

Daniel H. Weiss, *Why the Museum Matters*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022, hardback \$26, pp. viii + 224

Why the Museum Matters by Daniel H. Weiss, the president of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, is a fascinating book that sheds light on the challenges and responsibilities that museums and their leaders face, with a particular focus on institutions located in the United States.

The book is organized into three parts. The first part provides a selective history of the art museum, emphasizing key institutions throughout history and how they reflected the culture in which they grew. The second and most extensive section delves into the roles of museums today, while the third part discusses the evolving mission of museums and their role in relation to future generations.

One of the central themes of the book is the inherent challenge between the idea of an encyclopedic art museum – a space strongly committed to education, preservation, and scholarship – and the selective nature of institutions that can only acquire and display a limited number of works. The author identifies four main purposes for encyclopedic art museums today: spaces where audiences can learn about and experience beautiful artefacts; places that shape communities, allowing the development of shared identity and culture; spaces to discuss ideas, including controversial issues that are historically, culturally, or politically challenging; and venues that preserve art for future generations.

While the book briefly touches on the theme of imperialism and related aspects of the history of museums, it falls short in providing in-depth exploration around this topic, which might disappoint readers seeking a deeper understanding of the origin and history of museums in Europe. However, given the book's size and target audience, it is understandable that these themes receive limited attention.

The author effectively mentions major institutions like the Capitoline Museums in Rome, the British Museum in London, and the Louvre in Paris as a transition point to focus primarily on museums in the United States, particularly the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. This shift allows him to draw on his extensive experience leading institutions, and his dedication to education and arts engagement. Weiss also investigates the struggles faced by nonprofit institutions, which heavily rely on the generosity of patrons and their audience. His firsthand knowledge of these challenges enriches the reader's understanding of the complex dynamics involved in running museums and the importance of cultivating strong relationships with supporters.

In the past, museums and the art that they exhibited were governed by strict rules and traditions. Nevertheless, with the evolution of art and its institutions, museums have transformed into spaces that actively engage with the world around them, offering reflections on time and space. These institutions provide us with valuable insights into society and history. Over time, museums and the art that they house have broken free from rigid constraints, refusing to conform to outdated rules and thus embracing continuous progression and reflection.

However, as an encyclopedic art museum can hardly reflect the vast array of our past, this book also struggles to capture the entirety of museum history. Nonetheless, it sheds light on the important role that museums play in society, and it provides valuable insights into the challenges we face as a society.

In my own view, the book's title could have been more specific about its focus on museums in the United States, as this lack of clarity can create greater expectations towards the range of themes that the book can potentially address. This could avoid creating unrealistic expectations among readers, and alienating those who are familiar with state-funded institutions and used to free or subsidized entry.

While reading this book, different readers may have varying interpretations based on their perspective, particularly when the author addresses the issue of cancel culture. Some readers might perceive the author as a white man in a position of power attempting to justify certain actions. It is important to note, however, that others may view the author as someone who genuinely comprehends the challenges museums face, including issues of polarization,

and who has sought solutions that did not aim to please any specific position.

Undeniably, the author demonstrates clear commitment to supporting his staff and acknowledges his obligation to the museum and the public, even during contentious situations. Given the author's emphasis on transparency, it would have been difficult to write a book on the history of museums and their present role in society without addressing some of the controversies they encountered, although certain issues addressed in the book could have been reconsidered. For instance, the choice of citing the French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville in the context of cancel culture with the words 'tyranny of the majority' (84) does provide a strong foundation for discussion. It is important to remember that the book is intended for a general audience, and readers who are unfamiliar with de Tocqueville's observations during his nine-month journey through the United States and his perspective on issues such as the oppression of Black and Native populations may potentially misinterpret the context. Including additional footnotes or information about de Tocqueville would be helpful in avoiding such misunderstandings. As time passes, it will be interesting to see how future readers will interpret the same content shared by Daniel H. Weiss with the benefit of a different perspective and hindsight.

The book is a valuable contribution to the understanding of how art shapes cultural and social identities, and it provides a unique insight into the challenges and responsibilities faced by museums and their leaders. The chapters on the historical development of modern museums provide a good number of reference sources for further study and may be especially beneficial to emerging museum professionals.

Overall, *Why the Museum Matters* is an excellent choice for anyone interested in gaining a deeper understanding of museums and their role in the United States. The book offers unique glimpses into museum history and insights into its role today and in the future, making it a valuable resource for anyone interested in the intersection between art and society.

Sandra Samolik, School of Museums Studies, University of Leicester