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How to declutter a museum? Carmen Simon, manager of the Chüechlihus in Langnau (canton of Berne), has enlisted the help of the public and turned this challenge into a very democratic process. Photos: Andreas Reber



How to declutter a museum

From hats, to shirt collars, to braces – locals in the Emmental Valley have been given the opportunity to decide which artefacts their regional museum should discard and what should happen to these items thereafter. This pioneering project has democratised a process common to every museum: deaccessioning, or the permanent removal of artefacts.



EVA HIRSCHI

“People don’t like to talk about it,” says Carmen Simon, manager of the Chüechlihus Regional Museum in Langnau im Emmental (canton of Berne), “but there is nothing new about museums having to dispose of objects”. This should not really be a surprise, because no museum can continue collecting ad infinitum. Particularly at a regional museum like the Chüechlihus, where the vast majority of items have been donated, there may be more than one version of the same object. Or some artefacts may be damaged. And one day there will be no more space.

Simon, 37, took over management of the museum in 2021. “Careful curating not only involves building your collections, but reducing them too,” she says. Museums must review their inventories on a regular basis and dispense with individual items where necessary. This is called deaccessioning.

A novel idea

The Chüechlihus in Langnau, one of Switzerland’s biggest regional museums, has a novel take on this process. In a project unique in Europe, if not the world, the local population can decide which items the museum should give away and what should happen to them. “We believe the people of the Emmental Valley should have a say in what happens to their cultural heritage,” says Simon. The municipal council agrees. “No museum needs 20 walking sticks and 12 spinning wheels in its collection,” says Martin Lehmann, the culture officer in Langnau. “The more we talked

about it, the more obvious that became.”

In consultation with a dedicated committee, the museum initially got rid of over 2,000 textiles – from top hats, nightshirts and aprons, to shirt collars, folk costumes and scarves. In addition to museum, local authority and political representatives, five randomly chosen members of the public from Langnau sit on the committee. They include 36-year-old Jacqueline Maurer. “I immediately agreed to join,” she says. “It’s exciting to be part of this process.”

The committee met to discuss which items were to be discarded. All citizens of Langnau – living inside or outside the municipality – were able to add their voices by voting online at www.entsammeln.ch. All the objects in question were photographed and displayed on the museum website. They are also displayed in the top floor of the museum and can be viewed by anyone – QR codes contain descriptions of each individual item. “The idea is that the local people become actively involved,” says Simon. “Unlike in other museums, they can even handle the objects if they wish. This further increases their sense of engagement.”

Initial scepticism

This democratic process has also attracted dissent. “Many in the museum community were initially sceptical,” says Simon, whose tactic to counteract any misgivings was full disclosure, with the entire process clearly documented on the museum website. According to the International Council of Museums guidelines,



From antique furniture, to traditional textiles, to heirloom crockery – everything must go.
Photos: Andreas Reber (left), Eva Hirschi (right)

any object being disposed of must first be offered to another museum. But Simon believes that public museums are not the only place to keep artefacts. “We apply a broad interpretation of the guidelines,” she says. “However, we give priority to professional applications from other museums,” she quickly adds.

Jacqueline Maurer has no issue with the project either: “The museum staff have only disposed of items that are already covered in the collection. In addition, the project helps to keep the museum in people’s minds.” This approach seems to be working. The public nature of the process has also helped to elicit new information, re-



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Photo: Eva Hirschi

sulting in the museum changing its mind and keeping certain artefacts after all.

Simon: “We have enough specialist expertise to know what specific items were for, but we don’t always know whom the things belonged to.” Take the work garment that was returned to the collection. “We thought it was just a tatty coat, but we have now discovered that it belonged to a radio mechanic whom everyone knew in the village.” The committee decided to keep the garment.

Duty of care

The bequeathing phase finally took place this summer. This involved working out what exactly will happen to each and every object. Not through an auction or an online shopping platform (no money changed hands), but

via a thorough application process. Museums, organisations and individuals – including those outside the Emmental region or even abroad – can apply to obtain a specific item. There are no conditions attached to future use, regardless of the intended purpose – upcycling, art, interior decoration, or whatever. Next come the decisions on who gets what: the committee meets again in mid-August, taking account of the online public votes in each case.

The entire process is time-consuming, taking about a half a year in total. But Simon thinks this is justified: “After all, these objects have been entrusted to us. As museum curator, I have a duty of care.” Initial scepticism among the public seems to have evaporated, while interest across the wider museum community has also grown. They are even getting inquiries from abroad from people who want to know how the project works.

Carmen Simon is delighted. This is already the second round of deaccessioning – the museum conducted its first round last year, albeit for only about a hundred items. Another round is planned for 2024. According to a Chüechlihus survey of those who voted online, many in the local population now feel a greater attachment to the museum. “Bringing the museum to our community is exactly what we want to do,” says Simon. “What matters is that we establish a connection. It is not about objects, but people.”

Langnau native Jacqueline Maurer agrees: “I had forgotten that this region has so many intriguing things to offer. We should be proud to live here.” Because the aim of the project is not simply to free up space – but win hearts and minds.

For more photos of deaccessioned artefacts in Langnau, visit: revue.link/langnau.

Report



GERHARD LOB

Ticino is known as one of the sunniest spots in Switzerland. The sun does indeed shine very often in the country’s most southerly canton. Ticino often vies with Valais for the title of Switzerland’s sunniest canton. Sometimes the former comes out on top, sometimes the latter. But Ticino is the sunniest on average, according to MeteoSwiss meteorological records from 1990 to 2020. Ticino boasts five of the ten sunniest places in Switzerland. Cardada-Cimetta, the mountain overlooking Locarno, is in first place, with an average of 2,256 hours of sunshine each year. The Valais capital of Sion comes second, with 2,192 hours.

It is, therefore, no coincidence that Cardada-Cimetta is a popular destination for both locals and tourists. The 1,670-metre summit, Cimetta, is easy to reach. You first take a cable car from Orselina (395 metres) to Car-