

## **Give or take: thoughts on museum collections as working tools and their connection with human beings<sup>1</sup>**

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### INTRODUCTION

This paper proposes a look at museums from the perspective of sociomuseology, an area of research and practice under development in countries such as Portugal, Brazil and Spain. Sociomuseology was born from the Latin new museology tradition and is closely connected with the International Movement for a New Museology (MINOM/ICOM). The Lusofona University in Lisbon offers MA and PhD programmes in Sociomuseology. The University supports a research centre in Sociomuseology and publishes the journals *Cadernos de Sociomuseologia*, in Portuguese, and *Sociomuseology*, in English (for more information see <http://tercud.ulusofona.pt.>). Sociomuseology concerns the study of the social role of museums and of the continuous changes in society that frame their trajectories. The practice of sociomuseologists is based on their work with the different dimensions of social and community development from ecomuseums to networking and other ways of organizing social action in the 21st century in which heritage plays a strategic role.

The scope of the applied theory of sociomuseology highlights the ideas of means and ends; of the agency of museums (i.e. their capacity to act in society) and the tools, methods and languages they use for this purpose. Museum objects and collections could be regarded as working tools.

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Their use changes according to the new roles and strategies museums employ in the search for their place in a dynamic society. Another important aspect refers to the political dimension of working for and with people. Questions about 'who produces', 'who decides', 'what for' and 'why' inform the considerations about the ways museums carry out their activities.

The political dimension of the 'human factor' seems to be becoming an increasing concern of museums in different parts of the world. In the second half of the 20th century there has been a growing awareness of the social role of museums, referred to by Peter van Mensch as the "second museum revolution" (van Mensch 1992). Since the end of the 1990s, we could speak of a third museum revolution relating to the rise of new stakeholders in the museological field (Meijer & dos Santos 2009). This happened to a great extent thanks to the mobility of human beings around the globe (see for example the impact of immigration in Europe), globalization and the shaping of a network society in which the dominant forces of change are to be found more in the social movements and grass-root organizations than in the traditional structures of civil society (Castells 2004). As new social actors emerge, people are getting closer to museums in many ways. Be it in relation to the users' voice, the participation of new co-producers or disputes for more democratic modes of governance in heritage affairs; the avenues of interaction between museums and people in society are wider and more varied.

The changes taking place impose new urgencies onto the systems at work in the museum world. They challenge every operational aspect of museological institutions. How museums deal with their publics, the services they offer, the discussions about representation and authority are very clear examples of that. In addition, we see how the political dimension of connecting with people in society can transform the life of what many consider to be the very foundational components of museums; that is, their objects and collections.

Objects and collections have a social life inside museums. By looking at them as prime working tools, it is possible to explore how they relate to the lives of people outside.

In this paper, I do not mean to touch upon their connections with people in the past or focus on the subject of creating knowledge and giving meaning to objects. Thinking in terms of the social and political role of museums, I propose to look at how objects and collections can connect with us, human beings living today, social actors striving to cope with the challenges of the modern world.

In order to draw some thoughts together on these possible relations, I will refer to a personal experience I had in mid 2007, when in the short period of a week I had the opportunity to visit for the first time the Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg (Sweden) and the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris (France). Moving from one museum to the other felt to me like being hit by a museological shockwave, so strong was the impact of confronting their intentions and exhibitions. They could not have been more different from each other and at the same time they could not be more representative of the attempts of trying to cope with the new challenges of multicultural societies. The Museum of World Culture opened in December 2004 and the Musée du Quai Branly in June 2006. Since their openings they have occupied a central position in discussions regarding the changing role of museums in the 21st century and the strategies thereof. The original ideas concerning the review of the exhibitions at the Museum of World Culture and the Musée du Quai Branly presented here, were developed for a discussion group of young museum experts organized by the Tropen museum in Amsterdam in 2007/2008.

## INTO THE WORLD OF MUSEUMS

In the Museum of World Culture an exhibition called *Horizons - Voices from A Global Africa* ran from the opening in December 2004 until June 2007. *Horizons* brought up a “number of stories about Africa as a continent, an idea or a cultural identity. Voices from today and voices from the past open up

horizons in an increasingly globalized world” (<http://www.varldskulturmuseet.se>). The exhibition was divided into six main themes: Voices from the Past (on slavery), Voices of Resistance (starring the Jamaican Reggae artist Bob Marley), Voices of Power and Survival (on colonialism and resistance), Voices on Gender, Urban Voices and, the main object of this paper, Voices from the Horn of Africa in Sweden.

On the wall, an enormous glass case displaying a large number of ethnographical artefacts stood facing stations where it was possible to watch videos made by inhabitants of Gothenburg with roots in Ethiopia and Eritrea (mostly immigrants and refugees), on different aspects of their lives in Sweden and their countries of origin. It was very interesting to see the way the objects were displayed, in a quite old-fashioned way, in connection with the videos about contemporary life. To my knowledge, the main purpose of these objects was not to illustrate a story about the Horn of Africa; nor were these objects serving to represent culture. Instead, they were used as representatives of one of the parties in the dialogue between museum and society.

Such a way of making use of objects signals a broader tendency within museums. Confronted with the limitations of cultural authority and with the dilemmas of representation, many museums are reviewing their relationships with their own collections. Instead of trying to tell what a culture is through objects, exhibitions tend to re-contextualize and access collections as a work in their own right, i.e. as museological objects. This way of approaching collections aims to show them more for what they are: abstractions, authorial, timely and ideologically bonded in their conception and use.

Still, there are many ways of dealing with collections—especially when we take into consideration that they are not an end in themselves but are tools in the service of the museum and its purposes.

Connected to this renewed and growing familiarity in working with objects as integral parts of authorial constructions (i.e. collections), many museums are stepping up to the mission of facilitating connections and advocating for

understanding in a global context, in their desire- or need- to be meaningful to society. Among them, the museums of ethnography stand in a pivotal position, but they are not the only ones. Museums of history, religion, Jewish culture and the new Museums of Consciousness are examples of organizations looking for similar approaches.

In Gothenburg, *Horizons-Voices from a Global Africa* reflected the museum's ambition to serve as "a place for dialogue, where multiple voices can be heard and also controversial topics can be raised - an arena for people to feel at home across borders" (<http://www.varldskulturmuseet.se>). With this and other exhibitions and activities, the museum intended to act as an intermediary, aiming at building connections between people, by providing opportunities for communication and understanding in a global context.

In Paris, the Musée du Quai Branly also states its responsibility in promoting connections and understanding. At the opening ceremony, former President Jacques Chirac presented the museum as being a place where a breath-taking aesthetic experience would be combined with a vital lesson in humanity for our times. "Each culture enriches humanity with its share of beauty and truth, and it is only through their continuously renewed expression that we can perceive the universal that brings us together"

([http://www.ozco.gov.au/news\\_and\\_hot\\_topics/speeches/mqb\\_opening\\_speech/](http://www.ozco.gov.au/news_and_hot_topics/speeches/mqb_opening_speech/)).

By communicating and valuing diversity and the collaboration between cultures, the museum "seeks to encourage open and respectful views of the audience on other cultures" and "to promote the importance of breaking down barriers, of openness and mutual understanding against the clash of identities and the mentality of closure and segregation" (ibid).

The Musée du Quai Branly also has the dilemma of working with collections. On the website (<http://www.quaibrantly.fr>), the institution is presented as a museum of non-western art. It is an art museum with an ethnographical collection originating mainly from the legendary Musée de L'Homme and to a lesser

extent from the Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie. Still according to the website, the museum tries to promote a review of this ethnographical collection based on a multidisciplinary approach. This is probably true for the research and other activities. However, for the exhibition-particularly of the permanent collections- it is very clear how the museum places the focus on their aesthetic value and their approach to art.

The “breathtaking aesthetic experience” at Quai Branly begins before the exhibition itself. A very long walkway takes the visitor up and into another world. This world is one world, one very large space where objects from Oceania, Africa, the Americas and Asia are grouped in geographic regions without borders and connected by crossroads. In this almost ritualistic walk to the main gallery, round glass cases display artefacts on gloomy shelves as they appear in museum storages. It feels as if these cases are telling the story of the artefacts: first, they are on standby; later, they become alive in the exhibition. For me, it also serves to remind us that these artefacts belong to a collection - a discourse - and are to a certain degree alienated from real life (or, better said, from life outside the museum).

Despite other media in the exhibition, it is primarily the lighting that adds value and meaning to the artefacts. Light and the lack of it are the key resource deployed to make them into art. Artefacts float in a dark and fluid environment. They exist. Whereas the attention falls on the physical features of the objects, other aspects stay in the background in most of the permanent exhibition, being conveyed with the use of videos and very small texts (in both size and length).

Since opening, the museum has been in the spotlight for its highly aesthetic approach to artefacts. Some of the declared intentions behind transforming artefacts into art works refer to levelling the hierarchy between cultures, to highlighting the universal value of diversity and how different cultures dialogue with and influence each other. It is clear that focusing on the aesthetic value is just one option of many other possible common aspects that could be used for that purpose. I believe

that a major motivation to treat artefacts in this manner is one of the problems museums must face concerning the way they represent cultures and exercise their cultural authority. As said before, museums are moving from telling what a culture is to telling what their collection about a culture is. By presenting objects as art, it works as if it would be possible to converge the attention to the qualities inherent to these objects (i.e. physical) and minimize other judgements on their cultural qualities (besides the judgement necessary to “elevate” objects to the category of art, of course). Perhaps this could be seen as another alternative museums employ in their attempt to deal with collections as an authorial work.

In Sweden and France, two high-profile national museums - both opening in a time that many call a crisis for ethnographic museums - are looking for their own ways (and within their own contexts) of reviewing old colonial collections and using them as their prime working tools. They assume missions that are not so distinct from each other in the sense that, facing globalization, they both seek to promote understanding, value diversity, and ideally foster connections between people of different cultures.

Whereas it is possible to recognize similarities in their purpose, their strategy and approach to their collections could not be more different. Actually, they seem to head in two completely opposite ways.

While looking for words to describe what these two museums have in common after my one-week experience, I ended up struggling with the concepts of empathy and sympathy. Perhaps the subtle but significant difference between these two ideas can be useful in helping to explain not what these two museums have in common but what actually makes them so different from each other.

Empathy is the act of attempting to understand others' perspectives and experiences from their own frame of reference. It is trying to wear other people's lenses, perceiving the world as they see it. The Swedish museum employs a concept of world culture that stresses the uniqueness of individuals and tries to be an arena for multiple points of view.

In the exhibition *Horizons*, this meant literally giving a voice to a number of people and trying to create the possibilities for the visitor to experience the other's frame of reference. A good example was the display of a loincloth worn after female circumcision. Next to the artefact, a woman voiced: "No matter how beautiful the garment is, the girls dislike them, they remind them too much of a bad memory, a suffered pain. It is the loincloth of misfortune. When this loincloth appears in your life, your freedom has ended" (<http://www.varldskulturmuseet.se>). No matter how hated the garment is, I could not help thinking that it could have been easily displayed in another museum as just a beautiful example of a beautiful culture.

It does not necessarily follow that this will lead someone to put on another's lenses. In the same way, the museum is not free from providing its own frames of reference. However, the choices in the exhibition point to an empathetic approach of listening to others.

Differently, sympathy refers to affinity, to sharing the feelings and understanding of others. Once it is based on the identification of a "shared sameness", sympathy means that we depart from our own frame of reference while imagining and interpreting others perspectives and experiences. That is to say, from our own lens we perceive what others have in common with us. The French museum appeals to the existence of a universal human quality in order to portray the value of diversity. It calls for the acknowledgement and appreciation of what we have in common, as a route to understanding, bonding and respect. Arguably, in this case what we have in common departs from us. Of utmost importance in the exhibition at the Musée du Quai Branly is the fact that the channel chosen to convey this feeling of sharing commonness between different cultures (i.e. art) is a western concept. It is a western lens.

The way the two museums bring forward these different strategies is also very important. As said before, they are in a comfortable position of being able to explore collections in their full potential for what they are as museological creations- and not necessarily as pure representations of reality. How do they

make use of their collections in order to foster empathy and sympathy? I would say that one exhibition tries to connect with society by giving the objects to the people (people, not in the sense of museum visitors, but of producers of culture), whereas the other tries to connect with society by taking the objects from the people.

“Give or take” is the title of this paper and it is what places both museums at such opposite ends of the spectrum. The allusion may be a bit rough, but it tries to summarize crucial aspects of the connection between objects and people as producers and consumers of these objects. Give and take has to do with the frames of reference of ourselves and of others. Giving can also speak for the act of engaging people directly in the process of working with collections. Most importantly, the idea of giving and taking goes much deeper into the social life of objects inside the museum.

Peter van Mensch explains that objects are documents (sources of information) and have a complex data structure (section “Object as data carrier” in van Mensch 1992). He speaks about four levels of data: structural properties (physical characteristics of the object); functional properties (potential or realized use of objects); context (physical and conceptual environment of the object); and significance (meaning and value of the object). The historical process adds layers to these different levels of information. That is to say, an artifact has a life story. It started with an idea, in a specific context (e.g. the culture, the times and the choices of the maker). In time, it has been used and re-used, it has decayed, perhaps it has been restored. During its life, the object has changed again and again, the context has changed, perhaps its use, meaning and value have changed. The latter is certainly true for all museum objects, once they have been elected to integrate into a museum collection, gaining a different role, value and meaning. This all adds to the amount of data of an object, making it into an almost unlimited source of information.

Responding to historical and societal constraints, and following the wishes of their owners, museum actors decide on

the layers and levels of information to be explored and conveyed. The structure, function, meaning and value of objects also keep changing during their museum life. Today museums seem more comfortable in stressing objects as components of a created discourse about reality. Yet it remains complex. As part of collections, objects (generally) have their own life pre-collection. They have a past as part of the collection, and they have a present and a future as part of the collection. Both the Swedish and the French museums propose a new use for their collections, which means new uses and new ways of exploring the information potential of their objects.

In the exhibition *Horizons*, a layer of information common to all objects concerned their role as part of a collection – that is as the museum counterpart. It was possible to see something about the life of objects in the exhibition, however what really spoke out was the search for extra layers of information coming from outside the museum; interpretations, meanings and values of others, of living people and about the contemporary world. The loincloth is a good example of adding this layer of information to the use and meaning of an object, done by an author outside the museum and living in her specific reality. Also the glass case facing the video stations: the whole of the objects gained another layer of information in their silent dialogue with the Ethiopian and Eritrean inhabitants of Gothenburg. One could say that the exhibition at the Museum of World Culture tried to give the objects to people (producers of culture) in the sense that it is up to them to add an important, if not the most important layer of information. In short, they work in helping to bring the objects into a new frame of reference.

The Musée du Quai Branly also stresses the use of objects as museological items. It focuses on the object placed in the museum context and on its character as an abstraction of life outside the museum. What the permanent exhibition does is to privilege one aspect of the physical properties of the objects (i.e. aesthetic) and add to it the value of art, which tells more about the people who consume these objects than about the people who produce them. By doing that, the museum empties

objects from other layers of information about their life, about the context they have lived in, about the people who have made and used them, about the functions, meaning and values of them outside the museum. Objects are emptied of times, spaces and faces other than the museographical time and space. In the way it presents its collections in the exhibition, the museum keeps objects away from others' frames of reference. Such practice is common to the nature of museums, however it is taken to a new level at Quai Branly. What really takes the objects away from people (producers of culture) is the emptiness regarding what emanates from them when exhibited. The way in which they have been exhibited, although stressing a universal human quality, makes them feel sterile, as if they are emptied of traces of humanity.

A certain level of abstraction is inherent in every museum collection; it is an integral part of what makes an object a museological object. Still, there are many possible degrees of abstraction and levels of distance from reality. There are strong criticisms on exhibiting cultural artefacts as art which explore these issues. Collecting and exhibiting objects of other cultures as art is not a new phenomenon. In his seminal work *The Predicament of Culture*, James Clifford criticizes the concept of primitive art and the system that transforms cultural artefacts into masterpieces, and vice-versa, for being appropriative and alienating (Clifford 1984). The use of alienation here can be associated with the Marxist idea of commodity fetishism: the belief that inanimate things (commodities) have human powers (value) able to govern the activity of human beings. Alienation is the transformation of people's own labour into a power, which rules them as if by a kind of natural or supra-human law (<http://www.marxists.org/subject/alienation/index.htm>). Canclini is also emphatic in associating the idea of alienation and fetishism to museums: "To the extent that museums make people forget that a pan was made for cooking, masks for celebration, and sarapes for warmth, they are places that fetishize objects. Just like shops and boutiques" (Canclini 1993).

Many museums of ethnography have been experimenting with portraying their objects as art and certainly the Musée du Quai Branly has extended the frontiers in this direction.

#### FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

For all that “give” and “take” comprise in the scope of this paper, I believe that museums face important challenges in using their collections in their work for and with people in society. The two museums used as examples represent the opposing ends of the spectrum, perhaps with the choices of the Musée du Quai Branly being even more extreme than the Museum of World Culture. Most museums would navigate more freely and variably in the spectrum of possibilities of “giving” and “taking” objects from people.

If we consider the importance of objects in museums as assets, resources and tools, it is paramount that they participate in the discussions about the role of museums in society. Museums make use of collections as working tools, however these are not the property of museums only. They are also primary links with social actors that each time claim a larger role in museum affairs.

The consequences of “giving” and “taking” objects are felt directly in the role museums can play in society. The exhibition at the Museum of World Culture shows how ways of “giving” objects to people could work in fostering empathy, for example. How can museums go further in approximating objects to people? The example of the Musée du Quai Branly also raises important questions. What happens when a museum portrays a world without faces and human activity? In trying to create connections with human beings, the museum employs a strategy based more on “taking” than “giving”. Could the action of estranging collections from people (and alienating the humanity in objects) leave us with too few to connect to?

If we believe that it all comes down to people, to us, these are some of the vital issues for assessing the role of museums in the 21st century.

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