



**Gisela Weiss.** *Sinnstiftung in der Provinz: Westfälische Museen im Kaiserreich.* Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh Verlag, 2005. 598 S. EUR 54.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-506-71781-8.



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**Published on** H-German (June, 2007)

## Museums and Modernity

In 1871, the Prussian province of Westphalia had only six museums; by 1914, it had almost sixty (p. 27). Most were founded by middle-class associations and individual *Bürger*. Gisela Weiss uses these facts as the basis for her inquiry into the institutional nature of the cultural-historical (*kulturhistorisches*) museum, and its relationship to *bürgerliche* values. To outline the significance of this question, Weiss posits a potential paradox in viewing cultural-historical museums as quintessentially bourgeois. On the one hand, nineteenth century cultural-historical museums were fundamentally backward-looking and tradition-bound, seeking to preserve artifacts of the past from destruction in the wake of a rapidly changing, industrializing society. On the other hand, the middle class was itself responsible for producing this unsettling modernity and destruction, while tending to regard change in positive terms, as progress. Hence the paradox: how is it that a modern, progressive, industrial bourgeoisie could seek to express its values through conservative, romanticizing cultural-historical museums?

Weiss notes that Hermann Lübbe has already at-

tempted to answer this question by arguing that the cultural-historical museum served a compensatory function, to help diminish some of the less pleasant aspects of industrial modernity. In Lübbe's terms, the greater the advances of industrialization, the greater the tendency to build museums to serve as sites of nostalgia and provide the illusion of a formerly *heile Welt* (Lübbe, cited on p.4). Weiss questions this assumption, and sets out to ascertain just how modern or backward cultural-historical museums really were. She does so by examining not only their content, which clearly did construct an idealized past, but also the way that they functioned, taking as markers of modernity such social processes as professionalization, institutionalization, democratization (for example, opening the museums up to the public), and nation-building.

Weiss chooses four museums founded during the Wilhelmine Empire as test cases: the Landesmuseum der Provinz Westfalen in Münster; the Museum der Stadt Bielefeld; the Kunst- und Gewerbemuseum in Dortmund; and the Märkisches Museum in Witten. As provincial museums without state support, these four cases pre-

sumably reveal bourgeois attitudes more clearly than the large state museums in Berlin, in which various Prussian monarchs and nobles played leading roles. Moreover, the museums were established in four cities with different socioeconomic situations, ranging from the provincial capital of Münster, with its administrative function, to the highly industrialized city of Dortmund. By looking at these different contexts, the varying motivations of civil servants, teachers, industrialists, and *Bildungsbürger*—all bourgeois, but with different expectations and interests—come more clearly to the fore. What emerges from Weiss’s study is a finely detailed, richly researched institutional history of these four museums, one that presents a convincing case for the modernity of the cultural-historical museum, but which also at times loses sight of the larger issues in a welter of local details.

Chapter 1, which treats the museum founders’ motivations, is the most persuasive. Here, Weiss questions the assumption that provincial cultural-historical museums were necessarily sites of reactionary nostalgia—in the sense of twentieth-century Heimat-museums as a “Darstellungsform der Anti-Moderne” or “Ort des konservativen Traditionalismus” (p. 4). She persuasively shows that, while conservation/conservatism was a factor for some of the museums’ founders, it was by no means the only one. In Dortmund, the most industrialized of the cities, the museum was founded as an attempt to raise the industrial city’s prestige, a goal driven by the claims of the *Wirtschaftsbürger* to its “rightful” status in a modern, industrial Germany. In Bielefeld, industrialist August Oetker used his influence as museum patron to promote the museum’s natural history—and particularly chemistry—wing, rather than its early Germanic or medieval antiquities. In all four museums, historical artifacts were conceptualized as models for contemporary industrial design, with an eye to promoting and refining a modern economy, rather than looking wistfully into the past for a golden age. By the end of the century, all of the museums were clearing out some of their historical artifacts to make room for displays devoted to modern art. “Modern” concerns were thus as prevalent, if not more so, in the organization of the museums as neo-romantic, reactionary nostalgia. Cultural-historical museums can thus be classed alongside other, ostensibly conservative cultural forms—dueling, the purchase of noble estates, the appreciation of historicist aesthetics—adopted, appropriated, and modified to suit contemporary middle-class priorities.

Chapter 2, on the institutionalization and professionalization of the museums, presents a detailed institutional

history with many fascinating observations. Here, too, Weiss makes a case for the museums’ modernity, arguing that the museum personnel underwent a process of professionalization even before the museums were institutionalized, at a time when they were still run by private associations, and not yet taken over by official state bodies. Much of this process of professionalization, understood here as a commitment to specialized training in relevant fields of scholarship, was undertaken individually by the museums’ personnel, who sought out opportunities for further education by attending university lectures and pursuing other autodidactic measures. The fact that school teachers were most heavily represented among this personnel points to one of the driving forces behind the trend towards professionalization: it offered a means of social mobility, raising the teachers’ social status, if not their incomes, as the museum positions and their concomitant educational requirements moved the teachers fully into the *Bildungsbürgertum* at a time when school teachers were generally dismissed as not being fully part of the academic class. Also worthy of note are the lengths to which curators were willing to go to secure prized objects: aggressively cultivating donors, conducting archaeological digs, purchasing items through antiquities dealers and at world expos, and scouring the countryside to persuade impecunious peasants to part with their family heirlooms. This activity, too, is a sign of professionalization (and consequently modernization) for Weiss, as it suggests a targeted, judicious collecting, with clearly delineated, scholarly aims, rather than a passive acceptance of any and all donations of historical artifacts simply for their traditionalist value.

After the first two richly textured, satisfyingly thorough chapters, chapters 3 and 4 seem thin by comparison, and indeed show Weiss’s tendency to let some of the larger issues slip away. Chapter 3 focuses on the museums’ intersection with the broader public. This material, too, fits into Weiss’s museums-as-modern thesis, as she interprets the museum curators’ efforts to cater to a mass public after the turn of the century as part of the process of democratization. However, her evidence for the content and effects of this publicity work is rather lacking. She bases her assessment that the curators were reaching out to a larger public on expanded opening hours (which made it possible for workers to visit the museums), development of user-friendly display captions and museum tours, installation of evocative period rooms instead of study collections, and an increased tendency to advertise new exhibits in local newspapers. Weiss provides little evidence, however, on the reception of the museums by

this intended audience. Nor does she present a traditional reception history, as she does not draw much on newspaper accounts or other published texts to ascertain how contemporary critics, at least, interpreted the displays. Without this information, it is difficult to gauge whether the museums were in fact experienced as increasingly democratic institutions or not, whatever the intentions or wishes of the curators.

Chapter 4, on the interplay of national, regional, and local identities, likewise argues the case for the provincial museums' modernity, this time as sites of nation-building. Just because they were provincial in scope does not, according to Weiss, mean that they were reacting against the idea of the modern nation-state. On the contrary, local and national identities coexisted peacefully in the museums, and were sometimes even used to strengthen each other, as, for instance, when the history of the medieval German Reich was utilized to highlight Westphalia's unique contributions.

At the same time, however, this chapter does not provide a nuanced examination of how different social groups appropriated the notions of national, provincial, and local identity to suit their experiences and interests. As much as the actors in this museum drama might have voiced the universalistic ideal of a common history transcending class and confession, in reality, as Alon Confino has shown in his work on Württemberg's Sedan Day festivals, such richly symbolic venues also became sites in which contested meanings between class, gender, confession, and national location (province vs. metropole) were worked out.<sup>[1]</sup> Weiss does not provide a similarly differentiated view of the various social actors who were involved in, or excluded from, the museum planning, beyond a relatively one-dimensional division of bourgeois museum promoters into either *Wirtschaftsbürger* or *Bildungsbürger*. Confessional allegiances gain scant attention in Weiss's account, even though the province had a mixed population of Catholics and Protestants. One wonders, indeed, what it means when Weiss writes about museums as "middle-class" institutions without mentioning the *Kulturkampf*, which split even the bourgeoisie into antagonistic confessional camps. If confessional issues receive little attention, gender receives even less, despite the fact that the museum world, like the associational world to which it was related, was an emphatically male preserve, and became ever more so through the modern process of professionalization, which shut doors on women dilettantes without opening others to them as academics. Thus, this work incorporates little sense of the conflict and acts of exclusion that are ever a

part of the dynamic process of *Sinnstiftung*.

Nor, indeed, does Weiss pay much attention to the relationship between province and metropole (read: Berlin) in the organization of the museums. This omission has significant consequences. For instance, the fact that Weiss looks primarily at Westphalian museums, which did not receive significant monies from the central Prussian state but relied on bourgeois initiative, allows her to regard their characteristics as *bürgerlich*. How would this judgment change, however, if she had also taken the Berlin museums into her purview? These institutions shared many of the same "bourgeois" characteristics (professionalization, a dedication to modern scientific fields, openness to the public, and so on) that Weiss sees in Westphalia. However, the Berlin museums' founders were mostly aristocratic and royal, especially, for instance, in the persons of Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm and Crown Princess Victoria. Indeed, the first public museum plans in Berlin were integrally connected to the bureaucratic absolutism of Friedrich Wilhelm III. Some indication of a similarly variable class situation can be found even in Westphalia, although it is downplayed by Weiss. In Münster, Weiss identifies the museum founders as "die bürgerliche Oberschichte Münsters, in der hohe Verwaltungsbeamte, Akademiker und auch der Adel stark vertreten waren" (p. 334)—a group not dissimilar, it seems, to the situation in Berlin, and apparently not exclusively bourgeois.

One might, as a final note, look to the book's appendices to sum up the strengths and weakness of Weiss's work. At the conclusion of her text, Weiss offers almost two hundred pages of detailed material from her archival research. These include a catalogue of data (dates, personnel, collections, blueprints, bibliography) on all museum foundings before 1918 in Westphalia (fifty-eight in total); biographies of all of the museum personnel, 1871-1918 (with bibliography); a list of exhibits in Dortmund, Bielefeld, and Witten, 1871-1918; tables showing museum association membership lists, museums' financial basis, opening hours, and so on. Weiss reproduces this treasure trove of new archival data in the hope that it will provide "Anregung wie Grundlage für weitere Forschungen" (p. 26). This panoply of information reveals the degree to which the book is based on an impressive amount of archival research, in the spirit of the best monographs, but also how some of the larger, overarching themes and perspectives get lost in the mix.

Note

[1]. Alon Confino, *The Nation as a Local Metaphor*:

WÄ¼rttemberg, *Imperial Germany, and National Mem- Press, 1997).*  
*ory, 1871-1918* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina

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**Citation:** Eva Giloi. Review of Weiss, Gisela, *Sinnstiftung in der Provinz: Westfälische Museen im Kaiserreich*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. June, 2007.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13313>

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