Implementing best practices in museum documentation: the case of Haiti

by Rachelle C. Doucet

ICOM-HAITI

CIDOC 2017
Documentation: Past, Present, Future
Overview

1. Presentation of two case studies:
   (part of an ongoing research project: assessment of Haitian museums; these are preliminary findings)

   **MOF:** Musée Ogier-Fombrun
   Ogier-Fombrun Museum

   **PHCS:** Parc Historique de la Canne à Sucre
   Sugar Cane Historic Park

2. Lessons learnt
Implementing best practices: a transformative project

• Purpose of my presentation:

• I will use the 2 case studies to demonstrate how museum documentation is at the core of a deep transformation currently undergoing in some museums in Haiti.

• Context: 2 moments: the situation prior to 2010 and the situation after 2010
MOF (exterior)
MOF (interior)
MOF

- A renovated Sugar Cane Plantation (18th century)
- Collection: from diverse periods of Haitian history:
  - pre-Columbian period,
  - Spanish colonization,
  - French colonization, slavery, plantation economy
  - slave revolts, wars of Independence
  - Post 1804 (independent Haiti)
- Focus: the plantation slavery system
PHCS

- Renovated Sugar Cane Plantation (18th century)
- Collection: diverse periods of Haitian history:
  - pre-Columbian period,
  - Spanish colonization,
  - French colonization, slavery, plantation system,
  - slave revolts, wars of Independence
  - Post 1804 (Independent Haiti)
- Focus: the evolving technology to produce sugar (18th-20th centuries)
Assessment of documentation situation prior to 2010

- Primary inventory registers exist (manual; no database)
- No accessioning system
- No acquisition policy
- Many flaws in terms of documenting the provenance of the objects
- No adequate cataloguing
- No systematic marking of the objects ...

The 2 museums were run by amateurs, unaware of ICOM and CIDOC standards, of museology principles
Time for change: implementing best practices

• The earthquake was the occasion to rejuvenate and modernize Haitian museums cultural Institutions

• ICOM-HAITI: takes a new start since 2010

• The common goals pursued by both museums: to rise up to the international standards of ICOM, while taking into account the limitations of the socio-cultural and economic context of Haiti.

• The revision of the documentation systems was the trigger that led to a profound evaluation of the overall practices of the museum, from acquisition procedures to display/interpretation.
Lessons learnt (1)

Implementing best practices in museum

Issue of digitization

• One must always implement best practices taking into account the overall context (no one size fits all)
• To implement a good documentation system does not mean necessarily to acquire (sometimes expensive) softwares for digitization
• A local solution, culturally fit, and low-cost, is often a better solution
Lessons learnt (2)
Implementing best practices in museum 
Codification (inventory)

• The first quality of a system of codification is that it is useful and usable
• It should fit to the situation and be clearly spelled out
• There is no point using a foreign system of codification which does meet the particular needs of a small Haitian museum
Lessons learnt (3)

- **Object description: immaterial aspects**

While documenting an object, efforts must be made to include:

Not only information on the socio-historical context

But all the immaterial cultural aspects very alive in the collective imagination (ethno-history, myths, legends, religious-cult practices)
Lessons learnt (4): values

• Documentation is not just about technicalities, it is also about values
• Documenting and valorizing a collection (through a documentation system) is most and foremost about social and ethical values
• Ex. from 2 museums (MOF and PHCS): issue of fakes processes of documenting the provenance of the objects, or the interpretation of the objects,
• raise issues of intellectual honesty,
• raise issues of respect and service to the public
Lesson learnt (5)

• The process of re-organization the documentation system of a museum can lead to a profound personal transformation. (for both MOF and PHCS)

• New vision of 2 museums as an educational space to foster a sense of belonging to a community (be it national, regional or simply human)

• New mission the Directors of the 2 museums embrace personally as active citizens,

• The process is so rewarding that it is worth all the sacrifices past, present, and to come.
A thank you note

Thanks to the Getty Foundation for its generous support
Thanks to the CIDOC Board and CIDOC Committee
Thanks to ICOM–Georgia, to their staff and volunteers (and congratulations on their 10th Anniversary);
Thanks to all the speakers and participants who made this Conference such an illuminative event.

And thank you all for your attention!