

Merchandising In Museums: Education, Culture Or Pure Business?

Merchandising en museos:
¿educación, cultura o simple negocio?

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Currently, the merchandising of a museum is a good financing way but in its management should not be missed the educational and cultural purpose that defines these institutions. In fact, an adequate treatment of these products and the store can turn them into an extension of the exhibition space and transmitters of knowledge, art and culture. To achieve this, some strategies are proposed such as personalization, the choice of quality products, packaging care and the incorporation of key content. All this will position the museum as a culture diffusing entity and will move it away from mere commercial business.

Actualmente, el *merchandising* de un museo constituye una buena manera de financiación pero en su gestión no debería perderse el fin educativo y cultural que define a estas instituciones. De hecho, un tratamiento adecuado de estos productos y de la tienda puede convertirlos en una prolongación del espacio expositivo y en transmisores de conocimiento, arte y cultura. Para conseguirlo se proponen algunas estrategias como la personalización, la elección de productos de calidad, el cuidado del *packaging* y la incorporación de contenidos clave. Todo ello posicionará al museo como entidad difusora de cultura y lo alejará del mero negocio comercial.

Key words
Museum, merchandising,
design, culture, art

Palabras clave
Museo, *merchandising*,
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1. The museum shop

It seems that museum shops have cropped up a short time ago but actually they have existed since mid 18th century. At that time it was a marginal business to which little attention was paid. They usually were small, dark zones with an assortment of products limited to publications, prints and postcards that reproduced the works of art exhibited.

The museum depended financially on the local urban elites that, in the middle of the 20th century, were substituted by public agencies that supported culture and art. However, in the 1980s, public financing was reduced and private investments did not manage to fill the gap that they left. The museum then sought new activities that could generate income and began to relaunch sections of the museum that had previously been passed by. The shop, the cafeteria or parking space became valuable elements from a commercial point of view. In this manner the shops were catapulted from being a secondary idea to playing a lead role in the visitors' experience^{1, 2}.

All of this was accompanied, if not propelled, by the democratisation of culture and making the museum more popular. Those spaces once destined to a few people extend their appeal to a larger public and became a tourist attraction or "must" visits for the weekend. They became busy meeting places, of obliged circulation and visit, where cultural and commercial purchases meet³.

This trend towards commercial activity has established marketing as one more element in museum management⁴, with an operating system approach similar to that of a private enterprise. All of this in pursuit of more efficient management of

the museum assets, improving the profitability of the institution and making it as competitive as possible⁵.

For practical effects, the shop space meant an extension of the space devoted to merchandising, and a new location had to be found so that it would not go unnoticed. Specific personnel or an external company would be hired to manage it all. The assortment of products was also broadened into a panoply of possibilities and designs never before imagined and merchandising techniques began to be applied as in shops of any other sector (offers, promotions, fidelisation cards...).

However, museum marketing did not stop there, but also worked to extend itself beyond the museum walls, seeking a manner of attracting public in general and not only visitors. Perhaps the first move in this direction was to have an independent shop entrance separate from the visitors' entrance to the museum, which allowed access to the shop without previously having to visit the museum and its collections⁶.

Afterwards, online shops appeared⁷ and some museums installed permanent or temporary shops in the busiest and most commercial streets in the cities. Thus, for example, the Metropolitan Museum of New York (MET) has several dozen shops throughout the world where its merchandising is sold as if it were Warner Bros or Real Madrid⁸. It is no wonder why some museum shops have become part of the overall shopping opportunities offered by a city and that are mentioned as unique spaces in which to find surprising and special gifts.

These actions have separated the visit to the museum from the purchase of merchandising making them independent activities which are not connected, projecting the image of the museum quite similar to that of any other shop having only a commercial purpose. Carrying a Tate Gallery bag in London is no longer synonymous of having visited it nor, in fact, of having absorbed the culture distilled from the art works there exhibited.

1. MCCARTHY, ERIN: "The Victorian Secret". In *Display er Design Ideas*, 17 (US), 3 (March 2005), p90-92.

2. Bradford Kelleher is considered pioneer in museum merchandising As founder of the first modern store of the Metropolitan Museum of New York he advocated the entry of the museums in the business of gift shops and book stores. Little after joining the MET, he separated the sales and information departments, opened the Art and Book shop. At the beginning of the decade of the 1960s, the museum sold silver jewellery, engravings, books and many other articles, sending Kelleher to search through the whole world for artisans capable of complying with the high MET standards in the reproduction of glass and silver objects, making bronze and ceramic statues. KENNEDY, RANDY: "Bradford Kelleher, Creator of Met's Store, Dies at 87". In *The New York Times*, (6 November 2007). <<https://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/06/arts/06kelleher.html?ref=business>>. [20/04/2018].

3. HERNÁNDEZ HERNÁNDEZ, FRANCISCA: "La museología ante los retos del siglo XXI". In *E-rph: Revista electrónica de Patrimonio Histórico*, 1 (E-rph: Electronic magazine of the Historical Patrimony), 1 (Granada) (December 2007), p. 349.

4. HERNÁNDEZ HERNÁNDEZ, FRANCISCA: "La museología ante los retos del siglo XXI". In *E-rph: Revista electrónica de Patrimonio Histórico*, 1 (E-rph: Electronic magazine of the Historical Patrimony), 1 (Granada) (December 2007), p. 349.(Granada) (December 2007), p. 349.

5. VACAS GUERRERO, TRINIDAD: "Los museos madrileños como oferta turístico-cultural". In *Cuadernos de turismo*, 5 (Murcia) (2000), p. 107.

6. The Contemporary Art Center BALTIC located in Gateshead (England) promotes its merchandising throughout the building and there are posters in the restaurant and the cafeteria, for children in an educative zone or homemaking articles in the cafeteria. In this way the visitors are reminded that there is a store during their entire stay at the museum and not only at the end. CAINES, MATTHEW: "16 to Tips for Making the Most of Your Museum Shop". In *The Guardian*, 18 October 2012. <<https://www.theguardian.com/culture-professionals-network/culture-professionals-blog/2012/oct/18/top-tips-museum-shop-retail>>. [15/02/2018].

7. The MET store sells by catalogue since 1921 and through internet since 1999. See: <<https://store.metmuseum.org/about-the-met-store/page/aboutus>>.

8. VERDÚ, VICENTE: "Cultura, museos y comunicación en el siglo XXI". In *Museo*, 9 (Madrid) (2004), p.13.

With regards to the merchandising products that can be found in the museum shop, although an important part of the shop is still devoted to art publications, edited or not by the museum, these share space with different items: mugs, T-shirts, fans, ballpoint pens, magnets...⁹ Pérez Ruiz¹⁰ distinguishes three categories of objects: general articles with the institution's brand; articles related with one of the exhibitions, and unspecified objects, close to those of a gift shop, but related in some way with culture and/or design¹¹.

2. Cultural or commercial strategy?

It is evident that sales of merchandising help finance the fundamental activities of the museum institution such as conservation of art works, research, purchase of art works to extend its collection, improvement of facilities... In other words, the sale of merchandising products supplies income for the museum to grow and develop¹², so it can continue with its cultural and educational activity.

However, besides the arguments of financial nature, there are also important immaterial benefits that support this practice¹³.

In the first place the merchandising products contribute to the educational purpose of the museum, completing the educational function of the exhibits and extending them beyond the museum walls¹⁴. When a merchandising item printed with a work of art leaves the museum and is paraded along other streets¹⁵, it is perceived by many persons that have not been in the museum and it becomes an

instrument of dissemination of art and culture¹⁶. From this point of view, the merchandising object is seen as one more cultural product, together with the others the museum offers, although its place of exhibition is not a hall but a shop.

Besides, the merchandising products publicise the museum and increase awareness and recognition¹⁷. For the customer, those products are mainly tangible souvenirs of their visit to the museum¹⁸, but for others it is a communication support that addresses them and reminds them of the existence of the museum¹⁹. The T-shirt bought at the New York Guggenheim travels with its owner throughout the world and serves as a lure to attract new visitors.

Toepler and Kirchberg²⁰ also mention institutional isomorphism (and "me too") as the reason for a museum to have a shop. The success obtained by other museums through their shop and merchandising encourages and in some cases obliges the museum to adopt this commercial strategy. Besides, nowadays many people do not conceive the visit to a museum without walking through the shop. When they do not find it, they become disenchanted and this unpleasant sensation diminishes the experience of the visit.

3. Strategies to enhance a cultural dimension

In the previous section we have seen the different benefits that a museum can glean from the sale of merchandising and not all respond to a financial or commercial end. Thus, the purpose of management and design of these products should not center only on the economic profit expected from them, but rather in treating them as one more element within

9. GARCÍA ESCALONA, EMILIA: "De la reliquia al souvenir". In *Revista de filología románica*, anejo IV (Romantic Philology Magazine, Annex IV) (Madrid) (2006), p. 404.

10. PÉREZ RUIZ, FRANCISCO JAVIER: *Las tiendas de los museos*, 23 January 2013 <<https://issuu.com/franpe/docs/tiendasmuseos>>. [11/11/2017].

11. The San Francisco MOMA calls them *curated keepsakes*: element inspired on the artistic works of the museum but only vaguely linked to the objects of its collection. Generally commissioned to local artists or craftsmen. Their predominance in the museum stores, which make them seem veritable boutiques. Chernick, Karen: *Who Decides What You Buy in Museum Gift Shops*, 24 November 2017 <<https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-epredditorial-decides-buy-museum-gift-shop>>. [18/11/2017].

12. TOEPLER, STEFAN; KIRCHBERT, VOLKER: *Museums, Merchandising, and Nonprofit Commercialization*, National Center for Nonprofit Enterprise Working Paper, January 2002 <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319968491_MUSEUMS_MERCHANDISING_AND_NONPROFIT_COMMERCIALIZATION>. [11/12/2017].

13. TOEPLER, STEFAN; KIRCHBERT, VOLKER: *Museums, Merchandising, and Nonprofit Commercialization*, National Center for Nonprofit Enterprise Working Paper, January 2002 <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319968491_MUSEUMS_MERCHANDISING_AND_NONPROFIT_COMMERCIALIZATION>. [11/12/2017].

14. As the webpage of the NY Metropolitan (The Met Store) indicates, buying in the store creates a connection not only between the visitor and the museum, but also between the visitor and the art world. See: <<https://store.metmuseum.org/about-the-met-store/page/aboutus>>.

15. The store is the only place in the world where you can take a work of art without being arrested. WHITE, STEVE: *Coollest Thing I Ever Bought*, 31 August 2015 <<https://museumstoreassociation.org/2015/08/coollest-thing-i-ever-bought/>>. [11/11/2017].

16. The gift shop is the most important tool for diffusion and comprehension of art in the present world. Although it seems to be a mere appendix in most museums, the store is fundamental for the project of these art institutions. Its operation assures that the lessons of the museum - that refer to beauty, meaning, spiritual growth - can last longer in the visitor further than the actual tour of the facilities and can be used in every day life. See: <<http://www.thebookoflife.org/the-museum-gift-shop/>>.

17. SOLDATENKO, ANATOLY: "Hermitage Merchandising and International Marketing". In *Museum International*, 55 (Francia), 1 (2003), p.75-78.

18. GORDON, BEVERLY: "The Souvenir: Messenger of the Extraordinary". In *Journal of Popular Culture*, 20 (US), 3 (1986), p.135-146.

19. People can continue enjoying their experiences in the museum through the products they bought in our stores or which were given to them although the exhibitions have closed, the educational programs ended and the hallways of the galleries of the permanent collections are dark and lonely. STEINER, JULIE: *What Is A Museum Store?*, 24 abril 2018, <<https://museumstoreassociation.org/2017/09/what-is-a-museum-store/>>. [26/04/2018].

20. TOEPLER, STEFAN; KIRCHBERT, VOLKER: *Museums, Merchandising, and Nonprofit Commercialization*, National Center for Nonprofit Enterprise Working Paper, January 2002 <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319968491_MUSEUMS_MERCHANDISING_AND_NONPROFIT_COMMERCIALIZATION>. [11/12/2017].





the purpose of cultural and/or artistic propagation that all museum activity has²¹.

Just as the museum takes great care in the selection of the works it exhibits in its halls, their arrangement and presentation to the public, it should also carefully select its merchandising products since they not only contribute to its financial support but are also very closely linked to its corporative image

as an institution²². For this, without losing sight of the commercialisation and achievement of attractive and saleable products; the choice of those merchandising products must also be directed towards these ends that Toepler and Kirchberg²³ call immaterial: educational, promotional and capable of communication...

To achieve these certain practices that contribute to enhancing immaterial benefits before financial ones in the online shops of the main Spanish

21. Sue Shave, director of the Chiltern Open Air Museum (Buckinghamshire, England), maintains that museum stores are a part of the visitor's experience and should be treated as such. Although there is financial profit in the sales generated, the museums should work to guarantee that the merchandising products are related with the singularity of their collections and also help to promote them. CAINES, MATTHEW: "16 Top Tips for Making the Most of Your Museum Shop". In *The Guardian*, 18 October 2012. <<https://www.theguardian.com/culture-professionals-network/culture-professionals-blog/2012/oct/18/top-tips-museum-shop-retail>>. [15/02/2018].

22. PÉREZ RUIZ, FRANCISCO JAVIER: *Las tiendas de los museos*, 23 January 2013 <<https://issuu.com/franpe/docs/tiendasmuseos>>. [11/12/2017].

23. TOEPLER, STEFAN; KIRCHBERT, VOLKER: *Museums, merchandising, and nonprofit commercialization*, National Center for Nonprofit Enterprise Working Paper, January 2002 <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319968491_MUSEUMS_MERCHANDISING_AND_NONPROFIT_COMMERCIALIZATION>. [11/12/2017].

art museums have been observed²⁴. From this observation, four strategies have been extracted: personalisation, quality, good packaging²⁵ and inclusion of educational content. We will comment on each of these below using the examples found.

Firstly, personalisation helps create products which, just as the works exhibited in the museum, are exclusive and can only be found there and in no other shop. In fact, the merchandising products made specifically for the museum increase the value perceived by the consumer²⁶, meaning they are willing to pay a higher price than what the product would have if it were not personalised²⁷.

Just as a museum is visited and an entrance fee paid to see what can only be seen in that space, the shop, as an extension of the exhibition space, is also expected to present exclusive elements. In this way the visitor perceives shop and museum as a single ensemble and that a visit to the shop completes the visit to the museum. This means turning away from all the typical souvenirs we might find in any other shop, although on a financial level it might be more accessible and profitable for the museum.

Also, the exquisite appearance (aesthetics) and original products guarantee greater attention towards the products offered²⁸. The visitor seeks in the museum shop that which they cannot find in their place of origin and because of that they feel more attracted to products and designs they have not seen in other places. When they reach their destination this unique merchandising will also serve as an element of distinction and differentiation from all those that have not visited the same place as them. If we wish to position a visit to the museum as something exceptional, something we do not do every day, the souvenirs we acquire of it cannot be something everyday, but rather something extraordinary, far from common place.

This exclusivity or personalisation can be achieved in several ways. One of them is choosing products manufactured completely and exclusively

for the museum and that, therefore, cannot be found anywhere else. So, for example, the museum can create products from scratch that reproduce determined works and that can only be found in its shop: a pendant inspired in Velázquez' *Las meninas* (Museo del Prado, 1656) or a cushion with the shape of a doll dressed like Picasso and Dali (Museo Reina Sofía).

However, this process requires great investment and results in expensive products which are not accessible to all publics. For this reason, the majority of museums choose to offer merchandising products that stem from mass production items which are personalised and individualised by the design applied on them. This design can be, basically, of three types depending of the degree of elaboration.

On one hand there are the logo-products that only have the museum brand or a representative graphic element stamped (the outline of the building or the star work of art, for example). They are low priced products (pencils or key rings) or products made of materials (metal, leather, fabric) that do not allow more engraving or greater size (belts, coin purses...)²⁹. The degree of personalisation and exclusivity of these products is basic since they have been branded with the museum in the same manner as cattle is branded with the iron of the ranch.

Another type of products reproduce literally one of the works of the museum completely or partially. We could call them replicas and they would be, for example, a deck of playing cards that reproduce a detail of the triptyc *The Garden of Earthly Delights (El jardín de las delicias) (El Bosco 1500-1505)* (Museo del Prado) or a pencil case with a design inspired in Abstraction (Willem de Kooning, 1949-1950) (Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza). In this case the level of personalisation increases with respect to the previous one but it is convenient to enhance it even more by adding a text with the name of the museum, and in its case, of the city in which it is located. Thus we will be able to improve the exclusivity of the product and differentiate it from other mass produced items that have chosen that picture as a visual motif of their design.

Lastly, we find the interpretation-products on which a design that refers to one of the pieces of the museum collection but which is not the same as the original one. In these, the designer interprets the elements, colours and arrangements of the work of art to obtain an original and clearly distinctive design.

24. Museum del Prado (Madrid), Museum Thyssen-Bornemisza (Madrid), Museum Guggenheim (Bilbao) and Museo Reina Sofía (Madrid).

25. Lyn Falk, owner and designer of Retailworks Ind. (Mequon, Wisconsin), maintains good packaging is the key to strengthen corporate identity and can have a great promotional impact. For this, among other aspects, it is suggested that boxes bearing the logo of the museum be used as an object of decoration in different places in the store: as well as having the tissue paper with the museum logo printed on it, to wrap the customers' purchase. FALK, LYN: *5 Tips to Branding Your Shop*, 24 abril 2018 <<https://museumstoreassociation.org/2014/09/five-tips-to-package-up-branding-in-your-shop/>>. [26/04/2018].

26. KIM, SOYOUNG; LITTRELL, MARY A. "Predicting Souvenir Purchase Intentions". En *Journal of Travel Research*, 38 (USA) (1999), p153-162.

27. Both the online stores of the Museo del Prado and the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza dictate in the description of the product if it is something made exclusively for the store.

28. KIM, SOYOUNG; LITTRELL, MARY A. "Predicting Souvenir Purchase Intentions". In *Journal of Travel Research*, 38 (USA) (1999), p153-162.

29. Among the low cost products we find t-shirts with the silkscreened museum logo (Museo del Prado) or tote bags (Museo Reina Sofía). Among products whose materials do not permit greater personalised detail would include a wooden pencil and pencil sharpener presented in a metal box, designed exclusively for the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza).

Such is the case of the series of products for children sold by the Museum del Prado based on the triptych *The Garden of Earthly Delights (El jardín de las delicias) (El Bosco 1500-1505)* or the series based on caricatures representing different artistic movements (cubism, surrealism) of the Museo Reina Sofía.

This last group of products is surely the most appealing to the visitor and also the one that best represents the personalisation to which all museum merchandising must seek. However, it is also the one that requires more resources and that, therefore, not all museums can afford to have many lines of this type of products available.

However, before rejecting this option for budgetary reasons, the museum should evaluate that this exclusive graphic design makes an additional contribution to the product and sensibly increases the value perceived by the public. This finally means being able to fix a higher sales price. Therefore, although adding a graphic interpretation of a work to the configuration of the product supposes increasing its cost, this investment can be recovered afterwards since it is possible to fix a higher sales price.

On the other hand, the exclusivity or personalisation we recommend for museum

merchandising can also be done and perfected through the packaging of the product. This packaging should carry the text and graphic elements characteristic of the museum and will serve both to differentiate and personalise the merchandising product to transmit the corporative values of the institution.

In order for the personalisation of the product to be successful, it must be linked to good quality. To achieve this the following strategy consists in looking for good-quality products that are not just appealing or useful as souvenirs but that also adequately fulfill their function and that are can survive in time. If the ballpen bought in a museum stops writing in three days, it will end up in the trash and will not serve to advertise the purposes of the museum. Therefore, if a functional product is chosen as merchandising, it is vital that good quality be assured.

Besides, specially considering the educational and cultural purpose of the museum, it is convenient to establish standards reinforcing inclusion contents on the museum and its works in the products, their packaging or even, in the shop. For example, the products can have labels that explain the main features of the work which is represented on them



Tienda del Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Yokoo Tadanori (Kobe, Japón). 663highland. Disponible en: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:161224_Yokoo_Tadanori_Museum_of_Contemporary_Art_Kobe_Japan15n.jpg>. [25/11/2017].



Aplicación fragmentos de la obra de Miró (1893-1983) a distintos productos.
© Successió Miró 2018. © ART-Tic museum SL, 2018



or on which the design was inspired, or descriptive texts by means of posters, television or computer screens, which can be distributed throughout the shop, that prolong the educational dimension of the museum³⁰. In this manner, when buying the product or walking through the shop, the visitor receives some information that they might have already heard or read during their visit, but becomes better fixed in their memory.

Lastly, if reinforcing the promotional facet and making the product a good support for publicity communication is desired, in the first place seeking to give high visibility to the name of the museum and its identifying characteristics in the design applied to the product. In this manner it will be easy to identify the museum the product comes from. At the same time, and complementary to the above, it is important that all the products maintain a single and highly exclusive style and follow the same parameters that allow identifying them as part of one same ensemble that is no other than the corporative image of the museum.

Conclusions

The commercial dimension of museum is something already established and the shops constitute one more hall in the visit tour. However it is necessary to work in order not to lose sight of the cultural and educational dimension that was and must continue to be the main driving force of the entire museum.

This is why this work gathers possible avenues to guide the development of merchandising products that, without losing sight of the commercial aspect, enhance in a clear manner the cultural and educational component. To achieve this choosing an exclusive product above one without personalisation; a quality product above a low cost product is

suggested. A product that narrates, tells and educates above a product whose sole contribution is formal and aesthetic value.

Basically, efforts should be directed, in the first place, to achieving a highly exclusive product, that is, one which personalisation is such that it is impossible to find in any other shop. This personalisation is appealing to the visitor who is looking for a unique present but it is also adequate for the museum itself since it communicates its brand and corporative values through it. Secondly, a quality product will be sought, one that will remain, for a long time, besides its buyer, reminding them of their visit to the museum, and maybe, inviting them to repeat it. In the third place, the quality of the product will improve if the packaging or container that accompanies it also meets the criteria previously stated on quality and personalisation. All of this will contribute to augment the feeling of buying something that is unique. Lastly, in the fourth place, strategies to insert cultural and educational contents that speak of the collections and exhibitions of the museum, as well as the shop space must be established, and if possible in the packaging and the product itself.

All of this will be easier if the museum establishes and sets out in writing a number of standards that define the characteristics that a merchandising product must meet in order to be sold in its shops. Besides, just as there is a guide of corporative image that determines its application on different supports, these standards should regulate the application of the works of the museum in a direct or indirect manner on merchandising products.

In these regulations the financial or immaterial functions that the museum wishes to enhance in the management of its shop should be made clear in a continuity and homogeneity in all the products destined for sale. Finally, this becomes an improvement and consolidation of the museum entity as an educational institution and its positioning within the cultural realm, and not just the commercial one.

³⁰ In most of the museum shop web pages consulted we found that the description of the product includes the work it reproduces or which has inspired the product design, as well as the artist's name and date it was created. All this data contribute to enhance the educational and cultural perspective, as opposed to a purely commercial positioning.

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