The Critical Analysis of Sources as the First Step in the Scientific Documentation of Collections

The Example of the Musée d’art et d’histoire in Geneva

Any serious historical study must begin with a critical analysis of its sources: who is the author describing the events studied, what is their training, social background or ideological slant? Are they a visual witness, a contemporary of the events described or, if not, on what data do they draw?

This principle is employed as a matter of course for the study of historical events, thus giving us the tools to interpret the facts related by ancient writers such as Herodotus, Plutarch, Tacitus, and so on.

It might seem audacious, however, to compare the analysis of the documentary sources of a museum’s historical collections to a historian's approach. And yet, the example of the Musée d’art et d’histoire in Geneva, whose situation is certainly comparable to that of many other museums with collections assembled over the course of decades, shows that it can be highly beneficial to take an interest in those who created our current knowledge sources: manuscripts from the 19th and first half of the 20th century, and in particular inventories, which provide the general basis for the documentation of historic collections.

In Geneva, such contributors have mostly been well-known people very involved in the life of the city, sometimes the museum directors themselves, but more often curators and occasionally assistants; their scientific and sociological profiles can easily be reconstructed.

Some of these former colleagues would be referred to as experts today, while many others were "enlightened amateurs". They were all very learned, multi-disciplinary and involved in the patriotic mission of this grand new museum intended to rival the Swiss National Museum in Zurich and to be a tool for the new Swiss identity, of which Geneva had only formed part for a relatively short time when the museum first opened.

These ideological tendencies certainly had an influence on the contributors’ work and were sometimes used to help fill gaps in contemporary understanding, which can cast a shade of doubt on the degree of objectivity in the identification of certain objects.

Yet, beyond such considerations relating to the scientific competence and impartiality of these former colleagues, systematic work on the collections and handwritten sources have revealed a much more "down-to-earth" truth: our predecessors did not all possess the same level of rigour or systematic approach to their documentation; the outlines of "reliability profiles" have gradually been drawn up.

Documentary sources concerning the development of the collections at Geneva’s Musée d’art et d’histoire

The prerequisite for such an approach is precise knowledge of the history of the collections, as well as of the people who have managed them over the centuries. The minutes of the municipal council meetings from the third quarter of the 19th century give us a fairly clear idea of how this museum, now one of the most important in Switzerland, came into being. In them, we can closely follow the interminable debates over its location, the choice of collections, the sums of money to be invested or the architectural approach to be adopted. After plenty of twists and turns, building work on the new grand museum for Geneva began in 1903 and it opened to the public in 1910. This encyclopaedic museum housed the fine art, archaeology, numismatic and applied art collections created by bringing together the public collections formerly scattered among a number of small museums, the public library and the arsenal. Each of these ensembles, assembled for the most part over the course of the 19th century, had its own handwritten inventory in which its constituent works and objects were listed and described. Despite being highly uneven in terms of their "scientific" quality, these handwritten inventories still form the basis of our knowledge about the objects in our collections: old labels or numbers inscribed on the items refer back to these handwritten sources and provide us with information as to the object's provenance, place and date of discovery and manufacture. In addition, almost all former curatorial staff created boxes of small index cards, as still found today in some libraries, on which objects are described, analysed and documented in more detail and classified according to different criteria, thus forming, as it were, the first collection management tools.

These documentation practices, inherited from the 19th century, continued for several decades after the opening of the grand museum, which is explained in part by the fact that the director and his five curators were the ones already responsible for the separate collections before they were merged into one.

As a result of working with these manuscripts, in which it is possible to recognise examples of different handwriting throughout – on the exhibit labels or storage boxes, on the objects themselves or on the units in which they are kept – our experienced documentation officers quite naturally began to be able to distinguish them and then to connect them to some of their illustrious predecessors, which gradually opened up some very interesting perspectives.

The Documentation of Handwritten Sources

Systematic work on the collections has thus generated a large body of empirical knowledge on both the history of their development and the profile of the people who curated them. Interest in all these traces left behind by our predecessors generated the reaction to never throw anything away, since each label, each Post-it note or even storage material can potentially convey information that is not necessarily immediately exploitable.

This approach clearly has its limitations, as all these precious clues will inevitably be lost sooner or later or will no longer be able to be interpreted. Rather than striving to preserve them, it is important to document them and to transmit the knowledge acquired through years of experience.

With this aim in mind, the identified contributors have been progressively entered into the documentation system. Each of their records is enriched with biographical details, especially concerning their academic career, given that in the 19th century and throughout the first half of the 20^{th} century, curatorial positions were practically honorary ones; enlightened amateurs in the fields of art, archaeology or numismatics, these people very often came from totally different professional worlds, thus providing an initial indication of their scientific competence.

Furthermore, the collections on which they worked have been listed, along with the dates when they were active, and links have been created to the handwritten inventories to which they contributed and to other scientific works or articles of which they were the authors.

Lastly, representative examples of their handwriting have been digitised and attached to each contributor's record, which permits fairly rapid identification of the writing by filtering the collections and approximate periods concerned. In this way, about fifty contributors have been documented to date and the list is continually expanding as new discoveries come to light.

Lessons to be drawn from recognising the author of a handwritten source

Since the mid-1980s, the museum's inventory of collections has been systematically taken over and computerised by staff who devote their entire time to this task. The project is still far from complete due to the volume of data to be processed: the museum houses around 650,000 objects and works and its collections continue to grow every year through donations, legacies or acquisitions.

In the case of objects with old numbers written on labels or on the item itself, the inventory entry forms the basis of their museum record. This exercise can prove to be quite complex given that many different types of old classification numbers exist and that they are often similar and sometimes even identical. The results of this research, whether in terms of the identification, dating or provenance of an object, have often been taken at face value and transcribed literally in the inventories.

Those responsible for the inventories gradually became more critical. Consequently, the handwriting of former curators, which they grew to recognise, began to give credit to or, on the contrary, cast doubt on certain statements included in the entry records. Alfred Cartier, for example, appointed as the first director of the museum in 1910 and who was curator of the archaeological collections, has a "very good rating"; when you spot his handwriting, you know you are dealing with evidence-based information. However, Henri Reymond, associated with the prehistoric collections from 1952 to 1965, has a very poor reputation, as his identifications are often dubious and his statements unreliable.

Information that can be extrapolated from the recognition of a person's handwriting is all the more valuable when it concerns objects lacking an inventory reference number. This quite often occurs in the field of regional archaeology: among all the objects found at an excavation site, only the most spectacular, intended for display, were included in the inventory; others were often placed in storage without being formally incorporated into the collections. Consequently, objects can now be found in the museum's storerooms that have labels with often only scanty indications, sometimes including reference numbers or an indication of their type, origin or date. In the absence of any other data, recognising the person who wrote the label can provide valuable information, such as an approximate entry date for the piece, and it can also sometimes be connected to another object listed in an entry register.

The Difficulty is in the Details

This type of meticulous approach, which certainly does not apply to most objects and which will often only furnish slight clues, may seem rather anecdotal at first or even obsolete in an era marked by the explosion of information and communication technologies.

Our main concerns in the area of documentation today focus on the standardisation, accessibility and interoperability of data. Technological advances provide increasingly powerful tools for the exchange and development of knowledge. Yet the diffusion and growing accessibility of data should benefit, as a corollary, from increased vigilance in terms of reliability: the fundamental work of documentation officers virtually forms the basis for a globalised information system. Consequently, imprecise identification, dating or attribution can have increasingly significant repercussions.

Paradoxically, simplified or even permanent access to information as a result of new technologies generally seems to provoke diminished critical sense as to its origin and value. Very often, the average Internet user takes at face value the first response generated by their web request; probably few students or researchers systematically question the reliability of information found on an online collections website or document portal.

It may thus seem disproportionate or even pretentious to compare the work of an inventory manager with that of the historian and to advocate a similar approach and methods, and yet I am convinced of their increasing and sometimes underestimated responsibility. The critical analysis of sources, often through the identification of handwriting, certainly gives added value to object documentation, perfectly illustrating as it does one aspect of the need for the rigorous and systematic type of approach that has always been the cornerstone of inventory work. Today, it has become more than ever the foundation for a documentary system whose scope extends far beyond individual collections or institutions.