



## Dossier “In Relation to Art. Art from a Relational Perspective”

# Museum-making as Serious Leisure

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### Abstract

Amateur museums are independent museums made as leisure projects outside professional frameworks. This paper attempts to distinguish museum making as a leisure activity from professional museums and from collecting and to broadly identify some implications arising from their relations as questions of interest for future research. To do so, I rely on Stebbins theory of serious leisure (1992) and on some literature on institutionalism, collecting and museology, specially Martin's research on popular collecting and its relation to professional museums (1999).

### Keywords

serious leisure, museum-making, museology, collecting, institutionalism

## Facció de museus com a lleure seriós (serious leisure)

### Resum

*Els museus amateurs són museus independents que s'han creat com a activitat de lleure, al marge de qualsevol entorn professional. Aquest article intenta distingir entre els museus creats com a activitat de lleure, els museus professionals i el col·leccionisme, i alhora identificar àmpliament algunes de les implicacions que sorgeixen de les seves relacions com a qüestions d'interès per a futures investigacions. Per a fer-ho, m'he basat en la teoria de Stebbins sobre el lleure seriós (1992) i en certes obres sobre institucionalisme, col·leccionisme i museologia, especialment la recerca de Martin (1999) entorn del col·leccionisme popular i la seva relació amb els museus professionals.*

### Paraules clau

*lleure seriós, facció de museus, museologia, col·leccionisme, institucionalisme*



Amateur museums are independent museums made as leisure projects outside professional frameworks. Situating them in relation to professional museums and the hobby of collecting allows for pulling some lines of interest for future research. In the following lines, I will try to distinguish museum making as a leisure activity from professional museums and from collecting and to broadly identify some implications arising from their relations. To do so, I will rely on Stebbins theory of serious leisure (1992) and on some literature on institutionalism, collecting and museology, specially Martin's research on popular collecting and its relation to professional museums (1999).

## Amateur museum-making as *pensée sauvage*

Although amateur museums might seem to be mirroring and mimicking professional museums, they can be understood as having a parallel life that has been going on at least since the cabinets of curiosities of the Enlightenment. Wonder-rooms could not be said to be professional, even less institutional at a time when the formation of modern museography walked hand in hand with the birth of modern science and its professions (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992). Museographers then were, like scientists and scholars, all hobbyists: "the early history of many contemporary professions was made up exclusively of amateurs, the only people practicing the professions in their day. [...] clearly, however, they were experts, by the standards of the day, in their respective areas of leisure" (Stebbins, 1992, p. 42). Cabinetmakers displayed — although with restricted access — their collections due to a mix of motivations that had little to do with their professional life and more with the motivations that we still find for leisure activities. They did not make their living out of them: cabinets of curiosities were demonstrations of wealth and private ownership and their benefits were related to social status and to the construction of the self.

Such cabinets existed as a consequence of, and in tight relation with, private collecting. They were the medium by which private collections were displayed by the collectors themselves and usually at the private spaces of their homes for the enjoyment of friends and other selected visitors. Many authors identify this kind of exhibiting of private collections as a turning point that modified the manner in which material culture was thought and shown in the western world (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992) and as an important contribution to museographic institutionalisation.<sup>1</sup> Modern and contemporary museography are partially the heirs of that amateur semiprivate activity, but not its unique natural evolution. Private

collections and their semi-public exhibition have never disappeared and the cabinets of curiosities have assimilated and reflected social and epistemological changes together with other kind of museographic organisations and not merely after them. For instance, a very specific and paradigmatic discursive museographic tool like the guided tour — a currently highly institutionalized technique with a strong ceremonial character (Meyer and Rowan, 1977)— appeared in museums during the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Bennett, 1988), but long before that cabinet makers already introduced the objects of their displays to their visitors with a very similar kind of oral explanation. Nowadays and in a similar manner, contemporary private collectors also tend to orally explain their objects, the story of their inclusion in the collection, the relation between objects and so on to any visitor that would be interested to listen. In other words, collectors and cabinet makers have always physically, visually and orally mediated between their visitors and their collections although they also undergo isomorphic mimetic modelling after communicative and educative trends of the museums perceived as more legitimate (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). In this line, Jannelli (2012) also states that contemporary amateur museums are a form of museum-making that, like Lévi-Strauss *pensée sauvage*, is parallel and comparable to professional museum-making, with its own validity, processes, structure and motivations and not just its incompetent and childish brother.

## The serious amateur

Amateur museums have the burden of the negative connotations that are often related to amateurism such as lack of seriousness and quality. Curiously, such negative connotations do not affect private collecting in the same level, despite being an amateur pursuit too. Private collections are often highly valued and have fed some of the most well-known public and private museums, but amateur museum-making has been neglected or undervalued as unprofessional and illegitimate (Jannelli, 2012).

Stebbins' theory on serious leisure is useful in that matter. First, he restores the personal and social interest and seriousness of some leisure activities by differentiating between serious leisure and casual leisure, the first one being "the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity that is sufficiently substantial and interesting for the participant to find a career there in the acquisition and expression of its special skills and knowledge" (1992, p. 3). He adds:

Both hobbyists and amateurs are practitioners in definite and lasting pursuits. Hobbyists are serious about and com-

1. Institutionalization, in Berger and Luckmann's words, "occurs whenever there is a reciprocal typification of habitualized actions by types of actors. Put differently, any such typification is an institution. What must be stressed is the reciprocity of institutional typifications and the typicality of not only the actions but also the actors in institutions." (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p. 72)



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mitted to their endeavours, even though they feel neither a social necessity nor a personal obligation to engage in them (...) A hobby is a specialized pursuit beyond one's occupation, a pursuit that one finds particularly interesting and enjoyable because of its durable benefits. (Stebbins, 1992, p. 10)

Serious *leisurers*, to coin a word, have then careers in their endeavours, they acquire knowledge, training or skill with effort, they obtain durable benefits from the activity, like self-actualisation, self-enrichment, self-expression, recreation or renewal of self, feelings of accomplishment, enhancement of self-image, social interaction and belongingness, and lasting physical products of the activity — not obtainable from casual leisure — and they strongly identify with their pursuits (Stebbins, 1992). This definition of serious leisure fits both private collecting and amateur museum-making.

Second, Stebbins introduces a difference between hobbyists and amateurs, which is also an important difference between collectors and museum-makers: "if full-time participants in these activities fail to meet the sociological standards of a profession, or if there are no full-time participants, the part-time enthusiasts are more accurately described as hobbyists than as modern amateurs" (Stebbins, 1992, p. 42). A hobby is then an activity that does not resemble any ordinary work role such as fly-fishing, bird watching or collecting even if some professions perform similar activities as part of their tasks —some ornithologists might need to bird-watch but it is not their final purpose.

Since ownership or possession is required for collecting, a museum curator who uses other people's money to make acquisitions for the museum is not a collector unless he or she has strong proprietary feelings for the objects acquired." (R. W. Belk *et al.*, 1991)

If we understand that the professional collector does not exist, collecting is then properly understood as a hobby. But we do find different kinds of professional museum-makers in the shape of the curator, the museographer, the museum educator, the conservator or the security guard. In small local museums, professionals find themselves in the position to perform all these professional profiles simultaneously in a very similar way as amateur museum-makers often do. This emphasis on the existence or inexistence of a professional equivalent and the presence of public in both hobbies and amateur activities takes Stebbins to understand leisure activities as part of hobbyist-public (HP) systems or professional-amateur-public (PAP) systems respectively. Private collections are part of a hobbyist-public system, as they can actually have a specific public,

no matter how reduced or infrequent, that is often constituted by other hobbyists in the same field. Amateur museums instead, are part of a more complex professional-amateur-public system where amateurs are often the public of the professional activity, where professionals can sometimes be the public of amateurs and where both share, in different degrees, a more general public. It sometimes happens as well that professionals and amateurs relate not just as reciprocal public but as collaborators, like with the participation of amateur meteorologists in the data gathering networks of public meteorological services. This conception of PAP or HP systems can be useful as an approach for the analysis of the relations between professionals, amateurs and publics of amateur museums. Taken from a flexible perspective, such systems, apparently simplified in only three profiles, include a wide variety of actors that fulfil different roles and that could include close relatives and friends, the whole community as potential visitors, as potentially involved professionals or as active participants, like donors or prescribers, related public organisations, the material culture at play and the narrative conventions in use between all of them.

But one of the problems of the PAP system approached by Stebbins is the attempt to differentiate between professionalism and amateurism. Professional categories within museums have been specially developing since the decade of the 50s with specifications in the legislations and educative systems, increasing diversification and division of labour (Boylan, 2006). ICOM describes museum professionals as including:

all the personnel of museums, or institutions qualifying as museums in accordance with the definition in Article 3, Section 1 & 2<sup>2</sup>, and training and research institutions which are beneficial to museum activities, having received specialised training, or possessing an equivalent practical experience, in any field relevant to the management and activities of a museum, as well International Council of Museums Statutes (approved in 2007) as independent persons respecting the ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums and working for and with museums, but not involved in promoting or dealing with any commercial products and equipment required for museums and their services. (ICOM, 2007, article 3.3)

But despite having its own evolution and validity amateur museum-making and its professional parallel have not evolved isolated from each other. Like Stebbins' PAP system suggests, professionals and amateurs have a continuous and different kind of influence on each other, tightly sharing the same languages, purposes and epistemic backgrounds. Paul Martin's research on the relationship between private collectors and museums considered

2. ICOM's definition for museum being: "a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment" (ICOM, 2007, article 3.1).



the instruction of museography, conservation and curating to be offered by museums to the collective of collectors as a possibility (Martin, 1999). In this manner, the activity of the collector would be redirected and encouraged towards amateur museum-making, or in Martin's words, "museum practice would become democratized" (1999, p. 129). Although his proposal was directed to motivating and helping collectors to obtain the tools to maintain and arrange their collections, it would also turn into a motivation to create their own museums. Amateur museography, conservation or curating are often part of private collecting, as collectors also display, keep and manage their collections in different degrees of intensity, quality and even professionalisation.<sup>3</sup> But museum-makers also need to perform other professional profiles, that are so well delimited in large formal organisations (Meyer and Rowan, 1977), and all by themselves: display design, public relations, fundraising, ticket selling, visitor guiding and so on, including the professions already performed as collectors like acquiring, conserving, researching and cataloguing.

## Mimicry, naturalisation, legitimacy and empowerment

Highly institutionalised professional museums also encourage collecting and museum-making in a different manner. They play an important role in legitimising<sup>4</sup> and naturalising<sup>5</sup> the collection by offering normalised or proper manners of collecting and "encouraging the public literally to become collectors of things" (Macdonald, 2006, p. 86). In this institutionalising process, collecting becomes legitimised and socially accepted as a practice. Furthermore, collectors sometimes try to donate their private collections to public museums, in an attempt to guarantee their preservation after their death but also trying to gain the museum's legitimization and validation on the donated collection (Russell W. Belk *et al.*, 1988). Again in this sense, museums encourage museum-making too: in the same manner that they indirectly or passively encourage children to play museum-making and schools to do exhibitions in the corridors with the work of their students, they encourage a more serious—in Stebbins' sense—kind of amateur museum making. Collections reach their climax while exhibited, while experienced by someone, be it its owner, the

owner's family and friends or any interested stranger. For Pearce, systematic collectors—as different from fetish or souvenir based collectors—are the ones that "draw a viewer into their frame, they pre-suppose a two-way relationship between the collection, which has something public (not private) to say and the audience, who may have something to learn, or something to disagree with" (Pearce, 2003, p. 202). If we follow Pearce then virtually all amateur museums should be based on systematic collections, and not on fetishistic or souvenir collections that are far more personal and for private use and enjoyment. A difference between systematic, fetishistic or souvenir collections is provably rooted in their complex array of relationships between the collector, the collected objects, their space and display technologies, the market intermediaries and maybe close family (fetishistic), adding friends and visitors (souvenir) and other specialised collectors, interested external visitors, museums, field experts and other community organisations and entities (systematic). Systematic collections then need to be shared (shown) in order to unfold all these connections. But when exhibited as museums or in the shape of museums, such crystallisation of the collection not only allows further relational possibilities, it also provides an aura of legitimisation, of validation and truthfulness. Martin considers independent museums—not specifically amateur—as being "very often personal collections which have crossed the traditionally held divide between profane space (the private collection) and the sacred space (the museum). Once recognized as museums, their collections become validated by that recognition" (1999, p. 102). Can therefore, amateur museum-making be a kind of institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) as a means for validating one's own collection through the modelling after museum's appearance, languages and processes?

Private hobbyist collections are sometimes temporarily shown within museums without being constituted as museums themselves. Such is the case of People's Shows, popular in Britain and "exhibited as celebratory spectacles" (Martin, 1999, p. 108). These shows were open to any collector that wanted to participate in it, constructing collective exhibitions of popular private collections. Collectors could curate their own collections with the museum's supervision and independently from the others'. As Martin describes:

in People's Shows, the collections have been created and imbued with the collector's own meaning and values. In

3. Both Stebbins, in relation to serious leisure, and Martin, on collecting, question the professional limitations and the hierarchies of knowledge between professionals and amateurs or hobbyists.
4. The proces of legitimation is both cognitive and normative and it "'explains' the institutional order by ascribing cognitive validity to its objectivated meanings" (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p. 111). In relation to organizations like museums, legitimacy is understood as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman, 1995, p. 574).
5. Naturalisation happens when "a discourse type so dominates an institution that dominated types are more or less entirely suppressed or contained, then it will cease to be seen as arbitrary (in the sense of being one among several possible ways of 'seeing' things) and will come to be seen as *natural*, and legitimate because it is simply *the way of conducting oneself*" (Fairclough, 1989, p. 91).



Debordian terms, they subvert the original intention of the object collected [...]. This can be read as a very English way of mocking convention, through eccentricity. It is, though, perhaps more about material control. Collecting then, can be read as resistance to the spectacle by deliberately imparting meanings other than the intended ones into objects. This is done in an attempt to gain or regain a sense of proportion in a society increasingly at odds with itself, and to reassure ourselves that we still have our basic understanding of what things are. In reconfiguring the meaning of an object, through its collection, we demonstrate that understanding, through our confidence to change the objects' meaning for ourselves whilst still retaining our grounding in its material reality. (Martin, 1999, p. 108)

Martin is suggesting processes of empowerment<sup>6</sup> through collecting and through curating and exhibiting these collections, which is also detected by other authors in relation to collecting as consumption (Belk *et al.*, 1991) and in relation to leisure (Shaw, 2006). Shaw highlights the tensions of power and social control behind leisure which makes it also a chance for empowerment. Jannelli also finds processes of empowerment in her case studies of collective amateur museums (2012) in which museum makers use their collections and the museographic language to build and transfer specific museographic constructions about their pasts, their jobs or their land. The structural power tensions that crystallise in the exhibitionary complex (Bennett, 1988) are also the reasons that can turn them, through their intentional use, on a tool for empowerment (Lord, 2006). But although there are chances for empowerment in collecting and in museum making, People's Shows should be questioned specially because the structures of power that allow them to propose a controlled and up-to-down visibility and legitimisation. The meanings of the exhibited collections change the moment that a legitimate professional curator selects and displays them in a legitimate museum. A similar question should be asked about the tension between empowerment through the use of legitimised and legitimising museography and the naturalisation of and subordination to its power structures in amateur museum-making: the sought "legitimacy acts like a manipulable resource" and "like a taken-for-granted belief system" simultaneously (Suchman, 1995). Despite that, there are two interesting motivations rising from Martin's analysis of People's Shows to be taken into account when trying to understand amateur museums: first, in relation to collecting, the opportunity to regain a sense of proportion by reconfiguring the meaning of objects. And second, in relation to curating and

museum-making, the appropriation of legitimating power that arises from the museographic institution and its forms.

## Blurred boundaries

The limitation between the sacred space of the museum and the profane space of the private world that has already been introduced through Martin's statement a few paragraphs above is often used to explain the ritualised meaning of museums and their symbolic space. The boundaries between profane and sacred that seem so clear in abstract terms totally blur in amateur museums—which are indeed independent museums—and in private collections<sup>7</sup> showing how undistinguishable they might be from professional museums.

Through his extensive data, Martin draws a list of binary parallels between private collecting that he defines as belonging to the profane and to leisure, and museums belonging to the sacred and to work. Although, in contradiction to Martin's intention, the list helps to see how the opposition between private collecting and museums as an opposition between profane and sacred and between leisure and work collapses when applied to real cases and specially if we take into account amateur museums and their undefined boundaries between work and leisure:

Private collecting (*profane/leisure*) / Museums (*sacred / work*)  
 Collecting / Acquisition  
 Collector / Curator  
 Fetishist / Specialist  
 Hobby space / Museum  
 Private / Public  
 Practical display / Display policy  
 Kept in a safe place / Collection management  
 Check for condition / Micro environment  
 Treat carefully / Conservation  
 Make list / Accession and catalogue  
 Interest in history and context of objects collected / Research  
 Arrangement of collection / Taxonomy  
 Too much to display at once / Reserve collections  
 Personalia = *self-gratification* / Provenance = *Public edification*  
 Collecting = *hobby* / Curating = *work*  
 (Martin, 1999, p. 128, my emphasis)

To start with the differentiation between profane and sacred, we need to remember that collectors also develop ritualised processes similar to museums' such as symbolically placing the

6. Empowerment is understood as a process by which persons or groups that are "excluded from particular types of discourse or particular subject positions within types of discourse" use and infringe conventions "without radically changing them" (Fairclough, 1989, p. 244).

7. The gradation between a private collection and an amateur museum is subtle and full of middle terms to such an extent that some authors take the self-conception of one's exhibited collection being a museum as determinant for a museum to be considered as such (Taimre, 2013).



objects, devoting specific rooms to them, controlling the access and forbidding their touch not only for conservative reasons, taking reverent care or personifying the objects that sometimes reach the emotional importance and presence of a family member (Belk *et al.*, 1991). The profane and the sacred merge simultaneously with the merging of the public and the private through the conversion of the home into a museum-like space—which already happens with the mere domestic display of a collection—and leisure can completely equal work in seriousness, quality and effort, although not in economic rewards (Stebbins, 1992). Some of Martin's opposites are arising from professionalisation issues (taxonomy, conservation, research or accession and catalogue) that are understatements in relation to the validity of amateur's work and that seem to be in contradiction with Martin's own opinions, for example, on the much more specialised knowledge of collectors on the issues that they are interested in and that museum professionals cannot match. Also, considering amateur museums, the difference between collector and curator disappears as the same person fulfils both profiles and, as we have already seen, collecting is indeed a hobby, but curating can be a leisure activity too. But even considering collecting alone as a hobby, some issues in the list seem problematic, like the consideration of the collector as fetishist—we have already considered that fetishist collectors are only one kind among others (Pearce, 2003). Furthermore, the opposition between self-gratification and public edification becomes totally invalid in amateur museums where both objectives coexist. Again, what seems most outstanding from that list is the vagueness of the limits between private collecting, amateur museum-making and professional museographic organisations.

## Museum-making as a form of art as play

Finally, amateur museum-making as well as collecting are also play, an artistic playful activity. A collection—and an amateur museum too—is

conceived as display, it requires organized space in which to demonstrate its serial relationships. If museum galleries and glass showcases had not existed, it would have been necessary to invent them; but, of course, museums as the public institutions which we know, and serial collecting, more or less grew up together, uniting to demonstrate the laying out of material knowledge. (Pearce, 2003, p. 202)

This conception as display and the arrangement to demonstrate serial relationships are the construction of narratives. Understanding museography as a linguistic system (Pearce, 1995) and a specific museographic proposal as a narrative (Ball, 1994), museum-making—and collecting—should not differ much from writing poetry, painting landscapes or improvising drone music.

Like these other artistic activities and language itself museum-making is a form of communication. The collector—and of course the museum maker—is “a narrative agent, the motivation itself is subjected to the development of a plot” (Ball, 1994, p. 112). This narrativity starts at the process of selecting the sacred objects from the rest (Danet and Katriel, 1994) and continues with their arrangement and reframing:

The collection is a form of art as play, a form involving the reframing of objects within a world of attention and manipulation of context. Like other forms of art, its function is not the restoration of context of origin, but rather the creation of a new context, a context standing in a metaphorical, rather than a contiguous, relation to the world of everyday life. Yet unlike many forms of art, the collection is not representational. (Stewart, 1984, p. 151)

It is not representational because it constructs a closed narrative entity that for Stewart refers mainly to the subjectivity of the narrator as the ultimate referent. In such narration “the self generates a fantasy in which it becomes producer of those objects, a producer by arrangement and manipulation” (Stewart, 1984, p. 158). But she only refers to collecting, which for her is always midway between the private and the public, between hiding and displaying. Such narratives of the collection played and performed from the private become public when self-established as museums. If museum-making and collecting were two separate activities, the narrative of museography would overlap the narrative of the collection creating a meta-narrative. But museography and collecting connect in many aspects although they do not totally coincide. Although it is mainly through museographic conventions that collections narrate, and museographic narrations do not need a collection as a basis, none of them can be exhaustively explained nor performed without at least considering the other. Like composing and replaying a song, the play of collecting and exhibiting is “replayed at will, in reverse order if need be, (representing) the perpetual fresh beginning of a controlled cycle, thanks to which, starting out from any term he chooses and confident of returning to it, man can indulge in the great game of birth and death.” (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 16)

## Conclusions

Amateur museums awaken specific questions when seen in relation to leisure, to collecting and to professional museums. Far from being a simple imitation of their more legitimated versions, they have specific roles and motivations that still need to be better researched. When seen as serious leisure, not only amateurism is no longer a negative feature, but part of its complexity unfolds. Amateur museums can then be theoretically situated within their



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professional-amateur-public systems, which can serve as a starting point to analyse some of their relations with museographic formal organisations and their professionals and publics, their own specific publics, their communities and with other professionals, formal organisations and institutionalised fields of action of their specialisation. The difficult differentiation between professionals and amateurs, specially taking into account the quality, means and effort invested in some amateur museums, also gives us a glimpse of the complexity of such relations.

Despite the proposal of looking at amateur museums as entities with their own history, processes and motivations, their strong links with museographic formal organisations are relevant in many matters and aspects. In this paper, I have highlighted their role in the legitimisation of collecting and the naturalisation of the museographic discourse, as well as their capacity to encourage museum making. The same structures that legitimate and that can be naturalised and uncritically reproduced by museum makers are also a chance for empowerment by allowing to create one's own discourse through material culture and to take advantage of the museographic narratives. Again, this is also another intricate issue for study, as real cases might show that both naturalisation and empowerment can coexist in apparent contradiction.

The difficulty of setting defined boundaries between professional and amateur museums is similar to the impossibility of differentiating between certain private collections and amateur museums. Some collectors name their private personal displays "museums", others are opened to the public through previous appointment like many amateur museums but are named just "private collections", and many collections and amateur museums equally fit ICOM's definitions for museum. If, continuing with Stebbins PAP system, we look at their publics, amateur museums indeed have them as a necessary condition, as a motivation, as it is through their visit that their commitment to the community is fulfilled. But collections also have publics as belonging to HP systems, including family, friends, other collectors and genuinely interested strangers.

And finally, the point of view of leisure emphasises the playful facet of collecting and museum-making, which seems to disappear in other kinds of organisation veiled behind professionalism. Amateur museum-making as a leisure activity can be more easily linked to enjoyment and to artistic intentionality and helps seeing museography and collecting not only as a linguistic system subjected to structures of power, but also as a flexible creative language that can satisfy personal and collective needs of creative communication. Understanding, using and spreading museographic conventions as a playful creative language might be a manner to disarm it from its gravity and encourage its experimental uses.

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