

Review: *The Return of Curiosity*, by Nicholas Thomas

Journal ISSN number: 2054-5770

This article was written by [Ken Arnold](#)

03-07-2017 Cite as 10.15180/170711 Review

[Review: *The Return of Curiosity*, by Nicholas Thomas](#)

Published in [Spring 2017, Sound and Vision](#)

Article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15180/170711>

Keywords

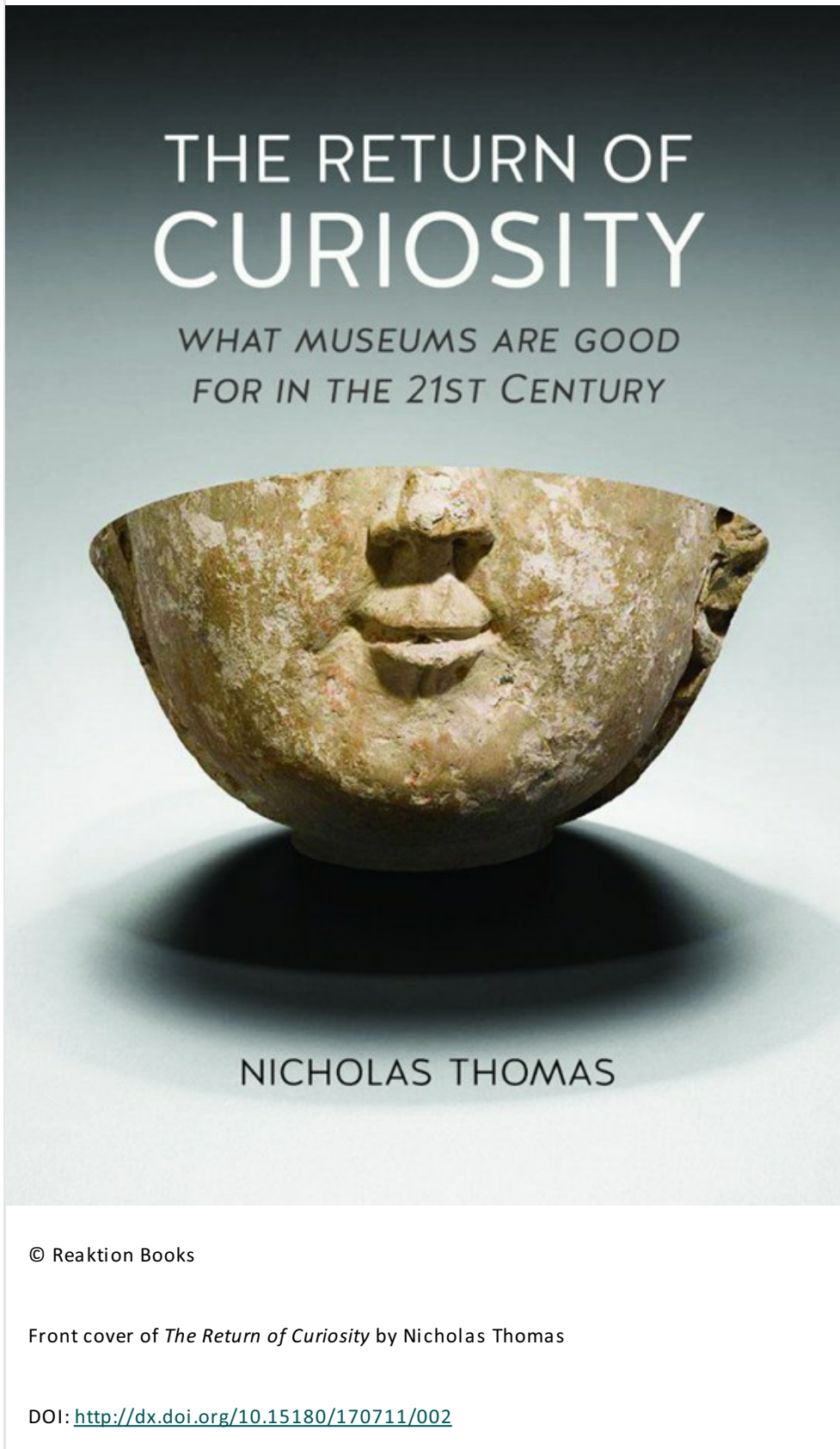
Review, The Return of Curiosity, Nicholas Thomas, Reaktion

Review: The Return of Curiosity by Nicholas Thomas

Museums are on the up. More than fifty per cent of the UK population now visits one every year; with attendances across many western countries having grown as much as ten per cent in the last decade. During half that period, a variety of funding agencies and individuals have poured no less than five billion dollars into America's museum infrastructure, with entirely new museums (such as the Eli Broad in LA and Smithsonian's African American Museum) or hefty extensions of established ones (like that at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art) being built as a consequence. While on the other side of the planet, somewhere between two and four new Chinese museums have been set up roughly every week for the last five years; though not all of them, it seems, are full of either exhibits or visitors. Across the entire planet, it has been estimated that there were something like 23,000 museums twenty years ago, with the figure more than doubling to 55,000 today (Fiammetta Rocco, 'Temples of Delight,' *The Economist*, 21 December 2013, p 152).

Museums then are unmistakably gaining in both social and cultural significance. These words will no doubt sound complacently hollow and implausibly distant to those working with dwindling budgets or through drastic cuts; but it is difficult to resist a sense that we might be entering a new international museum age. This swelling of overall fortunes provides the backdrop to Nicholas Thomas' timely and rewarding *The Return of Curiosity*.

Figure 1



His first chapter focuses on this ascendancy, characterising the shift as ‘a kind of belated adolescence’: a period during which museums have grown ‘suddenly in fits and starts, assuming new attitudes and responsibilities, demanding and obtaining attention and money’. What he lays out is a confidence-boosting depiction of an old institution discovering renewed purpose. And for those of us who have worked in the sector for a number of decades, it also provides a cheering reminder of how thoroughly museums have been saved from the cultural obsolescence that we probably recall from our early professional lives.

With the benefit of hindsight it seems clear that those of us embarking on a museum career 20–30 years ago were joining institutions that had become stuck in the past and appeared, like cultural dinosaurs, to be approaching extinction. And for a while, it seemed that the only way to save them from being trapped by their own irrelevance was to turn to business thinking and jargon for salvation: we needed – we were told – to turn our focus away from collections and toward audiences, who were being transformed into ‘customers’. Marketing strategies were to inform programming decisions; key performance indicators and mission statements were a pre-requisite for setting out organisational aims, structures and job descriptions; and concepts of ‘edutainment’ and engagement were to replace less clearly articulated or examined, and thoroughly old-fashioned, assumptions about what museums were good for. All this suggested that the traditional role of museums might well be disappearing for good.

And then, towards the end of the millennium, it became apparent that technology had got hold of a final set of nails to entomb an institution already outlasting its natural life. It was all but impossible to resist the logic that digital technologies were destined to make museums as we knew them utterly irrelevant. Swept along by strong currents of the information revolution (frankly it resembled a *tsunami* at times), museum leaders (not surprisingly, especially those working with science and technology collections) eagerly adopted all sorts of survival mechanisms in order to rejuvenate, or, better, reinvent the museum: digitization, electronic simulation, virtual environments, interactive exhibits, and numerous other technology-led innovations were all proffered as life-saving devices.

The transformations needed, we discovered, were root-and-branch, involving dramatic exercises in rebranding, with public edifices being visibly and sometimes violently plucked from their dusty and boring origins (those were invariably the favoured adjectives), and then replanted in vibrant electronic environments. Museums should be repurposed as broadcast systems, or as walk-in electronic publications, or as film production companies (it’s ironic how many of the models so beloved by excitable directors of that era, were themselves about to be threatened by the same cultural forces). In short, museums were to be anything but museums. Indeed, the name ‘museum’ itself had become a problem, which many solved by replacing with the functionally efficient sounding ‘centre’, predominantly adopted in two flavours: heritage or science.

Return of Curiosity doesn’t really hark back to those uncertain, less curious times; preferring to pick up the story a generation later. The world of culture has moved on, it is argued, by re-evaluating its past and reclaiming some of its institutional history. During that period at the turn of the last century, when bath water was energetically being tossed without necessarily much heed to saving babies, curiosity felt remote, irrelevant even. This perception was particularly heightened for me, since before embarking on a career in museums, I had spent years pursuing historical research on their early modern precedents: cabinets of curiosities.

Nor does Thomas apply himself to understanding what cultural and social shifts might have curtailed those uncurious decades, or why museums have re-emerged as prominent and thriving (if financially precarious) features of most progressive and confident civic environments. Instead, in this long-essay of a book, he describes the new optimistic state we find ourselves in with conviction, using his training and background (both as a distinguished and creative anthropologist and historian, and as the decade-long director of Cambridge’s Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology) to articulate what he sees as the point of museums now. To understand ‘what is behind the new, almost supercharged dynamism of the sector’ he draws less on accumulated evidence than on belief and experience. Fortunately his substantial track record and the wisdom he has garnered along the way enables Thomas to make a compelling and uplifting case for the power that museums have as a force for good in the twenty-first century.

The issue of what role museums can and should now play is, of course, much thought about and debated, both internally and more broadly among those with the power to decide how much funding they should get from government, foundations, businesses and commerce. For the state it is perhaps an increasingly important issue because visitors (as voters) contribute through their taxes, as do too, of course, the fabled stay-aways. Answers to what effects on visitors all of these stakeholders should expect from museums invariably gesture towards a mixture of psychological, educational and sociological impacts. Some argue with passion that an effective museum can demonstrably increase the personal wellbeing of those who go (adding to their very happiness); others focus on the help they can give to educational attainment, through channels of so-called ‘informal learning’; and still others point to evidence for consequent improvements to social cohesion and tolerance. A significant source of strength in the sector comes from its diversity, and this is rightly played out in the varied nature of any

given museum's value and worth.

But too many of these well-meaning attempts to provide arguments for continued funding, and certainly too much of its rhetoric, unthinkingly turn museums into instruments applied to broader social aims. It's unfortunate, if understandable, that those of us who work in museums are tempted to over-sell the relevance of our work to externally set agendas. Museums, I suspect, are rather less usable than we are inclined to suggest; and their impact is very likely more mysterious than it appears. As museum philosopher Hilde Hein usefully reminds us, museums came from 'idle roots' that were essentially 'gratuitous and wondrously unencumber[ed]'. What makes them *important* does not simply lie in their contributions to these worthwhile social agendas; and certainly what makes them *distinctive* is found more readily (and interestingly) in their history and intrinsic values than in any exit-survey-based evidence for their external effectiveness.

Thomas wisely avoids the intricacies of the discussions and debates that swirl around such topics, choosing instead to unfold an argument that begins with the foundational philosophical precept behind the emergence of modern museums in the first place: namely the curiosity of his title. For him, this fundamental instinct is 'fertile and necessary, not only for people in general, but specifically for those of us alive in the twenty-first century'.

Though he uses it rather sparingly, another word that I kept on thinking his book extensively addressed is 'investigation'. Maybe it sounds too serious (though not nearly as much as the word 'research' – the deadly serious and rather exclusive term applied in universities) but surely a return of curiosity in museums must bring with it a renewed emphasis on the basic human urge to investigate.

The idea of active enquiry has, in fact, also been an essential part of the museum mission since their early-modern reinvention. It comes out of the same philosophical and social forces that compelled late-Renaissance *curiosi* and *virtuosi* to invent anatomical theatres, menageries and scientific laboratories all as places in which they could closely inspect the world around them for themselves, rather than relying on received wisdom from the 'ancients'. One way of understanding this most recent return of curiosity then would be to see it as evidence of a broader, promiscuously democratic extension of the notion of who might properly be involved in such enquiries. Namely anyone who visits a museum, Thomas seems to suggest.

So having made it clear that museums are experiencing a few good decades, and urging us to see a revitalised place for curiosity at the heart of that up-swing, Thomas sets about articulating where and how he sees it surfacing. Given his bold adherence to a rather old-fashioned word, it is perhaps not surprising that material culture is also central to his thesis. However, he is rather less concerned with a nostalgic (and fashionable) return to museums as curiosity cabinets, and rather more focused on the effect that objects have in attracting and then agitating our innate investigative spirit. For him, museums are more meaningfully thought of as cabinets *for* curious people than *of* curiosities.

The value attached to things in museums waned somewhat during the last quarter century's infatuation with digital experiences. And not a few museum directors at some point wondered whether at least some of their collections could be converted into digital assets, so as to save space, money and trouble. More recently, the fortunes of this precious stuff seem to have waxed again as we re-embraced a concern for the physical, rather than just the visible. A recent *New Yorker* article reported that though scientific papers concerning vision outnumber those on the science of touch by fifty to one, there have nevertheless been more about the neuroscience and cellular basis of touch in the last decade than the preceding century (quoted by Alice Rawsthorn, 'By Design', *Frieze*, no. 182, October 2016, pp 57–59). The digital is here to stay of course, but the world's physical aspects seem also to be demanding more consideration these days. Those with philosophical inclinations have been saying something along these lines for a while, to the extent that a 'material turn' has been identified across the humanities. Prominent voices like those of anthropologist Daniel Miller and literary philosopher Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht have, for example, insisted on the urgency of dwelling on the materiality of things, adopting an almost fundamentalist position about the 'thingness of things'. They argue that when it comes to things, we must resist being overly seduced by the symbolic view of their importance, and concern ourselves as much with their basic presence as their subtler meanings.

Thomas, too, is keen that we think carefully about the value of being close to things – 'the conjuncture of intimate actuality' as he puts it. But his main point is not just to chime in with this recent chorus, but rather to offer a refined version that further encourages us to think about the collection in addition to individual objects. He's too polite to say so, but by implication he

might well be suggesting that we material-culture enthusiasts have become rather obsessed with isolated things. He wants us to broaden our purview and concern ourselves further with the internal relations that are set up within a collection, because he believes 'the strange gathering of related stuff that constitutes the collection has a certain magic' (p 143). It's perhaps an obvious, but nonetheless important point of elaboration: objects in museums are inevitably part of a collection. In fact, most 'museums do not hold "a collection" as much as they do "collections"' (p 74). So these gatherings of gatherings should not be thought of simply as amassed things 'susceptible to precise enumeration and definition'; because with intelligent inspection and contemplation they turn out to be 'stranger and more surprising assemblages than we have appreciated'. Similar to a nation or community then, 'a collection is likewise made up of complex associations, connections and representations'. Above all then, collections are made of relations, and thereby take on some of the more organic qualities of life itself (pp 17, 75).

Museum objects were, of course, brought into museums at some time in the past, and at that moment records and recollections of other 'lives' they carried from further in the past were simultaneously accessioned. But these things face the future too; they provide us with tools that can be used to do intellectual and emotional work. Thomas puts it this way: 'a collection is more than a historical resource; it is also something that we work with prospectively, a technology that enables the creation of new things'. This is the museum as method that supplies the title of his second chapter (pp 9, 99–100). In it he talks evocatively of the power of juxtaposition, which he prefers 'to an anodyne word such as "ordering" or "grouping" precisely because it implies a placing-side-by-side that may be argumentative, that may entail ambiguity or tension, that may take a risk' (p 110). And through this special form of associative analysis, curators are able to stage 'similarity, difference, progression, disruption, equivalence, hierarchy, singularity and accumulation' (pp 107, 135). The same contentious issues can, he points out, be raised on the radio as in an exhibition. But the former runs the risk of heightening tempers and sub-dividing listeners into echo chambers (as we've recently learned to call them); while the latter is more likely to give pause for thought and reflection, 'because a verbal assertion and an artefact's mute oration are different in their nature and effect'. Museums provide an ideal realm in which 'you can pursue interest and discover interests you did not know you had, not alone, but in company – that is, in the company of strangers' (pp 62–63). And in this way the museum becomes 'an apparatus that helps us "collect our thoughts"'.

These are ideas that many of us will hazily imagine we somehow already knew; but we owe a debt of gratitude to Thomas for expressing them so eloquently and persuasively. He is surely right: continuing to apply curiosity within our institutions can help us get more from our objects than they seemed to possess when they were brought over the threshold; and collections do amount to more than just a group of things precisely because individual artefacts are entangled with and point to each other in surprising ways.

Ultimately Thomas also wants us to acknowledge that what 'collections say to us is less important than the difference they make to who we are' (p 137). Here is the most optimistic implication of his claimed return to curiosity: the suggestion that collections have an important civic role to play because of the way they furnish us with a uniquely adept technology for applying the past to the future. This is because the type of curiosity they nurture leads to a shared awareness: 'Through devices of scale and address, not only contemporary works but also other sorts of museum exhibits elicit shared awareness and a common responsiveness (not necessarily a common response) from disparate people.' The curiosity promoted in museums is linked to sociality ('the one prepares us for the other'), so that the practice of visiting them can become a form of positive participation in civic life. Curiosity leads to connection, to sociality and finally to 'a readiness to encounter and acknowledge difference'. In short (and despite their disappointing conservatism and seeming inability to instil direct action beyond their own walls) museums do make us more eager to encounter the unfamiliar, the different; to suspend our judgments even; and thereby to elicit from us greater empathy. Thomas' answer to the quandary of what museums are good for is that the curiosity they champion 'equips us better to acquire an awareness of the societies we all now inhabit, and to act and live within them'. Museums, then, are not just a part of the public sphere, they constitute 'a space of participation in public life' (pp 143, 56, 58–9, 15).

Thomas' measured, rather than bombastic, approach to sharing these ideas allows them to land gently. And while he is right to point out that a number of them (if not his specific examples) can be found elsewhere, he is also correct in maintaining that they have to date been widely scattered and have not been collectively formulated in this way. Along the way, Thomas delivers a more than adequate work-out for some of the issues keenly debated in museological circles at the moment: Bourdieu's analysis of class capital bestowed on gallery visitors; post-colonial qualms about whether and when objects should be repatriated; how identity politics gets played out in exhibitions, and so forth. And doing this for a potentially broader audience

is in itself a valuable service. But this is far more than an exercise in synthesis, and his substantial arguments deserve to be discussed widely. The central tenet about the potential for curiosity to lead to healthier civic societies (and the opportunities for museums in particular to achieve this through work with collections) has already become a more urgent topic for us all to consider than when he was writing this book.

A number of the examples Thomas chooses, and the details he observes, are telling in themselves. It is good, for example, to be reminded that talk of 'audiences' for museums oddly implies a predominantly oral experience; and to remember too that every museum has a story of origin, which inevitably makes them, no matter what their purported subject matter, history museums of a kind. His point about the ways those of us working in museums – who were trained to critique the very idea of museums – now apply self-reflexive practices, is also intriguing to consider. It is gratifying to come across a book about how museums engage with society that does not feel duty bound to start with the assumption that their principle goal is to fix some of society's ills: a relief not to finish it with a deflated sense that at best they might offer inadequately small solutions to a catalogue of big problems. Thomas starts elsewhere with a refreshing assumption (implied rather than trumpeted) that museums can, and probably already are, doing something quite convincing simply by having the courage and confidence to stand on their own cultural legs and draw on some cherished and extensively-tried-and-tested convictions.

Thomas presents a convincing argument adroitly pulled together. But, I confess, I finished it wanting a little more. Anyone who has stayed with me this far can be in no doubt that I am with him in most of what he says; but then I came to this book as an unambiguously pre-converted reader. It's a subject close to my own interests and sympathies, which may explain why I wanted something a bit fuller and more rounded. But I did sometimes wonder what affect his sermon might have on more sceptical ears. Too often, I had a sense of being on the verge of firmly grasping the topic, only to feel it slip out of my hands.

I was eager, for example, to hear more about what curators can and should do to get the most from applying curiosity to collections. Oddly he seems to have more to say about the work of contemporary artists (acting as guest curators), than about those who work in them day-after-day. The idea of curation has recently entered into much wider use, emerging from relative obscurity into popular and cultural ubiquity. In a world of too much, where the problem of selection has become chronic, curation increasingly offers us a way to avoid drowning in stuff, images and information. People of all sorts with all sorts of training are inclined to curate pretty much everything from scientific data to musical playlists to dinner menus. Much has been written about the power of this concept in contemporary culture. So I found it curious that Thomas did not feel the need to say more about how the thoroughly thought-through version of this now-fashionable practice is being experimented with and refined within institutions that have forever been curatorial.

I also wanted Thomas to move on from the role of curiosity in grappling with collections to a more in-depth consideration of how museums can foster 'public research'. What sorts of enquiries can museums promote that academic departments in universities cannot? I suspect that museum-based investigations can more easily and naturally be cross-disciplinary, with readier access to visual and material culture; ones that are more open to experiential as well as textual evidence, and that draw on opportunities to discover and share almost simultaneously. I also missed Thomas's thoughts on the effects of museums as spaces – the cognitive, didactic, emotional and social values inherent in their architecture and design, but also simply their symbolic ethos as places. In this respect, Kali Tzorti's thorough study *Museum Space: Where Architecture Meets Museology* would be a very good, though somewhat fatter, volume to read alongside.

I worry slightly that Thomas's important insights could fall into a kind of limbo: those outside the museum world might find this book too narrowly specialised, while those immersed in the issues could mistakenly assume it to be simply a summary of already familiar ideas. In the end, *The Return of Curiosity* might have been either a more effective shorter essay, or a more convincing (if bulkier) monograph. But these were not the works that Thomas set out to write, and I for one have nevertheless been considerably enlightened by the book that he has written.

Tags

- [Exhibitions](#)
- [Museology](#)
- [Museum collections](#)
- [Material culture](#)
- [Curating](#)
- [Public engagement](#)
- [Research in museums](#)

Author information



Ken Arnold

Creative Director at the Wellcome Trust

[Contact this author >](#)

Ken Arnold oversees Wellcome's work on international cultural engagement and its interdisciplinary research Hub. He is also a professor at the University of Copenhagen, where he directs Medical Museion (partly supported through the Novo Nordisk Foundation Center for Basic Metabolic Research)