

# Museo Shan-Dany: Packaging the Past to Promote the Future

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*In modern society, the temple of authenticity is the museum, where we display the objects or pieces of culture that stand for the cultures of their possessors-creators. We have fine-arts museums to represent our own culture, which we consider to be a 'high' culture, and ethnographic museums to represent the less advanced cultures of others. (Handler 1986:4)*

Museums are no longer places that house and honor Western concepts of the world through the display of material culture. Today, communities small and large throughout the world erect their own *temples of authenticity*. Our informants have appropriated the museum for their own benefit. A new *temple*, the Museo Shan-Dany, was founded three years ago by the Zapotec Indian community of Santa Ana del Valle, Oaxaca, Mexico.

The museum is a secondary frame (Goffman 1974). Placed around material artifacts, it transforms their original use and meaning. The primary function of the artifact is replaced. Objects, once the tools of daily existence, now fulfill expressive, economic, political, rhetorical, and ideological needs as well. Material culture is transformed through the aestheticization of displayed objects and the poetics of the museum space. The museum is a dynamic setting for the construction of identity. This is mediated by the poetics of the museum as a display space. Identity is further informed by the aestheticization of material culture that occurs. In the museum, we see material culture as more than it is. Through ostension, single objects become signs and symbols for classes of objects—or at an extreme level, for total cultural systems. Mimetic displays recreate cultural life before our eyes.

The museum creates a framework for descriptive understanding. This understanding is invoked by keys. Goffman defines keys as "the set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something quite

else" (1974:43). A key, he continues, "performs a crucial role in determining what it is we think is really going on" (45).

Four types of keying frequently occur in the museum: (1) Culture is taken out of the home and placed on *stage* for examination. Adding to the creation of a staged display is the control of physical space. The museum is bounded spatially by its entrance, exit, and walls, and temporally by openings and closings (Kurin 1988). (2) We are asked to look at cultural artifacts as ostensive and aesthetic representations of their maker, not only as objects of daily life. (3) Displays are surrounded with an aura of authority and authenticity (Handler 1985). (4) Objects become rhetorical vehicles for the construction of identity. Through keys, the museum (a nonliteral or staged image) becomes a literal representation (Goffman 1972:47).

As poetic space, the museum aestheticizes culture. It asks observers to concentrate on the objects displayed not as message carriers but rather as purely artistic images. Objects in the museum stand as referential signs and symbols and at the same time become aesthetic displays. This function is perhaps most apparent in fine art museums where objects are displayed with little or no documentation. In these settings, we are asked to concentrate and be moved by the image, not to use it as a referent of other meaning.

Bachelard identifies a second and different poetic function for the museum (1964:xviii-xx). He points out the evocative power of space. It resonates with experience and allows for the creative and imaginative construction of meaning. In the museum, this power promotes a reflexive creation of identity. It can be real and perceived, or unreal and imagined. He points out that the "function of unreality" is no less important than the "function of reality," and continues to say, "Any weakness in the function of unreality will hamper the productive psyche. If we cannot imagine, we cannot foresee" (Bachelard 1964:xxx). The museum provides a structure for imaginative creativity. At a personal level, we confirm our beliefs and knowledge of what is signified. We also create and discover new meaning.

The museum can fulfill other functions beyond the poetic. Most important is the role it plays in the political, economic, and ideological life of a community. In this sense, the museum becomes a multivocal or multifunctional setting. Numerous *significata* interconnect within one signifier through simple association (Turner 1967). Community concerns are spun together within the museum's walls, creating a rich picture of life.

As a political space, the museum creates a rhetorical setting for the discussion, construction, critique, and articulation of political ideology.<sup>1</sup> The museum becomes a "display event." As such it allows for self-conscious, or reflexive, presentation and analysis of identity by a community for itself and others (Abrahams 1981). Like a festival or parade, cultural images are brought out for comment. Interaction can occur between individuals, communities, local ethnic groups, nationalistic movements and many other entities. Often the discussion concerns a claim of ethnicity or heritage.

Now it is precisely anxiety about existence that characterizes nationalist ideologies, whose fundamental premise is always that 'a' nation, bounded and distinctive, exists. Such anxiety is particularly apparent where national or ethnic groups find themselves in a struggle for recognition, seeking either national sovereignty or equal rights within a larger polity. (Handler 1986:3)

Evoking an aura of authenticity, the museum aids in the struggle for recognition. It creates a visual display of ideology that can distinguish ethnic populations and cultural boundaries.

Often the museum creates ideological statements of cultural identity. In tandem with its poetic ability, the museum forms, manipulates, and communicates identity and meaning. The rhetorical power of the museum is best seen in this light. It not only represents images of *others*, as for example the Smithsonian does in its ethnographic exhibits; it also represents reflexive statements about ourselves. By creating others, we construct boundaries within which we define ourselves. By establishing reflexive images within those boundaries (as in the museum display), we begin to create ourselves.<sup>2</sup>

Economically, the museum can influence the market system within which it is found. It often parallels a market as well as competing for the same consumers. Like any market, the museum is used as a tool to exploit and stimulate consumption. The didactics of the museum inform consumers about what is or is not considered authentic. These objects can later be sold as traditional, authentic, and collectible. Products may already be fetishes of a particular market. In this case, the museum aids in their further aestheticization and commodification.

The museum is not simply a neutral stage for the quaint enactment of life. It serves to help establish and inform identity within a community. It has both an expressive and didactic purpose in its display of material culture. The museum is loaded with political, ideological, and economic power. It can help establish and support political agendas, argue for an ideological position, and influence the economic well-being of a community. Funding sources and the poetic

nature of the museum may reduce some of the bite of a display. However, that a statement is simply made can in itself be a strong and powerful message. Finally, the museum aids in the rhetorical construction of identity within the community as well. More than a stage for display, the museum is an arena for the creation of community.

In *The Anthropology of Experience*, Bruner states, "It is in the performance of an expression that we re-experience, re-live, re-create, re-construct, and re-fashion our culture. . . The performance itself is constitutive" (1986:11). Similarly, the museum re-presents and constitutes culture. Unlike performance, the museum is not fleeting. It presents a multifunctional space for the dynamic, vibrant, and long-term display of culture. Working together, the functions of the museum create the "temple of authenticity" to which Handler refers. In the Museo Shan-Dany, we see how the *other* (in this case the Zapotec) have appropriated the form of the museum and turned it into an indigenous statement about their world. Santa Ana authors itself through the Museo Shan-Dany.

Representations can take a number of forms including: mimesis, characterization, and auto-characterization. *Living museums* create mimetic representation. In these settings, different lifestyles are enacted around us. We see actors living as *authentic* representations of a given cultural period. These representations can range from the serious to the comic depending on the setting. Ethnographic museums most often characterize cultures. Displays of material culture, constructed by museum specialists, are used to stand for, or characterize, their makers (Handler 1985). The Museo Shan-Dany represents an opportunity to examine the "auto-characterization" of cultural images. In the theater, auto-characterization is the monologue used to create a particular role (Bogatyrev 1977:42). The character authors him/herself through his/her words. An auto-characterized museum evolves images through a communal dialogue. This dialogue is represented in the display of artifacts. Inasmuch as representation is agreed upon by the individuals involved, the museum becomes a monologue of community identity. The display authors the community through words and images.

Santa Ana (pop. 3,000) is one of four Zapotec communities involved in the production of woven goods (called *tapetes*). The village lies in the eastern branch of the central valley of Oaxaca, at the base of the Sierra de Juárez mountains. The mountains rise abruptly to the north. The Zapotec name for Santa Ana, Shan-Dany, "Under the

Rocks," refers to the village's location. Other villages involved in this complex are Teotitlán del Valle, Díaz Ordáz, and San Miguel.

Families weave independently in their homes. There is very little production within workshops. While production is independent, the market for *tapetes* from the villages is controlled by merchants living in Teotitlán or the city of Oaxaca. The majority of production in Santa Ana is sold as piece-work to merchants in Teotitlán. Some independent production is sold directly to exporters.<sup>3</sup>

The market for the products of these villages is primarily as "luxury goods" sold to tourists (Cook 1984). Little production is specifically for self or local consumption. Trade is dominated by merchants from Teotitlán and Oaxaca City, as well as by importers and exporters from Mexico City and the United States. Few weavers in Santa Ana have direct access to the local or international market for their weaving.<sup>4</sup>

The Museo Shan-Dany was founded in 1986, in part to aid in the protection of archaeological remains. Santa Ana, like many central valley villages, has a long history. Remains from the area date to 600 B.C. (INAH 1986:4). Many artifacts wash out of an archaeological site in the village. These objects often find their way to the black market. To preserve and display these artifacts, the museum was established with the support of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH).

The political setting out of which the Museo Shan-Dany grew is closely linked to the protection of these artifacts. A program was established by INAH to promote the conservation of local culture and history. The Shan-Dany museum guide states:

Within the national museum program, INAH has established as one of its priorities the formation of new centers for the conservation of regional cultural patrimony. These have the goal of conserving in their original sites elements of local culture, archaeology, and history and of supporting local identity and education. (INAH 1986:2, translation by author)

The political basis out of which the museum grew was a conscious move on the part of INAH to promote the documentation and preservation of local culture. Economically, the museum is tied to the development of Mexico's tourist industry. For the people of Santa Ana, archaeological preservation was not enough. It was decided in community meetings during 1985 and 1986 to expand the museum. Two additional galleries were added to the museum: one section documents Santa Ana during the Mexican revolution, and another section documents weaving. Today the museum is divided into

three galleries: prehistory, revolution, and weaving. The guide states, "In this manner, you will find represented fundamental elements of past history, everyday survival and traditional art of Santa Ana del Valle" (INAH 1986:4). Like a working loom, the museum weaves a portrait of life and culture in Santa Ana.

The first gallery documents prehistory. It roots Santa Ana to the distant past of Oaxaca (600-100 B.C.). During this 500-year period, referred to as "Pre-classic" or "Formative," Zapotec culture began to take shape (Whitcotton 1977:29-36). Using archaeological artifacts, Santa Ana claims a connection with the early Zapotec history. The people of Santa Ana have begun to author themselves. Their claim to an authentic identity is rooted in local prehistory.

The second gallery is more problematic, and more research on its importance is needed. In this section, Santa Ana's role in the Mexican revolution is documented. Santaneros (people of Santa Ana) fought alongside the rebels of the Sierra de Juárez. In 1920, Santanero soldiers played a decisive part in the defeat of Carrancistas. According to the guide, "The excellent soldiers of Santa Ana and the forces of the Sierra caused numerous stops (or slowdowns) and were able to defeat the third and ultimate attack against the Sierra" (INAH 1986:9). This gallery emphasizes the ability of Santaneros to define their own destiny in the face of an overwhelming national army. Many informants like to tell of the Zapotec's *unconquered* status. Neither the Aztec nor the Spanish after them were able to exert control over the Zapotec to the extreme felt in other areas of Mexico.<sup>5</sup> This gallery is the physical representation of this statement. It attests to the tenacity with which Santaneros hold on to their culture.

The final gallery documents weaving. The tools of production are displayed, as is a case of natural dyestuff. The gallery walks visitors through the steps involved in the *proper* weaving of a *tapete* (from carding wool to cutting the final warp threads off the loom). A full-sized loom is displayed. During weekends and planned visits, a weaver is on hand to demonstrate. Weavings, including historical *tapetes* that are no longer made, are also displayed.

The historical development of weaving is documented as well. The traditions of Santa Ana are followed through to contemporary developments in weaving. Before the conquest, cotton *tapetes* from the village went as tribute locally and to the Aztec. During the sixteenth century, freestanding, two-harness looms (called *cuatro pilares*—four posts) were introduced to the Zapotec by Dominican missionaries. The dates of major changes in production are also cited.

After 1920, production for self-consumption was slowly replaced by production for external markets. The 1950s saw the elaboration of designs and motifs.

Economically, the museum is an attempt by Santaneros to break into the direct market for their *tapetes*. The museum acts as a tool in local economic strategy. While there is no formal museum shop, vendors wait to sell their *authentic* goods to visitors as they leave the museum. In the valley is an elaborate system of weekly markets that move between different cities and follow a set pattern (Cook and Diskin 1976). Other artisan markets and private galleries are found throughout Oaxaca City as well. The majority of market stalls and gallery contracts are monopolized by merchants from Teotitlán. It is almost impossible for the weavers of Santa Ana to compete under current circumstances. Using the museum to attract buyers avoids direct competition with the merchants of Teotitlán and Oaxaca. It also avoids a struggle over market stalls in Oaxaca City and other towns.

The Museo Shan-Dany has to this point accomplished two goals. First, it assists Santa Ana in its claim to an authentic culture. Direct connections are made with early Zapotec history. The tenacity of the Santaneros and their art is displayed as well. Second, the museum provides a new avenue for economic development. A new niche is carved out for the weavers without directly competing with the merchants of Teotitlán.

The accomplishments of the museum can be thought of as "subordinate discourse" (Messick 1987). For Messick, subordinate discourse is re-reading of what is said. She found, in her study of female speech in north Africa, that "While the discourse is outwardly built of much that is 'shared' with males, all such material is recast, augmented, and encapsulated in a world-frame constituted by women" (217). Language that appears similar on the surface is interpreted with greatly different meaning and importance for the two groups involved: men and women. We can similarly think of the discourse from a subordinate community like Santa Ana.

The museum is a stage for "subordinate discourse." The Santaneros build a *world-frame* for themselves within the Museo Shan-Dany that outwardly conforms to the expectations of the dominant culture. The museum as an institution is built from a model that is shared, and in fact taken, from the dominant culture. Yet for the Santaneros, a powerful local statement of identity is made at the same time. The Museo Shan-Dany aids in the construction of an alternative hegemony while appeasing the dominant power structure. Politically

and economically-loaded statements are made within hierarchical limitations. The poetic aestheticization of the museum helps to mediate and frame its loaded nature. The poetic function of the museum allows ideological issues to be addressed. Space is put to the service of rhetorical needs. Objects and customs are imaginatively and reflexively manipulated towards the invention of identity. The museum reframes and adds a sense of authenticity and authority to the identity displayed.

To create identity, a number of semiotic codes are manipulated. Language is perhaps the most obvious code. While there are some monolingual Zapotec speakers in the village, Spanish is the standard language used in most daily interaction. Spanish dominates interactions with outsiders (tourists or merchants). However, in the museum, Zapotec is used to identify objects. The museum's name, Shan-Dany, is the indigenous name of the village. Most articles displayed in the museum, including *tapetes*, are identified in Zapotec. Language again emphasizes the ethnic and cultural heritage of Santa Ana. In a sense, Santaneros become more *native*, or traditional. Subordinate discourse becomes, in the usage of Zapotec, a *subordinate dialect*.

Space and time are also manipulated. Temporally, using archaeological artifacts, Santaneros establish a direct line of descent from the area's original inhabitants. Their culture and art are rooted in local history. Spatially, the map in the guide manipulates local geography. Díaz Ordáz is identified, but neither Teotitlán nor San Miguel appear on the map. In fact, no mention is made of the remaining weaving villages in the museum or guide. This fulfills Bachelard's "function of unreality" and imaginatively constructs a new order through the manipulation of geographic space (1964).

Clothing and food are also manipulated. Uniforms from the Mexican revolution are displayed alongside the traditional outfits worn by women during fiestas. The everyday clothing of the region, T-shirts, blue jeans, and high-top tennis shoes, for example, are nowhere to be found. Food stuffs, traditionally associated with life in small Mexican-Indian villages, are displayed. Everything within the museum becomes aestheticized. All of these factors add up to create a complex and consciously-constructed display of life in Santa Ana.

The process continues to the aestheticization of the Santaneros themselves. During weekends, a weaver is on hand to demonstrate and explain weaving. The visit is completed with a *real-life* display of the traditions. She or he becomes a mimetic sign for all weavers in the village. Adding to the confusion, upon exiting, the visitor is



surrounded by vendors anxious to sell their *tapetes*. The museum now extends into the surrounding courtyard. Informed expectations are carried into interaction with other villagers.

Establishing an identity for Santa Ana, the Museo Shan-Dany follows the formula for an "invented tradition" (Hobsbawm 1983). The museum presents a novel response to a new situation and the changing economic world, a response "which takes the form of reference to old situations, or which establishes their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition" (Hobsbawm 1983:2). Over and over again, we see the connection of Santa Ana to the past and the long history of weaving in the area. The image is repeated within the museum and then again in the courtyard as the visitor is met by vendors selling their *tapetes*.

The museum accomplishes many other goals. A number of projects have been started in an effort to document local culture. A major project of collecting life-histories from older Santaneros is well under way. A linguistic program to collect the local Zapotec dialect is planned.

Such projects and the role of the community in creation of the museum alert us to its reflexive nature. Reflexivity establishes "a dialogue between a personal 'I' and a social 'me'" (Babcock 1980:1). The museum acts as setting for a number of these dialogues. The social *me* is displayed for the personal *I*. The private culture of the Santaneros (the private "we" perhaps) is displayed to social outsiders. For Santaneros trying to adapt to the rapid changes occurring in their world, the museum represents and helps to solidify a core identity. Finally, visitors may be moved to reflect on their world as they visit and see images that touch their lives.

The identity created by the museum's displays of objects completes a picture of Santa Ana that connects with many of our ideas of a traditional community. Santaneros become the *other* we need to help us in the definition of who we are not. The museum accomplishes more than simply building an *other* for visitors. Santaneros have become *others* to themselves in the reflexive construction of identity. They have objectified and aestheticized themselves. Objectified they become their own *other*. The underlying subordinate discourse that runs through the Museo Shan-Dany creates a rhetorical statement of their Zapotec identity. It makes the world of the Santaneros unique to Zapotec villages in the central valley of Oaxaca.

The museum adds authenticity and authority to this image (Handler 1985, 1986). The image created becomes real through the

verisimilitude invoked by the museum's frame. For Jakobson, reality is in the verisimilitude conceived by the author and in the realism as judged by the viewer (1978:38). The Museo Shan-Dany is a real expression of identity for many Santaneros. This has little to do with the *real* as it might be defined by the anthropologist.

In creating their museum, the Santaneros have authored themselves. They have taken the tools of the ethnographer and the support of local agencies to create an ideal image of their world. They have begun to prove for themselves their legitimate worth in the Western world. Santaneros have selected a uniquely Western stage on which to display themselves. They have poetically codified and created their history, and using the museum, framed this statement with an aura of authenticity. The Museo Shan-Dany is a "temple of authenticity" for the Santaneros and "presents the fundamental elements of past history, continued survival and traditional art of the community of Santa Ana del Valle, Tlacolula, Oaxaca" (INAH 1986:4). Like the *tapetes*, the museum creates a durable image of life and identity for Santa Ana.

### Notes

- 1 See Richard Kurin's (1988) paper on the festival of India for a discussion of the politics of exhibitions.
- 2 See volume edited by Stocking (1985), especially the article by Handler and Clifford (1988), for discussions of the ideological power associated with the museum.
- 3 Production and economy are more completely discussed in Cohen (1990) and Stephen (1987).
- 4 Cohen (1990) discusses the dominant role of Teotitlán del Valle and its relationship to Santa Ana and the other weaving communities.
- 5 Chance (1986) and Taylor (1972) present accounts of the unique history of the conquest in Oaxaca.

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