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Significance of Visual Storage with Special Reference to IGRMS, Bhopal

Danish Mahmood

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Abstract

Museum with its enormous collection is understood a place for education, study and enjoyment. Collection is a backbone of a museum, therefore its documentation, preservation and proper display is the first and foremost duty of a museum. The collections in museum either on display or in storage areas must accessible to the public because they are public resources. Increasing collections access for museum visitors has become a topic of interest in the museum community over the past decade. Access to collections particularly stored collection is a subject of paramount importance for all museums as collections contain knowledge and it should be disseminated by providing access to stored collection.

Visible Storage or Visual Storage is a popular method that has been used increasingly over the years to enhance physical access to museum collections. This method not only provides access to visitors in storage areas but also provide proper care of the stored collection. Present paper is an attempt to understand various pros and cons related to visual storage. An attempt has been made to present significance of visual storage in general and tribal collection of IGRMS in particular.

Keywords: Collection; Documentation; Preservation; Access; Visual Storage.

INTRODUCTION

Museums are usually understood as great institution for the documentation, preservation and display of the rich cultural heritage.

Author's Affiliation: Assistant Professor, Department of Museology, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh 202001, Uttar Pradesh, India.

Corresponding Author: Danish Mahmood, Assistant Professor, Department of Museology, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh202001, Uttar Pradesh, India.

E-mail: danish.alig69@gmail.com

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A museum is also known as a treasure house, not only of the materials but also of traditional as well as contemporary knowledge. Since this knowledge is displayed, to the public through objects, the collection of a museum is believed to be the heart line of the museum. The collections in a museum from natural resources to human creation give an opportunity to learn about the cultural heritage and the knowledge. Each and every Museum collects the objects according to its objectives and nature. After collection it is properly documented then it is displayed or presented to the public.

Collections are public resources and hence that they have an obligation to make them publicly available. They should heed theevidence of

increasing public demand foraccess to them. Increasing collections access for museum visitors has becomea topic of interest in the museum community over the past decade[4-7], with increased discussion about the fact that museum collections are held for thepublic (in most cases) and should be made available, or visible, as demand calls for it. The American Alliance of Museums (AAM)in 2010 recommends that museums not only preserve their collections, but also provide physicaland intellectual access to them. However, most of the articles on AAM's website regardingaccess to collections are about digital and online collections, with very little focused on physicalaccess to collections.

The terms 'access' and 'stored collections'have various meanings. In the context of museum, generally 'access'means physical access to collections by visitorsor users who are not the staff of the museumand 'stored collections' means all those objectsthat are not on display, not on loan, and not in ateaching or handling collection, including thosethat are in open stores normally visitable by thepublic. We do not include 'intellectual access',that is, enquiries replied to or measurements ofonline access to collections information.

Museums storages are the hidden treasures of the museum, have you ever consider how many treasures of the museum collections are hidden into their storages for the exclusive view of the few lucky ones.[3] Many international museums have a goal to change this situation, the open storage practice. It means display part of museums area and their collection which in stores or would normally not be on view to the public while making tens of thousands of objects available to visitors represents a great leap forward in accessibility. Museums have a huge amount of objects behind the scenes in their stores. They are getting better at opening up collections stores as the sector comes to realize that improving access is necessary if they are to make the most of their "hidden" objects and attract new audiences. It is also useful to show the public just how many things museums have to look after and how expensive it can be to store everything.

The storage and conservation of many museum collections have received inadequate attention in the past, and in most cases are still receiving inadequate attention. In fact, probably more harm has been done to museum collections through improper storage than by any other means. It is crucial for the future of all museums, as the custodians of a substantial part of mankind's natural and cultural heritage, that steps be taken to improve storage practices and facilities.[5]

Museums today try to increase the public's access to their collections in a variety ofways. Visible storage is one such popular method. However, there is little research done on whatthe public thinks about this kind of access.[3] The present studyis an attempt to understand visitor perceptions ofvisible storage methods in museums.

METHODOLOGY

To carry out the study on visual storage method at Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya (IGRMS), Bhopal, the author personally visited the museum for documentation of information and collection of primary data. During the visit of galleries of IGRMS, especially Visual Storage and Research Gallery the information was collected by personal observations and by asking questions to the staff of the galleries. Photographic documentation was done for ready references of the information. Brochures, leaflets and handbook were collected from museum staff for secondary data about the museum and its activities. The other reference books and articles were also referred for secondary information from already published sources on the topic. The detailed information with photographs has been given here for the analysis of the present study.

Museum Storage Facilities

More than 55 000 museums exist in the world, and typically 90% of their objects are in storage rooms. As collections grow, financial resources continue to dwindle, leaving museums struggling to ensure that their treasures in storage are adequately looked after and accessible.

A museum's storage facilities cannot be planned in a vacuum. Too often museums view their storage areas as if they were an isolated unit, unaffected by, and having no effect on, the other museum activities. This kind of approach cannot result in satisfactory and workable collection storage facilities, since most museums have other roles beyond that of a repository and preserver of collections.[3]

In order to develop an appropriate collection storage facilities programme the following factors must be assessed:

- What kind of museum is it? Art, science, natural history, cultural history, or a combination of these disciplines?
- What are the museum's roles within these disciplines? These roles will determine the types of collection that will be used.

- How will the collections be used in the museum's exhibition, education, and research programmes? These determinations establish how visible the collection must be, its accessibility and retrieval requirements, and its frequency of use.
- If there is an existing collection, how much space is required to store it adequately?
- What is the museum's acquisition policy, and how will this policy affect the future expansion of the storage facilities?
- What is the ideal physical relationship of the collection storage facilities to other museum areas?

Concept of Visual Storage

"Visible Storage or Visual Storage" (sometimes known as "open storage" or "study storage") is a popularmethod that has been used increasingly over the years to enhance physical access to museumcollections. Visible storage typically refers to situations in which collections are "systematically presented in high-density arrangements" without interpretation but still with information aboutthe objects.[8] Visible storage can also refer to showing collections workspaces that the public can see from a distance (usually behind glass).[7] The Visible Storage or Open Storage as a model of museum practice started in Canada and then expanded to the rest of the world, according to this idea the public is a real owner of the museum collections and therefore should have the right to have full access to them.

Since the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia (UBC) createdthe concept of visible storage in the 1970s, over 45 museums utilize visible storage methods including the Brooklyn Museum, Victoria Albert Museum, (Fig. 1 & 2) Arizona State Museum, the NationalMuseum of Ireland, and the Art Gallery of Ontario.[6] Museum professionals andmuseums all over the country and the world have decided that opening up their collections in thisway is an effective way to "democratize" their collections.[1]

Fig. 1: Visible Storage at Brooklyn Museum

Fig. 2: Visual Storage at Victoria& Albert Museum

Offers this definition:[8] "Visible storage, sometimes referred to as 'open storage' or 'study storage' combines two functions that modern museology generally considers separate storage and display. In visible storage, collections are systematically presented in high-density arrangements that lack interpretive labels but include access to the information available on each object".

Various museums in the world have started digitization of collection for public access to their collections weather it is on display or kept in stores. While digitizing collections has its advantages, it comes with difficulties. Technology itself becomes difficult to make usable for a wide variety of people. Sometimes, strict searchparameters can make it difficult to find what one might be looking for.[9] Therecan be a "disconnect between what the museum feels is understandable and what the user feltthey understood". But, having search parameters does allow visitors to truly customizetheir visit all the way down to any object they wish to learn more about. Some of the other ways museums have begun to create physical access has been to dooccasional behind-the-scene tours, some special programming to highlight the collections, and probably most notably, visible storage.

Museums utilize visible storage in a few different ways. High-density storage cases are acommonly used method that looks very similar

to an exhibit. Cases are filled with objects thatare typically related in some way with very little to no interpretation or labels. Some professionals believe that the experience one has in open storage is actually determined by the interpretation rather than the dense display itself (Museums Association, 2005). This is generally free to all visitors since it is part of the museum's exhibits and can sometimes be used to fill unused corridors or gallery space.[6] The Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Arts and Sciences, and the South Florida Museum are just a few museums that utilize high density storage cases.

Another way for a museum to have visible storage is by having walk-in space to theactual storage areas, very similar to behind-the-scenes tours museums might give. Museums, asan alternate to having visitors being able to walk straight into storage, can build a viewing window into collections and sometimes collections work space.

Because of the variety of ways museums can use this method, visible storage is used frequently to give maximum access to the collections, and show visitors the full extent of what the museum holds in storage.

Visual Storage of Tribal Collection at Igrms

The Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya (IGRMS) lies in a prehistoric landscape with evidences of prehistoric human settlement in its premises at Bhopal the capital city of Madhya Pradesh. Covering an area of about 200 acres of undulating terrain in the Shamla Hills, it is one of the largest and leading Anthropological Museums in India. Aesthetically curated Open Air Exhibitions components with the most enduring Indoor Exhibitions, it promises to live up to the expectations of Museum visitors. This Museum depicts the story of mankind in time and space.

The IGRMS collects the traditional and contemporary cultural objects of folk and tribal people of India. As on today there is a collection of more than 25,000 ethnographic objects of daily use as well as the artistic products of folk and tribal people of India and only a few from some other countries in this museum.

The objects are collected through field work by the official of this Museum as also from other institutions and resources through collaborative exercise. In IGRMS we have categorized our collection in 17 functional categories of Agriculture, Animal Husbandry, Art and Craft, Basketry, Fishing, Games & Amusement, Household, Hunting, Musical, Narcotics, Ornament, Ritual, Spinning & Weaving, Textile, Travel & Transport, Tools and Weapons.

After accession and categorization the specimens are photographed and then sent to the respective room for storage. The IGRMS is following the Categorized Storage System. All the objects are not stored at a place but are kept in different rooms belonging to different categories. For better maintenance of the museum objects these are stored in compactors, almiras, cabinets, racks and pedestals according to their requirement. The objects of perishable and delicate nature are stored in Compactors and Cabinets. Big objects are usually kept on open pedestals or open racks. For leather puppet and small scroll and paper painting, special storage has been made in drawing cabinets. For maintaining such objects the specimens store unit has to devise and apply specific and specialized techniques, which have given sustainability to these objects. As a custodian of these valuable examples of cultural heritage, the museum curators have always to keep this in their mind that the objects are to be kept forever, ever and ever.

Visual Storage and Research Gallery (Igrms)

At IGRMS the concept of visual storage can be seen in anespecially dedicated gallery of Visual Storage and Research (Fig. 3 & 4). The visual storage and research gallery, where unlike the the matic galleries that have already visited, the visitors are treated to a visual delight of a plethora of artifacts that not only give one a taste of the immense diversity of India but also give a sense of human diversity and scope of human creativity and imagination. This Gallery houses more than 4000 objects which are arranged according to their functional categories (Fig. 5 & 6). These collections may serve to widen the scope of knowledge and contribute towards ethnographic research of the researchers, academicians and students.

The objects in this gallery are systematically kept with different categories. Unlike other display galleries the collection here is stored in dynamic way but without proper interpretation.

Fig. 3: Visual Storage and Research Gallery (IGRMS)

Fig. 4: Visual Storage and Research Gallery (IGRMS)

Fig. 5: Display of Percussion instruments

Fig. 6: Display of Masks (Mukhautas)

Analysis of Study

Museum Collection either on display or in storage areas is enormous treasure and should be accessible to the public. A common way of increasing access to museum collections has been to digitize the collection. Many museums have digitized their collection and virtually made available to the public. Even some virtual labs are accessible to the public ac in case of Smithsonian Natural History Museum.

While digitizing collections has its advantages, it comes with difficulties. Technologyit self becomes difficult to make usable for a wide variety of people. Sometimes, strict searchparameters can make it difficult to find what one might be looking for (Wickell, 2014). Therefore, the museums should adopt some alternate method to make collection available and accessible to the public. The Visual Storage method is becoming popular among the museums to cope the problem of virtually availability of collections. This method is especially more useful for the accessibility to the huge collection available in storage areas which is not available to the general public normally for study and research.

But, unfortunately only few museums have understood the importance of physical access to stored collection and only displayed collection is available for public. The IGRMS, Bhopal is among the few museums thathave done a tremendous job by creating 'visual storage and research gallery, facility to the public for study and research and to retrieve information embedded in to the huge collection of storage areas. Though, these collections do not have interpretation but information.

It is suggested that museums where storage collection is large in number and not systematically arranged, should adopt visual storage techniques to disseminate knowledge and information to the public. It will take some efforts but benefit the audiences who visited the museums with the intention of education, information and enjoyment.

CONCLUSION

Museum collection is considered as back bone for any museum therefore it required proper care and maintenance. Museum collection is mainly displayed in different galleries and reserve collection is kept in store houses. Usually, the displayed collection is taken care and given more attention by the curators but the reserve collection is much neglected from the care and conservation point of

view. Being a public institution, the collection of the museum, both in display or in storage areas considered as intellectual property and should be accessible to the public. Visual Storage method allows public to inspect, study and researches the stored collection. Visual storage is used frequently to give maximum access to the collections, and show visitors the full extent of what the museum holds in storage.

To address this fact, museums and museum professionals have called for museums to increase their public access to collections[2] because having greater access to collections is seen as "an imperative and important part of museums being accessible by all".[7]

The Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya (IGRMS) Bhopal has done a tremendous job by creating a Visual Storage gallery for the access of researchers in to their stored collection. The collection is preserved here categorically with title and accession number only. One can access the stored collection with proper ease as in display areas.The other museums too should adopt some strategies by providing physical and intellectual access to the museum and its resources ensuring their preservation by means of visual storage methods. Then only they will serve the purpose of 'democratization of museum collection', the core concept behind visual storage.

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