Tales from the Crypt. Museum Storage and Meaning

Deadline: May 15, 2015

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CALL FOR PUBLICATIONS

Museums are about display. But are they really? In spite of recent curatorial attempts to exhibit 'visible storage', prevailing debates in the history of museums and collecting are mainly centred around questions of exhibiting, display and spectatorship. This kind of discourse, however, distorts the museum in many ways: it ignores the fact that museums do not just consist of exhibition halls but of vast hidden spaces; it leaves millions of objects out of our museum histories; and lastly, it presents the museum as an organized and stable space, in which only museological 'results' are visible not the intermediate stage of their coming into being. Display seems to be about the structured, purposeful, strategic gathering of things according to a system, the features of which are clearly defined. What remains out of sight is the fact that the majority of museum objects lie in storage. As a result, not only a vast physical but also important epistemological and semantic aspect of museums and their collections are eliminated from our discussions. The binary between 'display' and 'backstage' of museums has previously evoked the assumption that the exhibition area functions as a kind of theatre with objects 'perform' on stage, while in the back they are processed from their existence as a mere 'thing' to a proper artefact. But there is much more to say about museum storage. Backstage areas of museums are not simply areas where potential display objects are kept. They perform functions and fulfill intentions that, when studied, reveal deep purposes of the museum that go well beyond a mere history of display. A history of storage is a thus 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. These issues may and will be discussed very differently in various parts of the world, which is what this volume intends to address.

Seeking a variety of historical contributions (e.g. with specific case studies), theoretical and philosophical intervention as well as reflections on practical issues, we wish to explore these 'tales from the crypt' along the lines of the following themes:

- Storage and canonization
- The Politics of Collecting
- Power and Censorship
- The economic and epistemic value of museum objects
- Ethics and moral aspects of preservation
- Disposal, sale, and de-accessioning
- The (scholarly) uses, necessities and functions of storage

- Curated and un-curated storage
- Visible storage, off-side storage, deep storage, ‘non-museological’ storage
- The politics of displayability
- Storage, the archive and data mining
- Architecture, real estate and the physical spaces of storage
- Issues of access to storage
- Economic aspects of storage
- Storage and digitization

The volume will partly present the results of a workshop (Victoria & Albert Museum, October 2014), organized under the aegis of the India-Europe Advanced Research Network on Museum History that invited a small group of scholars to respond to museum storage – concept and practice – in India and Europe. It is this cross-cultural approach that we wish to take with the volume. We therefore welcome contributions addressing a broad variety of material and theories across all continents.

A report of the IEARN workshop can be found here:
http://iearn.iea-nantes.fr/rtefiles/files/iearn-museum-storage-workshop-2014-report-copy.pdf

Abstracts (max. 300 words) for papers (max. 8000 words) should be sent to mirjam.brusius@history.ox.ac.uk and kavising@gmail.com by May 15, 2015.
Authors will be notified in June. The deadline for final papers will be October 15, 2015.

Concept by Mirjam Brusius and Kavita Singh for the
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Reference:
CFP: Tales from the Crypt. Museum Storage and Meaning. In: ArtHist.net, Mar 19, 2015 (accessed Nov 17, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/9773>.