

Documenting exhibitions – a case study from the Olympic Museum, Lausanne

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ABSTRACT

The Olympic museum recently reopened its doors to the public following a radical two-year overhaul. The building has been renovated and the museum's exhibition spaces have been completely redesigned, using the latest multimedia technology, to meet the expectations of today's museum visitors. To maximize the long-term benefits of this massive investment, the museum is documenting the new exhibitions: seeking to capture not just the end results, but also the thinking and the design choices that went into their conception. This work raises some interesting problems since existing software and documentation standards are not focused on this area, and provide only limited support. This paper examines the problem of documenting an exhibition and proposes a conceptual model for doing so in a comprehensive and structured manner.

Introduction

At the end of 2013, The Olympic Museum reopened its doors to the public after a radical overhaul and redesign. During the project *Musée 2020* the museum was closed for two years, from January 2012 to December 2013.

The main aim was to completely rethink the permanent exhibition that had been in place for almost 10 years. The chronological presentation meant that the exhibits had to be updated after each edition of the Summer and Winter Olympic Games, resulting after just a few years in a critical lack of space. Moreover, the Museum team felt that the exhibition needed to be more vivid and “story-telling”, focused on athletes and underrepresented themes such as the Opening and Closing ceremonies of the Games, the relation between sport and science, life in the Olympic village, the impact on the host cities, broadcasting, etc. More space was therefore needed. Last but not least, the technological displays needed to be updated to enable visitors to benefit from the database of athletes, contextual information about artefacts, archival documents, etc.

The new exhibition areas were designed and produced by external UK-based partners, working in close collaboration with the management, the curators and the in-house exhibition managers: Mather & Co. for the scenography,¹ Paragon Creative Limited for the design and build,² Centre Screen,³ and Electrosonic⁴ for the audiovisuals.

¹ <http://www.matherandco.com>

² <http://www.paragon-creative.co.uk/> for the design & build, and, for the Audiovisuals

³ <http://www.centrescreen.co.uk/>

⁴ <http://www.electrosonic.co.uk/>

The Museum is now in the process of digitizing and archiving all the documentation that was produced by the project.

In this paper we examine the requirements for active exhibition archiving, and the various tools that are available to accomplish the task. We conclude from this analysis that greater attention should be given to this type of problem and that an innovative approach is needed to provide a satisfactory solution. We propose a conceptual scheme for documenting exhibitions and explain its implementation using our institution's existing software: MuseumPlus (Zetcom), LiveLink (OpenText) and Intelligent Topic Manager (ITM, Mondeca).

Requirements of “active” archiving

Viewed from the perspective of long-term preservation and access, the archiving of the documentation produced for the planning and design of The Olympic Museum's new exhibition does not pose any specific conceptual or technical difficulties. Plans, documents, spreadsheets, images, multimedia files and other documents, whether born-digital or on paper, can be collated, classified, digitised, indexed and stored using traditional archival techniques. Apart from some exceptionally large files – mostly multimedia and high-resolution photographs – all the digitised documentation has been sorted, classified and stored in the IOC's Livelink servers. This ensures both security and ease of access.

However, the ambitions of The Olympic Museums go beyond simply preserving this documentation. The aim is to capture and make available not only the documents themselves, but also the logical structure and the content of the exhibitions: how they are conceived and implemented. The intention is to make elements of the exhibition available for reuse and communication. Members of the Olympic Museum Network⁵ and other clients will be able to make use of exhibition elements, adapting the presentation and format to meet local circumstances, while respecting the exhibition's structure and creative intent as well as the associated legal and financial conditions. Multimedia sequences, for example, may need to be reformatted; substitutes found for original artefacts, texts translated, etc. but the overall narrative structure, the context and the legal conditions relevant to each exhibition element must be respected. Each element must, in effect, be considered as a work, an *oeuvre* in its own right.

Archiving plan

The *Musée 2020* exhibition consists of 14 *exhibits*, divided into four groups, each of which is under the responsibility of an exhibition manager. The sequence of these 14 exhibits comprises the visitor experience, and forms the basis of the archival plan.

Each exhibit is subdivided into 9 *sections*. These sections each present a sub-theme of the exhibit theme. Sections correspond physically to an “island” (*îlot*), a showcase, or a wall of artworks. These different spaces each contain a panel of general information, objects, captions, photos, videos or other multimedia elements.

⁵ Founded on 7 September 2006, the Olympic Museums Network (OMN) was established with 11 founding members, with the aim of finding ways of working together on useful synergies and joint projects in order to improve quality and share costs. The idea is not to take the place of existing associations such as the International Council of Museums (ICOM), but rather to establish a group of institutions with a common subject matter. The ultimate goal is to grow together and, where possible, to unite in order to become stronger and more efficient, to create a unique platform for the global Olympic Movement. The OMN now includes 22 member museums.

In the file archive of each exhibit, one can find an overall *in situ* picture, the text of the introductory panel, in both Word and pdf formats, as well as information relating to each section: the exhibit plan, a picture of the section, the texts, again in both Word, and pdf formats, along with images of the associated items.

The structure of the archiving plan directly follows the reality of the visitor experience and reflects the linear sequence of the exhibition. One can thus reconstruct the thread of the exhibition and enable the researcher to search through different elements and rediscover the links that the exhibition creates.

The added value of this archiving plan is to enable:

- links to be made from the exhibition archive to the artefact documentation, and between exhibited objects
- access to multimedia elements, images and sound,
- searching by keyword, in both French and English.

However, this approach has some limitations. Linking mechanisms are mono-directional, cannot easily be made from individual images and artefacts records towards the Livelink archive. In addition, some multimedia files that were too large to be archived in Livelink had to be archived on external hard discs.

For this reason, we began to look at new approaches to archiving the exhibition documentation in order to reproduce the visitor's experience more faithfully and allow multiple entry points to the exhibition archive.

State of the art

After some research, and to our best knowledge, no software exists that is designed for documenting and archiving exhibitions.

Collections management software

Our first thoughts were to use the institution's existing collections management software, Museum Plus, to record information about the exhibition. The database contains detailed information about all the items in the collections, and does provide an Exhibition module intended specifically for documenting exhibitions and loans. Exhibitions can be described by name or title, location and dates. Detailed textual comments can also be added. Collection items can be associated with one or more exhibitions. These features allow an exhibition inventory to be prepared (a comprehensive list of all the items included in an exhibition). This is of vital importance for *extra-muros* exhibitions or loans and can be used to prepare packing lists, transport manifests and insurance checklists. However, it does not preserve or document the internal logic and organization of an exhibition; all the items in the exhibition are effectively placed in the same basket: the logic and sequence of presentation is lost.

Online catalogue

A second line of investigation was the *emuseum* package, a module which provides a means of presenting a museum's collection catalogue online. This type of product is sometimes billed as a 'virtual exhibition'. However, we found that this approach did not meet our requirements as it would not allow us to document and present the structure and organisation of the exhibition.

Links between collection items

Another avenue that we considered was to create typed links directly between items recorded in the Museum Plus database, allowing a network of links between related items to be created. This approach has the advantage of technical simplicity since item links are a standard feature of the software.

However, the approach has several major limitations:

- i. in our institution, item-level links are already used to document physical or conceptual links between items (original-copy, part-whole, other version),
- ii. item-level links are global: items are included in more than one exhibition, or related for some other reason, automatically become part of the same network,
- iii. item-level links do not allow any sequence or hierarchy to be established. Linked items are all placed in the same context - as if all the items in an exhibition were to be placed together in a heap in one gallery.

Existing documentation standards

We also looked at a number of existing standards and recommendations: the CIDOC Information categories, the recommendation for the Banque de Données des Biens Culturelles Suisse (BdBS), Collections Trust Spectrum and the CIDOC CRM, but concluded that they provided little or no guidance with respect to the documentation of exhibitions.

Proposed Conceptual schema

From our analysis of the existing archival plan and related documentation, it emerged that the internal logic of the museum's exhibition can best be understood as a series of nested *contexts* containing individual *elements* that are all organized in a *sequence*.

Contexts

The *physical* contexts of an exhibition are the building, the rooms, the display areas and the display cases, while the *thematic* contexts are the exhibition, the exhibits and the sections. There is an inherent tension between the physical layout of the museum building and the thematic organisation of the exhibition. While the two may work perfectly together, the physical constraints of the museum building often force compromises, or may sometimes be used for dramatic effect. An analogous problem exists for exhibition catalogues, where the volumes, chapters, paragraphs and page layout to reinterpret an exhibition's thematic organisation in a paper format. To meet the aim of reusability, our aim was to capture the thematic structure of the exhibition, to allow flexibility of reuse in different physical settings.

For any given realisation of an exhibition, the thematic organisation has to be mapped onto the physical reality of the available exhibition space. Thematic contexts may fall within one or more physical areas; an exhibit may take up only part of a room, fill a complete room or spread across several rooms. The process of physical mapping may become most apparent for itinerant exhibitions moving from one venue to another. For a permanent exhibition it may be less obvious.

Exhibition

The “exhibition” itself can be considered as the top-level, parent context that contains all the other thematic components.

Exhibits

Exhibits can be seen as the primary thematic contexts. They contain one or more sections.

Sections

Sections are individual display areas that fall within an exhibit and form part of the exhibit’s thematic logic. They consist of clusters of elements (e.g. an artefacts, specimens, models, or multimedia sequences), some of which are used as the subject – the central focus of attention – while others, text, labels, diagrams images, etc., provide contextual material to help interpretation.

Elements

Individual elements are items that are intended to be perceived by the visitors as exhibition content. They may be physical artefacts or specimens, pieces of text, images or multimedia items.

Sequence

Whether intentionally or not, items in an exhibition always form a sequence. This sequence of presentation – the *hang* in fine arts jargon – is often of great importance, and can be used by exhibition designers and curators to make non-verbal comments through juxtaposition: inviting association and comparison. Visitors can *override* this sequence to some extent, moving in reverse order or jumping from one item to another, but their freedom of movement is limited to their current context. “Perverse” visitors (such as museum professionals) sometimes go against the natural flow deliberately, crisscrossing diagonally through a gallery like salmon swimming upstream, but even when doing so they still remain within the gallery context.

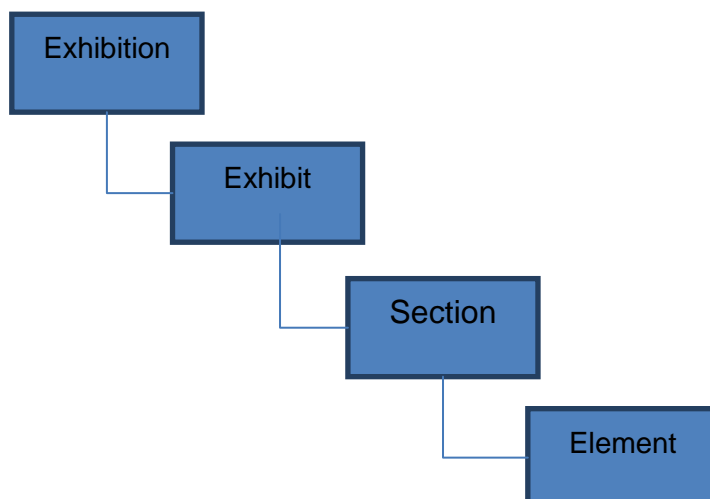


Fig. 1 Exhibition context hierarchy

Modelling Exhibitions with the CIDOC CRM

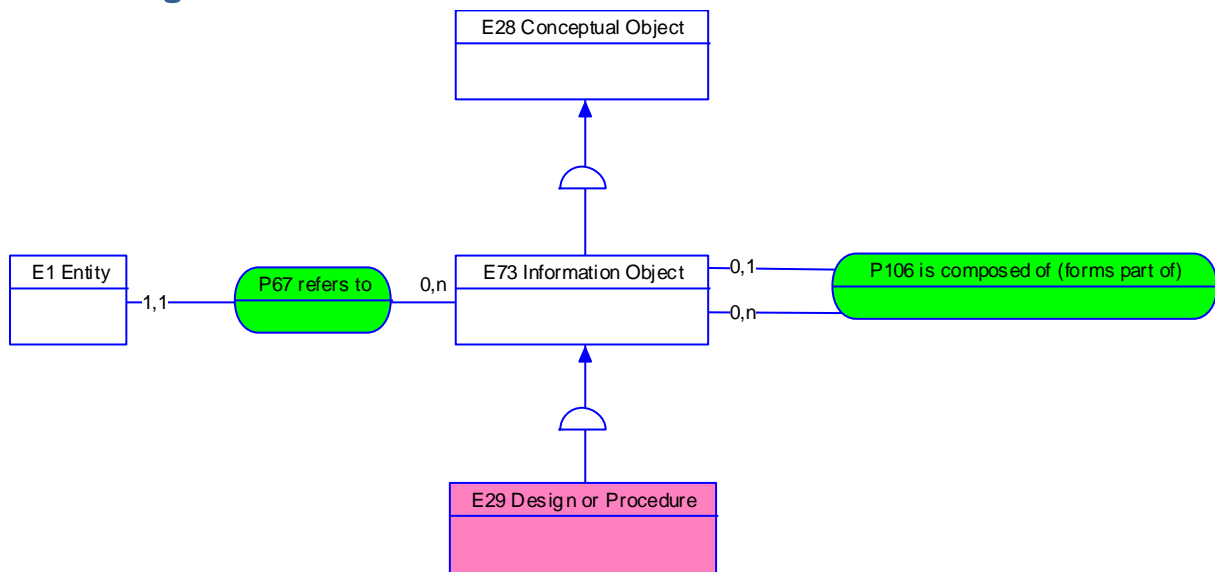


Fig. 2 Modelling with the CIDOC CRM

Our initial thoughts concerning the conceptual model for documenting exhibitions was to use the CRM class E53 Place, or E5 Event. The first because the exhibition, in our conception, consists of a series of place-like containers; the second, because exhibitions commonly take place during a certain time-frame at a given location. However, neither of these classes accurately matches the ideas we were seeking to represent. The definition for E53 Place clearly states that places are actual “extents in space”, “usually determined by reference to the position of ‘immobile’ objects”. This excludes the use the class to refer to purely hypothetical or conceptual contexts. Similarly, the definition for E5 Event seems to tie the class to actual events that have taken place, “resulting in changes of states in cultural, social, or physical systems” and is focused on participants and causality.

Finally, we decided that E29 Design or Procedure, a subclass of E28 Conceptual Object, was the most appropriate class. It includes “documented plans for the execution of actions in order to achieve a result of a specific quality, form, or contents”, which corresponds to our need to document the overall plan or conception of an exhibition, but not necessarily the specific realization at a given time and place. Our archive reflects the general plan for an exhibition, a plan which may be reused, either as a whole or in part, at different times and at different locations.

E29 Design or Procedure inherits the property *P106 is composed of (is part of)* from its parent class E73 Information Object. We use this class to create the instance hierarchy of nested exhibition contexts. The overall exhibition can be seen as an instance E29 Design or Procedure that is composed of one or more subsidiary instances of E29 Design or Procedure. The cardinality used in our schema is more restricted than that proposed by the CIDOC CRM since we needed to create a mono-hierarchy: exhibition spaces have at most one parent container.

E29 Design or Procedure also inherits the property *P67 refers to (is referred to by)* from E73 Information Object. We use this property to associate the various elements (physical objects, multimedia items, texts, images, etc.), with their corresponding exhibition context. Again our

cardinality is more restricted than the CIDOC CRM since, in practice, exhibition elements are never repeated within an exhibition.

The CIDOC CRM can be extended by the creation of subclasses of E29 Design or Procedure to implement specific classes for Exhibition, Exhibit and Section. This would allow specific properties to be declared for each subclass.

Implementation

The nested exhibition structure can be modelled within the production database using the Museum Plus thesaurus module's built in "Broader Term-Narrower Term" relation. Taking advantage of ITM's thesaurus module, we created this nested structure part of the reference terminology. This allowed us to represent the exhibition as distinct levels of containment. The ITM ontology module allows terms forming part of a thesaurus term hierarchy to be placed in different *classes*. This allows *exhibits* and *sections* to be clearly differentiated and additional properties to be defined. One important property, not defined by the CIDOC CRM, is *sort by*, which we use to determine the sort order of the exhibits and sections, and so respect the conception of the exhibition. Without this property, the various exhibition contexts would fall into alphabetical order.

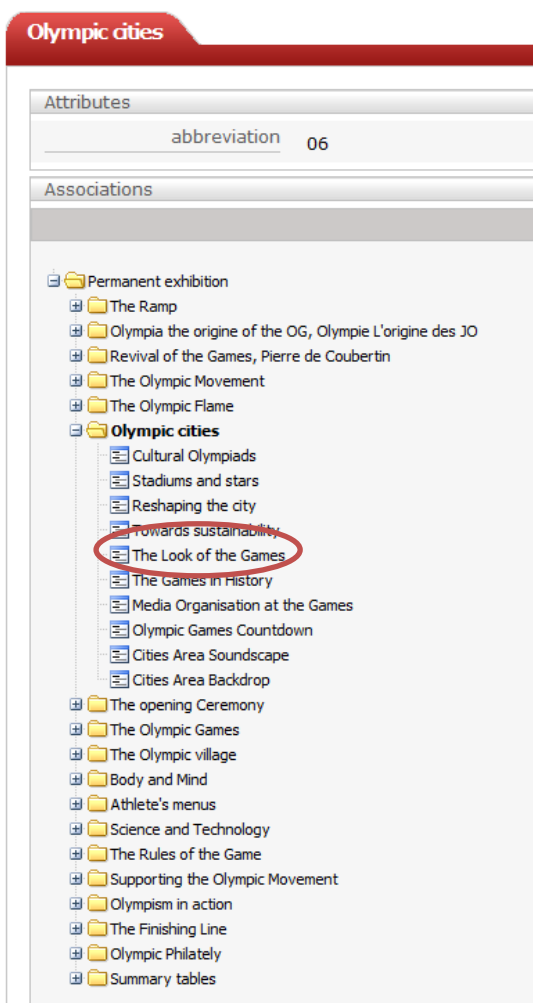


Fig. 3 Hierarchy view in ITM

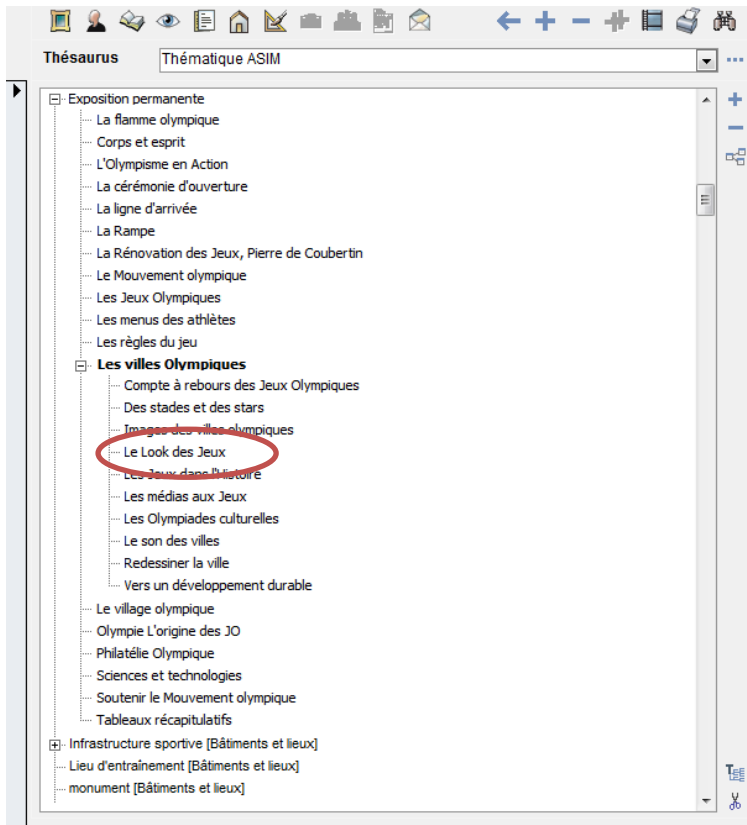


Fig. 4 Thesaurus view in MuseumPlus

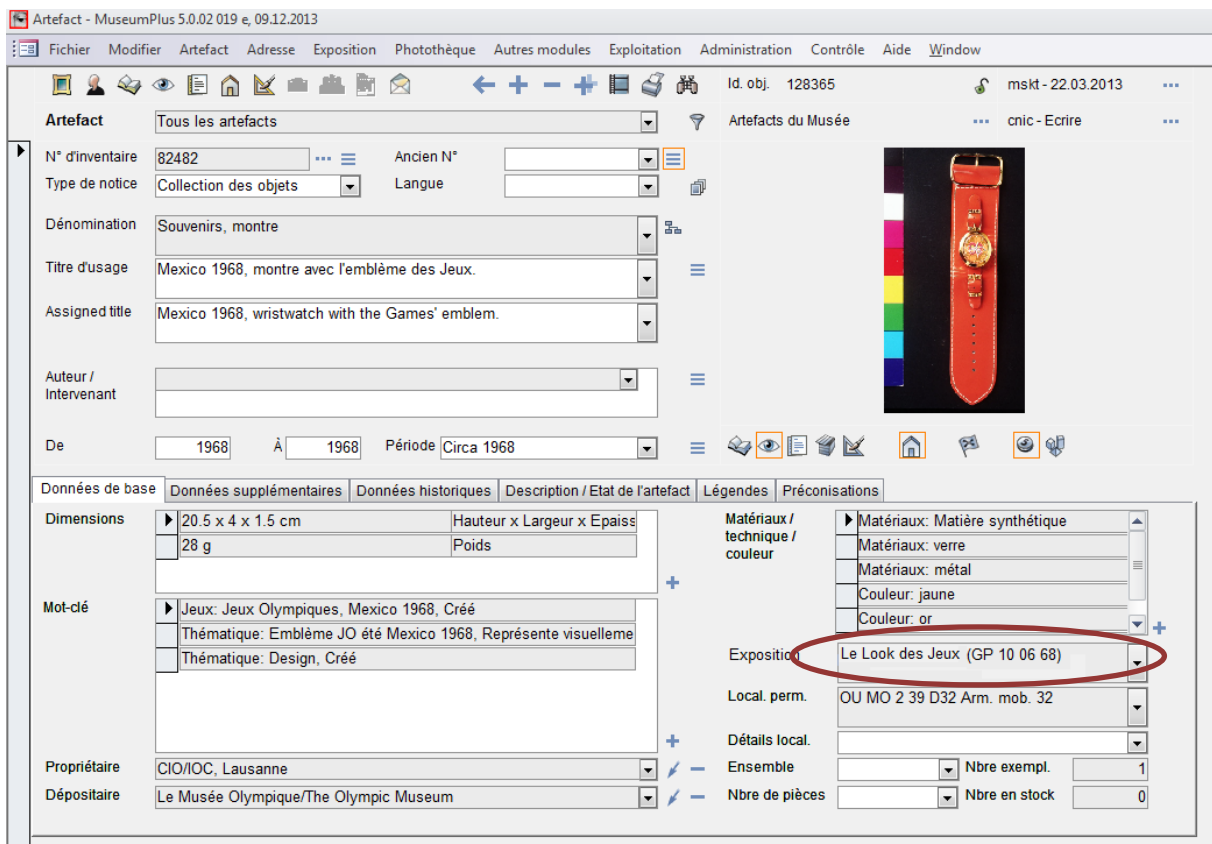


Fig. 5 View in MuseumPlus, Artefact Module

Publication and use

Here we come at last to the final result in the IOC Multimedia Library which brings together the IOC databases for artefacts, historical archives, pictures and moving images.

The nested exhibition structure appears on the left and allows elements to be presented in accordance with the exhibition's organisational logic. Associated texts and multimedia items are grouped together and the exhibition's sequence of presentation is respected.

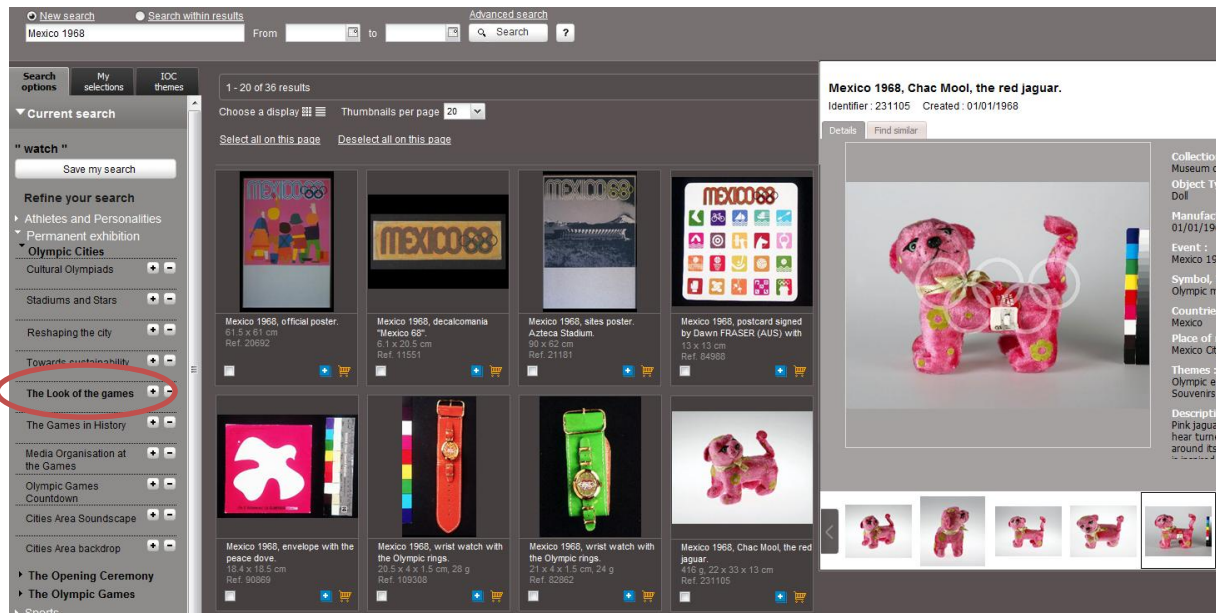


Fig. 5. View in IOC Multimedia Library

Conclusion

We conclude from this analysis that greater attention should be given to the question of archiving exhibitions and that an innovative approach is needed to provide a satisfactory solution. For this reason we have presented a conceptual scheme for documenting exhibitions and attempted to show that an implementation using existing software is indeed possible for all type of items used in an exhibition: artefacts, archival documents, pictures, moving archives and texts.

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