



## Introduction from the Chair

Åsa Stenström

## COMCOL - Guardian of Collecting

This year's COMCOL annual conference and meeting will take place in Umeå, Sweden 5–9 December. It will be hosted by the Västerbottens museum and is a close collaboration together with Contemporary Collecting Sweden (DOSS, the successor of Swedish Samdok), Norsam – Nordic collaboration for contemporary collecting and research at museums, and ICOM

Västerbottens museum.

Photo: Västerbottens museum/Anders Björkman.

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Sweden. The theme for the conference is *The Guardians of Contemporary Collecting and Collections – working with (contested) collections and narratives*, a theme that is very suitable for COMCOL and its collaborators to take on. Curators and researchers all over the world, working with contemporary collecting and collections in the museums or in research at the universities, are really the safe-keepers and guardians of collecting of our time, handling existing collections and developing them through collecting practices from different perspectives. At the up-coming conference a special focus is put on contemporary collecting, an important focal point in Sweden since the creation of Samdok in the 1970's. Now the work is carried out by its successor Contemporary Collecting Sweden (DOSS). We are therefore really happy to be able to collaborate with this network for the annual conference 2017. The Nordic network Norsam also has a focus on contemporary collecting and research and we are also happy to collaborate with them.

The interest for the conference has been great, we have never received so many papers! We therefore have tried to give as many speakers as possible the possibility to make presentations, you can find the program at the COMCOL website. Themes we will discuss are for example Sustainability and Contemporary Collecting through Networking between Museums where different ways of collaboration is highlighted. We hope it will inspire all participants to more collaboration on a national and international level!

Another important theme for the conference is Contemporary Collecting. Our keynote speaker, Peter Du Rietz from the National Museum of Science and Technology, was awarded the Swedish Contemporary Collecting of the Year Award 2016 and will share his thoughts about the awarded project called "I'm Alive!"

We will also highlight questions about Methodology, where we will meet different new approaches in working with collections and collecting. The session about Democratic Collecting will give us perspectives on how to work with contemporary collecting in an inclusive way.

Within COMCOL a new working group – or project – has started on Sharing Collections and during the conference there will be a workshop on this and also the session about Letting Go – Identification and Shared Authority will highlight the topic.



Textiles at Västerbottens museum.

Photo: Västerbottens museum/Emelie Sigfridsson.

You will also get inspiration from an Inclusive Art Collections session and have the possibility to discuss the Triangular Relationship between Museum, Collection and Community as well as about Connecting and Collecting Memories and the always very important topic of ethics under the headline Ethics of Inclusive Collecting. As you can see there will be a massive and interesting program, that we hope as many of you as possible have the possibility to take part in!

Being in Umeå, in the northern part of Sweden in December, means you have to dress for winter. At the conference website you can find all information needed to have a nice stay in Umeå.

The host museum, Västerbottens museum, will welcome you all and will provide guided tours at the museum among other things. Being in Sweden in December is also a lot about Christmas and darkness and lights, so you will experience some Christmas traditions along the way. At the post-conference day,

the 9th of December you will also get a taste of one of the most popular Christmas fairs in Sweden, at the Västerbottens museums open-air museum. Visits to three other museums in Umeå is also on the agenda! The organizing committee welcomes you all! Learn more about the conference and how to register at the COMCOL website!

ICOM COMCOL was this year granted funding from ICOM to create a special project together with ICOM CIDOC. It is a COMCOL/CIDOC joint conference with workshops on "Building Collections for the Future". The Brazilian team has been working a lot with the conference that took place in Rio de Janeiro 17–20 of October.

In 2015 COMCOL Brazil arranged another seminar and this May a publication was launched, the e-book COMCOL Seminar 2015. You can download it on the COMCOL website.

The publication from the 2015 COMCOL conference in Seoul has also recently been launched: "Collecting and Collections. The Politics and Praxis of Social, Economic and Intellectual Sustainability". A publication is also planned from this year's conference, to be launched in 2018.

I will also send a little reminder to you all, remember that the COMCOL Newsletter is a great opportunity and possibility to highlight best-practices and other things you want to share or get input on from the whole COMCOL community. With an increasing number of members all over the world you can reach many international colleagues and get input from many views and perspectives. So remember to keep writing and sending articles to the Newsletter and its great editorial team!

I will conclude for this time welcoming you all Guardians of collecting to the COMCOL Annual Conference 2017!



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## ***New COMCOL workgroup: Sharing Collections***

### **Do museums imprison objects or set them free?**

This year COMCOL has initiated a workgroup on shared collections and sharing collections. An e-mail invitation to join the group or send case studies was sent to members in June this year. We started with four members and had our first skype meeting in August 2017.

The group soon realised that the concept of sharing collections means different things to different people working in different environments. We started to collect case studies and will appreciate if you can send us interesting case studies to follow up. Or even better, join the conversation. A workshop is planned as part of the COMCOL Conference in December where we will discuss a few of the case studies with the aim to review museum collecting and collection management guidelines.

In the initial email notice, the following questions were posed to members:

- What models have been developed to manage the sharing of objects between museums and the community with the objects remaining in the possession of the community member?
- Is that compatible with museum practice?
- And how can we enhance online and offline engagement between communities and museums' collections in order to foster creativity, a stronger sense of identity/empowerment and even local economy?

Contemporary information technology has created opportunities for museums to develop joint information and discussion platforms on collections and to increase access to collections. Both museum professionals and the general public contribute to a shared understanding of collections by participating in these structures.

But shared collections and sharing collections goes beyond digital curating platforms. At the heart of the discussion are issues of ownership, authority, selection and control.

Talking about shared collections and sharing collections raises a number of questions:

- **Who owns collections?** Accessioning an object in a museum collection, means removing the object from its original context and ownership. Does this mean that the original owner's role is reduced to that of source of information and providing context and meaning? How do we include objects in museum exhibitions and programmes that community (or individuals in the community) wants to keep ownership of? Is it possible to recognise an object as an important source of information and appreciation for the broader society and conserve it as such without removing it from its original owner's possession?
- **Who is your community?** How do we define our communities? What is a museum community? What happens if the current communities are so different from the population at the time of collection, that the objects do not have any local relevance anymore? Who is the collections community – the audience community or the source community?
- **How do we involve our communities?** What are our expectations from our communities – to add

knowledge, donate objects or make objects in their possession available for the use in the museums? Do these expectations mirror that of the communities and how do we find out whether this is the case?

- **Ownership of objects:** Is placing objects under institutional (and bureaucratic) control the only way in which museums can conserve objects and communicate meaning through these objects?
- **User-generated collections:** How can we create shared collections, that consist of user-generated digital content? Is it possible to collect those digital objects within museum structures and logics? How can the process of curating be collective discussed online?

Looking at the above questions, sharing collections and shared collections goes beyond digitisation and joint curating programmes, whether with other institutions or with community groups. The core questions deal with relationships with communities, why we collect and how we collect. Digital platforms are tools to engage in these questions and not necessarily the best tool in all societies.

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# *Sweeter than Honey, Better than Gold. A Hive-minded Approach to Collections Mobility*

*Fabiola Fiocco and Carla-Marinka Schorr*

Mobility strategies can enhance collections accessibility and visibility as well as fostering collaboration, which is crucial for the relevancy of today's institutions. This proposal aims to share ideas on how these strategies could be implemented by using the case study of the newly established jewelry collection *Stichting Sieraden Collecties*. The proposal draws inspiration from one of the most effective mobility and distribution schemes in the natural world, the process of (cross-) pollination.

Structurally, the proposal is comprised of two interconnected systems, the External, which can be thought of as the (cross-) pollination process, and the Internal, which is represented by the physical collection space (the hive). Together, these systems are bridged, and presided over, by the Digital entity.

## **External – (Cross-) Pollination**

The external system represents a mobility strategy that can be employed before any house even exists. It relies on the relationships already established within the heritage community to choose and supply jewelry pieces that are to travel around the city, or further afield. Once selected, these pieces (*pollen*) leave the source collection on the journey of pollination. As the pollination process gathers interest and momentum, the selection process is opened up to a wider community of shared interest (*the queen bee*).

Within their journey, the selected pieces are then transported and transferred to different selected locations (*flowers*), and experienced through



Pieces of the private collection of Liesbeth den Besten, Amsterdam.

Photo: Fabiola Fiocco.

performance. Mobility agents (bees) transfer the pieces by wearing, handling, or otherwise allowing the jewelry to be experienced by the public through their own creative channels. Emphasis should be placed on movement, highlighting the pieces through bodily activation.

Within this process, an additional concept is cross-pollination – the exchange with other collections to introduce variability into the collection pool in relation with other museums or current temporary exhibitions.

These objects then eventually return to the source collection, enriched and 'sweetened' by the new connections, relationships and meanings that they have accumulated on their journey. In doing so, these organic relationships between successive meanings accrete to form the social life of the objects (*honey*) (Gell, 1998). "Things in motion [...] illuminate their human and social context" (Appadurai, 1986).



Pieces of the private collection of Liesbeth den Besten, Amsterdam.

Photo: Fabiola Fiocco.

### Digital – the bridge

This entire pollination process can be tracked, monitored, and archived through a digital platform made accessible to the public online. Furthermore, the platform can become a repository for public accounts, comments, and remarks regarding their encounter with and experience of the pieces while they are *in flight*.

By collecting audience experiences concerning the artworks in changing contexts, the website becomes an instrument to better understand the development of meaning and at the same time, the online community becomes relevant within the institution, as creators and suppliers of content (DIY curation, registration of other private collections).

In total, the bridge between the External and the Internal becomes a resource to reach and inform a wider public and to make the collection more usable, and hence further increasing its mobility.

### Internal – the hive

The mobility concept laid out thus far is not dependent on a single physical location. All items can be stored within the homes of private collectors or other cultural institutions, and all access can be accomplished through performances, events, and digital means. However, physical engagement is an essential component of experiencing jewelry, which would require a space where true physical interaction is emphasized (Huusko-Källman, 2014). Following the notion of a hive, the focus of the physical location is as a hub; a centralized place with room to be many different types of spaces, all of which are interconnected, combined, and designed with mobility of the collection and its accompanying information in mind.

Conceptually, although not necessarily physically, the spaces within can be classified into four different types. The four types are, a *(Fl)exhibition Space*, a *Social Space*, a *Working Space*, and an *Exchange Space*. However, since the most fundamental space to encourage mobility would be the Exchange Space, this space will be emphasized here for the purposes of this proposal.

### Exchange space – from the Foundation, outward and back

The exchange space is where items from the collection are made visible through display, and mobile through lending. The exchange space is set up as a lending institution, where mobility is the top priority, and accessibility and transparency is stressed.

In a physical state, it will take the form of a location termed the Foundation. When objects enter the possession of the institution, they first arrive at the Foundation. Here each piece will be made completely visible through accessible storage, and will be arranged according to its source collection. By arranging collections together in this way, it allows each sub-collection to be experienced as a whole, and the motivations and narratives of each private collector to be highlighted. By including the additional substance through this source-collection-dependent arrangement, it improves upon the concept by further diluting the bi-partite museum model – the classic separation between objects in storage, and on display (Meijer-van Mensch, 2015) – and increases mobility through visibility.

From the Foundation, items designated for loan are made available to the public to borrow in two distinct ways: On-site loans and Off-site loans. On-site loans involve visitors borrowing pieces to experience, handle, or wear for the duration of their stay. Off-site loans involve borrowing pieces to use and wear for the borrower's purposes outside the Foundation building. For each instance, the lending process will be inspired by models of lending used by libraries for decades to form reliable and reciprocal lending relationships between the institution and the public.

For the borrower, On-site lending will involve:

- *Agreement to a code of ethics* regarding practices and use
- *A signature to a trust agreement* which will include a legal framework structured as a shared liability system (Galambos, 2010)

Off-site lending will include these aforementioned steps, but also require:

- *Registered membership*
- *An approved explanation for use*
- *Proof of return and documentation* on completion of the loan which may come in any usable form

Within this extensive and novel collection exchange process, the objects will further become agents of “living heritage” through their activation and use in the external environment, and be preserved through an ongoing, “dynamic preservation” process which is made possible by this mobility strategy (Meijer-van Mensch, 2015).

### From ownership to guardianship

This mobility concept suggests the practice of shared ownership, which implies that the responsibility for the object – for example its preservation – is shared between the stakeholders who have an interest in the object but don't necessarily possess it. Sharing the ownership of the objects would expand the collection's significance for a larger group, the heritage community, and increase knowledge of the individual items.

To go one step further, understanding jewelry as common heritage may turn the role of the owner into that of a steward or guardian. Guardians are caretakers “in partnership with source communities, which is appropriate to respecting the dynamic or experiential quality of heritage” (Marstine, 2011).



Pieces of the private collection of Liesbeth den Besten, Amsterdam.

Photo: Fabiola Fiocco.



Honeycomb. Image courtesy of Alisa Miller.

Such guardianship acknowledges that heritage is fluid because its meaning is always changing. It also requires a more open and dynamic musealization process, to accord with this fluidity. One such approach that is taking form in the museology field is ‘musealization lite’, a more flexible and softer version of conventional musealization (Meijer-van Mensch, 2015). Coming back to the jewelry collection, the consequence would be to consider the idea of ‘musealization lite’ in the registration process.

### Expanding registration

To accommodate a collection as fluid and multidimensional as this, a custom registration process, expanded beyond standard documentation practices (ICOM), must be designed considering how an object can be, is, and has been experienced by the public.

Additions to this process include, *collector stories* specific to each item, *borrower stories* derived from each exchange, tagged associations from the digital entity, *documentation photographs in-situ I* (worn on the body), *documentation photographs in-situ II* (within the private collector’s home), *360° documentation photographs* if possible, and the designated *experience level* to which an object within

the collection can be experienced according to the private collector or authorizing agents such as for example *able to tour externally with mobility agents, able to loan off-site to the public, able to be worn, able to be permanently traded/deaccessioned* and so on.

The system will need to be highly specialized and flexible to facilitate the frequent location changes and shifts in physical possession of those pieces which are not within the institution’s walls. When guardianship is shared, transparency and certainty regarding the physical whereabouts of each item will be a key component in maintaining trust among caretakers.

### Focusing on the heritage community – a critical conclusion

By maintaining mobility as the main conceptual focus, and incorporating the most up to date ideas in this area, this proposal mainly relies on the idea of dynamic preservation, which allows the heritage community a higher grade of engagement with the collection through experience and use (Meijer-van Mensch, 2015).

Co-creative concepts such as this depend upon trust, which directly confronts ideas of control and ownership. Trust in itself is something that needs to be cultivated and established over time. It is not the most stable concept, and is very much dependent upon relationships within the heritage community. Therefore, if one follows a strategy reliant on trust – as suggested here – it must be accepted that one will not always be in control and will be constantly working to reinforce trust relationships. For working together in a meaningful way, the answer regarding the question of who is holding the power is crucial. Depending upon who is making decisions, participation can also mean manipulation, which neglects the principles of “dialogue, debate and democratic communication between friendly adversaries” within the heritage community (Lynch, 2011). The challenge is therefore to create “a reflective practice and an institutional space that allows for conflict, and, hence, builds trust” (ibid).

However, moving forward it is most important to focus on the needs of the heritage community and find the best solutions to meet those needs, making collections truly mobile through accessibility, visibility, and collaboration.



**Note: For the full version of the article, please contact the authors.**

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# *The importance of private collections of modern and contemporary art in the shaping of the museological landscape in Greece*

*Elisabeth Bargue*

At a time when everybody is speaking about Greece as an economically ruined country, the idea of wealthy collectors might seem contradictory. In fact, the first thing that comes to mind is a country with a very rich archaeological past – although ripped of its treasures like the Parthenon Marbles – rather than a country that can impose itself on the modern and contemporary art scene. However, Greece has had a long tradition of collecting that is tightly linked with its actual museological landscape.

Even though we can situate the beginning of collecting in Greece at the end of the 19th century, we should mention that this practice in Greece finds its roots back in ancient times, where works of art were kept in temples and even sometimes, people had to “pay” to enter and see them (Pearce 1994). Later on, in the Hellenistic Period acquiring a work of art was seen as a superiority sign and that drove wealthy people to even purchase copies in order to show them publically. The notion of the value of the work of art appeared only during the Roman period. Later on, in Western Europe, the first “cabinets de curiosités” make their appearance, as well as Maecenas, the Medicis being the most striking example of this phenomenon.

However at the same period, the situation in Greece was very different, since the country went through

what is known as the “dark ages” due to a very long period of Ottoman occupation. Although the country would have liked to become the cultural center of Europe, it was striving to find its identity in the middle of a very turbulent phase of its history. In 1821, Greece was finally free although many wars followed this period of independence. The collecting activity only reappeared at the 19th century, in a period where the country tried to reconstruct itself, in order to find again its place in the European world and to redefine its cultural identity (Polere 1999).

At the end of the 19th century, the artistic production regained activity and many artists and Greeks returned. This was the period when Greek wealthy “benefactors” who had built their fortune and business abroad came back to their home country with one goal: to give and help the rebirth of their country. Evergetism also goes through arts, and great benefactors as Antonios Benaki and Alexandros Soutzos were well aware of that. They both were avid collectors of Greek Art: Antonios Benaki collected mainly archeological and ethnological objects, but also some paintings of Greek artists, whereas Alexandros Soutzos preferred mainly paintings of Greek artists of the 19th century. The truth is that in Greece, it was still hard to find good works of foreign artists, and also, buying Greek art helped

promoting local production. These two collections gave birth to two of the most important museums in Athens: the Benaki Museum and the National Gallery. The Benaki Museum (Soulogiannis 2004) still is like a keepsake for Greek art from its roots to the 19th century and as far as the National Gallery is concerned, its initial collection was formed thanks to the donation of Alexandros Soutzos. That it why the institution bears two names “National Gallery – Alexandros Soutzos Museum” (Lambraki-Plaka, Mentzafou-Polyzou & Misirli1999).

However, at this period, art museums were still rare and houses of wealthy Athenians often served as exhibition spaces while works are also presented in shops. The first time a ticket was needed to visit an exhibition is in 1881 in the house of a businessman. However very few works were sold, and the main buyer remained the State. We must wait for the 20th century to see the emergence of new types of collectors who prove that art slips from state control and funding to the private sphere even though during the dictatorship of Ioannis Metaxas (1936-1940) many art galleries closed and the State interfered closely again in the art world. This was the period when the Panhellenic Exhibitions (with works from Greek artists chosen by a Greek state committee) were created. They took place once a year and lasted until the 1970s. At the end of 1950s new art galleries were created by persons that belonged to the higher classes which played again a major role in the art scene. These were the only places practically where collectors could buy art that reflected the contemporary tendencies, in opposition with the academic works exhibited at the Panhellenic exhibitions.

Most of the artists and the collectors of the first half of the 20th century shared one common characteristic: they have worked and lived abroad but decided to return to Greece or to participate actively in the cultural life of their birth country. We can see that once again the sense of patriotism was omnipresent and some of these collections have given birth to many museums of major importance in Greece. Around 1930, some more art galleries made their appearance and an art market slowly emerged accompanied also by the emergence of art criticism. The main economic activity took place in big cities like Athens or Thessaloniki but at the same time we see that many collectors wanted to



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participate in the cultural life of their home cities. Therefore during the whole the 20th century we find some of the most renowned collectors. We have for instance the great publisher Tériade (Collectif 1973). Based in Paris, Tériade was one of the most influential publishers in Paris in his time. However, he was always attracted by his home country and during one of his trips, he discovered the naïf painter Théophilos, who he patronized. He became his biggest collector and decided to found a museum with his works in a small village on the island of Lesvos, where he originated.

Also, Evangelos Averoff (Collectif 2008), a politician, who created a collection of paintings of the 19th and early 20th century and a museum (Pinakothiki Averoff) in the small village of Metsovo, in Northern Greece.

Another interesting example is that of the psychiatrist Aggelos Katakouzinis (Angelos Katakouzinis, ed. Mikri Arktos, Athens, 2008). Katakouzinis is a very interesting case, because besides his work as a Doctor, he was an art and literature lover and gathered some of the most important artists and writers of his time in Greece. His collection was therefore mainly based on his cultural activity and friendships but he managed to gather some works of great importance even from artists like Chagall. His apartment, including his practice cabinet, was turned into a wonderful little house-museum in the center of Athens.

At the same time Greek millionaire shipowners like Goulandris would also buy European modern art like Monet, Van Gogh, Cezanne and many other that will lead to major art collections (Collectif 1999). A part of this collection (mainly Greek art) is exhibited in its museum on the Island of Andros.

The dictatorship of Georgios Papadopoulos in 1967 forced many artists and members of the cultivated elite to flee the country until the restoration of democracy in 1974. When returning from countries like France, Italy, Germany or the United States they «brought» along with them the new tendencies of art which had difficulties in being accepted in the first place. The entrance of Greece in the European Community helped the country's economy and as well as the emergence of a new generation of collectors who profited from this effervescence.

Even though many discussed about creating a Museum of Contemporary Art in Athens, it took several years to create one. In the meantime, two major private collections of the 20th century helped to fill this gap in the second biggest city of the country, Thessaloniki. The Kostakis collection of Russian Avant-garde (Kafetsi 1995), which is unique in its kind, as well as the renowned collections of contemporary art with all the emblematic figures of this time, like Warhol, Magritte, Max Ernst and many others, belonging to the art lover and gallerist Alexandros Iolas (Stathoulis 1994). The first one is bought by the State Museum of Contemporary Art and still constitutes the major part of its permanent collection, and the second one is donated in order to found the Macedonian Museum of Contemporary Art, whose permanent collection is still mainly composed by donations.

At the end of the 20th century we see the emergence of a great number of contemporary art collectors. Many of these new kinds of collectors in Athens formed their valuable collections very quickly, and often found a cultural institution or museum to host their acquisitions. Most of them are doctors, lawyers and businessmen. They bought contemporary art, local or international because they were passionate about art of course, but also for other reasons, for instance because they wanted to show that they differed from the older generation and also because they wanted to be a part of the shaping of the contemporary art scene, like the collector Zacharias Portalakis likes to say, and also sometimes to discover new talents.

They often consider it like a duty to show and to share their collection with the public, since you still cannot see this kind of art in museums. Therefore for a very long time the Museum of Ion Vorres (Vorres, Kypriakopoulou & Misirli 1997) and the Pierides Pinacothèque, which exhibit to the public two very important private collections, were the only places where one could admire this kind of art. The Piéridès collection unfortunately closed a few years ago. A few years many other institutions hosting private collections were founded, for example the Frissiras Museum of Contemporary European Paintings (Frissiras, Iliopoulou-Rogan & Lambraki-Plaka 1990) or the DESTE Foundation presenting the major private collection of Dakis Joannou (Collectif 1996). Only a few examples are stated as there are many other

very important collectors that have participated in the cultural life of the country.

To conclude we should say that in the 20th century in Greece, private collections have been essential actors for the creation of modern and contemporary art museums and foundations. Moreover donations have helped build the permanent collections of the three biggest modern art museums in the country. Actually the only state museum of contemporary art not based on donations of collections is the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Athens, whose permanent collection will soon be displayed to the public.

Therefore it is not exaggerated to state that without these collectors, the Greek museological landscape, as far as modern and contemporary art is concerned, would have been much different and much poorer...



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**EDITORIAL**

COMCOL – Committee for Collecting – is the International Committee of ICOM dedicated to deepening discussions and sharing knowledge of the practice, theory and ethics of collecting and collection development.

COMCOL Newsletter provides a forum for developing the work of COMCOL and we welcome contributions from museum professionals, scholars and students all over the world: short essays on projects, reflections, conference/seminar reports, specific questions, notices about useful reading material, invitations to cooperate, introductions to new research or other matters. Views and opinions published in the newsletter are the views of the contributors. Contributions for the next issue are welcomed by **1 April 2018**. Please contact the editors if you wish to discuss a theme or topic for publication.

**COMCOL Newsletter** is available at COMCOL's website <http://network.icom.museum/comcol/>  
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