

Chapter 19

Geo-Aware Digital Cultural Heritage: Museum Opportunities and Experiences

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ABSTRACT

Museums face numerous challenges in the 21st century. Among these are a loss of cultural authority and the dispersion of collected objects through museums worldwide that makes it impossible for users to know where to search, or how to search, for items that might be of interest to them. The consequences are that museums and their holdings are less well known, and less understood, than they ought to be. An emerging technical infrastructure of “smart” objects and location-aware devices can play a role in enabling museums to succeed in these tasks. If the museum adds geographical coordinates to the description of the objects in its collections, people who are in the vicinity of those locations can be informed about the holdings of the (distant) museum, 24 hrs a day. These people include those from whose cultures the objects were once taken and people visiting as tourists; these two audiences are especially interested in understanding the museum’s collection, because it is relevant to them, literally ‘where they stand.’ Having access to the cultural objects that have been removed from their original contexts can reduce demands that they be repatriated, especially if the museum can engage locals to contribute their knowledge of the objects, and tourists to supply terms in their native language that would help their compatriots find the object. In this way, geo-aware objects could help museum fulfill numerous demands currently being made of them and usher in an extra-institutional dimension to cultural interpretation. This chapter examines the requirements for museum success in a geo-aware future.

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CHALLENGES FACING CONTEMPORARY MUSEUMS

Authority Undermined

At the start of the 21st century, the authority of established institutions—government, religion, family—is everywhere being challenged. Museums are no exception. For a century or more, they have been respected authorities in interpreting culture, but increasingly the “unassailable voice” (Walch, 1997) is itself being assailed. Among those with claims to be heard are the people whose cultures created works now residing in museum, the people who once used or owned museum works or similar objects, and people who live near where the objects were discovered or created, and from which these treasures have often been removed without proper consent. These may be the same people, or a number of different communities, and each increasingly wants the museum, and the public they serve, to hear their views.

The museum claim to authority has rested in part on its ownership of the artifacts, and therefore on the exclusive control they exercised over access, and in part on its claim to professional, scientific, objective, knowledge. Today the superiority of objective and scientific knowledge as well as the right to the ownership itself is being challenged. Much of what museums hold came to the institution without the uncoerced permission of its previous owners. It may have been seized in war, taken from archaeological digs, or ‘bought’ in transactions tainted by power differentials between the parties. Only a small proportion has been obtained in completely straightforward commercial transactions. In many cases, the objects now are facing demands for repatriation. Some of these demands, such as from indigenous communities, are increasingly being heard and acted upon, as reflected in the history of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). (Fine-Dare, 2002) Others are, as yet, not being heeded because they are not strongly

supported by the society, but this is subject to changing quite rapidly as the cases of Nazi war loot and trans-border shipment of declared ‘national treasures’ demonstrate (NEPP, 2009; Getty, 2006). Even if all the collections of each museum had been obtained without taint, the complete dispersal of objects and specimens from any given place to museums worldwide would pose a challenge for understanding the context from which they were taken. Simply reuniting these collected items enables us to answer research questions, provide public interpretation, and teach in ways that are denied us by their dispersal.

The contemporary museum is expected to be inviting as well as inclusive. Challenges to authority and ownership are related to the perceived decreasing ability of the museum to engage audiences. Groups not raised to respect the museum don’t visit, they don’t look to the museum for interpretation of the unknown, and they don’t think of museums as open to their input. Museums are trying to counter this by encouraging their visitors to speak back, but giving those who visit a voice does not engage their potential audience, only the one they have already reached.

In the past, museums could rely on shared cultural experience and the educational system to give its clientele a common template on which to assemble the added meaning provided by museum interpretation of novel artifacts and specimens. The museum contextualized its holdings so that visitors could connect them to their shared cultural knowledge. In the contemporary world much of that assumed common framework of shared cultural knowledge is not present. Contextualizing objects requires the museum to place them on a template available to all, on which the collections of other institutions can also be located and which situate the alien museum artifact in the physical and social universe of the potential audience. At the same time, the museum is expected to reach an audience that will never be able to travel to visit it physically, but might come virtually. These people speak many languages, have many differ-

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