

elements of museum management, whether local, regional or national — particularly in the current climate of reduced funding. In Italy, these policies are crucial. The country harbours 47 World Heritage sites, more than any other nation, and is home to 4,000 publicly registered museums, including some of the most important art collections in the world. But funds are shrinking, to the point at which the existence of some museums, and some of the country's most famous works, hangs in the balance. For example, in June it was discovered that Raphael's masterpiece *The Marriage of the Virgin* was endangered by water seeping through the walls of the Brera Art Gallery in Milan, owing to a lack of routine maintenance.

Yet strategic disposals, including long-term or even indefinite loans of museum pieces, are not being seriously considered by museums worldwide as a way to cope with the costs of maintaining full public collections. Museum authorities in Italy, as in many other countries, have elected to adopt such measures as reduced visiting hours rather than consider the disposal of selected holdings publicly and openly — perhaps fearing a public backlash. This is not, of course, to suggest that museums should sell holdings simply to cover the costs of routine maintenance; but it may be necessary for some to be realistic and open about the size of their holdings and the number of pieces that can be successfully exhibited.

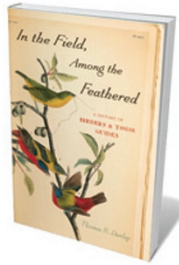
To achieve a balanced ebb and flow of pieces in museum collections, the phases of accession and disposal need to be carefully evaluated and managed. Traditionally, curators tended not to limit the inflow of items — in some cases coming to resemble compulsive hoarders. Today it is common for curators, applying narrower and more demanding criteria in their selection of accessions, to refuse 90% of the offers made.

Although most donations may be turned down without damaging the public perception of a museum, disposal of materials that are already held is a different matter. In the United Kingdom in 2009–10, for instance, public outcry halted Southampton City Council's attempt to sell works by sculptor Auguste Rodin and British artist Alfred Munnings in order to raise money for a new museum dedicated to the RMS *Titanic*. Competing resources, and debates over the relative significance of pieces or collections, form just part of the criteria for deaccession. The views of museum audiences need to be factored in.

Debates over deaccession and disposal should be conducted transparently, accompanied by a clear public explanation and rationale, and should involve the views of all stakeholders — from museum staff to local authorities and concerned individuals. This way, the public's sense of ownership of prized local collections can be honoured.

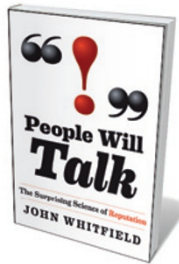
In the 1980s and early 1990s, Canada's ►

Books in brief



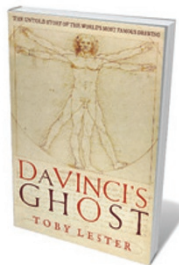
In the Field, Among the Feathered: A History of Birders and Their Guides

Thomas R. Dunlap OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS 256 pp. \$34.95 (2011)
Birdwatching may be an amateur science, but it retains close links to ornithology and conservation. In the century since twitching emerged as a suburban hobby, the one constant has been the field guide. Historian and birder Thomas Dunlap trains his binoculars on its evolution in the United States. His meticulous chronicle reveals how the collective urge to spot Nashville warblers or bald eagles ultimately jump-started the US eco-movement, and why the hobby is one of the great unfolding stories of crowd-sourced nature study.



People Will Talk: The Surprising Science of Reputation

John Whitfield WILEY 272 pp. £17.99 (2011)
Reputation is central to our lives, says science writer John Whitfield, yet we are not entirely aware of it. He draws on philosophy, sociology, economics and animal-behaviour experiments to punch through the surface of this powerful and perplexing phenomenon. At base, he finds, it rests on how we trust others and how we persuade others to trust us. An individual's concern for his or her reputation can be a fulcrum that tips them towards either brutal or altruistic behaviour — so ultimately, says Whitfield, the way in which society uses reputation determines whether that society thrives or fails.



Da Vinci's Ghost: The Untold Story of the World's Most Famous Drawing

Toby Lester PROFILE/FREE PRESS 263 pp. £16.99/\$26.99 (2011/2012)
Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* — poised within a circle and a square — is arguably history's most iconic image. Writer Toby Lester offers the absorbing story of this Renaissance rendering. Touching on anatomy, medicine, geography, mathematics, philosophy and aesthetics, he explores the idea that the body, geometry and mystic reality are linked. Its progenitor was Roman architect Marcus Vitruvius Pollio, who posited that human proportions echo the cosmos and should set the form for architecture and for all civilization.



Time Travel and Warp Drives: A Scientific Guide to Shortcuts through Time and Space

Allen Everett and Thomas Roman UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS 280 pp. \$30 (2011)
Physicist Allen Everett and mathematician Thomas Roman boldly go into the big speculations that lie at the root of 'frontier science', such as time travel. Through clear explanations and judiciously deployed basic algebra, they lay out the science behind the weirder possibilities offered by the characteristics of space-time. Travelling backwards in time, for instance, can be linked theoretically to moving faster than the speed of light. Warp bubbles, anyone?



Panda: Back from the Brink

Zhou Mengqi SARABAND 192 pp. £25 (2011)
The one-note diet, monochrome markings and long association with fertility treatments in captivity lend the giant panda an unreal air. But these animals are resilient: against all the odds, they total an estimated 2,000 individuals. This tribute to the beauty of the beast is informed by leading conservationists, but centres on stunning shots by photographer Zhou Mengqi. Backed by advice from panda experts Zhang Zhihe, Zhang Hemin and Hu Jinchu, Mengqi tracked his elusive subjects through the mountains of Sichuan for years.