

Women, Heritage and Museums

Women, Heritage and Museums (WHAM) was established as a group in 1984 as a response to a conference on this theme. For some time it had been felt that there was a need for some means of discussing and voicing comments on issues affecting women in museums. These issues include the historical and curatorial aspects of women in relation to museums and current employment status. The group is open to women and men and is keen to involve those who use museums for research, teaching and leisure.

Museums are potentially a rich resource for Women's history and heritage, and those using and working in museums have become increasingly aware that women's rôle in society both today and in the past has received inadequate attention in displays and other museum activities. WHAM aims to redress the balance and to make visible and more widely available women's contribution to society and heritage both, in the humanities and natural science. In line with this the group has six aims:

1. to promote positive images of women through museum collecting, exhibitions and activities;
2. to encourage informed museum practice through training, seminars and resources lists in relation to women's contribution to society;
3. to publicise museums as places where women's heritage can be studied and enjoyed;
4. to provide a wider forum for the exchange of ideas and sharing of information on women's heritage;
5. to campaign for equal employment in museums and related fields through changes in work practice;
6. to initiate debate and respond to relevant issues through the press and professional organisations.

The group is organised regionally, with regional representatives meeting nationally. The activities of the group include an annual national conference, quarterly newsletter, the compilation of a resource list, a register of collections relating to women, and a job register. Regionally the groups not only hold meetings and seminars, but also contribute to those organised by other bodies involved with museums and history. One of the regional groups is producing an exhibition on 'Fit to Work' looking at the work of women in seven industries in north-west England.

Where Women, Heritage and Museums are concerned there are two main areas of attention, current employment practices, and the presentation and educational uses of archaeology. Where statistics exists for museums (Legget 1984) there are more men than women working in museums, particularly in the posts of Departmental Head and Director. A survey of lecturers and post-graduates in universities and of authors indicated that teaching and interpreting archaeology is male dominated, while at the undergraduate level numbers of females and males are roughly the same (Arthur 1984). There is clearly a need for more information on the status and problems of women working in archaeology, for example in pay, decision-making, maternity leave, working conditions, retiring ages and pension schemes.

The second area of attention relates to the presentation of archaeology. Most displays are concerned naturally enough with material culture, but very often in an object-orientated way. Often there are few connections with the people who made and used the objects. When women appear they are usually associated with costume, jewellery, cosmetics and so-called domestic activities. If women are shown in drawings or

models they are usually in poses such as holding the baby or grinding corn. While men are shown in active 'bread winning' rôles such as hunter, farmer or metalsmith. The tenor of representation and assumed rôles implies that those values ascribed to sex rôles in the 19th and 20th centuries can be seen to exist in the past. In the use of language people are generally referred to in male terms such as 'Early Man' or 'Prehistoric Man' and the themes which are depicted are assumed to be male for example 'hunting', 'making metal', 'trade and exchange', or 'power and prestige'. The emphasis lies with activities that are the basis for a story of our evolutionary economic and social progression. Assumed female activities are shown as peripheral to these mainstream themes.

The main problem is that one can only communicate through display what is currently known about the past and the structure of archaeological knowledge is very frequently either explicitly or implicitly male biased. Even though many deny the validity or the ability to study people through the archaeological record, most impersonal studies still contain a male bias. It is only in the past few years that a few feminist critiques and approaches have appeared in the academic literature (e.g. Conkey and Spector 1984), but as yet there is no mainstream impact, which is where the 'story of the past' as displayed by museums comes from.

What are the possible solutions? One is that more work needs to be done to make women in the past more visible. Displays can attempt to redress the balance by taking care in the language used and making clear the problems and uncertainties in interpreting the

past. These are some of the aims WHAM is promoting. It is interesting to note that the Prehistoric Society (1984, 442) feels that there is a need for a more imaginative presentation of archaeology to the public and "... the emphasis of sites and site publicity should reflect a holistic view of the past". To achieve this demands serious consideration of how gender rôles are presented. Perhaps most importantly those who work in archaeology should be aware of and consider how their own sexism affects the production of archaeological knowledge, in what and how they excavate, research and interpret the past.

References

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