

Editorial

Material Culture of the Middle East, Its Intangible Dimensions and New Museums

In this issue of *Anthropology of the Middle East*, we present contributions that deal with museums, museology and their approaches to the new social situations through which they must navigate. Cutting a swathe very generously around the Mediterranean and the Middle East – from Tunis to Qatar, Turkey and, as an extension, to Austria – we bring together articles that look closely into some acute issues of today: the transformation from colonial to post-colonial and its reverberant impacts, from national to post-national and trans-national societies both in Europe and the Middle East, and to the stringencies of material culture, cultural heritage and ‘meaningful objects’, and how to preserve, to analyse and to exhibit them. All contributors dedicate their works published here to the social, cultural and economic changes affecting societies and communities, and to the demands that increasing diversity presents as challenges to cultural institutions and their personnel.

This special issue addresses the associated questions of the intangible dimensions of the material culture of the Middle East and new museological practices and approaches in the region. The Middle East is well known for its extremely rich material cultural heritage and is, as such, the home of several of the world’s most iconic World Heritage sites (such as Babylon and Palmyra, to name but two). As a consequence, the region has had a long-standing and tortuous relationship with the archaeological, ethnographic and museological practices of European scientists (and amateurs) whose work frequently served the colonial project as well as seeking to collect material culture related to Europe’s ancient and Christian pasts. The associated intangible aspects of this material culture have been less well discussed. Since the recognition of intangible cultural heritage is now understood to have introduced a new heritage safeguarding and protection paradigm, it is timely to consider what



implications this has for the identification, safeguarding, interpretation and presentation of the heritage of the Middle East.

Not all these developments are perceived as positive, however, and a tendency has been identified to design museum spaces geared towards tourists, replacing the needs of colonial powers by those of another international audience; yet again, the role of the museum to serve the local community and its needs may again be subsumed in this project. At the same time, as expressed in Virginie Rey's article, the experiences of Tunisia in the aftermath of their achievement of independence and, more recently, during the 'Arab Spring', presenting and promoting intangible heritage – traditional cultural practices and performances – remains a contested question and requires further critical examination and analysis. Noting that, unlike other countries of the region, in the Tunisian context, efforts put towards decolonising the museum did not result in the de-ethnographisation of material culture: in contrast, the requirements of the newly independent state led to a complete epistemological transformation in the ways the old colonial collections of indigenous arts were presented. The museum (and museology) emerged as a social agent which should be a forum where marginalised groups are given a voice and which explores alternative narratives. In her article, Rey presents new ethnography from Tunis: her fieldwork in and about the Dar Ben Abdallah Museum has revealed several contested approaches to exhibiting that were developed on-site and in accordance with the collections. This sheds light on curators' considerations behind the scenes, and on how the new museum concept could be valuable for visitors to shape a renewed vision of history – by using the objects of everyday lives in Tunisia to bring about a distinct feeling of worth and belonging in those who visit. It is a setting between postcolonial nation building, national identity and myths. Rey contrasts the approach taken in the Dar Ben Abdallah with 'traditional museum exhibitionary practices' as much more 'intimate and sensory'. Indeed, this is reflected in the way in which the article is built around an interview with the museum's curator, Sonia Hamzawi, and takes an anecdotal approach, which brings an immediacy and intimacy to the piece. Questioned about the possibility of establishing an 'open air' museum where artisans work in recreated environments, such an approach was rejected by Sonia Hamzawi as too objectifying and a rather pointless exercise, hiring actors to 're-enact their own traditions'. Rather, the museum's curator and her team plan to organise workshops and activities alongside the exhibition, not only for tourists but also, and most importantly, for local inhabitants. Through this, they hope to make the museum and its collection more meaningful to an audience whose own heritage, much of it intangible, is the subject of exhibition.

Janet Blake has given us, with her contribution, insights into acute issues of cultural heritage, and presents several modes as to how involved institutions can go about their tasks in meaningful and relevant ways. Building on her expertise as a lawyer, and her knowledge of museums in the Republic

of Turkey, Blake stakes out options for possible strategies to integrate both local and global aims in heritage collection, preservation and exhibiting. The dual character of heritage is explored in her article – heritage is celebrated for its outstanding universal value while at the same time it can carry special meaning and value for local and bearer communities. Applying an international law analysis to the question, she notes that, since the second half of the twentieth century, the notion of heritage as a universal value of global significance has been the dominant approach in international law-making. This characterisation of heritage as a ‘common heritage of humankind’ is shown to have its roots in the European colonial experience where Western powers not only acquired heritage of ‘global’ significance but also came to regard themselves as having the responsibility towards it of a world trustee or steward. As Blake demonstrates, international cultural heritage law continues to face a serious challenge as to how we should characterise heritage for the purposes of protection: should it be viewed as a ‘cultural heritage of humankind’, a ‘national treasure’, or as a source of value and identity to local and indigenous communities? She explores the ways in which, in recent years, the importance of heritage to local actors – as a basis for identity and even continued existence as communities – has become much better understood and recognised. Blake takes as an illustrative case for exploring this phenomenon the implementation of the International Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003), noting continuing tensions associated with the dual nature of heritage in this. This treaty marks a significant paradigm shift in international cultural heritage law-making from predominantly valuing material heritage to celebrating a living heritage that is primarily located in the skills, knowledge and know-how of contemporary human beings. In considering this shift, Blake’s article examines the role that museums can play in safeguarding intangible aspects of heritage and, in particular, ensuring the full participation of bearer and local communities in this process.

Danila Mayer addresses an issue that, nowadays, is an important one for museums, in particular for anthropological and ethnographic museums, namely: whom should they represent and how? She takes as her entry point into this discussion the treatment of ‘migration’ in present-day cultural production and as a sociocultural phenomenon in museum studies. She poses the question of how migration can be brought to a museum, along with all its facets as the lived experience of people. This leads her to an examination of the museum as an institution as such and considering such issues as to which urban and/or national society does a museum cater today, identifying who speaks, who is spoken about and how, and addressing issues of representation, articulation and positioning. As a conceptual framework, she takes recent approaches in museum policymaking aimed at allowing for a ‘multi-vocality’. By attempting to attract and represent a broader public, such attempts hope to bring about increased social inclusion. Within this, Mayer describes exhibition processes with immigrants to Vienna – many from ex-Yugoslavia and

Turkey – that addressed the experience of immigration from the point of view of those who came to Austria, using personal archives and bringing in people with various migration experiences. This could encourage people to visit the museum for the first time and discover objects and images familiar to them from their own lives, helping the new citizens to assert a sense of identity, finding a new and valid identity in Austria. In a further project she describes, objects brought in and documented in the course of the outreach activities which will be on display in the museum in a special show and the knowledge and experiences gained will contribute to future curatorial work. Museum exhibitions, Mayer suggests, can be regarded not only as a text (according to their narrating function), but also as *non-texts*, since they are composed of material culture, namely objects: many of their messages are non-verbal in nature. As leading producers of ‘culture(s)’, museums continue to favour the materialisation of culture into an object over the possibility of exchanges.

In her report on this year’s edition of the Istanbul Biennial – which has been a topic of research by Mayer for several years now – she takes this big show with its global dimensions into view. Curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev under the title *Tuzlu su – Saltwater: A Theory of Thought Forms*, the works by more than 80 artists lead the spectator into a strange world of interlocking organic and inorganic materials. Spread over the metropolis, yet staying within the picturesque, the Biennial is a model of city marketing, while also presenting many artists and collectives from the wider region.

There follow two book reviews which are not related to the topic of this special issue: one by Elizabeth Berk of Ellen Amster’s publication *Medicine and the Saints: Science, Islam, and the Colonial Encounter in Morocco, 1877–1956* and one by Ali Abdi of Madawi Al-Rasheed’s book *A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics, and Religion in Saudi Arabia*.

The report by Trinidad Rico on the Research Workshop on ‘Islamic pasts’ held in Doha (Qatar) in December 2014 by Texas A&M University (Qatar) and UCL Qatar addresses a number of extremely interesting issues touching upon the integration of heritage studies approaches with the management of Islamic values. The workshop broadly attempted to achieve the integration of Islamic studies into heritage studies and covered perspectives from various disciplines, in particular from archaeology, anthropology, history, heritage and museum studies. Among the important subjects of discussion drawn out in Rico’s report are: ways of interpreting historical Islamic narratives through a focus on the present-ness of the past; the appropriation of multiple pre-Islamic pasts into Qur’anic narratives; how narratives of the Islamic past are understood in different Muslim contexts, from the Arab Middle East to Southeast Asia; differing perceptions around sacred and pagan historical sites in different contemporary sociocultural contexts; how bringing together heritage-related disciplines and Islamic studies can help in the problematisation of the Islamic past and present; methods for historicising the constructed Islamic pasts through case studies; ways of studying emerging narratives; the

evolution of ascribed values of specific heritage sites across the Islamic world in response to specific social and political milieus that contextualise them. The intersection of the intangible and tangible is also presented with reference to the way that Islamic narratives are circulated as artefacts and created through a dialogue with material culture. Rico Trinidad notes that certain themes running through most of the discussions (such as destruction, renovation and appropriation) also demonstrated the importance of understanding the performance of intangible heritage in relation to processes of Islamisation. These discussions highlight the importance of considering how a constructed Islamic heritage fits other presents, and the pivotal role that forms of expertise take in the formalisation and reiteration of these constructs through disciplinary traditions. Finally, Rico notes that the workshop was not aimed at articulating any coherent approach towards the construction and management of heritage in Muslim contexts, but rather at highlighting the complexity of the question. It has proposed a paradigm shift allowing for cross-fertilisation of ideas from various disciplines that will allow for the development of new, less destructive, discourses of heritage in the region.

It is hoped that further work in contextualising heritage debates in the region will escape from the dominant and iconoclastic theme of conflict and destruction, produced and disseminated both by the media and academia.

– *Janet Blake and Danila Mayer*