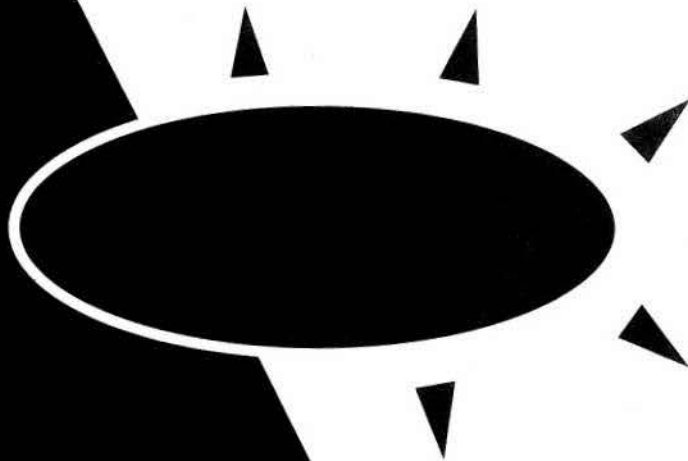


# Ways of seeing – looking at models of exhibition critique

Papers from the Museums Australia Inc (NSW)  
1996 International Museums Day seminar



**Occasional papers**

# Ways of seeing — looking at models of exhibition critique

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*Ways of seeing — looking at models of exhibition critique*  
Presented by Museums Australia Inc (NSW) in celebration of  
International Museums Day  
Friday 17 May 1996 at the Museum of Sydney on the site of first  
Government House

*Ways of seeing* was a half-day seminar which focussed on the development of a critical framework for discussion of museum exhibitions and other programs. The Museum of Sydney's temporary exhibition, *In the American spirit* was used as a stimulus for discussion. The two keynote speakers were followed by a panel discussion.

*Chair:*

Dr Campbell Gray, Co-ordinator Post-Graduate Studies, Faculty of Visual and Performing Arts, University of Western Sydney, Nepean

*Keynote speakers:*

Dr Diane Losche, Senior Lecturer, School of Art History and Theory, College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales

Dr Peter Emmett, Senior Curator, Museum of Sydney

*Panel:*

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# *In the American spirit* from a functional linguistic perspective

PETER R WHITE • LINGUIST

## **Introduction: primary conclusion**

As a linguist I view the *In the American spirit* exhibition as a unified communicative event in which the various visual, verbal, design and architectural elements combine to construct an overall message or set of messages. I reach the following conclusion.

*In the American spirit* is capable of a reading which endorses or at least accommodates two very mainstream discourses of power:

- firstly, it invokes what might be termed the 'official', ruling class view of American history and culture;
- secondly, it strongly endorses the art establishment's construction of 'folk art' as unproblematically separate from and of less value than 'high art'.

## **The functional linguistics approach**

Before I elaborate on my reading of the exhibition — which may or may not be controversial for an audience such as this — let me briefly sketch the outlines of the analytical apparatus I bring from my background in functional linguistics.

Linguistics divides very broadly into two contrasting approaches or schools of thought — functional linguistics and formal linguistics. The best known branch of formal linguistics is Noam Chomsky's theory of transformational grammar. Functional linguistics is primarily a European tradition (although it does have some important proponents in the United States), and its best known proponent in Australia is Professor Michael Halliday of the University of Sydney whose systemic functional grammar is now taught in universities around the world. It was Halliday's functional linguistics which formed the basis of the grammar included in the New South Wales Department of Schools Education English syllabus until the advent of Premier Bob Carr with his catchcry of 'back to basics'.

Functional linguistics is very different from formal linguistics. It is concerned with language and communication as a mode of social action. It sees language and the communicative events it constitutes as both conditioned by social context and conditioning social context. It sees communicative events as constituted of three elements:

1. Informational meanings (content) — entities, events, actions and relationships described as existing in the external world or in 'reality'.
2. Interpersonal meanings — meanings associated with the social role and status of the participants in the communicative event, their relationship to each other, their relative power and degree of intimacy etc, their evaluations, interpretations and emotional responses to the informational content of the communication.
3. Textual meanings — meanings which follow from the way the informational and interpersonal content is organised, staged and presented in any communicative event. Thus certain elements will be presented as 'thematic', as 'taken for granted', as 'given' or 'already understood' while other elements will be presented as 'new' or 'contrastive'.

Since functional linguistics is concerned with language in its social context it is interested in the way we use language to achieve all manner of social objectives which include:

- arguing a case in a convincing manner;
- presenting plausible explanations of complex events;
- successfully directing and controlling the actions of others;
- telling a story in a way which will engross and influence an audience;

- convincingly appraising works of art and other cultural constructs.

We note that any given culture will provide standardised or conventionalised ways of achieving these objectives. That is to say, there will be conventionalised ways of, for example, constructing news reports and children's stories, for arguing a case in a letter to the editor or an academic article, for evaluating an art exhibition in a newspaper review, for composing bureaucratic memos and reports, and so on. We use the notion of 'genre' to refer to these standardised ways of organising both informational and interpersonal meanings so as to achieve these social objectives.

When examining different genres we are interested in the following aspects:

- How is the text/communicative event staged — how does the particular genre typically begin; how does it signal closure; what stages are passed through and in what order as the text unfolds?
- How is informational content organised — what subject matter is typically addressed in a given genre; how is that subject matter ordered?
- What sort of interpersonal meanings are typically contained in the genre; does the author express an attitude towards or respond emotionally to the material; at what points in the text are such evaluations and responses typically found?
- What sort of relationship does the author seek to establish with his/her audience — does the author seek to construct him/herself as at a distance from the audience; as a figure of power, as a figure of authority; as the social equal/inferior of the audience; as impersonal and anonymous etc?

### **Applying the functional linguistic perspective to *In the American spirit***

Thus when I come to a museum exhibition, as a functional linguist, I am interested in it as a communicative event. I ask, 'what social objective is it setting out to achieve and what does it, in fact, achieve?'. I am interested in how it is staged, how it organises informational and interper-

sonal content and what is its ultimate message as a result of this organisation — allowing of course that this final message may or may not have been intended by the exhibition's creators.

What answers do I find to these questions?

#### *Genre: communicative objectives*

To begin, I would say that *In the American spirit* presents itself more as a 'report' than as an 'argument'. Here I contrast *American spirit* with those exhibitions which are organised so as to explicitly argue a case, apparently a growing trend, at least in some domains. Thus the Australian Museum's *Shark* exhibition of 1994 clearly set out to advance a conservationist argument, namely that sharks play a crucial role in our ocean's ecology and must be protected. *American spirit*, in contrast, presents itself as simply providing its audience with an experience of certain objects and background information about those objects. Thus while the *Shark* exhibition was, in terms of genre, of a kind with, say, the political speech, the letter to the editor and the church sermon, *American spirit* is of a kind with the encyclopedia entry or the scientific report.

But simply because *American spirit* contains no thesis and supporting evidence, that is to say, no explicit argumentation, this does not, of course, mean that it is free of value judgement or that it is not informed by ideologically and culturally determined assumptions. Even the most 'apparently' objective of encyclopedia entries and scientific reports reflect a particular world view and hence have the potential to influence their audience's attitudes, emotional responses and understanding of the world.

#### *Establishing a 'theme': the opening stage*

The first aspect of *American spirit* which attracts my attention in this context is the opening stage. In many communicative events the introduction or opening has a special salience and communicative importance. It is the opening which typically establishes the orientation or the framework for the remainder of the communicative event. It establishes the theme of the communicative event, or at least what is taken as given or widely understood with respect to the subject matter of the communicative event. So how does *American spirit* open, what sort of orienta-

tion or theme is suggested by the materials which the visitor first encounters as they begin their interaction with the exhibition?

The opening is constituted by the objects, images and written text situated outside the exhibition room proper. Most salient is the large wooden sternboard carving of the American eagle which spreads its wings figuratively over the entire exhibition, an arch under which we have to pass to enter the exhibition space. To the left of the eagle is the striking silhouette of a Salem witch on a broomstick, to the right the painting of the Mississippi steam boat. Arrayed beneath these are the smaller objects in their glass fronted boxes: a powder horn celebrating the spirit of the American Revolution and the Boston Tea Party; the scrimshawed ostrich egg depicting, we are told, 'the patriotic symbols of Liberty, namely an eagle, a shield and a billowing American flag'; and a doll depicting a newly freed slave celebrating emancipation. Of the powder horn, the attached commentary states, 'Its intricate imagery and wording reflect [the maker's] strong patriotic beliefs, which were echoed in his actions'.

Thus a large majority of the images we encounter in this opening stage invoke the iconography, the immediately recognisable symbols, almost the clichés of the history of the United States as that history is constituted by mainstream, official historical discourse. Now, of course, we might say, 'well the curators obviously wanted images which would immediately and unambiguously conjure up the sense or the image of America as it is popularly constituted — so it was perhaps inevitable that they would choose somewhat obvious, even clichéd images and icons.' We must note, however, that such a choice has clear communicative consequences. The official, mainstream history invoked by these icons is, of course, one which devotes itself primarily to the public, the political and the universal. It is a history which constructs its narrative by reference to a set of key epoch-making political and judicial events, by reference to the actions of the ruling class and its now legendary leaders. By choosing such an opening we establish this perspective as, if not the exhibition's framework and orientation, then at least its point of departure. But folk art in its essence is not first and foremost directed to the

public, the political, the epoch making, the legendary or the universally symbolic. Rather it addresses the private, the domestic, the every day and the individual.

Thus as a linguist, I ask about the communicative appropriateness of such an opening. Isn't there a danger that it may act to misrepresent the import and the orientation of folk as a social phenomenon? Might it not be seen as acting to incorporate folk art into this dominant historical discourse, of seeking to represent folk art as primarily preoccupied with the grand events, the legendary figures, the nationalistic themes, and ultimately the ideological assumptions which constitute the official, ruling class historical narrative?

I note as well, that while the majority of the objects in the main exhibition space do not reflect the preoccupations and the perspective of this hegemonic historical discourse, it is nevertheless continued and projected by some key elements in that space. I refer specifically to the large American flag quilt which fills one wall and which thus provides a backdrop for much of the exhibition, as well as the full-length portrait of George Washington which we confront immediately upon entry into the room. In this context, the choice of the American flag quilt is a particularly significant one since there would have been all manner of alternative designs available.

*The labels: art versus history, review and report — colliding genres*

The other key element of the exhibition which presents itself to the linguist's eye is the language and genre of the textual labels which accompany each object. They present a rather interesting combination of two genres — what genre studies would describe as the 'report' and the 'review'. The report elements simply present 'factual' background information of a historical nature which links the objects to certain individuals, and places them in a social, historical context. The label of an effigy jug, for example, informs the viewer that, 'A large number of effigy, or face, jugs were produced in the nineteenth century, many associated with the southern states and believed to be the work of African-American potters. A number from South Carolina are known, but other examples have

been found in Ohio and Pennsylvania, suggesting that effigy jugs were part of a much broader pottery tradition.' But intermixed with these report elements are an interesting array of aesthetic and moral evaluations and interpretations of the objects that in fact render the exhibition self-reviewing.

The review as a genre or set of sub-genres has been studied in quite some depth by a number of Sydney functional linguists, perhaps most notably Dr Joan Rothery. At the risk of oversimplifying the work, we can say that reviews typically contain at least some of the following:

- descriptions of the art object/event: plot synopses, character summaries, description of the painting/sculpture;
- account of the techniques used in the creation of the art work;
- explanation/interpretation of the work's meaning, a decoding of its symbolism;
- account of the mode of representation (abstract, naturalistic, impressionist, expressionist, photo-realist, etc);
- aesthetic judgements: evaluations of composition (well balanced, harmonious, symmetrical, ungainly, ill-formed, crude, etc), appeal to the senses (beautiful, striking, pleasing, ugly, imposing, etc), appraisal in terms of certain socially determined qualities (innovative, original, life-affirming, humanising, etc);
- judgements of the maker's competence (skilful, gifted, intelligent, uneducated, misdirected, clumsy, etc);
- judgement of the maker's ethical status as reflected in the work (honest, uncompromising, brave, deceitful, etc);
- assessment of emotional impact.

We find most of these elements in the label texts set out below. Art critical/evaluative elements have been italicised and categorised in following square brackets.

**100. Effigy jug, nineteenth century. Unidentified maker.**

A large number of effigy, or face, jugs were produced in the nineteenth century, many associated with the southern states and believed to be

the work of African-American potters. A number from South Carolina are known, but other examples have been found in Ohio and Pennsylvania, suggesting that effigy jugs were part of a much broader pottery tradition. *In this crude example*, [aesthetics] the facial features have been applied directly to the surface of the vessel itself. A corncob stopper inside suggests it was used to store liquids, perhaps liquor.

**3. Portrait of John Clarke, 1745–50. John Greenwood (1727–92).**

John Greenwood was apprenticed to an engraver in his native Boston before turning to portrait painting about 1745. With little competition from *more accomplished artists*, [competence] he met with considerable success before leaving for Surinam in 1752, never to return. This portrait of the Salem merchant John Clarke (1701–64) is among Greenwood's early works, *painted in a simple and yet bold style*. [aesthetics] The use of accessories relating to the subject's occupation and interests became increasingly popular as elements in portraiture. Clarke is shown holding a telescope before an open window, through which a view of Salem Harbor and the fort that he commanded in the 1740s is visible.

**4. Portrait of Mrs. Thomas Shippard, ca. 1758. Joseph Badger (1708–65).**

Born in Charlestown, Massachusetts, and trained as a housepainter and glazier, Joseph Badger moved to Boston in 1733 and added portrait painting to his list of services. While his *lack of academic training* [competence] often led to rather *awkward and stiff figures*, [aesthetics] Badger *was able to use color and patterned effect to advantage*, [aesthetics] qualities evident in this portrait of Mrs. Shippard, the former Mercy Lee, who was born on 27 December 1718, the daughter of Thomas and Deborah (Flint) Lee. She married Captain Thomas Shippard; a companion portrait of him by Badger is also in the museum collections.

**111. Appliqué quilt in rising-sun pattern, last quarter of the nineteenth century. 'Aunt Libby'.**

The donor's 'Aunt Libby' made this quilt when she was in her eighties, undoubtedly *one of the*

*crowning achievements of a lifetime of sewing.* [competence] *The boldness of the pattern* [aesthetics] known as the 'rising sun', 'mariner's compass', or 'blazing star' is *accentuated by the use of brilliant red and blue cotton prints against a white background.* [aesthetics] *While working within the constraints of a traditional quilt pattern,* [aesthetics] folk artists found expression through the *use of color, intricacy of pattern, and fine craftsmanship.* [competence/aesthetics]

**41. Fireboard: View of Court House Square, Salem, 1810–20. George Washington Felt (1776–1847).**

Two centuries of development are evident in this carefully painted urban scene on an unusually large fireboard. The scene depicted is one of Salem's main thoroughfares (Washington Street), looking north toward the great courthouse built from designs by Samuel McIntire in 1785. To the left is the yellow Pickman–Derby House built in 1764, with a cupola added in the 1780s. Beyond that is the seventeenth-century Lewis Hunt House and the tower of the Tabernacle Church erected in 1805. *While the artist's intent was to record the familiar architectural features of the scene, he attempts to humanize its starkness* [ethics] by including a man playing a violin and a father and daughter.

**84. Doll: *The Old Lady*, 1840–60. Unidentified maker.**

This handmade wooden doll was used by the children of Salem grocer William Barton and his wife, Mary, in the period between 1840 and 1860. While the doll was certainly created as a plaything, *the staring gaze, the chiselled features,* [aesthetics] and painted wrinkles combine to create *a moving depiction of old age.* [emotional impact/signification] The cotton wig appears to be worn as much by age-induced hair loss as by repeated manipulations of children's hands. *The doll's stiff but upright posture, however, creates a sense of dignity unbowed by the effects of time.* [signification]

I, for one, was somewhat troubled by this combining of genres, by this intermixing of the 'factual', impersonal language and orientation of the historical report with the idiosyncratic, judgemental and culturally-specific subjectivity

of the high art criticism. For me this combination had communicative problems — the inclusion of the highly personalised value judgements in this context seemed unmotivated and unjustified. It confused me as to the exhibition's ultimate communicative purpose and rendered the texts somewhat incoherent. At the very least I wanted to know, 'Who is making these pronouncements, what is the background, on what basis do they rule that one object is "crude" and another "the crowning achieving of a lifetime of sewing?"'.

Now obviously the question of whether so-called 'folk art' is either history or art or neither is an ongoing one with all sorts of cultural, ideological and even economic consequences. The customary assumption that it is in some way simultaneously both art and history — that its value and social meaning can be explained by reference to some notion of 'aesthetically-pleasing material culture' — is increasingly being questioned. There is a strong line of argument, for example, which insists that the aesthetics of this 'folk art' is distinct from that of the 'high art' museum exhibit and that the social significance of such objects is not simply that of material traces of past socio-cultural contexts.

The labelling, however, of *American spirit*, with its abrupt interspersing of the impersonal 'factuality' of the report genre with the personalised, idiosyncratic 'subjectivity' of the review genre, begs this question. In this forced combining of the genres of art criticism and historical reporting, the labelling ignores or dismisses this issue.<sup>1</sup> It acts as if 'folk art' can, in fact, unproblematically be represented as both art and social history simultaneously. The fact that the labels strike at least this viewer as problematic reflects the fact that the issue is not that easily settled, that a tension remains at this point of collision between two distinct discourses.

*Damned with faint praise — construing 'folk art'*  
Another point of interest is the way that the objects are construed as art. In this respect I draw your attention to a repeated motif in the review elements — appraisals which patronise and which damn with faint praise. For example, the label for the portrait of Mrs. Thomas Shippard informs us that 'While [the artist's] lack of academic training often led to rather awkward and



stiff figures, [the artist] was able to use color and patterned effect to advantage'. We are similarly informed that the artist of the portrait of John Clarke 'painted in a simple and yet bold style' and that the appliqué quilt was 'undoubtedly one of the crowning achievements of a lifetime of sewing' where the maker '[found] expression through the use of color, intricacy of pattern, and fine craftsmanship' despite 'working within the constraints of a traditional quilt pattern'. The labeller also feels a need to guide the viewer of the painting of Salem's Washington Street by observing that, 'While the artist's intent was to record the familiar architectural features of the scene, he attempts to humanise its starkness by including a man playing a violin and a father and daughter.' Likewise, the old lady doll is not permitted to speak for itself — the labeller observes that, 'the staring gaze, the chiselled features, and painted wrinkles combine to create a moving depiction of old age ... The doll's stiff but upright posture, however, creates a sense of dignity unbowed by the effects of time.'

Such evaluations and interpretations have clear interpersonal consequences. Firstly they give the exhibition a highly didactic tone, constructing the voice of the curator as highly expert and authoritative in matters artistic, as the source of a set of definitive aesthetic and ethical pronouncements. As a consequence, the viewer is relegated to the role of passive, uninformed spectator who needs to be guided in his/her responses and evaluations.

More importantly, however, these evaluations act to assert the mainstream, art establishment view of 'folk art' as perhaps quaint and endearing but ultimately as marginal and of little consequence in terms of 'high art's' grand cultural agenda, because of course, the work of 'real artists' is never so faintly praised in 'high art' criticism. An inexpertly executed attempt to humanise an image, a 'lifetime's devotion to needlework', the 'use of color to advantage despite stiff and awkward figures' would be unlikely grounds for praise in 'high art' criticism. This ultimately dismissive mode of appraisal clearly indicates that while this may be art, it is not 'real art', it is a different order of expression which does not warrant or require the same rigorous and demanding standards of 'high art' criticism. It is an art which can unproblem-

atically and uncontroversially be patronised by an essentially anonymous curatorial voice.

And perhaps most telling is the very presence of the evaluative review elements themselves. The objects in a 'high art' gallery exhibition do not come with reviews attached. The curator of a Brett Whiteley or Fred Williams exhibition does not attach his/her own personal evaluations to each work for the viewer's guidance and edification. Criticism is left to the suitably authorised professional reviewer. The fact that, in contrast, the objects in *American spirit* come with reviews attached once again indicates that this a different, less serious, less culturally demanding mode of artistic expression.

## Conclusion

My functional-linguistic communicative approach therefore provides a methodology and a language for exploring how we, as individuals with particular backgrounds, expectations and social identities, might react to, and read an exhibition such as *American spirit*. I am not, of course, claiming that my use of this functional-linguistic system of analysis makes my individual reading of the exhibition any more authoritative or 'valid' than that of any other individual. But by bringing the insights of functional linguistics to the critique of such an exhibition I am able to explain and articulate my reading of the exhibition by reference to a systematic, explicit and detailed account of how communication operates as a social process.

## Endnote

1. I would like to stress that in this I'm not in any way making an argument for or against 'objectivity', or for or against 'subjectivity' in labelling texts. I am arguing, on the basis of my own reactions, that the way the two are forced together in these particular labels is likely to trigger an adverse response in the viewer.

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