I.
Museums have changed during the last few decades. Technological innovation along with social and economic developments have encouraged a new approach to how museums care about their collections and communicate them to the people. Museums nowadays are expected to do more with their collections: to make them available in different and innovative ways, to use them effectively in order to spread knowledge of and appreciation for culture. Their role as agents of change, as advocates of social inclusion and stability is confirmed and has become vital in contemporary society. It extends beyond the limits of their immediate local and social environment, of one country alone and engages regional and even global audiences. European museums in particular are instrumental into fostering the European ideal and stimulating intercultural dialogue and the European identity.

Within this line of thought, collections management acquires primary importance. It is at this level of museum operation that these changes of museums’ character and role should be reflected and take force in order to empower and facilitate communication. Documenting, researching, borrowing and lending objects, to mention only a few of the activities of collections management, cannot be understood as isolated practices anymore. They are organic parts of a whole, they are parts of a different, holistic and empowering approach to collections care, development and use. Sharing collections becomes a core activity of any museum and a key priority of collections management planning.

Sharing of collections could be achieved through various methods: digitisation and on-line access, but also physical availability through exhibitions and public programmes. Planning for both at a strategic level is absolutely necessary. This presentation will focus on the need for such a planning and its relation to collections mobility. But before, we are going to discuss briefly the changes in collections management understanding and the importance of collections development and use.
II.
Collections management is everything that is done to take care of collections, develop them and make them available to the public. Each museum operates following its own collections management policy that describes the relationship among the museum and its collections, its authorities and staff and the outside world. Almost always the underlying assumption is that museums hold collections in trust for the public; the public in turn holds museums and their governing authorities accountable for maintaining the highest legal, ethical and professional standards.

The power of museum collections has been widely acknowledged. Objects and materiality of the past are what museums are really about. But they are not merely tokens of the past. Collections are appreciated for their power to provide people pleasure, to evoke wonder and awe. They enable people to explore the world; they make distant in time and space events, experiences and places real and tangible. They provide evidence and offer opportunities for research and learning. They give status to ideas, people or communities, they serve as memorials and they validate individual and group identities. In addition, collections have a considerable economic impact, since they stimulate contemporary science, creativity and industry. They provide people with a powerful sense of belonging, a sense of place and identity (Glaister, 2005).

For all this to happen museums have to provide access to collections and the opportunity for people to enjoy them, be inspired by them, understand them. Nevertheless, a large number of museum collections are underused; they are not exhibited, they are not published, they are not used for research or any other of the museum purposes. They remain in storage awaiting for special funding or different curatorial expertise. A research undertaken in 2008 by the University College London about stored collections and access to them, reported that the interested public too seldom experience access to the 200 million objects in the collections of English and Welsh museums (Keene, 2008). Beyond any doubt, a similar survey in many other European countries would have revealed similar results. And although this might not surprise museum staff (actually it might even look reasonable to some), it does conflict with the role of museums as public institutions, as we previously described them.

In order for museums to fulfill their responsibilities as public institutions, they should:
   a. realise that their collections are public resources of knowledge and therefore should be more available to as a wider public as possible
   b. formulate collections management policies that will provide transparency of practice and public justification
   c. develop cooperation and common initiatives in issues that refer to collections management and research in order to be able to better provide for people
d. realise that collections management and research cannot be isolated from communication and education (Bounia, 2009).

At another level, the understanding of museums as knowledge creators, instead of object repositories, along with the technological innovations of recent years have gradually transformed them into hybrid institutions: often the collections of real objects are supplemented by collections of other knowledge media, such as digitised objects and digital data archives. Intangible heritage and digital media are added to the definition of the contents of a museum collection. As a result, the term “collections management” has to be expanded in order to include not only the management of ‘things’ but also the management of knowledge (Bounia, 2009).

The aim of knowledge management is to create, perpetuate, organise and make available information that comes about by the collection, tangible or not. This knowledge is a direct product of the study of the collection, its exhibition and management. So far knowledge management has been a low priority compared with objects management. But collections without knowledge are of very limited use. The problems associated with existing collections frustrate and constrains new collecting. The challenge for museums is to realise more of the potential for their collections:

- by giving people more opportunities of engaging with them
- by releasing information and generating knowledge
- by using the Internet and increasing virtual access to their collections, along with the real one.

If we bring together the discussion so far, we can summarise by pointing out that collections management of the 21st century needs to take into account two major issues:

(a) its own transformation into knowledge management, i.e. an important internal shift of emphasis, and
(b) public accountability, which besides transparency of practice, it also means active use of collections and facilitating access to them.

This new approach in collections management needs to go beyond holding museums publicly accountable for their assets. It further needs to be driven by users’ interests and concerns. As well as capturing and communicating information related to collections, museums must ensure that their stock of knowledge is regularly replenished in collaboration with all stakeholders involved. Research is widely seen as a luxury by museums, but it is an essential part of their role, whether carried out internally or externally, whether it refers to curatorial matters or to museological feedback. And access is key to it, too. This might be through display, on-line access
to objects or associated information, publications, scholarship, loans to other museums or cultural venues, open storage or study tours and handling sessions. The intellectual climate within which museums operate is constantly developing and they must ensure that their collections are always open and available to re-appraisal.

III.
Our presentation so far has focused on the intellectual rationale of collections management in contemporary museums. We are now going to turn our attention to the mobility of collections as part of that rationale and onto collections management planning that takes into account mobility of collections. The transfer of objects between museums or from museums to other cultural institutions is an accepted part of good collections management. It is part of the ethical imperative for museums to increase the use of their collections as well as to maximise the care they are able to offer them.

Mobility of collections needs to be considered on three levels: that of collections management policy, i.e. as a requirement that can be related to the role of contemporary museums as custodians of manageable, well-cared for collections and as service providers; that of standards, i.e. as a tool that can facilitate museum professionals’ practices and everyday routines; and that of collections planning, i.e. as an integral part of the way a museum understands its collections.

A collections plan is rather different than a collections management policy. It refers to the ongoing process of deciding the museum’s collections-related activities. It establishes a vision for the collections that will best serve the museum’s mission, compares the existing collections to that vision, and maps out how the museum will achieve these ideal collections. A good collection plan helps a museum remain true to its mission without losing control of its collections, without underusing them, without underestimating their power. The intellectual framework of a collections plan is built around the mission and the needs of the users, and is often organised around interpretive themes that guide exhibits, programming and research, as well as collecting. Unlike a collections management policy, which is a set of general guidelines and principles that regulate the activities of the organization, the collections plan is an ongoing process of deciding museum’s specific activities (Simmons, 2006).

Borrowing and lending parts of their collections is one way for museums to meet their responsibility to disseminate knowledge and share information. Usually loans are short term and they are made to peer institutions, i.e. museums with a similar purpose or mission, that is capable of caring for collection elements or specimens while they are on loan (Fahy, 1995; Malaro, 1998). Each museum develops its own practices and policies, adopting either a more passive (mainly receiving requests) or

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1 For a detailed account of what constitutes a collections management plan, see Simmons, 2006: 7.
a more aggressive (organising exhibitions) approach. The requirements of the lending institutions are usually for the borrowing institution to be able to afford loaned objects adequate environmental protection, assure adequate safety precautions, encourage research on and public enjoyment of the object, avoid its use for private gain. In recent years, the cost of organising exhibitions has mushroomed. Insurance costs, packing and transporting costs, loan fees, along with funding cuts and shortage of additional resources (like private funding and sponsoring) led smaller institutions in particular to refrain from the practice of borrowing. On the other hand, larger institutions started getting requests only for their star objects, thus augmenting stored collections and contributing to their under-use (not to mention the practical problems related to the loan periods their star objects are requested for).

Nevertheless, loans are particularly important for museums: they allow for use of the collections; they promote collaboration; they offer the opportunity for new and more exciting exhibitions and therefore they contribute to the production of new knowledge. It is exactly upon these advantages that the need for the development of an efficient process for collections mobility has been built. But this process has to rely on a museums collections plan and a collections management policy.

Mobility of collections can address the need to explore new ways of using collections and of making them available to a wider audience. Taking objects out of storage and making them available for lending leads to documenting and researching them and therefore to an increase in knowledge production.

Museums cannot afford to work in isolation. Networks of museums have already been established; but there should be more. These networks can be within the limits of one country, as for instance has recently happened in Greece, in Thessaloniki, where five (5) museums have been collaborating for organising common public programmes and exhibitions; or, in the UK where the National Museum Directors Conference decided to collaborate with regional museums to facilitate mobility of collections and exhibitions exchange (2003); or, in the US where the Museums Loan Network aims to connect museums and their staff not only through loans, but also through ideas.\(^2\) Networks can also develop at an international level, as for instance in the case of the Asia-Europe Museum Network,\(^3\) which with a membership of 70 museums promotes international cooperation and mobility of collections between European and Asian countries, such as the Philippines. These exchanges, either short or long term, can establish significant future resources; they can enrich collections, and provide the experience of shared cultural heritage.

But such an approach also needs a shared understanding of lending and borrowing administration and standards. Trust on a more equal partnership basis is a


\(^3\) For further information see [www.asemus.museum](http://www.asemus.museum) (last accessed 22/5/2010)
particularly important issue that needs to be properly addressed. On a long-term basis collaboration and trust encourage sustainability both on economic and social terms. Collaboration promotes understanding, multiculturalism, social inclusion.

On the level of standards, mobility of collections can facilitate current practices and help smaller institutions or regional museums to participate to the wider cultural scene of Europe and the world, or to organise touring exhibitions and other events. Familiarisation with systems and practices of other countries and museums builds collaboration and trust. Loan administration and lending standards, valuation and insurance, understanding of legal guarantees can succeed in building strong commitment on behalf of museums, their administration and funding authorities. Building up trust and increasing contacts between stakeholders at all levels will help to enlarge the small number of lenders and borrowers and to promote the exchange of cultural objects.

Furthermore, mobility of collections can lead to more effective collecting practices, especially when it comes to collecting the contemporary. It can make little or even well-known collections even better known, as well as put loaned objects into proper historical and cultural context and strengthen the profile of existing collections.

Finally, the development of State Indemnity schemes in the countries these do not exist, like for instance in Greece, as well as a better understanding and trust can lead to the reduction of costs associated with loans and it can contribute into making exhibition exchanges easier and faster. The ultimate goal is to help cultural institutions to better serve their communities and better preserve and present cultural heritage.

V.

Collections management of the 21st century leads to a different approach to the culture of museum lending and borrowing; and if this is to be spread to include more museums, then a change in the understanding of sharing is needed. Sharing inspires creativity and learning by providing wider access to objects of cultural heritage. It strengthens existing museum networks, builds new ones, and provides a vehicle for the compilation and exchange of information about cultural heritage. It supports the skills needed to preserve and interpret cultural heritage. Museums have the potential to serve as more than collectors of artefacts; they can develop new roles in networks that tie them together not only through loans but also through ideas and individuals. Sharing is neither limiting nor restricting; it is challenging and inspiring for a new future of museums.
References


Alexandra Bounia
abounia@ct.aegean.gr