

Intangible heritage: a new look at the museum work

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S W E D E N

This paper reflects on defining an approach towards one of the most actual challenges which the museums are currently facing – how to safeguard and present intangible cultural heritage.

Textiles and particularly carpets belong to the phenomena which have the dual character: they simultaneously bear both tangible and intangible elements. The question we need to answer to in regard to carpets, rugs and other textile examples is if a museum's task is confined to collecting, cataloguing, documenting and preserving discrete and particular physical objects or there is something beyond which we still need to fix, protect and promote in a some way. Of course, our esteemed audience is well aware of the importance of safeguarding and promoting the intangible cultural heritage, and I would like just to remind the resolutions of the 21st General Assembly of ICOM held in Seoul in 2004.

Within the International Participation Among Museums Program (IPAM) the Azerbaijan State Carpet Museum and Washington Textile Museum are going to develop jointly a handbook on managing and handling textile and carpet collections. The Textile Museum answers many international requests for advice and related to the care of textile collections and also welcomes interns for training in conservation and collections management. In order to better serve these requests, the Textile Museum would like to collaborate with Azerbaijanian Carpet Museum to develop a handbook of basic procedures for managing and handling textile collections. This handbook could then be shared with other institutions from various parts of the world to train employees and interns. In its turn, Azerbaijanian Carpet Museum has collected over the long period its own notable experience, which includes methods of storage and conservation, digital archiving and tackling with the issues of legal protection of the intangible heritage (including both domestic and international laws and agreements). For example, we have launched an idea of regional cooperation between museums along the Silk Way in making a single database of digital images of carpets and rugs. The database will allow instantly exchanging information on collections and providing the much wider ground for comparative researches and virtual (electronic) restorations of items through their images.

Basic procedures regarding textile and carpet collections would be shaped out in the handbook into two parts. Part one would put the emphasis on Collection Management by addressing the process of collecting, recording and archiving information about collections. Procedures discussed would include inventory, basic conditions reporting, the accessioning process, various systems of numbering accessions (both temporary and permanent acquisitions), tracking object movement, and the loans process. Part two would be oriented toward the care of the collection with procedures for handling objects, and basic storage and mounting methods.

One of the features of this reference manual is that it is by definition inclined to address that ambiguous issue of documenting and presenting the intangible elements of textile collections.

The standard fields for documenting the museum objects like Object Management (owner, current and permanent location, accession details), Object Description (image, form/function, material, technique, dimensions, inscription/mark, condition etc.), History of the Object (producer, place, group, period and date of production) are to be complemented with additional fields reflecting information about usage of this specific type of object, geographic area of its prevalence etc.

Handbook of Standards for Documenting African Collections initiated by CIDOC in 1990s has given a strong impetus for more adequate and thorough way of documenting the museum objects. Important strand for further development contains in the last chapter of this reference tool: it's called "Documentation" and generally tells that (additional) "documentation should permit the retrieval of documents concerning the object - bibliography on the object or linked to the object, photographs (apparently there meant those other than the core image of the object), audiovisual documents, field notebooks, conservation files). Our attention was focused on those "non-compulsory" elements which we believe are as important for documenting the textile and carpet objects as the physical ones. Audio and video files, containing interviews with manufacturers, artisans, users, video shooting of the process of making and transfer of knowledge from the master to younger apprentice.

Using the opportunity to share resources and experience, we are going to work out with our colleagues from the Textile Museum a rational way allowing that personal, subjective information like beliefs and rituals, personal histories related with this particular object or a group/class which this object refers to get documented and systematized in a some way as well. To make the handbook user-friendly and practice oriented, we may propose that throughout the handbook examples are given in regard to Azerbaijanian “Shadda” rugs. Routine ritualistic actions related with this type of carpet are intervened with regional, local, even personal elements related with some museum objects. This fragile and sometimes nearly ephemeral information is however is quite important for perceiving the cultural value of a particular textile or carpet object.