Towards working together. Standardization of the museum documentation in Poland.

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The quality of digital documentation produced by museums in Poland is not satisfactory in most cases yet. Although using digital tools for the documentation of museum objects is not a novelty any longer, there are many reasons why only few museums have been following international standards and authorities or employ image quality management measures. Furthermore, many of the museums still confine their efforts to the very process of digitization and often fail to share their resources with potential users. As a result, only a minor part of the Polish museum collections is accessible online, especially if a high quality of data is sought.

A hard way up the hill

The political transformation which took place in Poland after 1989 brought about the need for changing the legislation in force. Yet, it took time to enact new regulations, therefore museums had to wait until 1997 for a new museum law and relevant statutory instruments governing their operation, including the field of inventorying their collections. The ordinance of 1997 concerning the cataloguing did not provide for any dedicated electronic documentation tools (although such tools did exist on the market at that time) – it only allowed inventory records to be created based on computer hardcopies. A new, amended issue of the ordinance, which took effect in 2004, included a regulation, which provided for the electronic inventory keeping, but the provision was standing apart from the remaining regulations (concerning the binding and sealing up of documents, for example). The document remains in force in this form until now.

Yet, the very issue of the electronic tools usage is not the main problem associated with the ordinance. Under the previous political system, the rules for keeping documentation in museums were described in detail: mandatory catalogue card templates were designed by the central authority, with the required scope of data defined precisely, depending on the collection type (artistic, archaeological, natural, etc.). In the 1960s, a list of regulations applicable to museums was issued together with the binding interpretation as a compendium of documentation-related knowledge for museum cataloguers, who used to refer to it as "the book with the blue strip".

In the new Poland, museums were to be given more independence in keeping their documentation, but the legislative effort resulted in a situation, where the previous thick and comprehensive volume

of the collection documentation guidelines was replaced by a page and a half list of very generic, laconic statements focussing solely on artistic collections.

Furthermore, Polish universities do not offer any courses that would educate future cataloguers or documentalists, especially in the field of new technologies – classes at museum studies barely touch the problem of keeping collection records or electronic catalogues, the subject of metadata standards or controlled vocabularies being presented extremely rarely at few faculties only.

In consequence, Polish museums are missing digital documentation specialists. High quality metadata are still lacking – only few museums follow international metadata standards, while the provision of digital access to collection objects is often confined to the presentation of digital photographs, whose quality is not infrequently below the minimum requirements.

The first steps

The first initiatives to run electronic collection inventories took place in the largest Polish museums in the early 1990s. Not much was known about metadata standards at that time – these first systems simply converted paper files into digital data. Although in the mid-1990s dr Dorota Folga-Januszewska from the National Museum in Warsaw (currently a professor and the president of ICOM Poland) and Agnieszka Jaskanis M.A. from the National Archaeological Museum in Warsaw came up with a very significant initiative aimed at creating a data exchange scheme (SSWIM) intended to become the first Central European implementation of the CIDOC and CEICOM recommendations, but the idea encountered neither understanding nor support at that time and the project was eventually given up.

Most museums have developed their own, internal data schemes individually, demonstrating different levels of understanding of the problem. Yet, due to the low data quality awareness, the schemes often lack internal consistency, the terminology used is messy, while databases have no content administrators even today. Therefore, those few collection management systems developed in Poland have never been standardized and fail to meet the requirements of museums choosing to commission them. Furthermore, the programs have gone out of date now, as software companies do not find it worth their while to improve them. Any attempts aimed at developing a modern, web-based product have been to no avail.

After the long years of such an uncoordinated approach, any centralised access to data cannot be provided for the time being. With the low quality of metadata and inconsistent terminology, museums are not prepared for sharing their digital resources. Fortunately, this is not always the case. The Digital Cultural Heritage project launched by the National Museum in Kraków can be

referred to as a worthy initiative, although a local one for the moment. The National Museum in Krakow is the only one in Poland to describe its collections using the AAT and Iconclass.

The National Institute for Museums and Public Collections and Kultura+ Project

The National Institute for Museums and Public Collections (NIMOZ) was established in 2011, in connection with the long-term government programme, Kultura+, scheduled for the years 2011-2015 and intended to support the digitization, long-time preservation and sharing of digital resources, as well as the development of dedicated infrastructure in the central and local government institutions of culture and archives in Poland. Having entered its final stage now, the Programme has been a major contribution to technological progress in some of the museums, but it has its weak points resulting from the fact that no museum experts have been invited to participate in its planning (it was not until the beginning of 2013 that the Institute was appointed to operate as the formal Centre of Excellence for the Programme). This solution is not capable of revolutionizing the situation all over the country though – out of 519 of various type museums existing in Poland today, only 30 benefitted from the Kultura+ programme over the last 5 years and another 7 – from an additional, supporting project (Protection and Digitization of Cultural Heritage) implemented by NIMOZ for other types of institutions of culture in the years 2013-2015. In addition, the effects of these activities are very uneven, the online accessibility of collections having been improved only insignificantly.

The Institute has been working on standardization in the field of digital documentation of museum collections since the very beginning of its existence. Working groups appointed in 2011 collected the best practices and prepared recommendations for the digitization process flow, as well as for creating metadata and for digital imaging. The recommendations were published in the form of both extensive studies and smaller brochures, intended as a guidance for the museums in their digitization projects. With regard to the fact that museums often consult NIMOZ and seek Institute's advice concerning their documentation processes, the work on a new publication is underway, to provide a general guidance covering various aspects of cataloguing museum objects (more detailed manuals focussing on specific collection types will be prepared in the years to come).

In 2013, the Institute embarked on a project to translate and localize the SPECTRUM standard. The document was published on our web forum for the museums to be able to discuss it and attend consultation meetings over the last year. Our intention was to make it accessible at this early, imperfect stage of translation, so as to give the museums an opportunity to make their contributions to the process. Currently, the final editorial work is taking place. Another working group, appointed under the Kultura+ programme, commenced the process of translating LIDO to Polish. Furthermore,

the Institute initiated the translation of AAT. During the first stage, a selected part of the material was translated, a method was developed and a computer program for the entire work was chosen. Also, preparations for translating the ICONCLASS to Polish have commenced.

Joint projects

Now NIMOZ is preparing its next project titled "E-museums – dissemination of museum collections", planned for the years 2016-2019. It will provide the first centralized solution in the field of digitization in the museums of Poland. So far, museums used to implement projects individually or under local consortium arrangements. E-museums will have a country-wide coverage and is expected to deliver the first central portal for the presentation of museum collections. The project will be granted co-financing from the European funds under the Operational Programme Digital Poland. According to its principles, only the museums operating under the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage will be eligible to participate. Hence, the group of beneficiary institutions will not be large, but on the other hand the project has been planned as a pilot activity intended to prepare the whole museum sector for sharing the collections online.

We are planning to develop uniform documentation standards (based on Kultura+ deliverables). One of the project objectives is to improve the quality of documentation in museums, with Spectrum as a mandatory scheme for project participants and a recommended one for other museums. Furthermore, the terminology used will be standardized, minimum digital imaging requirements will be introduced (e.g. a relatively high resolution and no digital watermarking of files being shared), metadata will be made accessible according to LIDO and Creative Commons licensing will be used for the non-public domain (or not copyright secured) objects. After project completion, its deliverables will be made available to the whole sector. We are planning to prepare a new collection management software, a central data aggregator and a free web portal, where museums will be able to present their collections, as well as to announce exhibitions, education activities and opening hours.

To begin with, we have analysed the situation in the museums entitled to participate in the project. In 2013, we conducted a survey designed to identify the respondents' status as regards documentation and digitization. Thereafter, we visited 31 potential consortium members. Although museums are not among the best financed institutions in Poland, our research has revealed that financing is not the greatest of their problems. Institutional management in the face of new challenges, insufficient specialist knowledge and inadequate monitoring of work results turned out to be much more problematic. While money for purchasing equipment or commissioning services can be obtained under various projects, know-how is much more deficient.

Moreover, analyses of museums dispersed all over Poland have exposed the depth of differences in local traditions. The documentation methods used are often very different, even in respect of keeping the count of collection elements : depending on the museum, a compound object can be recorded as one or as two artefacts . The terminology used for the description of museum collections is not consistent either – this is due to different schools and methodological approaches as regards art items, as well as vernacular terminologies in case of folk art. We are planning to define a common terminology by compiling vocabularies based on the AAT structure, since the whole of the Getty vocabulary will not be completed within the project duration. Thereafter, we shall switch to AAT in the Polish language version.

It is a matter of high importance to us that metadata on the portal presenting museum collections are not limited to such basic information as the author or technique, but that they introduce the user to the context of the object. Usually, metadata descriptions prepared by museums are confined to the basic profile and only some of them provide any key words. It is therefore necessary to define the missing terminology referring to such categories as the associated events, persons, locations and concepts. For iconographic associations, ICONCLASS will be translated. Considering that the project is expected to result in a body of some 60 thousand digital objects accessible online and has a limited duration, we have assumed that only some of the objects will be furnished with extensive descriptions at this stage. Those most interesting will also receive a popular summary.

Besides improving the quality of documentation and providing the online access to museum collections, the primary objectives of the project include the definition of a qualification framework for personnel dealing with digital documentation. With the already mentioned lack of precise regulations and differences in documentation habits, museums do not know, what requirements the candidates applying for digitization jobs should meet, or how the existing competence and skills should be developed. Consequently, academics do not know how to address the museums' needs when planning the courses of studies. As a result, even if a museum can afford hiring a new employee, it is difficult to find a candidate who will be able to operate a collection management software, for example. We hope that the project will render the necessary qualification framework, as well as networking opportunities for the museums and the academia. Furthermore, we are planning to launch a training system designed to train specialists from the museums participating in the project consortium, who will be next supporting other museum personnel in their regions and developing a cross-institutional cooperation network.

Recapitulation

As the project consortium has been limited to the museums most advanced in the field of electronic documentation, the project has been given a status of a pilot study. Following its completion, other Polish museums will be welcome to join the portal with their collections, provided that they meet the minimum requirements regarding the quality of metadata and imaging. The collection management system to be developed by the consortium will be offered as an open source product. This will be the first project in the field of digitization and online accessibility of museum collections on such a significant scale in Poland and potentially beneficial to the whole museum sector in the long term.

This is for the first time after years of individual, isolated attempts and efforts, that the museums are facing a chance to develop common solutions based on their previous experience and to support one another in their further work.