads made by this 'Emergent Paradigm' (James & Prout 1997), which emphasises "research *with* children rather than *on* children" (Warming 2011:41), Hirschfeld (2002:611) has highlighted the paucity of anthropological work specifically focused on children and 'children's culture'; "a curious state of affairs given that virtually all contemporary anthropology is based on the premise that culture is learned, not inherited". In spite of its uncomfortable juxtaposition of the role of children and socially-constituted 'objects' in the museum space (uncomfortable because it appears to refer to the premises of early childhood research, against whose 'objectification' of children the 'Emergent Paradigm' has turned), this thesis is a contribution towards this discussion. My child informants participated in research that was not purely focused upon the particular cultures of childhood (cf. James & Prout 1997; James 1993; Jenks 1996; Tisdall et al 2009). Instead, their perspectives are inherently valuable towards elucidating broader theoretical debates concerning authenticity and materiality in both anthropology and museum studies (cf. Romanek and Lynch 2008; Holtorf 2013).

In the post-colonial age, museums are haunted by questions concerning who has rights of ownership over their collections. Museums "are no longer the sole voices of authority in displaying and interpreting those objects, but acknowledge a moral and ethical (and sometimes political) obligation to involve source communities in

decisions affecting their material heritage" (Peers & Brown 2003:2). This shift in global museum practice has encouraged some museums in the UK to address issues of repatriation in various innovative ways[3]. Questions relating to power and ownership thus pervade the practices of both curating collections and visiting museums:

> If modes of perception depend upon the education of the senses within a particular sensory milieu, then apprehension is a political matter. Put another way, politics derives not just from relations of class, gender, or age, but also from processes of categorization that create particular forms of connection and division. An object or even a museum can thus be seen as a microcosm of general social practice. (Edwards et al 2006:21)

Within this contested space, children's negotiation of their own status, entangled with their physical and intellectual engagement with the museum's objects and representations, serves as a lens through which to understand the material outworking of some of these political concerns.

Rationale and Research Questions

My thesis makes a contribution towards our understanding of how broader concerns with the social constitution of knowledge, which have been reflected in the development of theoretical discourses such as the *new museology*, are being negotiated at ground level within museums. Drawing on an ethnographic study of children's engagement with material heritage in the context of education workshops at the National Museum of Scotland[4], I explore two key themes; firstly, the power dynamics and negotiation of status and positioning that take place within the museum space and, secondly, the presence and affective capacities of 'things', particularly, "real objects from the past".

[3] For examples of this, see Peers (2003) on hair samples from Beatrice Blackwood's Ojibwe Collection at the Pitt Rivers Museum; Brown and Peers with members of the Kainai Nation (2006) on the Kainai Visual Repatriation project; Peers (2013) on the Blackfoot Shirts collaborative project at the Pitt Rivers Museum.

[4] In order to avoid potential confusion, I will distinguish between the name of my primary field site, the National Museum of Scotland, and the wider organisation in which it plays a pivotal role, National Museums Scotland, by referrring to the former as the 'National Museum of Scotland' and the latter as simply 'NMS'.

Museums select 'things' from the material world and constitute them as 'objects' through a very controlled public performance of cultural knowledge. Thus, although museums can claim to reveal their artefacts' cultural worth and significance through stories[5], children's perspectives on museums and material heritage are interesting precisely because children do not necessarily engage with 'things' through narrative. In her study of the expression of animistic beliefs amongst children of the Manus tribe of the Admirality Islands in Melanesia, Mead (1932) has described children as being the practical realists, whilst adults were the mystifiers.

Touching upon the issues of trust and risk as they relate to materiality, I explore children's interactions within the social world of the museum through the sub-themes of 'authenticity' (encounters with "real objects from the past"), and the constitution and control of objects and knowledge in museums. I argue that embodied engagement with the material world is closely entangled with the social dynamics of power, status and positioning within the museum space. Entering into this discussion, the Lewis Chessmen (a collection of high-profile museum objects which were the focus of an innovative touring exhibition across Scotland at the time of my research) serve as a specific case study through which to explore some important concerns. Firstly, the means by which 'objects' are relationally co-constituted in a perpetual process of 'becoming'; secondly, the ways in which NMS (National Museums Scotland) related to museums and communities in Scotland's peripheries; and thirdly, the ways in which children's desire for the 'real' or authentic is mirrored by local communities' dynamic constructions of belonging and identity through material heritage.

When embarking upon my fieldwork, in October 2009, I stated that my principal research aim was "to discern *what* messages are communicated about Scottish cultural identity through museum objects and *how* people, particularly children, relate to these objects". After an extended period in the field, however, I no longer felt that the education workshops at the National Museum of Scotland were primarily

[5] See, for example, the exhibition and display policy at the National Museum of Scotland (Calder 2000 and National Museums Scotland Strategic Plan 2006-12, 2010-11 Update), which will be explored further in Chapter III.

about the communication of meaning; rather it was the reinforcement of social relationships and positioning which was at stake. I also realised that although the promotion of national and cultural identity and awareness featured highly in the organisation's policy remit, they did not exist as explicit objectives in the consciousness of the Education Department of the National Museum of Scotland, its practitioners or its audience (school children). Rather, I believe that the Museum was trying to *"inform, educate and inspire"* (the current NMS vision statement) its younger audiences, in order to fulfil the requirements of the new national *A Curriculum for Excellence* (a key influence on the Education Department's agenda). This, in turn, helped legitimise the Scottish Government's continued funding of NMS by justifying both the Department and the Museum's existence through its contribution to civil society.

Another important reason for this alteration in focus can be largely accounted for by the changes in methods my fieldwork had been forced to adopt (due to restrictions on my access to the fieldsite[6]). Adjusting to these discoveries, this thesis explores how children and museum objects both cooperate with and disrupt museum educational agendas by addressing the following questions:

1. How are knowledge and trust related to the negotiation of status, positioning and power in the context of education workshops at the National Museum of Scotland?
2. How are the Museum's attempts to control access to its collections mirrored in the approaches it adopts towards its child audience?
3. How do children and socially-constituted museum 'objects' engage in relational processes of 'becoming' in the context of museum education?
4. How are authenticity, 'realness', value and identification/recognition crucial to children's engagement with museum objects?
5. How does authenticity relate to materiality in the context of museum education?

[6] For a full description of my research methods and access negotiation process, see section on Methodology.

Before situating my own particular contribution to knowledge within broader discourses of childhood, education and material culture studies, it is first necessary to address the relationship between children and objects which stands at the heart of this thesis. How can an exploration of the constitution of objects be linked to the role of children within museum education?

Children and Museum Objects

Why do governments and city councils consider it particularly important to get children into museums (which are constructed as ideal learning environments for the advancement of the national curriculum)? The purpose of the National Museum of Scotland, no matter what happens in everyday practice, is fundamentally a national one. However museum artefacts are employed for multisensory learning within 'object handling' sessions, these 'objects' (as evidenced by my case study of Lewis Chessmen and their association with authentic belonging, place and the repatriation/Scottish independence debate) have ultimately been socially constituted as material representatives of national heritage. As such they form an important part of a narrative of the history of the nation. The particular ways in which the museum relates to children - through exhibitions' child-friendly interpretation panels, youth outreach programmes, informal family activities and events, in addition to a core service of school workshops - can thus be linked with the need for a nation to invest in its past (museums) and its future (children).

So, how do children and objects relate to each other within this political context [Figure 1]? The fact that both serve as key recipients of investment from the nation is one of the numerous parallels this thesis will draw between children and objects in the context of museums. Comparisons between these two central foci of my research can also be drawn in relation to ideas of control, protection and 'agency'. Museums are intensely powerful spaces which maintain significant control over both their collections and their child audiences in order to be able to operate within their primary social function as houses of authenticity and cultural capital; legitimate

dispensaries of knowledge about the world. Children and objects are treated by museums in comparable ways because they can both be understood as unstable; "requiring" some form of control from the museum. Children are in formation - living through the unpredictable process of becoming adults[7], whilst 'objects' are temporarily constituted from 'things' (stuff that exceeds objects, whose function and meaning can change at any point[8]). Thus museum 'objects' constantly have to be stabilized and rarified through the controlled narratives of the museum, whilst children's engagement with these objects must be controlled in a similar manner.

Both children and objects, on the other hand, are able to exert their 'agency' within this powerful environment, elucidating the processes by which status, trust and risk are negotiated within the political space of the museum. The concept of 'agency' has, however, been a focus of major concern and academic debate in both the fields of material culture and childhood studies, possessing multiple meanings and being used in markedly different ways. Recently coming under analytical scrutiny, 'agency' has been employed to describe the wilful action of children as intentional beings, in their attempts to assert some form of control and influence over their lives, whilst simultaneously being used by materiality theorists to describe the impact of non-intentional, inanimate objects in affecting the outcomes of actions and processes involving them. In the former case, other terms such as 'autonomy' and 'independence' might usefully replace 'agency' as concepts which are both less ambiguous and lend specific meaning and insight to the particular contexts in which they are used. In the latter case, 'agency' could also be substituted with terms such as 'power', 'affect' (Thrift 2004) and 'affordance' (Gibson 1986). Uniquely drawing together the two fields of childhood and material culture studies, my research emphasises the ambiguous and sometimes contradictory usage of 'agency', leading me to suggest that perhaps it is not useful as an analytical tool for examining flows of relations, stories and materials.

[7] See *Children as 'becoming' people* section (p19) for further discussion of this concept.
[8] See *Museums and Material Culture* section (p28) for further discussion of this concept.

Children as museum visitors and research participants

Whilst the evaluation of education programmes in museums has been described as being now "embedded in practice" (Jackson & Rees Leahy 2005:305), "there is comparatively little open-ended, disinterested research into the effects of education policies and programmes" (ibid). Up until the last few decades, this discrepancy within the museum profession between research with adults and that conducted with children[9] was also reflective of general patterns in social anthropology. Whilst the processes by which children are socialised into adulthood was considered by the discipline as early as the first half of the twentieth century (cf. Mead 1942 [1973]), Hirschfield (2002:611) has observed that "mainstream anthropology has marginalized children because it has marginalized the two things that children do exceptionally well…acquiring adult culture and…creating their own cultures".

So, what makes children distinctive as both museum visitors and as informants? Childhood studies' 'Emergent Paradigm' of the 1990s, has stimulated much research and discussion that can be related to this question.

Children as 'other'

As adults, we have been accused of stereotyping children and ignoring mounting evidence concerning the "the crucial differentiating roles which class, gender, health or ethnicity can play in shaping children's experience of and participation in the social world" (James 1993:28). Children have been opposed to adults in a dichotomous relationship paralleled by their association with 'nature' versus adults' 'culture'[10]. Although in 1978, Burton called for an expansion of the traditional anthropological focus on socialisation and cultural transmission, in order to address the cultural lives of children in their own right (1978:54), more recently, Hirschfield (2002) has criticized the discipline for not giving this important area more attention.

[9] cf. Hooper-Greenhill 2000, 1995, 1992 for research on museum education and Shepherd 1994 for research on museums of childhood.

[10] For an extended discussion of these dualisms, see Taylor 2011, although a recent 'new wave' of scholarship has argued for childhood as being understood as an irreducible combination of biology and culture (cf. Ryan 2012).

Such renewed focus on children, Hirschfield argues, is essential, because, "many adult cultural beliefs… are sustained precisely because of the way children organize their own cultural environments" (2002:611).

Even as recently as twenty years ago, Western conceptions of 'the child' have been identified as having much in common with the nineteenth century "savage" (i.e. being closer to nature and more distanced from 'civilised' society than adults - Prout & James 1997:10). These ideas can be traced back to the work of the eighteenth century philosopher, Jean Jacques Rousseau who argued that "Coming from the hand of the Author of all things, everything is good; in the hands of man, everything degenerates" (Rousseau 1888:11). Thus, as humankind, prior to its infliction by the corruption and artificiality of modern society, was construed to be naturally good, children became the innocent epitome of this 'natural goodness' (cf. Dent 1989:14); "We are born weak, we need strength; we are born destitute of all things, we need assistance; we are born stupid, we need judgment" (Rousseau 1888:12). Rousseau's pervasive ideas relating to 'naturalness' and its association with freedom (Dent 1989:17) also compared the "free child" with the "noble savage" - "peoples who have not yet been corrupted by European society", having "no moral or intellectual needs" (Grimsley 1973:32); creatures of instinct, living in harmony with their environment (ibid:33):

> The child is not a man in miniature; he is merely a potential man and, as such, does not yet possess the reflection and moral attributes of the mature human being… Since the child responds to his own spontaneous impulses, he relies mainly on his physical resources and instincts; he delights, like the savage, in his strength and energy.
> (Grimsley 1973:48 on Rousseau's *Discours* iv. 357-61, 363, 419)

Under Rousseau's influence, both the "free child" and the "noble savage" were therefore considered to be distinct from fully-social 'modern' adults, due to their natural, amoral behavior (Rousseau 1888:30).

The implications of these philosophical musings have seen children either being completely neglected from social analysis or "reimported as an afterthought" (Jenks 1996:5). Children can thus be conceived as being "imbued with the quality of

Otherness" (James 1993:29), bearing the "constant promise of liminality" (James, Jenks & Prout 1998:198). Consequently, the relationship that exists between adults and children in 'Western' society is one exemplified by the alterity of an elite and a subaltern group (Hirschfield 2002:613).

Further illustration of the status of the child in social research has been provided by James (1993:31), who states that in Western industrialized societies, personhood is so integrally related to the concept of work, that children, "who by definition are non-workers" are classified as "non-persons". The approach traditionally taken by academic enquiry has thus considered children as an important focus of study, only in respect to what they could reveal about adulthood. As Jenks (1996:9) has argued - "for the anthropologist to proceed from such a stance would be to invite the charge of ethnocentrism, and deservedly so!".

The recent turn in childhood studies has thus "breached the partition between childhood and adulthood, showing that not only adults are capable and reflecting human beings… It [the new paradigm] was to show that adulthood was the norm against which childhood had been measured, resulting in childhood being defined as a lack, deviation or imperfection" (Johansson 2011:102). This systematic 'othering' of children as a social category does not only take place amongst adults, however. Interestingly, Bjerke's (2011) study of some Norwegian children's reflections on responsibility found that "children and young people do not see themselves as identical to adults, but rather seem to celebrate the ways in which children and childhood are different from adults and adulthood" (Bjerke 2011:69). They are not "arguing that they…should hold the same responsibilities as adults. Rather they ask to be included, respected and acknowledged as persons with valuable contributions in social relations with adults" (ibid:77).

Children as 'becoming' people versus children as 'being' people

> *The child as incomplete adult or futurity* is the child as empty vessel or *tabula rasa*, starting life with nothing, but requiring to be

> filled with socially sanctioned knowledge and culture, and growing into a predetermined identity. (Moss & Petrie 2005:58)

In traditional socialization theory, children have been construed as "passive objects, rather than active subjects" (James 1993:76). Here, the choice of term, 'object', is of particular interest, in relation to my own concern with the social constitution of 'objects' in museums. Although influential anthropologists from the 'culture and personality' school (such as Mead 1973), introduced ethnography as an effective method, which gave child research participants a more direct "voice", even here, the focus was on the process of *becoming* adults rather than *being* children (James 1993:30). Children in the UK have been historically constructed as "weak, poor and needy" (Moss & Petrie 2005:55), which has impacted how they have been represented in a wide variety of forums - from media to government policy (ibid).

Mead's early claim that children do not have creative capacity and construct identity solely on the basis of imitation of the adult population (1973:205), however, has now been replaced with widespread acknowledgement that children should be recognized as complete persons now, not merely considered in relation to their future potential (Tisdall et al. 2009:2). The paradigm shift that has taken place in the last twenty years has thus reconfigured our understandings of childhood as "an actively negotiated set of social relationships within which the early years of human life are constituted" (Prout & James 1997:7). In addition, a distinction is now made between biological immaturity and childhood, the latter being conceived as a rather arbitrary social construction, a result of the "increasing push towards standardizing childhood embedded within the discourse of developmental psychology and child health promotion…" (James 2005:250). Childhood can thus be described as being neither a natural nor universal component of human groups, rather constituting a "specific structural and cultural component of many societies" (Prout & James 1997:8). A 'new wave' of Childhood scholarship has recently railed against the 'Emergent Paradigm's' overemphasis of the social construction of childhood and the consequent reinforcement of the nature:culture/bio-social dualisms it was attempting to overcome (cf. Prout 2005; Ryan 2012). The lasting consequence this perspective has had upon any research undertaken involving child informants, however, is that

"children must be seen as actively involved in the construction of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live" (James & Prout 1997:3).

The power dynamics of researching with children

> Making children's constructive roles visible, as well as laying bare the structural constraints that they are exposed to, would be one way in which childhood research might assist children in regaining status as members of the public without sacrificing the achievements obtained in modern societies of childhood as a protected position. (Qvortrup 2005:19)

Children's positioning in society has important implications for their involvement in social research. Scourfield et al (2006:31) have addressed some of the particular issues involved in using children as research participants, for example, the risk of children being denied a 'voice of their own' by the researcher speaking for them and "translating children's experiences and concerns into adult agendas". Komulainen (2007:23) also criticises the 'child-centred' approaches to research which perceive the child's 'voice' as an object; something to be possessed or retrieved. She argues instead that voices do not exist in isolation and that this approach limits articulation to that which is verbal, textual or linguistic. We should therefore not assume that children always have intentions that match situations defined by adults (ibid:25).

In response to the complex ethical and methodological dilemmas involved in representing children's 'voices' (see also Spyrou 2011), I have sought to reflect the nature of my relationship with my informants and their experiences of the museum in a way which does not objectify them as much as involve them as participants[11] in a discussion to which they have pertinent and insightful contributions to make. This has had implications for this written thesis - for both the ways in which I portray direct quotes from my child informants and how I represent them in more general discussions[12]. Whilst, in common with many of my adult informants, the children invariably did not have any conscious intention to contribute to anthropological and

[11] See Gallacher & Gallagher (2008) for further discussion on participation in childhood research.
[12] See also Methodology for a more in-depth discussion of the ethical implications of my research.

museological debates on objects and power in the museum space, this should not prevent them from providing meaningful commentary on their own perspectives of this everyday reality.

In light of 'Emergent Paradigm' discourse, I also tried to design my study in a way that placed the children on a more equal footing in relation to me, a 'powerful' adult researcher - "Recognizing how our adult status impacts the whole research process and by extension the production of children's voices requires a reflexive self-awareness" (Spyrou 2011:156). Often adopting a 'least adult role', whereby I abdicated my 'normal' adult position of authority and privilege (cf. Mandell 1988; Corsaro 1985; Warming 2011), my flexible, ethnographic approach encouraged open-ended reflection and discussion with my child informants in a relaxed and often informal environment. This, I hope, enabled an otherwise vulnerable and often 'powerless' group in society, to pursue their own priorities according to their own terms of reference (see Haddow 2008). The fact that I was always a lone researcher in the midst of groups of children, as opposed to working with them on a one-to-one basis, constituted another attempt to put the children at their ease (cf. Hill 2006). Although impossible to maintain all the way through my research (due to the expectations of different groups of children, teachers and museum staff), my experience resonated with Warming's (2011:44) observations that "despite the impossibility of dissolving power relations", this 'least adult' approach to research with children "allowed me to become familiar and identify with the children's perspectives in ways which would not have been possible had I adopted the role of 'other adult' or 'detatched observer'" (ibid).

Children's perspectives

Warming (2011:49) has claimed that "children's perspectives… are not fixed and essential, but rather fluid and performative" and thus "firsthand accounts of children's perspectives only represent snapshots of children's multiple and fluid perspectives". Although, of course, the same could be said of the perspectives of any informant, irrespective of their age and relative social or biological 'maturity',

Warming's comments are reflective of a growing concern in childhood research to seek children's perspectives relating to the, often impersonal, state processes to which they are subjected.

Prout has commented that "…despite the recognition of children as persons in their own right, public policy and practice is marked by an intensification of control, regulation and surveillance around children" (Prout 2000:304). This observation complements Bourdieu's (1984) earlier claims about the nation state's concentrated investment in children, whereby modern education 'reproduces' the culture of the dominant classes through their children, as a mechanism of mass socialization (cf. Althusser 1971). Significantly, in the UK, at the same time as museums were birthed in collaboration with the modern nation-state, children were "being reconstructed as material investments in the nation" (Hendrick 1997:51).

> The idea of the child as… immature, dependent and incomplete, is part of an Enlightenment narrative which envisaged a state of pure reason as maturity, represented by the autonomous, independent and self-sufficient adult… Central to this narrative, and its belief that knowledge would make mankind free and rational, is the role of education, which involves a process of transmission to an empty vessel, to fill or mould the child into the adult ideal…
> (Moss & Petrie 2005:70)

Museums continue to play an influential role in education, "because of their established reputation for validating human knowledge" (Shepherd 1994:77) and "defining conceptual frameworks" (ibid). With the marketisation of these institutions, however, children have become more influential in determining visiting patterns, which has, in turn, influenced museum representation (ibid:70); "although the childhood which children experience is regarded as central to any discussion of the reproduction of cultural knowledge, how children receive and make use of that knowledge remains relatively uncharted" (James 1993:82). This thesis addresses this under-representation by exploring the various roles children play through their involvement in the constitutive processes taking place within the museum.

Tisdall et al (2009:5) have stated that "postmodern critiques of identity" have undermined the rather simplistic categorical divide between adults and children, by

drawing attention to the multiple identities (e.g. gender and ethnicity), which both groups continually perform and reproduce in everyday life. Children can not be grouped together into one big, homogenous category, and their identification as a 'child' often will not take first place among the many different identities maintained by each individual concerned (see James 1993:31). A successful negotiation of childhood involves the employment of "symbols in the adult world" (ibid:96) towards a skillful balance between conformity (expressions of belonging to a particular group of children) and individuality (ibid). It is their engagement with these 'adult symbols' in the form of museum 'objects' that serves as a focal point of this thesis:

> peer cultures result from children's creative appropriation of information from the adult world to address their own peer concerns… children are not simply internalizing society and culture, but are also actively contributing to cultural production and change. (Corsaro 2005:232)

So what makes children interesting and distinctive as museum visitors and research participants? Firstly, whilst children, unquestionably, have less power over their own lives than do adults[13], they often find themselves at the centre of the policy-making decisions of influential institutions such as the Scottish Government and NMS. My child informants were unique as museum visitors precisely because they did not choose to be museum visitors; they were obliged to attend school and, thereafter, their school's trips to museums. This gave them a crucially important perspective on all that happened once they entered into this cultural space, due to the fact that they hadn't necessarily "bought into" the museum's assumed value system relating to material heritage and its monopoly on knowledge about its collections.

Secondly, children are part of two social worlds – the world inhabited by adults and the world inhabited exclusively by their peers. It is because children are not distinct and divorced from the social world occupied by adults, and yet are rarely asked to contribute their perspectives towards questions which concern them, that they make excellent informants in a research project addressing such issues.

[13] Qvortrop (2005:11), for example, notes that "Despite much progress made and despite the advancement represented by, for instance, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, it remains a fact that children do not enjoy economic and political rights as autonomous citizens."

Thirdly, children have less life experience than adults and are often not as restricted as adults by the norms of acceptable social behaviour and interaction. The findings of research on child psychology, for example, although contestable in a number of respects[14], can be consistently represented by the following observation:

> The experiences of the child, his desires and expressed desires, that is, behaviour and activity, usually are an inadequately differentiated whole in the preschooler. In us, this is all very definitely differentiated, and for this reason, the behaviour of the adult does not make as direct and naïve an impression as the behaviour of the child. (Vygotsky 1998:289)

It is perhaps because of this 'naivety' (evident, to varying degrees, in primary school children as well as 'preschool' nursery children) that children often demonstrate the tendency to explore museum objects in a tactile way, whilst adults, constrained by social rules and expectations, rely more upon vision than their other senses (such as touch and smell). Classen and Howes (2006:207) have argued that this emphasis on vision as being "the only appropriate sense for aesthetic appreciation for "civilized" adults" only really developed in the mid-1800s as both a response to the practicalities of opening up valuable collections to an uneducated public, and a means of fostering an attitude of respect towards these artefacts that would enable their continued preservation. It is thus interesting to note that, "In keeping with the common nineteenth-century association of touch with non-rational or infantile behaviour, the one kind of museum that consistently caters to the sense of touch in modernity is the children's museum" (Classen 2005:284). Children's tactile and multisensorary approach towards museum artefacts thus makes their perspectives especially interesting in the context of a study of physical and intellectual engagement with material heritage.

Finally, I have found through practical experience, that children make good informants, because they often do not appear to feel under a social pressure or obligation to provide answers to questions which reflect the answers either hoped for or anticipated by the researcher (cf. Jenkins 1994:438). The social etiquette commonly involved in conducting research with adults in the UK is neatly bypassed

[14] This particularly relates to child psychology's attempts to establish universal developmental frameworks (e.g. Piaget 1999, 1929 & 1926); see Prout & James (1997) for a detailed critique.

and replaced by a refreshing and open frankness. Children "tell it like it is" - not worrying about the various ways their use of language might be construed. In response to his teacher's question about what the Viking replica bone needles were made of, for example, Felix (7 years) correctly answered "plastic", although this was obviously not the response anticipated by either the teacher or the museum staff who had designed the activity (Fieldnotes, 1/11/10). Additionally, if I asked a question that seemed to them to be either stupid or uninteresting, it was generally left unanswered through a deliberate change in the direction of the conversation. This allowed for tangential or apparently unrelated discussions which frequently turned out to be far more interesting. My child informants were thus regularly able to surprise me, lending profound insights into not only their own experiences of history and 'the past' within a particular museum, but also the human condition which actively and emotionally engages with the world through material things.

Education Theory and A Curriculum for Excellence

> In a democracy, surely, how we educate the young is an expression of a culture's goals in the large, its broader aspirations for the future, its sense of the limits of human possibility.
> (Bruner 2006:2)

Learning about cultural heritage through museum objects has become particularly meaningful in recent years with the launch of the Scottish Government's new national school curriculum. The subject of much critical debate concerning its theoretical and philosophical basis and the claims it makes about 'national values'[15], *A Curriculum for Excellence* "aims to achieve a transformation in education in Scotland by providing a coherent, more flexible and enriched curriculum from 3 to 18" (Scottish Education website[16]). Its emphasis is upon cross-curricular learning through skills development and application; "the totality of experiences which are planned for children and young people through their education, wherever they are

[15] For an extended discussion of the theoretical and philosophical implications of *A Curriculum for Excellence*, see Gillies 2006; Priestly and Humes 2010.
[16] Scottish Education website - http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/thecurriculum/whatiscurriculumforexcellence/index.asp , accessed 14/12/12.

being educated" (ibid). The sentiment behind this 'new' approach to national education could perhaps be partially illuminated by Bruner's (2006:30) call for the prioritization of active knowledge acquisition with ready application as opposed to the passive absorption of sterile facts; "It matters not *what* we have learned. What we can *do* with what we have learned: this is the issue". It is within this framework that learning about history through experience, i.e. object handling and asking questions, is particularly encouraged.

"The strength of museums… has always been in providing rich, memorable experiences, generally based on real objects and phenomena" (Ansbacher 1998:45). The notion of experiential learning is thus not new to *A Curriculum for Excellence*, and can rather be traced back in education philosophy to the works of John Dewey (c1938). Dewey's description of a contemporary movement of "new education" in comparison to earlier traditional methods, for example, resonates with the current curriculum:

> To imposition from above is opposed expression and cultivation of individuality; to external discipline is opposed free activity; to learning from texts and teachers, learning through experience; to acquisition of isolate skills and techniques by drill, is opposed the acquisition of them as means of attaining ends which make direct vital appeal… (Dewey 1998[1938]:5)

Crucially, Dewey claimed that "all genuine education comes about through experience" (1998[1938]:13), but warned that not all experiences are "genuinely or equally educative" (ibid). These contemplations and the requirements of *A Curriculum for Excellence* present museums such as the National Museum of Scotland with the challenge of encouraging children to learn about history through the *experience* of their specialised environments; "The job of the exhibit developer and designer… shifts to one of creating an environment that will enable these experiences to take place" (Ansbacher 1998:39). Instead of being a passive recipient of educational messages, the child is perceived as an essential participant in this process, albeit within the confines of the education workshops in which s/he finds him/herself:

> the child is a part of the social situation and the relation of the child to the environment and the environment to the child occurs through

> experience and activity of the child himself; the forces of the environment acquire a controlling significance because the child experiences them. (Vygotsky 1998:294)

Dewey (1998[1938]:11) has also discussed how the principle of learning through experience concerns the subject of history (or cultural heritage, as it applies to the educational content of school workshops at the National Museum of Scotland) in particular:

> We may reject knowledge of the past as the *end* of education and thereby only emphasize its importance as a *means*. When we do that we have a problem that is new in the story of education: How shall the young become acquainted with the past in such a way that the acquaintance is a potent agent in appreciation of the living present? (ibid)

Thus, Dewey argued:

> History must be presented, not as an accumulation of results or effects, a mere statement of what happened, but as a forceful, acting thing. To study history is not to amass information, but to use information in constructing a *vivid picture* of how and why men did thus and so; achieved their successes and came to their failures. (Dewey 1967[1915]:151 *my emphasis*)

This thesis contributes towards a greater understanding of how this *vivid picture* of the past is experienced in children's imaginative engagement with objects in the museum. The nature, properties and affects of such 'objects' are central to the focus of both museums and anthropological studies of material culture.

Museums, Time, Multivocality and Material Culture

> artefacts appear as concrete forms, but human societies have always striven - through their construction, alteration, consumption and application of meaning - to make them internal to, and in part definitional of themselves. (Miller 1994:396)

The Latin roots of the term "artifact" have been defined by Domanska (2006a:339) as referring to "a manmade object", or, more broadly, "any material remnant of human activity". Museums originated as sites for physical engagement with exotic artefacts from across the world. Although the "first major, truly universal museum"

(Wilson 1984:54), the British Museum, was founded in 1753, the majority of early museums were heirs to the internationally competitive World Fairs of the 1800s to early 1900s, a period during which public education became an increasing source of interest and concern[17]. With a steady annual increase in the number of museums opening in Great Britain (reaching about 400 in 1920), "public concern about museums and their role in society was beginning to be heard" in relation to "both national and provincial museums" (Lewis 1984:36). Thus, the 'Education (Scotland) Act 1918' and the 'Public Libraries (Scotland) Act 1920' included moderations which ensured that local councils could raise taxes towards the support of museums to the tune of three pence in every pound (ibid). Additionally, upon the recommendation of the Royal Commission on the National Museums and Galleries, a Standing Commission on Museums and Galleries was founded in 1931, and "the need for the national museums to show a far greater awareness of their visitors… and extend their contact with schools" (ibid:39) was identified.

Throughout a period of dramatic social change following Britain's involvement in the two World Wars[18], museums were seen as centres of education and innovation (cf. Lawn 2009). 'Objects' also came to symbolise modern education (ibid:10),

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17 The free education movement resulted in the availability of primary school education for every child becoming fully established in Great Britain by acts of parliament. The 'Education (Scotland) Act 1872' represented a culmination of earlier Acts (1696, 1803, 1838 and 1861) regarding the establishment of schools, schoolmasters and school boards in every parish and burgh in the country (Graham 1902: xiv-xvii), providing "free, compulsory education for all, up to the age of 12 at first, and later to 14" (Spicker, accessed 05/03/12). Such legislation had a great impact on museums and communities across the UK. By the 1880s, for example, Lewis (1984:33) notes that the Liverpool Museum was "providing specimens to assist teaching" in a "circulating school museum". Unlike England and Wales, which saw the 'Museums and Gymnasiums Act 1891' and the 'Public Libraries Act 1892', however, "Scottish local authorities have never had separate museum legislation" (Lewis 1984:34).

18 In the early to mid twentieth century, educational reform became central to the post-war creation of the welfare state, "intended to redistribute social goods and resources more equitably and to encourage economic growth and productivity" (Tomlinson 2005:13). This political move away from "Laissez-faire"-ism combined with an adoption of Keynes' economic approach towards state involvement in the promotion and subsidisation of the arts (Heilbrun 1984). In various key articles, such as an essay written on "Art and the State" for the BBC publication, *The Listener* in 1936, Keynes recognised the important historical role of both the monarchy and the state in supporting the arts and argued for implementing a framework whereby the state would be able to establish public accessibility and appreciation of the arts through the provision of "parks, squares, fountains, theatres, schools, and galleries" (Heilbrun 1984:43). Keynes went on to become instrumental in the establishment of the post-war Arts Council of Great Britain in 1946.

being "placed on the front line in the educational agendas of the period" (ibid:22). The following years (1960s and early 1970s) also "represented an important period in the development of museums in Britain" (Lewis 1984:44), marked by both a rapid increase in numbers and the ways in which "existing museums responded to changing social and cultural conditions" (ibid) by increasing the number of educationists they employed and taking a greater interest in visitor attitudes, obtained through audience surveys. Whilst all this was taking place, however, the relevance of the classificatory systems and representation styles employed by many museums began to recede.

After significant steps towards the professionalization of the national museum service in 1970s (Lewis 1984:49), the 1980s witnessed a tide of reflexivity about the political nature of museum representation (Hooper-Greenhill 2000:148 &150), and a return to the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries' 'hands-on' approach to education in museums (ibid:125). Museums also increasingly became associated with more localised constructions of identity and belonging (Feldman 2006:265). Despite this, and of particular relevance to the interests of this thesis, the political significance of national museums has remained strong and has even grown in recent years. Wilson (1984:56) has suggested that a central function of national museums is "to express the history and aspirations of the country in which they are placed":

> The primary duty of museums – it must be emphasized – is not didactic. This is even more true of national museums. The public must have an experience, aesthetic, cultural, emotional or one of half a hundred exclamatory sensations, ranging from the spiritual to the curious when they visit the museum. (Wilson 1984:57-8)

Up until the recent impact of financial restrictions inflicted by the current economic recession, government policy in the UK has tended to emphasise the importance of public participation in cultural activities such as museum visiting (e.g. Chamberlain et al 2008). Museums in turn, are encouraged to increase their relevance to the general public by widening their audience and thus justifying continued public funding (Fisher 2000). They are therefore also becoming "increasingly important to a political agenda of lifelong learning, diversity, access and education" (de Groot 2009:236). Despite this, museums have been described as "merely housing objects

to which the viewer no longer has any vital relationship" (see Latchem 2006:48). It has also been claimed the material substance of heritage "has little intrinsic worth. Rather, values are placed upon artefacts or activities by people who, when they view heritage, do so through a whole series of lenses" (Graham & Howard 2008:2).

Time and the Past

When considering heritage, we must also explore what we actually mean when we talk about 'the past'. When I asked my child informants "what is the past?", I was greeted with raised eyebrows. The past, they claimed, was simply something that happened a long, long time ago. And so it is/was. But, the very notion of the 'past' can only exist in the present (cf. Hodges 2008). Both the past and the future are solely constituted in the lived experience of the present, begging two important questions – does the past actually exist at all? And does the present really exist either?

In his '*Sublime historical experience'*, Ankersmit (2005:1) has observed that:

> in the contemporary world the present tends to "devour" both the future and the past and that the "circles" of cultural, narrative, and textual meaning became ever narrower to the point where they finally coincided with their centre; that is, with the pure *experience* of the present.

He goes on to describe how historical experience requires a switch between this "timeless present into a world consisting of things past and present" (Ankersmit 2005:9), whereby there is a "discovery of the past as a reality that has somehow "broken off" from a timeless present" ("the moment of loss"), whilst, at the same time, the historical experience attempts to recover the past "by transcending again the barriers between past and present" (characterised by Ankersmit as "the moment of desire or of love") (ibid).

Hodges (2008), however, has reflected on the paucity of anthropological work relating to the question of time. Since the late 1970s/1980s, such discussion has generally founded upon an understanding of time as a constant state of change or

flux (e.g. Bourdieu 1977, Giddens 1979, and more recently; Gupta & Ferguson 1997, Ong & Collier 2004); "*fluid time*" being construed as the "(chiefly metaphorical) motor facilitating the ongoing reproduction and modification of social life" (Hodges 2008:402). The present is thus conceived as being inherently unstable – in a perpetual process of happening or becoming. Hodges (2008:401), however, has rightly criticised these assumptions of time's fluidity for their lack of rigorous, analytical grounding and "temporal ontology". Based on the philosophical work of Bergson and Deleuze on *la duree*, Hodges (2008:412) proposes a concept of time which "categorically has no 'direction', and is non-chronological in nature":

> *La duree*, as the continuous different/ciation of multiplicities, produces a 'living present', by linking what might commonly be thought of as successive instants into a fusion of what is conventionally termed past and future. (ibid:410)

Hodges' (ibid:411-421) description of Deleuze's three paradoxes of time is particularly pertinent to the discussion of museums' attempts to represent the past, through objects, in the present - 'the paradox of contemporaneity', 'the paradox of co-existence' and 'the paradox of pre-existence'. The 'past' is thus both contemporaneous and coexistent with the 'present', whilst also ultimately pre-existing the 'present' in its virtual, *a priori* form. Using the philosophical basis of *la duree*, we can therefore conclude that everything is emergent and in a perpetual state of becoming:

> The past would never be constituted if it did not coexist with the present whose past it is. The past and the present do not denote two successive moments, but two elements which coexist: One is the present, which does not cease to pass, and the other is the past, which does not cease to be but through which all presents pass.
> (Deleuze 1991:59, as cited in Hodges 2008:411)

These conclusions, however, are not to be understood as undermining the historical enterprise engaged in by museums:

> *la duree* offers a precise perspective on flux and change that allows one to clarify the relationship between historical change that anthropologists habitually curtail and define ethnographically, and the different/ciating flux of *la duree*, which is all-pervasive and provides an explicit spatio-temporal ontology with which to ground practice methodologies. (Hodges 2008:416)

Museums fulfil an important role in the attempt to 'stablise' time within the framework of linear progressive temporality with which we are more familiar. They do this by promoting a heightened awareness of 'the past' (revealing how time changes at different tempos), by constituting 'things' as particular 'objects', 'frozen' (as if outside of these perpetual processes of change) through a combination of narrative and material conservation practices.

Because the meaning of the past cannot remain in the past but lives in the present (Tilley 1994:73), therefore, the ways in which museums interpret historical objects are not neutral, but rather cultural products (Hides 1997:29). Under the reflexive influence of postmodernism and the *new museology* (Vergo 1989), museum exhibitions and education programmes are no longer assumed to consist of objective facts, but subjective, interpreted information, loaded with political meaning. It is important to note, however, that although curatorial intentions impact the substance of museum exhibits, this is quite distinct from the meanings these exhibits might impart to the museum visitor; "The nature of representation involves an interaction between the habits and constraints of museum practice and the sensory expectations various visitors bring to exhibits, particularly those containing objects with which the visitor has some link" (Edwards et al 2006:21).

Museums and Multivocality

In order to explore the communication that occurs through the symbolic medium of museum objects, scholars developed the concept of 'mulitvocality', arguing that "meaning develops as an interactive process between thing and viewer" (Pearce 1994:19). It was understood as impossible, therefore, to understand an object apart from through the veil of one's personal experience and preconceptions. Pearce (1994:27) argued that the engagement between ourselves and the object that we are viewing is both a dynamic and complex movement. Thus, curatorial intent as expressed in museum display was construed as being very distinct from the actual meaning that is imparted to the museum visitor. The communications of museum artefacts are therefore unable to be explained comprehensively by a simple

unidirectional model of symbolic code, with the interaction occurring between the visitor and an exhibit perhaps better described as a dialogue, whereby an object never means exactly the same thing to any two different individuals.

> Artefacts are very different from words, and when we talk about the meaning of things we are primarily concerned with questions of 'being' rather than questions of 'reference'. Artefacts are a means by which we give form to, and come to an understanding of, ourselves, others, or abstractions such as the nation or the modern. (Miller 1994:397)

This process of meaning-making taking place within museums can thus helpfully be described as *relational*, involving museum visitors and the collections themselves in addition to professional curatorial practice.

Material Culture

The relationships people have with each other and the physical world around them are fundamental to our understanding of what it means to be human:

> Material culture is, after all, the general name given to the elements of the world with which people work most closely. The forms that things are felt to take, the general sense of what it is possible to do with things, and the ways of being-in-the-world, derive from sensory interaction with the world.
> (Edwards et al 2006:5)

Pearce (1994:9) has claimed that "the whole of cultural expression, one way or another, falls within the realm of material culture". This centrality, however, has often been neglected in social research - an important omission, causing Miller (2005:41), for example, to repudiate "the privilege accorded to a humanity defined by its opposition to materiality as pure subject or social relations".

Latour (2005:75) has also described the assumed division between the material and the social as a false dichotomy; both superficial and unhelpful. He claims instead that the animate and the inanimate are inextricably linked and one cannot understand one without reference to the other. Independently, and in different ways, both Latour (2005) and Gell (1998) have introduced the notion that objects, like humans, are in

possession of 'agency' – the ability to impact the outcome of an action or process[19]. Thus, for Latour, "politics is no longer limited to humans, but also extends to things" (Domanska 2006a:340):

> Of course, the notion of the agency of things does not mean that things have intentions or consciousness; Latour does not animate things, but rather claims that things enjoy a particular status in their relations with people. For scholars inspired by Latour and by Marcel Mauss's idea of the gift, things perform a socializing function: they solidify interpersonal relations, they participate in the creation of human identity at the individual and collective levels, and they mark its changes. (Domanska 2006a:340)

More recently, scholars such as Brown (2001) and Bennett (2004)[20] have deepened the analytical question at stake by exploring the power of 'things' in affecting both the material and social worlds around them. Here, 'things' are distinguished from 'objects' as being the material stuff of this world from which 'objects' are socially constituted and yet, remaining in excess of these 'objects', held within an inherently unstable process of 'becoming'. For the purposes of this thesis it is thus helpful to adhere to Latour's (2005:71) suggestion that distinguishing between categories of people and 'things' is not what is important; rather, it is gaining an understanding of the network of relations that exists between them. These networks are particularly visible in the context of museums.

Whilst Latour's (2005) approach to the 'agency' of objects has been criticized on the basis that it involves the effective 'flattening' of historical context (cf. Navaro-Yashin 2009:9)[21], Bouquet (2001:195) has successfully applied his work on social networks to the context of museums, arguing that "...although an exhibition appears to be composed of things (and images, and words), it is actually a mixture of actors: things and people at the same time".

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[19] See Chapter III for a more detailed discussion of the work of Gell (1998) and Latour (2005) on 'agency'.

[20] See Chapter III for a more in-depth discussion of the different contributions made by Brown (2001) and Bennett (2004) to this ongoing debate.

[21] Miller (2005:12) has also argued that by adopting Latour's emphasis on "objects of science, rather than on artifacts, we do lose something of that quality of the artifact redolent with prior historical creativity".

'Things' are inherently multivocal, their meanings "constructed from the position in which they are viewed" (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000:103; Pearce, 1994:19). The interaction between museum-constructed 'artefacts' and their visitors is thus best described as a dialogue, rather than a linear communication, whereby an object's meaning is negotiated through the prior experiences and perspectives of its varying audience:

> The object is inexhaustible, but it is this inexhaustibility which forces the viewer to his decisions... The viewing process is selective, and the potential object is richer than any of its realisations. (Pearce 1994:26)

The relationship which exists between a museum 'object' and its viewer thus enables particular memories, emotions and personal experiences to be encoded in the artefact, which can then "be used to express a sense of self and a feeling of cultural affiliation" (Hooper-Greenhill 2000:109). It has been argued that it is the very act of removing an object from everyday life into a museum space, which imbues it with meaning (ibid).

Hodder (1994) has argued that all 'objects' are meaningfully constituted, however, these meanings can be altered and manipulated depending on how 'objects' are displayed (eg. which different 'objects' are chosen to be grouped together in museum exhibitions and education programmes - cf. Miller 1994:400), along with the decontextualising process inherent in museums themselves (Jones 1992:911). These ideas must be held in tension when considering the role of 'objects' in museum education. I argue that it is not just the *selection* of 'things' and their constitution as 'objects' through particular accounts of their recovery, value and authenticity by museum workers that makes them powerful in affecting visitor's conceptions of cultural knowledge and identity - objects, particularly "real objects from the past", also possess affective power through their material and relational qualities (cf. Navaro-Yashin, 2009).

Thus, in a museum context, objects and their audiences should not be separated conceptually by the glass panes of display cases, but rather, considered *relationally* (Gell 1998; Bennett 2004), as examples of communicative interaction within a

network of social relations (Latour 2005). This can be linked with Appadurai's (1986:3) thesis that objects have "social lives", but also goes beyond it, because this latter approach still maintains 'things' as being rather 'passive' – having social lives *because* of the actions of humans and not vice versa. The way in which the very physicality of 'things' in the temporary form of 'objects' is treated by museum exhibitions - either by actively preventing visitors from touching or inspecting objects closely, or by enabling such interaction (only in controlled environments and using objects which are either 'inauthentic' replicas, or those of lesser value, as is often the case in contemporary interactive museum exhibits), thus reveals important ideas relating to politics and hierarchies of value.

Introducing the field site

It could be assumed that the site of this research, the National Museum of Scotland [Figure 2], is less important than the interactions taking place within it, because it is merely representative of any large museum in the UK. Set within the context of current Scottish independence debates, however, the Museum's approach to children's educational provision demonstrates a particular relationship between national 'identity' and cultural heritage and provides vital insight into the complex processes of becoming which take place within its walls.



Figure 1: A group of school children engage with objects exhibited in a museum (Museum nan Eilean, May 2011).



Figure 2: The National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh (opened in 1998) © National Museums Scotland.

Extensive sociological research on nationalist civic/territorial beliefs has indicated not only that being Scottish is one of the most significant aspects of Scottish people's identity (Rosie & Bond 2003:119), a more salient component of personal identity than is found in Wales, Northern Ireland or England (ibid:122), but that birth is widely considered its primary qualification (McCrone 2001; Bond 2006). Crucially, the number of people identifying themselves as being Scottish as opposed to British has increased since the 1970s. There is, however, considerable 'non-alignment' in the three-way relationship between national identity, constitutional preference and political party identification (Rosie & Bond 2003:127). McCrone (2005) has highlighted the importance of cultural heritage in Scotland, which has been employed historically as if to "compensate" for the unusual situation in which it had found itself - a nation without a state. These findings provoke reflections on what 'being Scottish' means and how it is daily negotiated by museum workers and visitors in the light of constitutional change in Scotland (Hearn 2000).

In 2013, heritage continues to play an important role in distinguishing Scotland from its southerly neighbour, England. In recent years, for example, there has been a large increase in the number of heritage centres and museums in Scotland (Grabmann 2001:219), giving it more museums per head than any other part of the UK. A recent document pertaining to the new National Strategy for Scotland's Museums and Galleries highlights the significance of the role played by museums in Scottish society (2011, Section 1); there are more than 340 museums and galleries in Scotland which serve as repositories for more than 12 million objects (according to SMC, Scotland's National Audit, 2002). These museums and galleries attract approximately 25 million visitors annually, generating more than £800 million for the Scottish economy. The past couple of years have seen the fruits of substantial financial investment in the sector, to a total of £170 million, with the completion of works on "flagship" museum projects such as the Glasgow Life Riverside Museum, the Robert Burns Birthplace Museum, the National Portrait Gallery and NMS' own Royal Museum Project (a £46 million project in its own right, £16 million of which was supplied by the Scottish Government).

Many museums thus receive direct state funding, highlighting the growing importance of the heritage industry in Scotland (McCrone et al 1995:77). Heritage has become "a tangible link with a set of values, crucial to a sense of identity" (McCrone et al 1995:160), which privileges national identity over other scales of identification and belonging, such as regional and local (Graham & Howard 2008:8).

The very existence of the National Museum of Scotland is representative of the importance of cultural heritage in Scotland's contemporary political landscape. The modern section of the Museum's opening, for example, roughly coincided with the opening of the Scottish Parliament[22] after devolution. Considering the political implications of this, Lorimer (2002:97) suggests that "there is a very obvious form of 'materiality' about national projects either completed or initiated in the afterglow of devolution". In accordance with the argument that national museums actually constitute the nation (cf. Handler, 1985:211), McLean and Cooke (2003:115) have observed that "the very fact that a Museum of Scotland exists reifies the idea of a nation". Kaplan (1994) has also highlighted the close relationship between the establishment of national museums and surges of political nationalism. She presents museums as a "means of publicly defining self and nation, cultural and national identity and ambitions" (1994:1), whereby "collections have played important roles in creating national identity and in promoting national agendas" (ibid). McLean and Cooke (2003:121) observe of the National Museum of Scotland:

> The existence of the Museum itself is part of this flagging through the understanding that there is this thing called 'Scotland' and that Scottish material culture is a relevant category for collection interpretation and display.

Any research undertaken at the National Museum of Scotland, therefore, must not only acknowledge its involvement with Scottish national identity politics (both explicit and implicit), but also the importance of its relationship with the very notion of 'Scotland'. The mutually-constitutive nature of this relationship means that, in a sense, the Museum both *is* Scotland and *makes* Scotland.

[22] See Chapter II for further discussion of the historical origins of the National Museum of Scotland.

Although the concept of 'national identity' has been frequently employed in research conducted at the National Museum of Scotland (see McLean & Cooke 2000; Bucciantini 2009), the term 'identity', itself, is ambiguous. It has often been used in sociological writings to describe a range of ideas relating to perceptions of selfhood and group membership. Instead of being inherent to an individual or group of people, it is actively constructed in a "process of producing meaning" (Grabmann 2001:217). Recent anthropological work has moved away from using the term 'identity', because its meanings are considered to be both too diverse and context-specific (Brubaker & Cooper 2000). It also "has an unfortunate tendency to fix what is in constant flux", implying "that there is basic need for a group or person to produce a clearly outlined and unequivocal identity" (Geschiere 2009:31; cf. Nyamnjoh 2002:113). In addition, it has been argued that an excessive focus on the concept of identity has caused the neglect of more important questions concerning the role of relationships in impacting who we are as social agents (Nyamnjoh 2002:111).

Consequently, a new emphasis on 'belonging' (which has a more relational dimension, being both inclusive and exclusive) and 'subjectivity' (referring to the construction of the individual subject, cf. Werbner 2002) has begun to replace 'identity' in sociological as well as anthropological analysis. Significantly, Geschiere (2009:24) claims that processes of belonging and autochthony have "affected the status of national citizenship as an ultimate identity". He also suggests that "changing techniques of the self, mostly centred on the body, are obvious entrance points for trying to understand how the subject is both shaped and participates in evolving processes of subjectivation" (ibid:32). In this thesis, I consider the concepts of belonging and subjectivity as they relate to children's material engagement with heritage 'objects' at the National Museum of Scotland and some of its partner museums across Scotland:

> at the *general* level, things [relics of the past, keepsakes] can be used to help us determine who we are; the thing becomes the "other" of human being; the thing participates in creating human identity, legitimates it, and becomes its guarantor; it also marks changes in human identity. (Domanska 2006a:338)

This emphasis on the relationship between artefacts and human becoming, belonging and identity can be linked to Miller's (2005) important reflections on the continuous and unstable processes by which we have subjects making objects, which are also making subjects:

> So there is a level of philosophy at which it is wrong to talk about subjects and objects. These are merely appearances that we see emerging in the wake of the process of objectification as it proceeds as a historical process. All that can properly be privileged at this philosophical level is the process of objectification itself. (Miller 2005:10)

The case study of the Lewis Chessmen touring exhibition, in particular, demonstrates the importance of place and material heritage in local constructions of identity and belonging. These more localized understandings have also been explored by Nadel-Klein (2003:172), who describes the museums and heritage centres along the East Coast of Scotland as the fishing communities' response to an uncertain future, whereby social memory is transformed into historical reconstruction, in an attempt to construct a modern Scottish identity (ibid:176). Her case studies emphasise "the bonds that make identity a collective as well as an individual experience" (ibid:216).

Thus, whilst having broader applications for our understanding of children's engagement with material heritage through museum displays and object handling anywhere in the 'Western world', this thesis also has particular insights to offer in relation to the specific field site of the National Museum of Scotland, as it endeavours to carry out its public responsibilities and fulfill its national remit within a constantly shifting political landscape. In addition, the mutually constituting relationship found in this particular context allows for an explanation of the process by which 'things' are made into 'objects' and subjects are made into nations (cf. Miller 2005). 'Things' are made into museum artefacts, which are then used to constitute children as a way of constituting the future through constituting the past. Thus, the relationship between children and 'things' explored within this thesis can be considered from a perspective whereby the future (children, as subjects of the museum) is constituted through the relational becoming of things.

Methodology

> Research is inherently unpredictable: the best laid plans are liable to go awry. Methodological immaturity privileges open-ended process over predefined technique.
> (Gallacher & Gallagher 2008:513)

How do the children of today engage with material evidence from the past? How do those participating in education programmes at the National Museum of Scotland experience and talk about these workshops and the objects they encounter? - "there are implications that concern the *kind* of knowledge that is arrived at, which derive from the way that it is gained" (Jenkins 1994:444).

Although children visit museums in informal, family groups as well as youth groups and after-school clubs, I chose to focus my study on visiting school groups as this was the audience towards which the Museum's educational workshops and resources were being directed and it was within this dynamic that children's engagement with museum objects in the form of object handling sessions, could be most easily observed and investigated. The majority of my informants were thus between 3 and 12 years old. I feel that the obstacles I encountered when seeking to do research with this particular social group, obstacles which affected the level of access I was able to obtain to both my child informants and the museum space itself, serve as a useful reflection of some of the key issues relating to the political landscape of the National Museum of Scotland. My negotiation of these obstacles; forging carefully constrained pathways through the maze of bureaucracy, policy and politics at the Museum can now serve as a narrative through which I explain how I sought to produce answers to my research questions.

My experience of negotiating access to NMS for research purposes was a long and bureaucratic process. Firstly, the University of Edinburgh's own ethical procedures had to be navigated, which required my filling out lengthy forms in order to provide detailed evidence that all the necessary steps were being taken in order to ensure the safety and wellbeing of every child participating in my research project. Permission to work with children at NMS also entailed undergoing an 'Advanced Disclosure

Scotland' check to ensure I did not have a criminal record. This documentation allowed me to be with groups of school children, only if another responsible adult (usually their school teacher) was also present. My experience of obtaining informed consent from my child informants themselves was also fraught with the challenges identified by Gallagher et al (2010)[23], who discuss the problems of information, understanding, authority, capacity and voluntarity, which confront the ethically-minded researcher. So, despite my original plans involving information packs and formalised consent forms, I eventually found eliciting verbal consent from my child participants throughout the day-to-day activity of my research a far more accessible and practical approach for all parties concerned.

Aside from gaining access to my research participants and obtaining their informed consent[24], acquiring access to conduct research at the Museum institution itself was also challenging. I have categorised the process into the following four stages; 'going in at the top', 'barter and exchange', 'research as compromise' and 'access in practice'. Firstly, 'going in at the top' entailed an official meeting with the Director under whose authority the Education Department sits[25]. To my great relief, once my academic and professional credentials (and those of my supervisor) had been established, it became clear that this Director was very open to my research project and could perceive the potential benefits to NMS that it might entail.

The second stage of access negotiation can be understood as a period of 'barter and exchange', whereby at a more relaxed lunch meeting with both the Director and the Head of Education, the mutual benefits of a working relationship between me, as researcher, and the Education Department, were ascertained. My third encounter with NMS, in the form of another meeting with my key-gatekeeper can be understood under the rubric of 'research as compromise'. This meeting, which took place in the Museum café, involved working out the practical feasibility of my

[23] For further discussion, see also Gallagher (2009:15-18).

[24] See Gallagher et al 2009 for an extended discussion of some of the dilemmas involved in obtaining informed consent from child informants.

[25] NMS is a large organisation composed of numerous different departments which are grouped together into broader bodies known as Directorates – the Education Department is included under the broader umbrella of Public Programmes.

research project, and provided me with more realistic insight into how much access I would actually be granted to the Museum during a period of particular pressure and upheaval for the Department as the organisation entered the final phases of a large-scale renovation project of the adjoining Royal Museum building (the Royal Museum Project). Finally, 'access in practice' took place when I was able to be in direct contact with ground level staff, who provided me with the opportunity to gain practical day-to-day access to the Museum's education workshops. I facilitated the development of good working relationships with these museum staff by ensuring the mutual benefit of my research project and volunteering my time and expertise in helping test and evaluate various interactive exhibits and education workshops that were in the process of being developed as part of the Royal Museum Project.

All of these early encounters with the organisation which would serve as my primary field site provided me with an interesting framework through which to view the ways in which NMS perceived its role as both a guardian and communicator of Scotland's material heritage. The challenges I experienced when gaining access both to the Museum and the children involved in my research can be linked to the more central issue of control; the controlled constitution of space, 'objects', 'subjects' and knowledge.

Unlike more conventional field sites, which are constituted in a space which one can move in and out of at will, the nature of my research at the National Museum of Scotland determined that the building itself was only a field site (in the usual sense of the term) at particular times and in particular spaces, dictated by when and where education workshops were actually taking place. The field site could thus be construed as a restricted space, whereby access was controlled by the NMS organisation itself. My access to the Education Department was also constrained to appointments and interviews with staff, usually organised to take place outside of the open-plan office, within the context of the Museum café. Whilst I initially viewed these arrangements as problematic, as I was excluded from the internal processes and politics of the Education Department, they had the benefit of ensuring my continued focus on children's (externalised) perspectives of the Museum's educational

provision as opposed to allowing these perspectives to become sidelined by the central concerns of the organisation itself.

Research with children and other local audiences visiting the Lewis Chessmen touring exhibition also played an important role in extending my concept of 'field site' to include other museums, making this research multi-sited in its approach (cf. Falzon, 2009). *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked* exhibition was hosted by the National Museum of Scotland from 21st May until 19th September 2010, before travelling to Aberdeen Art Gallery (7th October 2010 – 8th January 2011), Shetland Museum (21st January – 27th March 2011) and finally, Museum nan Eilean in Stornoway, Lewis (15th April – 12th September 2011). The exhibition proved incredibly popular at each of its different tour locations, culminating in a total of more than 115,000 visitors, over 23,000 of which visited the Chessmen during their significant return to the Isle of Lewis.

My research in each of these different tour locations took on a slightly different flavour than it did at the National Museum of Scotland. Through introductions made by education staff at the latter institution (some of whom had both suggested and encouraged me to do research on the touring exhibition during my initial negotiation of access to the National Museum of Scotland), I was able to establish strong working relationships with staff at each host museum, which enhanced my access to informants at these sites. In addition to helping with their audience research for the touring exhibition (conducting interview-questionnaires with visitors in the exhibition galleries), at the Shetland Museum and Museum nan Eilean, I was also involved in developing workshops for school groups visiting *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked*. In the case of the Shetland Museum, this was in order for me to integrate the children's participation in my research into their general visit. Through extensive communication with the museum's Education Officer prior to my two-week visit to the islands in February 2011, I was able to obtain informed consent from every child and their parents for both the children's participation in focus group discussions and for my photography and digital recording of the workshop sessions. This arrangement was also carried out in advance of my two-week visit to the Isle of

Lewis in May 2011. In the latter case, however, if I hadn't volunteered to guide visiting school and nursery groups around the exhibition and to lead follow-up activities and discussion-based focus groups, there would have been no educational provision for child visitors to *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked*. This would have posed a significant obstacle for my child-centred research and so my working relationship with staff at the Museum nan Eilean, especially, proved to be mutually beneficial. The intensity of my research experiences during my time in both Shetland and Lewis contributed to an increased overall understanding of the role material heritage played in these local communities, as well as the impact of the Lewis Chessmen exhibition itself and its reflection of the museums' different relationships with the National Museum of Scotland.

The delicacy of the working relationships I made at the National Museum of Scotland in particular, through my role as a researcher on the one hand, and colleague on the other, was an aspect of fieldwork that demanded great care and attention. During the months I was conducting fieldwork at the National Museum of Scotland, I was employed by one of its satellite museums. This position as a paid employee of the NMS organisation facilitated my access to the National Museum of Scotland by both adding credence to my motives and reliability as a researcher during initial encounters with key gate-keepers, and later, on a more practical level, by granting me physical access to the backstage offices by use of my security pass (although I did not use this for the first six months or so, opting instead to 'sign in' at the staff entrance, like any other behind-the-scenes 'visitor'). Throughout this research, inspired by ethical concerns, I had to continually strive to balance my personal identity as insider/outsider in my dealings and relationships with members of the National Museum of Scotland's Education Department. In every encounter with my other informants, both Museum staff, and visitors, I asserted my positioning as a researcher as opposed to a member of staff, although through my voluntary audience research work with the Education Department, these boundaries sometimes became a little blurred.

An additional practical challenge posed by my choosing to conduct ethnographic fieldwork at a museum has been highlighted by Macdonald (2001:77); "like many organizations, it has a well-educated staff, many of whom are actively engaged in reflecting upon the organisation in which they work and who are well able to give accounts of it". Mosse (2005:232) has suggested that "in order to 'work' policy models and programme designs have to be *transformed* into the different logic of the intentions, goals and ambitions of the many people and institutions they bring together". My intention to observe what the staff at the museum actually did as well as listen to what they said they did (Agar 1996:156, Jenkins 1994:437), entailed the challenge of delving beneath the surface of 'policy talk' to look at the underlying assumptions of educational practitioners and the relationship between museum learning on paper and the reality of children's experiences at the National Museum of Scotland.

In addition to immersing myself in the day to day activities of the Education Department (cf. Wacquant 1995) and developing long-term relationships with staff whilst working primarily with the schools' workshops taking place in the Museum galleries (between January 2010 and June 2011), my principle means of data collection was through informal conversations with children, teachers and museum staff, semi-structured interviews with museum staff, questionnaires with class teachers and focus groups with children. These focus groups (14 groups in total with between 4 and 6 children in each group), which took place within the Shetland Museum and Museum nan Eilean, involved discussions centred on the Lewis Chessmen exhibition. I employed life-size replicas of several of the Chessmen for handling and observation activities, along with high-quality close-up photographs of the figures to stimulate conversations about both the Chessmen themselves (focusing on their fine detail, e.g. what they looked and felt like) and some of the cultural and political discussions revolving around them (e.g. where they were found and where they might 'belong') (cf. Scourfield et al's study of children's identification with place and nation in Wales, 2006:32). At the Shetland Museum, I ensured that there was also an open-ended opportunity for the children to respond creatively to all they had seen and heard at the exhibition through art and craft, drama, poetry and rap.

My preference for a very open, informant-led approach to my research at the National Museum of Scotland was one that appeared to sit a bit uncomfortably with some of my informants within the organisation. This could be partially explained by my failure to adhere to certain preconceptions about what research in a museum should be and look like. Although one must acknowledge the fact that ethnographic observations, when recorded as descriptions are "both comparative and theory-laden because in describing we choose what to describe" (Bechhofer and Paterson 2000:5), one of ethnography's great advantages is the fact that one is not constrained by "predetermined categories of measurement or response", leaving the researcher "free to search for concepts or categories that appear meaningful to subjects" (Adler and Adler 1994:378).

Since completing my 18 months of fieldwork at the National Museum of Scotland in the summer of 2011, I have come to be employed by the same Education Department with which I conducted my research. Through the completion of the Royal Museum Project and the re-opening of this newly refurbished section of the National Museum of Scotland, my new role involves developing and delivering education workshops and resources for school and family audiences. This distinct new phase in the life of the Museum has been beneficial in enabling me to psychologically differentiate between my formal period of 'fieldwork' and my current professional role. It is, however, important for me to acknowledge my vested interest in producing research that is helpful to those working in museum education at NMS, as well as striving to represent those who aided me throughout my fieldwork, in a manner that is both sensitive and respectful. Towards this end, I have tried to make sure the information and viewpoints represented in this thesis do not compromise the lives, reputations and livelihoods of the individuals involved in my research, to whom I am indebted. I have also changed the name of every one of my informants (children, teachers and museum professionals) in a bid to keep them anonymous and unidentifiable.

Besides my professional association with the National Museum of Scotland, being born and educated in the city of Edinburgh up until the age of 17 has meant that as an anthropologist, I have been confronted with the challenges of undertaking

ethnographic fieldwork 'at home' (cf. Jackson 1986). My connections with this particular museum and my fluency in the language of the cultural sector, however, have proved to be incredibly advantageous in contributing to the expediency of my access and integration into this fairly small and exclusive community. My firm belief is that, as an ethnographer and 'human research instrument' (Powdermaker 1966:19), my own social conditioning and cultural background have had a strong influence upon my research findings. A well-educated, British, middle class female, I have certain assumptions relating to the importance of museums and cultural education, which I hope to make transparent throughout this thesis.

I also need to stress certain ethical and empirical limitations of my research - principally the fact that although, for the purposes of this thesis, I group the children with whom I conducted my research together as a collective, I am fully aware that such a selection of individuals do not represent a homogeneous mass with the same beliefs, ideas and upbringing. Variables such as age (Vygotsky 1998:290) and gender make a significant difference to the ways in which children socially interact. James (2005:251), for example, suggests that "boys may often be less mature than girls…older children are not immune from manipulation by adults…therefore their testimonies might not be a reliable or true expression of their wishes and feelings". Purely due to practical reasons, I was unable to undertake research with a broad enough range of children in order to account for the impact of age and gender along with other important variables such as education, class, socio-economic status, geography, cultural background, ethnicity etc. I do, however, try to provide such ethnographic details as to facilitate my readers' contextualisation of the perspectives of my different child informants.

Thesis Outline

This thesis is arranged into seven chapters, each of which pertain to two central themes; firstly, the power dynamics and status negotiation present within the Museum and, secondly, the affective presence of material things.

Chapter II further contextualises my field site through a discussion of the historical, political and theoretical development of the National Museum of Scotland and its approach towards the representation of objects and knowledge, as well as the communication of meaning and the pursuit of children's cultural education. Employing the contrasts and concerns of the *new museology* as a central tenet, the chapter serves to both situate and develop some of the key questions addressed in this thesis.

Chapter III considers how objects are constituted theoretically within the museum space and how this plays out in ethnographic reality. Thus, the central issue at stake is the concept of the relational constitution of objects in the museum. Tension arises from the interplay between Appadurai's 'social life of things' (1986), Latour (1993) and Gell's (1998) independent discussions of the 'agency of objects' and Brown (2001) and Bennett's (2004) explorations of 'thing theory materialism' and 'thing-power'. These theoretical discussions assume illuminating applications when engaged with the National Museum of Scotland's education and display policies, and the reality that is worked out within its education programmes. A close examination of ethnographic data in this chapter reveals that museum 'objects' cannot "tell their own stories" because they are constituted *relationally*. Here, I also introduce the concept of 'presence' (Runia 2006), one which is particularly helpful in elucidating the descriptions used by my child informants when they talked about museum objects.

Chapter IV presents the case of the Lewis Chessmen, a specific example that both illustrates and develops claims made in the previous chapter concerning the 'social lives of things' and the 'agency of objects'. Where do the Lewis Chessmen belong? To whom? And to whom does the National Museum of Scotland belong? Using rich ethnographic material from my fieldwork in Aberdeen, Shetland and Lewis, I show how local and national understandings of belonging are constructed and represented through symbolic references to material heritage and how these came to the fore in Shetland and Lewis within political repatriation discourse. I also explore the different ways in which 'objects' are constituted relationally at particular places, at

particular times through combinations of material affordance[26], narrative, and social, cultural, historical and political contexts. Conveying a sense of the affective metaphorical and metonymical (Runia 2006) presence of the iconic Lewis Chessmen as 'objects', I illustrate how their "human-like" qualities impacted the engagement of local school children with the exhibition.

Chapter V discusses children's 'agency' in the museum; the Museum's expectations versus ethnographic reality. I also question what 'agency' actually means within this context, where terms such as 'autonomy' and 'independence' might serve to be more illuminating. The central tension in this chapter is the observed contrast between children's behaviour during their time at the National Museum of Scotland, where they are at once highly disruptive of the Museum's educational agenda, whilst also being extremely suggestible concerning adults' beliefs about museum objects and how they should be handled and thought about. Here, the Museum's cultural narratives, whilst often adopted unquestioningly, are also regularly compromised by the children's material engagement with 'objects' and the ideas these 'objects' have come to represent. My ethnography thus provides surprising insights into children's means of defiance and non-conformity within the processes of museum education.

Finally, before my concluding discussion, Chapter VI represents a culmination of the theoretical work of all of the chapters that have come before. 'Authenticity', or the search and desire for something 'real', serves as a key thread running throughout this thesis - an ethnographic fact brought to the fore by my informants (both children and museum staff). I use the dichotomous relationship between museum objects defined as either 'real' and 'fake' as a lens through which to explore the negotiation of status and other, underlying political concerns at stake within the museum space; 'trust' and 'risk', 'value' and power. Contrary to the claims of museum staff, 'authenticity' and 'realness' are revealed to be very important to children, but in different ways from the standards employed by the museum, and this can be related to their own personal projects of working out how to become 'people' and who to trust. The Museum's

[26] Affordance being defined as what the environment "*offers* the animal, what it *provides* or *furnishes* either for good or ill", implying "the complementarity of the animal and the environment" (Gibson 1986).

attempts to exert control over the constitution of knowledge, 'subjects' and 'objects' through its education programmes is thus revealed as a flawed and, necessarily, incomplete process. These notions are then considered in the light of lessons learnt from the Lewis Chessmen and application of concepts of the imminence, aura and affective presence of 'real' museum 'objects' from the past.

Conclusion

In concluding, I return to the children who opened up the discussion of this chapter by considering what museums are actually for. Boas (10 years, 08/03/11) suggested that they are to *"remind people of the past and to remind them the past is not so different"*. This can be interpreted as an appreciation of the museum's role in making sense of history in terms of the ideas and values of today, enabling an *experience* of the past in the present.

Shamira's comments also reflect the opinions of a number of school children, when she said that *"Museums are for ancient things like dinosaurs and precious things"* (10 years, 08/03/11). This emphasised my child informants' perception of museum collections as being inherently important and unique and illustrates the success of the museum's controlled social constitution of material stuff into 'objects'; artefacts used to convey particular narratives about the nation's cultural heritage. It was the very 'special' nature of these constructions which encouraged the children to engage with the museum's collections. This leads to Shamira's second point, that *"Museums can help little kids to know about things from the past that they didn't know about"* (08/03/11). This statement highlights museums' key role in the constitution of knowledge, 'objects' and personhood, a highly dynamic process, within which children can be understood as negotiating their own social status through their involvement in ever-changing material relationships with 'objects' in the museum.

This thesis explores the ways in which objects are employed in museum education programmes and exhibitions to represent Scotland's archaeological and historical heritage and the ways in which such narratives are adopted and disrupted by their

child audience. In examining NMS' claims to have "real things revealing stories", I consider the autonomy of both children and objects within the power structures of the museum social network. Using the politically-charged national touring exhibition of the Lewis Chessmen as a case study, I also explore the ways in which children in local communities in Scotland's peripheries relate to NMS and how they employ material heritage to create their own narratives of identity and belonging. 'Authenticity' was consistently highlighted as an issue of considerable importance to my research participants and is employed as a lens through which to view the continual negotiation of status, positioning, trust, value and materiality as they are made visible through interactions between children and objects in museums. Drawn from ethnographic observations from a field that uniquely combines anthropological interests in authenticity, materiality and children, this thesis thus contributes new insight into the role of museums in contemporary Scottish society by addressing the hitherto under-explored territory of children's engagement with museums and national material heritage.

Chapter II: The National Museum of Scotland and the *New Museology* - Conflict, Contradictions and Consequences

> The faster the world changes, the more we need an anchor in the past: the more we need museums. (Jones 2000:6)

Why research children's engagement with material heritage at the National Museum of Scotland more than a decade after the Museum's opening? Why does this issue matter today?

Museums are powerful places, whose origins can be traced back to classical times. Generous-spirited Greek and Roman collectors, such as Julius Caesar himself, dedicated their private collections to public buildings such as temples on the grounds that "the best of art should belong to the community, to the state, to everybody who can and wants to enjoy it" (Wittlin 1949:109). Cathedrals of the modern era (cf. Lorente 1998; Sheets-Pynsen 1988), museums can be defined as institutions whose role it is to collect, store, preserve, study, display and inform people about specimens and artefacts deemed significant to the advancement of human knowledge; "Museums are arguably the buildings most representative of the late 20th century…edifices through which communities of all sizes and types represent themselves, both to themselves and to others" (Jones 2000:4). Museums can thus be perceived as social artefacts (Cannizzo 2001:164), which "provide a sense of permanence to counter modernity's experience of rootlessness, rupture and displacement" (Rowlands & de Jong 2007:177). As such, they are seen as embodying collective memory, providing a platform upon which the 'imagined community' (Anderson 1983) of the modern nation-state presents itself (cf. Graham & Howard 2008:7). The objects they display, therefore, become symbolic of the idea of culture and constitute the property of this collective identity (Handler 1985:194). Being in possession of material heritage that is worthy of being stored and displayed

in these public-funded 'temples of society' is thus fundamental to the legitimisation of national culture and international significance (cf. Handler 1985:210).

The very acts of collection and display have become crucial processes of identity formation (cf. Clifford 1994:260), occupying both a privileged and precarious place in the representation of culture (Shepherd 1994:68). Museums are often held as an authority on the knowledge of any particular society (cf. Bradburne 2000; Hooper-Greenhill 2000; Walsh 1992). Lidchi (1997:154) has observed that "objects, texts and photographs work to create a representation of a particular people, at a precise historical moment". The decisions made about the acquisition, display and storage of objects, as well as which stories are told and which concealed, thus have significant political connotations (see Pearce 1994:10). Selected objects then serve as "an expression not only of the worldviews of those who chose to make and use them, but also of those who chose to collect and exhibit them, including, of course, the exhibition curator" (Cannizzo 2001:164).

This means that museums are powerful institutions both in the sense of the influence exerted upon and through them by elites, and the fact that the objects exhibited in museums reinforce specific cultural values (Shepherd 1994:73). Karp (1992), however, has noted that sometimes museums can also become forums for politico-cultural debate, where such values are challenged. Since the nineteenth century, when they emerged in the form with which we are familiar today, museums have undergone significant changes in their priorities, audiences, funding and consequent representations. These changes can be understood as a direct reflection of a wider epistemological shift in the way in which 'western' intellectual communities have come to understand ideas about the world (see Wolins, Jensen & Ulzheimer 1992; Walsh 1992; Vergo 1989). Taking place in the later half of the twentieth century, postmodernist discourse has served to challenge people's understanding of the very nature of knowledge. Consequently, the authority of museums to present such knowledge can be considered a 'crisis of representation'.

"A museum is a historically constituted space" (Lidchi 1997:154), and so, in providing the following account of the development of museums in the UK and their integral relationship to education in this chapter, I pay particular attention to the historical, social, political, economic and theoretical development of the National Museum of Scotland. A specific analysis of the ways in which the late twentieth century's 'crisis of representation' and subsequent *new museology* have been interpreted by this museum has important implications for its approach to display and children's education. Furthermore, an examination of the highly political national(ist) agenda that inescapably surrounds the National Museum of Scotland also lends insight into the Museum's national role in relation to communities across Scotland. This is particularly illustrated by my case study of *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked* touring exhibition.

This chapter also addresses some of the central themes of my thesis. Firstly, the issue of who has the authority to represent what - "In the museum, the viewer's perception of the object is often constructed through her/his acceptance of the naming/identification of the object by an 'authority' " (Walsh 1992:36). I explore the self-conscious, postmodernist conceptual shift museums have undertaken in the last decades of the twentieth century in reaction to the previous century's legacy of imperialism and the certainty and self-confidence of modernism. Secondly, leading on from this 'crisis of representation', I present an understanding of the National Museum of Scotland as a space which is at once deeply powerful and a site of profound struggle. I explore fall-out from the 'crisis of representation' and the adoption of a *new museological* approach which has attempted to produce democratic multivocality, at the risk of the Museum's *raison d' etre*.

Everyone with whom I came into contact within this centralised organisation had a different stake in its representations, and the outcome of frontline encounters between intellectual theory and the reality of socio-cultural practice is unpredictable. It is here that my positioning as an ethnographer can be understood as a reflection of the underlying tensions within the Museum as it continues to try to control interaction between its collections and its visitors. Importantly, the children

positioned at the centre of this discussion should not be perceived as a blank canvas - the passive victims of the Museum's powers of representation. Children have much more autonomy in this process than might be expected. They use these new forms of representation to obstruct and disrupt both the National Museum of Scotland's educational mission and any underlying political (or nationalist) agendas. Crucially, children can be understood as a counterpoint to the discourses perpetuated by the National Museum of Scotland.

The Museum, its origins and life's work

The roots of museums as institutions in the UK can be found entangled amongst the seventeenth century's 'cabinets of curiosities' and private collections of scientists, explorers and members of the peerage. The treasures of one such collector, John Tradescant, became the basis of Britain's first public museum, the Ashmolean. Opened in 1683, however, this museum was primarily intended as a place of research and "not an aid in general education" (Wittlin 1949:110). The origins of Britain's modern museum service can be more helpfully aligned with the establishment of the British Museum, which was created by an Act of Parliament almost a century later in 1753. This museum's "perceived aims would appear to have been the ordering and understanding of the world… obviously an aim closely tied to Britain's perceived role as imperial master of the universe" (Walsh 1992:30). "Following the enormous success of the Great Exhibition"[27], the Victoria and Albert Museum was established almost a century later, in 1852, with the "founding principle" of making "works of art available to all, to educate working people and to inspire British designers and manufacturers" (ibid). This institution also had a significant impact on the development of modern museums across the UK.

At the time of my research, NMS was composed of six different museums: the Royal Museum, housed in the grand Victorian building on Chambers Street in Edinburgh; the (National) Museum of Scotland, its iconic modern architecture extending from

[27] V&A website, Available online at http://www.vam.ac.uk/page/h/history-of-the-v-and-a/, accessed 07/03/13.

the Royal; the National War Museum, situated within the grounds of Edinburgh Castle; the National Museum of Flight, based at East Fortune's WWII airfield in East Lothian; the National Museum of Costume in Kittochside and the National Museum of Rural Life, a working nineteenth century farm in East Kilbride. My main field site was the National Museum of Scotland.

Despite considering itself part of a contemporary, world-class museum service, the National Museum of Scotland's history, like that of many museums in the UK, is embedded in the nineteenth century. As early as 1812 (thirty-nine years before the famous Great Exhibition at Crystal Palace in London), a Natural History Museum at the University of Edinburgh was opened to the general public, housed within the buildings of its Old College. An account of the Museum's first hundred years has been provided by Dr Douglas A. Allan (Museum Director 1945-1961), which hints at its strong imperialist origins; "Its collections were zoological and geological, but as time passed a certain amount of ethnological material, probably brought home by naturalists and explorers who contributed to the natural history specimens" (1954:5). It wasn't until 1852[28], however, that the work of a group of "strong protagonists for the formation of a permanent exhibition to encourage inventions and promote studies in industrial design" culminated in a deputation from Edinburgh being made to the Chancellor of the Exchequer (ibid). Consequently, a sum of £7000 was voted by Parliament towards the purchase of a site and initial expenses for a new 'Industrial Museum of Scotland', which was then established in 1854. Significantly, it "was not intended to be a museum of Scottish industry alone, but a museum of the industry of the world in special relation to Scotland" (Allan 1954:6). The threefold function of the museum was also established with the employment of officers to "collect, arrange and preserve" the newly acquired specimens (ibid).

On 23rd October 1861, the foundation-stone of the new Venetian Renaissance-type building was laid with pomp and ceremony by H.R.H. the Prince Consort and the

[28] 1852 was the year that London's Victoria and Albert Museum was established (V&A website, available online at http://www.vam.ac.uk/page/h/history-of-the-v-and-a/, accessed 07/03/13). The the two museums also share similar founding principles concerning the encouragement of industrial design.

new museum opened to the public in 1866. Prior to this opening, Allan (1954:8) notes that "the attendance in the old buildings, averaged 64,000 a year for the first two years", with corresponding attendance at the University's Natural History Museum standing at 80,350. These figures demonstrate the enthusiasm of the local community towards the museum's services.

Using the display of objects as a form of mass-education developed in the UK during the mid-nineteenth century, inspired by the Great Exhibitions. Largely motivated by paternal philanthropy (Greenhalgh 1989:80), these exuberant international displays of imperialist pride established some of the founding principles of the British permanent museum exhibition:

> Cultural activity signified knowledge, knowledge signified education, education signified work. In effect, work was at the basis of everything worthwhile; it was the route to God… everything displayed had to suggest, however obliquely, that the audience would benefit in some way from seeing it, and… it inculcated in the audience the idea that they should attend the exhibition at least in part to study. (Greenhalgh 1989:87)

By 1900, this approach "had more or less institutionalised itself into the fabric of English exhibition policy" (Greenhalgh 1989:84); "Few would visit an exhibition unless entertainment was offered, and yet education had to be a prominent element if the event were to receive official patronage and achieve the necessary cultural standing". This ideological distinction between education and pleasure can be seen to persist in attitudes towards museum exhibition in Britain to this day.

It is clear from the records, that the National Museum of Scotland's predecessor, the 'Industrial Museum of Scotland' took its educational role extremely seriously. In 1857, it came under the control of the Privy Council Committee of Education. Education thus remained its main function at least until 1954 (Allan 1954:7), and, as I argue, continues to be a central concern right up until the present day. Courses of lectures for artisans were organised for a small fee from as early as 1866 and talks, demonstrations and object handling sessions were provided for students in the Museum's galleries after 1890. In 1901, the Museum was transferred to the Scottish Education Department and admission fees were abolished completely. 1902 saw the

initiation of school class visits "under their own teachers, previously briefed by the Museum officers for their task" (Allan 1954:12), whilst the following year, a prototypical 'Learning Centre' was established - a room fitted with a lantern and a large collection of slides, to be made available as a teaching resource for visiting teachers (ibid).

In 1904, the Museum celebrated its Jubilee and its name was changed to 'The Royal Scottish Museum' (Allan 1954:12). The acquisition of new specimens towards the improvement of its collections indicates its continued self-identification as an educational institution. This impetus gave rise to the creation, in 1912, of an Advisory Committee "to serve as a link between schoolmasters, inspectors and the Museum staff in encouraging the Edinburgh School Board to organise school class visits" (Allan 1954:13). In 1914, the Museum employed its first member of staff whose role would be entirely devoted to public education (Allan 1954:14), a move which was shortly followed by the appointment of more "demonstrators" to deliver lectures to school children on the subjects of natural history, art and ethnology. Subsequently, in 1926, the Museum initiated the loan of some of its collections to local schools and ten years later, it launched Saturday morning leisure-time classes for children, featuring activities such as the drawing of "especially interesting objects" (Allan 1954:18). In concluding his general survey, Allan drew attention to Edinburgh Council's continued development of education at the Museum (1954:23). The National Museum of Scotland's contemporary provision for children can thus be seen as broadly following the same framework, established almost a hundred years ago.

Like the Royal Scottish Museum, many other museums in the UK were founded during "an era in which the prime problem was the increase in human control over the environment by means of the vigorously developing sciences of nature" (Wittlin 1949:186). Walsh (1992:18) has suggested the following -

> Whereas proto-museums were concerned with the naming and ordering of the universe…the museums which developed during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were clearly more influenced by the modern idea of progress and the modern preoccupation with representing humankind's place in a world which was recognized as

> being constituted by fleeting and opaque experiences, a world where humankind was just one element amongst all other phenomena.

The advancement of museums can thus be understood as being "an integral part of the modern condition" (Walsh 1992:30), rooted in industrialization and urbanization (ibid:31). This condition was intrinsically bound up with an imperialist mindset that sought to control the unknown through the act of classifying both the natural and social world. This was reflected in museum displays, which also attempted to exert a degree of control over the past "through an emphasis on the linear, didactic narrative, supported by the use of the object, which had been appropriated and placed in an artificial context of the curator's choosing" (Walsh 1992:31). Walsh (1992:31-2) makes the following observations -

> This type of display is closed, and cannot be questioned. The display case is a removed and *distanced* context, a context that can not be criticised. At the same time it is an artificial context, perhaps even a non-context. In a way, museums attempt to 'freeze' time, and almost permit the visitor to stand back and consider 'the past before them'. This is the power of the gaze, an ability to observe, name and order, and thus control.

As their numbers sharply increased during Britain's first 'museums boom' between 1890 and 1920, museums' standard approach to representation and their role within society was thus determined by the positivistic attitudes of imperialism and modernism. This notably involved having the core mission of educating the public (particularly the working classes) "often with the explicit expectation that an increased exposure to the arts would be translated into better products…industry needed a visually literate public – to buy its goods, and to produce them" (Bradburne 2000:384). Intrinsic to such notions was an understanding of the general populace as "empty vessels to be filled" (Hooper-Greenhill 2000:125). Museum buildings and environs were thus deliberately designed to impact visitors' behaviour and encourage good citizenship (MacGregor 2009; Hooper-Greenhill 2000:131). The notion that museums would "advance and improve their audiences" (Greenhalgh 1989:88) has remained at the "philosophical core of museum outlook, despite the glaring inconsistencies it contains for our own age" (ibid). It still can be seen, for example, in NMS' current aim *"to inform, educate and inspire"* its public.

Hand-in-hand with the Enlightenment's establishment of museum display as a form of public education, came changing attitudes towards how people should engage with museum collections. Classen (2005) has provided a comprehensive commentary on the latter. She argues that visitors to the 'cabinets of curiosities' and the early museums of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were able to explore objects through a combination of looking and touching (Classen 2005:280). In common with this early museum and scientific practice, the children involved in my study at the National Museum of Scotland were observed to use touch as a way of verifying visual perception - correcting or affirming information gained through sight, allowing "access to interior truths of which sight was unaware" (Classen 2005:277).

A marked reduction in visitors' physical access to objects in the 'modern' museum, however, corresponded to the heightened emphasis on visualism in nineteenth century culture (Classen 2005:283). Sight had risen to be the primary and preferred form of sensual engagement with the world through its association with "the burgeoning field of science" (Classen 1995:402) and its subsequent alliance with reason in Western philosophical thought (ibid). Another factor contributing to the elimination of touch in the nineteenth century modernist museum, however, can be related back to the issue of control - the concern over not being able to control one's audience when museums became public -

> Not only did the rowdy behaviour of the working classes disrupt the order of the museum, it constituted an affront to the social order, for many of the objects subject to such apparent contempt, as, for example, paintings and antiquities, were additional trappings of power and authority. (Classen 2005:281)

Thus, in order for the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century 'modern' museums to have the desired "civilizing and educational effect on the general public" (Classen 2005:282), "museum visitors could no longer be permitted to run around and grab everything; they must learn to control their bodies as they enlightened their minds. They must learn to keep their voices low, their pace measured, and their touch restrained" (ibid). In order for the "taboo on touch in the museum to be effective and accepted" (ibid), and of crucial relevance to my study, museum visitors were thus required to internalise the following notions;

> First of all, that they were less important than the exhibits on display and thus must behave deferentially towards them. Secondly, that to touch museum pieces was disrespectful, dirty and damaging. Thirdly, that touch had no cognitive or aesthetic uses and thus was of no value in the museum, where only cognitive and aesthetic benefits were to be sought. (ibid)

The results of the adoption of these notions can still be seen in museums today:

> In Western museum settings, artifacts are pre-eminently objects for the eye. Often, in fact, it is only the most visually-striking artifacts which are put on display. Less visually prepossessing objects are hidden in the museum storeroom, no matter how rich their auditory, tactile or olfactory intricacies.
> (Classen & Howes 2006:200)

It has also been argued that the "basic form of representing the past through the static museum presentation has not really altered in spite of the many changes in fashion and style" (Walsh 1992:31). This could be seen at the National Museum of Scotland, right up until the late twentieth century. In 1864, for example, the Museum's records show that its exhibition style and adoption of printed labels followed along similar lines to other contemporaneous modernist museums (Allan 1954:8), continuing with the post-WWII "introduction of uniform, simple and dignified type for the printed matter" (ibid:21). This "traditional object-focused" labelling style (Witcomb 1998:387-388) was thus generally "limited to the name of the object, a date, a classification, and, depending on the nature of the object, the name of its maker or a short description of its function" (ibid) [Figure 3].

Greenhalgh's claims about the inflexible philosophical attitudes underpinning the outlook of museums in the UK (1989:88) are also evidenced in Allan's concluding remarks about the Royal Scottish Museum in 1954 as it looked to the future. He ultimately presents an unproblematic view of the Museum's expertise and self-imposed duty to impart expert knowledge; an educational role quite distinct from that of pleasure and entertainment:

> The collections may well grow in size, but they must in addition grow in excellence – for, above all else, we must ever for ourselves and our public seek to raise standards. We must hold fast to intellectual integrity and fulfil with scrupulous justice our social obligations. (Allan 1954:24)



Figure 3: Exhibition of Embroideries in the Royal Scottish Museum © The Scotsman Publications Ltd (18th August 1961).



Figure 4: Interactive 'Discovery Zone' amongst stone carvings exhibits in the *Early People* gallery at the National Museum of Scotland (September 2013).

The past three or four decades, however, have seen a dramatic departure from these more traditional forms of museum representation towards more 'interpretive' techniques. Glass cases featuring examples of taxidermy and Grecian ceramics, labelled cryptically in a minute typeset, have gradually given way to a more democratic interpretation which employs multi-media such as audio and film, even occasionally giving voice to the ideas of a non-specialist audience. Witcomb (1998:387-388) has compared these more recent approaches to museum 'object labelling' with the traditional approach described above:

> In the ideas-driven display… labels have an explicit interpretive function and often carry the results of historical research. Such exhibitions tend to use a greater variety of labels, each with a specific function to carry various levels of the story being told. Labels become an essential part of the narrative being constructed. (Witcomb 1998:387-388)

These 'new' practices can be understood as a response to postmodernist discourses of the late twentieth century concerning the social constitution of knowledge and power (cf. Ross 2004; Jameson 1991). The view of the museum as an all-knowing bastion of society, bestowing knowledge as an act of good will towards the education and improvement of the masses began to crumble across the UK's museum sector (see Lidchi 1997:153). The very foundations upon which museums stood had come to be questioned; gone was the careless confidence in the empiricism of scientific knowledge, and the positivist notion that all things could be classified and understood within the context of the whole, if they were simply subjected to enough scientific research. A major consequence of these revelations was the emergence of questions concerning the power and authority of museums themselves – how could museums maintain authority over knowledge about their collections? Were museums and the claims they make about the world still relevant in a postmodern society?

These concerns with the value and definition of 'culture' and museums' authority to represent knowledge can be understood as a 'crisis of representation', which, in turn, gave birth to a new approach to museum representation during the late 1980s and early 1990s. The so-called *new museology*, attempted to radically challenge the dynamic of the relationship between museum professionals and the public they serve.

Peter Vergo, one of its chief proponents, described the movement as symptomatic of "widespread dissatisfaction with the 'old museology', which was preoccupied with museum *methods* as opposed to the *purposes* of museums" (1989:3). His views were reflective of a significant number of museum professionals who were no longer content to accept that the act of representing collections was a politically neutral activity and that the sharing of knowledge should remain strictly uni-directional - from the 'experts' to the 'laypeople'. To this end, it was claimed that a *new museology* "must concern itself with involving the public, not just during the visit to the museum through interactive displays, but also in the production of their own pasts" (Walsh 1992:161).

Needless to say, this new approach created quite a stir in the UK's museum sector. Individual institutions were, however, slow to adopt a more reflexive and critical attitude towards museum practice. As Bradburne (2000:386) has observed:

> When confronted with the collapse of the grand narratives, the museum's response to the postmodern dilemma has been to remain firmly 'top-down', and to address the content of the narrative, ever seduced by the desire to retain control over the narrative it presents.

By 1994, Vergo thus claimed that "the questions it [the *new museology*] raises have not simply gone away but continue to be debated and refined" (1994:149). To quote the original 'blueprint' – "Unless a radical re-examination of the role of museums within society…takes place, museums in this country, and possibly everywhere, may likewise find themselves dubbed 'living fossils'" (Vergo 1989:3-4). This challenge can also be understood in terms of approaches to education in museums – "a museum is an informal learning environment – not a school classroom" (Bradburne 2000:387). Museums thus struggle to relinquish control over the specific knowledge such experiences can offer children

In addition to the practical implications of the philosophical shift described above, political and economic pressures have been forcing museums to consider how to appeal to wider audiences, particularly social groups who have little tradition of museum visiting (e.g. through age or socio-economic background):

> Museum professionals are increasingly aware that the museum visit is a highly personal and unique construction of the individual visitor, influenced by the physical and social context as well as by the visitor's cultural background, prior knowledge and experience and preferred learning style. The discussion about museum learning has shifted in subtle but profound ways from the museum's agenda to the visitor's experience.
> (Wolins, Jensen & Ulzheimer 1992:17)

Dr Rintoul, Director of NMS, highlighted this new agenda; "We don't exist here for our own benefit…we exist for the benefit of the people of Scotland" (*The Scotsman*, 8th February 2003)[29]. Children now have a greater influence on museum presentation (Shepherd 1994:70), due to their significant role in determining visiting patterns (e.g. in the form of independent pressure groups such as the 'Kids in Museums Manifesto'). Many museums have been forced to prioritise the physical and intellectual accessibility of their exhibits, whilst museum education and understanding visitors' learning has become "a matter of survival for museums" (Hein 1998:12). Thus, today, as historically, the educational role of museums remains an important justification of their existence. Driven by the political and economic pressures exerted by funding bodies, they have often turned to marketing strategies normally associated with commerce in order to attract new audiences (Fisher 2000:157). Meanwhile, their education and outreach departments have rapidly grown in size and importance, gaining an increasingly influential say on the development and installation of new exhibitions. The fact that the total number of children (in school groups) visiting the newly refurbished National Museum of Scotland in the month of October 2011 was 3,932, over a thousand more than the Royal Scottish Museum received in a whole year in 1912, indicates the continued importance of museum education.

Resources have been redirected in an attempt to make museum communication relational rather than distancing, through an emphasis on social networks (cf. Hooper-Greenhill 2000:140). Some museum professionals have perceived such changes to organizational agendas as marking a shift in the power to represent - away

[29] *Exhibiting a new style of museum.* The Scotsman (published on 8th February 2003). Available online at: http://www.scotsman.com/news/exhibiting-a-new-style-of-museum-1-545302, accessed 01/11/13.

from the curators and towards museum educators (Terrell 1991:149). In recent times, however, "the increased definition of the visitor as customer changed the power relationship, emphasizing the visitor experience over the educative impetus" (de Groot 2009:233)[30]. The techniques of the new approach to museum representation thus poses challenges to the traditional roles of both objects and education.

Many museum professionals have translated the philosophical position of the *new museology* (desiring increased multivocality and accessibility in museum representation), as the need for museums to be more fun and to include as many interactive exhibits as possible, an attitude exemplified by Fisher (2000:158):

> Today's audiences are steeped in a highly stimulating soup of interactive media: computers, screen games, television, video. This means they won't settle for simple objects, facts or lofty performances which make no attempt to engage them or to respond to them. The traditional opera and the 'dry as dust' museum are non-starters.

This response, however, only involves merely the partial and superficial transference of power from curators to museum visitors (who are encouraged to engage in the social constitution of museum 'objects' by constructing their own meanings and narratives about the 'things' they encounter). It also presupposes that multivocality is purely a one-sided affair – making the assumption that only museum visitors' perspectives and understandings can be multifarious, in stark contrast to the knowledge of museum experts. The latter is represented as being both unified and unproblematic, although the ways in which NMS' recent exhibition, *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked*, challenged this general model will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter IV.

An interactive exhibit can be defined as anything that enables the museum visitor to engage (physically, although not always intellectually) with the ideas and objects

[30] The implications of a shift in the museum profession's perception of its audiences from 'visitors' to 'customers' can be directly linked to social understandings of value and the rights of citizenship, related to UK neo-liberal political agendas. Questions relating to the concept of *value* and the role it plays in children's interaction with objects at the National Museum of Scotland, a public service that is essentially free to everyone, will be further addressed in Chapter VI.

displayed around them. Examples might include a computer game, a dressing-up box, an audio-visual display or a construction exercise. This approach to museum representation strives to address current concerns with the promotion of active learning and engagement with our past by adopting 'hands-on' interactive games and simulations. Both of these are heavily reliant on cutting-edge IT capabilities and 'object handling' resources (which sometimes involve items from the museum's collections, but, more often, replicas of these objects). These attributes are considered a huge draw for family audiences and benefit from a significant amount of investment. A member of the Education Department at the National Museum of Scotland told me that *"interactive galleries are fun and can possibly be used as a pay-off for the learning activities undertaken in the other galleries… placing less emphasis on learning outcomes is actually a refreshing approach"* (Rebecca, 23/02/10). This belief appears to be substantiated by the behaviour of museum audiences. In answering my question about where families spend the most amount of time at the Museum, for example, a member of staff who works on the gallery floors told me; *"they enjoy the* ***Discovery Zones****, especially the armoured glove, because it involves movement. They also spend a lot of time in our interactive Connect gallery. People enjoy pressing buttons to make engine wheels go round, and the space helmet is especially effective - people put their faces in it and have a photograph taken"* (Jim, 26/01/10). His colleague, Brian, suggested that *"kids need to be doing stuff from the moment they come through the museum door"* (07/10/10). Brian also emphasised the importance of *"people experiencing things and identifying with things so as to get them interested in an historical topic"*.

At the National Museum of Scotland, interactive exhibits generally take the form of the aforementioned *Discovery Zones*, which I would describe as small islands of brightly coloured, 'child-friendly' activities which appear amidst the more traditional display cases and feature hands-on games and dressing up [Figure 4].

Such activities (particularly the dressing up) did indeed appear to be very popular with my child informants and I regularly observed family groups spending more time at these exhibits than they did elsewhere in the galleries, enjoying, for example,

trying on costumes, building a Roman bridge and playing a Viking seafaring game (Fieldnotes 21/04/10). Through some voluntary evaluation work undertaken for NMS, which involved testing some of the interactive exhibits being developed for the Royal Museum Project with museum visitors, I was also able to discern a distinction between the ways in which children and adults engaged with these activities. For example, when testing an interactive exhibit that was designed to look at the impact of the development of the telescope on our knowledge of space, I found that most of the older, or very young visitors did not take long to lose interest in the programme (under about 3 minutes). The groups of school children, however, were captivated due to the fact that they considered it to be a game and they wanted to 'complete' it; finding all the different space objects on the list. In general, the children found the controls intuitive and easy, but failed to grasp the learning concept of the interactive, whilst the adults found it easier to understand the concept, but were less confident and natural with the controls (Fieldnotes, 18/06/10).

Like the example above, interactive exhibits in the newly refurbished Royal Museum include a greater use of digital technology to produce scenario games and quizzes. One, for example, encourages visitors to make decisions relating to the reintroduction of wolves to Scotland, whilst another enables children to design their own camouflaged fish (which swim around a pond projected on the floor and hide every time a 'shark' swims by!). Small children appear to be especially hypnotised by this latter exhibit, which has been very successful. The National Museum of Scotland thus serves as a key example of the integration of interactive exhibits amongst more traditional forms of museum display and exhibition, a trend that has been on the rise since the 1970s. Nevertheless, museum professionals are becoming increasingly aware that, instead of serving as a simple solution to the 'crisis of representation' (by providing a more democratic means of both representing and creating new knowledge about museum collections - see Frost 2010:239-240), the use of digital media has problems of its own (cf. Roussou 2010:261) - "Digital Media (like any media) is anything but a neutral vessel. Instead of passively and objectively carrying and migrating content, digital technology contributes its own sets of connotations and inferences to the user" (Parry 2010:227). Classen and Howes

(2006:216) have also highlighted the fact that, despite the introduction of a variety of "innovative challenges to the glass-case model, an increasing reliance on visual technologies for documentation and dissemination (as in the case of the "virtual museum")" has meant that museums remain "more sight-bound than ever".

From the perspective of museum education, the results of comparative research conducted by Bamberger and Tal (2008) actually suggest that "real exhibits" and guide-led activities are more effective teaching devices than the new "hands-on" interactive galleries (2008:280; see also Frost 2010:238). It can also be observed that more often than not, interactive exhibits turn out to be more prescriptive than more traditional forms of museum display! A member of the Education Department at the National Museum of Scotland highlighted this issue in an interview. She admitted to me that she was not very impressed by touch-screen technology; *"it can often act as a barrier to really looking at the objects or display cases themselves as they distract you by getting you to focus instead on what you are 'meant to do' with the screen"* (Rowan, 30/06/10). *"They are not even that interactive",* she added. These ideas were shared by some of the gallery floor staff at the National Museum of Scotland, who had observed visitor behaviour in relation to the exhibits on a daily basis; *"Surely the aim is to encourage engagement, not just interaction? It's important to understand the difference between the two. Sometimes kids prefer the cardboard box (e.g. low-cost worksheets or something else that allows them to use their own imagination) to the expensive present inside!"* (Sid, 26/01/10). These arguments, resulting from daily observation of visitors' behaviour in the Museum, echo the concerns of Heath and vom Lehn (2010), which are also based on extensive research with museum visitors. It thus appears that having a memorable *experience* within a museum inspires greater learning and stimulation in visitors than engagement with many of the newly-developed museum "interactives".

Authenticity in the Museum

Museums are "extraordinary places where visitors have an incredible range of experiences" (Hein 1998:2). The important role of *experience* in effective museum

education can also be linked to a more general discussion of the increasingly esteemed and sought-after "real or authentic experience" in both cultural and historical spheres. This is occurring against the backdrop of improved digitisation and a perceived reduction in engagement with the physical world. It has thus been argued that - "Authenticity only becomes a significant, emotional, almost transcendent idea in an age of artifice, in an age where replication, bastardisation, cheapening of all sorts of things is possible" (museum director, Marc Pachter, 2010:332). As Walsh (1992:1) surmises; "It is this distancing from many of the processes which affect our daily lives that is modernity, or more recently, post-modernity".

What I shall call the 'simulation' of heritage experience has become a common theme impacting forms of representation in museums, galleries and heritage centres worldwide. Walsh (1992:4) has argued that "One of the most important effects of heritage has been its intensification of the modern emphasis on promoting the past as that which is entirely complete and removed from the present. This has served to neuter the past and permit its manipulation and trivialisation in the present". Perhaps symbolising this generation's practical application of the theoretical concerns of social constructivism and postmodernism, it appears that *experiencing* the past in a personal way has come to take precedence over acquiring particular knowledge about this past:

> the dominant mode of interaction with the past in contemporary culture is through embodiment, engagement and experience. By assessing their own experience and cross-referencing this with their physical understanding of the past, 'Reality' history promises the revelation of the contemporary self through the consideration of the historical subject. (Geschiere 2009:180)

Thus, another recent development in museum representation has been a recognition of the inability of a museum label or a decontextualised object on display, alone, to convey an understanding of the past to its audience:

> Focusing on the visual (or the audio-visual) elements of culture to the neglect of other sensory phenomena can…introduce a rupture in the interconnected sensory system of a society. This occurs most notably with artefacts, which are frequently abstracted from a dynamic context of multisensory uses and meanings and

> transformed into static objects for the gaze inside the glass cases of museums… (Classen 1995:403)

People need to be able to handle objects, to see them within a context, to use their other senses, such as touch, smell, and hearing, in order to gain insight into what it was like to live, for example, in Britain at the time of the Romans; "Photographs, sound, and lighting all contribute to a sense of the visitor being there as opposed to just looking at the objects and images" (Leinhardt & Crowley 2002:5). Physical proximity with museum exhibits also plays an important role in inspiring visitors' conceptions of having an "authentic experience" of the past within the museum. Authenticity can thus be considered –

> both an effect that exhibit makers strive to achieve and an experience that audiences come to expect from museums. It is crucial for museums to preserve this context of knowledge and credibility while providing memorable experiences that keep visitors coming back. (Roussou 2010:261)

The New National Museum of Scotland and the *New Museology*

The modern National Museum of Scotland, annexed to the original 'Royal Scottish Museum' building in 1997, was designed within the intellectual context of the *new museology* - "Gone are the dusty rows upon rows of exhibits…our new Museum of Scotland is light, airy and exciting – and that's just the architecture" (*The Scotsman*, 2nd December 1999[31]). A mere three years later, however, it was described in the same newspaper as having a "conservative air" (*The Scotsman*, 8th February 2003)[32]. The recent renovation of the former 'Royal Scottish Museum' (re-opened in July 2011 and re-named as part of the National Museum of Scotland), in contrast, has been designed entirely around the principles of the new open, accessible, multivocal ideology. Described as a "revolution in presentation and style" (*The Scotsman*, 8th February 2003), "the idea at the centre of the museum is that visitors feel as though they are walking through an encyclopaedia" (Mark Brown, Arts Correspondent for

[31] *Museum of Scotland.* The Scotsman (published on 2nd December 1999). Available online from: http://www.scotsman.com/news/museum-of-scotland-1-838605, accessed on 01/11/13.

[32] *Exhibiting a new style of museum.* The Scotsman (published on 8th February 2003). Available online from: http://www.scotsman.com/news/exhibiting-a-new-style-of-museum-1-545302, accessed 01/11/13.

The Guardian, 28th July 2011 – on the eve of the re-opening). Boasting over 200 "interactives" as an integral component of its new offer to the public, it prides itself on being the only museum in the UK at present with such an emphasis on this form of display. Interestingly, one of the renovation's most striking features and the "UK's single biggest museum installation" (*The Guardian*, 28th July 2011), the 'Window on the World', has been described by press as "a true cabinet of curiosities with more than 800 objects, including a Tay Bridge girder and a 1930s gyrocopter, displayed up to 18 metres high" (ibid). This statement, with its reference to the early collectors' 'cabinets of curiosities', unexpectedly harks back to the imperialist origins the Museum is trying to move away from with its new style of representation.

Four of the new National Museum of Scotland's galleries (*Connect*, *Communicate*, *Imagine* and *Adventure Planet*) are specifically geared towards family audiences, with interactive exhibits making up over 80% of the total content. Although "real" museum objects have been integrated amongst these "interactives", it can be observed that their incorporation into the hitherto quiet and reflective museum space, appears to have had a major impact upon the behaviour and expectations of museum visitors. People seem to spend more time 'doing' and less time reading and looking. A member of the Museum's gallery staff observed; *"with an interactive screen, the first thing kids do is to touch it to see if it moves, and it if doesn't do anything they go away"* (Brian, 21/06/10). Consistently praised and listed by children as some of their favourite bits of the Museum, do these "interactives" offer visitors an authentic and memorable learning experience? What has been the impact of other forms of *new museological* practice upon the experience of the museum visitor?

In the *new museology*-inspired museum, excessively detailed object labelling has, in many cases, given way to an absence of any kind of labels at all, with the aim of encouraging audiences to make up their own minds and respond creatively to what they see and experience:

> some museums have reacted against didactic labels that tell visitors what they should be seeing, doing, and learning rather than addressing the problem of creating labels that enhance the visitor's own experience with the exhibit. An extreme example is a science museum that eliminated labels on its hands-on exhibits altogether,

> with the result that many visitors simply became frustrated by not being able to operate the exhibit and left with no experience at all. (Ansbacher 1998:38)

Experience has thus come to take precedence over other more formalised or textualised forms of learning. The new natural world gallery, 'Living Worlds' (officially opened in 2011) at the Manchester University Museum, serves as another example where 'object labels' have been dispensed with in favour of a more creative and fluid style of display. It employs its natural world collections to present a series of themes (such as 'symbols') in the form of art installations, where the visitor has to actively seek out the information boards which stand apart from the cases, in order to find out even the names of the animal species on display. The traditional museum glass display case is also regularly dispensed with in favour of a more dynamic and open exhibition style. This often involves museum exhibits being treated in a similar manner to replica models, which visitors are encouraged to touch and explore physically for themselves.

Paradoxically, despite this move towards more creative forms of display, the messages conveyed by museum professionals to their audiences can, in other ways, appear even more restricted. If a group of animals, for example, are displayed together to convey the importance of their adaptation to extreme environments, then the deliberately minimalistic information provided means that more curious visitors will be hard pressed to find out anything else that interests them, if it falls outside of the museum's chosen narrative. If, as in the Manchester University Museum's 'Living Worlds' gallery, a dove is used to represent the symbol of peace, and the other information provided is restricted to its name/species (rather than more comprehensive descriptions of habitat, diet, migratory patterns etc), then the traditional specialist museum audience, at the very least, may be disappointed.

Crucially, does the new approach to museum representation require visitors to do more or less work? In theory, and in the minds of exhibition designers, the limited 'expert' information supplied by the museum forces the layperson to think for themselves and develop their own interpretations of the 'objects' on display (effectively taking part in the continuous processes by which 'objects' are socially

constituted in the museum). In reality, the design implications of the interactive family galleries, combined with a more abstract exhibition display style, often means that visitors treat the museum as a place of entertainment rather than learning and do not find themselves challenged to understand concepts and ideas which lie beyond their own knowledge and experience. Heath and vom Lehm (2010:275), for example, make the following observation -

> unlike a conventional label, which provides resources for comment and discussion and the collaborative inspection of the exhibit, the film [interactive] does not necessarily remain subservient to the object it is illustrating and, rather than engendering discussion, it can transform the visitor into a more passive participant while removing the necessity to examine the object.

A general re-examination of the purpose of museums and their role within society, inspired by the *new museology*, has consequently brought to light numerous problems and contradictions pertaining to museum representation. Conflicts of opinion between different museum professionals have made the transition from 'behind the scenes' to the very display cases themselves. The main arguments can be classified into three broad categories. Firstly, curatorial departments' and specialist visitors' interests in the collections have been pitted against education departments' interests in the learning experience of visitors and the accessibility of exhibits. Macdonald (2001), for example, has claimed that in many museums (such as the Science Museum in London), managerial restructuring has given perceived visitor needs precedence over the museum collections themselves; "This has consequences for 'science', for it led to it being defined not so much as an objectifiable practice, located in particular, tangible products, but as a more abstract 'message-based' conceptual matter" (Macdonald 2001:90). In a similar vein, some museum professionals have voiced complaint over the fact that visitors no longer have to endeavour to learn what curators decide is important to reveal to them; quite the reverse – museum and exhibition content is decided upon the basis of what it is believed the public want (see Terrell 1991:149). Following an academic seminar delivered at the University of Edinburgh, a curator at the National Museum of Scotland claimed that *"school children represent a maximum of 5% of the total number of visitors the Museum receives, whilst academics are not being served and*

are not using museums for source materials"[33] (Spring 2010). The connection was thus made between the new approach to display adopted by the National Museum of Scotland and its prioritising of children and family audiences over 'experts'. To this end, Professor Christopher Smout, Queen's Historian has also launched a scathing attack on the National Museum of Scotland, accusing it of "dumbing down" and "not being Scottish enough":

> It's unimaginable to me that a great museum would not have research and scholarship very high on their list of priorities. After all, what is a museum unless it curates and keeps objects and understands them and it's where you go if you want accurate information? It didn't seem to me that this document was reflecting that vision of what a museum was all about. (Smout, quoted in *The Scotsman*, 20th July 2003[34])

Dr Rintoul, Director of NMS, had acknowledged this dispute earlier in 2003; "In museums, there are always several camps, that's inevitable. There's always views on populism, what we should be doing and what we shouldn't. We shouldn't aim for a very particular kind of audience, but a much wider group" (*The Scotsman*, 8th February 2003[35]).

The second category of dispute concerns the view that the museum's educational role should follow traditional lines versus the view that learning in the museum should be fun and entertaining. In Scotland in general, and the National Museum of Scotland in particular, emphasis is placed not only upon the museum's ability to get people through the doors (through the adoption of a more interactive and accessible exhibition style), but also upon the work of its Education Department in adhering to and supplementing the nation's new 'Curriculum for Excellence'. The consequences

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[33] Although this percentage might be a fair representation of school group visitors at this time (according to NMS visitor figures from 2010), his statement failed to acknowledge that family visitors (groups composed of both adults and children) made up around 30% of the total number of visitors to the National Museum of Scotland in 2010 (and 27% of the total in 2011), according to Scotinform's audience research report for NMS.

[34] *Museums face the wrath of Queen's Historian.* The Scotsman (published on 20th August 2003). Available online at: http://www.scotsman.com/news/scotland/top-stories/museums-face-the-wrath-of-queen-s-historian-1-1291775, accessed 01/11/13.

[35] *Exhibiting a new style of museum.* The Scotsman (published on 8th February 2003). Available online at: http://www.scotsman.com/news/exhibiting-a-new-style-of-museum-1-545302, accessed 01/11/13.

of which has been a focus on the skills school children are able to obtain and develop within the museum environment as opposed to the specific ideas and artefacts with which they engage in the process of their 'learning experience'.

Many museum professionals remain sceptical about the ideas inspired by the *new museology*, in favour of maintaining the distinction between education and entertainment (see Greenhalgh 1989). This view is maintained in spite of the work of education theorist John Dewey (1938), who argued that "entertainment and education are not incompatible" (Ansbacher 1998:43). It has been claimed that "Less money is getting spent…on museum-based science than is being spent on mounting fun, visitor-friendly, interactive exhibitions" (Terrell 1991:149). The perception of an excessive emphasis on playful, interactive exhibits and family events has inspired some professionals in the field to ask what it is that makes a visit to a museum different from any other leisure activity? Ansbacher (1998:48) has thus argued that museums' frequent failure to coherently apply principles of experiential learning to their approaches to display has commonly resulted in ""hands-on" exhibits where the actual experience is quite empty and the hoped-for learning resides in a didactic label" (Ansbacher 1998:48).

The third category of dispute, leading directly on from the second, can be defined as an ideological conflict over the very incorporation of interactive exhibits within museum representation. Cannizzo (2001:171) addresses the concerns of many museum professionals when she argues the following:

> It is a museological illusion that if the subject is entertaining enough, if the labels are short enough, and the graphics spectacular enough, then everyone will become a museum visitor. If museums try to compete on the same terms with other institutions offering leisure products, there is a real risk that museums will lose sight of what their special combination of characteristics allows them to offer to their visitors: access to unique or authentic artefacts, understanding of those objects based on contemporary scholarship and specialised space to contemplate the meanings of these things.

Thus, the self-consciousness triggered by postmodernist *new museological* discourse has translated into significant tensions and contradictions within contemporary

museum practice. As hinted at above, these are evident, not least, at the National Museum of Scotland. All of these concerns can be linked directly back to the discussion over who has the authority to communicate knowledge in the museum space. Curators are effectively being forced to give up complete control of the representation of both the objects in their collections and the knowledge they portray, in order to allow visitors to be free to use and interpret exhibits in their own ways. These, very often, do not appear to correspond with the museum's intentions[36] (cf. Heath & vom Lehn 2010:276). The museum profession's assumption that children need to be entertained in order to be able to learn potentially undermines children's autonomy to define their own learning experiences within these institutions. On the other hand, it could be argued that the more entertainment the museum offers, the more its own authority is potentially threatened. The more "interactive" its exhibition style becomes, the more its educational 'mission' is potentially challenged and destabilised, as children are free to physically access and interpret exhibits as they choose and to experience the museum not as a learning environment at all, but rather as fun and entertaining leisure space. This serves as at least a partial explanation for the level of dispute and dissatisfaction expressed by large groups of museum professionals concerning the issue.

I suggest that the National Museum of Scotland must be viewed through the prism of its modernist and imperialist heritage, and the ongoing transformation of its approach to display, which has been stimulated by a radically altered worldview and growing self-consciousness relating to its authority to represent. The Museum is a complex political environment - a place of power, conflict and contradiction, where tight control is still exerted over its 'objects' and audiences, particularly children. Despite *new museological* concerns of growing irrelevance to Scottish society, attendance at NMS has been on the rise (654,971 in 1937 – Allan 1954:18; 0.7 million in 1979; 0.9 million in 1989 – Walsh 1992:182; and 1.26 million to all NMS sites in 2009/2010). As its vision, it aims *"to be a world class museums service that informs, educates and inspires"* (NMS Strategic Plan 2010:7). My research took place during a period of significant upheaval. Whilst being primarily situated in the modern building

[36] For further discussion of this issue, see Chapters III and V.

formally known as the Museum of Scotland, it also bore witness to the dramatic refurbishment of the adjacent Royal Museum building. The transformation has been both physical and conceptual as the two buildings are now known collectively as the National Museum of Scotland, their distinctive identities intertwined in a symbiotic relationship which continues to claim to *"show Scotland to the World and the World to Scotland"* (the words engraved on a flagstone underneath the archway connecting the two buildings). This name change is significant, not least because it marks the dominance of the relatively new and less established (National) Museum of Scotland over the older and larger Royal Museum. It is an exploration of the national context of the Museum of Scotland to which we now turn.

The National Museum of Scotland – a national project with national and local relevance

> The nation is said to "have" or "possess" a culture, just as its human constituents are described as "bearers" of the national culture. (Handler 1985:198)

An important aspect of the development of museums in the nineteenth century which I have not yet discussed, has been their intrinsic relationship with nationalist agendas. Bradburne (2000:384) states that, "Since the mid-19th century, the museum's political masters…had a strong interest in defining national interests, and in using the museum's pre-eminent position as a pulpit from which to proclaim the truths of national identity" (ibid). The former 'Royal Scottish Museum' with its awe-inspiring architecture, was no exception:

> the formation of the modern state required that visitors to a public museum no longer have the feeling of being received into the intimacy of a grand home, but rather that they be awed by the visual splendor of an untouchable state institution.
> (Classen 2005:283)

The modern half of what is now known, combined, as the National Museum of Scotland, was born out of 'The Society of Antiquaries of Scotland', which was founded in 1780 "very much in the spirit of the Enlightenment, to collect the

archaeology of Scotland"[37]. The society's collections were donated to the public in 1858 when they formed the original collections of the 'National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland'. They were housed in various locations around the city of Edinburgh over the course of the next hundred years. In 1985, the museum was amalgamated with the aforementioned 'Royal Scottish Museum', whose own remit had been to employ "world-wide exhibits where necessary and Scottish ones where possible" (Allan 1954:23). McKean (2000:125) suggests that:

> when the Secretary of State referred to the notion of a Museum of Scotland as 'the prime repository for artefacts representing the cultural history of Scotland' in his decision to form a single museum under a single Board of Trustees in 1983, he endorsed the emerging idea that the museum should somehow represent a country's culture.

It wasn't until 1998, however, that the national project of establishing a museum dedicated to the telling of "Scotland's story" was materialised in the form of the iconic modern architecture adjoining the original Victorian building on Chambers Street in Edinburgh today.

From its very inception, the National Museum of Scotland, not only as a place for housing cultural artefacts, but as a distinctly *national* museum, has been entangled in a complicated relationship with the highly-politicised issue of Scottish identity. This has culminated in it being perceived as an embodiment of the nation (cf. Handler 1985:211); "The existence of the Museum itself is part of this flagging through the understanding that there is this thing called 'Scotland' and that Scottish material culture is a relevant category for collection interpretation and display" (McLean & Cooke 2003:121).

The new museum opened its doors on St Andrew's Day (celebrating the Patron Saint of Scotland) in November 1998, a date which fell "between the devolution referendum for and the opening of the reinstated Scottish Parliament" (McLean & Cooke 2003:111). The close relationship between the two institutions was emphasised by the late First Minister, Donald Dewar (2000:ix), with the Scottish

[37] NMS website, available online at: http://www.nms.ac.uk/about_us/history.aspx, accessed on 01/11/11.

Government's Education Department continuing to oversee the museum service to this day. The Museum has thus been a significant player in the performance of "Scottishness" in both the national and international consciousness, often serving as a centre of debate about Scottish identity. This position, however, does not come without its share of difficulties and contradictions, as highlighted by McKean (2000:123):

> A national museum, if it is to represent more than a passive title, appears to contain the seeds of schizophrenia. Traditionally, museums are about the amassing, curation and communication of collections: a scholarly activity arguably at odds with the historical and political undertones implied by a 'national agenda'.

McLean and Cooke (2003:115), for example, highlight the fact that the "creators" of the Museum of Scotland were only too aware of the potential pitfalls of this political relationship and were "keen to be non-prescriptive in their narrative of Scotland". The National Museum of Scotland thus presents a particularly salient example of a museum which has become both symbolic of a nation and the nation itself (both metaphor and metonym – Runia 2006) - "a space where the nation is made visible" (Cooke & McLean 2002:112).

Museums can be understood as playing an important role in nation-building - strongly influencing "how people imagine the nations where they live" (Levitt 2011). Anderson has defined the nation as "an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (1983:15). Thus, despite constituting "the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time" (ibid:12), both nation-ness and nationalism can be understood as cultural artefacts (ibid:13). Rooted in modernity, with the advent of mass education, social organisation and the printing press (1997:13), nationalism was defined by Gellner in 1983, as a theory of political legitimacy, the principal by which political and national units are claimed to be naturally congruent. He argued that it is this principal which engenders nations, not the other way around. Nationalism employs pre-existing cultures selectively, often radically changing them in order for them to suitably signify the 'national culture' (Barth 1969:55). Museums have thus been described as serving nationalist agendas through their work of showcasing "the knowledge and

customs their citizens shared" in order to "create a unified "team" out of millions of people who would never meet" (Levitt 2011).

Unlike the nationalism described by Gellner (1983; 1997), contemporary nationalist sentiment in Scotland no longer links directly to the formalized project of nation building. The Scottish nation has already been consolidated, the question concerning nationalists today is political sovereignty; who has the right to govern a Scottish state. The Scottish National Party (SNP), whose current Government's neo-liberal values are tempered by communitarianism, would suggest that the Scottish nation can only be fully realized in the form of complete political independence from the rest of the UK.

Recent studies concerning the question of Scottish identity suggest that the number of people identifying themselves as 'Scottish' as opposed to 'British' has been on the rise since the 1970s, developing more out of a response to globalization than modernism and industrialization (cf. Gellner 1983; 1997). It has also been stressed, however, that there is a considerable 'non-alignment' in the three-way relationship between national identity, constitutional preference and political party identification (Rosie & Bond 2003:127). Thus, there are many layers to nationalist claims in Scotland; people can have a strong national identity without necessarily agreeing with the SNP politics of Scottish independence. The particular brand of nationalism occurring in Scotland in the twenty-first century has been described by McCrone (1992:195) as highly individualized and "pick n' mix" in its approach to identity, based upon the three foundations of "blood, birth and belonging" (Kiely et al 2005).

McCrone (2001:3) suggests that "Identity is not a 'thing' which can be treated as real or unreal, but a social space in which matters of structure and culture come together….Identity politics, then, becomes a sphere in which history, society and culture interact". The connection between cultural heritage and Scottish identity politics has been further emphasised by one of the National Museum of Scotland's principal curators. Hugh Cheape has suggested that through the "vigour and views of the Society of Antiquaries in the late 18th century, a Scottish dialectic may be

identified, that is, a rationalisation of the accumulation of national collections for patriotic purposes" (2000:70):

> What is now considered a strong sense of national identity among Scots has history as a strong component; at the simplest level, there is an implicit belief in the antiquity and continuity of Scottish nationhood…there has in recent years been a more lively and self-conscious pursuit of the concept of Scottish identity and the new Museum of Scotland has consciously addressed this issue, though not in an assertive or polemical mode. (ibid:71)

Particularly in recent decades, the heritage industry has grown in importance in Scotland (McCrone et al 1995:77). Heritage is "a knowledge, simultaneously, a cultural product and a political resource" (Graham & Howard 2008:5). Grabmann develops this concept by arguing that "because heritage can exist in the form of current objects and events…It is accessible for everyday experience and in that lies its power as a medium of identity-construction" (2001:220). McCrone et al (1995:160) agree that heritage has become "a tangible link with a set of values, crucial to a sense of identity", although Graham and Howard point out that it privileges national identity over other scales such as regional and local (2008:8)[38]. Handler (1985:198) has argued - "from the nationalist perspective, the relationship between nation and culture should be characterized by originality and authenticity". The role of heritage in the nationalist agenda, therefore, has significant implications for the role of museums in contemporary Scottish society.

Considerable research has been undertaken concerning the National Museum of Scotland's representation of Scotland's past, present and future and its impact on visitors' conceptions of what it means to be Scottish. The results of such research indicate that the premise that museums have the capacity to inscribe national identity is far from a reflection of what happens in reality - museums are more often used by their various audiences to reflect what these individuals already believe. NMS staff who were directly involved in the development of the Museum and its exhibition space have also distanced themselves from any suggestion that the Museum "was attempting to define Scotland or had any nationalistic overtones" (Cooke & McLean

[38] For more discussion of discourses of Scottish identity and belonging in localised contexts (in Aberdeen, Shetland and Lewis), see later in this Section and Chapters IV and VI.

2002:115). They claimed that, although responsible to the Scottish Executive (now 'Scottish Government'), the National Museum of Scotland is a "custodian", rather than a "creator" of Scottish identity (Cheape 2000:71). Thus, as Bradburne argues:

> In many ways, the coupling of museums and national identity represents a dead-end – or at very best, a vicious cycle. If museums are to shape national identity, nations must first have a meaning. However, as economic and political independence are eroded, and our world becomes increasingly global, the meaning of nationhood becomes increasing metaphorical and fragmented. (2000:386)

Although in the broader context of contemporary culture, museums' role in shaping and influencing ideas of culture and nation is commonly understood to be relatively small (especially when compared with other media such as film and television), the National Museum of Scotland continues to position itself at the heart of political debate about Scottish national identity; "But for the nationalist agenda, it is unlikely that the Museum would exist at all" (McKean 2000:140). Its current director, Dr Gordon Rintoul, has described its collections as an outcome of Scottish history, a reflection of the story of "our country and its engagement with the rest of the world"[39]. These intentions have also been incorporated into the Museum's tagline, which states its purpose as being to *'present Scotland to the World and the World to Scotland'*. In examining this statement, McLean and Cooke (2003:116) have observed that "the museum is a discursive site where the narratives of Scotland can be told, a place to communicate the 'story of a whole nation'. However, a tension therefore exists between the desire to tell the story of a nation and leaving room for alternative narratives".

Exemplifying this tension in his speech to the Royal Society of Edinburgh, Dr Rintoul went on to argue that history is a contested place. He specifically highlighted the controversy with the now-First Minister, Alex Salmond, at the Museum of Scotland's opening in order to illustrate his point (11/02/09). The dispute was over a lack of reference to important characters in Scotland's popular history in the new Museum's galleries (specifically relating to the Scottish Wars of Independence, which were fought against England between 1296 and 1357 AD).

[39] In a speech to the Royal Society of Edinburgh, February 11th 2009.

These individuals were William Wallace and Robert the Bruce. In this case, Alex Salmond's claims did not only reflect his nationalist party's political standpoint relating to Scottish independence. The campaign, led by *Scotland on Sunday* (McLean & Cooke 2003:119), also reflected popular opinion amongst many of Scotland's inhabitants (who had learnt all about Wallace and Bruce in Primary School), along with the expectations of tourists (representing the majority of the National Museum of Scotland's visitors figures), inspired by Mel Gibson's *Braveheart* film (released in 1995). Whilst at the time, the National Museum of Scotland claimed that there were no objects in its collections which could accurately reflect this part of popular history, it has since dedicated a display case to telling the story of William Wallace and Robert the Bruce with the aid of a few objects associated with the relevant historical period! Dr Rintoul argued; "We shouldn't take the easy route; we must act as a focal point for discussion, debate and engagement with different interpretations of the past and the present – representing different voices" (11/02/09). The dispute, moreover, highlights further tensions between the Museum's national narrative, and the expression of *authentic* nationalism; whilst Museum staff's views of the displays on William Wallace and Robert the Bruce were clearly disparaging due to their lack of material content, the fact that these figures have so captured the public's imagination would appear to render any telling of Scotland's history incomplete and irrelevant without them.

Displays of national identity thus need to "find a balance between public expectation and the way the museum staff see themselves and Scottish identity" (Grabmann 2001:225). This has been further illustrated by the work of Cooke and McLean (2002:110):

> The challenge for the Museum of Scotland is to represent Scotland through artefacts that have been acquired and have survived within the collections of the Museum. This representation is both produced and consumed; that is, both the creators of the Museum's exhibits and the visitors to the Museum make their own 'readings' of the objects contained therein, readings which in some way signify Scotland.

Grabmann's (2001:226) research amongst curators and directors at NMS has revealed -

> the strong educational impetus, the strive for enlightening 'the people' and at the same time the urge to convey a sense of nationhood through displaying national history. The wish to conjure up pride in national culture, nationhood and history is an indicator of the deliberate attempt to provide a sense of identity.

Notably, whilst children are often positioned as key beneficiaries of the Museum's performance of this national narrative, such political notions are a far cry from their everyday experience at the National Museum of Scotland. My child informants neither talked about politics nor used ideas about Scottish heritage beyond their own imaginings and agendas. Taking place almost a decade after Grabman's study, my research at the Museum revealed many ways in which educational practice deviated from the politically-inspired 'official line'. I was also able to detect a notable shift in the discourse of museum staff in the Education Department in relation to this issue. The concept of conveying a specifically national history through the educational workshops offered at the National Museum of Scotland was only briefly alluded to by one of the members of staff I interviewed. This indicates that, contrary to the suggestions of official literature, strategic plans and funding applications, the communication of national identity and belonging does not feature highly on the more practical list of Departmental priorities. This, however, is not to say it is not in their underlying consciousness – a principle that *goes without saying*[40].

Stepping away from a concern with the way in which the National Museum of Scotland conceptualises its displays, it is important to consider how these are received and perceived by visitors. McLean and Cooke (2000) have undertaken such research. Their study of visitors' perceptions of the Museum of Scotland reveals an interesting contrast between the politico-cultural and social dimensions of this national institution. Whilst in political terms, the Museum, in common with other museums since the mid-eighteenth century, is "a place where narratives of the nation are made manifest through classification and display of artefacts and specimens." (McLean & Cooke 2000:147), they claim that it would be wrong to overplay its social importance as a "space of identity formation" (ibid:156). Despite this, they suggest that when the idea of Scotland itself is in "a state of flux" triggered by

[40] For further discussion of this issue, see Chapter III.

political change since devolution, "the stories of the nation told in the Museum which give a sense of location, a connection between the individual and the nation as an 'imagined community' are especially important" (2000:148). McLean and Cooke (2003:120) also highlight museum visitors' "recognition that the Museum is portraying a Scotland which goes beyond the myth-making, that it offers an alternative symbol of Scotland. Or maybe it just offers another myth?". Many of those interviewed "called for a multi-vocal space where consumers can explore their own identities" (McLean & Cooke 2000:156). This thesis explores whether the same "multi-vocality" is apparent in the National Museum of Scotland's learning programmes as it is in exhibition galleries, and how political influences on the national curriculum affects the structure and content of the education workshops provided[41].

Over a decade after opening, and almost in spite of itself, the National Museum of Scotland continues to be at the nexus of political and cultural debate over the issue of Scottish national identity. Its relationship with the Scottish Government, headed up by the Scottish National Party (SNP) since 2007, has, if anything, grown stronger, with the Museum being dependent upon the Government for a significant proportion of the funding for the Royal Museum refurbishment project as well as other smaller projects and touring exhibitions. This has had a considerable influence upon NMS policy, particularly in the areas of access, outreach and education, all of which benefit from falling in line with the Government's national cultural priorities.

In the 2010/11 update of National Museums Scotland's strategic plan (2006-2012), it was claimed that:

> Our collections are at the heart of all we do. We are focusing on increasing access to our wide-range of objects and expertise, extending research and collaborations, caring for our existing four million objects, and acquiring more nationally and internationally important material for Scotland. (2010:5)

The Museum has also recently been considering how to take "control of the future" (Dr Rintoul, March 2010) in the midst of present economic uncertainty. The role of

[41] For further discussion of this issue, see Chapters III and V.

the NMS organisation has been considered internally on both national (dealing with the question of Scottish identity and what this means) and international levels (raising Scotland's profile worldwide). How these roles fit with current Government priorities was also a key priority, these being focused on *"making Scotland an attractive place to live, work, invest and visit"*[42]. Consultants have suggested that the 'ideal museum' is one which is *"able to combine ancient artefacts with ground-breaking visitor interactive technology"*, describing this technology as a hands-on, personalised, physical-digital experience. Staff at NMS expressed the desire for the Museum to impact Scottish society by *"celebrating the pioneering spirit of Scotland and its influence worldwide"*. The concept of *"real things, revealing real stories"* was also described as remaining at the heart of everything the organisation hopes to achieve.

In contrast to the newly refurbished Royal Museum galleries, the Museum of Scotland has a relationship with its audience, whereby it continues to dictate the terms of engagement rather than the other way around. This issue was particularly highlighted during my fieldwork, when I developed friendly relationships with a number of staff working directly with the public on the gallery floors. Over a coffee with Jim, for example, he exclaimed in exasperation – *"should the needs of the visitors* ***not*** *be relevant?!"* (7/10/10). His outburst was in relation to the layout of the Museum building, which is very un-user-friendly, despite having won architectural awards. The intentionally disorientating physical qualities of the building ("the deliberate lack of a structured route through the museum is seemingly an important component in this multi-vocality" - McLean & Cooke 2000:156), reflect the fact that the intellectual concepts employed by the Museum's designers are far removed from the concerns of the majority of museum visitors:

> 'Displays should avoid the sense of the past inevitably leading to the present, because that is the fodder of myth. History is full of blind alleys and unexpected breaks, and that is what makes it exciting.' Multiple entrances, disconnections and cul-de-sacs would do very nicely. (McKean 2000:130)

[42] See 'Scotland's International Framework', published by the Scottish Government on October 23rd 2012.

Architectural devices inspired by postmodern theoretical concerns have thus been translated into barriers to accessibility for visitors to the National Museum of Scotland. Throughout my research, I repeatedly observed visitors, school groups in particular, struggling to get a handle on where exactly they were in the Museum and desperately trying to make meaning out of the maps provided.

The difficulties presented by the building's layout were also highlighted by my informants in the Education Department, making the theme of disjointed disorientation consistent 'behind-the-scenes' at the Museum as well as in the public areas. One informant described the offices as *"a bit of a warren – difficult to find your way about"* (Miranda, 19/02/10), whilst the building works associated with the Royal Museum Project led another member of staff to joke that the construction work was *"really just to treat the museum staff like rats in a maze, blocking familiar routes and pathways in order to see how our behaviour is affected!"* (Rebecca, 23/02/10). On a later occasion, Jim elaborated his point, claiming that the National Museum of Scotland was largely self-serving, more concerned with establishing itself amongst the Cultural Sector's elite than catering to the needs of the public it was supposed to serve. He used the following example; *"Relationship is key to museum orientation (e.g. a map and a street sign affirm where you are); visitors cannot tell where they are in the museum, they have no relationship with it and therefore, they are* ***lost****"* (25/11/09). An analysis of this statement would suggest that not only was my informant referring to the physical, everyday challenge faced by visitors attempting to find their way amongst the Museum's different galleries, but his words could also be understood as forming an analogy for people's relationship with the National Museum of Scotland's representation of the history of the Scottish nation. Walsh (1992:4) has suggested that "the selection of a few unrepresentative images of the past, neutered by dazzling media, exacerbates the feeling of placelessness which is common in the (post-) modern world".

The concept of *place* is particularly important to the National Museum of Scotland, which, although physically situated in central Edinburgh, holds partial responsibility for the development of Scotland's national museum service. This role and the

perceived relevance of the Museum in relation to local museums across Scotland has historical roots stretching as far back as 1875, when the Museum provisioned 'redundant exhibits', resources, staff training and expertise to museums "ranging from Peebles to Wick" (Allan 1954:14). Today, the responsibility of being a key gatekeeper to the national heritage and international reputation of Scotland continues to weigh heavily on NMS. The organisation's mission statement claims that "As Scotland's leading museum of material culture and natural sciences, our role has important national and international dimensions as we reflect the Scottish nation to itself and to international perception through demonstration of the scope, calibre and breadth of our collections" (NMS 2010:8). An important condition of continued funding from the Scottish Government has been the organisation's investment in and development of collaborative partnerships with other, smaller museum organisations across Scotland. Although Wilson (1984:56) has observed that national museums' relationships with "provincial museums" are "often fraught with jealousies", through the establishment and development of such partnerships, NMS aims to contribute towards the sharing of resources, expertise, and, perhaps most importantly, collections. Towards this end, several touring exhibitions have been launched over the past few years.

A touring exhibition of exceptionally high profile was *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked* (May 2010-September 2011). Described as Scotland's most significant archaeological discovery, the Lewis Chessmen have been employed by the SNP since devolution in 1997 as a symbol of the Scottish nation's bid for "freedom" and independence from the rest of the UK. This has taken place in the form of a highly political repatriation claim to the British Museum (which currently owns 82 of the Chessmen, whilst the National Museum of Scotland owns 11). The timing of the touring exhibition (in discussion at NMS from as early as January 2009) represented a culmination of several important events: firstly, a loans request made to the British Museum by the Lewis museum in Stornoway, 'Museum nan Eilean'; secondly, the Chessmen's feature on the British Museum's well-publicised *A History of the World* project (broadcast by BBC Radio 4 on 28th June 2010); thirdly, the publishing of new research conducted on the Lewis Chessmen by one of the National Museum of

Scotland's principal Archaeology curators, Dr David Caldwell. The project itself, however, would not have come about if it had not been entirely funded by the Scottish Government; *"The SNP government have funded the Lewis Chessmen touring project, as this fits in with their political agenda concerning the repatriation of these symbolic objects if/when Scotland gains its political independence. This funding, however, is what has enabled this positive opportunity to be taken advantage of, and MPs have absolutely no influence at all on how the Chessmen are displayed and what kinds of messages NMS communicates about them. The same was true for the Museum of Scotland permanent displays opened in 1998"* (NMS curator, Spring 2010).

The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked exhibition was presented as the result of a singularly successful collaboration between the British Museum and NMS, aiming to "take a fresh look at the many theories, mysteries and myths of these evocative pieces which have inspired both academic debate and captured public imagination" (NMS' Tour Proposal, March 2009:8). The project facilitated the development and strengthening of NMS' relationships with Museum nan Eilean, Shetland Museum and Archives and Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museums. It also presented me with the opportunity to gain unique and unexpected insights into the organisation's relationships with more peripheral museum bodies, in a bid to uncover its perceived relevance on both a national and local stage. It is clear that whilst for many politicians, the Chessmen are understood as a symbol for the Scottish nation, for the exhibition's audiences in Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Shetland and Lewis, these iconic objects related far more to local heritage and identity in Lewis than to Scotland.

Through fieldwork conducted at the three different host sites of the Lewis Chessmen exhibition, I was able to observe significant divergence in the ways these institutions related to the core national organisation (NMS). The exhibition arrived at each of the locations amidst significant publicity and media hype. In Aberdeen, however, I observed that a proportion of the visiting public were critical of the exhibition's content (e.g. *"Disappointing. Dark backgrounds and poor lighting made for gloomy visiting – the texts dense and not easily read or absorbed, the pieces not standing out*

– could the bilingual aspect have been better designed too? Sorry to have been underwhelmed." – visitors' book, October 2010) and referred to the political debate revolving around the repatriation of the Lewis Chessmen to the island of Lewis (e.g. *"Keep them together in the place they belong"* – visitors' book, October 2010). It was felt by some that significant pieces of the chess set which had been included by NMS in the exhibition's marketing material (specifically an iconic 'Berserker', depicted chewing his shield), had been deemed by NMS to be too important to be included in the touring exhibition - instead, remaining on permanent display at the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh. This led to feelings of disappointment and disgruntlement at this particular host site.

A critical analysis of the reaction of the Aberdeen audience would suggest that the privilege of playing host to such a high profile exhibition was not felt as keenly in this major Scottish city as it was in the more remote island communities. Whilst the discrepancy between the marketing material and the content of the touring exhibition itself can largely be understood as the by-product of miscommunication within a large and over-stretched organisation running numerous projects at once, it is clear that at least some external perceptions of NMS are critical of its 'imperial' position within Scotland's museum sector, e.g. *"Great to see them in Aberdeen/ away from Edinburgh and London"* (visitor's comment, October 2010).

The exhibition's reception at the Shetland Museum and Archives was, on the whole, very positive. As at Aberdeen, the visiting exhibition appeared to be really popular, exemplified by significantly high local visitor figures. The "missing Berserker" was also noted by some visitors (e.g. *"Because I have to admit, when I first came in, I was a bit disappointed that they weren't all together"* – school teacher, 16/02/11), whilst arguments in favour of the return of the collection to Lewis were frequently proposed by children and adults alike.

Local pride in Shetland's new, award-winning museum was almost tangible and, I would argue, the largely positive response to the Chessmen exhibition was closely tied in with this. Visitors were proud that such a high-profile exhibition was visiting

Shetland and that their museum had made such a good job of housing it - *"I think that it is pretty amazing how you got these pieces in here. Doesn't the Edinburgh Museum hog everything good?"* (visitor's comment, Levenwick, Shetland, February 2011). One couple from the Fair Isle (a geographically isolated part of the Shetland Islands, situated south of South Mainland) informed me that they had seen the exhibition at the Aberdeen Art Gallery before it had arrived in Shetland and they hadn't even bothered to look around properly, thinking very poorly of the darkened display area, whereas in the Shetland Museum, they supplied glowing feedback. This was very interesting, given that the exhibition had exactly the same content and display boards at each venue! These observations hint at the complex processes by which 'objects' are socially constituted within museums in different places, at different times.

As noted earlier in this chapter, a significant proportion of the National Museum of Scotland's collections have been derived through the exploration and exploitation of the worldwide colonies of the British Empire. I would suggest that my informants in Shetland continue to view Scotland in general and the National Museum of Scotland in particular, in this light, perceiving a consistent imperialist attitude embodied in the actions of NMS concerning its exploitation of the Islands' more valuable archaeological resources. The National Museum of Scotland was perceived as being largely responsible for 'stealing' items of significant archaeological value from the Isles:

> Replicas of the silver [the St Ninian's Isle Treasure] are on display in the Shetland Museum; the real hoard was 'stolen' for safe keeping in Royal Scottish Museum in Edinburgh.
> (*Shetland Visitor* 2011:80)

This quote, extracted from a Shetland magazine, incorrectly refers to NMS using a title that is now out of date, emphasising the apparent distance and irrelevance of this national institution to the more localised concerns of the Shetlands. The perception of exploitation was also mirrored in Shetlanders' perspectives of the Scottish Government's approach towards North Sea Oil and the Shetland refineries – *"It's not Scotland's oil, it's ours!"* (cf. Button 1976; Nicolson 1975).

Even the concept of having a *national* museum seems flawed in Shetland – a people group who feel disenfranchised by the UK census which does not have an ethnicity 'box' for Shetland, forcing Shetlanders to tick 'Other' as opposed to 'Scottish'. NMS was therefore conceived as a distant, imperialist body with different interests from Shetland, an island group that views itself as a separate entity, independent from the Scottish nation. Thus, although the staff at the Shetland Museum welcomed its new working relationship with NMS, the majority of Shetlanders I spoke to were both aware and distrustful of the "Big museum in Edinburgh". They also expressed a desire to prove the Shetland Museum as more than worthy of important collections, particularly those that can be related to a distinctive Shetland local identity.

Finally, in Lewis, visitors were very positive in their response to the touring Chessmen exhibition. Whereas staff at the Shetland Museum viewed their relationship with NMS as a partnership, Museum nan Eilean appeared to perceive NMS more as a generous benefactor, without whose help the small museum would have been unable to resource such a high-profile exhibition. The relationship between the two museum organisations has been decidedly long-term, with NMS supporting Museum nan Eilean not just with loans of collections, but also staff training, conservation, education resources and advice – *"The NMS organisation is so big and so far away that it's not treading on us"* (Sheila, 13/05/11). The Museum nan Eilean also benefits from NMS' interface with the Scottish Government – *"it's useful to have such political clout"* (ibid). In focus groups with local school children, however, I observed that most participants had never even heard of the National Museum of Scotland and guessed that it was either based in Stornoway, London or Glasgow before Edinburgh was even suggested. With the exception of staff at Museum nan Eilean and 'An Lanntair' (an independent art centre in Stornoway), and increasingly, members of the Western Isles Council (due to NMS backing and involvement in their Heritage Lottery Foundation bid to develop a new Museum/Hotel complex at Lews Castle in Stornoway), NMS appeared to be fairly distant and irrelevant to the average person living in Lewis.

In summary, it seems that, ideally, the relationship between NMS and its partner museums can be viewed very much like the relationships these regional museums have with the smaller heritage centres in their local areas (or "hinterland") – the role of the 'heritage hub' or 'cultural centre' is to lend resources and expertise to the 'peripheries' in addition to showcasing and directing public attention towards these other sites (cf. Wallerstein's 'world-system' core-periphery model, 1974). Of particular note is the ways in which public reception and experience of *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked* touring exhibition, along with the meanings of the 'objects' themselves and how people engaged with them significantly transformed as they moved between each host site. This insight into the processes by which 'objects' are socially constituted through combinations of things, narratives, place, history and politics will be explored further in Chapter IV. In the meantime, it can be observed that NMS is under a lot of political pressure to serve Scotland on both national and local levels, particularly concerning access to collections and the development of partnerships with local museums towards the sharing of resources and expertise. As can be seen from an examination of how the organisation is viewed by people local to touring exhibition host museums in Aberdeen, Shetland and Lewis, however, the reality of these relationships, formed through the movement and reconstitution of museum 'objects' and exhibition narratives, does not always reflect these political intentions. The instability of the relational processes by which local conceptions of identity and belonging are constructed provides insight into NMS' role in Scottish society. Its performative embodiment of 'Scotland' means that all at once – it 'belongs' to everyone and no-one; it is both everywhere and tied to a specific place in Edinburgh; it is a cultural resource that is both ready-to-hand, and exceedingly distant in both geographical proximity and relevance from the lives of those it claims to serve.

Conclusion

I began this chapter by posing the following questions - why research children's engagement with material heritage at the National Museum of Scotland, more than a decade after the Museum's opening? Why does this issue matter today? Towards

answering these questions, I have explored the historical, political, economic and geographical context of my research subject(s). Firstly, by examining the origins of the museum institution in the UK and considering the approach to representation advocated by the *new museology*, I have revealed their particular consequences and permutations for exhibition and education policy at the National Museum of Scotland. I have also explored the important relationship between the Museum and the development and expression of Scottish national identity and nationalism, reflecting on the different ways in which the organisation is viewed from both an internal and external perspective and on a national and local scale. This examination has revealed the National Museum of Scotland to be caught up within several conflicts and contradictions. These have been provoked by the tensions that exist between the "democratic" and "multivocal" aims of the *new museology*, and its own historical tradition, which instils the desire to maintain tight control over its collections and narratives.

The launch of *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked* touring exhibition combined with the development and conclusion of the Royal Museum Project (the completion of which has catapulted the National Museum of Scotland beyond the national to the international world stage), has provided me with an excellent opportunity to examine the underlying premises behind the role of a national museum in contemporary society. Although of very different proportions, both of these projects lend significant insight into the ways in which children of different ages, backgrounds and localities, engage with and relate to the strategies of the *new museology* and its performance of representation through museum objects. Within the current context of considerable economic and political volatility, where the value of public investment in museums and other cultural institutions is being questioned and often, cut back, it is of fundamental importance to ask why museums are important to the post-modern nation. How do children act as a counterpoint to dominant museological discourse through their negotiation of educational practice at the National Museum of Scotland? In considering these questions, I will now turn to take a closer look at NMS' particular approach to representing and communicating ideas about material culture - "real things revealing stories".

Chapter III: "Real Things Revealing Stories"

> One is continually present as witness to that moment, always moving like the crest of a wave, at which the world is about to disclose itself for what it is. (Ingold 2002:12)

The previous chapter conceptualised the National Museum of Scotland as a place where people encounter heritage through a loose, grand narrative interwoven with interactive exhibits. Both of these museological techniques are ultimately focused upon constituting, interpreting and representing material remains from the past. Before taking a closer look at artefacts and their 'affects' in relation to a specific case study of the Lewis Chessmen[43], this chapter examines NMS' policy of promoting "real things revealing stories" (as it is implemented at the National Museum of Scotland). It does so in the light of theoretical discussion about 'objects', 'agency' and the "social life of things", and examines how this plays out in day-to-day educational practice within the Museum's galleries. An important question arising from this discussion concerns whether or not children actually engage with material heritage in the museum and, if so, how? This will be explored in Chapter V.

Central to its post-modern critique of museum practice was the *new museology's* (Vergo 1989) conceptualisation of the museum as a "system of representation", which produces "meaning through objects and their display" (McLean & Cooke 2003:114). The display of 'objects' within exhibitions was thus no longer held to be a politically neutral activity. The museum profession's response to this critique has been two-fold. Many institutions adopted an approach that seeks to be both reflexive and transparent - acknowledging that every exhibition arrangement is the product of underlying political agendas, and therefore deliberately making *ideas* rather than *objects* central to their representations (Witcomb 1998). This approach, however, has been met with scholarly criticism due to its denial of the independent and alternative 'agency' of things; "Because it has decided in advance that these images are a visual manifestation of an ideological force, it is unable to catch hold of the

[43] See Chapter IV.

ways in which the materiality of representation creates its own force field" (Pinney 2005:261).

The National Museum of Scotland, on the other hand, has opted to refocus its display policy onto the museum 'object' and the "life histories" it can reveal to its audience. It aims to employ this principle as the starting-point from which the design of rest of the exhibition space takes its cue. This second approach, however, is also far from unproblematic - not only from a theoretical standpoint, but also in its practical application, a fact that has been clearly identified by the museum staff themselves. Firstly, it assumes the *a priori* category of 'objects' as opposed to human 'subjects'[44], and secondly, that an 'object's' ability to impact and affect can only be constituted, passively, through its personification and identification with the social lives of humans. Furthermore, the physical environment of the Museum itself, and its treatment of 'objects', tends to obstruct and deny the relational 'agency' which exists between humans and nonhumans.

This chapter explores the concept of "real objects telling their own stories" in light of Appadurai's (1986) assertions about the "social life of things" and more recent anthropological debates about the 'agency' of 'objects' and the "return to things" (e.g. Brown 2001; Bennett 2004; Olsen 2003). Before embarking on this discussion, however, it is necessary to define its terms:

- 'thing' defines anything of substance, be it human or nonhuman; both the matter from which objects are materialised by perceiving subjects and that which is excessive of mere objects, constituting their force as a "sensuous metaphysical presence" (Brown 2001:5)
- 'object' is used to refer to the physical things constituted by the Museum as 'artefacts' and subsequently employed in its display cases, education workshops and handling resources
- 'agency' is employed to denote the ability to act in the world, having social and/or material *affect* or *efficacy*. This, however, reveals itself to be

[44] This dualism has been described by Course (2010) as being derived principally from the grammatical structures of European language, thus serving as an analogy as opposed to a representation of reality.

problematic when employed within the context of children's education in museums.

A potential source of confusion is the fact that, in contrast to these definitions, the "real things" referred to by NMS' policy appears to denote the Museum's collection of 'objects'.

Organisational policy at National Museums Scotland

> It is the objects which are important: they must speak for themselves. (Wilson 1984:58)

New museology's demands for increased polyvocality in museum representation (see Vergo 1989) are problematic for the National Museum of Scotland. To address this issue, the policy of "real objects telling their own stories" can be understood as a practical application of Appadurai's (1994:76) assertion that "objects, like persons, have social lives". This notion that objects are in possession of their own life stories, which can be used to illuminate the human social and cultural worlds in which they find themselves has had a significant impact on museum representation in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This has contributed to increased theoretical discussion about the "status of the object in museum practices" (Witcomb 1998:383). The field has been largely divided into two camps, identified by Weil (1990:47) and Witcomb (1998) as follows; "…for some, museums are about objects, while for others they are about ideas – with objects merely one resource amongst many for discussing and presenting those ideas" (Witcomb 1998:383).

The latter approach to museum representation views 'objects' as things which, in themselves, do not have inherent meaning and can only be conceived as messengers – a communicative device employed by curators and educators in order to convey messages to the museum audience. Whilst members of this audience interpret exhibits through the lens of their own individualised experience, ultimately, it is the context and conditions of the exhibition which impart meaning, not the objects

themselves, and so a de-contextualised museum object is very limited in conveying any kind of idea about the past it is supposed to represent. "The ways in which objects are selected, put together, and written or spoken about have political effects", argues Hooper-Greenhill (2000:148), but these effects, she contends, are not the effects of the objects *per se*. Lidchi (1997:160) makes a similar argument:

> a museum does not deal solely with *objects* but, more importantly, with *ideas* – notions of what the world is or should be. Museums do not simply issue objective descriptions or form logical assemblages; they generate representations and attribute value and meaning in line with certain perspectives or classificatory schemas which are historically specific. They do not so much reflect the world through objects as use them to mobilize representations of the world past and present.

These ideas can be linked with Goffman's (1997 [1974]) concept of "framing", whereby he claims that it is not the content of an event which matters or affects the reaction of an individual, but rather the cultural frame through which it is viewed. Thus, "a strip of activity will be perceived by its participants in terms of the rule or premises of a primary framework, whether social or natural…" and the individual will react accordingly (1997:158). Significantly, within this discussion, museum objects are treated as pure physical matter, as opposed to relationally co-constituted components of social life (things at work in combination with narrative, historical and political, spatial and temporal contexts). Cooke and McLean (2002:121) conclude that "…it would be wrong to attribute a direct inculcation of meanings…from producers, via material culture, to the visitors, or indeed direct from the material culture to the visitor ('letting the object speak for itself')" (2002:121). One could thus argue that it is only through their social constitution as objects within exhibition and the consequent social engagement of museum visitors that 'things' are able to impart meaning.

The alternative approach to museum representation, on the other hand, both recognises and emphasises the fact that 'things' (referred to as 'objects'), are not like language; i.e. merely a symbolic communicative code. Instead, they have inherent qualities (or 'thingness' – Brown 2001), which restrict and exceed the meanings they can be used to impart (cf. Hooper-Greenhill 2000:103). They can have both social

and material affects on their beholders and are, in turn, shaped by their own changing functions, contexts and subsequent life histories. Navaro-Yashin (2009:4) explores the role of the physical environment (spaces, places and things) in engendering subjective feelings in people. She concludes that despite the fact that theoretically, 'subjectivity' has been cast against 'affectivity', one does not need to make a choice between the two 'enemy' camps; neither the things nor the people who live with them are "affective in their own right, but both produce and transmit affect *relationally*" (ibid:14). This has strong applications towards my own research on the relational engagement of children and artefacts at the National Museum of Scotland.

As discussed in the previous chapter[45], the *new museology* advocated by Peter Vergo (1989), has levelled heavy criticism at the power structures inherent in museums, with specific reference to the political agendas of the cultural elites these institutions are presumed to serve. This call for the democratisation of museum representation has been answered with "an attempt to decentralise the museum, to make it more responsive to external communities" (Witcomb 1998:387), and, what is more - "Central to this attempt is the tendency to focus on ideas rather than objects" (ibid). A focus on 'objects' thus came to be seen by many in the museum profession as an approach which was both traditional and conservative (Witcomb 1998:383), associated with the imperialist modernism of the nineteenth century (Buchli 2002:4). It is important to consider where the National Museum of Scotland, opening its doors to the public in 1998[46], situated itself within this discussion.

By adopting a very specific display policy based upon the principle that "we were not telling Scotland's story illustrated by objects. Our aim was to present the stories objects could tell" (Calder 2000:46), the Museum appears to have been inspired by Appadurai's (1986) notion of objects' capacity for social lives. This approach fitted well within the Museum's existing conceptual framework of collection and display[47],

[45] See Chapter II.
[46] The National Museum of Scotland is annexed to the much earlier Royal Scottish Museum building, established in 1904.
[47] See Chapter II for further discussion of the history of the NMS institution and its constituent parts.

which, as Dr D. A. Allan (Director of the Museum, 1945-1961) notes in his 1954 survey, emphasised the importance of its "unique combination of real things, expert knowledge and modern invention" (1954:24).

Although only able to present a 'snapshot' of the life stories of particular artefacts at a particular place in time (the exhibition display case), the Museum can be understood as attempting to engage with Appadurai's (1986) investigation of relationally constituted objects across and over time by presenting their histories in accompanying display panels. It was also able to explore the notion of the object's journey to becoming a museum artefact in even greater depth within special exhibitions such as *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked*[48]. Inevitably, however, this decision to retell the history of Scotland through objects alone not only resulted in the representation of partial histories, but also the exclusion of other histories. Whilst curators and other staff at the National Museum of Scotland were clearly aware of this debate, particularly the principle that objects can tell multiple stories, their marketing taglines and display policies did not address the concerns of Weil (1990) and Witcomb (1998:385), who have drawn attention to the fact that implicit in this focus on objects was the belief in the possibility of objectivity –

> This is based on the assumption that objects, through their material existence, are neutral reflectors of the society which made them. Objects speak for themselves. Such an assumption also makes it possible to think of the museum as a neutral space which does not privilege one meaning above another.
> (Witcomb 1998:385)

NMS' display policy thus appears to stand in direct contrast to the *new museology*'s critique of the museum as an intensely political institution (cf. Vergo 1989), which must be recognised as such, becoming a site of contestation at all levels of society:

> reality can never be reached in any pure objective sense. It is always mediated by social and cultural values – it is always "constructed". All we ever have, therefore, are representations and abstractions of the real, even when dealing with objects. (Witcomb 1998:385)

[48] See Chapter IV for an exploration of the "social lives" of the Lewis Chessmen.

The National Museum of Scotland's implementation of an object-focused approach to display is thus perhaps best interpreted as a deliberate attempt to depoliticise its representations - a means by which to avoid or distance the Museum from its association with ongoing Scottish nationalist agendas (McLean & Cooke 2003).

In seeking to explain the reasons, aspirations and expectations behind the Museum's development, Jones (Director of NMS between 1992 and 2001, overseeing the completion of the new National Museum of Scotland in 1998) has emphasised that, rather than being a "book on the wall", the Museum "starts to tell us about the past and that the evidence which they provide is complementary to, not illustrative of knowledge derived from documentary sources" (2000:9). This emphasis on the importance of objects in their own right has also been employed by Calder (2000), who served as script co-ordinator for the (National) Museum of Scotland project and was heavily involved in work on the conceptual framework and narrative behind the exhibits. The National Museum of Scotland's exhibition style wanted to make the statement that prominence should always be placed upon "the real thing…we believed that reconstructions could detract from the object" (Calder 2000:46). Jones (2000:9) has elaborated, stating that:

> Objects have many meanings and in different contexts will illuminate different aspects of what they have to say. If they are to be enjoyed and wondered at and understood, they must not only be well shown, but also well placed, within a conceptual structure that engages with the viewer and allows each object to reinforce the significance of its neighbours.

Calder thus describes the Museum building as being developed in *response* to the objects (2000:41):

> As the objects themselves were the raison d'etre of the new museum, our responsibility was to present them in a way that allowed them to communicate their stories as strongly as possible. The centrality of the object was a guiding principle.
> (Calder 2000:42)

In making these assertions, she does however, admit that the objects' individual stories had to be limited, simply because they were part of a bigger story (2001:45) - the grand narrative of the Scottish nation (see also McKean 2000). The Museum's claims, have also been heavily contested by other authors as well as staff working in

the Museum today. It was suggested to me by Tara (a member of the Museum's gallery staff) for example, that only in the basement, the *Early People* (Archaeology) gallery, is the visitor actually surrounded by objects and it is only here that the exhibition is not dominated by the architectural design of the building itself. McKean (2000:128) acknowledges the divergence of some of the completed Museum's exhibition spaces from the ideals expressed in the organisation's display policy; "despite the reiterated intention that the national narrative would emerge from the selected objects themselves, rather than one imposed upon them from a historical perspective, there was sustained pressure for a more overarching approach". This pressure was evidenced, for example, within the Museum's first year of opening, by the *Scotland on Sunday*/SNP-led campaign for the national hero, William Wallace, to be represented in its galleries (McLean & Cooke 2003:119).

Whilst, from its inception, it appears that objects were perceived as central to the National Museum of Scotland's approach to representation, the mantra of "real things revealing stories" became more formally implemented across the NMS network after the organisation's official rebranding in July 2003. The move, which appears to have been largely influenced by its Marketing Department, represented a bid to both clarify and simplify the Museum's aims in order to communicate powerfully and effectively with its audiences. In describing the policy's implications for staff, NMS marketing literature claims that *"Every object tells a story and we all become storytellers. We share our knowledge and experience to bring our collections to life, making connections between time and place, cultures and civilisations"*[49]. Museum visitors, on the other hand, are invited to *"imagine they are in another place or time"*, encountering created stories *"so real they almost feel they are there"*[50]. In employing this catchy advertising campaign, however, it appears to make the naïve error of assuming a homogenous audience; adopting a display policy, which supposes that children and adults approach and engage with museum objects and displays in similar ways[51]. The re-branding literature goes on to

[49] NMS marketing materials, accessed March 2012.
[50] NMS marketing materials, accessed March 2012.
[51] See Chapter V for an exploration of children's engagement with objects at the National Museum of Scotland.

address some of the concerns of the *new museology* (Vergo 1989), regarding the unidirectional flow of knowledge from exhibition 'producers' to visiting 'consumers'. It does this by suggesting that visitors *"can contribute their own experiences and stories. This changes their perception of what a museum is – from one-way to two-way participation"*[52]. The language adopted by this policy, which uses the terms 'things' and 'revealing' as opposed to 'objects' and the more active 'telling', also hints at the Museum's engagement with ongoing theoretical discussion about the problems associated with 'object-centred' approaches to display.

Yet, how does this organisational policy and consequent theoretical debates map onto display practice at the National Museum of Scotland? How does its 'object-centred' approach appear differently from those museums dedicated to an emphasis on narratives and ideas? Entering into the space of the National Museum of Scotland, visitors might be struck by the minimalism of its interior – its walls are bare stone, embellished with neither pictures nor paint. Similarly, its display cases feature very limited adornment or illustration. Artefacts have been placed in glass cases with a cream/beige backdrop. They are arranged either singly, or in assemblages, accompanied only by a number (a key signifying the presence of a single sentence or one-word explanation to be found at the bottom of the case) or a paragraph of simple text. There is deliberately very little in the way of reconstructive illustration or other pictures; there is also little or no fabricated contextualisation of the objects. Both the architectural design of the building and its display style thus combine to present a very clear idea that the visitor is simply being presented with objects; nothing more and nothing less [Figure 5].

[52] NMS marketing materials, accessed March 2012.



Figure 5: A 'typical' display case featuring objects found in a Viking grave, *Early People* gallery at the National Museum of Scotland (September 2013).



Figure 6: Hilton of Cadbol stone, with adjacent interactive screen, as displayed in the *Early People* gallery of the National Museum of Scotland (September 2013).

This approach makes a striking contrast with the exhibition styles popular in the early 1990s, demonstrated by museums such as at The People's Story (City of Edinburgh Council Museums Service). At The People's Story, life-size reconstructions of 'typical' city-life scenes feature replica objects and costumed mannequins, all of which are employed to illustrate a broad, chronological storyline described in detail through numerous large text panels (2013). These displays have thus been premised upon the primacy of ideas and narrative as opposed to museum artefacts (see Witcomb 1998). They also demonstrate an attempt to re-establish the human-material context of the "contact point" - described by Feldman (2006:245) as "a general category of object that results from physical contact with the body, and then the subsequent removal or destruction of the body". This disruptive process disconnecting 'things' – stuff and bodies - is one that remains, by its very nature, at the heart of museum conservation and display practices.

Over a decade after opening, the National Museum of Scotland continues to maintain a display policy that explicitly claims to have "real things revealing stories". The outworking of this ideal in practice has been a stalwart refusal to use contextual detail in any marketing material (opting instead to present objects individually, on a plain white or coloured background) and to limit the use of reconstruction and/or illustration within the Museum's display cases. In a recent update of its Strategic Plan, NMS stated the following; *"Relevance and accessibility are fundamental to our vision. We also aim to make the relationship between our objects and our audience as dynamic as possible for our mutual benefit"* (2010:7). My informant, Jim, however, became quite indignant when I broached this subject with him, arguing that the Museum's approach to display was self-serving; *"it's complete academic snobbery to claim that no object is more important than other objects and that they should be treated absolutely the same – this makes no sense to visitors! Of course the tombstone of Mary Queen of Scots is more interesting than a quern stone! To suggest otherwise is just crazy!"* (04/02/10). He also questioned how it is actually possible for an object to "tell its own story", without the help of a museum guide or an information panel – *"an object will only be able to tell its own story if the person viewing it has a way to relate to it; if there is no relationship, there is no*

communication". He illustrated his point using the example of my locket necklace, which might, through our shared history, be able to say something to me, personally, but means nothing at all to him. Jim's comments concerning the importance of *relationship* in making visitors' engagement with objects at the museum meaningful, support the conclusions of Classen and Howes (2006:217), who have claimed that "most museum-goers are not solely interested in apprehending the formal appearance of the artifacts on display, but in establishing a connection with those artifacts and with the people who created them".

A member of staff in the Education Department expressed similar concerns with the Museum's policy to have "real objects revealing stories", admitting to me that it is difficult to maintain a narrative whilst keeping objects as a central focus. This is a challenge which has also been considered by Calder (2000:44), when she concedes that "objects can be obscure and remote, and often desperately need help to communicate. But sometimes a single object can deliver significant and relevant impact irrespective of the story in the words". Inherent to this argument is an implied dichotomous relationship between objects and ideas, a distinction which has been subject to renewed critique. The polarised nature of this discussion has been criticised by Witcomb (1997:383), who suggests that "while these debates have been both stimulating and the basis of worthwhile experimentation it may be time to question some of the central oppositions produced". She proposes instead, an approach to museum representation that is composed of a hybridisation of both of these elements, one which I observed to be particularly helpful in understanding children's engagement with material heritage at the National Museum of Scotland.

The false dichotomy in museum practice can be understood as a microcosm of wider theoretical discussions, which have been taking place in the field of material culture studies for at least the last couple of decades. These have called into question the very assumption of an object-subject dualism; the artificial opposition of human and nonhuman physical matter. Both Latour (1991) and Buchli (2002) have argued that this dichotomy, along with others such as nature-culture, human-nonhuman, us-it, can be understood as products of modernism; "collecting traditions of the nineteenth

century, liberal Enlightenment era notions of universality, colonial expansion, industrialisation and the birth of consumerism" (Buchli 2002:12). In opposition, Olsen (2003:88) has argued that all physical beings are –

> kindred, sharing substance ('flesh') and membership in a dwelt-in world. They are, of course, different, but this is a difference that should not be conceptualized according to the ruling ontological regime of dualities and negativities; it is a non-oppositional or relative difference facilitating collaboration, delegation and exchange.

The deconstruction of the subject-object opposition has thus led to recognition that objects and subjects are constituted *relationally* (see Miller 2005:38).

Thus, whilst Appadurai's stress on the "social life of things" (1986), and the National Museum of Scotland's claims to have "real things revealing real stories" appear to address the cultural bias towards humans, the "tyranny of the subject" (Miller 2005:29), they only do so at a superficial level which consolidates the "purification" process (Latour 1991). As Pinney (2005:259) puts it - "In Appadurai's case, endowing objects with quasi-human characteristics by conceding them a "life" and multiple careers ultimately reinscribes culture's potency through its ability to infinitely recode objects". He concludes that "Narratives of the social lives of things…" only serve to "reaffirm the agency of those humans they pass between." (ibid). Furthermore, "any discussion of materiality that starts and ends with the object is doomed to fail. In configuring materiality as objectness, it accidentally champions one half (objects) of a binary whose other half (subjects) it wishes to attack. Hence it intensifies the work of purification and does not advance the argument." (Pinney 2005:257). The ancient subject:object dualism (cf. Ingold 2010:2) thus remains despite 'materialists' innumerate assaults on the primacy of the 'subject' or 'person' in social life.

The premise that objects are constituted (and thereby personified) by stories, however, is inherent to the notion of the "social life of things". By claiming that real objects are able to tell their own stories, NMS's display policy not only asserts the fundamental distinction between 'objects' and 'subjects', but it also assumes that objects are purely constituted linguistically, by stories; that they can be read as some

form of symbolic code. Whilst narrative is certainly an important component in the social constitution of 'objects', as discussed in Chapter I, it is certainly not the only aspect. 'Objects' are socially constituted out of 'things', material stuff, which ultimately exceeds the unstable confines of 'objecthood'. The concern with making meaning through material qualities, therefore, only serves to reify the distinction between stuff and ideas that has been under so much criticism - a tricky state of affairs for the ethnographer, who seeks to analyse both at the same time! In order to analyse these notions of materiality, agency and relationality in relation to children's engagement with material culture, I employ ethnographic data from my fieldwork at the National Museum of Scotland to test its claims of having "real things revealing stories".

When objects are *prevented* from telling their own stories at the Museum

During my fieldwork at the National Museum of Scotland, I was able to observe that in the day-to-day gallery activities of the Education Department, the potential for socially constituted museum objects to "tell stories" about their own social histories, was obscured and diverted to serve the purposes, practices and convenience of staff and teachers in three different ways. Firstly, objects were sometimes prevented from speaking through their incorporation into the representations of the Museum's exhibition cases, thereby submitting to a grand narrative, which extended beyond the capacity of an individual object to tell. Secondly, they were often constrained by the structures of the education programmes themselves and thirdly, they were restricted by the actions of workshop facilitators. Using examples from my ethnography, I will now illustrate and discuss each of the three identified "preventatives" in turn.

Firstly, museum objects were sometimes prevented from telling their own stories through the very presentation style adopted by the National Museum of Scotland in its display cases. In the *Early People* gallery, for example, I observed children spending more time playing around with the interactive screen set in front of the

Hilton of Cadboll Stone[53] than looking at the Stone which the interactive exhibit was merely supposed to be interpreting for them [Figure 6]. This approach to display thus did not appear to prioritise public engagement with the object itself. In the same gallery, some of the children I was working with really enjoyed discovering how to put together a jigsaw depicting another carved Pictish stone, but failed to notice that the jigsaw was in fact a copy of the real object on display right beside them [See also Figure 4]. When I pointed this out, they completely lost interest in their completed puzzle and were rather more consumed with discovering the size and weight of the *"real thing"* (Fieldnotes, 06/10/10). In this case, the puzzle did not appear to have been instrumental in encouraging interest in the stone. Along with other similar encounters, this incident suggests that, far from facilitating active engagement between visitors and its collections, the National Museum of Scotland's approach to displaying its exhibits (particularly its use of detatched, interactive 'Discovery Zones'), often serves to obscure this potential engagement. This issue was also highlighted by a member of the Education Department when discussing the integration of the 'Discovery Zones' amongst the exhibits on the gallery floors. It was acknowledged that there had been complaints about the impropriety of including interactive displays directly beside 'holy' or 'spiritual' Pictish stone carvings in the *Early People* gallery. There had also been suggestions that these installations were causing visitors to confuse the boundaries between which objects they were allowed to touch and which ones they weren't (personal communication, 23/02/10).

It was also suggested by a member of the Museum's gallery staff, that the stories the objects on display were allowed to "tell" have also been restricted by the standardisation of the amount of words curators could use for each interpretation panel (a stipulation made by the project's designers). This argument returns us to my discussion of exhibition policy at NMS. Contrary to the National Museum of Scotland's claims of being object-centred, it appeared that some of the guiding principles regarding the ways in which its exhibits were presented were based upon

[53] Described on the NMS website as featuring "some of the most elaborate and intricately decorated examples" of Pictish symbols and unique to Scotland (www.nms.ac.uk, accessed 07/12/11), an image of the Hilton of Cadbol stone is frequently used in marketing literature to represent the National Museum of Scotland's archaeological collections.

design aesthetics. Of course, there is an emphasis on the communication potential of the simple object without recourse to reconstructive illustrations or diagrams, but indubitably this approach often made the objects on display revert to being things (without particular narrative or social meaning), and thus becoming, ultimately, more obscure and less accessible to visitors.

The National Museum of Scotland's recent involvement in the UK's *26 Treasures* campaign, can be understood as a recognition of the fact that *"standard museum-speak so often fails to connect the reader with the object in an imaginative or emotional way"* (Jamie Jauncey, Board member of the Edinburgh International Book Festival and *26 Treasures*). On its website, NMS makes the statement:

> Museums are about objects, each carrying a multitude of meanings. Often, we are only able to share one account, one view, one story, while others remain hidden, unexplored, untold. For this project, 26 writers have explored the stories of 26 objects and retold them from new perspectives… We have selected 26 objects from our Scotland galleries, which together trace Scotland's history from its ancient geological roots to its technological future. Some are iconic, others less well-known, but all have a story to tell.[54]

There was, however, a marked physical absence of the 26 objects integral to the project on the main stage at its launch event. They all remained safely within their glass cases, scattered amongst the Museum's galleries. Although visitors were given a brochure guiding them to where they could find each one on display, this absence was suggestive of the Museum's continued concern with narrative over the material substance of their exhibits (often due to the impracticality of the latter concern). The restricted sensual interaction with museum objects through the panes of glass, exemplified by this particular event, also prompts reference to Feldman (2006:251), who has suggested that an emphasis on visuality in museum collections and display practice continues to simply reflect the relationship between the objects in a museum and a museum's "visual logic", thereby impacting the relational engagement of museum visitors.

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[54] NMS website, available at: www.nms.ac.uk, accessed 07/12/11.

This tendency could also be observed within the context of schools workshops at the Museum. These were principally delivered by various reenactment, or drama specialists, who were employed by the Museum on a freelance basis. A typical programme would focus on an historical topic directly related to the Scottish schools' curriculum, such as the Romans, the Vikings, Robert the Bruce and the Battle of Bannockburn, or the Jacobites. The workshop would run for anywhere between forty minutes and an hour. Most class teachers had also booked an hour or a half-hour 'slot' with an Object Handling Box, if it were available (this being only possible for Egyptian, Roman, Viking and Victorian topics), perhaps also taking a tour of the relevant galleries and having lunch before leaving the Museum. The following descriptions are extracts from my ethnographic observations of three popular schools' workshops delivered by freelance specialists at the National Museum of Scotland; *Romans and Gladiators*, *Viking Training School* and *Bruce and Bannockburn*. All three of these workshops took place on the steps adjoining the lower basement *Early People* gallery to the upper basement *Beginnings* gallery.

I was able to observe several school groups participate in the *Romans and Gladiators* workshop. These classes were directed to sit down on the steps for the duration of the programme and I opted to sit with them, thus distinguishing myself from the other adults (teachers and parent helpers), who sat on the chairs provided at the top of the steps, behind the class. The children often became quite restless with excitement and anticipation, but the facilitator held their attention throughout the workshop due to his fun and easy-going delivery style. The programme was very interactive, giving most of the children in each class the opportunity to participate by dressing up and playing the role of a character in the facilitator's narrative, whether it be a Roman soldier, a slave owner, an emperor or a gladiator. Pictures, drama, language, costume and replica armour were employed to engage the children in learning Latin terminology for Roman weapons; what it was like to be a Roman soldier compared with the life of a gladiator; Roman army training and manoeuvres. The facilitator also took care to dispel popular myths about the gladiatorial arena. At the end of each workshop, everyone was encouraged to take a turn at lifting a replica of each of the three main pieces of Roman armour/weaponry (the shield, the sword

and the javelin/spear), and to consider which one was the heaviest. It was really interesting to see the power of conformity and peer group pressure taking place amongst the school groups within this museum context, as children who had initially claimed that the shield was the heaviest, changed their minds according to the views of more dominant children (who guessed that it was the sword), even though the shield was the correct answer (Fieldnotes, 01/03/10). This focus on the *weight* of materials being handled (the weapons were largely constituted of wood, leather and steel) echoes Ingold's (2007:1) concern with the material properties of 'objects' - "To describe these properties means telling their stories". The opportunity to have "real objects telling their own stories" in this manner, however, was missed in this workshop, as the facilitator did not communicate the substances from which the weapons had been made, nor how this process had taken place.

The second workshop, *Viking Training School*, was run by two freelance actors. Again, this programme was highly interactive, the facilitators leading from the front and eliciting participation from the children in the form of hands-up style questions and answers. The children were engaged in a number of activities ranging from dressing up in Viking helmets[55], taking on Viking warrior names, learning Viking words, playing a version of hangman with Viking runes, and helping write a gory Viking Saga. The teachers and I were included in the workshop by being given names and helmets just like the children. There was usually a lot of joking and repartee between the facilitators and the group, and every class seemed to really enjoy the workshop experience. Each participant was awarded a certificate bearing their 'warrior name' upon completion of the training school. Unlike *Romans and Gladiators*, however, object handling did not feature in any shape or form during these sessions and neither did the workshop facilitators make any connections between the content of the programme and the Museum's own Viking collections on display in the *Early People* gallery.

[55] It was pointed out by the facilitators that their plastic Viking helmets inaccurately represented real Viking helmets by having stereotypical horns on them. The children readily agreed, as the Vikings' horned-helmet myth had generally already been dispelled for them in the school classroom.

My final illustrative example is the *Bruce and Bannockburn* workshop offered by the same freelance facilitator who delivered the *Romans and Gladiators* programme. In common with the other two workshops, its content revolved around the facilitator's narrative of historical events, with the school children participating by dressing up and playing the various roles of the key characters involved, which made the storytelling fun and entertaining. The workshop told the story of the Battle of Bannockburn, explaining medieval battle tactics and the highly stratified nature of medieval society in the process. The facilitator's *piece de resistance* came at the end of the workshop, when he proceeded to show the children the different kinds of weaponry that would have been used in medieval warfare. He kept all his life-like replicas on a table behind him, covered mysteriously by a long green cloth. He then proceeded to reveal each weapon in turn, telling the children how it was used and emphasising where vestiges of medieval practice and terminology are still employed in the military today. The sessions concluded with the children forming an orderly queue in order to see what it felt like to hold some of the weapons, such as the war hammer and the claymore sword. The children later described this part of the workshop to me as particularly exciting, and it was also not unknown for some of the teachers and parent helpers to join the 'object handling' queue!

Through close participant observation of several of these workshops, it quickly became apparent that there existed some discrepancy between educational practice and the professed intentions of the National Museum of Scotland. The general lack of reference to relevant display cases, or indeed use of handling objects from the Museum's stores, appeared to be somewhat incompatible with the Museum service's overarching aim of having "real things revealing stories" through object-centred education. As one member of the Education Department, Shirley, put it; *"When I started here… I had to hold back the temptation to change everything in our learning programmes so that they focused more on the Museum's collections; but I changed my mind because of all the positive feedback received about our interpretative workshops and the fact that the teachers generally make use of the museum galleries and the objects on display there irrespective of whether they are included in the programmes or not"* (12/04/10). Interestingly though, whilst gallery trails and

resources for both Viking and Roman themes are made available to teachers (downloaded from the NMS website), most of the school groups I observed did not make use of them. This was something which Shirley, who had worked closely with teachers towards developing these trail packs, also commented on; *"The result was a resource based entirely on what these teachers wanted, but in my opinion, the resource isn't really used enough"* (12/04/10).

In interviews with the programmes' freelance facilitators and Museum staff from the Education Department, I was told that whilst the department provided a list of curricular subjects that needed to be covered by the workshops, the style of delivery and much of the content was left up to the facilitators and the Museum did not appear to exercise much control over the products. This approach was reinforced by evaluation work conducted by the Education Department administrators during informal post-visit phone-calls with class teachers; *"the teachers and the children love the dramatic live interpretation stuff, even though it does not necessarily tick many learning outcome boxes"* (Rebecca, 23/02/10). The importance of keeping the programmes fun and entertaining was stressed; *"Learning outcomes are not necessarily as important as giving kids a fun and exciting experience outside of the school environment"* (ibid). Those delivering the workshops also highlighted the need for flexibility and being able to adapt the material, based on their experience of what works and what doesn't. Thus, it seems that for the Museum's educational provision on key archaeological and historical subjects, objects are *prevented* from guiding both the content of school workshops and children's overall experience of the Museum, primarily by design.

Workshop design appeared to follow an entirely narrative-based format, which has recently been challenged and adapted in conjunction with the development of a new programme of schools workshops associated with the Royal Museum Project and the implementation of the Scottish Education Board's new Curriculum for Excellence; *"All our programmes are specifically geared towards the school curriculum. At the moment at the National Museum of Scotland, we're simply perpetuating what we already have, before new developments are introduced with RMP"* (Rebecca,

23/02/10). In contrast to my observations at the National Museum of Scotland, in an interview with Elise, a member of staff who was deeply involved in these Royal Museum Project developments, I was told that the new schools provision aimed to *"provide something for all; with a specific focus on the new galleries and object handling. The whole programme is skills-based"* (personal communication, 08/03/10) and when I asked what had prompted this significant change in direction, she admitted; *"Curriculum for Excellence is certainly the main driving influence, where the focus for the new museum's provision will be active and experiential learning"*. It is important to note, however, that this new direction in the Museum's educational provision did not necessarily mean a greater focus on the objects themselves; *"Our emphasis will be on teaching children skills, rather than simply focusing on the "intangible wonder" that is potentially inspired by museum objects"* (Rebecca, 23/02/10). These comments reflect the observations of Bradburne (2000:390), who has argued that "the museum's assets must be seen to include not only its collections, but also its role as a privileged site for learning, and must therefore stress the acquisition of new skills, not just information"[56].

The fact that the workshops described above do not feature any "real" museum objects is also partly due to the fact that there appears to be a lack of dialogue between Museum staff (particularly those in different departments) and those delivering the programmes which might actually make use of the Museum's collections in this way. In an interview with Rebecca, I was told that future plans to employ an in-house team of people to deliver education workshops *"might transform the ways in which the department is able to use objects, by inspiring greater trust from museum curators, who will then donate objects of greater value to be used in learning programmes, secure in the knowledge that trained personnel will be ensuring that the object is returned unscathed"* (personal communication, 23/02/10).

During my research, however, the National Museum of Scotland did already provide a very popular resource in the form of a number of Object Handling Boxes, which

[56] I will return to Chapter I's discussion of the broader significance of the recent turn in current educational discourse towards skills and experience over the formal acquirement of knowledge in Chapter V.

were made freely available for school groups to use independently of the delivered programmes. This kind of hands-on activity using the collections is widespread throughout the museum sector (Jackson & Rees Leahy 2005:305). I would observe, however, that although these activities took place within the National Museum of Scotland's galleries themselves, they were restricted to a specific space where the surrounding exhibits did not necessarily relate to the historical topic being studied and so they did not make much use of the objects on display all around them. Specific information relating to the particular date or provenance of such handling objects also rarely featured, in favour of a more generalized emphasis on their 'representation' of a particular historical period or learning outcome (such as the daily life of Roman soldiers in Scotland). Additionally, time restrictions made a narrative rather than object-focused approach more practically feasible[57] - once objects were allowed to become the focus of a workshop for children, control over the content, messages and subsequent behaviour of those participating becomes much more difficult to maintain[58].

Finally, museum objects appear to have been prevented from "speaking" through the actions of the adults leading the workshops, whether they were freelance facilitators or school teachers leading their own handling sessions using the Museum's Object Handling Boxes. During my research at the Museum, the freelance specialists who delivered the majority of the programmes offered to school groups, were granted a substantial degree of autonomy regarding both the structure and the content of these workshops. In an interview with Greg and Catriona, some of the actors who regularly deliver the *Viking Training School* workshop, for example, I was told that dressing up was one of the most popular activities amongst the children; *"they don't have any inhibitions before about Primary 7… keeping the children involved helps the programme to be fun, entertaining and interesting"* (11/03/10). It was interesting to observe, however, that the opinions of Education staff held considerable influence

[57] The use of Object Handling Boxes by school groups is discussed in the Section below, concerning *when objects are unable to tell their own stories.*

[58] See Chapters V, VI and VII for further discussion of the issue of control over the constitution of objects and knowledge within the museum space.

whenever they did choose to intervene, as they could dictate whether or not the Museum organisation would continue to outsource this work to the individuals concerned. For example, Shirley's suggestion to make the *Romans and Gladiators* workshop *"more Scottish"* (personal communication, 12/04/10), for example, seemed to have been directly implemented by the workshop's facilitator, as I later witnessed him place his Roman battle scenario in *Caledonia* (Latin reference for Scotland) and make frequent references to the impact of the Romans in Scotland (Fieldnotes, 16/11/10).

The workshop facilitators generally assumed the role of experts, imparting knowledge about the particular topic to a class of children, who played the role of a student audience, irrespective of how many interactive elements were involved. In one of the few formal workshops which did focus on the collections on display in the Museum galleries, *Mary Queen of Scots*, the facilitator, Marjorie, played the role of both Queen Mary herself, and a tour guide, leading the school groups around the *Kingdom of the Scots* gallery and pointing out objects of particular interest and relevance. The children dutifully followed this more traditional teaching approach, filling out the worksheets they had been given as they went along. Speaking with Marjorie after one such workshop, she emphasised the importance of *"getting kids to really look at the objects in the cases, which can make fairly mundane or boring objects, like the Beaton panels, for example, something which they can get very interested and animated about"* (personal communication, 21/11/10). Nevertheless, the 'voice' telling the stories of the objects was undoubtedly hers. The interpretation of the exhibits was also entirely didactic, with children seeking to provide the "correct" answer to Marjorie's questions, neither were the objects engaged with in an interrogative way, which might have inspired ideas beyond the Museum's controlled narratives.

The interactive, teacher-led Object Handling Boxes (which emphasised the attainment of investigatory skills as opposed to subject-specific knowledge), on the other hand, appeared to hold much more potential with regards to providing sufficient space for "real objects telling their own stories". They certainly seemed to

enable children to engage with the Museum's collections according to their own frames of reference, outwith the grand narratives exemplified by other forms of education workshop. This has also been observed in other work on children's education provision in museums. In their study of the use of theatre in education programmes at the Imperial War Museum (London) and the People's Museum (Manchester), for example, Jackson and Rees Leahy (2005:314) have commented that children attending workshops involving object handling, which did not feature an over-arching performed narrative in the form of a theatrical component providing "coherence and personal meaning to the variety of stimuli that they encountered, faced the bigger challenge of having to piece together the disparate elements of their visit". The lack of grand narrative in activities such as object handling, however, seemed to force children to "construct their own narratives from the collections, resulting in a much wider variety of responses than was the case with the theatre groups" (ibid). Through the findings of their comparative research, Jackson and Rees Leahy (2005:317-318) speculate whether there was "perhaps an implicit trade-off here between the lack of personal engagement with a figure from the past and a greater alertness to the larger picture: a greater opportunity to conceptualise from the particular" through activities such as object handling in the museum. During my participation in such workshops, however, it was difficult to discern children's engagement with handling objects through narrative at all.

At the National Museum of Scotland, a large number of the objects in the handling boxes were in fact replica and not "real" (a decision made upon the grounds of the value of the objects and the practicalities of running an essentially unsupervised facility). This was particularly true of the Viking Handling Box, which did not contain a single item from the Museum's collections. It also became clear that the extent to which the stories the objects could tell were actively sought out, was largely dependent on the approach and preparation undertaken by the teacher and the parent helpers leading the session. Teachers frequently adapted the resources and the information conveying the Museum's narrative to suit their own practical needs. In observing a group using the Romans Handling Box, for example, I noted that the teachers' notes provided by the Museum placed an emphasis on the presence of

Roman soldiers in Scotland (their material remains; what their lives were like etc.) and their interaction with 'native' people groups. This particular angle was, however, usually entirely missed by the teachers leading these sessions (Fieldnotes, 17/11/10).

Often, largely due to a lack of specific information provided in the Museum's teachers' resource pack, the identity and functionality of the objects were completely misrepresented. During another Roman object handling session, for example, a teacher mistook the glass oil jar for a lamp, ad-libbing in a manner which ran completely against the claims of the Museum that any replicas in the boxes were as accurate as could be achieved, by stating that *"the lamp wouldn't have been made of glass originally, but rather such lamps were made of clay and would have been hung up on the wall, like the lamps we've just been making at school"* (Fieldnotes, 16/11/10). The same teacher, when asked by one of his 8-year-old pupils if the coins in the Roman handling box were real, answered with an unhesitating "yes", when in fact, they were replicas. The boy appeared to be not entirely convinced with this answer, making the further query – *"So the Romans would have had them?"* (Fieldnotes, 16/11/10). This concern for the authenticity of the objects encountered within the Museum became a recurrent theme during the course of my fieldwork, impacting the behaviour of children as they engaged with the material culture[59].

In another Viking object handling session, I also made the following observations: The parent helper began the session by deliberately trying to lead the children into giving the 'correct' answer (from what she could glean from the teachers' resource pack), although often telling them 'facts' based upon her own assumptions. She was also keen to encourage the children to all write down the same answers. Both the leadership of the parent helper and the teacher were not helped by the fact that the contents of the drawers varied slightly from what was listed in the teachers' notes (provided by the Museum) and the objects were also not numbered. They thus

[59] See Chapter VI for an extended discussion of the importance of encountering "real objects" for children in the Museum.

became a bit muddled up, serving to create even greater confusion (Fieldnotes, 02/12/11).

Through observing these encounters, I was thus struck by the fact that the Object Handling Boxes at the National Museum of Scotland did not, in fact, allow objects to speak for themselves; rather the teachers or facilitators chose and controlled the messages the objects were able to communicate. In the example of the Roman lamp, the real purpose of the object was misrepresented and the children did not know any better. One might say that this doesn't really matter, only that it demonstrates the lack of 'agency' of both the children and the objects in this social interaction. The acquisition of knowledge, much like the exhibitions and education classes produced by the early modernist museums, seems to remain a one-way street, with the communication of meaning flowing from the expert "knower" to the student recipient.

In summary, it can be concluded that the approach adopted by the National Museum of Scotland in both its learning provision and exhibition style largely undermined its claim to have "real things revealing stories". It appears that the waters, in this context, were somewhat muddied by the actions and attitudes of the Education Department, freelance workshop facilitators, school teachers and the Museum display cases themselves, hinting at the impracticality of implementing a policy that requires objects to speak for themselves in everyday reality. Having established this struggle, however, it is now necessary to turn to a discussion over whether the objects employed in the National Museum of Scotland's learning provision and exhibition galleries were, in essence, actually capable of telling stories to the children who were engaging with them in the first place.

When objects are unable to tell their own stories

Children, the target audience of the Education Department's learning strategies, constitute a category of museum visitor which is perceived to be both unpredictable

and unstable. As such, children are subject to particular narratives[60] by which the National Museum of Scotland communicates ideas concerning 'heritage' and the cultural worth of its collections. Within the framework of these educational practices, objects' inability to "tell their own stories" was identified in two key contexts. The first of these was observed during the various Object Handling sessions undertaken by school groups and the second was in the context of the Museum's display cases.

The Object Handling Boxes have been produced by the Education Department as a practical application of the premise that, subject to children's physical and intellectual interrogation, replica objects and/or objects from the Museum's own collections are capable of "speaking for themselves". Mirroring NMS' display policy, these objects appear to have been viewed by museum professionals as having "social lives" (Appadurai 1986); personal histories culminating in their selection for display in the National Museum of Scotland. Despite the critique of this approach on both practical and theoretical grounds, at least in principle, these objects were considered to be in possession of some form of 'agency', able to impart to their beholder some kind of understanding about their original usage and the culture within which they were produced. These underlying theoretical assumptions explain why, although teachers' guidance notes containing fairly brief information about each object in the Handling Box were provided for the resource-users, those adults leading these sessions were directed to encourage the children to examine the objects first, seeing what questions the artefacts were able to answer themselves, before turning to this supplementary source of information. My observations of school groups using the Object Handling Boxes led me to conclude, however, that not only did teachers often prevent this desired form of interaction from occurring, but also the non-directive nature of the resource meant that the child participants often quickly lost interest in the objects, which, in isolation, were unable to impart any knowledge of particular interest to them.

[60] See Chapter II for further discussion of the national narratives communicated by the National Museum of Scotland.

My first encounter with a school group using the Museum's object handling resources involved a Primary 4 class (children between 8 and 9 years old) from a private school[61], which had reserved an hour-long session with the Roman Handling Box. The teacher organised the session by dividing her class into different groups and giving each of these groups a tray of objects from the box. Each tray would then rotate around the groups so that everyone had the opportunity to see each object. This activity, however, seemed to be fairly disorganised in contrast to the class' earlier tour of the *Early People* galleries (using the National Museum of Scotland's Roman trail resource). Having joined a group which was being supervised by a parent helper, I quickly realised that there was a lack of direction over to how the groups were supposed to use their trays of objects (the parent helper had only been given a copy of the Museum's teachers' notes about the objects). The concept of being able to learn from the objects themselves also appeared to have been lost on the children, as they sought answers from the parent-helper, the teachers' notes and me, in preference to a close examination of the objects. As a result, I observed that a couple of boys in the group became very distracted from the start of the activity, and only the first tray of objects was able to hold the attention of the whole group at one time (Fieldnotes, 01/03/10).

The objects' inability to engage the children and reveal any "stories" about their "lives" was also consistently observed when other school groups used the Roman and Viking Handling Boxes. During these other sessions, I also observed considerable confusion over identifying the function of some of the objects, for example - there was a lot of mystery surrounding the iron "buckle" found in the Viking Handling Box. A lot of the children tried placing it on the bridge of their noses, like a pair of spectacles, as they passed it around the circle. The teacher's resource was unclear as to what it was, leading the teacher to suggest that it was some form of fastener or buckle. There was also some ambiguity about the piece of antler, which the teacher described as a bone (Fieldnotes, 07/10/10). I was later to discover from an experienced member of the Museum's gallery staff, William, that the mystery iron object was, in fact, a strike-a-light [Figure 7] – used to created

[61] An independent, fees paying school from the outskirts of Edinburgh.

sparks from the pieces of flint also found in the Handling Box. He showed me how this and a number of the other objects in the Viking box could be related to artefacts found in a real Viking grave [Figure 22] on display in an adjacent section of the *Early People* gallery[62]. This incident lends further credence to the notion that, contrary to the Museum's claims, even with the help of information notes, the objects in the handling collections were often unable to communicate information to the non-expert interrogator. Even, for example, an artefact's basic function or what it contributed to our understanding of the past, very often remained obscure.

After observing numerous different school groups, I concluded in my fieldnotes (05/11/10) that the aims of the Viking Handling Box activity, which had been emphasised by staff to be largely skills-based, did not appear to be being achieved - how do children learn investigative skills if they have to be prompted to answer the most relevant questions about the objects by facilitators? I also observed that the children appeared to have a greater interest in the facts on the information sheets, and in using the objects or having temporal ownership over them than in the investigation process itself.

Although the objects appeared unable to communicate stories to their child-beholders in the ways anticipated by the Museum, however, this did not necessarily mean that the children did not engage at all. Instead, they were often seen to interact with the material substance of the Museum's carefully constituted artefacts in different and unexpected ways. In one particular ethnographic encounter with a nursery group (3-4 year-old children), for example, I made the following observations: The first object selected by the storyteller was the African gourd. He asked the children what they thought it might be made of and used for. The first child he handed it to, Ysolda, immediately held the gourd close to her nose and gave it a proper smell. She then turned the object in her hands and suggested that it might have been a "shaker". Following her example, the children passed the object around having each given it a sniff. Whilst some children appeared to be really excited at the thought of having a

[62] This grave proved to be really popular amongst visiting school groups as it had been re-assembled by Museum staff to reflect the form in which it had originally been discovered.

turn at handling the object, others were quick to pass it on, almost throwing it into the hands of their neighbour, as if it were dynamite (Fieldnotes, 9/11/10).

It seemed that in order for children to engage with the objects in the Handling Boxes in the ways desired by the Museum's Education Department, on the other hand, they needed direction in *how* to approach the 'object'; what questions could be asked and what kinds of answers the objects themselves were able to provide. This direction became most effective if it was provided in the form of a person who possessed both enthusiasm and some degree of expertise in the subject area. This, unfortunately, was often unavailable for school groups using the Museum's free, 'self'/teacher-led resources. During one session with a school group working with the 'Egypt on the Move' handling objects, for example, an adult helper (a grandmother of one of the children) who had been allocated one of the groups turned to me for help in a panic, explaining that she had been *"completely thrown in the deep end"*, having *"no idea about their Egyptian project"* (Fieldnotes, 13/03/10). She said that this *"wasn't fair on the children"*. In another Viking handling session, the class teacher gave me the following feedback; *"Whilst the Viking Training School*[63] *was fun and engaging for the kids, we could have done with more information sheets on the objects* [there were only two sets of the teachers' notes available with the Handling Box] *and neither me nor my class helpers had been prepared for leading the activity… I think the object handling would also benefit from the presence of an expert"* (Fieldnotes, 11/03/10). During another Egyptian workshop at the Museum, I fell into conversation with a parent helper who talked about the experience of some friends of hers who had also used the Viking Handling Box; *"They hadn't had a very good experience with this, because they had not been prepared, knew nothing about Vikings and yet were expected to teach a group about them, with nothing being provided by the Museum in terms of support! The kids just ended up running a bit wild!"* She concluded; *"if you're going to bring a class to the museum to try and inspire them about a topic such as the Vikings, if this experience ends up being rubbish, you would be better not to have bothered coming at all!"* (Fieldnotes, 18/03/10).

[63] *Viking Training School* was a workshop delivered by freelance facilitators, described earlier in this Chapter.



Figure 7: Replica iron ‘strike-a-light’ and flint from the Viking Handling Box at the National Museum of Scotland (September 2013).



Figure 8: Celtic carnyx on display in the *Early People* gallery at the National Museum of Scotland (September 2013).

In contrast, when an "expert" was able to present the objects to the school groups, narrating some of the stories behind them, the children's disengagement with the activity changed remarkably and they began to treat the objects with care and respect (Fieldnotes, 18/11/10). This modification in their behaviour can be understood as marking a significant moment when, for the children, the 'thing' became a constituted 'object' - they began to view its value through the controlled perspective of the Museum, which inscribed meaning above and beyond the material properties that enabled it to be employed as some*thing* else. Nevertheless, it could still be observed that the children had varying responses to the Museum's social constitution of things as objects. This can be illustrated by the following example, observed during a school group's encounter with artefacts from the Viking Handling Box: As the children passed around the drinking horn, it became clear that whilst many of the children treated it with great care and delicacy, one of the class 'rebels', Marco (aged 7), almost dropped it as he lazily held on to it by its tip as he passed it to his neighbour. Some of the other children threw the coil of sewing thread and some of the other 'less valuable' objects to each other and were promptly told off by the teacher (Fieldnotes, 7/10/10).

As part of the new learning provision developed in association with the Royal Museum Project, I was also able to observe pilots of a new workshop which was based around the concept that objects can be used as evidence for finding out about what life was like in the past. Although these workshops also involved Museum handling resources, they were led by a freelance facilitator rather than class teachers. During these sessions (which employed objects from the collections based around the themes of either rocks and fossils or Scottish emigration), the children were split into groups, each of which were given a large sheet of paper, subdivided into four different columns entitled 'I see', 'I feel', 'I think' and 'I wonder'. Each group was then given an object to examine and the facilitator instructed the children to fill out each of the columns with the information they were able to glean from examining the object. The children participating in this particular workshop were in early Primary School (around 6 years old) and appeared to find the task very challenging, particularly as it demanded a great deal of focus and the ability to write descriptively

(which also required a good vocabulary). Despite their general lack of engagement with the museums' interrogative questions, however, I observed that they appeared to enjoy handling the objects themselves; touching, feeling, dropping, scraping along the banisters, fighting over possession (Fieldnotes, 27/09/10)[64]. They found it difficult to think in abstract terms, however, and to isolate the different senses. The concept behind the 'I wonder' column (where they were encouraged to think of questions they would like to ask about the object) was thus often received with bafflement and incomprehension (Fieldnotes, 27/09/10). This particular column had been conceived as a way by which the children could be creative by testing broader hypotheses and considering what they would like to know about the object, but couldn't really find out without expert knowledge. The abstract nature of this task, however, appeared to be beyond the grasp of the majority of my child informants, particularly the younger ones. This was evidenced by the questions they eventually produced, for example *"I wonder why…it's bumpy?"*. This particular response, representative of a range of *'I wonder*' questions produced by the children again, however, echoes Ingold's (2007:14) concerns with bodily perception and relational agency:

> the properties of materials, regarded as constituents of an environment, cannot be identified as fixed, essential attributes of things, but are rather processual and relational. They are neither objectively determined nor subjectively imagined but practically experienced. In that sense, every property is a condensed story. To describe the properties of materials is to tell the stories of what happens to them as they flow, mix and mutate.

Therefore, whilst the objects did not appear to be able to impart the stories of their associated social/natural history to the children, the children's focus on their perceptions of the physical attributes of the 'thing' before them, according to Ingold, enabled them to escape the confines of the Museum's controlled social constitution of meaning and, instead, engage with their 'thingness' (Brown 2001) - the potential of the material properties of a thing to be comprehended in countless other ways. "Could not such engagement – working practically *with* materials", Ingold (2007:3)

[64] See Chapters IV, V and VI for more detailed discussions of children's engagement with museum objects, featuring their own descriptions and understandings of their experiences within the museum space.

asks, "offer a more powerful procedure of discovery than an approach bent on the abstract analysis of things already made?"

In response to the same 'I wonder…?' question posed during my Lewis Chessmen schools workshops at the Shetland Museum and Museum nan Eilean, participants were able to come up with a few more developed suggestions relating to the narrative components of the museum objects, such as *"I wonder who lost them?"* and *"I wonder how they got to Lewis?"*. Some children, however, still restricted their wonderings to the information which had already been presented during their tour of the exhibition, e.g. *"I wonder how old they are?"* or *"I wonder how many there are?"*. I would thus argue that in these latter situations, the objects were perceived by the children as things, which, in themselves, were unable to impart any form of new knowledge directly to their beholders; this role was reserved for the 'expert storytellers' (museum facilitators and class teachers).

Secondly, I would argue from my observations at the National Museum of Scotland that objects were unable to tell their own stories within the context of display cases in the Museum's galleries. This was particularly the case when the children found it difficult to relate them to their own personal experience. Although the children appeared to be naturally drawn to some exhibits more than others and enjoyed commenting on the more familiar displays of weaponry and gold and silver "treasure", other more unusual objects necessitated an "interpreter" in the form of a teacher or workshop facilitator, in order for them to be able to impart any form of meaning to their child audience. Whilst spending time with a group of 7-year-old children in the *Early People* gallery, for example, we came across a display case featuring a Celtic carnyx [Figure 8]. Visiting the Museum in order to learn more about the Romans, their class project, some of the children already appeared to know a little about the carnyx from earlier studies of the Celts. It was clear, however, that despite the object's impressive physical appearance, my companions would have passed swiftly by, had they not been told the story of how it worked – what it was used for in battle and how the tongue waggled to make a terrifying noise. This seemed to really capture their imaginations. When it was pointed out that the model

carnyx in the case (based upon the archaeological remains displayed by its side) would be able to work, Jill responded *"cool, I wish I could unlock the case and blow in the horn and see if the building would tremble!"* (Fieldnotes, 15/11/10). This example demonstrates how the lack of context in the form of drawings or illustrations within the National Museum of Scotland's exhibition design, did not enable children to relate very well, either physically or imaginatively, to the objects on display. The deliberate physical distancing of the relationship between people and objects within the context of the Museum display case appears to have restricted their 'relational agency' (as described by Gell 1998; Bennett 2004; Olsen 2003). Objects can only be constituted as such through the social interaction that exists between people, things and stories, in particular places at particular times. It thus could be argued that, in the museum display case, the artefacts had been left powerless and impotent; they had become things that were unable to communicate meaning to their audiences in any real or engaging way, because in order to be understood as 'objects', they require relational co-constitution.

In summary, it is clear that, contrary to the National Museum of Scotland's claims, 'objects' were often unable to "reveal stories", both within the contexts of schools' object handling sessions and gallery display cases. On the other hand, it is also clear that whilst unable to impart this form of narrative, during the object handling sessions in particular, the material properties of the museum artefacts enabled children to engage with them as 'things' (which have many potential meanings and functions), as opposed to rigidly defined 'objects'. By engaging with ongoing theoretical discussions about objects, agency and the power of 'things', the following section will situate my ethnography, illustrating how narrative-centred assumptions may not be the most helpful theoretical basis from which to account for the role of objects within the National Museum of Scotland.

On the Agency of Objects

So far in this discussion, it has been established that NMS' policy to have "real things revealing stories" can be subjected to two levels of critique, both of which

feed into each other. First of all, there are the practical issues presented by the idea that objects can directly impart to children some kind of understanding of their social lives. The somewhat obscure and abstract demands of this notion appear to be unattainable through museum practice. Secondly, there are the theoretical problems inherent to the concept of the "social lives of things", which not only reinforce an artificial subject:object dichotomy, but also rely upon the constitution of 'things' into 'objects' by stories. Objects can't tell their own stories because the very premise of 'objecthood' is false – objects are constituted relationally and so when removed from this relationship, they don't exist; they are merely 'things'! The museum's concept of objects as stable and clearly defined, "congealed" into their "final form" (Ingold 2002:16) also becomes problematic in the face of Ingold's notion of the world as being in a state of "perpetual flux" (ibid)[65].

It is important to acknowledge the considerable impact "ordinary objects" have in "ordering people" (Miller 1994:404), the very act of objectification potentially creating personhood. Edwards et al (2006:12-13) state that "objects function as social agents in a double dynamic that *both* extends human action *and* mediates its meanings", whilst Pinney (2005:256) has declared - "Clearly things make people, and people who are made by those things go on to make other things". Hodder (2011:154) has also recently written about the "entanglement" between humans and things, claiming that whilst "humans depend on things", "all things depend on other things", meaning that things also depend on humans in a self-perpetuating relationship of mutual interdependence. Having direct implications for the role of objects within NMS' education policy and its Object Handling resources, human actions can therefore be understood as being shaped by things in two ways:

> first, by the direct impact of objects on our perceptions channelled via the bodily sensations of sight, touch, smell, taste and sound; the second, the meanings and significance of these bodily sensations are shaped through the embodied processes of mind and memory by our cultural experience. (Dant 2005:x)

Over the past twenty years, it has thus been argued within various branches of social science, that 'agency', the ability to act in and on the world, is not restricted to

[65] See also Hodges (2008) on the fluctuating nature of time.

people, but is also shared by objects and animals (e.g. Olsen 2003:87). To this end, Olsen, amongst others, has called for a refocusing of our attention "to the other half of this story: how objects construct the subject. This story is not narrated in the labile languages, but comes to us as silent, tangible, visible and brute material remains" (ibid:100). Knappet and Malafouris (2008:xiii) qualify this "move towards a more active view of material culture", however, as being "more a case of acknowledging the active rather than passive use of material culture by humans, rather than ascribing much dynamism to the artefacts themselves".

In *Materiality*, Miller (2005) made a bid to turn the social analysis of stuff into this new direction; away from the associations of the "linguistic turn" which inspired social anthropologists and archaeologists to interpret material culture purely as a symbolic text, imbued by its human creators with cultural meaning. In the same volume, Pinney (2005:268) makes the following case:

> To address materiality…is to confront a tradition of subordinating objects and images to culture *and* history. The intransigence of the object has been submerged in the analytic surety of the power of humankind – that is, those who make culture and history, or those other frames within which we chose to dissolve the problem of the object and annual its enfleshed alterity.

In recent years, several different approaches to materiality have been advocated which have been collectively described as a "return to things" (see Domanska 2006b) because they share "the desire to overcome conventional distinctions between passive, inanimate objects and active subjects, in order to develop a more nuanced understanding of the relational process of becoming within which both "objects" and "subjects" are necessarily implicated and emergent" (Filippucci et al 2012:207). Domanska (2006a:337) has described this "renewed interest in things" as signalling "a rejection of constructivism and textualism and the longing for what is "real", where "regaining" the object is conceived as a means for re-establishing contact with reality". Thus –

> "new material studies" points to the agency of things, accentuating the fact that things not only exist but also act and have performative potential. Thus, in the "return to things", it is not the topic that is new, but the approaches to things and the forms of studying them. (ibid:338)

In order for objects to be able to "tell their own stories" at the National Museum of Scotland, the concept of agency is conceived as relational and context-specific rather than classificatory (Gell, 1998:22). Following the groundbreaking work of Mauss in *The Gift* (1990 [1954])[66], Gell (1998:16) has argued that agency can be attributed to "those persons (and things…) who/which are seen as initiating… events caused by acts of mind or will or intention rather than the mere concatenation of physical events". He makes a distinction between 'primary' (intentional beings) and 'secondary' agents, arguing for a concept of 'distributed personhood', whereby personhood is extended beyond the "confines of biological life" (1998:223) to include objects which contribute towards the identity of a person (e.g. a person and a gun combined constitute a soldier - 1998:21). Gell's theory of the agency of objects thus uses people's intentionality as its main reference point, concentrating on objects in order to reveal the human agency with which they are embedded (Miller 2005:13). This understanding of the role of objects in social life has been criticized for its human bias; "Designed to be secondary, they have to be secondary, forming the backdrop to our lives, of which we are of course the stars, the decision-makers, the agents" (Knappet & Malafouris 2008:ix). Pinney (2005:257) has argued that Gell's emphasis on "the personlike power of objects" only serves to intensify the work of "purification" (Latour 1991) – "that is, the impossible separation of subjects and objects, humans and nonhumans" (Pinney 2005:257). Brown (2001:7) also states that both the practical and theoretical implications of Gell's standpoint produce questions which ask "about the material effects of ideas and ideology" as opposed to the "ideological and ideational effects of the material world and the transformations of it". Instead, Brown proposes that we should be asking questions "not about the things themselves but about the subject-object relation in particular temporal and spatial contexts" (ibid), i.e. the mutually constitutive relationship of subjects and objects within a network of things:

> As they circulate through our lives, we look *through* objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture – above all, what they disclose about *us*), but we only catch a glimpse of things. We look through objects because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful, because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts… We

[66] An exploration of the interaction of people and objects through the total social system of exchange.

> begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks…when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation. (Brown 2001:4)

It is here that we may find Latour's (2005) conceptualisation of networks of social relations between human and non-human agents useful. In contrast to Gell (1998), he calls for an object-centred approach, whereby focus is placed upon the non-humans "below the level of human agency" (2005:13). Latour supports the view that material forms have 'agency' when they are *participants* in an action, despite not possessing any intentionality (Latour 2005:71). In order to apply this perspective to social analysis, he employs the term *actants* (referring to the underlying function of an action as opposed to its specific content; "*any thing* that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor – or, if it has no configuration yet, an actant" – ibid), within a systemic approach entitled *Actor Network Theory* (ANT). 'Agency' in this sense, can thus be understood as an effect of the outworking of networks constituted by humans and nonhumans, as opposed to an intentional action on the world.

Ingold (2010:3) has argued against the impact of ANT on social analysis, claiming that "the more that theorists have to say about agency, the less they seem to have to say about life":

> I suggest that the problem of agency is born of the attempt to re-animate a world of things already deadened or rendered inert by arresting the flows of substance that give them life….The idea that objects have agency is at best a figure of speech, forced on us (Anglophones at least) by the structure of a language that requires every verb of action to have a nominal subject. At worst it has led great minds to make fools of themselves in a way that we would be ill-advised to emulate. In effect, to render the life of things as the agency of objects is to effect a double reduction, of things to objects and of life to agency. (ibid:7)

Whilst this and other components of the approach have been convincingly critiqued for their lack of emphasis on the role of "bodily perception and movement in the

creation of the network, or the different qualities of the entities that are implicated in this process" (Knappet & Malafouris 2008:xvi on Ingold 2008:209-215), the theory provides useful food for thought in the context of museum representation, because –

> Instead of reducing the world to the regime of two opposing ontological realms, culture-nature, this approach claims that nearly everything that happens between two extremes, happens by way of mediation and translation, by heterogeneous networks linking all kinds of materials and entities. (Olsen 2003:98)

A further attempt to move away from dualistic distinctions between objects and subjects has been exemplified by the recent development of "thing theory" (Brown 2001) and "thing-power materialism" (Bennett 2004). Both of these approaches maintain emphasis upon a "*less specifically human* kind of materiality" (Bennett 2004:348), whilst seeking to promote "greater recognition of the agential powers of natural and artefactual things, greater awareness of the dense web of their connections with each other and with human bodies" (Bennett 2004:349).

In introducing this chapter, I adopted Brown's (2001:5) definition of 'things' as being both matter from which objects are materialised by perceiving subjects and that which is excessive or beyond mere objects, constituting their force as a "sensuous metaphysical presence". This conceptualisation of the properties of the physical matter of this world affirms Latour's (2005) definition of agency as ultimately independent of human intentionality; "A thing has power by virtue of its operating *in conjunction* with other things" (Bennett 2004:354). Ingold (2010:7) elaborates upon this continuous intermingling of things within the meshwork of social life, claiming that things are alive "because they *leak*".

Whilst 'things' still struggle to escape from the textualism of social theory discourse – "Living people speak in the name of things, which means that the discourse of things is always incorporated into our discourse" (Domanska 2006a:346), I maintain 'thing-power' as a useful way to think about the relationality of humans, nonhumans and other nonhumans, by focusing on their closeness, intimacy (Bennett 2004:365) and mutual dependence in everyday social interaction.

Conclusion

> Modern society…is averse to…chaos. Yet, however much it has tried, through feats of engineering, to construct a material world that matches its expectations – that is, a world of discrete, well-ordered objects – its aspirations are thwarted by life's refusal to be contained. We might think that objects have outer surfaces, but wherever there are surfaces life depends on the continual exchange of materials across them. (Ingold 2010:9)

Museums are all about "stuff". They house objects which are socially constituted to represent both the 'cultural' and 'natural' aspects of this world and, therefore, become central to any educational effort involving a shift in focus from the written word to learners' active participation through interaction with objects (Hein 1998:6). At the National Museum of Scotland, we have observed the importance placed upon the notion of "real things ['objects'] revealing stories" and the ways in which NMS' policy has been implemented both within children's education programmes and the exhibition style employed within the National Museum of Scotland's display cases. Leinhart and Crowley (2001:2) have identified four characteristics that are unique to the process of learning from objects in museums; resolution and density of information, scale, authenticity, and value. An application of this list to the work of the Museum's Education Department would highlight the important role of real ("authentic") objects in its Object Handling Boxes and the observed impact this has had on children's conceptions of value and trust[67]. Leinhart and Crowley (2001:8) claim that objects used within museum education can thus serve as "bridges between abstractions" (ibid:8), providing a "confrontation with the world as it is given us in experience" (Ankersmit 2005:11). Ankersmit (ibid) describes the complexities of this experience as those which "language, the symbolic order, enables us to escape".

The National Museum of Scotland's attempts to escape the consequences of potentially conflict-ridden encounters with unstable things can be observed through the controlled social constitution of 'objects' using language and symbolism. Both the way in which the role of objects has been conceptualized and the strategies through which they have been employed in education and exhibition practice,

[67] See Chapters V and VI for further discussion of these issues.

however, exemplify a failure to either reveal "stories", or illicit children's more-than-fleeting engagement, precisely because the stuff they are dealing with are not merely 'objects', but 'things' which are both independent and in excess of narrative.

In relation to earlier discussion concerning the agency of things (human and nonhuman matter, objects and subjects), these findings make the following contributions. Firstly, it appears that the objects employed in education programmes can indeed be understood as 'agents' within the social encounter of a class trip to the Museum, although only in the sense that their agency is relational and context-specific, in the ways described by Gell (1998:2)[68]. A Viking fish hook, for example, may impact a child's behavioural response for a variety of reasons such as - a personal experience (e.g. fishing with their dad); their identification with the story told by the museum about the object (e.g. that Vikings fished for their own food); or their upbringing which has socialized them into placing value upon specific forms of material heritage. In each of these cases, contrary to the claims of NMS' policy, it is not the object's inherent ability to tell its own story that takes the lead on this relationship with the visitor, but rather its physical qualities - its materials (Ingold 2007) and thingness (Brown 2001), which impact the ways in which people can engage and identify with it. The resulting 'story' is the outcome of a transformation of this thing of untold potential into a socially constituted museum object – a creative fusion of the thing's physical qualities with the imagination and prior-knowledge of the beholder (Bennett 2004; Brown 2001). In this way, however, these museum objects fail to fulfill Gell's (1998:16) aforementioned stipulation that agents must be seen as initiating events "caused by acts of mind or will or intention rather than the mere concatenation of physical events". Rather, it is the museum workshop facilitators and class teachers who initiate the encounter between the school pupil and museum object. Importantly, the experiential outcome of this encounter, is largely dependent on the child, the physical nature of the thing (its " 'real' qualities that affect and shape both our perception of them and our cohabitation with them" - Olsen 2003:88), and the relationally constitutive qualities of the interaction itself.

[68] See also Miller 2005; Brown 2001; Latour 2005.

Thus, in this way, the 'things' presented by the Museum are able to escape the narrative-based confines of its display policy (cf. Ingold 2007:14).

'Things' are by their very nature unstable, having the potential for different meanings and uses. For example, a piece of Roman pot can be venerated as a fragment of Scottish history; examined for evidence about its creation and use over a thousand years ago; imagined or understood as a physical connection between people in the past and the present; or employed as a missile and thrown across the room by a bored school child. It is thus worth considering whether 'agency' is in fact a useful term at all, when considering the flows of relations, stories and materials involved in the social constitution, re-constitution and deconstruction of objects in the museum space (cf. Ingold 2007:1).

The National Museum of Scotland's display policy appears to treat its objects like texts; part of "a structured sign system" (Tilley 2002:23), "silent 'grammars' of artefact forms" which are able to communicate "meaning like a language" (ibid). Close observation of museum practice, however, has revealed that objects are both prevented from and unable to act in this way; "a design is not a word and a house is not a text: words and things, discourses and material practices are fundamentally different" (Tilley 2002:23). It simply does not work to suggest that just because objects are involved in human interactions throughout their lifetimes and are consequently described as having "social lives" themselves (Appadurai 1986), their affective power can only be understood in human terms, both as socialized and personified. Arguing against this pervasive approach, Pinney (2005:258-259) has made the following observations:

> the recent preoccupation with objects' and images' "social lives" might be seen as a version of what we might term Late Purification. Ostensibly concerned with objects and materiality (and indeed celebrated as being apparently concerned with this), it also entails the further colonization by the social and the subject. Tiring of the totality of the "social", objects are initially invoked as an oppositional domain but quickly succumb (for the reasons that Heidegger and Latour outline) to the hegemonic strategies that dominate social enquiry. Caught within the dichotomous world of purification, they can only ricochet between the essentialized

> autonomous object and dematerialized space of things whose only graspable qualities are their "biographies" and "social lives.

As demonstrated by educational practice at the National Museum of Scotland, this conceptualization of material culture requires that objects are constituted by the stories we know about them, interpretations often reached "by other means" (Pinney 2005:261). These interpretations take precedence over material engagement with the things (Brown 2001) themselves, that "figural excess" where "intensities are felt" (Pinney 2005:266), which remain partially outside of the realms of linguistic explanation.

Feldman (2006:255) has argued that museum objects should be treated as "contact points", whereby encounters such as those experienced by children during Object Handling sessions enable the senses to "become historical links between histories and representation, thereby opening onto unexpected discourses of domination, agency, and material value that might otherwise be silenced or excluded by critiques of museums as markets" (ibid). It is therefore through children's interaction with the handling resources that the National Museum of Scotland's carefully constituted objects (constituted through a combination of narrative, place and social, historical and political context) become things with the potential for multiple alternative meanings and stories, or nothing at all. Children's interaction with these things in the museum thus witnessed the things' life or existence through 'acts' of thinging (Ingold 2010:7).

Museum objects, when viewed as 'things' (Brown 2001; Bennett 2004), are therefore released to "do far more than just speak and express meanings" (Olsen 2003:90), within the carefully-set perimeters of museum discourse - "artefacts perform active metaphorical work in the world in a manner that words cannot. They have their own form of communicative agency" (Tilley 2002:25). Runia (2006) has described this agency as 'presence', whereby the stuff found in museums are not just metaphors (symbolic of something), but also metonyms (standing for something – part for whole – transposed from one context to another; matter out of place). Crucially, such metonyms serve as "fistulae or holes through which the past discharges into the

present" (Runia 2006:16). Pinney (2005:268) has argued that "recognition that the "complex identity" of the visual and material will always "exceed" the present", is "the precondition" for "escaping the tautology of making images pass "from hand to hand" ("by other means")" that was critiqued earlier in this chapter. And so, whilst Runia employs commemorative monuments as her illustrative example of a 'metonymical object', I would argue that museum objects can also be helpfully described thus; like monuments, they are matter *out of place* – they make past events present on the plane of the present:

> It is a process of becoming by which the traces of past lives are reconstituted and come to assert an ambivalent quality of felt presence, which has the capacity to unsettle the here and now, with an indeterminate alterity… (Filippucci et al 2012:201)

Museum objects can therefore be understood as being both metaphorical and metonymical – they *say* something about what they *stand* for (Runia 2006:17). Using the example of the piles of shoes exhibited in numerous Holocaust memorial museums, Feldman (2006:256) has described the "metonymic contact point" as a beginning with "a visual association that opens onto a more expansive discourse of embodiment". Domanska (2006a:337) thus claims that an emphasis on presence as opposed to representation does not need to replace the latter, but rather "reflects a need for concrete actions when merely intellectual considerations fail to effect changes in the world".

These insights provide an important window onto an understanding of the affective qualities of "real" museum objects in the context of their interaction with children at the National Museum of Scotland; "It seems that we have to recognize the presence of nonhuman actors – and that this would mean that they have presence (and not only that they are present) – in order to challenge our relationship with the past" (Domanska 2006a:348). This issue of the affective presence of 'real' museum objects will be further explored in Chapters IV and VI.

In conclusion, the NMS' policy to have "real things revealing stories" at the National Museum of Scotland can be understood as problematic on two key levels; firstly because this ideal cannot be reflected practically in the social relations of display and

educational practice and secondly, due to the fact that even on a theoretical level, 'objects' cannot "tell their own stories" simply because their 'objecthood' is relational and not a given. Almost by their very inability to "reveal stories" in the controlled manner the Museum desires, the things from which museum objects are constituted can be seen as obstacles to the grand narratives of museum representation[69] in subtle and yet very material ways. This is particularly revealed by ethnographic observations of children's treatment of the Museum's carefully-constructed objects as things which do not necessarily have stories[70]. Unconstituted things can effectively be made into anything which combines their material attributes with relevant social contexts and historical and political narratives. Museums, on the other hand, perhaps do not want their constituted 'objects' to be treated as 'things', precisely because by allowing this to happen, they relinquish control of the ways in which their artefacts can be related to, engaged and interacted with. As Ingold (2010:9) writes:

> As parts of the fabric of the EWO [Environment Without Objects], pots are no more stable than bodies, but are constituted and held in place within flows of materials. Left to themselves, however, materials can run amok. Pots are smashed; bodies disintegrate. It takes effort and vigilance to keep things intact, whether they be pots or people.

Keane (2005:182) has questioned how we can "both understand things and do full justice to their materiality?", claiming that the "effort seems still to be haunted and confounded by such ancient dichotomies as form and substance, essence and accident, matter and spirit". The following chapter employs the Lewis Chessmen as a lens through which to explore the ways in which museum objects are relationally co-constituted, considering Keane's call to "shake off" one of Saussure's (1959) enduring structuralist legacies towards "a better understanding of the historicity *inherent* to signs *in their very materiality*" (Keane 2005:183).

[69] See Chapter II for further discussion of the use of grand narratives at the National Museum of Scotland.

[70] Children's engagement with things in the museum will be explored further in Chapter V.

Chapter IV: The Case of the Lewis Chessmen

In 1931 under ground,
Something extraordinary was found,
On the Isle of Lewis buried in the sand,
A set of Chessmen to be named after the land.

The number discovered was eighty-two,
Kings, Queens, Bishops and Warders to name a few.
All are short and stumpy,
With facial expressions that look rather grumpy.

11 are kept in Edinburgh, the rest in the British Museum,
Right now they are on tour so everyone can see 'em.
In Scotland we think they should remain,
So all the chessmen can be together again.
Primary 6 class (10-11 year olds), Shetland, 21/02/11

The Lewis Chessmen have been described as being "probably the most well-known" (Caldwell et al 2009:155) and most significant archaeological 'objects' found in Scotland (NMS website[71]), although their origins are most likely located elsewhere. Renowned amongst museums and galleries worldwide, they have been placed within the British Museum's 'Top Ten British Treasures'[72]. In recent years, they have also come to be iconic of the NMS organisation itself (frequently featuring in marketing material and advertising campaigns) as well as Scottish national heritage in general. They appeared, for example, on advertising boards sponsored by the Royal Bank of Scotland at Edinburgh International Airport which declared Edinburgh to be a cultural treasure trove. They have also been at the centre of contemporary political debate – employed as a symbol by the Scottish National Party, whose political claims for their repatriation to Scotland are closely aligned with the party's campaign for Scottish independence. *"I find it utterly unacceptable that the Lewis Chessmen are*

[71]NMS' website. Available online at: http://www.nms.ac.uk/our_museums/national_museum/lewis_chessmen_unmasked.aspx, accessed 15/05/13.
[72]The British Museum's website. Available online at: http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/online_tours/britain/our_top_ten_british_treasures/the_lewis_chessmen.aspx, accessed 23/08/13.

scattered around Britain in a bizarre parody of the Barnett Formula" Alex Salmond, SNP Leader and Scotland's First Minister, was reported to tell a gathering of Gaelic campaigners in 2007; *"I will continue campaigning for a united set in an independent Scotland"* (Akbar, *The Independent*, 26th December 2007).

Taking place in the midst of this ongoing political debate, NMS' *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked* exhibition (May 2010 – September 2011) was small and simple, featuring eight well-lit display cases in a darkened room. Human-sized, stand-up photographic images of some of the Chessmen, combined with the large, spinning images projected onto the wall by an audio visual display, gave visitors an impression of the detail and craftsmanship exhibited by these rather diminutive objects. There was also an opportunity to play board games (chess, backgammon and the Viking game of hnefetafl) at one of three tables set to the side of the exhibition space. Initial visitors to the exhibition at the National Museum of Scotland[73], however, expressed to me their disappointment – it was too small; too dull; there was too little information; only one theory of the Chessmen's recovery was really presented; there were not enough large-scale representations of the Chessmen; there was not enough background/context on the game of chess itself; the film was a bit cheesy (Fieldnotes, 30/08/10).

Despite these first impressions, the touring exhibition received overwhelmingly positive visitor feedback (obtained by the evaluation run by NMS) at all four of the exhibition's host locations. In fact, during the course of my fieldwork, I became aware that my own personal experience of the exhibition radically altered between each of its different tour locations. The material substance of the artefacts, display cases and gallery spaces were entangled with changing social, political and historical contexts in a mutually constitutive process of becoming. The results of this process were that the exhibition's meaning and impact changed relationally, in tune with the physical and sociopolitical landscapes in which it had become temporarily

[73] The exhibition received in the region of 70,000 visitors at the National Museum of Scotland host site alone.

embedded. The tension arising through the interaction of these different components will emerge as the heart of this chapter's discussion.

The political significance of the collaboration between NMS and the British Museum to create *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked* touring exhibition cannot be overestimated. Funded by the Scottish Government, *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked* touring exhibition was designed by a team at the National Museum of Scotland. Its development took place concurrently with the Royal Museum refurbishment Project. The latter project can be interpreted as the National Museum of Scotland's reinvention of itself, indications of which could be seen in the Chessmen exhibition, which demonstrated changes in the organisation's approach towards exhibition and display. Engaging further with the *new museology*'s postmodernist critique, the exhibition's authors attempted to distance themselves from the traditional didactic flow of information from museum producer to its visitors/consumers, by openly identifying with concerns relating to the commonly-held perception of the museum as the ultimate authority on objects and "the stories they can tell". This approach was embodied by a display case towards the end of *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked* exhibition entitled 'Your Move'. Having presented some different hypotheses about the Chessmen, their origins, and how they came to be discovered on Lewis, in this display case, the exhibition encouraged its visitors to make up their own minds. The Museum was thus able to make explicit the key message that it doesn't have all the answers and that visitors' understandings might be equally valid to those of so-called 'experts'. This approach thereby opened up the exhibition space to allow public participation in the complex relational processes of constituting museum 'objects'.

Another motivation for the National Museum of Scotland's approach may have been the sensitive political nature of the exhibition's contents, which would be returning to Lewis as part of its tour of Scotland. In consideration of this important final phase of the tour, the ultimate form of the exhibition allowed for a small gallery space (as this was the only appropriate space available at the Museum nan Eilean in Stornoway), a bilingual audience (with the exhibition text and some of the film audio giving Gaelic

equal if not preferential treatment to English) and an audience who might have particular attachment to local oral traditions (conveyed by an attempt to set traditional accounts of the Chessmen's discovery alongside the apparent contradictions of recent curatorial research). The outcomes of the exhibition were highly varied and visitors, particularly children, were observed to react in ways which were both unexpected and possibly unintended by its designers.

In Chapter III, the National Museum of Scotland's policy to have "real things revealing stories" was critically discussed, revealing that it was problematic on two key levels. Firstly, the theoretical principle could not be practically reflected in the reality of museum display and educational practice and secondly, even in theory, 'objects' cannot "reveal stories" in isolation, because their very 'objecthood' is constructed relationally. Contrary to the claims made by NMS' policy, in neither the workshops and handling resources for school groups, nor the exhibition galleries themselves were museum objects able to communicate *their own* stories about Scottish heritage. Instead, as implied by Appadurai's (1986) "social life of things", they were employed as passive messengers of human agendas – a task in which they were often observed to fail. This is because museum objects are ultimately composed of 'stuff' - things which possess an inherently unstable material potential that both exceeds and restricts their relations with human subjects in a continuous process of emergence that exists outside of the linguistic confines of narrative.

The affective capacity of 'stuff' (see also Bennet 2004; Brown 2001) has been widely commented upon within material culture literature. Dant has argued that 'objects' "shape our lives and realise our intentions and goals" (Dant 2005:x), in so-doing, shaping and "guiding us in the ways of our society" (ibid). Thus, by extension, we can appreciate the mutually constituting interrelations between materials, stories and practices which result in the creative process of stabilizing 'objects'. The tensions arising from this understanding of the interactive transformations between 'things' and socially-constituted 'objects' within the museum can now be explored through an examination of the case of the Lewis Chessmen. In developing the discussion of the previous chapter, I use material from

fieldwork undertaken with *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked* exhibition to challenge the implicit assumption that objects are solely constituted by stories. As seen in this ethnographic account of the Lewis Chessmen's touring exhibition, what objects *do* is often through what the museum narrates, however, it is also *more* than what the museum narrates. Contrary to the notion that an object's social biography is determined by the changing social/historical/political context around them, perhaps we should view the complex interactions surrounding the exhibition of the Lewis Chessmen from the flip side by considering the question; what is the Chessmen's role in changing the social/historical/political contexts which surround them? As we will see, the Lewis Chessmen are relationally constituted not merely through stories and materiality, but *place* also plays a key role – it really matters *where* they are physically situated, as this impacts both their meanings and potency for museum visitors.

This chapter takes a closer look at children's (and adult visitors') engagement with material heritage in the museum through a specific exploration of the activities surrounding the Lewis Chessmen and their touring exhibition. In light of the findings of Chapter III, it will pose the questions – *what* kinds of stories can objects tell and *how* can they tell them? More importantly, how do these stories combine with the different historical contexts, social practices and the affective material forms of the Chessmen themselves [Figure 9], in ways that both stabilize and rupture their constitution? And how do people's experiences of these iconic objects partially depend on a culmination of these different aspects in particular places, at particular times? Finally, how does all this point to the constant becoming of things? Situating my ethnographic observations within a theoretical discussion of *presence* (Runia 2006) and affects, I suggest that the case of the Lewis Chessmen contributes towards our understanding of the "closeness, the intimacy, of humans and nonhumans" (Bennett 2004:365).

Introducing the Lewis Chessmen

The Chessmen were not devoid of political and cultural meaning prior to *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked* touring exhibition. Far from it - they have been the source of scholarly research and debate since the nineteenth century. On the other hand, they have not always been as important as they are at present, on not only Scottish, but UK and international stages.

The Lewis Chessmen are a group of human figures carved out of walrus ivory (morse) and whales teeth. There are 93 in total, representing, it has been estimated, pieces from four different chess sets. The Chessmen differ markedly in size, detail and craftsmanship – each one is unique. Contrary to the expectations of many museum visitors, they are small in stature, with the largest measuring about 10cm in height. The British Museum states that they are, however, still large in comparison to standard playing pieces - a board big enough to lay out all the pieces according to the rules of modern chess would measure 82cm in length. Such are their monetary and intellectual value that none other than museum curatorial and conservation staff are allowed to touch these artefacts (and even then, only wearing the mandatory museum professional's white gloves). Nevertheless, close observation through their glass display cases and experiences of handling plastic replicas (on sale in museum shops and employed within schools' workshops) suggest that the Chessmen have been beautifully made. Both the ergonomic and aesthetic considerations of a hand-held object are also likely to have been prioritised by their original craftsmen. Whilst experts have hypothesised that some of the Chessmen had originally been painted red, they now all share the natural pigmentation of the raw materials from which they have been made (ivory; creamy-beige and brown, with dark cracks or marks appearing on some of the pieces, associated with the quality of the walrus ivory material used). *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked* exhibition dedicated significant space to a discussion of how the pieces had been crafted using different sections of walrus tusk[74]. It also conveyed how the detail of the Chessmen's costumes

[74] See Caldwell et al (2009) for further discussion of how the walrus ivory *material* from which the Chessmen were carved has been used by archaeologists to construct their historiography – a narrative

(featuring the clothing, armour and weaponry associated with Medieval warfare, with some of their conical helmets evoking Norse cultural associations) and their facial expressions have been used in recent research conducted by NMS Scottish Archaeology curator, David Caldwell et al (2009) in order to differentiate the chess sets and distinguish the work of several different craftsmen. The visual appearance and the material qualities described above played a key role in interactions between the Chessmen and their audiences throughout the touring exhibition.

Another significant component of people's fascination with the Lewis Chessmen relates to the mystery and intrigue surrounding their "life story" (cf. Appadurai 1986). Newly published research into the hoard by David Caldwell and his team has provoked as many questions as it answers, thus contributing to the work of historical accounts in constituting the Lewis Chessmen as a 'mystery'. Discovered on Lewis over 180 years ago, archaeological experts maintain a strong scepticism that the finely carved walrus ivory pieces were manufactured on the island itself. Instead, various theories have suggested that they were crafted in Scandinavia, although the identification of a specific region has become an issue fraught with contention. In recent years, an Icelandic chess expert and former MP, Gudmundur Thorarinsson made the controversial claim that the world-famous chesspieces were, in fact, made in Iceland (Alleyne, *The Telegraph*, 10th September 2010). He employed evidence in the form of thirteenth and fourteenth century Icelandic manuscripts which refer to the early role of the Bishop in Icelandic chess, in order to support his argument. Other Icelanders have highlighted the Chessmen's resonance with Icelandic culture as exemplified by the 'Berserker' pieces portrayed chewing their shields [Figure 10]. There appears to be a more widely held belief amongst archaeologists, however, that the chess pieces were carved in Norway, where similar sculpting styles have been identified in material culture including ivory carving and architecture. Caldwell et al (2009) have claimed that Trondheim in Norway, with its trading connections with Greenland (a key source of walrus ivory in Medieval Europe) seems the most likely location for the craft workshop in which the Chessmen were made.

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account of their origins, provenance, craftsmanship and subsequent transportation along the trade routes of medieval Europe.



Figure 9: A selection of the Lewis Chessmen © National Museums Scotland.



Figure 10: The “missing” Berserker © National Museums Scotland.

So we can see how the constitution of these objects was dependent upon the relational culmination of particular material components (walrus ivory) and social conditions (international trade and the spread of Christianity across Europe) in particular places (Norway, boasting trading links with Greenland) at particular times (reflecting and incorporating local and international cultural trends relating to both stylised carving craftsmanship and the game of chess itself). The Chessmen's life story, their historical journey towards their present-day position as high-status museum objects, can also illustrate how their meanings have changed and are continuing to change over time; "new layers of meaning are superimposed over older ones, or rearticulated as the object is placed in a different context" (Lidchi 1997:167). Whilst it is important to acknowledge this temporal aspect to the Chessmen's social constitution as objects, it is also significant to note how the different ways of constituting the Chessmen and their importance have related to changing social and political contexts in Scotland and the UK.

After over 150 years on display in museum collections without receiving much political attention, the sudden focus of academic research and debate concerning the Chessmen can be aligned with their increased public profile. This, in turn, has been brought about by their adoption as a symbol in the campaign for Scottish independence by various politicians representing the Scottish National Party (SNP). The party's electoral popularity in Scotland has been on the rise over the past few decades. In 2005, Scotland's current First Minister, Alex Salmond, declared that his party would make the "repatriation" of the Lewis Chessmen "a key plank of its forthcoming election campaign" (Allardyce & Goodwin, *The Sunday Times*, 20th March 2005), whilst, more recently, MP for the Western Isles, Angus MacNeil (based in Stornoway since 2005), has accused the British Museum of ""airbrushing" history" when the museum's *A History of the World in 100 Objects* poster campaign failed to mention the Chessmen's connection to Scotland (Sweeney, *The Times Scotland*, 24th February 2010). He also expressed a continued desire to see the Chessmen 'repatriated' to Scotland. Academics and museum curators, such as David Caldwell, (Burnett, *The Foreign Report*, 2nd January 2013) have been called upon to express their opinion on the issue.

Professional opinions about the approximate age of the Chessmen largely agree that the style of their costumes and weaponry, along with other indicators, suggest that they are over 800 years old (made in the early-mid Medieval period, between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries AD). The exact location of the find site and the manner in which the discovery took place, however, also remains shrouded in mystery. According to Caldwell et al (2009:168), the first formal account of the find was produced in 1863 by Thomas, an historian, "by which time, local mythology already tied the hoard's discovery to a tale of evil doings in the 17th century". This account named Malcolm MacLeod, a resident near the professed discovery site at the sand dunes of Ardroil in Uig [Figure 11], Lewis, as the original finder:

> One day in 1831 Malcolm MacLeod of Penny Donald, known as Calum nan Sprot, was herding his cattle among the sand dunes when he saw one of the beasts rubbing itself against a sand-bank and acting in a queer manner, so he went along, and saw her pull out some whitish objects with her horn. He lifted some of them up and took them to be idols or graven images of some kind which he did not understand. A gentleman from Stornoway heard of their discovery and came over and dug out all the pieces, for Calum nan Sprot would meddle with them no more.
> (MacDonald 1967:122)

Here, it appears that the physical appearance of the Chessmen led them to be associated with 'evil' and the 'occult'.



Figure 11: Uig Sands - the find site of the Lewis Chessmen, according to oral tradition (May 2011).



Figure 12: The entrance to *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked* exhibition at Shetland Museum, Lerwick (February 2011).

Other accounts of the discovery, however, suggest that the Chessmen were instead "found within a stone chamber in the sand dune" (Lawson 2008:221). It appears that Thomas' second-hand source had been the manuscript of local storyteller, Donald Morrison:

> Donald Morrison's tale of the 'Uig Chessmen' is the earliest known of a story that explains how a herdsman came to bury the hoard. The main variant of it, said to have been current in a ceilidh house near Baile na Cille in the late 19th century, names the herdsmen as 'Gille Ruadh', or the red gillie. The story is set in the 17th century and its main essentials are that 'An Gille Ruadh', a servant of the MacKenzie tacksman of Baile na Cille, spotted a young sailor fleeing his ship with a treasure bundle. 'An Gille Ruadh' murdered the sailor for the sake of his treasure that he then buried. He was unable to return and collect it, but confessed to this crime some time afterwards when he was on the scaffold at Stornoway, convicted to death for other misdemeanours. (Caldwell et al 2009:172-3)

Caldwell et al's (2009:173) comments on the value of this oral history do much to illuminate the somewhat strained relationship between the professional opinions of "distant" academics and the passionate and personal beliefs of some of the local amateur historians I met in Lewis:

> …the root of the story is the discovery of the pieces themselves and the desire by the inhabitants of Uig to locate an outstanding find within the parameters of their own traditions and memories. This kept the story of the hoard in local ownership… The workings of the sea are a crucial aspect of Hebridean life and so it should come as no surprise that the sea is invoked to explain or underpin sudden happenings and chance discoveries. Such stories act as a social cement amidst their communities, helping to define and maintain their collective identity, and to give a sense of continuity and enshrined cultural value. The Lewis hoard folklore tells us little if anything about the 12th-13th-century chapter of the hoard's social life, but it is an important account of a communal response to the discovery of the hoard. (Caldwell et al 2009:173)

During my stay in the Western Isles, I met a local history enthusiast, who volunteered at 'Seallam!', the central heritage visitor and genealogical research centre in Harris. In the ensuing conversation about what I was doing on the islands, she related to me her experience of an encounter at a seminar which took place at the traditional find site in Uig (Lewis). There, new findings relating to an alternative provenance of the Lewis Chessmen were being disseminated. My female informant

described this experience as an affront – *"How could they completely disregard so many years of oral history?! It shows a lack of respect or value for oral history, clearly they don't know much about it!"* (Fieldnotes, 17/05/11). Although historical sources have suggested a general lack of consistency in oral accounts of the subject, these can perhaps be explained by the fact that there were large population clearances and migrations from the Uig area in Lewis at around the time of the discovery (c.1831). We should also consider the importance of historiography in influencing the approach of 'historical accounts' in comparison with oral histories. Perhaps academic historians' discomfort with the existence of multiple, often conflicting, versions of the discovery of the Lewis Chessmen says more about their understanding of the constitution of historical narrative and museum 'objects' than it does about the actual provenance of the Chessmen themselves?

After providing a new alternative account for the provenance of the Chessmen (namely that they were likely to have been made to order for a rich landlord on the island of Lewis, and that they had actually been found within the remains of a coastal settlement several miles to the south-west of Uig, at Mealasta), Caldwell et al (2009:168) proceed to highlight records of what became of the hoard from 11th April 1831. These records refer to its first public exhibition by the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in Edinburgh, by permission of Mr Roderick Ririe of Stornoway, who may well have dug out the chess pieces from the sand, as claimed by a late nineteenth century version of the tale of the Chessmen's discovery. In yet another account of the find, Lawson has stated that this merchant, Mr Ririe, received the sum of £30 for the sale (2008:221).

However they were discovered, newspaper reports from the time make it clear that 93 chessmen were transported by Mr Ririe from Lewis to Edinburgh, ten face-pieces of which were sold to the private collector, Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe, before the rest were purchased by Mr A. J. Forrest who sold 82 pieces in bulk to Mr Madden (a Keeper at the British Museum) under the false pretences that they represented the complete hoard. It appears that Sharpe later acquired a bishop chesspiece from a source in Lewis (probably the original Mr Ririe). Thus, the original hoard was split

up, with Sharpe's private collection falling into the hands of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland at auction in 1888, which subsequently donated the artefacts to the then Royal Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh. Today, when they are not part of a special exhibition, all 93 chesspieces are on permanent display; 82 at the British Museum and 11 at the National Museum of Scotland.

The romantic stories circulating about the discovery and subsequent division of the Lewis Chessmen hoard have captured the imagination of numerous writers and storytellers, especially children's authors, some of whom have contributed towards their social institution as 'people-objects' through their attempts to write their life story from the Chessmen's perspective. Some of these stories particularly dwell on the sadness the figures feel about being separated from each other, and their joy at reuniting in *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked* (despite the fact that this exhibition did not feature the complete hoard).

Personification and anthropomorphism - "attributing human characteristics to the nonhuman" (Guthrie 1993:62), have been a significant feature of the touring exhibition itself, with images of some of the Chessmen blown up to almost human size [Figure 12]. Visitors were also encouraged to look at the objects eye-to-eye. When conducting fieldwork at Shetland Museum and Museum nan Eilean, I observed that this was also an approach adopted by museum staff when delivering schools' workshops. Both museums employed freelance storytellers who crafted their own versions of the story of the Lewis Chessmen, as if from the Chessmen's point of view. The children were asked to pick their favourite chesspiece from the exhibition to draw, and to include a written explanation of why they liked it. They were also encouraged to imagine what it might be like to be a Chessman - kept hidden in a box beneath the sand for hundreds of years before being discovered, split up from their friends, and placed in a museum for all to see. Much of the museum education staff's efforts at encouraging children to engage with the exhibition involved their socially constituted personalisation - making the Chessmen into people. Thus, those working with *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked* touring

exhibition, at the very least, clearly believed that the Chessmen had stories to tell about their origins, provenance and social lives.

What kinds of stories can objects tell?

> Viewing objects as palimpsests of meaning allows one to incorporate a rich and complex history into the contemporary analysis of the object. (Lidchi 1997:167)

The "fixed, popular identity of the hoard is evident in the many replica sets widely available for purchase, the souvenir replicas of individual pieces and their inclusion in, and inspiration of, other forms of cultural endeavour, including films, TV and children's literature" (Caldwell et al 2009:164). The following pages will explore the Chessmen's relationship with place and local landscape on the Island of Lewis and how the different stories surrounding them, together with their material form and their participation within national socio-political contexts are implicated in a constant process of becoming. Contrary to Caldwell's suggestion that their popular identity is "fixed" (ibid), this exploration reveals that the constitution and re-constititution of these museum 'objects' is inherently unfixed and unstable, as it relies upon the continually changing relationship between 'things' and their meanings[75]. Far from being smooth and unproblematic, this relational process of becoming is often fractious, incomplete and unpleasant:

> If the understanding of images' "social life" stresses their malleability, their suppleness in the face of changing time and place, I would like to reintroduce the presence, "tension" (as a limit to tensility), or "torque" of the image and explore the ways in which its time is never necessarily that of the audience. (Pinney 2005:268)

It is here, at this nexus, where politics is made visible through material obstruction and defiance of the museum's histories and technologies of meaning.

[75] cf. Hodges (2008) on time as a continual state of flux and emergence.

Tales of place, identity and belonging

The Lewis Chessmen can be understood as communicating a story which is highly symbolic of place and local identity in the Island of Lewis. On first arriving in Stornoway, whether by plane or by ferry, the visitor is immediately confronted with the physical presence of the Chessmen - in the form of large, carved wooden sculptures located at the airport and the ferry terminal as well as being distributed throughout Stornoway and Uig - the traditional find site [Figure 13] and the location of the Uig Museum. The Chessmen thus serve as both a symbolic representation and a physical attribute of Lewis' unique heritage and identity, through sculpture, graffiti [Figure 14], company brand names, logos and advertising (e.g. the Hebridean Brewery's 'Berserker' pale ale). Both the historical and current socio-political context within Lewis has enabled the Lewis Chessmen to be constituted as a physical 'symbol' of the island and its collective heritage. In turn, the material discovery of these things and their social constitution as important museum objects have also enabled the construction of meaningful collective representations of identity and cultural belonging in Lewis. The two are thus mutually constitutive. Indicating the sometimes fractious and dynamic aspects of this process (cf. Pinney 2005), this relationship has changed over the past few decades alone, when the Chessmen began to be used as a marketing device to represent Lewis as a place of unique historical interest as well as a place of natural beauty. One of my informants (a local Gaelic-speaking primary school teacher), for example, told me that when he was little (around 25-30 years ago), although he had been aware of the existence of the Chessmen, they were not nearly as high profile as they are now; *"I reckon there's been an increase in the fuss made about the Chessmen because of the island's increased focus on tourism. Last time the Chessmen visited the islands was in 1995/6, which was the kick up the backside that we needed to make the most of our cultural heritage."* (06/05/11)



Figure 13: Wooden carving of a ‘King’ Lewis Chessman at Uig Sands, the traditional find site (May 2011).



Figure 14: Graffiti featuring a Lewis Chessman in Stornoway, Lewis (May 2011).

Nowadays, a visitor to Lewis was able to observe that in the Western Isles, you were never far away from a post office or a heritage centre! The abundance of the latter seemed to point towards the importance of heritage in Lewis islanders' conceptions of identity and belonging. Here, the past's role in constituting the present (and vice versa) was evident in my conversations with 'incomers' (residents, who had been born elsewhere), who often talked about the efforts they had made to learn the history of the island. The fact that people from across the world, whose ancestors came from Lewis, took great pains to return there and research their own personal connection with the island was also evidenced in comments made by tourists and locals alike. It was clear, however, that the Museum nan Eilean did not serve as the focus of this passionate relationship with local history.

Established in 1983 by Comhairle nan Eilean (the Western Isles Islands Council), the Museum nan Eilean ('Museum of the Western Isles') was given the remit of providing the *"first professional museum service for the Western Isles"* (CNE website[76]) from its home in the Town Hall in Stornoway. During this time, I was informed that the museum's core role was to support and resource the numerous historical and volunteer-run museums scattered around the rest of the Western Isles (Sheila, personal communication, 13/05/11). In 1995, however, the museum moved into the converted building of the former Secondary Department of the Nicholson Institute, establishing a permanent exhibition on the history and archaeology of the islands, whilst continuing to support the twenty-one historical societies and four accredited museums dispersed along the island chain.

With only two galleries, one of which accommodated an irregular programme of changing exhibitions (such as *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked*), the museum held a small collection of *"objects, photographs, prints and paintings and archives"* (CNE website[77]). These were used to *"tell the story of the everyday lives of the people of Lewis and Harris from the time of the earliest human settlement perhaps some 9000*

[76] The Western Isles Council website. Available online at: http://www.cne-siar.gov.uk/museum/stornoway, accessed 02/02/12.

[77] The Western Isles Council website. Available online at: http://www.cne-siar.gov.uk/museum/stornoway, accessed 02/02/12.

years ago, until recent times" (introduction board to the permanent exhibition gallery). The Museum nan Eilean thus adopted an approach which relied on the information and ideas accessed through objects, although these objects were used to fit into a broader narrative of local heritage. It was these narratives which were communicated to visiting school groups.

The museum, however, was represented by both the comments of inhabitants and visitor statistics as a place for *tourists* to go to find out about the Western Isles; not as a regular school trip destination or a place to be proud of for its representation of local identity. Nevertheless, a couple of previous installations, which resonated with local interests (such as an exhibition on St Kilda), had enjoyed a popular reception from the local community. In addition to its lack of a regularly changing programme of exhibitions, a possible reason for the Museum nan Eilean's deficiency in local popularity (one which appeared in particular contrast to my experience of the centrality of the Shetland Museum within the socio-cultural lives of the Shetland island community), was the fact that it had to cover such a broad canvas. The museum was supposed to cater to the heritage needs of the whole of the Western Isles, a geographical concept which is fairly artificial in itself, particularly since the construction of 'the Western Isles' (known as the Gaelic *Comhairle nan Eilean Siar*) as a political entity occurred as recently as 1973, when Lewis, Harris and their southern neighbours became grouped together under one Council, thus severing previous political connections with the mainland[78]. Duncan, a member of the museum's staff explained to me that there was a sense of communal identity and ownership for the historical societies and museums in regions of Lewis such as Uig and Lochs, or indeed in the island of Harris, but not for Museum nan Eilean in Stornoway. These other smaller areas have their own more clearly defined historically-grounded local identities, whereas there appeared to be no such thing as a 'Western Isles' identity – *"You're either from Lewis or you're from Harris"* (or one of the other islands); *"People from other parts of the Western Isles, such as Harris or Barra wouldn't make the journey up to Stornoway to see the Lewis Chessmen at*

[78]Comhairle nan Eilean Siar website. Available online at: www.cne-siar.gov.uk, accessed 12/04/2013.

Museum nan Eilean; they have no local attachment to the Chessmen – they've got their own stuff!" (Duncan, 14/05/11).

Indeed, a lot of the local visitors to the exhibition claimed that this was the first time they had visited the Museum nan Eilean and that the last time they had been inside the building was when it was still their high school – the Nicolson Institute. Thus, prior to *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked*, the Museum nan Eilean appeared to have been considered simply irrelevant to the everyday lives of the local population, with the vast majority of its visitors (both previous to and during the exhibition) consisting of tourists who had either just arrived in Lewis or were waiting for their ferry back to the mainland. These observations lend weight to one of my key arguments in this chapter - namely that whilst museums try to direct the process of becoming that occurs through interactions between the mutually-constitutive past and present, the world just *is*; everything is just happening, all of the time (cf. Ingold 2002). As Ingold (2002:10) states - "life… does not emanate from a world that already exists, populated by objects-as-such, but is rather immanent in the very process of that world's continual generation or coming-into-being". The people of Lewis were thus free to produce their own response to the material form of the Chessmen - to the appearance or disappearance of stuff and substances "from the past".

The impact of *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked* touring exhibition can be considered even more significant in the context of the museum's lack of local popularity, as one member of staff commented - *"When we first opened the doors, it was mainly local people coming in"* (Sheila, 13/05/11). Another told me that there had been a big boom of press coverage when the exhibition first opened and that visitor numbers had significantly increased ever since; *"When I'm talking to people on the street, they often ask me how the exhibition is going and, if they haven't already been to see it, ask how long it's in Stornoway for, with an expressed interest in visiting the Chessmen before they leave again – the Lewis Chessmen exhibition is definitely special"* (Susan, 05/05/11). In conversation with visitors to the Museum nan Eilean, I was led to believe that visiting the Chessmen whilst the exhibition was in Lewis was viewed as an imperative for locals and tourists alike. On the part of the tourists,

this was described as being because the Chessmen represented a famous archaeological discovery and it was a privilege to see them in the place where they were found. To those living permanently on the island, on the other hand, they were perceived as being "our Chessmen" - the Chessmen's local significance was given precedence over their international reputation.

Thus, in Lewis, there was certainly a feeling of community ownership of the Lewis Chessmen. This sense of the value of the Chessmen was made particularly clear to me during the visit of the Uig Croilegan (nursery) group to the Museum nan Eilean. Encouraged by their English play leader, the children (aged between three and four) informed me that they were special visitors to the exhibition because they were from Uig and the Chessmen were from Uig. Another play leader also commented to me that her daughter had married a man from Uig and that they had adorned the top of their wedding cake with replicas of the King and Queen of the Lewis Chessmen – a significant expression of local ownership and identification with these objects.

Despite its notable impact on visitor figures at the Museum nan Eilean, however, the exhibition's presence did not appear to exceed local expectations, which were often based on their previous experience of the Chessmen's return to the island. I noticed that the small community museum in Uig still had posters relating to the last time this had occurred in the year 2000, when six pieces from the hoard not only returned to Museum nan Eilean in Stornoway, but also to Uig, for one day only. Some of the local visitors I spoke with stated that the current exhibition was far superior to this previous project, due to the number of pieces displayed and the fact that *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked* also included objects which contextualised the hoard. Others, however, referred nostalgically to the 1995 exhibition, which was the first and only time the complete collection had returned to Lewis (coinciding with the establishment of the Museum nan Eilean in its current form within the building of the old Nicholson Institute).

Some of the new ideas presented by the touring exhibition also provoked a surprising response amongst many local residents. This was primarily a rejection of the claim,

based upon recent academic research, that Lewis was not a backwater in the early medieval period, but rather a home to people of significant wealth and social rank – people who might have actually commissioned the manufacture of the Lewis Chessmen; owning and using these exquisite examples of medieval art (Caldwell et al 2009). The response of a lady from Uig; *"But how could they have been rich enough to have owned the Lewis Chessmen when they lived in blackhouses?!?"* (Fieldnotes, 10/05/11), highlights a popular view of local history as being wholly situated in the period both directly preceding and during the Highland Clearances of the 1800s (a significant time of disruption and change on the Island – cf. Lawson 2008; Buchanan 1998). It also suggests that the local population preferred to maintain the stories passed down through oral tradition than adopt new ideas which potentially undermined them. The accuracy of the oral tradition that the Chessmen were hidden by a merchant or stolen by a young sailor, from a ship that had foundered on its way from Scandinavia to Ireland, was maintained in opposition to new theories formed by 'expert' outsiders, even if the latter were attempting to set the record straight regarding the political significance of Lewis in the island's favour! This suggests that, like the controlled role of national rhetoric in constituting 'objects' and 'children' explored at the National Museum of Scotland[79], on the remote islands of the Outer Hebrides, the issue of who constitutes "stuff" and its importance is also situated historically, culturally and politically.

Broader political agendas are thus able to be constituted because of history, because of narratives, and because of materials being moved to a particular place at a particular time. The relational processes of 'becoming' which happen through 'things' and 'ideas' are thus not only unstable, but occur in directions which are both 'backwards' and 'forwards'. Both the past and the future (as indicated by the development of a Lewis community identity and the adoption of more strategic approaches towards the promotion of the island's heritage as a means of future income generation) are constituted in the present.

[79] See Chapters II, III and V.

In summary, although the notion of a unified perception of identity in the Western Isles is both problematic and contested, the Lewis Chessmen can be understood as providing important insight into the Lewis community's (Uig in particular) conceptions of local heritage and cultural belonging. Heritage was an immensely important aspect of place and identity on the island, demonstrated by the commitment of a significant proportion of the population to the voluntary running of historical societies and heritage centres, and the deep knowledge of local history revealed by my informants. The community's use of the Lewis Chessmen in advertising and other representations of the island not only indicated a desire to affiliate themselves with the positive public image of these archaeological treasures, but also an active identification with the unique and iconic personalities of the Chessmen. The local public's response to *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked* exhibition can thus be understood as an expression of collective ownership, whilst the Chessmen themselves play an important role in actually constituting what belonging to this community is and means. Crucially, although stories of local identity and belonging form an important component of the Lewis Chessmen, as things, they are not restricted to these narratives - rather they are constituted both through them and beyond them, through their material potential for new roles, uses and meanings. The Lewis Chessmen are thus also implicated in stories constituting Scottish national identification.

Tales of national identification

Highlighted as an important symbol of Scottish history and key to tourism development (and subsequent income generation) at both local and national levels, the Chessmen have been employed by community groups, politicians and museums alike to promote a unique cultural identity. In this way, the social uses of the Chessmen have remained substantially unchanged since their manufacture in the late twelfth/early thirteenth century; "Valuable objects are always markers of high status, but [these] objects show more than just wealth or power. The people who owned them were also showing off knowledge, taste and intellect" (MacGregor, Radio 4,

28/06/10[80]).

In contrast to the political rhetoric promoted by the SNP, it appeared that local politics on the island of Lewis did not set as much store on the 'national' importance of the repatriation of the Lewis Chessmen to Scotland (they would have preferred them to be returned to Lewis). One informant, Andrew, told me that *"islanders are different when it comes to politics; local people judge you really on what you are as an individual – if you help people out or if you're only in it for yourself. Up until recently, no-one has really bothered about the Western Isles, which have been left on the fringes and so the island approach has had to be very pragmatic – supporting groups and bodies which will give them funding for things"* (personal communication, 12/05/11). During my stay in Lewis in May 2011, I was keen to observe local reactions to the announcement of the electoral results for the Scottish parliament. In the Western Isles, as with a majority of other regions in Scotland, the SNP had won a resounding victory. Amidst this political upheaval, however, the Lewis Chessmen exhibition did not appear to serve as the bearer of a nationalist political message in Lewis (despite the fact that the exhibition had been funded by an SNP-led Scottish Government).

At the other host sites of *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked* exhibition (Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Shetland), the Chessmen seemed to carry with them a sense of national importance and identification which reached beyond the locally defined boundaries of Lewis.

The public response to the exhibition was at its most low-key at the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh, although this might easily be explained simply by the fact that high-profile exhibitions are a common feature of cultural life in Scotland's capital city and that several of the Lewis Chessmen are on permanent display in the Museum's *Kingdom of the Scots* gallery. Nevertheless, the visitor evaluation (an exit interview-questionnaire) undertaken by NMS reported that not

[80] *A History of the World in 100 Objects – Status Symbols (1200 – 1400 AD) 1. The Lewis Chessmen*. Broadcast by Radio 4 on Monday 28th June 2010, 9.45am.

only were 38.5% of interviewees visiting the Museum specifically in order to see the Lewis Chessmen exhibition (providing some indication as to their importance in public consciousness), but the overall response to the exhibition was very positive. 73.5% of visitors described their experience as being 'very good' and 25.5% stated that it was 'good'. No negative responses to this question were recorded. It was noted, however, that 4.04% of visitors, whilst not marking their overall experience as 'poor' or 'very poor', only offered negative comments regarding the exhibition, e.g. *"the exhibition looks low budget and is not in an impressive space (bigger one needed). There was no information on the political situation surrounding the Chessmen, and I would have liked more in depth information"*[81]. The reference made here to the political climate surrounding the Chessmen is reflective of numerous other visitors' comments in response to the exhibition in Edinburgh, as well as at the other host sites.

At Aberdeen Art Gallery, the exhibition was heralded by a high profile press-launch and eye-catching road signs, whilst numerous visitors made comments about how significant it was that such an important group of objects were on display outside Edinburgh or London.

The Aberdeen Art Gallery (and Museums service) originated in 1873, when John Forbes White and several other local art collectors held an exhibition to display their collections to the general public. The Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museums service continues to provide a service today, specializing in local history and archaeology. In an interview with an education officer at the Art Gallery, I was told that the museum service normally offers schools and families a regular in-house programme of activities and workshops, which can involve anything from drama and storytelling, to object handling, creative writing, craft and gallery tours (Andrea, personal communication, 26/10/10). Due to external political pressure, however, they had developed a particularly special project in response to the touring Lewis Chessmen exhibition, which involved working in partnership with a local school and a freelance

[81] This comment was made by a "repeat visitor from elsewhere in the UK", according to NMS' *Evaluation Summative Report* (2010:13).

artist in order to produce a "radio programme" featuring the children's imaginative stories about the Chessmen.

The physical exhibition space at the Aberdeen Art Gallery site, however, was darker and less well-suited to the exhibition, in comparison with the other host museums – something which was negatively commented upon by visitors. The exhibition's environment, in combination with the socio-political context of Aberdeen's relations with Edinburgh and the institutional relationship between the two museum organisations combined to make *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked* exhibition appear more critically received than at other tour locations in Lewis and Shetland. The fact that different combinations of place, time and socio-political context radically altered visitors' experiences of the Lewis Chessmen lends weight to my argument that museum objects are not merely constituted through narrative, but through the engagement of things within a temporal meshwork (Ingold 2002); a culmination of social and material factors occurring in a particular place at a particular time. Thus, the bright and spacious environment of *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked* exhibition gallery at the Shetland Museum, combined with the museum's positive relationship with its local community (inspired by a sense of collective ownership developed through substantial social and cultural investment), again, reformed the Lewis Chessmen as objects in new and distinctive ways.

Even more so than at Aberdeen Art Gallery, there was a distinctly local focus to the ethos of the Shetland Museum. This was communicated through the museum's educational provision (e.g. through the emphasis on local 'Viking' finds during tours of the Lewis Chessmen exhibition gallery). *"Shetland's story starts here…"* is the tagline employed by the Shetland Museum and Archives. The museum institution began its life as the Shetland County Museum (established in 1966), which shared a purpose-built building with the library in the centre of Lerwick. According to the current curator, Shetlanders had been clamouring for a new museum from as early as the late 1970s, but it wasn't until the local authority transferred the service to a quasi-autonomous trust (the Shetland Amenity Trust), that it qualified for the Heritage Lottery Funding that would enable the development of its exciting and dynamic

present-day form (personal communication, 22/05/13). The Shetland Museum is now sited within the waterside walls of an award-winning architectural project, commissioned in 1999. At the time of my research, it displayed collections relating to all aspects of the islands' history, and this subject area alone. Even special visiting exhibitions had been linked directly with Shetland's local heritage, such as St Ninian's Isle Treasure (2008), Gunnister Man (2009) and more recently, a modern sculptural art exhibition featuring artists from Shetland and Scandinavia (2010).

The Shetland Museum's approach to display was distinctly narrative-based; using objects to tell Shetland's story. In harmony with staff at the National Museum of Scotland and Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museums, its education department referred to the requirements of *A Curriculum for Excellence*, in relation to the development of new workshops. Its educational provision included the regular programming of tours, learning programmes and practical workshops for schools and family groups. The Shetland Museum described itself, and seemed to be perceived by islanders, as a "heritage hub" for Shetland; giving visitors an overview of Shetland's natural history, archaeology and social history and directing them towards the other local heritage centres scattered around the Shetland Isles. It also provided resources and support for these local institutions and communities.

The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked touring exhibition was described as *"the most high status exhibition we have ever had"* by the Shetland Museum's curator (personal communication, 17/02/11). The impressive amount of coverage the exhibition received in local media meant that even if everyone hadn't been to see it, the vast majority of Shetlanders were aware of the Chessmen's presence on the island. Conversations with museum staff, visitors and other Shetlanders in combination with regular tribute paid by both the local radio station and the weekly Shetland Times, all consistently represented the visiting exhibition as being a very significant event for the island. Many islanders expressed their great pride in being able to host such a nationally and internationally reknowned collection. In this context, the Chessmen appeared to be conceived more as evidence of growing national consciousness of the political and cultural significance of Shetland (a place worthy of high profile

exhibitions) as opposed to and distinct from particular local belonging and identity in Shetland; "*These Chessmen are a national treasure and the pieces are actually here! They were found in Lewis"* (Fieldnotes, 21/02/11). This visitor's comment highlights the fact that national rhetoric has constituted these 'objects' as a national treasure. In turn, their very presence constituted a real, material concept of Scottish nationhood and heritage.

Shetland has its own archaeological heritage to contribute towards the constitution of more localised conceptions of belonging and identity, and during my time on the island, I was consistently struck by the depth of knowledge concerning local history expressed by a large number of the people I met there. Shetland's "Living Archaeological" heritage was used to emphasise the distinctive culture and nature of the Shetland Isles, particularly in relation to the rest of the UK; "Artefacts prompt the re-learning of forgotten knowledge and skills, provide opportunities to piece together fragmented historical narratives, and are material evidence of cultural identity and historical struggles" (Peers & Brown 2003:6). Adults and children alike shared a passionate desire to see all objects found in Shetland returned to Shetland and put on permanent display in the Shetland Museum. A number of my informants also considered themselves personally related to significant local archaeological objects such as the St Ninian's Isle Treasure and Gunnister Man, through ties of kinship and friendship with their finders. These discoveries were still very much within the Island community's living memory.

Popular cultural activity in Shetland emphasises the Islands' Norse heritage (the islands were colonised by the Vikings during the late eighth and ninth centuries) as opposed to their connection with Scotland, an identity performed annually by the whole community in January and February's 'Up-Helly-Aa' fire festivals. Links between Shetland and the Lewis Chessmen were frequently made, however. A comment made by a representative of the British Museum at the exhibition's launch, for example, which suggested that the Chessmen might have passed through Shetland on their orginal journey to Ireland/Lewis, was often repeated by the Shetland Museum's learning assistant. Any objects which had originally been found

in Shetland and had been included in the exhibition were also highlighted in the tour she gave to school children. "Our" objects were regularly remarked upon by local visitors. Further emphasis was placed upon the relationship between Shetland and Lewis by a male visitor who I interviewed about his views on the exhibition in the gallery itself. He told me about the shared Norse linguistic roots between Shetland and the Western Isles, claiming that in the Western Isles, coastal place names are basically Gaelic translations of Norse names.

In both the local context of Lewis, and the national Scottish context represented by the exhibition's audiences in Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Shetland, the Lewis Chessmen were represented by many museum visitors as potent signs (Keane 2005) of identity and belonging. Their interaction with national historical narratives and local politico-cultural contexts enabled the mutual constitution of concepts such as place and heritage. Were these "stories", however, capable of being told by any high status archaeological objects deemed worthy of national consumption? - the implications of which would conform to Pinney's (2005:261) description of the imposition of interpretations reached "by other means". Or, was there, instead, some inherent or tangible quality in these particular things that enabled them to affect the people who came to visit them and ultimately impact the ways in which they were involved in broader political and cultural agendas? How important is the material form of a 'thing' in provoking one's aesthetic response? The big question arising from the discussion so far is this - why are the Lewis Chessmen so significant? Perhaps it is because they are not *just* being constituted into significant 'objects', but also because their material form allows them (through their *affordance* – Gibson 1986) to be made into 'pseudo-subjects' or persons? In an attempt to answer these questions, we turn to an exploration of intereaction between children and the Lewis Chessmen.

Human comedy and empathy; the Lewis Chessmen as objects, agents and icons

"It's good to see them in the flesh"[82]. Throughout my research, I observed remarkable personal encounters between people and the Lewis Chessmen [Figure 15]. Young and old, museum staff and casual visitor alike, regularly anthropomorphized these 'objects', responding to them as though they were human. My child informants, in particular, frequently conferred human characteristics and emotion onto the Chessmen. One 8 year old girl in Shetland, for example, claimed that one of the queens was her favourite, *"because I thought she was quite clever and, um pretty"* (Focus group transcript, 22/02/11), whilst another commented that she thought the Chessmen did not like being split up and sent to different museums, *"cos they'd be scared"* (Milly, 10 years, 21/02/11). A class of 7/8-year-old children in Shetland also wondered -*"why are none of them happy?"* (Fieldnotes, 22/02/11); *"maybe they're bored because no-one's played with them?"* (ibid). This personification was further extended by some of the children in their suggestions that the specific material qualities of the Chessmen, manifesting in their physical appearance, provided direct insight into their 'human' thought-life. For example, in response to my question about whether there was anything that she would ask an expert about the Chessmen, one Lewis school girl of about 7 years old, responded, *"If they are like happy, or sad?"*, to which her friend replied disdainfully – *"Well, you can tell by their faces!"* (Fieldnotes, 04/05/11, Lewis). Other children played with the idea that the Chessmen were, indeed, real people - *"I thought they were able to speak!"* (Ishbel, 8 years, 05/05/11, Lewis); *"It's…we think that its eyes are going to blink…"* (Flora, 10 years, 06/05/11, Lewis). Another 8-year-old girl told me that she thought that the Chessmen *"think they're small"* (03/04/11, Lewis). In this context, the Lewis Chessmen were being treated as if they were human (although this is not to say that the children actually believed that they were people just like themselves).

[82] Visitor's comment during visit to the exhibition at Shetland Museum (17/02/11).



Figure 15: Children experience a very personal encounter with the Lewis Chessmen at Museum nan Eilean, Stornoway (May 2011).



Figure 16: Children respond to the 'humaness' of the Lewis Chessmen at the Shetland Museum – here the Chessmen have been depicted with human-like qualities such as 'evil' red eyes (Februrary 2011).

It is worth considering whether children's ways of engaging with the Chessmen were distinct from those of other, adult, museum visitors. It was clear that whilst the children engaged with the Chessmen as if they were human on some level, they were often actively encouraged to do so by museum staff. Thus, perhaps they were simply fulfilling adult expectations, positioning themselves as 'children' engaged in 'play'. The Chessmen were thereby easily assimilated into prior understandings of the category of 'toys', which can be related to their original usage in medieval gaming.

While considering aspects of human representation identified in the Lewis Chessmen, it would now be useful turn to the work of Webb Keane (2005), who has embarked on an important discussion of the role of signs in the social analysis of material things. He argues that:

> we need to recognise how the materiality of signification is not just a factor for the sign *interpreter* but gives rise to and transforms modalities of action and subjectivity *regardless* of whether they are interpreted. I want to argue that this openness should be central to any theoretically principled effort to understand the historical dynamics of material things. (Keane 2005:186)

Keane refers to Peirce's (1955) model of signs and signification, which he describes as being processual (Keane 2005:186), entailing "sociability, struggle, historicity and contingency" (ibid), whilst also devoting "considerable attention to the complex range of possible relationships among signs, interpretations and objects" (ibid). Keane employs the building blocks of Peirce's approach towards a more specific study of the "relations between signs and their possible objects of signification, which can be one of resemblance (*iconicity*), actual connection (*indexicality*), or rule (*symbolism*)" (2005:186). Here, *symbolism* is taken to mean an object's representation of a particular meaning, which can be interpreted according to a pre-established order of signs, whilst *indexicality* refers to the recognition of oneself "in the products of one's labour" (Keane 2005:187). *Iconicity*, however, refers to a situation like that of the Lewis Chessmen, whereby the properties of the material thing resemble something else – "An icon can resemble an object that doesn't exist… Since all objects have qualities, *any* given object potentially resembles *something*. This means any object can suggest possible future uses or

interpretations" (ibid:189). The Lewis Chessmen can be considered iconic because they quite clearly resemble miniature versions of real people:

> The object in this case plays a role in the creation of something new that is not reducible to the acting subject's intentions. Rather, the interaction between the possibilities suggested by form and the taking up of that suggestion by the sculptor are a version of what Bruno Latour (1993) calls hybrids. Moreover, since resemblance is underdetermined, icons require some further guidance to determine how exactly they are similar to their objects… This guidance is thoroughly enmeshed with the dynamics of social value and authority – they are not merely external and supplementary to the force of iconicity. (Keane 2005:189)

Keane (2005:190) thus argues that the act of determining "what features count toward resemblance commonly involves larger questions of social value and authority". Due to the fact that iconicity refers only to something's potential, "there must always be other social processes involved" (ibid), processes which realise or suppress this potential, involving "varying degrees of self-consciousness and control" (ibid). Keane concludes that there is no such thing as a "total system" which is capable of "rendering all things meaningful" (2005:191). Instead, he suggests that "the openness of things to further consequences perpetually threatens to destabilize existing semiotic ideologies" (ibid). Applying Keane's framework within an analysis of people's engagement with the Lewis Chessmen lends insight as to why these particular objects have become so significant. The Lewis Chessmen are not merely symbolic of abstract concepts of local heritage and belonging or national identity, nor are they indexical – their historicity removes them from a direct relationship with their beholders – 400 years separate the craftsmen from their walrus ivory creations. Instead, the Chessmen's highly personalised affect on museum visitors can be accounted for by their physical resemblance to people, their 'humanness'. Far from being stable and concrete, however, the social meanings constituted through the resemblance of these things to humans remain perpetually "open" (Keane 2005:191) to potential new meanings and uses.

Importantly, the children's ways of talking about and relating to the Lewis Chessmen denotes value in their *recognition* of the iconicity of 'humanness' in their material form. Here, I use the term 'recognition' in reference to its meaning in the context of

interpersonal relations; the action or an act of identifying a person or thing from a previous encounter or knowledge; the mental process of identifying something that has been known before. Also: the fact of being known or identified in this way (cf. Oxford Dictionaries 2013[83]). Laitinen (2002:475) has made the following claim:

> recognition has something of the nature of making: it has a crucial active role in actualization of potentials, in identity-formation and in forming special relations. At the same time, recognition has the nature of a response. Recognition can be a response to actual evaluative features, in which case it does not bring about, but rather sustains, those features, or it can be a response to potential evaluative features, in which case it contributes also to the actualization.

From this statement, we can understand children's personification of the Lewis Chessmen as being both constitutive of the Chessmen as 'people-objects', whilst, simultaneously, serving as their response to the actual material features and human-like appearance of these things. The Chessmen are thus actualized as both museum objects and social actors within social, cultural and political debates concerning constructions of identity and belonging.

The manner of relating to inanimate objects in social terms observed throughout *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked* touring exhibition is also reflective of "an inherent human capacity to identify with and through material culture" (Harris & Sorensen 2010:148). Visitors often commented on the comic nature of the Chessmen, highlighting their humorous facial expressions and the farcical scale of representation employed by their craftsmen - *"the horses are more like Shetland ponies, with the Knight's feet almost touching the ground!"* (Fieldnotes, Shetland, 17/02/11). The Chessmen also often appeared to generate an emotional response in their different audiences, with both adults and children expressing an amused fondness for these human-like objects. One group of Primary 6 school children (around 10 years old) I was working with in Shetland, for example, burst into laughter in reaction to the replica 'Berserker' chewing his shield (Fieldnotes, Shetland, 21/02/11). The Chessmen were also observed to inspire other emotions,

[83] Oxford Dictionaries online (2013). Available at: http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/recognition?q=recognition, accessed on 02/11/13.

such as fear, however. An 11-year old school boy in Shetland, for example said *"I found looking into their eyes scary!"* (Matthew, 23/02/11), whilst some other boys commented that the King was *"angry"* and the Queen piece was *"evil"*[84].

The emotional affect these things had upon their human audience provides further insight into the co-constitutive processes taking place within *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked* exhibition. Harris and Sorensen (2010:145) have argued that emotion is the specific outcome of such relational engagements (ibid:149); "Fundamentally, emotions are produced through people's material engagement with the world, at the same time as emotions are productive of that engagement; indeed these processes are inseparable from each other" (ibid:148). We can see this process in action when the people encountering the Lewis Chessmen not only expressed their own personal responses using emotional terms (e.g. *"they make you feel small"*, *"look at their funny faces!"*[85]), but also conferred human emotion onto the things themselves (e.g. *"why are the Lewis Chessmen so grumpy?"*, *"the uniqueness and the humanity of the pieces have been made so much of here"*[86]).

These observations invite reference to Walter Benjamin's development of the concept of 'aura' in the early twentieth century. Benjamin's philosophical reaction to industrialisation and the introduction of mass-produced copies of 'art' sought to define the tangible quality of the authenticity of the original. Towards this end, he developed the concept of 'aura' in order to describe people's encounters with such objects. What is particularly relevant to this discussion of people's personal engagement with the Lewis Chessmen, is Benjamin's conceptual work on the *human experience* of 'aura', which he describes as resting "on the transposition of a response common in human relationships to the relationship between the inanimate or natural objects and man. The person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in turn." (Benjamin 1.2:646-47, referenced in Ferris 1996:21-22).

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[84] These reactions are reminiscent of those represented in historical accounts of the Chessmen's discovery, where they were associated with the occult.

[85] The responses of various school children visiting the exhibition in Aberdeen, Shetland and Lewis.

[86] One adult visitor's response to the exhibition (as recorded in the collaborative NMS/Shetland Museum's evaluation questionnaire, 2011).

Importantly, the Lewis Chessmen were not only perceived by their audiences to possess qualities of 'humanness' [Figure 16], but they were also assumed to be in possession of "their own stories", with visitors wondering what they would say if they could speak. In addition to being frequently observed during face-to-face encounters in museum exhibition galleries, this is also evident in the many children's books, films and television programmes they have inspired[87]. What the Chessmen get up to at night, when the museum is closed and they are left to their own devices, for example, was a common theme explored by the education programmes run by host museums in Aberdeen, Shetland and Lewis.

Aside from the opportunity for visual and emotional engagement, unlike adults' experience of the exhibition, school children were also able to interact with the Lewis Chessmen on a more physical level. Observations made during museum tours and research workshops consistently highlighted the enthusiasm with which children (from the age of 3 years upwards) *physically* engaged with the Lewis Chessmen through the various hands-on educational activities. The opportunity to hold and handle replica Chessmen proved to be very popular and enjoyable - *"Awesome!"*; *"That's really cool – it feels really weird!"*; *"I feel the face…bulging out…as if it was real"* (Fieldnotes, 7-9 year old children, Lewis, 04/05/11). Some of other children commented on their surprise at how light and smooth the replicas felt:

> Grant: *Let me have the King – I didn't feel it.*
> Fiona: *It feels bumpy…*
> Sara: *It feels nice in your hands.*
> Sara: *It feels kind of like cold, like fresh!*
> Arran: *It feels like hard coal!*
> Arran: *It feels like hard coal that doesn't make a mark on you!*
> (Discussion group transcript, 7-8 years, Lewis, 06/05/11)

These comments reflected upon the 'sensual' and 'material' ergonomics of the Chessmen, enabling an increased intimacy in the children's personal engagement with these people-objects. The faces of the Chessmen seemed to hold particular interest. In addition to talking about some of their other physical characteristics, such as the Bishop's umbrella and the Knight's *"Knight cap"* (comments from

[87]For example - 'Noggin the Nog' and 'Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone' – two examples highlighted by the exhibition (see Caldwell 2009:164).

nursery children visiting the exhibition), a number of the children were observed to study their faces very closely, being quick to imitate their expressions.

The children's engagement with the Lewis Chessmen (both the artefacts in the glass cases and the replicas used for object handling) could actually be distinguished from their emotional and physical interactions with other museum objects. Adult workshop facilitators, for example, were frequently surprised by the detailed and insightful observations made by the children regarding the Chessmen, observations made through attentive concentration. In Shetland, for example, one 11 year old boy commented – *"if you look at, like, the back of the chair there, it's like, it just looks incredible - really complicated"* (Kevin, 21/02/11), whilst another suggested to me that people considered the Lewis Chessmen to be very important, *"because, like, they're completely unique and if you look at all the curves, it's like, you think how could they have possibly done that?"* (Seth, 10 years, 21/02/11). Other close observations made by the children even thwarted the purposes of the museum workshop faciliators. In answer to the discussion group question *"If the Lewis Chessmen could speak about their life, what would they say?"* for example, Seth replied – *"You need to cut their mouth open"* (21/02/11). Here, the children's recognition of humanness in the Lewis Chessmen was expressed in a way which was distinct from adults' observed engagement with the same objects (relating to the specific physical attributes of the Chessmen, as opposed to the mere concept that they represented people). This process of social constitution was fundamentally mutual - the special ways in which the children recognised humanness in the Chessmen were, in turn, also part of their ongoing social constitution as children (and people in their own right).

The Chessmen had observable affects upon the human-subjects viewing them. In a seminar at the Shetland Museum, Dr Irving Finkel[88], claimed that *"contact with the eyes* [of the Chessmen] *gives you a split-second window into the world of human beings"* (17/02/11). He went on to suggest that this is what makes the Lewis

[88]Assistant Keeper of the Middle East department at the British Museum and world expert on medieval games.

Chessmen so special for a lot of people - *"They are so much more alive than the inanimate displays of silver which the museum has copious amounts of!"* (ibid). This claim was echoed in the statements of both children and adults visiting the exhibition. It suggests that the Chessmen were in possession of a tangible quality which enabled them to both affect their audience and inspire or communicate ideas, and that this quality did not derive solely from the current, anachronistic politico-cultural milieu in which they now sit (or stand, depending on the particular playing piece!). Rather, there appeared to be an 'aura' or 'presence' about the Chessmen which enabled them to be used for these other agendas more effectively. The following discussion will place these ethnographic observations within the context of ongoing anthropological contributions towards the concepts of *presence* and *affect*.

Presence has been described by Runia as "the unrepresented way the past is present in the present" (2006:1). Fontein (2009:4) has argued that human bones and remains have "emotive materiality" and "affective presence" through their "ambivalent agency as both 'persons' and 'objects'" (ibid:19). He suggests that their particular material qualities are not merely symbolic (ibid:21), but affect those beholding them in an emotional way (ibid:4). They thus "continue to make demands on society" (ibid:20). Children's interactions with objects (particularly 'people-objects' such as the Lewis Chessmen) at the National Museum of Scotland, indicate that Fontein's category of 'human remains' can be extended to include other stuff left behind by humans; artefacts crafted by people in the past. Here, the connection between the person who historically made the object and the person who is now beholding it in a museum display case is important. Being at once indexical (Keane 2005) and physical, this relational engagement stimulates the co-constitution of things into museum objects. It must also be acknowledged, however, that although, sometimes the actual remains of human bodies – bones, burials etc, impact people in more powerful, emotional ways than man-made artefacts (perhaps due to a reduction in the perceived distance between people who were once alive and those who are still living), the boundaries between the human and nonhuman in this context have become increasingly blurred, with human bones being treated as nonhuman objects

and nonhuman objects such as the Lewis Chessmen, being treated like people or subjects.

Can the Lewis Chessmen thus be helpfully understood as 'subjects' of a sort, just as bones in Zimbabwe "retort to, and provoke responses from the living" (Fontein 2009:1)? Like bones, the Chessmen have been made out of ivory. Their human iconicity, or 'humanness' also places them within an ambivalent space between objects and subjects – just like human remains. Their 'aura' and ability to capture the imagination thus might derive from their occupation of this ambivalent position between object- and subjecthood.

Whilst museum visitors' emotional responses to the Lewis Chessmen have already been linked to the Chessmen's iconic resemblance to humans (cf. Keane 2005), whereby people's recognition of 'humanness' in the Chessmen is a key component in the mutual constitution of these people-objects and their social meanings, there is still space for an exploration of the role of the affective presence of the past in this fluctuating and unstable process.

The concept of *affect* refers to the responses provoked by the Lewis Chessmen in the human visitors that behold them. Clough (2007:2) has described the "affective turn" as an expression of "a new configuration of bodies, technology, and matter instigating a shift in thought in critical theory". As opposed to being a "subjective, interpretive veneer projected onto material things" (McCormack 2010:643), *affect* has thus been conceptualised as:

> a quality of felt intensity, where this feeling is, in the first instance, not experienced or understood subjectively from within the inner world of the encultured consciousness, nor objectively as a property of some external causal agency, but as a feature of an ongoing process of becoming that is always material and relational.
> (Filippucci et al 2012:210)

As part of a wider attempt to allow for "greater recognition of the agential powers of natural and artefactual things, greater awareness of the dense web of their connections with each other and with human bodies" (Bennett 2004:349), Thrift (2004:57) questions why *affect* has often been neglected within discussions of

"issues such as identity and belonging…which quiver with affective energy?". Taking Thrift's (2004:62) notion that "relationship is a priory category for affect" as a point of departure, the concepts of *presence* and *affect*, and museum visitors' (particularly children's) recognition of their associated qualities in the Lewis Chessmen, can be employed in an endeavour to comprehend the different ways in which relations were formed between the Lewis Chessmen and their audiences.

Affects "occur in an encounter between manifold beings, and the outcome of each encounter depends upon what forms of composition these beings are able to enter into" (Thrift 2004:62). In the case of *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked* touring exhibition, we can understand these affects as being a culmination of various components such as material form, historical narrative, political context and local tradition. The consequent social constitution of these people-objects can thus be understood as being far from concrete. Expressing temporary stability as museum 'objects' only in particular places at particular times, they are part of an ongoing, relational process of becoming, within "a world of perpetual flux" (Ingold 2002:16). The notions of 'affect' and 'affectivity' thus enable us to situate the 'agency' of museum objects such as the Lewis Chessmen in a more meaningful way, within the "very real relational and material processes of becoming" (Filippucci et al 2012:211). It is within these processes, that we are confronted with the "demands of objects" (Pinney 2005), which, through their physical properties, are able to both afford and resist the confinement of their own social constitution.

In summary, the profound ways in which the Chessmen were seen to affect their beholders, inspiring stories of local belonging and national heritage in Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Shetland and Lewis were reflective of Runia's notion of "history *as ongoing process*" (2006:8). Building upon my argument in Chapter III, museum artefacts (in this case, the Lewis Chessmen), can be understood not only as metaphors, i.e. symbolic of the past (medieval European trade and past-times, Viking legacy and influence in Scotland etc), but as metonyms – "disturbing remains" which have "no "meaning" – they simply stand for the ineluctable fact" (Runia 2006:16). Runia (ibid:19) states that "whereas metaphor "gives" meaning, metonymy

insinuates that there is an urgent *need* for meaning". Not only do the Chessmen *represent* the past, but their material substance is actually *from* the past; they are, quite literally, a piece of history, having the capacity to affect human emotion in the present. The resulting, somewhat unpredictable, interaction between the past and the present has been described by McCormack as 'spectral' (2010:642). Runia (2006) has suggested two possible "careers" for metonymies in the social world: either they are incorporated and absorbed by their context - "What starts as an eye-catching, disconcerting, and ineluctable presence ends up as something so inconspicuous that it cannot even be called a cliché" (2006:17); or they themselves are so powerful, that they are able to transform and recreate the context into which they have been placed, into their "own image" (ibid:18). The following discussion explores how these categories relate to the case of the Lewis Chessmen.

Whose meanings? Whose stories?

> *"I think, another thing that mak(e)s items really special is when you know a different story about them…and sometimes just looking at one thing and then you hear the story, makes you change your mind, the more you think about it."*
> (Shetland Museum workshop facilitator, 16/02/11)

In his seminar at the Shetland Museum, Dr Finkel acknowledged the iconic status of the Chessmen, welcoming new research undertaken in the past decade as something which hadn't really taken place since the collection was first acquired by the British Museum in the mid-nineteenth century; *"The trouble with icons – they're like concrete – no-one ever has any new ideas about them"* (17/02/11). Despite this assertion, the shifting constructions of the Lewis Chessmen at each of the touring exhibition's host sites demonstrate that the exact opposite is true – the social constitution of the Lewis Chessmen is a process of continual transformation, regardless of the relative dearth of academic investigation into these museum 'artefacts'.

The new research undertaken by Caldwell et al (2009) was largely integrated into *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked*, within which an attempt was made to represent

several different stories concerning the discovery of the Chessmen, their origin, their purpose and their cultural context. These multiple, often contradictory, narratives were explored through a combination of textual wall panels (discussing the different theories and points of view), film (featuring the oral history tradition on Lewis embodied by a local storyteller), and a collection of objects from Trondheim in Norway (which were purposed as a comparative illustration of the cultural context within which the Chessmen had been made). The exhibition refrained from drawing any definite conclusions about many of the issues raised, preferring just to pose the questions and let the audience decide – a motif encapsulated in its final display case entitled 'Your Move'. I would observe, however, that this message was not effectively communicated to visitors to the exhibition. It appeared that their expectations of museum exhibitions were such that museums were perceived as almost duty-bound to present authoritative and definitive answers to problems; not merely ask interesting questions[89].

Many of my child informants visiting *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked*, only appeared to engage with the exhibition content as far as it affirmed their previous knowledge about the Chessmen, for example - *"I know they were found on Uig beach in a small chamber"* (Lewis school pupil, Tracey, 8 years, 04/05/11); *"The chessmen were found here in 1831"* (Lewis school pupil, Luke, 8 years, 03/05/11); *"I know Vikings made them from Norway/Sweden"* (Shetland school pupil, Evan, 8 years, 22/02/11). Some, however, were inspired by the exhibition to make up their own versions of the discovery of the Lewis Chessmen, for example – *"I think that, em…the Scandinavian, like, the boxes brought by the Vikings(?)…fell off the boat and ended up in Lewis"* (Shetland school pupil, Magnus, 10 years, 21/02/11).

Other visitors, such as a teaching assistant who had accompanied a school trip to the Shetland Museum, were left feeling confused and uncertain about what they had seen

[89] This central problem of people's 'expectations' of the museum as an authority on the objects in its possession will be explored further in the following chapter where the role of museum experts in constituting objects out of things contrasts with children's responses to the museum's narratives. The children in my ethnography were both accepting what they are being told about these objects, whilst also 'undoing' their social constitution by employing their full potential as things which could be thrown around and used to create different stories and meanings.

and heard at the exhibition:

> Teaching assistant: *They don't actually know who found them as well. I thought somewhere in the exhibition it said that they don't actually know who found them.*
> NLB: *No.*
> Teaching assistant: *Especially on an island!*
> NLB: *If you go back into the exhibition, there's a film on, which has a local lady telling the story of what they traditionally heard about it…*
> Teaching assistant: *Oh right. That's more near the truth, I'd imagine!...They're so tight-knit these communities, I can't imagine they wouldn't all know what had happened.*
> (Focus group transcript, Shetland Museum, 23/02/11)

The teaching assistant distrusted the 'official story' she perceived was being represented by the exhibition, in favour of oral tradition. This view was often echoed by some of my informants in Lewis. During my time working with staff at Museum nan Eilean and An Lanntair (the Art Centre) in Stornoway, I met with some local Gaelic storytellers involved in running a workshop for pre-school groups:

> *It was interesting to hear Cathy talk about the story she would be telling the nursery children next week - how she'd be emphasising the fact that after the Chessmen had been found on Uig, they describe the landscape as very similar to that in which they had lived before they had embarked on their 'big adventure'.*
> (Fieldnotes, 06/05/11)

In contrast to locally-accepted tradition, the storyteller's preferred interpretation of the Lewis Chessmen mystery was one which amalgamated her own pride in local craftsmanship (even if there has been no archaeological evidence to date which would suggest that the Chessmen were manufactured on the island) with recent theory proposed by the exhibition (see Caldwell et al 2009). She thus adopted and promoted the idea that they had been made for and used by people in Lewis, as opposed to the commonly-held belief that they were being transported by a merchant from Scandinavia to Ireland (thus ending up in Lewis by accident). She also used this narrative to communicate intentionally ideas that might instil pride in local heritage and belonging amongst her young audience. This agenda was to be thwarted by her child audience in practice, as she had to shorten and adapt her story in order to suit the varying needs of the nursery children (such as limited attention spans and the need

for familiar songs and phrases as opposed to the new Gaelic songs she had originally proposed to teach).

The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked exhibition thus attempted to present multiple stories about the Chessmen, stories which linked to concepts of heritage, history, oral tradition and local and national identity. Although, in reality, it was impossible to maintain simultaneously these different stories in equal measure, each story "belonged" to the people to whom it related; the politicians, the archaeologists and museum professionals at NMS, and the local residents of Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Shetland and Lewis, who each interpreted them through their own personal and cultural lenses. As metonyms, the Chessmen were able to both distance and draw attention to the context from which they were taken (a sand dune on a remote beach in Uig, Lewis) and the context into which they had been placed - a public stage in the national cultural arena, where their material forms have become intertwined with political heritage rhetoric and the reification of local and national pasts (Runia 2006:22).

Pinney (2005:269) has stressed the "disjunctures and fractures" in the process of constituting objects, referring to "the likelihood of uncontemporaneous practices in which…there are cataracts [cf. Kracauer 1969] of objects never fully assimilable to any "context"". Thus, like the other museum objects described in Chapter III, it must be remembered that the Chessmen are also things - "unfolding in unpredictable ways and characterized by what (from the perspective of an aspirant context) look like disjunctions" (Pinney 2005:269). And as unwieldy material things, their social constitution is not merely the result of the projections of a powerful intellectual elite, nor the fluid and subjective interpretations of their beholders, but rather the result of a physical encounter between things and the mutually-dependent relational constitution of matter and meaning that this entails.

Conclusion

The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked touring exhibition represented a significant moment in the history of the National Museum of Scotland. Launched in the summer of 2010, when the Museum was approaching the completion of its Royal Museum refurbishment project, the exhibition marked a significant move away from traditional authoritarian representations of knowledge, towards a more reflexive and self-critical approach. There is some irony in this response to the critique of the *new museology*, in that this more democratic approach to representation potentially undermines the practical implementation of the National Museum of Scotland's original mission and current *raison d'etre* – namely to *"inform, educate and inspire"*[90]. This could be observed in visitors' reactions to the Lewis Chessmen exhibition. The aims of the exhibition's designers might well have been to encourage its audience to engage critically with the different narratives, theories and forms of evidence presented, before making up their own minds about the story of the Lewis Chessmen.

In actuality, however, visitors seemed to either reinforce what they already believed by selectively engaging with only the aspects of the exhibition which presented stories that were familiar to them, or were left desperately looking for solutions elsewhere in order to ease their discomfort at finding in the exhibition more questions than answers. This tension between the different uses of the exhibition, whereby its audience were able to both confirm and challenge what they already knew "by other means" (Pinney 2005:261), relates, again, to the perpetual relational processes of becoming through which objects such as the Lewis Chessmen are socially and materially made and unmade. The exhibition's approach to representation thus constituted the Lewis Chessmen as objects, whilst simultaneously allowing for their thingly entanglement with alternative meanings. Visitors could choose to engage with the Chessmen on the grounds of historical narrative and contemporary research, and/or seek other ways through which to encounter them as things, e.g. through their aesthetic and ergonomic material form.

[90] NMS Strategic Plan 2006-12, 2010-11 Update, p7.

Despite bearing echoes of the earlier museums' 'crisis of representation'[91], public reception of *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked* exhibition at each of its tour venues was consistently positive. Both my own evaluation work and that which was undertaken by NMS revealed that every visitor who was asked, rated the exhibition as either 'very good' or 'good', stating various reasons for this, the most prominent being that it was clearly laid out, small and not overwhelming, and most significantly, because of its content – it featured the Lewis Chessmen themselves. These particular museum objects seemed to provoke an unfailingly enthusiastic reaction in their audience, whereby people found themselves attracted to the mystery of their provenance as well as their link with a romantic Viking heritage. Most crucially, however, people appeared to enjoy engaging with the Chessmen's very real, accessible and comical expressions of humanity.

Caldwell et al (2009:164-5) have commented upon the "depth of artistic inspiration and re-telling that museums and medieval material culture can fuel". This chapter has explored some of the telling and re-telling of such stories relating to the Lewis Chessmen. Some of these narratives have constituted the Chessmen as both 'museum objects' and 'national treasures' through the work of politicians and museum experts, whilst other stories, deriving from more personal, empathetic encounters between museum visitors and the physical characteristics of these things, constituted the Chessmen as 'people'. Whilst, in this latter case, "the force of matter" (Bennett 2004:357) can be understood as generating responsive attachments with people, it is of great importance that we also acknowledge the role of 'recognition' in attributing the value of 'humanness' to the subject-like Lewis Chessmen (cf. Laitinen 2002).

We have looked earlier at how Fontein (2009:18) has explored the ways in which heritage and commemoration in Zimbabwe have "involved the marginalisation of alternative pasts and alternative ways of dealing with its remains". He concluded that human remains, particularly bones, have both "confronted and subverted these normalising processes" (ibid). In a similar vein, the Lewis Chessmen (created of ivory, a formerly living substance), have served very specific political goals relating

[91] See Chapter II for an expansive discussion of the 'crisis of representation'.

to constructions of Scottish cultural heritage and local/national identity, thereby attributing material value to the more abstract concepts of freedom of expression and self-determinism in relation to Scottish independence. On the other hand, they have also demonstrated the potential for even the most carefully socially and politically-constituted objects to revert to their broader potentials as things. As Ingold (2010:4) has argued:

> the thing has the character not of an externally bounded entity, set over and against the world, but a knot of whose constituent threads, far from being contained within it, trail beyond, only to become caught with other threads in other knots. Or in a word, things *leak*, forever discharging through the surfaces that form temporarily around them.

As such, the Lewis Chessmen are embroiled in unstable and continuous processes of becoming, which, as demonstrated at each of the different exhibition host sites, occur in conjunction with particular social, cultural, political and historical contexts at particular times and in particular places. This approach to the social constitution of objects has been highlighted by Keane (2005:194) as an "obvious, but important" effect of materiality. Particular physical attributes "cannot be manifest without some embodiment that inescapably binds it to some other qualities as well, which remain available, ready to emerge as real factors, as it crosses contexts" (ibid). In the case of the Lewis Chessmen, for example, the 'human-like' quality of their faces cannot be completely disassociated from the materials (walrus ivory) from which they have been carved. The Chessmen's constitution as museum objects, through the particular semiotic ideologies communicated by the museum, therefore, "are vulnerable, not least by their exposure to the openness of things" (Keane 2005:194).

Keane (ibid:193) has also claimed that:

> If we are to treat things "in their own right", and not just as the tangible garments draped on otherwise invisible and immaterial ideas, we must consider their forms, qualities, practical capacities, and, thus, their place within causal relations.

In response to this challenge, I have argued that far from being purely symbolic and representative of particular historical narratives and political rhetoric, the Lewis Chessmen can be understood as affecting their human audience through the material

provocation of emotional response, as evidenced by expressions of empathy and personification. As things embroiled in a co-constitutive process of becoming (involving the mutually-dependent intermingling of matter and meaning), the Lewis Chessmen have been constituted in multiple ways. As iconic people-objects, they were both able to give form and substance to political and historical meanings, whilst remaining bound up in personal social interactions between people and things. Therefore, through their presence (Runia 2006), affects (Thrift 2004) and material affordances (Gibson 1986), for many children (and indeed adults) who encountered them within the exhibition, the Lewis Chessmen were indeed capable of "valorizing the peculiar intimacy between a historical moment and object" (Pinney 2005:262). Pinney has argued that such things are "not simply, always, a reflection of something happening elsewhere. They are part of an aesthetic, figural domain that can constitute history, and they exist in a temporality that is not necessarily coterminous with more conventional political temporalities" (ibid)[92]. The Chessmen's inhabitation of the world, their integral involvement in "threading their own paths through the meshwork" (Ingold 2002:14), thus contributes towards its "ever-evolving weave" (ibid).

The changing meanings of the Lewis Chessmen, evident between the different venues of the touring exhibition, illustrate the complex processes of the relational co-constitution of objects, which must be understood in relation to local political and cultural contexts and the material potential of things. People's recognition of the human-like properties of the Chessmen is crucial within this process of subjects making objects making subjects (cf. Miller 2005:38; Pinney 2005:269). The significance of the distinctive way in which children were observed to recognise the Chessmen's humanness will be developed further in the context of their engagement with other socially-constituted museum objects within the following chapters.

Radin (1982:957), in reference to the philosophical work of Hegel (*Philosophy of Right*), has claimed that the "premise underlying the personhood perspective [in law]

[92] This concept is discussed further in Chapter VI.

is that to achieve a proper self-development – to be a *person* – an individual needs some control over resources in the external environment". She describes a strand of liberal property theory that focuses on "personal embodiment or self-constitution in terms of "things"" (ibid:958). This concept lends considerable insight into children's negotiation of their own status as humans, with socially-constituted 'personhood', in relationship with things within the context of the museum. It is thus children's engagement with issues of value, trust, power and status through an exploration of their control of things in the form of museum objects, to which we now turn.

Chapter V: Children in the Museum

> *"Museums are all over the world, people come to visit museums to learn, explore and to enjoy themselves. Museums are full of facts, but while you learn you also have lots of fun. Most museums are about dinosaurs, fossils, historic things and new inventions…"* (Tessa, age 9 years, 08/03/11)

To develop a better understanding of what we mean by 'children's agency' in the context of museum education, this chapter explores the different ways in which children engage with the communication of cultural narratives at the National Museum of Scotland and the other museums involved in *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked* touring exhibition. First, I discuss children's identification with things as socially constituted museum objects and the more abstract concepts of heritage and nation they are employed by the Museum to represent. I then outline the heritage education narrative frameworks communicated by the National Museum of Scotland before examining children's engagement with these narratives. Finally, I return to the particular case study of *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked* exhibition, exploring how children engaged with the things and narratives presented in this particular collection of museum objects, before considering the contributions this study can make towards more general discussions of children's 'agency'.

Children, museum objects, heritage and nation

> Museums are for all of us, but to be for all of us, they should not aspire to the role of telling us who we are. By making history accessible, and serving as a mirror of identity, they can be profoundly local. At the same time, by putting an emphasis on communicating the skills needed to appropriate culture, they can be profoundly global. Therein lies the future of our museums, our culture, and our identity. (Bradburne 2000:391)

The children I encountered visiting the National Museum of Scotland had generally, very positive opinions about museums and what they are for, e.g; *"I think museums are for learning because they have all sorts of facts"* (Ruth, 9 years, 08/03/11);

"Museums are for learning and to make people know anything about what is in the past" (Andrew, 8 years, 08/03/11). Other studies have shown that, over the longer term, a school visit to a museum can assume great significance in the life experience of a child. Hein (1998:142) has suggested that children demonstrate a remarkable ability to remember their experiences of a museum visit weeks or even months afterwards ("through drawings, memories reported in interviews, or by reaching younger children"). This has been supported by the findings of Piscitelli and Anderson (2001:278), who conducted research with 77 four- to six-year-old children in Brisbane, Australia:

> children's visual recall and verbal descriptions of their previous museum experiences were remarkable for their accuracy in depicting actual exhibits and architectural features of museum settings… These early accounts of the impact of the museum on the young child show that some exhibits have real staying power as iconic experiences.

They also describe the majority (75%) of their informants as expressing a very positive view of museums, regarding them as places "which were exciting, happy and provided opportunities to learn, and gain many ideas" (2001:274). Another result of Pisciteli and Anderson's study was the discovery that "children's salient recollections of their visits to museum settings centred on experiences which appeared to be non-interactive in nature, and directed towards the large-scale exhibits in the natural and social history museum" (ibid:278). This is particularly significant in relation to NMS' recent Royal Museum refurbishment project[93], which features a combination of large-scale dinosaur and animal exhibits and numerous investment-heavy interactives.

Wolins, Jensen and Ulzheimer (1992) have also researched children's memories of museum visits, within the context of a long-term study involving school children in Manhattan, New York. They concluded that, amongst several other factors which combined to explain which particular museum trips the children remembered, key variables included children's high personal involvement, links with work done in school and multiple or repeat visits to the same museum (1992:25). Their study also

[93] See Chapter II for further discussion of the Royal Museum refurbishment project.

commented upon the effectiveness of including handling objects within the format of a museum education programme:

> The student teacher had been to China and brought clothing into the classroom and museum that some of the children were able to try on. One of the children explained it like this. "When you get to touch, you don't even have to be told things; you just touch". (Wolins, Jensen & Ulzheimer 1992:23)

Here, the act of touching is portrayed as a way of knowing, which Classen (2005:277) describes in relation to early museum and scientific practice as a means of providing "access to interior truths of which sight was unaware", thus correcting "the misconceptions of sight".

In contrast, in their study of 120 four and five-year-old children in Vancouver, Montreal and Paris, Kindler and Darras (1997:136) make the following comments; "It was interesting to note that some of these children (along with their counterparts in Quebec and France) defined a museum as a place were "you are not allowed to touch things," or where "you have to be quiet"." Within the context of education workshops at the National Museum of Scotland, children were presented, on the one hand, with handling objects which they were strongly encouraged to touch, and, on the other, with objects on display in exhibition galleries, which they were told expressly not to touch. Consequently, rules and rule-making, particularly concerning those which governed their behaviour and physical treatment of museum objects were of great importance to my child informants at the National Museum of Scotland.

Wolins, Jensen and Ulzheimer (1992:26) have claimed that:

> the most powerful memories are not just about what the child saw or did but about the affective or emotional content of the experience, including the child's feelings about himself or herself in that particular setting. This affective content tended to be unique to each child and frequently had little to do with the museum educator's or classroom teacher's intended goals for a visit.

This observation was echoed by my own ethnography, when children expressed their feelings about museum objects in terms of their own personal and emotional

connection. Carrie (8 years, 16/03/10), for example described a gold budha on display at the Museum, as being like a smaller budha statue that was at her home, expressing delight in the richness and beauty of the museum's budha's decorations. The literature indicates that museum visits are potentially very memorable and significant events in the life of children, who express a particular desire for unique, large-scale, old and/or iconic material encounters. It is also clear, however, that there is a significant degree of complexity concerning the nature of these experiences, which often produce results which are both unexpected and uncertain. /What demands further exploration, therefore, is the nature of the interaction between child and artefact – questions relating to the 'how' and the 'why'.

The National Museum of Scotland creates impact on first impression by the sheer scale and style of its architecture and the objects on display. Often defined by young children as "A big place where lots of people go" (Kindler & Darras 1997:127), very few other public buildings can rival a museum in its dedication to learning and visual stimuli. In still fewer places will a child come into contact with such a range and abundance of objects. The children with whom I did research often considered the objects found in museums to be unique and highly valuable. These findings corroborate the work of Kindler and Darras (1997:128), who, in their study of children attending pre-schools and daycares, found that, when describing what a museum was, children most frequently referred to their contents. At the National Museum of Scotland, I asked one school boy, Douglas (aged around 7 years old), what made a museum different from other places and he replied that it was because they have objects that are the *"only one"*, pointing to the bronze bell displayed on a plinth beside me in the *Kingdom of the Scots* gallery, in order to exemplify his point (Fieldnotes, 21/04/10). Although decorated with the arms of Glasgow and described by its label as being *"symbolic of civic pride"*, there was some irony in his selection of this bell (made by Gerard Koster of Amsterdam in 1663), since this particular object was not especially unique, but rather representative of a group of similar objects relating to the central role of public clocks in the Middle Ages. Piscitelli and Anderson (2001:278) support this impression in the findings of their study; "most children perceived that museums were places where they could see special things not

normally seen in everyday life", whilst Kindler and Darras (1997:133) also noted that the "notion of uniqueness and value of objects housed in museums was evident in comments offered by a young child in Quebec who stated that one can find in a museum "things that cannot be usually seen"."

From my ethnographic observations, it would seem that there are certain museum objects, however, which children found more interesting than others. These included: animals (e.g. the panda, cheetah, wildlife and early sealife dioramas in the *Treasured* exhibition); gold and silver items (e.g. the Budha figure, the jewellery accompanying the ancient Egyptian Qurneh burial [Figure 17] and the Traprain silver treasure [Figure 18]); weaponry (e.g. the Roman *gladius* [Figure 19], the Viking dagger and the Jacobean muskets); objects which were both large and impressive, often having moving parts (e.g. the tall silver rocket in the *Connect* gallery [Figure 20], the F1 racing car, steam trains and the gigantic Watt and Boulton engine); large stone carvings (e.g. the Celtic cross beside the shop in the entrance way to the museum and the Pictish stones in the *Early People* gallery). Although one might also find that these kinds of objects are also popular with adult visitors, my observations corroborate the findings of Piscitelli and Anderson's (2001:275) qualitative study, which suggested that children found dinosaurs (61%), animals (27%) and "exhibits relating to transportation" (13%) the most memorable features of their past museum experiences. In this way, it appears as if children preferred things which were, or at least used to be animate, along with exhibits which manifested themselves with a grand *presence* (Runia 2006)[94]. They might also be described as things with which the children already had some familiarity through experiences taking place outside of the museum, e.g. through television programmes and storybooks. But how did the children interact with these 'objects'?

[94] See also Piscitelli & Anderson (2001:278) for a discussion of the impact made by large scale exhibits upon a child audience.



Figure 17: The Qurneh burial, Ancient Egyptian mummy sarcophagus at the National Museum of Scotland (September 2013).



Figure 18: Traprain Law silver treasure, on display in the *Early People* gallery at the National Museum of Scotland (September 2013).



Figure 19: Replica Roman *gladius* sword from the Roman Handling Box at the National Museum of Scotland (September 2013).



Figure 20: Silver rocket on display in the *Connect* gallery at the National Museum of Scotland (September 2013).

During teacher-led handling sessions, I was able to observe certain patterns in the ways in which some of the children related to the museum objects being studied:

> *When the teacher brought the trays out of the box and placed them in the centre of the circle, many of the children could not help themselves crowding forward on their hands and knees in order to see their contents from close-up. The first object brought out of the box was the animal skin, which was given to a pair of children, who were then asked what it was and what it would be used for. These children's and those around them's automatic and immediate reaction was to reach out and stroke the animal fur, even though some of them were unsure as to whether or not the teacher would tell them off for this… Another object of interest was the leather shoe, which was both smelled and tried on by various members of the class.*
> (Fieldnotes, Primary 3 class aged 6-7 years, 7/10/10)

Here, the children were engaging with the objects in a highly sensory manner, particularly through touch and smell. In other handling workshops, I also observed numerous children using the replica Viking comb on their own hair, despite their teachers' protestations that it was "unhygienic" (e.g. children aged 6-7 years, 7/10/10). Others ran their hands over the drinking horn in order to feel how smooth it was, placing it under their noses to experience its "weird" smell (e.g. 7-10 year old children from a composite class, 7/10/10). In these cases, the words of Classen and Howes (2006:202) seem particularly pertinent:

> touch functioned as an important medium of intimacy between the visitor to the collection and the collection itself. Through touch the visitor and the collection are united, physically joined together. Touch provides the satisfaction of a corporeal encounter. By touching a collected object the hand of the visitor also encounters the traces of the hand of the object's creator and former owners. One seems to feel what others have felt and bodies seem to be linked to bodies through the medium of the materiality of the object they have shared.

The children's particular sensory engagement with museum handling objects through touch and smell, can thus be related to two important issues arising in discussions relating to an anthropology of the senses. Firstly, that human sensory perception is culturally constructed (Classen 1995:402) and that museums have played a key role in "institutionalising Western assumptions about how we apprehend objects through cultural processes" (Edwards et al 2006:3), placing a particular emphasis on

sight/vision. Secondly, that children "do not always manifest the same sensory order as adults" (Howes & Classen 1991:271), and, in fact, have been known to place greater precedence on smell than do adults (cf. Classen 1991:55). We will return to this discussion later.

In the meantime, other observations of children's engagement with the handling objects included their verbalised enjoyment of striking the flint stones together in order to create sparks, often leading to comments about the smell the flints made by being struck (e.g. a Primary 5 class of 8-9 year olds, 7/10/10), and their use of the replica Viking knife in a pretence of attacking other children or stabbing themselves (e.g. a Primary 4 class of 7-8 year olds, 3/11/10). From my close observation of their behaviour, I would suggest that particular things were chosen because they were those with which the children could more easily identify; through the material qualities of the things themselves, and the life experiences and imaginations of the children. This explanation has also been employed by Piscitelli and Anderson (2001:279) in their study of young children's perspectives of museum settings and experiences; "we believe that exhibits and museum experiences which provide context and links with children's own past experiences and prior knowledge rate more positively in a range of perceptual dimensions than those which are largely decontextualized in nature". They have also made the following argument:

> it is not sufficient for museums to provide contextual links and connections embedded within the messages of exhibitions, but rather these links must be easily recognisable for a young visitor. The forging of connections between exhibits and young visitors will ensure that detailed messages can be communicated, remembered and utilised. (ibid)

This analysis resonated during an encounter with Jamie, a nine-year-old boy I observed using the Viking Handling Box with his class (Fieldnotes, 04/11/10). Jamie became particularly animated about the Viking fishing hook, because he described it as being similar to one he had used on a fishing trip with his Dad. This very real and positive life experience was seemingly brought to mind by his physical encounter with the replica fishing hook.

Hein has suggested that "in order to be educative, experiences must be not only 'hands-on' but also 'minds-on'" (1998:2). This argument was derived from a study in which he employed close observation of the behaviour of children in museum galleries, noting their preference for interactive exhibits (1998:143), and the ways in which they oriented themselves; engaging in fantasy play, carrying out investigations and interacting with objects on a more general level. Significantly, Hein argued that social context is an important factor affecting children's behaviour when visiting museums – they act differently when they visit in the context of a school trip than they do within a family group. He concluded that children -

> may not do what exhibit designers intended, but indulge interests of their own ranging from causal interactions to pursuing personal and social agendas. Their activities usually are at least triggered by the exhibition and often involve the objects and concepts displayed. (Hein 1998:142)

Bourdieu (1986) has claimed that modern education 'reproduces' the culture of the dominant classes through their children, as a mechanism of mass socialization (cf. Althusser, 1971). The process of education can thus be understood as subjectification (Priestly & Humes 2010:354). The emphasis placed by the Scottish Government upon getting children into museums, whether through formal school workshops or informal family learning programmes is therefore significant:

> museums and galleries clearly support the Scottish Government's National Outcomes which seek to ensure that our society encourages children, young people and learners of all ages to fulfil their potential… A recent survey showed that 80% of parents think that museums and galleries are among the most important resources for educating their children. In Britain more than two thirds of children aged 5-11 visited a museum last year as part of a programme organised by their school and Scotland enjoys one of the highest rates of visits from schoolchildren in the UK. (Museums Think Tank, 2010)

As stated by Fiona Hyslop, Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Culture and External Affairs, "museums and galleries are vital in telling the story of Scotland's past and they inspire creativity and innovation for the future" (2010)[95]. Once there, children

[95] *Scottish Government response by Minister for Culture and External Affairs to the Report by the Museums Think Tank* (2010).
Available online at: http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2010/12/15144150/1, accessed 05/11/13.

become an audience to narratives of Scottish history and cultural heritage. Whether or not this political agenda is incorporated into the Museum's educational messages in practice, however, is far from clear, certainly from the perspective of education professionals and visitors at the National Museum of Scotland:

> Although the dominant reading of the Museum is that it has a proactive role in national identity formation, other visitors suggested alternative, often ambivalent understandings. Museums offer spaces for alternative readings and the creation of alternative understandings of identity in the relationship between the displays and the understandings that visitors bring with their visit. This would suggest that, as understandings of Scottish identity change, so will understandings of the Museum.
> (McLean & Cooke 2003:126)

In fact, incidences of the explicit use of key concepts such as 'heritage' and 'nation' were hard to find. Although, as discussed in Chapter II, these ideas can be understood as being inherently wrapped up in the educational mission of the museum, they were rarely mentioned by practitioners, let alone discussed by my child informants. 'Heritage' is defined in the dictionary as "property that is or may be inherited; valued objects and qualities such as historic buildings and cultural traditions that have been passed down from previous generations" (Oxford Dictionaries 2013[96]). Despite such definitions, however, it remained a rather abstract concept for most of the children with whom I came into contact. Objects encountered at the National Museum of Scotland were described as being important or interesting because they were *"really old"*, not because they told important stories about a personal and/or national past. For example, when describing the replica Roman *gladius* as her favourite handling object [Figure 19], Catriona said *"it was interesting because it was old and used by the Romans"* (8 years, 01/03/10). Furthermore, the children generally did not verbalise a connection between these artefacts from the past and their understanding of the world in the present. Neither did they relate these objects to their own identities; *"if we don't know about how other people lived in another time, it doesn't really affect our own lives"* (Struan, 8 years, 03/11/10). When I posed more challenging questions in a bid to discover how the children engaged with the very concept of heritage, such as - why we do we still

[96] Oxford Dictionaries online (2013). Available at: http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/heritage?q=heritage, accessed on 09/05/13.

study particular parts of history today (e.g. the Romans and the Vikings)?, I was met with responses such as: *"It's because they were really powerful and we want to learn about them"* (Poppy, 7 years, 02/11/10); *"because it's history and they're interesting… otherwise we'd only ever be learning maths and English at school"* (Ella, 8 years, 04/11/10).

Through my ethnographic observations, it also became clear that, contrary to the indications of the Museum's policy, educational practice placed little emphasis on the idea that the archaeological and historical collections in some way linked to Scotland's national story. When the issue of national identity did come up, however, it did so in the most unexpected of places. During a teacher-led Roman Object Handling session, for example, when asked why people wouldn't have really worn togas very often in Scotland during the Roman occupation, Ahmed (aged around 8 years old) answered, to my surprise - *"Because the Scottish people wore kilts instead"* (18/11/10). Here, a direct link was being made between the material and cultural practices of contemporary Scotland and people who lived in the same geographical area almost 2000 years ago. In this case, the 'Scottish' national stereotype was assumed to be in possession of its own temporality; existing outside of time and thus serving as a consistent cultural reference point for Ahmed's understanding of Scottish history, cultural boundaries and national identities. More predictably, reference to Scottish national identity was made during the infrequent *Jacobites Alive!* and *Robert the Bruce and Bannockburn* workshops. In *Robert the Bruce and Bannockburn*, for example:

> *The workshop facilitator selected volunteers to be the King of England, the Commander of the Army and two English knights. One boy kept exclaiming to his male classmate who had volunteered to be a knight; "You're English!" The remaining children appeared to be more than happy to be the Scottish army, crying "aargh!" enthusiastically when they were told to brandish their shields. There was also a lot of laughter when the facilitator started using his puppetry technique and funny voices to represent the English army. The two knights, for example, were named Terrance and Nigel!* (Fieldnotes, 23/11/10)

In this incident, it was apparent that not only were messages concerning the historical struggle between the nations of Scotland and England being communicated by the

National Museum of Scotland through its workshop, but that this was a narrative with which the children were already familiar and engaged[97]. They were also actively encouraged to personally identify with Scottish historical figures:

> *The class was told that after their defeat at the Battle of Culloden, bans were inflicted on the Highlanders that prohibited them from speaking Gaelic, playing the bagpipes, wearing tartan or carrying a weapon (on penalty of 7 years in prison). The workshop facilitator tried to get the children to* ***identify*** *with the Highlander's plight by asking them to imagine what it would be like if they were told they were not allowed to wear trainers and could only speak in German.* (Fieldnotes, 24/01/11)

It is towards the heritage education narratives of the National Museum of Scotland to which we now turn.

Heritage education narratives at the National Museum of Scotland

NMS has inherited an historical emphasis on its role in educating the public[98], which today, it consistently upholds. In its Strategic Plan (2006–2012), it expressed this core belief in providing an education service that was accessible to everyone - *"Provision of imaginative and well-designed learning programmes is one of the most important ways in which a more diverse audience can engage with the collections. We are already recognised as a key provider of object-centred learning in Scotland and will offer expanded learning programmes at our museums in communities and through digital resources, and through the quality of learning outcomes…"* (ibid:17)[99]. The National Museum of Scotland has indicated that the central messages this education service would convey; *"Our mission statement recognises that a key element of our activity is interpreting the history of Scotland, contemporary Scotland and the impact of Scotland and Scots around the world. As*

[97] The historic Battle of Bannockburn is often employed in nationalist political discourse and reported in the media, e.g. recent speculation over the date of the referendum on Scottish independence being held on the 700th anniversary of the Battle of Bannockburn, commemorating a Scottish army's defeat of 'the English' (as reported by Gerry Braiden for the *Scottish Herald*, Monday 2nd January 2012).

[98] See Chapter II for further discussion of the historical development of the National Museum of Scotland.

[99] See also NMS Strategic Plan Update 2009/10:18.

Scotland's leading museum of material culture and natural sciences, our role has important national and international dimensions as we reflect the Scottish nation to itself and to international perception through demonstration of the scope, calibre and breadth of our collections"[100]. NMS' commitment to the Scottish national agenda, as set by the Scottish Government, was further demonstrated by its Strategic Plan's conscious alignment to the Government's own strategic objectives, such as promoting a "wealthier and fairer, healthier, safer and stronger, smarter and greener" Scotland[101]. The National Museum of Scotland has supported these objectives through a combination of permanent exhibition galleries (examples of which include the *Scotland: a Changing Nation* gallery, opened in July 2008, which examines the recent history of modern Scotland, *"complementing the Government's own National Conversation by inviting Scots and others to reflect on the kind of country we are and could be in the future"*[102]; *Sporting Scotland* and *The Scottish Sports Hall of Fame* galleries) and the work of its Learning, Access and Outreach teams within the Education Department.

Another significant influence on the National Museum of Scotland's education narrative has been the national introduction of *A Curriculum for Excellence*, the demands of which have played a crucial role in informing the format and content of the majority of the Museum's new learning programmes[103]. The new curriculum has been described by the Scottish Government as "one of the most ambitious programmes of educational change ever undertaken in Scotland" (2008:8)[104]. It has, however, been heavily criticized within the circles of academic education philosophy for being inconsistent and structurally incoherent (Priestly & Humes 2010:355), largely ignoring a significant proportion of relevant literature (ibid:346) and thus constituting "essentially an ahistorical and atheoretical document" (ibid:358).

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[100] NMS Strategic Plan Update 2008/09:4.
[101] see Scottish Government's website: http://www.scotland.gov.uk/About/Performance/scotPerforms/objectives, accessed 10/04/13.
[102] NMS Strategic Plan Update 2009/10:12.
[103] NMS Strategic Plan Update 2009/10:12.
[104] See Chapter I for further discussion of *A Curriculum for Excellence.*

At the National Museum of Scotland, the messages conveyed within its schools' workshops focused upon the requirements of the *Curriculum*'s National Outcomes, contributing to children and young people's development in order that they become - *successful learners*, *confident individuals*, *effective contributors* and *responsible citizens* (Education Scotland website[105]). In an interview with a member of the Education Department, my questions regarding the key objectives of the organisation's provision for children were met with the following response; *"providing a useful resource in-line with the Curriculum to be used by teachers"* (Rebecca 23/02/10). Another member of the department described the core aims of the new schools provision (in development for the Royal Museum Project) as *"providing something for all, with a specific focus on the new galleries and object handling…the whole programme is skills based"* (Elise, 08/03/10). She said *A Curriculum for Excellence* was the main driving influence for these programmes, *"where the focus for the museum's provision will be active and experiential learning"*. This emphasis on learning through experience has already been linked to the earlier philosophical work of John Dewey (1938; 1907)[106]. The importance placed on children's sensory engagement with museum objects, however, has been commented upon by Jackson and Rees Leahy (2005:311) as contributing towards "a strong sense of engagement with the content of their [museum] visit and, equally, their ability to recall it". This can also be aligned with pervasive constructions of children as 'other' (James 1993; Prout & James 1997; Hirschfield 2002; Taylor 2011; Johansson 2011 etc), particularly in relation to adult museum visitors (who, in opposition to children's more tactile explorations, are supposed to interact with the museum's displays primarily through vision). As Classen (2005:284) has observed:

> In keeping with the common nineteenth-century association of touch with non-rational or infantile behaviour, the one kind of museum that consistently caters to the sense of touch in modernity is the children's museum.

[105] Education Scotland website: http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/thecurriculum/whatiscurriculumforexcellence/understandingthecurriculumasawhole/index.asp , accessed 10/04/13.

[106] For further discussion of the work of John Dewey and its relation to A Curriculum for Excellence, see Chapter I.

Our sensory engagement with the world is culturally defined (Classen 1995:402) and so, a consideration of the National Museum of Scotland's encouragement of children's use of their senses to engage with its collections, through particular educational approaches, provides insight into these "avenues for the transmission of cultural values" (Classen 1995:401). Later in this chapter, I will explore the different ways in which children responded to the Museum's skills-based and experiential learning objectives and educational narratives, both of which can now be understood as being closely interwoven with political agendas.

Another critical aspect of NMS' education policy has been its responsibility to make its learning resources accessible nationally; *"We will ensure that inclusive public programmes are available across our museums and more widely across Scotland. National, regional and local partnerships will inform planning and support delivery of exhibitions, programmes and services"*[107]. The other museums involved in *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked* touring exhibition serve as key examples of the organisation's partnership working with communities across Scotland. Although all four of the museums involved (the National Museum of Scotland, Aberdeen Art Gallery, Shetland Museum and Museum nan Eilean) employed notions of history and archaeology to convey a sense of identity and belonging to the children participating in their educational programmes and provisions, it is clear that their particular approaches, had a direct relationship with the places and communities they served. Were the messages conveyed by these museums, namely about the importance of knowing one's history and the inherent value of museum objects from the past, however, successfully communicated to their audience? We will now turn towards the perspectives and experiences of the children in order to find out.

[107] NMS Strategic Plan Update 2008/09: 21.

Children's responses to educational narratives at the National Museum of Scotland can be categorised under three sub-headings; doubt and denial, selective adaptation and creative alternatives. In what follows, I explore the ethnographic evidence for each of these responses, before examining my child informants' interactions with each other, their teachers and with museum professionals during this process.

Doubt and Denial

A common response to the presentation of ideas and objects within education workshops at the National Museum Scotland was the expression of doubt as to whether or not the artefacts on display or the handling objects were real. Whilst there often seemed to be no doubt at all as to whether adult authority figures (the workshop facilitators and their class teachers) were in possession of correct and all-encompassing knowledge about the topic being studied, the children's lack of confidence appeared to lie in their mistrust of what they were being told. It was as if the idea that there were objective, definitive facts out there, in existence, was perfectly acceptable to them; what was disputed was whether the children were being trusted with this truth in all its complexity. This lack of faith in what they were being told can be illustrated by the following example of a Primary 6 class (aged around 10 years old) participating in a workshop at the National Museum of Scotland:

> *During the meteorite handling activity, Ryan repeatedly asked me if his meteorite sample had actually come from outer space, giving me the impression that he thought that he considered it unlikely that he would be allowed to handle such an object. Justifying his questions, he said****: "it's because sometimes people tell you that something's real when it isn't"****.* (Fieldnotes, 19/11/10)

Here, Ryan's past experience of things being misrepresented to him by adults, appeared to be informing his present attitude of doubt. This disbelief was expressed again when I observed another Primary 6 class participating in the same workshop; *"Daisy was really disappointed that her meteorite "wasn't real" (identified as a pseudo-meteorite) and kept on asking me hopefully, in case some new information*

would prove that it was real after all" (Fieldnotes, 15/11/10). This distrust was also evident in the behaviour of a class of older school pupils from upper secondary school (around 15-16 years old). During an *Exploring our Evidence* workshop on Scottish emigration at the National Museum of Scotland, for example, when the freelance facilitator admitted that one of the objects, the Canadian snow shoe, was in fact a replica (i.e. not 200 years old), this was immediately picked up on by one of the girls in the class who questioned whether this fact therefore made it secondary rather than primary evidence. The facilitator side-stepped the issue, but apologised for misrepresenting the object when he was accused of "lying" by some of the pupils" (Fieldnotes, 28/09/10). Here, the question posed by the teenage girl was particularly pertinent to the central focus of the workshop, which was the nature of historical evidence and how this impacts the ways in can be used to develop an understanding of the past. Her question used the concepts imparted by the workshop facilitator regarding primary and secondary sources not only to question the value of the replica snowshoe as historical evidence, but also to undermine his capacity to communicate accurate information about the Museum's collections. The class participating in this particular workshop were significantly older than the 3-12 years age range with which I conducted the majority of my research. Upon the verge of 'adulthood' themselves, one might argue that their perspectives of the Museum as an authority on objects and knowledge would be irrelevant and unrelated to the experiences of nursery and primary school children. This ethnographic encounter, however, provided depth and texture to my understanding of the role of age or biological maturity in determining social interaction within the museum space. The girl's comments, and her ability to challenge openly the authority of the workshop facilitator, not only reinforced similar concerns to those expressed by my younger informants, but also highlighted the increased confidence and autonomy that age can bring in enabling teenagers to actively redress the imbalance in power between them and adults in authority.

Occasionally, some of the children participating in learning programmes at the Museum went beyond merely questioning what they were being told, to actually denying the truth of it. When a Primary 5 class (8-9 year olds) explored the Viking

Handling Box in groups, for example, each group independently arrived at the conclusion that the glass beads were "fake", because they were too shiny, patterned and brightly coloured to fit with their notions of what the Vikings would have been able to make. Although the beads were indeed, replicas, they were still copies of 'real' objects found at Viking archaeological sites. The children's reaction suggests that they understood replica objects to be, in some way, untruthful red herrings; completely different from the "real thing". When it was also revealed that the pieces of flint were "real" (as opposed to being made of some other material), Graeme was unafraid to openly deny the truth of this revelation, asserting, instead, amongst his peers that the flint sample was "not real" (Fieldnotes, 6/10/10). The Museum's claims about the objects in the Viking Handling Box were also challenged by Aaron (9 years), who, in front of his classmates, immediately refuted his teacher's description of the first object by exclaiming, *"it's not real animal skin!"* (Fieldnotes, 7/10/10). I also observed other teachers' statements about handling objects being openly questioned by the children in their class. For example, when Jade (7 years) asked whether the Roman lamp was 'real', her teacher, based upon her past experience of the Roman Handling Box, suggested that it was. Max (7 years) then turned the lamp upside down to reveal an engraving which signified that the lamp was, in fact, a replica (Fieldnotes, 15/11/10). Max's actions, much to the consternation and surprise of the rest of the class, proved the teacher's knowledge to be flawed. The integrity of the Museum's claims to have included a combination of 'real' and replica objects was also called into question when the majority of the objects in this Handling Box turned out to be replicas.

Denial of the Museum's claims about its objects was also observed in children as young as 5 years old. When attending a storytelling session about a collection of 'Mystery Objects', for example, Tai interrupted the storyteller in order to challenge a part of the story which he considered unbelievable; *"How could the statues walk?"* (Fieldnotes, 9/11/10). Edmund was also apparently unconvinced by the storyteller's explanation that *"they kind of shuffled along"*, claiming, after the story had been concluded – *"that can't be a true story because statues can't walk!"* (Fieldnotes, 9/11/10). Here, the children appeared to be naively cynical about the nature of the

'statues' in the story, revealing that they didn't just mistrust the museum storyteller, but that they also mistrusted the 'things' (i.e. the statues) themselves. Thus, despite the children's tendencies towards suggestibility, the 'thing' here was able to exceed even the Museum's narratives. In discussion with the storyteller after the session, it was revealed that queries as to whether or not the stories he told were true or real were the most common questions he received from children. He said that he normally responded by getting the children to think about it themselves, and they usually argued that some bits might be true, whilst other bits were not.

It is clear that children participating in learning workshops at the National Museum of Scotland regularly obstructed the educational purposes of practitioners by expressing both doubt and denial concerning the stories they were being told about museum objects. This response can be linked to the children's perception of their own social status in relation to powerful adult authority figures. Their expressions of doubt perhaps constituted a rebellion against this inescapably unequal relationship, whilst also reflecting their genuine distrust of both the desire and the ability of the adults concerned to represent historical reality through these socially constituted objects (or rather, things). Indeed, how can any layperson be sure of what they are being told by a museum about its collections? This question can be related to the issues raised by the *new museology*[108] (Vergo 1989) concerning the constitution of knowledge and power in the museum space[109].

Selective Adaptation

Children participating in education workshops at the National Museum of Scotland also exerted their autonomy by adapting the museums' heritage narratives in order to suit their own interests and requirements. This could be observed both in the ways in which the children used the resources and things at their disposal, and the ways in

[108] See Chapter II for an extended discussion of the impact of the *new museology* on museums in the UK and the National Museum of Scotland in particular.
[109] I will develop the contributions my ethnographic research makes towards this crucial discussion in the following chapters of this thesis.

which they engaged with the concepts and ideas communicated to them about the museum and the topic they were studying.

During a series of 'self-led' workshops on Ancient Egypt, for example, I witnessed several deviations from both the intentions of the workshop designers and the instructions of adult facilitators (their teachers and parent helpers). Firstly, a group of Primary 3 children (aged 7-8 years) often chose not to read activity instructions, e.g. electing to use all six of the different hieroglyphic symbol stamps to mark their bookmark cards, as opposed to choosing just two to represent themselves, as per instructions (Fieldnotes, 17/03/10). In one session, the equipment from the archaeologist's trunk was used by a few of the boys (aged 8 years) to interact with the other, non-Egyptian exhibits, e.g. they used the magnifying glasses to look at objects in the display cases and the white gloves to touch some of the fossils and do Michael Jackson dance impressions! Sandra (7 years) used one of the brushes as a prop when applying layers of patterned slides to the coloured glass design interactive and, rather than staying with their group, a couple of the other boys (8-9 years) also spent their time taking photographs of everything they saw. The other children amused themselves by dressing up in the craftsman and queen costumes and running around the gallery, chasing each other. (Fieldnotes, 30/03/10)

In another, *Create Your Own Exhibition* workshop, a class of first year secondary students (around 12 years old) used the protective gloves they had been given by museum staff for object handling, to creatively express themselves using "jazz hands" and improvised acting or role play, e.g. *"I'm really posh wearing these!"* (Nakita, 8/10/10). Although one of the workshop facilitators later claimed to have personally inspired the children's "jazz hands" actions, hinting at the suggestibility of his child audience, these examples serve to exemplify the ways in which the objects and materials employed in the Museum's education programmes were employed by the children to serve their own, alternative agendas. In light of the findings of previous chapters, the children can be understood as effectively employing the museum's carefully constructed props and objects as things which could be re-constituted through narrative and bodily interaction into new forms with

new and different meanings. The children's alternative agenda, in these examples, appeared to be simply to have fun together in the Museum, through their independent exploration and discovery of the galleries and amusing role-play performances for the entertainment of their peers.

Children also selectively adapted the messages presented within the educational content of the Museum's workshops. They regularly interpreted the Handling Boxes' replica objects in different ways than were intended by both museum staff and their class teachers. During a session using the Viking Handling Box, for example, a Gaelic-speaking class filled out worksheets produced by their class teacher which asked them what materials the various objects were made out of. The replica Lewis Chessmen were commonly (and accurately) described as being made out of plastic (e.g. Chester, 7 years, 1/11/10). It thus became clear that the programme's key message (namely, that the Chessmen had been made out of walrus ivory and that the pieces provided in the box were only replicas, because the real ones were so precious) had been re-interpreted by their child audience, who refused to play the Museum's games; the objects they had been encouraged to investigate were plastic, therefore the children were not going to pretend otherwise![110]

Creative Alternatives

Another means by which children both obstructed and disrupted the educational agendas of the National Museum of Scotland was by completely disregarding the Museum's narratives in favour of their own imaginative alternatives[111]. I was able to observe examples of this creation of alternative accounts of museum objects from children across a range of different ages. Firstly, there were several instances when a child was inspired to extend imaginatively their experience of a museum handling object, despite the assertions of teachers and workshop facilitators regarding the nature of these objects. For example; Stephanie (7 years) claimed to be able to hear

[110] The important association perceived by these children between real objects and truth versus replica objects and falsity will be explored more fully in Chapter VI.
[111] The stories my informants told me about their families, their friends, their schools and the museum artefacts we were working with can be understood as narratives for the purposes of this discussion.

the sea through a replica Viking drinking horn, which had, in fact, been made from cow's horn (Fieldnotes, 7/10/10) and Keir (8 years) claimed to be able to smell oil from a Roman replica glass oil jar which had never seen oil in its life (01/03/10). Here, the children's creation of alternative narratives seemed to be inspired by their sensual interaction with the museum objects, using smell, hearing and touch. Classen (2005:277) has contrasted touch with sight, arguing that, by contrast, touch "annihilates distance and physically unites the toucher and the touched". Handling museum objects thus gave these children "the satisfaction of an intimate encounter" (ibid). These ethnographic examples also highlight the potency of the children's imagination in being able to conjure noteworthy physical and sensual experiences through their interaction with particular objects; *"Museums are for people to remember the past, and so that people can imagine what happened"* (Craig, 8 years, 08/03/11). Importantly, however, these imaginative experiences occurred through partial intellectual engagement with the narratives through which the Museum has constituted these objects, almost in spite of the material qualities of the things themselves.

Museum artefacts were not the only things the children employed in these imaginative expressions. For all classes using the Object Handling Boxes, for example, stacks of square coloured mats were provided for the children to sit on in the floor space allocated in the *Early People* gallery. During one of these workshops, I observed that after the first tray of objects, the primary class' attention spans degenerated and the children (aged 8-9 years) became more preoccupied with stacking up foam mats to sit on and fighting over them. They came up with a remarkable number of innovative ways to play with these things, e.g. balancing them on their heads saying "I am the water/flower god" (depending on the colour of the mat) and two children used them to create a kind of see-saw (Fieldnotes, 01/03/10). This behaviour actively disrupted the intentions of their teacher and, consequently, the learning outcomes of the workshop (as devised by the Museum's Education Department). It also further exemplified the children's primary concern with having fun with their peers in the Museum, building and strengthening class friendships and rivalries through this performance of competitive and creative play.

Secondary school children were also observed to disrupt the communication of the Museum's educational narratives in this way. During a *Create Your Own Exhibition* workshop, for example, the group of 12 year old children with whom I was working quickly became disinterested in arranging their drawings of their exhibition objects onto a 2D design board – *"they did not appear to find this concept particularly inspiring and were more interested in talking among themselves about things classified as 'cool' and playing with their finger skateboards, using the African headrest as an excellent halfpipe"* (Fieldnotes, 8/10/10). Here, again, concerns with peer group membership through engagement with fun entertainment and the performance of "cool", appeared to preoccupy the children's alternative interests and agendas.

Children also demonstrated their ability to disrupt educational narratives in other capacities, for example, by encouraging adult facilitators to deviate from the intended 'storyline' of the workshop. In one instance, for example, a Primary 2 class (aged around 6 years old) did this by relating fairly irrelevant stories to the facilitator when he had asked them a specific question, effectively side-tracking his narrative. They also deliberately or unconsciously misinterpreted his questions and effectively distracted the facilitator by putting their hands up when he was speaking (indicating to an adult observer that they weren't entirely listening to what he was trying to tell them and were instead more interested in getting the chance to speak themselves). (Fieldnotes, 27/09/10)

My child informants thus repeatedly demonstrated a remarkable ability to obstruct and disrupt the educational narratives of the Museum in order to suit their own social interests and political agendas. These related strongly to the performance of self-identity and their negotiation of the power dynamics inherent to their relationships with adult authority figures.

My ethnography has shown children participating in education programmes at the National Museum of Scotland to be influential actors, fully capable of impacting the various outcomes of the carefully-constructed social situations in which they found themselves. Their successful negotiation of their class' visit to the Museum involved

the same skilful balance between conformity (expressions of belonging to a particular group of children) and individuality described by James (1993). By engaging with the Museum's exhibits, handling objects and heritage narratives on their own terms, the children with whom I was working can be understood as using "symbols of the adult world – their future – to negotiate a social position and identity in the present" (James 1993:96). This reflects the existence of an important relationship between children's interaction with museum objects and the negotiation of their social positioning within the museum environment.

Children's social interaction within the context of school workshops

An exploration of children's relationships amongst themselves and with adults in the context of educational workshops at the National Museum of Scotland constitutes the final key area where their 'agency' and autonomy could be observed. Firstly, many of the children I observed appeared to be preoccupied with rule-making amongst themselves, expressing a great concern with what they and their peers were or were not allowed to do. Although these rules generally adhered to the behavioural expectations of adult authority figures, children's interpretations often gave them a life of their own. When a teacher was informing his class that they were free to explore the exhibits in the Museum's temporary *Treasured* gallery, for example, *"Sophie put her hand up and suggested that they were also not allowed to touch the glass of the display cases as this would leave marks"* (7 years, 30/03/10). During another class visit to the Museum, one of the first things I heard a child say to his partner was – *"we're in a museum so you aren't allowed to touch things"* (7 years, 21/04/10), irrespective of being told no such thing by his teacher. These unexpected incidences of rule-making from the children hints at their suggestibility in remembering the instructions of adults during previous museum visits.

Children also often berated each other for disobeying these "rules", such as failing to line up with their original partners, despite the teacher having already asserted that she didn't mind how they lined up (e.g. a Primary 3 class of 7-8 year olds, 18/03/10). They socially excluded those who failed to comply with these social norms. During

one Roman Object Handling workshop (with a Primary 3 class of 7-8 year olds), for example, I became aware, from very early on, that there were some serious underlying social tensions within the group. The children fought over whose turn it was to hold the votive offerings and, as time progressed, they became less and less interested in the objects than in what other children were doing *wrongly* (Fieldnotes, 17/11/10). Adult authority figures, such as workshop facilitators and class teachers (and even me, a self-declared researcher) were also often implored to confirm or deny the validity of such social rules. As an 'adult-in-charge' (Johansson 2011:106), for example, I was asked whether they were allowed to press the buttons on the model steam trains to make their wheels go round. In another incident, I managed to escape this 'adult-in-charge' positioning by deferring to a member of the Museum staff; *"Samantha and Ahmed (both around 8 years old) both asked me if you were allowed to climb or sit on the large steam train exhibit, to which I replied that I didn't think so, but they should go and ask "that lady", because she actually looked after the exhibits in this gallery. Samantha surprised me by actually doing so"* (Fieldnotes, 7/11/10). This concern with rule-making amongst my child informants could be interpreted as further negotiation of social status not only amongst their peers, but also within the specific context of their relationship with adult authority figures in the museum. Their peer-monitored interaction with museum objects thus served as a physical embodiment of broader power structures of both the Museum and school institutions within which they were confined.

Aside from rule-making amongst themselves, children were also able to exert their autonomy in their social interactions with other adults. As a researcher, I encountered this on a regular basis, particularly because I failed to live up to their expectations of an authority figure by deliberately answering their questions about the museum and its exhibits with honesty, frequently confessing that I did not know the answer. During one group's visit to the *Early People* gallery, for example, although I guided our group in the right general direction, I clearly did not profess enough certainty about knowing where the Viking boat display was located. This provoked Alexander (8 years) to half-query, half-admonish - "you should know all about this"! Shortly afterwards, the log boat was duly found and marvelled over,

although Thomas pointed out that it wasn't actually Viking after all (Fieldnotes, 6/10/10).

In turn, when I tried to ask the children questions, they diverted away from my chosen topic with incredible ease, if it either did not interest them or they simply did not want to answer my question. Often, I found myself appropriated by my child informants, regularly submitting to cross-examination about who I was, how old I was, where I lived and what I was doing in the Museum, in addition to carting their discarded coats and rucksacks around the galleries in their wake!

Johansson (2011:105) has argued that "It is not random chance what happens in encounters between adults and children in areas and activities where adults and children meet. Every element brings its history along with it, consisting of materiality, meanings, values and presuppositions of the world". The children participating in my project exercised social powers within the context of their relationship with me, often with the researcher becoming the disadvantaged/weaker party[112]. I also observed this to be true for some of the workshop facilitators. During one workshop with a Primary 2 class (children aged around 6 years old), for example, I observed that the facilitator struggled to retain the attention of the children during a gallery exploration activity - The vast majority of the children appeared to be much more interested in pressing buttons on the displays; arguing over whose turn it was to look at something or who was pushing who; and vying for a good seat in an attempt to watch one of the exhibition films, than in anything the facilitator was trying to show or explain to them (Fieldnotes, 27/09/10). Johansson's (2011:106-7) description of the 'pupil' subjectivity performed by school children is relevant here; involving both constructive participation in workshop activities and the adoption of "an irresponsible attitude, making the pretence of working or diverting attention from the work". In this manner, my child informants were able to use their actions in "assemblages, consisting of bodies, space…etc." to "enable them to deterritorialize the adult-defined designations, and create more powerful performances" (ibid:104).

[112] See Chapter I for further discussion of my ethical considerations when conducting ethnographic fieldwork with children.

It remained clear, however, that whilst children were able to demonstrate significant disruptive autonomy during their visit to the museum, the attitudes and directions exhibited by adults during this time generally maintained a substantial influence over their behaviour when encountering museum objects. This could also be seen in the difference between the behaviour of children visiting the Museum within a school group and those visiting in a more informal family context. The latter was generally more child-led and entertainment-focussed, whilst the former was more structured and learning-focussed. Kindler and Darras (1997:137) have observed through their research with children in Canada and France that "parents played the most instrumental role in children's early museum experiences". Early experiences of family visits to museums can thus be understood as having an important influence on children's later attitudes towards school trips to these institutions.

Wolins, Jensen and Ulzheimer (1992:25) have also argued that, "Clearly, the classroom teacher influenced the strength or vividnesss of the children's memories for certain museum trips by creating a context for the field trip". This was frequently observed during my fieldwork at the National Museum of Scotland, particularly when teachers opted to lead object-handling sessions from the front of the class, deliberately describing what was interesting about each object. The children demonstrably accepted these opinions without question, often repeating them to each other and to me later, in response to my own questions. During Object Handling activities in particular, the children also often expressed a greater interest in finding out the "correct" answer than imaginatively discussing the different possibilities based upon a closer examination of the artefacts concerned. During a Primary 3 class' (children aged 7-8 years) 'self-led' Ancient Egypt workshop, for example, I noticed that the children's impatience to turn over the interactive flaps to discover the "right" answers was driven not by an interest in the answers themselves, but rather by their desire to have correctly completed the exercise (Fieldnotes, 17/03/10). The children also often imitated how their teachers handled things in the Museum, e.g. using the strigil from the Roman Handling Box to 'scrape' along their arms, or the clay jug fragment to mime pouring something (e.g. a Primary 3 class, aged between 7 and 8 years, 15/11/10). They thus appeared to be far more suggestible than the

proposals of education programmes at the National Museum of Scotland and *A Curriculum for Excellence* have implied – a suggestibility which sits in tension with the autonomous 'agency' embodied in their disruptiveness described in the other ethnographic examples above. These latter observations highlight the central concern of this chapter – how do children engage with material heritage on their own terms, *in spite* of and yet also *according* to the cultural frames of reference communicated to them by the museum? Towards answering this question, I turn to an exploration of the specific case of the Lewis Chessmen touring exhibition.

Children's engagement with *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked* exhibition

Between May 2010 and September 2011, *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked* exhibition opened at the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh before travelling to three different tour locations across Scotland. During my research, it became apparent that its different tour locations at Aberdeen Art Gallery, Shetland Museum and Museum nan Eilean, all placed their respective community's particular history and sense of belonging at the heart of their own identities as local institutions and, consequently, their heritage narratives. Although the approach adopted by each institution towards educating local school children was distinctive[113], relating directly to the social, political and historical contexts of the places and communities in which they served, their general messages concerning the immense cultural value of museum objects and the importance of knowing one's past, were easily incorporated into school workshops relating to the Lewis Chessmen touring exhibition. In the following discussion, I examine how children responded to these educational agendas.

Children visiting *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked* expressed great interest and excitement about the artefacts, at each of the different tour locations. The exhibition elicited responses such as *"Aww! cool!"* from several school groups who were encountering the Chessmen for the first time. The tables at the side of the gallery,

[113] See chapter IV for further details.

where visitors were encouraged to try playing different medieval board games, along with the Beserker chess pieces and the drawing activities, were consistently listed as being the children's favourite parts of their exhibition experience, whilst the maps showing trading routes between Norway and Scotland were generally described as *"boring"*. The Gaelic exhibition film, featuring subtitles in English, was also not very popular with this 'group' of visitors, with the exception of Gaelic-speaking children from Lewis.

The following observations were made during a school group's visit to the exhibition at the Aberdeen Art Gallery. The Primary 6 class (10 and 11 year old children) were participating in a special partnership project with the Aberdeen museum service, which involved working with a freelance artist in order to produce a "radio programme" featuring their imaginative stories about the Chessmen. It was hoped that thereafter, this programme would be made available to the public at listening posts positioned just outside the main exhibition gallery – *"It's always nice at the end of a project to have a thing to hand out to people to say "look what we've done"!"* (Andrea, Aberdeen Art Gallery education officer, 26/10/10).

Throughout my interview with Andrea, as with staff at NMS, she had stated the importance of *A Curriculum for Excellence*, particularly in relation to the Lewis Chessmen project:

> *"My emphasis today will be upon the mystery surrounding the chessmen – the fact that no-one really knows – so that they can choose what to decide for themselves… I imagine the project might take the direction of storytelling and Viking sagas, but I won't be disappointed if it doesn't… I would like the focus to be on the figures themselves and the time period they came from rather than the story of the discovery, but, you never know, that might be the way the children want to take it."* (26/10/10)

On the whole, the workshop was well received by its child audience, although the majority of the narratives produced by the children for their final "radio programme" featured the story of the discovery of the Chessmen and not the areas in which Andrea had expressed a greater personal interest. It thus lent substance to her claim

that *"Curriculum for Excellence is very much about encouraging children to take the lead and go with their own ideas"* (Andrea, 26/10/10).

Upon their first visit to *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked* exhibition, the children in this class appeared to have been well prepared and informed; one girl even talked about researching the Chessmen on the Internet beforehand. Nonetheless, during her introduction, the education officer was asked a lot of questions about the exhibits, particularly regarding how the Chessmen had been crafted. The children were also keen to follow her instructions and visually study the objects closely, often remarking upon their physical appearance. After one such careful examination, Fraser, for example, suggested that the differences in the intricate carvings on the backs of the royal thrones may have represented different clans, possibly linking the Chessmen to his ideas about Highland culture and Scottish national identity (Fieldnotes, 26/10/10).

After this brief introduction from the education officer, the children were encouraged to look around the gallery for themselves. During this 'free time', they often engaged with exhibits in ways which did not adhere to the prescribed intentions of the exhibition's designers. At the tables set up with board games along the gallery wall, for example, instead of using the rules-cards provided, the children preferred to make up their own rules for the Viking game 'hnefatafl', chess and backgammon (Fieldnotes, 26/10/10). They also darted almost haphazardly back and forth between different display cases rather than following the planned, sequential route around the exhibition. Some of the children made comments about the different sizes of the Chessmen, asking why a few of the pieces were broken or bashed. This concern with the materiality of the objects themselves resonates with the work of Romanek and Lynch (2008:284), who, in discussing the impact of object handling activities in museums, have suggested that:

> If an object is cracked, if it's damaged, if it's stained, if it shows the finger or thumbprints of the maker (as in some ancient clay objects), the object has a resonant history, and children can become connected to this person, or inspired by the object's story. Signs of wear and everyday use can capture the imagination of those of any age.

Looking at one of the display cases, I asked Trevor what he thought of the exhibition and he responded by suggesting how the objects (a sword, an axe-head and two large brooches) in the case in front of us related to each other. Angus told me that the exhibition film as being too long, so that you lost interest very quickly. When I indicated to him that I found his feedback helpful, he elaborated, saying – *"I couldn't understand the Gaelic and didn't want to have to read the subtitles"* (26/10/10). This opinion was shared by various adult visitors' remarks made in the exhibition's visitors' comments book. Angus went on to tell me; *"It would also have been better if they could have had all the chess pieces together in one case – they're a bit scattered as they are. All of the other things which aren't Chessmen should be put together too"*. On the whole, the class' written responses to the Lewis Chessmen (part of their workshop activity) largely centred upon how the Chessmen made them feel (e.g. scared) and what the figures might have been thinking/feeling (e.g. hungry, angry, bored). They also commented upon the intricate carvings on the back of the thrones and elected to draw their own versions of the pawns. These responses had been specifically encouraged by the focus and content of the workshop activities. The children thus not only conveyed their keen engagement with the Chessmen as particular people-objects[114], but also demonstrated their capacity to be both suggestible and disruptive. At once, allowing their responses to the Chessmen to be shaped by adult influences and expectations, whilst also subjecting the museum's approach to exhibiting these objects to critique and employing both the exhibition space and the interactive board games to serve their own personal agendas.

In Shetland, I found that children responded to the exhibition positively, with greater animation than I had observed at Aberdeen – *"OMG! They are v. awesome I liked the big cardboard cut-outs!"* (Visitors' comments book, Brae); *"I really liked it and I loved the replicas of them in the Gift Shop!"* (9 years, Lerwick). They also seemed to thoroughly enjoy the workshop activity which encouraged them to draw their favourite Chess piece - often producing some very well-observed, high quality drawings. I noticed a pattern in the more popular choices, these generally featured: a decorated pawn from the first display case (although some children admitted to me

[114] See Chapter IV for further discussion of the Chessmen's treatment as particular people-objects.

that they had chosen it because it was easier to draw); the "missing Berserker" chewing his shield[115]; the Queen and the Knight pieces. In conversation with two girls (aged around 7-8 years) who had both chosen to draw a Queen, I asked them why she was their favourite. Their response, *"because she looks cool and beautiful"* (22/02/11), however, appeared to have been based more upon their expectations of what a Queen should look like, rather than the unfeminine, grumpy, bulging-eyed reality embodied by the Queen of the Lewis Chessmen! A group of children visiting the exhibition as part of a clay modelling workshop at the Shetland Museum also expressed great interest in the age of the Chessmen (*"over 800 years old!"*) as well as their physical appearance. Hamish (9 years), for example, responded to the workshop facilitator's warning not to dry the clay too fast in case it cracks, by stating *"that would make it more like the real Chessmen. They've got loads of cracks because they're really old"* (19/02/11). Here, Hamish was making a direct link between something looking and being "really old" and it being "real" (cf. Romanek & Lynch 2008:284)[116].

As discussed in Chapter IV, the children also often spoke about the Chessmen in human terms, engaging quite naturally with the objects as if they were people. The personification of these museum objects had been actively encouraged by both their adult workshop facilitators and the exhibition's designers. During a gallery tour in Shetland, for example, when the workshop facilitator pointed out one of the chess pieces, saying *"Look at that poor Queen, doesn't she look so fed up?!"*, one girl (11 years) responded, *"It's because of the King"*; *"Maybe he slapped her!"*, another boy (11 years) chipped in (23/02/11). In a 'Question and Answer' session with special guest, Dr Irving Finkel (Assistant Keeper, Department of the Middle East at the British Museum and world specialist in board games), one child (9 years) asked, with reference to a particular Chessman; *"when was he born?",* to which Irving Finkel replied – *"you mean, when was the Chessman made?"* (17/02/11). This encounter

[115] This particular Berserker was an image commonly used by NMS in marketing material about the Chessmen, although, significantly, it did not feature in the exhibition itself – see Chapter I for elaboration on this topic.

[116] This important relationship between temporality and materiality, as embodied in the physical appearance of museum objects will be explored further in Chapter VI.

further illustrates the suggestibility of the school children visiting the exhibition. During the same session, however, they also demonstrated their autonomy in disrupting the musuem's narratives. They did this by expressing greater interest and absorption in asking questions of this 'important man' than in the answers he gave, or indeed the Chessmen themselves. I asked a girl (9 years) in the Primary 5 class what had been the most interesting thing she'd learnt, for example, and, after some thought, she replied – *"Finding out that Irving's chess set had been in the Harry Potter film! That was really cool"*. Another couple of girls agreed that their favourite part of the day had been asking Irving Finkel questions; *"It's a bit weird! When he was talking, I could see him talking on the film behind us!"* (Fieldnotes, 17/02/11). Here, the evidence of the exhibition film had served to affirm the authenticity of Irving Finkel as a 'real' expert, provoking the children's greater interest and engagement in what he was saying. Their responses to this particular kind of person mirrored their interactions with particular kinds of museum objects which were socially and materially constituted as 'real'[117]. According to my informants, being allowed access to 'real objects' and a 'real expert' conferred upon them an adult-like status. Their comments thus also serve to emphasise the importance they placed upon how their positioning was perceived by adults - Irving Finkel was quite clearly a high status visitor to the Shetland Museum (a fact which was consistently emphasised by museum staff) and so being granted the opportunity to ask him direct questions, was viewed as a reflection of the children's own increased status in the museum space.

At the Shetland Museum, in the context of a workshop I had helped to develop, the visiting school children were given the opportunity to respond creatively to all they had seen and heard during their tour of the exhibition, through a choice of art, drama and/or creative writing. It was during this part of the workshop that the children were really able to determine the outcomes of their museum visit, being encouraged to share creatively their own ideas and theories about the Chessmen. The children were quick to take advantage of this opportunity. Thomas (11 years), for example,

[117] See Chapter VI for greater exploration of children's concern for encountering 'real' objects in the context of the museum.

told me that he thought the decorated Pawn chess pieces represented grave stones, because of their appearance and the fact that there was such a high mortality rate for foot soldiers in medieval times *"because they got lots of diseases and died easily"* (23/02/11). Another boy suggested that *"the Lewis Chessmen were buried with someone when he died and the body has been dissolved by the earth"* (Fraser, 11 years, 23/02/11), an idea which may well have been influenced by his prior knowledge of Viking burial practices (illustrating an emphasis on Viking history in Shetland schools' curriculum).

During this creative section of the workshop, the majority elected to respond to their experiences at the exhibition through a craft activity, where they stamped their own autonomy upon the products of this activity by adding unprescribed features to cut-outs of the Lewis Chessmen, such as extra stick-on eyes, a moustache for the Queen and red eyes for the King (representing him as *"evil"*) [Figure 16]. Samantha (10 years, 21/02/11), chose to write a very clever, witty play, for which she enlisted other children in her group to read the respective parts of King, Queen and Bishop etc. Three boys (10-11 years), dressed up with helmets, swords and shields they had constructed for themselves out of paper and card in order to perform a rap in front of the whole class – *"This is the Lewis Chessmen rap, They were discovered on the Isle of Lewis, They were split up – YAY, We are the beserkers – licensed to kill"* (21/02/11), whilst another group of 10 and 11 year olds read out a poem they had written (Fieldnotes, 21/02/11)[118].

Each creative response demonstrated the children's engagement with the Chessmen and the exhibition. The raps and poetry also evidenced their awareness of underlying issues concerning the Chessmen that could be related to repatriation claims. The questions raised by this scenario were irrefutably political in nature, often inspired by the expressed concerns of influential adults such as class teachers, parents and museum staff. The children's adoption of these political values conveys both their

[118] See Chapter IV.

suggestibility and their desire to engage and identify with 'adult' concerns[119]. This sheds further light upon the curious dynamic of their relationship with adult authority figures.

Again, at Museum nan Eilean in Lewis, I found that the Lewis Chessmen exhibition was consistently greeted with enthusiasm by visiting school and nursery children. It was common to see the children engrossed in looking at the figures of the Chessmen in the display cases, asking lots of questions about them and making observations about their physical characteristics, e.g. "*They wore dresses"* (Tony, 4 years, 12/05/11). Often having been prepped by their class teachers the day before their workshop, I was impressed with the children's ability to remember lots of detailed information about the Chessmen and their discovery. The subject was clearly one with which they could relate intellectually. In group discussions, however, they were often unable to devise and develop their own arguments relating to the Chessmen or engage with the debate surrounding the question of their provenance. They were, however, able to demonstrate their ability to obstruct the agendas of the museum workshops by giving 'incorrect' answers to questions relating to major points of emphasis during the exhibition tour. On more than one occasion, for example, one of their first responses to the question *"share one interesting fact you know about the Chessmen"* (a question which was frequently answered with difficulty) was *"I know they are made out of stone"* (i.e. not walrus ivory).

Pre-school children were also able to be creative in response to my questions, e.g. when talking about what the Chessmen were wearing on their heads and holding in their hands, Seamus (4 years, 13/05/11) suggested that the Bishop piece was holding an umbrella. These responses from very young children (aged between 3 and 4 years old) also indicate their propensity to relate new experiences to already-familiar aspects of their everyday lives (such as umbrellas, instead of crosiers!). A few of the children played with some of the pieces such as the Knight and the Warders, making them gallop and/or fight and interact with each other, sometimes to the concern of

[119] The children's concern for the political issue of repatriation and the ultimate fate of the Lewis Chessmen is discussed further in Chapter VI.

their adult play leaders. Despite the practical problems with accessibility, these younger children generally described their trip to the museum as being fun and exciting.

The level to which children were able to engage with *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked* outwith the particular context of school workshops was commented upon by adult visitors in the exhibition's visitors' comments book, e.g ; *"Lovely exhibition. Nice to see them at last. My girls – 10, 7 and 4 enjoyed them too. Maybe some plastic replicas for handling would enhance the 'feel' for children and adults alike. Thank you"* (Aberdeen Art Gallery, October 2010). The emphasis here on the importance of touch in enhancing engagement with museum objects such as the Lewis Chessmen resonates with the claims made by Romanek and Lynch (2008:276-277):

> When a person has the opportunity to handle an object, they can have the feeling that the object is a part of themselves or, conversely, that they are a part of the object – an experience of intimacy that would likely be denied were the object placed behind glass out of reach.

The role of sensual engagement with museum objects through handling will be discussed further in the conclusion of this chapter. In the meantime, it is worth noting that evaluation work undertaken at Museum nan Eilean revealed that although family groups were in the minority (around 22%), those who did visit the exhibition in the company of children did not report any less enthusiastically about their overall experience, with responses varying between describing it as 'good' or 'very good'. One respondent from the Western Isles stated *"I am eleven and I found it easy to understand"*. When asked what he had discovered in the exhibition that he hadn't known before, a 6-year-old boy who was doing a project on the Lewis Chessmen at his local school, said that he had found out that the Chessmen were found on Uig. His 3-year-old sister said she had particularly liked the red playing pieces (from Irving Finkel's Harry Potter replica set) (Fieldnotes, 14/05/11).

Overall, it appeared that the exhibition made a strong impression on its child visitors at each tour location, with many participants expressing an awareness of the

historical significance of the collection; *"The Lewis Chessmen are important because: they tell us about the people who made them; because of the mystery surrounding them; because they tell us about our history"* (Shetland, children aged 10-11 years, 23/02/11). It also appeared that despite the exhibition content and style being geared towards a more adult audience, children were also engaged and absorbed in its displays. They easily identified with the humanity of the Chessmen, due, in part, to their very comical and expressive appearance. They were also able to relate to cultural references in the exhibition, such as *Harry Potter*, and enjoyed the playing with the 'hands-on' board game activities available in the exhibition. Whilst some children responded well to encouragement to create their own imaginative interpretations of the story of the Lewis Chessmen, however, others appeared to find this level of independent, undirected thought challenging. Thus, as was also illustrated by my observations of education workshops at the National Museum of Scotland, my child informants consistently presented themselves in relation to the representations of the museum as being very suggestible - highly influenced and dependent upon the knowledge and opinions expressed by adult authority figures. At the same time, they were also capable of disrupting the educational purposes of the museum's workshops by questioning the truth behind what they were being told and creatively employing the museums' resources to suit their own entertainment and to both support and sustain peer group relationships.

As explored in the previous chapter, the Lewis Chessmen, as a particular example of 'people-objects', captured my child informants' imaginations. They were both adopted as the 'special', 'valuable' and 'unique' artefacts which were both socially constituted by the museums' narratives, and complicit in the children's disruption of these heritage narratives. Imbued with "a life of their own", they were made 'evil' or 'beautiful', they fought each other and had arguments, and their arrival on Lewis was invented in new and exciting ways which differed from the theories described by museum experts. Children's 'agency' in relation to *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked* exhibition thus also lends us further insight into the social constitution of the Lewis Chessmen as 'people-objects', along with their affective material presence and iconic affordances.

We see, therefore, that children often engage and interact with the Museum's collections in ways that are suggestive of things – material stuff which has the potential for many new and different uses and meanings. The fluctuating and unstable processes by which museum objects are both socially constituted and deconstructed, can be seen as embodying a loss of control, which appears to sit uncomfortably with the Museum's understanding of the 'agency' of objects and their capacity to communicate meaning and cultural knowledge through "a structured sign system…like a language" (Tilley 2002:23; Saussure 1959). This belief assumes that; "Objects, like words and bodies, are not 'themselves', but symbols of themselves, and through them we are continuously at the game of resymbolizing ourselves" (Pearce 1997:10)[120]. Applying the principles of 'mulitvocality' in hermeneutics to museum education, Vallance (1995:4), has argued that art museum educators "help to develop students' abilities to see and hear the stories visible and accessible in the world around them". She also highlights one of the major difficulties faced by those working within this context, namely that they "rarely know how well… particular programs worked: Museums are an extreme example of curricula of unintended consequences and residual learning" (ibid:12).

Since the 1990s, an 'Emergent Paradigm' in childhood research (James & Prout 1997)[121] has surfaced whereby children have come to be widely considered in both academia and museum practice, as 'agents', exerting 'agency' in their interactions and relationships with other children and with adults. In stark contrast to Mead's early claim that children do not have a creative capacity and construct identity solely on the basis of their imitation of the adult population (1973:205), the new paradigm asserts that:

> childhood and children's social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right, and not just in respect to their social construction by adults. This means that children must be seen as actively involved in the construction of their own social

[120] See also Hunt (1993), Pearce (1994) and Tilley (1994) for further discussion of the hermeneutical approach towards the study of material culture.
[121] See also Chapter I.

> lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live. (James & Prout 1997:3)

Whilst a 'new wave' of childhood scholarship has claimed that rather than treating childhood as an "irreducible whole" (Ryan 2012:449) (a 'hybrid form' of biology and culture - Prout 2005:3), the 'Emergent Paradigm' only served to reinforce the social:biological dichotomy it was attempting to overcome (cf. Ryan 2012:44), it remains a general consensus that "researchers should recognize children's agency, their citizenship as human beings now and not just in the future" (Tisdall et al 2009:2). In this statement, 'citizenship' can be understood to mean children's full participation in society, although, in relation to education programmes delivered at the National Museum of Scotland, the term's political connotations to the nation state have particular relevance - how does the National Museum of Scotland encourage children to be fully participatory citizens in Scottish society? It appears to do this through its adherence to national priorities, *A Curriculum for Excellence*[122], and a focus on shared Scottish cultural heritage.

Crucially, what does it mean to consider children as 'agents'? In this context, the term 'agency' is used to denote the idea that children (roughly categorised as people between the age of 3 and 12 years old) are not mere proto-people, blank canvases upon which adults are able to paint a picture of personhood, but rather individuals in their own right, full participants in the social networks and material worlds in which they are situated. These ideas, however, must be held in tension with the undeniable fact that children remain completely dependent on adults for at least their physical needs, if not also their emotional and intellectual ones. As my ethnographic observations have shown, my child informants were only too aware of this uneven power dynamic. In line with the values of *A Curriculum for* Excellence, at the National Museum of Scotland (and its partner museums across Scotland), children were assumed to possess a kind of assertive agency; the ability to make up their own minds and create their own meanings and understandings of the museum objects with which they were presented. On the other hand, the very presence of an Education Department at the National Museum of Scotland, with particular responsibilities for

[122] See Chapter I for greater exploration of these areas.

children in the Museum, serves as testimony to the conceptualisation of children as 'other', requiring special treatment in comparison with adults. Thus, they were also considered particularly mouldable, in comparison with adult museum visitors. This assumption justified investment into the messages communicated by education programmes about cultural heritage, because these were often viewed as being capable of influencing children's lifelong attitudes as they grew up into adulthood (cf. Shirley, personal communication, 12/04/10).

As discussed in Chapter I, childhood has traditionally been opposed to adulthood as 'becoming' is to 'being':

> The human being is, or should be, capable of independent thought and action, an independence that merits respect. The human becoming, on the other hand, is changeable and incomplete and lacks the self-possession and self-control that would allow it the independence of thought and action that merits respect. The division between beings and becomings is that between the complete and independent and the incomplete and dependent.
> (Lee 2001:5)

In light of this historical division, Lee (2001:6) has argued that its development was both socially and culturally situated, and is thus subject to change. He argues that, since the 1970s, such economic and social change in 'western' society has resulted in 'standard' or 'normal' adulthood no longer being equated with predictable stability, but rather instability; "the 'new economy' has rendered the workplace uncertain and adulthood 'flexible'" (Lee 2001:15). Whilst the image of the adult at the "journey's end" (ibid:9), is "crucial in maintaining the authority that adults often have over children, the right and duty to make decisions for them", childhood has become a journey, which no longer has a "*knowable* destination" (ibid:7). This discussion can be linked to the work of previous chapters on the social constitution of museum objects, in that personhood, like those objects, can be conceived as being part of an ongoing, relational process of becoming, within "a world of perpetual flux" (Ingold 2002:16).

What does it actually mean, therefore, for children to have 'agency' in the context of education workshops at the National Museum of Scotland? This chapter addresses a

central tension running throughout my fieldwork – my child informants' capacity to be at once highly disruptive and surprisingly suggestible. They appeared to accept, unquestioningly, the authority of adults in the Museum to impart knowledge, and yet continually questioned the truth of this knowledge. They were heavily influenced by the stated opinions of museum professionals and their teachers, becoming complicit in adopting adult models of how to frame particular cultural knowledge, whilst, on the other hand, they threw museum property around the room and spoke of the value of museum objects in monetary terms rather than referring to their cultural significance. In this way, children and childhood should be viewed through the lens of uncertainty – "the ontology of childhood emerges through the *indeterminacy* of nature" (Ryan 2012:446, cf. Rousseau 1888). They are undoubtably actors with an important role within museum education – to both 'learn' the value of heritage according to the Museum's framing narratives, whilst also testing the boundaries of adult authority through the unpredictable expression of their own autonomy and independence of these frameworks.

Conclusion

In Chapter III, Gell (1998) and Latour's (2005) respective contributions to the discussion of 'agency' were related to the role of objects within the social network of the museum. This debate produced a conception of agency which is not restricted to humans, but rather includes any*thing* which participates in an action or event. Agency is therefore construed as being both relational and context-specific. Thus disassociated from conscious thought, will or intentionality, it can be linked with *affect* (cf. Clough 2007; Thrift 2004) and the affective capacity of both human and nonhuman actants (Latour 2005) to have social and material consequences. Despite the philosophical interest and value of this discussion, however, we have been left with a term that is no longer recognisable in the everyday reality of ethnographic fieldwork:

> Our concept of agency must make allowance for the real complexity of living organisms, as opposed to inert matter. It is simply absurd to place a grain of sand and an aphid on the scales of a balance and to claim that they are equivalent. They may weigh

> the same amount, but in terms of complexity they are poles apart. (Ingold 2011:94)

The discussions of 'agency' taking place within material culture studies can also confuse our interpretation of the conclusions drawn by the recent 'emergent' (James & Prout 1997) and 'new wave' (Prout 2005; cf. Ryan 2012) approaches towards Childhood studies, where children are described as possessing and exerting agency within social situations and relationships existing between themselves and adults. In relation to the definitions provided by both Gell (1998) and Latour (2005), these conclusions become both obvious and uninteresting – of course children have the ability to participate in actions and impact the outcome of events! It is consequently very difficult to use the same term for their interaction in the museum's social sphere as we have for museum objects. This distinction has been further explained by Ingold (2011:94) as follows:

> the essence of action lies not in aforethought…but in the close coupling of bodily movement and perception. But that is also to say that all action is, to varying degrees, *skilled*… Since agency calls for skill, and since skill arises through development, it follows that the process of development is a *sine qua non* for the exercise of agency. To attribute agency to objects that do not grow or develop, that consequently embody no skill, and whose movement is not therefore coupled to their perception, is ludicrous.

So, the 'agency' of objects and the agency of children (and all living things) are profoundly different, separated by the ability to develop skill, i.e. to learn. This factor is absent in the former, whilst significantly present in the latter. It is exactly this ability, evident in the responsive and creative capacity of children, which is depended upon by the producers of museum workshops in order for these education programmes to 'work'. Children's ability to direct their own learning is also the underlying principle of *A Curriculum for Excellence*. What, then, can we conclude about children's engagement with material heritage in the context of the museum?

Object handling – sensual interaction with the physical stuff of things in the museum plays a highly significant role in children's experiences of education workshops, having a "long-lasting effect and relationship with memory" (Romanek & Lynch 2008:284). Not only did the opportunity for the physical interrogation of museum

objects seem to enhance children's engagement with heritage education in the museum, but it also involved them in the processes by which such objects are socially constituted; "a deep mutuality exists between our sensory apparatus and material things… the sensor and the material call each other into existence" (Edwards et al 2006:5). Crucially, this direct encounter with objects enabled children to obtain a level of control and autonomy over the narratives that museums were attempting to communicate.

There is, however, more to the act of touch than this, particularly in the context of museums. Paterson (2007:1) has described touch as being "a sense of communication", capable of bringing "distant objects and people into proximity". Associated with "verification, the connnotations of tangibility being solid, foundational, undeceiving" (ibid:2), Paterson suggests that the "feeling of cutaneous touch when an object brushes our skin is simultaneously an awareness of the materiality of the object and an awareness of the spatial limits and sensations of our lived body" (ibid). Thus, "the world is with us" through touch (Paterson 2007:101) and the act of touching can be related to the construction of "affective", "emotional" and "metaphorical" meaning (Paterson 2007:3). This is of particular relevance to the constitution of material heritage in museums. Whilst the discipline of anthropology, in parallel with museological practice, has gradually distanced itself from the senses towards hermeneutics (Howes 2010:3-18), an appreciation of children's physical engagement with museum objects also not only restores the senses to a more central position in this field of research, but also provides insight into the how society directs and defines our cultural sensory orders (see Classen 1991:57).

This chapter has explored the multiple ways in which children interact with objects within the context of museums by examining the underlying premises of the educational narratives of the National Museum of Scotland and its partner museums, before paying particular attention to children's responses to these narratives. The central tension throughout the chapter has been the apparently conflicting demonstrations of children's behaviour in the museum as being at once highly suggestible and highly disruptive. My ethnography illustrates incidences where

children have been seen to 'swallow whole' the educated guess-work of class teachers about museum objects and history topics (about which the adults concerned were by no means expert), whilst other children threw replica museum objects around the room, denying the official explanatory information provided by the museum in favour of their own creative imaginings. Children's engagement with material heritage and their social positioning within the museum should thus not be viewed as a value that is fixed, but rather within the changing power dynamics of uncertainty.

The adult-instigated social rules to which children referred in their self-governance and peer interactions within the museum space were both limiting and hugely expansive at the same time, allowing space for children's imaginative interpretations[123]. The new approach to teaching and learning advocated by *A Curriculum for Excellence* encourages children to ask questions; "An important focus of Curriculum for Excellence is pupil participation in setting learning targets, reflecting on their achievements and taking responsibility for their own learning"[124]. This approach has impacted children's ability to direct and disrupt educational processes in both the classroom and the museum, yet, in a manner which is both socially and culturally acceptable, for example; "Together, my teacher and I discuss my progress and we agree targets. I like knowing where I stand and what I am aiming for. It makes it easier to speak up if I am stuck, because I want to meet my targets" (P7 pupil[125]). Consequently, throughout this chapter, it has been noted that children are far from passive consumers of museums' meticulously-designed cultural scripts, and that the educational concerns of museums, which are bound up with the national curriculum and the performance of notions of local/national identity, are often very distant from the day-to-day priorities of their child audience. Although the categorization of my child informants into one social group is found to be highly problematic (their opinions and behaviours being significantly impacted by variables

[123] See Chapter VI for further exploration of the imaginative affordances of children's particular material encounters within the museum.
[124] City of Edinburgh Council, 'Curriculum for Excellence Explained', p9.
[125] City of Edinburgh Council, 'Curriculum for Excellence Explained', p9.

such as socioeconomic status, education, rural or urban upbringing, family etc)[126], my observations of their responses to museum visits lead me to suggest that their collective interests largely concerned having fun and establishing their positioning within peer friendship groups. The children were thus very capable of adapting and disrupting the various agendas embedded within the communications of museum education programmes. They exhibited a level of autonomy which has been illuminated by Lee's (2001:19) observation that the "destabilisation of adulthood" in both economic and family life over the later half of the twentieth century means that adults are no longer able to assume authority over their children on the basis of their greater life experience – being *"experts* on how to live" (ibid).

This is not to say, however, that museums do not exert their undeniable power and authority in shaping children's experiences of socially constituted museum objects, through both formal exhibitions and workshops. Museums ultimately remained in control of the overarching narratives through which children encounter material heritage. Whilst, through their implementation of *A Curriculum for Excellence*, museums such as Aberdeen Art Gallery and Shetland Museum have professed to allow children the freedom to engage and respond to the Lewis Chessmen in their own ways, it is worth noting that the results of this creativity were not given equal status with the message content of the touring exhibition itself. It is thus significant that the Chessmen radio programme produced by school children at the Aberdeen Art Gallery was restricted to listening posts *outside* the exhibition gallery at both the Art Gallery and Shetland Museum, and not at all at Museum nan Eilean, so as not to interfere with the carefully-crafted messages of the exhibition. Thus, children's autonomy was encouraged only to a certain extent, and then controlled by the museums, in a way that can be seen to mirror the museums' approaches to the objects they displayed.

Much of my ethnography suggests that many children delighted in encountering 'real objects' in the context of their experience of a class visit to the museum - encounters which inspired an imaginative lived experience of the past. Many of the situations

[126] See also Chapter I for greater discussion of this issue.

whereby children disrupted and obstructed adults' expressions of authority in relation to their representation of museum objects also related to the children's desire to discern "real" objects and "fake" ones. Lending us further insight into children's positioning within the social context of the museum, it is towards a greater exploration of 'realness' and 'authenticity' to which we now turn.

Chapter VI: The Importance of being 'Real'

"Shouldn't there be real things in a museum?"
(Leo, 9 years, 17/03/10)

This chapter addresses the problem introduced in Chapter V – children's desire for (but doubt about) the 'realness' of museum objects. From the outset, this was a prevalent theme arising from my research. The first school visit to the National Museum of Scotland I observed, for example, was a Primary 4 class of relatively privileged 8-9 year olds. They were using the Roman Handling Box in the *Early People* gallery:

> *The first set of objects were the only ones which held the attention of the whole group at once. Great emphasis seemed to be placed by the children upon whether an item was 'real' or not, e.g. they seemed to really like the amphorae fragment* [Figure 21] *(Stewart: "you mean this was touched like this by a real Roman?") and when I answered Connor's question about the strigil, saying it was not 'real', his immediate response was "Boring!". I asked him why he liked real things more, and he replied; "because they're all the way from Rome".* (Fieldnotes, 01/03/10)

Stewart's comment, in particular, underlines his understanding and appreciation of the *presence* of the object (Runia 2006) and its perceived embodiment of the imminent past[127]. Here, he considers 'the past' as a distinct moment in time – a period that was completely separate from 'now', having taken place "a very long time ago". The children's concern for determining the 'true nature' of the artefacts presented to them thus opened up an insightful perspective into how they conceptualised their experiences of history through material heritage at the Museum. Despite my own discomfort, described by Theodossopoulos (2013a:338) as "anthropological correctness", about labelling "cultural products authentic, unreal, or fake" (ibid), the children seemed to find such labelling entirely unproblematic. It was also clear that, contrary to the opinions of staff working in the Museum's Education Department, discovering whether a museum object was 'real' or not was of primary importance to my child informants. This conclusion has been supported by the results

[127] See Chapters III and IV for further discussion of *presence*.

of a 2009 survey conducted by the UK's thirty-two national museums (including the National Museum of Scotland), which asked children to nominate their favourite museum pieces. At the National History Museum, for example, one boy stated that his favourite objects were "fossils and things that are real and not fakes" (Radio Four, The Today Programme, 13/05/09). Rhian Harris, of the Victoria and Albert museum elaborated, stating that "where kids are able to hold a real object inspires much greater engagement with the subject – they are 'touching history'" (ibid).

Handler has suggested that "contact with authentic pieces of culture in museums…allows us to appropriate their authenticity, incorporating that magical proof of existence into what we call our 'personal experience'" (1986:4). Here, he is alluding to the idea that 'culture', particularly the 'national culture' represented by museums, is ultimately unstable – its 'existence' needing to be perpetually constituted both materially (e.g. through collection and conservation) and through narrative. Contact with an 'authentic' piece of this culture is thus described as 'magical proof' because it simultaneously provides an other-worldly encounter between two distinct moments in time – the past and the present – thereby constituting 'proof' that such a thing as history exists and that we are in some way connected to it. We are then able to incorporate these notions into our personal identity and constructions of self.

In this way, through formalised practices of conservation and display, museums are complicit in representing time according to a linear progressive framework, whereby 'the past', 'the present' and 'the future' are conceived as distinct entities. This stands in direct contrast to the ever-changing state of perpetual flux through which all things are mutually becoming. Described by Hodges (2008) in his appropriation of the philosophical work of Bergson and Deleuze on *la duree*, this latter ontological grounding for 'time' is essentially non-chronological; "a series of successive instants" (Hodges 2008:410). It leaves us with the uncomfortable notion that the past is contemporaneous, coexistant and *a priori* of the present. By objectifying the past through the 'authentic' representation of material heritage, museums thus enable their visitors to comprehend the passing of 'time' through a more familiar framework,

whereby the past becomes something which is both distant and distinct from the present.

A material 'thing' can be at once representative of (metaphorical) and actually *from* (metonymical) the past (Runia 2006). Many adult visitors were observed to be inspired by the metonymical quality of the objects they encountered in the museum and so this reaction was not just expressed by children alone. Children were particularly interesting and distinctive as informants within this context, however, because: a) they had not necessarily chosen to be museum visitors - being both obliged to attend school and their school's trip to the museum meant that they hadn't necessarily "bought into" the value system of the museum and its framing narratives for the objects on display; b) children's adoption of a tactile and multisensory approach towards museum objects (cf. Classen 2005:284), unhampered by the same level of restrictive social stigma experienced by adult visitors, made their perspectives particularly interesting in relation to their physical and intellectual engagement with material heritage; c) children's concern with metonymical museum objects – objects that actually came from the past – related not only to their imaginative experience of this encounter, but also the implications this had for the authority of the museum's framing narratives (cf. Goffman 1986), particularly in relation to their own social positioning in the museum space. Unlike adults, my child informants appeared to question the ability of the objects themselves to reveal their true nature, often suspecting material trickery and misrepresentation.

Children did not necessarily trust that what the museum and their teachers were telling them about objects was 'true', neither did they take for granted that adult museum professionals trusted them with 'real' and precious objects. My child informants used 'real' to describe something which was *from* 'the past' (or could be dated historically) and 'fake' to mean its opposite – a replica/reproduction/copy of such an object – something which was dressed up to be something it was not. The words 'true' and 'truth' referred to the existence of 'accurate facts', or informed knowledge, as opposed to lies or over-simplification.

Taking the contrast between the children's understandings of 'realness' and the Museum's own concern with the concept of 'authenticity' as a point of departure, this chapter deconstructs the assumptions behind each of these notions, before unpacking further ethnographic observations of the National Museum of Scotland's children's education programmes relating to the opposition of 'real' and 'replica' museum objects. I explore how the nature of the objects encountered impacted both children's behaviour and their engagement with the Museum's educational narratives. I then discuss the importance of place and context in affecting the perceived authenticity of particular museum objects, looking specifically at the case of the Lewis Chessmen and the question of repatriation evoked by fieldwork in Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Shetland and Lewis. After reflecting more theoretically upon the notion of 'authentic experience' and how museum objects are able to induce particular sentiments in their beholders, I consider 'realness' and 'authenticity' in relation to the concepts of value and status as they interplay within the dynamic power structures of the museum space, before considering what 'authenticity' actually is and means in this context.

Ethnographic material from education programmes at the National Museum of Scotland suggests that 'authenticity' cannot be reduced to the intellectual and emotional projections of human subjects onto material things. Rather, museum objects have an affective capacity – a combination of their physical nature and the narratives through which they are socially constituted, which inspires the very notion that a truthful reality can be attained by their beholders; "An authentic experience… is one in which individuals feel themselves to be in touch both with a 'real' world and with their 'real' selves" (Handler & Saxton 1988:243). Thus, in contrast to arguments for the abstraction of authenticity from bodily experience, I examine the concept as it is constructed and employed by my informants (cf. Theodossopoulos 2013a; 2013b), firmly grounded in the material reality of handling museum objects. In so doing, making a contribution towards a more nuanced understanding of contextualised performances of personal identity and community belonging.



Figure 21: Fragments of Roman amphorae (featuring finger mark) from the Roman Handling Box at the National Museum of Scotland (September 2013).



Figure 22: Reconstructed 'Viking Grave' on display in the *Early People* gallery at the National Museum of Scotland (September 2013).

Authenticity, in itself a relative term, can thus, in the context of the museum, refer to an embodied experience, which does not have to be abstracted from the very real and physical encounter between things, and through which the metonymical *presence* of the past can be felt and acted upon (Runia 2006).

In this chapter, I also pull together some of the theoretical strands discussed in the previous chapters of this thesis, which relate to the social and material constitution of 'things'[128] through relations imbued with values of knowledge and trust. Interactions between children and artefacts at the National Museum of Scotland can be understood as being contingent upon their relative positioning within the Museum's self-conscious social structures. The observed responses of children to their encounters with museum artefacts thus demonstrate the closely-related interplay between power and materiality. In these encounters, replica handling objects frequently served as a stimulus for questions relating to trust, status and power in the museum space.

Children are in a relationship which is completely dependent on adults and they are only too aware of this[129]. Perhaps, it is *because* of their status in relation to adult authority that they feel the need to constantly question what they are being told? This question highlights an even broader issue; how can anyone trust what they are being told about any*thing*? Alluding to the processes of 'objectification' by which 'things' are constituted as 'objects', every*thing* can be both made and unmade physically (through material construction/conservation or destruction/disintegration) and conceptually, through narrative and social relations (cf. Ingold 2010, 2002). Despite these perpetual processes of emergence and becoming, museums attempt to both stabilise and contain their material things in the form of concrete objects and artefacts. They do so by trying to isolate them from both the organic processes of degeneration and the fluctuating and unpredictable relations of normal social life. In order for the museum's objects to remain objects, however, they also need to be

[128] 'Things' are defined (in Chapter III) as the material stuff of this world which is both a core component and in excess of socially constructed 'objects'.

[129] See also Chapter V for greater discussion of children's relationship with adults in the context of museums.

treated as such by museum visitors. Thus, inherent to the power dynamics of museum visiting is the act of relating and ultimately submitting to the museum's 'framing' (Goffman 1986) definitions of value.

Children's understanding of 'realness'

> You can see the real thing [in the museum]… that's better than just being told. (Jackson & Rees Leahy 2005:318)

Repeatedly during my fieldwork, the question of whether or not museum objects were 'real' was found to be one of prime concern to my child informants. The following extract is taken from my first fieldwork encounter with primary school children (aged 8-9 years) in the National Museum of Scotland's *Early People* gallery:

> *Stewart, Connor and Rosie asked if the skeleton in the reconstructed Viking burial* [Figure 22] *was 'real' or not. Stewart also showed me the jet, antler and bone objects at a discovery zone 'object handling table', asking what the objects were and why the Museum wasn't worried that people might break in and steal the 'precious' jet.* (Fieldnotes, 01/03/10)

The children's inquisitive questioning of someone who, despite my best efforts to suggest the contrary, they perceived as a representative of the institution, highlighted their interest in the artefacts on display in the Museum. Stewart, in particular, placed great importance upon the *value* of 'real' objects through his comments relating to museum security and the desire to either steal or protect exhibits of great economic worth. This incredible awareness of the monetary value of museum objects was also highlighted in a conversation I had with a different group of school children, who were looking at the plastic replicas of the Lewis Chessmen from the Museum's Viking Handling Box. I asked one of the boys, Patrick (10 years old), why the Museum hadn't given us the real chess pieces to handle, to which he replied, *"because they are worth a lot of money and if they broke, they'd be irreplaceable"* (Fieldnotes, 11/03/10). Here, the children were making a direct link between 'realness' and economic value. Quite simply - 'real' objects are worth more. Their understanding of this relationship thus emulates the original usage of the term

'authenticity' by the museum profession. This usage related to the outcome of expert analysis concerning whether or not an object was what it appeared or was claimed to be, and therefore worth the money that had been paid for it (cf. Trilling 1972:93). The children's concern with *value*, however, not only consolidates an understanding of their perception of museum objects, but also hints at further associations with ideas of trust and status. Patrick's statement, for example, made the suggestion that the children in his class were not being trusted with a 'real' museum object because they might break something that was really valuable. And why might they be more likely to break such an object? They perceived that it was because they were children – occupying a status that was distinct from adults (whose own social positioning is separate again from that of museum professionals) who are in possession of increased rights, responsibilities and expectations. These social distinctions will be further examined later in this chapter.

The following encounter sheds additional light upon the possible motivations behind the children's interest in 'realness'. Upon being asked by an 8/9 year old boy, Rudolph, whether I thought the silver rocket in the Museum's *Connect* gallery was 'real' or not, I asked him why 'real' things were better than replicas. He gave me the following response:

> *"Real things are better than replicas because they've been used, they look more historic, they're from before when you were born and are more delicate. Replica things are just hard to touch". Rudolph then proceeded to make the following unprompted observation; "I like history better than the present". When I asked him why this was, he said "because it's more interesting. There were funner things to do, not just television."*
> (Fieldnotes, 01/03/10)

Rudolph expressed the same level of interest as the other children in the 'realness' of the objects he encountered in the Museum. His description of the physical distinction between 'real' and replica objects perhaps originated from being told that you have to be careful with 'real' artefacts because they're delicate and you might break them; hence replicas are the very opposite – solid and unbreakable. His later comments, however, are strikingly unusual at first glance. His idealised concept of what life was like in the past might have been inspired by the images portrayed in

books, computer games and the television he had mentioned so dismissively, and can be understood as being somewhat *nostalgic*. Davis (1979:74) has defined nostalgia as being both an emotion and a "distinctive form of consciousness". He describes the pervasiveness of nostalgia within both art and the mass media as one which "need not merely feed upon or revel in the past; it can become the means for creatively using the past as well" (ibid:95). Thus, Rudolph's expressed awe and reverence for life in the past must be understood as having been created in the present (ibid:121):

> even though we may not have lived then, we feel – because of the movies we have seen, the stories we have read, the radio serials we've listened to – "as if we had". This, incidentally, is a nice, if rare, instance of a created, secondhand reality (a romanticized *version* of a slightly earlier historical reality) practically acquiring the same nostalgic status as something experienced firsthand in our very own lives. (ibid)

Rudolph's observations might also be related to the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries' preoccupation with the pursuit of 'authenticity' (cf. Cohen 1988) and the attainment of the 'true' self through our historical past (cf. de Groot 2009). Importantly, his statement also hinted at the *material* qualities of 'realness'. His observations suggested that there was something inherent in the material properties of 'real' museum objects, which set them apart as being older and more fragile than their 'replica' counterparts. Rudolph represented this fragility of 'real' museum objects as almost a 'moral' attribute, which, in turn, elicited from him a moral response. This reference to materiality is significant, as it suggests that there was more to my child informants' notions of 'realness' than its symbolism of status, social relations and their developing sense of self. What is more, children's appreciation of museum objects' material composition – their 'thingness' (Brown 2001) was further complicated by their need to seek adult affirmation of their own observations, which they appeared to mistrust[130]. My child informants did not just mistrust what they were being told about museum objects by adult authority figures (such as teachers and museum professionals), but they mistrusted the 'things' themselves. There thus appeared to be great doubt concerning the objects' own

[130] See also Chapter V.

material testimony towards their 'realness' (and authenticity), highlighting an underlying concern with a thing's very ability to impart 'truth'.

The concerns expressed by children in a vast quantity of my ethnographic material provide a striking contrast to claims that the postmodern tourist (and, by proxy, museum visitor) has become "less concerned with the authenticity of the original" (Cohen 1995, as cited by Wang 1999:357). The reasons for this may be interpreted in multiple ways. This concern might be linked to their expectations of what a museum is and should be, their recognition of their status and social positioning within the power dynamics of an unequivocally adult institution and their memories of previous heritage experiences. The children may thus have been suspicious of the museum's motives in displaying artefacts from the past and suspected hoaxing and fakery. This must be considered in relation to the decidedly unequal adult-child power dynamic in the learning environment. Some children's comments during Object Handling workshops at the National Museum of Scotland, for example, revealed an expectation of being lied to by adults about the 'realness' of museum objects (Fieldnotes, 19/11/10)[131].

Another aspect of children's concern with 'realness' could be linked to the fact that many of my participants (particularly those attending schools located in areas associated with relative economic deprivation) were unused to visiting museums and were therefore unaware of the underlying historical premises behind these institutions, expecting displays to feature reconstructions and copies similar to those encountered at other heritage centres. Perhaps the recent changes in museum display techniques[132] that have led to an increased use of reconstruction, virtual reality and audio-visual interactives have resulted in children no longer necessarily expecting to come into contact with the 'real thing' in these places? 9-year-old Leo's response to questions raised about the Ancient Egyptian mummy inside the Qurneh sarcophagus

[131] See Chapter V for analysis of one such encounter during a meteorite handling activity, when a 10 year old boy stated that "sometimes people tell you something is real when it isn't" (Fieldnotes, 19/11/10).

[132] See Chapter II for greater analysis of the impact of the *new museology* on the National Museum of Scotland's exhibition display style.

[Figure 17] – *"shouldn't there be real things in a museum?"* (Fieldnotes, 17/03/10), however, serves to throw these assumptions about children's expectations into doubt.

The desire for truth and sincerity was not restricted to the museum objects the children encountered, but also extended to include the narratives that were being imparted within the Museum's workshops. During these workshops, the children commonly expressed their doubts as to whether they were being told the truth about the objects and the stories behind them (the 'frame' constructed by the museum – Goffman 1986), regularly needing affirmation from other adults, such as the researcher. One might conclude, therefore that 'realness' mattered to the children for two key reasons. Firstly, it reflected on their social positioning in relation to peers and adults in the museum space – handling 'real' museum objects symbolised an investment of trust, which enabled them to assume temporarily the rights and responsibilities of adulthood. Secondly, their material engagement with 'things from the past' had a strong impact upon their imaginative experience within the Museum. Underlying my child informants' continual questioning of the nature of museum objects, however, was the concern that, not only were adult authority figures not revealing the truth, but that the objects themselves were capable of material deception.

The Museum's understanding of 'authenticity'

> *"Museums are for looking at artefacts from the past. They are not usually copies, they are usually the real things." Why? "Because museums are always needing money and they won't get it with fakes."* (Bethany, 9 years, 08/03/11)

Although not explicitly used by my child informants, the concept of 'authenticity' can be closely aligned with their understandings of the 'realness' of museum objects. 'Authenticity' is an important concern for museums, although the term itself can be understood as slippery and ambivalent, connoting 'real', 'genuine' and 'sincere' qualities in a manner that is highly relative and context-specific (cf. Holtorf & Schadla-Hall 1999:234-5). It must thus be acknowledged that any attempt to produce

a stable definition of the 'authenticity' is highly problematic, fraught with difficulty because it has become weighed down with intellectual baggage concerning both the extent to which all things can be understood as being authentic, and, inversely, nothing can be considered authentic at all (cf. Theodossopoulos 2013a:338). Handler (1986:2) describes the term as a cultural construct, closely associated with individualism and the quest for "reality" and "real difference", which has been pursued with fervour during the past couple of centuries by nationalists and anthropologists alike; "our search for authentic cultural experience – for the unspoiled, pristine, genuine, untouched and traditional – says more about us than about others" (ibid).

Theodossopoulos (2013a:339) has described the particular "unresolved tensions" that exist between constructivist and materialist approaches towards the study of "object authentification", arguing that:

> The concept of authenticity encompasses diverse sets of meaning that range from genuineness and originality to accuracy and truthfulness… In many respects, authenticity encodes the expectation of truthful representation. It is concerned with the identity of persons and groups, the authorship of products, producers, and cultural practices, the categorical boundaries of society: "who" or "what" *is* "who" or "what" claims to be. (ibid)

He argues against a "rigid conceptualisation of authenticity" (ibid:353), drawing attention to the fact that gradually, over the past few decades, "anthropological scholarship is moving in the direction of acknowledging the existence of plural, multidimensional authenticities" (ibid:340). Whilst Banks (2013:497) has described authenticity as a process rather than a quality, Theodossopoulos (2013a:344) claims that "context-specific conceptualisations of authenticity should be an object of study, rather than classificatory or analytical criteria". In order for this approach to be applied to the concerns of my informants at the National Museum of Scotland (both the children and the museum professionals), however, as a researcher, I am required to "fall into the trap" of authenticity (ibid:346; Theodossopoulos 2013b:397):

> …willingly, consciously, and reflexively – first comparing the authentic with the inauthentic in locally meaningful terms (however essentialist those may be), in order to understand the evaluative potential (judgements or tactics) inherent in the resulting contradictions. (Theodossopoulos 2013a:346)

Since its origins in the Greek language (*authentikos*) and its modern definition by the Romantics of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, authenticity has been understood as "a condition of an object which can be revealed so far as it exists but which *cannot be created wilfully*" (Holtorf & Schadla-Hall 1999:232, *my emphasis*). This definition seems to refer to inherent material qualities outside of the subjective projections of others. Regular use of the term actually originated in the context of museums, where a clear connection was made between authenticity and *value*. This link was also stressed by my child informants when voicing their concerns about 'realness', before being employed as symbolic capital in their negotiation of social relationships within the museum space (a practice which will be further explored later). The museum usage (outlined by Trilling, 1972:93) has since been adopted by the tourism industry, where various products such as works of art, festivals, dress and cuisine are described as being either "authentic" or "inauthentic" (Wang 1999:350). In this sense, authenticity has come to symbolise "traditional culture and origin, a sense of the genuine, the real or the unique" (Sharpley 1994:130).

It has has been argued that; "To view authenticity as the original or the attribute of the original is too simple to capture its complexity" (Wang 1999:353). Further attempts have thus been made to define the different ways in which the term can be used and understood, e.g. Bruner (1994) who suggests that 'authenticity' can mean: a) historical reproduction or representation; b) historically accurate simulation; c) an original versus a copy; d) the authentification of authenticity. The establishment of something's 'authenticity' can therefore be linked to the relationship between the subject and the object – the relational co-constitution of things. 'Authenticity' thus has special relevance to the status of objects in museums, which assume a cultural, economic and symbolic significance through the identification work of 'expert'

curators, or simply through their presence in museum storerooms or exhibition displays[133].

Authenticity was seen to be very important to those working at the National Museum of Scotland. Described as "temples of authenticity" (Handler 1986:4), not only have museums been closely implicated in the definition of the term, but their storage and display of 'authentic' archaeological and/or historical objects has often been used to distinguish them from other forms of heritage centre (cf. Cannizzo 2001:171). Great care was taken by the National Museum of Scotland to ensure that the artefacts they displayed were genuine, the research they conducted was as historically accurate as possible and that the information they provided to the public was as faithful to this expertise as it could be. These expectations were reflected in the museum's professed pursuit of excellence[134], and in its expressed intention to be "A world class museum service that informs, educates and inspires"[135]. Concerns with the authentic communication of knowledge about the Museum's collections were also outlined in its Strategic Aims; "To provide high quality experiences and services to visitors, both actual and virtual… To undertake collections-related research, in order to fulfil our responsibility to increase knowledge about our collections and to interpret our collections to the public"[136]. The Museum's integrity as a national institution can thus be understood as being contingent upon these efforts to maintain 'authenticity'. One would assume, therefore, that the general public has an expectation to encounter authentic objects within the space of the Museum.

The very treatment of museum objects denotes how special and distinct they are from everyday stuff. Viewing these objects from a distance, through panes of glass, can instil a sense of awe, contributing towards an experience in museums that is altogether unique. Yet, despite this, my child informants felt the need to question whether the objects in the National Museum of Scotland were 'real' or 'fake'. Here,

[133] Later in this chapter, I will explore how these notions of context and relativity have particular value in discussions concerning the provenance and repatriation of museum objects.
[134] NMS Strategic Plan 2006-2012, 2010/11 Update:8.
[135] NMS Strategic Plan 2006-2012, 2010/11 Update:7.
[136] NMS Strategic Plan 2006-2012, 2010/11 Update:9.

we can apply Goffman's (1986:21) 'frame analysis', whereby "a primary framework is one that is seen as rendering what would otherwise be a meaningless aspect of the scene into something that is meaningful", thereby influencing expectations of what is likely to occur within any specific encounter (ibid:38). The National Museum of Scotland's adoption of particular display techniques and cultural narratives thus effectively *frames* the objects in its collections in a light which both distinguishes them from the everyday and dictates the ways in which visitors can engage and interact with them; "Whatever the degree of organization…each primary framework allows its user to locate, perceive, identify, and label a seemingly infinite number of concrete occurrences defined in its terms" (ibid:21). Yet, for my child informants, it was often the authenticity of this frame that was at stake - not necessarily the authenticity of the object, but the Museum's own claims about it. Whilst, according to Goffman (1986), the frame determines the thing, the thing is always excessive of this framing[137]. The authenticity of the Museum is thus constituted by the 'realness' of the things that are placed within the frame of its own display cases. Moreover, like Goffman's "theatregoer" (1986:130), in order for a museum to be constituted as an authority on a society's cultural heritage, its visitors must collaborate in the work taking place "onstage". The doubt and disbelief expressed by my child informants regarding the 'realness' of its objects thus served to destabilise the Museum's social fabric by challenging the authority of its cultural framing.

The surprising responses of my child informants should also be considered in light of the fact that although museums are often considered as "the ultimate repositories for authentic artefacts" (Holtorf & Schadla-Hall 1999:230), there has been a recent change in museum representation from being purely object-based, to including reconstructions and actors (Hewison 1991:163)[138]. This shift in practice was emphasised by a member of the National Museum of Scotland's Education Department, when she commented upon the feedback received by Archaeology Scotland concerning their object handling resource; *"The schools' response was that "it's great to do something that's 'real'!", as opposed to purely using online*

[137] As seen in Chapters III and IV.

[138] See Chapter II for further discussion of recent changes in museum representation, inspired by the *new museology* (Vergo 1989).

resources, which they do a lot" (Rowan, personal communication, 30/06/10). In contrast, the findings of Jackson and Rees Leahy (2005:319) show that their child informants did not appear to make this same distinction between object handling and other more reconstructive activities during their participation in education workshops at the Imperial War Museum (London) and the People's History Museum (Manchester):

> [The children] attributed authenticity to all of their experiences in the museum, taking their cue from the presence of real objects and not differentiating between the diverse forms of interpretation (including theatre) that they encountered and, significantly, performed (e.g. playing shop and dressing up).

Contrary to my expectations about the importance placed by museums on 'real' objects, early interviews with staff in the National Museum of Scotland's Education Department revealed a general lack of concern over this issue of 'real' experience in relation to educational programmes for children. During my first meeting with Rebecca in the Museum café, for example, she stated that whether objects are 'real' or not *"doesn't matter for either the teachers or the children"* (personal communication, 23/02/10). This observation reveals a profound difference between the Museum's collection, research and display policy and its educational practice, highlighting the assumption that its own concerns with authenticity were not shared by its child audience. A different standard and agenda was thus discernible in the Museum's provision for school children in comparison with its services for other audience groups, who generally encountered the Museum's collections through guided tours around the galleries or lectures delivered by 'expert' curators. This is particularly interesting when considered in the light of other research conducted into children's experiences of museum visits[139]. The findings of such projects suggest that it is precisely the "intangible wonder" inspired by 'real' museum objects which creates the biggest and longest-lasting impression on child visitors, encouraging further learning and engagement with the museums' collections (cf. Piscitelli & Anderson 2001; Kindler & Darras 1997). This discrepancy also presented the Education Department with a problem; how to implement the Museum's policy of having "real things revealing stories" in the absence of those very 'real things'. Can

[139] As outlined in Chapter V.

'replica' objects reveal the same stories as 'real' objects, within the context of educational workshops? The reactions of my child informants would suggest that very often, they could not.

Whilst staff deemed the question of an object's authenticity a non-issue in museum education, there did appear to be a slight disagreement over how replica objects should be presented to the children involved in education workshops. Shirley, for example, recalled to me her shock at discovering that some external presenters (not direct employees of NMS) who were delivering a highly popular schools' programme on Ancient Egypt at the Museum, had been telling the children that the mummies they were using (high quality replicas made using leather and other materials, costing around £10k a piece) were 'real' (personal communication, 12/04/13). She told me that another member of staff had not been bothered by this, but that she had personally felt that the Museum's role was not to impart truth exactly, but to at least try to get its facts right and to avoid deliberate misrepresentation, because this might have consequences for children's trust in the Museum in later life. In this particular incident, the problem of representation was further complicated by the fact that the 'things' at the centre of the predicament were mummies. This further example of the 'people-objects' discussed in Chapter IV, fused together two very different concerns for the Museum – the truthful representation of 'real' and authentic objects, and the ethical challenges relating to the presentation of human remains. Contemporary museums frequently find themselves entangled in webs of ethical dilemmas relating to the respectful representation of 'other' peoples and cultures. In this particular case, the external presenters were flaunting the boundaries of the careful path negotiated by the museum organisation, thereby multiplying the concerns of this member of staff. This incident also highlights the 'moral' nature of the issue of authenticity as it was conceived by my informants. Here, the moral implications of inauthentic representation potentially threatened the trust existing in the relationship between the Museum and its child visitors.

As a step in a different direction, some of the new programmes developed for the post-refurbishment opening of the Royal Museum aimed to encourage children to investigate museum objects for themselves (both 'real', and where this wasn't possible, high-quality replicas), treating these artefacts like evidence, and thereby emulating the attitudes and activities of adult museum professionals. This return to the material components of the Museum's collections appeared to reflect a growing concern over the role, relevance and identity of the museum in contemporary society and subsequently, a renewed focus on the unique experiences it was able to offer.

'Realness' and 'authenticity' - a comparison

So far in this discussion, we can see that, whilst the 'realness' described by my child informants and the quality of 'authenticity' valued by the National Museum of Scotland shared many aspects in common, they cannot be considered entirely synonymous. 'Real' was often employed by children to describe things that had been 'used by' or 'belonged' to people, emphasising a human, subjective element. However, it was also used to describe meteorites which had "really come from outer space". Whilst children defined the opposite of 'real' as being 'fake' or 'replica', the opposite of 'authentic' could be multiple things, depending on the perspective and discipline of the person defining it. The term 'authenticity' in itself, therefore, is too inexact and cannot account for all the complicated interactions going on within education workshops at the Museum.

Although the Museum organisation and its child visitors (attending education workshops) both maintained a strong interest in the question of authentic representation, the motivations behind this concern and its implications also differed in a few subtle ways. Firstly, whilst 'realness' and authenticity were directly associated with status and social relationships for both groups, for the National Museum of Scotland, it was the Museum's place in society and its relationship with other museums that was at stake. For the children, on the other hand, it was their positioning in relation to adult authority figures within the power dynamics of the museum. Their dependency on these adults for both their access to museum objects

and their acquisition of knowledge about these objects served to reinforce my child informants' sense of their unequal and disadvantaged status within the social context of the Museum. Yet, when given physical access to 'real' and therefore valuable artefacts "from the past", they often perceived this opportunity as a temporarily afforded 'adult' status, with the accompanying rights and responsibilities.

Secondly, whilst authenticity was clearly valued by the National Museum of Scotland, upon closer examination, it became obvious that the implications of this value were rather more fluid in practice than the concrete definitions of 'realness' employed by my child informants. Whilst the children's definition of a 'real' object was, quite straightforwardly, a 'thing' which was used or created in the past, the definitions employed by museum professionals in relation to the objects employed in their education programmes focused more upon the *metaphorical* qualities of museum artefacts rather the *metonymical* (Runia 2006) – objects which accurately *represented the past* (often described as being, in a sense, more 'authentic', due to the absence of decay and degeneration, the objects therefore being more similar in appearance to those actually used by ancient peoples), as opposed to being *from the past*. Thus, for a member of the Museum's Education Department, a high-quality replica, faithful to the design and/or material construction of the original, was conceived as serving the same function as a 'real' artefact, whilst for a child, the two were very different. It is towards the impact 'real' artefacts had upon their child beholders to which we now turn.

Museum objects – 'real' versus replica

> *"A replica is something that is really similar to the real thing, but false."* (Eric, 8 years, 06/10/10)

Besides being one of the most common questions regarding the nature of objects encountered within the museum space, I observed that whether a museum object was defined by adult authority figures as 'real' or 'replica' had significant consequences for both the ways in which children both intellectually and physically engaged with the artefact and the ways in which they perceived themselves within the power

dynamics of the Museum. This was discussed in an interview with a member of staff who daily worked in the National Museum of Scotland's galleries. When I asked Sid how children interact with museum objects, he commented that during object handling, *"children prefer real than replica objects – this does make a difference"* (personal communication, 26/01/10). He also described the Victorian Handling Box as being the most successful of the handling resources, *"because it contains real objects and not just fakes – replicas just don't get the kids excited"* (ibid). Children at the National Museum of Scotland were certainly observed to become more enthusiastic about being able to touch and handle 'real' museum objects than replicas. Some 10 and 11 year old children, for example, described the meteorite handling activity within the Museum's new Space workshop as their favourite for the following reasons; *"because each one felt different"*, *"because I've never seen a real one before"* and *"because I could hold a real meteorite in my hand"* (Fieldnotes, 15/11/10).

My work with school groups also revealed that children appeared to treat 'real' objects with much greater care than they did replicas, often due to a belief that these artefacts were automatically more delicate and easier to damage than their replica equivalents. They thus imbued 'real' objects with a moral value of fragility, which exacted a moral response of physical care. This attitude is illustrated by children (aged between 8 and 9 years old) in following extract from my fieldnotes:

> *I attached myself to Eric's group… all of whom seemed particularly concerned with identifying which of the objects in the box were real and which ones were fake. Eric expressed a certainty that the Lewis Chessmen figures were real, because they "look really worn and bashed about, and they're dirty". I showed Sandra how to identify bone/antler in the other board game pieces, by looking for the little holes where the blood vessels used to be. I then revealed to them that the Chessmen were in actual fact replicas made from plastic. Eric then gradually changed his opinion to being "pretty certain that these are fake and the other pieces are real". He also suggested that the playing board was a replica because its nails hadn't rusted and the wood wouldn't have survived in such good condition from the Viking period. As the group progressed around the other trays, it was actually difficult to get them to engage with topics of discussion other than quest of discerning which objects were real and which were replicas. When I told them that in one of the trays (the one with the drinking*

> *horn), all of the objects were replicas, the children seemed disappointed. I asked them how this knowledge changed the way they felt about these objects. Jessica claimed that if they were real, she would treat them with more respect. When looking at the craft tray, I asked Jessica and Lyndsey "what makes things real?" They claimed that real things looked older; rusty and dirtier. Using the glass beads to demonstrated, they said that the Vikings wouldn't have had paint like this and that their beads would have been more perfect.* (Fieldnotes, 6/10/10)

Besides underlining their differing attitudes towards 'real' and replica museum objects, the comments made here also reflect the children's perceptions of the inherent physical qualities of material things from the past; qualities which contained a form of truth speaking to the 'realness' of the object. Romanek and Lynch (2008:284) have commented that if an object shows signs of damage and everyday wear and tear, "the object has a resonant history, and children can become connected to this person, or inspired by the object's story". This can be linked to the work of Holtorf (2013:430) on authenticity, which "focuses not on the age of an object but its age-value and on the quality or condition of being (of the) past". This 'pastness', he argues, is "experienced as a consequence of perceptible material clues indicating wear and tear, and disintegration" (ibid). Therefore; "Patina, cracks, and missing bits are hallmarks of an object possessing the quality of being of the past. They are clues that evoke the notion of a fragile heritage from another time" (ibid:432). My child informants were thus identifying the quality of 'pastness' in the handling objects they were encountering through their observations of physical signs of the age and disintegration of these objects. 'Perfect', clean and shiny objects were greeted with suspicion simply because their physical appearance failed to attest to the age they were claiming to be.

My ethnography also provides insight into children's conceptualisations of the Museum as an authority on knowledge about the past – they were both accepting of the information I provided them on behalf of the Museum, whilst simultaneously asserting their autonomy in making up their own minds about whether or not a particular object was 'real' or 'fake'. It is thus important to consider how the children's obsession with 'real' objects related to how they thought they were being viewed by adults in the Museum - being allowed to handle objects which were both

'authentic' and economically valuable suggested to them that they were being perceived as having an increased social status. Perhaps this was an important component of the powerful and mysterious qualities of 'real' objects, which also afforded greater opportunities for the children's imagination.

Children's respect for 'real' objects from the past was also exemplified when a school group was misinformed that a visiting Ancient Egyptian mummy interactive exhibit was 'real'. The teacher described the response of the majority of her class - initially holding themselves back from engaging in the activity for fear they might damage the mummy, until one "class character" stated confidently that it couldn't be real, precisely *because* he'd already started touching it (personal communication, 05/03/10). In contrast, children were frequently admonished by their teachers and other adult supervisors for treating some of the replica handling objects with disrespect; throwing them between each other, tapping them against other objects and using them for their own alternative purposes (e.g the Viking drinking horn was used by some children as a hat, whilst the strike-a-light was pressed against children's upper lips to represent a moustache!). Not only were replica objects treated with less care than their 'real' counterparts, but the children also expressed less interest in them. Upon discovering that the majority of objects in both the Viking and the Roman Handling Boxes were, in fact, replicas, for example, the children described them as "boring".

Sometimes, it was clear that the children actually *expected* the museum objects to be 'fake' – possibly a consequence of the "disappearance, or at least partial disappearance, of the traditional artefact-based museum" (Holtorf & Schadla-Hall 1999:230) which has led to "a different expectation by the public of the way in which the past should be communicated" (ibid). It was the revelation that the objects were 'real', therefore, which inspired a change in their behaviour - expressing greater interest and excitement about the exhibit or handling activity. These findings, however, appear to contradict the claims of Lowenthal (1985:355-356), who, based on what he describes as "typical curatorial judgements", has suggested that even upon discovering that what they are looking at is in fact a reconstruction rather than

an 'original', the public "are only very rarely disappointed" and their interest in these 'replicas' is not significantly diminished.

When Tessa, an 8-year-old girl, realised she was touching *real* bone, animal skin and leather objects in the Viking Handling Box, for example, *"she immediately dropped what she was holding and tried to get them away from her in disgust…"* (Fieldnotes, 03/11/10). Tessa's reaction occurred as a specific response to the material nature of these objects, which were composed of bone, thus highlighting the important point that children did not react to every 'real' object in the same way. Whilst they invariably treated non-plastic objects with greater respect than plastic ones, a child's engagement with a collection of metal coins was often very different to their physical response to objects made out of organic remains. Materials which inspired the children's personal empathy - such as the bones derived from real animals which were once alive, often provoked a more marked response than objects made of metal, wood and stone. The materials from which things are made thus clearly matter. They are not everything, however - in some cases, the fact that an object had been made and used by a real person in the past, such as the physical evidence of the human thumbprint on a Roman pottery fragment, was more important to the children (cf. Fieldnotes, 16/11/10).

It must be noted that there were a few exceptions to the general rule concerning the children's behaviour towards 'real' museum objects. One of the most prominent of these occurred with a Primary 2 class (children aged between 6 and 7 years old) during their participation in a workshop about rocks and fossils:

> *On the whole, the children did not appear to be particularly impressed by the notion that the rocks and fossils they were holding were both real and very old, e.g. "the oldest rock in Europe". This was demonstrated by their physical treatment of the objects (often dropping them) and the fact that when the workshop facilitator drew attention to their authenticity and significance, the children neither produced a spontaneous response nor adapted their behaviour towards the objects accordingly.*
> (Fieldnotes, 27/09/10)

Possible reasons for this lack of enthusiasm for the Museum's real objects include firstly, that this encounter occurred amongst a younger age group than the majority

of school classes with whom I was researching. Secondly, that the types of objects involved were formed by natural processes, as opposed to being the organic products of people in the past, with whom the children may have been able to form a more relational connection. Thus, here again, the *materials* from which the objects were made were significant, adding another dimension to the ways in which children physically engaged with things in the Museum. The fact that the fossils were made out of stone and not an organic substance such as bone, leather, wood or fur appeared to influence the ways in which the children responded to them.

In summary, the majority of the data provided by my child informants not only contrasted with the expectations of staff in the Education Department at the National Museum of Scotland, but also with the following conclusions drawn by Holtorf and Schadla-Hall (1999:229); "It is clear that the public does not necessarily put the same value on genuineness as do archaeologists" (1999:229), or indeed with Holtorf's later suggestion that "the experience does not suffer from the audience being aware of the underlying artifice" (Holtorf 2013:439). Rather, it was clear that the children with whom I was working placed a very high value upon so-called "genuineness", although, it must be ceded that this value was measured against different criterion. Their behavioural response to 'replica' objects, however, did sometimes differ when they were unaware of the true nature of these artefacts. The following fieldnotes describe my observations of a Primary 4 class (aged between 8 and 9 years old) using the Roman Handling Box:

> *All six members of the group chose the* [replica] *gladius as their favourite object. Requesting my help with his spelling, Connor said this was because "you got to see how heavy it was and see the patterns"... Keir wrote that it was because "it was heavy, pure metal and I thought it looked cool"... Catriona responded that it was "interesting because it was old and used by the Romans".* (01/03/10)

This observation provides further illustration of the relationship between the material qualities of an object (in this case, a replica sword [Figure 19] made out metal as opposed to plastic) and its affective imminence, which clearly appealed to the children's imaginations. The example thus also affirms the following claim of Holtorf and Schadla-Hall (1999:236):

> it can easily be observed that visitors to archaeological sites or museums experience authenticity in front of ancient originals to exactly the same extent as in front of very good reproductions or copies – as long as they *do not know* them as reproductions or copies.

Authenticity and place

In Chapter IV, I explored the ways in which objects are socially constituted through interactions between narratives and materials in particular places at particular times. This approach can also enhance our understanding of the social constitution of 'authenticity'. The term 'authenticity' has already been discussed as being employed to refer to any number of different things, commonly within discussions relating to tourism, historic monuments and heritage sites. Here, sites of authenticity are specifically linked to local landscapes and community conceptions of heritage and belonging. What makes museum artefacts distinctive from these other categories of thing, however, is the fact that they are, by their very nature, moveable; not tied to a particular place or context. One might suggest, therefore, that either place has no bearing on how a museum object's 'realness' and authenticity is viewed, or quite the opposite, as I now argue; place has everything to do with these perceptions. The following examples from my case study of the Lewis Chessmen illustrate how people's experiences of museum objects are closely entangled with their experiences of the place in which this encounter occurs. Spatial context can thus both contribute towards and detract from an object's authenticity. Place also illuminates another aspect of the politics of authenticity through its involvement in the perpetual negotiation of power and control over 'heritage' objects. The Lewis Chessmen, whilst admittedly firmly caught up in the 'hard' politics of Scottish identity and independence, can therefore also lend insight into the 'soft' politics of 'authenticity' as it relates to children's social positioning within museums and local constructions of heritage and belonging.

One of the most prominent findings of my fieldwork in Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Shetland and in Lewis, was the commonly-held belief that a museum artefact could

somehow be experienced more authentically in the place where it was found. My informants in Shetland often expressed a significant degree of knowledge and passionate interest in their regional heritage, particularly archaeological finds made by members of the community at local excavations[140]. When I talked to a gentleman who was attending Dr Irving Finkel's special lecture about the Chessmen at the Shetland Museum, for example, he complained that Gunnister Man (the body and clothing remains of what is thought to be an eighteenth century man, found in a peat bog near the A970 road to Northmavine, Shetland) is hard to find on display at the National Museum of Scotland; *"It's hidden away in a small dark corner!"* (17/02/11). Having pointed out the friend of his in the audience who had actually discovered the St Ninian's Isle treasure as a local schoolboy in 1958, he declared; *"we want them back"*. His comments infer a sense of personal ownership regarding these artefacts and alluded to their need for proximity to both their find site and their finders in order to be properly appreciated. Visitors to the Shetland Museum frequently described their relationships with high-profile artefacts, such as these, through their personal knowledge of the individual or family with whom the find had come to be associated. Another gentleman visitor I interviewed at the Shetland Museum, for example, told me that his grandfather had found a golden bracelet and necklace at an archaeological site on Fetlar, but pointed out that they only had a replica on display in Shetland – *"I'd like to go to the Museum in Edinburgh to see it"* (19/02/11). Here, it is important to note that two components were viewed as significant to this man's experience of this particular artefact – firstly, the place in which it was found, and, secondly, its original material form – seeing a replica at the Shetland Museum was simply not enough, suggesting that place, devoid of the physical presence of the 'original' object did not qualify as an authentic experience.

Another couple I interviewed that day also talked about artefacts that had been found in Shetland by relations of theirs, but which were, again, on display at *"The museum of antiquities in Edinburgh"* (19/02/11). The ways in which these informants referred to the National Museum of Scotland, i.e. using vague or outdated terms instead of its official title, underlines its conceived physical, intellectual and experienced distance

[140] See Chapters II and IV for greater discussion of the importance of material heritage in Shetland.

from the concerns of this island community. The comments made by these adult visitors to the Shetland Museum also hinted at their underlying discontent with the removal of artefacts of local archaeological and historical significance to this national museum institution.

This dissatisfaction was further elaborated by some of the Shetland school children participating in my focus group workshops, who complained about the St Ninian's Isle Treasure being on display at the National Museum of Scotland when it was found in Shetland. Although often influenced by the political opinions of their adult teachers, these incidents served to highlight the children's interest in the issue of NMS' "repatriation" of museum objects found in Shetland. This concern was further outlined by a member of the Shetland Museum's education staff during another focus group; "*There's a lot of argument in the museum industry about the things that are found in there – 'cos, we don't have the Gunnister Man here – that's in Edinburgh, we don't have the St Ninian's Treasure, which was found on St Ninian's Isle – that's in Edinburgh. There's some things which just get moved around…"* (Focus group transcript, 21/02/11), to which a 10-year-old girl from a local Lerwick school responded; *"I think it should just be like, if it's like from the place, then it should just be kept in that museum"*. These attitudes were summed up by the comments of a local woman visiting *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked* exhibition at the Shetland Museum; *"Edinburgh has Shetland silver and we want it back, whilst England has the Chessmen and Lewis want them back!"* (15/02/11). Importantly, my informants' desire to encounter museum objects in the places in which they were found did not merely relate to their political concerns regarding repatriation and regional autonomy; it also concerned a key belief that these objects were experienced better and more authentically in these places.

One of the more frequent themes referred to in *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked* touring exhibition's visitors' comments book related to the underlying assertion that it was indeed, better, to experience the Lewis Chessmen in Lewis, because this was the place where they were found: *"Very enjoyable and informative in <u>Lewis</u> (not Edinburgh/London)"* (visitor from Stirling); *"Great to see the exhibition being*

returned to its birthplace" (visitor from the Black Isle, Ross-shire); *"...far more convincing than Edinburgh or London..."* (visitor from North Yorkshire). Even more commonly, visitors from both Lewis and elsewhere argued that Lewis was where the Lewis Chessmen "belong": *"...lovely to see them in their "home" place. They should be here permanently"* (visitor from Portsmouth); *"It's fantastic to see the Chessmen up close for real. An important part of island heritage, hopefully returning for good one day"* (local visitor from Stornoway). These comments were distinctive from those recorded at the other exhibition host sites. Whilst the majority of visitors specified that the Chessmen should return to the island of Lewis, tourists from abroad reiterated Scotland's First Minister, Alex Salmond's more general statement (see Allardyce & Goodwin, *The Sunday Times*, 20th March 2005) that they should be repatriated from the British Museum to Scotland, e.g; *"Fantastic exhibition! It is rather shocking that these Scottish treasures are the property of the British Museum. Surely the Lewis Chessmen belong to Scotland, their true home in the modern world"* (visitor from Switzerland).

After the zeal expressed by many of my child research participants in Shetland: *"I think they should go to Lewis, because they're originally from there"* (Andrew, 10 years, Focus group transcript, 21/02/11); *"...they should build a museum on the exact spot where, like they found them"* (Fiona, 10 years, Focus group transcript, 21/02/11), I was surprised to note that such concerns were commonly communicated with far less force and enthusiasm by the children with whom I was working in Lewis. After my first research workshop, with a Primary 4 class (aged 8-9 years) from a local school in Stornoway, for example, I noted in my fieldnotes that none of the children had either been to or had heard of the National Museum of Scotland, neither did they make any direct reference to the issue of repatriation. In answer to my focus group question regarding what should happen to the hoard after the touring exhibition was over, the children suggested that we either put them in a museum at Uig in Lewis (*"because that was where they were found"*), or *"rebury them"* (Fieldnotes, 03/05/11). Other groups in the same class suggested that the Chessmen should be *"kept in Uig because that is where they were discovered"* (ibid.). Here again, as observed during encounters with handling objects at the National Museum of

Scotland, the children were imbuing the Chessmen with a value of authenticity that had moral implications. The question over where the Chessmen should be on display was thus also an ethical question, as illustrated in the following statement made by Emily, a 10 year old school girl participating in another workshop at Museum nan Eilean; *"They should have remained in Uig beach – they're someone else's property…which should not have been dug up… They should build a museum at Uig beach"* (Focus group transcript, 04/05/11).

The children involved in this particular discussion became very passionate and animated when I asked them where the Chessmen belonged, and, realising that some of their statements were political and potentially controversial, some of the children felt the need to double-check with me whether I was still recording their opinions using my DVR, confirming what I would be using the data for: *"Why do they have to go to London if they were found here?"*; *"They should get the fake ones! We should get all the real ones! And then they should get the fake ones"* (Christina, 9 years, Focus group transcript, 04/05/11). Here, the importance of the Chessmen's *materiality* was being emphasised – plastic replicas of the Chessmen, along with the sculptures and graffiti art found scattered across the island, may well serve as symbols of Lewis identity, but they were essentially *inauthentic* as they were not sculpted from a particular material (walrus ivory), at a particular place (Norway), at a particular time (around the twelfth century AD). These remarks also illustrate how, in the case of the Lewis Chessmen, the more general 'real' versus 'fake' issue became intermingled with highly politicised questions of repatriation for my child informants. Echoing my earlier ethnographic examples from the National Museum of Scotland, 'real' objects were being directly related to status and social positioning. In favour of a complete reversal of the present power dynamic in the relationship between the central British Museum and the cultural periphery of Lewis, my child informants deemed that the 'authentic' find site of the Lewis Chessmen should have the prestige of possessing the 'real' objects, whilst the British Museum should be content with the lower status 'fake' ones (which seemed to be perceived as a slight on the museums in Lewis). These statements thus lend particular weight to my argument that the distinction between 'real' and replica (or 'fake') assumes particular importance in the

reckoning of children, as it relates to conceptions of value, trust and, in this specific circumstance – power and status.

In opening this section, I suggested that, in discussions relating to the authenticity of museum objects, place either doesn't matter at all, or it matters completely. The case of the Lewis Chessmen demonstrates that place sometimes seems irrelevant to the value of a museum object, for whilst their exact place of construction and provenance remains unknown, these objects continue to be internationally acclaimed and described as a national archaeological treasure. On the other hand, however, my ethnography also suggests that, for the majority of my informants, the concept of place had a fundamental effect on the ways in which these museum objects were experienced, determining the value of authenticity attached to these particular experiences. Developing further the notions explored in Chapters III and IV, concerning the perpetual and relational constitution of museum objects, we can see that understandings of place combine with cultural and political narratives to play an important role in the social construction of 'authentic' museum objects. Perceptions of "homeland" and "belonging" were not only powerfully symbolic and emotive points of reference for visitors to museums in both Shetland and Lewis, but they also appeared to be embodied in the materiality of the artefacts themselves, in relationship with the surrounding landscape. The earth and soil from which the artefacts had emerged appeared to be viewed as a metonymic point of convergence between past and present (cf. Runia 2006).

Authenticity and material experience

Theodossopoulos (2013a:352) has argued that by considering the important role of materiality in relation to object authenticity, we are able to "escape the unproductive opposition between subjects and objects, persons and things" outlined by Miller (2005); "We also come closer to a comprehensive analysis of object authentification that evades the illusory tentacles of singular visions of authenticity" (Theodossopoulos 2013a:352). It is thus towards an ethnographic appreciation of

people's physical encounters with the materiality of museum objects to which we now turn. Such an approach has been described by Edwards et al (2006:8):

> Rather than understanding objects as possessing an unproblematic concrete existence that can be apprehended visually, or flattening their unique properties by considering them only as sites of inscription, the contributors argue for the necessity of thinking of objects as bundles of sensory properties which respond to specific sets of relationships and environments.

In their work concerning ancient art and monuments, Holtorf and Schadla-Hall (1999:232) have further underlined the integral relationship between authenticity and materiality by claiming that "authenticity has usually been understood as the material integrity of the object itself". Furthermore, Holtorf (2013:231) describes the quality of 'pastness', the age-value of a particular object, as "the result of a particular perception or experience and as such it is firmly situated in a given cultural context". The role of spatial context in constructing a conception of authentic experience has been illustrated by people's varying responses to the Lewis Chessmen. In the context of museum education workshops, however, we can also see the significance of children's *bodily* engagement with museum objects. Wang (1999:361) has argued that "the bodily concern consists of two aspects: sensual and symbolic". This relationship between physical interaction and authentic experience was highlighted to me by a visitor to *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked* exhibition at the Shetland Museum. An artist with particular interests in sculpture, materials and hand-shaped objects, she talked to me about the importance of the physical act of holding something, giving examples of past museum experiences which had impacted her in this way; handling coins at the British Museum (allowing her to realise the sheer weight of these objects and the implications this would have had for the people carrying them) and handling axe heads and other finds at the 'Tomb of the Eagles' archaeological site in Orkney. She claimed that both of these experiences will stay with her forever. Making reference to the museum at Kilmartin Glen (which she described as the first museum she had been to where you were encouraged to handle objects and feel different materials), she told me; *"It's wonderful being able to hold something in your hands, and if it's actually real, well the feeling is electric, isn't it?"* (22/02/11). Here, she identified the increased investment people make when

handling objects, explained by Romanek and Lynch (2008:284) as due to being personally "more emotionally connected to the object, and therefore more present".

Although the children involved in my research often found it hard to believe that the museum objects they were allowed to handle were 'real' (sometimes in contrast to the exhibits they could see in surrounding display cases), their physical interaction indicated how the tangible materiality of the objects formed an important component in the overall 'realness' or authenticity of their experience. This was also commonly exemplified by my child informants in their reactions to being able to hold even replicas of the Lewis Chessmen in their own hands. For example, when examining some of the replicas up-close, the children often broke into excited chatter amongst themselves, one girl (6 years) gesturing with her finger and thumb about how small the Knight's face was (Fieldnotes, Lewis, 05/05/11). Similar reactions were observed in the museum education research conducted by Jackson and Rees Leahy (2005:312), where "pupils evidenced a personal relationship with the subject-matter that undoubtedly contributed to an experience that, to all intents and purposes, was 'seeing' or 'doing' it 'for real'":

> Many of the pictures drawn by the children further confirmed the sense of 'realness' they had experienced, whether it was wearing an actual World War II helmet or joining in the dance with a fictional character or gathering around Muriel in the back garden of her wartime house. (Jackson & Rees Leahy 2005:318)

Physical interaction with objects within the context of the museum thus appeared to play a crucial role in the overall 'realness' and authenticity of children's experiences, the quality of these encounters seeming to at least partially rely upon the material composition of the objects. This is not to say, however, that the shape or form of the artefact itself was not also a valuable component of the encounter. McCrone et al have suggested that "Authenticity and originality are, above all, matters of technique… …The more "authentic" the representation, the more "real" it is" (1995:46). This portrayal of the construction of authentic experience, however, does not sit well with my understanding of children's conceptions of 'realness' in the museum. This is primarily due to the fact that, irrespective of the quality of the replica, my child informants did not take its 'realness' or authenticity for granted,

and the revelation that these objects were, in fact, 'fake' generally led to a loss of interest and a marked change in the ways in which the children physically interacted with them. A physical encounter with a 'real' museum object, on the other hand, appeared to provoke a far more remarkable experience; "*It's really weird being able to sit right next to them* [referring to the Roman altar stones in the *Early People* gallery]" (Peter, 7 years, 02/11/10). As noted by Classen (2005:277):

> Visitors not only touched objects in museums in order to verify their true nature… they touched them because they wanted to experience them intimately… In the case of human-made artefacts, it [touch] also provided the thrill of coming into vicarious contact with their original creators and users, and even – through, for example, hefting a spear or trying on a ring – a sense of what it would be like to *be* an artefact's original owner.

The significance of the 'realness' or 'authenticity' of the museum handling objects, their 'aura', can therefore be considered to be dependent upon the experiences of the children handling them in the present (Holtorf & Schadla-Hall 1999:241). In comparing these experiences of 'real' objects to similar encounters with 'replicas', we return to Walter Benjamin's writings on this concept of 'aura' (1935-1938):

> The authenticity of a thing is the quintessence of all that is transmissible in it from its origin on, ranging from its physical duration to the historical testimony relating to it. Since the historical testimony is founded on the physical duration, the former, too, is jeopardised by reproduction, in which the physical duration plays no part. And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object, the weight it derives from tradition. (Benjamin 2002:103)

Much like my child informants, Benjamin (ibid) asserted that; "In even the most perfect reproduction, *one* thing is lacking: the here and now of the work of art – its unique existence in a particular place. It is this unique [quality] – and nothing else – that bears the mark of the history to which the work has been subject". Children's definitions of 'realness' and their reactions to handling 'real' objects in the museum can thus be directly related to their appreciation of the history of the thing, a history that had become materially embedded in its physical properties. The 'aura' of the object thus remains dependent on a creative combination of the material properties of the thing itself and the social engagement of the children beholding it. It is worthwhile noting Benjamin's own attempts to summarise his thinking on the issue;

"What, then, is the aura? A strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be" (2002:104-105).

The discussion of Benjamin's (2002) concept of 'aura' serves as a useful foregrounding for Holtorf's (2013) later attempt to deal with the problem of authenticity by marrying a constructivist viewpoint with an appreciation for the role of materiality. Holtorf (2013:432) describes the perceived quality of age in an object as 'pastness', claiming that:

> Although the perception or experience of pastness may result from a credible determination of the age of an object's material construction or manufacture, it may also derive from other perceptions or experiences. For example, an object on display in a museum may be considered of the past because a label or museum guide convincingly says so.

Material clues as to the age of an object are therefore "not sufficient for achieving a perception of pastness" (Holtorf 2013:433). Rather, it is also essential that the appearance of an object both meets the expectations of its audiences' preconceptions and is provided with a "plausible and meaningful narrative" (ibid:434) which relates "then with now" (ibid). This narrative is both constituted by the museum and supported by its authority. Without this framing narrative (cf. Goffman 1986), my child informants' encounters with museum objects were subject to doubt and a distinct lack of appreciation of their 'pastness' or association with the past.

Authenticity and social dynamics of trust, power and status in the Museum

> …how can an authentic identity be asserted and maintained when more powerful others have the power to define? (Banks 2013:488)

Amidst an exploration of the role of place and materiality in contributing to children's encounters with 'real' and authentic objects within the museum space, this chapter has been fraught with a pervading tension between children and adults. The structural power struggle over children's positioning within the museum both informs and is, in turn, informed by its interplay with the values of 'realness' and

authenticity. Firstly, it is important to emphasise that the distinction between the rights and responsibilities of children and adults was primarily made by my child informants. Their perception that it was because they were children that they would not be allowed to handle real and valuable museum objects was not necessarily shared by museum professionals, who tended to group all laypeople, be they adults or children, into the same category, i.e. people who might damage or destroy artefacts through ignorance and a lack of specialist training.

Children exerted their autonomy within the context of education workshops by questioning what they were told about the museum's objects, thereby questioning the frame (Goffman 1986) through which these objects were being presented. In order for the work of the museum in socially constituting things as objects through narrative to be successful, however, the children ultimately had to accept what they were being told by adult teachers and workshop facilitators, thereby trusting the museum's definitions concerning 'realness' and authenticity. By accepting the museum's assertions to be true, the children joined the ranks of the other museum visitors, who had 'bought into' the museum's value definitions in order to appreciate the cultural and historical worth of the objects on display. Nevertheless, there was a significant element of risk involved in this interactive encounter for both parties concerned. For the children, maintaining a degree of aloof scepticism concerning the claims made by the museum, enabled them to preserve an autonomy and independence from adults, adult definitions and value judgements. They were often reluctant to relinquish their power to doubt and question, and yet, as discussed in the previous chapter, were still regularly found to be highly suggestible. For museum staff, on the other hand, there was the obvious risk involved in trusting children with valuable and potentially breakable objects (cf. Romanek and Lynch 2008:277).

My child informants placed a distinctive emphasis on the *value* of museum objects. Social interactions involving these objects were subsequently imbued with a sense of morality. These concepts of value and morality are strongly associated with ongoing anthropological discussion concerning gifts and commodities. Strathern and Stewart (2005:235) have described how, since the 1980s, contributions to this literature have

tended to make the analytical distinction between gifts and commodities a little blurred. A number of anthropologists, such as Parry and Bloch (1989) have argued that gifts and commodities are able to exist side by side in certain contexts, whilst Appadurai (1986) and Myers (2001) have questioned the validity of the rather essentialised gift-commodity opposition:

> Commodity exchange and gift exchange thus do not refer to different societal forms. Moreover, in practice the character of an exchange may include both commodity and gift elements. And specific items of value may enter into chains of transactions in which they are treated alternatively as commodities or gifts. (Strathern & Stewart 2005:236)

In the context of the children's regular questions regarding the monetary value of objects on display in the museum, it is perhaps worthwhile noting that the museum's attempts to distance and disengage its collections from the economic market enables these objects to be compared to "sacred objects that can never entirely be alienated from their original owners" (Yan 2005:255). The museum's denial of market forces was thus undermined by the children's classification of the objects on display as commodities.

The dynamics of the power struggle between my child informants and adult authority figures was particularly evident during object handling activities at the National Museum of Scotland. Whether it was the Museum exerting its authority over the children by insisting they put on white gloves before they were allowed to touch particular objects (a performance of authenticity which was meant to reinforce the 'delicateness' of the objects the children were handling - a precaution which was not necessary for museum staff themselves), or whether it was the children's sustained attempts to get the workshop facilitators' to tell them the monetary value of the museum objects (*"how much is it worth?"*), such interactions took place at a nexus where issues of trust collide with conflicting and intertwining economic and cultural values.

Howes (2010:xi) has claimed that sensation is "the medium through which all values and practices of society are enacted…every domain of sensory experience is also an arena for structuring social roles and interactions". By not only allowing, but

actually encouraging children to touch 'real' objects, the museum was thus able to initiate a restructuring of these social relationships, empowering my child informants with a sense of equality as they realised that they were being allowed special access to collections that were symbolic of this particular adult world. This opportunity brought with it the very real and genuine risk that valuable objects might get broken, damaged or stolen, as was observed not infrequently with some of the popular object handling resources. It also forced the museum to relinquish intellectual control over children's interpretations of the objects in its collections, whereby children were able to not merely physically mistreat the objects but also reject the museum's narratives in favour of their own creative alternatives[141]. This re-balancing of the relational power dynamics between adults and children was also observed by Jackson and Rees Leahy (2005) in their study of education workshops at the Imperial War Museum (London) and the People's History Museum (Manchester). Here, the children;

> appreciated the special privilege accorded them in being allowed to see and touch objects from the collection that were unavailable to the general public. Similarly, all groups commented on the relative lack of constraint enforced by the museums, which they seemed to perceive as a demonstration of trust and a spur to taking responsibility for their own learning.
> (Jackson & Rees Leahy 2005:312)

Jackson and Rees Leahy went on to describe the children's belief in their experience of authenticity at the museum as one which reinforced the authority of the museum, evoking "the role of the museum as a source of legitimacy and truth" (ibid:319). In contrast, my observations at the National Museum of Scotland, where children continually called into question the 'truth' and 'realness' of the museum's representations, lend insight into the controlled and structured nature of these particular education workshops, along with children's responses to these perceived restrictions within the ever-emerging, relational context of the museum.

[141] See Chapter V for ethnographic examples of children's different responses to museum narratives.

Conclusion: Authenticity in the context of the Museum

> Modern man is…seen, from the perspective of a contemporary existential philosophy, as being in quest of authenticity.
> (Cohen 1988:373)

Despite the "recent anthropological predilection for debunking authenticity" (Geschiere, 2009:29, in reference to the work of Van de Port, 2004; 2005; 2006), evidence from my encounters with informants in the field lends support to de Groot's argument that "the importance of the past – the importance of authenticity, empathy, reality, historical truth – has never been higher" (2009:249). Authentic objects are seen to "intrigue academic and non-academic audiences alike, perhaps more so today than ever before" (Holtorf 2013:427). The preoccupation with 'being real' as opposed to 'being fake', however, is applied not just to objects, but also to people, institutions, relationships and experiences. This general concern with the pursuit of 'authentic experience' has been embodied by people's engagement with post-modern tourism, described by Wang as involving "a bodily experience of personal authenticity" (1999:362). In this context, it has been argued that the 'authenticity' of an individual's experience of another culture or historical period, does not necessarily depend upon the nature of the material culture and traditions encountered, but rather the ability of that individual to feel or be "true to themselves" (ibid). This ability is, in turn, subject to their willingness to believe that at least the *spirit* of their *experience* is authentic. Wang surmises; "Objective authenticity refers to the authenticity of originals. Correspondingly, authentic experiences in tourism are equated to an epistemological experience (i.e. cognition) of the authenticity of originals" (1999:352). From this epistemological perspective, authenticity is argued to play a crucial role in the discovery or affirmation of the self, being a quality that is conceived as completely independent of the materiality of the object encountered. The quest for authenticity has thus been understood to represent a concern for the human ability to "be oneself" (cf. Handler and Saxton 1988). Holtorf (2013:430) suggests that herein lies the "main flaw of many cultural approaches to the authenticity of archaeological objects"; scholarly claims that "authentic objects of the past really are cultural constructs of the present".

In agreement with Holtorf (2013), I would suggest that whilst there is sociological value in these arguments, they sell short the subtle complexity of ideas of 'authenticity' and 'realness' described to me by my informants - particularly their concern with a material encounter occurring outside of themselves. Holtorf (ibid:428) has identified the tension which lies behind the "academic interest in authentic objects and experiences" as being a major conflict between materialist and constructivist approaches:

> Whereas the former argues that there is a discernible basis of authenticity that largely rests on an object's material substance, the latter approach denies this and points instead to the term being variable, negotiable, and relative to a specific social and cultural context. According to the first approach, authenticity is thus considered to be inherent in an object and subject to matter, while in the second approach authenticity is deemed to be a projection deriving entirely from the minds of onlookers. (ibid)

Holtorf (2013:430) also argues that "…what we need is a cultural concept of authenticity that can be linked to a specific object's materiality while also avoiding assumptions about qualities that are somehow inherent in an object". Echoing this line of reasoning, this chapter has argued that, whilst in some ways, my child informants' concern with 'realness', which both mirrored and conflicted with museums' understandings of 'authenticity', related to their socially constituted status within the museum (their relationships with peers and adult authority figures), in still other ways there was more to their understanding of 'realness' and authenticity than as a simple reflection of themselves. If a child was handed an object in the museum, they were, indeed, allowed a particular status relating to the trust and responsibility conferred upon those in adulthood, but their reaction to the material *presence* of certain museum objects could only be understood as an *affect* of the materiality of the things themselves.

Museums' interest in authenticity runs to the very core of their existence, differentiating them from heritage centres, in that the experiences they provide for visitors are grounded in 'real' objects and 'sincere' representations of knowledge (composed and consolidated by 'expert' curators), as opposed to romanticised constructions which give visitors an imaginative *impression* of what life was like in

the past, but where the past is not materially *present*. For museums, therefore, authenticity is about their status not only in relation to the audience within their own walls, but also within the cultural and socio-political landscapes of the 'outside' world.

Just what was it about 'real' objects, however, which generated such interest and excitement amongst my child informants? I can conceive of two possible answers. Firstly, it could be observed that some of my child informants considered 'realness' to be a discernible quality, which was physically manifest in the material nature of particular museum objects. Not all materials and their 'realness' had the same significance for children, however – even if a fossil of a leaf was determined to be "the real thing", it did not elicit the same excited response as did a fossilised dinosaur bone, a meteorite which "really came from outer space" or a pottery fragment marked by the thumb print of a "real Roman". Materials clearly had a role to play in affecting the outcome of these encounters, although the children's responses also appeared to be contingent upon whether or not they could relate to the object, through personal empathy, invigoration, or a metonymic connection with the object's historical maker. If you were to give the children some clay that was thousands of years old, for example, and ask them to make a pot from it, this would not be a 'real' artefact comparable to the pottery fragment in the Roman handling box. The Roman pottery fragment bears witness, by its thumbprint, to the creative actions of people in the past, which produces in its contemporary audience a far more significant reaction.

Different materials have different physical durability and it was often the conception of 'real' museum objects as being inherently 'fragile', which children represented as a moral value, and provoked in them a moral response relating to their duty and responsibility towards these objects. My child informants thus expressed wonder at the fact that they were handling things which had also been touched by people thousands of years ago, and relished the imaginative affordances (Gibson 1986) that these 'real' objects allowed. The imminence and metonymical *presence* (Runia 2006) of 'real' objects, were thus actively sought by the children, enabling them to

experience the past in the museum. Significantly, this experience was enhanced when it occurred in the place where these objects had been found or the context with which they had come to be strongly associated through local historical and cultural narratives. This was illustrated by the observations made by visitors to *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked* exhibition as it returned this world-renowned collection to Lewis.

Secondly, 'real' museum objects were sought by my child informants, because they were perceived to be of greater cultural and economic value than replicas, a fact which imbued them with social capital in relation to the children's negotiation of their own status within the social context of the museum[142]. Being allowed to handle these objects bestowed the children with a level of trust and responsibility, which appeared to reduce, in their perception, the palpable power dynamics between themselves and adult authority figures. Interestingly, one member of the Education Department expressed this as a learning outcome of some of the new workshops being developed by the National Museum of Scotland in association with the Royal Museum Project. These workshops were designed to encourage children to act as adult museum professionals, such as curators and archaeologists, during their museum visit. Ethnographic observations of children's behaviour within the Museum are thus revealing in that they demonstrate the children's keen awareness of their positioning within this very powerful context. Both inside and outside of the museum, children are completely socially and economically dependent on adults and it is perhaps because of this awareness of their position in relation to adult power that they feel the need to continually disrupt the museums' educational discourses by questioning the sincerity, 'realness' and 'authenticity' of what they are being told.

The reality of these power dynamics can be related to the work of Banks (2013:481), who claims that "authenticity can be seen as a process, used instrumentally, rather than a static quality, focusing on how authenticity is asserted, negotiated, performed, or rejected through social and *political* interaction" [*my emphasis*]. Banks employs

[142] For further discussion of the value of objects in relation to Anthropological debates concerning gift exchange, consumption and commodities, see Copeman (2011) and Miller (1995).

Dutton's (2003:259) definitions of 'nominal authenticity' and 'expressive authenticity'; the former being "the correct identification of the origins, authorship, or provenance of an object, ensuring, as the term implies, that an object of aesthetic experience is properly named", whilst the latter relates to "an object's character as a true expression of an individual's or a society's values and beliefs". Banks (2013:486) concludes that 'expressive authenticity' is that which is "verified by the thing itself, by which the object and its representation testify to each others' authenticity", arguing that "nominal, expressive, and instrumental forms of authenticity should be understood as context-dependent properties, or better, processes which attach to or are recognized in objects and social action" (ibid:487).

Power is thus revealed as not only integral to the manner in which different social groups relate to each other within the structures of the Museum, but as fundamental to the ways in which people deal with material 'things' and identify these things as authentic. The interaction between things, the constitution of some things as authentic museum objects, whilst others are disregarded, refers to the issue of trust, a concern for both museum practitioners and their child audience. Inherent to museological practice is the work involved in defining and classifying things, and a significant level of trust in the museum's knowledge and expertise is required in order for this to be achieved. As underlined by the queries of my child informants, however, how can anyone know for sure if what they are being told about an object is true? How can we be sure if the Viking brooch we are looking at through a glass display case is in fact the genuine article? Not only must museums impart trust to their child visitors, by allowing them to handle 'real' artefacts within the context of education workshops, but children must in turn trust that the museum is telling them the truth about these objects, thereby allowing them the authority to authenticate (cf. Holtorf 2013:441).

The process by which other people's frameworks of value, and subsequently how their determination of what some*thing* is finds acceptance in the context of museums, embodies the complex intermingling of politics and materiality. Every*thing*, even relationally constituted museum objects and the museum itself, can be both made and

unmade physically and conceptually[143]. At the National Museum of Scotland, children were observed to play the ambiguous role of making and unmaking designated museum artefacts through their imaginative engagement with material things and the relational context surrounding them. These actions can be construed as profoundly disturbing to the structured auto-narratives of the museum, because they produce uncertainty as to who has the authority to determine what constitutes a 'real' museum object and why this important.

So, what does 'authenticity' mean in the context of this particular museum space? Theodossopoulos (2013a:341) has argued that "the multilayered significance of authenticity provides local actors with a tactical advantage: the freedom to escape from a strict and limiting definition of the authentic, an opportunity to apply their own specific meaning". He also suggests that this "polysemy" (ibid) provides anthropologists with the advantageous prospect of understanding authenticity "within the cultural contexts of its production" and discussing "some of the particular contradictions and dilemmas" (ibid) that it can generate. Towards this end, my ethnography points to an understanding of 'authenticity' as it operated in the context of the National Museum of Scotland, as a highly complex and relative material value. It must also be understood as relational, linked to perceptions of status for both museums and children, in very different ways. Additionally, this chapter has argued that authenticity relates to materials and spatial contexts. I have discussed the particular ways in which interactions between children and museum objects are imbued with a sense of authenticity: through object handling workshops involving 'real' artefacts as opposed to replicas; through encountering these artefacts within particular places (the social and environmental context within which they are believed to both come from and belong to); and through the physical experience of actually touching objects and materials from the past. In this sense, 'authenticity' is undergoing the "continuous, relentless negotiation" described by Theodossopoulos (2013a:356).

[143] See also Chapters III and IV.

In conclusion, authentic museum objects can be described as being "simultaneously of the past and of the present. Their authenticity is both culturally situated and firmly connected to their materiality" (Holtorf 2013:440). My child informants perceived 'realness' as an embodied experience, a physical encounter between things and narratives, in a particular place at a particular time, through which the metonymical *presence* (Runia 2006) of the past could be felt and acted upon. In this way, they have latched onto the significance of the experienced meeting place between past and present in material form that lies beyond the intellectual considerations of museum professionals and their reflexive approaches towards 'authentic' representation.

Chapter VII: Conclusion

"It's really a great matter of trust."
(Katie, 11 years, 19/11/10)

As the children go home and the lights are switched off, the Museum is plunged into darkness and its objects return to being things - galleries full of materials; display cases full of potential - meaning at once nothing and anything at all. The world is full of things which could be displayed within a museum. Selected to become part of its controlled narratives about particular peoples in particular places at particular times, socially constituted museum objects serve as a poignant reminder of both the fragility and endurance of human endeavour. The encounter between children and these objects within the museum space becomes a crisis point – a nexus at which the 'real' and the 'fake', power and autonomy, trust and deception collide, revealing how ultimately, all things (people and objects), at all times, are embroiled in a continual, relational process of becoming. This encounter leaves both children and objects, in some way, changed. Handling objects acquire chips and cracks, get broken and are imbued with new meanings, whilst visiting school children gain new insights into what it might have been like to have lived long ago.

But why does this all matter? How do philosophical concerns with the mutual constitution of meanings and materials relate to the museum's everyday educational practices? And how does an ethnographic account of interactions between children and objects within the National Museum of Scotland contribute towards the greater body of anthropological thought? Firstly, through a reflection on the process of doing research with children within this context; secondly, through a discussion of the main findings of the previous chapters; and thirdly, through relating their implications to both the broader issues facing museums in the UK today (and the particular challenges confronting the National Museum of Scotland), I will draw my conclusions and suggest avenues for future research.

The children who participated in my research not only made this project possible, but shaped both its direction and findings. The insights my informants provided into the processes by which objects and knowledge are constituted within the museum revealed important tensions relating to the control of museum collections and how different audiences view and interact with them. From the outset, the challenges encountered during my journey towards gaining access to this group of informants reinforced these issues of trust and control[144].

The children found themselves in a liminal position within the social structures of the museum; mirroring the objects themselves, they were perceived to be in the midst of an unstable process of becoming and, as such, their responses to the museum's collections were unpredictable. So, on the one hand, they potentially endangered and obstructed the institution's carefully constructed narratives, whilst on the other, they remained remarkably controlled and influenced by adult agendas. Children were unrestrained by the social restrictions applied to adults in this particular socio-cultural space, free to exert their own autonomy by interacting and responding to the objects they encountered in imaginative and creative ways. Often, however, they were forced to adhere to the narratives of the Museum concerning what particular objects were and why they were important. Making children's experiences of museum education workshops the primary focus of my research thus allowed me insight into their relationships with adult authority figures. These involved the continual negotiation of their own social positioning, status and personhood in relation to adult 'others'. Within these negotiations, museum objects became material 'pawns', which were also symbolic of this powerful adult world.

In my research, children were also realists. Defying the *new museology* and its view of objects as being purely constituted through stories, children insisted that there are *things* that are *real*. Whilst their meanings are inherently unstable (able to be both made and unmade as they are constituted relationally through many possible temporal, spatial, social and material permutations), *things* are ultimately physical,

[144] See section on Methodology (Chapter I) for further detail on the processes by which I gained access to conduct research with children at the National Museum of Scotland.

with all the constraints and affordances that this entails. Although their physical properties are vulnerable to fluctuation, disintegration and change (processes which museum conservators try to arrest), herein lies their potential to establish a *real* connection with the past, as identified by my child informants.

In Chapters I and II, the scene is set, situating the key findings of this thesis within the following theoretical context: the social constitution of childhood, objects and 'agency' within the museum; the historical development of museums in the UK since the late nineteenth century (with particular attention to the National Museum of Scotland); and the practical and philosophical implications of the *new museology* (Vergo 1989) for the museum sector since the late twentieth century.

Chapter III examines the National Museum of Scotland's mantra of having "real things revealing stories", in relation to anthropological discussions concerning the "social life of things" (Appadurai 1986), the 'agency' of objects (Gell 1998; Latour 2005), and the "return to things" (Brown 2001, Bennett 2004, Olsen 2003). In this analysis, things are defined as the material stuff of this world, which is both a core component and in excess of socially constituted 'objects'. Children and museum objects interacted in ways which repeatedly challenged NMS' policy intentions concerning the representation of objects, demonstrating how although objects were often actively *prevented* from 'communicating' (through both exhibition style and workshop delivery), even when they were available for more open interpretation by child visitors, they were ultimately *unable* to tell their own stories. An exploration of the notions of materiality and relational agency within the social network of the museum thus finds the National Museum of Scotland's display policy to be problematic both in its failure to be delivered on a practical level, and because, on a theoretical level, objects in isolation simply cannot "tell their own stories" because their objecthood is constructed relationally. On the other hand, museums also do not appear to want their constituted 'objects' to be treated as 'things' (which are open to perpetual re-constitution through relational engagement and interaction), precisely because this would require them to relinquish control over the ways in which their artefacts are made meaningful through narrative.

In Chapter IV, I explore the actual processes by which particular museum objects are socially constituted. Through the entanglement of different stories, historical contexts, social practices and material forms (in ways which both stabilize and rupture their constitution), the meanings of the Lewis Chessmen changed as their touring exhibition moved between different museum venues around Scotland, thus illustrating the complex relational co-constitution of objects and the significance of people's personal experiences of museum artefacts. The Chessmen affected their audience through their material provocation of emotion and acts of personification. It was people's recognition of the Chessmen's human-like properties which enabled them to assume an ambivalent position between object- and subject-hood, playing an important role in the process of subjects making objects making subjects (Miller 2005:38; Pinney 2005:269). The chapter concludes that the Lewis Chessmen can be conceived as 'things', which are embroiled in a perpetual process of emergence or becoming. As iconic people-objects, they were able to both give form and substance to political and historical meanings, whilst remaining bound up in social interactions between people and things. Ultimately, through their presence (Runia 2006), aura (Benjamin 2002), affects (Thrift 2004) and material affordances (Gibson 1986), the Chessmen further our understanding of the "closeness, the intimacy, of humans and nonhumans" (Bennett 2004:365).

Chapter V focuses on the experiences and autonomy of children within the social structures of the museum. I highlight children's repeated attempts to negotiate perceptions of their own status and personhood in the face of their uncertain social positioning as 'becoming-people'. Considering what 'children's agency' actually means in this context, I explore the different ways in which child informants engaged with the cultural narratives of the National Museum of Scotland, and, to a lesser extent, the other museums involved in *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked* exhibition. I consider children's identification with things as socially constituted museum objects in light of the more abstract framing concepts of heritage and nation the objects were employed to represent. The chapter thus discerns the multiple ways in which children interacted with objects, critically engaging with the tension between children's suggestibility and their disruptiveness within the museum's education workshops. In the latter case, not only did the children disregard the value of these

objects, but also openly questioned and denied official explanations in favour of their own creative imaginings. The children were thus found to be more than capable of adapting and disrupting the agendas embedded within museum education programmes. They exhibited a degree of autonomy which reflects Lee's (2001:19) descriptions of the late twentieth century "destabilization of adulthood", whereby adults are no longer able to assume authority over children on the basis of being "*experts* on how to live" (ibid). Children both questioned the authority of adults and simultaneously reinforced this adult:child/expert:learner dichotomous relationship. Their autonomy remained significantly limited by the Museum, whose control over workshop agendas and outcomes mirrored its approach towards the objects in its collections.

In contrast to the 'agency' of objects, as being contingent upon their affective capacity (cf. Clough; Thrift 2004) and their unconscious participation in an action or event (cf. Latour 2005; Gell 1998), children's 'agency' is revealed to mean both their ability to learn and develop skill (Ingold 2011:94) and their wilful autonomy, frequently expressed within the context of museum education. I thus conclude that, having profoundly different connotations in each case, the term 'agency' is both relational and context-specific and, as such, it also has limited usefulness as an analytical tool for examining the relations between children and objects.

My central concern in Chapter VI is the misalignment between children's desire for and understanding of 'realness' in the museum, and the museum's own notions of 'authenticity'. The chapter deconstructs the assumptions behind each of these 'perspectives' before examining ethnographic material focused on children's perceived opposition between 'real' and 'replica' museum objects. I found that the nature of the objects encountered had a significant impact on both the children's behaviour and their engagement with museum education, "valorizing the peculiar intimacy between a historical moment and object" (Pinney 2005:262).

I also explore the role of *place* and materiality in constituting particular objects as 'authentic', 'less authentic' or 'inauthentic' in the light of people's responses to *The*

Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked exhibition and political claims for the repatriation of the Chessmen themselves. After reflecting more theoretically upon the notion of 'authentic experience' and how museum objects are able to stimulate particular sentiments in their beholders, I consider the qualities of 'realness' and 'authenticity' in relation to values and power structures within the museum space, before resolving that 'authenticity' in this context, has multiple meanings, because it is constituted in multiple ways. For my child informants, 'realness' or 'authenticity' could not be reduced to the intellectual and emotional projections of human subjects onto material things, rather, things, when constituted as museum objects, had an affective capacity which inspired the notion of truthful reality in the gaze of their beholders.

Interactions between children and artefacts at the National Museum of Scotland demonstrate the interplay between power and materiality, whereby contact with replica handling objects stimulated questions relating to trust and the negotiation of status and personhood within the museum space. By granting them temporary stewardship of objects of great age and some intellectual value, museum staff were placing trust in the children. In order to be allowed this special privilege, however, the children had to adopt the museum's value definitions and treat the objects with respect, thereby trusting that they were being told the 'truth'. The act of relating and ultimately submitting to the museum's external frameworks of value is thus revealed to be a fundamental aspect of the museum visitors' experience.

My child informants perceived 'realness' as an embodied experience, a physical encounter between things and narratives, which occurred in particular places at particular times, and through which the metonymical *presence* (Runia 2006) of the past could be felt and acted upon. In this way, they had recognised the museum object as a material meeting place between past and present; a point situated outside the intellectualised conceptualisations of museum staff who have adopted more reflexive approaches towards the professional ideal of 'authentic' representation.

Importantly, the findings of these chapters can be directly related to significant issues with which both museums and childhood research are currently grappling - the

question of what it means to 'experience the past'; the significance of touching objects; the interplay between status and control within the museum space; and children's active negotiation of personhood and belonging.

> Museums are (1) not to be strolled around in but to be experienced, (2) made up of collections expressive of the soul of that 'experience', (3) not in fact museums but merely galleries when emptied of their contents. (Pamuk 2010:526)

The nobel prize-winning author, Orphan Pamuk (2010:510), has described "real museums" as "places where Time is transformed into Space", emphasising museums' particular interest in the concept of 'experiencing the past', because it relates to their identity as storehouses of material heritage. Museums consider themselves distinct from the increasingly-popular 'heritage centre' by virtue of their possession of 'authentic' historical, natural and ethnographic collections. The concept of experiencing a physical encounter with the past through these objects, however, remains bound up with the notion that such artefacts or specimens bear material testimony to their life histories (Appadurai 1986) and thus increase our understanding of what it might have felt like to have lived "a long, long time ago". And so, the fine line between museum representation and the reconstructive, experiential history performed by heritage centres becomes a little blurred at the boundaries, especially in the light of "history's recent affective turn" (Agnew 2007), epitomised by contemporary reenactment (e.g. television programmes which claim to transport present-day families 'back in time').

Agnew (2007:299) describes such attempts at historical representation as being "characterized by conjectural interpretations of the past, the collapsing of temporalities and an emphasis on affect, individual experience and daily life rather than historical events, structures and processes", whereby "the past is reduced to a conceit for dealing with the present" (ibid:309). These observations have important applications in relation to education workshops at the National Museum of Scotland. In parallel with reenactment television programmes, museum staff and workshop facilitators were observed to encourage children to sympathise and identify with past peoples in order to gain a deeper understanding of the historical period being studied. This level of empathy was noticeably impacted by the perceived 'realness' of the

museum's handling collections, hinting again at the central role this encounter between children and objects plays in the museums' ability to enable these 'experiences of the past'. Although Agnew (2007:309) has noted that this 'reenactment' style of approach should also be "accompanied by a hard-eyed investigation of historical processes and a rigorous coming to terms with the past", my own ethnographic research with children at the National Museum of Scotland has largely supported Ankersmit's (2005:10) contrasting view that; "How we *feel* about the past is no less important than what we *know* about it – and probably even more so".

A fundamental aspect of children's 'experience of the past' in the museum was thus contrived through their physical encounter with 'real' museum objects, which brings us onto a second important issue affecting museums today – the question of touch. People's sensual engagement with collections have been of central interest to museums in the UK since their origins. The tactile exploration of artefacts in eighteenth century private collectors' 'cabinets of curiosities' played an important role in the experiences of select and privileged visitors. With the later onset of the nineteenth century public museum, however, the "preservation of collections for posterity" became "a *raison d'etre* for the modern museum" and so "it was deemed necessary for collections to be hands-off" (Classen & Howes 2006:208). Although this approach fostered an attitude of respect towards museum collections, Edwards et al (2006:20) have observed the following:

> During the twentieth century, as museum work has become increasingly professionalized, the apparatus that ensures the separation of objects and humans has become steadily more elaborate and bureaucratized. Even researchers must usually handle objects wearing gloves which impede the embodied experience and knowledge that comes only from the senses of touch, smell, and sometimes also hearing.

Consequently, the general public visiting a museum today are usually forced to encounter museum objects from a distance, through a pane of glass; "at one or more removes from direct experience" (Edwards 2006:19). In the face of the more recent postmodernist protestations of the *new museology* (Vergo 1989), Classen and Howes have also made the following observations (2006:216):

> Despite a number of innovative challenges to the glass-case model, an increasing reliance on visual technologies for documentation and dissemination (as in the case of the "virtual museum") make museums more sight-bound than ever.

Edwards et al (2006:2) have also claimed that the "critical nexus" the senses "form around material culture has yet to be adequately described and, following on from that, its impact for museological practice assessed". My ethnography attests to the significant impact physical engagement with the material past makes upon children visiting the museum. It thus both responds to this challenge and lends weight to claims made by those contributing to an *anthropology of the senses*, that "the reengagement with the sensory offers a more adequate framework through which the power of objects as mediators and active agents can be understood" (Edwards et al 2006:12).

Stoller (1989:89) has described this subjective approach as being a superior way to understanding human imagination and experience, rather than a return to fetishism or romanticism. Nonetheless, the museum's retention of ultimate control over which objects can be touched, by whom and when and where this activity can take place, still reveals complicated negotiations of status and control within the museum space. Distinctions between experts and laypeople, adults and children are very powerful, particularly from the perspectives of the latter, who observed that control over museum objects ultimately corresponded to autonomy and the other rights and responsibilities bound up in the status of adulthood.

Children's negotiations of their own social positioning within the controlled space of the Museum was particularly apparent in four key areas: firstly, the social constitution of objects; secondly, children's exertion of autonomy in their engagement with the Museum's narratives; thirdly, the Museum's different uses of both 'real' and replica handling objects; and fourthly, the employment of 'us' and 'them' categories and rule-making in respect of children's relationships with adult authority figures. All of these aspects are illustrated in the following example:

> *The pupils were… given a pair of gloves each (just like the 'experts') and were told that they were not allowed to handle the objects except with the gloves on, otherwise their sweat etc. would*

> *damage the artefacts, some of which were worth a lot of money as well as being valuable to science. During the course of the session, as a facilitator, I felt this distinction was very difficult to maintain without hypocrisy, as along with the workshop facilitators, the class teacher and the individuals who had come along to the CPD event for school teachers last month, up until this point, I had been freely handling the objects without gloves. I did, however, deliberately try to put on the gloves before touching the objects throughout the session (although I noticed that the other workshop facilitators did not). My later comments relating to my awkwardness at trying not to forget to do this were met with humour by the other facilitating adults. Does this imply a betrayal of trust as regards the power-relationship between adults and children? Was our inconsistency concerning the handling of objects apparent to the children, or did it pass without comment simply because that was expected of us; one rule guiding their behaviour and another rule applying to us?*
> (Fieldnotes, class of 11-12 year olds, 8/10/10)

Gloves were an important tool in museum workshops as they emphasised the special and delicate nature of the handling objects and encouraged children to treat them differently and more carefully than everyday stuff. Significantly, they also served as a barrier to actual physical contact between the children's hands and the surfaces of the objects. They thus reinforced the museum's attempts to control both its collections and children's engagement with these collections. Although taken from an adult's perspective, my fieldnotes from this particular workshop also served to illustrate how the children appeared to both accept what they were being told about the museum objects, whilst also subverting and disrupting these education narratives in numerous ways. For example, they used their white gloves to perform mime dances and employed one of the handling objects, an African headrest, as a "half-pipe" for their mini finger skateboards. These encounters emphasised children's awareness of their distinctive social positioning in relation to adult authority figures. This was also evidenced on numerous other occasions through my child informants' constant questioning of what they were being told, as if expecting adults to conceal the "truth" from them on the basis of their identity as children. Their expectation to be only allowed access to 'replica' objects rather than the 'real things', and the significant change in their behaviour upon realising that this wasn't always the case, thus contributes to our understanding of children's negotiation of their personhood

and belonging through the social constitution of 'real' and 'authentic' museum objects.

Lee (2001:18) contends that, in social relationships between adults and children, "the past is no longer a reliable guide to the present or, for that matter, to the future"; "Uncertainty over the nature of childhood and uncertainty over how properly to treat children is emerging" (ibid:19). This uncertainty was certainly reflected in my research. Although there is evidence to suggest that children perceived their relationship with adult authority figures as oppositional and rigidly structured, the boundaries of this division were being continually tested, questioned and re-negotiated. Adults were also not the only social category in opposition to which the children defined themselves. The recognition and response of peers to particular behaviours was also very important, as was their positioning within the broader structures of the disembodied museum organisation. The museum is thus a space within which questions of children's identity, personhood and belonging, can be worked out materially, through the control, constitution and re-constitution of museum objects (cf. Radin 1982) and narratives.

The National Museum of Scotland can be understood as a meeting point - a place of both conflict and paradox. This is particularly apparent in three key areas. Firstly, in the spirit of postmodernism, the National Museum of Scotland has attempted to engage with the provocations of the *new museology* (Vergo 1989) by adapting its approach to representation. This has been particularly evident in its recently refurbished Royal Museum building. By keeping object labels short and the information provided about its collections simple, it has tried to redress the balance in the unequal power dynamic between museum 'experts' and visiting 'laypeople' – encouraging people to think about the objects on display for themselves, engaging with them on their own terms as opposed to being overwhelmed by any personal lack of knowledge about the subject area. This new approach to representation has been framed as 'multivocality', a dialogue between museum professionals and visitors, whereby knowledge is no longer understood as a one-way flow from producers to consumers (see Hooper-Greenhill 2000; Pearce 1994).

In a similar vein, Peers and Brown (2003:1) have observed that in recent years, relationships between museums and source communities have also shifted to become a two-way process involving flows of artefacts and knowledge; "In some parts of the world, this shift has occurred in the context of changing relations of power, so that source community members have come to be defined as authorities on their own cultures and material heritage" (ibid). This process has involved building trust and sharing power. As my own research with children has shown, however, despite these changes in approach, the Museum still refuses to completely relinquish its control over the social constitution of its objects. In fact, its new emphasis on 'interactive' exhibits and games in 'family galleries' has been criticised for being even more restrictive on how people can engage with its collections, often serving as a distraction from the objects themselves.

Secondly, in the midst of economic recession, the National Museum of Scotland is being challenged to adapt its practice according to budget reductions and the changing priorities of funding bodies. The latter are closely linked to visitor figures and measurable contributions to society (such as the Museum's enhancement of the national school curriculum, its engagement with broad sections of society and its generation of income). Ironically, as greater pressure is placed upon the Museum to engage with its visitors in relevant and accessible ways, the reduced availability of staff and finance means that probing, qualitative research with these visitors (particularly child visitors) is become less and less possible.

Thirdly, in anticipation of the forthcoming referendum on Scottish independence (scheduled to be held on 18th September 2014), the National Museum of Scotland faces the challenge of keeping up with Scotland's changing society. Although the Museum is inherently political in its material existence and contemporary cultural remit, it strives to maintain some degree of distance and political neutrality in relation to nationalist politics in Scotland. Despite Scottish Government funding and influence over its organisational policy and objectives, the Museum remains an independent body which insists on doing things its own way. This has been illustrated, for example, by the construction of *The Lewis Chessmen: Unmasked*

touring exhibition, which the Scottish Government may have funded, but in which it ultimately had no say.

This thesis contributes a more nuanced understanding of the 'crisis of representation' faced by the National Museum of Scotland by adding ethnographic texture and depth to the processes by which this is negotiated in day-to-day life in the Museum's galleries. It is increasingly apparent that paying lip service to a more democratic and dialogic approach to representation in organisational policy does not necessarily translate into a more open and creative interactive space on ground level. We could even question whether this is, in fact, the most effective and appropriate way to engage children with material heritage. Although the Museum has attempted to adopt *new museological* principles, encouraging visitors to ask questions and investigate objects for themselves, the flow of knowledge generally remains uni-directional. My child informants not only expected the Museum to be in possession of all of the answers, they also suspected their deliberate 'concealment'. The National Museum's approach often did not result in my informants gaining more control over the learning process within the museum space, but rather served as a reinforcement of their vulnerability and powerlessness as children.

In claiming to allow objects to "speak for themselves", the National Museum of Scotland has attempted to distance itself from both political agendas and the enforcement of a metanarrative concerning Scottish material heritage. Yet, this postmodernist ideal is virtually unattainable in museological practice. No matter whether objects are selected and displayed according to grand historical narratives, or if such narratives are constructed latterly, on the basis of their correlation with material evidence; the very act of *selection* itself tells a story, which, in turn, is situated, partial and context-dependent. Whilst the Museum tries to deny the intensely unbalanced power dynamic between professional and layperson, staff and visitor, the children with whom I worked were happy to face it head-on. They did this by both accepting the Museum's narratives and disrupting or obstructing them - employing things in the Museum to meet their own interests and agendas as socially constituted objects (or subjects).

A solution to the 'crisis of representation' faced by the National Museum of Scotland would involve greater openness and transparency about the ideological and ethical issues with which it is grappling. For example, by inviting the public into this political arena and providing them with the tools by which to contribute to the social constitution of knowledge and objects within a more creative and less controlled space. This solution might be most helpfully implemented within the context of the Museum's educational practice. During the time of my research (January 2010-June 2011), the Museum's schools offer involved a combination of costumed, interpretative performance and 'self'/teacher-led object-handling sessions. My findings encourage the Education Department to continue in the direction already embarked upon with the implementation of the Royal Museum refurbishment Project. Placing increased emphasis on children's encounters with 'real' objects and providing inspiring contextualisation for these experiences will serve to further enhance children's engagement with museum education.

This thesis also makes contributions towards wider bodies of knowledge in Social Anthropology. It does this through a number of key areas of current interest and discussion concerning material culture, authenticity, museums and the social constitution of knowledge. It thus also touches upon the concerns of many other disciplines such as Sociology and Childhood Studies, History, Social Geography and Archaeology.

Firstly, my findings suggest that we need to move beyond the work of Appadurai (1986), Gell (1998) and Latour (2005) on the 'social lives' and 'agency' of objects. By espousing a 'return to things' (Brown 2001; Bennett 2004), we are able to understand the social constitution and control of museum artefacts as a far more complex process of perpetual emergence. Although Lidchi (1997:162) has observed that objects' "*physicality* delivers a promise of stability and objectivity", suggesting "a stable, unambiguous world", all objects are unstable, and museum objects are only *temporarily* constituted as 'object'-artefacts in order to serve the purposes of the museum. The physical degradation and disintegration of museum objects is only prevented through the museum's active, transformative interventions. This

requirement serves to reinforce the fact that 'material heritage' remains inherently composed of 'things' – the material stuff of this world, which, by its very nature is fluctuating and unstable, having the potential for different meanings and uses. The same 'instability' exists for children and perhaps all audiences visiting the museum.

Both the 'agency' of children and objects within this fluctuating and emerging world can be linked to the question of time, discussed in relation to the work of Bergson and Deleuze (Hodges 2008) in Chapter I. Time, or *la duree* is non-chronological; a series of successive instants (Hodges 2008:410). The past is thus contemporary, coexistant and *a priori* of the present. Whilst the world is always becoming, we only become aware of the possibility of the past because things change at different speeds. This awareness then requires considerable work in order for it to be contained within the linear, progressive temporalities with which we are familiar. This means that the role of museums must be understood as being part of wider processes of constituting and stabilising the past, in spite of this reality of constant change. Such work involves the *social* constitution of things as 'artefacts' as well as their *material* conservation, processes which, in a sense, deny the very historicity of these things. Ironically, in order to celebrate their aura and affectiveness and preserve them for future generations, the museum must sterlise these very qualities by removing them from social and physical interaction and placing them in glass cases. This paradox is perhaps the key to understanding why it is that, although children, adult visitors and museum staff alike, recognise the importance of sensual engagement with stuff and material experiences of the past, these approaches remain ultimately very problematic within museum education. This is because they undermine fundamentally the very linear progressive temporalities that lie behind the constitution of museum objects.

The tension relating to the control of museum objects, both in terms of physical access and in what they were employed to represent, is central to this argument. The encounter between children and museum objects became problematic when the children did not accept the museum's value judgements and definitions, but rather treated objects according to their material potential as things. They thus undermined

the cultural work invested by the museum in socially constituting these particular objects. The outcome of these encounters therefore lends us significant insight into the ways in which things – both people and objects, are embroiled in a continuous and inherently unstable process of becoming (cf. Ingold 2010, 2007, 2002), which, far from being smooth, cyclical and constructive, is sometimes complex, messy and destructive (cf. Pinney 2005).

Secondly, whilst all objects are socially constituted, particular objects in particular places at particular times come to be experienced as somehow more 'real' and authentic than others. Their material properties have particular surface qualities, which, according to Gibson (1986:127), impact both how they are perceived and what they afford. Gibson's "radical hypothesis", "implies that the "values" and "meanings" of things in the environment can be directly perceived. Moreover…values and meanings are external to the perceiver" (ibid). It is thus the material affordances of museum objects that enable children to conjure imaginative experiences of the past. These 'affects' have been described by Thrift (2004) as being emotional as well as physical and social, impacting people in very personal ways.

My thesis thus elaborates upon Runia's (2006) notion of *presence* – the combined metaphorical and metonymical qualities of objects and monuments which are both symbolically representative and actually constituted in the past. Resonating with Benjamin's (2002) earlier work on the 'aura' of original objects or works of art in the age of mass reproduction and replication, my child informants insisted that 'real' museum objects were better than carefully-researched 'replicas' because they were actually "from the past"; they were in possession of a tangible quality bearing witness to the 'truthfulness' of what they were claiming to represent. This highlights the importance of 'realness' and authenticity as qualities that are socially constituted in the museum space, particularly as they relate to the material negotiation of power, status and personhood.

This leads onto a third contribution that relates to the study of children and childhood. It concerns the processes by which children are and 'become' people. Burton (1978), Prout and James (1997), James (2005, 1993) and Tisdall et al (2009), among many others, have criticised traditional studies of children and childhood due to their over-emphasis on the socialisation and biological development of children; viewing children as 'becoming-people' rather than as people in their own right. My findings highlight the paradoxical ways in which children both accept and disrupt the educational narratives of the Museum (being at once highly suggestible and highly autonomous), negotiating their own personhood and social positioning through their physical access to and manipulation of 'real' museum objects. Uniquely combining perspectives from both material culture studies and the study of childhood, they also provide further illustration of the ways in which both children and museum objects are locked within a continual process of 'becoming'; their very instability being of concern to museums, which, in turn, try to retain some degree of control over their interaction.

Museum spaces, and what happens in them, are not only powerfully reflective and constitutive of wider social relations concerning age and status, but also of broader concerns with emergence, instability and cultural framing. Crucially, through my research at the National Museum of Scotland, I do not mean to exceptionalise children and suggest that their views and opinions are profoundly distinctive from the perspectives of adult museum visitors (despite some educational policies' suggestions to this effect). Instead, by choosing to conduct my research with children, I have been able to provide knowledge of the unstable, open-ended and fraught power relations involved in the processes of mutual becoming in which visitors and artefacts, together with museum staff, are closely entangled (cf. Hodder 2011). Focusing on children's engagement with material heritage in museum education workshops is useful, because it gives us access to something that affects everyone. Their comments make clearly apparent the tension that exists between the desire to both accept and disrupt cultural 'frames' (Goffman 1997 [1974]). They also draw attention to people's fundamental discomfort with the notion that everything in this world is ultimately unstable and involved in a process of perpetual

emergence. Everyone disrupts the narratives of powerful institutions, whilst at the same time, partially going along with them. We all go to museums to learn or experience something and we all desire narratives through which we can make sense of what we are seeing and experiencing. We don't want to get rid of museums' cultural framing completely as this would leave us lost, with no cultural reference points. Consequently, the instability apparent in the constant emergence of things, objects and knowledge is not just a problem for museums, but a problem for everyone. My findings provide us with insight on some of the many possible ways of dealing with this problem.

Thoughts on future directions

Central to this thesis is my argument that objects do not and cannot 'speak' in the controlled ways Museum policy dictates, but they can and should be allowed alternative forms of agency within museum practice, creating more effective ways for children to learn through stuff in the museum. Learning in and through objects in museums is still a work in progress and this thesis is a contribution to the debate. Although, restricted by the practical parameters of time, space and access, my fieldwork has revealed several new avenues for future research directions, which would provide opportunities to both consolidate and elaborate my findings.

- Further research into the incorporation of material heritage into contemporary community narratives of belonging and identity in both Shetland and Lewis (or the Western Isles) would make a significant contribution to our understanding of how 'things' become embedded in everyday cultural practices in this field.
- In order to deepen knowledge of how the materiality of the Lewis Chessmen impacted the social production of particular histories, I would also suggest further examination of how their material substance (walrus ivory) has been employed by archaeologists in (re)constructions of their provenance and subsequent journeys along the trade routes of medieval Europe. These particular ways of using materials in the social constitution of narrative could be helpfully contrasted with islanders' perspectives, whereby it may be other aspects of the Chessmen's materiality which predominates in the histories they construct for them.
- My findings concerning both children and adult's responses to the human-like spirit of the Lewis Chessmen has also brought to light interesting connections with anthropological discussions of animism and perspectivism. These connections might be fruitfully pursued in relation to Tyler's (1871) early claims that animism was 'child like'. The Chessmen were described by my child informants as having human-like desires, emotions, powers and

capabilities, thereby extending the 'social' realm to include these objects.

- Questions relating to the fluctuating and unstable nature of time could be pursued usefully through an anthropological study of other museum 'time freezing' practices, such as artefact conservation and preservation.
- My own experiences in the National Museum of Scotland's galleries suggest that it would be worthwhile investigating the role of space in affecting children's engagement with museum objects and their experience of education workshops. NMS would, itself, also benefit from commissioning research on children's engagement with material heritage through its current school workshops (which demonstrate a new approach to museum education developed in conjunction with the re-opening of the Royal Museum of Scotland building).
- I would also like to explore further the impact of socio-cultural background, age and class size upon children's attitudes towards museums and their engagement with museum collections.
- It would be important to focus in greater ethnographic detail on teachers' perspectives of their class' educational experience in the museum, in order to explore if/how/why children's behaviour changes between the classroom and the museum - particularly in relation to the increased opportunity for physical access to 'real' museum artefacts.

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Sources of Photographs

Figures 2, 9 and 10 are from National Museums Scotland Website;
http://www.nms.ac.uk/our_museums/national_museum.aspx, accessed 7th May 2012.

Figure 3; *Exhibition of embroideries at the Royal Scottish Museum – a visitor looks at the cushion cover designs* (published 18th August 1961) is from The Scotsman Publications Ltd archive on SCRAN www.scran.ac.uk, accessed 7th May 2012.

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