

## Making Museum Histories

**Review Number:**

536

**Publish date:**

Saturday, 1 July, 2006

**Author:**

Kate Hill

**ISBN:**

0754604322

**Date of Publication:**

2005

**Price:**

£45.00

**Publisher:**

Ashgate

**Place of Publication:**

Aldershot

**Author:**

Christopher Whitehead

**ISBN:**

0754632369

**Date of Publication:**

2005

**Price:**

£50.00

**Publisher:**

Ashgate

**Place of Publication:**

Aldershot

**Reviewer:**

Helen Rees Leahy

The authors of these two volumes are both young historians whose first books each stake a claim to a portion of the increasingly crowded field of museum studies in general, and of museum history in particular. Both are concerned with the development of museums during the second half of the nineteenth century, although each has selected a very different lens through which to survey the scene. Christopher Whitehead applies a metaphorical magnifying glass to a close study of the National Gallery, London between 1850 and 1876, while Kate Hill applies a telescope to the wide and varied panorama of British municipal museums from 1850 to 1914. Aware of the jostling for position that characterises every young discipline (and indeed, scholar) in the process of its maturation, each is keen to stress that they are charting new territory in museum studies, even if their respective subjects may appear superficially familiar at first. Hill argues that hers is the first systematic study of the municipalisation of museums following the enabling legislation of the mid-nineteenth century that allowed (but did not require) town halls to devote a small proportion of the rates to their establishment. Meanwhile, Whitehead stresses that, although some aspects of the National Gallery

(such as the collecting practices of its first Director, Charles Eastlake, between 1855 and 1865) are very well known, his analysis of the intersection of architecture and display during a period of institutional transformation breaks new ground. Both authors also reflect on the fact that during the past twenty years the critical literature on museums has grown exponentially, partly reflecting the rapid expansion of museum studies in the Anglophone world, and especially in Britain where there are now estimated to be more than fifty MA programmes in the discipline. Moreover, an interest in museums is not confined to academic museologists or to museum professionals: the museum is now a topic of interdisciplinary scrutiny by, among others, cultural historians, sociologists, anthropologists and archaeologists. It adds up to what we might call a 'museological turn' if only, to borrow from Peter Burke, 'there had not been so many turns already that [we] may be in danger of becoming dizzy'. (1 [3])

In their respective introductions, Whitehead and Hill each reflect on the development of different approaches to museum history since the 1970s in relation to their own projects. For example, Whitehead acknowledges his own indebtedness to empirical accounts of institutional biography, sometimes commissioned by museums themselves to mark a significant anniversary or the building of new wing (p. xiii). Examples include Frances Spalding's history of the Tate Gallery published in 1998 and David Wilson's equivalent account of the British Museum in 2002. (2 [4]) Such histories are typically chronological rather than thematic, consensual rather than controversial, and lack an overarching theorisation through which to analyse the actions of staff, donors and trustees. By contrast, the theoretical influences of Foucault and Bourdieu are palpable in studies of nineteenth century museums by, say, Douglas Crimp, Carol Duncan, Tony Bennett and Nick Prior. (3 [5]) And it is hardly an exaggeration to say that such theorised approaches have been in the ascendant for the past decade, and the deconstruction of the museum's operation in terms of a Foucauldian nexus of space/knowledge/power relations is now commonplace.

Both Hill and Whitehead are careful to position their projects in relation to what they perceive as a new theoretical orthodoxy whose value they each acknowledge and also, to different degrees, resist. Whitehead expresses concern that a single theoretical predominance can 'skew' a close historical reading and can deflect the historian's attention from the smallest – and sometimes the most illuminating – evidence (p. xvii). His objective is to write a museum history that is contextual and critical, but is driven and shaped by the wealth of archival sources that he musters, rather than by a preset theoretical position. On the other hand, Hill mobilises much of her material in support of the contention that 'behavioural and recreational reform of the working class was the major aim of the municipal museum' (p. 143). Although one of the most valuable aspects of her study is the demonstration that institutional objectives were inconsistent, variable and unstable across the period 1850 to 1914, she also tries to make critical sense of this complexity. However, despite her best efforts to impose some order on the scene that she surveys, Hill is too conscientious a historian to allow theory to impose a spurious order on overwhelming evidence of diversity, contradiction and change.

Instead, she draws on a range of theoretical positions to introduce successive thematic chapters: for example, she deploys Hillier's and Hanson's space syntax analysis in a chapter on 'Decoding the displays and layout' and Susan Pearce's theory of collecting in one entitled 'Reading the objects'. (4 [6]) Methodologically, this is a little clumsy and a telltale sign of the book's origins as a PhD. Her theoretical reflections tend to reach rather an abrupt halt and are the least useful dimension of a project whose real strength lies in its revelation of the impossibility of the task Hill has set herself. For she conclusively demonstrates that there was no single model, no coherent plan and really only a very hazy pattern of museum municipalisation in the second half of the nineteenth century. And what is often referred to as a boom period for museums was, in fact, characterised by official ambivalence and local contingencies, such the chance to take over a struggling Lit and Phil Society (Leicester, Sheffield and Preston) or the philanthropy of a wealthy individual (William Brown in Liverpool and Edmund Harris in Preston). The resulting map of municipal museums was scattered and varied, in terms of institutional rationale, ambition and scale, embracing the industrial towns and cities of the midlands and north of England, ports, seaside resorts and market towns. In turn, Hill's study ranges across disparate institutions in (primarily) Leicester, Liverpool, Birmingham, Hull, Sheffield and Preston. Invariably she finds herself pointing to divergences and contrasts between them, as the city fathers of each of these towns and cities pursued singular and opportunistic strategies that reflected local circumstances.

The picture that emerges from Hill's study is, inevitably, patchy given the parameters of her project: by focusing on municipal museums (in all their diversity), she necessarily excludes independent, associative and university museums, unless and until they become municipalised. Similarly, her explicit exclusion of art galleries (for understandable reasons of space) means that neither Manchester City Art Gallery nor the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool are present on these pages, although others (such as the Harris Museum and Art Gallery, Preston and Mappin Art Gallery, Sheffield) are. However, a lack of material is certainly not a weakness of this study: on the contrary, at times both author and reader struggle to maintain the thread that runs through this wide-ranging account. Hill's decision to organise her material thematically (rather than by institutions or places) has the virtue of drawing attention to the shared experiences of, for example, visitors across the country, but it also has the concomitant disadvantage of dropping the stitches that would help us to connect the experiences of visitors in, say, Leicester or Liverpool to their specific encounter with the collections, buildings and displays in those places. Of course, there is a difficulty regarding sources: archival evidence is not consistent across institutions and in particular, the paucity of first-hand information regarding visitors' experiences is familiar all museum historians. For example, Hill mines a rich seam of material relating to visitors to the Mappin Art Gallery, Sheffield, but the case for its extrapolation to other institutions is moot and, wisely, Hill does not attempt to make it. Instead, she locates the history and experience of her municipal museums within their wider civic and socio-cultural contexts: if her conclusions are rather general, they open up the field for further study and analysis.

Reading Whitehead's volume on the National Gallery has the opposite effect: by the end of it, one wonders if there is anything left to say about the history of the Gallery between its reconstitution in 1855 to the opening of a new suite of rooms (the Barry Rooms) in 1876. The two events neatly enclose a period of unprecedented (and subsequently unequalled) debate about, and experimentation within, the Gallery, which (according to Whitehead) contributed to the significant development and consolidation of new practices of museology, display and connoisseurship. In a sense, the National Gallery that we know today originates from this period, rather than from its foundation in 1824, which was followed by three decades of notoriously haphazard administration and ad hoc collecting. Of course, there are (deliberate) exclusions in Whitehead's account: notably, the choices and processes of acquisition, as opposed to the subsequent deployment of the pictures within the Gallery. However, the key decade of Eastlake's reforming directorship, from 1855 to 1865, has been exhaustively examined by David Robertson and more recently by Charlotte Klonk, and the current work provides a valuable counterpoint to these studies by turning our attention to both the minutiae and the wider contexts of museum architecture and design at this time.

Central to Whitehead's project is the resurrection and close examination of a wealth of archival sources through which the debates around and practices of the National Gallery were constructed. From these materials, he reconstructs the disputatious history concerning, first, the National Gallery site (should the

Gallery be relocated to a less noisome part of London?) and then the subsequent expansion and reorganisation of the Wilkins building in Trafalgar Square, culminating in the opening of the Barry Rooms in 1876. It all amounts to a relentless (and compelling) confirmation of the Victorian passion for enquiries, proceedings, reports, minutes, proposals, articles, designs, protests and counter-statements, and evidently the National Gallery was a burning topic for many influential parliamentarians, critics, artists, architects and sundry others who thought that they knew best. A useful by-product of Whitehead's scholarship is the light that it casts on the formation of public opinion in mid-nineteenth century London through the confluence of official intervention, private initiative and press commentary.

Whitehead's work also shows that close scrutiny of one institution demands comparison with others, and his archival sources frequently lead him to the South Kensington Museum (later the Victoria & Albert Museum) whose very different exhibitionary regime redefined the remit and nature of the National Gallery in the mid-nineteenth century and, in many ways, functioned as its museological 'other'. To that extent, his book exceeds the template of the traditional institutional monograph by locating the history of the National Gallery within wider national debates concerning the public management and promotion of visual art. It was an era of energetic, opinionated and voluble men – including Charles Eastlake, Henry Cole, John Ruskin, Richard Redgrave and J. C. Robinson – all of whose arguments, struggles and disputes populate this book. Of course, the National Gallery was – and is – an exceptionally powerful institution at the heart of the cultural state: the stakes were high for all those involved in its administration and development during this volatile period. It all makes Prince Charles's 1984 comment that the then proposed extension to the National Gallery was like a 'monstrous carbuncle on the face of a much-loved and elegant friend' seem tame by comparison, although few of Whitehead's protagonists would have concurred with Charles's admiration for Wilkins' building. Notably absent from Whitehead's account are references to the nation beyond London: this is almost exclusively a narrative of metropolitan culture, and, it seems, a world away from Hill's civic worthies and provincial benefactors

Finally, some aspects of the books themselves raise wider issues about the condition of museum studies. Both of these volumes are published by Ashgate Publishing, but each has been issued within different series, itself an indication of the mobility of museum studies across the field of the humanities: Whitehead's book is a contribution to 'Perspectives on Collecting' while Hill's forms part of the 'Historical Urban Studies' series. However, Whitehead is better served by inclusion of 45 black and white illustrations (mainly architectural plans and designs) that form an essential dialogue with, and amplification of, his text. By contrast, Hill's book is unillustrated except for her chapter on design and layout, leaving the reader to speculate as to what the museums' objects or their visitors might have looked like: this is very much the tradition of urban, as opposed to art, history. Finally, neither author is well served by the titles of their respective studies, which are both so generalised that they give little indication of what each is actually about. Perhaps the publisher felt that the combination of the words 'municipal' and 'museum' would be fatal to sales, but that (and not the wider arena of 'public museums') is actually what Hill's book is about. The title of Whitehead's book shows a similar lack of nerve: why exaggerate both the temporal and geographical scope of a book whose strength is its focus, and not its breadth?

## Notes

1. Peter Burke, *What is Cultural History?* (Cambridge, 2004), p. 71. [Back to \(1\)](#) [7]
2. Frances Spalding, *The Tate: a History* (1998); David Wilson, *The British Museum: A History* (2002). [Back to \(2\)](#) [8]
3. Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995); Carol Duncan, *Civilising Rituals* (1995); Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum* (1995) and *Pasts Beyond Memory* (2005); Nick Prior *Museums and Modernity: Art Galleries and the Making of Modern Culture* (Oxford, 2002). [Back to \(3\)](#) [9]
4. Bill Hillier and Julienne Hanson, *The Social Logic of Space* (Cambridge, 1984); Susan Pearce, *Interpreting Objects and Collections* (1994). [Back to \(4\)](#) [10]

**Other reviews:**

**Source URL:** <http://history.ac.uk/reviews/review/536a#comment-0>

**Links**

- [1] <http://history.ac.uk/reviews/item/4367>
- [2] <http://history.ac.uk/reviews/item/4368>
- [3] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/../../../../reviews/articles/reesleahy.html#1>
- [4] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/../../../../reviews/articles/reesleahy.html#2>
- [5] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/../../../../reviews/articles/reesleahy.html#3>
- [6] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/../../../../reviews/articles/reesleahy.html#4>
- [7] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/../../../../reviews/articles/reesleahy.html#1t>
- [8] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/../../../../reviews/articles/reesleahy.html#2t>
- [9] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/../../../../reviews/articles/reesleahy.html#3t>
- [10] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/../../../../reviews/articles/reesleahy.html#4t>
- [11] <http://history.ac.uk/reviews>