Review Essay

The Routledge Research in Museum Studies Series

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Contesting Human Remains in Museum Collections: The Crisis of Cultural Authority

Designing for the Museum Visitor Experience

Exhibiting Madness in Museums: Remembering Psychiatry through Collections and Display

Museum Gallery Interpretation and Material Culture

Representing Enslavement and Abolition in Museums: Ambiguous Engagements

The first five books of the Routledge Research in Museum Studies series offer a promising start to a needed body of literature. Unfortunately, the series lacks an editor or a statement of purpose, making it difficult to determine the criteria for publication or projected goals of the series beyond the field of museum studies—which ranges from administration, fundraising, collections management and exhibition design to educational programming and curatorship. Thus far, the series concentrates on comprehensive subjects (an edited volume on interpretation and a single authored manuscript on visitor experience) or specific, controversial topics (the material culture of human remains, madness, and enslavement).

In Contesting Human Remains in Museum Collections: The Crisis of Cultural Authority, Tiffany Jenkins, arts and society director of the London-based think tank...
the Institute of Ideas, explores contemporary controversies surrounding human remains. Varying in age, provenance, affiliation, and materiality, “skeletons and body parts are being used to fight the battles of the living” (142). Although the book is centered on British practices, the influence of indigenous people demanding repatriation from institutions around the world has had its influence. While groups that suffered under colonization have legitimate claims over human remains, others such as Honouring the Ancient Dead (HAD), a Pagan group, have made inconsistent assertions for respect, ritual, or reburial of British Isle skeletons. Museum professionals who believe that all human remains are subject to concerns regarding handling, presentation, and storage have also initiated campaigns to change the display of the dead. For instance, in 2008, Manchester University Museum covered ancient Egyptian mummies, which was opposed by those who felt the action unnecessary. A majority of visitors are untroubled by the display of human remains; in fact, they seek them out as witnessed by the popularity of Gunther von Hagens’ Body Worlds exhibits.

While Jenkins provides attention to questionable claims makers such as HAD, the book would have been stronger if it had focused more on the legal cases surrounding human remains in museums. An example touched upon is the Kennewick Man, the 9,000-year-old skeletal remains found in Washington State. Kennewick Man was the crux of a legal battle between scientists, the American government, and Native American tribes who claimed him as one of their ancestors. The ruling found no association between Native Americans and the remains as it is impossible to ascribe a relationship between people of today and humans from thousands of years ago. Such a ruling, however, has allowed scientific study of the remains to continue. Administrators resisting repatriation have evoked the case to challenge the legality of tribes to determine the fate of human remains that bear no genetic relation to them.

The second book, *Museum Gallery Interpretation and Material Culture*, evolved from the proceedings at “Fear of the Unknown: Can Gallery Interpretation Help Visitors Learn About Art and Material Culture?”, the first annual Sackler Centre for Arts Education conference at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London in 2008. The essays, edited by Juliette Fritsch (V&A’s Head of Gallery Interpretation, Evaluation, and Residencies) investigates the role, design, and practice of interpretation for learning in museums, art galleries, and historic sites around the world, defining the emerging practices of interpretation and the impact of visitor research.

Tensions exist between the idea of museums as institutions of the elite and purveyors of the dominant culture and their long history of establishments for the enjoyment of all classes, as George E. Hein, Professor Emeritus, Senior Research Associate, Lesley University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, explores in his essay, “The Museum as a Social Instrument: A Democratic Conception of Museum Education.” He finds that progressive education has been entrenched in the museum's missions
for over two centuries, that “museum education should provide both pedagogic and political goals—that is, through method and intention—that strive to improve the social conditions of society” (22).

Yet within the profession, education is viewed as separate from serious museum work. In “‘Education is a department isn’t it’: Perceptions of Education, Learning and Interpretation in Exhibition Development,” Fritsch questions the underlying assumptions of the concepts of education, learning, and interpretation, revealing the nature of their relationships as understood by those who work on exhibition development and design. A project manager notes that professionals use the word education “scathingly,” as education is considered an add-on practice, not a core component of display (243).

In “Art for Whose Sake?,” Sue Latimer, Senior Education and Access Curator, Glasgow Museums, discusses a project to renovate and redisplay Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum in Glasgow. The museum took into account their local audience, many of whom lacked functional literacy, were from low socioeconomic groups, and had families. While the museum received criticism from the art world for simplifying and clarifying their panel contents, the galleries proved successful, thought provoking, and welcoming. If governments require plain language for official correspondence, why should interpretative materials be any different?

In the first chapter of the third volume in this series, Exhibiting Madness in Museums: Remembering Psychiatry through Collections and Display, editors Catharine Coleborne (Associate Professor in History, University of Waikato, New Zealand) and Dolly MacKinnon (Senior Lecturer in the School of History, Philosophy, Religion and Classics, University of Queensland, Australia) ask, “How is past psychiatry both seen and obscured?” (3). The subsequent essays consider the presentation, interpretation, and representation of mental health through the history of independent and institutional collections of psychiatric objects in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United Kingdom. In the aftermath of deinstitutionalization, psychiatric buildings have now become ad hoc homes for collections of the material culture of madness. The essays examine the personal experiences of mental illness in a post-institutional age.

In “Remembering Goodna: Stories from a Queensland Mental Hospital,” Joanna Besley (Senior Curator at Museum of Brisbane, Australia) and Mark Finnane (Professor of History at Griffith University, Australia) believe exhibitions can be “an active gathering, a process that creates collections rather than just draws from them. If curators and others work closely and collaboratively with individuals and communities who have a personal stake in the history being presented in exhibitions, then memories, stories, fragments and even absences—not just objects—become essential elements of both collections and exhibitions” (116). The chapter demonstrates the benefits of collaborating with people whose lived experiences have often been excluded from historical accounts. The Goodna collection demonstrates how compassionate exhibitions have found critical acclaim from the viewing public.
Psychiatric living is difficult to display, particularly in collections linked to specific institutions or former staff members and held by private, volunteer groups. In “Always Distinguishable from Outsiders: Materialising Cultures of Clothing from Psychiatric Institutions,” Bronwyn Labrum (School of Visual and Material Culture, Massey University, New Zealand) discusses the purpose and meaning of institutional clothing in Australian and New Zealand museums. While objects such as straitjackets and restraints are often displayed in exhibitions, the absence of clothing, a vital part of patients’ everyday experiences, shape narratives in meaningful ways.

The subject of gaps and silences within history continues in Representing Enslavement and Abolition in Museums: Ambiguous Engagements. Editors Laurajane Smith, Geoffrey Cubitt, Ross Wilson, and Kalliopi Fouseki use a significant event to demonstrate current museum practices on a controversial subject. The year 2007 marked the 200-year anniversary of the Act of Parliament that ended British involvement in the transatlantic slave trade. Contributions from academics, museum professionals, activists, and artists are divided into ethnographic reactions to the bicentenary and critical examinations of government and museum responses.

The introduction, “Anxiety and Ambiguity in the Representation of Dissonant History,” by Cubitt, Smith, and Wilson, provides a survey of British museum bicentenary events. The subject is as much about the past as it is about Britain seeing itself as a moral, multicultural nation. The “ambiguous engagements” referenced in the subtitle refers to the museums’ compromised positions between reinforcing abolitionist narratives and re-reading history in the context of critical debate. The authors state, “understanding that compromise, and a desire to address and meet all audiences, may achieve little can nevertheless be an important observation, as it requires those dealing with dissonant topics to comprehend that how and why history is told has a political outcome” (17). They continue, “understanding that consequence, and using that understanding, to assess how and why history should be reworked and displayed is important if museum exhibitions are to matter” (17).

Cubitt’s “Atrocity Materials and the Representations of Transatlantic Slavery: Problems, Strategies and Reactions,” explores imagery—due to its familiarity, reductionism, disempowerment, and exploitation—that promotes enslaved Africans as passive victims. Unfortunately, the superb essay is impaired by low-resolution, pixilated images that the author analyzes. The same problem occurs in Wayne Modest’s “Slavery and the (Symbolic) Politics of Memory in Jamaica: Rethinking the Bicentenary.”

Smith, in “Affect and Registers of Engagement: Navigating Emotional Responses to Dissonant Heritages,” notes that people visit museums to learn, but they also use them to “reinforce their emotional and intellectual commitment to certain forms of knowledge and the values that they underpin” (260). Through interviews, she gauges visitors’ reactions to exhibits about slavery and whether they are seeking awareness or fortifying their identities. Due to interpretive narratives that avoided
controversy with difficult, dissonant histories, some visitors used the exhibitions to reinforce the dominant values and discriminatory narratives that buttress British imperial and colonial histories. Many white British respondents maintained an emotional neutrality towards slavery exhibitions, revealing that museums are perhaps less active in facilitating public discussion than they are in reflecting the nature and status of that debate.

The last chapter, “Commemorating Civil Rights and Reform Movements at the National Museum of American History” by Kylie Message discusses, from an American perspective, the administrative efforts to create exhibitions about the civil rights movement of the 1960s. The 1965 civil rights exhibition was considered too bold at the time, so the 1968 anniversary of the International Declaration of Human Rights provided both the primary vehicle and rationale for the National Museum of American History to revisit plans for both the 1963 “Emancipation Proclamation Centennial” and their civil rights exhibit.

Representing Enslavement and Abolition in Museums: Ambiguous Engagements grapples with the problems associated with collectivizing people's history (in slavery, or, in the previous book, in psychiatric institutions), rather than representing the complex, diverse history of individuals. Museums have an increasingly public engagement with traumatic histories, which often contain absences or lack interpretation. The well-known “Am I Not a Man and A Brother?” anti-slavery medallion, created by English potter Josiah Wedgewood in 1787, portrays an African kneeling with this manacled hands outstretched. As a symbol of the struggle for abolition and eventual emancipation, the image shows the enslaved as people to be rescued which was a call to action for audiences at the time, but the medallion, or reproductions of it, is often displayed for contemporary viewers without an elucidation of its problematic message.

In Designing for the Museum Visitor Experience, Tiina Roppola (Assistant Professor at the University of Canberra, Australia) examines phenomenological, visitor-centered research as the essence of museum encounters, with the understanding that visitor experience can build new knowledge into the discipline of exhibition design. She researched six leading institutions of the sciences and humanities in Australia: two natural and cultural history museums, two science and technology centers, and two themed museums (war and immigration). She believes exhibitions are the performance of meaning making, where visitors relate to exhibition environments through four key processes: framing, resonating, channeling, and broadening. Together, the processes create “a system with nuanced effects on the creation of meanings and the facilitation of experience” (263). Roppola suggests that exhibitions be built for the “limited attentional resources people naturally have…to achieve complexity and richness, without causing confusion and overload” (273). This volume is the most difficult to understand based on its theoretical approach and language, such as describing itself as a “meditation on the transactional space between visitors and exhibitions” and using multiple questions that overwhelmed
the text (277). Such difficulty in comprehension can perhaps be attributed to its contrast to previous volumes that emphasized museum praxis and material culture.

The lesson, from the series as a whole, is that while interpretation theory, design concepts, or technological developments provide exciting experiences, museums seek to change our perception of the world. Museums, however, have lost their traditional authority—both by their own professionals and from external influences—a dangerous prospect in our current economic times. While a postmodern perspective questions authority and understands that everyone is the author of cultural texts, society still requires museums for their capacity for collecting, interpretation, and display of heritage; cultural clout should not be undermined.

Overall, the Routledge Research in Museum Studies series inspects the interdisciplinary nature of museology and is therefore suggested for educators, designers, interpreters, curators, researchers, and students. Concepts examined in the series may also be utilized at other interpretive sites, such as art galleries, zoos, botanical gardens, national parks, and heritage sites. The newest book in the series, Museum Communication and Social Media: The Connected Museum by Kirsten Drotner and Kim Christian Schröder, guides professionals to reach young people as early adopters of technology and latecomers to museums. As one interested in museum scholarship, I look forward to this volume and future additions to the series.

*Editor’s Note: Look for Margot Note’s review of Museum Communication and Social Media: The Connected Museum in a forthcoming issue of the journal.*