

Fluid boundaries and False Dichotomies – Scholarship, Partnership and Representation in Museums?

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Museums vary immensely in size, scope and obligations. In no area are these differences more manifest than in that of scholarship. A trend is supposedly that the larger and older the museum, a higher percentage of resources are devoted to research and scholarship. Would we not make our collective lives and identities easier by allowing for, and on a managerial level consciously defining and refining, these differentiation? And creating organizational framework that can adequately reflect different obligations and purposes?

Shared across time and place among museums is the tradition that collections both contain our accumulated knowledge and the potential for a continuous renewal of questions. The contents of questions raised, and the methods employed, however, always vary within different historical periods.

Early museum traditions of the 16th and 17th century created collections that span a unity of knowledge, wonder, communication and the aesthetic. In the 19th century they split into separate realms, separate scientific disciplines and sometimes separate museums of art, history, ethnography, biology, zoology with separate methods and goals.

Am I right in believing that the late 20th century saw again a shift in paradigms with a desire to explore and present a more coherent, contextual and holistic world-view? To explore forms of scholarship and interdisciplinary projects that rejoin a quest for knowledge with the three-dimensional, sensual base of objects and collections and their presentation? To create, if not an immediate unity again, then a carefully structured dialogue between the sectors of research and communication, between the production and consumption of knowledge, where false dichotomies have marred our practices since the 19th century?

Increased internationalization and quicker dissemination of knowledge facilitate a more integrative approach between museums, between museums, universities and other research institutions and might in time also have a bearing on museum specialties within collections based, discipline based and issue based research.

Obligations as public service institutions and increased political attention are encouraging museums towards creating long-term and short-term relationships with outside stakeholders. General societal needs as well as specific legitimate and well articulated claims on our collections forge new forms of cooperation between museums and external partners. These partnerships tend to dissolve and transcend the traditional dichotomies between scientific and more subjective forms of knowledge and develop concepts of shared authority or shared authorship.

As a number of the other speakers at this conference I have been musing at the terms set up as the framework for this discussion.

What is the relationship between populism and scholarship as our core values are – again – shifting?

I took a stand on these terms as I was writing the synopsis for this talk in as much as I use the terms false dichotomies and fluid boundaries. I don't believe in these underlying oppositions or dichotomies and boundaries. I don't believe in them, both in the sense that I don't think they exist to the extent that we give them weight and in the sense that I don't think they ought to exist and be given further credibility. I could also say I don't accept them, and that I spend my professional life combating them.

I am unsure which of the terms I should start out defining - scholarship or populism. What scholarship is, is less controversial, or is at least on the surface less contested, whereas the forms under which scholarship is organized are more debatable. Populism on the other hand as a concept is in itself much more open to interpretation. I have chosen to talk about populism as a concept for a museum's relationship with the outside community, with its stakeholders, with society at large - as this relationship bears upon the museum's definition of its purpose and the way it organizes and understands its scholarly role. (For definition I should also say that I use the term science about scientific endeavors as such, not just about natural sciences, and I use the term research to signify scientific methods of exploration, not just in the sense of for instance 'audience research'.)

So I will look at how the exchange between museum scholarship and the surrounding society shifts with our shifting values. I will look back in museum history at this theme, tracing some patterns and some changes.

Yes, I believe our core values are shifting. And obviously I am close to making a very glib statement that our core values are always shifting. Looking back on museum history, I think they are always shifting. What is interesting of course is the specific content of each change. What is interesting are the societal forces, the societal needs and the changing scientific paradigms that lie behind each change in core values in the museums. Or one could also say the societal forces and needs that have as one of their manifestations, one of their faces also changing paradigms and value systems in museums.

I will dwell on these values for a while.

I have over the last two decades worked in three very different museum settings and I will be drawing on examples from these. I should say that these are history museum, dealing with modern history and art, with archaeology and anthropology, but not with science or natural history. The examples I use bear these limitations.

The display of collections is a specific form of presentation of a museum's or of a period's knowledge and the principles for this knowledge. The meta-language of museum displays show the categories through which a museum or a society or a period perceives its knowledge, which analytical tools it uses.

We often say that the first European Kunstkammern were characterized by fascination and curiosity towards both the natural and the artificial, i.e. the manmade worlds. We tend to speak of these early collections as non-hierarchical, as collections that receive their cohesion and wholeness through associations rather than through a systematic let alone hierarchical order.

The National Museum of Denmark has collections that date back to the Royal Kunstkammer of the 16th century. The Danish Kunstkammer is very well documented, the principles for the collecting and the displays are known. The headlines for each of the rooms of the Kunstkammer tell us about the ways of thinking, of categorizing and interpreting of this period. They tell us about heroes, about antiquities, about the Indies, about distinctions between artificial and natural objects. Of Art.

But I believe that as soon as we can begin to talk about these collections as museums – for the national museum of Denmark early in the 18th century - they acquire a fairly distinct purpose in exploring, defining and disseminating the value system of European colonialism, of European supremacy. They were preoccupied with identifying and defining a European history and identity as different from and as opposed to the cultures of people outside Europe.

Interestingly, when the focus in the 19th century, with the development of the nation state and with parliamentary democracy, shifted towards definition of national identities and a differentiation between the national identity and the neighboring European identities, a strict division between non-European and national collections was upheld. As far as the National Museum of Denmark was concerned – but I think this is true for the others as well – the national collections with artifacts that were meant to celebrate and highlight national pride were an undifferentiated mix of local and other European objects.

Progress and evolution were the underlying principles for the 19th century. Already at the beginning of the century the Danish collections had a clear and stated purpose of making it possible for the viewer room for room ‘to study the nations successive progress in culture and concepts, manners and customs’.

And the museum – mainly via archeology – became an explicit supporter of the emerging parliamentary democracy. In Denmark archaeology and museums were among the most important agents of an incredibly strong ideological offensive meant to forge a nation out of what was before a series of regions brought together by the power of the absolute monarch. Those of you familiar with archeology know the vicious debates that raged over the nationality of skeletal material from prehistoric periods where the idea of a nation is irrelevant.

We see at this time a very close relationship between the state, the national museum, and the scientific discipline publications, and debates.

I always feel that I sound slightly paranoid when talking about this period, but saying that science in the museum is in the service of societal change or political forces might be an understatement. It is certainly easy to justify saying that museums function as mirrors for an emerging national identity is, as national self portraits. ‘The time has returned when those chosen by the people gather again like in prehistoric times in shared deliberation on the future of our society’ is one such statement, running high with the pathos of the period.

Now, the 19th century saw also a split of museum collections according to the evolving scientific disciplines. In Denmark collections were divided into separate museums for zoology, botany, art, history, the royal collections etc, each with their own order and categories. Since then there has been little contact or little real professional or scientific exchange or joint development between these types of institutions.

This obviously represented a most radical shift in values or shift in paradigms, maybe the most radical we have seen in museum history. As any changes we see now, this split was as much a response to changing societal needs, about development, about shifts in the productive forces.

For some people the 19th century model of museums still stands as the ideal. I will return to this later.

In some lucky museums this split did not happen, some still have the collections from all spheres of life, of nature and culture, and they obviously have tremendous opportunities to day. Look at Kelvingrove in Glasgow for instance.

I will not dwell on the wars in the first half of the 20th century although museums certainly carried their political share in terms of nationalism. I also will not talk about the period or the logic of the emerging regional and local museums to supplement the nationals.

I will move on to another politically heated period, namely the 1970ies, 1980ies, when new museums based on a critical perspective started emerging.

The specialist museums of this period founded themselves on a more or less conscious and explicit critique of the value systems embedded in our collections. They distanced themselves from the colonial, racial, ethnic, gender or class base and divisions of traditional collection, traditional scholarship and communication.

They emphasized social history rather than the more general cultural history, and tried to deal with history from below. From different perspectives and various allegiances these new museums wanted to deal with the previously unrepresented stories. To use a shorthand jargon one could say that they wanted to create an antidote to history told by the winners.

It was new to start identifying the output from an intellectual institution with who was in charge of the input in the institution. It was quite heretic to connect the type of scholarship done, the type of collecting done, the type of analysis made, the categorization, narratives created, documentation, and obviously not least interpretation made – to connect these with who did them. From a scholarly standpoint this represented an extremely radical break with centuries of refined scientific methods. It crossed every dogma of objectivity within which we had been trained.

Museums are – more than other public institutions like schools or libraries – said to be popular initiatives. What we are coming to in this period is a very conscious use of museums as platforms for community organizing and self-confidence or self-representation. The new museums had different political legacies as well as different scientific paradigms. For me the two are obviously related.

Well-known examples from this period are the worker's museums, specific trades, the ethnically defined museums, the women's museums. I will use the Women's Museum of Denmark, started as a grass root initiative in 1981, as an example.

It was new to defined women's culture as a field of responsibility, but in form and method the museum entered what was already becoming a tradition.

As other new museums of the period, the Women's Museum is meant as an affirmation of the identity of the specific group, as a defense against cultural extinction, as a possibility for interpreting and reinterpreting the qualities that were.

It is intended as an active agent within the specific community, and will understand its documentation as substantiation of claims and choices in the present and thereby also an agency that may facilitate a re-orientation towards the future.

The museums program states that 'building a museum over women's lives means looking for what is already gone, what has been worn out or used or eaten up. In the same way it is the spoken word rather than the written that has carried on women's knowledge and traditions between generations. Asking about women's lives means asking also about that which has been put to silence'.

The form of governance and management were much less hierarchical than the museum legislation requires. When the Women's Museum gained official status as a registered museum it was granted exemption by the government to continue experimenting with forms of collective management that had over the years of the museums start proved unexpectedly productive. In terms of governance the museum consciously created organizational forms that demanded, if not total agreement, then at least consensus. The relationship between management and the board is one of equilibrium. The board itself is an even number to preclude simple majority voting. The majority of the board members is voted in by the Women's Museum Association. Other members are appointed by the city and other stakeholders.

In everything it does, the museum tries to change the relationship between subject and object. It created processes thought which the object for research, for collecting, for exhibiting, the object herself takes charge and becomes herself the subject.

The employment of large numbers of women on various public employment schemes with no previous background in museums - hardly even as users was one way of approaching this and gave the museum a non-elitist base and profile that was truly unique and came to mark also the collections and exhibitions.

As to scholarly methods, the museum never *believed in* objectivity in science. Or rather - and I am now quoting a much younger version of myself - we 'did not believe in an objectivity defined as the opposite of the subjective. We did not believe that things were more truthful, more objective they less they seemed related to one's subjective reality. We try instead to work within a method that makes conscious use of subjectivity as a unity of emotions and intellect, of thinking and feeling. We work with a rather therapeutic concept of becoming aware of and containing the emotions rather than splitting them off and doing away with them. We aim for a method of knowing emotions and subjectivity and putting them to work for us - the wishful thinking, the ambivalence, the identifications, anger, sympathy, compassion.

Ideally, transparency takes the place of scholarly blind spots, and gives way to both a fuller understanding and fuller intellectual clarity.'

So, if I should sum up this area or this type of museum, it is characterized by the object *for* the scholarship also tentatively becoming the subject *of* the scholarship. In this example the category 'women' is studied also by women researchers and the results are communicated back to women as a prime audience.

Methods developed exploit this personal approach. Identification and subjectivity become part of the method, both within collecting and within research and communication and exhibitions. Oral history, personal photographs, stories, other types of immaterial objects become part of the effort to get as close as possible and be as authentic as possible towards the studied object and her specific and unique context. This was true of the Women's Museum, but became paradigmatic for a number of other institutions working with contemporary cultures.

We let go of an 'epistemology where truth is measured by its distance to the subjective', as the philosopher of science Evelyn Fox Keller phrased it. Both scholarship and populism were given new meaning in these institutions. To some degree this type of new museum, often specialist, thematic museums, have managed to prove different methods, different points of departure successful. They have been able to exert a certain pressure on the mainstream museums, that combined with a

direct political pressure, from for instance indigenous groups, has forced also these to revise some of their position.

At the National Museum of Denmark a series of mission statements were created a couple of years ago that tried to align the museum's purpose to the value system of contemporary issues. These new statements even emphasized and built upon a national identity as a product always of exchange and process between neighboring and more distant lands.

At the core of these reorientations, or shifting values, is whether the museum manages to integrate the voices of different people in museum policies and practices.

These are real issues.

Museums have collected and communicated **about** various cultures, and have more or less reluctantly stated doing things **for** various diverse sections of the population, but have often failed to go to the next difficult level of actually working **with** the relevant groups it was representing or having productions **by** the relevant groups.

Speaking for, and even speaking on behalf of 'the others', is at the core of all museum traditions. Personally I find that museums are better suited to create this sort of empathy than most other media. Nonetheless, it is no longer a sufficient or adequate strategy or method. Not everyone wants us to or permits us to speak for them any more. A non-museum person recently pinpointed the inadequacy of this ventriloquism in museums. People are finding their own voices.

So as the third example in this line of reasoning I will talk about the museum that I am now directing, The National museum of World Cultures. It is, interestingly, a government initiative, i e it is an initiative from above, that tries to find a more dynamic position for a nation, or a much more dynamic concept of a nation, which these days always also implies an international or a global identity.

Negotiating histories was the intriguing and apparently paradoxical title given to a conference arranged by the National Museum of Australia on the present role and function of national museums.

The idea of history as subject to negotiations is a difficult one for museum people like us who grew up with a belief in history as a given body of knowledge dealing with specific known and identifiable facts, events or trends. The transition from an initial belief in scientific objectivity to a tentative position reflecting a version of history that is subject to interpretation and to reinterpretation when new facts emerge and more knowledge is gained, was in itself difficult. The concept of negotiation places history right in the center of a political agenda and places the given political agenda right in the center of historical interpretation.

It is a concept that makes it clear that there are several different partners in a decision making process of what history means at any given point in time. It makes it clear that other agents are Involved than the professionals, the historians. The general public, museum audiences, and other specific stakeholders are all involved with the interpretation of history, with the negotiations of historical interpretation.

What is happening is a serious attempt to go behind or beyond the concept of the visitor or the audience as the public partner of a museum. It is trying to reach also a level of dialogue more direct and in many ways more profound than that of the guest book on the one hand and the ministry of culture on the other.

And it is no longer a question whether it is desirable to combine what we are today speaking of as scholarship and populism. It is only a question of how.

The adoption of the perspective that truth is negotiable, that knowledge and history are not stable and static, but dynamic, open to interpretation and reinterpretation might strangely –

strangely because one would have thought that this was always so –be the newest, most recent change in core values, characteristic of our time. It might be as radical a shift in paradigms as that of the 19th century museums.

Where I used before a key concept of the subject/object relationship, should I correspondingly give one key word to this period, it is that of partnership. Every mission, every definition of purpose for the National Museum of World Cultures tie in with partnerships, be it with institutions, groups or individuals, be they professional or lay organizations or individuals.

Over the past year and a half we have tried to translate the governments brief for this new museum into an overall museum vision and corresponding missions for each unit within the organizational circle that comprises the museum as a whole.

The mission for the National Museum of World Cultures is defined through a number of key words or key concepts.

In dialogue with the surrounding world and through emotional and intellectual experiences the museum wants to be a meeting place than encourages people to feel at home across borders, to trust and take responsibility for a shared future in a world in constant change.

I cannot go into to detail on how we do this. I can say that obviously we are refusing to accept the boundaries that have traditionally divided museum into types. We will have, as I said, fluid boundaries and deal with anything between art, artifact, nature and culture. Knowing how one period's artifact is another period's art, or how one culture's art is an other culture's artifact, we don't find these divisions particularly meaningful. And for me it is the magic of museum collections that they can continuously respond to new types of questions, new angles, new perspective.

Basing ourselves on a traditional ethnographic collection we also know that while respecting the dilemmas and demands of care taking or warding particularly a collection from without one own geographic or cultural sphere, and making these dilemmas an essential part of our policies, we must also go beyond this collection in the way we set up programs for scholarship, exhibitions and communication.

Maybe I should also note here that the museum will have no permanent galleries. No permanent exhibition can capture the width or depth, the variation, the scope, the differences, diversity, and dynamics included in a contemporary concept of world cultures. Permanent galleries for me are tied in with a naturalized view of history and with the nation state.

We do try to find also if we can indeed respond to real need, real expectations and not just work from projections of what people want or need in our planning. This is the dilemma, when an institution is not grass root based – that exploring the needs behind the scheme are sort of an after the fact. Our communication and marketing unit has as its specific responsibility to ensure that the needs and particular interests of different user groups are articulated and that planning and priorities in the museum are based in a mutual exchange with contemporary societal issues.

Looking particularly at the area of scholarship which is our particular focus today, we have a statement that reads like this:

Through an interdisciplinary and thematically structured development of knowledge the museum will add new perspectives on relevant contemporary themes in forms that combine traditional scientific methods with the specific knowledge and competences that originate in a subjective background in a given culture or given topic.

We are here working within the framework of shared authority, for both the questions raised and the content produced. We accept that training and skills in scientific methods provide one important set of qualifications and that the personal roots provide another set, and that these different approaches and different methods supplement each other.

So we have the keys of partnership and shared authority.

And more than anything it becomes a management task and responsibility to encourage, cultivate, stage, guide and structure these partnerships and networks.

I will briefly give one examples here: The museum is owner, as it is called, of a EU funded project that spans the social sector, educational sector, private industry, national and local agents and transnational partners in Scotland and Austria. It will have as its point of departure a period of documentation of our collections from the Africa Horn area, done in collaboration between a curatorial specialist and people from Gothenburg who have their own cultural origins in Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea. Methods will be those of oral history and reminiscence work. The project will develop to encompass further education and vocational training and real job development on the part of the individual participants, and on the part of the museum to form a basis for one of our opening exhibitions. Personal empowerment is the ideal and aspiration shared by all partners.

People tend to talk as if our institutions and our scholarship are increasingly driven by outside demands and themes. As I indicated at the beginning of this talk, I think it might be more precise to say more explicitly driven by outside demands. But either way, an interesting fact is that the political or cultural responsibilities given us, or the societal responsibility given us, call for interdisciplinary methods, interdisciplinary solutions. Most often these tasks cannot be solved though the disciplinary scientific methods or frames of reference. And I wonder if it is really this interdisciplinary character and the change away from disciplines that seems to worry museum people or make us worry on behalf of our scholarship. Some people still find the late 19th century model the ideal.

In my experience – and again outside the natural sciences, where I think the situation might be somewhat different - only few areas are left in which museums are still the most important carriers or upholders of a scientific discipline. In Denmark for instance runeology and numismatics, but even these are gradually pointing towards the universities. I don't really regret that tendency.

What I do regret, is if the scientific or scholarly base for museum work or museum practice as such is too thin or fragile, or if our work becomes unreliable or dishonest or untrustworthy. But such lack of quality is not tied in with any specific organizational form or specific way of organizing an institution's scholarship.

But as I have said, I think we would do ourselves a service by differentiating between what the obligations can be for various types of museums.

Museums are almost incomparable institutions. They vary as much as a corner grocery differs from Bloomingdale's or Sears Roebucks or Nike or other empires that one could jointly name stores.

But, interestingly, our sense of community in the museum world is so strong that we talk about major research facilities of for instance the Smithsonian institution in the same breath as collecting of material for an exhibition at the tiniest of provincial museums. This is both good and bad.

But our obligations do differ. There is a trend that says that the younger and the smaller a museum is, the higher percentage devoted to the public and the less to research. I am not sure that is necessarily so.

I don't think we should take our scholarship responsibilities lightly. I don't think we should reduce our relative investment of resources in research. But I also don't believe that there is any one right form for organization around research, only specific, concrete, institutionally adapted solutions to how scholarship is defined in the totality of a given museum's context, and relative to the universities and to other museums.

For my present institution, the National Museum of World Cultures, I will even add, that the more explicit the political agenda for a museum, the more politically controversial it is, the more important is the level and the quality of the scholarship. For a museum like this, it is not permissible to be caught in easy standpoints, cheap ideologies, or undocumented statements or positions.

At this museum we have entered a close collaboration with the local university, and we structure our research resources so that we have an hopefully sufficient in-house staff to become an attractive framework for external specialists or experts on specific themes or subject matters.

We try to maintain a good level of expertise within the strongholds of our collections and history, and a good level of general museological theory. We have invested a lot in setting up jointly an international, master's level museums studies program that started this semester, and we are now experimenting with various forms for joint exhibition oriented scholarship.

So when I argue that we should not decrease our investment in resources for research, at the same time I think we must ask ourselves when we are keeping up specialties or specialist fields or trying to create new scholarship, which in reality is already redundant, is based on a lack of knowledge of what is actually already going on in other places? When does our ignorance and insularity lead us to duplicate already existing and possibly superior scholarship, in the world at large?

My feeling is that the international research community is today so closely connected that it seems futile for all museums, also small museums, to generate or uphold its own scientific knowledge within all the fields covered by our collections. For me it seems like best practice to call in a specialist in African sculpture from Africa – or from somewhere else for that matter – to work through the documentation of our African collections rather than to educate and uphold this expertise ourselves? Because, how fine a mesh of expertise can a museum of our size uphold? How many different specialists could we have? 8? 10? 20? How many continents or how many periods can one person cover?

My point is that the conditions around scholarship and research have changed so radically that our primary concerns might not be to foster and to maintain a specific knowledge locally, but could be to draw on the competences available in the world in general. This, however, does demand a new discipline in museums, something that has not traditionally been our forte, i.e. a written culture, a systematic and continuous written record of our knowledge about our collections - and for that matter making this knowledge available and accessible for further research, so the rest of the world can benefit from it. Knowledge should not be a private matter, neither for the individual nor for the institution.

As my last theme today within this overall frame of scholarship and populism I will turn to people – or to an underlying opposition in museums between scholarship and exhibitions and communication.

As most of these other questions it seems to have been around all the time. In the first half of the 19th century the Danish prehistoric collections were evicted from their first location of the university library loft, because the collections were visited too many

people, even common and unlearned people, noisy people. Serious scholarship was unduly and unacceptably disturbed by these irreverent people.

This latent or explicit dichotomy between on the one hand scientific and on the other more experiential qualities keeps reemerging.

In the second half of the 19th century – after the eviction from the scholarly library and after the move to the Princes Palace - the National Museum of Denmark was the victim of a vicious press campaign against its alleged Tivolization, as it was called. Tivolization is what at a later date in the rest of the world has gotten the name Disneyfication – in Denmark it is still to this day Tivolization - close to trivialization, right. Most people, even professionals, don't know that this critique was fashionable already 150 years ago. The museum – particularly the Ethnographic collections - was compared to 'a fancy Tivoli' and it was claimed that the diversion of a visit was not even of a healthy nature. So for the National Museum of Denmark the neighbor Tivoli was one such shadow figure. Others were the contemporary Barnum's circus, the Panopticon, the new department stores.

Most of us encounter these shadow images and more or less blatant accusations for populism.

Each period has its own interpretation of the balancing act of showing museum collections and documenting a scholarly knowledge in a form that is also defined by spatial and aesthetic principles.

This balancing act, however, to me is the essence of museum practice and defines museums, differentiates museums from other types of scholarly, educational or cultural institutions.

In museums it is often called finding the golden middle road between scholarship and the popular – with an underlying dichotomy between a cognitively and an emotionally founded understanding, sometimes seen also as an opposition between content and language of form.

As I said, I don't accept these oppositions. But it is an opposition that comes with a history – a history that I believe is related to the split into scientific disciplines.

It was certainly not part of the logic of our earliest collections, the Kunstkammers or Wonderchambers, as they were appropriately also called.

For me a totality that unifies experience, wonder, questions, answers, information, facts- a totality that unifies knowledge, perception and education with the spatial, the sensual, material qualities - this totality is what defines the museum as a specific institution.

For the National Museum of World Cultures the mission for exhibitions reads like this:

Through its exhibitions the museum will create dialogue with audiences that are diverse relative to age, class, gender, education, ethnicity. The museum will develop an experimental and questioning style for its exhibitions, so that many different voices can be heard and also ambiguous and conflict filled subjects can be articulated. Exhibitions will explore the unique understanding, poetry and power embedded in museums objects.

And I guess I will end by saying that these last areas, the poetry, the power of displays, the forms of perception and experience, these are areas that I would like to also make the subject for further scholarship. We have so blatantly ignored scientific conceptualization of these media that are the unique contribution of museums. I know only one major publication – '*The Power of Display*'- that seriously explores the independent meaning of the language of form and the way that the language of form informs content in ways that we cannot afford to leave unconscious.

So to sum up: Yes, I do believe that the late 20th century saw again a shift in paradigms towards a more coherent, contextual and holistic world-view. Towards interdisciplinary scholarship that allows knowledge to rejoin the sensual base of objects and their presentation, and towards a carefully structured relationship between the sectors of research and communication, between the production and consumption of knowledge.