Nationalmuseum i offentlighetens ljus
Framväxten av tillfälliga utställningar 1866–1966

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Akademisk avhandling

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Göteborgs konstmuseum, Göteborg, Sverige.
The purpose of this study is to investigate the emergence of temporary exhibitions at the Nationalmuseum of Sweden 1866–1966. My aim is to discuss and place the exhibitions in the complex ongoing tension between the role of the museum as a scientific and an educative public institution, and in relation to the permanent collection. This I have called the museum dilemma. The dissertation is divided in three main chapters put in a chronological order 1866–1913, 1914–1939 and 1940–1966.

I have found that during the 1866–1913 period many minor temporary exhibitions were arranged. It seems to have been a practice of coincidences rather than strategic art historical considerations. There were not many exhibitions focusing on art historical narratives. This situation reflects that the main reasons for arranging temporary exhibitions were to complement the museum collection or to present interesting art objects normally hidden from the public view.

When the term “temporary exhibition” was established in the late 19th century a tension between the exhibitions and the permanent collection was established. The temporary exhibitions were associated with variety and flexibility while the permanent collection indicated a static art historical narrative.

The 1914–1939 period was very socially inclined. There are many examples of exhibitions that openly supported national values and the ongoing democracy development and the exhibition practice developed in dialog with the museum’s collection. The concept “bringing art alive” was frequently used. The museum collections were talked about as dead material, the museum was called a morgue.

During the Second World War, the collections were evacuated from the museum building and an innovative period began. A focus on art history dominates the more elaborated exhibition practice during 1939–1966 period, so called “epoch exhibitions”. They invited to innovative actions, technologies as reconstructions of historical exhibitions, mixed materials and rehanging during the exhibition period. Principles as flexibility and variation were prominent. Another common denominator was the scientific focus and the idea that the exhibition is both an experience and a source of knowledge.

Even though half a century has passed I argue that the results I have found can be related to the museum practice of today. The tendency today is that temporary exhibitions functions as role models for museums, when re-organizing the permanent collections. The effect of this development is that the categories temporary exhibitions and permanent collection melt together. In that sense, I would also suggest that the term temporary exhibition should be replaced. Special exhibition seems to be a more appropriate term for the museums of today.

Keywords
Nationalmuseum, temporary exhibitions, art history, history of art exhibitions, museology