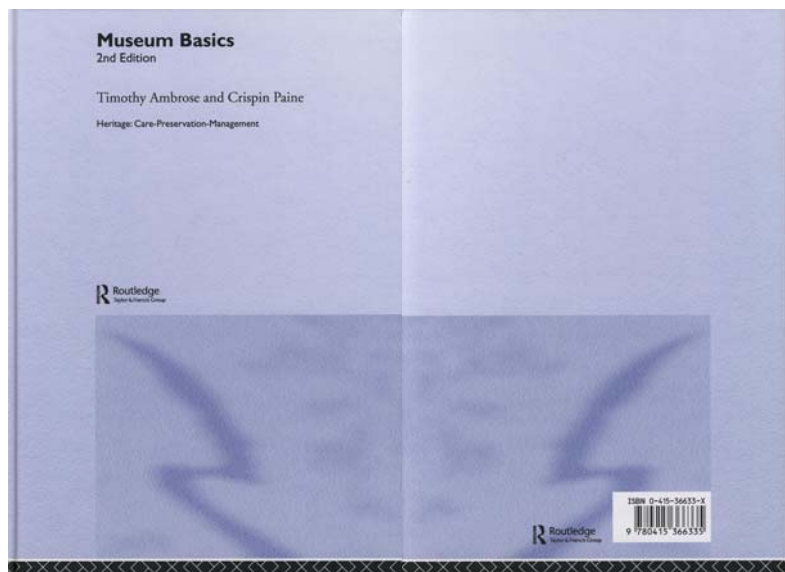


Ambrose, T. & C. Paine. 2006. Museum basics. Second edition. – London/New York, Routledge

Book review by M. van der Duin



At the dawn of the 19th century, museology started off as the professional discipline that analysed and described the structure and functioning of museums. Peter Vergo, in the introduction of his book 'The New Museology' (Vergo, 1989) recognises the difference between this 'old museology', pondering over *how* heritage institutions should fulfil their tasks, contrasting the 'new museology'. The more recent new museology line of thinking offered a different central question: What *is* a museum? What is its function in contemporary society and how can it be utilised to fit society's current needs? Since the early 70's this paradigm shift fuelled a process of change in the heritage field. Museums, originally being the somewhat static, introverted institutions dealing with *objects* from the *past*, moved on to explore a new role as dynamic and flexible organisations that focus on a dialogue with *audiences* in the *present*.

Handbooks for museum professionals have changed accordingly. Earlier this year, Routledge released Ambrose's & Paine's 'Museum Basics', a compendium on good museum practice, targeted at the museum professional, particularly those working in museums with limited staff and budget. Supported by UNESCO's International Council of Museums (ICOM) in close co-ordination with ICOM's commission for training of personnel (ICTOP), the book is not only a source of reference, but also a manual and a textbook, containing questions for further study and discussion. It is designed for training courses, to be supplemented by case studies, project work and group discussion.

But is it also the 'new museologist handbook'? Understandably, Peter Vergo considers handbooks to be the attribute of the old-style museologist by definition. It is not too difficult to refute his statement: surely the new goals museums set for themselves ask for procedures and good practice guidelines just as much as the old approach did. 'New museology' perhaps sounds a bit more cerebral, but its practices equally need a practical guide. Thus, a new museologist's handbook should offer strategies for museums to keep in touch with their audiences, to monitor and evaluate their role in society and to guarantee the flexibility needed to keep in pace with societies developments. At the same time it should offer strategies for museums to cope with relentless marketing competition from the amusement industry and commerce, all within the leeway of museum ethics and (at best) fixed government budgets.

'Museum Basics', above all, proves to be the solid, reliable resource, fulfilling expectations preset by the standard of its precursory first edition (Ambrose & Paine, 1993). After an introductory chapter that discusses the museum's characteristics, ethics, role in society and desired promotion of sustainability, many of the museum's tasks are elaborated upon. The many themes are clustered into four main chapters: the museum's users, its collections, its buildings and its management. The book furthermore contains a glossary, sources of (online) information and a select bibliography.

Let's take a closer look at the sections dealing with audiences and collections (that also contain the topic research); this being the three core tasks of a museum. The second chapter, 'Museums and its users', deals with the museum's relation with its audiences, the core theme of the new museology thinking. 'Museum Basics' meticulously describes many of the communication techniques the museum should master. It contains much practical advise on education, marketing, PR and visitors' studies. New in this edition is the attention for

audience development, information services and web sites. New media, web sites in particular, are presented as promising and powerful tools to be used in the museum's communication with its audiences, although the relevant section lacks the practical detail the book offers when it discusses the more traditional media. The same goes for database applications; the 'virtual museum', in the sense of an online collection database, is supposed to open up 'a rich seam in new thinking in museum work', but that's about it. Other database applications like the use of RSS feeds, the creation of new information products that could even be used in the museum itself, the internet as a means for internal communication - or simply using the museum website for online questionnaires are not mentioned here. This really is a pity, since new media could (and do) play an important role in the way museums offer society a platform and a custom-made interface for co-creating content and using the museum as the 'identity workshop'. For a while, museums seemed reluctant to indulge in these new techniques, since they feared that their most important asset, the authenticity of their objects, would be surpassed by spiffy new e-products. By now, these fears have receded and museums know the internet is a medium to be exploited maximally to develop audiences, optimise services and invite audiences to participate. In my opinion this chapter about the museum and its users would have been an excellent place for the authors to discuss the practical aspects of the museum's evolving relation with society, the way the museum and its audiences are in fact part of each other, and should find ways to fuel *each other* with input and ideas to generate 'meaning'.

The way the museum should deal with its collections is discussed in the chapter 'The development and care of the museums collections'. New here are the topics 'policies for collecting' and 'disposal' - the latter being a hot issue for years as an important principle for enhancing collection quality. It is strange that outgoing loans to colleague institutions as well as to third parties are so minimally discussed. Loans may seem complex and risky, but they are a vital factor in collection mobility and collection visibility. Some content of a loan agreement would have been appropriate in this section. Small museums deal with this a lot. Also the formation of a study collection as a distinct segment of the museum's assets, with a different status and specific policy is not referred to here - although it is discussed briefly in a section about education.

Initially, museology was about how museums work. It evolved to take into account heritage as a whole and the way it should be treated. By now it incorporates the more philosophical discourse about the role of 'semiotically enhanced' matter and narratives in collective identity. Museums are progressively more aware of the way the conceptions of the museum and the field of museology have widened. In the brief introductions Ambrose and Paine start their chapters with, these ideas are well articulated. Furthermore 'Museum Basics' contains just about anything someone working in a museum needs to know about museum practice: it is complete, accessible, written in a friendly but correct tone and offers many leads to further studying museum work. It is concise and compact and easy to handle thanks to its comprehensible structure. This edition was created by extending the structure of the previous one. This is fine, but it seems that some sections should have been integrated a bit better in the whole of the story. For example, gathering information from audiences should (also) have been linked to web sites; collection planning needs a link with the institute's mission statement; the outgoing loan could easily be associated with partnerships and collection mobility. And so on.

A new museologist handbook?' Yes, to a certain extent, and... no. The new lines of thought are articulated conscientiously in this book, but in most practical elaboration the story is all about the 'how to..' in a museum. Problematic? No. The ideas of the new museology are not superior to the older, collection based and practice based insights. I see it merely as an extra layer that is evolving under our hands. It is about belonging, sensitivity, creativity and experiment. It makes museum work more interesting, dynamic and lively, but it may be hard to fit it into procedures. Ambrose and Paine managed to give an excellent account of the *state of the art* in museum practice, although not all the high ideals have always seeped into the lower regions of the story.

Ambrose, T. & C. Paine. 2006. Museum basics. Second edition. – London/New York, Routledge. 336 pp. ISBN 9780415366335. Price \$ 110.00 (hardback).

Cited literature

Ambrose, T. & C. Paine. 1993. Museum basics. London/New York, Routledge (ICOM in conjunction with Routledge).

Vergo, P. 1989. The New Museology. – London, Reaktion Books.