

# DEACCESSIONING AND RE-LOCATING NEW OPTIONS FOR MUSEUMS

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## 1. Enhancing cultural heritage might be a tricky challenge

Cultural heritage is a complex and multi-faceted topic which one of the most controversial debates of the contemporary scenario is focused upon. In the art system, but more in general in society, museums have been identified as the vehicle of art valorization with specific and established duties. There is a general sense that conceive cultural heritage preservation as the museum's *raison d'être*, in order to keep the memory of human testimony alive. Indeed, it is undeniable that its own main and primary function is to hand down this inheritance. Talking about enhancement might be very tricky, in fact through the years it has passed across many different definitions and categories, initially even considered evanescent and fleeting concept. During the 1960s, a first interpretation was given in terms of activities aiming at the promotion, the enjoyment and the diffusion of cultural heritage but it was still kept separated from the conservation duties. Moreover, Italy had waited until 2001 to see enhancement regulation codified in the art. 117 of the Italian Constitution (Antonucci, 2016).

Why enhancing heritage is so important? Basically, the answer is quite easy: it might be stated that the bent to show and enhance cultural heritage is always teetering between the potentiality to express the actual value of cultural goods and the managing criteria under-

taken by cultural institutions<sup>1</sup>. As a consequence, it makes sense to talk about cultural enhancement as a relevant artistic, economic and social growth element. In this chapter I will try to figure out different solutions adopted by museums in their own collection's management system, bearing in mind the mandatory and essential goal of pursuing public interest<sup>2</sup> (Casini, 2016).

To sustain the primary and final museums' objective – that is usually identified with the collection's enhancement – museums need solid financial measures at disposal (Sanesi, 2018). Nowadays, many cultural institutions have to deal with burdensome economic issues risking to entail the devolpment of normal activities; on the one hand, public museums continuously deal with a gradual reduction of public funds, on the other hand even the most well-known private organizations are not able to survive by their own resources in spite of public accountability, qualitative fundraising and self-managing ability, as the pre-bankruptcy crisis of the Metropolitan Museum of New York (Mattiacci, 2008) shows.

Almost in the last thirty years, cultural policies have been changed, embodying a wider range of citizens' and the so called cultural consumers' flavours and needs. "Consuming art" has increasingly become a harder social demand to please on the part of cultural policies: people ask for spectacular initiatives, such as new museums openings, innovative art collections' exhibitions, important artworks' restorations

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<sup>1</sup> Museums to carry out their activities have to carefully balance their duties, caring oh the one hand about preserving, enhancing its own belongings but on the other hand to have to be financially sustainable avoiding the risk of bankruptcy.

<sup>2</sup> Existing copyright laws have traditionally attempted to define public interest as strictly related to Cultural Heritage, for example: J.H. Merryman splits public interest in four elements: preservation, cultural truth, public accessibility and cultural nationalism; Jayme in *Globalization in Art Law*, uses to divide it in five different categories: as a globally society interest (considering also accessibility and movements of goods for exhibition purposes), the capacity of Public policies to preserve cultural good with a relevant national value, artists and owners' private interests, good preservation' interests and market interests.

and each time different, curious, rare and stimulating temporary exhibitions to visit.

## 2. What are museums made of?

Big exhibition rooms, transparent crates hosting precious and delicate artworks, captivating light beams illuminating breath-taking paintings, some isolated chairs where tired visitors can rest and probably a healing cafeteria and a bookshop. Actually, what is described above is just what people see and live into the museum, but there is another part, hidden and out of consumption that should be considered as the institution's beating heart. It is deposits.

Many museums, both in Italy and abroad, keep a significant part of their collections locked in storage and, in recent years, the desire not just to show the objects in the best possible way but also to open the doors and allow people to come into contact with unknown spaces and artworks, has become increasingly evident.

It is a long time that the debate between preservation and enhancement of cultural goods is going on; on the one hand, indeed, a conservation-oriented vision is afraid about a possible unscrupulous use of cultural heritage and fights to keep it safe; on the other hand, at the opposite, a market-oriented wing thinks that enhancing that heritage should be considered a fundamental economic asset (Donato, 2010), able to tackle the dilemma of cultural heritage profitability troubles.

The enhancement argument, that has involved the whole cultural system for several years and is still heated, with the growing importance of cultural economic discipline made almost real by the Italian 'legge Ronchey' in 1993 (aimed at combining public and private provision of services in state museums), has changed directions. In fact, the focus was shifted on the privatization of public services into the museums' scenario and the introduction of some economic profit-oriented measures.

Actually, the enhancement *ratio* was totally different. Cultural heritage needed to be part of a change and even if its preservation is an unassailable value, it cannot be conceived as a passive action aimed at mere conservation. Opting out of caring about cultural goods sustainability in favour of a static conservative dynamic could run the risk of neglecting their value and moreover denying their shared enjoyment. Finally, the real challenge is to devise a combined system able to merge both sides, in order to implement an active form of preservation of our heritage.

Precisely, the commitment of promoting and divulgating cultural heritage, especially as a common good, and actions aimed to protect and enhance it must be underpinned in the interests of stimulating public and citizens' participation. And in so doing, paradoxically thanks to the proper use of cultural resources, it becomes possible to guarantee their preservation. To conclude, considering the neverending transformation of contemporary society it is crucial to ask ourselves: which contribution do we want to produce on people's quality of life through cultural policies? Are museums able to generate any kind of cultural and social impact? The answer is undeniably affirmative.

Due to the fundamental role of museums and cultural institutions in general, even according to the ICOM (2010) definition, we must acknowledge that their social function has to be maintained, contributing to the promotion and the devolpment of culture. Now, after having defined the general framework, the scenario looks focused on some major troubles. First of all, keeping artworks closed into museums' deposits may sound as a vital and necessary obligation to be adopted, but the extremely conservative vision shared by many museum professionals makes them blind to a more versatile evidence. Indeed, deposits generate a huge cost in which museums incur; not only a financial cost but mostly the cost – borne by society – of limited enjoyment, education, cultural growth and, from museums' perspective, of a very limited opportunity to establish an efficient exhibition system turnover among institutions, denying the chance to show what is often hidden and out of consumption.

### 3. New experiences in the contemporary scenario

“Museums, like many other heritage attractions, are essentially experiential products, quite literally constructions to facilitate experience. In this sense, museums are about facilitating feelings and knowledge based upon personal observation or contact by their visitors” (Prentice, 1996).

Museums need to tackle five traditional duties: to collect, to preserve, to study, to exhibit, and to interpret objects of their own collection (ICOM, 2013). Carrying out their mission, museums deal with several activities: they acquire objects either by donation or purchase and thus take care of their collections by monitoring them; museums produce research through the work of in-house curators or making their collection available to academics and professionals. Certainly, museums produce exhibitions allowing the audience to enjoy their own permanent and temporary collections. Moreover, they play the vital role of educating the audience through exhibitions and specific services.

Art museums’ crucial assets are their permanent collections. In fact, these are the key resources museums manage as they fulfil their public mandate. The collection is the very heart of a museum and since all the activities undertaken depend on the collection, then artworks preservation is paramount (Stebbins, 1991). If artworks are denied to audience visibility, not useful for research purposes, and not needing any specific restoration actions at the moment, their very reason for being in a museum is almost murky: “Museum’s objects are not the mission of the museum’s work but powerful tools that enable it” (Skramstad, 1997).

Thus, to try to keep as many artworks as possible accessible appears to be the right direction to chase. In recent times, maybe the most important museum of the entire world, the Louvre, has decided to open another Louvre venue in Liévin, just next to the older structure built in Lens. Another challenge has been mounted by the Museum, after the birth of Abu Dhabi Louvre and the Lens one, in fact the project’s aim is to create a new space able to host the big number of objects that

nowadays are located into the stocks. Through the decades the Louvre Museum has collected huge reserves of artworks thanks to extensive acquisition policies, but it is also true that being so close to the Seine river could endanger them.

After a past similar episode which forced the museum to close for some days in order to repair the damages, the directorate took the decision to create a specific-dedicated site where the stocks could be protected and preserved. The new Louvre in Liévin was born as a conservation center where more than 200.000 artworks are going to be kept. The promising project will be inaugurated in 2019 and the new conservation center could pave the way to a new idea of museum, where the background restoration works could be showed live to the visitors who can have the chance, for the very first time, to join and share a completely unusual visit experience<sup>3</sup>.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

“Museums are doing amazingly well, but can they keep the visitors coming?” (The Economist, 2013). The cultural market, just like every other market, deals with demand and supply, exchanging art, music, performing arts, literature and more in general all the initiatives, sensations, patterns, tools to ingenerate knowledge, emotional and intellectual fulfillment. “Doing culture” is such a hard duty, but first we have to start asking ourselves which is the real meaning of culture.

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3 In 2012, the Louvre directorate decided to open a third venue, beside the main one in Paris and the other one in Abu Dhabi, in Lens. Lens is in the mining region of Nord-Pas de Calais, and after being hard bitted by the economic crisis, it was decided to give a re-born chance to the city led by cultural policies. The new Lens Louvre has become not only the iconic symbol of the new contemporary architecture but also a virtuous space able to host many artworks from the main venue with the aim of mobilize the collections' heritage and make it more visible. Indeed, Louvre of Lens can be defined as “museum *in fieri*” because the 20% of its collection is renovated each year and at least every five years the exhibition changes.

If on the hand the question is whether or not in cultural production an audience is a *conditio sine qua non*, on the other hand there is another school of thought that doesn't accept the need of this requirement to be recognized as culture<sup>4</sup>.

We might say that even if the audience requirement is not necessary, it is also true that museums and cultural institutions more in general produce exhibitions to be enjoyed by visitors: without them their work would be unnecessary. In this scenario, considering the upcoming technological innovations, the chance to have an on-line museum visit, museums should consider the option of becoming more appealing and attractive to maintain their role.

Museums are not really future-oriented, but it might exist a way to be innovative with respect to their collections and their existing mission. Broadening the lending activities to increase the artworks turnover in museums, including also minor museums into successful networks; wondering to expose copies of hidden and precious artworks and avoiding risks of damages, pursuing a wider diffusion of art objects in order for people to be encouraged to visit them. At least an extreme solution, when possible, would be to sell objects: some of the major museums, such as Prado, keep over 90 per cent of their endowment locked in their deposits: these artworks are never showed to the public.

A reasonable selling system could allow museums to lighten their stock with the less prominent pieces in order for them to raise funds aimed at acquiring more consistent objects for a more appropriate interpretation of their collections; the sold artworks may add value to other minor museum's collections (Rizzo and Towse, 2016). Even if

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4 The Arts, more generally speaking, are something somewhere between hedonism and entrainment (Pellegrini, 2016). Since ancient times, starting from the Greece concept of *Paideia* to the Eighties social gathering, Culture wasn't conceived as a shared value, but something that belonged to the few. Concomitantly to the Industrial Revolution, to the renewed role of working class, to the feminism and the student's movement, it becomes increasingly clear that culture is democratic value, accessible to everyone.

museums tend to be stuck in an unmovable condition, with the recent cultural changes something has started to change, paving the way for a new creative direction to be followed in the years that lay ahead.

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