

## Book Reviews

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**Ken Arnold, *Cabinets for the Curious: Looking Back at Early English Museums*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006, hardback £47.50, pp. xiii + 297.**

Early modern England occupies a singularly important place in the history of museums. The Ashmolean Museum, founded at Oxford in 1683, is the oldest public museum in the world still open today; the British Museum, which opened its doors in 1759, is a precocious and influential example of the idea of the museum as a repository of a nation's treasures. As Ken Arnold details in his study of early modern English collecting practices, both were products of new attitudes towards things which emerged after the disquieting events of the English Civil War. Prior to the 1660s England made relatively few contributions to the great pursuit of collecting that flourished in the continental cities and courts of sixteenth-century Europe. To the extent that it participated, it did so largely in imitation of the European princes and patricians who created the first cabinets of curiosities. In the next century, however, leading English scholars and virtuosi came to envision museums as 'thoroughly empirical institutions ... used to establish publicly accessible knowledge' (p. 30). They created something different and more uniquely their own. This endeavor is the subject of Ken Arnold's book.

*Cabinets for the Curious* reflects on the goals and practices of contemporary British museums by placing them in the mirror of the seventeenth century: the moment in which the museum first emerged as an important scientific and cultural institution in England. Arnold's explicit purpose is not simply to reconstruct this earlier history, which he does well, but to invoke this history as part of shared conversation between curators and historians (he himself is both) about the function of the museum in today's society. By returning to the moment in which the museum first emerged as a novel institution and as a specific venue in which to present or experiment with new approaches to knowledge, Arnold invites us to consider how recapturing this initial excitement about the uses of collections might inspire fresh thinking today about the museum's future.

To some degree, *Cabinets for the Curious* revisits the terrain explored by scholars such as Robert Gunther, Prudence Leith-Ross, Stephen Bann, Michael Hunter, Marjorie Caygill, Marjorie Swann, and especially Arthur MacGregor. They have introduced to collectors such as John Tradescant, Elder and Younger, John Bargrave, Elias Ashmole, John Woodward, and Hans Sloane, and to collective projects such as the Royal Society repository. Rather than focusing on a single collector or museum, Arnold provides us with a thematic overview of the emergence of scientific, antiquarian, and medical collecting in seventeenth-century England. He identifies three important practices that shaped collecting in this period, namely, the narrative, functional, and taxonomic significance of objects as they were presented in museums. Taken together, they help us to understand how the meaning of things was articulate in this initial phase of the museum as an English institution.

In the first section of the book, Arnold discusses how Robert Plot, first keeper of the Ashmolean and member of the short-lived Oxford Philosophical Society, viewed collecting as 'a material analysis of the English nation' (p. 49). Plot's efforts to combine natural history and antiquarianism provide the starting point for an illuminating discussion of numismatics, the quintessentially narrative form of collecting. Describing how coins allowed collectors to reconstruct history from the thing itself, Arnold argues for the continued importance of 'object biographies' (p. 98) in the modern museum.

The second section of *Cabinets for the Curious* explores two different forms of

functionality. Arnold begins by discussing the utility of exotic things within the Baconian history of trades that interested some members of the early Royal Society. Arnold asks us to consider how exactly knowledge of distant lands through their things could be useful. Highlighting the persistent problem of studying cultures through objects removed from their original environment and often poorly understood by those who collected them, he invites us to consider the difficulties of understanding a variety of (by now canonical) Native American artefacts: ceremonial pipes, wampum, canoes, snowshoes, and the like. It was not indigenous knowledge *per se* that early Royal Society members such as William Petty and John Winthrop sought, but a kind of knowledge in support of a political and economic program of empire. "Indian" things, in other words, were part and parcel of a diffuse reconstruction of the exotic as it unfolded in accounts of British travel and colonization.

By contrast, medical collections fulfilled the very specific function of demonstrating the virtues of the new anatomy, medicinal botany, and more controversially chemical medicine. Arnold contrasts the more philosophically inclined physicians such as Woodward and Sloane, and natural philosophers such as Robert Boyle who also studied natural objects with medicinal uses, to more 'artisanal' collectors such as the apothecary James Petiver who demonstrated medicines to sell them as opposed to exploring what their underlying principles might be. While demonstrating the spectrum of interests and occupations that informed the emergence of medical collections, he also argues that by the end of the century they more or less concurred in their desire to demystify the virtues of medicines by drawing the viewer's attention to the nature of the object itself. Turning from the seventeenth century to the present, Arnold invites readers to consider current debates in anthropology and medical museums about the often charged and sometimes disturbing connotations of objects and how to deploy these meanings in educating people through things.

*Cabinets for the Curious* concludes with a discussion of the role of classification in reflecting concepts of order. Examining Grew's catalogue of the Royal Society repository, Arnold finds ample evidence to support his argument that there was a direct relationship between John Wilkin's proposals for a new sort of universal language that would perfectly express and order things through words, and efforts to create a well-articulated representation of all the species of nature inside the repository. In the struggles of important naturalists such as Woodward, Martin Lister, Edward Lhwyd, and especially John Ray, Arnold discerns the practical limits of Wilkin's project to capture nature's complex relationships among species. Describing how taxonomy became *the* sublime expression of museum science in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, Arnold shows us how, in an earlier and more experimental moment, Lister treated shells like coins, patiently and thoroughly illustrating them while leaving to others the thorny issues of interpretation. Most importantly, he insists upon the importance of Grew's 1681 catalogue as a stimulus to many of the natural historical projects of this period, leaving us with the image of later curators who simply reconfigured all the categories by cutting up his entries when the concerns of natural theology (as opposed to the endless and infinitely fine-grained rules of classification) no longer mattered.

*Cabinets for the Curious* is a meditation upon the origins of the museum as a diffuse and malleable response to the problems of knowledge, its representation and interpretation. Arnold concludes his book by inviting museum professionals and their publics to restore the image of the museum as a space of experimentation and play to the contemporary museum. His history is, in part, an object lesson about the evolution of institutions that expresses a good degree of optimism about the museum's ability to reinvent itself in the twenty-first century. An interesting, challenging, and well-written book that is itself an experiment in how to write history for multiple audiences, it is marred only by an unfortunate number of typos that Ashgate should have helped the author clean up.

**Conal McCarthy, Exhibiting Māori: A History of Colonial Cultures of Display, Oxford/New York: Berg, 2007, hardback £55.00, paper £19.99, pp. xx+ 243**

In this thoroughly researched and richly illustrated book, Conal McCarthy traces the history of the display of Māori culture in New Zealand museums from the mid-nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth century. Taking a chronological approach, McCarthy's analysis begins by considering how Māori were represented at the colonial exhibitions and world fairs of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and examines the frequent use of Māori motifs and artefacts to symbolize New Zealand during events like Royal tours. The main focus of the book, however, tracks the changing politics of display at the Colonial Museum as it transforms through time into the Dominion Museum, the National Museum, the Museum of New Zealand *Te Papa Tongarewa* and, more commonly today, *Te Papa*.

Drawing on a wealth of archival photographs, McCarthy provides a visual record of the exhibiting of particular objects. Images of the Colonial Museum in 1870, for example, reveal how Māori material was initially displayed as part of the natural history collections, whilst photographs from the first decade of the twentieth century reflect contemporary views, that Māori objects should be salvaged and displayed as a memorial to a dying race. An image of the main hall of the Dominion Museum from 1910 shows it to be literally crammed with objects: carvings hang from the ceiling and are placed wherever there is space on the floor, which must have made for a challenging visitor experience. In considering how displays of Māori material have changed over time, McCarthy illustrates the conceptual transformation of objects from curiosities, to ethnographic specimens, to art, to the present day where objects are presented within the Māori framework of *taonga* (highly-prized ancestral treasures). In this way, the book makes an important contribution to on-going museological debates concerning the presentation of ethnographic material as either art or artefact. Like other recent New Zealand-focused works, such as Amiria Henare's *Museums, Anthropology and Imperial Exchange* (2005) and Paul Tapsell's *Pukaki: A Comet Returns* (2000), McCarthy reminds us that indigenous categories or ways of seeing often challenge and complicate such debates. For Māori, whether an object is presented as art or artefact is often a secondary consideration. As McCarthy illustrates, at the Museum of New Zealand *Te Papa Tongarewa* in the mid-1990s, Māori curators initiated a reorganization of the displays according to objects' tribal affiliation and genealogical histories, rather than by their function or aesthetic qualities.

McCarthy's detailed archival research also provides new perspectives on the now legendary *Te Maori* exhibition. This major exhibition which toured the United States to great acclaim between 1984 and 1986, before returning to tour New Zealand, has been credited with putting Māori art on the world map as well as with transforming Pakeha (New Zealanders of European descent) understandings and appreciation of Māori culture. In the twenty years that have followed, *Te Maori* has frequently been written about and analyzed by curators, anthropologists, art historians and museum studies scholars from around the world. Here, McCarthy's access to the archives reveals the fascinating behind-the-scenes dynamics at the National Museum in Wellington, as they prepared to install *Te Maori: Te hokinga mai* (the return) in 1986. The museum was under immense pressure to ensure the exhibition lived up to its success in the United States and a great deal of effort went into recreating the art gallery style of display which the American museums had selected. A quote from the Museum's Annual Report for 1987 encapsulates the significance of *Te Maori: Te hokinga mai*: 'The impact on the institution was ... unprecedented. The Museum had adopted a "truly bicultural approach to display" and must never be allowed to "return to its monocultural ways again"' (p.150). Whilst *Te Maori* was, without doubt, a pivotal moment in the relationship between Māori and museums, this book also eloquently demonstrates the very significant level of Māori involvement with museums prior to the 1980s. In contrast to arguments that posit museums as instruments of colonial power, McCarthy's narrative aims to foreground Māori agency, revealing their longstanding engagement with and resistance to museum displays of their culture.

Despite its geographic and cultural specificity, this book will have broad appeal. Sufficient background into the particularities of the cultural politics of New Zealand is provided to make it a valuable resource for anyone interested in museum studies or anthropology.

Indeed, the images alone make it a fascinating case study of the changing dynamics in the relationship between museums and indigenous groups. That this book developed from McCarthy's PhD thesis has been noted by several reviewers; yet the thesis-style survey of relevant literature included in the early chapters means that those outside a museum audience can quickly get up to speed on the debates that shape the remainder of the narrative. It is a shame that McCarthy does not accord more space to his own voice or opinions. At times, he risks a certain passivity in his approach, explaining rather than critically evaluating the material he foregrounds. That said, more often than not McCarthy's analysis does more than just track the history of the display of Māori culture in New Zealand. In illuminating and insightful ways *Exhibiting Maori* also maps out a way of discovering the transformative dynamics which have shaped the relationship between Māori and Pakeha.

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