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Short Paper

The critical analysis of sources as the first step in the scientific documentation of collections

Any serious historical study must start with a critical analysis of its sources: who is the author describing the events studied, what is their training, social background or ideological slant? Are they a visual witness, a contemporary of the events described or, if not, on what information do they draw? This analysis is all the more crucial if the sources are few in number, especially if they are contradictory or when there is only one of them.

The sources for the documentation of historical collections are generally handwritten registers that list the provenance of the objects, followed by a more or less detailed description of them, often containing indications of dates, makers, geographical origins or, for archaeological objects, their excavation site. The holdings of the Museum of Art and History of Geneva were created by grouping together a variety of different collections, mainly assembled in the 19th century, and were enriched throughout the 20th century. Despite having been repeatedly moved, reshuffled and reclassified, a number written on the objects in ink or a label generally refers back to one of these registers, which contains the basic information used by the scientific staff responsible for documenting the collections. In Geneva, this mammoth task has been carried out systematically since the early 1990s. The scientific staff assigned to this undertaking have gradually become familiar with the different handwriting of the many contributors recognisable in the registers and on labels, in handwritten files, minutes of meetings, etc. They have gained considerable experience in optimising the interpretation of this data and in enhancing it, when necessary, with "between the lines" information, imperceptible to the uninformed reader. Many of these examples of handwriting have been identified and are now documented in our computer system with a description. A critical analytical study of the various contributors and their skills and reliability is currently in progress.

It is clear that systematic work on collections cannot afford to conduct extensive research into each of the objects documented, yet the basic recorded information must be extremely sound. Given the increasingly universal access to documentation, this data frequently forms the basis for assumptions, studies and exhibitions. The critical analysis of documentation sources often makes it possible to qualify or rectify the information they convey, providing a much more reliable basis for scientific research.

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