

## *Arms on display: core business or illustrations? A commentary on the presentation of arms and armour in museums<sup>1</sup>*

Some historians working in military museums, because they have ambivalent feelings towards weapons, or maybe because they feel it is the decent thing to do for the general public, allow themselves to be carried away when making their choices for the displays and when creating texts and captions. To mention an early example from my own experience, in 1974 the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam organised a special exhibition on Dutch firearms of the seventeenth century. The excellent display and main treatment of this subject were in my view marred by the unnecessary inclusion of wooden blocks in which the penetrative power of bullets fired by old firearms was shown.<sup>2</sup>

I am not saying that such effects should *not* in principle be dealt with, but when doing this we must prevent a judgment of value creeping in and blocking our capacity to look at a firearm in a neutral, objective manner. It is one of the recognised issues in museums of arms and military history, indeed in many other museums. Collections should be cared for by specialists capable of dealing with arms in an open-minded and unbiased fashion.<sup>3</sup> Emotions about the effects of arms on human beings inevitably influence our capacity to study them as objects; they make it difficult to sustain technical interest in them and they make it almost impossible to deal with arms as a hobby, for use in sport or as desirable objects to collect.

Time and again curators of institutional arms collections are put under pressure – not only externally but also and notably from within! – to show what is named the ‘shadow side’ of arms or the ‘dark side of war’. Very recently, my own Legermuseum (the Dutch Army Museum) held a temporary exhibition on the Kalashnikov, the well-known assault rifle. There was a lot of discussion in the preparatory stage of the exhibition and some of the staff were of the opinion that we should also display Somalian boys and other child soldiers using this rifle. As it turned out, the presentation itself was a pure arms exhibition, save for a sensational video presentation at the beginning showing the so-called darker side of its use. Nonetheless, many versions of the Kalashnikov were to be seen and there were many kinds of explanatory technical material including instruction films and trials by the Soviet army.

However, the chief poster used to promote this exhibition went too far in my eyes. It featured one of the aforementioned young rascals with a ‘Kalash’ and ostentatiously holding a cigarette between his lips so as to suggest, as it were, his casual attitude towards killing human beings. At the opening event of the exhibition, the inventor, the crafty old General Kalashnikov, was present too. He was very contented, he said, with the exhibition, but frowned when seeing the poster as well as the video presentation mentioned earlier. Asked about this, the general commented that it was impossible for him to feel responsible for the use of his rifle by many terrorists and so-called freedom fighters, saying: ‘I designed this weapon during the war mainly out of patriotism. My country was in great distress and I have dedicated all my knowledge and abilities to do my bit in reaching our final victory.’

### **The special problems of military museums**

These and other critical remarks below illustrate the dilemmas we often face in museums. The pressure by certain parties to ‘show the dark side of war’ will in my estimation always be a constant factor in our profession. As I stated above it comes mainly from within, and it is practically always justified by the perceived or purported demands of society, that is, the potential visitors. What these other parties in fact want is to turn our museums into war museums. They ‘...wollen den totalen Krieg!’ But as soon as you change your institution into a war museum – or a ‘peace museum’ for that matter – the arms shown will inevitably be saddled with a psychological load (a fitting term for firearms) which inhibits their being presented in terms of their design and technical characteristics, their changes and tactics and so on, except in the case of such elements being employed to point to the ultimate destruction of human beings. In such an approach the typology of a weapon is out of place. A historian working in a military museum told me recently: ‘If I want to tell the story of the revolver, I need only one revolver!’, adding, as if to rub it in, ‘...and if I have seen one revolver I’ve seen them all.’

If it were my own task to show the development of the revolver I would show it in a ‘typology’ of all its versions, together of course with a good explanation of why all the changes came about. A historian of the sort just mentioned considers the weapon merely as illustration, whereas in my view the weapon should be dealt with as a phenomenon first and then be placed in an explanatory context.

The historical component, preferably in chronological order of course, is always propagated by historians. But it is *just one of several* components that make up the context of weapons on display. What about a context of arms manufacture? What about the makers? What about a context on use? Let’s not kid ourselves by those who say that in practice it would not matter so much, for there will often be a blend of the ‘historical’ and the ‘typological’ approaches. However,

they are in principle totally different! For an army museum, weapons, beside uniforms, are 'core business', not 'mere illustrations'. The Legermuseum has a lot of collections of various kinds, but uniforms and arms are the two main components of its collection. In the basic display of our museum they form the two leitmotifs, despite the conspicuous tanks, vehicles, flags and paintings. Over the years the Legermuseum has amassed a large number of arms. Why can we not show them in all their different aspects?

Of course the message of a war museum and that of an army or arms museum are not diametrically opposed. There are areas where they touch or even overlap. Below I shall give some examples of how some contemporary museums have resolved the dilemma between regarding the weapon as an object and as a horrible instrument of destruction.

### **Arms: interpretation of functionality and application**

As far back as 1979 a well-known Dutch journalist wrote an article<sup>4</sup> about the deteriorating condition of the buildings of the Legermuseum in Delft, the so-called Armamentarium. They contained the extensive study collection of the museum, which then still had its main premises in Leiden. The following quotation from the article conveys the reasons why it is important to collect and care for arms in museums:

Few people, except a small circle of collectors and specialists, are aware that Delft has a world-famous collection of musical instruments. The particularity of that collection is not its size – it is large, but there do exist larger ones, for instance in America, England, France and Italy. What makes the collection in Delft exceptional is its diversity. It contains rare artefacts of extremely diverse natures and origins. It is probably the best all-round collection of musical instruments in the world.

This fabulous Dutch collection is housed in two beautiful 17th-century buildings in Delft. However, now be aware of something unbelievable: practically no money has been made available for the upkeep of these buildings for such a long time now that the collection is doomed. During a heavy rain shower the interior offers the alarming sight of rows of spoiled Amatis, Guarneris and Stradivariuses, mirrored in the flooded floors. Cases full of valuable wind instruments are covered with plastic sheets while the rainwater is gushing through the ceiling and everything is caught as best it may in buckets and tubs. On the upper floor, where enormous organs, concert pianos, bassoons and tubas are displayed, the walls have saltpetre beards. During last winter snow blew inside and was even found in the organ pipes.

Under these circumstances, upkeep is hardly possible any more. The valves of the wind instruments are turning green; the violins and cellos are affected by fungus. For the cleaning of a clarinet or an oboe and to make it damp-proof a specialist needs almost an entire day, but this collection contains hundreds of them and it is almost impossible to even begin such a project. In this manner one of the most valuable and

exceptional collections of the world is slowly going to the dogs. How is this possible? What is the reason that such a national monument of the instrument-maker's art is being treated with so much indifference?

The reason is that we are not dealing with musical instruments *but with firearms*. Those musical instruments were only a metaphor. But apart from that, everything else I've said is all true. A unique collection in Delft is indeed growing mouldy and turning green. However it doesn't consist of clarinets and oboes, but of machine guns and rifles. It is not organ pipes which had snow blown into them, but gun barrels. Those soaked instruments were not Amatis and Guarneris, but Albini-Carcanos and Gatlings, and it should be clear what statement I am making with this representation, namely that one is not worse than the other. If it is worth the trouble to keep exceptional products of a technology for posterity, then this goes as much as for firearms as for musical instruments.

Among firearms, too, there are works of art and the criteria this is judged by are the same as for other instruments, irrespective if they are musical instruments, astronomical clocks, Greek temples or steam locomotives. Those criteria have nothing to do with their application, no matter how unpleasant it may be. The tendency to see firearms as horrible things because they are used for a horrible purpose is based on the same misconception as finding a Stradivarius to be an ugly thing if played out of tune. A more or less similar difficulty exists in architecture: must we find a building ugly because it is being used as a prison or, even stronger, because it was designed as a prison? Something similar is valid for firearms. Machine guns are machines and among machines they are often the most beautiful, the most ingenious in existence and made with the utmost care. What quickly comes to mind is the word functionality.

There exists in this field a hardly recognised but essential difference between *functionality* and *application*. The functionality of a machine lies fully within the terms of the working of the mechanism and has nothing to do with what the person who uses it is thinking. Someone might try to bash in somebody else's head with a violin and the mechanism of a racing car does not become ugly when someone uses it to rob a bank. The aesthetic appreciation bears on the quality of the mechanism, not on the designer's or the user's motives.

The value of this article, besides of course that nice metaphor at the beginning, is its emphasis on considering the weapon as an object. In a display it should be detached from its effect on human beings – and animals one might add – and detached from war. Such detachment allows one to really come to grips with the weapon's characteristics, its development and its technical and aesthetic quality. These two sides of the coin, the 'historical' approach and the 'typological' approach, should be treated separately in the museum display. They can be integrated in the display, but not in one theme. Let us look at how different museums have approached this problem.

### **The Legermuseum, Delft, the Netherlands**

I have already mentioned the Legermuseum's Kalashnikov exhibition. In a corner of a very large display case containing almost 30 variants of the rifle, there were two blocks of gelatine into each of which a Kalashnikov bullet had been fired. The bullets were now visibly buried in the material, the intention being of course to show their effect on human flesh. One still wonders what the makers of this exhibition were trying to tell the visitor. Since something similar was shown nowhere else in the museum, it might just appear that of all the firearms on display only the Kalashnikov was deadly. As a message, it is also patronising – the wagging finger that says 'You realise that these weapons are deadly!' – as if the average visitor, meaning someone who is not a firearms specialist, would be totally ignorant of this fact in the first place.

It would perhaps be far more effective to dedicate a special display in our basic (so-called 'permanent') exhibition to a separate theme about the penetrative power of bullets and other projectiles through the centuries. Preferably, it should be treated in a broader way, showing different kinds of projectiles, those intended to neutralise the opponent, or indeed kill him, but also those projectiles intended not to kill in the first place, for instance rubber bullets – which in close encounters can kill just the same – or the many sorts of non-lethal weapons now under development. We could also enter into wound ballistics. But not place two gelatine blocks in *one* case in *one* exhibition about *one* particular weapon.

The lessons I have learned from these examples from my own museum are that if you want to show the so-called two sides of weapons, you must do so in a balanced way, and certainly not mix them, for then the museum conveys the wrong message, both to people who like arms and to people who do not.

### **The Wehrgeschichtliches Museum, Rastatt, Germany**

Another example in this discussion is provided by the Historical Army Museum in Rastatt in Baden-Württemberg, Germany. Its basic display is a pure example of one conceived by a military historian<sup>5</sup> classically educated to regard written documents as the historian's sole sources. The museum is housed in the Baroque castle of Rastatt and covers, among other subjects, the military history of the German *Kleinstaaten* relative to Prussia.

The galleries in the WGM are built up in a severe chronological succession. Each gallery has the *Didaktik* on one side and objects selected as illustrations to the historical tale on the other. The explanatory area uses one entire wall and offers texts and images. In every gallery, a map is shown, sometimes with battle maps added. All maps have been specially made for the display, meaning that all non-essential information could be left out. With each map is a well-

designed, explanatory thematic text dealing with strategic and tactical aspects. Then follows a table summing up the events in that period. Portraits, both reproductions and originals, of the various leading players take up the remainder of the explanatory wall.

Although the texts are kept as concise as possible, they inevitably result in a lot of text taken all together. The objects, as I have said, serve as illustrations to the theme and thus are placed in the correct historical context. However, the perceived distance between the macro level (the explanation) and the micro level (the objects) remains too large – simply because they are totally different among themselves. The risk is that the average visitor will either read the thematic texts and take the objects for granted, or will concentrate on the objects and just glance at the texts. As in so many historical museums, the display is a sort of picture book and as such, in my view, less effective than a book available in the museum shop.

In a frank discussion, the director explained that during the years he had been building up his museum galleries and bringing his concept to life, he had slowly come to reconsider his approach. There was the practical factor that his storage space was still full of objects, but the main factor which forced him to reconsider was that the museum *hardly got any visitors*.

He recognised that despite the many rare and interesting objects already on display in the 'historic' galleries, the museum barely catered for visitor categories that are important but unlikely to produce large numbers – such as collectors, specialists and other kinds of particularly interested people. He explained that he wanted to tie these specialists to his museum, not only to increase the number of visitors, but also to link them more or less permanently to his institution because he needed their expert opinion and the acquisition potential of the objects they collected.

In this way the concept of study collections (*Studiensammlungen*) was born. These collections are intended to be parts of the museum's permanent display. The director filled these study galleries with large numbers of objects and brought in collectors and other specialists on a temporary basis. They carefully and knowledgeably selected the many 'sleepers' from storage and put them on display in a typological manner. Since there was a lack of expertise among the museum staff and because the museum was always short of money, the project took many years to come to fruition. Three such study collections are now in place and exactly one year after the opening of one on the history and development of badges of rank (mainly in the form of hundreds of shoulder pads, but also including sword knots and tassels), the third study collection was opened (Figure 1).<sup>6</sup> It is about military swords and shows over 200 pieces that, together with explanatory material, have been put into rows of narrow display cases which can be viewed from both sides. They hold about 30 swords each, horizontally

placed parallel to their scabbards. Wishing to put as many swords as possible in the cases, the creators of the exhibition placed the swords with their hilts alternating to the left and the right. It is true that this arrangement forces the visitor to constantly change his or her viewing position, but for somebody interested in the objects this is only a minor nuisance.

With this approach the Rastatt museum has killed two birds with one stone. More visitors can now be expected. The number of collectors of militaria should not be underestimated, and they can now see a large number of pieces which otherwise would have remained in storage.

*Figure 1 The permanent study collection of swords at the Wehrgeschichtliches Museum in Rastatt, Baden-Württemberg, Germany. (Photograph taken by Eveline Sint Nicolaas on the day of the official opening of the display, 24 September 2004)*



### **The Schweizerisches Landesmuseum, Zürich, Switzerland**

The third museum worth mentioning is the Swiss National Museum in Zürich and the large exhibition 'Waffen werfen Schatten' ('Arms Throw Shadows') held in 2003. From a professional museological viewpoint, one can greatly admire its approach. For a museum of its kind it has a colossal arms collection, about 12,000 items, most of which are hafted weapons, primarily halberds (as one would expect in a country like Switzerland). From 1898 until a few years ago, a large mass of these weapons had been on permanent display in the largest hall of the museum, the *Ruhmeshalle* or 'Hall of Fame'. As befits nineteenth-century notions, the display concept was that of large numbers of martial trophies – so-called panoplies – although it had been renewed a number of times.<sup>7</sup>

The Hall of Fame was finally discarded in 2003 in favour of a temporary exhibition in which no fewer than 1600 swords, hafted weapons and firearms – and armour (!) – were suspended from the ceiling in such a manner that together they formed an enormous cupola with all the offensive ends – the points and muzzles – of the arms pointing towards the visitor, giving him or her an overwhelming feeling of threat from the inherent offensive power. Added to this feeling – and no doubt intended to deepen it – were musical sounds and, almost inevitably, a display of Jacques Callot's prints about the cruelties and miseries of war.

In itself, such a display is acceptable for its sheer impressive magnitude and for the fact that our Swiss colleagues conceived it in the first place. I already stated that I appreciated it as a museological experiment. The museum asserted that the old *Ruhmeshalle* display was 'sensational and seeking to achieve effect' in the negative sense, but in my view the 'Arms Throw Shadows' approach was just as sensational and seeking to achieve effect. Besides, one can wonder if it is the task of a national museum to use its arms collection just for a single goal, speaking out against war and leaving the many other aspects of these arms unattended.

The statement in Zurich was based on only (one of the aspects of) application, namely that arms are horrible instruments of death. The museum was silent about the functionality of arms and, indeed, about their true role in establishing and guarding Swiss independence.<sup>8</sup>

### **Conclusions**

It is hoped that my somewhat ex-cathedra statements, based on a lifetime of museum experience with arms, can help in conveying that arms have the same basic qualities as any other museum object and that they too have their own information potential. Arms should not be used in a museum to present a single message or a desired political statement. Their information potential is multifaceted and one should carefully differentiate between the functionality and application and all



their related aspects in order that the one does not negate or confound the other.

### **Notes and references**

- 1 This chapter is an edited and abridged version of a paper presented at the annual ICOMAM symposium for 2004, organised by the Royal Netherlands Army and Arms Museum (or Legermuseum) in Delft, the Netherlands, on 25 and 26 November 2004. ICOMAM is the International Committee of Museums and Collections of Arms and Military History, of which the author is the secretary. The subtitle chosen for the chapter was the title of the symposium theme. More information on ICOMAM can be found on its Website: <http://www.klm-mra.be/icomam>. The author is grateful to Barton C Hacker and Margaret Vining, both specialists in military history at the National Museum of American History, for their willingness to read an earlier draft of this article.
- 2 See the catalogue of this exhibition: Kist, J B *et al.*, *Dutch Muskets and Pistols: An Illustrated History of Seventeenth Century Gunmaking in the Low Countries* (London: 1974). This being a pure arms catalogue, the authors wisely did not include the wooden blocks in it.
- 3 On problems in methodology, dating, biasing factors and uncontrollable variables in arms historical research, see: Puype, J P, *Proceedings of the 1984 Trade Gun Conference: Part 1, Dutch and Other Flintlocks from Seventeenth Century Iroquois Sites* (Rochester, NY: 1985), pp2–9. The same problems, as well as those of the methodology in cataloguing arms, are dealt with in Puype, J P, *The Visser Collection: Arms of the Netherlands in the Collection of H. L. Visser: Vol. 1, Catalogue of Firearms, Swords and Related Objects, Part 1*, pp27–30.
- 4 Kousbroek, R, 'Het vuurwapen als kunstwerk: waardevolle collectie in Delft met ondergang bedreigd' ('The weapon as a work of art: valuable collection in Delft doomed'), *NRC Handelsblad* (17 August 1979)
- 5 Dr Joachim Niemeyer, who recently went into retirement.
- 6 The study collection of swords was opened on 24 September 2004 by Niemeyer's successor, Dr Kai Uwe Tapken. The display was designed by Dr Michael Gordon of Munich, a recognised specialist on edged weapons, who also selected all the swords.
- 7 The Schweizerisches Landesmuseum has produced a brochure entitled *Waffen werfen Schatten: Sonderausstellung in der Ruhmeshalle: 6. Mai bis 13. Juli 2003*, in which the history of the displays and the concept of this temporary exhibition is explained.
- 8 The exhibition was conceived under the supervision of the curator responsible, Dr Matthias Senn.