

A collection care program for/with school students | Broadening stakeholder engagement

Patricia H. J. Huang

Abstract

The Museum of National Taipei University of Education, Taiwan, is a newly-founded university museum whose core collection comprises over 100 plaster cast sculptures. While the museum has won critical acclaim for its groundbreaking exhibitions, it continues to run on a shoestring budget in the current economic climate. To attract funds for collection care and outreach activities, the museum needs to be adaptive, and in this case, 'workshop exhibitions' on conservation and an educational program to provide primary, secondary and tertiary students with basic curatorial training were proposed as an approach.

Introduction

The Museum of National Taipei University of Education (hereafter MoNTUE) is a university museum established in 2011. Headed by Director Lin Mun-Lee, a professor in the university's Department of Arts and Design and a former director of the National Palace Museum, the young museum is dedicated to arts and education. While the museum puts on award-winning modern and contemporary art exhibitions¹, its core collection is a series of plaster casts made after some of the most canonical pieces in Western art. In 2015, MoNTUE launched a project called "One Piece Museum" to send out its newly cleaned and restored casts to various elementary and high schools for educational programs. Supported by extensive funding resources from the public and private sector, this project illustrates how the museum tries to care for its collection and reach out to new audiences in a difficult economic climate.

The 100-strong storytelling plaster casts, permanently loaned by the Metropolitan Museum, New York, themselves represent an eventful story. When the Metropolitan Museum was founded in the late 19th century, the ambitious museum board came up with an ingenious idea to bolster its not-yet-mature collection: plaster reproductions of the best and finest examples of Western art. Admittedly, these casts of statues and monuments were not originals, but the museum took comfort in the knowledge that they were the next best thing for arts education (PROVAN 2016, 139). In addition, what the collection lacked in authenticity, it made up for in magnitude. By 1908, thousands of casts had been amassed and displayed in the central hall of the museum (NOBLE 1959, 139). Yet as the museum's originals grew, the casts inevitably lost their appeal. To find better homes for these once-treasured exhibits, in the 1980s, the museum started to lend out or give away the stored casts to academic institutions with MoNTUE, Princeton University and Carnegie Mellon University being among the recipients.

After decades of languishing in the warehouse, some of the casts that arrived at MoNTUE looked in poor condition. A little attention to their condition was urgently needed in order to send them back to the frontline. But like many university museums where underfunding is a chronic problem (KELLY 2001; University Museums Group & University Museums in Scotland 2013), MoNTUE is pressed for money. The budget appropriated by the university endowment barely covers the operating expenditure and the salaries of three full-time employees, and a 30,000 euros donation from a private foundation, Su Tien Chai Foundation (hereafter STC Foundation), had to be secured by the director for the selected items to undergo restoration. Eleven of the restored pieces, endearingly called *Metro 11* as the university is in close proximity to a metro line, were later installed in MoNTUE and became prominent architectural elements of the museum's modern glass-lined building.

Encouraged by the results of *Metro 11* and the following *Metro Plus*, the director sought another 150,000 euros from the same foundation for a five-year cleaning and restoration project. In the midst of a financial crisis, we were aware of how significant this funding was for a newcomer like us. But how could we make the most of the donation to achieve the mission of the museum?

One Piece Museum project

Museums frequently showcase newly cleaned or restored collection objects to the public as indisputable evidence of how they fulfilled their role as collection custodians. Yet lately, many museums have attempted to display not just the results of conservation, but the conservation process itself.

There are three reasons that may account for this trend: 1) to show behind-the-scene work to curious audiences; 2) to provide transparency about often controversial conservation decisions, and; 3) to reduce the need to withdraw 'star' objects from the spotlight. For instance, Michelangelo's masterpiece *David* had resided inside Florence's Galleria dell'Accademia since the 19th century, and it was given a thorough cleaning in full view of the public from 2002~2004. Unlike the free-standing *David*, the 1812 *Star-Spangled Banner* in the National Museum of American History in the Smithsonian Institute had to be taken down from the hanging rod to lay flat for restoration, but the museum's purpose-built laboratory was equipped with large windowpanes to allow the audiences to view the process. The Minneapolis Institute of Art was also devoted to broadening access. A webcam was used to transmit the conservation process taking place in the gallery for people who lived afar (SAYRE 2000).

¹ Many of the past exhibitions have been selected into the annual 'Top Ten Exhibitions in Taiwan' list, for example, *Stray Dogs* at the Museum in 2015 and *Yōga: Modern Western Paintings of Japan* in 2017, to name just a few.

In July 2017, the Boston Art Museum announced that they will publicly restore a giant Ming dynasty painting *Demons and Demon Quellers* so that visitors “can observe the elaborate process unfold, and, at specified times, interact with conservators at work” (Museum of Fine Arts Boston 2017)².

Attracted by the educational value of ‘exhibiting the conservation process’, MoNTUE decided to adopt this innovative approach as the principle of the five-year project. It is hoped that this will help the museum to re-imagine how its collection can connect with existing and potential audiences. The first program of the project, *One Hundred Years in a Flash*, was an open-studio style restoration carried out on the third floor of the museum. Junichi Mori, the Japanese conservator in charge of the *Metro Plus* restoration, led the program with assistance from museum staff and student volunteers. During the 10-day restoration period (11 to 22 March 2015), visitors who had made reservations could attend the guided tour and see the conservators at work from a short distance. The immediate changes to the casts, no matter how subtle they seemed, ensured a fresh and dynamic experience for the onlookers.

Given that very few non-museum professionals have the chance to actually assist professional restorers, even only marginally, the student volunteers were the first group to benefit from the program. The volunteers had all been with the museum for at least a semester and were given this chance to gain new skills irrespective of their university majors. But the visitors were naturally the biggest beneficiary group. As the ‘workshop exhibition’ drew to an end, the museum began to explore the possibilities to extend this well-received experimental endeavor. It is often said that a university museum has dual functions: to serve the university public and the wider community (MACDONALD, NYST & WEBER 2009; MACK 2001, 29). In this regard, could we take the project out and send newly restored pieces to primary and high schools, the wider community? Above all, the university, once a teacher training college, has always been active in the policy-making of school education, and many of its own students are set to become school teachers. It is not too much of a leap for the education-oriented museum to foster a relationship with this audience segment, who may soon become university students themselves.

The museum contacted a few art teachers who had previously worked with us. There was no scientific sampling as far as the partnership was concerned, but the understanding was that the schools needed to show commitment to the project. Two primary, one junior high and one senior high school in Taipei and our neighbouring cities, Keelung and New Taipei City, were chosen to be our partners. Of these four partnerships, the involvement of the two primary schools was school-wide while that of the two high schools was limited to only students from ‘artistically gifted and talented’ classes. Nonetheless, all the headmasters or head teachers responded to our call with acute interest to channel outside resources for the development of the students.

MoNTUE gave this project a self-explanatory name: One Piece Museum. Each time, only one piece/set from our collection would travel to the designated school. The educational theme would always be centred on the piece and the restoration, and all expenditures would be underwritten by the museum, but every collaboration was unique, a product of intensive meetings between the museum and the schools. Although the time-consuming meetings put a serious strain on the museum’s already stretched human resources, they provided valuable insight in understanding the spectrum of expectations and possibilities. Basic cleaning techniques were demonstrated in all four schools, yet a variety of classes such as field trips, creative writing, sociology or history were added by the school teachers as they saw fit.

The collaborations lasted either one semester or one year, but all culminated with an exhibition curated by the students themselves. Guided by the museum staff and school teachers, the students converted disused school spaces into galleries, designed their posters, produced their own artworks inspired by the restored pieces, and gave docent tours to media and visitors.

The Education Bureau of New Taipei City was an instant fan of our project, and word got around. One day, the Cultural Bureau of the same municipal government called, asking whether the museum would like to hold a restoration workshop in next year’s Children’s Festival in their gallery. We were keen to take part but during the discussions, an extended idea emerged. Why not turn the gallery into a mini MoNTUE outpost for the One Piece Museum project? The New Taipei Gallery is a public amenity donated to the city by the building’s developer in exchange for a permit for additional floor area. Located on the third floor of a high-rise building, the gallery was originally

² This paper considers cleaning to be part of restoration as ICOM-CC (2008) defines ‘conservation’ as embracing preventive conservation, remedial conservation and restoration.

furnished as a boutique store to sell products by up-and-coming local designers in a bid to nurture the creative economy, but the imposing façade of the expensive building deterred many would-be walk-in shoppers. Except for occasional events like the Children's Festival, the gallery seldom drew a crowd. The bureau hoped that our project would increase the exposure of the city's children to arts and improve the traffic to the gallery.

The proposal we came up with combined the strength of our previous two programs: *One Hundred Years in a Flash* and school-based One Piece Museum: an open-studio restoration workshop and conservation-related educational activities mainly for children aged seven to fifteen. Since these were museum activities, not school curriculum, we were aware that many of the audiences would be individuals or "one-off" participants, not classes or long-term followers, but the gallery would still serve as a complement to the school-based One Piece Museum. The gallery is much more open than any school, and it welcomes children and their parents from all school districts. Having a base in the gallery would help the museum to reach out to people not yet familiar with us.

The bureau invested 40,000 euros for the museum to redesign the gallery, in which the bureau also kept a room to display other cultural heritage conservation projects sponsored by the bureau itself. Only a part-time assistant from the bureau staffed the gallery, but whenever there was a group visit or an educational activity, the MoNTUE team would take charge. For the eight-month 'workshop exhibition' (July 2016 to February 2017), the bureau paid for the cost of all hands-on educational activities, while the expenses incurred by Mr. Mori's three-month stay were covered by the museum.

The workshop exhibition *Med#161 Touch and Time, One Piece Museum in the New Taipei Gallery*, proved to be a resounding success. Most Taiwanese parents with children aged seven to fifteen are looking to create weekend schedules packed with educational activities, even though a lot of parent-approved activities do not strike children as fun. Happily, conservation is a multidisciplinary science where background knowledge in art, history, chemistry and physics interlock. When the families gathered to watch conservator-in-residence Mr. Mori restore the Middle Ages lion cast (Metropolitan Museum accession No. 161), and when children donned a white coat to brush the dirt off the cast under supervision, the ideal of 'making learning fun' was quietly realized.

Fifteen more pieces from our collection were treated during *Med#161*, and special sessions for the 2016 Children's Festival *Fairytale Castle* were unveiled. The second 'workshop exhibition' in the New Taipei Gallery, from March to August 2017, saw a few more casts being restored, and the third 'workshop exhibition' commenced from September 2017. Meanwhile, with seven schools becoming the latest partners, the school-based One Piece Museum project has also entered a second phase. As more and more institutes join in, an extensive funding network is formed. At present, the project is jointly funded by the university, the STC Foundation, the education bureau and the culture bureau of New Taipei City and the Ministry of Education.

The goal and the fundraising opportunity of the project

In today's precarious economic state, there are two critical issues that every museum must constantly ponder: how do we stay relevant and how do we stay afloat? Compared to the challenges encountered by mainstream museums, these issues are perhaps even more compounded for university museums (KOZAK 2016). University museums are expected to achieve the eminence of scholarship and serve the university as well as the society. But few of them have full 'autonomy': they are frequently asked to take departing professors' teaching specimens, instruments or artefacts even when they have no staff to carry on the research; they are situated inside the campus, standing aloof from the outsiders; and more importantly, they have to compete with faculties for internal funds and they are rarely high on the university hierarchy of financial need (KELLY 2001). All these circumstances seem to hamper the prospective development of university museums. The talk of selling off the museum collection by Brandeis University is an extreme case, but it is fair to say that many university museums struggle to have a distinct identity and adequate financing. MoNTUE is probably an atypical university museum as it is not weighed down by accumulated historical baggage, but it still needs to acknowledge the gravity of these two issues. What the museum opts to do is to take collection conservation as an opportunity to engage new audience segments and, in so doing, it aligns itself with the objective of the university, justifies its existence and raises its funds.

Audiences are central to a museum's purpose. In the past decades, many university museums have progressively looked outward to enlarge networks and cultivate new audiences (BOYLAN 1999; University Museums Group & University Museums in Scotland 2013; MACK 2001, 34). MoNTUE's

strategy follows the same logic: it extends its target audiences from university students to school students. This is a reasonable step to take as our university used to be a teacher training college and art education is fundamental to the museum's mission. Museologically speaking, demographic analysis has also identified that school and family are two of the most important clusters of audiences (ZELLER, PONTE & O'NEILL 2014). Building up these two audience segments will certainly help MoNTUE's general audience development.

But how can we expand our reach without alienating our currently prioritized audience, university students? A tested-and-tried formula for museums is loan boxes or resource boxes, which contain collections or replicas of collections and can be used in different types of learning environments, thus allowing museums to remain homebased while enhancing their overall accessibility. Thanks to the STC Foundation's generosity, MoNTUE is able to turn a similar design into an enriching educational project. Even though object-based learning is an education mode less employed by schools, its close connection to pedagogies of active and experiential learning has been examined by University College, London, and many others (CHATTERJEE 2010). Moreover, through the project, the significance of museum collection, a concept sometimes difficult to convey to the general public, is laid bare and a sustainable relationship between the museum and the young can emerge.

As French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argues in his book *In the Love of Art: European Art Museums and Their Public*, culture is a form of capital that comprises knowledge and skills. Despite the commonly accepted notion that art appreciation is an innate ability, those not armed with cultural capital would easily feel helpless when facing the 'inscrutable' objects in the museums and would rather exclude themselves from the haughty 'temples of learning' (BOURDIEU 1997). Since cultural capital is linked to a person's habitus and social position, and family and school play an influential part in the formation of habitus, museums may need to work closely with families and schools for greater audience diversity. As long as the 'intellectual disposition' needed is inculcated into children, they will at least not be intimidated by museums, and may grow to enjoy visiting museums.

School and family visitors inevitably come in groups. Whenever the school-based One Piece Museum project opens an exhibition, there is a ripple effect onwards to almost every corner of the school. Even children not directly involved in the project would drop by with friends to see the show. Many of our hands-on activities in the New Taipei Gallery require children to be accompanied by their parents, and more often than not, parents would bring other children along. Going out into the field means the museum is literally out of its comfort zone, but fortunately in this case, the rise in the number of visitors is clearly discernable, and that is prompt and invigorating feedback for museum staff.

To a certain extent, the increasing visitor numbers also underpins the fundraising ambition of this outreach project. Research has indicated that many philanthropists are motivated by the pleasure associated with giving or supporting a cause when making donations to nonprofit organizations, and they do not always demand to see the performances of the organizations (Chamber Collective 2015). The prevailing altruism means that nonprofit organizations seldom have the need to sell their impacts to funders. But what with the rising of 'performance philanthropy' and the austerity measures brought on by the economic downturn, nonprofit organizations are now urged to evolve and learn to emphasize their leverage. The growing visitor number therefore permits the museum to articulate its success to interested sponsors with relative ease and conviction.

Our project's funding opportunity is further boosted by the visible transformation that restorations can present. Plaster is a porous material that absorbs moisture and dust particles. The removal of the dirt not only makes the cast less susceptible to erosion, but also visibly alters its appearance (RUNE & MARCHAND 2010). The before- and-after contrast revealed in the 'workshop exhibition' is a powerful performance indication for anyone wishing to assess how the museum works towards the strategic goals of the project. Our 'shop-fronts' in schools also help to keep the project never out of sight for the funders. For all intents and purposes, the One Piece Museum project stems from our desire to disseminate collection and conservation-related knowledge to school children, but it is true that the Culture Bureau initiated the collaboration because of the positive impacts that our project had generated. Once the New Taipei Gallery joined the project, the gallery's high profile has invited in even more potential sponsors, including other public sectors, to 'invest' in the project. The project's complicated funding structure is indeed administratively complex, but it guarantees that the museum is not vulnerable to budget cuts from the university or any single funder's whim, and can avoid manipulation from commercial sponsorship.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper is not to advocate 'workshop exhibitions' in museums. In fact, 'exhibiting the conservation process' can only happen when certain conditions are met. Besides, although the approach seems innovative, what MoNTUE does is simply to go back to the basics: look after the collection and nurture and extend the audience through new programs.

In marketing terms, 'optimization' is the process of improving the marketing efforts of an organization to maximize the desired business outcomes. But what should a museum 'optimize'? According to Blattberg and Broderick, aesthetic values, community interests and the preservation of the museum should be the ideal outcome of an art museum (BLATTBERG & BRODERICK 1991). Yet on the other hand, we are reminded that university art museums "cannot depend on one stable source of funding anymore" (KING 2001, 23). So how can we implement 'optimization', collection-care and education, in the aftermath of cuts in public funding? The One Piece Museum project is a prime example of how a museum tries to adapt itself in financially lean times without compromising its mission. The necessity of periodic cleaning and surface treatment of plaster casts means that MoNTUE needs to have an ongoing conservation program in place to ensure appropriate care of these casts. We are yet to know if this ongoing program will continue taking the form of One Piece Museum once the five-year project runs its course, but one thing is for sure: to have financial resilience, MoNTUE and the program will always need to be museologically robust first.

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Contact

Patricia H. J. Huang, Associate Professor, Department of Arts and Design, National Taipei University of Education.

Address: Department of Arts and Design, No. 134, Section 2, Heping East Road, Taipei, 106, Taiwan.

Email: path@tea.ntue.edu.tw

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