
“Truth may seem, but cannot be”¹: on the objectivity of museum collections data

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to indicate that presenting museum collections data on web sites is a rather risky business. As anything museums present, the information on their web site seems accurate. But, in reality, museum collections databases cannot be expected to be fully reliable. So, “Truth may seem, but cannot be”.

In this paper, I will elaborate on two aspects of the problem of the lack of reliability of museum collection data. The first aspect is that the way museum collections data is presented to the reader, holds a lot of implicit information about this data. The second aspect is that the idea that there is real objectivity in museum collection data, probably cannot be maintained. The discussion of these problems leads to a call for accountability for the database history in the form of an ‘account label’, that museums should provide. In the final part of this paper, a draft for such an ‘account label’ is given as a first step on the way to standardization in this area.

With this paper I would like to share a line of thinking with the professional community. The examples that are given have been collected in almost 20 years of working on museum documentation in The Netherlands and abroad. And herewith I would like to thank those colleagues who shared their thoughts (and often practical experiences) when we discussed elements of this paper.²

Implicit Information

A scene. I am an art historian, doing research into a particular artist. As I assume that the museum is the most reliable source of information on the objects it takes care of, I visit the web site of the museum, hoping to find information on the works of ‘my’ artist. The museum web site offers the opportunity to look at computerized data, using the special user interface the museum has developed to have its collection data presented on the Internet. I search for the artist’s drawings. The screen shows me well-structured records with clear data, containing some references to additional documentation.

What have I now found out about this data?

- This museum seems to have proper records of its collections.
- The collection data seem to be well structured and edited.
- The data is easily accessible.

However, I am not satisfied. I know, being such an expert, that the museum holds more drawings than indicated on the web site.

Another scene. On a fine day, I walk into the museum, hoping to find more information on the work of the artist I am researching. I have travelled to this city, have found the museum, its entrance, its information desk, its library and documentation center. I talk to the helpful documentation specialist and he shows me the library catalogue system, photos with filing cards and some dossier folders. It is great, but not enough. I get in contact with the curator. She takes me to the registration cards, where I find more details on some more drawings by the artist.

The cards are partly handwritten, partly typed. They contain data collected since the end of the last century, with many corrections, a lot of scribbling and notes.

What have I now found out about this data?

- The data has been collected over more than 100 years (I can see from the date the object entered the museum and when the card was made).
- The data has been entered by different people (which stands to reason with such a long history, but can also be seen from the divers handwriting and typewriter styles).
- The data has been changed/adapted (some texts have been half wiped away, even tipp-ex is all over the card).
- The data has been subject to disagreement (data are scribbled over each other, comments written in margins and boxes).
- The data is not up-to-date. As the curator told me, the collection data needs a full check-up.

The curator also explains that the museum is in the process of entering basic registration collection data for a very urgently needed inventory project. The prints and drawings collection is not fully entered in the computer. Which explains why I couldn’t find all drawings via the museum web site in the first place.

Comparing the two scenes, it can be stated that for historical or cultural researches museums hold, through their collections, sources of the highest quality. To care for these sources and to give access to them, museums manage collection information. The information has been filed over decades, by different people, as shown above. While old records show, to

some extent, the context in which data has been collected and created, a severely edited record in a computer system or on a web site is likely to lose some of this implicit information on the quality of the data.

A solution to this problem would be the entry of rules for maintaining the old written records in the rules for collection information management, preferably by declaring this 'documentation to go with the object'. Perhaps, particularly important records can even be scanned, to be added as a special image to the computerized object record. For users of the web site, some indication of the status of object records should be offered. I will elaborate on this below, but first I will address the second aspect of the reliability of museum collection data.

Lack of Objectivity

In this second part of my paper I will address issues that particularly led to the Shakespeare quotation "Truth may seem, but cannot be". These issues will indicate that - in my view - there is no real objectivity in museum collections data. For it is important to realize that museum collection information is likely to undergo different influences (many of which still need further thinking and discussing). For this paper, which allows limited space, I distinguish three types of influences: personal, managerial and political. To indicate the kind of influence I am thinking of, I will give specific examples. The examples are taken from 'real life experience', and will probably be recognizable for many colleagues.

Some Personal Influences

- **Preference** - In the early 80s the Dutch maritime museums helped introduce the MDA Data Standard for all museums in The Netherlands. With a small group of curators and documentation specialists, we developed a manual for the documentation of maritime iconographic materials. In the course of the

project we developed a terminology list, that had to be tested. At a certain moment, a colleague and I were indexing a 'Still life with game' (to get the image: a painting with a forest as background, a shotgun and a pile of dead hares, pheasants and pigeons in the foreground). Being a vegetarian, I had indexed the image with terms like 'hare', 'dead animal'. My colleague, a meat lover coming from a family where hunting was a well established tradition, had used the index term: 'food'.

- **Knowledge or expertise** - During the same initial stages of the Dutch maritime project (MARDOC), I was testing the usability of the MDA Pictorial Representation Card on a series of maritime images. Problem: I had little knowledge of maritime history, or of types of ships. However, after some time I was very pleased to recognize a specific kind of ship on the horizon of some painting. Immediately I added the ship key word to my index terms, only to realize much later that there were far better examples of such a ship in the pictorial collections. And, of course, one never finds the time (or inspiration) to go back to the early records to balance the index terms...
- **Thoroughness** - A group of museology students was working their way through an enormous collection of ceramic pots, cups and vases. It was OK at the beginning of the week, but on Friday afternoon they started - purely as a result of boredom - to enter object names like: "another pot", "and yet another pot" or "oh yes, one more pot".³

Some Managerial Influences

The examples given in this paragraph are more observations than practical examples. All the same, the examples will, once more, be recognizable for museum information professionals.

- **Documentation policies** - In the Anglo-Saxon countries and increasingly in western European countries, museums are developing documentation policies. In this process it becomes clear that a museum has to make choices. What is the minimal level of registration chosen for all objects? Will that level be determined by basic collection management needs? If so, what collections will need more in depth cataloguing and references to facilitate research? Is there enough expertise available (or affordable) to realize such cataloguing? Who is allowed to create records and who is going to supervise the results? Who will maintain and expand the records? To answer these questions, a museum will have to take into account its financial and organizational possibilities and limitations. The result will greatly influence the kind of collection information a museum will end up with.
- **Computer technique** - Computers are a blessing to museum documentation. The progress made in accessibility of information (and at the same time in conservation of the object) is enormous and more is yet to come. However, the use of computers has in itself influenced the types of records created. Apart from the influence of spell check facilities in word processing tools, there is another aspect of relevance here. In the past computers still had a storage problem. Hence the need for limited field length. With a critical look at a modern computer record, the professional can easily spot records dating from this era by the somewhat unnatural (telegram style) language being used.

Some Political Influences

- **National schemes** - In the last decade museums in The Netherlands have seen a political emphasis on inventorying collections. This is clearly visible in the databases now available: they contain - as a rule - short records on all objects (often of

groups of objects). The national standard Basisregistratie is the most common level of documentation. The UK museums have clearly indicated during the conference how influential the current New Labour policies of "access for all to information" can be. I hope to be around in 10 years time to look back on this dynamic era and listen to evaluations of the results.

- **Historical correctness** - The beautiful Onufri Museum in Berat, Albania, holds a collection of Icons painted by the Onufri family. In 1994 I visited this museum and was given a tour by an educational officer. This young woman explained how it was only after the political changes in Albania, in 1992, that she had been able to explain the icon's meaning: what biblical scenes or saints were depicted. Before that, she did not have access to any bible or 'lives of saints' in the since 1967 officially atheist Albanian Republic. Shocked, I asked what she used to tell visitors before. Apparently she only talked about the artistic values and technical details of production and conservation of the icons. Sad, as the actual meaning and religious value of an Icon in Christian Orthodox Churches lies in the iconography.

On another occasion, a curator of another museum in Albania remarked: "Madam, there are no storages without a list in Albania." Everything was listed, from the first sheep or chicken to the last museum object. But the museum object documentation contained anything but the broad historical, ethnographic or religious meaning of objects. Emphasis was on the less risky, more neutral physical aspects (or on party political interpretations). This has, by the way, made the general public in this country weary of museums: the institutions haven't shown themselves to be reliable sources of information.

Conclusion: The Account Label

When Internet is being used for communication of collection data, the museum employee will no longer be on standby to clarify certain flows in information. A lot of useful information will then be lost, as is illustrated by the story of a search for art-historical information in the beginning of this paper. Perhaps even more disguised are influences of a personal, managerial and/or political nature. More disguised but clearly with a potentially large impact on museum object records. Therefore, I think that 'objective recording' is impossible. As are, for example, 'objective journalism', 'objective documentary photography' or 'objective history writing'. In those fields the creators of information will (or should) give a clarification of their point of view to go with the publication.

Similar to that, I would like to recommend that museums reserve a special place on their web sites to describe the status of the information they offer. Museums now give information about when their web site was most recently updated, but I do not think that is enough. A 'clarification' or 'account' is needed, that should perhaps contain standard elements. Below, a first draft of a standardized 'account label' is given.

I would like to encourage CIDOC to take this further, should the idea be acceptable to the professional community. I think this paper has illustrated that we will need a document, an honest document, in which museums help us to weigh their information. Particularly when we do research into museum objects. Museums have an obligation and an opportunity to supply society with high quality information, but they are also obliged to make reference on the reliability of the data available. For: "Truth may seem, but - in all honesty - cannot be".

Database History: proposal for an account

SOURCE

why - original purpose of database
when - period of data collection
who - authority level of data entry

ACCURACY

when - period of latest data check
what - completeness of check
what - completeness of collection coverage
how - use of standards
who - authority level of data check

ADDITIONAL

what - additional data available
what - additional documentation available
who - contact for further information on data

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Figure 1

- 1 W. Shakespeare, from: *The Phoenix and the Turtle*.
- 2 And thanks to Ms. Marije Verduijn for text editing part of this paper.
- 3 Thanks to Mr. Friso Visser for this example.

