

BOOK REVIEW

Book Reviews

Medical Museums: Past, Present, Future, Alberti, SJMM and Hallam, E (eds.), London: The Royal College of Surgeons of England, 250 Pages, 2013

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Medical Museums: Past, Present, Future edited by Samuel JMM Alberti and Elizabeth Hallam offers an intriguing array of short papers on international medical museums. In total, the book contains sixteen chapters all concerning the past, present and future of medical museums. Alberti and Hallam are well-established experts in the field. Alberti, the Director of Museums and Archives at the Royal College of Surgeons of England and Hallam, a research associate in the School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, University of Oxford.

Each chapter presents a case study on either a medical museum or a science museum with medical objects. The geographical coverage of the book is limited to the United Kingdom, Europe, and North America. In the United Kingdom the Royal College of Surgeons' Hunterian Museum in London, the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh, the University of Aberdeen, the Science Museum of London, and the Wellcome Collection are represented. In Europe case studies cover the University of Leiden, the Florentine Museo 'La Specola', the Karolinska Institute, the Museum of the History of Medicine in Zurich, the Berlin Museum of Medical History, and Copenhagen's Medical Museion. Finally, North American examples include The Dittrick, the Mütter Museum, the National Museum of Health and Medicine, and the National Museum of American History. Although omitting medical museums in countries such as Australia and China, the most important medical museums in the three geographical regions are present.

Each chapter evaluates the original purpose of medical collections as tools of medical education belonging to practitioners. The importance of the collection was intrinsically linked to its educational value. Teachers of anatomy and pathology would collect abnormal and normal specimens and display them for their students. Some were accessible to a public audience, however, their aim was to educate future professionals and not the wider public. Alberti and Hallam argue that the introduction

of new technologies and new teaching methods in the fields of pathology and anatomy caused a decline in the significance of medical specimens. For example, microscopic slides replaced large specimens rendering them unnecessary to maintain (Alberti & Hallam 2013: 7–8).

There was also a change in the philosophy underpinning collecting. According to Alberti and Hallam, 'medical history collections assumed a heritage function' (Alberti & Hallam 2013: 9). What this means is that objects were collected to trace a history of medicine, not just to show current trends or practices. The medical museum began attracting wider audiences that can be categorized as professionals, artists, those who enjoy history and culture and those looking to be 'thrilled' (Alberti & Hallam 2013: 13). Its function shifted from the centre of medical education to what can effectively be termed a 'display of heritage'.

The current available literature on medical museums is scarce. One of the most prolific authors in this field is Samuel JMM Alberti, Director of Museums and Archives at the Royal College of Surgeons in England. His work on medical museums has traced the history of these museums and their visitor interactions. In 2011, Alberti released *Morbid Curiosities*, one of the first comprehensive studies on nineteenth-century medical museums in Great Britain. The book traces the history of collecting and displaying body parts. Alberti's previous and subsequent publications additionally focus on Great Britain. Elizabeth Hallam has also compiled numerous works on the development of medical museums including *The Anatomy Museum*. In terms of the wider historiography of this topic, all works have been primarily focused on one museum or region and contain information on the history of the institution and what has been on display.

This book is the first major attempt to compile a variety of medical museums into one source. The book was created to mark the Bicentenary of the Hunterian Museum at the Royal College of Surgeons in London. As part of the bicentenary, authors wrote sections for the book to reflect on the advancement of the medical museum. In addition, Alberti and Hallam argue it is the first attempt to present a historical and contemporary analysis of medical museums, 'highlighting their scope and dynamic capacity

for change' (Alberti & Hallam 2013: 2). However, it still presents a view from within neglecting to include an outside perspective on the function, purpose, and future of the medical museum.

Although concerning different museums in various geographical locations, all sixteen chapters highlight the importance of identity and innovation. The museums are geographically grouped with each section furthering the main argument of the book through the selection of case studies.

Each of the sixteen case studies begins with a historical overview of the museum. Immediately readers are aware of the origins of the museum in question and how its initial identity was formed. For example, the chapter by Alberti on the *Hunterian Museum* traces how the collection changed under various directors. Whereas some, such as Hunter himself, focused on the utility of the collection, now focus has shifted to its function as heritage. This means displaying its historic value. In fact, linking the identity of the museum and its collection to its past and current owners or curators is a common thread throughout most case studies. This ultimately supports the argument of Alberti and Hallam that medical museums are flexible institutions that can respond to change under new directors. In some cases, for example the museum in Copenhagen, new directors can change the collection name. In Copenhagen the word *Museion* replaced *museum*, reflecting the transforming intellectual climate and highlighting the collection's potential to inspire (Söderqvist & Pederson, 149). For others, the museum's identity is still in constant dialogue with the objects in the collection and those that have acquired them (Alberti & Hallam 2013: 14).

Besides identity, each chapter furthers the argument that medical museums are innovative institutions that are still relevant today. There are exceptions to this rule, for example Michael Rhode who argues that the National Museum of Health and Medicine is at serious risk of no longer being a relevant institution (Rhode, 198).

For other case studies, there are a variety of ways in which medical museums have attempted to maintain or restore their relevance. One of the ways they have achieved this is through actively expanding their target audiences, including school groups and the general public. There is evidence found within case studies that there are benefits associated with encouraging new audiences. The Berlin Museum of Medical History has seen great success in catering to a wide audience attracting over 90 000 visitors per year and, therefore, additional funding (Schnalke, 142).

Other case studies show how frequently transforming exhibition spaces to remain relevant (Henry, Hallam,

Hendriksen), gaining a social media presence (Edmonson), and developing public programs to entice visitors (Alberti) can also appeal to new audiences. Of course, each medical museum is unique and has seen different issues arise. Generally speaking, engaging more with the wider public and redefining their target audience has been a starting point for many in ensuring continued importance.

This book has encouraged a variety of medical museums to discuss their past, present, and future. However, there are a couple critiques to consider. Firstly, the geographical spread of the book is not all-encompassing and fails to consider medical museums outside the western world. This is a great omission as readers are left considering a narrow perspective. It would have been interesting to not only learn the history of medical museums in China or Hong Kong for example, but also if they have had to accommodate to the same challenges and transformations.

Secondly, the length of each article is relatively short. The room allocated for discussion about museum innovations is quite unsatisfying. Issues are commonly touched upon and then left in order to move on to another point. For example, some of the chapters mention including education programs to encourage new visitors. The details of these programs are unfortunately not included.

On balance, the book does provide an insightful look into the changing nature of medical museums. Themes of collection management, visitor interaction and use of space allow for a certain fluidity combining all chapters into one coherent piece. This is the great achievement of this book. Reading from beginning to end provides an overarching sense of how western medical museums are adapting and growing in the modern era. Its inclusion of museums that admit their relevance is wavering is a particularly interesting decision that further emphasizes the importance of adapting to change. Alberti and Hallam have contributed important ideas and thoughts into the study of medical museums that will hopefully be expanded in future studies.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

References

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Historical Perspectives in the Conservation of Works of Art on Paper, Holben Ellis, M (ed.), Getty Publications, 608 pages, 2015

Jane Colbourne

Edited by Margaret Holben Ellis, one of the principle driving forces in conservation education and research, this scholarly volume is based on a stimulating and informative amalgam of ninety-five readings distilled by an international group of advisers from what has originally been described in the *Preface* as a 'unwieldy mass of literature.'

Arranged in eight distinct parts or chapters the reader is guided by the editor through passages extracted from a variety of historic and contemporary texts focusing on western prints and drawings. Many of the references have been translated into English for the first time or sourced from obscure publications which are only occasionally encountered in the public domain. This unusual blend of academic articles, anecdotes and narratives is refreshing and provides a unique overview of drawing and printing materials and techniques. Other important issues discussed include the connoisseurship and syntax surrounding the collection of prints and drawings, the taxonomies used to describe paper, the limitations of treatment, and the developing attitudes that influences and guide professional judgment.

Holben's articulate and insightful introductions that precede each reading and chapter, are one of the books greatest strengths. A thorough understanding of the interdisciplinary complexities are displayed throughout and the annotations not only serve to contextualise each section but offer fresh perspectives and a contribution to knowledge in themselves. The additional endnotes and extensive bibliography add yet another dimension and distinct value to this weighty publication.

Undoubtedly, favourite authors may be absent and the publication/editorial conventions adopted and the slightly unusual format take some time to get accustomed to, but this book ably succeeds its goals and will appeal to a diverse audience ranging from conservation professionals, students, technical art historians, curators, artists and collectors.

My only criticism perhaps would be the overly long inclusion of historic articles in Part 1 and the lack of discussion on watercolours- a topic perhaps which could form the next in line Getty *Readings in Conservation* series.

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