



Museum statistical data in Germany and Europe

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Meeting:

**92. Statistics and Evaluation, Information Technology and
Preservation and Conservation**

WORLD LIBRARY AND INFORMATION CONGRESS: 75TH IFLA GENERAL CONFERENCE AND COUNCIL
23-27 August 2009, Milan, Italy

<http://www.ifla.org/annual-conference/ifla75/index.htm>

Abstract:

In Germany, the Institute for Museum research (IfM) (State Museums Berlin, Foundation Prussian Heritage) since 1981 delivers an annual report on museum statistical data for Germany. The report publishes the annual total number of visits and of museums, the number (and the titles) of the temporary exhibitions of museums, opening hours, entrance fees, a grouping of museums by number of visits, by German regions, by type of museums and much more. The annual statistical museum survey in Germany also includes special questions different in each year. Among these are questions that cover the number of museums providing internet offers, holding digital catalogues, and the number of digitised museum objects (digital photos of museum objects). In the report for 2006, 1.135 German museums indicated that 17.8 mio did digitise texts, 1.404 had 15.3 mio working photos, 7.2 mio object views, 20.306 digital video objects a.s.o. Figures on staff working on digitisation, public accessibility, and funding were also provided. In 2005, it was asked for historic photo collections. Of 2.094 museums, 36.2 % were also digitizing their photos. Also in 2005, a report was issued for the "nestor"-network on long-term preservation of digital data in German museums (www.langzeiterhaltung.de > nestor materialien 2). 67.8 % of the museums had already digital data, 20 % planned for such. Figures are then provided on the type, use, etc. of these data.

In short: From all the data sources indicated, an insight into the current state, some trends and needs for digital information by museums in Germany in the context of portals and initiatives like Europeana will be provided.

Museum statistics data are being collected and provided in most European countries. In order to exchange experience and knowledge, to make museum statistics better comparable and to possibly offer aggregated data, an annual Conference on

museum data in Europe has been convened in Berlin since 1995. In 2004, a summary publication ("Guide to European museums statistics") has been showing data for most countries; some reports include figures about the number of museum objects for that country. The Conference has now taken the form of EGMUS, the European Group on museum statistics (www.egmus.eu). Here, the sometimes differing concepts used in European museum statistics are discussed, questionnaires are discussed with a view to more harmonization, and data are being provided both through the website of the group and to institutions like the Statistical Office of the EU. The group and its data also represent some work useful for future European digital data collection.

The Institute for Museum Research (IfM) (State Museums Berlin, Foundation Prussian Heritage) since 1981 delivers an annual report on statistical data on museums in Germany. The report publishes the annual total number of visits and of museums, the number of the temporary exhibitions of museums, opening hours, entrance fees, a grouping of museums by number of visits, by German regions, by type of museums and much more. The annual statistical museum survey in Germany also includes special questions different in each year. Among these are questions that cover the number of museums providing internet offers, holding digital catalogues, and the number of digitised museum objects (digital photos of museum objects).

Library statistics exist in Germany for quite some time, at least since the 1960ies. In parallel, statistics on museum data have been compiled, though in longer intervals and not always with full coverage. They mainly concerned the number of museums, and the number of visits they received, correlated i.a. with the size of the local communities in which the museums are situated. It was only from 1981, after the foundation of the Institute for Museum Research, that annual statistics is being prepared, aiming at full coverage of all German museums.

Today, the number of museums registered in the database of the Institute is about 6500, ranging from small rural museums maintained on the basis of voluntary work to large museums of international relevance counting several hundred staff. Also, the Institute for Museum Research places high importance on recording all types of museums regarding their type of ownership: our statistics do not only encompass not only state museums and local authority museums but also "private" museums and museums held by associations and foundations.

For the number of visits, from 1981 (52 million) to 2007 (more than 100 million) a considerable increase can be observed.

The definition of museum on which we base our statistics is the following: there has to be a permanent collection which is not for sale, there must be an exhibition space primarily for exhibition purposes, the museum must be open to the public and the museum should not serve commercial purposes.

Even more than a library, a museum depends on its visitors consulting the information – the museum objects and exhibitions – on the premises. An important task of the museum is to furnish the objects with all relevant useful and required

information alongside the objects without which the objects often would not reveal their significance and literally remain “silent”.

In some countries a regular part of the annual museum statistics is a counting of the total number of objects held in the museums (in Germany it is not). But counted or not, the objects must be registered, inventorised and catalogued as carefully and precisely as media in the library. A special characteristic of museum objects is that there is no sharp distinction between formal cataloguing and (descriptive) subject cataloguing. Also, the majority of museum objects are unique objects, i.e. “Unikate”. This holds true for a lot of museums, but not for all of them: natural history museums for example have millions of very similar objects or objects of the same type, e.g. butterflies. These are often conceptualised by a leading or typical one, called “type specimen”, the others serving as further evidence to study this “type” or class. Sometimes such very large holdings are counted collectively, e.g. by number of type specimen or by the amount of drawers. While here, the similarity of the subjects plays a role, in archaeology there exist often only fragments of objects – where it often is not clear whether several of those fragments once belonged to the same object. In that case usually not the fragments themselves are counted but only bulks of them. And there is a third case: a number of objects – each complete in itself – may form a special set: e.g. a tea-set. In this case often not the individual cups, saucers and plates are counted but only the entirety as a whole is considered “the object”.

In general, cataloguing of museum objects is a more holistic process; the different types of data that are gathered can not be separated too strictly.

But not only the number of museums, the visits and the objects are recorded in Germany. Together with the ever repeating questions in every year, we also ask for further features, varying annually. Some of these questions concern a more detailed understanding of the use pattern associated with museums. In such type of “visitor research”, more in-depth data are collected of what persons and in which situations they are visiting museums, how often they come and how they prepare their visits. Other features which we touch upon are e.g. museum education offers provided by the museums, the information technology applied in museums, number of museums housed in protected buildings, a.s.o. Because we repeat these questions usually every five years, we can give statistical indications about developments unfolding over certain periods of time.

Much as in other fields, the electronic or digital revolution has influenced the museums. Object cataloguing is increasingly being done in digital databases, and a completely new feature of information provision has arrived in the museum world: it is now possible to provide, and use in many forms, digital surrogates of the objects so that they can be presented and studied in depth independent of their physical location. Of course, a statistical comprehension of the amount and the presence of such digital objects is of high interest also to the processes of statistical recording.

Now, what is a digital object in respect of a museum? Obviously, the first step is usually an electronic database catalogue record giving the catalogue data for the museum object. Often, this needs to be complemented by larger descriptive text, the results of scientific investigation etc. But most prominently, in the museum environment we would normally ask that one or more photos of the object be given in the context of the catalogue record. Museums are visual institutions.

Since the majority of museum objects are fully three-dimensional objects, normally several photos are needed to give an impression of the object from all relevant angles. (A bigger step – though mostly not yet achieved – towards reproducing a real world 3D object is the application of 3D scans). Where a museum object is defined as a combination of several separate individual elements, quite a number of digital photos will be needed to give the full impression. So, what is “the digital image” of such an object? Obviously it is the combination of a number of single photographs (together with the descriptive text). Thus, statistical capturing of the data in the entire digitisation process involves several steps, the first being the determination what the “object” as the reference unit should be; second, which documentation and how many photos are needed to give an adequate representation of the object in a digital setting and thus make it a “digital object”.

Another big challenge carried out today is the provision of digital object photos in a quality good enough for presentation on the internet but usually avoiding such a high resolution quality that would deprive the museums of the exploitation of the copyright on those images. And museums do not present objects in isolation alone, an important activity of them is putting objects together in a meaningful way, i.e. to create display and exhibitions. Another aspect for digital objects of museums is therefore the digital conservation and presentation of “virtual exhibitions” as well as the digital documentation of real-world exhibitions.

In the report for 2006, 1.135 German museums indicated that for 17.8 million of their objects digitised texts are available. 1.404 museums had 15.3 million digital work photos of their objects and 7.2 million digital object views. 130 museums reported 20.306 digital videos a.s.o. Figures on staff working on digitisation, public accessibility, and figures on funding were also provided.

As stated above, a special type of objects in museums are photographs which are present in almost every museum (either digitised or more and more born digital). They are differentiated in three different categories:

- a) photographs documenting the objects held in the museum
- b) photographs as evidence of historical situations, events etc. (including photos from private albums, photos of streets and buildings at different times etc.)
- c) photographs as artistic objects, as works of art, by artistic creators.

b) and c) are cases where the photograph is also an object within the museum collection.

In 2005, historic photo collections were the special topic of the annual survey. Of 2.094 museums, 36.2 % were digitizing their photos. Also in 2005, a report was issued for the "nestor"-network on long-term preservation of digital data in German museums (www.langzeiterhaltung.de > nestor materialien 2). 67.8 % of the museums at that date had already digital data, 20 % planned for such.

These figures certainly are only a minimum number because often the size of photographic collections can only be estimated and also, because not all museums found themselves able to answer this question. In order to maintain and to enlarge this information and to complement the collection size information with keywords on the photograph subjects, a special website www.fotoerbe.de continues to register

photo collections in German museums (as well as from archives and related institutions). As of end of May 2009, it had 151 million photos in 2.901 collections.

Concerning the holdings of digital objects in museums, an in-depth study was carried out in 2004 – with the major focus on long-term preservation efforts resulting from the existence of digital data. A sample of 1.200 museums received a special questionnaire which asked for their IT equipment, number of digital objects, storage technologies used etc. The full report can be downloaded at http://www.langzeitarchivierung.de/downloads/mat/nestor_mat_02.pdf.

European museums play an important role in showing the richness and diversity of cultures. In order to use museum resources effectively, a common understanding is needed. What is considered a museum in Spain may not be seen as such in Hungary or Finland. And the set of data Slovenia collects to describe its museums might be different from such a set collected in Belgium. It is more than only a question of words; it is a question of ideas and conceptions, too. European integration builds upon an understanding of these differences. To communicate, to learn from each other and to cooperate, demands such understanding.

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