

Book Review

John E. Simmons, *Museums: A History*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016, hardcover £54.95, pp. v+304

Museums: A History (2016) presents an exhaustive overview of the development of museum collections throughout the centuries, from the ancient world to contemporary times. The study focuses on the idea that museum collections are an attempt by humans to understand their history and the world they live in, by collecting objects, giving them an order and interpreting them: 'the history of museums is really the history of how humans organize and classify the world as they navigate through life using objects' (xii). Indeed, museum collections were born with that purpose: giving an order to a group of objects and preserving it (Conn 1998: 15). This is a human characteristic, as opposed to a chance accumulation of objects, typical of the animal species (xii). Simmons argues that, over the centuries, in addition to the purposes of creating order and producing knowledge, the aims of educating, entertaining and stimulating opinions became important. The relationship between museums and the act of collecting has been widely investigated in academic literature. For example, this is broadly described by S. M. Pearce (1999) in her work, based on the idea that the museum is 'the institution concerned with collecting' (vii). Again, the concept that collecting is a key function of museums is at the centre of the study by S. J. Knell (2004), where he examines the issues related to the practice of collecting and the several meanings that this has for different cultures. Moreover, he investigates, through some examples, the relationship between museums and collections, with the purpose of establishing a future collecting strategy for museums.

Museums raises a series of pertinent questions: how and why have objects been collected? How has the transition of objects from their original contexts to collections worked? What can the content and organization of collections tell us about the human beings who assembled them? Simmons considers the answers to these questions by using several sources mainly derived from historical documents, because, as he properly demonstrates, 'both the written word and the objects in collections are forms of preserving cultural memory, as well as interpreting the world around us' (xiii). Indeed, there is a strong connection between literature and collections, because humans collect and write in order to understand their history and the world around them: the oral and written traditions function as cultural memories, helping to understand how the collected objects were perceived and musealized.

Museums is divided into nine sections, organized chronologically, and well balanced between the author's own critical examinations and broader reflections on the past, present and future of museums. The study begins by examining the development of the 'museum' concept. Its definition evolved through different periods of history, focusing on several purposes, based on serving various social needs (259). Nevertheless, collections have always been at the core of the museum itself, and therefore the history of museums needs to be investigated from the point of view of museum collections. Here, the idea that a suitable 'museum' definition still does not exist is strongly evident. As shown by the author, ICOM's contemporary definition of 'museum' (ICOM 2016) fails to recognize the importance of collections. They are, indeed, mentioned only at the end of the definition, although they play a key role for the museum. Simmons' argument is compelling: museums are founded on collections and without them they would not exist. Therefore, the focus on collections needs to stay at the centre of all museum definitions, prior to other museum aims, including being at the service of society and its development, being open to the public, preserving and interpreting objects, producing knowledge and educating (ICOM 2016).

Chapters 2 to 8 highlight the history of museum collections from 700 B.C. to the twentieth century, with an approximation of specific chronological periods, because 'the history of museums cannot easily be broken into neat chronological blocks' (xiii). As Simmons rightly points out, from the ancient world through to the Medieval period, museums, as perceived in the contemporary cultures in which they performed, still did not exist. What existed was a continuous process of collecting objects, with the purpose of building private collections, ordered on the basis of the collector's own view of the world. The modern concept of the museum was born during the Renaissance period. In fact, these earlier collections cannot be considered as 'museums', but as 'treasuries' (Daston and Park, 2001: 74), housing objects assembled with the purpose of offering gifts to the Gods at the temples, as in the Greek and Roman cultures and, in a different way, during the Medieval period. The aims connected to the modern concept of the museum, such as educating and producing knowledge, were introduced during the Renaissance, and developed during the Enlightenment. As the author notes in Chapter 7, the modern museum rapidly evolved during the early nineteenth century, while new museums opened all over the world, in such a way that this period was later entitled 'The Age of Museums' (Siegel 2008: 3).

Museums concludes with a chapter describing what is happening to museums in contemporary times and what will happen in the future. Here, Simmons focuses on several issues that are now the subject of debate in the museum world: deaccessioning, interpretation, dioramas, virtual museums and universal museums.

One weakness of the book is its structure and layout, which make it difficult to easily identify the links between concepts, making it quite a challenging read in places. While it is not a simple matter to summarize the whole history of museum collections in such a compact study, with all the connotations and questions connected to this extensive topic, the author could have solved this problem by clearly linking every section to the previous one, making the transition between concepts easier to understand for the reader. Despite this, the use of text boxes which offer in-depth descriptions of some of the most interesting facts connected to museum history, only briefly mentioned in the main text, is consistent and helpful. These are particularly useful in allowing for an in-depth analysis of the key themes of the book.

This study provides a good introduction to the topic of the history of museum collections, although I have reservations about how this is presented throughout the text. The purpose expressed by Simmons at the beginning of his book; that is, writing a study not built on the history of collecting, but on 'a critical examination of the history of museums from the point of view of museum collections' (xii), is vague. In particular, the difference between the two approaches is not articulated. Sometimes this distinction is unclear in the text itself. In his study, Simmons divides private collections from the acts of collecting that have been at the foundation of modern museums. However, private collections constitute a big part of modern museums, if not the biggest in some cases, and for that reason their history is strictly linked to the history of museums and, therefore, they cannot be separated in this manner.

Nevertheless, *Museums* convincingly achieves the aim of giving a general summary of the key themes of the museum's history. The author does not fail in missing a point: he offers a comprehensive history of museums from the ancient world to contemporary times, focusing on well-known historical examples of museum collections taken from different parts of the world and on contemporary subjects of debate in the museum world, producing a valuable synthesis of this wide topic. I recommend this book to museum studies students interested in the history of museums, but also to scholars who would like to have a complete and valuable summary of the subject.

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References

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