



Thurner, Mark – Pimentel, Juan (eds.). *New World Objects of Knowledge: A Cabinet of Curiosities*. London: University of London Press, 2021. 278 pp.

The 40 entries composed by the 33 authors in *New World Objects of Knowledge: A Cabinet of Curiosities* succeed in replicating the dizzying stimulation often associated with early modern “cabinets of curiosity.” Known also as *gabinetes*, *studioli*, or *wunderkammern*, these personal collections of exotic specimens grew alongside Europeans’ increasing navigation around the world’s oceans in the sixteenth century. The spoils of this sprawling maritime expansion were at times trophies, commodities, subjects of study, and objects of derision. Different fashions for how to interpret, present, and organize these objects developed over the years, especially with the systematic impulses of the eighteenth century, but these items remained a constant source of debate and discussion.

Editors Mark Thurner and Juan Pimentel aim, “to incite critical curiosity about the New World as a key protagonist in the history of modern knowledge” (p. 2) and the many brief chapters assembled explore how material objects from Latin America led and followed changes in thinking and behavior around the world. The vignettes of these forty New World “objects of knowledge” often begin in the early modern period but their afterlives and reception at times carry well into the twentieth century. Each individual chapter provides insightful analysis of the many meanings generated and communicated by specific objects, from “Guano” to “Modern Quipu,” and the organization of the volume itself embraces and exemplifies the subjective tensions involved in interpreting objects’ materiality.

The book is divided into two sections of twenty items each, titled “*Artificialia*” and “*Naturalia*,” in reference to early modern categories of classification. However, the border between artificial and natural objects is manifestly porous and purposefully invites critique. Why is “Rubber” among the artificial and “Emeralds” among the natural when both are fashioned into myriad products? In what way is red dye made from “Cochineal” natural and the “Black” dye made from *palo de Campeche* artificial? More provocatively, what does it mean that enslaved and mummified human bodies appear as artificial unlike those of animals such as an “Anteater” or “Megatherium?” The point is not to quibble with the editorial selections but to appreciate how the volume invites reflection on continuities and discontinuities suggested by the crowded juxtaposition of objects.

The titles chosen for individual entries in the volume likewise reinforce the incongruous individualism of collectors and observers in the early modern period. Some titles are generic, such as “Mexican Portrait” or “Clay Vessels,” some ensnare particular human actors, such as “Mary’s Armadillo” or “Darwin’s Tortoise,” and some are cryptic, such as “Singing Violin” to refer to St. Francisco Solano and “Creole Cabinet” to refer to the Royal Cabinet of Natural History in Madrid. Of the forty

titles, “*Pieza de Indias*” is the only one in Spanish and “*Macuilxóchitl*” and “*Xilonen*” are the only two in an indigenous language. This variety gestures at the many acts of translation which contribute to the shifting understandings of these objects. As a whole, the inconsistency in nomenclature across the volume suggests less a flawed editorial policy than a deliberate decision to foreground individual authorial interventions, which the book implies are central to knowledge production past and present.

The evident curation of the collection manages to present both well-known and lesser-studied objects for readers familiar with the so-called “Columbian Exchange.” Classic case studies like “Potatoes” and “Cacao” appear alongside the “Spanish Deck” of playing cards and travels of an “Inca Mummy.” Even well-known objects of knowledge from the New World, such as a “Feathered Shield” or “Pearls,” are given fresh interpretations or approached from less conventional angles.

In spite of the rich assortment of items presented, the volume never directly addresses the premise of its collection: what is an “object of knowledge?” Or better yet, what *isn't*? There seems to be no limit to the kind of topics chosen for discussion, ranging from the entire city of “Potosí” to the single text of the “Codex Mendoza.” In what way are a volcanic eruption, particular kinds of ceramics, drawings of trees and fruits, silver coins, and the Andes mountains equivalent? While the volume favors curiosity and exploration, more explicit theorizing on how knowledge operates in relation to these objects could have helped equip readers’ own perusal. In the aggregate, however, readers are able to deduce certain characteristics regarding the knowledge associated with New World objects.

First, knowledge is not an elite category and is the purview of people from all backgrounds. The knowledge of painters, farmers, mountain guides, readers, and government officials is shown to be on par with the research of scientists and academics.

Second, knowledge is social and its transmission relies on collaborators and informants. The key contributions of local indigenous communities to European knowledge are regular examples of this interdependence, and the volume often turns the “discoveries” of luminaries like Alexander Von Humboldt into “re-discoveries.”

Third, knowledge associated with an object changes in different places. For example, Spanish silver coins receive new marks of value in China, indigenous feather shields become political symbols in Protestant theatre, and emeralds serve as diplomatic gifts in the Islamic Indian Ocean.

Fourth, as suggested above, knowledge multiplies as objects circulate globally. The volume presents several complicated itineraries, including the crisscrossing of a silver bowl across the Atlantic Ocean from Peru, to Congo, to Brazil, and finally to Germany, changing roles as either payment or gift.

It is always possible to find some wrongfully excluded corner of the world whenever global frameworks are employed, but Thurner and Pimentel successfully coordinate examples of New World items that made their way to every continent. However, the importance of the New World for global knowledge did not stem exclusively from its native products, but also from its role as a conduit for objects from other parts of the world which it transformed and passed along. While not original to the Americas, objects like carved Filipino ivories or painted *biombo* folding-screens could also have been included as a testament to the New World’s mediating role for luxury objects from Asia.

Furthermore, the global circulation of objects was only possible through the labor of countless couriers and intermediaries who transported these goods across incredible distances. While some authors make mention of individuals involved in moving objects, these figures and their journeys are generally overlooked. Muleteers, merchants, sailors, servants, and envoys were not the primary recipients, but their auxiliary knowledge many times determined the survival or spoilage of remitted goods, especially specimens of plants or animals.

Greater acknowledgement of the men and women who labored to bring the objects of this volume to life would also have been a welcome addition, and a testament to the way the volume does not simply entertain but embodies the collaborative dynamics of global knowledge production. Currently, the volume includes only the authors' names without any introduction or biographical background. A reader might suspect, but never fully face, the breadth of the team of thirty-three authors working in the United Kingdom, United States, Spain, Ecuador, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Netherlands, and Germany, coming from various disciplinary specialities including, History, Archaeology, Anthropology, and Art History.

Turner, Pimentel, and their many collaborators have gathered an admirable collection of objects and have displayed it with an impressive degree of self-awareness. The richness of the overarching structure and the brief individual articles, stocked with captivating images and helpful suggestions for further reading, provide a stimulating tour and will surely tempt a reader back for future visits.

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