

THE INTERNATIONAL HANDBOOKS OF
MUSEUM STUDIES

GENERAL EDITORS: SHARON MACDONALD AND HELEN REES LEAHY

MUSEUM
PRACTICE

VOLUME EDITOR
CONAL MCCARTHY



WILEY Blackwell

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Museum Practice

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THE INTERNATIONAL HANDBOOKS OF MUSEUM STUDIES

Museum Practice

THE INTERNATIONAL HANDBOOKS OF MUSEUM STUDIES

Museum Theory

Edited by Andrea Witcomb and Kylie Message

Museum Practice

Edited by Conal McCarthy

Museum Media

Edited by Michelle Henning

Museum Transformations

Edited by Annie E. Coombes and Ruth B. Phillips

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Conal McCarthy is Associate Professor and Director of the Museum and Heritage Studies program at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. Conal has degrees in English, Art History, Museum Studies, and Māori language and has worked in galleries and museums in a variety of professional roles: educator, interpreter, visitor researcher, collection manager, curator, and exhibition developer, as well as sitting on the boards and advisory groups of a number of institutions. He has published widely on museum practice, including the book *Museums and Māori: Heritage Professionals, Indigenous Collections, Current Practice* (2011).

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Ahakoā he iti te matakahi, ka pakaru i a ia te tōtara

[Although the wedge is small, it fells the great tōtara tree]

(Māori proverb)

A book of this size and complexity is the work of many hands, and I would like to acknowledge everyone who helped me complete it.

Thanks to the general editors, Helen Rees Leahy and Sharon Macdonald, for the opportunity to tackle the topic, the support to compile the contents, and the encouragement to get it completed.

Thanks to all the contributors who have made this volume possible by writing these diverse and accessible chapters on the contemporary museum at work – your labour, patience, and commitment have made a persuasive case for current museum practice.

In particular I would like to thank Gill Whitley, the Project Editor, for her many efforts large and small, which made it all happen.

Lastly, thanks to my partner Bronwyn Labrum for waiting for me to finish the project. Now we can get on to our book!

Conal McCarthy
January 2015

THE INTERNATIONAL HANDBOOKS OF MUSEUM STUDIES

Collectively, these handbooks include over a hundred original, state-of-the-art chapters on museums and museum studies. As such, they are the most comprehensive review to date of the lively and expanding field of museum studies. Written by a wide range of scholars and practitioners – newer voices as well as those already widely esteemed – the *International Handbooks* seek not only to provide extensive coverage of key topics and debates in the museum field, but also to make a productive contribution to emerging debates and areas, as well as to suggest how museum studies – and museums – might develop in the future.

The number of high-quality contributors able and willing to write on museum topics is itself testimony to the state of the field, as was recognition by the publishers that the field warranted such a substantial work. Bringing together such a range and quantity of new writing about museums was accomplished through the deep knowledge, extensive networks, and sheer labour of the volume editors – Andrea Witcomb and Kylie Message, *Museum Theory*; Conal McCarthy, *Museum Practice*; Michelle Henning, *Museum Media*; and Annie E. Coombes and Ruth B. Phillips, *Museum Transformations*. All enthusiastically took up the mandate to go out and recruit those they thought would be best able to write useful and timely essays on what they defined as the most important topics within their area of remit. Their brief was to look widely for potential contributors, including unfamiliar, as well as familiar, names. We – and they – were especially interested in perspectives from people whose voices have not always been heard within the international museum studies conversation thus far. This breadth is also a feature of the expanded and expanding field itself, as we explain further below.

Diversification and democratization

The editors of the four volumes that constitute these *International Handbooks* are based in four different countries – Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and Canada; and contributors have their institutional homes in over a dozen more. Yet these numbers alone do not fully convey the trend to diversification that we see in these volumes, and in museum studies more widely. “Internationalization” is a term that might be used but does not, we think, adequately characterize what is involved. Certainly, there is more traffic between nations of ideas about museums and about how to study them. Debates travel from one part of the globe to another, with museums and exhibitions in one location being used as models for emulation or avoidance in another. The massive expansion of professional training in museum

studies that has taken place over the past three decades helps establish a shared discourse, not least as many students study away from their home countries or those in which they will later work. So too do texts in and about the field, certain key ones often being found on reading lists in numerous countries and also republished in successive readers. Such developments establish the basis for a conversation capable of transcending borders.

It is evident from the contents of *The International Handbooks of Museum Studies*, however, that the democratization runs deeper than the traffic of discourse and practice across national borders, and, in particular, that the traffic is more multi-directional than it was previously. Not only do contributors have their primary work bases in a range of different countries, and not only do many have experience of training or working in others, they also often give attention – sometimes through the direct engagement of collaborative work or study – to a wide range of groups and populations in a variety of countries, including their own. This seeks not merely to incorporate but also to learn from and be challenged by people and perspectives that have not been part of mainstream museological debate. The attention to the (not unproblematic) category of the indigenous is especially marked in these *International Handbooks*, most notably in the *Transformations* volume, although it also finds its way into the others. Like attention to other forms of absence from the existing mainstream museum conversation, this is symptomatic of a broader move toward finding alternative ways of seeing and doing, ways that both add to the range of existing possibilities and also, sometimes, unsettle these by showing how, say, particular theorizing or practice relies on unspoken or previously unrecognized assumptions.

Diversification takes other forms too. While these volumes are not organized by type of museum – a format that we think restrictive in its lack of recognition of so many shared features and concerns of museums – and do not use this as a classification of content, it is nevertheless clear that a great range of museum kinds, and even of forms that might not always be considered museums, or that challenge the idea of the museum as a physical space, are included here. Museums of art, history, and ethnography – and also those more general and eclectic museums that have sometimes been described as encyclopedic – have powered a good deal of museum theorizing and debate, and they are amply represented here. But they are accompanied also by examples from museums of natural history, science, technology, and medicine, as well as heritage sites and out-of-gallery installations. Alongside national museums, which were the backbone of much important theorizing of the role of museums in the making of national identity and citizenship, are numerous examples of smaller museums, some of which are devoted to a specific topic and others of which have a regional or local foundation and focus. These museums may be less well endowed with staff, buildings, or funds, but are nevertheless doing important, even pioneering, work that deserves attention from museum studies. That attention contributes not only to extending the range of types and cases but also helps to illuminate the

range of specific features of museums that need to be taken into account in formulating more comprehensive approaches. As many chapters across the volumes show, one size does not fit all – or, to put it better perhaps, one theoretical perspective or set of guidelines for practice, one apt choice of media or transformative activity, does not fit all types and sizes of museums. Adding more to the mix does not just provide greater choice but also helps to identify better what is at stake and what might be possible in different kinds of situations, constellations, or conjunctures (to use a word favored in *Museum Theory*). It helps those of us engaged in and with museums to get a better grasp on what is and might be shared, as well as on what is distinctive and needs to be understood in more fine-grained ways.

Another feature of diversification that deserves comment here is the temporal. There has been a considerable amount of outstanding historical research undertaken in museum studies and the *International Handbooks* both review some of this and contribute further to it. Such work is important in its own terms, helping us to understand better the contexts in which museums emerged and have operated, and the concerns, constraints, personalities, and opportunities in evidence in particular times and places. It also contributes in vital ways to contemporary understandings, both by adding to the range of cases available for analysis and by showing the longer historical trajectories out of which various current approaches and practices emerged. Sometimes – and there are examples in all of the volumes here – their message is salutary, showing that what seemed like an innovation has been tried before, and perhaps with the distance of time allowing a more critical perspective than might feel comfortable today. The past shows change but also continuities and the re-emergence, or even repackaging, of what has gone before.

Disciplinary and methodology

Such research shows the importance of historical method, and of history as a discipline, within museum studies, which brings us to the wider issue of disciplinary and methodology. To talk of museum studies as interdisciplinary has become a truism. The volumes here are a clear illustration that those involved in museum studies have been trained in and may have primary institutional locations in a wide range of disciplines and areas of study, including anthropology, archaeology, architecture, area studies, cultural studies, economics, education, geography, literature, management, media studies, political science, and sociology, as well as history and art history. Beyond that, however, they are also carving out new niches, sometimes institutionally recognized, sometimes not, in areas such as digital curation, and creative technologies, as well as in art gallery, museum, and heritage studies, in various combinations or alone. Moreover, in addition to disciplines and a multitude of academic specialisms, practitioner contributors bring diverse professional