

A World of Museums

by Elizabeth Dospel Williams

Adopting an ethnographical approach on museums, Peggy Levitt explains how, as a crucial link between past and present, the local and the global, they play a political role in addressing questions of nationalism and cosmopolitanism.

Reviewed: Peggy Levitt, *Artifacts and Allegiances: How Museums Put the Nation and the World on Display*, Oakland (CA), University of California Press, 2015.

What roles do museums play in promoting national and cosmopolitan identities, while also retaining the memories of past narratives and shaping future ones? These questions emerge throughout Peggy Levitt's *Artifacts and Allegiances: How Museums Put the Nation and the World on Display*, and feel especially urgent in the age of Brexit, Donald Trump, and increasing nationalistic sentiment in Europe. Indeed, the book's focus on the idealized cosmopolitanism privileged in many of today's museums feels especially relevant in a world where free trade, borderless travel, and identity politics face increasing scrutiny: "So where do we learn about what we all have in common or learn to feel a sense of responsibility for groups and problems other than our own? How do we learn to live in increasingly diverse neighborhoods and to connect that experience to people living on the other side of the world? How and where do museums help?" (6). At once a thoroughly researched, academic book (its footnotes and bibliography stretch over 70 pages), Levitt admirably aims her book at a general audience, "so that museum professionals, colleagues, students, and my ninety-five-year-old father will all want to read it." (12).

Displaying identity politics

The development of museums in late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century nationalistic contexts has been well-covered in scholarship, particularly in work on European

and Middle Eastern institutions.¹ Levitt instead takes an ethnographical, even sociological, approach in her study: Rather than contextualizing museums' origins and the on-going importance of these foundational moments to the museum's core missions (as would be the case in any historically-focused study), she explores the current moods, opinions, and self-perceptions of the institutions' staff and core constituencies. Levitt also departs from historical analyses in taking a cross-cultural, comparative approach, with case studies from Europe, North America, the Middle East, and Asia. Diachronic and synchronic analyses consider both the local histories of chosen institutions and their broader contemporary contexts. Indeed, her decision to understand *today's* museums makes the book particularly appealing to general and specialist readers alike. Levitt demonstrates that museums, far from innocent places of display, are in fact places where identity politics play out on both local and international levels.

Her first comparative chapter, for example, looks to ethnographic museums and exhibitions on immigration in Sweden and Denmark to understand how museums in these countries present narratives of nationhood ("Chapter 1: The Bog and the Beast. The View of the Nation and the World from Stockholm, Copenhagen, and Gothenburg"). Levitt argues that the complex colonial histories of these countries, their differing attitudes towards immigration, and their respective governments' conceptualizations of their roles on the international stage have all shaped permanent and special exhibitions, staffing decisions, and public programming. She argues that Swedish museums, drawing on rich ethnographic collections, gathered at the height of the country's colonial powers, attempt to convey both a responsibility to the displayed past and a commitment to present the country's international political role today. This allows Swedish museums to emphasize "deep connections to the world beyond [their] borders" (41). In contrast, Levitt contends that Denmark's museums turn inwards to "celebrate Danishness," as part of this smaller country's efforts at grappling with the meaning of Danish ethnicity and identity (42).

Chapter 2 ("The Legislator and the Priest: Cosmopolitan Nationalism in Boston and New York") turns to American museums to understand how similar issues of cosmopolitanism and nationalism play out in a country of immigrants. Levitt first argues that the nineteenth-century roots of American museums have created vastly different foundations for the spectrum of cosmopolitanism and nationalism presented in these institutions. As civic foundations intended to equalize and educate the broader public, American museums' missions from the start reflected Americans' self-conscious constructions of national identity. However, Levitt argues that institutions in different cities approach "American" identity in a variety of ways, reflecting particularities of city history and culture. New York institutions like El Museo del Barrio and the Brooklyn Museum understand themselves as reflecting the

¹ Matthew Rampley (University of Birmingham) currently leads a project on applied art museums and national identities in the Austro-Hungarian empire; Wendy M. K. Shaw (Freie Universität, Berlin) has published widely on the development of national museums in late Ottoman and early Republican Turkey; Elliot Colla (Georgetown University) and Donald Malcolm Reid (Georgia State University) have explored the importance of archaeology and museology in emerging notions of statehood in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Egypt.

cultural melting-pot of the city's populations with a strong emphasis on ethnic identity. In contrast, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts instead must be understood within the more conservative, cerebral cultural landscape of a city dominated by universities.

New cultural institutions : becoming global

Levitt's third chapter turns to newly-formed museums in the Middle East and Asia. Whereas the collections explored in previous chapters represent the legacy of centuries of collecting and display, those in Doha and Singapore have evolved in the later twentieth- and early twenty-first- centuries alongside rapid developments in their respective cities and nations. Levitt argues that in Qatar, for example, collections acquisition and museum construction in the past twenty-five years reflect the government's self-conscious efforts to museums as "part of a strategic master plan to use cultural institutions...to reposition [the country] as a regional, if not global player" (91). Qatari museums like the Mathaf or the Museum of Islamic Art employ foreign specialists with transnational expertise, part of the government's aspirational efforts to place these new institutions on the level of more established collections in Europe and America. Levitt notes, however, that museums have not yet fully connected to local populations, in large part because until recently, Qatari audiences had no such tradition of attending them (114). In contrast, institutions in Singapore actively draw from the city's local history as a colonial entrepôt, where British definitions of citizenship and ethnicity (Chinese, Malays, Indians, and "other") still carry weight. Levitt argues that Singaporean institutions at once uphold these identities, while also attempting to define shared values expected of all citizens: Museums in Singapore therefore focus on a distinctly local identity, one that had always been and continues to be "eclectic" and "multiethnic" (106). By creating a narrative of cosmopolitanism *avant la lettre* and by pushing cultural hybridity an asset in the global marketplace, the government "sees museums as an important vehicle for transmitting an official version of the past that translates easily into the Singapore it needs for the future" (132).

Conclusion

Levitt's book is multilayered, offering entry points to anyone interested in museology, the history of collecting, and the connections between political and cultural sectors. Her examples explore museums' self-perceptions on the spectrum of nationalism and cosmopolitanism in refreshing ways not commonly seen in work in this field. Intriguingly, Levitt's position as a museum outsider is both a weakness and a strength of this book. She does not delve into museums' day-to-day operational activities, for example, a point that

comes through most particularly in her evaluations of museums' permanent and special exhibitions. Whereas Levitt relies primarily on exhibition making in her broader arguments about museum's attitudes towards the local and the global, one could equally argue that exhibitions are in fact very poor evidence for museum's broader and systemic ideologies. Special exhibitions, for example, are better viewed as idiosyncratic negotiations of individual curators' visions (aesthetic, intellectual, or ideological) with museums' practical needs (limitations of time, money, and collections), rather than strictly social statements aimed at shaping public discourse. Permanent exhibitions, which entail many years of research, conservation work, and funding, are slow moving and thus arguably problematic to equate with rapidly changing views on cosmopolitanism. Still, objectivity about institutional mission is hard to come by in large institutions like museums, and for this reason Levitt's observations about her selected institutions' self-perceptions are especially valuable.

The role of museums in promoting social activism is perhaps the most fascinating topic implicated in this nuanced book. After several decades in which globalism, free-movement, and cultural connectivity have been viewed as overwhelmingly positive attributes, a growing sense of nationalism, isolationism, and tribalism has emerged in the West: Elections in Europe and the United States in the past several years have abundantly proven this point, as communities turn inwards to themselves and shun elite expertise. Levitt's book is timely as museums ponder their capacity to promote inclusive and empathetic thinking by exposing visitors to other periods, cultures, and communities through exhibitions, public programming, and publications. Rather than viewing themselves as transparent repositories for knowledge or collections of materials, museums of all stripes and sizes might begin to understand themselves as agents of cultural critique and social activism, promoting encounters among diverse individuals and groups to convene, clash, and learn from one another. If Levitt's book addresses the questions "Where Do We Come From" and "What Are We," it is left to museum directors, curators, educators, and staff to respond: "Where Are We Going?"

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