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Title

Mind the gap! Documentation as a “missing link” in the ICOM definition of museum.

Introduction

The ICOM Statutes (2007) define the museum as an institution that “acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity”. What is missing in this catalogue of tasks – and consequently in the definition – is documentation. This is an important fact as documentation is what can be called the “missing link” between the museum’s five central assignments. This can be visualized by the following illustration:

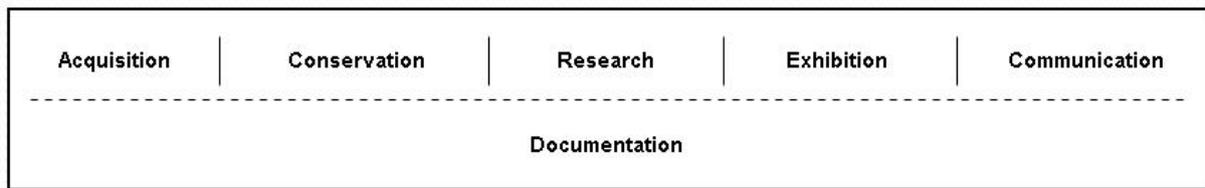


Fig. 1: The relationship between the various activities of museums (cf. Hagedorn-Saupe & Ermert (2005: 66).

The diagram shows that documentation is the fundamental task that serves as a foundation for all other assignments to the museum. This fact is emphasized by the Austrian museologist Friedrich Waidacher (1996: 5) who claims that documentation is not to be considered as an isolated discipline of the museum but instead has to accompany and bring together all fields of operation. In fact, documentation is inevitable in performing museological functions from documenting condition of objects, preservation and conservation procedures, results during research process, to documenting exhibitions and other communication forms (Maroevic 1998: 221f). This is quite well-known to the staff responsible for the collection management system. However, it is obviously not in the focus of attention of the other museum departments. Especially when planning personnel and budget for both routine activities and projects, the important role of documentation is often neglected or even totally ignored. Nevertheless, as Hartmut John (2005: 43) stresses, documentation is the indispensable platform for all effective museum work. Consequently, it is essential to reconsider the function and significance of documentation for the daily museum work and bring it to the attention of the institution, both staff and management. Changes in internal perception will only be the first step. The second step – which is not within the scope of this paper – will be the public awareness of documentation. As Rupert Shepherd (2014a), documentation manager at the Horniman Museum and Gardens, rightfully states, documentation does seldom appear in public. For this reason it is also difficult to find support for it inside the museum. Jude Dicken, documentation officer in the Manx National Heritage, Isle of Man, emphasizes that “documentation has become part of

the ‘life cycle’ of the institution rather than just being concerned with discrete functions” (Holt 2014).

Documentation as a cross-sectional task

Collections of physical objects are the heart of museums, they mark the difference to cultural heritage institutions such as archives and libraries. In addition to their physical dimension, museum objects have an information dimension (Keene 1998: 23). This dimension is recorded in the object documentation. Besides the information that can be deciphered from the physical object and the one that enters the museum together with the object, additional information is created inside the museum while dealing with the object. All this information is integrated in the documentation and facilitated for further use inside and – within reason – outside the museum. Therefore Friedrich Waidacher (1996: 11) correctly states that all areas of operation in the museum are in need of documentation in order to be aware of their course of action and the output they produce along the way. So it is essential that the documentation is accessible to all branches of the museum as it interacts with and forms the foundation for all related activities such as acquisition, conservation, research, exhibition, and communication. This is supported by David Bearman (2008: 38) who states: “Recording of facts about objects takes place in the context of activities, in the museum these activities might be collection, acquisition, conservation, exhibition, interpretation or research. This context makes the objects part of the museum’s knowledge.”

Acquisition

The acquisition of an object is a crucial step for the safeguarding of the contextual information about it as the object is taken out of its original context for which it was created and in which it was used. With the object being placed into the museum context, the original context has to

be documented in order to be preserved. Without proper documentation significant pieces of information about an object cannot be conserved and the object is isolated – to prevent this, the relations of the object have to be documented (Waidacher 1993: 178). Especially the contextual information of the object has to be preserved: “In documenting the object in the museum, we are recording the history of its interactions with other objects, and with people, places, events and actions.” (Bearman 2008: 38)

In addition, the documentation informs about the why and how of the acquisition of the object. The detailed documentation of the process in which the museum gained ownership of the object is important for two reasons: First of all, it provides legal evidence for the institution itself, its funding body, and the public. Subsequently, it is the foundation for researching the history of the object, its provenance and lineage through the course of history; an aspect that becomes more and more important for collection history (Hagedorn-Saupe & Ermert 2005: 67).

Furthermore, this documentation serves as a kind of passport for the object (Hagedorn-Saupe & Ermert 2005: 67). In case of theft, it can serve as a kind of warrant as the International Council of Museums’ Object ID does which includes basic information about the object that can be derived from its documentation.

With the growing size of collections, it becomes necessary to establish criteria for acquisitions (Treinen 1973: 339). From those criteria, if documented properly and updated regularly, a concept for a collection policy can be established. Apart from managing the physical aspect of the collection, the informational aspect has to be kept under control, too. With the growing size of collections there is an increasing danger of losing information over time: The more time passes between the acquisition and the documentation, the less likely will be an accurate object documentation in retrospective. Therefore, the perpetuation of the museum’s knowledge is one of the great challenges, as Helen Wilkinson (2009: 17) correctly states – and

documentation is the only instrument to preserve the history of objects and their contextual information.

Conservation

After the transfer of the object into the museum, the museum's duty for its preservation starts and becomes perpetual, if not to say eternal, in theory at least. Therefore it is essential to carefully document all the examinations, scientific findings and resulting measures of conservation and make them available and easy to use (Radin 2011: 1). Especially the thorough investigation of objects provides insights into applied materials, manufacturing techniques and production processes that are fundamental for the future work with the object. Furthermore, this information is of substantial interest for researchers who look for deeper insight into the object's production.

Preservation consists of several parts: prevention, conservation and restoration. Prevention of damage holds centerstage. It is achieved by providing the most favourable conditions for storage, presentation, and documentation (Götz 2005: 53). Having in mind that the conservation documentation is important, it is essential to make it available and easy to use. Otherwise it loses its purpose and significance.

Research

Museums are not only institutions of conservation but also research organisations. The research is mainly focused on the collections and their items (Xylander 2005: 57). As Willie Xylander (2005: 59f) points out, it is central for research to be embedded into a domain of established knowledge and build on it. Therefore, "in museums, all knowledge should be sourced", as David Bearman (2008: 37) emphasizes. At the same time, a strong connection between collection documentation and research is established: The collection and its docu-

mentation become the foundation for research in museums while research forms the scientific value of museum collections. In this way, as Hildegard Vieregg (2006: 34) concludes, documentation becomes an integral part of research.

Exhibition

Today, the esteem and appreciation of museums strongly depend on exhibits. Accordingly, the resources, both financial and human, are concentrated on this area in order to gain public attention. A well-maintained collection documentation is indispensable for planning exhibits (retrieving and selecting objects, managing loans, etc.). Moreover it is the key to contextualize the objects for presentation because “without documentation, the collections are a meaningless pile of odds and ends. If we don’t know what the objects are and where they come from, we cannot meaningfully display them or help people understand them” (Shepherd 2014a).

For the museum’s educational service, the collection documentation as well as the object documentation offer access points for planning programs (guided tours, presentations, workshops) and media support (audio guides, podcasts, online or mobile services) but also traditional media such as text.

But documentation is not only indispensable for exhibitions inside the museum but also for transferring exhibitions into the digital space of the Internet. To do so it is essential to have it available in a digital form because what is not documented electronically cannot be displayed on the Internet (Bearman 1995: 21).

Communication

For museum communication, digital documentation plays an important role in representing and communicating the museum’s collection, for example in data exchange between institutions (e.g. for loans or copyright questions), reprographic services, but also for information

transfer to the public. Especially digital services such as online exhibitions or data transfer to digital heritage portals make existing shortcomings in the collection records publicly visible. On the one hand, an incomplete, incorrect, or incomprehensible documentation that accompanies any digital object published on the Internet can have a negative impact on the quality of the presentation of the museum and consequently on its reputation (Schweibenz 2008: 119). On the other hand, in the age of Social Media, it is not to be considered as disgraceful for a museum to include the audience in completing or improving existing documentation by using participatory means such as crowdsourcing, expertsourcing, or social tagging as it is obvious that some tasks in documentation cannot be done by staff due to a lack of resources. What is more, from Web 1.0 and Web 2.0, the museum receives feedback on both the objects and the information they have placed online. This feedback reduces slips of the pen while it increases the museum's knowledge. Although the museum has to invest some effort to check and verify the received information, it is worth the trouble (Kühling 2010: 4). Of course, all the gained information has to be documented accurately.

Meta-Documentation

During the process of documentation and as a result of it additional information is created, for example documentation photography, technical data from the digitisation process, references to literature, biographical notes, catalogue and exhibition texts, controlled vocabularies, etc. All this information is produced inside the museum and increases the original object information forming a large and complex body of information. This requires some thinking about and planning of the documentation process. First of all, it is important to follow standards and guidelines for documentation to do it correctly so that the results can be used internally, exchanged with other institutions and published on the Internet. Such standards and guidelines

guarantee that not only the object information but also information about people, places, events, and actions can be related properly (cf. Lill & Schweibenz 2014).

Conclusion

A well-maintained and up-to-date documentation is an investment in the future and can be used for a wide range of tasks inside the museum as described above. In this way, it forms the basis for all sectors of museum work mentioned in the ICOM definition of museum, and what is more, it basically encloses these tasks and interlocks the different working fields in the museum as is shown in figure 2.



Fig 2: Documentation interlocking the activities in the museum

Considering figure 2, what would museum work look like without documentation? The answer is quite obvious: The museum would have a bunch of objects but only very little information about them. The quality of such statements can be illustrated by the following “mock example” from a Tweet on museum documentation: “Portrait of don’t know, by someone or other, donated in can’t remember – that’s why museum documentation is important” (Bilson as quoted in Shepherd 2014b). In such a scenario, the museum would not be able to maintain its role as a reliable provider of information and education in the information society and therefore lose its relevance for its communities and society.

The message between the lines is the one mentioned on the CIDOC’s website: “Documentation is essential to all aspects of a museums [sic!] activities. Collections without adequate documentation are not true ‘museum’ collections.” (CIDOC 2010)

So what is the next step? Bridge the gap!

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