

Book Review

Kate Hill, *Women and Museums, 1850-1914: Modernity and the Gendering of Knowledge*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016, pp. xi+255

The discussion on gender representation within the museum space has been a challenging one during the last four decades, opening a debate on the gendering of museum roles and the use of feminist narratives and museology (Deepwell 2006). This book traces the origin of the multifaceted relationship between museums and women, analyzing the period from 1850 to 1914 in the English context, a crucial moment both for museums and women's engagement with a changing society. During these years museums were becoming centres of popular education and entertainment, but also spaces of identity-making, while women started to have access to a better education, had more legal rights and were becoming 'public' figures. In order to understand the different ways in which women and museums interacted during this process, Kate Hill has based her research on two main ideas: the *distributed* museum¹ and the gendered division between private and public spheres.

During the period analyzed, women - middle class women in particular - began to look at museums as a potential space in which to negotiate identities, with the objective of blurring, breaching and contesting the binary oppositions and hierarchies based on the division between the masculine sphere of public, intellectual, national values and the feminine sphere of domestic, emotional, local values. Through her deep archival research, Hill retraces the stories of some of the most influential women (such as Kate Marion Hall, Octavia Hill and Lady Schriber) as well as secondary and nearly forgotten figures. Hill seeks to disentangle the mechanisms of the relationship between museums and women so as to understand how they influenced and used each other, both consciously and unconsciously. Despite Hill's attentive discourse analysis of the existing documents, the data generated are sometimes affected by the lack of objective information (many museum donors were anonymous or acted through third persons, usually men), entailing the risk of making the degree of real engagement of these women unclear.

The author divides her arguments into three main sections: women working in museums, women donating to museums and women visiting museums. The first chapter, 'Inside the museum: including or excluding women?', focuses on women working and volunteering in museums, arguing that despite the fact that museums had opened their doors to women, they also marginalized women's agency in the workplace to gendered and devalued roles. In particular, these consisted of traditionally female tasks which related to the domestic sphere, such as cleaning, educational activities and communication: especially with children, other women or the working classes. Hill unpacks this interaction by asserting that it was not merely a means of segregating women to specific areas, but it also allowed women to assert their identity by developing new expertise and values. Women tried to strengthen their position in the workplace by introducing distinctively feminine approaches, as emulating men or aspiring to curatorial positions would have not been effective strategies, and to change museums through their emphasis on education and the importance of the domestic, emotional and social side of the museum. A comparison between the English and American museum contexts highlights how in the latter the 'feminine' educational area was becoming prominent and women's volunteer groups substantially contributed to fundraising projects (Madsen-Brooks 2009; Kohlstedt 2013), confirming that 'the women's experience of museum work (...) was also heavily influenced by the national culture in which they found themselves' (23).

Chapters Two and Three ('Outside the museum: women as donors and vendors,' and

'Outside the museum: women's donations, materiality and the museum object') reflect on the types of objects that were collected by women, seeking to understand if they formed a distinctive category, and to what extent their donation affected the interaction between women and museums. Collecting and donating objects was another strategy used by women to enter the public sphere and to create networks outside the domestic space. Through donations and by creating direct contact with the curators, women donors became more influential in the shaping of museums and were able to build a trustworthy relationship with the museum. Women altered the system of values by introducing new objects, but more importantly they developed new practices, such as collective memory practices, which transformed the museum by highlighting the importance of memory and emotions, not only of knowledge and classification.

No research project using the distributed museum model would be complete without the analysis of a third element: women visitors. In the third section of the book, 'Women visiting museums', Hill examines to what degree the presence of women visitors, from both the middle and working classes, became an emblematic image of the modern museum opened for mass public access, but also how it was characterized by a shifting attitude. By the later nineteenth century, visiting museums was seen as part of the process of building citizenship and therefore everyone was expected to have access to this beneficial activity, especially those considered to be ignorant, such as women, children and the working class. But if on the one hand, the presence of educated women was seen as a positive moral and civic example for the working classes; on the other hand the perception of working class women visitors was influenced by the troubling relationship with the 'unclean' feminine body, associated with maternal duties, then perceived in a negative light, and also with inappropriate sexual behaviour.

The fifth chapter, 'Women as patrons: the limits of agency?', shines a light on the effective difficulties and backlash women longing to play leading roles within museums had to face. Chapter Six, 'New disciplines: archaeology, anthropology and women in museums', examines the development of two new human science disciplines, archaeology and anthropology, and to what extent their conjunction with museums was able to provide a wider set of possibilities to women, both at an educational and a professional level. The last chapter, 'Ruskin, women and museums: service and salvage', investigates why women were able to play a prominent role within museums inspired by Ruskinian principles. Ruskin's interest in craft production, especially domestic craft, and the perception of museums as spaces with an agency in the reform of the society through the engagement of women, children and the working classes, were re-elaborated by women and used to question the traditional museology in order to create a potential new one. Slowly, but relentlessly, women were changing the nature of museums, and they were also changed by museums, opening the path to a process that would transform the museum into a new, social, modern institution that was more welcoming to new, different audiences.

The book makes a serious contribution to the exploration of the complex and multifaceted interaction between museums and women in England before the First World War, highlighting the ways in which modernity produced ideas about gender, tradition, knowledge and community. Its merit lies in covering a period that is still under-researched, mainly because of the limits of the source material and the silencing of women's voices, and to integrate the studies conducted in the American context creating a useful series of comparisons. Despite the high quality of this research, it would have been interesting to read more original sources concerning the women who were able to play an active role within museum and research contexts, for example Amelia Edwards in Egyptology (with her fascinating *A Thousand Miles Up the Nile* (1877)) or Lady Eastlake as *connoisseur* (with her opinion on the acquisition of *The Tailor* by Moroni (1565-70), now one of the masterpieces of the National Gallery in London). It would also have been interesting to investigate whether the traces of these women, both as museum professionals and as collectors, are present in contemporary museum exhibitions and interpretations or if their voices have been silenced once again. By shedding light on women's material culture and material strategies, education and professional careers, as well as leisure practices, Hill provides an important historical context that will be of broad interest, especially to professionals and students researching gender, culture or museum studies.

References

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- Madsen-Brooks, L. (2009), 'Challenging Science as Usual: Women's Participation in American Natural History Museum Work, 1870-1950', *Journal of Women's History* 21 (2), 11-38.
- Kohlstedt, S. G. (2013) 'Innovative Niche Scientists: Women's role in Reframing North American Museums, 1880-1930', *Centaurus* 55 (2), 153-174.

Note

- ¹ Hill uses Gosden and Larson's (2007) vision of the *distributed museum* as the result of a collective production and a space where the dialogue and interaction between people, objects and institutions can shape and define knowledge, identities and culture.