

CODART ELF congress: Workshop 2

Cataloguing the collections

Chair: Nico van Hout, Curator, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp

Secretary: Sabine van Sprang, Curator, Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten van België - Museum voor Oude Kunst, Brussels

Introduction

Nico van Hout started with an evocation of his own experience: some time ago he wanted to buy a museum catalogue that was actually out of print. Since the museum had no intention to publish it again, he had to satisfy himself with the “masterpiece”- coffee table book. Indeed, our days more and more museums choose to publish their catalogues on line.

Speaker I: Amy Walsh, Curator of European paintings and sculpture, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), Los Angeles

Once the primary focus of curators, the cataloguing of the permanent collection has, in recent years, received less and less attention in deference to temporary exhibitions, which are mounted with the aim of attracting more visitors. Although the exhibition catalogue often brings new insight into the meaning and significance of works of art in the collection, is this enough? What is the role of the collection catalogue? Who is it for? What format should it assume – printed book or online catalogue? What function should it fulfill?

Questions: *Online catalogue vs. traditional printed text*

How does cost affect the decision – both for the museum and the audience? Is there room for approaching the objects from various points of view for various audiences?

Questions: *The printed catalogue:*

What is the preferred format and content for printed catalogues? Should the catalogue seek only to document, or also to educate by placing the works in a broader context?

Questions: *The online catalogue:*

Should online catalogues duplicate printed books or should the content be abbreviated or altered for a more general audience? Should online catalogues be interactive, allowing approved scholars to make comments and improvements?

Speaker II: Lia Gorter, Director, Foundation for Cultural Inventory, Amsterdam

The Foundation for Cultural Inventory makes inventories in museums mostly in former Eastern European countries, but also in India and Cuba. They digitize collections and copy the files of a museum. Sometimes they advise about the condition of a collection and make an effort to interest museum directors in improving the knowledge of their staff about Dutch and Flemish art. They add these collections to our website as well as to that of Cultural Heritage cc, an international server hosting almost 3000 collections of very diverse museums around the world.

Report on the discussion

At first glance, catalogues on-line seem to offer a perfect solution:

- Since museums rarely show all their works of art, on-line catalogues offer an easy way to make the whole collection available to the public.
- They offer the possibility to adjust new insights and findings without having to update and republish printed catalogues.
- Since even the best curator cannot be specialised in every field, on-line catalogues create the possibility to ask specialists on regular basis to give advice 'on line' and to exchange points of view on particular issues.
- On-line catalogues offer the possibility to explore different items (monographic or thematic) and to address different kinds of public at once: the scholar, the larger audience, children.
- Because of its playfulness and interactivity, the on-line catalogue appeals to a larger audience and may attract, by doing so, new kinds of public to museums.

But the catalogue on-line has also a negative side :

- The statement that it is cheaper than a printed catalogue is often wrong. On the contrary, the labour needed to transfer all the information on the internet, the licences and the copyrights, make it a very expensive tool.
- On-line information is not always easily "manageable". If you want to use it as a tool in your comparative research, for instance, you must print out the reproductions. But since these are often protected, it cannot be done properly.
- On-line catalogues encourage the continuous updating and replacement of information. As a result of which there is danger of losing the historiography of knowledge.
- We are not sure that we will be able to preserve all the information put on internet for the future generations.

The audience in the workshop therefore agree that on-line catalogue should not replace the printed catalogues but complement them. Ideally, the on-line catalogue should provide the "basic" information ("passport"-information as it has been called) of all works of art belonging to the museum. It should be easily found on the net and accessible to everyone. Actually CODART could play an active role in this matter: museums should have the possibility to connect their on-line catalogues to its website just as in the case of the National Brukenthal Museum of Sibiu, Romania.

Instead, the printed catalogue should contain scholarly information, reflecting the state of knowledge at a certain time.

The participants of the workshop felt that in general, museum directors consider printed catalogues less 'sexy' these days. Nevertheless, the scholarly catalogue remains the primary source for study and for showing collections to a wider public.

Participants in this workshop were:

- 1 Sylvia Böhmer, Curator of paintings, Suermondt-Ludwig-Museum, Aachen
- 2 Charles Dumas, Chief curator, Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie, The Hague
- 3 Thera Folmer-von Oven, Curator, Privatecollection, Aerdenhout
- 4 Carina Fryklund, Curator, National Museum, Stockholm
- 5 Silke Gatenbröcker, Curator, Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Braunschweig
- 6 Lia Gorter, Director, Foundation for Cultural Inventory, Amsterdam

- 7 Gerlinde Gruber, Curator of Dutch paintings of the 17th and 18th century, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna
- 8 Jan Jaap Heij, Curator, Drents Museum, Assen
- 9 Nico van Hout, Curator, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp
- 10 Dragana Kovačič, Senior curator, National Museum, Belgrade
- 11 Norbert E. Middelkoop, Curator of paintings, prints and drawings, Amsterdams Historisch Museum, Amsterdam
- 12 Lawrence W. Nichols, Curator of European paintings & sculpture before 1900, Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo
- 13 Maria Ordeanu, Curator of prints and drawings, National Brukenthal Museum, Sibiu
- 14 Mieke Perez, Curator Memlingmuseum, Sint Janshospitaal and Onze-Lieve-Vrouwe der Potterie, Musea Brugge, Bruges
- 15 Sabine Pénot, Research associate, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna
- 16 Ruud Priem, Curator of Old Master paintings, Museum Het Valkhof, Nijmegen
- 17 Ingrida Raudsepa, Head of painting and sculpture department, The Latvian Museum of Foreign Art, Riga
- 18 Pieter J.A. Roelofs, Curator of 17th-century Dutch painting, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam
- 19 Vadim Sadkov, Head of department of European and American art, Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow
- 20 Karin Sidén, Senior curator of paintings and sculpture / Old Masters, National Museum, Stockholm
- 21 Sabine van Sprang, Curator, Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten van België -Museum voor Oude Kunst, Brussels
- 22 Cécile Tainturier, Assistant curator, Fondation Custodia, Paris
- 23 Daiga Upeniece, Director, The Latvian Museum of Foreign Art, Riga
- 24 Amy Walsh, Curator of European paintings and sculpture, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), Los Angeles
- 25 Marjorie E. Wieseman, Curator of Dutch painting, National Gallery, London