

Enhanced Accessibility vs. Presentation of the Object Itself: A Sideways View

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Museums have sprung from the desire to collect rare, curious or precious things. These were exhibited in art galleries, glass cupboards and show-windows, mainly for the collector's own enjoyment. Occasionally others might be invited to gape in admiration at the collection, yet not so much for their own good as to enhance the image of the collector himself. Sometimes the objects were listed—complete with details about their origins and further remarks—affirming their precious or rare character. On other aspects, such as their interrelationships, the collector kept his own counsel, and it was there that the keys to the collection's accessibility—'the keys of the kingdom'—rested as well.

Fair-operators and Curators

The presentation of curiosities and rarities was for a long time the exclusive prerogative of fair-operators and keepers of labyrinths, who naturally did so only out of economic motives and without any kind of didactic intention. If nevertheless they contributed to the visualization of ideas, it was only by accident. From an economic point of view, it was fully understandable that they disposed of living and dead objects as soon as the profits declined: the dancing bear was kept in good shape so long as it brought in money, and likewise the fat woman, the mounted two-headed foetus or the collection of rare stones. Anyway, the relationship between the preservation and the presentation of culture was one of obvious causality. In the case of museums, it was somewhat different. Without caring too much for the historical exactness, I dare to say that for museums such presentations became the vogue only as an occasional secondary activity and that the motivation for them springs more from narcissism than from any didactic intention. A display for a long time mainly served the curator's own satisfaction: the visitors were admitted as paying voyeurs.

Between Scylla and Charybdis

When governments start to have a greater financial influence on museum affairs the need grows to account for the monies so spent on the preservation of culture, by ascribing to them a public utility, 'circumscribed' as the transmission of knowledge. The *Museum Note* published in 1976 by the Dutch government¹ makes this abundantly clear, and is, by doing so, in perfect harmony with the definition of a museum formulated by ICOM in 1974. However, considering that from now on the museums will have to sail between the Scylla of preservation and the Charybdis of presentation, the *Note* fails to give any conclusive solution. A tug of war between curators full of conscience—and those

responsible for presentation—full of ideas—is a regular feature. If museum management depends to a high degree on government support, politics will decide where, within the parameters of preservation and presentation, the museum activities should take place, although in the end, and this is the same for private institutions, the economics will settle the matter. If the presentation prevails (more fuss, more visitors, more sponsors, more earnings), then the preservation of culture threatens to become of only secondary importance, to such an extent that premature extinction can no longer be excluded. Indeed, if we compare this situation with that of other preservers of the ‘material evidence of people and their environment’, such as archives and libraries, it appears that the accent there is more on conservation and retrievability of documents, and less on the presentation thereof. Exhibitions held incidentally in archives and libraries are therefore mostly intended to draw attention to these activities.

Preservation vs. Presentation

It is especially in museums that there is an undeniable conflict between preservation of culture and its presentation; and, for example, optimum presentation generally makes great demands of climate, lighting or security which—seen from the point of view of accountable preservation—are unacceptable. Even so, paracollegial exhibitions enhance the risk of loss and damage, whilst the great expense they consequently entail is usually, be it directly or indirectly—passed on to the conservation budget. Furthermore, for presentational ends, corporeal documents are being temporarily lifted out of the collection in order to be exposed somewhere in some precoordinated connection stipulated by the organizers. They serve in a way as the illustrative elements of an invented picture-story, but outside this context the value of the information is very limited. This last example evokes the bygone image of a book printer who, having ordered his movable type into pages of text, is therefore unable to use them for any other purposes.

The Authentic Object as Transmitter of Knowledge

On the other hand, one should ask whether the authentic museum object is always the best medium for the optimum transmission of knowledge. Often it is either too big or too small, too complicated or it produces too much noise—that is, too much irrelevant data for the message to come through at all, or at least sufficiently. Museums have tried in a variety of ways to sit on the fence. In this respect I think of the installation of visible storage facilities, the building up of secondary collections, or the showing of replicas and models. Yet all of these efforts do have their own shortcomings or disadvantages. I would say that museums should consider in all honesty a return to their original objectives: collecting and preserving ‘material evidence of people and their environment’. The study of that evidence should essentially be reserved for ‘scientific’ institutions which, in close cooperation with market investigators and experts in the field of information transmission, prepare the form of presentation which suits best the defined objectives and target groups.

The Role of the Museum Information Service

Between preservation on the one hand and presentation on the other, there is the field of activities of the museum information service. This service caters for both preservation

and presentation. Both make their own specific demands, to which the information service is more and more able to respond, and it is therefore in an excellent position to mediate in the conflicts of interest between the two objectives mentioned above. As is understood, the fundamental duty of any documentation service is to collect and to provide in an efficient format relevant information wanted at any moment. As a matter of fact, museum documentation has to deal principally with the aims of building up and managing the collections of the museum to which it is attached, offering a quick, correct and up-to-date survey on both items and gaps in the collection, the storage and state of those items, their pedigrees, information on loans, restoration orders, replacements, etc., and all these preferably in relation to the financial, personal and other components, conditions and consequences.

Closely connected to this task is the provision of information on how to manage the collection, hence museum documentation has to be or become easily acquainted with the state of the art in this field. To succeed it obviously cannot confine itself to its own museum collection but has to keep in touch with documentation services of other museums, preferably in a structured manner such as participating in documentation pools, networks, etc. So, effective museum documentation is Janus-headed: looking with one pair of eyes into the dark stores of its own collection and with the other into the wide, wide world of museology. It also stands to reason that a good working museum documentation service should have a hot line to the Paris Documentation Centre. Providing information for the study of museum items, as well as storing and making retrievable its results, is another duty of museum documentation services. In this case the concerned party is no longer restricted to the museum staff, but may include scholars and learned institutions, not necessarily connected to any particular museum.

The Imaginary Museum

Processing by good teamwork with other documentation services a huge amount of collection and paracollection information, an immense *musée imaginaire* will permanently be under construction, in which, as André Malraux delineated, objects and knowledge from the four winds of heaven may continuously be brought together, selected from various points of view, and grouped according to different criteria. Certainly not the fragmented display practices of individual museums—often very attractive it is true, though not seldom self-centred and narcissistic however, this *musée imaginaire* will demonstrate in the future its potency as a generator of culture. It is obvious that this museum of the imagination, housing the verbal and pictorial ‘representatives’ of the cultural heritage from all over the world, will not succeed merely by collecting and documenting. It has to show, to display its substance in an inspiring way.

The Information Service and the Public

Although in many museums a certain link between presentation and documentation happens to occur, this is often rather primitive and not as firm as with collection management and scientific research. And yet, in planning and outlining exhibitions, or preparing publications and audiovisual productions, good museum documentation turns out to be essential and, not only for providing information on collection items, the results of research and loan possibilities. A well-equipped documentation service may in addition collect and make surveyable material serving the interests of scholarship, as well

as the waking or sleeping demands of the intended public. The importance of what I have just stated is often underestimated. In planning the framework for exhibitions, museums still think too much in terms of their own preferences, and seldom give eye and ear to the needs for information felt by others. Subsequently, rather expensive promotion campaigns have to be set up to encourage interest. Next, the public is confronted with the questions that the organizers have asked themselves and the answers they think appropriate to give. However, to what extent is such an exhibition relevant to the questions posed by science, or to those of concern to the public?

Information vs. Attraction for the Masses

The public or should we pluralize this concept? There is but little interest today in the diversity of both real and potential publics. Exhibitions are indeed expensive and therefore as many visitors as possible should be attracted. Hence the museums attune themselves to the requirements of the masses and nervously class themselves amongst the tourist attractions, blindly plunging into the fray of competition with funfairs and the entertainment industry. In that way, far from being ‘generators of culture’, museums become the ‘followers of culture’. Which culture is followed is determined by viewership figures, and where this may lead can easily be seen every day with TV shows.

As far as expensive exhibitions may help us to create, from the public at large, distinguishable groups of more or less regular visitors who will gain inspiration from a new cultural breakthrough, one can be reconciled to this because the museum may thus glory in proving itself—indirectly at least to be a generator of culture. In order for this qualification to be fulfilled, however, the museum has to respond to the needs for information existing within these groups, and undertake far more than has been done until now to develop itself into a centre of information in which the museum objects show themselves to full advantage as ‘material evidence of people and their environment’, or stated differently, as corporeal documents.

More Information, Less Handling of Authentic Objects

Of course I do not have in mind that everybody at any time should be allowed to handle, finger, smell and test any museum object. By no means! The authentic document should be protected as well as possible from loss, damage, wear and tear. It is at this point that the documentation service might show its assistance function to the public. As I stated before, such a service prepares ‘representatives’ of the museum objects. In their most simple form, those ‘representatives’ consist of description cards with a formal description of the object and information on its provenance, use, etc., and also more specific references to reports, literature, photographs and the like. Except for the few items of confidential data, which in consideration of museum policy ought not to be disclosed, this information has to be available to anyone who is asking for it.

Availability of Information

Availability means that those ‘representatives’ are regularly updated and made accessible as much as is needed. The degree to which the documentation service has been able to take care of this, in either an active or a passive way, depends strongly on economic factors. A documentation service striving to anticipate all possible questions is preparing for its own destruction and, moreover, is frustrating in the meantime the flair of the

information hunter, for all hunters wish to trail the game themselves, and those in search of information are no exception to this rule. According to their interest, understanding and imagination, they may need some assistance, yet no one should deprive them of their 'Eureka-pleasure'. This requires much self-restraint from the documentalist, and I know from my own experience that this is more difficult than often supposed. Most information specialists are eager to adopt the question as posed, choosing to play with it themselves, by preference in a stealthy way. Good information services, however, flourish only by way of a perfect interrelationship between those providing information and those wanting it. Interrelationship means in this respect that both parties might act in turn as giver as well as receiver.

Unfortunately, we cannot but observe that the number of museums in which the documentation service is operating as an official information centre, fully devoted to the public, is rather small. While visiting a museum one is but rarely guided to the library or the documentation department. If they exist, those departments are often hidden behind cloth-covered doors which, if unlocked, give entry to unmanned facilities or insufficiently staffed rooms. The information procured there is not seldom restricted to rather broad literature and some photographs. For more detail one has to visit other departments or to see specialist curators, who—for quite understandable reasons—are not always immediately available to the questioner. And speaking of questioners, it is obvious that schoolchildren ought to be taken seriously as scholars, but this I put aside.

Enhanced Accessibility

Let us revert for a while to the 'representatives' of the museum objects which I showed before: description cards with references to other documents, photographs, etc. These may serve the purpose, but you might observe, and not without truth in the light of modern information techniques, that it does so only in a rather primitive manner. With the help of personal computers and not too complicated software, the accessibility of data is not only substantially increased but, what is more, enables one to handle information in a more creative way. Seated before a terminal, the modern information retriever might walk without difficulty through all the storerooms, and all epochs and cultures, selecting and sorting out objects as it best suited, but without touching or even breathing upon one single object. Moreover, the application of audiovisual means enables the examining, lighting out, enlarging and reducing of a selected object; to overlook it with a bird's eye, to creep inside it as a fly, and to see it in motion. Hearing it is already possible as well: smelling, tasting and feeling it in effigy no doubt will one day become reality.

Technology will advance, no matter what, and most improvements, if prudently introduced, will pay in the end. So, without causing any damage, one can play infinitely with the 'representatives' of museum objects. In many respects even more is being effected than would be possible with the objects themselves, and only its manageability could ever allow us to do so.

Can We Do Without Authentic Objects?

The thesis that the optimum representation in an up-to-date documentation system will decently make dispensable the authentic object, so that it might be wrapped up like a mummy, buried in the dunes or—as some museum directors prefer—be sold to the highest bidder, now becomes self-evident.

Beside this, with regard to immovables forming part of the cultural heritage of a nation, it is easily decided—as soon as such is justified by the general interest—that posterity will have to content itself with ‘representatives’ only. Buildings considered an obstacle to ‘Progress’ are to be closely surveyed and documented, and then demolished, with the trenches in old town centres examined by archaeologists before the first piles are driven into the earth. Naturally, the incompatibility of economical and cultural interests in this field causes documentation, as is generally known, to be fulfilled at high pressure.

Loss of Information

Apart from practical and ethical implications attached to the irrevocable substitution of the cultural evidences themselves by their documental ‘representatives’, a conscientious documentalist ought to be prepared for *loss of information* appearing sooner or later. Every ‘representative’, as you know, is shaped after the supposed need for information, yet this need happens not to be constant. No matter how complete and excellently structured a ‘representative’ might be, and no matter how well it might answer to the existing demands—and as we saw already, in certain respects even better than the original object—the confrontation with authentic objects frequently makes totally new and unexpected questions arise.

Oblique Information

Allow me to give a simple example: on inquiring about a number of old prints in the library collection of my museum, I could draw on a computer file containing every thinkable bibliographical particularity. This enabled me to get out of my terminal a rather satisfying image of any copy in this collection, and to select, sort and group to my full heart’s content, according to the criteria previously dictated by the subject of my investigation, up to the moment where I stumbled, in a book description, upon a supposed observation error which obliged me to collate with the original copy. Although my supposition turned out to be wrong, I now discovered between the pages of this tiny 19th-century gold-edged, lady’s bower booklet, a still fluffy and nicely coloured bird’s feather. ‘You will always find what you’re not looking for’, as was stated in the Reinwardt Academy Exhibition in the ICOM ’89 Agora.

Without being a devotee of birds, this shocked me, since by this small feather the former owner was called to life again, sitting in her lavender-scented boudoir, thinking over what engaged her attention that day. Speaking of evidences of mankind, one should not underestimate such poor traces of personal life, which braved death. And then, for what purpose was the feather put there? Just to be conserved like flowers, leaves and locks of her children’s hair? Or was it marking some cherished lines? And then, was this a practice tied to a certain culture and social setting, and more for women than for men? If such insertions were used as book markers, then what do we know of this and other means for this purpose? ‘A dog’s ear’, for shame!

Book descriptions, however, hardly ever make reference to such details. This also goes for comments and jottings in the margins and on end-papers, sometimes made just to recall something that has nothing to do with the text, yet giving us an idea of a former user of the book. So the fact that a little child once was in the habit of scribbling on every page in an important work of the 17th century on the principles of architecture makes it clear to us what status was attached to this copy in the last owner’s family. The importance of this oblique information I cannot as yet calculate, and it be far from me to

blame any bibliographer for neglecting it. On the other hand, I would regret it if a concerned librarian would carefully remove those scribbles.

Preservation: The Paramount Assignment

With these few examples I hope to have made it clear that responsible management and accessibility of the 'material evidence of people and their environment' oblige the museums to take care of reliable and retrievable 'representatives', but that they will by no means ever release the museums from their obligation to keep in good condition the authentic objects as primary sources of information. Frankly speaking, this is their paramount assignment, unless the *preservation* of cultural heritage is properly guaranteed otherwise by law.

CIDOC's Responsibility

It fits with the whole that it should be CIDOC's responsibility to take up the following duties:

- (a) tracing the facts, in which from the point of view of good information supply it might be desirable, or even preferable, to give priority to 'representatives' instead of authentic objects;
- (b) stating terms for the 'representatives' which, in relation to the frequency of questions, guarantee optimum information supply;
- (c) recommending selection possibilities and search strategies in order to reduce the inspection of the objects themselves to the minimum;
- (d) promoting and advising statutory regulations for the protection of museum objects as primary sources of information.

In the atmosphere of an ICOM Conference it may sound rather heretical, but I do agree with Mr Crespo Toral, that *museums are not generators of culture*, nor should they have that pretention. They have no right to place themselves on any such presumptuous pedestal. However, as the appropriate and devoted guardians of basic material, they are assigned to offer the conditions for the culture to generate. In this field information storage and retrieval has to claim and to demonstrate its own indispensable and specific position within the parameters of preservation and presentation of cultural heritage.

Editors' Note

The above article is an edited version of the address given by Boy Wander to the meeting of CIDOC (ICOM International Committee Documentation) in the Hague, September 1989, within ICOM '89; translated from the Dutch by R. H. J. Wander.

Note

1. H. W. van Doorn, *Nota: 'naar een nieuw museumbeleid'* (Note: Towards a New Museum Policy'), uitgebracht door de Minister van cultuur, recreatie en maatschappelijk werk ('s-Gravenhage, Staatsuitgeverij, 1976), 121 pp.