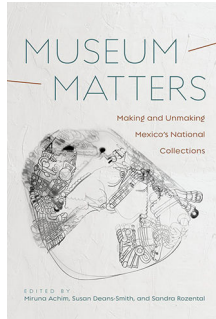


MIRUNA ACHIM, SUSAN DEANS-SMITH, AND SANDRA ROZENTAL (EDS.), *MUSEUM MATTERS. MAKING AND UNMAKING MEXICO'S NATIONAL COLLECTIONS*

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The history of museums and their collections has long been told as a cumulative process. In this view, collections grew steadily and were transformed from a state of initial chaos to a strict order. Thereby, the objects in the collections would unfold their supposed inherent meaning. This also holds true for the histories of the national collections in Mexico City. As one of the editors of this volume, Miruna Achim, states, the history of the Museo Nacional de Antropología has mainly been told “as one of the smooth unfolding and unveiling of a national essence” (p. 221). For some time now, however, this narrative has been called into question. Arjun Appadurai (1988) and Lorraine Daston (2000), among others, have already cogently shown that the use and meaning of objects depend on the context in which they are embedded and are therefore not intrinsic but highly contin-

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gent and contested.¹ J. M. M. Alberti (2009) and James Delbourgo (2017) drew on these approaches in their ground-breaking studies of the Manchester Museum and the British Museum respectively.² Chris Gosden and Frances Larson (2007) further introduced the idea of the “relational museum” in their pioneering study on the collections of the Pitt Rivers Museum, where they convincingly demonstrate that the meaning of an object depends on its entanglement in social and political relations.³ Following these more recent approaches, the panel “Matters of State, Matters of Dispute”, organized by Miruna Achim in 2018, invited the participants to “generate a conversation among historians, philosophers of science, archaeologists, and anthropologists who work on the convoluted histories of Mexico’s collections” (p. ix).

The insightful volume *Museum Matters. Making and Unmaking Mexico’s National Collections* resulted from this conference. Carefully compiled and well designed, the editors Miruna Achim, Susan Deans-Smith, and Sandra Rozental bring together ten essays by anthropologists, archaeologists, and historians of science, all of whom are among the leading experts on Mexican collections and their histories. While most of the essays focus on the collections or particular objects from the Museo Nacional de Antropología and the former Museo Nacional de México, some of the authors also cover other national collections like the Museo de Historia Natural or the Museo Nacional de las Culturas. All of the essays, however, “seek”, as the editors highlight in their inspiring introduction, “to historicize and complicate the emergence, consolidation, and dispersal of Mexico’s national museum complex by telling the stories of the objects that were part of the national collections at different moments” (p. 12). In doing so, they fundamentally contradict the nationalist narratives that still prevail in some collections and exhibitions. These narratives regard especially the Museo Nacional de Antropología as “a storehouse of collections presented as the collective heritage of a homogenous national whole” (p. 8). But, as the editors convincingly argue, neither do the individual objects have an intrinsic meaning as national heritage, nor do the collections and museums represent a fixed entity.

In order to show the contingency of the meaning and use of the objects and the constant instability and fluidity of the collections and exhibitions, the book is organized in three thematic parts. The three essays of the first section – “Canons” – investigate how par-

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Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge 1988; Lorraine Daston (ed.), *Biographies of Scientific Objects*, Chicago 2000.

2

Samuel J. M. M. Alberti, *Nature and Culture. Objects, Disciplines and the Manchester Museum*, Manchester 2009; James Delbourgo, *Collecting the World. The Life and Curiosity of Hans Sloane*, London 2017; Chris Gosden and Francis Larson, *Knowing Things. Exploring the Collections at the Pitt Rivers Museum, 1884–1945*, Oxford 2007.

3

Gosden and Larson, *Knowing Things*.

ticular objects, collections, and institutions may have contributed to the formation and transformation of canons. In doing so, the essays aim to “illuminate how categories of inclusion and exclusion are configured and reconfigured over time as collecting practices, values, and tastes change” (p. 13). Therefore, Susan Deans-Smith’s essay “‘A History Worthy of the Grandeur of the Spanish Nation’. Collecting Mexican Antiquity in the Viceroyalty of New Spain” goes farther back in time than the other essays to study how the meaning and value of some pre-Hispanic objects changed when they were placed in the Real Academia de San Carlos at the end of the colonial period. Incorporated into this prestigious royal institution in the urban space, they were detached from their rural-indigenous contexts and served “as evidence of a glorious past” worth studying. Their meaning and value, however, remained contested. Indigenous inhabitants of Mexico City started to venerate a publicly exhibited monument, leading the viceroy to rebury the “idol”. At the same time, the European classicism that dominated royal institutions in Mexico excluded pre-Hispanic artefacts from what were considered “beautiful” works of art.

This perception of pre-Hispanic objects, however, changed in the nineteenth century as Miruna Achim and Bertina Olmedo Vera pointedly demonstrate in their essay “Forgery and the Science of the ‘Authentic’”. In order to illustrate this change, the authors examine a collection of forgeries or “fakes” which were deposited in the storerooms of the Museo Nacional de Antropología carefully separated from the “authentic” objects. Based on the fact that it became increasingly important to distinguish “authentic” objects from fakes, Achim and Olmedo Vera deduce an increased value of Mexican artefacts. Simultaneously, they postulate “an epistemological connection between fakes and ‘authentic’ objects in the museum” (p. 59). With striking examples, they show how, on the one hand, experts in museums became increasingly familiar with craft techniques of pre-Hispanic artisans. On the other hand, this would also have been true for the forgers, who imitated these ancient techniques, making it again difficult to distinguish the “authentic” from the fake. In the last contribution to this section, “Body Objects in Transit. National Pathology between Anatomy Museums and the Museo Nacional de México, 1853–1912”, Laura Cházaro looks at some “anatomical pieces” which circulated between different collections in the second half of the nineteenth century (p. 81). Thereby, Cházaro argues that the meaning of these objects did not just depend on the institutional context in which they were exhibited or stored. The meanings also depended on who produced, collected, and donated them. Moreover, even though by the end of the nineteenth century most of these objects were incorporated into the same canon and were to function as expressions of a specifically Mexican pathology in an increasingly racialized medicine, their meanings remained contingent.

The second part of the book – “Fragments” – looks at objects that, at least for a certain time, have been forgotten or fragmented

or have completely disappeared from sight. Thus, in the nineteenth century, many pre-Hispanic objects were indeed broken into pieces. This also holds true for the Cross of Palenque whose trajectory is studied by Christina Bueno in her essay “The Tangled Journey of the Cross of Palenque”. The effort to bring back together the scattered parts of the Cross of Palenque during the government of Porfirio Díaz symbolizes for Bueno their increasing interest in effectively controlling all the territories within its borders as well as the meaning of the pre-Hispanic past. This was, as Bueno further argues, not just a matter of domestic political control. Rather, the Porfiriato wanted to show the international community that they were a sovereign, modern state, capable of fully controlling the material culture that existed within its territory. Frida Gorbach studies quite a different kind of objects in her essay “Past and Present at the Museo de Historia Natural”. Focusing on five natural history specimens from the Museo de Historia Natural de la Ciudad de México, Gorbach does not just demonstrate how many specimens got lost or were withdrawn from different collections, she also reveals their deep entanglement with colonialism and deconstructs the temporality attributed to these objects in natural history collections. While the essay is undoubtedly one of the most interesting and stimulating in the whole book, Gorbach addresses almost too many topics in the relatively short contribution, which makes it difficult to follow the argumentation at certain points.

The two last essays in this section “Clues and Gazes. Indigenous Faces in the Museo Nacional de Antropología” and “Unsettled Objects. The Pacific Collection at the Museo Nacional de las Culturas” by Haydeé López Hernández and Carlos Mondragón, respectively, discuss particular “ethnological imaginaries” prevailing in some mid-twentieth-century collections in Mexico City (p. 192). López Hernández for his part looks at a collection of photographs from the basement of the Archivo Fotográfico de Etnografía. Because it is not evident from the existing records why the photographs were made and by whom, it is difficult to decipher the exact meaning they should have in the collection. López Hernández assumes they were taken to visually document the Mexican ethnicities. Such an effort would date back to the nineteenth century when anthropologists tried to visualize “the supposed historical continuity of the populations” (p. 176). However, as the author further argues, the photographs are strikingly different from those of the nineteenth century. Depicting people in everyday situations, the photographs seem to adapt stylistic elements from the emerging photojournalism. Equally torn between the ethnological imaginary from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is the collection of 214 objects from Oceania. Mondragón shows how these objects served to stabilize the idea of the Olmec as the “mother culture” of ancient Mexico, which diffused throughout the region and would seem to differ significantly from those of other regions, such as Oceania (p. 198). Whereas this idea strongly resembles the diffusionism of the nineteenth century, Mondragón points out that by focusing on

stylistic elements rather than social evolutionism, the collection represents at the same time a break with this approach.

In the last section of the book – “Disturbances” – the essays deal with the silencing and violence inherent in the museum space and collections. Thus, Mario Rufer emphasizes that it is precisely the aspect of violence which is often made invisible. In “Conjuring Violence Away with Culture. The Purépecha National Emblem in the Museo Nacional de Antropología” he convincingly uses the Purépecha National Emblem as a case study to show how a symbol of war became an expression of artisanal skills of the Purépecha people in the museum space. While the exhibition paints a picture of the peaceful coexistence of different indigenous cultures within the nation, outside the museum space the Purépecha continue to fight against the expropriation of their communal lands. The two other fascinating and insightful essays of this section, “Tehuantepec on Display. Tlalocs, Theodolites, Fishing Traps, and the Cultures of Collecting in the Mid-Nineteenth Century” by Miruna Achim and “A Monolith on the Street” by Sandra Rozental coherently follow this line of reflection. Achim studies two ceramic objects from the island of Manopostiac which entered the collection together with minerals and plants removed during a survey in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Thereby, Achim lucidly analyses how the engineers considered not only the attitude of the local indigenous population towards the pre-Hispanic objects to be backward and useless, but also their actually highly elaborate fishing techniques. By looking at the long history of the huge monolith from San Miguel Coatlinchan, which stands today at the Paseo de la Reforma in Mexico City, Rozental observes the same dichotomies between “resource and waste, conservation and destruction” (p. 237). Thus, the handling of the monolith by the local indigenous population was portrayed as useless and even harmful by the “experts” in the museum and the engineers who were commissioned to transport the object to Mexico City. By highlighting these dichotomies, the essays of this final section highlight once more a central theme that runs through this entire book. Moreover, they clearly show that the practices and narratives of the engineers and museum experts were violent towards both the indigenous people and the objects themselves. The monolith now stands in a harmful urban environment and some of the statues from the island of Manopostiac were destroyed during their removal.

Overall, all the essays collected in this stimulating book consistently follow the questions raised in the introduction, demonstrating how the meaning and use of objects in the national collections in Mexico have always been, and still are, contingent and contested. It is further immediately apparent throughout all the contributions that the authors are not only very familiar with the latest approaches to the history of museums and collections, but also have an excellent knowledge of the objects and collections they study. Finally, the variety of historical sources studied in *Museum Matters* is outstanding. The authors work with written sources like museum

catalogues and protocols, visual sources such as photographs, oral sources such as interviews, and especially with material sources ranging from pre-Hispanic objects to fishing traps and fakes and forgeries. Thus, the breadth and quality of the scholarship, together with the innovative use of a wide range of historical sources offer an inspiring and insightful read.