

Do Museums Still Need Objects? Steven Conn. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2010. ISBN: 978-0812221558

*Do Museums Still Need Objects?* is an analytical narrative focused on the historical evolution of the use of objects in museum settings. Public Historian Steven Conn of Ohio State University is “more prosaically historical” in his inductive approach, beginning with disorganized particulars and leading to overarching conclusions and observations. Conn studies art, anthropology, natural history and science museums, while also looking at ethnically-specific museums and history museums devoted to specific events or ideas. The book is organized around six thematic chapters, in which the author invents and utilizes new terms for historical analysis of the museum (for example, he writes about the repatriation of objects as a form of “culture shock”). While his methodology may be unorthodox, Conn productively explores many interlocking themes including the role of objects, the aesthetic architectural design of museums, matters of public good and privatization, repatriation, and the rise of educational programming constituting the recession of objects.

In the introduction, Conn provides a survey of the opinions of historians and anthropologists who have written on museums. The first chapter provides a broad overview of the role of the object in different types of museums throughout the twentieth century. In the second chapter, repatriation is the major focus, with attention to the growing number of objects leaving museum collections. The third chapter provides extensive critical analysis of the portrayal of Asian art by non-Western cultures. The fourth chapter studies several museums (in particular science museums) and their

restructuring in order to focus on children as their primary audience. The fifth chapter provides a case study of a museum and its conclusion regarding why it was forced to close. The sixth and final chapter explores the role of the museum as public space and as part of the greater urban public sphere.

Conn describes a trend in contemporary museums toward displaying fewer objects than did late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century museums. Conn also reflects on the evolution from objects with few aesthetic properties to aesthetically pleasing objects and their application in twentieth-century museums. Repatriation is examined in the second chapter in terms of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). One notes Conn's heavy reliance on Franz Boas' works to support a specific point or provide general context for the reader. Conn argues that, in the modern age, objects have become less important due to the interactive elements incorporated into museums over the course of the last half century. In the fifth chapter, Conn analyzes the failure of some museums to change and adapt. Conn's overall premise is the transformation of museums in tandem with a the growth of the conviction that objects are insignificant. Museums must change along with culture; those that fail to adapt fall victim to society and are closed. The case of the Philadelphia Commercial Museum is examined in chapter 5 as an example of such a museum.. Conn states that "the demise of the Philadelphia Commercial Museum represents the death of the ideas that founded it" (174). The use of fewer objects in museum settings is intended to convey more meaning and knowledge, but too often the decrease in the number of objects has resulted in the distortion of the core concepts communicated by an exhibit. Instead of museums being built around the collections, today the inverse is true.

The core contention of *Do Museums Still Need Objects?* is that objects in contemporary museums have a diminishing role because people have lost faith in the ability of objects alone to tell stories and convey knowledge. In the end of his book, Conn contends that “we go to museums to be with other people. In other words, museums have become among the last places where the public can come and behave as a public” (231). This intriguing sentiment, expressed in the conclusion, comes as a bit of a surprise: it does not coincide with the book’s overarching theme. Although Conn does not conclude his argument by answering the question framed in the book’s title, his closing suggestion—the primary identity of contemporary museums is as a civic gathering space—is worthy of consideration. It becomes evident that there is not merely one answer to his question; museums do indeed need objects, but objects likewise need museums.

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