

## How do museums narrate the future?

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**Abstract:**

Northwest Coast Representations: New Perspectives on History, Art, and Encounters, edited by Andreas Etges, Viola König, Rainer Hatoum, and Tina Brüderlin, provides deep insights into Northwest Coast artifacts, the aboriginal life, and their histories. This book offers a new perspective on different facets – including traditional narratives, language, and relations among these indigenous people – while depicting a number of (china) plates that tell the story of people there. Furthermore, this volume introduces the reader to the famous artists Doug Cranmer and ends with an informative summary of the history of the Northwest Coast art market.

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Etges, Andreas; Viola König; Rainer Hatoum und Tina Brüderlin (Hg.): Northwest Coast Representations: New Perspectives on History, Art, and Encounters. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 2015. 220 pages, Paperback, 49 Euro. ISBN: 978-3-496-02858-1

Have you ever felt a headache after visiting a museum? If so, it might be due to the cognitive load that chases the visitor, a reflection of the absence of differentiation between "museum" and "store". Museums should help visitors to explore the history in its extensions, separations, and sequences of events. The present volume channels the efforts exerted in that regard by depicting a joint research project of the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin and the John F. Kennedy Institute for North American Studies at Freie Universität Berlin. It presents different perspectives on Northwest Coast representations as discussed by distinguished scholars from different angles, namely: ideas, architecture, exhibitions, and treaties that have been signed to strengthen co-operation between the two research cultures.

Beginning with Andreas Etges, who emphasized the larger endeavour of this project, which is to move "downtown into the reconstructed Prussian castle, the future Humboldt-Forum" (p. 8) was considered as a challenge and opportunity at the same time. He aimed at presenting the Northwest Coast collection as a new and an innovative way of approaching the subject. Since the entire volume tries to highlight adequate experiences to build on, the project's main task was to introduce selected but current exhibition practices and develop alternatives as new modes of presentation at the Humboldt-Forum (9).

Discussing specific modes of representation of the exotic other, Viola König elaborated on the background of the Northwest Coast collection. Based on the work of collecting scientists, about 2500 regional objects were gathered and systematized. The second mode König presented was the cooperation established with the indigenous people's representatives in Canada and Alaska to foster long-term relations with artists, politicians, and local museums curators. Nevertheless, it was of great importance to get in touch with other non-native colleagues who certainly enriched the examination of the Berlin collections (15-7). The third mode was to re-evaluate the Berlin collection by inviting a group of renowned scientists to an international symposium where they emphasized the challenges and complexity "connected with the presentation of old collections and [...] the merchandise of indigenous art and the demand of emancipation [...] by indigenous groups" (p.18).

One of the key concepts through which anthropological relics can be analysed is the one of translation. In this regard, Rainer Hatoum started his article with the Berlin Boas collection by

questioning its very own vocabularies and elaborated on the three main challenges: the definition of the northwest coast, the use of "object numbers", and the assigning of objects to certain names and ethnic groups (27-8). Hatoum went on to elucidate how certain ways of organizing relics in a museum reflect "general shifts of interest in the anthropological project at large" (30). Building on that, he turned to Boas' approach in collecting, such as the use of focal topics, associated information, and myths as criteria of quality. By noticing the paradox that arose while comparing the existence of Kwakwaka'waka culture and the disappearance of its relevant masks, Hatoum devoted a significant part of his article to discussing the basis of knowledge that Boas provided in his monograph on their "social organization" in 1897 (46).

One of the main issues this volume might be said to have is a lack of logical order in its topics: there is a certain redundancy, to such an extent that we can find the same topic discussed twice. For instance, the contested concept of traditionality has been investigated by Aldona Jonaitis. Despite the fact that it is a significant thematic complex, it should have been brought up right after its first mentioning (145). After providing a brief history of the Northwest Coast alongside certain temporary stations in an epilogue she discusses the relationship between identity and politics in this region. She accentuates the main message of the native speakers, which can be summed up as: "we are in a world of multiple sources of power [...] where we must insist upon being heard, understood and respected" (179).

Gray Wyatt recapitulated the main turning point that affected the Northwest Coast in his paper. He admitted the effect of the era of accelerated change we live in and the availability of certain material and resources such as bones, ivory, and cedar. However, he elucidated that such changes will affect the continuation of the art form. Bringing back the materials, media, its history and relative age, Gray summoned "glass art" as a relatively new medium. He explored its significant presence with the work of Preston Singletary and the Pilchuck Glass School in Washington. Furthermore, other materials such as bronze and aluminum were also new but common due to their durability in outdoor settings (210-11). He has shown the relationalities between the indigenous people, relationalities that helped them to develop many distinct languages and techniques to preserve them from extinction. All in all, he concluded that the people on the Northwest Coast are knowledge seekers; their travels along the coast enabled them to foster strong relations through trade, marriage, and warfare (213-4). As a conclusion, one might argue that it was the Western countries whose invaders ground down the indigenous people's civilization and pushed them to the edge. Nevertheless, such efforts should be considered as a basic step towards a much anticipated atonement.