A Cultural Arsenal for Democracy: The World War II Work of US Museums

Clarissa J. Ceglio’s 2022 book, *A Cultural Arsenal for Democracy*, is an insightful and enlightening text on the development of museums during World War II. Ceglio, who has conducted previous research on this topic and the Civil Rights era and the digital age, shares a story not often told: how both patrons and employees viewed museum development and what museum workers did to educate the populace during one of the worst global events in history.

Ceglio’s deft use of primary and secondary sources takes us, chapter by chapter, through this era of museum development. Specifically, Ceglio covers the development of American museums before, during, and immediately after the second World War, using interviews, exhibit records, and previous studies to show the reader what steps museum curators and workers took to increase museums’ role in educating the public during a tumultuous time. The book begins with a concise explanation of how the public viewed museums in the years before World War II. According to Ceglio’s research, many did not see museums as necessary to the education of the public until a couple of decades before WWII. Changing ideas of what a museum should be and do for patrons influenced work, such as supporting the troops through specially created organizations (e.g., sewing circles, Victory Gardens) during the war. For example, museums tested various methods for presenting information to patrons, such as new exhibit formats inspired by world’s fairs and large department stores’ layouts. Museums also successfully adapted communication techniques from the media to share necessary messages during wartime, such as the need to ration or join organizations supporting soldiers at the front. Ceglio’s overarching goal is to illustrate museums’ efforts to establish their own place in—and outside of—the societal upheaval created by war, and the accomplishments and limitations of museum work from the 1930s to the first few years of peacetime after the war.

Much like libraries and archives, many may mistake museums as places that provide information but discourage patron interaction. However, *A Cultural Arsenal for Democracy* demonstrates that, while museums often fit this stereotype before the turn of the twentieth century, external events like world’s fairs and new uses of...
media encouraged museum directors and workers to change the ways patrons saw the museum building and the objects inside it before, during, and after wartime. Ceglio’s in-depth text is intriguing, surprising, and satisfying, and makes an incredible contribution to the field of museum work.