

How to use and show your collection?

In our small Universitymuseum in the north of Holland we came upon the idea to confront the audience with one of our special collections. This collection of childrens skeletons was used for students in medicine. Up until 2003 these skeletons were placed in a classical and clinical setting as was usual for an educational collection throughout the late 19th and early 20th century. As this old museumroom was torn down for new construction work, the collection moved to a more public environment, the Universiteitsmuseum Groningen.

This move brought along an opportunity to show the old objects in a new, spectacular, but no less academic setting. The museum staff thought it would be appropriate to confront the audience with the type of collection. The staff noticed a kind of indifference within the public mostly due to the overall, clinical approach that was used before.

By taking these skeletons out of their showcases and arrange them in a spectacular environment, the public suddenly became aware of the story behind these objects. It made them realise that these were not sheer objects for education but once real human beings.

In that perspective discussion broke out. Is it ethical to show human remains? The adverseries in their anger forgot that these skeletons were on display over 200 years but the way of presentation (in a showcase with a small tag in a line-up) was never questioned. On the other hand, people got aware of these objects being once children. We as a museumstaff think that it is appropriate to put these objects in a environment that would have brought the children al lot of fun in their lifetime. The audience loved it, although they were at first a bit shocked. But the realization after the initial shock and awe turned out to be a kind of awareness that sometimes doesn't set in. In the end almost everybody appreciated our idea.

To conclude, I think creativity can be used to point out to the public what we're dealing with here. It's not just an object but a collection of memories, facts, ideas and so on. In sharing this with the public, these old collections can be very useful and entertaining for a very wide and broadthinking audience.

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