Virtual Space, Education and Cultural Heritage

The Latin American Collections at the Simon Fraser University Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology

David Chicoine

Collections at the Simon Fraser University Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology include a vast array of ethnographic and archaeological artifacts and archival images from several Latin American countries. These objects, as well as other resources, are currently the focus of a new educational website that explores past and present Latin American civilizations, their cultural heritage, and influence on contemporary ways of life in British Columbia. The website, entitled *¡Hola Canada! The Latin American Collections at the Simon Fraser University Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology,* aims at disseminating archaeological knowledge through different media, including photographic archives, texts, videos and interactive games. It is sponsored by the Canada Culture Online program of the Department of Canadian Heritage whose main goal is to promote Canadian presence on the internet. It was realized with the collaboration of many institutions including the Simon Fraser University museum, the Archaeological Society of British Columbia and MOSAIC. MOSAIC is a Vancouver based multilingual non-profit organization dedicated to addressing issues that affect immigrants and refugees in the course of their settlement and integration into Canadian society.

The website has been designed and built by a team of educators, academic consultants, technicians, and translators under the direction of Dr. Barbara Winter and the coordination of Janice Graf. Latin Americanists based in British Columbia were consulted and indigenous cultural insights were provided by Latin Americans established in the Vancouver area. Several members of the Archaeological Society of British Columbia were directly involved in the project. Hence, it appears a good idea to provide readers of *The Midden* with an overview of the website and its implications for the local archaeological community. In this brief contribution I present the website resources, review their organization and highlight their educational potential. Also, I outline some of the social implications of the website.

Virtual Resources: Content, Organization and Navigation

Overall, the website is organized as searchable databases for more than 450 artifacts, 1,100 archival images, and 80 short texts exploring cultural developments, ways of life and material cultures from regions corresponding to present-day Latin America. It is accessible through the website of the Simon Fraser University Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology [http://www.sfu.museum/hola]. Reflecting the composition of the museum collection, the website features materials from several different regions, mainly Mesoamerica and the Andes. The bulk of the collection is composed of ceramics, metal objects and textiles from different time periods, ranging from the first millennia B.C. to the present day. Most archaeological objects in the exhibition were donated in the 1960s and 70s by private collectors based in British Columbia.

The resources accessible through the website are diverse and include high quality photographs, location maps, video clips and textual entries. The content of the website is available in Spanish, French and English and, at any time, visitors can switch back and forth between languages. The various elements are organized as theme pages, games and descriptions navigable through search engines, keyword filters, and clickable images. Overall, the website is arranged in a non-linear fashion and puts little constraint on the visitor's experience. This strategy encourages visitors to explore their interests and learn through associative means, rather than through the imposition of a linear, narrative structure more common in traditional museum installations (Pearce 1990).

Most visitors should access an Adobe Flash Player 9.0 version, although a traditional .html version is also available. The homepage provides a short introduction to the project as well as links to the different resources and themes. Here, visitors are invited to navigate through seven block options: educator resources, themes, featured artifacts, artifacts, featured sites, archival images and favorites, respectively. Visitors can browse each section individually, but also select pages, images or texts and draw them together in the Favorites' section – a sort of "retrievable cart" in a style reminiscent of online shopping. Lesson plans are available to teachers and animators. These contain suggestions and outlines on the archaeology and anthropology of Latin America. Lesson topics include visual anthropology, prehistoric art, indigenous language, ceramic technology, the effects of globalization on indigenous cultures, and the Pre-Columbian origins of some common present-day foods and customs.

The website is tailored as an educational device for elementary and middle school students and, as such, it contains many games and interactive activities. An interactive book on the Villatoro Mastodon site in Guatemala familiarizes students with excavation methods, dating techniques and Pleistocene megafauna. Other interactive features include a Mayan version of the popular Sudoku game, an Ancient Orchestra! to create unique musical arrangements, a Build your Own Exhibit! activity, and a Mural Madness puzzle. The mural puzzle is particularly fun. The challenge is to assemble fragments of three ancient painted murals from the Late Classic site of Cacaxtla (A.D. 650-900). Once pieced up together, one can appreciate the vivid colors and detailed depictions on the murals.

During the Build your Own Exhibit! activity, visitors can retrieve their favorite images and build displays, descriptive texts and museum arrangements. The 1,100 or so archival images bring great potential to this activity. Students can summarize what they have learned and associate different forms of archaeological and ethnographic materials (e.g., sites, material culture, technology, rituals).

Virtual spaces are organized thematically and contain information on different aspects of Latin American cultural heritage such as ceramics, textiles, metalwork, music, art, food and architecture. These spaces are designed to merge various sources of information. For example, educators interested in preparing a session on, say, ancient textile production can assemble texts, videos, images and lesson plans on the topic.

One of the highlights of the website is the online access to a database of more than 400 artifacts. Given the limited gallery space at the Simon Fraser University museum, most of these artifacts lack a permanent place in the displays. The database can be browsed through a search engine based on different divisions and categories such as object name, culture, country, material and time period. Visitors can access detailed descriptions and high quality photographs, in some cases complemented by short texts. Unlike many virtual exhibitions, photographs are in a high resolution format and can be enlarged substantially, enabling the viewer to zoom in on details. As for the textual entries, they are structured as synthetic contributions that critically highlight selected aspects of Latin American cultural heritage such as ancient subsistence strategies, artistic production, ritual practices and political systems. They are tailored for a neophyte school age audience and references for further reading are suggested. In addition, a rich corpus of photographs from archaeological sites, ongoing excavations and architectural structures is available. More than 40 archaeological sites are described, illustrated and situated on Yahoo! maps. Apparent efforts have been made to include a wide variety of archaeological sites, beyond the traditional focus on the main Pre-Columbian centers. For instance, fieldwork in Mesoamerica by Dr. Brian Hayden provides extensive photographic archives on sites that are not typically illustrated in mainstream literature.

Maps are of special interest. They not only locate sites, but provide several different viewing options (i.e., satellite, map, hybrid) with, in some cases, powerful zooming possibilities. For example, archaeological sites located in the Valley of Mexico benefit from the high resolution of the Yahoo! maps. Overall, this resource gives the possibility for visitors to learn about ancient archaeological sites, places and landscapes. It also permits to appreciate the scale of recent urban encroachment and has the potential to sensitize visitors to issues of site destruction and preservation. One of the student activities takes advantage of this feature, and brings classroom attention to concerns of cultural preservation.

To sum up, the website stands as a valuable resource for students, teachers and people interested in Latin American anthropology and archaeology. It holds a rich corpus of visual and textual resources. The associative, non-linear arrangement of the virtual exhibition allows visitors to explore Latin American cultural heritage through different concepts, perspectives, and classifications. But beyond its content and layout, the virtual exhibition has broader social implications.

Virtual Space, Education and Society

In recent years, going "online" has become a widespread activity, creating the internet as one of the most powerful learning resources. Accordingly, virtual museums have become increasingly common and rare are the institutions that do not provide a virtual tour of their displays and galleries. However, educational websites are different since they do not aim at enhancing the experience of the "real", physical museum spaces. On the contrary, they are designed as experiences on their own and, as such, they open new avenues for communicating knowledge (McGee Wood 1997). Multimedia avenues are now favored by many museum curators and educators who believe that virtual spaces allow the establishment of more dynamic and flexible relationships between museums and the needs and interests of the public (Hopper-Greenhill 1991: 67-68).

At Simon Fraser University, this is the second time that the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology has promoted its collections through an educational website. In 2005, a website was launched exploring the initial settlement of the Americas (A Journey to a New Land/En route vers un nouveau territoire). This award winning project was realized as part of the Virtual Museum of Canada, a vast program of virtual exhibitions promoting Canadian cultural content and heritage.

In the same lines as the Virtual Museum of Canada, the current project's rhetoric adheres to the conception of Canada's cultural fabric as consisting of myriad threads, each of which contributes to the preservation of cultural diversity and distinctions, while, at the same time, stimulating the integration of several different pasts, identities and worldviews (McTavish 2006: 238-239). This ideological orientation is explicit in the mission statement of the project. In practice, it most visible in the vast range of topics, geographies, cultures and time periods exhibited, as well as the diversity of perspectives adopted.

The social implications of the website content and organization are manifold. First, the project highlights the work and contribution of British Columbia-based scholars to the study of Latin American anthropology and archaeology. Further, it profiles the museum, the Archaeological Society of British Columbia, MOSAIC and the Department of Archaeology at Simon Fraser University to a wider audience.

Second, it shapes identities, perceptions and social interactions, especially with respect to the contribution of Latin American cultural heritage to present-day practices. For instance, a video clip on the Day of the Dead celebrations in Vancouver demonstrates how ancestral Latin America traditions have become part of local customs. This is fundamental to establish bonds between members of different communities, as well as to create links between the museum and the local community (Hopper-Greenhill 1991: 142-143). At the same time, it contributes to the integration of Latin American communities into Canadian society.

By including living Canadians of Latin American descent, the museum promotes a view of a multicultural Canada and brings a lesser known group to broader public attention. This approach is cogent with the view that museum collections and exhibitions are vehicles for the advancement of multiculturalism in contemporary Canada. Such a use of museum resources has the potential of contributing to the obliteration of cultural, ethnic, and racial ostracism. By broadening cultural horizons through the incorporation of anthropological and archaeological contents in educative programs, the website ultimately works against racism and intolerance, thereby helping to shape a culturally more diverse

national landscape.

Third, it contributes to the diversification of perspectives about the past and the empowerment of social minorities. For instance, if social theorists have long recognized the role of museum practices in shaping identities (Fyfe and Ross 1996: 127), they also highlight their importance in reproducing structures of power (see MacDonald 1998; Simpson 2006). As institutions, museums exert a certain degree of control over knowledge through various mechanisms including narrative constructs, visual displays, and physical accessibility. Some scholars insist that such mechanisms have the potential to reproduce social asymmetries (Ames 1990: 158-162; McTavish 2006: 228-229). Significantly, one of the main changes brought up by the rapid popularization of online exhibitions and virtual spaces is the increased power given to visitors over the control of their experience and the appropriation of culture.

In the case of the current educational website, this empowerment is most visible in the absence of overarching narrative structure, the non-discursive, critical style of textual resources, the inclusion of community members in direct voice, as well as the site layout and search engines. For instance, texts aim at providing background information and stimulating debate rather than enforcing a single, definite narrative. Combined into a flexible, multi-layered search tool, the website has the potential of giving more freedom; both to people experiencing the website first-hand as well as to school teachers using resources to prepare lessons. By giving a louder voice to teachers and other educators, this strategy is likely to produce more open relations which, in turn, have the potential to translate into the creation of less centralized, more critically diverse narratives about Latin American cultural heritage.

Final comments

¡Hola Canada! The Latin American Collections at Simon Fraser University Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology will be attractive to a wide array of people, mostly students and individuals with an interest in Latin America. In particular, the site represents a valuable new resource for elementary and middle school students and teachers. The easy navigation and interactive displays make it a highly accessible teaching tool. The Flash version is particularly inviting. Displays, activities and games are entertaining which will appeal to a large range of people. Available to a wide, international audience, it is based on tenets of critical pedagogy, enforcing intellectual engagement and creativity through the use of multimedia. The virtual resources cogently favor intellectual inquiry through stimulating displays and interactive activities, an approach that has become widespread in museum institutions in recent years (see Bearman and Trant 2005).

This project is a timely contribution adapted to the changing realities of museum practices. It promotes the Simon Fraser University collections, photographic archives and other ethnographic materials. The website provides access to a large database previously unavailable and it sets standards for future treatments of museum collections for educational purposes. It highlights the potential of virtual resources to transform display institutions

into entities of dialogues and debate. Proceeding from the premises that cultural heritage and the perception of the past are critical in the construction of identities, individual actions, and the development of nation-states (Elliot Sherwood 1995: 111-112), the virtual project has the potential to impact on the constitution of society in British Columbia and beyond. More importantly, it promotes Latin American cultural heritage and gives a voice to the descendants of some of the most fascinating human civilizations.

David Chicoine is an Andean archaeologist specializing on the prehistory of coastal Peru. He has recently completed a Ph.D. research at the University of East Anglia (UK) and currently holds a postdoctoral research fellowship at Simon Fraser University.

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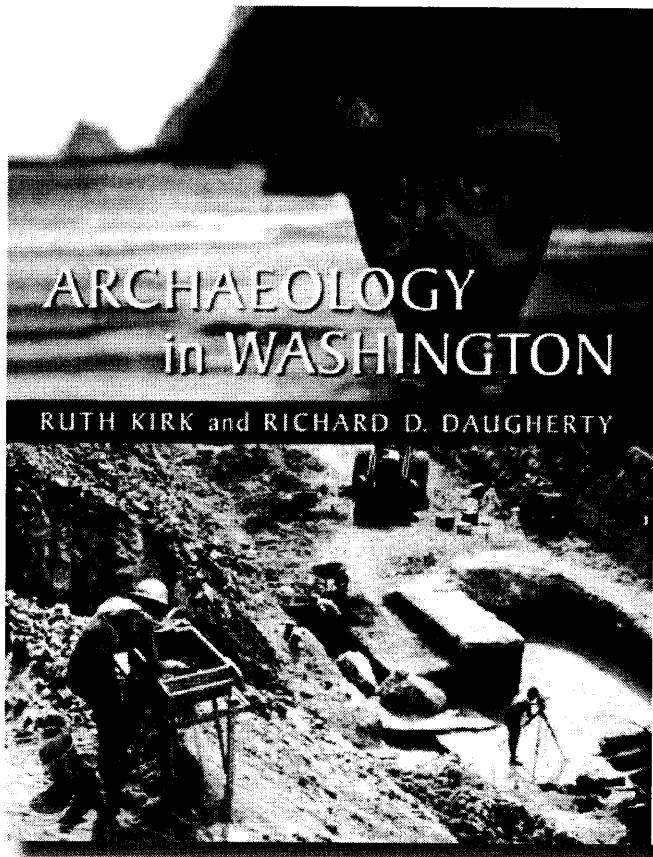
Archaeology in Washington

by Ruth Kirk and Richard D. Daugherty

University of Washington Press, 2007
168 pp., 150 color illus.
Paper: $26.95; Cloth: $40.00

The opening chapter of *Archaeology in Washington* informs us that our state contains the remains of actions committed by humans 14,000 years ago. These men and women were a hungry people. They butchered a mastodon in the Olympic Peninsula, cooked with earth ovens in the Pend Oreille country, and hunted in the area that is now used to treat Seattle's raw sewage. Often, there's a lot of earth between the traces of early human hunger and us. Prehistorical human activities, desires, weapons, and bones have been buried by thousands of years of mudslides, forest life, and small and tremendous geological eruptions. The job of archaeologists is to remove this layer of earth that separates us from them, the long dead who were unfortunate enough to be born in a land that was so inhuman, so indifferent, so senseless.

What's striking about the photographs in *Archaeology in Washington*—photographs of archaeological sites around the state—is not, however, the remains of the dead, but the bodies of the living scientists and students. Most of them appear to be young, and because they are digging up dirt all day, all month, all year, their bodies are in excellent shape. And because they often have to work in hot places, they wear as little as decency allows. These archaeologists are sexy.

Look at the cover of the book, look at the flesh of the woman in the foreground and the two young men in the depths of the excavation site: Their skin has been ripened and browned by the life-rich rays of the sun. Inside the book, you will find more images of young and bronzed beauties removing earth, shifting dirt, separating human from natural objects. A thousand years from now, this is whom we want to unearth and clean our dirty femurs and skulls: shapely archaeologists wearing tight, short pants.

Charles Mudede is a contributing editor and columnist with
The Stranger.

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(If someone would like to contribute a more archaeological perspective of this book, contact the Reviews Editor).

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