

Museums: A Visual Anthropology.* Mary Bouquet. New York: Berg. 2012. 256 pp.

Reviewed by Adrian Van Allen

The history of anthropology is bound up with collecting. From the material cultures collected for research and display in the beginnings of the discipline in the 19th century, to the contemporary moment where different voices contest the ownership and meaning of such objects—museum collecting is at the center of the discussion. Mary Bouquet’s clear and comprehensive *Museums: A Visual Anthropology* moves the reader carefully through an array of issues at the intersection of museum studies, material culture studies, and anthropology. Subjects include collecting practices, display strategies, repatriation, the integration of digital technologies, and ethnography as both an object (museums of ethnography), and as a subject (ethnographies of museums). The book deals at its core with globalization and the reproduction of knowledge—how museums shape collective identities and negotiate power relations through collection, exhibition, and repatriation strategies.

Bouquet begins in the Teylers Museum and its website, walking the reader through this Dutch Enlightenment museum and the layers of renovations and expansions that have accrued over the centuries. Bouquet embeds in her visual excavation a comparison of the embodied experience of visiting versus its digital proxy, the website, which “epitomizes current ideas about information, accessibility and customer service in public institutions...” (15). She briefly discusses questions of visibility and invisibility, of shifting modes of display, and of the funding decisions that have shaped the museum over time.

National museums are the focus of Chapter 2, with case studies of the Louvre in Paris and the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. Bouquet questions how these two institutions have reimagined, or “stretched,” their museums in recent years—via the creation of a satellite Louvre museum in Abu Dhabi and by a massive renovation of the Rijksmuseum’s original building complex. Through these projects changing ideas around collections and their various publics emerge, embedded in a larger discussion of “exhibitionary complexes” (cf. Bennett 1995:59).

Chapter 3 turns to the ethnographic museum, detailing its colonial history. Drawing on examples of museums across Europe and Africa, Bouquet examines the role of collecting Others as central to national identity formation and emerging exhibitionary complexes. The technologies of public display were reforming late 18th century Europeans into national citizens as they viewed the exotica of material culture and living or preserved human beings from their colonial holdings.

Museums themselves become the object of inquiry in Chapter 4, which focuses on ethnographies of museums, examining “a number of characteristic museum activities: collecting, exhibition making and public guided tours” (93). The inner workings of the museum are laid out in three case studies, ranging from the details of accumulating a collection, to creating an exhibition at a science museum, to the unexpected interpretations by visitors in two Israeli settler museums.

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The fifth and particularly compelling chapter deals with object display. Expertly analyzing a succession of methods of display and the resulting implications for both the viewing publics and the institution, Bouquet attends to “the principal dynamics that shape the poetics, politics, and practices of display: objectification, modernisms, and renovation” (121). Examples of early 18th to 19th century life groups and inhabited rooms are followed by a series of modernist approaches including the now-ubiquitous white box gallery. Contemporary practices of “renovation” within the museum explore ideas around access: visible storage (connected to online databases of collections), tours through museum spaces under construction, viewing scientists and conservationists at work behind glass, and contact zones (cf. Clifford 1997).

The sixth and final chapter takes up the controversial topic of repatriation, detailing the complicated negotiations for the return of not only objects and human remains, but also of images—all of which represent different forms of indigenous knowledge. During repatriation Bouquet underscores how both museums and source communities potentially benefit from the elicitation and exchange of knowledge during the repatriation process.

The afterword returns us to the Teylers Museum, examining the ‘renovations’ that have been enacted on the space. Bouquet calls into question the museum’s celebratory statements about returning to an ‘authentic’ Enlightenment version of the museum, asking which specific version of history is being reenacted, and for what purpose?

Bouquet’s clear writing provides a valuable guide and sophisticated introduction through important issues in museums, thoughtfully integrating historical trajectories with contemporary questions. The end of each chapter offers concise suggestions for further reading, as well as a list of key concepts and exercises to undertake in museums. A thorough and thought-provoking volume, *Museums: A Visual Anthropology* presents a solid foundation for understanding the museum as a site of knowledge-production in and across cultures, a place that “...combines the new and the old fearlessly in ways that are compelling without being confining. The museum as a public resource base can be a place where vision and understanding are renewed and extended, a place that is attuned to the world outside its walls” (188).

References Cited

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