Book Review: Museum Pieces: Toward the Indigenization of Canadian Museums

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Toward the Indigenization of Canadian Museums

A review of


Ruth Phillips finds that the indigenization of museums, specifically museums in Canada, was shaped by two consequential events in the late 1960s that led to ruptures of policy and politic. First, the Indians of Canada Pavilion at Expo '67 in Montreal exposed an anti-colonial critique of conventional Aboriginal-settler narratives through pointed use of exhibition design, theme and subject matter. Second, approximately two years later, in 1969, the Government of Canada was forced to withdraw its white paper, better known as the Statement of Government of Canada on Indian Policy, which intended to make all peoples of Canada heterogeneous under the law, thus executing the government’s strategy toward full assimilation. Positioned against such transformative events in Canadian museology and affairs of state, Phillips’s book offers a detailed and nuanced exegesis of Canadian museums and their evolving relationship with, as she says, Aboriginal “materiality, spirituality, community and history” (10).

For Phillips, “indigenization” is a particularly useful term in defining how museums in Canada and elsewhere understand and employ apparatuses of decision-making informed by Aboriginal perspectives. Namely, the unique ways that Aboriginal societies tackle difficult “concepts, protocols and processes” through verbal discourse with the intention that it leads to some semblance of “consensus” (10). Most importantly, and a central idea of the book, is that these models of relation have led curators, scholars and museum professionals to restructure modernist paradigms in museology toward beneficial policies of collaboration, hybridization and experimentation, though Phillips is quick to mention that even these are in the early stages of development.

The chapters in Phillips’s book were written over the better part of twenty years and comprise published papers and unpublished conference papers or lectures. The first section reads as a historical contextualization of today’s crucial museological debates. Each of the three chapters in the first section, “Confrontation and Contestation,” scrutinize a determining event in Canadian museology—and, for that
matter, reconceptualized Aboriginal representation in museums worldwide—from the Indians of Canada Pavilion at Expo ’67 and *The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada’s First Peoples* controversy of 1988 to the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation summit at the University of British Columbia’s Museum of Anthropology in 1997. Accordingly, as Phillips writes, these proceedings “narrate the postcolonial reform of the Canadian museum in terms of the Indigenous contestations of settler histories of the nation” (24). *The Spirit Sings* exhibition, staged at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary during the Winter Olympic Games and co-curated by Phillips, illustrates a jumping-off point for new understandings of critical museology in that it offered a site to dispute conventional Western exhibition practices. This is due, in part, to the fact that Shell Oil was slated to sponsor the exhibition of 650 pieces of Aboriginal art from international museums while simultaneously drilling for oil on Lubicon Lake Cree First Nation’s claimed land. Such an “ultimate hypocrisy” provoked a highly publicized boycott of the show by both Aboriginal groups and the international museological community. Using Veena Das’s term “critical event” to describe this establishment of “new modalities of social action” (51), Phillips affirms that *The Spirits Sings* was something of a necessary evil because it helped to reconsider Aboriginal intervention, hybrid exhibition designs, marketing tools and collaborative models for future exhibitions. Though her analysis is largely convincing, the lack of the pronoun “I” is troubling, because it leaves the reader speculating as to her exact involvement, considering Phillips herself was an integral part of the decision-making process for the exhibition.

Section 2, “Re-Disciplining the Museum,” builds upon Section 1 by examining three discursive constructs—authenticity, sacrality and possession—that resulted from the three critical events proposed by Phillips. Though they have not been as widely read as the essays in the first section of her book, they are nonetheless valuable, mainly for the reason that they are modelled as “case studies.” Seen in this light, they carry potential for “historical perspective and a site for theoretical analysis and models of innovative practices” (21). Chapter 5 takes up the issue of authenticity by demonstrating how modernist anthropology, art history and other academic disciplines assigned value and beauty to pre-contact items based on their technology, style and material while concurrently perpetuating the “primitive” archetype. Essentially, as Phillips describes, this undervalued the creation of contemporary producers whose post-contact hybrid Indigenous and Western forms “have been despised as inauthentic, relegated to the category of ‘tourist art,’ and rarely displayed in museums or art galleries” (109). The issue of sacrality is taken up in Chapter 6 through a case study discussion of the display procedures surrounding Onkwehonwe *ga:go:h:sa:b* (medicine masks). Although they were viewed by early ethnographers and primitivists as sculptural objects, some *ga:go:h:sa:b* were said to be alive and active, part of a larger ritual that could threaten the dreams and health of museum visitors thus requiring viewing limitations. The sacrality of the masks, and many objects like them, calls into question the ethics of display and the ability
of the postmodern museum to bridge secular and spiritual purposes; however, “the suppression of reproduction hits most directly at the principle of freedom of inquiry and the secular system of knowledge management that are at the heart of post-enlightenment Western academic traditions” (128).

Repatriation is central to the topic of possession and, in Chapter 7, Phillips explains the ontogeny of repatriation since the 1990s, citing that the repatriation mandates of Canada, Australia and the United States imply that objects that are illegally acquired, “sacred” or of “cultural patrimony” are subject to return (135). Conversely, though not as convincingly, Phillips observes that current repatriation policies and measures are open to interpretation and contain several obstacles including the exclusion of unrecognized Aboriginal communities, the incomprehensiveness of the tripartite policy mandate and, most significantly, items that do not fit comfortably within the classifications of sacrality, cultural patrimony or illegal acquisition. The potential for relocation (movement of items closer to the Aboriginal community, but still within the museum) and reproduction are seen by Phillips as possible alternatives to the plenary return of Aboriginal items.

In Section 3, “Working It Out,” Phillips engages the museum as a discourse in itself, a place of ever-evolving argument, discussion and compromise. Likewise, the contemporary museum plays an active social role that holds the potential to transform the political structures of communities in order to strengthen them (157). Rather insightfully, she also located the museum as a site for “rehearsal,” as a “safe space” that is approachable and open to reworking established meanings and beliefs, where communities join to “identify common goals, collaborate on a common project, forge social bonds based on mutual respect and trust, and form effective networks”(157). These ideas are fleshed out, most cogently, in Chapter 11, “Toward a Dialogic Paradigm: New Models of Collaborative Curatorial Practice.” Here, Phillips references the instrumental studies of scholars such as Tony Bennett and Carol Duncan to situate the traditional Western museum within hegemonic fields of socialization as opposed to contemporary examples of museums that aim to facilitate methods of power-sharing through a reorganization of power relations. She engages the collaborative exhibitionary principle in two ways: first, the “community-based” exhibit and second, the “multivocal” exhibit. In the community-based exhibit, the museum professional takes on the role of “facilitator,” the community becomes “the final arbiter of content, text, and other key components” and the museum remains the extension of the community’s space with the expectation that it all “serves as a kind of semiotic repair kit’ to forge new meanings” (195). While her analysis appears fractional in terms of its relationship to monographic or thematic exhibitions, Phillips’s collaborative model offers new ways of constructing social negotiations between the museum and Aboriginal communities (or diasporic communities) that seek mutual cultural benefit and social dynamism.
The fourth and final section in the book, “The Second Museum Age,” includes four chapters on recent innovations in and possible futures for indigenizing Canadian and international museums. Most notably, this section consolidates several key ideas and themes of the book, principally activism, intervention, collaboration and hybridity, while pushing for a recharacterization of the museum as an “experimental laboratory” (230). Phillips’s experimental laboratory is predicated upon a model of “respective dialogue involving listening as a precondition for the development of mutual understanding and power-sharing” with the hope that “such models, translated into larger social and political arenas, may be one of the most important contributions of the second museum age” (203). While the prospect of the museum as an experimental laboratory is fascinating, its fate is unlikely considering how operating budgets continue to wane ensuing that bureaucratic and corporate forces gain stronger currency. In Chapter 14, “Modes of Inclusion: Indigenous Art at the National Gallery of Canada and the Art Gallery of Ontario,” for example, Phillips examines the project of innovation and experimentation that lives out in the National Gallery of Canada and the Art Gallery of Ontario through, on one hand, a “classic modernist chronological survey” and, on the other, a “postmodern and postcolonial critique” of the contemporary museum installation (253). She summarizes by suggesting that the museum’s commitment to realigning itself against the primitivist tradition, which seeks to undercut the project of inclusivity, aesthetic hybridity and social harmony, will be fundamental to its meaningfulness as it moves forward.

As an academic, curator and former Director of the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, Phillips has steeped herself in practical knowledge and has been highly formative in indigenizing museums in Canada. Consequently, her book contains a sizeable amount of anecdotes to support her critical observations and judgements generating, in her view, a unique and fruitful amalgam of “history and theory and practice” (17). The tandem of autobiographical and objective writing is advantageous in a certain respect. The tradition of storytelling—especially one that strengthens and re-enforces critical writing—is entrenched in Aboriginal culture and here makes a fitting and refreshing partnership. However, Phillips’s tendency to lead by personal relationships to the subject matter instead of grounding it in critical theory at times leaves her argument and analysis problematic, though this continuous negotiation of proximity is compelling. Museum Pieces is an exceptional volume of essays recommended for scholars and museum professionals interested in critical museology with a special focus on Aboriginal perspectives in Canada. It makes a strong contribution to museum, historical, anthropological and art historical scholarship and should be considered a foundational text in these disciplines.