



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Media in Contemporary Heritage Presentation: The Case of the Amsterdam Museum

Masson, E.

Publication date

2017

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Museums and Innovations

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Masson, E. (2017). Media in Contemporary Heritage Presentation: The Case of the Amsterdam Museum. In Z. Antos, A. B. Fromm, & V. Golding (Eds.), *Museums and Innovations* (pp. 163-174). Cambridge Scholars.

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

CHAPTER TWELVE

MEDIA IN CONTEMPORARY
HERITAGE PRESENTATION:
THE CASE OF THE AMSTERDAM MUSEUM

EEF MASSON

Introduction

In September 2011, the Amsterdam Museum opened a new permanent exhibition entitled *Amsterdam DNA*. In the museum's promotional materials, the presentation was characterised as a "three-dimensional travel guide," leading the visitor through the city's history (Amsterdam Museum 2011).¹ The exhibition was centred on seven animated films, projected onto large, transparent screens, which together explicated its main narrative trajectory. Although historical objects were also on display, those films, along with a number of other screen-based audio-visual representations, provided the main attraction and incited the visitor to proceed.

The case of the Amsterdam Museum is symptomatic of recent developments in the heritage field. The use of media in museum contexts is, of course, hardly new; it has been argued, in fact, that the history of the modern museum coincides with the development of recording media (Henning 2006a, 74). During most of the twentieth century, science centres and museums for technology and natural history, in particular, exemplified this tendency (Griffiths 2003; 2008; Huhtamo 2010). More recently, however, media are also becoming fixtures in institutions focusing on aspects of social and cultural history.

The ongoing mediatisation of heritage presentation is motivated by a number of things. Museum professionals and academics alike are convinced that media strongly appeal to today's audiences, especially youths, who have developed new and preferred ways of accessing information about the present and past (Urban 2009; Black 2012, 3). At

the same time, media are taken to help museums compete with a range of other audio-visual attractions. The latter argument is particularly relevant at a time when public funding for the sector is no longer self-evident (Van Hasselt 2012, 42). In addition, their use is also justified with reference to contemporary, post-modern exhibition ideals. Commentators argue that media can help to “democratise” museum presentation by de-emphasising the authority of collection specialists and making room for alternative or plural interpretations of objects or events (Witcomb 2003, 102–27) or by allowing visitors to direct their own learning (Widbom 2002, 17). Over the years it has even been suggested that media, by highlighting the status of exhibitions as “interfaces” with collections, reveal what Michelle Henning calls the “workings of the museum” (2006b, 310), thus facilitating or even encouraging reflection on the very nature of presentation (Thomas 1998; Witcomb 2007).

In daily museum practice, however, it is not always evident how media can be of service. Focusing on the example of *Amsterdam DNA*, a recent presentation from the Netherlands, I will show how their use at times appears to complicate, rather than further, the optimisation of the aforementioned ideals. In doing so, I argue that the difficulty is caused not by the characteristics or user possibilities of AV media as such, but rather, on the one hand, by concurrent pressures on city museums to propose a coherent identity for a city and its inhabitants, and on the other by the assumptions we make about how visitors wish to be addressed and what they can/cannot or will/will not do or invest in during their visit.

The Exhibition: *Amsterdam DNA*

At the time of its opening, *Amsterdam DNA* was advertised as an “entry point” to the city and its residents, geared primarily towards busy tourists seeking a quick introduction to its various attractions of cultural and historical interest.² The exhibition, therefore, is rather small-scale, and patrons are expected to complete their visit in about 45 minutes (Amsterdam Museum 2011). Its two main spaces are divided into seven sections, each of which deals with a particular period in Amsterdam history, from the Middle Ages (1000 CE) up to the present. The red threads running through the exhibit are four values positioned in introductory texts as ingrained in the DNA of Amsterdam’s inhabitants: entrepreneurship, free thought, creativity, and civic responsibility.

At the time of its inception, the exhibition was conceived as an experiment in the use of modern interactive media (Van Hasselt 2012, 40). Upon entering a section of the exhibition space, the visitor is invited to use

a personal QR code, printed on the cover of a paper guide, in order to activate a one-and-a-half-minute animated film. The image is projected onto a large screen, located centrally in the room.³ The code identifies the visitor’s language, which is used in the voice-over narration audible through headphones. The remainder of each space is filled with artefacts of all kinds: everyday utensils, applied art objects and paintings, historical documents, and the occasional scale model of an object or building, either historical or purpose-made. In addition to activating the seven films, the visitor can also use headphones to listen to sound fragments or soundtracks to archival films shown on smaller screens, or operate the touch screens located on the panels marking the edges of the exhibition space.

Both their prominent position in each room and the way in which their *modus operandi* is brought to the visitors’ attention suggest that the seven projected films constitute the main exhibition “text.” Watching them and listening to their commentaries only confirms this initial impression. The films are there to offer the viewer a preferred reading of the objects in the surrounding space that are also represented or alluded to in the films themselves. The clips identify their historical significance or provide interpretations of the phenomena or events they are considered to reference. In addition and in light of the associated themes, they establish relations between each section of the exhibition space via labels. Presumably it is difficult for the target audience to infer those relations from the objects themselves, except perhaps in terms of a vague notion of historical coincidence stimulated by references to concurrent international events. A series of pronounced narratives built up through identification of the historical incidents, circumstances, and attitudes that together have come to define Amsterdam and its inhabitants is the result.⁴

As Andrea Witcomb observes, the recent displacement of museum objects by media is accompanied by an increasing emphasis on narrative (2003, 117). Philosopher Hilde S. Hein’s discussion of objecthood claims that the tendency towards story-centredness, which she relates to present-day museums’ involvement in the fabrication of experiences, coincides with a shift in the function of the objects on display. She argues that they are no longer valued primarily for their connection to a specific historical moment, maker or user, previously a marker of their authenticity, but rather for their corroborative power. They serve as evidence, supporting a story told in more generalising terms (Hein 2000, 51–68). *Amsterdam DNA* illustrates this argument; objects are functional simply by “being there,” regardless of anything else they might also do. If visitors first watch the films, which they are strongly encouraged to do, they *need* not

subsequently consider each of the objects placed or hung nearby. A quick glance will allow them to recognise at least some of them from their animated representations on screen. Judging by the presentation's overall organisation, the underlying assumption is that for the target audience, this will qualify as a worthy exhibition experience in itself.

Many commentators consider the growing importance of stories to hold rich potential for museums. It has been argued that narrative approaches, facilitated by the use of media, enable a democratic and pluralising form of meaning making (Mintz 1998, 25–7; Hanks, Hale and MacLeod 2012), and in the process allow for highlighting the fundamental interpretive role of the museum (Witcomb 2003, 117–119). However, as the above case illustrates, actual practice does not always bear this potential out. In the past, this fact has been attributed to the circumstance that museums not only have an educational role to play but are also subject to pressure to compete with other with commercial attractions, which narratively speaking, are often geared towards complete closure (e.g. Hooper-Greenhill 1992, 211–215). In what follows, I propose two additional explanations.

The Essence of Amsterdam

The first is that many so-called “city museums” feel they have a crucial role to play in the construction of an identity for a city and its inhabitants. The Amsterdam Museum is the reincarnation of a former “historical” museum. Like city museums elsewhere, it has recently decided to drop this epithet in order to foreground its contemporary relevance (Spies 2011, 3). Today's city museums primarily see themselves as meeting points and platforms for discussion among local people; their ambition is to act as some sort of “binding agent” between the city's residents (Van der Ploeg and De Groot 2006; Van der Horst et al. 2011, 30–9; Kistemaker 2011, 9). Heritage, in this context, serves a highly instrumental purpose. It is treated as a means of identification with broader communities and used as a vehicle for the transmission of citizenship ideals.

In exploring discourse on the role that city museums see for themselves, a friction is revealed. These museums emphasise the importance of visitor participation even more than other contemporary heritage institutions. Directly or indirectly, a relationship is established between the civic participation that the museum seeks to encourage and the active role visitors should play in the construction of an exhibition experience and, by extension, in attributing meaning to the realities upon which it reflects (Van der Horst et al. 2011, 46; Kistemaker and Alberts

2011, 60 and *passim*). Yet, at the same time, city museums also feel the need to function as clear reference points for the identities that visitors are to construct. In order to do so, a Dutch vision statement argues, they need to tell “a sharp story” (note the singular) inspired by a “city's profile,” suggesting, indeed, that such a profile is pre-given and undisputed (Ibid. 62). Some even advance that, in the event of a city which either lacks a clear image or suffers from a bad one, the museum has the opportunity to provide or substitute it through reference to historical situations or events (Kahn 2006).

The use of media in *Amsterdam DNA* attests to the fact that the friction between the two impulses may at times be difficult to negotiate. Although primarily targeting tourists, the exhibition as a whole seeks to project a coherent identity of a city and its residents. By hinging its overarching narrative on the notion of a metaphorical cultural DNA, it implies that there is such a thing as the “essence” of Amsterdam, captured in a series of characteristic features, behaviours, or attitudes, generally, although not always, presented as laudable and desirable.⁵ Sections of the exhibition, however, also demonstrate that the tension between city museums' attempts to involve visitors, both physically and in terms of what they contribute to the interpretive process, and their desire to unilaterally construct a clear “city profile” cannot always be easily resolved in the latter's favour. One component of the presentation that is particularly revealing here is a series of “interactive” displays embedded in the walls of the exhibition space.⁶

Six of the seven rooms in the exhibition feature a small touch screen, connected to software initialised by the visitor's QR code. The main menu on each display contains four animated pictures based on historical representations loosely inspired by the sub-themes for the separate rooms. Upon clicking one of the animations, the user will score a value of 100% on either one of the four DNA markers. On the sixth screen the software will generate an average of the values scored previously, suggesting that the visitor's DNA contains a particular ratio of entrepreneurship, free thought, creativity and/or civic responsibility. The aforementioned friction in this case entails that neither of the museum's aspirations is easily gratified. On the one hand, user participation in the construction of an exhibition experience is concretised as the making of a highly intuitive choice between a number of predetermined options. The meanings of the available choices are also predetermined. In light of the wider presentation, the display serves to reinforce the conceptual scaffolding for the overarching exhibition narrative. In other words, there is no demonstrable relationship between interaction with the medium and an

active partaking of the interpretive process.⁷ On the other hand, the display also complicates the exhibition's foundational premise that the four DNA components are very specifically part of the make-up of Amsterdam's population. After all, users of the application will inevitably achieve the highest score for one of those, regardless of which city in the world they feel the strongest allegiance for. Thus, the display suggests that those ideals are in fact universal, and universally desirable.⁸

The Media User as Browser

The second aspect of media use that I will briefly explore revolves around the assumptions the exhibition makes about the visitors it addresses. In positioning its audience in relation to the presentation, *Amsterdam DNA*, like any museum presentation, makes inferences about the people it "speaks to." This includes assumptions about the particular cultural experiences they can build on (Henning 2006a, 109) or their preferences as consumers of visual spectacles of all kinds (Noordegraaf 2004, 243). In what follows, I focus on the inferences the exhibition makes about its patrons as users of screen media.

According to the promotional materials, the visitor that *Amsterdam DNA* addresses is a busy one. The guest imagined here is one with little time to spare, and therefore, most likely, little patience to consider the propositions which the exhibition makes through media, among other things. They are also a browser, someone used to deciding what to look at, listen to, or manipulate. As I mentioned earlier, the attribution of a hierarchically higher position to the seven introductory films in the presentation suggests that consideration of any of the objects, documents, or models that are also on display is optional. The same applies to any of the graphic or written elaborations on the specific subthemes introduced in the purpose-produced shorts. Some of these are proffered in the manner of trivia, for instance the series of historical units of length bearing the names of body parts, introduced on a wall chart in the room dealing with the seventeenth-century world presence of Amsterdam merchants.

At the same time, the exhibition's visitor is also one with a strong predilection towards modern screen media. Again, the construction of the main exhibition text through large-scale projections is a case in point. Another sign is the presentation's inclination towards film and broadcast media, in lieu of objects or paper documents, in those sections of the exhibition that historically coincide with their widespread availability. The specific media viewer projected by *Amsterdam DNA* is one who has the habit of exploring media intuitively and proceeds by trial and error, rather

than by "reading the manual." The DNA touch screen displays, for example, exemplify this. At the time of my visits to the exhibition, the only way for patrons to know what the screens were for, was to touch them and see what happened.⁹ Media use, in other words, was and still is characterised as a highly embodied practice, with the user actively exploring the affordances for action that the medium offers (Hale 2012, 198).

In as far as explorations of this kind do not have a clear role to play within the construction, or reconstruction, of a more overarching exhibition narrative by the user, he or she is also portrayed as *homo ludens*, one attracted by the playful aspects of media practices. A telling example is the installation which allows the visitor, seated on an early twentieth-century bicycle, to slowly start a short video clip visible on the opposite wall by making cycling movements. By using the bicycle bell, he or she can switch between moving images of Amsterdam cyclists in the past and the present (Van Hasselt 2012, 45). The exhibition does not suggest that this particular action leads to more insight into the development of Amsterdam as a modern city, the thematic focus of the exhibit where the installation is located. One could even argue that the bike and images function rather as "props," rather than the pieces of evidence mentioned earlier or items that help create the atmosphere of a particular place and time (Hein 2000, 65). Other examples of this include the use of an abundance of paintings and luxury decorative art products which together illustrate Amsterdam's economic and cultural prosperity in the seventeenth century or the marked absence of objects in the World War II section, which are conceived of as some sort of a *Denkmal* to local victims of the Holocaust.¹⁰

Yet despite their haste and eagerness to play, the visitors are also characterised by the exhibition as people who need clear answers to their questions *also* from their media. This is most evident again from the seven purpose-produced films, and in particular their use of spoken commentaries. As one of the presentation's curators puts it, these function as what used to be known locally as the "A texts" of the exhibition. These are the texts that introduce the themes of each section, in line with the overarching conceptual principles. As it turns out, the voice-over commentaries are, on average, slightly longer than even the texts that would otherwise feature on the museum's walls (Van Hasselt 2012, 43). In other words, the use of media here does not go hand-in-hand with a reduction in the amount of information given; quite the contrary. Again, this seems part of a wider tendency. Julia Noordegraaf argues that "[despite] the disappearance of explanatory text panels in favour of

interactive multi-media displays, the total amount of information being provided in museum galleries has only increased" (2004, 247). In *Amsterdam DNA* the unambiguousness of this information is further underscored by the concurrent use of a highly visual language made up of pictograms, on the panels that subdivide the exhibition space. Reminiscent of Otto Neurath's Isotopes, these images, likewise, serve to communicate simple messages, often statistical information, understandable regardless of an addressee's native language (Henning 2007).

Presumably, then, the museum visitor inferred here actually requires a great deal of guidance in their interpretive activity because he or she is hasty and easily distracted by the lure of playful interactives. This assumption could be informed by a fear, transpiring in the discourse of museum professionals and museologists of the past 15 years that users might get lost in their attempts to make sense of what they see or even be in danger of misinterpreting it (Mintz 1998, 32; Cameron 2010, 85). This threat seems to become more real as media are used more intensively. For initial verification of this claim, one might start by comparing the use of screens in *Amsterdam DNA* with that in some of the older sections of the Amsterdam Museum's permanent exhibition, dating back mostly to the 1990s.¹¹ Here, media are used, but to a lesser extent. More importantly, they are put to the service of a different kind of storytelling.

In terms of topics discussed, the older parts of the exhibition show a good deal of overlap with *Amsterdam DNA*. Moreover, they are organised according to a similar chronological and thematic logic and display roughly the same categories of objects. The screen media they feature are of two basic kinds. On the one hand, there are those that provide access, sometimes interactively, to one or more short archival clips that take on the function of historical traces, much like the objects also on display. On the other hand, there are a couple of screens showing purpose-produced films. Unlike the films in *Amsterdam DNA*, these items do not take a central position in the presentation, nor do they always serve to establish the connections between the items placed in the surrounding space. In some cases there is no explication even of how they relate to those, or to the overarching theme of the room in which they are placed. A few of them have a contrapuntal effect; they challenge and perhaps even undermine whatever message the combination of objects in the larger space might seem to convey. This is true, for example, of a video on slavery in the food industry in a display about the material circumstances of Amsterdam's affluent residents in the mid-nineteenth century. In addition, the older parts of the permanent set-up also cut off fewer interpretive options. The interactive screens, in particular, are telling.

Rather than leading users, on the basis of a single choice, to one in a limited series of predetermined outcomes, they offer them a variety of stories and experiences without necessarily drawing conclusions as to what they might mean. Last but not least, those same sections also contain more "meta-textual" elements serving as brief verbal reflections on the status of a display.¹²

It is important to note that the visitor addressed here, much like the addressee for *Amsterdam DNA*, is a browser, someone happy to "shop around" for impressions and information. This particular browser, however, is one who is given much more responsibility in determining how the items on display matter historically, establishing relations between them, and, in general, contributing to the construction of an exhibition narrative. Taken together, the above observations suggest that the visitor addressed is one both able and willing to use their interpretive freedom and critically consider perspectives in relation to each other perhaps even someone who can be swayed to consider how historical arguments are constructed. The question, of course, is whether this still corresponds, or ever corresponded, to the attitudes of actual visitors; after all, the museum must have had its reasons to decide on a new presentation strategy.¹³ However, the same point can also be made with reference to the newer exhibition, which seems to grant its visitors fewer abilities or lesser willingness in this respect. Whichever is the case, it is clear that, of the two set ups compared, the older one tends to use media, in however limited a manner, in ways that respond more obviously to the requirements set by advocates of a fundamentally democratic and self-aware exhibition practice.

Conclusion

As my case analysis suggests, in daily exhibition practice it is not so easy to use media in ways that live up to the promise of an open, epistemically, relativist presentation practice (Cameron 2007, 53) that they are supposed to provide. In this chapter, I explored two factors that potentially complicate such ambitions, taking my cue from *Amsterdam DNA*, the first in a series of presentations that will together constitute the new Amsterdam Museum. One of those was the museum's desire, due at least in part to political pressure from outside the institution, to propose a coherent identity for Amsterdam and its residents, a desire that at times conflicts with the principle of creating interpretive openness in exhibition design. The second, discussed at greater length, was the set of assumptions the museum makes about the visitors it primarily addresses, specifically in

their capacity of media users. The patrons envisaged by the exhibition are able and willing to do some things, such as explore media intuitively, but not others, for example decide on the hierarchy of meanings assigned to historical events, people or phenomena. In the comparison of this exhibition with older displays, a shift is visible in terms of how people are supposed to behave, not only as users of media but also more broadly in terms of how they consider information and learn from it.

Regarding this interaction with media, a particularly revealing source is *The Virtual and the Real* (1998), an early collection on new media in the museum edited by Selma Thomas and Ann Mintz, a historian-filmmaker and a museum director, respectively. The contributions to this volume tend to approach media from the perspective of the audience. But, in doing so, they make the assumption that the members of the audience are highly unlikely to do or consider anything outside of their usual comfort zones. Overall, media are seen by the contributors not primarily as tools for challenging the visitor, but as means to facilitate an exhibition experience that aligns with existing preferences. Thus, a conflict emerges with the role of educator which is also assigned to the museum, and specifically, the museum's responsibility as a builder of critical and literate consumers of media (Thomas 1998, xi).

Of course, considering the increasing pressure on heritage institutions to become self-sufficient, it is hardly surprising that indulging the visitor ultimately becomes the most attractive of the available options. Judging from the above, museums are still in the process of finding a balance between a range of (often competing) concerns. The intensive use of media, a relatively recent practice for many of those institutions, may in the process have disturbed a relative equilibrium, established as postmodern ideals became more ingrained in museum practice. There is a lot of potential for it to be restored, however, as some of the more-recent presentations at the Amsterdam Museum confirm.¹⁴

Notes

¹ "Als een driedimensionale reisgids voert deze presentatie je [...] door de Amsterdamse geschiedenis." (Amsterdam Museum 2011).

² At the time, posters inviting visitors to "Experience the story of Amsterdam—Your Entry into the City" (in English) were displayed on billboards throughout the town. Promotional texts discussing the repositioning of the museum, in which *Amsterdam DNA* was a first step, also identified the exhibition's role as a guide to local historical attractions (Amsterdam Museum n.d.).

³ The exhibition trailer on the museum's website is a mash-up of fragments from all seven films and gives an impression of the animations used; commentary,

however, is absent here. See <http://www.amsterdammuseum.nl/en/dna/amsterdam-dna>.

⁴ The general direction of this reasoning, towards a present condition, is further underscored by the chronological build-up of the exhibition and the somewhat teleological formulations used, e.g. "Towards a Modern City" in the section title for room 5.

⁵ Occasionally, the exhibit or its accompanying materials point out to the viewer that those attitudes also have their downsides. For instance, the print exhibition guide mentions that the Dutch entrepreneurial spirit also resulted in "oppression, slavery and war," and one of the films mentions that Amsterdam owed its prosperity to the fact that everything including people, not just goods, would be sold. However, in addition to the fact that such remarks may escape the visitors' notice in the course of a 45-minute tour, those pointers do not amount to an invitation to challenge the essentialist premise as such.

⁶ The term "interactive" is used here not as a media theoretical concept, but as part of the discourse of the museum itself (Van Hasselt 2012).

⁷ For a more profound discussion of what is sometimes called "mechanistic" approaches to museum interactives, see Witcomb (2003, 128–164) and Henning (2006, 82–92). Their critiques go further than the warning of Laura van Hasselt, one of the exhibition's curators, who also references Witcomb (2006) in her piece (2012, 42).

⁸ It should be pointed out here that curator Van Hasselt, in a conversation with the author (Amsterdam, May 1, 2014), indicated that the museum itself considers the touch screen displays the least successful feature of the exhibition. However, in light of my objectives, it is a useful example as it illuminates a number of key frictions that more museums have to deal with.

⁹ At the time, it was pointed out to me that some form of instruction would be added to accommodate those for whom the screens' use was not self-explanatory (Van Hasselt, conversation with author).

¹⁰ The use of objects and documents in the World War II section is limited to just a few highly meaningful items for contemporary Amsterdammers, such as a ticket to Tram 8, a symbol to this day for the deportation of Jewish inhabitants, or a miniature version of an Anne Frank statue located on one of the city's market squares. In addition, the visitor can also use headphones to listen to excerpts from Frank's diary.

¹¹ Information obtained from Van Hasselt (conversation with author).

¹² A very simple example of this would be the remark, in the aforementioned display on living affluently in nineteenth-century Amsterdam, that the interiors shown are reconstructions, merely approximating what a real one might have looked like.

¹³ The museum is planning to gradually replace all displays dating from before the inception of *Amsterdam DNA* over the next few years (Laura van Hasselt, conversation with author).

¹⁴ An example is the exhibition about Jacob Cornelisz van Oostanen, a sixteenth-century Amsterdam artist, organised in the first half of 2014 in collaboration with Stedelijk Museum Alkmaar.