

# COMCOL



## *International Committee for Collecting*

[www.comcol-icom.org](http://www.comcol-icom.org)

COMCOL is the International Committee of ICOM with the mission to deepen discussions and share knowledge of the practice, theory and ethics of collecting and collections (both tangible and intangible) development. COMCOL is a platform for professional exchange of views and experiences around collecting in the broadest sense. The mandate includes collecting and de-accessioning policies, contemporary collecting, restitution of cultural property and respectful practices that affect the role of collections now and in the future, from all types of museums and from all parts of the world. COMCOL's aims are to increase cooperation and collaboration across international boundaries, to foster innovation in museums and to encourage and support museum professionals in their work with collections development.

COMCOL Newsletter (formerly *Collectingnet Newsletter*) is published four times a year and distributed to members of the committee. It is also available at COMCOL's website <http://www.comcol-icom.org>, at ICOM's website <http://icom.museum/who-we-are/the-committees/international-committees/international-committee/international-committee-for-collecting.html> and at the Swedish Samdok website <http://www.nordiskamuseet.se/Publication.asp?publicationid=4213&topmenu=143>.

### Editors

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### From the editors

Welcome to the twelfth issue of the newsletter. For COMCOL, the newsletter is an important forum and we invite museum professionals and scholars to take part in developing the work by contributing material within the subject field of the committee (see above). We welcome short essays on projects, reflections, conference/seminar reports, specific questions, notices about useful reading material, invitations to cooperate, new research or other matters. Please send your contribution for the next issue by **1 April 2011** to the editors, and contact us also if you wish to discuss a theme for publication.

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## COMCOL News

### Report from Shanghai

*Eva Fägerborg*

During ICOM's General Conference in Shanghai 7-12 November 2010, COMCOL organized two successful sessions. Despite the omission of the announcement of our meetings in the General Conference Programme, both were well-attended by delegates from all over the world, and also so inspiring that they immediately resulted in new members joining the committee.



*The first image of the first power point presentation at the first meeting of the committee! Photo: Eva Fägerborg.*

On 9 November, the participants were engaged in a lively debate on *the practice, theory and ethics of collecting the present*. The session started with a speech by interim president Peter van Mensch: *Why a new International Committee for Collecting?* (see page 4), followed by a panel and an open debate moderated by Léontine Meijer-van Mensch. The panel – consisting of Hans Ottomeyer, director, Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin; Tanja Roženbergar, director, Museum of Recent History, Celje; Zvezdana Antoš, curator, Ethnographical Museum, Zagreb; Eva Fägerborg, curator, Nordiska Museet, Stockholm, and Peter van Mensch, professor of Cultural Heritage, Reinwardt Academy, Amsterdam – were asked questions about perspectives and methodologies. The very active audience contributed with a wide range of examples from various kinds of museums, proving

that contemporary collecting is a topical and important issue.



*Participants. Photo Eva Fägerborg.*



*Participants. Photo: Eva Fägerborg.*



*Participants. Photo: Peter van Mensch.*

On 10 November, the programme started with two speeches. Léontine Meijer-van Mensch: *Contemporary tendencies in the practice, theory and ethics of collecting*, and Eva Fägerborg: *SAMDOK and the pre-history of COMCOL* (see page 7 and 10).

The second part of this day was dedicated to the formal statutory meeting of the committee. The minutes are published at COMCOL's website, so here in the newsletter I will just recapitulate on two points: the result of the elections and an outline of COMCOL's first annual conference 2011 (see below).

At the concluding General Assembly of ICOM on 12 November, COMCOL was represented by two delegates. Due to the probationary status of the committee, our delegates had no voting rights, but were given seats and a sign – which accordingly was collected by the chairperson.



*COMCOL representatives at the General Assembly: Newly elected chairperson Léontine Meijer-van Mensch (right) and secretary Eva Fägerborg (left). Photo: Lothar Jordan.*

## COMCOL Executive Board 2010-2013

*Chairperson:* Léontine Meijer-van Mensch, lecturer, Reinwardt Academie, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

*Vice Chairperson:* Elisabeth Tietmeyer, deputy director, Museum Europäischer Kulturen, Berlin, Germany

*Secretary:* Eva Fägerborg, curator, Nordiska Museet, Stockholm, Sweden

*Treasurer:* Roger Heeler, professor, Toronto, Canada

*Members:*

Etienne Boumans, adviser, European Parliament, Brussels, Belgium

Eva Hult, archivist, Swedish National Maritime Museums, Stockholm, Sweden

Minna Sarantola-Weiss, head of research, Helsinki City Museum, Finland

## COMCOL 2011 Annual Conference

**Theme:** *Participative strategies in documenting the present*

**Where:** Museum Europäischer Kulturen Berlin, Germany

**When:** 31 October – 3 November

**Draft of programme:** Starting in the afternoon 31 October, the first day is dedicated to keynotes. 1 November will be filled with papers and a plenary discussion, for 2 November an excursion to Eisenhüttenstadt is planned, and on 3 November COMCOL's formal annual meeting will be held.

## Speeches at COMCOL's meetings in Shanghai 10 November 2010

### Why a new International Committee for Collecting?

*Peter van Mensch*

When I became member of ICOM (Spring 1977), I was Head of the Department of Education and Exhibitions at the National Museum of Natural History (Leiden, Netherlands). Soon, I became involved in the Reinwardt Academie as part-time lecturer on natural history museums. I wanted to keep in touch with developments internationally, so what international committee should I chose? Should I become member of the International Committee for Natural History Museums, or should I become member of CECA, the International Committee for Education and Cultural Action? Or, could it be helpful to participate in the work of ICTOP, the International Committee for Training of Personnel? Given the fact that I had worked in different museums (an anatomical museum, a history museum and a decorative art museum) in different positions (researcher, educator, curator and registrar) and had developed a general interest in the theory and history of museums, membership of the newly created International Committee for Museology (ICOFOM) was also an option. I decided to become a member of CECA.

The structure of ICOM challenges every museum professional to reflect upon his/her professional identity. How do we define ourselves as professional and in what (inter)national professional discourse do we recognize our professional interests? Does the subject matter orientation or the function lead the debate? In other words, did I consider myself as zoologist working in the field of education, or did I consider myself as educator working in the field of zoology? Even though I studied zoology (and archaeology), I did not define myself professionally as zoologist in 1977. Actually, I did not define myself as an educator either. Without being aware of museology as an academic discipline, I have always considered myself first as museum professional ("museologist").

The three perspectives on professional identity are reflected in the structure of ICOM. The 30 (with COMCOL: 31) international committees can be classified in three groups:

- 1) committees based on the subject matter orientation of collections ("curatorial committees"), such as CIMAM, CIPEG, ICMAH, NATHIST, etc.
- 2) committees based on functions ("museographical committees"), such as CECA, CIDOC, ICOM-CC, MPR, etc.
- 3) committees aiming at a broader (meta) museological reflection on museums and the museum profession ("museological committees"), such as ICTOP and ICOFOM.

Apart from the regional organizations, ICOM's affiliated organizations can be classified in the same way. Among the "curatorial organizations" are the associations of open-air museums (AEOM), agricultural museums (AIMA), customs museums (IACM), history museums (IAMH), transport and communications museums (IATM), architectural museums (ICAM), maritime museums (ICMM), and museums of performing arts (SIBMAS). There is one "museographical organization": the International Association of Museum Facility Administrators (IAMFA). The International Movement for a New Museology (MINOM) is a "museological organization".

It will be argued that the new International Committee for Collecting (COMCOL) is the logical result of two major trends that can be observed among the curatorial and museographical committees, and fills a gap in the wide range of already existing international committees.



### Curatorial committees

The core committees in this group represent the five classical museum traditions (“museum cultures”). Four committees represent museum traditions that go back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century: archaeology and history (ICMAH), ethnography (ICME), science and technology (CIMUSET), and natural history (NATHIST). Interestingly, there is no general committee for art museums. Instead, three committees reflect subject matter specialization in this area: fine art (ICFA), modern art (CIMAM) and decorative art and design (ICDAD). Among the museums of decorative art some specialist collections achieved international committee status in their own right: musical instruments (CIMCIM), costumes (COSTUME), and glass (GLASS).

In the sphere of archaeology and history a comparable thematic specialization can be observed: egyptology (CIPEG), arms and military museums (ICOMAM), museums on money and banking (ICOMON), historic house museums (DEMHIST), and memorial museums (IC MEMO). DEMHIST and IC MEMO can be seen as steps in the direction of increased specialization of the field, but represent at the same time a new type of approach. This new approach moves away from subject matter specialization, emphasizing integrated and multidisciplinary perspectives. In this sense historic house museums and memorial museums can be connected with regional museums (ICR) and city museums (CAMOC).

Thus, among ICOM’s international committees we recognize the classical museum traditions, enriched by a growing number of specialist committees. Committees such as GLASS and CIPEG represent “old school” forms of subject matter specialization; committees such as ICR and CAMOC represent another “paradigm” in specialization. Considering the history of regional museums and city museums this paradigm in specialization should not be referred to as “new school”. However, what may be new is the focus on integrated and multidisciplinary

approaches. Such approaches are also visible in a completely new type of museum that emerges, not yet reflected in the structure of international committees: the “idea museum”.

Idea museums do not deal with specific issues of time and place. Concrete (for example, local or regional) events may be used as starting point for a discussion about some general concerns, such as justice, tolerance, resistance, slavery/forced labour/trafficking. An example of such idea museum is the Forum för Levande Historia (The Living History Forum) at Stockholm ([www.levandehistoria.se](http://www.levandehistoria.se)).

“New school” specialization challenges the role of collecting and collections. Traditional, subject matter based, solutions may no longer work. New approaches should be tested and discussed, preferably not confined to small groups of museums that share a common institutional identity. A committee for collecting could provide an effective platform for such discussion.

### Functions

There are different ways to classify the activities of museums. At the Reinwardt Academie the tri-partite PRC-model is used, identifying preservation (collection management), research and communication as the three basic functions of a museum. Since the Reinwardt Academie is not a curatorial training programme, i.e. not subject matter based, its curriculum focuses on four specialist areas: conservation and documentation (preservation), exhibition and education (communication). It should be added that instead of documentation the curriculum speaks of information management, and instead of education the term visitor services is used, thus reflecting a broader perspective on both functions (see [www.reinwardtacademie.nl](http://www.reinwardtacademie.nl)).

The translation of the model of three basic functions into four specialist areas relates to the role of the Reinwardt Academie as a higher vocational training programme. Students are trained for actual positions in museums (and similar organizations). This

ambivalence between functions and positions is also recognizable in the ICOM structure of international committees.

The museographical committees represent specialist positions rather than functions. A large majority of members of these committees is employed as specialist in a museum, as free-lance specialist or as consultant, reflecting an over-all increased specialization in museum work. As such, these committees have a clear professional profile, focusing on the practice, theory and ethics of one particular specialist area: conservation-restoration (ICOM-CC), education (CECA), documentation-registration (CIDOC), exhibition design (ICAMT), marketing-public relations (MPR), security (ICMS).

The International Committee on Management (INTERCOM) shows a gradual change in the perspective of the museographical committees. INTERCOM's main concerns are the managerial aspects of policy formulation, legislation and resource management. It also watches over the implementation of ICOM's *Code of Ethics for Museums*. This refers to more than the responsibility of specialist functionaries. Among its membership there may be a large number of museum directors, but the committee's concerns are concerns that are (or should be) shared among museum staffs as a whole.

This "new" perspective is also recognizable in other museographical committees in the growing emphasis on function rather than specialist position. This is connected with the advent of the "participatory paradigm" in museum work. Museum professionals are increasingly prepared to let communities play a role in the decision making processes concerning the creation and use of collections. In *Collectingnet Newsletter/COMCOL Newsletter* several examples are given, illustrating the importance of a function based approach rather than a position based one.

The new International Committee for Collecting is an expression of this new

approach. Collecting or collection development in the museum context is not the concern of a specialist "collector"; it is one of the specialist functions and one that was not yet represented in the wide range of international (museographical) committees. Like all other functions, collecting or collection development includes the dimension of subject matter, but similar to the other functions there is a dimension that transcends the specificity of subject matter concerns.

### **Integrated perspective**

The trends as briefly outlined above, show the breakthrough of an integral and integrated perspective in museum work. This perspective is on the international professional agenda since the UNESCO Roundtable on "The development and the role of museums in the contemporary world" (Santiago, Chile 1972) when the concept of "integrated museum" was formulated, sometimes also referred to as "integral museum". In this concept integration should be considered on four levels:

- 1) subject disciplines
- 2) museographical disciplines
- 3) heritage
- 4) society

The concept asks for an inclusive museum based on the principle of facilitating access, representation and participation (integration on level 4) and turns against the trend of increased specialization as to subject matter disciplines, museographical disciplines and heritage. A discussion on collecting and collection development can only be fruitful when inspired by this perspective.

### **COMCOL**

In a text on "Collecting as intangible heritage" (Van Mensch & Meijer-van Mensch 2010) three key concepts have been identified as parameters for the work of COMCOL:

- collecting as cultural performance
- collections as means
- collecting as instrument of collection development

These parameters emphasize the dynamic nature of collections and collecting as process. COMCOL is not the international committee on collections; it is a committee on *collecting*, or rather *collection development*.

As part of a larger process of musealisation, collecting and collection development involves the practice, theory and ethics of signification and selection. COMCOL is based on the assumption that this can (and should) be discussed from an integral and integrated perspective. Not by coincidence COMCOL is deeply rooted in the discussion on documenting the present. COMCOL's programme is not the denial of the validity of specialist approaches. COMCOL will not avoid discussions about collecting contemporary art, for example. However, documenting the complexity of contemporary society and the role of collecting as instrument provides some of the major issues to be discussed. In addition, the concept of collection development involves reflection on de-accessioning as possible instrument for increasing the use value of collections. De-accession does not necessarily mean the

destruction of objects. Transferring items from one collection to another may contribute to the use value of both collections. As such COMCOL is also interested in the concept of collection mobility.

By discussing the practice, theory and ethics of collection development COMCOL aims to make a major contribution to the general discussion on the specific role museums can play in the development of society. The specificity of museum work is related to the creation and use of collections. It is important to have a platform for reflection on how collections were, are and can be created.

#### Reference

Peter van Mensch and Léontine Meijer-van Mensch, 'Collecting as intangible heritage', *Collectingnet Newsletter* 2010 (9): 2-4.

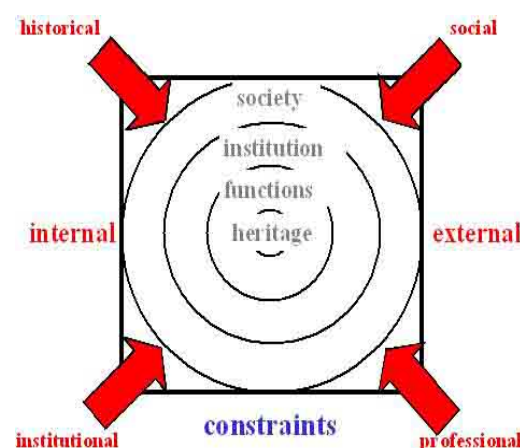
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## Contemporary tendencies in the practice, theory and ethics of collecting

*Léontine Meijer-van Mensch*

As starting point for discussing contemporary tendencies in the practice, theory and ethics of collecting is the Basic Constraints Model as developed at the Reinwardt Academie. This model identifies the four basic parameters in museology: heritage, functions, institution and society. Each museum has to make its decision as to what to collect ("heritage"), how to implement its responsibilities concerning conservation, documentation, exhibition and education ("functions"), how to organize its work in what physical structure ("institution"), for which target groups ("society"). In making its choices, and framing policies each museum has to cope with internal and external limiting (or



liberating) conditions ("constraints"), such as the availability of resources ("institutional constraints"), the historical legacy as, for example, expressed in its

collection and building (“historical constraints”), the (inter)national professional discourse (“professional constraints”), and the social, political and economic context (“social constraints”).

This article will describe how new developments concerning each of the parameters affects the concept of collecting. The first hypothesis underlying the article is that in their decision making processes as to the basic parameters outlined above, museums traditionally tend to make a connection between their own perceived institutional identity (“historical constraints”) and a specific professional discourse, i.e. natural history museums identify themselves with the specific professional discourse within the community of natural history museums and are rarely influenced by developments among other types of museums. The second hypothesis is that this “subject matter paradigm” is gradually replaced by a new paradigm emphasizing integrated and integral perspectives.

### **Heritage**

As to the first parameter (“heritage”) it should be noted that traditionally in museums the concept of heritage is related to the concept of collection. The specificity of museums is basically in the accumulation of objects from different origins according to some rational principle. Traditionally the rational principles are derived from a specific subject discipline. Museums thus followed the development of this subject discipline and often made a significant contribution to this development. As a result the museum field shows a high degree of subject specialisation.

During the last decades of the twentieth century increased subject specialisation tended to be accompanied by an increased academic interest in inter-, multi- and cross-disciplinary approaches. This anticipates, or at least reflects, new definitions of the relationship between heritage and heritage institutions. Traditional subject divisions become obsolete as well as the traditional institutional division of heritage sectors

(museums, archives, libraries, monuments, etc.). This can be witnessed in the development of thematic (cross-disciplinary or multi-disciplinary) museums. Industrial museums are good examples of this. In the post-industrial Ruhrgebiet area in Germany such an integrated perspective is visible in several regional museums where landscape, site, buildings, machines, archives, objects, and oral histories together make up the collection of the museum. The Ruhr Museum (Essen) defines itself as museum of “Industriekultur”, which the museum itself translates as “Industrial Heritage”. Such integral and integrated perspective on heritage is clearly visible in the changes in curriculum of several former museum studies programs. For example, the University of Newcastle now offers a museum, gallery and heritage studies programme, and in 2008 the Reinwardt Academy (Amsterdam) changed its bachelor programme from training museum professionals into training future heritage professionals.

### **Functions**

Collecting is one of the functions of a museum. Even though acquisition policies are in general derived from the mission of the institution, collecting practices very often were considered to be an autonomous curatorial responsibility. Traditionally the organizational structure of museums follows the structure of the collection with rather autonomous collection-based departments headed by a curator. Functions such as collecting, conservation, documentation, research and exhibition were organized within this departmental framework. The arrival of specialist educators challenged this organizational principle. Gradually, the collection-based organizational model developed into a function-based model.

In a function-based organizational model, the collection profile tends to be related to the other functions of the museum, in particular to education, rather than (curatorial) research. Questions like “Is the object important for our educational purposes?” imply that educators should play a role in the acquisition policy.



Acquisition is increasingly a shared responsibility of museum staffs, involving not only curators and educators, but also conservators and registrars. In view of the present emphasis on the ethics of collecting, registrars have an important role to play as they have a crucial responsibility to have a finger on the pulse concerning ethical and legal matters. This, of course, also implies a key role in de-accessioning procedures.

In the discussion at the Shanghai meeting of COMCOL, Prof. Hans Ottomeyer stated that “a collection created by a committee is a boring, one-dimensioned one” that is missing its “own character”. It is clear that the individualism of the director and/or curator is disappearing in a model based on shared responsibility, involving a number of criteria. Can we conclude that a boring collection is the dark side of a function-based professionalization? And is it too bold to state that museums compensate for this with daring exhibitions?

### Institution

New integral and integrated perspectives are not only visible in (re)new(ed) institutions, but also in multi-disciplinary networks of museums, and of museums and other heritage institutions. This may involve the exchange of objects and collecting between institutions. Recently an important handbook (*Encouraging Collections Mobility – A Way Forward for Museums in Europe*) was published proposing that “museums should rather be encouraged to build collection strategies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century than repeating the old pattern that is based on the idea of eternal growth” (see [http://www.lending-for-europe.eu/fileadmin/CM/public/handbook/Encouraging\\_Collections\\_Mobility\\_A4.pdf](http://www.lending-for-europe.eu/fileadmin/CM/public/handbook/Encouraging_Collections_Mobility_A4.pdf)). These collection strategies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century involve collections mobility as form of shared responsibility. Shared responsibility is also the core of the concept of “heritage community” as promoted by the Council of Europe in its Framework *Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society* (*Convention of Faro* 2005). According to the convention, a heritage community consists of people who value specific aspects of

cultural heritage which they wish, within the framework of public action, to sustain and transmit to future generations. This convention is implemented in the heritage legislation (*Erfgoeddecreet*) of the Flemish Community (Belgium). In this law a heritage community consists of people and organisations.

### Society

The 1970's witnessed a growing awareness of the social role of museums in many parts of the world. The UNESCO *Recommendation on participation by the people at large in cultural life and their contribution to it* (1976) was an important milestone. The *Recommendation* reflects new demands created by, for example, policies on social inclusion, emancipation movements and by growing multiculturalism in European countries. These developments resulted in the emergence of a new paradigm with a new sense of democracy in the museum and heritage field. The museum is increasingly seen as a place for encounter and dialogue. The ideal expression of the new paradigm is a museum that genuinely opens up its narrative for user-generated content and co-creation.

The key concept in this respect is “community”. In the Shanghai discussion meeting “To share or not to share?” (organized by the ICOM national committees of The Netherlands, China and South-Africa on Tuesday Nov. 9) Bernice Murphy, chair of the ethics committee, stated that we should “deconstruct the notion of community”. Implicit in ICOM's present code of ethics (2004) there is a distinction between “constituent communities” and “source communities”. In a future version of the code this distinction should be made explicit. This echoes a discussion about the concept of community in the *International Journal of Heritage Studies* (Waterton and Smith 2010). For example city museums are confronted with a wide variety of “communities of interest” or stakeholders. Some communities may have the feeling that they do not have full access, are not represented and are not invited to participate. A major trend in museum

ethics is to involve source communities and to involve them in such a way that they become constituent communities. How does this impact on collection policies? Following Ottomeyer's remark as cited above, does a "politically correct" involvement of a wide diversity of external stakeholders result into even more "boring and one-dimensional collections"?

### Conclusion

Museums in the first decade of the twenty-first century show some fundamental changes for example in the way they shape and use collections. Traditional institutional identities are increasingly being challenged by an international professional discourse emphasizing integral and integrated approaches. These approaches are visible in the definition of heritage, the organizational models, cooperation in networks and the participation of a variety of communities. This affects the very notion of collection and as such also the concept of collecting.

One of the key concepts of present day developments is the notion of "shared responsibility": a shared responsibility of museum staff, a shared responsibility of organizations and interest groups in networks ("heritage communities"), and a shared responsibility of museums and their source communities ("the participative museum"). This involves a discussion on the role and the responsibility of the museum professional.

In this context, it is not for nothing that participative collecting has been chosen as topic of our 2011 meeting in Berlin!

### Reference

Waterton, E. and Smith, L., 'The recognition and misrecognition of community heritage', in *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 16, 2010, (1-2), 4-15.

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## Samdok and the pre-history of COMCOL

*Eva Fägerborg*

Dear colleagues and participants in this session,

It is a pleasure to see you here, taking part in COMCOL's statutory meeting. It has been a long journey, both literally and metaphorically, up to these days in Shanghai, but now we are here to take our first formal steps as an international committee of ICOM.

I have been asked to tell you about COMCOL's pre-history, which is to be found in Samdok, the Swedish cultural history museums' network for contemporary studies and collecting. But I would say that the pre-history is also to be found in many other settings – in museums and academic institutions in several countries – where this kind of work is performed. There are lots of corresponding activities in other parts of

the world, so the Swedish initiative of creating an international ICOM committee for collecting is an expression of a wish to connect the work of many professionals, an expression of the need for a wider platform for exchange of views and experiences. As a background to the initiative I will give a brief introduction to Samdok.

### What is Samdok?

For more than thirty years, Swedish museums of cultural history have explored contemporary Sweden within the frame of Samdok. (The name is composed of "sam", which is the first part of the Swedish words for "contemporaneity", "co-operation" and "co-ordination", and "dok", which is an abbreviation of "documentation".) It is a

voluntary association, for the moment consisting of 80 member institutions spread all over the country: regional museums, municipal museums, central museums, special museums, and a number of other cultural heritage institutions. The members have different aims and orientations, different needs, competences and working conditions. So Samdok is a heterogeneous group, with a common mission, which is to contribute to a deepened understanding of human beings, of people in the society, through contemporary studies and collecting. Focus is on people's life, activities, material worlds, shifting conditions and values related to time, space and social contexts. We have also recently decided to introduce a broader perspective on the existing, older collections and their usefulness for communication and research in today's society.

Samdok was established in 1977 after some years of discussions and analyses of museum collections in Sweden which showed that most of the twentieth century was poorly represented, especially as regards artefacts. So something had to be done to ensure that museums in the future should have richer and more representative source material from present day society. This was a common challenge for the museums, and they decided to meet the challenge by organizing the work it involved on a national level.

Samdok's initial mission was to direct part of the museums' object collecting to the present, under the slogan "today for tomorrow", through planned and active collecting, effective use of resources, and shared responsibility. One important task was to formulate principles and criteria for collecting and to find a system for distributing the duties between the museums. The model that took shape was to engage the museums in a number of working groups, known as *pools*, supported by the *Samdok secretariat* and the *Samdok council*. This model has lasted, even if the work, the content, has changed.

Adjustments to Samdok are due to changes in society and academic standpoints as well as changes in the museums' working conditions and orientations. The original idea of organizing the collecting of *objects* in the age of mass production was soon abandoned in favour of documenting present day *life*. This approach

was labelled "contemporary documentation", with collecting of objects as one part of a broader task, mostly encompassing fieldwork with interviews, observations, photography, sound and video recordings, collecting of objects, narratives and documents. Now the museums have even more pluralistic methodological approaches, depending on the subject. Another change is the temporal orientation, from serving the future to working also for contemporary society. And the pools are now arenas for exchange of experiences and advancement of knowledge, rather than instruments for carrying out a national collecting programme.

Samdok's re-orientations reflect a theoretical movement away from a positivistic outlook towards recognition of socially and culturally influenced views of the world. Along with discussions on reflexivity and representation, this also sheds new light on the museums' power to select and legitimate what to include in the collective memory of society. Discussions on how cultural heritage is produced and used have consequently influenced the collecting activities. Interest in cultural heritage as a public concern has also affected museum collecting, and museums are increasingly involving people in the community in collecting activities and various kinds of dialogic – or participative – projects.

This leads to another role of Samdok, as a forum for professional development. It is a forum for discussions on contemporary culture and society, a forum for reflections on cultural heritage as a product of collecting, a forum for sharing experiences, and further education.

### How Samdok is organized

Perhaps Samdok's most well-known characteristic is the way the museums cooperate in the pools, and the core of Samdok work is the research and collecting carried on in these groups, by the respective museums. The original set of pools was replaced by a new one in the late 1990s and in recent years some have fused. In the future other alterations may be needed.

Currently there are seven working groups: The pools for *Domestic Life & Leisure*, *Local & Regional Spheres*, *Management of Natural Resources*, *Manufacture & Services*, *Society &*

*Politics, Sami Life*, and a *Cultural Encounters* group. Most of them are organized around different fields of human activities; one, *Sami life*, focuses on an indigenous ethnic minority, and the *Cultural Encounters* group was established in 1993 with the mission to integrate cultural encounter perspectives in all pools.

In the pools, representatives from the member museums meet regularly around contemporary subjects and museum projects. Each museum chooses the pool/s it wishes to join and each museum implements and finances its own projects. In general, the pools meet twice a year and they decide themselves how to work. Their meetings are in fact education days, when they have opportunities to analyse and discuss their work. They often invite researchers from universities, they organize study visits and field seminars. Most of the projects are carried out by the respective museums, but there are also specific joint pool projects, or specific topics that the pools gather around.

The work is coordinated by a small secretariat, located at and financed by the Nordiska museet, Sweden's largest museum for cultural history. The secretariat is responsible for information, administration, organization of conferences and other common activities, Samdok's website, a periodical (from 2010 in digital form, called *Samdok-forum*), and a database containing facts about the museums' contemporary studies. A major common event is the annual autumn conference. Recent topics have been collecting policies and -programmes, the role of objects, collecting in public and society perspectives, and use of new media/ICT.

The overall decision-making Samdok council is chaired by the museum director of Nordiska museet and consists of representatives for national, regional and municipal museums. The research council of the Nordiska museet is also a resource for Samdok and one of our links to universities.

### **From Collectingnet to COMCOL**

Samdok was founded in a national context, in a small country in Northern Europe, with museum collections that have been built up in national, regional or local settings. But this small country is part of a global society with a flow of people, products, and ideas – and also

new antagonisms. Museums face the shared challenge of examining their collecting in relation to the world and the conditions in which they act. How do museums in other parts of the world deal with contemporary issues? How is the concept of “cultural heritage” understood in an increasingly mobile world? The need for an extended dialogue became more and more apparent, and in Samdok we searched for an international platform for the dialogue. In ICOM we could not find a committee that answered to these needs. ICOM had committees for managing and handling museum collections (registration, conservation), but none with a focus on the considerations behind decisions of what to acquire and how, no forum for sharing experiences and developing collecting theoretically, methodologically, and as museum practise.

So what to do? We decided to try to start something new, find out possible interest for such a forum in other parts of the world, by issuing invitations to an international conference, with a view to forming a network. The process started with a letter in November 2006, informing of our plans and inviting to participation. The letter was distributed to museums worldwide.

The next step was to organize the conference, which was held in November 2007 and was endorsed by ICOM Sweden. That year Samdok had been in operation for 30 years, so we celebrated by looking ahead and across borders. The conference was called *Connecting Collecting*, with the daring subtitle *An international conference on collecting as a key to the future of museums in a global community*. Quotations from the invitation:

“Many museums of cultural and social history around the world are engaged in contemporary issues and devote part of their research and collecting to the society of today. Despite this, there is no international forum for dialogue and collaboration on collecting issues. The aim of the conference is to be the starting point for such a forum /.../

We invite museum professionals and scholars to ...  
... discuss and share experiences on collecting in contemporary society  
... discuss and share experiences of contemporary use of collections acquired in



earlier scientific, ideological and political contexts

... discuss, and hopefully agree on, establishing an international museum Collecting Network, which may develop into a new international ICOM committee.”

The conference attracted almost 150 participants from 19 countries, and ended in an agreement on the establishment of a new international network, Collectingnet. After the conference we started to publish *Collectingnet Newsletter*, which is edited by Catherine Marshall in Ireland and me. Since spring 2008, 11 issues have been distributed, from number 11 with the title *COMCOL Newsletter*. Another member started the compilation of an international bibliography on collecting.

More and more museum professionals and scholars took an interest in Collectingnet and the ambitions to develop it to a committee of ICOM. When we came in contact with Peter van Mensch and Léontine Meijer-van Mensch at the Reinwardt Academie in Amsterdam, the work proceeded with formulation of a proposal regarding the establishment of an International ICOM Committee for Collecting. In the proposal the scope was widened to collections

development (including de-accessioning), and to include all types of museums.

The proposal was distributed in spring 2009 and received declarations of support from 140 ICOM Members in 27 countries in 5 continents. It was approved by ICOM's Executive Council in December 2009 and formally confirmed by Director General in March this year. And now, in November 2010, we are here, in Shanghai! COMCOL already has a website and a newsletter; let us now move on with activities that increase cooperation and collaboration across international boundaries, foster innovation in museums, and encourage and support museum professionals in their work with collections development! As a new committee, COMCOL will have a probationary status for three years, to prove that it fulfils the requirements of ICOM and contributes to increasing knowledge in its sector of the international museum community.

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## Essay

### Murder in the museum. Reflections on Peter van Mensch's essay in COMCOL Newsletter 11

*Etienne Boumans*

“Take away the threat of death and all you're left with is a round of make-believe”. From *Still Life*, lyrics by Peter Hammill/Van der Graaf, 1976.

In the latest issue of COMCOL Newsletter, Peter van Mensch produced an excellent and thought-provoking essay on the dilemmas of collecting controversial contemporary objects. He commented on the public debate on the initiative of two museums to document two tragic events in recent Dutch history, involving the preservation of a pistol and a car wreck – both having been instrumental in attacking human lives.

No wonder, therefore, that public comments on the museums' intentions to preserve and/or exhibit the key objects documenting assassinations or attempted assassinations were coloured by – sometimes vivid – emotions. The city of Apeldoorn's mayor surely acted as 'the people's voice' in speaking out against the preservation of the car wreck for display by the city museum. Adding to public dismay is the fact that these events happened as recently as 2002 and 2009 and were seen or heard live on national media. Museums are often seen as depositories of the 'long gone past', not of recent history.

Although, at first sight, the two items appear to have common features, a further reflection brings differences to the fore. Thus, the emotional charge of a pistol may be different from a car (wreck): a pistol is an artefact in essence made to kill (though that should not necessarily be a human being), while a car has another primary purpose; also, contrary to a pistol, a car may bear the shocking signs of impact after having hit a person, which also raises the question of respect for human debris.

We know museums began as private collections, turned over to some public agency for care and display after the owner's death. After the French revolution, a rational, encyclopaedic approach was applied to the collections, and they were treated as instruments for bringing culture to the public at large (Friedman 2010:47). During this evolutionary process, which is far from completed, museums are reaching out more and more in an attempt to educate as many as possible – as opposed to pleasing as few as possible. What's next? According to sociologist Richard Sennett, the more a museum aims to be educational, the more passive its public will be (Dercon 2000:35). And Nina Simon believes museums have the potential to transform from being authorities of static content to dynamic platforms for content generation and sharing (Simon, *The Participatory Museum*, and <http://museumtwo.blogspot.com>). Should museums show more and talk less?

### How morbid can you get?

Scientists often collected memorabilia of natural or human origin, aiming to educate their contemporaries. Frederik Ruysch, a 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch anatomist collected limbs, foetuses and newborn babies in a 'Wonder Cabinet'. Peter the Great purchased the entire collection and integrated it in his *Kunstkamera*. In those days, hardly any distinction was made between scientific specimens, objects of art or the excesses of the idle rich and famous: such collections were simply high fashion.

The Songkran Niyomsane Museum of Forensic Medicine in Bangkok exhibits murder weapons and preserved corpses (including a severed head of a cadaver) of both criminals and victims. Cesare Lombroso, the father of anthropological criminology theory,

established a collection of over 400 skulls, which can be found in the Museum of Criminal Anthropology in Turin (Italy). Lombroso's own head, perfectly preserved in a glass chamber, outlives his theory. The Cincinnati Police Museum displays a case of murder weapons, donated by a local defence attorney. All of these institutions have the study of forensic science as a vital objective.

I first visited the collection of the 'Ecole de criminologie et de criminalistique', which used to house in the Brussels' Palais de Justice over thirty years ago, as an incoming criminologist. It contains the last guillotine blades used for beheading criminals before 1926 as well as skulls deformed by the impact of a bullet or axe. These *semiophores* (term used by Krzysztof Pomian as a synonym to symbol-charged objects) are properly documented and contextualized. Due to lack of funding, the collection, established as a pedagogical support for police researchers and criminologists, was integrated into the Federal Police Museum in 2006. In order not to confront uninitiated visitors, nowadays mostly school children, with potentially shocking items, objects are exhibited with due respect and restraint.

Clearly, this setting has nothing in common with the collecting of 'murderabilia', whereby those interested in the morbid kind of collector's items can purchase Charles Manson signed X-mas cards or rare police footage of crime scenes on the Web (<http://www.murderauction.com/index.php>).

### Pistol

I think there is little doubt that the (rhetorical) question put by Peter van Mensch: 'Can a pistol be national heritage?' is to be answered affirmatively. It suffices to go and visit the Ford's Theatre National Historic Site in Washington, where the pistol used to assassinate Abraham Lincoln is on display. The same goes for the exhibit, by the Royal BC Museum in Victoria (Canada), of a small wooden knife, believed to be the knife that killed Captain Cook in Hawaii in 1779. What makes these artefacts so special, in spite of their ordinary appearance, is the mere fact that they were used to take the lives of historical figures. Hence, the preservation of these key objects for future generations.

For the public at large, the Amsterdam Rijksmuseum is identified with Rembrandt's Night Watch and other superb Golden Age Dutch paintings, and they can't be blamed for that. The Museum has, to a degree, cherished this specialist role of housing the most important collections of Dutch art of this period, which put it firmly on the map in a highly competitive environment. Other statutory fields of collection policy may have been less publicised because of this. The new Rijksmuseum, which is undergoing considerable refurbishment, reopens in 2013 and will then offer visitors an overview of art *and history* from the late Middle Ages to the present day.' There is nothing wrong with that.

On the acquisition of the pistol, the director of the Amsterdam Rijksmuseum faced opposition within the Museum's Executive Board. How hard is it for museum professionals to take a step towards confronting and recognising new challenges to society? Also, due to budget cuts in many countries worldwide, public museums are facing financial constraints and challenges which may force them to enlarge their public, using new opportunities to attract attention. Exhibiting 'popular' or controversial items may be a tempting policy response. In this context, seeking the agreement of family members before the acquisition of emotionally charged objects for collecting purposes is a legitimate and sensible thing to do. In the case of the pistol used by Volkert van der Graaf to kill Fortuyn, this agreement may be easier to obtain, since the politician's brother (in the absence of a partner or children) was said to have no objection to this action, which was likely to upgrade the politician to national heritage. After all, paraphrasing Kenneth Hudson: 'a pistol in a museum is a pistol in a museum and not a pistol'.

### Access and participation

One thing is certain: in the years ahead, due to changing societal conditions and challenges, museums will have to be more accessible than ever to all layers of society. They will undergo significant changes, often vital in order to ensure their own survival. Yet, will this quantitatively greater interest be beneficial or detrimental to a better understanding of the key messages contained in collections, which is

more often than not favoured by a peaceful atmosphere (Dercon 2000:29)?

Another issue highlighted by Peter Van Mensch relates to the opinion, expressed by members of the public, that acquiring the controversial objects were "against all norms and values". On the basis of the aforementioned, none of the rules of the ICOM Code of Ethics seem to be imperilled. In fact, no-one suggested the acquisition of the pistol and knife used by a radical religious fanatic in the killing of Theo Van Gogh, a controversial film maker and critic, in 2006. Such an intention would have to be in accordance with the Code of Ethics.

Peter van Mensch states that both cases studies point at, what he called, the other side of the participation paradigm: 'over and above populist criticism concerning the cultural elite and its toys (art museums), is the lack of public understanding of museum work'. It is naïve to think that greater public attention will not affect policy decisions. Indeed, if our ambition is to promote the enhancement of general public participation in developing collecting policies, (a) is the public willing and able to respond positively to this objective, and (b) do museums agree to share decision making processes in museological matters with 'innocent bystanders'? Are museums ready to open up their premises and collections for ever greater numbers of visitors? Will quantity prevail over quality? Will the virtual museum take over from the live experience? Or are these the questions of the last century?

### References

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