

***Magnificent Objects from the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.* Jennifer Quick, ed. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 2004. 224 pp.<sup>1</sup>**

Reviewed by Regina Richter

The University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology boasts an impressive, culturally diverse collection, informing us of thousands of years of human existence; but did you also know that its objects are beautiful? In purposefully detaching selected objects from their anthropological context, senior editor Jennifer Quick takes a refreshingly new and likely controversial look at the extensive Penn Museum collection, charting the visually stunning collection in the museum publication *Magnificent Objects from the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology*. The book consists of two parts: a brief, four-page introduction to the history of the collection by museum research associate Deborah Olszewski followed by a photographic series of over 200 full-page, color images of selected objects. With the majority of the book devoted to images of these objects, organized around the various curatorial departments found at the Museum, the volume emphasizes the perceived aesthetic beauty inherent in these objects rather than their cultural meaning.

The book hinges on the concept of “magnificent,” defined by Olszewski as both “intriguing” and “beautiful” (p. 1), and enforces a methodology of interpretation commonly reserved for fine arts institutions. For the publication, curators from the various museum departments selected objects to illustrate the beauty and depth of the Penn Museum collections, revealing more about how these objects inspire and shape our understanding of humanity than about the represented cultures in the collection. Olszewski’s introductory essay wonderfully elucidates the rich collecting history of the institution, highlighting museum-sponsored archaeological expeditions, ethnographic fieldwork, and museum purchases. In choosing to speak to the history of the collection rather than the cultures represented in it, Olszewski skillfully imbues the objects with more than just a strict cultural meaning. These objects, for a variety of reasons, speak to museum curators, anthropological researchers and archaeologists.

Objects are arranged in alphabetical order beginning with Africa and ending with Oceania. Three additional, non-regional sections follow Oceania—European Archaeology (which includes objects manufactured by early humans and not Europeans hence its non-regional classification), Physical Anthropology, and Archives—thereby touching on the entirety of the Penn Museum collections. The large photographs of the objects easily dwarf their explanation, emphasizing their beauty. The alphabetical ordering by region, though arguably logical, has no intrinsic significance and is essentially arbitrary. The system effectively prevents any implied meaning from the ordering of objects, again focusing attention on the aesthetics of the pieces and not their relative significance.

This reorganization around the concept of aesthetics of the collection does, however, create some tension. Though Olszewski defines “magnificent” in both aesthetic (beauty) and contextual

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(intrigue) terms, the emphasis on the image of the object combined with the sparse and varied explanatory texts accompanying each object—ranging from pure description to detailed information on ritual, ceremony and social stratification—deemphasizes the so-called contextual, or “intriguing,” qualities of the pieces. Likely due to the different emphases within each of the departmental collections (and perhaps differences in opinion over an aesthetic approach to cultural material by museum curators), the varying degrees of information and lack of a standard approach to the writing in each section can be distracting, essentially challenging Quick’s attempts to equally manifest the magnificence of each object.

Also of concern, the alphabetical organizational method creates some unintentional and perhaps unwelcome associations among objects, most specifically between those selected objects in the last regional section, Oceanic Art, and those found in the first non-regional section, European Archaeology. Largely rejected now as a method of classification, the misnomer “primitive art,” also known as traditional indigenous art or aboriginal art, was applied by scholars in Europe and the United States to the art of peoples from Africa, Oceania and the Americas and was based on the conception that somehow these cultures were less evolved or less civilized than their Western contemporaries. To place these two sections back-to-back inadvertently and unfortunately reconnects, *a la* 19th century evolutionist anthropology, primitive man to contemporary indigenous peoples.

Though the aesthetic approach to material culture remains controversial, *Magnificent Objects* does offer a new perspective on an old collection. In the “Archives” section the Museum’s archival curator makes the point that “Many of the images in the Museum Archives’ extensive collection of 19th century photography are colored by the attitudes and mores of Western society of the time” (p. 198). How do 21st century values and mores influence our approach to the study of culture today? Quick attempts to definitively reduce the collection to a baseline, aesthetic form through visual representation of each object, essentially normalizing the collection. However, in staging and then arranging sequentially these selected objects, Quick ignores the fact that our perception of aesthetics is equally determined and shaped by our 21st century values and mores.

With the overall emphasis resting on the aesthetic quality of the objects, the book asks the reader to approach material culture from a very different perspective than that normally expected from a museum of anthropology and archaeology. In placing these objects within a framework more typical of a fine arts institution, the book’s organizers attempt to alter how we look at, and consider, cultural material. However, the disconnect between the images, which invite us to marvel at the beauty of these objects, and the explanatory text, still firmly rooted in an anthropological discourse, underscores some of the problems inherent in such a project and the difficulty in (re)categorizing archaeological and anthropological material as art.

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