

Book Reviews

Comptes rendus de livres

Amy Henderson and Adrienne L. Kaeppler, eds., *Exhibiting Dilemmas: Issues of Representation at the Smithsonian*

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Henderson, Amy and Adrienne L. Kaeppler, eds. *Exhibiting Dilemmas: Issues of Representation at the Smithsonian*. Washington and London: The Smithsonian Press, 1997. 285 pp., illus. \$24.95, ISBN 1-56098-690-5.

The significance of *Exhibiting Dilemmas* as an addition to the current stock of collections of essays in museum studies and cultural studies is that it provides superb examples of what curatorship can and should be about. At a time when museums and art galleries seem more likely to add marketing or retail staff to their ranks than strengthen curatorial staff, and when some down-sized or "right-sized" institutions have virtually abandoned their research resources, it is important to have narratives of curatorial adventures in scholarship at hand. These essays focus on the dilemmas of the curatorial enterprise — the political compromise, the power of a pre-emptive mythology, conflicting world views and time frames, the problematic argument for a coherent whole based on the evidence of fragments.

William H. Truettner, true to form, provides valuable insights into the dilemma of the curatorial process by setting his hypothetical curators, "A" and "B," in a methodological debate over the interpretation of American historical paintings, all in reference, of course, to the Smithsonian's controversial and more-or-less censored *The West as America*. Mary Jo Arnoldi does a masterful analysis when dealing with the problem of the Herbert Ward Collection of early twentieth century bronzes depicting African peoples in the tradition of nineteenth and early twentieth century imaging of the Dark Continent. The stereotyping of the peoples of the high arctic as exotic and homo-

geneous "Eskimo" through museum exhibits, and the dilemma of reconstruction is well documented by William W. Fitzhugh. The curatorial dilemma of collecting and exhibiting contemporary popular culture, for example, Archie Bunker's chair from the *All in the Family* set, is well explored by Ellen Roney Hughes. The curatorial expertise demonstrated by Richard Kurin, (the Hope Diamond), Tom D. Crouch, (the Wright Flyer of 1903), and Jane Maclaren Walsh, (pre-Columbian crystal skulls), provide exemplars for museum studies students.

If there are weaknesses in the book they are found in the "Introduction," where the editors seem less in tune with contemporary thought than their contributors, and most regrettably, in the first essay, "Exhibiting Memories." Steven Lubar, chairman of the Division of the History of Technology at the National Museum of American History, was the curator of *World War II: Sharing the Memories*. He writes in his essay about the *Enola Gay* exhibit at the National Air and Space Museum, which preceded *Sharing the Memories*.

The *Enola Gay* exhibit, which earned pages and hours of media attention, was about the particular aircraft that dropped on Hiroshima the first atomic bomb. There was such outrage at objective interpretation of the artifact and the event from veterans' groups and in Congress that the exhibit was reduced to a nebbish. Lubar explains why his subsequent curatorial exercise, *Sharing the Memories*, had to be crafted with the "fiasco" of the *Enola Gay* exhibit and the power of special interest lobbies always in mind. I find it an unfortunate apologia for a squeamish curatorial posture. He faced the curatorial dilemma, but I question his choice of

resolution. Compare this essay with Treuttner's contribution, where the imaginary curators debate the interpretation of three history paintings, which presents the dilemma of representation as a dilemma in scholarship, not in public opinion polls, petty politics or media frenzy.

Those of us interested in material culture, and the dilemmas to be faced when moving from object to information to ideas, should make special note of this book. The Hope Diamond story, or the curatorial issues surrounding the accessioning of The Woolworth Lunch Counter as an icon of the Civil Rights movement,

provide us with (no pun intended) food for thought. Reading these accounts of curatorial research at the Smithsonian Institution and enjoying the wealth of documentation brought to surround an artifact, a work of art or a collection is sumptuous feasting. Along with the praise we may give the curator/authors I suspect there will be envy. The privilege of the authority, the time and the resources to do the curator's job well is much too rare in our Canadian museum community. A few hours with *Exhibiting Dilemmas* should cause hunger cramps for most of the curators I know today.

Peter W. Williams, *Houses of God: Region, Religion and Architecture in the United States*

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Williams, Peter W. *Houses of God: Region, Religion and Architecture in the United States*. Champagne: University of Illinois Press, 1997. 321 pp., 105 illus. Cloth, US\$34.95, ISBN 0-252-01906-7.

In *Houses of God*, Peter Williams provides a regional and historical survey of American religious architecture. He divides the United States into seven regions, what he calls "cultural hearths." One chapter is devoted to each of the following: New England; the Mid-Atlantic states; the South; the Old Northwest; the Great Plains and Mountains; the Spanish Borderlands; and the Pacific Rim. Each, presumably, can be defined by at least one distinctive style (or a distinctive stylistic variant) originating in at least one distinctive religious or ethnic tradition.

The organization of this book has one major advantage: geographical comprehensiveness. Some authors would stop there. But Williams adds another kind of comprehensiveness. He is very careful to note the "diversity" and "pluralism" of American religious and art history. Unlike many other books of this kind, he gives Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, and other non-Christians their due. (It could be argued that his title is not inclusive, though, because neither synagogues nor most Protestant churches can be described, at least technically, in connection with the *domus dei*.) But the organization of this book has one major disadvantage, too. That requires some explanation.

As Williams himself points out, some regions have been much less distinctive and influential than others. With a few exceptions (due to the historical presence of the Spanish in Arizona and New Mexico, the Russians in Alaska, the Mormons in Utah, and, more recently, the Buddhists in Hawaii and California) western religious architecture was simply brought there by eastern migrants and modified slightly according to local needs and resources. Although these migrants came from homogeneous communities, they settled in what became very heterogeneous ones. The religious architecture of these could be described, therefore, as "some of this and some of that." As a result, most sections of this book dealing with western regions are somewhat less satisfying than those dealing with eastern regions. (By far the best chapters are those on New England and the South.) The organizational principle simply makes less sense when applied to the west, in other words, than when applied to the east. Williams might have used some other organizing principle for his book. He might have used five or six types of religious architecture, for example, or five or six types of religion, for that matter.

Williams is at his best when dealing with specifics. Most fascinating of all is his discussion of the New England meetinghouse and its transformation, as an "iconic" building type, to suit the needs of people far removed in time, place, and even spirit from those who first built them.