Case report: history of medicine

Designing the Scarpa's collection. A journey into the traditional medicines of the people of the world

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Abstract. The University of Genoa Museum of Ethnomedicine "A. Scarpa" is a unique collection in the world museums panorama. It contains objects of great cultural value and was created with the intention of communicating the vast knowledge in the field of medicine, carried out by the populations of the planet.
In need of a new location, it has been the subject of a new set-up, effectively performed by a multidisciplinary team. The intent of this paper is to provide a specific look at the compositional and set-up aspects of the A. Scarpa Ethnomedicine Museum, and how this exhibition choice follows the evolution of the conception of the contemporary university museum. The new museum set-up was developed aiming to synthesize the entire cognitive path of ethnomedicine and the experience of A. Scarpa, keeping the complete collection separate, as it had already been designed in the previous configuration, so that it could be experienced by different users. The collection, previously housed in an unsuitable location, has been reorganized in a historic building located in a strategic area in the heart of the ancient city of Genoa.

Key words: ethnomedicine, exhibition, museography, design, anthropology

Introduction

Designing a museum should be understanding what a museum - in this special case a museum of ethnomedicine - is. Therefore, in order to develop the museum project, it was necessary to understand what the visit itinerary must communicate.

Ethnomedicine is the study of the medical systems of prevention and treatment of different human populations. In different environments, individuals and populations have sought the essential elements for the maintenance and promotion of their health by adopting different therapeutic strategies in accordance with their culture and social structures, but also in relation to climatic, geological, phyto-geographical characteristics, fauna, and therefore to their specific ecosystem.

The museum is also the place for the collection and conservation of objects that no longer fulfil their original function nor occupy the place for which they were created.

This assumption derives from the consideration that objects acquire meanings from their arrangement and setting in a given context (1).

The design of a museum exhibition is a complex process; sensitivity, experience, study, engineering, architecture, communication, marketing and many other skills are needed to create suitable and usable spaces capable of conveying a cultural message in an effective and engaging way.

A good design of museum itineraries is based on the study of the user experience. In this specific case, it is a collection and a theme that could be explored and read at different levels: the user can be the academic, the university student, the curious, the child.

According to Huerta and Cohen-Pantoja: «when the visitors' experience results in an increase in their

knowledge, regardless of the level of that knowledge, it is an outcome of the cognitive processes they develop when engaging with the interactive exhibits. Consequently, every museological strategy should consider these processes» (2).

The design process started with long discussions with the curators of the exhibition, to understand what the intentions of the exhibition were. It was necessary to define the objectives of the museum in relation to the resources available. What immediately emerged was the desire to provide a space, a summary of the contents of the museum and of the fundamental concepts linked to the anthropological approach and to the meaning of ethnomedicine.

Museum's evolution

The modern concept of museum exhibition was outlined between the XVI and XVII centuries.

Mouséion (the modern word "museum" origin) in Alexandria of Hellenistic Egypt was not a museum, it did not have any exhibits, but it functioned as a library and centre for cultural studies, hosting writers and intellectuals of the Hellenistic world.

In the formation of European and non-European museums, *Wunderkammers* (Cabinets of Curiosities) were the "special" progenitors of modern museums, collections organized by privates. They can be partially considered as the first stage in the development of the museum concept, and above all for what concerns the set-up, often elaborate and extravagant, which aims to enhance the "fantastic" content on display.

In Italy, as in most European countries, the foundation of public museums resulted from the previous structures of the most influential families' private collections.

The conception of the no longer private but public exhibition also changes the exhibition aspects that adapt to the exhibition purposes of the works themselves, especially to the enhancement of their historical and cultural value. This aspect of detachment gradually led to a risk of crystallization of the exhibited work, too distant from the less specialized observer. Hence the need to make the museums, in particular the scientific ones, more interactive and understandable (3).

The traditionally severe setting of the Museums of the History of Science and the historical sections of science museums are strongly renewed: if they initially appeared as a deposit for objects to be worshiped such as relics, they then turned into pleasant and relaxing cognitive paths to reveal the traces of important scientific discoveries inserted in the cultural context of their time.

Particular attention is paid to those museums, as in the case of the Scarpa's collection, which present a research path: contemporaneity suggests an atmosphere that favours concentration and free mental association between different contexts. Their intent is to suggest to the visitors their personal path of discovery and study. University museums can play an important experimental role of new forms of conservation enhancement of the historical-scientific heritage.

Universities are the custodians of the processing of scientific and technical knowledge and of its transmission: instruments and apparatuses experimental assembled and used for important scientific and technological research, rare finds naturalistic tools and naturalistic finds used in teaching books.

The value of the historical heritage does not consist in the beauty or rarity of some single pieces, but it indicates a trace, a research path, otherwise the frequent mistake is to privilege the object rather than the context.

The single exhibit, composed by an instrument or a book or a letter, can be traced back to the context which gives it meaning. Scarpa's collection defines clear contexts, throughout images and texts in which the artifacts are inserted (4).

The Scarpa's collection

The Museum houses more than 1500 objects collected and catalogued over a 50-year long research carried out all over the world since 1938 to 1992 by Antonio Scarpa, a doctor curious to learn how, following his traditional medicines, the populations of the five continents have been treated and cured.

Objects, tools, drugs and pictures document health strategies, or individual prophylactic and curative practices, adopted by numerous and different ethnic groups.

Any object in the collection has a complex history behind it, a dense network of anatomical, physiological, linguistic and cultural references that link it both to its own culture and history, and to the universal phenomenon of suffering or needing-care human beings.

These objects draw the attention of specialists to the "active ingredients" or to simple but effective procedures, which, as far as "curious" they may appear, are worthy of consideration, as they emerge from centennial observations of direct human experimentation.

The collection housed in the Museum is a precious witness of a medical knowledge in danger of extinction. Its objects, some of which have long since disappeared, provide with an itinerary in the historical universe of man *sub specie medicinae*.

The main and very ambitious objective of collecting, cataloguing and preserving the precious testimonies in the collection is to favor a better knowledge of the contribution offered by traditional practices to the progress of all the sciences that operate to alleviate human suffering.

The Scarpa's collection has been housed in inadequate spaces with bad environmental conditions, poorly lit and inaccessible to people with mobility impairments. Many objects were not displayed in a valuing way and did not have adequate lighting and location.

It had to be moved with great care and attention to the new location, therefore the relocation of the collection has been carefully designed to minimize risks. Some objects in a very bad state of conservation have been restored on the occasion. The vast photographic collection was not entirely on display; some images had been digitized, others existed only in original copies or in formats that were difficult to reproduce.

The building

The building is connected to a strategic area for the museum attractiveness of Genoa. The wharf area is adjacent to the *Porto Antico* (Ancient Harbour) area, that includes exhibitions and conferences, as well as the famous Aquarium of Genoa. It also fits into the context of the historic centre of the city, characterised by medieval buildings of great architectural value.

The building where the museum has been set up was purchased in 2005 by the University of Genoa. It was renovated to house a marine biology laboratory in 2008-2009 and, after the laboratory was closed, in 2018 was completely renovated, both in the external and internal surfaces (plasters) (Fig. 1).

The building is composed of two initially independent bodies, formerly merged into a single one: a main part consisting of a single large and high room and an adjacent part, divided into three floors. The most probable initial use of the building was, considering its location, a warehouse or a port workshop.

The further transformation of the former biology laboratory into the headquarter for the ethnomedicine collection was mainly aimed at obtaining a formal and functional result suitable for the conservation and display of the exhibits, hiding the technical claddings on the ground floor, all the numerous (and now useless) mechanical networks, adding the air conditioning of the spaces and adapting the lighting system to the new needs.

The museum is spread over an area of about 400 square meters and is organised into two main floors, where the exhibitions are located, and two mezzanine floors where there is part of the museum exhibition, an office and an anthropology library with space for consultation and reading.

On the ground floor there is the traditional display of the entire collection in the display cases. This floor is accessible both externally at street level through an access from the warehouse and by an internal staircase that connects to the exhibition of the new set-up. On

Figure 1. The building in via del Molo, Genoa

the second floor is the new exhibition, divided into two levels, accessible from the street and from the internal stairs that connect it to the floors below. These differentiated accesses allow to overcome the accessibility problems linked to the historical nature of the building, which has very narrow stairs that are therefore not always adequate for the access through the insertion of the stairlift, which in any case are inserted where possible.

The original wooden floors have been preserved and the architectural features of the exhibition room on the second floor have been kept clearly legible because they are characterized by arches and vaults. The same goes for the windows that have not been closed but darkened with curtains to regulate the access of solar radiation.

Museum design: features and requirements

«A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment» (5).

The museum is no longer simply the place to exhibit a collection but is the fusion of a whole series of functions and services. For these reasons, when dealing with a historic building to be re-functionalized, it is necessary to adapt to its characteristics and at the same time equip it with adequate plant and functional elements.

Therefore, a new air conditioning system was created to guarantee the ideal thermo-hygrometric conditions for the preservation of the artifacts. A new lighting system was built on the second floor, using adjustable spotlights that were adaptable to the different configurations of the set-up. On the ground floor, in the display case area, the lights placed in a false ceiling have been replaced with more efficient light sources.

The new display cases that house the exhibition are made of glass and have been customized with coloured background panels that follow the geographical division that already characterized the old exhibition. The choice of colours for the panels has been studied in relation to the main colours of the artifacts following a principle of complementarity to best highlight the objects in the collection.

Regarding the main display materials on the second floor, the choice has been directed towards the use of wood. For its characteristics and environmental sustainability, wood is a material that has been increasingly used for exhibitions and the construction of light structures (6).

During the design phase, therefore, it was decided to use wood in light structures for the construction of walls and central blocks, possibly with shelves and niches, and the creation of custom-designed display furniture with the help of a specialized carpenter (Fig. 2).

The exhibition

This exhibition is divided into different functional spaces. It was conceptualised with a space for most of the objects in the collection, organized in a more traditional way (display cases), a space dedicated to the ethnomedicine library and a space for conferences.

The architects in charge of the installation followed the example of a previous ethnomedicine exhibition, based on Scarpa's collection, set up in 2012 on the occasion of the Genoa Science Festival. Some key elements have been preserved from this little experience: building a thematic path starting from key objects and drawing on the enormous photographic heritage of the collection. Once the objectives of the

Figure 2. The main exhibit structures

exhibition were defined, a great amount of time was dedicated to the definition of the contents by the curators of the exhibition.

Exhibits would divide the path into key concepts through which guide the viewers and introduce them to the next part of the visit to the complete collection in the display cases. The intention was also to propose a path that was in line with the new approaches tested in other ethnomedicine museums, trying to transpose using colours and objects also a certain aesthetic appeal as well as its scientific-cultural value (7).

The contents of the exhibition on the second floor have been organized into sections that correspond to six main exhibits and a separate section dedicated to Antonio Scarpa. Building the storytelling, it was decided not to proceed through a division into geographical sections, as it is traditionally done, but rather to proceed through key concepts: anthropology, ethnomedicine, childcare, crisis management, care experts and care spaces.

The six sections identified have the following titles: 1. The Anthropological Gaze, 2. Becoming Human, 3. Shaping; 4. Modes of Presence; 5 Different Crises (Minor and Major Crises); 6. Worlds of Care. The route begins near the main entrance and proceeds in a circular clockwise direction.

To define a clear readability of the content hierarchy, the sections have been organized with a title, larger and clearly legible, made with an extruded lettering. Each section has a subtitle which acts as the main theme of the exhibition and affixed to the vertical surfaces by a contrasting decal.

The choice of the colours plays a fundamental role: since most of the artifacts have a colour that varied in shades of brown and the floor is made of wood, for complementarity the colours in the blue cool tones are the most suitable for highlighting the collection. Each section is organized in thematic blocks described by main texts and specific captions, which identify objects, photos and diagrams. The choice of the font is in line with the choice of coordinated image of the University of Genoa, guaranteeing visual continuity.

The photographic collection has been digitized, restored and resized, following a proportional module that guides the alignment of the contents of the exhibits (Fig. 3).

Figure 3. The first exhibit

The most delicate and precious objects have been inserted into niches and wooden furniture, specially illuminated by LED lighting, to be safely stored. The niches were painted with a lighter colour than the walls of the exhibits in order to emphasize and enhance the objects on display. Collages of photos, diagrams and illustrations have been specially created to make the spaces available more effective. The larger objects were placed in the fifth and sixth exhibits.

Famous elements of the collection are the Yakka masks, which have deliberately not been placed under glass to be fully appreciated by the visitors. This involved a safety issue that was solved by making an inclined wood-element on which some images of the masks are housed, and each mask is secured to the panel by a hook equipped with a small washer (Fig. 4).

The area dedicated to Scarpa hosts the projection of a film about the museum and the professor's experience, as well as collecting objects that belonged to

Figure 4. The masks

him and a geographical map with a list of the main journeys made over the years.

To complete the visual communication of the museum, it has been used external perforated curtains that house images of the objects in the collection and a panel that creates a collage of faces of the world positioned at the entrance in via del Molo (Fig. 5).

Conclusions

It is necessary to consider the museum as an intercultural device, inclusive and accessible to the different categories of users, able to be understood at different levels of detail, flexible and adaptable also to the needs of the curators. In this way, and thanks to its disassembly nature guaranteed by wood-based structures it can adapt to further changes without impacting on the historical architecture. In the future, it will be able to integrate digital devices capable of amplifying the dissemination of contents that are necessarily summarized in relation to the spaces available. New digital technologies (qr-code, tablets, video) can provide a more effective museum experience by widening the access for a greater number of visitors and triggering specific learning processes, also through a deeper engagement (8).

Figure 5. The entrance

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