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Christian Kaufmann

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Does the materiality of museum collections matter in Digital Humanities?

by

Christian KAUFMANN*

ABSTRACT

After more than one hundred years of increasingly self-reflective collecting, museums and archives around the globe hold an immense corpus of physical objects and relevant archival material from the Sepik area of Papua New Guinea. While culturally coded knowledge is embodied in these materials, the use of additional outside observations may help to describe some of these areas of knowledge. To keep traditional knowledge alive, methodologies beyond the reading of traditional texts, photographs, and sound recordings have to be developed and applied consistently. The unusual complexity and high diversity of Sepik art makes developing new digital methods of storing, studying, and sharing these resources a challenging task. Future museum activities are likely to put the original object into a new, focused light. Long overlooked aspects in the work of artists may thus come to the fore. By communicating with source communities and, at the end other end, with museum visitors, and by fostering research activities combining the context oriented approach of disciplines rooted in natural science and/or in the humanities, museums will redefine our views of Sepik art and culture.

KEYWORDS: Material culture, visibility, traditional knowledge, art, conveying digitized knowledge

RÉSUMÉ

Après plus d'un siècle de réflexivité croissante sur leurs pratiques de collecte, les musées et les archives, à travers le monde, détiennent un corpus immense d'objets mais aussi de matériel documentaire liés à la région du Sepik. Alors que ces sources conservent tout un savoir culturel obéissant aux codes culturels locaux, des observations extérieures aideront à identifier certains domaines de ce savoir. Afin de conserver vivant le savoir traditionnel, une même méthodologie doit être développée et appliquée systématiquement. La complexité inhabituelle des objets d'art du Sepik requiert la mise en place de nouvelles méthodes numériques d'archivage. Dans le futur, les activités des musées associeront aux objets une connaissance plus précise et certains aspects du travail des artistes y gagneront une place centrale. En communiquant avec les communautés locales mais aussi avec les visiteurs des musées, en encourageant à l'approche contextuelle propres aux sciences naturelles ainsi qu'aux humanités, les musées redéfiniront notre vision de l'art et de la culture du Sepik.

MOTS-CLÉS : culture matérielle, visibilité, savoir traditionnel, art, savoirs culturels numérisés

As a starting point, we assume that the cultural knowledge encoded in objects or in documents relating to them can be rendered more accessible by using digital tools. Before getting carried away by the hype of being able to reach out to new audiences in Papua New Guinea equipped with mobile phones and other sophisticated gadgets, we ought to develop ideas about how to assess the relevance of such endeavours. In

the following, I concentrate on data regarding objects and documents stored in and with earlier museum collections. In doing so, I restrict my deliberations to the first step of relating object-specific knowledge to a wider set of cultural knowledge, in other words, by transmitting human experience accumulated under specific conditions such as the interaction with the natural environment, the climate, and fellow human be-

* Honorary Research Associate, Sainsbury Research Unit, University of East Anglia, Norwich (UK); chrkauf@yahoo.com.

ings in societies far from areas with city-like population densities. What is the potential of such cultural knowledge from the Sepik River area? And potential for whom? We need to assess possible ways of communicating this knowledge to such diverse audiences as the members of source communities, research communities, and museum visitors. Even providing a tentative answer emerges as a demanding task.

I refer to Digital Humanities as a relatively new branch in the field of the Humanities. My personal experience is with the team of the Digital Humanities Lab of the University of Basel. There, Lukas Rosenthaler and Peter Fornaro put it simply: their aim is

“to bridge the gap between the production of digital sources and their preservation, allowing researchers to work collaboratively with different types of primary and secondary source material.” (<http://dhlab.unibas.ch/#about>, consulted on 4 December 2017)

Data documenting research activities in the Humanities need to

“be sustainable, and access to digital resources must be possible over a long period. Only if these prerequisites are fulfilled can research data be used as a source for new projects. Reliability is another fundamental requirement so that digital sources can be cited, reused, and quoted.” (Rosenthaler, 2017; Rosenthaler *et al.*, 2015)

For a museum, engaging with members of present-day societies who keep traditional knowledge alive as part of their respect for cultural heritage is a basic task. Communicating in a responsible way with multiple audiences demands tackling this task right from the start. Regrettably, in the museum world some actors still seem to be reluctant to invest human resources and other means in such endeavours. Antonia Lovelace (*supra*) tested how accessible museum collections from the Sepik area are to present-day Internet users; the result was less than encouraging. Hopefully, by joining forces and leveraging synergies this can be changed.

Perhaps, if the effort of encoding knowledge on and about objects in a digital format is seen as a way of facilitating the task, opening new channels of communication may serve a double purpose. On the one hand, it justifies the archival task faced by museums and research institutions to keep the originals permanently available for restudy. On the other, using digitized formats could render communication more attractive, for example, by illustrating what one is talking about with an image, a sound sample, or a speech or song delivered in an original language. Implementing such an access would pave the way for integrating more easily members of source communities into a network of peo-

ple communicating about and around the contents of museum and other archival collections. In any case, enhancing our knowledge on what has survived and including what people have to say on the matter from a viewpoint closer to the cultural source is a potential key to future museum strategies, well aware of the fact that the members of a source community may occasionally prefer to express their sentiments by way of performance rather than by way of words. As in other dialogue situations, mutual understanding demands respect, intellectual curiosity, and intense listening.

New tasks for museums: From storing the original to digital communication

Museums with a history of collecting under changing anthropological perspectives are often stuck with extensive collections. These consist not only of physical objects, but also include visual documents such as photographs, slides, and films, often supplemented by text information relating to the context of collection, or recordings of local views and oral traditions. A rapid estimate suggests that collections from the Sepik area in major museums around the world number at least 75,000 physical objects, plus 150,000 photographs. Of course, the audible sphere including the performance of music in varied registers should also be integrated. Moreover, all this information should be treated on an equal footing, an objective that is rarely, if ever, met. Hard work and a clever digitization strategy could improve the situation markedly, especially if we have some basic assumptions to go by as to the broad spectrum of future uses. As far as art is concerned, we no doubt need to join up all forms of visual information concerning the original object with a list of all other relevant documents.

Evidently, a first way of putting digitized information on collections to use is to create platforms for comparing the contents of collections in a virtual space. Just being able to line up the objects collected in the same place by different collectors at different points in time would open up new perspectives for looking at certain kinds of objects, including simple tools used in everyday life. New questions would pop up, calling for new answers through additional questioning and research. For sure, additional questioning would require access to the original objects housed at different places around the world which just shows how digitized information about an object makes the original even more important, and in no way redundant.

Thus, getting to know the materiality of any artefact or, in our context, of a specially shaped

artwork from the Sepik with all its specific features will help us to better understand cultural developments in the past. This kind of knowledge will not hamper our appreciation of the original work in its original context, quite the contrary. I would like to briefly review the stimulating impact based on old and new, often digital, methods of analysing materials used in the past for producing objects may offer. In the absence of early written reports or drawings of artworks such as wooden sculptures considered to be particularly old, dating such objects with methods developed in the natural sciences may help to clarify certain points, for example, understanding just how and when a specific motif had been expressed in carved form. While Kocher Schmid in her contribution (*supra*) points, among other things, to an improved understanding of the characteristics of certain timbers based on an ethno-botanical analysis, Hellmich (*supra*) discusses the potential of serial Carbon-14 (^{14}C) tests run on a larger sample of objects. We still need to develop a better understanding of how tropical timber exploited by local people grows, ages and eventually dies (if not cut down by humans). Contrary to a popularly held belief, tropical timber actually often reveals a clear ring structure (if analysed across the stem), but we are not yet able to deduce conclusions as to whether and how these ring-like structures represent regular patterns of growth under tropical conditions.

However, it remains a fact that it was only by linking dendrochronology to ^{14}C dates in Europe as well as in northern Asia and North America that archaeologists were able to establish reliable dating methods for those areas. For understanding Sepik history, making comparable progress in dating tropical wood would mean a tremendous step ahead. In two or three artworks, potentially of key importance, the wood used for carving reveals an age of anything between 800 and 1,400 years BP. As we know from sculptors active in the Sepik area in the 1960s and 1970s, they only used freshly cut wood for carving, as did their predecessors. It would be worth the effort to find out whether there are types of timber which, even when dead for many years, can still be successfully carved with stone tools; if so, we would expect the result to fully correspond with what we know from old carvings collected in the 19th and 20th centuries (see samples in Hellmich's contribution). Such an experimental analysis would at least help us to understand the range of the gap between the age of a piece of wood and the age of the carving made from it.

So far, we have taken for granted that museum work is habitually based on collections of original objects, supplemented, at best, by substantial contextual information. Recently the Basel Museum der Kulturen "tested" its visitors by

confronting them with series of objects belonging, by form and function, to the same artefact category. The show built on the viewers' natural curiosity and ability to discern the scope of variety by comparing individual objects within a series. Based on my own observations, the test was inconclusive despite the very careful selection and well-designed presentation of the series of which three were dedicated to Sepik objects: Middle Sepik suspension hooks, Abelam yam masks, and Kwoma ceremonial pots. The idea of presenting series rather than ensembles was well received (Buri, 2017). In the case of the suspension hooks, the variations in form were more easily discernible. However, left on their own by the rather scarce textual information and the lack of visually stimulating hints, many of the visitors were unable to see and appreciate the fine differences in the ornamentation of the Kwoma pots and the design of the Abelam yam masks – all of them variations resulting from the work of creative individuals. How do we familiarize visitors with the unfamiliar forms museums confront them with?

In anticipating future museum practices, a key question will be to what extent and under what circumstances a digital replica, either of an original object and/or of a visual document, can stand in as a key information element with regard to the original context. By shifting our focus from curating museum collections (and collection-based research) to museum communication, we are treading on thorny ground. How can we anticipate what future museum users – a complex mix of people – might prefer? Will a majority wish to access "The Museum" through digital channels only? What about people who, like the ideal visitor of the past, visit an exhibition in the hope of seeing or learning something at least vaguely in line with their personal interests? What sort of experiences, based on training, work, travelling, or study, will guide the future visitor or user? How will an environment moulded on digital communication limit or, preferably, enhance their personal capacities and idiosyncrasies? In short: will they actually appreciate looking at original objects and original documents in all three dimensions, in addition to a selection of traditional media?

My answer is: Yes, they will, and I wish to add: the majority would probably even prefer it. I am saying this on the basis of my professional experience over decades and with visitors from all walks of life, and especially with children; but I hasten to add: they have to be able to interact with a person (not a headset) who assists them in accessing new ways of looking at or hearing about objects and materials which, at first sight, might have the touch or the smell of the unfamiliar. This kind of contemplation – looking at something, ideally from all sides and just stop-

ping short of touching the object with one's fingers – is what makes museums so special. Here lies the challenge. How should we cope with it?

First of all, museums have to avoid drowning the impact of the original object in a sea of unstructured information. Of course, the temptation to flood visitors with images of the tropical Sepik context is understandable. How can we convey an impression of what it was like, and still is, being in a Sepik village? The user should be helped in order to let her or him define his own choice about where to start and what to focus his/her attention on. It should be left to the visitors to decide how much they want to hear, see, or read. It goes without saying that returning to the old-fashioned wall text or the commented slide-show screen of past decades are not viable options. There is no alternative but to invest in human resources and provide the necessary financial means to convincingly utilize digital records to complement and underpin the presentation of original objects and documents.

However, simply digitizing images and texts in the standard way does not get us very far, costly as these technical procedures may be. The main task lies in linking the digitized visual document with at least a minimal amount of information regarding the original context. Unlike audio-visual sequences of story-telling at historical sites¹, when bringing to life a Sepik village situation, for instance people preparing for a ritual, viewers have no real connection to the original site. The senses fail to provide them the necessary clues as to the historical set-up they are witnessing, what it smells like in such a setting, how firm or soft the ground feels on which they are shown standing, and how the space is characterized by sounds. Creating a situation in which such connections can at least be partially evoked requires substantial effort. Back in 2005, the Museum Tinguely in Basel, in an exhibition devoted to John Mawrundjul, an Australian Aboriginal artist, created a special space with the intention of providing viewers this experience. In one room, leading from a preliminary section to the main rooms of the retrospective, there was only one painting on display. Two, at times all four walls were used to project a film shot with the artist on site, that is, in his open-air studio, portraying him on his land whilst collecting pigments, visiting a major spiritual rock site, or showing up at the modern art centre in Maningrida.² One camera followed the artist closely,

showing him commenting on the procedure of preparing pigments, painting the intricate *rar-rk* patterns, or invoking ancestral spirits, thus underpinning his family's ties to the land. As a counterpoint to the projections on the walls, there was a large TV screen in the middle of the room, featuring the artist in person, or at least his face, while speaking. The three-dimensional effect of encountering the artist in his local environment and talking about his life and ongoing work was stunning. Many visitors commented in retrospect that this audio-visual introduction had "opened their eyes" and provided the necessary perspective to really "see" the works in the upstairs part of the exhibition.

Watching closely how things are done while learning about why things are done precisely in the way we see them being performed – this would be a significant step towards a new exhibition design. Add to this the opportunity to check on what you have just learned by scrutinizing an original object created in a similar process. But what about a hands-on experience? Perhaps we should look at what science and technical museums have to offer in terms of creating learning situations in which visitors have the opportunity to become involved, step by step, in understanding, even influencing, certain processes.³ In a way it is like lending the old cabinet of curiosities concept a new dimension, or interpretation, creating situations in which the story evolves through interaction. Of course, in Sepik villages there was never any kind of machinery, not even the potter's wheel. However, the simpler the tool, the more challenging efficient handling becomes. I could easily imagine a teaching unit where visitors, let's say, learn to make a net-bag, combining visual information on screen with real-life materials, and ending with the use of the finished item. The challenge would be to design the interactive unit in such a way that would allow more than one visitor at a time to take part in the experience, in other words, a group approach is required. Handling clay while constructing or decorating a pot offers a similar potential, as does wood carving or plaiting a basket or a hood.⁴ Ultimately, exploring the images incorporated in a decorated net-bag (e.g. referring to patterns in bird feathers), or on a decorated pot (e.g. referring to specific plants or insects), or in a sculpture (e.g. referring to the faces of spirits or ancestors) would create

1. I am referring here to my recent visits to Warwick Castle and Blenheim Palace in England and the excavation of a Roman mansion in the centre of ancient Rome, all sites equipped with sophisticated audio-visual tours.

2. The film on John Mawrundjul was realized in 2004 in Arnhem Land by Ivo Kummer, Pedro Haldemann and their team from Insertfilm AG, Solothurn.

3. I refer to institutions recently visited like the Thinktank, the Birmingham Science Museum (see <http://www.birminghammuseums.org.uk/thinktank/highlights/>) and the Swiss Science Center Technorama in Winterthur (see e.g. <http://www.technorama.ch/ausstellung/kunst-im-technorama/>, consulted on 18 November 2017).

4. For most of the examples mentioned here and below, records of the technical procedures exist on film.

new ways of capturing the visitor's gaze when confronted with old collections.

Taking this aspect into consideration, museums, in their archival function, can never attain full coverage of their entire collections. This means, priorities need to be set, and their application efficiently organized. Should we primarily focus on the highlights, given the specific history of a museum's collections, or is there a more pragmatic approach? As one might guess, it has a lot to do with matching the past with the future.

The individual and the collective

As we have just seen, combining digitally stored records with an approach to physical objects that focuses on how they relate to specific individuals in the context of their social practices and networks would open a wider perspective on museum work. Museum visitors fascinated by the details of how certain things are made and used will still want to see how individuals create the artefacts they produce and own. Yet, equally, viewers usually also want to know how "big things", such as clan canoes and ceremonial houses, are built. Or how and from where people get their food. This can refer to planting yam and taro tubers, felling a sago palm and extracting the starch from the pith, along with collecting and preparing a whole range of other food items from forests and rivers. A convincing learning effect could be achieved by assembling visual documents on ephemeral forms of art, such as ways of decorating the human body or wooden sculptures with pigments, leaves, feathers, shell ornaments, and other small items, or the ceremonial display of yam, or initiates parading in public. Such temporary performances were known to create a vibrant visual impact.

Given that documentation of individual work procedures was originally created in an atmosphere of mutual understanding between the person doing the work and the person recording it, we should respect the underlying original informal agreement between the two. Doing so under digital conditions is not a problem as long as the digitized visual documentation is only shared with visitors to the institution the documentation was created for. However, problems could arise if such information was to be shared freely and without guidelines on the Internet. In fact, as early as 1972 we discussed an approach to such guidelines with local experts and representatives in a Kwoma village whilst seeking agreement about the future use of movie films yet to be recorded which focused on structured work procedures (in the broadest sense of the term, including certain rituals). As in other parts of the Sepik area, the local people were usually

quite pragmatic in these matters: what women and non-initiated were not allowed to see being performed live in the village was also not suitable for screening on film in local communities. However, in a museum or university context, these restrictions did not hold. At the same time, it was clearly understood that a "fair use" rule should apply throughout, implying that original restrictions should be respectfully mentioned. This also appertains to the situation in which indiscriminate access to digitized archival material via the Internet could lead to all kinds of discussions and grievances, even conflicts.

Digital archives: what to share and with whom?

Considering that, in a museum, archival tasks, such as storing physical objects including classical field photographs and any other document relating to the objects and the collections they are part of, are, by definition, combined with the tasks of making and keeping the archival materials available, of researching the collections, and of disseminating knowledge about the collections and their contents, we clearly need to develop and adopt new and clear guidelines. This is especially true with regard to the question of access and the last-mentioned point of disseminating knowledge which involve third parties. Maintaining respect for the original makers and owners is crucial. Areas of potential conflict will no doubt become more salient, the deeper the impact of external activities such as mining or logging become felt locally in the Sepik area. As long as the access to archival material serves to promote an understanding of operational sequences (*chaînes opératoires*) within a society, keeping in line with the "fair use" rule should not be too difficult. But as soon as access to archival material paves the way for out-of-context interpretations, issues may indeed pop up. A taste of what can happen was provided by designers from four fashion labels who were invited by the Museum der Weltkulturen in Frankfurt on Main to gather inspiration from items held in their collections for their own artistic projects. Free use of associated documents such as ethnographic films was also provided. The results were shown in the exhibition *Trading Style – Weltmode im Dialog* (2012/13). Among the designers were members of the UK designer team Cassetteplaya who were invited as artists in residence. Probably the most disturbing result was the movie clip called "Blood rites". The clip randomly combined ethnographic film shots showing scarification scenes from a male initiation ceremony in a Iatmul village, where the flow of blood is culturally grounded, with a presentation of newly designed cloths and models, where blood

merely served as a means to provoke attention. No doubt, the authors believed they were being highly innovative, when in fact they were paying no respect to the indigenous artists who, by cutting traditional and meaningful patterns into the initiates' skins, were expressing fundamental cultural values.⁵ One way to uphold a "fair use" strategy involves keeping alive the knowledge about the old collections and the people who produced the objects and their embodied cultural meanings. No doubt, this remains a fundamental obligation of museums despite the tendency to attract new visitors by opting for dazzling events rather than for research-based presentations.

Already today – not to mention the future – a substantial number of traditional techniques are no longer in use in the areas of origin. Young people living away from their villages no longer learn by simply watching and doing. Thus, using digitized resources in presentations aimed at audiences in source societies, seems a first rationale for future activities. On the other hand, museum visitors in the West increasingly find themselves confronted with objects presented as artworks (which they often also are) in a white or black cube, respectively, yet more often than not without the slightest visual hint as to how they were produced, in which context, and for what purpose. Clever use of digital resources could help solve this problem. What we need is a new (museum) *culture of sharing*, free of cumbersome administrative procedures and outdated notions of exhibition design. This kind of sharing would include not only collaboration with partners such as universities, archives, and libraries, but also with people in the places where the objects or the respective cultural practices originally came from. Broadening our perspective in this sense and including experts from source societies would allow us to deal with specific topics from a completely new viewpoint and open the door to new ways of seeing. What are local peoples' views of what we Europeans tend to call a landscape? Definitely more than a 3D-view of the environment! Even the comparatively simple task of placing buildings such as a dwelling house or a ceremonial house into the context of Sepik village architecture touches upon the problem of virtual boundaries and barriers. Garnier's report (*supra*) on what Chambri women are not allowed to see but perceive nevertheless could serve as a starting point for designing an audio-visual approach to this topic. How about developing an exhibition combining the original of a speaker's debating rostrum with a virtual setup of a latmul ceremonial house, which in itself evokes multiple levels of a complex cosmology. Such a setting

would grant a glimpse of traditional latmul debating practices in which speakers rely not only on words and the power of argument to get their point across but also on mimicry and a host of other impression management strategies. The elements for such a show all exist; what it needs is the effort to integrate them into a single exhibition project.

Speaking of visible and audible things: music and musical instruments from Sepik societies are quite central to this theme. While instruments played in ceremonies tend to remain hidden away, the sounds, rhythms and melodies they emit reach out widely. For an object-oriented approach, the option to bring musical instruments to life by combining image and sound with a commentary sounds tempting. A pilot project in online teaching in Ethnomusicology, conducted by one of the authors of this volume, Raymond Ammann, in collaboration with the New Media section of the University of Basel, shows the potential of such aggregate projects. Ammann illustrates the making and playing of flutes – the original instruments are held in the Basel Museum der Kulturen – with the aid of documents obtained on the island of Ambrym in Vanuatu (<https://opos.unibas.ch/module/#/paobleeblabo/erleben/filme/floetenherstellung.Ambrym>). Next to that, he exemplifies the potential of an analysis of performance and musical sounds with an example from the middle Sepik (Sepik: https://opos.unibas.ch/module/#/tabu_sounds/analysieren/instrumente%20bestimmen/).

Playing musical instruments is a very effective way of learning to appreciate how important the mastering of a technique is for creating an intended impact. Handling a pair of Sepik flutes and producing the correct flute sounds at the right rhythm is a good example (see Bateson, 1935). One could imagine that university students in Papua New Guinea, participating in a documentation programme focusing on local art forms, might also learn about past practices from digitized sources.

Historical perspectives

Creating new formats for mediating knowledge to future audiences should start by looking at what the old documents themselves have to say. What is the gist of earlier collection and documentation activities? When asking, where does our knowledge actually come from, we enter into a completely new field. This promises to be an even more challenging project, informed by a more comprehensive approach to digitized

5. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h1GDS1EJe0> for the exhibition project (consulted on 1 December 2017). The video clip CP_SS13_Blood rites on <http://cassetteplaya.com/vimeo/> is no longer available.

source materials. Such an overview would enable us to combine local perspectives of the past with a broader regional or even hemispherical perspective. While the local views are often well documented in oral traditions and their ritualized interpretations, the broader, outside views frequently still lack documentary evidence from disciplines such as linguistics and archaeology, along with botanical, zoological, and geological field studies, and, not least, a historical evaluation of museum collections. Even allowing for these gaps, developing such overview presentations should be feasible. It would indeed be fascinating to juxtapose all available documents on early collecting in the Sepik area – say from 1886 to 1917 – with what gradually became known through studies by administrators such as Georg von Schleinitz or Albert Hahl, scientists like Carl Schrader or Max Hollrung, missionaries like Franz Kirschbaum, planters-cum-traders like Richard Parkinson, and anthropologists like Albert B. Lewis, Adolf Roesicke, and Richard Thurnwald (Welsch, 1998; Schindlbeck, 2015; Craig, 1997 and Melk-Koch, 1989). Major collecting also took place during World War I in the footsteps of the men mentioned above (Craig *et al.*, 2015). Extending this longitudinal perspective up to 1941 would bring Australian administrators such as J. K. McCarthy and E.R. Robinson into the picture, but also anthropologists like Gregory Bateson, Margaret Mead, and Phyllis Kaberry, to name but a few. The period of WW II, regardless of the interruptions caused by the presence of Japanese troops, and the period of the growing collecting hype from 1949 to 1972 would find coverage in sub-chapters, as would the Revival period sparked by the elections to the Second House of Assembly in 1968 and the move towards Independence attained in 1975, coming to full blossom with the opening of the new House of Parliament in Port Moresby in 1983. During this period, objects of historical or artistic value changed from being freely accessible collectables to Cultural Heritage items (in 1965). However, the new category was interpreted rather loosely and not vigorously controlled until, in 1978, items of exceptional quality were defined as National Cultural Property (Smidt, 1975; Kaufmann, in press). What I have summarized here in a few lines would easily fill several virtual volumes of annotated documents. A closer look at local responses to initiatives launched by the Pro-Independence movement in what I call the Revival period would be of special interest. How did artistic creativity in the Sepik area compare to what occurred in other parts of Papua New Guinea and in wider Melanesia? Who were the big players and who were the artists that followed? What were, and continue to be, the interactions between the tourism trade, the village communities and the provin-

cial economy, on the one hand, and the international contemporary art scene, on the other? These are just some of the questions that indicate how a pondered use of digitized source materials could boost our appreciation for original objects, be they individual artworks, object series with specific traditional functions, or ethnographic ensembles built around scientific notions we no longer necessarily feel obliged to share.

Of course, the hands-on approach that informs the steps discussed here is just one possible way of going about it. In a number of institutions, similar initiatives are already showing promising results. Most notable among them is the Smithsonian Institution's decision to dedicate a curatorial position in Anthropology to globalization, designed to include the impact of digitization on different life forms. Joshua Bell, a scholar with extended field experience in Papua New Guinea, holds the curatorial chair. In a workshop hosted by the National Museum of Natural History (Smithsonian Institution), the organizers, Kimberly Christen (with project experience in Central Australia), Mark Turin (with specific experience in the Himalayas), and Joshua Bell focused on the topic of return. The volume *After the Return: Digital Repatriation and the Circulation of Indigenous Knowledge*, which deals exclusively with projects dedicated to collections from Native American societies, offers a broad and inspiring base for further discussions on this new and fast-growing issue. In a highly informative introduction the editors provide an overview with a wider horizon (Bell *et al.*, 2013: 1-14). And in a concluding contribution, Haidy Geismar, based on her practice in Vanuatu as well as in Aotearoa/New Zealand, raises the fundamental question as to what extent the materiality of objects, self-evident in the classical analogue mode of collection management, is still taken into account once collections are "born digital" (Geismar, 2014: 256). Through a process of translation, the relationship between a physical object and all relevant contextual data, or metadata, becomes digital knowledge. However, what ultimately matters in research, exhibiting, and mediating with source communities, is to enable participants to return to the original materiality. It is beyond the scope of this paper to enter into a broader discussion here. Nonetheless, it would be of interest to keep in mind what a museum visitor, as an outsider, gleans from the materiality of an object in terms of meaning, in comparison to the members of the source society on whose knowledge the object was originally conceived and produced. Yolngu experts in Eastern Arnhem Land (Australia), for example, advised not to put a specific painted human skull on show:

“Because they are secret?’, asked the curator? ‘No, because Europeans will think we are savages!’” (Morphy, 2015: 94)

It shows that materiality is not to be had without proper respect – a lesson from analogue museum experience which should certainly be carried over into the digital humanities.

Conclusion

The high degree of variation in expressing cultural value has made Sepik societies a test case for anthropological studies as well as for scholars in many neighbouring disciplines. Only by joining forces in an attempt to digitize all available records and facilitate access can we hope to come to terms with the materiality of these expressions. Artworks of all kinds, including ephemeral media from the Sepik area, represent just one aspect of this complex materiality. Employing a methodology developed by Digital Humanities’ advanced practices may help to structure data of different origin, uneven timelines, and varying relevance. An informed use of digitized visual and non-visual documents would enable us to shed new light on what Sepik art meant to those who created it, how it evolved by transformation, and what it represents today in a unique way. A new type of mixed-media presentation in museums and institutions with a similar mission might evolve from such an initiative. Ideally, it would be based on interconnecting source communities and museum audiences, and bring new communication networks to life.

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