

CODART NEGEN congress: Workshop 1

The roles of curator, restorer and management: delegating responsibilities or sharing it?

Chair: Sabine van Sprang, Curator, Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten van België, Brussel
Secretary: Manfred Sellink, Director, Stedelijke Musea Brugge, Brugge

Introductions

Speaker I: Jørgen Wadum, Head of collections, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen

Let professionals do what professionals do best!

In the last decades an increasing number of conservator-restorers have been trained as masters and even PhD's within their profession: in the assessment of the deterioration of our cultural past, in-house risk assessment and risk management for collections - both static and in transit - and the conservation/restoration of objects. Another interrelated profession is rapidly emerging, the conservation scientist. He/she will on demand, and in collaboration with the conservator-restorer, examine and quantify issues relating to the keeping and care of collections. The scientific examination of collections in order to unravel the making and meaning of the objects, using a variety of photographic techniques as well as natural sciences, has resulted in a new type of research, the so-called 'technical art history'. The majority of researchers within this discipline are conservator-restorers and conservation scientists, sometimes working in collaboration with an art historian. Curators have not been trained in the above disciplines and therefore cannot be blamed for not having the insights and thus responsibility for the care of collections for future generations. The role of the museum management is therefore to involve both the curator and the conservator-restorer in making a strategic plan reflecting the shared responsibilities of the professionals involved in safeguarding and researching our collections.

Statement:

In our current leisure society the resources for human mobility are greater than ever – and yet an increasing number of artworks are in transit, apparently chasing the audiences around the globe. Who is in charge, the public or the custodians of art?

Speaker II: Paul Huvenne, Director, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerpen

In times gone by, museums were looked after by a museum keeper who was assisted by the necessary number of museum guards and supervised by a board of directors in an arrangement that worked satisfactorily for the parties concerned.

The ICOM-definition of museums, accepted worldwide, changed all that, and made way for a fundamentally different concept of museology. Indeed, every separate core-business of a museum described in the ICOM-definition became a profession in its own right.

Ever since, the museum landscape has become more and more like the building site of the Tower of Babel, the main reason being the segregation caused by the specialisation that was needed to fulfill the demands of the separate museum tasks.

Professionalizing these tasks was certainly necessary, and in many ways very advantageous, but it had one major drawback: the museum field wasn't made an easier place to work in.

Where formerly things were judged and decided by one museum specialist who carried the title of museum keeper, nowadays a museum is run by a team of specialists, who very often have totally differing opinions on one and the same problem.

Guiding the necessary communication to help make the right decisions is a complex and diverse task, but the challenge is even bigger for the one person who has to make the final decision...

Report on the discussion

Who is in charge? Taking care of collections is a task of directors, curators, and conservators. Each of them has its responsibility, but how are these divided, how to deal with different opinions and conflicts of interests, who has the final say and who takes the blame when things go wrong?

Workshop 1 at the CODART congress 9 was presided and introduced by Sabine Van Sprang (curator at the Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten van België, Brussels). Two CODART members opened the discussion by elaborating on the statements they offered in the congress program (see above) Jørgen Wadum, head of Collections at the Statens museum for Kunst, Copenhagen, and Paul Huvenne. Director of the Koninklijke Museum voor Schone Kunsten in Antwerp)

Wadum opened the workshop by initiating a strongly debated sideline of the discussion with the words 'enough is enough', referring to the (too) large number of exhibitions and huge numbers of works of art travelling around the world. He also pointed out that according to the ICOM ethical code we should in general be more aware of the responsibility we have in safeguarding our collections for future generations. Wadum strongly argued for further raising the standards of the profession of restorers/conservators in all parts of the world to the level of a specialized academic training. Much more work should also be made of reaching generally accepted standards for facility reports, loan procedures, museum security procedures, etc. Against this background, regarding the topic of the workshop itself, he was in favour of a balanced, dual responsibility of the curator on the one and the conservator on the other hand, facilitated by the management. However, in case of decisions where the condition of an object is an issue, the balance should always lean towards the opinion of the conservator.

Huvenne discussed the problem from a more historical point of view, looking backwards to where museum curators and directors have come from. While also stressing that directors – whom Huvenne believes should first and foremost have a curatorial background – must facilitate and orchestrate the various points of views brought forward by curators and conservators, it was also clear that in his view

the final say and responsibility in all matters is that of the director. He also brought forward an aspect that grew in importance during the discussion: as curators/directors we have responsibilities towards collections, but just as much towards the public and society. "It is not only our task to preserve objects, but also to use them."

General outline of the discussion

Given the number of interesting but in scope rather broad topics brought forward by the speakers it proved difficult to keep the discussion on the track of the subject. At first the debate "narrowed" down to a very specific, but indeed very important and high-profile issue: do we lend too much, do we lend too easily, and who is responsible for these choices. When some members rightly pointed out that the subject of the workshop also included many other important aspects of what museums do, the scope widened to equally important and high-profile issues that in contrast were very far from specific: temporary exhibitions versus permanent collections, the role a museum could/should play in society, and – very interesting, but certainly a topic for a long workshop in the future – do we generate exhibitions ourselves and, if so, on what grounds, or are exhibitions forced upon us by politicians, boards of trustees or even the general public demand. For a short while the debate even turned a little philosophical and the importance of "the real thing" as a fetish in society was touched upon. After these digressions, the discussion narrowed down once more to the subject of the workshop.

While not implying that everybody present will underscore these points, the following remarks taken with some liberty from the discussion can be seen as generally accepted issues that are of importance to all CODART members:

- there are very specific dangers in the continuing trend of appointing directors with a non-curatorial/non-art historical background
- as in many other discussion we must not underestimate that scale differences in museums have huge implications in the choices that can be made; many tend to forget that most smaller museums or historical houses do not have restoration departments or even a single in-house conservator/restorer
- whereas the academic training of curators is a historical fact, that is certainly not the case in the training of restorers; a high quality academic training in the field of conservation is a must for restorers/conservators to balance the traditional role of the curators
- in the training of art historians more attention should be given to material issues of objects and problems of conservation; while it is difficult and a long road to change the academic training in general, museums could and should invest themselves in training post-graduate students, interns and junior staff in such matters
- the current trend (like the European project Collections on the Move, but there are several other developments in this field as well) of working together on generally accepted loan-procedures, facility reports; condition reports etc. must be supported; networking and continuous exchange of information is of vital importance, but far from realized
- one must not overemphasize the differences between conservators/restorers on the one, and curators on the other hand; in most cases they work together with common goals and shared values, each using his/her specific training and background
- the collaboration between curators and conservators in combining in-depth technical research and high standard (art)historical analysis is a slowly evolving trend which in itself results in many new insights that are of interest to the public and could be used more creatively in exhibitions and installations of the permanent collection

Conclusion

After a lively, and at times fierce discussion with some minor emotional outbursts, it may come as a surprise that in fact the consensus on the workshop topic was rather unanimous: ideally curators and conservators have shared responsibilities, each using his own professional, academic background. It is the task of the director to balance their opinions and incorporate their responsibilities in strategic choices with an open eye for the role of the public and all other “shareholders” in society, now and in the future. Regarding the differences between this ideal situation and the actual situation in many museums I leave it up to the reader to ponder upon.

Manfred Sellink, Bruges, 13 May 2006

Participants in this workshop were:

1. Joost Vander Auwera, Attaché, Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten van België, Brussels
2. Hanna Benesz, Keeper of early Netherlandish paintings, National Museum in Warsaw, Warsaw
3. Tatjana Bosnjak, Curator, National Museum, Belgrade
4. Quentin Buvelot, Curator, Mauritshuis, The Hague
5. Ingrid Ciulisová, Slovak Academy of Sciences, Institute of Art History, Bratislava
6. Stephen Hartog, Senior curator, Instituut Collectie Nederland, Rijswijk
7. Karen Hearn, Curator of 16th-and 17th-century arts, Tate Britain, London
8. Jan Jaap Heij, Curator, Drents Museum, Assen
9. Paul Huvenne, Director, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp
10. Paul Knolle, Curator of Old Master paintings, Rijksmuseum Twenthe, Enschede
11. Fritz Koreny, Senior researcher, Institut für Kunstgeschichte der Universität Wien, Vienna
12. Olga Kotková, National Gallery in Prague, Prague
13. Alastair Laing, Adviser on pictures and sculpture, The National Trust, London
14. Daniëlle Lokin, Director, Stedelijk Museum Het Prinsenhof - Gemeente Musea Delft, Delft
15. Ewoud M. Mijnlief, Curator of Museum het Catherina Gasthuis and Museum De Mondriaan, MuseumgoudA, Gouda
16. Lawrence W. Nichols, Curator of European paintings and sculpture before 1900, The Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo
17. Carl Nix, Curator, Atlas Van Stolk, Rotterdam
18. Maria Ordeanu, Curator of prints and drawings, The Brukenthal Museum, Sibiu
19. Zuzana Paternostro, Curator of foreign paintings, Museu Nacional de Belas Artes, Rio de Janeiro
20. Manfred Sellink, Artistic director, Stedelijke Musea Brugge, Bruges
21. Anja K. Ševčík, Curator Old Masters collection, National Gallery in Prague, Prague
22. Karin Sidén, Senior curator of paintings and sculpture / Old Masters, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm
23. Marieke Spliethoff, Curator of paintings, Paleis Het Loo Nationaal Museum, Apeldoorn
24. Sabine van Sprang, Curator, Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten van België, Brussels
25. Bernard Vermet, Associate, Foundation for Cultural Inventory, Amsterdam
26. Jørgen Wadum, Head of collections, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen