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9/30/99 @ Final to AltaMira Press / CURATOR: The MUSEUM JOURNAL, Vol. 42, Number 3

BOOK REVIEW

MUSEUMS OF THE NORTHWEST:

Discover the Best Collections in Washington, Oregon, and Lower British Columbia
By Harriet Baskas. Seattle, WA: Sasquatch Books. 1999. 320 pages. Soft cover, \$18.95.

Reviewed by Lynne Arany, Principal, Ink Projects.

Lucky travelers to the Northwest United States, Harriet Baskas has followed up *Atomic Marbles* (1993, co-written with Adam Woog, with a guide that goes even deeper into her local stomping grounds and comes up with over 300 venues that, like little museums across the country, you just won't find anywhere else.

There's always a temptation to explore why particular museums are where they are. And you may well ask: Is this the best way to learn about the area I'm traveling in?

As Baskas makes clear, that's not always the point. Travel, especially in America, is also about the wide and wonderful mosaic of American individuals. A trip to a small museum (most of the museums included here are on the small side) will often introduce you to folks—and interests—you might never expect on your own turf, though you might find yourself looking a little harder when you get back home again.

Baskas does not offer much explanation for her selections. But she does reveal something about idiosyncratic appeal in talking about her favorite museum exhibit: "the giant hairball at the Mount Angel Abbey Museum in Mount Angel, Oregon. . . . Why is it there and why do they keep this thing around? It really doesn't matter. I just love that it is there, nestled in among the museum's rare religious artifacts, military memorabilia, and assorted 'collectobelia' that includes a really big ear of corn and a taxidermied eight-legged calf."

That's not to say you won't also encounter the more expected artifacts of centuries of human settlement. But the intimate scale is bound to have a more personal—and so perhaps a more lasting—touch than the effect of the massive inventory at larger institutions. As Baskas says in her introduction, "By examining the old tools, vintage clothing, and assorted memorabilia that citizens save and display in their town museums, I also learned about local history, agriculture, economics, and business; the power of true love and determination; and heard stories of the sort of experiences that can bind together the citizens of a small community."

While historical museums predominate here, they are interspersed with collections you might find when you're particularly open to happenstance—places like a folk art installation, or a Frisbee museum. In fact, almost any museum can be viewed through the filter of a locality's history, economy, or culture. The Northwest is rich with all three.

Not all museums or displays in this guidebook are uniquely compelling. Indeed, spinning wheels, farm implements, and old stills can even start to look alike after awhile. The trick is finding collections that do give a sense of place—where you can tap into something about the locale that can then bring those mundane items to life for you. My sense is that Baskas had a bit of a struggle keeping fresh about it all herself. There can be a monotony to the historical museum descriptions, but still it's worth wading through to find the museum gems. The good news is that Baskas has worked hard herself to find items or features that say something special about the collection, and to make it clear that historical museums are not all alike. The blurbs generally give you a real sense of the place and help you picture its holdings. Occasionally resorting to a wry tone, she's more likely to use the Boas approach of letting the facts speak for themselves. This is not necessarily good—in many cases she is just reporting a highlights list. Also, unfortunately, the places are not particularly "interpreted" by Baskas; nor does she distinguish much between the rigorously catalogued and labeled sites and the more eclectic collections that might wow you with their objects but are weak on context. You can count on the larger, more rigorous, institutions to strive for context, but the littler museums are often a hodgepodge of *stuff*; what you get from the visit often relies on what you bring to it.

I am disappointed that she doesn't talk more about the curators. In researching *Little Museums*, at times I felt the curator was the find, more so than the museum's contents. Also, Baskas doesn't discuss her criteria for selections. Many venues are left out, and I'm bemused by her leaning toward the more traditional historic sites. I miss the somewhat quirkier mindset of *Atomic Marbles*. Baskas seems more at home (not to mention engaged and enthusiastic) when she's talking about sites like Dick and Jane's Spot, an artists' collection in Ellensburg, WA, than about, say, the Lopez Historical Museum, with its kitchen utensils and fish traps.

Regardless of quibbles, and however she made her selections, this reader is glad that she captured these 300. The unique visions found in some of these spots are in the front lines of America's defense against cultural homogeneity. These visions are idiosyncratic, and proudly so. No one would argue the critical role of our larger institutions in exposing us to art, scientific disciplines, and cultural diversity and in providing education and entertainment. But their sheer magnitude can sometimes get in the way of their message. This book represents an antidote.

