

Transforming Museums: Mounting Queen Victoria in a Democratic South Africa

Review Number:

720

Publish date:

Saturday, 31 January, 2009

Author:

Steven Dubin

ISBN:

9781403974112

Date of Publication:

2006

Price:

£42.00

Pages:

360pp.

Publisher:

Palgrave

Place of Publication:

New York, NY

Reviewer:

Sarah Longair

The museums and historic sites of South Africa are a highly significant and revealing source of evidence for investigating how the country's various communities have come to terms with their complex history and have chosen to project it publicly. Having been perceived by the vast majority of the population as a mouthpiece for the apartheid government's interpretation of history and culture, South Africa's museums and galleries have faced a significant challenge to establish and justify their role in the democratic era.⁽¹⁾ This is a useful time to reflect on the wide-ranging developments in these institutions over the last 14 years, both those with lengthy histories who have adapted themselves to the post-apartheid era and those established since 1994.

Museums are valuable case studies for the historian. Through their interpretations and narratives they can be used as a historiographical source. Their displays reflect both curators' ideas and also attempt to reflect society at large, although they also have the power to shape social memory and public understanding. They are, however, subject to pressures outside of their scientific, cultural or historical sphere, such as governmental interference, the need to attract audiences both local and from overseas and their local community.

Steven C. Dubin has followed his various analyses of museums in the United States with *Transforming Museums: Mounting Queen Victoria in a Democratic South Africa*. The title refers to an episode in the Tatham Art Gallery whose collection included a large-size painting of Queen Victoria. It was decided to keep the painting on display, but in order to create a sense of balance, a competition was set up to select an

artist to paint a portrait of similar dimensions of King Cetshwayo kaMpande, a successor of Shaka Zulu. Some controversy arose when the panel, comprising both white and black judges, selected an all white shortlist, in spite of it being a blind decision (p. 28). This example goes some way to demonstrating the highly sensitive and emotionally-charged challenge of transforming South Africa's museums into institutions that satisfy the needs of their diverse communities.

In his introduction, Dubin opens with the damning assessment of South Africa's museums in 1997 by Nelson Mandela where the President publicly criticised their collections and displays (p. 2). Dubin's intention is to assess the various degrees to which 'transformation' can be said to have taken place across the museum and gallery sector. Two important publications are precursors to this study. Firstly, Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee's *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa* from 1998 which included an assessment of the transition of certain historic sites in the early years of the democratic period.⁽²⁾ In 2004, Annie Coombes' *History After Apartheid* focused on museums, monuments and contemporary art to analyse how they both represented the past and were simultaneously contributing to the concurrent social transformation.⁽³⁾ Dubin's book takes a different approach to these studies, in part through the nature of the material he uses as his principal sources. Over six visits in two-and-a-half years, prompted by his first visit in 2000, he undertook over a hundred interviews with artists, curators, politicians, cultural commentators and museum staff. As such, the book has a conversational and informal style which brings the opinions of the various cultural agents to the fore. His other principal sources are newspapers, public debates and academic commentaries.

The question of who has the right to represent culture is interrogated in many of Dubin's examples. Prior to 1994, South Africa's black communities had been presented for decades in museums as objects of anthropological curiosity. Ownership of representation is therefore a highly contentious issue where communities seek to reclaim control of their cultural identities. In Chapter 3, Dubin discusses such struggles with his examination of the depiction of the Khoisan where he highlights the contrasting experiences of art galleries and history museums. He uses the much-studied example of the *Miscast* exhibition of 1995–6 where artist Pippa Skotnes reinterpreted the famous Bushmen casts from the South African Museum in an installation piece in the South African National Gallery. Working within the sphere of the fine art allowed her the freedom to challenge the audience in ways which a history museum would not have been able. However, with installation art as a relatively recent form of modern art in South Africa, Dubin suggests that the majority of audiences, not familiar with the different museological strategies or artistic genres, may not have viewed this as an individual's interpretation (p. 65). The ensuing controversy provoked debate and reflection, but also provided an important platform for interaction between communities and museums over ownership of representation.

Dubin uses the example of Sarah Bartmann, both her life and the subsequent use of her body, in Chapter 4. This is a means to explore how one person's body became intertwined with different aspects of display over two centuries. By using this example, he is also able to touch on issues such as repatriation of objects and demonstrates that even once this is achieved, communities themselves become divided about how to represent or use these highly symbolic relics. In the case of Bartmann's body, her burial site was contested by different communities although years later this event has had no legacy and plans to establish a museum at the burial site remain as unrealised ideas (p. 109). He also mentions the work of modern artists who refer to Bartmann's life and recognisable image in their work (p. 86). It would have been interesting to investigate further the fact that the artists he mentions are all women from diverse races and backgrounds. They all in different ways seek to empower women, in a way Bartmann was never able to, by controlling their own image. Prejudice against women and gender imbalances are highly significant areas of debate in contemporary South Africa, prejudices which cross racial and cultural boundaries.

Chapter 5 discusses the renowned District Six Museum through which Dubin approaches another important topic in South African cultural life – the role of memory. Nuttall and Coetzee assessed this across the cultural sector in 1998 and highlighted the complex relationships that South Africans have with memory and history. Public memory was manipulated throughout the apartheid era, in particular through written texts and, by extension, museums were treated with suspicion by the black population. Personal memory was

therefore a vital means of retaining elements of historical truth. Many of the museum and gallery transformations took place concurrently with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission from 1995–8 which made memory recall a public process and prioritised articulated memories over official texts in interpretations of past events. The District Six Museum ‘aims to construct a space where memory and community can be reactivated, confronted and explored. ... It prioritizes human interaction, therapy, and catharsis over amassing an enviable collection of rarified objects’ (p. 119). Through its attempt to revive the memories of a famously vibrant and multicultural community, razed by the apartheid government, this heritage site grew from a local community project into a world-renowned museum. Though much has been written on the District Six Museum, Dubin’s analysis brings these studies up to date by highlighting some of the dangers of its success. By 2004, tourists outnumbered the original constituency. The need for a larger staff has created a more hierarchical structure and, as an independent institution, fundraising has become a central part of its daily routine. The trustees are determined to retain the core values of the museum in spite of these developments. The community remains their priority, but the museum must continue to address the community’s contemporary needs. Whilst the museum has provided a focus for healing many of the scars of the forced removals, it needs to engage with contemporary economic and social challenges of former residents if they are still to find a place for the museum in their lives.

Chapter 6 addresses the question of reinvention of existing historic sites, such as the Voortrekker Monument and the prisons on Constitution Hill and Robben Island. In Robben Island, for example, the role of the tour guides has been an interesting case in point – initially these were all former prisoners who recounted the experience from their own perspective. This was an extremely powerful experience for visitors but also a potentially contentious one. Dubin cites his own experience of a guide who had a highly aggressive approach which did not permit questioning and removed certain aspects of the tour, including a visit to Mandela’s cell (p. 158). The variability of experiences, rendered through the personal perspectives of the tour guides, again prompts the question as to who has the right of cultural ownership and representation, and how the museum controls the narrative projected to visitors. A comparison can be made with the exhibition in the Number Four prison in Johannesburg, adjacent to the new Constitutional Court. Here the memories of prisoners again dictate the interpretation of the site, this time through large video screens in the cells of former inmates recounting their harrowing experiences. This prison differs from Robben Island in that it housed not just political prisoners, but also criminal inmates. The issues it openly addresses include not just the oppressive prison regime, but also gang culture in the cells and rape between prisoners. Using videos as a form of confession allowed inmates to describe violence they saw and participated in.

It is worth examining the effect of this beyond Dubin’s discussion to compare the way these sites deal with their prisoners’ memories. The key contrast is where the selection of the narrative takes place. The videos at Number Four were edited by the museum designers in consultation with the interviewees, whereas the memories revived by Robben Island’s former inmates are immediate but have also been honed over years of practice and in general conform to the heroic political prisoner narrative. These two sites represent the changing nature of the use of memory in museums – Robben Island was opened in 1997, Number Four in 2006. The latter is an equally visceral experience and deliberately resists a comforting resolution which is reflective of current interpretations of the democratic era.

The new museums established since 1994 are examined in Chapter 7. Dubin describes these institutions as designed to fill what he calls ‘memory holes’ in particular the Apartheid Museum and the Hector Pietersen Museum (p. 186). An interesting area which Dubin touches upon but could be investigated further is how far these museums are in fact dictated by architects rather than museum experts as government tenders are issued to architects for the building, prior to collection of contents or consideration of the museum’s story. In the case of the Apartheid Museum, the museum designers were presented with a building which they had to fill with a display. Chapter 8 analyses the nature of museum staffing, as they attempt to become more representative, and their administrative structures. Dubin is particularly critical of the ‘flagship museum system’ as created in Cape Town and the Johannesburg/Pretoria area (p. 217). With funding a highly challenging issue, it is yet to be seen how this will affect the museums in the long term.

The final chapter brings to the fore one of Dubin’s main arguments which considers how art galleries have to

confront the challenges encountered through the legacy of colonialism, whereas museums of cultural history, natural science and natural history were more affected by apartheid ideologies. He cites examples of museums across South Africa to demonstrate that ‘the call for transformation with superficial additions and changes hardly connotes a basic transformation in attitude, and does not significantly expand the scope of a museum or its appeal to a broader audience’ (p. 235). Although superficial changes do not connote transformation in his eyes, the criticism here is levelled at two smaller historic house museums that were unlikely to have been given sufficient funding or support to create a fundamental change.

Throughout the book, Dubin uses many comparisons, in particular with museums, exhibitions and contexts in North America. These comparisons seem to be designed principally for an American audience familiar with the arts heritage literature of his previous work. One interesting comparison was that of the growth of urban centres during the mid-20th century in the US and South Africa (p. 127). The comparisons are less illuminating when, due to the very particular nature of apartheid policy and its legacy, the American references do not help the reader to gain a deeper understanding of the South African context. However, it is extremely important to widen the range of examples to which arts and museums studies’ analyses take place, thus this volume holds an important place in bringing South African museums to a wider audience. Dubin could praise further the response of these museums and their highly original, inventive and dynamic displays. He might also give more detail of the success stories, such as the Talana museum. This has had sufficient funding for its ambitious and successful building programme, but we do not find out where this support came from.

The number of images within the book is quite limited, used mainly as illustrations at the start of chapters. When discussing such a visual subject, the reader relies on Dubin’s brief descriptions of the exhibition displays, urban spaces and artworks. When discussing displays, which themselves are already a selective vision created by the curating and design team, the reader sees only the parts of the exhibition which Dubin chooses to describe to us. The author did not personally see several of the central exhibitions examples, such as the controversial *Miscast* and one relies upon his description gleaned from the catalogue and the views of the artist and curator. Naturally, in the field of museums studies, one should not limit oneself only to examples one has seen or experienced. However, as a reader, one feels at several degrees of separation from the actual installation, with no visual support.

The Freedom Park project, which he mentions in passing as a legacy project for Thabo Mbeki, is an important example of where politics and cultural display coincide. The site has had various proposed incarnations, one of which Coombes described, which had Mandela’s fist bursting from the mountain top.⁽⁴⁾ The current building display is an original attempt to incorporate indigenous knowledge systems into a cultural display in a coherent manner.⁽⁵⁾ Clive van den Berg, one of Dubin’s interviewees, is one of the designers involved in this project. Van den Berg is responsible for the design of the Constitution Hill Number Four exhibit as well as the interior design for the WISER institute in Wits University, one of the leading social science academic institutes. The impact of this network of designers, whose visions are deemed appropriate to represent contemporary South Africa, and their links to the academic world, is another area worthy of analysis.

As a historian, one is forced to question the implication of the dominance of memory across South African history and heritage. The nature of memory, particularly from episodes of pain and conflict, means that it is a fragile source which has to be used carefully. When displayed in museums and heritage sites, it brings a personal voice which at this moment in South Africa is of primary importance, whereas original or historic artefacts are, especially in new museums, considered secondary. It will be fascinating to observe how these trends develop over the coming years. Dubin has collected a vital series of interviews which, in full, are a highly significant archive of historical and museological thinking in this transitional period of 2003–4. Already some of the stories are being re-interpreted and the next generation, who will have no direct memory of the apartheid era, will have to choose how to re-negotiate and revisit these histories.

Notes

1. Patricia Davison, 'Museums and the reshaping of memory', in *Negotiating the past: the making of memory in South Africa*, ed. S. Nuttall and C. Coetzee (Oxford, 1998), p. 148. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Ibid. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Annie Coombes, *History After Apartheid: Visual Culture and Public Memory in a democratic South Africa* (London, 2003). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Ibid, p. 22. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. See [Back to \(5\)](#)

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