

Getting Your Picture Collections to a Global Audience

Abstract: The digital age presents whole new challenges and possibilities to museums whose mandate is to both protect heritage resources and grant legitimate access to those resources. New avenues of preservation and income generation are opened up. But how do you get your collection to a global audience at the right standard, in such a way that you are not exploited, that your collection is safeguarded, and that it has the potential to create a solid income stream? This session will look in brief at the whole process of getting a collection from physical artifact to global publishing markets while sidestepping the pitfalls of the digital age.

INTRODUCTION

It is a great privilege to be speaking to you today on the topic of “Getting Your Picture Collections to a Global Audience”. Thank you to SAMA for the opportunity, particularly Dr Helène Vollgraaff and Dashy Hudek who put up with all the back and forth. And thank you to those in charge of this wonderful venue of Maropeng. It has been quite exceptional.

My stated purpose in this paper is to speak to you about the process of getting a collection from physical artifacts to a global audience while sidestepping the pitfalls of the digital age. My real purpose, though, is broader than that. I would love you to go away from this session with a greater understanding of the expectations of this global audience we are talking about, and so understand better how to engage that audience.

Perhaps then we should start with the audience.

GLOBAL EXPECTATIONS

Cheryl Stevens delivered a fascinating paper yesterday about how a number of new museums are changing the way they present the narrative of their collections to the public, saying that they are catering for the tourist who wants to see three museums in a day. I want to support her insightful observations by coming at it from another angle. My belief is that museums are having to change the way they communicate because the audiences they are dealing with are very different from the audiences of 20 or 30 years ago.

Modern museums trace their origin to 18th and 19th Century Europe. They arose in the so-called “Age of Enlightenment” and as institutions they largely served the underlying meta-narrative of the Modern era. That meta-narrative, or underlying belief system in the West, which set the Modern era off from the Middle was that the Universe was an ordered place that operated according to set laws, and that those laws could be understood in the light of reason. This meant that for the first time truth could be “discovered” if you gathered all the facts and then applied reason to those facts to work out the “nature” of things.

The opening lines of Charles Dickens’ novel “Hard Times” expressed the mood of the era very well. It is a headmaster speaking to a teacher:

“NOW, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir!”

It was this centuries long project to “gather all the facts” that was at the heart of the Age of Science and what gave birth to the modern museum. Museums were about collections – collections of artifacts so that we could get at the facts, work out how things worked, and in the light of that create technology which can solve our problems. This belief came to be known as the “myth of progress”. It was the belief that through the scientific endeavor we will eventually discover all there is to know to be able to control our environment with our technology and so “progress” to a perfect society. Museums, then, were the institutions where the facts were amassed, researched by experts, and then the findings presented to the public, contributing to the “myth of progress” - that somehow we were getting better and better and even evolving in to a higher state of being.

Thirty years ago, that was the underlying belief system in global culture and museums operated well in that milieu as the custodians of the facts. In 2007 that is no longer the underlying belief system of global culture, and it has never been the underlying belief system of our culture here in Africa. In terms of global culture, the Modern era has been overthrown by the Postmodern era. And what marks the Postmodern era is skepticism. At its most fundamental level it is skepticism about the knowability of truth. Few believe in the myth of progress any more. We haven’t colonized the moon and we are not about to. Technology may have helped us live more comfortable lives but two world wars and numerous genocides put pay to the belief that it could make us better people. And there is skepticism about whether the “experts” can really enable us to encounter the real. The digital age and the internet has meant that the facts are easily available, but facts don’t necessarily lead to truth or meaning, they may simply

lead to overload. The proliferation of knowledge has not necessarily meant the proliferation of wisdom.

The conversation yesterday after Patricia Davison and Cheryl Stevens' sessions was very interesting in this regard where the whole subject of epistemology, how we know what we know, came up. We are having that conversation because of the new milieu we find ourselves in.

This generation, then, is starting to look for reality (they have given up the hope of finding truth) in places other than just hard facts. They are looking in experiences (and especially instant experiences), in participation, in spiritualities, in the shared consensus of community, and in stories. We're far more open to metaphor as a way of knowing than we were 20 years ago. Of course this fits in well with commonly held assumptions here in Africa where, on the whole, in traditional society truth is what the community consensus says is true. (You can see that in the differences between a Western legal system operates and traditional African legal systems worked). And so indigenous knowledge systems are very much in vogue. Global culture is looking for new guides as to how one can know.

Impact on Museums

So this all begs the question, what does this mean for museums?

Well if museums have a dual mandate of both protecting heritage resources and granting legitimate access to those resources, then I would suggest that where the primary emphasis of many museums in the past was on the protection and preservation side, now, without diminishing that emphasis, there needs to be a greater emphasis placed on the access side. Julie Wells from Rhodes University did a wonderful job yesterday of mapping out some of the parameters of that. She encouraged museums to become resource centres allowing for participative learning and shared knowledge generation, and she also spoke about how the advent of digital technologies makes this democratization of knowledge far more possible.

Getting your Collections to Global Audience

So what has all this got to do with getting your collections to a global audience? A lot. Because while we as professionals involved in museums believe that our primary task is to safeguard the primary evidence of the facts, then granting access is always going to lose out to concerns about security. And if that is the case then developing a local audience is not a reality, let alone a global one. But if you take seriously the significant shift in the expectations of your audience, then you will be determined to transform your institution in to an organization that

welcomes participation and access. And that access will not just be for the experts, but it will be for a range of users, from someone working on a school project to a book publisher needing an illustration.

Digitisation is a Real Opportunity

I am grateful to Julie Wells for pointing out the benefits of digital technologies in this mission to grant access. While I share Patricia Davison's burden that the original object carries with it an authenticity that should be utilized to anchor exhibitions, digitizing a collection has the obvious benefit of allowing your audience to interact with the representation of the object while safeguarding the original. But it does more than that. It allows the object to be used in a multitude of creative and participative acts, by museum staff, by members of the public, by researchers and academics, and by commercial publishing markets who are often integral to the process of disseminating knowledge.

Practically How Does One Get Collections to a Global Audience?

Step 1: Training

If you are going to develop any kind of audience at all in this present milieu, then it is vital that your museum has the expertise to deal with digital data well. Julie Wells was speaking about museums as being sources of knowledge in digital media both for their own work of exhibiting and for community projects. And if you want to develop a global audience well then you certainly need to know what you are doing when you are interacting with a researcher in India or a publisher in Australia. You need to know what the global standards are and you need to know you don't try to email a 16 bit 125 MB tiff file with no colour profile attached to anyone. As many of you know Africa Media Online offers this kind of training in various masterclasses.

Step 2: Digitise

Large digitization projects are not easy to manage and they require a significant amount of expertise. My suggestion is to draw on specialists in this area for the bulk of the backlogged work. It is likely to be far more cost effective in the long run and very quick, and there are significant benefits in terms of file quality to scanning on a high end scanner that it would not be worth your while to invest in yourself. With 2010 coming up and all the potential of that event to develop a global audience time is not on our side. When we digitize with our Mobile Digitisation Unit we like to leave skills behind so that as material is added to your collections you are not dependent on us.

Step 3: Manage your Data

Data is easy to lose and it can cost you tens of thousands if not hundreds of thousands of rand if you do. You need to have backup systems in place. You also need to manage both the digital file and the original and associate metadata

and keyword the files so you can access them. Africa Media Online offers these services. We have developed Africa's first access thesaurus. Called the African Archival Thesaurus it is a controlled vocabulary based on the Australian Pictorial Thesaurus, and we are hoping soon to develop it in to a multilingual thesaurus so you can keyword in English and a person in Germany can search in German and still find the images. We also have South Africa's first professional keywording service and metadata capture is part of what we offer with our Mobile Digitisation Unit.

Step 4: Provide Access

There are many ways you can grant access, but in speaking about a global audience the most obvious way is through the internet and increasingly cell phones. There are ways of doing this securely. In terms of what you put on the internet, my perspective is that you would put online what best tells the story your collections tell. There are fears about fraud and theft but with the majority of these crimes originating within museums, there are many examples of incidences where digitization and making objects public have helped prevent crime and recover stolen objects. In part this is because the museum has laid claim to the object in the public space. This is why the Rosetta Stone is on the web site of the British Museum and why you can go and get a close up view of the Mona Lisa on the Louvre web site. Africa Media Online has developed Africa's leading online virtual museum system called *mematcollections*. Developed in Open Source code it can manage large databases of digitized objects and it is Freeware.

Step 5: Manage Sales

Which brings me to my final point, and that is that different users should have different access rights. Working for a number of years on the interface between museums and commercial publishing markets it is my firm contention that publishing markets should be contributing to the sustainability of your collections by paying for use rights to publish images or use sound and video clips. Likewise a student doing research should not have to be paying professional rates for access to a file. So you need a system that can manage differing access and also manage copyright. Africa Media Online's *mematcollections* system does this for you and has all the fine detail in place of delivery notes, systems to protect the files yet at the same time providing access. Sales to publishing markets can become a real part of sustaining a collection. Through our portal site <http://www.africanpictures.net> we also provide a ready made market which assists in making putting your collections online more sustainable. Africanpictures.net has a distribution network all over the world to commercial publishing markets and we can offer guidance as to what might be put forward to this site and what should be kept in house.

Conclusion

You as museum professionals carry an awesome responsibility in a time of tremendous flux. I do believe museums have had to reinvent themselves in the light of changes in their audience. Their vital task of gathering and safeguarding heritage is still as important as ever, but we are needing to find new ways of communicating the story that our collections are begging us to tell. And a key aspect of this communication is greater participation by our audiences.

Digitisation affords a wonderful opportunity to do just that while enabling us to preserve the original artifact. With standards in the digital world settling down, now is the time to digitise and especially for us here in South Africa in the light of the massive opportunity afforded by 2010 where we as a nation will host the world's biggest global event. Now is the time to gear up for getting ready for the global audience that will be coming to us. And we need to do that in such a way that we are dealing appropriately with different audiences. Inexpensive systems have been created to do that, and we will be a faithful guide where we can.

Thank you!