

The Return of Curiosity: What Museums are Good For in the 21st Century.
Nicholas Thomas. London: Reaktion Books, 2016. 144 pp.*

Reviewed by Jennifer Kirker

This book takes an optimistic and universal approach to the question of what museums are good for. Thomas argues that museums are the sustenance of civil society and play a key role in building solidarity, a premise that will resonate with museum professionals and anthropologists alike. His perspective on the important role of museums in building cultural competencies, redressing history, and promoting collective action is timely. The emphasis on collection objects in particular, as the heart of all museums and source of great potential, will bring cheers from curators and collections managers. As an overview of recent history and an optimistic proposal for the future, this is an important text for students and emerging professionals. For museum anthropologists and experienced professionals, this book is a powerful call for the return of curatorial practice and renewed focus on objects.

The central argument is that, in actively being *for* difference, museums foster empathy and cultural competency by using the “museum as method” to create moments of curiosity and discovery for visitors. This romanticized view seems to value the historic neutrality of museums and fails to consider how such displays reconstitute cultural and social hierarchies. Thomas’ argument captures something of the wonder and magic that inspire many of us to go into museum work; however, for experienced museum anthropologists, such work is only the first step in building solidarity and promoting collective action. If museums are to provide the sustenance of civil society, then museums must go beyond aesthetic displays of difference and use Thomas’ museum as method to reveal historical injustice, racism, and colonial legacies and build solidarity with a focus on human rights and social justice.

An experienced museum curator and director, Thomas does provide an insider’s view of the expanding work of museums to contend with representation and colonialism. Museums have largely evolved from tools of colonial regimes to important cultural centers and stimuli for urban regeneration. Curators are at the heart of the collaborative paradigm shift, working with source and local communities, as well as fostering increased access to collections. Thomas does an excellent job presenting twenty years of museum theory and history, from an admitted European and essentially large museum perspective. Since the majority of museums around the world are small, however, such an omission does not do justice to the variety and variation of museum experience.

Thomas seems to suggest that the work of decolonizing the museum is largely over, that the focus on representation and identity politics is no longer necessary. Few museum professionals would agree with this statement. In fact, indigenous anthropologists suggest that it is impossible

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to truly decolonize and that attention should be paid instead to the inclusion of indigenous people and ideas in museum work (Chavarria 2017, personal communication). Collaborative work in curatorial care, repatriation, and exhibition development may have become standard practice, however, it continues to be an imperfect, timely, and costly process. Furthermore, much work remains in the colonial legacies of catalog systems, acquisition and repatriation practices, as well as institutional commitments to change. As museum growth in China and the Middle East demonstrate, museums continue to represent nationalist and colonial agendas, ensuring that issues of inclusion, representation and identity will remain central to museum decolonization for some time.

One of the most significant contributions of this text is Thomas' return to an idea he first proposed in 2010, the "museum as method" (Thomas 2010). He defines this as "the activity of knowing in a museum," which he argues can be found in "moments of discovery, captioning and juxtaposition" (Thomas 2016, 101). Despite the policies and justifications that go into museum acquisitions, Thomas argues that no one can presume for whom collections will have value. Neither can we presume the representativeness of a collection. Instead, Thomas proposes that the curatorial method of selecting objects is driven by curiosity and an openness to encounter things not necessarily planned or theorized. In this, Thomas seems to be echoing James Clifford for museums as contact zones or sites of encounter (Clifford 1997), which has been critiqued elsewhere (Boast 2011). There is a deep respect for the work curators do to carefully select, caption, and juxtapose objects in order to evoke visitors' curiosity. Thomas clearly believes the collection is the heart of the museum and curators are uniquely qualified to activate the objects in museum as method. Not long ago, Jennifer Shannon's important ethnography on collaborative museology questioned whether the death of curation was imminent (Shannon 2014) and indeed, it appeared likely as museums of all sizes and types eliminated curatorial positions as they balanced budgets and endeavored to increase public programs. Thomas' argument is important for its articulation of the expertise and method that curators bring to museum work. One can hope that such a call for the return of curatorial practice will usher in a new era for museums.

Thomas proposes the concept of museum collections as a creative technology in that they "enable people to make new things" (Thomas 2016, 117). He argues that it does not really matter what objects a museum has, or how representative they are or are not. What matters is their "vital potential to inform alternative, affirmative understandings of difference" (Thomas 2016, 136). And here we arrive at the crux of his argument, that museums cannot just be for difference, but must actively promote the study and reflection of difference. There are few citations in this text, but almost certainly Thomas has been influenced by Stephen Weil (2002) and his ideas of museum relevance. But is that best attended to by promoting difference? While the museum as method does demonstrate how old collections can be reactivated through the careful act of selection, captioning and juxtaposition to tell new stories and stimulate curiosity about the nature of difference, many anthropologists and scholars would question the attention to difference. Such a focus can reify racist and colonial views rather than emphasizing common humanity.

Are museums about difference? Are they good for sustaining civil society? In what manner will museums build solidarity? This debate cannot be resolved here but Thomas' text will inspire reflection and discussion of these questions, which is essential to the advancement of the discipline.

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