Curatorship as Social Practice

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ABSTRACT **This article examines changes that have been taking place in the museum world over the past several decades—changes that have been transforming the social practice of curatorship in museums. We are seeing the emergence of more holistic, integrated and culturally relative approaches to curatorial work that acknowledge the relationships among objects, people, and society, and explore these relationships in social and cultural contexts. Through cross-cultural comparison, curating can be seen as a form of social practice linked to specific kinds of relationships between people and objects as well as to wider social structures and contexts. This approach allows us to transcend debates over whether or not museums and curatorial work should be either object- or people-focused. One approach cannot be separated from the other.**

INTRODUCTION

In the late nineteenth century, museums expanded their collections, professionalized their operations, and created a new type of position: curator. At that time, curators were primarily regarded as caretakers or "keepers of collections." Since then, curatorial work has broadened to encompass a wide range of tasks and responsibilities that extend far beyond caretaking (Glaser and Zenetou 1995, 17). In addition to the technical expertise required in caring for, managing, and preserving collections, curators today are also responsible for researching, interpreting and presenting collections in exhibitions, publications and other media.

Moreover, curators are generally accountable for the intellectual content of exhibitions and publications, obliging them to be expert in a particular academic discipline related to a collection. Because exhibition media are didactic in nature, curators are also educators and may be charged with creating educational programming based on their research and scholarship. Depending on the size of a museum and number of staff

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members, curators may perform administrative tasks related to running a museum. In fact, curatorial work has become so encompassing that it is now difficult to define precisely what a curator is and does.

The extension of the curator's responsibilities is one aspect of a larger set of changes that have been taking place in the museum world for several decades. Most profound, perhaps, is the diminishing significance of objects and collections. Objects, once thought to be the defining feature of museums, have lost their centrality. Museums have shifted to emphasizing service to their public. The educational role of museums—the quest to provide visitors with varied opportunities for experiential learning—has in many cases taken over the primary place of objects in museums. Frequently, objects are no longer of exclusively intrinsic value—that is, collected, studied, preserved, and displayed for their own sake. Instead, they are often used as a means to some other end (Hein 2000, 1–16).[1]

Despite the breadth of curatorial work these days, curators continue to be largely defined by what they do in relation to collections. For example, Edson and Dean in their edited volume *Handbook for Museums* describe a curator as "a museum staff member or consultant who is a specialist in a particular field of study and who provides information, does research, and oversees the maintenance, use, and enhancement of collections" (1994, 290). While this definition is useful for its succinctness, it overlooks the new reality that curators and curating can no longer be defined solely on the basis of their relation to objects. Just as the museum has become more people- and socially-oriented, so too has curating.

Museums and museological work do not exist in a vacuum, but are part of larger sociocultural systems that influence how and why curatorial work is carried out. Because curating cannot be divorced from these contexts, it seems appropriate that scholars and museum practitioners are redefining curating in terms that acknowledge the social and cultural dimensions both of objects and of curatorial work. This perspective allows us to transcend current debates over whether museums and curating should be either object- or people-focused. These orientations are not mutually exclusive. Objects in museums only have value and meaning in relation to people. What we need is an approach to curatorial work that recognizes the interplay of objects, people, and societies, and expresses these relationships in social and cultural contexts.

Philip Cash Cash, a Native American scholar, offers a view of curating that takes the field's multidimensionality and particularity into account. He bases his concept of curating on the premise that people's relationships to objects are ultimately social ones. Thus curatorial work is a form of social practice: "a social practice predicated on the principle of a fixed relation between material objects and the human environment" (Cash Cash 2001, 140). By "the principle of fixed relation," Cash Cash means "those conditions that are socially constructed and reproduced as strategic cultural orientations vis-a-vis material objects" (2001, 141). This definition implies that individual societies have patterned ways of seeing, valuing, ascribing meaning to and treating objects. By looking at curating as a social construct, we begin to see how curating is situated in particular cultural contexts and is thus a cultural artifact in itself.

Cash Cash's definition of curating as social practice suggests that people's "strategic orientations" in relation to objects can become cultural traditions over time. I would add that while social practices must remain fixed long enough to become a tradition, all cultural traditions change just as culture in general changes. Thus, we must also consider how and why people's orientations toward objects—or curatorial traditions—evolve in response to other social and cultural changes. If we think of curating as social practice it follows that change is a constant.

This article examines developments in the museum world that have been transforming the social practice of curating. I describe how these changes are leading to more integrated and culturally relative approaches to curating that recognize people's differing relationships to objects. In the following section, I briefly note developments in museological theory and practice that have contributed to these changes: the increasing emphasis on the educational role of museums, coupled with efforts to make them more "visitor friendly"; the "new museology" movement; and insights gained from studies in comparative museology.

The next section describes changes that are occurring in American museums housing anthropological or ethnographic collections. Here the social practice of curating, which has its own set of traditions, has been placed in sharp contrast to the traditions of the cultural groups from which the objects originated. I specifically focus on curatorship of Native American collections, which is being transformed as Native American approaches to curating—methods of "traditional care"—are integrated into mainstream museum practices. These modifications reflect the changing nature of relationships between these museums and Native American communities.

The final section examines indigenous approaches to curatorship in the Republic of Indonesia as a means of illuminating curating as social practice.[2] Indonesian examples, considered along with Native American methods of traditional care, demonstrate that curatorial behavior is a cross-cultural phenomenon. Developments in comparative museology have also been encouraging a redefinition of curating by presenting us with new and different approaches to curating and cultural heritage preservation from diverse cultural perspectives. Through cross-cultural comparison we begin to see how curating is a social practice linked to specific kinds of relationships between people and objects as well as wider social structures and cultural contexts.

FROM OBJECTS TO PEOPLE AND SOCIETIES

Western museum culture presents a set of standards, practices, and value systems regarding the collection, care, preservation, interpretation, and representation of objects. In this culture, objects are made into "museum pieces" or "special" objects by meeting criteria established by anthropologists, art historians, scientists, curators, and collectors. Standard criteria for determining an object's value include: provenence, age, formal aesthetic properties; rarity, uniqueness, or authenticity; monetary worth as determined by an art or antique market; and scientific significance, as evidence of natural or cultural phenomena.

The social value and dimensions of objects recede into the background once the objects enter the museum and become works of art, scientific specimens, ethnographic or historical artifacts. In Western museum culture, objects are stripped of their social attributes through decontextualization, a process by which objects are detached from some social whole and given new meanings as they are recontextualized within the culture of the museum (see Clifford 1988; Furst 1991; Gurian 1999; and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1992).

The problem of decontextualization has been especially acute in the traditional object-centered museum in which objects and collections have served as the core around which all museum activities revolve. In this type of museum, the collection, study, preservation, and display of objects for their own sake has justified the museum's very existence (Gurian 1999 and 2002). But today, scholars and museum practitioners are seeing how the decontextualization of objects in object-centered museums has created temporal, spatial, and conceptual distances between objects and people. They have also recognized how decontextualization has led to the neglect of the social and cultural dimensions of curatorial work and of museums in general. In turn, there has been a rethinking of the role of objects in museums as attention has shifted from a focus on objects to a focus on people, their relationships to objects, and the interests and purposes museums serve in society. As Clavir, a conservator at the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology, has noted, "The object [is] losing (some would say simply changing) its place in the theory of a museum" (1994, 53).

This reorientation is the result of a number of developments that have been taking place in the museum field for several decades. One is the increasing importance placed on the educational role of the museum as a public institution dedicated to serving society (Ames 1992; Karp, Lavine, and Mullen-Kreamer 1992; Simpson 1996). The central place of objects and collections has declined as greater attention has been paid to the needs of museum visitors (Gurian 2002). Efforts to provide visitors with more access to museum resources as well as more varied opportunities for learning are now overtaking the former primacy of objects in curatorial work (Hein 2000; Witcomb 2003). As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has observed: "Museums were once defined by their relationship to objects: curators were 'keepers' and their greatest asset was their collections. Today, they are defined more than ever by their relationship to visitors" (1997, 138).[3]

This shift in attention is also an outcome of museums becoming more responsive to the needs and interests of the diverse cultures—especially those of minorities and native or indigenous communities—represented in their collections. Curators now must be sensitive to criticisms emanating from these communities on how their cultures and artifacts are represented in museums. Attention is directed more toward people's values, traditions, and belief systems as they pertain to objects. The stories objects can tell us about these communities are often more important than the objects themselves (Ames 1992; Clavir 2002; Clifford 1997; Gurian 1999; Kurin 1997). To expand on Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's observation, today curators and the curatorial process are defined not only by their relationship to visitors but also by their relationships to the people represented in their collections.

The social role of museums and the social dimensions of curating have been of central importance to proponents of the "new museology," which has its roots in the social

movements of the 1960s and 1970s and in community-based museum initiatives. The new museology arose from a widespread dissatisfaction with conventional interpretations of the museum and its functions. To new museologists the "old museology" was too concerned with museum methods and techniques, and did not pay enough attention to the purposes and interests museums serve in society. Conventional museums were seen as object-centered. The "new museum" was to be people-centered, action-oriented, and devoted to social change and development.

The new museology movement has been fundamentally concerned with the democratization of museums and museum practices. It stresses the importance of community members, not just as visitors but also as participants in all aspects of museum work. New museologists strive to bridge the gap between professionals and non-professionals by working with local people, drawing on the people's knowledge, experiences, and resources (Davis 1999; Vergo 1989; and Witcomb 2003).

Out of the new museology movement have emerged alternative museum models—such as the ecomuseum[4]—and new approaches to curating—such as "people's museography," identified by Rene Rivard, a noted new museologist. According to Rivard, people's museography is a "body of techniques and practices applied by a population to the conservation and enhancement, in a museum or otherwise, of the collective heritage of the community and territory" (1984, 84). This approach places people and their relationships to objects in the forefront of curatorial activities, which may not conform to any one set of standards or procedures. Instead, curatorial work is constantly being redefined by on-going social processes and interactions. Thus, no single standard set of curatorial practices is seen as universally applicable or appropriate.

The social aspects of objects and curating are also the concern of comparative museology, which is the cross-cultural study of museological behavior. Comparative museology identifies the similarities and differences in museological behavior across cultures (Kreps 2003). An example of museological behavior is the collection, care, and preservation of valued objects. This behavior can be seen as curating if we recognize that curating is not limited to the realm of Western museology.

Cash Cash reminds us that the word curator is derived from the Latin word that means "to take care of" (2001, 139). If we return to this original meaning of a curator as a caretaker, then we can see how individuals or classes of people—such as priests, shamans, spiritual leaders, or royal functionaries—also have been curators. These people can possess specialized knowledge about certain kinds of objects and their care. They may be the guardians of a family, group, or community culture. This responsibility or right is socially sanctioned, and grounded in customs, traditions, and systems of social organization. From this perspective, we can see how the social role of curators in other societies is not so unlike that of curators in Western societies.

Comparative museology asks: What do specific groups or individuals choose to collect, care for, and preserve? What are their methods? And what are the purposes of collecting and preserving objects in particular cultural contexts? What is the role of culture in the perception, care and treatment of objects and in their transmission through time?