

The Legitimacy of the Virtual Museum

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A major aspect of museum work is the creation of permanent records of things that can otherwise only be experienced at the time and place of their creation. Although many technologies are used to do this, those used for the preparation of digital documents are among the most important. It is also possible for original creative work to be conducted directly in digital form, which gives rise to the need for museums to concern themselves both with digital records of events, objects and documents, and with “born digital” heritage.

> Both ICOM and UNESCO are involved in these developments. Entities that “facilitate the preservation, continuation and management” of “digital creative activity” are explicitly included in the definition of the museum contained in the ICOM *Statutes*. At its General Conference in October 2003, UNESCO adopted a *Charter on the Preservation of the Digital Heritage*. This states that “‘born digital’ materials should clearly be given priority”, and unequivocally includes cultural material in this sphere of concern.

> The utility of the Internet for museums is well recognised today, and most museums operate in both the physical and digital realms. Museum Web sites have long become commonplace. An early appellation for them was the “virtual museum”. This term has subsequently been used by organisations that do not maintain physical museums, but whose digital manifestations are indistinguishable from those of brick-and-mortar museums.

> The problem here is that although it is easy to verify the legitimacy of brick-and-mortar museum activity, there are no equally clear means for verifying the legitimacy of the digital component. Since the virtual museum lacks a physical dimension and yet may look identical to the digital realm of the brick-and-mortar museum, how can one tell them apart? Virtual institutions can only be assessed on the basis of the digital material that they provide on the Internet. Whereas a physical museum requires considerable time, effort and expense to create, and it is unlikely that anyone would erect a building solely to give the appearance of being a museum, creating a virtual museum existing only on the Internet can take less than an hour and requires technical resources that are readily available to anyone with access to the Internet. Hence the question: if the virtual museum exists only in digital form, what legitimacy does it have, and is there any way to recognise *bona fide* museum activity?

> The museological legitimacy of using the designation “virtual museum” for activity conducted exclusively in the digital realm is therefore frequently debated. One way of approaching this issue is to say that the core

term “museum” is subject to prior definition by the relevant professional community: a museum is essentially what the public accepts as a museum and the professional community recognises as such. Despite the problems raised above, the shared perception of what a museum is should expand today to include virtual museums, since a cultural sector on the Internet cannot be created without giving born digital creative activity its full due. Although a generally acceptable term for them remains to be coined, born digital bodies are meaningful participants in the process of creating this cultural sector. These bodies develop born digital material, to be borne digitally on the Internet in a manner that is in full accordance with the established standards of the museum profession. “Virtual museum” is a powerful metaphor that can be applied to the presentation of creative activity as well as knowledge repositories. Surely it is in the best interests of the established museum community to harness that potential rather than to brake it.

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