

Artefacts, Archives, and Documentation in the Relational Museum

By Mike Jones. Abingdon: Routledge, 2021. 192 pp. Hardcover and EPUB. \$128.00, \$39.16. Hardcover ISBN 978-0-367-55105-6; EPUB ISBN 978-1-003-09270-4.

I opened this book lazily hoping to find the PhD thesis I fantasize about writing on permanently active museum accession files and their relation to archives and records management. *Artefacts, Archives, and Documentation in the Relational Museum* differs from what I had in mind but is a very credible attempt to describe the wicked problem¹ engendered by digitized object documentation over time and a pathway to acknowledging the potential of its plurality for social justice within the cultural heritage sector. It is in fact based on Mike Jones's own 2018 doctoral thesis.²

Jones is an archivist, historian, and GLAM (galleries, archives, libraries, and museums) collections consultant in Australia and chose antipodean contexts in which to present his arguments, although his research necessarily took him to more than sixty museums around the globe, including in the United Kingdom and the United States. He has also written articles and book chapters on related topics such as documentation, context, and provenance in museums.³

The "relational museum," in opposition to the tradition of fixed, authoritative narrative, is predicated on museum planner and museologist Duncan Grewcock's concept of the "more complex, partial, processual world of connections . . . [reimagining] the contemporary museum as connected, plural, distributed, multi-vocal, affective, material, embodied, experiential, political, performative and participatory" (p. 11)⁴ in conjunction with the complexity of the full spectrum of archival context and the role of automation in capturing and navigating the relationship between artifacts (p. 12).

Given the complexities it discusses, the book is most suitable for specialists, although students and archives and museum researchers would benefit from its explanations of what may often seem like opaque or hidden practices and resulting access inequities. Over the course of five succinctly written chapters, Jones discusses the history of museums in conjunction with the archival profession; technological change in collections management and cataloging; and the idiosyncratic and dissociative nature of field [note] books—a format dear to my heart.⁵ The volume also includes a case study that reveals the failure of current practice to fully support artifact collections management and user communities, and concludes with a radical reconceptualizing of collections and collections documentation beyond hierarchies and networks to alternative relational models that reshape documentation.

Jones makes a strong case for generalizing from his local examples to show the complex web of connections and (often unethical) practices that brought artifacts into museum collections over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Two statements are the most compelling and central to his argument and also to the nature of the wicked problem collections documentation presents: “institutions will [n]ever describe and digitize all their collections and archives, or find the time and resources to update all their existing records” (p. 13); and, “Using the lens of preventative conservation, dissociation remains a significant issue, particularly where past or potential relationships are rendered less visible by historical separation of collections, professions, and systems” (p. 19). In Jones’s view, dissociating documentation from objects comprises custodial neglect and is directly linked to potential risk. Although some of this practice is due to preservation concerns and requirements, cataloging limitations (related to both systems and taxonomies), and physical space constraints, Jones still makes a powerful argument for the primacy of context as the key element of artifactual value. This value can be woven into strategic and financial plans to improve resources for archives storage and federated cataloging that aspires to the holistic record (including Indigenous and other source community shared knowledge). Dissociation moves the resource conversation around documentation and cataloging from a secondary concern to one that undergirds the entire relationship of the collection to the museum, on a par with curatorial output.

In light of this, two areas related to dissociation seem underdiscussed: archival fragmentation caused by the history of formalized artifact exchanges and by the documenters’ own movements.

Jones focuses on the separation of field notes from curators by archivists, internal cataloging dichotomies, and the silos between departments that lead to fragmented documentation but does not fully discuss the external museum relationships that also impact documentation. I read Jones’s volume in conjunction with Catherine A. Nichols’s work *Exchanging Objects: Nineteenth Century Museum Anthropology at the Smithsonian Institution*, a useful corollary even though it is centered around one organization.⁶ While this volume was not available to Jones, Nichols has previously written on the subject, so I was surprised that Jones did not specifically address the practice of exchanges carried out by many nineteenth-century museums (often to establish “type specimens” for scientific research in multiple locations) that scattered natural history (including archaeological and ethnographic) artifacts across the world, dissociating or fragmenting their documentation.

The movement of the documenters—collectors, curators, source community members—also played a large role in the fragmented documentation that exists for artifacts. Jones does not discuss in detail the peripatetic movements of people who relied on nonsalaried incomes (or often no income in the case of

women, who were assumed to have a male family member upon whom to rely). Collectors who sold to institutions that could not or would not afford whole collections often broke up documentation accordingly (and arbitrarily). Curator-collectors moved from institution to institution, much as they do now, to secure jobs and advance their careers, often taking their field notes with them. These materials tended to end up in the archives of whichever institution was home at career's end, or wherever family members felt the curator had the most positive experience or impact. Those movements and practices are part of the reason that institutions will never fully update their catalogs. Federated online catalogs have improved this situation to some degree, but it remains a problem for source communities (it is one of the reasons Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act [NAGPRA] repatriation requests and inventories take so long to submit and compile), as well as for other researchers, curators, collections managers, registrars, and archivists.

Jones elegantly articulates the issues inherent in applying cataloging systems across archival and object taxonomies and subject areas (e.g., anthropology, natural history, art), and his discussion ideally would be read by systems developers looking to expand their market. It is no accident that fine art collections cataloging is at the forefront of integration: that's where the money is and from which the most user voices stem. This is another of the wicked problems confronting registrars, curators, and archivists that often results in inadequate archival "modules" being tacked onto object collections management systems or, in cases where records and archives have been accessioned in the same manner as objects (despite the differing hierarchy of group/individual between and among the two), inadequate taxonomies that undercut the efficacy of searches and queries.

Jones also discusses the museum behaviors that impact access to documentation and the technologies (such as the move away from shared central files for e-records) that can silo documentation. He argues that bloated databases should be avoided while preventing internal dissociation by expanding the minimum field requirements of registration and cataloging systems—understandably a hard ask. Flatteringly, he cites my own contention that the records continuum is a more useful model than the lifecycle, as the former recognizes the plurality of actors and multiple simultaneous uses over time (p. 19).⁷ I would add that if built into the larger information governance structure, records management practices could also be used to reduce or prevent ongoing dissociation, especially when the records manager is also the archivist, as is often the case.

Using the Donald Thomson Collection at the Melbourne Museum as a framework, Jones goes on to argue for centering narratives of relationships and agency rather than objects and actors at the heart of descriptive work, opening the way for multiple and/or contradictory perspectives without a singular

“authoritative truth.” This would allow for classification by multiple taxonomies, incorporating a variety of source and user meanings through linked data without prioritizing a static “neutral” object definition (p. 21).

Jones concludes by advocating for better content and knowledge management systems that could describe connections and open pathways between functions and disciplines within the museum to recontextualize the data it holds, thereby reducing barriers to access and acknowledging the agency of the all-too-often underrepresented voices of source communities (p. 24). This makes the work an important contribution to the cultural heritage sector in general, and to archives in particular, by furthering our understanding of the relationship of archives to museums and discussing issues and approaches inherent across most institutional archives and special collections.

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NOTES

- ¹ Wicked problems are those with no “solutions” in the sense of definitive and objective answers. See Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber, “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning,” *Policy Science* 4 (1973): 155, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01405730>.
- ² Mike Jones, *Documenting Artefacts and Archives in the Relational Museum* (PhD diss., University of Melbourne, 2018), <http://hdl.handle.net/11343/219722>.
- ³ See Michael Jones, “Linking Items, Connecting Content: The Donald Thomson Collection,” in *Organization, Representation and Description through the Digital Age: Information in Libraries, Archives and Museums*, ed. Caroline Fuchs and Christine Angel (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Saur, 2018), 102–16; “Joining the Dots: Building Connections within GLAM Organizations,” in *Collections Care and Stewardship: Innovative Approaches for Museums*, ed. Juilee Decker (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 91–98; “Collections in the Expanded Field: Relationality and the Provenance of Artefacts and Archives,” *On Provenance of Knowledge and Documentation: Select Papers from “CIDOC 2018”* [Special issue], *Heritage* 2, no. 1 (2019): 884–97; and “From Catalogues to Contextual Networks: Reconfiguring Collection Documentation in Museums,” *Archives and Records* 29, no. 1 (2018): 4–20, to name a few.
- ⁴ The copy of the book supplied to me was in e-book format only and, apart from the table of contents, did not display original page numbers. All quotes in this review refer to e-book “pages,” of which there are forty-nine. The hard copy book comprises 192 pages to which the e-book index is keyed.
- ⁵ Sarah R. Demb, “Field Records and Scientific Notebooks,” in *Museum Archives: An Introduction*, 2nd ed., ed. Deborah Wythe (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2004), 177–79.
- ⁶ Catherine A. Nichols, *Exchanging Objects: Nineteenth-Century Museum Anthropology at the Smithsonian Institution* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2021).
- ⁷ Sarah R. Demb, “Records Management Basics,” in *Museum Records Management: An Introduction*, ed. Charlotte Brunskill and Sarah R. Demb (Oxford: Chandos Publishing, 2012), 35–46.