

CODART TIEN congress: Workshop 5

Curator in a small museum: ambitions and challenges?

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Introduction

(Relatively) small museums with limited staff and small collections seem to have problems of their own. How important is it to organize exhibitions, publish collection catalogues or make new acquisitions to attract and maintain the public's attention? What is the role of a curator in a small museum: researcher or manager?

And how can you achieve this with the limited means available? Are blockbuster exhibitions in big museums the downfall of the smaller museums? Having just one or two curators in a small museum demands special capacities of the person involved. Do you need to be a specialist or a generalist to work in a small museum? What is the role of a curator in a small museum: researcher or manager? This workshop aims to detect and discuss the specific difficulties of curators in smaller museums. Especially curators from small museums are invited to join, but curators in larger organizations or curators with a relatively small collection of Dutch and Flemish art within large museums (where other schools are more prominent) are also asked to share their experiences.

In the introduction we will address diverse questions concerning: definitions (what is a small museum?), partnership (how can it be an interesting partner for the larger museums?), PR (what possibilities are there to promote the unique character of your museum?), collection mobility (how difficult is it to get loans? Should the one or two masterpieces in your own collection always be travelling to get loans in return and perhaps earn money for restoration or should they be on view or part of small "in focus" exhibitions in your own museum?). All participants in the workshop (see list below) will be asked for specific remarks upon their own situation and also to the following statements:

1. Directors of small museums should enable the curator primarily to deal with the collection itself (research, registration, publishing etc.)
2. Curators in small museums should be "jacks-of-all-trades". They should be able to deal with the collections, organize exhibitions and focus on how the museum itself remains in the spotlight
3. CODART should assist small museums/curators in the exchange of expertise.

Points for discussion

- Is it the task of the curator to deal primarily with the collection itself (research, registration etc.) or to organize exhibitions and focus on how the museum itself remains in the spotlight?
- How important is it to obtain new acquisitions? Should you enlarge a 'collector's museum' or pay more attention to the history of the collection or the collector with exhibitions?
- Should you create exhibition space in house museums even if it disturbs the authenticity of the rooms?
- How important is the collaboration with large museums?
- Several small museums in Holland have been fused with large museums. Is this an advantage for the curator?

- Collection mobility: How difficult is it to get loans? Should the one or two masterpieces in your own collection always be traveling to get loans in return and perhaps earn money for restoration or should they be on view or part of small 'in focus' exhibitions in your own museum?
- Do you have to compromise within your own organization? And also externally, when dealing with colleagues of larger institutions?
- How can we learn from each other? What can CODART do, or how does CODART help?

Speaker I: Danièle Wagener, Director, Villa Vauban-Musée de l'Histoire de la Ville de Luxembourg

Danièle Wagener will address the situation of the Villa Vauban, the art museum of the city of Luxembourg. The museum underwent extensive renovation work and a new annex for temporary exhibitions was added. While defining the museological program for the new building, the specificities of the collection were analyzed in comparison to those of the larger museums in the region. How could the Villa Auban complement the existing offer and provide an added value? Acquisition and conservation are taken care of in house, whereas research, communication and exhibitions are to be achieved in intensive collaboration with others (universities and contacts with scholars etc.). International networks like CODART play an essential role in establishing these contacts.

Speaker II: Hans Nieuwdorp, Director, Museum Mayer van den Bergh, Antwerp

Hans Nieuwdorp will present the case of the Museum Mayer van den Bergh in Antwerp. It is exceptional in combining diverse characteristics:

1. The collection is international and of high quality, but it is also static or "closed" as there are no acquisitions possible.
2. The administrative situation is unique as there are "mixed statutes," which means: Museum Mayer van den Bergh is actually not only private property with its own board, but it is a city museum as well, falling under the authority of the city of Antwerp. This implies a certain independence next to being embedded in a larger administrative authority or hierarchy of city musea and public administration.
3. In terms of management the position is determined by the housing conditions: e.g. in a small, monumental house. This not only implies a restriction in the number of staff and personnel, but also influences the possibilities for research and the number of public to be admitted.

Report on the discussion

Workshop chair Helen Wüstefeld introduces the theme and speakers. The definition of a small museum is the first issue dealt with and different participants elaborate on their own situation. The group of participants is very diverse, ranging from curators of the RKD to curators in Madrid and Tallinn. The Amsterdam Historical Museum (40 fte) is bigger than the Dordrechts Museum (31 fte), but both are small in comparison to the Rijksmuseum or other large (national) galleries and both are much bigger than house museums (in fact both Dutch museums fused or joined forces with a house museum: Museum Willet-Holthuysen in Amsterdam and Simon van Gijn - museum at home in Dordrecht). A definition of a curator in a small museum could also be based upon the presence of a separate department of education and documentation or a technical staff. Most curators in (relatively) small museums have to be versatile and all round, but to what extent can they depend upon colleagues in the museum itself?

First speaker Hans Nieuwdorp presents the case of the Museum Mayer van den Bergh in Antwerp. The collection with internationally renowned high quality works and a total number of circa 2000 objects is also a static collection, since there are no possibilities for acquisitions. The house was built as a museum and became a non-profit institution: the museum is not only private property with its own board, but it is also a city museum, under the authority of the city of Antwerp. With other city museums of Antwerp many things like administration, photographic department, logistics etc. can be shared which is an advantage. The housing conditions - a small monumental house - has limitations (the number of staff and personnel is restricted and there are also limitations for the possibilities for research and the number of public admitted). It was one of the first museums with a collection catalogue. Due to the quality of the collection interest has been growing. 20 - 25.000 visitors per year and more with special exhibitions or events. Exhibitions are always about or with a strong link to the collection itself.

Catalogues to accompany the exhibitions are always made with help from experts (for example the recent collaboration with the RKD, which came about due to CODART, in making the catalogue on Dutch art in the Museum Mayer van den Bergh and Museum Smidt van Gelder). Apart from Hans there are only 5 people working in the museum (3 administrative and 2 academic, part-timers). A comparison is made with the two previously mentioned house museums in Amsterdam and Correct. The Museum Willet-Hothouse draws circa 50.000 visitors a year. For the silver exhibition they hired outside experts. About 25 - 30.000 people visit the Simon van Gin museum in Correct each year. The museum policy to make several smaller exhibitions a year was changed because the large amount of extra work didn't really result in higher visitor numbers. Contrary to the situation in the Corrects Museum the Simon van Gin museum attracts a solid number of visitors without making exhibitions (however, to stay in the focus of attention, publicity must be made regularly).

Second speaker Danièle Wagener elaborates on the situation in the Villa Alban, the art museum of the city of Luxembourg. In the members presentation on Tuesday 13 March Danielle will tell more about the recent renovations and new annex that is now being built. Temporary exhibitions dealing with the main aspects of the permanent collection will be better possible in the future. There is a good collaboration with larger museums in the region. Together with the Historical Museum many things are shared (one restorer for both collections). For research and making exhibitions the museum depends on external know how and contacts (universities, scholars, other museums etc.). CODART has played an important role in this. Thus far there was no curator and hiring one to organize temporary exhibitions is considered essential and will be one of the first priorities. Danièle Wagener finds CODART an essential network.

Helen Wüstefeld goes into the situation of Kasteel-Museum Sypsteyn in Loosdrecht (staff: a director, a part-time curator and a professional gardener as well as some administrative support and many volunteers). One of the main difficulties is that unlike all small or house museums mentioned above Sypsteyn cannot depend on a large museum or partner in the immediate surrounding (like Willet-Hothouse together with the Amsterdam Historical Museum, Simon van Gin together with the Corrects Museum and the Villa Alban together with the Historical Museum). As most structural funding is not available, it is inevitable to make the museum and its premises available for marriages and parties in order to get financial support - even if it is sometimes harmful for the precious collection. It is important for such a small museum to make alliances with partners in the region and to participate into the wellbeing of the region.

Jacek Tylicki, assistant professor of museology at the Nicolaus Copernicus University, Torun, Poland is actually also part time curator at the Muzeum Narodowe w Gdańsku (National Museum in Gdańsk), Danzig. There are actually three museums funded by the city of Gdańsk and there are two curators. The situation in Poland is different from elsewhere: there are directors, curators and keepers of the collection. The function of a curator in Poland is actually not the same as most CODART curators - he or she deals primarily with the collection. University provides an education for curators - but both worlds are far apart. The problem is that exhibitions are made by experts that don't have

much knowledge of the collection itself. The main problem at this moment, however, is still lack of funds for fundamental renovations.

Since Sophie Raux and Diederik Bakhuys have joined the workshop the French situation is also being discussed. There is no separate education for curators and the universities and museums are two separate worlds. Madrid curator Concha Herrero, curator of tapestries at the Patrimonio Nacional, a specialist in textiles, expresses that, to her surprise, she encounters many of the same problems as expressed in this workshop— even though she works in larger museums, she is often the only specialist in her field and has to address several of the same situations that curators or directors of the small museums face.

A general question is being raised: **what can CODART do?** There are so many small museums (in The Netherlands alone over 900 small museums). How can CODART help curators in small museums?

1. CODART may provide or mediate with internships or expertise of curators whose directors are willing to share expertise – perhaps not free of charge, but changeable in loans or PR.
2. Experiences within the CODART network could play a role in the education of new curators. It is essential to learn and get experience as a curator on the job and not (only) in university.
3. Especially for small museums it is essential to be part of the CODART network. Collaboration with larger museums is important also with regard to collection mobility.
4. CODART can be a clearing house for curators' with specialists' expertise.
5. CODART could also help in making smaller collections more known (via its website).
6. Being part of a larger organization such as CODART can also emphasize the importance of a small collection for political reasons.

Sander Paarlberg, June 2007

Participants in this workshop were:

1. Véronique van Caloen, Curator, Kasteel van Loppem, Loppem
2. Lydie van Dijk, Curator, Stedelijk Museum Zwolle, Zwolle
3. Concha Herrero, Curator of tapestries of the Patrimonio Nacional, Palacio Real, Madrid
4. Renée Kistemaker, Advisor, Amsterdams Historisch Museum, Amsterdam
5. Elly Klück, Curator, Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie, The Hague
6. Paul Knolle, Curator of Old Master paintings, Rijksmuseum Twenthe, Enschede
7. Suzanne Laemers, Curator, Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie, The Hague
8. Jan De Maere, Director, Documentatiecentrum voor het Vlaamse Kunstpatrimonium, Brussels
9. Hans Nieuwdorp, Chief curator, Museum Mayer van den Bergh and Museum Smidt van Gelder, Antwerp
10. Sander Paarlberg, Curator of Old Master paintings, Dordrechts Museum, Dordrecht
11. Ingrida Raudsepa, Head of painting and sculpture department, The Museum of Foreign Art, Riga
12. Helena Risthein, Curator, The Art Museum of Estonia, Tallinn
13. Jacek Tylicki, Assistant professor of museology, Uniwersytet Mikolaya Kopernika (Nicolaus Copernicus University), Torún
14. Danièle Wagener, Director, Musée d'Histoire de la Ville de Luxembourg and Villa Vauban, Luxembourg
15. Helen Wüstefeld, Director, Kasteel-Museum Sypsteyn, Utrecht