

On Museology: reflections from the field

Lynn Maranda

On Museology: reflections from the field

Lynn Maranda

Curator Emerita, Museum of Vancouver

International committee for museology – ICOFOM

Comité internacional para la museología – ICOFOM

Comité international pour la muséologie – ICOFOM

Editorial work:

Bruno Brulon Soares

Universidade Federal do Estado do Rio de Janeiro – UNIRIO

Proofreading:

Hilary Feldman

This publication contains information that originates from the author's personal first-hand knowledge garnered over 44 years as a museum curator of ethnology/anthropology and published by ICOFOM throughout these years.

Published in Paris, ICOM/ICOFOM, 2021

ISBN (print): 978-2-491997-34-2

ISBN (digital): 978-2-491997-35-9

Table of contents

Foreword	6
<i>Bruno Brulon Soares</i>	
1. Museology and Identity	10
2. Museology and “Developing” Countries—Help or Manipulation	14
3. Museology and the Indigenous Cultural Environment	19
4. A Museological Core Problem: The Material World	23
5. Museums and the Community	28
6. Museology and Intangible Heritage: Conduits of the Intangible	33
7. Museology and Indigenous Cultures: A New Reality for Museums in Canada	38
8. Museums, Museology and Global Communications: Whither Cultural Diversity?	44
9. Museology: Back to the Basics: Musealization	50
10. Deaccessioning and Repatriation	56
11. Empowering the Visitor: Process, Progress, and Protest .	64
12. Museum Ethics in the 21 st Century: Museum Ethics Transforming into Another Dimension	75
13. Is it Possible to Tie Down a Universal Museum Definition?	92

Foreword

Foreword

The museum as fieldwork

To read Lynn Maranda is a powerful invitation to see museology from the field: one that allows us to reconnect museum theory to experience. It is from her own experience in the museum domain that this museologist has developed a particular theoretical approach to the museum, which is recognized by generations of scholars and practitioners within the International Committee for Museology, ICOM. From her own professional perspective, museology can be understood as “an applied science of techniques and methodology for the handling and preservation of heritage materials,” but at the same time perceived as an expertise “under attack” by other epistemologies and indigenous points of view. The readers of her selected works in the present publication will find a practical approach to museum theory, or a museology based on the daily observation of an experienced professional who construes the museum as her main fieldwork.

This publication brings together a selection of essays published in the ICOM Study Series between 1986 and 2020. The articles originate from the author’s personal first-hand knowledge garnered over 44 years as a museum curator of ethnology/anthropology in the context of Canada. Born in Toronto, Lynn Maranda holds a Master’s degree in Anthropology from the University of British Columbia. From 1964 to 2008, she made important, sustained contributions to the Vancouver Museum, now called Museum of Vancouver. She joined ICOM in 1984 and started publishing her short essays based on the careful observation of museum practice in this institution. As a museum professional and anthropologist, she worked in a broad range of museological functions, including collections management and development, curatorial work, administration, research, and service to the profession. Her polyvalent dedication to museum work has allowed her to have a vast perspective over what she was going to study, according to museological theory, as *musealization*.

While developing a strong expertise on collections management and curatorial practice since the 1960s, Maranda has actively participated in the museum’s major acquisitions and has organized large exhibitions involving First Nations, such as the shows *Yuquot, The Centre of Our World* (2002) and *Honouring the Basket Makers: Woven Lives of the Musqueam, Tsleil-Waututh, and Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw* (2003–2004). Internationally, she has been a Board Member of ICOM for several terms (1993–1995, 2004–2016, 2019–2022), having been actively involved in many aspects of this committee’s journal and worked diligently at reforming the Rules of Procedure. This book is not only a tribute to her dedication to this international committee, but also a recognition of her longstanding work in museology, which I hope can reach new readers and continue to influence the future generations of professionals worldwide.

As some classical anthropologists have taught us, ethnography allows the “scientist” to perceive social reality in its subtle particularities, which, according to

Malinowski, can only be grasped in “flesh and blood”¹ through fieldwork. In the sense stated by this ethnographer in the beginning of the last century, field observation requires one to record, carefully and precisely, the actions of the actors and of the spectators in a given social reality.² Such a method implicates the observer, in being close to the observed reality and at the same time distancing from it, so as to perceive the different points of view and readings of the world. Even though based in a museum, Lynn Maranda was able to detach herself from the institution to see the museum as her field, and museum practice as *fieldwork*. A methodological distance is defined when she writes about museum procedures not in a prescriptive manner, but as a way to use theoretical reflection as a tool to make practice dependent on critical thinking. By creating such a distance, she also helps to define museology within the humanities, as a discipline that is solemnly concerned with human phenomena.

As we can notice in the selection of articles for the present book, museology and museum theory have changed at the center of ICOFOM and in its theme-oriented publications—mainly the ICOFOM Study Series, publishing its first issues in 1983. Since then, museology has evolved to be considered a reflexive discipline of the human and social sciences for the study of museum practice and theory. Such a development can be observed in the articles presented by Maranda to ICOFOM’s international symposia and Study Series. The articles chosen by the author for this publication give the reader a broad grasp of her approach to museology, from short essays on critical issues for museums in the 1980s (Chapters 1 to 3), to more analytical studies on museology such as one of her most current productions in which she problematizes the “universal” character of ICOM’s museum definition (Chapter 13).

Within ICOFOM debates, Lynn Maranda was one of the first authors to show a recurring concern with indigenous artifacts and their appropriation by museums, which has allowed her to cast a *decolonial* gaze—even before the term was commonly used by museologists—to face sensitive topics in the end of the 20th century and now in the beginning of the current one (see Chapters 5, 7 and 10 in this book). Maranda seeks to recognize the conflicts, frictions, and even violence produced in the museum’s “predatory”³ appropriation of indigenous culture, denouncing Eurocentric normativity in museum manuals and accepted procedures. Without recurring to the vast anthropological literature to confront the colonial matrix of museums, she makes her own line of thinking based on her pragmatic view of how relations of domination can be created in the museum environment. The musealization of indigenous material culture, thus, will be addressed as a central matter for museums, one that implicates an ethical

1. Malinowski, B. (1961). *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. p. 17.

2. Malinowski, 1961, p. 21.

3. On the topic “The predatory museum” see the issue of ICOFOM Study Series, volume 45, edited by Lynn Maranda and myself in 2017, with a selection of articles from the 39th ICOFOM Annual Symposium, in Milan, Italy, in the previous year.

difference that cannot be ignored, but brought to the surface of museological reflections.

When approaching musealization as museology's key concept involving primary procedures of museum practice, Maranda stresses the importance of seeing the museum perspective as one cultural viewpoint among others (see, for instance, Chapter 9). Therefore, museologist expertise is constantly confronted by indigenous perspectives over their collections and by the empowerment of visitors in their tensioning of museums' basic (and supposedly "neutral") procedures and methods (Chapter 11). In this sense, her conceptual analysis of "musealization" is never detached from the empirical context of museums in Canada, an approach that allows her critical views to touch sensible topics such as the adoption of colonial methods to collect and exhibit; the political implications of deaccessioning and repatriation (Chapter 10), the musealization of live natural history specimens, the partnership between museums and First Nations, and how museum policies impact the different groups within a broad society in their relation to and recognition of cultural heritage. The author then confronts the colonial framework of museums through the critical analysis of its given procedures: musealization being the continuous chain of inflicted practices onto museum objects.

Perceiving the museum as a "regime of value" in its own, in which things can be inserted and through which they circulate,⁴ Maranda takes on the discussions initiated by other ICOFOM museologists on some of its core conceptions and critical debates by accepting theory as a reflexive approach to practice, and every practice as a situated one. By considering the reality of museums in Canada, and specifically its Pacific Northwest Coast, Maranda addresses a context of disputes over cultural heritage and, to some extent, her work also helps to shake the absolute and "universal" basis of Western museology.

From her own situated practice, having the museum as her main fieldwork, Lynn Maranda raises some critical questions for any museology: Who can collect whom? Who has authority over one's cultural heritage? Should we seek "universal" procedures to musealize different cultures? Though museums continue to search for new identities and how to function in the current world, can they really get beyond their relationship with the physical object? How are oral traditions and intangible heritage to be collected and preserved? What are the ethical methods to be adopted to collect and preserve them? Who is accountable for musealization? Those are some of the reflexive themes presented in the chapters of this book, which may help to guide museum work from practice to experience and towards a museology in "flesh and blood."

Bruno Brulon Soares

Universidade Federal do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

4. Appadurai, A. (2007). Introduction: commodities and the politics of value. In A. Appadurai (Ed.), *The social life of things. Commodities in cultural perspective* (pp. 3-63). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Articles

1. Museology and Identity

What relationship, if any, do museums have with identity and if so, what kind of a relationship is it?

We know museums to be those institutions that collect, systematize, house, and conserve items of cultural and scientific value, and we understand identity to be that which tells people who they are. The kind of relationships that museums could have with identity would be:

1. that museums create identities for people;
2. that museums reinforce people's identity;
3. that museums provide services other than identity;
4. that museums negate identities for people.

Let us examine the proposition that museums have a relation with identity. An examination of a partial list of museums gives us this evidence.

Large "universal" museums such as the British Museum (London), the Louvre (Paris), the Hermitage (Leningrad), and the Royal Ontario Museum (Toronto) have collections which present an (universal) appeal to the viewing public and these museums are looked upon as holding items of considerable value in a special trust. The attachment the public has with these institutions is not one of identity, but it is one of education, admiration, and reverence. Most countries of the world have a national museum and, contrary to what the name implies, these museums do not by purpose generate or deliberately reinforce national identity but rather serve the public as keepers of national wealth. National museums have many collections on a world scale and so afford their people the opportunity to partake in the general world inheritance.

Similarly, many art museums such as the Victoria and Albert (London) and archaeological and anthropological museums such as the Musée de l'Homme (Paris) present collections that appeal as a source of education as well as having items held in a special trust. The natural history museums such as the British Museum of Natural History (London) and the Carnegie Museum of Natural History (Pittsburgh) present the public with an educational possibility, but, again, it seems that such museums do not engender an identity in the public although they may arouse empathy for a common subject, such as the study of ornithology, etc. In a similar manner, science and technology museums, for example the Science Museum (London), the National Museum of Science and Technology (Ottawa), and the Museum of Science and Industry (Chicago), exist because they provide the public with an opportunity for viewing presentations of aspects of human knowledge and, again, such a relationship would not be considered one of identity.

In summary, it seems that there are museums that have no relationship with identity but which serve the public with a universal appeal, with an educational format, and as keepers of a special trust.

However, there are other museums that must be listed and examined. These include local history museums such as the Richmond Museum (Richmond, Canada), the Museum of the City of Mexico (Mexico), and the Wisbech & Fenland Museum (Wisbech, UK) which owe their existence to the community's need to explain factors of their own existence, and so this kind of museum is seen to reinforce the need for identity. Similarly, historic sites, be they a building, a park, or an entire community, serve a function of reinforcing a people's identity. There are many special museums as well which come into existence owing to a specific request by a public in the course of its need for identity. These include religious, military, sports, and perhaps "item specific" museums such as those dealing with musical instruments, clocks, or ceramics, and company museums such as the Wells Fargo History Museum (Los Angeles) and the Alcan Museum (Montreal), the existence of which is dependent upon a public's request to supply identifiable material to the viewer. This section of the list concludes that there does exist a relationship between identity and museums, as many museums that have the role of reinforcing a public's identity do exist.

By examination of this partial list, it seems that existing museums serve mankind in the form of either (1) a traditional universal museum, which is a repository of "valued" items or as a source of human evolutionary knowledge, or, (2) as an identity reinforcing institution, which supplies a public with the value it is seeking. Nowhere is it evidenced that museums create an identity that people pursue as an activity of their lives. Therefore, the conclusion is that museums can have a relationship as reinforcers of social or community identity.

As a part of this examination, it should be stated that there is the possibility that a museum could function in a negative capacity, that is, the housing, preservation, and display of items arouse feelings of disassociation and disgust and emotions in a public that are considered antipathetic to positive attachments of identity. The request for the repatriation of items to their place of origin, or the displaying of material that a conquered people feel to be emblematic of their oppressors, will serve to make the point and has the possibility of generating a negative identity response.

This paper presupposes that the museum could enter into four basic relationships with identity and, as three of these have been discussed, attention should be given to the fourth possibility, that museums become identity creating. Although the record has been that museums do not function in this capacity, it could be the ambition for museology to reach forward in the future to become involved with social life in a capacity as creators of an identity for a people. It must be pointed out that there exist in our societies, institutions, the function of which is to create identity, that is, the arts, theatre, literature, philosophy, religion, politics, and that should museums attempt to assume the role of identity-maker, they quite likely will be placing themselves in competition with existing identity creators.

Such confrontation will undoubtedly cause confusion in the public's mind as its view of the traditional museum as keeper of a trust would have to change to accept museums as progenitors of a way of life.

It may be argued that to change the public's view of the role of the traditional museum is a good thing in that it would afford a "healthier," hands-on active attitude for museums to relate to their society rather than the popular view of a museum as a passive "stodgy" place. However, the question is whether or not the public is best served by a shift in basic museum policy or whether or not the answer to the needs for an active participation in the shaping of human life is best served by other means? In other words, the question of "Should museums consciously endeavour to establish the identity for a community of people?" is the question of "Should museums become an institution of political force?" or, "Should they become agents of a new theatricality or philosophers of a new way of life?" Or, on the other hand, should those individuals in the museological field who feel so compelled to change the community and the lives within it, seek the success of their ambitions through the established channels which already serve these ambitions? There are in existence political institutions which serve political ends and we have actors which perform new wave theatre and creative minds which write papers on philosophical literature. To implicate museums in a future of identity creation is a confusion of terms which has the possibility of becoming dangerous. The possibility being that those institutions entrusted to preserve values would become the same institutions creating values. On a political level, this would be akin to mixing the judiciary with the legislative levels of government.

We know the traditional role of the museum to be one of collection, systematization, conservation, and interpretation of items of cultural and scientific value, and that people within the scope of their living have used museums as a storehouse of treasured and educational objects, and that people's identity with their surround and history and other aspects that inform them of who they are, have used museums as a reinforcement of these identities. We also conjecture that museums, under specific circumstances, could have the effect of negating identity for a people. The possibility that a museum becomes involved with creating identity has added to it dangerous polemics of confusion and confrontation with other established institutions. Is it not possible that should museums succeed to influence the change in a public's thinking and create an identity for a people, that opponents of that position would consider the museum's collection held in trust as objects of a political opinion and so view the items with bias and unscientific attachment? The conclusion being that successors in any political contest would either accept or reject the museum's holdings on political grounds rather than appreciating the value of items by their merit or scientific contribution. Consider how conquerors of the ancient world destroyed temples of the vanquished to build temples in their own style or how Pizarro melted down the gold of the Incas—actions that resulted from the contest between competing identity-makers.

Originally published as:

Maranda, L. (1986). Museology and Identity. *ICOFOM Study Series*, 10, 177-182.

2. Museology and “Developing” Countries—Help or Manipulation

Definitions

The question posed by the symposium topic is, in fact, one of a utilitarian economic nature. Generally, the phrase *developing country* is perceived in economic terms, that is, the criteria by which a country is labelled as being either “developing” or “developed” is normally based on the state of its economy. While it may be argued that other factors, such as social or political development, could be taken into consideration, nevertheless it remains that economics is the most prominent benchmark used when making an assessment of development. Further, the phrase developing countries is often used synonymously with the *third world*. While developing suggests an egalitarianism whereby countries are trying-to-catch-up-but-are-not-quite-there, third world relegates to its membership a poorer status designation in which a lower economic level of development is accepted as the status quo. However, whether poorer countries are defined by some standards as developing or are recognized to be in an economic-political sphere of the third world, they are, in fact, being measured by those countries which are considered developed. It would continue to be the case, both philosophically and logically, that developing countries will be forever developing as they try to catch up to the level of developed countries, which are themselves continually advancing their economic and technological basis.

A part of the question being asked is whether or not museology has a rightful role to play with the economic development of a poorer status country, but more fundamentally, we are being asked to consider whether or not museology as a science in the exploration and application of a field of human knowledge can be legitimately employed in the shaping of human economy.

Museology is also an applied science of techniques and methodology for the handling and preservation of heritage materials. The general perception is that the techniques of museology are not as significant to the realm of human commerce as are other influences of human endeavour. Even when considering the aspect of knowledge, it is doubtful that museology has as much import on the domains of human activity as do the specific items of heritage with which it is concerned. However, the topic of discussion implies that these techniques of museum practice represent a unique discipline which is transferable from one economic location to another and which is therefore of a standard to influence the economic condition of developing countries.

What is deemed worthy of preservation for the future, and is therefore *heritage material*, is the result of a discernment made by every living culture. Items are given their historical meaning by those cultures interpreting them. Thus, the

social importance of an item shifts from one culture to another, and shifts with a cultural reinterpretation of an item's use as a society grows through phases of development. The value of what should be preserved is a determination of a culture's contemporary perspective, which suggests that "worth," at best, is an ephemeral quality. Further, it is noted that for a culture to admit that such items need preservation is, in fact, an admission that such items no longer have a practical worth, and that a distancing has taken place separating these items from utility to one of inheritance value, a distancing that is perceived by a society but which is contingent upon its economic stature and current mores.

Economics

Museology definitely has an economic basis. This is so not only because museums acquire objects of wealth, but also because they require the funding supplied to them by a healthy economy in order to function. By definition, developing countries lack sufficient economic strength to effectively undertake the full range of activities required by the science of museology. Further, what is deemed to be "museum worthy" quite probably is different when seen through the eyes of a Western expert than through the eyes of a third world inhabitant. Many third world and developing countries are viewed by the advanced nations as being culture rich provinces while, at the same time, people in such countries are often struggling with the basics of survival and accept their cultural basis as a simple inherited fact. The notion of "developing" has an implication within its verbal boundaries for it suggests that a distance can be measured between a prior and a current existence by which an evolution is in progress. An economic "development" is one in which the means of production of a people have evolved. It is for this basic reason that the distance of evolution as perceived by different cultural groups may not be as great nor as little as the term "developing" implies, and that questions the whole notion of bestowing museum studies as though it could contribute a direct benefit to the economy of a developing country.

Museology per se is not an economic force; it is an area of study. The disciplines which comprise museum activity contribute to the wealth of human knowledge, and by this fact, it could be interpreted that museology indirectly assists an economy as any knowledge will contribute to the well-being of a people and their culture. However, the practice of museology is costly to finance and the economics of encouraging the growth of these disciplines over others with more direct economic benefit may be questionable. Certainly, it does not seem probable that the acquisition of sophisticated museum practices would be high on the priority list of third world countries whose means of survival is at a subsistence level.

The museum, a concept synonymous with the developed industrialized West, has become influential in setting standards of collectability, aesthetic appreciation, and marketplace value of cultural materials. Museums have become not only hoarders of wealth but also, because of their activities, "brokers" in the burgeoning marketplace trading in cultural goods. In this way, museums have helped to foster an acceleration in the competition for increasing scarce resources and

thereby created an inflationary cost for indigenous items, a cost not affordable by developing countries. Consequently, these practices have enabled museums to increase the monetary value of their own wealth with the result that similar acquisitions of collectable objects are veritably not affordable by third world countries.

Museology

Museology as a science has set disciplinary standards not only which affect the practices of collecting and preservation, but also which indirectly affect the perspective of what is collectable and what should be preserved.

When talking about a universal museology, we are as well dealing with a science of technology. That is to say, any general application of an approach to museum work must be founded upon techniques related to, for example, the handling and preservation of materials. The theoretical concepts involved in such established disciplines as ethnology and history vary with the cultural milieu of their origin.

Heritage

There is no universal standard of “value” whether it is found in a living culture or taken in appreciation of some historical importance. What is deemed collectable either by an individual or by a science brings with it a kind of prejudice for what is considered to have value in a collection. This more importantly suggests that our Western knowledge of collectability is a combined networking of facts held together in meaningful cohesion by a social perspective of what is “worthy.” Thus, in the field of museology, our contemporary advanced industrial nations collect indigenous materials from around the world making value-selections of what is worthy of collection. For the same reason, it is seen that developing countries, whose knowledge perspective of the world is considerably varied, would not necessarily value the preservation of the same items. Western museums might quite easily desire to place one enormous plastic bubble over West Africa, for example, to keep its entire society under a “working-past-culture” heading and to parade this culture before the knowledgeable eyes of Western science. However, the many wooden implements and “camel driven” economies of this region would not consider the tools of their livelihood as candidates for museum retirement.

Should the disciplines of our most advanced museology be undertaken by an impoverished people, we would expect that these people would recognize a separation from the living cultural items which surround them as they place such artifacts in museum situations. There is a difference between a living culture and a museum culture. To suggest that developing countries would want a parallel museology means people would be separating themselves from a living culture and housing it. The result of such activity might cause a more severe economic hardship in that items of livelihood would have to be replaced, or else it might, as the most generous benefit, help these people spawn the birth of their own economic miracle. It could be argued that the introduction of a universal stan-

standard museum practice would assist people of a developing country by having them come to understand the nature of their current condition, and thus, as the knowledge of their present condition is a paramount prerequisite for making improvements, the introduction of such sound museum practices would naturally result in economic benefit.

It is of interest to note that if one uses the term “developing” as a heritage modifier rather than as an economic one, then it is seen that, for example, Canada, after only a few hundred years of existence, might well be considered a developing country and Egypt, with its long and important cultural history, the developed country. It should be remembered that President Nasser caused the Aswan dam to be built—a major economic step for contemporary Egypt—thus creating a man-made lake which threatened many priceless monuments of human heritage, and that these items were saved by the efforts of foreign and scientific expertise and funding, whereas the Egyptian economy would have been financially unable to preserve the relics. The morality and economics of the then current Egyptian policy placed the building of the dam at a much higher priority than the preservation of heritage materials.

Morality and History

The techniques for housing and caring for museum collections are expensive and so the recommendation that developing countries assume similar costs in maintaining the practices of museology is an imposition which they can ill-afford. Clearly, there exists in many countries priorities for economic survival which do not include the expenses of housing cultural heritage. Basically, this is an issue of morality.

Many Western and European museums have vast collections of cultural materials acquired from the third world. This material has been secured, in economic terms, as a form of imperial expansion and colonization. Museums working under such circumstances have served as storehouses of imperial booty. The thought of repatriation of cultural materials, or the “proper” location of artifacts, or who “really” owns what, are questions of politics and not questions of museology. Or whether the return of the Elgin Marbles to Athens, for example, would aid the economy of modern-day Greece, is certainly very moot, and is a very different question than “Should the Elgin Marbles be returned to Greece?”

Summary

The importation of museology into economically impoverished lands can, in the best scenario, alter the perspective of national peoples concerning their history, their current economic position, their environment, and can offer ideas as to improving the basic means of economic production. Whether that museum knowledge is of such import as to effect a change of economic strength for an impoverished country is moot, and it is suggested that other more direct economy-producing disciplines should be employed to foster economic growth—dis-

ciplines such as agriculture, engineering, chemistry, marketing, etcetera, which lay legitimate claim to primary economic development.

It is interesting that museology would want to place its discipline in relationship to economics, in that it begs the question as to whether or not there is a relationship between this scientific study and the livelihood and economy of a people. The question could have been posed, "Can museology benefit a third world museum?" The answer would have to be "yes," as one would expect the latest techniques in, for example, caring for artifacts could be readily useful to an established institution, though it exists in the third world. However, it is questionable whether or not these techniques can assist a country to develop. It can be interpreted that to assist development at this level is veritably a kind of manipulation by which countries not as committed to a particular form of economic activity become induced to participate in similar forms of pursuit.

There is an inherent difficulty exporting museum perspectives to other countries, especially to those of a lesser economic status, for the activity of such human industriousness is usually done for selfish reasons. That is, ultimately, we, as human beings, are always doing things for ourselves. The activity of American museums in restoration work in Mexico is a good example of how foreign expertise can gain positive knowledge for its own discipline while engaged in foreign programmes. However, there are spinoff benefits for expanding museum practices in developing countries and these might be: a general educative benefit which would raise the social awareness of a struggling people; the reinforcement of cultural identities and nationalism in areas of diversity; and, the encouragement of a tourism industry through the creation of points of destination.

Originally published as:

Maranda, L. (1988). Museology and 'Developing' Countries—Help or Manipulation. *ICOFOM Study Series*, 14, 175-180.

3. Museology and the Indigenous Cultural Environment

Indigenous peoples worldwide are playing an ever-increasing role in determining their own futures. They are actively seeking to salvage what they can of their past art and history, and are encouraging the renaissance of cultural forms which, in many cases, have been all but lost from human memory. In the course of this process, indigenous peoples are “relearning” or becoming “reacquainted” with their cultural roots—their language, rituals, art forms, and so forth. In Canada, for example, the route to self-determination has included territorial claims for large tracts of their original lands, requests for compensation for resources taken from these lands, and petitions for self-government, all being made either through the courts or directly to the Canadian government. As a part of this process, a growing number of the world’s indigenous peoples are requesting the return of objects that colonialists or conquerors have removed from their place of origin and taken to a foreign land. The legal and moral issues surrounding the removal of these materials have led to considerable debate. As the vast majority of the objects have found their way into museums, these institutions are being targeted by indigenous peoples as the repositories to which to appeal when negotiating ownership. In many instances, rights of ownership have been put to the test.

For example, in Canada, in 1978, a large collection of primarily ceremonial regalia, confiscated by agents of the government following a potlatch held in 1922, was returned to the native descendants of the original owners on condition that the material be housed in a museum which met the proper specifications. Firstly, this material was confiscated in an attempt to stop it from being used in traditional ceremonials such as the potlatch, which itself had been banned since 1884; secondly, the majority of the confiscated goods were placed in the National Museum in Ottawa, almost 4,000 miles to the east of the potlatching locale, while the remaining portion was sold, without authorization, to an American museum collector; and thirdly, following very lengthy but, for the indigenous peoples, eventually successful negotiations with the National Museum, the regalia was returned to the descendants of the original owners, but in reality not as their private property for their private disposition, but rather to another museum circumstance from whence it had just come. This material had, for over fifty years, been documented, cared for, interpreted, and preserved by the National Museum, and so that the continuity of proper museological practise be maintained, museum environmental conditions were imposed for its return. In addition, at the local level, the Provincial Museum of British Columbia was designated to oversee the on-site transfer process.

The issue of the restitution of cultural property is fast becoming a major concern for museums holding objects from indigenous cultures in their anthropological collections, and committees at the regional, national, and international levels have been formed to discuss this matter. Requests for the repatriation of objects

pose a dilemma for the museum. The indigenous peoples requesting the return of objects originating from their cultural environment, however, are looking at the issue from quite a different perspective than that of the museum.

The dilemma begins as the museum sees its relationship to the indigenous cultural environment in terms of its overall responsibilities to the collections for which it cares. As custodian of objects from this environment, the museum would undertake to study, interpret, and disseminate information on this material, and to preserve it for present and future generations. The fact that the museum would follow such a course is directly related to how it perceives the objects and what significance they hold in the museum circumstance. Objects are collected by museums primarily for their intellectual properties. While these properties may have scientific, historical, or aesthetic highlights, it remains, nevertheless, that the objects have been acquired and retained because they have an intellectual usage for the museum and this usage could be called its significance. The conflict is that the objects have a different significance in each of the two environments in question—indigenous and museum—and a distillate of this thinking is required.

In the most obvious sense, cultures supply the existence of human life with its significance. Individuals then take their meaning from within that cultural environment and bestow significance onto objects ascribing them with priority and value.

The dispute that arises when two such cultural environments compete over the value of items is a dilemma tending to be irreconcilable. As this paper relates, the cultural significance held by the museological inheritance of the West competes directly against the cultural significance given by the old priorities of the indigenous peoples of the world.

The notion to conserve items in museum settings is a relatively modern idea and one that is not traditional to the thinking of indigenous peoples. The manufacture of items by indigenous cultures would be done to fulfil a specific need and might acquire through that need, for example, a spiritual significance. Such a significance would only continue providing the item gave good service, otherwise it would be replaced. We do similarly in our own cultural environment with items that we feel are replaceable. However, the traditional indigenous attachment of spiritual significance is quite distant from the Western ideas of antiquity, for it accedes to a more cyclical notion of existence where objects come in and out of use as part of a cosmological process. The preservation of items as treasures of antiquity was not of prime importance, and the vestiges of the past that were kept sacred were dealt with through an oral tradition. Conversely, the museological approach is concerned with scientific documentation, preservation techniques, and physical observation, in an effort to preserve the quality of past eras.

The dilemma with the two significances, one with spiritual use and the other keeping faith to scientific doctrine, presents a perplexity of major proportions.

To return to the thought of indigenous spiritual significance competing with the Western museum perception of conservation, the former would use objects in ceremony until they no longer were capable of function, while the latter would ascribe a greater value of antiquity to such items and house them in a controlled environment for posterity, often regardless of their condition.

This contact between competing cultural environments creates constraints when adopting opposing significances either by transferring spiritual import to the anthropological discipline, or else by transferring the museum's perception of value to that held by indigenous peoples. This transfer of significance is not tautological for an item once acquired by a museum would replace any native spirituality with its own anthropological significance retaining the influence and strength of the Western cultural environment. Similarly, contemporary indigenous people do ascribe to the monetary system and do realize that the museum holds items of their antiquity in a form of trust. The return of native property thus becomes problematic with the addition of new overriding significance for consideration. Rather than having just spiritual purposes, for example, items to contemporary indigenous peoples also are seen to have monetary and antique value. So it is that stipulations are then balanced off against the conflicting significance, such that items requested for return can be loaned, sold under conditions, or returned under the guarantee of suitable housing in museum-like settings. Whatever, the new circumstances negate the possibility of a reciprocal arrangement as a simple reversal back down the path of acquisition.

Further, the ownership of items can only be determined through an inherited ownership, in the same way that we bestow an estate to future generations in our legal system. More than likely, the return of items would not be to the original owner or manufacturer and that adds supplementary complications. The contemporary indigenous peoples' desire for items for spiritual performances can be satisfied in the traditional manner and, as was done by their ancestors, duplicate items can be manufactured. This means, in a more extended argument, that the indigenous peoples' request for the return of their ancestral items already implies that they have adopted the significance of value placed by the museum's cultural environment. These values culturally would be ascribed as monetary, uniqueness, historical, aesthetic, and antique, creating a special scientific reverence and not, in the traditional sense, as solely having, in indigenous perception, spiritual powers.

The pattern of the museum-indigenous difficulty has four underpinning anchors: the one being the traditional museum thoughts of acquiring and preserving indigenous materials, another being the traditional indigenous production of materials for cultural use. The two remaining anchor points of the dilemma are grounded in modern precepts—one with the contemporary person of indigenous descent searching for cultural significance and desiring the return of artifacts for reasons other than that of their manufacture, and the last being the ambivalence created by the museum professional's uncertainty as to the course of ultimate benefit. From these four corners, the dilemma is stretched with sincerity and

good intentions but without an obvious sense of resolution. It seems improbable that a museum-trained person could yield the merit of scientific care to the value of spirituality and possible misuse (in the museological sense). On the other hand, for indigenous peoples to ascribe museological care to items would be to give ascriptions of significance altering their perception of need.

The reason this topic is appropriate for discussion is due to the importance it is gaining in museum circles. In fact, it is one of the most significant issues confronting the museum professional today. At present, the profundity of the issue of repatriation is just being felt and its total effect will be a determining factor in the shaping of the new museum and its relationship with the cultural environments of the indigenous and the scientific communities.

Originally published as:

Maranda, L. (1990). Museology and the Indigenous Cultural Environment. *ICO-FOM Study Series*, 17, 51-56.

4. A Museological Core Problem: The Material World

Things, Objects, Documents, and Perspectives

The universe is the totality of existence and all knowable things have been in existence prior to the perception of human cognition. Molecular and planetary phenomena are estimated to be millions of years old while the human animal, at best, one million years old, and modern man, ten thousand years old. With this perspective as a backdrop to the discussion of the paper, it is seen that everything that is knowable is already in existence and that therefore what we ascribe as knowledge is really a process that involves a relationship between mankind and the universe. This thought is instructive when setting out to define the notions of things, objects, and documents.

Things are defined as those items which are perceived to have an existence but which have no further properties or knowledge ascriptions attached to them. The meaningful aspect of a thing is that it exists. Even an item which has no specific relationship but which has been forgotten by a user will be referred to as a thing, denoting that it exists but that the detail of its meaning does not come to memory.

On the other hand, objects are items of existence that are a part of a network of meaning and are given specific ascription as to how they relate to other objects and other material of the universe. In this sense, objects are physical points of evidence of a particular set of knowledge.

Continuing with this thought that the difference between thing and object is the consequence of a directed application of the human intelligence, this direction is termed perspective and is the way that the mind focuses its resources when electing and ascribing meaning. The nature and shape of perspectives change and are influenced by other qualities of knowledge and are, as well, influenced by their own processes of investigation and fact-finding corroborative exercises.

Documents are those physical evidences that are brought forward by the extension of the perspective as it proceeds to make meaningful mapping of sense and logic over the objects of discovery or collection. In fact, documents are the result of that process where mankind would make sense of the known totality of the objects in the universe.

Museum Objects

A thing, being an item that has no specific meaning, is therefore, in the museum context, an item of existence that is not collectable. For example, when a “thing” that cannot be identified, has no provenance or accompanying information, in

fact about which nothing is known, is offered to the museum for acquisition, it is rejected. Nor is it possible to collect all the things in the universe for that would be an impossible immensity and gives reason to why museums operate within a collecting mandate selecting objects of relevance and importance. In support of the relevance of the collecting policy, documentation is prepared, assembled, and established. As might be expected, a change in the perspective of the latest human knowledge creates a change in the definition of what is collectable and what has meaning for museum exhibition. What might have been considered merely a thing, with a change of perspective becomes an object ascribed with special meaning.

Museum Documents

Museum documents comprise a body of evidence that supports the perceived importance of a collection. Such documents include: field or other data (notes, letters, photographs, tape recordings, receipts, appraisals, etc.) that accompany objects at their point of acquisition; subsequent research findings; catalogue, inventory, evaluation, loan, exhibition, conservation/restoration, publication records; and so forth.

Museum Perspective

Collectable objects with their attending documentation are amassed into the assemblage of a collection and this is done under the parameter of the museum perspective. This perspective says what is worthy to be housed, catalogued, and exhibited and what is not. In a broad sense, some perspectives become the working title of particular institutions such as aviation museums, maritime museums, or anthropology museums. But even under these special circumstances, it may not be physically possible to collect and house all objects that might qualify for inclusion. In these cases, some degree of interpretive value would have to be made on a professional basis while maintaining a consistency with the overall perspective. Guidelines detailing such parameters as appraised value, cultural, social, historical, etc. significance, age, aesthetic qualities, condition, size, relation to the existing collection, etc., are usually included within the collecting policy to assist in the acquisition of objects by narrowing the field of inclusion. These guidelines, however, are themselves subject to the dominating museum perspective.

The Core Problem with the Material World

Everything that is knowable in the world already exists and existed prior to human evolution—except for the sciences based on the humanities—and the recognition of aspects of the existence of things by the human awareness is what is termed knowledge. Which is to say that knowledge is that process which translates knowable functions and things of the universe into a “language” contrived and directed by the human mind. The major functioning of the universe has not

altered for billions of years, whereas the human perception of this functioning changes with the absorption of an ever-widening range of facts and evidence of knowledge. Mankind is not itself discrete from the universe, for it is a part of the natural evolution, and therefore the behaviour of this animal is itself included in the natural ordering of the universe. This in turn means that the human ability to structure an advance into knowledge and to analyze evidence to make predictions is in itself a phenomenon created by universal development. In other words, the product of the human awareness—the categorizing of phenomena that already existed—means that the universe is undertaking to translate that which already exists into another quality of existence known as knowledge. Why the universe, through the willing cooperation of mankind, should want to establish another category of existence by recording itself as it functions is moot, but very interesting to consider. It is this universe looking at itself for linguistic definition that is the core problem of mankind and the purpose of knowledge. The problem is that as human awareness does the chore of inverting physical existences into the realms of knowledge, the expansiveness of what could be included becomes proportionately very large and difficult to handle. The core problem is that, as more things become objects, the documentation of each object becomes more extensive.

A corollary to this thought is that knowledge in itself is an item of existence, and as mankind has become aware of this proportion and aware of its responsibility in evolution, the polemic of what is collectable and what is not has become exaggerated, for most phenomena and events of the universe have become meaningful objects replete with our wonder and amazement. What once was considered the stuff of things, such as the soil of archaeological digs, has now come to be considered with significance, as the current technologies would glean more corroborative evidence to substantiate the (archaeological) findings. It is this pressure, the expansion of the inversion of the existing universe into the frame of human intelligence, which is causing the museum perspective to evaluate the relationships between the material world, objects, and documentation.

Documents as Objects

With the rise of museology as a discipline, there has been an examination of the processes of museum work and, as such, a review of the kinds of documentation that museums do. This means that there has been a raising of the level of knowledge to a sphere where museums themselves and the processes they undergo are subject to analysis and are considered as objects of specialized knowledge. Therefore, specific documents pertaining to items in the collection are themselves objects of museological study. It is quite conceivable that every known document can be ascribed with this objectivity.

Objects as Documents

For an object to become a document means that the object must carry within it corroborative evidence that is interpreted and seen to support the existence of other objects in the collection. It happens all the time in the sphere of comparative methodology, whereby objects with little documentation are supported by the existence of a similar object already included in the collection. More interesting are those objects that become documents by suggesting the existence of other objects either through their function, design, pictorial characterization, or other attributes.

Shifts in Perspective

The shift in perspective is the first cause for a change in an item's status as either object or document. Shifts can occur with an evolution of new technology, with a re-examination of existing documents, with the inclusion of new objects in a collection, but it is the case that with the shift in perspective and that emphasis of cognition, the integral value of an item's collectability is reassessed.

When an object is known to carry documental attribute, that is, that it can explain the existence of other objects in the collection, it does not lose its previous condition of being an object but carries with it as well the second meaning as a document. There is no physical change as the object contributes its worth as a document but it does suggest that there is a difference in the mental approach to what is being observed.

With the growth of knowledge and the passage of time, historical representations of human thought have become collected as objects for the study of that evolution; and so, with the passage of time and the acquisition of greater scientific evidences, there has arisen a study dedicated to the functioning and purpose of museums, and thus the documents housed in these institutions become in themselves documents to the larger study.

It is of interest to consider, in a very broad sense, that life is that organizing phenomenon that works against the tide of entropy or the dissipation of energy in the universe. As mankind is a product of life, so too its actions and intents also are grounded to the fundamental urgency of life-activity. To complete the thought, it is seen that the activities of the human mind as well are working against the dissipation of universal energy, and this amazing phenomenon of human knowledge is a construction leaving a recorded legacy of how it is that the universe operates. Not that the universe needs to know, because it is doing it, but as mankind is part of the universe, it is a reactive response to the loss of entropy and an inversion into a unique realm of existence, which is thought. The point being that whatever has occurred in the universe, whether it be the "big bang," the building of Babylon, or the establishment of museums, the capturing of those existences into a human perspective places that capturing into a special realm of existence called thought. As these thoughts, it is suggested, have a real

existence, they are themselves subject to be treated as physical objects which occupy the main bodies of the collections.

Further, by the working definition that documents explain the existence of other objects in a collection, it is to be expected that documents that can no longer supply evidence for the inclusion of objects would lose their credibility. If such a document had been an object in a collection, it would naturally fall back safely into this object category providing that other documents could lend support for its inclusion. A situation that would give rise to such a condition would be where new contradictory information cancels the previous validity of a document and as such the loss of its usefulness.

The Core Problem

The core problem of the museum in the material world (which is a subset of the problem of the acquisition of human knowledge in general) is that it is an observer of the same world that it is recording. Its interpretations of universal histories, its translations and observations are done within the universal forces of evolution by the human intellect achieving a particular quality of existence called knowledge. We, as humans, observe that knowledge itself is a part of that same material world, and further, it is quite possible that the motives to expand our knowledge base, to make meaningful connections between things, and to understand the working of complexities that in the conduct of their own existence do not need to be understood by us in order to work, that this human motive is driven by the universe itself. Thus our cognition of things, objects, and documents is not static but in a flux of evolution as the universe is in dissolution, and what we perceive as permanent records are more akin to markings that indicate the scale of human acquired perspective. As the universe has dissipated, knowledge has risen and the facts of the material world's existence has inverted into document. Museums have in their own tradition held the passage and dissipation of previous cultures and have attempted to hold the knowledge of those existences in the static, permanent condition of collections to enshrine those facts for the future, and for the expansion of human knowledge.

Reference

Maranda, W. E. (undated). Unpublished manuscript.

Originally published as:

Maranda, L. (1994). A Museological Core Problem: The Material World. *ICOFOM Study Series*, 23, 33-38.

5. Museums and the Community

The Nature of Museums

There are many ways to view the nature of a museum and one illustrative way to examine the museum's character is to ascertain what community the museum serves. It can be argued that all museums do serve a community and that museums come into existence because of that fact. The service that a museum gives a population is one that unites a community by supplying it with a sense of history. Museums are another in a list of institutions that try to answer the questions of existence which the human race is continually asking. The questions of "Who are we?" and "From where did we come?" are asked in probing rhetoric to help define the purpose of our living and to shape the direction of our ambition. It is in this sense of a community or population curious to know its beginnings and wanting to know its future that the museum fulfils its role in the social order. Museums themselves have undergone evolution, with the change of social conditions and their own progression from private "cabinets of curiosities" to monolithic public institutions, and these changes can be readily traced. What separate histories are accommodated within a private collection or within a public institution and are, nonetheless, histories which make a commitment to the understanding of community: one commitment extremely small, yet deemed of great value; the other large and providing a wide opinion to assist in the understanding of a national population.

History

A museum is a house in which history is stored. If the purpose of history is to write the story depicting the evolution of a people from the beginning of a determined epoch to the present, then the current circumstance of a community or of a people is the major gravitational intellectual force which determines the attitude of written histories. It is in this respect that histories serve communities with museums being the warehouse of historical physical materials providing the evidence of given stated historical positions. The reason such purposes are required by humans is that when histories tell stories of evolution, they, at the same time, give special social meaning to the very readers of the evolution. Histories explain the existence of a people and, even if the depicted histories do not directly retell the particular story of a given population, the very outlook and fact of a population's existence is supported through the act of writing. For example, even the writers of history from the Victorian era can expound on subjects other than their own society as an indirect reinforcement of their own social condition. It is known that those museums which collected materials from around the world and displayed much of their findings in support of notions of "savagery" and "racial types" endorsed the European self-image, if not of "superiority," of an "advanced evolution."

Age and history are not the same qualities, though age and history can be applied to the same objects and concepts. The overriding difference between the two qualities is that one notion is based on a time determination and the other on an evolution determination which, in many cases, is imparted to an object rather than it being inherent in the object itself. It is a curatorial concern to impart historical meaning to objects of age and serve the community with historical interpretation.

The Community

Communities are defined as an aggregate of people having a joint interest. This interest could have arisen from an association with a simple locale such as a neighbourhood, or from the avid zeal in a subject such as aviation, or through the intellectual inquiry such as an archaeological study of antiquities, or by nationalist motives such as the state-run and operated museums of countries which propound patriotism, or through civic pride, or individual collecting, or by the awakening of a “new truth” the followers of which would make an historical statement and find that together they are a community.

Contemporary Pressure

Contemporary political and economic spheres have placed pressures on the world creating a modern oddly mixed social order. To discover and/or redefine a history for this extant new order has caused a re-examination of what is important in life. The world community is having now to achieve understandings where local claims to history are no longer adequate. Further, to add to the special modern mix, there has been an increase in special interest claims, international political movements, and global intellectual assertions which all need their explanations in history. The modern dilemma is that none of the demands for historical validation match a single threaded path of history, but are a part of a complex and competing arena that is vying for attention. Not all the contributions put forward to make a claim on history are overlapping or congruous. In fact, some are quite discrete and others definitely opposing. This modern and intense demand for knowledge of competing existences has created a situation where museums cannot possibly satisfy the variety of different publics and communities.

The Conflict

There is a conflict, which has arisen through the demands of international, national, provincial, city, ethnic and indigenous groups, and different political affiliations, that historical traditions can offer the justification of a community's existence and still be fair to all. It appears that history cannot logically envelop all the modes of explanation with equal clarity and force of pronouncement. For example, it does seem that the museum cannot serve the dominant culture of Canada and at the same time serve the aspirations of First Nations peoples as the notion of historical occurrences are in conflict. This rising friction between

the requirements for knowledge to explain existences and the ability to make the expression has created cracks in and hardships on the structure of museums. The stress caused on the morality of the museum purpose has pressured the decision makers to a more user-defined institution such that the morality is defined by public support rather than by ideology or thought-determined positions.

Politically Correct

Special interest groups and cultural minorities within the social fabric are demanding a “voice” and thus a forum in which to present their histories and to advance their socio-political messages. In this way and through this kind of “media conduit,” i.e., the museum, such groups can reach an audience for purposes of eliciting sympathy and support, which in turn becomes a powerful tool to effect changes desired by the group.

In keeping with the notion that histories are the story of evolution of how a people or culture or community have come into existence, the use of words, phrases, and concepts that have traditionally been used by one community have, in recent years, been challenged under the broad rubric of “political correctness.” The explanation for the rise of political correctness has to do with the enfranchisement of disadvantaged or minority communities that have recently acquired political strength and are demanding histories that explain their particular evolution or struggle for existence. In the common vernacular, it is stated that victors write histories and, in this sense, the volatility of historical meaning alters with the change of political climate. Clearly, this has a major influence on museum exhibitions and practices. The 1989 exhibition entitled *Into the Heart of Africa*, mounted by the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto and publicised as a view of Victorian Africa, was roundly criticized by many ethnic Canadian communities as being racist and derogatory.

A Search for a Solution

The signposts that a search is ongoing to find a solution to the demands arising from political correctness, historical explanation, and financial support are that museums are becoming responsive to a variety of community voices and sensitive to financial relationships, thus leaving their direction open to the vagaries of a “marketplace” not under museum control.

The Finances

The flow of money is a determinant in most human endeavour and is certainly a major factor in shaping the purpose and structure of museums. Most museums are dependent upon tax dollars and as such these institutions feel obligated to serve the broadest tax-paying public as possible. With nations that have a strong cultural identity, this identity would be fostered by a national museum giving purpose to the existence of a national type and to that form of visual and

tangible history that museum collections offer. Where nations have old defined national cultural attributes, the expenditure of tax dollars can be easily justified in promoting those national cultures through heritage collections. It is the case, however, that special interest groups assemble their own private money and spend it promoting the materials that give meaning to their causes. In the same vein, private collectors who have amassed dollars and collections that reflect their personal tastes have opened museums to exhibit their treasures and these have obvious credentials for their existence. The flow of money is a strong factor in the organization and life of museums and with the pressures to sustain a variety of collection perspectives, to serve a variety of publics, and to acquire funds, which have realized an increase in demand, it is not surprising that many museums are looking towards user-defined operations. A user-defined institution sets its objectives as a common goal for a known public and is supported by the public through donations and admissions. It therefore gratifies the user-public with information and meaning with the objective of ensuring its financial stability.

Responsive to Community Needs

It is a relatively new phenomenon where museums undertake to test the public's wants and needs with surveys and market analysis to discover what an institution's relation with its community is and/or should be. This phenomenon, most probably, is an offshoot of an institution's desires to become financially independent and to set their foundations on a user-defined basis. Many museums are spending money and time conducting studies to gauge public reactions, sentiment, and desire, to chart future courses under the heading of being responsive to community needs. In fact, businesses have sprung up in response to this need to locate and secure a permanent financial footing and to be perceived as being community-responsive, thus creating a class of museum consultants whose expertise is sought after on such professional matters.

Charging and Value

Museums are responding to a heightened social notion that value is equated with cost and that, therefore, if you pay little for an item or for admission or for the use of a service, then it could have little value. Hence, those items that have the greatest cost have the greatest value and museums are increasingly becoming caught up in this entrepreneurial spiral and are charging fees for services and admissions in an attempt to increase the notion of their value. As such, the larger notions of nationalism and abstract notions such as democracy and evolution have a more difficult time in aligning paths of historical truth through the display of their materials.

This drive behind the museum-community interface has created changes to the financial bases of museums, where museums are now actively soliciting funds, charging higher and higher admissions and membership fees, and becoming special-public oriented. This has created a political demand from the community,

which is wanting to have the museum reflect a particular public's concerns and notions of historical truth and has created a marketplace atmosphere where value and service are determined through a kind of auctioning process. The reactive/responsive contemporary museum has both gained and given power in its newly defined role with the community. Due to the museum's visibility, it is seen to be a focal place for ideas, and this gathers status and influence for the institution, while, on the other hand, the community's use of the museum has gained for itself a power base from which it can disseminate its messages.

Tourism

The financial dependence of museums on communities is readily seen in the tourism industry where the tourist anticipation of what objects they would be willing to pay admission to see determines the size and content of museological display, and, in a very real sense, the tourist is a member of a nomadic community that strongly influences museums as points of destination. Millions of people travel the world to visit specific locations that are providing known collections of objects which have been advertised as being available for tourist consumption.

Anticipation and Reality

Many museums are having to reconcile their museological objectives, which may have, for example, academic, ethnographic, or archaeological quests for education or discovery, and are having to modify these intellectual ambitions with the "real" demands from various public communities.

It is also noted that the world's populations are desiring more to be entertained rather than educated. They have become accustomed to mass entertainment models and expect the same from their institutions that portray their history; more and more, people are desiring interactive rather than passive displays.

The museum will continue to be a house where history is stored through the stories depicting the evolution of peoples and will continue to change as the social fabric of the community evolves.

Originally published as:

Maranda, L. (1995). Museums and the Community. *ICOFOM Study Series*, 25, 67-71.

6. Museology and Intangible Heritage: Conduits of the Intangible

The call for papers for ICOFOM 2000 was an intellectually stimulating invitation, for its listing and delineation of possible topics inspired many thoughts on what is the basic museum process and the very nature of the quality of heritage that the museum seeks to capture.

It is a passion of contemporary museologists to review the dynamics of museums and to rewrite mission statements for their institution's purposes, striking out to find a contemporary identity for the contemporary visitor in this era of the high-tech high-speed competitive environment. Museum directors recognize that the public's attention, if not slipping away, is certainly being focused on virtual reality shows, animatronics, film, and interactives, and want to move their institutions forward so as to capture their share of the visitorship. Though museums continue to search for new identities and how to function in a modern world, can they really get beyond their relationship with the physical object? Their thinking is: perhaps a new definition, or an expanded role of the museum might include more entertaining exhibitions, or perhaps they might capture areas of human endeavour which previously have been elusive and not catalogued—"the intangible."

For example, the arresting line, "Art and creativity as heritage," provoked the thought that there existed a cognitive process by way of which artistic items are created and that this process in itself is a heritage and perhaps collectable? How would one begin to collect the artistic impulses of indigenous peoples, or any people in that regard? We are aware that the results of the creative process are collectable—paintings, sculptures, baskets, pottery, architecture, weaponry, weaving—and, in fact, the very stuff of a museum's collection has had the hand of human creativity shaping it. But what about the process of creation itself, is that collectable? Descriptions of the artists or depictions of the discerning human mind at work can be catalogued and registered on a recording device, or by verbal notation, but the capturing of processes are in themselves physical pieces of evidence and come to constitute "new" artifacts of the museum's collection. Again, it was considered that thought processes could be searched to supply the artistic mind with a creative environment and in that way simulate the origins of the artistic impulse. This would somehow encapsulate the creative spirit and thereby make the process collectable. But again, this programmable approach to entrap the creative process would really result in establishing another level of a physical item—an artificial balloon of inspiration.

Upon examining the notion "Memory, tradition and intangible heritage," the complex issue of dealing with the "oral" traditions of people raised a common

subject. Foremost to this issue, which is generally considered necessary to be resolved, is “How are oral traditions to be collected?” and by that it is meant, by what physical means? Are they to be written down in a grammatically linguistic form by an interviewer, are they to be recorded on audio- or videotape for posterity, or are they to be recorded, by whatever means, by an initiate of an oral tradition thus ending the mystical passage of its content over the oceans of time? Certainly, to record the oral inheritance ends that continuity of that tradition. It would appear that, as in the previous example, the collector’s impulses to capture the intangible for the worthy ambition of heritage preservation really results in the manufacture of further museum objects, and while this birth of a new museum object has been given life, has the intangible heritage been caught? This is questioned because, though the last manifestation of the tradition has been recorded, the tradition itself has been concluded. Then, the resolution to capture the intangible “oral tradition” has created but another set of criteria, and a new set of rules of how to manufacture these physical representations of the oral intangibles—while the real intangibles appear to have eluded the museologist and dissolved by coming to an end.

Upon reading the proposed subject, “Museology, intangible heritage and cultural identity,” questions surfaced about the distinction, if any, between intangible heritage and cultural identity, and if there was no substantial distinction to be ascertained, then what was the true known destination of museological work and what was arbitrary and what intangible?

These questions were again aroused when reading “Museology, applied to the intangible heritage: how to musealise it, how to visualize it?” The underlying implication being that intangible heritages are those that surround a given heritage which somehow has not received, but needs, the attention of preservation.

To address these questions, a compulsory review of basic museum tenets revealed the following: first, that *The museum is a storehouse for physical objects, and as these are collected for housing, they are deemed to have a cultural significance. Through the eyes of the collector, a physical object constructed of wood, stone, clay, or cloth, is recognized as having an importance, perhaps historical because of its age of manufacture or its utility, which then gives it, by definition, value, and as this accreditation has been designated by museum professionals, the objects are furnished with distinctly new identities and futures of museum utility.* Thus the physical objects have undergone two processes, having been singled out and then adopted by the museum. Both of these procedures, the “singling out” and the “adopting,” have bestowed intangible significance to the material item.

While the museum acts as a storehouse for physical objects, the reason it does so is because a society deems that the housed objects are worthy of salvage and that they should be tended to, stored with care, and given a well-polished cultural shine. The museum spends time, effort, and money to maintain collected objects in a particular condition, usually contingent on the initial state of found-in composition, and then stored or set on display with prominence,

as one would set aside or store any item of value. This process, of relieving the object of its role of an in situ function and tagging it with shelf designation, is the creation and capturing of intangible meanings through the possession and cataloguing of objects.

Given the premise that the museum is the storehouse of physical objects, as a starting point, this thought was then used as reference and compared to a range of question-ideas bracketed within the concepts of museum culture. These are ideas that have been posed with growing sincerity over the last decade by many museum professionals who are interested in dealing with finding a new order or other direction for museum activity. Inevitably, many of the questions challenged the traditional role of the museum as the collector of physical objects, and so they looked to find a parameter for the “intangible” as a means for explaining their new approach. What is this intangible heritage that would constitute a new beginning for the museum—is it something attached to physical objects or does it have its own unique existence? For that matter, does it even exist or is it mere grammatical nuance—the opposite to the “tangible”? If it is assumed that intangible heritage does exist, then where would one find it, and once found, is it therefore collectable without the addition of further physical objects? Another interesting question is: How would you go about to preserve it and then disseminate it for educative purposes? The question that should be asked is, is the museum’s search for a new identity itself the intangible heritage—unsure of how to proceed in a new technological age with newly defined political parameters, is it possible for the museum to forge a relationship with the larger community devoid of its dependence on the physical object?

The examination of such circumstances would make evident that the intangible quality is an importation from objects, for even the essential significance of objects, the very reason that they are collected, is, in itself, intangible, but dependent upon the physical host. Perhaps this is a statement of rather obvious proportions, but then again, perhaps not, for why should a stone that is chiselled or shaped by human hands have value over stone that is not? The answer to that must be that circumstance of significance is linked to a system of cultural value, which is an organized mutually-held consensus of intangible perspectives.

Therefore, in conclusion, it is argued that the physical dimensions and attributes of the object are the only source of tangible evidence central to the museum’s concerns, and any and all other “accompaniments” are of an intangible nature. Intangibility addresses many varying incarnations and assignments to which the object is subjected within the museum “laboratory” formulating heritages “real,” “imagined,” and even “mythological.”

A second tenet reviewed could be stated as: A living culture is in the dynamic of existence and is therefore not the stuff of a museum, for the living is variable and full of random change, whereas the museum is by its nature, collecting through classification towards cataloguing, the solidification of change, and the establishment of intellectual placement.

By way of example, it is possible to examine a set of Senet, the ancient Egyptian board game. The board can be measured, weighed, and its composition determined. Similarly, the relevant facts of the playing pieces and throwing sticks can be measured and recorded. The date and kingdom of the game can be ascertained, and the rules of the game made public, but the assembling of these facts do not recreate or capture the thrill, excitement, or pursuit of winning a game of Senet. The living quality of winning cannot be found in the structure of the rules—or why it was that Senet was such a popular game among the Egyptians or why they believed that the playing of the game was a good reflection of life. They loved the game and its excitement, and so the question is: Is it possible to recapture that intangible excitement? Is it possible, say, to construct gaming rooms where Senet could be played and enjoyed? Would this constitute capturing the intangible quality of excitement or would this be the establishment of yet another physical presence within the confines of the museum's walls.

To find some benefit to this interesting exercise, it was also useful to review that the museum appeals to three functioning aspects which most institutions do and which interestingly correspond to processes of the mind. *The first is that function which puts things into the mind, so that the museum assembles data and presents it to a viewer for assimilation having arranged it into a network recognized as knowledge, a good portion of which is considered tangible evidence. We would describe this process as the educative function. The second is a diversionary function that the museum offers and this diverts the viewer's mind away from itself so that the mind is relieved of its concerns. This process we would describe as entertainment. The third function that the museum offers its devotees is an artistic function for it is the artistic component of valued items that grounds the mind with meaning. It is this "grounding" that we refer to as culture. In this way all those items which characteristically we label with cultural significance serve the human psyche by grounding it with meaning. Cultural items would include the normally accepted icons of art: historical paintings—which inform us about the path an intellectual heritage has taken; sculpture—holding representation of a solid ethics; contemporary renditions of twentieth century living—giving current explanation of existence. This cultural relation is also applied to heritage, archaeological finds, and social artifacts.* [The museum offers the service to our collective memories that the human species had diverse origins and differing social developments in many parts of the world, and that archaeological markers can trace the growth of civilization throughout the millennia and so "ground" the mind with knowledge of its beginnings. It is supposed that there is an ethical security acquired from knowing one's origins.]

When dealing with the function of putting things into the mind—the educative function—the museum is not inhibited with doubts of the intangibility of things. Whether or not something intangible has been missed or what is being presented is an offshoot of the tangible. Though such things do exist, the museum is confident that the data displayed which relates to a physical object is accurate, true, and therefore highly informative. Thus education takes place in

the museum setting and the nature and quality of intangibles is not registered as a critical matter.

When supplying the public with entertainment, again the museum appears comfortable with its approaches, for the mounting of exhibitions to overwhelm or titillate the public's sensibilities does not challenge the institution's perception of intangible qualities lurking in the hallways or behind cases, for the focus of activity is directed towards appeasing the public's appetite for *divertissement*.

However, it seems more prevalent, this searching for a solution to the intangible quality when embarking into the artistic, cultural, and aesthetic realms, that the museum is aware of the existence of intangible possibilities and is aroused by simple curiosity to find "the face" of the intangible and to bring it forward, with the question hovering, "Is there more to a creative moment than just the manufactured object?" But then again, what does that moment look like?

To find an advantage from which to understand what art embraces in its cultural arms, it is not only the collection of objects which we call art, but also the intangible qualities that give art its final definitions. That is to say, art supplies meaning for the mind and that nourishment is the purpose behind its creation. Museums recognize the underlying consensus that *the icons of high art* contribute to the universe of mankind and give definition to human motive and aspiration, grounding the minds of those that observe the art with a special location of meaning. The world community has adopted many artistic forms as carriers of special heritage—such *high icons* as Renaissance paintings, the material stuff of reforming beauty and expression; ancient Greek and Egyptian artifacts as cornerstones of our civilization; prehistoric cave findings as representing the first expressions of our early *Homo sapiens* forebears. These artistic values are interpreted by the museum and by the attentive public and are continually used as defining sources because of their ability to ground the mind with special meaning. In fact, the science of archaeology has created with its nomenclature and time-dating techniques instant icon celebrity status to well-known but recently discovered artifacts, i.e., "Ten Thousand Mummies Discovered in the Desert!" The prestige bestowed on museum pieces creates cultural value and meaning which the public honours and respects and it is this relationship which is the intangible element, and so it is the very presence of the physical objects which act as conduits through which the intangible makes its existence known to the public.

So it appears that to present intangibles is to find a physical means by which to make them tangible. By way of metaphor, it is as if the intangible is the shadow of an object and if one wants an image or a shaping to the shadow, then an object is prepared and a cultural illumination is cast over the physical horizon. In this sense, the object is the conduit through which meaning and value is transported.

Originally published as:

Maranda, L. (2000). Museology and Intangible Heritage: Conduits of the Intangible. *ICOFOM Study Series*, 32, 80-83.

7. Museology and Indigenous Cultures: A New Reality for Museums in Canada

In Canada and specifically its Pacific Northwest Coast, which constitutes the particular frame of reference for this paper, there are indigenous populations which have been here “from time immemorial.” Today, Canadians live and work alongside these peoples who refer to themselves as “First Nations,” many of whom live on government-designated lands known as “reservations.” Over the last thirty or so years, interface between the First Nations and governments has led to a dramatic change in the status quo, one that is having a profound effect on museums in this country. This effect is not open to speculation and cannot be framed in theoretical postulates. It is real, it is happening, and above all, it is readily observable. It is a work in progress.

There are forces at work and museums are being changed. Due to the politics in play, the change is being orchestrated far from the museum’s sphere of influence. There is nothing the museum can do except to watch it all unfold, not knowing how, when, or where change will take place. Being drawn into the tide, however, museums and museum personnel are having to respond to the new reality.

Backdrop

The backdrop against which change is occurring is being generated by a multiplicity of factors emanating from an accelerating movement of First Nations cultural revival and determinism. The major issues are punctuated by treaty-making, land claims and self-government. Involved in these are such First Nations imperatives as control over traditional territories (essentially the entire land mass of Canada, and often claimed by more than one Nation) and the resources (fish, timber, minerals, oil, gas) found in and on these lands, over education, health, and the administration of justice. First Nations are making huge advances in all of these areas. Some have their own education systems, replacing the provincial curriculum with an emphasis on educating youth about their own culture, with the teaching of Native languages foremost in this endeavour. Some have arrangements with the judiciary for the rehabilitation of criminal members within the structure of their own community.

The very change in reference terminology from “Indians” to “First Nations” has sent the message that indigenous peoples are demanding equal status as nations, challenging the existing exclusive domain of the federally-based nation that is Canada. Many printed documents and papers, including those that originate at the federal level, refer to indigenous governments in a fashion parallel to those that are municipal and regional. First Nations have received compensation

through the courts for reprehensible treatment in residential schools and for lost lands and resources. The winning of huge court settlements has afforded the First Nations considerable power and political influence.

First Nations business and free enterprise are taking root. Cultural tourism is growing with the opening of resorts, hotels, and recreational facilities. There are canoe tours, and visitations can be arranged for access to restricted sites (such as the World Heritage site of Anthony Island—*SGaang Gwaii*) containing masterpieces of culture and art. Special performances displaying dance, song, drumming, and costume are available, as are artists demonstrating their skills. The artistic output of the First Nations of the Pacific Northwest Coast is in demand worldwide, and accomplished artists can easily sell their products through appropriate commercial outlets or by way of commissions. Their shops, cultural centres, and museums cater to both Native and non-Native visitors alike.

For some time, museums have functioned as catalysts in the realm of First Nations culture and entrepreneurship. They have: acquired objects (through donation, bequest, purchase, commission); researched objects under their stewardship; mounted exhibitions of objects and published catalogues of same; conducted educational programmes; initiated workshops, demonstrations, special events involving relevant themes and, occasionally, indigenous peoples; conducted tours to First Nations destinations; and, purchased works of art for sale in their gift shops. Museums, too, have acquired contemporary works, produced by living artists, for inclusion in their collections, and subsequently have exhibited these. Through these actions, museums have played a pivotal role in placing the material culture of these peoples before the public consciousness. They have also been instrumental in the establishment of worth and of collectability in respect of First Nations art, and in this way have exerted an inadvertent influence of considerable consequence on the marketplace.

Cultural resurgence has led to the desire to reclaim icons (objects) representative of former lifeways. Such icons reside almost entirely in museums run by the non-indigenous community, and for these, even though they are open to First Nations for research, the issue of repatriation looms large. Further, First Nations are requiring that their voice be heard, and this has led them to target, in particular, museum exhibitions and educational programmes. In response, museums are endeavouring to comply by making the approach to First Nations in matters pertaining to any aspect of their culture. To this end, museums are undertaking consultations, collaborations, and partnerships, welcoming co-curators and programme interpreters, entering into protocol agreements, inviting involvement in a wide range of activity, and recognizing First Nation precedence in such events as blessings, cleansings, and exhibition openings.

The 19th century museum ideals, whereby everyone was cognizant of the accepted standards and their position in the scheme of things, where there existed an established museological nomenclature, and where there was an emphasis on “bring-‘em-exotic-curiosities-back,” can no longer be justified. There is no longer a confidence in the museum establishment that its processes will seamlessly

flow from one point to another. As it enters into the new arena of intercultural relationships with indigenous populations, it has been turned around from being proactive to being reactive, with very different processes to follow.

Process

The processes with which Canadian museums are now governed are contained in the 1992 Task Force Report on Museums and First Peoples, entitled *Turning the Page: Forging New Partnerships Between Museums and First Peoples*, prepared jointly by the Assembly of First Nations and the Canadian Museums Association. This report, which stands as the major impetus for change, contains guidelines for museological endeavour and, as such, has set the standard for museum policy. In particular, the report lists principles for establishing partnerships and makes recommendations in the areas of interpretation, access, repatriation, and training. Museums have embraced this report in varying degrees, but, overall, there has been a general willingness to comply.

Most importantly, the report has altered the way museums view First Nations cultures. Museums are no longer free to pursue many of their former firmly entrenched responsibilities and activities without the input of the appropriate First Nations. Gone are the days of internalizing the preparation of exhibitions and the delivery of programmes. Gone, too, is the intellectual “free-wheeling,” the self-servingness with whatever museological aloofness can be brought to bear, and the “we have all the answers” approach. To this end, museums must learn to do business differently, and, in the process, understand that not all First Nations conduct their affairs in the same manner or with the same degree of collaboration.

Exhibition and programming proposals are being formulated and subsequently developed through a collaborative approach between two “equal” partners, the museum and First Nations. To solicit the active input of First Nations, the museum is normally obliged to make a formal written approach to the relevant political body, often to the Chiefs and Council, which will consider the request through an agenda item in the course of regular meetings. It may take several agendas before the request is heard and lengthy delays are not uncommon. First Nations involvement, whether of an advisory, consultative, working, committee, or other nature, is normally sanctioned and controlled at the political level. The process also can involve the preparation of a Protocol Agreement, which sets down how the various groups involved will work together. Protocol, whether formalized into an agreement (written document) or being the active observance of process, language, deportment, and so forth, is extremely important in First Nations ethos and errors in protocol can quickly cancel collaborations, even if the best of intentions exist.

Even before collaborative projects commence, the issue of control is one over which the museum has little influence. Regardless of the fact that most, if not all, projects either emanate from or occur at the museum, the reality is that the

First Nations “set the agenda,” including project objectives, what is to be said, how it is to be said (and in which languages), rate of progress, eventual outcomes, and deliverables. Whether it is national guilt over past wrongs or varying degrees of desire to comply, to accommodate and to learn, the museum is being compelled to assume a secondary role. The loss of its traditional position, and the control it has had, is a dilemma.

Dilemma

The dilemma that museums are facing is one of power and control. They are finding themselves obliged to relinquish both, especially in such areas as curatorial and education where First Nations culture is interpreted. To suit the new order, there is a need to redefine the original principles of museology, where the museum had established and followed a set course that had been inherited though centuries of practise and precedence.

The new reality means that the intellectual domain is no longer solely that of the museum and no longer just curatorially based on science and authority. As First Nations cultures are rooted in oral traditions passed on from one generation to the next, this methodology, then, introduces a new perspective that is neither museologically nor scientifically grounded. First Nations will no longer accept the patronizing view of the museum whether it is scientific or not. It remains, however, that in some areas, oral traditions contradict hard evidence. The dilemma for museums is how to get the scientific information across without First Nations viewing it as patronizing. Nevertheless, curatorial operations are changing dramatically from curatorially based collections, research, documentation, exhibition, and publication undertakings to ones of a collaborative nature, and museums are learning to cope.

The extent of the intrusion this redefined condition has made into the “comfort” of the museum world is much broader still. Museums are more closely scrutinizing what they are and are not acquiring by way of new objects, and are even questioning the legitimacy of acquisition altogether. Due diligence is not only exercised in the usual areas of how and from whom objects were acquired prior to reaching the museum, but also extended to consider whether objects, once acquired, might be subject to repatriation. The documentation, storage, care, conservation, and use (including loans, exhibitions, education programmes, access to outside researchers, photography and the release of images for publication) of collections are all areas in which collaboration with First Nations occurs. Indigenous peoples are involved in exhibitions (and any attending publications) at all stages—from idea generation and concept formulation, through research, object and image selection, text and label writing, choice of audiovisual and other enhancements, design, installation, and opening format, to marketing and promotion. Similarly, First Nations play a seminal role in the interpretation of exhibitions through educational programming, from formulation to execution by serving as programme deliverers. Exhibition and programme-generated by-products, including related stock in museum gift shops, involve collaboration. Such

a seemingly minor issue as paint, fabric or other colours in the exhibition gallery is addressed collaboratively. Throughout, however, the use of First Nations languages, protocols in forms of expression, and respect for voice and the culture from which it emanates, are of foremost importance. Following the conclusion of a project, there is an obligation (whether implicit or explicit) to give something back to First Nations, something that can be used in their communities. This can take any form, from images used in an exhibition or for a programme, to specially prepared text panels that can be readily mounted by the recipients.

Another challenge that museums are facing is that of repatriation. The often fervent desire of First Nations to repatriate ancestor (human) remains and cultural objects is, by and large, being met with compliance. Unlike the United States where the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) has been in place since 1990, there is no comparable legislation in Canada to force the issue. Museums are, for the most part, accepting repatriation of ancestor remains, as a moral responsibility. Since the mid 1970s, the public display of human osteological material in museum exhibitions has been considered offensive to indigenous peoples. From off-of-exhibit to hidden-from-view in secure storage areas or lock-ups, much of this material awaits return to appropriate First Nations. Cultural objects are, in some cases, being tied in with treaty settlements, but requests for returns are also being received and handled on a case-by-case basis. The question of whether anything will be left of their archaeological and ethnological holdings is one with which museums are wrestling. They are busily writing policies to address issues pertinent to their First Nations holdings and their working relations with the indigenous population. They are also negotiating ways of retaining stewardship of these materials in partnership with indigenous peoples through such means as loans, transference of title, and co-management of cultural property.

Museums are, therefore, having to find accommodation, within their operations, for the new condition. Staffs are being diverted from “traditional” museological work; large amounts of time are being expended to ensure success in the new endeavours; there are now unexpected, but often sizeable, budgetary costs not only for staff time, but also to fulfill such obligations as relating to protocol, ceremonies, and repatriation. Besides disrupting “normal” day-to-day operations, exhibition schedules and openings can be delayed (in one known case, up to two years), and even the cessation of scheduled events or programmes can occur.

With its long-established processes in a state of uncertainty, the museum finds itself in the position of needing to develop a new operational methodology in order to function effectively. It is facing ever-increasing interaction with First Nations and is being compelled to learn to relinquish its position of omnipotence in favour of another’s voice. The museum, whether it likes it or not, is being changed by forces outside of its control. Within this arena, there are, for the museum, challenges to be met, concomitant consequences to face, and opportunities to be had in the future.

Future

The future is uncertain, being in a state of a kind of re-evolvement, and no one knows how it will all play out. It is certain that the process will not be reversed and how each museum deals with the issues confronting it will determine its “survival” capability in this particular arena.

How will the future evolve? Will objects continue to be acquired by museums due to growing demands (including repatriation) by First Nations? Will museums continue to expand this collaboration in all areas of museological endeavour? Will museums cease altogether any interpretive function (whether exhibition, publication, education programme) in favour of a First Nations only voice? Will First Nations ultimately control all these aspects in respect of their own culture? Will museums develop a parallel line of information dissemination, one that is scientifically based, in juxtaposition to but along with oral traditions? Will museums explore opportunities offered by the new reality?

Whatever happens, the voice will be that of the First Nations, whose perspective will be

interjected into the mindset of museum operations, and museums will acquiesce as it will be politically expedient to do so, whether it is to assuage feelings of national guilt in an effort to right past wrongs or because it is “the right thing to do” or for professional enlightenment. A type of museology with “acceptable” standards based on the new order will be developed. A language that is sensitive and “politically correct” will continue to evolve. Museums will learn from First Nations and broaden their knowledge base. Museums will acquire patience, tolerance, and diplomatic tact to interact effectively with indigenous peoples. Museums will acquire skills to “stick-handle” through periods of fallout resulting from inter-First Nations political conflicts.

While the shape of the future has yet to be decided, museums, as a result of their new circumstance, will be seen to be compliant advocates of disenfranchised indigenous populations by providing both a cultural and a political platform for First Nations voice. As the politics of change evolve, the continuing challenge for museums is still how much control are they prepared to relinquish and how far are they prepared to compromise in the era of the new reality.

Originally published as:

Maranda, L. (2003). Museology and Indigenous Cultures: A New Reality for Museums in Canada. *ICOFOM Study Series*, 33, 77–80. Also *ICOFOM Study Series*, 34, 38–42.

8. Museums, Museology and Global Communications: Whither Cultural Diversity?

In this age of globalization, given the rapidity with which the world is changing thanks to the advent of the “computer age” and the fact that worldwide communication is now almost instantaneous, it is difficult to imagine how peoples will be able to retain their cultural distinctiveness. This is of concern especially since the impetus for the electronic evolution has originated from the centres of world power, those “dominant” cultures whose citizens can socially and economically afford to “buy into” and “play” in this arena. Museums may wonder that the cultural individuality they have so long endeavoured to preserve through their collections will start to meld to produce a global culture, devoid of unique identities. Through the ever-accelerating globalization movement, are cultures heading towards a metamorphosis and eventual solidification into one identifiable composite (a realization of the concept of the “global village”)? What are the challenges and what role can museums play in the scheme of things?

The following image is offered as a starting point for this discussion.



This Associated Press photograph appeared in the “World” section of the Vancouver Sun newspaper on Wednesday, 31 May, 2000. The sur-caption reads: “New Guinea natives catch TV news on visit to town,” and the accompanying text reads: “Hunting for News: Villagers holding bows and arrows and traditional

spears and headdresses on Enarotai Island [in Enarotali?] in West Papua New Guinea [also known as Irian Jaya] look out of place as they arrive in a local town to watch TV news broadcasts, believing they had gained independence from Indonesia, which has ruled for more than 30 years. However, independence was not granted by Jakarta.”

The question is whether cultures, such as represented here, can withstand the onslaught not only of the television technology, but also of a new one that can now reach into virtually all corners of the world, one that will continue to evolve into what is not yet known. Yet, as a consequence of the new technology's effort to maximize the capabilities of instant communication, to interconnect peoples on a worldwide basis, and to truly achieve the reality of the global village, it would appear that all roads would ultimately lead away from cultural individuality and towards cultural amalgamation.

While examining the incongruity expressed in the image above, which juxtaposes two realities—one which could be identified as “indigenous” and the other “Western”—it would seem that this encounter between two extremes (which may very well not have been the first) is appearing to have little, if any, culturally-based effect, the one on the other. The important factor at work here is one of time. What there is about this image that makes these human figures distinct are the circumstances and the degree or measurement of time separating the two realities and the level of contact between both.

From the beginnings of human habitation on earth, and, in particular, since the large migrations out of Africa some 50,000 years ago, peoples have constantly moved from one place to another. The process of migration has allowed peoples originally holding common beliefs to diverge many times resulting in new ideas developing along separate lines. That movement away from a commonality has embodied a period of time often stretching several thousands of years.

Throughout history, the process has been (and will continue to be) that peoples have migrated. Differences have been created due to the separation of peoples and the time over which they remain apart. Migrations allow for the opportunity of groups of peoples having different cultures to “bump” into each other. Such contacts between peoples result in cultural exchanges and the transference of cultural ideas. The degree of impact seems contingent on the time and distance between occurrences.

Looking again at the image above, the disparity of time and circumstance is evident between these two distinct cultural entities or forces, impacting on and conflicting with each other. This is a graphic example of what has always gone on whereby one group of people has lived separate from others in both time and place. Both cultures have taken very disparate migratory routes with one leading to isolation with little or no contact with other cultures along the time spectrum.

While cultural evolution may take place over thousands of years, contact with an idea may result in an instantaneous change. Contact between different cultures

allows for the transference of ideas. Some ideas have been found to be more advantageous in the course of existence and these have “won out,” thus leading to the replacement of the “old” with the “new.” The question becomes: how long will it take for the “indigenous” to “catch up” to the “Western,” as one thing seems certain, the roles will never be reversed—the Western will not be aspiring to be indigenous.

Culture, loosely defined as the aggregate of the behaviour of a peoples, is influenced by many factors, including language, ideology, ethos, material tradition, learned behaviour, transmitted traits, and so forth. All these go to create and maintain a culture. They transmit a sense of identity to all members of the group—a sense of “who we are.” In addition, cultures have a locality, a physical place which is part of this identity—a place “where we live” or “from where we come.” Nevertheless, in spite of this, all peoples are basically the same: they have a penchant for selecting and utilizing what is best for the survival of themselves. So too with whole cultures.

When early European explorers first made contact with indigenous peoples in various parts of the world, it did not take long before iron and steel were incorporated into the manufacture of tools and weapons, replacing parts made from culturally modified natural materials of local origin. While the material traditions of a culture may signal the first observable consequences of contact with “others,” the composite of “cultural identifiers” of a peoples is a “bond” which enables cultures to maintain distinctiveness.

Immigrant populations, for example, mainly of European descent, in Canada and the United States, live in close proximity with First Nations and Native Americans. These indigenous peoples, while appearing through their day-to-day lifestyles to have been fully assimilated by the dominant European-based “culture,” still maintain a cultural core that is, in fact, undergoing a period of steadily increasing reassertiveness through waves of cultural resurgence and artistic Renaissance. While this is not the same as it was traditionally, it has adapted itself to forms by which these peoples exert and reaffirm their identity. These cultures are not “dead” as is so often thought—sadly, a belief to the perpetuation of which museums have contributed. They have, due to many superimposed challenges and upheavals not of their own making, simply changed and adapted for the sake of survival. Today, the very real presence of the cultural continuum provides ample evidence of living peoples cultures, albeit in forms estranged from what they once were.

If in truth globalization is causing the alteration and, indeed, loss of cultural traits for many peoples worldwide, it is because people are being confronted with new opportunities, which they adapt to better their lives. To this end, it is only natural that they would choose that course which will bring an improvement. While assimilation of new ideas has always taken place, in this age of the electronic evolution, human interaction and communication on a global scale is faster and more invasive than ever. Change and assimilation are taking place at a rapidly accelerating rate. It is this increase in the time factor of “bumping” that

is the basis of the alarm that is being sounded and the concerns being expressed by such organizations as museums.

The museum is a registry of what was. While this is an important task, this conservation cannot keep peoples in the past, especially if they (museums) hope to coexist in the “real world.” As cultures are so quickly assimilating “world culture,” it means that the role of “discovering” new peoples is virtually gone. The inheritors of these “new peoples” should now be the focus of museological endeavour, even though perhaps museums are reluctant to accept this role. Why should they not? Museums treat cultures as if they are fixed in a specific time frame, in some cases occupying an almost fanciful place in the past. Museums would see the two men in the image above as points of interest and the objects from their material tradition which they wear and carry as worthy of collection. The interface between the men and the surroundings in which they find themselves apparently would hold little or no interest for museological study, with such being left to the work of anthropologists and sociologists. The perception is that museums deal with a sense of purity, and not the hybrid resulting from integration. Museums need to accept this as it is representative of the cultural continuum. While numerous cultures have been declared “extinct,” there are so many others that have simply morphed into their surrounding milieu. These cultures have not died, but rather live in the inheritors who continue to maintain their identity, an identity tied to that of their ancestors. Is this not worthy of museological study?

There is a stereotypical belief or myth that “authentic cultures” are “frozen in time,” do not change, and can be visited and observed without interference. Very often, museums and their encased displays perpetuate this notion. Today, this myth is also reinforced by the tourist industry. As indigenous peoples increasingly take control of the marketing of their “old” culture and environment, they have learned to use this misconception to their advantage. By staging special performances for travellers and producing distinctive objects for sale, indigenous peoples also develop stereotypes about the other, and set boundaries on the consumption of their culture.

Museums are in a dilemma and may find themselves in the same position as the two men in the above image. As museums are ultimately the same, representing another element in the transfer of cultural ideas, they may expose themselves to what is an older cultural concept, as the notions of museum and the latest, contemporary modern world are themselves incongruous. Museums are a product of the “age of discovery” and have been comfortable in that role. This cannot persist, however, in light of the current trend toward instantaneous communications on a global scale. How can the museum, normally perceived as being locked in the past, meet this new reality in order to become and stay relevant and useful to the publics they serve? What can museums do so that the notion of value to the community does not disappear? What is the museum going to be?

This does not mean that the museum would no longer be the essential repository for objects from extant and, yes, extinct cultures. What it does mean is that the

museum needs to become more in tune with modern times, and, to achieve this, there needs to be a shift in ideology to allow for the contemporaneity of museological thought and action. This means that the museum must shed its proclivity for what it considers to be “real” or “authentic” cultures and accept the fact that cultures change and out of these are born hybrids which themselves are as diverse as the milieus from which they originated. This would be a big step for museums to take, to overcome their resistance to letting go and to become what they had never before imagined.

The opportunity for museums to address cultural assimilations and the tangential or hybrid cultures that arise from competing ideas provides the museum with new ground to explore. How is it possible for the two realities in the above image to come together? While Western cultures have not entirely seduced those that are still considered indigenous, it is inevitable that this will happen and the overarching factor in all of this is time. Museums can do much to counteract the romanticized view of survival in indigenous communities and address the issues of place, time, circumstance, and the changes cultures are undergoing, especially in light of the global communications technology currently at work.

Over time, each culture develops in response to circumstance and adapts to new ideas in its own way. It is these differences that will continue to constitute what is diverse among peoples. How the museum chooses to deal with this is open to debate, but if the museum still wants to include cultures as part of its collecting, research, exhibition, publication, and education purpose, then it needs to move forward and recognize not only the cultural continuum, but also the framework in which change takes place. It needs to concede to the hybrid and acknowledge the value of its study and musealization. This would be a very important role for the museum to undertake, for, if it does not perform this task, it runs the risk of being supplanted by a new type of institution which will do so.

Perhaps the trickiest challenge for the museum would be that which has been its primary focus—the collections. How can the museum continue to fulfill its mandate in this area if material cultures blend to become ostensibly the same as that of the visitor? What is there that the museum can offer that can continue to be seen as unique? While this is not an easy question to answer, museums might do well to look to the study and presentation of cultures on a diachronic basis. This would allow for the past manifestations of a culture to be shown not only as stops along the continuum, but also as changing in relation to influences outside of its commonality.

As the material culture changes and melds with that of the more dominant influences, much of that which falls in the category of “hybrid” can be collected and displayed. In addition to this, there are the other aspects of cultures which are highly collectable and these are those comprising the intangible heritage of a people. Here, the essential core of the lifeways and thought processes of peoples can be found. While these evidences appear only in an intangible form, they need to be converted to a tangible medium in order to be preserved. This is the paradox of intangibility—once it is collected in its tangible form, it is no

longer “intangible heritage.” This is particularly the case with peoples where the transference of cultural information is only through oral traditions. Once the information has been recorded, the oral tradition, fundamental to so many cultures, no longer exists. This can be extremely intrusive and museums may wonder if these actions may be contributing to and indeed hastening the annihilation of cultural diversity.

Nevertheless, this is an area of collecting that is open to museums that had formerly focused only on the tangible products of a culture. Collecting in this area would allow for knowledge to be gained in respect of the cultural continuum and the changes that occur in this process. This knowledge is a vital link in the history of mankind and the museum can safeguard this as it has with its material culture collections. It may also provide an important insight into the transferring processes occurring in the image above.

With the incursion of the current electronic evolution, museums are now able to disseminate information globally and thus become essential purveyors of important data on cultures and whatever changes that occur. Museums holding diverse collections can readily contact counterparts worldwide for relevant information outside of their own area of immediate source material. This global sharing of information can allow the museums to retain a strong presence not only in their traditional arena of influence, but also in the real world. Museums can, with the incorporation of the voice of indigenous peoples, thus serve as informed intermediary between cultures in transition and the publics they serve.

Whither cultural diversity? As the answer to this question lies in the future, it can only be addressed through speculation and the projection of current trends. The closer the shift towards the realization of the concepts of world culture and the global village, the harder it will become to distinguish the uniqueness of peoples. Since the advent of the electronic evolution and its power to break down the barriers of space and time in respect of global communications, assimilation of ideas outside of the commonality which peoples hold, have taken on a life of their own and are now both invasive and unstoppable. Will cultural distinctiveness be swallowed up by this frenzied rush? Possibly. But who knows? How long will it be before one of the realities in the image above catches up with the other? Whatever the consequence yet to come, museums need to find a niche through this transition and the constructs of museology will be compelled to adapt accordingly.

Originally published as:

Maranda, L. (2008). Museums, Museology and Global Communication: Whither Cultural Diversity? *ICOFOM Study Series*, 37, 133-138.

9. Museology: Back to the Basics: Musealization

1. Musealization: The Event

What is it that happens at the moment of musealization? As the object is removed from its in situ circumstance to be transplanted in the museum, it is transformed from one state to another. The object loses its functional role to become an iconic source of knowledge in the place where “object” data is housed, the museum. In fact, the knowledge base of the object changes through musealization, transforming it from an active to a passive state. This transformation of the object into a sphere of knowledge has been made deliberately and for the purpose of knowledge keeping. If this transformation process does not occur, the object would continue to deteriorate physically and its intrinsic knowledge base along with it. In order that this does not happen, a decision is made to musealize the object.

Musealization is focused on the object whether it has been created within either a natural or a cultural milieu. Whatever the setting, the object was created for a specific purpose and it functions in that “originating” environment until its life has either run its course or it has been removed to a situation so unlike its initial one that it no longer performs in the way that was intended. While the object is in its environment of creation, it is imbued with both attributes of its own functionality and of relational characteristics from other associative materials and circumstances.

Occasionally, an object is removed from its functioning environment for examination and retention elsewhere. This is undertaken by diverse individuals for a wide range of reasons, including those that are intellectual, protective, avaricious, or commercial. Some, not all, of the objects so removed are subjected to musealization. It could be argued that the process of musealization begins at the point at which the object is removed from its functional environment, but only if the motivation of removal is one of subsequent musealization and is undertaken by those expert in information acquisition from “the field.” Similarly, not every object that becomes subjected to musealization has been collected directly from its originating or functioning source. Many objects have long histories, having been passed from hand to hand until they are where they can be ascribed with museal status and thus subject to musealization. By way of example, would it be possible to attribute museal status to objects looted from archaeological sites or thieved by stealth from indigenous longhouses? What about objects that are sold, often by indigenous peoples themselves, to private collectors or to non-indigenous outsiders often for resale on the open market? Certainly, such objects have ceased to function in their originating environments but, under such circumstances, they can hardly be said to be entering a state of

musealization. Of course, there may be musealization aspects to what happens next, such as the display of the object, label writing, etc., in commercial venues, but not the deliberate identifiable process that is musealization.

As time goes on, objects deemed worthy of musealization become fewer and fewer as the “original” natural and cultural environments become “contaminated” and the “uniqueness” or “authenticity” of such objects is called into question. In fact, at this point, how can their “originality” even be verified? Both the natural and cultural continuums change and evolve in response to factors beyond the control of any species or society. Are there any truly “original” contexts remaining, and if so, how do we know? The fact is, we do not and it devolves to the theory of “the best educated guess.” Even some societies from which objects originate no longer have knowledge of the creations of their ancestors, let alone know their cultural significance or function. This certainly is not the case in every circumstance and objects, too, change and evolve to suit the “current” circumstances of their functioning.

Regardless from which source the object originates, the process of musealization is initiated only from the time a decision is made to assign museal status to it. At this point, the intrinsic values in an object are extrapolated at or from its functional source or from the object itself, by way of prior recorded knowledge or comparative analysis with other like objects held in museal repositories. The information is then distilled and reattached to suit the precepts of musealization. Attributes so attached to objects include: name (object name, genus, species, common, etc. names); cultural, geographic or environmental source; scientific milieu in which it was found or from which it was removed; date of collection; age; number of parts; measurements; weight; colour(s); description; condition; cultural or historical function; history of use; and so many more. Regardless of the number of attributes attached, it is the extrapolation and reassignment of data that comprises the major step of musealization.

2. Musealization: The Process

As the foregoing dealt with the “occurrence” of musealization, this section addresses the “practice” of musealization. As the object passes from cultural or natural to museum functioning, it is processed through a series of definable, unidirectional steps which enable it to become musealized. What are these steps? What is the process through which objects become musealized? Each step, nevertheless, progressively solidifies the grip of the museum’s authority over the object.

Collecting objects from the field by well-trained professionals is always considered to be the best condition under which to build a museum collection. This methodology, however, has been under attack for some time as indigenous peoples and environmentalists worldwide press their concerns in respect of this practice. In Canada, for example, it is no longer appropriate to collect live natural history specimens. Taxidermy has become a “bad word.” On the other hand, animals

that have died due to accidental or natural causes are considered acceptable for museum acquisition. Also in Canada, First Nations and Inuit peoples have become far more protective of their cultures and retentive of the traditional material objects still in their possession, having previously lost most of these through waves of field collecting by museums in Europe and the United States, let alone the large quantities taken by or traded away to early explorers to “the New World” which were taken back home to Europe. This understandably protectionist position has escalated into global efforts to repatriate such objects by and for the people from whose cultures they originated. As a consequence, field collecting—seemingly except for archaeological digs, which now must actively involve indigenous communities, and collecting “contemporary” cultural objects, similar to those that would normally appear for sale to tourists—tends now to be a rare occurrence and not encouraged by current ethical standards. This does not mean that there are not individuals, some with questionable motives, still in the field but for the most part these are likely to be dealers, who pay little for objects from people willing to sell them and who then resell them, often at exorbitantly higher prices, to private collectors and, yes, to museums.

While field collecting has been an activity that large museums could afford, the vast majority of mid-sized and smaller museums relied on the goodwill of private persons to donate or bequeath objects to them—objects far removed in both time and place from the field. This does not mean that the objects are any less worthy of collection, and that cultural or scientific information is not entirely known or cannot be reconstructed from a variety of knowledge bases (whether learned, acquired from other sources, comparison with similar objects, etc.). In terms of musealization, however, the process does not always commence when the object is removed from its original context, but rather from the time a decision is made and action taken to musealize it, thus imbuing it with museal status.

The first physical step in the musealization process, therefore, is the act of acquiring the object, by whatever means and from whichever source. As soon as the object enters the museum, it is put through a sequence of processes, which will eventually result in it being not only the purveyor of knowledge, but also a “tool” to be assigned various roles and identities within the museum’s own “culture.” Following the act of acquiring and the accompanying recording of the transaction, the object is considered as a formal “acquisition” to be “accessioned.” The accessioning process “registers” the object by recording basic information concerning what it is, what it looks like, the source from where or from whom it was acquired, relevant dates, and any other essential data. This work is often undertaken by a special museum functionary such as a registrar, a collections manager, or another equivalent position. At this stage, in particular, once the musealization process has begun, the object takes on almost sacred characteristics in how it is treated. It is no longer touched or handled casually, but with extreme care and with rigid attention paid to its physical structure and integrity, and only by those specially trained in doing so. It is examined and its physical condition assessed by conservation staff who afford it a cleaning or treatments as determined by those with expertise in this field. It is “researched,” “catalogued,”

and researched again by curatorial staff with the academic knowledge specific to the field of study from which the object originates. It is categorized, digitized, inventoried, photographed, and carefully stored. It is pigeon-holed, laboured over, monitored, and intellectually configured to fit the museum's purpose. Except for its physical characteristics, it no longer bears any resemblance to its functioning origins. No, the object itself cannot be considered a "substitute," but the intellectual ascriptions, which the museum culture has bestowed on it for its functioning in its new cultural milieu, are. The object, through musealization, has become a passive entity that is manipulated to suit any one of a myriad of contrivances in which the museum decides to place it at any particular time. It has, in fact, gone from being singularly purposed (in its original functioning environment) to being multifaceted (in the museum "culture").

Monetary worth is ascribed to the object as is a new intrinsic value, that assigned by the museum. Learned decisions are made by conservators, who, along with museum collections management and curatorial staffs, go to extraordinary lengths to ensure that the integrity of the object is protected from any possibility of incremental deterioration. Gloves are worn to prevent oils from the skin coming into contact with the object. It is placed in closely monitored artificial environments where ambient temperature, relative humidity, and light levels are set according to scientific requirements. In fact, every stage in the musealization process is ultimately focused on protecting and conserving the object for "eternity." Having "removed" the object at whichever stop along the road to its eventual demise, however that may occur, the museum can take heart in arresting this certain inevitability through its institutionalization in an artificially created web of physical and intellectual protection.

So long as the object exists, the musealization processes are ongoing. They never stop. The object may be "used" over and over again. It may be publically exhibited. It may be highlighted by museum educators to capture the imagination of schoolchildren. It may be interpreted in numerous different contexts. Labels and texts may be written about it. It may be the focus of or included in publications. It may be lent to other museums for research or exhibition purposes. Researchers and professionals from outside of the museum may visit to examine it. It may be "restored," "re-catalogued," and "reassessed." It may be insured for damage or loss. It may even be "deaccessioned" and subsequently transferred, traded, and, yes, even sold.

As a process, musealization has no firm beginning and no fixed ending. It is a continuum with those ideas and activities within its catchment and along its course constantly changing as circumstance dictates or as the need arises. The musealization process can be fluid and adaptable. Its principal components (assemblage, classification, processing, research, presentation, communication, etc.) are germane not just to museums alone. The museum is, in fact, only one manifestation of musealization. As a process, musealization is relevant to a range of institutions and concepts, and while the tenets of musealization remain the same, the rules of application change and are adapted accordingly. Thus, it is

possible to include in its catchment such institutions as aquaria, zoological and botanical gardens, aviaries, vivaria, a variety of specific natural or artificial sites and monuments, as well as science centres and planetaria. While “museum” is a fixed institution and concept, “musealization” is not and can be applied over a broad spectrum.

3. Musealization: The Motivation

Why musealize? What is the motivation for musealization? Musealization is fundamentally a function of human scientific enquiry. The human character is driven by the application of the brain to examine the proportions of existence, from physics and chemistry, from the weather and planetary movements, to the parameters of society. Things that exist are transformed and relocated in what is called knowledge. There is a human desire to transform everything into a knowledge base, thus giving it permanence. This is the human contribution to universal existence. Musealization, therefore, is undertaken to serve and satisfy knowledge, and the museum is the repository for the knowledge of objects.

Further, museums have played a part in the development of “new science.” For example, the dinosaurs, which existed 85 million years ago, became extinct and now their fossilized bones have been discovered. In turn, these have been removed from their arena of discovery, musealized, and housed in museums. At the same time, an elaborate science has been developed around those discoveries. In this way, dinosaurs have passed from living to stone to science, as the world of science has created a whole new knowledge-based existence for these creatures. The same can be said for the archaeological excavations of ancient civilizations where science has analyzed and synthesized the findings to fashion a cultural and societal reconstruction based only in knowledge.

Musealization is a solid generalized term for the process of human thinking that perpetually searches for the truth or the scientific evidence of existence. Things have always existed and performed, but it is the human penchant for knowledge that has created the classification of objects and of behaviour, whether social or natural or physical. It is interesting to note that the scientific revolution, which began by the exploration of the sciences (physics, biology, etc.), eventually turned its attention to man-made objects and housed them in museums, and that this process has now become identified as an activity of human endeavour. “Musealization” is a good label for this human activity as it has the added implications of “removal from natural evolution” and “storage” and thereby the “making of a static condition.” Musealization is a world process that transforms objects that are “living” in arenas of practical use into spheres of static scientific knowledge. Ironically, this has created a living profession for those who do the museum processing and thereby effect musealization.

It is also of interest that humans, in pursuit of understanding by carefully examining the world, are also creating a new form of existence, the “world of human-based knowledge.” The laws of physics, the elements, electrons, chemistry,

weather, rocks and minerals, and human activity have become the substance of this knowledge, which only has existed in the world with human exploration of the universe. Things have always existed, but their interpretation of existence has only come to pass with the activity of the human brain filtering the natural world under examination, such as that which musealization, for example, provides.

Originally published as:

Maranda, L. (2009). Museology: Back to the Basics: Musealization. *ICOFOM Study Series*, 38, 251-258.

10. Deaccessioning and Repatriation

Museums find themselves in a state of change. The fact that deaccession and repatriation have been chosen as the current subjects of discussion is not only an indication of their importance to museums, but also representative of the movement of museums in a direction away from that for which they were originally conceived. This shift in direction is in response to the pressures of a growing reality that is challenging an inalienable aspect of museum responsibility.

The foundations on which museums were built were centred on collections composed mainly of cultural curiosities, natural specimens, historical rarities, and works of art. Many came from private individuals and much was collected by museums from the field. Collecting the curious and the beautiful became a passion for museums, as was the desire to publicly display these acquisitions at which all the world could marvel. Museums became known and gained prominence through their collections in the same way named assemblages gave immortality to the originating collector. In time, these collections became ascribed with an aura of indisputable value and permanence. Museums believed that they would hold collections in perpetuity and no thought was given to the contrary.

Even though most collection items were not made or came into being with permanence in mind, this perspective is supported by the fact that museums are housed in structures purposely built for them and that white gloves are worn when handling objects. Codes of ethics further reinforce the credo that museums acquire collections to be held in trust (for present and future generations). Nevertheless, this sense of permanence is being challenged by diverse factors originating both from within the museum and from without. Formerly thought to be inalienable, collections are receiving a scrutiny that was once believed impossible.

Museums are evolving and taking on new and expanding roles in their relation to the communities they serve. In the course of this development, museums are examining all aspects of their fiduciary responsibilities, including the connection they have with their collections. While collections are still the acknowledged core of museum undertakings, they have lost the cachet of being the sole focus. Museums have diversified and with this has come the need to question long-held principles pertaining to the collections. There are also identifiable circumstances that play a practical role in this reassessment. For example, museums are physical structures with little or no room in which to expand. Many have run out of space to properly house collections, which are under increasing threat by crowded storage facilities. Objects have become damaged, often beyond repair, due to improper housing, through infestation, or by other means. Some lack accompanying data and therefore have little use for didactic and research purposes. More recently, following a trend, a number of museums are changing their stated mandates

and embarking in new directions. A new vision may simply mean a change in the mission statement or a major “rebranding” of the product, the museum. These are only some of the conditions that have caused museums to question their long-held sense of permanence and to examine alternatives to managing their collections. Many of the answers to this dilemma fall within the realm of “considered removal” and the act of deaccessioning.

There are, then, many compelling reasons why museums should give serious consideration to divesting themselves of burdensome collections—whether to make room for extant holdings or for new acquisitions either to improve quality or to fill gaps in assemblages or sequences. On the other hand, there are also those motives that stretch credibility and could bring museums diminishment by public censure or contempt for unethical behaviour. Included here are the desires to dispose of collections for the sake of convenience (as may well be the case when mandates are changed) and for monetary gain (including acts of corruption). Whatever the reasons, there are consequences which museums must consider with great care when contemplating such an action. So too, museums need to be careful as to which collections or objects are to be earmarked for deaccessioning. For instance, the differing affections which museums have for objects can set up a determination for deaccessioning. This in turn leads to a search for legitimacy and the setting up of standards.

While the foregoing refers to some internal issues that could cause deaccessioning to take place, the greatest pressure challenging the museum’s long-held sense of permanence in respect of its collections is coming from external sources. In North America, for example, these external sources comprise primarily those indigenous peoples now known as First Nations (in Canada) or Native Americans or Native Hawaiians (in the USA). These peoples have squarely targeted those museums, in both North America and Europe, holding materials originating from their cultures and over which they would exercise a claim. In fact, the same holds true around the world where material culture has been appropriated by invaders, explorers, scientists, and, yes, museums. European countries that have engaged in imperialistic activities have, no doubt, spoils that have been taken in times of both war and peace from nations under their subjugation, much of which now resides in museums. From these external forces, museums are being held to atone for actions for which they themselves may not be directly responsible, but in which they are seen to be indirectly complicit. Nevertheless, ill-gotten collections, being those received or acquired under questionable (often now illegal) circumstances are all justifiably open to claim. By association, collections of the same cultural provenance, regardless if they were legitimately obtained, are also being targeted, thus adding more pressure to the increasing collections fluidity which museums are facing. The seriousness of these external demands is compelling museums to realign their thinking, prepare appropriate policies, and implement courses of action, all in light of increasing requests for the repatriation of cultural materials.

To put these two issues into a comparative perspective, deaccession is, in museum-speak, the physical process of formally removing an object or objects from the permanent collections, normally following a period of deliberation in respect of such an action and its consequences. Repatriation (return) is only one consequence of deaccessioning. It should be mentioned that the term “restitution” also means reparation, and it is not germane to this paper. Further, repatriation could be seen as a moral obligation, while restitution may have legal grounds which form its basis.

Objects may be considered for deaccessioning if they are too damaged to warrant repair or restoration, and, in such cases, witnessed destruction and disposal is an accepted procedure to follow. In the case of objects or collections for which there is non-existent or insufficient data, while these may go through the process of deaccessioning but may not leave the museum’s premises, their status changes. They may find use, for example, in school or public programming either in the museum or in the community, or as props in exhibitions, or as raw, illustrative, or experimental materials for use by conservators. So long as these deaccessioned objects remain somewhere in the museum’s scope, knowledge of their altered state seldom goes beyond the museum walls.

If, on the other hand, objects or collections leave the museum, especially in substantial numbers or continuously over long periods of time, or if they have an iconic identification with the institution in question, then the community is likely to hear of this action. This can create problems of immense proportions for the museum. At the outset, after due consideration and in concert with institutional policies, museums receive objects from benefactors who range from just ordinary members of the community to private collectors of considerable means. Upon receipt and acceptance by the museum, objects, whether donated, purchased, or bequeathed, go through the formal process of accessioning. Where objects have not been purchased, a gift receipt (or equivalent) is normally perfected between the museum and the donor. This receipt indicates that both parties are bound in a kind of contract, an agreement whereby the donor gives rights of possession to the museum (and all that entails) and the museum confirms that it wants the donation for its collections. Even though what the museum will do with or how it will treat the objects is not spelled out, there is, nevertheless, a tacit agreement with the donor on the part of the museum that it accepts the gift to preserve, to present, and to use it in the course of its (the museum’s) scientific and didactic activities, and to hold it, in perpetuity, in trust for the community. At the outset, both the public’s perception and the museum’s own perspective does not include receipt for purpose of disposal (or why would the museum accept it in the first place?).

When objects that are deaccessioned leave the confines of the institution, there is very little the museum can do to suppress any ensuing negativity. Both donors and the community at large feel a sense of betrayal that leads to a loss of confidence in what they perceive as the museum’s primary trust responsibility. The public becomes wary and reluctant to support the museum through donations or by

visitation. The stigma can be enduring and can leave the museum permanently scarred. The transferral of deaccessioned objects to another museum, while not always endorsed, can have an ameliorating effect on any fallout that may occur. It is the selling of collections by the museum, however, that is particularly distasteful to the community.

When it comes to the return of material culture to originating peoples, the public's position tends to soften. It is hard to know whether this is a result of pangs of guilt, the acquisition of a conscience, or just simple submission, but the situation in which museums find themselves, however "noble" it may appear, is still little understood by the community. In North America, First Nations and Native Americans have been disenfranchised for so long, having been stripped of their culture with much of their traditional materials being appropriated, often under problematic conditions, away from their places of origin. In fact, the oldest and the best of the material culture from the Pacific Northwest Coast peoples of Canada resides in museums in Europe (pursuant to early exploration by the British and Spanish in particular) and in the United States (as a result of scientific study and collecting forays into the area).

In Canada, for example, through a growing movement of self-determination and cultural resurgence, First Nations peoples have been gathering strength and demanding the return of objects from their cultural heritage. Much of the impetus for this has come from the long struggle by the Kwakwaka'wakw peoples of northern Vancouver Island to repatriate the many hundreds of sacred potlatch masks and other regalia which were confiscated by government agents in 1921, and ultimately deposited in major museums in eastern Canada and the United States. With efforts starting in the late 1950s, and resulting in the building of two museums, one located at Cape Mudge, opened in 1979, and the other at Alert Bay, opened in 1980, in which to house the objects, much of the confiscated potlatch materials slowly returned to the originating communities, not to the private individuals or families who were the owners in 1921. From this hard-fought, but still not fully completed struggle, First Nations have been buoyed by the fact that museums can be put in a position which would compel them to loosen their grip on what they (museums) thought was solely theirs and formulate a new ethics in respect of a peoples who are part of and reside in the communities they serve. The return of the potlatch materials was not without conditions, the primary one, in this case, being the construction of a museum with acceptable atmospheric controls and security in place to safeguard the objects. Even though museums may be willing to return objects to First Nations peoples, this undertaking is not devoid of an overarching museum presence throughout the procedure.

In 1990, the United States Congress passed a federal law entitled the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) which provides, among other things, a process for museums and federal agencies to return certain cultural materials—human remains, funerary and sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony—to lineal descendants, "culturally affiliated" tribes, and

Native Hawaiian organizations. This is powerful legislation whereby the initiative originates with the museum in response to the Act. It is the museums that must identify cultural items in their collections and prepare inventories of same, consult as to the identification of and send notices to lineal descendants, Native American tribes, and Native Hawaiians, describing the lineal descendancy or cultural affiliation, and stating that the cultural materials in question may be repatriated. Museums holding materials subject to NAGPRA have specifically appointed staff whose sole responsibility is to deal with nothing but the compliance of their institution with this act. NAGPRA is a legislated repatriation to which any indigenous person or group may respond.

A few years later, in 1992, a Canadian document was produced jointly by the Assembly of First Nations and the Canadian Museums Association by way of a Task Force Report on Museums and First Peoples, entitled *Turning the Page: Forging New Partnerships Between Museums and First Peoples*. This document emphasizes an equal partnership approach between museums and First Nations based on the principles of working together, mutual appreciation, common interests, acceptance of the philosophy of co-management and co-responsibility, and the full involvement of First Nations in the development of policies, projects, and programmes related to indigenous heritage, history, and culture. In respect of repatriation, the report encourages museums and First Nations to work collaboratively to resolve issues relating to the management, care, and custody of cultural objects; it takes the position that, as concepts of ownership vary, there should be a case-by-case joint approach to resolving repatriation issues, based on moral and ethical criteria rather than one that strictly adheres to the letter of the law. The report favours the return of human (ancestor) remains, associated burial materials, sacred and illegally obtained objects, and objects considered to be of special significance to the cultural patrimony of the appropriate First Nations. Several options for this process that have been recommended include: restitution; transfer of title; loan by museums to First Nations of sacred and ceremonial objects for use in traditional ceremonies and community festivals; the replication of materials designated either for repatriation to First Nations or retention by the museum, for use by the other party; and shared authority in the management of cultural property.

It should be noted that a number of treaties negotiated over the last decade between the government and several First Nations groups in British Columbia (the one area in Canada where no previous treaties had existed) have included the return of museum collections from, for example, the Royal British Columbia Museum located in Victoria. The basic principle that was worked out was one of sharing the collection, but only after those materials and objects considered “sacred” or culturally significant, from graves, or obtained in a questionable fashion had been set aside for return. In the end, however, the negotiations came down to issues of power and control, with museums throwing up roadblocks and impeding the process and First Nations having great difficulty reaching consensus within their own groups.

Since the Task Force report is not a legislated document, it is not enforceable. In addition, the report calls for special funding from the federal government to assist museums and First Nations to implement the principles and recommendations it contains. Far too little of the requisite funding has been forthcoming to adequately address this issue. Nevertheless, museums with First Nations collections have responded in spirit and have been endeavouring to comply with the recommendations. Some museums have been proactive where human (ancestor) remains are concerned and have taken the initiative, while others have taken the course of waiting for requests to come from First Nations before initiating action. Requests are normally handled on a case-by-case basis and the burden of proof of claim rests with the First Nations themselves. Where there are conflicting claims, the onus is on the First Nations to reach a resolution amongst the competing groups before the museum becomes fully involved. Where there is negotiation but no resolution, the objects continue to remain in the care of the museum.

For the museum, the task of repatriation is not an easy one, and even when it has deaccessioned and released objects, it has done so knowing that it relinquishes all rights to materials for which it has cared for a good long time. What happens to these objects is entirely up to the discretion of the recipients. While the museum is fully aware that, even though most collection items were not made with permanence in mind, it needs to accept the reality that repatriated objects may well be left to disintegrate or decay. It also must accept the circumstance that such objects may be passed from hand to hand or even sold to profit the new owners. After all, whether they admit it or not, museums have, by their nature, set standards of excellence and in doing so have pumped up the values of their collections. In this way, they have become a powerful player in the marketplace and this is bound to have consequences for any objects that have previously resided in museums.

Nevertheless, the claims coming from First Nations peoples for the repatriation of their cultural materials, which have been appropriated away from their communities of origin, is something museums cannot ignore. Museums need to ask themselves whose culture it is that they are holding and whether they have the moral and ethical rights to continue to do so, especially in the light of demands from First Nations or those from any indigenous peoples for that matter. Perhaps museums have forgotten that they are the stewards, not the owners, of this material. Museum vaults are full of booty, the acquisition of which, to the indigenous outsider, appears to be innumerable cases of "theft in the guise of science." As stewards, museums are the custodians or keepers of the objects in their care on behalf of others. One of the questions being asked in concert with this current discussion is whether museums have the right to alienate. Perhaps the question should be whether museums have the right to retain. To whom do museum collections belong? Who has the legitimate right of ownership? Do those currently living "own" the product of an earlier peoples? Who is the final arbiter? These questions are those with which museums holding materials from other cultures are now struggling and for which there is no one answer.

Regardless of how and why materials are earmarked for deaccessioning, the basic physical process is the same, whereby objects are formally and permanently removed from any active inventory by way of generating and keeping detailed records that are held in perpetuity. In cases of repatriation, the museum may very well need to respond to the appropriate protocol as required by First Nations or other indigenous peoples. For First Nations peoples of the Pacific Northwest Coast, for example, this normally takes the form of funding the formal transference, from the provision of boxes in which the items are packed and transported, to the interment of human/ancestor remains, to all accompanying ceremonies, including the provision of food and “gifts” for such individuals as chiefs, speakers, witnesses, cultural workers, and anyone else taking care of traditional business, to whatever else the recipients consider necessary. All these processes need to be recorded in detail and appended to the deaccessioning documentation.

Deaccession and repatriation are two terms that make museums decidedly nervous. Museums even close ranks and become excessively defensive when these themes are discussed. Perhaps this is a result of years of guilty covetousness, a late-blooming conscience, or an unresolved quandary. Regardless, museums are just plain uncomfortable addressing these two, almost inseparable issues. At a time when museums themselves are questioning their role in the scheme of things, where new primary collections are no longer available, where secondary and “tourist” materials comprise large portions of collections thus raising the spectre of “authenticity,” perhaps there is a feeling that they (museums) have met all their responsibilities. Museums initially have been collectors and hoarders with a “bring-‘em-back-alive” attitude, and are now having to see themselves in a different light, a light that includes deaccessioning and repatriation. Perhaps, in the absence of new primary materials, there will even be a point at which museums will no longer collect, especially since those objects representing the cultural continuum seem to hold little ongoing interest. While a dismantling of the collections is tantamount to museums dismantling themselves, museums need to assume a different mantle in order to fully serve their public. Such service may no longer just mean collecting, caring, researching, or informing, but must extend to the ethical and moral leadership the museum could provide to reconcile wrongs perpetrated in the past and promote partnerships for a more equitable social harmony.

The defining point of the “new” museum and its shift in direction is that it must now develop the skills to guide the cultural changes that are happening. Certainly, museums are still in a position of having collections and resources, but the atmosphere throughout the world has changed. Holding collections is no longer of great importance. What will be important is to include diverse peoples and to be able to disseminate “ownership” for the benefit of all.

References

- Assembly of First Nations and Canadian Museums Association. (1992). *Turning the Page: Forging New Partnerships Between Museums and First Peoples*. Ottawa, Canada.
- Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act*. (1990). Retrieved from <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nagpra/index.htm>.
- Potlatch Goods Repatriation (2010). Retrieved from . <https://umistapotlatch.ca/potlatch-eng.php>.
- Royal British Columbia Museum and Treaty Negotiations, personal communication, 2010.

Originally published as:

- Maranda, L. (2010). Deaccessioning and Repatriation. *ICOFOM Study Series*, 39, 167-174.

11. Empowering the Visitor: Process, Progress, and Protest

This paper focuses on the subject of museum visitor empowerment by examining what museums are doing and whether what they are doing is empowering.

For some decades now, museums have been sensing something in the public mood that has caught their attention. It might be the result of a shift in demographics, of changes in cultural and social relevancies, of what is in vogue and what is not, of questions concerning ownership and voice, of challenges to authority and control. Also included in this mix is feedback from media and funding sources, from other like institutions and organizations, from professional associations, from the general populace, and from museum visitors. Whatever the case, public disposition has led to a continuous decline in visitor numbers for nearly all except the newest, largest, or most prominent museums. Museums are feeling the competition especially from other sources of learning, knowledge gathering, idea exchange, and entertainment, which digital technology has now made available even from the comfort of home.

Sensing that there has been a change in the public mood, and this is concurrent with the decline in audience attendance, museums are taking steps to identify and come to understand what is out there and adjust accordingly. Museums, therefore, are asking whether they are really doing what people want and whether they are doing the right thing. They are doubting what they are doing and how they are doing it, and question whether it can be done differently.

To this end, museums have developed mission statements and prepared policies incorporating their contemporaneousness in the societal structure. They have made these public and have been prepared to change in response not only to their own long-range goals and objectives, but also to the current trends of the public mood. Museums have incorporated simple techniques such as comment books and suggestion boxes, and have conducted surveys to gauge visitor temperament. The quantitative results of surveys and the findings emanating from the qualitative research methodology used in focus groups have enabled museums to delve deeper into assessing their place in the community. In addition, museums have mounted forums for discussion and debate, have undertaken consultations, have engaged in collaborations, and are cautiously venturing into partnerships. Further, museums have formed associations and invited membership subscriptions, they have pursued donors for monies to support their probing activities, and they have encouraged the move to an increased visitor participation in their programmes and activities.

The public mood has directed museums to inform the community as to what they (museums) are all about—what they represent, what they are doing, and where they are heading. The community has come to the realization that there is

a collective public ownership in museums, that museums are only the stewards of a shared heritage, and is calling for transparency and disclosure from these institutions. In response, museums, whether directly or through their governance bodies, have developed mission statements and set definable goals and objectives as a start to meeting these conditions. These are backed up with policies which define operational parameters and with procedures which map the course of fulfilling policy requirements. As the collections are central to museum existence and the focus of most of its activities, policies addressing this institutional responsibility tend to be the first that appear and are those most often disseminated to the community as evidence of good intentions. Over the years, museum goals and objectives may change direction, as may its collections mandate, its name, its whole persona. Consequently, mission statements and policies will change to conform to the new reality and to keep pace with directions gleaned from the public mood. In addition to the public mood, funding and other support sources are in want of these as well and they, too, are also steering production of these statements and documents from the museum.

In order to more directly determine visitor temperament as to how it is performing, elementary level tools which museums use include: informal surveys by way of comment books, often placed at kiosks strategically situated in association with a particular presentation such as an exhibition or a programme; suggestion boxes located, for example, in the museum foyer; or a person behind a ticket desk who can receive oral submissions and even thank visitors for their contribution. While solicitation of opinion by way of comment books can be rather random, it is normally targeted to cover a specific subject or event, unlike suggestion boxes which, by their nature, normally serve to invite remarks on any aspect of the museum. In fact, through comment books, opportunities are provided for feedback for specific reasons, reasons which diverge from any perceived impressions visitors may have that they are actively contributing to a process that may effectively have meaning for the museum's developmental consciousness. Exhibitions and programmes cost considerable money and museums are required to be accountable to donors and granting agencies as to how the products produced with approved funds are received by visitors. Within this framework, by selectively choosing positive or complimentary statements, museums use their visitors' comments in support of fulfilling funding report requirements. Such remarks are also utilized in funding applications and in promotional and marketing materials.

Surveys in the form of questionnaires also aim to test the public mood and to garner information that museums can use for their own ends. Unlike comment books, surveys are highly structured and aim to focus visitor responses in particular ways as prescribed by the nature of the question. These may be in the form of a document which invites written answers or they may be verbal during which selected visitors respond to questions asked by personnel conducting the survey. Carefully constructed surveys are illustrative of a deliberate museum approach to gather quantitative data from public sources for the purpose of incorporating the findings into objectives that have more to do with the securing of funding

and the development of marketing plans to increase attendance. As in the case of comment books, there is a visitor-based expectation that the information being conveyed will contribute in some way to the “betterment” of the museum. Nevertheless, the museum already has a specific goal in mind and may not be seeking to confirm, cancel, or change its planned course or to plot a new one, thus negating any real opportunity for visitor empowerment.

In the course of a survey aimed at developing a marketing plan to increase its attendance, Museum “x”, for example, included a list of almost 20 types of exhibitions and asked respondents to prioritize the entries in terms of their level of appeal. The results revealed that, of those surveyed, the top-rated exhibition was one on “Egyptian archaeological digs and treasures,” and at the very bottom, an exhibition on the “toy soldier collection.” Buoyed by this revelation, Museum “x” was eager to secure a first-rate exhibition of Egyptian antiquities. After a number of years had passed, however, the museum mounted an exhibition of its toy soldier collection, even though at least one blockbuster exhibition of ancient Egyptian treasures from the British Museum had been twice offered exclusively to the same museum. With a price tag of some 2.5 million dollars, the Egyptian exhibition was well beyond the comprehension of the museum’s decision makers. This chance for visitor contribution fell by the wayside as the museum chose to ignore the mood of its survey respondents.

Focus groups are another method of surveying visitors although under quite different conditions. This strategy is normally carried out by private companies that retain professionals specially trained to undertake the work, analyze the data received, and synthesize the findings into a report for use by the client. This kind of qualitative research methodology is one where selected individuals from specific demographics are invited to join one of several small groups where a trained facilitator conducts proceedings in a rather informal and, to some extent, unstructured manner. Participants are asked for their observations and opinions on subjects relating to the museum, can respond in any way they wish, and are free to talk and interact with each other. Sessions tend to be lengthy and intense. In the end, the findings may be the result of consensus rather than of individual responses to the questions posed, and may incorporate a certain amount of empirical research. While the participants may believe they are actively engaged in making a meaningful contribution towards the museum’s future, what eventuates from such encounters again is most often used by the museum to report on funds spent, to secure funding for future undertakings, and to develop marketing plans. The focus group level of visitor input has the real potential for the museum to instigate genuine opportunities to empower visitors, but this is rarely the case.

Museums often mount forums for discussion and debate on specific topics to which the public are invited to attend. In order to give structure to such encounters, a panel of “experts” or individuals “appropriate” to the topic would normally be invited to conduct the formal proceedings, with questions for panel members and comments from the public gallery often being left to the end.

Forums for discussion and debate are normally subject-specific and serve as an addition to or an augmentation of an exhibition or a programme mounted by the museum. While information flows in one direction from the panellists to the audience, it does allow for audience-generated discussion. Depending on the topic of the forum and whether it is of a contentious nature, discussion can become intense and range beyond the confines of the subject matter. One such event took place in association with an exhibition that addressed the encounter between Native Americans and Jesuit priests in the mid 19th century. It was thought a good idea that the Salish peoples of the Pacific Northwest Coast and those of the Plateau meet in a forum to discuss common ground and issues of the past as reflected in the exhibition. The panel was comprised of Salish peoples from local First Nations groups with a few Native American Salish, with much of the audience being a mix of local First Nations and non-indigenous attendees. The discussion soon developed into an emotional exchange in respect of past wrongs perpetrated against First Nations and Native Americans and became a sounding board not only for ongoing pain and anger, but also as one more step in the healing process. Non-indigenous visitors to the forum that day could not but have felt the intensity of the issues raised and could only have left with a new perspective on the struggles indigenous peoples have had to endure. Except to ask questions, this faction was all but silent throughout. The First Nations and Native Americans, on the other hand, were provided with a platform that allowed them a short-lived level of empowerment to air grievances, to give voice to their relationship with non-indigenous peoples, governments, and museums, and to attempt to sensitize others. In this instance, the struggle for “real empowerment” came face to face with the museum.

The foregoing are just some of the more common strategies used by museums for communicating with and soliciting input from their visitors. Further to these, museums have also moved into problematic areas involving individuals or groups within the community by way of consultations, collaborations, and, most recently, a far more difficult relationship forged through partnerships. Each of these levels involves an incremental dimension, with consultations on specific topics requiring expertise not present in the museum amongst its staff compliment being the least complicated and partnerships, at the far end of the scale, being the most challenging. The range goes from the simple receipt by museums of relevant data from an outside individual or group (consultation), to a joint enterprise between museum and outside individual or group in the creation of a shared product, whether or not it is physically centred within the museum but over which the museum maintains ultimate control (collaboration), to a shared venture between the museum and an outside faction where the external collaborator is in a position to vie with the museum for control and over which the ultimate authority does not necessarily rest with the museum but may rest only jointly with the external entity (partnership, full and equal).

Consultations come in all forms from simple telephone calls for information to extensive meetings with experts or persons of interest whose knowledge or expertise can assist the museum with any of its events or projects. Virtually

all museums utilize this technique especially whenever there are not adequate staff resources to cover the knowledge or skills base required. Collaborations grow out of a need for much closer consultation and an alliance, for example, to jointly undertake a project is formed between the parties, with such being initiated by either the museum or the outside individual or group. Special interest private individuals or groups can be of particular concern for the museum, and, while an alliance may be initiated by the museum seeking a special affiliation to produce an identifiable product beneficial to the museum's programmes, there are many occasions when the museum is not the originator but enters into a collaborative relationship with an individual or group offering an enticing opportunity which may be difficult for the museum to refuse. Such arrangements may be made, for example, with private individuals owning collections relevant to the museum's exhibition mandate, the ethical dilemmas notwithstanding, or with scholars or commercial enterprises who become guest curators, designers, etcetera. Nevertheless, those collaborating with museums in such a manner have an empowerment opportunity afforded to few visitors and which their special circumstances allow.

Partnerships are probably the most challenging of all of the techniques by which the museum interfaces with its visitors. This level of interactivity is becoming the norm particularly for those museums that work with indigenous peoples. Of course, consultation and collaboration figure into this equation as well, but it is primarily and ultimately a full and equal partnership that is being sought. While consultation can, for example, identify projects to be undertaken, and while collaborations can be achieved through, for example, the mounting of particular exhibition openings or other events following traditional indigenous formats, the actual development, mounting, interpretation, and implementation of all aspects of a project, from initial conception to any residual activity extending beyond completion, as an equal partner, is the demand that is being voiced. This has become a huge issue for these museums as their authoritative position is being severely questioned and their power structure summarily challenged. The question of empowerment here is one which is not necessarily emanating from or granted by the museum, but rather one which is being appropriated by indigenous peoples and to which museums, in concert with issues of contemporary moral behaviour in such circumstances, are complying as they have little or no other recourse.

Such a partnership was formed between a western Canadian museum and three local First Nations to prepare an exhibition. The partnership per se was formalized in a Protocol Agreement, which detailed how all of the parties agreed to work with each other. The First Nations representatives chose the subject matter and theme of the exhibition, jointly applied with the museum for a grant to develop and realize the project, chose all of the objects for display along with the attending illustrations and graphic embellishments, wrote all of the texts and labels, were heavily involved in the design of the presentation including the choice of colours, text and label format and size, the lighting, and so forth, commissioned the audio component and the manufacture of some replicas as needed, prepared

the objects for display and did any repairs and cleaning as required under the guidance of the museum's conservator, undertook to develop and deliver the accompanying educational programming in collaboration with the museum's education department, liaised with local media, and conducted the opening ceremonies in true First Nations style. Essential to this project was the fact that all three First Nations insisted on controlling those funds, awarded to the museum for this project, which were to be paid to the "cultural researchers" (in fact, the co-curators), one from each of the three Nations. This meant that the co-curators were employees of their respective Nations and not of the museum, and it was the Nations themselves who set the employment parameters of the curators, all three of whom took their primary guidance from their representative on the project's Steering Committee. The dynamics of the situation all but precluded the museum from any role as pacesetter and decision maker, relegating it to one of museological broker and project facilitator, with little or no call upon its authority. Time was an issue with which the museum struggled throughout and the rigidity of its own "corporate" pre-planning schedule ultimately had a sizeable effect on when expected deliverables appeared. The process was entirely out of the museum's hands, even to the extent that the opening of the exhibition had to be postponed several times.

The museum's perceived loss of control over this exhibition, in favour of First Nations demand for "voice," instilled a level of caution in respect of subsequent dealings with these Nations to the degree that, several years later, when an exhibition with an important indigenous component was being developed, the same three Nations were invited to participate, but only long after all the rest of the elements had been decided and a preliminary design prepared. Needless to say, the First Nations representatives were highly offended. Shortly thereafter, some nastiness ensued and the First Nations walked away from the project altogether.

Protest arises not only from such an instance as described in the previous paragraph, but also from a range of perceived insults from wherever such may originate. The issue over a 1988 exhibition entitled *The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada's First Peoples*, mounted by the Glenbow Museum during the Calgary Winter Olympics, was caught up in the politics surrounding the land claim initiated by the Lubicon Lake Cree in northern Alberta. While the Lubicon took advantage of the Olympics to voice their dispute with the federal government, their attention ultimately turned to the exhibition, which they claimed the Glenbow had mounted over the objections of a First Nations group not represented in the presentation. The inclusion of, in particular, Shell Oil, a prime target in the Lubicon's land claim, as an exhibition sponsor, provided additional aggravation. Resulting from the ensuing controversy was the 1992 document, *Turning the Page: Forging New Partnerships Between Museums and First Peoples*. This Task Force report, jointly sponsored by the Assembly of First Nations and the Canadian Museums Association, outlined principles and made recommendations in respect of how the two parties should work together in partnership arrangements and, in particular, how museums must treat First Nations peoples and their ancestor remains and objects of cultural patrimony.

The following year, in 1989, the Royal Ontario Museum's exhibition, *Into the Heart of Africa*, with its contextualization focusing on the subject of white Canadian imperialist history, bore the full brunt of displeasure from Toronto's Afro-Canadian community. Particularly offensive were some not so subtle, large blown-up images depicting the subservience of the African peoples to the imperialism of the foreigners. The museum was picketed and protesters demanded that images and exhibition texts be changed. The fact that the Royal Ontario Museum steadfastly stood by its intellectual prerogative and did neither fuelled an already volatile situation. Consequently, all four institutions (two Canadian and two American) scheduled to receive the exhibition when it closed in Toronto quickly cancelled their bookings, and the exhibition's guest curator, who taught at the University of Toronto, was forced to resign from her professorial job as a result of threatening invectives she received from her students.

Beyond these techniques, there are other possibilities the museum can follow in which to more fully engage the visitor, and these are through various avenues of participation. Over the last decade, in the light of declining visitorship and the recently arrived digital age where museum audiences are turning more and more to other sources for learning, knowledge gathering, the exchange of ideas, and entertainment, this has become an important matter for museums. While it is difficult for the museum to compete with all that technology has to offer, it can still utilize such a tool in building a base for visitor participation in its own sphere of influence. In fact, this is only one of many ways the museum can move visitors from passive consumers to actively engaged participants, and even to a point where exhibitions and programmes can become visitor-driven. In this engagement mode, the visitor can be not only consumer, respondent, or critic, but also contributor, creator, purveyor, facilitator, discussant. Nevertheless, there are endless avenues which museums can and do create for visitor participation, including enticements to join a museum's association or "Friends" group, to become a volunteer, to donate funds in support of museum exhibitions or programmes, and so forth.

To empower means to give or grant power or authority to someone, to enable someone to be imbued with power or authority. Empowerment implies a transference of power and is predicated on the ability that it can effect a change. For the museum, empowerment would mean, for example, granting authority for developing policies and standards of operation, for acquiring and repatriating collections, for setting the course for exhibitions and programmes, for steering didactic and intellectual parameters, and for all the other important work museums do. Decision-making would be transferred to others, away from the museum governance, operational, and management bodies.

Empowerment has become, however, a current buzzword, a construct now ranging across disciplinary and conceptual boundaries and bearing many interpretive variables depending on perspectives, contexts, and applications. As there appears to be no concrete definition, it is a concept open to debate. Yet, empowerment has also been described as a social process which has multiple aspects and which

fosters power in people to enable them to gain control over their own lives by acting on issues they define as important. It emphasizes self-management and self-determination by building abilities and equipping the individual with the tools and authority for making decisions.

In its struggle to gain a contemporaneous place in the affairs of social intercourse and widespread acceptance, the museum has adopted current vocabularies, notions, and activities to suit its interface with the publics it serves. In this way, the museum hopes to gain the attention it so anxiously craves to garner public recognition, approval, and support, thus securing, along with a growing visitorship, its sustainable relevance in the world of today. So, enter “empowerment.” Sounds good, even conciliatory, which, along with many other factors of recent origin, the museum believes will enable it to position itself amongst and one with its public for the benefit and in the service of society and its concomitant aspirations. Through an ongoing introspection and search for an uninterrupted recognition and confirmation of its own lasting existence, the museum is taking hold of many a modernity as confirmation of the course it chooses to take. Since empowerment is *au courant*, then this is one of the routes the museum has chosen to follow. The museum is in constant fear of being labelled socially incorrect, resistant to or out of synchronization with the trends of the day, all of which have the potential of leading to its loss of relevance and thus its fall from favour within the social milieu. As a trend seeker and adapter, the museum, therefore, builds its own form of pan-societal continuum in the best interests of its own perpetuation.

The concept of empowerment seems, however, to have different meanings to museums and their interpretation of this concept seems to range far and wide. Museums think they are implementing a state of empowerment, from acts of responsiveness to visitor needs to an outright capitulation of its previously ascribed authority in favour of another entity. Whatever the case, the museum sets limits in both time and scope as to how far it is prepared to go to divest itself of what it continues to believe is its authoritative prerogative, regardless of its perceived attentiveness to its newly set course. In fact, the museum has reinterpreted empowerment in its own image of its accepted position in society and regularly balks at taking it further for fear of losing its own persona.

While it might be argued that the first act of a museum-based empowerment was the allowing of the public into seeing collections of man-made artifacts and natural specimens that once comprised those private cabinets of curiosity, the hundreds of years of museum evolution have led not only to the inclusion of an “in the service of society” sentiment in current definitions of “museum,” but also to the need to respond to the current trend of “empowering” the museum visitor. This has become a warm and fuzzy sentiment in the museum world and while museums “think” they are empowering the visitor, there is all too often a fundamental slippage in the museum’s interpretation of this concept.

It is the case that there has arisen a growing movement from within the ranks of the museum visitor in respect of how they would wish to interface with these

institutions. Museums have heard this call and are responding to meet the stated wants emanating from their clientele. After all, museums' responsiveness can be traced to the dialogic process they are following by which they constantly seek to find out what they are by gathering information from variable sources to enable them to discover themselves, and, in so doing, evolve within society. The visitor has become not only a sounding board in this process, but also a catalyst for museum change. In its search for contemporaneity, museums are paying heed to visitors' concerns and undertaking to comply with many of these.

Many of these concerns have tended to be more practical than scholarly in nature and, as such, the museum has been seen to submit with little or no consequence to its intellectual prerogative or budgetary bottom line. Some of the primary public gripes have included such issues as poor signage, hard to read labels, too little or too much information, too low lighting (difficulty in seeing objects), inability to touch the objects, nowhere to sit down and rest, no coat check, no cafeteria, and so on and so forth. Some of these are an easy fix, while others may not be so readily addressed either in the short term or even at all, and still others are simply not practicable. Nevertheless, a positive response to such concerns fits squarely into the realm of the museum's expansion of services and has little if anything to do with visitor empowerment. Shifting priorities and interests toward visitors can be done at many different levels, but it is important that the museum be able to delineate the difference between providing improved services, being seemingly inclusive, soliciting input, and visitor empowerment.

As outlined above, museums conduct surveys, provide books for visitor commentaries, and hold focus groups in order to gauge how they are performing in the public's eyes. While museum motives may be honest and perceptibly in the best interests of the community, the results of many such initiatives tend to be shelved and remain, for the most part, unreferenced and in a state of perpetual limbo. This is a pity because some of these actions involve budgetary allotments and thus an implicit statement that there will be consequential actions when the findings are known.

On their part, museum visitors arrive at the museum either for a predetermined specific reason—to see a new exhibition, to attend a workshop, to hear a lecture, etc.—or simply for a visit to the museum for whatever purpose. By and large, each visitor's motives and experiences are as different as each individual. Many may wish to be actively engaged with the museum in a way they identify meaningful to themselves, while many may wish to be totally anonymous with no engagement whatsoever. Many may want the museum to "guide" them around and set the course of visitation, while many may want to feel that they have the freedom to make choices and are in control of their experience by being able to move about freely, plotting their path, proceeding at their own pace, and withdrawing when they decide they have had enough. There are thus active and passive visitors and a whole range of identifiers between these two polarities. Thus, effecting a state of visitor empowerment, with so many variables in the mix, is difficult for museums to identify. For visitors just to comment on and make suggestions in

respect of museum facilities, programmes, exhibitions, etc. might equate, in the museum's eyes, to an attempt to the granting of empowerment to the visitor, and visitors may feel empowered to the extent that they believe they are making a meaningful contribution to museum growth and development and, perhaps, that they may even effect a change in museum policy.

So, how is empowerment realized? If visitors feel empowered by certain actions that the museum takes, then is visitor empowerment achieved? This needs to be asked in the light of the reality of a true empowerment, which at the museum level has to do with funding (money) (who funds activities?), decision-making (who ultimately makes decisions?), and power (where does the power reside?). Since the museum retains control of all of these activities and the answer to the bracketed questions remains "the museum," then seemingly, empowerment from the museum perspective is to be located elsewhere. To this end, museums seem to have identified a state of visitor empowerment to equate with providing opportunities for visitors to have a say, to make choices, to feel included, to be engaged, to participate, to construct meaning, and to experience a level of self-determination and self-directed control. Although this may identify the consequences of what the museum is doing, the question still needs to be asked whether this is really empowering. It would seem that the intent of empowerment has thus been modified or diluted to suit the museum circumstance and to conform to the lengths to which the museum may only be prepared to go in respect of its interface with its visitors. This has meant that the granting of empowerment to the visitor has become superficial and museums have turned out to be manipulative.

While they feel they may be espousing a kind of participatory democracy, museums still subtly position themselves to retain power even though they may go to lengths to give the appearance that there has been a shift. It would seem that the word "empowerment," and all that goes with it, may be the wrong term to use, since it is rather doubtful that "real" empowerment will ever be achieved. An exception to this may be those partnerships some museums are forming in relation to indigenous peoples and other minority groups. Such partnerships are making museums feel decidedly uncomfortable as they now risk losing their authoritative position and their ability to control the decisions they make, having to defer to groups that, while they may not be inputting monies, carry an equivalent political currency.

Nevertheless, for the purposes of its own culture and its perceived societal obligation, the museum's definition and application of empowerment, from their perspective, probably suffices. Since the most common way visitors participate with museums is through contribution in one form or another (feedback, source of objects for the collections, stories, memories, pictures, and so forth), most will more than likely remain relatively content in their relationship with museums. Of course, there are those who will want more from museums and they will make their desires and expectations known. On their part, museums will continue to engage their visitors in their activities, seeking new avenues for their participa-

tion. In the long run, it is certain that protests will arise especially when museums and visitors perceive empowerment from widely disparate points of view.

Originally published as:

Maranda, L. (2012). Empowering the Visitor: Process, Progress and Protest. *ICOFOM Study Series*, 41, 255-264.

12. Museum Ethics in the 21st Century: Museum Ethics Transforming into Another Dimension

Narratives

In the last days of January 2014, the press reported that the directors of two well-known American museums, the Seattle Art Museum and the Denver Art Museum, had made a wager on the outcome of the U.S. National Football League's annual Super Bowl game which pitted the Seattle Seahawks against the Denver Broncos. The wager was a three-month loan of an object from the museum's collection of the losing team to the museum of the winning team. Sounds all right so far? No problem here—just a “lighthearted cultural exchange between museums” (Drews, 2014, p. A2)! The Denver Art Museum put up an iconographic sculpture known as *The Bronco Buster*, created by Frederic Remington and dating from 1895. On its part, the Seattle Art Museum selected a *circa* 1880s Nuxalk First Nations ceremonial Raven forehead mask. The peoples of the Nuxalk First Nation are located on the central west coast of Canada in and around Bella Coola, British Columbia. The press also reported that this wager was the idea of the Seattle Art Museum's director and CEO, and that, evidently, wagers of this kind between art museums have been made on the outcome of previous Super Bowl games (Griffin, 2014)

It should be of no surprise that the Nuxalk First Nations community leaders, who heard of the wager through social media and news outlets, took justifiable umbrage at this action and voiced their strong disapproval. The Seattle Art Museum has acknowledged its mistake, has apologized, and has offered to travel to Bella Coola with the mask to deliver its regrets in person (Drews, 2014). While the action taken by two museums in respect of any wager on the outcome of an American football game (or any other sporting competition, for that matter) might seem to be of questionable distinction, the choice of the object to be wagered by the Seattle Art Museum was not only extremely thoughtless and in very bad taste, but also highly disrespectful to indigenous peoples, whether Canadian First Nations or U.S. Native Americans, with whom museums, especially those holding materials originating from these communities, are attempting to connect in a responsibly societal manner. To make matters even worse, the choice of Raven over Hawk to represent the Seattle team would only serve to add further insult to the injury already perpetrated. In the aftermath of its initial ill-conceived enthusiasm, the Seattle Art Museum opted to wager *Sound of Waves*, a six-panelled screen created in 1901 by Japanese artist Tsuji Kako, featuring a “Seahawk-like raptorial bird” (Hopper, 2014), also described as “depicting a

powerful eagle with outstretched wings” (Drews, 2014, p. A2). It is not known how Japanese Americans felt about this.

In a similar vein, in February 2014, the Winnipeg Art Gallery (WAG) decided to host its annual Art and Soul fundraiser under a “Big in Japan” theme banner. This theme has been described as “particularly hurtful,” as it invites “Orientalism, fetishization and stereotyping in the name of charity” (Wills, 2014), and serves to endorse the spread of “yellowface” activities. Dr. Wills, an English professor at the University of Winnipeg, further states that Asian cultures “continue to be an endless resource for cultural appropriation” with old and new traditions being “reduced, consumed and exoticized out of context,” with the images that appeared on the Gallery’s fundraising invitation ignoring “the struggles of Asian-Canadian and Asian-American activists who have worked for decades to resist this kind of cultural tourism,” especially since such “decontextualized images also perpetuate dangerous stereotypes” (Wills, 2014). Acting in response to a backlash from the community, the Winnipeg Art Gallery scrapped its “Big in Japan” fundraiser theme, opting to go with “Hot and Cold.” The Gallery’s director and CEO has apologized for “any offence that was caused” and stated that “the WAG would never want to reduce any culture to stereotypes” (Rollason, 2014).

Unfortunately, lessons from past cases, where poor judgement prevailed, still have not resonated in the present. Two prominent Canadian examples immediately come to mind.

In 1988, an exhibition entitled *The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada’s First Peoples* and staged by the Glenbow Museum (Calgary, Alberta) “as the centrepiece of the Calgary Winter Olympics” (Phillips, 2011, p. 48) was caught in the middle of the politics surrounding the land claim initiated by the Lubicon Lake Cree in northern Alberta. In April 1986, the Glenbow received a sizeable grant from Shell Oil Canada Limited for the exhibition, following which the Lubicon “announced a boycott of the 1988 Winter Olympics to draw attention to their unresolved land claim” (Harrison, 1988, p. 6). While the Lubicon took advantage of the Olympic stage to voice their decades-old dispute with the federal government, their attention ultimately turned to *The Spirit Sings*, which they claimed the Glenbow had mounted “over the objections of a Native group not represented in the exhibition” (Ames, 1992, p. 161). It was the inclusion of Shell Oil, also a target in the Lubicon’s land claim, as the exhibition’s major corporate sponsor, which was the direct cause of the boycott of *The Spirit Sings* (Phillips, 2011, p. 49), with Shell Oil being seen as “responsible for the destruction of their [the Lubicon First Nations] lifestyle” (Dibbelt, 1988). The announcement of Shell Oil’s sponsorship of the exhibition was followed by a massive letter-writing campaign and the boycott garnered support from such prominent organizations as the European Parliament and the World Council of Churches, along with national and regional native political bodies and members of the academic community (Harrison, 1988, p. 6). In the end, 12 of the 110 institutions worldwide originally contacted by the Glenbow supported the Lubicon’s boycott by not lending their artifacts to the exhibition (Harrison, 1988, p. 6) (Steward, 2008).

The following year, in November 1989, the Royal Ontario Museum opened its exhibition entitled *Into the Heart of Africa*. With its contextualization focusing on the subject of white Canadian imperialist history, it nevertheless bore the full brunt of displeasure from Toronto's Afro-Canadian community. Particularly offensive were some not so subtle, large photographic blown-ups depicting the subservience of the African peoples to the imperiousness of the foreigners. The most controversial of these was an image entitled *Lord Beresford's Encounter with a Zulu*, which was taken from the front cover of *The London Illustrated News* of Saturday, September 6, 1879, and which showed Lord Beresford on horseback killing a Zulu warrior with his sword. The exhibition did not directly address this image of European conquest, nor "was the propagandistic aspect of the engraving made explicit, a problem when we consider that typically the public views newspapers as sources of 'objective facts'" (Butler, 2011, p. 30). By March 1990, the museum was being picketed by the Coalition for the Truth about Africa and protesters demanded that images and exhibition texts be changed. The fact that the Royal Ontario Museum steadfastly stood by their intellectual prerogative and did neither fuelled an already volatile situation while prompting the question: "how offensive [is it] permissible to be in the exercise of free speech and scholarly interest" (Ames, 1992, p. 157)? There were violent confrontations with the police as the protests escalated, and eventually, "the demonstrators had only one non-negotiable demand, the closure of the exhibition" (Cannizzo, 1990, p. 122). In the end, all four institutions (two Canadian and two American) scheduled to receive the exhibition when it closed in Toronto quickly cancelled their bookings, and the exhibition's guest curator, who taught at the University of Toronto, was forced to resign from her professorial position as a result of threatening invectives she received from her students. Seen as racist, this exhibition ultimately produced what has been described as "the worst scandal in the history of Canadian museums" (Fulford, 2007).

Issues

The primary issues which I believe will dog museums in the 21st century in respect of an ethical stance will relate to: the relationship museums will have with indigenous and other minority populations; and, the museum's place in and interaction with the marketplace. How the museum ethos chooses to perform in these two broad categories will define the development, or lack thereof, of the ethical principles which will govern behaviour by museum governance structures and personnel in years to come.

(a) Museums and Indigenous Peoples (and Other Minority Populations)

The four examples described above illustrate ill-thought-out actions, and each in its own way resulted in creating offence to indigenous peoples or minority populations. The selection of a First Nations mask for a football wager, a "yellowface" Japan theme-based fundraiser, the acceptance of a sizeable grant from a corporation with which a First Nations group was locked in a loss of lifeways

and land claim dispute, and the refusal to remove insulting materials from an exhibition, all created situations which have served to paint museums in a poor light, especially since all these circumstances were entirely avoidable. The actions taken by the Seattle Art Museum, the Winnipeg Art Gallery, and the Glenbow Museum are errors in judgement that could have been prevented. While *Into the Heart of Africa* was intended to be provocative, “the organizers obviously thought that [it] would be seen as a critical portrait of colonial collecting and museum ethics,” but rather it was perceived “by many people as a glorification of colonialism” (Schildkrout, 1991, p. 16). Thus, as a consequence, “the subtlety of the message and the absence of a clear coalition with Africans in Toronto” (Cruikshank, 1992, p. 6) is precisely what lay at the root whereby the exhibition was labelled as being racist. In this case, the Royal Ontario Museum also refused to relinquish its intellectual prerogative and authoritative voice in favour of “the other.” In fact, all of these incidents were preventable by simply involving or partnering, from the very first stage of idea initiation, with those communities offended by the subsequent actions taken.

Each of these incidents represents the all too often fragile nature of the relationship between museums (including art galleries) and the publics they serve and begs the question: Where are the ethical precepts that might address such action and, perhaps thus allowing a pause for reasoned reflection, prevent matters from going awry? Regrettably, there exist many such examples of blatant indiscretions and questionable actions. Reports of such transgressions spread readily throughout the profession and are often restricted to private and furtive exchanges between colleagues. It is when these disputes reach the public that museums become the focus of that criticism which develops distrust in the community.

Although the four narratives involve questionable behaviour by the relative institutions, they also typify an ethos which is still inherent in museums in respect of an ingrained self-superiority and a marked predisposition towards an intellectual prerogative and authoritative voice, all to the exclusion of “the other.” There are multiple voices out there knocking at the museum door, demanding and waiting to be heard. The loudest of these are from indigenous and other minority peoples targeting those museums holding materials from their various cultures, materials that most museums still view as their own property rather than acknowledging their role as stewards of a heritage that does not belong to them. Museums have become over-dependent on other people’s materials and this form of cultural appropriation (including matters of copyright) has become more and more unwelcome. It is this interface between museums and minority populations that I believe may very well steer much of the ethical and moral precepts in the forthcoming decades. This may, in fact, become the most important issue for those museums holding materials from these peoples, along with the particularly thorny but related question of the increasing requests for the repatriation of cultural property. Involved in this will be not only the voice of “the other” in relation to museum holdings, but also an entire gamut of associated activities, including acquisition of collections, their care, their documentation,

their interpretation, and their disposition. This will eat at the very heart of the museum, but it is also a growing sore that needs addressing.

In Canada, motivated by the Lubicon Lake First Nation's boycott of *The Spirit Sings* exhibition, the Assembly of First Nations and the Canadian Museums Association brought "Aboriginal peoples and museums together in a series of national discussions" (Assembly of First Nations & Canadian Museums Association, 1992, p. 1), which produced a Task Force Report on Museums and First Peoples entitled *Turning the Page: Forging New Partnerships Between Museums and First Peoples*. The report lists principles and makes specific recommendations for the establishment of partnerships between museums and indigenous peoples in Canada. These recommendations were specific in areas of interpretation, access, repatriation (including such options as restitution or reversion, transfer of title, loans, replication, shared authority to manage cultural property), and training (Assembly of First Nations & Canadian Museums Association, 1992, pp. 7–10). It is expected that the establishment of such a partnership through the implementation of the recommendations would give full and equal voice to indigenous peoples. Unfortunately, the proposals have no legal status and are not binding. The report also recognizes that significant funding, human resources, and time would be required to implement changes. Since too little of the requisite funding has been forthcoming, the report, therefore, remains virtually a shelved document which museums, if they are so inclined, can adopt either "in spirit" or so far as their resources and intermittent government-funded project grants allow. Meanwhile, the full and equal partnership intent of the report remains both elusive and distant.

A few years earlier, in 1990, the United States enacted a federal law known as the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). As its primary purpose, this Act requires institutions that house collections originating from Native American and Native Hawaiian peoples and that receive federal funding to inventory their holdings of human remains, funerary and sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony, to provide summaries of other material culture holdings, and to consult with the relevant indigenous groups and organizations all aimed at reaching agreements on the repatriation or alternative disposition of these materials. A secondary major reason for this Act is to provide greater protection for indigenous burial sites and more careful control over the removal of materials from federal and tribal lands. This Act of the U.S. Congress is binding, has legal status, and has the teeth to prosecute offenders by exacting both fines and imprisonment.

While NAGPRA squarely addresses the problematic issue of human (ancestor) remains and associated, and other cultural materials and their disposition, the Task Force report recommends ongoing partnership agreements between museums and indigenous peoples in a number of key areas. Regardless of the fact that the Task Force report has no legal status and is not binding, the recommendations contained therein will weigh heavily on Canadian museums holding

such materials to the extent that they will eventually be obliged to incorporate many, if not all, of them into their institutional policies and codes of conduct.

A museum position in which it simply reacts to requests for repatriation of, in particular, human osteological and other sensitive materials is slowly having to become one where the museum is proactive in this endeavour. Museums are also receiving, from indigenous peoples, requests for the repatriation of materials (other than those in the categories already mentioned) originating from their communities. To the indigenous peoples, it matters not that these materials have been acquired by museums through field expeditions or from “legitimate” sources, the pressure is now on to give serious heed to such requests. This is especially acute where museums are located either on or near former or current traditional indigenous lands, as is the case in Canada. It should also be noted that repatriation requests are not limited to the museum’s immediate sphere of influence, but can and have come from indigenous peoples living elsewhere in the world. While it is unsure to what extent repatriations will eventually go and how far the indigenous voice will be heeded, it is certain that this will be an important factor in the museum landscape for a long time, whether it entails the return of single items at a time or vast swaths of material such as that in which the Royal British Columbia Museum has been involved in the course of treaty negotiation settlements with First Nations in British Columbia. It should be noted that not all indigenous peoples want their objects returned, with some having moved on beyond this point (Thomas, 1990, in respect of the Pere village on the island of Manus, Admiralty Islands, Melanesia, p. 26), or others not knowing the appropriate ceremonies for the receipt of objects from their ancestors’ past. On the other hand, the “either show it or send it back” cry has been around for many decades, being one to which museums have not responded. Perhaps an argument could be made that it would be more appropriate that “the private life of other cultures” in museum storerooms be returned “to the lands in which it was made and where it has great meaning. Why should the [museum] ethnographers be allowed to steal all these lives?” (Pye, 1987, p. 79). Nevertheless, it is certain that the repatriation process will eat up valued museum assets in both staff time and financial resources.

A positive and productive interface with indigenous peoples will require a reworking of the museum ethos and an acceptance of new partners especially where collections and their interpretation are concerned. It is important, for example, to realize that there are ways of presenting histories that are non-linear, and cultural lifeways that diverge remarkably from the current standard. These approaches may challenge the scientific premises on which museum interpretative methods are based. This may even result in two parallel interpretations being presented, one based in science and one from the cultural perspectives of the indigenous peoples themselves. While collections still remain an important part of the museum’s core, the entire spectrum relating to the museum’s work involving indigenous holdings is undergoing a scrutiny over which the museum has little control. This scrutiny may eventually extend far into the administrative, scientific, and didactic mechanisms of the museum, and there are currently

no ethical precepts to chart such a transition. Interestingly, there are inherent contradictions here. Museums acquire and maintain collections, which they hold in trust for present and future generations, that is, “for the benefit of society and its development” (ICOM Clause 2). They also hold “primary evidence for establishing and furthering knowledge” (ICOM Clause 3) and are thus places of scientific research and for the dissemination of scientific knowledge. In light of the repatriation movement, however, the standard precepts in extant codes of ethics as applied to indigenous collections are no longer tenable.

(b) Museum and Marketplace

Whether the museum is or is not viewed as a player in the marketplace, it has a high-stakes position if for no other reason than it holds “authentic” objects of considerable value. In fact, “collections have value as commodities” and the “fetishization of objects makes viewers aware that museum collections are valuable” (Marstine, 2005, p. 11). There is a widespread belief that because something is in a museum collection, and thereby has cachet as a “museum piece,” it is worth collecting and owning. Museum collections set high standards for value and collectability and consequently collectors worldwide follow suit. This is something over which the museum has absolutely no control especially since museums particularly like to showcase their finest holdings. Nevertheless, valuable objects circulate widely throughout the marketplace with the museum being only one competitor. Normally, museums do not have the kind of monies required for the purchase of pricy pieces and often have to rely on external funding sources. This may include finding an individual or consortium of buyers to purchase and, normally in a purely tax-driven gesture, donate to a public, not-for-profit institution such as a museum which has a registered charitable or equivalent status giving it the capability to dispense tax receipts. This mode of operation has already become widespread and is often the only action available to acquire important collections pieces.

In Canada, for example, individuals can donate to designated museums and art galleries in exchange for tax receipts. Fair market value appraisals are made by outside experts and the issuance of tax receipts by museums to donors is a normative museum activity, even though the claim the donor is allowed is considerably less than 100%. A full-value, 100% tax advantage is accorded to those gifts that are Certified Cultural Property through the Canadian Cultural Property Export and Import Act. While the Act is designed to protect the national heritage and to inhibit the illicit international traffic in cultural property, it also serves as an incentive for the donation of valued objects to selected institutions and public authorities. Certification is achieved only through an application process after the gift has been perfected. Application is made by the receiving institution and adjudicated by the Canadian Cultural Property Export Review Board, which will rule on the significance of the object—its close ties with Canadian history or national life, its aesthetic qualities, its value in research, or its degree of national importance—which, in fact, does not need be of Canadian origin.

Arm's-length appraisals are needed for any action for which there is tax consideration or where such is required for any reason. Finding the "right" appraiser, one who is qualified and diligent, who operates at arm's-length from both the donor and the donee, and, where possible, one who is a member of an accredited appraisal association can be a difficult process. Without this, however, the process can be open to abuse and possible prosecution of one or both parties through the revenue agency. Conflicts of interest can easily creep into this area of museum endeavour and, while there are many cases where this is known, tempting opportunities are always readily available. Many appraisers are, in fact, dealers and have that knowledge acquired through their profession, which could interfere with the museum's intent, thus placing them in a competitive or adversarial role with the institution for whom they have been retained to provide service. This is another issue that museums have had to address for years, but as values for specific areas of cultural property continue to increase, almost at an alarming rate, museums will need to exercise more vigilance in this regard and develop ethical routes that will carry them well on into the future.

Many years ago, the Canadian Archaeological Association resolved not to place any monetary values on objects of Canadian archaeological origin. This was needed to prohibit the buying and selling of Canadian archaeological objects, to protect archaeological sites, and to reduce the incidence of pot-hunting. This also means that individuals wanting to donate objects they have dug up in their backyards or have inherited would not receive a tax receipt for same as no values would be ascribed to the items in question. By not attributing any value to archaeological objects, the incentive to buy, sell, or profit from these objects evaporates.

Although illegal trafficking in and the exportation of cultural property has been an ongoing issue for a long time, the continuing rise in value of much of the material involved will only serve to accentuate the problem. The Canadian Cultural Property Export and Import Act includes provisions to help to protect Canadian heritage for exportation through a Control List of objects that are not less than 50 years old and those made by a person who is no longer living, thus defining in detail the cultural property for which export permits are required. Applications for an export permit are reviewed by a Permit Officer and, if the cultural property appears in the Control List, it is then forwarded to an Expert Examiner which may be an institution or an individual. If the Expert Examiner determines that the cultural property is important enough that the export permit should be refused, then there is a delay period of up to six months during which time an institution or public authority in Canada is afforded an opportunity to purchase the material in question. If no purchase from within Canada is forthcoming, an export permit is then granted. This legislation, however, does not stop objects from leaving the country and material is still often removed illegally and without the requisite export permit.

While Codes of Ethics tend to be firm in respect of museum actions in light of the acquisition of objects originally obtained under questionable circumstances

and/or either illegally removed or suspected to be illegally removed from their countries of origin, there are situations where second thought should be given to these stipulations. There are, on occasion, objects which may have been obtained under dubious conditions or have been removed from or be in a country illegally, that should be received by a museum. By way of example, if the person offering such objects has in mind to dispose of same by sale, should the museum not accept the donation? If the museum, adhering to the stated ethical standards in the matter, refuses to accept the objects and, thus, knowingly allows them to be put up for sale on the open market, is it not being compliant, or even complicit, in that action? In such a circumstance, a case can be made for the museum to receive the material and hold it until such time that it could be further investigated and possibly returned to its country of origin. It is realized that the museum would serve as a clearing house in such cases, but there is also the argument for the museum as societal advocate, not only in its immediate sphere of influence but also on the wider world stage, even if the objects in question are not from "the territory over which [the museum] has lawful responsibility" (ICOM, 2006, Clause 2:11). This is a case where actions contradict and override stated ethical principles and where the resolution is in the realm of conscience.

It should be mentioned that most small and medium-sized museums cannot afford to build their collections in the field and rely almost solely on public donations. Far too many of these gifts come with little or no reliable provenance except what the sources know from and within their mainly familial circle. Nevertheless, such objects form a base for research, can add knowledge through a comparative approach with known collections, and can enrich exhibitions through contextualization. Acquisition of such material is important for these museums, which would otherwise stagnate in the absence of such activity. Again, such action overrides stated ethical precepts and, since there are few alternatives at hand, would seem to defy appropriate museum behaviour even though the practice is widespread.

Most museums are notoriously poorly funded and, while they may be able to secure grants or sponsorships for shorter term activities such as temporary exhibitions, educational programmes, and special projects, and public or corporate funding for capital undertakings (and occasionally for the purchase of new collections), it is almost impossible to fund operations through such initiatives. Operating funds are normally generated internally or through regularly available sources on an annual basis. Museums are now hiring their own fundraisers in an attempt to bring in more financial resources, not only for operations but also for projects. This can become a tricky business because the quid pro quo factors are unknown at the onset (except where tax receipts for such gifts can be issued) and can strain the ethical precepts under which museums operate. Also to be considered in this mix is the activity in which museums all too often engage, whereby, for whatever reason, they undertake to cull objects from their collections by offering them for sale on the open market. Monies in exchange for selected museum holdings is all too tempting and many museums have been severely criticized for proceeding along this path. Such an example is an incident

involving the Croydon Museum whereby the Arts Council England and the Museums Association warned the museum that it could lose its Accredited Museum status (on which it relies to secure loans) if it proceeded to sell 24 pieces from its antique Chinese ceramics collection. The chance of securing good monies by whatever means to fund important projects may, in the end, override the necessary caution required, and those responsible for museum governance need to exercise prudence in how far they are prepared to go in such an endeavour.

Nevertheless, corporate funding may eventually be the way to go for many museums and this may pose significant problems. As reported in the *Vancouver Sun* newspaper on 11 March 2014 (Sherlock, 2014, p. A1 and A7), a debate has arisen amongst the various Vancouver (Canada) area school boards, all of which have seen governmental funding for education decline drastically in past years. The Chevron Canada oil corporation initiated a Fuel Your School programme, which provided \$1.00 for every person who buys 30 litres or more of gas in the participating school district and is run at arm's-length through a registered Canadian charity, MyClassNeeds, to cover costs for everything from playground equipment to computers to breakfast programmes. Such a gas-for-education relationship, especially when sustainability and students walking or biking to school is encouraged, caused ethical challenges for the school districts. There is here, however, a cautionary tale for the museum as there is a very thin line between needing the resources to succeed in its endeavours and the tempting availability of corporate funding to assist in this happening. Another easy step would be that museums become part of a money-making enterprise, thus shedding their not-for-profit status to sustain their programmes. This jump to corporate player would mark the end of museums as we know them today. Interestingly, the corporate ethos has already infiltrated many museums with directors now being known as CEOs (Chief Executive Officers) and the “rebranding” of a museum’s image becoming all too commonplace.

Another concern museums should have, which touches upon their role in the marketplace, is that involving private collections. While there has been a tacit understanding that a museum ought not to exhibit private collections or borrow objects from private individuals for display, this, nonetheless, happens regularly. There is no doubt that the public exhibition of privately owned materials enhances both their monetary value and their pedigree. A quick glance through any Sotheby’s or Christie’s auction catalogue confirms this, as exhibition in a primary cultural institution such as a museum garners prestige and consequently greatly increases not only its collectable value, but also its monetary worth. Consequently, the “display in museum = increase in value” pattern is a given and museums become firmly entrenched in fostering the wealth of private holdings. An example of this activity occurred throughout 2013 when the Canadian Museum of Civilization held a special exhibition entitled *Vodou*, which was comprised almost entirely of materials from the collection of Marianne Lehmann, a Haitian citizen of Swiss origin. The materials, now comprising some 2,000 objects related to Haitian Vodou, were assembled beginning in 1986, and it is one of the most important collections of its kind worldwide. While it is managed by

a Haitian foundation, it still is privately owned. In their search for new ideas for exhibition, which often lead to the display of private collections, museum programmes will continue to engage in this practise and perhaps there need to be ethical guidelines to define the operational boundaries of such activities.

The concept of the “patron of the arts,” in whatever form, is a tricky matter which museums have been courting since their inception. As the need for diminishing funding grows, the need for private support also increases, and there are many corporate enterprises willing to jump on-board and show their support for culture and the arts in exchange for whatever benefit they can accrue. Museum governance needs to take a hard look at this and decide to what extent they are prepared to go in compromising ethical stance while pursuing economic imperatives in their quest for “survival.” Sadly, it is the case that there are museums that certainly do not seem to care about ethical precepts and only endorse these whenever it is convenient to do so. To make financial ends meet, corporate support is courted, collection pieces are sold, entrance fees are raised, expertise is farmed out for a price, science is compromised for the sake of a more popular mediocrity, quid pro quo deals are arranged, rules are bent. Even in the light of extant Codes of Ethics, there seems to be enough slippage whereby ethical codes are loose enough to allow for institutional interpretation of and adherence to the same.

Ethics and Transformation

While much has been written on the issue of ethics, and ethical codes abound at levels ranging from the largest of museum organizations such as the International Council of Museums (ICOM) to the smallest of museums, the purpose of this paper is to examine where ethics go from here and why incidents such as those mentioned in the narratives above still perpetuate. Can important omissions be found to encourage a new approach?

Ethical codes “define appropriate behaviour, establish responsibilities and other means for self-assessment,” and while they “are not legally binding...they may influence the law. They function through group pressure [with] museum association censure, loss of accreditation, and threats of professional isolation [being] the typical means of enforcement” (Marstine, 2011, p. 7). Each and every code is tailored to the dynamic of the initiating body or organization and, even so, is “fraught with contradictions indicative of the diversity of voices that impact and are impacted by museums today” (Marstine, 2011, p. 7). Codes of ethics, however, cannot and do not prevent unethical behaviour.

All too often, ethics and morals/morality are used interchangeably and are considered as parallel concepts when they are, in fact, quite different and should be used to identify two separate, albeit overlapping, dimensions. Ethics, as a set of behavioural principles, have parameters that are firmly prescribed, normally in written codes that contain broad sweeping statements to which a defined group adheres and the acknowledgement of which is widespread. Ethics are prescribed

behaviour. On the other hand, morality is variable and subject to change and is based on cultural mores and generally held societal values of right and wrong. As individual principles, they are seldom written down and are loosely acknowledged by the like-minded. Adherence is individual and personal and can be based solely on conscience. Morality is, for the want of a better descriptor, “freelance” behaviour. As such, morality reaches outside of and beyond ethical precepts.

Edson (1997, p. 25) states that while morals “relate more to custom and actual practice while ethics refers more to the examination of those practices,” morals “is a broader term that includes any form of voluntary human activity where judgement is involved.” Robert Sullivan (2004, pp. 257–258) has described museums as being “ritual places in which societies make visible what they value” and, as such, through practice and behaviour serve as “moralizing institutions, reflecting as well as shaping their communities’ moral ecology.” Since museums are staffed by individuals, each with his or her own set of values, the choices made within these institutions are, however, heavily value-laden. Even so, and because the community maintains an overall respect for what the museum represents, the question to be addressed is “not *should* museums be moral educators but *how* museums should be involved in moral education.”

For Tristram Besterman (2011, p. 431), museum ethics “seeks to provide a purposeful, philosophical framework for all that the museum does” and that it is “an expression of the continuing debate about the responsibilities that museums owe to society.” Further, it reflects “social context and articulates a contract of trust between the public museum and society,” and is useful because it charts “a principled pathway to help museums to navigate through contested moral territory.” Since ethics is ultimately “concerned with human behaviour, its application starts and ends with the individual” (Besterman, 2011, p. 438). He concludes:

The center of gravity is shifting in the ethical paradigm of the Western museum. A tradition that originated in the universalism of the European Enlightenment increasingly challenges the restrictive boundaries of that cultural inheritance. The possession, presentation, and interpretation of material culture raise highly sensitive issues of “representation” and “ownership” in which cultural values beyond the material come into play and demand attention. In this evolving ethical framework, museums have an opportunity to reflect, respect, and nourish the human spirit as well as intellect, and to celebrate different ways of seeing, studying, and comprehending the world. (Besterman, 2011, p. 440).

On first glance, an ethical approach to the first issue raised (Museum and Indigenous Peoples) appears elusive mainly due to the number of related variables associated with inherent museum behaviour. If ethical codes are “developed within, encapsulate and reflect the particular social and cultural milieus of their creators” (Pickering, 2011, p. 257), then any relevance to this issue is questionable. There are two players in this equation—the museum and the indigenous (or other minority) population. Since the currently prescribed parameters are formulated by only one side without the input from the other, it is difficult to

see how each side can fulfill the requisite adherence to any ethical statements governing their respective behaviour. True, the Code of Ethics applies to museums and not to any other jurisdiction, but if there is to be a linkage between museum and indigenous peoples, then the Code needs to reflect this new arrangement. Failing the establishment of ethical precepts to deal with this type of binary circumstance, the principles of interaction will automatically defer to moral behaviour, which at the individual level will eventually transform into an issue of conscience.

It is presumed that ethical behaviour subscribes to stated institutional or disciplinary ethical precepts and that morality is aligned to societal concepts of right and wrong. It would be exceedingly difficult to bundle morality into ethical codes that serve a broad constituency. Yet, a number of the critical issues confronting museums, as advanced above, are outside of the realm of prescribed ethical precepts for the very reason that they are opened to individual interpretation and thus circumstances that result in questionable behaviour. Might this then require ethical codes supporting endless addenda to cover perceived circumstances? How could codes deal with the multitude of variables? It is certain that this is neither feasible nor desirable, thus leaving the door open to individual assessment and action without the assistance of behavioural guidelines.

The ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums, for example, utilizes the word “should” throughout. “Should” is a long way from “must”, with the former incorporating too many variables and the latter, along with “will” or “will not,” being perceived as dictum. “Should” means “do not have to.” “Should” is too vague to be binding. Does this mean that adherence to such a code of ethics has become an issue of take it or leave it, of personal preference, or even of conscience? It is understood, of course, that this particular Code of Ethics, which reaches around the globe, needs to be as widely encompassing as possible. From this, more regional museum codes spring and even further removed are those codes pertinent to various disciplinary organizations or associations. Nevertheless, it is true that ethical codes for museums are also supported by additional documents (conventions, bilateral agreements, etc.) that not only originate from inside disciplinary or scientific professions, but also are germane to museum work and circumstance (for example, UNESCO’s 1995 Unidroit Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects and the United Nations’ 2007 Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples). While not every nation has ratified such relevant conventions, it could be argued that their primary effect is moral rather than material (Brodie, 2005, p. 135). Any initiative that will give pause for thought prior to action needs to be part of the equation in matters of institutional deportment.

Where do ethics, as codes of conduct, go from here? It is certain that ethical statements need to be tightened to render the guidelines more stringent and less open to interpretation and more of a deterrent to individual choice or avoidance options. While “ethics statements are not always precise” and “what is ethical is often in the eye of the beholder,” ethics still involve putting the community the

museum serves ahead of both the institution and the profession (Boyd, 2004, p. 359). Marstine (2011, p. 20) goes further: "As a discourse, the new museum ethics is not merely an ideal; it is a social practice." It is also "a way of thinking—a state of mind" (Šola, 1997, p. 170). Museums are in a trust relationship with the public and are accountable to this constituency for their continued existence. When this trust is damaged through poor behaviour, the museum's ethics are questioned.

Dealing with issues such as those raised above is not going to be easy, and there may not be adequate or even relevant ethical precepts to guide the museum through troubled times. The voice of "the other" will serve to challenge the museum as science and as diligent steward for society as a whole and as societal advocate in all things equal to all. Conflicts between these various roles will arise which may seem to be encouraging anti-science, anti-museum, in support of new partnerships through the appropriation of an advocacy favouring one social jurisdiction over another.

It is also certain that while ethical context is continually changing and evolving, not every circumstance can be covered by ethical codes and is thus left to fall into the grey areas of morality and the individualization of response. The sheer plethora of situations and individual responses to the same verify that this is the case. Given the two narratives presented at the start of this paper, incidents such as these cannot be couched effectively in ethical terms and will continue to plague museums for the simple reason that there cannot be an ethical precept to cover every circumstance. These events were perpetrated by individuals, representing well-known institutions, who were not cognizant of the consequences of their actions. These are issues which devolve to tenets of moral behaviour. But how can moral behaviour be standardized when it is produced by individuals, each with their own perception of right and wrong? Perhaps what is required here are not behavioural principles, but rules of "personal" conduct to which are attached consequences for transgressions, consequences other than social censorship through the media. The problem here will be the vetting of what is perceived to represent bad taste and poor behaviour. Who sets the standards? Who adjudicates? Many universities and professional organizations have ethics committees that scrutinize research and other projects prior to initiation. Should museums consider the same for forays into uncharted or problematic territory? Whatever route museums take, those circumstances that are not covered by the firmly prescribed parameters of ethical codes will seek resolution in another dimension, being one where behaviour is variable and subject to change. The search for guidance in the established ethical precepts is leaning increasingly towards a solution in the realm of morality. As a result, museum ethics will progressively move towards transforming into another dimension—an unstructured, unregulated, freewheeling dimension of conscience.

References

- Ames, M. (1992). *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes: The Anthropology of Museums*. Vancouver, Canada: University of British Columbia Press.
- Assembly of First Nations and the Canadian Museums Association (1992). *Task Force on Museums and First Peoples: Turning the Page: Forging New Partnerships Between Museums and First Peoples*. Ottawa, Canada.
- Besterman, T. (2011). Museum Ethics. In S. Macdonald (Ed.), *A Companion to Museum Studies* (pp. 431-441). Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Boyd, W. (2004). Museum Accountability: Laws, Rules, Ethics, and Accreditation. In G. Anderson (Ed.), *Reinventing the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift* (pp. 351-362). Lanham, USA: AltaMira Press.
- Brodie, N. (2005). Illicit antiquities: The theft of culture. In G. Corsane (Ed.), *Heritage, Museums and Galleries: An Introductory Reader* (pp. 122-140). London, UK and New York, USA: Routledge.
- Butler, S. (2011). *Contested Representations: Revisiting "Into the Heart of Africa"*. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.
- Cannizzo, J. (1990). Exhibiting Cultures. *Culture*, X(2), 121-123.
- Cruikshank, J. (1992). Oral tradition and material culture. *Anthropology Today*, 8(3), 5-9.
- Dibbelt, D. (1988). Nations gather to protest Glenbow's Spirit Sings display. *Windspeaker*, 5(23), 2. Retrieved from <http://www.ammsa.com/node/16694>.
- Drews, K. (2014, January 30). First Nations mask pulled from Super Bowl wager. *Vancouver Sun*, A2.
- Edson, G. (1997). Ethics for museums: Ethics and the profession. In G. Edson (Ed.), *Museum Ethics* (pp. 18-35). London, UK and New York, USA: Routledge.
- Fulford, R. (2007). Into the heart of political correctness. *National Post*. Retrieved from www.robertfulford.com/2007-11-24-rom.html.
- Griffin, K. (2014, January 28). Seattle Museum wagers loan of Nuxalk mask from B.C. First Nation on outcome of Super Bowl. *Vancouver Sun*, A4.
- Harrison, J. (1988). "The Spirit Sings" and the future of anthropology. *Anthropology Today*, 4(6), 6-9.

- Hopper, T. (2014, January 29). Seattle museum drops plan to wager ceremonial mask on Super Bowl after B.C. First Nation complains. *National Post*. Retrieved from <http://nationalpost.com/2014/01/29/seattle-museum-drops-plan-to-wager-ceremonial-mask-on-super-bowl-after-b-c-first-nation-complains/>.
- International Council of Museums (ICOM) (2006). *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums*. Paris, France.
- Marstine, J. (2005). Introduction. In J. Marstine (Ed.), *New Museum Theory and Practice: An Introduction* (pp. 1-36). Malden, USA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Marstine, J. (2011). The contingent nature of the new museum ethics. In Marstine, J. (Ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Museum Ethics: Redefining Ethics for the Twenty-First Century Museum* (pp. 3-25). London, UK and New York, USA: Routledge.
- Phillips, R. (2011). *Museum Pieces: Towards the Indigenization of Canadian Museums*. Montreal and Kingston, Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Pickering, M. (2011). 'Dance through the minefield', The development of practical ethics for repatriation. In J. Marstine (Ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Museum Ethics: Redefining Ethics for the Twenty-First Century Museum* (pp. 256-274). London, UK and New York, USA: Routledge.
- Pye, M. (1987). Whose Art is it, Anyway? *Connoisseur*, March, 78-85.
- Rollason, K. (2014, February 12). WAG changes fundraiser's theme after community reaction. *Winnipeg Free Press*. Retrieved from <http://www.winnipegfreepress.com/arts-and-life/entertainment/arts/WAG-changes-fundraisers-theme-after-community-reaction-245215211.html>.
- Schildkrout, E. (1991). Ambiguous Messages and Ironic Twists: *Into the Heart of Africa and The Other Museum*. *Museum Anthropology*, 15(2), 16-23.
- Sherlock, T. (2014, March 11). Vancouver school board rejects Chevron donation, as Surrey cashes in. *Vancouver Sun*, A1 and A7.
- Šola, T. (1997). Museums, museology, and ethics: A changing paradigm. In G. Edson (Ed.), *Museum Ethics* (pp. 168-175). London, UK and New York, USA: Routledge.

Steward, G. (2008, April 13). Our Own Olympic Controversy. *Toronto Star*. Retrieved from http://www.thestar.com/opinion/2008/04/13/our_own_olympic_controversy.

Sullivan, R. (2004). Evaluating the Ethics and Consciences of Museums. In G. Anderson (Ed.), *Reinventing the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift* (pp. 257-263). Lanham, USA: AltaMira Press.

Thomas, D. (1990). Who Owns the Past? *Natural History*, August, 24-27.

Wills, J. (2014, February 12). WAG and the peril of yellowface. *Winnipeg Free Press*.

Retrieved from <http://www.winnipegfreepress.com/opinion/analysis/wag-and-the-peril-of-yellowface-245138681.html>.

Originally published as:

Maranda, L. (2015). Museum Ethics in the 21st Century: Museum Ethics Transforming into Another Dimension. *ICOFOM Study Series*, 43b, 151-165.

13. Is it Possible to Tie Down a Universal Museum Definition?

Prologue

For those in the field, defining the museum has been a popular activity for decades. Why is this the case? What is the purpose of such activity? For whom or for which entity is this necessary? Do museum “insiders” feel this is so important that their future in this realm is determined by achieving such a goal? Are they so unsure of what they are doing that they have to seek validation by such means? Is there an essential need to lay bare their ongoing *raison d’être* through this activity? Or do they just wish to communicate what they believe they really are?

Museums are a Western construct that, as they currently exist, evolved in the late Renaissance (16th century) from those “cabinets of curiosities” which the gentry kept to show off to and impress their friends and acquaintances or to enliven their social gatherings. The museum concept and edifice then grew out of these humble beginnings and began to evolve in the 18th and 19th centuries to what we see today. Beginning in the last half of the 20th century in particular, museums, along with the notion “museum”, have been dissected, analyzed, pondered, and subjected to continuous, almost obsessive scrutiny from within the museum community. During this time, the “science” of museology was developed and a “new museology” advanced. The latter aimed to steer museums away from their focus on methodology (“old museology” and possibly heading in the direction of museum obsolescence?) towards one of purpose (Vergo, 1989, p. 3). Further, such long-standing concerns as the “social relevance of museum exhibits, deconstruction critiques, critiques of ethnocentric primitivism,” along with issues of authenticity and the “politically-charged implications of museum exhibits in contemporary society” (González et al., 2001, p. 107) are included in the “new museology” debate. Also included is the transformation of the museum as a “site of worship and awe to one of discourse and critical reflection” committed to “examining unsettling histories, with sensitivity to all parties” where the museum is “transparent in its decision-making and willing to share power” (Marstine, 2006, p. 5).

Much has been written about museums—how they are structured and what their function is, how they should perform and what their role in society should be, how they need to change and reinvent themselves in concert with the times, how to be *au courant* with world dynamics and circumstances, and so on. In addition, Codes of Ethics and how-to manuals have been prepared to guide museums on the “correct” path forward. Individual museums have identified and made public their mission statements with attending goals and objectives.

As time has advanced, the museum is now expected to become more outward-looking than inward-facing, more value-driven than object-driven. Perhaps this is an advancement from the internal workings of the “museum method,” which might now be considered to be solidly in place, to an extension beyond its walls and into the realm of multi-layered interactions where the museum believes it could have an influence in the wider world, not only at the societal level but also on the economic and political stages. Consequently, museums find themselves in a chronic state of self-examination. Does this mean they do not know what they really are or are they still trying to find their niche of comfort and relevance?

Mise en scène

In its most basic sense, a museum is a place where objects of importance, beauty, relevance, intrinsic value, and so forth are deemed to be worthy of acquisition, care, study, and public display, and a place where visitors are able to see artifacts or specimens selected for their illustrative significance whether within a thematic framework or as stand-alone examples attesting to their innate uniqueness, visual power, or by a range of other criteria. The museum believes its exhibition offerings will not only attract the visual attention of its visitors, but also convey, through accompanying texts, labels, and other forms of “mixed media,” relevant data not only of an informative but also of an educative nature. In this way, the museum also holds that it is a place where visitors can learn about themselves.

Whatever the museum does in carrying out its “prime directive” and fulfilling whatever it believes society’s expectations are for achieving its purpose, whether based on scholarship or as entertainment, the rules for the “museum method” and parameters of responsibility originate firmly from within the museum itself. In this way, museums can exercise complete control over their predetermined path and their product. Thus, based on such internally constructed parameters, any person, group, or jurisdiction outside of the immediacy of the museum-centric ethos, is viewed as external to its focus and all too often dismissed out of hand. Even if, from time to time, museums venture forth and solicit input from outside of their inherent control, such forays can be few and far between. In other words, the museum is an operational-centric law unto itself and, while it welcomes visitors to its exhibition halls and education programmes, it tightly maintains its position of authority in all that it does and plans to do.

At this point, it could be argued that the museum, being in full control of its faculties, is self-sufficient and not in want of any intrusion in its set path of operation. The way forward is secure, and the institutional sights are firmly fixed on the objective. In this way, defining “museum” would seem to be a relatively simple matter and may be seen as universally applicable as well. Even so, beginning in the latter half of the 20th century and continuing into the 21st, museums have changed and these changes and the hints of or paths towards change yet to come are causing a new introspection of not only what a museum is, but also what it should or could become.

Scenario

Caught in a web of attempting to define the museum so that it can be understood and accepted by all to whom it applies, the challenge is to identify not only the players in this process, but also the recipients of the final determination. With the museum being a Western construct and having its most populous roots in European society, it may be difficult for those living outside of this catchment to fully comprehend and accept what originates under a Eurocentric banner. Although countries that were once heavily colonized by Europeans may well be accepting of a European status quo, this does not nor should not constitute a universal *carte blanche*.

To think that a museum is a museum in a universal sense is to negate the societal and cultural milieus in which it is located and for which it has concomitant responsibilities. In this sense, should the starting point be not only from the perspective of those the museum serves (the societal demographic), but also in concert with those in that part of the population who have a legitimate and vested interest in what the museum houses and in its various interpretive programmes (the politics of representation)? Might the whole notion of “museum” need a serious rethink and subsequent actions for realignment undertaken?

The “traditional” museum is normally perceived as a finite structure in which there are collections deemed to have been worthy of acquisition, in keeping with its inherent policy, and where they are stored, conserved, researched, and displayed and to which any person has access. Visitors to the museum are there primarily to see what is inside—the collections the museum holds or a specific exhibition—or just to visit the gift shop or to have coffee in the cafeteria. They may also be there to attend a museum-organized event—a programme, lecture, tour, demonstration—whatever the museum has orchestrated for public consumption. Museums are also on the list of “must-sees” for tourists and the world’s premier institutions attract millions of visitors each year—so many, in fact, that they are very cognizant of the “visitor numbers” game played by their counterparts the world over. This has become a source of both pride and bragging rights for many museums and is one of the primary objectives of museum policy, often to the detriment of other activities that museums perhaps ought to consider pursuing. Nevertheless, an emphasis on visitor attraction for the income which museums need to pay staff, care for the collections, present exhibitions, and undertake programmes will always be a priority, regardless of the fact that most rely on grants and funding from alternative sources that are primarily government-based. There are also museums funded by corporations and private individuals, thus placing them in a questionable situation in respect of the requisite not-for-profit status. In fact, are museums being pushed to become “money machines”? With altruism not in the vocabulary of the museum lexicon, the focus can easily turn to one of competition and predation.

An email dated 15 May 2020, addressed to members of the Canadian Museums Association, gave the 2019 results of a study undertaken by Oxford Economics

which was commissioned by the Ottawa Declaration Working Group, a consortium of stakeholders co-led by the Canadian Museums Association and Library and Archives Canada, which focused on the economic benefits of non-profit galleries, libraries, archives, and museums (GLAMs). The study found that Canada gains a net profit of almost 8.6 billion dollars per annum in economic benefits from the GLAM sector as it “feeds the economy and innovation, and forms an integral part of the fabric of our nation, benefitting Canadians of all ages, backgrounds and regions.” It further concludes that GLAM visits “are associated with a number of other important societal benefits including greater literacy, curiosity, innovation, knowledge and creativity, and a better sense of community.”

Staying with economic issues, museums also have a discernible effect on the marketplace in that they, primarily through the display of specially chosen objects, set standards of what is valuable and worthy of collection. Acquiring something perceived to be of “museum quality” for a special place in one’s home is, interestingly, a throwback to the days of those private “cabinets of curiosity.” Nevertheless, mini museums are well entrenched in many homes of the wealthier members of society. In addition, museums themselves are often predatory in the marketplace when engaging in collections acquisition in an arena of competing wants for scarce resources, especially where supply is low and demand high. The prices that museums pay for such acquisitions contribute to and often set the benchmark for the sale of similar objects in the future. In this way, in fact, museums are often major players not only in setting standards of excellence, but also in effecting the economic dynamics in that marketplace. This goes for a whole raft of objects, from antiquities to historic treasures, to fine arts, to riches from exotic lands, to archaeological and ethnological material culture. While many objects are acquired legitimately, forays into the marketplace in some instances may be questionable unless museums undertake their due diligence regarding the legitimacy of acquisition and the attending ethics governing the transactions.

On closer examination, museums come in many different forms ranging from the “traditional” museum described above, whether it be a large, all-encompassing institution having national stature, to a small, community-based facility often located within or under the aegis of another larger entity (such as a community centre) to which it is administratively linked. There are ecomuseums which physically encompass entire communities; neighbourhood museums; tiny museums tucked in the back rooms of civic buildings, businesses, or shops; historic, palatial, and religious buildings and sites; open-air museums; travelling museums; cyber or virtual museums; special spaces such as “keeping places” deemed by locals to be museums; and even field labs which are often considered as being in the category of “museum.” Private museums are springing up which showcase the collections of the very wealthy and which are open to the public. Into this mix, the American Alliance of Museums (formerly the American Association of Museums) also includes botanical gardens, zoological parks, aquaria, planetaria, battlefields, and cultural heritage centres. In addition, there are even “museums,” such as the Arizona Museum for Youth (now called the i.d.e.a. Museum), which

have no collections of their own and create temporary exhibitions using works of art borrowed from established institutions (Watkins, 1994, p. 28). Still, I am certain that there are other places and functions or experiences professing to be “museum” which have been left out of this list. Nevertheless, this comprises an incredibly wide range of “museumness” and it is certain that both the term and concept “museum” have a cachet which most everyone agrees is both recognizable and has a level of publically perceived importance.

Consequently, being able to define all museums under one meaningful umbrella poses a huge logistical problem and doing so would undoubtedly negate the community-ness of most, along with the attending pride any community may have in its museum. Museum definitions generate a strange dialectic and are very much based on achieving a means to an end which is couched in language to meet standards set by institutions and organizations of the “higher echelon” and not by each community. This then sets up a dichotomy where each entity can gauge whether it is “in” or “out” of the “legitimate” museum sphere and therefore whether it has the “right” to call itself “museum.” Community ethos is a valued commodity for its residents and to be told that its museum does not fit the prescribed definition, thus rendering it therefore a “non-museum,” would be socially and emotionally injurious not only to the community’s identity and pride, but also to the national good.

Nevertheless, official museum definitions emanate from the heart of the Western construct and therein lies the issue at hand. They are not “universal” in their intent and, in fact, they never can be. Who is to say what is or is not a museum? Policy makers and definition builders need to know that there are peoples who live in the world in whose languages the word “museum” does not exist. This even includes peoples who live in colonized countries such as Canada and the United States and who themselves may have museums or museum-like collections on their indigenous reserves. Although almost all these peoples now speak English, the lexicon of which contains the word “museum,” their native tongues do not. Even while indigenous languages are fading from memory as the number of native speakers decreases rapidly, there are many concerted and urgent efforts being made to preserve those languages under threat of extinction. Perhaps even new terms might be added that may give reference to something “museum-like,” but the perception of what indigenous peoples perceive as “museum” may, in fact, be something entirely different. Does this make it even less valid and thus not worthy of inclusion?

This is an important element as museums have appropriated material culture from nearly all indigenous peoples worldwide and such objects have contributed extensively to the status that reputable museums enjoy today. Not only have such treasured and valuable “spoils” graced the exhibition halls of museum establishments, but museums also were complicit in the 19th and early 20th century “human zoo” displays which represented a growing public curiosity in so-called “primitive cultures,” the tragic story of Ishi being one case in point (Clifford, 2013, pp. 91–191). Nevertheless, curiosity in this sphere has not abated,

as evidenced throughout the Karp and Lavine (1991) publication *Exhibiting Cultures* and referenced by Desmond (1999, pp. 2–141) in Part I of her study *Staging Tourism*. Perhaps the colonialistic perception of “them out there” has clouded the issue to the extent that such peoples are either at best marginalized or at worst forgotten completely. Unsurprisingly, these same peoples do not see the museum in a positive light but rather as that entity responsible for stealing their cultural objects for its own benefit. Now, in an age in which these peoples are feeling closer to their indigenous roots and are beginning to lay claim to the physical manifestations of their culture through the growing repatriation movement, this past will dog the museum and its often-professed right of ownership. This situation has cast a negative pall on the relationship between those museums holding such materials and the descendants of the original owners. For the latter, their perception of the museum, from the “outside looking in,” remains a negative one.

This is not to say that no steps have been taken to try to address the imbalance. In Canada for example, the 1992 *Task Force Report on Museums and First Peoples: Turning the Page: Forging New Partnerships Between Museums and First Peoples*, sponsored by the Assembly of First Nations and Canadian Museums Association, specifically recommends that partnerships be established between First Nations and museums in such areas as interpretation, access, repatriation, training, and implementation (Assembly of First Nations & Canadian Museums Association, 1992). Despite its best intentions, the report became a shelved document as funding to effect implementation was not forthcoming from the Canadian government. Nevertheless, museums could accept it “in spirit.” On the other hand, the course followed in the United States was in the form of national legislation whereby, in 1990, a federal law known as the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) was enacted, requiring federally funded institutions housing collections originating from Native American and Native Hawaiian peoples “to inventory their holdings of human remains, funerary and sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony,” and to consult “with the relevant Aboriginal groups and organizations all aimed at reaching agreements on the repatriation or alternative disposition of these materials” (Maranda, 2015, p. 155).

While these steps are all well and good as far as they go, they do not address the plethora of museum holdings that originate from those outside of their country’s indigenous populations, whose voices are being raised from afar. Museums located in the same regions where indigenous populations live are endeavouring to be responsive to these peoples’ concerns, but the issue of stewardship still gives way to ownership and is left wanting. The question here is: What is happening in museums in countries where there are no extant indigenous populations? How are these museums dealing with either their colonial past or their past collecting regimens? This is an important issue due to the fact that the concept of “museum” varies widely and, since indigenous collections and their source communities and peoples worldwide are increasingly gaining attention in the “museum sphere,” there are voices other than those of museum insiders that

need to be heard and considered. Many of these concerns can also be extended to museums holding materials originating from other minority groups, including those who have immigrated from their countries of origin.

As museums proliferate, real inclusivity still appears as remote and elusive as ever. As for the definition of the museum, there are just too many voices out there for any text to be either inclusive or effective. While lip service may be offered, the only proof would be not just in a show of museum sincerity but in real and substantive museum action with measurable outcomes. Wherever extant museums of whatever ilk or size may be, it is the community that will determine its relationship to those entities. A definition will not.

Nevertheless, it is deemed essential that a definition there must be, but where to start and on what to base it? Might just reiterating the basic functions of a museum suffice, since going into further detail referencing its societal relationships, especially those outside of its walls, is where the process goes off the rails, becomes controversial, and results in creating camps of inclusion and exclusion? If the “definition makers” keep it simple, then the “community” can apply it to whatever it accepts as “museum.” This would promote a more bottom-up rather than a top-down view of the museum and its place in the world.

There is a long history of scholars, museologists, thinkers, laypersons, and so forth who have had ideas of what a museum is or should be. In 1917, archaeologist Harlan I. Smith, then working for the Geological Survey of Canada, concluded that if “the museum...does not rise to the occasion and at least adjust itself to meet war needs” and by so doing, aid “the general progress of the world” then other organizations “will take over what should be the most important part of museum activities” (Smith, 1917, p. 430). Burcaw (1983, p. 12) lists numerous definitions of “museum,” including one from UNESCO which states that museums “of whatever kind all have the same task—to study, preserve, and exhibit objects of cultural value for the good of the community as a whole.” Marstine (2006, pp. 8–9) observes that “the notion of museum holds diverse and contradictory meanings” and that “the metaphors of museum as shrine, market-driven industry, colonizing space and post-museum” are those most commonly heard.

An anthropologist offers his definition of museum as an “institution in which social relationships are oriented in terms of a collection of objects which are made meaningful by those relationships—though these objects are often understood by museum natives to be meaningful independently of those social relationships” (Handler, 1993, p. 33). In 1984, Joseph Coates, an American futurist, predicted that by 2010 museums “will include minority points of view and different cultural perspectives” and that “museums will shed their elitist associations as they integrate themselves more fully into the mainstream of American culture” (Coates, 1984, p. 45).

Tomislav Šola (1987, p. 48) describes the ecomuseum as an “institutionalized form of cultural action in the preservation of our heritage [which] transcends the bounds of official definitions” and that it is “a museum organized accor-

ding to its own needs—a museum which is less a fact and more a process, less an institution and more both action and reaction.” Still on this subject, André Desvallées (1982, p. 8) sees the ecomuseum as a place where “heritage has radically been substituted to that of collections” and while “collections are not the first aim of the museum” it is even the case where “the museum is out of its walls and everything belongs to it.” The ecomuseum is also described as a “museal institution which, for the development of a community, combines conservation, display and explanation of the cultural and natural heritage held by this same community” (Desvallées & Mairesse, 2010, p. 59).

More recently, “museum” has been examined and re-examined in several publications from the International Council of Museums International Committee for Museology (ICOFOM). These include Mairesse and Desvallées (2007), Davis, Mairesse and Desvallées (2010), Mairesse (2017), and Brulon Soares, Brown and Nazor (2018). In the end, Duncan Cameron (2004, p. 63) observes that attempts “to define museum have been made for almost as long as there have been museums” and concludes that as “yet there is no definition to my knowledge that meets with everyone’s satisfaction.” To this, Bernice Murphy (2004, p. 6) adds, “The definition should be clear to the mind but also nudge the human heart.”

Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft

Borrowing loosely from these two concepts, first introduced in the 19th century by German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies and later “remodelled” by fellow German sociologist Max Weber, the attending precepts could be useful in delineating a museum definition. Tönnies contrasted two types of society, *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. *Gemeinschaft* (“communal society”) “is a society in which people feel they belong together because they are of the same kind” (Broom & Selznick, 1958, p. 35). In other words, “they are kin and cannot freely renounce their membership, for it involves great emotional meaning for the group as well as for the individual.” *Gemeinschaft* is also found to include such elements as custom and tradition. This was contrasted with *Gesellschaft* (“associational society”) in which “the major social bonds are voluntary and based upon the rational pursuit of self-interest.” This is a type where “people enter relations with one another, not because they ‘must’ or because it is ‘natural’, but as a practical way of achieving an objective.” It should also be noted that the “long historical trend has moved toward *Gesellschaft* with more and more activities governed by the voluntary action of freely contracting individuals” (Broom & Selznick, 1958, p. 35).

Both *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* can be referred to as “positive types of social relationships, that is, modes in which individuals are bound together,” but that the “keynote of *Gesellschaft* is the rational pursuit of individual self-interest” and to these Weber introduced *Kampf* (conflict) as a third “basic relationship element” (Parsons, 1968, p. 687). Further, a characteristic of *Gesellschaft* is “a fusion of interests over a specific, positively defined area” within which it involves “a ‘compromise’ of interests of the parties” but which “only mitigates

their deeper-lying separateness, which in essentials remains untouched” (Parsons, 1968, p. 688). Nevertheless, “there remains a latent conflict which is only patched up by compromise.”

Breaking this down in terms of the current study, the “insiders” of the museum structure and function, that is, the professional museum community of like thought could be equated to a *Gesellschaft* society, and that of the “outsiders” who have a culturally vested personal or community-based interest in the museum and its collections—what is done with them and how they are interpreted—as *Gemeinschaft*. Further, while the development of a museum definition could be categorized as an element falling under *Gesellschaft*, it may not be achieved without a good measure of *Kampf*, thus pitting *Gesellschaft* against *Gemeinschaft*.

The differentiation between these two types of society is, on the one hand, *Gesellschaft*, which is likened to the established museum and the expectations and trappings that go with its adherence to the meaning of the definition ascribed to it, and on the other side, *Gemeinschaft*, which represents the community, its peoples, their ingrained life and ethos, and is recognizable by that community and what is important to it. There are, in fact, two separate communities here—the *museum* community as functioning entity and the *human* community, which is either the site of the museum or is seen to be represented by the museum. While the latter is normally referenced only in the singular (community), it needs to be referred to in the plural (communities) because a museum represents, is answerable to, and affects not one but many communities in its catchment and sphere of influence. This applies not only to Western but also to minority populations, whether they be resident immigrant or indigenous peoples or those who live elsewhere but whose material culture resides in foreign museum facilities.

It has been evident for far too long that the demographic with which the museum is most concerned is that of the majority population in which it is situated, and that segment with which it is perceived to be most accommodating is described as the “elite.” Even though museums spend an inordinate amount of energy trying to woo the public at large, most are concerned with making themselves open and primarily presentable to the societal sector they feel will visit and support their establishment and its programmes. Not everyone is a museumgoer, and, in fact, it is certain that there are those who fear visiting such a place even though museums often “dumb down” to try to attract the non-goers and the “under caste.” In doing so, museums are aware of their intimidating side and, while outreach initiatives have had some measure of success, there remains a huge gulf especially between museums and indigenous populations.

Turning to indigenous and non-Western populations, whether they live in “developed” or “developing” countries, and considering the fact that, for many, much of their culture has been appropriated away from their own communities to end up in museums, their “voice” has been ignored by the very organization that believes it is being democratic, inclusive, and socially responsible. Take for example, the spontaneous remarks aired by museologist Amareswar Galla in the course of a lecture at the 1992 triennial meeting of the Commonwealth Associa-

tion of Museums regarding an Australian aboriginal band that was “successful in obtaining a government grant to build a museum for its sacred objects” but when “the inspector came to see the result, he was shown a small plain building with no windows and one door which was locked,” and when he asked, “What kind of museum is this?” he was told, “This is the keeping place and this is the way it is supposed to be” (Cameron, 1993b, pp. 9–10).

Cameron, in another paper (1993a), suggests that the “new museum-like institutions in non-European societies...must find new forms and new functions” and that they “must grow out of the rich humus of their own cultural soil, reflecting the indigenous mythos” (Cameron, 1993a, p. 167). But, perhaps the most telling and uncomplimentary juxtaposition of the museum “myth” with the “realities” came from the collective opinions of a mix of Maori and European university graduate museum studies students in New Zealand as follows (Cameron, 1996, pp. 12–13):

The Kiwi Profile

MYTH	REALITIES
Museums serve society	Museums serve the elite
Museums are a Window on the World	The Window is only a mirror of the museum itself
Museums are a representative sample of world realities	Museums are a biased Eurocentric collection of bits and pieces
Museums preserve the whole world's heritage	Museums plunder the world stealing the heritage of others
Museums create new knowledge	Museums store old knowledge
Museums give public education	Museums indoctrinate and spread propaganda
Museums teach about other peoples and their cultures	Museums are ethnocentric and use stolen culture to teach cultural superiority

For many indigenous peoples, decolonization of the museum ethos is at the crux of the issue. Lonetree (2012, pp. 168–175) concludes that transforming museums into places that matter for indigenous peoples means that decolonization requires:

- telling hard truths,
- engaging a collaborative methodology,

- transforming sites of oppression to places that matter, and
- sharing indigenous knowledge.

In a different circumstance, Bruno Brulon Soares (2018, p. 164) makes reference to the favelas in Brazilian cities, some of which are “using the label ‘museum’ to implement a resistance device and to reclaim cultural and social rights.” In fact, the museum has become “a political instrument for the invisible local groups to become political agents, existing socially through the museum agency” and, in this way, “it allows them to address the Brazilian State and the local governmental institutions” (Brulon Soares, 2018, p. 16)

Epilogue

By museifying other cultures, museums are not only asserting their control and superiority, but also disregarding the essence of what it means to be a member of a minority population and one without a critical mass or voice for representation. Until museums can come to grips with how they are perceived by those communities from which they have purloined many of their treasures, it will be impossible to design a “museum” definition that will ever have anything close to either a universal comprehension or a universal acceptance.

Nevertheless, there is no reason why Gesellschaft and Gemeinschaft cannot have a mutually beneficial symbiotic relationship, but whether such can be couched and encapsulated or even reflected in a definition is, at the least, moot. To date, definitions of “museum” have been perceived as partisan in nature and in no way akin to plural experiences or even more than one ultimate reality. Lost in the realm of ideas in a temporal world that constantly shifts and changes, it would be almost impossible to reflect all communities, all peoples, all cultures, all beliefs in such a process. Subtle exploitation, scientific racism, and an ethos of superiority aside, in ICOM’s May 2020 E-Newsletter, the words “Museums are more trusted than governments and newspapers” have an uneasy ring and should be a cause for concern.

In advance of the new museum definition that made its appearance in 2019, ICOM’s periodical, *Museum International*, produced a special issue entitled *The Museum Definition, the Backbone of Museums* (2019, Vol. 71, No. 281–282), which is full of human and societal-based issues that are people and community oriented and far removed from any concept of a fully comprehensive definition. This being the case, it is evident that an inclusive, universally meaningful definition is as elusive as ever.

References

- Assembly of First Nations and the Canadian Museums Association. (1992). *Task Force on Museums and First Peoples: Turning the Page: Forging New Partnerships Between Museums and First Peoples*. Ottawa, Canada.

- Broom, L., & Selznick, P. (1958). *Sociology*. Evanston, USA: Row, Peterson and Company.
- Brulon Soares, B. (2018). Museum in colonial contexts: The politics of defining an imported definition. In B. Brulon Soares, K. Brown, & O. Nazor (Eds.), *Defining Museums of the 21st Century: Plural Experiences* (pp. 163-68). Paris, France: ICOM/ICOFOM.
- Brulon Soares, B., Brown, K., & Nazor, O. (Eds.). (2018). *Defining Museums of the 21st Century: Plural Experiences*. Paris, France: ICOM/ICOFOM.
- Burcaw, G. E. (1983). *Introduction to Museum Work*. Nashville, USA: American Association for State and Local History.
- Cameron, D. F. (1993a). Marble Floors are Cold for Small Bare Feet. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 12, 159-170.
- Cameron, D. F. (1993b). *The Pilgrim and the Shrine: The Icon and the Oracle: A Perspective on Museology for Tomorrow* [Conference session] Colloque: Musées et Recherches, Paris, France.
- Cameron, D. F. (1996). *The Goldfish Bowl* [Unpublished manuscript].
- Cameron, D. F. (2004). The Museum, a Temple or the Forum. In G. Anderson (Ed.), *Reinventing the Museum* (pp. 61-73). Lanham USA: AltaMira Press.
- Clifford, J. (2013). *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-first Century*. Cambridge, USA: Harvard University Press.
- Coates, J. F. (1984). The Future and Museums. *Museum News*, August, 40-45.
- Davis, A., Mairesse, F., & Desvallées, A. (Eds.). (2010). *What is a Museum?* Munich, Germany: Verlag Dr. C. Müller-Straten.
- Desmond, J. C. (1999). *Staging Tourism*. Chicago, USA: The University of Chicago Press.
- Desvallées, A. (1982). *The subject/matter of museology* [Unpublished manuscript prepared for unpublished *MuWoP*, 3, 1-9].
- Desvallées, A., & Mairesse, F. (Eds.). (2010). *Key Concepts of Museology*. Paris, France: Armand Colin.
- González, R. J., Nader, I., & Ou, C. J. (2001). Towards an Ethnography of Museums: Science, Technology and Us. In M. Bouquet (Ed.), *Academic Anthropology and the Museum* (pp. 106-116). New York, USA and Oxford, UK: Berghahn Books.

- Handler, R. (1993). An Anthropological Definition of the Museum and its Purpose. *Museum Anthropology*, 17(1), 33-36.
- Karp, I., & Lavine, S. D. (Eds.). (1991). *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*. Washington, USA: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Lonetree, A. (2012). *Decolonizing Museums*. Chapel Hill, USA: University of North Carolina Press.
- Mairesse, F. (Ed.). (2017). *Définir le musée du XXI^e siècle: Matériaux pour une discussion*. Paris, France: ICOM/ICOFOM.
- Mairesse, F., & Desvallées, A. (Eds.) (2007). *Vers une redéfinition du musée?* Paris, France: L'Harmattan.
- Maranda, L. (2015). Museum Ethics in the 21st Century: Museum Ethics Transforming into Another Dimension. *ICOFOM Study Series*, 43b, 151-165.
- Marstine, J. (Ed.). (2006). *New Museum Theory and Practice*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Murphy, B. L. (2004). The Definition of the Museum. *ICOM News*, Vol. 57, No. 2.
- Parsons, T. (1968). *The Structure of Social Action, Volume II*. New York, USA: The Free Press.
- Smith, H. I. (1917). The Work of Museums in Wartime. *The Scientific Monthly*, April, Reprinted April/May 1918 by *The Science Press*, 362-430.
- Šola, T. (1987). The concept and nature of museology. *Museum*, 153, 45-49.
- Vergo, P. (Ed.). (1989). *The New Museology*. London, UK: Reaktion Books, Ltd.
- Watkins, C. A. (1994). Are Museums Still Necessary? *Curator*, 37(1), 25-35.

Originally published as:

- Maranda, L. (2020). Is It Possible to Tie Down a Universal Museum Definition? *ICOFOM Study Series*, 48-2, 163-177.

