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In my PhD dissertation, published in 2002, I attempted to clarify from numerous different viewpoints what a museum is, how it works, and how it could be defined. At that time, I ended up taking the view that a museum, especially the most visible part of the museum – the exhibition – is primarily a way of discussing, arguing and gaining insights with the aid of facts and objects, thoughts and ideas; a way of experiencing, learning and understanding. Judging by the institutions that can be considered to be museums, and by the great diversity of their scopes of operation and the variability of their goals, we can say that a museum is a place for people to embrace the entire spectrum of the world, and for seeing how previous generations or alien cultures have behaved and thought. In a museum you can question what you know and come to new conclusions, or project the individual and the universal into a single whole. At the same time, a museum is entertainment, new experiences, aesthetics and art. It is often politics, and sometimes a public statement on current affairs. Even if a museum primarily displays the past and things that are over and done with, its staff are constantly weighing up how future generations are to be informed, and what not even if what we see in the museum is the past, the staff are anticipating the future.

What?

Teaching and learning are uppermost when the broad public thinks about museums. At the same time, it seems that, for many of us, the education offered by a museum should preferably take the form of objective information that is not open to question, rather than the art of thinking, assessing and evaluating. We can draw this conclusion, for example, from the statements made on the website of the AAM (American Alliance of Museums):

“Americans view museums as one of the most important resources for educating our children and as one of the most trustworthy sources of objective information.

Museums are considered a more reliable source of historical information than books, teachers or even personal accounts by relatives, according to a study by Indiana University.”

The trustworthiness expected of museums derives from the staff’s professional skills, the latest equipment for investigating objects and finds, and an openness to the material, i.e. expertise, meticulousness and open-mindedness. The public’s ideal is regrettably only a mirage. Nevertheless, the everyday life of museum work does not concern the public, in people’s minds a museum is a close relative to the more solid and more enduring aspects of reality and truth, since what it accumulates in its storerooms is permanence. In those storerooms it attempts to preserve real objects taken from the real world, and for as long as possible. Above all, however, the quotation speaks of a kind of innocence. US museum visitors appear to believe that there is some universal truth that exists above the gamut of individual experiences and antagonisms, and that this is epitomized specifically by museums, where the material remains of history are preserved, apparently incontestable in their solidity.

That truth, the “grand narrative” that unites the experiences of all human beings, has customarily been told in terms of the stages of nationhood, in the triumphal march of science, and in series of art masterpiece. Instead of such stories, contemporary museums want to tell the life stories of the little people, to create concrete, human-scale encounters with the exhibits, and to put a face to the past. At the same time, this takes us away from the now increasingly clearly recognized conflicts caused by the limitations of particular viewpoints and the scarcity of available information. Incomplete archives and gaps in expertise, along with the biases of the curator and exhibition maker, disappear from view, it being difficult to call an individual person’s experience and feelings into question.

We can reckon among the sphere of interests of the museum sector the whole of our material, and to an increasing extent nowadays also our intellectual heritage. This expanding horizon is also visible, for example, in ICOM’s definition of the term heritage. This has been updated especially at the behest of Asian representatives, since a spiritual tradition bound up with living human individuals occupies an important and revered position in their cultures. ICOM’s (International Council of Museums) definition of the term heritage from 2010 (only partially quoted below) sheds light on the range and diversity of the material dealt with in museum work:

“[…] ‘May be considered heritage all objects or groups of objects, material or intangible, that are collectively recognised or appropriated for their value as evidence and historical memory and which merit being protected, preserved, and enhanced’ (Arpin, 2000). This concept refers
to all natural or man-made goods and values, whether material or intangible, without restriction of time or space, whether they be simply inherited from the forbears of earlier generations or gathered and preserved to be transmitted to the descendants of future generations.”

History and cultural heritage are tools for self-understanding and self-definition, after all, culture (broadly understood) is the factor that most clearly creates group cohesion. It visibly and audibly separates people from others and, at the same time, it lives and changes so that only the innermost circle is capable of interpreting its varying meanings. History also confers certainty, even producing a sense of having the right to be physically present somewhere. According to Julian Agyeman, for example, for Britain’s black minority it is important in terms of their identity to know that there were already black soldiers in the country in Roman times, that they have traditions in the country dating back thousands of years. He says: “Heritage is a powerful tool. [...] It can be used to include or exclude, to give accurate or false impressions.”

Of course, ICOM, too, has defined the museum, the place for the preservation of our traditions. It regularly updates its definition, because, as it says on ICOM’s website, as society changes, museums change, too. The latest definition is from 2007:

“A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.”

In practice, a wide-ranging set of institutions, which do not at first spring to the mind of the casual thinker when the word is mentioned, are counted as museums. As became clear above, an institution can be defined as a museum at least on the basis of its field of interest, holdings and operating principles. The AAM’s website lists the wide spectrum of sectors that come under the American Alliance of Museums: “[A]rt, history, science, military, maritime, and youth museums, as well as public aquariums, zoos, botanical gardens, arboretsums, historic sites, and science and technology centers”. Despite its diversity, and despite the fact that, during its history, it has aspired to encyclopaedicness, and technology centers.

Collecting became fashionable in the 16th century, when princes in particular began to acquire collections. An important feature of rulers’ collections was expanding the worldview of the individual owner of the collection, and controlling the surrounding material and spiritual reality. The prince in his collection — independently ordering and shaping his thinking and developing his understanding of how the relationships between

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7 Quoted in Simpson 1996, 137. For a life history of George P. Horse Capture see, e.g., Chawkins, 2013.
8 There were also alchemical collections in which the work done prefigured experimental research in chemistry and physics.
9 A good idea of the diverse spectrum of collections and of the various objectives of collecting in the 16th and 17th centuries can be gained, for example, from Impey & MacGregor 1986 or Collet 2007. The volume edited by Impey and MacGregor and the preceding seminar were the first serious attempts to survey the topic. Subsequently, numerous collection histories have appeared in German-speaking Europe, for instance, of the Habsburg dynasty’s extensive collections. The biggest of these, Rudolf II’s (1552–1612) collection, has been studied for decades. See, for example, Fucíková et al. 1997.

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When, Where, Whence?

The accumulation of collections for the study of human history began with humanism in the 14th and 15th centuries. At that time, people were particularly interested in the Classical World. Humanists collected inscriptions, and anything from which they might read and understand what had happened in the classical period and how people thought at that time. As the Middle Ages went on, in several instances, there was a desire to replace corrupt written sources, which might even have been copied from memory, with the originals. Plant collections and illustrated books were complemented by gardens held by universities. Medicinal use was central to plant research. Rock and wood collections, meanwhile, were maintained for very ordinary purposes. With the aid of sample fragments people could, for instance, order the desired types of material for new construction projects. There were also professionals’ collections of tools and materials used in their own practices. For example, in their collections — in one of the forerunners of laboratories — apothecaries conducted experiments to study the mutual effects of plants and various other substances on each other and on human beings. Such collections served as places of study and practice, in them people became familiar from childhood onwards with a wide variety of tools and ways of working.

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things function — is an early example of the modern individual. These collections contained works of art, varying specimens from nature, and objects from various parts of the world, which was gradually becoming more familiar to Europeans.

The more extensive collections included gardens and zoos, i.e. collections of living plants and animals, along with dried specimens, some preserved in fluids in jars, and some stuffed. Freaks of nature and representatives of alien peoples were brought to aristocratic courts. Everything that could be kept from dying on the long journeys, and which could withstand the new living conditions, was preserved alive to be marvelled at and studied. The most multi-faceted benefits were, in fact, gained from the materials that could be inspected in the most multi-faceted ways. Observation of animals' behaviour was another innovation that came about in tandem with the collections. In the Middle Ages, people had relied almost uncritically on Classical sources, such as Aesop, Pliny, and a collection of early Medieval moral animal tales derived from the Greeks, the Physiologus. Frequently, however, attempts to preserve living beings did not succeed, and people had to be satisfied with studying pictures and descriptions; or with claws, beaks and bones — the harder, most easily preserved parts of animals.

Etymologically the word museum refers to the Ancient Greek Muses, who inspired the sciences and the arts. A museum is a place dedicated to the Muses, it is their home. The mother of the Muses is Mnemosyne, who is the goddess of memory and guardian of the preservation of knowledge. The word museum was borrowed as a designation for collections in the 16th century, from the Mousieon of Classical times in Alexandria. The reason for this was undoubtedly the growing, widespread interest in acquiring greater knowledge of the physical world, along with a belief in astrology. These could be seen as having parallels with the observation of earth and heaven, and the gathering of information in Alexandria, as well as with attempts to explain and understand events and the connections between them.

The Mousieon was a centre of late-Classical learning, an academy, where learned individuals from the Mediterranean region met to ponder topics in mathematics, astronomy and other subjects. The model was copied from the Greek philosophers, around whom pupils gathered to discuss and debate; thus forming philosophical communities and schools of thought. The Mousieon was adjoined to the most extensive library of its day, and to various collections, including a garden and a zoo. In it were gathered every possible piece of knowledge about the sciences, inventions and the arts, and it was open to everyone who wanted to learn. The Mousieon could be described as a kind of university, with the objects of its research spanning the full spectrum of nature, space and human life. Like Alexandria’s Mousieon, the 16th century collection was a place where people learned to understand nature and the world, and where they sought models for solving problems and where they went for help with everyday decision-making. Later on, museums became important centres for research, especially on the physical environment and the sciences. Before the 19th century, a great deal more, and more important, research was done in museums than in universities proper. Many important inventions are directly linked with observations and experiments carried out in collections. Linnaeus’ (Carl von Linné, 1707–1778) system for classifying plants is one such innovation.

The idea that collections and museums would help in the resolution of everyday problems was rooted in the notion inherited from the Ancient Greek philosophers, especially Aristotle, that memories (mental images) were intermediaries between reality and the human mind and understanding. It was believed that mental images stored sensed reality almost as it is. People used their intelligence to interpret the material in their memories, and to decide what the world is like. A museum can be defined as a kind of external memory — a tool for remembering that works like the art of memory, which was passed down from Antiquity to the new age, and was especially used by public speakers — but, instead of speeches, it helped to manage bodies of material. In a museum people did not have to bear everything in mind; rather, they could compare objects from very remote origins side by side. When things are collected and archived, they can be investigated again and again, a variety of comparisons made, and new viewpoints found. The same object can be interpreted in different ways on different inspections. Ever new versions of the same items and objects were clearly an important factor in the breaking away from a static world image that took place at the beginning of the Modern Age.

10 The term is used here in its current sense. The concept of art was not used in the 14th–17th centuries, the idea of the genius and the master were written about, but attitudes to works and to their often multiple makers were in many senses different from the later one.

11 The status of living human beings in “collections” varied and depended, for instance, on their original social status plus personal abilities. Thus, for example, those who were aristocrats among their own people were also treated as members of the nobility in Europe.

12 The Greek origins of the Physiologus are unknown. In the Middle Ages, various version were in use and authorship was attributed to numerous famous Christians.

13 Drawings and book illustrations took on an important role as the craft of book printing spread and as printing costs fell. Already in the 16th century, there were extensive natural-philosophy book projects, such as Conrad Gesner’s (1516–1565) Historia Animalium (1551–1558). Ulisse Aldrovandi (1522–1605) at the University of Bologna, for instance, built up wide-ranging collections of plants and established a garden in which the plants were arranged into groups according to which part of the body they were thought to affect. In the 17th century, several books were published using these collections as their source. A large portion of Aldrovandi’s collections is still viewable in the museums of the University of Bologna (Palazzo Poggi Museum), where there is also a partial reconstruction of the garden.

14 The Mousieon may have been founded by Ptolemy I around 290 BCE; but it only began functioning fully during the time of his son Ptolemy II. Its end is even more shrouded in mystery than its beginning. It is said that, in 48 BCE, Caesar burned part of the library. Some say that, in this event, 40,000, others 400,000 books, were destroyed. It nevertheless continued to operate for centuries. The Mousieon was permanently destroyed in the 3rd century CE in intercneice fighting in the Roman Empire. Its sister library on the other side of the city carried on into the 4th and 5th centuries. Depending on whether the person writing the history was a Muslim or a Christian, the other side is held responsible for the library’s final destruction.


16 Ars Memoriae, the art of memory — putting things to be remembered into visual or spatial units in one’s mind — was a method used actively from the Classical Age until the 16th century, when book printing made it obsolete. For more details see, e.g. Yates 1966; Bolzoni 1994.
Platonism is in practice categorically banned. My view differs from accepted museum history, in which Neo-Platonism is considered to be Thomas Aquinas’ (1225–1274) Summa Theologica. This does not centre on readymade answers – as when quoting earlier authorities or adopting existing propositions and information – but on a way of thinking, in which importance is attached to speculation, discussion and debate, and using these to form one’s own views. A summa is thus primarily a construct based on logic. Olmi’s thinking, as is often the case in museum history, emphasizes the rationality of early-modern collecting and the use of collections for beneficial purposes. The concept of the summa, nevertheless, also seems an apt description for forms of collecting that are seen as being irrational or based on superstition, which were practised by princes in particular.

Having materials from different parts of the world all gathered together in one place allowed them to be compared and contrasted in an unprecedented way. Linnaeus’s system — which came about when it was possible to place plants from different parts of the globe side by side — can be said to have been the culmination of the centuries-old aim of finding a place for each of God’s creations. As products of a Christian upbringing and of the concept derived from Scholasticism, according to Olmi, in collections nature spoke in metaphors and in the cumulative summa, all-encompassing collection of metaphors, the encyclopaedic, all-encompassing collection of the world created in its entirety all at once, people believed that it was possible to archive an example of every individual thing in nature, which is evidenced in the attempt made in the early days of the British Royal Society (founded in 1663) to collect all the plants of Great Britain. Well into the 18th century, and even into the 19th century, it was considered possible to have an at least almost perfect understanding of the world. As if in a continuation of this, the theory of objectivity was formulated in the 19th century, when developments in research methods brought advances towards obtaining ever more precise and more detailed information. The hypothetical objectivity of collections is particularly associated with empiricism and positivism, and is evidently still very much alive, as we have seen in reference to comments from the public at the beginning. These models of thought from the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century emphasized direct observability and the “pure information” available through the senses, or via mechanical imaging, as being a precondition for the existence of things or phenomena. Existence and truth were derived from the absence of interpretation. A large number of major international museums had their beginnings around this same time, and the idea arose of using museums to educate and enlighten the masses, so it is surely no wonder that an institution exhibiting material evidence acquired the status of a Font of Truth.

Why, Whose, How?

Museums have always worked with concrete examples from history and life; the objects were and are a starting point for their everyday work. Staff education reminiscent of the apprenticeship system guaranteed the continuation of traditions of knowledge and skill in a way that no general education would have been capable of. This approach carried on for a long time, and is still in use, but alongside it there gradually emerged the academic field of museology, which deals with the general requirements of all museum work, although this is still not a very widespread discipline. In-house training kept museums out of the discussion going on elsewhere in society, and in particular distanced staff from shifts in academic thinking. These include, for example, ‘the new social history’ and ‘the new art history’, which began to be seen and heard in the 1970s and 1980s, and which specifically questioned museums’ key areas of operation and principles of communication. Claims made as part of the new academic trends, that every collection and every exhibition is an interpretation of the world, and that they automatically leave out a large portion of the total range of phenomena, came as a surprise to many museums, even though interpretability was specifically a basic principle in the early stages of the history of museums.

The exhibition – an experience open to all – was subjected to the most trenchant critique, when people began to criticize museums for overlooking (the history of) large swathes of the population, such as the working class and various minorities. This shift in public attitude seems to have hit museums particularly hard in Britain and the USA, where archiving and preserving had concentrated on the life of the wealthy upper classes, and where museums had a solid foothold in the life of the elite, but where rising living standards particularly affected the status of the lower social classes. It is to some extent possible to speak of the criticism directed at museums as a rebellion of the middle class.

18 At the end of the 19th century, Ernst Mach (1838–1916) formulated the phenomenological thesis set out in the text about the evidential power of sensory perception. This was further developed, for instance, by Bertrand Russell (1872–1970). In current usage the term objective means verifiability, measurability and reproducibility, i.e. that everyone accepts and understands the issue in the same way.

19 In addition to unquestioned traditions, obstacles to the planning and realization of an exhibition were too often posed by everyday shortage of time and unclear job descriptions, along with various external influences ranging from governmental concerns to individuals. Among the most important factors affecting the balance of power is funding, for instance, sponsorship and the concomitant constraints. For example, in Steven C. Dubin’s research materials about controversial museum exhibitions the question of censorship and withdrawal of financial support comes up repeatedly, starting with the incident that inspired his research. Other factors that continually affect museums’ work include legal and administrative issues. Dubin 1999, 8, 15–16.
classes. No basic rights or goods essential to existence were demanded, rather there was a desire to reshape perceptions, conceptions and models of behaviour. There is, however, cause to see the high public profile offered by exhibitions as being politically more important.

Critical research, which has nowadays established a powerful foothold in the USA, is generally associated with what is seen there as leftist, i.e. a democratic ethos that promotes social change. The background to this is in the radical movements of the 1960s, such as those for racial equality and feminism. In the USA museums found themselves most powerfully under the spotlight of scholarly scrutiny in the 1990s, the time that gave us what are still the most interesting discussion about clashes between different cultures and about understanding difference. In Britain the impetus for demands for change lay primarily in working-class movement, and was focussed directly on museums more swiftly than in the USA, where the problems were more complex than in Britain, beginning with the current legislation. The teaching of museology began in Britain as early as 1964, albeit discussion of workers’ museums only began more broadly in the 1970s. 21

While academic writers in English were showing an increasing interest in forgotten topics — museums as experiences, and as teachers of history — respect for museums among the general public for the most part declined. The narrative told by museums did not feel like it applied to “us”; people’s own culture and heritage were found in songs, memories, fairy tales, myths and legends, or they arose “here and now” with changing life situations and awareness of difference, along with pride in their own culture. The truth became complicated. For museums this was a challenge that prompted them to look for ways of communicating and collaborating with the desired visitor base.

If “the people” rejected the museums, the people’s chosen or self-appointed representatives did not. For example, in the USA activists from various cultural and social groups and indigenous peoples visibly accentuated and maintained their group’s identity, among other things, in relation to museums, too. Their leaders, for whom culture and history were a means for creating a sense of ‘us’ and for standing out from the prevailing culture, began loudly criticizing museums, especially from the end of the 1960s onwards, as part of their strategies for influencing their own public image. At the start, black people were the most active, but later on, more and more (so-called) minorities demanded, and got, visibility in museums, the last to gain prominence being Native Americans. It was demanded that museums revise their approach to the archiving and preservation of minorities’ histories and their ways of telling people about their own cultures. A feature that came to constitute one of the main operating models was the participation of minorities’ representatives in the production of history (i.e. the planning of exhibitions), and taking the group’s values into account through negotiation. 22

During the last couple of decades of the 20th century, heated disputes surrounding exhibitions sporadically filled the media. In the USA exhibitions were opposed with demonstrations and flyers, and with boycotts and barricades. Nowadays, the situation seems to have calmed down, not because there are no more differences of viewpoint and culture, but because the people who are mounting exhibition are better able than before to take various opinions into account. Museum staff are more skilled at finding their way between presented and predicted criticisms. There are fewer surprises. Exhibition curators cannot, however, be experts in all disciplines, and even if they were, they cannot be aware of every possible opinion, conception or value that museum visitors might have. The absence of objectivity has to be accepted, it even has to be taken advantage of, and the best, or at least the most interesting possible exhibition, made. As an anonymous curator said in 1991:

“Regardless of one’s politics, museums should provoke and coerce reaction precisely by taking a crisp and non-centrist position as the situation warrants. […] there is no question that controversy attracts attention and public involvement.” 23

Attempts can be made to achieve a kind of objectivity by listening to various viewpoints during the exhibition’s preparation period. When planning and mounting an exhibition, a polyphony is synthesized into an entity that the exhibition designers can put their names to. 24 Even if the viewer perceives and understands the exhibition’s assertions differently from the way in which its makers intended, or does not accept them and consequently expresses a criticism, the museum’s and the curator’s considered view can be argued for and the criticism can be answered. Criticism can then be seen as an opportunity for discussion with various groups in society who would perhaps not otherwise be reached. It is also worth remembering what Steven C. Dubin says about the potential for exhibitions to mould their recipients:

21 The numerous differences between countries are reflected, for instance, in the way that the situation in Finland is in many respects different from that in the USA or Britain. What is in itself considered a pan-European enthusiasm for museums in the 19th century gave rise to the National Museum of Finland’s collection of handicrafts by people living in the countryside and remote villages, instead of the archiving of the history of those in power. The underlying patriotic spirit sought to get away from “foreign overlords”. Nor were museum work and academic teaching and research ever totally separated. The same people worked in both, and there was — and still is — collaboration. Nowadays, a notably highly educated staff work in Finnish museums.

22 The most vociferous demands for change to museums emerged with the growth in visibility of black cultures, according to Simpson, beginning already after the Second World War. Direct protests against museums’ work hit the headlines from the end of the 1960s onwards. The Smithsonian Institution, which is a national museum maintained by the US Federal Government, for instance, held seminars on the representation of different cultures and on collaboration with different groups — The Poetics and Politics of Representation (1988) and Museums and Communities (1990) — once they had begun to gain experience of working in a multi-cultural environment. The proceedings of both were published in book form. At this time, various minorities also began to get their own national museums: Simpson 1996, 13, 102–105, 167–169. Richard Kurin views the representation and display of cultures from the viewpoint of an anthropologist working at the Smithsonian Institution, and writes about many of the same issues that Simpson mentions. Kurin 1997.


“If you fear that people will be ‘force fed’ a particular point of view by an exhibition, you are assuming that they don’t digest what they’ve consumed by means of their idiosyncratic mixes of personal history, racial, religious, gender and geographical biases, and countless other factors. You’re assuming that they swallow things whole.”

In so saying, Dubin comments on the fears publicly expressed by people who set themselves up as the “voice of the public”. It is highly unlikely that any group’s members would be unanimous, any more than that they would support the standpoint presented by the most outspoken among them. The opposite is more probable. Exhibition makers have to assess not just the power and nature of protest, but also its extent.

Seeking to acquire greater cultural standing with the aid of museums is, of course, neither uncomplicated nor easy. Analyses of exhibitions that have aroused controversy show that misinterpretations easily also arise when the intention of the exhibition was supposed to be to appeal to visitors. Press releases and texts have not always been clearly worded and unambiguous. One key reason seems to be museums’ excessive reliance on verbal communication. The visual sense (not to mention the other senses) is forgotten. The gaze that forms an image of a space has articulated and classified the whole thing even before the owner of that gaze notices it, and steers the individual’s movements from one attraction to another. Visual material easily distracts museum visitors’ attention, so that explanatory texts go unnoticed. The tangible materiality of museum objects, with their countless possible combinations and modifiable text panels, in itself offers an excellent opportunity for politics or for reinforcing group identity; if the material can be used to tell one thing, then it can also be coerced into telling another. The solidity of the material and its involvement in a life that was once real illustrates a “truth” for insubstantial words. The use of juxtapositions of objects, varieties of exhibition architecture, colours, lights, sounds, smells, and other means of focussing attention that affect the senses to back up the spoken word makes museums and exhibitions potent political tools.

Their long history has moulded museums into being a platform for western values. Museums tell stories about existence, about the various pasts, and about transitions, in exhibitions people have to contort themselves to fit into an unfamiliar mould and learn to use the available tools. The politicized exhibition has frequently faced this problem when demanding that the ideas and objects that have been placed on view be accorded the same unquestioning respect as has traditionally been received in museums by things that are considered the best and most admirable. Such an exhibition represents the equality demanded from western culture by minority groups, in a concrete way that is accessible to the senses. This model would appear to come from modern art’s cult of the genius, which is particularly easy to recognize as being a construct, a cult in which artists, backed by their supporters, actively helped establish their own status with the aid of exhibitions and the concomitant public discussion. The respect gained with the aid of museums, like the respect for art, should be transferable to any subject through the authority of an inner circle.

Those doing critical researchers at universities both denounce and seek to explain. In particular, approaches to research that draw on French thought – such as that of Lacan, Baudrillard and Derrida – and which treats its object as a text or intertext, as something to be interpreted, to be understood in various ways, and as making references in numerous directions, spread into museums as being a construct, a cult in which artists, backed by their supporters, actively helped establish their own status with the aid of exhibitions and the concomitant public discussion. The respect gained with the aid of museums, like the respect for art, should be transferable to any subject through the authority of an inner circle.

26 See, for example, Simpson 1996, 26–30, 43.
museums’ research 20–30 years ago. This approach appeared to be able to engage with many kinds of material, and to be able to give a name to, and hence make visible and discussable, the components that affect the emergence of any particular end result. Researchers’ critique emphasized the role of museum visitors as the generators of meanings. By analysing exhibitions, and by talking to representatives of minorities and those who are indifferent to museums, it was demonstrated that the message really does not get across as its authors in the museum intended. At the same time, there was a calling into question of objective information, of the one correct state of affairs, the one possible interpretation, and the one shared culture, which had been pivotal to the “modern museum”29 whether of art or science.

In the museum critique people began to see the objects in an exhibition as being mute and as signs, in particular as defined by Krzysztof Pomian. For him, an object represents facts or phenomena, it points almost like a road sign, in a certain, unambiguous direction, and nor does it in itself have any impact on the establishment of a reference. This was evidently the allotted task of the objects, when museums educated the nation into a shared narrative under the pretext of a supposedly shared, homogenous frame of reference; the objects drew reality to the spot and the visitors learned because they had a desire to learn the things that were being taught. It was assumed that they wanted to develop themselves to be the same as their teachers. Underpinning Pomian’s theory (in its original context, on the role of exhibits in early public displays) appears to be the behaviourist theory of learning, which long influenced museums, and according to which it is possible to transmit messages without their meanings changing, with the learner a tabula rasa on which the museum writes its exhibitions.30 The early public museums of

29 The modern museum here refers not only to modernism in art and to the minimalist display that it favours when exhibiting objects, but also more broadly to the institution that has been functioning for more than a century, acting as a storehouse for what has been presumed to be the whole nation’s shared story. See also footnote 27.

30 Pomian 1987, 15–59; cf. Bennett 1995, 177–208. In his much-quoted text that investigates the time before public museums, Krzysztof Pomian describes the objects put on display as references to something that is somewhere else (a semiphone/sign). They show a way outside their own material presence, and nor do they have any particular meanings beyond the claims made by the person who put them on display. In saying this Pomian emphasizes the narrative nature of the museum, and the habit, either conscious or not, associated with its pedagogic role, of giving every collection and exhibition a viewpoint, (cf. Pearce, footnote 27). He sees the objects as examples whose connection with reality is negotiable, in which case it should also be possible to teach the public new meanings. Cf. According to Saussure: “it is characteristic of the symbol that it is never completely arbitrary; the symbol is not empty. There is the rudiment of a link between the idea and the sign, in the symbol.” (Italics A.A.) Jyrki Vuorinen says here that Saussure is following the same lines as Hegel, according to whom: “the symbol is no purely arbitrary sign, but a sign which in its externality comprises in itself at the same time the content of the idea which it brings into appearance.” Quoted in Finnish in Vuorinen 1997, 50. In the light of current research, even when they are born, a human being is not a tabula rasa, but “coded” to learn certain skills and to perceive particular shapes and structures. Differences between individuals are not formed solely because of the cultural framework, but also through variations in sensing and in the interpretation of sensations, and different ways of learning. It is also worth remembering that objects have been archived in museums, for example, to familiarize people with materials and shapes, and as study material, by no means all archiving has been part of some grand cultural narrative.

the 19th century neither knew nor cared about the problems that result from a sign being agreed, learned, and culturally specific. At the same time, the advance of western culture was such a self-evident value that it took a hundred years to notice that “not everyone inhabits the same rope that the best drag forwards while the rest willingly follow”.31

Even the archiving of material objects was called into question at the turn of the millennium, above all because of the object’s highlighted “inability to speak”.32 The situation described by Pomian, in which the exhibition makers have control of their message, does not, however, arise in museums and exhibitions, if only because the publicity given to the exhibition, the media’s interpretation, gives rise to advance expectations. Prior to the exhibition and its interpretation, there, nevertheless, comes the fact that the objects do not break away from their solidity or from the links that connect it to the outside world. Viewers recognize these connections and are more or less interested in them solely from their own starting points, regardless of the museum’s or the exhibition’s aims. The individual’s memory operates via the objects’ permanent, transferrable and uncontrollable characteristics, and hence behaves unpredictably. On the other hand, it is specifically in those material anchorage points whose interpretability seems never to end that the museums’ power appears to reside.

Being aware of the room for different interpretations makes museums, exhibitions and objects into (potential) instruments for the wielding of power and for politics. The museum has, admittedly, always been an instrument of power, but because it has been in the hands and in the use of the ruling class, and because divergent opinions did not see the light of day, this was not understood. Steven C. Dubin speaks of the public disputes associated with exhibitions as a shift from real to symbolic politics. According to him, conflicts arise when the balance of power becomes unstable and the power relationships between different communities change: the old elite wants to maintain an agreeable image of itself, upcoming groups want to shatter it. Disputes arise when communities take up opposing positions, when a group mirrors its identity in an exhibition, or when an exhibition is so important to someone that that individual personally takes on the voice of a whole group.33 With this unsettling
of the equilibrium, museum pedagogy acquired a status that it had not previously enjoyed. It became a mediator between people who were talking past each other. The task of museum educators became to interpret the demands of various groups of people to the rest of the museum’s staff and, on the other hand, to tell a variety of publics about the aims of the museum and its various exhibitions, and to speak to them in these different groups’ own “languages”.

Although the potential polyphony of museum exhibitions initially emerged in conflict, the end result, waking up to culture-specific values, can be considered as neither a compromise nor a loss. Interpreting exhibitions as the birthplace of webs of texts, disparate mental constructs and personal judgements entails a kind of return to the early-modern idea of the shifting relationships between the objects, the exhibition architecture, the viewer and the surrounding world; relationships in which viewers can feel they are important and take pleasure in their own insights and interpretations. Masao Yamaguchi puts the same idea in different words when he considers western museums from the viewpoint of the Japanese tradition of putting things on display. According to him, every exhibition is, in essence, a fake, like the pseudo-god in Japanese tradition, who even looks more real than a genuine one, but is still not true. It is the theatrical context that makes an exhibition true, he says. By ‘theatre’ in relation to museums, Yamaguchi does not mean a story with a plot or some other narrative, but refers to the Neo-Platonism of the Renaissance and to the art of memory, and to their way of using objects and architecture to construct an image, or an abstract model, of the structures of and mutual influences operating within the universe, a way that always leaves room for new designs, new insights and new ways of using them. He sees this approach as being reminiscent of traditions familiar from Japan, for example, ikebana (flower arrangement), and Japanese forms of drama, which use the visible to give intimations of the invisible world of beliefs.

34 Museum-education posts and functions were set up in museums where there had previously been none. Their area of responsibility was also extended to range from children and school pupils to adult publics. Dewdney, Dibosa and Walsh fittingly describe this development at the Tate Museum. Dewdney, Dibosa & Walsh 2013, 23–95.

35 Cf., for example, Stephen Greenblatt, is one of many who miss the aura lost by the works of the Impressionists and other early modernists in Paris’ Musée d’Orsay, where, according to him, the masterpieces are not given the proper space. According to him, cultural resonance, the juxtaposing of contemporary phenomena, replaces the wonder and resonance induced by unique aesthetic masterpieces. Greenblatt sees the less worthy pieces as getting too much space. The visual experience of the artworks, which in the modern museums is maximized by segregating each individual object, is unable to awaken properly when distracting art flashes into the viewer’s visual field. Greenblatt 1991, 53–54. Let it be noted that historically these works, nevertheless, competed with each other for attention, and were hung in dark, gloomy and often cramped rooms, where exploring and experiencing them was many times harder than at the Orsay.

36 This view of the early-modern collections is based on my doctoral research. Here I am particularly referring to the collections of princes at the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries, which I mention earlier in the text. The collection brought the ruler-collector into a kind of magical relationship with the world that he ruled. It is virtually impossible to study the everyday reality of the exhibitions and what the “ordinary visitor” experiences. One method used, for instance, is visitor surveys, but their obvious weaknesses include readymade questions with their advance expectations, hurried, reluctant or careless answers, and the fact that most people are unable or unwilling to put their experiences into words, even if the interview is in-depth.

37 For example, in kabuki theatre the ostentatious costumes are directly connected to the gods, filled with divinity, while the actors are just “machines” that move the costumes around; ikebana, meanwhile, offers a possibility to depict, for example, the structures of a mythical universe. Yamaguchi refers in his text to Baudrillard’s concept of the simulacrum. He says it is close to the Japanese mitate. Mitate is made up of the parts mi (to see) and tate (to stand, to arrange). Yamaguchi 1991, 59, 64–67.
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