

Museums for Everyone***Inkeri Hakamies***

Nina Robbins, Suzie Thomas, Minna Tuominen, Anna Wessman (eds.) 2021. *Museum Studies – Bridging Theory and Practice*. ICOFOM, University of Jyväskylä, Open Science Centre. 557 pp. ISBN: 978-2-491997-31-1 (electronic).

Museum Studies – Bridging Theory and Practice is intended as a handbook for everyone interested in museums and cultural heritage debates, and it ‘aims to connect the humanistic discipline of museum studies with the wider context of society’ (9). It has many prospective readers: the editors claim that the book is directed at both readers within the arts and cultural heritage sector and as well as readers outside of it. As the first English-language handbook about Finnish museology, it is also directed at a wider international audience interested in the Finnish – or Scandinavian – museum field as well as Finnish students and museum professionals who wish to know about the latest developments in the field. In short, the book gives an overview of the current status of Finnish museums to anyone interested.

The book includes a total of 27 chapters arranged in five sections, covering the themes of *Museology and Museums as a Profession* (Section I), *Collection Management Leading to Collection Development* (Section II), *Communities and Audiences* (Section III), *Exhibitions as Transmitters of Changing Museum Identities* (Section IV) and *Ethics* (Section V). Each section begins with an introduction that presents the main issues to be discussed and links the other sections together. Section VI presents the biographies of all 31 authors, who represent both the academic community and the field of practical museum work.

The Never-ending Debate

The first section combines discussions on how Finnish museology has evolved, how it is connected to Scandinavian and global trends, and how museums serve as societal and political agents. In the end, all these branches point to the bigger discussion of *what a museum should be*, and several of the book’s authors refer to the current renegotiation of the ICOM’s Museum Definition (which is more thoroughly discussed in Eero Ehantti’s article in Section V).

Johanna Enqvist’s article, (‘Reflections on Museology – Classifications, conceptualisations and concepts at the core of museology theory and practice’) is a great choice to start the first section and thus the whole discussion. She explains the functions of concepts and categories, specifically in the world

of museums and heritage-making. Referring to Mieke Bal, Enqvist points out that interdisciplinary studies, such as museology and heritage studies, should pay attention to the dynamics of concepts. According to Enqvist, by discussing and co-defining 'what a particular concept may mean we gain insight into what it can do' (20).

The museological field of study also moves forward through processes of renegotiation. According to Enqvist, the community of museum and heritage professionals shares 'a knowledge system and a discourse, which is organised and structured by classifications, conceptualisations and concepts' (32). The debates about these classifications – about the true definition of a museums, museology or museum professional – have been ongoing for centuries. As Kerstin Smeds points out in her article, the terminology and its meaning has changed many times throughout the world, but 'unfortunately not in the same way and at the same pace' (64). In Smeds's words, there is a great confusion regarding definitions, contents and research objectives in the museum field, and in fact, 'much of the theoretical debate on museology's objectives since the 1970s has been about the question of what museology is, and this has by no means been resolved' (65). However, it is perhaps not so important or interesting to ultimately resolve just *what a museum is*, but rather to analyse how the *museum* as a dynamic concept has been understood and used in different contexts.

Each writer in the book introduces their own concepts and perspectives on museums, but keeping Enqvist's article in mind helps the reader to view them critically: museums have been agents of categorising, but museums and museology are also the targets of re-negotiation, and museums or their goals are repeatedly being defined through new concepts, such as *museological values* and *impact* (Robbins), *critical, social or practical museology* (Smeds), or *collection development* (Häyhä, Jantunen & Paaskoski). The readers can then decide for themselves what new aspects each concept brings to the table.

The Old New Paradigm?

Smeds humorously points out that the development of museology 'is, internationally, paved with a peculiar cyclic amnesia' that spans approximately 15–30 years, and each 'generation of museum professionals and theorists believe that they invent the wheel, implement a paradigm shift, create something new, develop a dialogue with society or are more integrative, mostly being unaware that these things were indeed said and done before' (70). The question arises, do the new concepts then change anything? Are the museums of today living in a different paradigm than 30 years ago?

Judging by the articles in the book, the current megatrends that might define the paradigm of today include the ideas of museums as political entities (Robbins) and promoters of sustainable development (Levä), openness, sharing and co-creation (Pettersson). The discussion around participation or the engagement of customers and audiences is one where new concepts seem to be somewhat re-inventing the wheel. According to Minna Sarantola-Weiss, the topic 'had been established as an idea as early as in the 1970s, but did not get much wind in its sails until the 2010' (190). Sarantola-Weiss supports this claim by noting the fact that the Finnish Museums Act of 2019 highlighted for the first time 'matters such as community, cultural diversity and equality as purposes of museum activity' (196).

However, the ways of educating, engaging and 'conceptualising' (296) different museum audiences have definitely transformed throughout museum history, as explained in the articles by Kaija Katajavuori and Mari Viita-aho. As Viita-aho summarises, in the research articles that she studied 'there are several understandings of the concept of participation, several ways for approaching it and several understandings about what can be achieved by it' (328). It is indeed a vague, dynamic concept, as suggested by Enqvist, and as Viita-aho concludes, museums should be critical of the way they utilise participation as a concept and practice.

All of Section III is dedicated to the theme of *Communities and Audiences*, whereas many of the chapters in Section IV focus on the aspect of co-creation through case studies. But as Heikki Häyhä, Sari Jantunen and Leena Paasikoski point out, the issues of promoting social and cultural sustainability, accessibility and participation also touch upon collection management – or *development*. According to them, cataloguing an object is often seen as a mere technical process of recording information and describing the appearance of the artefacts, when in fact it is very telling of the visions and affections of the museum professionals. As discussed at the beginning of the book, museum professionals who share a similar knowledge system and a discourse know how to *read* the information that is recorded in the database, but it is not as understandable to outsiders. Mere digitisation and sharing of the catalogues thus do not make the information in them more accessible, and therefore, we must pay more attention to *what* we catalogue. As Häyhä et al. suggest, the significance analysis method could be one way of mediating the meaning of museum collections to different audiences. Personally, I would like to see more research on how museum audiences actually use the digitised information – have they invented 'new and innovative ways of using collections?' (201), as proposed by Häyhä et al.

Mari Viita-aho claims that the discussions about participation have mostly focused on how to design exhibitions in order to make the museum content more relevant and the visitor experiences more worthwhile, but the 'outcomes, benefits and challenges for museums when using participatory approaches have been less studied, as are the ways participation might be changing museum work and knowledge production' (310). The example given by Häyhä et al. demonstrates that gradually the new way of thinking about the purposes of museums will change even their core practices, such as cataloguing museum objects.

The Balance

The book is a multifaceted, albeit weighty package, of different viewpoints on museums. The articles range from accounts of Finnish museum history and theoretical reflections on participation or ethical conduct to more practical examples and case studies from the field. The variability also reflects the interdisciplinarity of museum studies. The book achieves its aim of capturing the current status of ongoing discussions, and in my opinion, it will only gain more interest over time: in 30 years, one can loop back and analyse how the concepts and ideas have developed.

One article that stands out in particular due to its style is Benjamin Filene's rather personal report of his experiences in the Finnish museum field as an American museum professional. Filene reflects, for example, on whether the Finnish mindset is perhaps more collective than the American one, and he asks: 'How does a country that embraces the common good allow room for difference? How does it balance equality with innovation?' (371). Should Finnish museums be more daring and take more risks? This also leaves me with a rather provocative question that might require a closer reading of the book: In a world of global networks and international museological literature, is there something particularly Finnish about Finnish museums?

AUTHOR

PhD Inkeri Hakamies, from the University of Helsinki, has recently completed her doctoral research project on museum practices and how they define ideal museums and museum professionals. In her next project, she will be looking into museum pedagogy and how children are met in museums. She is a member of the Young Academy Finland (2022–2026).