

Claudia Augustat (Weltmuseum Wien)

Colonizing memory: Indigenous heritage and community engagement

In recent years collaborative projects with representatives of Indigenous communities have become common practice in many ethnographic museums around the world. Especially in former settler countries, including the United States, Canada and Australia, exhibitions about the native population and their heritage are no longer possible without their participation. These practices are affecting and trying to overcome power relations inside the museum space. They are asking for the sharing of authority, and a re-thinking of the ownership of collections and Indigenous curatorship. However, the Western museum is not simply a place where heritage is kept, researched and communicated, it is also a very special way to re-create heritage and histories. In this paper, I take a closer look at the effects of the museum memory machine on Indigenous ways of remembering. In Amazonian societies, where remembering can sometimes mean to forget, the effects may be far-reaching.

Paul Basu (SOAS, University of London)

Re-mobilizing colonial collections in decolonial times: exploring the latent possibilities of N. W. Thomas's West African collections

This presentation reports on the work we are conducting as part of the AHRC-funded 'Museum Affordances' project with the ethnographic collections and archives originally assembled by the Government Anthropologist N. W. Thomas in West Africa between 1909 and 1915. These collections, which include material culture, photographs, sound recordings and botanical specimens, were made in the context of a series of anthropological surveys sponsored by the colonial governments of Southern Nigeria and Sierra Leone. It is doubtful that they ever fulfilled whatever governmental purposes they were perceived to afford and were instead deposited in various institutions in the UK, where, for the most part, they have remained dormant and hidden away in storage for over a century. Now they are part of a museological experiment in which we are re-assembling, re-circulating and re-configuring these collections in order to explore what they afford to different stakeholders today. In this presentation, we reflect on the different ways we are attempting to mobilize the collection in West Africa and the UK through what we term 'archival returns,' 'diasporic reconnections' and 'creative reengagements.' In particular, through such interventions, we consider what decolonial possibilities these explicitly colonial collections might afford. For further information about the project, please see <https://re-entanglements.net>

Joshua Bell (National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington)

Circuits of accumulation and loss: intersecting natural histories of the 1928 USDA New Guinea Sugarcane Expedition's collections

In 1928 the United States of Department of Agriculture sent an expedition to the Territories of Papua and New Guinea to locate new species of sugarcane with which to breed hybrid sugarcane resistant to the mosaic virus. Equipped with a seaplane, the USDA Expedition relied on colonial infrastructure and a mixture of governmental and commercial sponsors to collect an array of biological, ethnographic and visual materials that are now dispersed between multiple herbariums, museums and experimental stations in the Americas, Asia and Europe. In this paper, I examine the circuits of accumulation and loss materialized in the lives of the Expedition's botanical materials. For while knowledge was created and accumulated through the cutting, treating and planting of sugarcane clones and the exchange of voucher specimens, knowledge was also lost. Examining the Expedition's dispersed collections and their circulation allows for a critical reading not only of the scientific networks and the associated ideologies of value that facilitated these movements but also allows for a partial recuperation of indigenous life-worlds that enabled the collecting of these materials. Revealing these intersecting natural histories is an important step in understanding and addressing the legacies of inequality, labor and diverse knowledge that informs science and collections.

Caroline Cornish, Felix Driver & Mark Nesbitt (Royal Holloway, University of London and Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew)

The mobile museum:
economic botany in circulation

This paper presents research from an AHRC-funded project on the mobility of objects into and out of the economic botany collections at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, from 1847 to the present day. Originally established as part of a public museum designed to illustrate the properties of plants and their economic potential, these collections received thousands of specimens and artefacts from all parts of the world. The project seeks to move beyond the conventional focus in museum studies on processes of acquisition and accumulation in order to consider the re-circulation of specimens and artefacts through donations to and exchanges with other botanic gardens, ethnographic collections, industrial museums and schools. The paper will consider the role of Kew as a centre of circulation, mapping the dispersal of objects out of the collection, tracing their trajectories across multiple collections. It will explore various different forms of mobility, including Kew's role as a clearing house for major collections (such as those of the India Museum), the exchange of so-called 'duplicate' objects with ethnographic museums and the dispersal of specimens and artefacts to civic museums in the UK and colonial museums abroad. The paper highlights the significance of the circulation of objects beyond Kew – not merely as disposals of surplus, but as active agents of museum and pedagogical practice, revaluing their meaning in the process. Whether in sorting and splitting of major existing collections, the exchange of duplicates or the circulation of objects to regional and colonial collections, it was the movement of objects that made the difference.

Sally Gregory Kohlstedt (University of Minnesota)

Mobile botany: education, horticulture and commerce in New York City, 1890 to 1930s

Botany moved from an amateur activity into a more systematic educational component over the course of the nineteenth century, extending its accessibility across class lines and into schooling at every level. Herbaria, conservatories, arboretums, and botanical gardens reflected both the promotion of botanical subjects and increasing public expectations for access to such sites. Particularly notable in the United States was their integration into elementary education (indeed all education), where the importance of working with specimens seemed particularly compelling as an instructional tool. By the twentieth century, botanical gardens (alongside agricultural programs and voluntary associations), particularly those in or near urban areas, hired staff and enlarged their public visibility. They provided experts advice, exhibitions and onsite activities, specimens (living plants, dried plants, and seeds), and even mobile instructional units to circulate in the local community. Many of these techniques were developed in conjunction with a nature study movement whose pedagogy relied on giving students hands-on experience with plants. Leadership came from interested gardeners, public school teachers, legislative as well as private patrons. Assigned garden staff (often women) sometimes found themselves in tension with their colleagues responsible for research and collection maintenance. Boards and administrators approved outreach activities, but the programs relied on private patrons, a cadre of trained teachers, and local horticultural institutions. The Brooklyn Botanical Garden and the New York Botanical Garden were early adopters and their visible successes inspired other gardens including the Missouri Botanical Garden and some in California.

Steven Hooper & Karen Jacobs (University of East Anglia)

The remobilisation of material culture in Fiji

The main focus of the presentation will be about how certain indigenous skills have been 'lost' or almost lost, but also about how there is increasing interest in revitalising them for cultural and even economic purposes. 'Heritage' items are not universally valued in contemporary Fiji, as recent iconoclastic burning of things purportedly associated with pre-Christian religion can attest. However Fijian artworks (including canoes and fibre skirts) are being remobilised, and are today circulating in a major exhibition, Fiji: Art & Life in the Pacific, previously at the Sainsbury Centre, UEA, soon at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts.

Luciana Martins (Birkbeck, University of London)

Plants and artefacts then and now:
reconnecting biocultural collections in Amazonia

The biocultural objects collected by Richard Spruce in the Brazilian Amazon in the 1850s constitute a unique point of reference for the useful plants, ethnobotany, anthropology and environmental history of the region. This remarkable collection, housed mainly at the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew and the British Museum, incorporates indigenous plant-based artefacts, samples of useful plant products, detailed archival notes on the use of plants, and accompanying herbarium voucher collections. This paper focusses on an ongoing research programme aimed at building capacity in Brazil to research, catalogue and mobilise data from these biocultural collections, developing these resources for improved understanding of the useful and cultural properties of plants. It aims to build collaborative relationships, making biocultural collections and associated data accessible online, and above all to strengthen capacity of indigenous communities on the Rio Negro for autonomous research into material culture and plant use. Considering the trajectories of selected objects from the field to the archive and back to the field again, I ask: how can the stories of these objects be told, taking into account not only what they were made to be, but what they have become? What difference does it make to our understanding of these objects if we consider their mobility through different spatio-temporalities – those enmeshed in the field but also in the metropolitan archive? How can indigenous and scientific knowledge be displayed successfully, establishing meaningful ontologies for knowledge platforms within this context? How can knowledge about specific useful plants circulate considering a constructive, culturally appropriate engagement with local communities?

Laura Newman (Royal Holloway, University of London)

Mobilising the school museum: Kew museums, plants and the London classroom, c.1880-1940

This paper focuses on Kew's role as a major supplier of plant specimens to British classrooms. Between 1875 and 1914, more than seven hundred schools were recipients of plants from Kew's Museums of Economic Botany, providing teachers with much-needed teaching aids and pupils a chance to encounter the botanical products of Britain and its Empire. By pinpointing Kew's contribution to curricular initiatives such as Nature Study and commercial geography, I show how the growing presence of plants in schools formed part of a broader national and transnational phenomenon -- one that simultaneously stressed the benefits of pedagogy-through-nature and the instrumental possibilities of museums both within and without the classroom. But what did it mean to be part of a much broader botanical marketplace for schools in late nineteenth and early twentieth century London? By comparing the origins and workings of Kew Gardens' schools scheme with those of the London County Council and the Imperial Institute, I uncover both the benefits and disadvantages that could present themselves to museums and other kind of institutions when working with schools. Correspondence with teachers, inspectors' reports, teaching periodicals, and school log-books in turn will reveal the various ways in which Kew's museums became embedded into schools through the transmission of objects. Particular attention is paid to the politics of display, and the ways in which these can be seen as informed by and existing in dialogue with museological practices of the time.

Catherine A. Nichols (Loyola University Chicago)

Illustrating anthropological knowledge: the exchange and use of duplicate specimens at the U.S. National Museum and the Pitt Rivers Museum

The exchange of duplicate specimens has been understood as a means of diversifying and refining museum collections, particularly during national museums' formative collecting efforts, which were influenced by their colonial occupations. Under this broad system of exchange, duplicates were made available for distributions to schools and universities as a means of object-centered pedagogy. Here, the value and use of the duplicate is primarily an exemplary and illustrative one. Further, the use of duplicates in schools allows for phenomenological practices in which students might engage in a more diverse sensorial experience with the specimens. This calls attention to considerations to the nature of duplicates as evidence within the practice of both assimilating and producing knowledge. This paper examines the relationship between anthropological interpretations, the evidence on which those claims are made, and the modalities through which knowledge is shared. Specifically, I examine how illustrations are positioned in relation to texts. I consider three types of illustrations: hand-drawings, visual technologies that make use of mechanical reproduction (e.g. engravings), and duplicate specimens. Drawing primarily on correspondence and exchanges between the Pitt Rivers Museum and the U.S. National Museum in the late nineteenth century, I explore the relationships between the properties of these types of illustrations and the nature of proximal texts. I will argue that duplicate specimens may be employed as means of evidencing contentious interpretations and that this reflects the value of objects in relation to the observational emphases of natural history and anthropology.

Jude Philp (Macleay Museum, University of Sydney)

Circulations of paradise or How to use a specimen to best personal advantage

Some things simply dazzle and captivate humans. Birds of Paradise have had a captive audience in Europe from the fourteenth century, and in their native lands for tens of thousands of years. By the nineteenth century a new kind of person pursued the birds – the specimen collector. With the market created through and by museums, zoos and gardens, such collectors acquired particular forms of specimens (dry, wet, pinned and mounted) as part of the international project to classify the world's flora and fauna. Focussing on a headdress, this paper explores the paradise feather trade and spectacle in colonial Papua New Guinea and in museum processes. From the late nineteenth century, Motu people of the Port Moresby region were involved in international and local socio-cultural economics of the feather trade. The feathered headdresses worn by Motu men in this period are dramatic examples of taxonomic and ecological knowledge. They can also be recognised as moments of success in the circulation of feathers within and between peoples of the region. Predominantly aimed at foreign acquisition and export, in 1911 new laws were introduced to protect bird species from over-hunting. Museums as scientific organisations were largely exempt from these laws, leaving a loop-hole that was happily exploited by photographer Frank Hurley and the Australian Museum 1923-1924. The success of their manoeuvres depended utterly upon the mechanisms museums incorporated for extending diversity in collections.

Daniel Simpson (National Maritime Museum)

Circulating the national museum: naval collecting and curatorial authority, 1827-1855

The identification and analysis of historically mobile collections gives witness to the equally fluid and often elusive ways in which museums have themselves mobilised against each other in competitions for relevance and meaning. Long before the concept of the 'national' collection came to have any fixed semantic, scientific or political import in Britain, the forced or voluntary circulation of high-value objects charted the ebb and flow of particular institutions' prominence. In this paper, I discuss how recent work on the nineteenth-century circulation of the imperial collections of the British Royal Navy has accordingly engendered new understandings of Victorian museum culture. Tracing a three decades-long quarrel, from 1827 to 1855, between the British Museum and the museum of the Royal Hospital Haslar in Gosport over the location and relocation of the navy's ethnographic and natural history specimens, I probe our understanding of the origins of British collecting, and ask what was involved in the making of claims to national eminence. I conclude the paper with a discussion of the problems and possibilities of Haslar Hospital Museum today. Though Haslar Hospital itself no longer exists, the museum's ethnographic exhibits survive intact within the present British Museum. As a fossilised collection defined still by the peculiar sensibilities of the medical facilitators of nineteenth-century British naval exploration, I discuss how, why, and in what ways Haslar's collections might be made mobile once again.

Alice Stevenson (Institute of Archaeology, University College London)

Circulation as negotiation and loss: Britain's role in distributing archaeological finds from Egypt, 1880–present

The AHRC-funded project *Artefacts of Excavation* examined the history, politics and legacy of a century of finds distributed from British excavations in Egypt to museums and related organizations worldwide from 1880 to the present day. It identified more than 350 institutions in 27 countries across 5 continents that benefitted from this network. This paper will take a broad look across the four phases of circulation that characterized the period between 1880 and the present day, the variety of mechanisms involved, and what can be inferred not just about the development of museums or archaeology, but also about society's attitudes towards antiquities - what we have termed 'object habits' - that are revealed in these circulations. These four phases include: (i) the period between the 1880s and 1920s, which saw the extensive global dispersal of antiquities across the UK, Europe, the British Empire and Japan; (ii) the interwar years, when alternative technologies of collecting were developed in response to restrictions on the export of archaeological material and a contraction of the distribution network; (iii) the post-second world war period, when divested more than acquisition came to define museum activities with regard to collections; and (iv) the post-1982 period in which the export of antiquities from Egypt was drastically curtailed and then ended entirely, though objects continue to circulate today on the problematic antiquities market. The final part of this paper will turn to communities in Egypt itself and the effects that the practice of finds distribution has had on perceptions of foreign archaeology in Egypt and in museums worldwide.