

## Book Review

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**Domenico Sergi, *Museums, Refugees and Communities*, London: Routledge, 2021, paperback £120.00, pp.170.**

This book by Domenico Sergi, Senior Curator at the Museum of London, is a timely way to keep the spotlight on a topic that has been at the centre of the debate in recent years, but seems to have slipped into the background: the involvement of refugees in the life of the museum and the impact of this involvement on museums, communities and society at large.

The question at the heart of Sergi's volume is if, and how, the initiatives undertaken by museums in recent years have contributed to overturning the mainstream narrative on refugees, and what lessons can be learnt. Critically describing a number of case studies from the UK, The Netherlands and Germany, Sergi sharply analyses the challenges, complexities and questions posed by working with refugees in the museum context. For example, that of reciprocity, which often translates into a strong involvement in the 'lives of others': to what extent is it fair for the museum to occupy the space that was once the prerogative of social workers? Which competences are necessary in order to be 'useful' (in the sense developed by Lynch, 2020) while being clear about roles and aims? The issue of activism here is crucial, and analysed through a multifaceted, yet never apologetic, lens.

The author describes a first-hand experience of when he worked with a group of Congolese refugees at the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts at the University of East Anglia, Norwich (2014). Also based in the UK, the work of the Migration Museum, the Pitt Rivers Museum and the Horniman Museum are analysed. In Germany, the project Multaka, implemented in five national museums in Berlin by refugees from Syria and Afghanistan, is described. In this case, the refugees mediate the heritage – coming mainly from the Middle East – in Arabic and German, the interpretative authority stemming out of their own expertise and educational background. The other German case study is the Documentation Centre and Museum of Migration (DOMiD), which since the 1980s has collected the visual memory of immigration, while in the Netherlands Sergi explores the work of Humanity House, funded by the Dutch Red Cross.

Each of the case studies is deepened in relation to the migration policies of the different countries and the methodological framework chosen, maintaining a critical eye on the challenges and opportunities suggested by each programme. In the case of the programme developed at the Sainsbury Centre, for example – a case study in which Sergi was directly involved – he points out the issue of ethnicity as well as separation among refugees from different national backgrounds, with the related mistrust and misunderstandings, as critical points. The division caused by the administration of welfare is also a crucial issue which might cause tensions within the group.

What emerges above all from Sergi's reflections and the verbatims published is the risk of flattening complex and varied contexts within a concept of 'community' that is convenient, but fundamentally incorrect. The key to religious affiliation, for example, stirs up preconceived categories: the reading of an object by a member of the Methodist or Pentecostal church can be different from that of a fellow countryman of another (or no) religious belief, and determines the interpretation of sensitive issues such as nudity, femininity, or social behaviour. 'Community' is an elusive concept, and power dynamics in groups are always lurking. In the social configurations emerging through diaspora and asylum, dictated by mobility and

temporariness, interpretative authority passes creatively from hand-to-hand and does not belong entirely to anyone: in this sense, it is important not to take for granted the familiarity with a certain type of craftsmanship or art production.

The notion of community is unstable and ambiguous and it is neither a simple or uncontested word. Communities are shifting and often intangible groups defined by one or more identity markers, experiences or geographical locations. They may be generated through a sense of belonging and/or exclusion. Museums and communities exist within intersecting networks that are shaped by contested histories, politics, economics and value systems. Museums can act as catalysts for social regeneration. Museums can encourage the formation of groups among socially excluded individuals and provide opportunities for civic participation (82).

One of the most interesting parts of the book, in my opinion, is the chapter dedicated to the materiality of the object as a vehicle of stories, an evoker of personal and collective memories, an activator of associations. While many museums in recent years have been fascinated by storytelling as a panacea – the object is the holy grail, magically recomposing fractured and scattered trajectories, past and present, the self and the others – Sergi investigates the possibilities, but also the criticalities, offered by the relationship with the object, especially when it is the result of dispossession and colonial violence. What happens in the observer's gaze in front of objects torn out of their context and forcibly transformed into works of art, or juxtaposed on the basis of their formal aspects? If 'ethnographic collections are fabricated and not found' (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 3), what forms of mediation, and in what ways and at what times, can fill the void of history? How can we also help the audience to grasp the meaning of that object in relation to their own migration trajectory? Sergi refers here to Edward Said's theory (2000) of the *counterpoint*, defined as the juxtaposition of melodies that fail to create a harmonic composition. This concept, applied to museums, proves fertile for explaining how refugees can rely on objects to counteract given ethnographic categories, constructing new ideas of belonging and identity. The object-led methodology thus becomes a site of co-creation of meanings, an ultimately political gesture, as Mears and Modest suggest when they invite a focus on a 'politics of positional difference', with the aim of highlighting inequalities between social groups (Mears and Modest 2012: 299).

A consequence of the object-led methodology is the reflection on the 'body of objects' and the bodily techniques used in the relationship with collections, also with respect to categories such as beauty, decency and modesty. The diasporic body, one that has to learn new rules, reach an always blurred conformity, and adhere to an unspoken protocol, looks at itself in the museum by looking at the collections. In the confrontation among refugees, and between refugees and mediators, the friction between family traditions and new structures, ancient moral codes and new aesthetic paradigms emerges: the museum becomes a place in which to negotiate one's own bodily identity, giving it words and a new three-dimensionality. The urgency of decolonizing museum displays, still linked to a distancing and objectifying look codified in the colonial period, is intertwined in this reflection. Refugees are often depicted as victims, their complexities and trajectories erased by their status, but museums, as Sergi points out, can provide a space for their agency and right to self-description; beyond that, refugee mobilities challenge the traditional idea of borders and might, therefore, contribute to re-shaping ethnographic museums.

Although the author's thoughts on policies towards refugees and asylum seekers are explicit, the question on the meaning of working with refugees is posed – and the answer analysed – with secularity and extreme scientific rigour. A wealth of interdisciplinary references and a clear language are also among the qualities of this excellent volume. For these reasons, the book will be of interest to university students, to the academic and museum field, but also to social and cultural mediators working with migrants and refugees in other fields. The essay offers precious hints for a reflection on the challenges of activism, on the risks of a paternalistic and didactic approach, on the importance of meeting audiences (not only refugees) with respect and delicacy, in a listening attitude, in order to avoid perpetuating stereotypes and prejudices and to take a step forward in the understanding of cultural diversity as a means towards social justice.

**References**

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