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"A Library is not a Museum"?

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“A Library is not a Museum”?

After retiring from a decades-long tenure as Chief Curator at Large at the Israel Museum, Jerusalem, I was invited to serve as Consultant on Art and Exhibitions in relation to the new building planned for the National Library of Israel (NLI). During this process, I was reminded by the Chairman of the Board of Directors at the NLI that “a library is not a museum.” In this essay, based on a lecture I gave at the Third International Conference of Judaica Collection Curators at the NLI (July 2016), I will offer comments on this assertion.

Many libraries host exhibits on a regular basis, but few invest in establishing a permanent one, as this is an expensive and technically complicated endeavor. Nevertheless, during discussions about the new library building, NLI leadership fostered the idea of a permanent exhibition to feature its collections, based on the premise that such a welcoming gesture would enhance the visitor experience. The display would serve as an immediate encounter with the heart of the library, as an unmediated connection with the institution’s core collections. Representing the content of the library, the permanent exhibit would initiate the visitor into both the library’s vision and its values. As a first step, the NLI leadership summoned a team of scholars from various fields to discuss ideas and develop a concept for the envisioned permanent exhibition. Citing author Edmond Jabès who wrote, “the Jew’s real place is the book. In the book he questions himself, in the book he finds his freedom” (1976, vol. 1, 158), the team proposed the concept that text itself be the framework of the exhibition. Being the most significant, long-lasting cultural mark in the history of the Jewish people, the team felt that text would be more suitable than other forms of expression for forming the conceptual basis of the exhibit. Moreover, this would be especially appropriate because the NLI provides a safe home for Jewish treasured texts.

Based on the text theme, it was decided that the permanent exhibition would highlight cultural and spiritual commonalities among Israel’s predominant religious traditions (Judaism, Islam, and Christianity), which share a culture of the book. The exhibition would serve as a backdrop to the display of Jewish, Muslim, and Christian literary masterpieces, emphasizing the universal aspect of the collection and demonstrating how well it reflects the cultural crisscross so fundamental to this part of the world.

By focusing on the concept of the text, the permanent exhibition would eschew the aesthetic, visual, or sensory aspect of the displayed items and call attention to their content. This would set the NLI display apart from museum exhibits that emphasize material culture.

Indeed, in the last few years, libraries have found themselves in the business of exhibitions owing to the fact that they become involved, like museums, in what is referred to as a Third Place—a space where social interaction occurs outside of the home (First Place) or work (Second Place) environment (Oldenburg 1999).

At the same time, museums also resemble libraries, and the function of the two institutions can overlap, as, for example, historic manuscripts or maps are preserved and displayed in museums, while art objects or photographs are collected in libraries.

But is there an essential difference between museum collections and presentations and library exhibitions? Do libraries have unique needs, different from those of museums, vis-à-vis principles of display or the way interpretative material is cared for?

The museum is first and foremost an exhibition site, a “showing machine” in essence. We perceive it as such the moment we step over its threshold. We enter into museums expressly to view exhibitions; in contrast, library exhibitions are still a bit surprising, as we do not expect them. A museum without exhibitions is not a museum, but a library without exhibitions is even more of a library; it is a library in its utmost manifestation.

A major difference between museums and libraries has to do with the fact that although both institutions are collection-based, their collecting philosophies differ deeply.

A national library collects, by law, copies of all the books published in that nation. At a symbolic level, it means that the library is an encompassing, inclusive, limitless archive. A national library represents a total cultural memory, since any published material deserves to be collected and presented. The library is metaphorically an infinite cosmos of published mater. The museum, on the other hand, is all about exclusiveness. Its essence is defined by the selection of what deserves to be canonized versus what should be excluded from its venerated precincts: the museum’s appeal stems from its selectivity.

Therefore, the reader’s experience in the library is that of freedom. Library readers are free to select any book they choose from the library collection. In contrast to the library, each object in the museum is presented as a link in a curatorial chain. Curators are the ones who determine what visitors will see during their visit and in what way; it is historically an authoritarian experience. Current-day museums are attempting to challenge this authoritarian impression; still, the view of the museum as a canonizing institution prevails.

This perception underlines the library’s permanent exhibition dilemma: should such an exhibit focus on collection highlights—an idea that might contradict the anti-authoritarian nature of the library—or should it adhere to a more democratic, “library-centric” conception?

Another crucial difference between a museum exhibition and a library exhibition is the viewer’s gaze. In a museum, the object submits itself to the gaze, and visitors enter the museum with the goal of “hunting for something to see.” Therefore, the way that the museum object is experienced is passive, physical, and sensory.

While the museum object exists in the physical world, the text takes shape in the mind. In other words, a collection exhibit in a library is challenged to present objects that are not just the material containers of texts, or texts as documents, but the text itself as a monument.

The dilemma of authenticity is an added layer of complexity. People come to the museum because they look for authenticity and rareness, especially in our postmodern reality, ruled as it is by mass media, simulacra, and the idea of post-truth, where examples of authenticity are rare. Could it be that authenticity is not valued in a library as much as in a museum, where the authenticity of the object is assigned a sort of transcendental value? Is the authenticity of library collections reduced since the objects collected are printed books and digitized documents? After all, what is wrong with telling a good story through facsimiles and digital objects in the age of mechanical reproduction? I believe that the physicality of some library displays, and their quasi-fetishistic realness, are nevertheless fundamental. In the spirit of Erri De Luca's quotation (De Luca and Moore 2005), "Bread rises, copying the shape of the baker's palm. Bringing it to your mouth is like shaking his hand," I would argue that almost being able to touch Isaac Newton's handwritten notes in the NLI is equal to being able to sense his breath.

Taking into account all these contradictions and complexities, a library is first and foremost a reading space. Its medium is language—read or written. The difference between reading and viewing is crucial.

The typical exhibition device of the museum is the pedestal, well lit, viewer gazing admiringly from below. The classic exhibition device of the library is the showcase, in which the book or paper document is safely enclosed, visitor bending down intimately to read, rather than look at, the document.

The object in a museum exhibition gains its meaning mainly as it relates to other objects on display. This chain of meaning is created when visitors look at a group of objects and make connections with their eyes, body, and mind, making sense of the order of objects; this connecting of objects and phrasing a visual sequence is the essence of the curatorial craft.

In a library, on the other hand, visitors enter an exhibition and encounter a sea of glass, uncertain of what they will see; they can only guess that stunning rare fish are swimming in the depth of those small glass ponds. They see these "fish" one by one. The meaning of their gathering is not obvious since the reason for presenting this particular collection of objects is not obvious, the library's curatorial chain of association blurred.

Books, or a handwritten note picked from an author's personal archive, are weak curatorial objects as stand-alone items. They call for help, for enhancement. They require enlarged photos, explanatory texts, videos, works of art, and digital interactive devices. They need to be part of

an “enriched presentation” and become visually intriguing, provocative, and inspiring—though not necessarily beautiful.

Then, other times we encounter library exhibitions that are like mediocre museum exhibitions. How so? Because they tend to get away with only showing beautiful and tempting items—and that is not enough. Therefore, we must find a brilliant, fresh, and different way to present texts and showcase content.

Our job is to find a way of invigorating the library curatorial object and fill it with charisma. The NLI will not settle for just a highlights show, because it is too simple, risking being a potlatch, just another teleological story about power, hubris, and vanity.

Bearing in mind all these dilemmas, our NLI curatorial team began the process of shaping a concept for the permanent exhibition from the collections of our institution. A few fundamental principles guide our approach to the exhibition: it will emphasize the reader’s perspective and interaction with the selected items and their historical impact; it will be inspired by a storytelling ethos and new technologies; and it will present copies, even manipulated ones, of original text alongside meaningful originals.

The exhibition will be enriched with different kinds of media: digital presentations of items, passive projections (film), and interactive displays (both manual and digital). Such media intend to engage the visitors with both physical and digital artifacts: visitors will be able to save to their digital devices or accounts their library tour and the content associated with their visit, as well as give their own written or recorded reactions to the exhibition.

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