

A postcard is not a building

If currently museums are asked to make their inventory records on-line available, there is a great reluctance or even inability to do so. Since the data were created for internal use, their scientific status is not established and quality is insufficient to go “public” for professional and amateur users alike. Even though, there are great values by going public: It would suddenly be possible to aggregate again all the objects of common provenance, such as shards of a vase, pieces of an excavation campaign, pieces of complex artworks such as the “Gate to Hell” by Rodin. It would be further possible to make objects available for trans-disciplinary use such as artworks of real scenes for historical studies, historical photos for photographic art studies, musical instruments design art studies etc.

This paper presents experiences from the effort of the Singapore National Museums to make all if not most of their collections on-line available. The curator in the traditional role of a researcher has a task to increase the collection by relevant pieces for his/ her discipline, and to elaborate publications and exhibitions about selected collection objects in a contextual framework. From these tasks he/ she gains professional awarding. This is ultimately incompatible with going horizontally through the collection, and documenting each object (a) according to the latest stage of knowledge and (b) to note its trans-disciplinary relevance. The Singapore National Museums therefore employed dedicated staff to do that. We found for instance, that a historical collection documented a postcard (which shows a building) as a building instead of a postcard depicting a building; whereas the art collection documents a documentary painting of a building only by the artistic style. We further found that different museum disciplines have different potential objectives and benefits from going online. From practical examples, we could develop guidelines for documenting relevance and significance in a discipline-neutral way.

The paper argues that it should be a task of CIDOC to develop professional framework and guidelines for effective online documentation of museum collections and their objectives according to the specific museum disciplines.

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