

# Open Research Online

---

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

## [Book Review] National Museums: New Studies from Around the World

### Journal Item

How to cite:

Marsden, Richard (2011). [Book Review] National Museums: New Studies from Around the World. *Conservation and Management of Archaeological Sites*, 13(1) pp. 84–85.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2010 W. S. Maney Son Ltd.

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1179/175355211X13097877339058>

---

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's [data policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the [policies page](#).

---

[oro.open.ac.uk](http://oro.open.ac.uk)

## **National Museums: New Studies from Around the World.**

Edited by S. Knell, P. Aronsson, A. Amundsen, P. A. Barnes, S. Burch, J. Carter, V. Gosselin, S. Hughes, and A. Kirwan. Pp. 484. Abingdon, UK: Routledge. 2010. £80 (HB), ISBN: 978-0-415-54773-4; £25.99 (PB), ISBN: 978-0-415-54774-1

In recent decades, museums have undergone a reflexive turn, albeit not always willingly. No longer are they seen as bastions of objective authority imparting knowledge to the masses. Instead, the assumptive frameworks, within which they operate, previously naturalized and hidden from view, are being laid bare by external critics and museum curators themselves. Perhaps the most powerful of these frameworks has been that of national identity. Indeed, the national museum is a 'must-have' accessory for self-aware nation-states the world over. Yet the roles that these institutions play in imagining the nation are complex, nuanced, and cannot be adequately explained by any single sweeping theory. *National Museums: New Studies from Around the World* is a response to this realization.

This anthology consists of twenty-nine studies of national museums from around the globe. These are based on papers delivered by early-career researchers at a series of six conferences, held as part of the Making National Museums project funded by the European Commission's Marie Curie Actions. As such, the book is no survey or reader, but instead contains the fruits of cutting-edge research. The volume's goal, as the preface boldly states, is to explore how national museums have contributed to the 'historical, mythological, aesthetic and political construction of the nation'.

The book is divided into four themed parts. The first of these, entitled 'Introductions and Reflections', is the shortest and comprises just three essays. These lay the conceptual foundations for the volume by highlighting the illusory nature of curatorial objectivity, rejecting any blanket explanation for the ubiquity of national museums, and reminding the reader that artefactual

meanings are projected by the viewer rather than intrinsic to the object. However, it is with Part Two, on 'Origins and Ideologies' that the collection gets into its stride. The papers in this section focus on the varied ways in which national museums have been used, both consciously and unconsciously, as tools for building and maintaining the nation from the 1800s to the present day. All nine of them are of high quality, but particular plaudits go to Mattias Backstrom's wonderfully leftfield application of gender theory to the open-air museum at Skansen. Another pearl is Sarah Hughes's analysis of contemporary guidebooks and catalogues relating to the British Museum. Her achievement is all the more impressive because she investigates the present, rather than surveying the past from the lofty pedestal of hindsight. Taken together, these essays highlight how different national museums are from one another, but also suggest that their roles in nation-building often rely upon the attribution of cultural specificity to material culture in order to create arbitrary boundaries of inclusion and exclusion.

Part Three focuses on 'Museology and Participation'. Here we are treated to a sharper focus on the nitty-gritty of display and the role of the museum visitor. The crux of these themes is authority and the willingness or otherwise of museums to surrender it, as demonstrated by Stuart Burch's intriguing discussion of how the play of visiting children was actually incorporated into an exhibition at the Norwegian National Art Gallery during the late 1960s. The nine essays in this section explore the relationships between visitors, curators, and the objects through which they meet. An excellent example of this is Rhiannon Mason's argument that the Museum of Welsh Life has been shaped as much by the need to provide what visitors want as by changes in academic thinking. An honourable mention should also go to Sunghee Choi's essay on the National Museum of Korea, where she previously worked as a curator. Choi's use of insider ethnography to reflect on her own curatorial agendas is disarmingly honest.

The closing section of the anthology is about 'Ourselves and Others', and in some respects harks back to the theme of identity-making highlighted in Part Two. Key themes explored by these eight papers include the apparent dichotomy between aesthetics and ethnography, and the exhibition and conceptualization of one culture by another. The stand out is Karen Shelby's analysis of the politicization of the Ijzertoren Memorial Museum in Belgium as an unofficial emblem of Flemish nationality. The essay does an excellent job of showing that the 'others' referred to in the title to Part Four are as liable to be found at home as abroad.

Although it consists of numerous disparate case studies, taken as a whole the anthology has some important things to say about the ways in which museums contribute to the re-imagination of our national pasts and, through that, our collective presents. Inevitably, some papers are stronger than others, but the standard of scholarship is generally very high and the interpretations put forward almost always convince. The collection's willingness to occasionally step outside the official canon of national museums and engage with institutions representing stateless nations is also valuable. In addition, the work benefits greatly from sumptuous production values that make possible the inclusion of numerous colour photographs set into the text at relevant points.

One criticism is that the focus is predominantly on Europe and the Far East. There is nothing relating to the settler societies of Australia, New Zealand, or the USA, and papers on South America, the Middle East, and Africa are thin on the ground. Another issue is that of accessibility. One of the charges often levelled at museums is that they hoard authority and guard the power of the professional. That point is made in several of the essays contained in this volume, yet many of them are written in a dense and theory-laden style that is sometimes off-putting even to the informed reader. Even whilst some of these writers wag a metaphorical finger at

museums for their exclusionist tendencies, their own words perpetuate the imprisonment of museum studies in an ivory tower of expert authority. Once again the ordinary museum visitor is shut out of the debate. Yet this is symptomatic of academic writing on heritage as a whole, and it is therefore perhaps unfair to single out this volume in particular for censure.

Despite these minor flaws, this collection is a valuable and insightful contribution to the development of a self-aware and self-reflective museology, and a greater understanding of the heritage work that museums do in a variety of social, cultural, and historical contexts. It places national museums under the microscope with an unflinching yet ultimately constructive gaze.

Richard Marsden, Open University