

## Book Review

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**Iris Edenheiser and Larissa Förster (eds.), *Museumsethnologie - Eine Einführung: Theorien, Debatten, Praktiken*, Berlin: Reimer, 2019, paperback €39, 384 pages, 129 mainly colour images**

*Museumsethnologie - Eine Einführung: Theorien, Debatten, Praktiken* offers the first and long overdue introduction to 'Museumsethnologie' (museum anthropology) devoted to 'Theorien, Debatten, Praktiken' (theories, debates, practices) associated with the German ethnological (ethnographic) museum landscape. Following the conceptual design of the edited collection, the editors pay heed to the particularities of disciplinary and institutional histories and contemporary situations of the 'German case', but also link it to the international sea change that has affected and reconstituted the very idea of the ethnographic museum in many parts of the world. Furthermore, the editors and authors show that the German scenario needs, in fact, to be pluralized, as imperial, fascist, socialist and nowadays federative reconfigurations have reshaped theories, debates and practices in museum anthropology at different points in time and in differing localities.

The volume is structured into sections, each focusing on a core field or place of museological work – research, depot, archive, conservation, exhibition, education, digitization, management – or a key theme, such as the histories of ethnographic museums in the German-speaking region and current topics like provenance, sensitive collections, anthropology and art, and transcultural collaborations. Each thematic section consists of an extensive, general chapter (in German), which is juxtaposed with one or several 'object portraits' (in German or English) and concluded by a 'different perspective', written mostly in English, originating from beyond the German ethnographic museum world in order to decentre it, as the editors argue, and to build bridges to originating societies and international museological and anthropological developments.

In this short review, I refrain from commenting on specific chapters, which differ in quality and depth, as in most edited collections, especially those that intend to introduce an entire field of study. Instead, I prefer to engage (both praisingly and critically) with the format chosen by the editors to create an introduction to museum anthropology, which, in my view, should not simply amount to a collection of individual voices (even when committed to a common cause) but offer a richly diverse yet tightly coherent tool kit that enables readers (students, academics and museum professionals) to study and work with.

It is in this vein that I find the thematic and visual curation of the sections, consisting of both substantial texts and object-based narrations, appealing and productive. It is quite ironic that one can find many books on museums (and material culture more broadly) with hardly any depiction of what these institutions have been founded on: material things (which of course are, in many instances, not simple objects but living entities, as some of the chapters in this volume show). This point is not meant as a call for material fetishization or fashionable visualization, but rather for a return to thing-based enquiries that, despite all recent and topical developments mapped out in this collection, remain at the heart of museum anthropology or anthropology *through* museums (as opposed to the anthropology *of* and *in* museums, which, again quite ironically, have dominated much of the literature). In each section, the reader can thus first follow a largely discursively produced chapter and then 'see' (materially, visually) how the respective topic under scrutiny resonates with the concrete items that museums, as knowledge-producing institutions, have been built on.

This thematic and visual curation should thus be lauded, but, of course, there is also room for further improvement and development. While reading the book from first to last page, I could follow the individual contributions and their visualized materialization, but sometimes lost track of the thematic focus of the respective section and its position within the overall composition. While the editors set the scene in a solid introduction, it would have been worthwhile to introduce each thematic section from the editors' perspective to create a more robust and coherent structure. Without this, and given the scope and diversity of the collection, it is at times hard to trace which key theme or core field and place of museological work (listed above) is being tackled. A succinct conceptualization of each section would assist the reader to mobilize the discursive/material/visual substance beyond the individual case, as a conceptual lens and tool with which to study and work through other discursive/material/visual examples and manifestations in different points in time and differing localities.

Having said this, *Museumsethnologie - Eine Einführung: Theorien, Debatten, Praktiken* will be a foundational text for many years. As the editors rightly point out, museum anthropology – one of the oldest fields of anthropology – was constitutive of the discipline itself. Yet it has, especially in the German context, long been neglected in academic research and teaching. The volume alludes to the sheer diversity of facets, topics and questions that are not only of concern to museum scholars, students and professionals, but also to related disciplines and institutions as well as to the political sphere and wider public. Different audiences will thus find enlightening nuggets of information. The shortcomings of the volume in terms of coherence and structure, referred to above, should not be seen as diminishing the book's quality. Instead, they point to the need for additional publications delving into the depths of the themes presented and issues raised so that museum thinkers and doers in Germany and beyond have the necessary resources to develop the skills and expertise required to navigate the museological sea change, which will not abate but intensify in the years to come.

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