

V. Book/Journal Article Reviews

Museum Culture: Histories, Discourses, Spectacles, ed. by Daniel J. Sherman and Irit Rogoff, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1994. xx+301pp. and numerous illus. \$49.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

Reviewed by

Jeffrey Abt
Department of Art and Art History
Wayne State University

The comparatively recent and rapid expansion of museum studies, accompanied by increased work in the history of collecting (Impey and Macgregor), offers a fertile ground for examining the origins of several disciplines including archaeology. Historians of anthropology not only were among the first to recognize this fact, they also gave currency to the expression “museum period” to characterize an early stage in that field’s nascence (Sturtevant 1969, Stocking 1985). Of course nearly all disciplines relying on the study and interpretation of material objects have passed through their own museum periods. But the historiographers of those other disciplines are only beginning to appreciate the full import of the relations which linked museums with research and pedagogy throughout most of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Scholars researching art history’s emergence have started probing the role of museums in it — a project which includes the archaeology of the classical world (Smyth and Lukehart 1993). Researchers are just now extending this work to the ancient near east. Despite American anthropology’s kinship with Americanist archaeology, the historiography of anthropology has not given much attention to the inter-animations of museums and archaeology in the Americas. In other words, there are many opportunities for investigating the place of art, “natural” history, and other types of museums in the collecting, taxonomy, and interpretation of archaeological finds.

Museum Culture is a recent contribution to the museum studies literature which does little to alter this situation. Nonetheless, several of thirteen essays in the book model critical strategies and methodological approaches useful to researchers working in the history of archeology. Space does not allow discussion of all the essays, but some, because of their potential usefulness to the BHA’s readership, deserve particular attention. An especially commendable example is Frederick N. Bohrer’s “The Times and Spaces of History: Representation, Assyria, and the British Museum.” The author’s subject is the mid-nineteenth century installation of Layard’s finds in the British Museum and the impact of those spectacular objects on the popular culture of the time. Bohrer analyses and then moves outside the museum’s galleries, and the alternative display possibilities they offered, to arenas of public discourse where the objects were illustrated (e.g., popular journals) and replicated (e.g., for theatrical productions). While the museum labored to define and promulgate a “scientific” appreciation of the sculptures, it inadvertently became instead a stage upon which popular beliefs about the exoticism and mysteriousness of antiquity found material expression. The museum’s stimulation of oriental fancies, accompanied by Layard’s accounts of his risky and “heroic” archaeological exploits, contributed to the public’s developing enchantment with archaeology as romantic adventure. Sober scholarship was viewed as a necessary but tiresome byproduct. The celebration of Assyrian images and archaeological feats — especially the removal and transport of the huge winged bulls and lions — in the popular culture of mid-nineteenth century London did not adversely affect scholarly interpretation of Layard’s finds. But it did contribute to the origins of academic archaeology as a collecting (actually borderline looting mechanism for individuals and institutions. The extent to which subsequent generations of archaeologists piggy-backed scholarship onto the lingering vestiges of this collecting frenzy warrants further study. Bohrer’s essay offers a persuasive model for studying the relationships among archaeology’s earliest patrons and practitioners in the overlapping and reciprocal worlds of museums, scholarship, private collecting, and mass culture.

The uses of museums and exhibitions in political discourse is one of the most recent subjects of museum studies (Sherman 1989, McClellan 1994). Several essays in *Museum Culture* extend this work to scrutinize the creation or consolidation of national identities through the deployment of cultural patrimonies. Ariella Azoulay’s “With Open Doors: Museums and Historical Narratives in Israel’s Public Space” considers a well-documented region of nationalist enthusiasm and its expression in a variety of museums and related cultural institutions. The author shows how, over the course of this century (beginning with the Zionist forebears of Israel’s founders), a host of museums took up the challenge of composing a national history which flows seamlessly from Judaism’s pre-biblical origins to the founding of the State of Israel in 1948. Even “art” museums could not escape the pressure to redeploy “canonized works of art and craft according to a system of values in which national values preceded, if not overruled, aesthetic ones (p. 109, n. 2)”. Brian Wallis approaches a related topic in his essay “Selling Nations: International Exhibitions and Cultural Diplomacy.” Here, too, objects — including ancient artifacts — are exhibited for national ends. But Wallis concentrates on the projection of national identities through traveling expositions (his principal example is “Mexico: A Work of Art,” a related series of exhibitions and events staged in New York in 1990). The author is particularly intrigued by “a central paradox common in national exhibitions: in order to establish their status within the international community, individual nations are compelled to dramatize conventionalized versions of their national images, asserting past glories and amplifying stereotypical differences (p. 271).” Wallis did not, but could have more deeply considered the tendency of comparatively new

governmental entities to valorize ancient cultures. The purpose of these efforts is to extend backwards in time the duration and continuity of younger countries' political legacies, thereby helping legitimize them in the community of (older) nations. The centerpiece of the Mexican celebration, "Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries," was mounted at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The exhibition found precursors in ancient cultures which have little connection with the modern state save the coincidence of being rediscovered within a nation whose political boundaries were delineated as much as, well, thirty centuries later. This act of cultural hubris is reminiscent of nineteenth-century U. S. citizens' preoccupation with effigy mounds and other ancient remains. The enthusiasm was an outcome of the popular desire to find within the states and territories native cultural ruins which corresponded to the antiquity and splendor of Europe's classical forerunners. The fixation on European cultural supremacy, and this nation's corresponding sense of inferiority, inspired the creation of its first generation of cultural institutions including, ironically, its greatest museums.

Perhaps the most stimulating essay, by Dominique Poulot, examines the "ecomuseum" movement in his native land. "Identity as Self-Discovery: The Ecomuseum in France" surveys the "advent of a radically new phenomenon in the French museological landscape (p. 66)": an institution conceived to exhibit knowledge of highly-localized communities' cultural, human, and material resources, compiled through the collaborative efforts of local inhabitants with the advice of museum professionals and scholars. The resulting museums became "living history" sites devoted partly to preserving "collective memory, the source of a people's identity (p. 73)" for local residents and partly to providing a kind of ethnology of those localities for visitors from other parts of the country. The movement is imbued with an element of social activism reified in the practice of ordinary citizens constructing firsthand museological interpretations of their own lives and times. Eventually the present-tense immediacy of many ecomuseums was transformed into more conventional past-tense, third person ("dead history") narratives when economic recessions rendered numerous industries obsolete and nearly obliterated their communities. Nonetheless, the participatory nature and cultural self-consciousness of the ecomuseum movement's exhibition of its participants' lives, its "subjective" basis, throws into sharp relief the methodological foundations of "classical" museology—in particular the function of temporal "distance" in establishing scholarly "objectivity"—subtly questioning the legitimacy of museum history narratives, and the collecting and interpretative strategies upon which they are based.

Finally, but in the beginning of *Museum Culture*, editors Sherman and Rogoff provide a concise and provocative "Introduction: Frameworks for Critical Analysis" on museum history. Their brief statement transcends the obligatory task of setting out the book's contents and organization to effectively summarize why "the interrogation of museum practice cannot be separated from the larger terrains of cultural history, theory, and criticism (p. ix)." The editors are also to be complimented on the high overall quality of the essays and a scholarly apparatus which is excellent and up to date. While *Museum Culture* does not attempt to survey the full disciplinary range of museums, it succeeds in furnishing an overview of new research strategies in museum history and criticism.

References Cited

- Impey, Oliver and Arthur Macgregor
1989 - present *Journal of the History of Collections*, Oliver Impey and Arthur Macgregor, eds.
- McClellan, Andrew
1994 *Inventing the Louvre: Art, Politics, and the Origins of the Modern Museum in Eighteenth Century Paris*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Objects and Others: Essays on Museums and Material Culture*,
1985 edited by George W. Stocking, Jr. University of Wisconsin Press, Madison.
- Shaman, Daniel J.
1989 *Worthy Monuments: Art Museums and the Politics of Culture in Nineteenth-Century France*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge.
- Smyth, Craig Hugh and Peter M. Lukehart
1993 *The Early Years of Art History in the United States: Notes and Essays on Departments, Teaching and Scholars*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- Sturtevant, William
1969 "Does Anthropology Need Museums?" *Proceedings of the Biological Society of Washington*, 82: 619-50.