

Museums and Culture

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Kate Hill

Whose culture, and more specifically whose objects, are the central questions in these two very different books. In modern Western legal systems, objects can have only one owner, though that owner may be a corporate or collective body. But what does it mean for a state or nation or community to own an object, and what should we make of claims to hold objects in trust for all humanity? James Cuno's polemical book has one set of answers to these questions; in a more empirical and historically grounded work, John MacKenzie has another. As an historian of museums, I find MacKenzie's approach more compelling, and believe that the contributors to Cuno's book would benefit from more historical situating of their institutions and disciplines.

MacKenzie is well-known for his work on the culture of Empire in Britain around 1900; in this book he looks instead at the museums *in* the Empire. He investigates how the essentially European phenomenon of the museum played out in colonised lands, and how the new museums conceptualised and developed imperial, national and local forms of identity, whether exclusive or inclusive. He looks at a selection roughly in order of foundation, beginning with Canadian museums and covering South Africa, Australia, New Zealand; finishing with Indian and Singaporean museums. He starts from the conviction that museums were a way of knowing that was particularly characteristic of the 19th century and the modern, as worldwide infrastructures in transport and communications opened up the world to be known. Those infrastructures, of course, both enabled and were created by the British Empire. The museum, therefore, 'symbolised the networks, the support systems, and the skewing of administrative and legal provisions in the direction of the enthusiasms of the dominant people' (p. 4).

However, MacKenzie recognises that museums were not and could not be simply an imposition by the dominant people on the territory. Rather, museums created a new encounter between different constituencies. Of course, this encounter was not equal, but this is not to say that people of different cultures did not interact with each other in museums. This is particularly clear in the museums where a number of ethnicities formed the potential audience, such as in the Raffles Museum and Library in Singapore, covered in chapter ten. As MacKenzie says, 'the themes of rapacity and of respect, of authoritarian dictation and of cultural dialogue, are worked out in this book' (p. 5). Some of the rapacity he uncovers is pretty grim, and certainly undermines the argument put forward by some of Cuno's contributors that museums are universally and transcendently a force for good. Museums do not seem to be a force *for* anything; they are institutions which can be used in a number of ways at different times, and MacKenzie demonstrates this forcefully through the scope of the book, which is deliberately comparative across a number of barely-studied institutions.

Museums and Empire wears its theory lightly; there is a good deal of emphasis on the messy details of each locality, and a reluctance to build a model of colonial museum formation. In the conclusion he does suggest a number of loose phases that museums tended to go through, but it is equally clear that rhetoric was particularly far removed from reality in these museums. They all, to a greater or lesser extent, were at the mercy of personalities and funding crises. While one would not wish to see museum history reduced to personalities, in these fledgling institutions with very weak structures, individuals could exert a disproportionate influence. Equally, colonial governments with very tight budgets treated museums as optional extras, so that funding varied wildly from year to year. The phases, then, characterised by MacKenzie as proto-foundation, pioneering, transitional, pre-modern and modern, are not sharply delineated or temporally fixed, and could be seen more as a number of key elements. They do draw attention to the way that many of the museums started out as a transplant of bourgeois society in Britain, as offshoots of learned societies; and then took up the twin rationales of economic usefulness and social improvement to underpin their claim on state finances. Subsequently there is an interesting shift from natural history to ethnography, and to audience engagement. Overall, it seems that while most museums begin by aiming at a version of the 'universal' museum along the lines of the British Museum, they come to see their mission as reflecting the new national identity of the colony. Partly this is because of the greed and unscrupulousness of those universal museums: in several cases colonial museums are driven to collect local ethnography because it seems that wealthy American museums and collectors in particular will carry off the whole lot.

From this empirically-grounded study, therefore, MacKenzie concludes that the messages of these museums were ‘ambiguously dynamic’ (p. 6). This recognition that museums were not and could not be purveyors of a single, coherent message which they effectively transmitted to the visitors, is significant: museum history has moved on from claims that the institutions were ideological instruments which physically inculcated certain behaviours and knowledge; ‘technologies of progress’ in Bennett’s phrase.⁽¹⁾

MacKenzie’s book is therefore a particularly useful addition to the corpus on museums and Empire, providing an alternative perspective to that of most work hitherto. The very removal of material from imperial territories to represent Empire in Britain set up tensions in the colonies. The effect of contributing exhibits to international exhibitions was also transformative for fledgling colonial museums. This enables us to see afresh the representations of such colonies in museums and exhibitions; while the colonies were represented in the metropole by a set of objects and discourses, there was a great deal more going on ‘back home’.

Cuno’s book originated in a conference titled ‘Museums and the Collecting of Antiquities: Past, Present and Future’, held in 2006. Of the nine essays included, three are quite close versions of papers presented, four are versions of essays published elsewhere, and two are new, commissioned works. There is a certain unevenness of tone as a result, though there have clearly been authorial and editorial efforts to make it all hang together. The essays all engage with the idea that objects, particularly antiquities and ethnographic material, have a status as knowledge-producing which in effect lifts them above the ordinary; they deserve to be seen, studied, communed with by as large a proportion of humanity as possible. Therefore, the claims to exclusive ownership put forward by modern nations, and, apparently, archaeologists, are to be resisted.

The book is arranged in three sections. The first section argues essentially that museums are a universal good, particularly encyclopaedic museums such as the British Museum. It should be pointed out that two of the three authors in this section are themselves directors of such museums, and therefore hardly unbiased. Neil MacGregor’s essay gives an historical justification for the British Museum, as an institutions founded ‘for everybody, for the whole world’ (p. 39), which is somewhat partial and tendentious. Enlightenment ideals were not as inclusive as he suggests, and museums such as his were founded in a particular historical moment which enshrined power differentials that a relatively large but arguably unfocused collection could not mitigate, and may even have reinforced. He goes on to argue that the ‘hideous’ acquisition of the Benin bronzes had the beneficial side effect of destroying Western stereotypes and racial hierarchies, which is surely overstating the case by some margin.⁽²⁾

The final essay in this section, and one of the best in the book, is by Kwame Anthony Appiah, who does not act as an apologist for museums. His is almost the only essay which gives any sign of understanding those who argue against the appropriation of objects by Western museums, and who does not belittle them. At the same time, he acknowledges the complex economic and political processes that have brought us to this position. He comments, ‘The problem for Mali is not that it doesn’t have enough Malian art. The problem is that it doesn’t have enough money’ (p. 78). This is a compelling statement of the problem facing developing countries seeking some sort of cultural heritage. Appiah would enlist the market to sort out the problem, by licensing and taxing excavations and exports; but one can’t help suspecting that this would not be an adequate solution to Mali’s money problems, and instead would accelerate the stripping of the country’s historical artefacts.

The second section is devoted to what appears to be an ongoing argument between museums and archaeologists, of which I have to say I was unaware. The argument focuses on the problem of thefts from archaeological sites, and of measures to deal with them. Authors argue here that refusing to acquire, publish, or even talk about unprovenanced objects is an over-reaction, and a pointless restriction on academic freedom, which seems a tenable argument; and that archaeological excavation is not that important anyway, which does not. It is a little disconcerting getting just one side of the argument, and one hesitates to judge without hearing the archaeologists' response. What can be said, though, is that the tone of the debate is rancorous to say the least. Sir John Boardman asserts, speaking of archaeology, that

my own observation of a profession to which I have belonged for over half a century ... has not led me to any great admiration for some of its procedures and motivations. Indeed I am not sure that I have encountered any scholarly group so prone to arrogance, and I know that this is a view fairly widely shared in the academic community. ... [S]ome archaeologists are not the best people to make dispassionate judgements about relics of antiquity' (p. 108).

Now, this firstly raises the question of who *are* the best people to make dispassionate judgements about relics (why, museum curators of course!), and secondly leads to the question, what if we substitute 'museum curators' for 'archaeologists' throughout? It does not advance the debate, to say the very least. Clearly, no academic or professional group is wholly 'on the side of the angels', but equally clearly, heaping blame solely on one group is counter-productive. One of Sir John's chief accusations against archaeology is that it fails to disseminate knowledge about antiquities, by not publishing excavation reports; therefore objects should be removed to museums where they can be publicly seen. However, museums are not necessarily the paragons he suggests when it comes to publicising objects: one estimate suggests museums rarely display more than 50% of their objects and may often display less than 25%.[\(3\)](#)

The third section focuses on the equally vexed and probably better known problem of cultural property, and the claims of often relatively new nations to hang on to it, through export bans, or even get it back, via restitution claims. Two of the essays here, by Brown and Gillman, are thoughtful, exploratory, and non-judgemental, but the final one, by Merryman, while proposing a 'straightforward' solution to problems of cultural property, seems to oversimplify and replace one dogma with another. Merryman proposes that an 'object-oriented' approach to disputes over cultural property would ask, in order of importance, what would best serve the preservation of the object, what would best enable the truth to be known about the object, and what would enable optimal access for scholars and the public to the object. It is not clear why these three areas are prioritised as they are, nor what 'truth' might entail, how the competing claims of scholars and the public are to be mediated; nor, indeed, who is to arbitrate in applying this approach to disputes. It seems entirely possible that both opposing parties might believe that their retention or acquisition of an object would best serve the interests of preservation, truth and access. Additionally, in the emphasis on preservation, though Merryman suggests in different circumstances it may be served by retention or removal of objects, there is something of that argument that 'they' cannot possibly look after anything as well as 'we' can, they are just too poor/feckless/useless scholars.[\(4\)](#)

In many ways Merryman's article encapsulates the approach of the book as a whole, both in its fondness for transcendental absolutes ('the truth') and in its lack of interest in interrogating categories which are frequently used, such as 'source nations' and 'market nations'. While source nations can include almost any, the fact that 'market nations' only comprise a very small proportion of all countries is never really made explicit or discussed. This, to me, is the fundamental argument against seeing museums as universal Enlightenment institutions dedicated to the benefit of all humanity – they are self-evidently institutions implicated in and enmeshed in a whole series of power relations, expressive of global economics and geopolitical systems, which benefit some nations at the expense of others. This is not to say that curators do not have the highest motivations (though from the evidence of this volume 'museum chauvinism' seems fairly widespread, as one might perhaps expect), but that museums can never transcend their specific, historically

produced, setting, and can never be innocent autonomous actors. Foucault argued that knowledge is power, and whatever we think of Foucault, we can no longer be naive about what knowing things may entail. MacKenzie's book, by uncovering the details of the historical process whereby museums came into being, is able to chart how museums were used, what sort of knowledge they produced, why and with what effects, giving a view of museums as institutions neither good nor evil, merely products of their time. They are not inherently superior or inferior to archaeology, they hold their objects for specific and historically variable reasons, and it is hard to argue that they have ever been apart from the workings of power. The future for museums must surely lie in understanding and acknowledging their historical embeddedness, and working through it. MacKenzie does in fact take some of his museum histories up to the present day, though this is of necessity quite sketchy; the most successful museums appear to be those who do not hide their past under a rhetoric of transcendent universality.

Notes

1. Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, (London, 1995), section III.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. MacGregor has made the argument for the British Museum as a 'universal' museum before: it is well refuted in Mark O'Neill, 'Enlightenment museums: universal or merely global?', *Museum and Society*, 2 (2004), 190–202.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Bruno Frey, *Arts and Economics: Analysis and Cultural Policy*, (Berlin and New York, 2003), chapter 3.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. For an example of this type of argument, see Dorothy King, 'Elgin Marbles: fact or fiction?' *The Guardian*, 21 July 2004, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2004/jul/21/highereducation.parthenon> [3] [accessed 10 November 2009].[Back to \(4\)](#)

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