

practical discussion and debate among public history practitioners about the deeper meaning behind those crises and different responses to them. It also prods us to define “the museum,” to think about how the crises identified can affect museums of different types, topics, and communities disproportionately, and how the ramifications of those effects reverberate today.

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A Cultural Arsenal for Democracy: The World War II Work of US Museums by Clarissa J. Ceglio. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2022. xiv + 224 pp.; illustrations, notes, index; clothbound, \$90.00; paperback, \$28.95.

Spend even just a bit of time picking through the history of American museums and you will quickly discover that something transformative happened during the middle part of the last century. What’s much harder to discern though is what that thing was exactly. Sure, we know about the New Deal, we know about World War II, we know about the turbulent postwar years. And we can all kind of guess how those flashpoints must have mapped themselves onto the nation’s exhibitionary complex. But it’s precisely that tendency to guess, Clarissa J. Ceglio contends, that has obscured what on closer inspection turns out to be an important forgotten moment. *A Cultural Arsenal for Democracy* is Ceglio’s attempt to unveil that moment and to remind us amid today’s latest round of culture wars that “museums have a longer, more complex history . . . of believing that they should be involved in civic matters” (xi).

What has been missing in our guesswork it seems is an appreciation for how an ongoing debate among exhibit makers shifted, though inconclusively, during the war years. On one side were proponents of object-based epistemology. Ceglio borrows this phrase from historian Steven Conn who popularized it some decades ago in describing a late nineteenth century dispute between universities and museums over the evidentiary value of objects. Back then, Conn argues, museums perceived knowledge as fully residing in objects—rather than, say, in text—and thus believed that, within exhibit spaces, things should be left mostly alone to speak for themselves. Ceglio picks up the story in the 1930s during which a progressive turn convinced some people that, if couched within just the right kind of storytelling, museum objects could be more powerful, and maybe even could encourage audiences toward active citizenship. Ceglio calls this position “social instrumentalism” after the title of a book written in 1942 by the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Theodore L. Low. And it’s within social instrumentalism, the argument goes, that we find the antecedents of recent efforts by museums to encourage civic activism through all manner of narrative, sensory, and affective exhibit craft.

Ceglio makes the point by digging through an array of unpublished reports, correspondence, newspapers, old issues of *Museum News*, and the institutional

records of several well-known museums, all in American urban centers.¹ She also does the hard work of reimagining several exemplary exhibits through scripts, floor plans, reviews, and other remaining residues of our exhibitionary past. What results is a careful survey of social instrumentalism's fortunes during the pre-war years, throughout the war, and then in the immediate postwar era. It is a complicated story and so Ceglio concludes by reflecting on how the mixed bag of midcentury museum craft helps us make sense of what is happening in museums today.

What is evident from the outset is that early flirtations with social instrumentalism took place during a particularly delicate time for museums. That delicacy owed to a proliferation of political and financial entanglements that museums could not avoid as the United States repositioned itself on a global stage. We learn, for instance, how some museums were drawn into the work of popularizing President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy during the 1930s. There were real opportunities here for social instrumentalists to show how narrative exhibits could help Americans reimagine themselves as hemispheric citizens, and Ceglio sees that early work as formative. But also formative was funding and guidance from the Department of State, Nelson Rockefeller, and a whole coterie of public and private actors who sought to build solidarity with Latin America through economic pressure during the march toward war. The exhibits they favored portrayed our southern neighbors as nodes in a transnational marketplace wherein American museumgoers might imagine themselves as tourists. Thus, freighted with soft imperialism and a persistent colonial gaze, even the most instrumentalist exhibits could hardly deliver on their progressive promise.

In my view, this point ranks among Ceglio's most important messages to public historians: the war years spun a new web of alliances between government, media, and capital that always already mitigated whatever chance progressive exhibits might have at encouraging social reform. Consider, for instance, *Wartime Housing*, a fascinating exhibit mounted by the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MoMa) in 1942. *Wartime Housing*, as Ceglio describes it, was a very early example of "an experience expressly designed to produce embodied knowing by engaging museumgoers' senses" (110). Provocative photographs, moody lighting, evocative soundscapes, and disembodied voices all conspired to activate visitors around the challenge of combatting poverty and strife associated with a dire wartime housing shortage. And yet even this most progressive of exhibits was subject to regressive influence of the wartime exhibitionary complex. People with power who involved themselves in the creation of the exhibit disagreed over what kind of housing might solve the crisis. Designers bickered about the differences between art and architecture. And the exhibit was so vague on the issue of wartime housing for Black Americans that an event organizer had to ask, "are negroes welcome at the museum?" (122). So, by

¹ These include the American Museum of Natural History, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Brooklyn Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the National Art Gallery, the Newark Museum, the Rockefeller Archive Center, the Smithsonian Institution, and the Wadsworth Atheneum.

the end, the best this most successful instance of social instrumentality could muster was a “conventionally conservative message [about] maintaining the domestic, familial shelter as a well-ordered physical and moral space” (127).

Revealing precisely how American museums struggled under the weight of wartime chauvinisms is important work. Ceglio does this best perhaps in a standout chapter wherein the object-based epistemology crowd scores a postwar victory by aligning with Wendell Willke’s One World movement. It’s harder for me to see, however, the line between these midcentury museum debates and, as Ceglio puts it, “contemporary activist public history and museum work” (3). There is, for sure, a lot of eagerness today to presume a progressive lineage for modern public historical practice. And, yet, as Ceglio makes quite clear, the progressive impulse within midcentury museums was deeply bound up with whiteness and privilege. It reminds me of Devin Manzullo-Thomas’s *Exhibiting Evangelicalism*, published concurrently with Ceglio’s book, wherein we discover that evangelical Protestants—hardly progressive stalwarts—also pioneered affective exhibit craft and civic storytelling at pretty much exactly the same time as Ceglio’s protagonists did. One wonders where those folks would fit in the standoff between the epistemologists and the instrumentalists.

But, then again, perhaps it is that standoff that is the problem. I worry that by building on Conn’s framework, Ceglio risks echoing scholarly tendencies that an intervening generation of public historians have worked hard to ameliorate. Foremost among them is the centering of those old, familiar museums with their marble columns and big endowments. It’s not until the conclusion, for instance, that we learn about the “progressive work of a more radical vein” happening during these same years in Indigenous museums, community associations, and in support of civil rights activism (162). Ceglio contrasts these museums with the “mainstream museums” that she studies. It is a narrow category. House museums, for instance, rarely appear here. Fiske Kimball’s contribution to the instrumentalism debate is framed by his role as an art museum director, not as one of the nation’s foremost preservationists. We hear briefly from the National Park Service’s Ned Burns, but without regard for his agency’s own complicated relationship with war and instrumentalism. It’s not Ceglio’s purpose to survey all museum types, but recognizing that most kinds of American museums have been unabashedly committed to civic storytelling for a very long time—and across a very broad spectrum of political difference—raises the stakes even further, I think, for *A Cultural Arsenal for Democracy*. It forces us public historians to wonder if what we presume to be mainstream really ever was.

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