

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Religious Objects in Museums: Private Lives and Public Duties*, by Crispin Paine. Bloomsbury, 2013. 192pp., 21 bw illustrations. Pb., \$34.95. ISBN-13: 9781847887733.

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### Keywords

religion, museums, curators, meaning-making

Crispin Paine's *Religious Objects in Museums: Private Lives and Public Duties* is a broad and very useful survey of the state of "objects which may in some sense be considered 'religious'" (2) in museums worldwide today. Paine, a seasoned museum professional, has for several decades been traveling and observing the treatment of religious objects—and hence religion itself—in museum settings. The depth and breadth of his familiarity with the subject and its changing practice across the globe is astounding, as reflected in his many enlightening examples and the book's thorough and highly useful bibliography. Paine makes religious objects come alive with interest and relevance, as expressed in his chapter headings: religious objects in museums are "curated," "visited," "worshipped," "claimed," "respected," "dangerous," "elevating," "militant," "promotional," and "explanatory." He finds these objects in a wide range of settings, from anthropological collections to modern theme-park creations; from evangelistic, pro-religion museums to Soviet "Museums of Atheism;" from vast, national museums to local house museums; and from the rational setting of the natural history museum to the quasi-sacred space of the art museum. He shows us that not only are religious objects in museums increasingly demanding and receiving curatorial and public attention, museums are becoming more open (however tentatively) to the overt expression of religion within their walls, even hosting explicitly religious events and celebrations, such as the annual Buddhist festival at the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

Paine's thoughtful work is both descriptive and prescriptive. Meaning-making, he insists, should be viewed as a three way interaction between museum professionals, visitors in all their uniqueness and complexity, and the objects themselves. Paine maintains that respect is crucial: respect by curators for

the objects in their care and the complex way they represent faith; respect by museums for their visitors; and visitors' respect for the objects and one another. One exhibition Paine found to be a model of positive interaction and respect was David Goa's thematically organized "*Anno Domini: Jesus through the Centuries*" at the Provincial Museum of Alberta, Canada (2000). (The web version is still available, see <http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/sgc-cms/expositions-exhibitions/annodomini/index-eng.html>).

Given the "current dominance of religious discourse, and the way that globalisation has made people throughout the world aware of other faiths, and often concerned to protect and promote their own" (3), museums that choose to tackle this subject enter a conversation with high stakes. Paine sees this as a tremendous opportunity. Undertaken with care and respect, museums can—and should—use the objects in their care to foster a productive, public conversation about religious practice and belief, a conversation carefully designed to increase mutual respect and understanding.