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## Exhibitions- preservation and meaning

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Per Cullhed

This introduction is dedicated to the objects we exhibit and contains a discussion on the importance of objects. I will concentrate on the character and values of those objects, and why the objects we put forward, or in other words, exhibit, are so important and what their inherent values, which we aim to preserve, really are. I will try to name a set of these values. So this paper is not on how, but on what to preserve. In our times, when digitization has become a powerful tool in the service of museums, it is also highly relevant to think about the significance of original objects.

In the beginnings of organized society the museum was one institution harbouring both objects, such as statues, and books or information containers. Later, when printing was invented, there was a more distinct division between archives and libraries.

Museums, which for a long time were kept together with libraries, also more and more became individual institutions

Museums have by their nature two movements – by acquiring objects, there is an inflow of objects – let us call them the inhabitants of museums and by arranging these objects in a special way, curators move the inherent values out or ex-musea – they exhibit.

These values are not absolute, but variable according to the circumstances and this characteristic can be capricious and unpredictable and not to the liking of those who strive for exact explanations. The same object can actually have a different meaning in different exhibitions. This way of being inspired by and gain knowledge from a certain set of objects is very much what the French anthropologist Claude Lévi Strauss, called “bricolage”, and it is sometimes used in museum contexts. The definition of the word is often described like this; “to make creative and resourceful use of whatever materials are at hand (regardless of their original purpose)” “Bricolage”, or “tinkering” in English, is a very useful term for analyzing the process of exhibiting museum objects and it can help in understanding the complexity of those same objects and it also helps in understanding the different aspects of preserving museum items.

The before mentioned in- and outflow in museum collections, also exists in private collections where the collector add things to his or her collection, investing thoughts and feelings about the objects and ultimately, the collection express itself to the world more as a symbol for the interests of the collector than for the values the objects initially were intended for. This is especially true as regards book-collections, where there may be misunderstandings as to the intentions of the collector as books, apart from their object values, are intended for reading. For example, already in antiquity,

book collectors were scorned for collecting books they did not read, "The ignorant book collector" written by Lucian, describes how the collectors care more for their objects than their content.

The same thing is described in the incunabula "Das Narrenschiff", written by Sebastian Brant. This book speaks the same language; the collector cannot even read the books he gathers in his library. However, as you can see, he cares for them by constantly dusting them. Caring and collecting go hand-in hand and the scornful and witty tone in these publications overlook the fact that the owner may have collected the items for very personal and sentimental reasons, whatever those may have been.

The concept that we invest values in objects and feel attached to them is an ancient capacity of man, sometimes described as a pre-modern capacity in a time line where modernity is defined as the time when science and rationality became dominant. Still this pre-modern idea of values invested in objects is very much alive in museums, or for that sake in shopping malls, overflowing with things just waiting to catch the eye of a potential owner.

So from theory to practise-what capacities do museum objects have? I will describe a few of them and the stories told are themselves a bricolage, small stories all emanating from a set of a few items or museum objects in this case a couple of pens with a history behind.

First we have the broad evocative capacity of museum items – they often evoke feelings. How can a pen evoke feelings?

On this picture by Pieter Brueghel from app.1558 we can see the ancient story of Icarus flying too near to the sun, melting the wax of his wings, tragedy left almost unnoticed in the corner of the picture. This tragedy resembles the following real-life

story. In 1897 a group of three persons, led by the Engineer S. A. Andreé, tried to fly to the North Pole by balloon. Just like Icarus they failed, more due to cold than heat. After three days of drifting over the ice they crashed and started their long walk back to Spitsbergen. They all died tragically on the small island of Vitön where they were found by an expedition in 1930 and the diary written by the youngest participant, Nils Strindberg, revealed the tragedy. The pens symbolize the tragedy and when looking at them and the diary and reading the love letters he wrote to his fiancée, these objects all evoke feelings of sorrow, of the craziness of the expedition and of blind faith in technology. Their poor state may be their greatest asset and the most important one to preserve.

Intuitive understanding is another capacity of museum objects. If we for example try to explain time by normal means and write "five million years ago", it is still very difficult to grasp the amount of time which lie behind. And still we often have to explain how old for example fossils are in museums. We have not only to understand time, but also to experience it, and that is what museums can give us. Let us take a look at this sloth skeleton, which is five million years old. If we imagine that one second is one thousand years we would need app. one hour and twenty minutes to count back to five million years, which by the way, is quite a short time in geologic history. This would be the approximate pace.

Is this still something we can grasp? Probably not, but we are getting closer. Let us make another experiment with a one-hour hourglass, containing app. five million grains of sand. If we imagine that each grain is one year and pour out the amount of sand equivalent to 18000 years ago, (corresponding to the former slide), we get this result and it is immediately understandable. This instant or self-explanatory capacity is another important aspect of museum objects, this experiment was carried out with-

out artefacts but many old objects can convey this immediate sense of understanding and that may be their most precious quality, one example is this manuscript, originally bound in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and rebound in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. You can actually see the two time layers on the spine, and they must be kept as they are and left alone.

Authenticity, or a feeling of being near to history can be demonstrated by one item, again a pen, once owned by Gustav III, king of Sweden in the 18th century. When being in Rome it feels appropriate to first mention his travel to Italy. Gustav III was known to love the arts and consequently he visited Italy in 1784, much intrigued by the newly discovered interest in antiquities following the excavations in Pompeii and Herculaneum. The Vatican museum was relatively new and he was received by Pope Pius VI, and given an interesting book, a poem translated in more than 40 languages and in a vast array of alphabets praising this peaceful king from the north, The book was printed by the Propaganda Fide and is a remarkable effort in itself. In this poem, as opposed to the more violent Visigoth king Alaric, who sacked Rome in 410, Gustav III was praised as a king of the arts. He travelled anonymously under the name of the "Count of Haga". Haga is a park in Stockholm. Piranesi conveniently presented the king with a special issue of the Theatre of Herculaneum and he was seen as a rich buyer and a potentially good customer as he at that moment was putting together a museum of antiquities in Stockholm. However, not all sellers were satisfied, and pasquinades like this one were also written.

Well; back to the object, his pen; The king himself not only wanted to be seen as a peaceful king but also as a warrior king – especially in his affairs towards Russia, and several wars took place, some of them badly planned with great losses of life as a result. So when holding the pen with which he signed the peace treaty in Werälä in 1790, this object conveys an immediate sense of authenticity, authority as well as

tragedy. The most important aspect of this object is probably its pristine state, which, together with the comment on the circumstances of the undersigning, makes the pen look like it just recently was picked from the king's hand

Identity is another capacity which museum objects are available to communicate. This book by Isaac Newton is interesting in itself, but as being signed by Per Elvius, a professor of Astronomy in Uppsala in the late 17th c., it is in itself associated with the scientific progress of the young university and when the book was given back to the university after having been stolen and gone for more than 40 years, this was a big event because of its potential to bring identity.

Identity borders on legitimacy and museum objects can be put forward as proof of a legitimate heritage, which even reflects on politics of today. This may be of great importance to young nations seeking an historical identity, here illustrated by the energetic 17th c. professor Rudbeck who lifts a piece of the globe to reveal the true history of Sweden. Today this book is read as an eccentric and amusing example of false history. He even placed the Garden of Eden in Sweden.

Aesthetic value is one of the two values mentioned by the famous Italian art historian Cesare Brandi, who differs between aesthetic value and functional value. Aesthetic value is perhaps the most evident and cherished value of museum objects, so present in artistry ranging from crafts and sculpture to pictorial art and it may also be one of the most tempting to preserve.

Monetary value is another characteristic, which has to be given special care as it may be tempting to exaggerate this value to the detriment of others, more intrinsic but less profitable values and this feature has destroyed many other aspects of arts and crafts throughout the ages. However, as it is so easy to understand this value it is some-

times used as an argument for the importance to preserve and protect museums. I know of a book museum in Stockholm, which never caught the interest of its owners until they realized the monetary values in the collections.

Place is another value which may be inseparable to certain museums, that aspect of their exhibitions is also one that cannot travel, except in pictures, and it is also an aspect which may be very difficult to preserve as landscape by its nature has to be used for present day activities. The axiomatic, or self-evident understanding of such museums often has a special impact. Le Chemin des Dames is a sector where some of the heaviest fighting took place during the First World War and it cannot be fully understood without seeing, adding the exact location and even colour to pictures otherwise seen only in books.

Evidence is another important aspect of museum objects, which complicates the act of preserving historical items. Dust and dirt is normally seen as impurities, which should be removed, often for aesthetic reasons. Today, however, many museum objects can be scientifically analyzed and show to be extraordinary new sources for knowledge. One example is the tomb of Copernicus in Frombork in Poland. In 2005 excavations were made inside the Cathedral with the purpose of finding his tomb. In the grave, which was believed to be his, archaeologists unearthed a skeleton, which they assumed to be his earthly remains. To further prove this, archaeologists searched for objects that might have belonged to Copernicus and this included the books, which he owned. These books are kept in Uppsala university library and samples of hair found in the inner margin of some books were analyzed for the DNA-code and compared to the DNA found in the buried teeth of the skeleton in Frombork. The results show that two samples of hair may come from the same person and the archaeologists concluded that they actually had found Copernicus' grave. This example

shows the importance of not unnecessarily disturbing the traces often found in for example old books. Other examples show that pollen analysis can be made from such traces.

Function is another aspect of museum objects, which play an important role for the way we treat these objects. Cesare Brandi specifically mentions function in his works. Houses are for example one of the more obvious objects which need to function to survive. Industrial museums often give a deeper level of understanding if they work. I myself have always wondered about the amount of water necessary to engine a paper-mill and when I finally got a chance to see it, it was an immediate and axiomatic moment to see how seemingly little water was necessary to power this water wheel and this experience gave me a deeper understanding of how certain places could have been used for paper mills. Paintings often give us clues for how historical, often non-existent objects looked like and reconstructions are often made to prove the functions of such constructions. Paintings of girdle books in a church may be compared to those few examples that are still left for us to study.

What shall we then preserve to be able to exhibit with success, i.e. convey meaning to museum visitors? I hope it is evident that it is not one aspect of objects, which need to be preserved, but many, and that these aspects may vary according to circumstances. However, if only one aspect should be mentioned I think it may be the evocative capacity, the capacity to bring to our minds, and touch our minds, for this may be the heart of exhibitions and the true character of ancient objects.

Per Cullhed

Uppsala University library

Box 510

751 20 Uppsala