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Festskrift til Ellen Høigård Hofseths vikingtidsutstilling

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INNHOLD

A kaleidoscopic vision:
exhibiting and imagining the Viking Past in *Fra Istid Til Kvitekrist*

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In this paper I propose the metaphor of the kaleidoscope as a tool to analyze exhibitions. More specifically, I will apply this metaphor to the analysis of the exhibition *Fra Istid Til Kvitekrist* ('From the Ice Age to Christianity') set up between 1992 and 1997 by curator Ellen Høigård Hofseth at the Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo.

The metaphor of the kaleidoscope enables me to capture and critically discuss the exhibition's multifaceted character and museological features – layout, contextualization, sensory engagement and narratives, among others. I suggest that these features are indicators not only of the distinctive and visionary character of the exhibition, but also of its museological significance within the broader historical, institutional and disciplinary contexts in which it developed.

The exhibition as a kaleidoscope

The exhibition *Fra Istid Til Kvitekrist* is devoted to the representation of Norwegian history 'from the Ice Age to Christianity', thus including the crucial Viking period. This exhibition evokes in my mind the image of a museological kaleidoscope, a wondrous assemblage of display approaches and techniques. I propose to use this metaphor – the kaleidoscope – to capture the innovative and unique character of this exhibition, combining diverse museological approaches, display techniques, narrative tones and curatorial styles.

The kaleidoscope is an optical device invented in 1815, consisting of a "tube containing an arrangement of mirrors or prisms that produces different images and patterns [...] light is typically reflected from the mirrors or prisms through object cells containing glass pieces, seashells and the like to create ever-changing patterns of design and color" (Spade and Valentine 2008:xiii). Given its peculiarities, the kaleidoscope has lent itself to be used as a metaphor in several domains, with particular success in the humanities and social sciences. For instance, the metaphor of the kaleidoscope has been used to describe linguistic variety and complexity (Dalby 2001); gender identities and relations (Spade and Valentine 2008); and the interplay of time, memories and emotions in creating a sense of place (Richardson 2008; Stanton 2003).

At the root of its potential as a metaphor lies the kaleidoscope's ability to efficaciously illustrate

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ideas of refraction, multiplication, fragmentation, and perpetual transformation (Groth 2007:217). This is because the kaleidoscope creates multiple and constantly changing views and gazes; in so doing, it produces images that demand to be apprehended as objects in their own right. It could be argued that the kaleidoscope is a liminal device: it provides an interface between different worlds, between subjects and objects, and between reality and imagination. As Helen Groth (2007:217) notes "the kaleidoscope has always suggested interaction, a dialogue between hand and eye, inside and outside". As a non-Norwegian based at a Norwegian institution, and writing about a very 'national' topic, I am too casting both an insider and outsider's gaze.

In its original cultural and historical setting of 19th century England, the kaleidoscope had a great success as an object of popular delectation, a 'toy' for both children and adults, and later a sought-after collectible. In this sense, since its origins, the kaleidoscope has been more an object of aesthetic pleasure than a scientific instrument or a tool for precise observation. The viewer may experience the uncertainty, volatility, even slight dizziness induced by the many blurred, dancing images created by the device. As Groth puts it "the interplay between spectacle and intimacy […] [*was*] synonymous with experiment and perceptual instability rather than mastery" (Groth 2007:223). The kaleidoscope, continues Groth, captures "the moment that precedes resolution and definition, when the mind and eye are open to sensation and difference" (Groth 2007:233). What the kaleidoscope lacks in precision and scientific rigour, it compensates with aesthetic pleasure and evocative power.

I suggest that the metaphor of the kaleidoscope can be fruitfully applied to an exhibition – all the more when this succeeds in providing visitors with a wide range of 'views' and images, and thus becoming a creative artefact in its own right. In an exhibition, views and gazes intersect, refract, multiply… they ultimately create an object of both beauty and knowledge, a museological artefact that opens up fresh and unexpected perspectives on much-discussed themes and old collections. Yet in one respect at least, the kaleidoscope metaphor offers a limited explanatory capacity, this is the multisensorial aspect of exhibitions. The kaleidoscope is centred on vision and visuality, whilst exhibitions are complex and composite media, activating multiple senses and providing rich sensory experiences. As we shall see, *Fra Istid Til Kvitekrist* is particularly engaging for the senses, memories and emotions. That said, the kaleidoscope metaphor retains its utility in highlighting the liminal character of the experience, the exhibition-viewing as an encounter between subjects and objects. In approaching the exhibition in this way, I implicitly adopt a phenomenological museological perspective (see Dudley 2009, 2012, 2013; Edwards *et al*. 2006) whereby the focus is on the micro-dynamics of the encounter understood as a "process in which both participants, person and thing, are active and significant […] part of a mutually interdependent, material world, full of multiple and shifting meanings, values and functions" (Dudley 2013:2). This theoretical stance, emphasizing the encounter, the interaction, and the 'space in between' (thus implicitly attributing some degree of agency to materiality, see Gell 1998) brings to the fore a set of factors – such as sensory stimulation, proprioception, and imagination – that are affected (amplified or silenced) by display techniques, and that can become complements to (or even substitutes for) texts in exhibitions, enriching and transforming the interplay among the most 'classic' exhibition elements such as text, objects and images. As such, these non-textual, sensory dimensions play a considerable role (if still relatively poorly understood) in the way visitors experience and interpret museum exhibitions. Sensory stimulation and proprioception can activate cognitive and emotional personal responses, such as imagination, memories, poetic vision, and shifting perceptions of time and space. Yet too often, due to their non-visual but perceptual nature, these factors are overlooked in the analysis of displays. In what follows, I consider how the above mentioned factors play out in the exhibition *Fra Istid Til Kvitekrist*, and more

broadly I discuss the aspects of the exhibition that mark a departure from conventional museological approaches, and may contribute to explain why the legacy of this – not uncontentious – exhibition is nevertheless enduring.

The making of a time-capsule

The exhibition *Fra Istid Til Kvitekrist* occupies a large section of the ground floor of the Museum of Cultural History of the University of Oslo. The exhibition space, relatively narrow and elongated (on a floor map, it would look like a long rectangle), has been structured to create an involute and meandering visiting path. Most of the objects on display are presented in glass cases that line the walls and shape the space in-between to create a zig-zagging viewing path.

This however, does not follow a chronological criterion, but rather a thematic one. Indeed time is almost flattened in the exhibition: we know we are in the past, we become gradually immersed into what that past might have looked like, but there is no emphasis on 'evolution' or 'progress' (which tend to be recurrent themes in historical displays).

The exhibition texts are essential and non-intrusive (situated below or next to the display case). This is not an exhibition meant to be 'read', as to be 'experienced': the main points of entry into the display are provided by the overall atmosphere and the mood created in the room, as well as by objects themselves - their inter-relations, the resonances and the contrasts that emerge from their juxtaposition and grouping in glass cases.

Figure 1. The zig-zagging visiting path in the gallery. Photo: Marzia Varutti.

Light (both natural and artificial) is used sparingly and with precision. In some areas, such as the closing section "En Variert Gudeverden" (translated as 'The Gods and Their Worlds') which includes religious objects, the exhibition room is quite dark, almost as to suggest a sacred environment, although this clashes with the representation of the gods through cloth dolls. The exhibition makes extensive use of mannequins and miniature figures made to represent individuals in past societies as well as deities. In so doing, the curator placed human figures (life size and miniature, puppets and sculpted effigies) at the core of the display. With this somewhat ironic use of miniatures, the curator gives a face to Vikings (often benignly smiling) and physiognomic features (fair skin and fierce red, untamed hair).

Figure 2. Life-size figure representing a Viking. Photo: Marzia Varutti.

This 'humanizing' approach is a direction rarely taken in archaeological exhibitions, which tend to focus on the materiality of the archaeological artefacts retrieved through excavations, whilst scrupulously adhering to the chronological time-line.

Telling (hi)stories in new ways

The exhibition plays with the idea of contextualization. There is clearly an intention to provide contextualization for the objects on display. Information panels located below the exhibition case provide short descriptions for objects: a general caption provides details on the objects' provenance and dating (e.g. "Grave-find from the 9th century from Torshov, Gjerdrum & Akershus") and each object is provided with a concise description (e.g. "belt with buckle"). The panels are relatively discreet, being located below the gaze level, as if to invite only interested visitors to bow down and read the captions. In addition, an exhibition catalogue (in Norwegian and English) is available to visitors next to the display cabinets. The catalogue – addressing topics as broad as glacier movements, flora and fauna distribution, Stone Age hunting techniques, farming, burial practices etc. – offers comprehensive, in-depth, research-based information complete with scientific sketches and references to academic sources. Given its format, breadth and depth of information, this publication, more than an exhibition catalogue, can be thought of as a proper academic book. In this sense, one would ideally read it in the quiet and comfort of a library, rather than standing in the exhibition room. A more concise text with highlights and pointers to key objects in the exhibition would have probably provided visitors with a more efficient tool to navigate the display. That said, the catalogue is an important testimony to the depth of research underlying the display.

Through the low-level panels and the exhibition catalogue, information is made

available but is not imposed on visitors. This curatorial decision reveals the prominence attributed to the encounter with the object and its evocative power. Like the refracted images in the kaleidoscope, objects such as miniatures, life-size mannequins and dioramas are re-framed as tools for contextualization in the exhibition. For instance, miniature cloth figures are placed in the display case to illustrate how specific tools would be used (e.g. a small figure representing a silversmith at work). Importantly, these figures also create an image – and a canon – for 'the Viking' which emerges as a strong, industrious, assertive character. Contextualization is also provided through dioramas and large background landscape paintings. These don't aim to be realistic, but provide a coloured canvas that covers the original museum architecture and obscures the large window frames.

An original aspect of the exhibition is that it includes poetry: in the same way as miniatures and mannequins, poems are also turned into tools for museological contextualization. Panels with short poems relating to the objects on display (e.g. Norse Gods) are located near, and sometimes in, the glass case as if to complement the information available to understand archaeological objects and artworks.

One senses the efforts of the curators to show that it is possible to move away from conventional forms of representation and contextualization, and succeed in communicating meaning by evoking emotions and by stimulating imagination through other channels – such as painting, art installations and poetry. These create new, highly original visual and emotional frameworks to the archeological objects. This approach blurs the divide between the archaeological exhibits and other elements of the display: there is now a new kind of dialogue going on between dolls, ancient iron work, poems, landscape photography, and art installations. The kaleidoscope's magic is at play. This new kind of intertextuality (Bryson 1988) is one of the most innovative and powerful museological aspects of this exhibition.

'Sensing' the past

The exhibition makes a point to transcend visuality, and engage more senses. Indeed, the exhibition is rich in sensory stimuli and invites visitors' physical engagement with the display. In addition to vision, several sensory channels are activated: sound (through background medieval music), touch (through invitation to touch the textiles, the fur offered by the mannequin, the stones of the fake cross and pith), proprioception (the raised platforms and ramps bring visitors to move in the space, to bend over to see some exhibits – for instance, the faces of some Viking deities, reproduced as textile cloth dolls – and closely observe minute objects in the glass cases).

The visiting path, playing with turns and twists, high points and descents, creates vistas, points of view, and directs the visitors' gaze. Visitors are invited to look up (to catch sight of exhibits placed on top of display cabinets – as in the case of a wooden sculpture and the textile birds hanging from the ceiling in the section devoted to Norse deities) and down to the graves (to grasp the details of the funerary sets). They will need to zoom in on the detail of the beautiful carvings on combs, and zoom out to take in the large background paintings hiding the window frames.

Such a degree of sensory engagement in a museum exhibition might go unnoticed today, at a moment when curatorial practice is strongly concerned with stimulating the senses in the gallery space and providing visitors with multiple sensory channels to experience the displays (see for instance Edwards *et al.* 2006). This was however less the case in the early 1990s, when this exhibition was set up; moreover, the sensory dimension has been mostly explored in art exhibitions, much less in an archaeological exhibition. This is thus another innovative aspect of the exhibition that deserves mention. Conversely, the inclusion of human remains on display (the burial site of a male identified as 'Hal', and dating back to the 8th century) is a curatorial choice that can be questioned in the

Figure 3. Viking cape? Photo: Marzia Varutti.

light of ongoing ethical debates in museology (e.g. Fforde *et al.* 2004; Lohman and Goodnow 2006; Jenkins 2011; Redman 2016; see also WANG); in addition, it contrasts with the lighter tone of the rest of the display.

Playing with ambivalence

The concept of museum object is creatively explored, challenged and redefined in the exhibition. Artworks, craft and archaeological objects are mixed in creative ways: they complement each other and provide an imaginative background for the archaeological findings.

For instance, in the section devoted to religion and deities, the glass cases include archaeological specimen arranged around a textile artwork representing a Norse deity. Here, the 'authentic' historical piece is set into a dialogue with 'props'. A panel below the glass case visually clarifies this: a stylized drawing of the contents of the glass case eases the identification (through numbers and letters) of each archaeological specimen (dating, provenance and meaning) whilst implicitly revealing the non-scientific nature of the centerpiece artwork, which is the only item devoid of description.

In another instance, a new-looking red cape is hanged high on a wall, surmounted by an helmet. The objects are illuminated by a powerful light, which signals their relevance and invites attention, yet they are exhibited without glass protection, and the chair of the gallery security guard was placed just under it in occasion of my visit.

These features send out ambivalent messages: this is an object worthy of attention, yet it is not as valuable as others; the cape looks relatively recently-made, how old is it? In what ways is it related to the Viking past? Is it ancient? Is it 'authentic'? Is it a 'museum object'?

The visitor is taken by surprise, unsettled in his or her own understanding of what the 'real' museum object is, and how it is, or should be presented. One is not sure where to look for the 'authentic' object: in the display case, or also

beyond – on the ceiling, the art installations, the painting on the panels covering the window....? The exhibition-kaleidoscope is again refracting images. We might look at this ambivalence as a trade-off for imaginative display solutions and freedom to establish new creative connections among objects, as ultimately the display invites the visitor to look at all the elements as 'museum objects'. One senses that there is some kind of 'museum effect' at play (that is, the constitution of an object as museologically relevant, Alpers 1991:26-27) in the space in-between objects, as well as in the overall gallery space, as a result of the atmosphere created by the juxtaposition of different elements and their creative interplay. This curatorial approach points at a clear move away from the object-witness, that is, the object that has become relevant by virtue of its history and social biography. Here we are rather engaging with the evocative power of objects.

One might legitimately ask whether in taking this approach the museum (and curators) are somewhat withdrawing from their role of interpreters, of knowledge creators: can evocative, imaginative exhibitions still be effective vehicles of meaning? I believe they can, if meaning is reconfigured as and through critical thinking. This is perhaps a direction in which the exhibition might have pushed further, by explicitly raising critical questions, challenging common assumptions, developing self-reflexive awareness, and ultimately turning the exhibition room into an opportunity to question preconceptions and 'undo' mainstream thinking by showing the ways in which one can think otherwise.

Poetic photography

The way in which photography is being used in the exhibition is intriguing: there are relatively few photos on display, mainly they depict natural landscapes, in other instances they are enlarged details of miniatures on display. These enlarged photos achieve little in terms of contextualization, or information support; they are essentially self-referential, they are a celebration of the high level of detail of the miniature diorama, and indirectly, a means to praise the work of artists and craftsmen who collaborated in the exhibition-making. In other instances (as in the case of natural landscapes, or enlarged details of Viking boats) they approximate art photography: they emphasize the sharpness of lines, the play of light and shadows, or the intricate patterns formed by man or nature. It follows that the photos in the exhibition are conceptualized not so much as documentary evidence, nor necessarily as visual complement of information, but rather as poetic springboards for imagination. They invite the viewer to make a lapse of fantasy, they evoke other worlds and their values (the beauty in small objects, the details of things made by hand, the peace and serenity of nature).

A fresh look at the past

For most of the 19th and 20th centuries, the exhibition layouts and narratives of ethnographic museums have tended to emphasize the cultural features that make each cultural group unique, the elements that distinguish one cultural group from another, and from the home culture. In so doing, ethnographic exhibitions have contributed to create 'Otherness' through an emphasis on difference, often exoticized (Karp 1991; Hallam & Street 2000; Naguib 2004). In this exhibition however, one senses that a reverse process is at play: rather than exoticizing the Viking Other, that is, rather than emphasizing what sets the Vikings apart from other cultures of their time and of ours, visitors are brought to consider aspects of their social, economical and political organization, to which they can relate. In other words, the image of the Viking is de-dramatized, even to some extent de-historicized since there is not a sustained emphasis on the historical time line, nor on narratives of progression or evolution. Rather the 'humanity' of the past – its ingenuity, virtues and limits – is evoked here as a metaphorical bridge that enables the viewer to relate to the communities presented. A lapse of imagination is required on the part of the visitor: the creativity deployed in the display invites a

mirroring freedom and creativity in imagining the Vikings.

In the exhibition's themed sections and narratives, one can detect a progression from earthly and serious matters (such as death, violence, social inequalities), towards lighter and more poetic themes (everyday activities, personal decoration, beliefs and deities). Thus even though the historical perspective is present in the exhibition, this is not its main organisational principle (in contrast to most archaeological and historical displays). Rather, it's the social dimension of the past that takes the centre scene (most specifically in the exhibition section entitled "Det Var forskjell På Folk", translated in English as 'the social ladder'). This focus on the social reshuffles associations among objects on display: they are no longer used to illustrate an historical trajectory of progress and change, but rather they are set into dialogue, they contribute to create vignettes, visual and imaginative windows on past societies. Like brush strokes, the objects on display become meaningful when juxtaposed, when set in relation to one another. In this way, they become illustrations not so much of an historical period, as of a culture – its social organization, its values and prerogatives (virtues and limits).

There is little space for the individual objects to come to prominence, to tell their own object stories, indeed there are no object biographies in the exhibition. There is a flattening of objects individual 'values' and trajectories. They are all on the same level, all contributing to paint a picture, to create an image. It's the overall image and its mood that are more important.

This is to some extent a departure from conventional archaeological exhibition approaches (often including singularized 'star objects'). Given the emphasis on social organization and visual representations of human figures, this exhibition seems to move into the museological territory of ethnographic, cultural history, and to some extent, artistic exhibitions; in this sense, this exhibition can be seen as an experiment in museological transdisciplinarity.

The focus on the social and the human contributes to make the Vikings more approachable, not only less distant in the past, but even de-historicized, suspended in the timeless realm of imagination, whereby – precisely as in a kaleidoscope – reality plays with fantasy to fill up historical (or visual) gaps and missing fragments, whilst giving way to new personal, invented Viking stories and images. As a result, the factual and historical mixes with the evocative, the personal and the imaginative. It is this unique conflation of meanings that potentially enables the visitor to make a connection on a human-to-human scale with the past – an effect that might well have been what the curator was ultimately after.

We know that exhibitions are assemblages (Bennett 2005), they work through juxtapositions, associations, contrasts, distinctions, references, that is, they work with relations. It is connections that make objects meaningful, it is relations that attribute meaning and value to them. In exhibitions, connections and relations are of course efficaciously expressed through the verbal and the narrative, but they can also be established through the non-narrative. Indeed, this is an exciting challenge for museums: to tell a story in a non-narrative way, without being limited by plain text.

When an exhibition succeeds in accessing visitors' intuition and memories, rather than just giving an account, the meanings of that exhibition seem to stay with us longer, because they tap into a level of understanding that is deeper than verbal or textual. Interestingly, when this happens, we feel as if the object 'talked to us', even though of course *we* are the authors of narratives and images inspired by the object – and this is crucially made possible by the kaleidoscopic medium.

Art and imagination

The exhibition catalogue (Hofseth 2008[1993]: back cover) states that "a number of artists and artisans have contributed to making the exhibition an interesting thought provoking one". Indeed

art and craft works are a prominent feature in the display, making this – as mentioned – a rather unusual archaeological exhibition.

Art drawings are placed in the glass case as background for objects. This is the case for instance of a black and white large realistic sketch depicting a horse; a plate with flower and geometric motifs in bold red, white and black in a glass case devoted to body ornaments; a water colour painting reproducing a weaving pattern in the textiles section. Enlarged detailed drawings of objects' ornamental motifs are reproduced on panels as large as the glass boxes: they highlight the stylistic features of objects, whilst also providing a kind of aesthetic contextualization, setting the 'mood'. In a similar vein, sculpted effigies are displayed right above the reconstruction of a burial site. The effigy almost seems to provide a human correspondent for the funerary items displayed, as if the sculptures 'completed' the display by highlighting their relation to human beings of the past. In all these instances, the names of the artists are not visible. Nevertheless, the large dimensions, visual prominence, and aesthetic appeal of these artworks suggest that they are meant to provide much more than a mere background: they are objects worthy of attention in their own right.

The curatorial decision to use artworks in the context of an archaeological exhibition is a daring one. The effect, significance, and impact of artworks in an exhibition differ substantially from those of archaeological, historical and scientific specimen: the artwork talks to our emotions, memories, imagination, more than to our rationality, logic, and need for precise, correct, tangible, verifiable, factual information. Despite the different significance and tone of objects, the setting of archaeological objects in dialogue with art pieces produces a final effect of surprising synergy and originality.

In praise of museological boldness

I have used the metaphor of the kaleidoscope to highlight the creative, innovative and daring combination of approaches and display techniques deployed in this unique exhibition. The kaleidoscope was originally thought of as an instrument at the interface between art and science, between education and leisure, between knowledge and dream, and the same can be said of *Fra Istid Til Kvitekrist*: they are both tools that allow us the freedom and the thrill of leaving behind the well trodden path, and letting our imagination roam freely for a short, yet possibly memorable moment.

Miniatures, mannequins, dioramas find their place one next to the other, in an exhibition style that conflates ethnographic, historical and artistic museological approaches and regimes of representation (Varutti 2011). It offers a new way of developing a non-text-centred narrative in the exhibition space by setting scenes, creating vignettes, moods and an atmosphere, by stimulating the senses and desacralizing the past through irony and imagination. Museums often struggle to steer away from pedagogical, dull and, at worst, paternalistic tones. In this exhibition in contrast, contextualization and communication of meaning are pursued through original and ironic solutions, through the theatricality of the life-size mannequins, the irony of the deities puppet-like figures, and the intriguing detail of the miniaturized life scenes.

It took a visionary sensitivity to create an exhibition able to respond and, to some degree, anticipate visitors' demands for sensory, emotional and creative engagement. This approach also worked as a caution against a certain fatigue for displays where narratives are spelled out in a pedagogical format. The exhibition responds to this by creating space and opportunities for the non-narrative to unfold: the experiential, the personal, the creative, the imaginative. There is no felt need for a cohesive uninterrupted story-line because there is not necessarily a need to interpret, to understand, to make sense, to place a verb next to that exhibition experience on the part of the audience. The lack of a strong narrative structure is precisely creating room for imagination, intuition, inspiration, discovery and new understandings of the past.

The curator, Ellen Høigård Hofseth, has left a clear imprint on the display layout. The exhibition speaks for her own personal views on archeology as a discipline (popularized, accessible, with a human face), on the past and the Viking Age (de-mythicized, enfranchised from national narratives), as well as on her museological approach, interests, and taste.

This is bold. The curatorial voice is making itself heard, the curator has a standpoint, and she is taking responsibility for it. Since the exhibition ultimately offers a personal view of the past (and in this sense it marks a departure from more institutionalized, formal, pedagogical and anonymous approaches in history exhibitions), it succeeds in softening the edges of temporal and disciplinary boundaries: we can think of it as a personal work of art – an expression of a personal perspective on the world, on the past, on identities, mixed with individual creativity, imagination and sensitivity. A personal kaleidoscope.

Artworks, especially those that stir our feelings, are seldom consensually pleasing. They are not necessarily meant to please the many, as to leave a trace, to change direction, to show that it is possible to think in a different way. Ellen Høigård Hofseth has accomplished this with her exhibition, and has left us with a legacy of many valuable lessons one can learn from, thanks to her original thinking and creative museological practice.

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