

## *'The Price of Freedom: Americans at War'*

'The past is essentially unknowable, forever lost to us, and in museum displays its material traces are reconstructed into images of time past which have meaning only for the present, in which their genuinely intrinsic relationships to the past are used to authenticate a present purpose. That present purpose, it can be argued, usually has the ideological motive of maintaining the status quo, of showing how smoothly the processes of the past led to the present day, of suppressing dislocation, fragmentation and false starts, and of reinforcing local value systems, of conservation rather than an opening to change and redemption.'

Susan M Pearce, *Museums, Objects, and Collections* (1992), p209

Guns and uniforms... guns and uniforms. The first impression of a visitor to the National Museum of American History's new hall of military history, entitled 'The Price of Freedom', is just that – guns and uniforms. In this exhibition, the trajectory of American military history is followed from the middle of the eighteenth century, when European colonial powers battled each other as well as the native populations for control of North America (Colour plate 15), to the beginning of the twenty-first century, when the world's sole superpower imposed its will on parts of the Middle East through force of arms. The display comprises over 18,000 square feet of exhibits and about 800 objects, only a fraction of which turn out to be guns and uniforms.

Indeed, the list of objects in 'The Price of Freedom' runs from 'accoutrements' (a shovel, for example, Colour plate 16) to 'vehicles' (such as a Vietnam War-era 'Huey' helicopter, Colour plate 17), and encompasses the heroic and famous (George Washington's camp kit, or the stuffed body of General Philip Sheridan's horse, Winchester) as well as the mundane (a Hills Brothers coffee jar, representing Second World War rationing). In much of the exhibition, these objects are surrounded by a sea of images, which themselves range from murals depicting the signing of the Declaration of Independence to television monitors showing anti-Vietnam War demonstrations.

This is an exhibition in which little expense has been spared, few fashions of modern display have been neglected, and no group has been left voiceless. The one thing that is conspicuously missing, however, is a message. There is no introductory statement to tell the

visitor this exhibition's purpose or point of view. All that introduces us to the experience, besides the title, is an expensive-looking display of images, faces and models against which such words as 'death', 'power', 'allies', 'controversy', 'conflict' and 'sacrifice' are projected. Exhibition literature and Web pages help a little, telling us that 'this exhibition examines how wars have shaped the nation's history and transformed American society'. This might serve to alert the thoughtful visitor to the fact that the exhibition is less about military history, in its usual sense, and more about the social meaning of warfare in the American experience. Unfortunately, even this bit of clarification is muddied by the exhibition's actual combination of displays and interpretations. The social 'experience' of warfare is mixed in with some fairly straightforward history of campaigns and battles (although not a great deal) and with much of the basic hardware of death and destruction (lots of guns). The exhibition, in other words, attempts to be all possible things to all possible audiences, and suffers the customary fate of such attempts in avoiding failure by neglecting to give any clear measure of success.

What role do the objects in this exhibition play? Ideally, one answers this question against the background of an exhibition's clear purposes, but this is impossible here. In an exhibition in which historical artefacts play a central role – the display of a collection of guns, for example – we need not demand too much of curators to tell us their intent; the objects convey this themselves. But in a display in which objects are embedded in complicated settings, surrounded by images and reproductions and the like, the challenges of ferreting out the objects' own stories and significance can be formidable. 'The Price of Freedom' does not help us greatly here; we cannot easily determine why we want to see the 'real' things of history, especially as unreal things – models, replicas, videos – carry most of the interpretive burden.

### **Weapons as exhibition artefacts**

The most distinctive objects in military history are weapons. These are devices most of us never encounter in our daily lives and which have meanings and uses that are unique to the waging of war. As already stated, 'The Price of Freedom' gives the impression that it is filled with weapons of all kinds and sizes. Many of these, foreign as they may be to our daily experience, are familiar in an iconic sense – swords, muskets, cannon and bayonets are precisely what we picture in the mind's eye when we think of battle, and these mental pictures have been shaped by years of exposure to articles, books and movies. So what can an exhibition attempt to do with these weapons? They can be made part of a chronology, both of warfare and of weaponry itself. They can be analysed as technical artefacts, revealing their working and making. They can inform our understanding of the experience of



*Figure 1 American-made composite musket from the Revolutionary War, assembled with a barrel bearing London proofmarks, a lock bearing French marks and the trigger and stock of an American manufacturer. (National Museum of American History)*

war, of the material culture of the soldier. Each one of these functions places certain demands on the exhibition and on the visitor.

There is a sufficiency of weapons in 'The Price of Freedom' to provide a sense of how the weapons of war have changed over 250 years. The most prevalent class represented is the shoulder weapon – muskets, rifles, sub-machine-guns and the like. These have clearly changed significantly since the mid eighteenth century, and each conflict in the exhibition is represented by examples of such guns. The shoulder arm or weapon, indeed, would have made a useful thematic thread for this exhibition, suggesting just what museum objects can tell us about the experience of war that other media cannot. In some cases, the Smithsonian collections are remarkably and surprisingly rich, as in the American Revolution. Here we see muskets from all types of combatants – not just colonials and British, but Hessians and French as well. A wonderful example is a 'composite musket', in which parts from British and French guns have been cannibalised to complete an American-made firearm (Figure 1). Here is an object that captures particularly well the improbability of the American war for independence. It is also an object that displays what museums can do best – show us that which is not self-evident about an object but which close study can reveal. It is the London marks on the barrel and the French marks on the lock and American design of the trigger that indicate the mixed parentage of this gun – these are features not obvious to the casual viewer, but which the museum can reveal.

A mock-up of a Revolutionary War musket makes accessible the feel of the weapon, although the fact that we cannot lift it leaves out the experience of its heft, which must have been the most distinctive aspect of the foot soldier's physical experience of carrying his firearm, aside from its recoil on firing. It's too bad that even this limited access to the weapons is missing in the remainder of the exhibition, for the shoulder arm both changes and, in many ways, remains the same, throughout the history covered here. Few single objects could convey so well the relationships between soldiers' experiences as the years move on.

Furthermore, technical changes in shoulder arms can become evocative of different experiences and different values. For example, Sam Houston, the 'father of Texas independence', possessed a rifle with a very unusual breechblock (Figure 2); this so-called 'harmonica lock' carried five shots, which could be fed sequentially into the breech



by sliding the block across. Nothing is said, however, in the exhibition about the efficacy of this design, why it was so rarely used (something we have to infer), and whether it led to any more successful designs. Still, it is of real interest to learn that a notable such as Houston was ready and willing to use such an experimental gun.

The Houston rifle is in contrast – although this may not be obvious to the visitor – to other nearby examples. A display of a crate marked ‘Bibles’ is filled with Sharps carbines, of the sort shipped to Kansas in the 1850s by antislavery activists. While this is a nice way of representing the sometimes violent clashes that preceded the outbreak of the Civil War, the display is fake – the Sharps rifles are genuine, but the crate is a prop and weapons of this type were unlikely to have been distributed in this way. The casual manner in which this exhibition shifts from real to fake undermines the value of the authenticity that gives some parts of the exhibition real power.

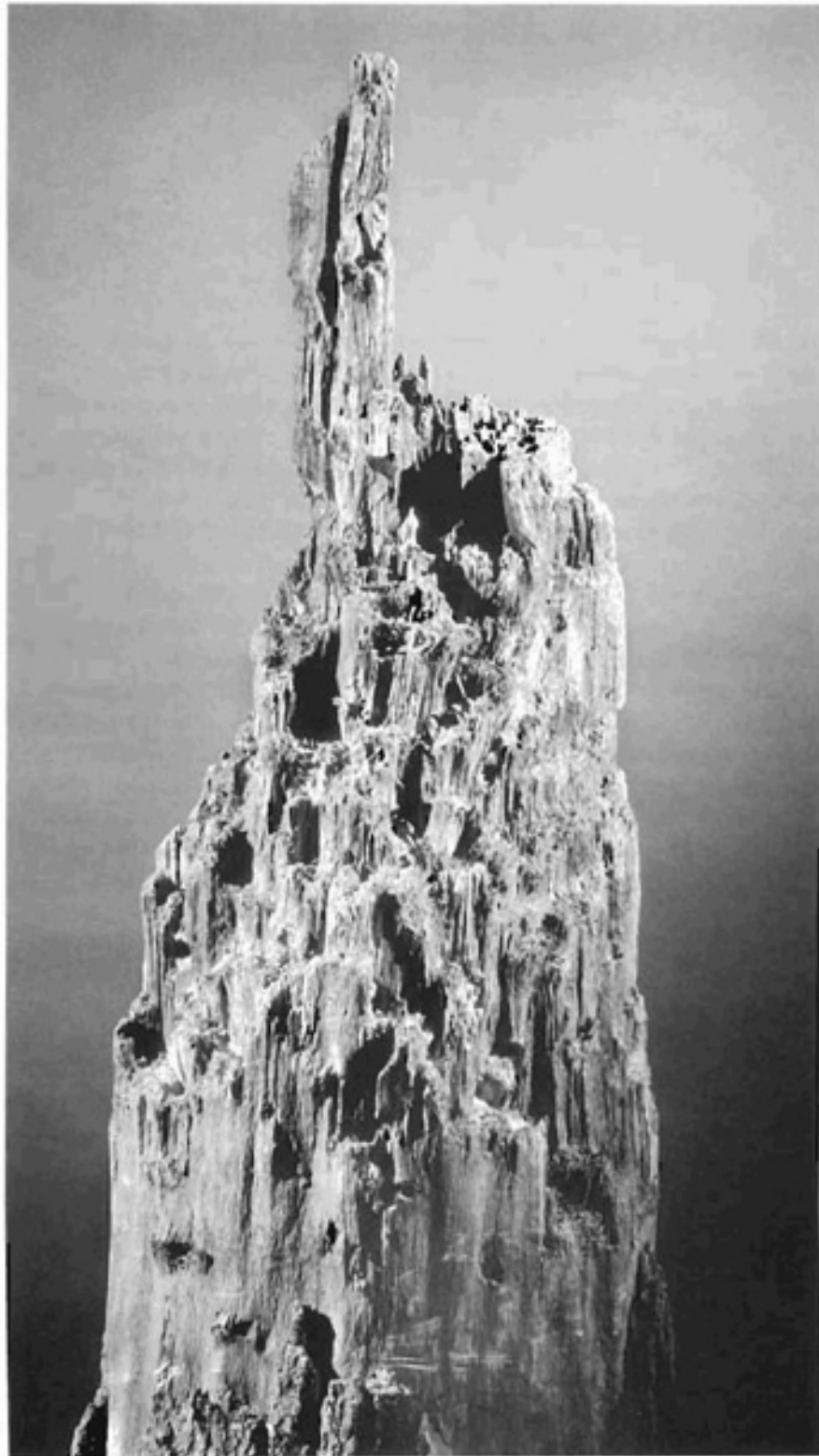
Another mid-century innovation was the Minié ball, a lead bullet with a hollow at one end (Colour plate 18). When it was fired in a rifle, the ball expanded to fit the rifled grooves of the barrel and thus was spun rapidly as it exited the gun, increasing accuracy. The Minié ball is shown, accompanied by a large cutaway model to show the structural features that made the ball such an effective bullet. This is one of the few places in the exhibition where the technical improvements to weapons are carefully explained (this is done at a few other points, generally for artillery). When the exhibition enters the American Civil War, one of its largest and most complex sections, the Minié ball reappears, with the display of a shattered tree stump (Figure 3), less than two feet high, that was retrieved from the battlefield at Virginia’s Spotsylvania Courthouse. There, on 12 May 1864, we are told, a large oak tree was struck by hundreds of bullets, a sylvan victim of a storm of gunfire that struck down some 2000 soldiers. Some of the Minié balls fired that day can still be seen in the tree’s remains.

### **Competition: objects and images**

The poignancy of this display is in contrast to much of the Civil War section of the exhibition, where many of the objects – uniforms, swords, camp equipment – have a static and detached character that is put into the shade by some of the sobering photographs (this, after

*Figure 2 This rare nineteenth-century Henry Gross rifle with an unusual breechblock belonged to Sam Houston, the ‘father of Texas independence’.* (National Museum of American History)

*Figure 3 The shattered tree stump retrieved from the US Civil War battlefield at Virginia's Spotsylvania Courthouse. (National Museum of American History)*





*Figure 4 A nineteenth-century pistol made by Salola, a blacksmith in the Oconaluftee Cherokee settlement of Quallatown, North Carolina. (National Museum of American History)*

all, was America's first photographed war) projected on the wall above some exhibition cases. Indeed, the Civil War section, the first that features war photography (itself not more than a half-dozen years old when the war began in 1861), marks an interesting shift in the exhibition. From this point the exhibition's objects and other graphics compete, often unsuccessfully in terms of emotional effect, with the stark images – black and white until the last few decades of the twentieth century – of soldiers and battles.

Flanking the Civil War, in both time and the exhibition, are cases devoted to 'Expansion', which includes the wars with Mexico and Spain and the Indian Wars, both in the East and in the West. Here the firearms are still present, but the display of American arms is joined by a couple of rather interesting additional items. A .28 calibre pistol (Figure 4) made by a Cherokee Indian blacksmith named Salola appears in a section devoted to the removal of Native Americans from the eastern part of the United States. The handiwork does not look exceptional, but that's the point – that white men's arms could be and indeed were manufactured by native people. A bit more unusual in appearance is a 'Homemade Filipino Rifle' (Figure 5) appearing in a case devoted to the Philippine War – the bloody conflict that followed the conquest of the Spanish Philippines by the United States in 1898. This gun is a remarkably crude and unpolished piece of work, but as such it seems particularly fitting to represent the desperate resistance put up by Filipinos against the Americans who had come to 'civilise' them. For nearly three years freedom fighters – insurgents, if you will – fought their 'liberators', at a cost of more than 20,000 Filipino dead and 4200 Americans. This visitor, at least, could not read the candid and straightforward description of this little-discussed episode in American imperialism without drawing chilling parallels with more recent history.

In these two cases, artefacts do in fact go beyond any images and words to convey messages. These messages themselves in fact resist verbalisation, and in the politicised environment in which a national museum has to function, particularly in areas as potentially controversial as military matters, it is particularly important that curators include objects such as these guns that are open to a range

*Figure 5 The 'Homemade Filipino Rifle' appearing in a case devoted to the Philippine War. (National Museum of American History)*



of interpretations, depending on the political vantage point that is brought to them. Salola's pistol and the Filipino insurgent's rifle are objects as foreign to their makers as they are unconventional to their eventual American possessors. They bear eloquent if mute testimony to the cultural conflicts that are frequent but neglected features of American wars.

The second half of the exhibition covers the wars of the twentieth century and after. The First World War actually gets fairly short shrift, contained in a small exhibition area between the large Civil War and Second World War sections (in fact, the visitor passing from one to the other may easily miss it). The scale of the Second World War is appropriately overwhelming. Particularly significant here is the great attention given to the home front and the support personnel. The weapons are there, but their prominence is much diminished by the message of total mobilisation and the implications this had for life throughout American society. Large military objects are plentiful, from a full-size jeep suspended from the ceiling to parts of aircraft and some large guns. But more striking are the tableaux with soldiers in their barracks, women factory workers, a USO (soldiers' entertainment) stage, and the like. Here is a mixture, often hard to differentiate with precision, of real artefacts and props, reinforcing the impression throughout this exhibition that the artefacts are indeed often no more than props for vignettes that carry the real messages. That jeep hung from the ceiling, for example, cannot be inspected (except for the underside), but can be little more than decoration or symbol. The largest single object in the exhibition, a 'Huey' helicopter used in the Vietnam War (Colour plate 17), can be seen much more clearly, but it too is essentially a stage set, a setting for mannequins, video presentations and other depictions of the experience of modern jungle war.

### **The artefact as background**

Herein lies the puzzle that runs through 'The Price of Freedom' – how are the artefacts to be more than settings, decorations or symbols, particularly as they appear with stark photographic (after 1860, at least) and cinematic (after 1939) images that document war and sacrifice more eloquently and evocatively than any three-dimensional object? This exhibition, better than most, illustrates a dilemma in which many modern museums find themselves: how do you make artefacts speak effectively to audiences much more accustomed to receiving messages from pictures, words and moving images? How do you do this, especially, when the images are of a particularly familiar and affecting type? One approach is to design an exhibition so that the artefacts are not incidental pieces but are clearly more prominent and more significant than supporting images. This exhibition does this in a few places – the displays of prisoner-of-war items, both from



the Civil War and from Vietnam, are good examples: here, the objects, small as they are, are the unambiguous focus. Oddly enough, when the objects are large – the Vietnam helicopter, for example – this focus is diminished by the imagery and other props nearby.

Large objects do not have to suffer this fate. Upon exiting 'The Price of Freedom' one sees, across an empty space, just past a garish shop devoted to toys, trinkets and booklets, a much older exhibition, the American gunship *Philadelphia*. In a quiet space, surrounded by labels that tell the artefact's story as well as the tale of its rescue, lies the oldest American warship. Despite its quaint understated display, this boat, raised in 1935 from Lake Champlain, where it was sunk in a battle with the British just a few months after the Declaration of Independence was signed, attracts visitors and tells a powerful story – just as we would wish a museum object to do.

'The Price of Freedom' highlights one of the core dilemmas of the general-history museum: the temptation to convey large and complicated stories, filled with many possible interpretations and meanings, by constructing a putatively 'objective' and 'balanced' image of historical events and circumstances. Such objectivity, as Susan Pearce pointed out in the epigraph to this article, is an illusion, but it is still a meaningful goal. This goal is meaningful and honest, however, only when it is carried out with the objects of the past as the primary actors on the historical stage. If these objects become only bit players, as in this exhibition, then the conservative, ideological weight of the exhibition, even if intentionally kept implicit, overwhelms everything else.