Tales from the Crypt: Museum Storage and Meaning

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Report by: Mirjam Brusius, University of Oxford
Kavita Singh, Jawaharlal Nehru University

Conference report by the organizers

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 V&A 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 V&A's storage areas 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 stages 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 keeps 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 Unshow-

able, 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 in which a small audience of gentleman scholars was allowed to handle, touch, smell and even taste the samples in the drawers. Here, the discussion touched not only upon the aesthetics of storage, but also the sensual aspects of museum display. As audiences changed and the museum shifted the nature of its pedagogic address, large parts of the collection, which were available for consultation became not only untouchable but also simply unshowable to the general public.

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.

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?

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. Further points of discussions were the iconography of storage: While visible storage appears to be ‘backstage’, it is yet another front stage.

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, showing a number of museums where it was hard to distinguish between the display and storage areas. If a site museum simply may not have the resources to take care of it, authorities might consider the object safer in the ground than in the museum: re-burial becomes a storage option. Often local temples and shrines take charge of sculptures and temple fragments, but 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 de-accession objects 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 preserving objects for the longue durée, for which objects must be retained and preserved forever? 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. But 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, Riggs explained that the colonial ‘fantasy of the archive’ and a desire for ‘completeness’ drove museums 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. Drawing on ethical dilemmas of holding human remains, Riggs explained how these concerns do not seem to apply to Egyptian mummies or other human remains from the ancient past. Instead mummies are turned into objects suitable for scientific investigation, rather than being seen as human remains. This raises questions about the unchallenged 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. But 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 problematic large-scale architectural objects in the V&A’s collection. She then turned to controversial instances of museum storage and de-accessioning within museums in India. If the sight to see is the temple, for example, 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 object 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 ‘digital virtual doubles’ by considering all kinds of reproductions, casts and objects that were virtual by means of being imaginative constructions of what the past might have looked like. Through an increasing ‘ease of reproduction’ 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. 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. In the following discussion participants stated that the reproduction of objects and their consequent circulation will influence canon formation. Most agreed, however, that digitization does not necessarily make the museums objects more ‘democratic’ or move them 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? And what are the benefits of keeping expensive museums (stores), 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.

A more detailed report will be made accessible on the IEARN website:
http://iearn.iea-nantes.fr/focus-areas/museum-and-art-history/workshops/2014

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