

Book Review

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Museum. Learning. Democracy. The Work and Life of Alma S. Wittlin (1899-1991)
Hadwig Kraeutler, Vienna: LIT Verlag, 2025, paperback €34.90, pp. 454

This monograph tells the story of Alma S. Wittlin (1899–1991), a renowned museologist, art historian, and writer who later in life endeavoured to become a scientist. Her life spanned almost the entire twentieth century and was shaped by forced migration and its associated sense of loss, periods of financial hardship, and her repeated rediscovery of self.

At a young age, Wittlin moved to Vienna from Lemberg (now Lviv, Ukraine) and was later forced to migrate to the UK and the US to escape the aftermath of the Second World War in mainland Europe. Despite these challenges, she produced work of exceptional quality that often went far beyond her time and anticipated future developments in the global museum sector. This forward-thinking approach was most clearly articulated in her advocacy for museums as public spaces rather than repositories of artefacts, a position later reflected in the 1974 revision of ICOM's definition of 'museum'.

The subject of the book, in its broadest sense, concerns how a person's lived experience can inform their practice and shape the wider world around them. Whilst the book at first appears to be a biography, from the opening pages it becomes evident that the author's ambitions extend beyond recounting the life of a single museum researcher and practitioner in a linear way. Hadwig Kraeutler offers an insightful and carefully structured study of Alma S. Wittlin's life, work, and intellectual legacy, tracing the multiple narratives and contexts that shaped her development and, ultimately, influenced the evolution of international museum practice. 'The overall intention of this book is not just to point at someone to remember and think about, but someone to think with' (38). The book reads as a call to action, offering support and a sense of companionship to those working in today's museum sector, many of whom feel the disheartening effects of global pressures on their institutions and the communities they serve.

The monograph comprises an introduction followed by five chapters, each exploring Alma S. Wittlin's legacy through different facets of her personality. Chapter One introduces the research context, highlighting its intersectional nature through cultural, gender, and exile studies, which inform the research methodology. This chapter also establishes Wittlin's vision of museums as places for learning, a position that was novel for its time and was 'appreciated in times of rebuilding societies after the war' (86). Readers are immersed in the wider historical and cultural context of Wittlin's time, from the Nazi invasion and post-war recovery to the oppressive period of McCarthyism, prompting unforced comparisons with our contemporary world.

The following two chapters examine specific dimensions of Wittlin's professional identity. Chapter Two explores her work as a journalist, writer, and art historian, drawing parallels with her identity as a 'communicator', while Chapter Three offers a detailed analysis of her museum practice. Chapter Four maps the international landscape of organisations and networks with which Wittlin engaged to disseminate her work and build professional connections. The final chapter draws together the key themes running throughout the book, demonstrating how the diverse strands of Wittlin's practice underpin her wider vision.

Kraeutler depicts Wittlin's view of museums through a constructivist lens, in which learners are given the freedom to actively develop their own learning experiences through engagement with artefacts, museum spaces, and other visitors. Wittlin is convincingly portrayed as a pioneer of participatory engagement and object-based learning, approaches that were novel in her time yet now constitute fundamental pillars of contemporary audience

engagement in museums and heritage sites. In her work, active learning is presented as vital to cultivating democracy in post-war society, offering an alternative to indoctrinating didactic narratives that undermine personal authenticity, critical thinking, and creativity. The monograph features numerous examples of Wittlin's museum projects and publications, which highlight her progressive and innovative approach to audience development and engagement. These range from introducing robust visitor evaluation during her time at the Fitzwilliam Museum to juxtaposing human-made and natural environments in a free-choice learning experience she developed in New Mexico.

However, the most inspiring example of forward-thinking and human-oriented museum practice lies in Alma Wittlin's own life story. Kraeutler paints a convincing, honest, and reflective portrait of a woman refugee who chose not to surrender in the face of global tragedy but, instead, 'to start anew – with outer and inner events of a full life – a new job, new partner, new self' (70). Noting the relative absence of autobiographical writing, Kraeutler draws parallels between Wittlin's life and the protagonists of her fiction, another facet of her creative identity that was particularly resonant in a time of oppression. From these experiences, Wittlin developed an interdisciplinary practice shaped by her lived experience and the lessons she learned. While Kraeutler's research foregrounds the invaluable legacy of Wittlin's work, it also demonstrates that her attempts to innovate were often marginalised or disregarded by the museum community for a range of reasons.

Wittlin's example remains highly relevant today. While museums increasingly seek to act as 'listening ears' for their communities, incorporating voices and stories through consultation and co-production, there is still much more to be done. As Kraeutler notes in the introduction: '[t]ypically, innovation and change come from the outside, not the core, so why do we not explore this perspective more often?' (13). Museums can build on Wittlin's human-oriented approach by prioritising care-based practices that recognise trauma, displacement, and loss, and by valuing lived experience as a form of expertise. Crucially, this requires listening to be embedded within institutional culture through sustained relationships that enable communities to see how their contributions meaningfully shape change.

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