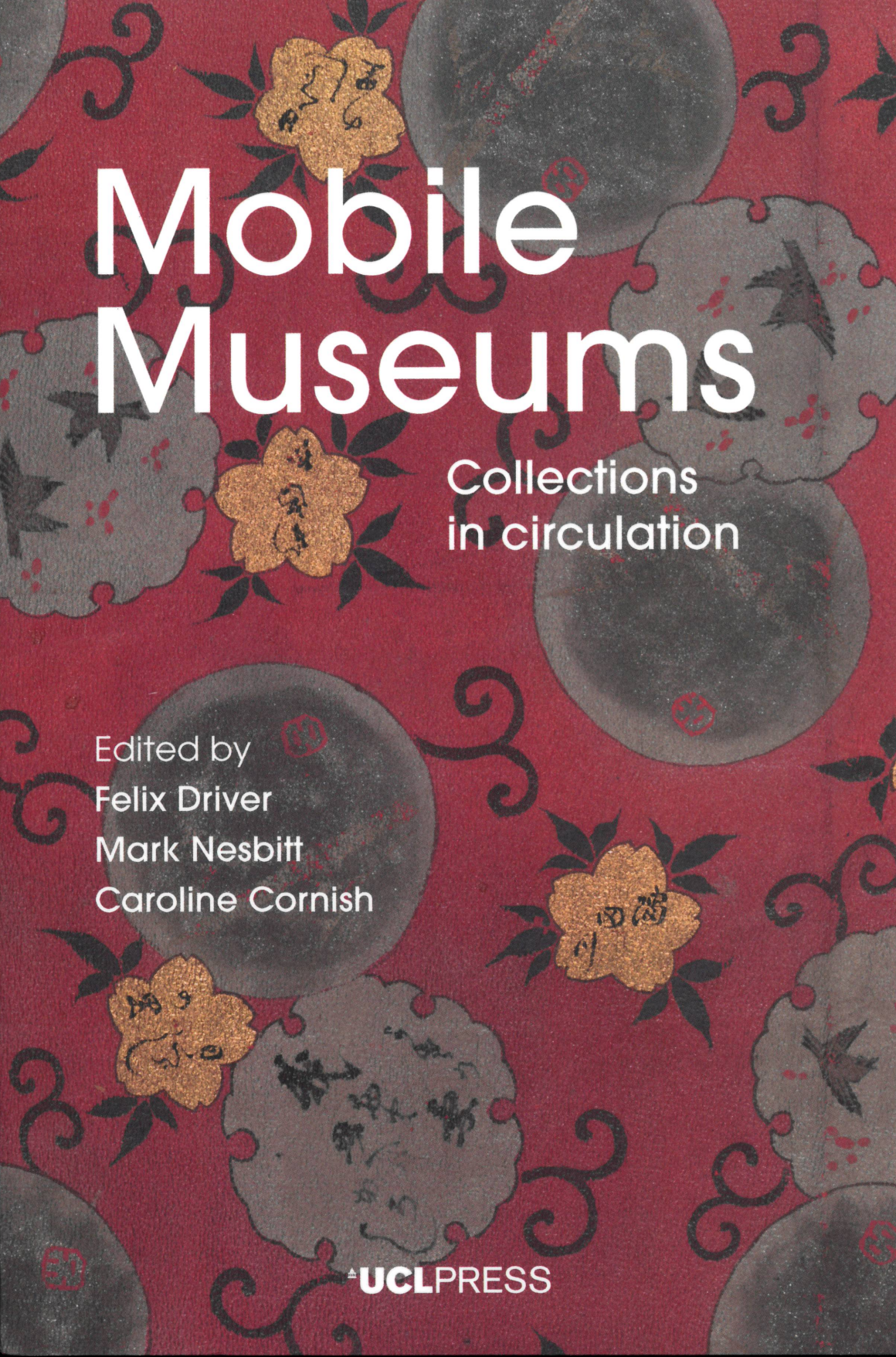




Mobile Museums

Collections
in circulation

Edited by
Felix Driver
Mark Nesbitt
Caroline Cornish

 **UCLPRESS**

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Acknowledgements

The idea for this book originated in the work of the Mobile Museum project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AH/N00941X/1), which focused specifically on the Economic Botany Collection at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. Our research on the circulation of specimens and artefacts from this remarkable collection into a variety of different kinds of museums, botanic gardens, research institutes, schools and universities in Britain and across the world raised wider questions requiring a broader focus. Questions about the mobility of collections intersected with new approaches to museum history. The work of researchers such as ourselves on the provenance of museum objects was propelled into wider arenas by urgent debates over repatriation and decolonising collections. And so, our decision to host a conference at Kew with the circulation of collections as its central theme proved remarkably propitious.

As outlined in the Introduction, the theme of this book – the mobility of museum collections, past and present – invites an interdisciplinary approach. The conference from which the book arises, held at Kew Gardens in May 2019, brought together historians of science, anthropologists, imperial historians, geographers, archaeologists, botanists, museum curators and historians of education to address the theme. The papers at this event were presented in pairs, an arrangement largely reflected in the organisation of this book, a format which encouraged discussion and debate among speakers and participants. We are very grateful to the authors for contributing their work and engaging in dialogue across disciplines and professions in a spirit of generosity and openness (and also remarkable efficiency and tenacity, given what else has been happening in the world since then). We hope that bringing their chapters together in book form will not only make their work more widely available, but will also encourage further collaboration between researchers and others working in very different disciplines and contexts.

We would like to thank Clive Gamble, Anne Secord, Gaye Sculthorpe and Joshua Bell for their generous contributions as conference session chairs, and for the continued stimulus they have provided to the work reflected in this book. We are also grateful to Tim Boon, Jeremy Coote, Tony Kanellos and Judith Warnement for their advice on the Mobile Museum project. In addition, we gratefully acknowledge the work of other members of the project team and associates, especially Beth Wilkey, Harriet Gendall, James Morley, Laura Newman, Frankie Kubicki and Kim Walker. Kew's Library, Art and Archives team (including Kiri Ross-Jones, Katherine Harrington and Rachael Gardner) deserve special thanks, not only for curating a special display for the conference which inspired this book, but also for providing expert guidance to the Mobile Museum project researchers over a much longer period. Warm thanks are also due to Chris Penfold at UCL Press, and to the reviewers of our book proposal.

Introduction: mobilising and re-mobilising museum collections

Felix Driver, Mark Nesbitt and Caroline Cornish

This book presents an argument for the importance of circulation in the study of museum collections, past and present. Bringing together international researchers from a wide variety of disciplines (including the history of science, museum anthropology, archaeology, geography and postcolonial history) to consider the mobility of collections, we aim to provide an overview of some urgent themes in the study of museums and collections. From the first chapter to the last, the book seeks to move between questions of theory and practice, and so our contributors include museum curators working with a variety of collections in the UK, Australia, the United States and Austria. The 13 essays that follow combine historical perspectives on the circulation of museum objects in the past with contemporary accounts of their re-mobilisation, most notably in the context of Indigenous community engagement. The authors seek to explore processes of circulation historically in order to re-examine, inform and unsettle common assumptions about the way museum collections have evolved over time and through space.

By foregrounding questions of circulation, we argue, the essays in *Mobile Museums* collectively represent a paradigm shift in the understanding of the history and future uses of museum collections. In this introductory chapter, we outline the basis for such a claim, exploring different aspects of the mobility of collections as reflected in both recent historical scholarship and contemporary approaches to the management of collections. The book covers a wide range of collections, including the botanical, the biocultural, the ethnographic, the photographic, the naval, the educational, the archaeological and the zoological. And its perspective extends from the local to the global, with case studies drawn from South America, West Africa, Oceania, Australia, the United States,

Europe and the UK. The essays in this book help us to understand why the mobility of museum collections was a fundamental aspect of their history, and why it continues to matter today.

Circulation: making museums mobile

Why ‘mobile museums’? In our experience, the term elicits a variety of responses, usually associating mobility with pedagogical programmes of knowledge diffusion, as in the university extension movement, the circulating public library or the travelling museum on wheels. Such initiatives have a long history stretching back for over a century and a half, often associated with progressive ideals of community education, social welfare and modern citizenship. The positive associations of mobility in this sense have been further accentuated in our own time, the era of digitisation, as characterised by a profusion of initiatives to ‘unlock’ the archives, ‘break down’ the walls of the museum and ‘share’ the knowledge embedded in particular institutional collections.

Alongside, but distinct from, this ethical commitment to reaching new audiences, we intend the term ‘mobile museum’ to signal a significant moment in research on collections, reflecting a wider paradigm shift in the form of a ‘mobility turn’ across the disciplines. Here, mobility refers to the flow of ideas and practices, as well as to the movement of people and things, and especially their diasporic legacies in dispersed collections of archives, objects and photographs.¹ More generally, in the context of academic research within such fields as global history, historical geography and the history of science, the vogue for studies of ‘circulation’ (of things, people, techniques and ideas) has in recent years been sufficiently marked to have become itself a subject of scholarly study.² In the public sphere, meanwhile, the political dimensions of commitments to free circulation, especially the so-called ‘frictionless’ circulation of goods and people in Europe or the Americas (a utopian idea, if ever there was one), have become simultaneously more universally discussed and much less certain in an age of refugee crises and global pandemics. Hence the increasing emphasis in political discourse on the regulation of mobility. Within the world of heritage, meanwhile, the language of circulation has sometimes carried distinctly negative connotations, notably in the debate over repatriation – as in in the Sarr–Savoy 2018 report to the French President Emmanuel Macron, where ‘circulation’ in the form of temporary museum loans is figured as the conservative substitute for genuine restitution.³

The language of circulation thus suggests particular, and often contested, ways of thinking about exchange and mobility in the making of the modern world. Moving closer to the focus of our book – the importance of circulation as an aspect of the formation and mobilisation of museum collections – a host of recent historical studies have drawn attention to the mobility of collections at every stage of their formation and development, as well as the increasingly global infrastructures of trade and empire which enabled this mobility.⁴ From the perspective of contemporary science, increased realisation of the value of data locked up in collections (including natural history museums, botanical gardens, and national and local archives repositories) has reinforced arguments for their reconnection in digital form. Here, the history of circulation can easily be associated with the fragmentation of knowledge: the promise of the digital is one of integration, reconnecting collections with their users. On the other hand, in the history of science, we have an increasing number of studies attending to the different ways in which collections – and the knowledge embedded in them – have circulated and continue to circulate, in whole or in part, both materially and virtually. Here, the history of the ‘duplicate’ (as discussed further, below) is of particular importance.

In the context of ethnographic collections, the question of dispersal has been turned to advantage in a number of recent studies, notably the work of the Pacific Presences research team at the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. In his introduction to the work of this project, Nicholas Thomas makes clear the challenge of working with large collections of artefacts originating in countless places across the vast human realm of Oceania and now stored in European museums thousands of miles away.⁵ As described by Thomas, this challenge was conceptual and ethical as well as practical and logistical, and it involved being attuned to the creative potential of such collections once they are reunited with the sources of their vitality. Rather than seeing museum artefacts as legacies of the past or as heritage resources, Thomas insists on their active potential for remaking the future: ‘The collection is, in a profound and vital sense, a creative technology, a complex formation that can enable new knowledge and new outcomes of many kinds.’⁶ This argument for the collection as a ‘creative technology’ is also evident in Paul Basu’s Museum Affordances project, concerned with colonial anthropological collections from West Africa, which is discussed in Chapter 2. Projects such as these have drawn attention to the value not just of reconnecting objects with the communities which made them, but of *re-mobilising* these collections. ‘At the most basic level’, as Basu has

argued, 'dispersed collections create relationships between communities (between museum professionals, different audiences and source communities, for example); they generate networks of exchange that entail obligations and responsibilities.'⁷

The use of the term 'mobile museum' in the title for this book requires some more specific explanation. For three years, we have been engaged on a research project in which we traced the circulation of objects into, and especially out of, the Economic Botany Collection at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew (the subject of Chapter 4).⁸ The project title – Mobile Museum – reflected our focus on the movement of objects and their continued circulation after they had entered the Kew complex. It also drew attention to the fact that this was often a programmed mobility – not simply a byproduct of reorganisation or rationalisation, but an integral aspect of the functions of the museum as seen by its Victorian founders. This, we argue, reflected a broader cultural economy in which the circulation of specimens and artefacts was designed into the structure of the museum system. The term 'mobile museum' was inherited from a prior study (undertaken with design historian Sonia Ashmore and cultural geographer Phil Crang) of South Asian textile collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum.⁹ That work was concerned with the various forms in which the knowledge of textiles travelled during the nineteenth century, from the abstracted Oriental designs of Owen Jones to the 'portable museums' of John Forbes Watson, the India Office's 'Reporter on the natural products of India'. Forbes Watson's use of the term 'museum' – to describe simultaneously the larger institution he curated for a period at the India Office, the ingenious cabinets he designed for the display of thousands of specimens *and* the series of volumes of textile samples cut from South Asian fabrics – is itself highly suggestive.¹⁰ New technologies of display, combined with innovations in print culture, helped to make the museum mobile.

At another level, we intend the term 'mobile museum' to draw attention to the dynamism of the museum landscape, with its constantly mutating institutional forms.¹¹ Through a telling anecdote in his book *Travels in South Kensington* (1882), the freethinker Moncure Conway captured the impact of the extraordinary profusion of museum buildings and displays in this part of London during the second half of the nineteenth century. Seeking a picture to illustrate his narrative, he finds the museum attendant has none to sell: "What, no photograph of the South Kensington Museum!", I exclaimed with some impatience. "Why, sir", replied the man mildly, "you see, the museum doesn't stand still long enough to be photographed."¹² As an illustration of what Arindam Dutta

has called South Kensington's 'state of permanent incompleteness',¹³ this image – or, rather, the lack of one! – points us towards a museum world much more mobile than the one with which many of us are familiar. In part, this was another expression of a programmed mobility in the sense that the South Kensington Museum had a powerful pedagogic mission reaching far beyond its walls, as reflected, for example, in the work of its Circulation Department, as well as in its extension into the world of East London via the Bethnal Green Museum.¹⁴ Yet the museum, and the museum complex of which it was a part, was also the product of unanticipated contingencies, as collections were acquired, merged and redistributed across an expanding network.¹⁵ This way of thinking about collections as inherently mobile, actually or potentially, provides the starting point for the studies presented in this book. In the remainder of this introduction, we explore its significance for studies of the histories of museum collections and the challenges facing museums today.

Histories: collections in circulation

Museum histories have often been thought of as histories of concentration, of the accumulation of objects assembled in one place. As Gosden and Larson write in the first sentence of their book *Knowing Things* (an indispensable reference for work on the history of museum collections), 'The Pitt Rivers Museum is in Oxford'.¹⁶ From the fact of location, of the concentration of objects, people and knowledge in particular places, much else follows: the museum, even the universal museum, is after all always situated in a particular place. The work of a generation of museum theorists and historians of science on the history of collections has been profoundly influenced by this concern with matters of site and location, and associated questions about the geography of power. To acknowledge the importance of location is to draw attention to the contexts and networks in which collections are built, extending from the local to the global; to draw attention to their highly situated nature, socially and culturally as well as spatially. However, when combined with somewhat linear and/or teleological frameworks of analysis that centre on the evolution of a museum collection towards its present state, this focus on questions of concentration can obscure important aspects of the history of collections.

What might it mean to think of the history of museums and collections in terms of dispersion rather than accumulation, mobility