Book reviews

Alexandra Bounia,
The Nature of Classical Collecting: Collectors and Collections 100BCE – 100CE
Aldershot: Hampshire, Ashgate, 2004, £55.00 hardback, 370pp.

Based on her doctoral thesis, Alexandra Bounia explores the 'archaic period' in the history of collecting in the *longue durée* of European tradition. She describes the type of collections during this period as 'the early hoards and grave goods, the accumulations of Greek temples and open-air shrines, the royal collections of Hellenistic kings, the art and curiosity collections held by the Romans, and the relics treasured by the medieval princes and the church' (p.1). The period examined is particularly interesting because it marks an age of transition from collecting as commemoration of triumph in war and for holy dedications to collecting for its own sake, an intellectual and social phenomenon with associated practices such as art patronage and the emergence of the individual collector driven by a variety of personal motives and ideological and social demands. Of Pearce's (1995, p. 55) four phases in the development of collecting, (archaic, early modern, classic modern and postmodern) this is the earliest and the least understood; consequently this book fills a significant gap in our knowledge and is an important addition to the literature of historical museology.

The author uses the works of four Latin writers – Marcus Tullius Cicero, Gaius Plinius Secundus, Marcus Valerius Martialis and Titus Petronius Arbiter – who lived and wrote during the first century BCE and the first century CE as her key sources to explore attitudes to collecting in the classical world. Their views are mapped against four key parameters, antiquarianism; the gift exchange tradition; identity; and time and space, in order to identify the motivations for collecting. There are, of course, difficulties in 'reading' ancient texts as sources of data, and Bounia devotes the whole of the first chapter to this issue, dissecting the work of Ricoeur and Barthes to find a methodology to enable historical 'reality' to emerge from classical documents. Having elected to read the works in the light of Ricoeur's 'Analogue', she is aware that even this approach is problematical, noting 'What we can reach is interpretations of this world, or perceptions of the interpretations of this world' (p. 41).

The structure of the book following Chapter 1 will provide something of a puzzle to anyone skipping the Introduction, where it is explained. The text is divided into two parts of four chapters each. The chapters in the first part discuss in turn the four key parameters of collecting mentioned above, while the second part has four chapters, one for each of the selected Latin writers. So Chapter 2 is devoted to an exploration of antiquarianism, matching to Chapter 6 which is a detailed discussion of the phenomenon as described by Pliny in his *Historia Naturalis*. Similarly Chapter 3 links gift-exchange with Martial and his epigrams in Chapter 7 and Chapter 4 links identity – the individual as a cultural category – to a discussion in Chapter 8 of Petronius's *Satyrica*, a novel written during Cicero's reign. Chapter 5 investigates time and space in the classical world in order to begin to understand ideas of classification and order of material culture, being complemented by a discussion of Cicero's collecting discourse in Chapter 9. While this format is acceptable for a doctoral thesis, re-working of the structure to bring together parameter and classical text would have made the ideas embedded there much more accessible. Nevertheless the core of the book is a delight of detailed information and ideas – for me the highlight was the discussion of Pliny's collection, where it is easy to see how his activities influenced subsequent generations of naturalists, shaping Renaissance collecting and ideas of classification.

The author concludes that ancient historians focused not only on the recent past, but also the distant past, developing the antiquarian approach and so legitimising collections as sources of information and knowledge, able to act as symbols and signifiers of events, personalities, places and 'the past'. She maintains that collections in the classical world signify an advanced role for the individual collector, but that these should not be seen as an indicator of the rise of individualism, but simply as a means of creating a social niche and access to a community of culture and prestige. Collections acquired power and positive (real) value when placed in the correct situation, that is, in a public or sacred realm, where they can benefit whole communities. Bounia notes that 'The dichotomy between the false values that individual collectors allot to their possessions, as opposed to real values represented by the public collections, occupies a central place in the discussion of all four writers' (p. 311). This situation – the dichotomy between private collections (= bad) and public collections (= good) – is still prevalent in today's world, as private collectors vie with museums for important acquisitions. In terms of time and space, Bounia concludes that during this period material culture was used 'to recreate and evoke the sense of a different time and place both in private and in public' (p. 312), in other words that objects were used to stimulate ideas and memories, and revisit facts and concepts. Objects were therefore assigned 'real value' and collections became associated with gift-giving, a social ritual.

Although clearly derived from a doctoral thesis, and occasionally reading like one (the word 'thesis' rather than 'book' creeps in here and there), and being strangely structured, there is a great deal to admire here. Museology students will find the theoretical introduction and discussions of methodological approaches especially useful. Anyone with an interest in the history of museums will be able to mine the text for fascinating facts and insightful ideas, and gain an overall impression of a collecting period that has remained hidden up until now.

Reference

Pearce, S. 1995 *On Collecting: an investigation into collecting in the European tradition*. London and New York, Routledge.

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Tony Bennett
Pasts Beyond Memory: Evolution, Museums, Colonialism
London and New York: Routledge, 2004, £19.99 paper, 233pp.

In the context of Tony Bennett's long engagement with the history and social function of museums, *Pasts beyond Memory* provides those interested in this field with his most focused and sustained account of the relationship between museums and notions of civic reform. In comparison to Bennett's other work on museums, this book is not a radical intervention into the New Museology or into Cultural Studies in the way that *The Birth of the Museum* (1995) or *Culture: A Reformer's Science* (1998) were at the time they were published. However, *Pasts Beyond Memory* does offer new historical material to support his more general arguments as well as a brilliant account of the connections between English political thought, social theory and museum practices in late nineteenth century Britain, America and Australia. His concern is to point out how the form of the visual culture in these museums was an attempt to manage the population by connecting new developments in political and social theory with the emergence of new knowledge about the distant past via the emerging disciplines of the historical sciences – geology, natural history, archaeology, and anthropology. As a study into the history of ideas behind the practices of 'evolutionary museums' at a specific moment in time, *Pasts Beyond Memory* offers a rich, detailed account of how and why museums used the display of objects together with textual forms of interpretation to achieve both an evolutionary account of human nature and society and an attempt to control the interpretations its visitors might make.

In Pasts Beyond Memory Bennett's previous concern to understand how museums play a role in the reform of populations in liberal democratic societies is given specific foci. The first of these is his attempt to understand the differences between different types of liberal theory in nineteenth century Britain and the ways in which these differences were represented in differing cultural policies and practices at an institutional level. Bennett's particular contribution here is his attempt to bring together a Foucauldian governmental perspective with a deep knowledge of British political theory. This enables him to draw important distinctions between different forms of liberalism and their affect on museum programs in the nineteenth century. While in previous work Bennett focused on classical liberalism and its attempt to govern populations through the reform of manners, in *Pasts Beyond Memory* Bennett provides an insightful account of neo liberalism in the second half of the nineteenth century, drawing particular attention to its reliance on the notion of civilization rather than an ethics of morality.

The second theme is the relationship between these different modes of liberalism and the emergence of new theoretical frameworks in both the sciences and the humanities. While in earlier work, Bennett was concerned with explaining the connections between classical liberalism, romanticism and faith in the power of museums and galleries to reform the habits and manners of the working class, in *Pasts Beyond Memory*, Bennett attempts to link neo liberal forms of governing with the development of the theory of social evolution. Briefly put, his argument here is that post Darwinian social theory was closely connected to developments in the new historical sciences which focused very closely on the category of time. Scholars in these disciplines argued that the existence of material fabric through time (rocks just as much as material culture) provided a new form of evidence which could be read with the same evidentiary status as the written word. The contribution of post Darwinian social theory was to apply this same analogy to human beings, arguing that they too contained the traces of the passage of time within them. This enabled a new understanding of the self to emerge, a self which could be improved not by emulating the morality of the middle class but by erasing the traces of prior, older civilizations. The idea was to avoid the possibility of a return to savagery. At the same time however, indigenous populations were interpreted as trapped in time, unable to advance into modern civilization precisely because their societies had not experienced the passage of time through the development of more advanced forms of civilization. This perspective on the nature of human beings became particular important in colonised countries such as Australia, or in immigrant nations like America, where the presence of indigenous populations or peoples from 'less civilised parts of Europe' had to be managed in ways which quarantined the possibility of a return to savagery on the part of white man. While in Australia this meant the separation of populations, in America it meant an attempt to speed up the evolution of migrant peoples. Thus evolutionary museums –those based on the historical sciences - played a different role in Australia and in America than the one they played at the centre of Empire in Britain. As Bennett puts it, he is interested in these countries not because they are similar but because 'these three national contexts provide a set of contrapuntal perspectives on the relationships between post-Darwinian developments in the historical sciences, the functioning of evolutionary museums as a new kind of memory machine, the changing practices and priorities of liberal forms of government, and the quite different connections that were forged between the historical sciences and practices of government in colonial relationships between occupying and indigenous populations' (p. 2).

Thirdly, ever since the publication of his article on the exhibitionary complex in 1988, Bennett has maintained an interest in how the links between political and social theory are expressed through the visual culture of the museum – the actual language of display. It is here that his continuing interest in governmentality, through the work of Michel Foucault, and, in *Pasts Beyond Memory,* the work of Bruno Latour on science, is particularly useful as it gives him the tools to offer a detailed study of exactly how evolutionary museums contributed to the governance of populations. It is this focus which is perhaps of most interest to museum practitioners and offers the opportunity to reflect critically on contemporary, late twentieth-century display practices.

While the link between the history of colonialism and museums is a well trodden one (See for example Barringer and Flynn 1998, Coombes 1994, Griffiths 1996), Bennett infuses it with new significance by pointing out its links to the political theory of the time. At the same

time, it is the link with the history of colonialism that provides the main motivation for the book – a desire to help museums overcome their origins. As the blurb at the back of the book puts it, '*Pasts Beyond Memory* will help all museums seeking to shed the legacy of evolutionary conceptions and colonial science, so that they can contribute to the development and management of cultural diversity more effectively'. While the book does not provide a map for how this may occur, as it does not examine the legacy of this history in the present or propose ways to overcome it, there are nevertheless possible lines of inquiry which stem from some of the detailed accounts of exhibition design Bennett provides. For me, the most exciting possibilities lie in the tensions between the didactic and showmanship tendencies of museums. While the didactic tendency is expressed in evolutionary museums through linear forms of display supported by textual forms of interpretation aimed at erasing any possible gap in the evolutionary narrative, the tendency towards showmanship leaves gaps in which the imagination can play a role in interpretation. The current turn towards emphasising experience in museums can be interpreted as a turn towards allowing for the possibility of more gaps in the narrative, breaking linear forms of interpretation and therefore the attempt at curatorial control. Filling in the gaps is, in this schema, not only a didactic form of pedagogy; it is also a political statement which erases difference by wanting to assimilate it to evolutionary interpretation schemas. Allowing space for gaps in interpretation, however, is to allow not only a greater degree of interactivity on the part of the visitor but also a greater number of voices to be represented. That this might be Bennett's aim is not made explicit. It is however, one of the ways in which his desire for a museum practice which teaches the value of cultural diversity might be achieved.

References

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