

**DR SUZANNE KEENE**

**INSTITUTE OF ARCHAEOLOGY, UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON**

**COLLECTIONS: TREASURE OR TRASH?**

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**Introduction**

The non-displayed collections are in the future going to be a major aspect of the politics and positioning of museums. This paper will address issues of their usefulness and uses.

Collections have increased enormously during the second half of the last century. Housing and managing them to accepted standards takes a substantial proportion of museum finance, staff time and space; and collections constitute a huge resource. Yet, museums still see themselves primarily as places that exhibit, with activities involving non-exhibited collections as optional extras. It seems to me that through accumulating these very large resources museums have in effect become different organisations, without yet realising this and without getting to grips with appropriate strategies.

**What is the issue?**

First, many collections are very large. For instance, in the Australian Museum there are 1.1 million items in the cultural collections; 70,000 in the bird collection; 635,000 fishes; 5 million insects ... and so on. The National Maritime Museum in London has around 2.6 million items, about half of them paper-based: archives, images and photographs.

The issue is not just the absolute amount in the collections: it is the rate at which they grow. The collections of the Museum of London have grown from about 10,000 in 1900 to well over a million items today. David Wilson when Director of the British Museum admiringly quoted Augustus Franks, one of the nineteenth century British Museum curators: '... in 1851 the scanty collections ... occupied a length of 154 feet ... and three or four table cases. The collections now [1896] occupy 2250 feet of wall cases, 90 table cases and 31 upright cases' [1] In the late 1990s two authors calculated that '...at an annual growth rate of 1.5% [which had been established for the UK] the size of the Nation's Collections will double within 47 years. A century hence it will have increased by almost 450%'. [2].

This is not an issue for large museums only: small ones often have disproportionately large collections that they find it difficult to make use of.

One would hope that such a substantial resource would be well used, since it is nearly always maintained using public money. But one would mostly hope in vain. These are a few statistics, from my experience in managing collections and from the Pitt Rivers Museum website:

### **Science Museum small object collections**

year 1998-9: about 700 visitors (researchers and tours)

year 2002-3: about 250 visitors (mostly specialists)

year 2004-5: about 700 visitors on 46 tours, after extensive publicity.

### **Victoria & Albert Museum, National Archive of Art & Design**

Year 1998-9: just over 900 researchers

### **The Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford**

'more than 200 research visits a year'.

As well as their visitors, objects are of course used for display, loan and so on. But these activities utilise only a tiny proportion of the collections.

Praiseworthy efforts by the museums in question have achieved these numbers of users, but do they justify the existence of these large and expensive resources? In 1999-2000, the Science Museum's 350,000 small and medium objects occupied 9000 square metres of storage at an annual cost of nearly three quarters of a million Australian dollars (excluding salaries, and insufficient to maintain a high standard). The Glenbow Museum, the large regional museum for Alberta, Canada, found that approaching half of its 11.5 million dollars (AUS) operating budget was being spent on storing and maintaining its collections.

### **Does it matter?**

When I worked with the collections of the Museum of London and the Science Museum, I found that people such as the general public, non-curatorial colleagues, and even trustees and other museum stakeholders were quite baffled by the museum collections. They often asked in puzzlement, 'I suppose you use the objects to change the things in the exhibitions?'; 'I suppose people come and work on the objects for research?'; 'Why do you have collections when you can't display them?'; and, from the bolder ones, 'Why don't you let some of the collections go to private owners who will appreciate them, then?'. Keith Thomson in his book, *Treasures on Earth*, has echoed the latter query [3]. During research for my forthcoming book I posted questions on some museum email lists and found that this was common experience, and that colleagues in museums in many countries found it difficult to construct convincing replies [4].

In the UK, these sentiments have begun to be publicly aired, in two or three articles in the national press and in government reports and consultation papers. We are not the only country: in the Netherlands this issue has also been articulated by government ministers and others [5]. In the US, colleagues in email list correspondence said that they had been embarrassed when legislators from funding bodies raised the question. Archaeological collections present a particular problem, and for example in the state of Victoria in Australia a research project is currently under way investigating how much archaeological material needs to be kept.

So yes, I believe it does matter that museums collectively have a huge resource, maintained at public expense, that at present cannot be said is sufficiently used.

## Researching the positive

However, despite these daunting figures, there are many examples of collections being accessed and used in a plethora of different ways. There are examples to be found all over the world. I undertook a research project to study examples of use and to bring them together so that they could be seen as a body of practice on which museums could build. I also wanted to set the collections and their uses in the context of museological theory, so as to provide a more coherent intellectual justification for their existence. Too often, theory seems to be divorced from practical application, but when we are floundering to justify the collections an intellectual grounding could be very useful [6].

## Collections varieties

Before discussing uses of them, a note about collections. They are extremely varied, and of course some are more suited to one kind of use or access, some another [7]. Broad categories that seem to be useful are:

- The aesthetic: to be *visually enjoyed*. These include fine art and often decorative art collections. These collections are not usually huge, because of cost and value.
- Functional objects, where there is an expectation that they will be made to work, and *demonstrate their original function*, including science and industry collections.
- Those that are primarily *archives for research*. The number of objects is often vast, such as the 70 million specimens in the Natural History Museum, London. An 'object' can be hard to define – is it a single potsherd, a boxful from an archaeological context? Is a sketchbook one object, or thirty?
- Harder to define: collections *relating to places and people* – history and ethnography collections in particular.

Museums and their purposes are also very varied, but this is not the place to discuss that.

## Different collections, different uses

I considered five broad uses of collections:

### **Research**

This is the primary purpose of some kinds of collection, such as natural history and archaeology collections. Natural history collections in particular tend to be very well used for research. Archaeology collections are much less used, since archaeology is less economically relevant and is not an established scientific discipline, and many museums have difficulty in managing and justifying them. But all museum collections should be used for research, surely, by a wide range of people, and it would be good to see more of this important use.

### **Education**

My focus here was on higher and ongoing education and learning, since there is so much literature on schools and museums. There has been a degree of concern about university collections: although some university courses make use of collections most do not [8]. There is undoubtedly more scope for this use: it requires museums to enter into partnerships with universities and colleges and to let them take the lead – something that they are not good at doing. For ongoing adult learning, events and programmes could make much more use of the collections – not just handling collections – but it requires museum collections professionals to play an enabling role, rather than their current guardianship one.

### **Memory and identity**

Memory studies are a rich field of intellectual enquiry, and there is a huge volume of literature on the subject. It has been proposed that collections could be seen as the brain of the museum, exhibitions the voice. Museums are important players in fostering collective memory, which promotes social cohesion and a sense of belonging – or of exclusion if one does not feel that one's past and culture is represented in these significant social institutions [9]. At an individual level I found many examples of people being very moved by objects in collections – including particularly military collections and ethnography collections. This is clearly an important justification for them. There is a growing use of collections for memory work with the elderly, although this tends to use special handling collections, not the collections themselves.

### **Creativity**

I was prompted to look at creativity by a natural history museum director, who had observed that about half the visitors to his collections were in fact artists. I found an astonishing variety and amount of uses of collections, in literature (my book includes four poems), films (they draw on the dark, mysterious feel of museums – which I think is the presence of the collections), architecture (there are a number of imaginative buildings for museum storage), music and sound (a number of sound installations), technology and design. It is clear that collections are a rich resource in the worlds of art and design, which would be much the poorer without them. Museums could do a lot to encourage these uses. The public draw on collections for creative purposes too, and I feel there could be much more of this [4].

### **Enjoyment**

The large object collections of the Science Museum were for a number of years my responsibility. Because of the very size and scale of the objects they were quite accessible, and the ex airfield where they were kept was regularly open to the public, who appeared to enjoy visiting them. Happily, this habit has spread in the Science Museum – the National Railway Museum in York has a very successful open store, *The Warehouse*. 'I'd rather see all this than a quarter displayed properly': said a visitor to it. Consultants' advice to the NRM: Market the mystery [10]. Of course these are but some of many examples of open stores or stores tours.

But the best example I found of the public enjoying collections was Glasgow's Open Museum project, where the public were invited to use the stored collections on the same basis as would museum professionals – to make

exhibitions etc. in places outside the museum and that they themselves controlled [11]. The difference between this and other community exhibitions is that in Glasgow people were encouraged and permitted to use the museum's own historic collections: in most such projects they are invited to donate and collect additional objects. This implies an openness to the use of collections that is far beyond what is normally the case in museums.

For many of these uses I advocate greater opportunities for use of and engagement by the public. But it is interesting to note, from my own experience, confirmed in the email discussions I held as well as by some visitor studies, that people in general are unaware that the collections exist at all – they assume that the collections are what they see on exhibition [12].

### **The effects of digitisation**

Few organisations today are unaffected by digital technologies. Museums have barely begun to feel the effects. All of the major uses of collections that are identified above could be assisted by using digital technologies. I think that the most important development is making available online a complete inventory of what a museum holds. This is fundamental to letting the public know what the museum holds, on their behalf, and to many or most of the other uses of collections.

### **The values of collections**

By 'value' is meant economic, social and cultural value rather than monetary or saleroom value. If collections are to be justified, it seems essential to be able to discuss what are their values [13].

It seems to be well accepted that museums have a value in economic regeneration. The Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao is often cited, and in the UK we have Tate Modern in the Bankside area of London, and new museums and cultural facilities in cities like Manchester and Liverpool. There have been reviews of the economic value of museums in the UK. Undoubtedly museums do have an effect, but cultural economists point out that it is not specific to museums: many other types of organisation or development could do this, too [14]. For example in London it has been found that simply the development of new, expensive apartment buildings brings about a desirable (to some) social milieu in that part of the city.

Anyway, it is not the collections that having this effect - it is the museum and its activities. So can any value be attributed to the collections themselves?

It is difficult to argue that collections have economic value – they cannot generally be sold off – although it is true that certain collections, especially art, support the art market. To find the value of collections we have to look for cultural value. UNESCO's website has information on the cultural policies of a number of countries, and it is evident that cultural value is in fact considered important in many of them; most general political statements on cultural policy refer to it [15]. When it comes to the practicalities of funding it is often a different matter, as we know – but at least the recognition is there. In the UK, where we are largely ruled by the dead hand of government bean counters,

politicians seem at last to be grudgingly accepting that economic value is not the only consideration – that there is such a thing as cultural value, too [16].

It is in fact very interesting to examine collections as constituting cultural capital, as do cultural economists, particularly David Throsby (from Macquarie University, as it happens) [17]. The collections can be seen as a store of cultural capital, from which cultural value may be generated. A parallel is financial capital, which can be used to generate income. Museums can maintain and even increase the cultural capital inherent in the collections, by research which will add information to them, documentation, proper preservation care and so on. Museums are also in a position to generate cultural value for people from their stored cultural capital, through exhibitions, but these leave the vast majority of their store of capital unused.

In fact the Culture Minister in the Netherlands has made that very point: ‘The shareholders of the Collectie Nederland – and they are the Dutch taxpayers – should be able to assume that the cultural entrepreneurs who curate the public cultural fortune (and this includes museums, archives, libraries and other collection curators) attempt to gain the maximum profits from their input. Not of course for the sake of financial gain. But for the sake of the social and cultural returns that expresses itself for instance through an optimal accessibility and utilisation of the Collectie Nederland for the whole of society.’ [18].

What does cultural value consist of? A number of aspects have been identified:

- aesthetic value (beauty)
- spiritual value because of religious or other associations
- symbolic value because of something the object stands for
- historical value because of evidence or associations with the past
- authenticity value because the object is incontrovertibly the genuine, historic item

Economists have found that people do place a range of values on the heritage, not all dependent on uses they themselves make of the item. They have identified, for example, existence value: people like to think that the heritage asset exists; and inheritance value: they want it to be available to be passed on to future generations. In several surveys of what people think important about museums, conservation (meaning retention) of the collections comes top or close to top.

It seems, therefore, that people recognise collections as having a cultural value (even if they are only vaguely aware that they exist).

### **Multiple answers**

Henk van Os, ex director of the Rijksmuseum, has bluntly written: ‘The real problem is ‘the unimaginative programming, failure of public relations or sheer

lack of courage which prevent museum staff from making the best use of their stores and keep the public away.' [19].

So, what to do about the non-displayed collections? There have been a number of proposals, not in my opinion sufficient to solve the problem (if it is agreed that there is one).

### ***Less stuff?***

Have museums simply got too much stuff? Is disposal, or dispersal to other museums, or even the public (as some advocate) the answer? I believe not. There are a number of startling examples of museums disposing of collections that are at the time unfashionable [20]. There is always a temptation to re-write history by eliminating aspects of collections that seem at the time unimportant or incorrect. Dispersal to other more suitable organisations is sensible, but it is very expensive, and does not result in less of a charge on the public purse.

However, the Glenbow Museum in Alberta reduced its collections by a very substantial amount and was able to finance better care and access for the remainder, so perhaps we should not completely dismiss this.

But is the size or quantity of collections really an issue in countries other than the UK, the Netherlands and sometimes Canada? There is little sign that this is a universal problem, so let's not export a solution if it isn't needed.

### ***Loan and exhibit***

The Dutch Minister of Culture has vigorously advocated getting the collections out and about, through loans and exhibits in a much wider range of places than is currently the case [18]. This could be part of an answer, but it is very costly in terms of resources, and can only ever affect a small part of the collections. Moreover, let's face it, a lot of collections and objects are not at all publicly attractive or interesting.

### ***Collections centres***

In the UK, collections centres, or storage off-site somewhere much cheaper, is a fashionable answer. But surely this only highlights the issue? If a museum can't make use of its collections for the public when they are nearby, with staff to provide information and to make use of them through public engagement and programmes, why are they going to be more useful when they are perhaps a hundred miles away down a salt mine in Cheshire? (This is proposed for parts of the National Archives, for which there is much greater justification, and being considered by the National Maritime Museum). For collections that are mainly used by professional researchers, such as archaeology materials or archives, this is perhaps a potential solution, but for most collections I have severe doubts.

### ***A way forward***

Rather than planning how to reduce the collections or send them somewhere cheaper but much more distant, I believe that museums should be planning how to make better use of this potentially marvellous resource. Not so much less collections, as more use.

## ***A change of mindset***

The UK Museums Association will launch its report on museum collections in the UK in June 2005, *Collections for the future*. It will call for museums to recognise the concept of cultural entitlement, meaning that everyone has a right to a certain level of cultural provision, and to think beyond passive 'access' to active 'engagement' for people. Museums, it will say, might think about museum collections as something that everyone is entitled with – in whatever ways suit them best, which might not be the ways that suit museums best.

There are a number of strategic implications for museums if they are truly to enable people to engage with their collections, centering on the organisational psychology of museums. Rather than being guardians of collections, they need to see themselves as facilitators of engagement with them. Rather than storing static collections, they need to see the collections as a service. Rather than seeing themselves as different and separate from other organisations and institutions they need to see themselves as some of the players in a network of services and provision for research, learning, creativity, enjoyment and leisure.

The notion of engagement with other organisations is crucial. Museums are not the organisations best placed to carry out research on collections: that might better be done by people in universities, the prime research institutions, and by individuals interested in their subjects, or even by commercial companies seeking to make use of collections information. Museums, as experience has shown, are not best placed to provide formal education: they need to provide resources for and work with educational establishments – on their terms, not on those of the museum. In this new view of life, success for the museum would be measured not by the outputs it produces itself, but by outputs from other organisations that have drawn on museum collections resources.

## **Conclusion**

The UK artist, Mark Dion, has brought cheer and glamour to archaeology through his artwork, *Tate Thames Dig*. Like many artists, Dion is intrigued by collections. He has said: 'The museum needs to be turned inside out – the back rooms put on exhibition and the displays put into storage.' I wouldn't go quite that far, but there undoubtedly needs to be a better balance. If museums allocated the imagination, resources and priority to using the collections that go into exhibitions there would not be a problem. I look forward to the time when all museums make use of the many diverse and inspiring ways that there of encouraging and facilitation people's engagement with collections, so that they are a truly popular and public resource.

## **Notes**

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Dr Suzanne Keene  
Museum Studies  
Institute of Archaeology  
University College London  
31-34 Gordon Square  
London WC1H 0PY  
UK

[suzanne.keene@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:suzanne.keene@ucl.ac.uk)