

## Book Review

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**Virginie Rey, *Mediating Museums: Exhibiting Material Culture in Tunisia (1881-2016)*, Amsterdam: Brill, 2019, hardback/ebook £65.85, pp. xiii+244**

Despite its rich culture, complex history, and location as a crossroads for trade between Africa, Europe and the Middle East, North Africa has received scant attention from international museum scholars. Recent research on the region has focused on the Middle East, particularly Saudi Arabia and Jordan, with works by such authors as Carol Malt and Sarina Wakefield. To a certain extent, studies of Marseille's MUCEM (the Museum of Civilizations of Europe and the Mediterranean) have stood in for in-depth discussions of museums' representations of MENA countries. In this context, Virginie Rey's book, *Mediating Museums: Exhibiting Material Culture in Tunisia (1881-2016)* is a welcome and necessary effort. The book's title might suggest a narrow scope; however, its content is frequently applicable (and applied to) museums throughout the region as well as to the histories of formerly colonized nations. In addition, Rey cites works by a wide variety of theorists, ranging from Erving Goffman to Homi Bhabha, from James Clifford to Michel de Certeau. This deepens her analyses and makes the book even more useful.

Rey's primary thesis is that museums are involved with mediation both as media 'by which a certain social reality is communicated and expressed' and as 'mediators between visitors and the social worlds they inhabit, naturalizing certain cultural values, whilst displacing and diffusing tension and anxieties' (2-3). As her narrative follows the history of museums in Tunisia, emphasizing ethnographic institutions, she deftly illustrates both functions of the term. In the first section, she illustrates how under the French Protectorate, exhibitions often included artisan goods. The latter created and reinforced an 'evolutionary ladder' (53) with French artistry at the top and regional works, perceived as crafts, below them. Such exhibitions illustrated how local items were available for consumption by elites. This section is the strongest in the book, as it includes a history of France's colonization efforts and local resistance. Rey simultaneously provides analysis of the role of museums in other parts of the French empire, referring to institutions in metropolitan France that displayed colonial objects.

Part 1 is followed by a section on early decolonization under Bourguiba. After Tunisia achieved independence, museums took a role in defining nation. The emphasis at the time was on distinguishing modernity and tradition. The third section of the book concentrates on museums between the 1990s and the 2010 revolution. It discusses how museums attempted to connect more to communities as well as how they developed new buildings and greater professionalization. The final section focuses on museums between the revolution of 2010 and 2016. Here, Rey describes the rise of private museums, comparing them to public institutions under government regulation. She also explains how the revolution and ensuing emphasis on national unity created political constraints for museums. The idea that this situation, combined with increased Islamic fundamentalism, limited diversification is intriguing. During this time there were efforts to return mosque sites to religious uses, for example. The section is particularly helpful for thinking about how and why institutions in certain regions are not part of larger attempts to make museums more inclusive. It is humbling and inspiring to read about personnel who put themselves at risk.

Tunisian museums face relatively low visitation rates at a time when other museums are attracting increasing audiences with their attention to interactive programming, community co-curation, and other strategies. The few museums I visited in Tunisia are dusty repositories of

stunning archaeological treasures, which could benefit from more up to date conservation and display methods, not to mention labels that would appeal to the public rather than to scholars. I was shocked when a scholar, also a lead curator, and a guide in another institution freely touched antiquities in their galleries and invited visitors to do so, too.<sup>1</sup> These circumstances in a diverse and multicultural nation with invaluable heritage sites offer thought-provoking comparisons with other MENA states as well as elsewhere. They also offer temporal comparisons since the text begins and ends in periods of when Tunisians face political precarity.

My overall impressions of this book are strongly positive. However, descriptions of museum administrative changes in the past may be useful to Tunisian museum scholars/practitioners, but they can become tedious for the external reader. The book contains too many summaries: in the introduction to the book, in the section headers, and again in the conclusion. The space allotted to these might better have been given to additional descriptions of specific displays and objects – how did they change over time? It would have been interesting to see more of these at each step in the progression. But these are minor quibbles.

During the summer of 2021, Tunisia experienced another political crisis. It is too early to tell how it has affected museums and heritage sites, but the events will certainly add to Rey's narrative. In the meantime, I recommend *Mediating Museums* to a variety of audiences for its discussions critical topics in museology: colonization, decolonization, community connections, defining nations, creating inclusive definitions of heritage, and building diverse audiences.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> I was told that these items were not 'friable', by the archaeologist. If this were fully the case, we would have many more ancient mosaics and carvings available to us.

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