Museums and the Cultivation of Knowledge in the Pacific

Introduction

In the history of Europe's engagement with the Pacific, the idea of the "museum" holds a special place. From the seventeenth century, the same Baconian precepts that privileged the "inspection of particulars" over sacred texts also contributed to a "factual sensibility" that found its greatest expression in the collection, representation, and display of objects of natural history. With this impulse came a quest to discover, explore, and "complete" the unread Book of Nature, by filling in gaps in the record—of peoples, places, and things. By the early nineteenth century, the metropolitan centers of Europe celebrated the arrival of such new knowledge, duly collected, classified, cataloged, and codified—transforming art and nature into cultural capital, and information into power. In the diversity of nature lay the rewards of science, as in its products lay the wealth of nations. By the middle of the nineteenth century, for the exploring nations of Europe—as for the new nations of the Americas, and for the colonies of conquest and settlement in India and Australasia—the museum had become a site of power, enlisted by the metropolis for its purposes of governance. In the museum lay the means and the method to civilize unruly nature; to demonstrate the diversity of creation; to document the passage of peoples, flora, and fauna; and, ultimately, to illustrate the superiority of the West.

In the Pacific, as elsewhere, Europeans viewed nature through European eyes. A historically specific Western way of seeing, with its particular autopic sensibility, came to shape received knowledge of the region, its people, and its very different natures. At the same time, the instruments of collection—the expedition, and the museum—lent a new status to natural knowledge, elevating the curios of the collector into the data of science. In the process, the "empire of Nature," whose secrets Bacon invoked mankind to discover and possess, became indelibly associated with the history of imperial rivalry among nations of secular intent. To advance knowledge and secure supremacy, the metropolitan natural history museum held a special position—in itself a metonym of empire, and a reflection of natural hierarchy and power.

This special issue arises from a symposium on Museums and the Cultivation of Knowledge in the Pacific, convened by the Pacific Circle (a Scientific Commission of the International Union for the History and Philosophy of Science) at the last annual meeting of the (U.S.) History of Science Society, held in Vancouver in November 2000. Professor Fritz Rehbock, of the University of Hawai‘i, has published abstracts of all the papers delivered in the Pacific Science Bulletin No. 5 and has since reported on the conference in the Pacific Science Bulletin No. 6. Six papers were presented, of which we are pleased to present four. In some ways, they represent a significant cultural "turn" in the history of science. In recent years, historians of science have joined anthropologists in the task of recording and interpreting the local amidst the global, and in unraveling the entanglements that emerge in the act of collection, representation, and display. In a similar spirit, this symposium set out to combine, compare, and contrast selected cases in which the museum has become a key agency in the building of Western knowledge of the non-Western world.

In this endeavor, context greatly assisted content. Several participants recalled how appropriate it was that all visitors entering the arrivals hall at Vancouver airport passed through an extensive exhibition titled "The Pacific Passage"—an exhibition sponsored by the Vancouver International Airport Authority, with assistance from the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British
Columbia. This telling reminder of the omnipresence of the indigenous Pacific—from the First Nations of Canada and the American Northwest, to the “first peoples” of Australasia—formed a compelling introduction to our symposium. The very act of arriving in Canada became itself a trope of discovery—and the experience of entering a museum of Pacific humankind highlighted the significance of our session.

Of the following four papers, two are written by historians and two by anthropologists. In the first, Richard Burkhardt explores the role of the Museum d’Histoire Naturelle of Paris during the years after the Napoleonic Wars, when France, defeated in its strategic goals, sought to outpace England in intellectual ambition. In the second paper, Jim Endersby offers an illustration of British scientific criticism and its influence on the shaping of scientific interdependency between naturalists and collectors. His paper reveals the problematic role of “locality” as a factor of significance in the emerging self-definition of natural history.

With the third and fourth papers, we move from history to anthropology, and to the present day. Revisiting the Maisin culture of Papua New Guinea, and calling upon ethnographic fieldwork as well as archival evidence, John Barker explores a set of attitudes, familiar to Western museum curators, that at times fails to understand the meanings intended by indigenous peoples. His narrative informs a new role for the postcolonial museum. The legacies of colonialism are also taken up by Alexia Bloch, who finds indigenous Siberians, rather than Russian “metropolitans,” increasingly shaping the organization and conduct of natural history museums in the Russian Far East.

Taken together, these papers contribute significantly to one of the most important projects of the Pacific Circle—in recalling the importance of the “museum idea” as a factor central to the history of science in the Pacific.

Roy MacLeod
University of Sydney