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Cover photo: Restoring the exterior of the Cincinnati Museum Center, Ohio, as part of the two-year renovation. Reopened 2018. Photo by Maria Dehne – Cincinnati Museum Center.

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Museums and War: documentation provides security to the collections

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Keywords Museum; Security; Documentation; Qatar; Collections Management

Abstract The increase in the number of museums built in Qatar has led to an increase in the awareness of individuals living and visiting Qatar of the importance of these museums. The objects that are acquired and maintained by these museums are many and the collections continue to increase. This continued growth means that museums need to focus on maintaining their collection documentation, because of the value documentations add to the collection. Through analyzing the importance of documentation and understanding Qatar's focus on these museums during this period of blockade, this article explains why collection documentation needs to be a priority of all museums.

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Introduction

Museums follow strict rules and codes of ethics to maintain and protect their collections. Therefore, museums should follow and improve the methods used in documentation, because documentation can enrich and give more value to any object in the collection. Documentation provides each item in the collection with context and meaning, which gives better awareness of the item's uniqueness, its value, the way it contributes to the collection as well as the reasons behind acquiring it.

Documentation is useful for both users and the museums. Documentation helps users find objects in the collection quickly whenever they are needed. In addition, documentation provides proof of legal ownership of the pieces and, when lost or stolen, documentation maximizes the chances of tracing the objects and helps both the police and insurers find these items and to file a claim on the value of the objects. Aside from the ability to support the learning process and provide security, documentation is beneficial to museum staff. Complete records can help museums to formulate exhibitions because exhibitors can identify and find potential objects for exhibitions and prepare exhibition catalogs.

Practicing proper documentation would increase the museum's profile and reputation with stakeholders, donors, funding bodies, and the general public. Also, maintaining accurate documentation would foster collaboration with other organizations and museums through shared expertise and databases. Another positive point of having accurate documentation is that when staff leave the institution, these records will be able to ensure that knowledge about the collections stays for the institution. Lastly, detailed documentation of collections are important as they increase the security of the collection because museums are vulnerable to many types of crises and disasters (Wirilander 2013).

ICOM Code of Ethics describes the museum's documentation process through emphasizing both the organization of the data and its confidentiality:

Museum collections should be documented according to accepted professional standards. Such documentation should include a full identification and description of each object, its associations, provenance, condition, treatment and present location. Such data should be kept in a secure environment and be supported by retrieval systems providing access to the information by the museum personnel and other legitimate users. (ICOM Code of Ethics, 2006, 2.20)

Security in Museums

When discussing security in museums, it should be clear that museums are reassuringly low in thefts. Nevertheless, securing the collections is a very difficult task museums are responsible for due to the thousands of precious items that require high standards of care and preservation (Atkinson 2010). This is because most of the objects, presented or stored, are unique and significant in nature. Thus, replacing these objects if they are lost or stolen would not be possible in many cases. The museum building is the first layer of security that protects the collection, but collection documentation is valuable and should be the main thing a museum prioritizes. As a result, it is noticeable that due to the focus on museum security, the ratio of documentation being stolen is low compared to its possibility of being lost amongst other documentation (Giannachi and Westerman 32).

There are several steps that can be taken to provide and enhance the security of the museum collection. The proper and active organization of the museum's collection records is a key factor of providing security to the collection. This is done through effectively managing the objects from the time of their receipt to the museum. In addition, clear systems and procedures are central and can minimize lost or misplaced items and their documentation. Most museums include the accession number, the accession register, and the item's place in each document to organize and keep track of the museum collections.

As noted earlier by ICOM, museums usually follow these standards in order to document their items, and these standards include many important aspects. First, the accession number that is linked to the object and recognizes each item in the collection in a way that is unique to the object. The accession register is the official administrative document that functions as the basis of setting up the item's documentation system. Then, the museum

catalog, which can be found as a printed source or electronically in a database, has key information about each item in the collection, therefore, these records are protected and confidential because of the complete account of each item they contain (Reible 53). The object's location should be recorded and noted through regular check-ups to maintain that the process is in place and nothing is moved without being recorded. It is important for museums to be aware of the objects' locations to easily locate, remove, or track. Thus, it can be understood that items that are not documented are considered useless without associated documentation and information. Without proper documentation, the ownership of the object cannot be traced back to the museum, the museum cannot accurately estimate the object's value, and it is more difficult to understand its historical context. Therefore, pressure is put on museums to manage collections effectively (Avaro et al. 7).

The majority of the public views museums as strong institutions because they contain and preserve the country's heritage and history. Nevertheless, the truth is that museums are usually a target of natural and unnatural disasters that make them vulnerable and exposed. Museums face several emergency situations and disasters that range from flood, war, and political uncertainties. These natural and unnatural disasters raise the possibility of damaging the museum collection. The collection may suffer from destruction, damage, theft, or vandalism (Sease 2).

In some parts of the world, there were many museums, archeological, and cultural sites that were targeted and faced damage and destruction due to wars and armed conflicts. Some of these museums and sites were in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and Europe during the First and Second World Wars. The National Museum of Iraq is considered one of these museums that faced destruction due to war. The museum, established in 1926, was a prestigious institution in the Arab region that contained many important historical objects that represented the region and other parts of the world. The invasion of Iraq by the United States to overthrow the government began in 2003 and the museum was one of the most affected institutions. In April 2003, the museum witnessed many waves of vandals that swept through its building and collections (Sease 2). It should be taken into consideration that most of the museum items were collected through excavations in Iraq, and many of the materials had hurriedly come into the museum prior to the American invasion. Therefore, there was not enough time for the museum staff to complete the registration process of these recently received items. During the vandals' invasion that took place in the museum, groups entered the storage areas of the museum and objects were either stolen or damaged. In the aftermath of these thefts, many of these artifacts fell out of their boxes or envelopes and they were separated from their documentation (Sease 2).

An important concept to understand through looking into the documentation in the Iraqi museum is that an improper documentation process of the museum collection caused many of the museum artifacts and their records to be lost. In an ideal scenario, if the artifacts had been fully marked and cataloged, the situation at the national museum would have been different. This can be accomplished through assigning each object in the collection with a distinctive accession number that can be placed both onto the object and in the museum cataloging system. This accession number will provide information on the location of the object. Also, a photograph allocated to the documentation could help the museum to recover and claim its stolen items.

Currently, the museum is not able to claim its stolen collections, although some of these items have been witnessed going through customs around the world. The lack of documentation, inventories, and photographs hinders the process of ownership of the items, and therefore, the ability to return the items to the museum. Moreover, poor documentation prevents staff from knowing the exact items that were returned to the collection and what items are still missing. The museum staff kept announcing inconsistent numbers of lost artifacts due to the vague records of these items. The case of the National Museum of Iraq, alongside other examples of museums during war, shows the importance documentation has during these difficult times (University of Cambridge 2). Museum objects should always be documented; maintaining full documentation with photographs and written records is always preferable, as well as a duplication of these documents stored in another location for safety.

Qatar's Diplomatic Crisis

In respect to disasters, as they represent a great threat to museums, the Middle East is a region that thrives on conflicts and is in an unstable situation. Qatar, as do other countries in the region, promotes the history and cultural heritage of the region. As Qatar is evolving and developing rapidly, its museums hold and protect the country's history and legacy. The country has several museums that fall under the umbrella of Qatar Museums (QM). These museums focus on different cultural aspects from Islamic Art, national history and heritage, and Modern Arab Art. Museums in Qatar are constantly growing through adopting systems and policies to fulfill the need of the museum's customers. Some museums in Qatar are undergoing structural changes to best enhance the museum's accessibility and organization for both the public and its shareholders.

Currently, Qatar is struggling with a diplomatic crisis with its neighboring countries. The land and sea blockade imposed by Qatar's neighbors began in June 2017 and is ongoing because Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt have cut off their diplomatic relations with Qatar. Cutting off ties with Qatar would not place it in a situation of risk, however, if the current situation escalated to physical conflict, there will be consequences that could affect the museums. At present, Qatar Museums are engaged in an exercise to reclassify and unify the numbering system of the entire collection of the different museums in Qatar. This activity will create inconstancy in the cataloging system of these museums until it is completed.

The National Museum of Qatar (NMoQ) opened to the public on 28th March 2019, and some of the collection of the museum are scattered in different storerooms around Doha such as Fahad bin Ali Palace (Arabian Business 2017). Amongst Qatar's museums, NMoQ is the only museum that has a dedicated section to biological life in Qatar. It is worth mentioning that the documentation associated with natural history specimens are unquestionably more important than the physical specimen itself. Considering that most of the items of the wildlife section of the museum are found and reoccur in nature, such as the Arabian Oryx that is found in Qatar's desert, it is possible to display multiple Arabian Oryx in the museum, but the information found in the documentation makes these natural history specimens unique from the one another. Hence, proper documentation provides these items with a story that speaks to their significance and makes them incomparable to other specimens. Information about the specimen is highly valued to genetic studies and evolutionary

sequencing. Typically, the museum's labels do not explain about the specimen on display and researchers usually go back to the item's records to understand the item. Thus, most museums keep comprehensive registration details, catalogs, card indexes, databases and other associated documentation due to their importance (Carnall 24).

It will be a disaster to the museums' collections if the current situation reaches an armed conflict. That is because there are not any centralized storerooms for the museums' collection as well as the incomplete status of the cataloging process that museums are undertaking. Therefore, dealing with war in the current situation will not be straightforward in regards to reallocating and moving the collection. Museum documentation and inventories are the first and most important aspect when dealing with emergency situations because the organized documentation of the collection will help museums take the first step to retrieve these lost objects (Hekman 45).

There are several options that can be taken into consideration to further improve the safety of the museum collections. There are many institutions around the world who are interested in helping cultures protect their heritage and their history. After the Second World War, UNESCO adopted the Hague Convention in 1954 to protect cultural items and collections during armed conflicts. This convention is considered the first international treaty that aimed to protect the cultural heritage of countries who suffer from war. As a result, the symbol of a blue shield was adopted during wartimes. The symbol is placed on top of cultural sites for two reasons, to identify sites and save them during natural disasters, and to avoid destroying these sites in human-made disasters (Mackenzie 8). Having proper documentation in place, the international committee would be able to perform the act of saving these items more easily.

Moreover, the local emergency service agencies offer their assistance to several institutions during a disaster. However, museums should be aware of the type and the amount of assistance required in the different circumstances. It is necessary to let the agencies and the country's police know of the assistance needed by the institutions. It is usually recommended that museums prepare a contact list that includes the personnel needed in different scenarios such as, army officials, the police, the fire department, and the museum staff. These recommendations will minimize the time wasted during an emergency and promote active involvement. Museums should also be aware that individual lives are always prioritized, thus, hospitals, schools, and the general population needs will be met first by the city, state, and national agencies in an emergency situation (Hayashi and Planche). These suggestions play into the development of the staff readiness to respond to museum-specific emergencies whenever required.

On the museum level, there are several policies and procedures concerned about the safety of the museum collection. These procedures involve the curator, registrar, and conservator. These individuals will have more knowledge and authority to approve and administer the ways to deal with the museum collection during these situations by going back to the collection documents. These documents include and specify the various conditions of these items through taking into consideration the materials they are made from, the extent of damage, and different ways of mobilization and storage (Jones and Dorge 139). Thus, when

evacuating and relocating these objects and their records, these items will be kept as per their original conditions.

It is interesting to see how people with different backgrounds and training understand the needs of the museum collections and the ways to take care of them. On the other hand, there is a possibility that individuals with no knowledge about dealing with museum objects will be required to assist, and documentation will help these individuals understand and assist with these items. During disastrous situations, a clear plan is needed complete with object documentation, the staff responsibility and their level of awareness regarding each item, and a safe relocation and storage place for exhibits as well as the museum catalogs (Sant 42). In the aftermath, to relocate and to find these lost, stolen, or destroyed items would not be possible without their documentation. Qatar will lack the legal grounds to request these items back, and if they were destroyed, the country would not be able to recall and record the number of items that had disappeared from their museums' collections.

By taking all these aspects into consideration, it is clear that the documentation of museum objects is significantly important. Without proper documentation, items are valueless and are hard to locate amongst the collections. Unfortunately, many museums worldwide are not sufficiently prepared for unforeseeable situations and disasters as most of their collection records are incomplete or are not documented appropriately. Thus, when these museums are faced with a disastrous situation, the safety and security of these historical items and heritage sites are put at risk. Museum objects that are not registered in a system or documented properly are far easier to be stolen or lost. In an effort to advocate the process of documentation and to avoid museums losing their values due to lack of documentation, museums are focusing more and acknowledging the importance documentation provides to their collection, especially during emergency situations.

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