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COMMITTEE ON CULTURE AND EDUCATION
Sub-Committee on the Cultural Heritage

Museums as crossroads: meeting other cultures

Conclusions

of the European Museum Forum Workshop
held in Parma (Italy) (17-20 October 2002)

in co-operation with

the Istituto Beni Culturali, Bologna and
the Cultural Department of the Regione Toscana
the Commune and Province of Parma

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The subject

The 2000 and 2001 European Museum Forum Workshops, entitled respectively 'The Spirit of Europe' and 'Opening doors: Access to European Heritage in Museums', focussed on issues such as the idea of Europe and of European culture, of a European civilisation and heritage, and on the role museums can play to support and lead the process of European collaboration and integration, while retaining and celebrating cultural diversity.

Museums as cultural institutions with a special direct relationship with local or national communities and/or with users from other countries should also function as crossroads and gateways, as places where borders and cultural and political barriers can be crossed. They have been identified as places for: discovery, re-discovery of collective and individual cultural backgrounds, meeting the others, learning and exploring, celebrating diversity, reconciling and harmonising differences.

Better access to a wider interpretation of museum objects has to be accompanied by a consideration of the needs and the cultural backgrounds of a new kind of public, consisting of a wide range of users with very varied cultural backgrounds. Today the definition of a 'foreigner' is not restricted to the traditional tourist and, at the same time, the term is no longer adequate to define somebody not belonging to a traditional local culture. In future Europeans can be born on this continent or will have chosen it as their new home, and in their different ways they will all contribute to European culture. To put it another way, European museums have to face the challenge of building and communicating a form of European culture where local and trans-national aspects are constantly shifting.

The 2002 EMF Workshop has therefore focussed on how museums use their collections to illustrate their understanding of the diversity of European cultures, how they produce special projects, such as exhibitions and learning activities, to achieve this same goal, and how they work with their actual or potential audiences within the context of an increasingly integrated continent.

More specifically, the seminar's work has followed four areas dealing with relevant issues connected with the main subject:

1. Multiculturalism in European museums.
2. A new breed of museum visitors. If we are all Europeans, when visiting other State museums we are no longer tourists, but simply European residents from another area making use of local cultural facilities.
3. Understanding and sharing the European culture and heritage - an illusion?
4. The museum profession: what are the main and most urgent adjustments needed in our profession in order to cope with the new European situation?

Conclusions

The outcomes of the four groups were discussed in a plenary session. The following Conclusion was accepted unanimously.

In order to meet the needs of today's multicultural European society, where mobility has become the trend, museums must adapt their policy and professional skills in such a way that their collections and presentations are available and understood by people from all cultures and all walks of life.

The four groups came to the following conclusions.

I. Multiculturalism in European museums

Multiculturalism starts when two persons meet each other.

Multiculturalism in a museum context could be termed as a sensitivity to various and complex symbiotic relations between different communities which may be the subject of the museum and/or the public to which it addresses itself.

Community is a group of people who are living together with the same language, culture/heritage, values (rules, laws, religion). Communities can interact (symbiotic communities, guest communities, …). This causes multiculturalism.

Every museum can be a unique example (paradigm) reflecting the needs and parameters of the communities it represents and the ones it serves.

1. Nobody should be left out: a museum has to be an inclusive and connective place.
2. A museum should respect and acknowledge the community/ies that it represents (through collections, presentations, activities, …).
3. In order to meet the needs of today's multi-cultural European society, where mobility has become the trend, museums must adapt their policy and professional skills in such a way that their collections and presentations are understood by people from all walks of life.
4. It should start from something in common and thus use connections to come to a multicultural interpretation.
5. It should create European corners/rooms to display artefacts of common European character.
6. It should create (inter-regional) European projects.
7. It should start from local aspects to come to global views and vice versa.
8. It should make the collection accessible for the broad public: multilingual, use new technologies.
9. It should use facilitators who make links with several kinds of communities – build bridges – outreach.
10. It should share collections between several museums (inter-regional/international exhibitions).
11. It should keep its uniqueness.
12. Museums have to be 'welcoming places', comfortable for all (tourists and visitors) and treat everyone as a valuable visitor/user who can related to and be interested in the context of the museum.

A museum should maintain and preserve the collections and make them available in the most appropriate ways for the use and enjoyment of the public in order to promote a wider appreciation and understanding of the (international) cultural heritage embodied in the collections.

Recommendations

Museums should address the challenge of dealing with the maintenance of and tolerance to diversity of cultures. One form of it should be the 'European corner' idea, where museums could exhibit about the reasons of diversification (e.g. origin of human populations, the surrounding natural environment, language, religion, structure of settlements, travel and trade) and way of development (e.g. isolation versus influence by other cultures, changes in the natural, man-made and social environment) of various cultures of Europe. Understanding the common roots may help accepting the differences.

There could be an extensive core knowledge accumulated, focussing on the general phenomena, possibly in electronic and multilingual form. Each museum could use it and

form its own unique exhibition using items from its collections and expertise in its field of interest, to make the chosen culture(s) understandable for its audience, local or international alike.

II. A new breed of museum visitors. The joy of getting to know each other.

The museums users: what are the main features of the present-day public in Europe? If we are all Europeans, when visiting another State are we still tourists or are we simply European residents from another area? What are the main features of this new breed of visitors?

Preambles

1. Europe is an extremely diverse and dynamic 'patchwork' of local and regional cultures, which makes it very interesting for travelling and exploring, both for Europeans and visitors from outside Europe.

2. Migration is constantly adding new and exciting value to this patchwork of diversity.

3. Europeans will travel more and go out for exploration more often and also easier, already now and more so in the future.

4. Their motivation, or part of it, is to be surprised and thrilled by what we have in common, but even more by our European cultural diversity.

5. Immigration from outside Europe creates both interesting new expressions of culture and new target groups for museums.

6. Motivations for travelling are becoming more and more complex; leisure, cultural tourism, adventurous travelling (and others) mix in individuals when they used to be clearly socially distinct.

7. Breaking barriers between cultures, locally, regionally, nationally, globally, all basically belong to the same task and all deserve attention, from any museum.

Statements

1. Museums consider it as part of their mission to preserve European diversity.

2. Co-operation should be aiming at diversification, and the awareness of this in all European citizens, not unification.

3. If we are to define 'European culture' or 'European cultural heritage', it will be with a paradox: inspiration of people by appreciation of differences.

4. It is a challenge for European museums, big and small, to find new ways to serve the future Europeans and their new, complicated needs.

5. An effective scale for good cultural programmes by museums is the regional scale.

6. Maintaining diversity, in the interest of the visitor/cultural tourist, is also necessary from a marketing/economic point of view, because otherwise reasons for travel will disappear.

Conclusions and Recommendations for the relationship between Museums and Target Groups

Everybody has become a tourist, but all tourists are different.

1. Make optimal use of travelling time, e.g. by giving cultural information in trains, planes, airports, etc.

2. Seek co-operation with the local, national and European travel businesses.

3. Visitors are very difficult to categorise, because of the new, more 'eclectic' behaviour of the tourist. We suggest, in designing marketing strategies, concentrating on both 'passive' and 'active' tourists.

4. If the focus of European museums is to be on regional differences and qualities, colleagues of other museums (in other regions) within the same thematic field should get attention as a target group; the promotion of these contacts deserve more effort and attention than they are getting already.

5. Learning of European languages other than English should be actively promoted.

6. Thematic search possibilities and thematic linking of internet-sites of museums demands active and large-scale efforts of improvements in order to reach people all over Europe.

7. Museums should creatively and flexibly react to the behaviour and demands of the 'quick leisure tourist' (disagreement).

8. As to subcultures (of immigrants) within cities and regions: special programmes for these groups also have a stimulating effect on visits by European visitors from other regions and countries. Museums should invest in these sort of activities.

9. Multilingual guided tours and/or multilingual electronic systems in museums are necessary, because language (verbal communication) is an essential means of meeting other cultures.

III. Understanding and sharing the European culture and heritage - an illusion?

The sharing of a European Heritage should be in harmony with the development and realisation of local, national and global culture. The realisation of identity should be constructed as much on an individual, local level as it is part of a greater European and world culture. By following these ideals, collection policy should always be aware of the importance of individual objects and how they relate, connect and fit into a wider local, national and international context. Co-operation in a shared culture also relies heavily on issues of conservation.

Recommendations: Our recommendations for the Council of Europe are as follows.

1. To promote European guidelines and standards of conservation which would allow for more works to be shared safely in different locations.

2. To offer guidelines for sharing information about collections. In particular, those countries where the keeping of inventories is still based on outdated procedures, the Council of Europe should propose that all museums make 'accessible' the collections they hold in the easiest and most efficient manner – in this case, probably digitally.

3. The Council of Europe should concern itself with the issue of restitution. The question of restitution is not only a cultural one: it is one with political, judicial, moral, legal and symbolic dimensions. We recommend that the Council of Europe draws up a common approach to evaluate individual cases where restitution is in question and we must be prepared to abide by their decisions.

   We should also be aware that any decision which implies that one situation is 'easily' judged, i.e. the works stolen from Jewish communities be returned to their owners, we must also acknowledge that there may be many equally 'clear' cases.

   The ownership of individual works is never easily defined. We recommend that the Committee of Culture and Education of the Council of Europe draw up a common approach to the question of restitution, and it should be remembered that the issue of restitution is not only one of international dimension, but also of national interest and a question of sharing culture on a national level.

IV. The museum profession: What are the main and most urgent adjustments needed in our profession in order to cope with the new European situation?

In order to meet the needs of today's dynamic, multicultural European society, museums must enhance their policy and professional skills in such a way that their collections are used to offer learning opportunities for all. The Group has tried to identify the most urgent European professional skills required by the changing situation of museums in terms of a transnational public and new forms of networking.

The development of Museum Professionals

Preliminary comments

1. Culture is something we all learn, like language. We can learn it together.

2. Contact and cultural understanding begins between individuals.

3. Collections are often of international significance and meaning and offer exceptional learning opportunities. They are keys to memory, to identity and connect the past to the future. We know of many examples of collections interpreted in an international way, including the Historial de la Grand Guerre in Péronne and the Dutch Intercultural Programmes, Keys to Memory and Migrating Memory programmes in Sweden.

Statements

1. Museums need to focus on intercultural issues and on diversity.

2. Museums have a pivotal role to enable people to explore their identity as individuals, as Europeans and as world citizens.

3. Museums need to develop programmes that are not just visitor oriented but audience led.

4. Museums need an educational mission in which all staff take part. Too often the role of involving the public is an add-on one or the job of one person.

5. Museum activities must favour understanding and respect in order to heighten awareness of human rights and possible discrimination towards the museums public and among professionals.

Training statements

We are very aware that our knowledge is limited. We have based this paper on our joint experience and on the research we know of done by the *Polish Malopolska Cultura Institute*; *the German Museum Association* and the *Institut für Museumskunde* in Berlin; and the *Skills Foresight Training of the Cultural Heritage National Training Organisation* in the United Kingdom.

1. Most museum professionals in Europe are not formally trained to work with the public. They are trained to collect and conserve, but not to interpret. In some countries there is a lack of awareness that this is important.

2. European museum professionals do not have enough opportunities to collaborate in a real way and much work is at a superficial level, on the simple exchange of loans.

European museum professionals do not have enough opportunities to network efficiently. So while we are not very mobile, part of our audiences are. There is a discrepancy between professional and personal experience. As contact begins between individuals, museum professionals need that too.

Skills and knowledge gaps

1. Joint training programmes to begin to learn together.

2. Retrain in the interpretation of objects in three ways:
- intercultural
- multidisciplinary
- general in many places

3. Training in leadership
- direction
- coping with new types of museum governance

4. Project management

5. Dynamic social reality
- cultural diversity of our populations
- globalisation
- mobile populations

6. Communication training
- language
- new media
- ICT
- Visual communication

7. Customer care

8. Team Working

Recommendations

1. Development of joint training programme for museum professionals in Europe to meet the main gaps in our skills and knowledge through the Life Long Learning Programme.
   = communication with and interpretation to the public intercultural competence awareness of the social dynamic.

2. Provide more opportunities for networking for museum professionals
   = EMF to organise more than one annual session to provide an ongoing discussion forum involving museum professionals from other continents with one session using a museum professional's chat room.

3. To undertake research to establish skills and knowledge gaps at a European level
   = situational analysis
   = map training standards
   = training needs analysis among museum professionals, with special attention to newly-elected EU member states

4. Intershare: International Sharing Skills Programme
= for exchange of staff, both within Europe and with other parts of the world, building on the experience and excellent examples of SAMP (Swedish African Museums Programme) and IPAM (American Museums Exchange Programme).

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