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Review of: From Private To Public: Natural Collections And Museums by Marco Beretta

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From Private to Public: Natural Collections and Museums by Marco Beretta

Review by: Kristin Johnson

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potential impact of visual images that enlist the empathic faculties of audiences. She reflects on her own deliberate uses of ‘anthropomorphism ... as a tool of communication and comparison’, while avoiding the making of ‘explicit claims of dangerous and incorrect implications that the orangutan subjects are “just like us”’ (p. 197).

No single coherent voice on the nature of anthropomorphism emerges from this volume. But this absence is deliberate. Indeed, it is precisely as appreciations of the highly local and specific nature of anthropomorphic practice that each of these essays effectively contributes to the whole, whetting appetites for even more diversity in perspectives (in the form, perhaps, of more cross-cultural studies of anthropomorphism). Scholars interested in the animal–human boundary will find here much to satisfy their interests, and instructors of undergraduate and graduate courses should welcome these succinct, high-quality essays into their syllabi.

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MARCO BERETTA (ed.), *From Private to Public: Natural Collections and Museums*. Uppsala Studies in History of Science. Vol. 31. European Studies in Science History and the Arts. Vol. 5. Sagamore Beach, MA: Science History Publications, 2005. Pp. ix+252. ISBN 0-88-135360-4. \$39.95 (hardback).
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As the priorities and methods of science have changed, and governments and academic institutions have adjusted funding accordingly, natural collections and museums have faced steady marginalization. Certainly, modern collections exist within a world very different from that in which they arose. No longer do European researchers in natural history museums inventory the spoils of empire. Nowadays, institutions such as the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard concentrate on empowering members of local communities in the Dominican Republic and elsewhere to become ‘parataxonomists’, inventorying their own natural wealth in the name of biodiversity conservation. And no longer does a strong emphasis on fact-gathering provide a methodological context in which museums are privileged as centres of science. Concept and theory are the name of the game, so that those working in natural history collections must justify their activities as ‘data collection’, often through pointing out the importance of careful descriptive work as foundational to both evolutionary theory and biodiversity conservation. In recent years, London’s Natural History Museum’s Darwin Centre has come to embody the new situation. There the traditional divide between collections for research and collections for public display has been overturned in a bid for popular (and parliamentary) support.

The current historiography of collections is thus being written at a time when the very existence of these collections is often insecure, and when new avenues for their defence, such as their status as cultural heritage objects, are being explored. The twelve contributions to *From Private to Public: Natural Collections and Museums* are a case in point, as they were originally presented at a conference that formed the second stage of a European Science Foundation conference network devoted to ‘New Perspectives in the Enhancement of the European Scientific Heritage’. At least one of the contributions duly notes that the future of a collection under discussion ‘looks uncertain and bleak’, and that it ‘has been chronically understaffed and without proper funds’ (p. 192). As academic collections in particular struggle to maintain support within scientific communities, developments in the history of science that give more attention to material culture over philosophical, theoretical or conceptual developments may prove a helpful tool in expanding the role of historical collections in both academic and civic life. Collections have long been stereotyped in the history-of-science literature and lost to the general historian’s analysis of science as a factor in the history of the modern world. This volume, belonging to the recent trend

in the history of science towards giving due attention to scientific practice and material culture, seems ideally placed to give these institutions and their objects new meaning and importance. As is remarked in the preface, ‘Each specimen is not merely a neutral object but offers precious clues for understanding the events surrounding the birth of natural history museums and the development of the scientific disciplines that grew up around them’ (p. viii).

The individual papers range widely in quality and style – one on ‘The Museum of Alexandria’ unfortunately reads like a list of notes – but the majority are well written and researched. Overall, one suspects, a more explicit discussion of why the title was chosen, as well as more sustained engagement with the theme of ‘private to public’ in each of the contributions, would have conferred narrative coherence to such a diverse collection. Nevertheless, many of the papers are elegantly composed and in themselves important contributions to our understanding of the history of natural collections and museums.

Crucial information on natural collections in the Spanish Renaissance is provided by Susan Gómez López. Alessandro Tosi furnishes an all-too-brief historiographical overview of work on the relationship between the natural history museum and *Wunderkammern*. Through attention to auction catalogues, E. C. Spary examines long-forgotten collections – and in so doing provides a particularly good example of the volume’s claim to look beyond each object to the social, political and economic structures that give an object its often various meanings and values. Anna Maerker uses the anatomical waxes of the Royal Museum of Physics and Natural History founded in Florence in 1775 to examine the transition from princely cabinet to public museum as depending on the (often failed) attempts to establish new and ‘obedient’ publics. Both Maerker and Janet Browne tell fascinating stories about how collections often played centre stage during disciplinary disputes or scientific controversies. And Browne examines how collections contributed to the professional reputation and scientific credibility of collectors and collection-owners.

Many of the contributions demonstrate how examining collections in their local contexts illuminates broader political and social changes. Jonathan Simon, for example, relates eighteenth-century French collections of minerals to the rise of science in the public sphere so central to Enlightenment science. Samuel J. M. M. Alberti’s essay analyses the ‘private to public’ of the title by bringing out the ‘spectrum of modes of ownership between these poles’ (p. 141). He thus usefully reminds us that this dichotomy also – no less than a simple narrative of a transition from private to public – must be used with caution. Jenny Beckman’s essay on the Swedish Museum of Natural History’s effort to capitalize on (and, in so doing, create) the ‘Linnaean tradition’ stands out as telling a compelling story that provides a historical context to collections’ current struggle to establish relevance and maintain support. She demonstrates how contributions on the history of collections as tools of scientific knowledge can provide a historical understanding of the challenges and triumphs of collections as they make their way in different contexts.

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AMIRIA HENARE, *Museums, Anthropology and Imperial Exchange*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. Pp. xix + 323. ISBN 0-521-83591-7. £48.00, \$80.00 (hardback). doi:10.1017/S0007087407009545

Amiria Henare describes her book as a ‘historical ethnography’ (p. 2). The use of the term ‘ethnography’ is justified as it is based on personal research in museums in Scotland and New Zealand, focusing on collections of Maori and Scottish artefacts. Throughout the text this research is introduced with small vignettes, excerpted apparently from her personal field diaries