

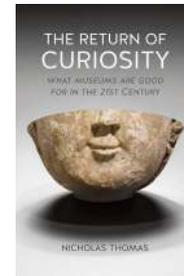


**The Return of Curiosity:
Encounters with the Unknown
with
Nicholas Thomas**



By Mark Bidwell

Nicholas Thomas, who has been Director of Museum of Archeology and Anthropology in Cambridge since 2006, is an anthropologist and historian. He visited the Pacific Islands first in 1984 to research his PhD thesis on the Marquesas Islands, later worked in Fiji and New Zealand, Europe, and North America. His books include *Entangled Objects* (1991), *Oceanic Art* (1995), *Discoveries: the voyages of Captain Cook* (2003), *Islanders: the Pacific in the Age of Empire* (2010) and *The Return of Curiosity: What Museums are Good For in Twenty-first Century* (2016).



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So Nick, great to have you on the show. You've recently published a book called "The Return of Curiosity: What Museums Are Good For In The 21st Century." What does curiosity mean in this context?

I've been entranced by the idea of curiosity for almost the whole of my adult academic life, partly because it's such a contested category. People, like the great philosopher Edmund Burke, dismissed curiosity as an attitude of women and children, a kind of a passionate interest that is sort of skittish and never really settles on anything, but leaps from one thing to another. On the other hand, curiosity is sometimes seen as the foundation of scientific inquiry, of what drives people to try to find new things and make sense of them. Stephen Jay Gould, for example, wrote very eloquently about curiosity as a driver, particularly for people in natural history, who wanted to know more about new species. So I think curiosity is intriguing as a key element of human nature, prompting people to want to try new things and to go to new places. But it's also a category that people have been uncomfortable about. It's been associated with sexual licentiousness in various contexts, like Samuel Richardson's great and profoundly disturbing novel about rape, "Clarissa," so it's a problem. But it's also an attitude that, in a sense, drives us towards innovation.

Well, it's interesting, I interviewed the chief executive of a large pharmaceutical company the other day, and he talked about curiosity as being at the core of what his team of 20,000 research and development scientists are doing. But also beyond that, he was encouraging everyone in the business to be more curious, because it is, as you say, a trigger of innovation in the broader sense.

And I think it's also a critical value in the present, where the risk of restating very familiar observations about politics today, there is a push to return to what people imagine are national borders and known traditions, and fixed identities and so on. There is a tension between all of that thinking and cosmopolitanism, embracing the mixed up world that we all inhabit, being prepared to engage places we've not been, to engage people with whom we may be relatively unfamiliar.

So let's get to the second part of the title of your book which is the return of curiosity, the implication being that museums have established something of a resurgence. I'm relating to your earlier comment that museums are places to help you understand not just the past, but also the present. What is behind this resurgence of museums in the last 20-30 years?

One of my motivations for writing the book was a sense that museum studies, a growing set of academic disciplines, of field for training and so on, had got the field wrong in an important sense. During the 1980s and 90s particularly, along with a lot of other critique across the humanities and social sciences, of power, gender, ideology, all sorts of issues, museums became targets and a discourse emerged where the legitimacy of museums was being challenged. It was suggested that the growth, the efflorescence of digital culture made the physical encounter with material objects, even with works of art somehow redundant. And if you work through that literature, you very often find people suggesting that museums are dinosaurs, these cumbersome physical things that are superseded, and there was clearly a strong political

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edge to much of this discussion. Museums were seen as instruments of the dominant culture that were challenged in multiple ways by voices that had been marginalized. So there was this sense that museums were in crisis. I was struck by a paradox, which was that over the period that this discourse had developed and become a kind of orthodoxy, museums had actually received more investment than they probably had at any time in history. We'd seen many institutions renovated, extended, we had seen new museums, and we had also seen a growth in the importance of museums in society, not just in the European nations that we associate with museums over recent centuries, but also in other parts of the world. So there are very disparate points one might cite in this resurgence of museums. Tate Modern, which opened early in the millennium, is said 10 years later to have contributed a hundred million pounds to the economy of London. Concerns about inclusion within museums, are they just there for the middle classes or the elite, are addressed, particularly in the UK, by free general admission for national museums, and by 2014-2015, we find that 50% of adults have been to a museum at some point in the year, and the numbers of lower income social groups visiting have also increased significantly, and those contributions towards social inclusion, what's called place making, making disadvantaged towns and regions better places to live in, more attractive places for people to visit. All of those agendas have driven a growth of museums, alongside that there's an extraordinary proliferation of museums internationally, exemplified by the Louvre of Abu Dhabi, a grotesquely expensive project, Abu Dhabi pays I think 565 million US dollars for the rights for the Louvre name for a 30 year period, before they start paying for loans and curatorial services. So it's an astonishing expression of ambition power from the Emirates, but it also represents something more important, a pluralization of centers of culture. I think what intrigued me most was that these developments, this revival of the museum was not just a top down phenomenon from states and international foundations, but also a bottom up phenomenon. In many parts of the world, in low and middle income countries, you find grassroots communities committed to the development of cultural centers, local museums, celebrations of their heritage. There's something about the museum as a form, as a kind of an institution, as an experience that apparently has much to offer, even in this epoch, in which everybody's supposed to have gone online.

What is unique about a museum visit versus a visit to the theater or cinema, or some other social activity?

I think that growth and extension of museum culture reflects the fact that museums have something very particular to offer. I engaged in a thought experiment - what is it about going to a museum, in what sense is the experience distinctive? And I think it is peculiarly unstructured, it's something that you can shape yourself, that you do in a way on your own terms. When we go to the cinema, we witness something that's being produced and is presented for us. Theatre, concerts, there may be a certain amount of participation and you have a sense of being there as part of a group, but you're essentially witnessing something that is being composed, created, staged.

It's scripted essentially.

It's scripted, it has a beginning and an end, it has a structure, you have a focus of attention. I'm intrigued by the way in which a museum visit is so unlike that. For example, those who go to the British Museum might be tourists from the other side of the world, it may be their first visit to London, they know the British Museum is the major attraction, they spend the whole day there, they feel they must get around a range of galleries, and they do it in a particular order. But somebody like myself, fortunate to live not so far from the institution, can pop in for half an hour to see something that we want to be reminded of, you can visit by yourself, you can visit with friends, visiting can be part of a quasi-therapeutic activity for an elderly parent, you may want to study a set of artifacts very closely. If you're a connoisseur of Chinese ceramics or 18th century English prints, you may just feel like walking around the building, and having a space to think, perhaps responsive to these extraordinary historic objects but isn't really focused on them in the way that a formal study visit might be. So that eclecticism of experience in the museum intrigued me. Foregrounding that, I was responding very differently to some museum critics of the last 20 to 30 years. There's been an influential argument about the Louvre having a particular structure and having in the revolutionary period and subsequently inducted French citizens into a conception of themselves as subjects, of citizens of a particular nation who were the inheritors of this great set of civilizations and a narrative of cultural progress. I think that's all true up to a point. Clearly there are values in museums, and today, if you go to a museum

that's a commemorative museum, a holocaust museum for example, or one such as the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg, there's a concern that people understand and acknowledge, and respect a particular history. But I'd say that those are more exceptions, and if we think it's somewhere like the Louvre now, which of course has a profoundly international set of visitors, people do not go in there and learn this narrative that as French nationals they're the inheritors of a particular civilization. It's more eclectic than that, people make what they will of museums.

As I mentioned to you earlier on, our audience are by and large business people wrestling with ambiguity and the complexity of doing business in the global environment. I'm just curious, when one visits the museum, one often brings a bias, be it conscious or unconscious bias. I'm interested in how does a really good curator help a visitor overcome them? I'm thinking in the context of a business person, reflecting on a business challenge. It seems to me that, as you said, the characteristics of a museum visit, as a result of your thought experiment, is that they're safe environments, unscripted, you can visit them for all sorts of different reasons. To what extent does a museum help someone overcome some of their biases?

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I think what's exciting in a museum such as the museum of decorative arts, of archaeology and antiquities, of anthropology or world cultures, is the encounter with material culture, with something that's been made by people from a very different moment, from a very different place, that confronts you with something very real, it confronts you with something quite specific, it may be an exotic ritual object, that exemplifies beliefs that you personally can't understand. It may also be something like a dish for holding food, a blanket or some other kind of textile for wrapping the body. I think one's often confronting things from far away, things from a strange milieu, but things that are at another level very familiar and that remind us about common humanity. People in very different settings still need clothes, vessels, knives, and so on. So one's reminded of those affinities over deep time in some cases. But one also has to acknowledge the extraordinary creativity and skill of human beings in very different settings. One also has to confront meanings and significances that you may have some inkling of, that may be explained or contextualized through a label or an interpretive panel, but of which one has a limited understanding. I think encountering material from other times, other cultures is exciting, humbling, thought provoking. I think these are also safe spaces. We may encounter artifacts associated with warfare and violence, we may encounter artifacts that were collected under problematic circumstances, even looted, but it's still a space where you can sort of pause and think "well, what does that mean, what do I take away from that?" What I would signal is that this kind of encounter with material culture is very different, to pick an extreme example, to the way issues about cultural difference might be debated by radio shock jocks, where it's all reductive, it's trying to draw out polarized opinions, it's all conducive to anger in a really unhelpful way. And of course, people can go into museums and be offended by a display that they think is insensitive or provocative, or whatever. But speaking more generically, I guess the museum should, in any case, be a space for the recognition of things you didn't know were there, of contemplation, of reflection, of stepping back a bit from where you started from. I think the question you raise about what do these sorts of spaces mean for leaders trying to work through complex challenges and problems, are that they're in a way conducive to this open minded thinking. Let's go and look at something that we haven't encountered before, something that may not obviously be some kind of great work a painting, one of the ones you must see before you die, but something seemingly more inconsequential, but that nevertheless is thought provoking. I think museums take people to places that they haven't been before, and that is a really important and positive thing to be thinking about.

We all, as a result of this dynamic you mentioned with the shock jocks, live in our bubbles and the internet, as someone described it to me, is a giant confirmation bias engine and we're not immune to that. It seems to me that museums are great places to be potentially made aware of our bubbles, what we do know and what we don't know, what we are familiar with, what we're not familiar with, but also how those bubbles burst by some of the questions that might be raised by the way something is exhibited or labeled, or how it fits into a broader collection. The serendipity that takes place in museums, encountering the unfamiliar is a key characteristic of the experience, I suspect.

I think that's true, and I think they're also question raising. I like these simple questions that people have. What is it? Where did it come from? How did it get here? Why is it here, should it be

here? And they're all questions that appear simple, but are often not simple at all. Is something actually a ritual object or might it be a replica? What do we mean by replica? Why might an indigenous person, say from some part of the Pacific, had made a replica for trade at some moment in the 19th century, when a collector visited? I think those kinds of questions are really important, they are curiosity questions. They help us hone a skill, which is being curious. That skill is quite critical in a heterogeneous and dangerous world, a world in which you really need to keep asking what else is there. Is this story that we've been given about the causes of this situation, does that stand up, or do we need to look behind it, or ask something else and try and get it a wider context?

It's interesting, I went to the Museum of Anthropology, I go there quite often, every time I go to Vancouver on a quarterly basis. It's a wonderful museum and it really does get you to confront a lot of the behavior of the ruling classes on the indigenous communities. I think the Potlatch was banned for many years and now that's undergoing a resurgence. But it really gets you to ask some pretty fundamental questions about how we found ourselves in the situation we found ourselves in.

Yes, and I think, as there is increasing concern about cross-cultural engagement, we all engage cross-culturally, we live in heterogeneous societies, if our projects are to be successful we need to build relationships internationally. Those kinds of museums that present people with histories that perhaps they weren't aware of, histories of the marginalization and exclusion of native people, it really is important that those histories are acknowledged and understood. Of course, you can access that understanding through books, but I think being able to do it in the company, as it were, of these extraordinary representations of ancestors, these expressions of indigenous power is a different thing, and it also is an uncomfortable thing. It's often said that things are taken out of context to be drawn into the museum environment. The whole history of museum making is a sort of unavoidable aspect of the experience now, and I think we're all aware that there's gain and there's also lost in bringing things into museum settings.

Yeah, some of the language, the misperceptions of museums as sort of temples of elite cultures or warehouses of colonial loot, and certainly the experience in Vancouver was a very different one for me, partly because it was curated by indigenous community members who would be able to tell the narrative from their stories, which clearly a book doesn't necessarily give you that richness of conversation.

No, I think museums have long been spaces of encounter. Even during the colonial period, they were places in which sometimes indigenous people shape displays or are present in various senses, but they certainly have become much more so now, particularly in those societies with indigenous populations, like Canada, Australia, New Zealand, parts of South America. So the public gallery has become a space that is certainly contested, but more positively co-produced, a space of interest and negotiation. It's a space that gives people access to those perspectives, and the presence of people, especially when the video was used to bring people in. That can be a very enlightening experience, it puts people in contact with voices and perspectives they might not otherwise encounter. And that is really critical, I think, in the present.

And I'm curious, you're a historian, an anthropologist, an art historian - when you visit a museum, how do those different perspectives play out? I'm thinking of the concept of looking at the world through different lenses. If you're looking at something through the lens of an anthropologist versus the lens of a historian, what's different as you encounter something in a museum? Anything that comes to mind in a recent visit to a museum?

Sometimes I'll visit a museum as a parent and sometimes as an academic and a curator, sometimes as someone who simply wants to see what's there. In a way, I think my colleagues and I sometimes get tired of the business of going into a museum and engaging in a mental critique, saying "they should have done this, or there's something missing here, or I don't like the lighting or whatever." Of course, all of us who are practitioners and professionals benefit from seeing different experiments, different shows, and in the current context with so much debate about decolonization, one can't resist or one has to raise questions about how effectively has this particular story been told, is this balanced and open to the extent that you would hope it would be, is it too simplistic, all of those issues. And I do think as well, that in a way nearly all museums are history museums, whatever else they are, and I'm often intrigued by, that in a particular Museum you'll have a mix of some new, effectively renovated, re-displayed galleries

with very fresh and engaging stories on the one hand, and then some very dated areas, and that kind of dissonance in the experience between something that's been done by the standards we're working with today, and something that's much older, I think it's often thought provoking in itself. Sometimes you have a sense that there were strengths in an older display that have been lost. Material might have been very crowded that you had a mass on, but then you could make sense of a whole range of varieties, a range of examples of some decorative art or whatever. But I think what's also important for me about museums visits is often just the kind of uplift, a sense of well-being that you get. About six weeks ago, I was in Munich and I saw a very major exhibition at the Haus Der Kunst of the work of El Anatsui, and I thought it was simply astonishing, breathtaking kind of exhibition. Like most people who go to modern and contemporary art spaces, I had seen some of his work. But this large scale exhibition, which incorporated installations, doing very different things, creating very different environments, together with some of his earlier work, some of his drawings, was just enormously rich, a real visual and experiential feast. It was also a sad experience to visit because the exhibition was co-curated by Okwui Enwezor, a legendary director, a man about my own age who passed away just about the time the show opened. I think a lot of a museum visit often unfolds after specific circumstances. I didn't know him personally, but things that are going on in your own life, or things that are going on in public life are always an experience of a particular time. .

Wonderful. I'm aware the time is marching on. So perhaps we could just go to the three questions that I sent you before. The first one, what did you change your mind about recently?

I think the big debate around the restitution, the repatriation, the return of works in European museums, prospectively to Africa, to other formerly colonized nations, has been an issue in motion. I hope my view about those issues has always been balanced in one sense. I've had a sense that those questions need to be addressed on a case by case basis, and there are some instances where people ask what they think is a simple question "Why don't museums just do the right thing and give material back?" Other people are equally certain about the opposite perspective. I don't know that I've changed my mind fundamentally, but I think there is now a much greater sense that there is a real urgency about a coherent, open response to these questions, a real preparedness to engage in dialogue, and to see individual artifacts, maybe extensive collections, returned to the countries from which they originated. I remain of the view that we don't want to do this for the wrong reasons or in the wrong way, that may not lead to public community educational benefit in the places we're talking about.

It's a shift of emphasis of your position.

Yes, that's right.

Second, where do you go to get fresh perspectives, particularly when you're facing challenges or dealing with complexity?

I think travel is really important, not just in the obvious sense in which to see something specific, but just to get away from your own milieu. And you may have conversations with colleagues, you may have conversations with people you meet more randomly, but those are often rewarding. It's just getting away and being in another environment, sitting in a train and just having that space and time to reflect. I'm fortunate to have friends, my partner Renee Coombs, who is always a great source of inspiration, argument, ideas. I go to a lot of places to get new ideas.

And then the third question, which is around your most significant low - what did you learn from it and how have you applied that learning?

It's hard to point to a specific event or incident. The museum environment is very competitive, we're always applying for funding, sometimes putting in a lot of time and energy and thought into funding applications, research funding applications as well. And it's always disappointing when one misses out. In a larger sense, my disappointment has been about not succeeding in bringing more resources to the museum I work in. We've done well in some ways, but not as well as I might have hoped. It's a dynamic institution that has a great group of staff. We really want to strengthen that body. And thus far, I haven't gained traction with fundraising that I really would have hoped to have done. What one learns from that is that one just has to keep taking

stock, and adapting and reframing plans, and trying to act dynamically and creatively, in relation to what's achievable, what's possible, where you're standing.

The final question, I know we are tight on time, but I think I mentioned, we had Gillian Tett, who got a PhD in anthropology, you might know Gillian yourself?

I certainly read her writing.

She's probably one of the most well known anthropologists outside the world of anthropology. Anthropology seems to be enjoying something of a resurgence in the world, it's getting a lot of traction in the corporate world, people are recognizing how important it is to have anthropologists on staff, helping make sense of customer experiences. Do you have a perspective on the importance of anthropology in the business world?

I think no one can afford to ignore questions of cultural difference, and questions of cultural differences are not a simple thing about we have this set of values, they had that set of values, we must observe the certain kind of etiquette. It's about a deeper set of issues, what matters to people in history, what matters where they're coming from, their sense of power, quality, relationships, ethics. I think it's really critical as we try to interact across regions, across milieu internationally, that we take the time to think about where they are coming from, what their values and their stories are, that we take the time to listen. So thinking anthropologically is something of fundamental importance that pretty much everyone needs to do.

Yep, absolutely. Well, Nick, great to have you on the program. Where can people get in touch with you? Are you on any social media platforms, or is there an email that people can use if they have any questions?

I'm slightly embarrassed to say that I isolate myself from social media. But I'm very happy to be emailed.

And we'll put the email address in the show notes when we produce them. Thank you very much for your time today, I know you've got a meeting but it was great to talk to you. I very much enjoyed your work and very grateful for your time.

Thank you. Pleasure to join the conversation.

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