

## Community Relations and Social Value in the Museum World

Review by Jesse Van Hoy

Richard Sandell, ed.

*Museums, Society, Inequality.*

Abingdon: Routledge, 2002

Moira G. Simpson.

*Making Representations: Museums in the Post-Colonial Era, Revised Edition.*

Abingdon: Routledge, 2001

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One of the most daunting challenges facing the modern museum profession is the struggle to identify and address the needs of a multitude of audiences. In many cases, centuries of institutionalized racism, adverse social conditions, or the pursuit of the colonial project have systematically marginalized the communities in question. Others have emerged as a result of shifting definitions of the term 'community.' Museums have an obligation to heed their cries for a voice in their own representation. They are more than capable of performing great services for these and all other sections of society; it is only a question of will.

*Making Representations: Museums in the Post-Colonial Era* and *Museums, Society, Inequality* tackle the many facets of this issue. The authors demonstrate that each community or group brings a unique set of grievances, concerns, and values to the table. Both volumes deliver the resounding message of the need for museums to work with these communities in a sensitive and cooperative manner. Moreover, the books suggest that such cooperation need not be a response to pressure to conform to standards of political correctness. Rather, the case studies employed show that such a reassessment of museum practice can produce tangible social benefits for the heritage sector, the aggrieved communities, and the greater public.

### ***Making Representations: Museums in the Post-Colonial Era***

As the subtitle suggests, Moira G. Simpson's book examines museums in countries that have played the roles of colonizer and colony. She draws examples from the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States. The common thread here is the power relationship that once existed between these nations: the latter four countries were jewels in the imperial crown of Great Britain.

Simpson chose these particular former British possessions because they all contain significant indigenous populations that were continually subjugated by the colonial structures and the independent governments that took their place. This treatment informed the manner in which museums represented them and subsequent minority groups. She argues that the demands of these groups are the reason that the selected nations are at the forefront of the representation sea change taking place in the heritage sector (p. 2). The post-colonial museum's response is the subject of Simpson's investigation.

The author's critique of the contemporary museum landscape unfolds in three acts, each of which is supported by a bevy of case studies that are both relevant and compelling. Simpson first outlines the circumstances that have led to the problems facing indigenous and minority communities in the heritage sector. Several especially insensitive or ill-conceived exhibitions, including *Into the Heart of Africa* (pp. 26-28) and *First Encounters: Spanish Explorations in the Caribbean and the United States, 1492-1570* (pp. 40-41), are recounted in detail. These examples demonstrate the degree to which the disregard for native values has been institutionalized. The curators believed

that they were shedding new light on previously underrepresented topics. However, by treating Africans and indigenous Americans as subjects to be studied rather than living peoples to be engaged, these museum professionals only perpetuated the problem.

Simpson does a fine job of contextualizing this conflict. She does not vilify mainstream museums. These accounts of poor decisions are followed by tales of the subsequent efforts to remedy them. Most museums seem willing to work with subject communities following errors in judgment, but it is the recurrence of such errors that underlines the need for a managerial paradigm shift (p. 69).

At this point, Simpson moves on to the next phase of her project: an overview of museums that successfully convey indigenous or minority values. The most significant aspect of all of the case studies here is that they highlight institutions that are run by the source communities themselves. Most of these museums are incorporated into the tribal or community structure, or at least have a significant number of community members as staff, curators, or trustees. Tribal cultural centres such as the 'Ksan Historic Indian Village in British Columbia (pp. 149-152) and 'spirit houses' in Papua New Guinea (pp. 112-113) allow indigenous groups to take matters of representation into their own hands, with great benefit to their cultures and local economies.

Again, the author maintains a balanced view of the situation by citing examples of true collaboration between major state museums and members of source communities. The National Museum of the American Indian is an example of an entire institution founded upon this principle (pp. 167-169). In Australia, the Koorie Heritage Trust of the Museum of Victoria employs Aboriginal staff in the management and interpretation of its artefacts (pp. 130-132). The case studies presented in this segment of the book demonstrate that, both within the mainstream and without, the way for museums to move forward is through the empowerment of the communities being represented. This is a sensible approach. Partnerships should be encouraged as they maximize the resources available for projects and share the results with all of the associates.

The final section of *Making Representations* addresses a very sensitive issue within the museum world: the repatriation of human remains, related grave goods, and other cultural property. This has deep cultural and emotional ramifications for the communities in question. For the institutions, the very foundations of their collections may be at stake.

Simpson enumerates the policies that have been developed in each of the four countries regarding the respect shown to human remains in accordance with indigenous traditions. They have all made strides to address this important 'bone of contention,' as she puns in one chapter title. She describes the changes that have been made since the passages of the Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in 1990, which calls for the return of all identifiable human remains held by federally funded museums to the proper tribal authorities (pp. 228-231). She also notes that museums in Canada have been able to make progress in this endeavour without the pressure of a legislative mandate. Major museums in New Zealand are even campaigning for the return of Maori artefacts and remains from collections overseas (pp. 231-236).

Not to overlook the museum community's interests, Simpson goes on to explain why curators often seek alternatives to repatriation whenever possible. She herself is a museum professional, and is not calling for the wholesale dismantling of the world's collections. The artefacts and remains that museums hold are, after all, valuable sources of information that may yet yield research at an unknown point in time (pp. 186-188). It is not simply a battle over possession.

With objects of ritual or religious importance, many museums have negotiated arrangements with the source communities that allow them special access to their collections for use in ceremonies. In return the objects remain in safe and sensitive museum storage, which is often designed under advisement from elders or other leaders. Simpson characterizes this development as an example of the shift from museum ownership to museum custodianship of cultural property (pp. 200, 211-214). This is an ideal situation, for it pays respect to the values of indigenous communities while keeping research avenues open.

There is still much more progress to be made, but Simpson believes that the future will be bright if museum professionals continue to make the right decisions (p. 266). The injection of indigenous values enriches the stories that are told and tells them from the perspective of the living cultures behind the artefacts. This book is at once sobering and refreshing. Simpson points out the faults, both past and present, of the museum community, but the entire project is predicated upon the belief that some institutions are moving in the right direction with regard to representation. It is an astute and constructive assessment that should be read by anyone interested in the future of the profession.

### ***Museums, Society, Inequality***

This book is an edited volume that both widens the context of the issues discussed in *Making Representations* and raises some new ones. Editor Richard Sandell has selected essays that focus upon concepts such as the duality of social inclusion and exclusion, the implementation of plans to extend museum services to audiences that have traditionally been ignored by the profession, and the social utility of museums. By employing this social exclusion schema, Sandell's project encompasses more groups than Simpson's, which adheres to ethnic criteria of community identity.

Sandell sets the scene by describing the modern museum as a place in which the act of collecting, which ought to be treated as the means to the end of serving the public good, has become an end in itself (p. xvii). Value construction is secondary to catalogue construction. His ultimate aim is to present essays that show the potential, and indeed the duty, of museums to serve their respective communities in their entirety and enact meaningful social change.

Sandell divides the papers into three categories: Museums and society, Strategies for inclusion, and Towards the inclusive museum. However, these three parts are rather poorly defined. This is especially true of the latter two. Many of the essays could be shuffled between the different sections without adding to or detracting from the framework Sandell attempts to build. Most of them are fine pieces of scholarship in and of themselves, but the editor could have simply presented the book as a reader on topics concerning value

and social inclusion in museums without squeezing the papers into clumsy boxes.

A number of essays address the arrival to the mainstream of communities that were once considered to be on the fringe of society. These include homosexuals, the physically disabled, and people with mental or emotional disorders. The chapters describe the historical neglect, both in representation and service, of these groups by the museum community and recent attempts to resolve it. The authors provide interesting anecdotes about the resultant new projects, which have implications that reach beyond their immediate circumstances. They are curative measures for specific groups, but they also speak volumes about the ability of museums to serve the general public.

Angela Vanegas' chapter entitled 'Representing lesbians and gay men in British social history museums' addresses the chronic issue of the invisibility of the homosexual population in cultural institutions. She notes that when their existence is acknowledged in museums, it is typically in reference to exotic oddities such as sadomasochism or the AIDS epidemic. This condescending practice harkens back to the *curios* of the Age of Enlightenment and does not afford homosexuals the luxury of being represented as normal people. Vanegas goes on to describe her own museum's innovative exhibition that presented homosexuality as one of many valid lifestyles present in the town of Croydon (pp. 99-103). The success of such an exhibition is a testament to the cultural influence of museums. By choosing to include homosexuals in these important public institutions, a mandate is given for people to accept them as members of society.

The physically handicapped are another group that have made huge strides over the last century in terms of social inclusion. The Annie Delin essay 'Buried in the footnotes' points out that they, too, have historically been represented as curiosities in artistic representation, when they are represented at all. Delin lists a number of key victories on the museum front for the physically disabled in terms of representation as well as access. Those with both disabilities and great talent need not be portrayed in the stereotypical fashion as strugglers against adversity. Their handicap is just another one of their vital statistics, like their gender or their ethnicity (pp. 93-94).

The same attitude is displayed in Lois Silverman's chapter on the therapeutic value of museums, which is one of the book's most compelling essays. It chronicles her collaborative projects between museums and wellness facilities, including rehabilitation programs, nursing homes, and hospice centres. She emphasizes the shared focus on principles like aesthetics, memory, and learning as keys to the success of the pilot programs developed between the museums and the health facilities, which helped return order to the lives of a number of patients. One of the most important points Silverman makes is the assertion that these individuals do not need to be seen as pitiful because mental health is crucial to all human beings. We all need to maintain balance (pp. 75-76). This egalitarian notion promotes the museum's role as a resource for the entire community to utilize. It is a space in which all people can come together to share their experiences and perspectives.

The book's other major contribution is the case it makes for the positive social value of these institutions. Carol Scott's 'Measuring social value' provides a competent analysis of the many *quantifiable* benefits that regular museum visits can bring to a population. As Scott observes, the need for museums to demonstrate their utility arises from the constant struggle to secure funding from governments, charities, corporations, and other bodies. The heritage sector is in competition with other national concerns such as defence, healthcare, and education, all of which may seem to have more tangible outcomes for the average citizen. However, she cites studies performed in the United Kingdom that have identified a host of areas in which museums facilitate both individual and communal wellbeing. A brief list of the long-term social benefits includes increased self-esteem, promotion of national and local identities, development of personal creativity, educational value, and economic benefits via tourism (pp. 47-52).

Scott stresses the need for all museums to conduct empirical studies of their own value. This is very sound advice, especially in an age when public money is in short supply. Her goal is to make a case for the justification of current spending. However, the stronger and more implicit point is that once their social utility has been proven, it should be much easier for museums to secure even more funding and continue their important work. This could have been made clearer in the essay, but it is insightful nonetheless.

These two books compliment one another rather nicely as overviews of the state of the museum profession in terms of community relations and social value. *Making Representations'* narrow focus is well suited to the delicate microcosm of the status of indigenous peoples in the museum world. *Museums, Society, Inequality* takes a step back and considers the rest of the picture. Despite its awkward and imposed structure, it presents a number of quality papers that highlight the social utility of museums and its potential for applicability to all communities, if a commitment is made on the part of the professionals. Together the two volumes offer them a clear challenge. The authors demonstrate that the post-colonial museum has the tools for fair representation in its hands. They simply need to be put to use.