

JO BLATTI (ED), Past Meets Present: Essays about Historic Interpretation and Public Audiences. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington DC, 1987. pp 169 (9 plates). \$19.95 and \$11.95 ISBN 0-87474-272-2 and 0-87474-233-1.

Reviewed by Nigel Holman

This volume is the product of a conference held in New York in 1984 which was "designed to foster discussions of the intellectual assumptions and theoretical perspectives that inform historic exhibitions and site interpretations" (p. 1). The volume comprises 11 papers from North American contributors who share similar concerns based on an enthusiasm for public history as a constructive force for change in the present. It is very well produced, is a delight to read and has lessons of relevance for historians and archaeologists alike.

In Jo Blatti's introductory chapter she draws on her experience as an oral historian -- where the perceptions of informants are frequent sources of theoretical insight. She argues for historic presentations to be based on an interchange between 'scholastic' and 'popular' views. This would develop mutual understanding by the two groups without suppressing the views of one or the other, or without destroying both by attempting their fusion into a single perspective.

The paper by Pierce Lewis argues that no part of the cultural landscape is more 'historical' than any other. He criticises the use of "picket fences and velvet ropes" which separate out the 'historical' from that which is not, arguing that such segregation leads

inevitably to the belief that history is irrelevant and that it can be avoided. In a similar vein, Elizabeth Cromley discusses how historic preservation districts can destroy the realities of change which are inherent to an urban environment. Similarly, the concern for appearance mitigates against the present functions bearing any similarity to those which pertained in the past. Together, a "static Past When Things Were Nicer" (p. 32) is created. Michael Wallace discusses American public attitudes to history. This serves to introduce a discussion, with specific critiques three public presentations, of the relationship between sponsors, curators and the audience.

Jane Greengold's paper describes her works of art which feature fictional individuals from New York history. They are designed, unlike traditional public art based on historic themes, to raise questions in the minds of the public about the events and processes portrayed. While many of the papers of this volume are concerned with non-traditional contexts for the presentation of the past, Michael Ettema's contribution is concerned with the traditional artefact-oriented museum. He compares the formalist perspectives which prevailed in museums until the last few decades -- which combined "a clear...sense of purpose, a well-articulated concept of educational message, and a...highly appropriate exhibit technique" (p. 71) -- with the modern analytical perspectives which have different goals but have presentation techniques which have barely altered. In the currently fashionable analytical perspectives, artefacts are seen as by-products of human behaviour and thus peripheral to

the major themes of a relevant historical consciousness. Ettema argues that it is necessary to address in the museum context the basic question of why people require goods. This serves both to critically examine contemporary materialism and to demonstrate the crucial role of artefacts as means of communication.

Three papers discuss in more practical terms how some of the recommendations contained in papers noted above can be achieved and how this end product might be devised for maximum efficiency and 'user-friendliness'. Barbara Charles emphasises the important part played by the design of an exhibit in its overall effectiveness. Irene Burnham's paper furthers this discussion by demonstrating how a central, coherent -- though not necessarily all-inclusive -- theme is a fundamental prerequisite for a successful exhibit. Mary Ellen Munley stresses the importance of evaluation programmes which seek to ascertain visitor reaction to an exhibit.

The paper by Warren Leon continues the discussion in several previous papers and looks for means by which the visiting public can be encouraged to gain as much as possible from an exhibit. The use of techniques and paradigms which are at odds with accepted canons of museum procedure are recommended. The paper continues by focusing on the educational strategies which can be used to present messages. The paper by Michael Frisch and Dwight Pitcaithley is a description and critique of the historical presentation at Ellis Island (prior to its recent redevelopment). Here, public presentation is a particular challenge because of the firmly fixed images with which

visitors arrive on the island. As a consequence, the potential for influencing public attitudes is so much greater.

If the past is to play a constructive role in determining the future of human society, then it is necessary for the museum profession to respond with self-appraisal and a spirit of openness. Only in this way can museums meet the needs of the present while avoiding the pitfall of uncritically providing mythical pasts in the image of the present. The papers in this book discuss many of the crucial themes inherent in the development of displays which fulfill these requirements and address the problems of the modern world.

The necessity for self-criticism is a common topic in this book, as is the need to develop review procedures for the benefit of the profession and their paymasters (and ultimately, of course, the public). Many contributors emphasise the importance of providing the public with the ability to understand the 'museum experience' while others emphasise the methods by which the visitor can be encouraged to think actively about -- rather than watch passively -- the presentations they visit. Others stress the importance of thoughtful planning, design and evaluation which is necessary if these goals are to be achieved. The examples which all the contributors provide make their discussions that much more convincing.

There is no mention of archaeology in this volume. This serves as an excellent illustration of the reluctance of the archaeological profession to become involved with these important debates. The discipline's unique character-

istics, in terms of time depth and materials studied makes such involvement highly desirable. Archaeologists must continue to develop the self-criticism and greater awareness of the discipline's wider responsibilities shown in recent years and I recommend them to read Past Meets Present as part of this process.

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G. DE G. SIEVEKING and M.H. NEWCOMER, The Human Uses of Flint and Chert. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. 1987. 263pp. £60.00 (Hard). ISBN 0-521-26253-4.

Reviewed by Andy Brown

Let it first be said that I did not attend the fourth international flint symposium held at Brighton Polytechnic in April 1983, of which this volume, along with a companion The Scientific Study of Flint and Chert (Sieveking and Hart 1987) are the published proceedings. I cannot, therefore, compare the content of the actual proceedings with those published, but in spite of the fact that a number of the papers (it is not clear how many, nor which) were commissioned as review papers, the presented papers appear to have been skilfully tailored by the editors to retain a real 'conference atmosphere'. That this is achieved by rather short, staccato presentations, however, has its drawbacks: part of that atmosphere is the frustration of some papers never going quite far enough.

This volume presents 30 papers with specific archaeological relevance, falling into the sub-headings of a) flint mines and exploitation of sources of raw materials, b) spatial aspects of flint and chert,

from exchange studies to deposition patterns on individual sites, c) technological aspects of production, and d) microwear-related topics. The companion volume deals with the more strictly geological aspects of flint and chert.

At the extractive end of flint exploitation, the general chronology of flint mining is considered in two papers, although here the use of radiocarbon dates is slack, and the exploitation of chocolate 'flint' in Poland and chalk flint in Scania are given particular attention. The former case study was a good example of that conference frustration which I mentioned above, for after four pages of description of various stages of mining activities and numerous figures of dubious relevance, Schild finally proposes alternative hypotheses to account for this data, each apparently with profound social implications: one turns the page expectantly, excitedly even, to find what? The bibliography!

The other papers in the group are concerned with the ad hoc extraction of flint nodules at Neolithic Hambledon, Dorset (R. Mercer) and the extraordinarily well-preserved multi-period mines of Old and Middle Kingdom Egypt (G. Weisgerber).

Robert Miller's model of the economic context of production and circulation of flint tools in the New Kingdom period around Thebes, as well as two other urban-related sites in the Middle East, provides both a stark contrast to the rather minimal view of extractive processes at the earlier sites described by Weisgerber as well as a link with the group of papers concerned with exchange systems. Miller's reconstruction reminds us that it