

Session 3

Focus on Collecting: Contemporary Collecting for Reinterpreting (Older) Collections

Reinterpreting the definition of Acquisition and Collection for the Contemporary History Museum

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1. Introduction

In museology, ideas of museums vary from past traces of humanity to future vision. The mission and purpose of museums promulgated by ICOM – a non-profit organization that promotes collecting, preserving, studying, and exhibiting in order to educate and research tangible and intangible heritages - in 2007 includes future:

ICOM is the international organization of museums and museum professionals which is committed to the conservation, continuation and communication to society of the world's natural and cultural heritage, present, and future, tangible and intangible¹.

Concepts of museum are still locked in the past. As Pearce argues, "it is truism, but still true, that museum hold the stored material culture of the past²", and Lee writes to give away worn

¹ ICOM, "ICOM Statues" (Approved in Vienna (Austria) August 24, 2007).

² Susan M. Pearce, "Collection Reconsidered", Gynor Kavangh ed. **MUSEUM LANGUAGES**, Leicester Univ. press, Leicester, 1991. P, 137.

and old objects to museums³, museums are often related with older time period especially in the field of history.

In contrary, the objects considered for building the collections of contemporary history museums do not remain in the past. The ideas of museums became more specified and expanded once the science and space museums of the future visions were built in 19th century; the museums specializing in contemporary history appeared in 1990s demanding to tackle issues of collecting and interpreting objects with new paradigm. This essay questions to discuss policies and methods of collecting and its interpretations and evaluation for contemporary history museums. Note that cases conferred in this essay centers around the National Museum of Korean Contemporary History (MUCH) opened on December 26, 2012.

2. Collecting for the National Museum of Korean Contemporary History (MUCH)

In 2008 President Lee Myung-bak announced that he has a deep respect for Koreans creating the miraculous development despite tumultuous times. In order to bear honorable moments in heart of Koreans, he declared that, “a contemporary history museum will be built so that the next generations can learn from the history and feel national pride.” On February 11, 2009, the new regulations for the ‘Advisory Committee for the Establishment of the National Museum of Korean Contemporary History’ were enacted. 19 civilian members and 10 government ex officio members were selected for the committee on April 16 of the same year, and the Office for the Establishment of the National Museum of Korean Contemporary History composed of two divisions - Planning and General Affairs Division, and Establishment Division- of twelve people was launched to oversee the whole process and finally opened on 2012.

MUCH has begun to collect earnestly since 2010. ‘Regulation for Acquisition and Preservation Management’ was enacted in order to establish the MUCH (commanded by the

³ Nan-young Lee, **INTRODUCITIN TO MUSEOLOGY**, Samhwa Pubilshing, 1993. P. 9

Ministry of culture, Sports, and Tourism, No. 125, April 23, 2010) and an official campaign was advertised encouraging citizens to donate on June 23. Asking people to donate items related to Korean contemporary history, the MUCH was able to collect about 10,000 objects as of 2012. Another announcement for purchasing the items was advertised on the same year and 30,000 objects were bought prior to the opening.

Gathering appropriate pieces for the themes of the MUCH permanent exhibition was the key policy for collecting. Exhibition has been organized into four sections: Exhibition 1 (Prelude to the Republic of Korea), Exhibition 2 (Founding of the Republic of Korea), Exhibition 3 (Development of the Republic of Korea), and Exhibition 4 (Modernization and Korea's Vision of Future). Under these main themes, three supporting concepts with forty three key words were decided. Then a list was formed to search for items to collect⁴.

History museums research and exhibit pieces related to historical events, and MUCH also sought for documents and objects that were proof of such criteria. The museum had trouble collecting since even dealers of cultural properties neither possessed nor were familiar with the idea of 'contemporary collections'. Thus, the museum's list of items to collect played a key role; not only the list was given out to dealers to search but also had to educate them.

MUCH goes through deliberative process three times before the purchase. First, the curators consider whether the documents and objects are helpful for the museum's exhibition and research. Second, an evaluation committee of experts is held to verify their authenticity, value, and price, etc. Lastly, an evaluation committee at the level of cultural heritage members is held to appraise the objects worth as cultural assets and price. Through these processes, historical values of items have been questioned.

The original goal was to collect around 10,000 documents and objects in order to

⁴ 80% of MUCH Permanent Exhibition, 904 out of 1,128 items, are part of the museum's collection and expect to own up to 90% considering the current collecting status.

exhibit 1,200 pieces with an expectation to receive around 7,000 donations and purchase about 3,000 objects. After thorough studies of national museums purchase history, the average price of a collection was set around 1,500,000 KRW and secured budget of 45 million KRW. However, it turned out that the average price of items were lower than expected. Due to lower cost (average of 150,000 KRW), around 30,000 items were purchased prior to the opening in 2012.

3. Collecting for Contemporary History Museums

According to Dan Monroe, “Collecting, preserving, and interpreting are essential activities for museums. But they are not ends, or purposes, standing alone.”⁵ These activities must be carried out in a mutually complementing fashion and such activities should not be the purpose but mechanism. The typical museum’s preexisting systems of methods, policies, and processes of collecting have been applied to contemporary history museums without any discrepancy. Nevertheless contemporary history museums sometimes transfer documents in custody of administrative agencies until very recently which differentiate its practice from the norm.

Contemporary history museums must set up a new set of policies for collecting because the ‘age of collections’ are not a key standard in evaluating. The typical archeology, art history, and folk museums value historicity and mastery. Generally history museums also put historicity above everything then consider its ability to relate or prove historical incidents. However, contemporary history museums prioritize the value of historical materials over historicity.

Though not designated as cultural assets, most of historical museums’ collections are considered as cultural properties. In Korea, according to the ‘Cultural Heritage Protection

⁵ Dan L. Monroe, “The Future of Ethnology Museums”, Lecture by Director Dan Monroe of the Peabody Essex Museum in the National Folk Museum, 2005, p.34

Act (CHPA)', cultural properties are defined as following:

Article 2 (Definitions):

(1) The Term "cultural heritage" in this Act means artificially or naturally formed national, racial, or world heritage of outstanding historic, artistic, academic, or scenic value, which is classified into the following categories:

1. Tangible cultural heritage: Tangible cultural works of an outstanding historic, artistic, or

academic value, such as buildings, records, books, ancient documents, paintings, sculptures, artifacts, etc., and other archeological resources similar there to;

2. Intangible cultural heritage: Intangible cultural works of outstanding historic, artistic, or academic value, such as a drama, music, dance, game, ritual, craft skills, etc.;

3. Monuments: "omission"

4. Folklore resources: Customs or traditions related to food, clothing, housing, trades, religion, annual observances, etc., and clothing, implements, houses, etc. used therefore which are essential for understanding changes to the life of nationals.

In this act, historic, artistic, and academic value are the key standards of the cultural heritages on the premise that they are historically old. The 'Cultural Heritage Protection Act' (CHPA) Enforcement Regulations – asterisked #1 – emphasize this concept of old antiquity further. Following regulations are on historical materials:

A. Books/Prints:

1) Copies: Originals or old manuscripts of Korean books, Chinese character books, used books, and religion books, etc. that are systemically or historically categorized

2) Woodblock-prints: Valuable woodblock-printed books or blocks

3) Printed: Printed books or types that are important in general history or in the history of the art of printing

B. Books Publications:

Representing calligraphically works like *Sakyung*, *Uhpil*, *Myungapiljuk*, *Gopil*, *Mookjuk*, *Hyunpan*, *Jooryun*, etc. or valuable epigraphy and historiography

C. Documents:

Valuable materials in history and historiography

When cultural heritages are designated, historicity and historiography are central as stated in the CHPA. Though not set in stone, items that are old and valuable as historical materials become cultural heritages. Books/prints and documents in particular emphasize historical and historiographical values.

In CHPA, the concept of 'registered cultural property' was introduced in order to preserve cultural assets other than 'designated cultural heritages'. In the 'Enforcement Regulations of the Cultural Heritage Protection Act (Commanded by the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, No.119, partially reformed on June 21, 2012.), the standards of registered cultural properties are:

Article 34 (Standard of the registered cultural properties):

(1) According to the standard of Article 53 – 2, cultural works that are not designed as cultural heritages and constructed, made, and formed, over 50 years ago can become 'registered cultural property'. Works less than 50 years old yet requires immediate protection can also be considered for the registered cultural property

1. Works of an outstanding historic, cultural, artistic, social, economic, religious, and living value

2. Works in historical and cultural context and its value are widely known
3. Works that reflect the technical development and artistic trend of a period or helps to understand certain value

Above regulations define oldness as item that is older than '50 years' and providentially states how some objects that require immediate attention can be designed as cultural heritages, which opens up opportunities for contemporary historical materials to be protected as well, but it is not that easy in reality.

Collections for contemporary history exhibitions are neither traditional nor old and also not cultural assets in current standard. As a consequence, we must reason that 'preliminary cultural assets' are being collected, which more than the concept of the conventional cultural assets. Contemporary world is full of complicated phenomenon than the past. Collections related to the incredible IT technologies and products that are result of rapid developments of high technology should be also considered for collection if they are significant. However, this does not encourage collecting every product of the today's society. The value criterions for collecting products should be:

1. Products that brought technological innovation and changed history of mankind
2. Korea's or world's first produced goods
3. Reflects upon social trend (million seller)

Instead of searching for items that are merely old, rare, aesthetic, and unique, we require policies that promote to collect items which portray contemporary history.

Besides objects with stories of contemporary history should be considered for collection and be freed from the core leading idea of cultural heritage – valuing tradition. This is well implied in the 'changes in the concept of fine art of the MOMA in 1941 and mission

statement' of Peabody Essex Museum.⁶

Museums are expected to collect, preserve, exhibit, and research, educate the tangible cultures. Intangible materials are also collected but usually have auxiliary role in museum activities. Contemporary history museums should become free of these typical practices. Photos and videos are one of these examples. Before usage of photography, most of historical moments were recorded in texts and very rarely illustrated. However, since mid-19th century once the photography appeared, it functioned not only as artwork but also as documentary.⁷

Photographs were considered as supplementary materials to explicate the exhibitions but, in contemporary history museums, photos become one of the main subjects for collection. Photos are important document as well as good exhibition materials. Text panels and labels explaining the exhibited items have limits attracting people's interest. According to Monroe, "visitors begin their visits to a museum by following sequential paths, within ten minutes they give it up and begin 'cruising' through exhibitions and galleries."⁸ On the contrary, photos have power to draw audiences' attention.

Video appeared in development of photography. Whereas photos capture a very brief second, videos record longer period offering fuller context of events. In museum exhibitions, videos function as very important exhibition items if digital media are utilized effectively. Videos can be edited according to the varying purposes such as exhibitions and

⁶ ibid

⁷ About the function of the photography as a historical archives refer the papers: "[Everyday life of Korea in Bukgando from photograph], **Myeongdong, utopia built on Bukgando**, the National Folk Museum, 2008, pp.335-361.; [The funeral rites in 1960 from the donated photographs of Kim Ensuk], **The Memory of warm farewell**, the National Folk Museum, 2010, 134-145.; "Folk Archives and Photographic Folklore", **The Review of Folk life and Culture 26**, the National Folk Museum, 2010. 9. pp.113-130.)"

⁸ Monroe, ibid, p.38

researches. The method of visual-anthropology should be utilized actively during such process.⁹

The testimonies given by people who experienced contemporary historical moments have a high value. Regardless of their recording methods – text, photos, videos, etc., testimonies become very important materials. Testimonies recorded in video are more valuable and effective than photos or text. They help to verify both (or opposing) parties' intention without being one-sided.

Contemporary museums also put emphasis on mass media. Mass media ranged widely in current society from classical newspapers and magazines, internet news and magazines to personally owned blogs. However, such flooding information must be discerned as many are just copied from unverified sources.

4. Reinterpreting the contemporary history museum's Collections

Various aspects are considered in interpreting museum objects and documents. Exhibition is the most representing analysis of collections. Other analyzing process occurs for preservation, research, education, etc. Exhibition methods provide the best reflection of the museum's purpose of establishment and also demonstrate whether the themes are explored accordingly. The most basic method is to align collections grouped according to typical themes. Visitors can understand historical events by actually seeing exhibit with help of brief texts.

Most of museums offer panel text to supplement the information on actual objects, but a study showed that, "the average person in the United States spends less than 3

⁹ Following arguments are well explained in chapter 2 of Shim's thesis: "Jae Seok Shim, "Visual Folkloristic Study on Changes of Contemporary Ethnography Patterns", doctoral dissertation, Academy of Korean Studies, 2012."

seconds reading an interpretive label. In other words, people don't read many interpretive labels."¹⁰ This proves how texts prepped for the visitors actually have no effect.

The methodologies should be differentiated from those used at classic museums. History museums typically put historical value forth in order to analyze and apply a general consensus views reached by historians. However, most of contemporary historical events are very recent. People who have experienced these events are alive and share many conflicting memories that are still being debated. Contemporary history museums are challenged by emotive survivors and must do their best to present objective view without being fragmentary. Exhibition organizers should be careful to convey the meaning of the collections from the visitor and not their subjective views in order to convey actual meanings. Museums must always bear objectivity and fairness in mind while leaving some margins for visitors to interpret. Again different paradigms are required in order to understand contemporary history museum collection.

Hence contemporary history museums' works should be examined in larger context rather than actual direct interpretation. Such methodology is called, "storytelling interpretation," and it is better to use digi-logue technique¹¹ – a combination of digital and analogous methods – than to rely on the panels or labels.¹² Utilizing visual history techniques have advantages; in order to comprise deep analysis and draw visitor's attention, virtual technique is a good solution¹³.

¹⁰ Monroe, *ibid*, p38.

¹¹ Digi-logue is the main technique used at the National Museum of Korean Contemporary History

¹² About the visual history refer the papers of Kim Shidug: "(「History in the era of information: Advocate the 'visual history」', **THE YOKSA KYOUK(The Korean History Education Review)75**, YOKSA KYOYUK YONKU HOE(The Korean History Education Society), 2000, 127–153.; "Visual History–Enlargement of the role of History and its new responsibilities", **YKOSA HAKBO 200**, The Korean Historical Association, 2008.12, 99–130.)"

¹³ Affleck, Janice; Kvan Thomas, "Reinterpreting Virtual Heritage", CAADRIA 2005 (proceedings of the 10th

5. Conclusion

After collecting and exhibiting in building the National Museum of Korean Contemporary History, the typical methodologies utilized in the classic museums could not be applied, because the concept of the 'contemporary' history museum is new. Thus, new sets of system should be applied to collect and interpret. Historicity becomes relatively less important but prioritizes historiography value. Also the scope of collecting is extended beyond the material culture.

Interpreting for contemporary history museums should also be altered from typical methodologies. Survivors who are emotionally attached to the incidents are still alive, and even objective interpretations can be unfair. In order for interpretation to be not biased and also allow others to construe openly, 'Storytelling interpretations' and story line exhibitions should be utilized fully. Contemporary history museums are challenged with various intricate issues beyond academics. Thus, a certain interpretations should never be forced and also be able to offer assessments that people who were involved with historical incidents can also accept to a certain extent.