Do Museums Still Need Objects?, Steven Conn

A Review

Jeremy Murray

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In 2010, Ohio State University professor, Steven Conn, published a collection of previously written essays and articles in a six chapter volume titled, *Do Museums Still Need Objects?* Conn is a professor of history and director of the Public History program at Ohio State University. His subject specialty is in 19th and 20th century cultural and intellectual history, with special interest in the physical manifestation of ideas through things such as museum objects.¹ As an academic historian and not a museum professional—yet a historian with a demonstrated understanding of museums and museum issues—Conn’s book provides wonderful analysis of different issues facing the museum world that is backed up with in-depth research.

In the introductory of the book, Conn sets the stage for his analysis in the following chapters by drawing attention to the “second golden age of museums” as new museums have sprung up and established museums have undergone additions and renovations—a golden age that has most likely come to an end with the onset of the global financial crisis in the years since the book’s publication. Along with this museum “boom,” according to Conn, has come an equal boom in scholarly work—of which this book is certainly a part of—on museum issues.² Conn also points out in the introduction that the book is not a comprehensive work, but a compilation of four previously written presentations that he revised, expanded, and supplemented with three additional chapters. These chapters “explore an interlocking set of themes, grounded in the particularities of history,” that include: the role objects play in a museum; how museums and objects help

¹ Steven Conn, “Faculty Profile: Steven Conn, Professor & Director of the Public History Program,” The Ohio State University, http://history.osu.edu/directory/conn23 (accessed October 12, 2013).
define particular bodies of knowledge; the relationship between museums, objects, and changing ideas about architectural space; funding, philanthropy, and patronage of museums; and the professionalization of museums. Conn’s overall argument is that “the place of objects in museums has shrunk as people have lost faith in the ability of objects alone to tell stories and convey knowledge.”

The first chapter serves as the raison d’être for the book with the following chapters serving more as supporting appendices titled as chapters—though even in a supporting function, some of the chapters are questionable in their contribution to the work as a whole. In Chapter 1, Conn discusses how the centrality of objects in different types of museums has changed to varying degrees in each museum type. Conn writes that in art museums objects have remained important due to reinforcement from the outside market, the relation between art objects and art history, and the direct correlation between the art of seeing and learning through seeing that is essential to art objects.

But art museums appear to be the exception. Conn continues by addressing how in history and natural history museums the central role of objects have been reduced and how in many science and technology museums objects have disappeared almost entirely. Conn identifies the culprit of this shift away from objects as the increasing use of “didactic devices”—audio-visual, interactive technologies, etc. Conn argues that the reduced centrality among history museums has been assisted by the emergence of new “thematic” museums, such as the Hellenic Museum, Norwegian American Museum, or Holocaust Museum, that “convey values rather than knowledge, and they use language

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3 Ibid, 7.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid, 29.
6 Ibid, 20.
and images... rather than objects to do that.” Conn explains the disappearance of objects in science and technology museums as being caused by the emphasis in these museums on teaching the principles of science, rather than the history, which does not require the use of objects.

Conn is clear in pointing out that the trend of moving away from the object-centered approach is one that is not new in the museum world. Conn presents this decentralization of museum objects as a continuation of the trend started around the turn of the 20th century when museum professionals realized that the objects they displayed could not, as was previously believed, convey knowledge on their own. But Conn does not believe this trend will continue to the point of objects disappearing from museums all together. Conn closes the chapter with a statement of reassurance in stating: “...objects will endure.... Museums—some of them anyway—may not need objects anymore, but without objects we all may miss the delights and surprises that come with looking.”

The remainder of the chapters, as stated above, do no real justice to the title of the book other than to serve as topical treatments of several key issues in the museum world that are contributing to the difficulties of displaying museum objects and the declining use of objects in exhibits. In Chapter 2, Conn addresses the issue of museum objects leaving collections, either through sale or repatriation. Conn views repatriation, in accordance to Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), as the “victory of private interest over the public good, which has been a defining drift in

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7 Ibid, 46.
8 Ibid, 53.
9 Ibid, 57.
American society since the 1970’s and a centerpiece of the New Right agenda.”¹⁰ He warns that allowing objects to be claimed by one group and culture it “may mute their [the objects] capacity to speak to us all.”¹¹

The third chapter of the book is committed to the issue of Western museums struggling to represent the “East” through Asian objects within their collections. Conn describes in detail the indecision as to whether these items should be exhibited as art or anthropology and the challenges that arise with each categorization. Chapter 4 covers the trend of science museums and science centers to cater entirely towards children as their audience. Conn argues that by conceding scientific research to universities, science museums also conceded their adult audiences. Because of this concession, Conn posits that science museums are failing in their part to alleviate scientific illiteracy that is needed in a world requiring policy decisions dealing with scientific issues, such as global warming.¹²

Chapter 5 is the one chapter that is most questionable as to the purpose it serves to the entirety of the book. In the chapter, Conn investigates the rise and demise of the Philadelphia Commercial Museum. Conn speculates reasons for the failure of the institution to include: a stagnation of the collection after active collecting had dropped off; obsoleteness of the categorical system due to commercial advancements; apparent failure to alter exhibit practices to reflect changes in the commercial or museum world;

loss of intellectual guidance with the death of its founder, William Wilson; and the unanswered question of what objects in the collection constituted commerce.\textsuperscript{13}

In the final chapter, Conn discusses the role museums, and their objects, play in creating civic identity. Conn sees the role of museums in this manner starting from the beginning with the efforts of large U.S. cities competing with one another to have the biggest and the best, which helped to develop strong local identity.\textsuperscript{14} Conn furthers his argument by noting that museums have sought to be democratic institutions—though he duly notes that for some institutions, the extent of their democratization is open for debate—by serving all levels of society.\textsuperscript{15}

Taken as a whole, Conn’s book is more disjointed than it is tied together by the themes he puts forward in the introduction. With the exception of the first, the chapters of the book do not provide much in providing answers to the question posed by the books title. In fact, it is a question that Conn—perhaps purposefully—leaves unanswered. This criticism is, however, not intended to take away from the excellent scholarship of Conn. While the subjects may be disjointed, they are nonetheless important issues in the museum field and ones that Conn does a wonderful job in explaining and analyzing in a manner that is easily accessible for both professional and layman alike.

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\textsuperscript{13} Ibid, 184-190. \\
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid, 208-210. \\
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, 210-211.
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Bibliography


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