

## Print publishing at the museum. Why?

Ontario Museums Association Conference: Attracting Visitors, Transforming Lives.

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Slide	Speech.
1 Why do museums publish books?	<p>I am very pleased to be invited to speak today. For the last five years I have been researching answers to the question: Why do museums publish books? What special relationship exists between printed books, museums, art galleries, their staff, exhibitions and their visitors? I am writing up the results of this study now for submission as a PhD thesis at the University of Leicester, Department of Museum Studies.</p>
	<p>The books on the slide are published by the British Museum and represent a small selection of the over 250 current and back titles that they offer to the general public. Their technical bulletin and research reports considerably expand this number. And I have started with the British Museum because it is important to understand that for this research I set considerable limits on the study in order to understand and grasp what turned out to be a very complex topic. This also means that the findings may not be universally applicable.</p> <p>I limited by data gathering to the publications associated with temporary exhibitions at national institutions. I selected two institutions based in London. I interviewed staff involved with publishing and those people involved with exhibition preparation. And, I obtained responses to the books from visitors who purchased the books through email and web-based questionnaires. In a few cases I was also able to interview visitors after they had read the books.</p>
	<p>In the course of researching why museum publish books, I came to understand answers to this question, but also why people buy museum books. I'll start by talking about the institutions and the temporary exhibitions which had catalogues and books associated with them. Then I'll discuss the answers I obtained.</p>
2 Wellcome Collection	<p>The Wellcome Collection is dedicated to the public understanding of science and medicine. The exhibition space is in central London, includes a cafe and a bookshop, library and a theatre for public programmes. A small exhibition staff includes three full time members and several part timers who put on a comprehensive programme of major and minor exhibitions throughout the year. Most are accompanied by printed publications.</p>
3. Covers of books for Wellcome Collection exhibitions	<p>I studied three of their exhibitions: The Heart, Sleeping and Dreaming and War and Medicine. Each of which had an accompanying book published. The books were published with commercial publishing companies, as collaborative products between the gallery staff and the publishing company. In the case of The Heart and Sleeping and Dreaming, content was primarily responsibility of gallery, with the publisher contributing production tasks, and crucially distribution and some marketing into the book trade. With War and Medicine, the editorial process was much more collaborative. In all cases however, the book was not thought of as a catalogue, but rather a means to extend the visitor's (or non-visitor's) understanding of the subject. So, books to accompany an exhibition, with a life after the show closed.</p>

<p>4 National Gallery, London. Books for these Alison Watt and Sisley exhibitions</p>	<p>I also studied two exhibitions at the National Gallery which had catalogues published to accompany them: Alison Watt: Phantom and Sisley in England and Wales. In this case study, the catalogues were written by the curators, and produced by the in-house publishing staff, with assistance of external designers. The Sisley catalogue followed a more standard form with a list of lenders, images of the pictures and contextual essays from the two curators.</p> <p>Alison Watt was less conventional in content. The associate artist scheme offers contemporary artists opportunity to work in the National Gallery for two years with a concluding exhibition. Its catalogue included a long poem and pictures that showed the contemporary artist at work in the Gallery. The high production values required additional sponsorship for the printing of this catalogue.</p> <p>These catalogues were closely tied to the exhibition and sales have fallen off now their exhibition are closed, although sales (particularly Sisley) were good during the exhibition mainly due to the low cost</p>
	<p>What did I found out from the staff and visitors at these institutions?</p> <p>Data pointed to some fascinating issues around reading, readership and book production, but as time is short, I will cut to the chase and talk only about various motivations for publishing and purchasing the books.</p> <p>For institutions, the primary acknowledged and fore-grounded purpose is to make money for the institution. And, to communicate the results of the scholarship underlying the exhibition.</p> <p>Few surprises here. These institutions have sufficiently high numbers of visitors who represent a captive audience so that most of their exhibition books will make a profit of some sort, it is just a question of how big a profit. And I realise that this is not the case with museums and galleries with smaller visitor numbers. Their publishing strategy has to be very different.</p> <p>Essentially, beyond the obvious communication and funding purposes the data pointed up several themes in the use that producers and readers make or expect of museum books.</p>
<p>5 Books as record</p>	<p>Books as records. These comments apply to the staff of the institutions.</p> <p>The curators told me that they use the museum books as a record of the exhibition. They use the list of objects to remind them of the actual objects in the exhibition, their size, and in particular, their lenders. This relic of the exhibition is more easily accessible than the papers or electronic files used as the exhibition was being formed and this information is referred to many years later to locate exhibits or lenders.</p> <p>It is much easier to lift a book from the shelf, turn to the back to find this information, than to search through the files either in filing cabinets or electronically. Essentially, books provide an easily accessible form of data.</p> <p>Alison Watt said she used the catalogues of her show to remind her of paintings which had passed from her ownership. She said, it sounds ridiculous, but sometimes she needs a reminder of the size or even the title of a painting.</p>

	<p>Now, this in itself is not a reason to publish a book, but combined with the commercial and communication purposes, it does point to a force maintaining the production of books.</p> <p>One curator said that the book also provides a reminder of the theme of the exhibition and its purposes. In other words the book is a reminder of a past event. This purpose leads on to the purpose for visitors.</p>
<p>6 Books as souvenirs</p>	<p>For visitors, the main motivation in buying an exhibition books is to acquire a record of a personal event, a souvenir although interestingly only one person used the term souvenir to refer to the books. They referred to them as reminders or records of an enjoyable experience. An experience they had shared with friends and family. The book, they realised would remind them of this life event.</p> <p>I am guessing now, but I think the avoidance of this term souvenir is because it has connotations of impermanence, and frivolity inappropriate to the cultural associations of non-fiction museum books.</p> <p>Another purpose voiced by visitors is that as a resource for their work. Several visitors indicated that they thought the information and images would be useful in teaching.</p> <p>But all mentioned its use as a record of a pleasant experience.</p>
<p>7 Books as representation for readers</p>	<p>The data supporting this next purpose is less obvious from the responses, but there is evidence that museum catalogues and books serve a function as representation for their owners.</p> <p>Probably from our own lives we are familiar with the role that books play in representing life experiences. We all have books from childhood, school, university, travel so that these experiences can be and often are represented on our bookshelves.</p> <p>And, while museum books and catalogues represent a pleasant experience to ourselves, they also represent our experiences to others. The familiar coffee table book is a somewhat pejorative name for an elegant and glossy book but Janis Adams of the National Galleries of Scotland explained to me that she selects the cover image for the catalogues with an understanding that people in Edinburgh buy catalogues as trophies of their visit and that these books will be displayed in their homes as evidence of their participation in the cultural life of Edinburgh.</p> <p>Books also serve to represent curatorial scholarship. The curator's name is associated with this permanent record of their research and study. There are few other locations which associate the individual's scholarship and research into the collections with the exhibition.</p>
<p>8 Books as representation for museums</p>	<p>Books as representation for museums</p> <p>Most of you will be familiar with the ideas that the architecture of the museum building represents the authority of the institution. The associations with the Greek temple of learning and aesthetics are evident in this image of the British Museum. These visual effect of approaching this portal is part of the resources that contribute to the visitors experience and are available for constructing</p>

	<p>meaning of the visit. Their entry into the museum represents their passage from the external world into the world of the learning and possibly entertainment, certainly an environment of culture and of community.</p> <p>Books like buildings represent the museum. Their weight, the quality of their paper, illustrations, photography, binding, their covers: these convey a sense of establishment, authority and cultural status. These signs (semiotics) combine to represent the museum through the physical presence of the book.</p> <p>Museum books also usually display a foreword written by the director and addressing the reader. This text puts the book into context and attaches it even more firmly to the institution.</p> <p>Books as representation provide additional features over that of the building. They are portable. They reside in visitors' homes. In their living space, on bookshelves where they represent the museum (and the visitors' association with the museum) for years to come.</p> <p>The publication of most art gallery books are sponsored by commercial companies. The book then represents the association of the company with the cultural authority (cultural capital to use a well-worn phrase) of the museum.</p> <p>Sponsor companies then use these books to advertise this association to clients and the general public. Again, books are a permanent record of this representation.</p> <p>In addition to this form of representation for the institution and its staff, for the visitor, the museum book frames their experience in the exhibition space. As the books is usually consumed after the museum visit, the framing action occurs in retrospect, but it does provide a</p>
<p>9 Digital versus physical</p>	<p>So, this brief synopsis of my study provides some idea of what might be the reasons why museums continue to print books at a time of ipads, apps and ebooks.</p> <p>The physical nature of books allows them to function as a record, a souvenir and as representation for both producers and for audience. In conjunction with the commercial contribution that publishing makes to most large national museums, these purposes are currently supporting the continued print publication programmes.</p> <p>This physical and visual permanence is not available from electronic products. There are many advantages that electronic communication offer, but these particular purposes of books are not replicated by digital.</p>
	<p>Future purposes The question now is, how long will these physical purposes continue to be celebrated by museum producers and audience?</p> <p>Books are currently purchased primarily by people who grew up using books as their primarily source of information and reading entertainment. What happens when the majority of museum visitors are those people who grew up with the</p>

	<p>Internet as their main source of information, is something which needs to be considered.</p>
	<p>I'm going to conclude now with my view, which effectively sits somewhere in the middle and says that: Some data is best presented digitally, other information is best presented physically.</p> <p>Both forms will survive. Books no longer have the market to themselves, but my research indicates that the physical nature of books offer advantages that are appreciated and celebrated by visitors who will continue to buy a book as a records of their experiences.</p> <p>Price, the balance between text and images and the overall number of images in the book are important factors in visitors' decision to purchase and these features should be place to the fore front when writing and designing books.</p> <p>Whether purchases will remain at sufficient numbers to allow publishing to continue their contribution to funding that is currently enjoyed by the major art establishments remains an unresolved question.</p>