

Museuming: the things museums need to do

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Many years ago I went to an exhibition. I can't remember where it was now. But, it was an exhibition of illuminated manuscripts. I was mesmerised. Despite seeing the physical barrier of glass cabinets, I was drawn to try to touch them. To feel the vellum, to touch the unintended relief work the old monks left behind as their colourful paints blinded and poisoned them, to smell the dust and age of millennia. Of course, all that happened was a slight crushing sensation as my fingers hit the glass. But an idea emerged and I realised the only way I would ever be able to appease that feeling was to work in a museum. I would not only be allowed to touch the objects, it would be a necessary part of my job. And, here I am.

Even after many years of working in museums, I still get that same sense of awe and fascination when I visit one. I have a particular fondness for the rambling cabinets of curiosities that museum used to be – so much taxidermy, and so full of arsenical dangers – but I also have an understanding they are really a relic of the past. Museums have a new role in contemporary society but should still aim to inspire that same kind of awe and fascination.

Over recent decades, museums have sought to professionalise their practice. An essential aspect of professionalisation has been to ensure skills and practices are codified, which has seen the development around the world of post graduate university programs designed to educate and train future museum workers. Today's museum professionals come from a range of academic disciplines including history, archaeology, anthropology, fine art, and art history, and an array of sciences. Through museum studies, curatorship programs or cultural heritage studies, they are given a grounding in the practice, legalities, and ethics of working in museums. Additionally, many of them spend inordinate amounts of time volunteering, where they develop the hands-on skills, experience and expertise which complements the theoretical framework.

Professionalisation has involved establishing performance standards, developing skills, and setting a self-imposed code of ethics and conduct, ratified by the peak industry bodies. The industry bodies have arisen to reinforce the codification of practice but also to act as advocates for the organisations, the people working within them, and affiliates, such as university programs.

In the latter part of the 20th Century, museums underwent an existential crisis of sorts. The social and cultural expectations from the communities in which museums were located sought new functions from them, they wanted more than a cabinet of

curiosities. In the 1970s, academics working in this field described the contemporary climate as a challenge between the museum as temple or the museum as forum (Dubuc, 2011). Museums, renowned as sites for subject knowledge experts, reinvented themselves as sites administered by experts but not necessarily for experts. They redefined themselves as information communicators and supplementary educational institutions, sites for informal and nonformal learning, as well as advanced research and, in the most recent reform, social hubs, where collaborative research and curatorship is the norm, as well as a healthy dose of good old fashioned fun. The power of fun to provoke and encourage learning cannot be underestimated. Today's visitor is considered as capable of making meaning as any curator, and in their current iteration, museums can, and should, be both temple and forum.

So, what is a museum?

For the past few years ICOM, the International Council of Museums, has been trying to update the definition of a museum. The process was mired in disagreement and controversy but after international consultations and roundtables, the new definition was released in August this year. ICOM defines a museum as:

"...A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing." (2022).

The Geoffrey Kaye Museum of Anaesthetic History exists within a larger organisation, the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists (ANZCA). While it's a not-for-profit organisation, and thereby meets at least one of the criteria for the definition of a museum, ANZCA does not collect, conserve, research or exhibit material or intangible culture. The business of museums is foreign to functions of the larger organisation although ANZCA houses, funds and promotes the museum. At first glance, this has the potential to create a chasm between the work of the museum, and that of the larger organisation within which it belongs.

In 2014, the museum had reached a critical point in its quest to become an accredited museum with the Victorian branch of the Australian Museums and Galleries Association (AMaGA), then called Museums Australia. The Museum Accreditation Program (MAP) has been running for over 25 years and there are in excess of 1000 organisations in the state of Victoria that fit within the AMaGA definition of a museum (a definition derived, though slightly different, from the ICOM definition).

And, it's the only accreditation program in the country, with other states running different programs according to their recognised needs and capacities. As a museum, we operate within both Australia and New Zealand and, while it would be wonderful to be accredited in both countries, New Zealand doesn't have an accreditation program at all.

MAP is aligned to the National Standards for Australian Museums and Galleries (National Standards for Australian Museums and Galleries, 2014, p. 8). The standards are focused on key areas of activity common to organisations that care for collections and provide collection-based services to the community. "Museums and galleries exist in every imaginable Australian setting", as they do elsewhere in the world: "from small regional towns through to busy city centres, from universities to sports clubs", and the standards lay out an industry wide code of practice that takes that diversity into consideration. (National Standards for Australian Museums and Galleries, 2014, p. 8).

One key criterion for MAP is a museum's suite of policies and operational procedures. The accreditation process considers a collection policy, volunteer policy and interpretation policy as core documents. Disaster preparedness plans, evidence of collaborations and involvement with the sector are also examined.

MAP also required a number of procedural changes regarding collection management. Apart from tidying up our collection policy to fit into the ANZCA's style guide, there were some elements of the policy itself that needed to be updated.

In his book, "Inside the Lost Museum: Curating, Past and Present", author Steven Lubar states, or understates, the complexity of collections - they are, he writes, "...a challenging problem" for museums (2017, p. 17). Lubar is a former museum curator and director, and is currently Professor of American Studies at Brown University. "How", he asks, "do you balance the resources for collecting with those for taking care of and making use of collections?" (2017, p. 17).

In many ways, this question points to the very role of a collection policy. In the past, a collection's focus was often dependent on the individual interests of a subject-expert curator. For this reason, museums around the world are currently holding collections that have nothing to do with their purpose, nothing of significance to add to the collection as a whole, and are truly a vanity legacy from a bygone era. It also helps to explain why, for example, some of the world's biggest and best art museums were slow to accept photography as an art form, refusing to admit it to their collections until well into the second half of the 20th Century. Curatorship was the domain of the connoisseur, not the professional, and personal taste and interests

often governed collecting practices. There were no objective criteria by which an individual object could be assessed to determine whether it was “museum-worthy”.

Today, curators, museum registrars and collections managers seek to rid themselves of “lazy” objects (Active Collections, 2016). Objects which found their way into the collection by stealth and haven’t “earned” their place. A lazy object doesn’t meet the acquisitions criteria laid out in the collection policy, nor does it meet any recognised collection themes. Significance is a key determinant in whether an object should be accessioned, and significance incorporates “context, environment, history, provenance, uses, function, social values and intangible associations” (Lubar, 2017, p. 17). These are complex ideas, and are no guarantee of objectivity when in the midst of decision making, but they do provide a benchmark.

Another essential for us, was the introduction of an acquisitions panel. Acquisitions panels are an essential requirement of museums, helping to reinforce significance, remove curatorial indulgence, and maintain professionalism. Professionalism is enshrined in the ICOM Code of Ethics as a distinct principle (ICOM, 2022). The acquisitions committee shouldn’t include anybody with a conflict of interest (for example, an antiques dealer specialising in medical instrumentation probably shouldn’t be on our committee, although could be a wonderful resource for a number of reasons in other capacities), the committee must be aware of its legal requirements (for example, are there shipwreck objects, which are subject to national and international legislation, are there Indigenous objects which are subject to national and international legislation, as well as the UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Cultural Property). The list of potential acquisitions hazards is long. And, we kind of go back to where we started, is this object significant enough to be added to a museum collection?

The basic criteria we use for acquisitions are as follows, and they’re a good indication of what to look for in each object:

Relevance - Objects that relate to the museum’s purpose and key collecting areas (Museums Australia, 2016).

Both of these things, purpose and key collecting areas, should also be outlined in the collection policy. This document can be an essential guiding document for the acquisitions process and does its best to remove individual bias, creating a more targeted approach to collections.

Significance - Objects which are significant for their historic, aesthetic, scientific/research or social/spiritual value (Museums Australia, 2016).

As a discipline, history is delving more and more deeply into the social to understand context. The same is true for museum collections. Context is everything and significance can even outweigh condition.

Provenance and documentation - Objects where the history is known and associated documentation and support material can be provided (Museums Australia, 2016). Where did it come from? Who made it/bought it/sold it? How did it come to be in the possession of the person offering it to the museum? Are there gaps in the chain of ownership? Gaps may suggest nefarious activities have brought it to you, regardless of the good standing, or any personal acquaintance with the donor. Ultimately the museum will be held responsible for decision making of this type if a problem arises.

Condition, intactness, integrity - Condition must be taken into consideration. Damaged material will not normally be accepted into the collection (Museums Australia, 2016). Can your museum afford conservation work on an object in poor condition? Does the object have special storage requirements that you can't meet? Storage is a "hidden" cost, but it is a cost nonetheless. But, is this object significant enough to warrant conservation work? Authenticity is another word that could get bandied about in this category. Is the object what it purports to be or is it some kind of cobbled together object masquerading as the real thing? Bits and pieces of various objects brought together to make a whole, don't generally make a "museum-worthy" object.

Interpretive potential - Objects that tell a story that adds to the interpretation of museum themes will be prioritised (Museums Australia, 2016). Every object has a story. Does the object have a story that stems from one of the four elements of significance? Is there a social context that could be explored? What are the stories this object brings with it?

Rarity - Objects may be prioritised if they are rare examples of a particular kind of object (Museums Australia, 2016). How rare is this object? Is there one in every collection in the world? Is this the only one, or one of very few? Storage = space + time + cost. So, if every other museum has one, you don't need one too, that's what loan agreements are for. Save the storage, space, time and cost for something a little unique.

Representativeness - Objects may be prioritised if they are an excellent representative example of a particular kind of object. (Museums Australia, 2016). Does this object immediately conjure a time, place, era, event? Is it a recognisable representation of something, whose stories will immediately make sense to others?

Duplications - Objects that duplicate items already in the collection will not be accepted unless they are of superior condition and/or historic value. In such a case the duplicate may be considered for deaccessioning. (Museums Australia, 2016). The general rule for collections is that one is enough, although sometimes it's an heir and a spare, just like royalty. The only real exception to this may be if there is a need for an interpretative, or prop, collection for handling. In which case, a third example might be useful, but never use your best example. And, it is ok to deaccession. There is such a thing as too much. But, be mindful of the process you have in place to deaccession. Does it meet the legal and ethical standards?

Legal requirements - Objects where the donor/vendor has legal title to the object. (Museums Australia, 2016).

Is the owner of the object the person offering it to the museum? If the owner of the object isn't present, is the person offering the object the legal personal representative of the person who owns the object? Do they have a copy of the original documentation appointing them to the position, which has been certified as a true and correct copy by a lawyer or other authorised person according to local law? This applies whether the object is worth 25c or \$25m. You must be able to substantiate a claim of legal title.

Is copyright legislation applicable? Is the owner the copyright holder as well? Is copyright being transferred to the museum, or is some sort of non-exclusive rights agreement being offered?

What are the terms and conditions on offer? Is the museum able and prepared to meet them? Think about the long term implications of donation conditions as well. And, finally, are they within the legal parameters of the jurisdiction in which you operate?

Museums are difficult spaces to navigate, particularly when they are part of an organisation that isn't in the business of cultural heritage. But, they are seriously one of my favourite places to be, and I pretty much love them all, from some of the disorganised, dusty and slightly frenetic historical society collections and displays I've seen, through to the landmark sites of international renown, with millions of objects stored back of house. But, they are fraught with dangers. What you see or do at the front of house – eg exhibitions, public programming or other events, is a fraction of the work museums should be doing. The important stuff – and, it's almost all of it – happens behind the scenes. It's not as sexy, and it's certainly not a public space but it is the bedrock on which museums should be built.

Discussing and implementing standards, policies and protocols generally elicits a groan rather than any sort of joyous response. They are frequently viewed as inhibiting creativity and process, rather than expanding it. Yet, a well-functioning

suite of standards, policies and protocols can, and should, be viewed as a framework that allows for greater creativity as it draws people, or even different parts of the same organisation, together with a shared understanding of purpose and practice, a shared language, if you will, through which to more readily communicate with each other.

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