

The Future of the Museum in the Digital Age

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The essence of the traditional museum - as classifier, authoritative holder and producer of knowledge and as source of the “right” interpretation and view of society through place-based exhibitions – is a building. By contrast, the museum of the future will be more of a process or an experience, moving out into the spaces of the communities that it serves. For it can no longer be assumed that collections are central to the role of the museum – rather, it is people. Paradoxically, museum collections still powerfully symbolise diverse cultures and identities, how they are represented formally and celebrated. But as the importance of the meaning of the object and its past grows, so the need to collect cultures more holistically, the intangible as well as the tangible, becomes more apparent. Digital technologies make this possible.

> From the perspective of these new technologies, the focus will sharpen on museums as collections of knowledges rather than of objects. Museums already know that there are many people not employed by them who have extensive knowledge of objects in their collections. Some museums have enlisted the help of their audiences – the San Francisco Art Museum instigated a “word soup” project, in which key terms to describe pictures were provided by non-specialist volunteers, thus providing better search results (<http://www.thinker.org/fam/about>). This is part of sharing knowledge and building links, which is enabled by developments in technology.

> As inventories and catalogues of collections are increasingly digitised, so they must become available as a single resource, together with related information provided by libraries, archives, sites and monuments. For example, the British initiative Online Register of Scientific Instruments is a collaborative listing of historic instruments in museums in a number of countries and even in a few private collections (<http://www.isin.org>).

> A further effect of new technologies is that even the location of communication and museological interpretation services will not just be inside the museum space but everywhere: for example, BBC television’s virtual exhibition, “Painting the Weather”, was curated by the National Gallery, London, but with contributions from museums and galleries all over the country (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/paintingtheweather>). We can already see university departments or organisations which conduct research into oral history or anthropology contributing their collections as a resource alongside those of museums. Examples range from the September 11th Digital Archive (<http://911digitalarchive.org>) to the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/ava/archives/AIATSIS_archives.htm).

> Museums are uniquely well placed to take advantage of digital possibilities, which offer a natural extension of the means to pursue their central purposes. However, going digital will affect the way museum curators conceive their work and the ways in which the museum allocates its resources. Sophisticated databases require specialist staff. Electronic capability must be fostered in professionals in all museum areas, who will form cooperative teams just as they do in publishing and exhibition creation now.

> Control over the museum’s intellectual property will be crucial. The quasi-public status of museums in many countries today will complicate matters further. Some museums are already signing control over images, to commercial companies.

> Will going digital be crucial to the museum’s survival? Museums, and especially their collections, are under considerable threat. Museum

collections are essentially held for the benefit of society, and, even less fashionable, for its long-term good. It seems increasingly necessary to substantiate our claims that museum collections will benefit people in the future, by showing how these benefits might be delivered.

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