

M.Langenhach, Y.I.Smit, J.J.de Vries, Werken in het museum, Historisch-Didactische-Cahiers 4. Groningen 1981.

SUMMARY

1. Introduction

The booklet has been written for history teachers and for educational officers in museums and for all those who direct museum policies.

2. The museum past and present

Private collections of curiosa and art have often been the origin of museums. Admission to these collections was restricted to a few connoisseurs only. These heterogeneous collections were divided into separate departments at the time of the foundation of the museums: the departments of the fine arts, of science and of natural history obtained parts of buildings or buildings of their own. The art museum became a temple for the initiates where many works of art were reverently adored.

In the nineteen sixties a wind of change brought about new developments in many museums. In Holland some historical museums or historical departments of museums were renovated.

The growing interest in social and economic history was reflected in several exhibitions accentuating problems in social history. As the greater part of the objects from the past belonged to the well-to-do, much information in spoken or written form will be necessary for using them to explain history.

Looking attentively at authentic remnants from the past may help produce emotional responses and intellectual insights, that - together - lead to real historical knowledge.

3. Objects for history lessons

The teaching of history is changing, too. Within the curriculum attention is shifting from the past to the present. Diachronological developments are replaced by structures. Local, regional and national history is pushed into the background by the history of ever increasing territories. And, finally, social and economic

history gains ground upon political history, while cultural history and history of art remain underdeveloped areas.

In history teaching a combination can be discerned of liberal-humanistic interpretations, and materialistic ones, based on neo-marxism. These changes brought about changes in subject matter, which became more abstract and generalising.

At first sight museums, offering objects from the past of regional, national or cultural importance, do not seem to offer anything for modern ways of teaching history. Yet they do have opportunities to complement the usual schoolbook: opportunities to give concrete form to abstract ideas, to see what things really looked like.

Ideological opinions greatly influence the choice of cognitive and affective educational objectives. The same holds for the aims of museums: these opinions determine the choice of the exhibits, the methods of exhibition and the accompanying texts.

Examples are the historical museum in Frankfurt, professing a neo-marxist ideology and the Römisch-Germanisches Museum in Cologne which appears to have a liberal point of view.

In Frankfurt this leads to a closed learning circuit for the visitor who must be led to a predetermined interpretation; in Cologne to an open presentation "qui épate le bourgeois" and which gives information (for those interested) about the life of an upper stratum of the population.

In Holland this contrast does not show so clearly. Museums devote much attention to attracting a wide public.

Temporary exhibitions, even very important ones, are unsuitable for a visit with a school-class: the crowds prohibit close contact with the objects and often there is not time enough for a good preparation.

Objects have an appeal for a spectator if what can be seen or felt can be assimilated with already existing knowledge. Therefore information about the object must try to evoke associations with the personal experience and foreknowledge of the spectator. This information must be precise, concrete and as detailed as

possible. A pectoral of Tutankamun is used to demonstrate that specific knowledge is necessary to use an object as material for a lesson.

So, our observations so far are that there is a tendency to transmit abstract generalised knowledge; that this preference is caused by the ideology of the teaching person or institute; that much precise knowledge is required to evoke associations with personal experience and that there is a great danger that the pupil or visitor is so overwhelmed by verbal information that looking attentively is seriously hindered.

A remedy cannot be found in an exhaustive visit of a museum as a whole with a complete schoolclass. A small number of objects must be consciously chosen to realise the desired objectives.

Glückel gave a series of educational aims for history teaching that may further a conscious choice of direction. Rohlfes, Coltham and Fines gave a list of abilities some of which may well be trained while working with objects.

4. Examples of museumlessons and the importance of analysis of subject matter

With some ideas of a general orientation the teacher or museum-official inspects the museum.

Phase one: It appears that there is a number of objects perhaps suitable for a lesson or a series of lessons.

Phase two: A study is made of the function of the provisionally chosen objects at their time of origin, and of the possibilities they offer to elucidate their historical background, cultural context, the social data of their makers and/or users.

Phase three: The objects are studied for their comprehensibility for pupils of a certain agegroup, or a type of school. What will the pupils be able to see themselves, which conclusions can they reach, which associations can they produce? Now the definitive choice is made.

Phase four: One tries to foresee and avoid effects not wished for.

Now the museumlesson can be planned, because the aims, the procedure, the logistics, (the whole class, or split up into small groups, or each pupil as an individual?), ways and means and the required form of information will have become clear by now.

Six existing museumlessons are inspected in accordance with these four phases. A thorough analysis of subject matter assures a better possibility for evaluation, reveals the general historical aims and objectives of the maker, and in this way the lesson can be used by a like-minded teacher.

Another conclusion is that all well-planned and well-prepared museumlessons have closed aims and objectives: clearly defined information is given and precise tasks are set. "Laissez-faire" is out of the question. The museumlesson is just one of a series of lessons taught in school, before and/or after the visit to the museum. Thus the museum plays an important part in the acquiring of historical knowledge.

5. Preparing the visit, ideas and pitfalls

To test this theory in practice we chose two objects: an Egyptian Book of the Dead in the National Museum of Antiquities in Leyden and a sword in the Central Museum in Utrecht.

The Book of the Dead can be used very well for a lesson. We found that a mass of work must be done by a non-professional, because the information required for the type of lesson we advocate is not always provided by the museum. Moreover one has to resign oneself to the fact that one single object, as an unwritten historical source, hardly ever shows all the characteristics of a culture or a period mentioned in general surveys or handbooks. So there is a strong need for publications to give exact background information and description of the function of exhibits, without the pretensions of a scientific catalogue.

The sword poses a quite different problem. The museum labels it as a "Vikingsword". Intending to use it to explain Viking invasions into Dutch territory, we found that the sword dates from after the Viking period, that it is probably a local product, and that it is suitable for cavalry action. So the object can only function to explain part of medieval armour.

Teaching history in a museum poses many problems, yet it can be done with careful planning in museums that have not been organised at all for these activities.

Some hints:

- prepare the lesson very carefully,
- make the museum lesson fit in a series of lessons taught at school,
- contact the museum beforehand, collaborate if possible,
- make your central aim to look at things and talk about what is seen,
- have small groups of pupils look at one object at a time,
- ask museums to make information accessible about the exhibits,
- emphasise the authenticity of the objects,
- make collections of museum lessons,
- ask help from parents, they may be experts, or they may enjoy accompanying the group,
- restrict your choice to some single objects to be studied and discussed thoroughly by the pupils.

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