



Advances in Research

Museum worlds



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Holistic Houses and a Sense of Place: Contextualizing the Bishop Museum *Hale Pili* Exhibit through Archaeological Analyses *Jennifer G. Kahn*

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EXHIBITION REVIEWS

BOOK REVIEWS

Responding to the need for a rigorous, in-depth review of current work in the broad field of Museum Studies, *Museum Worlds: Advances in Research* contributes to the ongoing formation of Museum Studies as an academic and practical field of research, the expansion of which parallels the rapid growth of museums in just about every part of the world. *Museum Worlds* aims to trace and comment on major regional, theoretical, methodological and topical themes and debates, and encourage comparison of museum theories, practices, and developments in different global settings. Each issue includes a conversation piece on a current topic, as well as peer-reviewed scholarly articles and review articles, book and exhibition reviews, and news on developments in Museum Studies and related curricula in different parts of the world. Drawing on the expertise and networks of a global Editorial Board of senior scholars and museum practitioners, the journal will both challenge and develop the core concepts that link different disciplinary perspectives on museums by bringing new voices into ongoing debates and discussions.

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Introduction

Dark and Bright Futures for Museum Archaeology

James L. Flexner

One could easily create a pessimistic view of the future of museums, and museum archaeology more specifically, from current events. Budget constraints, the elimination of research staff and departments at venerable institutions (Aubusson 2015; Johnson 2015; Shen 2012), and even the closure, albeit temporary, of long-established state institutions (Davis 2016) all paint a bleak picture for museum research within an environment of continuing austerity and financial crisis. In archaeology, on top of immediate economic concerns, we have yet to solve a long-perceived “curation crisis” caused by an urgent need to increase the size, quality, and sustainability of long-term storage spaces (Kersel 2015; National Park Service 2016; SAA Advisory Committee on Curation 2003). In some cases, archaeologists are even reasonably advocating for returning finds to the ground in order to take some of the pressure off overwhelmed curatorial facilities (Williams 2011). This crisis looms while the rate of accumulation of archaeological materials accelerates, driven largely by the expansion of development-driven commercial archaeology globally.

And yet, there is much to be optimistic about, as archaeologists are finding new ways to work with, research, document, and conserve collections even as they face challenges including the ones mentioned above and others. This collection of articles explores current approaches and trends within museum archaeology from a variety of perspectives. One of the key observations, as Julia King points out in the opening article, is to “dig less, catalog more.” There are masses of largely untapped data in existing collections. Much of the archaeological research in the future is going to involve returning to museums and other storage facilities to document and reanalyze materials, often making exciting discoveries along the way. Revisiting assemblages of already excavated artifacts can bring treasures long forgotten to public awareness. For example, researchers recently found a 5,000-year-old whalebone figurine from Skara Brae in Scotland, believed to have been lost since the 1860s, in “the last box” while reassessing the old collection (Towrie 2016).

The articles that follow do not necessarily represent a comprehensive overview of museum archaeology. Rather, the aim is to provide case studies that show the variety and vibrancy of current approaches in the field, as well as representing emerging trends that might indicate how the field will evolve in the future. The articles cover a broad range of geographic areas, including case studies from Europe (Frieman and Wilkin, Prados Torreira, Ytterberg), North America (Beisaw and Duus, Buchanan, King, Roth), Australia (Asmussen et al., Bigourdan et al.), and Oceania (Flexner, Kahn, Mulrooney et al.). Prehistoric and historical archaeology are



represented, as are terrestrial and maritime archaeology. Several of the articles cross disciplinary boundaries, taking an archaeological approach to “ethnographic” collections.

A number of key themes emerge from this collection that may show some of the ways that museum archaeology will develop in the twenty-first century. Lourdes Prados Torreira and Niklas Ytterberg show the ongoing importance of museum interpretation as a site of progressive politics, fighting the forces of sexism (Prados Torreira) and nationalism (Ytterberg) in a Europe where conservative backlash is increasingly prominent. Archaeologists are still addressing the legacies of colonialism, and this is abundantly clear where issues of repatriation come to light. April M. Beisaw and Penelope H. Duus provide a multigenerational perspective on the present and future of repatriation movements through a reexamination of the 1916 Susquehanna River Expedition. In Australia, the changing approaches to the Burnett River Engravings reflect broader changes in the ways that archaeologists, state heritage organizations, and museums interact with Aboriginal heritage and communities (Asmussen et al.). This concern with communities is likewise visible in evolving practices of the Laboratory of Archaeology at the University of British Columbia (Roth).

A number of case studies examine the growing role of new technologies in museum archaeology. The use of online databases can make collections of artifacts available to researchers and diverse public audiences, as seen in the Ho‘omaka Hou initiative of the Bishop Museum (Mulrooney et al.). Three-dimensional scanning and printing are increasingly cheap and effective. These techniques can make museum collections increasingly accessible for people with disabilities and people unable to physically visit museum spaces where certain objects reside (Nancarrow). Social media and crowdsourcing increasingly influence the work of museum archaeologists, as seen in emerging trends from the British Museum (Frieman and Wilkin).

Case studies in maritime archaeology report on the value of public reconstruction and interpretation in the *La Belle* shipwreck in Texas (Buchanan), and the potential for doing high-quality research and public engagement “on the cheap,” as happened with the *Xantho* in Western Australia (Bigourdan et al.). Archaeological approaches can forge greater understandings of ethnographic collections, as well as the importance of such collections for archaeological interpretation (Harrison et al. 2013). Archaeologists’ sensitivities to provenance, provenience, and context show the ways that we might interpret past mobilities among Pacific Island societies (Flexner). Archaeological examination of the Hawaiian *hale* (house) at the Bishop Museum provides a new sense of place for understanding and challenging notions of “traditional” vernacular architecture (Kahn).

Concerns with the politics of representations of the past, repatriation and working with communities, new media and technologies for documenting and interpreting collections, and the use of archaeological techniques to contextualize collections will continue to shape museum archaeology in the coming decades. These case studies show that archaeologists continue to find creative solutions to contemporary and future challenges, despite the financial and institutional limitations posed by the current political and economic climate. An additional common thread in these articles is the importance of partnerships between museums, universities, and other institutions and communities. Research teams composed of people from various backgrounds and areas of expertise will likewise continue to be critical to the development of museum archaeology as a discipline. While there are many challenges ahead, there is also much to be optimistic about for the future of museum archaeology. Researchers represented in this collection and many others working throughout the world continue to advance the causes of conservation, repatriation, research, interpretation, and public presentation of the vast and significant stores of knowledge about the past currently housed in the world’s museum collections.

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