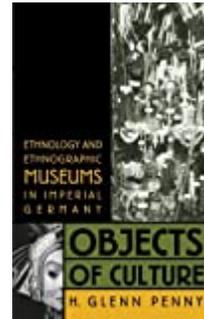


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H. Glenn Penny. *Objects of Culture: Ethnology and Ethnographic Museums in Imperial Germany.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001. xi + 296 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-5430-3.



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Once considered repositories of dead, arcane, or useless artifacts, museums have, since the 1980s, become key institutions in analyses of modernity. They have been variably interpreted as expressions of elite ideologies, as sites of memory, as spaces of civic ritual, and venues for the contestation and creation of identities.[1] Glenn Penny's recent monograph *Objects of Culture: Ethnology and Ethnographic Museums in Imperial Germany*, based on his award-winning dissertation, falls within this growing field of museum studies, but it implicitly challenges many of the assumptions prevalent in the literature on museums. Historical in nature rather than genealogical or archaeological, this book provides a critical history of the rise of ethnographic collections in Germany and the patronage networks that sustained them.

Penny states in his introduction that his study considers "how the cultural and social as much as the intellectual interests and desires of scientists, civic associations, collectors, patrons, and visitors, as well as the force of a growing international market in material culture, shaped the science of ethnology and German ethnographic museums" (p. 11). In this sense Penny's work moves beyond a focus on the museum as an institution to consider its broader historical context: the professionalization of ethnographers, their changing conceptions of their work and their collections' mission, the influence of support-

ers and patrons, the significance of a culture of exchange, and the central role played by visitors in interpreting and even influencing display culture. As such Penny's work on collections in Hamburg, Berlin, Leipzig and Munich, and the efforts made by ethnologists to obtain artifacts and shape and control displays aspires to make an important contribution not merely to the history of a certain type of museum, but to the history of German ethnography, of provincial politics in the Wilhelmine era, and of modern Germany in general.

The book's central argument is that these ethnographic museums were not necessarily nationalist, racist, or imperialist at their inception, but that various pressures—professionalization, market concerns, and the demands of an increasingly broad and socially diverse audience schooled in visual culture, ready and eager for entertainment and distraction—altered museum displays and the ethnological vision behind them. Penny argues that local politics and civic pride with a decidedly cosmopolitan outlook played a more essential role in the establishment of these museums than national or nationalist sentiment. Museum officials cited regional competition within Germany and the desire to keep up with international trends in their self-representations, and did not rely on claims of national greatness to win supporters. Unlike their counterparts in Great Britain or the United

States, German ethnologists like Adolf Bastian, director of Berlin's ethnographic museum from 1873 to 1905, were not guided in their efforts by racial hierarchies; instead they viewed the world within a Humboldtian framework that saw different cultures as part of a cosmic whole. According to Penny, therefore, museums offered a way of exploring the diversity of this culture, discovering the essential nature of humanity and allowing audiences to gain an understanding of others, and also of themselves.

In terms of how to display objects such as Polynesian canoes, Mayan altars, Benin bronzes, weapons, bowls, and other artifacts of "native peoples," this vision resulted in displays that were open in a physical as well as a narrative sense. Such displays meant to enable visitors to make connections across time and space and come to their own conclusions about the fundamental nature of man.[2] Driven by the conviction that knowledge was power and more was better, ethnologists sought to expand both their horizons and their collections; this desire was magnified in the face of modernizing tendencies which threatened, in the eyes of many, to wipe out the very things that ethnographers hoped to possess.

In describing how ethnologists acquired their collections, Penny thus emphasizes anthropologists' cosmopolitan and liberal aspirations and an expanding market of material culture in which Germans competed for prized treasures valued for their scarcity. The free-for-all for objects within this international market meant that museum officials placed a greater emphasis on acquisition than on other museal activities, and as a result they could barely stay on top of their burgeoning collections. Museum directors struggled constantly to gain the upper hand over their cramped, stuffed, and disorderly displays. In a modernist *Flucht nach vorne*, officials placed their hopes on the future and on expansion, lobbying for newer, larger buildings that they hoped could house their holdings, please their patrons, and delight their public.

Penny details pressures—from outside, from above and below—that pushed German ethnographers to abandon their cosmopolitan vision and embrace a more nationalist and even imperialist stance in their collecting practices and in their displays. With the founding of Germany's empire in 1884, the acquisition of objects became more politicized and ethnographers began to see themselves as Germans first and part of an international, cosmopolitan scientific community second (p. 115). Penny sees public demands and concerns for more accessible entertainment as instrumental forces behind the turn towards *Schausammlungen*, or didactic displays that had

fewer, more "representative" objects and simpler messages. It was thus mass culture, and museum visitors in search of modern distraction and displays of empire with which they had grown acquainted through travel literature, popular magazines, and *Voelkerschauen* (sensational displays with "live," "primitive" peoples), that helped to transform ethnologists' ideas about how their own collections should be displayed. In tracing this development, Penny argues that democratization (as he terms a more diverse public and the demands of mass culture) undermined the initial liberal vision of German ethnography.

By tackling the issue of reception, Penny takes on one of the central concerns of museum studies and one plagued by a scarcity of source material. It has become a commonplace for scholars to note that museums are more than vehicles for dominant ideologies, that the production of knowledge is equally dependent on visitors, and yet the paucity of sources has often meant that most analyses of displays remain unsubstantiated. In his chapter "The Audience as Author," Penny identifies four essential audience groups, each of which influenced museums in important ways: members of the international community of science, wealthy patrons, local elites, and the "uneducated masses." His analysis is especially strong for the first three groups, as he considers how such audiences could shape displays through their expectations, criticisms, and patronage. But Penny also hopes to show that the demands of the "uneducated masses" undermined the original "scientific" project envisioned by ethnographers (p. 144). His attempt to assess the degree to which mass public reception influenced displays is laudable, but his broad claims about the transformative nature of reception are based on a very narrow empirical base. Penny uses a few newspaper articles and reports submitted by museum officials to get at elite concerns about popular reception, but visitor responses for the period remain filtered through second-hand sources. Penny thus takes on this important issue, but it remains open whether or not the source material is available to support his arguments.

In addition to its relationship to the field of museum studies, Penny's work can be situated against the background of three interrelated historiographical moments. First, it can be viewed in light of the reconsideration of the Wilhelmine era as something more than an example of liberalism's failure and a precursor to Nazi crimes.[3] Secondly, it can be considered in the context of the revitalization of imperial studies in the wake of the post-colonialist critique of empire and the manner in which the rise of a new interdisciplinary scholarship has chal-

lenged the notions of the “domestic” and “imperial” as discrete domains.[4] Finally, it can be considered in the framework of concerns about the relationship between the social and the cultural and the fear that a focus on culture as a site of intellectual inquiry threatens to “efface all reference to social context or causes.”[5]

Penny’s work engages all three of these currents in historical scholarship. As to the first, Penny challenges the assumptions linking German imperialism with anthropology, recasting the work of ethnologists as inherently liberal, if sometimes instrumental. Penny posits, but does not fully explore, an alternative vision of illiberalism, noting in his conclusion that “liberal humanism and democracy, two things that we in the West tend to cherish, do not always or necessarily coexist well together” (p. 215). An exploration of the challenges of democratization and the manner in which it undermined a liberal and cosmopolitan vision could lead us to a historically specific understanding of modernity in Germany.[6]

Linked to this is the second moment, recent work in the history of imperialism. Rather than proceeding from a stance that sees the emergence of culture itself as historically coincidental with the rise of imperial ideologies in the latter half of the nineteenth century,[7] Penny argues that assuming that ethnology museums were inherently imperialist would be reductionist, “akin to running through an open door” (p. 12). Maintaining that imperial interests were neither foremost nor dominant in the development of ethnographic museums, Penny sees imperialist messages entering largely from below, “pushed into the museums” by the audiences.

This viewpoint can be seen against the backdrop of the third moment, that of the relationship between social and cultural history, and is reinforced by Penny’s method, which focuses on the motivations and imperatives of ethnographers. This is not to say that Penny ignores or bypasses the cultural, but that he is situated closer to a social history model. It may be an idle fantasy, but it would nevertheless be intriguing to see what sort of work would have emerged if Penny had rushed through that doorway, and explored such contentions as those made by Edward Said that the imperialist enterprise “depends upon the *idea of having an empire* ... and all kinds of preparations are made for it within a culture.”[8]

Related to this issue is Penny’s argument about the cosmopolitan and liberal tradition of German ethnographers. Penny is clearly writing here to address prejudices about German anthropology that might

equate nineteenth-century ethnological enterprises with twentieth-century racial and biological theories. Imperial ethnology was not Nazi science. The Humboldtian approach did not look to find difference across cultures, but similarities. With this work Penny rescues German ethnology from interpretations that see it as entirely driven by colonialist and racist desires. But in stressing the differences between nineteenth- and twentieth-century anthropological outlooks, Penny may have left unexplored the ethnocentrism that pervaded Humboldt’s thought, despite his quest for natural unities and a vision of a total humanity. As Anthony Pagden has noted, Humboldt “looked forward to a future in which the Europeans would be able to assist the Amerindian in his slow and painful struggle towards ‘civilization.’”[9]

As regards cosmopolitanism, Penny’s focus on the vibrant nature of provincial urban centers situates the “nation” within the context of nineteenth-century Germany. In Penny’s account polycentrism and not national unity lay behind the rise of German ethnography. Penny thus questions the rigid framework of “nationhood” that fails to capture the complexity of these local efforts that looked to an international stage for incentives and recognition. He questions the master narrative that teleologically places the German nation as the normative framework for any and all cultural activity in the Kaiserreich.[10] With this welcome corrective Penny may have downplayed the national dimensions of regional or civic cultural politics. As Rudolf Vierhaus noted some twenty-five years ago, local, regional, and national identities have always stood *dicht nebeneinander*, and the work of Celia Applegate and Alon Confino (which Penny cites) has shown us how the particular could serve as a vehicle for and expression of national identity.[11] In the case of Munich, for example, civic pride played a role in defining German identity. It was the very vitality and strength of particularist traditions that gave Munich’s city officials, the Wittelsbach monarchy, or Bavarian ministers a platform from which to claim national priority. It was Ludwig I, after all, who purportedly stated “I want to turn Munich into such a city, that no one shall know Germany who does not know Munich.”[12]

The dexterity of Penny’s contribution lies precisely in the manner in which he takes on such important debates through the lens of these ethnographic collections. As part of a growing literature on anthropology in Germany, and as a consideration of the modern nature of the Wilhelmine era, this is a provocative, challenging book that deserves a readership beyond the field of museum history.

Notes:

[1]. An introduction to the literature can be found in the introduction to Daniel J. Sherman and Irit Rogoff, *Museum Culture: Histories, Discourses, Spectacles* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

[2]. Penny follows here Steven Conn's argument that museums provided an "object-based epistemology." Steven Conn, *Museums and American Intellectual Life, 1876-1926* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

[3]. Geoff Eley has detailed the consequences of the paradigm shift in "Is There a History of the Kaiserreich?" in *Society, Culture, and the State in Germany, 1870-1930*, ed. Geoff Eley (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996): pp. 1-42 [review at <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=18871856792140>].

[4]. Mrinalini Sinha, "'Signs Taken for Wonders': The Stakes for Imperial Studies," *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 3:1 (Spring 2002).

[5]. Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, "Introduction," in *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999): p. 9f; more recently see, William H. Sewell Jr. "Whatever Happened to the 'Social' in Social History?" in *Schools of Thought: Twenty-Five Years of Interpretive Social Science*, eds. Joan W. Scott and Debra Deates (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001): pp. 209-226.

[6]. Pascal Grosse, *Kolonialismus, Eugenik und Buergerliche Gesellschaft in Deutschland 1850-1918* (New York: Campus, 2000).

[7]. Nicholas B. Dirks, ed., *Colonialism and Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992): p. 3. See further Antoinette Burton, "Thinking Beyond the

Boundaries: Empire, Feminism and the Domains of History," *Social History* 26:1 (January 2001).

[8]. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Aldine Publishing Company, 1993): p. 11.

[9]. Anthony Pagden, *European Encounters with the New World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993): p. 8.

[10]. H. Glenn Penny, "Wissenschaft in einer polyzentrischen Nation: Der Fall der deutschen Ethnologie," in *Wissenschaft und Nation in der europaeischen Geschichte*, eds. Ralph Jessen and Jakob Vogel (Frankfurt: Campus, 2002): pp. 80-96.

[11]. Rudolf Vierhaus, "Einrichtungen wissenschaftlicher und populaerer Geschichtsforschung im 19. Jahrhundert," in *Das kunst-und kulturgeschichtliche Museum im 19. Jahrhundert*, ed. Bernward Deneke and Rainer Kahsnitz (Munich: Prestel, 1986): p. 110; Celia Applegate, *A Nation of Provincials: The German Idea of Heimat* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); and Alon Confino, *The Nation as Local Metaphor: Wuerttemberg, Imperial Germany, and National Memory* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997) [review at <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=20384917881357>].

[12]. Eugen Franz, *Muenchen als deutsche Kulturstadt im 19. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1936): p. 68.

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