

# MUSEUM THEORY

EDITED BY

ANDREA WITCOMB AND KYLIE MESSAGE



WILEY Blackwell

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**Andrea Witcomb and Kylie Message**

General Editors

Sharon Macdonald and Helen Rees Leahy

**WILEY** Blackwell

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# EDITORS' PREFACE TO *MUSEUM THEORY AND THE INTERNATIONAL HANDBOOKS IN MUSEUM STUDIES*

## ***Museum Theory***

As general editors of *The International Handbooks in Museum Studies*, we – Sharon Macdonald and Helen Rees Leahy – are delighted that *Museum Theory* is now appearing in paperback, as a self-standing volume. So too are the other volumes, which is testament to the strength of these volumes individually, as well as collectively, and to the importance of the issues that they each address. *Museum Theory* clearly concerns a fundamental area of museum studies. Although fundamental, however, there is not an established consensus on precisely what might be covered under the label 'museum theory'. One reason for this is the relative recency of museum studies as a field. A second reason is that museum studies draws on a wide range of disciplines, each themselves renewing their toolkits in various ways, resulting in new impulses for museum theorising too. In addition, and perhaps of most significance, is the fact of change – and calls for more change – within museums themselves as they seek to address wider social and cultural transformations. This inspires a search for fresh theorising to understand and shape new developments. At the same time, as museums can be seen as themselves 'theorisers', it helps to propel new theorizing.

As such, the editors of *Museum Theory*, Andrea Witcomb and Kylie Message, in consultation with us as general editors, faced a task of how to achieve a volume that would cover approaches that have become central to the theorising of museums, while also being sure to include as much as possible of the new directions and ideas that have been emerging in recent years. That this was achieved so well is evident from the resulting volume. The range of topics included and the ways in which they are tackled, provide a sound and also cutting-edge coverage of museum theory.

## ***The International Handbooks in Museum Studies***

Collectively, *The International Handbooks in Museum Studies* include over a hundred original, state-of-the-art chapters on museums and museum studies. As such, they are the most comprehensive review to date of the lively and expanding field of



museum studies. Written by a wide range of scholars and practitioners – newer voices as well as those already widely esteemed – *The International Handbooks* provide not only extensive coverage of key topics and debates in the museum field, but also make a productive contribution to emerging debates and areas, as well as to suggest how museum studies – and museums – might develop in the future.

The number of excellent contributors able and willing to write on museum topics is itself testimony to the state of the field, as was recognition by the publishers that the field warranted such a substantial work. Bringing together such a range and quantity of new writing about museums was accomplished through the deep knowledge, extensive networks, and sheer labour of the volume editors – Andrea Witcomb and Kylie Message, *Museum Theory*; Conal McCarthy, *Museum Practice*; Michelle Henning, *Museum Media*; and Annie E. Coombes and Ruth B. Phillips, *Museum Transformations*. All enthusiastically took up the mandate to go out and recruit those they thought would be best able to write useful and timely essays on what they defined as the most important topics within their area of remit. Their brief was to look widely for potential contributors, including unfamiliar, as well as familiar, names. We – and they – were especially interested in perspectives from people whose voices have not always been heard within the international museum studies conversation thus far. This breadth is also a feature of the expanded and expanding field itself, as we explain further below.

## Diversification and democratization

The editors of the four volumes that constitute *The International Handbooks* are based in four different countries – Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and Canada; and contributors have their institutional homes in over a dozen more. Yet these numbers alone do not fully convey the trend to diversification that we see in these volumes, and in museum studies more widely. “Internationalization” is a term that might be used but does not, we think, adequately characterize what is involved. Certainly, there is more traffic between nations of ideas about museums and about how to study them. Debates travel from one part of the globe to another, with museums and exhibitions in one location being used as models for emulation or avoidance in another. The massive expansion of professional training in museum studies that has taken place over the past three decades helps establish a shared discourse, not least as many students study away from their home countries or those in which they will later work. So too do texts in and about the field, certain key ones often being found on reading lists in numerous countries and also republished in successive readers. Such developments establish the basis for a conversation capable of transcending borders.

It is evident from the contents of *The International Handbooks of Museum Studies*, however, that the democratization runs deeper than the traffic of discourse and practice across national borders, and, in particular, that the traffic is

more multi-directional than it was previously. Not only do contributors have their primary work bases in a range of different countries, and not only do many have experience of training or working in others, they also often give attention – sometimes through the direct engagement of collaborative work or study – to a wide range of groups and populations in a variety of countries, including their own. In doing so, they strive not merely to incorporate but also to learn from and be challenged by people and perspectives that have not been part of mainstream museological debate. The attention to the (not unproblematic) category of the indigenous is especially marked in these *International Handbooks*, most notably in the *Transformations* volume, although it also finds its way into the others. Like attention to other forms of absence from the existing mainstream museum conversation, this is symptomatic of a broader move toward finding alternative ways of seeing and doing, ways that both add to the range of existing possibilities and also, sometimes, unsettle these by showing how, say, particular theorizing or practice relies on unspoken or previously unrecognized assumptions.

Diversification takes other forms too. These volumes are not organized by type of museum – a format that we think restrictive in its lack of recognition of so many shared features and concerns of museums – and do not use this as a classification of content. Nevertheless, it is easy to see that the volumes include a great range of museum kinds, and even of forms that might not always be considered museums, or that challenge the idea of the museum as a physical space. Museums of art, history, and ethnography – and also those more general and eclectic museums that have sometimes been described as encyclopedic – have powered a good deal of museum theorizing and debate, and they are amply represented here. But they are accompanied also by examples from museums of natural history, science, technology, and medicine, as well as heritage sites and out-of-gallery installations. Alongside national museums, which were the backbone of much important theorizing of the role of museums in the making of national identity and citizenship, are numerous examples of smaller museums, some of which are devoted to a specific topic and others of which have a regional or local foundation and focus. These museums may be less well endowed with staff, buildings, or funds, but are nevertheless doing important, even pioneering, work that deserves attention from museum studies. That attention contributes not only to extending the range of types and cases but also helps to illuminate the variety of specific features of museums that need to be taken into account in formulating more comprehensive approaches. As many chapters across the volumes show, one size does not fit all – or, to put it better perhaps, one theoretical perspective or set of guidelines for practice, one apt choice of media or transformative activity, does not fit all types and sizes of museums. Adding more to the mix does not just provide greater coverage or choice but also helps to identify better what is at stake and what might be possible in different kinds of situations, constellations, or conjunctures (to use a word favored in *Museum Theory*). As such, it helps those of us engaged in and with

museums to get a better grasp on what is and what might be shared, as well as on what is distinctive and needs to be understood in more fine-grained ways.

Another feature of diversification that deserves comment here is the temporal. There has been a considerable amount of outstanding historical research undertaken in museum studies and the *International Handbooks* both review some of this and contribute further to it. Such work is important in its own terms, helping us to understand better the contexts in which museums emerged and have operated, and the concerns, constraints, personalities, and opportunities in evidence in particular times and places. It also contributes in vital ways to contemporary understandings, both by adding to the range of cases available for analysis and by showing the longer historical trajectories out of which various current approaches and practices emerged. Sometimes – and there are examples in all of the volumes here – their message is salutary, showing that what seemed like an innovation has been tried before, and perhaps with the distance of time allowing a more critical perspective than might feel comfortable today. The past shows change but also continuities and the re-emergence, or even repackaging, of what has gone before.

## **Disciplinary and methodology**

Research on past museum innovation and practice shows the importance of historical method, and of history as a discipline, within museum studies. This brings us to the wider issue of disciplinary and methodology. To talk of museum studies as interdisciplinary has become a truism. The volumes here are a clear illustration that those involved in museum studies have been trained in and may have primary institutional locations in a wide range of disciplines and areas of study, including anthropology, archaeology, architecture, area studies, cultural studies, economics, education, geography, literature, management, media studies, political science, and sociology, as well as history and art history. Beyond that, however, they are also carving out new niches, sometimes institutionally recognized, sometimes not, in areas such as digital curation and creative technologies, as well as in art gallery, museum, and heritage studies, in various combinations or alone. Moreover, in addition to disciplines and a multitude of academic specialisms, practitioner contributors bring diverse professional expertise in areas including exhibition design, community engagement, conservation, interpretation, and management.

Alongside the diversity of concepts and methodologies offered by various disciplines and diverse forms of practical expertise, is also the distinctive feature of museum studies – its engagement with the past, present, and future world of museums. Such work, to varying extents, confronts researchers and academics with the actual concerns, predicaments, objects, spaces, media, and people all, in various ways, involved in museum collections and exhibitions. Increasingly, this means actual collaboration, and the development of methodological approaches

to enable this. Examples in these volumes include those who consider themselves to be primarily academics, artists, or activists being directly involved in the production of collections, media (e.g., new media apps or forms of display), and exhibitions. The nature of museum work is, inevitably, collaborative, but in some cases it also involves more explicit attempts to work with those who have had little previous engagement in museum worlds and draws on methodology and ethical insight from disciplines such as social and cultural anthropology to do so. Such actual engagement – coupled with what we see as more fluid traffic between academia and museums also powers new forms of theorizing and practice. This productive mobility affords museum studies its characteristic – and, in our view, especially exciting – dynamic.

## Organization of the *International Handbooks*

As we originally planned these *International Handbooks*, dividing their coverage into the four volumes of Theory, Practice, Media, and Transformations made good sense as a way of grouping key areas of work within the field. Our idea was that *Theory* would bring together work that showed central areas of theorizing that have shaped museum studies so far, together with those that might do so in the future. We envisaged *Practice* as attending especially to areas of actual museum work, especially those that have tended to be ignored in past theorizing, not in order to try to reinstate a theory/practice division but, rather, to take the opportunity to transcend it through theorizing these too. We saw *Media* as the appropriate label to cover the crucially important area for museums of their architecture, spaces, and uses of diverse media primarily, though not exclusively, for display. *Transformations* was intended to direct its attention especially to some of the most important social, cultural, political, and economic developments that are shaping and look likely to reshape museums in the future.

In many ways, what has resulted fits this original remit. We always knew that there would inevitably be areas of convergence: in particular, that theory can derive from practice, and vice versa; that the development and expansion of social media is propelling some of the most significant transformations in museums, and so forth. Yet it is probably true to say that there are more synergies than we had imagined, perhaps because museum work has itself become more open to change, new ideas and practice, and unconventional practitioners and participants, from what would previously have been considered outside. To make distinctions between practitioners and theorists continues to make sense in some contexts. What we see, however, is an increasing band of critical practitioners and practice-based researchers – those who operate in both worlds, drawing inspiration for new practice from areas of theorizing as well as from adaptations of cases from elsewhere. Equally they use practice to think through issues such as the nature of objects, the role of media, or sensory potentials.

It is interesting to note that at an analytical level, the volumes all contain chapters that give emphasis to specific cases and argue for the importance of paying close attention to grounded process – what actually happens, where, who, and what is involved. Although not all are informed by theoretical perspectives of actor network theory or assemblage theory, there is much here that recognizes the significance of material forms not just as objects of analysis but as agents in processes themselves. There is also much work across the volumes that gives explicit attention to the affective dimensions of museums, exploring, for example, how different media or spaces might afford certain emotional engagements. The sensory is also given new levels of consideration in what we see as, collectively, a more extensive attempt to really get to grips with the distinctiveness of museums as a medium, as well as with their sheer variety.

Various forms of collaborative engagement with specific groups – sometimes called communities – as well as with individual visitors, is also a notable theme cutting across the various volumes. Certainly, the idea of a generic “audience” or “public” seems to be less present as a central but abstract focus than in the past. Divisions along lines of gender or class are made less frequently than they might have been in earlier critical perspectives – though when they are, this is often done especially well and powerfully, as, for example, in some contributions to the discussion of museum media. Interestingly, and this is a comment on our times as well as on social and political developments in which museums are embroiled, the work with “communities” is framed less in terms of identity politics than would probably have been the case previously. No longer, perhaps, is the issue so much about making presence seen in a museum, increasingly it is more about mutually enriching ways of working together, and about pursuing particular areas or issues of concern, such as those of the environment or future generations. Yet politics is certainly not absent. Not only is the fundamental question about whose voice is represented in the museum a thoroughly political one, the chapters also show political concerns over relatively subtle matters such as methodology and reformulations of intimacy, as well as over questions of sponsorship, money-flow in the art world, the development of mega-museums in Gulf states, environmental destruction, and so forth. Indeed, there is a strong current of work that positions the museum as an activist institution and that shows its potential as such – something perhaps indicative of at least one future direction that more museums might take.

One thing that is clear from these volumes, however, is that there is no single trajectory that museums have taken in the past. Neither is there a single track along which they are all heading, nor one that those of us who have contributed would agree that they should necessarily all take. The diversity of museums themselves, as well as of those who work in, on, and with them, and of the perspectives that these volumes show can be brought to bear upon them – as well as their very various histories, collections, contexts, personnel, publics, and ambitions – has inspired the diversified museum studies represented in these *International*

*Handbooks*. Our hope is that this more diversified museum studies can contribute not only to new ways of understanding museums but also to new, and more varied, forms of practice within them – and to exciting, challenging futures, whatever these might be.

## Acknowledgments

Producing these *International Handbooks of Museum Studies* has probably been a bigger and more demanding project than any of us had anticipated at the outset. Assembling together so many authors across four different volumes, and accommodating so many different timetables, work dynamics, styles, and sensitivities has been a major task over more years than we like to recall for both us as general editors, and even more especially for the editors of our four volumes: Andrea Witcomb, Kylie Message, Conal McCarthy, Michelle Henning, Annie E. Coombes, and Ruth B. Phillips. As general editors, our first thanks must be to the volume editors, who have done a remarkable task of identifying and eliciting so many insightful and illuminating contributions from such a wide field, and of working with authors – not all of whom were experienced in academic writing and many of whom were already grappling with hectic schedules – to coax the best possible chapters from them. We thank our volume editors too for working with us and what may sometimes have seemed overly interventionist assistance on our part in our push to make the volumes work together, as well as individually, and for all contributions, as well as the *International Handbooks* as a whole, to be a substantial contribution to the field. We also thank our volume editors for sharing so much good humor and so many cheering messages along the way, turning what sometimes felt like relentless chasing and head-aching over deadlines into something much more human and enjoyable. All of the contributors also deserve immense thanks too, of course, for joining the convoy and staying the journey. We hope that it feels well worth it for all concerned. Without you – editors and contributors – it couldn't have happened.

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The idea for a series of *International Handbooks of Museum Studies* came from Jayne Fagnoli at Wiley Blackwell and we are grateful to her for this and being such a great cheerleader for the project. She read a good deal of the work as it came in and knowing that this only increased her enthusiasm for the project boosted everyone's energy as we chased deadlines. We also thank other staff at Wiley Blackwell

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Because of its extended nature and because things don't always happen according to initial timetables, editorial work like this often has to be fitted into what might otherwise be leisure time or time allocated for other things. Luckily, both of our Mikes (Mike Beaney and Mike Leahy) were sympathetic, not least as both have deeply occupying work of their own; and we thank them for being there for us when we needed them.

Lastly, we would like to thank each other. We have each benefited from the other's complementary expertise and networks, from the confidence of having that insightful second opinion, and from the sharing of the load. Having somebody else with whom to experience the frustrations and joys, the tribulations and amusements, has made it so much more fun. Not only has this helped to keep us relatively sane, but it has also made *The International Handbooks of Museum Studies* so much better than they would otherwise have been.

Sharon Macdonald and Helen Rees Leahy,  
August 2014 and July 2019

# MUSEUM THEORY

EDITED BY

ANDREA WITCOMB AND KYLIE MESSAGE

*Museum Theory* offers critical perspectives drawn from a broad range of disciplinary and intellectual traditions. This volume describes and challenges previous ways of understanding museums and their relationship to society. Essays written by scholars from museology and other disciplines address theoretical reflexivity in the museum, exploring the contextual, theoretical, and pragmatic ways museums work, are understood, and are experienced.

Organized around three themes—Thinking about Museums, Disciplines and Politics, and Theory from Practice/Practicing Theory—the text includes discussion and analysis of different kinds of museums from various, primarily contemporary, national and local contexts. Essays consider subjects including the nature of museums as institutions and their role in the public sphere, cutting-edge museum practice and their connections with current global concerns, and the links between museum studies and disciplines such as cultural studies, anthropology, and history.

**ANDREA WITCOMB** is Professor of Cultural Heritage and Museum Studies at Deakin University and Deputy Director of the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation, Victoria, Australia. She brings an interdisciplinary approach to her research, locating her work at the intersection of history, museology, and cultural studies.

**KYLIE MESSAGE** is Professor of Public Humanities in the Humanities Research Centre at the Australian National University, Canberra, Australia. Her research examines the relationships between cultural organizations, citizenship, government, and political reform movements.

## THE INTERNATIONAL HANDBOOKS OF MUSEUM STUDIES

GENERAL EDITORS: SHARON MACDONALD AND HELEN REES LEAHY

*The International Handbooks of Museum Studies* is a multi-volume reference work that represents a state-of-the-art survey of the burgeoning field of museum studies. Featuring original essays by leading international museum experts and emerging scholars, readings cover all aspects of museum theory, practice, debates, and the impact of technologies. The four volumes in the series, divided thematically, offer in-depth treatment of all major issues relating to museum theory; historical and contemporary museum practice; mediations in art, design, and architecture; and the transformations and challenges confronting the museum. In addition to invaluable surveys of current scholarship, the entries include a rich and diverse panoply of examples and original case studies to illuminate the various perspectives. Unprecedented for its in-depth topic coverage and breadth of scholarship, the multi-volume *International Handbooks of Museum Studies* is an indispensable resource for the study of the development, roles, and significance of museums in contemporary society.

**SHARON MACDONALD** is Professor of Social Anthropology in the Institute of European Ethnology, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, where she also directs the CARMAH, the Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage.

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