

Etiquette in lending and borrowing exhibitions. Is giving credit really a problem?

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Abstract. In the past fifteen years cooperation between museums in lending and borrowing exhibitions has become more and more common. Rules regulating the procedures, however, have not been found so far, despite the legal complications involved. The paper pleads that conceiving the concept for an exhibition is an original creative act that deserves protection and as such is subject to the copyright like other activities and productions in the realm of creativity. A few examples of violating the right of authorship are given. It is suggested that the ICOM Code of Professional Ethics should give more precise guidelines in this respect.

In the first years of my career as a museum director, we borrowed from the Museum of Ethnography in Berlin a reduced version of its exhibition "Boote aus aller Welt", shown in Cologne from November 1985 to February 1986. Our contribution to this venue was to make a selection of the much larger show in Berlin in order to adapt it to the gallery space available in our museum, the writing of new labels, the installation, the printing of a poster and the opening for the press and the public. The catalogue sold in Cologne was the original edition of the Berlin exhibition.

Upon receiving copies of our posters my colleague in Berlin, Klaus Helfrich, wrote me to point out that he thought it not right that the name of his museum, whose team had conceived the exhibition and whose collections it showed, was not mentioned in the handouts to the Cologne clientele. Getting all of a sudden aware of his obvious being right and realizing for the first time the sensitivities involved in lending an exhibition I blushed with embarrassment. He was kind enough to receive my apologies and did not hold it against me. It goes without saying that after that experience it never occurred to me again not to indicate the origin or the authors of an exhibition we took over from somewhere else. I should add that due to notorious shortage of staff about half of the two to four exhibitions presented per year in our museum are venues of shows conceived by colleagues of other museums.

For sure I had learnt my lesson, but with growing experience in borrowing and lending exhibitions I noticed that in an international context there is by far no established routine in quoting origins and authors of a show handed over to another institution. Since the transfer or exchange of exhibitions seems to become more and more frequent these days, it is no doubt one of the everyday topics of the dialogue among museums, a dialogue to which this symposium is dedicated. In such a context it appears appropriate to ponder about problems involved in the procedures.