

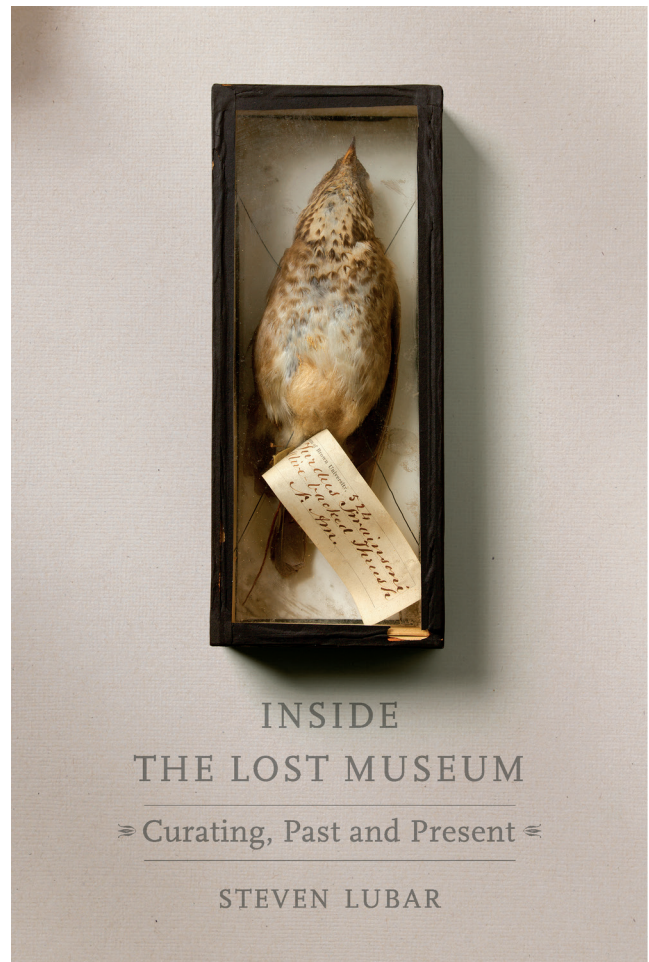
Inside the Lost Museum: Curating, Past and Present

Reviewed by Suzanne Fischer

When John Whipple Potter Jenks died in 1894, his colleagues at Brown University were not sure what to do with his 50,000 objects of already old-fashioned natural history museum collections. The field was giving way to the lab, and Jenks' style of artifact display – intended to demonstrate God's immense creativity – was out. The university closed the Jenks Museum of Natural History and Anthropology in 1915. The bird specimens he had battled alligators for in Florida, the ethnographic objects he'd received in trade from the Smithsonian, the mice he'd caught across New England, were all unceremoniously trashed in 1945.

Jenks himself exemplifies a certain strain of 19th-century museum work. After graduating from Brown, he spent most of his career as teacher and headmaster at a school in Massachusetts. There he maintained collegial networks, was quick with rod and gun on field expeditions, published papers and books, and traded specimens with correspondents across the country. When he retired as headmaster in 1871, he returned to his alma mater to start his natural history museum.

In 2014, Brown professor Steven Lubar and a group of his students in the university's public humanities program constituted themselves as the Jenks Society for Lost Museums. They were joined by the museum-obsessed artist Mark Dion, who was commissioned to work on this project. Their goal was to resurrect Jenks and his collections. The Jenks Society mounted *The Lost Museum* in Rhode Island Hall at Brown, the original home of the Jenks Museum, from May 2014 to May 2015. The temporary exhibition featured, among



Inside the Lost Museum: Curating, Past and Present

Steven D. Lubar

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other exhibits, objects from Jenks' collection that the society had arranged by degree of disintegration, from whole medallions to broken bird eggs to the paper labels for objects that no longer exist, surmounted by the admonition: "Friends, cast your eyes on these shattered remnants and know that all things return to dust." *Inside the Lost Museum: Curating, Past and Present*, Lubar's new book inspired by the exhibition and its experiments, captures these remnants and launches from the Jenks Museum story into a thoughtful synthesis of museum history and theory, deeply rooted in collections.

Grounded in Jenks, Lubar guides readers through "the fundamental nature of museums." His long experience as curator at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History and his recent work as interim director at Brown University's Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology give him an excellent perspective on the recent history of museum collections and exhibitions. For Lubar, collections are at the heart of museums. They are what distinguishes museums from other institutions and simply "what make museums so interesting." Rather than rehash the field's debates about the place of collections in the 21st-century museum, Lubar shows us how important they are by devoting this entire book on curating to museum objects – how we collect them, how we preserve them, how we display them, and the other ways we use them (for research, for education, for community connections). This focus is extremely successful.

Lubar's work adds a great deal to our understanding of how (mostly American) museums of all disciplines have both talked about collecting and actually collected in the last century. Among the motivations for collecting and the attributes of the curator, he highlights what anthropologist Sharon Macdonald calls "object-love," a curator's passion for "their" artifacts. Since Lubar frames this book about museums and their

objects through the work of curators, he underscores that "the meaning added to artifacts by expertise" is what distinguishes a museum from a room of things, and one of the major roles of the curator. Lubar makes clear, however, that for him "the museum needs to be both about something and for somebody." He is committed to a vision of museums as a place where visitors can interact with, learn from, and make meaning with artifacts, and to tracing the ideas and practices that have swirled around museum objects, from those in early modern collector Ole Worm's 17th-century cabinet of curiosities to those in *The Lost Museum*.

Each chapter of the book begins with an episode from Jenks' museum career, but other museum figures recur in the narrative. Lubar's favorite museum antagonist is Benjamin Ives Gilman, director of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts from 1893 to 1925. Gilman insisted that art objects could speak for themselves and focused on attentive looking, going so far as to design a device he called a skiascope, which blocked everything from the viewer's field of vision but the artwork itself. Lubar built his own – "perhaps the first one created in one hundred years" – and tried it out in an institution with a wall of artworks hung salon-style. Experimental museum historiography! Though the skiascope worked at the museum he visited, it ultimately failed, Lubar notes, because Gilman and his colleagues transformed art museum exhibitions into places where skiascopes were no longer necessary. Lubar has read widely in the literature of the many museum disciplines, and highlights the commonalities and differences in the ways art, history, science, anthropology and other museums have treated objects and visitors.

Lubar tracked down the remnants of the Jenks collections at other institutions, and one of the many interesting object stories in the book is that of Jenks'



mouse hunt. In response to an 1850 call for small quadrupeds, Jenks sent hundreds of mice, shrews, and voles from Massachusetts to the Smithsonian. (Lubar notes that he paid his pupils six cents a mouse to collect for him.) Illustrating the astonishing circulation of museum specimens in the 19th century, Jenks' mouse specimens traveled across the country through trades and transfers. Lubar visited Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology to see 107 of Jenks' quadrupeds. While most of the mice – preserved as skins and skeletons – intrigue Lubar, it is a jar of wet specimens (mice preserved whole) that really captures his attention:

The jar is labeled on the outside with the scientific name, Jenks's name, and the location caught: Middleboro, Massachusetts.... The big jar of mice stopped me cold. John Whipple Potter Jenks had collected these mice 160 years ago.... The mice had been transferred to a new jar and they had been retagged. But here they were. I had been following Jenks' trail for several years, and suddenly I felt that I was, oddly, in his presence.

Though Jenks seems present to Lubar in the mouse experience (and frames the book), the 19th-century naturalist rarely seems present to the reader except as one of many similar 19th-century naturalists. In part, it is because the book is filled with so many noisy, robust, opinionated stories from museums that still exist. And in part, it is because what has endured from Jenks is so thin: the jar of mice, the article from a student who remembered that he talked in a loud voice. "I am fascinated," writes Lubar, "by museums' peculiar capacity for stasis and transformation, the way they embody both stability and flexibility." *The Lost Museum* exhibition focused on the ravages of memory, time, and fashion. It succeeded because of how ephemeral Jenks' career really was, despite the affirmation, carved on his tombstone like the one on the statue's pedestal in poet Percy Blysshe Shelley's "Ozymandias," that

"this museum, the fruit of his labor, will be his abiding monument." *Inside the Lost Museum*, this memento mori notwithstanding, is about museums that endure, the work that endures: collecting, making exhibitions, learning from objects, sharing, connecting, making the new out of the old.

Suzanne Fischer is Museum Director at the Michigan History Center in Lansing. fischers2@michigan.gov

