

Book review

Mike Jones explores the connections to be made in museums (review by Tim Sherratt)

***Artefacts, Archives and Documentation in the Relational Museum*, by Mike Jones, London and New York, Routledge, 2021, 192 pp, eBook, \$AU 70.99, ISBN: 9781003092704, Publisher's website: <https://www.routledge.com/>**

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Restrictions wrought by the Covid pandemic have made historians more dependent than ever on the digital collections of GLAM organisations (galleries, libraries, archives, and museums). But rarely do we think about the historical processes involved in the construction of these resources. Mike Jones's book, *Artefacts, Archives and Documentation in the Relational Museum*, makes an important contribution to our understanding of the intellectual, institutional, and technological contexts within which museum collections are documented, and what this means for our ability to use and understand them.

This short, but densely-packed, book is particularly concerned with what we might gain through documenting the mesh of relationships that surround museum artefacts. It is not, however, a 'how to' manual. Instead it uses a series of historical case studies to trace changes in descriptive practice, and analyse how relationships within and around collections have been captured, lost, rediscovered, and reimagined.

It begins by examining shifting relationships between museums and archives, demonstrating how institutional and professional boundaries have often made it difficult to maintain the connection between an artefact and its context. The next chapter looks in depth at the history of descriptive systems used by Museums Victoria and its predecessors. Exploring changes in metadata capture and management brought much pleasure to my nerdy heart, but underlined a crucial point. Migrating data between systems is complex – the implementation of the Museum's current system took a decade – and while new capacities can be added, existing information and insights can be lost. The latest technology does not guarantee better access to collections. GLAM professionals and users alike need to be aware of the trade offs, and be prepared to engage critically with such processes.

Chapter 3 focuses on one particular type of artefact – field books, used by researchers to record their activities and observations. These, Jones suggests, are 'boundary objects', 'sitting within and between collection and documentation'. As such, they reveal both the value of maintaining contextual links between collection items, and the ways in which these links can be lost. At the Museum of Victoria, for example, field books were documented in two separate systems, depending on whether they were created by Museum staff or outside researchers. Again it is a reminder that the logic of description is historically contingent, shaped as much by institutional structures as by the needs of future users.

All of the issues raised in preceding chapters come together in a compelling exploration of the large and complex collection assembled by anthropologist Donald Thomson. Starting with a single object, a rope and harpoon used for hunting dugong by the people of East Cape York, Jones analyses the layers of description created as the Thomson collection was absorbed into Museums Victoria. Recognising the rich interconnections between artefacts, field books, photographs, and specimens in Thomson's collection, considerable effort was invested in documenting relationships between items. Nonetheless, these have not always survived across system migrations, and researchers are often forced to find these connections anew. If you're designing a history methods course, this chapter would provide an excellent way of subverting students' assumptions about online access, and opening up discussion of the way descriptive practices in GLAM organisations construct meaning and use. Each entry in an online catalogue has its own history – connections are made and lost in the flux of time.

But where to from here? In his final chapter, Jones tries to articulate a framework for understanding and valuing the relatedness of GLAM collections. Exploring the coral reef as a possible metaphor, he suggests we think ecologically – navigating connections and embracing complexity. Such metaphors point to the richness of our cultural collections, but the descriptive systems we construct will only ever capture slivers of this complexity. As Jones demonstrates so well throughout this book, the task is not simply to document connections, but to maintain them. How do we move forward while recognising the limits of our understandings, the fragility of our systems, and the ongoing importance of maintenance and repair?

The 'relational museum' described by this book is built by engaging with communities, as well as by creating links. The need to open up descriptive processes to allow new voices to be heard, and new stories told, is a consistent theme, as is the importance of including First Nations perspectives at the heart of these discussions. As historians we might ponder our own role as users of collections, documenters of relationships, and creators of narratives. How might the books, articles, and web sites we create feed back into the descriptive systems of GLAM organisations to help capture some of the potential richness that this book surveys? Jones briefly mentions the possibilities of Linked Open Data, and emphasises the importance of thorough and generous citation practices. But we might also think about systems for creating and sharing annotations, or directly linking our published outputs with GLAM collection sources. None of this is easy, but this book provides a strong argument for why it is important.