

Book Review

Kate Hill (ed), *Museums, Modernity and Conflict: Museums and Collections in and of War since the Nineteenth Century*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2021, hardback £96.00, pp. xii+258

The interplay between museums and war has intensified since the 1800s. That is the clear, compelling message forwarded by Kate Hill's edited compendium *Museums, Modernity and Conflict*. Whether through finding themselves caught up amid war, interpreting war or, perhaps most controversially, contributing to, benefiting from or being founded out of war, the museum as an institution has become intimate with the phenomenon over the past 200 years. Each chapter exemplifies this using the respective author's own creative and informative approach. In introducing them, Hill also articulates her observation of 'a productive relationship between museums and war which is part of the modern world', leading to the contention that 'Museums themselves [...], while no more exclusive to modernity than war, took on their current "modern" form at the same time as war itself was modernising' (2). This volume offers compelling evidence supporting that thesis, which is ripe for further study.

In part one, thematized as 'Collecting and conflict', this volume considers, through two chapters, ways that war has influenced museum development, and that museums present objects collected during war. The first, by Tom Stammers, explores how the London art market exploited opportunities to purchase art from wealthy refugees fleeing European armed conflict during the nineteenth century, pieces which would eventually be acquired by major British museums for their collections. And the second, by Zoe Mercer-Golden, explores how different national museums have interpreted contested antiquities acquired through war, and justified their possession based on the national narrative and experience which each museum represents. Both chapters establish core issues and ideas addressed during the subsequent chapters as regards the connection between museums and the state plus their relationship with society during armed conflict, making them good starting points. Moreover, they could make effective reading for students of museum studies who are studying topics such as the development of the modern museum, representation, and ethics – matters widely written about elsewhere, just not usually in this context.

The second and third parts consider how museums have responded to war in the heat of the moment. Hill suggests that the productive relationship mentioned above is most clearly evidenced during these two sections. Part two, thematized as 'Keeping going?', comprises two chapters addressing historical protective measures performed by several different museums: one by Zoé Vannier on the Louvre Museum's Near Eastern Antiquities Department during the Second World War, and another by Eva March on Catalonian art museums during the Spanish Civil War. These chapters add to a nascent literature regarding historical cultural property protection (other recent examples include Bevan 2006; Pollard 2020; Deans 2022). Both expose challenges when undertaking such work and the need for creative thinking in advance of and in the moment of armed conflict. Vannier's study is particularly interesting in exploring 'positive' working relationships between staff at the Louvre and the occupying German authorities, adding some nuance to the narrative on Nazi behaviour regarding a defeated country's cultural property during their occupation.

In part three, this volume considers the productive relationship via three different yet complementary chapters thematized as 'Propaganda, morale and resistance'. The first, by

Bridget Yates, considers the establishment of the Rufford Village Museum, an initiative to preserve and represent rural life and tradition as the Second World War loomed over and impacted the United Kingdom. The second, by Karin Müller-Kelwing, explores how various German institutions continued a public programme during the Second World War despite their objects having been evacuated – although its section on the staffing of museums under the Third Reich is particularly fascinating and makes worthwhile reading for anybody interested in historical museum administration. And the third, by Evelien Scheltinga, analyses public programming at the Stedelijk Museum and Van Abbemuseum in the Netherlands during the Second World War. Hill appears to have had to work hard here to identify a unified thrust for these three different chapters. In doing so, she has seemingly deployed ideas reminiscent of museum instrumentalization during war as the framing. With Yates' chapter, this involves a museum being used to preserve a fading way of life; with Müller-Kelwing and Scheltinga's, this comprises museums being used to buttress or undermine fascist propaganda. Those interested in museum instrumentalization during war should consider reading these alongside recent works by Pearson (2017) and Redman (2020), who address complimentary issues, ideas and tensions.

Part four, the largest section, addresses war displayed in museums. Thematized as 'Museums of war and conflict', it considers, over four chapters, historical and contemporary collection and curation of war at various museums dealing with conflict: one by Doreen Pastor on the evolution of exhibitions at the former Ravensbrück concentration camp, a second by Peter Elliott on the establishment and development of the Royal Air Force Museum, a third by Kasia Tomasiewicz on the curation of large objects and the peopling of exhibitions at IWM (Imperial War Museums), and a fourth by Sarafina Pagnotta on the establishment and development of the art and memorials collection at the Canadian War Museum. This section may be particularly interesting to practitioners and contemporary museologists. As Tomasiewicz contends, 'previous practices and collecting policies have much to offer contemporary analysis' (215), a sentiment also discussed by Hill elsewhere.¹ This section strikes as being the most sophisticated, offering a balanced synthesis between museological theory and historical, contemporary and near-contemporary practice. Its chapters may be read with further profit alongside Bogumił *et al.* (2015) and Echterkamp and Jaeger's (2019) recent works on historical and contemporary collection and curation of war, and Muchitsch's (2013) work on whether war belongs in museums.

Fundamentally this is a good volume and warmly recommended as offering something for academics, professionals and students alike with interest in museums 'in and of war since the nineteenth century'. While the volume's temporal and geographical setting has understandable limitations – 'there is so much to say that cannot be adequately covered in one volume', explains Hill (8) – the discussion content provides breadth and depth of original ideas with potential for broader applicability beyond the cases presented. This makes the book a worthwhile reference for those reading or working in war museums as well as broader museal contexts and perhaps even allied disciplines and cultural industries.

Endnotes

¹ Kate Hill, 'Why Study Museum History?', Museums and Galleries History Group Blog, 27 May 2017. <http://www.mghg.info/blog/2017/5/27/why-study-museum-history>, accessed 17 January 2022.

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