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Searching for New Ways to Improve Museums

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Searching for New Ways to Improve Museums

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Regarding recent changes in the social system, I explore three themes to predict the role and features of next-generation museums. The three themes are: the museum and an expansion of the social communication systems; the museum as a self-presentation tool; and the museum as a new source of information.

1 The museum and an expansion of the social communication system

During the last one or two decades, a remarkable change in our communication system has occurred. That is the rapid diffusion of social network services, such as YouTube, Twitter, Facebook and others. As you well know, these systems allow the spread, using a computer web system, of personal written messages as well as static or moving image(s) within a few seconds to locations all over the world. Many book - and newspaper - publications have also begun to introduce the electronic system. Today, the use of dictionaries and general reference books is uncommon among the younger generation, including my students, who often use the World Wide Web as their information source. The new system is extremely convenient. The tools are lighter and allow for a quick reference. A new additional advantage of the system is the rich images that can be found in data sources.

As a new trend, some museums have actively introduced electronic devices to show video and computer images, both in movies and static pictures. The appeal of this type of equipment is that it is possible to show more attractive images than those of classic printed types. However, at the same time, this type of change in display method tends to concentrate the visitor's eye not on the displayed objects, but on screen images.

An important attribute of museum objects is their three-dimensional character. Most tactile data, excluding temperature and weight, are integrated in the three-dimensional object. Photographic images seem to represent virtual three-dimensional scenes or shapes, even though they are not the real article. To reduce from three to two dimensions, some data has to be discarded. Careful segregations may allow the saving of the original value; however, for most simple photography, such care is not applied. Included in modern electronic images are both static types, such as photos and illustrations, and moving types, which are often more attractive. In application methods for a museum display, the function of the two types of image used, classic print and modern electronic display, is often less distinctive; however, we have to ensure that they possess a function other than possible movie - or static - images.

That is, classic print utilizes a fixed image and TV images use afterimages. TV images are composed of an accumulation of tiny color light spots excited by a series of instantaneous electronic signals. Therefore, modern electronic images provide stronger stimuli to our visual nerves and it is difficult to watch them meticulously whereas printed or painted types have less strong stimuli under weak and soft reflective light. That is, the observation of electronic images over a long period of time causes fatigue in the visitors, and shortens their viewing times of objects. One of its major advantages, however, is that dynamic images can show many actions in an easier manner. In classic methods, telling a complicated story using only words and painted illustrations was difficult. Of course, dynamic images are more useful and attractive than the classic solid two-dimensional data, such as photos and illustrations. We are required to clearly segregate them because the functions and purposes of the two methods are not the same. Thus, it seems that we have somewhat defined the quantity and qualities of the three-dimensional data, including the museum objects. We must not forget that the basic museum concept should be based on “objects”. Three dimensions should contain more data than two dimensions. What types of messages can we send using three-dimensional data? As a result of the expansion of modern display methods, in particular using electronic devices, we are inevitably encouraged to reconsider the meanings and values of three-dimensional objects.

2 The museum as a self-presentation tool

Some people believe that the museum is tool for self-presentation. “Of whom” or “for whom”, that is the point. It is clear that one of the main purposes of history, natural history, community and other similar type of museums, which have a close affinity with a particular area such as state, village, ethnic group and others, is to show the regional themes to visitors. The presentation of regional topics by those with an affinity is nothing other than self-presentation. So, what should we do in the case of an art gallery or private collection? We tend to regard only the result of the collection. A few curators will show who, why or how the collection was made to confirm the expectations of some visitors. However, if there is no idea, there is no collection. To show the idea of the collection is also a means of self-presentation of the collector. Without private collections slanted towards the collector’s strong personal tastes, few inclinations appear while a little and characteristic ones of the responsible in charge, in each terms of his/her duties, are still reserved.

To show off masterpieces or rare objects from the collector’s collection is useful for displaying one’s authority, although this is not self-presentation so much as a means of self-display. There is a certain value attached to self-display albeit of a secondary nature. No additional words are necessary because just being given the chance to view this collection will be enough. The purpose of self-presentation is

not to show the collector's authority to strangers, but to produce mutual comprehensions between the collector and his/her counterparts.

Up to half a century ago, the museum was definitely a space for showing valuable objects to so called "connoisseurs". The experience was afforded to only a limited number of intelligent visitors, and a few additional words on objects were sufficient for their display. Visitors also had sufficient knowledge on the displayed objects, or otherwise they went to the museum to confirm their preconceived notions. This is the old style of collection or museum, because most of these collections were put together by noble, rich or politically strong person(s). They could select the visitors other than the owner(s) and those with an affinity to the collection. Those who were not part of the intelligentsia were simply not invited to attend.

It was necessary to have an affinity with the museum objects rather than using them as a means of new mutual self-presentation. How this affinity with the objects was formed was never discussed. What I will say, however, is that most museum visitors had an affinity with the objects and considered them as an information source. When such a function works well, visitors should be able to discover a new interest in museums.

The entrance fee system to the museum was basically authorization from the owner to view the collection. Some political museums of socialist countries had a principle of 'free admission', since the initial stage. This was because it was the owner's duty to 'allow illiterate people to learn about the new social system, which gave priority to the citizens' right 'to learn by themselves'.

Since the new communication system was introduced, as I have previously stated, people have obtained variable new knowledge and been provided with many opportunities to visit another world beyond their home territory to make direct contact with unknown fields. Their sources of information such as TV, Internet, photo journals and others, are so rich that the museum visitors continue to be extremely well-informed. And they have been able to exert less effort to obtain such information than the former generations. They can obtain new knowledge at home by more visual and more comprehensive methods. As a modern tendency, some younger generations, in particular, find it difficult to read long and complicated text books. World diffusion of modern *Manga* culture, which was born in Japan, is one such typical phenomenon. *Manga* artists can represent very delicate feelings and emotions in an excellent visual manner and with few or no words. Such sentiments may otherwise be difficult to understand in foreign novels and poems, even with a good translation.

Rapid development of modern communication systems, in particular TV and computer websites, allows all people easy acquisition of a wide spectrum of information. Now it is easy for anyone anywhere to find minimally necessary

general information.

Fifty years ago, most museums provided information, either in written or in spoken form, for novices including students, amateur collectors and dilettantes. However, some museums have simply used the objects themselves with no other additional explanation. Even today, some fine-art galleries retain these methods because there are still many people who believe that such works of fine-arts are unique objects to be appreciated only by observers with the most discerning of aesthetic taste. It should be a memory of classic manner.

3 Museum as a new source of information

When I was in my youth, I found a short phrase in a French booklet, the title of which eludes me now, which took me by surprise. From what I recall, the contents were as follows: "To respect and to guard the French language is to save the French economy and the State of France itself. Reduced numbers of French-speaking people mean reduced markets of French products." Some years ago, I had an occasion to check the numbers of books on the collection of Louvre published in France in comparison with other major European countries. There were an infinitely larger number of French art books, which made me realize why the Louvre is more famous than the other museums. As far as qualities and quantities of the collection go, the Louvre compares favourably with the other world famous museums such as the British Museum, Hermitage, Cairo Archaeological Museum, Chinese Imperial Palace and others. However, the unparalleled numbers of French publications, in which they have approached the collection of Louvre, separate the Louvre from the others and keep us enthralled. This was due to the policy of the French government that was directly linked to its tourism development. Even today many tourists go to Paris to visit the Louvre. Just a few decades ago, books and other printed materials, including illustrated post cards, were very important sources for spreading information. The numbers of people who were able to visit distant foreign countries and also to read books in foreign languages were limited. The influence of those publications, therefore, was great. Then the point is now a day. The age of the printed book will end in the not-so-distant future, and a new era of cultural propaganda through a new media will begin. Within the last quarter century, visiting far-flung places has been made easy and there are very few places left in the world that have not been explored. Large numbers of people are now visiting every corner of the world, and enjoying the discovery of new value from other cultures. An increase in the number of tourists, including many ordinary citizens, changes the types of tourism available.

How does one find an on-site source of information? Ordinal communication on diurnal lives can be covered by minimum words in English but it is difficult to cover other matters, in particular cultural concerns of which tourists are naturally

curious.

Now the age of museum is waiting us, as I believe. Just as the French government and publishers in times past have done, next generation museums must find a core function of the cultural information. That is the main reason why the museum is not a place to visit to read something but rather is a place to observe, or at least to look, at something and a museum display using visual methods can become a new universal language. Ideally, no verbal languages are necessary. Unfortunately such methodology has yet to materialize.

4 Conclusion

In truth, I do not yet have a clear idea of the practical methods that can be employed to change museums for the next generation. However, I do anticipate that the age of museums as a house of treasures will end and a new era of the museum as a communication tool will commence, with the latter exploiting the plethora of modern high technologies available today.

Since the discovery of print technologies, written culture has attained a major position in world communications. Written phrases, which are nothing more than signs indicated by a sequence of letters or of words, have acquired and maintained their position for centuries by reason of their simple and lucid systems even though the information contents are inferior to those of visual materials, including three-dimensional shapes. One disadvantage of the visual method is that due to the enormity of its information contents, it is difficult to make an exact transmission which sometimes means insufficient comprehension. However, modern rapid developments of IT technology for message transmission, photo-technologies for making copies, polymers produced from synthetic chemistry and others can help to counteract the disadvantages. Just recently, a mechanical copy machine that can duplicate three dimensional shapes from the original has come onto the market, although there are still limits to its capabilities.

The museum is no longer simply a place to conserve valuable materials, in multiple meaning, nor one just to visit to admire them. We should make more effort to reveal the deeper unknown visual meaning hidden in the objects and to establish new methods and technologies to activate them.