

Tangible and intangible heritage in interactive exhibitions



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Tangible and intangible heritage

Dear colleagues, I would like to give you an idea of the way in which Tropenmuseum Junior collects its material for exhibitions and programmes.

We are an ethnographical museum, a museum which deals with people. Therefore, a traditional approach of only a material collection is not enough.

Beyond that, we are a museum for children. That makes that looking and listening are very important, but not enough. The subjects come to life because the children are an active part of the exhibition. Not only for children the best way of learning.

Tropenmuseum Junior also sees intangible heritage as collection; this includes stories, songs, dance, music, food and drink, production processes and events.

Perhaps the only way to do justice to a culture on exhibit, is when all of these components are brought together.

Realising that the greatest part of the world's population chiefly uses oral tradition to pass on its cultural information, while only a minority does this by primarily using the written word, we should exercise ourselves in using the others means of communication in our exhibitions.

An example of the exhibition 'Stories to know where to go' (1995-1997) about the people of the Wild Honey. Their paintings, tools, stories, dance and songs all comprehend the knowledge of this clan. Each expression deals with a spot on their land, the land of the Wild Honey.

We built a kind of replica of the land of the Wild Honey with the signs of the land that refer to the dreamtime:

Stones?



If you know the stories, these stones are no longer ordinary stones, but Mimi spirits, dreamtime-creatures. We told the stories which belong to the different places. We sang the songs referring to the myths; we danced as trees and animals. We analysed the pictures and the children painted the signs in red, white and yellow clay. By connecting everything together, the children learned the story to know where to go. The exhibition is about a family of approximately 60 people. This clan of the Wild Honey has their own answers to universal questions, such as:

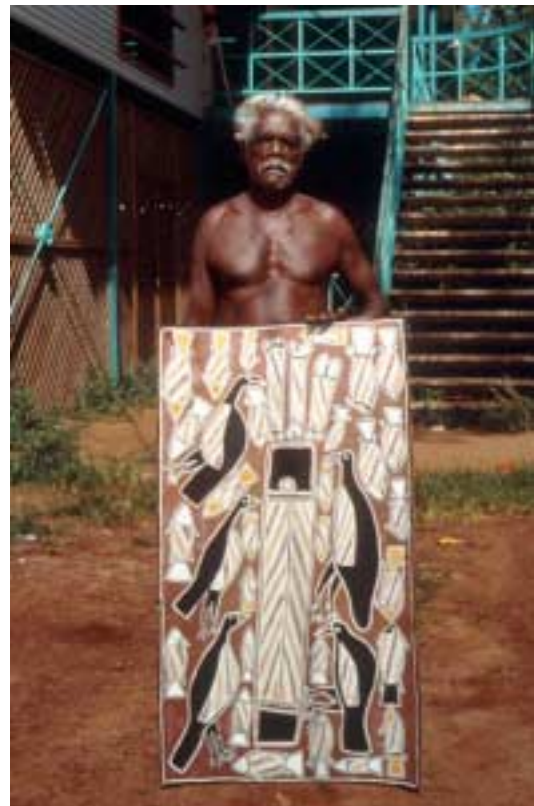
- Where do we come from?
- To whom do we belong?
- How do we survive?
- How do you recognise a friend or an enemy?
- The relationship between people and nature.





The knowledge of these aborigines lies in the songs, the paintings (on body and bark), stories, dances and music.

To be a good fisherman or hunter you need to know the behaviour of animals in detail. We know about the family from research done by an anthropologist, Ad Borsboom, who has had contact with this aboriginal family for 30 years. He wrote a thesis about a present-day friendship ritual of this family. We were inspired by his stories and saw the possibility of an exhibition in our museum, of bringing oral history, objects, activities and philosophy to our children. Together with the anthropologist we visited the land and the family. We asked the artists of the family to paint their myths on tree bark for our exhibition. This they did.





And we also asked for an explanation for the different elements. Even when we received the answer “this is a silly question” that was also included in the exhibition. An example: There was one element in the painting, which we did not receive an answer to, and did not know what it was. We told the children that we did not know the answer.

And we didn't know why we got no explanation about that. Immediately the children started to guess what it could be. And they were guessing why we didn't receive an explanation. Was it because we are outsiders? Was it because it was not for children's ears? Was it because they didn't know it themselves? Maybe the last old man or woman who knew it died without telling it to somebody? With these questions coming from one detail they came very close to a big and complex reality of the aboriginal culture.

The people of the Wild Honey painted, danced and sang for us the information they wanted us to use for Tropenmuseum Junior. Every element has many layers of meanings. And much cultural information is getting lost. So one detail with a good inside story can often give more information than many details together with only general information.

Without the intangible heritage this exhibition would have been almost meaningless. Maybe a nice art collection, but even than you don't know what you are looking at.

From world workplace to museum



When, in 1975 the Tropenmuseum started Tropenmuseum Junior, this was a museum without a material collection. Without objects from the cultures in the exhibition in which we were involved.

We did have lots of stories, dance, music, roll-play and handicraft activities.



The objects the children made were displayed in the exposition, it was our main collection. One or two treasures from the Tropenmuseum were “hands-off” displayed. The children who became Moroccan craftsmen could see a real piece of jewellery or a bowl that was made in Morocco. The strength of this real collection in combination with the hands-on working method, was unmistakable. It made Tropenmuseum Junior into a museum that deals with real people and real things, which they make and use.

Dead things

The collection of the Senior Tropenmuseum is full of special and wonderful objects. Unfortunately, there are seldom objects, which we can use in Tropenmuseum Junior. The condition that Tropenmuseum collection has to be displayed “hands off” is not even the biggest problem. The problem is that there is so little known of the history of the objects. One example:

an intriguing mask without the headdress, without the costume, and no knowledge of the person who made it, the user or where it came from, no images of the dance going with it, and without the music belonging to it, without information of the travel of the mask to the museum.

The lack of information makes the mask unfit for use in our programmes. When I asked the head of the collection department which percentage of the total collection is complete and with enough information to place it in a context, he guessed that it was 1%. He told me that it was probably the same in other museums. He called the objects without information “dead things”.



Objects-stories-activities



From 1980 Tropenmuseum Junior has been able to travel to collect the objects, the stories and the ideas for activities in the exhibition. Objects are not chosen for their uniqueness, but are chosen to fit in with method used in Tropenmuseum Junior.

Every village and every area in Bali has its own gamelan orchestra. On that small island there are a thousand orchestras. Nearly all the boys and men from one neighbourhood or village are members of the orchestra. Making music together is considered to be very important. They say on Bali: If you cannot play gamelan together then you can't work together on the rice fields or live together in harmony. The gamelan orchestra therefore, has a significant social function. One which fits well into our working method, in which we offer children a shared experience. It is not the idea that an individual player stands out by playing solo, but the melody made by the group is the most important.



The children who visit the exhibition 'Invisible Guests' played a gamelan composition which was made up of easy scores per instrument. Together it appeared to be a melody.



We were able to follow the instruments being made in Bali and so we learnt a great deal of extra details. Our orchestra also received an initiation ceremony.

The instruments were decorated and offers were given. This was done on one carefully chosen day.



We asked the people of the village where we stayed to play on our instruments dressed in the costumes we bought. The event was photographed and the sound recorded. We joined many other temple events as well, to see the reality in which we didn't interfere. For background information we consulted gamelan experts, they helped us in finding old en new stories. This has all been brought together in the Bali-exhibition and the result was a wonderful set of instruments and the activity was one of the best we have ever had.

And we had an abundance of stories to bring in.

Research

Tropenmuseum Junior makes exhibitions about present-day cultures. Approximately about six months before we travel to the different countries we start with the research by reading books, watching films, talking to professionals and more and more from the internet. This information is then correlated into our method and programme, to new ideas, experiences, results of evaluations, the possibilities we see for the people who have to carry out the programme, the needs of the community etc. We try to bring the always complex realities back to the essentials and above all to fit this into our method and the perception of children in Holland. This process takes a lot of time

and effort from a team that works critically and creatively together. Each subject has its own power and problems and needs specific solutions. The more the solutions come from the content the more significant they are. The research is the basis of everything we develop:

the exhibition, the programmes with all the activities and the stories, the books, the audio-visuals and the new media productions, the teachers' manual; the PR and last but not least teaching staff members.

We strive to have an comprehensive approach where shape and content, objects, activities, staff and children, how to receive the parents, the material which belongs to the exhibition, the PR, are like limbs of the same body.

The recording of the research

The way in which we record research is also very important: besides written text, there are photos, video and sound recording, which are equally important. A dance cannot be learnt from written text or from a photo. Photographs give a concrete image and the text gives the background to the images. Each means has its own power. To show connections a CD-ROM is a good medium. I can give you an example from the exhibition about the indigenous people from the Bolivian altiplano. We can show you what and how we collect information and where that leads.

From research to end-product, an example:

The literature we use is recorded; this is also the case with the video's and the audio recordings. Personal travel experiences are part of the information. Each item is photographed and written down in detail, the name of the maker, the place where it was bought, the material, the meaning, the use and the connection with other objects in the collection. The database of the collection is available in The Museum System (TMS). This is also used as a reference for staff members. The research is focussed on the information that can be used in the exhibition and in the educational programmes.



an other example from the Bolivian exhibition is the Tinku. Tinku is one of the deep-rooted thoughts of people of the Andes. It means 'encounter'. It is an encounter between opposite powers, which are needed, to come to productivity. To get something new you need two opposites. This idea is expressed in the music, in textiles, in the exchanging of products between the highlands and the lowlands, in the agriculture and in rituals. Although this is a very difficult thought, it was one that we wanted to include in the exhibition. So we planned our trip to take in the celebrations which took place on the 3 May where this tinku idea came to fruition in a ritual where two opposites fight dance with each other. We were able to be there when this celebration took place and we joined

the preparations in one village. Everything was filmed, sound-tracked and written down. We were able to buy the costumes and instruments, which were used, and we tried to gather as much detailed information as we could about the helmets, caps, hats, cloths, dresses, belts, jackets, mirror broaches, feathers etc. Everything we needed for use in our museum, to be able to dress approximately 30 children (boys and girls and in different sizes). We asked a dance choreographer in La Paz if he could choreograph a tinku fighting dance for us, taking into account the amount of space we have and the amount of time we have to teach to children but keeping the essential parts of the dance. He taught not only the tinku but also the diablada dance to a group of children in La Paz and we filmed them in action.

The changes we make for the use in the museum we try to do with the help of experts in this field. We do ourselves not lay claim to being experts but we think we know what fits in our museum method and what interests children in Holland. The joint cooperation with content experts is essential. The more "tinku" the cooperation is, the better the results. With this example I wanted to be able to stress how important a comprehensive in research and presentation is.

The artists who make the collection



A large number of the objects in the exhibition are commissioned for Tropenmuseum Junior. We get to know the maker of the piece and we record his personal story.



We follow the production process and learn about the material, the work and the inspiration of the artist.



This brings the personal stories in to the exhibition. We consider the personal stories as part of the collection. Present-day collection.

A collection which was commissioned by Tropenmuseum Junior



We came into contact with I Guste Gede Rake in Bali after we had seen his beautifully painted banners in a temple. It turned out that he was a great artist in this area and also in his younger years a good dancer, he also played the lead drum in the gamelan orchestra and performed with his family at home and abroad. He had very colourful paintings hanging on the walls in his house. These were painted in the traditional style, but with modern German acrylic paints; he let us see his paint-box. We then commissioned him to paint seven paintings for the exhibition. For each one we pointed out what we liked to have and discussed about the details.

We provided him with photographs of the objects we bought in the meantime for the exhibition, so that these objects were recognisable in the painting.



As the saying goes we were like 'elephants in a china shop' in the Balinese painting culture. As the Balinese painting culture and Mr. Rake are very open to new impulses, it turned out to be a very fruitful cooperation.



We asked him to tell us if we were asking something that was wrong in one way or the other. And that he did. It was usually because we were asking too much per painting. I asked him a thousand and one questions. One afternoon he was lying outside resting and I noticed that he had his eyes open but when he saw me coming he closed them quickly as if he was still sleeping.

I also asked him if he would paint his own life story. The painting of his personal story is published in the front of the catalogue that belongs to this exhibition.

He is quoted in the catalogue as saying 'the painting for the museum was a lot of hard work. They told me what should be painted. To me that had never happened before. I was used to painting whatever crossed my mind, that is: aspects of the ancient stories of the gods. I had never painted people before. Only gods and demons...



My son helped me with colouring-in some of the pictures, as I did not feel at all well some of the time.

I am very pleased I managed to get all the pictures finished on time. I told the people from the museum that they did not have to take what they did not like, but they took all of them'.

This shows how the commissioned paintings became more worthwhile because Mr. Rake painted them in cooperation with us but of course also from his own traditional culture as well as from his own artistic background. The objects collected in this way, we consider to be authentic, present-day, ethnographical collections, contextually collected and therefore suitable for the museum, the catalogue and the programmes.

Concrete, personal and specific

To try and make the unusual familiar is basic to Tropenmuseum Junior. This never happens explicitly but the unusual is taken as natural. This way we try to bridge gaps between the different cultures without naming the differences and without comparing our culture with theirs. Each visitor takes what touches him or her. Sentences like 'that's what people do there' or 'different from us' or 'it's their tradition' are avoided in Tropenmuseum Junior.

The most essential in the personal approach is that life elsewhere is not explained in general terms. We try to bring elsewhere life as close as possible to our children. By being specific, children make own connections with their personal life.

Using things that happen



In 1999 we were in Ghana to prepare the exhibition about the Asante Kingdom. Most of the time we stayed in Kumasi, the capital of the Asante Kingdom. One of the first days in Kumasi we asked for an audience with the Asante King, the Fifteenth King of the Golden Stool, King of the Asante

Kingdom, Otumfuo Opoku Ware II. The same evening we were visited in our hotel by a messenger of the mayor. He said in a whisper `we have to tell you a big, big secret: the big tree has fallen'. We knew immediately from our research what this meant. It turned out that after thirty years of reign the Asante King had died, exactly in the five weeks we were there. We also knew from our research that funerals are very important in Asante-life. But before travelling we didn't know how to include the funeral traditions in the exhibition for children. From the moment it was officially confirmed, all the chiefs gathered together to arrange the funeral. There were endless meetings concerning who did what and where, and the chiefs discussed about traditional rules and how to adjust them to modern conditions. It was 30 years before that the last king had died. We were witnesses to a very impressive funeral ceremony.



Our experiences, the newspaper articles and the photographs we took were used in the book Kofi a royal child. In the exhibition we made a memorial room with mourners. In the school programme for 10-12 year olds the funeral inspired us to make a story line. The children are the palace drummers and dancers and teach the new king the Asante traditions. The new king, Osei Tutu II was educated abroad and was taught Asante traditions before becoming King.

It was a great honour when the new King of Asante visited our museum and he played the part that is usually played by the teacher, of the King of Asante. He played himself and about the exposition he said 'This is a true representation of my life'.

This occurrence was a wonderful addition to the story and to the exhibition. This example shows clearly how important it is that the makers of this exhibition have their eyes and spirit open for everything that occurs. Reality is full of surprises nobody can invent and very useful in our work. The skill of the exhibition maker lies in the skill to see it and use it.

Real life

Children live in the real world, a world that through travel and communication gets smaller. Tropenmuseum Junior does not take the children in a supposed children's world. Children are interested in life itself. It does not have to be about childish things. The person in the story does not have to be a child. The approach in Tropenmuseum Junior gives children the idea that they are taken seriously. For that reason also adults like our exhibition as well.

The most interactive medium: people



The staff who work with the children, partly represent the culture on exhibit. This has an irreplaceable extra value. The staff are personally involved with the exhibition subject, and they add valuable knowledge to the programme. Guided by the staff, the children bring the exhibition to life. People are the most interactive medium imaginable. They tell the tales, play the roles, they dance, they play music, they inspire the visitors to participate actively, they intervene with the public, they organise, guide, encourage, they correct inconspicuously, they improvise and they

transmit the exhibition's content in a lively way. They teach the visitors that it is fun to get to know a different culture.

Here, we receive a group of children. They sit on a kind of rug. Esther welcomes the children and, while telling the story, she dresses up as Ferdosi, an ancient Persian poet.

The power of stories

In this role, she leads the visitors into an age-old story, a story from way before Islam. A story which is important to Iranian identity. While telling her tale, details from old miniatures depicting the story's scenes are projected on the screen behind her.

It is about a grey-haired baby of a wise man, a child born to bring peace to two families who had fought each other for centuries.



Ten minutes later, she leads the children even further into the story and into the exhibition, when she tells them of the mythical bird Simorg who took the child up to its nest, far away from the human world. Drummer Behzad accompanies the storyteller.

When the child grows up to be a man and his father comes to take him home, the bird gives him a feather from its wing and says: 'If ever you need to choose between good and evil, thrust this feather into the fire. You will see that I will appear instantly'.



This story serves as the inspirational source as the children then visit the rest of the exhibition. All collection comes from contemporary Iran and is collected especially for this exhibition. The staff add their information to the collection, often by means of a theatrical tale, and also quite often through interaction. For example:

Collection information in an act



Two door knockers. Why are there two different knockers? Merel asks a child to tap the door with the knockers.

Some children guess the answer: a female and a male knocker. Why would that be?

Merel plays the answer. She asks a boy to use the male knocker. Meanwhile, she places herself behind the door with a chador over her head.



She opens the door: Salaam. Instead of passing on ready-made information, she plays for a moment that she is an Iranian woman who covers her hair quickly when she hears a man knocking at her door.

Breach the pattern



The school group's teacher is put into a role by us on the spot. We do this purposely, to breach the daily school pattern. Here he is in his role as the poet. He writes a poem of what 'his' children are doing in the exhibition: the dancers, the musicians and the teahouse personnel.

By the end of the programme, the children assemble in the teahouse to show their artistry to each other.

From theme to an educational programme

By using our current exhibition *Paradise & Co.*, I will illustrate in short how we elaborate themes in the exhibition and the educational programmes.

This exhibition's themes are: cultural diversity, identity, the urge to create. The theme of 'diversity' is communicated by means of the costumes, the dances and the music from seven different regions in Iran. The costumes are made in Iran, traditional Iranian dances were transformed by an Iranian choreographer into dancing movements which we can rehearse with the children in a minimum of time. In Iran, we collected drums from the same seven regions. The music from these seven regions is transformed by Iranian musicians into simpler rhythms. The staff member plays the leading drum.

The dancers enter dressed in white chadors.



They spread their chadors to catch the projection of an image of that particular region in Iran.

Then they take off the chador to show their costumes and to dance. The group of musicians accompanies them on their drums.



The art of hospitality, food for the stomach and the mind



The teahouse personnel serve tea and food for the stomach. And also food for thought, as they read the future on their notes with a line from an old poem and a contemporary foretelling.

The theme: The urge to create

Iran is a country crammed with rules. The laws of the land are based on fundamentalist ideas of Islam. Despite or perhaps thanks to the limitations which are the result of these rules, art flourishes in Iran: poetry, calligraphy, painting, tapestry, film. Time and again I was amazed by the difficulty people engage upon in order to create something beautiful.



In this exhibition, we make with the children a growing tile tableau of some six thousand tiles. The images depict events from ancient poems.



Also, children work on pages of a large book. They imitate details from age-old miniatures made by the great Iranian masters. We choose the details along with the poet Ferdosi's words.

Staff training



The exhibition staff is trained during six weeks prior to the exhibition's opening. Training in content, teaching, the art of storytelling,



dance, music,



making tiles, miniature painting, cooking and the art of hospitality. And even during the whole period of the exhibition (some two and a half years), trainings take place on a regular basis. On top of that, colleagues take the time to observe each other, to learn from each other and to discuss one another's approach.

Teamwork



Open communication among the staff is crucial to us. Museum work is teamwork, and this demands trust in each other and in oneself. Since each person is different from the next, fortunately, we try to use as much as possible each staff member's special abilities. The programme must fit the people who work in it. In the course of the exhibition, the programmes and the staff become more and more a unity.

At this moment, we try to elaborate the staff's own personal stories into wonderful personal tales in the programmes we offer families. It is especially these stories which attract visitors of all ages.

To finish: What we can learn from a broom

A broom, made from the veins of palm leaves.

The grandmother of Kofi from Ghana taught her grandson everything a child should know. She pulled a branch out of the broom and broke it in half: 'crack', people are as fragile as a branch. She took the broom in both her hands and bent the bundle. Not one branch broke' So together

These are the stories I wanted to tell you. Maybe you liked them. Maybe not. I hope you took something from it and will bring something back.