

What is museology?

ANE HEJLSKOV LARSEN

Abstract: *This article is an edited version of my inaugural lecture as professor of museology at Aarhus University, Denmark, on September 22, 2023. It targeted colleagues from Danish museums and universities and students.*

Keywords: Museology, etymology, scientific discipline, heritage, museums, schools of museology

That is the title of my inaugural lecture. Why is this question relevant to ask? The reason is that there still exists an uncertainty about what the research object of museology is and what museologists understand by various museological concepts. Furthermore, a strong Nordic perspective is lacking in the definition of museology and the understanding of the work of museologists.

I will answer the question by looking into and answering the following sub-questions, on which the sections of my lecture are based:

- What does the word museology itself mean?
- Where does the word museology appear as an expression of a discipline or science?
- When and why did it become a discipline at Aarhus University?
- What is the difference between museum studies and museology?
- Is museology a science?

In my discussion and conclusion, I will explain how I understand a museological research

process based on my own research practice and my background as editor in chief of the journal *Nordic Museology* from 2005 until 2012.

During my lecture, I will refer to Kerstin Smeds, former professor of museology at Umeå University in Sweden from 2003 to 2019, as an important Nordic voice. I will do so by drawing on some of her statements from her article "Museology as science?" in volume 1 of *Nordic Museology* 2018 and discussing them in relation to the above-mentioned questions.

I have chosen Kerstin Smeds because she represents a clear, pragmatic Nordic museological voice. I first met her when I was asked to take over the job as chief editor of *Nordic Museology* from 2005.¹ The journal had existed since 1993 and from its very beginning was aimed at becoming a Nordic forum for museological research and debate.

In 2005 Swedish museologist Per-Uno Ågren was the chief editor of *Nordic Museology* and he wanted to retire. Subsequently, I was offered the position. In the following years I organised editorial board meetings. These took place in the different Nordic countries, where we also visited museums, met museum colleagues, and

shared experiences regarding each country's museological education. In this way, the editorial process also developed a collaboration between our countries

When I became chief editor, I had been an associate professor in museology at Art History at Aarhus University since 1998. I had been the chairwoman of the fine arts committee at the Danish Arts Foundation from 1996 to 1998 and a museum curator at Trapholt in Kolding from 1989 to 1992 and at Aarhus Art Museum (ARoS) from 1992 to 1994. Together with colleagues from Archaeology and the Steno Museum (now a part of the Science Museums of Aarhus University), we developed a new one-year supplementary education for bachelor students called Museological Studies in 2001. The education was interdisciplinary; students came from subjects such as History, Art History, Classical Studies, Archaeology and Anthropology. The same year we also established a Center for Museology at Aarhus University. In 2005, associate professor Bruno Ingemann from Roskilde University and I edited and published an anthology called *New Danish Museology* (title in Danish *Ny dansk museologi*).

WHAT DOES THE WORD MUSEOLOGY ITSELF MEAN?

I will now answer the first question: What does the word museology mean? The etymological definition links the word museology with antiquity. The etymology of "museology" means "study of the museum" according to the French museologist François Mairesse, professor of museology at Sorbonne Nouvelle University.²

The word "museum" is derived from the Greek word "museion". Museion is a term for a shrine, grotto or mountaintop dedicated



Fig. 1. Forum Romanum, Rome, Italy. Photo: Ane Hejlskov Larsen.

to the nine Muses. The connection between "museum" and "museion" has been used in museological literature as an excuse to perceive the museum as a modern temple with its own special rules – as a particularly exalted place. However, this might be a slight overinterpretation since modern museums are striving to become a kind of forum or meeting place, where people can exchange and discuss ideas.

If one looks at a temple in the Roman Forum in Italy and the National Gallery (Statens Museum for Kunst) in Copenhagen, one can see clear similarities between the two buildings (Fig. 1-2): the imposing stairs that lead up to the entrance and the mighty pillars; the stairs and pillars could be said to support the idea that the modern museum can be perceived as



Fig. 2. The National Gallery, Copenhagen, Denmark. Photo: Ane Hejlskov Larsen.

a temple. In conclusion, a museum is a place which can be both a sacred building in the form of a temple and a site in nature that has a ritual function.

As I mentioned earlier, the Greek word “museion” is linked to the nine Muses, all sisters, who represented epic poetry and eloquence, history, tragedy, love and lyric poetry, music, astronomy and astrology, comedy and dance and pantomime. In this Italian wall painting from 1514-1528, we see how the nine muses are dancing with Apollo, the god of light and song (Fig. 3). Thus, the word “museion” encompasses different disciplines. So does the modern museum; however, far more than the

spheres of the nine Muses have been added to the modern museum.

The use of the word “museum” seems to have been restricted in Roman times mainly to places of philosophical discussion. This applies, for example, to the great museum in Alexandria with its famous library, founded early in the 3rd century BC. Both buildings no longer exist. Today, the ancient museum in Alexandria can be considered a prototype of a university rather than a museum in the modern sense. In modern times, museology is a discipline at many universities around the world.

The suffix of museology derives from the



Fig. 3. Baldassarre Peruzzi (1481-1536): *The Dance of Apollo with the nine Muses*. 1514-1528. Oil on canvas. Palazzo Pitti, Florence.

Greek word “logos”, which means rational discourse that relies on inductive and deductive reasoning. Today it is a syllable in word combinations such as archeology, the study of the ancient and recent human past through material remains and anthropology, the study of humanity, concerned with human behaviour, cultures and societies. It follows that museology must be the study of museums. We can also formulate it in another way: “Logos” refers to knowledge, science and to the practice of research or to a scientifically based approach to the world. What characterises research is that it refines and generates insight into everyday experiences. It does this by using methods and theory. At the same time, the results of science must be discussed in an open, critical way.

So according to this etymological introduction, we can assume that museology means both the doctrine of learning and the scientific discipline concerning museums. This does not mean that there is a connection between the contemporary understanding of museums and the museion of antiquity. Today, a museum does not necessarily have to be a physical

place. A museum without a physical building or a museum with a digital extension is more common than ever. However, the etymological introduction allows us to focus on the relationship between museums, teaching, and science.

WHERE DOES THE WORD MUSEOLOGY APPEAR AS AN EXPRESSION OF A SUBJECT OR SCIENCE?

In her article from 2018, Kerstin Smeds refers to the German bibliographer and literary historian Johann Georg Theodor Grässe. He was the editor of the *Zeitschrift für Museologie und Antiquitätenkunde sowie für verwandten Wissenschaften* (*Journal of Museology and Antiquarianism and Related Sciences*). In this journal he published an article in 1883 in which he stated that museology had been considered a scientific subject for the last 30 years. Let us dwell for a few minutes on Johann Georg Theodor Grässe. Who was he?

Grässe lived from 1814 until 1885. It is interesting to note his educational background

and later profession: He was educated at the University of Leipzig, where he studied philology, philosophy, and archaeology. He then studied literary history at the University of Halle. He thus had an interdisciplinary background.

In 1848, Grässe was employed as the curator of the Dredsner Münzkabinett. From 1861 to 1882 he was also responsible for the Dresdner Porzellansammlung and later he was appointed director of the Dresdner Münzkabinett. Both collections are today included in the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen in Dresden.

At the same time, he was a prolific writer. In 1872 he published a cultural historical study of beer bearing the long title *Beer Studies. Seriousness and Fun. The History of Beer and Its Distribution Around the Globe. Beer Statistics. Beer Superstitions. Beer Verses. Ordering Beer. Beer Festivals. Beer Songs for All Times and People. Beer Proverbs, Brewing Secrets*. He was wide-ranging in his work. Internationally, he began to be cited at the precise moment when museologists in the 21st century started discussing whether museology was a scientific discipline or not. He wrote:

If someone had spoken or written about museology as a scientific discipline thirty years ago, or even twenty years ago, they would have encountered a pitying, contemptuous smile from many people. Now, of course, things are different.³

As the quote tells us, museology was considered a scientific discipline by Grässe and his colleagues. From the quote we can also conclude that Grässe perceived museology as a scientific discipline about museums.⁴ At the same time, he drew historical connections between the cabinets of curiosities from the 16th and 17th centuries and his own work with

the collections in Dresden in the 19th century.

A Danish example of a cabinet of curiosities is the Museum Wormianum (Fig. 4). It consisted of stones, minerals, soil, dried plants, seeds and fruits, animals, fish and crustaceans, shells and corals, antiquities, artefacts, and ethnography from around the world, which doctor and antiquarian Ole Worm (1588-1654) had collected.

On the frontispiece of his book from 1655 (published after his death), we find a large fold-out engraving of the collection in his home as well as the system according to which the objects were arranged. Worm used the collection in his teaching at the University of Copenhagen, where he was employed as a professor of medicine. In other words, the collection had a didactic significance. Grässe emphasised that although such cabinets were like the museums of his time, the methods of systematisation were very different.

Grässe worked and wrote in the 19th century when an important interaction was taking place between the establishment of new museums and the creation of new disciplines across Europe. Throughout 19th-century Denmark, as in Grässe's Germany, people were busy reorganising and systematising private collections. The work was initially focused on royal collections and those belonging to the nobility. Museums were being established for the benefit of the new civil assembly in Denmark and they became important national institutions for the Danes. Several Danish scholars such as literary historian Rasmus Nyerup (1759-1829), antiquarian Christian Jürgensen Thomsen (1788-1865), art historian and critic Niels Laurits Høyen (1798-1870) and the first professor of Art History at the University of Copenhagen Julius Lange (1838-1896) played a crucial role in this process, not only in relation to the birth of museums but

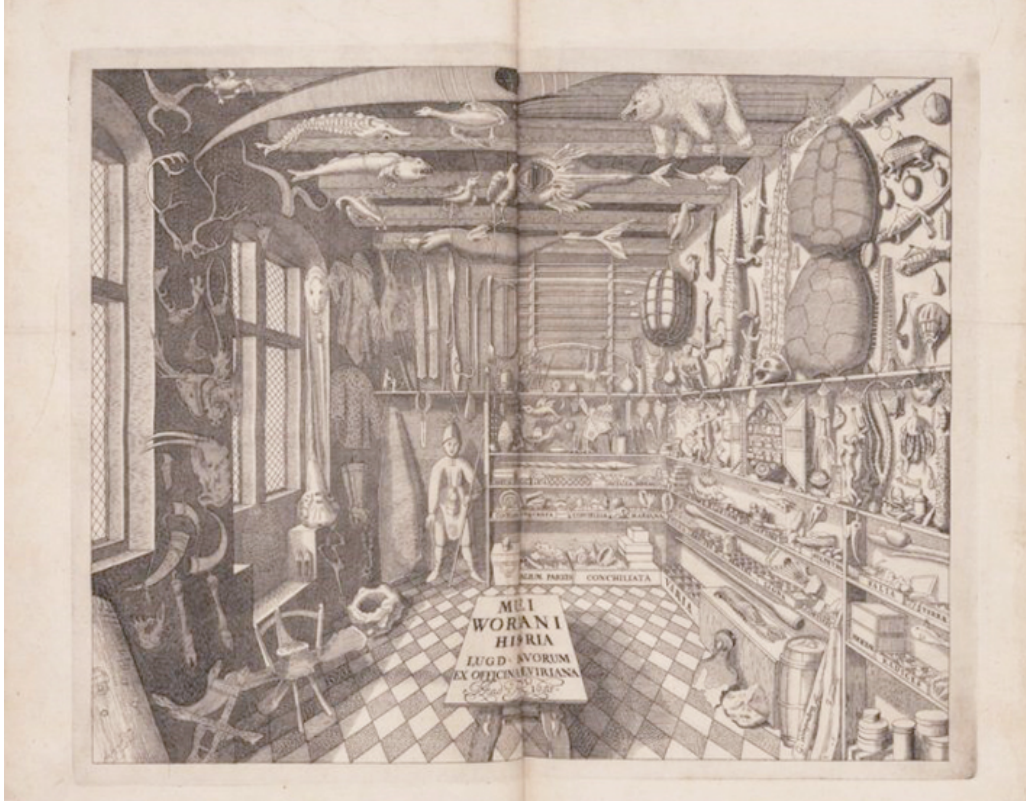


Fig. 4. Ole Worm's *Museum Wormianum*, published in 1655. Frontispiece showing the interior of his collection or museum. University of Reading.

also to the emergence of new disciplines at the University of Copenhagen. In the same way as Grässe did in Dresden.

In Denmark, the systematisation of collections and development of museums was concentrated in Copenhagen, which was the location of the only Danish university at that time. The reorganisation of the large private collections contributed to the creation of new disciplines such as archeology and later anthropology. This was also the case for art history as a discipline.

Art history was formalised as a university discipline in Copenhagen in 1856. N.L. Høyen

was a docent and Julius Lange was the first professor from 1888. Art history was not established as a discipline at Aarhus University until 1953. In 1955, the new professor of art history, Else Kai Sass, was made responsible for Aarhus Museum's art collection. In this way, the university and a future art museum were meant to enhance each other.

Denmark's first museum building was Thorvaldsen's Museum in Copenhagen (Fig. 5). It was financed by the civil society, the Copenhagen City Council, and Danish artist Bertel Thorvaldsen, who donated his art collection and his own works to the new



Fig. 5. Photo of Thorvaldsen's Museum, Copenhagen. The architect was Michael Gottlieb Bindesbøll (1800-1850).

museum, which opened in 1848. The National Museum opened in 1892 in the Prince's Mansion (Fig. 6), while a new building for the National Gallery of Denmark was opened to the public in 1896 (Fig. 7). The new national museums were a result of the extensive work of systematising and categorising the objects from the royal and other private collections. In the 1870s, the first museum buildings appeared outside Copenhagen. A new building for Aarhus Museum was inaugurated on May 20, 1877 (Fig. 8). Initially, the Picture Gallery and the Diocesan Library moved in.

The three oldest natural history museums in Denmark are the Zoological Museum from 1862 (Fig. 9), the Geological Museum's collections, which can be traced back to 1772 and were moved to Øster Voldgade in 1893,

*Fig. 6. A drawing from 1861-1862 by C. Nielsen of the National Museum, the Prince's Mansion, Copenhagen. The original house was built in 1684. The drawing was published in *Illustreret Tidende*, a Danish illustrated magazine published from 1859 to 1924.*





Fig. 7. National Gallery of Denmark, Copenhagen. The original museum building was built 1889 to 1886 and designed by the Danish architects Jens Vilhelm Dahlerup (1836-1907) and Georg Ebbe Wineken Møller (1840-1897).



Fig. 8. A photo of Aarhus Museum around 1877, designed by the Danish architect Vilhelm Theodor Walther (1819-1892). The archive of Den Gamle By (The Old Town), Aarhus.

as well as the Botanical Museum and Garden, which was laid out back in the 17th century. The three museums were merged in 2004 under the name The Natural History Museum of Denmark. Today it is organised as an institute at the University of Copenhagen, while cultural history museums and art museums fall to the Ministry of Culture.



*Fig. 9. Engraving from 1871 in the magazine *Illustreret Tidende* of the hall of Zoological Museum, which opened 1870 in Copenhagen (Krystalgade). The collection was established in 1862. The building was designed by the Danish architect Christian Hansen (1803-1883).*

These three main categories of museums - art galleries, cultural history museums and natural history museums - form the basis for the categorisation of museums in the current Danish Act on Museums.⁵ Each of the three categories has its own focus:

- § 4. The cultural heritage museums shed light on change, variation, and continuity in the living conditions of human beings from prehistoric times to the present.
- § 6. The art galleries shall illuminate the history and current expression of visual arts and their aesthetic and cognitive dimensions.

§ 8. The museums of natural history shall illuminate nature, its development, the present environment and interaction with human beings.

According to the Danish Act on Museums, the following is common to all three museum categories:

§ 1. The purpose of this Act shall be to secure cultural and natural heritage in Denmark through professionally and financially sustainable museums' activities and cooperation and to develop the significance of these in interaction with the world around us.

In this understanding, art is part of cultural heritage.

The focal point of the Danish Act on Museums is cultural and natural heritage. As we can see from this visual collage of objects from Danish collections, cultural and natural heritage covers a wide range of collected objects (Fig. 10). The photograph shows only a small selection of the types of objects collected by Danish museums since the 19th century. In a broader historical perspective, the 19th century systematisation of existing collections and the building of museums in Denmark originated in the ending of the monarchy and the establishment of a civic assembly. Cultural and natural heritage became part of a comprehensive enlightenment

Fig. 10. Visual collage of cultural and natural heritage objects from Danish collections. From left to right: The Grauballe Man, Moesgaard, Aarhus; half-timbered houses, The Old Town, Aarhus; installation with mail art works by Mogens Otto Nielsen, KUNSTEN Museum of Modern Art, Aalborg; painting by Vilhelm Bendz, National Gallery of Denmark; conch shells, Herlufsholm, Næstved; chair by Poul Henningsen, Designmuseum Denmark; hash stall from Freetown Christiania, National Museum, Copenhagen; painting by Per Kirkeby, National Gallery of Denmark, Copenhagen. Photos: Ane Hejlskov Larsen.



project. The new museums were to disseminate knowledge about Danish culture and history. They were to become public institutions that contributed to societal development.

We can now conclude that modern museology arose along with the birth of the 19th century museum. Museology would not have become a discipline and a science if collections and museums had not played such an important societal role. Consequently, it is understandable that some museologists perceived and still perceive museums and their work as the primary object of museological research.

WHEN AND WHY DID MUSEOLOGY BECOME A DISCIPLINE AT AARHUS UNIVERSITY?

We now leave Grässe and his work with the collections in Dresden and jump more than 100 years forward in time and to Aarhus.

In 1977, seven art history students at Aarhus University established a museology group. Among them were Lars Kærulf Møller, Nina Hobolth, Aase Bak and Jens Erik Sørensen. Several of the seven students later became curators and directors at Danish art museums such as Randers Art Museum, North Jutland Art Museum (now KUNSTEN), Bornholm's Art Museum and Aarhus Art Museum (now ARoS). They were all interested in museums because they wanted to prepare themselves for museum careers. Volunteer jobs were rare at the time and primarily concerned with the internal workings of a museum. The group wanted to learn about the museum and its connection to society. They were curious about the societal function of museums, their exhibitions and who their visitors were.

From the beginning, the museology group's work was interdisciplinary, and they studied

cultural history museums and art galleries. They decided to carry out a series of field studies including interviewing museum professionals, going on trips to museums and developing their own exhibitions. They also travelled to East Berlin for inspiration. They visited the museum of the German artist and Communist Otto Nagel. They felt that the exhibitions and activities in the museum Otto Nagels Haus were an example of good dissemination in a socialist country, whereas they were more critical towards the Danish Museum scene:

You often get the impression that the employees at the National Gallery of Denmark (Statens Museum for Kunst) never leave the museum, that they live and die, so to speak, in the big red palace on Østervold. Here, reality is just shapes and colors in tidy arrangements ... It is different with The National Museum. Here, a lot is done to attract the audience and guide them. They try to make the collections interesting and fundamentally exciting, while realising that if museums are to have any popular appeal today, they must fit into a pattern of leisure recreation and entertainment.⁶

However, it was not only the young students at Aarhus University who criticised Danish museums and especially art museums.

Art historian Minna Heimbürger also did so in a Danish book entitled *What's Wrong? The Problems of Art Museums (Hvad er der galt? Kunstmuseernes problemer)* published in 1978, when museology was already established as an interdisciplinary discipline at Aarhus University. Heimbürger had previously been director of Aarhus Art Museum from 1961 to 1969. The point of departure of her criticism was the aesthetic-artistic mode of exhibition, which, according to her, only appealed to an elite audience. In other words, she agreed with



Fig. 11. An Exhibition with the British artist Tony Oursler, ARoS Art Museum, Aarhus 2012. Photo: Ane Hejlskov Larsen.

the criticism propounded by the museology group.

Heimbürger insisted that it was necessary to establish the historical context from which works of art stem. She was surprised that there were so few professionals with a research background in art history employed in Danish art museums, in contrast to abroad. At the same time, she was shocked at how little research was conducted. She advocated for future research centres in which research and dissemination were combined.

Heimbürger had no political agenda with her book. She was first and foremost interested in upskilling museum staff and opening museums up to a broader audience by communicating

the historical dimension of their exhibitions. She did not agree with the more socially critical view represented by the museology group. From a contemporary perspective, Heimbürger had several interesting recommendations that we are now on our way to fulfilling.

Today, co-funded PhD and postdoctoral positions have strengthened research into the dissemination of museum collections and exhibitions. These PhD students have various professional backgrounds and have been interested in different aspects of museology. Their dissertation topics are centered around a wide range of art museums and cultural history museums. My own museology PhD students focused on topics such as didactics

and pedagogy, learning partnerships between museums and educational institutions, open-air museums and dramatised dissemination, museum visitors and their motivations for visiting museums. Without funding from Danish foundations such as Novo Nordisk and New Carlsberg Foundation, these PhDs would not have been possible.

To return to the criticism of artistic-aesthetic exhibitions, one can still find aesthetic-artistic

exhibitions in many museums, where the aesthetic value is paramount, while there is more experimentation with the design in exhibitions of historical art. The next two photos show exhibition examples from ARoS in Aarhus (earlier Aarhus Art Museum), where there was room for both kinds of exhibition: The first photo depicts a purely aesthetic-artistic exhibition (Fig. 11). The aesthetic values of the works were first and foremost

Fig. 12. An exhibition with the title "What is Modernism?", ARoS Art Museum, Aarhus 2012. Photo: Ane Hejlskov Larsen.



to be experienced through the visitors' ability to perceive and reflect. In other words, the interaction between the art, the space and the visitor were the main concern. The photo was taken at the English artist Tony Oursler's exhibition, which was shown at AROs in 2012. It is important to emphasise that in such exhibitions it is often the artist who sets the agenda and art can be critical and communicative. The second photo is of the exhibition "What is Modernism?" shown at AROs the same year (Fig. 12). It was an example of an historically researched exhibition. In "What is Modernism?", the museum displayed newspaper cuttings from contemporary reviews and photos from various events that had inspired the artists and established listening posts with information about the societal conditions of the time. In this way, visitors were offered tools to understand why art was shaped as it was in the first decades of the 20th century.

Despite the criticism of the artistic-aesthetic exhibition from both the museology group and Heimbürger, there is no evidence that an informative and historically contextual exhibition at art museums engages more visitors than an aesthetic-artistic presentation. On the contrary, research indicates that artists' names, the motifs of their art and the dramaturgy of the exhibition all have a more influence on the number of visitors (Andreasen & Hejlskov Larsen 2005: 297-309). But that is a different discussion.

A more recent example of a dissemination-oriented exhibition with a critical perspective on modern art is the exhibition entitled "Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Emil Nolde for Discussion" at the National Gallery of Denmark in 2021. The exhibition started a debate about the two well-known artists and their views on and interpretation of cultures

outside Europe. Their works were accompanied by contemporary voices from those cultures and their perception of themselves displayed in interviews, videos and quotes. The museum tried to ask questions such as: What view of humanity do the works of art express? Can we hold the artists responsible for their view of people from countries outside of Europe, especially Africa and Bali? Should we? And is the art of Nolde and Kirchner relevant in today's racism debate?

Another way of conveying an historical period can be found at the Danish Cold War Museum REGAN Vest in the Northern part of Jutland, which opened in 2023. REGAN Vest is an enormous bunker 60 metres below a chalk bank located in a wooded area (Fig. 13 a-b). It was secretly built in the 1960s and was supposed to house the Danish government and the royal family in the case of nuclear war. The bunker and its interior are completely authentic. One can only gain access to the museum by booking a guided tour. Before the guide opens the door to the bunker, visitors are given access to an exhibition area, a cinema, and a learning centre, where they are afforded a situational description of life during the Cold War: the fear of nuclear war, the political tension between the great powers in East and West and ordinary everyday life in an atomic age.

The museology group wanted to create a dialogue between a museum's visitors and its staff, thus making the museum more accessible to a broader audience. REGAN Vest would certainly have fulfilled the museology group's ambitions regarding better dissemination. In their opinion, museums had to offer activities in which visitors were involved and engaged. Behind these thoughts lay a desire to develop museum exhibitions for people who did not have the prerequisites to understand what to do in a museum.

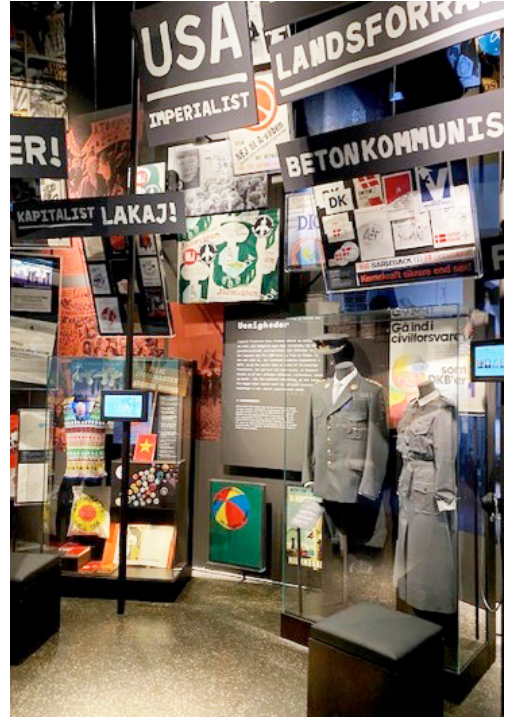


Fig. 13 a-b. The Danish Cold War Museum, REGAN Vest, Denmark, 2023. Photos of the entrance to the bunker and the exhibition area of the learning centre. Photo: Ane Hejlskov Larsen.

The rationale behind the creation of the discipline museology was, in the words of student Lars Kærulf Møller from the museology group, to establish "a scientifically based discipline where research can be carried out and results disseminated for the benefit of the museums and their audiences. However, the object of museology is not the museums but the context of the historical, contemporary, and future function of a museum" (Kærulf Møller 1983: 102). The quote appears in an article from 1983 called "Why museology?" (*Hvorfor museologi?*). The museology group had now learned about ICOM and discovered that there was an international interest in museology. In his article, Kærulf Møller referred to ICOM's

1971 definition of museology, in which museology was perceived as an independent discipline concerned with museums. He emphasised that museology was not only about the practical aspects of museum business, but also about problems that extended beyond the museum and into societal conditions and history. In other words, museums should be perceived as societal institutions. Kærulf Møller advocated for a Marxist approach that he believed would open a way to examine the museum, its societal conditions and functions based on questions about why museums exist and what their role is.

The interdisciplinary course in Museology at Aarhus University continued until the end

of the late 1990s.⁷ In 2001, a new one-year interdisciplinary supplementary education in museology for bachelor students was established in collaboration with colleagues from other disciplines.⁸ It ended and still ends with a two-month internship at a museum, where the students apply the methods, concepts, and theories they have learned. Afterwards, the students must reflect on what they learned from their museum experience in an internship report.

To sum up, at Aarhus University in the 1970s there was an understanding of museology as both the subject-matter of a research-based supplementary education and a scientific discipline about museums and their functions in society. Museology became interdisciplinary and basic subjects such as archaeology, anthropology, history, and art history were considered as auxiliary disciplines. The museology group was far ahead in their thinking about an education in museology and aligned with what was happening in museological research environments internationally. Educational focus was on visitors and dissemination. This was also seen as a way to stop the increasing institutionalisation of museums.

As a kind of appendix to my historical description of museology as a discipline in Denmark, I would like to point out that artists, or some of them, did not necessarily welcome the steadily increasing interest in dissemination and visitors. Danish visual artist Per Kirkeby (1938-2018) wrote a polemical article called "The Local Museum" in connection with a seminar at Moesgaard Museum in 1998 (Kirkeby 1998). He wanted the local museum to maintain its quality of being a Wunderkammer full of tantalising objects from the past. He was not in favor of curatorial interference or a pedagogic gaze that chose in advance what the



Fig. 14. Installation. 1974. Haderslev Museum.
Photo: Per Kirkeby.

visitor was allowed or forced to see. Instead, he preferred an object's own sensuality and materiality to speak for themselves.

Throughout the 1970s, Kirkeby created several museum exhibitions which focused on the aesthetics of the displayed objects. An example was his exhibition at Haderslev Museum in 1974 (Fig. 14). On March 10, 1974, the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* wrote the following about Kirkeby's exhibition at Haderslev Museum:

... At the exhibition, the intention is not that someone else should come and tell you what art is, says Per Kirkeby ... He is particularly fond of two old display cases at the museum. In one display case, there is wonderful space for up to 100 pieces of bread, whose shape and ornamental design can arouse interest ... In the other display case, Per Kirkeby shows contemporary porcelain originating

from factories around the world. And why not show contemporary things ... to visitors in the same way as you show the things that are known from Roman times? (The Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten, March 10, 1974).

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MUSEUM STUDIES AND MUSEOLOGY?

In her article in *Nordic Museology* from 2018, Kerstin Smeds commented on the widespread use of the Anglo-Saxon term museum studies instead of museology. Smeds summarised the difference between the two concepts in this way: Museology was characterised as being more theoretical, and museum studies as being more practice-based. I checked Google to corroborate Smeds' characterisation, knowing that such searches are conditioned by my previous searches. When searching for images generated by the British term "museum studies", websites about education programmes from universities from primarily English-speaking countries appeared.⁹ I have selected two of those websites: The website of Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the website of The University of Tampa in Florida. Both websites focus linguistically on practical topics such as museum administration, management, curation, and cultural heritage management, and both websites show photos of a person performing an action. In the photo on the Harvard University website, a young man is observing an exhibition being set up in the photo at Tampa University, a young woman is curating an exhibition. Both words and images on the websites give the impression that at these two universities, a person studying museum studies will be training for a future labor market by acquiring skills that lead to a career in museums and similar cultural heritage institutions.

If one Googles "museologi" (the Danish word for museology),¹⁰ covers of books and magazines appear, including images of three of our own museological publications from 2005-2021 whose titles *New Museology* (2005), *Cybermuseumology* (2015) and *Museology between Disciplines* (2021) give the impression that there are several museologies: A new and old museology, a museology that is oriented towards digital media, and a museology encompassing different disciplines. The first two book covers have abstract layouts, while the third book cover shows a person in a museum looking at objects, writing notes about them and listening to an audio guide.

There is a significant difference between the two Google searches: At Aarhus University and other universities, the word "museology" prompts images and text on websites and social media that suggest a preoccupation with museological research exemplified by research publications, and to a lesser extent a consideration of how studying museology advances students' future careers.

A search on Google for the English word "museologist" – the person who practices museology – brought up an image of an American magazine from 1920 called *The Museologist*. It was published by the marketing department of The American Museum of Natural History. According to the foreword, the content focuses on working conditions for staff at the museum. The aim of the publication was to make museum workers feel closer to the museum. In other words, the term museologist was used in the meaning of a museum employee. This suggests that professional museum work and museology as a discipline were perceived as synonymous.

Since 1966, the way of teaching at the School of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester has had a major influence on

museums and universities globally. Most teachers at Leicester have an academic educational background and many of them have PhD degrees and carry out research within museums, galleries, and other heritage institutions. However, according to the School's website, teachers and researchers seem to have limited practical museum experience. Despite that, photos on the School's Facebook page indicate that lessons are distinctly hands-on or practice- and action-oriented. This gives the impression that learning-by-doing is the teachers' didactic and pedagogical choice or methodology. Of course, lessons are not necessarily less theoretical for that reason.

To sum up: Kerstin Smeds could have been more nuanced in her comparison of practice-oriented museum studies and theory-oriented museology. She could have referred to Dutch museologist Peter van Mensch's museological conceptual framework, in which he distinguished between subject-matter disciplines, academic disciplines in general and museology as a discipline. Smeds knew van Mensch from ICOFOM, where he had played an important role. In his PhD dissertation *Towards a Methodology of Museology*, published in 1992 at the University of Zagreb in Croatia, van Mensch presented a model with three levels:¹¹

Level 1: the relation between museology and other academic disciplines in general (meta-museological level).

Level 2: the relation between museology and subject-matter disciplines within the museological field (institutional level).

Level 3: the relation between museology and subject-matter disciplines on the level of day-to-day museum work (museographical level).

Van Mensch placed daily museum work or museum practice at the museographical level and at the bottom of his conceptual hierarchy. In contrast to Kerstin Smeds, he attached importance to subject-matter disciplines such as history, archeology, and art history since they are also based on scientific criteria and oriented towards working with museum collections.

From van Mensch's point of view, Kerstin Smeds' understanding of the relation between museology and museum studies can be criticised because she does not include a professional daily work perspective and the importance of the subject-matter disciplines (levels 3 and 2 in van Mensch's framework). Employees at museums have different educational backgrounds and their professional skills can be a springboard for fruitful and open dialogue about how to improve and carry out museum tasks by challenging and rethinking institutionalised museum work processes.

IS MUSEOLOGY A SCIENCE?

Smeds used the English word "science" instead of Grässe's German word "Wissenschaft". The English word generally refers to the natural sciences, whereas "videnskab" in Danish and "Wissenschaft" in German cover several areas of systematic knowledge about nature, culture and art. However, Kerstin Smeds emphasised that museology belonged to the human sciences and had its own methodological basis. She perceived museology "as a philosophical and theoretical platform for" studies in modern man's relationship with time and heritage inside and outside the museum. Museology was not only a science of museums but a science of "heritage of all kinds":

I would formulate my personal view in the following way: museology is a theoretical and philosophical

platform for the study of industrial man's (traumatic) relationship to time and to the material world, and how this is expressed in musealization and preservation of reality, things, environments, and "heritage" of all kinds. Museology is dealing with the concept of loss as an existential, philosophical, and practical problem. Museology focuses on the problem of time in our culture, and on what strategies we draw to stop time, prevent deterioration, procrastinate entropy and, if only possible, to postpone death (Smeds 2007: 155).

In an older article in the *Swedish Journal of Cultural History* from 2007, she compared museology with the science of history: A museum object functions as an important historical source even though most historians have more confidence in written sources (Smeds 2007). Smeds is an historian herself. How does Kerstin Smeds' Nordic conception of museology compare to that of museological schools in other European countries? Throughout the 20th century, professional museological communities in various European countries tried to identify and map common features in the understanding of museology and its terminology. They discussed their understandings in ICOM and ICOFOM. An important issue for ICOFOM was whether and how museology was a science. Kerstin Smeds became involved in the ICOFOM discussions from 2007 and her input regarding museology must therefore be seen in this context. She was partly inspired by the Central European school, but together with Swedish museologist Per-Uno Ågren she added new perspectives to this school of thought.

Kerstin Smeds thought that the question of whether museology should be perceived as an independent science was basically unimportant. To her it was more fruitful to inquire about what was being researched and

how. To her, museology was not limited to being about the museum itself but covered the entire field of cultural heritage and the ideology and practice behind conservation, as stated in the quote above. She also preferred to view the museum as a process rather than an institution because she believed it was in a state of constant change in direct contrast to the misconception that museums are often stagnant and dusty. According to Smeds, change and resistance to change in these organisations generated a more fruitful analysis of how staff in e.g., collections, exhibitions, communications, research, and dissemination worked with different paradigms and understandings.

Kerstin Smeds became a member of the group of people behind *Nordic Museology* in 2004. In the first issue of *Nordic Museology* in 1993, the editorial board, which at that time consisted of Ole Strandgaard, head of Museumshøjskolen in Denmark, John Aage Gjerstrum, museum director in Norway, and Per-Uno Ågren, the head of museology at Umeå University, announced that they wanted to establish a Nordic forum for museological research and debate and to create an "open channel" between theory and practice. The three editors believed that research and education could be nourished by practice and that practice could be enhanced by applying research results. In his article entitled *Museology and Cultural Heritage*, Per-Uno Ågren elaborated on his own view of museology:

Other public institutions have their sciences - the church has theology, the court has the law, the school has pedagogy, the archive has archival studies etc. In the same way, museology examines how historical cultural heritage is created, how it is defined, separated, and managed by official bodies and institutions, but also by individuals, groups, and organisations. Material cultural heritage as a societal

phenomenon is - briefly explained - the domain of museology. (Ågren 1993: 62)

He stressed that museology embraced not only museums and heritage institutions in general but also cultural heritage, which included natural heritage, since it is as culturally conditioned as all other forms of heritage that are created through an historical process – through use and research.¹² To him, cultural heritage included natural monuments, cultural landscapes, buildings and urban environments and antiquities. He advocated a broader view of cultural heritage and recommended that museologists analysed cultural institutions' own documents in the form of business reports, visitor statistics and exhibition material as well as conducted interviews with relevant local stakeholders. In this significant article, he offered his take on three main museological theoretical perspectives:

An historical perspective is about the selection and collection of material cultural and natural heritage, both historical and contemporary.

A sociological perspective about structures and rules in cultural heritage institutions and their activities as well as their societal significance.

A communicative perspective about the dissemination of cultural and natural heritage in exhibitions, in the institutional work process from documentation to communication.

All things considered, museology can be perceived both as an independent philosophical scientific discipline and as an analytical field of practice. According to Smeds and Ågren, museologists must also analyse change and resistance to change in museums and in the understanding of heritage from an historical, sociological, and communicative perspective, respectively. To sum up: Museology is about

more than museums; it also deals with cultural and natural heritage. Smeds and Ågren were especially concerned with analysis of the physical manifestation of these heritages.

The researchers involved in the Danish research project *Our Museum* (2016-2021) worked with and developed a Nordic, more process-oriented approach to museology. Furthermore, they focused sharply on communication in the sense of museum dissemination and museum visitors. The purpose of the national project was “to contribute theoretically, empirically and practically to the development of Danish and international museum communication, thereby promoting local and regional development through the involvement of large and small museums across the country and, not least, to support the mental health and quality of life of Danish citizens in terms of for example social inclusion, citizenship and participation”, as was written in the application. The project originated at the Danish Centre for Museum Research (DCM), which was formed in 2011 with professor of Media Studies at University of Southern Denmark Kirsten Drotner as director. She also became the head of the research project *Our Museum*. What was unique about the project was the organisational interface between participants from universities, museums and science centres and the research involving many disciplines. The digital perspective was a recurring theme, especially in relation to research concerning dissemination. The project resulted in eleven PhDs dissertations and in several publications containing guidelines for museums.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Efforts are still being made internationally to reach a consensus on the concept of

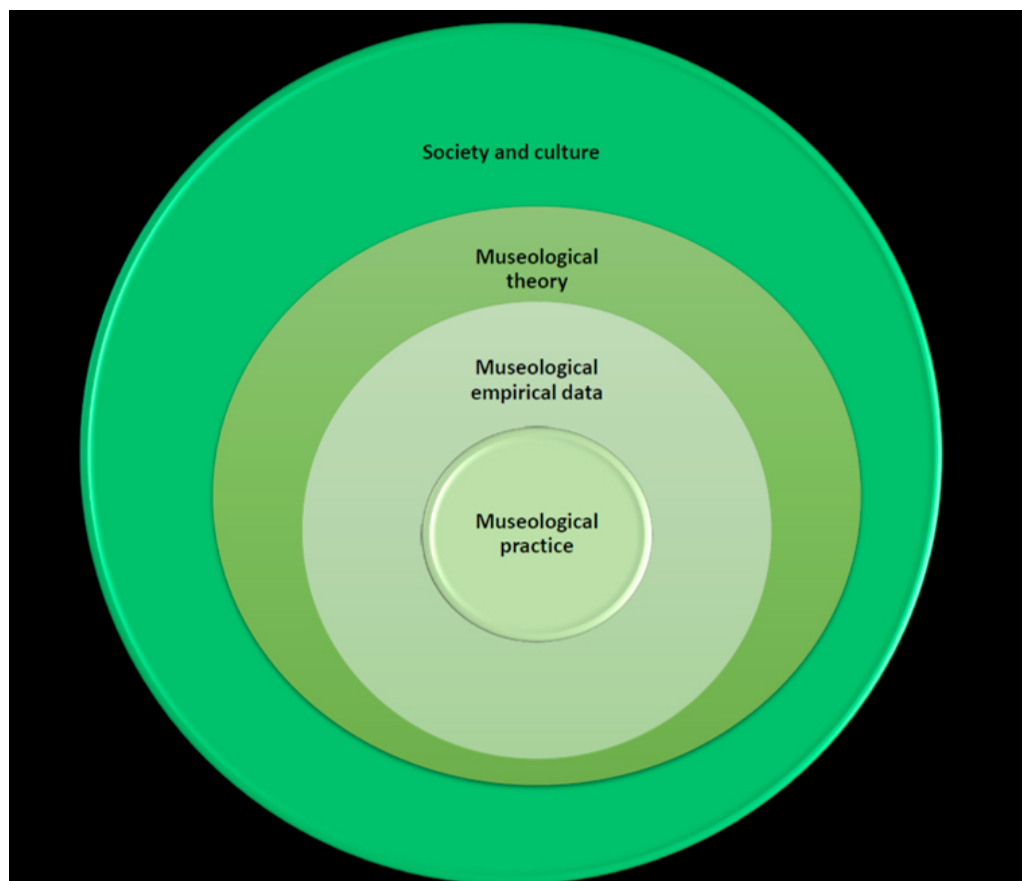


Fig. 15. Model illustrating the four rings of the museological research process.

museology. Most recently, a 582-page dictionary entitled *Dictionary of Museology* was published on the initiative of François Mairesse in 2023 by ICOM and Routledge. According to its introduction, the complexity, professionalisation, and internationalisation of museums and heritage from the second half of the 20th century onwards made it necessary to produce a dictionary that presented a common understanding of museological concepts. The dictionary is the result of several decades of work.

The new dictionary contains contributions from many colleagues with solid professional museological backgrounds. A characteristic feature of the dictionary is that the same words appear with different meanings, depending on the institutional context and theoretical background of the author. Furthermore, the words and concepts are of varying substance; some are abstract and some of them very concrete. I will now go through two of them: “Museology as a meta-discipline” and “museum theory”.

The understanding of museology as a meta-discipline goes back to the Zagreb-based, Czech museologist Zbyněk Zbyslav Stránský (1926-2016), and his conceptual system, which dominated ICOFOM thinking until 1989. However, following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, Stránský's conceptual system was overlooked in the museological circles of the new Europe. Meta-museology, according to Stránský, covered the theory that related to museology and discussed its scientific status from an historical and philosophical perspective. Zbyněk Stránský worked in several museums during the 1950s, and in 1962 he was appointed head of the innovative department of museology, which was institutionally affiliated with both the Moravian Museum and the Jan Evangelista Purkyně University in Brno. According to Stránský, the main object of museology was the relationship between man and his reality, and that the museum should only be seen as a manifestation of this relationship.

Museum theory is a term used by the Anglo-Saxon school, which has dominated museological circles internationally from the 1990s onwards. An example of this is *The International Handbooks of Museum Studies* from 2015 with Sharon Macdonald and Helen Rees Leahy as chief editors. In these four volumes, the Central European school is not mentioned at all. The reason may be that articles and books from the Central European school were written in Czech, German and French. In the Anglo-Saxon school, the museum is perceived as an object of and starting point for critical analysis of the intellectual and philosophical basis on which museums build their activities and work. If one studies the list of contributors to the handbook series, it seems that the Anglo-Saxon school determined its choice of keywords and its authors.

A characteristic feature of the Mairesse's dictionary is that there is not a single Nordic museologist to be found among the authors. The Nordic voices have not been heard. This must change. Setting up an alternative model for the museologist's work is one way of working towards this goal:

I will now describe how a museologist's research process can soften the relationship between practice and theory in a gainful way (Fig. 15). I have been particularly concerned with this relationship in my own teaching and research. I imagine the museological research process as a dynamic activity consisting of four sliding rings that can move in and out of each other. As a museologist doing research, one can start where one wants: In museological practice, which is based on experience, or by collecting empirical evidence based on methodical observation of museological circumstances and activities, or with museological theory, which makes the interpretation and systematisation of museological concepts and statements possible. These rings are at the same time influenced by the fourth ring, which corresponds to the research environment and the research question, which can be approached inductively or deductively. The four rings move in and out of each other and have an impact on each other.

An example is an ongoing research network working with cultural sustainability.¹³ The purpose of this Scandinavian research network is to bring together theory-driven and practice-based research environments in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden to exchange experiences and knowledge about how museums in these countries play an important role for a society's cultural sustainability. Cultural sustainability complements and adds a fourth pillar to the three classic pillars of sustainability: economic, social, and environmental. One of the goals of this new Scandinavian research network is

to define and delimit the concept of cultural sustainability by drawing on the network members' different areas of expertise in different types of museums. We hold online meetings about planning, process, and progress, and we meet with museum professionals and university colleagues from other countries to learn from their experiences and get their feedback on our thoughts and work. We send out questionnaires to the museums asking them about their understanding and then share the results with them, a process which in turn validates these results. We read articles together and code them according to certain conceptual understandings.

As this lecture has shown, the answer to the question "What is museology?" is complex and multi-faceted. The following bullets summarise the main points of the lecture, all of which illuminate aspects of museology:

- Museology has an etymological connection to antiquity which influenced and to some extent still influences how heritage institutions such as museums and its activities are viewed, e.g., as temples of knowledge and meeting places for discussion.
- Museology was developed as a subject-oriented and scientific discipline alongside and related to the rise of the museum and the identification of cultural and natural heritage as fields of study in the 19th century. In this understanding, culture also includes art.
- Museology embraces all aspects of the museological process in a historical, societal, and communicative perspective: Museum institutions and cultural and natural heritage including collection, registration, documentation, preservation, dissemination, and visitor studies.
- Museology is interdisciplinary: Its auxiliary disciplines interact with each other and make use of each other's methods and theories.
- The object of analysis of museology is perceived differently by the two main schools of museology: the Anglo-Saxon and the Central European schools, which do not refer to each other's publications.
- The terms "museology" and "museum studies" are often used as synonyms for each other in museological literature.
- Nordic and especially Danish museology breaks down institutional boundaries and barriers in the form of joint research projects and centres and emphasises procedural, temporal, and experimental approaches.
- By building working communities across institutions, experience and methodological views can be exchanged and the boundaries between practice and theory can become more permeable.

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museology and lecturer in museology; Gertrud Latif Knudsen, PhD in corporate communication and museums and post.doc. at Museology and The Skovgaard Art Museum, Viborg; Lise Skytte Jakobsen, associate professor and head of the department of Art History, Aesthetics and Culture & Museology, Aarhus University; Janne Vilkkuna, former professor of museology, Department of Art and Culture Studies, University of Jyväskylä.

NOTES

1. A new editorial board was appointed in Umeå, October 29 2004. It consisted of Ane Hejlskov Larsen (chief editor, Denmark), Bjørnar Olsen (editor, Norway), Guðný Gerður Gunnarsdóttir (editor, Iceland), Janne Vilkkuna (editor, Finland) and Kerstin Smeds (editor, Sweden).
2. *Dictionary of Museology* edited by François Mairesse, ICOM, Routledge 2023, p. 324.
3. This quote is from the 15th issue of the journal *Zeitschrift für Museologie und Antiquitätenkunde sowie für verwandten Wissenschaften* from August 1883. Translated from German: *Wenn jemand vor dreissig Jahren, selbst vor zwanzig Jahren von der Museologie als einer Fachwissenschaft gesprochen oder geschrieben hätte, würde er bei vielen Personen einem mitleidigen, geringschätzenden Lächeln begegnet sein. Jetzt freilich ist dies anders.*
4. According to the article entitled “The Beginnings of Museology” by Milan Popadić in *Muzeológia a kultúrne dedičstvo*, 2020, 8:2:5–16, the word museology was first used in 1839 in the title of German Georg Rathgeber’s book *Aufbau der Niederländischen Kunstgeschichte und Museologie* (The Construction of the Dutch History of Art and Museology).
5. Quotes are from the following paragraphs “Part 1-4”. *Consolidated Act on Museums Executive Order No. 358 of April 8, 2014*. Pdf. Upag.
6. The museology group 1977: *Vil du ha’ et museum. En udstilling om Museum og Samfund*. Horslunde. Leaflet published in connection with the exhibition of the same title. Vesterbro Ungdomsgård, Copenhagen, October 31 - November 17, 1977:31.
7. Until 2000 a single interdisciplinary course in museology was offered according to the archives at Aarhus University.
8. Hanne Teglhus, curator, and lecturer in museology, Steno Museum, Science Museums, Aarhus; Maiken Hansen, MA in Museum Studies from Department of Archaeology, Conservation and Museum Studies at University College London and lecturer in museology.
9. If one searches for the Danish word for museum studies, relatively few images appear, primarily of museum objects and exhibition spaces.
10. If one searches for the English word museology, several book covers appear with English titles.
11. Quote from Peter van Mensch’s dissertation from 1992, but updated in 1997, chapter 7, unpag. Mensch admits that the relationships between the three different levels are not always clear.
12. Mattias Bäckström has in his well-documented article “Heritage, milieu, and environment. The concept of *Nordic Museology* in the early 1990s” in *Nordic Museology*, volume 1, 2018: 27–44, analysed the Nordic concept of museology and its inspirations in the early 90s. He stresses that Per-Uno Ågren had an open interdisciplinary and approach to the theoretical platform of museology. Bäckström concludes that Per-Uno Ågren “made the wide-ranging “environmental heritage” the primary knowledge object of museology, however with a profound interest in “idea heritage” too.”, 41.
13. Funded by Independent Research Fund Denmark.

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Ane Hejlskov Larsen, professor of museology
and chair of Danish Centre for Museum
Research
kunahl@cc.au.dk
Aarhus University
Center for Museology
Department of Communication and Culture
Langelandsgade 139, bld. 1580, rm. 248
DK - 8000 Aarhus C