

RIFLESSI  
COLLANA DI SEMIOTICA DELL'ARTE

RIFLESSI IN ELICONA  
SEZIONE DI MUSEOLOGIA

20

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La collana di studi "Riflessi" raccoglie pubblicazioni di semiotica dell'arte, critica e letteratura artistica proposte da ricercatori di università italiane e straniere. Inquadra gli aspetti del visibile da un punto di vista teorico e metodologico. Fonda la sua specificità sull'efficacia della descrizione, che consente l'andirivieni tra pratica e teoria e perciò l'introduzione di concetti e strumenti utili all'analisi delle immagini. Guarda ai processi di enunciazione delle culture in un'ottica differenziale, come risorsa per comprendere, attraverso le immagini, i modi di ibridazione e le strategie del reciproco posizionamento politico.

RIFLESSI in ELICONA

La sezione Elicona raccoglie saggi teorici e di analisi sulle strategie di produzione e fruizione proprie della museologia. Un fronte aperto tanto allo studio delle funzioni conservative e didattiche che l'istituzione museo esprime, quanto alla conoscenza della sua natura spaziale. Modello ideale di "girotondo" della arti, il museo è un'architettura in continua evoluzione, che dà corso ai ripensamenti del collezionare ed esporre oggetti significanti.



ELENA MONTANARI

# MUSEOGRAPHIC HERITAGE

## CONSERVING AND ENHANCING THE EXHIBITION DESIGN CULTURE

*Preface by*

ANA TOSTÕES





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## PREFACE

### TOWARDS AN EXHIBITION DESIGN CULTURE PRESERVATION

The study carried by Elena Montanari on the museographic heritage is an innovative approach to knowledge archive, its dissemination among the experts' community and its transfer through the great public. As an intellectual history of the built heritage preservation discipline, it offers a rich journey on conservation in time and space focused on the exhibition design culture.

The book enables the acknowledgment of the importance of the display while recognizing its memory, and the significance of understanding the past, in order to contribute for the historical preservation theory to the construction of the future. The title is clear firstly daring to consider the museographic work as heritage. And therefore defining the exhibition culture as an architectural design discipline considering its value and the need of its conservation. In other words, the author approaches the «ephemeral» action of display, daring to study the exhibition design as a discipline that stands for cultural preservation.

How can we talk about museographic heritage considering not only the contents, the exhibit objects, but as well the art of display, the contentor narrative of the contents as another layer of heritage value?

Through a fantastic *voyage* over the world of beauty, this study enlightens the museums revolution on transforming the community bringing to discussion new ideas, issues and challenges. This publication is the first synthesis offering an overview updated in the field.

Bringing to light case studies from Italy, United Kingdom, Brazil and United States, the question of design exhibition is situated in a field of knowledge and science summoning diverse knowledge. Relating the practice of architecture to the exhibition design field, the author addresses, in a crescendo, matters like the interplay between museology and museography, the relation between exhibition design and history, the museographic heritage as an emerging notion, and its conservation as a new interdisciplinary challenge. For that, she goes further on identifying the six case studies, selected within a range of inspiring arguments, that contribute to «enhancing Museographic Heritage», which is the main objective of this research.

By analyzing architectural culture in its relation with the art of display, this book opens as well new visions for contemporary architectural practice and theory. Retaining, renovating, restoring, adapting, forwarding, re-enacting, are some of the consistent actions addressing the multifaceted ways in which the past can be reevaluated and enhanced in the present contexts. The curator is envisioned as the one who thinks how to make the narration apt to serve the society. The museum and the exhibition are presented as a source of knowledge, implying a powerful transfer action towards the public, as well as strategic tools participating in the education of people, considering how the enjoyment matters today.

In fact, museography deals with the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity, and on how this shapes the collective memory. Being one of the most creative cultural programs for architects, museums have given birth to the inspiring answers from such master as Carlo Scarpa, Franco Albini, Lina Bo Bardi, Louis Kahn, and many others.

Following the most inspiring experiences, *Museographic Heritage. Conserving and Enhancing the Exhibition Design Culture* reveals the museum as a particularly complex body, that is designed to operate not only as a «repository, treasury or stronghold of objects or heritage, but rather as a laboratory of history and of knowledge» — or, in other words, envisioning the museum and the exhibition as the «most important communication system of our time». This assumes particular relevance nowadays, as we are going through a tremendous revolution conducted by digital culture, another field emerging in parallel. The

author stands for the possibility of museums to remain relevant for the contemporary society as long as they serve it under a large democratic scope, which relies on the capability to present collections and narrations through display means and communication strategies that can be accessible, clear and resonant to the public.

The importance of the *saper mostrare* is mandatory for the aesthetic experience as opposed to mass culture, the speed of the present time and the evolution of audiences.

In this context, the museum is not only a space for memory, culture and education: it has become a place of leisure, distraction and consumption, and this new role is forcing an update. That is why it is so necessary to think in terms of heritage, to ensure careful maintenance and, when necessary, careful and informed rehabilitation.

The magnificent renovation of the *Neue Nationalgalerie* in Berlin conducted by David Chipperfield Architects Berlin between 2016 and 2021 is an example of this approach. The renovation of the building (designed by Mies van der Rohe between 1965 and 1968) aimed to be an invisible imprint and at the same time to undertake a technical and functional update of a worldly renowned masterpiece. Based on the consideration of the actions that Mies would have developed if he was still alive and designing, the project was managed to faithfully conduct the *Neue Nationalgalerie* into the present times, transforming it in a truly contemporary museum for art, while enhancing the mesian spatial performance. The same approach can be detected in the symbiotic relation between the project and the conservation plan of Louis I. Kahn's Yale Center for British Art, that should be taken as a paradigm of how to successfully delay the action of time in a museum building's lifespan, and to guarantee for the continuity of heritage in time. The almost natural synchronization of Peter Inskip and Stephen Gee's conservation plan, which established the guidelines to approach the building, with Knight Architecture's detailed conservation project is the secret for the completion and transcendence safekeeping of Khan's presence in this museum.

In the form of a critical anthology, *Museographic Heritage. Conserving and Enhancing the Exhibition Design Culture* brings together the debate generated around the art of display and its legacy. It cleverly proposes

an analysis of the power of museums and the duty of historiography, revealing itself to be an invaluable document for students and scholars, historians and critics, or simple lovers of architecture and museums.

Being these institutions going through a major renovation phase, the book presents the state of the art and proposes new perspectives on some of the questions leading this path, with detailed information, comprehensive documentation, and a critical research around selected case studies, that exemplify possible scenarios and problematize the interdisciplinary strategies and tools that need to be developed for the enhancement of the history of museums and exhibition design. Setting the framework for the emerging notion of museographic heritage, Elena Montanari's book is the beautiful praise for the museums and the art of display inspiring the future.

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## CHAPTER I

### MUSEOGRAPHY AS AN IN-PROGRESS DISCIPLINE

The last twenty years have been widely described as an outstanding evolution phase for exhibition cultures and museums, which have variously reacted to massive changes in social structures, economic conditions, circulation dynamics and communication possibilities, and thus started to question previous approaches, strategies and tools, and to experiment with innovative solutions<sup>1</sup>. This ongoing renovation phase has triggered a critical rethinking of the concepts and instruments that lie at the core of the theoretical and practical aspects of the museum project. Such self-reflexive endeavor led to an overall revision of the identity of the institution — to the extent that a new definition has been designed<sup>2</sup> — and eventually it triggered new perspectives concerning its roles and responsibilities towards societies, cultures and heritages, it enhanced the development of unprecedented interpretations and uses of its history, and it fostered the upgrade of the understanding and operation of the various disciplines that revolve around its project.

#### **Assessing, Sharpening and Consolidating the Definition of a Complex Discipline**

The museum is a particularly complex body, that is designed to operate not only as a repository, a treasury or a stronghold of heritage, but

rather as a laboratory of history<sup>3</sup> and of knowledge<sup>4</sup>, and one of the most important communication systems<sup>5</sup> of our time. Accordingly, it is the result of a multi-layered project intertwining several matters, instruments, competences and disciplines.

While the theories and practices pertaining to the definition of the museums' contents, representation modalities and scientific aims are comprehensively studied and debated, the development of those strategies and tools that enable their implementation remains a less investigated subject.

Display, fruition and communication tasks are associated to a discipline generally referred to as exhibition design, which cohere all the practices, know-how and techniques required for defining, arranging, installing and fitting out spaces and settings.

As highlighted by its etymological origin, the term «exhibit» — which derives from the Latin word *exhibere*, combining the prefix *ex-*, i.e. out, and the verb *habere*, i.e. to hold — refers to the act of “proffering”, in other words bringing to the attention, conveying and publicly displaying a relevant content. Thereafter, exhibition design is the discipline that handles the implementation of the spaces and media that enable these tasks.

This activity is focused on the definition of all the instruments and forms used in a display to show and communicate the museum's collections and narrations, such as cased objects, dioramas, display panels, screens, interactive computer devices and so forth. Beside the arrangement of these media, the discipline's objectives also include situating the contents in space, i.e. positioning, ordering and juxtaposing them in a sequence that allows each element to be understood in relation to the others and in dialogue with the conditions of the place, with the aim to show and explain them in a meaningful and accessible way to the widest audience. The accomplishment of these tasks also refers to the definition of all the aspects that participate in the functioning of an exhibition space (which include light and other environmental control systems, procedures referred to the mounting and maintaining of the displays, etc.). In fact, this discipline does not only focus on those parts of the museum project pertaining to mere display devices or to the galleries: rather, it also concerns the arrangement of

the spaces and instruments accommodating the visitors' experience, the contents' reception, the setting of scientific programmes, and the management of the collection.

Due to the variety and complexity of its tasks, exhibition design has a highly interdisciplinary nature. It entails the engagement and cooperation of several disciplines, ranging from architecture, interior design, technology, light design, graphic design, audio-visual engineering, digital media, communication strategies and content development, and it is increasingly engaged with video making, advertising and innovative forms of communication media and technologies. Its operation coalesces different knowledges and practices, hence making the boundaries of this field not clearly defined.

Its connotation is also blurred by the differences that may emerge in various geographic and cultural contexts; these may reveal themselves in regard to the approaches, the conceptual frameworks and even the terminology associated to it.

While the use of the term exhibition design is consolidated in Anglo-Saxon countries, the Romance-speaking areas employ other words, not only as a consequence of contextual linguistic differences but also as a manifestation of a diverse development of the notions and implications referred to the discipline. For example, starting from the 1990s, following the development of new directions in exhibition-making that has evolved beyond the presentation of artefacts by incorporating more complex experiences and integrating stances from environmental, performative and digital researches, some areas (and especially France) started to engage the term "expography"<sup>6</sup>, which is rooted in a vision of exhibition design tending towards scenography (i.e. the discipline instrumentalizing the tools of theatre, cinema and fine arts to shape evocative spatial settings)<sup>7</sup>. This word is used for museums as well as for non-museal spaces, and is generally considered to have a quite indistinct nature.

The most diffused, alternative expression still remains museography. This is a compound noun, with a highly evocative etymology. The word derives from the combination of the Latin term *musæum* — i.e. a sematic articulation of the Greek form *mousêion*<sup>8</sup>, derivation of *môusa* (i.e. muse, as in the Classical world it was referred to the «seat





The frontispiece of Caspar Friedrich Nieckel's *Museographia oder Anleitung zum rechten Begriff und nützlicher Anlegung der Museorum* (Leipzig, 1727), that includes the drawing of a cabinet. The walls are set up with densely arranged cases that house books, on the left, and a collection of scientific objects, on the right; in the center of the room, the table represents the place where theoretic and practical knowledge coalesce.



of the muses» and designated a philosophical institution or a place of contemplation) — and *graphía* — i.e. a derivation of the Greek suffix *-graphé*, i.e. a drawing, painting, writing or a description, which derives from the verb *gráphō* (i.e. to write).

Museography thus encompasses all the theories, methods and techniques related to «the writing of the museum». Its etymology emphasizes the foundational role of production and formation dimensions within the exhibition design project. By cohering this discipline's conception to the act of writing, which is the ideational and creative act intended to offer to a reader the description of a content, this term slightly repositions its meaning with regard to design. In this latter word, a vague reference to the idea of writing resounds — as it derives from the Latin word *signum*, i.e. sign or mark, which can be considered the minimum unit of writing. These semantic details seem to connect museography to the act of writing and (exhibition) design to the instruments of writing, hence revealing a subtle difference in the conception of these fields — emerging, for example, in the shift from an approach oriented by a broader cultural perspective to another one, oriented by a preponderant focus on specific, technical aspects.

The term museography first appeared in the 18th century, in the renown publication by Caspar Friedrich Nieckel, *Museographia*<sup>9</sup>, published at Leipzig in 1727. This treaty introduced the terms museum and museography into a scientific circulation, and represents the first attempt to systematically investigate the features and history of the precursory exhibition spaces known at that time, and to provide practical recommendations to beginner collectors for the care, classification and display of the collected materials.

Museography operates parallel to museology, which is the discipline generally described as the «study of the museum» — deriving from the combination of the word museum and the Ancient Greek suffix *-lògos*, a complex term ensuing from the verb *légō* (i.e. to arrange, gather, reckon, speak) and variously meaning «study», «thought», «reason», «discourse», «account». This definition is very close to its equivalent within the Anglo-Saxon countries, i.e. museum studies. Museology is defined as «the science of the museum», that «studies its history, its role in society, the specific forms of research and physical conservation,

activities and dissemination, organization and functioning»<sup>10</sup>. Also the term museology first appeared in the treaties of two German scholars (the first was released by Samuel Quiccheberg in 1565, the second by Philipp Leopold Martin in 1869<sup>11</sup>), but the two expressions coexisted until the first decades of the 20th century<sup>12</sup>.

From an epistemological point of view, a clear distinction between the two disciplines that we identify as the «writing» (museography) and the «study» (museology) of the museum was consistently acknowledged only in the 1960s<sup>13</sup>. This delay doesn't merely imply the late development of museology in its wider sense, rather it highlights the unfocused approach that has been applied for a long time to the disciplines pertaining to the museum project, that were considered of secondary importance in comparison to those pertaining to the collections' fields (e.g. art history, archaeology, anthropology, natural sciences, etc.).

Despite a sharper interpretation of their specificities has already been developed, some ambiguities still persist — due to the complexity of this realm, the multiplicity of its tasks, and its unresolved condition, lying in-between science and technique, theory and practice<sup>14</sup>. For example, museography is often described as a derivative of museology (i.e. as «the practical or applied aspect of museology, that is to say the techniques which have been developed to fulfil museal operations, in particular with regard to the planning and fitting out of the museum premises, conservation, restoration, security and exhibition»<sup>15</sup>).

This subordination can be also detected in the use of the term «applied museology», which several museologists from Central and Eastern Europe customized to refer to the practical application of techniques resulting from the study of museology.

Although museography was born before museology<sup>16</sup> (at least in its recognition as a clearly defined discipline), for a long time it conserved an ancillary role, probably related to its practical nature. Nevertheless, in the last decades this condition is gradually being overcome.

Exhibition design is increasingly recognized as a «primary factor»<sup>17</sup> within the museum project, an area of growing interest<sup>18</sup>, as well as «a significant form of creative expression»<sup>19</sup>. On the one hand, this acknowledgement builds on the ongoing reconfiguration of the museum environment: its increasingly audience-centered nature has repositioned

the role of exhibition design and its contribution to the construction of visitors' experience and interpretation. On the other, the raise of new design possibilities, tools and challenges (especially related to technological experimentation and content mediation) are reevaluating exhibitions as a significant testing ground for the development of innovative, interdisciplinary solutions.

### **An In-progress Discipline for an Ever-changing Institution**

Throughout the history of the museum institution, the different tasks related to the conception, organization and set up of exhibition galleries have been evolving into specific fields of study and operation through a gradual process that has expanded, sharpened and ordered the theoretical and methodological assumptions and applications of this area, and has thus defined the distinctive objectives, expertise and tools of museology and museography.

This path has been primarily nurtured by the acceleration of research work and international debates around these topics, essentially fostered by the formation of the first thematic associations — i.e. the British Museum Association (1889), the American Association of Museums (1906) and the *Office International des Musées* (1926), which later became the International Council of Museums (1946).

One of the milestones within this process was the conference *Muséographie. Architecture et Aménagement de Musées d'Art*, organised in Madrid in October 1934 by the newly founded *Office International des Musées*<sup>20</sup>. This event was a turning point in the reflection on museum arrangement and display practices in Europe and the United States, and it triggered a debate that was already central to the work of the institutions which promoted it but had not been formalized yet. The conference proceedings — released in the pages of the journal «*Mouseion*», the Office's bulletin whose publication had started in 1927 — is a repertoire of the topics under examination in the most recent museum studies. For the first time, museums and displays pertaining to different fields of knowledge (from art history to archaeology and anthropology) could be compared. Subjects were systematically addressed, hence

starting a specific observation of the organization and presentation of collections, display devices, artificial lighting, safety conditions and environmental systems, as well as the creation of restoration laboratories, storages and libraries within museum venues. This publication represents a sort of treaty<sup>21</sup>, which documented the state of the art of the exhibition design practice, and highly contributed to codify and disseminate it as a specific discipline.

A further step towards the acknowledgment of the specificities of the disciplines pertaining to exhibition spaces was taken at the conference organized by UNESCO in Rio de Janeiro in 1958, where a clearer distinction among museology (that in this context was defined as the science which studies and organizes the museum) and museography (intended as the sum of the techniques employed to enable its project) started to arise<sup>22</sup>.

Even after the consolidation of its disciplinary scope, methodologies and instruments, exhibition design has remained the object of an ongoing definition process. Indeed, museography is a constantly evolving field, being its tasks strictly related to several aspects that are modified throughout time or require upkeeps and updates. On the one hand, it needs to accommodate the various changes in the ways the institutions collect, organize and present their objects and narrations, in response to internal or external solicitations. On the other, it has to guarantee the conservation and efficiency of all the elements that constitute the museums' physical dimension, which from time to time requires maintenance, restorations, repairs or adjustments, in order to fix damages and prevent risks, to adapt to evolved standards, to fit new regulations and norms, to integrate innovative means and to enhance exhibition, communication and education functions.

Along its history, the evolution of the museum was accompanied by some milestone moments in which major transformations in the design, use and scope of exhibition spaces and settings were propelled by the special conjunction of cultural, economic and political events.

An initial progression in this practice (i.e. in the structural and spatial organization of displays) can be observed even before the birth of the museum — in the first spaces specifically arranged to accommodate the precursor forms of exhibition activities.