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Review of *Displays of Power: Memory and Amnesia in the American Museum* By Steven C. Dubin

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Displays of Power: Memory and Amnesia in the American Museum. By Steven C. Dubin. New York: New York University Press, 1999. Illustrations, list of interviews, notes, index. xiv + 289 pp. \$24.95 cloth.

Displays of Power describes the movement of museums from mausoleums to centers of controversy during the period from 1969 to 1999. In his prologue and epilogue, Steven Dubin gives his general observations about the nature of this paradigm shift and the reasons for it, in essence attributing the transformation to the coming of the culture wars to museum exhibits. The younger culture warriors of the 1960s are now the older curators, educators, and exhibit designers in museums. Claiming expertness, they are the anonymous voice of power behind the museum oracle. Nowadays, however, oracles are questioned. In an increasingly democratic society, "experts" are challenged from every political and cultural direction.

Dubin provides valuable insights through his balanced and detailed accounts of five of the more famous exhibit disputes: *Harlem on My Mind* (Metropolitan Museum of Art); *Gaelic Gotham* (Museum of the City of New York); *Sigmund Freud: Conflict and Culture* (Library of Congress); *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier 1820-1920* (National Museum of American Art), and *The Enola Gay* (National Air and Space Museum). Reading them, potential visitors should feel this is an exciting and seminal time for museums. As centers of learning rather than shrines, museums are becoming public forums for debating the ideas that emanate from the objects exhibited. Instead of exiting with glazed eyes of boredom, visitors are more likely to leave engaged in argument with curators and other visitors. It is a wise museum "expert" who understands and accepts differences of opinions, includes holders of diverse views in the exhibit planning process, and incorporates "talk backs" for visitors in exhibits. Once curators have provided a forum for debate, it is incumbent on dissenting government officials and special interest groups to let the exhibit have its day. Protest, yes; prohibition, no.

Exhibits that revise the romance of the Plains are especially volatile, which *The West as America* demonstrated. Art is often more than aesthetics. What, if anything, were the artists in that exhibit trying to represent or say? Why can't we debate artists' perspectives when they celebrate as well as when they desecrate? Why can government officials rewrite Plains history by adopting the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act and then object when museums create exhibits that tell the Plains story from multiple perspectives? A revision of Plains history will soon occur next to Congress itself as the Museum of the American Indian takes its place on the nation's cherished mall next to the Capitol Building.

If you are interested in how museums are "reinventing" themselves to play a more central role in the lives of all Americans, *Displays*

of Power will offer you both stimulation and insight.

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