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Redeeming the Copy: A Valuable Tool for Enhancement of Cultural Experience

Valeria Minucciani, Michela Benente, and Francesco Paganelli

Polythecnic of Turin, DAD – Department of Architecture and Design, Turin, Italy

ABSTRACT

The copy has historically been deemed as an unworthy reproduction of an *original*, the sole holder of undoubted value, thus rendering the reproduction a mere, less-than duplicate. However, this evaluation is supported by the notion that an artifact inherent value is in the authenticity of its material, which bore witness to a particular time, event or an idea. This narrow understanding of material heritage calls into question the extent to which material is fetishized hindering the chance to recognize the potential of the copy as worthy for something rather than just a thing. Among the first minds to realize the possible use value of copies, Viollet-le-Duc in the XIX century proposed an entire museum filled with these, formally opening to the recognition of the educational potential and as viable tools for the diffusion of culture. This paper aims to delve into the contrast between the copy and the original, thus proving how the preconceptions on the topic thwarted the usage of copies as an instrument to draw the public up to a higher degree of the cultural experience: rather than mere accessibility or child-friendly features, these could act as a democratizing tool whenever other supports may not be as immediate. With the support of the first informal experiments carried out in the research, the copy potential to startle the visitor is explored, its ability to fix the cultural episode in their minds, favoring an act of personal appropriation by the public through a co-creative process. The copy shall therefore be intended as an aid to a well-designed experience involving a narration and something able to spark co-creation; to encourage the appropriation that comes in the co-creation process through the projection of a personal input onto the object – whether physical or not; inviting the public to actualize what showed them through the posing of a question has demonstrated its potential to facilitate such co-creative action. The pondering that follows – especially in the case of stimulating, abstract questions – forces an introspective reflection that frees the cultural experience from the strings that tie it to the need of learning rather than understanding, simultaneously pinning the memory of the experience. If the visitor gets to hold on to the object, say through a souvenir – *a copy* –, then this will most likely trigger in the future a bodily response that recall that memory and take back the visitor to the moment of the experience, having therefore enhanced the perceived value by the individual and the value of the object/event itself as this it depends on the share of such recognition.

Keywords: META-MUSEUM, Cultural heritage, Accessibility, Co-creation

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INTRODUCTION

This paper presents some of the first considerations derived from the first-stage research developed in the framework of the EU Horizon META-MUSEUM project, funded by the European Union. META-MUSEUM targets the cultural experience as a whole, with the aim to heighten the value of Cultural Heritage shining a light on its nuanced, evolving interpretations through time, and the changing eyes of society.

To this scope, the project poses the cultural experience to the center of its attention with a desire to guide the public through a more complete and enriching experience of Cultural Heritage while also contributing to the definition of a new paradigm for heritage communication. META-MUSEUM chose to focus on archaeology, challenging one of the most complex shares of heritage: archaeological heritage is in fact a tricky subject to be communicated as the temporal gap between the deep past of antiquity and our 21st century modernity can be difficult to overcome in the space of a museum gallery, rendering an encounter with this cultural heritage impotent, lacking meaning and significance for the majority of audiences. Such difficulty in grasping and owning the cultural value of archaeological heritage can trigger a withdrawal tendency that produces indifference in the visitor. To avert what would otherwise constitute a failure in the cultural experience, META-MUSEUM welcomed the challenge with the ambition of overturning this conviction by means of revising the usual concept of accessibility: shifting from the comforting illusion of providing everybody with the same cultural and learning experience, to the importance of enabling the public to realize and exercise their right to individual cultural experience towards a fuller democratization of culture.

The noble goal is often mistakenly understood as the need to level the cultural experience for everybody; going over the principles of *design for all* instead, it is easily understood how the focus should rather be directed towards the provision of a certain flexibility that would easily allow for accommodation of individual needs actually providing an inclusively meaningful and rewarding experience.

LOOKING FOR THE RIGHT ANGLE

The longstanding deeming of *copies* as lesser value reproductions of *originals*, the sole holders of unquestionable worth – always branded the former as vile duplicates. This line of reasoning might encounter support when the perceived value of the original resides in its understanding an artifacts inherent value is in the authenticity of its material, which bore witness to a particular time, event or an idea, be that as it may, such narrow understanding may fall into a fetishism hindering the chance to recognize the potential of the replicas as worthy *through something* rather than just *something*.

The dichotomy original-copy should be carefully examined, unveiling the absence of antagonism when looked at from the right angle: value in use here significantly overpowers other ones, with no presumption from replicas to neither substitute themselves to originals nor be recognized the same *masterpiece allure*.

Among the first minds to realize the possible use value of copies, Viollet-le-Duc in the XIX century proposed an entire museum of replicas, opening and admitting to the educational potential as a mean of broadening the diffusion of culture.

It could help clarify this position highlighting how the discussion unfolds drifting away from the debate on authenticity that copies intended as *perfect replicas* attentive to materials, scale, details. The existence of a copy, its production, steers clear from the contrasts articulated and explored by Alois Riegl at the beginning of the past century, the intention here is to uphold the potential of reproductions that must consciously and willingly alter, emphasize or even omit, elements accordingly to the scope that lead to the replica being produced.

Once preconceptions are left behind and value in use is openly accepted as the motive legitimizing the existence and production of copies, episodes like the Parisian Trocadero Museum see the light. The galleries of the museum host hundreds of replicas of French highest sculptural and pictorial peaks; although initially motivated by the desire of preserving such pieces, these reproductions quickly turned into powerful tools that broadened – and facilitated – the access to the French heritage there hosted and displayed, understandably turning the gallery into a safe of pivotal French cultural imagery.

The didactic value expressed in the Trocadero Plasters and models constituted the first level design for accessibility: losing the angst for preservation, the copy can easily be molded into a tool tailored to fit a plethora of scenarios. Such elaborations result in colors turning into ridges, small details be enlarged, textures enhanced and emphasized to fit a narration where – regardless of impairment – everyone can actively experience heritage. Italy boasts laudable examples of this in the tactile national museum Museo Omero in Ancona and its Bolognese counterpart Anteros tactile gallery of modern and contemporary art.

In not-so-recent times, museums have largely integrated copies into their exhibitions, but these are often introduced as mere accessibility – acknowledging most of the time only visual impairments therefore of limited overall accessibility value – and child-friendly features. Museums are, more often than admissible, inaccessible: unescapably relying on sight to navigate and experience collections there displayed and requiring prior knowledge to explore hosted exhibitions curated by professionals for professionals, where the public hardly finds a place in these pristine strongholds of culture.

Alongside tools dedicated to compensate for physical issues of accessibility, copies have helped to make an additional step forward in democratizing the museum reducing the gap between differently abled publics: *ability* that shall not be intended as limited to physical ability rather understood in the broader spectrum of differences in knowledge, experience and predisposition of the public. To better illustrate this last passage, it is sufficient to think of the difficulties that a non-specialized public might encounter trying to decipher a technical drawing, much more accessible if supported by *maquettes* or other iterations of physical models restoring the spatiality lost on paper. It is easily understood that original artifacts require expert handling and cannot

therefore be made *too* accessible; nevertheless, the use of copies enables the public to touch, hold and take their time exploring an artifact, unveiling minor details that can help holding onto the moment, fixing it into a lasting memory individuals can treasure.

Unfortunately, a narrow understanding of providing accessibility to heritage and culture has led museums to mostly procure said accessibility only through furnishing and equipment to aide the physically impaired; the inclusion of these, albeit paramount, does sometimes halt the tension to a proper development of full-range accessibility, resulting in a delusional sense of reached objectives. Disregarding the simple necessity of meeting heritage accordingly to one's abilities, the same strenuous effort must be put in place to advance on the emotional frontier, now finally understood as one of the main acts in building the significance of an encounter with Cultural Heritage.

On such note, enhancement of accessibility – intended as a better chance for the public to approach and own the cultural experience, in a recently inaugurated exhibit, Fondazione Museo delle Antichità Egizie di Torino (Turin, Italy; Associated Partner of the META-MUSEUM Consortium) took ancient ceramics out through two degrees of separation from the public: clay artifacts were for the first time taken out of storage and 3D printed replicas are on display for the public to engage with. One artifact in particular, thanks to highly detailed 3Dscan, allowed the reproduction of a fingerprint to be visible in the tactile copy. Albeit, not so easily found, such small details humanizes the artifact, it can hold the power to induce strong emotional resonance in the public, stimulating a stream of thought that links the artefact to its creator, the emotion of a story overarching millennia told by something so easily overlooked yet part of our everyday life. The copy so becomes a device of empathy that promotes the acquisition of knowledge not only through the digestion of factual information but also through engagement with experiences which go beyond cognition, prompting a deeper learning which resonates on an emotional level leading to a transformative encounter.

CO-CREATION IN THE CULTURAL ENCOUNTER

The META-MUSEUM effort comprises the study of emotional encounters to bring the experience of culture to a higher level of significance. The research targets the role of emotion, juxtaposed and over-imposed to the rational counterpart, as a key contribution in the elicitation of a transformative encounter which will make the cultural encounter into a lasting and marking experience. From this angle, the public has to be exposed to Cultural Heritage in such a way that allows and encourages reflection and elaboration to reach personal appropriation: that marks the moment when the encounter acquires a transformative nature, stimulating one's projections onto heritage and stimulating the recognition of value.

The research conducted in the META-MUSEUM framework elevates the individual experience and elaboration approaching Cultural Heritage as a primary element to be induced in the public. Favoring an act of personal appropriation implies a mutual exchange with heritage in which the public is invited to project a personal input onto the encounter – whether relative

to material heritage and its immaterial values – producing a meaningful transformation that leaves a mark behind on the public.

The process just described is designated as *co-creation* underlining the importance of mutual exchange between an artifact and person via which the encounter acquires a value otherwise absent in a more common and traditional more occurring passive learning experienced museums. Co-creation, in its current and progressive articulation, rests its base on the inversion from a top-down didactic approach in culture to a bottom-up and user-centered process where the recognition of value is stimulated, obtained, and affirmed by the public connecting to heritage through a personal lens. The value of co-creation resides in the amount of preparation required crafting these activities: a well-designed experience allows everybody to actively participate in the creation process, thus making it intrinsically inclusive democratizing.

To consolidate and preserve the memory created, a catalyst can be introduced to aid the process of acquisition alongside a curated narration and well-designed experience: almost anything, as long as proven effective, can work as such, let it be an object – *a copy* of an object perhaps, a smell, a sound, etc. there is really no limit considering the introspection required and the high degree of subjectivity involved.

FIRST EXPERIENCE

Returning to elements presented in previous paragraphs, the spirit of the research might be better exemplified thanks to the first informal experiment conducted aimed at presenting the value of co-creation approaches in enhancing the meaningfulness of the cultural experience.

The experiment chose a peculiar case-study, something physical yet invisible to the public: the heart amulet hidden under the bandages of Kha's mummy, displayed in the collection of the Fondazione Museo delle Antichità Egizie di Torino, Turin, Italy. The amulet, a scarab carved out of stone, has been resting on the Egyptian architect's heart for almost three thousand years, salvaged by the foresight of the archaeologist that discovered the intact burial vault in 1906. Schiaparelli, the archeologist, prohibited the undressing of the mummy confident that advancement in technology would have soon permitted to see through the bandages.

Presented as such, the amulet would have meant little to the public – probably more impressed by Schiaparelli's vetoing rather than the invisible artifact. To test the effect of co-creation and incentive the encounter with the transformative nature of Cultural Heritage, the small group of visitors gathered was shown a video depicting the digital unraveling of the mummy. A voiced-over comment, recorded to this purpose, presented the case-study and stressed the protective and propitiatory nature of the amulets in Egyptian culture, explaining the reason of the presence of these artifacts neatly placed in between layers of bandages. The experience for the public climaxed in a question posed to them at the end of the commentary, inviting them to think of something they would wish to carry on their heart forever.

The first catalyst was then introduced gifting the visitors a copy of the amulet – printed by a model obtained through retopology processing, merging the images acquired through CT scans and X-rays.

The same group was posed the same question again the following day, putting in place the second catalyst, this time an experience, inviting all to answer anonymously and populate a word cloud they were not shown until the last answers came through; when completed, the word cloud offered interesting points for discussion:

- even if made aware of the tension to the afterlife these amulets carry, most answers cited objects or experiences relative to the life that will eventually come to an end. This demonstrates how the long-standing tradition of leaving objects with our deceased really is, yet how profoundly society has changed it, possibly – in the limitedness of the experiment and the sample used – reflecting a weaker belief in an afterlife or a higher importance attributed to one's history
- many answers were along the lines of "photos of…", "ring of…", "memories of…" most often than not citing other people rather than oneself directly, leaving the room to acknowledge the power of affective and emotional ties and how they connected to heritage through their intimate selves.

In its simplicity, the hands-on experiment tied the encounter with Cultural Heritage to a co-creative experience and a *copy* that effectively guided them to possess the cultural experience enriching its meaning through the self-projection onto what could otherwise be looked at as a "simple" carved out object.

The promising twofold value of use of the copy here is demonstrated by the actual possibility to observe what otherwise invisible – unless willing to compromise the integrity of the artifact – and the chance to fix a memory of intimate interaction with Cultural Heritage through a physical object.

CONCLUSION

The scope of the article is to present and ignite discussion around the role of the copy as a plastic device that can be molded and shaped to serve a purpose in the dynamics of the cultural experience. Copies as here presented – with no intention or possibility of constituting forgery – morph into devices that in various ways support the cultural experience through its multifaceted essence, effectively broadening accessibility and heightening the value.

Following along these lines it is just natural to think of copies devoted to the visually impaired public that get to see by running their fingers across textures and ridges. At other times, copies become a necessary decoy introduced to preserve fragile heritage that would otherwise severely deteriorate due to public affluence, a notorious example is the Lascaux caves network, which closed to the public in 1963. The delicate Paleolithic UNESCO site, quickly deteriorating due to microclimatic changes brought by roughly 1200 daily visitors, now relies on a full cave reconstruction, immersive features and mediators' work to ensure safeguarding *the original*.

It is then by means of a *copy* that the value of heritage is made accessible, understandable and immortalized. Citing the Berliner Pergamon Museum exhibit by Yadegar Asisi, this proves how technology has provided advanced tools for the reproduction of heritage in a digital setting, proving of particular use in contexts where, due to various reasons, a copy must stand in for an inaccessible *original*. Today, the capillary diffusion of the internet and the possibility of accessing content from anywhere has further broadened the accessibility of culture and heritage, with a sharp rise observed in virtual exhibitions hosting the 21st century interpretation of gypsums.

Aside from all the declinations in consistence and use of copies, these still cannot be considered as autonomous and self-sufficient devices in Cultural Heritage communication. The *copy* shall be part of a properly designed mediation discourse where it can neatly fall into place to induce the coveted transformative encounter with heritage, thus inducing fruitful appropriation of its historical, cultural and identitarian values. Co-creation activities shall therefore come in support in this panoply of tools effectively guiding the experience by anchoring the individual experience to an object that morphs into a device that relies on the power of memories to cement acquisition.

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