

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Carol E. Mayer, Anthony Shelton, eds. *The Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009. 192 pp. \$40.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-295-98966-2.

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Commissioned by Jonathan Anuik

The Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia is a coffee table-type book with color pictures of the museum's vast collections on almost every page, along with brief descriptions of each artifact. The book's introduction states that "this book offers readers a reflective overview of the Museum of Anthropology's diverse collections. It was a challenging task to select the 150 objects featured here from the museum's holdings of more than 17,000" (p. 5). Recognizing the fact that the museum is located on traditional Musqueam territory, the museum's major focus is on northwestern First Nations' cultures. However, it also has collections of Chinese and European ceramics.

In his introduction, museum director Anthony Shelton describes how the museum's collection began in 1927 with a gift of a private collection of artifacts. In 1948, efforts began on the part of the museum's staff to collaborate with First Nations to provide a respectful and authentic display of its collections. In 1963, the first class on museumology and non-Western art was offered. In 1973, funding from the Canadian government was provided for a new building to house the collection, and the new museum director called for "democratization" and the right of First Nations to "curate their own exhibitions" as part of an effort to create a "museum of world cultures" (pp. 11-13).

Of particular note are the efforts the museum has made to support contemporary Aboriginal artists and the display of more recent work. Bill Reid's sculpture, *The Raven and the First Man* (1980) is a centerpiece of the museum's collection. Museums in eastern Canada and the United States collected such work before the Museum of

Anthropology was opened, but despite its late start, the museum has accumulated an impressive collection of historical artifacts that are complemented by its collection of more recent works of Aboriginal art.

The book is divided into nine chapters that represent the different collections in the museum, each with a commentary by a different author. Representative examples are shown of blankets, leggings, weaving, house posts, basketry, atlatls (a spear throwing device designed to give the thrower leverage to throw a spear harder and farther), canoes, totem poles, harpoon points, masks, rattles, paddles, and chests. The first chapter is on the British Columbia Aboriginal Collection, which is the major focus of the museum. That chapter is followed by chapters on the North, Central and South American, the Circumpolar, European, African, Asian, and Oceanic collections. The final chapter is on the museum's collection of historic photography, which includes photographs from around the world.

Besides the history of the museum and its relationship to the University of British Columbia given in the first chapter and some historical information in the descriptions of the photographed artifacts, there is little history in this book, educational or otherwise. There is some description of how the museum's holdings were collected, and passing mention is given to the outlawing of potlatches in 1884, and the 1920 legislative mandate to send First Nation, Métis, and Inuit children to Indian Residential Schools. However, the reader will have to look elsewhere for much more of the Canadian Aboriginal experience beyond the fine examples of Aboriginal art portrayed in this book.

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