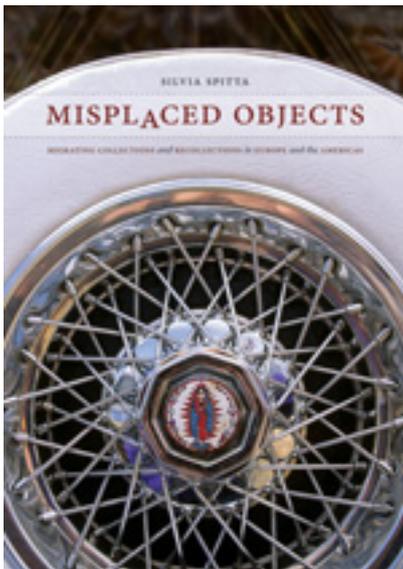


Silvia Spitta's *Misplaced Objects: Migrating Collections and Recollections in Europe and the Americas*

Eric Ames | University of Washington

Spitta, Silvia. *Misplaced Objects: Migrating Collections and Recollections in Europe and the Americas*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009. 280 pages; 141 illustrations. \$50.00 cloth.



Silvia Spitta's new book contributes to the growing literature on the cultural practice of collecting by querying the role of objects in their own right, their patterns of movement in time and space, and the historical experiences associated with them. It is a compelling way to organize what is essentially a wide-ranging study of cultural exchange and encounter between Europe and the New World in specific situations, from the Conquest to the present. For although material objects have no intrinsic meaning or value of their own apart from those ascribed to them by human actions and transactions, such an observation cannot account for the historical circulation of things. To understand that, as sociologist Arjun Appadurai has noted in another context, we can follow the specific forms, uses, and trajectories of objects as they are moved from one place to another as well as in the passage of time (Appadurai 1986, 5). This is precisely the task of Spitta's book. Methodologically, it proceeds from the assumption that the movement of things can illuminate their human and cultural frameworks. Of particular interest here are the frameworks of knowledge, power, identity, and memory. While collected objects literally supply some of the materials that are needed to construct and support these frameworks, Spitta contends, they also sometimes resist being assimilated and exploited in such terms.

The types of objects that most interest Spitta are those that follow multiple paths, diverging over time and space despite all efforts to contain or control them. First, she considers objects collected from the New World and transported to Europe under the flag of science

EMISFÉRICA

and commerce as well as colonialism. Then, she looks at selected European objects circulating in the Americas. Whereas “objects from the Americas arrived in Europe without a concomitant migration of people (other than the occasional Indian to be displayed as a rarity), European objects arrived in the Americas *along with* successive waves of Europeans, Africans, and Asians” (9; original emphasis). Migrating as they do, the objects of this study become imprinted by history and memory, layered with different cultural associations, transformed by changing contexts of use, display, exchange, and neglect; in a word, they become “misplaced.” Spitta’s use of this term is unusual because it does not imply the correlative idea of a “proper” arrangement or location. Rather, “misplacement” here describes the various effects of movement on the object itself. For this reason, Spitta’s particular use of the term and what it brings could have been made more explicit, especially in contrast to more familiar usages as well as to adjacent terms used by other scholars—such as “detachment” in Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s work on the ethnographic object (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998).

Historically, Spitta argues, misplaced objects have had a key role in certain processes of shaping and reshaping the world. The emergence of the European Wunderkammer (or curiosity cabinet) offers a case in point. When American objects began appearing in early modern Europe, they radically shook up systems of scientific ordering and understanding, burst the seams of existing collections, and created new cultural hierarchies as a result. Artifacts of the New World at once stymied and inspired the taxonomic imagination. The very incongruity of American and European objects became a formative principle in its own right, resulting in a fundamental reorganization of what Spitta (drawing on Foucault) calls the “table” of knowledge (3). In this regard, Spitta discusses various collections and institutions, some more familiar than others. Her signal example is also the least well known: the Real Gabinete de Historia Natural de Madrid (or Royal Cabinet). In making this material available to an English-speaking audience for the very first time, Spitta observes that contributions to western science made by Spain and Latin America have historically been either overlooked or dismissed. Working directly against this tendency, Spitta not only recovers this example of the Royal Cabinet, which was assembled in the late 18th century, but also uncovers the fascinating exchange between U.S. president Thomas Jefferson and Juan Bautista Bru, the Cabinet’s official taxidermist. Their shared interest in dinosaur bones discovered in the Americas, and especially their cooperation in framing the significance of such discoveries for an audience of scientific experts, became the occasion for contesting Buffon’s theory of species degeneration as it pertained to the Americas in particular.

Spitta goes on to explore the cabinet’s transformation in later centuries and especially in the United States, ranging from P. T. Barnum’s American Museum in New York City to David Wilson’s Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles. This part of the book is less detailed and suggestive than the discussion of the Royal Cabinet, perhaps because it covers what is relatively well-trodden ground in the scholarship. Spitta associates Barnum, quite rightly, with the democratization of the curiosity cabinet, but she also seems to align him with “science” as a serious pursuit. When Barnum employs the discourse of science, however, he does so

EMISFÉRICA

strategically for an effect; his is a parody, which not only trades on the authority of scientific experts, but also—and more importantly—questions that authority, inviting spectators to take issue and participate in the debate while promoting a relationship to pleasure which is on some level anathema to science. To explore this aspect of Barnum's museum would have only strengthened the book's argument without changing its longer trajectory. Referring to more recent projects such as Wilson's museum and Rosamond Purcell's installations and photographs, Spitta observes that "The Wunderkammern are reclaimed as whimsical, Baroque, magical, performative, post-apocalyptic yet pre-scientific spaces. These revisited spaces...serve to formulate a critique of the hierarchies of natural history and its ethics and aesthetics" (92).

Not only profane objects but also sacred ones are on the move. Hence Spitta's interest in the Virgin of Guadalupe, the different forms in which she has appeared over time, and the many stories and miracles surrounding her visual image. In the course of her migration from Spain to the New World, the Virgin "has been transformed from protectress of Spaniards during the Reconquest of the Peninsula to protectress of Indians shortly after the Conquest of Mexico, only to be appropriated as the banner under which creoles fought for independence from Spain" (119). More recently, in 1999, Pope John Paul II named her patron saint of the hemisphere. And yet, as Spitta explains, the Guadalupe material attests not just to the spread of Christianity, but also to the very unorthodox role of religious syncretism, which plays out in many different and sometimes conflicting ways.

If this book has a symbolic center, it is the discussion of "Guadalupe's Wheels," a phrase that Spitta uses to mean the icon's "relatively fast migration and transformation across the Atlantic into New Spain, and shortly thereafter into New Mexico and other Southwest states, and most recently into the heartland of the United States" and as far north as Canada (124). In the latter context, the image of the Virgin reappears on tattoos, magnets, posters, mouse pads, and other forms of kitsch. One example is that of lowrider cars, a form Spitta discusses not in terms of kitsch, but rather in terms of "performativity," with particular emphasis on the sense of identity and community that is created along with the cars, their spectacular (neobaroque) forms, and their equally remarkable uses. "While lowriders may be entirely a Southwestern phenomenon," she writes, "the performativity of cruising culture, the transformation of cars into cathedrals on wheels, and the use of lowriders for pilgrimage purposes...parallel the Virgin's 'wheels' in Mexico" (130-131).

One of the most interesting claims that Spitta makes is that things-in-motion can effectively open up a space for creating new and increasingly mobile forms of cultural identity. It is her emphasis on the performativity of collecting that makes this point vivid. Witness the cult of Guadalupe and the inroads it has recently made in North America. Spitta cites a group of worshippers from Grand Rapids who traveled to Mexico, where they had commissioned a large wooden sculpture to be made of the Virgin, and then carried it not by car or airplane but rather on foot all the way back to Michigan. By going on foot, and stopping at certain locations along the way, the pilgrims actively redefine the space between and what it means to traverse it. That

is, according to Spitta, they enact a new form of sacred geography, while at the same time redefining a “Mexican identity-in-migration” (157).

The notion of identity as being shaped and reshaped by mobility can lead in many possible directions. This is clearly suggested by the book’s final chapters, which focus on works by contemporary artists: namely, the relational autobiography of Mexican-American sisters Sheila and Sandra Ortiz Taylor, which foregrounds issues of cultural identity and memory as seen through the prism of miniatures and found objects, and the visual art of Sandra Ramos, which challenges and revises the dominant narratives (and politics) of Cuban exile—i.e., as they tend to be presented in the U.S. mass media—by considering those narratives “from the reverse angle of those left behind” (183). Seen from this perspective, not only the political stance but also the artist’s relationship to objects changes radically, the latter being recast in terms of loss and scarcity (as opposed to retrieval and abundance).

This volume represents an object of collection in its own right. Handsomely designed and richly illustrated, it reproduces numerous color images of artifacts, sculptures, paintings, and installations. For so many reasons, *Misplaced Objects* deserves a place not only on the bookshelves of research libraries, but also on the shelves of readers interested in American studies, art history, cultural studies, museum studies, and performance studies.

Eric Ames is Associate Professor of German, adjunct in Comparative Literature, and a member of the Cinema Studies faculty at the University of Washington. He has published on various forms of collecting and exhibition in 19th-century Germany (including zoos, panoramas, ethnographic villages, and Wild West shows), which is also the subject of his book, *Carl Hagenbeck’s Empire of Entertainments* (2009). Currently, he is writing a book on the cinema of Werner Herzog, with particular focus on issues of documentary and performance

Works Cited

Appadurai, Arjun. 1986. “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value.” In *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, edited by Arjun Appadurai, 3-63. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. 1998. *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.