

Opening Our Eyes to See

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A. Kendra Greene, *The Museum of Whales You Will Never See: And Other Excursions to Iceland's Most Unusual Museums*. 222pp., 37 drawings. Penguin Books, \$22 cloth.

IT IS SAFE TO SAY THAT THE ICELANDIC MUSEUM SCENE IS not a saturated field of study. A. Kendra Greene's recent book, as far as I can tell, is the first to widely address the topic. I'd venture that most people know of at most, one museum in Iceland—the Phallogological Museum—even though the country has over 265 known institutions, making this volume an eye-opening introduction to the rich and sometimes quirky culture of this island nation. But this book is far from a simple survey of museums. With persistent and contagious curiosity, Greene guides us through the unexpected spaces that make up Iceland's museums, revealing the many ways that objects can tell human stories, if we are willing to look and listen. At the heart of these stories, however, are deeper questions about the nature of human collecting and the place of museums, questions that resonate far beyond local museums of Iceland. Simultaneously a tribute to Iceland and the power of storytelling, the book challenges readers and museum-goers to think beyond standard definitions in order to see the world in new ways, even those things that we would normally consider unseen.

The book is not a comprehensive guide or description of all Icelandic museums, nor is it a travel volume akin to those of ancient or medieval writers who regaled their patrons at home with tales of faraway places. From the start, Greene makes clear that she is recording her own story, recounting her own fascination with Icelandic museums and their blurring of public and private. According to a list in an appendix, the author visited over thirty Icelandic museums in preparation for the book, and while many of them only make a small appearance, this thorough research is apparent in the wide-reaching and rich way in which she describes the country's history and the peculiarities of its culture. Although centered around the expansive stories of seven key museums—case studies of a sort—her tale is carefully woven to create a coherent picture of Iceland's cultural history and the way it is displayed and consumed.

As might be expected, the book begins with the Icelandic Phallogological Museum. The museum claims to be the only penis museum in the world, a superlative that is difficult to challenge, and has origins in a single man's collection of curiosities, which was not originally intended for a museum. What might surprise you, though, is that the Phallogological Museum may be among the more conventional institutions documented in the book, since it has a fairly traditional mission: to collect, preserve, and display objects that tell a specific story. In this case, the museum collects, preserves, and displays "phallic specimens belonging to all the various types of mammal found in a single country [Iceland]"—certainly not your typical Impressionist painting—but clearly articulated. You have to give an institution credit for adhering to its stated mission and vision. In the end, it is precisely this conventionality that makes the Phallogological Museum so very ordinary. Why is a penis novel when you have an entire museum full of them?

If, after spending time with the Phallogological Museum, penises seem too ordinary, there are plenty of other unusual museums from which to choose. Among others, Greene ferries us through the Bird Museum, full of all species of taxidermized birds; the Museum of Sorcery and Witchcraft, featuring all sorts of trinkets related to witchcraft including the ever-popular necropants (literally "corpse britches"); and the Icelandic Sea Monster Museum, which collects testimonials of monster encounters (although sadly, no monsters themselves). For me, the most interesting museum was not that which displayed unusual and out-of-the-ordinary objects, but actually the most ordinary: Petra's Stone Collection, technically not a museum, began like many Icelandic museums, as a personal collection. The eponymous Petra gathered rocks and stones that she found beautiful or interesting on her daily walks, and eventually her collection outgrew her house and her yard, and began to draw the attention of neighbors and passers-by. It is now on the "must-see" list for most tour buses in the region. But why? The collection has never been counted, so it cannot claim any particular superlative for size or scope and the rocks themselves hold no inherent value. While whale penises seem to become less interesting the more ordinary they get, stones somehow become *more*

interesting—perhaps because they are so incredibly accessible. Who among us can't recall picking up a stone, or relate to the urge to collect things?

So what about those places we will never see? By far the most unexpected sections of the book are those that discuss the museums or collections that cannot be seen, or simply *with nothing* to see. I started the book assuming that I would encounter glossy photos or illustrations of the museums under discussion. My own bias as an art historian left me expecting to be guided by the objects or at least the places in which they were located. In the absence of images, I initially felt lost, stranded, even cheated—unsure how to form a picture of a museum without...a picture of a museum. I realized quickly that the absence of photographs was another of the book's gifts. In many ways like seeing a movie of a favorite old book that you've read many times over, seeing the galleries, storerooms, or objects might shatter the beautiful picture I've formed in my mind, the collection of images and stories that I've created thanks to Greene's vivid and precise descriptions that far outshine what could be included in the volume, and perhaps even what I might see in real life—in some instances because there is actually nothing to see. Although it may seem absurd to build a museum for no physical objects, or that can be seen by no one, this is actually the case for several collections under discussion, which begs the question: is it so absurd? Is it a prerequisite of a museum to have physical things, or really, to tell a story? In the case of the Icelandic Sea Monster Museum, for example, the absence of sea monsters is part of the intrigue. Would there be so many stories of sea monster encounters, if there were sea monsters available for the taking?

It would be a disservice to end this short review without mentioning the book itself, that is, the physical book. The volume is small in size, almost like a journal, and the typeface is an unusual, but pleasant green. Greene, an artist, has included over thirty drawings throughout the text. The drawings are not illustrations, although an appendix at the back eventually reveals that they do correspond to objects in collections under discussion, but feel more like the kinds of drawings or annotations that would appear in a personal notebook. These subtle, but noticeable additions to text lend an additionally magical quality, turning this from a simple guide or history, to more of a personalized story. It would be a mistake to read only the e-version of this book.

In the end, we are left with fewer answers than questions—nowhere does Greene provide the magic solution or definition for what constitutes a museum, which objects should be collected, or even a comprehensive guide to Iceland's collections, but she does not leave us stranded with no way forward on our journey to see those things that are normally unseen. In her characteristically whimsical prose Greene instead offers a gentle, albeit powerful call-to-action: "The world is chockablock with untold wonders, there for the taking, ready to be uncovered at any moment, if only we keep our eyes open." Perhaps this is a solution after all. . a