MUSEUM LIBRARIANS AS INFORMATION STRATEGISTS[1]

By Geert-Jan Koot

What's wrong with museum libraries?

Libraries and museums both have similar missions: they acquire, describe and make accessible records of human experience. But what is the perceived importance of a library within a museum? The role of museum libraries could be described in special library terms – to provide information to support the activities of the museum, especially its research – and one could assume that such libraries do play an important role in their information-intensive organisations. However, the status of museum libraries, as well as their influence, is less clear than this. In 1996 Esther Bierbaum published an article on this subject, based on a survey of 152 randomly selected museum libraries[2]. Her conclusion was that museum libraries do not fare well within their parent organisations.

There are several measures of departmental status within an organization. One is funding; another, staffing and services, and a third is utilization. By the first of these measures (funding), the museum library's status is not exactly stellar. By the second (staffing), status is at the least ambiguous, but the services offered by library personnel, especially to museum staff, somewhat redeem the situation[3]. The third indicator measures the degree and extent to which management shows awareness of the library, for example by using its services. Unfortunately, utilization by those who matter when it comes to defining institutional status results in a low grade for the library. These results are not unique to museum libraries. In 1993 Davenport and Prusak examined why many corporate libraries play such a marginal role in their organizations. Their conclusions apply perfectly to museum libraries. 'Corporate libraries have largely been left behind by the information revolution. Their goal is to obtain as many books as possible on the assumption that someday someone would want to use each one. Library policies are not focused on how to ensure that information resources are used, but rather on

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[1] Revised version of paper given in Cambridge, Fitzwilliam College at the ARLIS/UK & Ireland Annual Conference *The changing agenda for art librarians,* 6-9 July 2000.

[2] Bierbaum, E. Green. 'Museum libraries: the more things change…' *Special Libraries* vol.87 1996 p.74-87.

[3] *ibid.* p.83

ensuring that they do not leave the premises illicitly. Librarian skill development focuses on acquisition, storage, and classification of printed materials, and distribution of them on request. This is essentially a warehouse model of information provision.[4]

There must be more to a museum library than an open door and neatly filled shelves. Living in the information age, even museum librarians perceive themselves as information professionals. It seems, however, that they operate according to the wrong conceptual model. Librarians have a high degree of potential value. They know what information is needed, and how to facilitate the effective delivery of that information. Unlike their counterparts in information systems they have chosen to focus on information, rather than technology. However, technology is one of the tools to expand their mission, their function and scope, perhaps even combined with other information functions in the museum. To find out what a museum librarian should do to upgrade the status of the library, the potential and the opportunities in this specific setting have to be articulated. To do this, I would like to place the museum library within the information structure of its parent organization, and analyse current electronic developments as part of the museum information service model.

The library as part of the museum information structure

In 1998, Elizabeth Orna and Charles Pettitt published a study about information management in museums and galleries[5]. Although this book sets out guiding principles and practices for integrated management of the whole range of information, it is remarkable that the museum library remains absent. Museums are considered to be storehouses of objects, but they are also powerhouses of information. According to Orna and Pettitt there are two main players in this field: the guardians and the stakeholders of collection information. The guardians are responsible for managing particular types of information. They have authority about acquiring, recording, and amending the information at issue, and they have an overall picture of the ways in which it is used. These guardians are the curators and the researchers, converting raw to refined information. The stakeholders have a vital stake in information because they need it in order to maintain the essential knowledge for their jobs. The stakeholders include curators providing cataloguing information, the registrar's department, conservators, collection managers, and also documentation specialists[6].

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[4] Davenport, T.H. and Prusak, L. 'Blow up the corporate library.' *International Journal of Information Management* vol.13 1993, p.405-413.

[5] Orna, E. and Pettitt, C. *Information management in museums*. 2nd ed. Aldershot: Gower, 1998.

[6] *ibid.* p.29-30

To which of these categories does the librarian belong? Orna and Pettitt see documentation specialists as stakeholders, using refined information. 'Their interest in the refined information made available by the curator is likely to be incorporating the information into the integrated information management package.[7] In my opinion, this role is too limited.

Museum librarians as natural guardians of knowledge

Orna wrote in 1990: 'The real essential is that museum professionals should try to put themselves in the place of the widest range of potential users when they look at their collections. Then they should think of how they can manage the information to allow users to find their own way in, even if their ways of looking at the material are very different from the museum's own conception of what it is there for.[8] Librarians have traditionally been the interface between knowledge and dissemination. As knowledge brokers they confront those who seek with those who know. Because museum librarians meet staff members from all the different departments of the museum, they are well informed about the needs and sources of knowledge within their institutions. Furthermore, they consider user service of paramount importance, and are equipped with highly developed methods of information retrieval for anything they do not already know. The librarians not only provide information, they also provide a physical space of communication, their libraries. These facts make them natural guardians of knowledge.

All decisions about collection information management and access should contribute towards the aim of using the full store of information. This store includes the invisible knowledge in the minds of the people responsible for the care and presentation of the collections. Museums do need people capable of gathering knowledge from those who have knowledge. Subsequently this knowledge has to be structured and refined. Librarians and documentation specialists are among this group of knowledge administrators, involved with recording the information produced by others. In this position museum librarians are again the natural guardians of knowledge, which also gives them a leading role in defining criteria for the information structure. Librarians are the ideal people to act as information managers, analysing needs and designing a strategy for the integrated management of, and access to, information.

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[7]   *ibid.* p.37

[8]   Orna, E. 'Helping users to come to terms with the documentation.' *Terminology for museums. Proceedings of an international conference held in Cambridge, England 21-24 September 1988.* Cambridge: Museum Documentation Association, 1990 p.538

Management of collection information

In museums different kinds of information are needed for survival and success. At the centre of the museum's requirements for information are the collections: all the other kinds of information that any museum requires depend on them. That core should be properly maintained, and if it is not, there will be a black hole in the middle. Current developments in technology will bring new ways of using collections and of creating services based on them.

The role of the librarian should be explored in connection with current developments in object registration. In the early days of computing, the registrar's department was set up to provide inventory control and support basic core data to administer the objects. The databases created could have been the results of a stocktaking exercise, since they recorded only simple physical descriptions, with no information about history or significance. Later on this activity was expanded to record basic object data in such a consistent way that the data are usable in the long term as information. In the year 2000, there is an international standard system format and vocabulary for describing museum objects – CIDOC, Object-Oriented Reference Model (CRM) – but its is not widely used[9]. Museum collection management systems too are heterogeneous with respect to record type, platform and comprehensiveness. Although cataloguing objects is a highly individualized affair, more or less the counterpart of the standardization familiar to libraries, the librarian can still furnish language-based information, methods and means for authority and vocabulary control, indexing tools and record structures. Cataloguing practices developed for use in library or archival settings might be usefully applied in object description. Moreover, based on the experience of three decades of wrestling with computerization, librarians have a significant base of knowledge to share with museum professionals. Librarians have something to offer museums in this respect[10].

An example of the supportive role of librarians in the development of collection information is the REACH project in the United States. REACH stands for Record Export for Art and Cultural Heritage. Librarians are concerned with providing information to the museum visitor, as well as to the educators and curators. It's not surprising at all that a professional organisation of librarians, the Art and Architecture Group of the Research Libraries Group (RLG), started this project to investigate whether information about objects could be extracted from collection

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[9] CIDOC Object Oriented-Reference Model (CRM),
http://www.ville-ge.ch/musinfo/cidoc/oomodel/oodocs.htm

[10] Bierbaum, E. Green. 'Records and access: museum registration and library catraloguing.' *Cataloging and Classification Quarterly* vol.9 1988 p.97-111

management systems and made useful for research purposes. RLG has developed a testbed database of museum object records from a number of different museums that use different collection management systems. The goal was to combine these records into a single interface for the use of researchers. Essentially, the project was concerned with standards. The REACH element set created in this project has many points in common with other cultural heritage data standards[11].

Here we have the old preoccupation of librarians, in love with standard formats, standard vocabularies, standard procedures, and standard rules for cataloguing.

Integrated access to information in museums

Why do we use standards and why do librarians think museums should use standards for information management? Standards are of critical importance for structuring and networking databases in order to share information. The isolation of the departments will erode as soon as museums make commitments to internal information exchange and link computer programmes. Standards are necessary in order to integrate object information, images and bibliographical descriptions. Access to integrated information allows completion of the picture when an artefact or a work of art is being researched. Although technology can greatly increase the power of museums to retrieve, analyse and disseminate information, this is not enough. Integrated management of the whole range of information is essential for the museum. Those who provide value-added services successfully will benefit, more than the owners of the objects. Librarians are able to contribute their knowledge of information management and to support the dissemination and use of standards. They can help to enrich the storehouse of cultural information available in electronic form by leading object documentation projects in their institutions.

Today museum librarians are increasingly involved in the digitization of information. Years ago, in 1995, the role of the chief librarian of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston was expanded into Director of Information Resources, responsible for the library, the archives and for the development of an automated collection management system.

My own library, the Rijksmuseum Library in Amsterdam, is an example of how this involvement can evolve into leadership. My library was assigned to select and build a museum collection management system. To demonstrate the close relationship between collection management and collection information, the library started to design a museum-wide, automated collection information system,

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[11] REACH Project Summary Report, December 1998 http://www.rlg.org/reach.html

bringing together the most diverse forms of art information in the institution. As recognition for expertise in this field, the responsibility for the development of the information system and the digitizing of the collections was taken away from the department of collection management and assigned to the library.

These are only two examples focused on bringing a collective power to museum libraries, which has been absent from their previous state as independent, isolated entities.

Museum information centres

Nowadays many museums put increasing emphasis on access to information. They stimulate visitors to discover more about the objects on display and the subjects or cultures to which these objects belong. We have seen that within the museum many different groups need access, desperate to find information. They choose their own route through the information embodied in the objects, and through the museum's knowledge resources. There is a growing group of informal learners who set their own targets about what they want to know. Meeting objectives that relate to the needs of informal, self-directing learners is one of the most interesting challenges in information management. According to Orna and Pettitt[12], little research has been done on the questions actually asked in museums, either by visitors or by museum staff. The most common enquiries are about specific types of objects, or individual objects. In second place are requests for associated information on places or individuals. Surprisingly, enquiries for objects illustrating a particular subject matter represent a small proportion of the total. This kind of research provides useful pointers to the essentials of information management.

The problem is that many collection management databases are rather poor in content, being the result of stocktaking exercises or created as working tools for the curators. The more raw materials are available, the more they have to be mediated by indexing and interpretation in depth. Besides, in many of the larger museums only a portion of the collections has been recorded in a database. Therefore there are considerable limits to the ability of present-day systems to provide users with full and accurate information about the museum's collections. Staffed information services meet this need[13]. In my own experience, many visitors need associated information of a very different kind, which is not supposed to be recorded in the systems we use. Despite the attraction of electronic information, printed materials will form the major resource for many years to come. Books have been produced for hundreds of years, and much of the information they contain

[12] *ibid.*5 p.52
[13] Will, L. 'Museums as information centres.' *Museum International* vol.46 1994 p.21

will never be transferred onto computers[14]. John Burnett wrote in 1995: 'Bibliographical aids are vital, and if I had to choose between better online bibliography and improved collections databases I would choose the bibliography: I need access to dozens of objects, but hundreds, if not thousands, of pieces of literature. Only a small number of objects are needed to pose questions whose answers are widely scattered through print and manuscript.[15]

There is only one conclusion to draw: the need for staffed information services, combined with the importance of books, highlights the library as the best location for the museum information centre. Moreover, librarians are trained and experienced mediators between individual users and the knowledge stored in their museums. Librarians must be focused on innovation, since museums are places where innovation begins. Innovation originates with listening to the users: What questions do users ask? How do they use information? What are they expecting from technology?

Three different examples of museum information centres and how they are organized.

- Already well-known are the self-service multi-media centres like the Micro Gallery of the National Gallery in London, the ARIA system of the Rijksmuseum, and many more. Despite their attractiveness, these information products are limited in their scope and interactive approach. It is often education and communication departments that set up these centres. In fact, education people are users of the museum's information sources, and as such do not differ from other users like curators and researchers, seeking information about the objects and their context. The educators create a range of products aimed at informing and educating the public, such as textual displays, guided tours, leaflets and guides, packs for teachers, gallery lectures, and also interactive systems, multi-media presentations and websites.

- The second example is the human-mediated, internet-based virtual reference desk of the Electronic Reference Service of the National Museum of American Art in Washington. This service was started by the librarian in 1993 as an extension of the traditional library reference function, to attract more users. At that time the users of the Museum's library were very few in number, and the Museum had extraordinary but little-known resources for the study of

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14   *ibid*. p.21
15   Burnett, J. 'Museum scholarship in the information age.' Information: the hidden resource, museums and the Internet. Proceedings of the seventh international conference of the MDA held in Edinburgh, Scotland 6-7 November 1995. Cambridge: Museum Documentation Association, 1995 p.250

American art. One of the goals was to use the resources of the institution to the fullest extent. Information from Museum-developed sources was incorporated, including the curatorial files. Today, many museums offer virtual reference desks, receiving in some cases hundreds of questions daily, in other**s** one every two weeks like the Royal Tyrrell Museum in Alberta[16]. For the Museum of American Art the outcome of this service is an increased membership, attracting many who were unfamiliar with the Museum before visiting it electronically. Being part of an outreach programme, this service makes the museum more visible and proves to be a powerful instrument for the public relations of the library[17].

- A very different but most interesting example of the organization and influence of a museum information centre is located at the National Maritime Museum in London. In the early 1990's the Collections Division established a functional separation between the provision of information by the Information Division and the management of information. The Collections Division is concerned with activities that lead to the input and processing of data. The Information Division's responsibilities are for output in the form of information products and services. That being so, the information people have a decisive role in determining the form and content of documentation and setting priorities. Analyses of visitor's requests are used to decide what part of the collections the the collections people should tackle next. However, the need to balance the interest of public access with the interests of collection management, curatorial research and conservation is recognized. In the Maritime Museum, the process of managing information is shared between the two divisions, and its success depends on interaction, negotiation and co-operation between them[18].

Collaborative efforts towards improving access to museum information

Museums and libraries are increasingly called upon to deliver, and provide access to, collection information and educational programming, often in electronic form. To achieve this technologists, collection managers, librarians, archivists, curators, researchers and educators must work together as never before. The teamwork approach, problem-solving groups that cut across departmental and institutional divisions, or even organisational restructurings, are the rule rather than the exception.

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[16] Virtual Reference Desk http://www.vrd.org
[17] Stahl, J. 'Have a question? Click here. Electronic reference at the National Museum of American Art.' *Art Documentation* vol.17 1998 p.10-12
[18] *ibid. 5* p.195-201

The example of the National Maritime Museum shows the importance of close collaboration in terms of interaction, negotiation, and co-operation between those who are responsible for the input of information and those who are responsible for its output. Monitoring users' needs by analysing their requests has become the directional force for processing information.

Another user-related factor is the technology of the information system and the method of the way in which this is used. Information technology is supposed to support the storage and retrieval of information. Close collaboration with software engineers and systems managers is essential for the design and operation of user-friendly interfaces and the interconnection of databases. The technology needs to be developed by people capable of reaching understanding with those who retrieve information and those who manage the collections[19].

Several initiatives in integrating and distributing museum information have been launched recently. They were initiated by librarians and based on collaboration between institutions.

- Already mentioned is the REACH project of the Research Libraries Group, aimed at sharing data about museum objects. Their VISION project has been set up to test applications to share image information, and is aimed at developing a core cataloguing record for visual images. Both projects merged in 1997 to further the goal of improved access to object and image information[20].

- In 1993, the NINCH project (National Initiative for a Networked Cultural Heritage) was launched in the United States to bring national cultural heritage online. Museums, libraries, research and educational institutions and contemporary art organizations joined together to create an environment in which cultural resources could be networked[21].

- In the United Kingdom, the National Museum Director's conference of 1999 offered its vision on how digitization could help to integrate the resources of museums and libraries. Meanwhile, the UK government has taken steps to hasten the integration of museum and library services. A new body has been

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[19] *ibid. 5* p.104
[20] Lanzi, E. 'Improving access to art information: The REACH and VISION projects.' *Art Documentation* vol.17 1998 p.15-19
[21] Green, D.L. 'Networking Cultural Heritage: introducing NINCH (National Heritage for a Networked Cultural Heritage).' *Art Documentation* vol.16 1997 p.15-17

created, the Museum, Libraries and Archives Council[22], with the aim of welding together the areas they cover in order to exploit the synergy that exists between them.

- Without these powerful bodies in the Netherlands, the Rijksmuseum Library has taken the initiative of bringing together the curators of this museum's Department of Prints and Drawings, the Department of Dutch History and the curators of the special collections at the National Library in The Hague. Together they have formulated a project based on the content of both collections called the Digital Atlas of Dutch History. The Atlas will result in a website covering national history presented by means of characteristic print materials and objects, including pamphlets, prints and medals depicting historical highlights**:** this will be thematically arranged and enriched with research findings. During this project the photographic departments of both institutions joined the party. The Rijksmuseum Library designed the record structure and the vocabulary for cataloguing printed texts and museum objects. A uniform method of cataloguing will make it possible to link the pamphlets, prints and medals. The Royal Library provided the standards, the procedures and the infrastructure for the digitizing of text (pamphlets), images (prints) and three-dimensional objects (medals). This partnership has revealed great potential for both institutions.

Museum librarians as information strategists

Museum libraries should be more than storehouses accumulating books, and their librarians should be more than custodians of collections of books. These will become simply historic collections if the librarians do not participate in the world of online resources. But there is much more to take care of. I defined librarians earlier as the natural guardians of knowledge. As such, there are many potential roles to be performed, most of them in co-operation with other information-oriented functions. Within the museum setting, librarians have their work cut out for them: they have the opportunity to take on a leading role as information strategists and create a dynamic environment. The Director of Information Resources at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Nancy Allen[23], put it most clearly in saying that museum librarians are shaping themselves as information navigators, organizers and creators. They will continually expand their

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[22] Owen, T. and Johnson, R. 'Libraries, museums and archives collaborating in the United Kingdom and Europe.' *Art Libraries Journal* vol.24 no.4 1999, p.10-13. The Commission has now been renamed Resource: the Museums, Libraries and Archives Commission.

[23] Allen, N.S. 'The role and function of libraries in art museums.' *The Bulletin of Japan Art Documentation Society* vol.5 1996 p.19

understanding of information access and, in turn, teach others how to be self-guided on the information highways. They will bring their knowledge of information management to ongoing developments in capturing, describing, and sharing museum information and, in turn, will support the dissemination and use of standards. Many museum librarians will also help to enrich the storehouse of cultural information available in electronic form, by leading object documentation projects in their own institutions. Museum libraries of today have to be led by information strategists, bringing all the resources in their institutions together, and making them available to a global community.

I would like to conclude with a statement by my director, Ronald de Leeuw, comparing the information policy of museums and libraries. He stated that museums believe that they push themselves forward with spectacular exhibitions, lavishly full-colour books about the collections and multi-media installations. But all these achievements together open only a tiny window onto their large resources of stored information and knowledge. Libraries are traditionally geared to maximize the size of this window. In managing information and making it accessible, museums can learn a lot from the library community.

It is now up to museum librarians to make these contributions, by offering their expertise, and addressing museum needs outside and inside the library.

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Keywords: Museum, library, museum pedagogies, library pedagogies. 1. Introduction. The formation of the modern system of pedagogical activities, as well as the full-scale progressive development of the theory and practice of museum and library activities led to the integration of traditional and innovative forms of acquiring cultural values. The education in the contextual space of culture is of the priority importance, as it plays a leading information and communication role in the field of social awareness. The research into the leading role of pedagogical activity in the cultural and educational spheres of modern society is an important incentive to study in detail and analyze the history of the formation of library and museum traditions. Museums libraries and archives are seen as social, recreational places where the opportunity to mix with fellow users and receive professional advice. The guidance from MLA staff is highly valued. Immediately accessible sources of information such as newspapers, television and the internet are perceived as preferable despite the relatively low levels of trust and value placed in them. Busy lifestyles, and the consequent pressures on available time, limit the opportunity to seek a deeper understanding of social and political concerns, and limit respondents to more immediately accessible information sources than museums libraries and archives. Assess if in "the information age" people still need and value access to traditional repositories of public knowledge. Museum librarians are natural guardians of knowledge, and need to focus on supporting the development of information about the museum collections and taking on a leading role as information strategists.

Export citation. Copyright. 1. Revised version of paper given at the ARLIS/UK & Ireland Annual Conference in Cambridge, The changing agenda for art librarians, 6-9 July 2000. 2. Bierbaum, E. Green. 'Museum libraries: the more things change…' Special libraries vol. 87 1996, p.74–87. 3. Ibid. p. 83. 4. Davenport, T. H. and Prusak, L. 'Blow up the corporate library.' International journal of information management vol. 13 1993, p.405–413. 5. Orna, E. and Pettitt, C. Information management in museums. 2nd ed. Aldershot: Gower, 1998.