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Book Review: Do Museums Still Need Objects?, by Steven Conn

Allison C. Marsh

University of South Carolina - Columbia, marsha@mailbox.sc.edu

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Book Reviews

Steven Conn. *Do Museums Still Need Objects?* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010. 272 pp.; 34 black-and-white illustrations, notes, index. \$39.95.

Do museums still need objects? It is a provocative question, one that I frustrate my graduate students with on the first day of their history and theory of museums seminar. “Of course they need objects!” the students exclaim, flabbergasted by the very notion. After all, they just spent a full semester in my material culture class agonizing over the many faces of interpretation of objects. They are committed to analyzing material culture as primary sources and cannot wait to construct their own exhibits. But when confronted with the reality that museums today devote a fair percentage of their public space to cafés, gift shops, and venues for performances, my students are forced to pause and re-evaluate the purpose of museums.

Exhibiting objects was clearly a driving force for museums constructed in the great building boom of the nineteenth century, as images of walls and walls of cluttered cases can attest. But the mission of museums and their role in the public sphere has evolved over the last 150 years, and according to Steven Conn objects have steadily lost ground. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, as Conn posits in his introduction, museums are struggling with the dueling tensions of being a surrogate for politics, on the one hand, and an economic driver for the community, on the other. Where do objects fit in such an environment?

Although the title question is the ultimate thesis of the book, curiously enough objects only make a cameo appearance. This is not a book about material culture, per se, but rather a history of the changing philosophies of American museums. Objects may always be the undercurrent of debate, but they are not the main actors in the story.

Do Museums Still Need Objects? is loosely organized around the six types of museums George Brown Goode, assistant secretary of the Smithsonian, identified in an 1895 essay: art, historical, anthropological, natural history, technological, and commercial museums. Within the framework of these museum types, Conn examines the logic of an object-based epistemology, his benchmark for measuring how objects function in museums.

Each chapter tackles a broad question regarding the relationship between objects and museums and is built around an example of one of Goode’s museum types. The first four chapters are titled as questions: chapter 1, “Do Museums Still Need Objects?” continues the introduction with a broad overview of museums in America. Chapter 2, “Whose Objects? Whose Culture?” is a refreshing look at the potentially politically charged question of repatriation of artifacts. Chapter 3, “Where Is the East?” continues the examination of ethnological and anthropological theories of objects encountered in the previous chapter by focusing on the development of Asian art collections. (Observant readers of *Winterthur Portfolio* may notice that parts of chap. 3 appeared in vol. 35, nos. 2/3, in 2000.) Chapter 4, “Where Have All the Grown-Ups Gone?” is a question I often ask myself in the same context. Here Conn examines the transition of science and technology museums from learning centers for adults—from research scientists to mechanics—to

their present incarnation as kid-friendly museum spaces.

In the final two chapters, Conn breaks with his “big question” approach, although questions implicitly remain. Chapter 5, “The Birth and Death of a Museum,” provides an overview of Philadelphia’s Commercial Museum while raising questions about that uneasy relationship all museums have with business. Finally, with chapter 6, “Museums, Public Space, and Civic Identity,” the author pulls back to provide a broader frame for interpreting general claims about museums, questioning how historians and museum practitioners have constructed their own ideas of why museums matter.

The organizational approach creates a wonderfully idiosyncratic introduction to the history of museums. Early museums aimed at encyclopedic displays, and while Conn does not approach encyclopedic coverage in his book (nor does he claim any intention to), he should be applauded for his ability to tackle large questions using specific examples and then apply the analysis more generally to many different types of museums. Although the book may end up raising more questions than it answers, it sets a great foundation for ongoing discussion on the purpose of museums.

The book is a part of the Arts and Intellectual Life in Modern America series, edited by Casey Nelson Blake. The series aims to explore questions at the intersection of the history of expressive culture and the history of ideas. It wishes to challenge scholars in American studies and cultural studies to explore artistic expression. *Do Museums Still Need Objects?* lives up to these ideals and would appeal equally to intellectual historians, cultural anthropologists, museum professionals, and the curious museum visitor.

Throughout the book, Conn is unapologetic with his politics and not ashamed of stating his opinions and preferences. By doing so he invites the reader to be an active participant in the dialog. After providing the necessary background information, Conn almost challenges you to form your own museum philosophy.

Much to the frustration of my public history students, “Do museums still need objects?” is not a question with a simple yes or no answer. Perhaps an even more difficult question is, “Why do museums need objects at all?” The absence of objects throughout the book is a subtle reminder that over the past century museums have moved from object as evidence to object as metonymy. Is it the objects that matter or the ideas they represent?

Conn ends his book with a discussion of how the Guggenheim fundamentally altered the relationship visitors had with the objects on display when it opened in 1959 and thus created an entirely new visitor experience. The ground has shifted again, and the question for the beginning of the twenty-first century is how will digital representation of objects change the visitor experience—whether or not that experience is even within the walls of a museum? Conn does not address the issue directly here, but his book provides a framework for considering the options. What is clear is that museums must continue to adapt. Will museums be leading researchers—as they were in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—investigating the cognitive user interaction in virtual environments? Or will they simply be reactive, using advances made by Google and Facebook? Personally, I remain a fan of stuff—I am not willing to let the object go, even as I work to develop geo-referencing web apps for museums. But I am also an advocate for change within the museum. I continue to challenge my students and my museum colleagues to engage in material culture research, holding it to the highest level of scholarship, and then to surprise museum visitors by provoking curiosity and making them think about the object at hand.

ALLISON C. MARSH
University of South Carolina

Carole G. Duncan. *A Matter of Class: John Cotton Dana, Progressive Reform, and the Newark Museum.* Pittsburgh: Periscope Publishing, 2009. 226 pp.; 84 illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$40.00.

Ezra Shales. *Made in Newark: Cultivating Industrial Arts and Civic Identity in the Progressive Era.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rivergate Books, 2010. 302 pp.; 12 color plates, 65 illustrations, notes, index. \$49.95.

John Cotton Dana has long deserved critical study. He was a cultural leader as library director in Denver and Springfield, Massachusetts. He directed the Newark Library from January 1902 until his death in 1929. At the same time, he realized another dream, founding and building the Newark Museum. Initially a part of the library, the museum developed as a leading urban museum, which subsequent leaders sustain to this day. By Dana’s time, many US cities supported libraries and museums, often as separate entities. His vision was larger, however, seeing these institutions as joined in forming