

PowerPoints and brain activity

– Managing collections in local museums in Finland

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Finland has well over 1,000 museums. From the museum institution's perspective, a central division is made between professional museums and other museums. The Museums Act determines the conditions that define whether a museum is professional or not, and only professionally managed museums are entitled to state subsidy. Finland has around 160 professionally managed museums, which maintain a total of 330 museum sites. The other museums are local museums and collections owned by associations, companies, foundations, congregations and private people. They are mainly maintained by volunteers or people to whom the museum is a secondary occupation.

In public discussion, the central stage is normally reserved for the professionally managed museums. The wide field of local museums based on locality, volunteer work and the cultural interest of the public are often only mentioned as if they were the "grey area" of the museum sector. In September 2010, the Ministry of Education and Culture appointed a committee to outline a policy and put forward proposals for the development of non-professionally managed local and home district museums and specialised museums and for ways to uphold local cultural heritage. The objective of the committee was to:

- Find out the situation of local museums regarding their operations, finances, premises and collections,
- Identify best practices, cooperational models and educational needs,
- Make presentations in order to develop the operations and operational conditions of local museums.

To support the review of the committee, an extensive survey was carried out in spring and summer 2011 concerning the operations of local museums. The participants of the survey were defined using the following terms:

- the subject is not entitled to state subsidy;
- the subject is called a museum or the management has defined the operations expressly as museum operation;
- the subject is open to the public and/or
- it has a collection and/or collections or a building and/or buildings, the maintenance of which is a central objective of the management.

The survey was sent to a total of 1,224 museum sites owned by communities, foundations, congregations, the state, companies or individuals in March 2011. The survey's target group was extended to beyond the committee's assignment so that the overview of the field of non-professionally managed museums and collections would be as extensive as possible. According to the review, there are 730 local museums owned by local authorities, associations and foundations, and they operate a total of 865 museum sites.

My presentation is based on the responses to the survey's questions and on the final report of the local museums committee that was published in March 2012.

The collections of local museums

The final report of the committee states that the local museums maintain collections and buildings that are significant on a local and national scale. The local museums offer a learning environment, provide employment and services, are tourist destinations, provide expert knowledge and offer opportunities for both participation and volunteering. The committee points out that the local museums carry out comprehensive work regarding cultural heritage, and with this work, they advance the awareness of cultural heritage and the environment and of their significance in society.

According to the survey responses, there are at least 2.4 million objects in the collections of local museums in total: objects, photos, documentation of natural sciences and archive collections. The real size of these collections, however, is even more extensive than that. Therefore, local museums bear a great deal of responsibility for a significant part of our shared past and ensuring that local cultural heritage is available in the future, as well. The collections of local museums include materials, stories and subjects that are not necessarily documented in the collections of professional museums. The collections of

local museums tell a story about their makers, users and local events: they tell a story about people.

The resources for maintaining and preserving the collections and the building heritage are often minimal. The public funding annually allocated to them averages less than one euro per inhabitant. The focus of operation and the activity of local museums vary; the people in charge or personnel change and the activities regarding the collections are often carried out as short-term projects. Therefore, documenting the information concerning these collections should be the first priority. Sometimes, the information of the whole collection relies on the memory of one museum activist.

Cataloguing methods and the amount of catalogued materials

The survey attempted to find out the cataloguing methods of the materials in the local museums' collections and the amount of catalogued materials. However, it is only possible to give an estimate of these, as the number of those who responded as well as the amount of reported materials varied a great deal. The materials in local museums have been at least partly catalogued, most often, for example, on paper forms, cards or some other manual method. Based on the survey, 62.7% had been catalogued on paper (419 responses, a total of 744,715 objects) and approximately 26.8% (202 responses, a total of 318,382 objects) had been catalogued electronically (i.e. on computer, utilising some database application).

In terms of the artworks in the collections of local museums, 71.8% (32 responses, 6,010 art pieces) had been catalogued on paper and 14.1% (21 responses, 1,180 art pieces) electronically. With regard to the photo collections in the collections of local museums, 18% (80 responses, 104,547 photos) had been catalogued on paper and 17.7% (51 responses, 102,704 photos) electronically.

When talking about local museums, what does electronic cataloguing actually mean? The use of collection management software was reported by only 232 museums, about one-third of the participants. Based on the responses, the museums use over 20 different programmes and applications with varying lifespans and levels of usability. Most of the databases are created using regular MS Office software, such as Word, Excel and Access

rather than actual database applications. In addition to these programmes, the responses also mentioned typewriter, PowerPoint and the brain activity of Mr. N.N. Based on the responses, it is safe to say that local museums are lagging behind in terms of technical development, and most of the museums are only considering introducing an electronic cataloguing system. Partly, the reason behind this is that there is no Finnish or Swedish version of cheap or free cataloguing software. Other reasons are the high threshold for older museum activists to start using information technology, and the general limited resources in local museums.

Digitising the collections is a challenging task for local museums. They have come up with many various solutions: local actors have built customised systems for the local museums, sometimes with the support of the general public administration. This extensive range of various systems is a very worrying factor considering the preservation of the data. As digitising becomes more commonplace, the need for electronic cataloguing software increases rapidly and transferring the existing data into a possible, new common system is going to be a big and expensive operation. Long-term preservation of the collection data has not been taken into account. The collection data of the local museums is in danger of disappearing.

Acknowledgement of this challenging situation is visible when the local museums were asked about their needs concerning the collections. Two-thirds of the participants from local museums said that they needed support, guidance, equipment and expert resources for their work with the collections. The biggest needs related to cataloguing. The participants have a need to catalogue the collections of their museums, and electronic cataloguing in particular was seen as important. However, it was also considered difficult and expensive to implement. Many participants also lacked the appropriate cataloguing software.

Several possible actions to support the local cultural heritage work were presented in the final report of the local museums committee. These suggestions are focused on improving the training, advisory services and guidance of local museum actors, organising collection management, identifying various methods of regional cooperation, improving the maintenance and safety of museum buildings and supporting a systematic way of

conducting museum operations. The possible actions considering collection management are as follows:

- Supporting the introduction of existing collection management software compatible with the National Digital Library in local museums by provincial museums, regional art museums and national specialized museums.
- In connection with the Museum 2015 project, producing a national collection management system that also takes into account the needs of local museums.

Both the National Digital Library and the Museum 2015 project are introduced during this conference, so I won't discuss them further. The final report of the committee points out, that evaluating local museums by the same criteria as professional museums is fruitless, perhaps even futile. These constitute two different ways of operating, though both aim to preserve and promote cultural heritage. In the first, the responsibilities lay with educated museum professionals who work within their yearly grant allocated for their operations, and in the second, the operation is usually just a secondary occupation for someone and the work is performed by volunteers, purely based on their interest and desire in the matter. Nevertheless, as the objective is the same – to preserve and disseminate information on our shared cultural heritage – the local museums should also receive respect, support and competence resources for their work.

In the museum sector, it is a commonly acknowledged fact that the local museums need support for collection management work and for ensuring the preservation, availability and accessibility of collection data. In few years to come, we will find out what concrete changes can be achieved through this strong will.

Because even though local museums are all about people and about their love for cultural heritage, this love and interest also needs to be appreciated and should benefit from the proper tools.

Sources:

This text is based on the final report of the local museums committee entitled "For the Love of Cultural Heritage". The Ministry of Education and Culture's working group memos and reviews 2012:5. Authors: Local museums committee, Chair: Päivi Salonen, Secretaries: Marianne Koski, Juha Hirvilammi, Ulla Viitanen. The report is in Finnish, with an English abstract.

http://www.minedu.fi/OPM/Julkaisut/2012/Rakkaudesta_kulttuuriperintoon.html?lang=fi&extra_local_e=fi