
Museums, the Web and the Serendipity Facilitator

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Introduction

I think I might have made a big mistake in being last on: everything I say will either have been said rather better by someone else, or worse, will have already been proved to be nonsense. But I can promise you it'll be short.

I wish to return to the theme of the conference, to remember that phrase, 'Delivering Diversity'. In the original call for papers, we were asked to think about cultural content, and about reaching new, traditionally excluded audiences. I want to explore how we can do this on the Web, not by creating virtual exhibitions of particularly cunning design, but by forgetting about virtual exhibitions and opening up our virtual stores.

Much of the information that museums put up on their web pages about the collections takes the form of virtual exhibitions. These can represent actual exhibitions put on at the museum or they can be a little introduction to the type of material on display, some images and linking text which give a 'flavour' of the collections, selected in order to attract actual visitors. Either way, they're very controlled, very mediated.

In the press release for 'A Netful of Jewels', the National Museum Directors' Conference said that museums offer not only rich collections but also special expertise in interpreting them: I would like to suggest that if we are to **deliver diversity**, what we need is a bit less expertise - we need to set the objects

free from specialist knowledge, release them from the restraints of interpretation, and to let them boldly go where no objects have gone before, let them speak for themselves and let the users make their own choices about what they look at and where they go.

Interpretation

Museums have always put information in context, always presented individual items within a larger background like 'Life in Ancient Egypt', 'The Jurassic' or 'Aubrey Beardsley - Poet or Pervert?' Often, as you can tell from the last, not entirely serious, example, the title of a display tells you quite a lot about the way in which the objects are to be presented. Of course, 'interpretation' is a major part of the museum's role: without it we would simply be warehouses. In order to put objects in a context, we place them within groups and hierarchies, in familiar frameworks, and arrange galleries in an order which renders visible an abstract concept. In the course of doing this, it is easy to impose our own frameworks and there is a wide literature on this, on how museums mediate the information they present.

Multiple significances

But a single object may over the process of time have a series of significances. We have in the NMS a porcelain plate, made in China during the Ch'ing dynasty. In one exhibition it may be used to demonstrate the state of porcelain decoration in China in the Ch'ing dynasty, a purpose which it fills perfectly well. The figures illustrated on it however are apparently Scottish highlanders, so it would not be far-fetched if it were

used to illustrate highland costume in the late 18th century. They are not only Highlanders, they are also soldiers: some of the details of their uniforms are very accurate, although the colours have strayed rather far from the original. They are soldiers of the British Army, for those of you who aren't sure whether there was a Scottish Army in the 18th century, which is another dimension. In yet another exhibition, the plate could be used to demonstrate the active pottery trade between Asia and Scotland.

Lastly, for the moment, it could be useful in demonstrating how images can be recycled between media, as the picture on it is taken from a print by Francis Grose, copied in turn from an earlier version by George Bickham, from which the Chinese artist copied one of the original figures. The piper's banner, which began as a Scottish St Andrew's cross, on the plate actually looks remarkably like a St George's cross. These images were initially created in connection with the mutinies in the highland regiments in 1743, when the men were executed at the Tower of London: they then came to be used as images of heroic highlanders, and then were associated with the Jacobite cause in the same way as anything kilted irresistibly did.

So, there are a lot of things going on on this one plate, China, Scotland, Ch'ing dynasty, the Jacobites - or, rather, not Jacobites - mutinies in the British Army, trade with the East - or if you're in the East, trade with the West. In an exhibition, actual or virtual, you would only have to explain a part of this, but if you're delivering diversity and it's going into the virtual storehouse, you have to find ways to make it **all** available, so that the item can appear in any number of potential exhibitions, according to the virtual visitors' choice.

Another example might be the silver tea set, made by H.W. in Sheffield, in 1905-1906 and presented to Mr and Mrs Keir Hardie on the occasion of their silver wedding anniversary by 'a few Socialist friends'. It is an object rich in association, but it is also a very good example of art nouveau silver, a fact which tends to fade beside these other points of interest.

Both of these items could be deemed to be Scottish and have come my way because of their Scottish associations, but they could also appear in displays on entirely non-Scottish themes - Chinese porcelain or European art nouveau, the history of inter-continental trade.

As displays change over time within a museum, these different meanings can be revealed, but for the virtual visitor we need to be able to reveal them simultaneously - to fulfil the potential of different meanings, to deliver diversity, to facilitate serendipity. The records for the objects must be susceptible to many approaches. This is why we must start to think in terms of giving access to the stores - not a warehouse, but a storehouse of our objects, a treasury.

Too often we make our visitors jump through hoops by channelling enquiries through different departments, and through different museums; different ways of looking at things rather different things. If we take our categories and classifications from existing displays, we will take on their assumptions. We need to use a classless classification. If we are going to make our storehouse databases open to all, we must do it without forcing users to follow our well-trodden paths, without their having to know about horology or ormolu or the Jurassic.

At the Points of View meetings which the Getty Art History Information Program supported in 1995, when we were studying examples of real questions asked of museums, we came up with a character called Mr Rococo, believed by an enquirer to be an artist - we need databases which can answer questions about Mr Rococo, and Mr Ormolu and Mr Jurassic, without

making our users feel stupid or as if they've blundered into the wrong web page.

Ian has spoken about the need to continue learning about what people want to know from museums, and the importance of analysing the use of web sites, which I entirely agree with. Research carried out at the New Mexico Museum of Natural History and Science web site in 1998, and reported on at the Museums and the Web Conference earlier this year, indicates that visitors 'come to a museum web site ready to learn and that we have an obligation not to squander that opportunity'. Perhaps we should have less talk about expertise, and more talk about obligations - or am I being too Presbyterian?

Although, to be honest, I've never managed to do any systematic evaluation of web-accessible museum information - even in preparation for giving this paper - because every time I set out to do it, I get side-tracked: I always end up going somewhere I didn't mean to go, somewhere the material takes me, and I think that's really important, to remember that the material has a life of its own: I've been saying for years that information is organic, and it grows in directions we cannot anticipate, and here we can see this happening: museum information is overflowing over the side of the petri dish faster than we can keep up with, and we can't keep up with the users either.

While building our collections management databases we have, perfectly properly, concentrated on object-specific information. To make the virtual stores truly available, we have to provide access to those other levels of information and integrate information from different sources, in order to provide context for the individual object, to indicate where and when it was produced, in what sort of surroundings it was utilised, its relationships with other objects. These elements are essential if we are to give the users real choices. But we need to do it by widening out the choices, not by narrowing them and forcing users along existing paths: by facilitating

serendipity. We should be making far more use of information which is already generated within the museum but is left to dissipate itself harmlessly into the atmosphere instead of being incorporated back into the museum's information systems. Do you know, all the text which my institution was creating to accompany images supplied to SCRAN, nearly 10,000 objects so far, information created by and checked by curators at considerable expense of time and **expertise**, was then being left on a disk in the Multimedia department - it was available to outsiders on the World Wide Web but not available to the staff within the NMS? We now capture it on its way to SCRAN, and whisk it into the collections management database, but only because a fairly unimportant drone in the Collections Documentation Department thought of it and implemented it. I'm far too modest to tell you who that far-sighted and perceptive person was. But it is difficult to get the idea of using information in more than one way accepted: even if curators recognize it as a good idea, they don't want to do it with this information, and not now. Maybe with the next lot of information, which will be better. After they've checked it.

As well as **objects** being accessible on the Web, **which may not be accessible in the actual museum for reasons of space**, we can also provide information which would not be available within the actual museum for reasons of text space. So far, the Web has usually been seen as a place to put concise, essential information, the highlights of the collections, but given the technology's capabilities for information-handling, it is an excellent place to put all that information that can't be squeezed on to labels, to provide virtual study rooms.

And if the information is to be truly interactive, it must also be capable of being updated, it must be dynamic. There will be occasions when the user may be able to add to the information that we have about the objects, with photograph collections for instance, when they can recognize mystery

landscapes or street scenes or railway engines. We are not the only people with expertise and we have to be open to that sort of contribution.

Having different levels of information implies that for some objects there will be a very large volume of information, images and text, and we need to continue to develop ways to help the visitor navigate through this, help them find the areas that are relevant to this visit, to this exhibition. What we don't need to say is, here is a list of objects that we will let you look at if you correctly navigate the carefully structured pathway. We have to find ways of prompting users without nudging them too hard: we have to have options, choices, pop-up lists or whatever their technical successors are - but we need them in order to indicate where the riches lie rather than directing the user, we need them to arise from the material. Myself, when I'm faced with a search box and no clues, I search for **teapot** and **chair**, so for all you people out there working on evaluation studies, if you're finding that lots of people look for teapots, it's really me, skewing your statistics. The reason I use **chair** as a test is to see if it brings up armchairs as well.

When we're looking for models of how to put concentrated visual and text information on the Web, we have a lot to learn from mail-order catalogues and Internet shopping. Mail order catalogues have to describe stacks of things consistently and accurately, yet in a sufficiently clear and direct way that we don't order the pink shorts when we wanted the black satin basque. They have to be sure that we can do it quickly too. Consistent use of data fields, and consistent style are essential if users are to find their way around a large body of information, often as important as terminology control. Consistently composed information can be much more effectively and helpfully re-presented. Thoughtful use of different type sizes helps too, as well as screen layout, and in my experience hasn't been utilised much.

I think we have to let our virtual visitors have far more freedom than we allow their dreary earthbound equivalents: we have to say Here it all is, and we are going to let you go wherever you like - what would you like to see? Do you want to see teapots? Do you want to see things made of inflated pigs' bladders? Do you want to see things from your home town? Or things from the other side of the world? Or things from the town your grandmother came from? Do you want to see things made by a potter, or a goldsmith, or a blacksmith? Or a gynaecologist or a haberdasher? Do you want to see what a sunshine recorder looks like?

People love to get behind the scenes in the museum, and now they can. They've always suspected that the best stuff was tucked away out of sight and wanted to have a good look around themselves. Not all objects are as rich as others, of course. Some are frankly dull and sometimes it is very hard to think up more than a few obvious words to describe them, no matter how hard one tries. I'm sure we all have our own favourite examples of objects which, while no doubt of great interest to the scholar, are less than breathtaking in themselves. But dull objects have their place, and who are we to say what people should or shouldn't want to see? Items which wouldn't be selected for any virtual exhibition may still be displayed in the virtual storehouse.

Users must be able to create their own exhibitions - as users of SCRAN create their own teaching packs, their own multimedia applications, they can also create their own exhibitions. SCRAN offers resource packs - groups of objects which have been prepared earlier - or individual items, and of course these can be combined. Licensed users can download the resources and use and re-use them as **they** wish.

Our databases can be a continually changing kaleidoscope of significances - not a **random** display of shapes and colours and vivid objects, but because of the integrity of the database, an eternally renewable series of coherent

and meaningful patterns. Which comes back to the conference's theme of **delivering diversity**. We would hope that the records for objects in our collections for American Indian material would be as easily and meaningfully searched by a visitor in Edinburgh, a visitor to the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, or an expert member of staff there. Or by an American Indian.

None of which is to say that I think we don't need curators, or expertise at all. Or that these virtual storehouses can replace real exhibitions. ... it is to say that they are an **addition** to the richness that museums can offer, not a substitution for it.

To end with another point from the world of mail-order and internet shopping: look at **amazon.com** and how swiftly it takes us to the very book or video that we knew we were looking for but couldn't quite remember the name of, or that was published under a different name in the U.S. Look at the lists it gives us of other books bought by previous shoppers, of other videos that you might enjoy. Imagine if we said 'Visitors who looked at these chairs were also interested in this teapot.' And we could let our visitors write reviews of our objects, like amazon.com does. I think that would be terrific.

