This is the published version of a paper published in Designs for Learning.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Setting the ground for engagement – multimodal perspectives on exhibition design.
Designs for Learning, 5(1-2): 30-49

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:
http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:mdh:diva-24044
A SENSORY IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCE
Designs for Learning
Volume 5 / Number 1–2
2012
In this article we offer an approach to analysing exhibition design, based on a multimodal and social semiotic view of communication and meaning making. We examine the narration and construction of different messages concerned with identity that shapes the conditions for visitors’ engagement and interpretation.

INTRODUCTION

In museums, exhibitions are shaped as a result of professional strivings but also in relation to the contemporary political agenda. An exhibition is in that sense not only a representation, for example, of history, but also a response to interests in the present society (Aronsson, 2008). Around the turn of the 21st century, a large body of research described how museology as well as museum practices were in a process of change (e.g. Hooper-Greenhill, 2007; Kratz & Rassool, 2006; Svanberg, 2010). While earlier interpretations of material culture often were about specific ‘cultures’, the colonial ‘other’ or traditional national narratives, interpretations have become more complex and nuanced. What seems to have changed in exhibition-making are the strategies of narrating nationhood. It is not surprising that in a globalized world, the national approach to community and representation loses some of its significance; and it is now apparent that a multicultural discourse dominates museum policy (Beier-de Haan, 2006; Aronsson, 2008).

Thus, museums are changing as a response to (demands from) a society in transition. The change is apparent in several ways and on several levels; in the museums’ presentation of itself (through architecture and interior
design, on websites, in advertisements, in booklets, etc.) and in the way it addresses its visitors in exhibitions. The old emphasis on facts and grand histories of nation-states has been replaced by an emphasis on description of contexts, emotions and everyday themes (Beier-de Haan, 2006). Aspects of identity, in terms of existential questions, may be one of the things that are emphasized in the efforts to make exhibitions that aim at providing new perspectives on history. According to Bier-de Haan (2006) there is a tendency in museums internationally, to present polyvalent or non-national identities. In different ways, unity and heterogeneity is promoted. One example is the German Historical Museum in Berlin, where the idea is to promote, not a global, but a transnational identity, and to present different perspectives on history, connections and diversity in a European context. Aronsson (2008) has shown how the multi-cultural standpoint prevails in Sweden. The cultural agenda concerning civil virtues and human rights seems to promote all kinds of identities, except for the national, which according to Aronsson is perceived as a threat to democracy, unity and integration. Within Swedish cultural heritage work, there is a focus on access and on broadly humane questions, which are relevant to people in all times, and in the present society (Pettersson, 2004).

In what follows, we approach these issues from a didactic perspective, based on a multimodal and social semiotic view of communication and meaning making. We wish to demonstrate how such an approach can be used as a starting point in an analysis of the exhibition-as-text. We especially examine the narration and construction of different messages that shapes the conditions for engagement and interpretation.

A MULTIMODAL AND SOCIAL SEMIOTIC FRAMEWORK

A multimodal and social semiotic perspective emphasizes the social aspects of communication, and pays special attention to the interplay between the different modes that are combined in the production of signs in a specific

---

1. We see didactics as a discipline dealing with all questions located in the intersection of, on the one hand a specific area of knowledge and, on the other hand, learning in specific settings.
situation (Kress, 1996; 2000b; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; Kress, Jewitt et al., 2001). In museum exhibitions, meanings are constructed and construed by means of a combination of aspects that interplay – displayed objects, written texts, light design, colours and sounds and so on. Museum visitors combine speech with gestures, facial expressions and ways of moving within the exhibition in their communication. In both cases, the various modes are set to perform different tasks in the production of meaning. Modes have been shaped over time, as a result of people’s work to communicate and make meaning in different social and cultural contexts. They have been developed and refined to various degrees and display regularities through the way they are used. The modes combined in a message perform specific tasks in communicating meaning. Each mode is particularly apt to perform specific semiotic work. In other words, modes are semiotic resources for representation that can be used in the making of signs of some sort. The focus of the theoretical perspective applied here is directed towards how people communicate and make meaning by means of a number of socially and culturally shaped semiotic resources.

Social semiotics departs from ‘traditional’ forms of semiotics in the view that all signs are socially motivated (Kress, 1993). Sign-making can thus be thought of as a process where a signified is connected with an apt signifier – a connection between form and content. The two can never be completely separated, other than as a theoretical device, as they give meaning to each other. A different combination of signifier and signified – in effect, a different design - gives a different message. The design of a representation says something of how the signmaker perceives of the phenomenon that is being represented (Kress, 2003; Rostvall & Selander, 2008). Methodologically the perspective provides tools for analysing how people, in their communicative actions, participate in the constant construction of the social world (Hodge & Kress, 1988).

According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2001, p. 114) communicative practices always include both representation and interaction. By communicating we do something for or to people. We interact – for example by entertaining them or persuading them to do or think in one way or another. Kress and van Leeuwen explain that no such communicative activities can exist without being connected to some form of represented content (ibid.). While communication focuses on the ‘other’ and the presumed interest of
that person within a specific context, representation is focused on my own interest here and now—"the meaning that I wish to realize, to make material" (Kress, 2010, p. 71). As Selander (2009, p. 28) explains, a representation is set in the space between a subject and some occurrence in the world and it tells of how it appears to the subject, as interesting, meaningful and what aspects are salient to the person.

A key element within social semiotics and multimodality is the notion of *metafunctions*, which stems from Halliday’s functional linguistic theory. According to this notion, all communicational systems must be able to produce three different forms of meaning simultaneously (Kress et al., 2001). They must be able to represent some aspect of the world (the *ideational* metafunction), represent and construct social relations between the participants in communication (the *interpersonal* metafunction), and produce texts that appear coherently by themselves and in relation to other texts within a certain context (the *textual* metafunction). These metafunctions appear in all forms of texts – books, verbal communication, films and so on. We will here use the metafunctions as a tool for analysis of aspects regarding identity and engagement in relation to the design of museum exhibitions.

**The Historical Background of Two Museums**

The *Museum of National Antiquities* is not a national museum in the sense that its collections cover Sweden’s entire history. Its first prehistoric object was acquired in the 17th century, but the collections remained relatively sparse until the 19th century, when an interest in Sweden’s early history was awakened. In 1919 the museum was integrated into the organisational forms of state responsibility. At that time, the cultural heritage of museums became a matter of the state’s interest, as part of the ambition to construct the image of the Swedish people, or *Folk* (Hillström, 2006; Aronsson, 2008). Since the end of the Second World War, the museum has acquired a large part of its collections through the growth of rescue archaeology (Andersson & Jansson, 1984). The museum is responsible for the prehistoric collection and ecclesiastical objects from The Middle Ages. Its area of responsibility in terms of collections and objects reaches back to the 16th Century, when Sweden became a Lutheran state during the rule of Gustav Vasa. In 1943, the museum was opened at its present address on Narvavägen. Over the period
since then, the nation-state has lost much of its earlier significance, and the rapid changes in society have shaped the museum in many ways. As a part of the central museum agency of the National Historical Museums, its task is to preserve and promote Sweden’s cultural heritage and provide perspectives on social development and on the present (www.shmm.se). The aim for their exhibitions is to provide new perspectives on history (www.historiska.se).

The history of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities began in China during the 1920s, when the Swedish archaeologist Johan Andersson found painted ceramics from China's agricultural Stone Age. These collections formed the basis for the museum, which was instituted by the Swedish parliament in 1926. The collections were merged with the National Museum of Fine Arts’ collections of Far Eastern and Indian arts and crafts in 1959. This led to the opening of a new museum located on its present site on the island Skeppsholmen. Since 1999 the museum has been one of four Swedish museums that together constitute the National Museums of World Culture, a Government agency under the Ministry of Culture. The instruction from the Swedish Code of Statutes states that these museums are “responsible for displaying and bringing to life the various cultures of the world, in particular cultures outside of Sweden.” (www.varldskulturmuseerna.se). Similarly to the situation of the The Museum of National Antiquities, the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities finds itself in a cultural context that has changed since the time of its inauguration. Museum director Sanne Houby-Nielsen addresses this fact when she states that:

“Today, over 40 years later, we find ourselves living in a different world altogether. Parallel to ongoing globalisation and the expansion of trade, growing numbers of Swedes have become acquainted, through tourism and business travel, with China’s cultural treasures and historic places. In the light of these developments, the historical Chinese collections of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities have acquired a decisively new and important position. The thousand or so exhibits on display in ‘The Middle Kingdom’ were produced in China, but as a collection have no counterpart in the world, not even in China itself, the reason being that this Museum’s collections represent a history of Swedish acquisitions and have come about through the special contracts forged between Sweden and China”. (Houby-Nielsen, 2007, p. 6)
The permanent exhibition Prehistories 1 was completed in November 2005, as part one of two connected exhibitions about prehistory. It is presented on the museums’ website as an exhibition where one can get to know many different accounts, from different periods of time, ranging from the woman from Bäckaskog in the Early Stone Age (7000 B.C) to the man from Vendel in the Iron Age (600 A.D). The exhibition is about the lives of the people who, for thousands of years, have populated the land we today call Sweden. We are encouraged to examine the similarities between those people and ourselves. In the exhibition, the visitor encounters a time which gives a background of today’s Sweden, an exhibition which answers questions of how one looked upon life, on relations and on death during prehistory and at the same time provokes thoughts about how we live today. (http://www.historiska.se/utstellningar/fastautstellningar/forntider/).

A signboard at the beginning of the exhibition, tells us that it is ‘about the people who lived here before us’. The museum’s curators wanted to put humans in the centre, by presenting eight life stories, as ‘frozen moments’ in history. In this way the exhibition represents different times, different places and different circumstances.

The exhibition is characterised by worked-through scenery, with archaeological material arranged chronologically to stage the different life stories. These productions are constructed through a multitude of modes: e.g. sound, images, materiality and light. Often, the artefacts are placed in display cases which are integrated into the ‘scenery’. The exhibition is rather dimly lit which gives a mysterious tone to it all. It consists of seven rather small rooms, placed in sequence, one after another. It starts with an illustration of a time-line as the ‘introduction’ (the Ice Age) in an open space just before the actual exhibition, where a large sign board tells the visitor about the exhibition and its overall theme. In the first room, there is a film featuring the life stories that the exhibition presents. While standing there, you can hear music, babies crying and birds singing. There follow six more rooms; in the last room, there is a shorter version of the introduction of the exhibition, meant for those who start their visit at the opposite end. The film is also shown, but in smaller scale.
The exhibition represents particular milieus, places, periods and humans. For instance, in the first room we meet the woman from Bäckaskog, placed in ‘woodland’ in the Early Stone Age. Later on in the Stone Age, there is the old man and the child from Skateholm, arranged as a settlement by the sea. In yet another room we meet The Iron Age ruler from Vendel, in a room just like a large hall, with a throne and a fire-place.

Fig. 1. Prehistories 1, entrance. Photo: Museum of National Antiquities

IDEATIONAL ANALYSIS OF ‘PREHISTORIES’

The decision to approach Scandinavian prehistory through human life stories and different thematic contents represents a break with a more ‘traditional’ way of displaying a collection of objects. The exhibition is chronologically structured, but objects are not presented as taxonomies of examples of styles or stages of cultural progression. The selection of archaeological objects has in this case been made so that it is possible to attribute all included objects to the eight individuals and their life worlds. There are many different objects for everyday use, like ceramics and axes, but also weapons and objects which can be identified as ceremonial or in other ways connected to higher social classes, such as jewellery and imported goods. Several of these objects have been on display in previous exhibitions and they also occur in Swedish school textbooks about prehistory; it is possible that they will be recognized by some of the visitors. The emphasis on narrations of everyday people and themes as well as stories of the elite makes connections to existential questions and to identity on a personal level.
A detailed analysis of the written texts however tells us something about how identity is constructed on a didactic or discursive level. Next to the display cases, each archaeological object is mentioned by name, together with dating and the name of the place where it was found. Instead of the overall nationality, it is the local identity that is being emphasized. Connections to identity on a community level are made through the emphasis on sites where the archaeological material was found. There is even talk about the Stone Age people as “Skateholmers”. The eight individuals are equally ‘local’ in their identity: they are called “The people from Rössberga”, “The woman from Köpingsvik” and “The man from Kvissleby”. A national approach to community only appears in very subtle ways. The question of nationhood is vaguely addressed in the beginning, where a large sign-board informs the visitor about the exhibition. It is an exhibition “about the people who lived here before us” (our emphasis). The written texts in the exhibition do not mention any specific territory, it is just assumed that “here” represents the land that we today call Sweden. The word Sweden or Swedish is never explicitly mentioned. So in this case, national identity seems to be a topic that is almost avoided in the exhibition.

In an equally subtle way, the national appears in contrast to ‘the other’; that is to other nations or areas. In texts, we can read about similarities between finds presented in the exhibition (found in today’s Sweden), and finds from Denmark. As a part of a theme “living together” it is mentioned that on a bone from Denmark, there is an engraving that represents a group of people, which has been interpreted as a family. Implied is that there are similarities between areas that go beyond borders and countries. Another way of representing ‘us’ is as part of something that’s mutual. In texts, we can also read about finds, which are the oldest ones discovered in Scandinavia. If we look at the written texts, we can conclude that the exhibition narrates the story of a common Scandinavian heritage, but never actually mentions national identity.

If we take a look at the different images, we are facing a prehistory which in a sense is presented to us as a story of a fixed place. This fixed place can be identified as somewhere in Scandinavia. There are large photographic pictures which represent landscapes like a forest, a wintry snowy landscape, shore or plain. Most images in the exhibition are easily identified as representing ‘Scandinavian nature’, with actual actors who are represented as
‘Scandinavian’. In one room, though, there is a break with the overall narration. Here, the scenery differs completely, and we are suddenly in a Roman setting, with columns and images of Roman soldiers. The idea is to show that there were strong connections between ‘us’ and the Roman Empire. In the exhibition, written texts tell the story of a process, where Sweden as a nation did not exist, and where similarities over areas and exchange between people were a common feature of society.

**INTERPERSONAL ANALYSIS OF PREHISTORIES**

The interpersonal meta-function is a function of enacting social interactions as social relations between participants in communication. The organisation of space is one aspect that needs to be attended to if we want to analyse how relations are established between visitors and the producer. In this case the layout implies a certain ‘reading path’, which implies that visitors’ agency is limited. The exhibition-as-text has a narrative with a given start and a given end, depending on which way you start your visit. The beginning at Ice Age – Stone Age is more elaborated, and can be seen as the ‘proper’ start. Once inside the exhibition, you can’t deviate from the path, unless you go back the same way you came or if you quickly go through it till the end. On this first level, Prehistories I can be seen as a rather closed text. To get a full understanding of what the exhibition is about, the visitor must enter and engage in the exhibition room by room. However, the organisation of resources within each room opens up other possibilities in terms of choice and agency. There are many possible ways of engaging with the resources inside each room, as images, large sign boards and objects are arranged with links to different written texts, like poems and interviews. Visitors can choose to read some texts but skip others. There is also a possibility to get further information through an audio guide.

The written texts in Prehistories are in a non-formal style, with many open questions, which allows for a dialogue where the visitor is invited to contribute with own reflections and interpretations. The texts are written with direct address, which works as a way to create a connection to the reader. In the text, there is an introduction telling us about the eight individuals. It says: “You meet them as frozen moments in time”, and further “It could have been you who lived at that time”. We are connected in a fellowship where “there are similarities with us and our time”.
In images, the system of gaze is important to create social interaction. If a person in an image looks at the viewers, that participant establishes an imaginary relation, in a way demanding something from the viewers (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996/2006; van Leeuwen, 2005). The images of the eight individuals are mostly arranged so that the participant looks directly at the viewer. Each person is depicted as someone to engage with. As visitors we can imagine that these (prehistoric) people were just like us. Our conclusion is that the exhibition invites personal interpretation and engagement. Existential questions and the visitor’s own identity are put forward as important aspects of the interpretive act.

**TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF PREHISTORIES**

The textual meta-function has to do with how a text is presented as ‘seamless’ and coherent to the reader. To begin with, we can see how the setting, i.e. the overall design which appears at first glance, shapes the conditions for engagement. The layout with successive small rooms makes it hard to get an overview of the exhibition before actually entering it. At first glance, there are no obvious symbols or signs that tells us as visitors what we are about to see. In the first small room before the actual exhibition, there is nothing that indicates that this has to do with humans during prehistory. What we see there is a reduced glimpse of the Ice Age, with blue ‘blocks of ice’, a reindeer horn and a small tool. However, the exhibition-as-text is coherent in several other ways, as noted in the structure between the rooms which is shaped through the use of the chronological series of Stone-, Bronze- and Iron Age and through the use of colours. For instance the colours green and blue represents Stone Age, orange and yellow Bronze Age, and so on, and in this way holds several rooms together. Coherence is also produced through the connections between text elements within rooms that are used to create certain narratives. The narration around particular individuals is another example of how coherence is construed. The narrative is shaped through the use of several resources, and through the sliding glass doors it is possible to see a glimpse of the film with the eight individuals, which can be seen as a more obvious sign of the overall theme in the exhibition. The film gives us an idea of ‘what it means to be human’ at different times in history. The same images that are included in the film, reoccur along the way in different rooms. Visitors’ interpretations will be guided by the museums’ representa-
tion and will at the same time be made in relation to personal experiences and interests. In this case, the film encourages such comparisons between now and then. The emphasis on existential questions, local identities and to some extent European integration creates cohesion within the text. At the same time, this narrative can also be seen in relation to the context of other exhibitions, and to other representations of identity in society at large. The focus on existential questions has been noticed in earlier research, as has the focus on local community and European integration (Beier-de Haan, 2006; Aronsson, 2008).

**THE MIDDLE KINGDOM — AN EXHIBITION ABOUT CHINESE HISTORY AND WORLDWIDE RELATIONS IN A HISTORIC PAST**

The permanent exhibition the *Middle Kingdom* was completed in September 2007. It accounts for aspects of Chinese history through a selection of dynasties, ranging from Shang (1600 – 1050 B.C) to Qing (1644 – 1911 A.D.). It is presented as a continuation of the exhibition *China before China*, which describes the oldest known Chinese civilisations. Together the two exhibitions present glimpses of 5000 years of Chinese history and show more than 1200 objects on display (Houby-Nielsen, 2007, p. 6).

The *Middle Kingdom* is staged in a large, subtly lit room with a vast number of display cases along the walls. Floors, ceiling, walls and backgrounds are black. All texts are written in white letters on a black background. The room is divided by a long (approximately 20 metres) conceptually designed ‘dragon’ in red and black, created by a well-known Swedish architectural group. Apart from its symbolic and aesthetic value, the dragon serves to define the exhibition space and the walking path as the exhibition is organized around it. The dragon also contains a number of display cases. Its front end, facing the visitor at the entrance, displays a sculptural head of a woman. This sculpture is portrayed in posters, advertisements and other representations of the exhibition.
Once inside the exhibition room, the visitor can go either right or left. However, the directionality of the writing (‘Shang’) on the floor indicates that the visitor is meant to go left. The exhibition is chronologically ordered, beginning with a presentation of objects from the Shang dynasty. A written text explains the ritual use of the objects on display. In similar ways, each of the display cases throughout the exhibition are arranged with one to five shelves with objects from the represented dynasties. Informational texts give insight into different aspects of the objects and civilisations presented. The name of each represented dynasty is written on the floor. Each dynasty is also presented with a small map of its territory in relation to present-day China, a mark on a timeline and an explanatory text concerning the historical circumstances. Half-way through the exhibition a historical relationship between China and Sweden is introduced, opening up for a parallel theme where aspects of Swedish cultural history related to China are accounted for.
o begin with, the overall design of the exhibition can be seen as a way of embodying the idea of ancient China through the use of some of the symbols and semiotic tokens that are commonly associated with it – such as the dragon, Chinese signs and the use of red and black colours. The dim lighting and the dark surfaces are part of the representation and add to a sense of mysticism and historicity. In terms of identity, the selection of elements used to signify China says something about the construction of ‘the other’ within the exhibition, through the emphasis on differences: between nations, cultures and across time. The image of China expressed here is marked by a mystical and mythological sense. It is worth noticing that this specific combination of a few rather common elements becomes an efficient multimodal signifier of China as a nation, interpreted within a specific (Swedish) cultural context. They become efficient markers in the construction of ‘Chinese identity as a sign’. The way this is performed aesthetically in the exhibition - through the modern design – contributes with certain qualities to the representation, as they serve to portray China as an interesting nation.

Simultaneously, the design at this level also signifies the exhibition itself, at a meta-level: the visitor is approaching ancient China in a new and appealing way. The design of these aspects of the exhibition can thus be seen as a form of self-presentation of the exhibition itself. In the same way as clothing and other aspects related to ‘style’ are resources in the construction of personal identity, the aesthetic design of the exhibition is a way of performing museum identity.

Attending more closely to each part of the exhibition, the selection and display of the various objects demonstrate historical progression within different areas – in terms of technology, cultural customs, craftsmanship etc. Apart from the objects themselves, several of the display cases include informational texts that shed light either on the specific objects and their cultural and historical contexts or on aspects of the history of the dynasties in focus. These texts contribute with a didactic layer of meaning, as they direct the visitor’s attention to specific aspects of Chinese history in regard to the presented objects on display. The texts contribute to the sense of progression that can be seen within the themes that are introduced. Besides presentations of how techniques are enhanced and refined over time and of
social conditions that have influenced this development (e.g. differences in artistic freedom between different dynasties), international trade is gradually brought into the picture. Halfway through the exhibition the Swedish East-Asian trading company is introduced, followed by a number of texts about Swedish collectors along with displays of specific sets of china made for Swedish royal families and other prominent families in Sweden. Texts also inform of the recent making of a replica of one of the old Swedish ships used in the trade with China during the 18th century. In this way, the exhibition leaves room for the visitor to partake in the construction of Swedish identity.

Other aspects that are accounted for in the texts have to do with archaeological scientific work and of achievements made by early Swedish archaeologists in tracing aspects of a Chinese past through the remains on display in the exhibition. This can be seen as another way for the museum to perform its own identity.

The texts and maps that inform about the various dynasties are of particular interest in terms of national identity. Taken together they give an idea of China as a nation in constant transition, both in terms of its changing geographical boundaries and in terms of the diverse groups of people (culturally and ethnically) that are represented as Chinese at different points in time.

**INTERPERSONAL ANALYSIS OF THE ‘MIDDLE KINGDOM’**

The organisation of space in relation to the chronological structure of the exhibition plays an important role in establishing the relationship between the visitor and the producers. The directionality of the tags with names of dynasties written on the floor indicates where the exhibition begins and once the visitor decides to follow the indicated path the ‘dragon’ ‘prevents’ her or him to leave that route for own excursions. The visitors are, of course, free to dispose of their own time and they can move freely within each part of the exhibition, but the narrow and corridor-like organisation of the exhibition space - where one thing is presented after another – implies a certain ‘reading order’ and an intended directionality of flow. Viewed as a text, the exhibition (space) thereby appears to be rather closed in relation to the visitors and in that sense it reminds of older forms of pedagogic texts, where the author has the authority and the reader is subjected to the organisation
of the text. The producers here construct an interpersonal relation where the visitors are subjected to the organisation of the exhibition.

A closer look at the various informational texts confirms this relationship between producers and visitors. The texts are informative and written in a formal language. Visitors are not invited to reflect or pose questions. Instead, they are ‘told’ about aspects chosen by the producers. Another way of inviting a reader to a joint possession of a text or a topic is to use personal pronouns, such as ‘you’, ‘we’ and so on – thereby making the reader part of a community in relation to the text. In the approximately sixty informational texts within the *Middle Kingdom* the pronoun ‘we’ is used in ten instances. In each of these instances, however, ‘we’ is used to signify the producers and the scientific community they are part of, thus leaving the reader/visitor outside. Again, the visitors are subject(ed) to the interests of the producers, which reinforce the unbalanced relationship between them.

Quotes from - and references to - ancient Chinese texts function as modality markers which indicate seriousness and a familiarity with historical sources within the field. Apart from using these sources in order to inform visitors about different aspects of ancient China (related to ideational meaning), they serve to establish the producers’ as authorities within their field. In relation to the visitor this implies a difference in knowledge and can simultaneously be seen as a way of establishing a social hierarchy of curator and visitor within the exhibition.

Similar to the way that organisation of space influences the interpersonal relations between visitors and producers, the organisational aspects of informational texts have a social impact. The texts in this exhibition are written in quite small letters, and most of them are placed in the lower part of the display cases. To be able to read, visitors need to stand close to the glass. In other words, the visitor needs to expend effort to engage with the written texts. This can be seen as yet another way of demanding something from the visitor – you need to be conform in order to gain something from the texts.

In sum, an analysis of the way social roles are construed through the organisation of space, written texts and other resources for meaning-making within the exhibition points towards an underlying view of learning and communication corresponding to the ‘sender – message – receiver’ metaphor that was popular during the 20th century. This has consequences in
terms of visitors’ agency and thereby also in terms of their possibilities of engaging actively with the exhibition.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF THE ‘MIDDLE KINGDOM’

The textual metafunction concerns aspects of how the text becomes a text. One important aspect of this has to do with coherence. Coherence as such is not a natural given, but a matter of organisation and dependent on what is regarded as ‘natural’ and logical within a specific social and cultural setting. An example within the Middle Kingdom is how the display cases themselves are used to make the selection of more or less disparate objects seem coherent by adding a frame that binds them together as a unit. There may by centuries between them in terms of age, and they may be made in different materials and techniques, in different parts of the country and for different purposes. But the framing of the display case presents them as a coherent and cohesive group of objects that belong together for one reason or another. The display case can thereby be said to contribute to textual meaning.

Coherence is construed in similar ways (but with different means) at all levels of the exhibition, making it appear as a unit – a multimodal text. Another example of this is how the Swedish theme is introduced. The first part of the exhibition, consisting of Chinese historical artefacts, and the part more closely connected to Swedish cultural history are brought together through a gradual change of themes in the informational texts. One such theme has to do with materials and technology. In the first part of the exhibition, visitors are invited to follow the progression from clay pottery and the use of bronze vessels, to other and more sophisticated technologies and materials. Once they reach the time of the introduction of porcelain, the narrative shifts from a national to an international focus. Trade is gradually brought into the picture, first within Asia, then in more global terms. The logical continuation once we reach Europe is to present the Swedish trading companies and their travels to China. From there on, the narrative is more dominated by aspects of Swedish cultural history.

The exhibition is made coherent through the interplay of three-dimensional design, the organisation of space, the historical artefacts and the informative texts. Each of these parts are organised coherently in relation to norms within their own specific fields of communication and are brought
together through the overriding design on a general level and through the organisation of themes presented through the written texts. Chronology, thematical/narrative organisation and the organisation of the exhibition in a circular path from left to right are important in relation to the other aspects of both meaning-making and construction presented above. At the most general level, the design of the exhibition-as-text also contribute textually with a sense of coherence, as it brings together all the different themes presented throughout the exhibition as parts of the complex Chinese sign.

Concluding remarks

Multimodality and social semiotics are not often used as theoretical perspective in museum research. Our aim has been to examine the narration and construction of different messages that shapes the conditions for engagement and interpretation in two museum exhibitions. We provide tools that enable a systematic and detailed analysis of exhibition design. Our way of approaching exhibition design does not necessarily contradict earlier contributions, but allows for analyses that take into account the complexity of communication.

In this concluding section we will point at some of the differences between the two exhibitions. From this comparison a few conclusions have evolved. As a first observation both exhibitions respond to features that are characteristic of the postmodern condition at large. In Prehistories this can be perceived through the focus on local identity while in the Middle Kingdom, there is a focus on globalisation and transnational flows.

The exhibitions approach identity in different ways and emphasise different aspects. In Prehistories there is a focus on existential issues as the prehistoric life-worlds invite the visitor to reflect upon her or his own life situation. Through the direct address and open questions in the written texts, the visitor is also invited to make comparisons between now and then and also to take part in the interpretation of the prehistoric life-worlds. This existential feature, where the visitor can question what it means to be human, is emphasised in the overarching narrative. In this sense the Middle Kingdom is more closed in relation to the visitor. The formal address and the overall structure of the exhibition as a closed text keep the visitor at a distance. Identities are not negotiable in the same sense as in Prehistories.

In The Middle Kingdom, time is represented as an even flow. The narrative and the presentation of objects create a sense of historical progress.
In Prehistories there is, on a macro level, a chronological wholeness, and on a micro level, sections where time appears as more intense. The narration stops in a sense, in order to communicate with the visitor in a dialogue around specific themes and issues in the exhibition.

National identity is not foregrounded in Prehistories in the same way as it is in The Middle Kingdom. In the first exhibition, the overall theme is more about time; where each room tells the story of a specific time. This can be compared to the overall design of the surface in Middle Kingdom, which uses many different symbols and signs which are easily identified as ‘Chinese’. Both exhibitions set out to represent a time when nations did not exist. However, a difference between them can be seen in their approach to national identity. It appears to be more problematic to represent aspects of nationhood when it comes to ones own cultural heritage.

The results from the analysis can be related to what Pettersson (2003) has brought forward in his research on the fundamental values of Swedish cultural heritage preservation. His research suggests that national identity is articulated first in representations of the Middle Ages and even more strongly in representations concerning the period after the 16th century. In prehistoric exhibitions, for instance, there seems to be a tendency to leave out the national in favour of a representation that’s especially focusing human beings as social creatures, in order to provide perspective on our existence. Questions of identity may be dealt with in more common terms, or as part of the regional or the local. As Aronsson (2008) stated, the dominance of the multi-cultural standpoint within cultural heritage work in Sweden makes it problematic to promote the national.

REFERENCES


