

## **Museum Narration and the Collection Machine: Or how Collections Make Collectors**

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The article deals with the role played by collections and collection work in museums. It argues that collection needs to be seen as communicative and structuring in very important ways. Collecting is in fact thoroughly creative work, not primarily a question of managing and conserving which many people tend to think.

“Museums exhibit things, as can be seen by everyone, but that is illusory. There is stuff in the showcases, sure, but what audiences see and experience are feelings, values, concepts and ideas. Museums collect and care for artefacts but exhibit imaginations.”

Billy Ehn (1986, p. 83, translated by the author)

## Imagineering

Nothing is ever natural in museums. A specific building houses exhibitions that tell specific stories and relate to audiences in specific ways. Behind the scenes, in most cases, extensive collections of which only a tiny proportion is on display, are accessioned, classified and handled in very specific, even ritualized, ways.

Cultural analysts and critics are often content with taking a look at exhibitions and judging ideological positions and the narration of museums based on that. While this is perfectly justified, and while exhibitions are certainly the main communicative interface of museums, I will argue that it is at the same time crucial to understand the inner machineries of major collection-based museums. The collector makes the collection, but when it comes to museums the opposite also holds true to a surprisingly high extent. In sociological terms, it may be said that *actors* on the inside of museums, such as curators, exhibition producers, collection specialists and even managements, are not as free to act in relation to *structures*, or rather traditions of structure, as is commonly assumed. The *practices* of collecting, or “the collection machine”, are the kind of structures I wish to give specific emphasis here. These practices, like all practices, are not just the result of ideas and strategies – not the least since many people working in old museums often only have rather selective knowledge of the histories of ideas and decisions that have resulted in the practices they follow. These practices are also by nature creative in themselves and often embedded in misrecognition of what they actually do to the world.

This is becoming even more true since (some) museums are gradually opening up their inner sanctums for audience work and web publication in line with the nice idea of the open and responsive museum (Lang, Reeves & Wollard 2006). That means that collection classifications, practices and so on are *communicated themselves* directly to audiences and so becomes part of the overall range of communication of museums, along with exhibitions.

In this paper I will try to very briefly outline some of the ways in which collections make collectors. It is true (the initial quotation) that museums exhibit and communicate imaginations, but these are not just based on the fancy of exhibition producers or indeed so separated from the “caring and collecting of objects” that the same quote seems to indicate. The imaginations exhibited by museums are to a high degree engineered by practices and most important collection practices. This “*imagineering*” is thus important to understand for anyone seeking to address the major questions posed by the NaMu project, such as those concerning representation, the making of us and them, whether museums are creating or disrupting social order, and so on. If museums are to be compared, it is not enough to compare their histories of ideas and what they communicate in exhibitions; their inner machineries and the different ways in which these machineries structure their surroundings and communicate themselves deserve comparative scrutiny as well.

## Selectivity, Classification and Organization

Collections are by definition selective. That is the difference between collecting and accumulating or hoarding. To start on a very basic level, this obvious selectivity of collections must work to structure what is exhibited and narrated. For example, the collection of the Museum of National Antiquities in which I work is mainly made up of archaeological objects

from within the present borders of Sweden. It thus represents those borders, though these are completely irrelevant for the prehistoric times to which the vast majority of objects date. The museum cannot exhibit geographical contexts outside these borders based on own collections (except to an insignificant degree based on random things collected from abroad). The more specific geographical organization of the collection is based on modern regions and parishes. This present geography (or early 20<sup>th</sup> century geography, since parishes are of neglectable importance today) is constantly reaffirmed by the classification of these prehistoric artefacts that did not have anything to do with it before arriving at the museum. Though not impossible, it takes some effort to use the collection to represent other geographical systems or indeed those many other human groups with different identities inhabiting this part of the world before the time of a modern Swedish identity group.

Since the collection replaces origin and context with classification, its very existence is dependent on principles of categorization and organization. Susan Stewart perceptively notes that “in contrast to the souvenir, the collection offers example rather than sample, metaphor rather than metonymy. The collection does not displace attention to the past; rather, the past is at the service of the collection, for whereas the souvenir lends authenticity to the past, the past lends authenticity to the collection” (Stewart 1993, chapter 5, quote p. 151). This authenticity of the past is thus given the principles of selection, organization and categorization of the collection. To ask which principles are used in articulating the collection is to begin discerning what it is all about, or, more specifically, which was the dispositions of those who decided on the principles. To give authenticity to and to represent the modern nation, its geography and borders (established in 1809) was, for example, a very conscious choice of the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century founders of the Museum of National Antiquities (Svanberg 2003, pp 36ff).

The classification and organization of major museum collections, furthermore, are not mindgames, to be sure. They are practices taking place in the very real physical world. New curators have to be trained and socialized into these practices. The ideas that constructed such practices are actually “lived out” in the structured environments of museum archives. Those working with collections are only making the collections to the extent that they are in fact conscious about the ideas guiding collection selectivity and order, and exercise an active reflection and control over those ideas. Otherwise it may easily be argued that it is more a question of the collections making them, since such “uncontrolled” collections certainly structure the actions and ways of life of their caretakers (and museums). Either way, these practices of collection classification and organization will affect other parts of the museums.

For example, classification systems – which unarguably must be made up based on the overall specific ideas and selectivity of the collection – will guide what is documented about objects and classifications will construct the identities of objects in their new museum context. These classifications will probably locate objects in series of categories and types and the associated documentation will typically include a geographical find spot, the year of acquisition and so on. Now, this information, this new identity of the object – one which is clearly entirely made up and structured by the knowledge system of the collection and has next to nothing to do with the original context of the object – will inevitably find its way into all kinds of documentation and communication, public and non public, information signs on showcases being the typical main communication output. This documentation will inevitably also find its way into databases and hey, now when we have this nice database, why don’t we make it public? That must mean to increase the public availability of our collections! That is true, but it will also mean that the collection system becomes the narrative. Hmm, we wanted a post evolutionary, post nationalist museum but it seems that crude modern chronology and national geography are the frames and contexts here...

The collection of my museum is not classified ethnically. This possibility appears far-fetched and unattractive to most curators and no attempt has been made to organize the bulk

of artefacts according to historically known identity groups, which would have been possible to a certain extent (but of course questionable in many respects). At the same time, and as a consequence of this seemingly neutral outlook, it all very easily becomes “Swedish”, the cultural heritage of the Swedes, though, as pointed out above, these modern concepts have nothing to do with prehistory (or, that is rather precisely what they have, since the concept of prehistory is a modern phenomenon associated with nationalism, but let’s not go there now). This may seem of slight importance, but how does it relate to people immigrating to Sweden from other parts of the world and becoming Swedish citizens? Due to the geographical definition of the collection and its “Swedishness” lurking due to a lack of other categorizations, these people may hardly apprehend it as their heritage – since they have a different geographical background. While absurd due to the non-existing continuity in identities, culture or indeed genetics, people born in Sweden and thinking of themselves as ethnic Swedes may on the contrary well understand the collection as their heritage due to its principles of selectivity. In this way the principles of this collection has a definite bearing on integration and the making of us and them in society. This is rarely taken to its points today, while it certainly was in 1943 when the first major exhibition in the present building was inaugurated (Svanberg & Wahlgren 2007, pp 78ff). In present exhibitions it is made perfectly clear that there were no Swedes or Sweden a thousand years ago, but the selectivity and order of the collection, which is simultaneously communicated in ways such as those outlined above, does not tell that story and its old principles may surface and structure museum narration in unexpected circumstances and to unexpected degrees.

To an interesting extent, then, collection selectivity and classifications, and specifically the ways in which these are *practiced* in museum work, may easily be shown to structure what is communicated. Representation, the overall making of us and them, whether museums are creating or disrupting social order, and so on – are partly generated behind the scenes by the collection machine.

### Limits of the Open Museum: Audience Work and Collection Practices

Many museums of today wish to engage in new kinds of audience work. They take on a more interactive approach. The archaeological museums have to relate to relatively new, and increasingly influential archaeological directions dealing with the contemporary past (Buchli & Lucas 2001) and the public dimensions of archaeology (Merriman 2004). These directions have great potential for functioning as catalysts for new collection practices (cf Merriman 2007). The area of archaeologies of the contemporary inevitably brings new kinds of artefacts to the collections and raises ethical and political questions, since it must interact with the world of the living. Public archaeology, on the other hand, strives to involve people in the making of history, with an aim towards more inclusive, and even democratic, pasts and collections. A series of recent projects at the Swedish Museum of National Antiquities have dealt with these issues (the following after Wahlgren & Svanberg, in print).

In the collection and exhibition project *Future memories* the public decided what was to be exhibited and collected. Their descriptions and ideas about the chosen artefacts were registered in the museum database. As it turned out, these personal reflections over memories, chosen for the future, influenced the perception of other exhibited objects and their histories in the museum. In addition, the project shed light on current collection practices. The setup allowed people to deposit their chosen future memories in a case in the museum entrance hall during the spring of 2007. The objects were tagged with notes with the stories the audience chose to tell and left on display until the end of the summer, when they were finally incavated in a pit in the museum courtyard. Each future memory was photographed and registered in the museum database.

The concept of future memories plays with the established idea of memorabilia from ancient times, turning the concept on its head. This twist becomes a work of contrast, which focuses on issues such as the significance of things, the assembling of the collection and the stories that are put forward. The museum contributed with the framework, consisting of an exhibition form, and the public created the content by choosing the objects and stories that were to be sent on to the future. This worked at several different levels. The museum was enriched by new stories and knowledge about the public comprehension of artefacts and their choices of historical focus.

Future memories started processes in which the museum was forced to reflect upon collection and exhibition practices. Due to the rules governing the treatment of accessioned objects, it was not possible to give the future memories real inventory numbers and they were only given an identity code in the database. This clearly illustrated the current limit for which objects are acceptable in the collection and what kind of preservation conditions current policies force the museum to offer accessioned objects. The greatest stumbling block was the question of how the incavated objects, without preparation or conservation against decay in the ground, could be accounted for from the perspective of collecting. This offered interesting insights, as the collecting practices and the regulatory framework for the retention of collected objects were revealed to have major implications for the possible uses of, and public interaction with, the collections.

Another project, *Archaeologist for a day*, consisted of a public archaeological excavation of the museum itself. The summer audience of 2007 was invited to take part in the excavation of the central courtyard of the museum. A great number of artefacts from the last 350 years, relating to the history of the area as well as of the museum, were found and collected. The project demonstrated the learning possibilities of involving people in the archaeological process as well as the limits to availability and public use of the collection database system.

Professional archaeologists led the excavation, but the museum audience was invited to take part in it and interpret their finds. The artefacts were accessioned and the interpretations registered in the museum database (inventory nr 34 759). The aim of the excavation was to investigate the history of the museum itself as reflected in the material remains in the courtyard, and to catalyse an internal discussion on the museum's own history and collection practices. Another important aim was to study the situation itself, and to make the museum more competent at handling an interactive audience in an excavation context. As it turned out, thousands of objects from the time when the complex was built, and from some 300 previous years of neighbourhood activities and history, had been deposited in the few cubic meters of excavated courtyard soil.

This work with public involvement clearly outlined the possibilities and limits for public work/public availability of various dimensions of the museum's collection and registration system. It turned out that this system, and primarily the database, was very much made from the viewpoint of museum specialists, making it hard for audiences to access and use it. This was indeed true for the "public" search application, although the finds from the courtyard held, and are still holding, high rankings in the search statistics. The database is otherwise, more or less only accessed by researchers.

During a test excavation in the courtyard, in the autumn of 2006, a reconstructed Viking Age cremation burial was found and investigated. The (previously employed) educational staff, having made it in the 1980s, or possibly 1990s, had deposited some replicas of cremated bones, a large mosaic bead, an object made from iron thread and a copy of an oval brooch. The oval brooch was accessioned and registered as a regular object, an act that stirred some controversy among staff, was it in fact "a real object" or "just a copy"?

The questions raised by this discussion, as well as the discovered limits to public access and use of the database mentioned above, relate to and may illustrate more or less

unconscious museum positions on bigger issues of classification, authenticity and the unspoken values behind (and generated by) the collection practices of the museum. These positions, and the competence to actively make choices in this context, will become more and more important as public interaction increases and the area of archaeologies of the more or less contemporary becomes interesting to more archaeologists (which will in turn generate more such material in the collection).

In a global context, the idea of fixed criteria for authenticity and the value of cultural objects are gradually being abandoned. UNESCO sponsored major research work in the 1990s in order to try to find a globally acceptable definition of authenticity. One of the most important results, *the Nara Document on Authenticity* states that all judgements on the value of cultural heritage vary between cultures, and may also vary within the same culture. Thus it is not possible to base judgements of authenticity on defined universal criteria (Larsen 1995; compare Holtorf 2005). This means that a view on authenticity is dependent on the context of the viewer. The status of the oval brooch mentioned above depends entirely on the dispositions of its collector. However, if this is true, the converse is also true – that the position of the collector is constructed by the status and classification system of the collection. The question of the authenticity or non-authenticity of the oval brooch is not a question as to whether it has some essential qualities or not. The question of where the borderline between public interaction possibilities and professional collection practices should be drawn is not a question of finding a “natural” system. These questions can only be answered by making decisions about what the museum wants to be – that is to say, its identity and value system. The oval brooch can be seen as authentic and valuable or as a worthless copy, which makes two different museums.

To deal more intensively with the public relations of archaeology, and to get more engaged in the contemporary, has definite consequences for the collections and collection practices of archaeological museums such as ours. As it turns out, the converse also holds true. The way museums work with collections will structure and limit the ways in which they may engage with audiences. These limits and structures may only become visible if actively explored.

### Reconsidering Narration: The Example of Fred Wilson

Many interesting challenges to and reconsiderations of collection practices of museums come from the art world. Of the more famous ones are those of Marc Dion who has questioned collection practices of museums of natural history and archaeology. Dion wants to exhibit the collection process itself in order to be able to question the selectivity and practices that lay behind what museums tell (Coles & Dion 1999).

The American artist Fred Wilson, on the other hand, has taken a specific interest in museums as social arenas. He has been called a “Foucauldian archaeologist”, unearthing hidden histories from within the collection machines of museums. His special focus has been the scrutiny of collection practices and ideological paradigms invisible on the surface or to the untrained eye viewing exhibitions. A Foucauldian archaeology of discourses sees them as “archive systems” that can be “dug”. In addition to questioning the “already-said” in discourse, such a method supplies that which is not coherent, not general and not part of a totalizing theory or seamless historical narrative (Foucault 1972). As a museum archaeologist, Wilson has a special eye for social injustices of the past and how they were unconsciously supported by museum practices. He wants to find and focus attention to what does not fit in collections or what can question collection and exhibition practices. He demonstrates what institutions have chosen *not* to talk about and exhibit. He also finds new and unexpected connections between museum objects, which may tell new stories (González 2001; Berger & Wilson 2001).

Wilson's methods include preparations of going through exhibited and archived collections, staff interviews and reflections on how present exhibitions look, what they contain, what they tell and not. Afterwards, he makes new exhibition projects. Questioning how exhibitions are *framed* by signs and texts, and what is exhibited together and not are favourite devices. His most famous project was *Mining the museum*, which addressed the creation of cultural diversity and the containment of such difference in public institutions. He reinstalled a major part of the permanent exhibitions of the Maryland Historical Society. Visitors were invited to pose questions rather than to seek answers by posters in the elevators asking: What is it? Where is it? Why? What is it saying? How is it used? For whom was it created? Who is represented? Who is doing the telling? Where are you? The most poignant installations was perhaps "Cabinet making" in which he had grouped four Victorian chairs around a 19th century whipping pole. The contrast between these museum objects, which had never before been put together and which would otherwise never share the same page in historical narrative – the elaborate chairs and the crude pole, pleasure of the gentility "high" culture vs. suffering and violation of the lower classes – was most telling. Another installation, "Metalwork 1793–1880", exhibited exclusive silver vessels in Baltimore Repousse style together with a pair of contemporary slave shackles, further text comments were not needed.

Wilson has exhibited alternative world maps and pointed out unconscious differences between how one and the same museum may exhibit for example African and European objects differently. He has put blind folds made of British and French flags on African masks brought to museums in colonial circumstances. He has made "x-ray-images" showing "over-painted" scenes of violence in beautiful and harmless Australian landscape paintings from the same colonial period as the great violations of the aborigines. Many of these installations serve to put the seemingly innocent, natural and objective collection practices of colonialism in direct relation to its contemporary social circumstances and thus demonstrate its limited historical and representational value and true selective character (Berger 2001).

The strengths and convincing power of Wilson's work all depend on his detailed knowledge and understanding of the internal collection machinery of museums. He uses their own means of narration and representation to tell new stories. My point, of course, is that if museum narrations are to be changed, they will need to be accompanied by revisions of collection practices.

## Summing up

I have tried to demonstrate some of the different aspects of how collections make collectors. This occurs through the practices of selectivity, classification systems, and the organisation of collections. New forms of audience engagement and new interests in social or even post colonial perspectives will depend not only on new ideas about how to make exhibitions, but also on revisions of collection practices. Such practices cannot, then, be understood as a "special" sphere within museums, but must be considered in relation to museum narration and as communicative in themselves. If there is no active reflection and control over these practices, there can be no coherent narration or change of museums.

The ultimate point I want to make, is that collection principles and practices need to be known and actively analysed and reflected up on if museums are in fact to be able to exercise control of what they say and do. A mere shift in ideology is not enough to change. Strategies for change need to take the museum deep structures into account and revision, all the way into the core of the collection machine.

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