

Review Essay: A Future for Museums?*

***Do Museums Still Need Objects?* Steven Conn. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010. 272 pp.**

***Museums in a Troubled World: Renewal, Irrelevance or Collapse.* Robert R. Janes. New York: Routledge, 2009. 224 pp.**

Eric Gable

It is almost axiomatic that one can use the past to imagine (and therefore potentially prefigure) the future, and the authors of both of the books under review do that for the future of museums. Robert R. Janes wants to do more than predict; he wants to push museums to do nothing less than help lead humanity toward ways of solving the world's biggest problems, central among them global warming, but also to invent alternatives to the ever-increasing reliance on models for civil society that are derived from radical and unsustainable ideologies of capitalism. Janes is an erstwhile archeologist who worked with Dene hunters in the boreal forest of Northern Canada, a place at once rugged and hostile yet congenial to humans if they form small highly flexible and cooperative bands. Janes was also the CEO of the Glenbow Museum in Calgary—one of Canada's ten largest—and he is currently a consultant and editor of *Museum Management and Curatorship*. Janes' vision for the future is utopian; his past is at times prehistoric. Calgary with its glitzy skyline and trendy neighborhoods is not a part of the story. The Dene and the environment to which they have adapted are central to it.

Steve Conn has a less exalted vision for the future of museums, although he also has an agenda beyond mere forecast. To remake the future, he wants museums to remember their roles as producers of a certain kind of civility and to continue to focus on this core mission. Conn, a historian, studies cultural contexts of shifts in museum practices as revealed through the careers of founders and directors, and in the trajectories of exhibits at specific deftly sketched sites: The Franklin Institute in Philadelphia, the Freer Gallery in Washington DC, the Museum of Natural History in New York, the (now forgotten) Philadelphia Commercial Museum, and several others. His past extends fleetingly into the late-18th century, but dwells for the most part in the late-19th to the late-20th century. It is a past in which museums and cities grew up together. His future for museums requires the city, and assumes that some sort of symbiosis between the city and the museum will be salutary for both.

The two men are, in short, very differently positioned and very different in their sensibilities. Janes works in museums; but he is relentlessly critical of them, attacking most of their current taken for granted practices. Conn works on museums; yet, unlike many of his peers who disparage the museum for that institution's role in producing what they often characterize as insidious justifications for the status quo, he clearly likes them, and takes pleasure in visiting

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them. Indeed, his book is in part framed as a defense of museums (and museum goers) against their critics.

Conn begins with two observations. There has been a recent explosion in the number of museums world-wide and they are ever more popular among their public—a “second ‘golden age’” (p. 1) for museum construction that echoes the late-19th century boom that brought us the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the American Museum of Natural History, to name the two most iconic. Yet, in the era of this explosion with its globalizing efforts to replicate through museums what has come to be known as the “Bilbao effect,” a scholarly literature on museums also emerged that was relentlessly critical of them. In Conn’s appraisal the critique is Michel Foucault as parody: “in some of this literature museums resemble penitentiaries, but with better interior decorating” (p. 3) and “as any resident of the former Soviet Union will happily tell you, a day in the Hermitage is not the same as a day in the Gulag” (p. 3).

I had fun reading phrases like that. Conn obviously enjoys critiquing the critics, although the series of quips does not add up to an argument. More important is his observation that the study of museums, like cultural studies more generally, has relentlessly (and pathetically) conflated the politics of representation with politics that matter. Thus in the literature we have the endlessly repeated (but about different venues in different parts of the world) “intervention” (note how muscular the word, and note how ubiquitous it has become) by the cultural critic who deconstructs an exhibit, exposing it for its racism or classism or sexism. Such an “intervention” is counted in the academy as a political act with the museum cast as a villain as villainous as Goldman Sachs.

Although Conn clearly enjoys fighting hyperbole with hyperbole, he raises a crucial question about how we are to understand those who study museums and critique them: why do they visit museums? We, who do this kind of work, are endlessly fascinated with why visitors visit and what they get out of their experiences, but we usually leave ourselves out of the picture. Conn, wondering why “the vast bulk of writing about museums focuses on art museums and anthropological collections” (p. 5), rather than science or technology museums, answers hypothetically that most museum scholars would rather spend time with art and ethnological or archeological artifacts (meanwhile, “sneaking off guiltily to the cafe or the gift shop” [p. 5]) than they would with science displays because, “perhaps these humanists suffer like so many of us from a general scientific illiteracy” (p. 5) The point is well taken, but, to me, off target. It is not scientific illiteracy that keeps the humanist scholars out of science museums but class of the kind Pierre Bourdieu or Paul Fussell explored. Science museums are often tacky. They are full of shouting children; their cafes and gift shops are down market. You get better food and more aesthetically pleasing baubles at art museums, and you pay about the same. But a visit to a science museum or an aquarium or zoo is educational—so the parents are always promised, even as they also know that it will be entertaining. About looking at art, the case is not so easily made. Art is for adults with taste. So, the upshot is that “in the United States at least, [science museums] attract far and away the largest number of visitors” (p. 5) and the culture critic avoids visiting them.

Off target or not about why humanist critics do not write much about science museums, Conn is ultimately right that science museums are central to any analysis of what museums do in the

modern world and what they teach us. By looking at science museums along-side art, anthropology, and natural history museums Conn tells a rich and insight-provoking story of shifts in museum practices over a particular stretch of time. If there are now more museums than ever before, museums also exhibit fewer objects than they did in the late-19th century; thus the title of his book. Phrased as a question—do museums still need objects?—the answer Conn provides in several brilliant chapters is yes for art museums (although even in those, fewer with better lighting and so forth, trumps more) and no for science and natural history museums. His story then is to trace what has happened to objects in museums and why.

Crucial to this story is what happens to anthropological collections and objects, for anthropology straddled the border between art and natural history. Why, for example, did the National Museum of the American Indian end up as a place virtually devoid of evidence of the rich collection of Native American artifacts it inherited from the Heye Collection and now controls? In general, as anthropology left the museum for the university, the collections anthropologists gathered in the 19th century were orphaned as objects of knowledge. Some were assimilated into the canons of art, which, in turn, expanded its canon to include the arts of erstwhile “primitive” peoples. Others remained in the halls of natural history museums. And those, recently, became objects of contention in an emerging era of the politics of recognition. Objects bought or taken from aboriginal peoples are the paradigm here, although one can also think about other controversies: Benin bronzes, Elgin Marbles. In a chapter titled “Whose Objects?” Conn focuses on the controversies associated with the repatriation of artifacts to Native American groups. His summary of the ins and outs of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) legislation is excellent. His critique of the cultural shifts the law represents will also be grist for further debate among anthropologists. For him, repatriation has not been an undo burden for most museums, but compared with the real problems Native Americans face today it is also a fig leaf and a diversion. Worse, NAGPRA is “yet another victory of the private interest over the public good, which is... a centerpiece of the New Right Agenda”(p. 70). Conn’s critique of NAGPRA dovetails with his arguments with the NMAI. A place that controls objects refuses to display but a few of them because such objects are no longer unambiguously a public property and because they are tainted with a past in which Indians were othered as “primitive.” So, instead NMAI is a site full of the latest technologies. With technology you can look at pictures of things. And above all you can bear witness to the fact that Indians are present. Separate but...(not?) different.

If some anthropological artifacts have slipped out of the savage slot and into the art museum and some have been used to reify culture as property and possession, likewise too, according to Conn, other objects produced by other societies never quite fit into the comfortable evolutionary paradigms that guided anthropology in the Victorian era. By looking at Victorian era founders of museums and the exhibitions they mounted, Conn details, in a chapter “Where is the East?” how Asian artifacts were collected both ethnographically and as art from the beginning of the modern museum. Because anthropologists had little to do with Asian civilizations (as opposed to tribal peoples) they came to be associated more and more exclusively with art. Yet, because Asia remained foreign, their inclusion as art at once was a catalyst for expanding western canons, and a catalyst for founding museums devoted nearly exclusively to Asian art; thus the place of the National Museum of Asian Art on the Mall in Washington D.C. It is separate from the National

Gallery—which tells the standard story of western art as progress and pedigree. But it is art not ethnography.

The story Conn tells about anthropology will probably be a familiar one to anthropologists, although the chapter on Asian art, linked to his discussion of the fate of Indian artifacts makes his work on this topic exemplary. The story he tells about science museums (which parallels work done by Sharon Macdonald and Simon Knell in the UK is also exemplary. Art museums grab headlines; science museums attract more people—in 2007, according to Conn, 300 US science museums claimed a gate of 115 million, mostly children. Children are the science museum’s audience, and Conn links this fact to a shift in the relationship of the science museum and the objects its collections to knowledge. Science, in the Victorian era, was closely connected to collecting. What would Darwin have been without all those close observations of wildlife, carefully catalogued, bagged, and stored? Natural History museums were like giant filing cabinets. You expected to learn much and to discover much by counting and comparing. Scientists worked in museums, using collections to produce knowledge. What was true for natural history was more equivocal for the experimental sciences, but even into the mid-20th century, the Franklin Institute (which was founded in 1825) had a large research laboratory and published one of America’s most respected journals in applied science and technology. Now the Franklin Institute, like the Museum of Natural History caters to kids. It justifies itself as a place for the production of scientific literacy, but the level of literacy is low and must be packaged as fun for children. As such, museums of science have given up on what was once the core mission in their first golden age: to make adults into better citizens.

Conn believes that museums need to recuperate that goal in order to have an impact on our collective future. But how? In a concluding chapter, he ends with an image of optimism, albeit a vague image—commentary that is accompanied by a photograph of the Guggenheim, a classic shot by Robert M. Mates, offering a perspective a viewer would have if peering over a top floor balcony to take in the sweeping spiral of the ascending floors below, each spiral crowded with people. Conn uses these people to underscore how far museums of the “second golden age” of museums have come from their origins as containers of objects. In the first golden age, art museums were everywhere more or less the same. Built to look more or less Roman on the outside, they contained fairly generic gallery spaces perfect for hanging images on walls. The Guggenheim’s walls are curved; in many ways the museum is antithetical to art, and the building becomes the spectacle not the objects it contains. Yet the Guggenheim is also an exalted space (as the photograph demonstrates) to see and be seen. Conn argues that such spaces are necessary for a civic society to exist. They are places (and here he borrows from Anthony Appiah and from Richard Sennett) where people become a public and where they learn, through consumption, the virtues and pleasures of cosmopolitan civility. As such the objects even the most exalted art museums contain are less important than the people they shelter and bring together as a sort of casual but significant polis.

Janes has only scorn for museums such as the Guggenheim that depend on people who plan trips to distant cities to visit the museums that are their icons. For him making a large carbon footprint for the sake of cultural tourism is unsustainable and immoral. He also finds the preoccupation with collections and their upkeep to be a symptom of the museum’s potential irrelevance. Better to deaccession and to share, than to collect, catalog, and store. Better yet, for him, is to use

museum spaces and resources to foster community awareness. Thus, he praises Chicago's Field Museum for eschewing the goal of "competing with the British Museums and the Smithsonian Institution to build one of the world's largest collections" (p. 125) and to use its clout and expertise to foster environmental programs and do urban research and outreach. He also praises the ecomuseum movement, places that allow members of local communities to display and learn about their own cultural creativity, whether it be folk dancing, quilting, wine-making, and so forth. Ecomuseums are hybrid institutions—community centers that evoke community as a complex interaction between a place broadly conceived as an environment and a people who occupy and have stewardship over that place. Ecomuseums do not have to be rural, but they tend to be situated in smaller communities. They do not have to be about traditions, but they tend to privilege crafts. They enshrine and nurture culture rather than Culture. So, the visitors who make Bilbao effects seem economically attractive hardly appear in Janes' book at all. Their absence, given his long tenure at Glenbow in Calgary is odd at least to me.

I read Janes' book first, then Conn; as I read Conn I kept wondering what he, or a future historian in Conn's subject position, would make of Janes. My guess is that he would be fascinated by Janes' language and perhaps would assimilate it into earlier attempts by curators and directors to make museums relevant to contemporary problems and crises. Here is Janes on the current state of museums (his book is full of passages such as this): "A medley of hesitation, introversion, and self-doubt supports the museum's isolation from mainstream issues and aspirations, with the notable exception of participation in the marketplace...(T)he profile of many museums is now being achieved through the notoriety of that which accrues to consumption—sensational shows, vanity architecture, large private donations and so forth—you've heard it all before" (p. 158) Museums should instead be "mindful" if only they can perform "a rotation of consciousness" (phrases that hark to a certain discourse of management that draws its inspiration from asceticism of Asia). As such they will build on their "core characteristics of authenticity and trust," while becoming "steeped in an awareness of what it means to exercise stewardship beyond the needs of mute objects and visitor statistics" (p. 165). To "prosper...museums can no longer look to the corporate world for guidance" (p. 166) nor can they find inspiration in public bureaucracies that "are dinosaurs waiting for the meteor to fall" (p. 166). Instead, they must fulfill "their latent potential as community organizations of the highest order"—this last sentence in the book framed or illustrated by a photograph of three young Dene children looking at the camera, arms over each other's shoulders in front of a log cabin (p. 166).

That photo used as a visual coda contrasted to Conn's image of the Guggenheim tells us much about competing visions of the future generated by the museum's present. Juxtaposed they signal: city versus country, Bilbao versus the ecomuseum. Juxtaposed, however, they leave out the middle: cities that depend on local tourism, rather than international, but cities, nevertheless that strive for a certain cosmopolitanism while also aspiring to a situated sense of place. I live in one such place. I love my city, Richmond, and cannot wait to look at the art and the people in the soon to be opened renovation of the Virginia Museum of Fine Art, so reading Conn rather than Janes was more pleasurable to me. But then again I am a consumer of museums and what they contain, not a producer.

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