

Museums and Biographies: Stories, Objects, Identities

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Slowly but surely the history presented in museums is coming to the attention of academic historians. However, the relationship between museums, memory and history remains complex. In selecting what to collect, museums seek to define what is or is not history. In preserving their collections in perpetuity they act as a permanent, if selective, memory store. In the way they display and interpret that material evidence, they construct and transmit meanings. In contemporary museum display, there is an on-going conflict between the construction of meanings that support an authorised collective memory, frequently linked to a linear narrative of progress, and an ambition to act as places of pluralism and inclusion. Furthermore, visitors to museums are not passive recipients. Rather, in the process of engaging with the collections and associated interpretive material on display, visitors add new content to their existing knowledge and understanding, and construct their own meanings. History is thus selected, constructed and transmitted by museums and then, in the process of being experienced by visitors, it is transformed into ‘something else – their own understanding of the past, a type of ‘historical sense’ independent of the professional historian’s ideal ...’.(1) For the academic historian new to the debate on what makes history in museums, the variety of content, particularly in the latter half of this edited volume, gives some sense of the complexity of the subject. There is much of interest that can also be garnered from the first part, not least in considering how museums *and* their collections came into being.

The book weighs in at two pounds four ounces, but is heavyweight also in its content, ‘... the many finely articulated and challenging contributions to this rich collection of observations on museums and biography’, as Preziosi describes them in his endpiece (p. 321). It is based on a conference of the same title, held in 2009 under the auspices of the Museums and Galleries History Group, itself founded in 2002 ‘to promote the

study of the history and theory of museums and galleries' (www.mghg.org [2]). The website states that the Group 'acts as a forum for considerations of the place of museum history within academic discourse and its importance for current museum practice'. This dual ambition is evident throughout much of the 325 pages of text of the book, consisting of an introduction and endpiece, and 21 chapters positioned under six sections as a reflection of the breadth of approaches taken, and supported by 51 illustrations.

In her introduction the editor, Kate Hill, sets the challenge: '... to consider how biography in and of the museum can be used to become more reflexive about the 19th-century inheritance [the 19th-century museum's concern to develop an objective, systematic representation of the world as knowable by the Western subject], and to develop new ways of knowing' – no mean feat if achieved. The central structure of the book is defined by its six sections. 'Individual biography and museum history' 'investigates the extent to which individuals have been identified with particular museums, and have even "become" their museum in some ways'. 'Problematizing individuals' biographies' '... takes issue with the extent to which simple and discrete life stories of individual selves can explain museums and their histories'. 'Institutional biographies' '... aims to examine the extent to which the institution of the museum itself has a biography'. 'Object biographies' '... brings together a number of essays which are interested in using the object biography approach to understand museums more fully'. 'Museums as biography' '... assesses the ways in which museums can produce biographical narratives'. Finally, 'Museums as autobiography' '... interrogates the ways in which museums can enable people to tell their own lives in different ways and for different groupings'.

The three chapters in the first section examine benefactors to the Cabinet des médailles et antiques in Paris, and the impact of two curators on their institutions – Hultén at Sweden's Museum of Modern Art and Pavière at the Harris Museum and Art Gallery, Preston. What surprised me about much of Gray's account of Pavière's work in Preston was how contemporary many of his ambitions were, not least for the museum to play an active role in the cultural life of Lancashire and for the visitor to be the central focus of the museum. By contrast, Burch's chapter on Hultén was undoubtedly the most troubling of the book, as he explored '... the pervasive influence that certain individuals are able to exert over public collections – both during their lifetime and after' (p. 29). The lesson Burch drew from his account is one we should all note: '... the paramount necessity of maintaining a critical eye on museums and the people and organisations that shape them' (p. 42).

In the section on 'Problematizing individuals' biographies', it falls to Anne Whitelaw to challenge the whole premise of the book: 'In the specific case of the museum, biography's focus on individuals risks isolating particular figures from the larger institutional structures that shape their activities, and the linear character of its narrative does not account for the complexity of the institution itself, particularly as it pertains to the relations between individuals and the roles they inhabit' (p. 76). She illustrates this in her chapter on 'Women, museums and the problem of biography' in speaking of the privileging of those in leadership roles, '... at the expense of uncovering the anonymous, often collective labour of other women working in museums' (p. 80). Her concluding remark is: 'Given the complexity of the institution and the imbrications of its practices with the people – both known and unknown – who contribute to their realisation, biography is inadequate to the task' (p. 85).

By contrast, Sandino, in researching the professional lives of Victoria and Albert Museum curators, is able to argue strongly in favour of the biographical approach, placing the curators within the realms of collective memory, wonderfully borrowing from Nora to propose the community of long-term curators as a *lieu de mémoire*: '... a community that bears comparison with any village made up of a mixture of personalities, competencies, gossip, surveillance, alliances and disagreements but bound by a commitment to a particular sense of place' (p. 91). Thus, just as we see museum collections as the cultural memory of humankind, if a selective one, so she sees the curators as an 'active repository of memory' (p. 91), based on their lifelong interaction with those very collections. Five chapters explore aspects of 'Institutional biographies' – a very contemporary issue, given the unprecedented wave of new museum developments that took place in the late 1990s and 2000s. Janes, quoted in the first chapter in the section, has been particularly critical of this:

Although often likened to a renaissance, this architectural boom doesn't merit this praise, lacking as it commonly does any vigorous intellectual or creative resurgence within the museum itself.⁽²⁾

MacLeod, author of the first chapter in the section, is right to state that we need to establish what we have learned from this phase, not least because 'The sole focus on the architect and architectural style neglects any consideration of the needs of multiple users of the museum and promotes the desire among patrons and funders for a signature building by a named architect' (p. 106) – nothing new there then. Comparing this to past experiences is one approach. Her example is the prolonged gestation period of the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool.

The other chapters see Miller explore the complex history of Schinkel's museums in Berlin, Apt examine the impact of the use of incorporation in the establishment of non-profit museums in the USA, Rees Leahy evaluate a recent spate of attempts to re-create past exhibitions and Whitehead discuss the 'restoration' of the Barry Rooms in the National Gallery in London, in the 1980s. With the National Gallery, Whitehead begins with the, as he puts it, very basic point that 'museum buildings represent attitudes to knowledge specific to the cultures which give rise to them' (p. 157). So he shows how the original Victorian Barry rooms were later modernised as neutral spaces, in a 'reaction against old-fashioned ways of looking at, understanding and experiencing art' (p. 158), but there was then a significant about face in the 1980s and 1990s, resulting in a series of costly restoration projects nationally, reflecting new developments in museum studies and art history. Both Whitehead and Rees Leahy highlight the basic problem however, '... the fallacy of authenticity at play' (p. 166). Visitors do not see the displays as they would originally have been. The dilemma, as Whitehead puts it, is that '... museums present themselves on the one hand as historical institutions which prize their own history... and, on the other, as constant re-inventors of themselves ...' (p. 167).

'Object biographies' is a very tight, thought-provoking section of four chapters, each exploring a different aspect of what used to be called ethnographic collections. We see the complex ways in which Chinese objects have been viewed and classified by the West over the last 150 years; the journey of a ritual red feather coat from 17th-century Brazil via the Netherlands to the Danish National Museum; the private development of a collection of Pacific artefacts; and the uncertainty felt by Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Ethnography at its rediscovery of a collection of sculptures of Indian 'types', made in the 1930s, and accessioned into its collections in 1948 and 1951. The underpinning concept for the section relates theory directly to practice: the ability to present these objects in a way that will stimulate visitors to think more critically about them, and about the issues that underpin them.

In Tythacott's account of the Buddhist bronzes held by Liverpool Museum, we see an early wrestling over 19th-century racial hierarchies that placed the Western male at their summit – how to distinguish between Asia's 'highly cultivated' ⁽³⁾ races that were not a part of ethnology and the 'aboriginal races' that were – placing Chinese figures in a 'position somewhere between the 'civilised' white and the 'uncivilised black races' of the world' (p. 176). In Françaço's chapter on the red feather coat, we discover that, from feather adornments initially being produced for religious and war rituals, local populations in Brazil had begun from early in the colonial encounter to manufacture them for exchange with European colonisers and travellers. The sculptured heads of Indian 'types' were linked to a belief in the interconnectedness of physical characteristics and physiological or mental capacities. In Elliott's discussion, he notes that 'it is the disturbing connotations of colonial oppression, racial prejudice and the objectification of individuals into representatives of primitive tribes or other anthropological categories that has influenced the ambivalent reception of Milward's sculptures by postcolonial museum curators and academics' (p. 222).

For Françaço, speaking of the red feather coat, 'By simply looking at these items, one is confronted with the complexities of the colonial encounter that took place between Brazil and the Netherlands in the mid-17th century' (p. 196). Elliott, who displayed the Indian 'types' in 2009-10, believed their presence 'created a

space to reflect upon more difficult and contentious periods in the history of the museum and of anthropology ...' (p. 226). The ability of museums to exhibit and encourage meaningful reflection on difficult issues is a major contemporary issue, requiring some visitor research to establish impact in both these cases.

'Museums as biography' are a relatively common phenomenon: 'Museums which are focused on a single personality are a popular sub-type of the museum genre, with over 170 in the UK alone, of which the birthplace museum is the best-known type' (p. 247). As the author of this chapter, Sophie Forgan, points out, next in popularity come artists and national heroes, while those on women or scientists form a tiny minority. Forgan briefly discusses the origins of three of the latter: Isaac Newton's birthplace at Woolsthorpe; Charles Darwin's Home at Down House in Kent; and the house in London where Sigmund Freud lived from 1938 to his death in 1939, 20 Maresfield Gardens in West Hampstead. She emphasises the importance of the passionate individual believer in the founding of such personality museums. Her focus is on what such museums can achieve and how this is done: '... presentation has to focus on the man (or woman) first and foremost; and the site, the house, its contents are seen as the key to unlocking personality. The purpose is threefold: to humanise the subject and create a sense of the person, to allow key objects to stand in for a long and complex 'whole life', and finally to provide models for inspiration and emulation ... The museum, like the best biography, has to attempt to re-integrate the personal and the scientific life, but in a very different genre' (p. 257). She is also very aware of the need to meet visitor needs: 'Personality museums have the problem of maintaining that indefinable quality called 'atmosphere', whilst at the same time attempting to diversify the visitor experience ... a sort of individualised consumption by the tourist' (p. 259–60). This is the potentially depressing part of her story – when theory meets practice – but I feel she has over-egged it a little. To make this case would require a detailed analysis of the motivations and expectations of actual visitors to personality museums.

Booth, in her chapter in this section, goes a stage further than Forgan in her discussion of the personality represented, quoting from Parker (4) that '... museum professionals should admit that "we are not simply in the business of preserving artifacts; we are also in the business of calling up ghosts" ... The biographical house museum is a house haunted in a way that echoes the readers' response to written lives in non-fiction as well as fiction' (p. 231–2). She sees such houses as *lieux des memoires*, but recognises how sanitised they can become. Yet the house and the objects in it – not least, for the writer, the scene of creativity with the study, desk, chair and pen – provide a public performance of the personality's life. Like Forgan, she recognises that the house experience will be audience driven: 'the audience constructs the house by re-reading it as inhabited'.

Coming to the final section, the concept of the 'Museum as autobiography' is at the heart of current thinking in history museums. It is part of an on-going response to the rise of the new social history in the 1960s and 1970s, and the influence of the writings of Bourdieu (5), leading to a call for the 'democratisation' of mainstream museums through the representation of multiple perspectives, social and cultural diversity, and reaching out to new communities. Today it reflects the replacement of the single, authoritative version of the past with a multivocal alternative. We see many museums working with those previously silenced, spoken for or marginalised to reclaim ownership of their own and their communities' pasts. In essence, it is about the democratisation of the past and the role museums can play in this. The trouble is that democratised history is messy in comparison with the more authoritative work of academic historians. How do you ensure the quality of the history presented?

The papers by Steffi de Jong and Elizabeth Crooke add to the debate. De Jong, exploring the incorporation of individual video histories into museum display, is excellent in her discussion of both the practical problems and the basic issue that the museum still retains authority in defining the interviewing process, in the selection of episodes from the life-story and the loss of individual identity as stories are used to illustrate themes chosen by the museum. By way of contrast, Crooke explores how communities research and tell their own stories as 'contributions to community autobiography' (p. 309). The community becomes its own author and censor. Crooke recognises the importance of this switch: 'The expectation of what history is, with whom it is concerned, the sources it draws upon and who should be its author has dramatically changed' (p.

311) – with academics and curators of recent history now ‘indebted to the people on the ground’ (p. 312). Crooke also recognises that communities will have different understandings and uses of the past than professional historians and will self-censor material that does not fit into the story they want to tell. Authority, identity and selectivity are all exposed in these two chapters and I would have relished more on each of these issues, and on the sheer messiness of democratic history.

So, does my account suggest the book is a useful collection of disparate accounts relating to aspects of museum history and practice or is the whole greater than the sum of the parts? As a practitioner who specialises in the development of content for museum exhibitions, I must focus on relevance to current museum practice. As the comments above make clear, the final two sections relate directly to practice while that on ‘Object biographies’ cries out for new, participative and reflective means of display that can draw out historical issues in ways that will make a meaningful difference to the attitudes of visitors. However, the chapters as a whole raise a more profound issue. In the ‘age of participation’ (6) in which we now live, museum users are no longer willing to be passive recipients of received wisdom, but are becoming more critical and challenging, and expect both to be able to contribute and to have their contributions valued. They effectively want a sense of ownership of what are public institutions, and museums must respond to this by becoming more transparent in all aspects of their activities, and more welcoming of user participation. The issue of transparency towards their users is present, if not always noted, in all of the essays in this volume. It is an issue that can only become more important.

Notes

1. S. Watson, ‘Myth, memory and the senses in the Churchill Museum’, in *Museum Materialities: Objects, Engagements, Interpretation*, ed. Sandra H. Dudley (Oxford, 2010) pp. 204–23, p. 205, quoted in G. Black, ‘Museums, memory and history’, *Cultural and Social History*, 8, 3 (2011), 415–27, 415.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. R. R. Janes, *Museums in a Troubled World* (London, 2009), p.108.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. C. Gatty, *Catalogue of the Mayer Museum II: Prehistoric Antiquities and Ethnography*, (London, 1982).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. D. Parker, ‘Literary museums: present opportunities’, in *Literary Memorial Museums*, ed. W. Bartel and M. Kunze, M. (Frankfurt & Berlin, 1986), pp. 25–9.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel with Dominique Schnapper, *The Love of Art: European Art Museums and their Public*, trans. Caroline Beattie and Nick Merriman (Stanford, CA, 1969 (1990 ed.)).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. S. McNealy, *Oracle Open World Keynote Speech*, 20 September 2005 <reported in press release at http://news.cnet.com/2300-1010_3-5875466.html [3]> [accessed 12 December 2012].[Back to \(6\)](#)

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