

Artefacts, Archives and Documentation in the Relational Museum

by Mike Jones

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Artefacts, Archives and Documentation in the Relational Museum is a testament to the author's vast experience in the GLAM (galleries, libraries, archives, and museums) sector. Jones writes that the book is 'inspired by these rich relationships between artefacts and archives' (p. 1). For anyone working in museums or researching museum collections, *Artefacts, Archives and Documentation in the Relational Museum* will be a familiar read. At a time when research projects are increasingly interdisciplinary and seek to bring together dispersed collections, this book could not be more relevant. The book provides a historical overview of United Kingdom, United States and Australian museum documentation processes focusing on the development of museums and collections management from the late 1700s until the present day through focused case studies. It considers the pros and cons of different documentation practices while providing practical suggestions for collections today. The breadth and depth of this book is outstanding, and Jones cleverly provides a detailed but not overly dense narrative that is accessible for a wide range of audiences.

The book is divided into five chapters plus an introduction and conclusion. The core argument throughout the book is the value of relational content management systems that make collections more accessible by enabling all information about a collection to be visible for all audiences. Outlining the historical development of UK museums such as the British Museum and the Ashmolean, continuing with a discussion of the Smithsonian's disciplinary divisions and how this has affected their catalogues, and drawing on additional examples from other UK and Australian institutions, Chapter 1 considers how the professionalisation of collections management has affected how we have, and continue to, engage with museum collections. Jones argues that the

separation of archives from other museum collections has contributed to a loss of knowledge about these collections and meant that connecting these collections in the present can be very difficult.

Rather than suggesting radical new approaches that seek to undo the work that has contributed to this loss, Jones argues that we need to move forward to reconnect 'artefacts and archives in ways that better reflect the complexities of knowledge' (p. 33). Chapters 2–5 seek to provide the ways in which museums can move forward using the collections of Museums Victoria as case studies to illustrate Jones's arguments. Following the catalogue history of a spring gun and a rifle at Museums Victoria, Chapter 2 looks at the move from analogue to digital documentation and the data loss that occurred during this process. Importantly Jones highlights an issue not limited to Museums Victoria where early moves to digital documentation that sought to make data more consistent often focused too heavily on what Jones terms 'inherent data' (data specifically linked to an object such as its material) rather than 'attributed data and narrative text' (contextual information) (p. 50). This meant that, while it was possible to physically identify an object, its social and cultural value was often lost.

Chapter 3 focuses on this contextual information to discuss field notes and the digital and physical management issues that surround them. Highlighting 'neglect as a non-physical agent' (p. 69) of change to collections, Jones makes a case for giving fieldnotes the same care as objects and specimens, recognising their value beyond just providing information about an object or specimen. Chapter 4 continues this argument by highlighting the social, political and cultural value of the fieldnotes within the Donald Thomson Collection at Museums Victoria alongside the photographs and artefacts that also comprise the collection. Using the example of a dugong rope, Jones discusses how the Thomson Collection has been documented over time and the different types of knowledge that are attached to this documentation. Jones also highlights the problems researchers and curators have had in accessing and linking up the various types of knowledge attached to the collection because of previous documentation practices. Describing the dugong rope, Jones writes:

more than just a functional tool for hunting or fishing, the artefact is entangled with language, myth, local animal species, and geographical features, as well as with Thomson's research and published output ... Today the rope sits in the Many Nations display, within First Peoples at the Melbourne Museum, accompanies by the story of Katterra and the discovery of the rope manufacturing process, a photograph of Thomson, and an image of a silver gull. Surrounded by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artefacts in a space shaped by community voices and consultation, the meaning of the dugong rope is now shaped by the aims of a contemporary relational museum. (p. 108)

He considers how relational documentation, while often visible in a museum display as shown in the quotation above, is often not explicit in the catalogue record and that by incorporating 'attributed data' such as 'indigenous perspectives' into documentation practices 'we can move away from the authoritative museum' (p. 104).

In Chapter 5 Jones provides some possible ways to move forward. He argues that museums should develop their documentation practices by drawing together cross-disciplinary models to reflect the ways in which 'people already understand and work with collections' (p. 126). In short, a model that is not based on silos but is about interconnection brings relationships to the fore and suits different users with different needs. Jones concludes by calling for the development of better tools for 'capturing and preserving diverse cultural knowledge, while retaining the systematic data required to support inventory and storage management, conservation and loans' (p. 138). Importantly, Jones is not suggesting that all institutions should adopt his suggestions in the same way but that responses should be bespoke to each institution and that the focus should be on recording all data and ensuring they remains linked.

While Jones draws heavily on museum and archive theory, the practical applications of this book are valuable and should be considered. As such the book is relevant not just to museum studies, anthropology, archaeology and information studies students and researchers but also to those working in museums, galleries and archives.

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