

Circling Back

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Exhibition methods from a non-linear chronological perspective

Frederik Engel Møller

Abstract

To exhibit chronologies can be a difficult undertaking – especially if the chronologies span millennia. This article is an effort to present an alternative method of exhibiting chronologies in museums by introducing a non-linear model. This model is based on the Eketorps Veckband by Swedish archaeologist Elin Engström and focuses on the non-linear structure of chronologies and time, and theories on folds in time, as proposed by scholars Michel Serres, Gavin Lucas, and Laurent Olivier. The model's purpose is to

visualize encounters across time and space, which objects can be exposed to – this is exemplified in this article by classical sculptures and how the perception of these has changed over time. By viewing time in a non-linear fashion, we can change our perception of some objects as being frozen in time and instead as constantly being re-evaluated and changing. Thereby gaining a deeper understanding of the relationship between the present and the past.

Introduction

This article is inspired by a 2024 seminar on chronology, titled *Critical Chronology: Periodization and Temporality in a Multidisciplinary Light*¹, held at the University of Copenhagen. The interesting discussions on chronology and temporality made me want to revisit my master's thesis, which examined the reuse of Classical antiquity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Møller, 2023) and reevaluate the importance of time and chronologies as tools to shape the past and present.

I was fascinated by a discussion from the above-mentioned seminar on how to display chronology in a museum. When viewing chronologies as linear timelines going from "the beginning" to the present, several problems arose. Firstly, many museum buildings face spatial

¹ Danish: *Kritisk Kronologi: Periodisering og Tidelighed i et Flerfagligt Lys*. Facilitated by Amalie Skovmøller. Held 12th of April 2024.

difficulties, as exhibiting chronology as a linear route would have to propel the guests ever-forward through different eras/styles/cultures/events. Secondly, the sheer information load on the guests by doing so would exhaust the guests quickly – museum fatigue (Gilman, 1916) – as broad chronologies often entail large amounts of information and objects. While listening to the discussion, I was reminded of a model – *Eketorps Veckband* (Engström, 2015, p. 236 Fig. 79) – which I was introduced to at another seminar². I propose that this model – consisting of a ribbon with pins and folds – might be a perfect candidate on which to apply methods communicating the complexities of time to museum guests in exhibitions engaged in archaeology, history or other subjects concerned with exhibiting chronologies.

In our current landscape, the past reemerges as material remains. These are often studied to increase our understanding of past cultures and events. However, it would also be beneficial to study them to improve our understanding of ourselves in the present. To do so, I present the following question: What meaning do archaeological objects convey in the modern museum, and what does the encounter with them evoke in our understanding of the past? Just as a person is the sum of past moments lived; societies are shaped by past events. These events are observed from a present perspective, which is viewed as separated from the past – presentism (Olivier, 2019, p. 22). Though the specific memories linked to these events may now be lost in the mists of time, we can trace some of the fabrics of society through the material remains left behind by past cultures. These material remains exist in the present yet are associated with the past – they transcend time and space and give the observer a glimpse through the fog of time. These encounters with the past through material remains create temporal folds – linking the present and past over vast amounts of time in an instant (Deleuze, 2006; Serres & Latour, 2008, p. 59). These folds may also link ideas – though, as I argue, it is not a one-way street from the past to the present.

This article aims to present a theoretical framework to examine and exhibit an archaeological theme or subject through a non-linear chronology. I have done so from an archaeological perspective, both because it is my field and because archaeology is the study of the material culture of the past that has survived to the present and, therefore, concerns itself with chronologies and time (Renfrew & Bahn, 2012, pp. 12–13). Thus, the presented framework or model relates to exhibitions revolving around time and chronology in a Danish perspective, which are more than often presented in a linear chronology – examples are the permanent exhibitions at the Danish National Museum, Moesgaard, and The Danish National Gallery, which the above discussion at the seminar revolved around. This is not to say all exhibitions are linear, but those that relate to chronology often are. Parallels can be drawn to recent work on object itineraries and mobility (Bauer, 2019; Hahn & Weiss, 2013; Joyce & Gillespie, 2015), though this article is not as focused on objects but rather a more holistic idea of mobility and exchange.

² Reframing Sculptural Reuse in the Greco-Roman World. Facilitated by Gabriella Cirucci and Jane Fejfer. Held on the 12th and 13th of October 2023.

Within art history and museology, we have also seen examples of 'ahistorical' exhibitions (J.Meijers, 1996). Though comparable, I do not believe they were trying to achieve the same as I am.

In the following sections, I discuss chronologies from a theoretical perspective. I hope that the discussions will contribute to a broader understanding of the past, time, and chronologies, while also bringing into focus our own influence on how that understanding is shaped. Lastly, I exemplify the use of the discussions in a proposed hypothetical exhibition.

The Beginning *and* the End

Where to begin is often a question of chronological order. Usually, one would start at the beginning, as with a fairy tale. Chronologies, as defined in the Oxford English Dictionary, is '*the science of computing and adjusting time or periods of time, and of recording and arranging events in the order of time*'. They are often understood as representing time propelling forward in an ever-increasing complexity. The three-age system introduced by C.J. Thomsen is one example of this (Thomsen, 1838), which found its foothold in science and society at large – and became the cornerstone of archaeological exhibitions. It was devised for prehistoric Europe yet is not a fit-all chronology even within Europe, as different regions and cultures experienced e.g. Bronze Age at various moments in time (Childe, 1925, pp. 331–333). It is a *relative* chronology, as it can only be dated relative to absolute time (which itself has been relative since Einstein's theory of relativity (Einstein, 1920; Lucas, 2021, pp. 14–15, 20)) – which can be dated by e.g. carbon dating or dendrochronology, which are *absolute* chronologies (Lucas, 2005, pp. 3–5). Other chronologies are dated using historical texts that describe events or people, which we can compare and date to our current calendar. The end goal of both types of chronologies is to order events within a chronological frame, often with an evolutionary and sequential understanding of progress (Lucas, 2005, pp. 9–15).

What I propose in the following is that the "beginning" may not be the best starting point when trying to convey perceptions of the past – it is perhaps better to start with where we are now – the present.

The past in the present

The present is made of the past – not just a singular *past* but many different *pasts* (Olivier, 2004). These *pasts* are made up of different materials, which stem from different epochs, and different cultures.

The past in the past is a concept which has been explored within archaeology for some time (Alcock, 2002; R. Bradley, 2014; Lund, 2022; Olivier, 2004; Yoffee, 2007). It revolves around the study of the material remains of an older past in a younger past. A good example of this, highlighted by archaeologist Laurent Olivier (Olivier, 2004, p. 204), is Susan Alcock's book

Archaeologies of the Greek Past: Landscape, Monuments, and Memories, which highlights how the Greeks under Roman rule were nostalgic for Hellenistic Greece, while the Classical Greeks were deeply fascinated by places thought to belong to the Homeric era.

In a similar way, European and American cultures reflect on antiquity and mimic its forms - both in art and architecture, but also in institutions, such as the American Senate. The nostalgia for Classical Greece and ancient Rome flows in the European veins and returns and revisits have been made throughout antiquity up until the present – thus evoking the past in the present. A noteworthy recent example was an executive order by the then 45th president of the United States of America Donald Trump, who wished to promote “Beautiful Federal Civic Architecture” (Trump, 2020).

The reuse of forms and materials from the past creates a *relationality* – a physical and referential relationship that moves across time (Fowler, 2017; Lund, 2022, p. 247). It is common for archaeologists to create typologies – groupings of similar objects – that are used to observe relations between artefacts. Yet, these relations also transcend the physical forms, and we must ask ourselves why people mimic objects of other cultures and not just how physically similar they are (Sørensen, 2015, p. 91). While the current use of an object may be similar to past use, there will always be a difference, just like how the blow from a hammer on the anvil is always different from the next or the previous (Deleuze, 1994, pp. 1–27; Lund, 2022, p. 247). We should, therefore, be wary of attributing the same or similar meanings to reused objects and revisited sites. From a museum’s perspective, this can be resolved by highlighting certain objects’ many past lives rather than focusing on one use.

The relationship to the past is an important factor when forming collective identities, and human societies – however grounded in the present – are made up of elements from the past (Olivier, 2004, p. 205). Archaeological materials, or any material remains, have a finite lifetime and only last as long as the material in which they were forged lasts. Ancient empires, like the Roman or Egyptian, persist through their material remains, which in the present are exhibited and sometimes still in use — e.g., the Colosseum. Their worlds still exist as concepts, while their realities have ceased to exist (Olivier, 2019, p. 18). This makes it easy to manipulate them into representing whatever one may want, as the social conditions that made up the fabric of the past are long gone and perhaps are only preserved in the writings of its elite and, as such, do not represent the society as a whole.

The Present in the Past

Time has two aspects. There is the arrow, the running river, without which there is no change, no progress, or direction, or creation. And there is the circle or the cycle, without which there is chaos, meaningless succession of instants, a world without clocks or seasons or promises. - (Le Guin, 2019, pp. 185–186)

The above quote comes from Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, wherein the protagonist, Shevek, explains his *General Temporal Theory* to a layman during a party. The theory tries to combine two seemingly contradicting modes of perceiving time: the linear, wherein irreversible successive instants occur, which is what is normally perceived as the progress of time; and the simultaneous, where there is no time, and the order of things is mixed together (Tavormina, 1980, p. 52). The metaphorical take from Le Guin's book is the understanding of how the future is shaped by the present and how the past causes the present.

Like the sister planets Urras and Anarres, which are each other's history and hope, the past and future are bound to each other. To deny the present reality of either is to deny the reality of the present itself. - (Tavormina, 1980, p. 58)

Like the sister planets, Western cultural heritage emerged from the same root(s) and has diverged and split many times. Yet, to not acknowledge and examine the different off-shoots of Western culture is to deny understanding Western culture itself. Both of the sister planets' worldviews are real, and they shape their societies – even though they are their solar opposites. Interpretations of the past are just as real – though sometimes counterfactual – since they have lasting effects on society.

It is also good to be aware of how time works in different ways. Time is not wholly linear but folds on itself, as argued by Gilles Deleuze and Michel Serres (Deleuze, 2006; Serres & Latour, 2008, p. 59). It is common to see time progress as a line, from the reindeer hunters being replaced by Neolithic farmers, who in turn were replaced by Bronze age societies, and so forth, until the present day. Yet, what we also observe is the many folds, or repetitions, in time. Styles re-emerge in art, and places are revisited through time, both deliberate actions. While trends are repeated, it is never a complete reset to the first instance, as with circular time. Historians try to make meaning of these successive epochs and chop them up into periods, distinct enough to be separated from the previous and the subsequent (Olivier, 2004, p. 208). This can, however, be viewed as an anti-historical approach — "This idea of time being under control is at the heart of the historicist approach to the past, which is, strictly speaking, an anti-historic conception of the past." (Olivier, 2004, p. 208). Periods are also often arbitrarily applied when it comes to choosing when to cut — "it is something imposed by the scholar on the past or on the course of history, rather than something inherent in history itself." (Lucas, 2021, p. 72). A person living during the fall of the Roman empire is unlikely to have acknowledged the passage into the medieval period. Though we can put a date on the transition, for them, life went on as it always had.

To make meaning of the endless successions of time, we have to put past events into a relationship with the present – in what way does it become distinct events separated from contemporary events? In some ways they cannot be separated, as all current events are shaped by past events and all past events are observed from the present perspective. As German philosopher Walter Benjamin observes

'History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [Jetztzeit]' - (Benjamin, 1986, p. 261).

The present can evoke the past, just like fashion can evoke styles of the past, and like fashion, there is "a flair for the topical", no matter where in the past it might come from (Benjamin, 1986, p. 261). In this manner, we must be vigilant to what aspects of the past are revitalized and how it changes our understanding of the past. As Benjamin says, "it is a tiger's leap into to past", a leap which jumps hundreds if not thousands of years and that jump takes place in an arena dominated by the ruling class (Benjamin, 1986, p. 261).

Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as the 'time of the now' which is shot through with chips of Messianic time. - (Benjamin, 1986, p. 263)

To separate the present from the past is to say that they are two different realities when, in reality, the past is ever present in the now - and this notion of the present embedded in the past has serious consequences for the interpretation of archaeological materials and the past (Olivier, 2004, p. 210). This returns us to the question of what meaning archaeological objects convey in the modern museum and what the encounter with them evokes in our understanding of the past. We are ever susceptible to the fallacy of presentism – to insert present knowledge or beliefs into the past (Olivier, 2019). To see, e.g. the white marble sculptures of the present makes us see the white marble in the past – even if we are aware of Classical sculptures' original colourful nature (Brinkmann, 2008; Skovmøller, 2020).

The Folds of Eketorp – A Visual and Analytical Tool

The intermediaries - Hermes, angels, I myself as intermediary between the sciences and between science and the humanities we are forced to fly according to these curves. Sometimes things that seem incomprehensible have causes or sources that are completely limpid (...) - (Serres & Latour, 2008, p. 65)

In her doctoral thesis *Eketorps veckningar: hur arkeologi formar tid, rum och kön*³, Swedish archaeologist Elin Engström, presents a model, a folded ribbon with pins, to show the folds of

3 English: *The Folds of Eketorp: How Archaeology Shapes Time, Space and Gender*

time in relation to the cultural heritage site of Eketorp on Öland, Sweden (Engström, 2015, pp. 234–236 Fig. 79). This folded timeline represents the instances regarding Eketorp which have been discussed in her thesis and follows French philosopher Michel Serres view of time (Serres & Latour, 2008). Each instance creates folds or waves in the timeline, which can span many years, yet are all connected in the middle, which is a cluster of meetings connecting the central archaeological, antiquarian, and museum-relevant instances at Eketorp (Engström, 2015, p. 235). This model lets us visualize and contextualize a subject or theme with large chronological spans (Engström, 2015, p. 235; Serres & Latour, 2008, p. 64). The model allows us to reuse it – by simply adding new pins in new places, we can reshape it and see new clusters meet. Examples of how it can be used are many. From the reuse of one archaeological site, the reinterpretation of archaeological objects and shifting understandings of past cultural concepts.

Model for Exhibitions

I believe that this model can also be utilized in exhibitions. This would help visualize the intertwined and non-linear chronologies, which would otherwise simply be visualized as a straight timeline. I believe it would be highly effective when focusing on a theme – perhaps something relating to the present and contemporary discussions. I will now insert a current discussion – a discussion which has been ongoing for centuries really – into the model to highlight the potential use of this model in an exhibition. I have chosen the interpretation of Classical sculpture from Greek antiquity, as it is a subject I am greatly interested in, and which has didactic potential in this case. It is a subject often brought up and used to fit into the modern perception of the origin of Western culture.

Classical antiquity has been subjected to various appropriations and interpretations throughout time. Some of these interpretations have been conflicting with the research put forward by scholars, yet have still made their way into public knowledge and cemented themselves as “truth”.

The human form and the human mind attained to a perfection in Greece which has impressed its image on those faultless productions, whose very fragments are the despair of modern art, and has propagated impulses which cannot cease, through a thousand channels of manifest or imperceptible operation, to ennoble and delight mankind until the extinction of the race. - (Shelley, 1886)

Classical antiquity has been revisited time and time again (Vout, 2018). The above quote by English Poet Percy Shelly is just one of many such examples of the reverence of Classical Greece, which became evermore popular in the late eighteenth century and onward. The fascination with Classical Greece in modern times had a surge with the publication of Johann Joachim Winckelmann's *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* in 1764, which led to a rediscovery and reappreciation of Classical art (Faedo, 2014, p. 430). Since then, Classical art has been

instrumental in building prestige and national glory within Western Imperialism (M. Bradley, 2010; Díaz-Andreu García, 2007; Funder et al., 2019). Winckelmann, however, did not invent this reverence for Classical sculpture – he merely revived it. The Romans were already bringing home vast amounts of booty from captured Greece in the late third and first centuries BCE (Kousser, 2014, 2015, pp. 115–116), and their appetite for Greek art only grew from there. While the Romans created their own art in the style of the Greeks (Kousser, 2014, pp. 385–390), they did not perceive it as being of the same standard as the high Classical period as expressed by Pliny the Elder in his *Naturalis Historia*.

The practice of this art then ceased for some time, but revived in the hundred and fifty-sixth Olympiad, when there were some artists, who, though far inferior to those already mentioned, were still highly esteemed. - (Plin. Nat. 34.19)

We have also seen in contemporary times how different political groups – mainly on the right of the political spectrum – have used antiquity in the promotion of Western ideals. In 2017, the far-right white supremacy group *Identity Evropa* used Classical and neo-Classical sculptures to spread their white supremacist ideology (Balleck, 2019, pp. 145–148; Davis, 2017; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2024), and others have also used antiquity in their campaigns to promote Western ideals (Pharos, 2021). The appropriation of antiquity is however not new, as stated earlier in this text. Both the leader of fascist Italy Benito Mussolini and the leader of

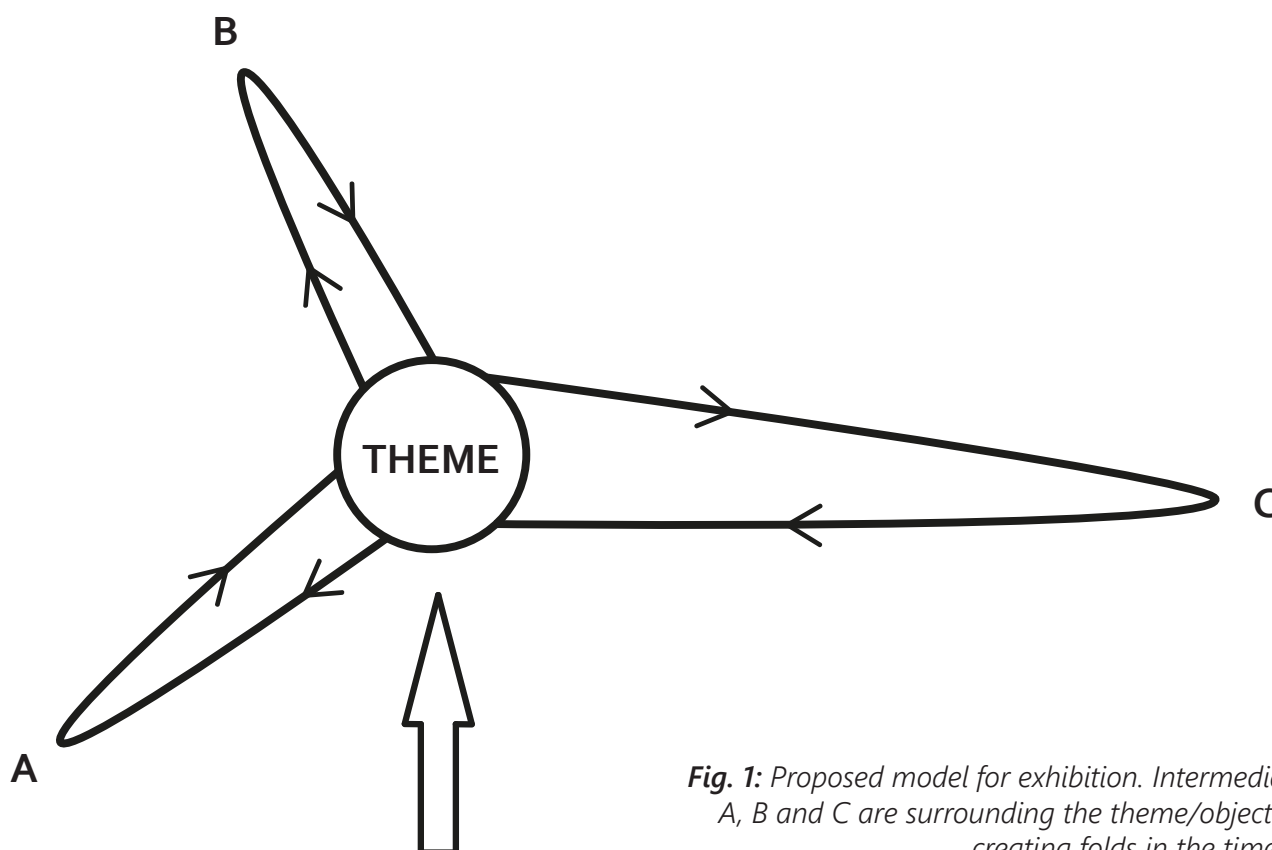


Fig. 1: Proposed model for exhibition. Intermediaries A, B and C are surrounding the theme/object and creating folds in the timeline.

Nazi Germany Adolf Hitler used antiquity extensively in their campaigns to promote racial and cultural supremacy (Chapoutot, 2016; Haskell & Penny, 1981, p. 199; Painter, 2018; Squire, 2014, pp. 16–23). And even before them, antiquity was used in self-promotion by nations and political actors in Europe and abroad (Faedo, 2014; Miles, 2014, pp. 511–512; Vout, 2018).

We have here seen some leaps and folds in time, wherein the past has been evoked in the present. To put this into the exhibition model, we would first have to establish the central theme – that is Classical antiquity and its sculptures. The theme is located in the present and is the entry point for the museum guests. From this central theme, the folds of time leap out. These folds are interpreted and communicated through intermediaries (Engström, 2015, p. 235; Serres & Latour, 2008, p. 65) who connect the leaps in time and highlight how some connections which seem complex may be simpler than imagined.

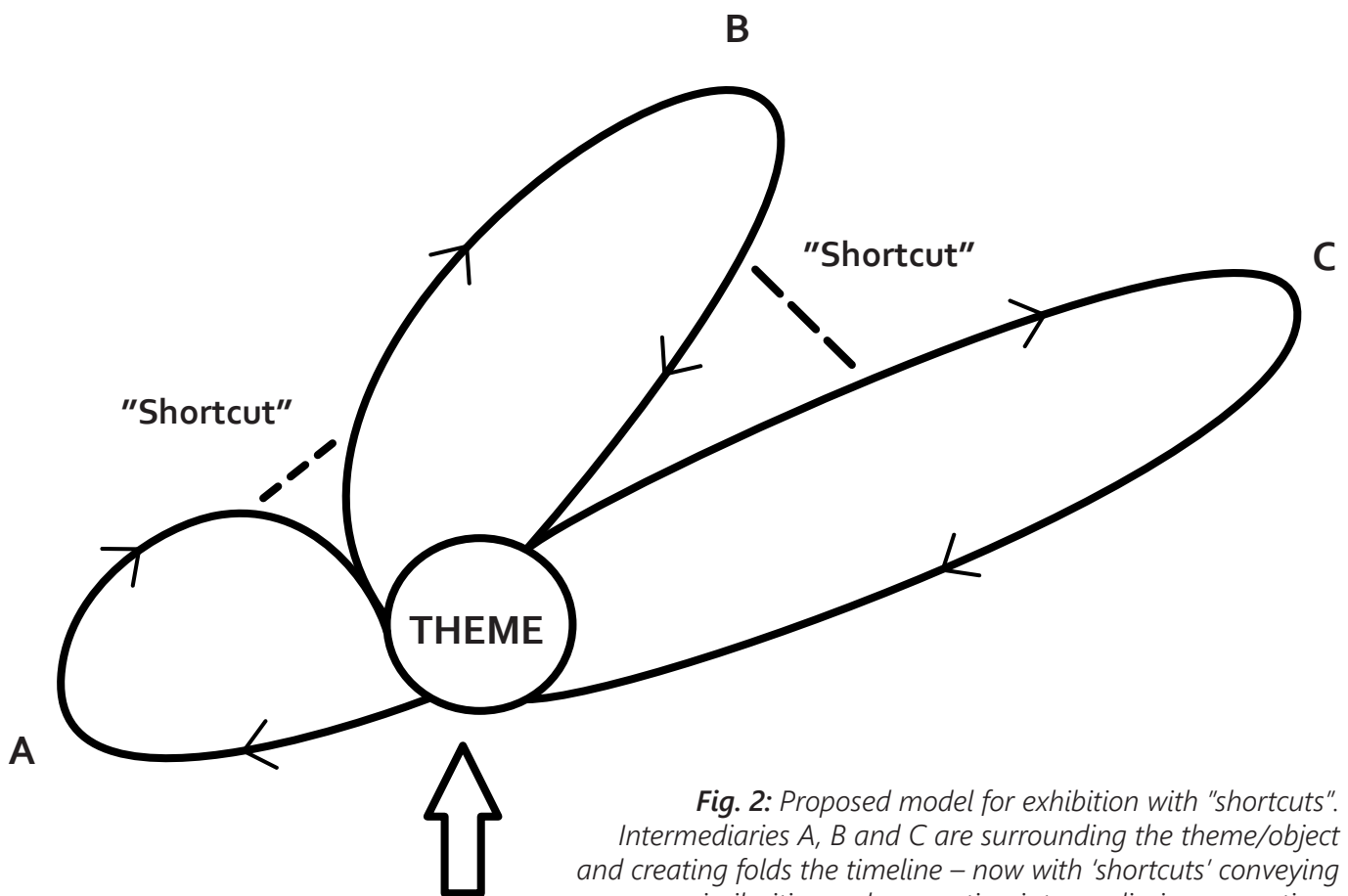


Fig. 2: Proposed model for exhibition with "shortcuts". Intermediaries A, B and C are surrounding the theme/object and creating folds the timeline – now with 'shortcuts' conveying similarities and connecting intermediaries across time.

Examples of these intermediaries in the current case could be Pliny the Elder (Fig. 2: A), Winckelmann (Fig. 2: B), and perhaps even Donald Trump (Fig. 2: C). Each of these people connects the past with the present and thus anchors the theme across the chronological gaps. When the guest enters the exhibition, they are confronted first with the theme – the sculptures, which are material remains from the past, and are very present in the contemporary. Following the curves of time mentioned by Serres (Serres & Latour, 2008, p. 65), the guest is presented with cases of time folding in on itself. This should manifest itself in the exhibition as a slight

departure from the central theme (which I imagine being in the centre of the room), which both communicates the leap in time and the connection through the intermediary. For Pliny, this would be his comparison between his contemporary sculptors and those of the Classical Greek era. This could be exemplified by presenting the quote and two sculptures, each representing the Roman and Greek sculptors – though finding Greek originals might prove difficult.

The exhibition could add another layer of complexity by having some of the folds overlap. Winckelmann was heavily influenced by the authors of Antiquity and therefore overlaps with them. Here the exhibition could be designed much like an IKEA store, where you follow the designated route through the building – from living room to bedroom to bathroom etc. You are however also able to utilize several shortcuts connecting two areas of the store. This will allow the exhibition to convey similarities in the folds of time without the need for repetitions. It will thus allow intermediary A, Pliny, to be connected to intermediary B, Winckelmann, and so forth. This can be repeated infinitely, though museum fatigue would likely be a limit.

The folding nature of this model will also allow the museum to utilize rooms with limited space. Temporary dividers will enable us to reshape the exhibition to fit the needed narrative. Further, the intermediaries do not necessarily have to be historical figures; they could also be contemporary artists or scholars contemplating a theme or object – such as with The Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek's exhibition *Petrified Ideals* (Aug. 2023).

Conclusion

The past is all around us and conveying the complexity of time in writing and exhibition is challenging. An object's meaning changes right before you. They are not solely objects of the past, neither are they exclusively objects of the present. By employing this exhibition method, I hope that museums will be able to highlight the changing nature of objects as they move through time and space.

The folding nature of the model helps relativize a theme or object in a chronological setting. When do the relevant changes appear, and how does it influence the perception of the theme? Classical antiquity is a period in time, yet classical sculptures are both a theme and object which transgresses this periodization. This is just one of many examples, that would benefit from being highlighted in a new non-linear chronology. Our perception of the past is heavily shaped by the present and its current ideas rather than factual evidence - as with polychromy. I hope that this method and models can help change the perception of objects as frozen in time, but rather everchanging and influenced not only by the past but also the present. By circling back, we will be able to gain a deeper understanding of the past and the present, and perhaps we will also be able to glimpse at where we are heading.

About the author

Frederik Engel Møller

MA in Classical Archaeology with a focus on reception studies, UCPH

BA in Classical Archaeology with a focus on forgeries, UCPH

Contact:

Frederikengel@gmail.com

Research interests: Classical reception studies, Greek and Roman sculpture and their afterlife, Decoloniality, Plaster casts, and Whiteness of Classical sculpture.

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Figure list

Fig. 1: Proposed model for exhibition. *Frederik Engel Møller & Freja Astrid Petersen*

Fig. 2: Proposed model for exhibition with "shortcuts". *Frederik Engel Møller & Freja Astrid Petersen*