

**This is a self-archived version of an original article. This version may differ from the original in pagination and typographic details.**

**Author(s):** Vanha-Similä, Maria

**Title:** Museums in a changing world

**Year:** 2022

**Version:** Published version

**Copyright:** © 2022 the Author

**Rights:** CC BY-NC 4.0

**Rights url:** <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

**Please cite the original version:**

Vanha-Similä, M. (2022). Museums in a changing world. *Ethnologia Fennica*, 49(1), 104-106.  
<https://doi.org/10.23991/ef.v49i1.115932>

## Museums in a Changing World

**Maria Vanha-Similä**

Rastas, Anna & Koivunen, Leila (toim.) 2021. *Marginaaleista museoihin*. [From margins to museums.] Tampere: Vastapaino. 345 pp. ISBN 978-951-768-889-5 ISBN (electronic) 978-951-768-883-3

Today, museums must respond quickly to global crises, such as the current COVID-19 pandemic and climate change. These institutions also face new kinds of questions about citizenship and identity. Museums generalise and popularise information for the public, and in doing so, they can inadvertently push different groups, stories or objects of collection into the margins.

This book, *Marginaaleista museoihin* (From margins to museums), discusses the responsibility of museum work. The aim of the publication is to look at the changes and challenges in both the museum field and museum work. It also discusses the connection between museums and academic research.

The authors of the book are researchers and museum workers. Their anthology comprises 18 articles, consisting of longer research articles as well as shorter review pieces. The book contains three parts, beginning with theoretical and methodological chapters.

The first part of the book, 'Time and change in museums' (Aika ja museoiden muutos), includes six articles. In the first chapter, Anna Rastas, Leila Koivunen and Kalle Kallio write about the development of museums. They define the concepts of marginalisation and marginalised groups and discuss important questions related to marginality. Whose histories are saved and told in museums? Whose stories, experiences and perspectives are left out? How can missing perspectives be made more visible? Even though museums collaborate with marginalised groups, such projects do not necessarily change the permanent practices of museums. As the authors tell it, the marginal themes promoted in museum exhibitions may not be of interest to many museum visitors. This presents a challenge because one of the key goals of museums is to increase the number of visitors. The strength of the article is that it clearly defines marginalisation. It is also important to write about the practical problems of museums, though. The writers do not offer direct solutions, but their observations do make readers think.

Olga Davydova-Minguet, tenure-track researcher at the Karelian Institute of the University of Eastern Finland, writes about an extremely timely topic. In her article, she describes how Finns have reacted to the Russian-speaking

minority in Finland. The article is based on her own ethnographic research in North Karelia, Helsinki and the Republic of Karelia. Those whose mother tongue is Russian are the largest foreign-language group in Finland, but memories of the Second World War still influence the attitudes of Finns. Russians experience discrimination in Finland and struggle to be properly accepted into Finnish society. The author deals with the subject through the concept of transnational memory. Davydova-Minguet asks museums to build bridges, but Russia has been a tricky topic for museums as well. During the Ukrainian war in 2022, Russian speakers have faced more and more hate speech and prejudice in Finland. Many museums promise free admission for those with a Ukrainian passport, but how could museums support Russian -speakers?

The second part of the publication is entitled 'Decolonisation, marginal knowledge, and new interpretations' (Dekolonisaatio, marginaalinen tieto ja uudet tulkinnot). It consists of three research articles and three review articles. The section begins with sociologist Anna Rastas's article on museums, racism, and anti-racism. In her article, Rastas discusses how Finnish museums and museums elsewhere in Europe are addressing the issue. She writes that the museum staff of museums are usually well-educated, but they may not be familiar with various forms of racism. In her article, Rastas focuses on how minorities can be better treated in museums. Through an excellent set of examples, she also describes how museums can challenge old stereotypes. The primary message of the article is to remind all those who influence the mission of museums to consider the importance of racism.

The review article 'Reunion – Australian arerntes and collection in Finland', (Jälleennäkeminen – Australian arerntet ja kokoelma Suomessa), by cultural anthropologist Kristina Tohmo, is one article that stands out. The article offers a brief but interesting description of what museums can do for collections from other cultures. The article describes how museums can operate in an ethically sustainable manner. Tohmo writes about how one collection of 100 objects came into being and ended up in the National Museum of Finland. The collection has been studied in collaboration with the Australian Arrernte community and researchers, which has significantly increased understanding of the collection. Returning items to the original community is always a lengthy process. The article also shows how different objects are included in other museum collections in Finland.

The final part of the book, entitled 'Involved and inclusive museum work' (Osallistuva ja inklusiivinen museotyö), includes five shorter review articles. They are not so theoretical but nonetheless comprise a very interesting part of the book. In the articles, the authors describe how the objects and stories of marginalised groups are archived in different museums. Museums not

only look to the past but also more and more practice contemporary collecting. Curator Maria Ollila writes about how Roma culture is being collected by the National Museum of Finland. At the end of the article, Ollila considers how contemporary collecting practices provide opportunities to give voice to groups that have not been taken into account in museums before. Museums have not always operated in an ethically sustainable manner. The practice of contemporary collecting can also be used to correct injustices from the past. This requires careful planning and time. Working with different communities is fruitful, but also challenging.

The book emphasises the responsibility of all museums, but almost all examples from Finland are from the Helsinki metropolitan area. I was glad to notice that the book includes several examples from elsewhere as well, but I would have liked more from other parts of Finland.

The articles in the book are written from different perspectives. For example, it is interesting how museum staff write about the day-to-day work of museums, the challenges that museums face and the opportunities that museums have. These are very fruitful topics for academic articles. The publication includes many articles and examples that address the topics. While a good solution, such an approach at the same time makes the book somewhat tedious.

This is a book that should find its way to all Finnish museums. Museums are busy, and staff do not have enough time to follow the latest research as much as they would want. The book is also useful for other cultural heritage professionals and students. The end of the book includes comprehensive directories, which are very handy when you want to quickly search for information on a particular topic.

## **AUTHOR**

Research Fellow Maria Vanha-Similä, PhD, works in the Department of History and Ethnology at the University of Jyväskylä. She is currently working on the research project 'My Countryside: Intergenerationality, Place and Gender in the Finnish Countryside', funded by the Kone Foundation.