

Towards a critical evaluation of your collections

A lecture for the bi-annual symposium of AEPM in Wadgassen, September 4, 2010

Introduction

A critical evaluation of your collections ... how necessary is that?

As long as things go fine and there is nothing to complain, visitors stream in every day and leave your museum with great enthusiasm, sending new visitors all the time, well, why change anything? Why having such a critical look at your collection? It works, doesn't it?

If things are not going so well, if it proves to be very difficult to attract a public, to attract young people, then, maybe then it is necessary to sit and think.

I have been in a great number of graphic museums, and one thing struck me the most in nearly all of them: they were overcrowded. Not with visitors, unfortunately ...

They were overcrowded with artefacts: presses, Linotypes, all sorts of small equipment, well, there would even be hardly any space for visitors.

In this contribution to our bi-annual meetings I want to make a statement first. It is wonderful that so many people are involved in making printing history a living history. There are many local initiatives, private initiatives, and after a while a building is opened, often with help from local governments, sponsors and firms, and another graphic museum is born. In this lecture I will look very critical to them, but not only to these small or local museums. This is not meant to criticize the smaller museums to the very bone, there is absolutely no evil in my intentions. I will also not spare the larger museums but, looking around, so much still can be improved! With only a little effort much can be reached. Giving your museum a lot more to offer for your visitors. And bringing about a pride of your museum. This, in short, is not meant to break down anything, but to build up, and give an advice on how things can be improved by some simple measures.

First problem: donations

Graphic museums, but also workshops, suffer from "getting things offered". If a printing firm in the neighbourhood has to get rid of something, they telephone a nearby graphic museum or a workshop and offer the press, the type caster, or

whatever they want to clear out, to this museum. And we, curators, volunteers, afraid as we are that something will be destroyed or will be lost forever, are, in many cases, willing to accept the offered materials – provided they are not too large. “Well”, we say, “we can put it in that corner, we can store it, we can expose it in that showcase if we take something else out”.

There is nothing wrong with our wish to preserve the history of printing for future generations. On the contrary. Too much material and equipment has already disappeared. What is wrong, however, is the ease with which we accept things, with which we let our museums explode with all sorts of stuff.

Many museums are run by volunteers without a museum background. How important they may be for the museum – and they are, believe me, or a museum could close its doors - there is also a certain drawback: if an old press is offered to them, they will most likely accept it. If they don't, the press will be sold as old iron and consequently be destroyed. And just show me one old volunteer from the graphic industry, working in your museum, who can accept that! If, however, a press is offered with a story of its own, like: on this press an illegal newspaper was printed during the war, this printing press may be more interesting than a press without such a “personal life”.

By accepting everything that is offered to your museum you may end up with a hotchpotch of machines without a clear relationship with each other. Graphic museums have the tendency to accept every typesetting machine that is offered to them. But putting them on display is not attractive to the visitor, who has to move carefully in between all those machines, making sure he is not smudging his or her clothes. For a general visitor it is important to know that from hand casting and hand composing the technique developed into machine casting and machine composition, NOT that there were dozens of typesetting machines in all different sorts. That can only be interesting for the specialist, or for a museum on typesetting.

Second problem: the story behind ...

A second problem that many graphic museums have is the lack of reflection, resulting in a lack of a consistent story. Every technical – if not any - museum wants to tell a story: this technique dates back from then and then, developed along these lines, etc. etc. Illustrated with the equipment and all other sorts of paraphernalia to demonstrate this development.

Not having a story means that no direction can be given to a policy of collecting. If you have a story you want to tell to your audience or to your visitors, you have to go through your collection and ask yourself the question: is this object part of my story? Does it demonstrate what I want to tell? Is there a “chapter” in my story which I can not illustrate with examples, printed works or machinery?

Of course the story will differ from museum to museum. A museum of lithography has to tell the story of lithography, Paul Wirths museum on typesetting is different from the story of the newspaper museum that most of us heard yesterday. But most of the graphic museums are museums of letterpress printing, and have to tell about printing books and stationary and all sorts of ephemera. Where it began, who invented it – you all know who ... - how type was cast, how hand presses were replaced by automatic presses, how the technical developments went hand in hand with the growing need of an increasing educated population. This story is more or less clear and can consequently be more or less the same for many museums. So why invent it again? Talk with your colleagues and ask them how they tell the story. There can still be a lot of progress and cooperation in this field.

But especially those museums that were started with gifts from the industry have a problem to get their story right. They have a collection which was brought together not by a plan or a story, but by what was available. To tell a story, to be demonstrated by a sheer accidental collection, is hard, very hard.

If you see that something is missing to complete the story, you can try to find it somewhere else. For example in the depots of your colleagues. This requires an active attitude, but first and for all a critical examination of your story. Is there such a logic in your story that a general public, a public that is not familiar with printing at all, will understand something about printing? Will understand the trials and tribulations our ancestors had to deal with if they wanted to communicate something?

What I miss very much in many museums, are the products that were made on the presses at show. How can you tell a story about machines and how they were used, but not what for?

Many museums have exhibitions of artists prints, but, though that is graphic work too, it is not the type of work that was made on the machines at show. And how easy is in nowadays, with Google and almost all antiquarian shops in the world displaying their catalogues on the internet, to find books or all other sorts of ephemera that were

printed in the nineteenth of early twentieth century? Or printed in the place where the museum is located?

Being decisive

Don't be too afraid to remove things from your display. As long as it is not important for the story you want to tell, your public will be grateful for your "less-is-more" adagium. The story gets clearer, there are less details to be remembered.

This does not mean that a very specific machine, as for example a fully automatic train tickets printing machine as we have in the Dutch Drukkerijmuseum in Etten-Leur, should be removed. It is an eye-catcher, and its presence can easily be explained with just one sentence: "Printing presses got more and more specialized or differentiated, as you can see here with this train-ticket-printing-press".

If you have a lot of machines in your collection that do not support the story you want to tell, you have to ask yourself the question: do they enhance my story? Do they add to the my arguments? Or do they just stand in the way?

Knowledge

Showcases in our museums are very often overloaded with the smaller items in our collections. Woodblocks, four-colour blocks, engraving tools, some matrices, some specific vignettes or what smaller items you may have, everything has to find a place and is just added. Apart from the way in which many of these showcases are arranged and which deserve a bit more feeling for display and order, they are usually without descriptive texts. Now, I personally like to look into this disorder of objects to see if there are any rare objects. When I spot one and ask what it is or what it served for, in many cases I don't get an answer.

That is bad. Don't put it on display or ask your colleagues or fellow museums what it is. This is, in short, a lack of theoretical knowledge. It is, however, very difficult to ask such knowledge from your volunteers. Just try to find that one man or woman whom you can ask to sort these things out, find their use, document them from old catalogues of machine suppliers, and give all these things a life of their own.

Preserving printing heritage

Preserving the history of printing is a complex task and should be thoroughly investigated to be able to make the right choices. Spending public money to preserve

a Linotype is - generally speaking, of course not if it is your Linotype! - a waste, as there are still plenty of them around.

But even with the rapid decrease in the number of people who know how to handle these “machines”, this is not the greatest threat to printing history. Most historical printing presses and machines are relatively simple and will be understood by a mechanic also after hundred years from now. It is the craft, the manipulation of tools and small equipment, that is in danger. It is the ability to provide the stock to feed the presses, to cast type, to grind it to an exact height, to make electro blocks from wood-engravings, just these crafts are lost already. The old craftsmen have died out, taking their knowledge and tricks with them. We should, therefore, be extremely careful with these old, experienced volunteers, even if in many cases they are a “pain in the ass” from a museums curators point of view. But this, of course, is only true for the real craftsmen, not for all those who want to enjoy the freedom of being away from household duties. Volunteers should be committed to learn what they have to tell, why they have to tell it, how to communicate with a younger public, how to tell the story right, and not just to living their hobbies.

The public

Museums can only survive if they attract enough visitors. How do they do that? Just by contacting local schools and trying to make deals with them? By investing in children’s birthday parties? Is that what we want? Do we take the risk to severely damage a machine just to please parents ever looking for something completely different to please their spoiled children? Or do we have a task? Do we want to show future generations how difficult it was to print something? These kids just know that Ctrl-p will print their essay for school. Why bother?

This means that a museum also has to be aware of the message that has to be given to our children. To adjust the story the museum wants to tell. To go through the collections and see if this collection can demonstrate the story.

But in order to convey a message to young children you have to draw their attention first. Their attention is not drawn by a lengthy introduction of a staff member to the history of printing and its importance for the spread of science. Have you ever seen a teenager passing by an operating Monotype without stopping and asking: what is this machine doing? The rattling of matrices falling back into their magazine on a Linotype or Intertype, or the whispering but grand movements of an old stopcylinder

press: these are the sounds and movements kids will be drawn to as bees to honey. These machines, not yet regulated by a million prescriptions to avoid any possible danger for the pressman, still show what they do, with all their moving parts visible and not yet hidden behind protecting plates that kill every machine as a machine, and turn them into boxes with an input and output side. What happens inside the box is a secret.

How do we make this work?

The official, professionally staffed printing museums have a task to preserve their presses and other graphic heritage in a good state. They do this by putting them under the right atmospherical conditions in a setting more or less giving the impression of an old workshop. To avoid any risk of breaking things, these machines are just standing there. Texts will explain what the machine was built for, when it was built and by whom, in short, the basic information a museum has to provide to their exhibits. For an official museum it is impossible to have these machines run, to have demonstrations: they can't run the risk of breaking some irreplaceable part, they have to protect their staff and their public from inhaling fumes of cleaning solutions, and just imagine the trouble of dirty hands which may contaminate other objects! Smaller and private museums, or workshops are the places to go when you want to see something working. The owner, or a retired printer who loves his trade, will demonstrate. He wants to demonstrate, he wants to show how he masters his machine - and it is his machine: it is his risk if he breaks something, he inhales the fumes of cleaning solutions voluntarily or opens a window or door, a practice not done in an institutional museum.

When considering this difference between a public museum and a private collection or workshop, we can see they have different tasks, different perspectives. The museums must primarily preserve, the private collections and workshops must arouse interest in the next generation.

A large museum is staffed to think about educational subjects rather than practical demonstrations, they can provide models of textual explanation, of cultural background to every item in their collections: what was this used for? When was it used, by whom? Why not work together to develop educational projects with museums which have a staff specially engaged to do just that?

The workshop will demonstrate and use the machines as they have been used for years and years, with all the risks connected with it: wear and tear, cracks and fractures, and dirty spots everywhere. Why should an official graphic museum not cooperate with these workshops? Why not take out some presses from the depot with the risk they break down at some point?

The future

We will have a discussion on the future of AEPM during these days in Wadgassen. In other words: we have to look at the future of graphic museums. There seems to be a tendency towards more local consultation and meetings, local, that is, with the workshops and museums in your country. The advantage is clear: distances are shorter and everybody speaks the same language. Maybe it will be possible, on this country-wise level, to find a central depot or storage room – to be sponsored or housed by a large printing firm with a lot of space – to store machinery for which there is no room in your museum. Again, critical evaluation is necessary. You don't want to fill up your storage with 25 Linotypes, would you? But an extra one, for spare parts, might be wise. So, to give you an example, an old and respected printing firm in Holland offered their stock of engraved blocks for blind and relief printing. A collection weighing several tons. It was such an amount of blocks that it would be impossible for a museum to take it all. At the time it was difficult to have all museums warned and made appointments to come and pick out some of them: the owner, of course, would like to get rid of them all, and all together. Not by receiving a museum one day, a collector another day, again another museum the next week. How good would it have been if everything was just brought to a central depot! The irony is of course that these things, which have been laying around in the firm for many, many years, have to be removed at once! You will all recognise this...

Local depots, we think, could be a real possibility. To organise this on a European scale would be dreaming. Lets take the facts of life. Let's join together for this one goal we all want to strive for: the preservation of graphic heritage. But let us do it with care, with discrimination, and above all with a keen and open eye to what is important and what is of minor interest. Let's have a critical evaluation of our collections!