

Workshop: Tales from the Crypt. Museum Storage and Meaning

October 30-31, 2014, Victoria and Albert Museum, London

REPORT

In October 2014, under the aegis of the India-Europe Advanced Research Network on Museums, Kavita Singh and Mirjam Brusius co-organized a workshop that invited a small group of scholars to respond to museum storage – concept and practice – in India and Europe. The workshop was held at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, where the first day was memorably hosted in the museum’s Clothworkers Centre that houses vast parts of the museum’s reserve collection. Tours through the Clothworker’s Centre as well as the V&A’s South & South East Asia Study Room allowed participants to see the storage facilities that a leading museum has, providing fodder for many of the issues that the workshop wished to discuss: about the technologies, spaces, economies and ethics of museum storage. Each session invited participants to address a particular aspect of museum storage; one Indian and one European participant delivered short opening statements, which were followed by relatively lengthy periods of free-flowing discussion.

Debates in the history of museums and collecting have hitherto mainly centred around questions of exhibiting, display and spectatorship. This history of display tells mainly triumphalist stories about the structured, purposeful, strategic gathering of things according to a system, the features of which are clearly defined. This kind of discourse, however, has distorted the museum in many ways: it ignores the fact that museums do not just consist of exhibition halls but of vast hidden spaces; it has left millions of objects out of our museum histories; and lastly, it presented the museum as an organized and stable space, in which only museological ‘results’ are visible not the intermediate stage of their coming into being. As a result, not only a vast physical but also important epistemological and semantic aspect of museums and their collections were eliminated from discussions in museum history. It was precisely this imbalance that this workshop intended to address.

One of the key themes at the beginning of the workshop was centered around the question of power and censorship: what informed the decisions to show certain things, and to keep others off display? For an object that lost its displayability at one point or never possessed it in the first place, this may have had consequences: it might have lost its value, both economic and epistemic. Perhaps it was 'decanonized'. Thinking about the threshold between storage and display provoked not only questions about the mysterious 'backstage' of museums, but entirely new questions about canonization, the politics of collecting, the ethics of preservation and economies of storage and display.

These were the issues addressed by **session 1** which was entitled "**The Unshown, the Unshowable, the No-Longer-Shown**". In the first statement of the workshop, James Delbourgo discussed the entangled histories of Sir Hans Sloane's collections, which formed the kernel of the British Museum. In the late 18th century, the collection was a kind of store into which visitors were admitted: extensive cabinet drawers in Sloane's home housed his specimens, and were annotated by notes in Sloane's hand. Viewers were allowed to open drawers and to handle objects, always with the awareness of Sloane's own presence as the collection's progenitor. Here, the discussion touched not only upon the aesthetics of storage (something participants could experience during the tours through the storage areas of the V&A), but also the sensual aspects of museum display. The small audience of gentleman scholars were allowed to handle, touch, smell and even taste the samples in the drawers. Later, making things public also meant to make them untouchable and this move resulted in a loss of smell, taste and touch when handling objects. As audiences changed and the museum shifted the nature of its pedagogic address, large parts of the collection, which were available for consultation became simply unshowable to the new audience. Masterworks or specially important objects were separated from the study collection, and only the former were placed on selective display. Delbourgo ended his presentation by considering the new trends in museum display, seen particularly in science museums, in which scientists are often made visible as they work in labs or among collections. While the viewers who are admitted into the museum cannot enter the labs or handle specimens, they see other specialists doing so, and see the ways in which specialists can engage with the specimens; this is a form of return to an earlier mode of engaging with museum collections.

In his presentation, Naman Ahuja began by considering the many reasons why certain kinds of museum objects are destined from the beginning to be 'storage' objects, rather than 'display' objects. Some things are too large or too small to display. Some are aesthetically unremarkable, incomprehensible or simply too boring. Others are too fragmentary. Some were judged to be morally or religiously sensitive, pornographic or too politically charged to be made public.

While museum display is guided by aesthetic considerations and tries to highlight the most significant and aesthetic objects for display, another kind of museum design makes the over-abundant collections themselves an aesthetic of display. This is typified by a museum such as the Pitt Rivers Museum in which viewers are not invited to dwell on particular objects but rather to view an impulse to collect, or a moment in the history of collection through the over-abundance of objects crowded together in cases.

This aspect related to **Session 2, entitled "The Spaces of Storage", which** asked whether we can discern a history – and even a poetics – of museum-storage architecture. What are the architectural protocols of the museum storage space and how are things kept in the store? Is there a parallel curation and a different taxonomy for the storage space? What is 'visible storage' and what accounts for its increasing popularity in recent years?

In the first presentation in this session, Nicky Reeves historicized the curatorial concept of 'visible storage' by looking into its history of the past 40 years or so, provocatively asking whether these attempts are more related to showing off or hoarding. The statement asked what kind of 'anxiety' is behind the decisions of museums to create a visible storage area revealing all, e.g. making as much as possible accessible and being seen to do so, actions that can be described as pre-digital ambitions. Does making things from storage visible – often down to showing the packing cases – demystify things or does it actually mystify objects even further? The rhetoric of revelation, further enforced through a public that wants to be taken on tours in formerly backstage areas puts a burden on curatorial staff. Further points of discussions were the iconography of storage: While visible storage appears to be 'backstage', it is yet another front stage. Some kinds of 'behind the scenes' operations are made visible: the workings of scientists and curators, for instance. But some kinds of workings are not made visible: thus we are unlikely to be given access to the workings of janitors or museum directors. This leads us to the question

why we find it unpalatable that 'front' and 'back' are different and that the museum is not the same kind of entity all the way through.

The contribution by Upinder Singh raised fundamental questions regarding the cultural codes and local specificities of the storage of artefacts. Moving away from the large, metropolitan institutions and sites, Singh considered archaeological museums in the Indian hinterland, sometimes focusing on extremely modest museums of almost no means. How do such museums store objects, and how is their collection displayed? Singh showed a number of museums where it was hard to distinguish between the display and storage areas. Was an un-curated display also a form of storage? In some cases, an object might be excavated which is so large and so valuable that the site museum simply may not have the resources to take care of it. Authorities consider the object safer in the ground than in the museum. Here, re-burial becomes a storage option. Singh cited an instance when monumental pillars that had been excavated were studied, photographed and re-buried. In villages rich in archaeological material, but far from the reach of the state and its museums, Singh showed that local temples and shrines take charge of sculptures and temple fragments that are accidentally discovered. Perhaps because these had been part of older religious buildings, the local temple or shrine becomes a 'natural' place for these sculptures and these temples become de facto stores for artifacts. Many temples store tremendous amounts of antiquities – not just the accidental finds mentioned above, but objects that have been acquired by temples over the course of centuries. What is the status of these treasures, which exist but are hardly ever seen? And conversely, how should one think of museums that display sacred objects that are not intended to be seen by all?

What happens when the space occupied by a store becomes valuable real estate, too valuable to continue as backroom? Are museums then under pressure to/have they begun to de-accession objects or distribute them to other institutions to reduce backroom expenses? Have museums even come to the point of disposing of objects, or destroying them because the costs of storing them are too high, or will they remain committed to storing their objects forever? How do museums mediate between answering to pressures of immediate needs vs commitment to retaining and preserving objects for the *longue durée*, for which objects must be retained and preserved? These were issues considered in a **Panel Discussion with Alice Stevenson**,

Deborah Swallow and Bill Sherman, chaired by V&A director Martin Roth. Roth opened the discussion by asking participants to speculate on the shape and meaning of museum storage 20 years from now, inviting them to reflect on the different time-horizons within which the museum operates, addressing present-day audiences as well as retaining custodianship of objects for the distant and even unforeseeable future.

Session 3 was titled “**Museums as Archive.**” Museum collections, like archives, were and are places of scholarly encounter. The museum is thus a split entity that addresses two kinds of publics: One face of the museum allures a popular audience through eye-catching objects delivered in a pedagogic framework. The other face turns to a smaller community of scholars for whom it pulls out its reserve collection backstage in libraries, prints and drawings rooms, or storage areas. How do museums justify the investment in storing, conserving and servicing objects in storage and the small community of scholars who might use them? Drawing on her experience in the Egyptian Section of the Manchester Museum, Christina Riggs made a presentation that threw up sharp questions about the present-day functions, practices and meanings of museums that are the residue of colonialism. In reference to Jacques Derrida’s “Archive Fever” (*Diacritics*, Vol. 25, No. 2, 1995), Riggs asked whether contemporary programmes of ‘improvements’ to storage and collections management exemplify what Derrida characterises as the archive’s self-destructive character: in seeking the ‘perfect’ archive, one simply erases or adds to past archival systems, hence perpetuating rather than challenging or overturning the assumptions on which those systems were based.

The colonial ‘fantasy of the archive’ was a fantasy about encapsulating all knowledge, represented through objects, samples, photographs or documentation. The desire for ‘completeness’ drove museums (along with other institutions) to acquire vast quantities of objects, many of which were not intended for display but were to be part of the museum’s archival store.

As a result, Riggs recalled, the museum held a large number of Egyptian mummies as well as mummified parts, and it was not uncommon to open a drawer and discover packages of mummy lung tissue or fingernails. While other parts of the museum world were addressing the ethical dilemmas of holding human remains, these concerns do not seem to apply to Egyptian mummies or other human remains from the ancient past, and mummy autopsies continued within the

museum even as other kinds of human remains were returned to communities for burial. Riggs discussed the discourses and operations through which a mummy was turned into an object suitable for scientific investigation, rather than being seen as human remains, and asked questions about the meaning and unquestioned authority of 'science' and the West's need for cognitive and intellectual control over the legacy of Egypt.

Kavita Singh began her presentation by noting that the V&A Museum had the largest collection of Indian artifacts outside of India, while its Indian galleries were small: the V&A's Indian collections thus were mostly an archive. What are the pressures that are brought to bear on the institution that holds such a vast collection, particularly when certain kinds of objects or collections lose relevance in changing historical circumstances? Singh tracked this by discussing three large-scale architectural objects in the V&A's collection – one of which had been de-accessioned; a second which remained in the museum but was now concealed behind an architectural addition; and a third historically important colonnade that was too expensive to restore, too controversial to display, and which had been consigned to deep storage. Singh then turned to controversial instances of museum storage and de-accessioning within museums in India, discussing first the scandals that bedevil the Indian Museum in Kolkata, where the disappearance of museum objects was followed by the disappearance of the museum official who raised concerns about these; and then the 'site museum' at Somanatha in Gujarat, where religious communities who wanted to build a new temple cleared ground for it by taking apart the remains of an ancient monument that stood on the site and removing them to a hastily-assembled 'museum'. Since the sight to see in Somanatha is the temple, the museum is in fact a store, constructed to hold inconvenient remains from the past while suggesting that they remain under an institution's benevolent care.

The **last session** turned its attention to the impact of digital age on museum storage. Titled "**Things and Virtual Things**," the session noted the expanding digital collections of museums and asked whether digital objects would become substitutes for real ones. As access to virtual objects becomes easier and less expensive even for the museum, might it want to use images of the objects in virtual exhibitions, on websites or even in the galleries themselves? What is the status or the future of the stored object in the digital age?

In his consideration of the theme, Jyotindra Jain expanded the scope of 'virtual doubles' by considering not just digital copies but other kinds of reproductions, casts and objects that were virtual by means of being imaginative constructions of what the past might have looked like (as in dioramas). He also spoke of the ease of reproduction – in two and three dimensions – which now allow many public spaces to cite or recreate historic artifacts. Thus the museum is no longer the only place in which one encounters objects of heritage. A shopping mall, an airport, a hotel might equally be a virtual gallery or a virtual heritage zone. The question then arises: what is the meaning – sociological and political – of this diffusion of 'museum-style' into a broader space? What kinds of assertions and legitimations are being done through these alignments with high culture?

The statement was juxtaposed by Ruth Horry's statement on a large collaborative digitization project between the University of Cambridge and the British Museum. She asked how the digital age changed the ways people can tell stories about stored objects and whether it can be described as a freedom to tell more stories. New media technologies are reshaping the world of museums. What are the benefits of virtual access and its promises to be apparently cheaper, more convenient, to achieve universal outreach and to 'democratize' art? Indeed, the value of the virtual double often seems to have greater value than the original. But what are the consequences of this apparently more nuanced historical approach that enables microscopic examination, comparison across time and space, decontextualization, virtual collages and digital montage?

The discussion that followed focused on the role of reproductions, in particular the impact new media might have in the future in making objects meaningful. The reproduction of objects and their consequent circulation will influence canon formation. Most participants agreed that the digitization of museum collections does not necessarily make the objects more 'democratic'. A large concern shared by all participants was further the apparent accessibility of digital museum objects: Reproductions do not necessarily move objects within reach of an audience or a scholar. With fees being high in both Europe and India, digitalization can perhaps be described as a new economic power in museology altogether. Concern was also expressed that within cyber space, images become curiously ahistorical and manipulated. This raised a moral aspect in respect to

the mobility and the dispersal of museum objects through the digital: how does it affect the ways things are understood? Furthermore, digital storage raised difficult questions relating to the benefits of keeping expensive museums, if virtual archives are in place.

The workshop theme helped to debate important issues in museum history through the lens of storage, while further advancing the conversations between Indian and European participants. A history of storage is a history of things that are not shown, but also not written about. The understanding of museums and the intellectual histories they encode undergoes a radical shift when we consider what a museum shows alongside the (usually much larger) range of things it stores.

Mirjam Brusius and Kavita Singh, January 2015