

Making invisible work visible

The Depot of Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam

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What was the central idea behind making the museum depot accessible to the public, and what did you hope to change in the traditional relationship between museum collections, storage and visitors? The starting point for the Depot of Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen was both practical and visionary. On the one hand, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen needed a new, future-proof storage facility for its collection of more than 157,000 artworks. On the other hand, we felt that a public collection should be more accessible. Traditionally, visitors only see a small percentage of a museum's collection on display, while the vast majority remains hidden in storage. With the Depot, we wanted to rethink that relationship. Rather than separating the collection, its storage and the public, we brought them together in one building. Visitors are invited into a fully functioning depot, where they can discover artworks in storage and gain insight into the work that goes into preserving, researching and caring for a collection. Accessibility starts as soon as visitors enter the building, where they can see artworks being handled, packed and prepared for transport. Throughout the building, they can also explore visible storage areas and join guided tours through storage rooms. In addition, visitors can discover presentations on restoration projects and exhibitions that offer new perspectives on works from our own collection.

Our ambition was not simply to open a storage facility, but to broaden people's understanding of what a museum does. Museums are not only places where artworks are exhibited; they are also responsible for preserving cultural heritage for future generations. The Depot makes that often-invisible work visible and accessible, while offering new ways to experience the collection.

How does public access affect the everyday work of the depot? What particular challenges arise when conservation, logistics, security and collection management have to coexist with visitor access?

The main challenge is ensuring that conservation, logistics and security can continue uninterrupted while remaining accessible to visitors. Over the years we experienced that public access, and collection care can coexist very well. The Depot allows us to make the often-invisible work of preserving and managing a collection visible to a broad audience. Naturally, this requires careful planning. Security, logistics, conservation and visitor access must be balanced at all times, and some activities take place outside opening hours. Because the storage areas are visible to the public, they also need to remain organised and presentable.

What has surprised us most is how interested visitors are in everyday museum work. Whether they see a conservator at work, an artwork being moved or a technician carrying out routine tasks, they are curious and respectful. Over time, working in a public environment has become second nature to many of our colleagues. They often enjoy engaging with visitors and sharing the stories behind their work.

What have you learned about the way visitors engage with collections in a depot setting?

We have learned that visitors are far more curious about the behind-the-scenes work of a museum than many people might expect. They appreciate the opportunity to discover the collection from a different perspective and gain a sense of its scale and diversity.

The Depot sparks many questions about conservation, storage and collection care. It has shown us that visitors are interested not only in the artworks themselves, but also in how museums preserve them for future generations.

To deepen engagement and share more of our work with the public, we regularly organize presentations and projects that are connected to conservation and collection research. The research project *Unpacking Boijmans*, for example, explored the colonial histories of objects in our collection. Last year, the exhibition *Weeping Glass* allowed visitors to step into the shoes of glass conservators

and learn more about the fragility of glass. They could discover the different symptoms of unstable glass and experience what deteriorating glass looks, smells and feels like. More recently, *All Around Fashion* showcased our large-scale registration project, in which every object in our fashion collection was carefully examined, and photographed for our database.

After several years of experience, where do you see the greatest opportunities - but also the limits - of the publicly accessible depot model?

The model offers a unique opportunity to place collection care at the heart of the public experience. Traditionally, museum storage facilities are located on the outskirts of a city and remain largely inaccessible. By building the Depot in the city centre, next to the museum, we have been able to make an essential part of museum practice visible and accessible to a broad audience. We have seen how strongly the Depot has been embraced by the people of Rotterdam. It has also attracted private collectors, who can present parts of their collections in dedicated storage spaces. Most importantly, it allows visitors to discover how a museum cares for its collection and why conservation and storage are so important. At the same time, there are limits to the model. A depot is fundamentally different from a museum. Generally, visitors do not encounter traditional galleries or curated exhibitions, so it is important to communicate clearly what they can expect before and during their visit. Looking ahead, we see the greatest strength in the coexistence of both our buildings. When the historical museum reopens in 2030, visitors will be able to experience both sides of our work: the museum as a place for exhibitions and storytelling, and the Depot as a place where the care, preservation and long-term stewardship of the collection become visible. Together, these buildings provide a more complete understanding of what a museum does and should be.

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