

## 1 Introduction

Ivar Arosenius holds a very special position in Swedish art history. His paintings often tell a striking story in a highly idiosyncratic yet remarkably universal vocabulary. Their impact on the viewer is at many times considerable, largely but not only because of their forceful imagination. Arosenius' reputation as a painter largely rests on his innovative relation to tradition, but the more or less cultic attention to him is due not only to the enigmatic character of many of his paintings, but also to the fact that he died very young, only thirty years old, from haemophilia. Born in 1878, he passed away on New Year's Day 1909.

The particular circumstances surrounding Arosenius illustrate the impossibility of understanding an artist and his or her position without examining how the artist has been treated and construed in reception up to the present day. The moulding of this cultural heritage takes place in different waves and stages, through exhibitions, reviews, studies, etc., gradually forming the complex image of today. In order to better understand this example of cultural heritage as it meets us, we need to study how it was construed. It is, however, not merely a question of reception history, since the artist can be assumed to have wished to establish him/herself as, precisely, cultural heritage. So, for a fuller understanding, there is also a need to examine how the artist attempted to construe him/herself.

Reception is very much the process that produces cultural heritage, but it is also a very broad phenomenon. In order to make it manageable, in this context I will limit the inquiry to *stagings*: cases of reception where a scholar, curator, writer or the like has presented the artist from a certain understanding and from a particular selection of works. This staging of the artist from the archives obviously stresses some aspects and ignores others. Staging is not the same as reception: it is active and mediating, performed by curators, authors and the like, rather than the more personal and, usually, unstructured reception of audiences in general. The concept of staging, however, is not restricted to reception. It proves useful also for studying how the artist endeavoured to construe his or her own persona and position; staging him/herself mainly through the works of art, although interviews and manifests, for example, would be additional means of self-staging.<sup>1</sup> The stagings of the artist and those of posterity sometimes coincide in ambition, and sometimes deviate considerably from each other, in their evolution into the cultural heritage we meet.

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of staging connects to performance, but the performativity is here not that of the scene. Rather, it connects to J. L. Austin's speech act theory (Austin 1962). Strictly speaking, 'illocutionary' must apply to language, but through the stagings of the artist, the work of art very distinctly addresses its receiver and effects notions if not actions.

The artist's staging him/herself can be seen as part of an effort to establish a public persona and thus to make him/herself into cultural heritage. This staging is for natural reasons less concise than the one performed by a scholar, curator or writer. It has taken place over a number of years and changed for a number of reasons, and it has been presented largely through the works of art, which have since been scattered to a number of different places. So: how to trace the stagings of the artist? The Arosenius Archive ([aroseniusarkivet.dh.gu.se](http://aroseniusarkivet.dh.gu.se)) is a case study which proposes to provide the means for such examinations by collecting the artist's works from various archives – primarily museums such as the Gothenburg Museum of Art and the Swedish National Museum, as well as the artist's notes, sketches, letters, photographs, etc. from the Gothenburg University Library where they are deposited – and private owners.

The works and sources are collected digitally, and offered to all users for free consideration. A number of tools are offered for structuring, filtering and understanding the works of the artist in ways that have not previously been possible – or for critically tracing and examining previous understandings, with the aid of a much larger body of material than they could embrace. That is, the Arosenius Archive stages the artist anew, offering the public as well as researchers the opportunity once again to stage the artist according to any aspects they wish to pursue – or, simply, to approach the artist bypassing established historical prejudice. The ambition is to let the artefacts speak for themselves, alone or in conjunction, through contexts new and old. The artefacts include a number of different kinds of objects, not only what would traditionally be described as artworks: the distinction between works of art and other objects is sometimes a useful simplification, but the combination of kinds is intended to, in the end, enable disregarding of such borders. Thus, the intention is to enable new kinds of exchange between the audience/users and the artist.

The present study is devoted to three different instances of staging the artist Ivar Arosenius. Section 2 constitutes a discussion of the different ways an artist or a collection may be called forth from the archives and staged through digital media. The theoretical foundations and framework will be clarified through the aspects of mediation and agency.

Section 3 examines how the artist was staged after his death, in monographs and anthologies. The admittedly important newspaper reviews are for practical reasons left to future research, while the corpus here treated consists in more 'long-lasting' and elaborate stagings, more readily available to readers over long periods of time (the entries on Arosenius in works of art history are often written by the same authors, and are not brought into

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discussion as they do not add substantially to the picture of the artist). Arosenius' real breakthrough came with an exhibition a little more than a month before his death, and the intention is to clarify the different attempts to establish the artist as cultural heritage.

Section 4 is devoted to an attempt that can be phrased in two ways: it may be seen as an analysis of how the artist staged himself in and through his art, directing how to be understood and steering the subsequent collecting, archiving and presentations of his works. It may also be seen not as focused on the artist's intentions, but attempting to let the artefacts themselves speak, tracing how the artist emerged through them. The concept of staging is applied to the artefacts in different ways that structure the examination, in the end illuminating not only how the artist's role and character were devised, but also how he staged his home, his family and himself as viewed and viewer, and in the end how he staged the beholder of his paintings.

Section 4 utilizes the Arosenius Archive not so much with regard to tools as with regard to collected resources: it employs the aggregation of artefacts, works, drafts, etc. into an archive more comprehensive than anyone has previously had access to. The analysis thus takes its point of departure from the Arosenius Archive; so, too, does the form of presentation, utilizing the medium in an exploratory fashion. In this section, frequent reference will be made to various works of art. This Element contains a limited set of illustrations, but as more images are essential for a fuller understanding, the Element should be read together with the wider selection of images available at [aroseniusarkivet.dh.gu.se/construing.pdf](http://aroseniusarkivet.dh.gu.se/construing.pdf). Thus, the figures referred to in this study are consecutively numbered, but not all of them are rendered here as images – they are all found in the PDF file at the web address.

The ambition is to enter a future path of studying the artefacts detached from their usual context and thus to an extent letting the artefacts structure our understanding, on the one hand as they create the scene for themselves and the artist, and on the other hand as they work – individually and collectively – to orchestrate the reactions and reception of the audience. The options for releasing the artefacts will be more numerous and powerful in the future, as, for instance, works may be mapped against other works on the Internet, allowing connections, coincidences and influences to emerge. It will then also be possible to relate them to other, larger patterns and narratives, such as those of artistic periods and general developments. This is to be understood as a first, tentative attempt at mapping possibilities and options.

## 2 The Work of Art and the Archive

### 2.1 Mediation

What does digitization do to works of art, to artists and to the archives? It may be illuminating to start thinking of this age of constantly accelerating reproduction in the light of a previous technological revolution – that of photography. Walter Benjamin in his famous 1935 article ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ proposed that the photographic reproduction not only lacked the (not so easily defined) *aura* of the original work of art, but also diminished the aura of the original: ‘that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art’.<sup>2</sup> This description would invite us to understand the work of art as being all the more extenuated and flattened in our own, very much more efficient, age of digital reproduction.

However, at the same time, Benjamin underscored that the reproduction ‘enables the original to meet the beholder halfway’ (Benjamin 1968, 220). And as has been demonstrated by Peter Walsh (2007), the truth of the aura seems to be quite the opposite. Photographic reproduction did not destroy the aura of the work of art; rather, it created it. Walsh builds his argument on the development of museums: what he calls ‘pre-photographic museums’ were built around collections of original works of art which had in different ways ended up in a place for exhibiting. The ambition of the museums was not to represent art and art history as such, but merely the collection in question. Around 1800, they were not rarely expanded into monuments of the nation, region or other powers and institutions.

From the middle of the nineteenth century, photography caused the emergence of the ‘post-photographic’ museum, which was not dedicated to a collection but could instead aim at presenting great art and art history. These museums, exemplified by Walsh with South Kensington Museum (today’s Victoria and Albert), would use originals, casts, copies and photographs without actual discrimination. In effect, photographs were in some cases significantly more powerful than originals. Through the photographs, hierarchies were changed: less accessible works of art could be made known and be attributed a place in art history, and a distinct effect of photography and publication was the canonization of that which was most readily disseminated. As certain paintings were more suited for black-and-white photography, even colour scales could and would change an object’s place in the hierarchy.

Simultaneously, photographic reproductions established new practices for the exhibiting of originals. Previously, works of art had been improved in

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted from Benjamin 1968, 221.

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different ways: missing parts of sculptures had been filled out, paintings had been retouched and adapted – but photography introduced a view of the original in its current state, documenting flaws and wear rather than reconstructing a posited ideal.<sup>3</sup> Thus developed the practice in museums to exhibit originals without ‘improving’ them, but rather viewing damage now as an important sign of their age, originality and authenticity.

Thus, even as the post-photographic museum replaced photographs and other reproductions with originals in their galleries, the direct influence of photography lingered in the displays. Photographs had, ironically, made the originals themselves so important and valuable that curators could no longer tolerate anything less. The replacement of restoration for conservation had significant consequences:

It is . . . the re-production that confers status and importance on the original. The more reproduced an artwork is – and the more mechanical and impersonal the reproductions – the more important the original becomes. . . . Even the massive, symbol-laden architecture of the post-photographic museum reflects this transformation of art from precious objects into sacred icons of deep quasi-religious power – all thanks to this power of photographic reproduction. (Walsh 2007, 28–30)

Thus, there is reason to argue that the work of art does not lose aura from mechanical reproduction, but rather the contrary. It is clear that the aura will be deeply affected by digitization. Walsh points at some effects: one is the increased awareness that photographic or digital reproductions are never neutral; another is that collecting, sharing and interpreting works of art is now possible for very many actors outside of museums and academia. Walsh concludes that while museums are entering the Web, considerable development remains.

As Walsh wrote this in 2007, much has taken place since, and the speed has increased significantly. This is not the place for an account of that development, but particular aspects should be commented on. The definition and understanding of cultural heritage as a rule varies for a number of reasons, but the fundamental reason is arguably mediation. Focusing on digitization from the perspective of photography’s impact, the main points are the following:

- Photography instigated a number of processes and notions about the work of art, which developed over time and according to circumstances in unpredictable ways, exemplified by Benjamin’s concept of the aura – which would with time be understood in the exact opposite manner, as Walsh shows.

<sup>3</sup> In terms less focused on media, Bennett’s account of the development of the modern museum can be seen as the foundation of this view (Bennett 1995). Cf. Liepe 2018, 18–19.

Digitization has started a wealth of processes in considerably more foundational layers of society, with effects that are only gradually becoming visible.

- Photography sharpened the focus on the historicity and authenticity of the items contained in the archive: reproductions enhanced our attention to the original and authenticity. Analogously, digitization sharpens the focus on the original in a number of ways – most obviously perhaps in the considerable progress of book history, paradoxically through ethereal, digital reproductions causing decisive attention to the material dimensions of texts and their impact on meaning and understanding. The existence of copies and the possibilities of manipulating them further enhance the attention to the original.
- Photography brought about new ways of handling and distributing artefacts, causing new models of evaluation and understanding. Digitization provides exponentially more means of handling and distributing, thus providing new evaluations – both richer access to highly valued pieces of cultural heritage and a redistribution of value hierarchies. As regards understanding, re-contextualization on different levels, alignment and comparison provide entirely new venues.
- Photography altered the notion of the archive: the collection of a museum shifted significance from being its primary concern, to being part of a more general exhibition, coupled with reproductions and introductions into wider contexts and developments. Thus, photography also sharpened focus on the archive, its degree of representativity, the ways into it and the manners for staging its contents and artists. Digitization provides, among other things, new ways to call forth, structure and filter the items of the archive, efficiently re-contextualizing and merging them with larger materials in different ways. The original will be less often actually brought out of the archive than before, and will thus gain new status – the function of the physical archive as shrine will be even more accentuated.
- Photography made art the property of everyone through reproductions. Digitization not only adds pure reproduction, but also enhances the ways in which reproductions may be handled and distributed. The visitor potentially becomes a user, with swift access to substantial materials and collections either provided at museums and other resources or distributed for gathering and curating at one's own will, exhibiting (e.g. on a computer or television screen), and examining for new patterns. Not only the ownership of art is disseminated, but also the curatorship. The effect also applies to research and other instances of interpretation: the materials will be available not only to experts but to anyone, to stage, filter, contextualize and interpret in a number of new ways, presenting materials and opinions in even more ways.

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Accessibility through media thus to a great extent regulates hierarchies and canon. Digitization can be expected to significantly increase this development – a development that certainly offers not only possibilities, but also risks.

As the post-photographic museum changed access to and notions of art, original, archive, value and knowledge, so the post-digital museum has the potential to accentuate these changes through a practically inexhaustible array of options for enhancing experience and augmenting reality. That is, access to and understanding of cultural heritage to a great extent change as a result of medial change. These changed understandings also include the artist him/herself, which calls for considerations on the relation between work, biography and history.

While the example of the photographic museum is illustrative of the fundamental role of mediation, in a sense it is an understatement. As David Bolter and Richard Grusin persuasively claimed in 1999, there is nothing prior to mediation. Explicating *remediation* as ‘the Mediation of Mediation’, they concluded:

The events of our mediated culture are constituted by combinations of subject, media, and objects, which do not exist in their segregated forms. Thus, there is nothing prior to or outside the act of mediation.

In order to arrive at this conclusion, Bolter and Grusin adapted the concept of *hybrid* from Bruno Latour’s *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993):

For Latour, the phenomena of contemporary technoscience consist of intersections or ‘hybrids’ of the human subject, language, and the external world of things, and these hybrids are as real as their constituents – in fact, in some sense they are more real because no constituent (subject, language, object) ever appears in its pure form, segregated from the other constituents. (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 57–59; see also Blackman 2016, 38)

The inevitable conclusion is that cultural heritage must be understood not only as an object of mediation – things and ideas to be presented – but also as a process of mediation. Cultural heritage is readily described as a powerful social process for understanding both the past and the present, negotiating a number of discourses into cultural practice (Smith 2006, 304; cf. Harvey 2008, 20). Besides the social processes on individual and collective levels, the original work of art comes into being in a form which includes not only the technology for mediation and presentation, but also arrangement, selection, interpretation, etc. Cultural heritage is a blend of objects, presentations and negotiations which constantly develops not only through ideology, politics and aesthetics, but also through media technologies. Heritage in the making is heritage in the mediation.

## 2.2 Agency

The discussion so far has pointed to the agency of media: as regards the impact of photography on the museum, the nature and effects of its agency are fairly clear; as regards the impact of digitization on the museum and other modes of exhibiting archives, the nature and effects of the digital media are not yet as clearly discernible. Within Actor-Network Theory, agency has been attributed to non-human actors as well as human actors. Concerning museums and museal practices, the focus has been on objects as mediators, as discussions have been directed towards indigenous heritage and the need to de-colonialize heritage collections and exhibitions. The key to exploring these kinds of agency has been formulated as the ‘processes of categorization, classification, ordering, and governance of things and people’ (Harrison 2013, 8, 18). Ethnological and archaeological practices are at the forefront in a way that is not obviously applicable to the issue of art museums, yet the archival and museal approach calls for consideration.

The processes that have led to the archives and museums will not be followed up in this particular study. What is seminal, though, is the results of categorization, classification, ordering and to some extent governance in the reception of the artist’s works. In the context of ethnographic museums, Latour’s example of an Amazon expedition has been used for illustration:

The plants find themselves detached, separated, preserved, classified, and tagged. They are then reassembled, reunited, redistributed according to entirely new principles that depend on the researcher, on the discipline of botany, which has been standardized for many centuries, and on the institution that shelters them, but they no longer grow as they did in the forest. The botanist learns new things, and she is transformed accordingly, but the plants are transformed also. (Latour 1999, 39)

Quoting this passage, Bennett et al. add that even the origin of the plants is transformed by environmental management that results from the collecting of the specimens. On the one hand, then, the processes are influenced by one another and human as well as non-human actors are involved. On the other hand, the objects, the non-human actors, are helplessly relocated into new contexts, where the meaning they are assigned has only rarely been that of their origin, as, for example, they have been inserted in constructions of social and cultural development (Bennett et al. 2017, esp. 24–26). Still, regardless of whether the meaning assigned to them by their new context is consistent with their origin or not, they have the potential of transforming audience and research.

By definition, the agency of things is demarcated by how they are categorized, ordered and handled as the result of human actors’ social theories (Grinnell



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and Portin unpublished). Such social theories may be taken to include aesthetic presumptions that surround the handling of artistic artefacts. In addition, the element of chance is crucial: what arrives at different archives may have been more or less fortuitous. As the artefacts have arrived, they have then been ordered, categorized, interpreted, exhibited and stabilized or frozen according to theoretical frameworks, explicit or implicit.

Latour's words on plants are easily transferrable to works of art: collected, assembled, ordered, classified and perhaps exhibited according to a number of aesthetic and scholarly theories as well as practical considerations, they have ended up in archives and collections where their testimony has been substantially overlaid with interpretations or simply silenced, blurred and/or stabilized into new meanings, their statement being diminished or altered.

The post-colonial critique of museal practices thus concerns, on the one hand, the processes that led to the current state, and on the other the options for freeing the objects from the frameworks they have been inserted into and opening them up for their own agency, or at least clarifying, altering and expanding the frames for their agency. This to a great extent can be said to imply reconfiguring the contexts of the objects: 'reassembling the collection', as Harrison (2013) puts it, or, in the suggestion of Grinell and Portin, re-defining and re-modelling the museum into a re-presenting instance, diplomatically offering its objects for constant renegotiation (Grinell and Portin unpublished; cf. Bennett 2018, 205). While it is not entirely clear how this is to be achieved in practice in archaeological museums, principally, the more objects and audience can be freed from fixation and ordering, the better they may form alternative orders.

The basic issue of Actor-Network Theory as applied to ethnographic and archaeological museums is to make the objects speak: to change them from silent intermediaries to mediators which do exert agency. As Latour outlines ways of making objects 'talk, that is, to offer descriptions of themselves, to produce scripts of what they are making others – humans or non-humans – do', his discussion is strikingly similar to the general approach of media theory towards media: the objects constantly risk receding into the background, and their 'mode of action' is not as visible anymore. Through innovations, controversies, mistakes or clumsiness, accidents and so on, 'silent intermediaries become full-blown mediators' in Latour's Actor-Network Theory. The point of departure for media theory, turning towards media archaeology, is that media remain transparent, unnoticeable, until something – a medial revolution, or something less grandiose – makes us suddenly see them and find ways to explore their nature, impact, import and agency. This exploration may often be performed in a Foucauldian archaeological manner, distinctly reminiscent of Latour's suggestion that the objects can be brought back to light through

a historical tracing of how ‘machines, devices, and implements were born’ (Latour 2005, 79–81; cf. Huhtamo and Parikka 2011 and Parikka 2013, 151). Applying this reasoning to artists and art, the works of art which have to a greater or lesser extent come to be fixated in their contexts can be called forth and presented anew in ways that make them talk of their origin, their context and some of the networks they arose in. Although conditions and effects differ, they can do this as originals or as reproductions.

The audience is a central actor not least as the receiver of the results of collecting and governing, ordering, interpreting and presenting. When Bolter and Grusin made the concept of remediation the foundation of long and wide debate and development, a seminal issue was how mediation and remediation destabilize the relation and interaction between domains such as the social, the psychological, the cultural and the aesthetic. Pointing to this and connecting to Latour’s ‘hybrid objects’, Blackman underlines how the elusive boundaries between old and new media are paralleled by the relation between old and new audiences. Leaving the notion of cultural objects as fixed and finalized entities and focusing instead on the processes and interrelations between all actors, it is obvious that the new audience can take a more active part, being more in control of the objects in question (which, on the one hand, may liberate the audience from previous orders and thus acknowledge its agency, and on the other, subjects it to new orderings): ‘In the context of digital media, audiences are now approached as potential co-producers of meaning and content’ (Blackman 2016, 38). Still, the mechanisms of what Bolter and Grusin termed ‘the double logic of remediation’ are complicated: on the one hand, there is a cultural logic dominated by the desire for transparent immediacy, effacing (the signs of) mediation; on the other hand, there is a cultural logic dominated by the fascination with media. The striving for immediacy, or presentness, Blackman argues, closely ties in with the issue of audience, curating and affect (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 21–44; Blackman 2016, 39–40).

We may conclude that digital representations and the way they are situated and contextualized provide a number of alternative venues for the conceptualization of artefacts, art, audience, affect, cognition, experience, power, archive, collection, exhibition, museum and knowledge production. The question is how to best make use of them: the options are manifold.

### 2.3 The Arosenius Archive

Principally, what a museum does may be described as stabilizing the artefact into a specific meaning (Guggenheim 2009, 44–45). The object becomes a quasi-object, a hybrid, the sum of all contributions by human and non-