



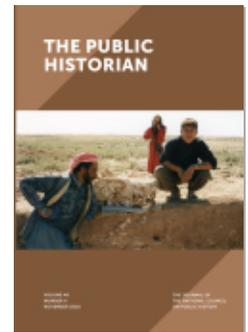
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From Idols to Antiquity: Forging the National Museum of Mexico by Miruna Achim (review)

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The Public Historian, Volume 40, Number 4, November 2018, pp. 218-220
(Review)

Published by University of California Press



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the work of Barnum as illustrative of the concept of museum as forum. Pandora notes that museums during this period, especially popular museums like Barnum's, were sites where truth and knowledge were negotiated and popular authority was not only valued, but necessary. Ultimately, as later essays in this volume show, museums would succumb to the ideal of museum as temple, where knowledge is passed on from the elite to a passive public. These two essays provide an excellent opening to this collection and its promise of a different perspective on the history of science museums.

Likewise, the section entitled "The Scientist-Showman" gives the modern museum professional much to think about when considering the tension between spectacle, profit, and serious scholarship. Authors Lukas Rieppel and Jeremy Brooker present narratives pitting establishment scientists against scientists who sought to profit from their performances as showmen while still trying to maintain their legitimacy as practicing scientists. Brooker describes men like Henry Morton, John Tyndall, and John Henry Pepper while Lukas Rieppel presents the work of Albert Koch and his "sea monster." The lines between spectacle and "serious science" were still being negotiated in the nineteenth century and the questions of who could or should profit from scientific work was still an open question.

The latter sections of the book, however, begin to look more traditional as the modern research oriented museum run, by elites for a lay public, takes shape. In the section on "The National Museum," authors Pamela Henson and Caroline Cornish examine the Smithsonian and Kew's Museum of Economic Botany respectively. In the final section, "The Research University," Carin Berkowitz reexamines the work of Joseph Leidy as a center of scientific collaboration, while Sally Gregory Kohlstedt analyzes the role of academic museums as institutions of education and display as well as collecting.

Readers of *The Public Historian* may, at first blush, find little to interest them from this group of essays that appears to engage mostly the work of historians of science and science museums. However, they will likely recognize the tensions between elite and popular authority, the changing definition of museums from forum to temple, and the space popularizers attempted to make for themselves on the continuum between elite experts and popular entertainers.

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From Idols to Antiquity: Forging the National Museum of Mexico by Miruna Achim.

Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017. 1 + 327 pp.; illustrations, notes, bibliography, index; clothbound, \$60.00; paperbound, \$30.00.

It is an article of faith that nations, especially those seeking to distinguish themselves from monarchical or colonial pasts, endow public museums as assertions of cultural and political independence as well as techniques of citizen-formation.

Mexico is no exception. In 1825, a mere year after securing independence from Spain, the National Museum of Mexico was founded. The collections amassed over the course of the nineteenth-century seeded an impressive federal museum complex with today's National Museum of Anthropology its most spectacular legacy. In *From Idols to Antiquity: Forging the National Museum of Mexico*, Miruna Achim explores the first four decades of the National Museum's operation, revealing that during this period the museum was more an ideal than a reality. Its failures, however, provide a glimpse into the process by which the Mexican state established its custodial claim to the indigenous antiquity with which it would become identified.

Achim notes the dearth of archival material on the museum's operations during its early years, a consequence of the new nation's political instability during the first half of the nineteenth century. Part of Achim's achievement, therefore, is the impressive archive of supporting materials she has gathered from both sides of the Atlantic to tell this story: correspondence between museum functionaries and European and US antiquarians as well as regional authorities within Mexico, official decrees, archeological surveys, expeditions and publications, to name only a few. Through this archive, she substantiates her central claims. First, the museum's development did not follow from "previously scripted protocols," but rather was improvised and contingent upon "interpersonal relationships, private greed, competition for collectibles, imperialist claims on certain kinds of objects, market, and intellectual ambition" (9). Second, the museum's early history was as determined as much by "material conditions"—bad roads, foreign blockades, the weight of objects, available technologies for the dissemination of information—as it was by a "master plan." And third, the museum was a node through which "local, national, and international politics of collecting were being played out" (9). On this final point, Achim highlights the competition over Mexico's indigenous antiquities within the European and American collecting booms. Her book restores Mexican voices to this contest. Furthermore, by attending to the power dynamics between political elites in Mexico City and local authorities in the Yucatán, she sheds light on the imperial dimensions of collecting within Mexico as well.

Achim divides her study into six chronological chapters that trace the museum's development from its founding in 1825 through 1867, when Benito Juárez established the legal and financial infrastructure necessary for its subsequent success. She focuses on key actors such as lawmaker Lucas Alemán, curator Isidro Icaza, and director José Fernando Ramírez, and situates their endeavors within a nexus of foreign antiquarians such as Jean-Frédéric Waldeck and Carl Nebel and their expeditions to the Yucatán; influential publications, such as William H. Prescott's *History of the Conquest of Mexico* (1843); and ongoing civil war and military interventions by the United States and France. Chapter 1 tracks the transition from colonial collecting cultures to the republican logics of national patrimony during the museum's rocky first years. Chapter 2 explores early attempts to craft the pre-Columbian past as Mexico's classical antiquity. Achim shows how the need for

collaboration with foreigners resulted in the pillaging of antiquities, which in turn helped to build the impressive collections of Mayan art in London, Paris, New York, and Philadelphia. Chapter 3 focuses in greater depth on the international race to claim and collect the ruins of Palenque. Here, Achim convincingly demonstrates how physical conditions, such as impassable roads or the resistance of local authorities obfuscated the state's attempts to convey objects to Mexico City. Chapter 4 explores the museum's exploitation of an emergent independent press to produce and circulate information about its antiquities. Chapter 5 emphasizes the development of comparative archeology. Chapter 6 tracks the museum's fate across the tumultuous War of Reform (1857–61) and the French invasion that made Austrian Archduke Maximilian Emperor of Mexico (1864). With his execution and the restoration of the liberal republic, Juárez brought an end to foreign intervention in Mexican affairs. However, Achim shows that the museum benefited enormously from funding and support during the Second Empire.

Achim's book is an impressive academic study, produced by a scholar working at Mexico's Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Cuajimalpa in Mexico City, a powerhouse of Mexican anthropology and cultural history. It is therefore intended for scholars working in the fields of Latin American studies, Mexican cultural history, anthropology, archeology, and museum studies. The book makes major contributions to the study of museums in Latin America and to the historiography of nineteenth century Mexico. As such it complements but significantly expands upon the literature on Mexico's exhibitionary histories, such as studies of its participation in World's Fairs or Victorian era displays, histories of key cultural institutions such as the Academy of San Carlos or the National Museum of Anthropology, as well as scholarship that traces the relationship between visual technologies, such as maps and prints, in the construction of the modern nation. The public historian may not find much in this book to inform their practice directly. However, the history Achim narrates helps to situate US collections of pre-Columbian antiquities within the conditions of their gathering. Likewise, she re-contextualizes influential texts like John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood's *Incidents of Travel in the Yucatán* (1943) that continue to inform both scholarly and popular interest in Mexican and Central American ruins to this day.

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San Miguel de Allende: Mexicans, Foreigners, and the Making of a World Heritage Site by Lisa Pinley Covert. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017. xi + 289 pp.; illustrations, notes, bibliography, index; clothbound, \$65.00; paperbound, \$30.00.

Although all scholarly studies expect some prior knowledge of contextual details, this book presumes a great deal of readers in relation to twentieth- and early twenty-first century socio-economic and cultural-political histories of Mexico. Lisa