

10 or 20 minute presentation

The preservation of changes of knowledge and its sources: theoretical, practical and ethical considerations

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Abstract

In an age where there is a proliferation of research resources, many available online, knowledge about objects in collections has increased dramatically. The issue is not just to preserve its provenance or referred sources, the changing knowledge itself needs to be reflected in the documentation of the objects concerned. From a documentation point of view, this presents several dilemma, theoretical, practical and also ethical.

Thus on one level we need to decide which changes are worth recording, and to what extent we source the knowledge. In many cases, we may only have a list of relevant sources available, not the original knowledge about the object, nor its development.

Even if we only record the sources, such as publications or authored opinions, this exercise requires research and expertise, and where do we draw a historical line?

There is also the question of whether to preserve certain archaic views or approaches reflecting a less enlightened historical period. Such considerations apply both to data about objects but also to terminologies. And with financial and time constraints, decisions have to be made in the broader context of the pressing need to document collections and make the information available to the public. Will the greater resources of some institutions compared to others create a two-tiered system, effectively undermining the efforts of the less advantaged ones pursuing more pressing goals?

Compromises are inevitable, and this paper discusses some approaches taken in relation to the British Museum Collection database.