

# Private Collecting as Public Challenge: Visions for the Future

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## Abstract

The relationship between museums and private collectors is not without its contradictions. This basically boils down to issues of professionalism and authority, and often involves a conflicting understanding of the information value of historical objects. In recent years, new approaches which respect the differences of perspective between museum professionals and private owners have been developed. One of the most powerful concepts is that of the »heritage community«, as introduced by the Council of Europe. It is tempting to see this concept as an expression of radical, new ideas about museums, including the notion of a »liquid museum«.

## Privates Sammeln als Herausforderung der öffentlichen Hand: Zukunftsmusik

Die Beziehung zwischen Museen und privaten Sammlern ist nicht ohne Widersprüche. Dies lässt sich grundsätzlich auf Aspekte der Professionalität und Autorität und oft unterschiedlichem Verständnis von Informationswert historischer Objekte reduzieren. In den letzten Jahren wurden neue Ansätze vorgestellt, welche die Differenzen zwischen Museums-Experten und Privatbesitzern respektieren. Eines der mächtigsten Konzepte ist das der »heritage community«, das vom Europarat vorgestellt wurde. Es ist verlockend, das Konzept als Ausdruck radikaler neuer Ideen zu sehen, wie beispielsweise die Idee des »liquid museum«.

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The approach taken in the present paper is determined by the current discourse within the field of museology. Museology is an academic discipline that developed in parallel to – and as part of – the professionalization of museum work. The recognition of museums as heritage institutions (together with archives, libraries, and similar institutions) has fed into the argumentative perspective in which museology (defined as museum studies) is perceived as a subdiscipline of heritage studies.

## Musealization

One of the key concepts in museology is musealization. André Desvallées and François Mairesse define musealization as »the operation of trying to extract, physically or conceptually, something from its natural or cultural environment and giving it a museal status, transforming it into a musealium or »museum object, that is to say, bringing it into the museal field.«<sup>1</sup> This process involves the recognition of social values and the attribution of museum or heritage values, that is the intention to preserve this »something« for the future, assum-

ing that it holds social relevance not just to the present but also for generations to come.

Two issues are at stake here: the conceptualization of this »something«, and the conceptualization of value. In their descriptive definition, Desvallées and Mairesse are deliberately vague in using terms such as »something« and »museal field«, avoiding more obvious, concrete terms such as object and collection.

The current definition of museums as established by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) shows a broad understanding of Desvallées' and Mairesse's »something«: »A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits *the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment* for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.«<sup>2</sup> This characterization involves a re-conceptualization of object, not just by extending the concept of object (and artefact) to intangible phenomena, but also by valuing the

1 André Desvallées, François Mairesse: Key concepts of museology. Paris 2010, p. 50.

2 <http://icom.museum/the-vision/museum-definition/> [4. 9. 2017]; emphasis by the author.

intangible dimensions of tangible objects. Indeed, this perspective is reflected in current practices of preservation (conservation and restoration) which respect the original, intended active use of objects.

Such practices of dynamic preservation are common in the sphere of technical museums (for example in the preservation of trains, cars, steam engines, and recently computers), but also among ethnological museums in which the use of sacred objects in performed rituals is becoming a well-accepted practice, and of course in musical instrument museums. In the field of natural history, equivalent modes of preservation have been institutionalized: museums, zoological gardens, nature reserves.

### Values

Musealization involves the attribution of values. How to operationalize this process is a major concern in contemporary museology. An important methodology has been developed in Australia, known as *Significance*.<sup>3</sup> The guidebook's first edition was published in 2001; a second edition followed in 2009. In 2013, an adapted Dutch version was published.<sup>4</sup>

The Dutch methodology involves assessment on the basis of a framework that consists of three dimensions: features (such as condition, provenance), values (such as historical values, social values, use values), and development potential. The last dimension tries to answer such questions as: can research into the provenance, the materials used, or the history of use yield knowledge that will increase the historical values and / or use values? Or, can these values increase through restoration, or placement in a more appropriate context? As in the case of *Significance*, the Dutch procedure results in a Statement of Significance. Part of this statement should include an investment plan. By comparing the current valuation with the development potential, priorities should be set for investing in value development.

The key is that all values are relational: a museum's mission and the specific collection profile that follows from this

mission provide the relevant point of reference. The basic assumption is that collections are a means, i.e. an instrument to support the social (including educational, scientific, and other) aims of an institution. Use values, as referred to in the previous paragraph, are to be understood to relate to the function and actual use of objects and collections, from both a museal and an economic perspective. Questions to be answered are: How often is the object used for presentation, education, research and reference purposes? Is it a highlight of the permanent exhibition? How often does it appear in popular or academic publications? How important is it for the organisation's reputation? Does the object's use bring in additional revenue for the organisation? Does the object's use generate indirect revenue for the neighborhood, municipality, region, or country? Does it attract additional visitors?<sup>5</sup>

### Private versus Public

The majority of European museums have their origin in private collections. In fact, the term museum was first used for a private space, a room »to honour the muses«: »Das Musenzimmer ist ein Ort wo der Kunstliebende abgesondert von den Leuten alleine sitzt, dem Kunstfleiß ergeben«. <sup>6</sup> Gradually, wealthy collectors with big collections began to hire specialists to take care of their collections. Albrecht V, Duke of Bavaria (1528-1579) appointed his Flemish physician Samuel Quiccheberg (1529-1567) as supervisor of his *Kunstammer* at Munich. Quiccheberg was the author of the first theoretical treatise on museums. The Flemish painter David Teniers the Younger (1610-1690) was court painter and curator of the art collection owned by Archduke Leopold Wilhelm (1614-1662), the Governor-General of the Spanish Netherlands. Teniers prepared the first printed illustrated collection catalogue. Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778) and Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768), in turn, were able to make their major contributions to the classification of plants and animals

5 Versloot 2014 (note 4), p. 45.

6 Jan Amos Comenius: *Orbis sensualium pictus*. Nuremberg 1658. The Latin version gives the term museum: »Muséum est locus, ubi studiosus, secretus ab hominibus, solus sedet, studiis deditus«. In the 1672 English version museum is translated as study: »The Study is a place where a Student, apart from Men, sitteth alone, addicted to his Studies«. URL: [https://books.google.de/books?id=FzNNOjf8WooC&printsec=frontcover&dq=Comenius:+Orbis+sensualium+pictus&hl=de&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewiCjabs\\_o3WAhUlyRQKHdL7CO0Q6AEIWzAI#v=onepage&q=museum&f=false](https://books.google.de/books?id=FzNNOjf8WooC&printsec=frontcover&dq=Comenius:+Orbis+sensualium+pictus&hl=de&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewiCjabs_o3WAhUlyRQKHdL7CO0Q6AEIWzAI#v=onepage&q=museum&f=false) [11.4.2018].

3 Roslyn Russell, Kylie Winkworth: *Significance 2.0. A guide to assessing the significance of collections*. 2nd ed. [Adelaide] 2009, URL: <https://www.arts.gov.au/sites/g/files/net1761/f/significance-2.0.pdf> [5.9.2017].

4 Anne Versloot (Ed.): *Assessing museum collections. Collection valuation in six steps*. Amersfoort 2014, URL: [http://cultureelerfgoed.nl/sites/default/files/publications/assessing-museum-collections\\_0.pdf](http://cultureelerfgoed.nl/sites/default/files/publications/assessing-museum-collections_0.pdf) [5.9.2017].

(Linnaeus) and classical sculpture (Winckelmann) because they were hired by collectors to organize their collections.

The 19th century has often been described as the Museum Age. The idea of a public museum as it emerged in the second half of the 18th century, became a well-established phenomenon. At the same time, some basic concepts of museum work as a profession were being formulated and shared widely through new channels. The connoisseur as autodidact was replaced by the university-trained specialist. It is no coincidence that the first publication on the ethics of museum work (in 1898) makes a clear distinction between museum professionals and private (amateur) collectors, emphasizing the primacy of the former.<sup>7</sup>

At the beginning of the 20th century, a sophisticated professional infrastructure contributed to the canonization of processes and procedures. As museum collections increasingly became connected with the academic interests in the sciences, their rationality and logic was an academic one. Art historians gradually replaced artists; museums with collections of art works were museums of art history rather than museums of art. This process developed into what Laurajane Smith has identified as the Authorised Heritage Discourse,<sup>8</sup> which the well-known museologist Kenneth Hudson has criticized tongue-in-cheek by using George Bernard Shaw's phrase »all professions are conspiracies against the laity«<sup>9</sup>, adding that »every profession has its theology and its own ways with heretics. I personally mistrust all theologies«.<sup>10</sup>

In her book *Wilde Museen*, Angela Jannelli has analyzed the tension between professional, scientific museums and amateur museums.<sup>11</sup> Her research is an example of a (re-)new(ed) interest in the philosophical structure of collections. While other researchers have studied the structure of pre-Enlightenment Kunst- und Wunderkammern, Jannelli focuses on the rationality behind amateur museums. She describes this rationality in terms of a subjective »milieu narratif«, as »Orte des Erfahrungswissens, nicht des wis-

senschaftlichen Wissens« (places of experiential, not academic knowledge).<sup>12</sup> She uses Claude Lévi-Strauss' concept of the savage mind.<sup>13</sup>

This dichotomy between academic (»wissenschaftliches«) and savage modes of thought (»wildes Denken«) also extends to the conceptualization of objects as well as the views on conservation and restoration. It should, however, be noted that »wissenschaftlich« does not stand for a single, unified perspective. The process of institutionalization and professionalization involved a process of specialization. Within the museum field different traditions emerged, to a large extent following the specializations apparent in the academic field. There are notable differences between, for example, art museums, natural history museums, history museums, science museums, and anthropology museums.

### Different Traditions

Musical instrument museums do not constitute a major sector with a strong characteristic tradition. Many prominent collections of musical instruments can be found in cultural history museums (as the Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg), decorative art museums (the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, Hamburg), ethnological museums (the Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin), and technical museums (the Deutsches Museum, Munich). In terms of their metadata, these collections follow different traditions and express a different identity. Academically trained in well-defined, subject-oriented disciplines, professional curators are »trapped« within a specific logic. Private collectors, who rarely have the same degree of academic training, tend to be more open to alternative logics.

A reflection on the differences in perspective as to structure, conservation/restoration, and use between private collections and public museums is relevant since a major part of public museum collections is the result of internal (secondary) collecting.

In the theory of collecting, a distinction is made between external collecting and internal collecting. The term external collecting (primary collecting) is used for acquisitions made directly from the maker or the first user(s). The acquisitions thus document the context of active use and/or production, and, of course, the act of collecting. All sorts of documents,

7 Theodore Dru Alison Cockerell: Entomological ethics. In: Proceedings of the tenth annual meeting of the Association of Economic Entomologists (Bulletin 17 of the U. S. Department of Agriculture, Division Entomology). Washington 1898, pp. 87-90.

8 Laurajane Smith: *Uses of heritage*. London 2006.

9 George Bernard Shaw: *The Doctor's Dilemma*. London 1906, Act I.

10 Kenneth Hudson: The flipside of professionalism. In: *Museums Journal* 88/4, 1989, p. 189.

11 Angela Jannelli: *Wilde Museen. Zur Museologie des Amateurmuseums*. Bielefeld 2012.

12 Jannelli 2012 (note 11), p. 280.

13 Claude Lévi-Strauss: *La pensée sauvage*. Paris 1962.

including recorded interviews, can supplement the documentation value of the object.

The term internal (secondary) collecting refers to acquisitions made from dealers, private collectors and institutional collectors (which may include other museums). Such acquisitions thus document the process of musealization, i.e. the choices made by successive collectors etc. The ways in which production and active use are documented in the object may very much be a matter of extrapolation.

The acquisition of private collections may give rise to a conflict between the strict disciplinary logic of the museum collection and the more personalised logic of the collector. The acquiring museum has to reach a decision on the importance of maintaining the integrity of their collection as an artefact, and on the possibilities of interfering with its design, structure, etc. The same questions have to be answered when a private collection is transformed into a public museum, especially when the original collector is succeeded by academically trained professional curators.

### Expertise

The Authorised Heritage Discourse is very much about authority and control. In the assertion of authority, academic expertise is paramount, and the recent redefinition of expertise has challenged the traditional notion of authority. The amateur professional or professional amateur is a »new social hybrid« who is becoming increasingly important. Charles Leadbeater and Paul Miller have coined the term Pro-Am revolution.<sup>14</sup> They concluded that »the 20th century was shaped by the rise of professionals. But now a new breed of amateurs has emerged...«. Their publication is a plea for bridging the professional and amateur divide: »a Pro-Am pursues an activity as an amateur, mostly for the love of it, but sets a professional standard«. <sup>15</sup> Leadbeater and Miller see professionals and amateurs operating on a continuum: »fully-fledged professionals are at one end of the spectrum, but close by we have pre-professionals (apprentices and trainees), semi-professionals (who earn a significant part of their income from an activity) and post-professionals (former professionals who continue to perform or play once their professional career

is over)«. <sup>16</sup> These latter three groups of »quasi« professionals are Pro-Ams.

### Two Case Studies

Two Dutch museums are briefly introduced in the following, as examples of museums which embrace the expertise of Pro-Ams.

On its website, the Amsterdam Museum defines itself as »a meeting place for anyone who wants to learn more about the city«. <sup>17</sup> It has a large and diverse collection of about 80,000 items. In 2010, the Stichting Genootschap Amsterdam Museum (founded in 1975) decided to establish a network of private collectors, gathered together under the metaphor of the table. Seven so-called »tables« were defined: costumes, interiors, modern and contemporary art, numismatics, porcelain, prints and drawings, and silver. Each table member is collector within the relevant area. On average, the tables meet at the Amsterdam Museum twice a year in order to discuss objects from the museum's collection and/or the collectors themselves. In the long run, the Genootschap thus generates valuable knowledge and ideas for exhibitions and can also play an important role in the acquisition of loans and donations. <sup>18</sup>

The second museum is FOAM Fotografiemuseum, Amsterdam. FOAM describes itself as »an internationally operating organisation in the field of photography, based in Amsterdam. FOAM informs and inspires the widest possible audience by presenting all facets of contemporary photography. We accomplish this by organising a range of activities. These vary from exhibitions to publications, debates and educational projects. FOAM discovers, develops, defines, publishes and stimulates. In this process, scouting and presenting young, emerging talent is one of our distinguishing qualities. Many activities take place from within the Amsterdam museum, but for specific projects, FOAM will also approach an international audience.« <sup>19</sup>

For many years, and on a regular basis, FOAM has organized a special course for collectors at which curators, photographers, experienced collectors, art dealers, and

<sup>16</sup> Leadbeater/Miller 2004 (note 14), p. 23.

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.amsterdammuseum.nl/en/about-us/about-museum> [4.9.2017].

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.amsterdammuseum.nl/over-ons/over-de-organisatie/genootschap-amsterdam-museum> [4.9.2017].

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.foam.org/nl/over-ons/over-foam> [4.9.2017].

<sup>14</sup> Charles Leadbeater, Paul Miller: The Pro-Am revolution. How enthusiasts are changing our economy and society. London 2004, URL: <http://www.demos.co.uk/files/proamrevolutionfinal.pdf> [5.9.2017].

<sup>15</sup> Leadbeater/Miller 2004 (note 14), p. 20.

restorers share their knowledge and experience with young collectors.

The two case studies are expressions of a new way for museums to (re)define professionalism and expertise. In the following, this new vision is explored along three lines: ethical, philosophical, and organisational orientation.

### Ethical Orientation

In 2011, Routledge published *The Routledge Companion to Museum Ethics*, edited by Janet Marstine, which may be seen as the handbook of what has been defined as the New Ethics in museology. New Ethics is part of a contemporary movement that is usually referred to as New Museology or Critical Heritage Studies. The movement challenges traditional concepts of authority and control. For example, in her own contribution to the book, Janet Marstine advocates an »ethics of guardianship« as an alternative to traditional practices of ownership:

»As it establishes new pathways to accountability, contemporary museum ethics reimagines the responsibilities to collections in the museum. Feminism, post-colonial theory and digital heritage studies have all contributed to the construction of a more fluid and contingent relationship between objects and experiences in the museum; this anticipates a corresponding transition from a stance of possession to one of guardianship. In contemporary museum ethics discourse the concept of guardianship is a means towards respecting the dynamic, experiential and contingent quality of heritage and towards sharing in new ways the rights and responsibilities to this heritage.«<sup>20</sup>

### Philosophical Orientation

Following Zygmunt Bauman's ideas concerning Late Modernity as Liquid Modernity, the Australian museologist Fiona Cameron introduced the concept of a liquid museum. »In a liquidity frame, institutions are no longer solely conceived as hierarchical, closed, or fixed to a physical location. Instead, institutional structures and forms are replaced with soft power, porous borders, and heterogeneous practices

that are distributed, light, fluid, mobile, contingent, unpredictable, and emergent«.<sup>21</sup> This assertion concurs with the notion of »more fluid and contingent relationships between objects and experiences in the museum«<sup>22</sup> as outlined by Marstine. Like Marstine, Cameron advocates new ways of sharing heritage: »[...] where distant others are made proximate through digital technologies, new cosmopolitical configurations made up of diverse actors coalesce, each exhibiting both common and differing worldviews, values, and knowledge that are making an incursion into the museum. Museums must accommodate and embrace different worldviews and see conflict and dissent as operative in complex networks as both intentional and unruly dynamic forces«.<sup>23</sup>

### Organizational Orientation

In its *Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society* (also called *Faro Convention*) of 2005, the Council of Europe introduced the concept of a »heritage community«.<sup>24</sup> Such a community is deemed to consist of people who value specific aspects of cultural heritage which they wish, within the framework of public action, to sustain and transmit to future generations. As such, the concept of a heritage community may offer an organisational framework that can accommodate the approaches advocated by museologists such as Marstine and Cameron. Crucially, »the familiar parameters defining the respective value of a heritage as it relates to territory and space are not included [in this definition], and there is no reference to local, regional, national or global importance. Also noteworthy is the absence of predefined societal parameters, national, ethnic, religious, professional or based on class. A heritage community can thus be built up across territories and social groups. It is defined neither in terms of the place where the heritage is situated,

20 Janet Marstine: The contingent nature of the new museum ethics. In: *The Routledge companion to museum ethics. Redefining ethics for the twenty-first-century museum*. Ed. by Janet Marstine. Abbingdon, New York 2011, p. 19.

21 Fiona Cameron: The liquid museum. New institutional ontologies for a complex, uncertain world. In: *Museum theory (The international handbooks of museum studies 1)*. Ed. by Andrea Witcomb and Kylie Message. Oxford 2015, pp. 354-355.

22 Marstine 2011 (note 20), p. 17.

23 Cameron 2015 (note 21), p. 350.

24 Gabriele Dolff-Bonekämper: The social and spatial frameworks of heritage – What is new in the Faro Convention? In: *Heritage and beyond (Council of Europe Publishing)*. Strasbourg 2009, pp. 69-74.

nor in terms of the social status of its members, who may participate from elsewhere, even from a long way away: one can be a member of a heritage community simply by valuing a cultural heritage or wishing to pass it on.<sup>25</sup>

The European convention was implemented by the Flemish Community of Belgium in its *Erfgoeddecreet (Heritage Act)* of 2008. The Flemish *Act* also adopted the concept of a heritage community, albeit with a small – but relevant – amendment. In its definition the term »people« is extended to »organisations and people«. The *Act* thus emphasises what is implicit in the *Convention*: the co-operation between a range of public, private, and voluntary partners, transcending the traditional boundaries between heritage disciplines.<sup>26</sup>

### Conclusion

The relation between museums and private collectors is sometimes ambivalent, even though many museums have their origins in private collections. Contemporary museology, however, offers new concepts that can be used as frameworks for a (re)new(ed) discussion of productive collaboration. In the present paper, three such concepts have been explored briefly: the ethics of guardianship, the liquid museum, and the heritage community. These concepts challenge traditional notions of expertise, authority, ownership, and control. In the Netherlands, the field of transport heritage has been organized along these lines, initiating productive collaborations between museums, other heritage institutions, private collectors, and other stakeholders.<sup>27</sup> As a network, the Stichting

Mobiele Collectie Nederland (MCN) respects different approaches concerning the value of its heritage, as well as different approaches to conservation. Some participants may prefer the active use of the objects, while others favor other forms of conservation. MCN maintains a register of important objects, constituting a virtual national collection.<sup>28</sup> The network thus functions as an alternative to traditional approaches to the preservation and use of heritage. It embraces diversity and, at the same time, facilitates exchange and access.

25 Dolff-Bonekämper 2009 (note 24), p. 71.

26 Peter van Mensch, Léontine Meijer-van Mensch: *New trends in museology*. Celje 2011, pp. 55-56.

27 Stichting Mobiele Collectie Nederland (MCN). URL: <http://www.mobiel-erfgoed.nl>. MCN is the umbrella organisation of four sector organisations: water transport (Federatie Varend Erfgoed Nederland FVEN, URL: <http://www.fven.nl>), road transport (Federatie Historische Automobiel- en Motorfietsclubs FEHAC, URL: <http://fehac.nl>), rail transport (Historisch Railvervoer Nederland HRN, URL: <http://www.railmusea.nl>), and air transport (Nationale Federatie Historisch Luchtvaart NFHL, URL: <http://www.nfhl.nl>). FVEN and FEHAC are themselves umbrella organisations, bringing together specialist interest groups: FEHAC, for example, has more than 200 special interest groups, such as owners and collectors of Mercedes Benz R / C 107-SL (350 members), the 2CV Kitcar Club (400 members), the Citroën Dyane Vereniging (220 members), the Volkswagen 412 Club (70 members), etc.

28 FVEN administers a register (Register Varend Erfgoed Nederland, URL: <http://rven.info>). It is estimated that there are about 6,000 historical ships in the Netherlands. The present register includes about 3,000 objects. The register of historical ships will eventually be merged with the national register that is administered by MCN (Nationaal Register Mobile Erfgoed, URL: <http://www.mobielecollectienederland.nl>). The registers are accessible online.

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