

Book Review

Artefacts, Archives and Documentation in the Relational Museum - By Mike Jones

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Museums and Museum people love to categorise. The scientific specimen goes in one silo and its field notes go in another. But what does that mean when researchers want to reconnect those parts?

Artefacts, Archives, and Documentation in the Relational Museum is based on Dr Mike Jones PhD in History at the University of Melbourne's School of Historical and Philosophical Studies, which he completed in 2018. Jones is an archivist, historian, and collections consultant based in Canberra, Australia. The central themes of his research are how Museums document their collections over time; how technologies have influenced this collection description and documentation, and how this has informed our understanding of Museum collections. It is about tracking the origins and whakapapa of collections and the consequences on our collective understanding when contextual archival information is lost or separated from its artefact. This book is not a "how to" but a history of documentation and a nudge for Museums toward "the development of new, more interconnected ways of working".¹

I have been reflecting on the timeliness of this publication. I started writing this book review while New Zealand entered another nationwide lockdown. This period of sequestering highlights to me the importance of nuanced collection description to enable successful digital access. The past 18 months have seen worldwide temporary (and in some cases permanent) closures of cultural-heritage institutions due to the pandemic. As a result, we have seen many institutions leverage their digital collections so that they can remain connected and relevant to their myriad audiences and communities. But are the public really accessing the best that we can provide? Is the overwhelming nature of decades-long backlogs that influence the creation of brief collection records, only making the blankness of the search box starker? Do current collection-management systems enable more relational description to weave contextual information and successfully link related collection objects, archives, taonga or Mātauranga? I think we all know the answer to that.

The first few chapters outline the development of museums and museum archives, the history of museum catalogues as well as museum computing from the 1960s onwards. The assumption that online catalogues have made our collections more connected is quashed. The siloing and departmentalisation of collections based on format or object type is the bane of many Museums or Cultural Heritage Collections. It creates a disconnect between a collection, voiding them of context. We all know the drawbacks of Museum's using multiple collection management systems and expecting them to magically link back up when they go online.

The main part of the text is structured around several case studies, from Australia, America and Britain, and it likely reflects its origin as a PhD thesis with Chapter 3 exploring the concept of dissociation² through field books — an effective example as field books straddle the boundary between collection item and institutional archival record. Jones asserts that archival collections such as field books are often left out of the loop within the records continuum model. "Though done with good intentions, and in large part as a response to particular technical constraints, taking documentary content out of its archival context breaks one set of connections in the service of another, rather than supporting the multiple contexts and polyvocal perspectives of the relational museum."³

Chapter 4 delves even further down the rabbit hole of complex collections, assessing the history of collection documentation and the fragility of successful knowledge management, through the exemplary work of Australian anthropologist Donald Thomson. It is an exemplar of the "herculean task" of approaching the description and care of a complex collection. The chapter considers how elements of collection management systems, such as the Person file in Vernon or Parties module in EMu, aren't used to their capacity to better document "the rich relationality" of a collector, donor or researcher's life and work.⁴

Chapter 5 asks us to widen our perspective and to move on from the recent focus on networks to more inclusive models drawn from ecology, anthropology, and Indigenous studies. In this he emphasises the much-needed expansion of the language we use to describe collections moving on from the hierarchical "tree of knowledge" to using metaphors such as the ecology of the Great Barrier Reef or the interconnectedness of weaving. The concept of weaving is one that would sit well in the context of Aotearoa me te Waipounamu New Zealand with raranga (weaving) a well utilised metaphor for knowledge creation and community cohesion.⁵ The conclusion focuses on the need for Museums to slow down and focus

on creating context rich records that leverage the Archival record, instead of supporting the production line of digitising and describing artefacts.

As a non-Archivist, who works in the realm of public history, I must be honest I got a bit lost in parts due to the pretty niche and dense nature of the case studies. However, I found some real gems hidden within the details. Mike Jones' asks us as Museum workers to challenge the conventions of a siloed museum. Where objects are disconnected from their origins through minimal cataloguing, the imperfect design and use of collection management systems, and user interfaces that don't easily reconnect or display collections as a cohesive whole.

Jones uses the term "entangled" to describe the relationship between archives, people, artefacts, taonga and things. It is an evocative term that flings open the curtain of civility and order that Museums have tried to create over the past 200 plus years. And I love it. It means artefacts and collections aren't fixed and tied to a moment in time (by whom they were collected or when they were accessioned and catalogued) but can interact with the wider world in different ways at different times and in different voices. I hope we would all agree that the sector would benefit from increasing its world view to include not only more contextual information but also indigenous perspectives and voices to better reflect their collections and the communities they serve. We just need to find a way to present the evolving nature of our collections to our ever shifting and expanding audiences.

Luckily Jones doesn't suggest that we throw out the baby with the bath water. Using the existing descriptive taxonomies and hierarchies is effective in capturing one type of information but it is not the be all and end all. I guess if it has taken us 150 years to get where we are it will take Museums another 150 to unravel and / or increase its tangle and this book is a good place to start.

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Endnotes

1. Jones, Artefacts, Archives, and Documentation in the Relational Museum, 67.
2. Loss of objects, or object-related data
3. Jones, 79.
4. Jones, 108.
5. Whakataukī by Kukupa Tirikatene ONZM

E kore e taea e te whenu kotahi ki te raranga i te whāriki,
Kia mōhio ai tātou ki a tātou,
Mā te mahitahi o ngā whenu,
Mā te mahitahi o ngā kairaranga ka oti tēnei whāriki.
I te otinga, me titiro tātou ki ngā mea pai ka puta mai,
Ā tana wā hoki me titiro ki aua raranga i makere,
Nō te mea, he kōrero anō kei reira.

Translation:

The tapestry of understanding cannot be woven by one strand alone.

Only by the working together of strands and the working together of weavers will such a tapestry be completed.

With its completion let us look at the good that comes from it and, in time we should also look at those stitches which have been dropped because they also have a message.