

Susan PEARCE (ed.), *Objects of Knowledge: New Research in Museum Studies* (London, The Athone Press, 1990, 234 p., ISBN 0-485-90001-7)

Barbara Le Blanc

Volume 15, numéro 2, 1993

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1083208ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1083208ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (imprimé)

1708-0401 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Le Blanc, B. (1993). Compte rendu de [Susan PEARCE (ed.), *Objects of Knowledge: New Research in Museum Studies* (London, The Athone Press, 1990, 234 p., ISBN 0-485-90001-7)]. *Ethnologies*, 15(2), 185–188.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1083208ar>

Butler précise à plusieurs reprises que le véhicule textuel utilisé dans un contexte situationnel particulier dépend largement du degré selon lequel la connaissance traditionnelle est partagée par les participants de l'événement de communication (p. 142). C'est une affirmation importante qui témoigne d'un renouvellement en profondeur possible de la discipline de l'ethnologie et l'auteur en assume bien les conséquences méthodologiques. En effet,

l'acte de performance ne communique pas seulement un contenu de croyance, mais réaffirme le statut social de chacun des participants et réciproquement confirme la validité des relations sociales telles qu'elles sont perçues. En dernière instance, la décision d'assumer le rôle de narrateur, aussi bien que le choix de la forme narrative et du texte, sont dictés par les caractéristiques du contexte de l'interaction particulier et spécialement par l'identité des participants et les relations sociales existant entre eux (p. 144; ma traduction).

Le livre de Gary Butler est intéressant, sobre et précis. La thèse du partage de la connaissance commune mérite d'être approfondie. Dans cet ouvrage, Butler s'attache prioritairement à illustrer chaque élément de sa définition du traditum et à identifier les interrelations entre les récits, les narrateurs, les interlocuteurs et les éléments socioculturels des contextes. On peut prévoir que ses prochains travaux pourront mieux reconstituer la dynamique interactionnelle elle-même en analysant des situations complexes et en tenant compte de l'ensemble des genres de récits et des types de discours qui constituent le système de communication d'un groupe donné.

Lucille GUILBERT
Université Laval
Québec, Québec

Susan PEARCE (ed.), *Objects of Knowledge: New Research in Museum Studies* (London, The Athlone Press, 1990, 234 p., ISBN 0-485-90001-7)

Objects of Knowledge is the first volume in the new periodical series *New Research in Museum Studies*. The journal, in book form, will appear annually. Editor Susan M. Pearce explains that in the midst of "new public needs, new management styles, new philosophical perceptions about society, knowledge and the nature of objects and collections...and the impact of these changes" (p. 1) upon museums, this periodical series "has been designed to meet two contemporary needs: to add to the broad debate now under way in museum circles, and to provide an appropriate forum for discussion" (p. 1).

The book is divided into two parts: part one is a series of eight articles, five from England, two from Canada and one from the Netherlands; part two is a review section of recent books, exhibitions and conferences. The eight articles reflect the diverse academic backgrounds and experiences of the authors. Although some of these works are difficult at times, because of the complex nature of the concepts or approaches, the reader will, nevertheless, be engaged by the significant issues many of the writers present. They offer material for thought and stimulus for debate and discussion. The articles reflect the complexity of the issues and the limitless spectrum of possibilities the contemporary museum world faces.

The guiding thread which links the eight articles is how meaning is created via the museum object. From an historical perspective, Mark Goodwin describes the origins and early period of the Victoria and Albert Museum, demonstrating how objects and collections have contributed to the development of Victorian attitudes concerning the moral values of objects. He analyses how these attitudes in turn influenced the relationships which developed among government, museums and the arts.

In "The Discursive Object", Canadian sociologist Edwina Taborsky offers a multi-layered, interesting and novel approach to objects and their meaning in museums. She considers the nature of society, the nature of objects and the ways in which objects generate meaning and interpretation in the light of the broad semiotic concepts developed by Peirce, Eco and Bakhtin. She uses the divisions of material, group and individual realities as a tool to help describe and define the formation and usage of meaning within a group. Taborsky then examines two cognitive paradigms, one based in discourse and the other based in observation. After a description of the three types of signs — *qualisign*, *sinsign*, *legisign* — which she believes a museum should consider when exploring an object, she urges these institutions to base exhibitions around the discursive object.

Anthony Alan Shelton examines the world of the writer, which he defines as the seen, recorded, classified and exhibited, juxtaposing it with the world of J. L. Borges' "imaginary monkey" or the unseen, unrecorded, unclassified and unexhibited. He then pairs these juxtaposed images with modernism (the writer) and post-modernism (the monkey). He states that in the museum world, every exhibition lies on the foundation of acceptance of a selected "truth". The monkey symbolizes the truth which remains unselected, unseen and unheard in the museum exhibit. Shelton believes that the arbitrary selection, classification and reclassification of objects combined with the meaning and value attributed to them by museums often result in the alienation of the object from its context. The museums thus procure "a monopoly over knowledge...and from this emerges a pedagogic authority that establishes an impeccable and unquestionable expertise which exercises a solitary reign over their empire of signs" (p. 98). He concludes

that museums have not yet realized their “propensity to allow us to explore ourselves critically through our juxtaposition with the other” (p. 99).

Ghislaine Lawrence compares museum and television coverage of medicine. She uses the example of a BBC television weekly series on medicine in 1958 which provoked furor in the medical profession. A few years earlier an exposition on medicine at Wellcome Historical Medical Museum was barely noticed. The conclusions that Lawrence suggests are that these opposite reactions show that the medical community of 1958 considered museums an appropriate vehicle for communicating medicine whereas they saw television as a threat.

Susan M. Pearce examines the significance and power of an infantry officer’s red jacket worn at the Battle of Waterloo. She adapts Ferdinand de Saussure’s concepts of *langue* and *parole* for understanding language to another communicative system, material culture, Barthes signifier (jacket) and signified (message), and Leach’s analysis of communication to show that the jacket works as “a message-bearing entity” (p. 127). The analysis helps in understanding the “emotional potency” which resides in an object. It further “gives a framework for understanding better how our relationships with material culture of the past operates and shows that this is part of the way in which we construct the ever-passing present” (p. 135).

Museology, Peter Van Mensch believes, can make contributions to the actual operations of museums by “developing theories about the potential scope of museum collections” (p. 141). He sets out to show the possible parameters within which “the definition of museum objects, activities and institutions may operate” (p. 142) and he applies his model to the activity of conservation. One of the central questions considered is the “special character which may reside in the authentic object” (p. 142) compared to contemporary approaches where the “importance of the preserved authentic object dwindles” (p. 142). He qualifies his remarks by stating that decisions in an area such as conservation can not be separated from the communicative and research functions of museums.

Canadian Michael M. Ames, in straightforward language, examines cultural empowerment and museums, using as an example the movement of native peoples towards self-determination. He describes three ways museums can respond to the request of society to recognize Native interest in their own heritage. Museums, he believes, have the role of facilitating cultural empowerment of the less powerful which in turn will build relations of trust.

Margriet Maton-Howarth proposes an alternative learning system both in philosophical and empirical terms. She addresses three issues: the psychology of learning, the educational potential of museums and heritage institutions and the development of an alternative learning system in these institutions. Maton-Howarth proposes an innovative approach to learning which explores the potential of museums and heritage institutions and their ability to offer exciting experiential learning environments where the child is actively involved in learning, an experience which brings meaning to words.

The four articles which can have an immediate and direct influence upon Canadian museum personnel are those by Taborsky, Van Mensch, Ames and Maton-Howarth. Museum workers are already challenged by the questions these authors examine. Taborsky looks at the levels of signs and their respective meanings, which museum professionals serving a diversified public cannot disregard. A multicultural society rightfully requests and expects to see itself reflected in the institutions which are supposed to represent it. Ames offers potential methods for meeting the requests for cultural empowerment from minority groups which are beginning to pressure museum personnel. Van Mensch suggests that the new tendency towards communication and research in museums has challenged traditional object-centred museology. Maton-Howarth's alternative learning system explores the potential which museums have as exciting learning environments. Museum professionals today face these challenges and the papers presented in this new journal can help in understanding and in formulating appropriate methods for positive action.

Barbara LE BLANC
Université Laval
Québec, Québec

Charlotte Allen WILLIAMS, *Florida Quilts* (Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 1992, xii + 232 p., 137 colour, 82 b&w photographs, preface, bibliography, index, \$44.95 cloth, \$24.95 paper)

This book resulted from a statewide survey of quilts organized by Quilters Unlimited of Tallahassee, known as the Florida Quilt Heritage Project. In undertaking this project, the group attempted "to discover, document, and preserve the history of Florida as expressed through Florida quilts and the lives and times of the quilt makers". The project's steering committee decided to include any quilts currently found in the state, rather than to restrict the survey to only those quilts made in Florida. This decision yielded information on migration patterns of both families and quilts, which remains to be analyzed.

In addition to the book, the project also involved a 1990-1991 exhibit at the Museum of Florida History, which now maintains the project records and photographs as well as the quilts which were donated during the project. This cooperative effort with existing institutions within the state, notably the Museum of Florida History, as well as the Florida Archives, facilitates research by making the project data available for further study.