Exhibiting Science And Professionalism: Organizational Symbolism And Professional Commemorations In Vietnamese Museums

Exposer la science et le professionnalisme : symbolisme organisationnel et commémoration professionnelle dans les musées vietnamiens

Jonathan Paquette* & Christopher Gunter**

* Associate Professor, School of Political Studies, University of Ottawa, 120 University Avenue, Ottawa, Ontario, K1N 6N5, Canada
** Doctoral candidate, School of Political Studies, University of Ottawa, 120 University Avenue, Ottawa, Ontario, K1N 6N5, Canada

Received: September 19, 2015 Accepted: February 25, 2016 Online: June 17, 2016

To cite this article (original version)

Pour citer cet article (version française)
EXHIBITING SCIENCE AND PROFESSIONALISM: ORGANIZATIONAL SYMBOLISM AND PROFESSIONAL COMMEMORATIONS IN VIETNAMESE MUSEUMS

JONATHAN PAQUETTE* & CHRISTOPHER GUNTER**

Abstract

While classic functions of Western museums have included conservation and preservation of objects and artefacts, the same cannot be said for the institutional makeup of the museum itself — which has been repeatedly torn down and rebuilt by conflicting political forces and emerging critical discourses. These transformations and consequent pressures have led to profession-related concerns and questioning around curatorial authority and the general role of professionals in the field. Through a lens of organizational symbolism, this paper analyses exhibitions from museums in Vietnam in an effort to shed light on how the social and political forces of national independence and colonialism have changed the contours of the curatorial profession and institutions in Asia. By emphasizing the significance of professional rituals and organizational symbolism in museums, this paper argues that exhibitions showing the practice and acts of professional commemoration reveal important normative aspects and elements of the professional ethos of museum professionals. In other words, these aspects illustrate the post-colonial challenge of crafting a professional identity in Southeast Asian museums, while also pointing to common profession-related concerns.

Keywords: profession; organizational symbolism; ethos; Asia; Vietnam

Over the course of the past few decades, Western museums have undergone significant transformations, several of which have amounted to a certain critique of and challenge to curatorial authority in museums. Many of these transformations are the result of policies widely encouraged and promoted by governments which have targeted social and cultural services in the wake of sweeping public sector reforms. In particular, these reforms have affected museum structures, funding, and/or operations by introducing new forms of evaluation to, on the one hand, improve government capacity to evaluate museum performances and, on the other hand, create new accountability standards for museums (Gray 2011). In other words, museums are now being pressured to demonstrate their social and economic contributions to society (Poulard and Tobelem 2015; Sandell 1998, 2003). While, arguably, the museum has always been shaped or at least traversed by significant political forces (Bennett 1995), what has emerged from this current political context is a new managerial apparatus that acts as a catalyst for the creation and institutional valuation of new kinds of expertise in the museum. As a result, Western museums have entered an important transformational phase that not only affects curatorial practices, but might even renew them in a certain way.

* Associate Professor, School of Political Studies, University of Ottawa, 120 University Avenue, Ottawa, Ontario, K1N 6N5, Canada. jonathan.paquette@uottawa.ca

** Doctoral candidate, School of Political Studies, University of Ottawa, 120 University Avenue, Ottawa, Ontario, K1N 6N5, Canada. cgunter@uottawa.ca

Received: September 19, 2015 Accepted: February 25, 2016 Online: June 17, 2016
But what has perhaps been the most striking challenge to curatorial authority is the one driven by forces from within the sector. Critical discourses in the curatorial field have made their way into its curriculum and have had an important effect on the socialization of new professionals. Ranging from pleas for a more inclusive and socially responsible museum to more radical critiques of the institution, Museum Studies programs have been the catalysts for a renewed vision of the museum and a new ethos for curatorship (Knell et al. 2008). What was primarily Anglo-Saxon introspection is now gaining currency in the museological traditions of continental Europe (Chambers et al. 2014). As a result, the public is mobilized and portrayed as playing an increasingly important role in museum operations, from interpretation to exhibition development. The public and the publicness of museums are the new measures of excellence for all museum activities. These pressures, which lead to a questioning of curatorial authority, are often driven by professional concerns in the field (Jenkins 2014). But are these concerns global in scope? Are they shared by professionals the world over, or are the challenges to curatorial practices expressed and experienced in different ways?

If we take an example from the other side of the globe, Asian Museums have also faced important social, political, and economic changes and challenges. These changes are, however, different in nature and, in many ways, more profound, as many Asian countries have, in recent decades, emerged from colonial rule to stake out their claim and identity as nations and independent states. It is reasonable to suppose that social and political changes of this kind may have helped to shape the contours of the curatorial profession and museum institutions in Asia. Furthermore, it has long been argued that Asian museums are “foreign imports” (Kahn 1998) – an argument that reveals the singular challenge of developing a professional and institutional identity for museums and curatorship in post-colonial contexts. Building on research data from China and Southeast Asia, this paper explores the challenges and contexts of curatorship in Vietnam. We focus in particular on the organizational symbolism and representational politics of curatorship and research in museums that “exhibit” or showcase the profession. This paper studies exhibitions – most of which are permanent – where museum researchers and curatorial practice are “exhibited” for the public. While the primary purpose of the paper is to contribute to our knowledge of curation in Southeast Asia, through examples from Vietnam, it also indirectly raises awareness about the importance of professional rituals and organizational symbolism in museums.

We argue that exhibitions showing the practice and acts of professional commemoration reveal important normative aspects and elements of professional ethos; they illustrate the post-colonial challenge of crafting a professional identity in South-East Asian museums, while also pointing to common professional concerns. After drawing on these exhibitions that illustrate the practice of curation, while taking some additional analytical distance, the paper concludes with a discussion suggesting different ways democratization in museums can be understood.

ORGANIZATIONAL SYMBOLISM AND THE STUDY OF PROFESSIONAL CULTURE

There are, most certainly, many ways to assess the evolution of museums and curatorial practices. This paper adopts a theoretical and disciplinary position rooted in the sociology of professions and organizations. From this theoretical perspective, we consider museums and their professionals as the agents of their own organizational and professional culture – suggesting that the professional transformations and challenges alluded to in the introduction can, in fact, be conveyed, experienced, and reinterpreted in the symbolic space of organizations and through professional discourse.

From an institutional and organizational perspective, museums are considered both a reflection and an expression of culture. At the institutional level, all museums reflect the collective pressures that are placed on their operations. New museums are shaped by the expectations of professionals, the government, and, to a certain degree, their users. From an historical perspective, new institutional theories in sociology have described how institutional interactions come to shape a field – such as the
museum sector – through normative, mimetic, and, at times, coercive processes (Powell and DiMaggio 1991:67-71). While museums may adopt important and distinctive strategies to promote a measure of singularity and uniqueness, they are nonetheless subject to pressures that act as catalysts for greater conformity in their norms, practices, and organizational structures. The work of DiMaggio (1982, 1991) brilliantly illustrates how the museum sector has been shaped and transformed by social and professional pressures that consistently stress the importance of collective dynamics – especially cultural dynamics – in the evolution of this field of activity. An institutional perspective of this kind underscores the part played by inter-organizational pressures in the constitution and transformation of organizations.

Taking these insights further, the paper focuses on how inter-organizational pressures have been received within the field of museology. In other words, it focuses on agents’ experiences of their environment (Kondra and Hurst 2009). Siding with Meyer and Rowan (1977), we suggest that professional and organizational culture results, in large part, from a subjective engagement between professionals and their environment. To borrow an expression from Meyer and Rowan (1977:340), professional and organizational culture serves to consolidate agents’ myth(s) of their institutional environment. Additionally, this viewpoint on museum professionals and curatorial practices requires that we pay close attention to many subtle dimensions that are constitutive of professional culture and identity.1 Inspired by the ethnographic tradition, sociologists of professions have been interested in the world views developed by professional groups and how they articulate their place within and relationship to the State and the public. Hughes (1958) uses the notion of “professional mandate” to describe how professional cultures try to articulate a more or less coherent conception of their origins, relationship with the public, and contribution to society – thus making it an interesting tool for the socialization of members. Others, inspired by the work of Foucault (1969), have approached professional culture from the lens of knowledge to understand culture as a collective by-product of professionals’ strategies to develop, cultivate, or protect their monopoly (or authority) over certain practices (Evoces 2006; Freidson 1986, 2001). Other commonly studied dimensions of culture include the normativity, beliefs, and value systems of professional groups, often characterized as the ethos of professions (Demazière and Gadéa 2009; Dubar 2000; Watts 2010). Some authors have extended the study of these normative dimensions to include the rituals (Alvesson 2013; Boltanski 1982; Sainsaulieu 1988; Schlesinger et al. 2015) and material culture (Jeffcutt 1996; Parker 2015; Strati 1997) of professional groups, incorporating these layers as additional lenses for the study of professions and occupations. The development of new research programmes in organizational symbolism in the 1990s has influenced the sociology of professions, bringing greater attention to professional artefacts and visual and material elements of professional culture.

In this research, we focus on these latter dimensions – on the visual culture and symbolic displays of professional activities. From a methodological perspective, our research builds on exhibitions and commemorative displays of the practice of museology as windows into professional culture and normativity. Displaying curatorial activity – as a profession and as a process – offers many insights into the beliefs and value system(s) of professionals: it offers a window into understanding the ritualization of power, hierarchies, and authority; and it arguably also offers a number of insights about professional concerns and challenges, not to mention a sense of what is professionally valued and rewarded. The nature of the museum – its common juxtaposition of narrativity and materiality – reinforces the interest for further investigation into the meaning behind the display and memorialization of curatorial practice. Moreover, in the Asian context, the display of curatorial activities may offer possibilities for expressing professional concerns that would not be appropriate for other channels; it demonstrates the need to spotlight the profession and make it more visible.
MUSEUMS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Museums are, culturally and historically, products of Western society. It has widely been argued—and has been the cause of many of its critiques and contentions—that the museum has acted as a catalyst for evolutionary discourses and the emergence of a scientific spirit, and, as such, has contributed to the ideological apparatus of colonial order (Bennett 2004). A critical perspective on the museum’s history identifies it as the cultural accomplice of European imperialism. Whether we agree with this perspective or prefer a more nuanced approach to a global museum history, it remains that the museum—as an institution—has typically embodied values and an attitude towards culture that is deeply rooted in Western beliefs and values. As such, museums reflect, through their collections—a rationalized and technical attitude to cultural care that, itself, is a reflection on many of the processes of social transformation at play in Western societies.

According to Kahn (1998:226), “[m]useums are a Western import that has been grafted onto Asian societies in the course of the twentieth century.” To his credit, Kahn was not far from the truth: most Southeast Asian national museums trace their origins to institutions and scholarly societies developed during (and under) colonial rule. For instance, the Dutch colonial powers in Indonesia supported the activities of the Royal Batavian Society of Arts and Science, an institution that played a key role in the development of museums in the area (Thompson 2012). Similarly, in Thailand, the influence of scholarly societies, such as the Siam Society (1904), contributed to the rise of museums in the region. If Thailand differs from other Southeast Asian nations because it was not dominated by foreign colonial powers, the development of museums in the country remains the result of cultural exchanges during the colonial era. More recently, French archeologist, historian, and former director of EFEO (École française d’Extrême-Orient), George Coedès, exercised an important influence on the dissemination to Asia of European standards for classification, display, and preservation of artistic and cultural artefacts (Peleggi 2013).

European colonization introduced the museum as an institution, but it also played a significant role in the consolidation of standards of practice. In Malaysia, whose first museum was introduced in 1883 during British rule, the cultural significance of the colonizer has had an enduring effect on the organizational culture of museums. According to Kalb (1997:70), “Malaysian museum culture owes much to British colonists. Malaysian officials struggle to establish a postcolonial identity using colonial museum practices.” For Kalb, the colonial order has a long and enduring legacy in Malaysian museums.

For Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, the advent of the Permanent Archeological Mission of Indochina—first developed by the French State in 1898 and which later came under the direction of the EFEO in 1900—acts as a seminal moment in their cultural and museological histories (Nguyen Thi Thu 2012:85). Beginning as a modest collection and exhibition that moved from Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) to Hanoi in 1901, the project evolved and resulted in a permanent exhibition in a conventional museum managed by the EFEO in 1913. Over the next few decades, a series of prominent museums would begin emerging in Vietnam, all of which exhibited traces of colonial influence—either in name or intent: in 1923, the Museum of Imperial Antiquities was developed in Huế (Central Vietnam); in 1929, the Musée Blanchard de la Brosse opened in Saigon (known as the Museum of Vietnamese History in Ho Chi Minh City since 1976); and in 1932, the Louis Finot Museum opened in Hanoi (later to become known as the National Museum of Vietnamese History) (Hue Tam 1998:189). Additionally, in Phnom Penh, an institution associated with the EFEO—the Musée Albert Sarraut (today known as the National Museum of Cambodia)—opened its doors in 1919. In other words, more than simply being influenced or subjected to the shaping effects of colonialism, Vietnamese museums are intimately rooted in the cultural history of colonialism.

After the Second World War, many colonized countries acquired their independence at the price of devastating wars, while others acquired it through diplomatic efforts and political channels. After liberating their countries from Japanese and European powers in the 1950s, Southeast Asian nations were
left with the challenge of reinventing and reimagining their museum institutions. In particular, those nations were left with the complex task of developing new narratives, creating professional cultures of their own, and “domesticating this foreign import” that is the museum (Khan 1998:226).

While, historically and culturally, the foreign character of Western museums is largely accurate in the context of Asian countries, with a certain distance we can start to offer nuances with respects to this foreignness. For instance, in Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea, the museum sector relies on a lively professional culture where challenges are discussed and scrutinized through conferences and professional networks that are unique to the cultures of these countries in their approaches. Similarly, in 2010, the Chinese government sponsored the opening of more than two thousand museums scheduled to open within five years (Paquette 2015). Despite cynicism entertained by many in the Western press, these museums have since opened and communities of practice have developed around them as Chinese museum professionals experiment and strive to create a curatorial path of their own.

EXHIBITING SCIENCE AND A PROFESSION: CRAFTING A PROFESSIONAL CULTURE

Commemoration (and memorialism) are practiced in most, if not all, museums. For instance, it is common practice in Western museums to name a hall or wing of their buildings after a founding figure or as a way to recognize the contribution(s) of a famous scientist or his or her active role in documenting and constituting a collection. Commemorative plates, halls, and collections are named after individuals who had a seminal impact and influence on the institution. Through their own official histories, museums also shape their institutional identities: they tell us who they are, and they convey their mission and values through a narrative they shape and render available on websites, pamphlets, or in books available for purchase. Historical collections – the first artefacts or pieces of artwork – are often put to use in exhibitions that demonstrate a point of origin or a point of departure for a given museum. But the act of curating, the practice of curation, of exhibiting the museum and its processes, is something less usual as a practice – at least in Western society. What does this practice tell us about the field and the curatorial culture underlying this type of action?

This paper engages with the practice of curating curation by focusing on the exhibitions of three sites in Vietnam: two permanent (one at the Museum of the Imperial Citadel of Thang Long in Hanoi and the other at central hall of the Museum of Vietnamese History in Ho Chi Minh) and one temporary (at the Ho Chi Minh Fine Art Museum). The latter exhibition, Objectif Vietnam – Photographies de l’École française d’Extérieur Orient, was first presented in France, then in the National Museum of Vietnamese History in Hanoi from December 2014 to March 2015, before finally arriving at the Ho Chi Minh Fine Art Museum in June 2015. Before we begin, however, two important acknowledgements need to be made. First, this paper originates in a broader research programme on museum ethics and colonial heritage in China, Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand, and Singapore. The data discussed in these pages focuses exclusively on site visits that occurred between June and August 2015. While many of the insights covered here deal with issues of colonialism, what we focus on should be considered as supplemental to the scope of the research programme these observations are derived from. Second, the objective of the paper is not to state that Vietnamese (and, more broadly, Southeast Asian) museums are the only ones exhibiting their practices. For instance, in Toronto, Canada, the Royal Ontario Museum’s Galleries of Africa presents objects of the Nubian Kingdom of Kush in juxtaposition with videos of one of the museum’s senior curators working outside the museum. This can be understood as an original and rich way of providing a learning experience, or it can be approached through more critical lenses – in which case, it raises issues about the politics of the museum and its associated professions. Resituating an exhibition in its institutional and political context provides many interesting insights into the museum and its professionals. So while we do not think exhibiting the practice of curation is unique to Southeast Asian museums – although this approach is widely used in museums of the region – focusing on the region enables us to address some of the issues that traverse curatorial practices there.
THE MUSEUM OF THE IMPERIAL CITADEL OF THANG LONG

The Thang Long Citadel is a museum, an interpretation centre, and a heritage site undergoing archeological exploration. The Citadel encapsulates the ancient and modern political history of Vietnam. While the site itself was initially built under the Chinese domination of the region (Hanoi), the Citadel was later rebuilt during the period of national affirmation of the Vietnamese people in the 11th century during the Ly Dynasty (Figure 1). The site also contains the underlying marks of colonial occupation, as many of its buildings and monuments were demolished under French occupation to better reflect the French administration’s ideals of urban planning.

As a result of the French occupation, only parts of the Citadel’s main walls and a select number of its original buildings remain, while European-inspired buildings were added (Figure 2). The site was successively used by military powers as a command post for the liberation of the nation, and, until recent decades, still served for military purposes. Two military bunkers and administrative buildings are now accessible to the public. This site obtained national heritage status in 2002 – along with legal provisions to protect and conserve it – and was recognized as part of the UNESCO World Heritage program in 2010.

Along with the Palladian-styled colonial buildings developed on the site of the Ly Dynasty’s historic citadel is a building – also constructed under the French administration – used for a permanent exhibition on the Museum’s history (Figure 3). This exhibition occupies a 5x5 meter room and contains approximately 40 photographs and documents related to the Museum’s development and history. Many of the photographs represent the museum and its activities in official circumstances: they demonstrate the Vietnamese Communist Party leaders’ interest in the site because of its embodiment of different layers of national history, including the history of the Party; they also portray the museum as a place for cultural celebration, highlighting the visit of the UNESCO representatives after the area was recognized as one of UNESCO’s official World Heritage sites.

Figure 1. The main walls of the Imperial Citadel of Thang Long, Hanoi, Vietnam. Photo taken by the authors in 2015.
The exhibition *Thang Long: Some Typical Activities* also focuses on key moments in the Museum’s history between 2010 and 2014 (Figure 4). While the montage of photographs in this exhibition present several celebratory events, some of the more notable images highlight levels of domestic cooperation as part of the exhibition’s building process. In this case, cooperation serves as the main catalyst for the narrative on professionalism; it is the primary “signifier” of this exhibitionary complex. What the exhibition panels display, on the one hand, is the Museum’s newly acquired role as a pivotal site for heritage excellence; it presents the Museum and its professionals as expert scientists disseminating their expertise to local heritage sites and institutions. In this context, museum professionals are shown in their roles as researchers, archeologists, and educators. In this respect, the exhibition focuses on the more conventional and established conceptions of curatorial practices, with a strong emphasis on research-intensive activities. The panels stress the place and part played by professionals of the site/museum as enablers of professional capacity throughout the country.

However, on the other hand, these exhibition panels also depict the curatorial profession as a catalyst for social and political cooperation. This political role, played by the museum and the profession in the exhibition panels, should not be interpreted as naively political – as if the museum professionals shown were either simply acknowledging existing political forces or seeing themselves as conveyers of a political ideology. In other words, we should not interpret the exhibition as being influenced by a manipulative political effort, as many Western researchers may be tempted to do at first glance. What the exhibition conveys, it is argued, is a sense of professionals acting politically in the substantive sense – as representatives of a profession that is helping to build a community and foster more harmonious relationships. Another dimension of the display leads us to believe that a further theme emerges from the research activities presented – a dimension that is tied to the museum’s own distinct historical identity.
It also can be argued that this exhibition describes the curatorial professional as an agent for cultural diplomacy. In fact, many of the exhibition’s photographs present the museum and its professionals together with national and international politicians, so calling attention to the unique role museums can play at the political level. This further bolsters the cooperation narrative underlying the entire exhibition, with its portrayal of research activities as opportunities for connections with the nation and with international partners. The Thang Long Citadel Museum display conveys a professional identity based on research, scientific rigour, and social action through cooperation.

THE MUSEUM OF VIETNAMESE HISTORY

Located in Ho Chi Minh City in the south of Vietnam – and not to be confused with the similarly titled National Museum of Vietnamese History in Hanoi – the Museum of Vietnamese History was built under the auspices of the EFEO’s archeological mission in Indochina (Figure 5). It opened in 1929, originally under the name Musée Blanchard de la Brosse, in honor of the former French governor of Cochinchina – the name used by the French to denote the portion of territory now known as South Vietnam and Cambodia. Today, this national museum exhibits the history of Vietnam from its pre-historic settlements to the end of the Second World War. Its collection contains many rich relics and cultural artefacts from the Oc Eo culture and the Champa. As it stands, the museum occupies an important position in Ho Chi Minh City’s museum scene. Because of its collection, composed essentially of archeological finds and ethnological material, this museum differs from most of the museums in the city insofar as it is less concerned with contemporary history.

In the case of the Museum of Vietnamese History, an exhibition of curatorial practices occupies a central place the Museum’s rotunda located just past the entrance, in a place where visitors both start and end their tours, where they are guided through the historical stages of the cultural history of the Viet people and its minorities. The central hall exhibits a dozen Buddhist statues, while a bust of Vietnamese
leader, Ho Chi Minh, sits triumphantly in the middle of the room. The exhibition on curatorial practices comprises a series of a dozen blue panels permanently showcased around the main hall (Figure 6).

Two themes run through this exhibition on curatorial practices. On a first level, the exhibition focuses on the most conventional aspects of heritage practices and curatorship, with an emphasis on the collection and preservation of heritage items. The panels portray museum researchers in their active role as scholars and custodians of the nation’s cultural heritage. In some photographs, professionals are shown in scenes where they actively comment on artefacts and exchange knowledge, while in others they can be seen as agents of cultural diplomacy, playing an active role in cultural exchanges throughout Asia. On a second, perhaps more important, level, most of the scenes presented in the exhibition portray curatorship and preservation in an active mode. In fact, where the exhibition puts particular emphasis is on cultural preservation through the development of the Museum’s collection. Most of the panels describe curatorial activities as chiefly resulting from the development of collections. Some scenes portray curators and other museum professionals in donation ceremonies, while others give prominence to procurement as a strategy for collection development. Other exhibition panels draw attention to the transfer of cultural property from different orders of government (Figure 7). A final group of photographs and exhibition panels show professionals actively involved in the recovery of cultural heritage through archeological work. Clearly, collection development takes centre stage in how curatorial activities are portrayed, conveying an asymmetric image of the curatorial role and leaving little room to other activities such as interpretation, restoration, or preventive conservation. In most panels of this exhibition, an object from the collection is showcased to illustrate its provenance. This discursive strategy constructs an active and creative representation of curatorial activities. Also important is the emphasis on collection development, an approach that can also be found in other rooms where the
The contribution of professionals to the collection – whether it is from their own personal collections or from their work – is widely acknowledged. The contribution of curator Vuong Hong Sen, for instance, is recognized through the memorial apparatus of the museum in an exhibit of his legacy. While this last aspect is neither exceptional in itself nor unique to this museum, it does serve to reinforce the importance of a developmental attitude in museum collection.

The main hall’s exhibition of curatorial activities culminates with a single panel providing statistical figures on the Museum’s development. It could be argued that the glorification and presentation of the Museum’s mission statement and descriptive history is emblematic of its separation from its colonial ties, and the establishment of the unique identity of those involved, including their profession and their degree of autonomy. The venue itself – a colonial building – could be seen as a symbolic illustration of a level of freedom from colonial ties and a re-appropriation of territory. Additionally, these exhibitions displaying the curatorial process suggest the Museum’s desire to be a transparent in its efforts to maintain or garner local support and trust that might have been lost with independence and the severing of colonial ties. Similarly, the importance attached to presenting cultural statistics in the exhibitions could suggest a certain sense of accountability. In other words, making this data accessible creates an overall acknowledgement of the Museum’s public and community, so constituting a subtle legitimization of their involvement. In this sense, the choice of transparency around museum data could be viewed as a strategy to encourage further engagement.

OBJECTIF VIETNAM – THE HO CHI MINH FINE ART MUSEUM

To date, the temporary Objectif Vietnam exhibition has been presented in two major institutions in Vietnam: first, at the National Museum of Vietnamese History in Hanoi; and at the Museum of Fine Art of Ho Chi Minh City. It was in this latter venue where we had the opportunity to engage with the exhibition on a site visit in July 2015. Building on the vast archives of EFEO, the exhibition was developed by Paris-Musée – an association of municipal museums in Paris – and first shown in the Cernuschi Museum of Asian Arts in Paris. The exhibition guides us through a huge number of historical
photographs showcasing EFEO researchers at work and invites us to engage with the hermeneutic work of reinterpreting the past through the eyes (photographic lenses) of French scholars in the colonial-era regime of Indochina. *Objectif Vietnam* was presented in the central building of the Fine Art Museum, one of three colonial-era villas used by the museum.

The exhibition stresses how a foreign eye can distort the perspective on a culture different from one’s own. Pictures are organized to show French scholars and their local collaborators at work. While an effort is made to portray local residents and sources as scientists, scholars, and collaborators working with the Museum, the exhibition does not avoid showing the asymmetry between the French colonists and the local scholars. Panels draw attention to the study of funerary rites and annual religious ceremonies – such as the Vietnamese New Year (Tết) – and they also make a point of presenting the mission of the EFEO as that of a developer of cultural institutions. Speeches by famous members and administrators of the EFEO acquaint visitors with the contributions of the institution, especially in its seminal role as museum developer. Excerpts from the EFEO mission statement convey an image of the institution as a progressive organization committed to the recovery and preservation of Indochinese history (Figure 8). What the exhibition fails to do, or leaves up to visitors, is clarify the role played by the EFEO in the French colonial order.

In this case, what is interesting is not so much the development of the exhibition itself as how it is used as a tool for cultural diplomacy and its reception in other prestigious Vietnamese institutions. This outcome in fact adds further meaning to the exhibition. Its reception in those other institutions implies a public acknowledgement of their colonial roots. This recognition of the long legacy of colonialism in Indochina, and colonialism’s strategic role in the development of the colonial apparatus, brings to salience the question of ambivalence towards Vietnamese organizations. On the one hand, these were institutions that – building on Bennett’s ideas – were part of the cultural infrastructure of colonialism. On the other hand, those colonial roots were germane to the development of institutions in which museum professionals now evolve. The exhibition and its reception can be interpreted as an example of post-colonial ethics in museum and curatorship activities in Vietnam. The ambivalent history of the institution is made public as a means of coming to terms with the past, while underscoring the urgent necessity of creating (or furthering) a professional and organizational culture that can claim its own place and identity.
DISCUSSION

These three exhibitions reveal interesting characteristics about the nature and definition of curatorial practice in Vietnam. While the two permanent exhibitions discussed are structured along the lines of two different master narratives or master signifiers – cooperation in the one case and collection development in the other – both illustrate a profession whose reach and activities resonate well beyond the confines of the museum itself. In the first case, curators felt the need to exhibit their practice and portray their work as being part of a broader agenda, in this case, that of increasing cultural diplomacy opportunities for the nation. Curators in this context are presented as intermediaries. In other words, their interpretation of cultural materials and work on different layers of dynastic power in South Asia (including the influence of colonial powers) can be capitalized on to build further opportunities for collaboration. On the other site, these museum professionals put the emphasis on their understanding of their institution as being driven by collection development. In this latter case, the museum professionals have engaged in the complex task of tracing the paths that brought objects to the museum. The choice of transparency can be seen as functioning at two levels. At a first level, the museum public is offered descriptions of the processes involved in a given professional practice. At the other level, the second exhibition also illustrates the importance of identifying ways to measure the value of the elements that make up the exhibition – offering what might almost be seen as administrative accountability to the public through pictures and data of a kind more commonly found in annual reports or strategic plans. When the third exhibition is then added to triangulate or cross-check the viewpoints shown, the museum public can obtain a better understanding of the undeniable colonial weight of this field of history and the ways in which institutions are actively engaging with that history – despite the painful process that may be involved. Their engagement arguably allows these institutions and their museum professionals to unapologetically take charge of, and redefine, their institutional and professional narratives both transparently and accessibly. In doing so, they are shaping the ways their audiences understand and/or appreciate not just the museum itself, but the practices and professionals involved in delivering the museum’s message.

If we reflect more deeply on the need for museum professionals to celebrate and exhibit their practices, what is striking about curatorial exhibitions is how they convey a dual professional ethos arising from a conventional conception of curatorship. This conception can be seen in the exhibitions where professionals are shown in action, performing their scientific duties, and, in a sense, ‘performing’ science. Their quest for a singular and distinctive professional identity may seem paradoxical from a western perspective; however, it comes precisely from the performance of conventional scientific activities. This predisposition may lead critical scholars of museum studies to interpret it as a sign of colonial alienation. But to fully understand the ethos of curatorship displayed in these exhibitions, one must also acknowledge how the displays convey ideas of professionalism that are closely tied to an underlying subset of social and political activities that reach beyond the museum space. The professional discourse and strategies presented are not as explicit in this regard as those now employed in the professional world of curatorship. Those former positions convey a different sense of the broader social and political mandate of professionals in society. What we are offered may be less explicit, but it is no less political. As a caveat, we are duty-bound to recognize that this earlier view constitutes only a very limited reflection of the different concerns and identity markers of professionals in the field. Nonetheless, it does bring to the fore the issue of how to engage with exhibitions of professional activities. Are we “symmetrical” (Latour 1987) when it comes to talking about professionals exhibiting their activities? Should we not be treating these initiatives as cultural material that raises important issues about the curatorial profession?

This leads us to interpret these observations as a template for further discussion – not only about professional identity through visual culture and exhibitions, but also around the question of democracy and democratization in museums, and the part curators and museums are ready to play in fostering it. With museums everywhere now integrating the public into many of their activities – not only as visitors,
but also through significant involvement in museum projects — one might wonder to what extent, if at all, these initiatives are politically reflexive? When different activities, narratives or programming are presumed to better reflect the public’s interpretations of situations, are we really taking the necessary critical distance? After all, the increasing mobilization of the public by museum professionals occurs only within the political confines of the museum. In fact, these processes draw museum publics into areas where they may not necessarily be equipped to produce the results we would expect. Are these intensive attempts to downplay curatorship and give greater voice to the public or audience, by not merely giving greater voice to the most educated and distinctive audience — the amateurs — and reinforcing their power over the institution? While these activities are undeniably shaped by professional aspirations, they are also part of a certain degree of democratization of the museum. As museum professionals open their practices up to the public, they are making museums more conspicuous institutions. In the process, they are giving new prominence to inconspicuous aspects of museum activities to in order to foster a greater appreciation of these institutions’ potential for contributing to society.

NOTES

1 These issues, while stemming from a corpus of research founded in the sociology of organizations, are germane to museum anthropology, especially when research provides a reflexive outlook on the practice, stressing an inward-looking reflection, on the anthropology of museums in general rather than on anthropology defined as practices used in a particular museum. In addition, the sociology of art and artistic work has also on several occasions used methodological perspectives inspired by ethnography. Becker’s Art Worlds (1982) and more recently, Nathalie Heinich’s work (2001).

2 This paper builds on data from a research project on Museums and Asia and Southeast Asia funded by institutional funds from the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Ottawa. Directed by Jonathan Paquette, the project aims to engage with colonial heritage and with the representations of social policies in national museums.

3 Displays of institutional memory can be found in many museums of the region. They celebrate the museums’ founding figures and attempt to create non-colonial roots for the practice, through the commemoration of key national curators.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


