Museums in a time of migration

Rethinking museums' roles, representations, collections, and collaborations

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From totality to infinity
Reimagining museum collecting

Fredrik Svanberg

The Syrian man from Damascus points to a small, roughly crafted gold crucifix hanging from a thin gold chain around his neck and says that his story is actually about that crucifix. It glimmers and shines like a gem while he speaks. His voice begins to crack in emotion as he talks about leaving his family and fleeing his home town and his country, having to live as an ill-treated fugitive in Turkey and Greece, and making his way north through an unwelcoming Europe of the 2015 ‘refugee crises’ to reach relative safety in Sweden. All his close relatives contributed with small personal gold items or money to raise the gold needed to make the crucifix as a preparation for his journey. They did so with the idea that he would have something to sell if in dire need of cash. But of course he never sold it, no matter how hungry or desperate he got. The crucifix is so much more than a crucifix and its value in gold. It became part of him, he says, he cannot move without it and, as he puts it, there are many people inside it.

Few museum visitors watch the video of the man, his crucifix, and his story without being deeply moved, and without finding new dimensions to their understanding of migration from the refugee perspective. The story is focused on the object, so obviously important and vibrating with intense meaning. Its presence in the video and in a museum showcase close by, having been lent by the man in question, is a point of reference for the story told. The material, physical presence of the object, with all its visual properties, provides a focus for the thoughts and experiences of viewers and visitors. The story told and the object perceived combine in the museum to strengthen each other.
The installation with the video and the cross is part of the artwork ‘The Gold Room’ by artist Esther Shalev-Gerz, on show in the Swedish History Museum in Stockholm as part of the exhibition ‘History Unfolds’ (2016–2017). The filmed interview with the man is one of ten which all centre on specific objects, half of them chosen by museum staff from the museum’s own collections and half of them personal belongings of migrants to Sweden.

Many people love museum objects and some showpieces have attained a near-cult status. This is the case with must-see museum artefacts such as the Parthenon Sculptures, the Rosetta Stone, Mona Lisa, Nike of Samothrace, or the death mask of Tutankhamun. But, as the example of the small gold crucifix illustrates, the wonder and awe of museum objects is not limited to such iconic masterpieces. Less spectacular objects connected to strong experiences and stories may be just as engaging. Indeed, few would disagree about the key role of collections and hence collecting practices in museums. What museums hold and what can practically be done with those holdings has obvious influences on most aspects of what they do, from physical exhibitions and the contents of social media communication to all sorts of programming. When it comes to renewal, however, museum work with collections is not always seen as a progressive force, able to drive development. Collections work is more often framed as ‘collections management’, evoking an idea of collections as a static assortment of material in need of being managed.

This text will seek to encourage a re-imagining of museum collecting by exploring and exemplifying the true magic and power of collections and collecting, which are commonly limited in scope by narrow, totalizing ideas about how collections and the information surrounding them should be ‘managed’. Collections management, set up in traditional ways, may certainly be a conserving force in museums and a hindrance to developing new perspectives, new practices, or new kinds of exhibitions. By no means is this integral to collections work, however, which may just as well be harnessed as a force for progressive development (see also Malin Thor Tureby’s and Jesper Johansson’s chapter elsewhere in this book).

In fact, and as a key element in the sort of understanding of museum objects needed if collecting is to be a path to renewal, there are often ‘many people inside’ museum objects, as the man from Syria puts it. This is true in the sense that objects are generally related to many people, historical events, stories, and contexts in the distant past as well as in their not so distant and contemporary museum existence. Objects have many potential meanings since they are often connected to many contexts and can always be viewed from many perspectives and interpreted in different ways. This crucial richness of museum objects has often been hidden and contained in older and narrower museum classifications and information systems. Such systems were generally constructed as totalities, limiting the meanings of objects and tying them to a few grand narratives typical of older museums. In order to handle the richness of objects better, new collection practices and new digital collection systems should be geared to supporting and presenting the actual infinity of connections and meanings of collected material objects.

Not all museums have their own collections, but museums in general do. A museum is an institution ‘which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity’, as stated in the museum definition by ICOM (2010). Collecting is the most unique and defining characteristic of museums as an institution, and museums that do not will miss out on the specific and engaging magic inherent to collecting.

The magic of collecting

Collecting is a practice that achieves many things outside of itself whose origins in collecting are often neither seen nor acknowledged. The poorly analysed and understood ways in which collecting affects the world is what gives it a magic aspect. In the following I will try to illuminate some of this semi-magic and I will use the term collecting to mean the full range of collections work in museums, including collecting things, managing them, handling information connected to them as well as all of its related processes.

The first principle of collecting is selectivity. If collecting is not selective then it is rather accumulation, which is something else. Selectivity means that someone, based somewhere in certain circumstances, is making a subjective choice on what to collect. This is the root of everything that follows since the nature of this selectivity and
of the circumstances in which it is performed lays the foundation for what it subsequently achieves. Who is making the choices and setting the parameters? Based on which ideas and perspectives? Into what system, set of practices and geographical, socio-cultural, and economic contexts are the things collected incorporated?

All these aspects will help to define how collected objects are set up to ‘speak’ in museums and to influence the world in different ways. Museum collection systems, however, have generally managed to hide their particular and historically specific points of view. While selection is rarely invisible, how objects are situated and set up to speak in museums through practices such as classification and selective information systems often are, though the importance and influence of classification systems must not be underestimated (Bowker & Star 2000). As described in further detail elsewhere (Svanberg 2015a), new ways of studying collecting based on perspectives drawn from sociology—and in particular the ‘sociology of associations’ developed by Bruno Latour and others—can further any understanding of how collecting actually works in real life. According to Latour, museum collections are mediators from a social point of view, or actors in themselves (Latour 1987, 2005) involved in the continuing making of the world. This opens up the agency of objects and collections to new understandings and studies (see also Byrne et al. 2011).

The collected object, situated in specific circumstances in a museum context, will act on the world, creating meaning in a range of ways. How it is themed, classified, described, and put into context with other objects, and how it is communicated, are some of the aspects that will shape this meaning-making. Although the perspectives of specific audiences and people will always be crucial to meaning-making, the feelings and understanding evoked by perceiving the small, Syrian gold crucifix are also very much shaped by how it is presented and connected to a specific story. Had it been an exhibit in a showcase entitled ‘The art of the Syrian goldsmith, twenty-first century’ in a row with similar crucifixes and without any other framing story, the experience would be very different.

So museum collecting is selective in important ways, museums situate collected material objects and make them ‘speak’ in different ways, and this speech creates cultural meaning in society. A most common misunderstanding about museum collecting is that it primarily concerns the management of heritage objects and information systems. Our example here shows that this has to be seen in another way. What should be focused on is rather what collected objects and collecting systems actually do in the world. Collecting in a museum context is really about managing the world outside the collection through the management of heritage objects and information systems. Collecting is a meaning-making machinery that structures the world external to the collection, and that is the ‘magic’ of collecting.

The meaning-making aspect of collecting and collections has been the focus of a number of recent Swedish projects and publications which deserve proper notice (see also Gustafsson Reinius et al. 2012). Thus Adriana Muñoz (2011) has worked with the collections of the Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg, Eva Silvén (2016) with the collecting of Sami artefacts by Ernst Manker at the Nordic Museum in Stockholm, Bengt Wittgren (2013) with catalogization in museums, Fredrik Svanberg (2015b) with older anatomical collections in Sweden, Emma Hagström Molin (2015) with biographies of seventeenth-century spoils of war, and Staffan Lundén (2016) with the Benin objects in the British Museum.

Unfolding the collected object

The Reliquary of St Elisabeth, inventory number 1 in the Swedish History Museum in Stockholm, is an amazing treasure of gold, silver, and precious gems. The object is also stunningly rich in its historical connections and stories. Its history has been known to researchers for some time, but it has not been incorporated in the museum's information system or spelt out to the public. An attempt to do so is currently underway in the ongoing exhibition ‘History Unfolds’ at the museum, and the following is a précis of a discussion of the reliquary in the exhibition catalogue (Svanberg 2017).

The reliquary came to Sweden as spoils of war during the seventeenth century, and that is how it has generally been presented at the current Historical Museum and its predecessors in Stockholm. The reliquary was not seen as part of ‘Swedish history’ as such, and was therefore somewhat sidestepped in earlier exhibitions.
an image of what is probably the Roman god Mercury, one an image of Christ, and another one an image which may depict a Sassanian married couple.

Princess Elisabeth of Hungary was born in 1207 and was canonized shortly after her death in 1231. She is an important Catholic saint and her personal story, like her role as a saint, are major stories connected to the reliquary, which was once made to contain her skull in her shrine in Marburg, in a church built to her glory by the Teutonic Order. The reliquary was later plundered by troops of the Swedish king Gustavus Adolphus in 1631. Its earlier history and its connection to St Elisabeth was forgotten as the reliquary became an item in the royal treasury in Stockholm, then in other collections, and finally in the Swedish History Museum. It was not until the 1950s that the earlier history of the reliquary was rediscovered.

The reliquary defies all simple classification. It embodies more than two thousand years of history and is connected to numerous people, places, and stories across much of the world and to a number of cultures and religions. It may be an unusual object, but in fact many museum objects have equally complex backgrounds and biographies, having moved across the world and through long periods of tie rather than having been in the possession of single individuals or cultures. Objects are often tied to different kinds of social and material networks.

Yet this is rarely how they have been classified or presented in museums, where they have rather been tied to single classifications, historical events, or geographical sites. What can be unfolded is the stories and perspectives that lay behind the common, narrowing classification of objects. The point is not a lack of knowledge, of which there is often plenty; the point is the lack of perspective. Instead of trying to narrow down the imagined essence of an object, its multidimensional character and wide range of connections and relations—its potential infinity of meanings—should be acknowledged as a theoretical starting point.

In earlier days, analogue information systems in museums (typically inventory books and vast card indexes) could only keep track of a few classifications. An 'archaeological' object could only be classified according to a few general categories such as the place of the find, chronological dating, and type of object. In such analogue registers, the multidimensional, connected nature of objects could not really be
handled. New, digital systems, however, can do just that, and an infinity of classifications, themes, and connections can now, in theory, be tied to objects. There is work to do in order to realize this, but it is certainly not about discarding older information, rather all about complementing it. What should be developed are the potentially complex biographies and connections of objects regarding people, places, times, events, and uses, both before and in their museum existence.

Unfolding the collection

In his dissertation about the world-famous so-called Benin objects, Staffan Lundén analyses how they have been exhibited and described by the British Museum in a limited way: more or less only about their pre-1897 history as objects crafted and used in Benin in present Nigeria. But the Benin objects were plundered in an infamous British punitive expedition, and then sold to museums all over the world, though most ended up in London, and by now the objects have a museum, research, and reception history that spans over a century, in addition to the rest of their existence. In their museum and research history, the objects have been interpreted and exhibited very differently over the years, having been key elements in key debates about, for example African art and the (early) promotion and (later) debunking of the ideology of global racism. Lundén carefully retraces their context and role in British colonialism and their twentieth-century museum histories, and suggests that they could have been exhibited together with dumdum bullets and soap (also connected to colonialism in interesting ways) to put them in context. He also relates how other Benin objects are currently exhibited in the Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm, where a multidimensional approach has been chosen in which broader aspects of their history and range of connections are represented (Lundén 2016).

Unfolding the themes, histories, and connections of individual objects such as the Reliquary of St Elisabeth, or whole groups or entire collections of objects such as the Benin objects, opens them up for new considerations and contextualizations in similar ways. Starting to work with the realization that objects do not usually belong to just one time, one place, and one big idea has consequences for museums. It tends to lead to a questioning of the old ways of exhibiting and the range of information available in databases, and opens up paths to renewal.

Another example is the geographical information about objects in the collections of the Swedish History Museum in Stockholm (see Svanberg 2015 c). On the ground floor of the museum, which opened its doors in 1866, the visitor was invited to walk through a representation of Swedish history from the Stone Age to the nineteenth century. This representation was made as an 'object landscape' consisting of an evolutionarily ordered archaeological and art-historical collection, with thousands of objects in grand showcases with very little explanatory apparatus. The visitor could follow the slowly evolving object types through time, set up to evoke an idea of a similarly evolving Swedish culture.

The walk through time was at the same time a walk through a modern, national space, since the geographical information about the objects on display was their archaeological find-spot expressed in the idiom of modern Swedish geography. Although the nineteenth-century Swedish space had little or nothing to do with Stone Age or Bronze Age spaces, or ancient concepts of territoriality, this geography, which ignored the origins of objects outside Sweden's national borders, became crucial to nation-building in this particular museum context.

What was on display was a collection system. In 1866 there were very few objects in the museum that were not exhibited. The exhibited information and order was that of the collection. Each object as it was acquired was given a number in the state historical collection, their find-spot in the nineteenth-century national geography was recorded, and it was then placed in the chronological order of object–time in the museum.

The situating methods of seriation, recording of selective geography and placement in showcased object–time, positioned the collection so it spoke in a certain way. It spoke of evolution and of the distinctly modern Swedishness of the nineteenth century, in which Swedes could find themselves anew as an evolved people with a deep historical and material cultural heritage. This ensured that history could not only be envisaged as a national collective, but the visitor could now walk through a materially 'proven' manifestation of it, from the Stone Age to the present. In the late 1930s the museum began to move into
its new building, and a new exhibition was inaugurated in 1943 on the theme of ‘Ten thousand years in Sweden.’ The evolutionary walk remained essentially the same—although the objects on display were now fewer—and the basic, evolutionary exhibition model was retained until the late twentieth century, when it was gradually modified.

The museum has always possessed many objects from other parts of the world, such as the Reliquary of St Elisabeth, which it has never tried to ‘nationalize.’ Since they could not say much about Swedishness, they were instead themed as the spoils of war, or used for comparative purposes, juxtaposing them with ‘Swedish’ artefacts. Yet the interesting thing is that many of the archaeological objects, exhibited with their find-spots in present Sweden carefully noted, originally came from somewhere else too. They may well have been made and first used in far-off places before being brought to Scandinavia, where they were later found by modern archaeologists. Though this is true of thousands of objects—some of them the iconic showpieces in the museum—those stories were rarely pursued or allowed to intervene in the ‘long march of Swedishness,’ which was the gist of the previous permanent exhibition.

It is plain that new work on the selective geographical information about objects in the collection (which has recently got underway) has the potential to alter the earlier impressions created by their presentation in the story of Swedishness in the museum. Basing new exhibited narratives on fresh understandings of the complex biographies of migrating objects can shape new understandings of what Sweden’s heritage actually is. A case in point is the Gold Room, a permanent exhibition of the bulk of the prehistoric gold finds from present-day Sweden, where almost all of the gold used to make the thousands of exquisitely made objects on show came from elsewhere. Sweden’s heritage, just like the Swedes themselves, comes from all over the world.

Collecting the contemporary, the hot, and the difficult

Museums are increasingly keen to engage with contemporary social and political issues, migration included (Johansson 2015). As the standard grand themes, with their unproblematised national histories and representations of other peoples, are called into question, new topics, and especially those related to the questioning of grand nar-

ratives, are coming to the fore, as noted in the anthology Hot Topics, Public Culture, Museums (Cameron & Kelly 2010).

There are important ways in which museums can engage with pressing current issues. If they can summon the nerve, working with difficult things already present in their collections is one. Active collecting is another. Although it could be argued that it would be a strange heritage institution that ceased all acquisitions, given that the present, with all its important events and their material aspects, will soon enough be history and heritage. An additional reason for documenting and collecting contemporary material.

Swedish museums have a long and notable tradition of documenting the contemporary and of working with difficult matters (Silvén & Björklund 2006; Silvén & Gudmundsson 2006; Silvén 2010), but it will suffice here to note their progressive and audience-engaging qualities. There are important ways of employing methods and skills specific to museums for engaging with contemporary life, unique to museums as institutions. A recent case in point was the major exhibition ‘Disobedient Objects’ at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (2014–2015). The exhibition was the first to examine the powerful role of objects in modern and contemporary movements for social change. By exhibiting a range of objects from a suffragette tea service to protest robots, it explored how political activism has related to design ingenuity and collective creativity (V&A 2014). Another case in point is the collective project by institutions in the southern Swedish county of Skåne about the 2015 ‘refugee crisis,’ discussed elsewhere in this volume, which centres on collecting documentation and objects which will certainly be invaluable to future museum representations of this series of important historical events.

Recollecting museums

Museums stage objects as testimony to specific narratives, and, as exemplified by the Syrian man and his crucifix, objects and narratives usually complement one another to form a whole. As argued throughout this essay, however, the meaning of objects and the narratives to which they connect are not fixed, no matter how strongly this was insisted on by older, limiting systems of classification and information.
Museums in a Time of Migration

Museum objects and collections, once their true richness or polysemic nature is realized (Cameron & Robinson 2007; Svanberg 2015), can be ‘unfolded’, acknowledging and documenting a wider range of connections and stories, and thus opening up museums to the presentation of more complex narratives based on those collections. This move from the totality of older systems to a potential infinity of meanings can be achieved by abandoning limiting classifications for the principle of the open list (Law & Mol 2002), supported by new, digital collection systems. The shift from totality to infinity regarding extant collections and collection systems, as well practices for collecting contemporary material—the hot and the difficult—have pushed museums into more progressive ways of collecting and of using their collections.

A new museum of migration and/or democracy in Malmö, based on inclusive and non-essentialist practices of collecting, representation, and audience interactions, as well as basic ideas about globalization and human rights, would be a welcome addition to the larger Swedish museum landscape and presumably a catalyst for further developments. In order for these hopes to be realized, the new museum would do best to fully engage with basic, core museum practices, not limiting itself to being an exhibition gallery or telling new, exciting stories.

There is a common and sometimes justified view that museum collections are costly to upkeep, just as institutional conservation seems to have generated the notion that new museums, and some old museums, should exist as institutions without collecting and collections. Why not a cultural centre with exhibitions focusing on an important issue, but without the millstone of having to maintain a collection? Objects for exhibitions may be loaned, and not keeping them for eternity will surely mean so much more institutional freedom to transform and develop. Well, perhaps in the short-term, but it could also be argued that such an institution would miss out on the important aspects of what it means to be a museum, one of the core things people love about museums, and, above all, the far-sighted, long-term depth and seriousness of institutional theming, of the positive responsibility, authority, and authenticity that comes of collecting, and of its potential for renewal.

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Chapter 8

The making of cultural heritage and ethnicity in the archive

The example of the Nordic Museum

Malin Thor Tureby & Jesper Johansson

The technical structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of the archivable content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event. (Derrida 1996: 17)

Archives are not sites of passive curation, but of active decision-making, where archivists themselves are constantly involved in processes that shape the material from which history and cultural heritage is created (Blouin & Rosenberg 2011: 142–3). This essay aims to discuss how memory institutions, and especially archives, contribute to create and dissolve boundaries of national communities by including and excluding immigrants and ethnic minorities in the creation of processes for narrating cultural heritage. To achieve this, we have explored one Swedish example in empirical detail: the archive of the Nordic Museum and its creation of narrative collections about and with people positioned as immigrants or ethnic minorities in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The Nordic Museum in Stockholm, founded in the late nineteenth century, is an influential cultural heritage institution in Sweden with a mission according to its statutes to collect, preserve and illustrate the memory of life and work in Sweden. The museum has systematically collected material and immaterial cultural objects for over a hundred years. Today the museum collections comprise approximately 1.5 million...