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A NEW METHOD FOR ASSESSING THE VALUE OF COLLECTIONS

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ABSTRACT

The Cultural Heritage Agency of The Netherlands (RCE) is currently working on the development of a new, holistic method for assessing the cultural value of moveable collections. The challenge that lies ahead is to develop a method that is not only effective and easy to apply, but also acceptable for professionals in the field of Dutch moveable cultural heritage. This paper will discuss how methods for value assessment of moveable collections have developed in The Netherlands over the past two decades. It will explain why a new method for value assessment is needed and how RCE is currently working on the development of such a new method.

RÉSUMÉ

L'Agence pour le Patrimoine Culturel des Pays-Bas (RCE) travaille actuellement sur le développement d'une nouvelle méthode holistique permettant d'évaluer la valeur culturelle des collections de biens mobiliers. Le défi à venir consiste à élaborer une méthode qui soit non seulement efficace et facile à mettre en œuvre, mais aussi acceptable pour les professionnels du domaine du patrimoine culturel mobilier hollandais. Cet article explore le développement de méthodes d'évaluation de la valeur des collections de biens mobiliers aux Pays-Bas au cours des deux dernières décennies. Il explique pourquoi une nouvelle méthode d'évaluation de la valeur est nécessaire, et de quelle manière l'RCE travaille actuellement au développement d'une telle méthode.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of the heritage profession is to pass on cultural heritage to future generations in optimal condition and under optimal conditions of accessibility. But what relics from the past, both material and immaterial, does a society want to preserve for future generations? And what is it exactly that we are trying to preserve: the original material, the concept of the maker, the stories behind the object, its original function, or several or all of the above? To what purpose, and for whom are we preserving? What stories do we want the objects to tell? Of course, many other factors are involved as well: the amount of time and money available for the upkeep of collections, political and management priorities, public interest, the desired use, etc. The answers to these questions call for different strategies in collection management. Professionals in the museum field have the complex task of weighing all these factors against each other and making well-balanced decisions.

DECISION-MAKING

Collection management decisions are more often than not based on some sort of value judgment. Making acquisitions, choosing objects for an exhibition, dealing with loan requests, restoring objects – all these day-to-day museum practices involve an assessment of the cultural value of objects (a museum curator answered “every day”, when asked how often he dealt with value assessment issues). These value assessments can be expressed explicitly through a system of categorization that classifies objects according to their attributed cultural value or in a written document (‘statement of significance’). But more often, these value judgments are less straightforward. There does not seem to be a need to make them more explicit, because the curator is considered to be the expert in his or her field and simply “knows” the value of the objects under his care. The fact that he considers an object to be of importance needs no further explanation.

This process of assessing, which relies heavily on the connoisseurship of the curator was of great use at a time when managing the collection was the exclusive responsibility of the curator. He or she made acquisitions, kept records of the objects, described them, wrote catalogues, prepared exhibitions, took care of the loan administration and was responsible for

RESUMEN

La Agencia Holandesa para el Patrimonio Cultural (RCE) trabaja actualmente en el desarrollo de un nuevo método holístico para evaluar el valor cultural de colecciones de bienes muebles. El reto al que se enfrenta consiste en desarrollar un método que no solo sea efectivo y fácil de aplicar, sino que también sea aceptado por los profesionales del ámbito del patrimonio cultural de bienes muebles en Holanda. Este artículo analiza cómo se han desarrollado en Holanda en las últimas dos décadas los métodos para analizar el valor de las colecciones de bienes muebles. Explica por qué es necesario un nuevo método para analizar el valor y cómo la RCE está trabajando en el desarrollo de ese nuevo método.

preserving the collection. The only person the curator was accountable to was the museum director and sometimes even those two positions were filled by the same person (a model that is still to be found in some smaller museums in The Netherlands).

PROFESSIONALIZATION

However, museum practice has changed dramatically over the past two decades. The work that was once the exclusive domain of the curator is now divided between several specialized and skilled professionals, such as the registrar, the conservator and the collections manager. As a result of this development, collection management has reached a higher level of professionalism. Also, the decision-making process has become more complicated. More people are involved with the management of any given collection, and these people may have different views on what is best for the collection. Since, as stated before, most decisions in collection management involve some sort of value judgment, a need arises to make these value judgments more explicit, so that they can be shared and discussed more openly. Also, it no longer seems desirable to let value assessment be the exclusive responsibility of a single person, in most cases the curator.

ECONOMIC VALUE

Not only do developments within the ways museums operate exert influence on the ways in which collections are being valued, changes within society at large do too. In a society where cultural values are increasingly expressed in economic terms, museums are often put on the defense. They are asked to explain why they keep collections that represent no economic value, that require storage in expensive acclimatized rooms, and, maybe worst of all, that do not always have evident cultural significance. Museums often tend to resist this kind of pressure by bringing up their cultural contribution to their country's economy. But when they are obliged to stress the cultural importance of their collections, the answers often consist of platitudes like 'national significance' or 'unique' or 'irreplaceable.' This is hardly surprising, given the absence of a broadly accepted and objectified set of guidelines that museums could use to test their collections. Such a set of guidelines becomes all the more necessary when museums are increasingly forced to defend their own legitimacy.

DELTA PLAN FOR THE PRESERVATION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE

Thus, both internal and external factors tend to force museums to assess their collections in an objective and verifiable manner. A method of collection assessment that was originally developed for the 'Delta Plan' for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage has been in use in The Netherlands since the 1980s (Bever and Halbertsma 1991). This was a major rescue operation for moveable cultural heritage, which took place from 1990 to

2000. During these years, the Dutch state government invested €150 million in the preservation, conservation and registration of museum collections. It was decided that only important collections qualified for government subsidies. In order to prioritize between collections, a value assessment system consisting of four categories was set up:

Category A

The object is compatible with the museum's purpose and is irreplaceable and indispensable to Dutch cultural values because of its

- 'symbolic value' – the object is a distinct momento of people or events of paramount importance to Dutch or international history
- 'reference value' – the object is unique or prototypical
- 'link value' – the object represents a key phase or change of direction in an artist's work, or in the development of a branch of learning, school or style.

Category B

The object is compatible with the museum's purpose and is important to the museum on account of

- its 'presentation value' – it often figures in temporary displays
- its 'pulling power' – a quality which need not be based on great artistic, historical or scientific value
- its 'genealogical value' – it is important because of its origin, e.g. it was purchased by a previous director who had a different approach, or produced by certain pupils of a master
- its 'ensemble value' – it forms part of an ensemble which in whole or in part meets certain criteria which it does not meet by itself;
- its 'documentary value' – it contains important information.

Category C

The item is compatible with the museum's purpose.

Category D

The item is not compatible with the museum's purpose but has ended up in the collection by chance or on account of its curiosity value: items of this kind can be deacquisitioned.

To this day, the Delta Plan categorization system is the only overall method of value assessment for moveable collections in The Netherlands. However, several objections can be raised to this method. First of all, it simultaneously assesses objects from two different perspectives. Objects in Category A are perceived as the most important on a national scale,

while objects in Category B are considered to be of lesser importance etc. But at the same time, the compatibility of an object with the museum's purpose is taken into account. The results of these two different ways of assessing value do not necessarily coincide. Obviously, an object can be quite important within the context of the collection of an individual museum, but of little or no importance when considered on a national scale. The opposite, of course, can be true as well. When an object is put in category B because of its attributed 'presentation value', what does that mean exactly? Is it a B-object within the context of the museum, or on a national scale? Or both at the same time?

A second objection to the Delta Plan method lies in the fact that certain specific values, such as 'reference value' and 'ensemble value', are linked to certain categories; in this case, category A and category B, respectively. This implies a hierarchy between values; if 'ensemble value' is attributed to an object or, more likely, to a group of objects, they automatically fall into category B and are, therefore, considered to be of lesser importance than objects from category A. Why should this be the case? Why should an object that has 'symbolic value' always fall in the highest category? The Delta Plan system does not provide us with answers to these questions.

A third problem associated with the Delta Plan system is its focus on single objects. Although, in theory, the method can be applied to single objects as well as groups of objects, it puts great emphasis on single items of national importance within collections. This is not surprising when we realize that the Delta Plan system was designed at a time when the "single object approach" was dominant in collection management and, therefore, also in value assessment. Nowadays, museums tend to put much more emphasis on the connection between objects within a collection and the fact that, when presented together, they can tell a story.

Finally, it can be argued that the Delta Plan method is not even a fully-fledged method. Like many other value assessment methods, it is merely a list of criteria. It describes neither the different stages in the process of value attribution nor what is required to complete each stage. As a result, the application of the method relies heavily on the skills and experience of experts. The outcome is hardly verifiable by others. It is therefore of limited value as a practical tool.

CHANGING ATTITUDES

Despite the problems described above, the methodology for the value assessment of moveable heritage in The Netherlands has not been modified or replaced since its introduction in the early 1990s. Even though during the 1990s several other sets of criteria were developed for specific types of collections (maritime collections, photographic collections, ethnographic collections, natural history collections and historic computers, among others), these were merely slight adaptations of the Delta Plan system. Therefore, the same objections as described

above apply. On the other hand, the approach to value assessment has changed considerably over the past two decades. To name four of the most important developments:

- Attention has shifted from single objects to entire collections and groups of objects within collections.
- Objects are appreciated more because of their capacity to ‘tell a story’ than because of their aesthetic qualities.
- There is a growing tendency to value different types of heritage in their relation with other types; for example, to regard built heritage in relation to its surroundings or collections in relation to buildings and interiors, etc.
- Public appreciation of heritage is taken more and more into account when assessing the value of collections; this is no longer considered to be the exclusive domain of experts.

Considering the changing professional attitudes towards value assessment, the shortcomings of the existing method and the increasing political and economic pressure on museums to defend their right to exist, it can be stated that the need for a useable and suitable method for value assessment is now more urgent than ever before.

From the questions and requests the Cultural Heritage Agency of The Netherlands (RCE) receives, it has become clear that there is a growing demand for a more systematic and objectified framework that enables collection keepers to make their own value assessments. Over the last two decades, the Dutch cultural heritage field has professionalized considerably. Collection keepers are better trained than before and have become less dependent on the advice of professional experts from outside the museum. As a result, the role of these external experts has changed as well. They are no longer seen as omniscient authorities, but as partners in the development of new process standards. When asked by a museum curator “What is the value of my collection?”, experts will nowadays be inclined to provide collection keepers with guidelines on how to assess the value of their collection themselves.

A NEW METHOD FOR VALUE ASSESSMENT

For this reason, the RCE has started a research program entitled ‘Value and evaluation of cultural heritage’. The most important goal of the program is to create more awareness among collection keepers of the importance of the issue of value assessment for collection management. Secondly, it aims to develop practical tools and guidelines for collection managers. The most important result of the program will be a new “do it yourself” method for value assessment for moveable collections. This method will replace the old Delta Plan method. The remaining part of this paper will describe how RCE is developing this method.

In order to develop a new method for value assessment, RCE has set up a research project entitled ‘Methodology development for assessing the value of collections’. The leading questions in this research project are:

- How can we assess the value of an object?
- Who are the key players in the value assessment process?
- How can we reconcile different perspectives on value and weigh different values against each other?
- What role does value assessment play in decision making processes?
- How can public appreciation of collections be integrated in the value assessment process?

INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

The research is aimed both at gaining insight into current practices of value assessment as well as developing tools and strategies for improving these practices. The first phase of the project consists of research into value assessment methods from different countries and heritage fields, such as built heritage, archeology and landscape, to study the similarities and differences between these methods and see where there is common ground. In 2009, RCE, the National Archives and the Government Buildings Agency held a conference on ‘The technique of value assessment’. The goal of this conference was to facilitate the exchange of knowledge and practices between professionals from six different disciplines: built heritage, moveable heritage, archeology, archives, intangible heritage and landscape. It was the first time in The Netherlands that professionals from these different heritage fields had come together to discuss the topic of value assessment and it was the first step towards an interdisciplinary approach. A follow-up conference in November 2010 focused on Paleis Soestdijk, one of the former Dutch royal palaces, as a case study for an interdisciplinary approach to value assessment.

In order to learn more about the current practice of value assessment and to list the demands and wishes of potential users regarding a new method, RCE is conducting both a series of interviews and a digital survey among potential users, mostly Dutch museum curators. The combined results of the desk research, the interviews and the survey will lead to a program of demands for the value assessment method.

The next step will be the development of the method itself. It will most likely consist, in its definite form, of:

- a methodological outline that describes the different stages in the process of value assessment and a description of what is needed to complete each stage
- a description of the different stakeholders and their respective roles and tasks in the value assessment process

- a list of possible criteria for value assessment and supporting questions that help to determine whether an object meets those criteria
- a ‘tool’ for weighing different values against each other
- a list of frequently used terms and definitions.

INTERACTIVE METHOD

In the third phase of the project, a pilot model of the method will be tested by potential users in the form of case studies carried out under the supervision of the RCE. The results of these case studies will be published along with the method. This test phase is of crucial importance, since the new method is intended as a “do it yourself” tool, which can only be a success if the users for whom it is being developed actually employ it in their daily practice. The involvement of potential users in the development process will provide us with feedback and first-hand experiences that will help to improve the method in its definitive form. In the recent past, RCE has gained experience with this interactive method. During the development of the guidelines for the cultural value assessment of historic interiors, this method was tested in several case studies in historic house museums, in close cooperation between RCE and members of the curatorial staff. Their comments proved to be invaluable and have resulted in an adaptation of the text. The guideline was first published in December 2009 as a preliminary version on the RCE website (Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage 2009), and was published in its definite form in December 2010 (Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage 2010). Users were explicitly invited to give their comments on the concept version and their feedback has been used to improve the guidelines in their definitive form.

CASE STUDIES

In the selection of case studies, special attention will be given to the value assessments of objects that have been taken out of their original context – e.g. stained glass windows, wall paintings – or objects that are or have been part of a unit, e.g. picture frames. Another aspect that will be stressed in the case studies is how to value objects of everyday use. In working on the case studies, the publication *Significance 2.0* by the Collections Council of Australia (Russell and Winkworth 2009) will serve as an important source of inspiration. Our aim, however, is to take certain aspects, such as experience and ensemble value, one step further.

CONCLUSION

The museum profession has changed considerably over the past two decades. Due to developments both inside and outside the museum, there is a growing demand for a systematic, objectified assessment framework to serve as a foundation for value based decision making. Hopefully the

new “do it yourself” method for value assessment, to be developed by RCE in close cooperation with the Dutch heritage field, will contribute to a better, more transparent decision making process.

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