Book Review

The Poetic Museum: Reviving Historic Collections

Julian Spalding. Munich; New York: Prestel. 2002. 184 pages. Illustrated. Hard cover, $39.95.

Reviewed by Peter Linett (peter@slstrategies.com)*, partner, Slover Linett Strategies, Chicago, IL.*

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"It has crossed my mind," mused philosopher Jonathan Lear in his 1998 collection *Open Minded: Working Out the Logic of the Soul*, "to wonder whether it isn't the point of all professions—of medicine and law as much as of philosophy and psychoanalysis—to instill deadness." He goes on,

> Of course, the conscious self-image of every profession is that it is there to maintain high standards. And there must be *some* truth in this image. But what does this image cover over?. . . Doesn't a professional set of standards enable the profession to forget about standards? That is, it enables the profession to stop thinking critically about how it ought to go on precisely because the standards present themselves as having already answered the question. The profession can then act as though it *already knows* what high standards are. This is a form of deadness (Lear 1998, 4.)

If so, then what do we call a moment in a profession when the professionals can no longer be sure what "high standards" ought to mean, or can no longer agree with their colleagues about which meanings count? A transition? A crisis? Both words are heard with some frequency these days in the museum field, where a growing historical anxiety has been more or less acknowledged in all the relevant specialties and camps. The phrase "high standards" used to make most museum people think immediately of scholarship—the rigor and independence, usually, of the research that undergirds the display of objects. And within that sphere of reference, things do still look (a few scandals notwithstanding) relatively clear. But if the phrase is taken to mean something larger about museums' excellence (or lack of excellence) in relation to their purposes and constituencies, then one begins to see the gray areas. What are those purposes, anyway? What benefits should museums aim to provide their visitors? If museums now offer "experiences," what sorts of experiences do we mean? And who is "we": who gets to answer the questions?

This uncertain juncture in the evolution of the field has been diagnosed in a spate of recent articles and books, to which we can now happily add *The Poetic Museum: Reviving Historic Collections*, Julian Spalding's attempt to bring the field back to life in roundly human, rather than narrowly specialized, terms. Spalding, the London-born former director of the Glasgow Museums and Art Galleries and founder of several award-winning museums there and elsewhere in the UK, writes with infectious passion and a veteran's authority (his examples are dazzlingly various), yet stands outside many of the profession's assumptions about itself. Here is neither sober reappraisal (as in Stephen E. Weil's *Making Museums Matter*) nor theoretical dissection (as in Hilde Hein's *The Museum in*

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Transition: A Philosophical Perspective), but a restless, bristling invocation of a new kind of ideal for museums. It ought to be required reading both for those who believe the field is in the midst of a revolution and those who haven't admitted it yet.

As his subtitle suggests, Spalding is worried about the future of the object in our museums. "A museum without things is not a museum but a theme park," he warns; yet if museums don't find ways of inspiring interest in their collections of unique, "real" objects—whose presence offers the only remaining distinction between museums and more virtual ways of learning and experiencing—then that is exactly what they will become, as visitors vote with their feet and museums contort themselves into new, mercenary shapes to stem the exodus. In Spalding's view, inspiring that interest will be made even harder by museums' own bad habit of thinking of their collections as a kind of "open storage," in which the objects are really there for scholarly study but are exhibited to the public as a fair tradeoff for civic funding or admission revenue. It is an attitude that relegates curating, in its public, interpretative senses, to the back of the bus, which in turn ensures that the experience of the collections will be lifeless. And the cycle is self-fulfilling: when visitors are left cold by the collections, their disaffection seems to confirm curators' (mistaken) belief that the masses aren't interested in great art or history or science, which means curators can stop trying to please them and are free to pursue their own research interests in peace. Spalding argues that if museums fail to resolve these twin tendencies toward superficial commercialism and Alexandrian insularity, they risk succumbing to both: "Our treasures could soon be locked away in high-security stores, with access to them strictly regulated, and ersatz heritage displays and adventure rides filling the halls and galleries instead."

Whether that dire state of affairs strikes one as imminent or comfortably distant, Spalding certainly has his finger on the right problems. What it will take to repair them, he argues, is a far more sanguine, less academic vision of what encounters with certain objects can do for people. Spalding's expectations are lofty: museums should (and sometimes even do) stir us to deep "wonder" or "awe," "evoke profound feelings," offer "electric" and "revelatory" experiences, stand us face-to-face with mystery, and in general mirror the "invigorating, experimental spirit" of the art or discoveries they display. This is language we're accustomed to hearing in directors' speeches and the occasional wishful mission statement, but rarely does anybody know what it might look like in the galleries. Spalding does. In example after vivid example, ranging across continents, decades and museum types, he imagines what could have been—what could still be—in museums whose rare and remarkable objects are currently buried alive in their displays, either choked by a tangle of dry facts that paradoxically obscure their richest meanings, or torn from their original, resonant contexts of use or significance and grouped in museological categories that make human connections harder to draw. At Florence's Museum of the History of Science, Spalding notes, one of the telescopes Galileo built and used himself is "tucked away in the cor-

ner of a room full of telescopes, in a display about the history of this instrument," while a few rooms away stands an enormous armillary sphere embodying the geocentric model of the universe that Galileo's observations helped overthrow.

> Were Galileo's simple little telescope to be placed next to the colossal contraption of the armillary sphere, his revolutionary idea could have been beautifully encapsulated. So, too, could the power. . . that is invested in traditional ideas. The heavenly host that circle the earth in the armillary sphere are all gilded. The arms of the Medici emblazon its outer reaches and on top is a golden cross, demonstrating clearly who then owned the heavens, and our thoughts about them. How moving and telling it would then be to read Galileo's 'Renunciation of his Suspicions', and see the instruments of torture he only had to be shown to make him sign.

By the same token, the objects in the British Museum's new Africa galleries are displayed in gleaming, attractively-lit cases, but their meaning (in the everyday sense that Spalding insists on) remains in the dark:

> Extraordinarily, the British Museum has decided to resort to the outmoded method of displaying exhibits according to how they are made. The new galleries are divided into woodcarving, textiles, brass-casting, pottery and forging. . . . So, a crude ritual vessel inscribed with female pudenda, which a Bura man once kept next to his head while he slept, made offerings to for good fortune, [and] drank from with only his closest male friend. . . sits next to a wheel-turned, slip-decorated floral flask made in Egypt in the 19th century that would have graced any respectable Victorian mantelpiece, just because they both happen to be made of clay.

How much richer an experience those objects would provide, Spalding imagines, if the curators had taken a more natural, associative approach and attempted some creative, eloquent juxtapositions. The museum of the future, he hopes, will be one in which the visitor "can look from pots to sculptures, coins to texts, with a rising crescendo of understanding."

The heresy Spalding commits here, though without spelling it out, lies in viewing the object as more important for what it illuminates, for what it can point toward in our own humanity, than for what it simply is. He declares on several occasions that collections must remain central, and he means it; but he means it in a new and lovely way. The experiences he wants museums to offer must begin with the actual, before-our-eyes artifact but also must transcend it, and eventually, in some sense, return to it. The transcendence has to do with connecting to the object at the level of the universal—where traditional academic categories become meaningless—and the return has to do with accepting the object's obdurate mystery: the fact that we can never quite bridge its specificity to its resonance, what it is as a mere physical thing sharing space with us, to all the things it means. Thus for Spalding, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, even though many of its objects are in themselves banal, may be "the best museum in the world, if you judge a museum not by what it contains but by what it gives its visitors." The shoes, snapshots,

and propaganda posters are each labeled "to explain why it is worth looking at" (something museum visitors have been asking for in focus groups for years), are encountered in a darkly metaphorical flow of spaces (for Spalding "a factory in which you soon discover that is you yourself who is on the production line"), and, most importantly, are woven together in an overarching story—one in which both the objects themselves and the interpretive materials which bring them alive in the minds of visitors play critical, indeed inseparable, roles. "This is a museum not just of facts but of feelings," Spalding writes, and he might have added, not just of objects but also meaning-laden stories about them.

This notion of story is particularly important for Spalding, and he isn't thinking of neat chronological sequences tied up in pedagogical bows. Museum stories should be like poems, he believes, evoking and embodying rather than lecturing. They can be "haiku"-like encounters with a single object or longer "sagas" flowing from gallery to gallery; they can be dramatic or lighthearted, lyrical or political; the best ones vibrate with the teller's—that is, the curator's—passion. Too often, Spalding's observes, curators "restrict themselves to providing facts, and rarely try to convey the excitement they feel, even though it is precisely their enthusiasm that could really start the visitor on his or her journey of discovery." Such energized and energizing stories would help visitors appreciate even the most famous objects in new ways. Visitors to the Louvre file past the *Mona Lisa* unprepared, Spalding laments, and most are left "wondering what all the fuss is about." What if the museum had really *interpreted* this icon?

> The *Mona Lisa* was the product of a journey that had taken Leonardo several decades, as he searched for a way to depict the soul. It is possible to imagine an entire museum that would take you through the Renaissance and through the study of Leonardo's mind, finally leading you to this one great painting. Creating such a journey is the art of the museum.

Spalding knows how foreign or threatening such calls may sound to many museum professionals. No stranger to controversy, he has been writing articles and delivering lectures in a similar vein for more than a decade, and has occasionally drawn public and professional fire for putting these and other ideas into practice at the various museums he has overseen during his thirty-year career. The British press (which still gives museums headlines) has been fanning controversy about *The Poetic Museum* since before it hit the bookstores, excitedly covering Spalding's "blasts" against the National Gallery and other London heavyweights and casting the author as an attention-courting gadfly (a role, it must be said, that he doesn't seem to mind, judging from recent articles and talks amplifying his more contentious claims.) But *The Poetic Museum* is too deeply felt to be dismissed as self-promotion or mere polemic. Spalding spends a fair amount of energy in the book insisting that his ideals are an attempt to raise, not lower, museums' intellectual and aesthetic ambitions. In the end—by showing what it will look like for museums to take their own public-minded promises to their logical conclusions, without losing

an inch of contact with their collections—he makes us believe him. Only the most entrenched (Spalding would say fearful) museum professional will be unmoved by his call to renew the mission of historical collections by focusing, in the tradition of no less an intellect than John Ruskin, more on "ideas and feelings than categories of learning."

Along the way, though, there are a few bumps. That idealistic populism in which Spalding's main argument is rooted is accompanied by a more pragmatic, cheaper sort of populism which occasionally undermines the credibility of his object-first approach. In his eagerness to make museums relevant and empower the visitor, he sometimes champions what is "accessible" over what may be worth "accessing" in the first place: *Star Wars* comes in for several mentions, as do several retail, theme park, and technological models that would seem to diminish the very uniqueness of the museum experience that Spalding is anxious to preserve. Reading Spalding's dream visit to the British Museum of the future—a long, mesmerizing fantasy which closes the book—this reviewer found himself exhausted just thinking about all the electronics Spalding envisions mediating the experience. But it's Spalding's larger point that matters here: the museum ought to facilitate seeing not only things but the connections between them, and help visitors follow their own threads through the tapestry of contexts. Technology is only one possible way to make that happen; each museum must find its own way, using its own vision.

More troubling, perhaps, is Spalding's Solomon-esque suggestion that traditional collecting museums be cut in two: into "collection centers" responsible for storage, conservation, and "technical" study, and galleries responsible for exhibition, interpretation, and (in Spalding's broad sense) education. It's hard to tell how seriously he intends us to take this idea. Certainly, it has the effect of forcing us to see the gulf that already divides museums' inward-looking archival and academic functions from their outward-looking exhibition and education roles. Spalding believes that museums have failed for so long to resolve that central tension—in fact, have pushed the two sides further apart in recent years—that it is time to ask whether it's even possible, or desirable, to resolve it. If, in the current museum, "fiefdoms of vested interest hold sway. . . and decisions about what the museum actually does are usually the results of compromises between conflicting aims, rather than creative solutions realizing a shared ambition," then why not pull the conflict of interest out by its roots? Separating the two missions would free curators from their current responsibilities for areas that most museum goers have little interest in, such as taxonomy, materials analysis, and provenance, and allow them to focus more creatively on the communication process and on "what the museum is achieving in the visitor's mind." (As for how the objects would be owned, loaned, and otherwise managed in such an arrangement, Spalding has some loosely worked-out and, in this country anyway, perfectly unrealistic suggestions.) Is this a "Modest Proposal" intended to help unstick the gears of the machine, or a radical's naïve overstepping? The answer may be both.

There as elsewhere Spalding would

have benefited from a firmer editor. Minor confusions and contradictions pepper the text, and it's occasionally difficult to figure out how Spalding feels, finally, about what he's describing (the rise of technology, for example, or thematic installations like the Tate Modern's). A few typos and editing errors contribute to the hasty feeling. But these are quibbles. *The Poetic Museum* represents a lifetime's passionate thinking about museums, and takes us much further forward than other recent books that diagnose the same ailment but offer only vague or familiar cures. The inertia working against Spalding's ideas will be enormous, not least because the kind of benefits that a poetic museum provides to its visitors will be hard to quantify, and in today's funding climate evaluation is all. If so, it will be profession's as well as the culture's loss. If, as Jonathan Lear has it, a profession that thinks it knows what high standards are is threatened by deadness, perhaps one that admits it has, at the moment, more questions than answers about itself is threatened by something else: the prospect of coming alive.

NOTE

1. Lear, Jonathan. 1998. *Open Minded: Working Out the Logic of the Soul.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.