

# Book Review:

## ***Liberating Culture: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Museums, Curation and Heritage Preservation***

*Reviewed by Lynne Teather*

*Lynne Teather is Associate Professor in the Museum Studies Program, I-School (Faculty of Information) at the University of Toronto. She may be contacted at [lynne.teather@gmail.com](mailto:lynne.teather@gmail.com).*

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**Christina Kreps. 2003.**  
*Liberating Culture: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Museums, Curation and Heritage Preservation.*  
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If I had to recommend to colleagues just one volume that has inspired my teaching and practice, out of the abundance of writings published in the last decade, this is the one. Dr. Christina Kreps, who is Director of Museum Studies and Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Denver, offers a comprehensive, expert volume examining cross-cultural approaches to preservation and the work of museums and other cultural and heritage manifestations. Her conclusions are well supported by a selection of global examples to profile what she terms “Western” and “non-Western” approaches.

The value of Kreps’ work lies in its placement within what she calls a comparative and critical museology (Chapter 1 and 6). It offers alternative models of the field of study (Chapters 2-4) aiming to “liberate” culture—in the forms of collections, curation, interpretation and preservation—from the “management regimes” of Eurocentric museum premises.<sup>1</sup> Ideological views aside, her underlying premise is that people everywhere have the right to control and manage their own culture and heritage in whatever form, a philosophy that I believe would be echoed by most museum professionals. To the wealth of examples of alternative ways of working that can inspire new museum practices, Kreps shares insights into her own biases in studying Museum Balanga, Indonesia. Her comparative and reflexive analysis offers an example of how museum professionals can free themselves from traditional and limiting conceptual assumptions about the museum, culture, and heritage phenomena.

This volume from the Routledge series on Museum Meanings avoids over-theorization and offers expert summaries of many areas

of museum thinking. It includes convincing discussion of examples that clarify her argument, making this essential reading for museum students as well as professionals. Kreps’ journey began many years ago in a comparison of Dutch and American museums in which she noted a shared kind of colonialism: one involved in a colonial empire up until the close of World War II, the other a settler society with an interior colonization that involved Native or indigenous people. Invited by the Indonesian Directorate of Museums to visit, Kreps’ dissertation field work followed on from the Tropen Museum, i.e., the Royal Tropical Museum in Amsterdam, to Museum Balanga, the Provincial Museum of Central Kalimantan, in the interior of Indonesian Borneo. There she found that the museum essentially reproduced a Western model, a colonial legacy of Dutch empire. Further, she discovered that she, along with museum colleagues, reflected a kind of restrictive “museum-mindedness” in an effort to reach perceived international museum standards: a way of thinking about notions and functions of museums that is pervasively Western. Locals had a different sense of culture and heritage expression and so the museum developed a kind of cultural hybridization of practices. Informed by this experience, the author then proceeds to look to other parts of Indonesia, the Pacific, and Africa for variations of museum manifestations. She turns finally to Native American museum work evidenced in tribal museums in North America, the implications of NAGPRA, and how museums such as Te Papa, New Zealand, and the National Museum of the American Indian have attempted to incorporate consultative and co-managed processes into their practices.

Part of the power of the volume may be the

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way in which Kreps mirrors the current museological zeitgeist. She does this in three ways. First her work underscores the complexity of our definitional dilemmas and critical studies. In the end how we view museums and their appropriate function reflects what we think they are, their very definition and origin, and their relation to larger cultural and heritage discourse. This opinion will probably shape how one responds to this volume. For those of us who have kept up with the evolving and expanding definitions of professional organizations of the last decades (ICOM News, 2004), it becomes clear that a wider and more inclusive definition requires a different storyline of origins and contemporary and historical location, going beyond simple definitions, our usual histories and professional assumptions. As Kreps highlights, the common view in the modern museological tradition is that museums are purely Western inventions. On the contrary we have plenty of evidence that museums or museum-like phenomena and the work of culture and heritage exist in other cultures (Chapter 3). This range of practices includes the creation of museums; but it also involves a variety of tangible and intangible practices to save and display to signify what and how something marks human relationships in the world. At the same time the phenomenal growth in the number of museums and related heritage work marks a network across the globe, depicting an interrelatedness yet to be studied. Some researchers have examined how the museum idea has taken on local characteristics, but Kreps follows the few scholars who have attempted to look directly to non-Western museological processes (Cash Cash 2001).

The second reflection then is how the author takes up the so-called critical and “reflexive”

perspective to deconstruct the models of museums she engages, in so doing to take up Michael Ames’ challenge, as she reminds us, “To study ourselves” as much as we study others and “view ourselves as ‘the Natives’” (1992, p.10). Looking to Indonesian, Pacific, African and Native American cases, Kreps compares what she names “Western” and “non-Western” workings of objects, museums, and curation, showing what may be appropriate in one context but not in another. It is no surprise that Kreps is an anthropologist, familiar with the criticism of museums regarding issues of power and authority, where the premise of “First Voice” (a term<sup>2</sup> representing indigenous peoples) and cultural ownership and management is ever present (Galla, 2008, p. 11).

For me it is her discussion of the third sign of our times that is the most powerful and predictive. Perhaps my opinion is affected by my own interest in international perspectives, professional development, culture and heritage work, and the struggle over the appropriateness of one’s own role as an advisory agent locally or globally. In Chapter 5, titled “Museums, Culture, and Development,” Kreps moves from critique to implications. Here she discusses participatory development processes, modes of working that are differently attuned to issues of power and authority. “Participatory” has become a term used in design, community planning, research methods, community museology, and work with visitors, as in Nina Simon’s work (2010). It can also include discussions of the cultural rights of source communities in which core representatives are involved whether as originators or participants. This cooperative approach has become preeminent in the rhetoric of fields attempting

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Participatory museology is a term that many of us have thrown around, alternating with words such as cooperative or community, but it is significant to see the concepts discussed here with such attention, care, and convincing argument.

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**Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup>For more on museum studies/museology as an academic or professional study area see L. Teather 2009.

<sup>2</sup>A term proposed by many people, notably Gerald McMaster, Lee-Ann Martin, W. Rick West, Michael M. Ames, George F. MacDonald, Gloria Cranmer Webster and Amareswar Galla. For more see Galla (2008).

<sup>3</sup>For more recent work by Christina Kreps see her website <https://portfolio.du.edu/pc/port?portfolio=ckreps> and particularly her article "Appropriate museology in theory and practice" from 2008.

to reform and operate projects inclusively; easy to articulate perhaps, but difficult to achieve. Thus one of the strongest contributions of the book lies in the discussion of the damaging role of monocultural professional premises in cultural development. These can be community or international in scope, but should follow "bottom-up," participatory, respectful and in the long term sustainable practices. Participatory museology is a term that many of us have thrown around, alternating with words such as cooperative or community, but it is significant to see the concepts discussed here with such attention, care, and convincing argument.

Of course there are a few problems with the work. One is in the continued use of a phrase, "museums and curation practices," as if they were somehow disassociated from each other. Another lies in the use of the models of "Western" and "non-Western," or words such as Eurocentric; while a convention used for clearer communication, such reductions (sometimes also often referred to as "traditional" or "mainstream") erase so much of the practice of progressive museology of the last century. One would wish a more integrated treatment of progressive museum work and history for a truly reforming result. Further, in creating her references to global examples, such as museums in Africa and ecomuseums, the work depends in large part on secondary, indeed Western sources (Davis, 1999). These miss nuances and complexities present in the Indonesian and Pacific examples based in her direct field experience. Her work also leaves out major regions such as Scandinavia, India, China and Latin America, or countries where notions of sociomuseology have taken off (MINOM, 2010;

Moutinho, 2010). Kreps also writes with an emphasis on material culture, at a time when intangible culture and its recognition have come to the fore through UNESCO and the *International Journal of Intangible Culture*. A clearer recognition of intangible culture may strengthen her analysis and discussion of transformational approaches, wherein the material and immaterial can be re-integrated. Finally, given the premise of this work, I would also have liked to have heard more testimony and insights of people from indigenous publics from the locales being studied. It is always important in cross-cultural or participatory treatments to have the "First Voice" directly present in the work.

The most important implication of this work may be in what Kreps does not address, i.e. the historical aspects of an inclusive and comparative approach, which must challenge notions of museum pasts and precepts of professional practice. Changes to the definitions of museums, culture, and heritage forms must affect the story of museum "roots," beyond narratives of large European collections and national museums. A pluralist approach would include a wide range of phenomena both in and beyond Europe which could have revolutionary results for our professional conceptions. As one who has been involved in museum history and museological teaching and writing for some decades, and who currently serves on ICOM's International Committee for the Training of Personnel, I am always searching for progressive philosophy and practice. Kreps's volume offers a welcome and innovative perspective that I hope will foster comparative, cross-cultural, and participatory principles and outcomes.<sup>3</sup> ✨