MUSEOLOGY — WHY, WHERE, WHEN?

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To many people outside the museum world the term «museology» is a foreign word – and even to some people inside as well. Thus I could also have chosen other interrogatives: «What?», or even «Who needs it?» The last one is a question I have been asked many times, certainly more often by museum professionals than lay people. My answer was and is «You need it».

WHY?

Let us assume that you are a linguist or mathematician, you were trained as a teacher of languages or mathematics, and you are working at a secondary school. It is therefore your job to teach young people, help them find access to the respective subject, and impart to them a knowledge that will enable them to deal independently with certain matters. How do you proceed?

I presume that you would prepare and communicate the necessary material using certain methods. You would, I think, also check, evaluate and feed back the success of your work which is at the same time your student's success.

For all this you would make use of the methodical know-how of a science which – independent of content – is relevant for this specific teaching and instructional approach to certain disciplines. I am speaking of educational theory.

It would be utterly absurd to abstain from using this tool in such an important undertaking and rely only on the theoretical proceedings of the subject matter you are assigned to communicate instead. In the case of languages this might be for example medieval grammar, for mathematics the theory of numbers.

Perhaps you are already asking yourself why I am telling these truisms. It is perfectly obvious anyway that a theory that is the basis of one certain subject is necessarily incapable of solving another's problems.

It is true that I can knock nails with a hammer but I cannot cut logs with it. People have invented saws for the latter purpose. Why these examples?

I have now already activated my first interrogative: WHY?

The answer is: because museology is a science capable of fulfilling a similar summarizing, comprehensive and basic function as educational theory does. Its imple-

- 94 mentation, however, is ignored by the majority of those who should be obliged to use it.

Often people who have served in the museum field for some years and thus gained practical experience think that theory is just a useless hobby horse and a waste of time. They have apparently never learnt their lessons properly and they have certainly not understood what my compatriot, Nobel Prize laureate Ludwig Boltzmann had in mind when he said: «Theory is the quintessence of practice».

I want to impart to you some basic thoughts about museology, its development, its structure, its place in the system of sciences and about what it is able to provide.

To deal with matters cultural, to treat objects – which I shall refer to as irreplaceable because they are part of the museum's specific entity – in a dilettantish manner, to ignore the wealth of knowledge museology has acquired in the course of its existence (and is still acquiring more than ever) is at least negligent if not highly irresponsible and detrimental to the museum.

Moreover, and this is really critical, museology is able to considerably upgrade the quality of museum work of all levels. After all, many years of theoretical research and practical application, have placed at its disposal procedures and methods which are far superior to mere unreflected empiricism or even to a mistaken employment of inappropriate methods.

History of Museology

Museology is a comparatively young subject – comparable to sociology, psychology or ecology but senior to cybernetics, infor-

matics and anaesthesiology. Its roots, however, lie much further in the past, as I will show.

The first attempt to formulate a theory of museums that we know of is to be found in Germany at the beginning of the Renaissance: in a book published in Munich in 1565 the Belgian physician Samuel von Quiccheberg presents a comprehensive collection of specimens and artifacts in an ideal form as an autonomous educational institution.

This important work had lasting influence on museum theory and the practice of collecting until far into the 18th century. Further major publications on museum theory were published particularly in Germany, some in Denmark (Ole Worm 1655), Bohemia, France and Russia. The term «museology» appeared for the first time in the early 18th century (Neickelius 1727).

Museology, as we understand it today, was established in the second half of the 19th century. The beginning of its current phase is precisely dated with the foundation of the German journal «Zeitschrift für Museologie und Antiquitätenkunde sowie verwandte Wissenschaften» by Johann Theodor Graesse, director of the «Grünes Gewölbe» in Dresden in 1877.

Another pivotal point in the development of modern museology at the turn of the century was the publication of the periodicals «Anzeiger tschechisch-slowakischer Museen und archäologischer Gesellschaften» (1895), «The Museum» (USA 1902), «Museums Journal» (Great Britain 1902) and «Museumskunde» (Germany 1908). The two last-named, as is well known, are still published.

Before and after WWI splendid and for-

ward-looking ideas were formulated by the members of museology's hall of fame Alfred Lichtwark, John Cotton Dana, Hans Tietze, Arthur W. Melton and Otto Neurath.

Shortly afterwards in Germany, the birthplace of museology, this promising research was forcibly ended not to be resumed until after WWII, when it was continued on an international basis, particularly after the foundation of ICOM fifty years ago.

The first hesitant agreements about the qualification of museology as an independent discipline can be found at the end of the fifties. The decisive approach to modern museological thinking, however, comes a decade later.

Museology today

The definitive consolidation of modern museology occurred more than thirty years ago when Zbynek Stránský published his outline of a system of museology which he had developed along epistemological principles (*Predmet muzeologie*. Brno 1965).

Thus he introduced a philosophical approach which had so far been lacking in the research. Through identifying a timeless object of cognition he made possible museology's final emancipation from pragmatic restrictions.

In 1971 Museology was officially acknowledged as a preparatory academic discipline by ICOM, and, finally, in 1977 the International Committee for Museology was founded.

Museology has now had at its disposal a well assorted set of instruments for a generation or more. With these instruments the important task of specific conservation

and communication of the world's natural and cultural heritage can well be accomplished.

WHAT?

I am now posing another interrogative: WHAT? The reason of course is not because I suppose that you do not know what museology is, but in order to tell you how I see it.

Fundamentally, I understand museology as a collective term. It comprises the description, classification and explanation of all theoretical principles and practical procedures, methods, technologies and auxiliary means relevant to the museum phenomenon.

Definition

Museology is the theoretical explanation and practical realization of a specific distinguishing and evaluating relationship of man to reality which is carried out with the help of philosophical tools. This relationship is called museality, a term that has been coined by Stránský. It is expressed through objects that are selected, conserved, studied and communicated as testimony of a particular social reality in the service of the respective society.

Object of cognition

Thus the question for museology's object of cognition in the formal sense is the question of which aspect of reality museology is investigating. The answer is: it looks into the common motive for the existence of the museum phenomenon and its forerunners.

This object of cognition is therefore, as in all theoretical science, an idealized part

96 of the environment. It is the already mentioned relationship of man to reality, which we have called museality. Museality is established when people consider selected objects so important as evidence for certain facts that they want to conserve and to transmit them – to their contemporaries as well as to posterity.

Museality thus relies on material objects which have been identified as potential bearers of this relationship and have finally been declared as such. We call these objects musealia. Their characteristics and properties can only be conclusively perceived with the help of epistemological and axiological means within a definite social structure, they can even only become musealia at all within this frame of reference.

Museology thus does not distinguish, describe, study and explain things of all kinds but only those which have been methodically recognized as objectifications, as embodiments of museality.

Whether they belong to the realm of museology or not therefore entirely depends on their meaning. This meaning is not something they possess intrinsically but it is attributed to them on their objectivation.

Such an approach is, in contrast with other museum or object centred concepts, unmistakably related to society. Here it is not things or properties that are the object of cognition, as in special disciplines, but museality, this specific, namely socially relevant relationship between human beings and their world.

This relationship is subjective by nature and any attempt to objectivate it, to separate it from its living expression, would fail. Museology, as Stránsky once put it,

does not depend on the museum but on knowledge of the specific human relationship to reality.

Basic museum functions

The basic museum functions however – selection, collecting, conservation, restoration, documentation, research, exhibiting, interpretation, publication – can also be found in varying contexts without a museum. They appear alone and in any combination and for a variety of purposes. These activities simply do not have by themselves an exclusively museum quality, even the knowledge linked to them is not restricted to the museum. None of these activities therefore is museum specific in itself.

Objects as a centrepiece

This approach is as important for the selection of objects as it is for their study, documentation, conservation and presentation. Musealia are not just semiophores, bearers of signs, as Krysztof Pomian misleadingly claims: tapes, books and traffic signs are bearers of signs too. Musealia on the contrary, are bearers of meaning, nouophores. Objects are given a new quality by means of specific and controllable methods. This quality only gives them intersubjective significance in a museological sense. Because of this they are transformed into something different from what they were before their musealization, something completely new.

Usually objects are not incorporated into a museum collection because of their intrinsic value, nor because they are so rare, big, small, beautiful or otherwise extraordinary as such, but because they represent certain meanings. They stand for

ideas, they can furnish evidence of particular events, facts and circumstances. This is also what as a rule makes the approach of a private collector so fundamentally different from that of the museologists.

Identity problems of the museum

That is precisely where the problem lies today: museum people still are blundering where they should be performing in a very professional manner, namely as museum people – instead of specialists in their field of research. There are several reasons for this. One is the misconception that the methods of one particular science can solve the problems of another science. The confusion of philosophical realization and objective practice is also a reason why many people think that museology is nothing more than the application of the methods of certain special subjects to daily museum practice. Some also think that there is no necessity to look for generalizations beyond empirical knowledge. Ultimately many even believe that the requirements of the museum profession can be met altogether by the knowledge inherent in the subjects represented in the museum.

MUSEUM AS CONCEPT

The museum is the type of organization which makes museality real today. Admittedly, although it expresses everything in a physical language its identity is not material but lies in the world of meanings. Museality cannot be objectivated independently but has to be desirable and understandable in society. Only when a message meets willing recipients can it become concrete.

Once again: museality does not exist intrinsically but is in each case a socially created and acknowledged attitude that cannot even exist without its carriers, that is human beings. As long as there is evidence of human life this particular desire can be proved, hence we can call it timeless.

Museum institutions in their objective functional and organizational appearance, on the other hand, are variable by necessity. The museum, as a concrete institution of our times, is just one dynamic form among many possible alternatives. This form has been created under certain historical and social circumstances and it had predecessors of a different nature. It will inevitably change in the future.

This is also the reason the museum itself cannot be museology's subject of cognition as has been erroneously thought for a long time. The museum is not a goal but only the means through which an idea is expressed.

This idea persists unchanged in its structure although in its separate elements, governed by history, changes happen permanently. So the subject of cognition museology deals with is that attitude which makes people select certain objects from the abundance of reality and preserve them at great trouble and cost; in fact because they intersubjectively consider them important to such an extent that they want to keep them indefinitely and present them to their contemporaries as well as to the future.

Meaning

Museums are certainly characteristic of the time. They had forerunners and they will, as I said, be replaced by other institu-

98 tions depending on the demands set up by the respective societies. All these institutions – treasuries, portrait galleries, Kunst- und Wunderkammern, scholarly collections – served goals of various kinds at different times. They had their own organizational forms, basic ideas, messages and modes of operation. Their meaning, however, was always the same.

MUSEUM WORK AS A SYNTHESIS

In order to achieve its goals in the best possible way the museum must not make use of the methods of other types of institutions, but has to proceed in an independent synthesis of science and art. This is the only way to realize its cognition, memorial and communication functions appropriate to its essence.

This is also the reason all attempts so far, and there have been many, to explain the nature of museum presentation through semiotics, have only resulted in fruitless repetitions of discoveries which have been small change for linguistics for thirty, fifty or eighty years. Museology also looks at its signs differently from other disciplines: namely ontologically. This is a difference which has so far been carelessly neglected in all definitions. The individual being of each single particle of museological attention is the point which concerns museology and one of her daughters, the museum. Again the simple classical rule is valid: the problems of one science can never be solved using the methods of another one. Lock and key inseparably belong together. Of course this applies not only to presentation but to all, I emphasize, all aspects of museum activity.

ACCEPTANCE OF MUSEOLOGY

The scope of acceptance of museology, however, is wide. It might be of interest that a person not unknown in the world of museums recently delivered an expert opinion on museology in the following form:

I do not believe that a subject called museology exists. I think it is something created in order to provide jobs and committees. I myself have no interest in or respect for theories and I have a particular contempt for philosophy... Museology is no more a science than psychology or education is.

I have chosen this extreme example in order to show what grotesque figments of imagination the refusal to perceive the human mind's achievements of at least the last four hundred years can result in.

To return to reason.

Museology is no isolated case. It has the same experience as any other relatively new science. It not only has friends but is still disapproved of, ignored, even attacked by the majority of the establishment. Why is this so?

Here is the answer of a another Nobel Prize laureate, Max Planck: «A new scientific truth is not in the habit of gaining acceptance in such a way that its opponents are persuaded and pronounce themselves instructed but rather due to the fact that its opponents die out gradually and that the coming generation is familiarized with the truth right from the beginning.» (*Wissenschaftliche Selbstbiographie*. Leipzig 1967: 22)

Thomas S. Kuhn (*Die Struktur wissenschaftlicher Revolutionen*. Frankfurt a. M. 1976) has told us what happens to every

new discipline that questions familiar rules. It is rejected by most specialists whose domains are affected. Each new theory has its impact on works already successfully completed and demands a revision of former theories and a re-evaluation of earlier concepts. Consequently many museum workers are not even properly prepared for their profession as such.

Remedy: education

I think there is only one remedy for this deficiency: education. Whoever works within the museum system must not only be able to perform known and familiar tasks but must also be able to judge and act in a museologically relevant way in new and even unexpected situations.

Regular formal training in museology however is only available for one generation. As it always takes at least a dozen years for the first well-trained professionals to become effective the predominant majority of museum staff at work are still amateurs in a museological sense. They are usually excellent specialists and craftspeople of course but they lack proper qualification for their occupation. As a consequence inadequate and obsolete practices are so firmly established that even when they are proved false it does not lead to a shift in thinking but rather to suppression. I shall give an example of this tension between museological potential and museum reality below.

WHERE?

Where, within the system of sciences, could museology find its place? I shall briefly refer to a paper of mine published a couple of years ago.

I believe that museology with reference to its goals of operation is an applied (as opposed to a theoretical) science;

as to its matter it is idealistic;

as to its basis of recognition empirical as well as rational;

regarding the way it sees things it is part of the humanities (museology strives to gain insight into single and historical phenomena and contexts by means of interpretation, and it deals with all kinds of objectifications of human mind);

as to its form it is a cultural science that describes singularities and makes use of a generalizing method;

concerning its mode of manifestation it does not justify phenomena transcendently but it demonstrates and describes them objectively;

finally, museology is only slightly abstract and highly concrete.

This attempt already shows us that museology is not a monolithic discipline but rather heavily integrative.

Museum as a system

The essence of the museum phenomenon cannot be understood through random empiricism or other disciplines' methods of realization. An investigation into museology's single components can never give an insight into the idea that is the basis of all museum practice. This idea is simply not to be found in the variable particulars of museum institutions but only in the structure they are forming, and in their relations.

Thus it is its system which makes the special differences – another vital fact, by the way, which has so far not been taken into account in the least by any of the existing museum definitions.

100 *Museology as an eclectic science*

Museology investigates a complex behaviour and its impact. Therefore it really needs exchange and cooperation with many other disciplines. Just because it has the potential has to investigate and to explain all conceivable actual phenomena of the natural world and that shaped by man from this specific point of view, it can of necessity only exist in an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary fashion.

That is why museology needs the loyal help of all basic as well as special disciplines – from geology to history of art, and from philosophy to communication science. In order to be able to develop their faculties to the optimum, however, they must all be put to use under the primacy of museology.

WHEN?

Let me take the third of my interrogatives: WHEN? When do we need museology? There is a simple answer to this question too: at any time, in any context, in any phase of museum specific thinking and acting; from concept to deaccession, from selection to exhibition, from conservation to publication. There is not a single detail which cannot and should not be dealt with according to museological standards and with the specific system in mind which makes a museum.

Example: museum presentation

I shall give you the example I referred to earlier: museum presentation. What is called museum exhibition must in fact be more than just a showing of objects. Museum presentation is a message, it must communicate. It represents abstract

substance through concrete objects. Its specific importance is that it does not only communicate knowledge but that it also proves it correct with the help of authentic objects. Museum presentation is by no means an imitation of reality but is a cultural reality in its own right. Museum reality is always metareality. This is what basically distinguishes it in its meaning as well as in its appearance from all other kinds of representation. A mere showing of objects is just ostentation whereas museum presentation shows and tells. It presents, it makes present.

The subjective experience of museum visitors is a personal, intimate coming awareness of essence which they can – immediately or much later – understand as significant. This reaction is due to the fact that museum presentation is a work of art, and the way art is perceived is totally different from the way in which intellectual contents are taken in. Museum presentation is an eminently symbolic mode of expression because the objects presented, even when they look most attractive, are not as a rule standing for themselves but are evidence of certain realities which they should make it possible to understand.

A fundamental requirement for this is the palpable or visual encounter with musealia. Consequently the museum is not in the first place a site of transfer of knowledge but of understanding. The museum as a medium offers a unique opportunity to transform the physiological process of seeing into an holistic experience of understanding by looking.

Only a few museologists, among them Jerzy Swiecinski, have so far pointed out the decisive role of poetry in museum pre-

sentation. In schools – I take this example because museums are frequently mistaken as such to their own and their public's detriment – pedagogy and didactics are indispensable requirements for the conveyance of knowledge and skills, of material and formal education. The museum however must make use of totally different, namely artistic tools in its presentation.

MUSEUM AS MEMORY STORAGE AND HOLISTIC INFORMATION SYSTEM

Let me return to my first interrogative: WHY?

I shall try to offer you an answer that is possibly just the sort that sometimes fits museums, namely not a direct answer but an attempt to provoke you into finding your own answers by offering reflections on the poetic quality of the museum experience. At the same time I want to give an example of museological reasoning.

Why do we want to remember?

Why do we try to keep memory alive? In the case of museums, mostly memory in the shape of tangible objects?

Because a human being without memory is a living corpse. Without memory there is no remembrance. Amnesia is a disorder which tears us out of the here and now, which deprives us of our certainty of knowing where and when we are.

Why do we want to remember? This desire is an expression of the basic human need for orientation, for finding our way around. We need orientation wherever there is expanse: therefore in space and time.

Our organ of equilibrium tells us where up and down are, our eyes where front and back are, our hemispheres let us distinguish between right and left. And even when we cannot see our ears help us to orientate ourselves, and when we are deaf we perhaps still have our sense of touch. Anything beyond our direct experience is given a substitute: plans, maps, ground plans, elevations, sections. Signposts tell us where we are, arrows and pictograms where to go.

And in time? Moments we can recognize through the blink of our eyelids, our pulse, our breath; day and night, morning and evening through the position of the sun; plants and animals show us the seasons; rock lets us grasp the gigantic periods covered by the history of the earth. For whatever goes beyond our experience in time and yet is still needed in everyday life we have invented calendars and clocks so that we can find orientation between century and second.

However, there is also our desire to understand periods of time not only as quantities – from nanoseconds to aeons – but also in terms of their quality. Above all it is important for us to know what has happened or not happened at a certain moment or during a certain period. The reasons for this are deeply anchored in the human mind: to pass oneself on, to make oneself remembered, to transcend man's finite being on earth. Since we know of the existence of the human race this desire can be detected.

There are also other, very pragmatic reasons. Recently Alexander Kluge (*Die Wächter des Sarkophags – 10 Jahre Tschernobyl*, Standard, Album, 19. 04. 1996) has pointed out in connection with the

- 102 Chernobyl disaster that never was one single generation able to create or maintain community. Community is the result of a contract between generations where the essence is the passing on of knowledge. Fundamental experiences of life are transferred with the object of reaching grandchildren and great-grandchildren. One must not deprive these new generations of knowledge, especially knowledge of what is dangerous and what is not. This is not a moral requirement but a very practical one.

How do we remember?

How can we keep hold of memory and use it as an orientation mark in time? Firstly, there is our personal ability to remember – just now, yesterday, a fortnight ago, last year, when I went to school... this does not yet need objective determination, I can keep it within myself, I do not have to separate it in order to keep it. If it is more than I can keep in my memory I can still write it down in notes or diaries.

But what about other people? Did they experience it too, did they even take part? And if they did, how did they experience it? Whenever more than one person, more than a small group, wants to record facts it must be done in a way with which all or at least the majority can basically agree. If this knowledge is meant to be available to other people too, this record must also survive for as long as possible. This is the more difficult the more rapidly time is perceived to pass in a certain culture, the fewer the considerations among people, the more attention is given to having instead of being.

To preserve memory is a laborious task. Not only because of circumstances, of the

world we live in. There are also intrinsic reasons. Not only does the world in each case appear as the individual perceives it – my world is not the same world as yours, as hers, as his; the media themselves that help keep memory alive are also treacherous.

The classical and most widespread carrier of information is writing. Memory is preserved in written form and where it bears particular significance it is brought into the world as historiography. For a long time it was possible to believe that it was objective and did report how something had actually been. This, however, is too simple. We know that memory of the past as well as writing about it are dependent on conscious and subconscious selection as well as interpretation and distortion. None of these is the responsibility of any one individual. They have social causes because they depend on the organization of their transmission and on the different media used. (cf. Peter Burke, *Geschichte als soziales Gedächtnis*, in: Thomas Butler, Ed., *Memory. History, Culture and Mind*, Oxford 1989: 97-113).

Among these media are, in addition to oral tradition, conventional historical documents such as memoirs and other written records, paintings or photographs, still and motion pictures, collective memorial rituals, geographical and social spaces and, finally, objects – things that literally and concretely are set in opposition to us.

Objects, carriers of significance

Objects play a special role in this context since they do not report indirectly, like all other media. They are not carriers of signs but they are the signs themselves. What they carry is meaning. Objects are able to give evidence, to prove.

It is of course not a modern idea that objects are important media for preserving memory. In the 19th century Jakob Burckhardt defined his history of culture from the contrast of texts and traces, that is written reports and direct material evidence. Texts as the encoded messages of a period comprise all possible tendentious self-delusions. Traces, on the other hand, document the involuntary memory of a period and are more truthful. Of course this concept is open to discussion and has been questioned, but in each case traces – in our case objects – by necessity possess a much higher degree of authenticity than written evidence.

Walter Benjamin called collecting a form of practical recollection. Objects can indeed help us to reconstruct certain facts. Just think of a possibly trivial thing which falls into your hands again after many years and suddenly opens a window into the past or into a strange world. On a larger scale it could be a Viking ship, Carl Nielsen's trumpet or Hans Christian Andersen's rope.

Why do we consider objects to be so important? Claude Lévi-Strauss has given a very thorough answer: people only differ from each other through their works, they can even only exist through their works because these are evidence of something really having happened among human beings in the course of time.

What kinds of objects are suitable to give evidence? They must be authentic, authentic with reference to the fact they are to testify to. Only something that has been part of an occurrence and thus conforms with it ontologically can serve as a direct and immediate proof. Such an object, however, is not automatically a

«material witness of history» but is in each case an element of and a testimony to a historical construct.

Objects can serve as signs when they stand for a whole of which they are an integral part. The examples I gave are signs of this kind. For the sake of completeness I want to mention objects that serve as symbols if they are put into an arbitrary context with elements they are not intrinsically related to – a broken candle as a parable of death, a twig of acacia as a symbol of eternal life. Such objects do not have to be authentic because they do not serve as concrete evidence.

Example: conservation of bearers of significance

Since objects are bearers of significance their conservation plays a decisive part. Recently the Austrian conservator Maria Ranacher put conservation into a broader museological context which I should like to mention, especially since it was written for a catalogue but was eventually omitted from the printed version due to lack of space.

Works of art and other cultural evidence of the human mind are important in three respects: the idea out of which they have been made, their material existence as carrier of this idea and the statement, the message they convey. Museums are points of contact for past and present, they are a place of simultaneousness of the non-concurrent and – actually a most spiritual institution. This potential – idea, materiality (decay), historicity and its impact on the present and future is content and programme of a museum in itself, it is the subject of research and conservation.

The museum offers to its visitors a unique opportunity to experience themselves in front of the

104 background of the past. This experience with the aid of original objects is more than the transfer of knowledge, it is a getting into resonance with historicity, getting into resonance with the contents and essence of a document and it gives us the infinitely important feeling of being integrated into a succession of generations and it puts us in touch with the stream of human beings who have inhabited this planet Earth, who have created empires and works, and who have suffered, fought and loved.

It is just this experience of life, this interest (which means to be within a matter) that makes people visit a museum, be they conscious of it or not. The political significance of museums is that by way of this experience they reinforce their visitors' ability to deliberately accept and to integrate or to reject their own past instead of repressing it without reflection.

The perception of three-dimensional objects possesses a special quality, in contrast to photographic or filmic documentation, in contrast to merely virtual worlds of experience. Through an original object idea, material and message can be experienced because it offers a possibility of realization on an authentic one-to-one scale.

For that very reason it is so important to hand down authentic objects as genuinely as possible. This trusteeship which museums have accepted towards human history means responsibility. Namely, the responsibility of bringing and keeping museum objects in such conditions that reasons for aging and decay are eliminated or at least decisively minimised.» (Maria Ranacher, *Erhalten für die Zukunft : Präventive Konservierung in Gemäldegalerien*. [Not printed]. Wien 1996).

EVERYDAY LIFE

There are museums that concentrate on collecting the extraordinary, the outstanding and exemplary. This is perfectly right for some types of museums but certainly

not for all, not even for the majority. It is one of the great failures. e.g. museums of ethnography suffer from and will continue to suffer from, the fact that only the significant and conspicuous have been selected and collected from the wealth of material evidence of everyday life. Thus we know quite a lot about 19th century festive clothing but too little about work clothes. And we shall never be able to regain the material evidence which has been lost because of this narrow perspective. Thus, I am keeping to the chosen example, most early museums of ethnography are in fact museums of folk art. This is what some of them actually call themselves, even though there is no such thing as folk art.

Things vs. musealia

Care for museum objects is thus very important as everyday things and musealia differ intrinsically. The latter have been lifted out the river of time. A new capacity has been conferred on them which they did not have before. They have been endowed with values. They are the result of a specific epistemological and axiological process of selection. Their value is not a material value but a cultural one. This is the reason why each and every museum object is basically equally important and why they should only be evaluated according to their testimonial capacity.

Everything counts, even the most unspectacular

I shall conclude with a quotation from a work of a poet who has dealt with the same topic, admittedly not knowing that his poetry is at the same time a good example for museological thinking. His name is David Malouf, he is Australian,

and his essay is called *In Trust*. This is what he wrote about the trivial objects we are surrounded with:

There is to begin with the paraphernalia of daily living: all those objects, knives, combs, coins, cups, razors, that are too familiar, too worn and stained with use, a door-knob, a baby's rattle, or too swiftly in passage from hand to mouth or hand to hand to arouse more than casual interest. They are disposable, and are mostly disposed of without thought. Tram tickets, matchboxes, wooden serviette rings with a poker design of poinsettias, buttonhooks, beer mats, longlife torch batteries, the lids of Doulton soup tureens, are carted off at last to a tip and become rubble, the sub-stratum of cities, or are pulped and go to earth; unless, by some quirk of circumstance, one or two examples are stranded so far up the beach in a distant decade that they become collectors' items, and then so rare and evocative as to be the only survivors of their age.

So it is in the life of objects. They pass out of the hands of their first owners into a tortoiseshell cabinet, and then, whole or in fragments it scarcely matters, on to the shelves of museums. Isolated there, in the oddness of their being no longer common or repeatable, detached from their history and from the grime of use, they enter a new dimension. A quality of uniqueness develops in them and they glow with it as with the breath of a purer world – meaning only that we see them clearly now in the light of this one. An oil-lamp, a fragment of cloth so fragile that we feel the very grains and precious dust of its texture (the threads barely holding in their warp and woof), a perfume flask, a set of taws, a strigil, come wobbling towards us, the only angels perhaps we shall ever meet, though they bear no message but their own presence: we are here.

It is in a changed aspect of time that we recognize them, as if the substance of it – a denseness that prevented us from looking forward or too far back – had cleared at last. We see these objects and ours-

elves as co-existent, in the very moment of their first stepping out into their own being and in every instant now of their long pilgrimage towards us, in which they have gathered the fingerprints of their most casual users and the ghostly but still powerful presence of the lives they served.

None of our kind come to us down that long corridor. Only the things they made and made use of, which still somehow keep contact with them. We look through the cracked bowl to the lips of children. Our hand on an axe-handle fits into an ancient groove and we feel the jarring of tree-trunk on bone. Narrowly avoiding through all their days the accidents that might have toppled them from a shelf, the flames, the temper tantrums, the odd carelessness of a user's hand, they are still with us. We stare and are amazed. Were they once, we ask ourselves, as undistinguished as the buttons on our jacket or a stick of roll-on deodorant? Our own utensils and artefacts take on significance of a moment in the light of the future. Small coins glow in our pockets. Our world too seems vividly, unbearably present, yet mysteriously far off.

NOTE

* from: David Malouf, «In Trust», in: *Antipodes : Stories* by David Malouf. Penguin Books 1986: 123-124)

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