

Barbara J. Black. *On Exhibit. Victorians and their Museums*. (Victorian Literature and Culture Series). Charlottesville and London: The University Press of Virginia, 2000. viii + 242 pp. Twelve illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$ 37.50 (cloth), ISBN 0-8139-1897-9.

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The Victorian museum: shelter from all terror, doubt, and division

Writing in 1848 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels identified change, and in its wake insecurity and anxiety as main elements characterizing the new industrial, the capitalist society. "All fixed, fast-frozen relations ... are swept away ... All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned..." [1]. What had hitherto been taken for granted or accepted as truth came to be called into question. In addition, new truths, new knowledge was unearthed as the twin forces of science and imperialism progressed in their specific appropriation of the world. Despite all positivism and the belief in progress and pride in the achievements of the first industrial nation, the Victorian age was full of doubts, fears, the terror of social division and its potentially revolutionary consequences. Throughout the period contemporaries looked for ways in dealing with the fragmentation and alienation of the emerging modern world. As Barbara Black persuasively argues in her fascinating exposition of a Victorian peculiarity hitherto underrated or seen in different contexts, the museum was one such way, one of the multifarious efforts initiated by individuals, groups, and institutions to cope with change and anxiety, the unwanted concomitants of modernity.

Of course, the Victorian museum, conceived as the greatest constructive project of the nineteenth century, was much more than this. It thrived in an era that not only saw all the previous centuries as its legacy, all the world as a museum, but combined an increasing acquisitiveness gradually transforming into a commodity fetishism with the urge to exhibit the spoils. Collections should no longer be the prerogative of those moving in the upper echelons of society, but were to operate as complex civic spaces with "the people" in the roles of actors and onlookers. All this happened

parallel to other fundamental processes of transformation. The meanings of material culture changed, leading the Victorians to see the world through things and their value – previously studied by Richard Altick and Asa Briggs. Science proposed to order and control the accumulated plenitude. This in turn changed the conceptions of the museum and its functions. As a result, a characteristic nineteenth-century British culture emerged, reflected in the texts that it generated – and by which it was generated in turn. This culture, for which the museum took on such an importance that it may be analyzed as a museum culture, is the focus of Black's perceptive exploration of Victorian things and the ideas connected to them. In order to illuminate the era's museum culture, the study offers interpretations of fictional and non-fictional texts, historical retrieval and theoretical discussion. With the methods of literary analysis and cultural critique it illustrates the social functions and representations of the Victorian museum and the culture which gave birth to it.

Within the time frame of the years 1837 to 1938 the book focuses on a restricted number of London museums, the house-museum of Sir John Soane, the Natural History Museum, and the South Kensington Museum, later renamed Victoria and Albert Museum. The glance at Sigmund Freud's house-museum in 20 Maresfield Gardens in the last chapter serves to review the connections between museum building, utopia, rootedness, and homeliness inspected before.

The guided tour through the Victorian museum culture begins with an investigation into the acts of collecting and their functions, particularly the desire to accumulate all the world under one roof. You can see how the museum was contextualised within the visual culture of the age. The next step leads to a reading of Edward FitzGerald's *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, a poem which unites various features of museum culture. It is a vivid example of the Victorian attempt to domesticate the exotic, a product of cultural imperialism linked to the era's political and economic imperialism, and a virtual leaving of the familiar realm without leaving home – one of the central characteristics of the museal world. As you go on, you are invited to take a closer look at the middle class home as the site of the era's craze for collecting and exhibiting. Sir John Soane's house, a home that became a civic institution, is only the most blatant example of a phenomenon common

to Victorian bourgeois culture. Next, the tour leads out of the private and into the public sphere, into the public museum as a place to see and be seen. Readings of handbooks such as the *Popular Handbook to the National Gallery* and of fictional texts reveal the ambiguity of the museum as well as its quality as an image. In novels such as Henry James' *A London Life*, Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, E.M. Forster's *Maurice* the museum serves as a background used to analyze the relationship between culture, society and individual desire. In addition, the texts point to the issue of art's survival in the marketplace. This issue is dealt with more extensively in the subsequent section, which turns to poems by those contemporaries who commented on their age as an acquisitive one: John Keats, Robert Browning, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Alfred Lord Tennyson, and Thomas Hardy. As with some of the novels named above the element of museum culture in these poems has attracted little attention so far. The link between home and museum is graphically displayed in the review of imperialist boy fiction, for instance in Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* and Edith Nesbit's *The Story of the Amulet*. The last group of 'exhibits' is reserved for dystopic representations of the museum. Their number soared when, at the end of the nineteenth century, anxiety and the fear of decline had increased to such a degree that pessimistic assessments moved into the center of public attention. In the image of Soames Forsyte's home Robin Hill, John Galsworthy's *Forsyte Saga* depicts a museum culture in decline. In H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* the Victorians' grand ambitions have dwindled into nothingness and all that remains of the greatest constructive project is an anti-museum. In contrast, William Morris' *News from Nowhere* puts forth a more optimistic vision in the concept of a new museology that will have overcome the problematics of possession. Morris' image of a (British) museum reverted into a home leads on into Freud's study, the final Victorian home-museum of a man who liked to see himself as a Schliemann of the mind.

Guided by Black's readings you come to see that the nineteenth-century museum was not simply a collection or a building housing collectibles, but rather many things to many people: an emblem, a historical event, an institution, an image, a practice, a pleasure dome, a collection turned into utopia, a memorial, a site of decadence testifying to a society whose delight in possession became an obsession, and more. But most important of all it

was to the Victorians, as John Ruskin put it in his description of the true nature of home – the museum in miniature –, “the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division” [2], in other words, a continuous struggle to prevent a culture’s ruin.

[1] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, in *A Handbook on Marxism*, New York 1935, p. 26.

[2] John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*, Lecture II: “Of Queen’s Gardens” (1865), in *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. By. E.T. Cook, Alexander Wedderburn, Vol. 18, London 1905, p. 122.