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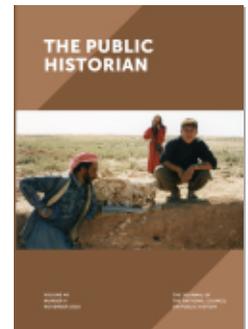
Museum Rhetoric: Building Civic Identity in National Spaces

by M. Elizabeth Weiser (review)

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(Review)

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“a muddle of foreign armies, indistinct locations, and uncertain lessons” in most accounts (190).

Licursi’s work struck multiple chords for me as I serve on a local county war centennial commemoration group. Our organization faces many challenges in designing events, including the fact that we do not even know for certain how many men from our small county died in the war. The public’s memory is a miscellaneous collection of bits of things they somewhat remember from their history classes and television shows, such as the sinking of the *Lusitania* or dough-boys somewhere in a trench. I suspect that if I asked the average person for a list of war veterans Snoopy’s WWI Flying Ace would be in the top five. The public response with which we deal reflects the very muddle Licursi discusses, and I strongly suspect other public historians will find the same.

Remembering World War I in America should be of interest to anyone concerned with how the American public remembers its history. Licursi includes two very useful bibliographies as a separate appendix. The first lists personal narratives of the war; the second details World War I novels. I wish she had included one on relevant movies, but the two that are included are by themselves valuable. There is also a thorough bibliography of the books and archives she used in her research and a decent set of footnotes. There are only four illustrations, but I do not think that more were particularly needed. The work is appropriate for undergraduate classes in public history and for graduate classes in combination with other works.

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Museum Rhetoric: Building Civic Identity in National Spaces by M. Elizabeth Weiser.
University Park: Penn State University Press, 2017. ix + 220 pp.;
notes, references, index; clothbound, \$69.95.

A body of critical literature on the socio-political relationships between museums and nation-building has been developing over decades. Museums are also being examined today as active rather than passive and/or reactive participants in the construction (as well as preservation and exhibition) of national and regional identities. Furthermore, museums are being studied as fertile sites for the formation of collective identities. One of the most interesting and fairly recent developments in the evolving transdisciplinary field of museum studies is the attention to the interplay of memory, history, and the individual museum experience. This entails increased emphasis on the moral, civic, and ultimately affective dimensions of that experience, insofar as it may translate into action on the part of the visitor—in and beyond the museum.

This communicative and persuasive power, its multiple object-centered strategies, and its varied modes of address to the visitor, are the subjects of M. Elizabeth Weiser’s *Museum Rhetoric: Building Civic Identity in National Spaces*. As the author maintains in her introduction, “All museums—historical, scientific,

and artistic—select aspects of the world, turning them into crafted exhibits, turning life into *diction*” (9). Weiser’s thought-provoking study attends to the intricate elements of that diction and the arguments it seeks to advance; the book examines how the explicit yet flexible tools of rhetorical analysis enable us to identify and understand the constructive, transformative, and rhetorical work of museums.

Form and subject enjoy a reciprocal relationship here. The success of Weiser’s approach depends on her ability to persuade us to view museums as narrative—as well as material—spaces; the book itself thus relies on the art of persuasion, supported by a breadth of examples and a fine analytical eye. We do not find an extended treatment of any one museum or exhibition here, however, and *Museum Rhetoric* may prove most valuable in its presentation of abundant exempla rather than fully developed close readings of cases-in-point.

The book considers how communication proceeds—as we would expect in a work of rhetorical criticism—but, of course, the illustrative examples are primarily (not exclusively) visual: the arrangement of artifacts, the interplay between words and things, and the importance of spatial relationships. As Weiser looks at how a “story is built from the material remnants of the past” (67) she also looks at the “potential polyphony” of those material objects (69). She does not oversimplify, and some of the most interesting claims of the book involve attention to the presentation of “a national myth that is more dialogical, more flexible, and more capable of incorporating fully those ambiguities of the individual subjects making up the ‘we’” (11).

Overall, Weiser strives to raise the reader’s rhetorical consciousness, visual consciousness, and historical consciousness. This is a tall order. The book is heavily inflected with rhetorical theory, particularly the work of Kenneth Burke, the primary subject of her previous book, *Burke, War, Words: Rhetoricizing Dramatism* (University of South Carolina Press, 2008). Weiser uses the “concept of the *personalizing of essence*” (from Burke’s *A Rhetoric of Motives*), for example, to explain how the individual visitor “translates the disparate events of her personal narrative into an abstract reflection, and then translates that reflection back into a narrative now larger than herself, a persuasive narrative” (101–2). She also acknowledges the contributions of Gregory Clark, whose work on the rhetorical dimensions of museums—including the National Jazz Museum in Harlem—is essential to the emerging literature on specifically museological arts of persuasion.¹ Weiser also draws on other key sources in museum studies, including Eilean Hooper-Greenhill on the museum as a “communication medium rather than repository” (12); Simon Knell on the fact that “the significant object . . . exists more in our minds than in the vitrine” (70); and Donald Preziosi on the constructed nature of the “*myth of nationality*” (67). She also summons support from the work of social

1 See Greg Dickinson, Carole Blair, and Brian L. Ott, eds., *Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2010), which includes an essay by Clark.

scientists, William Penuel and James Wertsch, for example, on the museum as “storehouse” of a “collective cultural tool kit” (101).

Weiser skillfully illustrates how, through “their display of the artifacts of national identity—and in such a way that the mind is stirred to active identification with their ideals—national museums contribute to the imaginative creation of a unified national identity” (128). Her examples are wide-ranging; they extend across regions and continents, and vary in size. Some are little known beyond their immediate locale; others are major global tourist destinations. They include the Capital Museum (Beijing); the State Museum of Temurids History (Tashkent, Uzbekistan); the British Museum (London); the Bardo National Museum (Tunis); the Museum of the Nation (Lima, Peru); the Uluru-Kata Tjuta Cultural Centre (Australia); the National Museum of American History, the National Museum of the American Indian, and the new National Museum of African American History and Culture, all part of the Smithsonian Institution (Washington, DC); and the National Museum of Anthropology (Mexico City). Through her attention to multiple institutions in the same nation—two museums in New Zealand; three in India; four in Australia and in Germany; five in Peru and in Argentina; and seven in Turkey—she examines their contrasting methods and messages and demonstrates that the “national” is not (necessarily) univocal, particularly in regions where indigenous populations are able to articulate their historical and contemporary experiences. Global in scope, and nation-centered in focus, *Museum Rhetoric* also makes a contribution to the growing list of texts devoted to culturally specific museums (what Weiser terms “alternative identifications”).

Weiser provides a convincing and highly instructive collection of nation-related museum narratives. These examples clearly support the idea that the power and utility of the centuries-old unifying story—the theme itself and its many variations—is alive and well across the globe. Yet *Museum Rhetoric* also contains an underlying prescriptive message that will resonate with many public historians: “Reality is messier and more contested than any musealized narrative; material space of sufficient dialectical scope to encompass the real conversation must thus also be messier, more complicated, better able to use its space to engage with the babel of competing values” (92).

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Science Museums in Transition: Cultures of Display in Nineteenth-Century Britain and America edited by Carin Berkowitz and Bernard Lightman. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017. ix + 375 pp.; illustrations, notes, bibliography, index; clothbound, \$45.00; eBook, \$34.99.

The history of museums has enjoyed amazing growth in the last few years. To cite one milestone, the *Museum History Journal* is celebrating its tenth anniversary this