



Inventory and Catalogue of museum goods: principles and experiences

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Before introducing the current orientations about inventory, catalogue and the most recent operating plans from the ICCD (Central Institute for Cataloguing and Documentation), thought should be given to the meaning of these terms in order to focus on objectives, limits, interconnections, critical thinking and conventionalisms between concepts and rules.

The goal of the stocktaking process is drawing up an inventory, that is to say a systematical registration of items of the same kind, periodically written with the purpose of recognising and quantifying the heritage. The definition is almost automatically associated with that of its application field, called "inventory of the goods" – in this case cultural goods – a quite ambiguous combination, but it is certainly a happy combination in the area of the judicature, of specialist literature and of current opinion.

It is an operation that basically responds to practical and economic needs, involving the monetary evaluation of the registered good, an estimation based on its worth – real or presumed – on the market.

This type of evaluation is a very critical focus for cultural goods, since their nature goes beyond material parameters and doesn't fit the standard market; thus the estimate indicates the value of purchase of the item at the moment when it becomes part of the collection or the discretionary value attributed to it by the compiler of the register.

Moreover, this value is useful for other pragmatic purposes all involving economic consequences, such as opening new insurance policies, managing heritage cases, selling or exchanging goods.

The process of stocktaking has a double nature. On one hand, it is urgent, because of its recording what has been materially found, as well as temporary, because of its being constantly verified and updated; on the other, it is a precise, formal reference document for practical and cognitive matters.

Indeed, since the inventory is generally compiled by a public officer who indicates the quantity, the value and the features of the goods found, it has

juridical and administrative significance. The inventory also proves the real property of the goods kept in institutions recognised as museums and of the ecclesiastical goods, which are preserved and exhibited in a site that includes collections of the same kind.

The stocktaking of cultural heritage basically underlines its material aspects, collecting measurable and quantifiable objective data. The operation necessarily includes the assignment of a number code to each item processed in order to easily retrieve it and place it in time. With regard to this subject, it is emblematic the finding of fragmentary records that have been registered as soon as they arrived and later have become parts of a greater unitary good identified by a single number code, so that it can be tagged with as many codes as the single parts are.

Thus, the aim of stocktaking is a clear and effective presentation of the goods that briefly illustrates their properties and consistency, keeping in mind that, despite the specific informative potential of cultural goods, objective data is shortly exhausted with little information given by the compiler according to his qualification.

In the common use, inventory is a synonym for properly compiled list, a light index, easy to write or read, but also arid from the viewpoint of information and hardly cognitively stimulating.

Cataloguing, instead, means to create a set of documents responding to specific requirements that have been collected following precise regulations and organised for research in a systematic structure. Since it is a more detailed and wide-ranged operation than stocktaking, the approach with cataloguing is much better configured.

When cataloguing cultural goods, this work of the human activity reveals processes that, compared to others, have more complex value from a linguistic point of view. Naturalistic goods, recently recognised as part of the cultural heritage, are analysed from a scientific standpoint and represent symbolic finds of the historicised set up of positive science beyond their substance, unidentifiable in a hand-made object. So, the concept of inventory itself seems rather insufficient, reducing a cultural good to a common product and not valorising its specific features and semantic richness.

Listing the physical and objective properties of the analysed item, instead, would require technical support to embrace its total worth and a complete view upon its complex linguistic-symbolical and relational nature.

Thus, stocktaking results in a cognitive process that extends the relationship between the catalographic object and the environment of origin or reference and studies in detail historical and critical elements coming from exhaustive and generally comparative research.

When reconstructing sets and groups, this kind of attitude may influence the identification and definition of a good as well as its quantification in comparison with the typical inventory-like approach, according to which every item is isolated and counted as single in a plain enumeration.

In order to attain a compiled and simplified record, the systematic methodology of the stocktaking process used by the ICCD doesn't only involve the goods belonging to the heritage register that are tagged by a number code, as to say museum goods - in both narrow and broad senses of the term - but also activates the catalographic process at its base. The identification of

any good through a minimal set of so-called "compulsory information" is the threshold level to enter an inventory; should it lack any of this information, the good cannot be properly identified. Starting from this level, it is possible to continue with the cognitive process by adding further information that, according to the typology, the significance and the representativeness of the good, requires the support of detailed technical and specialistic analysis.

Thus, the stocktaking level, in spite of the undoubted rapidity of the survey and the simplification of the approach, is rather unstable for its contents. The survey data is not always the result of a proper knowledge of the subject and is generally directly extracted on the spot, locally or from previous registers.

Therefore this tool is effective only when dealing with the recognition of large quantities of data, such as unexplored photographic collections, serial goods or poor in informative contents. In this case, detailed analysis may not find any further data, determining an actual informative correspondence between the stocktaking and the cataloguing threshold. Stocktaking is not very accurate, instead, when dealing with more complex items that cannot be exhaustively described through the sole essential and overall data, because it would reduce the worth of a good as to cause a nearly total loss of cultural identity.

From this point of view, the passage from the inventory to the catalogue might be interpreted as the explicit confirmation of the cultural value of a catalographic object, an attribution that would be otherwise laid aside, suspended or implied as a conventional assumption based on, for instance, the circumstance of the preservation of a good in a museum regarded to as a cultural site.

The identification of goods on the national territory started within the Superintendencies in small proportions and without a precise organisation; it was then developed with some historic investments in the field of cultural goods and later rationalised through procedures of computerisation and systematisation. In the course of this process, stocktaking and cataloguing have had alternate issues with supporters and opposers according to the expectations and the objectives proportioned to specific exigencies and contexts. The wavy spur to add or remove information, based on practical aims or cognitive aspirations, brought to the compromise of an average level, commonly referred to as "precataloguing", which collected all the available data beyond the narrow inventory level.

Some large-scale census operations proved in facts the insufficiency of the mere inventory level. It is the cases of the so-called *Emergency Operation (Operazione Emergenza)*, based on a plan deriving from that of the Law 84/90 for the Special Projects. It was organised between 1992 and 1994 as an activity especially addressed to the tied goods of private property, which had great difficulties and strains in the successive phase of computerisation. Also, as regards to the more recent and still ongoing filing of the ecclesiastical heritage, the Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI) had to choose a higher informative level because of different issues with the initial inventory level.

As a result, the adoption of very narrow and abridged patterns for the registration of cultural goods data is rather restricting and disappointing when, at the time of surveying or receiving feedback, it is possible to recover more information compared to the basic inventory level.

Once clear that stocktaking corresponds to the starting catalogue level in the

ICCD's system and that it can be auto-sufficient according to the morphologic and stylistic typology of a good, we can move on to the section on the heritage data of an inventory.

The catalographic plan refers to this subject as Location and Heritage Data, which involves the area of localisation and collocation for its direct relationship with the site. This section is repetitive, because, for its own nature, the inventory is subjected to updates and has to be necessarily filled in when dealing with goods kept in museums and collections. In fact, it responds to the so-called context compulsoriness – i.e. related to the actual situation of a good – because the plan can only be applied to the mobile goods as a whole, independently of their belonging to a museum, which is why a general obligation to compile cannot be accepted a priori.

As regards to museum goods, some fields have to be necessarily filled in, such as the number code along with the related date and the worth again with the related date, in order to reconstruct, when they are associated with the repetitiveness of a good, the sequence of the inventories and the worth referred to an item back in time. Since it deals with the history of goods, this path represents the highest level of cataloguing, while for the inventory level, i.e. the beginning of the catalographic process, it suffices to consider the most recent register containing administratively useful data.

Moreover, it should be pointed out that the entries and the related obligations within this section are common to every typology of goods that can be registered in an inventory, among the most important ones archeological, historical-artistic, demo-anthropological and naturalistic. For this kind of information paintings, photographs, prints, anthropological, archeological or naturalistic finds are described with the same modalities, because they all concern the same informative contents about preservation and heritage, not affected by the nature of the good itself. The consonance among the various typologies of file models referring to the different typologies of goods for this section has come naturally ever since the creation of the first versions of the plans. Thus, their evolution, with the possibility of further detailed studies, has moved in a similar way according to the same exigencies.

While the above-mentioned directly concerns the Location and Heritage Data section, which is a specific segment of the plan, as regards to the inventory level, that is to say the minimal informative threshold necessary to register cultural goods in a heritage record, the Institute is moving on with its procedures in order to establish a common set of absolute obligations not only for mobile goods, of which museum goods are only a preservative specification related to property, but also for premises and territorial goods.

In the last few years, in fact, the ICCD's analysis and catalographic methodology has been aimed at achieving the best integration among the technical services to establish survey rules as unitary as possible with relation to the components of the national cultural heritage. The typological belonging to the heritage is not always clearly limited and its informative contents, after an objective cross-field comparison, are basically homogeneous for the general data.

The integration for the uniform treatment of different kinds of knowledge is based on the methodological assumption that for any typology of good – architecture, art, monuments or also portions of territory or naturalistic or

demo-ethno-anthropological goods – a set of common informative features can be found, apart from the particular characteristics related to the “nature” of a good, that require appropriate disciplinary analysis. With this viewpoint, it has been possible to proofread the previous plans with a unitary logic, applying the same approach and formal conventions also for the complex goods that differ in appearance from each other, such as an album of dried plants, a composite mineral, a scientific instrument, a painted polyptych or a pluristratified site. The proofreading is connected to the progress of scientific research in different disciplinary fields and to the constantly more interrelated exigencies of cataloguing. For this reason it aims at attaining the best possible convergence of the descriptive models.

Later, the Institute has achieved another alignment of those informative cores common to all the kinds of files that are usually defined “transversal sections”, because of their intersecting every catalographic plan. In structures and data, they are the basic unit upon which the sections aimed at surveying the particular characteristics of a precise typology of good are organised.

Within the area of the operations as regards to the Location and Heritage Data section, renamed Heritage Data and Collections, it has been carried out a better structure that involves the possible genetical complexity of a cultural good with possible recomposition or reuse of some parts and valorises with a special structured field the collection set to which a good might have belonged in time.

With relation to the detailed methodological and technical study, although the identification of a cultural good rarely occurs along with its finding, the exigency to rapidly report potential items for the national cultural heritage has never faded, especially for some fields like archaeology, needing urgent preventing procedures when connected to research or findings.

With this attitude, it has been created a soon-to-be-released informative module that, thanks to the transversal approach pursued by the ICCD, can be applied to every typology of goods and used for activities of work planification and information recovery.

The logic of the Institute involves a common informative basis to identify goods and possible informative paths according to different types and situations. So, the module is composed of a fixed and common part, concerning compulsory data and valorising it according to the ICCD’s standard rules, which may be accompanied by optional customised and variable parts selected in compliance with the planned activities.