Civilizing Museums

Editorial

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This volume of *Museum Worlds* opens with Howard Morphy reflecting on his involvement in the development of the British Museum's recent *Indigenous Australia: enduring civilisation* exhibition. Morphy begins his commentary by ruminating on the idea of civilization and its complex relationship to museums. Historically these institutions have—together with academic disciplines—drawn upon the notion of civilization, explicitly or implicitly, to categorize objects as art or antiquities on the one hand versus craft, ethnography or material culture on the other. Of course this has also meant—still means—classifying peoples as civilized or not civilized, however directly or indirectly, intentionally or otherwise. Museums are, as Morphy points out, still “struggling with categories that have their origins in past histories.”

As it stands, this is not a radical claim in today's critical landscape. Much printers' ink has been expended in explorations of the colonial baggage of museums and their associated academic disciplines. A great deal of literature also addresses the impacts of this historical legacy on how museums have represented and continue to represent, and engage (or not engage) with, their collections' originating communities and their descendants. There is, too, an increasing awareness of a range of approaches and projects, both academic and practice-based, to these issues. For example, we are presently witnessing a mounting understanding within the research field of the agency of historic originating communities in the shaping of colonial-era collections, and, at the same time, a growing, and increasingly nuanced, consciousness of the forms of and responses to “the museum” in practice in formerly colonized communities around the globe.

Morphy does not, however, simply reiterate or summarize now widely accepted critical positions on historical museum practices and contexts. He offers us an optimistic re-evaluation of a particular moment in the ongoing shifts in the relational matrices within which museums, their collections, and the communities and places whence those materials originate, are all embedded. Central in this view of current, increasingly collaborative and reflexive museum practice is the emphasis given in both the title of the British Museum's exhibition and in Morphy's reflections, to the term “civilization”. Indeed we witness, it seems, a positive re-appropriation of the term not wholly unlike other attempts to re-claim formerly divisive or pejorative terms, such as “queer”. Within Morphy's discussion we can, I suggest, discern three aspects to the reconstitution of ‘civilization’ in museums. First, it is remade as *condition*, with recognition that the peoples whom museums represent are indeed “civilized”, whether or not their way of life is similar to that of the culture within which the museum happens to be embedded. Second, “civilization” is reformed as *process*, so that rather than attempting to civilize—or representing

attempts to civilize—"the other", as may once have been the case, it is now the *museum* that is on the receiving end of the civilizing process. And thirdly, "civilization" is reappropriated as a descriptive term and idea, as Morphy and the exhibition about which he writes do explicitly; that is, a concept that has been problematic—in anthropology particularly, because of its former classificatory and exclusionary uses that resulted in the making of pejorative judgements about those deemed to lie outside its boundaries—is re-used in a positive way.

This central use of the idea of "civilization" in discussing historical, contemporary, and globally distributed museum practices and contexts, is not merely an interesting one; nor is it apposite only to questions of importance to Aboriginal communities and collections. It is also a critical frame that could be applied to a range of other contemporary situations and issues around the world. For instance, "civilization" and its opposites, such as "barbarism", and yet wider notions like humanity, comprise a dominant trope in current discourse around ownership and treatment of cultural heritage in and of Iraq and Syria, including in the language of international museums and organizations (e.g. statement from the Louvre, quoted in Chulov 2015; Roberts 2015; Saul 2015; Wroughton 2014). How, one wonders, might such tropes, their historicities and their continued and evolving functioning in today's world impact not only upon contingent ideas of heritage and its potential loss and/or protection (e.g. Fibiger 2015, Holtorf 2015, Tanaka 2015), but also upon museums and aspirations towards collaborative practice, however distant such aims might seem in some contexts at present? This journal welcomes submissions that consider these important questions in their myriad global instantiations.

Beyond its explicit consideration of "civilization", Morphy's commentary places its reflection on *Indigenous Australia: enduring civilisation* firmly within the context not so much of historical value judgements about objects and other people (the backdrop), but of a *contemporary* creation of value by museums that works actively to appreciate "the complexity and richness of other ways of living . . . as part of a changing world." There is challenge here: to established ideas about art, non-art and art canons, to some pervasive notions around the perceived fragility and vulnerability (or, conversely, fixity) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders' ways of life, and to museums' prior modes of constructing values and representations. The exhibition approach that results is, of course, given a particular frisson and historical platform through its British Museum venue and 'civilisation' filter; nonetheless, it sits within an expanding set of global manifestations—in both museum studies and museum practice—of the kinds of multivocal, multilocal, multiperspectival creations of value Morphy may have in mind. One might argue, of course, that some museums and some scholars have now been so oriented for at least two decades. Think, for example, of collaborative projects between Indigenous communities and museums holding collections of their material culture, and exhibitions in such museums in North America, Australia and New Zealand. Indeed, later contributions in this volume address, in different ways, just such collaborations; e.g. see the meeting and project reports by Edmundson and Neale; Rivèt et. al; Brown and Argounova-Low; and Hyltén-Cavallius and Svanberg. Yet even the apparently established creations of value entailed in endeavours such as those described in these pieces, and the ways in which they celebrate and give agency to "other" ways of life (and whether "other" has any meaning here is of course inevitably questionable and depends only upon where one stands), continue both to grow and spread, and to become more complex, subtle and careful in their machinations. Meanwhile, museums are becoming more sensitive too to the rights, needs and practices of other groups as well: not only Indigenous and other formerly colonized peoples, but also those whose age, economic, political, and cultural capital, physical or mental abilities, or sexual or gender orientations, may mean they have either been formerly absent from, or without agency in their representation in, the museum. There are

ever- but unevenly growing literatures addressing these sensitivities, but it is easy for a reader to be unaware of the extent to which they have yet to affect both practice and wider scholarship and how that differs around the world—and this journal welcomes articles discussing these and other matters in all parts of the globe, however they may be framed. In particular, we are interested in contributions that reflect on how the *museum* is transformed—*civilized*, in the terms discussed here—by such issues and processes.

In the current volume, we re-encounter civilization in a rather different manner—and in more depth to the British Museum—in the last of the research articles in these pages, by Mark Turner. In this article, the positive inflection of Morphy’s civilization has been supplanted by a more plaintive and museologically introspective tone. For Turner as for Boon (1991) as for Burton (1621), it seems, all is erected upon—and, crucially, *from*—the rubble of what came before: writings, civilizations, museums . . . all depend upon destruction, fragments, spoils, and the repurposing thereof. Writing particularly about museums’ exhibitionary explorations of their own pasts, what he calls an “autobiographical . . . introspective and retrospective ‘return to curiosity,’” Turner asks what, in such a frame, a museum is a museum of? He sees a representational emptiness at the heart of this building on the ruins—or at least, a vacuum at the center of museums’ interests in visually interrogating their own histories, a hollow that is both mournful and intellectually unsatisfactory. Museums’ commentaries on their own pasts actually have less to say about the curatorial practices of those lost ages than they do about today’s. In this, Turner and Morphy would probably agree, and though their perspectives on the matter are rather different they neatly bookend this volume’s research component.

Building upon the past in the present and for the future—whether or not that is construed as the shoring up and recycling of past debris—need not always be challenging or melancholic. It can also be, or be perceived as, a creative, exciting process with energising and regenerative effects far beyond, as well as within, the museum. Mersmann’s article in this volume, on two flagship museum projects in Asian megacities—Museum+ in Hong Kong, and the new Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MMCA) in Seoul—explores the way in which schemes for the development of new public institutions for the display of contemporary art are enmeshed within long-term urban planning visions and strategies. The process of design of such new museums serves, Mersmann argues, as a means to enable cities’ self-representation and identity building, locally and globally, in the face of cultural and economic competition. In the course of this, the museum is, in Mersmann’s terms, disembedded and deterritorialized, its architectural design a key part of global city branding. Yet as she shows, ultimately both Museum+ and the MMCA are also conceived as community-building “network nodes that directly connect with the urban life of the city and its full range of activities” rather than as static monuments and landmarks. Ultimately, both these institutions exemplify a breaking down of the boundaries between museum and city; where one ends and the other begins—who is civilizing whom, perhaps—becomes blurred.

Civilization is a pertinent theme too, albeit implicitly and indirectly, to the research articles in this volume’s special section, Collections, Museums, Africa. This section has its origin in a panel, Museum Collections as Material for African Studies, convened by Zachary Kingdon at the 2014 conference of the African Studies Association of the UK (ASAUUK), held at the University of Sussex. The panel focused on indigenous African agencies in the making of museum collections and on the possibilities within such collections for enhancing understanding of the historical relationships and dynamics within which they were and are interwoven. As Kingdon pointed out in his original call for papers, using African material culture as a source of, or route to, knowledge concerning African peoples, is historically problematic (Kingdon 2015). Over

twenty years ago now, Coombes's work (1994) demonstrated the use of African objects and British institutions' collections thereof, to construct and show imagined ideas of Africa—in opposition to which, equally constructed notions of British-ness could be defined. Indeed, the recognisable us/other distinction so created echoed perfectly the customary civilization/barbarism binary. Yet while—once we read them critically in the light of Coombes's and others' work—collections in British ethnographic museums and elsewhere may seem to say more about the British in Africa than the Africans in Africa, they were not free from African agency in their making. Strategic African decision-making and action in exchanges, gift-giving and sales concerning objects that eventually ended up in British and other European museums, was ever-present—although these activities and associated biographical details tend to be lacking in museum documentation (Shelton 2001).

The two articles based on papers from the original ASAUK panel that appear in this volume are both built upon detailed research work that attempts to reconnect museum objects with the tales that belong with them. Kingdon's article is concerned with tusks in the World Museum Liverpool, beautifully carved by Central African coast Kongo-speaking people in the nineteenth century. He begins by pointing out the ironic contrast between the complex and rich narratives on the tusks on the one hand, and the lack of discussion of them in contemporary firsthand European sources and museum documentation on the other. Through the application of ichnography, or the "science of traces" (Byrne 2013), Kingdon is able to demonstrate something of the cross-cultural dynamism and interaction that characterized the context within which the tusks were obtained. It was, however, as Kingdon explains, a setting within which British traders and residents understated (at the least) the agency and sophistication—*civilization*, one might say—of the Central Africans. Moreover, even if individual British collectors of objects did pass on information illuminative of African agency and complexity, such data have, as Kingdon puts it, "tended to be effaced by the objectifying systems of museums." This indigenous agency in the making of collections is also highlighted by Fiona Savage, in her essay on Asante artefacts now in the British Museum that were brought back by Thomas Bowdich in the early nineteenth century. Through a careful forensic investigation of contemporary published and archival documents, and analysis of the socio-political context, Savage demonstrates a significant local agency in the assemblage of what became Bowdich's collection. Indeed, she shows that some of the most important objects in the collection, some pieces of gold-work, were donated by the King of Asante, Osei Bonsu, in, she concludes, a deliberate act of self-promotion and with the intention that these artefacts should stand for the Asante in the British Museum.

Kingdon's and Savage's approaches exemplify challenges to modes of interpretation of African material culture that have been dominant for two centuries. Savage's depiction of an Asante king purposefully using diplomatic gift-exchange as a way to disseminate an image of an important, sovereign—and *civilized*—Asante nation is powerful and even moving. Not least as an unforeseen after-effect of Osei Bonsu's (and Bowdich's) actions was the creation of a fixed, "compelling and enduring golden vision of Asante, which continues to dominate the popular public imagination." The analyses within both these articles also embody the challenge to established museum methods of constructing representations and values that is inherent in Morphy's opening commentary, here from a principally historical perspective. Neither paper uses such terminology, but were they to do so, in bringing in the long lost agencies and identities of indigenous Africans important in the making of collections both might be said to be contributing to a civilizing of the museum.

Silvia Forni's article, the last in the special Africa section, also makes such a contribution, though in a slightly different way. Forni's contribution was not previously presented in the ASAUK 2014 panel, and rather than looking at historic collections of African artefacts now

in museums outside Africa it instead explores the nature of the displays in the many small palace museums that have opened in the Cameroonian Grassfields since the early 2000s. Forni traces the colonial, postcolonial and contemporary Cameroonian socio-political and economic contexts of these institutions, demonstrating their local nuances and the extent to which their narratives differ from national ones. The displays in these small museums challenge taxonomical and temporal conventions, building on local rather than international modes of interpretation to represent the identities and prestige of the Grassfields kingdoms. There is great complexity in the displays in these museums. Thus communities may, for example, choose to represent themselves with artefacts—such as Kongo *minkisi* or Ibo figures—that are from cultural groups and/or historical periods that have no direct relationship to them. Forni shows that, understood in the context of the local agencies that have created these museums and the palaces within which they sit, the heterogeneity of their displays makes sense—and that it is only within the modernist museological and art historical paradigms of the Cameroonians’ other, that it is problematic. To return once more to the trope introduced by Morphy’s commentary, we might say that it is these paradigms, not the palace museums of the Cameroon Grassfields, that need civilizing. The growing number of those museums in the twenty-first century, meanwhile, far from doggedly preserving an anthropological past are instead politically significant agents in their own right, “using the available tangible and historical resources to establish a polity’s relevance in today cultural landscape.”

This optimistic and contemporary end to the special section complements Morphy’s positive perspective on the shifting dynamics in museums, collections and museology. There are two other points one might extract from his opening to this volume which are significant to both its other contents and its future. They are also vital to a continuation of, and growing subtlety in, comprehension and practice of museums now and in relation to the past. Firstly, it is notable that Morphy’s piece draws from first-hand involvement in exhibition development and curatorial experience—both directly in the exhibition about which he writes, and in the past. While this journal would in no way wish to imply that critical discussions of museums and museum practice that do not draw on practice are of lesser value or unwelcome (patently neither is true), it must also be said that analysis and reflection drawn from—however indirectly—a basis in practice are vital to advancing insight into museums. Much more such work is needed. It is thus particularly pleasing that in addition to Morphy’s commentary, four out of the six research articles in this volume are authored by individuals engaged in curatorial posts (Kingdon, Savage, Forni, Pilegaard).

Ane Pilegaard’s paper also highlights—indeed, entirely concerns—the other essential current theme for museum practice and museum studies that runs through Morphy’s commentary: the importance of objects. Morphy highlights the “lead role” given to the objects in the *Indigenous Australia: enduring civilisation* exhibition and the ambition of the curatorial team “to let the objects speak through material presence, through their power as an integral part of the historical record, and through their complex relationship with source communities.” Pilegaard’s article examines the first of these—material presence—in particular. Her work operates at a fine-grained level of both practice and analysis, and entails drawing on object theory and understandings of exhibition design. It makes a real contribution to our still embryonic understandings of how people encounter and experience objects on the one hand, and of the effects of things on the other. Through a series of design experiments in the gallery spaces of Medical Museion in Copenhagen, Pilegaard sought to explore ways to break down and play with the barriers that impede the otherwise apparently close encounters with objects which exhibitions apparently seem to enable. Pilegaard brings her analysis of the small, close space between museum object and visitor into focus with her development of the concept of

material proximity. She elegantly shows us how it is through the possibilities inherent in such proximity—and in intimacy between objects and the sensing bodies of visitors—that material presence and the physical qualities of things can become apparent and have most effect. Indeed, one could say that in all research articles in this volume there is close analysis and re-positioning of presence, and of proximity and intimacy, in the sense of close and significant relationships—be it in relation to material objects in displays, historical African collections, contemporary small museums in Africa or national institutions of contemporary art in Asian megacities, or museums’ representations of their own pasts. They may not—and do not need to—be articulated in such terms, but in all such re-positionings we can discern, perhaps, both a reclaiming of ‘civilization’ and a civilizing of the museum.

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