Beyond the Walls: The Rise of Digital Information and its Impact on Cultural Heritage

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The increasing demand for instant access to, and dissemination of, digital information is likely to change the way knowledge related to physical cultural objects is produced and managed. This is especially true for cultural institutions and their associated practices, which are constantly transforming in response to broader societal and technical developments. For instance, as cultural institutions actively convert more of their documents and data to digital formats, they are affected by the pace and intensity at which information is growing, which means that they have to shift to online platforms by reorienting, integrating and developing elaborate ways of mediating their collections both inside and outside their institutionally defined boundaries.

Although museums are adept at dealing with the representation of cultural objects, they are constantly devising new ways of representing different cultural objects curatorially. Part of this involves providing authoritative content in an environment where competing narratives and interpretations exist. In the past two decades, digital technologies have become ubiquitous in museums. Digital technology has changed the way that museums document, collect, research, curate, preserve and display information, as well as how they make that information accessible to visitors (Chowdhury & Ruthven, 2015:11).

Since cultural institutions are investing in emerging digital technologies, such as electronic devices, data management systems and cataloguing, many museums are evolving curatorially by embracing digital technologies as a tool for engaging the public and for disseminating information about the museum collections. However, in the case of curatorial mediation, the importance of properly representing digitised cultural heritage objects cannot be overemphasised. This means that museum practitioners should actively think about understanding both the cultural history and current context of the object. For instance, in the South African context some digital heritage preservation methods reflect the "battle around how the sediments of colonial and post-apartheid history are being used, collected and interpreted" (Autry, 2017:120). This debate is important because the

introduction of digital culture into museums means that present-day curators face new challenges regarding representation.

The classification of creators of cultural objects as "unknown" potentially deprives object makers of any substantial acknowledgment, especially when a significant number of object makers are assigned anomalous curatorial values (Stocking, 1985:237). It is even more problematic when cultural objects are assigned lower aesthetic value without any concerted effort to conduct in-depth research about who created the objects and what they represent. This is important because members of the public have to interpret the limited information available to them in order to understand the value of the object or to seek an authoritative explanation of the object maker's provenance (Van Beurden, 2015:150).

This challenge is exacerbated by the public's expectation that museums are able to balance the demand to observe, acknowledge, and even celebrate differences. However, the "unknown" status of some creators perpetuates a culture of objectification in the museum discourse, because many objects in public collections, as well as their associated museum practices, bear remnants of the colonial past. In South Africa, for example, the collapse of apartheid and its associated ways of defining identity, history, and culture resulted in an urgent push to recast the past and attempt to assemble histories that included the voices of people who had been written out of the national story (Autry, 2017:120).

In the past, museums were widely recognised as places of specialised knowledge and enlightenment, and much of what is displayed in a museum is trusted to be authentic. Poster (2001:21-23) points out that the real object that is "encased and enclosed by the museum is rendered authentic or privileged by the associated apparatuses of scholarship and institutional authority which is different from a manipulated digital object that is materially unstable in a way that the real object is not." A digital object composed of bytes and digits can easily be re-formatted, re-aligned, re-coloured, cropped, erased or altered. Essentially, the museum context confers authoritative authenticity on both written and visual texts, and other objects. This status of "authenticity is recursively affirmed by the public's expectation of experiencing real things in public museums" (Davison, 1991:97).

However, authenticity is not only present in the object but is also projected onto its community of origin and proceeds from "assumptions about temporality, wholeness, and continuity" (Van Beurden, 2015:52).

In summary, when museum objects find expression as distinct objects, or digits used to represent something in the real-world, digital curatorship will inevitably be required to maintain an intimate relationship between the real and the virtual world. Moreover, defining curatorial standards and processes for collating descriptive data as historical evidence will become even more urgent. Equally, within the museum discourse, the word "unknown" in the term "unknown maker" functions as a deficient link or inference that impedes digital curatorship, and only intensifies the challenge of creating a balance between the preservation of knowledge and the accurate representation of cultural material.

1.2 Research background

The South African Department of Arts and Culture acknowledges that the digital revolution is fundamentally altering how cultural goods and services are produced, distributed, marketed and accessed. In the spirit of disseminating and sharing knowledge, the Department of Arts and Culture's *National Third White Paper on The Digitisation of Heritage Resources* (2010:21) highlights the need for universal access to digital heritage, where digitisation is seen as an enabler of the right of access to information as stipulated in section 32 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. Therefore, the Department is encouraging cultural institutions to put mechanisms in place to create and manage digitisation programmes.

It is necessary to locate the use of digitisation firmly within the context of public art collections, specifically for recording and documenting heritage material that will allow public cultural institutions to preserve and share information about South Africa's heritage. To this end, all custodians of heritage material that operate under the Department of Arts and Culture are required to develop a digitisation strategy that aligns with the White Paper, taking into consideration the recommendations by the South African Heritage Resource

Agency. The "digitisation strategy for each custodian should reflect the unique characteristics of the institution including: its legislative mandate; its identified stakeholders and beneficiaries; the nature of the collections being managed, and institution-specific collection management processes and policies" (Department of Arts and Culture, 2010:42-43).

Considering the current local struggles, including the legacy of apartheid and the shortcomings of various cultural public institutions in relation to digital custodianship, a new digital generation is nonetheless emerging. Since the end of apartheid, there has been a need to actively address existing inaccuracies about the past through digital decolonisation projects in an attempt to rewrite the lived experiences of indigenous and marginalised groups.

The current local decolonisation discourse, which continues to rage on various public platforms, serves as a compelling reason to engage with the digital profiling of "unknown maker(s)", particularly when there are traces of liberal academic curiosity in studying cultural objects from the mid-20th century to the 1990s. Under the South African autocratic apartheid government, the pervasive effects of racial segregation and the range of policies that deliberately aimed to reinforce cultural differences were evident in the obscure classification practices of the time, in which certain cultural group experiences and artistic traditions were systematically ignored, misrepresented or marginalised in mainstream museums (Autry, 2017:99).

1.3 Research question

The main research question was: "Is there a curatorial framework(s) that is used, or can be used, to digitally profile "unknown maker(s)" of cultural objects adequately?"

To assist with answering the main research question, this study asked two sub-questions:

- What content or descriptive metadata is being used for the classification of "unknown maker(s)" in the digitisation of national art collections?

- What reasonable precautions can a museum take to ensure that the digital classification of "unknown" identities does not perpetuate ethically unsound narratives when transferring them from the physical collection into the digital space?

1.4 Research problem

The museification of cultural institutions is one method of preserving the past, but it implies that without it, indigenous communities would fade into obscurity, although they are problematically portrayed as other, exotic, unchanging and disconnected from the present (Morphy, 1999:20).

In the context of a national museum, this study focussed on the process of digitising public art collections, and cast light on some of the ethical problems that could possibly emerge in relation to the current digital preservation framework(s), particularly those applied to cultural objects, including the use of tools for ingesting data, and managing, accessing and reusing digital objects from ISANG's official records.

Museums are still plagued by colonial museological systems even though they are moving towards decentralising and democratising their collections. In this regard, the digital augmentation of ahistorical information, restitution, and decolonialisation of museums foregrounds a need to redress the historical injustice museums might have caused by revising the inherent cataloguing and classification methods. This is crucial to restoring the agency of "unknown maker(s)" of cultural objects as producers of their intellectual and aesthetic history within contemporary museum work.

1.5 Objectives of the study

This study was designed to investigate current digital curation practices regarding cultural objects catalogued with an "unknown maker(s)" classificatory label. This research explored the practical and technical challenges that arose when dealing with the digital profiling of "unknown maker(s)" in public art collections, by examining how the Iziko South African

National Gallery (ISANG) museum currently catalogues and presents objects created by "unknown maker(s)".

1.6 Rationale

The digital profiling of "unknown maker(s)" of cultural objects necessitates an ongoing investigation into issues of language, identity, authorship, semiotic weight, cultural heritage and the supposed democratisation involved in access to, and future usage of, digital cultural heritage objects. Failing to address the potential indignity of representing the maker of a cultural object as "unknown" may exacerbate inequalities by perpetuating them in a digital curation system. The correlation between culture and language is embedded in cultural objects, enabling us to identify and deduce information about them. Thus, inaccurate data can produce inconsistent information, which can pose a serious threat to good digital curatorial practice. If digital curatorship and preservation activities are not undertaken, or are neglected, the ability of the institution to successfully take care of the digital objects, and accompanying information, will be negatively affected (Wanless, 2007:16).

Whatever the controversy over the use of the word "unknown" in the term "unknown maker", cultural institutions can no longer afford to passively digitise or profile "unknown maker(s)" of cultural objects based solely on a lack of clear classification terms. As for the term "unknown maker", it is hoped that the terminology or definition adopted in this study will avoid the problems associated with using such a vague term particularly in relation to the reproduction of unconscionable narratives because of insufficient or unavailable information. This is important because knowing about the object's origins can result in emotional and intellectual responses from which judgements, based on those responses, can be made (Davison, 1991:141).

1.7 Definitions of related terms

Authenticity refers to an original work of art as having to exist in a unique space and time. Walter Benjamin (1936:143-144) defines authenticity as

> [an] aura that can be possessed only by an original work of art but the reproduction of works of art in modern times causes the loss of the aura and the loss of authenticity in the aesthetic experience. The aura distinguishes the viewer from the work and creates the necessary detachment for a true aesthetic experience.

Cultural objects refers to a "collection of objects, or a type of object adapted by human workmanship with historical significance, or objects to which oral traditions are attached and which are associated with living heritage, objects of scientific or technological interest" (SAHRA, 1999:S,32e-h). Examples of cultural objects can be found in disciplines such as architecture, sculpture, painting, music, photography, textiles and digital media.

Digital curation is the management and preservation of digital material to ensure accessibility over the long-term. Digital curation also includes maintaining and adding value to a trusted body of digital information for future and current use; specifically, the active management and appraisal of data over the entire life cycle (Abbott, 2008).

Digital collection refers to "the body of acquired objects held in title by museums and all objects in digital form in the museum collection, whether born-digital or digitised" (International Standard ISO/DIS 18461:2016).

Cultural institution is a term used to define "institutions with an acknowledged mission to engage in the conservation, interpretation, and dissemination of cultural, scientific, and environmental knowledge, and promote activities meant to inform and educate citizens on associated aspects of culture, history, science, and the environment" (Borowiecki, Forbes & Fresa, 2006:300). Examples of cultural institutions include libraries, museums, historical sites and community art centres.

The term **"unknown maker(s)"** will be used in this study to refer to unidentified makers/creators of cultural objects which are designated or classified as indistinct, strange or exotic (Henning, 2005:22).

1.8 Research methodology

Data triangulation was used because it is "a research strategy that cuts across the qualitative-quantitative divide which is consistent with a pluralist theoretical viewpoint" (Olsen, 2004:23). There should not be "a contradiction between the interaction of quantitative and qualitative modes of research, rather it should be possible to bring them together to shed light on any chosen social research topic" (Olsen, 2004:3).

This study utilised data triangulation, a multi-method strategy that allows the researcher to use a variety of "data sources, such as archival records, physical objects, direct observation, surveys and literature reviews to collect data" (Yin, 2009:102). Data triangulation is recommended for this type of research because of its multi-perspective meta-interpretations. The study also used a single case study approach, which focussed on ISANG, and collected data from the Iziko institutions by using an online questionnaire, museum archival records, content analysis, and an exhibition review.

Objects that were listed in the ISANG art collections as having "unknown maker(s)" were selected for this project. The research made use of purposive sampling, inviting responses from the body of Iziko's museum professionals who were invited to participate in an online questionnaire. The REDCap Software web tool was used for the descriptive analysis of the data that was collected.

1.8.1 Research design

The research was supported by a case study that drew attention to the problems that digital classification presents in the museum environment. The case study provided useful

data, some of which came from Iziko's published catalogues. These catalogues provided information regarding the selected objects and how they were curated.

1.9 Limitations

ISANG, located in Cape Town, was the only institution to which the researcher was able to gain access. Therefore, the study was only able to access a limited number of cultural objects associated with "unknown maker(s)". Furthermore, the short period of time in which this research was conducted restricted the scope of the study. There was also a limited amount of primary research material available, such as exhibition reviews, journals and museum publications on cultural objects, or prior research available on the digital classification of "unknown maker(s)" of cultural objects, that focussed on South African art museums.

1.10 Chapter outline

The first chapter introduces the research topic and explains the rationale behind the study.

The second chapter reviews existing and relevant literature from other researchers, and provides a theoretical background for the research topic. This chapter also organises theoretical views, indicating how previous research informs this study.

The third chapter describes the research design. It provides a comprehensive description of the methods and procedures used to collect data, including ethical considerations and the data analysis process.

The fourth chapter presents the findings of the study based on the analysis of the collected data and the theory used to inform the study.

The fifth chapter concludes this study with a summary of the research findings and makes recommendations for future research.

1.11 Annexures outline

Documentary materials held in a museum constitute a vast resource. However, this study also included official published annexures from Iziko including documents such as the 2004 digitisation policy, extracts from the 2003/4 Iziko annual report, inventory and catalogue cards as well as photographs from the 2017 *Hidden Treasures* exhibition. This selected auxiliary documentation and the usage of its contents provided substantial data in support of the triangulation research methodology utilised, where a multi-method strategy approach was applied.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This literature review has been divided into interrelated themes, and discusses theories concerned with representation and the preservation of museum collections. It explores the literature available on digital curatorship and examines different theoretical frameworks used in museum curatorship practices. It also provides an overview of the current usage status of the term "unknown maker" within the museum context, by focussing on the important contributions made by the Iziko Museums of South Africa towards decolonising museum information.

2.2 Theoretical framework

In his publication *Icon and Images* (1974), Denis Williams claims that a relationship exists between anthropologists, aesthetes, scholars of form and semioticians that feeds imputation and misunderstanding, as reports undertaken by European scholars on Africa show an absence of seriousness on their part. The decision by European scholars to study indigenous cultures as an enforced study deliberately omitted the lived experiences of the formerly oppressed colonised communities and was motivated by the necessity to legitimise colonial administrative and political power (Williams, 1974:29-30).

Inspired by the social sciences, many noteworthy postcolonial scholars have been interrogating the notion or concept of "being" by offering different perspectives on the critique of scientific knowledge. Cristopher Alexander Udofia (2016:10-12) offers the contentious theoretical position that, while Europeans proposed "a conception of being, Africans conceive of force, where Europeans see concrete beings, Africans see concrete forces, a notion that stems not from what they know but rather from what they do not know." Although critical in the recognition of the known and unknown, most differences in rigid classificatory schema do not necessarily have historical validity or accord with the self-identity of people so defined.

In his ontological framework, Udofia (2016:2-3) uses the notion of "force" to illustrate that "African people do not engage themselves in anything that does not serve a specific purpose because utility or function is a fundamental dimension of African social life", which constitutes a plural paradigm of knowing. However, it must also be noted that "force" is not for Africans, a necessary, irreducible attribute of being.

By using a range of pertinent postcolonial theories, and reflecting on the complexities of cultural classification schema and their relevance in contemporary museum collections, this study critically assessed the use of the term "unknown maker", and considered how to improve the way in which creators of cultural objects are recorded in order to appropriately represent their identities.

Against this theoretical backdrop many questions have been raised regarding the ontological schema used to describe cultural objects. Many scholars connect the question of ontology to history and the study of cultural norms because pre-colonial cultural objects, untainted by the influence of Western modernism, are assumed to be prime carriers of culture. However, a serious engagement with a range and depth of cultural objects has led to disagreements about how to name and account for fundamental lived ontologies, because labels such as "unknown" identities or provenance of cultural objects have unintended repercussions associated with their material representation (Kelly, 2014:1). Within museum discourse, the word "unknown" seems to suggest that it is possible to nullify or denounce an identity.

As far as the adopted theoretical framework is concerned, this study argues against the hypothesis that the status of an artefact is always in flux, that is to say that although most museum objects become a work of art separate from their creator, their original meaning should be retained. When cultural objects are taken away from their owners and placed in collections or recontextualised they acquire a new meaning, which is not always related to their original use or purpose.

It is, however, safe to conclude that an outsider who is hampered by a "lack of both the language and culture of a particular community distorted by a translator untrained in the

techniques of preserving or gathering information will find it difficult, if not impossible to get to the fundamentals of other people's cultures" (Okon, 2013:99).

2.3 Museum objects

Although museum objects are a subject of research and a source of intellectual stimuli through a mediated experience, some academics see museum objects as a social construct that could help society explain a universal story of human history. Museums are preoccupied with the things that surround us and the politics of representation. French historian Pierra Nora (1996:200-225) suggests that museums are memory machines, a "technical means by which societies remember and organise the past for the purposes of the present. They are a product of societies, which have a historical consciousness by treating material things as evidence or documents of past events."

In the late nineteenth century, museums were created as an important means to understanding the world. They are like laboratories where theoretical concepts in cultural material can be applied in practice and provide a means of acquainting many visitors with such concepts (Guiart, 1983:135-6). According to Jean Guiart (1983:135), museums inherit their roots from the world of the past, seeking to collect evidence of man's cultural heritage in different social settings. This has, however, presented a number of challenges for museums, which ought to be looked at afresh, especially when showcasing cultural objects that are historically and symbolically associated with *Wunderkammern* or cabinets of curiosities.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004:58) states that "authenticity, uniqueness, and originality constitute the foundation of today's museum collections, where artefacts or objects of curiosity become museum objects by virtue of being redefined, segmented, detached" and recontextualised by curators and researchers. Broadly defined, "the mission of museums is to maintain the intelligibility of objects, which are meaningful and valuable objects. Despite the apparent simplicity of this goal, its attainment is highly problematic" (Domínguez, 2014:617) because cultural objects often become representative of

unjustified concepts. There is a practice of objectification in the way that museum cultural objects have been conscripted into the same narrative (Guiart, 1983:136).

Against this backdrop, "many museum institutions were products of an outsider's curiosity, seeking the primitive elements, the exotica, rather than the cultural differences, which made up the rich mosaic of indigenous civilization" (Guiart, 1983:135-6). Museums traditionally prioritise objects and tend towards permanence and the unique, rather than ephemeral reproductions. Although museums claim "to maintain the dimension of the object's original function, it is no more than a claim because the object has been irreparably cut off from this function" (Henning, 2005:1865). Mauss (1969:245) asserts that "the misunderstandings between the African and European cultures are based purely on a blind obeisance to colonial usage and written in an underserved and fortuitous way because of the role played by fetishism."

From the perspective of museums, curatorial problems related to the interpretation and attribution of meaning to cultural objects have passed through several phases that reflect changes in society. The avant-garde museums of the early twentieth century rejected the preservation of what was perceived as the "dead past" in favour of new technologies associated with speed and immediacy that had greater relevance to the present. Yet these new technologies themselves would extend the "realm of the dead" into the present through digital recordings and archiving (Henning, 2005:74).

2.3.1 Museum curatorship

Museum curatorship has recently received much attention because the curator occupies the role of an expert who delivers knowledge or educational information about a collection's objects to an audience. A more contemporary concept of a curator is that of a collaborator, facilitator, arranger, interpreter, storyteller or a moderator of conversations about the objects in an exhibit (Proctor, 2010:38). As the impact of technological advancement increases, digital curatorship has influenced the preservation and dissemination of cultural objects, and new technologies are being used to preserve a

"rapidly disappearing material culture, together with the human knowledge and skills that have created it" (Parry, 2007:166).

New technology is characterised by its ability to separate objects, scenes and people from their fixed place in space and time, and "allows them or their forensic traces to circulate as multiple reproductions that threaten the aura of the unique object by making it available for close inspection by a mass audience" (Brown, 2001:16).

Kress (2010) concedes that appreciation for new modes of communication and, sometimes, cultural similarities, inspire museum practitioners to engage in the production of knowledge in previously unimagined ways. This has enabled a detailed account of how new technologies interact with both social and cultural materials.

2.4 Digital technology in a museum

There is no doubt that postcolonial thinking in contemporary museums faces difficulties with finding meaning in symbols, objects and signs, be they analogue, digital or virtual reality. Broadly speaking, with the realisation that information is critical to preserving history, cultural institutions need to consistently curate and store information seamlessly. Initially, one may visualise cultural institutions like libraries, museums, theatres and galleries in their physical form. However, cultural institutions are quickly realising that they need to build their online presence to provide their patrons with access to their ever-growing information (Chowdhury & Ruthven, 2015:9).

Therefore, museum curatorship requires the ability to work productively with digital knowledge and participate in digital networks of collaboration and co-creation (Andrews et al., 2012). As Domínguez (2014) has noted, museum curatorship needs to be understood in complex relation to driving innovation and spearheading digital adoption, while taking into consideration the impact that socio-technical change is having on long-established institutional norms.