

## **DIGITISATION VERSUS AUTHENTICITY: TOWARDS DIGITAL REPRESENTATION OF MUSEUM ARTEFACTS**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Educating and engaging museum audience in contemporary times have become imperative considering the increasing persistent information society which has brought about the need for museums to utilize new methods of disseminating information. Digitisation therefore has become the new instrument for access and preservation in museums but can be perceived as a threat to authenticity. Loss of authenticity of artefacts through reproduction could result in the loss of connection between the audience and the artefacts otherwise known as aura. The object value with respect to authenticity and aura will be discussed in this paper in relation to digitisation. A theoretical approach will be used in exploring how authenticity can be used as a tool to validate digitisation of artefacts used in the representation of culture.*

**KEYWORDS:** digitisation, authenticity, reproduction, artefacts, culture, aura

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### **INTRODUCTION**

MacDonald (1992) describes the museum as a place for the dissemination of information rather than a central repository for objects and encompassed with institutionalised authority to act as custodians of the past. The museum is also described by Witcombe (2003) as an elite institution of old that have assumed the responsibility for preserving objects and the ideas that is thought about them in the past and representing and interpreting those ideas for the present (Bearman 2008). He (2008) agrees that the museum is a storehouse of things that were consciously gathered from a natural or cultural context and placed in the context of things also gathered thereby making representations for a purpose. . Museum to them is both a place for the education of their audience about the past as well as a place where culture can be learned based on the artefact held in their custody.

The introduction of computer technology into the museum world has informed, shaped and further challenged the sector. Williams (1987) suggests that museums are faced with new audience of the television era who are not used to reading labels and text but are accustomed to having information supplied to them visually. Therefore, the needs and expectations of museum visitors have become increasingly complicated over the past decade and museum professionals are increasingly concerned with ensuring that the right information resources are available to all users, of the museum (Marty et al., 2003). Consequently, everyday practices of museums appear to be one requiring new spaces, new collection and new audience thereby making digitisation the new watchword for access and preservation in the museum (Knell, 2003).

Digitisation thus refers to the process of converting, creating, and maintaining any type of original, be it paper, photographic prints or slides, three dimensional objects or moving images

into a digital format which can be viewed via computer and other devices (Astle and Muir, 2002). The definition of digitisation by Astle and Muir (2002) recognises that museums work through material objects therefore digital technology is not a move to replace the impact of material artefacts but to enhance the real objects and improve accessibility. Consequently, the digitised artefacts are in a position of being viewed as a reproduction, an imitation devoid of power to enact emotion and lacking authenticity. The paper will focus on how digitised museum artefacts can be treated as replica and perceived as a treat to authenticity which is associated with real material object. Considering the materialist approach in which real objects are appreciated for their authenticity unlike photographic image that are classified as replica or reproduction. This paper will argue that the experience and negotiation of authenticity is related to network of relationship between the people, place and the artefacts which is determined by culture and not dependent on the methods used in exhibiting the artefacts following the tradition of Jones (2010).

## **THEORETICAL / CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND**

Akporherhe, (2002) quoting Taylor (1921), defines culture as a way of life of a group of people which includes knowledge, belief, art, moral, law, custom and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of the society. Rugman & Hodgetts (2000) quoting Joynt and Warner (1996) saw culture as the acquired knowledge that people use to interpret experience and to generate social behaviour, they further suggested that culture is shared by members of a community, organisation or a group and that through culture, values and attitudes are formed which invariably shape individual as well as group behaviour. Culture to them is learned and transferred from one generation to another resulting into an acceptable way of life that is identifiable to a community.

Culture according to Geertz (2000) is the whole way of life of a particular people which include their artefacts and their technology. He (2000) implies that artefacts of a particular people can inform museum visitors about the culture of the people. Malinowski (1944) suggests that culture is inherited artefacts, goods and technical process, ideas, habits and values. Culture can also be identified and expressed in physical or other goods that can be traded and sold as crafts, films, books as well as music which could bring about the process of globalization that can also be achieved through digitisation (Ghosh, 2003). This implies that culture though intangible as expressed through learned behaviour can also be made tangible as artefacts for economic purpose giving less consideration to the issue of authenticity. The commoditization of culture therefore encourages the active construction of authenticity and ironically undermining it through the staging or sale of culture (Jones, 2010).

Authenticity started in the eighteenth-century notion that human beings are endowed with a moral sense, an intuitive feeling for what is right and wrong (Taylor, 1991:26). Phillips (1997) suggests that authenticity is seen as a product of culture. Implying that material world goes through different characteristics, history including its chain of custody; and its relationship to other objects. In contrast to Phillips (1997) idea Jones (2010) queries the issue of authenticity as a product of cultural construct suggesting that culture might allows authenticity to be wrapped around any objects irrespective of its unique history and its materiality.

However, Lowenthal (1995) associates' authenticity with the sequence of development which is usually associated with buildings or monuments that should not be tempered with except for essential repairs. While Pye (2001;58-59) in contrast to Lowenthal (1995) suggests that

authenticity is the notion of 'original' and 'genuine' uncontaminated by the intrusions of another age. Placing emphasis on the true nature of the object defined in relation to their origin, fabric and intention of their maker (Clavir, 2002). Following the argument of Pye (2001) and Clavir (2002), Jones (2010) also describes authenticity as the attribute given to artefact that is true to its origin in terms of its date, material, form, authorship, workmanship, primary context and its uses. From all the above argument it can therefore be concluded that authenticity thus plays a part in various aspects of our life as well as many spheres of cultural practice within the museums and can be dependent on prevailing culture.

Authenticity for this paper will be following the tradition of Pye (2001) and Jones (2010) mentioned above but not limited to material objects but includes digital images that capture the all-necessary information related to the object: as confirmed by Benjamin (1999:214) that photography (which can be digital) can bring out those aspects of the original that are unattainable to the naked eye but accessible to the lens. Authenticity is thus not inherent in the object rather, it is a quality that is culturally constructed and ascribed to it: which varies according to who is observing the object and in what context (Larsen 1995, Rubridge 1995, Jones 2010). Emphasizing that the contexts in which objects are viewed, the person viewing and where it is exhibited have effect on the definition of authenticity.

Considering Joynt and Warner (1996) idea that culture is responsible for the way people interpret experience as well as generate the social behaviour associated to a community: it is therefore necessary to note that artefacts with much significance within a community will have much effect on the audience from same community. As culture is seen as one of the major determinants of how people think and behave: it will therefore have influence in the way and manner audience approach issues of authenticity (Kessapidou and Varsakelis, 2002). In determining authentic, original, and genuine, artefacts are perceived to reinforce the credibility of the culture they represent, as well as the beliefs and values of both the community and its members. Hence the definition of authenticity can be associated to a network of relationship between people (individual member and other members within the community), place and things (Jones 2010).

### **The context of authenticity in cultural heritage**

According to (Lowenthal, 1995) the Middle Ages witnessed objects being held as authentic by the public because the things demonstrated supernatural powers or those with authority validated them as such. He (1995) went further to describe sacred relics as being authenticated by the Church based on their virtue performing miracles not by their origin or attribute. New methods for establishing the genuineness of artefacts were introduced, thus valuing objective observation and experimentation over received opinions: due to growing concern by 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries for detecting forgeries in the rapidly increasing antiquities market (Jaffe, 1992). Various techniques ranging from observation with naked eyes to employing different kinds of magnification, including the use of ultra violet light, chemical test and x-rays were used to distinguish between the original and subsequent renovation revision, alteration or addition (Phillips, 1997). Therefore, the structure and composition of artefacts have become central to the way material scientist and conservators approach authenticity placing emphasis on originality (Pye, 2001:65). The above suggestions demonstrates that both museums and their audience have come to understand the importance of authenticity when representing culture the issue now lies on what method is adopted to recognise the original from the reproduction.

Lowenthal (1995) points out that the status of authenticity accorded to artefacts is based on the people with authority in this case the museum curators. The museum audiences are thus at the mercy of the curators who display this information of authenticity through materiality from the museum glass cases expecting it to strike a feeling in the audience (Larsen, 1995). The need to satisfy the curiosity of the museum audience has also led to the sale of authenticity which has become as principal marketing technique in heritage context (Watts, 1999: 836). Leaving museum audience no option than to seek authenticity as a tool for making sense of their encounter with the past, using it as aid to meaning making inherent to a particular subject matter (Kidd, 2010)

Authenticity can also be determined from the context in which artefacts were found and their use. Benjamin (1999) suggests that authenticity is derived from the real meaning the object has acquired from its beginning and the testimony to the history which it has experienced. He (1999) implies that the authenticity of artefacts is connected to their original origin, their use and the meaning they have acquired through the course of their existence. Consequently, objects found in primary context and still maintain some aspects of their primary function are often deemed more authentic than those from secondary context without their primary function (Foster 2001, Jones 2010). Due to reasons that the artefacts in their original environment are able enact some form of connection recognized as 'aura' (Benjamin, 1999). However, Hofstede (1991) confirms that culture is responsible for the patterns of feeling, thinking and acting to mental programmes which constitute what he referred to as the "software of the mind". It therefore shows that authenticity is pressed on the mind of the people and derivable from culture.

The relationship of nature to people brings about an experience of aura which rests on the changing order in human society reaction to normal: which implies that the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity's mode of existence: which is determined by historical circumstances (Benjamin cited in Marx *et al* 2007). Benjamin (2007) describes aura simply as a 'glance being answered with a glance by the person being seen' relating this idea of aura to museum artefacts that return our glance through their salient voice which makes connection with the person viewing them. He (2007) further explained that when we stare at someone we expect the person to react to our stare and this can be related to when we view objects at the museum gallery and we expect to engage with the object. Kaufman (2002), considering the idea of Benjamin on aura suggests that aura is created through artist imaginative labour: acknowledging the trace-presence of something no longer literally or physically present but nonetheless still with the artefact. The removal of work of art from the domain of tradition which eliminates aura is brought about by the contemporary crisis of mechanical reproduction and the renewal of mankind (Benjamin 1973). He (1973) suggests that the desire of the audience to bring things closer spatially has led to the loss of uniqueness of every reality by accepting reproduction. From the above argument, aura is on the ritual and traditions associated their origin. This ritualistic purpose is associated to a particular community and determined by the prevalent culture that guided the value of its members.

### **Aura as a determinant for Authenticity: delusion or idealism?**

Benjamin (1969: 221) in his recognition for authenticity emphasizes the importance of an objects unique history and relationship says that "the authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to the history which it has experienced". Artefacts tend to attain their voice from their relationship and

experience of the tradition in which they originate. Benjamin (1969) aura is eliminated by techniques of mechanical reproduction such as photography; which detach the object from the domain of tradition. Aura according to Benjamin (1973) originates from the objects association with rituals and it is threatened by mechanical reproduction which separates the defining nature of an object, its accumulated history and jeopardising its authority.

Baudrillard (2000) following the traditions of Benjamin (1964) claims that digital reproductions will be sold as a perfect image of the “real” object and act as a continuous, faithful and objective reproduction. Viewing the digital image as an instrument for destabilising the real and true he concurs that all historical and political truth will be reduced to information - a semiotic self-referring to existence. He (2000) implies that audience will not be able to distinguish the replica from the real as the ability for the object to engage the senses and trigger emotional response and memory is affected by the emerging convincing surrogates as a result the collection becomes obsolete. Aura to both Benjamin (1964) and Baudrillard (2000) is therefore associated with the tradition and ritual associated to its origin which gives the artefact a voice responsible to triggers emotional response from the audience found only in the original material object. They both saw reproduction as a means for the elimination of the criterion of authenticity which is based on rituals to shift to politics, liberating the work of art from its dependence on ritual.

In contrast to Benjamin’s 1964 and Baudrillard’s 2000 claim, Wells (1994:121-122) saw mechanical reproduction (which includes digitisation) as the capacity for endless reproduction and wide circulation afforded by photography was a ‘way to world peace that can be followed without any very grave risk of collision with the warring political forces and the vested interest of today’. He (1994) views the technology of reproduction as a possibility of going beyond the antagonism of contemporary politics and towards a global community united under a common ideology by proposing what he called a Permanent World Encyclopaedia involving the collecting, indexing, summarising and release of knowledge through micro-photography.

His (1994) idea is replicated in the invention of the internet and World Wide Web, where museum now have their website and can use these medium to exhibit their collections to a wide range of audience. Wells (1994) idea can be seen as an illustration of Malraux’s (1951) concept of the museum without walls where photographic reproduction can be used in bringing the works of art of the whole world in a new format on an accessible platform. Both Malraux (1951) and Wells (1951) can be considered as forerunners to the introduction of digitisation which makes both artists and works of art available to audience through photography and cannot be deterred by warring political forces.

Digitisation can also be said to be a confirmation of Valery’s (1964:226) statement that “like the introduction of water, gas and electricity to satisfy our needs in response to minimal efforts; so shall we be supplied with visual or auditory images which will appear and disappear at a simple movement of the hand, hardly more than a sign”. Digitisation can therefore be the future for museum exhibition in today’s technology driven society. Due to its ability to facilitate increase in access (multiple users can access material simultaneously from various locations) which can only be hindered by the sophistication of the technology employed (Astle and Muir 2002)

For aura to be limited to material artefact, it gives an impression of misconception about the idea of authenticity: as aura is linked to emotional feeling enacted by material artefacts simply



because of the history they accumulated through existence as argued by Benjamin (1999). Subsequently how do audience classify or consider the emotion enacted by the photograph of someone or objects that has affected a community and its members? Hence doubt about the idea that aura only comes to existence only when materiality comes to play is thus questioned. The idea of 'knowing' can also strike a relationship between the object and the audience: if the artefacts in question have affected a community one way or another: and if the tradition or story about the artefact is passed from one generation to another (Joynt and Warner (1996)). Since museum audience see the museum as a knowing archive where all their questions about the past can be answered and assist them in locating their place in that past: audience can then be educated about the details to identify the original artefact from the replica as authenticity has become important consideration of identifying with the past. (Bagnall, 2003). Thus the issue of authenticity has become a principal concern and aspiration of museum curators and their exhibition though might be a potential distraction from their initial goal (Kidd, 2010).

Authenticity plays a significant part in our everyday lives and not limited to spheres of cultural practice alone. In our everyday life of acquiring things we are able to distinguish between a replicated designer labels from the original by knowing the characteristic of the original. These everyday objects can be purchased from the comfort of our homes with the use of latest technologies. The truth we know about the original empowers us to identify with its authenticity. It is the unique experience people have with an object and crucially its network of relationship with the past and present, people and places that are important (Jones, 2010). Though they are divorced from their tradition they still have a voice in which they communicate that people experience as a sense of truthfulness or genuineness of the objects. It can therefore be related to the unique individual analysis and recognition, which Kidd (2010:25) identifies as the search of an 'authentic self'

Furthermore, artefacts displayed within the museums which are already separated from their original context, rituals, tradition and where they originated thus have a possibility of losing their aura as they are displayed in another context (Parry 2010). The displayed authentic artefacts in museums thus create new interpretations and meaning for the audience within the museum space (Hooper-Greenhill 2000). What is considered as authentic with an emotional enactment can then be assessed for originality authenticity and be viewed therefore as an assessment that we make about something in the present—something that we have in hand—relative to claims about the past (predecessor copies) (Lynch, 2002). This relationship by Lynch (2002) is responsible for how people experience and negotiate authenticity and aura through exhibited objects. The people in this case are the museum audience, the things in question are the museum artefacts and the place is the museum web site (online galleries). It is then possible to say aura is about a network of relationship between people, place and things that appears to be central and connected to their existence (Jones, 2010).

### **Is Materiality forerunner to Digitisation?**

Hampson (1998) sees that the selection of material artefacts for digitisation is based on written criteria recommended by curators within organisations. He (1998) implies that the curators have to go through the materiality of the artefact that is selected to be digitised which is based on the availability of the real object not an abstract. The past is at the service of the object reclaimed through its digital counterpart as it has the ability to illustrate, reiterate and passes on a set of social relations constructed for the 'real' and validate a collective social memory for a particular people (Hall, 2005, Cameron, 2007)). Cameron (2007) further argues that the decision to

digitise can be compared to traditional museum practice, which involves an active process of value and meaning making equivalent to that of physical objects: endorsing the curatorial process of selecting what is significant, what should be remembered and forgotten, and what categories of meaning such as classification, cultural values or aesthetical values are given pre-eminence. She (2007) maintains that the value of the real is increased through being digitised by enhancing its social, historical and aesthetic importance owing to the resources required in the compilation of a 3D rendering, and through distribution.

The photographic data at the time of their discoveries can be stored digitally: which can bring about a possibility of representing the artefacts with the environment where it was found: therefore digitisation introduces a possibility of manipulating the information in both spatial and temporal ways before being transmitted to remote viewers (Kalay, 2008). The digital representation in contrast to the traditional display enables information to be disseminated to the museum audience and increase new interest in museum artefacts. Digitisation can facilitate access to artefacts that are too valuable or too fragile for regular physical handling there by allowing material artefacts to be stored to which access can be justifiably restricted (Smith, 1999, Astle and Muir, 2002).

## CONCLUSION

In an environment characterised by persistent deception, it will be necessary to provide verifiable proofs for claims related to authenticity which would usually be taken at face value in the physical world. This demonstrates that digitisation is introduced to support material world through museum spaces and websites and encouraging the preservation of these artefacts in their original place where they can be visited for verification. Benjamin (1973) also confirms that the presence of the original is a prerequisite to the concept of authenticity: therefore digitization is not about reproduction but representation of the original in its own right conveying the original artefact halfway to its observer. As Joynt and Warner (1996) suggested that culture forms the foundation of values held by members of a community and interpretation given to their artefacts sums up their experiences evolving from generation to generation. Thus authenticity is a product of a relationship between people and things and does not rely on the validation of artefacts by museum since culture is a determinant of how individuals navigate the issue of authenticity. Digitisation of artefacts can be considered to be the answer for museum collections in our contemporary world of technology. However lack of revenue to change museum installations, the cases and plinths coupled with the hanging systems and practices of the museum world bestows tradition with a relentless drive for material artefacts (Phillips, 1997).

This paper therefore concludes that are representation of the culture of a particular people whose experience of authenticity is based on their pattern of feeling, thinking and acting to mental programmes which thus constitute what he referred to as the software of the mind following the tradition of Hofstede (1991) and Geertz (2000). Finally, digitisation which is a representation of the artefact and not reproduction as suggested by Benjamin (1999) and Baudrillard (2000) does not affect the navigation of authenticity because authenticity is based on aura which is dependent on the prevailing culture and not the mode of representation.

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