

The Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia.* Carol E. Mayer and Anthony Shelton, eds. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009. 237 pp.

Reviewed by William Green

The always-innovative Museum of Anthropology (MOA) at the University of British Columbia has reinvented itself yet again. Its expanded research facilities and new “Multiversity Galleries,” which opened in 2010, are parts of an ambitious community-collaborations initiative termed “A Partnership of the Peoples.” The Multiversity Galleries’ big idea is that “there is never just one way of knowing and seeing the world” (p. 3), a viewpoint consistent with the museum’s aim “to provide access to many alternative views of reality” (p. 13).

This fine book elegantly expresses and illustrates the MOA’s philosophy. In compiling this overview of the museum’s collections, Mayer (head of the MOA’s curatorial department) and Shelton (MOA director) do more than present photographs of the museum’s beautiful treasures. They also highlight cultural contexts, include artists’ statements, discuss important collectors, and identify gaps in knowledge or understanding. In place of anonymous “expert” identifications of objects are thoughtful object summaries signed by authors Karen Duffek, Susan Rowley, Elizabeth Lominska Johnson, and Krisztine Laszlo, as well as the editors.

Mayer and Shelton begin by presenting an overview and history of the MOA. They touch on some of the distinctive characteristics familiar to MOA visitors and followers, such as the museum’s distinctive architecture, the long-standing focus on collaboration with Aboriginal communities, and the visible storage area developed in the 1970s (succeeded now by the object- and media-rich Multiversity Galleries). Because the book aims for a general readership, it does not contain detailed anthropological and museological analyses or critiques. It does, however, contain thoughtful, footnoted object discussions and regional overviews in the nine collections-focused chapters that form the heart of the book.

Naturally enough, given the museum’s renowned strength in material from the Northwest Coast of North America, the first chapter on collections presents Aboriginal objects from British Columbia and adjacent areas. Yet what may surprise many readers is the wealth of material from other regions, not just in North America but also in Europe, Africa, Asia, and Oceania. This broad coverage nicely reflects the museum’s interest in world arts and cultures.

Objects selected for presentation range widely in type, age, and source, from archaeological and ethnographic to contemporary. For example, the chapter on Europe includes folk-art figures made within the past decade as well as ceramic and glass vessels made over a 1600-year span. The decision to illustrate and discuss such a variety of objects effectively conveys the diversity and scope of the collections and the inclusiveness of the museum’s vision.

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Chapter introductions and object descriptions illustrate the principle that learning about objects and cultures is an ongoing process that requires research and collaboration. Researchers and collaborating communities are, once again, named rather than anonymous authorities. Examples of researchers in action include University of British Columbia students whose work with Vancouver's Ghanaian community informed an innovative exhibition on African textiles (pp. 126-127), the student researcher who identified a Qing Dynasty copy of a famous Ming Dynasty painting (p. 177), and the faculty member and Japanese classical dancer who collaborated to correctly identify a putative kabuki theater robe as a bridal garment (p. 185).

The book concludes with an overview of the MOA's historic photography collection. Discussions and sample photographs illustrate the richness of those archival holdings and their research significance. The photos can serve a wide variety of purposes because they "say as much about the photographers as they do about the subjects" (p. 226). Similarly, as the book shows, study of the museum's other objects can help audiences learn about the collectors as well as the source communities.

The earlier observation that this book is intended for a general audience should not dissuade specialists and practitioners from reading it and using it as a model in their own work. It is well written and visually appealing, perhaps more so than if it had been aimed at specialists. It will be useful for anyone involved in museum anthropology because it shows how an intellectually and organizationally dynamic institution represents itself following a period of extensive renewal. Those engaged with university and college museums may find it particularly inspiring.

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