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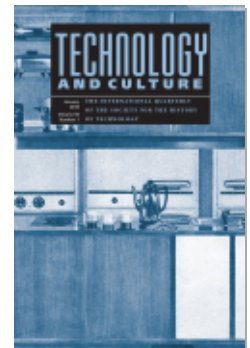
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*Life on Display: Revolutionizing U.S. Museums of Science and Natural History in the Twentieth Century* by Karen A. Rader, Victoria E. M. Cain (review)

Joyce Bedi

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## BOOK REVIEWS

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### **Life on Display: Revolutionizing U.S. Museums of Science and Natural History in the Twentieth Century.**

By Karen A. Rader and Victoria E. M. Cain. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014. Pp. 456. Hardcover \$45.

How do museums remain relevant to their audiences? What factors determine collecting, research, exhibition, and education priorities? Should museum policies, programs, and fundraising be driven by events shaping American culture? How do museum professionals measure success? These are a few of the questions raised in *Life on Display: Revolutionizing U.S. Museums of Science and Natural History in the Twentieth Century*.

In addressing them, Karen A. Rader and Victoria E. M. Cain explore themes that will be familiar to readers of museum histories. Museums of multiple disciplines have experienced the evolution of exhibition design from static to dynamic, a shifting emphasis on interpretation over research, the difficult decisions surrounding funding sources, and the changing needs of the museum profession. However, by examining a broad swath of major museums of natural history and science and science centers across the United States, Rader and Cain provide nuance to these overarching themes with an analysis that seats them within the context of American society as a whole.

For example, the authors describe how the Progressive values of the “museum men” who led the profession in the early twentieth century transformed their institutions by replacing the display of scientific specimens with more dynamic exhibitions meant to enhance public understanding of science. This had consequences for collecting efforts and research, even as their “vision of museums as palaces of popular education” (p. 49) informed public educational programs. Similarly, postwar changes in formal science education were reflected in exhibitions at natural history museums, new museums of science and industry, and later science centers. With the goal of creating an informed citizenry, especially after the launch

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of Sputnik and the expressed need for greater “science literacy” among Americans, exhibition design became more interactive and more narrative, seeking to engage visitors in conversation and exploration; the hands-on experiences created by Frank Oppenheimer for the Exploratorium were the epitome of this strategy.

Such shifts in goals and attitudes affected natural history and science museums’ entire structure. The ranks of museum workers expanded to include educators, professional designers, dedicated fundraisers, store managers, and more. Women were represented in greater numbers. Many museums moved resources from collecting and research to education and exhibition, responding especially to new priorities in science education. As the twentieth century progressed, museums came into direct competition with other leisure-time destinations, including theme parks, giving rise to the demand for blockbuster exhibitions and a focus on “edutainment.”

Rader and Cain weave all of these complementary and conflicting threads together into a complex and intriguing tapestry. Readers of *Life on Display* learn how changes in exhibition style, informal education, the museum’s role as social advocate, and the tensions between public history and academic study have molded some of the most venerable museums in the United States. Necessarily, some supporting topics receive less attention. For example, this reader wanted to learn more about the role of world’s fairs, the factors that influenced the National Science Foundation’s change in policies for supporting museums’ work, the increasing emphasis on evaluation and visitor studies, and how the vision of major museums filtered down to smaller institutions across the United States. The curious reader, however, will find much in the notes, bibliography, and essay on sources to mine for continued inquiry. Delving into the notes is especially rewarding, revealing fascinating stories that readers should not miss. See, for just one example, note 122, p. 318, on the adventures of American Museum of Natural History taxidermist Carl Akeley, who strangled a leopard with his bare hands, was crushed by an elephant, and then “sweated through bouts of blackwater fever and, eventually, died in the jungle.”

The paramount message of *Life on Display* is that museums continually adapt, change, and grow to remain relevant to a broad American public. As stewards of history—natural, scientific, or otherwise—museum professionals strive to share their knowledge and passion with visitors and instill them with curiosity and a sense of context. Karen Rader and Victoria Cain’s work explores a century of successes and pitfalls, inspiration and uncertainty, through the human beings who made it all happen.

JOYCE BEDI

Joyce Bedi is senior historian at the Lemelson Center for the Study of Invention and Innovation, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.