Making one out of four?

Can you bring four museum databases together?

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Four museums with different scientific background and – a dozen databases for objects and images were pulled together in 1999. This paper will discuss some of the experiences from the process of finding a more centralized or collaborative solution in database management and Knowledge organisation within the National Museums of World Culture.

The four museums were Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm with both archaeological and fine art collections, but with a staff and historical connection with fine art history and museums. The Mediterranean Museum with classic archaeological collections from Greece, Cyprus, Rome and some Islamic art and has its background in archaeology. The other two museums are cultural ethnographic museums with collections mainly from cultures outside Europe. One of them situated here in Gothenburg, The Museum of World Culture, and the other one in Stockholm, the museum of Ethnography. The Academies of Natural Science founded these two museums. At that time, about 100 years ago, the "primitive man" was a part of the vertebrates in natural science according to Swedish views.

These four museums were brought together in 1999 in a new organisation named The National Museums of World Culture and we are now in Gothenburg in one of those museums.

The aim of our director is that we should `put together´ or at least harmonise our four databases so that the public and the staff should be able to find out what we together hold in our collections/treasuries. None of the databases is yet published on the web.

When we started to analyse the databases we found that they were built out of different purposes and different goals. All of them proper in the circumstances of the earlier evolution of the museum and the tradition in the view of the curators involved. Today – when the four museums are working together in one authority organisation it's at least a matter of lifting some specialisation to a more general level.

The collections at the Mediterranean Museum are all documented in English and divided in separate databases for Greece-Rome, Cyprus, Egypt, Luristan and Islamic art. The databases are aiming at colleges with the same knowledge. Schooled students mainly registered the information. The collections contains of about 40 000 objects, including lots of potsherds from Cyprus. About 20 000 of them are digitalizes and 90 % of them have a digital picture.

The database of The Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities started as small private information bases in the curators PC for exhibitions and collegial use. These databases were then taken care of and built in a bigger system in connection with a big renovation, moving and replacing project of all objects, about 100 000. A bar code system was introduced at the same time. Its aim is also to document the labels used in exhibitions and to be used in the exhibitions both in Swedish and in English. The main language in the database is Swedish. Photographs are now being made and imported in the database. The database contains about 17 000 objects and about 9 000 of them with photographs.

The Gothenburg Ethnographic Museum, now this Museum of World Culture, also started its registration because of moving objects to new storage areas. They used the printed catalogue as prime source and registered all old information from the catalogue cards. The database includes today most of their object, about 100 000. The information has been registered by students but not been checked with the real objects and no additional information has been added. Today digital pictures are made of the objects to be included in the database. The content of the database is written in Swedish. All these three databases are developed in FileMaker.

The museum of Ethnography in Stockholm developed two databases after moving to a new museum building in 1980, one for the new location of the objects and one for the documentation of the objects, due to both practical and security reasons. The information in the documentation database is written in Swedish. The majority of the objects that have been registered have been looked at and checked by the registrars, who all have been students. Beside the old catalogue information the objects have also been classified with the Murdoch systems *Outline of Cultural*

Material and *Outline of World Cultures*. A very good part has also been photographed. Out of the whole collection of approx. 250 000 objects about 50 000 are registered either very thoroughly or at least with minimal information and a photograph. The database is built in Oracle with a flexible way to form new data elements, the SWETERM data element naming convention, which was a project, worked out in CIDOC and Sweden during the 1990[th.] and preceded the CRM.

All the databases have been developed in house and/or in collaboration with systems developers and consultants. This means that the National Museums of World Culture today houses quite a good understanding of database systematisation and modelling and also an awareness of system standardisation. Still the traditions – and the single users needs and convenience – seems to be an obstacle in a more museological viewpoint. The different viewpoints are as a result of the discussed process now starting to get closer to each other and open for new understanding.

What do these four databases have in common and what could we gain out of harmonizing or pulling them together? They represent non-Swedish cultures. Is that enough?

We have had discussions during the last year within the four museums in a working group of specialists from the four museums and headed by Hans Rengman. Beside technical discussions about database systems and digital standard and preservation of digital pictures the discussion has much focused on the content. Different traditions for writing has been found, grammatically and syntactic as well as drifting language over time or semantic shift in words and phrases. The museums different audience in Sweden or internationally have an impact and even the professional exchange which makes single English information find its ways into the Swedish databases.

A need for common authority lists emerged and will be solved locally in some case and lean on international thesauri in other. These will be central as far as possible but also open for local specialisation. This means in practice that the level of abstraction is supposed to be set to a very general one to be useful over the disciplinary borders.

Rules for registration and documentation will be taken into use – to minimize future problems.

The work has also pointed out other fields of cooperation where tradition not yet has formed a company profile. Better routines for backup and a more well-defined decision of image formats and image handling point to a more effective long-time digital preservation policy.

The work did raise some strategic question within the documentation field.

Language? One museum is total English the others have small parts in English. Is it a solution to translate the subject words to English, French and Spanish for instance?

- It's very important to define target audiences

Should we also translate geographical names, ethnic groups, material and cultural periods and leave the rest of the text in Swedish?

- There seems not to be very good general authorities to use.

The Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm has used codes, from Human Relations Area Files by Murdock. They are not perfect, but a way to avoid language problems. Is that a solution?

- How common used are they in museums globaly?

Published text or exhibition labels contains much interesting information. Those texts are today always made digital. It's important to take care of them and add them to the database with the information of in which exhibition they were used.

- New focus on internal workflow issues arises.

We need to use Unicode to take care of our different languages and signs.

- System limits are strategically

We have checked geographical names with Getty's TGN and found out that it can be useful sometimes but can't be used alone. There are also historical names that are not included in TGN that we use. Those names are used for objects/collections made during colonial time together with today's name. The ethnographical museums also register continent, which is totally irrelevant for the Mediterranean museum where even country is unimportant since the databases themselves are scheduled for specific cultures!

- Today's common tools are not taking historic values into consideration. The research tradition and language bias tend to be to specialized (i.e. German, French or English focus in knowledge handling and research in earlier time still lives in the curatorial tradition)

Definition of provenience. This question resulted in all information about country, donation, bought, former owner etc. If the databases are being merged precise data elements have to be made.

- Maybe the original context is void when structuring in modern ways.

Some more central parts of terminology last on academic education and department internal rules and in some cases even personalized use of definitions. Good in itself – and accepted in the group - but maybe not so well fitted for exchange. Even relations to other bodies – connections to university - are part of this problem field.

- Standards have to be used with fingertip-feeling to not be overruling other workflow.

We have looked into how we use the data elements Material and Technique. They have been used in a confusing way and we could also see the differences between art, archaeology and ethnography in the way of using specific words. We will combine the lists we have been using and try to have a fixed list in two levels. The rest is free.

- The need for disciplinary specialization hinders full standardisation.

We have had long discussions about if our databases are/or will be/ good enough to be published on the web or if we should make extractions to be published. Our PR-people want to make something more public on the web and think that our information and presentation is not ´hip´ enough. Have you heard that before?

- Internal communication and the awareness of a central knowledge management viewpoint is to be considered.

That latest question also conducted us to try to be very clear in our museums and say that no separate databases should be allowed to be established. That means also that we have to have databases that could easily take care of demands from different areas and demands in the museum.

Conclusions

It is important to take care of the efforts made by curators and others trying to organize data about museum objects, conservation and exhibitions. But, theses efforts have to be taken care of in a common database for the whole museum and its need.

Databases do not have to be merged but facilitated to be searched in an easy way.

The process has opened the eyes on the importance in this field. Merging databases are not just a matter of using the same software, it's even more a matter of reviewing and monitoring research tradition and the company knowledge flow towards a common understanding. This is triggering change of technique, authority files, standards or data element catalogue but is also opening for good new meetings between different groups of professionals catching knowledge of various sources into a modern Knowledge Organisation system thinking.