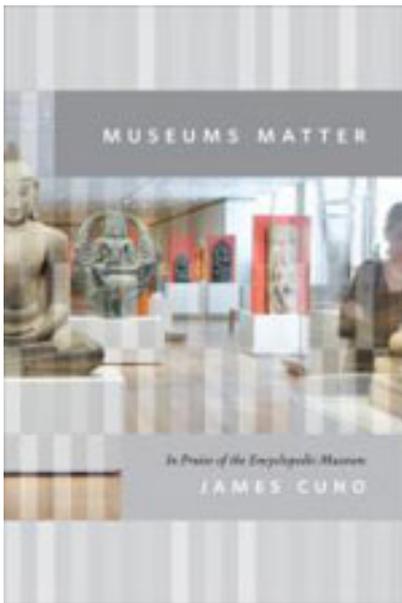


***Museums Matter: In Praise of the Encyclopedic Museum* by James Cuno**

Courtney Rivard | University of California, Santa Cruz

Cuno, James. *Museum Matters: In Praise of the Encyclopedic Museum*. University of Chicago Press, 2011. 160 pages. \$22.00 cloth.



In *Museums Matters: In Praise of the Encyclopedic Museum* James Cuno, President and CEO of the J. Paul Getty Trust, issues a polemical call for seeing encyclopedic museums as Enlightenment institutions that hold the promise of producing a cosmopolitan worldview rather than myopic nationalist sentiment. In Cuno's definition, encyclopedic museums are dedicated to collecting, cataloguing, and presenting a representative sample of the world's many cultures in a scientific and objective manner, thereby allowing visitors to use their own faculties of reason to make conclusions about the complex world in which they live. In extolling the liberal possibilities of museums, he aims to discredit recent scholarly critiques of the immense power of such museums to foster ideas of national, state, and/or Western supremacy, including most notably Tony Bennett (1995), Carol Duncan (1995), and Donald Preziosi (2004), who often draw on the work of Michel Foucault to analyze the structures of power involved in the production of knowledge and subjects within the space of the museum. The book is geared to a general audience rather than the academic community. This leads to an accessible writing style but poor citational practices; for example, a few select anthologies stand in for rich and complicated areas of study. Ultimately, the argument is undercut by the narrow selection of supporting evidence and the failure to thoroughly grapple with the real effects of the structures of power and role of (neo)colonialism that recent critiques of the encyclopedic museum as a Western institution expose.

EMISFÉRICA

Cuno begins his argument with a question: why do so many people go to museums (in 2009 over 42 million people went to the 100 most popular art museums), if they are, as some critical scholars suggest, merely “participants in a ritualistic experience” controlled by museum curators, financial elite, and state actors for the benefit of “a state and Western-centric view of the world?” His answer to this question, which runs contrary to the critical literature, is that visitors, not museums, are the authors of their own experiences when viewing collections. People go to museums not to be indoctrinated by hegemonic state ideology but out of a “hunger to have their world enlarged, their life enriched by the experience of new and strange, wonderful things” (9). This hunger for a larger view of the world is what Cuno sees as the promise (and, consequently, necessity) of encyclopedic museums. If encyclopedic museums remain true to their Enlightenment roots—“suspicion of unverifiable truths, opposition to prejudice and superstition, confidence in individual agency, [and] the public exercise of reason” (112)—and dedicate themselves to promoting a cosmopolitan worldview, they can promote a more tolerant and peaceful world. In making this argument, Cuno praises recent scholars, namely Tzvetan Todorov (2006) and Zeev Sternhell (2010), who advocate for a cosmopolitan worldview by underscoring the importance of Enlightenment principles (as in the works of Kant, Locke, and Hume) in today’s globalized world.

However, the logic of this argument has some serious flaws. Cuno rails against scholars such as Bennett and Duncan who are critical of the narratives produced through museum exhibitions that often and perhaps subtly promote state and/or Western superiority. According to Cuno, these critiques are based on the premise that museum visitors have no individual agency and little intellect, thereby allowing for their easy indoctrination. While this is a gross oversimplification and misunderstanding, Cuno argues against this perspective by activating Enlightenment theories of individualism to explain that visitors construct their own narratives and draw their own conclusions. Cuno’s argument sits well with contemporary liberal individualism and multiculturalism, but glosses over the highly orchestrated nature of the museum. No object or narrative description is randomly placed in a museum. Rather, just as Cuno himself explains, everything is organized according to certain established principles, which often depend on a particular museum’s institutional goals. A cosmopolitan encyclopedic museum has its own goals; it, too, hopes its visitors will walk away with certain ideas and a certain view of the world. With these crucial omissions, Cuno hides important issues of power involved in exhibition construction and institutional goals in cosmopolitan rhetoric.

In the last chapter of the book, Cuno makes another jump in his argument to a discussion of the relationship between museums and empire. While his previous chapters skirted around the issue of colonialism (a glaring absence), this final chapter does acknowledge these issues, though in a rather odd and dismissive way. The argument here is that while museums may be “witnesses to empire,” they are not “*instruments* of empire” (89, emphasis in the original). Cuno makes this point by way of a quick and simplified account of museums in India, which, he laments, rely too heavily on nationalist and religious discourses, eschewing ideas of reason and science as colonial imports.

EMISFÉRICA

The fact that his account begins with Indian independence works to erase a complicated and often violent colonial past that has a lasting impact in the present. Within the scope of Cuno's argument, this criticism of Indian museums only serves to emphasize his insistence that encyclopedic museums must be spaces of secular reason devoted to tolerance and understanding.

Throughout *Museum Matters*, Cuno's explication of the goals and principles of encyclopedic museums is in line with dominant multicultural rhetoric that congratulates itself for acknowledging that difference exists in the world and should be encouraged rather than denied. Like such multicultural rhetoric, Cuno's argument fails to acknowledge the role of history and power in constituting difference. Instead, he allows liberal conceptions of individuality and equality to propel his argument, ignoring the many ways in which difference is embedded within deeply unequal power structures. Moreover, his outright contempt for critical accounts of museum practices undercuts his analysis of the many possibilities afforded by encyclopedic museums. Rather than engage in a serious dialogue that could prove quite useful to Cuno's goals, he instead asks the reader a series of facile rhetorical questions: "Is this your experience of museums? Do you walk through the galleries of your local museum and feel controlled in any significant way? Do you feel manipulated...Do you feel yourself...being re-membered in new ways or gendered in any way?" (43-4). Cuno's dismissal of recent cogent critiques of museum practice as well as his failure to analyze the very real issues of power and inequality that inform museum practices ultimately undermines his argument and the promise of museums that *Museum Matters* purports to advance.

Courtney Rivard recently received her PhD in Politics with concentrations in Feminist Studies and Latin American and Latino Studies from the University of California, Santa Cruz. Her dissertation is entitled "Archiving Disaster: A Comparative Study of September 11, 2001 and Hurricane Katrina." She examines the newly created disaster archives relating to September 11th and Hurricane Katrina in order to analyze the power relations embedded within the archival process that produce ideas of national belonging, gender, race, and sexuality. More generally, Courtney is interested in the politics of cultural memory, feminist theory, citizenship, and the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality in both the U.S. and transnational contexts. Courtney has received various research awards including the Oakes Dissertation Writing Fellowship, the Diane Woest Fellowship from the Historic New Orleans Collection, and the Transnationalism, Feminism, Justice Dissertation Writing Workshop fellowship.

Works Cited

- Appiah, Kwame Anthony. 2002. "Cosmopolitan Patriots." In *For Love of Country?* Ed. Martha Nussbaum. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Bennett, Tony. 1995. *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*. London: Routledge Press.
- Duncan, Carol. 1995. *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*. London: Psychology Press.
- Falk, Richard. 2002. "Revisioning Cosmopolitanism." "Cosmopolitan Patriots." In *For Love of Country?* Ed. Martha Nussbaum. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Glazer, Nathan. 2002. "Limits of Loyalty." "Cosmopolitan Patriots." In *For Love of Country?* Ed. Martha Nussbaum. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Nussbaum, Martha. 2002. *For Love of Country?* Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Preziosi, Donald and Claire Fargo. 2004. *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Sternhell, Zeev. 2010. *The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition*. Translated by David Maisel. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. 2009. *In Defense of the Enlightenment*. Translated by Gila Walker. London: Atlantic Books.