

Exhibiting History

Annotated Bibliography

*Kathleen McIlvenna and Oliver
Godsmark*

Introduction

By working with museums and heritage sites, historians have been able to share their expertise and knowledge with a wider audience. Early definitions of public history focused on the idea of historians working outside of the university with these types of institutions (Kelley, 1978). However, more recent work on public history has demonstrated the wide-ranging and far-reaching activities that the practice of history in the public realm can encompass (Cauvin, 2022). This bibliography focuses on the work of academic historians with museum and heritage collections.

This short list of works provides a starting point for students interested in exploring how historians can work with objects in a global context. Objects present unique challenges for historians as they contain many layers of meaning and may require different expertise to read and decipher them. However, they also provide tremendous opportunities to understand networks and connections between people, places and things. This bibliography is influenced by the global turn in our understanding of the histories of such objects and references works that allow for a deeper understanding of the UK and Europe's colonial past through heritage collections.

In addition, some of the works provide a starting point for doing public history from a practical perspective. The practice of public history has changed over time, with recurring emphasis in more recent work on the importance of collaborative working to address the issues of power and control over historical narratives. Other scholarship addresses the practicalities of that communication, most notably in writing public-facing interpretative text for an object, and the challenges that it raises.

Interdisciplinarity is another recurring theme as the bibliography includes works influenced by anthropology, archaeology, and museum and heritage studies. This provides evidence of how the discipline and practice of history continues to evolve.

Introductions to public history

Thomas Cauvin, *Public History: A Textbook of Practice*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Routledge, 2022).

This ambitious work attempts to bring together and summarize the wide range of approaches to public history and methodologies for doing it. It is split into four parts. The first part looks at the past, present and future of public history, examining the differing definitions and approaches over time and across the globe as more and more public history programmes and departments are created. As former president of the International Federation of Public History, Cauvin is well placed to provide this global overview. Parts two and three are more practical, focusing on the sources and collection management of public history materials including archives, material culture, oral history and historical sites. The textbook then looks to how these historical narratives are created and shared through text, fictions, audio-visual production, exhibitions and performance. The final section of the work examines the opportunities and challenges of working as a public historian and the various collaborative approaches that are needed.

The work fits into growing scholarship on public history and its development. Working with the public is not a new idea. Since the 1960s, the UK History Workshop movement, under the influence of historians such as Raphael Samuel (1994), has encouraged academics to work with the public to create history. Hilda Kean and Paul Martin's *The Public History Reader* (2013) is also useful in outlining the development of public history in the UK and across the world, with chapters that range from the trade union badge as a symbol to memorials and the politics of memory in the Black Atlantic. Additionally, Jerome de Groot's edited collection *Public and Popular History* (2012), which began as a special issue of the journal *Rethinking History*, looks at the intersections of public and popular histories through a global framework. It includes works from queer histories and historic houses to the problem of popular/public history in China.

Margot C. Finn and Kate Smith, *New Paths to Public Histories* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

Finn and Smith's public history scholarship is representative of the growing interest in colonial history and the intersections of global histories and British history. This work has its origins in the Leverhulme Trust-funded

research project ‘The East India Company at Home, 1757–1857’ (2011–14), which explored the impact and legacy of the East India Company on heritage collections. Finn and Smith collaborated with hundreds of people from archivists and curators to family historians and stately home volunteers (Finn and Smith, 2018). The project was part of a wider trend in examining the long legacy of Britain’s colonial past which also saw the hugely influential ESRC-funded ‘Legacies of British Slave-ownership’ project (2009–12) create the renowned database of individuals paid compensation for freeing the enslaved people in their possession.

New Paths to Public Histories is also representative of another trend in public history practice which is utilization of models of collaboration and co-production. It demonstrates the changing relationship between historians and the public in line with the radical ideas of the History Workshop collective, in which authority and power are given to collaborators. These approaches acknowledge the skills and expertise outside the academy held not just by professional archivists and curators, but in wider communities through volunteers and family historians.

Object histories

Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

This extremely influential edited collection has helped shape how historians have understood and analysed objects. Published in the 1980s, it was part of the cultural turn in history and reflects the influence of anthropologists and archaeologists on the historical discipline. The collection includes an essay by Igor Kopytoff on the concept of the biography of an object, arguing that objects, like people, cannot be understood as existing only in one moment and time, but that they come with a much wider narrative and history. The collection built on wider scholarship on objects as gifts and commodities, definitions first outlined by Marcel Mauss and Karl Marx respectively (Gosden and Marshall, 1999). Around the same time this collection was published, the anthropologist Marilyn Strathern (1988) was also arguing for a greater understanding of the role of gender in creating meaning for objects.

Appadurai has continued to be influential in writing about objects, building on the argument presented here on the importance of context in understanding objects (2006). In this telling, objects are social things whose meaning can change from gift to commodity and back again. For Appadurai, the object’s relationship to people is integral for understanding and decoding it: objects and people are not necessarily distinct categories and are both understood through the lens of social relations.

Dan Hicks, *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (London: Pluto, 2020).

Dan Hicks is a professor of archaeology and curator at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. *The Brutish Museums* has been incredibly influential in shaping conversations about the impact of colonialism in UK and European museum collections, as well as debates on repatriation of objects taken during colonial rule. Hicks uses the Benin Bronzes as a gateway to explore these issues. Published in 2020, the book reflects changing ideas and discussions following the Black Lives Matter movement that started in 2013 and the increased focus on antiracism movements.

Hicks's work has done a lot to demonstrate that coloniality is not just a residue of the age of imperialism, but 'rather an ongoing structural feature of global dynamics' (Whittington, 2022: 250). With this acknowledgement has come an increasing desire to 'decolonize' the curriculum and the museum, so that these spaces are more inclusive for a wider range of people, particularly the global majority. This work is challenging and has underlined the importance of the collaborative and co-produced methodologies explored by Finn and Smith.

Practical texts

Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*, 2nd edn (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

This is a much more practical text than most of the works above. It is aimed at professionals who want to write better interpretation labels. It is influenced and shaped by museum studies and visitor studies, disciplines that have increased our knowledge and understanding of who museum and heritage site visitors are and how they behave. There has been a number of influential works on how visitors learn and how they are engaged, from scholars such as Hopper-Greenhill (1994), Falk and Dierking (2012) and Graham Black (2005). This scholarship has developed since the 1990s as the discipline of museum studies or museology has grown, alongside the professionalization of museum work and a wide range of postgraduate qualifications that foster the theoretical and practical skills of looking after collections and presenting them to the public. Serrell's work, alongside that of Stephen Bitgood (2014), focuses on the writing and designing of labels, short text that sits within exhibitions and needs to convey a narrative very quickly to the public. The book deals with very practical aspects such as length, how to manage text for digital interactives and issues such as the label's visual appearance and evaluating its success.

Conclusion

Work on public history and how historians engage with the public continue to develop and grow. We have focused here on scholarship related to how historians can use objects to understand our global and colonial past. This literature is influenced by recent and ongoing trends and movements to decolonize the museum and university, though this is only one aspect and area of debate for academics and museum scholars. The climate emergency, as well as the development of technology and generative artificial intelligence, are two other areas that are currently shaping the public work of academic historians and museum professionals. It is yet to be seen how these shifts in culture will influence how we analyse the material culture around us and in heritage collections, or how methodologies of collaboration and co-production may help us create better understandings of shared expertise.

Additional citations

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