

PIRAEUS BANK GROUP CULTURAL FOUNDATION: SYSTEMS OF KNOWLEDGE ORGANIZATION AND CURATING OF DIGITAL COLLECTIONS

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Abstract

The Piraeus Bank Group Cultural Foundation (PIOP) is a non profit foundation. PIOP owns, manages and makes the most of a wide range of primary and digital museum collections, historical and active archives as well as an extensive book collection. In this framework, PIOP is facing the “hybrid” challenge by developing an integrated Knowledge Organization System (KOS) for its collections, regardless of their material background and through extensive programs of digitization. The goal here is to create a reserve of knowledge for these collections, in order to serve the public groups as well as to increase the organizational knowledge within the organization. This System includes metadata standards, categorizations, thesauri, subject headings and data bases, which aim to organize the semantic structure of an area of knowledge in order to achieve knowledge retrieval. The practical implementation of such a strategy of knowledge with terms of an information system (input-process-output-feedback), presupposes the technological adequacy of the digital archives circulated by the system (technical specifications). At the same time, it allows for the semantic interconnection of all levels of documentation as overlapping levels of information: research, library, archive and museum information. This consistent documentation sequence allows for the production of various digital cultural products with a comparatively lower cost and maximized benefits, by making use of the entire available knowledge reserve of the organization.

INTRODUCTION

The Pireaus Bank Group Cultural Foundation (PIOP) is a non profit foundation. It implements actions regarding culture which fall within the framework of the Corporate Social Responsibility of the Pireaus Bank Group. The PIOP, as a modern cultural organization, owns, manages and makes the most of a wide range of primary and digital museum collections, historical and active archives as well as an extensive book collection. In particular, the PIOP is managing a network of 7 thematic-peripheral museums which aim to rescue and promote the Greek technological inheritance and the cultural identity of the area in which they operate. The PIOP has two extensive research libraries, specializing in the history of technology, industrial archaeology and their presentation in museums. The PIOP Historical Archive has additionally undertaken to gather, organize and provide to research, a great archive concerning the history of Greek enterprises. The Foundation's Photography Archive is managing the photography-archive material produced and used in the research programs, the publications as well as the exhibition units of the PIOP Museums.

Finally, the Foundation has a publication agency which constantly produces print material as well as titles in digital form. Our presentation is an examination of the Foundation's approach in what concerns the increasing volume of its digital collections, the management and curating of these collections, aiming at the end result of producing cultural products of high quality.

Becoming Hybrid

In the framework of its reformation, the PIOP is facing the "hybrid" challenge by developing an integrated Knowledge Organization System (KOS) for its collections, independent of their material background and through extensive programs of digitization. What exactly is the hybrid challenge? It is common ground in the relevant literature, that the traditional cultural organizations (Museums-Archives-Libraries, henceforth MAL) are characterized by "work allocation" based on the

material nature of their collection: the objects are kept in museums, files in archives and books in libraries (Fox 2005). At the same time, these organizations have developed sophisticated schemes of conceptual organization and description: for example, the traditional archives, which include in their collections unique, unpublished documents, are organized based on the producer of these documents (organization or person). Their description takes place in hierarchical groups and the original classification with which they had been attributed to the archive organization is still preserved. Libraries collected published bound documents and books, which are described on a level of unique document. They are organized in particular thematic units¹. The museums collect unique or representative objects² that are described in the Museum's inventory on a level of individual document, emphasizing on the morphological characteristics. Some of these objects are selected and exhibited in permanent and/ or periodical exhibitions, according to the curators' classification, which in the traditional museum, was strictly chronological while in the modern museum, is often thematic and the objects "tell" stories to the visitors³.

However, during the past few years, these organizations⁴ are faced with a challenge, as they are called to make the transition from the tangible objects of their collections to their digital representations and the necessary organization of their metadata. Through extensive digitization programs of their collections and the acquisition of digital resources, the MAL are becoming "hybrid" cultural organizations, collecting both analogue and digital objects. Digital objects are those that represent an object, an image, a text or an analogue signal through a number of samples. This representation is achieved through sampling, a process during which are taken particular capacities of the analogue object. The result is called digital representation, digital image for an object or digital form for a signal. Sampling is used also for the labels we use, either to record or determine something. Labels can tell us, as Nelson Goodman put it, either what exists or what we have to place inside different "boxes" (Goodman 2006, 93-

¹ Dewey Decimal Classification available from <http://www.oclc.org/dewey/>; accessed 1 December 2007.

² The New Archaeology of the 1960s contributed significantly in the transition from the "unique" to the "characteristic" object (Johnson 1999, 26)

³ For the division of museums based on typological criteria, cf. Nakou 2001

⁴ It should be noted here that the Foundation contains all three types of organizations (archive, library, museum).

97). Their importance lies on the fact that they are useful for the analysis, organization and classification of what we see.

A Mnemonic Machine

The goal of a modern cultural organization is, therefore, to deal with this new problem, the "labels" and the "samples" that make the digital objects. According to our approach, this requires an integral strategy, a Knowledge Organization System, which operates as an information system. The aim is to create a digital knowledge content in order to serve the groups of the public⁵, as well as to increase and utilize this knowledge within the organization. The System is not limited to the adaptation of an isolated metadata standard or the operation of a data base. On the contrary, the Knowledge Organization System wants to become a "mnemonic machine", which includes various "wheels": metadata standards, classifications, ontologies, thesauri, subject headings and data bases, which aim to organize the semantic structure of an area of knowledge in order to retrieve and utilize information. A Knowledge Organization System is the bridge between the need of an internal and external user for information and material in the collection. With its help, the user will be able to recognize and retrieve an object of his interest. The goal is to limit obscurity in the rendering of meaning to the objects. In what concerns the everyday experience of a cultural organization, we all know that the greatest part of the work time and the productive process is taken up by collecting information for making and implementing decisions. This is probably happening because people with different roles, knowledge backgrounds and ideas must have a powerful tool that, in mutual agreement, organizes a field of knowledge, making all the information available, with speed and accuracy.

⁵ At this point, it should be noted that what used to be a "public" is not a unified mass but various groups of visitors, different people with different needs. Falk & Dierking emphasize the importance of three frameworks of reference in the Museum: the personal, the social and the physical (Falk and Dierking 1992). This means that each visitor comes from a different background of experiences, knowledge, while the social framework in which the visit takes place as well as the museum as a natural space also plays an important role.

The practical implementation of such a knowledge strategy, in terms of an information system about the Foundation (input-process-output-feedback) presupposes the technological adequacy of the digital objects circulated by the system (technical specifications). At the same time, it required the semantic connection of all the levels of documentation as overlapping layers of information (research, librarianship, archive and museology), while offering criteria for the selection of the material to be digitized.

We argued that the basic ontological feature of the digital object is its ability to adequately sample the represented object. This means accuracy in the rendering of color, high analysis and proper compression for the clearer representation of the primary, etc. In current practice, all this is called technical specifications and they have been offered to the field of Cultural Administration by the horizontal specification studies of the Society of Information. In what concerns the Foundation, we are using these technical specification as a firewall for all the digital objects (images, sounds, moving images and texts) that come into or, alternatively, are created inside our information system. The technological adequacy of the objects is absolutely necessary, when there are called to be processed by the information system: to be preserved, optimized and used for the publication of books, the production of films, the illustration of museums (signs, multimedia and other audiovisual-interpretation means).

Afterwards and during the process within the information system, the digital objects must become a knowledge that can be used by the users and administrator of the organization's information system (PIOP services, external users and associates). In other words, the goal is to create a cultural content. Cultural content refers to the syntactical and semantic connection of the information (of scientific, administrative and legal character) and of its individual means (images, sounds, moving images and texts)⁶. This policy comes to deal with management issues of the objects that are circulating in the PIOP information system. It tries to handle

⁶ OECD, On the LAM: Library, Archive, and Museum Collections in the Creation and Maintenance of Knowledge Communities. Available from www.oecd.org/dataoecd/59/63/32126054.pdf ; accessed 2 January 2008.

issues of obscurity and fragmentation of the information about these collections. A result of these malfunctions is the increase of cost and time for the documentation, archiving, preservation, search, retrieval and utilization of the information for making organization decisions.

The methodology which is implementing this strategy makes use of the multiple layers of information about the objects. It starts with the Research-Historical documentation, adds the Bibliography reference and continues with the Archive and Museology documentation. The Semantic organization of the cultural multimedia content is achieved with the adaptation of international documentation standards⁷, the extensive use of classification schemes, thesauri⁸ and normalised signalling of personal, temporal and geographical information. Another prerequisite is the implementation of a central knowledge model (CIDOC CRM). Also required is the connection with the Foundation's software and the decision sequence of the Board of Directors.

If consistent, this documentation sequence allows for the production of various digital cultural products at a relatively lower cost and maximized benefits, making use of the entire organization's knowledge reserve. Our approach is inevitably faced with the real world of everyday work and the handling of practical issues that often do not reveal their deep theoretical dimensions. Many issues have been handled successfully and others remain pending. We believe, however, that by following this strategy we can optimize the quality of our cultural products by controlling the time and cost of their production.

From the mnemonic machine the mnemonic theater

This is a presentation of the methodology followed for the redesign of the permanent collection of the Silk Museum in relation to its digital collection. In this case, there was already a rich photography archive, which was the result of the research program

⁷ Archival Documentation Standard –ISAD/EAD –Museology Documentation Standard–Spectrum – Documentation Standard for Monuments – Buildings – Cultural Heritage (Object id) - Bibliographical Reference Codification Standard UNIMARC

⁸ Getty AAT and TGN, UNESCO Thesaurus.

that had taken place in the late 1980s, in order to found the museum. According to the museum's director at the time, Stelios Papadopoulos, the stages to create a museum are as follows: research, exhibit, publish. Therefore, we already had a great volume of photographs and texts which concern sericulture and the traditional architecture in Soufli (cocoon houses), totally adapted to the needs of sericulture. The entire material was digitized and documented, in order to connect, at least thematically, the exhibition units, the bibliography and the available files so that they become a cultural reserve that strongly supports the museum's narrative. Additionally, taking under consideration the constant enrichment of the Foundation's archive, we located and acquired significant photography document about the village of Milogousta in Thessaly, by the well-known photographer Takis Tloupas, who captured the process of sericulture with his known poetic and anthropocentric manner. New photographs are now been taken, using modern standards and capturing sericulture as is now taking place in Soufli.

Within this framework, by adapting the model of story narrative and wanting to truly connect the Museum with the local society in a way that indeed relates to that society, given the Museum's social mission today (Vergo 1989, 3), we have interviewed men and women who have experienced the age when sericulture was at its prime in Soufli, in both a private and industrial level. Therefore, we actively embrace the view that culture is not a simple passive product of human activity, according to the standard of natural science, but a result of the active participation of society's members (Kotsakis 1999, 20), while ourselves, as curators must become interpreters (Ross 2004, 90). Also, taking under consideration that the preservation of the intangible cultural heritage⁹ is also important, we have collected traditional songs from the region, that the inhabitants were kind enough to share with us. Finally, the multimedia applications that will surround the exhibition of the Silk Museum are utilizing the available material and implementing the anthropocentric character that we wish the Silk Museum has, and as every museum should have, per the currents trends in Museology.

⁹ A characteristic of this trend is the fact that in 2004, the main theme for the celebration of the International Museum Day was the preservation of intangible heritage.

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