

The Showcase of the Past

History of Man, History of Civilisation and Natural History in Museums 19th-20th Centuries

Museums do not merely reflect scientific knowledge towards the public. Quite on the opposite, they have always played an active part in the construction of knowledge. It is on this basis that the research project *The Showcase of the Past* has been thought of. Since the foundation of museums in the early 19th century, museography's practical requirements have indeed brought about the implementation of processes and classification modes which appeared to be decisive in the making of scientific research methods.

Although focused on the history of archaeology, the research project broadens its scope to the fields of natural science (palaeontology) as well as social and cultural anthropology (folklore). It studies the practical diversity of the « handling » of scientific materials in order to identify the relations between the collection practices and the construction of knowledge on the one hand, between the collection practices and the display of the past on the other.

To this effect the research fellows will at first concentrate on the case study of the museums and collections of the town and canton of Neuchâtel (Museum d'histoire naturelle, Laténium-Musee cantonal d'archeologie, Musee d'ethnographie et Musee d'art et d'histoire). With their rich and, well-documented collections, these museums have had a clearly articulated historical development, at the intersection of distinct scientific traditions. Subsequently, the neuchâtelese museums will be put in perspective through the study of a couple of other case studies which will be led in various museums relevant for our project (France, Germany, Italy, USA).

Lessons for the epistemology of archaeology

By its transversality and its focus on institutions, practices and stakes, the project lies within the scope of a social and cultural history of science. In this respect, the specificities of archaeology make it an exemplary subject : because of its intimate relation to the artefacts, archaeology largely oversteps its actual applications in this field of knowledge. The historical analysis of the forming of the archaeological methods should indeed feed the reflection on the heuristic potential of archaeology, at the crossroads of natural science and science of man.

Lessons for museological reflection

The part played by the collection practices in the construction of knowledge is a very topical cultural heritage and museological stake. Faced with the costly requirements of management wants, museums are more and more requested to reassess the usefulness of the preservation of artefacts which seem to answer the needs neither of present science nor of cultural mediation. A better historical knowledge of the forming of the collections as well as their contribution to the epistemological foundation of the modern disciplines may help to reassert the value of the museums' ancient collections while demonstrating the significance of this museum heritage.

Funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNF) for four years (2006-2010), the project is led within the Department of History of the University of Neuchâtel (www.unine.ch/histoire). Supervised by [Marc-Antoine Kaeser](#) (SNF professorship), the project associates [Serge Reubi](#) (post-doc in history of anthropology) and [Géraldine Delley](#) (PhD student in prehistoric archaeology).