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Book Review

Edith Franke / Ramona Jelinek-Menke (eds.), Handling Religious Things

The Material and the Social in Museums

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Five small statues advance in a neat row, as if part of a procession. They invite us to immerse ourselves in the book *Handling Religious Things. The Material and the Social in Museums*. This cover image gives visual form to key concepts that frame this collection of essays. The statues are diverse, yet although they come from different places and times, have different stories, features and dimensions, materialise different beings, ideas and relationships, they dwell today in the same museum. The statues refer to cultural, religious and museal practices and, most importantly here, they are material things and therefore important sources for reconstructing complex (religious) communication processes that take place every time they are looked at, touched or used.

The collection adopts four approaches, divided across four sections, to unravelling the complexity of things as socio-cultural practices. The first section, “Entering a Complex”, offers a general reflection on the roles and transformations of things in museums. The editors of this volume, Ramona Jelinek-Menke and Edith Franke, director of the Religionskundliche Sammlung in Marburg, which was founded in 1927 by Rudolph Otto, introduce the interdisciplinary research project “Dynamics of Religious Things in Museums”, whose results are documented in the anthology. The second chapter in this introductory section, “Negotiating Religion in Museums”, is co-written by Franke and Anna Matter. Overall “Entering a Complex” focuses on the specific and complex meaning-making processes generated

by objects in relation to their origins, travels and interactions with other things within the specific displays in which they are exhibited and within the various relationships they form with researchers and visitors.

The next three parts of the books are presented as if galleries in a museum. The reader, or visitor, undertakes a fascinating exploration of materiality not simply in terms of the academic study of religion, but also by engaging in an aesthetic relationship with things.

The first gallery, “Religions Things and Social Contexts – Discovering an Entanglement in the Museum”, exhibits three essays that provide deep insight into theoretical debates. While Mirko Roth makes a strong argument in favour of considering materiality a fundamental approach to social practices, Peter J. Bräunlein shows by means of analysis of a selected object the challenges and opportunities in considering the inherent agency of things. Bärbel Beinbauer-Köhler enriches this section with a historical analysis of the role and function of things and displays in the Near and Middle East. Overall, this section provides an illuminating approach to material religion and the role of the museum from a theoretical perspective, prioritising objects as actively engaged in multipart communication processes that are performed in cultural exchanges and through time.

The second gallery, “Materialisation of Social Processes – Analysing Musealisation”, focuses on the status, history and transformations that mould things whose travels have brought them to a museum. The articles collected here are case studies from different times and places. Ekaterina Teryukova, Kerstin Johannsen, Leila Tavangar Ranjbar, Susanne Rodemeier, Ferdinand Liefert, Pardis Eskandaripour and Alisha Meininghaus scrutinise selected things and museums across the world in light of the social processes they materialise as well as the challenges of reconstructing religious settings within a museal context. A cross-reading of this section highlights tensions between the objects, their histories and their contexts, as well as the opportunities and limits of the scholarly categories used to analyse them. Accordingly, this part of the book demonstrates the relevance of the theoretical debate discussed in the introductory part of the volume: things in museums are dynamic and the communication processes they mould and materialise mirror not only socio-religious practices but also the regimes of knowledge that regulate academic approaches.

The third gallery, “Social Transformation by Religious Museum Things – Reflecting Museum Mediation and the Social Environment of Religious Things”, enlarges the concept of the museum by considering other social

spaces, such as social media. It critically discusses meaning-making processes arising from museum things in a broader cultural setting, with case studies by Yuriko Yamanaka and a chapter co-written by Ramona Jelinek-Menke and Maike Sieler. An interview with Léontine Meijer-van Mensch, the director of – among other important collections – the State Ethnographical Collections of Saxony and a scholar with broad experience in museum practices and museology, concludes the section (and the book), focusing on the role of museums in forming and transforming approaches and perceptions of religion in contemporary society.

The anthology provides fascinating insights into this research field and opens up reflection on materiality on different levels. The book is rooted in a shared debate, and by means of varied case studies it elucidates the key terms of a common research project. Theory and phenomenology are put in enriching relationship. In exploring thing and museum, the project highlights the inherent transformations and, accordingly, complexities of religious communication in a particular context, and thus under specific circumstances. Things can be understood as materialisations of relationships and communication processes that carry meaning whenever a scholar, curator, museum visitor, believer or indeed anyone at all relates with an object with which they are confronted. The book stimulates thinking about the arrangements of objects and their agency and impact, as well as considering the places and regimes in which they are preserved and displayed. It suggests that academic treatment of museal objects that describes and contextualises them in terms of scholarly method should also embrace sensorial, emotional and aesthetic perceptions as fundamental dimensions of materiality. Things are always at work; they travel and testify to the complexity of religion as a social and cultural practice that resists scholarly attempts to tame it.