

Gender, Sexuality, and Museums

A Routledge Reader
Edited by Amy K. Levin



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Gender, Sexuality and Museums

Gender, Sexuality and Museums provides the only repository of key articles, new essays and case studies for the important area of gender and sexuality in museums. It is the first reader to focus on LGBT issues and museums, and the first reader for nearly 15 years to collect articles which focus on women and museums. At last, students of museum studies, women's studies, and LGBT studies as well as museum professionals have a single resource.

The book is organized into 3 thematic parts, each with its own introduction. Sections focus on women in museum work, applications of feminist and LGBT theories to museum exhibitions, and exhibitions and collections pertaining to women and individuals who are LGBT. Case studies in the fourth part provide different perspectives on key topics such as memorials and memorializing; modernism and museums; and natural history collections. The collection concludes with a bibliographic essay evaluating scholarship to date on gender and sexuality in museums.

Amy K. Levin brings together outstanding articles published in the past as well as new essays. The collection's scope is international, with articles about US, Canadian, and European institutions. *Gender, Sexuality and Museums: A Routledge Reader* is an essential resource for those studying gender and sexuality in the museum.

Amy K. Levin is Acting Associate Dean for Academic Administration in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Northern Illinois University. She is also a professor of English at the university and has served both as director of Women's Studies and coordinator of Museum Studies. She studies and teaches about race, class, and gender in museums in the US and Europe. Her first two books were studies in literary criticism, and her third book, *Defining Memory: Local Museums and the Construction of History in America's Changing Communities*, is an edited collection of articles on small museums.

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Contributors

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Anna Conlan has served as assistant curator at the Amie and Tony James Gallery at the Graduate Center, City University of New York, where she participated in the development of a variety of exhibitions. In that capacity, she worked closely with PhD students gaining experience in the gallery. Her own research focuses on sex and prostitution museums.

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This collection would not exist without the collective wisdom and hard work of the authors of the articles included. I am grateful to those who wrote new material especially for this book, as well as to those whose material is reprinted here. The publishers of this reprinted material deserve credit as well. While every effort has been made to trace copyright holders and obtain permission, any omissions brought to our attention will be remedied in future editions. The following pieces were reproduced with kind permission.

A shorter version of Marjorie Schwarzer's chapter appeared as "Women in the Temple: Gender and Leadership in Museums," in *Museum News*, May/June 2007. Two articles were printed in *Museum International*, vol. 59, no. 4 (2007): Carol Malt's chapter, "Museums, Women, and Empowerment in MENA Countries" was included on pp. 53–62, and Olivia Robinson and Trish Barnard's article, "'Thanks, But We'll Take it From Here': Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women Influencing the Collection of Tangible and Intangible Heritage," on pages 34–45. These are reproduced with permission of Blackwell Publishing Ltd. Barbara Clark Smith first published her chapter as "A Case Study of Applied Feminist Theories," in *Gender Perspectives: Essays on Women in Museums*, edited by Jane Glaser and Artemis Zenetou (Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 1994), pp. 137–46. "Queer is Here? Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Histories and Public Culture," by Robert Mills, was originally part of *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 62 (2006), pp. 253–63. I am grateful to Left Coast Press for granting permission to republish Paul Gabriel's "Why Grapple with Queer When You Can Fondle It? Embracing Our Erotic Intelligence." Gabriel's chapter first appeared in *Museums & Social Issues*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2008), pp. 53–66; it has been revised and expanded for inclusion here. Tamar Katriel's article, "Pioneering Women Revisited: Representations of Gender in Some Israeli Settlement Museums," came from *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol. 20, no. 5/6 (1997), pp. 675–87. Expanded versions of two articles which were first published in the *International Journal of Art & Design Education (JADE)*, vol. 26, no. 1 (2007) are included in this text: Stuart Frost's "The Warren Cup: Highlighting Hidden Histories," was on pp. 63–72, and Michael Petry's "Hidden Histories: The Experience of Curating a Male Same Sex Exhibition and the Problems Encountered," was on pp. 119–27. They are reproduced with permission

of Blackwell Publishing Ltd. Taylor & Francis gave kind permission to republish Angela Vanegas's "Representing Lesbians and Gay Men in British Social History Museums," from *Museums, Society, Inequality*, edited by Richard Sandell (London: Routledge, 2002). Rebecca Machin's "Gender Representation in the Natural History Galleries in the Manchester Museum" was first printed in *Museum and Society*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2008), pp. 54–67. "Bodies of Evidence: Queering Disclosure in the Art of Jasper Johns," is Chapter 5 in *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948–1963* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), pp. 136–162. Frank Holliday has granted permission for us to reprint his conversation with Carrie Moyer, Sheila Pepe, Stephen Mueller, and Andrew Robinson, which appeared in *Gay City News*, 30 December 2004. Finally, Erica Rand's "Breeders on a Golf Ball: Normalizing Sex at Ellis Island," is being republished from *The Ellis Island Snow Globe* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), pp. 41–66.

Credit is due for the images in this work as well. Michael Petry took the photographs accompanying his chapter, and I took the photograph for my piece on evolution museums. The British Museum has given rights for the use of the photograph of the Warren Cup, which is part of Stuart Frost's chapter. The photograph accompanying Rebecca Machin's article is included by kind permission of Bryony Bond. The image of *Target with Plaster Casts* by Jasper Johns in Gavin Butt's chapter is included by permission of DACS; the artwork is in the collection of Leo Castelli Gallery, New York.

At Northern Illinois University, many individuals and offices helped to make this book a reality. The English Department, the Graduate School, and the office of the Vice President for Research provided travel funds related to my chapter on evolution; the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences provided travel funds and two magnificent graduate assistants, Christine Brovelli O'Brien and Joshua Adair. In Women's Studies, I received travel support as well as Lise Schlosser's secretarial assistance and Rebekah Kohli's advice at various stages of manuscript preparation. My students and colleagues in Women's Studies, English, and the Dean's office were helpful with my questions, calming when I expressed anxieties over completing the manuscript, and understanding when the book took precedence over other tasks.

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Amy K. Levin

INTRODUCTION

FOR THE PAST TWELVE years, I have taught a class on race, class, and gender in museums. The first time I taught the class, I used articles from *Gender Perspectives*, a 1994 book published by the Smithsonian and edited by Jane R. Glaser and Artemis Zenetou, when discussing the role of women in museums.¹ As time passed, students began to find the collection dated, and I used articles from journals and other books instead. As more time passed, my students complained increasingly because the texts on women's issues were overshadowed by the increasing availability of works focusing on other forms of diversity in museums. LGBTQ issues received short shrift as well. As the annotated bibliography at the end of this volume will show, this tendency was not due to prejudice on my part, but rather to a stubborn gap in the literature on museums and social inclusion. No collection of articles suitable for classroom use has focused exclusively on gender and sexuality. Intellectually engaging articles have been written, but the instructor must collect them from scattered journals, books, and websites. Researchers are similarly hampered in their efforts, as are museum professionals seeking information on institutional trends and possibilities.

This volume represents an effort to fill that gap by gathering an extensive selection of articles between one set of covers. Like most scholarly pursuits, the effort ended up being more complicated than I had initially envisioned. Prospective authors began to send queries: Are you interested in the sex and gender of museum staff? Of collections? Collectors? What kinds of collections? Which parts of the world will be included? Are you interested in an historical approach? How theoretical should the pieces be? Are you only accepting new pieces or will you reprint classics in the field? How knowledgeable is your audience about museum theory and/or feminist theory? Do they understand the meaning of "queer"? As I answered these queries, the book began to take shape.

To understand the role of gender in museums, it is essential to know some history, beginning at the very least with the movement from private collections and cabinets to the growth of national public museums in the early nineteenth century. While the research on cabinets of curiosity conducted by Olive Impey and Arthur MacGregor does not focus explicitly on gender, it does document how these collections were associated with wealthy gentlemen who possessed the means to wander the far reaches of the known world themselves or to pay others to bring

back its wonders.² The private nature of the cabinet was an essential part of the gentleman's privilege, particularly when its contents were especially arcane or erotic. The family portrait gallery served a related function in the social construction of the gentleman. The scene in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) where Darcy finds Elizabeth accompanying her maternal aunt and uncle as they tour the portraits in his home deserves fame not only for its key place in a beloved novel,³ but also because it records the penetration of the gentleman's mansion by more plebeian folk. It was a short step from allowing visitors into private galleries to the creation of the public museum with specially designated visiting hours for working people and upper-class females, populations that overlapped little in the nineteenth century.

Carol Duncan has traced how the illustrious national museums, particularly the Louvre in Paris and the National Gallery in London, played key roles in the great nineteenth-century trinity of nationality, masculinity, and colonialism. If the Louvre offered Napoleon a site to exhibit the spoils of his overthrow of an effete royal succession, the National Gallery allowed the British to create a patriotic narrative beginning with Raphael. The election of Raphael as a point of origin in a national narrative of art history effectively erased any claims the French might have made to influencing British tastes following the invasion by William the Conqueror. The elevation of Raphael allowed the British to elide the legacies of the Ancient Egyptians as well, omitting from narration the brief French governance of Egypt under Napoleon as well as any influence African peoples might have had on the creation of the British Empire.⁴ Later in the nineteenth century, the role of famous capitalists in the expansion of major institutions, especially in the United States, also had major implications relating to gender. As Eric Gable and Richard Handler have demonstrated in their accounts of the role of John Rockefeller in the founding of Colonial Williamsburg shortly after this period, museums and historic sites provided an avenue for industrialists to "wash" newly inherited money. By founding or donating collections to public institutions, they created the impression of passing on a well-established patrimony, rendering them in the role of *noblesse oblige*.⁵

In many cases, the wives of capitalists were involved as well; for example, Bertha Palmer (wife of Chicago real estate mogul Potter Palmer) donated her collection of major Impressionist paintings to the Art Institute of Chicago. The first women's groups related to museums arose at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, leading to a long period in which the activity of visiting art museums and certain historical collections was feminized, perceived as a social activity for women of leisure as well as an educational activity for children and the women tending to them.⁶ Fathers might trot along on Sunday afternoons or accompany their sons to the more masculine collections of stuffed animal trophies or reconstructed dinosaur skeletons in natural history and science museums.

An indicator of the importance of gender in museums at the beginning of the twentieth century – and of images of women on display within – is the fact that in 1913 and 1914 members of the women's suffrage movement launched attacks on several museums. In her autobiography, Emmeline Pankhurst noted that, when the glass on paintings at the Manchester Art Gallery was broken, "The only answer of the Government was the [temporary] closing of the British Museum, the National Gallery, Windsor Castle, and other tourist resorts."⁷ Nevertheless, the National Gallery in London was soon the target of two attacks. First, Mary Richardson slashed a painting of Venus.⁸ Later, the famous Sargent portrait of Henry James was defiled. Through these actions, "the Suffragists had succeeded in large measure in making England unattractive to tourists, and hence unprofitable to the world of business."⁹ In her description, Pankhurst correctly read the entrepreneurial and materialistic aspects of public museums, realizing that much of the institutions' authority stemmed from their ability to promulgate carefully controlled images.

The destruction of paintings in one of the most influential museums of the Western world was not arbitrary. Richardson's attack on the classical image of female beauty was directed at the stereotype of women as unintelligent and incapable of making wise political decisions or voting for themselves. In the nineteenth-century museum, such visions were caged, their voluptuous curves flattened to two dimensions – hence, the suffragist's attack was directed as much at the frame (or act of framing) as at the images themselves. Moreover, both Singer and James specialized in depicting a particular kind of woman from a relatively privileged class. The assault on the Sargent portrait was two pronged: first, it targeted a painter who turned celebrity matrons into nearly flawless visions of beauty, their personalities submerged by their clothes, homes, or other material possessions. Furthermore, given that James was a male author who specialized in depicting women, the suffragists seemed to be asserting the right to present, and even speak for, themselves.

Winston Churchill's government incarcerated the suffragists, ironically sentencing them to less time for destroying artworks – windows to the culture at large – than for breaking shop windows harboring mannequins. But the damage to the *status quo* had already been done. In claiming the space for displaying representations of womanhood, females publicly reclaimed the representations themselves, challenging the ideological and economic underpinnings of cultural authority. These gestures were to be repeated by the Guerrilla Girls in New York later in the century, as they took on the authority of the Museum of Modern Art and its lack of representation of female artists.

As this short and vastly simplified history of Western museums approaches the present, it is important to note that in the twentieth century, the profession of museum work became more feminized as segments of the profession moved from a privileged male domain to part of the educative role associated with females. As men went off to the world wars, women often took their places. As will be discussed later, at the Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City, Ruth Lindsey Hughes took the helm of the Asian art collection while famed curator Laurence Sickman was at war.¹⁰ Other women adopted the social and educational tasks of volunteering to serve as docents in the 1950s and thereafter, although as Marjorie Schwarzer's chapter shows, women continue to be under-represented in the highest ranks of museum administration.

Public museums as we know them in North America and Europe have played a large part in the creation and enforcement of ideologies of class and gender. As educational institutions, they have continued to serve as places for acculturation well into the twenty-first century. Yet despite widely held perceptions of the prevalence of gay men in particular – but also of lesbians and bisexual individuals – in museum work, little evidence of their contributions exists. The perception that these populations are over-represented in the field may be based on stereotypes about feminized domains being the province of gay men. But the lack of evidence mirrors the silences, gaps, and distortions that surround gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender histories in general. The pages that would tell us the role of homosexuals in the creation of museums are largely blank, their contributions generally obscured, with the exception of a few extremely famous individual collectors, such as Philip Johnson or (very likely) Charles Freer. Aside from such major figures as Gertrude Stein, history is even more stubbornly silent about the lives of lesbians and transgender individuals in museum work than it is about the existence of gay men and bisexuals. This discrepancy may be accounted for in part by sexism within the larger population as well as by the very small number of people who identify themselves publicly as transgender. As a result, however, sections of this collection must inevitably be uneven.

Museum staffing is not the only domain in which gender comes into play. When contemporary museums attempt to focus on marginalized populations, their exhibitions gain inflection from three inextricable and commanding forces: the institution's past and present

relationship to dominant groups; the politics of control inherent in spectatorship and display; and the evolving economics of marketing culture, and especially sex, as a commodity. Because similar forces come into play in the more traditional use of the term "exhibitionist tendencies," I have adopted the expression to describe what happens when museums assume responsibility for greater inclusiveness, particularly with respect to gender. The term is particularly apposite when one considers that the assertion of power in exhibitionism compels others to gaze at the self; similarly, many museum installations reveal as much about those who present them as about the "others" they claim for their subject.

Another set of limitations to this book emerged when I considered the key role of the Western tradition of colonization in the creation of museum-quality collections, whether items were acquired through purchase, pillage, or trade. In contrast, formerly colonized countries often lack the means to build museums and preserve artifacts, let alone to train professionals. Because they have a less established tradition of museums, it is harder to trace patterns related to gender and sexuality in them, although Carol Malt's article on women in Middle Eastern museums provides useful information. Museums are also less suited to certain cultures that value the past differently from Western societies, for instance cultures that destroy or bury the possessions of the deceased, or that are going through upheavals which have led to the destruction of antiquities, such as Afghanistan and Iraq. Still other cultures burnish their treasures through use rather than setting them aside for display.

The roles of women and individuals who are LGBTQ with regard to museums are severely limited in regimes that restrict the free circulation of the former or, in the case of the latter, deny their right to exist. Indeed, in many places, the stories of gays and lesbians may ultimately be documented more through memorials than through museums, through traces of their absence, such as pink triangles at Holocaust museums, rather than through former possessions that bear their stories and personalities. For a time, it appeared that AIDS was going to create a similar scenario in the US; now, collections of LGBTQ-related memorabilia are springing up in many urban centers. As Angela Vanegas points out in her chapter, one dilemma remains: how to mark the stories of LGBTQ individuals when so many of their possessions are no different from those of anyone else (or perhaps one should say that the possessions of heterosexuals are no different from those of queer people).

The difficulties incurred in an effort to trace gender and sexuality in museums throughout history and around the globe are embedded in critical theory. Consequently, this text addresses the relations among museum theory, queer theory, and feminist theory. Museums are ideal sites for explorations of these theories, for their visitors, staff, and collections provide superb case studies. Artifacts in particular are the perfect media for evidence-based research. However, few individuals are familiar with all of these theoretical areas. In selecting articles for this collection, I walked a fine line, seeking pieces that provided complexity for experts and sufficient background for novices.

Current museum theory, for the most part, is grafted on to major streams of cultural theory, including, but not limited to, Marx's critique of capital and capitalism and Veblen's explorations of the role of the leisure class. Post-colonial theory provides insights into the creation and purposes of major ethnological and natural history museums, while post-modernism pervades dialogues about museum architecture and aesthetics. Rather than engaging in a game of "buzz-word bingo" with major theoretical concepts, it may be more useful for readers to focus on concepts that intertwine most particularly with issues of gender and sexuality in museums.

Increasingly, museum scholars studying all kinds of institutions – including those that concentrate on art, natural history, public history, ethnography, and science – reject the notion