

Museum Publishing: Representing the Museum

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The communication and cultural uses of print media associated with permanent and temporary exhibitions by national museums are examined in this paper. Also outlined briefly is the author's ongoing study of production of these commodities, the analysis of their text and their reception by museum visitors. Print media are presented as extending national museum's communication in time and in space while representing the values of the institution and its associated sponsors. In addition, it is suggested that visitors use these commodities to align themselves with the values of the institution. The ideas outlined in this paper are being examined through case studies in two UK museums. This field work will be completed in 2008 and the study submitted as a doctoral thesis to the University of Leicester, Department of Museum Studies.

Introduction

This paper sets out the context of research to be presented for a PhD from the Department of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester. Started in January 2006, the ongoing study is based in cultural and communication theories and explores the ways in which printed commodities, that is, books and catalogues, frame museums, collections and objects and how they are used by the producers (the institutions), the authors (curators) and the readers (visitors) in diverse ways. The field work for this study is pending, so the ideas and comments are speculative or based on initial interviews and observations. In presenting this paper, I hope the ideas will contribute to understanding one of the avenues by which national museums present themselves to their publics and construct meaning. I also suggest the authoritative nature of published text is used effectively by institutions to shut down negotiation between the museum and its visitors *and* that visitors willingly use these commodities to align themselves with the cultural values of the national museums.

An examination of the production of published text by national museums and its use by audiences will contribute to the study of narratives in national museums. The books, catalogues, guides and other printed materials published by and for national museums not only contribute to the museums' communication processes but also constitute part of the complex discourse between the institutions and their audiences. This discourse contributes to the diverse and evolving concept of a national museum.

Museum publishing includes a number of commercial and non-commercial activities involving printed texts. For this context, I define museum publishing as writing, illustration, design and production of books for a general audience to support permanent or temporary exhibitions.

Routes to Production

The comparative aspects of my study concern an examination of the national museums' various routes to production in their publishing activities and the effect of these routes to production on the resulting text. I suggest a textual and design analysis of books and catalogues would identify differences between publications from national museums in the United Kingdom and those in France, for example. In the UK the national museums' enterprise entities within individual museums conduct publishing activities along similar lines to commercial publishers and undertake commercial risks. In France, a government institution (Réunion de Musée Nationaux) provides publishing services (along side exhibition services) to 30 national museums located throughout the country. This centralized approach is likely to provide less diversity in design and a cohesive presentation style to the publications. In 2004, the Réunion service was reconstituted on a competitive basis and some museums, for example, the Louvre, and Musée National d'Art Moderne, have set up autonomous publishing offices. Is it possible to identify a difference in approach with this new structure? Do publications produced in the autonomous centres of museum publishing, both in France and the UK, create products that are more diverse than those produced under a centralised system? And, if so, what difference, if any, does this produce in the way the documents are used by institutions, departments, sponsors and visitors?

From a preliminary Internet survey, national museums in other European countries would appear to work primarily with commercial publishing companies which take on much of the production and design of the books, and a considerable part of the commercial risk. Does this approach result in a more market-oriented, less academic product aimed at a scholarly audience? What affect might these differences have on the reception of the message by their respective audiences?

Historical Associations of Printed Materials with Collections

Although an historical view is not the focus of this study, a brief reference to institutions' use of publishing in codifying and presenting museum collections shows that the authority vested in books has been used by museums over an extended period. Catalogues associated with early museums 'demonstrate(s) that texts both as physical objects and as vehicles of presentation were vitally important to the negotiation of meanings of collections and collectors in early modern England.' (Swann 2001 p. 9). Over 100 years later, museums were seen as a means to help construct a national identity; one function for the Louvre, for example, was to instil a sense of national identity and pride in citizenship, 'Cheap catalogues and guides to the collections on display were produced specifically to inform the visitors' (Hooper-Greenhill 1992 p. 182). At this time the function of the museum (with its publications) was to produce a 'population... constituted as citizens of the state' (Hooper-Greenhill 1992 p. 182). Preziosi (1996 p. 75) explains that the public institutions of the early 19th century were distinguished from their predecessors by the 'heightened linkage of structure to chronology...objects and artefacts were selected for their documentary value in staging a progress'. Supporting texts made these narratives explicit and provided visitors with a guide to the themes and purposes in the displays.

Considering contemporary national museums, it is in the printed material that the museum's 'voice' is made most explicit. For example, visitors to the new Musée du Quai Branly in Paris can revel in the architecture, enjoy the ambience of the gardens, marvel at the artwork and objects in the exhibition but only through reading the guide book are they initiated into the explicit purpose and intentions of the institution. In summary, objects are 'always contextualised by words' (Hooper-Greenhill 1994 p. 115).

Despite printed materials' long association with museums, this commodity has received little attention in museum studies. The recent book *Museum Text* (Ravelli 2006) makes no mention of catalogues, books or any other published materials in considering the relationship of text to displays and museum communication.

Books as a Communication Resource for National Museums

The book, its form, history and association with authoritative knowledge, its cohesive presentation of image and text, the semiosis of its cover, presentation and sale and its consumption by readers either within or away from the museum, place it in a particular relation to its producing institution, the collections and objects: a relation that is very different from other museum texts. What communication resource do museum books provide to their institutions, collections and objects? I suggest national museums utilise books in a number of ways.

Catalogues provide a permanent record that outlives the exhibition, particularly for high-profile short-lived touring shows. These books extend the life of the museum's communication and in some cases are the only record of the unique mix of borrowed objects garnered from around the world. As relatively expensive objects offering a specific academic focus, these exhibition books are retained by scholars and lay people for subsequent reference. Their communicative function persists long after the objects are dispersed. In essence, we could say that the exhibition book extends the museum's communication temporally.

Catalogues carry the institution's communication far from the institution itself. National museums promote their books to an international audience who may become visitors to the museum or may remain consumers at a distance. Representatives of the national institutions such as The British Museum, V & A, Réunion du Musée Nationaux, the Louvre, National Galleries of Scotland, Metropolitan Museum of Art, to name only a few, attend the international rights selling fairs in London and Frankfurt to promote future publications.

Besides additional income derived from the rights sales, these conjunctions either with other national museums or with commercial publishers advertise the institution and aspects of its collections. International sales of book rights place the institutions in positions of power and excellence which recognise that their collections offer something of international value. Here, the book extends the museum's communication spatially into the arena of international collaboration and globalisation.

In the essentially anonymous and non-personified agency of national museums, books provide a substrate for the name of the institution, and the exhibition's or collection's curator. Only in the catalogue or the exhibition book, which is bound by book conventions, is the curator/researcher obviously acknowledged as author. In addition, the catalogue's preliminary materials usually acknowledge the director and the sponsor with forewords or commentaries for each of these participants. These pages provide a permanent record of the generosity of donors and this acknowledgement is considered by some publishers as one reason for owners agreeing loans to exhibitions and donations to museums. Books make museum communication less anonymous, more appellative and personified. Communication through print could be described as using a warmer, more human substrate.

Most national museum catalogues for temporary exhibitions provide a 'voice' for the institution, usually in the form of a situating foreword from the museum director as mentioned earlier. As an example, it is instructive to examine *The Museum Guide Book* to the new Musée du quai Branly (Musée du quai Branly 2006). Two introductory texts open the book. One, on page 6, is *signed* by Jacques Chirac as President of the French republic. His photograph is printed along side the text. This written piece strongly associates the new institution with the French state, at the same time that it establishes the museum's relationship to its collections and their cultures and the institution's 'will to see justice rendered to non-European cultures'. The other introductory text on page 8 is by Stéphane Martin, President of the Musée du quai Branly. Martin explains that the guide 'familiarises readers with the museum' before their visit, 'offers directions and advice' during their visit, and 'when the visit is over, it spurs them to deepen their knowledge and, ... to return.' These messages follow a listing of patrons, donors and contributors and a list of senior staff. At no other location is the visitor presented with such a forceful voice outlining the intent of the museum, explaining its purpose and its inception. This printed vehicle is the personification of the museum in a package which is easy to carry, long lived and, above all, explicit in its message.

In taking these observations further, it would prove useful to examine this voice from a single institution over time, or compare similar publications, for example, guide books, from a number of national museums. Guide books occupy a particular position in relation to museums and galleries and their visitors and the introductory text in these documents might provide a useful resource for investigating this relationship. For example, the guide tells visitors how to enjoy and participate in the museum. The size of national museums and their collections make a guide necessary. Tourists want the essence of the overwhelming institution and need to locate the 'valued' objects which will provide resonance within their communities on their return home. The guide reassures, removes anxiety, ensures that the visitor locates the iconic objects in the museum. Writing in the *Guide to the Uffizi Museum* (Fossi 2005) the superintendent of Florence's museums, Antonio Paolucci, explains the book is 'for both the uninformed but willing visitor and the refined and jaded intellectual'. His preface explains that 'These guides ... guarantee that at the year of publication the state of each museum is exactly that described in the guide.' – a comment indicating the difficulty in maintaining accurate but commercially viable guide books. Museum books then provide a vehicle for a specific message to the visitor, and to other institutions such as funding bodies and local governments.

Another voice is associated with catalogues. The sponsor of a museum, exhibition or collection is provided with space for a supportive message that serves to associate the commercial enterprise with the cultural values of the exhibition and the institution. The company logo is usually shown prominently in the exhibition and printed with the sponsor's message and company logo in the catalogue which provides the permanent vehicle for the company's association with the exhibition. The catalogue is the usual gift for attendees at sponsor-funded openings.

Museum books and catalogues have high production values: they are generously illustrated in colour and care is taken to ensure the colour printing provides an accurate rendition of the object. The paper, usually heavy weight and glossy, and binding are high quality even in paperback books. The books are usually individually designed, or, when part of the series, the series itself will have been designed. These attributes communicate a sense of substance and importance to the publication, its message and its publishing institution. The logos of museums (or their presses) appear obviously on the front cover and/or the spine of their publications. The high quality museum book represents the national museum and its values.

In addition to representing the institution, I suggest that museum books are designed and written to communicate the authority of the museum and its collections. Books provide a uni-directional form of communication from author to reader unlike exhibitions where audiences are freer to interpret objects because of the three dimensional nature of their presentation and the possibilities of group interaction during the visit. While readers interpret texts differently, most books offer no specific site for debate or negotiation unlike museums with their sites for comment and discussion. At a time when museums are being urged to be more constitutive, inclusive, embrace a diversity of views and voices, and 'move away from their previous roles in controlling the meaning and messages of collections' (Suzanne Keene 2005 p. 161), is it possible that the growth in the number of museum books indicates a contrary approach which shuts down this diversity of view and so effectively avoids a debate? Books present an author's view; and while they do contribute to a wider debate, few museum books are published with the idea of generating discussion. Even if they were, where would the discussion take place? There is no location within traditionally designed books for the reader's response. Books are essentially one-to-one, one-way communication.

In concluding this discussion of museum books as a communicative resource, I suggest that the obvious delivery of information through the text and illustrations is augmented by the style and authority of the book which supports and extends the institution's style and voice beyond the institution's walls into visitors' and non-visitors' homes. Books also extend the institution's reach through time. They provide a platform for sponsors, donors and funding agencies as well as providing a vehicle for career advancement for curators and other contributing researchers. Museum publications make manifest the museum's symbolic functions, its current purposes and institutional voice. These defined roles and messages are easily and obviously packaged in the printed commodity which can be consumed *in situ* or at a distance by the visitor and non-visitor alike.

Audiences Use of Museum Books

Museums 'involve the culturally, socially and politically saturated business of negotiation, and value-judgement; and they always have cultural, social and political implications' (MacDonald 1998 p. 1). In a similar way that museums use books to represent their values, so audiences use these commodities to advertise their association with the institution and its values. I suggest it is through the acquisition and display of the guide books and catalogues that tourists and national visitors align themselves with the purposes and values of the national museum. These printed materials enable visitors to share their performance with others, so extending the museum experience to non-visitors. Books and catalogues carry the

authority of the museum back to the visitors' home town and country and in bringing these commodities back, the individual audience members gain status from their association with the museum. Books become the physical equivalent of the photographic pose in front of the iconic museum object. I suggest that audiences use museum books and exhibition catalogues to demonstrate their alignment with the high cultural values of the objects and art on display.

While guides, catalogues and books are used within the museum during the visit and also serve as souvenirs, visitors use the museum catalogues in ways other than reminders of an experience. These books offer audiences a means of possessing the unpossessible. The value of these collections, both as individual objects and the collections as a whole are often reported in the national press. These values put the objects and artwork beyond the reach of visitors; postcards, posters and books provide the means for them to 'possess' some part of the 'fabulous'.

My initial observations suggest that books, catalogues and other publishing activities represent the museum and in providing a commodification of the museum experience, offer a non-negotiated arena for the authoritative presentation of the institution's values. Visitors make use of these acquirable objects to celebrate their association and identification with the cultural values of the museum.

Data Collection for the Study

These preliminary observations will be tested using a case study approach to data gathering in UK national museums and exhibition centres. Interviews with staff members curating exhibitions with publications will seek to identify ways that working practices, discussions, norms and constraints affect the production of messages through the exhibition and catalogue. This approach will be augmented by observation of discussions and meetings during the development of exhibitions and their catalogues. I will analyse the preliminary text of the catalogues using textural analysis methods (Fairclough 2003) to identify the coded meanings presented in the publications. Finally, I will examine the exhibitions' visitors' practices of decoding and reception through interview and observation. I am currently negotiating access to exhibitions with accompanying publications in an art museum with a national constituency. I have agreement from the Wellcome Institute, London to take part in evaluating some of their 2007 exhibitions. Field work will be completed by the end of 2008.

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