

Book review: Wintle, C. (2013). Colonial Collecting and Display. Encounters With Material Culture From the Andaman and Nicobar Islands

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Book Review: Wintle, C. (2013). Colonial Collecting and Display. Encounters With Material Culture From the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

New York, NY: Berghahn Books. ISBN: 978-0-85745-941-1 (hbk.) ISBN 978-0-85745-942-8 (ebk.). i–xix + 244 pages.

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Claire Wintle's first book *Colonial Collecting and Display* approaches (post-) colonial theory from a new perspective, based on a focus on material culture: It seeks to 'decolonize' the written colonial discourse and adds new contexts to postcolonial critique by examining museum objects instead of textual sources. These commodities and personal belongings once used by indigenous peoples are studied as material marks on the world left by people who are excluded from the written modes of representations such as colonial archives or published documents (p. 3). The volume investigates the biography of a set of objects such as dishes, clothes, jewelry as well as zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figures made by the indigenous peoples of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the era of British colonization between 1858 and 1949. It follows their way through personal collections to their final place in the Brighton Museum, now called the Royal Pavilion and Museums, Brighton & Hove (RPMBH).

As a senior lecturer in the History of Art and Design at the University of Brighton, the author's research focuses on museums, imperialism, and decolonization, with special attention to the material culture of India and its neighboring islands, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. After several field studies in the area and having taken on the curator role of the exhibition *Temple, Man and Tuson: Collecting the Andaman and Nicobar Islands* in the Brighton Museum, the author gained sufficient first-hand experience and sources for her research. Yet, Claire Wintle emphasizes that her book is not an ethnographic study of the culture and peoples of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, but is an object-centered – that is, not text-focused – research of the colonial project (p. 11). Along with an emerging group of scholars – amongst others museologists and anthropologists such as Nicholas Thomas, Chris Gosden, and Chantal Knowles – the author emphasizes the importance of material culture in exploring the cultural, social, and economic processes of empire formation. The author raises one major question: What do a certain set of objects and its changing meaning reveal about imperial histories? Throughout her analysis, Wintle seeks to answer this question by investigating the factors that played a role in the biography of the collection displayed in RPMBH.

Using the example of a zoomorphic figure called *hentakoi*, the circumstances of production, use, and collection of the objects in the Andaman and Nicobar

Islands are examined. The author emphasizes the two-way nature of trade, arguing that although the attacks of British colonizers and indigenous hostility made encounters and product exchange difficult, the conflict softened with time. Hence, cooperation between the two parties slowly developed, whereby the sale of Andamanese objects to the colonizers can be considered as a creative and positive response to the new historical situation. A strong point the book makes is that even though it does not deny the negative elements of colonialism, it succeeds in highlighting the balance of colonial encounters.

By questioning the existence of an “average collector” (p. 60), Wintle makes a key argument in Chapter 2, where three different sets of objects are examined, which later formed the whole collection of the Brighton Museum. By introducing the three collectors’ different personalities, their degrees of professional responsibility, the levels of access to indigenous life, their personal status and individual tastes, Wintle points out how all these aspects influence the circumstances of collecting as well as the later career of the objects. Wintle discusses the scientific collection of Edward Horace Man, Richard Carnac Temple’s collection for professional status, and the gendered approach in Katharine Sara Tuson’s indigenous artifacts to show how the objects acquired different layers of meaning from the very beginning of their biographies.

Moving farther along this line, the next station of the collected objects is Victorian and Edwardian Britain, as the personal possessions of the returned (ex)colonial elite or as their donations to the Brighton Museum. A thorough social and cultural analysis offers insights into the preformed conceptions with which the museum visitors might have approached the collection (Chapter 3). This reception was formed by three major factors: by the pictorial depictions of this Asian colony on the pages of the *Illustrated London News* (ILN), by the Colonial and Indian Exhibition in 1886 where the Nicobar and Andaman Islands were brought to the fore as a curiosity, and finally by Arthur Conan Doyle’s popular Sherlock Holmes novella *The Sign of Four* (1890). In the latter, the villain is a savage and vicious native from the Andaman Islands, who commits the central murder of the plot. Wintle analyzes in detail how the character of the native Tonga encapsulates the image of exoticism as well as the colonial fear prevailing in Victorian society. Nevertheless, the native character of the Doyle-novella may also be interpreted as the negative manifestation of a *general* colonial feeling, but not – as Wintle suggests – as a *concrete* antipathy towards the Andaman Islands. It seems that she does not consider the possibility that Doyle simply searched for ‘something exotic’ for his plot. Owing to the illustrations of ILN and the Colonial Exhibition, his attention turned to the Andaman Islands – but only to find a geographical place for his plot. Wintle’s lack of information in this regard may be the consequence of her overprotection of this territory’s cultural heritage, signs of which can be occasionally perceived throughout the whole book. Yet, irrespective of Doyle’s intentions and writing methods, Claire Wintle is undoubtedly correct in her judgment that due to the *Sign of Four*, Victorian society was faced with a negative image of the Andaman Islands, which influenced the reception of the Brighton Museum’s collection, too.

In Chapter 4, it is made clear that the author of *Colonial Collecting and Display* certainly cannot – and does not want to – deny her museological vein: She examines

various paradigms according to which the Brighton Museum approached, organized, and presented the collection to the audience. From the professional viewpoint of an insider, she gives a gripping overview of how evolutionary, geographical, later on aesthetic, and finally thematic approaches led to continuous reconsiderations and reorganizations of the exhibition.

The scope of the book is limited to the year 1949; however, the final chapter studies potential contemporary postcolonial approaches to the display and interpretation of the objects.

In sum, *Colonial Collecting and Display* offers a fascinating overview of how material culture can serve as a mediator between peoples, cultures, and historical periods, and how attributed functions and meanings change and form people's knowledge and ideas about imperial histories. Claire Wintle presents her analysis of the colonial discourse in a three-layered way: Through the life of concrete objects (e.g., the *hentakoi* mentioned above), she offers insights into the colonial relations between Great Britain and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and into the whole colonial project.

Colonial Collecting and Display is a must read for anyone interested in the peoples and material culture of India as well as the Nicobar and Andaman Islands. Due to the detailed object descriptions and the museological approach, the book is particularly interesting for ethnographers and museum experts. Owing to the illustrations and a clear and lucid writing style, it also constitutes a fascinating read for those who simply have an interest in learning about colonial encounters from a unique and original point of view.

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