

Museum^x
**Zur Neuvermessung eines
mehrdimensionalen Raumes**
herausgegeben von Friedrich von Bose, Kerstin Poehls,
Franka Schneider und Annett Schulze



IMPRESSUM

MUSEUM^X. ZUR NEUVERMESSUNG EINES MEHRDIMENSIONALEN RAUMES

Herausgegeben von Friedrich von Bose, Kerstin Poehls, Franka Schneider, Annett Schulze

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The Shop | Multiple Economies of Things in Museums

Sharon Macdonald

You enter the museum. The shop is there, to one side of the lobby, beckoning to you. Perhaps it is doing so subtly – a glimpse of displayed books and neatly stacked mugs through the restrained doorway. More likely it is doing so through overt but stylish seduction – glass windows to direct your gaze to its contents, artfully placed objects as ›enticers‹, a large sign (*SHOP*) – maybe even in pink neon if the museum (probably art gallery) is audacious enough to play double-bluff with the imagery of glitzy commerce.

The shop sets you, the visitor, a test: to succumb to its calls now or to ›save it‹ until later. Perhaps you are one of those who rationalizes a look in the shop before their main visit as a chance to ›see what is there and think about what I might want to buy at the end‹. Maybe you even agree that it is a good way to find out what the ›must see‹ objects of the museum are – ›if it has been put on a postcard, it must be famous‹. But more likely, perhaps, you regard peeking in the shop before visiting as ›naughty‹, a ›guilty pleasure‹ that you should not indulge but to which you feel somehow compelled. It need only take a few minutes and you can return again at the end – figuratively encasing your visit to the galleries with the shop. Let's assume here that you *are* planning to visit the galleries too, that you are not here only to shop – in search of something ›that bit different‹ from what you will readily find elsewhere, on the high street or in the chain-stores. But even if the latter is your plan, you promise to come back to the museum later, deferring the decision that others must make right now; and you will surely already, perhaps some weeks or even months ago, have visited the museum's galleries because otherwise ›it wouldn't feel right‹. The shopping must somehow – however loosely – link to the museum.

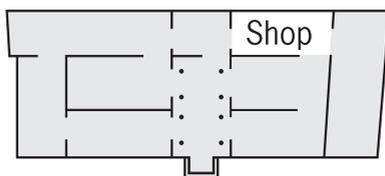
So – do you go in now? Or do you show restraint and leave the shop for the treat at the end of your visit – the reward after your cultural labours, the grand finale, the final exhibit of the show?¹

The shop is always in the museum

Since the 1980s, shops have elbowed their way into more and more museums and taken up increasing space within them.² But I want to assert that even when the shop is or was not physically present in the museum, it is or was there all the same. It is there as part of a cultural dialogue with and about things – a dialogue played out through the sameness and difference of shops and museums; that is, through shops being like museums and at the same time not being like them.³

Like the museum, the shop is concerned with objects. Both museums and shops are special ›thing places‹, where objects are clustered together, out of everyday use. Both take care with how they select, store and arrange things, with how they record and create information about them, with how they position some things in relation to others, with the lighting they do or do not shine on them, with the colour and design of the surroundings. Both employ some kind of labeling. Both have expert people – ›staff‹ – whose role is to know about, organize and care for them. Both are places where other people – ›the public‹, ›consumers‹ – are invited to come and behave in preferred ways, paying some kind of homage to the things on display.

Unlike the museum, the shop puts price tags on the labels of its things. It is also much less reluctant to let people touch and handle its objects. In the museum, touching is a special privilege, usually undertaken only by special people – certain ›staff‹ – and with special tools – ›white gloves‹. Watch people in any shop – they pick things up with ungloved and unwashed hands; they turn them over, stroke and even sniff them. Sometimes they try them on, shake or drop them. Perhaps most importantly, they get their hands on them in another sense too: they take some of them away. One consequence of this is that the things on display in shops are mostly only there for a short time: things flow fast into and out of shops; ideally they have ›rapid turnover‹ and a ›short shelf life‹. Shops are places of thing mobility. Things replace other things in as swift succession as the shop can manage. Museums, by contrast, are places of thing stability. Things flow in – but, comparatively, glacially slowly. And there they sediment. They settle mainly in the storage areas of the museum, where



few visit them. A select few make it to the galleries, where they are shown off to the world, for at least some part of their life, before they return to the darker space of the depot. On those rare occasions when museum objects do flow out, this is usually done surreptitiously or is the subject of embarrassment. ›Disposal‹, or the more euphemistic ›deaccession‹, are rather rude words in museum circles; indicating a practice that happens but preferably should not. Museum objects should properly be kept – ›in perpetuity‹. They are oriented towards long futures; as well as (usually) to long pasts. Compared to shop things, museum things have extensive temporalities.

The shop is always in the museum, then, in its shared obsession with objects but also in the alternative ›thing ontologies‹ that it presents. It offers up partly shared but also partly differing cultural accounts of things and of ways of relating to things. Museums can be seen as presenting us with an officially sanctioned account of the importance of objects. They tell us that objects matter, that they can be the stuff of important narratives about ourselves and others. They also show us that objects do not need to be about money and the market, that they don't have to be commodities. Museums tell us that things can be there for the duration, outliving us and outliving the cycles of fashion and ephemerality that characterize the world of commerce. The shop is more ambivalent. It provides us with things that we might try to make into durable stories about ourselves – things that we will transform from commodities into meaningful objects that are part of our ongoing lives. But the shop itself is a transit point – the place where things are bought for money, where the market rules, and the prime aim (›the bottom line‹) is to make profit.⁴

Putting this in terms of crude dualisms: the shop is commerce to the museum's culture; the shop is about materialism, the museum about meaning. We can object to these by pointing out that shops are also about meaning and culture and that the profit motive is hardly absent from museums. But the dualisms matter all the same because the brash but handy opposition is precisely what allows for the debate that the two institutions implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) set up. They provide good tools for thinking about different kinds of ways of relating to things. This is partly why artists have found the shop and shopping provocative motifs for critical art works. (This has been another route of shops into museums – or art galleries.) Andy Warhol's ›prediction‹ that »All department stores will become museums and all museums will become department stores« (quoted in Taylor 2002, 42) drew its

iconoclastic power from just this opposition; though it was also an astute observation.

On the one hand, then, we oppose the shop and the museum. That is why it feels naughty to visit only the museum shop or to spend longer in it than in the galleries. But at the same time, we want to rescue shopping from its banality and materialism. We want it to be about something more, something meaningful. And we want this partly because the shop gives us some experiences – and possibilities – that we don't easily get from the museum. We want to enjoy the object possibilities that the shop affords and the museum fails to entirely fulfill. This makes it hard to resist going into the museum shop.

The museum in the shop

Museum shops are not just any shops. They must somehow index their relationship to the museum. If they don't, they risk being ›just shops‹ – nothing more than profiteering enterprises. But it is a win-win game because this indexing is also what helps sell the goods in the shop. It is what makes them special and marks them out as particular kinds of things – ones more readily able to disentangle themselves from the market and become meaningful.

There are two main dimensions of how they perform this indexing: (1) Modes of display; (2) Objects themselves. In both, the work of indexing is performed alongside other concerns that the shop has – its need to be *not* like the museum as well as to be like it – and in the brief account that follows I highlight some of this too.

Modes of Display

Some shops could be mistaken for galleries – and sometimes are by visitors. Watch visitors to the *British Museum*, for example, turning right after the main entrance into the *Grenville Room*. You see many looking around, not quite sure of the nature of the space that they are in. I hear an American-accented voice: ›Hey, it's a shop! You can buy the stuff!‹. There seems to be delight in the recognition. This shop isn't even named as such – it is simply labelled *Grenville Room* and a smaller sign points through to galleries

beyond, turning it into another gallery along the way. Its immediate appearance is that it *is* a gallery – apparently in a former library; and a particularly old and lovely one at that. Its walls are inset with wooden, glass-fronted cases, the top and bottom layers of which are filled with old books. The middle – eye-level – layer of display contains selected beautiful objects, spot-lit and with labels. You have to get up quite close to see the price tags that give the game away. Everything in this shop is beautiful and pricy; everything here I could imagine being in the Museum itself – and, indeed, it contains many replicas of museum things, as I shall come onto below. In the central areas of the shop are cases of luxury items, such as jewellery, glassware and figurines; full-sized classical statues stand on plinths; and gorgeous silk scarves, ties and jackets hang in an eye-catching display. In looking at items here, one’s eye is also drawn to the gallery beyond – *The Changing Museum*, an exhibition of selected items from the Museum, whose logic – showing attractive selected items for a relatively short time – links it closely with the shop. In this



shop, even the cash desk (which seems like it should have another name in a place like this – perhaps it is a ›sales point‹ or some such?) is not immediately noticeable, perched inconspicuously on a desk that is the same height as the surrounding low jewellery display cases.

It is only expensive shops that can get away with this degree of being museum-like; and is probably only possible for museums that have more than one shop. The *Grenville Room* risks being not noticed as a shop. Many visitors don't turn right into it, seeing it as just one small gallery to a side and finding themselves beckoned by the brightness and allure of the stunning Great Court ahead of them. Or they turn left, to the cloakrooms, where they encounter another shop – a small more functional shop on the way to the bookshop.⁵ This sells items such as catalogues, mugs, pens, umbrellas – the kinds of items that, as you collect your coat, you might swiftly select as a souvenir of your visit or to protect against London's weather. But back to the *Grenville Room* briefly, as an extreme in the museum-shop continuum – i.e. as an especially museum-like shop. Even here, we should notice, there are differences from the museum. Most importantly, there is some stuff available to be touched: cushions and rugs piled on plinths, the statues (though fewer people touch these – perhaps because they know the museum message not to touch statues) – and the silk scarves. And there are the price-tags and signs that credit cards are accepted; and the cash-register.

Elsewhere on the continuum, shops beckon their customers more overtly. But even these will share some styles of display with the museum – especially the display cabinet. Of course, to refer to these as belonging to the museum rather than the shop is incorrect. The history of museum and shop design is thoroughly intertwined, with each borrowing from the other and the same companies often producing vitrines and lighting for both. ›Shop-fitting‹ is the term used in many museums in the UK for the stage of exhibition production when the cases, partition walls and lighting go into a gallery. But the point is that there is stylistic similarity. Moreover, in the museum shop, this is usually heightened by the greater spacing between the objects than is the case in shops and often a self-conscious replication of styles and colours from the museum in which the shop is located. Take, for example, the ›Aladdin's Cave‹ appearance of the *Tropenmuseum's* shop – carved oriental statues at the door, masks in rows, objects displayed in large painted dressers – perhaps from Indonesia or Malaysia. Or take the ›white cube‹ aesthetic of so many

art gallery shops: light wooden floors; white cabinets; ›frameless‹ glass cases; aluminium-framed prints; splashes of ›pantone‹ colour.

The shop staff are also part of the overall aesthetic. An assistant in the *Tropenmuseum's* shop looks like a hippy university lecturer – specialism India I speculate – with her long skirt and colourful necklace. In many art gallery shops, especially in Germany, the assistants are dressed in black, often wearing oblong black-framed glasses too. There's also a gestural form of correlative embodiment. In the *Grenville Room* I watch a shop assistant (again, I am struck that there should be a different term here – perhaps there is?) – older than in some other shops – carefully unlock one of the cases and pull out a tray of jewellery, handling it with what seems to me like curatorial care. He somehow manages to convey a sense that he has infinite patience, that he can hold back time in this special moment as the customer thinks carefully about what they will buy. I imagine him saying ›Take your time, there's no hurry‹. Elsewhere, museum shops are sometimes more frenzied, especially



those that cater to children. There, the staff may wear bright colours and their manner is breezy and chatty, deftly parcelling things up and making the customers happy with their selections; »Tyrannosaurus – my favourite too!«.

Breezy busy shops still make their stylistic links with the museum of which they are part but they also typically have other differentiating features. In particular, they have more multiple amassing of objects on display. There will be racks of postcards and perhaps of novelty items, such as named key-rings; and mugs and books may also be piled into stacks. As well as ›piling high‹, such shops also have ›piling deep‹ via the so-called ›dumper bins‹. These are usually quite low containers that are filled with relatively cheap items such as pens, pencil sharpeners, rubbers, notebooks or marbles. They invite rummaging for your preferred colour or style of item or just for an Amelie-type moment of sensual enjoyment of dipping in your hand (just watch people, especially if there are bins of marbles). Museums only rarely use these ›piled together‹ – bazaar – modes in which objects are not simply presented in profusion but touching one another such that they become one mass – until untangled and released into individual identity by the customer. When museums do use the bazaar aesthetic they are likely to do so as part of a conscious attempt to flout usual conventions or in order to make some specific point. But for shops, it is a mode that invites touch, that important stage on the route to possession, as recognized by Octave Mouret, the brilliant psychologist of the shopper and establisher of *Au Bonheur des Dames*, in Zola's social documentary novel about the birth of the department store in late nineteenth century Paris (1883). Even the *Grenville Room* does not forgo it entirely.

Objects

There is a range of ways in which the objects in museum shops are indexed to the museum. The main ones follow:

Reproductions: This includes reproductions of museum objects or paintings – usually in miniature – as well as reproductions of images of museum objects or paintings on other items. The former, which we might call *mimetic reproductions*, includes items such as tiny suits of armour, model statuary or reproductions of china from the collections. In the *Grenville Room* we can spend £10,000 on a full-sized reproduction of a classical statue of Hermes.

More frequent in shops, however, are our second category – what we might call *relocated reproductions*. Here, for example, is a list of some of the items featuring an image *Sunflowers* that are sold by the *Van Gogh Museum*: bangles, bookmarks, buttons, carrier bags, chairs, document wallets, espresso sets, headphones, lunch boxes, notebooks, pens, pencils, pillboxes, plates, playing cards, postcards, scarves, shawls, ties, tiles, trays, T-shirts, umbrellas, vases. Sometimes, the line between mimetic and relocated reproduction is blurred, as when a miniature suit-of-armor is appended to a key-ring; or for the case of books that reproduce images of items from the collections.

Insignia: These are objects that feature the museum's logo or name. Reproductions may have these too, though there are some items whose only museum link is its name or logo. These are often – but not always – cheaper items and often they can be found in museums around the world, distinguished only by the sign of the museum. Naomi Klein might see these as pure branding: what is being sold is the name, and whatever it connotes, rather than the intrinsic product (Klein 2000). These are usually cheap disposable items that you can easily have lots of – sweets, pens, notebooks. There is also a more expensive use of insignia – subtle versions of the museum's logo on a silk tie, for example; or perhaps we could include in this category items such as the pottery sold in the *Solomon R. Guggenheim* whose shape echoes the spiral of the museum's architecture.

Associations: Many museum shops stock objects that relate more loosely to the museum's collection. Sometimes they are items that might be reproductions of museum objects but are not: old-fashioned looking china tea sets, Egyptian-looking book-ends, or ornate decorated Easter eggs perhaps. In some cases, these are objects that are held by other museums. Many art galleries, for example, stock postcards and prints of works that are found in other museums. Often, however, the associations are looser still. Books – a major item in many museum shops – may range from being closely linked to the museum galleries (especially in the form of the catalogue) to being more vaguely on theme. Historic house museums may have tomes on gardening and traditional cooking, aristocratic families and general history; art galleries, books on artists, art forms, architecture, design, photography, graffiti and how to paint or do origami. A shop manager explains to me that it is very useful to have a natural history section in a museum as this allows you to stock cuddly toys, plastic dinosaurs and myriad other animal-themed products. Jewellery is also easily legitimated by any kind of decorative art content.

Anything vaguely historical seems to allow packs of old-fashioned sweets and pots of jam with checked lid-covers. A shop manager confesses to the tenuous nature of some museum links. Her shop, for example, stocks Russian dolls. There are no Russian dolls in the collection and no Russia section in the museum – »but we do have a few objects from Russia«, and they sell well as they are attractive and there is nowhere nearby that sells them.

While the museum shop should index the museum, then, it can do so more or less loosely. At the same time as trying to make associations with museum objects, concerns of needing to get objects *out* of the museum space – off the shelves – are also crucial to the shop. So they must also be *unlike* museums and like other kinds of shops in some respects.

What people do in museum shops

A first answer to the question of what people do in museum shops is that they buy things. Of course, not everybody does so but from such few reports as I have been able to find and some anecdotal evidence, it seems that a substantial proportion of visitors buys *something*.⁶ Like taking home a souvenir from a holiday, museums seem to encourage those who visit them to take something – a reminder of their trip – home with them.⁷ Perhaps they are prompted to do so not only by the fact that the museum visit is itself an excursion (perhaps part of a holiday) but also because many museums imaginatively transport us to other places through their displays. Sometimes what people buy in museum shops is the promise of a further journey – perhaps deeper into knowledge of a topic through literature that they purchase about it, or perhaps in the form of a guide-book and hope of a visit to a country whose objects they have viewed. The *Wereldmuseum* in Rotterdam takes this to its logical conclusion by situating a travel agency within the Museum. Now really go there!

In buying things in the shop, important too, surely, is the prompt and legitimation that museums give to the collecting impulse – their approval of the amassing of things and attribution of meaning to them (Macdonald 2006). Museums comfort us that things deserve our time and attention – and money. They let us know that things carry meanings and are worthwhile. Museum shops provide the ideal transit point – and the actual stuff – to do this meaning work for ourselves.

Another answer to the question of what people do in museum shops is provided by observing their behaviour. I have alluded to some of this above. Especially important, I have suggested, is touching. Released from the haptic deprivation of the museum (at least, of most museums), shop-goers grasp, stroke, fondle and press items in the shop. I watch a child hold a cuddly toy to her cheek; a man apparently absent-mindedly polish a gemstone between his thumb and fingers in a dumper-bin; an older woman run her hands over the tapestry stitching of a cushion. The manager of a heritage site reports that the most sold object in her shop is a rubber egg.⁸ This has nothing very directly to do with the site itself but its joke-quality and low price seem to appeal she thinks. Perhaps its peculiar haptic qualities do so too? She describes customers throwing them onto the floor of the shop and watching them bounce.

Museum-Shop Economies

The shop, then, is part of the wider economy of the museum. It is part of its financial economy – often providing income for the museum of which it is part. Particularly for museums that do not charge for entry, the shop may be crucial to sustain certain museum activities, such as temporary exhibitions. But the shop is part of other museological economies too. It is part of its sensory economy – continuing the visual feasting that the museum has stimulated but allowing too the satiation of some of the other senses, especially touch, that the museum galleries have probably held in check. It is part of an economy of possession: metaphorically carried away by objects during their museum visit, the shop allows people to complete the possessive journey by themselves carrying objects away.⁹ It allows the transition too from viewing objects that are collectively owned to individual ownership. Finally, the shop is a part of the economies of the meanings of things. It breaks down the simple dichotomy of objects as culture versus objects as commodities; and in doing so it offers the promise that the ephemeral may be made durable, and that bought things may become part of meaningful narratives and memory. I am told of a marketing investigation of customers to a museum shop that threw up the apparently puzzling response from one customer that what he wanted was for the shop to not be commercial. I hope that the account given here explains why such a response may make more sense than

it might at first hearing. I also hope that the account here might explain why it is vital for museums to have shops. And, finally, I hope that it explains why I believe that museum shops should not be seen as an added 'extra' to the museum but should be regarded as fully part of the complex object-identity work that museums perform.

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Notes

- ¹ Griffiths (2002, 10) observes: »For present-day visitors, shopping is now perceived as an integral part of the museum experience, with satellite shops selling merchandise relating to an exhibit constituting the final room of a show, requiring all visitors to walk through the shop in order to exit the space.«
- ² The history of museum shops has still to be written. They are not new: the *Metropolitan Museum* in New York established a shop in 1908 (Wasson 2005, 171). Leach (1993) provides further history of the shop at the Met; and see also Harris 1978. But as Griffiths (2002) observes, they seem to have expanded in numbers and floor space since the 1980s. Others also commenting on this include Anheier and Toepler (1988), Hewison (1985), McTavish (1998) and Rectanus (2002). There are also books on museum marketing and

museum shops that sometimes contain some brief historical comment and that are themselves part of the research field. For recent examples see Andoniadis 2010 and Leimgruber/John 2011.

- ³ I should note here that museums do not all have an equally comfortable relationship with shops and my discussion below – based on visits to numerous shops in many different countries – focuses especially on those that have come to embrace shops. By contrast, sites of what I call ‘difficult heritage’, for example, are sometimes uncomfortable with the presence of shopping, for reasons that are connected to the connotations and emotions connected with shopping discussed here. This was the case, for example, for the documentation centre in Nuremberg that I discuss in detail in *Difficult Heritage* (2009). Shops of such sites usually put particular emphasis on books, conceptualized as a continuation of the serious learning process that such sites hope to encourage. There are, however, exceptions which do stock other items, as in the shop at *Ground Zero* in New York. This is perhaps legitimated by the aim of raising money for a worthwhile cause.
- ⁴ My discussion here has been especially shaped by work in the anthropology of material culture, gifts, commodities and value, including among others: Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986; Miller 1998 and 2010; Graeber 2001.
- ⁵ The *British Museum* has four main shops in addition to this small one. On the website, these are described as: Bookshop, Family Shop, Collections Shop and Culture Shop (<http://www.britishmuseum.org/visiting/shop.aspx>, accessed on 11.06.2011). The latter is what is here described as the *Grenville Room*.
- ⁶ E.g. information provided at *Buying into Heritage, Centre for Cultural Tourism and Cultural Change*, Leeds, April 2010; including data provided by the *National Trust*.
- ⁷ There is an interesting literature on souvenirs. Stewart 1984 is the classic work on this.
- ⁸ At the event listed in footnote 6. In a report on the surprising increase in sales from museum gift shops during the economic recession in the UK, Peter Tullin, founder of *CultureLabel* – an online store stocking items from museums shops (www.culturelabel.com) – was reported as observing that »Increasingly, consumers want objects with soul [...]. If a product is humorous, it sells.« (Guardian, 18.06.2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2009/aug/18/museums-national-trust-gift-sales>, accessed on 11.06.2011).
- ⁹ For discussion of some of these themes in relation to shopping more generally see Bowlby 2000.

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