

Clarifying Collections

Joachim Huber

Storages in cultural and historical institutions are clarification units for collections. Over time, their management results in a reflection of an institution's idea of cultural-historical significance. This evolution and perspective is different for every institution, every type of museum, every region and every society or group. Each institution will apply its own criteria and formulate its own collection strategy, determining why one object belongs in the collection and others do not. An object's associated meta-information plays a central role and is at least as important as the artifact itself, establishing the object in its entirety, including the original and all later contexts, the history of the object, its previous owners, methods of manufacture, construction plans, and operating instructions.

A collection is raised in profile by setting focal points, by condensing and by improving absolute and content-related qualities. A collection therefore does not necessarily have to grow over time, but rather improve. It should by no means degenerate into a junk room of material cultural assets without a unifying concept. Museum collections are to be regarded as archives. They document cultural and historical conditions and developments, being a selection made from the wealth of incoming material. As in an archive, holdings must be reassessed routinely, condensed and, if necessary, released from the collection. To this end, a stringent collection strategy is indispensable as a changeable but nevertheless reliable guideline.

The possibility of changing a collection is mandatory. The resources available in terms of space, money and personnel in the everyday life of a museum are finite. Decisions have to be made, priorities have to be set, collections have to be constantly questioned and improved, and - if necessary - reduced. An institutional framework for addressing the question of what will be relevant in a hundred years' time is necessary in this context. How shall we use the resources available for museum collections in a way that ensures an appropriate number of cultural and historical artefacts will survive and give future viewers a relevant picture of social conditions in different periods? A first step is to document also what cultural connotation a specific new entry to a collection has to the collecting institution/collector. This will help future generations to understand the object's relevance to the collection. Let's collect the collector's intentions and understanding together with the collected item.

Biography

Joachim Huber was born 1962 in the heart of Europe (Berne, Switzerland)

1985-1990 Studies in History of medieval Art and Architecture

1990-1992 Head of project for the church inventories (concept and setup of the project)

1992-1994 PhD on late 11th c. religious silver smith work

1995-1997 Curatorial assistant at the Historical Museum Basel and at the Swiss National Museum, Zürich.

1997 Co-founder and since partner at Prevalt Ltd. (Winterthur, Switzerland). A small museum consultant company which found it's niche in focusing on museum work behind the scene and in exceptional circumstances.

Prevalt has been involved in the planning of storage facilities of more than 20 football fields in size and the relocation of several 100'000 museum objects. Among the clients are major museums in Switzerland, Germany, Austria and Sweden. Currently Prevalt is involved in more than 15 major storage facility projects. Main focus are sustainable and cost efficient infrastructures in the long term run for museums, archives and collections. Together with Karin von Lerber a textile conservator and lecturer in emergency preparedness and emergency response, he has published in 2003 a handbook on handling and storage of mobile cultural objects (in German, still available). Joachim Huber's main interests are the long-term protection of mobile cultural property and the research in sense and non-sense of public and private collecting in times of limited funds and important global issues that affect future generations.