


## Unreviewed Mixed Matters Article:

# Discussion: The Concept of Authenticity in Collections of Open-Air Museums

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**Author(s):** Joerie van Sister [1] ✉, Marc van Hasselt [1], Thit Birk Petersen [2], Lara Comis [3], Maura Stefani [4], David Freeman [5], Sverre Christoffer Guldberg [6], Randi Stoltz [7], Henrik Zipsane [8], Léontine Meijer-van Mensch [9], Martin Schmidt [10], John Ertl [11], Thomas Bloch Ravn [12], Nigel Copsey [13]

[1] Novitas Heritage, Maliestraat 10, 3581 SL Utrecht, the Netherlands.
[2] Middelaldercentret, ved Hamborgskoven 2-4, 4800 Nykøbing F., Denmark.
[3] Independent researcher, address withheld by the editors (GDPR), Parma, Italy.
[4] Parco Archeologico Didattico del Livelet, Italy.
[5] Independent researcher, address withheld by the editors (GDPR), Bournemouth, United Kingdom.
[6] Museum of Archaeology, University of Stavanger, Norway.
[7] Independent researcher, address withheld by the editors (GDPR), Norway.
[8] European Museum Academy, Sweden.
[9] Ethnographic museums in Leipzig, Dresden, Herrnhut, Germany.
[10] Landesmuseum Hannover, Germany.
[11] Keio University, Japan.
[12] Den Gamle By, Denmark.
[13] Independent researcher, address withheld by the editors (GDPR), United Kingdom.

How is it possible that if you go into an arts museum, the ceramics you see may be made yesterday and may be a valued and legitimate part of the museum collection, while in open-air museums, a similar object may be produced by a master craftsperson yesterday, yet is not called authentic? Are we blinded by historical-archaeological authenticity? Is the key to documented objects, their stories and their provenance – which gives them their authenticity - not right? Well-structured documentation of stories with objects and people is, per se, an important step towards being regarded as open-air museums. This is an important part of our current EXARC EU Project, www.retold.eu.

## Joerie van Sister, Novitas Heritage, the Netherlands

A few years ago, I assisted an archaeological open-air museum to get them acknowledgement as an official museum. During this extensive project, we had some debate with the auditing committee on the nature of the museological collection. In their opinion the reconstructed structures, buildings, statues etc, for which I even wrote an extensive argument, were not a collection as defined by the International Council of Museums (ICOM), while the museum argued that even the intrinsic value of 20-year-old reconstructions is a collection by the ICOM definition. The registration was completed, and the park was acknowledged as museum, mainly because of the small archaeological collection as well as the source records for the reconstructions. In my opinion, a collection should be defined based on its shared coherence, value and purposes (for example, education), not on its age.

## Marc Van Hasselt, Novitas Heritage, the Netherlands

Recently, ICOM tried to redefine what a museum is and should be. This was not without controversy and even led to a crisis in the leadership of ICOM. Since 2007, the definition of a museum has focused on its public task of preserving heritage for 'education, study and

enjoyment'. The proposed new definition, which was rejected by a number of founding members, starts with the statement that 'museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures.' This statement, obviously, is controversial.

There has been a similar discussion on the definition and purpose of open-air museums for a while. From its re-enactment roots (more than the environmental education roots many museums have), the idea of 'authenticity' is important. Reproductions and presentations should be as close as possible to how things were. One of the most common questions by the public is still: "Is that real?" Meaning: "Is that historically accurate?" This has translated into an over-focus on material culture, which suffers from the same issue that ICOM came up against: the world at large has moved past the traditional definition of (open-air) museums and is looking for something else: transformative experiences. A visit to a museum should not be a visit to a place filled with dead things to be looked at; it should be an immersive experience that leads to new insights applicable in the here and now, thereby making critical dialogue about not only the past, but also, possibly, the future. Most open-air museums are not focused on how people experienced life in the portrayed era, but instead focus on getting the details right. The question 'is that real' should not even occur to the visiting public as they are immersed in the experience.

## Thit Birk Petersen, Curator, Middelaldercentret, Denmark

This is a very interesting debate that has many branches. Are archaeological open- air museums authentic? The buildings are often our interpretation of the archaeological and historical sources, and many pieces are missing and are therefore “our best qualified guess” but they are not buildings or objects from the time period in question. They are modern buildings, built with modern tools, by modern people in a modern world but after authentic and original sources. The Medieval Centre is not a museum. We do not hold original objects in our collection. We are a cultural institution which, via living history, show the middle ages in Denmark as we interpret it in 2021. Again, it is our best qualified guess based on the knowledge that we have of the period, in this very second. But because we do not have original houses or objects does that make us unauthentic? Where is the line? When is something authentic?

We also need to consider that if the reconstructions become part of a museum collection, will we then be able to use them as we do now? Use the objects, use the houses, the clothes? Objects in museum collections are not to be handled or used for the purpose they were made because they have to be preserved for the future generations. So we need a redefinition or at least a new category in the collections debate. A category for open air museums who do not hold original objects but do have objects with some sort of authenticity, be it made with the original methods, tools etc. But do we wish to be part of this museum category?

I agree that our museums are collections of some sort and that they should have some sort of 'protection' that would also make it easier to apply for funding for maintenance, which is almost impossible right now as funds do not give money out to maintenance. We need to put that money aside in our budgets – and the maintenance part does not get smaller as the buildings get older. One branch of this debate should therefore be about how we secure our collection, our buildings and our objects for the future, so that future generations can experience this period of history. After all, as soon as something is set in the world, it becomes part of our story and our history.

## Lara Comis, PhD cand., MA experimental archaeology, Italy

My thesis deals with the aspect of authenticity within the context of both experimental archaeology and archaeological open-air museums, but approaches the theme from an ontological and then epistemological perspective. The comparison between "authentic" heritage and archaeological open-air museums' heritage is not useful, because it is set on incorrect assumptions. The "authenticity" concept, as superficially utilized in the above discourse, is ontologically flawed: it is undoubtedly true that the archaeological record is degraded and incomplete, therefore the comparison between the source for the reconstruction and the reconstruction itself cannot hold. Within the field of Archaeological Theory, this has been explored by Sandra Wallace, who urged archaeologists to confront the ontology of absence, so crucial for the interpretation of the archaeological record. There is, in other terms, a lack of understanding of a crucial passage between the actual archaeological record (degraded, needing special care, which constitutes the basis for our research as Archaeologists, and it is stored in museums and storehouses across the globe), and its explanation through the use of reconstructions (which need quite a bit of research of all sorts to be achieved and represent yet another interpretation of the archaeological record, and, sometimes, the best possible explanation according to the data available). This lack of acknowledgement of the different ontological nature between "authentic" and "communication of results" consequently has important epistemological consequences. In other words, another misunderstanding emerges here, focusing on the deeper need for acknowledgement of experimental archaeology, as the primary scientific inquiry tool, to the best possible explanation. In my thesis, this discussion is also applied to the other essential dimension which must never be forgotten in arguments like this, i.e. the time perspective, as well as with epistemological considerations. If the archaeological open-air museum could be considered as a research centre which communicates results to the public, this could all be clarified and communicated. If archaeological open-air museums simply represent an imaginary interpretation of the past and communicate it to the public, and are clear about the communication purpose, there would be no space for such a discourse. I would argue that there is, instead, a very important aspect of this issue which has real museological consequences and should be explored the other way round: are there original "authentic"

pieces of the archaeological record used within archaeological open-air museums' communication and archives? The question is not a new one, but could be reconsidered.

## Maura Stefani, curator, Parco Archeologico Didattico del Livelet, Italy

In an historical moment like this, in which the very definition of a museum has been reformulated by ICOM and is still source of discussion, the concept of authenticity becomes even more elusive.

This is particularly the case with open-air museums that make extensive use of reproductions of ancient objects. But if well guided, the public itself can become an ally. Visitors are more and more accustomed to interacting with the collections, so much so that sometimes they are disappointed if something cannot be touched. Occasionally it happens because in their mind it is "only" a reproduction, expendable, but most of the time it is because they sense its potential. In any case, they are increasingly open to give value to reproductions as objects that can help to interpret the past and at the same time understand the present or imagine the future.

Of course, mediation by the didactic operator or by adequate communication tools are essential. Sometimes visitors ask if what they are looking at is "ancient", meaning "made in the past". If there is someone prepared to explain the value of a reconstruction for the research but also for present and future generations, the public of all ages is, for the most part, ready to welcome it and evaluate it correctly. If well-presented and told, reconstructions become the strength of the open-air museums. Often this kind of museum is considered "for children" but then adults are amazed at how much they themselves are stimulated to interact in front of the reconstructions, which often push them to share emotions and experiences during guided tours, becoming protagonists. Reconstructions thus become powerful tools of dissemination and bridges between spaces, times and people.

## David Freeman, UK

Open-air museums themselves may not value objects that have been made/constructed as part of a public display. There is sometimes no thought given by the museum to the effort needed to produce the object, nor its impact on public perceptions during a visit/viewing.

Most of the objects should be a copy\construct based as close as is possible on the archaeological find, but in presentation it should be explained to the public where and when the original was in use, and perhaps how to use it, with demonstration. The problem comes when the presenter\narrator does not have that knowledge, and so the reason that the object is in use, is lost. When there is no member of staff around, the display\objects are

approached in two ways by the public. The older generation have been brought up by “look, but do not touch”, and the younger generations are taught at school to handle, question, and extrapolate on their thoughts as to an explanation of the objects use, and not necessarily corrected as to accuracy.

A written explanation, with graphics, can be made available to inform when there are no staff present, though a limited number of the public will use this information.

## Sverre Christoffer Guldberg, Museum of Archaeology, University of Stavanger, Norway

I believe this is a complicated and multi-layered issue deserving of a PhD (which is why I am doing one). From the perspective of experimental archaeology/processual authenticity in buildings conservation (preservation of Stavanger Cathedral), it appears to me crafts have fallen into a hole between arts and science, following underlying societal structures of capitalism and knowledge hierarchies. Considering that the Medieval master builder was a combined architect, engineer and crafter, this is a new development that has in part come with the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. I interpret arts today as a high-class “intellectual subjectivism”, whereas science can be perceived a high-class “intellectual objectivism”. Traditional craft, in the modernist sense replaceable by machines and modern materials, has somehow become a low-class pursuit for those “too stupid” for an academic degree. These are constructions of modern mentality that go hand-in-hand with the subjective/objective and mind/body dichotomies: reductionist thinking leading us to considering theory as the work of the mind (high-class), and practice as the work of the body (low-class). Without status, nor protection, crafts fall prey to capitalist market economy. Mason and conservator Nigel Copsey has pointed out how unappreciation leads to deskilling and a loss of material knowledge, which I believe to be destructive both to our heritage and to the environment. Happily, there are promising developments in academia, f.ex. in Phenomenology and the New Materialisms. Simultaneously, professionals from several craft traditions (e.g. Copsey, Jonas Bals, Mattias Tesfaye, Jon Boyer Godal) are speaking up in defense of an experience-based knowledge resulting from human-material interaction. I believe we have everything to gain by taking this seriously.

## Randi Stoltz, Norway

This master craftsperson probably produces historical art/crafts like a traditional craftsperson produces traditional art to maintain a living tradition? Like the modern artist produce modern art. As a tablet weaver I work on three levels:

- Replica

- Reconstructions (fill gaps)
- Free work

None of them are authentic. For a replica, the colours may be guess work. To fill gaps, you add guess work. Free work based on finds includes even more guesswork, still it is 90 % facts. A skilled craftsperson should be able to copy technique and style so well that a visitor from the period, who take a trip to the future, would recognize it. The master craftsperson brings dead traditions to life, and this work should be valued as art/crafts and shown to the public in a historical context.

## Henrik Zipsane, Director, European Museum Academy, Sweden

I think authenticity in a museological perspective has more to do with what we imagine in an experience than with originality. It is important not to confuse the two terms. The sense of authenticity in an experience in the museum may very well be strengthened by knowledge of the originality of the objects and artefacts. But the one is about sensing and the other is about knowing.

Years ago I visited the National archive in Seville and stood before a glass case in which there was placed an old letter. It was the letter from Ferdinand and Isabella to Columbus in 1492 in which they finally promised to be sponsors. I will never forget the very special feeling I had as I looked at this letter and realised that this was World history in making. The letter would have meant less to me if I had not known who Columbus was. That knowledge made the sense of authenticity very strong, as I imagined the two monarchs signing and the rise of tension and energy in Columbus when he read the letter. But I do not think the authenticity would have been less sensed if I had experienced two actors in the real surroundings creating a credible atmosphere of the moment when Ferdinand and Isabella discussed the matter of investing in the wild ideas of Columbus.

In museums, by our interpretation of sources from the past, we try our best to create the sense of authenticity. We cannot expect everybody to have deep knowledge of the past, or of art. That is simply not realistic. People, therefore, rely on us to be trustworthy and do our best in our interpretation of the past and provide sensible experiences.

## Léontine Meijer-van Mensch, director of the ethnographic museums in Leipzig, Dresden, Herrnhut, Germany

In the world of archives, “authentic copy” is a well-accepted concept, in the world of museums this seems to be a contradictio in terminis. This does not need to be. In the dictionary of the Society of American Archivists, an “authentic copy” is defined as “a reproduction that has been

officially certified, especially so that it may be admitted as evidence". It would be interesting to explore the potential of the concepts of "authentic copy" and "authentic reconstruction" in the world of archaeological open-air museums. In an archival context "certification" is connected with "authority". In an archaeological context the concept of "certification" could be replaced by "validation", connected with the "expertise" of the archaeologist(s) involved. According to this logic, an archaeological open-air museum would be a rational accumulation of authentic copies and authentic reconstructions made, collected, and used as validated (or validating) evidence of the technologies of past communities. When we look at contemporary art museums, where they collect works of art that are explicitly made for a functional purpose, i.e. the purpose of initiating a visual (or other sensory) experience, it is clear that there is not so much difference with archaeological open-air museums. In the end it is a performative dimension that connects art with archaeology, but is that not something that connects all museums?

## Martin Schmidt, manager of collections, vice director, Landesmuseum Hannover, Germany

A piece of art is always authentic, that is why it is called art. It is the same with the product of a craftsperson. But that is only authentic as an (art)work made by that craftsperson.

But that product of the craftsperson is not authentic in the sense of scientifically and/or historically "correct" or "right" (I am still afraid to use the word Wahrheit (truth)). It is the old discussion about scientific quality in archaeological open-air museums (that are supposed, or mostly claim, to be historical and not art museums) and Experimental Archaeology. Is the craftsperson skilled, are they skilled enough, so that they only use technology and knowledge that was available e.g. for a Stone Age person? Are they using the right materials and tools, are they aware of the status quo of archaeological knowledge on what he is doing etc.?

Archaeology is not art, it is science! And science means that you need to use a defined set of scientific paradigms, rules and regulations, that is given at the time when you are doing things. Something made in earlier years can be seen as incorrect from a modern perspective, but can be very correct if made with the knowledge of the period.

You need, therefore, to discuss different concepts of authenticity when talking about art and something that has been created in an archaeological open-air museum by the above mentioned master craftsperson.

I am still wondering, however, that the items made in archaeological open-air museums are not collected and documented on a regular basis as an authentic and "valued and legitimate part of the museum collection". It is a very important part of the history of archaeological

open-air museums, replication, experimental archaeology etc, but then that is still another concept of authenticity.

## John Ertl, associate professor, Keio University, Japan

Considering authenticity in the context of prehistoric reconstructions at open-air museums in Japan, the two concerns that come most directly to mind are provenance and life history.

As with archaeological remains, to begin analysis of reconstructions one must be able to clearly trace back to their origins. Who, when, and why were they built? Who were they built for? What strands of data and subjective preferences were drawn together in making decisions about the shape and materials? Unfortunately, while the original archaeological remains may have been preserved, the decision processes that went into reconstructed buildings are painfully absent.

Considering the life history of a reconstructed dwelling is essential, as evaluating the authenticity of a reconstruction one must think about how and why it changes over time. Of course, any building will shift and change from when it was built, lived-in, repaired, abandoned, and re-appropriated for other uses. With reconstructed buildings, people often forget that they are not “old” buildings people used to live in, but structures that we make for us to use today. In other words, the life history of a reconstructed building continues to unfold into the future. How we choose to use them, and what kinds of experiences people are allowed to have at them, are all part of the authenticity of reconstructions.

## Thomas Bloch Ravn, museum director, Den Gamle By, Denmark

I have been asked to join this interesting discussion about the concept of authenticity which, in my opinion, is very difficult to handle. I do this knowing that my English is not on a level suited for this kind of conceptual discussion: however, I will give it a try.

Years ago in England I met John Gall from Beamish who said, making the distinction: “this is the museum and this is the theatre” pointing at the storehouses and archives as the museum and the living history open-air museum as the theatre. He also pointed out that a close link and “dialogue” between “the theatre” and “the museum” is indispensable and of fundamental importance.

I like that, because it refers to the antique/original concept of museum, where the mouseion is the home of all the muses, who are dedicated to drama, poetry etc. But I will say that “the museum” is not only the objects, archives etc, it is the combination of them both: “the theatre” and “the museum”.
When you define an object as authentic, it is loaded with positivity and sympathy. Authenticity

is a buzz-word which is often used to reject something as not original, not true, fake, frivolous and – of course – in unauthentic. But it is difficult to define and I think it is a complicated to use as a scientific concept.
A stone axe, for instance, is in general defined as authentic, even though the handle is missing and it is exhibited in a modern glass case with designed electrical lightning. So the preserved "authentic" part is only a part of the tool, the rest is missing. You cannot say, therefore, that it is authentic as an axe. It is just a remnant of what once was an axe. Furthermore, you also have to know about the object before you can understand it. It is very much alienated from its originality, and the context (glass case and lightning) is certainly in-un-authentic.

I believe the key is that everything we do as museums will be reliable and trustworthy, and based on the best research and knowledge.
In Norway, Knut Einar Larsen and Lars Roede have distinguished between three aspects of authenticity which to me have been very useful. First, the material authenticity which is the original parts that are left, i.e. the head of the stone axe.  Secondly, the processual authenticity, where you can recreate the missing parts, i.e. the handle, using original crafts techniques and tools; and thirdly, the visual authenticity, where the authenticity is visual, so that the object looks right.
But I prefer to use the terms "reliable" and "trustworthy" instead of "authentic" about objects, houses, interiors and other kinds of museologic storytelling.

## Nigel Copsey, UK

Open-air museums in the USA tend to celebrate the experience of white Europeans. So long as this is acknowledged, they play a positive role in preserving knowledge of our vernacular pasts. But until relatively recently, they misrepresented much of this, in terms of the materials used (so often modern, not traditional materials – particularly mortars, due to a perception of lost skills, expediency, or simple misunderstanding of their importance), distracted by rebuilding a relocated structure aesthetically, but rarely functionally. This is mitigated when experimental archaeology informs the process. But, as someone above has pointed out, they are also products of capitalism, fetishizing the past without exploring the class dynamics of that past, the relations of production by which they were constructed. I have read something recently that the Latin root of 'vernacular' is a word meaning 'not a commodity' and this, I would say, is significant. Vernacular buildings were not commodities. Reconstructed and relocated vernacular buildings undoubtedly are.

On a more practical note, and this is common over here, a much evolved early building (each evolution having its own authenticity, performed until recently with very similar and compatible materials), will usually be reconstructed in its original, earliest form, the evolutions erased. Does this reassert its authenticity, or diminish it, in fact? For myself, I

would look to understand and to record those evolutions wherever possible, but only to undo those performed with inappropriate, damaging materials. Beyond this, open air museums cannot, by definition, bring the 'power of place' of a relocated building, although, of course, if the alternative is destruction or loss; another discussion.

Experimental archaeology has much to offer to this endeavour, but so, of course, do the building crafts themselves, executed with the right head and themselves re-educated by a thorough and informed analysis of historic craft practice and materials and the necessary understanding in the current period that these were the fittest for purpose and the most sustainable options – that it is not just about the past, but also about the future.

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## Corresponding Author

**Joerie van Sister**
Novitas Heritage
Maliestraat 10
3581 SL Utrecht
the Netherlands
E-mail Contact