

What Makes an Object ‘Real’?

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In March 2024 I met Simona Casonato, Media, ICT & Digital Culture Collection Curator from the Museo Nazionale Scienza e Tecnologia di Milano. She was in Oxford researching the history of our Marconi collection after discovering a duplication between our collections. Simona had spotted that we have identical, or near identical, items which have the same round numbered discs. Simona had travelled to Oxford to see if she could track down any details about the source of these items, thinking that perhaps they were produced by the Marconi company to be used at trade fairs and had been sent around the world (there are reports that a duplicate collection may exist in the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry). One morning we sat at a coffee table in the Weston Library on Broad Street. It is one of the Bodleian libraries, at Oxford University, where the Marconi Archives are preserved: these were collected at the closing of the Marconi factory in Chelmsford, which was the company’s main production site. Simona was there to consult the documents. The History of Science Museum, where I manage the object collections, is just across the road. We discussed the nature of these collections and the consideration that, in the past, the objects selected to preserve Marconi’s legacy were not ‘real’ objects having been produced for show or demonstration.

This led me to wonder what makes an object ‘real’?

The first sentence of the ICOM definition of a museum states that: “A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves,

interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage".¹ There is nothing within this on what qualifies an object to be museum worthy. When looking up the definition in the Oxford English Dictionary there are several options which have been used in the past with the definition dating from the seventeenth century being "A building or institution in which objects of historical, scientific, artistic, or cultural interest are preserved and exhibited",² although I suspect

the definition from the eighteenth century, in extended and derogatory use, of "any large or motley collection of things, esp. outmoded or useless ones; the repository of such a collection"³ sometimes feels more accurate to many museum collection's staff.

But what makes an object qualify as a 'real' museum object? In this paper I will pose questions to explore the various factors that could be used to make this judgement.

Does Used Equal Real?

A key question with these items is: are replicas or models real objects? Is an item made purely to showcase a concept of equal value to one made to be used? Does an object have to be used to be a valid acquisition for a museum? With the increased focus in museums on contemporary collecting it is not uncommon for museums to buy items directly from the supplier or a shop to ensure that a representative is preserved in their collection. Are these items less valid for still being in their original, unopened packaging?

Prototype models are often considered highly desirable items in museums as they show a development of concept, but are generally not made to be used and are often not fully functional as they have been created to show just one aspect of a design. Some of our Marconi items although not used in real world situations may still have been demonstrated at fairs and so may qualify as used. By having this limited use they may be in better condition than those that were extensively used before being donated to a museum.

Does Old Equal Real?

If these Marconi items were donated at the time in which they were created, does the fact that they were new technology make them less appropriate and real as a museum collection item? Does an object have to be over a certain age to be real? The idea of active contemporary collecting of museum objects is a relatively new concept that has come about due to the increased impermanence of items. No longer do our possessions last

for decades, are repeatedly repaired and passed down through the generations. If a museum wishes to represent society and its possessions today then it needs to collect them today. A problem contemporary collectors have, much like art curators, is how do you know what items in use today will prove to be meaningful to future museum visitors? These items by being show pieces created by the Marconi Company and used at fairs to

¹ ICOM 2022 definition, March 2024, <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition>.

² Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "museum (n.), sense 2.a", March 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1145175542>.

³ Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "museum (n.), sense 2.b", March 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1034106098>.

showcase the developments in the technology that they were at the forefront of creating are excellent examples of what they thought were their significant developments of the time, and over time have proven to be key

items to explain the history of the development of this technology. By standing the test of time has this made these objects more real than when they were collected as new technology?

Does Original Equal Real?

Conversely is an item that has replacement parts real? Working items often have consumable parts which have been replaced over time. These items, having been used for demonstration only, will have all original parts. Are they therefore more real than an item that has had many parts

replaced? When a museum decides to continue working an item, be that a steam engine in a mill or a car in a transport museum, the decision is made that parts will have to be replaced in order to keep it working. Does this lessen the realness and therefore the significance of that item?

Does Context Equal Real?

When considering items for acquisition, the provenance of that item, who used it, when and where are key questions that I ask of any donor. For me, the story that goes with an item can be more important than the item itself. If an item, such as these, has a clear and complete provenance does that make it more real than one that is simply an anonymous example of a type of object? But, is an object that has no story less real than one that does if it is still has the capacity to remind visitors of their own stories?

I have known industrial and transport museums where objects are still considered tools by some and not really museum items. At a mining museum where ex-miners were volunteers, they saw no difference between the spade they used when a miner, and now an accessioned museum item, and a tool that could be used if they needed to dig a hole. Although a used item, that has a known provenance, due to its age and purpose in the eyes of some this is not considered a real object.

Does Tangible Equal Real?

Increasingly we are looking at the intangible⁴ and how we collect it. If something has no physical presence, instead it

is an oral history recording or website etc. does this make it less valid, less real, as a museum collection item? Many of

⁴ The 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage defines (Art. 2) the intangible heritage as "the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity". <https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention>.

the problems associated with collecting and preserving this material is the same as it is for a physical item – sourcing it, gaining permission to collect it, how and whether to display

it and how to ensure its future preservation. The Marconi collection items are all physical objects does that therefore make them more real than an intangible item in a collection?

Does Uniqueness Equal Real?

Does an item need to be unique to be of value and so collected by a museum? There are multiple sets of these Marconi objects. Are they therefore individually of less value? If something were to happen to our collection would it matter as there is another set in Milan and possibly Chicago, and who knows where else? In the last century, an increasing number of items have been mass-produced and transported around the world to be

sold. Does this mean all museums should have a representative example of an item? Or can one or two museums collect an example and then lend it to other museums should they need one? Does it matter if the item collected or displayed was actually used in the collecting area of the museum? Or does the fact that one of this type is likely to have been used sufficient? Which object is more real and relevant to a museum collection?

Does Access Equal Real?

Living history museums often have levels to their collections, where they may have one example that has the best provenance and is in the best condition that is kept within the core collection, additional copies are then kept and used on open display and regularly handled, with their degradation

and potential destruction recognised and accepted. The core collection items are accessed less frequently to ensure their preservation. But which object is more real? The one that is used, seen by the public and engaged with? Or the one that stays in the store, safely in a box and is rarely, if ever, seen?

Does Functional Equal Real?

If an item is designed to be used and instead is kept static in a museum, does this make it less real? It is often easier to understand an item when you can see it functioning as it should. However, if an item is no longer in working condition, or the decision is made to maintain it in a static condition, does that make it less valid as an object? Simona told me that one of the Marconi objects in the Milanese collection was opened up to check its interior: there was a key element missing, with no sign that it had ever been present. This means that this example

was never built to be functional, merely to show what the outside looked like. Does that make it less or more legitimate as a museum object than something that once functioned and now doesn't? Or something that still functions?

This purpose of this paper is not to determine what should and should not be accepted into museum collections. Or to justify the continued retention, or recommend the disposal, of the Marconi material in either the History of Science Museum in Oxford or the Museo Nazionale Scienza e Tecnologia di Milano. Instead the purpose was to

question the concept of a 'real' museum object. To look at what this statement means and if it is possible to define it. From looking at the various ways 'real' can be defined it is clear that this is not a concept with validity to define what museums should or should not preserve. Any object that is collected by a museum must be able to justify why it is there, or all museums would soon run out of space to store

their collections, but an objects validity within a museum should not be questioned and rejected on the basis that it is not a real object. In fact, in favour of history of science and of our society, should we not instead be thanking the Marconi company for creating 'museum ready' items for our collections, and wishing that all technology companies could be as forward thinking?