

Book Review

Laely, Thomas, Marc Meyer, and Raphael Schwere, eds. 2018. *Museum Cooperation between Africa and Europe. A New Field for Museum Studies*. Bielefeld: Transcript; Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 272pp, paperback, £31.44

It is well known that the divisive history of museum work in Africa has left complex and contested legacies for institutions today. The colonial extraction of cultural material has resulted in European museums holding large quantities of African arts and cultural property, while museums in Africa have been subject to both neglect and suspicion by post-colonial governments and communities. In recent years, European and African museums have trialled new ways of working together and with their publics. This is an important area of scholarly attention. While there are similarities between the post-colonial challenges surrounding African museum collections and the more studied examples of museum collaborations in the Americas and Oceania; African and European museums also have a unique history and face different contemporary challenges.

Museum Cooperation between Africa and Europe is an urgently-needed dedicated investigation of collaborative projects being undertaken between European and African museums. The primary focus is on ethnographic museums and most of the cases examined are from the last two decades. 'Cooperation' is taken to mean any collaboration or partnership between African and European institutions, ranging from financial assistance to jointly implemented programmes.

The contributors (all have first-hand experience of the projects they discuss and many are based in African institutions) analyze unfolding relationships between European and African museums. This is (thankfully) not a formulaic 'how-to' guide for cooperative work. Instead, the chapters foreground the post-colonial politics of museum work between Europe and Africa. They take readers through the practical and conceptual stakes of collaboration, showing how the practice of 'cooperation' remains fundamentally bound up with colonial legacies in museums.

The core message is that cooperation between European and African museums is both essential and flawed. Despite a 'collaborative turn' in museum practice since the 1990s, there are few instances of Euro-African museum cooperation that genuinely 'live up to the demands of postcolonial critique.' (p.4) Projects often end up reproducing colonial dynamics through developmental approaches seeking to 'educate' African museum professionals, rather than coproducing new knowledge and practice. Yet, the contributors also stress that collaborative museum work can be genuinely transformative. Despite these issues, it is a powerful mechanism to reflect on and overcome the colonial legacy in museums and to develop new ways of engaging communities. However, this potential only exists if new paradigms and ways of working can be built.

The chapters are divided into four sections, which cover new directions in international cooperation across different aspects of museum work (including curatorship, exhibition development, community engagement and conservation). Part One provides context by looking to the history of museum cooperation between Europe and Africa. An opening chapter by George Abungu details a fraught history of often unsatisfactory museum collaborations and sets the critical tone.

Part Two focuses on museums in Africa, especially on interactions between international networks, national museums and local communities. A major theme is how local knowledge can be enabled or constrained through collaborative work and how bringing community

knowledge into museums enriches and transforms practice. In Nelson Abiti's chapter, we learn how a collaboration between the Uganda National Museum, the Norwegian Directorate for Cultural Heritage and local communities in northern Uganda worked to promote traditional conflict resolution after the devastating Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) conflict. Not only did this respond to community level priorities, it significantly expanded the traditional remit of the museum's work to post-conflict reconciliation. The partnership was enriched by the Norwegian collaboration, who provided not just funding, but also vital comparative experience.

Part three switches attention to African collections in European museums. Jeremy Silvester makes the case that these collections can be used to build dialogue and understanding between different constituencies. He describes the experience of Namibian museum professionals working with Finnish counterparts to increase knowledge about Southern Africa cultural heritage stored abroad. He urges that there is vast potential for activating and reconnecting these collections with creator communities. In Kiprof Lagat's chapter about the 2006 *Hazina* exhibition, in which objects from the British Museum's Africa collection were used in an exhibition at the National Museums of Kenya, we begin to see ways of working with these collections in practice. The success of *Hazina* shows how models of engagement and collaboration can be found, even around the emotive subject of repatriation and global access to collections.

The final set of chapters evaluates attempts at museum cooperation. One of the most interesting case studies is Michaela Oberhofer's account of a conservation and restoration exchange between the Rietberg Museum (Switzerland) and the Palace Museum in Foumban (Cameroun). She describes how the conservation principals clashed in the exchange, between an 'international' model of stabilising the object while leaving some damage visible, and the Palace Museum's criteria to restore aesthetic and ritual value. These different priorities were exposed in the conservation of the throne of King Njoya, the ruling Sultan, which continues to be used in cultural festivals even though this incurs damage to the materials. The occasional incommensurability of these approaches shows the challenges of equitably working across different cultures of preservation. Ultimately, museum cooperation must embrace these apparent contradictions if it is to generate new practice.

The core insights of this book will resonate most closely with those working with (and in) African collections and institutions, but there are general lessons for museums developing relationships with historically excluded communities and in places where grievances and mistrust exist. A welcome effect of the case study approach is foregrounding the role of objects themselves (such as the throne at the Foumban Palace Museum) in generating new practices and ways of thinking within the museum. Contributors also raise important wider questions about what a museum is and how these institutions should best serve society (wherever they are located).

There are some areas where readers may want more. The restitution of African objects from European museums (which received renewed political attention in Europe while this book was in press) is not systematically addressed.¹ Yet, the insights in this volume do chart a range of useful ways forward for working with contested colonial collections across the two continents; an important contribution at a time when the relationship between European and African museums is poised to dramatically evolve.

Note

¹ On 23 November 2018 Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy submitted a report, commissioned by President Macron, on the restitution of African artworks in French museums <http://restitutionreport2018.com>