Rosetta

Bealby, M. S. (2014); ‘Sandra H. Dudley (ed.), *Museum Objects: Experiencing the Properties of Things*. London and New York 2012’

Rosetta **16**: 37 – 41

http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/issue16/Bealby1.pdf

Sandra H. Dudley (ed.), *Museum Objects: Experiencing the Properties of Things*. London and New York: Routledge (Series: Leicester Readers in Museum Studies), 2012. Pp. xxix, 397. $ 55.95. ISBN 978-0-415-58178-3 (Pbk)

Reviewed by Marsia Sfakianou Bealby
University of Birmingham

The aim of this book is to discuss museum objects, how these objects are experienced, and the relationship between beholders and objects, within the frameworks of museum and material culture studies. At present, this is the only major academic publication that thoroughly and comprehensively discusses assorted museum objects in these contexts. The book presents a selection of articles written by scholars from diverse backgrounds, with contributions grouped into four parts according to subject. This review will deal with some notable articles, which, the reviewer believes, highlight the wide range of issues considered in this book.

First, Dudley introduces the reader to the 'hidden', non-material qualities of objects, drawing attention to the fact that a physical object is much more than material, traits, and measurements. It reflects sensory and emotional qualities, received and interpreted differently from viewer to viewer. Therefore, as Dudley convincingly points out, museums should stimulate the visitors' sensory (e.g. 'hands-on') and emotional (interpretative) relationship with exhibited objects. Additionally, in her article ‘Museum Objects’ in part I ('Objects and their properties'), Pearce defines terms such as 'object', and 'artefact', and briefly discusses how personal and cultural values attached to objects give significance to these objects, turning them from simple 'things' into material culture. These two contributions are important because they prepare the ground for the discussions in the following chapters of the book.

For instance, also in part I, Rosenstein, who deals with the aesthetics of antiques, puts the previously mentioned concepts into practice in his riveting contribution. He sees much more than materiality in antiques, defining what antiques are, why and how they

differ from other / modern artefacts and what makes them so attractive and desirable. He examines their rarity, beauty, authenticity, agedness, and their social and cultural qualities. His article, which is well-grounded and page-turning, assists the reader to grasp the mesmerising 'voice' of these fine items.

The work of Gschwandtner suggests that even minor, every-day items have a character, taking yarn as an example. According to the author, when yarn is knitted, it receives a very distinctive nature. It operates as a message that tells a story: the story of how the knitted project was done and even the story of the knitter. Knitting is a craft that becomes a work of art. It has social components; it is a 'community activity' and gathers people together, even on internet forums. It has a historical and political background; e.g., as the author describes, knitting has become popular during every major American war. Gschwandtner, as a visual artist, uses a system of writing which is not strictly academic in style. Still, her article reads nicely, captivates the reader's attention, and generously offers food-for-thought.

Part II ('Experiencing objects') deals with how museum objects are encountered. The contribution of Morgan expands on the definition of material culture, adds to the discussions of Dudley and Pearce, and nicely summarises some key-points which are crucial for the understanding of museum objects. Material culture, as Morgan perceptively states, is '*things [...]*', but also *feelings, values, fears, and obsessions that inform one's understanding and use of things*' (page 101). In addition, material culture draws significance from social settings, and specifically, from its circulation among people.

There follows the work of van de Wetering, which is particularly engaging thanks to lively examples. Van de Wetering, similarly to the authors mentioned above, also sees beyond the looks of objects. He investigates what lies behind the damage and the ageing of the objects' surface, highlighting how natural wear can in fact enhance the way beholders interpret and appreciate artefacts in museums. This approach is in agreement with Rosenstein's view of agedness in antiques. Therefore, van de Wetering emphatically supports minimalism in conservation and restoration of

museum objects. This is warranted, in the reviewer's opinion, as natural wear helps visitors to mentally place these items in time, and even consider how artefacts were used.

A truly remarkable, and somehow unexpected (but certainly welcome) contribution to the book is the work of Zeki, linking art and the 'visual brain'. In his powerful contribution, Zeki, who specialises in neuroaesthetics, binds together neuroscience, cognitive science and art, stating that art is conceived, made, and interpreted, not with the eye, but with certain areas of the brain in the cerebral cortex. This work significantly adds to the understanding of the way art is experienced, as it provides an alternative, science-based point-of-view in the humanities.

In part III ('Contexts of experiencing objects'), Coote's well-researched work refers to the Nilotic aesthetics of Nuer, Dinka, Atuot, and Mandari (ethnic groups in Southern Sudan). Coote informatively describes how these cattle-keeping Nilotic groups have developed an aesthetic view which is almost entirely based on cattle. They admire the piebald and variegated colours and patterns and the large proportions of these animals. They value the sheen of their hide and the shape of their horns, and have developed an 'aesthetic vocabulary' (e.g. the description of 'beautiful' or the names of colours) based on cattle observation. Coote persuasively concludes that this case-study manifests how individuals naturally seek to maximise their aesthetic satisfaction.

Rovine also 'sees' beyond the surface of things. She examines handmade textiles and insightfully describes how the texture (i.e. the feeling textiles evoke when touched), colours, and patterns of garments, encode authenticity and tradition. As an example, she presents the South African handmade textile called *isishweshwe*, the authentic character of which has turned it into a symbol of national identity. When mass-produced in global markets, *isishweshwe* loses its sense of authenticity and value.

In part IV ('Object/person distinctions'), Knell discusses the intangibility of things, suggesting that in essence, material objects have an intangible twin, and the two are interrelated and interdependent. This intangible twin, consisting of notions and

interpretations, gives value to material objects. For instance, as Knell notices, what would Picasso's *Guernica* be without its contextual (cultural, historical, and art historical) background that attracts the crowds to see this painting at the Reina Sofia museum? Therefore, to Knell, museums should encourage visitors to think of intangible objects, and not simply portray their material twins. Knell's article is a bit 'heavy', as the author, without doubt, describes some complicated notions, the comprehension of which requires some extra care by readers who are unfamiliar with the topic. Otherwise, the numerous examples provided assist in following the discussions and 'hook' the reader's attention.

All previous articles have manifested how perception has the power to 'transform' material objects and vice versa. Malafouris, on similar grounds with Zeki, challenges the brain - artefact interface, with the cogent example of the blind man's stick. The stick, he notices, is not just a mobility tool, but an extension of the blind man's brain. Thus, he convincingly argues that in effect, artefacts, from prehistory to modern times, operate in a similar manner, and are so interwoven with the cognitive process, to the point that drawing a line between the two is almost impossible. To the reviewer's mind, this statement is right, as no archaeological object is unrelated to human thoughts and beliefs; and for that reason, all artefacts reflect culture.

In conclusion, the aims of the editor and the authors are widely met in this collective work, which successfully provides a stimulating discussion of museum objects. Overall, the book is a very good read. The articles are well-balanced, the text is easy to follow, and the topics are insightful and well-researched. All contributions are consistent and blend well together. The content is often accompanied by relevant illustrations in grayscale, though, in the reviewer’s opinion, grayscale does not give all pictures justice and at least some (e.g. the images in the works of Coote and Rovine) would look better in colour.

This publication would be received well by museum professionals and academics, as well as students of museum and heritage studies. To the reviewer’s mind, archaeologists would find this book equally inspirational, as it offers an alternative,

less standardised view of material evidence, and in effect, re-addresses material culture. It encourages readers to look beyond matter, style and design, and examine objects more consciously, with sociocultural notions in mind. Most importantly, this collective work reminds researchers that encountering material objects with personal sensations and interpretations is the only way that one can 'read' what is implied, but not expressed on the surface of things.