

Book Reviews

***Museum Bodies: The politics and practices of visiting and viewing.* By Helen Rees Leahy. Ashgate, 2012. ISBN: 9781409418610, x and 204 pages. Hardcover.**

As well as being a curator, I also work a lot in the area of repatriation of Indigenous remains and on issues related to the display of remains. So, when I'm offered the chance to review a book titled *Museum Bodies: The Politics and Practices of Visiting and Viewing*, I immediately think my reputation has got around and the book is about viewing remains, so I agree. The book arrives. I'm wrong! It's about visitors and audiences. Like most curators, I would normally throw that sort of stuff over to our public programs people and go back to being clever about content. After all, my exhibitions (unlike those of others) are of interest to everyone of every age, gender and class, so I don't need to know about specific audiences issues. However, a commitment is a commitment, and I start reading the book.

And I'm very glad I did. It was a delight to read, and very informative, providing both a history of the visitor experience, and not a few 'eye-openers' to my own pre-conceptions and practices. I learnt something, and it will affect how I do things in future.

The book explores different dimensions of visitor experiences through the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries and across a number of senior institutions. It presents these in six well-structured and readable chapters, broken up into neatly sub-titled narratives, with appropriate illustrations, making it a reader-friendly work in which it is possible to take a break from reading, and get back to some pressing museum work, without losing the thread of the narrative. It's easy to return to.

The book works on a number of levels, ensuring it will be of interest to a range of museum readers. Helen Rees Leahy takes an historical approach, looking at the way museums have treated their visitors over 250 years. What is disclosed is the evolution of a series of codified values, a sub-culture, of how people are expected to behave in museums. This sub-culture is the product of both audience- and museum-imposed values and protocols. The reader will find themselves repeatedly exposed as both perpetrators and victims of values and practices we often take for granted. Indeed, it shook me out of my curatorial complacency and preconceptions of visitors and their experiences by describing the long history of many issues that I've not only observed but probably helped preserve.

As an historian, and as a curator whose thinking is often more pragmatic than abstract, I was particularly content with the historical approach taken. We are led through the history of museum visitor experiences, well-supported by contemporary and entertaining observations and comments. This history alone is good reading as well as simultaneously highlighting the various issues addressed in the book, such as museums and galleries' different treatment of men, women and children, discrimination based on class, methods of display, and the overall 'load' placed on visitors to perform as visitors.

I didn't know, for example, that museum fatigue was identified almost from day one of museums. Similarly, problems with seating. Too much or too little? Label number, size and information, conservation; all long standing problems. I identified with a number of points raised. Take, for example, the discussion on the history of appropriate attire when visiting a museum. My family often play 'spot the red clothing' or 'spot the black skivvy'¹ when attending art gallery openings. How fast should one travel through an exhibition? I'm a runner – returning to specific items of interest, and preferring multiple visits. A family member, on the other hand, prefers to read every label from the start, forcing me to sit and wait – and usually staring at some work that I come to appreciate more in the longer viewing. I like (happily) noisy children

in the museum, whereas one marketing officer once told me they prefer no children because 'they annoy the art lovers'. These issues, and many more, are identified and highlighted in the historical texts that Leahy presents. Who knew these were not new problems?

Of course, this history of identification of problems raises its own questions. If people were identifying museum fatigue 200 years ago, and blaming it on the accumulated pressures of other visitors, internal climate, architecture, text length, font size, smell, awkward viewing positions etc., then how come we haven't been able to solve this issue with new gallery and exhibition designs? We've gone from square halls to rounded halls, straight walls to sloping walls, stairs to ramps to escalators, yet nothing seems to change. Indeed, we seem to give architects more and more control over space and, by default, on the long-term experiences of visitors².

Other concerns? Generally minor. Occasionally, Leahy begins or concludes her chapters with some theoretical consideration – this had me reaching for my *Dictionary of Anthropology* (What is phenomenology again?). I wasn't always sure that the stated aims or outcomes in the intro/conclusions were fully supported by the discussion, but the historical narrative alone was sufficient to balance my confusion and still provide me with interesting new insights. That probably tells you more about me than about the book. However, it's because I think the book is a good read, and should be read by museum professionals across the disciplines within the industry. I would like the theory to be a little more 'general – museum - reader friendly'. Further, a lot of the comparative examples are between institutions such as the British Museum and the Royal Academy. I always query comparisons between institutions that have clearly differing collections, responsibilities, and agendas. The visitor experience in an art gallery is likely to be very different from the experience in a social, science, or natural history museum (Everybody seems to be using the term 'museum' these days).

I would've also liked a bit more consideration of the treatment of people with disabilities as an audience segment. Certainly, this is suggested on the back of the jacket, and it is of increasing concern.

In conclusion, I found the book a stimulating read. There are things I won't take so much for granted when planning future exhibitions. I certainly have more weaponry to throw at exhibition designers. I also suspect that it might reopen some considerations of the visitor experience, simply for the reason that it clearly shows how long these have been identified issues. The overall readability of the book, not pandering to any single disciplinary domain, makes it suitable for a wide audience and, in particular, for a museum and/or student reading group because it reinforces the question that given the visitor experiences has been debated for so long, what can we do better?

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Notes

- 1 A skivvy is a black polo neck shirt.
- 2 For example. See the controversy surrounding the design of the National Museum of Australia. See also 'Nations controversial museum needs new wings to soar' Sydney Morning Herald' <http://www.smh.com.au/news/arts/controversial-museum-needs-new-wings-to-soar/2007/04/18/1176696914393.html> accessed 27 November 2014.

Archives, Museums and Collecting Practice in the Modern Arabic World, Mejcher-Atassi, S. and Pedro, Schartz, J. (eds), Ashgate, 2012. £65.00, Hardback, ISBN: 978-1-4094-4616-3

Archives, Museums and Collecting Practice in the Modern Arabic World has been written from the perspective of contemporary museum studies and collections in the Arab World, a first for this subject. Dedicated to the status of the museology of Arab countries in the Middle East, it makes a valuable contribution to the field of museum studies. As one of the most complex parts of the world in terms of the mixture of culture, religion and language, studying Middle-Eastern museology requires careful consideration and understanding of the political, cultural and historical contexts. The area embraces ancient civilizations such as Mesopotamia, Egypt and Persia, and connects the ancient world civilizations of Rome, Greece and India. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the establishment of colonization - and its consequent political problems and warfare - opened up pathways for trade and cultural exchange between Europe and the Middle East, a relationship which had begun with the entrance of European merchants and trade companies in the Medieval period. Archaeologists followed to study the area's wealth of historic sites, as well as enriching the newly established European collections. This context perhaps compelled the authors to add a footnote to the first page of the introduction and explain that 'the term Arab world here is used as a geographical marker, designating the countries on which the case studies included in this book focus.' The book contains ten articles in three chapters, each containing a few case studies. Distinguishing between textual and material artifacts is one of the main objectives of the book, as outlined in the introduction.

In Part 1, 'Local representations of modernity', the maintenance, and recovery, of national identity through the activity of collecting is the main focus. Although the three papers here are specific to Palestine and Jerusalem, the points made are of value to the Arab world as a whole. The first article by Nadia Bou Ali deals with the importance of archival documents in shaping the Arab identity in modern area and analyzes the movement of two founding fathers of the Arabic movement (Nahda). The second paper by Helene Sader, considers the influence of collecting antiques on the preservation of national heritage in Lebanon and examines the problem faced by many museums around the world: the purchase of works from uncertain and illegal origins. Lastly, Vera Tamari deals with the life and academic profession of Tawfik Canaan, a linguist and scholar who was active in donating to the museum of Birzeit University. The author details Canaan's collecting activities within the context of his intellectual and cultural environment in Jerusalem at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Part 2, entitled 'Collecting Practices, Historiographic Practices', deals with the relationship between these practices, past and present. Lucie Ryzova analyzes the relationships amongst collectors, dealers and academics, illustrating how these three spheres shape the historical and anthropological value of works on the market. In the second paper, Betty Gilbert-Sleiman traces the development and modification of school textbooks following the formation of the first national state of Lebanon in 1990. The author aims to highlight the ways in which historical narratives are 'collections' of historical facts, and how those facts are chosen and shaped for specific purposes, revealing much about the Lebanon context and identity. Sophie Brones' paper, 'The Beit Beirut Project: Heritage Practices and Barakat Building' outlines the process of changing a private building into a state-owned museum, a case study for understanding the complex processes of museum-making and collecting activities in Lebanon. Taken together, the papers here present the view that the major concerns of collectors and policy makers in these countries are the establishment of museums. Although the visitor is (nominally) the centre of attention in world museums, Arabic museums seem to be mostly involved with interpretation, and political and historical issues.

Part 3, 'From Institutional to Artistic Collecting,' emphasizes that despite a long history of collecting practices in the Middle East, the museum is a new factor in that area, having a closer relationship with modern European history. 'The Formation of the Khalid Shoman Private Collection and the Founding of Darat al Funun' by Sarah A. Rogers illustrates the formation process of a private collection from contemporary Arab art in 1980 to its entrance into Dar Al Funun in Jordan in 1993. The author highlights the various changes in artistic activities within the past thirty years which are reflected in the collection. Emily Doherty examines private and

public collections in the United Arab Emirates in the second paper, especially in Dubai and Abu Dhabi. Both forms have a direct relationship with the desire to highlight personal, national and local identity. She also discusses the issue of wealth for wealth, i.e. the relationship between the collector and his assets, the feeling of ownership and culture of the consumer. However, the major motivation of Emirati collections is to display personal and public identity.

In the third paper, Nada Shabout focuses on pre-war Iraq in 2003, and the role of contemporary art collecting in promoting the state-making process. The fourth paper - 'Collecting the Uncanny and the Labor of Missing' by Walid Sadek - explains the necessary conditions of collecting in Lebanon by realizing a presence for those who were absent in war.

Overall, the book highlights that identity crisis is a major issue in Arabian countries, especially in the Palestine area. The Arabic Movement drew attention to the disappearance of cultural heritage, which can be connected to the process of colonization by Europeans. As cultural heritage and works were removed, so was the identity and history of a nation. Efforts in the modern age to restore and redefine national identity and history (partly through adopting the idea of the museum from the West) has, however, revealed differences between collecting in the Middle East and the West, linked to the motivation of collectors. In the Arab world, the motivation to collect is linked to power, ownership, self-confidence and/or habit, and interest. Arabian collectors intend to maintain their cultural identity and heritage for their own benefit, their cultural and social activities hiding the political influences underneath. This is the natural result of permanent war, unsafe conditions, colonialism, and differences in the area. It is necessary to mention here that Iran and Turkey have some commonalities with the Arab world, particularly in religious issues, but differences in language, culture and history mean that these countries must be considered separately from the Arabian countries.

To sum up, this book is an excellent source for a reader with a good knowledge of the language, culture, geography and history of Arab countries, but more precise definitions are expected from a book which is aimed at non-native readers. For instance, it lacks a comprehensive and clear definition of the Arab Movement (Nahda). Here, Nahda is used in relation to 'movement', 'awakening' or 'renaissance', which usually refers to the Arabic cultural improvement in the late nineteenth century. The editors have tried to pull the papers together in a way that helps the reader understand the story and problems of growing field of museology in the area, but greater clarity is still required. This book provides a very good attempt at discussing the museology of the area, and is a promise for further studies to cover in greater depth the relevant issues and complex situation of the area.

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***Museum Law: A Guide for Officers, Directors and Counsel.* By Marilyn E. Phelan. 4th ed, Rowman & Littlefield: Maryland, 2014 ISBN: 978-0759124349, xxxi and 480 pages. Hardcover, £59.95.**

There are some fields of law which are potentially so wide and deep in their content that, although one can describe them pithily in a title, the reader needs to delve into the book itself to learn more about what will be discussed. This is particularly true of any book which covers the laws relating to museums. An author is faced with the challenge of deciding the extent to which they want to analyse legal principles and the range of laws which they wish to consider. Relevant laws include public international law (such as international conventions), private international law (concerning which country's domestic laws should apply where there is a dispute), charity law, company law, property law, tax law, commercial law, trusts and succession, economic crime, human rights, freedom of expression, etc. The list is almost endless. There is therefore an opportunity for a number of books which examine museum law, with each book quite justifiably taking a different approach.

Museum Law by Marilyn Phelan concentrates upon U.S. law. It is wide-ranging in scope and provides an overview for professional people. It has the virtue of supplying the reader with footnotes containing details of source material, enabling those who are keen to research a particular issue to find further literature on that matter.

Phelan's book refers to ethical principles in the ICOM Code, rather than considering the law alone: it consequently provides a richer discussion as a result. For example, there is a discussion of corporate governance issues in chapter 1 and the writer immediately links the duties upon the members of governing body to act with integrity and in accordance with ethical principles with the fundamental notion of 'public trust.'

The book is broken into three parts. The first four chapters are concerned with governance issues; the second four chapters focus upon museum collections; the final part, consisting of three chapters, discusses national and international laws that protect cultural heritage. The division in parts provides a logical structure. In the first part, Chapter 1 moves from a discussion of the internal governance structure of the museum and the obligations of the members of the governing body to Chapter 2, where there is a discussion of employment policies, the personal liability of the museum and its staff for accidents, security issues and other matters.

An English lawyer studying U.S. law will meet many familiar concepts. For example, in relation to corporate governance, a museum may be governed in the form of a charitable trust, or a company, or an association. As in the U.K., trustees and directors owe 'fiduciary' duties to act in good faith in the interests of the museum and to avoid any conflicts of interest. But there are important differences in relation to the level of control exercised by governments over museums in different countries. Phelan emphasizes that many U.S. museums have considerable autonomy because they are private institutions.

All museums must be financially sustainable. Phelan helpfully explains how a museum may qualify for tax exempt status as a charitable organization in Chapter 3. The discussion moves on in Chapter 4 to address fundraising and commercial ventures, and their tax implications. These chapters are consistent with the general approach of the book, which is concerned to take a practical approach, whilst providing footnotes with supporting information.

The second part of the book deals with museum collections and covers acquisitions, deaccessioning, loans, the rights of the artist, copyright laws, and other matters. Some topics are dealt with relatively briefly. For example, deaccessioning is dealt with in five pages. However, it should be borne in mind that deaccessioning is a complex issue which raises extraordinary legal difficulties in relation to such matters as interpreting the legal effect of any restrictions imposed by the donor at the time of transfer. Detailed treatment of this issue could occupy many pages and unbalance the book. Instead, Phelan offers a competent overview of the legal and ethical problems in this area, rightly encouraging the transfer of unwanted objects to other museums or non-profit public institutions.

The final part of the book discusses U.S. legislation and international conventions relating to heritage protection. There is some comparative material, particularly in relation to the impact of the international conventions. For example, Phelan explains the decision in *Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran v The Barakat Galleries Ltd* [2009] Q.B. 22, in which the U.K. Court of Appeal analyzed Iranian patrimonial laws and accepted that the Iranian government could bring a claim to recover looted antiquities using an action in conversion.

The structure of this book is excellent but there are other ways of organizing material which may have more appeal to academics and museum professionals. For example, in her outstanding book *Art, Cultural Heritage, and the Law: Cases and Materials*, Patty Gerstenblith discusses the litigation involving property misappropriated during the Holocaust period, and gives the reader a sense of how attitudes have changed and the remarkable steps taken in recent years to achieve satisfactory resolutions to disputes. In Phelan's book, the most famous decisions involving spoliated works are placed correctly in terms of legal principle: *Menzel v. List* 24 N.Y.2d 91, 298 N.Y.S.2d 979 (1969) is explained in the subsection on acquiring good title and the subsection on restitution of stolen or illegally exported objects; the case involving the *Portrait of Wally* (*U.S. v. Portrait of Wally* 663 F. Supp 2d 232 S.D.N.Y. 2009) is considered in the context of loans and anti-seizure legislation. Phelan's approach may well be right for a book which is intended (as stated in her sub-title) as a 'Guide for Officers, Directors and Counsel.' Nevertheless, museum professionals and academics may wish to turn to the substantial treatment provided by Gerstenblith's work for further enlightenment (at pages 561-622). Gerstenblith's brilliant book (with a length of 1146 pages) contains far more extensive critical analysis and debate.

Phelan states in her Preface that her book is intended to act as, 'a valuable guide for museum professionals and counsel in recognizing, working through, and securing some understanding of the myriad of laws that are applicable to museum operations.' In my view, Phelan's book on *Museum Law* accomplishes its objective. It provides a helpful overview of the law and ethics affecting museum practice in the U.S.A., using cases in the main text to illustrate particular principles. Museum professionals and academics in the U.K. may find the description of particular cases of great interest. They remind us how similar some problems are (such as conflicts of interest) regardless of the country. However, some of these cases show us that there may be issues which are perceived as controversial in the U.S.A., such as the decision of the Smithsonian Institute to use objects in its collections to demonstrate the theory of evolution (*Crowley v. Smithsonian Institution* 636 F2d 738 D.C. Cir. 1980), which are likely to be viewed with more equanimity in the U.K.

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***Re-imagining Heritage Interpretation, Enchanting the Past-Future*, by Russell Staiff, Farnham and Burlington, Ashgate, 2014, pp. 194, Hardback £60, 978-1-4094-5550-9.**

Russell Staiff makes a clear statement from the outset that *Re-imagining Heritage Interpretation* is 'not a heritage interpretation manual' (3). This stands as a comment both on what appears to have become the expectation for a book with this title, and also signals that it will not follow this format. Therefore, if what you are looking for is a set of principles or methodologies on best practice in heritage interpretation you will not find it here. However, what you will find in *Re-imagining Heritage Interpretation* is a thought-provoking, and sometimes challenging, re-conceptualization of heritage interpretation as a cultural phenomenon, which I think makes a refreshing contribution to the body of literature in this area.

The book is structured thematically into eight main chapters framed as a series of 'interlocking mediations' (25). The premise of the book is that heritage interpretation is 'ripe for conceptual reexamination' (26). Staiff argues that we have reached a static point in our consideration of the subject, heritage interpretation having become restrictive and rather narrowly defined within a discourse relating to educational activity. However, apart from making this point, what is meant by an educational activity is not discussed in detail and therefore it is difficult to know what Staiff's understanding of this term encompasses. The author indicates that this re-examination of heritage interpretation aims to move away from what he considers to be a restricted definition and consider the subject through broader conceptual lenses, which I think he does achieve.

In the second chapter 'Tilden: beyond resurrection' Staiff begins to unpack his main issues with existing conceptualizations of heritage interpretation. His starting point is a critical re-examination of Freeman Tilden's principles of interpretation, who might be considered the grandfather of heritage interpretation. Staiff focuses on Tilden's use of the term 'revelation', which aside from conveying religious undertones, it is argued, implies that there is knowable truth residing in 'things', which can be exposed by 'experts'. Ultimately, Staiff considers Tilden's idea of heritage interpretation to be limited and rather narrowly focused on interpretation as education rather than as a 'system of representations' (31) which are multi-layered, culturally ascribed and residing outside the 'heritage object' itself.

The third and fourth chapters go on to emphasize other dimensions which, it is explained, are neglected or absent from current discussions of heritage interpretation. This includes notions of heritage as an embodied 'somatic' experience which, rather than being a static concept, concerns movement and blending of people in, with and around space. Staiff argues that heritage concerns 'intensities'; heightened senses, interconnections and networks and deepened reflections and enhancements, not just of knowledge and awareness but 'the embodied experience of...self *wrestling* with the materiality of places and objects' (68). The conclusion is reached that in order to more closely articulate *what heritage does*, we need to enlarge our conceptual reach concerning heritage interpretation to encompass 'other realms

of experience' (69). Chapter 4 focuses attention on a further neglected aspect of heritage interpretation, the role of the visual and 'visuality'. Despite a strong emphasis on the visual as a mode of heritage interpretation very little, Staiff argues, is discussed which considers visuality as a culturally inscribed process, once again informed by systems of representation.

Chapter 5 considers the centrality of narrative construction to heritage interpretation and this is an area that I think is usefully identified by Staiff as conceptually rich territory. The characteristics of the narrative concept are identified, and so too are some of the areas of debate that they raise, such as, which narrative is told and by whom? However, what Staiff only hints at is the impact of (consciously or unconsciously) manipulating narratives in the heritage context, and this is certainly an area worthy of further investigation.

Staiff focuses in Chapter 6 on the very thing that he states has influenced the writing of this book, namely the increasing influence of digital media as something which has the potential to profoundly alter the landscape of heritage interpretation. He summarizes arguments put forward by authors such as Parry (2008) and Cameron & Kenderdine (2007) around how digital media has re-articulated the relationship between heritage sites and their visitors, facilitating a much higher degree of personalization of experience and engagement. The challenges and potential pitfalls of communicating across cultures are explored in the following chapter, and importantly Staiff highlights the need to think about the ethical and moral implications of heritage interpretation, including the idea, in certain circumstances, of limiting the extent of what is interpreted due to cultural sensitivities. This, it is acknowledged, may appear at odds with western ideals of transparency of information.

So does Staiff succeed in re-imagining heritage interpretation? The book, I think, certainly makes some persuasive arguments for, if not completely re-imagining, then certainly broadening our conceptual understanding of heritage interpretation to more fully recognize it as a process of representation. There are certainly aspects of this re-conceptualization, as presented here, where further explanation would be welcomed. For example, Staiff makes it known that the book is not an attack on learning at heritage sites, however, a more detailed exploration of what he means by terms such as 'educational activity' would be useful. I think the book actually *will* be a valuable text (if not in the traditional textbook fashion) to both practitioners who wish to reflect on their own practice and for those who teach and study heritage studies and related subjects.

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