

International Conference

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Playing and operating: functionality in museum objects and instruments

4th– 6th February, 2020, Cité de la Musique – Philharmonie de Paris, France

CALL FOR PAPERS

Deadline for submissions: **15th September 2019**

Museum collections are formed by selections of objects that represent snapshots of the complexity of the world at different times. As such their value resides as much in their physical supports, as in the representation of the cultural networks of meanings and interactions of which there were part. For some types of objects, this includes a particularly strong ‘performative’ element, where the object is a tool to accomplish an action: musical instruments, vehicles, clocks and watches, machinery and objects of science and technology are few of the most obvious examples.

For decades, museum approaches have been divided between emphasizing the preservation of the material support of the object, and preserving its capability to operate, for reasons that include dissemination as well as research. The use of alternatives, such as replicas and digital modelling has also been explored, sometimes controversially, and few attempts have been made at producing guidelines for the care and preservation of few among these types of objects.

This conference aims at offering a platform to discuss and compare current approaches the preservation, and interpretation of functional objects, comparing practices across collections, institutions and countries. It is hoped that, by highlighting overlaps and differences, it will be possible to develop a greater understanding of the practical and ethical reasons that inform different policies and that the outcomes of the conference will prepare the ground for a common set of guidelines that might build on the cross-disciplinary experience provided by a variety of objects that present common challenges.

The conference is particularly open to perspectives from curators, conservators, makers, musicians and all key professional stakeholders dealing with the preservation and interpretation of functional objects across collections.

The conference is jointly organized by the International Committee for Museums and Collections of Musical Instruments and Music (CIMCIM), the International Committee for Museums of Science and Technology (CIMUSET) of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and the Cité de la Musique – Philharmonie de Paris. It is generously supported by the International Council of Museums ICOM (<http://icom.museum>). The International Council of Museums is an international organisation of museums and museum professionals which is committed to the research, conservation, continuation and communication to society of the world's natural and cultural heritage, present and future, tangible and intangible.

Sub-themes:

1. The ontology of functional objects

It has been widely argued that the nature of an object is transformed as soon as it enters a museum collection. Moreover, most functional objects have undergone changes, repairs, maintenance work and degradations, either before or after entering a museum collection, which might have transformed the way it operates and its outcome.

How relevant is the preservation of functionality – or the capacity to operate – in faithfully preserving and representing a museum object, and how does it combine with the many conflicting priorities that regulate the life and choices of a museum collections?

2. Interpretation of functional objects

Interpretation and public engagement are traditionally among the main reason to operate functional objects in museums collections, either within the museum galleries or taking them outside of the museum environment itself. This is often the case with musical instruments, vehicles, trains and several types of objects that would have operated in public spaces before entering a museum..

How can the impact of operating an original object be measured and justified, if at all, beyond the satisfaction of passing curiosity? How reliable is the message conveyed by operating an original and how satisfactory are possible alternatives such as copies or digital reproductions. Can truly satisfactory alternatives be found, compared to operating originals, which could still deliver a fully satisfactory experience for the visitor?

3. Good practice and risk management

During the last decades, approaches to operating museum objects have greatly changed leading to the production of sometimes contradictory policies and guidelines that reflect the spirit of their time. Individual museums, sometimes individual conservators, have developed practices and protocols to support informed decision making and risk assessment/management.

Can these policies and approaches be distilled in an overarching approach to operating objects held in museum collections? Where do they overlap and where are they unique to certain types of collections? Which policies and practices are currently in place and how effective have they been in their implementation?

4. Objects functionality in the 21st Century

In the last few years, the rise of virtual object design and physical modelling has created new opportunities and alternatives to reproduce and demonstrate the functionality of objects. These innovative approaches may question the very reason for making actual objects work.

How is the ongoing digital revolution changing the discussion on instruments playability and objects functionality? Can it provide a satisfactory alternative to understand functional objects? What can it contribute to the discussion on the usage of functional objects?

Abstracts submission Guidelines:

The following types of contributions are invited:

- Short papers, 10 min. + 5 min. Q+A
- Full papers, 20 min. + 10 min. Q+A
- Posters

Please send an abstract of no more than 300 words and a short CV of no more than 150 words including the following information.

Family name:

Given Name:

Museum/Organization:

Position:

Email:

Please specify if you are a member of: CIMCIM CIMUSET ICOM

Abstracts must be sent to **Mathilde Thomas (mthomas@cite-musique.fr)** by **midnight (12:00 AM-GMT) 15th September 2019**; late entries will not be considered. Accepted formats are MS word and .rtf.

All submissions will be vetted by the Review Committee.

Please note that the conference language is English.