

## Archival and museum curatorship challenges for RK&M preservation

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Memory is supported by various types of records: archives, equipment, monuments, buildings, etc. In addition to its own efforts to preserve and transmit memory, the operator will rely on institutions specialised in heritage and memory transmission: national archives, museums, libraries, etc. These institutions are facing two major issues: their own durability, and the durability of the pieces in their collections. From an international survey on institutions, which favourable factors for sustainability of this transmission may be identified? (For example, how can users' communities play a role in RK&M preservation? Which lessons may be learnt?)

### Abstract

The main purpose of this study is to investigate how heritage institutions are handling their duty to transmit their collections, buildings, etc. on a long-term basis. It is often said that they are here to ensure a transmission of the heritage for eternity (which means very the long term). Of course, there are plenty of examples in history where libraries were burnt, museums looted, monuments destroyed and archives' buildings collapsed due to a hurricane or an earthquake, decades or centuries ago, but even very recently.

So, this study had to begin with a worldwide "state of the art" on institutional curators' durability throughout history. It has to be complemented by a study of what is done today in these institutions to ensure their sustainability and the durability of the heritage transmission on a very long-term basis. We firstly had to define the scope of our investigation and select archives, libraries, museums and monuments, but also include institutions which are more and more in charge of transmitting intangible heritage. This state of the art is based on a bibliographical research on heritage losses that were documented, consisting of published scientific articles, studies or books. Then, the study had to focus on trying to understand what kind of risks these institutional curators are facing, why some of them could survive after a disaster, and why others could not.

The first thing to keep in mind is that an institution dedicated to the curation of a memory or a heritage has its own lifecycle. There are several phases and each of them has its own vulnerability. For instance, the first one is the establishment of the institution itself, then a phase of institutionalisation, the "age" of conservation and then the transmission. Often, conservation and transmission take place in parallel. There is an implicit memorial link or thread between generations. When a society decides to create an institution dedicated to the curation of part of the community's heritage, there is a moral contract between this community and the people who are responsible for this mission. More precisely, this means that the society recognises itself through this institution and leaves the heritage, itself, as a message to future generations.

A number of hazards have been identified to define more precisely which disasters hit heritage institutions most often. Among the cases identified in the bibliography, most of the disasters are due to political and geopolitical hazards (armed conflicts, acts

committed in times of war, political regime changes, etc.). Then come the natural hazards (floods, hurricanes, the natural degradation of heritage materials themselves, etc.) and the economic and social hazards (censorship and book burnings, theft, societal or demographic changes), and finally the “everyday hazards” (small scale floods or fires). The “patrimonialisation” (or creation of heritage) also represents a risk for the newly protected institutions (such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) world heritage nomination) but is not perceived as such.

Of course, people developed many strategies during centuries to protect those heritage pieces and improve their security, at different levels. Society answered through organisational or legal arrangements, at a national scale as well as at the international one. This means, for instance, the adoption of international conventions protecting heritage from armed conflicts (1954 Hague Convention), or guidelines to safeguard world heritage sites from natural disasters, etc. Heritage professionals have not been outdone, they are providing technical and scientific solutions, finding new ways to avoid disasters or, at least, irretrievable losses or damages. Those solutions are more or less efficient according to the level of damage or the kind of hazard they have to face. We have not excluded from our scope individual initiatives that allowed rescuing some heritage pieces from destruction, even if those stories are not well documented.

We have also identified some “survival factors” for institutions that have faced damages and survived with limited losses. Heritage institutions that are able to adapt themselves despite societal changes continue to have value in the eyes of their contemporaries. Continuing to keep this memory is highly valued by the community. The most difficult task for professionals running these institutions is to identify and anticipate these insidious societal changes, which require that their institution undergo an important adaptation effort. We are investigating the notion of “tutors of resilience” as we have found out that communities played a role in the survival of some institutions, and, for instance, heritage professionalised organisations. Another hypothesis to continue this investigation is to define if the “institutional age” is just a step to transmit heritage on the very long term or not. Communities could have a greater role to play in this long-term conservation.

One of the last works that needs to be done is to complete the study using information and experiences provided by the current heritage institutions. Through an international survey, we will try to find out which measures people are taking nowadays to ensure the long-term transmission of these heritages. It will also be a good occasion to find out if heritage professionals are aware of some undergoing societal challenges that could impact their institution and how they will try to manage or anticipate their consequences.