

## THE IMPORTANCE OF MUSEUM LIBRARIES\*

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### Museums - Introduction

The purpose of our meeting is to discuss co-operation between art institutions and their information resources. One could plunge in straight away and try to set formulae and programmes, set targets and target dates.

But art institutions did not spring from nowhere and to look back is to begin to understand what our current strategy is, and to build on what is good. After all, art institutions, whether contemplating the past in museums, or creating the history of today in art schools, in contemporary galleries, and so forth are all involved primarily in the art of preservation. We belong to that dimension of society whose primary task is to guard artefacts, guard the manifest part of the evolution of the human mind. Art institutions who study these artefacts depend on this preservation of the manifest object.

So, it will help to look back very briefly at our institutions and at the way co-operation took place in the past.

### Museums - history - chronology

So where did museums come from? In its most basic form what we call a museum, has come to mean a *collection* of something. In fact the notion of a museum, according to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, springs from the passion for collecting which is deeply rooted in human nature. All civilisations, from the most primitive to the most advanced share the desire to accumulate objects that are beautiful, costly, rare or merely curious.

Religious communities, rulers and magnates set up the first collections open to the public, or at least to certain members of it. An early example is the Athenian Treasury at Delphi. Another early 'collection' was in fact books, Aristotle's Library.

The term 'museum' arises with the *Musaion*, the temple of the Muses, in Alexandria. This *Musaion*, however, is also known as the Great Library of

Alexandria which was established in the 3rd century AD and which provided the final resting place of Aristotle's famed library. This *musaion* was in fact a place

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dedicated to the muses and to study where one engaged oneself in noble disciplines. Thus in its origins a museum was an institution of research, a library and an academy. In time the term museum became strongly identified with a building type, namely, according to the *Oxford Dictionary of the English Language*, «a building used as a repository for the preservation and exhibition of objects illustrative of antiquities, natural history, fine and industrial art». The term also became to be applied to the collection of objects itself.

Collecting blossomed in the middle ages in the great religious institutions which each contained libraries. But collecting here was by commission, in addition to accumulation, both of objects and of manuscripts. The manuscripts of those times survive in the great modern libraries of today.

With the Renaissance, collecting as an activity *per se* reflected the meaning of the word *renaissance*, rebirth. After all, in classical times Aristotle first collected books, and the dispersal of his library, politically inspired, was experienced as a source of sadness. This rebirth manifested itself in collecting. Collecting became a mania. However, it was a very select mania in that connoisseurs collected for themselves and not for the general public.

From the basic satisfaction of the collector's instinct we progressed in time to making use of the collections of objects to suit the needs of study and museums started to open their doors to people who had access to knowledge through education. In modern times the 'public' first gained access to a collection only in 1683 when the Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology was founded in Oxford and the first use of the word 'museum' in the English language to refer to a building housing artefacts was in relation to Dr Ashmole's. The great push came in 1793 when the new Museum National du Louvre was founded with the specific intention of making it possible for the people to view the objects collected together, and so to educate them. However, broadly speaking, connoisseurship remained the driving force in the act of collecting and the aim of education remained only implicit.

In the US, however, a sense of cultural isolation can be discerned in the creation of museums, and education as a purpose became a strong and overt driving force. Education has remained a very strong component of American museums since then.

### **Museum libraries - purposes**

As more and more museums were created in the 19th century libraries were regarded as an essential part of the museum. For example, the Boston Museum created a reference library in 1875, and a library was envisaged as an integral part by the founders of the Metropolitan Museum in New York. The German National Museum created in 1852 in Nuremberg established a library and archive to collect documentation on the history of German art.

One purpose of a museum library was seen to be to provide documentation on the objects within the specific museum. The museum library was seen as a tool to provide support to the museum staff alone and museum-libraries were not regarded as for the public at all and in many instances they retain to this day the character of a private library. Where the library collections have become known to be very strong in a specific subject, scholars and connoisseurs have been allowed in as a favour, and they predominantly gain access through their relationships with museum curators.

However, some museums realised that they could physically collect only a very small amount of objects but to study these objects one would need to view many more examples than the museum could house. In these museums, libraries were developed as extensions to the museum objects. Whilst the museums tried to obtain one or two examples of an object, the museum library collected books in which examples of hundreds more objects of the same type were illustrated.

The Library in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London is one such example. In 1837 the British Government created a School of Design because it felt that design in Britain was inferior to other countries. The School of Design aimed to educate artisans of all the crafts and to do so it collected both plaster-casts of objects and illustrated books. In fact, books were regarded as of such importance that the first staff-member of the School of Design to be appointed was the Librarian. It was the Librarian's job to acquire books in which examples of well-designed objects were illustrated.

After the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London (of which Expo '98 in Lisbon is a great-great-great-grandchild), the Government decided to set up a Museum of Manufactures and to this end purchased a large number of the best artefacts from the Exhibition so that craftspeople could study actual objects from many nations. But because it was desirable that artists and craftspeople should view as many objects in their trade as possible, a library of illustrated books was an essential extension of the Museum's collection. It was therefore decided to incorporate the Library of the School of Design into this new museum. By the time this museum established its own home in South Kensington in the mid-1850s the library began to be called the National Art Library.

But implicit in the nature of the material that libraries collect, one can discern a third purpose of a museum-library, namely to view the book not only as an information-carrying device, but as an object in its own right and the librarian also as a curator. In this way the book, and its forerunner the manuscript and illuminated manuscript, is viewed as the technology through which that unique capacity of the human being, *thought*, is communicated and transmitted. Since the invention of moveable type and of printing in the west, books demonstrate the development of typography as much as the manuscript demonstrated the history of calligraphy.

Both manuscripts and printed books are moreover the objects in which the history of illustration can be followed. Printed books also contain the history of printing processes.

In many museums, however, the function of the book as an information-carrier and the book as a cultural object are split and different management units look after these two functions. One can argue about the advantages and disadvantages of this split but it seems to me a general truth that when the library does not look after the book as an object, the library as an information resource is usually worse off and is often badly treated within the management of the museum.

### **Support for museum's mission**

To understand the importance of the role of libraries in art museums better, it is necessary to bear in mind the explicit and implicit functions of museums. At its deepest level a museum is a collective memory bank of human achievement through a collection of objects. The museum's function can, therefore, be seen at its basic level as ensuring that the objects survive. After that follows the activity of presenting the objects to the people so that human consciousness continues to incorporate these achievements in its activities. Museum officials execute innumerable actions to achieve these goals.

In the first place an object is mute. Its history needs to be researched and this must then be interpreted for the various publics of a museum. The object must be conserved and displayed and questions about the object must be answered. The question is what role does the museum library play in all this?

The museum library supports research into the object and its context; into the methodologies for conserving the objects; and finally it supports research relating to the display of the object, and into exhibitions. The heart of this research support lies in its collecting of evidentiary documentation. Since the museum library supports research related to a specific collection of objects museum libraries develop deep and uniquely focussed collections of research materials. The museum library provides the context within which an institution's specific collection of objects can be researched, documented and interpreted. Thus, if the public was allowed into the museum library they could complement their experience of viewing and studying an individual object with printed information about the object as well as other related objects which were not available in the museum. In the library the public can also find out more about the person who created the object, other works by the same artist, craftsman or designer, other works of that period or locality or simply background information about the period or locality, in other words: context. The museum library thus compensates for the inevitable limitations of the museum. Visitors to the museum know that they will be able to find the most in-depth information on works of art in the museum's collection in the museum library. They also know they will find information about

how museums work, and about other museums' collections and exhibitions. In this way art museum libraries fulfil a particular need in the community. Thus, because the museum library provides a niche for special collections of related material, the museum's mission and its collections of objects are enhanced, amplified and enriched through the museum library.

There are specific types of publication which are dealt with in different ways in museum libraries than in other libraries. Museum libraries specifically collect catalogues of other museums' permanent collections, exhibition catalogues from both museums and commercial galleries and the catalogues of auction houses. Compared to university and public libraries museum libraries collect the catalogues of other museums in depth. As far as exhibition catalogues are concerned museum libraries set up elaborate networks to ensure that they can collect as many as they can since most exhibition catalogues cannot be found in bookshops. Museum libraries therefore catch many many documents which would not normally find their way into national libraries and thus museum libraries fulfil an important role in the memory of the nation. As far as auction house catalogues are concerned, they are essential in tracing the history and thus the authenticity of the object. The detail in which museum libraries analyse auction house and exhibition catalogues far exceeds that possible by a national library. For example, as an economy of scale, the British Library would catalogue the exhibition catalogues for a specific art gallery only with one catalogue entry which states that the BL holds exhibition catalogues for this gallery. In a museum library these exhibition catalogues would typically be described individually and in full detail. The same is true of auction house catalogues.

It is very important for the curator and art historian to trace the work of an artist to its earliest beginnings. These are usually very ephemeral sources before an artist becomes recognised, and they are typically invitations to exhibitions. In museum libraries there are usually extensive ephemera files containing such exhibition invitations, other types of announcement, cuttings from the press etc. etc. In most other libraries such ephemera are not collected, but if at all, would be treated very superficially, whereas in museum libraries their importance is recognised in that each of the ephemera-files is usually catalogued to indicate that there is such material available in the library. Many different departments in a museum may collect such ephemera but they are best placed in the museum

library because research cannot be bound by departmental borders. For example, a file on a photographer may be of great value to a sculptor or a painter and to retain the file in the photography department is to restrict its usefulness. The museum library can make the file available across all the departments of the museum and so achieve much greater usefulness.

It is important to note that the museum library can support the museum's work in other ways. Museum officers? other than curators can rely on a library which collects in areas of museology, arts administration, arts law, etc. This is especially the case when suddenly there is a question not faced before, for example legal liability in the case of accidental injury to a volunteer while working on behalf of the museum. Librarians further deal with copyright issues every day of their working lives, and the museum library can therefore become the focus point for resolving copyright issues facing the museum. The librarian can produce examples of either useful or problematic sorts to alert or bolster the position of other museum officers.

The librarian is professionally trained in the methodologies necessary to collect and to disseminate information. Standardisation of description is a concept inherent in a field where materials have been mass-produced for centuries, i.e. books in multiple copies. Curators of objects have long resisted standardisation in descriptions because they regarded their objects as unique. But the advent of mass communication through Information and Communication Technology has meant that they also have to adopt standard languages of description if they want their objects to be included in any search activity. To give very simplistic examples: if someone searches on the Internet for Le Corbusier but in your institution you insist on calling him by his real name, Jeanneret, your objects will not be found. Similarly, if you insist on calling your object X but it can also be described as Y, any search which uses Y as its key will always miss out on X.

Now, librarians have long ago agreed that standardised descriptions are essential if you want to find the maximum of responses to a question. And this knowledge and experience is a contribution a museum librarian can bring to the museum's effort to find the most efficient way to describe its collections. The librarian as an information specialist has long been used to building Thesauri and in our present time of overhauling management in museums the museum librarian can bring this experience to the museum's enterprise in cataloguing its objects in a way that they can become accessible far beyond the museum's walls. The librarian's expertise actually lies in his or her knowledge of the structure of information rather than the content. The content must be left to the subject specialist and a museum librarian can never aspire to sufficient subject knowledge across all the different objects contained in a museum.

However, the librarian, through the knowledge of how to manipulate information structures and systems can guide museum officials to a variety of sources and resources over a large spectrum of subjects. With the explosion in publication of research results curators are misguided if they maintain that they know the documentation in their subject-field. That was perhaps true before the second world war. But the breakdown of barriers between subjects since then, the development of interdisciplinary studies, the mass increase in research output means that museum

officials must avail themselves of information mediating specialisms. And that is what librarians are trained to do. Within the art museum the art librarian is fully aware of the myriad tools available. It may be that the curator of sculpture is aware of the general tools where he or she can follow trends in publishing on the subject, but it is the art librarian who can draw attention to the fact that, say, Rodin is being analysed in the philosophical or psychological literature in a seemingly new way which may have an effect on the scholarship of the curator concerned and hence on the way the label is written or the story told in a museum publication. At a recent conference my colleague, Jeannette Dixon, told the story of the expert on Audubon who very proudly told her that he had compiled the definitive bibliography on Audubon. It consisted of 63 entries. She persuaded him that it would be worthwhile to search across various electronic databases. She discovered 20 more references than he had found. This left the expert, obviously, crestfallen. Through their specialist knowledge of research tools and of electronic resources the museum librarian can provide a way through the labyrinth of relevant remote physical and electronic collections. Like practically everyone else, museum staff expect more and more from the information reaching their desktop via the world-wide-web. They expect ease of use and ready identification of relevant items. They are also increasingly under pressure to make sense of all this information fast. The important role of the museum librarian lies in mediating and assisting with this task, especially in sifting, analysing and presenting information. They do this through identification of resources, development of searching methods and of catalogues, etc. etc. The museum librarian thus provides a gateway to global resources.

These skills, peculiar to the librarian as information specialist, can have yet more value for the museum. The numbers of enquiries which museums receive have increased very much over the last decades. One cannot expect the subject specialist to answer all these enquiries. The librarian can be the buffer between the scholar-curator and the ever more demanding public. Given that the trend towards a mass-culture is leading to ever greater demands on access to museums there will also be an ever greater demand to information about objects in the museum and their contexts. The librarian with his skill to locate information will play an ever-more important role in safeguarding the very valuable time and attention span of the museum scholar.

However, the quality of the library and especially of its collection depends very much on the close co-operation between librarian and curator. Curators often think that librarians cater perhaps too much for the public and it is a question of how one can persuade very busy curators to expend some of their time on library business and I mean here specifically acquisitions. At my own library we appointed individual library staff as liaison officers with the curatorial departments, as well as with Education, Conservation and Research departments. We then invited the curators and the other departments concerned also to appoint liaison officers. These

pairs of people meet at regular intervals, some more often than others. During these meetings they discuss developments in the library as well as developments in the departments so that we can focus our collecting on the work in the departments. From time to time we come across a very enthusiastic curator who is particularly concerned to build up one section of the library's collection. One such example is our collection of material on Frank Lloyd Wright. Some years ago a senior curator was given the task to develop a special Frank Lloyd Wright room in the Museum. To achieve this he wanted to see every single printed word that he could find on Frank Lloyd Wright. He checked our collections and found that ours was just a very general collection and he wanted to have much more than that. He therefore started contacting second-hand bookshops, various agents, etc. etc. and found for us a large number of fairly unique material. As a result of his enthusiasm over a 2-3 year period we have expanded our Frank Lloyd Wright collection magnificently. This pattern of the bibliographically-minded curator is repeated in a number of museums.

The main art of getting such collaboration lies in the librarian being able to satisfy the curator that his or her requirements are being looked after and this can mainly be done in person to person relationships. Librarians should not sit and wait for the curator to arrive but should actively go out and speak to the curators. Those curators who are already enthusiastic will in any case come to the library. My own experience has also been that the Director of an institution can have an impact on the good relationships between the librarian and the curator. In my own case I was extremely fortunate in having Dame Elizabeth Esteve-Coll as the Director of the Museum. She enthused the curators to regard the library as a positive support for their research beyond their own departmental libraries and as a result a number of curatorial departments responded positively to our overtures.

The curator and the librarian bring separate skills to the benefit of the museum at large and it is only with the active support of the top management, from Director downwards, that a successful collaboration between these two arms of the museum can succeed. If the librarian has not done so yet his or her first task is to convince the Director of the museum of the importance of the library and to build good relationships with the curators.

### **Museum libraries - conclusion**

If a museum doesn't have a library or at least a librarian, where can museum staff go for information to help them do their work? Even if a museum cannot afford to build a library collection, at least having a librarian with a phone and Internet connection, plus a very small reference collection, is necessary to support the work of curators and of museum education department staff.

Museum libraries see themselves as part of an information environment at their museum. A researcher may be referred from one part of that environment to



another, from the library to an office where they are compiling an inventory, or to the photo archive. But the library is the fulcrum, where the researcher can start their research and be forwarded onward. In the library there is a recognition of public service, so the researcher is more likely to be guided or helped as they formulate a research itinerary through the museum's information environment. So even if all the parts of that info environment aren't "under" the library, the library staff are the ones who have the clearest notion of the relationship between the parts and the whole.

Museums have in the past broadly served a distinct clientele - but today the demands are changing and the clientele is becoming much larger to include the general public. An efficient information service to the public adds lustre to the museum's reputation.

When preparing for this conference I contacted a number of colleagues across the world to solicit their views on the importance of museum libraries. I want to end this address by telling an anecdote one of my correspondents told me. A building programme for a huge extension of a museum was being developed and at one stage all the senior management of the museum was assembled to hear differing points of view. At that stage a library was not included in the planning. A contemporary artist was a member of the library committee who was lobbying to have the library included in the building programme, and the situation did not appear to be very positive. He simply stated: «Without a library you have nothing».

They got their library!

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