

CODART NEGEN congress: Workshop 2

More or less?

Mixed presentations in museums and their impact on curatorship

Chair: Charles Dumas, Chief curator, Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie, The Hague
Secretary: Helen Wüstefeld, Director, Kasteel-Museum Sypesteijn, Loosdrecht

Introductions

Speaker I: Hildelies Balk, Curator, Museum de Fundatie, Kasteel Het Nijenhuis, Heino

Mrs. Balk was responsible for the reinstallation of Kasteel Het Nijenhuis, the 'housemuseum' of Dirk Hannema (1895-1984), former director of Museum Boijmans van Beuningen

A mixed presentation is more interesting for the public than the classic arrangement of objects according to discipline; it is less intimidating and gives the audience more chance to identify with the objects. This style of presentation demands greater versatility from the curator.

This, at least, is the experience of Museum de Fundatie (The Foundation Museum). The museum has two locations; Kasteel Het Nijenhuis in Heino and the Paleis aan de Blijmarkt in Zwolle, where the artefacts are displayed in the context of the original private collections. Castle Nijenhuis is arranged as a collector's house, where a combination of paintings, sculptures, applied arts and furniture, both old and new, European and exotic, are displayed in the spirit of the original owner, the collector Dirk Hannema. In the Palace, diverse collections which have come into the possession of the museum by way of bequests or purchases are shown in eight galleries in a mixed arrangement, reflecting the background and preferences of the original owners. The involvement of collectors is also crucial to the planning of the exhibitions.

This method of display, which is often a revelation for the audience, gives, I would say, an extra dimension to the role of the curator. The 'story' that is being told must always be borne in mind, and it should be possible to see the hand of the collector in the arrangement, without this rendering the objects as merely illustrative. A passionate interest in the objects they collect is characteristic of the private enthusiast, and this is the atmosphere in which the museum aims to exhibit the works. The achievement of this is a stimulating challenge. But it also has its disadvantages. There is the discrepancy between creating an open, homely setting for the objects and the museum standards which must be met if the objects are to be exhibited responsibly in a safe and secure environment. Also, the emphasis on presentation means that there is little time left over for research into interesting aspects of the collection which, apart from anything else, sometimes require specialist knowledge of, for example, seventeenth century drawings or Asiatic ceramics. In my lecture I want to examine these questions and explore the various creative solutions which have been devised by the staff of Museum de Fundatie to address them.

Speaker II: Jet Pijzel-Dommisse, Curator of decorative arts, Gemeentemuseum Den Haag

Mrs. Pijzel recently organised the exhibition Haags Goud en Zilver in the Gemeentemuseum.

There is a tendency to present the decorative arts more and more in mixed displays: in a display dedicated to a period, a style, to a historical event or some special theme. Among museum directors exhibitions of this kind are popular, because they are likely to attract more visitors and not just specialists in, for example silver, porcelain or glass. As part of these displays, however, the objects can act as no more than illustrations of that story, usually more or less stripped of their own art-historical values. The information provided for silver exhibited currently in the Rijksmuseum, for instance, doesn't mention the city where the silver was made and assayed, both essential pieces of information for the understanding and knowledge of Dutch silver. If all curators become generalists, the expertise in different fields of decorative arts will get lost.

Besides multi-disciplinary displays it is important that museums keep on organizing exhibitions and displays of decorative arts based on one discipline. The exhibition *Gold and Silver from The Hague* in the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag (September 2005-January 2006) proved that it is possible to present and make public new research in this field, and make an attractive show as well

Report on the discussion

Introduction

Does the public still want a classic art museum, showing its art objects in separate genres? Or does the visitor require a story larger than the sum of the objects? On a smaller scale, this bipartite division of historic and art-historic missions can be followed particularly in castles and/or collector's houses and historic musea. Is there room for both with and next to each other – as the new Rijksmuseum would like us to believe? The recent discussions concerning the renovation of the Rijksmuseum, where historical and art-historical story lines shall be combined, plays an important role in these considerations.

Summarizing, there are four kinds of museums:

1. Houses of collectors (where mixed presentations are not a choice but proscribed and show the hand of the collector; for example Museum De Fundatie, Simon van Gijn Museum aan Huis)
2. Historic Museums or Thematic Museums (where mixed presentations often explain the history of a city or the history of a specific subject; for example Amsterdams Historisch Museum, Museum het Catharijneconvent)
3. Art Museums (with mixed collections; for example Gemeentemuseum The Hague, Frans Hals Museum, Dordrechts Museum, Stedelijk Museum De Lakenhal)
4. Picture Galleries (for example Mauritshuis, National Gallery London, National Gallery of Scotland)

Exhibitions of mixed displays are very popular among museum directors, as they are likely to attract many visitors. However, by telling a good story ('sell experiences', including the context and having a good title) directors can still be convinced to stage more specialized exhibitions (see, for instance, the recent silver show in the Gemeentemuseum, The Hague, a museum that has c. 40 exhibitions a year, but had not shown silver since 1962, and the public loved it).

Today's museums should include all – whereas in the past they were more academic. The function of the curator is no longer emphasized, instead the administration and development departments have become more and more important. There are always compromises to be made, but loss of expertise and connoisseurship is to be regretted. Possibly we see a gulf-movement.

Emily Gordenker (National Gallery of Scotland), Pieter Biesboer (Frans Halsmuseum, Haarlem), Ewoud Mijnlief (Catharina Gasthuis, Gouda), Norbert Middelkoop (Amsterdams Historisch Museum), Jan-Rense Boonstra (Bijbels Museum), Eymert-Jan Goossens (Koninklijk Paleis op de Dam) and others participated in the discussion by highlighting examples of their own musea.

Points that were emphasized:

1. Mixed presentations give an extra dimension to the role of the curator.
2. But if all become generalists, the expertise in different fields of decorative arts will get lost.
3. Generalism should not jeopardize research.
4. Basic standards of conservation and security in presentations should be met.
5. Objects should be more than just an illustration of the story.
6. Beware of designers 'just shopping' for decorative arts.

Has the changing role of the curator - from specialist to generalist - consequences for CODART?

CODART started as an association for curators of Dutch and Flemish art, primarily 17th century paintings, drawings and prints. Should CODART now also draw other curators, and if yes, what specialists? If we would like to extend our services, what specialists do we want to attract? What do we have to offer them?

Generally, the members of the workshop concluded, that modern art curators are not an option, as this field is not essentially Dutch or Flemish but international. But 19th century specialists are welcome, as well as experts on sculptures, silver and all applied arts etc. As most of the foreign curators who are member of CODART are generalists on Dutch art, the more we should welcome specialized experts as they, par excellence, could function as sources of information for others. Information that can be shared through CODART, being one of the basic purposes of our association. However, when curators of other fields become participants, this should have consequences for the program of our congresses. The needs should be assessed, excursions, lectures should be adapted (for instance, including lectures offering a broader view of the arts).

We all realize it will be very fruitful to speak with each other – and CODART may function even better, being a clearing-house between experts and generalists.

Helen Wüstefeld, 30 March 2006

Participants in this workshop were:

1. Hildelies Balk, Chief curator, Museum de Fundatie, Zwolle
2. Pieter Biesboer, Curator, Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem
3. Janrense Boonstra, Director, Bijbels Museum, Amsterdam
4. Till-Holger Borchert, Chief curator of Groeningemuseum and Arentshuis, Stedelijke Musea Brugge, Brugge
5. Osvaldas Daugelis, Director, Mikalojus Konstantinas Ciurlionis National Art Museum, Kaunas
6. Henri Defoer, Former director of Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht
7. Charles Dumas, Chief curator, Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie, The Hague
8. Eliška Fučíková, Senior advisor, The Office of Senate of the Parliament of the Czech Republic, Prague
9. Eymert-Jan Goossens, Curator, Koninklijk Paleis, Amsterdam
10. Emilie Gordenker, Senior curator Dutch and Flemish Art, National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh
11. Lia Gorter, Director, Foundation for Cultural Inventory, Amsterdam
12. Saskia van Haaren, Chief curator, Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht
13. Ursula Härting, Exhibition curator, Gustav-Lübcke-Museum, Hamm
14. Sandra Janssens, Research curator, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp
15. Fred G. Meijer, Curator, Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie, The Hague
16. Norbert Middelkoop, Curator of paintings, prints and drawings, Amsterdams Historisch Museum, Amsterdam
17. Hans Nieuwdorp, Chief curator, Museum Mayer van den Bergh and Museum Smidt van Gelder, Antwerp
18. Jet Pijzel-Dommisse, Curator of decorative arts, Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, The Hague
19. Loet Schledorn, Curator, Stedelijk Museum Het Prinsenhof - Gemeente Musea Delft, Delft
20. Peter Schoon, Director, Dordrechts Museum, Dordrecht
21. Geert Souvereyns, Coördinator, Vlaamsekunstcollectie, Ghent
22. Ron Spronk, Associate curator for research at Straus Center for Conservation and Technical Studies, Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge
23. Daiga Upeniece, Director, Arzemju Makslas Muzejs (Museum of Foreign Art), Riga
24. Helen Wüstefeld, Director, Kasteel-Museum Sypesteyn, Utrecht
25. Yao-Fen You, Theodore Rousseau Post-Doctoral Fellow in European Paintings, Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge
26. Olena Victorivna Zhivkova, Head of department of European art, Bogdan and Varvara Khanenko Museum of Art, Kiev