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# ARCHIVES, MUSEUMS AND COLLECTING PRACTICES IN THE MODERN ARAB WORLD - AN INTRODUCTION

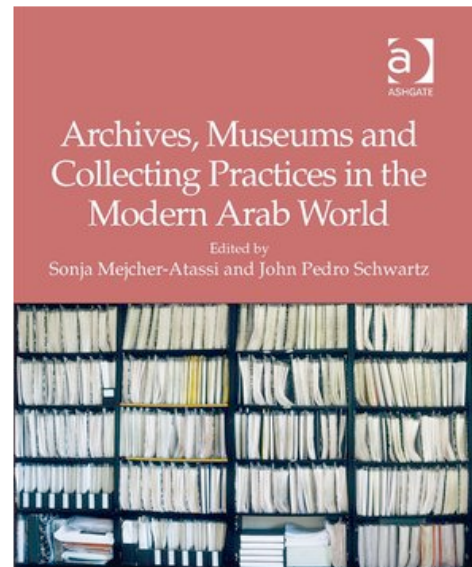
Sonja Mejcher-Atassi and John Pedro Schwartz

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In the introduction to their new book, *Archives, Museums and Collecting Practices in the Modern Arab World*, editors Sonja Mejcher-Atassi and John Pedro Schwartz outline a number of critical tensions inherent within museum practices of the Arab world. Seeking to fill the dearth of research in the increasingly pertinent field of collection studies, Mejcher-Atassi and Schwartz question what constitutes a collector in politicised and contested Arab states. They outline the complexity of authoring museological narratives that are sincere to local cultural production, as opposed to ones that function as an imperial interpretation of what constitutes 'locality'.

Mejcher-Atassi and Schwartz assert that there is urgency for collectors to salvage a part of modern Arab identity, arguing that a museum's collecting practices are in and of themselves, a form of rescuing. Ultimately they argue that collections require a re-visioning to evidence that each and every Arab museum bears the imprint of the many local lives who constitute its shared narrative history.

What follows is the introduction of their new book, *Archives, Museums and Collecting Practices in the Modern Arab World*, which is published by Fernham: Ashgate.



Archives, Museums and Collecting Practices in the Modern Arab World, Cover image, 2012. Courtesy Ashgate

## Introduction: Challenges and Directions in an Emerging Field of Research

*Sonja Mejcher-Atassi and John Pedro Schwartz*

I'm afraid that this museum craze in the West has inspired the uncultured and insecure rich of this country to establish ersatz museums of modern art with adjoining restaurants. This despite the fact that we have no culture, no taste, and no talent in the art of painting. What Turks should be viewing in their own museums are not bad imitations of Western art but their own lives. Instead of displaying the Occidental fantasies of our rich, our museums should show us our own lives.

Orhan Pamuk, *The Museum of Innocence*<sup>[1]</sup>

While this passage focuses on Turkish museology, it also points up the broader problem for collecting practices in the Arab world.<sup>[2]</sup> For this discursive activity – and the emerging discipline that studies it – faces a twofold challenge: to think critically about the transmission of western assumptions, methods and goals while adapting the insights of a tradition most commonly associated with the west, and to combat the orientalist tendency to essentialise the region's culture and society as timeless and identical. How can collectors in and of the Arab world show 'their own lives'? How can they do this without offering an elitist or paternalistic representation of life? How might they bridge the gap between art and life? What are the material conditions in which art production and exhibition function? Who are the audiences for these collections? For what purposes are they exhibited? And how can those who study such collections read, analyse, critique and intervene in them?

Rather than provide ready answers to these pertinent questions, this book proposes a reflexive turn in critical attention, examining collections as processes or practices and not just as things. It focuses on the local context of a given collection: the mesh of exigencies, desires and discourses that distinguish a collection in form and function and drive it into being. It pays attention to the particular interplay of audience, goal and circumstances that situates a collection rhetorically and historically. It foregrounds local histories of collecting, allowing room for the contestation of meaning and the messy contradictions and discontinuities that this entails. It complicates the monolithic conception of Arab society and culture by situating cultural practices and products within their specific historical, social and material contexts – in relation to their lives and afterlives, their narratives and counter-narratives, their patterns of production and consumption.

As [Donald] Preziosi and [Claire] Farago point out in their introduction to *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, more has been written about the museum in the last decade than ever before. However, this does not apply to the Arab world for a variety of reasons. *Archives, Museums and Collecting Practices in the Modern Arab World* fills a gap in collection studies, a growing area of concentration within the interdisciplinary field of cultural studies. It does not give a comprehensive overview; rather, it offers case studies of collecting practices in different Arab countries, at the same time highlighting their shared histories with colonial – and neo-colonial – practices in western countries. The authors come from numerous disciplinary backgrounds, including Middle Eastern studies, history, art history, archaeology, anthropology, and comparative literature. Their case studies deal with both material artefacts, such as antiquities, art, and architecture, and textual artefacts, ranging from dictionaries and encyclopaedias to print ephemera and history textbooks, while complicating the distinction between textual and material. The book aims to make sense of the growing phenomenon of collections in the Arab world, by joining nascent theory to inchoate practice, and to pave the way for further research.

[...]

The recent museum boom in the Gulf is closely linked to global developments and raises a number of questions with respect to the production and consumption of art. It can be regarded as an effort to provide the 'cities of salt', as the late Arab novelist Abd al-Rahman Munif called them in his five-volume novel of the same title, with 'cultural capital', 'distinction', and 'taste', to use Pierre Bourdieu's critical vocabulary.<sup>[3]</sup> The new museums in the Gulf are, in fact, closely related to cultural tourism and near in character to theme parks. Saadiyat Island ('the island of happiness'), off the coast of Abu Dhabi, with its cultural district housing four major museums, is especially noteworthy not only for its scope and the architects involved in its design, such as Frank Gehry, Jean Nouvel, Zaha Hadid and Norman Foster, but also for its institutional affiliation with the world's most powerful museums, such as the Louvre and the Guggenheim.<sup>[4]</sup> While such mega-institutions claim to speak on behalf of one world, they fail to give room to 'conflicted histories' and to 'reveal the imperial as well as the Enlightenment history of collections', critics say.<sup>[5]</sup> [...]

At the same time that the Gulf is taking a leading role in institutionalising the collection of modern and contemporary art in the region, war, occupation and political crisis have hindered the foundation of collections and at times destroyed existing collections, both public and private, as in the case of Palestine, Lebanon and Iraq. [...]



A number of non-governmental and non-profit organisations have set out 'to rescue a part of their identities', to use [Hans] Belting's words, in response to the destruction of collections, to global claims over world heritage, and to authoritarian regimes' control over collections – which might be summarised as the absence of collections devoted to 'show[ing] our lives'. [...] These initiatives have gone hand in hand with an increased interest in collecting practices, especially the archive, in contemporary artistic practices. The latter have introduced a new perspective on collecting, as they bring together factual and fictitious material. [...] Of particular interest for the subject of our book is Khalil Rabah's ongoing project of *The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind*; a photograph, which is part of the multi-media installation, figures on our book cover. Rabah has collected, classified and put on display often invented artefacts. *The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind* has travelled to a number of different art venues, each time taking on different manifestations. Existing as a virtual museum only, it offers institutional criticism and mocks the museum, but at the same time 'function[s] as a substitute for a situation so deprived, so disrupted, so totally unlike any other'.<sup>[6]</sup> [...]

This book critically questions not only what collections exhibit – whether museums, archives, or lexicons – but also how and why we collect, how collections come into existence, grow, transform, wither, or are destroyed, what purposes and audiences they serve, and what narratives they engender. As the book's title indicates, the focus is on collecting *practices* rather than on collections themselves. The book thus argues for a valuation of collections as the subject, and not just the source, of study. Such reflexive attention parallels the introspection in museum studies, in which the re-examination of the field's assumptions, methods and goals has led to a new regard for the institution, and not just its contents, as an object of study. More broadly, treating collections as ends and not just as means participates in the archival turn in cultural and historical studies in the last three decades. [...] The study of collecting practices ultimately involves a change from considering collections solely in terms of the world to which the objects refer, to considering them also in relation to the world to which the collections themselves refer, that is, to the circumstances – social, political, cultural and economic, as well as epistemological – that made the objects in the collection *collectable* in the first place. Part of such inquiry involves questioning class dynamics: Who are the collectors? What sorts of distinctions enable them to collect? Why do they collect? Who has access to these collections? [...]

The collecting practices discussed in this book encompass both objects and texts. Their common status as historical documents and discursive monuments justifies the inclusion of both the material and the textual. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Michel Foucault identifies a change in the object's status with the disciplinary transformation of history in terms of archaeology, which he links to a broader transition from the modern to the postmodern episteme. In the modern episteme, archaeology turned mute, opaque monuments into fluent, transparent documents. In the postmodern episteme, history converts written documents into monuments. These monuments represent 'discourse in its own volume' – opaque, non-allegorical, non-referential – and derive their meaning not from the decipherment of hidden messages but from their underlying habits of thought.<sup>[7]</sup> Foucault's valuation of texts and objects as discourse and his own archaeological approach to historiography drive the archival turn toward collecting rather than collections that we consider methodologically useful.

In arguing for archives, museums and collecting practices in the modern Arab world to 'show us our own lives', the lives of the people of the region, we suggest a strategy of examining 'the local, in a historical way, and the historical, in a local way'.<sup>[8]</sup> This strategy, pursued broadly by our contributors, involves steering between the Scylla of an uncritical, western-centric approach to collecting practices, satirised by Pamuk as the 'establish[ment of] ersatz museums of modern art', and the Charybdis of a nationalistic emphasis on an authentically and exclusively Arab culture. A strategy that looks at collecting practices in their cultural and historical specificity paradoxically reveals the entanglement between the local and the global. It is a commonplace in collection studies that national collections, which arose in conjunction with the nation-state, symbolise the continuity and coherence of that nation-state. This book complicates that model, showing that every collection is always already enmeshed in identity conflicts. A methodological focus on collecting practices, as well as on collections, reveals these contradictions in the history of every collection. Tracing the local circuits of production, transmission, reception and collection, of encounters and exchanges, often of clashes in contact zones of asymmetrical power relations, in colonial, neo-colonial and postcolonial settings – tracing, that is, the practices responsible for a collection's existence exposes the contest of meaning that occurs at every stage in the process



of collecting. Every collection constitutes a narrative, the narrative of its own contestation. From this perspective, every collection amounts, fundamentally, to a collection of the practices that went into its creation. These practices, uncovered by our contributors, attest the efforts by collectors in and of the modern Arab world to 'rescue', in Belting's words, '*a part of their identities*' (our italics) from competing efforts to identify the collected objects with contending cultures. Collecting practices are, at bottom, rescue practices. Thus the aim of a local-historical approach to collecting practices – to 'show us our own lives' – does not mean showing a monolithic national identity, as it may appear to western eyes. Rather, it means showing that 'our lives' are plural in the sense that every collection bears the imprint of many lives – lives given, gained, claimed and counter-claimed in that contention over the meaning of objects, material and/or textual, that forms the object of this study.

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[1] Trans. Freely, Maureen (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), pp. 524-5.

[2] The term 'Arab world' here is used as a geographical marker, designating the countries on which the case studies included in this book focus.

[3] See especially Bourdieu, Pierre, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (New York: Harvard University Press, 1984) and *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993). See also Pierre Bourdieu, Alain Darbel and Dominique Schnapper, *The Love of Art* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

[4] See <http://www.saadiyat.ae/en>.

[5] Marc O'Neill, director of the Glasgow Museum, objecting to Neil MacGregor's vision of the British Museum as quoted in Hans Belting, 'Contemporary Art and the Museum in the Global Age', in Peter Weibel and Andrea Buddensieg (eds), *Contemporary Art and the Museum: A Global Perspective* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2007), p. 33.

[6] Craddock, Sacha in *Nafas* art magazine April 2007. See [http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2007/khalil\\_rabah](http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2007/khalil_rabah).

[7] *The Archaeology of Knowledge* trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), p. 139.

[8] Babbaie, Susan, 'Modern Arab Art', lecture, American University of Beirut, 27 January 2010.