

Things + Ideas + Musealization = Heritage A Museological Approach¹

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Martin R. Schärer*

Let's start in the very beginning! In the World, whatever this may be! **The world consists of facts.**

Facts or sets of circumstances are notions, occurrences and things. For our purposes, we will focus on things. The **person** exists both outside and inside these three worlds. As subject, a person has thoughts and ideas, participates in occurrences as actions, and exists in relation to things. As object, a person is the content of thought and ideas, a (passive) part of events, and, broadly speaking, is also a thing. From this perspective, institutions are "collective people". The person is "a thing", a research object, for example; he is in constant danger (politically, scientifically and so on) of being misused as a thing.

Let's have a closer look to the three terms: notions, occurrences and things.

Notions are intellectual abstracts. They exist within the person; they are ideal units of thought of a rational and/or emotional, and/or intuitive nature. Thoughts are manifested by means of actions and things. This is the only way they can be communicated.

Occurrences are intended actions, or non-intended events.

Things are everything that is physical and concrete. Things only become meaningful for humans when they are experienced through the senses - materialized. The term "thing" is broadly understood to mean that which is found external to the sphere of human notions and ideas, and which is symbolized in an I-It relationship. Given its materiality, it can be grasped and experienced, as indicated by the Latin root of the word "object"²: that which is thrown in the way or stumbled over.

So, our extremely broad definition of the term *thing* subsumes everything that has, somewhere and sometime, been rendered into a material form - or has been externalized, including extremely fleeting and intangible phenomena like language and music. In this sense, then, all of the physical, living world, including the human species, can be included in this definition. Things are universal and omnipresent; a thing-less culture is unimaginable; without things the human culture can neither survive nor evolve.

Things have a **structural** and a **cultural facet**. The former refers to a thing's materiality, the latter to the context of its application and use. Things have a structural and cultural "biography". Artifacts are created based on a notion or idea (named also "conceptual identity"). One could also call this the essence of things. Within the course of their "lives", both artifacts and natural objects usually have various structural and functional ("factual") identities, up to and including their current status ("actual identity")

* Vice-President of ICOM; Alimentarium Food Museum, Vevey, Switzerland.

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² [N.E.] *objectum*.

and through their future demise through decay, wear-and-tear and/or destruction. Each “biographical” phase of an object is connected with either loss or a gain of information. The distinction between these different identities is especially important for musealization and restoration. These identities also undergo constant change in relation to ascribed values (cultural facet).

Nothing can be said about those things (from the subset of natural objects) that have never been humanly perceived or thought.

Things are only relevant in relation to people and society. In both phylogenetics and ontogenetics, the *man-thing* relationship precedes the development of language. The man-thing relationship constitutes a fundamental phenomenon of human existence and is essential for individual and collective life. Things, then, only become meaningful through human involvement. Collective memory is not possible without materiality or corporeity.

“Truth”, no matter how it is defined, is not to be found in things themselves, but in the *man-thing* relationship, in human interpretation and definition of things. Essentially, we can only subjectively - and consciously - conceptualize the world around us; we can never explain how a thing is real. A qualification must be noted, however: things are their own truth, i.e., they refer to themselves and to their own existence.

The relationship of the individual to things - the I-It experience, in contrast to the I-You relationship - is defined by a utilitarian function and by ascribed values, whereby both aspects always are at least potentially present. They define the *man-thing* communication and the communication between people through things. There is no artifact that is exclusively utilitarian and there is no artifact that is exclusively non-utilitarian. When an artifact is in use, irrational moments - that is, emotions and values - always play a role; conversely, even a “beautiful” artifact always has some, be it ever so small, utilitarian aspect. It goes without saying that the museum is, of course, a part of the meaning-making process in regard to collectively and institutionally ascribed values.

The **utilitarian function** (intervention or mediation between the individual and every situation/action) is the instrumentalization of things through people, for a specific purpose. Every thing has a (material) utilitarian function or a purpose. This function or purpose can, however, be extremely minor or just potentially exist, as in the case of works of art that, at the time of their creation, were not collected for reasons of capital investment.

A cultic artifact also has a function in combination with a dominant, magical-symbolic value that is either present from the onset or later ascribed to the artifact. With art one can better speak of an object’s “primary function” (e.g., pleasure, decoration, social commentary) rather than of its “utilitarian function”. Works of “autonomous art” (art for its own sake) are, though, a borderline case. They have existed as a new experience of reality since Antiquity; they were reborn in the Renaissance and again revived later, in the 19th century. Art for its own sake is “self-referential”, as it is “simply there”. These pieces are the creative-communicative expression of the artist, replete with values assigned to it by the creator. The “genius theory” negates any utilitarian function of art. It was this approach that made “art collections” possible. Art works that have been created expressly for a museum have almost nothing to do with the process of musealization. It is very important to make a distinction between art exhibitions and art history exhibitions.

Ideas or values are ascribed to a thing and/or to the materials it comprises, by individuals (according to personal “lifestyle”) and by society (according to how groups and institutions reflect the “style of the times”). The ascription of values can be rational and/or emotional; the values can be internal or external to the utilitarian function.

The conscious or unconscious ascription of values and the construction of meaning in regard to things are essential for human culture, also for reasons of social differentiation; the value and meaning of the thing does not exist *per se*, but is (relatively) independent from the material form. A value attribution is evoked based on the entirety of the physical and sensory image the object conveys. The value and meaning can be different for individuals and for society, and these values can constantly change. Every thing, depending upon its spatial and temporal position in the *man-thing* relationship matrix, can simultaneously have different values and/or meanings.

When discussing values, a part of intangible heritage, it is useful to think of

other concepts, such as the “aura” emanating from an object (and the related concepts of “authenticity”, “age“ “original”); of fetishism; of “the meaning of things”; “the capacity to provoke memory”; “the evocative qualities of object” and “the fascination of the authentic”. One can never presume a meaning, a symbolism or a congruence of the thing in and of itself; a symbol within the object. Things are not just material products that fulfill a specific function, but are always also individually and culturally positioned products, that is, a vehicle for ideas.

In contrast to a specific utilitarian function, which only has a limited time span, ascribed values - especially the ideal values - are intended to be permanent. The (futile) efforts of the conservator to give things “eternal life” is, lastly, the attempt to overcome the materiality of the object and to hold on to its ascribed values. These ascribed values can outlast the demise of the thing itself; the object is then generalized, typified, mystified and endlessly reproduced as, for example, the cross in Christianity or the crossbow as a symbol of Swiss consumer quality, freedom and independence. And certainly the sand for Cariocas!

The different “life spans” of one and the same thing (physical appearance, utilitarian function, **material values**) are a problem for the interpretation, conservation and preservation of objects. Which of the earlier “stages of life” should be restored? This problem is posed quite differently in other cultures, where the idea is more important than the materiality of the object. Using objects to communicate a particular message in an exhibition is so difficult precisely because an object can simultaneously embody so many different (past and present) values.

Because the ascription of value is neither universal nor unambiguous, contrary to the utilitarian function of an object, its determination harbors the possibility of manipulation; leaving negative political connotations aside, this simply means that things can be intentionally loaded with values (and their interpretations), which are connected to an information shift and the alienation of the thing from its original context. This has implications for the process of musealization. Every decision to collect and preserve something for purposes other than expressly for its utilitarian function is determined by a deliberate intention. In this sense, exhibitions are never objective and neutral, but communicate a particular (historical) picture.

Objects can be instruments of communication only because their values are communicated through signs and symbols. An example is the current trend to give Christmas or birthday presents that have a greater ascribed or symbolic value than a utilitarian function.

It is impossible to write up an exhaustive list of all values. Two general areas can be distinguished: **material values** (monetary or barter value) and **immaterial or ideal values** (aesthetic, remembrance, knowledge and symbolic values. Museology!

The relative importance of materiality and the related terms “authenticity” and “identity” depend upon the era and its predominant philosophical currents. In Western modernity values are linked to materiality (object fetishism), which have changed as a result of the process of secularization. This, however, is not the case for earlier time periods or for many non-Western civilizations. In these cultures identity is linked to ritual and symbolism, the material object itself - the vessel, so to speak - is exchangeable or renewable as long as that which it embodies remains unchanged. Thus, the immaterial and not the material (which in the extreme can be destroyed) has primacy. Still, “intangible heritage” must somehow be tied to something material, no matter how fleeting, for it to be communicated and experienced. A Chinese Tang temple can be “authentic” even in the absence of original building parts; its “soul” can be manifested in a timeless, renewable materiality: in a building with the proper proportions, forms, colors, etc.

Musealization is the preservation of the ideal values of things as signs. Basically, objects can be collected and preserved for their utilitarian function and/or for their ascribed values. The collection and preservation of objects based on ascribed ideal values is motivated by heuristic, aesthetic, symbolic or remembrance reasons.

Do museums primarily collect information? Yes, museums are collectors of signs. The process of musealization - saving cultural assets from the natural decay of the material world - is a specific appropriation of reality through setting apart, e.g., decontextualization. Objects are physically collected in order to be saved and preserved,

but it is actually the specific *man-thing* relationship, a sign, (information, meaning, process) that is being musealized. Collection of as much information about the original context of the object as possible is also necessary, in order to objectify the process of musealization, since this knowledge will be missing for decontextualized objects.

Collecting begins as soon as something has been removed from its original site. Do such activities reflect the human attempt to overcome transience? The physical object can be seen as a kind of vehicle for collecting information - a view, however, that is not generally accepted.

Musealization can be applied to all natural and *man-made* things, as well as to the preservation *in situ*. For example, cheese manufacturers or breweries have become so called “living museums” that produce their wares in a traditional manner. This is a genuine exhibition situation in which - as with restored individual objects - the preservation of the function is central. Museologically speaking, there is no real difference between a collection of silver cups and a collection of mountains, plants and animals in a national park; both collections preserve things for ideal reasons, hoping to preclude further change. A person can, *in extremis*, also be musealized, when a past state of existence is idealized and maintained without change. Museums face special problems with regard to the musealization of history (“reconstruction”).

Musealization is a temporally indefinite, stoppable and reversible process; basically, it can happen at any time and at any place, on both individual and social levels. Etymologically speaking, the term “musealization” refers only to collecting, preserving, displaying, and other functions that take place in a museum. The phenomenon is, however, universal.

Musealization provides more than just physical security (hoarding treasures) for objects; it also secures the intellectual value, the emotional value (remembrance), the religious value (symbols), as well as the aesthetic value (“best of” collection) and knowledge value of objects. Musealization at the individual level and at social level are not the same. Indeed, depending upon the context they often end up conferring a different status to one and the same object. Just because something can be musealized for one person, it does not mean that it necessarily has the same quality for everybody. In this connection, one need only think of art and cult objects in churches. Processes of musealization at the individual level are defined by personal and social biographies as well as by a personal code. Processes of musealization at the collective level are defined by complex social issues.

The reversibility of the musealization process is an important fact; each object collected can be given back its original utilitarian function or given a new function. The physical appearance and form of things do not change upon “entrance” to or “exit” from a museum, except for the application of an inventory number. We exclude any conservation and restoration measures that may have been taken, since they might also have been implemented anyway to maintain the normal functions. The only changes verified are at the level of the ascribed values.

Through the process of musealization, things are re-valued and assume a new quality: **museality**. They become **documents** as carriers of individual or collective memory and tradition, and become **witnesses** with a designated signal quality that is not intrinsic to the thing itself. These documents and witnesses are called **musealia**.

The tradition-creating musealization process halts dynamic processes. In other words: in the process of musealization, the original *spirit* and the integrative social context of things disappear; remaining are the “physical wrappings” that will be scientifically and systematically classified as illustrations or substantiations of something. In a manner of speaking, the object is saved through its “death” (a departure from its first context). Musealization also means coming to terms with something foreign, with the other. A musealized thing has become something other than its previous reality, although it is physically identical to what it was. The object is real, but is no longer found among the real.

In a certain sense one can speak of a shift of the object from a specific time/space context to a new context of timelessness and spacelessness, from diachrony to an “eternal” synchrony of concentrated time. In general, different times and different spaces are simultaneously present in every museum. For example, one must differentiate between when an exhibition was created and when the visitor views an exhibition. To

that, you have to add the timeframe of the exhibited theme!

All objects have their own history, which is generally unknown to the visitor. In the exhibition, these objects have become a part of a new history in a new temporal context. If, however, these musealized objects have not been given a new environment, that is, if they are simply placed next to each other (as in a store room) without any sort of [intelligible] context, then one can speak of the transition to anachrony. Indeed, synchrony - the simultaneousness of things of different ages - can exist in an inventory of uses in the *real* reality (generally spanning several generations); in the fictive reality of a collection, however, synchrony is much more prevalent and can represent millions of years.

The term “documents” refers to all musealized objects. A document - a musealized object - is unique and anecdotal; without additional explanation it cannot contribute much to an understanding of complex structures. For example, a knife in an exhibition has a completely different meaning than that same knife would have in its original context. On display with other knives in a heuristic ensemble, the “underlying reality” of the instrument becomes clear, the object is to some extent abstractly idealized and neutralized. That same knife will have another meaning in the context of a criminal science collection.

As previously stated, museum objects comprise only a fraction of all musealized objects. The question of selection is especially significant for museum collections. A collection policy, however defined, is always based on socially defined criteria that are a reflection of the current, dominant academic and aesthetic trends. No matter how neutrally formulated or which thematic and/or geographic criteria are applied (exemplary, typical, representative, elementary, fundamental, innovative, of model-character), the selection process remains culturally specific. This makes the selection process - the “production” of history - potentially error-laden and manipulative, thus dangerous.

For this reason - and because museums present their authoritative positions anonymously - the power of such institutions should not be underestimated. There is potential for the misuse of museums especially in non-pluralistic systems. One need only recall the misappropriation of history during the period of National Socialism or other totalitarian dictatorships. Or the incident when a new African head of State purportedly said he needed - in the following order - a powerful army, a functioning radio station and a national museum. National museums, although rarely occupied in the course of political upheavals, are often closed and later redone. Finally, the conflicts in former Yugoslavia among the successor states with their willful destruction of cultural heritage provide a deplorable example. Unfortunately, such events are seldom addressed by exhibitions. Ethical guidelines demand responsible dealing with such things.

Things + Ideas + Musealization = Heritage. Things alone are never sufficient. We always need concepts and ideas. And never forget: the process of musealization is an act of will. Because heritage as a whole is so important, I like the term *heritology*.

There are things which already exist (**naturafacts**) and things that humankind has made (**artifacts**). Both categories are registered and classified, that is, named and identified. Together, they constitute **material culture**, the heritage of humankind. Hence we don't need to differentiate, there is only ONE heritage!

The concept of the immaterial and intangible, especially important for Far Eastern philosophy, should be mentioned here again. The increasingly common term “intangible culture”, indeed most recently with its own UNESCO Convention, is less apt for our definition purposes since we already assume that objects have **both** a material and an immaterial side. Orally transmitted traditions and skills can only become a part of cultural heritage because they have already been rendered material as, for example, a repetitive action or demonstration, a song, a theatre piece or a book; indeed, this even applies to the moveable Foucault pendulum in an exhibition, where not the pendulum but the movement itself is “the real thing”. Nonetheless, the museological debate over tangible and intangible culture is extremely important because musealization and visualization result in specific problems at concrete level.

Again, **both** natural objects (things that already exist) and cultural objects (things that humankind has made) constitute material culture, the material heritage, being the core issue of museum work. ■