PRODUCTION, CONSUMPTION AND PRIDE: ART OBJECTS IN A LOCAL CONTEXT

CATHERINE ROSS

This paper is about the three poor relations of the museum world: display, local museums and decorative arts. Decorative arts are, of course, the grubbily commercial poor relations of their grand fine art cousins. Local museums are the poor country relations who have spent most of their lives trying in vain to imitate the patrician manners of the nationals in London. Display is the poor relation of research in that the relationship between the two is often seen in terms of original and copy. Research is the true original and display is the crude copy made for the mass market. Display is where the subtle shadings that gave the curator such pleasure in the research are brashly over-painted to make them more visible.

What I hope to do in this paper is to suggest that these three poor relations need no longer feel wretched about their place in the museum world. Because, by a happy coincidence of academic Zeitgeist, popular interest and professional pragmatism, opportunities for social betterment have arisen. Taking these opportunities should be seen as advancing the cause of decorative arts in this country, even if the manner of doing so might be considered by some to be rather vulgar.

In this talk I am going to look at the upward mobility of decorative arts in the local museum service I know best: Tyne and Wear Museums. Altogether I have had three jobs in Tyne and Wear since 1976: Assistant Keeper of Applied Art, Keeper of Applied Art, and, for the last three years, Principal Keeper of History – which involved no responsibility for applied art at all. I should perhaps confess at this point that I tend to be a born-again social history curator.

In looking at Tyne and Wear Museums I must emphasize that this is a case study of one particular local museum reacting to its own particular circumstances. The last thing I want to suggest is that Tyne and Wear should provide a general model for the decorative arts to follow. However, if there is a general point for the decorative arts it is this: that there are considerable benefits in being a flexible and pragmatic area of activity since flexibility can encourage new approaches to three-dimensional objects and, most importantly, raise the status of decorative arts within an institution.

Although institutional status might seem peripheral to the
debate about the future of the decorative arts, I would argue that it is pretty central for a subject that depends on individuals working in a variety of different institutions and organizations, from auction houses to universities. It is certainly an important consideration for decorative art curators in local museums where their subject is not the natural focus of attention, as it is at the Victoria and Albert Museum, and where research is not a natural activity. Although debate about the subject's internal form – its philosophy, boundaries and methodology; the inclusion or not of the aesthetic dimension; the difference between 'design history' and 'the history of design' – is important, it pales into barely visible insignificance beside the central problem that there is just not enough new research or creative thinking being done in the decorative arts, at every level – Ph.D. thesis or individual object identification.

To me, it seems immaterial whether people do research under the banner of social or economic history, cultural studies, design history or collectors' lore. Neither is it terribly important who they are – academics or amateurs, provincial or national curators. Nor whether they take as their starting point questions about the object itself, questions about the documentary evidence surrounding the object, or questions about the larger social and economic forces in the society that contains the object. What matters is that something is done so that objects are better understood by us, our colleagues and, ultimately, the general public.

Doing something, for most of us, comes down at some point to time, money and the policies of the institution we work for. This, of course, is why institutional politics are important and decorative arts curators, like curators in other fields must behave politically if they want their subject to move forward. This, then, is a case study of a provincial museums service where the status of decorative arts has risen in recent years, largely by switching the subject's allegiance away from art, and the traditional art concerns of placing objects correctly on the map of taste and design, towards a much broader approach to museum objects. The real benefits that resulted were not just greater visibility, use and work on Tyne and Wear's decorative arts collections but also a more intellectually stimulating climate that encouraged curators to ask new questions of their old objects. I will begin with a little bit of background about the Tyne and Wear collections before looking at the use made of these collections in recent years, a time when Tyne and Wear Museums had developed very definite ideas about what its priorities were and where its resources should go.

Tyne and Wear Museums runs twelve museums and galleries in the north-east of England, including the two major art galleries in each of the two large north-east cities, Newcastle and Sunderland. For the purposes of this talk, I am going to concentrate on the Newcastle end of things where, as many of you know, the gallery is
The Laing Art Gallery. The Laing was founded in 1901 and opened in 1904, relatively late in the day for a large civic art gallery. It had the added disadvantage, when compared to its predecessors in Manchester or Birmingham, of opening without a permanent collection. The Laing in the gallery’s title, Alexander Laing, a wine and spirit merchant, is commemorated not because he gave a collection of art to Newcastle but because he gave money. He was a genuinely public spirited man who felt that the lack of an art gallery in the city was a gap which needed filling. In its early days the Laing relied almost entirely on loans from its richer, older cousins in the capital, particularly the V.&A., the Tate and the National Gallery, who all responded generously, enabling objects and paintings of first division quality to be seen in the provinces. The Laing did, however, start buying things of its own and within about twenty-five years the permanent collections had grown impressively in size and quality. This early collecting was carried out along the lines laid down by the nationals and the model for the decorative arts was, of course, the V.&A. The Laing tried to provide the citizens of Newcastle with examples of ‘best practice’ in art, craft and manufacture from all ages and all parts of the world – everything from Athenian black-figured vases to Coptic textiles, Nuremburg brass dishes, arms, armour and continental porcelain. The influence of the V.&A. on the direction in which the collections developed was strengthened by the people behind the early collecting, particularly the first curator, C. Bernard Stevenson, and one of the Laing’s earliest benefactors, J.G. Joicey, who pursued his interest in the Laing alongside his interest in the V.&A. and The London Museum.

Following the V.&A.’s model, the collections proceeded along typological and art-based lines, dividing up the subject into materials and using conventional categories to bring order to these material groups. When I arrived at the Laing in 1976, the collecting policies were still about ‘filling gaps’ in the collection, although by then the rising price of art had made typological completeness an impossible ideal. However, the Laing’s curators had already begun to stray from the never-ending typological highway onto the byway of local production and this seemed to be going somewhere a little more interesting.

Newcastle, which has been a centre of power and wealth since the Roman period, offers possibly the most interesting history of decorative arts production of any English city. It saw the production of pre-industrial luxury goods, particularly silver: silversmiths have been recorded in Newcastle from at least the thirteenth century. Thanks to the easy availability of coal, Newcastle made an easy transition to industrial manufacturing in the eighteenth century, producing creamware and flint glass for the middle classes. There is a third chapter to the story with the arrival of semi-mechanized mass production in the middle of the nineteenth century when vast
quantities of cheap pressed glass and printed pottery flowed from
the factories of the north east: in the 1870s Tyneside boasted not
just the largest pressed glass factory in the world but also the largest
pottery in the world. Few other English cities can trace decorative
arts production through all three phases with such vigour.

Looked at from the point of view of the consumption of goods,
Newcastle seems almost as interesting although, here, it is
impossible to say anything more than ‘seems’ because there are a lot
of questions and, as yet, few answers. Why did London tradesmen
set up shop in Newcastle in the eighteenth century? Is it really true
that 1840s Newcastle saw the world’s first department store and, if
so, what did it mean at the time? These are all questions in need of
some answers.

To return to the nature of the Laing’s collections. By the 1970s
a local bias had crept into the decorative arts but the collections
were still essentially typological and ‘art’. This was certainly the
message of the displays, which by the 1970s consisted of specimens
in cases, arranged according to material – silver, glass, ceramics and
pewter, costume; then date; then types or subclasses. The labels
acknowledged the gaps in the collection and assured the visitor that
curators were striving hard to fill those gaps.

During the 1980s the balance shifted slightly as new ideas
began to affect museum thinking. Local objects were given more
prominence in the displays and shown with stronger reference to
their local context. The interest in design found expression in both
displays and collecting. Costume and decorative arts began
systematic contemporary collecting with what was grandly called
the High Street Design Collection, which meant that every year
curators went out and bought a dozen or so items that seemed to
express something about the particular year in which they hit the
Newcastle streets: this initiative produced an interesting variety of
items, from Alessi kettles to shell suits.

In the late 1980s things shifted a bit more fundamentally. For
various and very good reasons the ‘corporate culture’ of Tyne and
Wear changed colour. Three things happened as a consequence.
First, public face activities – displays, exhibitions, marketing etc. –
were given far higher priority than they had had in the past.
Secondly, the general public were taken into account: all displays
and exhibitions had to be accessible, stimulating and useful to
people with no prior specialist knowledge. Thirdly, displays and
exhibitions tended to approach their subject – whether art, natural
history or science and technology – in ways that related to the local
environment and people’s lives within that environment.

So staff directed all their efforts to displays and exhibitions,
adopted a more populist tone, and brought fresh thought to bear on
their approach to their subjects and indeed their objects. The
exhibitions and displays that were produced in this new climate
were certainly object based but it was the broad simple questions behind the objects that the curators now had to ask. Who made this? Who used that? Why is Newcastle so proud of this? This approach could be applied to objects from any discipline – art, natural history, archaeology or science – but social history was the disciplinary spirit that hovered above all of them. Social history informed the displays not just because the questions being asked were about local people and the structures that influence their lives, but also because they were addressed very clearly to local people. At the risk of contradiction, I would say that social history in museums (even more of a poor relation than the applied arts) has developed a more sophisticated approach to communicating through museum displays than other museum disciplines.

How, then, did the decorative arts fare in a culture that favoured ‘people-centred’ displays which explored and explained the local environment? I hope that this will not be misunderstood, but I think it true to say that the objects got treated with a little less respect. By which I mean less respect for their traditional character as art objects which in turn allowed other parts of their nature – their social, economic and emotional aspects for example, greater visibility. I think that this was a good thing, not least because it encouraged a more adventurous use of decorative arts objects in displays. It certainly encouraged a wider use: in the last few years more decorative art has been visible in Tyneside’s museums than the 1970s. No longer confined to the spaces in the Laing Art Gallery that were left over after the fine art had been arranged, decorative art objects have found their way into other buildings and other displays, particularly, of course, social history displays. This is good for the decorative arts but also good for social history in Tyne and Wear. Some social history curators are fond of saying that their displays are about people not objects, but what they must never forget is that in a consumer society people and objects are inextricably entangled and social history ignores objects at its peril.

In the abstract of this paper I put down four different ways in which decorative art objects are being ‘used’ in Tyne and Wear’s current displays: focussing on the objects and using social context to add interest – the art history approach; focussing on the social context and using objects to add interest – the social history approach; focussing on the signs and meanings embodied in the object – the anthropological approach; focussing on the object alone – the cabinet of curiosity approach. I do not want to go through these in detail except to explain to what they refer. And I must emphasize that to categorize them in this way is to thoroughly over-intellectualize what are essentially popular displays aimed at the general public. These are not displays about objects: they are displays about people. They do, however, treat objects in ways that curators approaching from a more settled art background might not
otherwise have done and this is, surely, no bad thing since new angles of sight show up new sides of the objects and raise new questions.

My first example refers to the Laing’s ‘Art on Tyneside’ display, opened in 1991 and much criticized by some, as much for its style as its content, although its more apoplectic critics found it difficult to distinguish between the two. ‘Art on Tyneside’ presents decorative art as used and produced on Tyneside from 1700 to the present day as part of a broad, seamless story of progress, a story that weaves together fine and decorative art, production and consumption. The use of decorative art in this display is nothing novel. Although thought by some to be a social history display, ‘Art on Tyneside’ is unmistakably an art display and a traditional one at that. It takes the objects, the artists and the craftsmen as the centre of attention and adds a bit of social context in order to make the objects more interesting and easy to understand. In doing this, the display is doing nothing more that making available to the general public the historical contexts that art and design historians already know about. If the display has novelty it mainly lies in addressing an audience that is not usually addressed so clearly by art galleries. To a lesser degree there is novelty in mixing fine and decorative art together in the same display and ‘Art on Tyneside’ does raise some interesting questions about the relationship between the fine and decorative arts at any one time. Curiously, for a display that aims to weave them together in a seamless whole, the answer that the display seems to give is that in many cases there was not one: for example, that in the 1870s the relationship between the mass production of pottery and the arrival of art galleries in Newcastle was only that they happened at the same time.

My next three examples come from a real social history display, ‘Great City!’, a display which, beneath its unashamedly populist surface, raises some far more interesting questions about objects and their relationship with people. ‘Great City!’ which opened in June 1992, looks at the history of Newcastle from 1914 to the present day. It asks big questions. What was it like to live in Newcastle in the past? How has the development of the city been shaped by the experiences of people living in it? How have social and economic forces shaped people’s lives? These big questions are explored on a popular level using text, images, sound, touch, drama and, of course, objects.

Some decorative art curators might argue that the use of objects merely as illustrations of wider social themes does nothing to advance the subject, but I would argue that it does. Quite apart from the practical point that using objects in this way still requires all the basic work of identification and dating that are the basis of any understanding, relating objects to wider social themes cannot help but lead to a fuller understanding of the almost infinite layers of
meaning that, like it or not, are present in any object that moves through time. Using an eighteenth-century creamware mug to illustrate the point that in the 1920s many people's lives were lived out with second-hand or old fashioned goods does not deny or contradict the meaning that the mug had when it was new, or the meaning that the curator puts on the object when placing it in a display about pottery techniques.

Using objects to illustrate a social theme was the second of my two examples. The third, focussing on the meaning in the object, steps further way from the traditional art approach not least because in 'Great City!' the meaning is defined by the owner of the object rather than the curator. 'Great City!' includes a number of cases where members of public can 'join in' the display by contributing objects, photographs, or whatever else means something to them. This, predictably, produces some interesting results. For example, it offers some insight into what kind of things ordinary people think 'should be in a museum'. Decorative art curators should take comfort from the fact that 'their' things, that is, ceramics, glass, pottery and metalwork, get a strong popular vote. Decorative art curators of the aesthetic dimension tendency should take particular comfort from the fact that many people think the reason an object should be in a museum is that it is beautiful. On a more prosaic level, these cases are also interesting for drawing attention to the types of object and design that tends to be neglected by decorative art experts but admired by the public: the things decorated with rosebuds, crinoline ladies and small animals.

My fourth way of using the decorative arts is the cabinet of curiosities approach. This refers to what we called 'matchbox museums': little cabinets of small drawers placed in each section of 'Great City!' for people to open and discover little curios, such as small toys, packaging, badges, postcards. Displaying objects as curiosities without context or explanation is something that curators are not supposed to do these days and I must admit to rather enjoying the feeling of naughtiness that putting together the matchbox museums produced. The cabinet of curiosities approach does not, of course, raise any deep questions about objects but it has to be said that even putting together this relatively frivolous thing entailed object research and dating: should that toffee tin with the Arabian nights scene go in the 1920s or the 1950s section?

This brings me on to my final point which is a very important one: that the price of freedom of interpretation is discipline in identification. All these heady new approaches to our objects depend absolutely on the solid traditional curatorial work of dating and identification: whether the object is a silver mounted bellarmine or a teapot shaped like Britannia, we have to be able to place it before we can say anything about its social, economic or cultural
meaning at any one particular time. Few people, I hope, would disagree with that. Where there might be room for disagreement is the question of the nature of these traditional tasks of identification and dating. Should curators devote themselves to ‘object-based scholarship’ – spending time looking at objects in museums and exploring the aesthetic and technological relationship between objects of a similar type? Or should they turn to ‘document-based scholarship’ – spending time looking at paper in record offices and exploring the historical context of objects. Personally, I think that pure object-based scholarship can lead the curator uncomfortably near the treacherous quick sands of connoisseurship, but that’s the view of a social history curator.

To conclude, my own view of the immediate future of the decorative arts is a rather shapeless one: it does not really matter how the subject goes forward as long as it does indeed go forward, by which I mean gets bigger and involves more people. In terms of the way these people look at objects and the questions they ask, the decorative arts should be as broad minded and as intellectually promiscuous as it likes and should not worry too much about its internal indiscipline, its lack of conventions, methodology or terminology. All this will probably emerge in the future. At the same time, the subject must maintain a rigorous and disciplined streak in ‘pinning down’ its objects to a time, a place, a maker, a consumer or whatever is appropriate to the line of enquiry.

This paper has looked at a case study of the way decorative arts has fared in one provincial museums service. It has, I hoped, illustrated that decorative arts did progress by, in this case, switching its allegiances away from its traditional fine art base to a broader rôle in displays inspired by a more populist approach to museum objects. This has undoubtedly been a good thing for Tyne and Wear’s decorative art collections which have been more visible, subjected to more research and conservation in recent years than would otherwise have been the case. It has also been good for the subject for encouraging fresh thinking about objects: if decorative arts is to move forward, it must include a measure of creative free-thinking about objects as well as their systematic study.

To return, finally, to my initial trio of poor relations: display, local museums and decorative arts. I would argue that rethinking the future of the latter can bring the first two into a more central rôle. A subject area that is less overshadowed by its fine art past should encourage a climate where debate about the object can be advanced though displays in local museums as much as systematic research in the nationals. And there is no doubt that in Tyne and Wear without the curators relaxing their approaches to their subject, the decorative arts collections would have ended up marginalized and mothballed – a sorry fate for anyone, whether poor relation or not.