

The Non-Existent Object: an Inspiring Technology

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Introduction

The museum object is a specific item, and its value ensues not from its material cost or price but its unique scientific, historical, artistic, and cultural worth. Protection and presentation of such objects requires various types of museums, from historical, ethnographic, and archaeological, to galleries of contemporary art. The history of the evolution of the museum institution is very long and quite complex, a result of the fact that the “museum” as a concept and the museum as an institution followed different paths of development.

What is a museum?

In order to retrace the genesis of the concept, we would have to move back to the 5th century BC when the first Greek museions, or temples dedicated to the Muses, goddesses of poetry, dance, history or astronomy, were founded. If we take a closer look at those places, which is perfectly possible in the literal sense as, for instance, the Museion—part of the Lyceum established by Aristotle in Athens—was opened to the public three years ago, and scrutinise its description, we may become doubtful about contemporary museums bearing any sort of resemblance to those establishments. The Mouseion at Alexan-

dria, founded by Ptolemy I Soter in the 3rd century BC, was a lot like contemporary museums as it not only collected objects, but also conducted extensive research¹.

Let us not divagate into notions, and focus on the institution, or rather its function and its most substantial elements. The International Council of Museums has adopted the definition composed by Georges Henri Riviere²: “The Museum is a continuing institution, not meant to generate profit, but to serve the society and its development, open to the public, whose objective is to collect, preserve, research, popularise, and exhibit material traces related to humans and their environment, all this for examination, education, and pleasure.” The same functions were already fulfilled by the Pinacotheca on the Acropolis of Athens, dating back to the 5th century BC, even though the definition comes from as late as the 20th century AD. If we accept this definition, then we must agree that there is no museum without a collection, and we thus reach the questions that are crucial in how we understand the museum today. When the first great museums were emerging in Europe in the second half of the 18th century, including the Louvre or the British Museum, there was no doubt as to their basic functions being publicising and displaying collections of art, as well as the equally important educational activity.



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It seems obvious that exhibitions which make use of the newest technologies, which create an aura, an atmosphere, an ambience, will attract more and more visitors because they have a way of inspiring our imagination, of making us think, and talk.



Fig. 1. *Wszyscy jesteśmy migrantami* [We are All Migrants] exhibition, 2016, ZAMEK Culture Centre, Poznań

And so it comes as no surprise that museums have to contain objects, or musealia, that make up part of the sets they have assembled, or their collections. It seems right to explain here that not every set of objects can be considered a collection. However, even if it comprises copies of artworks or replicas of everyday items, these are still necessary for a museum to operate.

Museums, especially those established today, are highly diverse, and they adopt various approaches to the exhibiting of objects. The Acropolis Museum may serve as a perfect illustration of a modern approach to displaying archaeological legacy; the 92

metopes of the Parthenon Frieze force the viewers to lift their heads as they would have had to in the authentic setting, facing the walls of the original building.

Museums without museum objects

In the past decade or so, a tendency has developed to skip the physical object, and to replace it with some effects produced by modern technology. For instance, the Emigration Museum in Gdynia has not abandoned its efforts to build up a collection, but the exhibits on permanent dis-

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← Fig. 2. *Wszyscy jesteście migrantami* [We are All Migrants] exhibition, 2016, ZAMEK Culture Centre, Poznań

play are meant to evoke associations, stir up memories and emotions at least some visitors know from their own past. Such feelings as suffering, fear, alienation, or weariness are difficult to reconstruct – all the more so as the process of emigration necessarily allows only a limited number of physical items which could later on stand for what it involves. Natalia Bloch faced a similar challenge when she curated the exhibition *Wszyscy jesteście migrantami* [We are All Migrants] at the ZAMEK Culture Centre in Poznań. Both expositions inevitably aim to create an aura, or a piece of the world for the viewers to immerse themselves in, to experience the phenomenon of migration. The task is not an easy one; it can soon lead to peculiar artificiality where fiction is nothing but a tacky stage set of an unsuccessful costume drama. According to Ludmilla Jordanova: “We understand the past, not by spuriously re-experiencing it, but by turning over many different kinds of evidence relating to it and by generating from this an understanding which inevitably has a strong intellectual, that is, abstract component. To pretend we ‘know’ the past by looking at reconstructions devalues historical scholarship and allows audiences to cultivate a quite unrealistic belief in their own knowledgeability.”³

How to attain the objective of provoking emotions without denying the significance of or depreciating small components of daily life? Our memory is linked to objects, but these connections can be very individual as can be seen in Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*. The taste of a madeleine cake evoked memories in the protagonist that soon recreated an entire story from the past. A similar method is attempted (very successfully, in my opinion) by the initiators of the Emigration Museum or the organisers of the exhibition staged by the ZAMEK Centre in Poznań, aware of the fact that it is not only objects, but also scents, gestures, or sounds, that revive reminiscences.

Creating the atmosphere of the exhibition

Provocative as the title of this article appears, it does contain an idea which, it seems to me, was pursued by the makers of the two shows. It uses available technological means to direct viewers’ attention to the intangible, non-physical phenomena that trigger associations, and create the atmosphere of the exhibition, rather than just displaying objects.



Fig. 3. *Wszyscy jesteśmy migrantami* [We are All Migrants] exhibition, 2016, ZAMEK Culture Centre, Poznań

Modern museums seek to adopt an interactive perspective on how knowledge should be presented, combining education with entertainment to encourage the viewers to revisit the exhibition as well as to discover the past or art. Neither show gives up objects altogether, and we may find authentic items illustrating the history of emigration there, but what they feature the most are photographs. Importantly though, these are not to constitute a simple set of souvenirs, but to contribute to the unique atmosphere transporting the viewers into a different world, the world in which they can meet protagonists of the related stories. This is possible thanks to multimedia, to authentic recordings of emigrants talking

about their travels, but also of sounds characteristic of train stations, ports, or bustling streets. When we are standing on a misty quay like we were just about to walk up the gangplank, we forget this is a stage set; we feel as apprehensive and lost as those desperate refugees, migrants, escapees must have felt... And showing these emotions is exactly what this kind of exhibition is about. When we open a drawer full of potatoes, it is not a few kilos of the popular vegetable that we see; we can smell the scent that brings back memories which may not be the same for contemporary viewers and emigrants in the early 20th century, but they are still powerful and individual.



Conclusion

It is highly unlikely that objects should disappear from galleries, or that they should be replaced by technology, because they are testimony to bygone ages, authentic traces of the past or expressions of an artistic vision, and as such they cannot be replaced even by the most advanced developments. But it seems obvious that exhibitions which make use of the newest technologies, which create an aura, an atmosphere, an ambience, will attract more and more visitors because they have a way of inspiring our imagination, of making us think, and talk.

Important though they are, exhibits are not an absolute requirement to motivate the viewers to follow the story presented at the exhibition.

References

- ¹ Mirosław Borusiewicz, *Nauka czy rozrywka. Nowa muzeologia w europejskich definicjach muzeum*, Kraków 2012, p. 16-20.
- ² Nina Gorgus, *Le magicien des vitrines. Le muséologue Georges-Henri Rivière*, Paris 2003.
- ³ Ludmila Jordanova, *Objects of Knowledge: a Historical Perspective on Museums*, In P. Vergo (ed.) *The New Museology*, London 1989, pp. 25-26.

