

Shared Stories: Narratives Linking the Tangible and Intangible in Museums

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the problem of conserving the personal memories that artefacts, in collections held by traditional museums, elicit in the minds of ordinary people who recognise them and relate to them. The focus is specifically on art museums with religious objects. Using a museum in the Netherlands as a case study, we explore how the systematic collection of intangible religious heritage can be pursued. We present the results of several experiments conducted between 2011 to 2016 in collecting personal narratives from visitors who attended four popular exhibitions based on religious themes: pilgrimage, religious women, charity, and sainthood. The article concludes with policy-oriented advice regarding museum strategy, including the importance of recruiting volunteers, sharing narratives in a sustainable way, and putting digital technology to good use.

Keywords

Netherlands, Utrecht, narratives, memories, art objects, religion, digital technology, museum collecting policies, Museum Catharijneconvent, *Pilgrims, Women in the Spotlight, 'I Care!' Charity down the ages, Francis*, participatory projects, cybermuseology, 'experience experts'

Introduction

Since the rise to prominence of intangible heritage, sanctioned in the UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (2003), a spate of literature has dealt with heritage in the form, not of concrete objects and monuments, but of commemorations, festivals, customs, rituals, performances and handicraft techniques. For museums

focused on traditional, object-oriented collections, the new emphasis on intangible heritage poses a major challenge. In contrast to tangible artefacts, the physical aspects of which usually do not change, intangible heritage tends to be both impalpable and mutable. Both material and immaterial things can be longlasting, but material things last longer in the same form while immaterial things

are subject to change from the moment they are recorded. Yet there are evident connections between the two kinds of heritage. Tangible objects are not just meaningful expressions of immaterial ideas and viewpoints; objects also provoke opinions, memories, anecdotes and stories, thus adding to the reservoir of intangible heritage.¹

This article addresses one aspect of the debates surrounding intangible heritage: the problem of conserving the personal memories that artefacts in museum collections elicit in the minds of ordinary people who recognise them and relate to them. If museums aim to collect memories in addition to artefacts, how should they go about it, and how can they ensure the sustainability of shared authority?² Few things are more ephemeral than things we are told about material objects. How can museums build on previous experience? How should they amass, store and make accessible people's narratives about concrete historical objects in existing collections, in order to preserve knowledge about them for posterity? How can they communicate constantly changing values? And what does this mean for museum policy?

In posing these questions, we also aim to demonstrate that there are aspects of intangible heritage that are not easily subsumed under the 2003 *Convention*,³ as articulated in Article 2.1. The *Convention* puts much emphasis on community and collective practices. A museum such as the one described in this article, however, although it is obviously concerned with collective practices and memories, is also quite strongly focused on individual ones. The *Convention* is concerned with safeguarding in the sense of conserving intangible heritage; museums however, may be interested only in the momentary recording of personal experiences and narratives, regardless of whether this contributes to their 'viability' (Article 2.3). The domain of 'oral traditions and expressions' identified in Article 2.2 is defined broadly enough to include the kind of personal narratives discussed in this article. But where the *Convention* encourages the promotion of *education for protection of ... places of memory* (Article 14(c)), a museum may be concerned more with just providing information to its public in an accessible way. A museum's objective is understanding rather than adoption; its aim is to stimulate the hermeneutics of objects, not to actively keep meanings alive.

In what follows we present the results of one museum's experience in collecting personal narratives from visitors who attended exhibitions organised at a

museum that specialises in religion. We use the term 'memory' interchangeably with 'narrative'; we focus on personal recollections about events, places and objects recounted directly by ordinary people, that is people who do not represent specific organisations but speak from their own personal situations. First we offer an outline of changing museum practices, in particular regarding the role of visitors' narratives, from the perspective of a museum of religious culture. We then discuss the museum's collection and the problems that follow from the changing context in which it operates. This is followed by an outline of several experiments that were undertaken in the recent past to tackle the museum's shifting position regarding its relationship with its audience. Finally, we discuss the implications of these initiatives for future museum policy, with respect to both our specific case and museums in general.

Museums, memories and religion

Since the 1980s there has been rigorous debate in academic scholarship on the status and public tasks and functions of museums. Not affected by the debate were ecomuseums, community museums and local museums; these emerged directly from concerns about community building, community participation and shared authority. The debate did largely affect traditional institutional museums⁴ and has led to questions about their role and authority in society, their relationship and co-operation with communities, and the way they interpret and display the objects in their collections.⁵ If the discussions have been less intensive in the museums themselves, much of the 'critical' literature asserts that they should realise, now more than ever, that they occupy a position of considerable power.⁶ Museums decide which items they collect, curate and order, what they put on show, and what information they offer their visitors.⁷ Museums, in part, determine what is or becomes part of public memory – and, no less importantly, what is not or does not become part of it. Since the making of public meaning and memory is so central to the way museums operate, it is essential for them to seek new ways of interacting with the publics they serve. This applies no less to museums with historical collections, since they contribute to public meaning-making by influencing perceptions of the past.

One way of theorising materiality in the context of a museum is to understand objects in terms of their 'biographies'. Such an object biography usually comprises

two basic ‘chapters’. One chapter provides extrinsic information on the origin, creator, function and owner of the object. The second chapter offers intrinsic information on its form, colour, material and condition. A third chapter, however, has become mandatory: one giving information on the meanings attributed to objects and on their value to individuals or to a community. Crispin Paine has called this third form of information ‘adtrinsic knowledge’.⁸ This new focus on the meanings of objects has been popular in museums since the beginning of the twenty-first century. A case in point is *Significance 2.0*, a well-known guide to assessing the meanings of cultural heritage collections, published by the Australian Heritage Collections Council.⁹ Collecting narratives about objects is one way of providing museum visitors with an insight into the meaning that objects possess (or have possessed) for ordinary people.

Insofar as museums possess repositories of oral histories, their focus is on the academic community. Interviews can usually only be consulted at the institutions themselves.¹⁰ A few museums present a selection of the material online or offer the option of searching the collection in preparation for more extensive research in the library.¹¹ Museums rarely enable people to add directly to the collection, nor do they link the oral history to the material collections. Participatory projects typically focus on museum visitors and strictly limit the duration of the project. In consequence, the narratives shared by the visitors are not usually kept in a permanently accessible digital repository. As a consequence, they are impossible to access after the termination of the project. Where those narratives are digitally accessible, they are seldom connected to the museum’s material collection database. Yet another limitation in many countries, including the Netherlands, concerns the kind of traditional, institutional museums engaged in oral history and participatory projects: normally these are museums with historical, urban and anthropological collections.

Not all art museums have shown interest in developing oral history collections and participatory projects.¹² Throughout most of the twentieth century, museums generally focused on the collective ‘high culture’, resulting in static museums with spacious rooms, neutral partitions and symmetrical arrangements. It was only in the latter part of the century that a growing interest in individuals’ pasts, as well as collective ‘low culture’, led to changes in museum practice. This transformation took place in three stages and had a direct bearing both on the nature of the

objects collected and on the way museums interacted with the public. First, in the 1970s, a variety of museums started collecting the histories of ordinary people, and integrating them into their exhibitions. In the Netherlands, for instance, exhibitions on subjects such as public housing were contextualised by including interviews with ‘ordinary’ people who spoke from experience.

From the 1980s onwards, during the second stage, everyday implements and utensils began to be added to museum collections. The trend-setting Swedish exhibition *SAMDOK, Today for tomorrow*, aimed to document the daily life of ordinary people on the basis of photographs and objects in addition to interviews. Finally, in the 1990s, museums often directly involved people in both collection development and the mounting of exhibitions. The National Museum of American History in Washington set the model by organising an exhibition on World War II designed to elicit stories from visitors, and leading to the collection of hundreds of narratives.¹³ A parallel example from the Netherlands was an exhibition on Anatolia in Amsterdam (Amsterdams Historisch Museum, 1996), to which people could contribute objects from their own past, and during which visitors could respond to interviews with young people of Turkish descent.¹⁴ Some museums thus evolved into platforms for social and cultural participation, which resulted in an expansion of oral history collections as well as collections of objects.¹⁵

Museums housing collections on religion went through a similar transition. These museums have generally been one of two kinds. Museums with anthropological collections tended to focus on religion ‘from below’, on religious beliefs and practices as an essential element of living communities. Those with historical or art collections, on the other hand, usually paid attention to either an institutional history of religion (underlining formal organisations, rituals and beliefs) or to the aesthetic value of religious heritage.¹⁶ The growing interest in collecting individual memories requires museums with religious collections to adopt the anthropological model. This need to integrate a more anthropological perspective was bolstered by the interest among academics since the early 1990s in material religious culture. The so-called ‘material turn’ suggested that religion needs to be understood, not just by asking people what they believe, but also what they do in making use of tangible objects. Appreciating how people relate religiously to objects thus came prominently to the fore, and it was up to museums to take up this challenge.¹⁷

There is another challenge, one which museums housing collections on religion in particular need to deal with, and largely resulting from the specific nature of the objects they collect. Perhaps more than other museums, they needed to deal with the problem that the objects they display once served another purpose. Paine employs the term 'museumification' to refer to the general transformation of objects when they are taken out of the world in which they originated and are given a new meaning and personality by being preserved in a museum. In the case of religious objects the transformation is, however, particularly obvious, since sacred artefacts to which highly-charged, symbolic or devotional values were once attributed, are turned into 'normal' or 'ordinary' objects in a secular setting.¹⁸ As Philip Fisher has put it: *Take the crucifix out of the cathedral and you take the cathedral out of the crucifix.*¹⁹ The challenge for museums on religion is to provide insight into the role played by objects in their original religious context to visitors who are not necessarily familiar with specific religious practices, or even with religion as such. Understanding religious practice requires (in the words of Victoria Nelsen) *accepting a vision of the universe that includes both a level of non-material reality and a direct connection to the other level through that which seems most profoundly to negate it: the 'dead' inanimate of which sacred objects are made.*²⁰

This makes it all the more important, if not urgent, to collect the memories people (still) have concerning the use to which religious objects were once put.²¹ Over the past

years, art museums have increasingly paid more attention to religion and to the religious aspects of the objects in their collections.²² This has not, however, resulted in the systematic collection of intangible religious heritage. In what follows, the best practices developed in tackling the problem of acquiring and conserving and interpreting intangible narratives by a historical museum is illustrated by examining the case of Museum Catharijneconvent, a museum in the Netherlands focused on religion and its history. The Museum Catharijneconvent is the first museum housing a religious collection to take structural measures regarding the collection and preservation of people's narratives on religion.

Museum Catharijneconvent

The Museum Catharijneconvent is housed in a former convent, the 'Saint Catherine monastery' in Utrecht, the Netherlands. The museum opened its doors in 1979, but its three basic collections date from a much earlier period. The first collection originated in 1862, when the parish priest G.W. van Heukelum (1834-1910) established an Aartsbisschoppelijk (Archiepiscopal) Museum. The middle of the nineteenth century witnessed a period of rapid emancipation for Roman Catholics in the predominantly Protestant Netherlands, resulting in the abolition of former clandestine churches. Anxious about the loss of Catholic heritage, Van Heukelum, following the example set by the Erzbischofliches Diözesan-Museum in Cologne, began to collect and preserve objects from the



Plate 1
The Catharijneconvent.
Photo: AeroCamera - Michel Hofmeester, Rotterdam, 2008



Plate 2
The Treasury in the Museum Catharijneconvent.
Photo: Ruben de Heer, 2006



Plate 3
The cloister in the Museum Catharijneconvent.
Photo: Ruben de Heer, 2006.



Plate 4
Exterior of the Museum Catharijneconvent.
Photo: Ruben de Heer, 2008.

former clandestine churches.²³ His collection of primarily medieval art emphasised the intrinsic value and beauty of the objects and was meant to inspire artists and patrons.²⁴ A second, rather different collection stems from the Haarlem Bischoppelijk (Episcopal) Museum, founded in 1869 by the bishopric's secretary J.J. Graaf (1839-1924). This antiquarian collection was intended to demonstrate the high points of Catholic culture to sceptical Protestants. Graaf, too, was concerned to preserve neglected or discarded church property.²⁵ However, since he was also interested in documenting the history of the Haarlem bishopric, he had an eye for unpretentious objects.²⁶ The third collection was that of the Oud-Katholiek (Old Catholic) Museum, which opened in 1928 and displayed the possessions of the Utrecht chapter.

Plans to integrate the three collections emerged in the 1960s, in the wake of progressive movements brought about by the spirit of the time, including the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). The Church's modernisation programme, however, threatened its religious heritage.²⁷ To acquire state funding, a new museum had to cater to Christianity as a whole, rather than only to Catholicism. In consequence, the three Catholic collections were merged in a new foundation, together with that of the Stichting Protestantse Kerkelijke Kunst (Foundation for Protestant Ecclesiastical Art, 1975). Opened in 1979, the Rijksmuseum (State Museum) Het Catharijneconvent focused on material objects which could serve as witnesses to Dutch Christian culture and its influence on Dutch society.

The initial permanent exhibition was arranged chronologically and thematically. Conscious of the fact that the Netherlands was rapidly becoming secular, the museum focused on explaining the Christian past to people who had

often experienced religious life in their youth but no longer went to church. A series of objects and some two hundred texts told the story of Christianity in the Netherlands, from the early medieval conversions to contemporary experiences of faith. The interiors of churches, a Sunday school, a child's bedroom, and a living room divided into Protestant and Catholic halves evoked a sense of nostalgia. When the museum was redesigned in 2006 to modernise the provision of information, an aesthetic rather than collaborative presentation prevailed. The emphasis on cultural history and nostalgic displays was replaced by a focus on the artistic meaning and relevance of the objects, often displayed in isolation. Many of the information panels disappeared, at the cost of the educational element. Visitors were no longer offered information about the Catholic mass or a Protestant service, or the differences between them, and the many rituals and objects involved. In consequence, the link with the visitors' personal experience became even more tenuous than before. Visitors who had never received religious instruction found few points of contact. The permanent exhibition's narrative had become a one-sided history of the institutional Church, its dignitaries and its religious art.

In order to regain the interest of, as well as to open up interaction with, the public, two obstacles needed to be overcome. The first concerned the collection of tangible artefacts. As we have seen, the Catharijneconvent had applied itself to collecting and preserving religious objects immediately relevant to the institutional church and often those accorded a high aesthetic value. The relatively few objects in the collection pertaining to the daily religious life of ordinary people largely dated from before 1970 and were acquired by coincidence or as a result of the personal interest of individual curators. These objects, consisting



Plate 5
The former refectory with medieval masterpieces in the Museum Catharijneconvent.
Photo: Ruben de Heer, 2006.

of a wide array of articles (prayer beads, statuettes, crucifixes, devotional prints, souvenirs of pilgrimages, cribs, tablecloths decorated with biblical scenes, holy-water fonts, mission boxes, bibles, hymn books, and so on), constituted the cultural-historical collection. Next to nothing has been published on the collection, while the museum had only organised a single exhibition in 1996, on Roman Catholic devotional objects between 1900 and 1950. The museum's collecting policy for the period 2017-2020 still refers to such items as 'mass products' of inferior art historical value, thus undervaluing them and unintentionally prohibiting collecting them in any systematic way.

In addition, personal narratives connected with the origin or meaning of cultural-historical objects, were archived (if at all) in a haphazard fashion. This points to the second obstacle: the absence of an unambiguous policy enabling the accumulation of individual stories and memories connected with everyday objects that played significant roles in people's lives. For example, a nativity scene or crib dating from 1947, consisting of ceramic objects representing the birth of Jesus, was donated in 2016 to the museum by a Franciscan female congregation. Documenting the narrative of this specific artefact would require not only the rechanneling of museum resources to collect and store such intangible heritage, but also immediate action, since the group of sisters who gave it is in rapid decline.

Now, towards the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century, as a result of a continuing decline in church attendance and the concomitant closure of church buildings, the Dutch religious landscape is undergoing rapid change.²⁸ Since 2010 the museum has come to realise that to participate meaningfully in the public sphere it needs to focus on those members of the public who still have memories of its religious heritage collection. Apart from idealistic motives to prevent the permanent loss of knowledge, there are two good reasons for doing this. If the experiences of believers concerning both institutional practice and domestic culture are not recorded, they will disappear, making the collection less meaningful to a generation not trained to recognise religious objects or understand their use. Moreover, narratives about material artefacts tie in directly with a better understanding of the rise of non-institutional religious forms, new communities of faith and, most importantly perhaps, novel practices involving rituals that are not necessarily less 'sacred' than the mainstream Christian ones associated with the museum's current collection. On the assumption that, even while the practice of Christianity continues to decline, religion as such will continue to reappear in different forms and formats, it is wise to invest in the narratives, rather than only in the objects associated with mainstream religious faith, before it is too late.

Between 2011 and 2016 the museum conducted several experiments in collecting and presenting narratives in the context of four exhibitions, each of which are presented as case studies in developing methodologies for participatory heritage practices for museums with particular collections (such as a religious collection). In the context of generational change, in this case involving a rapid decline in religious knowledge, it is crucial for museums to maintain their representativeness and relevance. Heritage professionals and curators play an important part in this, but the public, in this case the members of religious communities or specific cultural

groups, is no less indispensable. They add a layer of knowledge, emotions and memories to objects that may otherwise lose their meaning; the challenge for a museum is to ensure that visitors are able to empathise with that layer and understand it.

Four case studies

Pilgrims (2011/2012)

The first exhibition's theme was the traditional Christian pilgrimage to the Spanish town of Santiago de Compostela,



Plate 6
Combination of contemporary pilgrims' attributes and cultural historical objects from the *Pilgrims* exhibition.
Photo: Ruben de Heer, 2011.



Plate 7
The 'albergue' turned out to be a popular meeting point for visitors at the exhibition *Pilgrims*.
Photo: Ruben de Heer, 2011-12.



Plate 8
Contemporary pilgrims' attributes at the *Pilgrims* exhibition.
Photo: Ruben de Heer, 2011-12.

still one of the best-known journeys undertaken by people in search of religious enlightenment.²⁹ To understand how the multi-dimensionality of a real-life experience could best be evoked within the physical confines of a museum, the exhibition's curator, apart from doing the usual research, in 2010 travelled by foot from Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port, on the northern side of the Pyrenees, to Santiago – a distance of more than seven hundred kilometres. As an insider, she quickly gained the trust of her fellow travellers, leading to a range of contacts that proved exceedingly useful when developing the exhibition's outline. Sixteen pilgrims invited to a brainstorming session offered recommendations, including the design of a hostel, attention to non-Christian pilgrimage sites, and the possibility of personal involvement. These and other suggestions were used in developing the exhibition.

The exhibition was divided into three parts. The first part contextualised the pilgrimage as such, depicting it as an ancient ritual common to many religions. The second part concerned artistic portrayals of Saint James the Apostle, whose (putative) grave in Santiago was the pilgrims' final destination. Finally, visitors themselves were taken on a pilgrimage through a display of artistic, cultural and personal artefacts that represented the pilgrims' itinerary from the preparatory phase to their arrival at Santiago. For the first time in the museum's history, items from everyday life were put on display in one showcase together with objects of aesthetic value.

Because the museum was intent on involving people at an early stage in order to generate content for the exhibition, it launched an interactive platform allowing them to set up their own profile and add narratives, photographs and videos, a collection they could subsequently enlarge, change or delete.³⁰ The platform attracted no less than 48,209 visitors, of whom 423 created a profile; in the end, 350 narratives were uploaded. The exhibition's 'narrative site' thus proved to be a successful means of collecting stories from the audience and it was reused for other exhibitions. Eight people with user profiles were asked to tell stories for the audio tour. These were then used to connect different narratives to a single object, offering the visitors a varied, multi-layered perspective. In effect, the narratives functioned as the exhibition's *leitmotiv*. Personal stories were treated no differently from the historical accounts offered by experts, while their authenticity was guaranteed by leaving on tape any unintended expressions of emotion or slips of the tongue.

In addition, the museum asked 32 people with user profiles to lend it an object of personal value symbolising the pilgrimage to Santiago. These objects were displayed in a large case together with the personal narratives connected to them. This part of the exhibition evoked many reminiscences among the visitors. *The stories, impressions, feelings are very familiar and make one relive one's own journeys*, was a typical comment. The objects led to insight: *It is the combination of exhibition and narrative that enables one to empathise. Pilgrimages are topical and in this way they also allow one to identify with many of one's predecessors.*³¹

A third way of bringing the exhibition's content closer to the visitors (or the visitors nearer to the exhibition) was to organise encounters with actual pilgrims. Again the user profiles on the narrative site were used to recruit people, in this case seventy 'experience experts'; five coordinators were enlisted via the Dutch Association of Saint James ('Het Nederlands Genootschap van Sint Jacob'). For the duration of the exhibition, three volunteers were present on each day. They received a brief orientation and were given two basic rules: to respect the visitors' boundaries and to talk about their own experiences. They were then given free rein. The visitors much appreciated the conversations with the volunteers,³² which gave them insight, not just into the nature of pilgrimages but into their own lives. Some were so inspired by their experience at the exhibition that they embarked on a pilgrimage themselves.³³

This was the first time the museum had consulted 'ordinary people' as experience experts, resulting in a first encounter with shared authority. The museum drew several lessons from the experience. Firstly, volunteers were able to contribute significantly because they had been integrated into the exhibition plans at an early stage. Secondly, they developed into joint proprietors of, and ambassadors for, the project. By sharing personal items and memories they became co-creators of cultural heritage; their knowledge added to (and in some cases corrected) the knowledge of experts. Thirdly, it was clear that using the internet as a means of outreach was crucial to recruiting the volunteers. Some pilgrims were members of the Dutch Association of Saint James, but not all, while the Association itself was not necessarily representative of all pilgrims. Evidently, accessing the global village is no less important than communicating with traditional communities.³⁴ Like many



Plate 9
Sharing stories at the exhibition *Women in the Spotlight*.
Photo: Ruben de Heer, 2012.



Plate 10
Sharing stories at the exhibition *Women in the Spotlight*.
Photo: Wouter de Winter, 2012.

other contemporary communities, pilgrims, too, form temporary groups of individuals who meet consciously to co-operate for specific purposes, rather than constituting a formal association based on continuous participation. Fourthly, the link between contemporary heritage (personal items and memories) and historical artefacts enriched the visitors' experience, while increasing the exhibition's didactic significance and the objects' aesthetic value. Visitors were able to immerse themselves in the exhibition more easily and gained more insight into the nature and history of pilgrimages. Memories added to the descriptions of art objects amplified the message, making the objects all the more meaningful.

***Women in the spotlight* (2012)**

The second case study concerns an exhibition on women's roles in church.³⁵ Spanning the period between the Middle Ages and the present, the exhibition dealt with a number of themes, such as nuns, Protestant women, parish priests' housekeepers, preachers' wives and female clergy. These were illustrated both by objects from the collections and interviews with women involved in church life.³⁶ To counterbalance the collection's many portraits of official religious leaders (all male), the museum commissioned a photographer to portray and interview women.³⁷ The audio tour linked the photographs to extracts from the interviews. The final part of the exhibition invited visitors to write on small cards about their own experience of women in church life. Memories were activated by displaying several appealing objects,

including a church hat (mandatory for women in some Protestant congregations), a christening dress and a collection bag. This simple method of engaging the visitors elicited dozens of reflections on the exhibition and more than eighty reminiscences.³⁸

The main lesson for the museum was the importance of paying attention to neglected histories, in this case those of women. Some of the respondents' stories were positive but they also shared memories of grief, fear and repression. One woman wrote in relation to the christening dress: *My mother's mother lost her first child. It was still-born. In consequence, it remained unbaptised and was buried outside the churchyard. It was not buried in hallowed ground. She would never talk about it.*³⁹ Interestingly, objects from the Catholic tradition (such as a Communion dress) elicited responses from non-Catholic women: *My class-mates received preparatory lessons on Wednesday afternoon. I wanted that too! Fortunately, they allowed me to attend. In the end I secretly took part in Communion. I sat at the rear of the church during Mass, but the priest did give me the host.*⁴⁰ Such memories are sources of knowledge that are outside the scope of most current church histories, and they would probably have disappeared forever if visitors had not penned them down during the exhibition. A second lesson concerned the added value of the memories for specific objects. Some fifteen stories were told about the church hat, which was actually incidental to the museum's collection. For the museum this could be a convincing argument for

deliberately collecting this particular item in the near future. Moreover, some objects were enriched with new information, such as a banner depicting Mary (mother of Jesus) that once belonged to a Roman Catholic girls' association and was recognised separately by two women. One of them wrote: *My great-grandfather embroidered this banner. Word has it that Mary's hair is actually my grandmother's.*⁴¹

***I care! Charity down the ages* (2014/2015)**

The exhibition of our third case study⁴² was structured thematically rather than chronologically. First the visitors were offered an overview of charity as a practice common to all mainstream religions. The second part gave a historical overview of the role of Christianity in the history of care in the Netherlands, followed by an impression of the development of care for specific groups. Works of art and cultural-historical objects were shown in combination

wherever possible. To ensure that the historical narrative was both topical and personal, a multimedia tour provided additional information with the objects. About fifty employees of welfare organisations, professional authorities and above all, experience experts, contributed to the database on four levels (audio, video, text and image).

Again, good use was made of the narrative site as well as the contacts with welfare institutions, resulting in the recruitment of 45 experience experts. Since the museum was keen to give a platform to people with challenging, or even shocking stories, the group of experience experts included deaconesses (volunteer nurses), informal care givers and buddies on the one hand, and clients of food banks, former homeless people, former psychiatric patients and refugees on the other. The team was actively involved in developing the exhibition: they contributed

Plates 11, 12 and 13

Views of the exhibition *I care!*
Above right, a showcase exhibiting personal items.
Below right, shared stories.
Photos: Ruben de Heer, 2014.

Below left, one of the places to meet experience experts.
Photo: Rick Huisinga, 2014.





Plate 14
Personal objects at the exhibition *Francis*.
Photo: Marije de Nood, 2016.



Plate 15
Personal objects and stories at the exhibition *Francis*.
Photo: Ruben de Heer, 2016.

to the exhibition's concept and attended brainstorming sessions with the designers. As in the case of *Pilgrims*, three experience experts were present every day to communicate with visitors, making use of a showcase exhibiting personal items as a means of breaking the ice. According to the experience experts, the exhibition evoked many memories; visitors, of whom the large majority valued the opportunity to talk with the volunteers, often felt the need to share their experiences immediately. This was unexpected: the experience experts listened more often than they spoke.

The interviews with the experience experts were placed online on the narrative site and people were invited to add their own stories.⁴³ It turned out that stories were mostly added by members of welfare organisations and were not the recollections of 'ordinary people'. Nevertheless, during the exhibition some 11,000 unique visitors found the site online, of whom 133 added a story. Moreover, people could write about their own experiences of giving or receiving charity.⁴⁴ In several ways, then, this exhibition corroborated the lessons drawn from the previous two exhibitions.

***Francis* (2016)**

The fourth example likewise included personal narratives and items, but they figured much less prominently in the exhibition than in previous cases. *Francis* (referring to the Christian saint) was conceived as an art historical exhibition, featuring the finest items in the collection as well as unique pieces on loan, and focusing on both the man and his ideas. After intensive debate the

museum decided to include two rooms dedicated to the Franciscan orders and to the inspirational example of Saint Francis, which were set apart from the art historical part of the exhibition. The first room showed the history of the Franciscan orders based on a timeline and a selection of historical objects. The second room displayed personal objects, together with interviews with sixteen people who had been inspired by him, including clergy, laypeople, and non-believers who, interestingly, also felt attracted to the example of Francis, such as a seller of a newspaper for the homeless who had recently interviewed the pope. The stories elicited by the semi-structured interviews prompted so many interesting narratives that fragments of them were subsequently integrated into the multimedia tour. Visitors were given the opportunity to leave behind their own narratives, including reflections, poems, drawings and 27 reminiscences.⁴⁵

In this way, personal narratives were connected to the art objects in the exhibition. In an attempt to better integrate the works of art into the visitors' experience, the role of experience experts was adapted slightly. Once a week, on Wednesday afternoons, two groups could, if they wished, accompany a member of a religious or secular Franciscan order who spoke about his or her life in connection with a painting, a statue or another object of aesthetic value. Despite the enthusiasm of the experience experts, they found it difficult to take their cue from the art works; in such cases the conversations had less depth. *Francis* demonstrated that 'high art' did not necessarily fulfil the museum's objective of engaging with its visitors.

At the same time, it once again became clear that experience experts fulfilled a need. Visitors often posed existential questions and wanted both to narrate their own stories and listen to those of others. They set great store by recorded memories: 94% of the 151 visitors who filled out the survey found them an added value. The same applied to personal items, which achieved a score of 81% (from 68 respondents). In the visitors' book people referred explicitly to the interviews: *What sticks in my memory is the story of the Franciscan and the sister who spoke so wonderfully about their vision and inspiration*, wrote one visitor. And another entered into the book: *I now better understand my own Catholic background*.⁴⁶

Personal memories and 'experience experts': restructuring collections

With the active deployment of narratives, the museum began to function as a 'contact zone', a place where dialogue and interaction take place, as James Clifford put it in 1997,⁴⁷ and a 'pluralistic space' was created – a place where abstract 'cross-culturalism' becomes concrete and turns *into a pluralistic space that pays tribute to the inescapable pluralism from within*.⁴⁸ The four cases outlined in the previous section made abundantly clear that museums broaching topics closely related to living practices cannot restrict themselves to object-oriented, purely art historical exhibitions, but need to find ways to integrate both everyday objects and personal narratives into their core activities. No less importantly, they offered valuable information on how contact zones operate in practice. *Pilgrims, Women in the spotlight, 'I care!' and Francis* underlined that, for museums with cultural-historical collections:

- volunteers contribute significantly if they are involved in the exhibition plans at an early stage;
- volunteers act as co-creators of cultural heritage: their knowledge adds to the knowledge of experts;
- the internet is by no means the only channel of recruitment, but it is indispensable in obtaining a cross section of potential publics at any given moment;
- items from everyday life, as well as personal memories, offer visitors easier access to the content of the exhibition and amplify the historical meaning of the objects on display, both art works as well as mundane artefacts;
- neglected histories resonate strongly with visitors.

The four pilots showed that collecting interviews in addition to offering visitors the opportunity to contribute directly was very effective in developing a collection of narratives. However, only a limited number of museums actively do both. Expanding collections on the basis of visitors' participation will remain a challenge for some time to come, but the four cases do offer suggestions as to how museums that combine objects of aesthetic value with a cultural-historical collection need to adapt their policies.

For traditional museums with a strong focus on their collection's aesthetic value, temporary exhibitions based on themes explicitly present in the permanent exhibition are a safe way to experiment. It is easier to convince the management to set up pilots in temporary exhibitions, to acquire funding, to interest the press and ensure exposure, and to alternate topics rapidly. Conversely, temporary exhibitions run the risk of being isolated from the museum's core presentation, while their integration into the permanent exhibition requires a high degree of flexibility on the part of museum personnel. There is no one size fits all solution, and each museum will need to determine its own viable options.

Collecting memories in a sustainable way directly impacts museum policy. The most important step is to opt for a specific core collection of narratives and to put as much effort into accumulating and preserving them as one would with regard to traditional items. In the case of the Museum Catharijneconvent, narratives were formally added as a seventh core collection, next to the six existing core collections of material objects. As a consequence, the museum began to approach the narratives that it already possessed more critically than before. This decision to collect and preserve narratives raised questions that are hardly trivial, but are in part similar to those put to any collection. Is there a limit to the number of memories we want to collect and if so, which criteria do we use to set that limit? The ability to provide access to the collection may be a criterion itself. Some problems, however, are specific to narratives. It is easy to add items to a digital collection, but curating them is less simple. Should memories be edited?⁴⁹ If so, that would require a curator who is able to moderate.⁵⁰ To what extent should access to memories be restricted? Whether or not limitations are in order, curating personal memories in relation to objects involves the solicitation and administration of permissions, from the interviewee to the museum, as well as from the

museum to interested third parties such as researchers. Opting for the inclusion of narratives in a collection thus involves additional funding as well as additional expertise.

Although the institutional context often limits possibilities, using digital technology can offer innovative solutions to the question of how to collect, store and present intangible heritage, and provide solutions to address problems associated with the mutable nature of intangible heritage.⁵¹ Using a website as a community platform to collect and share a core collection of narratives based on accepted standards affords museums a unique set of advantages. First, it offers the possibility to directly connect personal memories in digital form and those in different media (text, audio and video) with material heritage, enabling a more varied perspective. The link between the tangible and the intangible can be put to good use both in a database of multiple collections and in making those collections accessible digitally. Second, a website means that the collection of narratives will be publicly available. This ensures that, apart from the content itself, the process of creating heritage is democratised through the internet. People can upload their own memories and add directly to the collection themselves, while narratives can be adapted, amplified or enriched with images. In the third place, the collection will be fully searchable. Fourth, such a digital collection of narratives will be available for interdisciplinary research, allowing cross-overs between different research areas, including religious studies, (cultural) history, art history, anthropology and social sciences. Indeed, the presentation of intangible heritage online gives rise to a new specialism: cybermuseumology. As museologist Dominique Langlais pointed out, cybermuseumology is known as a practice that is knowledge-driven rather than object-driven, and its main goal is to disseminate knowledge using the interaction possibilities of ICTs.⁵²

For this reason, parallel to *Francis* an experiment was run based on digital humanities expertise. After the museum website for narratives ('Catharijneverhalen', or 'Catharijne narratives') was launched, it ran for four years on outdated software, which after January 2016 was no longer supported. While the content was hosted on an external server, this meant that it was no longer available to the museum once the site was removed. In 2016 a demonstrator was therefore developed to explore the possibility of collecting narratives on material objects through a website.⁵³ Based on a mock-up of the original

narrative site, the demonstrator enabled users to create a profile, add content in the form of stories, audio, video, and images, but also to link a narrative to an object. Given the positive outcome of the demonstrator, the museum decided to upgrade the Catharijneverhalen website. In the future, moreover, users will be able to extract data automatically from the museum's collection registration system as well as add data to it. The site will then also be connected to external databases to enrich the museum's content with personal narratives and information from the collections of other cultural institutions.

Conclusion

Lacking reference models and knowledge of best practices, many museums wrestle with questions concerning the preservation, documentation and presentation of intangible heritage. The sustainable integration of immaterial heritage in collecting policies is not easy, especially for traditional museums that prize above all the art historical value of collections. Building a collection of narratives requires a conceptual change in focus from the object to the person. This poses all kinds of challenges. How will narratives be incorporated in the museum's collection and interpretation policies? What, exactly, will be collected, how, and by whom? What needs to be done to ensure that the museum has sufficient resources, including personnel, knowledge and funding? In brief, opting for intangible heritage as part of a museum's core business entails a fundamental organisational transformation.

Our case study, the Museum Catharijneconvent, shows that if museums want to take narratives seriously, they need to do two things: systematically build a collection of narratives, and enable narratives to be shared. Experimenting with methods and procedures through trial and error is important, since every method has its own specific opportunities, challenges and dynamics. The sustainability of the narrative collection should obviously be guaranteed on the same level as a collection of material objects.

The development of a website to present both the existing collection of 'oral history' interviews and offer visitors the opportunity to add their own narratives proved to be an ideal combination of collecting and sharing. And sharing is crucial. A carefully curated narrative collection not only adds to knowledge about the material objects;

it also hugely expands the social relevance of those objects. Visitors feel personally, and often emotionally, attached to particular objects, and narratives help them to make sense of their own lives, and to better understand the lives of others. This effect was especially evident when 'experience experts' were included in exhibition development. By catering directly to the needs of visitors, these experts ensured that narratives were shared, while also eliciting new ones.

For museum practice this means that objects and first-person narratives must be structurally connected. In our case, the museum opted for a thematic collection strategy, since religious objects are always part of larger rituals, feasts, traditions, and so on. To facilitate the collection of narratives, the selected themes were showcased in exhibitions, in which museum objects and interviews were given equal value. To actively engage communities and visitors, people were approached before, during and after the exhibitions to share their memories online, on paper, or in a video booth. The interviews were then integrated into the 'intangible' core collection, in the same way that objects are integrated into the 'tangible' one. They are made available through an open-access database, to which people can continue to contribute. The material can additionally be used for presentations, publications, education, the press and social media. First-person narratives are highly significant to traditional, object-oriented museums, not just by involving wider communities but by taking seriously museums' role as knowledge centres. It is time for museums to take seriously the power of narratives, in order to systematically collect them and make them accessible, not just for research purposes but to the public at large. 🇳🇱

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ENDNOTES

- 1 We realise that the distinction itself is artificial - cf. Meskell, Lynn, 2015. 'Introduction: Globalizing Heritage', in Meskell (ed), *Global Heritage. A Reader*. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell: pp. 1-22. For us, a precise theoretical position on the relationship between the tangible and the intangible is not immediately relevant: we simply want to emphasise the entanglement between the one and the other.
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- 8 Paine, *Religious Objects*, pp.15-16. Cf. Kopytoff, Igor, 1986. 'The cultural biography of things: commodification as process' in Appadurai, Arjun (ed), 1986. *The social life of things. Commodities in cultural perspective*. CUP: Cambridge: pp. 64-91.
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- 10 E.g. <https://www.moma.org/learn/resources/archives/EAD/OralHistoryProgramf> and <https://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/research/gallery-archives/oral-history.html>.
- 11 E.g. <https://www.ushmm.org/research/research-in-collections/overview/oral-history/search-for-an-interview>.
- 12 For some examples of participatory projects in art museums, see Simon, Nina, 2010. *The participatory museum*. Santa Cruz: Museum 2.0: pp. 23, 42, 124, 150, 165-166, 287.
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- 24 *Rijksmuseum Het Catharijneconvent*. Haarlem: J. Enschede, 1983: p. 8.
- 25 Peters, *Naar de Middeleeuwen*: p. 116.
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- 27 *Rijksmuseum Het Catharijneconvent*: pp. 19-28.
- 28 A Dutch-language overview of religious history in the Netherlands is van Eijnatten, Joris and van Lieburg, Fred, 2006. *Nederlandse Religiegeschiedenis*. Hilversum: Verloren; an English translation is due in 2018 from Brill: Leiden.
- 29 The exhibition ran from 15-10-2011 to 26-02-2012, attracting 52,000 visitors.
- 30 The site www.pelgrimsverhalen.nl went online on 23-05-2011; now www.catharijneverhalen.nl/.
- 31 Guestbook *Pilgrims* (2011-2012).
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 According to a newspaper article, 'Intens geluk en huilen' in *De Stad Amersfoort Regio* (09-09-2015), 6.

- 34 Dibbits, Hester, Willemsen, Marlous, 2014. 'Stills of our liquid times. An essay towards collecting today's intangible cultural heritage' in Elpers, Sophi and Palm, Anna (eds), *Die Musealisierung der Gegenwart. Von Grenzen und Chancen des Sammelns in Kulturhistorischen Museen*. Bielefeld: De Gruyter: pp. 177-198.
- 35 The exhibition ran from 31-03-12 to 7-10-2012, attracting 33,347 visitors.
- 36 Two interviews are accessible digitally: hdl.handle.net/11653/oral57.
- 37 The photographer was Lucia Ganieva (<https://www.luciaganieva.com/22411039/vrouwen-voor-het-voetlicht>).
- 38 These have been digitised and are available at <http://www.catharijneverhalen.nl/search/3494/nl>.
- 39 <http://www.catharijneverhalen.nl/3911/nl/het-verdriet-van-vrouwen>.
- 40 <http://www.catharijneverhalen.nl/4853/nl/stiekem-communie-doen>.
- 41 <http://www.catharijneverhalen.nl/5466/nl/geborduurde-vaandel-olv-goede-raad>.
- 42 The exhibition ran from 13-09-2014 to 1-03-2015 and attracted 36,000 visitors.
- 43 <https://www.catharijneconvent.nl/bezoek-ons/tentoonstellingen/ik-geef-om-jou/>.
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- 47 Clifford, James, 1997. *Routes: Travel and translation in the late twentieth century*. Cambridge: CUP.
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- 51 See the special issue on the digital: Musiani, Francesca and Schafer, Valérie, *Digital Heritage and Heritagization* (<https://reset.revues.org/806>).
- 52 Langlois, Dominique, 2005. 'Cybermuseumology and Intangible Cultural Heritage' in *Intersection Conference 2005*. Toronto: pp. 72-81 (<http://www.yorku.ca/etopia/docs/conference/Langlais.pdf>); quoted in Solanilla, 'The Internet as a Tool', note 16.
- 53 <https://dig.hum.uu.nl/catharijneverhalen/>.