

Book review

Kate Hill, *Culture and Class in English Public Museums, 1850-1914*, Aldershot: Ashgate 2005, £45.00 hardback, 174pp.

This is an engaging and timely book which looks at municipal and not national, English museums in the age of their most intense development, after the series of mid-nineteenth-century Parliamentary Acts which allowed town councils to establish museums and to levy rates to do so. The book is structured thematically rather than chronologically and chapters focus on some of the key areas of interest and debate over recent decades, including: the museum as a disciplinary space; its involvement in the politics of class and consumption; attitudes to material culture in museums; and the ideologies and attitudes which collections, displays and the articulation of museum space may be seen to have embodied. While much attention has been paid elsewhere to the development of national museums and galleries (although there is still much more to do here), this book responds to a distinct gap in the literature. Its level of detail and sustained analysis also mean that it seems literally more substantial than previous histories of municipal museums, such as the celebratory catalogue of the Royal Academy's 1998 *Art Treasures of England* exhibition. The book can also be contextualized in relation to a growing number of doctoral theses – from which it draws – on the history of museums and museology outside of Britain's capital cities, including Hill's own.

Hill does a number of useful things. First, she urges caution when considering the relations between museums, class and power; her analyses counter the simplistic notion that nineteenth-century museums were simply organs of elite power intended to police and mould the working class. Hill argues persuasively that the museum was also an arena for the display and definition of middle class identities, as well as a locus of middle class leisure. This is an important corrective to the monotonous idea that the nineteenth-century museum should be seen primarily in relation to the project of social control. Secondly, Hill's analysis attempts to go beyond the study of the attitudes and intentions of politicians and cultural producers to museums, by examining also the characteristics and qualities of realized buildings and displays, as well as interrogating forms of visitor consumption as closely as documentary evidence permits. This allows us to gain a sense of the extent to which the politics, rhetoric, ideology and debate surrounding museums were carried through into practices of curatorship and visiting, and to the realisation of buildings, spaces and displays. These latter things are harder to get at and require more localized (and more taxing) research into unpublished and archival sources.

In this context some of Hill's findings are revealing. For example, by looking carefully at specific museum buildings, she notes that identifiable resource issues undermined the potential for the architecture and layout of museums to be discursive in terms of presenting theories and narratives, or disciplinary, through their encouragement of visitor self-surveillance and self-regulation. Drawing upon Tony Bennett's Foucauldian analysis of nineteenth-century museum buildings and upon the increasingly fashionable methods of space syntax analysis (which allows for diagrammatic representations of the ways in which museum interiors are articulated, how their interiors communicate with one another and how this determines the movement of visitors), Hill assesses the extent to which museum buildings really can be seen to be disciplinary and/or discursive. Similarly, Hill's account of the factors and groups involved in the determination of the municipal museum is helpful in avoiding the view that individual museums were the product of consensus. Municipal museums, notes Hill, can be seen as the outcome of competition between different groups to define them.

While these are fruitful insights which capture something of the multiplicity, contradiction and complexity inherent to museum identities, there are aspects of this book which work less well. Hill rightly maintains that municipal museums cannot be 'lumped together with national museums as part of an identical phenomenon'; but this does not mean that we should ignore the role of national museums in creating contexts and conventions of culture and practice of importance both within capital cities and without. Where national museums are discussed there is some simplification: Hill notes (with Janet Minihan) that Henry Cole 'favoured a very didactic approach based on the display of clearly labelled examples of good and bad practice' (p. 117); this, as much of the extensive literature on Cole and on the South Kensington Museum attests, is not a fair summary of Cole's attitudes over his long career. One could also take issue with the claim that natural history was the category most linked to 'a visual display of taxonomies'; Hill argues: 'the museum was a vital tool for learning and researching in natural knowledge... in a way it was not for other subjects' (p. 74), whereas there are extremely complex taxonomical schemes developed for national art collections in the mid-nineteenth century which very much resemble the model of learning and researching which Hill discusses. This is not to suggest that Hill is wrong on this point, but that there are complexities and relationships being overlooked, such as the relationships between disciplines, and circumstances such as the essentially financial difficulties municipal museums faced in assembling art collections which could be articulated according to such taxonomies.

Hill's attention to architecture and layout is very worthwhile in general, although more awareness could be shown of the cultures of production of museum architecture and how the development of public buildings was regulated. As stated, Hill rightly points out that resource issues influenced public museum building, and the importance of this lies in its affirmation that the buildings were not perfect, unadulterated expressions of the intentions those who willed them into being or who managed them, and should not be taken as such. However, Hill falls into a similar trap in overlooking other factors influencing the museum building; in particular, the role of architects is not explored as much as it could be. Architects (and builders and decorators) brought specific ambitions, influences and constraints to the design and construction of public museums, and the channels of communication between them and their paymasters were often unclear. This means that the layout of museum buildings cannot be effectively 'decoded' without reference to the cultures and practices of architectural production or to the personal agendas of building professionals. In this context some of the conclusions drawn by Hill are a little risky: for example, she argues that the extension to the Liverpool Museum in 1906, which made the layout less rational and regulatory, can be taken to suggest that discursive potential was now being prioritized over the policing of visitor behaviour; in fact there may be many other explanations, not all of which may be so inherently museological in character.

In general though, this is a sophisticated and persuasive book, which I imagine will form an important reference point for scholars working in similar areas. It surveys relatively new territory well and forms a very worthwhile contribution to the literature on museum history as well as to the debates about museum historiography.

References

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